RELIGION, SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND GENDER

The Specifics of the Religious Education System in Georgia (Second Half of the 19th Century)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the specifics of the religious education system in Georgia during the second half of the 19th century. Analysing historical, political, and educational dynamics demonstrates how religious education functioned in the empire's border regions, particularly in Georgia, as a tool of cultural suppres-sion, assimilation, and Russification. The research emphasizes the challenges faced by Georgian clergy and public figures under Russian policies; examines the interrelation among adaptation, education, and the preservation of cultural heritage under colonial oppression; and showcases the resilience of Georgian identity despite systemic pressure on national culture and the native language. The religious education system during the studied period reveals contradic-tions within the Russian church between modernisation and reactionary poli-cies, with theological schools becoming a kind of battlefield. Georgian clergy, intellectuals, and students played a decisive role in ensuring that religious education did not fully align with imperial objectives. Against the background of systemic violence, they used it as a platform to safeguard the Georgian language and cultural heritage. Thus, in Georgia during the second half of the 19th century, the dual role of the religious education system was revealed: it served the policy of Russification and, at the same time, reflected the emer-gence and development of mechanisms for preserving Georgian identity with-in it. This duality enriches the narrative and illustrates the complexities of the historical moment.

Keywords: Ecclesiastical history of Georgia, Russian ecclesiastical policy, Georgian history, 19th century, religious education in Georgia, Russian Em-pire education system, Russian history

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INTRODUCTION

The research on religious education in Georgia during the second half of the 19th century addresses a critical period in the country's cultural and political life, when Russia systematically sought to advance its colonial interests in the empire's national regions through Russification and assimilation.

This topic sheds light on how education systems were systematically weaponised as tools of assimilation in Georgia, underscoring the broader implications of empire-driven policies. The problem centres on the interplay between Russification policies and the resilience of Georgian cultural identity, specifically through religious education.

We will attempt to demonstrate how imperial policies sought to undermine national consciousness in Georgia; analyse the methods employed by the authorities in theological schools against culture, language, and identity, the mechanisms of assimilation within the religious education system; and how Georgian society resisted these policies, managing, despite challenges, to preserve the fundamental elements of its cultural heritage.

In today's globalized world, where cultural preservation and struggles over identity remain deeply relevant, we think the presented research offers a valuable historical perspective. Understanding the dynamics among education, politics, and resistance during the Russian Empire offers insights into contemporary debates over the role of education in cultural integration, assimilation, and resistance to hegemonic forces. The Georgian experience serves as a case study for examining broader patterns in colonial and post-colonial history.

METHODS

This article is a historical investigation based on primary sources, scientific literature, and documents, reflecting the characteristics of the religious education system in 19th-century Georgia. The research was conducted using the principles of historicism, applying historical-comparative methods, analysis, and synthesis.

The specifics of ecclesiastical education in Georgia were examined against the background of Russia's religious-educational policies. On the one hand, the analysis of Russia's global imperial tendencies, and on the other hand, the local examples and ongoing events in Georgia, revealed both the local-regional and global-universal contexts of the research issue and their interrelation. The focus on key figures and institutions proved engaging: the influential Georgian clergy and public figures added a personal dimension, illustrating how individuals coped with and resisted the pressures of Russification. This approach complements the broader structural analysis.

RESULTS

The article showcases how education and religion were wielded as tools of assimilation. It demonstrates how the resilience and adaptability of local communities counterbalanced the

suppression of native languages and cultural practices.

It was significant to show the dual role of the religious education system. The article contributes to understanding how colonial policies affect peripheral regions, contradictorily, often unintentionally fostering resistance and cultural consolidation rather than achieving total assimilation.

The initiatives of Georgian clergy, educators, and intellectuals underscore their agency in maintaining cultural heritage. These figures emerge not as passive subjects of imperial policy but as active participants in shaping national consciousness.

