

The Karabakh War and Ethnic Cleaning through the Eyes of Witness and Researcher

(Social anthropological research)

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This article is based on eyewitness testimonies regarding the ethnic cleansing practices carried out by Armenian ultranationalists against ethnic Azerbaijanis during the Karabakh conflict (Nagorno–Karabakh conflict) and the First Karabakh War (1988–1994). Since 1988, ethnic cleansing has been a prevalent form of violence directed at ethnic Azerbaijanis, resulting in the forcible displacement of approximately one million individuals from the Karabakh region and Armenia. The paper examines the Karabakh conflict and ethnic cleansing through oral testimonies, which provide substantial evidence of atrocities committed against Azerbaijanis. These atrocities have deep historical roots, marked by violent ethnic conflicts, such as the Armenian–Muslims massacres of 1905 and 1918, and the widespread terror inflicted by Armenian chauvinists on Azerbaijani populations. These incidents involved the systematic targeting and destruction of Azerbaijani villages,¹ culminating in severe acts of violence and genocide² in the South Caucasus between 1917 and 1921.³ The events were marked by large-scale ethnic violence and mass killings, resulting in widespread loss of life and deepening tensions between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. These events left lasting scars on the region and intensified ethnic and territorial conflicts that shaped subsequent historical developments. This paper also addresses a lesser-known aspect of the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict: the

¹ Kamran Ismaylov, *Azərbaycanın Zəngəzur bölgəsi 1918-1920-ci illərdə*, Bakı, 2019, s. 16–17.

² *Геноцид Азербайджанского народа 1918 года. Организаторы и палачи*, Баку, 2013, с. 272; Ильгар Нифталиев, *Геноцид азербайджанцев в Иреванской губернии (1918–1920)*, Баку, 2017, с. 188; Сабир Асадов, *Философия реваншизма или армянская кровожадность*, Баку, 2001, с. 216.

³ “Азербайджан”, 1918, 13 ноября; Vəqif Abışov, *Bakıda Azərbaycan xalqına qarşı 1918-ci il mart soyqırımı*, Bakı, 2017, s. 220.

helicopter crash that resulted in the deaths of 44 passengers, primarily women and children, and 3 crew members. This article brings to light the human and environmental catastrophes resulting from the ethnic cleansing and terror acts committed during the Karabakh conflict. Incorporating Azerbaijani eyewitness testimonies and a historical analysis of Armenian media disinformation highlights the critical need to confront these atrocities as part of a path toward justice and reconciliation.

Keywords: Karabakh conflict and ethnic cleansing, Armenian terror acts, crimes against humanity, collective trauma, collective memory.

Introduction

For the past two decades, the author of this article has been researching oral history and the social anthropology of collective memory among internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees impacted by the Karabakh conflict. The *Data Bank on Witnesses and Memorizers of the Karabakh Conflict (1988–2020)* is a comprehensive repository of information on individuals who experienced or were otherwise affected by the conflict. This database predominantly contains records of ethnic Azerbaijani respondents from the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and Armenia. It spans various age groups, including children who lived through the conflict, those born after, as well as youth, middle-aged individuals, and elderly people. Additionally, it covers both male and female perspectives, offering a broad and inclusive view of personal narratives, memories, and experiences across different demographics. The study integrates respondents' testimonies with the author's personal memories. This initiative also highlights the importance of maintaining diverse voices and perspectives in the collective memory of historical events. Primary materials for this research include narratives from passengers of the last peaceful helicopter flights from Baku to Shusha (20 January 1992) and Shusha to Aghdam (28 January 1992). Eyewitness testimonies from Shusha and Khalfali residents regarding the terrorist attack on the Mi-8 helicopter during the First Karabakh War are introduced here for the first time, offering crucial evidence for legal proceedings against the perpetrators. Additionally, video footage from the Azerbaijani News Service related to the Mi-8 crash has significantly contributed to this research. The author's socio-anthropological study is developed from a historical perspective, engaging former members of the Shusha battalion and eyewitnesses who were either children or adults during the First Karabakh War. The respondents share their reflections on the helicopter crash that profoundly affected their families, friends, and personal lives, providing invaluable insights into the catastrophe's repercussions. These narratives are invaluable for detailing the helicopter catastrophe's impact. The research also includes testimonies from civilians and armed participants. The study examines how collective memory of the war is built, preserved, and passed down to future generations. The primary questions posed to respondents were: How did the conflict start, escalate, and progress to the stage of full-scale war? How did the conflict affect people's everyday lives?

The goal of this research is to analyse the relationship between collective and individual memory in the context of inter-ethnic armed conflict. It is essential to explore the complexities of what is referred to as collective memory and to examine the interplay between memory and history within the framework of the Karabakh conflict. I argue that the role of both individual and collective memory among IDPs and refugees is not only to transmit experiences from the past into the present, but also to convey notions of responsibility. These memories provide a platform for discussing and imagining pathways

towards peaceful reconciliation and conflict transformation. However, alternatively, these same memories can also act as a catalyst, fuelling narratives that justify or envision further armed violence.

The Nagorno–Karabakh conflict: a historical background

In late 1987, the Armenians of Nagorno–Karabakh⁴ collected over 80,000 signatures to petition the Soviet Government about the region's secession from Soviet Azerbaijan and its reunification with Armenia. Azerbaijan refuses and demonstrations in Nagorno–Karabakh and Erevan lead to clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Azerbaijan.⁵ In the autumn of 1988, Armenians organised a well-planned meeting at Stepanakert's⁶ square, with slogans such as *Independent Karabakh*, *Reunification with Armenia*, and *Great Armenia*. This movement grew daily, becoming increasingly radical and hostile towards local Azerbaijanis. The escalation of events and their transformation into a full-scale war was unexpected for the ethnic Azerbaijanis: soon their population was forced to flee the cities and villages. The violent Nagorno–Karabakh conflict between the two neighbours erupted during the disintegration of the Soviet Union spanning from February 1988 to 2020, within the legally recognised territory of Azerbaijan.

The Nagorno–Karabakh region and its surrounding territories are internationally recognised as a part of the Azerbaijan state by the United Nations, most of the international community, and key organisations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, including Nagorno–Karabakh, has been upheld by multiple UN Security Council key Resolutions (822, 853, 874, 884), and were adopted in 1993, reaffirming Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and calling for the withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied areas.⁷ Despite that, this conflict, which escalated into full-scale war, resulted in the displacement of numerous individuals, leading to their dispersal across the Caucasus region and beyond. The escalation and subsequent military engagements during the Karabakh conflict – spanning from the initial clashes in 1988 to

⁴ *Nagorno-Karabakh*, a mountainous region in western Azerbaijan, derives its name from the Russian “Нагорный Карабах” and Azerbaijani “Dağlıq Qarabağ,” both meaning “Mountainous Karabakh.” The conflict over this region has come to be referred to as the “Nagorno-Karabakh conflict” or “Karabakh conflict”, a term used in international discussions since the conflict's beginning. The author has adopted this terminology throughout her work to maintain consistency with established references to the region in both historical and contemporary discourse.

