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Research paper

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## THE PROCESS OF SHAPING NEW URBAN CULTURE IN LENINAKAN DURING THE EARLY SOVIET PERIOD

**Abstract.** In the USSR, an entity largely isolated from the global sphere due to its distinctive formation and evolution as a multinational yet cohesive state, unique processes, unparalleled in their scope and vigor, unfolded, which outlined the novel paths for traditional cultural development. These dynamics manifested in different ways across rural and urban settlements, shaped by emergent political, ideological, socioeconomic, and cultural imperatives. Within the Armenian context, such transformations manifested most vividly and idiosyncratically in Leninakan, propelling the city by mid-century to become a major industrial hub not only in Soviet Armenia but across the broader USSR. This article aims to delineate the principal factors that profoundly shaped the city's emergent cultural complex, while demonstrating the interplay between Alexandropol's entrenched urban traditions and the evolving Soviet ethos of Leninakan, reflected in every facet of civic life. Although the traditional culture of Alexandropol has received considerable scholarly attention and documentation, the multifaceted cultural milieu of Soviet Leninakan demands deeper, more detailed approach, which constitutes the core ambition of this study. Employing historical, ethnographic, and ethnocultural methodologies, the research centers on comparative analysis framed within a systemic paradigm. The contemporary periodical press was widely used as a reliable source for studying the dynamics of historical and cultural processes and transformations. Particular attention was paid to the analysis of previously unpublished archival materials.

**Keywords:** Leninakan; tradition; sovietization; socialist ideology; industrialization; immigration; new urban culture

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Исследовательская статья

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## ПРОЦЕСС ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ НОВОЙ ГОРОДСКОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ В РАННЕСОВЕТСКОМ ЛЕНИНАКАНЕ

**Аннотация.** В почти изолированном от внешнего мира СССР, в силу специфики его становления и развития как многонационального, но при этом единого государства, происходили уникальные по содержанию и интенсивности процессы, которые определили особенные пути развития традиционной культуры. Они проявлялись по-разному в сельской и городской местностях, в зависимости от новых политико-идеологических, социально-экономических и культурных требований. В армянской действительности эти трансформации наиболее интересными и своеобразными способами отразились в Ленинакане, в результате чего уже в середине XX века город стал одним из важных промышленных центров не только Советской Армении, но и СССР. Цель данной статьи заключается в выявлении ключевых факторов, оказавших значительное влияние на формирование нового культурного комплекса города, а также в представлении взаимосвязи традиционной культуры Александрополя и культуры Советского Ленинакана, которые проявлялись во всех сферах повседневной жизни горожан. Если традиционная городская культура Александрополя в целом изучена и опубликована, то культурный комплекс советского Ленинакана, требует более глубокого и всестороннего изучения, что и является основной задачей данной работы. Исследование было проведено с использованием методологии историко-этнографических и этнокультурных исследований. В качестве основного метода применялся сравнительный анализ, который использовался в рамках системного подхода. Широко использовалась периодическая пресса того времени как надежный источник для изучения динамики исторических и культурных процессов и трансформаций. Особое внимание было уделено анализу ранее неопубликованных архивных материалов.

**Ключевые слова:** Ленинакан; традиция; советизация; социалистическая идеология; индустриализация; иммиграция; новая городская культура

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## *Introduction*

Modern Gyumri is a city in Armenia with a unique identity, the foundation and development of which are presented in numerous and diverse sources, both scientific and popular literature. Initially built as a city of strategic importance with a clear urban planning layout, it has continuously expanded and changed under the influence of various demographic, economic, cultural, and political factors.

Gyumri – Leninakan, the second-largest city in Armenia, was founded in 1837 by Nicholas I under the name Alexandropol. Its inhabitants were immigrants from the Western Armenian cities of Kars, Karin, and Bayazet. By the late 19th century, the city had become an important military-strategic center of the region and was considered the third most significant trade, craft, and cultural center of the South Caucasus, after Tiflis and Baku.

Local (Eastern and Western Armenian), Russian, and numerous Western European cultural traditions coexisted successfully, influencing urban planning, craftsmanship, and trade, but most notably shaping the social and humanitarian aspects of city life.

As a district center, Alexandropol assumed not only administrative and managerial functions but also served as an economic and cultural hub for surrounding settlements. The transformation of any settlement into an administrative center is clearly reflected in the socio-psychological and behavioral aspects of its population's value system. Many ethnocultural phenomena characteristic of Alexandropol are unique and result from the urbanization processes that took place there in the 19th and early 20th centuries [1].