DISCUSSION

1. Institutional Reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church and Educational Policy in Georgia

By the second half of the 19th century, the clergy's legal and social status as a distinct class in the Russian Empire had significantly expanded, turning them into an untouchable caste. Following the abolition of serfdom in the 1860s, the existence of the clergy as a special and self-contained caste became outdated. (Lopukhin, 1901, p. 652) Naturally, the reform efforts of Alexander II's era also addressed the Russian Empire's ecclesiastical administration. The reforms of the 1860s and 1870s, which initiated the process of the Russian state's bourgeois evolution, aimed to break down the caste-based insularity within the Russian Church and introduce noticeable societal changes. It is worth noting that the Church did not embrace these transformations enthusiastically. It struggled to adapt to the new conditions, causing delays and hindering the reform of ecclesiastical structures. During this period, the Russian Church was essentially undergoing an imitation of reforms. Most of the initiated reforms were completed under the political reaction conditions of the 1880s, effectively taking on the character of counter-reforms (Litvak, 1989, p. 357). Naturally, the reform process in the empire's peripheral and colonial regions, including the ecclesiastical life of Georgia's Exarchate, progressed even more slowly and at a more sluggish pace than in Russia's internal provinces.

The ecclesiastical reforms of Russian Emperor Alexander II, implemented in the 1860s-1870s, aimed to actively involve the clergy and priests in public life. Revitalizing ecclesiastical life meant addressing problems in the spheres of social, economic, charitable, and public education. Naturally, innovations within the religious education system gained special significance.

It is noteworthy that, unlike the internal provinces of Russia, where the religious education system consisted of four levels, Georgia had only three: theological seminaries, district schools, and parish schools. The highest level of religious education – the theological academy – did not exist in Georgia. Consequently, outstanding students who graduated from seminaries in Georgia pursued higher theological education at theological academies in Russia. The theological academies of Kyiv, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kazan were the main centres of theological education in Russia (Khundadze, 1951, pp. 161-162; Bubulashvili, 2022, p. 380).

The reforms of the 1860s in the Russian Empire's religious education system did not entail fundamental changes. Essentially, they represented periodic changes to the regulations and staff schedules of religious institutions. However, positive innovations were also noted in the reform process. In 1863, the children of the clergy were granted the freedom to choose their profession, as well as the right to enter university and work in public service. However, this law was repealed again in 1879. In 1867, the principle of inheritance in selecting candidates for clerical positions was abolished (Litvak, 1989, pp. 358-360).

Additionally, the ecclesiastical reforms allowed dioceses to convene gatherings of the clergy to discuss the economic conditions of the diocese and educational and pedagogical issues in religious schools. However, these gatherings lacked sufficient authority to implement decisions effectively.

Beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, under the initiative of Bishop Gabriel Kikodze of Imereti, clergy assemblies from various dioceses of western Georgia (Imereti, Samegrelo, and Guria) repeatedly petitioned for the establishment of a theological seminary in the city of Kutaisi. These requests, voiced over several years (in 1871, 1879, 1881, 1885, and beyond), stemmed from the difficulty local students faced in continuing their education at the Tbilisi Theological Seminary. Although the clergy of the aforementioned dioceses expressed their willingness to cover a significant portion of the seminary's expenses, the authorities remained unsupportive of the resolutions and petitions adopted by the clergy assemblies of the respective dioceses. The Kutaisi Seminary was ultimately founded only in 1894, following a decision by the Holy Synod. Notably, in 1893, the temporary closure of the Tbilisi Seminary due to student unrest coincided with the government's interest in establishing a new theological institution (Bubulashvili, 2022, pp. 399–405).

In 1867, new staff regulations and statutes for theological schools and seminaries were approved, and in 1869, similar statutes were introduced for theological academies. As a result of the reform, theological schools were administratively subordinated to diocesan management; A special educational committee was established, headed not by a secular official but by a clergyman, who determined the teaching methods and content. Under the new statutes, the position of seminary rector became elective. Special bodies responsible for selecting teachers were also created within seminaries and theological schools (Litvak, 1989, p. 359).

These modest democratic elements were meant to overshadow the significant and regressive changes in the content and process of education in theological schools. Specifically, subjects like Biblical history, hermeneutics, ecclesiastical archaeology, and polemical theology – disciplines that required critical thinking from seminary students – were removed from the seminary curriculum. The teaching of civil history was also abolished. Instead, the hours allocated to classical languages and the study of Holy Scripture were increased. Books unrelated to the educational curriculum were removed from seminary libraries (Litvak, 1989, pp. 358-360).

In the Caucasus region, including Georgia, the practical implementation of reform measures was, in most cases, delayed compared to the central areas of Russia. For instance, the enactment of the new regulatory statute on theological schools, adopted in the Russian

Empire in 1867, was not carried out in Georgia until 1872.

