

Port Arrangements along the Caucasian Coast's Black and Caspian Seas

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ABSTRACT

In the 19th century, three main factors determined the Russian Empire's conquest of the Caucasus: 1. Interest in the Caucasus as a system of trade routes, 2. Market – as a commercial area for the extraction of industrial items, agricultural products, and raw resources. 3. Geostrategic space – Russian Empire's political and strategic position. These three factors were closely connected to the Empire's broader ambitions to expand its influence toward Asia and India. To advance these imperial objectives, it was essential to develop and control both land and maritime routes. This discussion focuses specifically on maritime routes and their development.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Caucasus, Seaport, Poti, Batumi, Abkhazia

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INTRODUCTION

From ancient times to the present, the interests of numerous states have intersected and competed in the Caucasus region. Control over the region provided a significant strategic advantage, as the Caucasus functioned as a bridge between East and West ([History of the Caucasus, 2023, p. 15](#)). To facilitate direct trade with India, Peter I sought to build a route across the Persian dominion along the western coast of the Caspian Sea ([Dubrovin, 1866, p. 16](#)). Geographical discoveries, the shift of global commercial centers toward emerging land and maritime routes, the Ottoman Empire's rise following the fall of Byzantium, and significant political and economic transformations in Europe collectively contributed to the creation of an entirely new world ([Kakabadze, 1920, p.165](#)). By seizing control of the Bosphorus, the Ottomans enhanced their dominance over the eastern trade route. They attracted the attention of England, which had become a major player in international trade. Russia likewise sought to participate in these developments, which contributed to its increasing activity in the Caucasus region ([Gabashvili, 1966, pp. 178-179](#)). In addition, three primary factors shaped the Russian Empire's military campaign in the Caucasus: 1. interest in the region as a system of trade routes; 2. the region as a market; and 3. the region as a strategic and political location ([Found – 1505, descry – 1, doc – 15](#)). These strategic and economic considerations also help explain the Russian Empire's interest in constructing and operating ports in Georgia and across the Caucasus.

Russia built ports in the Caucasus, especially in Georgia, to advance its economic interests and strengthen its strategic position in the region. Georgia's geographic position enabled its seaports to serve as active links between Europe and Russia in the international trade networks. As Gureshidze ([2021, p. 55](#)) observes, "The growth of trade and, by extension, the economy is intimately correlated with the advancement of society". This perspective helps explain why the Russian Empire allocated substantial financial resources and employed European engineers to support this difficult task.

Georgia encompasses two major land and maritime segments of the Silk Road, each carrying substantial political, strategic, and economic significance. Regarding the Georgian Military Road, it is noteworthy that classical Byzantine authors refer to various passages or gates across the Caucasus Range, including the Caspian, Alanian, Caucasian, and other passages (Pylae or Portae). However, many medieval travelers journeying from Europe to Asia for religious, diplomatic, or commercial purposes during the Mongol and Tatar periods do not mention the Darial Pass. In such cases, they traveled along the western coast of the Caspian Sea via Derbent and the Great Caravan Road. Trade caravans also followed the same route to Persia from the Genoese colony of Tana, which prospered near the mouth of the Don, not far from modern-day Azov ([Weidenbaum, 1888, pp. 265-270](#)). Beyond contributing to the development of Georgia, the region, and the Silk Road as a whole, the construction of ports in the 19th century provided a crucial link between the land and maritime routes. Considering similar infrastructural developments in the Russian Empire – such as the fortified route connecting the Azov and Caspian Seas and the port of Novorossiya – and the land and maritime corridors linking the Middle East and Europe within the Ottoman

Empire, Georgian ports were regarded as strategically and commercially valuable by international powers in the 19th century.

Although Russia is presently (2025) engaged in war with Ukraine, its road infrastructure remains fully operational. The Black Sea, and specifically Crimea, serves as a strategic platform from which Russia projects military power in Georgia, Ukraine, and even places as far away as Syria and Libya ([Coffey, 2020](#)). For instance, there are railway and road routes along the Sea of Azov. Thus, the routes crossing Georgian territory continue to function as important segments of regional trade networks, providing equal opportunities for prominent international actors. The effectiveness of the roads that pass through Georgia depends on international actors' cooperation. Especially given that the Silk Road is currently dominated by the European Union and the BRICS (Russia, China, India, etc.). To contextualize this discussion, a brief overview of the history of the Russian fleet is appropriate.

