

Some Aspects of Vorontsov's Cultural Policy: Strategy and Vision

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Abstract. This study examines Mikhail Vorontsov's cultural policy in nineteenth-century Georgia as a strategic instrument of Russian imperial governance. Positioned at the imperial periphery, Georgia served as a laboratory where culture, education, and aesthetics were employed to consolidate authority under the guise of modernization and civilizing influence. The research investigates three interdependent domains – sacred, public, and private/elite – through which Vorontsov implemented his cultural vision: the repainting of Sioni Cathedral (sacred sphere), the founding of the Tiflis Opera Theater and introduction of European repertoire (public sphere), and the cultivation of elite musical salons (private sphere). Using an interdisciplinary framework drawing on postcolonial theory, cultural imperialism, and key concepts of power and cultural capital (Said, Bhabha, Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu), the study combines discourse analysis with interpretive readings of architecture, performance, and visual art to reveal how culture simultaneously enriched local life and naturalized imperial domination. The findings highlight a coherent and multi-dimensional strategy where religious, artistic, and social spaces were orchestrated to cultivate consent, internalize empire, and produce hybrid forms of cultural negotiation. Vorontsov's policy exemplifies how imperial power operated through attraction and aestheticized governance, transforming coercion into cultural engagement and shaping elite subjectivities while reinforcing Russia's hegemonic authority. © 2026 Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.

Keywords: Vorontsov, cultural policy, Russian empire, Georgia, imperial hegemony

Introduction

The Caucasus – and Georgia in particular – was among the most strategically significant zones of Russian imperial interest in the nineteenth century. As the empire pursued both territorial expansion and the role of “civilizing bearer,” Georgia became a testing ground – a periphery to be remade into a European cultural model albeit exclusively through

Russian imperial mediation. As Layton and Jersild note, the Caucasus served as the space where Russia positioned itself as the sole translator of civilization (Layton, 2000; Jersild, 2002).

This mission was entrusted to one of the most influential figures – Viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov (1844-1854), who sought to transform the Tiflis guberniya into a modern center of administration,

culture, and imperial prestige. An aristocrat with European education and diplomatic experience, Vorontsov epitomized the ideal imperial functionary – one who, as Sigua observed, replaced military coercion with a “planned cultural expansion camouflaged by benevolence and liberalism” (Sigua, 2017). Under his governance, culture and education became instruments of imperial progress, visual proof that the Caucasus could be “civilized” under Russian rule.

Before analysis, it is important to outline the interpretive framework. This study treats cultural politics as central to imperial power, where culture, education, and ideology formed a unified political language. Vorontsov’s initiatives offered genuine cultural value – improving infrastructure, architecture, and access to European forms – yet cultural value and political function were not opposites but coexisted. Imperial institutions operated as sites of both enrichment and domination – precisely because power, as Foucault (Foucault, 1977) and Said (Said, 1978) show, worked through culture, knowledge, and aesthetics. Examining cultural governance through Vorontsov’s initiatives, reveal this duality – where cultural progress and imperial power advanced together, progress and power intertwined, shaping subjects to internalize empire as civilization.

Materials and Methods

The empirical evidence examined in this study reveals a coherent imperial strategy operating across three interlocking – sacred, public, private/elite domains: (1) the sacred: the repainting of Sioni Cathedral (1851-1855), commissioned by Vorontsov and executed by Prince Grigol Gagarin; (2) the public: The Tiflis Opera Theater (1851): the founding of the Imperial Opera Company, introduction of the opera curtain and European repertoire; (3) private: Musical Salons – elite social spaces where Europeanism and imperial manners functioned as instruments of distinction and education. This triadic structure was not incidental

but represented a systematic cultural logic through which the Russian Empire, under Vorontsov’s viceroyalty, sought to transform territorial conquest into hegemonic authority. Each domain functioned as a distinct yet interdependent mechanism of power, together forming what can be characterized as a totalizing system of cultural governance. Disaggregating imperial strategy into collective and symbolic (sacred), performative and visible (public), intimate and habitual (private) – showing how imperial power was enforced and internalized, rendering imperial domination but as the naturalized structure of civilized life itself.