In the 1860s, during the Russian Empire, there was a notable increase in the Russian Orthodox Church's role in public education. In 1866, the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, D. A. Tolstoy, was also appointed as the Minister of Public Education. The merging of two positions under one individual indicated the strengthening influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on public education (Litvak, 1989, pp. 364-365).

The Church was entrusted with a special mission in primary education. The clergy of parishes were tasked with teaching reading and writing to the children of peasants and ensuring their basic education in parish schools. The secular and spiritual authorities in Russia regarded parishes as social entities tasked with practically fulfilling the Church's social mission and addressing contemporary societal issues.

As a result, in 1864, the Russian Empire established ecclesiastical-parish guardianship committees. Their goal was to improve the well-being of parishes, renovate dilapidated churches, enhance both the spiritual-moral and material conditions of believers, and assist orphans and the needy (E. K., 1901, p. 269).

In the Georgian Exarchate, parish-ecclesiastical guardianship committees were founded in various areas of Tbilisi only in 1887, affiliated with different churches – such as those of John the Theologian in Vera, St. Nicholas in Chughureti, the Peter and Paul Cemetery, Ascension in Sololaki, Didube, and other churches. Later, ecclesiastical-parish committees were established in different regions of Georgia as well. These committees did not fulfil the expectations envisioned at the time of their establishment; however, their valuable contributions cannot be denied. They played a role in the creation of churches and schools within the parishes, as well as the implementation of individual charitable initiatives (E. K., 1901, p. 271).

In the second half of the 19th century, the network of religious education in Georgia gradually expanded. Religious schools existed in Tiflisi, Kutaisi, Telavi, and Gori, as well as in Samegrelo, Guria, and elsewhere. It is significant that the network of religious education mainly grew through the establishment of primary religious schools. The government showed little initiative in opening secondary religious schools in Georgia, particularly seminaries (Kokrashvili, 2014b, p. 108).

Notably, at the beginning of the 19th century, after Russia conquered and annexed Georgian territories, the number of local Georgian schools and educational institutions decreased significantly. Many were closed and abolished, including the theological seminaries in Tiflisi and Telavi. The establishment of Russian schools and educational institutions was also delayed. Thus, the noble school opened by the Russian administration in Tiflisi in 1804 was, for many years, the only state-funded school in Georgia. The Russian theological seminary and the district school with a parish school in Tiflisi were not opened until 1917. The state treasury did not allocate funds, and the Georgian Exarchate borrowed the necessary finances from the missionary society – „Ossetian Ecclesiastical Commission" (Kokrashvili, 2014a, pp. 72-73).

„Until the 1890s, the only central institution of Orthodox theological education in Georgia was located in Tbilisi. This institution was the Tbilisi Theological Seminary, which operated within the framework of the Georgian Exarchate". In 1894, after years of effort and with significant support from the clergy of Western Georgia, a local budget was allocated to open the Kutaisi Theological Seminary, which operated only until 1904.

The objective and subjective conditions of societal development also led to the formation of religious schools for women in Georgia. Between 1866 and 1879, a women's school was established at the Samtavro Monastery, which was later relocated from Mtskheta to Tiflisi and transformed into the Ioannike Women's Diocesan School. In 1892, Bishop Gabriel founded the Kutaisi Women's Diocesan School in the city of Kutaisi, among others (Sakvarelidze, 1958, p. 108; Ketsbaia, 1997, p. 98).

It should be noted that, in the internal provinces of Russia, theological seminaries and schools operated at the expense of the state treasury, while in Georgia, theological seminaries and schools functioned through the income of the Georgian Exarchate – derived from local parishioners and the Church. Despite the enormous political mission assigned to the education system in the Russian Empire for the Russification and assimilation of "foreign peoples", the government showed little interest in financially supporting the religious education system in national regions. The formation of secondary religious schools (district schools and seminaries), which required greater government expenditure, progressed more slowly than that of primary religious schools, which were mainly established at the expense of the population. Due to budget constraints, teacher salaries were inadequate, and schools often operated in unimproved buildings.

2. Theological Education as a Tool of Russification: Language Suppression and Cultural Reconfiguration

In the 1860s, the teaching of the Georgian language in public schools was significantly restricted. In 1861, a regulation was issued "On Primary Public Schools", which stipulated that all types of schools in Georgia should conduct instruction in Russian. However, in the same year, rules compiled by the missionary and charitable organisation "Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus" preserved the study of local languages in the primary classes of schools under its management (Gvanceladze, Tabidze, Sherozia, Chanturia, 2001, p. 97).

