

Introduction

RAGNAR BJÖRK AND THOMAS LUNDÉN

This is an anthology about the man who coined the concept of ‘geopolitics’, the political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922). It deals with his ideas about state power and its relations to domestic resources in nature, infrastructure, culture and population. The volume also deals with his relevance for modern-day international affairs as well as the problematic aftermath of his sometimes controversial and enigmatic thoughts. With the renaissance of geopolitics as an object of study in geography, political science, international relations and other disciplines – as well as the fundamental role it plays in the realms of strategy and diplomacy – Kjellén has to some extent already been analysed by scholars, but the existing literature on him remains remarkably limited.

While occasionally referred to in Sweden and abroad (especially in South America), Kjellén was for a long time either forgotten, neglected or misinterpreted. A fair judgement of his political thinking and values was given by political scientist Nils Elvander in a paper (1956) on Kjellén’s inclination towards radical conservatism, and in Elvander’s dissertation (1961) on the conservative ideological debate in Sweden in Kjellén’s time. Both of these are in Swedish. However, neither of them aimed to cover his ‘life and letters’ or his scholarly thinking. An abbreviated copy of Kjellén’s first article mentioning geopolitics in 1899¹ was published in the geographic periodical *Ymer* (1976/77). A biography based on a collection of Kjellén’s letters has been edited and commented upon by his daughter (Kjellén-Björkquist 1970), also in Swedish.

Although Kjellén was included by Elvander in the 1968 edition of IESS (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*), the first elaborate account of

Notes for this section begin on page 9.

his scholarly ideas was Sven Holdar's article 'The Ideal State and the Power of Geography' (1992), which has been the foundation for further references in political geography and political science in the English-language literature.

The idea to produce a comprehensive anthology sprang up a few years later. In 1996, Japan scholar Bert Edström took the initiative to arrange a symposium about Kjellén at Stockholm University.² Historian Ragnar Björk was involved in producing an anthology based on the symposium, but for several reasons the idea could not be implemented at the time. Several years later it was taken up again, with geographer Thomas Lundén also involved, and the book *Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitiken och konservatismen* was published in Swedish (Edström, Björk and Lundén 2014). It was launched at a symposium at Skytteanum, the Political Science department of Uppsala University, where Kjellén had held the very prestigious Skyttean Professorship in Rhetoric and Political Science from 1916 to his death in 1922. Some of the original contributions were updated, while other new ones were added.

The book in Swedish had a slightly different scope to the present one. While Kjellén is mostly known abroad for books and articles translated into German (and from German into other languages), his extensive publishing as a public intellectual – comprising pamphlets, newspaper articles, lectures and reviews in Swedish – cover another and often more biased side of Kjellén's production. One chapter in Edström, Björk and Lundén (2014), by geographer Claes Göran Alvstam (Alvstam 2014), describes his activities as a (physical) geographer, a role that was forced upon him, but that was, as it turned out, much in line with his interest in nature and cycling as an avid 'outdoorsman'.³ This role also brought him into contact with canonic German geographers of the time such as Carl Ritter and, above all, Friedrich Ratzel. One of Kjellén's favourite great powers was the ascendant Japan; and his distinction between *Lesefrüchte* (learning by reading) and the facts on the ground (studied by visiting an actual location) has been analysed by Bert Edström (Edström 2014). By contrast, the British Empire was initially seen by Kjellén as a doomed power that would be overcome by the United States, Japan and Germany. But this was a question about which he had already changed his mind before the Great War. Kjellén's very strong disavowal of the British in the war against the Boers in South Africa (which he made with little reference to African peoples) is described by Gundel Söderholm and Jan Gunnar Rosenblad (Rosenblad and Söderholm 2014; Söderholm and Rosenblad 2014) in two chapters in the Swedish anthology *Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitiken och konservatismen*. All the other contributions are, in revised form, included in the present anthology, together with some new essays.

Kjellén as an Activist

In the present anthology, the focus is on Kjellén's scholarly achievements, on geopolitics, and on his analysis of the great powers. It concentrates on his scholarly production; thus, his role as a 'radical activist' in parliament and in Swedish domestic debates, is only mentioned in relation to his geopolitical scholarship. He always wavered between an exclusive Swedish nationalism unconcerned with irredenta (primarily Swedish speakers in Finland) and a globalist perspective. This volume, however, only briefly mentions his combination of activism and conservatism; his sceptical attitude, at the time, towards a democratic and parliamentary polity; gender equality; his alleged xenophobia and antisemitism; and his evolution on some of these questions.

