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Urban Resilience of Ganja/Elizavetpol: Environment, Economy, and Multiethnicity from the Middle Ages to the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract: Drawing on Armenian, Persian, Ottoman, Russian, and European sources, this article examines the long-term urban resilience of Ganja (Gandzak/Elizavetpol) as one of the principal urban centres of the South Caucasus from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. Its central argument is that urban resilience in Ganja was shaped by three structural factors: inter-ethnic economic interdependence, environmental constraints, and the city's position within shifting imperial networks—rather than by imperial modernisation or administrative integration alone. The analysis shows that Ganja's urban continuity rested on adaptive reconfiguration rather than institutional stability. The earthquake of 1139, the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts, and the Russian imperial transformation each remolded the city's economic and social foundations without dismantling them entirely. Resilience was rooted in multiethnic coexistence, which sustained trade networks, craft production, and horticultural systems throughout repeated episodes of political upheaval. At the same time, the article foregrounds the structural limits of that resilience. The collapse of the imperial order between 1917 and 1923 dismantled the regulatory framework that had sustained inter-communal interdependence, converting multiethnicity from a source of urban stability into a vector of conflict. The result was a rapid demographic and socio-economic contraction that reveals the conditional character of resilience in imperial borderlands. More broadly, the evidence from Ganja suggests that urban development in the South Caucasus was shaped by the long-term coexistence of heterogeneous economic forms rather than by a linear transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' systems, thereby challenging received models of modernisation.

Keywords: Ganja, Gandzak, Elizavetpol, Caucasus, urban history, demography, economy, Safavid Iran, Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, multiethnicity, silk industry

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Introduction

Analysing the urban resilience of Ganja/Elizavetpol requires attention to the city's capacity to sustain demographic reproduction, maintain trade continuity, and preserve morphological integrity across recurring episodes of violent upheaval,¹ and to do so within the framework of three determining factors. The first is inter-ethnic economic interdependence: above all, the symbiotic relationship between Armenian and Muslim-predominantly Turkic-speaking – merchant and artisan communities engaged in silk production, carpet weaving, and horticulture. The second is environmental constraint, encompassing the distinctive character of the urban landscape, its gardens and irrigation infrastructure, and the variable seasonal climate. The third is the city's economic and strategic position as a nodal point linking the South Caucasus with Iran and the Russian Empire. The long-term reproduction of the urban system rested on the interaction of these three factors-notwithstanding recurring cycles of conquest and destruction-while simultaneously generating a structural vulnerability that became acute when the imperial administrative framework regulating inter-communal relations collapsed between 1917 and 1923.

Known as Gandzak in Armenian sources, Ganja in Persian and Ottoman texts, and Elizavetpol under the Russian Empire, the city ranked among the largest urban centres in the South Caucasus.² Its strategic significance derived in large part from its location between the Kura and Araks rivers, a position that rendered it both a contested imperial frontier and a key hub connecting Iran, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East within broader trade networks. The study of Ganja's urban development therefore offers a productive vantage point from which to examine wider processes of imperial rivalry, inter-communal interaction, and economic transformation in the region across the period from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Historiography and Analytical Framework

Ganja, the birthplace of the famous Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi, Armenian medieval intellectuals such as Kirakos Gandzaketsi, and Mkhitar Gosh, occupies a well-established place in the study of medieval Caucasian literary and intellectual culture. For the medieval period, the foundational textual record comprises Arabic geographical and historical writing-above all al-Qazwini's cosmography, the chronicle of Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, and the geographical dictionary of Yaḥyā al-Hamawī-alongside the Armenian narrative tradition represented by Kirakos Gandzaketsi and Mkhitar Gosh. Minorsky's editions of the *Hudud al-'alam* and the *Tadhkirat al-muluk* remain

¹ Vale & Campanella, 2005: 3-5.

² Smith & Dwight, 1834: 172.

indispensable for the Safavid administrative framework, whilst Ashtor's work on medieval Middle Eastern economic history and Farmer's study of the silk industries supply the wider commercial context.

Scholarship on the early modern and imperial periods remains fragmented along national historiographical lines. Soviet and Azerbaijani historiography, exemplified by Altman's historical sketch of the city, has concentrated on the Turkic-Islamic dimensions of Ganja's past and on its incorporation into the Safavid and Russian imperial structures. Armenian historiography, represented most fully by Lalayan's ethnographic survey and Barkhudaryan's corpus of Armenian inscriptions, has focused above all on the economic role of the Armenian community-particularly its involvement in silk production-and on the epigraphic evidence for the Armenian presence in the city. Russian imperial sources, including the anonymous statistical survey of the Russian dominions beyond the Caucasus (1836) and the military-statistical description by Naumenko,³ treat Elizavetpol primarily as an object of colonial governance, yielding valuable quantitative data whilst largely effacing the agency of local communities.