In the 1870s, the restriction of the Georgian language in the Tiflisi Theological Seminary and Georgian theological schools became a systemic phenomenon. In many cases, this occurred in quite harsh forms. In 1873, by order of the Russian Holy Synod, the Georgian language was abolished as a mandatory subject in secondary theological schools. Two hours per class were allocated to the native language, which was assigned a supportive role in the study of Russian. The Georgian language hours were primarily used for learning Russian. At this stage, preference was given to the so-called „Comparative method", which involved learning a foreign language through the native language (Khundadze, 1951, p. 203).

It is noteworthy that due to the inadequate teaching or complete neglect of the Georgian language, the Tiflisi Theological Seminary was producing clergy who were entirely unqualified for Georgian religious services. These individuals were unable to establish proper contact with the Georgian congregation or to conduct prayers and services in Georgian.

In Georgia's theological schools, the study of the Russian language became a priority. According to the 1875 decree, „the Visual learning method" for Russian language instruction was enhanced, requiring students to use Russian when conversing with each other. Additional hours were assigned to struggling students to prepare in Russian, among other measures. As per the 1879 order of the Holy Synod, „In the future, only individuals of Russian origin with higher education should be appointed as Russian language teachers in the theological schools of the Georgian Exarchate" (Georgian National Archive, Central Historical Archive, f. 440, case № 194, sheet 111).

In general, it should be noted that, according to Georgian historiography, the early 1870s saw relatively favourable teaching regimes and conditions established in Georgian theological schools. Due to the elective system, a significant portion of the supervisors and teachers in these schools were of ethnic Georgian descent. Many of them distinguished themselves by their progressive pedagogical and social ideas (examples include Iase Sulkhanishvili, the inspector of the Tiflisi Theological Seminary; Iakob Gogebashvili at the Tiflisi Theological School; Davit Datoshvili at the Telavi District School; Gerasime Kalandarishvili in Kutaisi; and Mikheil Gurgenidze, who headed the Samegrelo Theological School). Teachers of theological schools (such as Niko Tskhvedadze, Thoma Turiyev, and Giorgi Ioseliani at the Tiflisi Theological Seminary; and Pavle Berkanidze, Ilia, and Christofore Zarapishvili at the Gori and Telavi Theological Schools, among others) had a significant influence on students, providing them access to the works of leading thinkers and progressive ideas of the time. Despite the significant restrictions imposed during the 1860s and 70s, the Georgian language survived and was not entirely excluded from the curriculum of theological schools.

After the assassination of Russian Emperor Alexander II in the 1880s, the Russian Church began to counter the few progressive reforms implemented over the previous two decades. From this period, when a strict political regime was established across the empire, the development of the Russian Church entered a new stage. These counter-reforms led to a surge of activity among influential ecclesiastical figures and officials in Russia. Their confusion and inactivity during the reform years were replaced by relentless efforts to restore the Church's lost authority and consolidate its shaken positions, especially in the national regions.

It is known that, at the beginning of the 19th century, Tsarism completed the integration of the Church into the bureaucratic apparatus of state governance and gradually elevated the Church's status within the state. By the end of the same century, the Russian Church assumed the primary ideological function of defending the existing order. Under the leadership of its energetic administrator, the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, Pobedonostsev (1880–1905), it took a firm stance on the fundamental issues of domestic policy.

The 1880s–1890s can be considered a distinctive era in the Russian Empire in terms of the relationship between the state and the Church (Litvak, 1989, p. 357; Religija i cerkov' v

istorii Rossii, 1975, p. 215). This connection is well reflected in the words of Russian ecclesiastical figures: "The Russian state, Orthodoxy, and autocracy – all these are organically intertwined. Every matter associated with faith, the Church, in Orthodox Russia also acquires the significance of a state issue" (Cerkov' v istorii Rossii (IX v.-1917 g.), 1967, p. 284).

The special significance of the Church's role in state policy is highlighted by the appointment of the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod as a member of the Ministers' Committee, as well as the Supreme Commission on the Press. On the initiative of the Chief Procurator, regular audiences and meetings with clergy were organized with the emperor, among other actions. Steps were taken to expand the Church's independence from the highest secular bureaucracy. In 1881, the Holy Synod was granted the right to resolve specific issues without the emperor's intervention, such as awarding honors to clergy, opening monasteries, introducing private changes in religious-educational institutions, and more (Istorija religii v Rossii, 2002, pp. 157-158).

