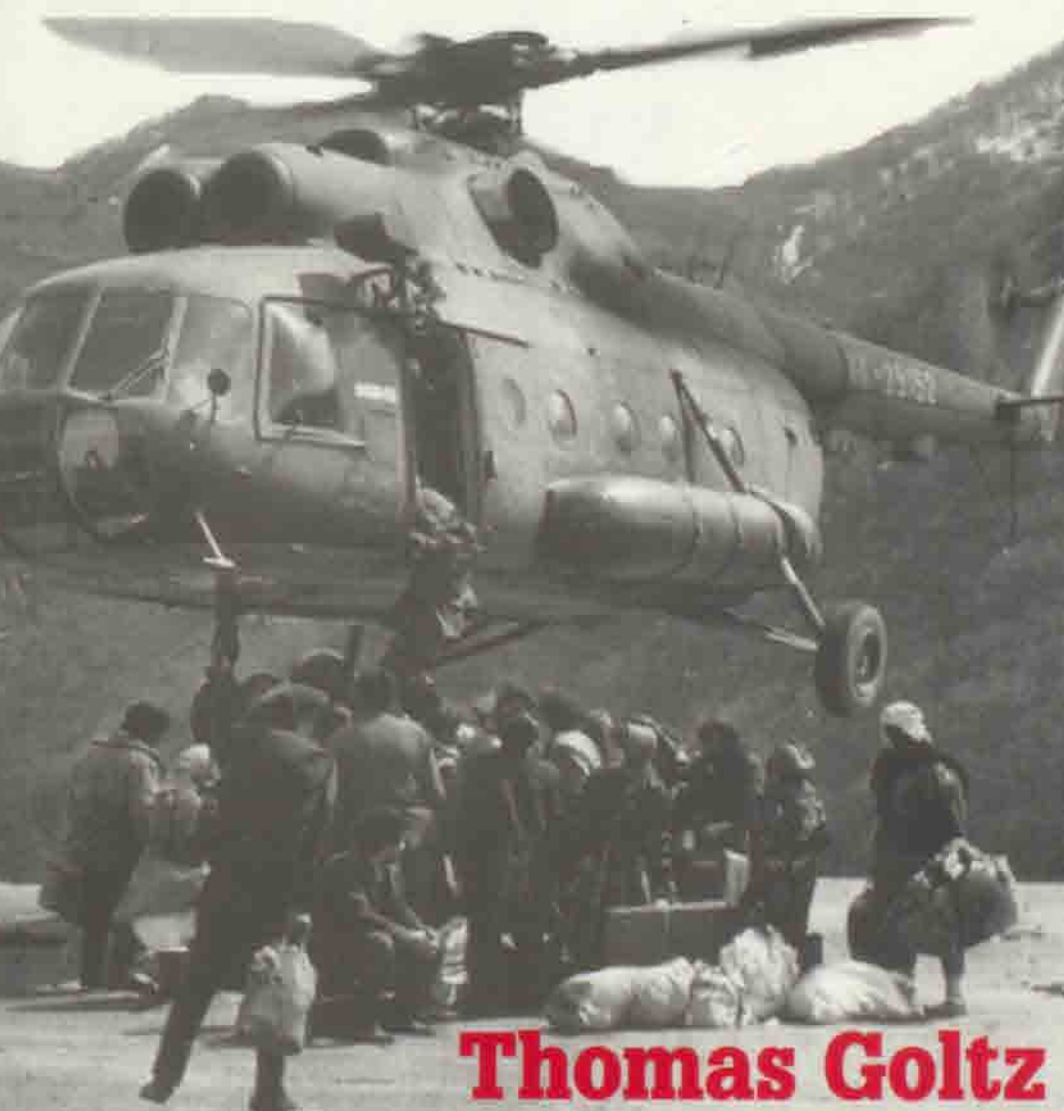


**A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an  
Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic**

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# **Azerbaijan Diary**



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Post-Soviet Republic**

**Thomas Goltz**

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**For Hicran**

# Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments and Special Thanks	xiii
Prologue	xv
1. Getting There Fair and Square	3
2. A Distant Coup	37
3. Friday Evening on Freedom Square	44
4. Karabakh: The Black Garden	74
5. Home Sweet Baku	89
6. A Reborn Republic	106
7. Xodjali	117
8. Slithering in the Swamp	131
9. Of Militias and Mamed the Mule	149
10. A Diversion Through the Islamic Republic of Iran	155
11. Riding the Roller Coaster	177
12. Coup Redux	199
13. From Ballots to Bullets	215
14. An Army Stumbles Forward	231
15. Alla Turca	250
16. Of War—and Oil	262
17. Corruption in the Ranks	280
18. Rumbblings of Dissent	290
19. The Snow Job	299
20. Kelbajar	322
21. The Lull Before the Storm	348
22. The Crowbar—Or Heydar Comes Home	366
23. Meanwhile, Back at the Front . . .	393
24. Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan . . .	407
25. Scars on the Soul	426
Epilogue	445
Index	488

**Maps appear on pages  
xxvi—xxx.**

**Photographs follow pages  
116, 154, 298, and 406**

## History As Contact Journalism

The original intent of this book was to tell the story of the Republic of Azerbaijan from its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 to its decision to join the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1993. The working title of the draft manuscript, published obscurely in Istanbul in 1994, was 'Requiem for a Would-be Republic.'

The reason I selected that thoroughly depressing title was that it fit with the tenor of the times. Azerbaijan looked like it was about to fall apart, and not too many people seemed to care. It was being held up as a classic example of a 'failed state,' a place marked by such an appalling level of chaos, confusion, and self-destruction that it almost did not deserve to exist. It was not a pretty picture, but it was the way things were and it was from that eye-witness experience that the original 'Requiem' emerged. And, because the historical facts have not changed, it is that experience which remains the flesh and bones of the current work, no matter how unflattering to many of the actors within it, the author included.