A particularly rich strand of the source base is provided by European and Ottoman travel accounts. The mid-seventeenth-century description by Evliya Çelebi, the Jesuit Philippe Avril's late-seventeenth-century account, and the early nineteenth-century surveys of Dubois de Montpéroux and Francis Rawdon Chesney offer sustained eyewitness testimony on the city's physical fabric, economic infrastructure, and demographic composition at successive moments of its history. These are complemented by the statistical data of the 1897 Russian imperial census, and the demographic records of the Soviet period. The resilience framework applied in this article draws on the comparative urban history of Vale and Campanella, whose work on post-disaster urban recovery supplies the theoretical vocabulary for the analysis of Ganja's repeated cycles of destruction and reconstruction.

Environment, Space, and Urban Structure

Despite its proximity to the Ganja River, the city frequently suffered from water shortages, and disputes over water distribution could escalate into violent confrontations between local communities.⁴ The irrigation of gardens, which occupied much of the urban area, depended on a complex system of artificial canals requiring constant maintenance and collective management. Drawing on the aggregate evidence of different sources, it is possible to reconstruct the urban infrastructure of Ganja in the early nineteenth century. The city possessed eleven mosques, of which only four

³ Naumenko, 1903.

⁴ Dubois de Montpéroux, 1840: 107-108.

were functioning at the time;⁵ four Armenian churches; and one Orthodox church serving the Georgian and Greek communities. Its economic infrastructure comprised between 1,300 and 1,900 orchards or vineyards,⁶ five caravanserais, 200 shops and stores, 250 boutiques, and 120 silk workshops equipped with looms.⁷ As in Yerevan, almost every household in Ganja maintained a garden or at least a few fruit trees.⁸ Statistical surveys recorded 1,394 gardens in total, of which 718 were dedicated specifically to vine cultivation.⁹ Houses were built predominantly of mud brick, with some structures in fired brick, and roofs were covered with a locally produced clay render known as *gaj*.¹⁰

The city's internal geography reflected and reinforced patterns of ethnic and religious organisation that had developed over centuries. The Kilisakent quarter-located on the right bank of the Ganja River, its name meaning "the village of the church" in Turkic-was inhabited predominantly by Armenians.¹¹ According to the statistical survey of 1836, in the early seventeenth century, during the siege of the city's fortress by Shah Abbas, a number of Armenian families departed and resettled approximately four versts away, where they constructed a new church dedicated to St Hovhannes Mkrtich (St John the Baptist).¹² The church's epigraphic inscription records its foundation precisely: "in the time of Catholicos Hovhannes, in the year of the Armenian chronology 1633, the church of St Hovhannes was built."¹³ On the left bank of the river, several distinct quarters developed, each with its own ethnic character and economic specialisation. The Molla-Jallu quarter was home principally to Turkic-speaking Muslim communities, designated as "Tatars" in Russian administrative usage-a term applied generically to Turkic-speakers throughout the empire.¹⁴ The Baghbanchilar quarter took its name from its numerous gardens (*bagh* meaning "garden" in Turkish¹⁵) and was noted for its horticultural production, particularly walnuts, peaches, and figs.

Disruption, War, and Urban Resilience

The earthquake of 1139, though it predates the primary chronological focus of this study, left consequences so far-reaching that the urban landscape and collective

⁵ Dubois de Montpéroux, 1840: 108.

⁶ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 357; Chesney, 1850: 151.

⁷ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 357.

⁸ Lalayan, 1899: 297.

⁹ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 357.

¹⁰ Barkhudaryan, 1982: 227.

¹¹ Lalayan, 1899: 297; Margaryan & Harutyunyan, 2025.

¹² Dubois de Montpéroux, 1840: 108.

¹³ Ibn Kathir al-Damishqi, 1997; Houtsma, 1889: 190.

¹⁴ Brosset, 1859: 61.

¹⁵ Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, 2013: 313.

memory it shaped were still present when early modern inhabitants arrived. Arabic sources record catastrophic casualties: al-Damishqi gives 230,000 dead, al-Bundari 300,000.¹⁶ Medieval chroniclers habitually employed hyperbolic figures, and even allowing for considerable exaggeration, these numbers point to a disaster of exceptional scale. The Armenian historian Kirakos Gandzaketsi, writing in the thirteenth century on the basis of local memory and oral tradition, offered vivid testimony: “Many other men, women, and children were killed, who were killed by the buildings that fell on them.”¹⁷ Beyond its immediate human toll, the earthquake triggered profound geological change, including the collapse of Mount Alharak (now called Kyapaz), the blocking of valleys, and the formation of several lakes, thereby permanently altering the region’s hydrological geography.