⁵ UNHCR web archive. In: <<https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230518095635/https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f3866c.html>>, [2024-11-11].

⁶ In 1991, the Azerbaijani Parliament officially restored the historical name “Khankendi” for Stepanakert, the central city of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). Throughout this article, references will use the historical name “Khankendi” in alignment with this restoration.

⁷ United Nations Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884, “Reaffirming respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan” (1993).

full-scale battles in the early 1990s, the extended “frozen conflict” or “no peace, no war” period from 1994 to 2020, and the renewed fighting in 2020 – resulted in thousands of casualties and immense civilian suffering. Much like other prolonged historical conflicts, the civilian population bore a heavy burden, experiencing extensive displacement, loss of family connections, and the destruction of homes and cultural sites. These traumatic impacts have left lasting scars, particularly among displaced communities, who continue to grapple with the personal and cultural losses from decades of conflict. The conflict was inflamed by outside support from the Armenian diaspora, military operations by the Russian Army, and ultranationalistic groups across the region.⁸ The intertwined nature of the conflict events made it difficult to find a resolution. Various historians, political analysts, and witnesses of the event allege that Armenian provocateurs and the KGB staged the Sumgait pogrom on 27 February 1988, to incite further conflict and draw international attention to the plight of Armenians in Nagorno–Karabakh. The events targeted the Armenian population living in the city and are considered one of the key early escalations in the conflict over Nagorno–Karabakh. This violence was intended to catalyse a response that would favour Armenian territorial claims. “Attacks on Azerbaijanis in Erevan escalate markedly and the Armenian government fails to pursue and prosecute most of the perpetrators of the attacks. As a result, the violence against Azerbaijanis in Armenia escalates and the exodus of Azerbaijanis begins. Meanwhile, violence in Azerbaijan against Armenians, especially in Baku, escalates as well”.⁹ The Sumgait pogrom¹⁰ occurred as a response to the mass movement in Armenia for the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis, with slogans such as *Armenia must be cleansed of Turks! Armenia is only for Armenians!*

The increasing numbers of Azerbaijanis refugees in Baku and other urban areas contribute to the increasing levels of violence in Azerbaijan. Mutual hostility and the increased availability of arms, due to remnants of the Soviet military, radicalised the situation and precipitated full-scale war. On 26 February 1992, Armenian separatists committed the Khojaly genocide against peaceful residents attempting to flee the settlement, marking one of the most tragic and horrific chapters in the history of the Karabakh conflict.¹¹ The Khojaly genocide remains a symbol of brutal ethnic cleansing.¹²

⁸ Parvin Ahanchi, “Witnesses” and “Memorizers” of the Conflict and Occupation in Nagorno–Karabakh”, in: *Azerbaijan Archaeology and Ethnography*, 2017, No. 2, pp. 241–251.

⁹ UNHCR web archive, in: <<https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230518095635/https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f3866c.html>>, [2024-11-11].

¹⁰ Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, London: Routledge, 2001, ISBN 978-0-7007-1162-8.

¹¹ Rachel Denber, *Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Escalation of the Armed Conflict in Nagorno–Karabakh*, New York: Helsinki Watch, 1992, pp. 19–21.

¹² Johannes Rau, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. A brief historical Outline*, Berlin: Verlag Dr. Koster, 2008, p. 39.

The Khojaly genocide has not achieved universal legal recognition as genocide under international law, which typically requires a formal judicial decision. However, it has garnered political acknowledgement from various nations and legislative bodies that have condemned the violence against Azerbaijani civilians in Khojaly. It has been internationally recognised and commemorated through resolutions passed in 15 countries and 28 US states. While political recognition highlights a moral stance against the atrocities, it does not carry the same legal implications as a court ruling would. This undeclared war led to the occupation of over 20% of Azerbaijan's territory and the ethnic cleansing and displacement of about one million Azerbaijanis, who became IDPs or refugees from Armenia.¹³ Concurrently, Armenians residing in Azerbaijani cities and villages fled to Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and neighbouring countries amid inter-ethnic violence and tensions. This period highlights the ongoing struggle and efforts to resolve the enduring conflict in the South Caucasus.

During the Karabakh conflict, mass displacement led to the formation of two distinct groups within Azerbaijan: refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). These groups were displaced by different forces, affecting where they were able to relocate. Over 700,000 Azerbaijanis became internally displaced from the occupied territories of Karabakh region. Approximately 300,000 Azerbaijanis fled from Armenia to Azerbaijan due to ethnic tensions and forced displacement as the conflict began. The combined displacement of nearly one million people drastically altered the region's demographic landscape, significantly impacting Azerbaijan's social and economic framework. International courts, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and UN tribunals, have recognised similar acts in other conflicts, such as those in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as ethnic cleansing. The term "ethnic cleansing" describes the systematic and deliberate expulsion of an ethnic group from a specific region, typically through violence, intimidation, or forced displacement. Its goal is often to create a homogeneously ethnic area. These various acts are punishable under multiple international agreements such as the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute of the ICC.¹⁴ While not formally defined in international law, ethnic cleansing is generally prosecuted under crimes against humanity and genocide or war crimes frameworks. UN Commission of Experts' Final Report describes ethnic cleansing as "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area", which involves actions such as murder, torture, arbitrary detention, forced expulsions, and property destruction for such purposes.¹⁵

¹³ Parvin Ahanchi, "Witnessing the War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Shusha's IDPs Testify", in: *Azerbaijan in the World*, 2011, No. 4 (10), pp. 74–79.

¹⁴ Geneva Conventions of 1949, Articles 49 and 147; Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Article 7(1) (d) and 7(1) (h), which address crimes against humanity involving forced displacement and persecution.

¹⁵ Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Under Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), S/1994/674, 27 May 1994, Annex, para. 130.

In many ways, the Karabakh conflict represents most of the characteristics of ethnic cleansing – largely because of the forced expulsion of Azerbaijanis and genocides committed by ultranationalistic Armenian organisations and groups. From 1988 to 1994, organised violence, including the Ağhdaban,¹⁶ Ballyqaya,¹⁷ Bashlybel,¹⁸ Garadaghly,¹⁹ and Khojaly²⁰ genocides resulted in the mass expulsion of Azerbaijanis from Nagorno–Karabakh and the surrounding territories, destruction of villages, and severe human rights violations. Systematic violence and intimidation have forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral lands, erasing not only their presence but also the rich historical and cultural legacy spanning centuries.

