

HISTORIOGRAPHY

SOUTH CAUCASUS UNDER THE INTERESTS OF THE GREAT EMPIRES (XVI-XVIII CENTURIES)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the great empires' imperialist ambitions in the South Caucasus during the 16th -18th (in particular, till the 1720s) centuries. During this period, the region was under the control of two powerful eastern countries, Persia and the Ottomans, which threatened the region's stability. However, by the mid-sixteenth century, a new political landscape began to be shaped, with Moscow State as a third power with strategic interests in the region. Unlike Persia and the Ottomans, Russia adopted a comparatively diplomatic approach to its involvement in the region based on avoiding military confrontation whenever possible. Within the frames of the study, we employed the historical-comparative method, analyzed various historical facts, and conducted a systemic analysis to draw relevant conclusions. Our research included an examination of written sources in this period. Through this analysis, we discovered that Moscow's primary objective during this period was to maintain its position in the Caucasus by creating its influence on the individual South Caucasian governors. Our research also revealed that the Georgian kings and princes needed to understand the objectives of Russia's foreign policy despite their desire to be liberated from Persia and the Ottomans. This lack of understanding was partially conditioned by the complexity of Russia's regional strategic goals. Nevertheless, the common faith shared by Russia and Georgia provided a "good bait" for Russia to expand its influence in the region. In preparation for its eventual attack on the South Caucasus, Russia complied with various types of political, economic, and statistical information to ensure its success. The information was critical to the success of Russia's imperialist ambitions in the South Caucasus in the 16th - early 18th centuries.

Keywords: Caucasus, Russia, Ottomans, Persia, imperialist, empire

Introduction

The South Caucasus, situated strategically between the Black and Caspian seas and encompassing present-day Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, holds significant geopolitical importance. The focus of this report is to provide a comprehensive historical and political overview of this region spanning from the 16th century to the early 18th century.

Owing to its pivotal location, the South Caucasus has historically attracted the attention of major empires. Throughout antiquity and beyond, notable powers such as Achaemenid Persia, Rome, Sassanid Persia, Byzantium, the Arab Caliphate, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, Safavid Persia, Ottomans, and Russia vied for supremacy in this region.

The 16th century was particularly tumultuous as Georgia, fragmented into various kingdoms and principalities, found itself contending with two assertive Islamic states. The prolonged conflict spanning 40 years (1514-1555) between Safavid Persia and the Ottomans, intermittently punctuated by periods of ceasefire, culminated in the Treaty of Amasia. As per this truce, Persia and the Ottomans delineated their spheres of influence: Persia secured Eastern Georgia and the eastern portion of Samtskhi, while the Ottomans claimed Western Georgia and the western part of Samtskhi. Consequently, the historical region of Meskheta fell under Ottoman control.

Consequently, by the mid-16th century, the Caucasus region was under the dominion of two assertive Eastern powers – Persia and the Ottomans.

Subsequently, in the 1560s to 1580s, a new geopolitical landscape began to take shape. A third influential entity with its strategic objectives emerged in the region – the Moscow State. The Muscovite authorities initiated diplomatic relations with the Georgian royal principalities, including the kingdoms of Kakheti, Kartli, Imereti, and the Principality of Samegrelo.

The tangible diplomatic ties between Muscovy Russia and the Kingdom of Kakheti date back to January 1483, when King Alexander I of Kakheti dispatched an official delegation to Ivan III, the Grand Duke of Moscow, carrying a formal message. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the primary objective of Kakheti's monarchs in fostering close ties with Moscow was to preempt incursions from the North Caucasus, particularly from Dagestan's Shamkhali region. Simultaneously, the rulers of Kakheti, Kartli, Imereti, and Samegrelo believed that aligning with a robust Christian power would emancipate them from the influence of perennial adversaries - Persia and the Ottomans - and serve as a deterrent against further invasions.

Despite the absence of direct documentation, historical references indicate sustained diplomatic interactions between the Moscow kingdom and King Levan Kakheti during the 16th century. The Georgian monarchs and princes, unaware of the harsh realities of Ivan IV's regime and drawn by the prospect of an influential Christian state, sought favor with the newly emerging power. Concurrently, the Moscow kingdom was intrigued by Kakheti and Georgia's strategic position and economic prospects.

In 1586, envoys representing King Alexander II of Kakheti were received in Moscow, and in 1587, Moscow's ambassadors, Rodion Birkin and Peter Pivov presented the "book of oaths" to the King of Kakheti. However, this document did not explicitly benefit Russia in any tangible manner.

