

The Ultimate Handbook of Political Geography

Okunev, Igor. Political Geography. Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2021.

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When the modern discipline of Geography was established on the European continent and in North America, many of the new professors took up the task of writing geography textbooks for their students. Some of these works were university-level texts, but some were for secondary level students, the schoolchildren their graduates would go on to teach. The British Geographer H.J. Mackinder wrote a series of textbooks to promote geographical education throughout Great Britain. As an ardent imperialist, Mackinder hoped that his considerable efforts in geographical education would prepare British schoolchildren to be effective custodians of the British Empire. Geography, he once wrote, was necessary education for thinking imperially, “that is to say in spaces that are worldwide – and to his end, our geographical teaching should be directed.”¹ All geography was political geography, and political geography was all for the imperial state.

After advising President W. Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference after the Great War, the American geographer I. Bowman went home to the US and helped create the Council on Foreign Relations. He also wrote *The New World: Problems in Political Geography*, a regionally organized geographical description of the world in 1920.² This was supposedly free of politics, but the preface indicates I. Bowman’s mission was to educate “the men who compose the government of the United States” who needed “more than native common sense and the desire to deal fairly with others.” I. Bowman’s book supplied the necessary geographical and historical background materials that are required to make effective foreign policy. But U.S. foreign policy was ineffective in stemming the rise of fascism in Europe, and the country underwent a revolution in its geopolitical culture as it seized the opportunity afforded by World War II to drive for global power.

After World War II, political geography, tainted by association to Nazi geopolitics, largely fell out of favor in the English-speaking world. Geography became technocratic

1 Mackinder 1907.

2 Bowman 1921.

but was still attentive to the needs of the global state. When it returned, most especially in the late Cold War and thereafter, it was helped along by a series of textbooks that offered critical global accounts of the themes and concerns of political geography. P. Taylor's book *Political Geography* (first edition 1985) used world-systems theory to tie together his different themes. With his former student C. Flint, the book is now in its seventh edition.¹ The British geographer J. Painter offered a more state- and locality-centered book in 1995, now in its second edition.² More recently, S. Smith has written a textbook that captures the full range of feminist, post-colonial and critical geopolitical thinking on security, identity and the Anthropocene.³ The goal is full-spectrum critical thinking beyond service to any state. Geography textbooks have come a long way since the time of H.J. Mackinder. The linguistic world remains, however, bound by the English language.

I. Okunev's masterful new textbook *Political Geography*, published in Russian in 2019 and now published in English by P. Lang, offers a different kind of textbook.⁴ His volume is distinctive for many reasons. First, I. Okunev is a Professor at MGIMO University in Moscow, one of the world's most prominent universities. Though it is not its only function, MGIMO is where Russia's future diplomatic corps are trained, where they learn the world's languages and get exposed to the ideas that literally shape the world. Soon after the Soviet collapse, MGIMO created Russia's first-ever international dual degree program with the French Sciences Po in Paris. It was also the first to launch a full-fledged English-taught Bachelor's program in International Affairs. MGIMO is thus cosmopolitan yet also distinctively Russian. I. Okunev's textbook is based on his teaching at MGIMO. It shapes his conceptualization of the textbook, its comprehensive vision, its pedagogical goals and the examples he uses. I. Okunev's textbook is distinctive because it emerges from a context and institution that is not normally part of the conversation on political geography in the English-speaking world. This alone makes the book distinctive, unique and worth reading.

This is not a textbook with a Russian ideological agenda. Those looking for a defense of Russian foreign policy or V. Putin's worldview will not find it for this is a textbook that does not address ideology. Rather it is a remarkably comprehensive fact-centered survey of the field of political geography. The book largely steers clear of controversial issues like the status of Crimea or Russia's policy towards the Donbas. It cites imperialism and empire but treats both as largely historical through discussion of colonialism and dependent territories. Thinking political geography from Russia results in important research on state size and territory, on the composition of state territory and on the different types of borders and border regimes one finds across the world. The spatial structure of the state is a central preoccupation in the textbook. Its examples and cases are drawn largely but far from exclusively from Eurasia and the Caucasus.

Second, I. Okunev's book is distinctive in conception, design and ambition. *Political Geography* is a large book, coming in at 473 pages in English translation. It has

1 Taylor, Flint 2018.

2 Painter, Jeffrey 2009.

3 Smith 2020.

4 Okunev 2021.

12 chapters that proceed from the global level to the local. This is a textbook where the display of facts and figures, graphs and data are privileged over images, maps and theorization. For a Political Geography textbook, there are remarkably few maps. The lecture note origins of the book are evident in its design. This presents a very clearly arranged display of classificatory concepts, theories, facts and figures. Every term that might be used in discussion about international affairs and the state, from customs unions to territorial leases to enclaves and continental shelves is listed and then given a precise definition. If there is a family of concepts, these are often arranged in a table next to each other to distinguish them (e.g., *Table 4.6 Types of States Through the Lens of State Recognition*). The term “listicle” is used in English to describe web publication articles organized around the display of lists. I. Okunev’s book is a highly advanced version of this design principle, possibly with its origins in a comprehensive collection of *PowerPoint* slides, and he follows it throughout the book. But we can also see the background influence of gazetteers and world factbooks. This makes the work a handy single-source handbook for aspiring diplomats.

I suspect that some if not most students will find this very useful. They get the key concepts and ideas laid out before them with clarity. Some of the tables have great potential to stimulate debate in the classroom. The first table in the book, for example, lays out the different levels of spatial organization. I. Okunev identifies thirteen of them, considerably more than most English-language readers would expect. This is followed by an even larger table laying out the elements of spatial organization.