The origins of the modern Russian Navy trace to the reign of Peter the Great, although earlier regional rulers maintained small squadrons of warships. Peter I believed that maritime strength was essential for Russia's emergence as a great power, and he personally studied European naval construction and development before initiating the creation of Russia's own fleet ([Martin, 1947, p. 532](#)).

The anatomy of the Russian flotilla is as follows: The struggle for access to maritime space gained new strength in 1505, when Moscow led the unification of the Russian principalities into a centralized state. To protect the Narva trade route and shipping on the Baltic Sea, Ivan IV Vasilyevich began to build a state-owned privateer fleet. In Russia, during the Northern War (1700-21), a regular army and navy were created. Russia gained access to the Baltic Sea ([Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia, 1984, p.485](#)). Russia was able to connect the sea route with the east and west land trade routes. In 1771, the Dunay military flotilla was formed. During this period, the Caffa in Crimea was captured, and in 1783, Crimea became part of the Russian Empire. The battle for Crimea was finally over. Following its annexation of Crimea in 1783, Russia established the Black Sea Fleet. In 1783, the first battleship of the Black Sea Fleet was launched, and the famous port of Sevastopol (a strategic base on the Black Sea) was established. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Russian merchant and military fleet consisted of the Baltic and Black Sea fleets, the Caspian, Belmorok, and Okhotsk flotillas. Following the Treaty of Adrianople (1828–1829), which secured significant portions of the Black Sea coast for Russia, the port of Novorossiya was established (1838) ([Krasnov & Shitikov, n.d.](#)).

The strength of the Russian fleet has consistently played a pivotal role in the empire. This significance is reflected in Stalin's Order of the Day of July 28, 1945, in which he declared: "The Soviet People wish to see their fleet grow still stronger and more powerful. Our people are constructing new battleships and bases for the fleet" ([Martin, 1947, p. 532](#)).

Turning to archival records provides important historical context. Until the beginning of 1903, port construction in Russia was confined to major commercial and strategically important locations. Depending on changing circumstances, at different times, the Black Sea coast belonged to the following objects: Poti, Batumi, Novorossiya, Anapa, Tuapse, Sochi,

Temruk, as well as Petrovsky and Darubandi on the Caspian Sea coast. However, the initial stages of port construction and river-mouth development progressed slowly. During this period, Russia's port infrastructure had not yet developed sufficiently to meet the demands of expanding trade relations ([Found – 1087, descr – 1, doc – 125](#)).

METHODS

By comparing documents from the Georgian National Archives with relevant scholarly literature and conducting an objective analysis, this study identifies the reasons the Caucasus and the Black and Caspian Sea coasts held such strategic importance for the Russian Empire.

DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the seaports of Poti, Batumi, and Abkhazia and, drawing on archival documents, examines the resources allocated by the Russian Empire to their development and the strategic purposes these investments served. The archival materials are presented in the following summarized form.

In particular:

Poti Seaport

As early as 1804, plans for constructing a port on the eastern shore of the Black Sea emerged after Russia secured access to this coastline following the capture of Imereti. Between 1805 and 1863, the issue of selecting a suitable location for the port was revisited multiple times, and a project was proposed. “In 1828, following the Russian army’s capture of the Turkish fortress at Poti, former Minister of Finance Count Kankrin informed the Caucasus commander-in-chief, Count Paskevich, that Emperor Nicholas I intended to establish Poti as a first-class fortress and port and to link the Black Sea with the Caspian Sea through a shipping canal. For this, he asked that an engineer, Captain Chadayev, be sent. In 1830, Engineer Chadayev presented the collected materials in St. Petersburg. Furthermore, in 1831, Major General Pote was dispatched to Poti, who, based on the received materials, drew up a port project. Pote proposed damming the southern branch of the Rion River to create a wide internal basin. He recommended providing a forward port for entry into the pool. However, insufficient funding prevented the project from being initiated. Instead of proceeding with port construction, Russians had to work on improving the climate - draining the swamps. In 1839, the high costs associated with unsuccessful dredging led to the suspension of port construction at Poti. The site was deemed unsuitable for settlement, and attention shifted to constructing a port at Redoubt-Kale, which already served as a significant hub for Transcaucasian trade with Russia and Europe. In 1804, this city began work on constructing/adapting the outfall for Khofa-Tskhali cargo operations. To create a well-equipped port in Redoubt-Kale, the opinions of authoritative figures at the time (Gakhausen and John Ren-