Theoretical framework, methodological approach. This study employs an interdisciplinary framework combining colonial/postcolonial theory, cultural imperialism, and theories of power and cultural capital to examine how imperial domination was enacted through culture in nineteenth-century Georgia. Building on Said’s Orientalism (Said, 1978) and Bhabha’s colonial ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994), it interprets Russia’s “civilizing mission” as a strategy producing the Georgian “other” while fostering imitation and dependency among elites. Gramsci’s cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), Foucault’s power and discipline (Foucault, 1977), and Bourdieu’s cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) show how coercion became persuasion, as education, taste, and aesthetics enforced imperial distinction. Methodologically, the study combines discourse analysis of Vorontsov’s reports and correspondence with interpretive readings of architecture, theater, and religious imagery to trace how empire sought to “civilize,” educate, and aestheticize domination into consent. While this power-centered approach risks privileging structure over agency, its purpose is not ideological but analytical – to expose the political dimensions of culture often masked by narratives of benevolent modernization.

Results

The Sacred, Public and Elite domains – Forging Imperial Narratives

Sacred domain: Sioni Cathedral as an empire's policy of "shared memory". Grigory Gagarin's fresco painting of the Sioni Cathedral represents one of the most striking examples of the Russian imperial cultural policy in Georgia. The significance of this project extends far beyond the boundaries of religious art. Sioni – one of the oldest churches in the country, the resting place of Georgian secular and ecclesiastical hierarchs, and a sacred center of national and Christian identity – was chosen by the Empire as a space in which a new historical memory would be constructed, one intended to become shared by both Russians and Georgians.

In the collective memory of nineteenth-century Georgian society, Sioni Cathedral was associated with a dramatic act of imperial coercion: in 1802, during a service dedicated to the veneration of the Georgian relic – the Cross of Saint Nino, brought back from Russia by Emperor Alexander I – the church was suddenly surrounded by troops on the orders of General Knorring, Governor of Georgia, and Georgian nobles were forced to swear allegiance to Russia (Bagrationi, 1983). Sioni was also the site of the first imperial intervention in Tbilisi's ecclesiastical architecture – the bell tower built in 1812, which, according to Davit Khoshtaria, "with its spire rising above Georgian and Armenian churches, became the first symbol of Russia's establishment in the Caucasus" (Khoshtaria, 2016). Given these historical antecedents, the decision to paint the cathedral's interior during Vorontsov's governorship was a logical continuation of imperial cultural strategy. The task was entrusted to Grigory Gagarin – an artist who, by that time (1851-1855), had already become the chief representative of imperial visual culture in Georgia.

Under Gagarin's direction, a full iconographic program and a design for a new iconostasis were developed, transforming the interior of a medieval

Georgian architectural monument into an entirely new artistic space. As T. Khosroshvili notes, Gagarin's program included depictions of saints significant to the Georgian Church (St. Nino, St. Ketevan the Martyr Queen, St. Archil, St. Luarsab, and the Thirteen Syrian Fathers), which may be regarded as his consideration of local wishes (Khosroshvili, 2016). At the same time, the frescoes – combining imperial symbols, Georgian saints, and Russian inscriptions within a single space – created a visual formula of a shared faith between the two nations. The long-term aim of this synthesis was the integration of Georgia's national past into the imperial narrative and the transformation of Georgian sacred heritage into a component of a shared Russo-Georgian cultural identity.

Public domain: Tiflis Opera Theater as stage of imperial visibility. The Tiflis opera theater was the culmination of Vorontsov's political vision – a space where European aesthetics, imperial ideology, and the disciplining of the local elite converged. The public domain under Vorontsov functioned as a stage of imperial visibility, where specific architecture, operatic performance, and civic ceremony performed the aesthetics of empire, transforming urban space into both a site of cultural enrichment and disciplinary spectacle.