Over thirty years, the conflict has passed through several phases: peaceful demonstrations, escalations, armed conflict, a prolonged “frozen” period, and renewed military engagements. During the years of Armenian occupation, the Karabakh region's natural resources were exploited, and cultural monuments, residential buildings, museums, li-

¹⁶ *The Ağhdaban tragedy* is a devastating chapter in Azerbaijan's history, part of the broader Nagorno–Karabakh conflict. It occurred on the night of 8 April 1992, when Armenian military forces attacked the village of Ağhdaban, located in the Kalbajar district of Azerbaijan. This atrocity is remembered for its brutal execution, targeting Azerbaijani civilians and leaving deep scars on the local population. Ağhdaban was a small village, home to many poets, musicians, and intellectuals, and was known for its rich cultural heritage. The attack was a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing and terror aimed at driving the Azerbaijani population from the area. The massacre resulted in the deaths of 67 civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. Survivors who managed to flee described horrific scenes of brutality, with Armenian forces showing no mercy to the defenceless villagers.

¹⁷ *The Ballyqaya tragedy* is one of the lesser-known but equally harrowing events that took place during the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict. On 28 August 1993, the small village of Ballyqaya, located in the Goranboy district of Azerbaijan, became the site of a brutal massacre carried out by Armenian armed forces. During this attack, 24 Azerbaijani civilians, including women, children, and the elderly, were mercilessly killed. Among the victims, tragically, there were six children, the youngest being only six months old. The massacre appeared to be an act of terror and ethnic cleansing, aimed at spreading fear and causing the forced displacement of Azerbaijanis from the region. Survivors of the attack have recounted stories of extreme brutality, with Armenian forces showing no regard for the lives of the civilians, many of whom were trying to flee the violence. Despite its severity, the Ballyqaya tragedy has not received widespread international attention, though in Azerbaijan, it is commemorated as part of the national grief over the atrocities committed during the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict.

¹⁸ *The Bashlybel tragedy* is another tragic event from the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict that reflects the brutal violence faced by Azerbaijani civilians during the war. It occurred in April 1993 in the village of Bashlybel, located in the Kalbajar district of Azerbaijan. This massacre unfolded as part of the Armenian military campaign to capture Kalbajar and its surrounding areas, forcing the Azerbaijani population to flee or face violence. As Armenian forces advanced on Kalbajar, many villagers from Bashlybel attempted to escape to nearby mountains and seek refuge in caves. However, they were eventually discovered by Armenian troops. On April 18, 1993, Armenian forces launched a violent attack on the Azerbaijani civilians hiding in these caves. During the assault, 12 people were brutally killed, while others were captured or managed to flee deeper into the mountains, where they remained in hiding for an extended period under harsh conditions, with little food or medical assistance.

¹⁹ Genocide Garadaghly, in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QxImFfw0zU&ab_channel=AhmeDos11 3:29/5:33, [2024-09-22].

²⁰ One of the most horrific examples of ethnic cleansing occurred in Khojaly on February 25, 1992, when hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians were killed, and many more were forcibly displaced by Armenian forces, supported by the 366th Motor Rifle Regiment of the former Soviet army. *The Khojaly Tragedy*, in: https://azerbaijan-az.translate.google.com/related-information/?_x_tr_sl=az&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc.

baries, and other structures were destroyed or repurposed for Armenian business ventures. It is important to note that, irrespective of the various phases of the conflict, the lives of the peaceful inhabitants of the Karabakh region from both nations and other ethnicities have undergone drastic changes. The conflict, which led to two wars, effectively ended the peaceful existence of people in both countries. The complexity of the Karabakh conflict is further intensified by the political and economic interests of regional and global powers, including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, Russia, the United States, Turkey, and France. The ideological basis of the conflict, *Miatsum* (meaning “reunification” in Armenian), advocated for the annexation of the Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast [NKAO]²¹ to Armenia. This idea was propagated by Armenian historians, public figures, and ultranationalist organisations and parties such as *ASALA*,²² *Artsakh*,²³ *Gnchak*,²⁴ *Dashnaktsutyun*,²⁵ and *Krunk*.²⁶ The Armenian diaspora, a significant financial backer of the separatists, played a considerable role in escalating the conflict to military phases in 1988–1994 and 2020. Armenian ultranationalists from parties such as *Dashnaktsutyun* and *Krunk* misled the populace with distorted historical narratives, claiming that “Nagorno–Karabakh belongs to Armenia”, thereby inciting the population to fight for reunification. This narrative, portraying Armenians as historical victims of Muslim neighbours such as Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey, fuelled the conflict. However, extensive research and historical documents

²¹ The Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was formed on July 7, 1923, within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (1920–1991). Its establishment was shaped by the geopolitical realities of the early Soviet Union, where borders were often delineated according to ethnic compositions. At the time of its establishment, NKAO was predominantly inhabited by ethnic Armenians, which, from the start, contributed to growing tensions with the Azerbaijani community. This complex demographic and political situation set the stage for escalating conflicts, particularly the activities of Armenian ultra-nationalistic groups and parties, which were instrumental in inciting and executing mass terror actions against Azerbaijani communities. This fuelled long-standing ethnic tensions and resulted in widespread violence, targeting Azerbaijani populations in multiple regions. *For more details see: К истории образования Нагорно-Карабахской автономной области Азербайджанской ССР. 1918–1925: Документы и материалы*, Баку, Азернешр, 1989, с. 334.

²² “*ASALA*” (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia): a militant group known for its violent tactics, particularly assassinations of Turkish diplomats. *ASALA* was one of the radical organisations that supported the idea of Armenian territorial expansion.

²³ “*Artsakh*”, the Armenian nationalistic group advocating for the secession of Nagorno–Karabakh from Azerbaijan and its unification with Armenia.

²⁴ “*Gnchak*” (*Hnchak*, the Armenian revolutionary party, founded in the 19th century, which also supported the nationalist cause and the idea of *Miatsum*).

²⁵ “*Dashnaktsutyun*” (Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), is a political party founded by Armenian nationalists in 1890 which advocated for *Miatsum* and brutally contributed to the ethnic cleansing and the mass killing of Azerbaijanis during the Karabakh conflict and wars.

²⁶ “*Krunk*”, an Armenian nationalist group, was influential during the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The organisation championed *Miatsum*, which called for the unification of Nagorno–Karabakh with Armenia, rallying support among Armenians for this cause. *Krunk*’s actions heightened tensions in the region, playing a pivotal role in escalating the conflict into a full-scale war. Its efforts left a lasting impact on the conflict’s trajectory by strengthening Armenian claims over Nagorno–Karabakh, shaping both political and military developments during that period.

reveal the violent actions of Armenian terrorist organisations and their crimes, both locally and in the West.²⁷

The escalation of events and the subsequent transition to a military stage disrupted the peaceful lives of individuals in both republics. Russian military intervention further solidified the irreversibility of the conflict. The involvement of the former Soviet 366th Motor Rifle Division Forces stationed in Khankendi, provided the Armenian forces with a significant advantage over the inadequately coordinated Azerbaijani army and hastily assembled volunteer battalions. Numerous testimonies regarding the acts of violence and vandalism have been documented by eyewitnesses who visited the liberated cities and villages, as well as by local and foreign journalists.



