

Azerbaijani refugee  
from Karabakh  
(1993). Photo by  
Ilgar Jafarov.



# Black Garden

## Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War

**I**n 1988 the unthinkable happened: two Soviet republics—Armenia and Azerbaijan—entered into a violent territorial dispute, and the previously omnipotent Kremlin was powerless to stop them. The dispute—the first in a series of nationalist uprisings that would contribute to bringing down the Soviet Union—revolved around Nagorny Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian region located inside Soviet Azerbaijan. Technically, the conflict ended when the two newly independent nations agreed to a ceasefire in 1994, but the agreement did not bring peace. To this day, the Armenian-Azerbaijani border remains closed and heavily militarized. Not to mention that violent flare-ups between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces

### An Interview with Thomas de Waal

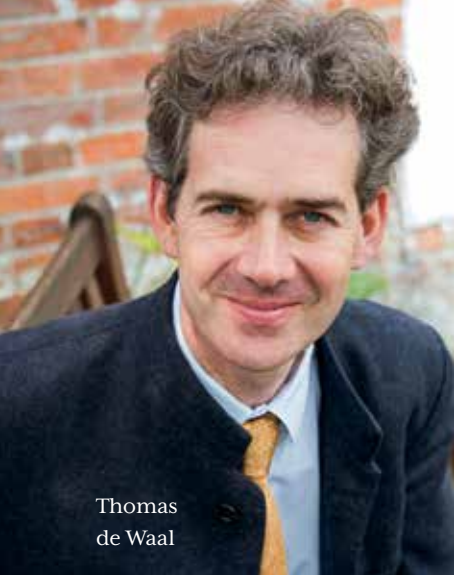
BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

continue—the two sides clashed in April 2016, causing thirty casualties; and, most recently, in May 2017, when Azerbaijan destroyed an Armenian air missile defense system.

Six years after the ceasefire agreement, journalist Thomas de Waal, currently senior fellow with Carnegie Europe, embarked on a book project about the conflict. Thanks to a grant from the U.S. Institute of Peace, de Waal spent the year from 2000 to 2001 poring over archives; interviewing conflict victims, witnesses, and participants; and traveling intensively between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The logistics were complicated—to circumvent the closed border, he had to travel hundreds of miles each time he wanted to get from one country to the other. But the trouble was worth it—in 2003, de Waal published *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York University Press), a nuanced portrayal of the conflict and its aftermath. The book was rereleased in an updated tenth anniversary addition in 2013 and continues to be the definitive account of the conflict.

In November 2017, all 120 of the original interviews de Waal conducted for the 2003 edition became available at Columbia

University Libraries as part of the new Thomas de Waal Interviews Collection. I spoke to de Waal about *Black Garden* over Skype last spring. What follows is an edited version of our conversation. (You can read my interview with him about *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, the other book in the Thomas de Waal Interviews Collection, in the Fall 2017 issue of *Harriman Magazine*.)



Thomas de Waal

**Masha Udensiva-Brenner:** Your book opens with you crossing the ceasefire line between Armenia and Azerbaijan. No one had crossed it since the two nations signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994. But there you were. How did this happen?

**Thomas de Waal:** In May 2001, when they were gearing up for big peace talks in Key West, Florida, the U.S. cochair [of the OSCE Minsk Group mediating the conflict], Carey Cavanaugh, invited some journalists to come with him on a symbolic crossing of the ceasefire line, which is also called the Line of Contact. I was one of the people he invited. Just to give you an idea, the ceasefire line had started as trenches—not very fearsome—but it became more and more fortified over the years. Now it's incredibly militarized, with artillery and drones and minefields and helicopters. So, it's basically this big scar running through the territory of Azerbaijan. When we crossed it, we started in Azerbaijan and walked across. They demined it for us, but we were actually crossing a minefield. Most of the time we do this metaphorically, but I did this literally in 2001.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Has anyone crossed the line since then?

**De Waal:** I think there have been a few crossings, but you can probably count them all on one hand. It's a very rare occurrence.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Your reporting for this book took place from 2000 to 2001, six years after the conflict ended. How did the project come about?