nie) were taken into account. John Rennie even drew up the project.

However, the war with Turkey nullified all the state's efforts to create well-equipped ports in this area.

After the Sevastopol campaign, the state intended to build a railway between the Black and Caspian seas, so the question of building a port on the Black Sea coast was raised again. In the southeastern Black Sea region, Poti was preferred for its proximity to the Transcaucasian administrative center, its location at the mouth of the Rioni River, and its exposure to strong sea winds. In 1857, Poti was declared a port city. The Military Engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Radionov, was entrusted with studying both branches of the river. Then, project preparation was handed over to the road engineer Bogushevich. Bogushevich's project was submitted for consideration to English engineers Bell and Gabby, who at that time were studying the Transcaucasian Railway.

In 1861, the military engineer Shavrov was sent to Poti to draw up the project. He was instructed to improve the fairway on the crossbar, so that warships could enter the river, and to use wood for work, as no stone was available within roughly thirty miles of Poti, and it was unwise to transport stones from such a distance. However, the wooden equipment proved unsuitable; although the surface remained intact, the submerged sections had been damaged by sea worms. Consequently, constructing the pier from stone rather than wood became necessary. Shavrov therefore submitted a new design proposing two piers at the northern mouth of the Rioni River to create a front basin with an approximate area of 50,000 square meters. The plan also appears to have included excavating an internal island within one of the river's cut branches. The designed fence required reinforcing the river's southern branch, and the plan further included constructing a canal linking the Rioni River with Lake Paliastomi to mitigate flooding in the city of Poti. The flow of water from the river Rion into the Lake Paliastom would lower the lake's water level, which would then flow into the sea through a long channel. In 1890, the sketches for general works were completed. From 1872 to 1891, total expenses amounted to 7,010,392 rubles.

In 1891, the Poti Seaport was considered inadequate for shipping, primarily due to the lack of a coastline for unloading and the depth of the port basin, which was insufficient to accommodate cargo ships. Ships that were logged in the Poti Seaport had to queue to get to the pier and stand in pairs in an open dock for a whole week. Another significant drawback was the unsafe harbor mooring conditions, where strong southern, southwestern, and western winds were frequent. At this time, sea waves from the exit broke into the port, causing significant turbulence and forcing the ships moored at the North Pier to stop unloading cargo. However, accidents at the port were rare. "During storms, large vessels attempting to enter the port posed a significant hazard, as they frequently collided with the piers. Therefore, passengers on ships were forced to stop in the open sea during raids, exposing them to various risks (Found – 1087, descr – 1, doc – 125).

The effective operation of the Poti Seaport enables Georgia to play a meaningful role in the development of Euro-Asian trade, cultural interaction, diplomatic relations, and broader economic ties. The steady expansion of the Poti seaport aided in Georgia's capitalist devel-

opment. Because the full operation of the seaport aligns with the interests of international stakeholders, it also enhances Georgia's strategic security.

Batumi Sea Port

“A beautiful corner of Georgia, the Batumi region, since ancient times has been part of the Guria, which in turn was part of ancient Colchis, and during the Eastern Roman Empire was known as Lazika. In the history of the people, Colchis played the greatest cultural role: with its wealth, they attracted the Greeks and Romans, and to expand trade, and along the entire eastern coast of the Black Sea, their factories and colonies were developed” ([Found – 1438, descr – 1, doc – 187](#)).

The significance of Batumi for the Russian Empire is outlined in an archival document, which states: “One of the important successes of the Russian diplomacy at the Berlin Congress was that, despite the efforts of the powerful states' representatives, Batumi City remained on his side. The prosperity on the sea coast is determined by the ports' improvement, in general by the development of sailing and maritime activities” ([Found – 1438, descr – 1, doc – 187](#)).

