



## Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus

by Gerard Toal, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2017, 387 pp., photos, maps, graphs, tables, notes, index. £22.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780190253301; £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780190069513

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal) the esteemed Irish political geographer has delivered a *tour-de-force* in *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. The book certainly has an acute relevance in light of the “post-factual” phenomena of BREXIT, Donald Trump’s 2016 election and 2019 impeachment, the latter aided by his political blunders in Ukraine and Russian “crony” Vladimir Putin, who in January 2020 accorded himself the status of “Neo-Tsar” with his Kremlin power-grab. Ó Tuathail is known for conceptualizing a seemingly postmodern critical, discursive and perceptual approach to geopolitics, in contrast to the *fin de siècle* work of respective British and German political geographers Halford MacKinder, and Friedrich Ratzel, who espoused “Great States” and world regional perspectives. However, in *Near Abroad*, Ó Tuathail, without dispensing his own theoretical underpinnings, turns to a more grounded, subtly commensurate geographic perspective, to trod the regional chess-board of Eastern Europe once played by Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev, George Kennan, Dean Acheson, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. He writes:

In Ireland, naming a town Kingstown or Dún Laoghaire, Londonderry, Derry conveys power and identity. The lands of the former Soviet Union have similar postcolonial contentious dynamics over place names ... thus the names and oblasts and other locations in Ukraine are from Ukrainian not Russian. I use Kyiv instead of Kiev, Donbas instead of Donbass, and Kharkiv instead of Kharkow. *Because language, privileging, place naming and territorial ownership are part of the contentious geopolitics examined in this book* (emphasis mine) (Toal 2017 pp. xvii-xviii).

This sublime perspective animates Ó Tuathail’s work as it teases out the complexities of “earth-writing” in a political geography of “red and blue states” and “axes of evil” proffered by the monosyllabic-saturated United States media culture of the twenty-first century. The aim of the book Ó Tuathail writes is to “examine the making of the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the United States over Georgia and Ukraine” (p.3).

In unraveling these conflicts Ó Tuathail analyzes the distinct social and political regional topographies and protagonists along three indices: as a *geopolitical field* – a stage framed by rules, statecraft and populated by various actors; *cultural geopolitics*, in the sense of how different nations perceive the world, and the *geopolitical condition*, which in dovetailing with the previous two, is the manner through which media and military technologies act as visual and discursive lenses to shape how different societies experience conflict.

“Near Abroad” he explains is taken from the Russian *blizhneye zarubezhye* (lit., “near beyond border”) – a popular geopolitical phrase Russian politicians used during the

dissolution of the Soviet Union. Ó Tuathail observes that Russia's new borderland states were once part of the Russian Empire and it has been difficult for many Russian to accept this loss. This is all true, despite the fact that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's 1954 decree transferred the Crimean Oblast from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Khrushchev's "symbolic gesture" – purportedly granted when he was drunk – marked the 300th anniversary of Ukraine becoming a part of the Czarism of Russia.

It also strategically increased Ukraine's ethnic Russian population by almost a million people, thus planting the seeds for an ethno-nationalist conflict that Putin would later reap. (In this regard, an interesting cultural and contrapuntal hermeneutic exists between Ó Tuathail' *Near Abroad*, and the 2017 film *Bitter Harvest*, set in the early 1930s depicting the *Holodomor*, the genocide through mass starvation caused by the forced collectivization of all farms and businesses owned by ethnic Ukrainians under Khrushchev's mentor Joseph Stalin.)

During the 1990s the ascension of borderland states into independent nations after the fall of the Soviet Union stripped Russia of a Cold War security blanket. The nation's descent into a nihilistic, though strategic war in the Chechnya, and invasion of Georgia in August 2008 set a template for things to come. The same year, the Bucharest Declaration placed Ukraine and Georgia on a path to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accession and conflict with Putin. In addition, the recognition of Kosovo's independence from Serbia the same year further rattled the territorial integrity of Eastern Europe.

Painted in the West as a gambit similar to Adolf Hitler's seizure of the Sudetenland in 1938, Ó Tuathail asserts Russian Putin's 2014 annexation of Crimea and fomentation of borderlands separatism in southeastern Ukraine were tactical moves to protect Russia's vital security interests on the Eastern European chessboard. Ó Tuathail admits that by focusing specifically on the Ukraine, Georgia and Russia, he slights the latter's intransigence toward Moldova, the Baltic Countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Despite this, *Near Abroad* provides a detailed and painstaking account of how Putin's revanchist war-footing on the coastline of the Black Sea materialized from a hornet's nest of regional political and strategic concerns, compounded by the twenty-first-century malpractice of principal actors in the United States (with their elision of mature or sophisticated historical and geographical knowledge – what Ó Tuathail calls a "thin geopolitics"), the European Union and NATO. This timely and incisive work is highly recommended for those interested in how a new path leading from the ruins of the crumbling liberal international order established after World War II can be anticipated, plotted and navigated.

## Reference

Toal, Gerard. 2017. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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