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Karabakh: outside perspective

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DERIVED FROM KARABAKH NOTEBOOK



These notes were taken in late March 2021. Together with photo journalist Sergey Kivrin, I travelled at least 1,500 kilometers through southern Karabakh, as well as six Azerbaijani regions which had been occupied by Armenia for 28 years.

A dark red flash and a shattering roar. In a second, the shock wave tosses sand and last year's dry leaves in your face. Though we are at least 500 meters away from the mine blast area, it definitely feels like a soil shudder under our feet. There is a thick black smoke-screen in the air.

"I didn't get the flash," Sergey said grudgingly.

"We will be blowing up the next batch in an hour," a squad commander of the demining agency ANAMA assured him.

Indeed, enough of this "good stuff" is available. There are a few more dozen mines with dismantled fuses in the trench.

The squad includes a total of nine people, including a doctor. All of these are experienced people. It appears that none of them is below 40. In fact, their faces are so burned by the sun and roughened by the wind that it's hard to tell their age. This group has been working in Aghdam district since last December. **Over 700 anti-**

personnel and anti-tank landmines have been removed so far, excluding missiles and TNT fuses that have been rendered harmless. Unfortunately, the demining work has been rather slow. **The command of the Armenian armed forces has refused to provide the maps of mine fields. There are mines everywhere.**

If you take a step aside from the asphalt, you are likely to explode. Caution boards saying "mine" are frequently encountered in the area. **Nevertheless, more than a hundred civilians have already been killed or wounded.** How many more women and children will have to die here? It is frightening just to think about it. The Armenians planted mines in homes and courtyards as well as on roads, paths and fields during their withdrawal from the area. For instance, there could be a deadly object under a purportedly safe path that has been hidden there for decades until a child runs over it or an unsuspecting farmer or herdsman steps on it.

Sergey posted photos made in Karabakh on his website upon return to Moscow. Afterwards, one of his online subscribers claimed that anyone's point of view mostly depends on "which side you came from" and



who hosted this person with “tea and pie” on the table. In a nutshell, I can say that you would witness the **same view of a devastated and looted area**, no matter whence you arrive (this land currently resembles the Zone from “Roadside Picnic”, a novel by the Strugatsky brothers, in terms of its deadliness). It is the same if you arrive from the west through Lachin, from the south through Jabrayil, from the east through Aghdam or

from the north via Barda. **This region has not been burned down in the aftermath of the war, though its traces are certainly noticeable, albeit not pervasive. However, this area has been regularly and persistently devastated for three decades.** By the way, this is, in fact, a large area. Armenia invaded one-fifth of Azerbaijan’s territory by 1994. Whoever does not believe these conclusions may come and see it first-hand! I am afraid they will not find anything except endless ruins in this area. If you remember the photos of Stalin-grad after it was liberated from the Germans, it would be easy to imagine the present-day appearance of Karabakh.

Karabakh is currently a deserted area with random life spots. We are entering this zone from **the Horadiz settlement area, which is located on the Araz River.** I am inclined to say that this is an “astonishingly” contrasting view, but it is actually horrifying. Horadiz is a prosperous settlement with a multitude of new buildings







surrounded by green trees. The spring set in early there and a viewer may enjoy the wonderful appearance of the Mugham Center, the Olympics Center, as well as schools and stores...Then we pass by the former Line of Contact. Trenches, shooting hideouts, machine gun fire nests, anti-tank ditches. Sappers have a great deal of work to do there. **Furthermore, ruins are seen mile after mile** as we keep on driving. **Villages destroyed by the Armenians could be traced back only due to the ruins of building foundations.** One after another, it's endless...No home was left intact.

The Fuzuli regional center. Prior to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, its population equalled 17,000, including mainly Azerbaijanis. Only several hundred Armenians lived in the whole district. The Azerbaijanis were ousted from their homes, but Armenians did not stay there either. **The town was razed to the ground.** It does not exist any more. We follow the path, which was once a street, passing by piles of rocks, which were part of homes three decades ago. Our guide explained, point-

ing at the wall ruins. "This was a theater and this was a library. I believe, that used to be the House of Culture. Here is a mosque..." Sometimes the guide loses track of things, which is not surprising. It's hard to figure out which building the remaining piece of a wall was part of.

A monument to Fuzuli, a 16th century poet. It's broken. Only its base remained on the spot. For some reason, the medieval lyrical poet was disliked by the leaders of the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic".