In the last two decades of the 19th century, the counter-reforms and reactionary politics implemented in the Russian Empire were most acutely felt in the peripheral colonial regions of Russia, including Georgia. The idea of „United and Indivisible Russia" became relevant. Russification, which by the 1880s had been methodically developed and theoretically justified within the Russian Empire as a universal political system for all colonial entities, aimed at opposing the national identities and peculiarities of various peoples, as well as their moral and intellectual lives. Russian autocracy launched attacks on several fronts, using the following as tools: (a) state policy, (b) the education system, and (c) the Russian Church. Consequently, the process of counter-reforms unfolded with extreme intensity in the life of the Georgian Exarchate, affecting all aspects of ecclesiastical life (Kokrashvili, 2014b, p. 112).

Several Western historians, including Edward Thaden and Andreas Kappeler, emphasize that the Russian Empire's educational policy in Georgia exhibited a distinctly particular character. Despite their shared religious affiliation with Russian Orthodoxy, Georgian Orthodox Christians were perceived as potential sources of resistance, which led to religious education becoming a principal target of Russification efforts (Kappeler, 2001; Thaden, 1981). Russification in Georgia was more assertive than in other regions of the empire, involving not only the suppression of the Georgian language but also the abolition of the local independent Orthodox Church's autocephaly and the consolidation of Russian ecclesiastical governance (Thaden, 1981, pp. 161–178).

With the new regulations for theological schools, even the minimal elements of democratization introduced during the reform period were abolished: the election of teachers was eliminated, the administration was strengthened, and the authority of bishops was increased, among other changes. During the reactionary period of the 1880s, various progressive-minded educators of both Georgian and Russian origin were dismissed and expelled from the Tiflisi Theological Seminary for various reasons. In their place, extremely reactionary teachers were appointed.

In Georgian theological schools, a political regime of surveillance and strict control over each student was established. They were forbidden from reading literature of a liberal ori-

entation, and expulsions of students, particularly Georgians, became more frequent, often for trivial reasons (Khutsishvili, 1987, p. 102). The confrontation between the administration of theological schools and students reached its peak. In 1894, following the murder of the rector of the Tiflisi Theological Seminary, Chudecki, by a student of the seminary, the institution was closed for a year. After its reopening, during the 1890s, an even more oppressive regime was imposed in the seminary: the number of supervisors increased, spies and provocateurs became more numerous, and students of different nationalities were turned against one another (Bubulashvili, 2022, p. 396; Kvitsiani, 2001, p. 153).

In the 1880s–1890s, the education sector and schools throughout the empire took on the mission of Russifying local ethnicities. Schools were to become the implementers of Russian civilization and the suppressors of national culture in the peripheral national regions of the empire.

The circular dated October 20, 1880, sent by Kirill P. Yanovsky (1822-1902), the head of the Caucasus Educational District, to his subordinates, stated: "The establishment of Russian schools in the Caucasus and attracting the local population to study in them must undoubtedly be considered the main means of consolidating Russian civilization in this region... This civilization, which strives to penetrate the people and develops through a rationally organized school system, will prove to be more resilient than the civilizations previously existing here, which it has come to replace" (Georgian National Archive, Central Historical Archive, f. 17, inv. 3, case № 300; Khundadze, 1951, p. 153).

On January 13, 1881, the publication of the "Primary School Curriculum" laid the foundation for the full Russification of public primary schools under the Ministry of Education throughout Georgia and the entire Caucasus. According to this curriculum, the teaching of the Russian language in primary schools was to begin in the second half of the first year, and from the second year onward, students were required to study all subjects in Russian (Khundadze, 1951, p.100).

Under the 1895 regulations, which fell under the Ministry of Education's jurisdiction, local languages were removed entirely from primary schools. From the very first day of learners' school attendance, all subjects were required to be taught in Russian. In the 1890s, to make the process of Russification more effective, the so-called "natural" (silent) method was purposefully introduced. This method was first used by Levitsky, the director of the Kutaisi public school, in schools under his jurisdiction. The method entirely prohibited the use of the native language for learning Russian, aiming to make Russian the language of thought for the students.

