

RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS IN THE CAUCASUS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND GEORGIA

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Abstract. The Caucasus, as a region of significant geostrategic importance, has consistently attracted the attention of major powers seeking to exert influence in Eurasia. From the eighteenth century onward, alongside the Ottoman Empire and Iran, an increasingly powerful Russian state also became involved in the struggle for hegemony over the Caucasus. Russia skillfully exploited, on the one hand, the socio-economic and political challenges of the Caucasian peoples themselves, and, on the other hand, the favorable international circumstances. As a result, by annexing the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in the early nineteenth century, it gained a decisive advantage in the contest for dominance in the Caucasus. Gradually, Russia expanded and consolidated its influence both in the Caucasus and along the Black Sea coast.

Although Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856) temporarily weakened its position in the Black Sea basin, by the 1870s it had restored its influence. Its victory in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 further strengthened Russia's position not only in the Caucasus but also in the Balkans. According to the Treaty of Berlin, the regions of Batumi, Kars, and Ardahan were ceded to Russia. While Batumi was initially transferred to the Russian Empire under the status of a *porto-franco* (a free port) – a status unilaterally abolished by Russia in 1886 – the acquisition of one of the most important Black Sea ports provided the empire with vast opportunities to expand its influence in the Near East.

Alongside this territorial expansion, Russia pursued a systematic policy aimed at the comprehensive economic, political, and demographic integration of the Caucasus, in accordance with its colonial interests. The most severe consequence of this policy in the second half of the nineteenth century was the mass, forced displacement and exile – known as *muhajirism* – of the indigenous Caucasian peoples, including the Adyghe, Abkhazians, and and of the Muslim Georgians (Ajarians, Klarjs)

Key words: Caucasus, Russia, Ottoman Empire, Georgia, *Muhajirism*, Geopolitical Interests

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Introduction. Due to the extremely significant geostrategic location of the Caucasus, it has been, since time immemorial, a primary target for powerful states, both near and distant, seeking to gain influence worldwide. It should be noted that there has not been a single state striving for world hegemony that has not attempted to subjugate the Caucasus. In the struggle for influence in the Caucasus, Georgia was assigned a decisive role due to its central location.

The Caucasus, owing to its particularly strategic location, always attracted the attention of states competing for world hegemony. Due to its central location in the Caucasus, Georgia played a special role, representing the key to the Caucasus. From the 16th century onward, three great powers – the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Russia – confronted each other to gain dominance in the Caucasus. From the 18th century, as a result of objective and subjective factors, Russia's superiority in this confrontation became evident. At the beginning of the 19th century, Russia skillfully exploited the favorable situation and, with the conquest of Kartli-Kakheti, firmly established its foothold in Transcaucasia. In the early 19th century, Russia successfully exploited the favorable circumstances and, through the conquest of

Kartli-Kakheti, firmly established its position in Transcaucasia. During the first third of the 19th century, through successful wars with the Ottoman Empire and Persia, Russia expanded its influence in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region in general.

Review of Sources and Literature. Regarding the issues examined in the present article, there exist valuable sources (archival materials, press accounts, foreign travelers' accounts) and historiography (works by Sh. Megreldze, V. Sichinava, A. Chkheidze, V. Guruli, O. Turmanidze, and others), which have been taken into account in this study.

Methodology. In accordance with the research objectives and tasks, the following types of methods have been employed in this work: linguistic analysis, source analysis, comparative analysis, systems analysis, comparative-historical method, logical analysis, and others.

Discussion. Since ancient times, numerous rivals have competed with one another for dominant influence in the Caucasus. From the 15th-16th centuries, three powerful states confronted each other in this truly significant geostrategic region: the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Russia. Russia successfully exploited every opportunity – the problems of the Caucasian peoples and their attitudes toward Russia, the weakening of its rivals, and favorable international circumstances – and by the beginning of the 19th century had achieved significant success in the struggle for primacy in the Caucasus. The Ottoman Empire persistently attempted to maintain its existing positions. This circumstance determined the intense Russo-Ottoman confrontation throughout the 19th century, which resulted in wars between them during the first third of the 19th century: 1806-1812 and 1828-1829.

By the end of the 1840s, the „Eastern Question“ intensified once again, occupying a central place among Russia's foreign policy problems. In such circumstances, the strategic importance of the Caucasus increased even further. Russia couldn't contemplate large-scale expansion in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins without dominating the Caucasus.