A part of Kjellén's activism in the years leading up to the First World War was his juxtaposition of 'the ideas of 1789' and 'the ideas of 1914'. In his account, the former had exhausted their emancipatory power and relevance, and now a more sombre attitude towards the present, emphasizing duty and national unity, was due. This also reflected his philosophy of history, in which the pendulum swings between expansion and concentration, and between liberalism and a conservatism whose most urgent concern was protecting gains and buckling up for hard times.

Kjellén's Interpretation of Geopolitics

Kjellén's interpretation of geopolitics will be analysed in many of the contributions in this volume. Among its key aspects are the following:

- For Kjellén, geopolitics is both a (sub-)discipline of political science and, on occasion, a strategy used by political actors. While he typically focused on the object, he at times argued for a specific foreign policy.
- While geopolitics can be studied semantically and pursued at all levels of territorial regulation and domination, Kjellén concentrates on the nation-state and, to some extent, on groups of states, while downplaying subordinate categories such as provinces and municipalities. But in an important sense he differed from conventional geopolitical studies of later years in not treating these nation-states as unchanging units. He rather included internal aspects such as resources, demographics and so on in evaluating the great powers and their abilities to act in the international arena.
- States are seen as driven by their natural and cultural endowments and their geopolitical situation. Individual statesmen and their impact on politics are given little attention by Kjellén.

- Kjellén frequently refers to the state as an organism with stages of birth, growth and death. To the extent this is more than a metaphor, it regards the nation-state's involvement in *struggle* against other nation-states, and the need to exert *willpower* in this struggle. While Kjellén concentrates on the 'expansionist' and even antagonistic pursuit of geopolitics, the concept of geopolitics is not in itself tied to expansion and conflict.

Geopolitics is only one of Kjellén's categories of the exertion of power, and it is part of an array of different factors that influence each other in an ever-changing mix of influences. These include natural resources, technology, demography, economics and governance. Regarding the last, great powers may have very different polities and still be competent and powerful. Democracy (exemplified by 'England', like many of his contemporaries, he refers to Great Britain as 'England' and the Netherlands as 'Holland') is only one among several types of authority. Others are the centralized state (as seen in France), federalism (as in the United States) and 'caesarianism' (as witnessed by Czarist Russia). His concentration on geopolitics is motivated by what he sees as a lack of spatial consciousness among political scientists and insufficient awareness of political science among geographers of his era (with the remarkable exception of his primary inspiration, Friedrich Ratzel).

A Biased and Skewed Reputation

As mentioned, despite the renaissance of geopolitics as an object of study and as an approach to diplomacy and strategy in international affairs, Kjellén has been peculiarly absent from most studies of the topic. German scholarship was for a long time obsessed with the disastrous use of the concepts of *Lebensraum* and *Geopolitik* by the Haushofer school (until 1935 admiringly referring to Kjellén), only recently modified by the insight that other, and even darker, interests guided the Nazi regime. In Anglo-Saxon and French scholarship – based on the few accounts available in English, and with some remarkable exceptions – Kjellén has been either neglected or misunderstood. This is also true of Ratzel. Halford Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan are very often named as the forerunners of a territorial strategic analysis. But these geographers with a military background mainly looked at territorial and naval space as a means to dominance,⁴ while Ratzel analysed the content of territorial resources and related it to the state and its power. Kjellén organized Ratzel's rather eclectic findings into a more systematic inventory.

Outline of the Book

This anthology is arranged in sequence from ‘life’ to ‘letters’ to ‘concepts’, and finally to ‘reception’. The ‘letters’ chapters are loosely related to the development of Kjellén’s scholarly production, from his first article on geopolitics to his last edition of *The Great Powers* and its legacy. The first chapter, ‘Rudolf Kjellén: Academic, Publicist, Politician’ by Björk, Edström and Lundén, sketches his life line from a rather insignificant position at a small urban university college in Gothenburg to a prestigious position at Sweden’s oldest university in Uppsala. He was the inventor of the concept of geopolitics, which is the theme of the present volume, but in his hopes for Sweden’s future he also used the word *folkhem*, ‘the people’s home’, which was later used and partly implemented by his adversaries, the Social Democrats. His neologism ‘*nationell socialism*’ went on to have a very different legacy. Kjellén actually meant the goal of and an expression of the political striving for a *folkhem*, but the term would go on to be used by others with discriminatory and totalitarian connotations. The chapter also examines the character of Kjellén’s scientific approach and his personality as a scholar.

