

# ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTES ON A CITY THAT SURVIVED AN EARTHQUAKE.

## *Summary*

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The city of Gyumri experienced a devastating earthquake on December 7, 1988. This article analyzes how perceptions of Gyumri's urban space changed in the aftermath of that experience. The paper draws on a range of sources to address historical, mythologized, and existential levels of perception of that space, the latter based primarily on the international avant-garde art biennales that have taken place in Gyumri since 1998. The article also discusses the transformation of Gyumri residents' identity through an analysis of public discourse about images of the city before and after the earthquake.

The earthquake principally destroyed structures built during the Soviet period, when the city was called Leninakan. This facilitated a division of the city's history into three stages which correspond to its successive names. It is now perceived in the manner of Russian dolls composed of all its historic names: Kumairi–Gyumri–Aleksandropol–Leninakan–Kumairi–Gyumri.

Until the earthquake, the inhabitants of Gyumri perceived the city's early history in terms of stages of a constant ascent. This evolution supposedly peaked in the Soviet city of Leninakan, which was not only heir to the best traditions of urban construction, but moved on to a different and superior style of development. The earthquake, which was soon followed by Armenia's independence, disturbed this image of linear evolution. Post-Soviet identity is predicated upon the idea of return, of turning off the Soviet cul-de-sac and back to the previous crossroads of history, the moment where a "wrong turn" was taken. The article examines this discourse of a "turning point," which, to use Jan Assmann's terminology, was sometimes based on communicative memory and sometimes on cultural memory. Exponents of cultural memory (especially historians) advocated restoring the city's oldest name, which may be traced back to the Cimmerians or Hurrians, depending on the sources. Older carriers of living, communicative memory viewed the city's history as part of their own biographies or those of their parents, and insisted that it be renamed Gyumri. Today, many former residents of Leninakan advocate the restoration of the Soviet name as a symbol of a well-planned city. Descendants of the intelligentsia of Aleksandropol (Gyumri's name in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

insist that this should be the city's name, because the town's "urban history" started during that period. The "artisanal" name Gyumri, which was chosen in a citywide referendum, is still being questioned because of its Turkish origins (everything Turkish being often perceived as antagonistic). Thus discourse about the city's different names refers to different images of the city and to different social perceptions of a unified urban space that is inscribed into different historical contexts.

Not only do the city's names *reflect* the stages of its historical development; they *embody* these periods, being perceived as self-sufficient images that are sometimes coextensive and sometimes in competition, striving for a superior status in a hierarchy of Armenian cities where Leninakan/Gyumri usually takes second place. The article analyzes the mythologem of the "second city" as well as center-vs.-periphery discourse and discussions of the "second" city's relationship with the "first" and "third" cities. It also shows how this discourse has been affected by the social and cultural changes that have taken place since the earthquake. Whereas before the earthquake, the "second city" discursively competed with the capitals of other countries or Soviet republics, since the tragedy there has been talk of the city "sliding down" to third place or even becoming a "village." At the same time, discourse about the city includes the theme of a "center" and, since the earthquake, an "epicenter," which raises the question of the boundaries of the regional or virtual map in which Gyumri would occupy a central place.

A city's image becomes more recognizable if other, similar communities can be identified. There are three cities that Armenia's second city compares itself to: Leningrad, Kars, and Ani.

The similarities with Leningrad are constructed both around the status of a "second" city and around the comparison between "intellectual" second cities and "rural" capitals (compare the metaphor of Moscow as a big village). The city of Kars, now in Turkey, which sent numerous migrants to Gyumri in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is sometimes considered Gyumri's twin in terms of both architecture and population. The comparison with Kars also stresses the image of the old, "traditional" Gyumri, which is partly preserved in the artisanal neighborhood of Slobodka.

The medieval Armenian town of Ani (whose remains are now also in Turkey) is perceived, symbolically, as a city of ruins, and the article focuses mostly on attempts to avoid the comparison. The rich archaeological finds in Gyumri, which date to the same period as Ani, were irrevocably lost during the construction of a holiday camp in Soviet times, and the residents of Leninakan never developed a connection with Ani, even though they always aspired to match its grandeur. In Gyumri's new coat of arms, the upper shield (which, heraldically, indicates a family's younger branch) displays the lion of Ani. The church of the Holy Savior, which is also displayed in the new coat of arms, was modeled on the Katoghike Church of Ani. For Gyumri residents, its reconstruction became a symbol of their city's rebirth. The whole range of approaches to conservation was voiced in the debate that preceded that reconstruction. In the end, the "reanimation" approach, which is based on treating destroyed buildings as living human beings, won the day.