The life of Alexandropol changed significantly after the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia and the transition to a new state economic system. The city, known for its strong craft traditions, underwent a major restructuring, affecting not only its population but also its main occupations, economic and social relations, and overall way of life [2].

In 1924, it was named Leninakan in honor of Lenin, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was renamed Gyumri in 1992. In terms of urban culture, the city is distinctly characterized by three historical developmental phases, each reflected in one of the three names given to it. Thus, a number of characteristic economic, cultural, and spatial-structural features of urban organization emerge in each period, which reflect both the state's policy approaches and the degree of participation of the urban population in these processes.

This article discusses the processes from the 1920s to the 1940s that had a significant impact on the formation of a new urban culture in Leninakan.

The establishment of Soviet Rule in Armenia in 1920 and the transition to a new state-run economic system brought significant changes to the life of Alexandropol, and, since 1924, to the life of Leninakan. In a city that had previously developed artisan traditions, major shifts began to occur, resulting in changes not only in the composition of the population and their primary occupations but also in economic and social relations, which in turn influenced other aspects of daily life. Archival materials and publications from the time contain rich information about these transitional, turbulent years, offering a chance to reconstruct the process of Alexandropol's shift from a traditional urban culture to the new, industrial, Soviet Leninakan.

Several books were written and published about Leninakan during the Soviet years, which, in line with the demands of socialist ideology, aimed to present its progress by contrasting it with pre-Soviet Alexandropol [2-6]. These works detailed the changes that occurred during the Soviet period, covering the city's industrial development, urban planning, and housing construction, efforts to improve the population's well-being, and cultural life. H. Gabrielyan only briefly addressed the ethnographic description of the people of Leninakan in the subsection "Lifestyle and Customs" in his book [6, pp. 21–33].

The sole study addressing this topic is K. Seghbosyan's work, which, grounded in extensive ethnological research, examines and elucidates the artisan traditions of Alexandropol and their embodiment in the everyday lives of Leninakan's residents [7]. With rich ethnographic, factual, and historical materials, this study remains unmatched to this day, despite the application of Soviet methodology and the adherence to socialist ideology in its presentation. The author, while thoroughly presenting the preservation of artisan traditions in Leninakan's reality, only briefly discusses the processes that form the foundation of the new circumstances and relationships.

This article aims to clarify this very issue and has been carried out using the methodology of historical-ethnography and ethno-cultural research. Various forms of comparative analysis have served as the primary method, employed within a systematic framework. In addition to relevant literature, the study places particular emphasis on periodical press materials of the time, considering them as reliable sources for examining the dynamics of historical and cultural processes and transformations. Special attention is given to the analysis of previously unpublished archival materials.

Since the topic is vast, it is merely a brief analysis of the deep and multifaceted changes that had a significant impact on the formation of Leninakan's new urban culture. This was influenced by a number of factors, of which we highlighted the following:

- The change in the composition of the population;
- The new economic policy and the process of industrialization;
- The policy aimed at eradication of illiteracy and promoting gender equality;
- The spread of socialist ideology.

### *The change in the composition of the population*

The culture of any city is shaped by, and best represented by its population. The changes in the population's composition inevitably led to changes in the city's character, creating the social environment in which the urban population forms and establishes its own patterns.

World War I and the Turkish invasions of 1918 and 1920 had disastrous consequences for the demographic picture of Alexandropol. The composition of the population changed significantly; the city lost its young, capable workforce, and both emigration to Tbilisi and the immigration of Western Armenians, including thousands of orphans, became widespread. According to the data from the 1897 All-Russian Census, the population of Alexandropol was 30,316 people, 95% of whom were Armenians [1, p. 13]. After the mentioned events, between 1914–1926, the population decreased by 10,410 people, or 19.7% respectively [8, pp. 126].

In 1920, 20,000 orphans were placed in the "Polygon," "Cossack Post," and "Severskyi" military units of the American Committee for Armenian Relief. The American government aimed to relocate the best students to the USA. The first group of orphans was relocated in 1922, but this process was halted later at the request of Alexander Myasnikyan, effectively stopping the relocation of children. To this day, it is unknown how many orphans were sent to the USA.

