

Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar in Tbilisi: A comparative study on the representation of a historical event

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Article Info	Abstract
Original Article Main Object: International relations Scope: Iran, Georgia Received: 12 September 2025 Revised: 29 September 2025 Accepted: 30 September 2025 Published online: 25 October 2025 Keywords: Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, historical memory, relations with Iran, Tbilisi, 1795.	The invasion of Tbilisi by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar in 1795 stands as a pivotal event in the history of the Caucasus, whose echoes have persisted across the historical memories of Iran, Georgia, Russia, and Europe for more than two centuries. While earlier studies have often been valuable in reconstructing aspects of the event, they have typically remained confined within a single linguistic or historiographical tradition and consequently produced partial or one-sided accounts. Persian narratives generally depicted the campaign as the “conquest of Tbilisi” and a symbol of restored Iranian authority; Georgian accounts framed it as a “national tragedy” that marked the collapse of effective independence; Russian historiography cast it as a “historic mission” of the empire to protect the Christians of the Caucasus; and Western writings frequently portrayed it as an illustration of “Eastern violence,” especially within orientalist frameworks. This article takes a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, bringing these divergent traditions into dialogue and focusing in particular on the contested figures of casualties and captives, which appear exaggerated and politically motivated across all accounts. The analysis demonstrates that numbers and descriptive terms were not neutral reflections of reality but instruments serving broader political legitimation and national identity formation. The findings highlight that the significance of the 1795 invasion lies far less in its short-term military outcome than in the conflicting historical representations and national memories it generated and reproduced over time. In this respect, the article goes beyond traditional accounts and treats the event as a critical case study in the “politics of historical representation” in the Caucasus, while underscoring the need for further comparative historiographical research.

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1. Introduction

The 1795 sack of Tbilisi by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar—anchored in the Battle of Krtsanisi and the burning of the city—has been canonized in four distinct narrative traditions: Persian, Georgian, Russian imperial, and nineteenth-century European. Rather than arbitrate a single “true” version, this article reconstructs how these traditions frame the same episode, what rhetorical devices (lexicon, plot, numbers) they deploy, and how such framings sustained political projects and historical memory from the late eighteenth century onward.

2. Questions and Method

Three questions guide the analysis: (1) How do different traditions name and stage the event (e.g., “conquest”, “tragedy”, “rescue”, “Eastern cruelty”) and to what political effect? (2) How do casualty/captivity figures operate as persuasive instruments? (3) How did these narratives shape understandings of Russian forward policy and Iranian responses thereafter? Methodologically, the study aligns multilingual corpora—Persian chronicles and later histories, Georgian annals, Russian imperial historiography and documentation, and European travelogues and press—then performs a comparative discourse analysis of key terms, a lean reconstruction of the 1783–1796 sequence, and a critical reading of quantification (“politics of numbers”). Demographic plausibility (urban size, flight patterns) is used to check expansive claims.

3. Historical setting (1783–1796)

The Treaty of Georgievsk (1783) placed eastern Georgia under Russian protection, while the consolidation of Qajar rule in Iran revived ambitions to reassert authority over borderlands associated with Safavid-Qajar legitimacy. The gap between Russia’s promises and its protective capacity in 1795, together with Agha Mohammad Khan’s state-building imperatives, set the stage for the campaign. The article traces the short-term outcome—defeat of Georgian forces, the fall and sacking of Tbilisi, and the Qajar army’s brief stay and withdrawal—and the medium-term effect: enabling a Russian retaliatory expedition in 1796, a prelude to the nineteenth-century Russo-Iranian confrontation.

4. Findings: Four narrative families

Persian. Persian accounts tend to present *fath-e Teflis*—a legitimate restoration of central sovereignty after decades of disorder. Civilian suffering appears unevenly and is subordinated to the idiom of rightful punishment and strategic demonstration; numbers, when cited, are lower or vague and rarely central.

Georgian. Georgian memory casts Krtsanisi as national trauma and pivot in sovereignty’s erosion. Emphasis falls on mobilized nobles and

townspeople, the absence or insufficiency of Russian troops, urban devastation, and forced transport of captives. Figures often reach “tens of thousands,” operating as moral indictment and ground for subsequent political choices.

Russian imperial. Nineteenth-century Russian narratives often stage a civilizational drama: the suffering of Christians under “Asiatic barbarity” and the necessity of a protective Russian presence. The 1795 episode becomes retroactive *raison d'état* for forward policy; high numbers bolster the urgency of intervention and frame Qajar conduct as predatory rather than governmental.

European. Travelogues and journalism reiterate large numbers and stylized images of Eastern cruelty, with limited attention to local demography or internal politics. The event serves as a set piece in a universal morality play of civilization versus barbarism, later dovetailing with the Great Game.

4.1. The politics of numbers

Reported casualties and captives vary widely—from laconic “thousands” to precise, expansive totals. Read as rhetoric rather than neutral measurement, numbers solicit sympathy, authorize punishment or protection, and enlist patrons. When set against late-eighteenth-century urban scale and evidence of civilian flight, the most expansive figures are difficult to sustain; conversely, low or indeterminate Persian figures de-dramatize civilian harm and re-center military achievement. Treating numbers as arguments explains their mobility across languages and their durability in national memory.

4.2. Strategy, Occupation, Aftermath

A strategic paradox emerges: the Qajar campaign achieved a dramatic demonstration—defeating the field force and capturing the capital—without installing durable garrisons or administrative structures. That brevity made the episode easier to weaponize within Russia’s strategic narrative: 1795 served both as justification and fuel for the 1796 expedition, even though the latter was truncated by succession in St. Petersburg. Short-run success, thus, seeded medium-run vulnerability, a pattern that recurs as reputational narratives congeal into policy defaults.

5. Contribution and Implications

The study’s contribution is twofold. Substantively, it clarifies how 1795 functioned simultaneously as military operation, moral theatre, and lever for great-power politics. Methodologically, it models a portable comparative protocol—aligned reading across languages with attention to lexicon, plot, and quantification—and argues for folding demographic reasoning into narrative criticism. More broadly, it urges scholars to read casualty figures as claims embedded in political

projects rather than as unmediated facts, a stance transferable to other contentious episodes in the entangled histories of Iran, the Caucasus, and Russia.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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