Russia intended to establish dominance in the Near East at the expense of the weakened Ottoman Empire. England and France also had significant economic and political interests in the Near East and sought to expel Russia from Crimea and the Caucasus. The activism of Nicholas I provoked a rapprochement between England and France. Austria-Hungary also opposed Russia over influence in the Balkans. Thus, by the early 1850s, Russia found itself in virtual political isolation. Nicholas I and his entourage, however, persistently sought to initiate war with the Ottoman Empire. The problem that intensified over the „Holy Lands“ and Russia's undiplomatic actions precipitated the Russo-Ottoman War in June 1853.

On June 21, 1853, Russian troops crossed the Prut River and invaded Moldavia without declaring war. For a certain period, there remained hope that the conflict would be resolved peacefully. To this end, a conference was convened in Vienna in September 1853 with the participation of England, France, Austria, and Prussia. The „Vienna Note“ was drafted, which envisioned a peaceful resolution to the Russo-Ottoman conflict. Russia accepted this proposal, but the Ottoman Empire, incited by English and French envoys, refused and demanded that Russia evacuate the occupied territories. On October 1, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia, and on October 20, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The next Russo-Ottoman war began, into which European countries would subsequently be drawn. It entered history under the name of the Crimean War, which concluded with the Treaty of Paris on March 18, 1856. The treaty conditions were harsh for Russia. It returned the fortress of Kars with adjacent territories to the Ottoman Empire; Article XI of the treaty declared the Black Sea an open sea for the ships of all countries. Russia was prohibited from building fortifications on the Black Sea. The Allies could have inflicted an even more severe blow on Russia, but failed to exploit the favorable situation.

During the Crimean War, Western Georgia, including the principalities of Abkhazia and Samegrelo, fell within the zone of military operations. The Abkhazian Prince Mikhail Sharvashidze rendered great

service to Russia, for which the Emperor awarded him the Order of the White Eagle. Despite this, in 1856, the Viceroy of the Caucasus, N. Muravyov, raised the question of abolishing the Abkhazian principality on the grounds of Mikhail Sharvashidze's alleged betrayal during the Crimean War, but Emperor Alexander II did not accept the petition at that time. Since the war continued in the North Caucasus, Tsarism still needed Mikhail Sharvashidze. The Emperor did not recognize the Abkhazian prince's betrayal as proven, and the matter was again shelved (Khorava, 2004:46). Russia skillfully exploited the 1856 uprising in Samegrelo, which began on social grounds, and abolished the principality's governance. In 1864, after the conquest of the Western Caucasus, the situation changed. The Russian authorities had already developed a plan for the colonization of the Caucasus, which envisioned settling Cossacks along the Abkhazian coast of the Black Sea. The implementation of this plan would have been impossible under conditions where princely authority and indigenous landowning populations existed (Dzidzaria, 1982:250-252). Therefore, Alexander II made the decision to abolish the Abkhazian principality and introduce Russian administration in Abkhazia (Central State Historical Archive, Fund 416, Series 3, File 177, Sheet 48). The last Abkhazian prince, Mikhail Sharvashidze, who had rendered great service to Russia in his time, was resettled from his homeland to Voronezh, where he died in 1866. According to his will, he was brought back to Abkhazia and buried in Mokvi Cathedral (Khorava, 2011:280-284).

After the conquest of the Northwestern Caucasus, the situation changed. „The long war that Russia waged to subjugate the Caucasus came to an end. One of its consequences was the mass resettlement of mountain peoples to Turkey, which became a national tragedy for the resettled populations“ (History of Russian Foreign Policy, 1999:67). The Russian authorities had already developed a plan for the colonization of the Caucasus, which envisioned settling Cossacks along the Black Sea coast. What Tsarism's actual objectives in Abkhazia were is clarified by a letter sent in 1864 by the Governor-General of Kutaisi, D. Sviatopolsk-Mirsky, to the Chief of Staff of the Caucasian Army, Kartsov: „If, after the abolition of the principality, some of the Abkhazians wish to resettle in Turkey, we should not prevent this“ (Janashia, 1988:7). Russia's policy in Abkhazia did not change thereafter. In 1900, the head of the Sukhumi District addressed the Governor of Kutaisi: „The colonization of Russia in the region has great state significance from a political perspective, especially since the Abkhazians, as the district's primary population, remain an extremely low-cultured nationality in terms of developmental level, vacillate in religious belief, and have repeatedly demonstrated their political unreliability... This requires special attention, and the best means should be recognized as the colonization of the region with the Russian population“ (Georgian Central Archive, Fund 186, Series 1, File 69, Sheets 11-12).