Notably, compared to 1920, the number of orphans decreased by 14,999, or by a factor of 3.6. On January 1, 1927, there were 5,501 orphans in the American Committee's orphanages in Leninakan, and by the following year, the number had decreased to 3,125 [9, pp. 5–6].

During World War I, Armenians who had fled from Sarighamish, Kaghzvan, Ardahan, Ardvin, and Batumi settled in Alexandropol. By the end of 1914, about 2,400 people had settled in the city. In the early months of 1915, another 360 Armenians from various parts of Western Armenia settled in the city [10, p. 66]. As a result of the Turkish invasions in 1918 and 1920, thousands of residents from the Kars region and the city of Kars arrived in Alexandropol.

Since 1921, Armenian repatriates from Constantinople, the Balkans, and the Near East joined the emigrants, and the issues of their settlement and accommodation were nearly insurmountable due to Armenia's harsh socio-economic conditions. By the end of 1921, a significant portion of the 3,000 Armenians who had fled from the countries of the Near East were settled in Alexandropol. In 1924–1925, more than 3,000 Armenians who had emigrated from Constantinople, the Near East, and Greece settled in Yerevan and Leninakan [8, p. 67].

In Leninakan, the refugees settled in the area near the railway station and in the "Barracks" neighborhood that had been established after the 1926 earthquake. By 1928, the local economic division's inventory records showed that more than half of the 400 residents of the Barracks were Armenian refugees who had immigrated from Kars, the Kars region, and Sivas. The remaining residents of the neighborhood came from various villages of the Leninakan region.

It is important to note that as a result of the repatriation that began in 1926–1927, three groups were formed in the city: those who had emigrated from Western Armenia after the 1915 genocide, known as the "refugees"; the diaspora Armenians, or "People of Constantinople"; and the native Armenians, or "locals" [9, p. 67].

The next stage of immigration spans from 1933 to 1936, during which about 73,300 people immigrated to the country. While the exact number of people who settled in Leninakan during these years is unknown, ethnographic sources suggest that the majority of the immigrants were French Armenians, with some also coming from the Balkans. These repatriates, joining the already established sub-ethnic group, were called the “French” (as they were also referred to in Yerevan) and “newcomers,” in contrast to the previous phase of repatriates.

The establishment of Soviet Rule had a generally positive impact on stabilizing the demographic situation of Alexandropol–Leninakan and promoting the subsequent growth of the population. This growth was mainly due to the immigration and repatriation of the rural population, which indicates that the opportunities for settlement and employment in Leninakan were greater compared to other regions of the republic. Among the repatriates, there was a significant number of artisans. Those who immigrated from France and Constantinople were predominantly intellectuals and skilled craftsmen. Many of them settled in the city center, while the outskirts were populated by rural immigrants from Syria, Iraq, and Iran, who needed land for agricultural work.

Between 1922 and 1931, the population of Leninakan was also supplemented by foreigners: Russians and Ukrainians (6,613), Turks (316), Kurds and Yazidis (146), and others (967) [8, pp. 128–129].

Alexandropol was a city with a traditional artisan-trade economy, and, according to the 1901 statistical data, its population was divided into the following classes: “The wealthy class consisted of the prominent families of the city, landowners, moneylenders, contractors, political service officers, doctors, and lawyers, if available. Among the wealthier group were the retailers, small textile owners, butchers owning their own shops and houses, and officers in military service.”

The middle class encompassed craftsmen, large rural families, and civil servants earning an annual income of 300–400 rubles. Most priests also fell into this category. The lower class, by contrast, included owners of secondary crafts, lower-ranking civil servants, members of the working class, able-bodied men who were currently unemployed, and widows with adult children. It further comprised elderly individuals without descendants, the blind, the crippled, and the disabled who subsisted on public charity, as well as widows with young children.

According to 1901 statistical data, there were 127 rich families, 363 wealthy individuals, 1,448 middle-class individuals, 1,431 lower-class individuals, and 61 very poor persons. These figures underscore that the overwhelming majority of the population comprised craftsmen and low-ranking civil servants [11, pp. 261–263].

By 1920, as a result of the aforementioned processes, the number of wealthy and affluent people in the city had drastically decreased, while the number of poor people – including immigrants and orphans – had increased. The previously established class, socio-economic, and professional structure of the city had changed, and the main social classes of the population had been transformed.