But this design principle and the ambition of the book to cover as much as possible means that in-depth discussion of concepts and ideas is limited. There are a few lines on a key term and then it is on to the next. More curious students will find this limited. There is little discussion, for example, on how certain of the concepts defined may have rival understandings. For example, geopolitical code is privileged whereas geopolitical culture is not discussed at all. Geopolitical field is conceptualized in the textbook differently from how it is within Anglo-American critical geopolitics (state territory versus dynamic arenas of competition, mostly regional and global).

One appealing feature of the book is that each chapter has at its end questions for discussion, a set of potential activities, and a list of suggested readings. Most instructors will find this extremely helpful, though, in reading through these questions, I found some of the questions hard to answer based on what was covered in the chapter. The question (p. 72), that asks students to imagine what the defense might have argued if K. Haushofer was brought before the Nuremberg Tribunal, is an example of this. That is a tough assignment! Another assignment, after Chapter 6 on the composition of state territory, asks students to determine whether a certain space is a Russian territory or not. Among the examples listed are Russia’s Gyumri military base and an Air France aircraft flying from Paris to Beijing in the skies over Russia. The issue is timely given the fate of the Ryanair flight transiting over Belarus in May 2021.

I. Okunev’s book does have a number of weaknesses. First, there are a number of factual errors. Critical geopolitics is not rooted in the French school of geopolitics (p. 41). H.J. Mackinder did not serve in Afghanistan and was not N. Spykman’s teacher (pp. 47–48). It is possible some errors are products of imprecise or flawed translation. The English translation is, for the most part, good but there are certain passages that are

hard to comprehend. The sentences were translated but their meaning in resultant English is not clear. There are other issues. "Territories with the mixed regime" (p. 208), for example, is a concept that reads poorly in English.

Second, some will find the bullet point design dry and tedious. Lists and tables make for dull readings next to narrative vignettes and carefully chosen examples. Perhaps a certain MGIMO imperative was at work when the book discusses Russia's diplomatic relations with foreign states. It lists those states whose ambassador does not live in Moscow and it then proceeds to list all the countries where Russian ambassadors are accredited in different places. The list of countries takes up most of a page. Other passages contain comprehensive lists of territories, some very interesting like *Table 4.7* which is a comprehensive list of Proto-States of the world, others less so. Here we get definitions of a series of concepts like limited recognition, unrecognized, insurgent, proto and quasi-states though no mention of the most common term in the English literature on such entities, *de facto* states. Some may read bias – and a blurring of the differences between Kosovo and Abkhazia or South Ossetia – in *Table 4.6* which categorizes states with recognition from an absolute majority of UN member states and recognition from at least one UN member state both as "states with limited recognition"!

Third, the book has little to say about gender, race and sexuality. I. Okunev cites S. Smith's recent book but it made no impression on his. There is no definition of feminist geopolitics or discussion of associated concepts. There is nothing on the volumetric or materialist turns in Anglo-America political geography. Some will see this as evidence of continued blindness to these issues in Russia. They may even go further and read into this a grander clash between a Western culture that is wrestling with toxic legacies of empire, slavery, racial hierarchy and white supremacy and Russian culture that is still ignoring or repressing these issues. That reading is too self-congratulatory to the West and too ignorant of the struggles over equally toxic legacies in Russia and beyond, legacies that incorporate unique histories with state terror and imprisonment. In all places, these notions are sites of struggle but too often these struggles happen within self-contained linguistic bubbles. This book steers clear of controversial topics by adopting a "just-the-facts" style. It works but it is also unsatisfying in certain respects for educators need to tackle contentious social, political and cultural issues. In this sense, the textbook does not reflect the lived reality of diverse populations living in advanced technoscientific states, including the lifeworld of MGIMO students and Russian diplomats.

The final weakness is one that counts. I. Okunev has little to nothing to say about the climate emergency. The Anthropocene is not seen. This is the defining crisis of our time, even if our politics do not yet reflect this. But with California and Siberia burning, with the great cities of North America, Europe and Russia struggling with extreme heat, flooding and smoke from wildfires, we are all caught in the grip of a geophysical and biogeographical transformation that is accelerating us into conditions that are unprecedented for human civilizations. This above all matters, and it will fill the pages of future political geography textbooks if we are able to adapt sufficiently to an earth's surface is transforming rapidly into something unknown. The political geography of the future will be a matter of life and death on territory, about habitable and uninhabitable spaces for humans. That grim reality is already upon us.

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Received: August 25, 2021. Accepted: December 6, 2021.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

For citation

Toal, Gerard. "The Ultimate Handbook of Political Geography."
Journal of International Relations 12, no. 4 (2021): 180–184.
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2021-12-4-180-184>

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Дополнительная информация

Поступила в редакцию: 25 августа 2021.

Принята к публикации: 6 декабря 2021.

Конфликт интересов

Автор заявляет об отсутствии потенциального конфликта интересов

Для цитирования

Тоал, Дж. Важная книга по политической географии // Международная аналитика. – 2021. – Том 12 (4). – С. 180–184.
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2021-12-4-180-184>

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Адрес редакции:

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Международная аналитика. – 2021. – 12(4). – С. 1-184.

Подписано к печати: 14.12.21.

Формат: 108х70/16. Печать офсетная. Цена свободная.

Уч.-изд. л. 11,5. Тираж 200 экземпляров. Заказ

Отпечатано в отделе оперативной полиграфии и множительной техники МГИМО МИД России.

119454, Москва, просп. Вернадского, 76.