We are going uphill toward the city cemetery. It's the same picture. **Not a single gravestone remained intact. Some of the graves were dug out** with human bones seen inside. "They were looking for jewelry and removing golden tooth caps from the dead bodies," the guide says. This is over the top. We are speechless.

Finally, we can see something reassuring. A transformer substation is being built on the outskirts of Fuzuli. **The district was left without electric power by the time it was liberated from occupation.** Power



grid wires were removed and taken away by the Armenians.

A highway is under construction nearby. It has six lanes in some areas. The highway will link Fuzuli with Shusha. We drive onward to see the construction of the Fuzuli airport. A lot of up-to-date machinery is being used. The construction work is consistent and fast-paced. The runway has been cleared and smoothed. Concrete pouring is expected to begin soon. According to one of the engineers, the operations will be definitely completed by early 2022. Thus, the airport will be probably put into operation next year.

Jabayil District, Khudafarin bridges. They stand out for their grandeur to this day. One of these bridges, built in the 12th century, overlooks Araz with its 11 vaults. The second one, which is three centuries older, rested on 15 bases. Unfortunately, not all of these structures remained on the spot.

Iran is on the other side. There is an almost uninterrupted array of buildings along the river bank. Vehicles are rushing by and life is burgeoning. The Iranian side of the river is full of light at night. **But no light is seen on the Azerbaijani side. People have not returned to their villages yet. They have nowhere to return at this point.** Frontier guards say it was the other way round three decades ago. The Iranians looked at the shining Azerbaijani river bank with a sense of envy. The leadership of the self-proclaimed "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic", which was closely involved in looting, did not invest in the development of this region. That was not its goal. The Karabakh land, which was once famed for its fertility, was leased out to Iranian farmers, which was absolutely illegal. The farmers, in turn, collected abundant harvest, enriching themselves, without any concern for the norms of international law, while the Armenian leaders made a profit. They benefitted from this significantly.

Driving by one of the destroyed villages, we saw a roadside monument. It was a memorial site for the Karabakh residents who fell in the battles of the Great Patriotic War. Three faces were discerned within the huge memorial plate. Those were three soldiers who left the village and went to the frontline, but never came back. The bas-relief is riddled with bullets. The Armenian militiamen took precise shots at the monument, knocking out the eyes of the soldiers.

Zangilan District, Basitchay State Nature Reserve. Unique Oriental plane trees used to grow in the area. Some of the trees were up to 50 meters high with a circumference of up to four meters. The trees were up to 170 years old on average. **These beautiful groves are gone without a trace and even little stumps are not seen in the area. The Armenians felled those protected groves and sold the timber.** Only a few huge plane trees are seen along the banks of the small river that crosses the natural reserve. These trees were not touched, since it was too difficult to get their trunks out to a nearby road. They tried to burn the trees down, but they were moist and rather inflammable. So, the trees with scorched trunks are still there.

The Babayli village. There is a mausoleum dating back to the 13th century on a hill. The Khakyari river is seen in the bottom. Behind the flowing river the skyline



is covered by the mountains. Remnants of a village are seen to the right. Not a single home remained undamaged. None of the homes were spared. Each of the walls was taken apart half-way. Was it easier to break it down that way? Or was this done so that those who built these homes would never think about coming back? Having noticed my bewilderment, the person accom-

panying me said that they were ruining the structures not just "for pleasure". The removed blocks of stones were transported to Armenia, Georgia and Iran. It was a smooth-running business and it had a significant scope, according to observations. But how can anyone live in this home if these rocks, brought from Karabakh, are "soaked in grief"?





Zangilan. You should always add the word "formerly". It is a former town. It is the same picture again and again.

Homes that have been ruined or more precisely, taken apart, broken monuments, abandoned gardens. A police officer warned us that we should look





under our feet and avoid getting off the asphalted area as there could be hidden mines in the area. He is absolutely right. Sergey barely escapes touching a tripwire



device hidden in the grass. That's a reminder that an Armenian military post was once stationed there.

Zangilan is a small town, but it is beautiful. At least, it was beautiful prior to the Armenian occupation. It is located in a woody depression. The wonderful Highland Park was set up upon one of the local slopes. Women used to walk down its pathways with baby strollers and children were running around. On Sundays, large groups of people used to get together in a restaurant under pine trees.

A total of 7,000 people lived in this town. According to a population census, there were only five Armenians among local residents. In 1994, Azerbaijanis were driven out of the town in one day. Evidently, this was done to vacate it for Armenians. However, Armenians were reluctant to settle down in Zangilan for some reason. As a result, the town's population had not exceeded 400 by the time it was liberated.