The Russian authorities diligently compiled a plan for the resettlement of Abkhazians. The resettlement of 4,500 families was designated. Russia found common ground with the Ottoman Empire on this issue; the attitude of the two empires toward the resettlement of Adjarians would be analogous later. The cooperation between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the *muhajir* (migration) affairs of Abkhazians and other Caucasian peoples was not coincidental. While Russia was „organizing“ colonization through the resettlement of indigenous populations, Turkey wanted to settle mountain peoples in uninhabited and sparsely populated areas, to develop those territories, particularly in border regions with Russia. The Sultan would use this contingent both to suppress national liberation movements occurring in the empire and in the anticipated war against Russia (Achugba, 1988:15).

The first wave of Abkhazian resettlement was carried out in 1867. The government nevertheless failed to fully implement the „plan“ – instead of the planned 4,500 families, 3,358 families comprising 19,342 souls were resettled to the Ottoman Empire (Central State Historical Archive, Fund 545, Series 1, File 91, Sheets 205-250; Khorava, 2011:73). Unfortunately, the process of Abkhazian resettlement did not end there.

In the 1870s, the intensification of the Balkan problem made another Russo-Ottoman war inevitable. Russia traditionally supported the liberation struggle of the Slavic peoples of the Balkans. In 1875, the Ottomans responded to the uprising that began in the Balkans with harsh punitive measures. Russia came forward to „defend“ the rebels. The Georgian press, particularly *Iveria* and *Droeba*, paid special

attention to reviewing the situation created around the Balkan question and the attitudes of Europe's great powers toward it. *Droeba* wrote in its editorial „The Matter of War“: „The Ottoman Empire did not agree to any of the proposals presented by the Constantinople Conference... The dissolution of the conference... teaches us that Russia and the Ottoman Empire will now be left to their own devices; they can directly declare war on each other...“ (*Droeba*, No. 14, January 12, 1877).

Regarding what position Georgian society should take during the anticipated war, N. Nikoladze wrote: „Let us not forget that the name, well-being, and future of our country depend on our own actions. Let us not disgrace the name honored until today... Let us not hide in the shadows. Our wise, proper, and honorable conduct will elevate Georgia's name and show friend and foe alike that our people are worthy of love, respect, moderation, and prosperity“ (*Droeba*, No. 37, April 6, 1877). That is, Georgian society, hoping for the return of territories seized by the Ottomans, was prepared to support Russia in the anticipated war.

On April 12 (24), 1877, a new Russo-Ottoman war began. Immediately upon the outbreak of war, military operations commenced on two fronts – the Balkans and the Caucasus. The Russian Emperor's brothers commanded the fronts: Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich commanded the Balkan Front, while Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich commanded the Caucasian Front. The fronts had different strategic objectives. According to the Russian command's plan, the Caucasian Front was to engage maximum Ottoman forces in Anatolia and capture Kars, Erzurum, and Batumi.

Intensive battles erupted on the Caucasian Front starting in spring 1877; by October, the main Ottoman forces had been defeated, and the Russian army advanced several hundred kilometers deep into Ottoman territory (History of Russia, 2003:212), although the subsequent advance of the Russian army and Georgian volunteers toward Batumi was not equally successful.

The Ozurgeti Detachment advancing from Ozurgeti toward Batumi was commanded by Lieutenant General Ivan Oklobzhio. On the very first day of the war declaration, the detachment crossed the Chorokhi River and engaged in intense battles in the direction of Mukhaestates and Khutsub. From then on, the Ozurgeti Detachment, conducting battles against the Ottomans on Kobuleti territory, was called the Kobuleti Detachment. The offensive took on a protracted character. Difficult terrain was compounded by bad weather, and matters were further complicated by the Ottomans' clear superiority at sea. Due to this, battles in the Batumi direction proceeded so slowly that the Kobuleti Detachment reached Tsikhisdziri only at the beginning of July 1877. Even a visit to the front line (near the village of Mukhaestates) by Mikhail Romanov, Commander-in-Chief of Caucasian Forces, did not help matters. The Caucasian Front command could not tolerate the situation created in the Batumi direction and persistently attempted to rectify the situation. However, Russian forces had achieved great successes in the Balkans, where they captured Plevna and approached Constantinople. They achieved decisive success on the main direction of the Caucasian Front – capturing the powerful fortress of Kars. After the fall of Kars and Plevna, the Ottoman Empire lost hope of successfully concluding the war and appealed to European states with a request for mediation in peace negotiations with Russia (Megrelidze, 1969:88). The result of the victories achieved on the Balkan and Caucasian fronts was that by January 1878, Russian forces from the Balkans approached Istanbul, while on the Caucasian Front, after the capture of Kars, the road to Erzurum was opened. Istanbul faced serious threats from both the north and southwest. The Ottoman Empire was forced to consider making peace. The Sultan wanted to prevent Russian forces from attacking Istanbul, though he also realized that Alexander II would demand major concessions in exchange for the blood of countless officers and soldiers killed in battles. The Emperor sent advance instructions to the commanders-in-chief of the Balkan and Caucasian fronts, according to which they should act if Ottoman commanders approached them with peace proposals (Guruli, 2018:370).

