

RUSSIA'S SOUTH CAUCASUS POLICY IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 18TH CENTURY: THE GEORGIYEVSK TREATY

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ABSTRACT

The second half of the eighteenth century marked a decisive change in the balance of power in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus. Russia's victory in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774, its consolidation of the Caucasian Line, and its annexation of Crimea in 1783 created the strategic setting in which the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti sought Russian protection. The Treaty of Georgievsk, signed on 24 July (4 August, New Style) 1783, restricted the kingdom's independent foreign policy while promising to preserve its territorial integrity, internal government, and ruling dynasty. This article examines the treaty as an unequal protectorate arrangement shaped by the different objectives of its signatories. Erekle II sought a credible security guarantee against Ottoman and Iranian pressure, whereas the Russian imperial court sought a dependable military and political foothold south of the Caucasus range. The withdrawal of Russian troops in 1787 and Russia's failure to protect Kartli-Kakheti during Agha Mohammad Khan's invasion in 1795 exposed the gap between the treaty's guarantees and their enforcement. The later incorporation of Kartli-Kakheti into the Russian Empire in 1801 therefore represented a repudiation of the autonomy and dynastic continuity promised in 1783.

Keywords: South Caucasus; Kartli-Kakheti; Russian Empire, "Treaty of Georgia"

1. INTRODUCTION

Owing to its strategic position between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus occupied an important place in the policies of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Russian empires from the sixteenth century onward. Control of routes through the region offered military access, commercial advantages, and political influence over local kingdoms, principalities, and khanates. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the regional balance was changing. Russia had become capable of projecting sustained military power toward the Black Sea and the Caucasus, while Ottoman influence was under increasing pressure. Iran remained an important source of political and military power in the South Caucasus, although the period between the death of Karim Khan Zand in 1779 and the consolidation of Qajar rule was marked by internal competition.

The Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti occupied a particularly exposed position within this changing environment. Erekle II sought to protect his kingdom from Ottoman and Iranian pressure while strengthening royal authority and preserving the Bagrationi dynasty. Russia, by contrast, viewed eastern Georgia as a strategic partner that could support operations beyond the Caucasus range and extend imperial influence into the South Caucasus. These different objectives converged in the Treaty of Georgievsk of 1783. The agreement offered Kartli-Kakheti external protection, but it also subordinated the kingdom's foreign relations to the Russian crown. Its political significance therefore lies in the tension between the security guarantees it formally provided and the unequal structure of dependence it created.

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2. RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC ADVANCE TOWARD THE CAUCASUS

The foundations of Russia's eighteenth-century policy in the Caucasus were laid during the reign of Peter I. His government regarded the region as a corridor linking the northern Black Sea, the Caspian basin, Iran, and the Ottoman frontier. Russian campaigns on the Caspian coast and diplomatic contacts with Christian rulers in the South Caucasus established precedents that Catherine II's government later developed on a larger scale. By the late eighteenth century, Russian strategy combined military expansion, fortified frontier lines, and alliances with local rulers. The reinforcement of the Kizlyar-Mozdok sector and the wider Azov-Mozdok line improved Russia's capacity to move troops and supplies toward the central Caucasus (Bushuev, 1955; Glasheva, 2019).

Under Catherine II, this regional policy was also connected with broader projects directed against the Ottoman Empire. The so-called Greek Project envisaged a major reordering of Ottoman territories under Russian influence. Although its most ambitious objectives were never realized, it encouraged the imperial court to treat the Caucasus as part of a wider Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean strategy. Kartli-Kakheti acquired particular importance because the Georgian Military Road offered a potential line of communication between the North and South Caucasus. A protected Georgian kingdom could function as a military partner, a logistical base, and a political counterweight to Ottoman and Iranian influence (Bocharnikov, 2013).

Russia's victory in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774 materially strengthened this policy. The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed on 21 July 1774, recognized the independence of the Crimean Khanate from the Ottoman Empire, transferred important Black Sea fortresses to Russia, and expanded Russian commercial navigation. The agreement also altered the strategic environment of the northern Black Sea and brought Russian power closer to the Caucasus (Türker & Soofizadeh, 2015). Its provisions concerning territories occupied during the war required Russia to return several places in Georgia and Mingrelia to their former holders and required the Ottoman government not to oppress the Christian population there. The treaty did not, however, create a general Russian right to protect all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Such a broad interpretation developed later in Russian diplomatic practice.

For the Georgian rulers, the settlement produced mixed results. Russian withdrawal from occupied territories removed an immediate military presence, but it did not provide a durable security arrangement for the politically divided Georgian lands. Erekle II had already observed both the possibilities and the limitations of Russian assistance during General Gottlob Tottleben's campaign of 1769–1772. His later approach to Russia was therefore not simply an expression of religious solidarity. It was a strategic decision made under conditions in which the kingdom lacked sufficient military resources to deter its more powerful neighbors.