The curtain as visual allegory. In nineteenth-century imperial theatres, the main curtain served not only a scenographic function but also a ceremonial and propagandistic one. The most significant cultural project of Vorontsov's governorship was the construction of the Treasury Theatre in Tbilisi, designed by Giovanni Scudieri and built between 1847 and 1851 as a cornerstone of the Viceroy's cultural agenda in the Caucasus. Before its completion, the Manege building (now on Sh. Chitadze Street) housed the Russian Theatre (1845), followed in 1850 by the Georgian Theatre (Kobyakov, 1888), directed by playwright Giorgi Eristavi. A former 1832 conspirator, Eristavi returned from exile to lead the troupe, embodying the

intelligentsia's reluctant collaboration with empire – a tactical effort to preserve culture within a system bent on its assimilation.

Central to Vorontsov's cultural project was the theatre's first curtain, painted by Grigorij Gagarin – a visual manifesto of imperial ideology. As Maia Sigua (Sigua, 2017) notes, Gagarin's dual role as soldier and artist shaped this vision, echoed by the theatre's first director, poet Vladimir Sollogub. Our understanding of Gagarin's curtain comes from two surviving drawings (Gagarin, 1903): a preparatory sketch and the final version used on stage. In the preparatory sketch, a goddess of law and justice – combining Themis and Justitia – sits above the imperial coat of arms, in her left hand she holds scales, and in her right – a raised sword, symbolizing the unconditional execution of law. Beneath her lies the coat of arms of the Russian Empire. On either side of the pedestal, in the lower register, stand two female allegories representing Russia (left) and Georgia (right). At the feet of Russia's allegory lies the barrel of a cannon. In the final version, the female figure who in the sketch personified the power of law and imperial justice is replaced by a Muse of Art and Inspiration: the sword and scales become a lyre and book, the cannon disappears, and Zakon ("Law"), in the form of a book placed beside the allegorical figure of Russia, becomes a minor decorative detail. The image of domination gives way to one of harmony, reflecting Vorontsov's move from military coercion to the use of art and Orthodoxy as tools of influence. Equally significant is the replacement of the classical pedestal with an altar screen decorated in Georgian ornamentation. Whereas the sketch depicted the subjugation of the Caucasus through justice and power, the final version grounded imperial ideology in the notion of a harmonious union between Russia and Georgia within a shared Orthodox space.

The iconographic program of the curtain continues in the lateral and lower registers. On the side of Russia's allegory, we see an industrial landscape featuring the Moscow Kremlin, a large

bridge spanning a river, a ship, and a steam locomotive. Below appears a bust of Homer, a church bell, a sheaf of wheat, a painter's palette and brushes, a telescope, a globe, and a cello – all together presenting Russia as a realm of faith, art, science, and advanced technology, the arena of progress and knowledge. On the side of Georgia's allegory – who holds a tambourine and rests her foot on a cushion – are depicted a drinking horn, rattle, oriental carpet, grapes, and a wine vessel (qvevri), among other ethnographic objects. In the background rise the Caucasus Mountains, the ruins of a fortress wall, and a monument of medieval Georgian architecture, evoking a once-monumental culture of the past. The composition thus conveys a clear hierarchy within the imagined unity of Russia and Georgia – presenting the illusion of "civilizing" harmony: Russia as the agent of progress, and Georgia as a poetic yet "uncivilized" embodiment of the exotic Eastern Other, awaiting refinement under imperial rule. Using allegorical style, Gagarin translated the empire's political ambitions into art.

Language, circulation and imperial cultural geography. Vorontsov's broader strategy extended this logic to repertoire, language, and circulation through the empire's cultural geography, shaping the local elite to align with Russian imperial objectives.

Italian repertoire, performed by Italian troupes – including works such as Lucia di Lammermoor, Ernani, and Rigoletto – was deliberately chosen because it represented the pinnacle of contemporary European operatic culture. The circulation of Italian repertoire across imperial centers – from St. Petersburg and Moscow to Kiev and Tbilisi – created a shared cultural space and sense of unity, linking periphery and center in a unified imperial aesthetic order. This established Russia as the source of cultural legitimation and positioned local musical traditions as raw material to be complemented by European forms, reflecting Bhabha's notion of cultural transformation and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994). Attendance at the opera house became a social ritual, representing genuine cultural pleasure,

social prestige, and connection to European artistic developments.