Fig. 1. Kamala Abbasova with family. Left: Tragically, killed in a bomb blast: Kamala Abbasova, her husband Abbasov Suleyman, their young son, her mother. Right: The author with the student Kamala Abbasova, photo taken in 1987 in front of Shusha school No. 2.

The Second Karabakh War (2020) ended with the liberation of Azerbaijani territories that had been under Armenian occupation for nearly 30 years. Despite the ceasefire facilitated by the entry of Russian peacekeeping forces, unresolved issues persisted in Khojaly, Khankendi, Khojavend, and Aghdere. The Azerbaijani army recaptured five

²⁷ Michael Gunter, *Pursuing the Just Cause of Their People: A Study of Contemporary Armenian Terrorism*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 30; Bruce Hoffman, *Terrorism in the United States During 1985*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1985; Michael Szaz, "Armenian Terrorists and the East-West Conflict", in: *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies* (Winter 1983), pp. 387–394; Paul Wilkinson, "Armenian Terrorism", in: *World Today*, No. 39 (September 1983), pp. 344–350; Francis P. Hyland, *Armenian Terrorism: The Past, the Present, the Prospects*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991; Sonyel Salahi Ramsdan, *Armenian Terrorism: A Menace to the International Community*, London: Cyprus Turkish Association, 1987.

cities, four settlements, and 286 villages. Additionally, Armenia returned the Kalbajar, Aghdam, and Lachin regions to Azerbaijan without further military conflict. In September 2023, approximately three years after the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan launched a counterterrorism operation in Karabakh targeting separatist military units. This operation led to the reintegration of the territories of Khojaly, Khankendi, Khojavend, and Aghdere back into Azerbaijan.

Escalation of the conflict and family tragedies during the First Karabakh War

From the onset of the Karabakh conflict, people were caught in a whirlwind of events, leaving lasting memories and deep traumas. Some became witnesses and narrators, while others remained victims or missing persons. As a native of Shusha, the author experienced these devastating events first-hand. After these events, the author lost contact with the students they had taught in Shusha. Years later, they reconnected, conducting interviews about the students' experiences during the Karabakh conflict and war. The memories shared by former primary school students and other pupils proved invaluable in shaping this article. Sadly, the war had made it impossible to reunite with all their former students, as some had tragically become victims of the conflict.

Kamala Abbasova, the cherished only daughter in her family, graduated from school, married, and became a mother to a son. While pregnant, she was forced to leave Shusha due to military attacks; a few months later, she returned to Shusha to give birth. Tragically, on their way back, their car was bombed, killing Kamala, her husband, their young son, her mother, and the driver.

Sarkhan Ismayilov, a gifted fifth-year student at the Azerbaijan Medical Institute, tragically lost his life in a helicopter crash. He was known for his dedication to medicine and passion for helping others, often volunteering at local clinics and participating in community health initiatives. His peers admired him for his unwavering commitment to his studies and his genuine compassion for patients. Sarkhan's untimely death left a deep void not only in the hearts of his friends and family but also within the medical community, which had high hopes for his future contributions. His untimely death is a heartbreaking reminder of the fragility of life, especially for those who aspire to make a difference in the world.

***War memories of veterans of the First Karabakh War.
“Remembering Shusha: Dadash Rahimov’s reflections on the defence
and fall of Shusha”***



Fig. 2. Dadash Rahimov

The Karabakh conflict and its aftermath deeply involved numerous young individuals from both Azerbaijan and Armenia, many of whom found themselves participating against their will. This research aims to capture their memories and experiences related to the conflict and the wars that followed. Due to space constraints, only a selection of particularly poignant stories is shared here. One such story is that of Dadash Rahimov, one of the founder of the Shusha battalion and a childhood friend of the author. At the time, the author could not have anticipated the profound personal impact the conflict would have on her life, just as it did for millions of others. Many women became single mothers, left to raise their children without fathers. Dadash, an active participant in the defence of Shusha, was committed to protecting civilians and saved many lives during the war, including those of women and children. Yet, despite his valiant efforts, the larger geopolitical dynamics ultimately rendered the defence of Shusha futile. He participated in hostage exchanges, but the disparity in military forces ultimately led to failure. Dadash was wounded on the day Shusha was occupied (8 May 1992) and was subsequently transferred to a hospital in Baku for treatment. His memories of Shusha were fraught with tears and pain. To honour the memory of his beloved city, Dadash named his son *Vatan*, meaning “Homeland” in Azerbaijani. He explained that naming his son *Vatan* was a way to keep the spirit of Shusha alive in their hearts and minds. He taught his son that “all the beauty around us represents Shusha ... all the strength in the world is Shusha”

and “everything delightful – fruit, cakes, and juices – holds a connection to Shusha”. He emphasised the exceptional nature of Shusha, ensuring his son understood its profound significance. The loss of Shusha and the intense fighting deeply affected Dadash, leading him to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), marked by traumatic dreams and significant depression. He often woke at night, haunted by the harsh events he witnessed during the Karabakh conflict and war. This psychological toll underscored the profound and enduring impact of war on individuals like Dadash, highlighting the need for support and recognition of mental health challenges faced by veterans. His position as a defender of Shusha left him feeling deeply unhappy and depressed, encapsulated in his lament: “We were losers, we lost Shusha, and we didn’t do enough to save Shusha”. Despite the government granting him a second-group disability due to his war injuries, he refused to accept it, viewing the loss of Shusha as a personal dishonour. Tragically, Dadash passed away at the age of 37 from the wounds and concussions he sustained during the First Karabakh War.

The testimonies of veterans like Dadash Rahimov provide a poignant glimpse into the profound and enduring impact of the First Karabakh War on individuals, families, and communities, those who lived through it. His narrative is emblematic of the collective trauma experienced by many Azerbaijanis who witnessed the violent loss of their homeland and cultural heritage. His story epitomises the personal sacrifices, emotional turmoil, and deep-seated sense of loss experienced by those involved in defending their homeland. Shusha, once a thriving cultural and historic city, is more than a geographical location in Rahimov’s story – it is a symbol of both the resilience and the deep scars left by the struggle to defend it. His dedication to protecting civilians in Shusha and his refusal to accept disability benefits underscored his unwavering commitment and pride in his role, despite the tragic outcome. Dadash Rahimov’s narrative also highlights the lasting traumatic legacy of the conflict, where the memory of Shusha continues to resonate deeply with those who fought to defend it. His decision to name his son *Vatan* as a tribute to his beloved city underscores the enduring significance of Shusha in Azerbaijani identity and heritage. However, the war left Dadash grappling with profound psychological scars, including PTSD. His experience serves as a stark reminder of the mental health toll inflicted by conflict, alongside its physical and emotional impacts. Through these accounts, it becomes evident that the First Karabakh War was not just a geopolitical struggle but a profoundly personal and emotional experience for those directly involved. The scars left by the conflict, both physical and psychological, continue to shape the lives and memories of veterans like Dadash, reminding us of the human cost of war and the resilience of those who endure its hardships.