Sibt ibn al-Jawzi records that after the earthquake “black water” welled up from beneath the ground,¹⁸ a detail that later prompted speculation about petroleum deposits—particularly after the Arab geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi documented two self-flowing oil springs near Baku.¹⁹ The economic destruction wrought by the disaster was no less severe than the physical. Sibt ibn al-Jawzi (1185-1256) captured the rupture with Ganja’s long-distance trading world in a single image: “the traders returned from their travels and began to frequent the cemeteries to mourn the loss of their relatives and their possessions.”²⁰

The catastrophe did not end with the earthquake. King Demetre I of Georgia (1125-1156) seized upon the city’s vulnerability and launched an assault to plunder it. The Armenian jurist and chronicler Mkhitar Gosh described the aftermath without restraint: the Georgian troops “acted unmercifully and rudely and attacked the survivors, put them all to the sword and led them to slavery...they did not think of being merciful to the city, dug up and took away gold and silver treasures and with their raids and tortures they tortured the people more cruelly than the earthquake itself.”²¹ The famous gates of Ganja were carried off to Georgia, where they remain to this day in the Gelati Monastery, their inscription recording the act: “King Demetre ravaged Arran and... (carried away?) these gates in the 13th year of his reign.”²² The removal of the gates was simultaneously a material act of spoliation and a symbolic assertion of conquest over the city’s identity. Yet for all the violence visited upon Ganja, neither the earthquake nor the Georgian campaign succeeded in permanently destroying the city’s social and commercial networks. That recovery constitutes the first instance of adaptive resilience examined in this article.

¹⁶ Meynard, 1861: 78.

¹⁷ Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, 2013: 313.

¹⁸ Dowsett, 1958: 482.

¹⁹ Brosset, 1851: 41.

²⁰ Defremery, 1859: 490.

²¹ Ansari, 1991 26; see also Minorsky, 1943/1980: 44.

²² Arakel of Tabriz, 2010: 530.

The French scholar Charles Defremery, commenting on his translation of Ibn al-Athir's account of the Gandja earthquake, proposed that the sources in fact describe two distinct seismic events subsequently conflated by later chroniclers into a single narrative.²³

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, Gandja formed part of the Safavid state, serving as one of its thirteen *beglarbegdoms*.²⁴ This administrative standing reflected the city's strategic weight and embedded it within a structured system of provincial governance. Its frontier position between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, however, repeatedly drew it into imperial conflict. During the Ottoman-Safavid War of 1578-1590, Ottoman forces took the city and brought it under Istanbul's authority; in 1606, Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) recaptured it and reintegrated it into the Safavid realm.²⁵

In 1616, Shah Abbas I decreed the construction of a new city some three to seven kilometres from the old urban centre.²⁶ The episode remains imperfectly understood. Although Shah Abbas I's reign is celebrated for large-scale urban projects across the Safavid realm—the refashioning of Isfahan as an imperial capital being the most prominent—the precise reasons for relocating Ganja are not clearly articulated in the surviving sources.

When the archbishop and ambassador Antoniý Sukhanov passed through Ganja in 1652, he found the old city “completely destroyed, and every building shattered to the ground; nevertheless, the mosque stands intact.”²⁷ He described the old settlement as far larger and more populous than the new one, which struck him as “empty, large, made of bricks and stones from the soil.”²⁸ By Sukhanov's account, four decades after Shah Abbas I's decree, the relocation remained far from complete, and the new city had failed to draw in, or adequately house, the population of its predecessor.

The Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, journeying through the Caucasus in the mid-seventeenth century, left one of the richest surviving descriptions of the city. Despite the destruction of the fortress by the Safavid shah, he found six thousand houses still standing, together with vineyards and gardens, mosques and taverns; it was, in his judgement, “a well-kept and beautiful city with baths and bazaars, surrounded by mountains and covered with vineyards.”²⁹ The picture he draws underscores the city's remarkable capacity for recovery from earthquake, conquest, and forced resettlement alike.

²³ See Altman, 1949: 94.

²⁴ Ivanovsky, 1889: 103-104.

²⁵ Ivanovsky, 1889: 104.

²⁶ Evliya Çelebi, 1999: 329-330.

²⁷ Wüstenfeld, 1848: 351-352.

²⁸ Darke, 2002: 103.

²⁹ Ashtor, 1976: 266.

Economy and Interdependence

Al-Qazwini described Ganja as a prosperous and wealthy city in which silk weaving and silkworm cultivation were the prevailing economic activities.³⁰ The city exported fur turbans known as *'amā'im*, silk cloth, satin, and various garments that Persian-speaking merchants referred to as *qutni* (a cotton-silk blend). Ganja's textile output enjoyed an international reputation, and its products circulated under the distinctive designation *al-kanjii*-'of Ganja' or "from Ganja."

The city's production of cloth and garments reached its zenith during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when it attracted recognition well beyond the region. The celebrated Seljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk, in his *Siyasat-nama* (The Book of Government), refers explicitly to garments made from Ganja fabric.³¹

Cantari, a distinctive variety of silk from the Caucasus named in association with Karabakh, gained wide international recognition,³² whilst *seta cantaji*-literally "silk of Ganja"-became a well-established commodity in European markets, imported by Italian merchants and distributed across the Mediterranean.³³ Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sources portray Ganja as a prosperous town with extensive agricultural hinterlands and a specialised production of woollen goods.³⁴ Throughout the medieval and early modern period, Georgia ranked among the principal markets for Ganja silk: until the nineteenth century, Tiflis (Tbilisi) traded exclusively in Ganja silk,³⁵ and even after the disruptions of the Russo-Iranian wars and the Russian conquest, the city still operated 120 silk workshops equipped with looms.

