

## **The Geopolitical Vicissitudes of the Georgian Kingdom in the Eighteenth Century**

(Abstract)

**KEYWORDS:** Georgia, Erekle II, Russia, Totleben, Treason, Treaty of Georgievsk, Politics, History

For two centuries, a cohort of Russian and Georgian politicians and scholars has asserted that the Russian Empire – and later the Soviet Union – was indispensable to the survival of the Georgian nation. Their argument runs that a people who have inhabited their homeland for millennia, repeatedly repelling invaders in defence of Christianity, could not have endured the vicissitudes of the nineteenth century without Russian protection. Yet a critical appraisal of primary sources and documentary evidence allows for a more nuanced interpretation, revealing layers of agency, contingency and contestation that complicate any facile narrative of benevolent tutelage.

The medieval Kingdom of Georgia, having fragmented in 1490, gave rise to a plurality of polities: Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti and the Principality of Samtskhe, while Samegrelo maintained a degree of autonomy. Into this fractured political landscape emerged figures whose careers combined local resilience with dynastic ambition. Heraclius II (Erekle or Irakli) stands prominent

among them. From the age of fifteen, he commanded troops, defending Kakheti with conspicuous vigour against marauding Lezgi bands and earning the sobriquet “Little Kakhetian.” Between 1744 and 1762, Teimuraz II and Heraclius II co-ruled Kartli and Kakheti; on Teimuraz’s death, his son Heraclius consolidated his authority and became the pre-eminent ruler of a reunited feudal Kartli-Kakheti.

Diplomacy and warfare in the latter half of the eighteenth century unfolded against the contending pressures of Ottoman, Persian, and Russian ambitions. In 1763, Heraclius transferred Azat Khan, a prisoner of war, to Kerim Khan Zend – an act that facilitated peaceful relations with Persia and exemplified the careful bargaining regional rulers were forced to pursue. During the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774, both Kartli-Kakheti and Imereti Kingdoms fought against Ottoman advances and looked to the Orthodox neighbour to the north for assistance. Expectations of Russian support, however, were repeatedly disappointed, and the pattern of intervention proved erratic.

In 1769, Russia sent a small expedition under Count Tottleben, which proved insufficient for the campaign. Reinforcements arrived in early 1770, but Tottleben’s actions aggravated Russo–Georgian tensions: he abandoned Georgian forces at Atskuri, occupied several local fortresses and, in some cases, compelled garrison commanders and inhabitants to swear allegiance to the Russian empress while Heraclius was confronting Ottoman forces. Tottleben was removed in mid-1770; although General Sukhotin later superseded him, Russian troops were progressively withdrawn by 1772. The episode revealed the

unreliability of Russian military support and the dangers of depending on it for Georgia's territorial defence.

The detrimental experience of unreliable Russian support prompted internal reform in Kartli-Kakheti. In 1774, Heraclius established a standing army, enabling the kingdom to repel Lezgian raids and to begin the slow process of economic recovery. Heraclius's requests for financial assistance were rebuffed because the Russo-Ottoman peace and shifting Russian priorities limited the imperial government's willingness to subsidise Georgian defence, forcing Kartli-Kakheti to assume its own fiscal responsibilities and develop internal military and administrative remedies.

Renewed Persian–Ottoman tensions in the late 1770s induced Heraclius to recalibrate alliances. He entered into an accord with the Ottoman Empire in 1776–77, a rapprochement that strained relations with Persia and illustrated the pragmatic, sometimes opportunistic, diplomacy of Georgian rulers. Attempts by Kerim Khan to depose Heraclius were thwarted by the Georgian sovereign's strategic manoeuvring and by Kerim Khan's death in 1779, underscoring the unpredictable dynamics of regional power.

The dissolution of the Georgian standing army in the early 1780s left Heraclius exposed; without the backing of Western Europe or the Ottomans, he turned once more to Russia. Negotiations produced the Treaty of Friendship, signed at Georgievsky Fortress on 24 July 1782, which obliged eastern Georgia to seek Russian military assistance and, at least formally, affirmed Heraclius's dynastic rights. Yet the treaty's reception

was fraught: contemporaries in both East and West perceived it as a potential prelude to Russian predominance. France and Britain urged Ottoman resistance; Ottoman protests and wider geopolitical caution prevented Russia from concluding a comparable arrangement with the Kingdom of Imereti. Russian troops entered eastern Georgia on 3 November 1783, but the exigencies of the Russo-Turkish conflict and Ottoman demands in July 1787 compelled a withdrawal that effectively contravened the treaty.

During the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–1791, Georgian elites sought to unite Kartli-Kakheti and Imereti; although immediate political unification proved elusive, the 1790 Treaty of the Georgian Kingdoms and Principalities symbolised an aspiration to collective defence. Yet the international environment remained unforgiving. The ascent of Agha Mohammad Khan and the Qajar consolidation in Persia created a renewed and violent threat. Between 1793 and 1794, Heraclius repeatedly appealed to Russia for the troop deployments promised by treaty; those requests went largely unanswered. Over the preceding dozen years, the Russian Empire had repeatedly neglected its obligations, rendering formal guarantees hollow in practice.