**De Waal:** I'd been spending time in Azerbaijan since '95 and in Karabakh, in Armenia, since '96. I liked both places. But, obviously, the narrative from each one was very black-and-white. When you're on the Armenian side and you hear about this conflict, you begin to inhabit their worldview; you begin to see everything through their eyes—that they were the victims of this injustice, that they tried political means to give freedom to the Karabakh Armenians and were met with violence. That's their version of reality. When you go over to the Azerbaijani side, you see a different reality. That they thought they were living in a peaceful republic with all these Armenians, and suddenly the Armenians start revolting. It's very scary for them; they aren't sure whether the Armenians are backed by Moscow, and the whole thing descends into violence. They've lost control, they try to reassert control over their republic, and the Armenians start attacking them.

Both sides obviously have a certain validity to their view, but the problem is that they have no empathy for one another. I wanted to get a deeper understanding of what was happening. But there was nothing written about the conflict that presented the view from both sides. Everything was quite biased, quite partisan, very propagandistic. So, eventually, I decided

I wanted to write the book I wanted to read.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Can you give us some historical context for the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan before the conflict broke out?

**De Waal:** There's this concept I've come across frequently in the Caucasus, that all these conflicts are ancient conflicts and people have hated each other for centuries and waited for the opportunity to fight one another. It has been debunked by scholarship and also by the empirical experience of the people living there.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis began to come into conflict perhaps in the nineteenth century, and certainly in the early twentieth century. But, at the same time, they've always had a lot in common; they've shared the same territory. I think both sides would tell you that in cultural terms they have a lot more in common with each other than they do with the Georgians, the other big nation in the Caucasus. They've always traditionally done business with one another more than they have with the Georgians. And if you look at the culture in terms of music, in particular, there are a lot of songs that an Armenian would say are Armenian songs and an Azerbaijani would say are Azerbaijani songs. And there's always been some intermarriage, particularly in Baku. So these are people who have mixed together culturally, historically, demographically.

But, politically, there had been collisions between them. Part of this was for socioeconomic reasons—Armenians were closer to the top of the social pile, particularly in Baku,



and Azerbaijanis were down toward the bottom. But the main clash has always been over the highland part of the Karabakh region, which we tend to call by its Russian name, Nagorny Karabakh. This ambiguous place had been part of the culture and history of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. As long as Armenians and Azerbaijanis were part of the Russian Empire, or the Soviet Union, it didn't matter so much whose territory it was. During those times, there was this kind of central policeman who looked after things. People lived together, and if there was a dispute, the Russians could always restore order. But at times when the empire weakened—such as during the early twentieth century with the Russian Empire; after the Bolshevik Revolution when the Russians left the Caucasus; and then again during perestroika, when the Soviet Union started to

weaken under Gorbachev—during all those periods, tensions about who this place owed its allegiance to, who deserved to be there, and who deserved to be running things resulted in conflict.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** The conflict erupted during perestroika in 1998. What happened?

**De Waal:** For that we have to take a brief excursion to 1921, which is when the Bolsheviks held a meeting in Tbilisi that decided what to do with all these conflict regions in the Caucasus, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Stalin chaired the meeting—he was the Commissar for Nationalities—and they basically allocated Nagorny Karabakh to Azerbaijan, but with autonomous status. The idea was that it would become an Armenian majority

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province in Azerbaijan, run by Armenians but within the Republic of Azerbaijan. That was in 1921. In 1923, the autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh was created. There is lots of speculation about why this decision was made. But I think a primary reason was economic. It was part of the economic space of Azerbaijan, and there wasn't even a good road at that point between Yerevan and Karabakh.

Men working by war-ruined building in Shusha, Nagorny-Karabakh. Photo by Adam Jones (2015).







Shell-pocked facade, Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh. Photo by Adam Jones (2015).

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And this is interesting because while the Soviet regime separated Nagorno Karabakh from Armenia, it also gave Armenians a homeland for the first time in recent history. And this had an effect on Armenian attitudes during the conflict . . .