The change in the title of this edition of the book, however, should speak volumes. No longer a dirge for a dead country, it is now a diary account of the rebirth, in blood and agony, of a post-Soviet republic with a future. No one can be happier than I am that the prediction implicit in that first title was at the very least premature, if not down-right wrong, and the author thus wishes to be the first to express how delighted he is that Azerbaijan *still is*.

Indeed, Azerbaijan has now taken its place on the map and in the popular imagination in a way that was almost inconceivable a few short years ago. The reason, of course, is oil. Between November 1994 and November 1997, some \$30 billion in contracts have been signed between the government in Baku and a veritable alphabet soup of oil companies, all



of whom (along with the governments that back them) now have a large, vested interest in insuring Azerbaijan's continued existence as an independent state and, one hopes, as a very prosperous one. A vast material difference is already evident between 'my' Baku of the bad old days, when it was impossible to find a new toilet seat, and the current boom-town on the shores of the Caspian Sea, where Mercedes dealerships are springing up like hydrocarbon-fed mushrooms.

This is not to say that everything is completely rosy. Different power factions in Moscow continue to cajole and threaten Baku by turns, while Washington both claims the Caspian as part of the new American energy future and imposes sanctions against Azerbaijan. Article 907 of the Freedom Support Act, generated by the Armenian lobby in Congress, marks the country as a political pariah, undeserving of American aid and assistance. If not resolved, the outrageous contradiction between these two positions is bound to have future repercussions—especially in light of the fact that Armenia continues to occupy some 20 percent of Azerbaijan, and nearly one in seven Azeris live as internal refugees in their own country.

The reason for this sad state of affairs, of course, was and is the ghastly eight-year war over the disputed territory of Mountainous (Nagorno) Karabakh, which resulted in over 30,000 dead (mainly Azeris) and untold misery before grinding to the no war/no peace situation that persists today. Detailing the progress of that tragedy from the Azerbaijani side of the lines is a major theme of this book, as is the intimately related rise and fall of the Popular Front government of Abulfaz Elchibey.

So, too, is the amazing return to power of that amazing survivor, Heydar Aliyev. Through gutsy political realism, cynical manipulation, and just plain force of personality, Aliyev has effectively become the father of his modern country and a leader to be reckoned with in the Caucasus region, Central Asia, and the wider world.

