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THE CAMPAIGN OF IRAKLI II AND RUSSIANS AGAINST CH'AR-BELAKANI AND MUGHANLO BATTLE IN OCTOBER 1784 (preliminary military history analysis)

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Georgian and Russian military cooperation in 1783-1787 constituted one of the major factors in the South Caucasian political history of the period. Two Russian regular Jäger battalions deployed in the Kingdom of Kartl-K'akheti at the disposal of Irakli II contributed to both the defensive and offensive potential of this Georgian state but also alienated and embittered its Muslim subjects, allies, and neighbours.

This article is devoted to the military analysis of one of the major military campaigns of this period: the Georgian-Russian offensive against Ch'ar-Belakani, culminating in the battle at Mughanlo ford over the Alazani river on 14 November 1784. Regrettably, only Russian and Georgian primary sources have been available; as to the other side's evidence, seemingly nothing has survived. Vasiliy Potto mentioned Irakli II's letters to Potyemkin regarding the battle; however we could not locate them. The New History by Prince Teimuraz and its expanded version preserved by the H-25 manuscript written by Prince Bagrat are the only Georgian sources and provide a concise version of the campaign and battle, also listing some Georgian casualties. As to Russian sources, the testimony of Alexander Pishchevich, who participated personally in this campaign and fought in Mughanlo battle seems to be of utmost significance; we translated it from Russian into Georgian entirely for the first time. Historiographic works by Pyetr Butkov, Nikolay Dubrovin, and Vasiliy Potto, based on currently mostly unavailable archive documents retain their significance, albeit stand in dire need of critical review. Needless to say, we subjected all the available primary sources to scrupulous analysis. We also reviewed the more or less modern Georgian and Daghestani historiography (S. Kakabadze, N. Papuashvili, M. Dumbadze, V. Guruli, Sh. Khapizov) covering this campaign.

Adequate military analysis of the battle would have been impossible without researching the historical geographical aspects of the campaign and the battlefield landscape. Crossing the Alazani river was of an utmost significance for both the invading army led by Irakli II and General Samoylov towards Ch'ar-Belakani, as indicated unanimously by the sources; and the Lezgis, returning there. The movements of the adversaries naturally became directed towards the Mughanlo ford, one of the most convenient locations for crossing swollen Alazani. Therefore, it was no coincidence that they met on November 14 on the right (Kingdom of Kartl-K'akheti) bank of the river, while the Lezgis were attempting to cross the river. The battle was fought next to the current village of Samtats'qaro in Georgia, at the border pass between the

modern republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan (the terrain lowers in 1-1.3 km to the South-West where the steep slopes transform into Shiraki lowland).

The Georgian-Russian host outnumbered the Lezgis by a ratio of approximately 13.75:1, and in contrast to the enemy comprised not just horse, but also foot and artillery: Approximately 4,000 Georgians (cavalry, foot, artillery), >1,500 Russians (200 horse, 1,300 Jägers, 4 artillery pieces) vs. approximately 400 Lezgis (notwithstanding an additional but uncertain number on the opposite bank of Alazani). Irakli II led the allied army, but obviously much of authority lay with General Samoylov; we do not know the names of the Lezgi leaders.

Despite the difficulties with food provisioning, the allies managed to start the campaign by marching (separately) to Alazani, Irakli II joining Samoylov only on October 7 or 8. Heavy downpours muddled the roads and made the river rise. The campaign would probably have been aborted provided the allies had not been notified on October 12 (confirmed on October 13), that a band of Lezgis was approaching while returning to Ch'ar-Belakani. Irakli II and Samoylov marched off towards the Mughanlo ford but were late to intercept the Lezgis who had already started entering the woods along the Alazani. Georgian-Russian horse led by Irakli II in person approached the forest first, but refrained from attacking (meanwhile the Lezgis perhaps already started crossing the river, while also taking up a defensive position in the woods). Later on, Russo-Georgian foot and artillery arrived. The artillery was deployed on the left flank and started bombarding Lezgi positions, while two Russian columns attacked the forest, later being reinforced with the rest of Russian Jägers and Georgian foot. The Lezgis put up a fierce defense, at a certain point even forcing the allies to retreat. Nevertheless, eventually the Lezgis either left the forest in a more or less organized way or were driven from it, and crossed Alazani (under enemy fire) retreating to Ch'ar-Belakani. Critical analysis of the primary sources leads to a conclusion that the battle outcome was not a smashing victory for the allies: Despite the huge numerical superiority and the advantage of employing both artillery and regular infantry, Russians and Georgians suffered substantial casualties (albeit we agree with traditional historiography that the Lezgi casualties were also in the range of hundreds, i.e. 50-75% of initial number), and hardly managed to disperse the heavily outnumbered enemy band. Moreover, it became clear that invading the territory controlled by Lezgis would be unattainable and even perilous, presumably due to the flooding but also anticipated resistance on the other bank. The allies preferred to return to Tiflis, the capital, doing their best to aggrandize the encounter and its outcome as a correspondingly major battle ending in a decisive Allied victory.

Having analyzed the military campaign and the battle as well as various factors predetermining the eventual outcome, we confirmed that the Allied victory was a tactical one at its best and had no lasting effects, perhaps only for encouraging Irakli II. On the other hand, it presumably diagnosticated the generally precarious political and military stance of the Kingdom of Kartl-K'akheti after resigning to the Russian Empire in 1783, despite the more or less candid at this stage albeit limited attempts of Russian authorities to give support to their transcaucasian vassal.

We would conclude that the October 1784 campaign, including the Mughanlo battle, has a significant historiographic value highlighting many principal aspects of the Georgian-Russian military confrontation with the Lezgis in 1783-1787, as well as the military history of the Kingdom of Kartl-K'akheti in general.