Thus, the population of Alexandropol was clearly distinguished not only by ethnic and sub-ethnic affiliations but also by religious denominations and even occupations. This was reflected in the territorial division of the city (e.g., Russian, Sloboda, Greek, Catholic, Turkish, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

The migration processes mentioned above had a profound impact on the city’s new culture, population behavior, ritual systems, and overall ethno-cultural environment. The identity of any city is best shaped and expressed by its population. The changes in the population’s composition, therefore, inevitably led to changes in the city’s character, while the other two factors – industrial development and social-professional composition – shaped the social environment in which the urban population forms and establishes its own patterns.

### ***The new economic policy and the process of industrialization***

The processes initiated in Leninakan, aimed at fostering new political, economic, and socio-cultural relations while promoting a socialist way of life, were carried out under difficult conditions resulting from the Turkish invasions of 1918 and 1920. The reconstruction and economic transformation of the city began in 1921,

1 K. Kostanyan. Gyumri and its cities. Archives of Museum of Literature and Art, Fund of K. Kostanyan. 22 page, p. 5.



spearheaded by the newly established Executive Committee of the City Soviet. Their mission was not only to revive a broken and dormant economy but to rebuild it on a foundation of socialist ideals.

The first significant step in economic policy was the nationalization of private enterprises. Pre-Soviet Alexandropol had no large factories but was home to several small enterprises, including Dzitoghtsyans' and Tzaghikyan's breweries, Tzatourian's soap factory, Heqimyan's mechanical enterprise, and a few printing houses. Archival records reveal that most of these were destroyed during the First World War, with much of their equipment looted. Among them, only Tzaghikyan's factory was partially spared. During the years of the First Republic, the original owners made no attempts to reclaim or restore their properties, and the government neglected these enterprises.

In 1922, the Leninakan Executive Committee initiated efforts to restore these businesses. By 1924, these enterprises had been placed under state accounting, albeit on an experimental basis. A final decision on the structure and management of trade and industrial enterprises came in 1925 after thorough deliberation. These enterprises were subsequently consolidated under the Trade and Industrial Department, later known as Arard. Before this restructuring, in 1924–1925, all enterprises managed by the Leninakan Executive Committee were placed under state accounting and consolidated into the Communal Trust.<sup>2</sup>

In 1927, the following factories and production enterprises operated under Industrial Trade, as reported by the *Banvor* newspaper:

*Soap Factory*: 12 workers, 3 employees; soap production of various qualities.

*Tile Factory (Tomet Factory)*: 12 workers, 2 employees; tile manufacturing, mosaic works, bricks, concrete pipes, and various concrete products.

*Brewery*: 17 workers, 3 employees, 5 seasonal workers; "Table," "Export", and "Soft" beer production, which were consumed not only in Yerevan but throughout the country and also exported to Georgia.

*Mechanical Factory*: 47 workers, 4 employees; unable to produce independently but operated a main foundry (copper and cast iron) and focused on repairing local construction and agricultural machinery.

*Printing House*: 23 workers, 3 employees; printed the *Banvor* newspaper and handled orders for the State Publishing House and local institutions.

*Electric Plant*: 17 workers, 4 employees.

*Brick and Tile Factory*: under construction in Jajur.

*Store*: construction materials, with 5 employees.<sup>3</sup>

Under the New Economic Policy in the country, in addition to state enterprises, small private factories also operated. These were documented in the "Research of Small Industrial and Handicraft Economic Enterprises of the Rural Areas of Leninakan Regions in 1927." Among the listed artisans, the following were noted: one power station, one automobile workshop, two workshops for winnowing machines, one slaughterhouse, one tile factory, three lemonade factories, four bakeries, one musical instrument factory, two sausage factories, one brick factory, four olive presses, two water mills.<sup>4</sup>

The remaining industrial activity in the city was concentrated in workshops, which by 1923 numbered 270. These private workshops employed 521 people, while a large group of artisans who did not have their own workshops and consequently became unemployed. To provide work for these individuals, between 1925 and 1932, 16 artisan cooperatives were established under the cooperative policy. These cooperatives specialized in various crafts, including tailoring, shoemaking, horseshoe and nail making, cotton weaving, carpet weaving, metalworking, woodworking, construction materials, and more [2, p. 61].

