

The Caucasus- An Introduction
Thomas de Waal

A wonderful introductory overview of a very complex place.

Geography is destiny, as de Waal lays out in his opening chapter. The Caucasus is defined by the so-named mountain range, and the Lesser Caucasus which runs through Armenia and western Azerbaijan.

The mountains have historically presented a formidable barrier. Only in the last couple of centuries, under the Russians, has there been a road passage north to Russia, or even an east-west internal link within Georgia. There is water to the east and west, mountains to the southwest, desert to the southeast. These natural boundaries frame an area which corresponds in size and population to Florida.

These barriers have limited trade, warfare and migration. The result is numerous pockets of small populations of diverse people. De Waal says the Arabs called it Djabal al-alsun, the "mountain of the languages." They include the remnants of once widespread ancient peoples such as the Sarmatians and several others which have resisted, in their hidden valleys, the sweeps of armies and empires. On the other hand, however, seaborne trade has been a dominant factor along both the Black Sea and Caspian coastlines. The waters brought pockets of trading peoples such as Pontic Greeks and Jews.

It is the meeting place of civilizations and religions: the southern boundary of the Russian Empire, the Western boundary of the Ottomans, and the northern boundary of the Persians. It is a patchwork of Christian and Muslim. Although each has claimed political authority off and on over the centuries, and traces of their influence linger, de Waal makes a strong case that the peoples of the Caucasus have retained their own individual characteristics, and that there are several traits unique to the Caucasus which characterize many or most of the peoples.

Having provided this background, de Waal leads us fairly quickly through ancient and medieval history up to the czarist conquest of the 3 countries, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, in the 19th century. He describes their efforts to integrate them into Empire and the abortive attempts to establish independent states before the Bolsheviks took over.

Then we get to modern times. Problems in the Caucasus prefigured the fall of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was unwilling to use extreme force to subdue internecine warfare among the Soviet Socialist republics of the Caucasus, and they unraveled. Abkhazia, Armenia, and Georgia spun themselves free, after which South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh spun free from them, generally with bloodshed.

Other reviewers have focused on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, and the treatment of Armenians in general. I will only note that Armenians, like the Jews, are singularly articulate in their own defense. De Waal gives quite colorful descriptions of the national characters of the three nationalities. As an anecdote, he says that the Georgians claim that once Jew can cheat three Greeks, but one Armenian can cheat three Jews.

The late 1990s and early 2000's were a period of economic development and peace, but not peace treaties and normal relations. It came apart again in 2008 with the war between Russia

and Georgia. I find de Waal's treatment of this conflict especially valuable. Contrary to what the American press reported, but consistent with what I read in Europe, the Georgians started the hot war. They had had ample provocation from Russia, but they ignored advice from Americans and others to avoid conflict.

Here in Ukraine we read about the "Georgian miracle" whereby they have supposedly gotten rid of the communist era corruption and invented a new society. Either de Waal hasn't heard about it or he finds it not worth reporting. He describes Michael Saakashvili as a strongman, albeit intelligent and sophisticated, of the more typical post-communist mold. He is not very sanguine about the progress of the other two countries in reducing corruption, either. This will be a major issue for them if and when they want closer integration with Europe.