**De Waal:** That's right. Prior to the formation of the Soviet Union, there were Armenians scattered all over the Caucasus, in Anatolia and what's now eastern Turkey. But they'd had very little statehood. They had had some statehood back in the Middle Ages. They had a brief independent republic again for a couple of years after the Bolshevik Revolution. But

this was a completely devastated place because it was taking in refugees from the Armenian genocide in Turkey in 1915–1916. All of this shaped the collective Armenian mentality. It left them with this fear of being killed, fear of reprisals, a need for belonging, a need for solidarity.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** How did these fears, and this sense of victimhood, affect the evolution of the conflict?

**De Waal:** In part, it explains the very strong emotional reaction in Armenia toward the cause of Karabakh Armenians. And it certainly meant that both sides escalated pretty quickly. In the Soviet Union, there

were no mechanisms for dialogue or for working things out through democratic means. Basically, the center decided what got done, and when the center broke down, no one decided what got done. The result? You end up with a conflict. And so, certainly, this fear of Turkey, fear of being massacred, was pervasive. And, ironically, it meant that Armenians engaged in some preemptive aggression against Azerbaijan, which only fed the whole cycle of violence.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And how did the violence start?

**De Waal:** It all happened within a few days. On February 20, 1988, there was



Young woman with photos, including her missing brother, at the Museum of Missing Soldiers in Stepanakert, Nagorny-Karabakh. Photo by Adam Jones (2015).

a resolution from the local Soviet of the Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan, asking for the transfer of Nagorny Karabakh from the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of Armenia. There was this huge naïveté that “justice” could be restored at the stroke of a pen. That Mikhail Gorbachev would sign the order and everything would miraculously turn out well. That Karabakhis would live in their homeland and this kind of nationalist dream would fill the Soviet vacuum that was being created.

At first, there were some isolated, violent incidents. People grew scared and started to flee. Within a few days there was a march by some Azerbai-

janis on Karabakh and two of them were killed, Azerbaijanis who had fled Armenia and turned up in this seaside town of Sumgait just north of Baku on the coast. It was a very poor, industrial, criminalized town. And they were telling tales of horror, which were exaggerated, but they were in a traumatized state, saying that they’d been thrown out of Armenia. The local leadership was out of town, and then, suddenly, this crowd—most of them not so much nationalists as opportunist thugs—started rampaging through the Armenian part of town and doing a classic pogrom, violently attacking Armenians. There were murders, there were rapes; it was pretty horrific. And it lasted twenty-four hours.

The Politburo was completely blindsided. They didn’t know what to do. It took twenty-four hours to deploy Interior Ministry troops to restore order. By that time, twenty-six Armenians and six Azerbaijanis had been killed. The six Azerbaijanis were killed mainly by Soviet troops. Many more were injured.

Hundreds of Armenians were taking refuge in a building. One of my most extraordinary interviewees was this guy called Grigory Kharchenko, who was basically the first official from Moscow to arrive on the scene trying to restore order. He gave this incredibly vivid interview about what he had seen there. The Armenians





in the building took him hostage at one point, in order to guarantee their own safety. These were completely unprecedented scenes in peacetime Soviet Union, and it was a point when the political system started to melt down. As a result, there was this massive outflow of Armenians fleeing from Azerbaijan. There were reprisals in Armenia against Azerbaijanis. So just one week after the resolution on February 20, everything was pretty much out of control and remained so from that point on.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And what's the relationship like between Karabakh Armenians and Armenians on the mainland?

**De Waal:** So, Karabakh is this highland territory that's quite geographically separate from the Republic of Armenia, eastern Armenia. They speak a very different dialect. I don't speak Armenian, but, even to my ear, it's fairly obvious. They also have a very different history. They're more pro-Russian. This is partly because, during the Soviet years, many of them didn't go to Baku to study—they didn't want to go to the regional capital of Azerbaijan; they went straight to Moscow. They're fluent Russian speakers. Both Karabakh Armenians who've been president of Armenia, Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sarkisian, certainly used to speak better Russian than they do Armenian, although they wouldn't admit that publicly. So, they have a very different mentality as well.

