Thomas de Waal


Thomas de Wall’s *Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* is an important book for anybody interested in understanding the general problems of why societies disintegrate and the specific problem of why Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war in the late 1990s. The book traces the roots of the subtle but underlying factors that exploded into a full-blown war between the two neighboring Caucasus countries and, so far, the unsuccessful attempts that have been made by the international community to resolve it.

Most articles on the conflict tend to be partial towards one side or the other, putting the blame on Armenia or Azerbaijan. The truth of the matter, as it has been made clear by de Waal, is that the causes of the conflict are not as easy to assign as some of the partisan articles would have readers believe. *Black Garden*, as a publication, is probably one of the few exceptions. The treatment of the causes of the war is done in as even-handed a manner as possible, and the book provides good historical and political backgrounds interspersed with personal interviews and comments from people, who fought and suffered on both sides of the war. The result is that readers see the human face to the conflict and get a better grasp of the complex and intractable nature of the causes. The war which ended in a stalemate has smoldering embers which could flare up again. On my part, I wish that I had read de Waal’s book before my Fulbright stay in Azerbaijan in the Spring of 2000.

From the onset, it is important to observe what de Waal wrote did not cause the conflict. Unlike most wars, this one, he argues, was not caused by “ancient-hatreds” between the two countries. Armenians and Azerbaijanis have lived side by side for centuries even though Azerbaijan is a predominantly Muslim country and Armenia a Christian one. Throughout the period of the Soviet Union, until its dissolution in the early 1990s, both countries were economically interdependent, intentionally so, as the Soviets sought to foster a new society based on economics and not on ethnicity.

Furthermore, de Wall suggests that the conflict was not caused by “top-down politics” but rather communal conflicts which trapped and engulfed the two countries. Ethnic conflicts have always been a part of the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan but for the most part, they had been confined to localities and had not involved the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia or the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. They had been like brush fires which had been put down or had simmered and died out. Finally, de Wall argues that the conflict was not, and is not about socioeconomic issues.
Whatever the cause was not, it is quite clear that the 1989 declaration of unification between Armenia and Karabakh provided the spark for the explosion of the powder keg. "Mutual insecurity" was made worse by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and both sides sought to create its own security zone by redefining or consolidating territory.

For a full understanding of the conflict, a little lesson in geography is in order and the book provides two easy to read maps of the region that help the narrative; I found myself flipping to and from them as I read. A lot of ink has been spilt on why Nagorny Karabakh (NK) was “left” or “made” a part of Azerbaijan. This is important because it was this decision which ultimately provoked the full blown war in 1991. It has been asserted by some that this was a deliberate attempt at state formation by fusing together different ethnicities to promote peace. Others argue that it was an economic decision and that it was the economic viability of the region that dictated the decision. Consider where Nagorny Karabakh (NK) is situated; it is to the southeast of both Armenia and Azerbaijan and has a majority Armenian population. There had been some indecisiveness in “leaving” or “making” NK a part of Azerbaijan and granting it an autonomous status. For example, in 1920, shortly before the decision, Nariman Narimanov, an Azerbaijani leader, had declared Karabakh, a part of Armenia.

Joseph Stalin and the “Kavburo” had also initially sought to make NK a part of Armenia before finally deciding to “leave” or ‘make” it a part of Azerbaijan. Even though NK became a part of Azerbaijan, official business was to be conducted in the Armenian language and not in Azeri (the language of Azerbaijan, in some localities where Azerbaijanis were in the majority, they could use Azeri). The result was that educated Armenians in NK were pulled more towards Yerevan (the capital of Armenia) than to Baku (the capital of Azerbaijan). For educated NK Armenians, opportunities could be found outside of Azerbaijan in Yerevan and elsewhere, not in Baku. This created a diaspora of Armenian population, which population de Wall argues, played a prominent role in the conflict by exacerbating nationalist tendencies to merge NK with Armenia. As long as both Armenia and Azerbaijan belonged to the USSR, this was a problem that could be contained.

Making or leaving NK as a part of Azerbaijan was the first serious seed of conflict sown by the Soviets. By including NK in Azerbaijan instead of in Armenia, it ensured that there was going to be constant underlying ethnic conflicts instead of ethnic harmony. A natural question to ask would be why the Soviets decided to make NK a part of Azerbaijan and not Armenia. One explanation given is that the Soviets wanted to eradicate nationalism and ethnicity and regions were designed primarily for economic reasons. This argument