Gubadli District. The Damirchilar village. The same ruins. We came here to see a **14th century mausoleum. Fortunately, it remained on the spot, just like the single-arch bridge dating back to the same period of history that leads to it.** Solar signs inherent to the



culture of Caucasian Albania are clearly visible upon the walls of the tomb. Perhaps, the structure was built with the use of rock slabs of an ancient shrine. The tomb's floor was cut open. The rock slabs were broken down to reach the burial site. God knows whether or not ill-wishing Armenian diggers managed to find anything inside. In any case, if any valuables had been stored in that grave, these items were undoubtedly taken abroad and placed in a privately owned collection, just like almost all of the exhibits derived from Karabakh museums.

Khojavand District, Hadrut settlement. For the first time during the days spent in Karabakh, we saw homes that remained on the spot. There are even some undamaged streets in their entirety. We did not have to ask the question as to whether or not Armenians lived there. It is obvious. All of them fled the area when Azerbaijani forces approached Hadrut in October 2020. I remember the footage broadcast on television: dismayed women, somber men and crying children. And a lot of bitter words with regard to Azerbaijan. **However, in fact, these people were not being forced out, unlike their Azerbaijani neighbors, who were driven out of their own homes at gunpoint about 30 years ago.** But the Armenians apparently forgot about

it or perhaps, they didn't want to remember the past. In any case, I have not heard any of them expressing regret over their actions in any of the interviews. Not a single Armenian woman remembered her neighbors whom she visited and had meals with. Afterwards, they indifferently looked out of their window, observing neighboring families being ousted from their hometown.

Over 700,000 Azerbaijanis were driven out in the early 1990s during the invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts. "Deported", they say, and it is a handy word with no emotional coloring. In essence, **the Azerbaijanis were expelled, ousted from these areas. It means "get out immediately!" Leave right now or we'll kill you!"** So, that's how it happened. I have heard it many times while talking to refugees.

I've read somewhere that a mosque was once restored by Iranians and even rebuilt in a certain manner in the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic". Maybe. I have never seen it. But **I have witnessed a dozen destroyed, ruined and deliberately desecrated mosques.** Although I am an atheist, I believe these are vile actions. Well, their treatment of Christian churches was not any



better. At least, this holds true for the most ancient Albanian shrines. There was a unique caravanserai dating



back to the late 17th century in the former Garghabazar village of Fuzuli District (nothing is left of it either). The unusual structure had a balcony with a view of the courtyard, decorated by two columns and three semi-circular arches, which added lightness and elegance to the building. Moreover, **an ancient Albanian temple** is located upon an adjoining rock above the caravanserai. **The Armenians kept cattle there and in the caravanserai.**

The same happened to an Albanian temple in the Tug settlement. We ascended there using a steep curved road from Hadrut. A total of 920 Azerbaijanis and 700 Armenians lived in the settlement shortly before the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. I don't know whether or not local residents used to get along with each other, but all of the Azerbaijanis were ousted following the occupation of Khojavand District by Armenia and their homes were destroyed, while the Armenian-populated part of the settlement remained intact. **Moreover, the Albanian temple was significantly Armenianized. Its roof was 'decorated' by a little tower;** windows and a new entrance were hewn in the wall; the floor was deepened and a new altar was set up. In a nutshell, an Albanian architectural monument was turned into an Armenian church. In particular, a lot of changes were made in the temple courtyard. Many stonemasons



worked to create gravestones with Armenian inscriptions and various dates traced back to the beginning of the 19th century. However, they had no time to complete the work on these fake items.

Our Azerbaijani colleague suggested visiting the Boyuk Marjanli village of Jabrayil District.

"My parents' home is there," he said. "All of us, my brothers and sisters, grew up in it. In 1993, we had to go, leaving everything behind. I haven't been to my village for 27 years. I've only seen satellite images. It looks like the house was ruined. But there should be something left there. My father and mother asked me to take some pictures. For all these years, they have dreamt of coming back and living here as before."

Here's the road sign saying "Boyuk Marjanli". Our companion is turning pale. **The village is gone. Just a shabby shrub and quite tall trees are seen in the area where homes, courtyards and household structures were once located.** In some places, rocks that were part of building foundations remained on the spot, along with a remainder of walls sticking out of last year's grass.

"This was a huge village," our fellow traveler explained. "There used to be three schools here, including

a music school, along with a clinic, a house of culture, a stadium, stores and a local railway station..."