Karabakh Armenians are famous for being more stubborn, being good fighters. And what we've seen throughout this conflict is the



(Top) Armenian village guards from Nagorno-Karabakh (1918–1921); photo by Movses Melkumian (1891–1937). (Bottom) Tank monument near Mayraberd (Askeran), Nagorno-Karabakh; photo by Adam Jones (2015).

Karabakh tail wagging the Armenian dog. This small group of Karabakh Armenians has basically dominated Armenian politics, and they've kind of set the course of modern Armenian history, where defending Karabakh has been the number one priority. And this is a bit of a paradox, because Karabakhis as a people are often rather unpopular and disliked in Yerevan because they are perceived to have taken over. There's even a joke that you hear in Armenian—that first the Karabakh Armenians occupied Azerbaijan, and then they occupied Armenia.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** How did regular citizens feel about the conflict when it started?

**De Waal:** In my book, I have a lot of examples of Armenians and Azerbaijanis who were friends and didn't want to fight each other and even passed messages to one another across the radio while the conflict was going on. "How are you getting along?" "How is it on the other side?" This was a conflict between neighbors who didn't really want to fight but were forced into it.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And you played a role in passing messages back and forth between the two sides. Can you discuss some of the experiences you had?

**De Waal:** When I started writing the book, I decided that I wasn't just going to try to be an academic author. I was interested in trying to be helpful in the conflict. If anyone, whether a politician or an ordinary person, wanted to send a message to the other side, I would try and help

them send that message. And when people said things that I disagreed with or thought were untrue, I wouldn't just keep silent. I would actually engage them in dialogue and try to give them a different point of view. I met a lot of people who'd been displaced. There was one Armenian lady from Baku, whom I met while she was working as kind of a hotel servant in Armenia, in pretty poor circumstances. She really missed Baku, and I was able to deliver a message back to her friends there, who hadn't heard from her for years. In another instance, I met a group of Azerbaijanis in Baku who were from Shusha, a town in Karabakh that had been a major center of Azerbaijani culture. They, too, really missed their homes. I passed a message to some of the Armenian friends they'd grown up with in Shusha. It was very touching; quite difficult, at times, too, because there was obviously resentment there as well as friendship.

There was one case where an Azerbaijani from Shusha gave me the address to his old apartment and asked me to check whether or not it was still there. The town was pretty badly destroyed during the war, but his apartment was still standing. There was an Armenian lady leaning over the balcony. She invited us up, and we had a friendly conversation that turned a little bit tense as it became clear that I'd actually met the previous occupant. It was a very complicated story, because this woman had had her house burned by some Azerbaijanis during the war, and then found this apartment in Shusha. So, the question was: "Who does this apartment belong to? Does it belong to the guy who was thrown out and

**There was this huge naïveté that "justice" could be restored at the stroke of a pen.**

now lives in Baku, or does it belong to this Armenian lady who's found a home because she lost hers?" In a way, it belongs to them both.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Was the swap of houses governed by any official body?

**De Waal:** I think in the beginning it was pretty improvised. But then I'm sure there was some kind of system. More recently, it became much more organized and people were allocated to houses. And then, of course, on the Azerbaijani side, all these hundreds of thousands of IDPs [internally displaced persons], refugees—many of them lived in tent camps for ten, fifteen years until they were rehoused. There was nowhere for them to go.

It's a great tragedy. More than a million people were displaced in a very small region. Many of those people were displaced from towns and cities that are not very far from where they ended up, but they could never go back or see their original homes. There was a lot of loss and longing.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And you mentioned that there had been a lot of intermarriage between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. What happened to those couples during and after the conflict?

**De Waal:** A lot of people went to Russia. A few stayed in Azerbaijan,



but mostly they went abroad. I actually got a letter from someone in Australia; I think she was of mixed parentage. She wrote: “As far as I was concerned the world went mad when that conflict started, and I ended up in Australia. Thank you for writing a book that describes the conflict and describes my life. It makes me feel a little bit saner.” There are people like that all over the world.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** How did the collapse of the Soviet Union affect the evolution of events?

