The title here is fairly ambitious. And, as with most ambitious titles, it rests on an ambitious assumption: In addressing the USSR’s peripheral zones, we assume that the Soviet reality was a colonial reality, which in some ways it was. But the fit between Soviet-style colonialism and classic forms of Euro-colonialism is imperfect at best; this is so especially when applied to subaltern peoples—usually ethnic minorities—who had to struggle within a complex system of domination, marked first by republican authority, which bolstered and legitimized titular nationalities over them, followed by all-Soviet authority, which both enabled and constrained the republics in dealing with minority questions.

My aim here is first to explore the contours of this complex system, and second to make sense of what seems to be coming out of its aftermath, using the embattled enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh as my main point of reference.

Many of you know about Nagorno-Karabagh, its geography and history: Found in the southern Transcaucasus, it is a mountainous enclave that for centuries has been inhabited mainly by Armenians. However, in a bit of territorial horse-trading following World War I, the region was awarded to Soviet Azerbaijan by decision of Josef Stalin in 1923. The indigenous majority, by and large, never accepted this decision, and with the advent of glasnost and perestroika more than six decades later, petitioned regional and central authorities to rejoin Soviet Armenia, in keeping with the Soviet constitution’s Article 70, providing the right of national self-determination. These efforts, largely peaceful, were met with brutal repression by Azerbaijani authorities, and with the...
rapid demise of the Soviet Union, spiraled into all-out war. At first pitting local insurgents against Azerbaijani special forces, the struggle soon drew in regional actors including not only Armenia and Azerbaijan, but Russia, Turkey, Iran, and to some extent the US. After several years of bloody clashes, local Armenians, with outside support, established a de facto Nagorno Karabagh Republic, drove out Azerbaijani military occupation and civilian presence, and in 1994 secured a cease-fire which holds to this day.3

What is interesting here is that, depending on one’s framework and scale of analysis, Karabagh can be characterized variously (1) as a site of underdevelopment, led by Azerbaijani colonialism; 2) as an “apple of discord” between rival republics/nationalities (i.e. Armenia and Azerbaijan); or 3) as part of larger constraints, manipulations, and other tendencies set in motion by a central power—Moscow—whose imperial character appears in many forms. These characterizations, often argued during the Soviet era, apply no less to the post-Soviet era, thus making our task both rich and difficult.

Let us dig into it:
1) If we follow generic definitions of colonialism, there can be no question that Nagorno-Karabagh under Soviet Azerbaijan fits the description. As Michael Watts tells us, colonialism can be viewed as:

the establishment and maintenance of rule, for an extended period of time, by a sovereign power over a subordinate and alien people that is separate from the ruling power...Characteristic features of the colonial situation include political and legal domination over an alien society, relations of economic and political dependence and exploitation between imperial power and colony, and racial and cultural inequality.4

Now this definition is clearly a generic one. For if we take the classic path of European colonialism—in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere—colonialism was something more than that defined above. Specifically, it was related intimately to imperialism, which is typically associated with a distinct form of contemporary capitalism. Nevertheless, within the context of the Second World, Nagorno-Karabagh’s occupation—in which Azerbaijani supremacy manifested itself in cultural, political, and economic discrimination—may still be considered as a form of colonialism.