Language was the second instrument of imperial strategy: the planned shift to Russian-language performances aimed to familiarize audiences with Russian speech and customs, assimilating the periphery into the empire's cultural space and political framework. Vorontsov articulated this goal explicitly in a letter to Prince Pyotr Volkonsky on July 14, 1849 (originally in Kashmadze, 2015, as cited in Sigua, 2017): "I look at the Russian theatre in Tbilisi not as a means of an entertainment and fun, but as an institution that has the significant goals: familiarizing the local people with the Russian language, Russian habits and their gradual merging with Russia, I think it is my duty to try to have a good Russian theatre in Tbilisi".

Through both repertoire and language, the theater positioned the periphery as a participant in an empire-wide cultural project, while simultaneously reinforcing the center's authority and role as the arbiter of taste. Applying Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), the theater generated cultural capital that reinforced social distinction and dependence. The eventual attempt to fully Russify the repertoire failed, revealing both the limits of imperial control and the enduring influence of repertoire and language in shaping consent and hierarchy.

Vorontsov's model resembles broader nineteenth-century European imperial strategies, where culture was instrumentalized to justify domination (Layton, 2000; Osterhammel, 2005). Like British or French policies, it shaped obedience through education and aesthetics (Cohn, 1996; Conklin, 1997), but Russia adapted this approach to assert its own "Europeanness" by "civilizing" the Caucasus (Gvosdev, 2000). This produced a "double orientalism," with Russia both teacher in the East and student of Europe (Wolff, 1994; Jersild, 2002). The Tiflis Opera exemplifies how imperial culture projected authority, mediated prestige, and shaped

local elites, revealing the tensions and negotiations inherent in cultural domination.

Private/elite domain: musical salons and formation of subjectivity. Salons represented key sites for the enactment of Vorontsov's "civilizing mission" among the elite social strata, where creative freedom and cultural initiative were formalized and always framed within imperial discipline. As Anna Stoler observes, colonial power operates most effectively in intimate spheres – households, salons, and private interactions – where influence is experienced as "natural," "desirable," and "voluntary" (Stoler, 2010). These salons were inherently hybrid, where the local and imperial, Georgian and European, traditional and modern intersected. As Tsurtsunia notes, "Georgian songs were harmonized in European styles, and both salon performances and public concerts in European forms marked major developments in Tbilisi's musical life, blending urban folklore with European practices" (Tsurtsunia, 2020).

The Orbelians' (Maiko Orbeliani) and Chavchavadzes' (Alexander Chavchavadze) salons represented exactly such hybrid cultural spaces where imperial influence was subtle and indirect. By asserting their own "civilized" status, these families preserved their aristocratic positions within the imperial hierarchy. As Norbert Elias (Elias, 1983) demonstrates, aristocratic survival depended on the ability to adapt to new social orders, and culture provided one of the most effective mechanisms for such adaptation. In particular, the Chavchavadzes' salon became a site where Georgian intellectuals cultivated the literary revival – a form of "cultural resistance" through which they sought to preserve linguistic and cultural autonomy within the imperial framework (Suny, 1994).

Within this hybrid musical environment, the piano and guitar carried distinct symbolic codes of European modernity, bourgeois lifestyle, and imperial "civilization." The piano, central to European middle-class identity, embodied respectable living, education, and household refinement. As the "king of the family salon," it functioned simultaneously as

a musical instrument, status marker, and pedagogical apparatus, signifying economic, cultural, and social capital (Leppert, 1993). The guitar, by contrast, conveyed associations with European Romanticism and intimate salon-style music-making, was more mobile and accessible, and served as a symbol of romantic individualism, less suited for collective performance than the piano (Tyler & Sparks, 2002). These instruments together with local traditional music facilitated a musical hybridity that allowed local culture to survive, adapt, and flourish even under conditions of imperial pressure.