Kjellén would be remembered by posterity as an exceptional figure, both in his political opinions and in his academic writing. As demonstrated by Ragnar Björk in Chapter 2, ‘Rudolf Kjellén: The Swedish Intellectual and Political Context’, in Kjellén’s time the three spheres of scholarship, politics, and public debate were all dominated by a rather learned and cautious mindset, so although he had much in common with his colleagues in his ‘professorial conservatism’, his much more radical, maverick approach in all areas gradually alienated him from his peers. Also, with his vision of a ‘people’s home’ with a collective structure and a nationalist footing, he was increasingly out of touch with the rising interest in social engineering techniques, which would be realized by others in the interwar years. On the whole, he was more of a ‘continental’ type of scholar – had he lived in Germany, he might have been a *Kathedersozialist*.

Kjellén’s first publication after studies at Uppsala University was his 1899 article on Sweden’s international boundaries, in which he defined the concept of ‘geopolitics’. In Chapter 3, ‘Sweden’s Borders: Kjellén’s Contribution to Social Science by Defining and Applying Geopolitics’, Alvstam and Lundén review his cross-disciplinary scrutiny of borders, starting from a traditional historical analysis of their legal underpinnings, but ending in a geopolitical evaluation of the strength of the line separating Sweden from its neighbours, with a number of comparisons to other borders across the world.

Kjellén's breakthrough as a scholar came with the first edition of *Stormakterna* [The Great Powers] in 1905. Ragnar Björk's contribution, Chapter 4 on 'Kjellén's Great Power Studies: The Editions', follows Kjellén through three editions of the book, allowing the reader to understand how his analysis and methodologies changed over time, comparing documents simultaneously in an almost 'online' fashion. In the following chapter, 'Kjellén's Great Power Studies: Examining Germany, USA, Russia, Japan' (Chapter 5), Björk shows how Kjellén in a *Landeskunde* manner digs into the essence of 'great powers', meaning both the concept itself and its instantiation in the actual powers, which after the turn of the century numbered eight. Kjellén's analyses of four great powers are analysed here in detail. Across editions, Kjellén unsentimentally allows the rise of the United States and Japan to affect and correct his provisional analysis of the relevant features of a great power – as, later, global war would as well.

Kjellén's second 'hit', at least in the German-speaking world, was *Staten som livsform* [The state as a form of life], published in Swedish in 1916 and in German the year after. This was an attempt to claim geopolitics for an activated and redefined political science. In the preface he declares his goal as a scholar: to produce a unified theory of the state as a political system. But in spite of this, his way of thinking was still very much inspired by Ratzel, as underlined in Thomas Lundén's review in Chapter 6. Nonetheless, Lundén shows that, contrary to Ratzel, Kjellén puts his examples within a theoretical framework and widens the scope of his analysis by including new features of an active state and its relation to the nation (as an 'imagined community') and its members. His view of the state as an organism, one with willpower, is a metaphor for its ever-shifting power and extension, its life and death under changing governance.

The Great War was seen by Kjellén as a possible, perhaps probable, outcome of the contradicting interests of the great powers. In Chapter 7, 'Kjellén and the First World War' by Gunnar Falkemark, three questions are in focus: What caused the outbreak of the war? Which values were at stake in the trial of different states' strength? How can the outcome be explained? According to Kjellén, the different sides of the war represented different values. Countries like 'England' and France were inspired by the ideas of the French Revolution: freedom, equality and fraternity. But these values had exhausted their progressive potential. Germany represented order, justice and duty, ideas that better served the harsher needs of the present. Thus, Germany's time had come. Kjellén's sympathies were totally with Germany, and its defeat was a shock to him. He sees the American intervention in the war as decisive. He does not credit the outcome to the resource strength of the United States, but rather to American idealism and their belief in democracy.

One example of extreme vulnerability in the balance of power in the first decades of the twentieth century is given by Carl Marklund in Chapter 8, 'The Small Game in the Shadow of the Great Game: Kjellénian Biopolitics between Constructivism and Realism', in which he analyses Kjellén's thoughts on the peripheral 'in-between' state (i.e. Sweden) in terms of its relations with the great powers, and its chances for gaining a foothold in regional commerce and culture. Kjellén's conclusion in 1912 was that nearby Russia, especially its Baltic provinces, were the most susceptible to, as it were, a 'soft' Swedish influence.