**De Waal:** You could make an argument that this conflict was the first stone in the avalanche of territorial conflicts that ended the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union collapsed, it became a conflict between two states, the newly independent states of Armenia and Azerbaijan. This gave a certain trump card to Azerbaijan, because the world recognized the territorial integrity of these new states on the basis of Soviet borders. Armenians could argue for as long as they wanted that this was a border drawn by Stalin, but this was de jure how the world recognized the former Soviet states. Then, in 1994, Armenia won the conflict by capturing not just Karabakh itself, but all of the surrounding regions as well—a much bigger territory, and certainly home to a lot more people.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** How were the Armenians able to do this?

**De Waal:** There are three reasons why the Armenians won the conflict. First, they were better organized, and they organized earlier. Second, there was Russian help to both sides, but Russia ended up helping the



Facade with boy walking, Shusha, Nagorno-Karabakh. Photo by Adam Jones (2015).

Armenians more. They got more weapons and fuel and things like that. Third—and I think this was the major reason—Azerbaijan was in complete political turmoil; there was political infighting and massive instability, after which eventually Heidar Aliev, the old Communist leader, came back to power. A lot of people in Baku were more interested in capturing power than they were in defending Karabakh or the regions around it; so many of them fell without a fight.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Can you discuss Russia’s role?

**De Waal:** This is probably the most confusing question of all in what is already a confusing conflict. When

we look at other conflicts in the region—in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, Ukraine—we see a definite Russian role, a definite Russian strategy. In this case, the Kremlin has multiple agendas, probably more so on the Armenian side if we consider the larger picture, but, at certain significant moments, on the Azerbaijani side as well. Certainly, at the beginning, when Moscow rejected the central Armenian demand for Karabakh Armenians to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia.

When the war started things became even more complicated because the Russian military got involved. And we have evidence of Russian tank drivers and Russian air



Soldiers of the Army of Azerbaijan during Karabakh War (1992–93). Photo by Ilgar Jafarov.

pilots participating in some of the '92 battles in Karabakh on both sides. But it's difficult to tell how many of them were actually sent there by the Russian army—some of them were Russian officers left behind in the Caucasus after the Soviet collapse, who signed up for the states of Armenia and Azerbaijan as freelance fighters in order to earn some income.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** But there is clear evidence that Russia sold weapons to the Armenians . . .

**De Waal:** Yes, that is another factor. In 2000, I interviewed Levon Ter-Petrosian, who was a leading politician in Armenia and then its president from 1991 until he was

forced to resign in '98 in a kind of palace coup. Ter-Petrosian said a number of interesting things, including confirming something that many had already suspected—that Russians had sold a lot of weapons to the Armenians. He told me that they had done this in order to preserve a military balance, because the Azerbaijanis had a stronger army. “Yeltsin would be pretty tough about not selling me more than he thought I was due,” he told me. There was one famous incident where Ter-Petrosian actually flew to St. Petersburg to plead with Yeltsin. So, this tells us that Russia's strategic interest was not so much about the Armenians winning the conflict as the Armenians not losing the conflict.

**This was a conflict between neighbors who didn't really want to fight but were forced into it.**

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And how did the two sides come to a ceasefire agreement in '94?

**De Waal:** By that point, the Armenians had captured enough territory to secure what they would regard as a buffer zone around Karabakh. Some wanted to carry on fighting, but I think, in general, they had tired themselves out. The





U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan before a meeting on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in Vienna (May 16, 2016).

fighting was getting more intense, the weapons were getting stronger, more people were dying, and the war was becoming less popular. And the Azerbaijani side was exhausted. Heidar Aliyev wanted to consolidate power in Baku, and he agreed to a ceasefire in order to consolidate his own power.

And the Russians mediated the ceasefire. Their goal was to get a Russian peacekeeping force on the ground, as they had done in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That would have given the Russians leverage. But neither side wanted the Russians there, because it would give them too much power, so you had a ceasefire without any peacekeepers.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** You've called the resulting situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan one of the worst "peace" periods in history. What did you mean?