That neglect had calamitous consequences in 1795, when Agha Mohammad Khan invaded Kartli-Kakheti, inflicting widespread devastation when he sacked Tbilisi and other cities of East Georgia. The Georgian defence at the Battle of Krtsanisi, though valiant, was unsuccessful; the rout exposed the limits of dynastic valour and the perils of strategic dependence upon an unreliable protector. King Heraclius, intent on dying with honour

on the battlefield, was instead compelled to retreat by his royal guard; his survival underscored the tragic cost of being forced into dependency on an unreliable protector after western avenues of support had been foreclosed.

Heraclius's death on 11 January 1798 ushered in the reign of George XII, who sought to navigate Persian threats while pressing Russia to honour its treaty commitments. Emperor Paul's 1799 interventions – affirming George as king, naming his son David heir and dispatching troops – temporarily suggested renewed Russian engagement. Georgian envoys proposed, on 7 September 1799, amendments to the treaty that would place Kartli-Kakheti under Russian jurisdiction in foreign and domestic affairs while preserving the royal title. Documents submitted on 24 June 1800 and approved on 23 November that year intimated a protectorate-style relationship, yet European realpolitik swiftly altered imperialistic calculations.

A rapprochement between Russia and France, and shifting strategic priorities, prompted Emperor Paul I to contemplate the abolition and integration of Kartli-Kakheti. On 18 December, he signed a manifesto to that effect, which was published in St Petersburg on 28 January 1801 without the knowledge of Georgian diplomats. Following George XII's death, the political situation in Georgia underwent significant changes. Authority passed to his son, David, during which Georgian diplomats worked to strengthen governance and improve relations with Russia. Paul's assassination on 11 March 1801 did not reverse the unfolding administrative measures. Alexander I's manifesto of 12 September 1801 formally abolished the kingdom, and the

regulations governing it came into force in May 1802, affecting the constitutional and bureaucratic absorption of Georgian institutions into the Russian imperial framework.

Interpretations of these events remain contested. For some, Russian intervention was a providential salvation; for others, it amounted to calculated annexation that undermined Georgian sovereignty and sought to efface national identity. The documentary record – military reports, treaties, diplomatic correspondence and eyewitness testimony – points to a more complex reality. Georgian rulers and elites repeatedly solicited external patronage while simultaneously cultivating local capacities; they acted as agents within severely constrained circumstances, not as passive dependents. Viewed in its entirety, the pattern of Russian engagement reveals a gradual, politically engineered encroachment that increasingly subordinated Georgian sovereignty. While a minority of contemporaries consider this relationship as salvific, many Georgians experience it as annexation and occupation, arguing that imperial policy aimed to marginalise Georgia on the international stage. The eighteenth century's vicissitudes, therefore, reveal a polity negotiating survival amid the rival claims of neighbouring empires, where imperial ambition, local resilience and international diplomacy together determined the nation's fate.

## საქართველოს სამეფოს პოლიტიკური გედი და უბედობა XVIII საუკუნეში

საკვანძო სიტყვები: საქართველო, რუსეთი, ერეკლე II,  
ტოტლებენი, დაღატი, გეორგიევსკის  
ტრაქტატი, პოლიტიკა, ისტორია

ორი საუკუნეა, რაც პოლიტიკოსთა თუ მეცნიერთა ნაწილი როგორც რუსეთში, ისე საქართველოში, „ორ ზღვას შუა“ მდებარე, უძველესი ისტორიისა და კულტურული მემკვიდრეობის შემქმნელი, ქრისტიანობის დასაცავად მრავალმგამოვლილი ქართველი ერის გადარჩენაში რუსეთის იმპერიისა და საბჭოთა კავშირის უზარმაზარ „წელილზე“ საჯაროდ საუბრობს. რეალურად რა სურათიც იკვეთება დოკუმენტირებული ფაქტებიდან, ნებისმიერ დაინტერესებულ ადამიანს შეუძლია დამოუკიდებლად დაინახოს.

1490 წელს ოფიციალურად გაფორმდა საქართველოს სამეფოს დაშლა ქართლის, კახეთის, იმერეთის სამეფოებად და სამცხის საათაბაგოდ. საბედნიანოს სამთავრო, იგივე, სამეგრელო, არ აღიარებდა ქართლ-იმერეთის მეფის ხელისუფლებას და არ ემორჩილებოდა. 1762-1801 წლებში აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე მამა-შვილ მეფეთა, თეიმურაზ II-ისა და ერეკლე II-ის ძალისხმევით გაერთიანდა ქართლისა და კახეთის სამეფოები. ამ ფეოდალური სახელმწიფოს მმართველი 1762 წლიდან მეფე ერეკლე გახდა.