In this way, salons operated as both instruments of imperial governance and spaces of local agency. They allowed the elite to navigate and negotiate imperial expectations while cultivating distinctively Georgian cultural practices. Through this delicate interplay of influence and adaptation, Vorontsov's "civilizing mission" was enacted not with coercion alone, but through the subtle, hybridized culture of intimate social spaces.

Discussion

Vorontsov's strategy demonstrates a coherent, multi-domain approach, where sacred, public, and private spheres reinforced each other. Sacred interventions

legitimized imperial authority through shared memory; public performances enacted imperial aesthetics and language; and private salons shaped elite subjectivity, creating voluntary assimilation into imperial norms. This integrated system reflects Russia's specific "civilizing" project in the Caucasus (Layton, 2000; Osterhammel, 2005; Gvosdev, 2000) and at the same time, illustrates "double orientalism": Russia as both teacher in the East and student of Europe (Wolff, 1994; Jersild, 2002).

Conclusion

The strategic coherence of Vorontsov's cultural policy lay in its multi-dimensionality embedding imperial power in daily life – through worship, performance, and refined taste – making empire appear less as external domination and more as the natural framework of civilized social distinction, benefactor rather than conqueror. Vorontsov's strategy exemplified what Nye calls "soft power" – achieving compliance through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). Imperial institutions transformed domination into attraction, control into education, and obedience into cultural pleasure, translating the inherent violence of empire into the refined language of aesthetics and civilization.

ხელოვნებათმცოდნეობა

ვორონცოვისეული კულტურის პოლიტიკის ზოგიერთი ასპექტი: სტრატეგია და ხედვა

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** საქართველოს შოთა რუსთაველის თეატრისა და კინოს სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, სახელოვნებო მეცნიერებების, მედიისა და მენეჯმენტის ფაკულტეტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ზ. სხირტლაძის მიერ)

წინამდებარე ნაშრომში განხილულია ვორონცოვისეული კულტურის პოლიტიკა, როგორც რუსული იმპერიული მმართველობის სტრატეგიული ინსტრუმენტი მე-19 საუკუნის საქართველოში. იმპერიის პერიფერიაზე მდებარე საქართველო გადაიქცა ლაბორატორიად, სადაც კულტურა და განათლება გამოიყენებოდა იმპერიული ძალაუფლების განსამტკიცებლად. ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილია სამი სივრცე: საკრალური, საჯარო და კერძო/ელიტარული, რომლებშიც ნათლად აისახა რუსეთის იმპერიის ხედვა და სტრატეგია. მსჯელობა მიმდინარეობს სიონის ტაძრის (საკრალური სივრცე), თბილისის ოპერის თეატრში გაგარინის მიერ მოხატული ფარდის, ევროპული რეპერტუარის დანერგვისა (საჯარო სივრცე) და ელიტარული მუსიკალური სალონების (კერძო/ელიტარული სივრცე) მაგალითზე. პოსტკოლონიური თეორიის, კულტურული იმპერიალიზმის, ძალაუფლებისა და კულტურული კაპიტალის კონცეფციებზე (საიდი, ბჰაბა, გრამში, ფუკო, ბურდიე) დაყრდნობით, კვლევაში გამოყენებულია ინტერდისციპლინური მიდგომა, რომელიც აერთიანებს დისკურსის ანალიზს და ვიზუალური და საშემსრულებლო ხელოვნების ინტერპრეტაციულ წაკითხვას. ეს მეთოდი აჩვენებს რუსეთის იმპერიის მრავალგანზომილებიან კულტურის პოლიტიკის სტრატეგიას, რომლის ფარგლებში იმპერიული ძალაუფლება ხორციელდებოდა ვორონცოვის ესთეტიზებული მმართველობის მეშვეობით და არაერთმნიშვნელოვან გავლენას ახდენდა ადგილობრივ კულტურულ ცხოვრებაზე; ამასთან, ამტკიცებდა რუსეთის იმპერიულ დომინირებას XIX საუკუნის საქართველოში.

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