The Jesuit traveller Philippe Avril (1654-1698), who journeyed through the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran between 1685 and 1690, described Ganja-which he rendered as Gangea – as "the best and most splendid city in the East."³⁶

Evliya Çelebi singled out the city's grapes and its silk as especially renowned, and noted it was equally celebrated for horses, iron, and iron manufactures.³⁷ He recorded the cultivation of cotton, rice, and silk across the plains surrounding the city on all four sides – evidence that the economic base of Ganja rested not on artisanal production alone but also on a diversified agricultural specialisation in its surrounding countryside.

³⁰ Farmer, 2017: 46.

³¹ Minorsky, 1970: 144.

³² Dubois de Montpéroux, 1840:108-109.

³³ Avril, 1693: 79-80.

³⁴ Evliya Çelebi, 1999: 329-330.

³⁵ *Revue des deux mondes*, 1841: 372.

³⁶ Wüstenfeld, 1848: 351-352.

³⁷ Storey & de Blois, 2004: 363.

Nineteenth-century records indicate that Armenian entrepreneurs operated an alum mine near Ganja generating an annual income of some 40,000 francs.³⁸ Alum was indispensable to the textile industry as a mordant fixing dyes to fabric, and its local extraction thus underpinned the broader textile economy of the city.

The statistical surveys of the 1830s depict a city devastated by war yet retaining its commercial and artisanal fabric. According to the cameral description of 1833, Elizavetpol counted 868 Armenian families (2,236 males) and 1,141 Tatar families (2,402 males).³⁹ Zubarev's contemporaneous account records 8,751 inhabitants of both sexes, Armenians and Tatars, in 1835.⁴⁰ With some 2,000 houses, the city supported more than 200 shops and five caravanserais, and over 1,300 orchards and vineyards were attached to its dwellings.⁴¹ The focus of urban commerce was the bazaar square, some 500 paces in length: two rows of stone shops joined by a domed vault with apertures overhead, a dyeing house, bathhouses, and a caravanserai housing the postal station.⁴² The compilers of the survey recorded the structural shift in plain terms: in former times trade and manufactures had been the principal sources of the wealth of Ganja's inhabitants, but "with the change in political circumstances" they had turned predominantly to agriculture.⁴³ The trajectory of silk weaving, the city's foremost manufacture, is eloquent: although some 120 silk workshops continued to operate after the Russian conquest, the number of looms, which had reached 375 under Javad Khan, had fallen to 200 by the mid-1830s.⁴⁴

Gardens formed the agrarian foundation of the urban economy: Elizavetpol counted 165 large orchards and 27 mulberry gardens, and since fruit trees grew by every house, "the entire town might be called a garden", some seventeen versts in circumference.⁴⁵ Up to 19,000 vedra of wine were produced in the city, and a single garden yielded an annual income of between 50 and 700 silver roubles.⁴⁶ Sericulture rested on a network of up to 315 mulberry gardens in the city and district, producing up to 600 puds of silk.⁴⁷ The cultivation of madder, a dye-stuff, belonged largely to townspeople, while flax was sown by Armenians in the mountains and near the city.⁴⁸ Economic life was regulated by a local system of measures: the Ganja weight (a batman of 16 Russian pounds, with its subdivisions the stil and the tilani), the tagara for grain, and the khan's

³⁸ Browne, 2013: 344-345; de Bruijn, 2009.

³⁹ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 367.

⁴⁰ Zubarev, 1842: 80.

⁴¹ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 361.

⁴² *Obozrenie*, 1836: 358, 360.

⁴³ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 379.

⁴⁴ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 387.

⁴⁵ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 383.

⁴⁶ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 385.

⁴⁷ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 385.

⁴⁸ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 382-383.

arshin, which stood to the Russian arshin as 7 to 5.⁴⁹ Retail trade was reckoned in abazes: wine sold at between half an abaz and three abazes per batman (equal to one vedro), and the holders of the fishing lease paid their fishermen one abaz per fish.⁵⁰

The monetary sphere reflected the city's position between empires with particular clarity. The Ganja mint, active since Safavid times, continued to strike coin without interruption after the collapse of Nadir Shah's empire: in the second half of the eighteenth century the khanate issued anonymous silver abbasis, whose weight standard was repeatedly lowered in step with the Iranian monetary reforms, alongside a copper coinage; under Javad Khan larger denominations were struck, including the "Ganja rouble" (minaltun) of five abbasis.⁵¹ With the fall of the city in January 1804 local minting ceased, never to be resumed by the Russian administration; yet the khanate's coin remained in circulation for decades, and as late as 1840 a contemporary observer recorded the "ink-shay" and the "Ganja abaz" still passing in the Elizavetpol district.⁵² Nor was this an isolated survival. The official table of "Asiatic coins current in the Transcaucasian region" published in the Caucasian Calendar for 1849 admitted to circulation, alongside Russian money, silver abazes of Georgian and Russian mintage (rated at 20 silver kopecks), half-abazes and shaurs, Persian gold tumans (4 roubles), half-tumans and bajaghlis, and silver sahib-kirans and panahabadis.⁵³ A unified imperial currency established itself only gradually, as the Russian administration deliberately displaced local issues with its own coin.⁵⁴

