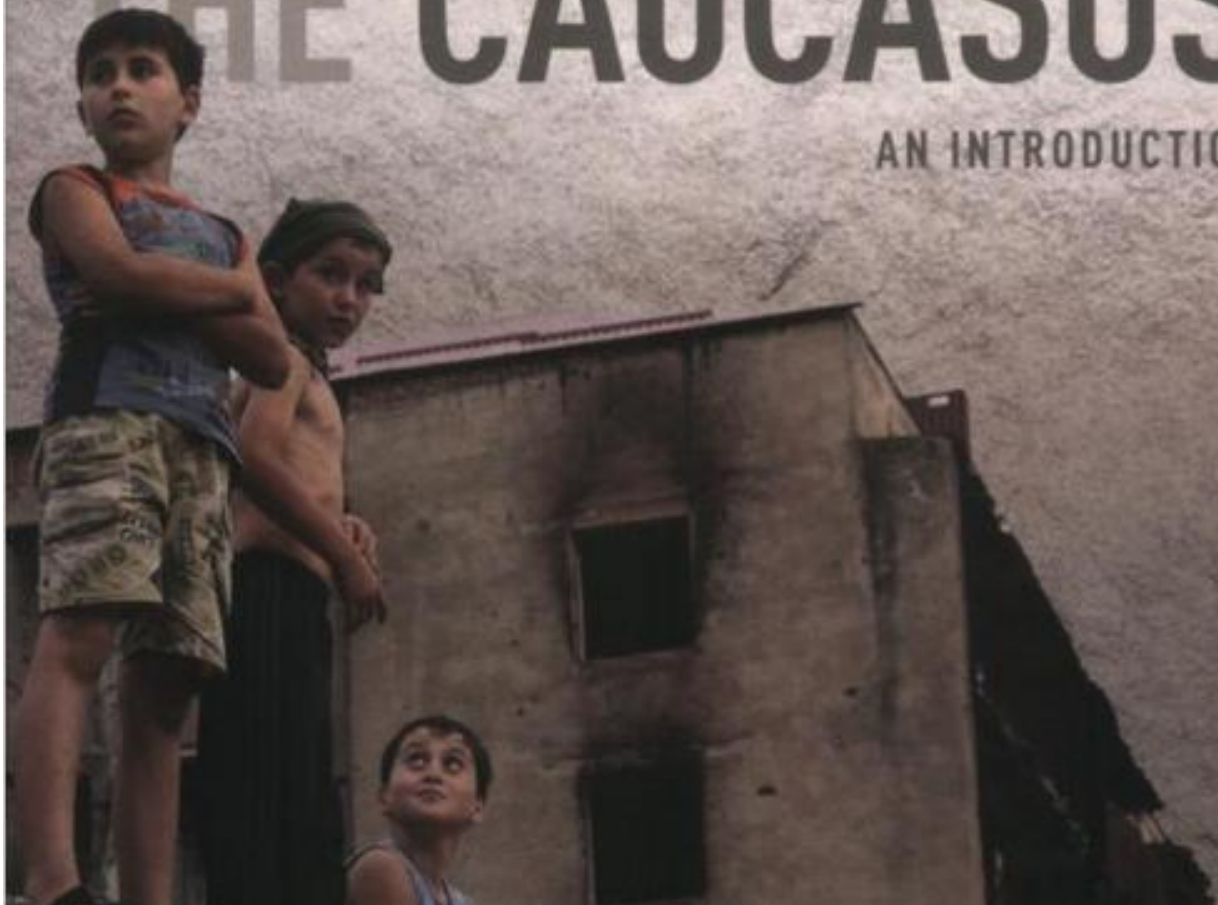


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THOMAS DE WAAL

THE CAUCASUS

AN INTRODUCTION

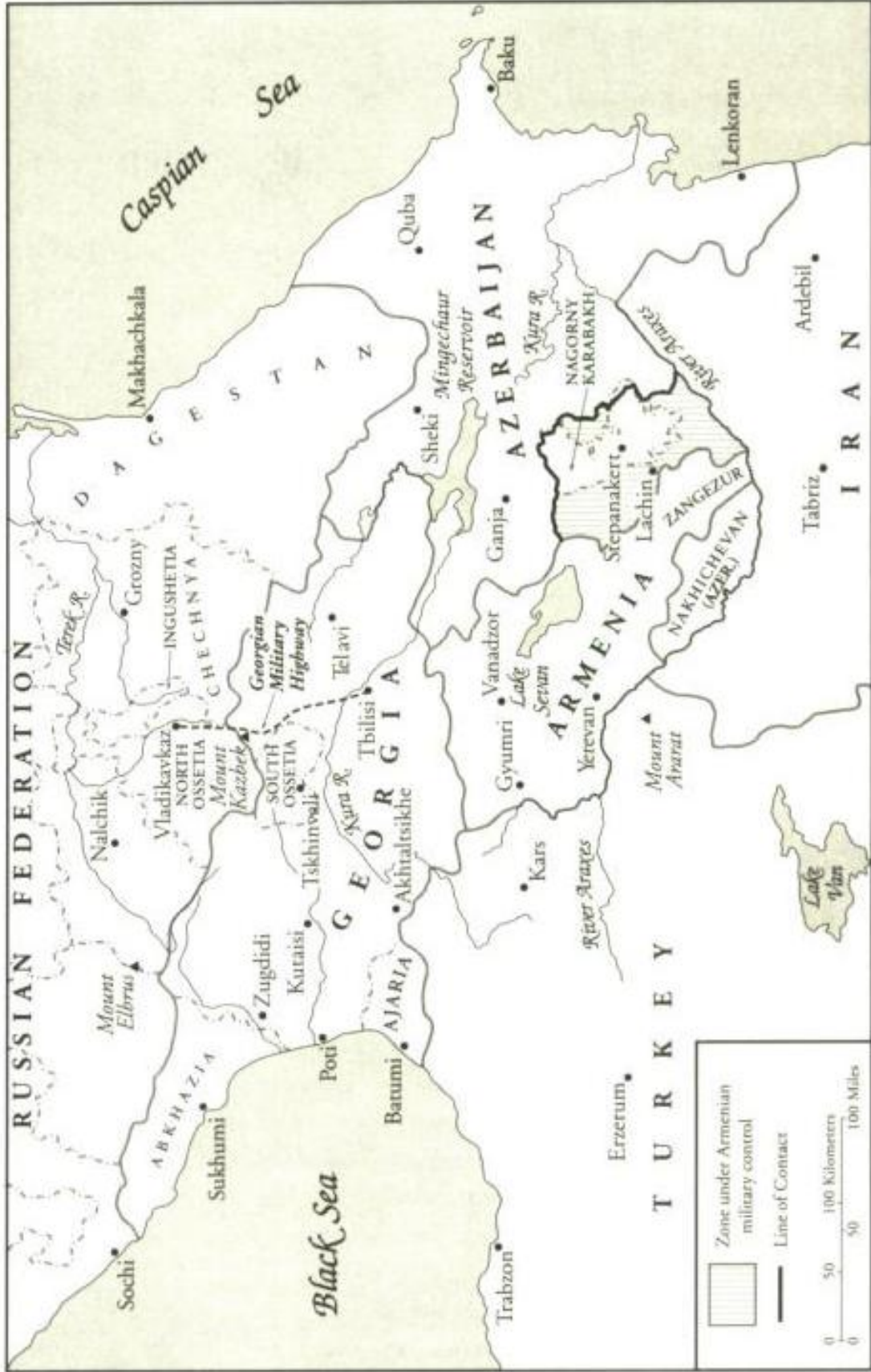


Introduction

The countries of the South Caucasus have always been the “lands in-between.” In between the Black and Caspian seas, Europe and Asia, Russia and the Middle East, Christianity and Islam and, more recently, democracy and dictatorship. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and the territories around them have the mixed blessing of being at the crossing-place of different cultures and political systems. These fault lines have made their region a geopolitical seismic zone. The kind of local shock that might be muffled elsewhere in the world reverberates more loudly here. That was what happened in August 2008, in the tiny territory of South Ossetia, a place with barely fifty thousand inhabitants: an exchange of fire between villages escalated into a war between Georgia and Russia and then into the worst crisis in relations between Moscow and the West since the end of the Cold War.

The war over South Ossetia was an extreme illustration of the principle that “all politics is local.” The people on the ground were at fault only inasmuch as they called for help from their big outside patrons. A chain of response went from Georgian villagers to the Georgian government in Tbilisi to Georgia’s friends in the West; the Ossetian villagers called for help on their own government, which looked to its protector in Moscow.

For such a small region—it has a population of just fifteen million people and the area of a large American state—the South Caucasus has attracted a lot of Western interest since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. A series of political agendas have landed here. There is a desire to resolve the three ethnoterritorial disputes of Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, and South Ossetia



The Caucasus in 2010

and calm a potential area of instability—South Ossetia was in fact the smallest of the three conflicts. There is strong commercial and political interest in the growing energy resources of the Caspian Sea: the Caspian may contain 5 percent of the world's oil and is likely to have a role to play in Europe's future energy supplies. There is support by the large Armenian diaspora in the United States, France, and other countries for the newly independent Republic of Armenia. There has been political investment in Georgia's ambitions to be a model of post-Soviet reform. There is also the challenge of the South Caucasus as an arena of engagement and, more often, confrontation with Russia.