In the 17th century, the ascendancy of Iran's influence in Eastern Georgia disrupted Georgian-Russian relations. Internal upheavals within Russia itself marked this period. Foreign interventions and peasant uprisings plunged the country into a catastrophe (Zhuzhunashvili, 2006, p. 280). Naturally, these domestic tumults reverberated in Russia's external engagements. The nation ceded territories in its western and northwestern frontiers. Adding to this turmoil was Wladyslaw, son of Polish King Sigismund III, laying claim to the Russian throne. Consequently, Russia faced three primary challenges during the 17th century:

1. The consolidation of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian territories in the west entailed grappling with the Kingdom of Poland.
2. The conflict with Sweden to secure access to the Baltic Sea.
3. The defense against relentless incursions by the Ottoman Empire and its vassal, the Crimean Khanate, into the central and border regions of the state (Saitidze, 1995, p. 302).

Simultaneously, Russia maintained ostensibly amicable relations with Iran, motivated by economic ties (foreign trade) and shared geopolitical interests (common adversary - the Ottoman Empire). Evidence of this lies in the exchange of 35 diplomatic missions between the two countries from 1588 to 1676, with 20 missions from Russia and 15 from Iran (Zhuzhunashvili, 2006, p. 284). Consequently, Russia's trade, economic, and political interests precluded direct military aid to Georgia against Iran. Throughout the 17th century, Russia and Iran endeavored to outwardly sustain favorable diplomatic ties. However, Russia concurrently sought ideological dominance in the South Caucasus to secure a reliable foothold for prospects. Notably, Christianity emerged as a pivotal factor in this context; the Georgian monarchs perceived a unified Christian Russia as a means to emancipate

themselves from Islamic Iran and the Ottomans, a sentiment Russia also found advantageous.

In the 1620s, Persia orchestrated devastating campaigns in Kakheti, resulting in the deportation of 200 thousand individuals to the Fereydan, Khorasan, and Mazandaran provinces of Iran. Numerous cities and villages razed during this period were never reconstructed. Turkmen populations began settling in the depopulated territories of Ivri and Alazni. King Teimuraz I revived diplomatic channels with Russia to address this dire situation. Concurrently, as Persia and the Ottomans, arch-antagonists, reached a truce and partitioned the South Caucasus anew, Teimuraz I perceived Russia as the sole power capable of aiding the Georgians. The Georgian rulers naively hoped that involving a new Christian nation in the Persian-Ottoman conflict would tilt the scales in their favor. Consequently, Teimuraz I actively dispatched envoys to Moscow seeking explicit assistance. However, Moscow's response appeared somewhat detached; Mikheil Teudorez dze expressed concern for their plight and advised them to seek help from "the Almighty God."

Following Shah Abbas I's ruinous campaigns in 1625, Teimuraz I sought Russia's assistance again and dispatched ambassadors. Moscow reciprocated with an embassy, yet the envoys returned with hollow assurances. Throughout the 1630s to the 1660s, embassies continued actively. Georgian monarchs and princes (Levan II, Chief of Odisha, Alexander III, King of Imereti, Teimuraz I, King of Kakheti) collectively implored Russia to liberate them from Ottoman and Persian dominance and assist in their struggle against these powers.

During the politics of the Persian Shahs, one of the most contentious issues revolved around the religious allegiance of the Georgian kings. Beginning in the 1630s, regardless of the merits held by the Georgian king in the eyes of Persia, no king would receive the Shah's approval without adhering to Islamic law. Those Georgian kings and princes who converted to Islam were granted prestigious positions within the Persian court. They held significant roles as Qularaghas and Tarughis in Isfahan for nearly a century and a half. The presence of Georgians in the Persian army was notably extensive.

Despite outward displays of satisfaction, the Shah handled Georgian affairs with meticulous caution, employing various imperial methods to ensure complete compliance: bribery, intimidation, confrontation, and other coercive measures. Persia strategically intertwined the royal lineages of Kartli and Kakheti, deliberately weakening them and facilitating their subjugation and defeat. This policy was initiated in the 17th century and persisted into the 18th century.

From the 1620s to the 1720s, Russia's approach toward the Caucasus was primarily intelligence-oriented. The nation thoroughly assessed Georgia's distinct kingdoms and principalities' political, religious, and economic landscapes. This encompassed internal relations and the kingdoms' stances regarding the Ottomans, Iran, and the North Caucasus. Perfect intelligence would have facilitated Russia's expansion in the Caucasus. Through embassies in the 16th and 17th centuries, Russia meticulously examined the South Caucasus' geographical layout and access routes.

