



## The Mtkvari River's Many Faces: Symbolism, Space, and Agency in Late Imperial Tiflis<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The Mtkvari (Kura) River framed urban life in Tiflis (contemporary Tbilisi) under tsarist rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This paper examines how the river acted as a symbol of an evolving Georgian nation and played critical roles in local society and culture. Flowing through the middle of Tiflis, the Mtkvari, its banks, and the infrastructure built to accommodate it affected all city residents, albeit unequally. They drank its water, used it for local food supplies and entertainment, and dealt with its strong currents and frequent floods. The river acted as an agent alongside human efforts to control and transform it. Unlike elsewhere in the tsarist and European empires, efforts to modernize riverine life in Tiflis stalled. The reclamation of the Mtkvari's legacy takes a step towards recognizing urban (in)equality and the multiethnic nature of late imperial Tiflis, where the roots of Soviet and independence-era projects were envisioned if not enacted.

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The Mtkvari River defined Tiflis. The city rose on both sides of its banks. Crowds gathered on its shore to fish, swim, drink, fight, or pray, mingling with the porters (*metulukcheebi*) who hauled river water in sacks citywide. Tiflis residents crossed and congregated along the multiple bridges traversing the Mtkvari to shop, stop to see or be seen—careful to avoid constant cart traffic—and watch the river’s current carry massive timber rafts as well as boats, swimmers, and animals. The Mtkvari’s flow, whirlpools and steep drops challenged those who set out on it, even when it was not overflowing its banks and flooding low-lying neighbourhoods. This combination of importance and peril made the river central not only to residents’ daily lives but also to the symbology of a multiethnic city and a Georgian nation. It shaped the nature of local and imperial control over the seat of the Caucasus Viceroyalty in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Tsarist Tiflis remains, in many ways, a lost city, buried by Soviet-era reconstruction (Manning 2019). The Mtkvari (in Georgian—in Russian and most Western languages, it was known as the Kura) was entombed from the 1930s by concrete embankments. Stalinist-era urban plans and population politics radically altered the city, officially renamed Tbilisi, a decade-plus after Bolshevik armed forces ended Georgia’s independence (1918–21). Soviet designs, focused away from the river, transformed not just the landscape, but also memories. Lost has been a vibrant, multiethnic imperial city that showcased the relationship between human and non-human agency.

Centring the Mtkvari allows new ways of seeing the evolution of Tiflis, as well as broader interactions between humans and nature in the Caucasus, the Russian Empire, and beyond. As Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted (2014, 8) wrote: “When the river becomes an organizing theme, a new history evolves.” This article argues that the Mtkvari played three critical functions in urban life in the last decades of tsarist rule. First, it acted as a symbol, touching on the nature of nation and empire, and interrogating the city’s place in contemporary narratives of ‘West’ vs. ‘East.’ The Mtkvari linked the region to Greco-Roman antiquity, when it was known as the Cyrus, as well as to the ‘East,’ from where Persian and Mongol conquerors invaded along the river. The aesthetic as well as historic value of the conquered river basin, separating Tiflis’ soaring hills, reinforced the beauty and power of the tsarist empire. The river subsequently emerged as a Georgian waterway, at a time when national ideas were coalescing. The Mtkvari, finally, provided a living symbol of the extent and limits of tsarist modernization in the Caucasus.

The Mtkvari River, second, acted in space: at the geographic centre of Tiflis, it anchored daily life. As a material resource, the river’s water nourished the city. Water was used not only for drinking and washing but also to cultivate the island and other gardens that fed Tiflis and provided it with shade and entertainment. It powered flour and sawmills and provided fish. Tiflis residents feasted on riverboats and at riverside taverns or island restaurants. Water sustained the animals that were the foundation of local trade and transport. Relationships to the river generated and reflected urban social hierarchies.

Third, the Mtkvari was an actor. Rivers are, by nature, fugitive resources, “inevitably unpredictable and often unmanageable” (Breyfogle 2023, 9). Tiflis residents attributed human qualities to the Mtkvari, from its mood to its sounds as it roared through the city. We can debate whether to endow the river with inorganic agency or something more akin to human agency, but its power awed residents and was a defining feature of imperial Tiflis.

Even as efforts to bend bodies of water towards human needs proliferated in the nineteenth century, across the Russian Empire as well as globally, Tiflis proved an oddity. Residents and newspapers

questioned why the city and vice-royal governments refused to construct concrete embankments to prevent damaging spring floods, decades after such structures had been built in St. Petersburg (*Iveria*, May 13, 1893). Even as massive canal-building projects engulfed areas of tsarist Central Asia, the Tiflis city administration seemed incompetent in delivering piped water to a city bisected by the Mtkvari, with its tributaries flowing through different Tiflis neighbourhoods (Peterson 2019). This article provides pathways to consider the power of place and local societies in tsarist modernization.

Tiflis, if a lost city, is on its way to rediscovery. Paul Manning (2019) has noted the natural environment's importance in the late imperial era. Manning argues that gardens—including those on Madatov and Ortchala Islands, eliminated as part of Soviet reconstruction—allowed space for a Georgian national literary identity, away from imperial regime narratives. Hubertus Jahn (2014) has written about the 1867 erection of a riverside statue of tsarist Viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov as a moment to underscore a new European public culture in Tiflis through its connection to Russia. Manning and Shatirishvili (2011) have highlighted the importance of urban social distinctions, ones that will be implicated here through relationships with the Mtkvari.

Water, as a resource, demands local management (Fagan 2011). In Tiflis, the city administration (*gorodskaiia uprava*) and city assembly (*gorodskaiia дума*) continually debated how to handle the river. Residents viewed their actions as far from satisfactory; even bridge projects stemmed from private initiative and funding as much as state action. Even as rivers extended empires through facilitating economic exploitation—particularly before the arrival of railways—their usage can be dictated by the quotidian needs of those who interact with it as well as the river's character (Reid 2021).

Water and rivers have become important subjects of inquiry in tsarist history. Rivers shaped cities, as well as the reverse. The Neva, Randall Dills (2010, ii) argues, was St. Petersburg's "lifeblood" and defining cultural feature. Rivers linked cultural and economic identities. Zeisler-Vralsted (2008) argues that the Volga represented both freedom and oppression to the Cossacks who depended on its water. Iliia Repin's image of Volga boat haulers offers an iconic portrayal of nineteenth-century Russian inequality. The economic utility as well as aesthetic beauty of rivers inculcated them into the idea of the 'Russian soul.' Across the empire, water could be "endowed with sacred and transformative properties," write Jane Costlow and Arja Rosenholm (2017, 4). Peterson (2019) has argued that efforts to control water exposed the nature of imperial control—both the colonizer's power and the agency of the colonized.

This article uses the Mtkvari, its banks, and infrastructure to examine urban, cultural, social, and other processes in Tiflis, focusing on tsarism's last decades. The river runs from Turkey to major cities of Western Georgia, including Gori, to Tiflis, then passes to Eastern Georgia and through Azerbaijan before emptying into the Caspian Sea. Sources consulted include travel diaries in English, French, German, and Russian; Tiflis-based German, Russian, and Georgian language newspapers; documents from the Central Historical Archive of Georgia [sakartvelos tsent'raluri saist'orio arkivi]; and secondary material. The first sections will concentrate on efforts to develop the Mtkvari as a Georgian and an imperial symbol to harness the river's power into ideas. The article then moves to daily interactions with the river, as it powered the local economy and centred its culture. Major 1890s floods constitute the next section as residents seek to attenuate the river's impact on Tiflis even as its powerful current offers a new opportunity—that of hydropower, which was envisaged in late tsarist Tiflis but only realized in the Soviet Union.

## The Mtkvari as Symbol

The Mtkvari River connected Tiflis and Georgia in an emerging national imagination. Nineteenth-century Georgian literary culture employed rivers as geographic referents to anchor Georgians as a people within the empire. The Mtkvari held a unique place within this symbolic geography. Georgian aristocrats who entered tsarist service in the early nineteenth century but eschewed education in Russia became known as the *mtkvardaleulni*<sup>4</sup> ('those who drank the water of the Mtkvari') (Suny 1994, 125–6). They tethered themselves to the river of their homeland—flowing within Georgia and through Tiflis, now seen as both a Georgian and imperial capital city. Nineteenth-century Tiflis was dominated not only by Russian imperial bureaucrats but also an Armenian bourgeoisie. A minority—about 30 percent of the urban population—and often seen as an underclass, Georgians nonetheless considered Tiflis the 'mother of cities,' the seat of Georgian history and heritage (Suny 2009, 17). Now a symbol of the Georgian homeland, coursing through the heart of a nation and its capital, the Mtkvari threaded the national body.