**De Waal:** I've described it as a "Karabakh trap," in which the leaders decide not to have a proper dialogue with society about how they can get out of this situation; how they can make compromises, make peace. They prefer to pursue the nationalist narrative of the conflict, which helps them politically at home. But that means that when they do talk to the other side about peace, they've suddenly got problems at home; because of this nationalist narrative, 99 percent of the population isn't interested in peace. Leaders have created a context in which there's no support for peace, even though they know deep down that this is in the long-term interest of their countries. For that reason, the whole thing is stuck in a vicious cycle that doesn't have any way forward.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** At the same time, there's an anecdote in your book

describing Azerbaijani and Armenian soldiers on the border swapping cigarettes and stories. They don't actually want to be fighting . . .

**De Waal:** I think people who actually fight the wars and deal with the other side are often the most peace-loving because they understand the cost of violence, they understand what it's about. Who actually wants to go kill in the name of a political slogan?

And you still see a basis of pragmatism in ordinary people. In Georgia, for instance, outside the conflict zones, there are Armenian villages with mixed Armenian and Azerbaijani populations. They happen to live in areas outside the political context of the conflict, and they find ways of getting along. So, I believe that if a decision was made to pursue peace, the population could go along with it. Unfortunately, I just don't see how to get from here to there.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** The construction of the BTC [Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan] pipeline has had quite an impact on the conflict's status quo. Can you discuss that?

**De Waal:** This is a major new factor since the ceasefire in the region. The new Azerbaijani oil boom in the Caspian Sea, led by a number of Western oil companies, BP in particular, resulted in a new major Western oil export route from the Caspian to the Mediterranean. That was opened in 2006, and it did a few things. It gave Western oil companies a strategic role in the region; it anchored Azerbaijan and Georgia as a transit route to Europe and the West; and it also made Azerbaijan incredibly wealthy for ten years. There was an enormous influx of wealth, some

of which was spent on useful things such as rehousing refugees, and infrastructure, and so on, and a lot of which has been, unfortunately, wasted or stolen. And also spent on weapons. This is the other major significance of the BTC pipeline: Azerbaijan massively boosted its defense budget after having had this very weak army in the '90s. Now it has some very formidable weapons—aviation, drones, heavy artillery, and long-range missiles—which it uses to intimidate the Armenian side.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** So the weaker military side remains the winner of the conflict, but the military balance has shifted.

**De Waal:** That's right. The Armenians still have the advantage of having won the conflict and captured the territory. They are holding the high ground. And, obviously, it's easier to defend that than to fight if there were to be a new conflict. *Ne dai bog* [God forbid], as the Russians say. Let's hope that doesn't happen. So this is where we are at the moment. We had a kind of low-tech conflict that ended in the 1990s and a rather low-tech ceasefire with no peacekeepers and militaries on either side of these trenches, and now, suddenly, you have this incredibly militarized zone with two very well-equipped armies on either side of the trenches. Rationally, neither side really wants to fight a war. They both have much to lose. Yet the risks of a miscalculation or a misjudgment are huge, and we saw in April of 2016 this so-called four-day war in which about 200 people died, which I think is a dangerous portent to what could happen again, unfortunately.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And how likely do you think it is that something will happen again?

**De Waal:** I'm quite worried, to be honest. I think there's a danger of misjudgment, miscalculation

of some kind of small operation getting bigger; and if that happens . . . A few years ago that would just have been a very low intensity thing, but now, given the scale of the weaponry they have, it could blow out of control, and at that

(*Top*) U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev before a meeting on the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict, in Vienna (May 16, 2016). (*Bottom*) Homemade rifle with photo of mourning at the Museum of Fallen Soldiers in Stepanakert, Nagorny-Karabakh; photo by Adam Jones (2015).





point you factor in all the political calculations. Once you've started something there's a lot of pressure not to stop and not to back down. So I think there's a real danger that we could see another flare-up.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And what can we learn from this conflict about conflicts in general and how they start and evolve?