The Russian side conveyed its demands to the opposing side. The Ottoman Empire was to abandon Erzurum, Bayazet, and Batumi. Parallel to the negotiations, military operations continued, in which the Russian army continued its successful offensive. This forced the Sultan to satisfy the victor's demands. On January 19 (31), the sides signed an agreement in Adrianople on the cessation of war and the

basic principles of the future peace treaty (History of Russian Foreign Policy, 1997:208). In February 1878, negotiations began in San Stefano on the peace treaty. The Russian side was represented by N. Ignatiev (Russia's former ambassador to Constantinople) and P. Nelidov, while the Ottoman side was represented by Safvet Pasha and Sadullah Pasha. Ottoman diplomats attempted to prolong the negotiation process because they hoped for a revision of the preliminary agreement's conditions with European countries' support. For its part, Russian diplomacy also understood that the formalization of the treaty would compel Europe to recognize its conditions. After several days of tense confrontation, on February 19 (March 3), 1878, a peace treaty was concluded whose conditions fully corresponded to the interests of victorious Russia. According to the San Stefano peace conditions, the situation on the Balkan Peninsula was resolved in accordance with Russia's demands – Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania gained independence. Bulgaria was granted principality status (with independent government) under Ottoman protection. For damages incurred as a result of the war, Russia demanded and the Sublime Porte undertook to pay:

- a) 900 million rubles for military expenses (costs of maintaining the army, provisions, military orders);
- b) 400 million rubles for damages inflicted on southern Russia (damages to trade, industry, and railways);
- c) 100 million rubles for damages inflicted during the invasion of the Caucasus;
- d) 10 million rubles for damages inflicted on Russian subjects and Russian institutions in Turkey.

In total, one billion four hundred ten million rubles (Collection of Russia's Treaties with Other States (1856-1917), 1952:168-169).

Taking into account the Ottoman Empire's difficult financial situation and the Sultan's wishes, Emperor Alexander II of Russia agreed to accept territorial concessions in exchange for the major part of the payment. In exchange for 2/3 of the payable amount, the Ottoman Empire ceded to Russia southern Bessarabia, and in the Caucasus, Kars, Ardahan, Bayazet, and Batumi (Troitsky, 1999:170). These territories were given to Russia in exchange for one billion one hundred million rubles.

Ottoman representatives, seeing that Russia did not intend to make concessions, were forced to agree and recognize the peace conditions and border line proposed by Count N. Ignatiev. In return, the Ottomans demanded a reduction of the contribution amount by 40%. Russian representatives assessed the territorial concessions, which included Kars, Batumi, Artan, and Kaghizman, Bayazet, at 1,100 million francs, while the Ottomans were to pay 300 million in cash (Ignatiev, 1916:228).

According to Article XXI of the San Stefano Peace Treaty, populations of territories transferred to Russia who wished to resettle could sell their immovable property within three years of the treaty's ratification.

Thus, Russia forced the Turks to cede the territories discussed in the first Caucasian project: Batumi, Kars, Bayazet, and the entire territory, including the Soghanlugi Ridge (Megreldze, 1969:101).

The San Stefano peace conditions legitimized Russia's serious successes both in the Balkans and the Caucasus, which was unacceptable to European states, particularly England.