This is an essential point, because it suggests not only the flexibility of Heydar and his ability to react to changing political circumstance, but also the dangers involved for people like myself who write about contemporary history—the old problem of 'shooting at a moving target,' as it were. Not everything is always at it seems at first blink. Political actors *do* change their attitudes, and they often do not reveal their real intent early on. In the case of Heydar Aliyev, who is still referred to as a dubious Soviet holdover in much of the Western media, the attendant distortions between perceptions and reality are vast. In an effort to try and capture this dynamic of change, I have left the bulk of the original 'Requiem' text essentially as it was, 'correcting' it with a new Epilogue. The modifications I have made to the text consist of cutting back for the sake of space and incidental editing for

the sake of clarity (and ridding the text of egregious typos). The original 'Requiem' was cast as a sort of annotated diary, a journey of discovery on which the reader was invited to travel with the writer as his or her perhaps imperfect yet enthusiastic guide. I see no reason to alter that approach with hindsight.

\* \* \*

The scholarly reader may take issue with the first-person style of writing and the virtual lack of academic-style footnotes. The reason for the paucity of reference to 'others' is that I have seen far too many examples of bad sourcing in the press and in scholarly articles on Azerbaijan to believe anything not witnessed by me (or by someone whose honesty and integrity I can vouch for). That was so when I completed the first version of this book in 1994 and remains so today.

I then called this approach and still refer to it as 'History As Contact Journalism.' If you don't get bumped around a bit (as in 'blood' sports like football and ice hockey), you have no business talking (or writing) about a place like Azerbaijan and indeed, the Caucasus as a whole. Those of us who lived through the chaos and violence of the region in the post-Soviet era are a small club of very picky people ('informational shock-troops' was how one observer put it) when it comes to differentiating fact from fiction. There was a lot of the latter floating around during the early years, and there is still a lot floating around half a decade later.

A related theme that has been carried over to the new edition is the assault on conventional wisdom, especially that which has become common in the Western media. I said it in the first preface and I will repeat it again now: the screening of sources has collapsed, and virtually anything can become 'news' (the first step to becoming 'fact') so long as it has a pedigree—no matter what that pedigree is. I can detail dozens of cases of how a non-event or factoid moves down the informational pipeline from local news sources to Reuters to the *New York Times* before being quoted in scholarly articles and now, the first generation of scholarly books on the region.

A classic example concerns Heydar Aliyev: If one is to believe a *Washington Post* report on Aliyev's visit to the Oval Office in August 1997, Heydar was a 'member of Leonid Brezhnev's Politburo,' was 'driven from office in 1991,' but then managed to 'seize power again' through a 'Moscow-inspired military coup' in 1993. There is so much wrong with this construction that I scarcely know where to begin. While Heydar was a member of the Brezhnev circle of cronies, he was first brought into the

xii ■ PREFACE

Kremlin by Yuri Andropov. In 1991, he was not in power in Baku, but in self-imposed seclusion in Naxjivan. And as for his alleged seizure of power in 1993, this can only be described as a nasty, simplistic, and ultimately incorrect interpretation of very convoluted events. But because it was so written in the *Washington Post*, this pernicious version of the career and personal history of Heydar Aliyev (and modern Azerbaijan) has become a quotable fact. I have the arrogance to suggest to the reporters, editorial writers, and, ultimately, scholars of the period and place that they take the time to wade through this opus before furthering the promotion of 'facts' based on repetitive errors.

Lastly, I would like to end this preface on the same note that I concluded the original: a hope that a lot of readers will find the story of a rasty character from Montana wandering around Caucasian war zones sufficiently weird to command interest as an adventure, pure and simple. If the plethora of obscure names and references confuse, think of yourself as the idealistic hero of the *Doonesbury* comic strip who finds himself called on by the new Clinton White House to do some troubleshooting in a post-Soviet place so distant he has to call his mother to find out where it is on a map. Although probably better equipped with languages than the *Doonesbury* character, I was essentially that guy, boarding an aircraft bound to Baku in the summer of 1991, not even really aware of where I was going until I got there.

Thomas Goltz  
Livingston, Montana  
December 1997

## Acknowledgments and Special Thanks

Many people helped make this book possible. First and foremost, I will thank Dr. Hicran Öge Goltz, who tolerated not only my frequent absences but my frequent excesses, too. This book is dedicated to her.

Next in line comes Peter Bird Martin, the executive director of the Crane-Rogers (ICWA) foundation, which supported me through the first years of the Azerbaijan venture. Peter convinced the ICWA trustees to accept my unilateral transfer of my 'Central Asian' fellowship to the Caucasus. I also would like to thank a number of editors who had the thankless task of dealing with me at my petulant worst. David Ignatius and Jodie Allan of the *Washington Post* are high on the list of those due thanks mixed with apologies. Ditto for 'Wild Bill' Holstein of *Business Week*.