We are following a police sergeant along the former main street of the village. He knows which roads have already been de-mined and how to sidestep mines elsewhere.

"The clinic used to be here," the police sergeant said, pointing at a large crater on the ground. "The Armenians blew it up on their way out."

"Armenians never lived in our village," our colleague replied.

"Yes, but they were bossing around once you were driven out," the police officer said.

Our colleague looked around helplessly. No landmarks are in sight.

"The house was located 200 meters behind the railway. We could hear the sound of trains passing by," he said.

"They took the railway apart and sold the rails, but the earth fill is still there. We'll find it!" the police officer assured him and kept walking ahead confidently.

"Wait! There used to be a school here. My father worked there as a teacher," our colleague says.

A small wall with wide-open windows is the only thing left of that school. Even the desks were either taken out or burned down.



“That’s it! We can’t proceed. There might be mines out there,” the police officer said as he blocked the road.

“The house has to be over there. It is close by...”

“No, you can’t go there!” the police officer insisted. “So many people have already died here... They can see their house, start running and...”

The police officer was waving his hand as he spoke. Everything was crystal clear.

Our colleague kneels and we step aside.

The more impressions you get, the more questions arise. **But the one that pops up most frequently is “why Armenians needed this land”.** Is it that same “Lebensraum” issue, which caused even bigger problems for most nations? This had not been a problem in Armenia with its relatively small and plummeting population. It is common knowledge that more Armenians currently live in Russia than in their home country. Maybe, they should ask themselves the following question: why are people fleeing Armenia? It would be more reasonable than calling for invasion of another country’s territories. Judging by my observations in Karabakh, in the Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, Lachin and other regions, **this is not Armenians’ land. It has never been theirs**

either. This is not the way you treat your own land.

It is cherished and improved instead of looting, ravaging or leasing it out to someone you don’t know.

Aghdam. It was called “a ghost town”. My last visit to this town was in 1987. I remember it by its cleanliness and an abundance of greenery. Certainly, I was then taken to see the Bread Museum and the Tea House as local residents particularly took pride in these two sights. Currently, it is next to impossible to figure out where they were located when you see these ruins that stretch for miles on end. **The only recognizable building is a jami shrine or a Friday mosque. It turned out that it was not destroyed for only one reason. Its minarets were used by Armenian artillery men as landmarks during adjustment of fire.** Otherwise, everything in this area is the same as in the other towns liberated by the Azerbaijanis. The Armenians had not left a single building intact in Aghdam. They removed the roof off each building and broke the windows, doors and floors, and then took the walls apart. Nevertheless, they lived worse than poverty-stricken people. I have seen such “dwelling space” once. Even a homeless person would refuse to live



there. Certainly, mansions were built for the bosses, while ordinary people lived in shacks, although Armenians were the most well-to-do residents in Karabakh prior to 1994. And why would anyone destroy the Aghdam Drama Theater? How about **using the Natanavan tomb as a barn? What could possibly have caused such hatred for this wonderful 19th century poetess, who was one of the most educated women of that time period**, and prompted them to nastily desecrate her grave?

I have heard and read a great deal about the beauty of Karabakh, its wonderful nature, cherished soil, spacious gardens and green pastures, as well as abundant villages and cozy towns. I did not see any of that during my visit. I saw exploded bridges and roads that have not been repaired for decades, looted water pipelines, ruined power transmission towers, felled forests, gardens and vineyards, mine fields, abandoned trenches and anti-tank ditches that are falling apart. I also witnessed desecrated mosques and temples, exploded theaters and hospitals, as well as endless ruins that were once populated towns and villages. I've seen grievous views, which are in contrast to the concept of beauty.

Insufficient data has been published outside Azerbaijan with regard to the actions committed in Karabakh during the long-standing occupation. However, the voices of those representing the Armenian community are loud and clear. They have been urging protection for Armenia and punishment for Azerbaijan and seeking regaining of Karabakh. I presume that such calls are made by numerous persons who are poorly informed not only about the history of this conflict but also its consequences. This is particularly likely **because Armenian politicians and falsifying scholars have made every effort to hide real historical developments under a host of flattering myths that are fueling hard-line nationalism of their nation**. Nevertheless, there should be enough well-informed people and those who visited the territories that had been occupied by Armenia and witnessed everything firsthand. So, why are they keeping silent? How is it possible for an illegal "code of silence" to dominate the life of an entire nation? 🌹

P.S. I did not use any correspondence, facts or figures referenced by other people on purpose. My personal observations are the only source of content for the Karabakh notes. March 2021