Consequently, detailed descriptions of regions such as Samegrelo, Imereti, Kakheti, Dagestan, and North Azerbaijan were compiled. The instructions provided to Russian ambassadors before departure to Georgia are exciting. In the 16th century, these instructions were rather general. However, with Russia's growing interest in the South Caucasus, refined instructions and specific questionnaires were developed in the 17th century. Two primary types of questionnaires emerged: political and statistical-economic. The political questionnaire entailed detailed descriptions of the political landscape, while the statistical-economic questionnaire aimed at gathering comprehensive information regarding geographical features, population, economic status, military potential, political sentiments, and attitudes. In certain instances, a third questionnaire concerning religious matters accompanied these two, prompting Georgians to demonstrate adherence to Orthodox tenets.

Drawing from these inquiries, detailed descriptions of different regions of Georgia were produced in the 17th century. Fedot Yelchin documented Samegrelo, Danil Mishetski wrote about Kakheti, while Nikifore Tolochanov and Alexi Yevlev penned descriptions of Imereti. Russia endeavored to portray itself as a peace-loving, Christian, and civilized entity in the Caucasus, aiming to foster amicable relations with neighboring nations and safeguard the security of bordering populations.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Russia lacked sufficient strength and opportunities to openly launch an assault on the Caucasus. The global geopolitical landscape did not favor such endeavors. During this period, Moscow's efforts focused on securing its foothold in the Caucasus, gradually consolidating influence among Caucasian chieftains. The gathering of diverse political, economic, and statistical information marked this period. Effectively, this era served as preparation for Russia's future advances into the Caucasus. Simultaneously, Georgian kings and princes needed a comprehensive understanding of Russian foreign policy's primary directions.

At the onset of the 18th century, Persian-influenced kingdoms once again installed rulers upon their acceptance of Islam. Among those who resisted this religious con-

version was Vakhtang VI, supported by the eminent Georgian writer Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani. Georgia faced Persian aggression not just physically but also in terms of national identity during this time. The contributions of figures such as Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, Davit Guramishvili, and Vakhtang VI and their intellectual circles were significant.

Vakhtang faced imprisonment in Persia due to his refusal to convert to Islam. Disturbed by the Shah's policies, he sought to counter Persian aggression with the aid of European nations. Sensing Persia's relative vulnerability, Vakhtang sought to disengage from Persian influence and placed hope in the Pope of Rome and the King of France.

An embassy dispatched to Europe, led by Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, witnessed his self-sacrifice by adopting Catholicism to facilitate dialogue with the Pope and the French King. However, the embassy (1713-1715) failed as Europe was reluctant to confront Persia because of Georgia. Negotiations at the French King Louis XIV's court and Pope Clement XI's court concluded fruitlessly. Consequently, Vakhtang was compelled to convert to Islam and was appointed as an ambassador and commander of the Persian army by the Shah.

Subsequently, between 1716 and 1721, the Kartli kingdom's normal relations with the Persian court were reestablished. However, the Georgian king and his cohorts, disillusioned with this relationship, pinned their hopes on Russia and sought to distance themselves from their former conqueror.

The king of Kartli's pro-Russian inclinations strengthened during his time in Persia, catalyzed by the Shah's hostile policies toward him and Russia's successes in the Northern War. In 1715, Russian Emperor Peter I dispatched Ambassador Artem Volynsky to Persia, tasked with gathering intelligence and initiating diplomatic ties with the South Caucasus, specifically the Kingdom of Kartli. The embassy proved successful; Volynsky established contact with the Kartli king and signed a trade agreement between Russia and Persia.

Peter the Great aimed to exploit the already weakened Persia-Ottoman axis, primarily for economic gains in these regions. Since the 18th century, Russia's interest in the South Caucasus, notably Georgia, became pronounced as Mediterranean and East Asian issues became pivotal in politics. This marked the commencement of Russia's aggressive policy toward Georgia, initially camouflaged under a veneer of peace and diplomacy. During this era, Peter the Great formulated his imperialist plan, envisioning the subjugation of the Caucasus and the establishment of Russian dominance in the region. Consequently, from the 18th century onwards, the Rus-

sian Empire actively pursued its expansion into the South Caucasus.

During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Western Georgia remained within the sphere of Ottoman political influence. The kings of Imereti, alongside the leaders of Odisha, Guria, and Abkhazia, were among those claimed by the Ottoman Sultan, manifesting their compliance by sending annual tribute to the Sultan. Despite this, the rulers of Western Georgia diligently sought ways to break free from Ottoman dominance. The Abkhazians, acutely aware of the peril posed by Ottoman rule in Western Georgia, joined forces with other Georgian factions in resisting the invaders, setting aside their conflicts with Samegrelo for this united cause. Abkhazia faced internal strife compounded by Ottoman incursions, making it challenging for Abkhaz princes to maintain control. The practice of purchasing captives became widespread in this period. Seeking relations with a unified Russia emerged as the favored path for the kings and princes of Western Georgia to liberate themselves from Ottoman influence.