For Rahimov and others like him, the memory of Shusha endures as an emotional touchstone, representing both a painful loss and an unyielding connection to heritage.

Veterans who fought to protect the city often carry with them vivid, painful recollections of the conflict, which remain deeply embedded in their identities. Their experiences are testimonies not only of personal sacrifice but of a shared historical memory that continues to shape the collective psyche of Azerbaijani society. The trauma, memories, and enduring love for Shusha fuel a broader hope for restoration and justice, underscoring the need for continued acknowledgment of these events and the resilience of those who endured them.



Fig. 3. Aslan Huseynov



Fig. 4. Nazim Huseynov



Fig. 5. Kerkijahan village view

By studying these testimonies, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of conflict and its lasting impact on individuals and societies. Honouring these stories and reflecting on their lessons allows us to strive for peace, reconciliation, and a future unburdened by the shadows of war.

“Kerkijahan’s resilience and rownfal: reflections from the Huseynov brothers”

Karkijahan is a settlement near the city of Khankendi. The village had an Azerbaijani-majority population of 1,796 inhabitants before the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict in 1988.²⁸ Following the expulsion of ethnic Azerbaijanis from the city of Khankendi in 1988, the majority of them resettled in Karkijahan.²⁹ Aslan Huseynov, a resident of Karkijahan and a policeman, together with his brother Nazim Huseynov, played an active role in defending their village against Armenian nationalists during the Karabakh conflict. They nicknamed him *Cobra* and promised a substantial reward to anyone who would hand him over to them. Alongside fellow villagers, he bravely protected women and children for a prolonged period. During the hostilities in Karkijahan, a journalist from Radio Mayak, Leonid Lazarevich, was killed. Azerbaijani forces recaptured the village by 31 December, but on 20 January 1992, their efforts proved futile as Armenian forces burned their houses, forcing them to flee. By the time of its capture, most of the village’s Azerbaijani population had already left. Aslan recalls that 40 people were killed during the battles. He sustained a foot injury during the attacks and still carries an iron replacement in his bone as a reminder of those harrowing days. For years, he underwent a series of surgeries on his foot. Nazim Huseynov had burns on his face.

During an interview, both brothers vividly recalled the taunts of the Armenian attackers as they set fire to Azerbaijanis’ houses, mocking them with words like “Ara, [‘man’ in Armenian] look, your house has vanished, and now go away!” In defiance, Nazim asserted, “You could burn our house and all our belongings, and we will rebuild it again and again! But this land belongs to me and my ancestors, so you cannot take it away from us easily”.

In Baku, while interviewing the Huseynov brothers, the author realised that on 20 January 1992, the day their village was cruelly burned to the ground by Armenian separatists, she was on a helicopter flying over the burning landscape, transporting her mother’s body to Shusha. This deeply resonated with her. Witnessing the smoke billowing like a spreading flame was a poignant reminder of the devastation inflicted on Kerkijahan village and its inhabitants. It was painful to witness the thick smoke rising, resembling a burning flame that spread ominously. At that moment, it was these brothers’ village, their house, and the homes of all the Azerbaijani inhabitants in the community. The memories

²⁸ Зона конфликта в Нагорном Карабахе (1988–1994 ...). Карта 33, in: <<https://www.iriston.com/>>, [2024-10-22].

²⁹ Дмитрий Леонов, “Карабах: путевые заметки времен чрезвычайного положения”, in: <<http://www.panorama.ru/gazeta/1-30/p23kar.html>>, [2024-05-29].

of the author and the interviewee converged around this tragic event, intertwining their experiences and emotions in a profound reflection on the past. Both individuals carried the weight of loss and sorrow, their recollections serving as a haunting reminder of the destruction wrought by the conflict. As they shared their stories, they navigated the pain of displacement, the longing for a lost homeland, and the indelible scars left on their communities. This shared narrative not only highlighted the personal toll of the tragedy but also illuminated the broader implications for their collective memory, revealing how the echoes of that day continue to resonate in their lives. Through their dialogue, they sought to honour those who were lost and to find meaning in their suffering, ultimately striving for a future where such devastation would never be repeated.

Aslan and Nazim Huseynov's testimony offers a compelling insight into the profound personal and communal suffering caused by the Karabakh conflict. Their account of the defence of Karkijahan, the subsequent destruction of the village, and the loss of lives provide a stark illustration of the broader humanitarian crisis faced by Azerbaijani communities. Despite sustaining severe injuries that required numerous surgeries, Aslan's resilience and determination to protect his village and rebuild his life highlight the enduring spirit of those affected by the conflict. The vivid memory of witnessing their village engulfed in flames, juxtaposed with my own experience of flying over the burning landscape, underscores the shared trauma and devastation experienced by many. The brothers' story is a testament to the deep-rooted connection to ancestral lands and the indomitable will to persevere in the face of overwhelming adversity. By documenting and reflecting on Huseynov's experiences, we gain profound insights into the human cost of the Karabakh conflict – insights that extend far beyond mere numbers and statistics. His resilience serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive peace-building efforts and highlights the importance of addressing the lingering effects of such traumatic events.

Personal narratives reveal the psychological, emotional, and social toll of the war, illuminating the suffering of displaced families, the trauma faced by survivors, and the loss of cultural heritage. Through this lens, we come to understand the pain of loss, the longing for home, and the deep scars left on individuals' and communities' memories. By honouring these stories, we foster a greater appreciation for the complexities of conflict and underscore the necessity of striving for a peaceful and reconciled future. Such reflections are essential for cultivating a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict and emphasising the imperative of peace and reconciliation to heal the lasting consequences on human lives.

Ethnic Cleansing of Azerbaijanis in Karabakh.

Attack on Civilians in the Sky

The main road Shusha–Aghdam, 37 km long, was blocked by Armenian militants, so people had to overcome instead the 220 km long route of Shusha–Lachin–Gubadly–Zangilan–Fuzuli. The danger of the movement of the Azerbaijani population along the Shusha–Aghdam–Shusha land highway, which grew every day in the conflict, forced people to use the services of a civilian Mi-8 helicopter, which carried out the transportation of civilians along the Shusha–Aghdam–Shusha route. The use of the helicopter was also difficult, as the Armenians systematically fired on them, believing that the helicopters were delivering weapons and ammunition to Shusha. In this regard, the number of helicopter flights had been minimal, which led to people waiting for a long day for a flight. On 20 January 1992, early in the morning of the second anniversary of the tragic January events in the Republican Clinic named after M. A. Mirqasimov, surrounded by three daughters, the mother of seven children Latifa Kerimi (the mother of the author and her two sisters of the interviewees: Zhale Rustamova, Shahnaz Ahanji) passed away. Latifa Kerimi was the wife of a political emigrant, Amirali Ahanchi, who belonged to the indigenous dynasty of Shusha serfs who had lived here since the eighteenth century, when the city was called the Shusha fortress (*Shusha galasy*), and its first inhabitants were serfs (*galalylar*). The last testament of Latifa Kerimi was to be buried next to her son and husband in Shusha.