The formal annexation of Crimea, Taman, and the Kuban by Catherine II in April 1783 transformed the regional context. It weakened the Ottoman position on the northern Black Sea and enabled Russia to devote greater attention to the Caucasus. At the same time, the imperial court anticipated that the annexation might provoke another war with the Ottoman Empire. Russian planners therefore examined how Georgian forces and local Christian communities could support operations on the Ottoman eastern frontier (Volkhonsky, 2018).

Grigory Potemkin and officials under his authority developed networks of agents and intermediaries in the South Caucasus. Armenian merchants and clergy, including Archbishop Joseph Argutinsky, provided information about political conditions in Kartli-Kakheti, the Erivan and Karabakh khanates, and neighboring territories. These networks helped the Russian government evaluate the military resources of local rulers and the feasibility of creating friendly political formations south of the Caucasus range (Tabuashvili, n.d.). Plans for Georgian and Armenian buffer entities were not humanitarian projects detached from imperial strategy; they were intended to reduce Ottoman and Iranian influence and to support Russia's military position.

The document known as The Highest Guidelines for the Conclusion of a Russo-Georgian Treaty, drafted by Alexander Bezborodko, shows that the Russian court carefully directed the negotiating framework (Tabuashvili, n.d.). Erekle II's position was stronger than it had been during earlier negotiations in 1771–1772, and Russia accordingly moderated some proposed obligations. The court abandoned or reduced certain financial demands, described the Georgian ruler as an ally under imperial protection, and promised to station two infantry battalions with artillery in the kingdom. Nevertheless, the proposed relationship was unequal from the outset. Russia offered military protection in exchange for decisive influence over the kingdom's external policy and for Georgian military cooperation in future conflicts.

The negotiations also reflected Russia's desire to coordinate the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti with the western Georgian Kingdom of Imereti. Russian mediation between Erekle II and Solomon I was expected to reduce internal conflict and make Georgian forces more useful in a possible war with the Ottoman Empire. Bezborodko explicitly connected the protectorate project with the prospect of such a war. The treaty was therefore both a response to Erekle II's search for security and an instrument in Russia's regional military planning.

3. THE TREATY AND ITS POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Treaty of Georgievsk was signed at the fortress of Georgievsk in the North Caucasus on 24 July (4 August, New Style) 1783 by representatives of Catherine II and Erekle II. The Georgian delegation was headed by Prince Ioane Bagration-Mukhraneli and Garsevan Chavchavadze; Erekle II himself did not attend the signing. The treaty contained thirteen principal articles and four separate articles, commonly described as secret articles, and was ratified in 1784 (Dzhakhiyeva, 2017; Volkhonsky, 2018).

The agreement established a Russian protectorate over Kartli-Kakheti. Erekle II renounced dependence on Iran or any other power and accepted the Russian monarch as the kingdom's supreme protector and suzerain. He undertook not to conduct independent diplomatic relations without Russian consent and promised military assistance to Russia when required. Successive Georgian kings were to receive imperial confirmation of their accession. These provisions substantially restricted the kingdom's external sovereignty and made dynastic legitimacy partly dependent on approval from Saint Petersburg.

In return, Catherine II guaranteed the territorial integrity of Kartli-Kakheti, recognized the hereditary rule of the Bagrationi dynasty, and promised not to interfere in the kingdom's internal administration. Russia also undertook to treat attacks on Kartli-Kakheti as attacks on Russia and agreed to maintain two infantry battalions with artillery in the kingdom, with reinforcements to be supplied in wartime (Dudayti, 2013; ERTÜRK, 2021). The agreement extended reciprocal privileges to nobles, clergy, and merchants. It also defined a relationship between the Georgian Church and the Russian Holy Synod, although later imperial policy would go far beyond the treaty's provisions (Türker & Soofizadeh, 2015).

The separate articles sought to preserve peace between Erekle II and Solomon I and provided for Russian mediation in disputes between them. The commander of the Caucasian Line was instructed to take measures for the defense of Kartli-Kakheti in the event of attack. These clauses reveal the treaty's central bargain: the Georgian crown exchanged freedom of action in foreign affairs for a Russian security commitment while retaining formal authority over domestic government. It was therefore neither a treaty between fully equal allies nor an act of immediate incorporation. It created a protectorate whose durability depended on Russia's willingness and ability to enforce its obligations.