3. Primary Education Network: the Dual Models of Russification, Cultural, and Religious Integration

In the 1880s, special emphasis was placed on primary religious education. Following the assassination of Emperor Alexander II of Russia, the Ministers' Committee unanimously expressed the view that the spiritual and moral development of the people – an essential corner-

stone of the state system – could only be achieved through the clergy's involvement in the governance of public schools. The implementation of this directive was undertaken by the highly energetic Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, K. P. Pobedonostsev. In 1884, the "Rules on Church-Parish Schools" were established, setting the goal for these schools to promote Orthodoxy and elementary education among the broader population (Aleksidze, 1998, p. 20).

In 1884, according to new regulations for theological schools, responsibility for diocesan theological schools and seminaries was assigned to the clergy. They were granted the right to convene independent congresses, which were tasked with electing educational and supervisory councils for theological schools and seminaries. Congress delegates were chosen from parishes, with one delegate elected for every ten parishes. Deacons and psalm readers also had voting rights. The clergy were authorized to oversee women's education and open theological schools and educational institutions using diocesan funds, where instruction in the native language was not restricted (Litvak, 1989, p. 366).

Thanks to such congresses, the number of church-parish schools increased, the number of students grew, and old schools were renovated. Clergy oversight was extended not only to orphaned children but also to the children of impoverished clergy. Buildings were constructed for church-parish schools, and additional funds were secured to support each student. The clergy also took care to improve teachers' material conditions by supplementing the salaries of theological school educators from diocesan funds. Unlike public schools under the Ministry of Education, church-parish schools were subordinate to the highest ecclesiastical authority.

Since 1885, the Holy Synod has developed a special „curriculum" for church-parish schools in the Georgian Exarchate, taking local conditions into account. A church-parish school could be either single-class or two-class. In Georgian parishes, single-class schools had a three-year program, while in the Exarchate's Russian parish schools, the program lasted two years. Two-class church-parish schools offered a four-year education. The curriculum consisted of the following subjects: canon law, reading and writing in the native language for local students, while Church Slavonic was taught to Russians, as well as elementary arithmetic. In two-class schools, this was supplemented by civil and ecclesiastical history. Some of these schools also included classes in handicrafts (E. K., 1901, pp. 214-215).

In 1885, by order of the Emperor, the "Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus" was placed under the jurisdiction of the Holy Synod. As a result, the society's schools were administratively merged with church-parish schools (Khundadze, 1951, p. 65; Pkhaladze, 2000, p. 74). Sunday schools and literacy schools were also established. Education was funded by parish resources, supported by local priests, or provided through teachers appointed by the diocesan bishop, who worked under the supervision of parish clergy. In the Georgian Exarchate, parish and Sunday schools were managed by the educational councils of the respective dioceses, which were accountable to the Georgian Exarchate.

Since teaching Georgian as a native language was neither permitted nor prohibited in church-parish schools, demand for these institutions in Georgia increased significantly. By the end of the 19th century, the number of church-parish schools in the Georgian di-

ocese totalled 103, in the Sokhumi diocese – 45, in the Imereti diocese –106, and in the Guria-Samegrelo diocese – 127 (E. K., 1901, p. 217; Tatiev, 1913, pp. 16-17).

However, tensions arose in those historical regions of Georgia whose populations the Russian Empire regarded as ethnically non-Georgian. These included the Mingrelians, Svans, Khevsurs, Adjarians, and others. The imperial authorities sought to detach these groups from the unified Georgian cultural framework.

The campaign began with the expulsion of the Georgian language from schools in Samegrelo and Svaneti, where efforts were made to create alphabets for local populations based on the Russian script– even though Georgian had long been recognized as the language of their culture, literary tradition, and religious practice. In 1888–1889, textbooks were developed for primary education, specifically for parish schools and institutions overseen by the "Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus." These textbooks were written in Mingrelian, Abkhazian, and Svan and primarily consisted of collections of prayers (Pkhaladze, 2000, p. 75).

It can be said that in the second half of the 19th century, two models of Russification of "inorodtsy" (a term used in Imperial Russia to refer to non-Russian peoples) existed within the Russian Empire. Both models of Russification naturally played a significant role in the field of education, with a primary focus on primary schools.

The first model was directly connected to the educational and pedagogical processes of public schools under the Ministry of Education. It sought total Russification of schools and the population through coercive methods, aiming to alter their minds and ways of thinking. By using Russian schools to eradicate native languages and strengthen the Russian language, this model deliberately fought to abolish the Georgian language, establish instruction in Russian, and alter the national consciousness of the local population through education (Kokrashvili, 2014b, p. 116).