Nor was the city's mineral base confined to alum: the 1836 survey lists mining industries, alum and iron, among the sources of the inhabitants' wealth.⁵⁵ According to the Mining Department, gold-bearing placers were known in the vicinity of the city: six versts from Elizavetpol, in the bed of the Kochkarka (Koshkary) river, the upper two strata of sand contained gold at up to 33½ dolyas per 100 puds, and in 1829 a silver nugget weighing 3 dolyas was washed from these sands; in seven ravines near the same river the second stratum of sand was likewise auriferous (some 17½ dolyas per 100 puds). Within the city itself, along the Ganja-chay (Ganjinka), gold occurred in the river sand in very fine grains and in small quantity; placers were also known along the banks of the Shamkhor.⁵⁶ In the second half of the nineteenth century copper became the leading extractive industry of the district: two smelting works in the highland part of Elizavetpol uezd yielded some 84 per cent of all the copper

⁴⁹ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 400.

⁵⁰ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 385, 387.

⁵¹ Akopyan, 2016: 286-294; Paghava, 2016: 27-28.

⁵² Akopyan, 2016: 293, 298.

⁵³ *Kavkazskii kalendar'*, 1849: 61.

⁵⁴ Akopyan & Petrov, 2016: 9.

⁵⁵ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 379.

⁵⁶ Meller, 1896: 8.

produced in the Caucasus (90,418 puds in 1891), and the Dashkesan deposit near the city gave 604 puds of cobalt glance in 1891.⁵⁷

By mid-century commercial and artisanal life had revived. The Caucasian Calendar for 1851 records that the inhabitants of Elizavetpol were engaged in “horticulture, trade, and crafts, particularly the dyeing of fabrics,” and notes successful experiments in the local manufacture of indigo: at the Tiflis exhibition of Transcaucasian products in 1850, the Elizavetpol resident Mikirtich Antonov received a commendation for indigo production.⁵⁸ The city’s caravanserai was reputed the finest in Transcaucasia, and an annual Pokrovskaya fair was held in the city from 1 to 15 October.⁵⁹

By the early 1890s the city’s commercial infrastructure had expanded considerably. In 1892 Elizavetpol counted 1,000 shops, up to 1,740 artisans, and some 111 manufacturing establishments of a predominantly artisanal character, with a combined annual output of 57,450 roubles; seven caravanserais served the transit trade, and municipal revenues exceeded 42,000 roubles.⁶⁰ The principal occupations of the population remained horticulture and viticulture: over 2,400 desiatinas of vineyards surrounding the city yielded some 300,000 vedra of wine annually, and part of the population was engaged in sericulture. In the same year 1,318,658 puds of goods were dispatched from the Elizavetpol railway station, including 358,671 puds of grain and 260,558 vedra of wine.⁶¹

The Transcaucasian Railway secured the city’s connectivity: the Ganja station lay five versts from the town, linked to it by a highway and a tramway line; visitors were served by the hotels Evropa, London, Petrograd, Tsentralnaya, and Ermitazh.⁶²

Population and Multiethnic Dynamics

Ganja’s rich natural resources drew substantial populations to the site from antiquity onwards. Its position as a nexus between Iran, Armenia, the wider Caucasus, and the Middle East made it a natural centre of commerce, cultural exchange, and political competition. As a multiethnic city, Ganja bore the cumulative imprint of successive waves of migration, conquest, and imperial integration. Under the Arab Caliphate, its population comprised Iranians, Armenians, and Arabs. By the eleventh century, Kurds had settled in the city during the reign of the Kurdish Shaddadid dynasty, and Seljuq Turks began arriving in significant numbers towards the end of that century—a movement that initiated a far-reaching demographic transformation,

⁵⁷ *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1894: 618.

⁵⁸ *Kavkazskii kalendar'*, 1851, otd. II: 70; otd. III: 119.

⁵⁹ *Kavkazskii kalendar'*, 1851, otd. II: 83; otd. III: 119.

⁶⁰ *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1894: 617.

⁶¹ *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1894: 617.

⁶² Anisimov, 1924: 338.

most consequentially through the progressive integration of Turkic languages and cultures into urban life.

Notwithstanding successive waves of Turkic migration and settlement, Ganja's population retained a predominantly Armenian character in the aftermath of Seljuq domination in the eleventh century. Al-Qazwini, writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, noted the inhabitants' reputation for piety and courtesy, their adherence to Sunni Islam, and their particular skill in the manufacture of weapons.⁶³

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries marked a period of cultural efflorescence for Gandja, when the city served as one of the capitals of the Ildegizid (Eldiguzid) Atabegate. Despite the city's increasingly Turkic demographic character, it remained an important centre of Persian literary and intellectual life. Among its celebrated natives was Nizami Ganjavi (c.1140–1209), the foremost Persian narrative poet of his age and the most acclaimed Persian poet after Firdausi.⁶⁴ Mahsati Ganjavi (c.1089–mid twelfth century), a poet of exceptional technical accomplishment and intellectual independence, left a body of quatrains (*rubā'iyāt*) that stands as one of the notable achievements of the Persian literary tradition.⁶⁵