**De Waal:** I'm glad you asked that question, because it's certainly something that is very much on

my mind. One thing that interests me is the issue of identity, of how we all have not just one identity but multiple identities—within our family, our work, our region; but obviously there's national identity as well. What a political conflict situation does is it starts to put you into categories, and that results in having to make choices. And that includes people in mixed marriages and someone who's got an Armenian mother and an Azerbaijani father. They're suddenly told, "OK, there's this argument, this dispute, and you have to choose: which side are you on?" That, in turn, leads you to regard the other side as the "other," to demonize them, to cease contact with them. I guess what I'm saying is that conflicts start when people start to see another category of people as "other," when identity boundaries harden. Only when that happens is it possible to start fighting.

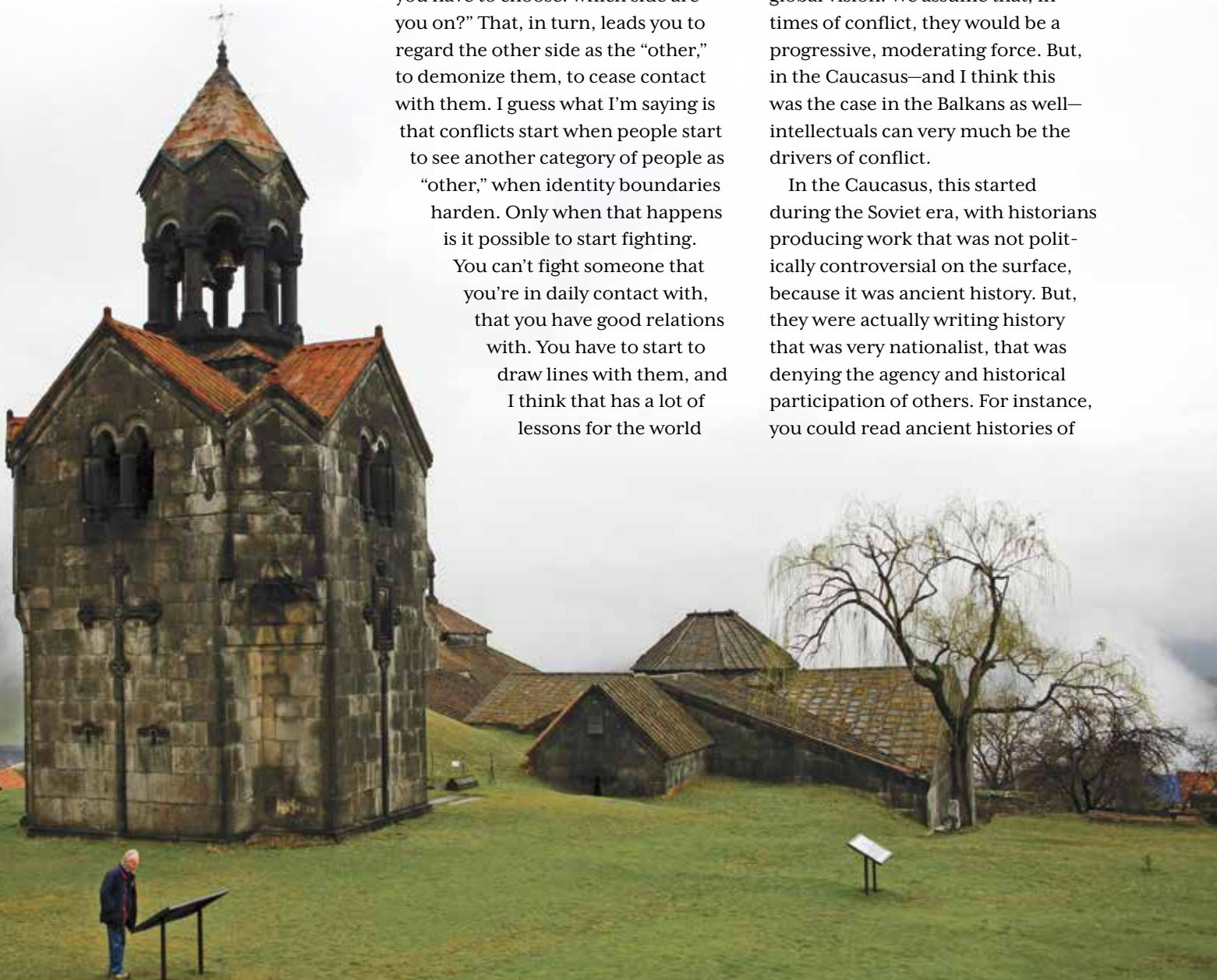
You can't fight someone that you're in daily contact with, that you have good relations with. You have to start to draw lines with them, and I think that has a lot of lessons for the world

