



Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus by Gerard Toal.

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In *Near Abroad*, political geographer Gerard Toal (Virginia Tech–Washington) presents a fresh and valuable overview of Russian policies in the Caucasus and Ukraine, as well as Western (primarily US) reactions to them. He highlights NATO’s April 2008 Bucharest Declaration proclaiming that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join the organization; the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war; and events in Ukraine since February 2014. These most recent developments include the overthrow of Russian-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea, a “strategic blunder for many reasons” (281). Toal provides ample background to understand these subjects and proposes a conceptual approach—“critical geopolitics” (8)—that is usefully more flexible and less deterministic than classic geopolitics. He emphasizes

the necessary emotional foundations of rational thinking; the importance of embodied affect in human thinking; and the significance of the vast substratum of thinking that is automatic and unconscious, below or barely at the level of consciousness, ... [arguing that] an affective geopolitics is at work in the foreign policy practices of both the United States and Russia, one that activates historic myths and heroic self-images while framing adversaries as equivalent to historic enemies (Hitler, Nazism, fascism). (12–13)

His thinking here is akin to that of political philosopher Martha Nussbaum.¹ Toal also adopts an empathetic attitude to Russian geopolitical culture, well aware that it will not prove popular in the West.

Currently, any empathetic presentation of Russian geopolitical discourse in the West today faces social opprobrium. There is fear that using Putin’s words or presenting his perspective will somehow legitimate his point of view—that it will infect thought and confuse or relativize what should be clear moral distinctions.... Some are quick to label those who present empathetic readings of Putin’s discourse as “apologists.”... I believe this reflex serves U.S. and Western geopolitical culture poorly and inhibits our ability to understand the contemporary geopolitical crisis in relations between Russia and the West. It also displays a lack of confidence in the outcome of any presentation of divergent narratives. (11–12)

This type of empathy calls to mind Zachary Shore’s notion of “strategic empathy”—“the skill of stepping out of our own heads and into the minds of others.”² Shore believes this is “an essential first step” toward settling most conflicts peacefully. “It is what allows us to pinpoint what truly drives and constrains the other side. Unlike stereotypes, which lump people into simplistic categories, strategic empathy distinguishes what is unique about individuals and their situation.”³ Such empathy does not imply agreement or uncritical acceptance; it merely helps enlighten us.

1. See, e.g., her *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2013).

2. *A Sense of the Enemy: The High Stakes History of Reading Your Rival’s Mind* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2014) 2; see my review at *MiWSR* 2016-019. Shore’s viewpoint has been gaining adherents: see, e.g., Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, rev. ed. (Washington: Brookings Inst Pr, 2015) 5. In March 2017, President Donald Trump appointed Hill to his National Security Council staff as senior director for European and Russian Affairs.

3. Shore, *ibid.*, 2, 189.

Toal's book comprises eight chapters and an introduction explaining that Russian politicians first began using the key term "Near Abroads" in 1992 to denote the fourteen former Soviet Republics that had become independent countries.

In chapter 1, "Why Does Russia Invade Its Neighbors?" the author expresses his "deep dissatisfaction with the two storylines that are used to explain Russia's invasions within Western capitals, most especially within the United States" (20). The first condemns Russia for being imperialistic and exerting a domineering influence over its borderlands. The second, so-called "realist" position, is less judgmental, yet still casts Russia as bullying its neighbors, but more from geographical insecurities than any inherent cultural traits. Toal faults both approaches for not being empirical or contextual enough, but driven by schematic and preconceived thinking. As political philosopher Isaiah Berlin once put it, "What matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness."⁴

Chapter 2, "Geopolitical Catastrophe," concerns the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Boris Yeltsin era, and Vladimir Putin's subsequent agenda. Like Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy,⁵ Toal considers Putin an exponent of "a conservative statist philosophy, one that has pragmatic respect for what makes the state strong" (88). Revanchism, "a desire ... to recover past position, power, and status, [but] not inevitably about territorial aggrandizement," characterizes Putin's position. In short, he wishes to "make Russia great again" (89).⁶ Although Toal employs strategic empathy to better understand Putin, he is not "soft" on him. For instance, he accuses him of lying to foreign leaders during the takeover of Crimea.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5⁷ treat post-Soviet Georgia. Toal details the special relationship that Georgian presidents Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili cultivated with the United States. The latter, who received a degree from Columbia Law School (1994), served two presidential terms (2004–13), astutely gaining US support for Georgia from, among others, President George W. Bush and Senator John McCain. He tried to leverage their backing to regain control of Georgia's two breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia: "This attempt ended up precipitating the [Russo-Georgian] August 2008 war, for which Saakashvili bears considerable responsibility" (14). Eschewing any simplistic analysis of events, Toal stresses the complexities of Ossetian and Abkhazian relations with Georgia and Russia. He also clarifies why the hopes of Saakashvili and various American politicians that Georgia might join NATO aroused Russian fears and suspicions of Georgia and the West.

Chapters 6 and 7,⁸ shift to Ukraine and its relations with both Russia and the West, especially the United States and NATO. Toal describes the lead-up to the "invasion of Crimea in late February 2014 and ... its subsequent annexation" (14), as well as Russia's role in fomenting revolt in Eastern Ukraine, especially in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. He also details why the Novorossiia project was not more successful.

The government of Catherine the Great gave the name "Novorossiia" to a new Russian province north of the Black Sea, acquired in wars with Turkey. But, starting in the 1990s, the designation was (controversially) associated with various areas in and near the former province. Some pro-Russians in Odessa, pointing to its mixed ethnic population, believed Novorossiia should be an autonomous region in Ukraine. Later, some Russian nationalists who "combined conservative orthodox religious val-

4. "On Political Judgment," *NY Review of Books* (3 Oct. 1996) 26–30.

5. Note 2 above.

6. See also my "Is Vladimir Putin an Ideologue, Idealist, or Opportunist?" *History News Network* (3 May 2015).

7. Respectively, "A Cause in the Caucasus," "Territorial Integrity," and "Rescue Missions."

8. "Places Close to Our Hearts," and "The Novorossiia Project."

ues with imperialist nostalgia” (246) desired to make it part of an expanded Russia. In 2014, Toal was part of a team that polled people in Crimea and southeastern Ukraine (excepting Donetsk and Luhansk, where conflict was ongoing); they asked them whether Novorossiia was “a myth or historical fact.” And, if a fact, whether it could be “a basis for separation of Novorossiia from Ukraine?” (269). The poll found little popular support for any Novorossiyan secession from Ukraine, except in Crimea, where ethnic Russians outnumbered ethnic Ukrainians.

Toal’s last chapter, “Geopolitics Thick and Thin,” critiques the “thin” approach to geopolitics typical of both Russian and American political thought. Rather than relying on stereotypes and stale thinking, he prefers a “thick” analysis resting “on recognition of the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and people[,] grounded in the messy heterogeneity of the world” (279).

Having completed his book shortly after the US presidential election in November 2016, Toal recognizes that Donald Trump’s foreign policy may jettison old ways of thinking about Russia and geopolitics and warns that “xenophobic tendencies are flaring at a time when the common security threats facing all states—climate change, global pandemics, nuclear proliferation, information system vulnerabilities, and transnational terrorism—are acute and require greater levels of global cooperation and sovereignty pooling.... Collective effort and patient diplomacy are required” (302).

Gerard Toal has achieved his aim of providing a “deeper intellectual and moral understanding” (16) of the contest between Vladimir Putin and Western leaders over Ukraine and the Caucasus. *Near Abroad* is very much a book for our time.