The *Banvor* newspaper wrote about this in 1928 under the headline "Handicraft Collectives in Leninakan"<sup>5</sup>:

"To combat unemployment, with the support of the public administrative agency of Labor Commissariat resources, 8 collectives were opened and are operating in Leninakan, involving 149 previously unemployed artisans. The organized collectives fulfill orders more cheaply than private artisans and deliver higher quality and more timely work."

The organization of work for the unemployed was managed by the Labor Exchange, which placed advertisements in the *Banvor* newspaper, inviting specialists to present themselves. There was significant

2 The National Archives of Armenia (henceforth NAA). F. 131, inv. 6, file 21, p. 11.

3 *Banvor* (Worker) Daily newspaper. 1927, 50(513); 1928, 126(691).

4 NAA, F. 131, inv. 7, file 120, p. 38.

5 *Banvor*, 1928, 119(683).

demand not only for artisans but also for employees and specialists in the service sector.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1924, a textile factory was established in the city, rapidly emerging as one of the USSR's leading textile enterprises. In December 1927, the Soviet industrialization drive was formally launched; by 1928, Leninakan's hydroelectric station had opened to supply power for anticipated industrial facilities. This was followed by the establishment of several key factories: the fabric factory in 1930, the meat-preserving factory in 1934, and the bread factory (bakery) in 1936.

These developments marked significant progress in Leninakan's industrial sector. As a result, the working class became the dominant group within the population. For example, while in 1913 there were 560 workers in the city, by 1923, the number had increased to 2,593 [2, p. 54]. By 1930, 2,044 workers were employed at the Textile factory, and by 1935 [12, p.13], the Meat factory employed 1,200 workers [6, p. 15].

As noted at the time, "through socialist labor, life in the city has changed, the relationships among socialist classes have transformed, and petty trading has been overcome and destroyed. With the development of industry, the city itself has been improved and transformed" [6, p. 19].

The city had only just initiated its efforts toward improvement and reconstruction when the earthquake of October 22, 1926, devastated a substantial portion of Leninakan. Paradoxically, this catastrophe also had a major impact on the strategic planning for the city's development and the forging of its new identity. A few days after the earthquake, a slogan for the construction of the new city was proclaimed: "From the ruins of the old, medieval Alek-Pol,<sup>7</sup> a strong, industrial Leninakan must be built."<sup>8</sup>

Efforts to eliminate the consequences of the earthquake continued into the 1930s. Through the combined efforts of local, republican, and union authorities, the city's industrial potential and housing stock were restored. During this period, not only were the destroyed industries rebuilt, but new ones were also established.

Additionally, the railway and station were restored and modernized, and a new water pipeline was constructed to provide the city with drinking water. New neighborhoods were founded, such as those around the textile factory, railway, and meat factory. Initially, these neighborhoods featured wooden or stone temporary buildings, widely known among the population as "barracks."

These neighborhoods were primarily populated by graduates of the Faculty of Philology and the Professional Technical School (PTU, known in Leninakan by the Russian abbreviation FZU). The majority of the residents were former orphans from Leninakan's orphanages and workers who had moved to the city from various rural villages in the region.

Each settlement had its own cultural house, medical center, club, bathhouse, and other facilities. Over the course of one and a half decades, Leninakan gradually transformed from a traditional artisan and trade city into a major industrial center within the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In the 1930s, the State Architectural Workshop No. 3, led by architect M. Mazmanyan, developed a new urban plan for Leninakan. The city's construction continued according to this design until the 1940s. Between 1926 and 1940, the state invested significant funds into the city's reconstruction. This effort not only restored Leninakan but also revitalized, expanded, and transformed it [13, p. 141].

After sovietization, both the city's population and the nature of its occupations changed. Industrial enterprises replaced artisan workshops and craft businesses. From 1926 to 1939, Leninakan saw consistent growth in its economy, employment, and population, influenced in part by the socio-economic policies introduced by Soviet authorities.

One of the key aspects of these policies was aimed at eradicating illiteracy, promoting gender equality, and spreading socialist ideology. The Soviet authorities considered the "cultural uplift of the people" essential for ensuring the success of socialism. They believed that the creation of the new system could only be achieved through education. To this end, they focused on two main objectives: organizing school education for children and eradicating illiteracy among adults. The overarching goal of these efforts was "to raise the cultural level of the masses and educate them in the communist spirit." The eradication of illiteracy was viewed as a vital precondition for enabling the working-class population to actively participate in the political and cultural life of the republic.

The decision to eradicate illiteracy was adopted by the Armenian government in September 1921. Teachers,

<sup>6</sup> *Banvor*, 1929, 55(759).