“I turned to the head doctor of the hospital, asking for help in this matter. The doctor, noting Karabakh’s difficult military situation, refused to help solve this problem. It seemed impossible to carry out this testament during a fierce armed conflict”, noted Zhale Rustamova, the eldest of the respondents. However, the duty to fulfil the mother’s last testament forced the sisters to look for possible options for transferring the mother’s body to Shusha. The surgeon, Dr Shahnaz Ahanji, with the support of her husband Rahimagha Talibov, managed to transport the mother’s body to Shusha by Mi-8 helicopter with an ambulance mission. As she remembered:

At this time, by a lucky chance, the head doctor of the hospital received a call asking for needed blood donation, which was very necessary for the wounded near Khankendi. Having received such a task, the doctor without hesitation told her to get ready, the transfer of the mother’s body would be carried out on the same Mi-8 helicopter, which had the mission to deliver blood to the wounded soldiers...

Thus, by a random course of events, the author, surrounded by two sisters – Zhale Rustamova, Shahnaz Ahanji, and her spouse Rahimagha Talibov – became passengers in a helicopter flying from Baku to Aghdam with donated blood on board to help wounded Azerbaijani soldiers. This remark testifies that the Mi-8 helicopter was a civilian helicopter that transported Azerbaijani civilians. From the helicopter, passengers witnessed the scenes of hostilities: burned villages and destroyed houses. Their attention was especially

drawn to the fire and a thick plume of smoke that burned more than 300 houses in the urban settlement of Kerkijahan, Khankendi city. People of this settlement struggled for their land and then Armenians set their houses on fire and expelled people by force to flee their land. Seeing a helicopter flying to Shusha, Armenian militants fired at the helicopter. Passengers experienced an unforgettable [to this day!] fear and hopelessness. Thanks to the swift reaction of the experienced pilot Viktor Seryogin, the helicopter climbed higher and managed to avoid the death of most of the family members on board. Upon arrival in the snowy Shusha, they were dumbfounded by the dilapidated and lifeless state of the city. Later, it was learned that the inhabitants had been hiding in basements to shield themselves from the relentless rocket attacks launched by Armenians from Khankendi. During the seven days of family mourning, one of the most tragic events, the Dashalty operation,³⁰ unfolded. Ethnic Azerbaijanis lost their lives in this operation, marking another profound collective trauma for the city of Shusha.

After seven days of mourning in Shusha, on 28 January 1992, the author had scheduled to return to Baku. Shusha and all surrounding villages were blocked by armed Armenian militants, leaving no other transportation options for civilians. The helicopter route was the only way to reach the destination. Once again, the unpredictable, challenging, and perilous journey aboard the Mi-8 helicopter awaited. Having narrowly escaped danger on the previous helicopter flight from Baku to Shusha, the author together with relatives were terrified of repeating the experience, knowing that they might be targeted by Armenian military forces again. Early that morning they arrived at the heliport, a makeshift area for helicopter take-offs and landings. Despite the early hour, the area was crowded with people eager to reach Aghdam, from where they planned to travel to Barda, Yevlakh, Ganja, or Baku, or attend to their affairs before returning to Shusha. However, this time, they could not board the helicopter as special passengers had priority. A large crowd had gathered at the heliport in Shusha, hoping to leave for Aghdam for business or to temporarily escape the escalating violence threatening their safety and peace. To the crowd's surprise, the path to the helicopter was blocked by Ramiz Gambarov (1962–1992), the commander of the Shusha battalion (the National Hero of Azerbaijan), and his deputy, Dadash Rahimov (1964–2001) veteran of the First Karabakh War.

During the conflict, local commanders from both sides had agreed to exchange corpses or hostages. This time, the author witnessed two Armenian hostages being exchanged for Azerbaijani corpses in Aghdam. The commander and deputy of the Shusha battalion appealed to the crowd to wait for the next flight, explaining that the current mission was

³⁰ The Dashalty operation, launched on January 25, 1992, aimed to reclaim Dashalty village near Shusha but ended in heavy losses for Azerbaijani forces. Due to communication failures, tactical mistakes, operational leaks, and betrayal by local guides, Azerbaijani forces advancing from Nabilar village were ambushed. The operation resulted in over 90 Azerbaijani casualties, with numerous soldiers still unaccounted for.

to take two captured Armenians to Aghdam in exchange for seven deceased Azerbaijanis. The situation was tense, and the people of Shusha empathised with the grief of their compatriots.

Two captured Armenians, accompanied by two armed members of the Shusha battalion, boarded a helicopter along with Allahverdi Asadov, a journalist from Azerbaijani TV, Dr. Ahanji Shahnaz, a surgeon, her husband, and the author, a researcher from the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. Dr. Ahanji's responsibility was to ensure the prisoners' well-being and facilitate their exchange upon arrival in Aghdam. Meanwhile, the remaining individuals were disappointed and had to wait for the next helicopter.

During the First Karabakh War, "field diplomacy" existed between the belligerents for the exchange of wounded and dead soldiers. On this morning flight, there were only crew members, a few soldiers, and four civilians, whose narratives provided valuable information about the events. The helicopter flight proceeded smoothly and peacefully, as the Armenians did not fire on our helicopter, knowing it was transporting captured Armenians. Despite this, we were all stressed and nervous. The helicopter operated on the morning of 28 January from Shusha and upon arrival at Aghdam airport, the Armenian hostages were exchanged for the seven deceased Azerbaijanis, completing the field diplomacy mission. The helicopter safely arrived at Aghdam airport and completed its mission of delivering prisoners of war. The author, along with surgeon Shahnaz Ahanji and her husband Rahimagha Talibov, became the fortunate passengers of the last peaceful flight of the Mi-8 helicopter on its Shusha–Aghdam route.

Upon reaching Aghdam, the hostages were handed over to the soldiers. While at the Aghdam airport, the author saw a large crowd of people, including many compatriots from Shusha. Among them were student Sarkhan Ismailov, Namik Zalov – the musician from Shusha – with his family, Murshid Dunyamaliyev a scholar-historian, a young scholar Sara Aliyeva, and many other familiar faces. Each person in that crowd was eager to board the helicopter back to Shusha, unaware they were rushing to their deaths. On the afternoon of 28 January 1992, the helicopter picked up civilians impatiently waiting at Aghdam airport, all longing to return to Shusha. The crowd was filled with excitement and anticipation, not knowing that the helicopter was already a target for the Armenians. Mostly women and children were on board, forced to avoid the land route due to the danger posed by Armenian armed groups.

The helicopter managed all those requested flights and came back, filled with civilians and not carrying any Armenian hostages. The armed ultranationalists in Khankendi were aware of this. Near the village of Khalfali, as the helicopter was nearing Shusha, it was brought down by an anti-aircraft missile. Tragically, all the civilians on board were killed when Armenian terrorists shot down the helicopter.