in general. That's certainly how this conflict started.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** What I found really striking in your book is the big role that academics played in shaping the conflict. Can you talk about that?

**De Waal:** This is a very interesting one. In Western countries, we tend to think of academics as the kind of *New York Review of Books*-reading class, the sort of people who want to seek compromise, and understand all points of view; who have a global vision. We assume that, in times of conflict, they would be a progressive, moderating force. But, in the Caucasus—and I think this was the case in the Balkans as well—intellectuals can very much be the drivers of conflict.

In the Caucasus, this started during the Soviet era, with historians producing work that was not politically controversial on the surface, because it was ancient history. But, they were actually writing history that was very nationalist, that was denying the agency and historical participation of others. For instance, you could read ancient histories of



Armenia and Karabakh, written by the Armenian side, that don't even mention the word "Azerbaijani." There are also whole histories written by Azerbaijanis that don't even mention Armenia. And the Azerbaijanis came up with this bizarre theory about how the Caucasian Albanians, this national group who most people think died out about a millennium ago, have mysteriously lived on and were inhabiting Karabakh; that the Karabakh Armenians were not proper Armenians but Caucasian Albanians. Intellectuals were very much the drivers of the nationalist narrative, which was used in reaction to the Soviet system. When conflict broke out, they were some of the most implacable people, wanting to see it continue.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Do they continue to play a role today?

**De Waal:** They do. Maybe not as much. What we're seeing now is a kind of internet culture, where a lower level of intellectual discourse that relies on a few myths, a few conspiracy theories, drives the mentality. But it started from these intellectuals forty years ago.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And what role has this internet culture played?

**De Waal:** Unfortunately, 90 percent of what's on the internet is myth-making, it's hate speech, it's misrepresentation, it's conspiracy theories; and there's a lot of that in this conflict. And what this means is that the younger generations who have grown up with this conflict, but weren't alive when the Soviet Union existed—many of these young Armenians or Azerbaijanis have

never met an Azerbaijani or an Armenian. They've grown up with a very simplistic, clichéd, black-and-white view of this conflict, which is then unfortunately perpetuated by the internet.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** The book came out in 2003, and you published a second edition ten years later, in 2013. Why did you decide to do this?

**De Waal:** The book obviously found a niche on the market. It was the first book on the conflict that tried to deal with how it started and what happened from both sides. It was translated into Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani; into Turkish as well—so it was a resource for people. A few years after it was published, I looked around and saw that there was still no new major text on this conflict, but quite a lot of things had happened since. So, I talked to my publisher, and we decided I would

work on a new edition. The text did not change; I corrected a few small things, added a new chapter, and that's what happened.

But, that's it; I'm not going to do another edition. It can be quite difficult dealing with this conflict. Anything you write attracts angry comments from Armenians or Azerbaijanis. I wrote something warning of the dangers of war in 2017, and then on Twitter someone accused me of being pro-Armenian. Fortunately, someone else wrote, "it's well-known that you take Azerbaijani oil money." So I was able to connect those two people and say, "You better talk to each other and sort it out among yourselves." I'm glad I wrote this book, but I don't want to be living with the Nagorny Karabakh conflict until the end of time! So I think that having done the update, and now giving you this archive, is a way to draw a line on my main contribution to this field. ■



*Above:* Shusha, Nagorny-Karabakh, in February. Photo by Ilgar Jafarov (1992).  
*Opposite page:* Haghpat Monastery in Nagorny-Karabakh. Photo by Saro Hovhannisyan (2011).