<sup>7</sup> Alek-Pol is a shortened version of the name Alexandropol.

<sup>8</sup> *Banvor*, November 7, 1926.

educated citizens, cultural-educational organizations, publishing houses, and especially the press were mobilized for this effort. As a result, illiteracy was completely eradicated in Leninakan by the 1930s.

Clubs, libraries, museums, and the press – particularly the *Banvor* newspaper – closely tied to factories and plants, played a significant role in spreading socialist ideology. This ideology emphasized the establishment of gender equality, the elevation of women's role, and their involvement in public and state life. To achieve these goals, the Soviet state created the system of “women's departments,” which functioned as executive bodies tasked with promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights [14, pp. 122–125].

The liberation of women was a complex process fraught with obstacles. For the people of Leninakan, who had grown up with traditional family and social values and had lived with gender stereotypes, women's work outside the home was considered dishonorable.<sup>9</sup> Public participation and a free lifestyle for women were not only discouraged but often forbidden, leading to conflicts both between spouses and between parents and children. The press frequently published literary and real-life stories criticizing and ridiculing such attitudes.

One notable example is an accusatory statement published in the *Worker of Armenia* magazine:

“Your Honor,

I got married five years ago. True, I have tried to adjust to my new life. I have always been a man of honor, enduring it, thinking maybe she'll respect her parents and feel ashamed. But as time goes on, things are only getting worse – she's going completely off track.

Now she's decided that I should learn typewriting so I can go out and work. How can I let my wife work while I stay home? What kind of man would that make me? I think her attitude is absolutely disgraceful. God forbid I let the reins go too far – she needs to be reined in. She's shortening her skirts up to her knees, baring her arms up to her elbows. Am I the head of this household or not?

No, if I get mad, I'll trample her like a rag, strike her, crush her – and who knows, something might happen. Then they'll take me and send me to Siberia. No, I'm also a man with such capabilities, and I'm asking you to annul our marriage before any misfortune occurs, before my reputation is destroyed. I haven't lost my head.

Your humble servant, Gevorg of Soloyans.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the population's conservatism and resistance, life began to follow its own course, shaped by the more liberated and unconstrained lifestyles of former orphans and Russians who had settled in the city. One of the most striking manifestations of this shift was the establishment of the first women's gymnastics groups, which were opened along the railway line. As described in contemporary accounts, “still living a patriarchal life, women stand next to men, demonstrating unique courage and achieving their first sports successes.”

Since 1924, the industrial construction boom in Leninakan became a catalyst for invigorating and enriching the city's sports life. Sports facilities were established at the Textile factory, the “Khorartzar” club, and the Builders' club. By the eve of the 1926 earthquake, Leninakan boasted 390 athletes, including 50 women. According to statistics of the time, Leninakan ranked first in both the republic and the Caucasus in the number of female athletes [15, p. 416].

In 1937, with the adoption of the new Constitution of the Armenian SSR, it was officially declared: “Women have equal rights with men in all areas of political, economic, and cultural life.” [16, p. 469]

The opportunity to exercise these rights was ensured through equal employment, remuneration, leisure, social security, and education systems for women. Additionally, the state provided care for mothers and children, support for large families and single mothers, and other forms of assistance. This policy significantly changed societal attitudes toward women.

In constructing a new socialist way of life, the spread of anti-religious and anti-church ideology was given significant importance. The main targets of the state's anti-religious policies were traditional Armenian religious holidays and rituals. Naturally, this persecution was primarily directed against churches and clergy, resulting in the closing of churches, the destruction of church property, and the execution or exile of clergymen. The Union of Fighting Atheists spearheaded many anti-religious efforts, including publishing the magazine *Atheist*.

In Shirak, anti-religious propaganda was actively promoted by the *Banvor* newspaper, which regularly published articles and satirical pieces condemning and mocking priests. At the same time, it promoted new

<sup>9</sup> See our research on gender stereotypes: <https://doi.org/10.37708/bf.swu.v33i1.13>

<sup>10</sup> *Hayastani Ashkhatavoruhi* (Armenian Woman Worker) Magazine. 1928, 4, p. 18.



socialist family rituals through stories praising socialist principles. These rituals were given titles such as “Red Baptism,” “Red Betrothal,” and “Burial Without a Priest.”