Around the early 1720s, under the Ottoman Empire's instigation, attacks by the Leks on Persia and its associated territories escalated. Lek detachments emerged in Daruband, Shemakha, Ganja, and Kartl-Kakheti. Georgians actively engaged in combat against the Leks.

In 1720, Russian Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Artem Volynsk persuaded Vakhtang VI that Peter the Great harbored considerable goodwill toward Christians and assured the Georgian king of Russia's support in his struggle against Muslim powers.

Peter the Great's strategic maneuvering in the Caspian Sea campaign was astutely calculated:

1. Peter refrained from formalizing a written military-political agreement with Vakhtang, thus avoiding legal obligations, as his primary objective was not solely to assist Kartli but to safeguard Russia's interests.
2. He informed the Persian Shah that the campaign aimed to chastise his adversaries – the Dagestanis.
3. Anticipating the Ottoman Empire's adverse reaction to Russia's Caspian campaign, Peter signed a treaty with the Ottomans in Istanbul in 1720, thereby neutralizing Ottoman hostility in potential future conflicts.

Kartli's involvement in the war stemmed from a singular motive: an invitation from a potent Christian monarch requesting aid in battling a common enemy. Vakhtang had firm confidence in Peter's potential victory. However, Russia's strategic Cau-

casian policies and imperial ambitions did not align with establishing a Christian union in the South Caucasus under Vakhtang's leadership. Russia aimed to conquer the Caucasus, expel the Persian Ottomans, and assert dominance in the region, diverging from Vakhtang's aspirations.

During Peter the Great's era, his initial aspirations to implement a specific project fell short. Nevertheless, subsequent Russian authorities persisted in advancing toward a similar objective.

In 1722, Russia commenced a military campaign against Persia, an endeavor also involving Vakhtang VI, the king of Kartli. Vakhtang and the Russian emperor pursued distinct aims: while both sought to defeat Persia, Vakhtang, with Russia's backing, aimed to establish a robust Georgian state in the region, whereas Peter sought dominance over the Caspian Sea and Eastern Georgia. These conflicting interests rendered the Russian-Georgian alliance inherently untenable.

Events unfolded as anticipated. In 1722, Peter mobilized a sizable army towards Astrakhan, while Vakhtang anticipated reaching the Persian borders soon, planning to confront the Leks and jointly invade Persia. Vakhtang, leading a force of 30-40 thousand soldiers, eagerly awaited the arrival of the Russian army in the Caspian Sea. Despite numerous appeals from Vakhtang to Peter, the latter did not arrive. Peter's reversal left Vakhtang isolated against the adversary. Consequently, in July 1722, Vakhtang VI ventured into Russia with a meager force of 1200 men.

On September 13, 1723, a treaty between Russia and Persia was concluded in St. Petersburg. Persia ceded Caspian cities like Baku and Daruband to Russia in exchange for Russian assistance against the Afghans and Leks. With the Ottomans also asserting claims on these territories, Russia geared up for a potential conflict but temporarily opted for a truce. The 1724 truce acknowledged Ottoman supremacy in Eastern Georgia under Article X. Russia's endorsement of this agreement amounted to an apparent betrayal of Georgia, especially Vakhtang VI, prioritizing its own country's interests over others. The shameful nature of this agreement was such that the Russians themselves refrained from incorporating its complete text into any collection of diplomatic documents.

Russia's actions deliberately contributed to the downfall of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. Initially, Russia sought to exploit it to fulfill its imperial objectives, later relinquishing it to Georgia's adversary, the Ottomans.

In conclusion:

1. During the 15th to 17th centuries, Georgian rulers made significant con-

cessions, hoping for substantial aid from their powerful Christian northern neighbor. Despite their concessions, including sending their descendants to Moscow as honorable hostages, they received nominal gifts, unfulfilled promises, and ineffective, condescending handouts rather than genuine military support.

2. In the early 18th century, Russia seized Persian territories amidst Persia's weakened state but acquiesced to Ottoman claims, acknowledging its dominance over the South Caucasus.
3. The Russian emperor disregarded the pledges made by the King of Kartli through diplomats, taking a step detrimental to Georgian King Vakhtang VI, tantamount to destroying statehood and precipitating a national tragedy.

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