The second model, which entailed beginning the Russification process through religion, was developed based on the experience of the clergy, particularly missionaries, and was primarily implemented in the theological schools and institutions in the peripheral regions of the Russian Empire. This model aimed to merge and assimilate the non-Russian population of the empire's conquered territories with the Russian people through the religious factor – in this case, the empire's prioritized state faith, Orthodoxy. This method did not prioritize teaching the Russian language in primary schools within national regions. Instead, it used educational influence in the native language to instill a Russian worldview, lifestyle, moral norms, customs, and religion among the non-Russian population. A unique characteristic of this model was that the "inorodtsy" (non-Russian peoples) were Russified not through aggressive, direct means, but rather subtly. Initially, the native language and Russian state religion were used to cultivate and establish Russian mentality among the non-Russian population, followed by their complete assimilation into the Russian Empire through the Russian language (Kokrashvili, 2014b, pp. 116-117).

Throughout the 19th century, the aforementioned second model underwent systematic development and substantiation, playing a crucial role in the expansion of Russia's polyethnic

and polyconfessional empire and in the consolidation of the newly annexed territories. In the second half of the 19th century, following the conquest of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire, when the Russification policy became the primary direction of the state, this model was utilized to strengthen Russian power in the Caucasian countries, including Georgia. From the 1860s onward, schools established by the "Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus" operated in Georgia based on this model, functioning in dioceses and individual parishes. From the 1880s, church-parish and Sunday schools also began implementing this method (Kokrashvili, 2024, p. 189).

Soon, it became clear to the Russian authorities that church-parish schools, where teaching in the native languages of the local population was allowed, were somewhat hindering the planned pace of the "Russification" of the "inorodtsy" (non-Russian peoples). Therefore, in the 1890s, K. P. Yanovsky, the custodian of the Caucasus Educational District, attempted to integrate all types of primary education institutions in the Caucasus into his department, specifically into the Ministry of Education's public school system: church-parish and Sunday schools, as well as Tiflisi self-governing schools, where, similar to church-parish schools, the Georgian language continued to be taught.

K. P. Yanovsky succeeded in city self-government schools and subordinated them to the Caucasian educational district. As a result, Georgian language teaching in these schools was restricted. However, he could not, at this stage, subordinate the church-parish schools under the Caucasus Educational District.

4. Cultural Resistance, Adaptation, and Identity Preservation: The Role of Georgian Clergy and Intellectuals

In the Russian Empire, Orthodoxy and Russianness were inseparable concepts. Clearly, in Georgia, adherence to Orthodox Christianity did not equate to political loyalty, which is precisely why the Church and religious education became instruments of Russification and ideological influence. Within this context, Georgia's Orthodox population found itself under imperial pressure; yet it was precisely within this space that cultural resistance and national self-awareness began to take shape. Such a perspective deepens our understanding of how religious education functioned as a site of intersection between imperial authority and national opposition.

The intensified policy of Russification in primary education provoked protest within Georgian society. Leading critics included Ilia Chavchavadze, Sergi Meskhi, Dimitri Kipiani, Raphael Eristavi, and others. The movement began with a publication by Sergi Meskhi in the only Georgian-language newspaper of the time, „Droeba", titled „An Open Letter to Mr. Yanovsky". In it, Meskhi wrote: „The desires of Georgians are the same as those of all peoples: to preserve their language, homeland, customs, and faith. This desire is legitimate, and every government supports its people in this. Your wish, however, is for Georgians to forget their native tongue, so that as soon as pupils enter primary school, they begin learning in a foreign language. This desire contradicts both state interests and, quite clearly, pedagogical truth" (Meskhi, 1880).

In the second half of the 19th century, the Georgian intelligentsia continued the struggle for the preservation of the Georgian language, initiated by the Georgian intelligentsia, under the leadership of Ilia Chavchavadze. The mentioned problem constituted one of the Key issues of the national liberation movement in Georgia. As a result of protest movements and at the request of the local population, the state's attitude toward teaching the Georgian language in theological schools underwent periodic shifts. In 1882, a department for the Georgian language was established at the Tiflisi Theological Seminary, and in 1883, by the decision of the seminary administration, Georgian church hymns were introduced as a mandatory subject. Naturally, such concessions were formal and temporary. By the ongoing political course of Russification throughout the empire, the suppression of the Georgian language – the primary marker of Georgian national identity – continued in the educational system (Khundadze, 1951, p. 153).