The demographic composition of the city continued to evolve in subsequent centuries. In his chronicle *Gulistan-i Iram* (Paradise Flowerbed), Bakikhanov attributes to Timur (Tamerlane) the large-scale displacement of Turkic-speaking families into the region at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, claiming that the conqueror resettled some 50,000 Turkic families from Anatolia and Syria to the districts of Yerevan, Karabakh, and Ganja.⁶⁶

Writing in the 1830s on the Transcaucasian territories of the Russian Empire, the compilers of the statistical survey of the Russian dominions beyond the Caucasus offered the following assessment: "The districts of the Elisavetpol Governorate are inhabited by Armenians and Tatars. Considering the historical events of past centuries, Armenians can be considered the oldest inhabitants, whilst Tatars arrived from the Trans-Caspian regions during the Mongol-Tatar invasion."⁶⁷

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Dhul-Qadar Turkoman tribal group was deliberately settled near Ganja as part of a Safavid frontier defence strategy.⁶⁸

In the nineteenth century, the city's population contracted sharply. Félix de Beaujour, Inspector General of the French Establishments in the Levant, attributed this decline directly to the devastations of recent warfare.⁶⁹

⁶³ Bakikhanov, 1926: 66.

⁶⁴ *Obozrenie*, 1836: 349.

⁶⁵ Minorsky, 1943/1980: 190; Seddon, 1934: 143.

⁶⁶ Beaujour, 1829: 41.

⁶⁷ GPIB, 1868: 596.

⁶⁸ GPIB, 1868: 597.

⁶⁹ GPIB, 1873: 117.

Imperial Transformation and Modernisation (Nineteenth-Early Twentieth Century)

A survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the Russian occupation in 1804 laid bare the human cost of the preceding conflicts [Tab. 1]. Only 213 houses remained standing within the city proper. In the Armenian suburbs of Kilisakend and Norashen, 792 and 74 houses respectively survived, with a combined population of 2,294 people; the Tatar suburbs counted 615 houses and 2,367 inhabitants.⁷⁰ Within the fortress itself, the survey recorded a mere 19 houses, 2 bathhouses, 40 craft workshops, a bank, a flour mill, and a glass factory. The suburbs contained 5 caravanserais, 45 commercial stalls in operation, 28 further stalls in ruins, a bathhouse, and 6 flour mills.⁷¹

A document of 1811 sheds light on the political organisation of the city in the immediate post-conquest period. A letter addressed to the Russian administrator, Marquis Paulucci, bore the signatures of 45 Armenian and 35 Tatar representatives of the Elizavetpol Council of Elders.⁷²

The population of Ganja grew markedly more diverse following Russian annexation. Alongside Armenians and Tatars—who remained the two largest communities—Russians arrived in significant numbers, among them members of religious dissenting movements such as the Dukhobors and Molokans, resettled to the Caucasus as part of Russian colonial policy. Germans (primarily from Württemberg), Georgians, Lezgins, Poles, Greeks, and members of numerous other groups also established themselves in the city.⁷³

Eli Smith and H.G.O. Dwight also described the German presence in the district: the Württemberg colonies of Helenendorf and Annenfeld near Ganja, founded by settlers who had reached Georgia in 1817, enjoyed self-government, exemption from conscription, and temporary freedom from taxation. Ruined and driven out by the Persians during the war of 1826, the colonists near Ganja were recovering by 1830, when the seven Transcaucasian colonies together numbered some 2,000 souls.⁷⁴

The American missionaries Smith and Dwight, who passed the city in August 1830, estimated its population at about 12,000 and described Ganja as “still the most important place in this part of the Russian provinces,” the capital of a small province containing as many inhabitants again and producing considerable silk; the surrounding plain they found fertile and well watered, though the site itself was “considered peculiarly unhealthy.” Cholera was raging in the city at the time, and

⁷⁰ Lalayan, 1899: 354-359.

⁷¹ Dubois de Montpéroux, 1840: 107-108.

⁷² Chesney, 1850: 151.

⁷³ Malte Brun, 1853: 122.

⁷⁴ Smith & Dwight, 1834: 168-169.

quarantines on the roads compelled the travellers to skirt Ganja along its eastern suburbs.⁷⁵

The Swiss traveller and ethnographer Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux, who visited Crimea and the Caucasus between 1831 and 1834, recorded a city of 2,515 houses and slightly over 16,200 inhabitants-11,100 Tatars and 5,100 Armenians – with an average household size of six to seven persons.⁷⁶

The British general and explorer Francis Rawdon Chesney, travelling at roughly the same period, reported that Elizavetpol and its surrounding mahals (sub-districts) contained 11,330 Tatars, 2,997 Armenians, and 531 Württemberg Germans. Within the city itself, the population stood at 4,230 Tatars and 4,028 Armenians.⁷⁷ The divergence between the two travellers' figures most probably reflects differing units of enumeration: Dubois de Montpéreux appears to have counted the city together with its suburbs, whereas Chesney distinguished the city proper from the surrounding mahals.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Ganja had recovered from the destruction of the early 1800s to reach a population of some 12,000, making it the second-largest city in Transcaucasia after Tiflis (Tbilisi), then home to roughly 20,000 people.⁷⁸ Growth continued thereafter: by 1870, the city's population is recorded as 16,000.⁷⁹

The first general census of the Russian Empire, conducted in 1897 using modern statistical methods, returned a population of 33,625 for Elizavetpol [Tab. 2].⁸⁰ Tatars (described in census documents variously as “Tatars” or “Azerbaijanis”) numbered 17,426, representing approximately 52 per cent of the urban population; Armenians numbered 12,055 (approximately 36 per cent); and Russians 2,735 (approximately 8 per cent).

