

NEAR ABROAD

PUTIN, THE WEST, AND THE CONTEST
OVER UKRAINE AND THE CAUCASUS

GERARD TOAL



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*To my mother Bridie Toal,
and my daughters Sirin and Nives*

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As this book went to press, the Russian government decided to classify the Levada Center, Russia's leading independent polling agency, as a "foreign agent" because it worked with international academics, like John O and I, on social-scientific research. This move is part of a long-standing effort by the state to control independent knowledge about Russian attitudes and society. Unjust on its own terms, it is also counterproductive in that fictions and preconceptions now have an easier time not only within Russia but beyond it. At the very moment we need more social science facticity, we have post-factual politics.

Third, living and working in the Washington, DC, metro region shaped my decision to organize and write this book for a general audience rather than a strictly academic one. I am very grateful to my institutional home, the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) at Virginia Tech in the Washington metro region, for supporting my research down the years. In particular I would like to thank Timothy Luke for years of unstinting support; the current director of SPIA, Anne Khademian; and my colleagues in the Government and International Affairs program—Joel Peters, Giselle Datz, Patricia Nickel, and Ariel Ahram. I would also like to thank those students who provided research assistance—Megan Foran, Adis Maksic, Gela Merabishvili, Jeffrey Owen, and Emil Sanamyan—and those whose own research efforts helped inform my thinking: Julie Ademack, David Belt, Sonya Finley, Marc Jasper, Kevin Joyce, Walter Landgraf, Matthew Osterrieder, Mirian Popkhadze, Bryan Riddle, Christopher Lee Walker, and Heather King Westerman. Among research institutions, I found regular intellectual sustenance in the Kennan Institute; George Washington's Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES); and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Thanks to them and others for hosting excellent events and speakers. I would like to thank the following individuals personally for helping me deepen my knowledge of the subject matter of this book: Kristen Bakke, Laurence Broers, Michael Cecire, Jon Chicky,

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NOTE ON PLACE NAMES



Geography literally means “earth-writing.” Place-naming practices are part of how people write political geographies and live them. Names are often chosen to signify ownership of a territory or place, symbolically marking the political and cultural dominance of one group, and one geopolitical relationship, over others. In Ireland, naming a town Kingstown or Dún Laoghaire, Londonderry or Derry conveys power and identity. The lands of the former Soviet Union have similar post-colonial contentious dynamics over place names. Multiple claims and languages are at play, as are abundant historical legacies and memories. In most Union Republics, Russian was the dominant language, and the Russian administrative name for places tended to predominate locally and internationally. Since the Soviet collapse the newly independent states have made varying efforts to nationalize place names, renaming towns, streets, and other places to privilege new nation-state heroes and dates while removing Soviet symbols.

The place names in this book are, for the most part, simplified English language transliterations of official state language names. Thus, the names of 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 Kharkov. Because language privileging, place

naming, and territorial ownership are part of the contentious geopolitics examined in this book, I often provide competing names and forms of knowing places in the text. Thus, I use the Russian names Odessa, Kharkov, and Nikolaev when appropriate and when used by the speaker. Though Donetsk has a different spelling and pronunciation in Ukrainian and Russian, its common English transliteration misses this. Not so for Luhansk/Lugansk: I use transliteration from Ukrainian to name the oblast but from Russian to name the Lugansk People's Republic as this is its official name. Those with zero-sum mentalities will inevitably find problems with this but part of the pedagogic value of the strategy adopted in this book is to foreground place-contestation, and the life-world that is part of it, on the page.

The situation in the breakaway regions of Georgia is particularly complicated because one has trilingual geopolitical dynamics: titular nations (Abkhaz and Ossetians), a nationalizing state (Georgia), and a former imperial center that is now a privileged geopolitical player (Russia). This is to say nothing of nontitular minorities like the Armenians in Abkhazia. The politics of naming in South Ossetia begins with the existential question of whether that name is even recognized and acknowledged. The Georgian government abolished this region and name in December 1990. In Georgia, the north-central region of the country is named Shida Kartli (lit., "Inner Kartli"). The area around the capital of South Ossetia is called Samachablo (lit., "fief of the Machabeli clan"). The names are ownership claims that locate the area within Georgian nation-space imagining. Because South Ossetia nevertheless endured as a geopolitical fact on the ground the Georgian government began to refer to it euphemistically as the "Tskhinvali region." The name was a diminishing gesture in the face of the unilateral proclamation by those in power there that it was the Republic of South Ossetia. The practice I have followed in naming the two regional centers ("capitals") of the breakaway territories in Georgia is to use a form that signifies the contested name of these places, without privileging either. Thus, the Ossetian name Tskhinval and Georgian Tskhinvali is rendered Tskhinval(i). The same applies to Sukhum(i), the administrative center of Abkhazia.

