

Thomas de Waal

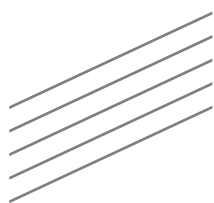
# THE CAUCASUS

AN INTRODUCTION



# THE CAUCASUS

## AN INTRODUCTION



Thomas de Waal

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

1921, it was a logical decision. Consolidating Soviet Azerbaijan at that time was a much bigger priority than satisfying weak and devastating Armenia, and their new ally Kemalists Turkey also supported the Azerbaijani claims. As good Marxists, the Bolsheviks also saw an economic rationale in placing Nagorny Karabakh within Azerbaijan. The move has been called a case of imperialist divide-and-rule politics, but the Bolsheviks were actually more interested in what could be called “combine and rule” in making Azerbaijan a single economic unit in which farmers could move their flocks between the plains and highlands of Karabakh without crossing a republican border.

Having placed Nagorny Karabakh within Azerbaijan, the Bolsheviks drew the boundaries of the new autonomous region in 1923 to give it an overwhelmingly Armenian population. Only one pocket of territory with a large Azerbaijani population, the semiruin city of Shusha, remained. In the long term, this was an arrangement with a strong structural flaw, in that it made Nagorny Karabakh a place of uncertain allegiances—an Armenian province within the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan but not far from the republic of Armenia. Moreover, the map was drawn such that the borders of the new region came close to but did not touch Armenia. In between lay the Lachin region of Azerbaijan (initially known as Red Kurdistan). This eventually had a crucial bearing on the geography of conflict, as the Karabakh Armenians did everything they could to build a land bridge with Armenia.

In Soviet times, Nagorny Karabakh turned into something of a backwater. Rumbblings of Armenian discontent were audible only to those listening very carefully. In 1945, 1965, and 1977 there were petitions for the region to be united with Soviet Armenia. The local Armenians complained that they had no Armenian-language television and that their church monuments were being allowed to fall into disrepair. The province was relatively poorer than Soviet Armenia but not much worse off than most of Azerbaijan. Its demographic balance slowly changed in favor of Azerbaijanis: in 1926, there were 117,000 Armenians and 13,000 Azerbaijanis; by 1979, the two groups numbered 123,000 and 37,000, respectively. Azerbaijanis were settled in new towns and villages, while many Armenians emigrated in search of a better life. Many Karabakh Armenians, unable to get on the career ladder in Azerbaijan, ended up studying in Moscow or Yerevan. A long-term effect of this was that they came to feel more of an allegiance to the Soviet Union as a whole and less loyalty to Soviet Azerbaijan. (A similar process occurred in Abkhazia with relation to Georgia.) Yet these resentments were more or less managed by the Soviet system. The cultural and historical problems only