Special thanks, too, are owed to Alexis Rowell of the BBC, another proponent of 'contact journalism,' who dragged me into places I did not want to go; Cengiz and Laura for hand-holding and ego-stroking; Elef, Nejla, Liam, Larry, Hugh, and Steve, traveling companions along the highways and byways of the Caucasus, as well as the late great Rory Peck, killed doing what the few of us do for a living. Big and Little Nana, Nata, and Nino are owed thanks for help and assistance in Tbilisi and Yerevan. Tehran would not have been Tehran without Farzin. Barry of British Petroleum and Ed of Amoco were less tight-lipped than most oilmen, and took the time to explain aspects of that vitally important subject to me, as did the late Mary Jo Klostermann of Exxon (and Shanely High School, Fargo, North Dakota). Philip Remler and Robert Finn of the American embassy in Baku were friends before they were diplomats and shared much with me that the 'hack-pack' never knew or would not learn. The same goes for Mehmet Ali Bayar of the Turkish embassy. Audrey Altstadt's support for my taking an interest in 'her' Azerbaijan was continual and deep. Thanks, too, to all the academics and institutions that had me drop by for guest

xiv ■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND SPECIAL THANKS

lectures during the course of return visits to the United States. The 'circuit' gave me a chance to develop the ideas for this book, and discussion with experts on other, related areas (Russia, Armenia, Georgia) added depth of understanding to regional issues and nuances thereof. Robinder Bhatti of Columbia came through with moral support (and a Ph.D. dissertation subject based in part on my work) when I was convinced that no one else in this world cared about my experience. I also would like to thank my old pal Robert Scott Mason for his critical reading of the manuscript and insistence that I publish it at length and not in an abridged version. Diana Finch of the Ellen Levine Literary Agency and Patricia Kolb of M.E. Sharpe Publishers were patient far beyond the call of duty. Dan and Kathleen Kaul of the Murray Hotel in Livingston took care of me when I was seriously down and out.

Lastly, I have to thank all the citizens of Azerbaijan—including Vafa, Kubrah, Kazanfer, Niyazi, Elfrieda, Gala, Rosa, Mustafa, Yusuf, and others who opened their homes, offices and front-line lives to me during the period we shared together. There were good times, but on balance I think the bad outweighed them. Let's hope the future corrects the present to balance the past.

## Prologue

In the heights above Baku, in what was formerly a festive park named after Stalin's comrade in arms, Marshal Sergei Kirov, rows of silent faces stare out from steel and glass tombstones tucked beneath a canopy of dwarf pine.

This is the *Shehidler Xiyabani*, or "Martyrs' Lane," the cemetery devoted to the memory of those killed in the cause of achieving the independence of the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. It is, as it should be, a quiet and solemn place, and over the years I have found myself spending quite a bit of time there, walking the lanes and remembering. I usually lift my palms to the sky and repeat the *Fatihah* after placing a red carnation or two on the graves of friends and strangers. I am not a Muslim, but reciting the creed seems appropriate, at least for me.

The Martyrs' Lane in Baku is the second such cemetery on the same spot. The first was devoted to those who died, creating and then, defending the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918. Founded in the wake of the First World War, that republic collapsed into the waiting arms of the Bolsheviks in 1920, unable to support itself due to internal wrangling and outside meddling. The cemetery subsequently was dug up to make room for the pleasure park, and a huge statue of Kirov, the 'Lenin of the Caucasus,' was erected nearby.

The original park was reconsecrated after the last president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, ordered the Soviet Army to roll on Baku to quell anti-Armenian rioting that had in fact ended a week before. The so-called pogroms had been sparked by events beginning in 1988 in Mountainous Karabakh, where local Armenians had declared their intention to secede from Azerbaijan. So emotional was the Karabakh issue and the related January 20, 1990, Baku massacre that even the Azerbaijani Communist Party was obliged to get aboard the nationalist bandwagon. To prove their patriotism, they closed a lovers' lane and rededicated the park to the memory of the victims of Black January, etching the names and images of eighty victims into a gray marble