The Russian Empire considered that, apart from Batumi, on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, there was no such convenient and natural port. Sukhum, by contrast, was isolated by mountain ranges and separated from the principal artery of the western Caucasus, the Rioni Valley. “Significant funds had already been invested in the artificial construction works at the Poti Seaport, yet it retained only a commercial function; its location at the mouth of the Rioni River also contributed to severe flooding. By securing access through Batumi and its environs, the Russian Empire sought to establish a firm position along the Caucasus coast. The significance of the Batumi port, particularly during the winter, is evident. Through the Russian navigation points on the Black Sea, linking Batumi with Odessa, Sevastopol, and Novorossiysk, the port could maintain year-round maritime communication with the Transcaucasus. Because Batumi lay along the shortest route between key trading provinces and was situated on a direct line with Yerevan, Kars, and Ardahan, its commercial significance was considerable. Batumi was considered by the Russians as crucial center for coastal shipping. From a military perspective, Batumi was viewed as an essential base for the Russian Navy's expansion. According to Russian Empire generals, Batumi's convex shape made it an excellent defensive military port because it was easy to mine, had ridges all around it, and housed naval artillery. “At the time when the Russian Empire entered Batumi, it was a small settlement with approximately three thousand inhabitants, including Turks, Laz, Georgians, Circassians, Abkhazians, and Armenians ([Found – 1438, descr – 1, doc – 187](#)).

The Russian Empire viewed Batumi as the most suitable location to serve as a major Transcaucasian port, including for cargo handling. In 1879, the Russian government drew attention to this fact. To expand and improve Batumi Bay and turn it into a port, under the leadership of the military engineer General Frolov, a special commission was created. It became clear that the turnover of cargo passing through Batumi in the first years did not exceed 500,000 feet; after that, it increased to 8 million, and a large volume of oil cargo

was required to complete construction of the Batumi-Baku line. Moreover, the increasing storage and transport of oil through the port raised concerns regarding the safety of the city. Therefore, during the development of the first project for the Batumi seaport, the need to construct a dedicated oil harbor was recognized ([Found – 1087, descr – 1, doc – 125](#)).

“The development of Batumi urban life rather depended on the sailing. After the Crimean War, cargo vessels began calling at Batumi with increasing frequency. On account of it, there was established close trading relations with the West and East regions of the Black Sea coast” ([Uzunadse, 1997, p.72](#)).

From a strategic perspective, the Batumi seaport strengthened the Russian Empire’s ability to secure its border with Turkey, thereby countering Turkey’s potential expansion into western Georgia. Batumi’s geographic position also made it particularly suitable for expanding oil exports and for facilitating transport routes toward the Middle East.

Sukhum-Kale

Even before 1881, Sukhum-Kale had been identified as a potential site for establishing a coastal port on the Black Sea. connected to the Russian railway network, the construction of large port facilities was not initially prioritized. Instead, early efforts focused on improving conditions for receiving larger ships serving key trading areas. However, in 1888, a small pier was built in Sukhumi for receiving small coastal vessels ([Found – 1087, descr – 1, doc – 125](#)).

It is notable that, during the Caucasian War, Abkhazia was strategically significant. “Through this country, which constitutes a narrow strip between the sea and the inaccessible mountains, lay the only path for the invasion of some mountain tribes of the western Caucasus into the territory of the Christian population up to the Inguri and Rioni lines” ([Megrelidze, 1969, p.4](#))

The primary objective of Abkhazia Seaport is maritime transportation. Its importance to the Russian Empire stemmed from its incorporation into the empire’s broader commercial and logistical system.

CONCLUSION

The establishment and gradual improvement of Georgian ports were part of the Russian Empire’s strategy to position Russia as a maritime state, intertwined with the Empire’s trade interests and the expansion of the geography of new places advantageous from an economic and strategic point of view. To address the serious problems associated with port development in Georgia, the Empire devoted significant resources to implementing its domestic and foreign policies, while also taking into account the interests of world actors.

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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