In 1883, Tedo Jordania of the Tbilisi Theological Seminary introduced a Georgian language curriculum that included secular literature. In 1885, Rector Pavel Chudetsky repealed the program and authored a shorter course, which was also rejected by the Russian Holy Synod. Instruction was then confined to reading and preaching from ecclesiastical texts. Georgian clergy continuously demanded Georgian language instruction in seminaries, but to no avail. In 1899, a comprehensive curriculum proposed by a commission led by Bishop Leonid (Okropiridze), with contributions from Bishop Kirion (Sadzaglishvili) and educator A. Grdzelishvili, was likewise dismissed by the Synod, reinforcing the imperial resistance to Georgian linguistic inclusion in religious education (Kvitsiani, 2001, pp. 153-154).

In the second half of the 19th century, under the intense pressure of imperial policy, preserving identity and resistance also involved a certain adaptation. Clergy and public figures in Georgia often did not directly oppose the system, but rather deliberately adapted to it in order to preserve their national identity. This was a flexible strategy, according to which Georgian clergy acted within imperial constraints to protect national and spiritual values. They used the academic and ecclesiastical spaces created by the system – such as theological schools and church service – for national purposes: to protect the native language and culture, and to form national consciousness.

It is also worth noting that, despite the political and ideological pressure of the Russian Empire, as well as the intensified Russification and assimilation policies, religious education brought positive outcomes for Georgia. Russian theological schools – seminaries, academies, and theological institutions – produced numerous representatives of Georgian religious intelligentsia, progressive clergy, and national and public figures (E. K., 1901, pp. 178-180): Platon Ioseliani, Gabriel Kikodze, Dimitri Bakradze, Mikheil (Gobron) Sabinin, Mose Janashvili, Giorgi (Kirion) Sadzaglishvili, Kallistrate Tsintsadze, Polievktos and Vasil Karbelashvili, Tedo Zhordania, Ambrosi Khelaia, Ekvtime Takaishvili, Sergi Gorgadze, Aleksandre Tsagareli, Korneli Kekelidze, and many others.

Several generations of researchers also emerged in the academic arena, who received specialised education in the fields of historical theology and ecclesiastical archaeology at various theological academies in Russia. Their social and intellectual lives were dedicated to uncovering Georgia's cultural treasures, highlighting the place of the Georgian Church

within the Christian world, and demonstrating the role of the Georgian Church as a defining and significant phenomenon in the processes of Georgian national self-determination and the formation of national consciousness.

This was the result of the paradoxical reality characteristic of imperial education systems: when a colonial power seeks assimilation, it often unintentionally creates space for critical thinking and cultural resistance. Education received within the imperial system was frequently used against that very system – as seen in the biographies of those figures who later actively participated in the struggle for the restoration of the independence of the Georgian Church, national-educational efforts, and public life.

Research has demonstrated that, in nineteenth-century Georgia, religious education did not serve merely as an instrument of assimilation but operated as a multifaceted arena in which imperial authority, ecclesiastical policy, and local cultural resistance converged. State reforms that sought to construct a unified ideological space through the Church often produced unintended consequences, most notably, the intensification of national self-awareness. Through this evolving dynamic, an intellectual and spiritual foundation emerged that later catalyzed the autocephalous movement of the early twentieth century, representing both a form of ecclesiastical independence and national self-determination.

CONCLUSION

The educational and ecclesiastical policies implemented by the state aimed to instrumentalize the Church as a means of disseminating imperial ideology. At the same time, the Church, as an institution, sought to maintain its influence over local communities and frequently adapted imperial policies as a strategy for self-preservation. This process also involved the local population, which, on the one hand, was subject to assimilative pressures, and on the other hand, employed education as a vehicle for resistance and the preservation of cultural identity. An analysis of this triangular relationship – state initiatives, ecclesiastical strategies, and cultural resistance enables us to conceptualize religious education not merely as a tool of assimilation, but as a dynamic space in which power, identity, and resistance intersect.

The Russian Empire systematically employed education as a tool of assimilation and Russification, aiming to suppress national identity and reinforce control over peripheral regions. In response, local clergy and members of the intellectual elite sought ways to preserve and disseminate elements of Georgian culture, language, and religious tradition.

Although Russification left an undeniable imprint on both the structure and content of religious education, the enduring efforts of Georgian clerics and society reflect the resilience of cultural defiance. By overcoming the constraints imposed by imperial policies, they succeeded in safeguarding Georgia's spiritual and cultural heritage and became part of a broader national liberation movement.

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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