The author vividly recalls those events, bearing a lasting sense of guilt for the lives lost in the helicopter crash. It feels surreal to have survived, yet the haunting memory of what could have been lingers. The helicopter flew through hostile territory, where any moment could have turned fatal. The terror of knowing Armenian forces had previously targeted similar flights, bringing down helicopters and claiming innocent lives, was ever-present. The steady drone of the blades merged with the tense uncertainty of whether this flight would share the same fate.

Arriving safely left a profound sense of guilt over those who did not—the victims of the devastating attack. Armenian ultranationalist groups, armed with military-technical support from the former Soviet 366th Motor Rifle Division, carried out a terrorist strike targeting Azerbaijani civilians. Armenian militants used a man-portable air defence system (MANPADS),³¹ a highly mobile, easily camouflaged anti-aircraft missile, to bring down a helicopter carrying civilians.³² The incident took place near Shusha as the helicopter, descending to land at a low altitude, became an easy target. The aircraft, engulfed in flames with 44 civilians and 3 crew members on board, crashed, leaving no survivors. Emergency teams arrived swiftly, but the devastation was total. Journalists from the Azerbaijani News Service, stationed in Shusha, documented the final tragic moments of the Mi-8 disaster, capturing an enduring memory of the tragedy.³³

This was the fatal flight of the helicopter, and with it, all connections between Shusha and Aghdam were severed. The escalation of the conflict took on new dimensions, resulting in more victims and destruction. Eyewitnesses waiting in Shusha for the next flight and Khalfali inhabitants reported seeing people falling from the helicopter into the forest. Witnesses who were waiting for the next flight said that “they saw how people, one by one, two by two, fell from a helicopter into the forest. They believed people were throwing themselves out of the helicopter”.³⁴ But in reality, the force of the anti-aircraft missile impact caused the helicopter door to open, and people were involuntarily thrown out.

Eyewitnesses noted that the experienced crew commander, Viktor Seryogin, managed to take the burning helicopter away from the helipad, saving hundreds of people waiting for the next flight. The helicopter crashed in a gorge near the Khalfali-Kerkijahan road, igniting a fierce fire.

³¹ Man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) are surface-to-air missiles that can be fired by an individual or a small team of people against aircraft. These weapon systems often are described as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. MANPADS: Combating the Threat to Global Aviation. <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/pm/wra/c62623.htm>>, [2024-11-11].

³² List of Losses of Mi-8 and its Modifications (2022), in: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_losses_of_Mi-8_and_its_modifications> (1992)>, [2023-11-22].

³³ On January 28, 1992, an Azerbaijani civilian Mi-8 helicopter was shot down near Shusha (2019), in: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95pPjhL3mSY&t=271s.>>, [2023-09-07].

³⁴ Тəranə, Muxtarova, *Şuşa harayı*, Baki, 1996, s. 40.

Collective trauma and memories of the Azerbaijani Community from the Shusha region: reflecting on the helicopter crash

All the families of the victims were bereaved. The inhabitants of Shusha experienced collective pain and sorrow, as 20 families held a funeral for three days. Relatives faced the harrowing task of identifying the remains of the passengers, many of whom were unrecognisable. Ultimately, all the victims were buried in the cemetery of martyrs, a sombre testament to the tragedy that had befallen the community.

The helicopter crash near Shusha remains a profound collective trauma for the Azerbaijani community from the Shusha region, particularly the residents of the city of Shusha and the village of Khalfali. Eyewitnesses recount their panic and horror at the sight of the downed helicopter, with one noting, "We were in a panic and what we saw was horrifying. All the families of the victims are in mourning. The collective grief of the community was palpable, as 20 families held funerals for the victims, who included representatives of the intelligentsia, scientists, teachers, musicians, and entire families".

Gilad Hirschberger defines collective trauma as "a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society".³⁵ The downing of the helicopter by Armenian militants epitomises such a tragedy for the people of Shusha and Khalfali. The brutal targeting of civilians attempting to return home inflicted a severe psychological shock on the entire Azerbaijani community in these areas, leading to long-term depression and inactivity among many. In the collective memory of these communities, the tragedy and the images of the young, talented specialists, and members of the intelligentsia who perished remain vivid. The heroic crew members of the Mi-8 helicopter – Commander Viktor Seryogin, second pilot Shafa Fatulla Axundov, and on-board mechanic Arastun Ispendi Mahmudov – are remembered as national heroes of Azerbaijan.³⁶

Investigating the Mi-8T USSR-24137 helicopter crash near Shusha town, a tragic event of the First Karabakh War has been a significant challenge. The research unveils untold stories not previously covered in the media or explored in social anthropological research. The author explored the accounts of eyewitnesses to the crash and the passengers of the Mi-8 helicopter's final peaceful flight from Shusha to Aghdam. Upon landing at Aghdam airport, passengers met a crowd unaware of the imminent persecution by Armenian ultranationalists. Those people were very happy when the helicopter arrived, seizing the chance to fly to Shusha. Each of them eagerly tried to secure a seat in the helicopter, unaware that this was a flight to their deaths. Thirty years later, the tragic events of that winter's day remain a nightmare for the respondents.

³⁵ Gilad Hirschberger, *Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning*, in: *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2018, No. 9, p. 1441, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441.

³⁶ Vüqar Əsgərov, *Azərbaycanın Milli Qəhrəmanları*, Bakı, 2005, s. 11–12, 89–90, 139–140.

Eyewitnesses of the terrorist act – residents of Khalfali, Lachin, and Shusha – consistently testified to the cruelty of the Armenian military units. Respondents and eyewitnesses from Khalfali described the horrifying scene:

The helicopter, burning in the sky, was falling rapidly. The anti-aircraft gun broke through the door of the helicopter, as a result, people fell from the sky, and it was the most terrible thing I have ever seen in my life ... The aftermath was equally traumatic, with parts of bodies scattered around, hanging on trees and electrical wires. The burning helicopter and parts of bodies emitted an unbearable smell, which lingered for months. Locals avoided passing near the crash site ...



Fig. 6. Sara Aiyjeva

Numerous interviews conducted by the author indicate that these communities are still experiencing profound psychological trauma. The death of innocent civilians and the unpunished crimes committed by Armenian militants remains deeply troubling. Aghakerim Mammadov, the uncle of the young scholar Sara Aliyeva, significantly contributed to the research for this article by revealing critical details of the tragic event. He recalled waiting for Sara to return to Shusha when the helicopter was directed to land. Suddenly, it was shot, causing a few passengers to fall out. The helicopter veered away from the inhabited area and caught fire. Despite their will to help, they were unable to reach the victims due to ongoing shooting from Armenian forces. Aghakerim Mammadov expressed regret and sorrow that they couldn't reach the helicopter to potentially save some lives.