The Mtkvari anchored a growing awareness of nationality throughout the late imperial period. Manning notes how one Georgian journalist, writing pseudonymously as S. Bavreli, emphasized the Mtkvari's Georgianness in proclaiming his love for a river "devoted to the fatherland" (quoted in Manning 2012, 256). Bavreli followed the Mtkvari across Georgia, circumscribing the localness of his experiences. Even as the river entered Ottoman lands, he considered it, in Manning's words, "a patriotic Georgian, who refuses to go abroad...a river that flows through Georgia alone" (Manning 2012, 256). Centuries-old ruins dotting the Mtkvari basin tied adjacent regions to the ostensibly glorious twelfth-century reign of *Tamar mepe* (King Tamar), when all Georgian lands were united. Trekking upriver in the 1860s–70s into Ottoman lands (much of which was conquered by tsarist forces in the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War), Georgian writers enthusiastically, if often dubiously, asserted an ancient Georgian provenance of stone bridges, fortresses, and churches as proof of these lands' historic national ties (Manning 2012, 262, 265; Memmedli 2018, 245, 251–2). The Mtkvari was a symbolic cradle of nationality, but also a source of destruction that frustrated efforts to unearth the extent of this riverine nation. The river's rapid current and unpredictable nature, along with that of its tributaries and lakes, had submerged many 'Georgian' structures over the centuries (Memmedli 2018, 251–2).

European travel writers viewed the older, Roman-era ruins along the Mtkvari as a symbol connecting the region to Europe. Their narratives offered a civilizational arc stretching from Roman antiquity to the Russian imperial present, with an understanding that these were Georgian lands. The Mtkvari again reared its Janus-faced head as a source of livelihood and threat. The river, for centuries, acted as a trade route, with towers placed along sloped banks near large bends and gorges, where it was convenient to stop merchant ships and levy duties (Markov 1887, 123). These same towers, however, attested to the river's treacherous role as an invasion route for foreign conquerors and solidified an impression of Georgians as a martial, fighting people (Hahn 1892, 26–7; Merzbacher 1901, 1:925).

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<sup>4</sup> A subsequent generation of Georgian intellectuals who pursued an education in Russia in the 1850s dubbed themselves the *tergdaleulni* ("those who drank the water of the Terki" [Terek, another major river along Georgia's northern frontier]) (Andronikashvili 2021, 138). They evolved as a self-conscious, more progressive foil to the *mtkvardaleulni*.

Within Tiflis, the unfolding of daily life and culture along the Mtkvari further accentuated the river's role as an anchor for a burgeoning city and Georgian identity. The river acted as Tiflis' "main architectural axis" through which the town could be read (Kardava 2013, 174). Its main buildings surrounded the river—especially at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the town was more diminutive in scale and ravaged by a 1795 Persian invasion (Kardava 2013, 174). Tsarist urban development focused on Tiflis' right bank, with newer districts and broad tree-lined streets flowing outwards from existing terraced mansions perched on steep cliffs towering above the river (Koch 1843, 332; Merzbacher 1901, 1: 938). The left bank gained a reputation as an 'old town' of half-earthen '*saklis*' [Georgian for 'house'] and Persian bazaars stretching below on flat plains (Hahn 1924, 13). The river also linked urban spaces considered focal points of local identity and culture. Bridges connected Tiflis residents to gardens, watered by the Mtkvari, on either side, as well as other sites of leisure and work. Bathhouses in the old Persian district along the river were a popular draw for the average "Tifliser." German botanist Karl Koch, visiting in the late 1830s, noted workers' enthusiasm for attending baths, their hard-earned wages spent as soon as they could afford the entrance fee (Koch 1843, 322-3). Across the river, a capillary ran from the Mtkvari up the hills of Sololaki to water the Botanical Gardens nestled amidst ruins of hilltop castles. With wine shops at their entrance, the Gardens hosted parties of song, dance, and storytelling, one of many river-connected sites that encouraged European stereotypes of Tiflis Georgians as a people fond of leisure and entertainment but loathe to work (Freshfield 1869, 105; Hahn 1924, 15; Markov 1887, 311; Merzbacher 1901, 1: 956).

Religious life in Tiflis revolved around the Mtkvari. Its banks acted as a ritual site for Georgian and Armenian celebrations of Christmas and the Epiphany, a symbolic re-enactment of the Jordan River where John the Baptist purified believers (Gurchiani 2023, 26).<sup>5</sup> Koch and Alexandre Dumas wrote detailed accounts of Epiphany celebrations, which attracted people from across the region. On the day of the celebration, clerics and officials proceeded from morning mass at riverside churches to the Mtkvari's banks. The Metropolitan blessed the river's waters, dipping the altar cross and church banners into it (Dumas 2002, 328; Koch 1843, 319). "Despite the cold," wrote Dumas (2002, 328), who witnessed the ceremony in 1859, "all of Tiflis went, descending from the heights and rolling like a colorful avalanche towards the Koura." A gun salute from Tiflis' garrison marked the moment when the Metropolitan completed the blessing of the river. A loud "hurrah!" roared from the congregation. Brave congregants leapt into the icy river to absolve their sins; timid ones rode in on horseback (Dumas 2002, 328). Still larger throngs of believers rushed to the river's edge to ladle some of the blessed water and bring it home as a talisman against illness (Koch 1843, 318).

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<sup>5</sup> The Epiphany is an Orthodox celebration marking both the three Magi's visit to the infant Jesus and Jesus's baptism by John.

**Figure 1: Armenian Celebration of the Epiphany, 1901**

Original Title: Water blessing in Tiflis in 1901 on the banks of the Kur River (Tiflis, 1901)

Source: Armenian Revolutionary Federation Archives, Watertown, MA. Photographs: Box 31, Image 32

The Mtkvari's symbolism thus circulated throughout local society, spanning and enforcing ethnic divides. Georgians and Armenians collected blessed water in discrete congregations, avoiding inter-mixing (Koch 1843, 319). Armenians celebrated Epiphany mass at the Vankh cathedral, the main site of Armenian worship in Tiflis, standing in a predominantly riverside Armenian neighbourhood (Markov 1887, 331).

### **Imperial Transformation and the Mtkvari Waterscape**

The Mtkvari assumed meanings related to tsarist rule as a space to communicate imperial power. Symbols of political mythology linked to the river appeared in the decades after Russia's conquest of Eastern Georgia in 1801 and its establishment of the Caucasus Viceroyalty. In 1846, Viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov raised a large commemorative cross at the site of a state-ordained miracle on the Georgian Military Highway. Marking where Tsar Nicholas I had survived an overturned carriage while travelling at high speed during a visit to Tiflis in 1837, the cross stood along the Vere River, a Mtkvari tributary (Gurchiani 2023, 26; Jahn 2021, 182). Visible to anyone travelling into or out of Tiflis, the monument implicated the Mtkvari in imperial political pageantry. In 1871,

Tsar Alexander II received a delegation of Tiflis notables at the site of the cross, after which they celebrated mass at the Sioni Cathedral on the Mtkvari's banks (Jahn 2021, 182). As Tiflis expanded, travellers and residents encountered the cross at the city's heart (Merzbacher 1901, 1: 932). In a land where the tsarist regime staked the legitimacy of its annexation on an imagined primeval and paternalistic relationship between the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches, the cross reminded Georgia's faithful of the divine protection bestowed upon their Russian ruler.

**Figure 2: Memorial Cross and Bridge, Vera District**



Source: Alexander Engel. n.d. Accessed May 16, 2024.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander\\_Engel.\\_Cross\\_on\\_the\\_Vera\\_district.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_Engel._Cross_on_the_Vera_district.jpg).

Mountaineer Douglas Freshfield, passing through Tiflis in 1868, found the symbology of the cross wanting. He linked it to the lethargy of the tsarist government, which had failed to improve inefficient road and river transport in the region, even after its precariousness nearly killed Nicholas I. Two decades after the tsar's accident, "steep-sided gullies" and "perilous descents" still plagued the unfinished, difficult road into Tiflis, characteristic of "the usual Russian habit of leaving difficulties to the last" (Freshfield, 1869, 97–8). For decades after, the cross lorded over a river system it could not control, forcing the use of land transport—roads and eventually railways—still vulnerable to natural hazards.