In the absence of churches, state bodies established “Red Corners” at schools, libraries, and clubs to organize the population’s ritual and cultural life. These “Red Corners” hosted lectures, speeches, educational programs, and celebratory events, all aimed at spreading socialist ideology.

These cultural institutions, established during the first decades of the Soviet Union, were tasked with addressing political and socio-cultural goals. They focused on eradicating illiteracy, promoting and rooting new Soviet norms in society, and shaping new spiritual and cultural practices, among other objectives.

In addition to constructing typical buildings, it became common practice to transform religious structures into culture houses and museums. This was often seen as the best way to save churches from destruction. Transforming a church into a culture house also carried an ideological message of “recycling.” A church, traditionally a spiritual and religious gathering place, served to unite various segments of the community, fostering communication and the formation of shared values and ideas. When repurposed as a culture house, the building continued to fulfill these functions, albeit with a completely different ideological content [17, p. 176–178].

With this purpose in mind, in 1930, the Shirak Regional Museum (later the Philharmonic) was established in the Church of St. Amenaprkich (Holy Savior) in Leninakan, and a planetarium was set up in the Church of St. Nicholas [18, pp. 451, 476].

These processes brought about significant changes in Leninakan’s social life, resulting in a conflict between those adhering to old ways of life and those embracing new Soviet norms. This tension was largely resolved during the Second World War. The contradictory atmosphere in Leninakan during the 1920s and 1930s is vividly described in the magazine *Anastvats* (Atheist):

“Whoever says that Gyumri is a single, united city, don’t believe them. The people of Gyumri and Leninakan differ from each other as much as the Chinese differ from the Germans. These two have nothing in common. One calls the other vulgar, ragged, “Tsarist times”, foul-mouthed; the others retort, ‘You are godless, against Christ; that’s why earthquakes keep happening and destroying the city.’

The people of Leninakan clearly differ from the people of Gyumri. Today, they have abandoned all the heritage of their ancestors – God, religion, church services, Satan, priest, angel, saint, and Gospel – creating and building a new home, and live there.

The Bolsheviks, Komsomols (The All-Union Leninist Young Communist League), women’s organizations, pioneers – all come from Leninakan. It is a Soviet city; it values education and a new way of life, attends clubs and reading halls, reads newspapers and the Atheist magazine instead of the Gospel. It builds factories, brings in electricity, establishes kolkhozes (collective farms), and constructs socialism.

Meanwhile, the people of Gyumri go to church Yot Verk (Seven Wounds), pray, give thanks to Saint Karapet (John the Baptist), and make offerings. The people of Leninakan hold meetings and talk about a new lifestyle, construction, industrialization, and the third loan, the men of Gyumri drink vodka, and the women visit each other’s homes.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The aforementioned processes brought about profound transformations in the everyday life and activities of the people of Leninakan. In particular:

**Population Growth:** A significant increase in population occurred due to both internal and external migration.

**Ethnic Composition:** The ethnic makeup of the urban population changed considerably, including shifts in sub-ethnic and other ethnic groups.

**Social Class Structure:** The class structure evolved, with the emergence of workers, service providers, and intellectuals, fundamentally different from the population of pre-Soviet Alexandropol.

**Gender Relations:** Gender roles underwent profound changes. Although difficult, traditional stereotypes

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<sup>11</sup> *Anastvats* (Atheist) Magazine. 1929, 9, pp. 18–19.

about social roles, status, and the division of labor were gradually broken.

**Communal Living:** Multi-apartment residential buildings introduced a new way of life, along with changes in interior decoration, clothing, cuisine, and other cultural elements.

**Education and Ideology:** The policy of compulsory education, combined with the spread of socialist ideology and anti-religious propaganda, reshaped the population's worldview.

**Cultural Institutions:** To satisfy the spiritual needs of Leninakan's people, "Red Corners," clubs, libraries, and later culture houses and palaces were established in all state institutions. These venues replaced churches and served both educational and recreational purposes.

Between 1920 and 1940, on the foundation of Alexandropol's traditional artisan and commercial culture, a new Soviet socialist culture emerged in Leninakan. This culture was carried forward by newcomers who had settled in the city. Unburdened by the conservatism of the native people of Gyumri (as the Alexandropol residents came to call themselves after Sovietization), these newcomers quickly embraced economic and socio-cultural changes, adapted to the new circumstances, and became the bearers and propagators of the socialist way of life.

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