

Gerard Toal. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 408 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-025330-1.

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Russia's annexation of Crimea and its shadow war in eastern Ukraine since 2014 coupled with the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 will remain key case studies for scholars and foreign policy analysts trying to make sense of Russian foreign policy. These conflicts have also come to define the deterioration of relations between Moscow and Washington, at least when it comes to their disputing visions for the former states of the Soviet Union.

Political geographer Gerard Toal in his book *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* seeks to shed light on the tense relations between Moscow and Washington by analyzing the conflicting geopolitical cultures of Russia and the United States. The aim is to demonstrate how Washington, its political elites, and the American media fail to understand Moscow's worldview. Second, the goal is to shed light on the nature of the conflicts in the "geopolitical archipelago" of the frozen conflicts in Russia's near abroad, specifically over Ukraine, Georgia, and the Caucasus more broadly. This is a well-written book that will be valuable to scholars of this region and engaging for the nonexpert audience. It is a page turner—as much as a serious scholarly work can be.

Toal offers a thoughtful and deeply researched analysis that makes two significant con-

tributions. First, scholars of the region and of Russian foreign policy will welcome the fresh assessment of American (as it relates to the post-Soviet space) and Russian geopolitical culture. This is probably the strongest part of the book. Toal defines geopolitical culture as a state's "prevailing sense of identity, place, and mission in the world" (p. 39). In terms of the United States, its geopolitical culture toward the post-Soviet space could be boiled down as a struggle between two conflicting viewpoints: "the Kissengerian framing of geopolitics as great-power realpolitik" and an ideological one driven by values, missions, and ideals (p. 12). The author offers a discussion of the broader elements and developments of this American geopolitical culture and details how the leadership in Tbilisi, Kyiv, and beyond also took an active role in shaping American perceptions and interests.

The various strains of Russia's geopolitical culture are assessed as stemming from different and often competing visions of the country: from "Westernizing Russia" with a liberal European identity to an "Imperial Russia" whose ideologues like Russian politicians Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Alexander Dugin, and Dmitry Rogozin sought to create a political coalition between those leaning toward Communist and neo-Nazi ideology. Finally there is the "Strong Russia" vision whose primary mission was rebuilding Russia as a great power.

Toal describes how Vladimir Putin's government incorporated all of these competing strains of Russian identity and ideology while he forged a domestic and foreign policy agenda that the author convincingly labels as "revanchist."

Second, the book offers a detailed and well-researched review of the two seminal conflicts between Russia and the West over Georgia and Ukraine, specifically the conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as over Crimea and the Donbas, respectively. Toal offers important details of the conflicts that had not received sufficient attention in other works of scholarship or policy analysis. In shedding more light on Moscow's perspective, Toal has "sought to make an empathetic stretch toward Russian geopolitical culture" (p. 11). The effort is intended to help explain Russia's perspective rather than offer an apology. As Toal notes, "Understanding is not justification" (p. 20). Justification would be difficult indeed for answering the central question of the book and the title of the first chapter as Toal frames it "Why does Russia invade its neighbors?"

In trying to understand Moscow's motives and the underlying political culture, the analysis faces some problems when it often takes at face value the statements of Vladimir Putin, his close associates, or the Russian state-controlled media. Most experts recognize the effectiveness and pervasiveness of Russia's state-run information warfare machine that also works in conjunction with other tactics like cyber attacks and covert military activity. Thus, the Kremlin's words on conflict in Ukraine or Georgia should be assessed for their factual accuracy and considered for their intent as these words are often state propaganda and instruments of war. This is evident in the Georgian case, when Toal cites Putin's words to Tbilisi in April 2008—"be patient and establish a dialogue with these small ethnic groups. And we will try to help, by the way, Georgia to restore its territorial integrity" (p. 125)—and seemingly accepts them as genuine. This sincerity is almost certainly un-

likely considering that just three months later the Russo-Georgian war erupted and considering proceeding years of Russia's efforts to sow divisions among Georgia's different ethnic groups.

More problematic is Toal's repeated referencing in chapters 4 and 5 of Georgia's so-called genocidal campaign against the Ossetians without ever denouncing this as pure Russian propaganda campaign to incite violence and fear. Indeed Toal does note that the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague found that it was the South Ossetian de facto authorities who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Georgian civilians not the other way around. Likewise, citing notorious fabrications by Russian television of ludicrous stories about girls burned alive and babies stabbed to death in Georgia with Putin's conclusion "It is genocide, really" requires more analysis rather than simple mention in such a scholarly work (p. 182). Thus summarizing Russia's story line in relation to the Georgian war as "genocide and the responsibility to protect" and concluding that with the war "Russia prevented genocide and in so doing it also prevented NATO enlargement" requires more unpacking (pp. 179, 190). Is it something the Kremlin believes in or is it simply Russian information warfare tactically used to hide its aggression?

The analysis of the Ukraine crisis does more thoughtfully unpack the Kremlin's narrative that they were "fighting fascism" in Ukraine. For instance, there is a section, "Producing a Scenography of Legitimacy," that does analyze Putin's efforts to justify his annexation of Crimea. In this case study, many of Toal's key conclusions are correct: with the annexation of Crimea, "Putin instantly alienated the majority of public opinion in Ukraine, most significantly Russian-speaking Ukrainians, not to mention doing serious damage to Russia's position in the international community" (p. 281). Nonetheless, it is problematic to consider even as somewhat true Putin's statements in propaganda films, such as *Crimea: The Way Home*

(2014), or Moscow-conducted polls or referendums.

In the end, Toal's analysis offers many thoughtful insights that probably cannot satisfy all students of this region but will benefit many. Indeed a study of Russia's motives, interests, and geopolitical culture invariably deals with myths, beliefs, falsehoods, and deliberate lies, and these are hard to disentangle even in a scholarly work.

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