Vorontsov, appointed Caucasus Viceroy in 1844, initiated significant infrastructural development to turn Tiflis into a Russian imperial capital. Government patronage spurred the construction of new theatres, banks, and libraries (Kishmishev' 1909, 3; Markov 1887, 327). Prior to his appointment, Western and Russian travellers recorded dismal impressions of the town, struggling to rebuild after the 1795 Persian sacking. A British visitor in the 1820s complained of a "horrible dungeon-impression of Asiatic dirt and barbarism" (Ker Porter 1821–2, 114). Another British diplomat a decade later asserted Tiflis as "one of the meanest and most disagreeable towns [he] ever saw," with dirty markets, dirty baths, and a dirty river (Lyall 1825, 515). Under Vorontsov, however, "Tiflis was becoming more European every year" (Markov 1887, 327). Tree-lined streets and the city's first sidewalks along the new Golovinskii Prospect (today's Rustaveli Avenue) led to state institutions. New spaces demarcated a modern European city from its 'Oriental' character. Brightly coloured Russian buildings and open-air plazas stood out from narrow dusty alleys and grey-bricked Persian-styled bazaars (Bodenstedt 1851, 1:160; Freshfield 1869, 105).

Even as Vorontsov's transformations gradually pulled the city's gravity away from the Mtkvari's riverbanks, the river remained central to Tiflis' cityscape. Just as the Mtkvari defied binaries of beautiful or dirty, calming or dangerous, it also evaded straightforward categorization as 'European' or 'Asian' in travel writers' imaginaries. Tiflis remained a grey zone, a place where the "strangest inter-weaving of East and West, Asian life and European life, takes place" (Phillipova 1910, 104). The Mtkvari wove through this aesthetic confusion, anchoring Tiflis' "picturesque disorder," tying together church domes, minarets, modern bridges, castle ruins, and a new skyline of Russian buildings (Phillipova 1910, 111). On the left bank, houses and gardens of German colonists stood out "strangely incongruous" next to the old town of sandy bazaars and caravanserais (Freshfield 1869, 105). Even these colonies, however, had an ambiguous relationship with Europeanness. A German newspaper in Tiflis reported that colonists in Alexandersdorf, on the Mtkvari's banks on Tiflis' outskirts, displayed marked ignorance of irrigation techniques. Their gardens—an ostensible hallmark of Europeanness—were "pathetically" dry and brown in summers (*Kaukasische Post* Jun. 18, 1906). *Aziatskaia Rossiia*, a tsarist guide to its conquered territories, highlighted the grey-bricked caravanserais on the Mtkvari's banks as evidence of Tiflis' Oriental qualities. Camels loaded with market wares crossed bridges to bazaars echoing with the "vile cry of thousands of Asiatic crowds" (Phillipova 1910, 104–7). Vorontsov's development of Tiflis away from the river's banks, now increasingly steeped in Orientalist tropes, accented the spatial character of the city's "Europeanization."

The budding greenery of new gardens—sometimes inaccurately characterized as a novel European transplantation without local antecedents (Leist 1903, 54)—fired the European imagination over the beauty to be unearthed in Tiflis. Explorer Gottfried Merzbacher claimed German colonists' green gardens "stood out like an oasis in the middle of a pale-yellow, sun-scorched alluvial plain," a village of high red-brick gable houses "gaily surrounded by a belt of green fields and fruit orchards" (Merzbacher 1901, 1: 931–2). Christopher Ely (2002, 87) argues that nineteenth-century European travel writers in the Russian Empire sought to reveal the picturesque, judging that while the Russian landscape was inferior in external beauty to the rest of Europe, it might be superior in hidden beauty. The Mtkvari, at the centre of Russian artistic portrayals of Tiflis and its verdant landscape, could unlock the city's picturesque potential as part of the empire. The river's capillaries were tools in this quest. Jahn (2014, 176) notes Vorontsov's urban reconstruction efforts aimed to "enhance the fertile nature of Georgia through the establishment of gardens and vineyards"

watered by the Mtkvari. One German visitor to 1840s Tiflis viewed the magnificent gardens at the Viceroy's residence as a symbol of what could be achieved in Tiflis when "Asiatic luxuriousness" was "managed by a European hand" (Bodenstedt 1851, 1:160). By the turn of the twentieth century, the city began tending to and maintaining lush patches of wild vegetation sprouting out of riverside ravines, which provided city residents with fruit and a space to picnic (Gurchiani 2023, 26; Merzbacher 1901, 1: 937-8).

The Caucasus administration and Tiflis elites began fundraising for a monument to Vorontsov following his passing in 1856. Such a tribute, the official newspaper *Kavkaz* reported, would be a "big step towards Europe" (Jahn 2014, 168). Completed in 1867, a statue of Vorontsov was placed at the end of the Mikhailov Bridge commissioned by him, overlooking the Mtkvari. Georgia's first secular monument developed as a subject and symbol of local literature and the press, which evoked its riverine setting. A military officer's poem for the official opening ceremony ran: "And in hallowed greeting to it [the monument], roars excitedly the Kura" (Jahn 2014, 175). Writer Vladimir Sollogub toasted "the monumental, unwavering bronze man towering over the roaring Kura" (Jahn 2014, 180). Even as Vorontsov moved the development of Tiflis away from the Mtkvari, his rule and its memory marked the riverscape.

The grandiose statue concealed challenges, and largely failures, in using the Mtkvari as an economic transport channel. Mid-century imperial bureaucrats were convinced they could unlock the region's economic potential through rivers. The Mtkvari would nourish prized export crops to be shipped to Russia and beyond (Bryce 1878, 160; *Zapisky Kazkavskogo Otdela Imperatorskogo Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva* 1852). The river's capricious nature soon became clear, however. Changing rapids, fluctuating shallows, and periodic flooding frustrated ambitions for commercial shipping. The Mtkvari's many unnavigable points forced long overland treks. Steamships, sitting higher in the water, offered new hope. In its inaugural year of 1853, *Kavkaz* (Jan. 21) hailed the arrival of steamships to the Mtkvari as "a new era in trade in this far-flung region." Vessels such as the steamship *Orthodox Russia* could transport goods 260 kilometres between Tiflis and Mingechaur (Mingecevir, in today's Azerbaijan). Steam trade broadened possibilities, but the Mtkvari remained a waterway unable to take goods sea-to-sea. The railroad's arrival to the region in the 1870s pivoted tsarist investment in regional economic development, which had been waning away from rivers.

Even as grandiose imperial visions foundered, the Mtkvari played a central role in the local economy. Georgians had long used the river for trade. Merchants loaded goods from watermelons to fish and caviar in sailboats from as far as the Caspian Sea, often offloading them just before Tiflis city limits to avoid duties (Anchabadze and Volkova 1990, 156). Within Tiflis, the Mtkvari's current turned large wheels, buoyed in place by two separate boats, along an axle to rotate hefty millstones that sawed timber or ground flour (Suny 2009, 30). All species of wood from Caucasian forests lay along docking sites, feeding the thirty-three active sawmills, as massive log booms floated downstream from forest and mountain areas (Freshfield 1869, 106; Merzbacher 1901, 1: 931-2, 951). Riverside mills became an urban icon, appearing on postcards to mark Tiflis' uniqueness in the empire. Entrepreneurial peasants, with foodstuffs, locally produced goods, and even livestock in tow, darted downstream in one or two-person rafts to the bazaars of Gori, Mtskheta, and Tiflis. The advent of railway travel made this enterprise even more profitable—peasants could sell the timber that composed the raft and return home on the train with a pocketful of cash (Markov 1887, 124). The river generated urban and regional everyday economic activities.

### Drinking from the Mtkvari

Tbilisi's topography created a unique relationship between river and city in meeting residents' daily needs. Sharp banks and a strong current complicated efforts to draw water from the Mtkvari. Alexander Pushkin's (1974, 42) remark that the river's "cloudy but delicious" water nourished the city in 1829 remained true decades later. British officer J. Buchan Telfer (1876, 1: 175) wrote: "The Kura is the only source supplying the city with water, and notwithstanding its polluted state, the Georgians have what may indeed be called a religious liking for it." Only a wealthy few relied on springs or wells (Anchabadze and Volkova 1990). For the rest, water had to be transported upwards from the Mtkvari through narrow, winding streets. Pathways were often dusty and dirty, and in the poorer neighbourhoods could be filled with insects surrounding manure and other waste (Kardava 2013, 64). Knowledge was also required to draw potable supplies. Pooled river water, though easier to pour into buckets, might carry disease. *Iveria* (Mar. 24, 1877) noted that hundreds died of typhus annually in the 1870s, blaming the city for being unable to ensure safe water supplies.

