

Justice, Legality, and Imperial Rule: The Russian Coloniality and Institutional Transformations in the First Half of the 19th-Century Georgia¹

Abstract

This paper investigates Russian colonial rule in early 19th-century Georgia through the lens of institutional transformation, focusing on how imperial legality reshaped local power structures. The study challenges simplistic moral framings that reduce colonial governance to whether a specific administrator, like Mikhail Vorontsov, was “good” or “bad” for the region. Instead, it explores the deeper structural changes that accompanied Russia’s imperial project in the Caucasus, particularly in the former Kartli-Kakheti kingdom. Using institutionalist theory and postcolonial critique, the article analyzes the introduction of Russian legal and administrative frameworks as part of a broader “civilizing mission.” It examines how imperial law, while formally imposed from the center, was shaped by local resistance, global conflicts (such as the Napoleonic Wars), and internal crises (such as the Decembrist revolt). The paper draws on legal documents, royal decrees, and correspondence to trace both vertical power consolidation and the horizontal diffusion of norms through local populations. Findings suggest that Russian law functioned not only as a tool of domination but also as a site of negotiation. Legal pluralism and the contested nature of legitimacy led to frequent disruptions and reinterpretations of justice on the ground. While early figures like Tsitsianov initiated legal reforms with little local engagement, Vorontsov’s administration introduced a more flexible model that selectively incorporated local elites. This case contributes to broader debates about imperial governance by showing how law operated as a hybrid institution, simultaneously centralizing, localizing, and mediating colonial power.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Colonial Governance, Legal Pluralism, Justice, Viceroyalty, Mikhail Vorontsov

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