As far as Georgians and most all the international community are concerned, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are Georgian territory. To the *de facto* regimes in these areas, however, Georgia begins at the *de facto* boundary lines Russia has helped them establish in the region. I follow the convention of using the terms “uncontested Georgia” and “Georgia proper” to refer to Georgian territory beyond the boundary lines of the *de facto* states. I recognize that these terms are objectionable to Georgia but they have the virtue of recognizing the material realities on the ground that persist in the face of imagined seamless maps of territorial integrity.

The Georgian government controlled enclave settlements within South Ossetia and Abkhazia until August 2008. The rule I adopt is to respect the place names that the majority of local residents use, with the alternative form in brackets. Thus, I use the name Tamarasheni (lit. “built by Tamar,” a famous queen in the Georgian pantheon) for the first Georgian settlement immediately to the north of the town limits of Tskhinval(i) instead of the Ossetian name Tamares. In the last Soviet census of 1989, this settlement had both Ossetian and Georgian families, some intermarried. As a consequence of the violence of 1990–1992, Tskhinval(i) became predominantly Ossetian, and the settlements to its north overwhelmingly monoethnic Georgian communities. In saying this, however, we are summarizing a condition brought about by violence that forced people into either/or ethnic categories that may not reflect their kinship histories or actual beliefs and lived identities. I use the place name Akhagori for the largely ethnic Georgian town to the southeast that was under Georgian government control until August 2008. In Soviet times it was known as Leningori. The *de facto* Republic of South Ossetia authorities privilege the Ossetian variant of this Soviet name: Leningor. Other Soviet names endure in South Ossetia. Tskhinval(i) today has both a Lenin Avenue and a Stalin Avenue, the latter figure an Ossetian folk hero (as he is also for some Georgians). Another Soviet name that endures is Roki tunnel, which is the Georgian form of the ethnic Ossetian village of Rouk on the southern slope of the Caucasus where it derives its name. I stick with the familiar Roki and not the Ossetian name. I use the Ossetian name Styr Gufta for the predominantly Ossetian settlement north of the Georgian enclave on

the Transcaucasian Highway (TransKam). I also give the Georgian name, which is Didi Gupta. The strategic bridge outside the town is known as the Gufta bridge in Ossetian, and Gupta in Georgian. The central river in South Ossetia is Styr Liakhva in Ossetian, Didi Liakhvi in Georgian, and Bolshoi Liakhvi in Russian. I use the translation "Greater Liakhvi River" and reserve "Didi Liakhvi Valley" specifically for the Georgian enclave north of Tskhinval(i), as this helps signify its ethnic Georgian character. Its destruction was a concerted effort to erase that cultural identity. Campaigns of purification and erasure by the victorious, unfortunately, are all too common in the wake of episodes of ethnicized and geopoliticized violence.

In 2015 Ukraine's parliament launched a "decommunization" process that sought to erase Soviet names and symbols across Ukrainian territory. Thousands of Lenin statues have been toppled in Ukraine since its independence. A new wave started with the Euromaidan protests and continues, now legitimated by decommunization laws. Certain place names, like Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro), came too late to update maps in this work. Hundreds of place names were mandated for change in Crimea also, with a few replacement place names recognizing the heritage of the Crimean Tatar, heretofore ignored by Kyiv. A move by U.S. technology giant Google to implement these changes sparked outrage in Moscow and Crimea. One Russian lawmaker charged the U.S. company, cofounded by a Russian immigrant, with "topological cretinism." Place-naming controversies, and asterisks on maps indicating disputed territorial status, are expressions of a place remaking geopolitical contest that unfortunately looks likely to continue for some time. Geographies are inevitably political but they need not be about singular domination and control. They can be thought and lived differently.

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