*Metulukcheebi* (water-carriers) plied the riverbanks to meet these challenges. Named for the sheepskin sack (*tuluk*) they draped over horses and mules or carried themselves from riverbanks to all points of Tbilisi, *metulukcheebi* formed a critical part of the urban landscape. They numbered approximately 200 in 1879 (Gersamia 1984, 64), and their ubiquitous presence along the river and on city streets attracted the attention of travel writers. Evgeni Markov (1887, 322), who visited Tbilisi in the mid-1880s, noted:

Water carriers carry a heavy service. They have a thick leather lining on their backs, as on the sides of the horses. They draw water deep down from the Kura, across the cliffs of the bank, into huge stone jugs or, rather, barrels, fasten them with wide straps, one on the back, the other on the shoulder, and then climb with a slow step up some narrow, slippery and crumbling passage...It is pitiable to watch how painfully they make their ascent along this thorny path with full jugs... On the same steep slope of the coast or at its foot, [they were] breathing heavily, barefoot, tanned, darker than any bronze, spreading directly under the sun, right on hot stones.

Donkeys or horses might carry a dozen barrels at once to transport to city residents in this arduous enterprise.

**Figure 3: Metulukcheebi (Tulukchi or Water-Carriers) on the Mtkvari's Banks**

Source: Dmitri Yermakov. n.d. Accessed May 16, 2024.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11352176>.

Tiflis' municipal authorities sought to regulate this essential service, setting a price of 15 kopecks per barrel for water delivery. This rate was frequently breached. Prices more than doubled when water levels made drawing water too difficult for ordinary citizens (Anchabadze and Volkova, 1990, 69). The Mtkvari's strong current always threatened to sweep away those who stumbled in; *metulukcheebi* themselves drowned. On March 30, 1887, a crowd on the Avlabari bridge witnessed two *metulukcheebi* being carried away, along with barrels and horses (*Tiflisskii Listok*, (TL) Mar. 31, 1887). Prices dropped when the river froze, and residents could drag blocks of ice up the streets themselves using ropes and animals (Anchabadze and Volkova 1990, 69).

To improve the city's drinking water supply, Tbilisi's municipal administration designed an urban water piping system (*vodoprovod*) in the 1880s. An interest-free loan from St. Petersburg allowed the purchase of equipment (sakartvelos tsent'raluri saist'orio arkivi [Central Historical Archive of the Republic of Georgia] (stssa) pody/fond (p) 192 anats/opis (an) 7 sakme/del (sak) 76). Engineers began in the city centre with twin piping to deliver freshwater and remove wastewater. The Mtkvari would be the ultimate source and destination. Water was drawn upstream at Avchala

and delivered through a mechanical pumping and aqueduct system to the city (*TL* Jan. 11, 1887). As pipes appeared on streets in January 1887, residents became aware of the system's imminent arrival. One basement flat for rent on Golovinskii Prospekt advertised its attachment to the water supply (*TL* Feb. 10, 1887). Installation, however, was fraught from the start. Complaints abounded about animals—and inebriated or unaware residents—falling into holes where pipes were being installed. Those who received the first water found its taste unpleasant, like iron. Rust from the pipes coloured the teeth (*Iveria* Sep. 13, 1887). Errors in designing and laying the pipes led to drinking and wastewater pipes being interlinked. One resident reported seeing worms come from his taps (*TL* Sep. 30, 1887).

*Metulukcheebi* considered this new system a direct threat to their livelihoods, even given its rough rollout. On September 13, 1887, the municipal administration declared its central water supply functional and ordered the closing of some river access points used by *metulukcheebi* and residents alike. The city's decision sparked the first of multiple labour actions by the water-carriers. Closure of access points would substantially affect their work. The expenses of extra travel, they claimed, would reduce their daily take from 2–3 rubles to 50–70 kopecks (*TL* Sep. 16, 1887).

The *metulukcheebi* work stoppage overlapped with continued discord over the water supply rollout. By the fall of 1887, only a few neighbourhoods received piped water and those that did still preferred river water (*Iveria* Sep. 18, 1887). A crowd descended on the municipal administration building to demand better service for water delivery. *Tiflisskii Listok* (Sep. 18, 1887) reported that *metulukcheebi* strike-breakers were charging “ridiculously” high prices to deliver water, forcing residents in Tbilisi's hill districts to beg. The city opened new water-collection points that it claimed city residents could safely use. The locations, however, were near institutions such as the city hospital, which discharged wastewater directly into the river (*TL* Sep. 29, 1887). The Mtkvari's role as a dumping ground—*dvorniks* [groundskeepers] collected waste from yards and streets for a fee and tossed it into the river (Kardava 2013, 66)—further complicated efforts to find potable water. The Adelkhanovs, a prominent Armenian business and political family, built leather and shoe factories along the river, where it would be easier to deposit waste (Kardava 2013, 67). By mid-October, the city acquiesced to a higher fixed rate for water delivery, and the *metulukcheebi* returned to work (Anchabadze and Volkova 1990, 108).

Another strike erupted in June 1893, when the municipal administration raised the per-barrel tax on water from the Mtkvari. Tiflis allowed the drawing of water for personal use at no charge; *metulukcheebi* and others who sold water had to purchase city stamps. *Metulukcheebi* petitioned the city, claiming the rising price of barley for their animals following massive floods had already minimized profit margins. City officials took a hard line, announcing that the strike would be considered illegal. On June 7, the Tiflis police chief arrested 25 *metulukcheebi*. Others returned to work on the promise that the next city assembly session would reconsider rates for water as well as tax rates on their animals (*Kavkaz* June 11, 1893). The municipal administration sought to prevent future strikes by creating a watercarrier cartel, with privileged access to prime water-collection points on the Mtkvari. One particular individual, M. Bozhoev, received a concession to set rates and would be guaranteed a profit. Arrested *metulukcheebi* were banished from Tiflis (*Iveria* June 17, 1893). The city again opened water-collection points, which were, ostensibly, more accessible to the “most impoverished part of the city's population” not yet linked to the municipal water supply. *Kavkaz* (June 16, 1893) noted that “with the proximity of the taps, it will be possible, with the help of manual labour, to completely avoid the need to turn to water-carriers.”

*Metulukcheebi* nevertheless constituted an indispensable part of Tiflis' landscape through the revolutionary period. It took over a decade to connect the city centre to water pumped from the Mtkvari via the Avchala aqueduct (Kardava 2013, 67). Complaints about the slow pace and poor quality of construction proliferated in the local press. *Iveria* reported on an extraordinary Duma meeting to address resident anger regarding the water supply on May 17, 1903. The primary challenge was the lack of new water sources; the aqueduct was incapable of serving the whole city. The next decade witnessed multiple efforts to locate springs to provide water to outlying neighbourhoods (Charkviani 1975, 28). Communities and enterprises took the initiative to access reliable water supplies. One 1903 petition to the Caucasus Water Inspectorate featured a request to withdraw 50,000 barrels of water daily from the Mtkvari to supply gardens and dachas on the city's outskirts. Residents of the Nakhalovka neighbourhood gained approval to initiate their own water supply construction (stssa p. 365, an. 1, sak. 313, purtseli/list (pur,) 6.). *Sakhalko Gazeti* (Aug. 5, 1910) reported that residents in outlying areas by the early twentieth century considered piped water safer than that coming from wells, which could be contaminated by disease. Upriver on the Mtkvari, children were dying of water-borne diseases in the prosperous German colony of Katherinenfeld (*Kaukasische Post*, Jul. 23, 1906). Efforts to find a major source beyond the Mtkvari eluded municipal engineers in the years preceding World War I (*Sakhalko Gazeti* Jun. 10, 1912; *Kavkaz*, May 8, 1913). Sporadic and limited water supply marked Tiflis through the revolution. By 1921, 42 percent of villagers outside the city centre lacked piped water (Kardava 2013, 64).

### **The Mtkvari, Urban Hierarchies, and Daily Life**

The Mtkvari played a central role in the social and cultural panorama of Tiflis. It alternately reflected, exacerbated, and challenged social hierarchies. Rich and poor might interact differently with the river but could not avoid its singular importance and unpredictable nature. The Mtkvari required constant crossing, by bridge or boat, for business and leisure. Its cooling action allowed relief from spring and summer heat. Wealthy residents profited from aeration by building large terraces facing the river—an architectural feature that remains characteristic of Tbilisi today (Goncalves, Asinadze, and Pinto 2016, 25).