The aftermath was devastating as they attempted to identify the victims. They found only parts of bodies, and those who had fallen out of the helicopter were barely recognisable. Families were forced to bury fragments and ashes. For months and years, Aghakerim couldn't rid himself of the smell of burning, which seemed to permeate his nose, nails, and hair. He had to sell his car and dispose of his clothes to escape the lingering odour. During

the interview, he was visibly shaken and mentioned that he could still recall that terrible smell, highlighting the enduring impact of the traumatic event on his psyche.

The passengers of the last peaceful flight before the terrorist act remember the faces of compatriots who died in that terrible attack. Armenians continue to spread false information, claiming the helicopter was carrying weapons. However, witnesses and former passengers of the Mi-8 helicopter attest that it was a civilian flight carrying Azerbaijani civilians. This deliberate act by Armenian militants aimed to intimidate and create panic among the Azerbaijani population.

Eyewitness accounts provide invaluable insights into the experiences of affected Azerbaijani communities, while a careful examination of media manipulation underscores the systematic nature of disinformation campaigns. Addressing these narratives with clarity and authenticity is essential for acknowledging past injustices, supporting historical accuracy, and fostering understanding, which are vital steps toward building trust and lasting peace in the region

Conclusion

The legacy of the Karabakh conflict continues to cast a long shadow, profoundly impacting generations and underscoring the necessity of documenting and confronting historical injustices. Essential to this process is the acknowledgment of the forced displacement of Azerbaijani populations from both Armenia and the Karabakh region, the extensive destruction of cultural heritage, and the immense human cost of the prolonged conflict. As the region looks toward a future built on justice and reconciliation, addressing these historical wounds becomes vital for achieving long-term healing and fostering a sustainable peace.

One cannot overstate the importance of preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage in these territories. Advances in technology now offer hope for the restoration of destroyed cultural monuments, enabling the reconstruction of architectural wonders, khan's palaces, mausoleums, and other historically significant sites in Karabakh cities such as Aghdere, Aghdam, Askeran, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Lachin, Khankendi, Khojaly, Zangilan, Shusha and others. Yet, despite the potential to rebuild these structures, the irreplaceable loss of human lives—victims of a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of people—remains a tragic reminder of the cost of war.

The Karabakh region's cultural and national identity has been shaped by generations of influential Azerbaijani artists, philosophers, scholars, and visionaries who contributed masterpieces to the nation's cultural legacy. This rich tapestry of heritage, spanning music, literature, architecture, fine arts, and artisanal crafts, has been deeply scarred by the long-standing conflict. These Azerbaijani figures not only enriched the culture but

held an intellectual potential capable of advancing the arts and sciences in Azerbaijan. However, the conflict inflicted not only physical destruction but also a substantial loss of intellectual and cultural contributions from those who could have furthered the nation's development.

The Karabakh conflict and the subsequent wars, incited by Armenian ultranationalists, divided the social, economic, and political histories of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis into "before" and "after"³⁷. This division has left a lasting imprint on the collective memory, filled with remnants of a shared history and the painful events that followed. Thousands of Azerbaijani and Armenian lives were claimed by the conflict, creating a collective memory that bears witness to the tragedy and to the hope of justice that remains elusive. The instigators and perpetrators of these acts must be held accountable to prevent the legacy of violence from repeating.

Despite the end of active hostilities, the humanitarian crisis continues as the Armenian side has yet to provide Azerbaijan with maps of the extensive minefields left behind in liberated territories. The danger of unexploded mines poses an ongoing risk to returning Azerbaijani civilians, obstructing resettlement and reconstruction. Addressing the mine threat is essential not only for humanitarian reasons but to enable a safe and sustainable return to these lands. International assistance and cooperation are urgently needed to mitigate this peril, promote safe resettlement, and facilitate long-term recovery for Azerbaijani communities in Karabakh.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the critical importance of addressing collective and individual memory, not only as a means to preserve history but as a foundation for reconciliation and peace. On one hand, collective memory can serve as a bridge between past and present, facilitating dialogue on peaceful reconciliation and conflict transformation. The stories of individuals, such as those from internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, transmit personal experiences that convey a sense of responsibility toward peace and understanding. These memories can be a powerful resource for envisioning a future free from the violent divisions that have marked the region's past.

However, the same memories also hold the potential to fuel opposing narratives. They may reignite the trauma of the past and justify new cycles of hostility. Thus, addressing the past becomes not only an act of historical inquiry but a responsibility for all stakeholders in the region. Establishing a balanced view requires recognizing the depth of personal loss and the destruction of cultural heritage while acknowledging the shared responsibility to work towards healing and peaceful coexistence.

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Parvin Ahanchi

Kalnų Karabacho karas ir etninis valymas liudininko ir tyrėjo akimis

Santrauka

Šis straipsnis grindžiamas liudininkų parodymais apie armėnų ultranacionalistų vykdytą etninį valymą prieš etninius azerbaidžaniečius Karabacho konflikto (Kalnų Karabacho konflikto) ir Pirmojo Kalnų Karabacho karo (1988–1994 m.) metu. Nuo 1988 m. etninis valymas buvo vyraujanti smurto prieš etninius azerbaidžaniečius forma, dėl kurios iš Karabacho regiono ir Armėnijos prievarta buvo iškeldinta maždaug milijonas asmenų. Straipsnyje Kalnų Karabacho konfliktas ir etninis valymas nagrinėjami remiantis žodiniais liudijimais, kuriuose pateikiama nemažai įrodymų apie prieš azerbaidžaniečius vykdytus žiaurumus. Šių žiaurumų istorija ilga – ji apima žiaurius etninius susidūrimus, ypač 1905 m. ir 1918 m. armėnų ir totorių žudynes, masines azerbaidžaniečių žudynes Pietų Kaukaze 1917–1921 m. ir genocidą Karabacho regionuose. Šie įvykiai pasižymėjo didelio masto etniniu smurtu ir masinėmis žudynėmis, kurių metu atimta daug gyvybių, o įtampa tarp armėnų ir azerbaidžaniečių bendruomenių dar labiau sustiprėjo. Užsitęsęs konfliktas ilgiems dešimtmečiams suformavo istorinį ir politinį regiono kraštovaizdį. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariamas mažiau žinomas Kalnų Karabacho konflikto aspektas: sraigtasparnio katastrofa, kurios metu žuvo 44 keleiviai, daugiausia moterys ir vaikai, ir trys įgulos nariai. Jame atskleidžiamos žmonių ir aplinkos katastrofos, kilusios dėl etninio valymo ir teroro aktų, įvykdytų per Kalnų Karabacho konfliktą. Azerbaidžaniečių ir armėnų liudininkų parodymai bei istorinė analizė pabrėžia būtinybę pripažinti šiuos žiaurius nusikaltimus ir į juos atsižvelgti, siekiant teisingumo ir susitaikymo.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Karabacho konfliktas, etninis valymas, armėnų teroristiniai aktai, nusikaltimai žmogiškumui, kolektyvinė trauma, kolektyvinė atmintis