Between 1897 and 1902, the city's birth rate stood at 1.9 per cent-markedly lower than in Nakhichevan, Ordubad, and Nor Bayazet, but comparable to figures recorded in Yerevan and Lenkoran.⁸¹ The mortality rate during the same period was 1.3 per cent, yielding a rate of natural population increase of 0.6 per cent.⁸² The female-to-male ratio, at an index of 71.4 women per 100 men, was lower than in most comparable cities in the region.⁸³

⁷⁵ Smith & Dwight, 1834: 171-172.

⁷⁶ Dussieux, 1880: 601.

⁷⁷ Troitskiy, 1904: 62-63.

⁷⁸ Andriyevskiy, 1908: 22.

⁷⁹ Andriyevskiy, 1908: 23.

⁸⁰ Andriyevskiy, 1908: 24.

⁸¹ *Pamyatnaya kniga Elizavetpol'skoi gubernii*, 1910: 2.

⁸² *Pamyatnaya kniga Elizavetpol'skoi gubernii*, 1914: 361.

⁸³ *Obzor Elizavetpol'skoi gubernii*, 1915, appendix 1.

By 1908, the population had risen to 37,806, comprising 16,432 Armenians, 17,199 Tatars, 1,800 Russians, 572 Georgians, 288 Poles, 271 Greeks, and 239 Germans.⁸⁴

On the eve of the First World War, in 1914, the population had reached 56,886,⁸⁵ representing an increase of more than 50 per cent in six years. The final pre-war demographic survey recorded 57,078 inhabitants: 5,480 Russians (1,689 classified as indigenous, 3,791 as incomers), 10,844 Armenians (all classified as indigenous), 37,305 Muslim Shias, 865 Muslim Sunnis, and 435 Jews.⁸⁶

The Caucasian Calendar for 1916 gives a total population of 57,731, including 6,091 Russians, 12,125 Armenians, 37,619 Muslim Shias, 539 Muslim Sunnis, and 391 Jews.⁸⁷

By 1923 the population had fallen to 39,327. The city counted 502 enterprises employing 1,125 people in total, of whom 298 were wage workers—a ratio indicating predominantly small-scale establishments averaging two or three employees each.⁸⁸ The crisis also engulfed the city's mining hinterland: the Kedabek and Kalakent works in the upper reaches of the Shamkhor-chay in Ganja uezd, the principal centre of copper mining and smelting in Transcaucasia, stood idle in 1923.⁸⁹ A partial recovery followed: by 1926 the population had climbed again to 55,538.⁹⁰

The demographic evidence for 1914-1923 lays bare the catastrophic implications of this article's central argument. A city that in 1914 had reached a population of 57,078—multiethnic, economically interdependent, and regulated by an imperial framework—had contracted to 39,327 by 1923, a loss of approximately 30 per cent within less than a decade. This contraction was not a consequence of economic failure in any ordinary sense; rather, it reflected the violent destruction of the conditions upon which inter-ethnic coexistence had depended. The upheavals of 1917-1920 – the collapse of the Russian imperial order, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict of 1918-1920 (in which Elizavetpol/Ganja was a principal site of confrontation), and the subsequent consolidation of Soviet power—transformed multiethnicity itself, previously the city's socio-economic foundation, into a vehicle of ethno-territorial violence.

⁸⁴ *Kavkazskii kalendar'*, 1917: 190-193.

⁸⁵ *Vsesoiuznaia gorodskaiia perepis'*, 1923: 571.

⁸⁶ *Naselenie Azerbaidzhana*, 1927: 3.

⁸⁷ *Kavkazskii kalendar'*, 1917: 190-193.

⁸⁸ *Vsesoiuznaia gorodskaiia perepis'*, 1923: 571.

⁸⁹ Anisimov, 1924: 338.

⁹⁰ *Naselenie Azerbaidzhana*, 1927: 3.

Tab. 1. Population of Ganja in the aftermath of the Russian conquest and its recovery (1804-1870).