Lack of building space along riverbanks and tsarist development projects shifted elite districts away from the Mtkvari in the nineteenth century. Imperial construction patterns of large boulevards, primarily Golovinskii Prospekt, altered the interaction of Tbilisi's newer wealthy classes with the river. Unlike pre-tsarist elites, who largely remained in the city through the summer's blistering heat, tsarist upper classes abandoned Tiflis for cooler, but still riverine, retreats. In so doing, they imitated patterns across the colonial world. Hill stations in British India, far above cities that sweltered in the summer, created a trans-imperial model to escape the heat and contact with colonized peoples and recharge "Europeanness" (Kennedy 1996). Markov (1887, 311) wrote that "the rich retire to the cool heights of heaven, to high mountains, to shady forests, to heavenly dachas abundant with sweet fruits..." The exodus started in late May. Wealthy Tiflis denizens sought not only to relax and improve their health but also to find suitable mates for their children in elite playgrounds (*TL* Jun. 2, 1887).

The Mtkvari lent its aesthetic value to these retreats. Arthur Leist (1903, 11) recalled summer getaways where "the countryside attains an even higher charm on moonlit nights, when the wavy

surface of the Kur shimmers like silver.” The Mtkvari’s “charming oasis,” von Thielmann (1875, 145) wrote, centred life in an ethnic German village, Chertwiss, used as a summer “escape.” Picturesque riverine castle ruins and gardens permitted leisurely strolls on the hottest summer days. Ostensible Western mastery over water in bath and spa retreats made liveable an ‘Oriental’ environment that was otherwise “unsuitable for long-term European residence” (Abich 1896, 2: 268; Merzbacher 1901, 1: 957).

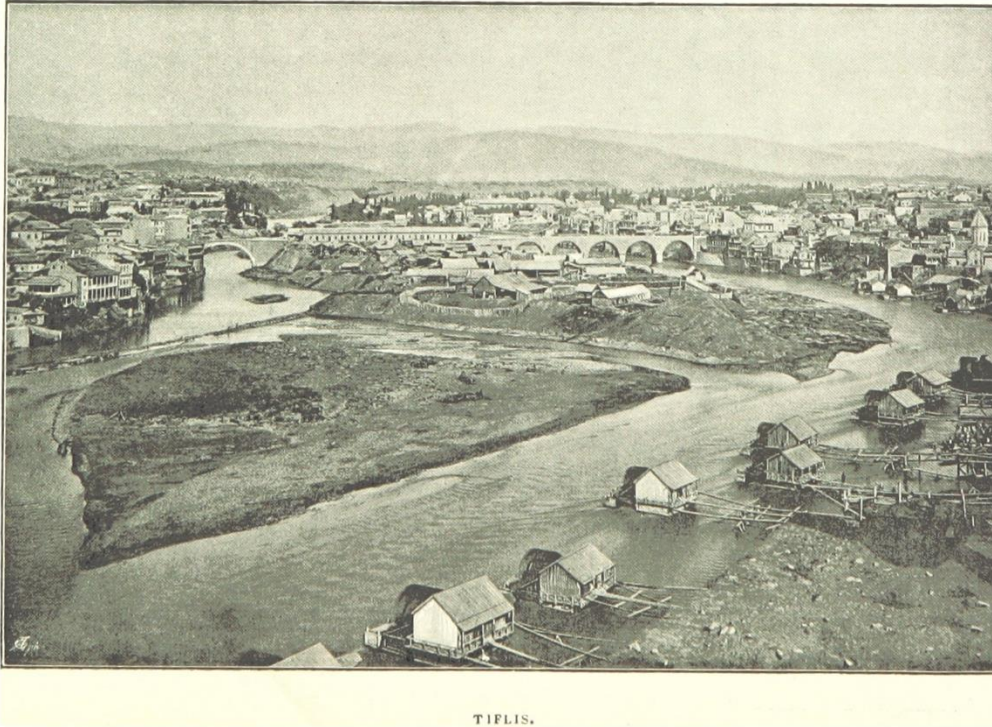
Borjomi, upriver and nestled in a gorge, emerged as the favoured getaway for imperial leaders. British historian James Bryce (1878, 345) called it the “most fashionable” escape, and it became known as the ‘summer capital’ of the Caucasus. Medicinal springs dotted hills and valleys, with an environment that purportedly prevented fevers. Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich Romanov constructed a summer home across the Mtkvari from Borjomi’s main settlement. A stone bridge reminiscent of those left by the Romans traversed the river (von Thielmann 1875, 38). Summer residents thought “joyfully about endless galleries of pine trees, full of coolness and green twilight, [compared] to those condemned to languish on the merciless scorching pavements of Tiflis...” (Markov 1878, 311).

Summer escapes along the Mtkvari and the pulling of elites away from its banks intertwined with images of the river as a place for the poor in turn-of-the-century Tiflis. Tiflis’ largest imperial-era riverside neighbourhood, named for differing perceptions of its riverbank—Riqe (small stones) in Georgian or Peski (sands) in Russian—hosted a diverse underclass. Molokans (largely Slavic religious sectarians) joined Georgians, Russians, Turks, Persians, and other Caucasus peoples (stssa p. 192, an. 4, sak. 72, pur. 120). On a flat section of the Mtkvari’s right bank near the city centre, Riqe was populated by porters, carriage drivers, fishers, manual workers, and small traders. Livestock yards dotted the neighbourhood along with small squares and one- or two-level houses. Workers without accommodation established temporary “hostels” in district squares (*TL* Jul. 15, 1887). By the 1880s, Riqe’s disarray became a regular topic in Russian-language newspapers. *Tiflisskii Listok* (May 19, 1887) wrote that sanitation in the courtyards of the area’s inns, where carriage drivers stayed, was “in a horrible state.” Animal waste filtered to neighbouring yards through rain, threatening epidemic diseases. Residents dumped refuse at the same places where *metulukchebi* gathered water. In summer, Dessimonov square, the district’s centre, presented a “disgusting picture.” As manure decomposed and stank, “billions” of flies and other airborne insects swarmed the main market, bothering sellers of fruits, vegetables, and fish. The city bore responsibility for failing to provide adequate sanitary services, such as sweepers or wheelbarrows, to remove waste (*TL* June 14, 1887). Dirty streets produced dust storms or led to massive puddles, which attracted disease-bearing mosquitoes.

Riqe’s location placed it in the direct path of frequent floods, which will be detailed below. Districts threatened by flooding, however, implicated wealthy as well as poor residents. If the Mtkvari’s banks were seen as dominated by the underprivileged, its islands remained playgrounds for the wealthy. Madatov and Ortachala Islands were important features of Tiflis’ cityscape. Fruit, vegetable, and spice orchards provided sustenance and flavour. Donkeys and horses stationed on the islands delivered goods citywide throughout long growing seasons. Madatov hosted live entertainment, including a sophisticated animal show. Early in the morning, organ music greeted travellers who traversed or gathered on Mikhailov Bridge, directing them to a spectacle held twelve times daily. Spectators witnessed a costumed elephant lunching, trained dogs and monkeys performing pirouettes and somersaults on horses, and talking (and swearing) parrots (*TL* Jan 10,

1887). The show's owner, G. Fets', sought to ingratiate himself with Tiflis' educated public by pledging half the show's profits to an animal protection society (*TL* Feb. 8, 1887).

**Figure 4: Madatov Island and Mikhailov Bridge**



Source: George Kennan. 1893. Accessed May 16, 2024.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AR\(1893\)\\_p318\\_TIFLIS.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AR(1893)_p318_TIFLIS.jpg).

Ortachala hosted orchards and vineyards, whose ownership passed between noble families and constituted a long-time local getaway from the summer heat. Pushkin encountered musicians, singers, dancers, and “Asian tribesmen” in a garden lit with candles on tree branches. His hosts provided games in addition to music for a fulfilling evening (Kardava 2013, 195). The island—and the boats that ran from it, sailing along the Mtkvari—were prime feasting sites, with the freshest orchard foods accompanied by diverse entertainment (Manning 2019). Among restaurants and inns, multiple brothels beckoned (Kardava 2013, 196). Ortachala maintained its prestige even as tsarist building projects focused inland on main boulevards.

