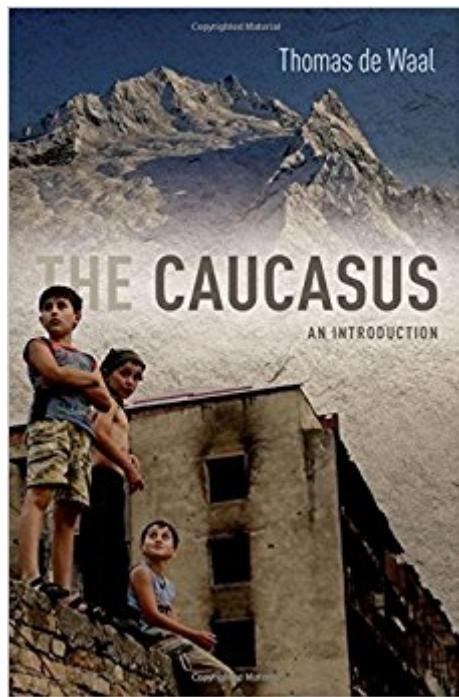


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The Caucasus: An Introduction



Synopsis

In this fascinating book, noted journalist Thomas de Waal--author of the highly acclaimed *Black Garden*--makes the case that while the Caucasus is often treated as a sub-plot in the history of Russia, or as a mere gateway to Asia, the five-day war in Georgia, which flared into a major international crisis in 2008, proves that this is still a combustible region, whose inner dynamics and history deserve a much more complex appreciation from the wider world. In *The Caucasus*, de Waal provides this richer, deeper, and much-needed appreciation, one that reveals that the South Caucasus--Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and their many smaller regions, enclaves, and breakaway entities--is a fascinating and distinct world unto itself. Providing both historical background and an insightful analysis of the period after 1991, de Waal sheds light on how the region has been scarred by the tumultuous scramble for independence and the three major conflicts that broke out with the end of the Soviet Union--Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The book examines the region as a major energy producer and exporter; offers a compelling account of the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the rise of Mikheil Saakashvili, and the August 2008 war; and considers the failure of the South Caucasus, thus far, to become a single viable region. In addition, the book features a dozen or so "boxes" which provide brief snapshots of such fascinating side topics as the Kurds, Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, the promotion of the region as the "Soviet Florida," and the most famous of all Georgians, Stalin. The Caucasus delivers a vibrantly written and timely account of this turbulent region, one that will prove indispensable for all concerned with world politics. It is, as well, a stimulating read for armchair travelers and for anyone curious about far-flung corners of the world.

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Customer Reviews

In the stench of crude state-sponsored propaganda war surrounding the region's modern history De Waal's book is a much needed breath of fresh(er) air. The Author rightly mentions in the beginning of the book that "The whole picture is deeply complex and makes the Balkans seem simple by comparison". Indeed, way too often we witness overly amateurish and simplistic (thus mostly wrong) views on the region expressed in various publications - both online and in print - as well as on some international forums from OIC through EU up to UN. De Waal's book - despite all its drawbacks (some highlighted below) - is one of the best independent references for anybody who is genuinely interested in the region and its immediate future. To all fairness to the Author, he seems to get closer to "calling a spade a spade" in "The Caucasus: An Introduction" compared to his previous landmark publication "Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War". For example, he seems to have adjusted his somewhat simplified view of Karabakh conflict as a war between "Russian-supported" Armenian and "pro-Turkish" Azerbaijan. Instead, in "The Caucasus..." he calls Russian assistance "erratic" and highlights important facts about Azeris inheriting from the Soviet Army substantially more weaponry and ammunition than Armenian side did. However, De Waal still misses three fundamental factors shaping the core essence of the current Armenian-Azeri conflict which in turn determines the division of the region. 1) The Big Elephant in the room - which De Waal chooses not to notice - is perceived imbalance in force - in terms of wealth, population, unconditional political, diplomatic, economic and military support from at least one local power - between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

I find myself agreeing with many of the points listed in the extensive review posted by reviewer VA. I have had the opportunity to read and review Mr. De Waal's previous book, Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War, and his new one largely does not differ from it, with the exception of the chapters it reserves on Georgia and the role of oil politics in the region. As one of the reviewers has aptly put it, Mr. De Waal does come much closer to "calling a spade a spade", distancing himself from a frustrating decision to present, equivocate and justify actions and events in the "Black Garden". The book starts off with a basic introduction to the Caucasus, providing concise summaries on the geography and the bewildering variety of peoples who inhabit the region. The focus of the book, it should be said, is on the South Caucasus, that is, the Republics of Armenia,

Azerbaijan and Georgia. Consequently, readers who are keen on learning about Russia's problems with the Chechens, Daghestanis and other minorities living in the North Caucasus should look elsewhere, toward more specialist literature. But with this aside, De Waal does excel in presenting the history of the modern Caucasus and his early chapters on Russian rule in the region and Soviet nation-building truly stand out. He does have difficulties, however, in presenting the more darker, politically incendiary sections on the history of the Caucasus in regards to Armenia.

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 Sarmartians 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.

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