The United States in particular has discovered the South Caucasus. Over the last decade, a number of very senior figures in Washington have taken an interest in the region. In May 2005, President George W. Bush stood on Freedom Square in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and told Georgians, "Your courage is inspiring democratic reformers and sending a message across the world—freedom will be a future of each nation and every people on earth." A year later, Senator John McCain was presented with a Georgian sword on his seventieth birthday and told Georgians, "You are America's best friends." In the U.S. Congress, a powerful Armenian lobby ensured that Armenia was for a while the largest per capita recipient of U.S. aid money of any country in the world—aid to Georgia would soon match that level. Secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld made four visits to Baku and told Azerbaijanis, "The American people greatly appreciate the steadfast support of Azerbaijan in the global war on terror, and we look forward to continuing to strengthen our military cooperation in the period ahead."

The danger of these kinds of intervention is that they are too narrow and focus on one part of the picture and not the whole. Yet the whole picture is deeply complex and makes the Balkans seem simple by comparison. In the past its multiple local politics has defeated the strategists of the great powers of the day. In 1918 a British general Lionel Dunsterville tried to sum up the situation he was supposed to be sorting out:

There are so many situations here, that it is difficult to give a full appreciation of each. There is the local situation, the all-Persia situation, the Jangali situation, the Persian-Russian situation, the Turkish-advance-on-Tabriz situation, the question of liquidating Russian debts, the Baku situation, the South Caucasus situation, the North

Caucasus situation, the Bolshevik situation and the Russian situation as a whole. And each of these subdivides into smaller and acuter situations for there is no real Caucasian or even North or South Caucasian point of view, there is no unity of thought or action, nothing but mutual jealousy and mistrust. Thus the Georgians of Tiflis regard the problem from a Georgian point of view and play only for their own hand; the Armenians and the Tartars in the south, and the Terek and Kuban Cossacks and the Daghestanis in the north, do the same.¹

In a place as complicated as this, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. In this conjunction of the deeply local and the global, the small players can overestimate their importance, and the big players can promise too much. The history of the Caucasus is littered with mistakes based on these kinds of assumptions and miscalculations. In August 2008, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili blundered into a war over South Ossetia, almost certainly believing he had more support in the West than he actually did. The biggest problem in the South Caucasus, the unresolved Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorny Karabakh conflict, is an earlier example of how a dispute about local grievances has caused international havoc. When it began, it was a local dispute in a far-off Soviet province, but it proved to be the first link in a long chain that eventually tugged down the whole structure of the Soviet Union. Nowadays, the dispute literally divides the South Caucasus in two and, by virtue of its proximity to oil and gas pipelines, has a bearing on European energy security.

For the West, ill-judged intervention can be dangerous for another reason: the South Caucasus—or Transcaucasus—was for long periods part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union and remains a zone of intense Russian interest. Russian strategists often regard Western interest in the Caucasus as dilettantism. Although no one believes that the West will abandon the Caucasus to Russian interests as the Western powers abandoned it to the Bolsheviks in 1920, there is more than a grain of truth in this. Modern Russia has a more sustained strategic interest in this region on its borders than any Western powers are ever likely to have. To take one example, in 1993 it was Russia, not the West, that agreed to set up a peacekeeping force for the conflict zone of Abkhazia, in which 120 Russian soldiers subsequently died. Western countries were not interested in a peacekeeping mission for this remote and

unstable area. That decision set the stage for Russia's subsequent outmaneuvering of the West in Abkhazia many years later. Yet Russia also overestimates its understanding of the Caucasus and confuses agreement with subservience in a place like Abkhazia. Power in the Caucasus is generally in inverse proportion to knowledge: the small peoples of the region, speaking multiple languages and keeping a keen eye open, understand their more powerful Great Power neighbors much better than vice versa.

Thus, there is a big gap of understanding about the South Caucasus, which this book hopes partly to fill. It is part portrait and part history, with an emphasis on the events of the last twenty years, from the first nationalist movements near the end of the Soviet Union to the August 2008 war in Georgia. My aim is to focus firmly on the local dynamics of the region, while putting them within a broader context. To get a proper perspective on this region, you need both zoom and wide-angle lenses.

The South Caucasus is in many ways a constructed region. Some will say that it exists only in the mind, in the memory of a Soviet-era generation and in the vision of policy analysts who devise concepts such as the "Eurasian Partnership" project. Actually, the cynics say, the South Caucasus "region" is just a tangle of roadblocks and closed borders that has no common identity beyond a shared past that is being rapidly forgotten. I make no apology for opposing that view. I believe that the South Caucasus does make sense as a region and the future of its peoples will be better served by them thinking as one. As I will make clear, there are strong ties of culture between the different nations of the Caucasus and patterns of economic collaboration that persist, even despite closed borders. A common history of Russian rule has shaped everything from railway systems to schooling to table customs. It is also worth considering the South Caucasus as a region in a negative sense, because its different interconnected parts have the capacity to do real harm to one another. Surrounded by bigger neighbors and entangled with each other's problems, the countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and their breakaway territories cannot escape their Caucasian predicament even if they wanted to.