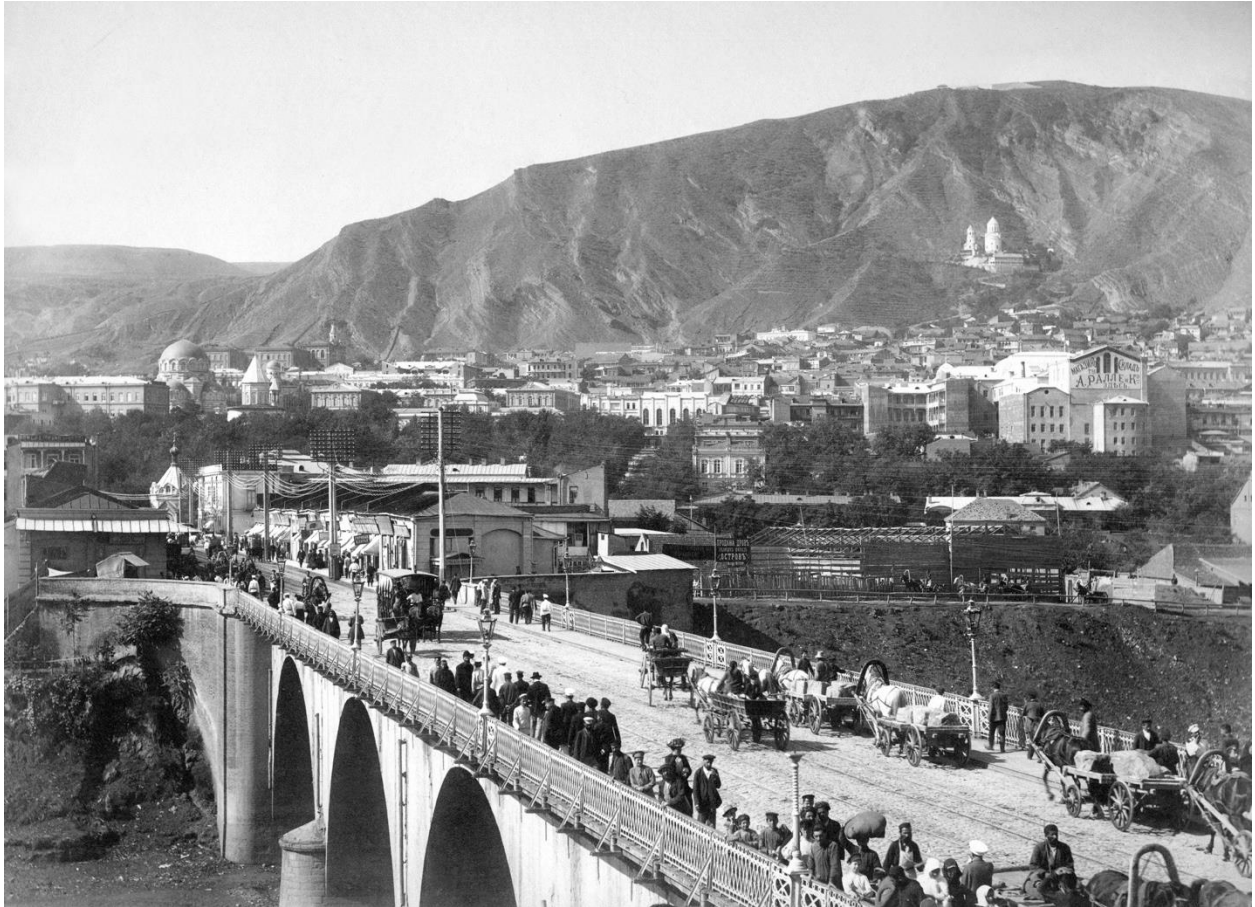
Fishing was a popular pastime and a staple of riverbank eating establishments. The Mtkvari held khramul, pikeperch, trout, barbels, and catfish (Eriksen 1892, 21). A Caucasus branch of the Imperial Russian Society of Fishing and Fish-Farming met regularly, but most residents simply noticed the many lines cast from riverbanks and low bridges into the water (*Kavkaz* Apr. 30, 1896). Fishers, who also used nets, took their catches in buckets to sell to nearby restaurants or passers-by. Fish constituted a beloved part of the local Armenian diet.

Tiflis' riverbanks, on the islands or main shore, served as leisure hubs, including multiple taverns. Boxing was a central attraction. Teams were divided by neighbourhoods, often pitting one side of the Mtkvari against the other (Kardava 2013, 188). Fights started with boys, then advanced in age. Inexperienced boxers would be the 'undercard' before each neighbourhood's best fighters. Fights could be vicious, especially 'stone boxing,' where opponents used wooden sticks or brick fragments. Fighters with broken noses, jaws, or worse washed off blood and tended to their wounds in the river.

The riverbank was a contested territory along multiple axes. On the Mtkvari's left bank, swimmers launched rafts and dove into the water, given the lack of comfortable beaches. The shore and river were not only used by swimmers, however. One newspaper article recounted soldiers bringing their animals to drink and allowing them to bathe in the water. Parents were disgusted by the soldiers' foul language and behaviour. One who protested was treated by "rude antics" but could not locate a police officer to complain (*TL* July 18. 1887).

A bridge-building spree in late imperial Tiflis typified the government's reticence towards riverine development. Private initiative underwrote the construction of cross-river linkages. Garden owners on Ortachal Island invested in a new bridge to increase foot traffic and revenue (*TL* May 3, 1887). Tiflis's Armenian community financed a permanent bridge over the Mtkvari, where its church annually celebrated the Epiphany, after a temporary one collapsed during the 1892 celebration, killing fifty (*Kavkaz* June 13, 1893). Bridges played crucial roles in the city's economic life, lined with stores that took advantage of heavy foot traffic and city residents who used them as entertainment. As *Kavkaz Zhurnal* wrote in 1888 (no 177): "Often we witness how a dense mass of every possible class of the public besieges the railing of the Mikhailov bridge, to see what is going on with the Kura. In some cases, they see a horse or a water buffalo swimming; in others, their attention is drawn to boats, which are unusual on the fast-flowing river, but in most cases, they see bathers or swimmers" (cited in Anchabadze and Volkova 1990, 205).

**Figure 5: Mikhailov Bridge**



Source: Dmitri Yermakov. n.d. Accessed May 16, 2024.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tbilisi\\_XIXc\\_03.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tbilisi_XIXc_03.jpg).

**Figure 6: Avlabari Bridge**

Source: Dmitri Yermakov. n.d. Accessed May 16, 2024.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ermakov.\\_Tbilisi.\\_653751.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ermakov._Tbilisi._653751.jpg).

### Swimming in the Mtkvari

Besides leisure and entertainment, the Mtkvari presented danger. Drownings proliferated in its strong currents and whirlpools, particularly in summer months when swimming was a popular pastime for those who lacked the means or desire to leave Tiflis. Children and teenagers were frequent victims. *Tiflisskii Listok* (Jul. 10, 1887) wrote: “Daily a massive amount of the city’s children, starting from the youngest age, can be seen, with no supervision or restrictions, on the banks of the Kura. Daredevils seek to swim across the river and many stay in the water for a long time. It’s true that these young swimmers can well enough navigate the underwater rocks, water mills and whirlpools. But this does not always end well and some easily drown. Similar numbers of cases occur annually and will keep occurring without better supervision.” Quality swimming pools (*kupalnykh*), where residents might safely avoid the summer heat, were absent in densely populated neighbourhoods. *Iveria* (May 21, 1903) wrote: “soon it will be sunny and working people will come to Mtkvari to bathe. Unfortunately, there is no swimming pool in the city and because of this many swimmers die every year.”

Drownings dominated summer news reports throughout the tsarist period, from establishment newspapers in Russian and Georgian to more popular ones such as *Tiflisskaia Gazeta Kopeika* and *Sakhalko Gazeti*. Individual cases were reported in detail. In one *Tiflisskaia Gazeta Kopeika* (Jul. 17, 1910) story, a young swimmer near Mikhailov Bridge was sucked into the water mid-afternoon. He swam bravely to the mill of M. Tamamshev. Observers rushed to have the miller stop his wheel; Tamamshev ordered his workers to save the boy, who was pulled out unconscious but recovered. The frequency of accidental drownings prompted the establishment of a branch of the Imperial Russian Society of Water Safety in the 1880s, with one boat patrolling the river (*Iveria* Apr. 12, 1893). Adults who drowned were frequently reported as inebriated. On Aug. 29, 1910, Dateb Matiashvili, a cobbler, spontaneously decided to jump into the Mtkvari, was swept into a deep part of the river, and seemingly perished (*Tiflisskaia Gazeta Kopeika* Sep. 1, 1910).