At the end of 1877, Great Britain's foreign policy officials and military circles attached serious importance to the question of control over Batumi and were therefore alarmed by Russia's successes on the Caucasian Front. They were particularly troubled that the Russian army's capture of Batumi would make it relatively easier for Russian diplomacy to persuade opponents of Batumi's annexation to Russia to agree (Chkheidze, 1974:33). It was supported by Austria-Hungary and France. European states' dissatisfaction was not limited merely to protest; they openly began preparing for war. England was particularly active. Through the mediation of Prime Minister Beaconsfield (Disraeli), Queen Victoria declared the mobilization of reserves at the end of March 1878. English ships moved toward the Dardanelles (The Eastern Question in Russian Foreign Policy, 1978:226). Russia found itself facing the threat of a new major war; therefore, it agreed to the revision of the San Stefano peace conditions at a congress of European states. In 1878, the renewal of war became unnecessary. Russia, weakened by war and in isolation, made concessions. This represented a great success for English diplomacy.

On June 1 (13), 1878, the Congress of European States opened in Berlin, which was to revise the conditions of the San Stefano Treaty. Delegations from Russia, the Ottoman Empire, England, Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, and Italy were present. During the congress proceedings, it became clear that Russia was, in fact, in international isolation and was forced to make serious concessions. Particularly serious opposition arose over the question of Batumi. England did not want such a strategically and economically significant center transferred to Russia. To this, Gorchakov responded that Russia was ceding Erzurum, Bayazet, and the Alashkert Valley. He also noted that this served England's commercial interests, as the main trade route to Persia passed through the latter. There, he indicated that Batumi would be declared a free city, with the establishment of Russia's sovereign rights over it. Such a status for Batumi served the interests of all trading countries, and even more so Britain's interests, which possessed the largest merchant fleet. Gorchakov directly stated: What does England have to dispute – the Batumi question is being resolved in accordance with its interests. Gorchakov's statement indicated Russia's fear that England might yet raise opposition on the Batumi question (*Golos*, 1878: No. 5; Chkheidze, 1974:91).

Thus, the English delegation initially attempted to prevent Batumi's transfer to Russia in any form, but, encountering the firm position of the Russian delegation on this issue, then proposed the creation of an „independent khanate“ of Batumi (Lazistan) under international control. In such a case, Russia would have limited rights to use the port. Finally, Beaconsfield settled on the idea of declaring Batumi a free port, on condition that it would be „only a commercial“ („unfortified,“ „unarmed“) port, but Russia succeeded in obtaining for Batumi the status of an „essentially commercial“ port, which under those circumstances should be considered a certain success for the Russian delegation. Many in Russia also believed that Russia had achieved success on the Batumi question at the congress (Chkheidze, 1974:114).

Ultimately, Batumi was transferred to Russia with the status of a free commercial port with porto-franco privileges. The English delegation agreed to Batumi's declaration as a porto-franco with the intention of using the city in the future for military and economic attacks against Russia.

But Batumi still remained in Ottoman hands. A joint Russo-Ottoman commission was established to finalize the question of Batumi's transfer. The mixed commission's meeting was held in the city of Kutaisi from August 12-20, 1878. The Ottoman side undertook to withdraw troops from Batumi by August 25. On August 25 at 11:00 a.m., Russian and Georgian forces entered Batumi. The Viceroy of the Caucasus, Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich, congratulated Emperor Alexander II with a telegram: „I have the honor to congratulate Your Imperial Majesty on the occupation of Batumi“ (Troitsky, 1999:100).

The San Stefano Peace Treaty and the Berlin Treaty still did not ultimately resolve Russo-Ottoman relations. In January 1879, negotiations were taking place in Constantinople. The Russian side was represented by the extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador to the Sultan's court, Alexei Lobanov-Rostovsky, while the Sublime Porte was represented by Ottoman Foreign Minister Ali Karatheodori Pasha and the Sultan's minister and Chairman of the State Council, Ali Pasha. On January 27 (February 8), 1879, a new Russo-Ottoman peace treaty was signed in Istanbul. The agreement comprises 12 articles and, to some extent, clarifies certain articles of the Berlin Treaty.

The Constantinople Treaty of February 8, 1879, between Russia and the Ottoman Empire left in force the Russo-Ottoman border in Asia as defined by the Berlin Treaty (Guruli, 2018:391).

Thus, the military successes achieved in the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman War allowed Russian diplomacy to demand significant concessions from the Ottoman Empire both in the Balkans and the Caucasus. This situation was expressed in the San Stefano Peace Treaty of 1878. Under the threat from European states, Russia was forced to agree to the revision of these conditions at the Berlin Congress, where it also had to make serious concessions, though it retained the city of Batumi (albeit with porto-franco status) and a significant portion of the historical territories of Georgia and Armenia, thereby substantially strengthening both its economic and military-strategic positions in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region.

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