Political Significance and Consequences

For Erekle II, the treaty was an attempt to solve an immediate security problem. The kingdom faced raids from the North Caucasus, pressure from the Ottoman frontier, and the continuing possibility that an Iranian ruler would seek to restore effective suzerainty over eastern Georgia. Alignment with a powerful Orthodox empire also offered diplomatic advantages, but confessional affinity alone does not explain the decision. The king expected Russian troops and the treaty's deterrent effect to compensate for Kartli-

Kakheti's limited military resources. His policy was therefore rational in its short-term objective, even though it exposed the kingdom to a new form of dependency.

For Russia, the treaty produced several advantages at relatively low initial cost. It established a recognized political presence south of the Caucasus range, restricted the diplomacy of a strategically located kingdom, and secured the prospect of Georgian assistance in wars against the Ottoman Empire. Kartli-Kakheti could serve as a base for intelligence, logistics, and future military operations toward the Caspian and Iranian frontiers. The treaty also provided a legal and diplomatic language through which Russia could present expansion as protection requested by a local Christian monarch. In this respect, the protectorate served as an intermediate form of imperial control: it extended Russian influence without requiring immediate annexation or full administrative occupation.

The arrangement nevertheless contained a fundamental asymmetry. Kartli-Kakheti's obligations, especially the restriction of its foreign policy, took effect immediately. Russia's most important obligation, military protection, depended on changing imperial priorities. This weakness became evident when the Russian battalions stationed in Georgia were withdrawn in 1787 at the beginning of a new Russo-Ottoman war. Erekle II consequently sought to reduce tensions with the Ottoman frontier and negotiated with Süleyman Pasha of Akhaltsikhe in 1786–1787. These contacts did not erase the Georgievsk relationship; rather, they demonstrated the practical need for regional diplomacy when Russian protection was uncertain (Dzhakhiyeva, 2017).

The gravest test came in 1795. Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar demanded that Erekle II abandon the Russian alliance and recognize Iranian authority. When the king refused, Iranian forces defeated the Georgian army at Krtsanisi and devastated Tbilisi. Russia did not provide the timely protection promised under the treaty. The destruction of the capital exposed the central contradiction of the protectorate: Kartli-Kakheti had limited its diplomatic autonomy but could not compel Russia to honor its security guarantee. Russian forces entered the region in the following year, but the expedition did not reverse the immediate consequences of the 1795 invasion.

The events of 1800–1801 must therefore be treated as a consequence of the altered power relationship created after 1783, not as a clause or automatic outcome of the treaty itself. After Erekle II's death in 1798, dynastic disputes and renewed external insecurity further weakened the kingdom. George XII sought additional Russian assistance, but the imperial government moved from protectorate to incorporation. Paul I issued an annexation manifesto in December 1800, and Alexander I confirmed the incorporation of Kartli-Kakheti into the Russian Empire in 1801. The abolition of the Georgian monarchy violated the treaty's guarantee of Bagrationi dynastic continuity and the kingdom's internal autonomy.

This limited nineteenth-century aftermath clarifies the treaty's historical significance. The annexation of Kartli-Kakheti gave Russia an administrative and military base for further expansion in the South Caucasus, but the subsequent incorporation of other Georgian polities occurred through separate processes and should not be presented as the direct legal operation of the Treaty of Georgievsk. Nor did the treaty by itself eliminate Ottoman or Iranian influence throughout the region. Russian dominance emerged through later wars, annexations, and administrative consolidation. The treaty's importance lies instead in its creation of an unequal institutional relationship that narrowed Georgian sovereignty and made later imperial intervention easier.

4. CONCLUSION

The Treaty of Georgievsk resulted from a temporary convergence of interests between two unequal states. Erekle II sought an enforceable guarantee that would protect Kartli-Kakheti from Ottoman and Iranian pressure and preserve the Bagrationi monarchy. Catherine II's government sought a strategic foothold south of the Caucasus range, a dependable regional ally, and a framework for extending Russian influence without immediate annexation. The treaty met Russia's objectives more effectively than Georgia's: Kartli-Kakheti surrendered substantial control over foreign policy, while the implementation of Russia's defense

obligations remained contingent on imperial priorities.

The withdrawal of Russian troops in 1787 and the failure to defend Kartli-Kakheti in 1795 demonstrated that the protectorate did not provide the security on which its legitimacy depended. At the same time, the restrictions imposed by the treaty reduced the kingdom's room for independent diplomacy. Russia's incorporation of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801 then overturned the promises to preserve its internal government and hereditary dynasty. The treaty should therefore be understood neither as an equal alliance nor as an act that immediately annexed Georgia. It was an unequal protectorate agreement that changed the regional balance of power, weakened the practical foundations of Kartli-Kakheti's sovereignty, and supplied Russia with a political framework for a deeper imperial presence in the South Caucasus.

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