As a liminal space exposing city life to the Mtkvari's manifold dangers, riverbanks assumed a macabre character as a place where bodies could be discovered. Tabloidesque reporting in Tiflis' German newspaper speculated over whether a German resident and his Georgian friend, who went out fishing late one evening and whose bodies were later discovered on a Mtkvari island, had drowned or been murdered (*Kaukasische Post* Oct. 15, 1906). In a more clear-cut case upstream at Borjomi, locals fished the body of a well-known robber out of the river with a bullet wound to the chest (*Kaukasische Post* Sep. 24, 1906). Others might be drawing water from the river or simply walking along its bank, lose their balance, and drown. On April 29, 1913, two coachmen, Iosif Zukakishvili and Pavel Shioshvili, brought their horse and carriage to the riverbank near Vera Bridge. A sudden current dragged the cart, animal, and drivers into the river. Zukakashvili swam ashore, but Shioshvili drowned (*Kavkaz* May 1, 1913).

Drownings affected the wealthiest—though these appeared to occur away from the city center. On June 2, 1913, P.G. Ivanov, the director of the Caucasus Silk Station, took his family for a riverside picnic on Tiflis' outskirts. As the picnickers set up their fishing rods, a surge swept away Ivanov's sons, Peter, aged nine, and Giorgii, thirteen. Along with the men who jumped in to save them was sixteen-year-old Iraida, the daughter of A.V. Mulin, deputy head of the Caucasus Migration Board. Iraida, a gymnast, launched herself into the river's "dark waves" (*Kavkaz* Jun. 5, 1913). Piotr and Giorgii were saved; Iraida, however, fared badly and, despite the party's efforts, was carried away by the current. Her body washed ashore on a small island near the Saburtalo district. The parents' mood, according to *Kavkaz*, "defied description." Later that summer, after decades of demands for city action on river safety, which, *Iveria* (May 21, 1903) wrote, always met with a "deaf ear," Tiflis' acting deputy policeman, G.V. Levashov, led a commission that included the Society of Water Safety to develop a system of flags to display safe places to swim on the Mtkvari—at least those without the whirlpools and steep drops that caused many drownings (*Kavkaz* July 18, 1913).

## Floods

On May 3, 1893, *Iveria* reported flooding on Tiflis' islands—a virtually annual spring rite. In subsequent days, heavy rains and a strong melt produced an unusually high and strong river flow upstream. As storms hit Tbilisi, police officers notified Riqe residents of potential danger and advised them to consider leaving; few, however, did so (*Kavkaz* May 21, 1893). Rain in eastern Georgia strengthened on May 10, raising the Mtkvari's level by one meter. Overnight on May 12, this swell arrived in Tiflis, accompanied by a major rainstorm. Water overflowed the Riqe district.

Dessimonov Square was under 1.5 meters of water by two in the morning. Residents evacuated the district by boat to other parts of Tiflis. The Water Rescue Society's vessel removed people from houses that were taking on water, which overflowed shops, stores, churches, and Arbuz Square (*TL* May 14, 1893). Police and fire officials arrived to awaken residents and order them from their homes. A sapper brigade worked to fix a pontoon bridge across Dessimonov Square so people could safely leave lower-lying areas.

This flood's generational impact soon became apparent. *Kavkaz* (May 14, 1893) wrote: "in the terrifying strength and disastrous aftermath of the storm even older residents could not recall the like, even if flooding that might destroy houses and carry away property is almost an annual occurrence." Water roared over islands and riverbanks, flooding Ortachala's orchards and ripping away its wooden bridge to the mainland. Gardeners climbed trees and strapped themselves with rope to survive the night. The current tore valuable log booms from their moorings at Vera Bridge and washed them downriver (*Kavkaz*, May 14, 1893). Flooding reached gardens and orchards in Vera as well as the basements and lower floors of major streets. Water climbed low-lying streets and then cascaded downwards, destroying stone walls. Police stopped people from crossing the Avlabari and other low-lying bridges as they risked being engulfed by rising waters—gigantic whirlpools could be seen from above (*TL* May 14, 1893).

By morning, Riqe's one-story structures were demolished, and two-story ones effectively shorn in half. As the rain subsided, retreating water destroyed more buildings, whose foundations were encased in silt and sand. Streets were rendered impassable (*Iveria* May 15, 1893). Riverside flour and timber mills were ruined. Warehouses on Tbilisi's islands or riverbanks, with substantial stores of flour, barley, fish, and other goods, were washed away, along with buildings of riverside caravanserais. Animals perished by the thousands. Traders would shelter cart animals by the riverbanks, and animals took goods from islands into the city. Pigs held for slaughter were kept in riverside pens—over two thousand were lost in the floods. One observer reported hearing the "roar" of cattle in Riqe as they were swept into the water (*Kavkaz* May 21, 1893). *Kavkaz* (May 15, 1893) noted the effect on Tbilisi's population, quoting one eyewitness: What a terrible, grandiose spectacle the Kura presents. Its dirty, heavy waves roll with dizzying speed, destroying and absorbing everything in its path. Roofs of houses, uprooted trees, logs, boards, household items and animal corpses float on its surface, as if testifying to the victory of the enraged element over all else. Like an enraged sea, the river rumbles, boils and foams about the foundations of bridges, as if trying to conquer them with its all-destroying power.

Tbilisi municipal officials and residents took to boats to throw bread to those trapped on the upper floors of Riqe's buildings. Private fishing vessels transformed into water taxis (*Kavkaz* May 14, 1893). Ironically, damage to the Avchal pumping station led officials to warn of a water shortage in the city in the coming weeks.

Human loss of life was unclear. *Kavkaz* (May 14, 1893) reported that "one native" (*kakoi-to tuzemtsev*) drowned, ostensibly while trying to corral logs. As the current eased, boats launched downstream to capture valuable goods left floating in the water. A later article speculated on deaths at the Zubalov caravanserai (*Kavkaz* May 16, 1893). Every day, buildings were collapsing and sinkholes opening (*Iveria* May 20, 1893). One unfortunate individual was reported killed in

flooding at the Wetzel brewery on the left bank (*Kavkaz* May 21, 1893). Worries mounted over a potential typhus outbreak from pooled water, as had happened following a lesser flood in 1881.

**Figure 7: Riqe district and Water Mills after 1893 Floods**

Source: Dmitri Yermakov. 1893. Accessed May 16, 2024.  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3009317>.

The storm's chaos prompted calls for Tiflis' government to consider fundamental changes to mitigate flood damage. *Iveria* (May 13, 1893) asked: "will the building of a solid embankment like that of St. Petersburg cost any more than the abundant tribute that the Mtkvari collects yearly from Tplisi residents?" Palliative measures were no longer sufficient. Total losses from the 1893 flood were estimated at 400,000 rubles (stssa p. 192, an. 4, sak. 66, pur. 215). Popular fascination with the river's power grew, however. Flood images captured by renowned photographer Dmitrii Ermakov went on display at local stores on central shopping streets. Duma discussions in coming weeks were strangely sanguine, focused mostly on repairing damaged bridges (stssa p. 192, an. 4, sak. 66, pur. 212–230).

Flooding again plagued Tbilisi in 1896. The city endured a month of floods, with four surges. Total damage surpassed 1893. Its first hint came on April 21, as residents witnessed huge trees, shorn from their roots upstream, floating atop a roaring Mtkvari. Mills secured their connections to the shore, and islands flooded as the city banned boat traffic. Tiflis avoided the worst of this wave, which struck Gori hardest. A provisional committee headed by Princess Maria Aleksandrovna Shervashidze gathered donations for flood victims. A charity performance of the vaudeville show

“When he knew” (*Kogda-b on znal*) was staged at the state theatre on April 27 (*Kavkaz* Apr. 24, 1896).