Year	Population	Composition / details	Source
1804	4,661 (suburbs)	Armenian suburbs (Kilisakend, Norashen): 866 houses, 2,294 people; Tatar suburbs: 615 houses, 2,367 people; city proper: 213 houses	GPIB, 1868
1830	c. 12,000	Travellers' estimate; 'the most important place in this part of the Russian provinces'	Smith & Dwight, 1834
1831-1834	c. 16,200	11,100 Tatars, 5,100 Armenians (2,515 houses)	Dubois de Montpéreux, 1840
1833	4,638 (males)	Cameral description: Armenians 868 families (2,236 males); Tatars 1,141 families (2,402 males)	<i>Obozrenie</i> , 1836
1835	8,751	Armenians and Tatars	Zubarev, 1842
1830s	8,258 (city)	City: 4,230 Tatars, 4,028 Armenians; with surrounding mahals: 11,330 Tatars, 2,997 Armenians, 531 Württemberg Germans	Chesney, 1850
1848	12,996	6,499 male, 6,497 female; cameral description: 2,321 households (11,605 souls): Armenians 4,750, Tatars 6,590, Gypsies 30 (state peasants), 235 Armenian landlord peasants	<i>Kavkazskii kalendar'</i> , 1849
1850	c. 13,000	—	<i>Kavkazskii kalendar'</i> , 1851
Mid-19th c.	c. 12,000	Second-largest city of Transcaucasia after Tiflis	Malte Brun, 1853
1870	16,000	—	Dussieux, 1880

Source: Compiled by the authors from the sources indicated in the table.

Tab. 2. Population and ethnic/confessional composition of Elizavetpol/Ganja (1892-1926).

Year	Total	Ethnic / confessional composition	Source
1892	25,758	Tatar-Muslims 13,392, Armenians 10,524 (4,053 houses)	<i>Entsiklopedicheski slovar'</i> , 1894
1897	33,625	Tatars 17,426 (52%), Armenians 12,055 (36%), Russians 2,735 (8%)	Troinitsky, 1904
1908	37,806	Tatars 17,199, Armenians 16,432, Russians 1,800, Georgians 572, Poles 288, Greeks 271, Germans 239	<i>Pamyatnaya kniga</i> , 1910
1914	56,886 / 57,078	Muslim Shias 37,305, Sunnis 865, Armenians 10,844, Russians 5,480 (1,689 indigenous, 3,791 incomers), Jews 435	<i>Pamyatnaya kniga</i> , 1914; <i>Obzor</i> , 1915
1916	57,731	Muslim Shias 37,619, Sunnis 539, Armenians 12,125, Russians 6,091, Jews 391	<i>Kavkazskii kalendar'</i> , 1917
1923	39,327	502 enterprises, 1,125 employed	<i>Vsesoiuznaia gorodskiaia perepis'</i> , 1923
1926	55,538	—	<i>Naselenie Azerbaïdzhana</i> , 1927

Source: Compiled by the authors from the sources indicated in the table.

Conclusion: Rethinking Urban Resilience in the South Caucasus

The case of Ganja/Elizavetpol suggests that accounts of urban resilience in the South Caucasus cannot be adequately contained within modernisation-centred or empire-centric frameworks. The city's persistence and recovery were not derivative products of imperial administrative rationalisation; they were grounded in a historically embedded system of interdependence between environmental conditions, economic practices, and multiethnic social organisation.

This study has demonstrated that Ganja's resilience was not a fixed attribute but a dynamic process sustained by the continuous interaction of three structural factors: inter-ethnic economic interdependence, environmental constraints, and the city's position within shifting imperial networks. These factors did not operate in isolation; their mutual reinforcement produced a flexible yet fragile urban system capable of absorbing repeated shocks. From the earthquake of 1139 through the Ottoman-Safavid wars to the Russian imperial transformation, each cycle of disruption and recovery illustrates that urban continuity in Ganja was achieved not through stability but through adaptive reconfiguration.

The analysis also discloses the limits of that resilience. The mechanisms that sustained the city across centuries—above all, the integration of diverse communities into shared economic networks—depended on an overarching imperial framework that regulated inter-communal relations. When that framework dissolved between 1917 and 1923, the rupture was not merely political; it fundamentally altered the conditions of urban life. Multiethnicity, which had long operated as the city's socio-economic foundation, was converted into a source of fragmentation and conflict. The crisis of Ganja in the early twentieth century is therefore best understood not as a failure of resilience as such, but as the breakdown of the structural conditions that had made resilience possible.

More broadly, this case calls into question the linear models of imperial modernisation that interpret urban development in the South Caucasus as a progressive transition from “traditional” to “modern” forms. The evidence from Ganja points instead to the persistence of hybrid economic arrangements in which artisanal production, agricultural specialisation, and emergent industrial activity coexisted and adapted to one another. As Gatrell has argued with respect to the Russian Empire more generally, the absence of any clear triumph of “modern” political economy demands that modernisation be rethought as a heterogeneous and uneven process. Ganja confirms that this heterogeneity was not a transitional phase but a durable feature of urban life.

These findings call for a broader reassessment of modernisation-centred narratives in the historiography of the South Caucasus. By foregrounding local agency, environmental constraints, and inter-communal economic practices, this article

contributes to a more nuanced understanding of imperial urbanism as a negotiated and contingent process—one shaped as much by the texture of daily economic life as by the decisions of distant administrators. Future research might build on this approach through comparative studies of analogous urban centres across the region, further refining the analytical framework proposed here and situating Ganja within a wider comparative history of resilience in imperial borderlands.

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