Heavy rain triggered a second surge a week later. Flooding hit hay barns and livestock pens as well as basements. Police led carriages, wagons, and animals to higher ground. Northern Madatov Island was underwater, as were Ortachala gardens (*Iveria* May 5, 1896). *Tiflisskii Listok* (May 7, 1896) wrote: “It is impossible to describe how much grief and loss the flood caused to the Peskovites [Riqe residents], which are a poor class of the population, generally performing physical labour and producing crafts.” Police Chief M.I. Tamashev protested to the city Duma that small credits proposed for more rescue boats were insufficient. Major capital investments were needed to mitigate losses after two major events in four years. Duma members were unmoved, leaving *Tiflisskii Listok* (May 7, 1896) to report that the “population [is] doomed to the loss of their property, illness, and so on; the hardships to endure when found out in the open, in pouring rain, in the middle of the street.” Regional flooding cut rail and road lines, isolating Tiflis from mail and supply deliveries. Damage to telegraph lines complicated communication (*Kavkaz* May 5, 1896),

The third bout of flooding hit Tiflis on May 11, with a current so sudden and powerful that it swept away rescue boats and tore children from homes. Mothers desperately sought them in the water where barrels and other detritus floated (*Kavkaz* May 12, 1896). Tiflis residents trapped near the river climbed to the tops of mills in the hope that their fastenings to the shore would hold. People watching from terraces of wealthy riverside homes witnessed one teenager carried away by the current and drown. Horses were spotted swimming in flooded squares citywide. *Iveria* (May 12, 1893) reported: “The raging Mtkvari...destroyed the planks of sawmills, many trees and forest material and small huts where workers sheltered goods.” Water reached the theatre district and flooded caravanserais that had survived 1893. Ortachala Island flooding promoted speculation that it would never rebound as a summer playground. Military fortifications and a disinfection chamber on Madatov Island were underwater. A subsequent surge washed away shoreline worker barracks; at least one man lost his life (*TL* May 18, 1896).

The month of flooding was unprecedented in city history, wrote *Kavkaz* (May 24, 1896). The loss of warehouses and island orchards significantly affected food prices. On May 24, the city Duma commissioned an inquiry into the floods, led by member Melikh-Nubarov (stssa p. 192, an. 4, sak. 72, pur. 120). In a contentious session, one member recounted seeing a youngster cry out in vain for 20 minutes after being caught in the current and passing under Avlabari Bridge, which was crowded with people watching the spectacle. The only rescue boat (essentially a vessel with a long strong rope) was helping to rescue property at Riqe; consequently, the man drowned. Other Duma members contested whether a boat rescue would have been feasible given the current’s strength before the debate moved to which concrete measures might be taken to prevent repeats of highly predictable occurrences.

Duma head A.A. Ivanov declared that the city administration was designing a plan for embankments to protect Riqe. Others demanded a broader strategy beyond payments to help Riqe residents once again rebuild their lives (stssa p. 192, an. 4, sak. 72, pur. 212ob). The Duma unanimously voted for the commission to study permanent solutions and immediately distribute 1,000 rubles to Riqe residents as well as open a charitable drive while considering appropriate total compensation.

Three days after the Duma meeting, another major flood occurred. Tables and chairs set for Vera Park restaurants deemed sufficiently far from the banks were swept away. Linen and silverware bobbed in the river. A stone embankment, built days before by a sapper battalion readying a pontoon bridge should others be washed away, was itself destroyed. A later Duma debate acknowledged the month of destruction:

The losses of the Peski [Riqe] people are already well known. The entire site has become an impromptu Venice, with home-grown gondoliers taking people in boats on flooded streets for 20 kopecks. Never has the water splashed onto the roadway of the Avlabari bridge. Cleanup will take months. On July 8 Babov announced that his commission's work was ongoing and Peski residents were justifiably complaining about the time it is taking to move sand and silt from houses and streets. (stssa p. 192, an. 4., sak. 72, pur. 194ob)

A July 3 Duma meeting agreed to spend 33,000 rubles to strengthen riverbank protection, but the focus was on the upstream Avchala district. Damage there had halted the piped water supply to Tiflis. Expenses were approved with nary a word about Riqe residents, who were expected now to rely on private charity (stssa p. 192, an. 4, sak. 72, pur. 247).

### **An Incomplete Evolution**

As debates about the river's danger escalated, the Mtkvari remained critical to modernizing the imperial capital of the Caucasus. The 1890s floods highlighted that dirt roads still proliferated in Tiflis, with not much changing outside the centre of a city characterized as an "impenetrable cesspool of stinking mud" (Markov 1887, 311). Efforts intensified to use stone, gravel, and sand from the Mtkvari's riverbanks to pave streets. By the turn of the century, these building materials became so valuable—for new structures as well as roads—that the city had to post guards along the river to stop theft (*Kavkaz* July 13, 1913).

The prospect of hydroelectricity vaulting Tiflis to modernity attracted significant attention from the 1880s. Georgian public figures and intellectuals led the charge in advocating for hydro-electrification based on European models. In 1884, Georgian writer Niko Nikoladze beseeched the city Duma to study ways to harness the river to power street lighting, now common in St. Petersburg and Moscow (Charkviani 1975, 11). Tsarist-era electric power in Tiflis remained the domain of small-scale steam-powered generators, however, designed for one house, block, or factory. In 1895, Ilia Chavchavadze, *Iveria*'s founder and publisher, implored municipal authorities to emulate Geneva, which was powered by the Rhone River. Upstream at Borjomi, Grand Duke Mikhail commissioned a hydropower plant as part of a pumped water storage system, based on models in the Alps. The system's completion on a mountain Mtkvari tributary in 1898, meant to power his summer residence and courtyard, produced sufficient energy for lighting the entire town. In so doing, it gained repute as the first "high-pressure hydroelectric station in the empire" (*Izvestiia Tbilisskogo gorodskogo obshchestvennogo upravleniia* 1896, 177, cited in Charkviani 1975, 23). In Tiflis, Chavchavadze's article sparked Duma debates in 1896–7, but action was limited to site studies up to the First World War. Bidding processes for lighting Tiflis nonetheless attracted significant attention. Electricity allowed for new leisure forms, including a massive public roller-skating rink (*Tiflisskaia Gazeta Kopeika* Dec. 4, 1910). Imperial and local visions of

modernity anticipated a shift in views of Georgian rivers as energy sources in the Soviet era when the Bolsheviks would push for mass electrification.

## Conclusion

Georgian journalist S. Bavreli, in the 1880s, wrote: “Oh how it made me happy, when I saw my old acquaintance and friend, the Mtkvari! It made me happy, but what to do, because this no longer was that Mtkvari, which I had seen in my boyhood—It no longer seemed to have that purity, that freshness, that peacefulness. The agitated Mtkvari was running along so angrily and so wrathfully grumbled, that my heart almost broke” (Manning, 2012, 255). As symbol, space, and actor, the Mtkvari remained at the centre of Tiflis through decades of tsarist modernization and technological change. The river’s power both challenged and anticipated national and imperial visions of progress. In imperial Tiflis, the Mtkvari remained a source of life and culture, a place of excitement, spectacle, and peril, one that anchored a multicultural and stratified society. Weaving past homes and under crowded bridges, with its banks holding beaches, taverns, livestock pens, caravansaries, and all manner of critical infrastructure, the river represented a type of non-human will and agency its residents seemed to respect, even as its capriciousness, highlighted by the 1890s floods, provoked great frustration. Over time, the river might differentiate winners and losers, but it touched all residents’ lives. Even escapes from Tiflis by the wealthiest led them to banks of the Mtkvari outside the city. Floods threatened water supplies for those privileged enough to receive piped water instead of relying on *metulukcheebi*. The Mtkvari allowed residents and outsiders alike to map cultural perceptions and attitudes on a city seen as neither stereotypically ‘Oriental’ nor modern European, but an urban space in between. Training their gaze on the Mtkvari, Europeans and Russians could see the picturesque in the Caucasus in both external and hidden beauty, as a space between Europe and Russia as well as between Europe and Asia.

A focus on the Mtkvari takes a step to recover the ‘lost’ histories of imperial Tiflis. What remains for further investigation is how various ethnic communities interacted with, shaped, and, in turn, were shaped by the river. While this article has noted the Mtkvari’s role as a symbol for a Georgian national imaginary, Tatar merchants plied the river with goods from the Caspian, German colonists irrigated the river to water their vineyards, and Armenian businessmen featured prominently in Duma debates over how to harness the river for modernization schemes. Much as the Mtkvari of imperial Tiflis has been lost to Soviet-era concrete embankments that walled the river from its previous interactions with city life, so did other Soviet transformations dilute the multiethnic composition of the peoples that lived with the river. The descendants of German colonists in the Caucasus were deported wholesale by the Soviet state in 1941, while the Soviet patronage of separate national republics moved the gravity of Armenian intellectual and political life to Yerevan and dissimulated the Armenian footprint in a city redesignated as the capital of a Georgian SSR and, in 1991, an independent country. Tbilisi may lack the beaches—or islands—of the imperial period, but the Peace Bridge of 2010 and the flood of 2015 remain two symbols of the potential and peril of a young nation through its interactions with the Mtkvari. Now, as then, humans and nature exist in a dynamic, mutual, and unpredictable relationship (Linton 2010, 229).

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