In Chapter 9, 'Discourse, Identity and Territoriality', Ola Tunander analyses Kjellén's thinking about a European federation of states. Kjellén's version of geopolitics, with its understanding of the state in organic terms, was an attempt to treat the state as an independent object of study with its own dynamics and internal logic, political power and will, and a unity of land and people. This stood in sharp contrast to the Anglo-Saxon conception of geopolitics, which had a technological and geostrategic focus. Kjellén turned to the German cosmopolitan tradition with its multicultural unity and its drive towards a European league of states, meaning a union that would respect the freedom and independence of states while placing leadership in the hands of a central power. His description of this union is practically identical to what would later become NATO – but for Kjellén it was Germany, not the United States, that was expected to accept this leadership role.

The subject of Chapter 10, 'Rudolf Kjellén's Intellectual Impact in Latin America' by Andrés Rivarola Puntigliano, was mediated by domestic geographers and political scientists, often of German origin, and especially in Brazil. In Latin America, Kjellén is usually referred to in connection with Ratzel; but there have been more recent comparisons to Gramsci, who read descriptions of Kjellén's thought in Italian geographical journals.

Kjellén died in 1922. In Chapter 11, 'Kjellén's Legacy: A Story of Divergent Interpretations', Thomas Lundén explores this legacy, with a focus on the European and American use and misuse of his ideas. Kjellén's last German edition of *The Great Powers*, was reprinted and 'revised' by Karl Haushofer, who continued appropriating his work until around 1934, after which Kjellén (and to an extent Haushofer as well) disappeared from the Nazi German discourse. With a few exceptions and for entirely different reasons, Kjellén also disappeared from Swedish social science. After the Second World War, occasional articles have dealt seriously with Kjellén's scholarship, whereas most references in the English language refer to him at best as the inventor of the concept of geopolitics, ignoring his global vision and his criticism of capitalism and laissez-faire liberal democracy, which partly resembles the critique in recent work on 'critical geopolitics' of 'neo-liberalism'.

Kjellén – an Actor in Multiple Domains

Kjellén was active within several different spheres: as a scholar, as a public figure and commentator on contemporary issues, and as a practising politician with a mandate in parliament. This anthology focuses on his academic writing related to geopolitics and great power relations, but his other activities have to be considered in order to understand his worldview. He was a political scientist, but his scholarly activities and his teaching assignments spanned a number of different disciplines. Besides widening his own discipline towards a much broader definition of political science in a way that had not been done before, advocating it to be *the* social science, he worked on problems within history, geography (even including physical geography; see Alvstam 2014), social anthropology, international relations and comparative historical sociology. The diverse contributors to this book mirror this interdisciplinarity.

In the Swedish context, Kjellén is not recognized as a pioneer, but he stands out internationally as one of the forerunners of geopolitical studies. After his death, books on geopolitics almost ceased to be published in Sweden, but on the European continent the topic remained of interest, and his reputation as a trailblazing scholar of international politics and as the father of geopolitics was not questioned – even if it was often misunderstood. Geopolitics has lately witnessed a revival both as a concept and as an activity; it is often associated with cynical and aggressive power plays, a diplomacy of threats and bullying, and periodic pressure to redraw national borders. This book is an attempt to elucidate the scholarly contributions of its progenitor, contributions that qualify him as a pioneer in his fields of study and a figure of ongoing international interest.

Acknowledgements

The editors gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Stockholm, in the preparation of this collection.

Ragnar Björk is a retired associate professor of history from Uppsala University and is now affiliated with Södertörn University. His research is mainly concerned with ‘research on research’, with the history of historiography and the social sciences, the history of science, including the Nobel Prize, and also modern political history. He graduated at Uppsala in 1983 with a dissertation on explanatory techniques – including narration and colligation – among historians, and was awarded the Geijer Prize

for best historical dissertation. Since then, he has conducted a number of research projects on those same themes. Some of his latest publications are: ‘Re-embedding the Historian: German-Language Refugee Scholars in Scandinavia, 1933–1945’, *Storia della Storiografia / History of Historiography* 69(1) (2016); ‘Voluntarismens väg: Och något om Rudolf Kjellén som producent av helhetskunskap om samhället’, in Erik Nydahl and Jonas Harvard (eds), *Den nya staten: Ideologi och samhällsförändring kring sekelskiftet 1900* (Nordic Academic Press, 2016); Thorsten Halling, Ragnar Björk, Heiner Fangerau and Nils Hansson, ‘Leopoldina: Ein Netzwerk für künftige Nobelpreisträger für Physiologie oder Medizin?’, *Sudhoffs Archiv* 102 (2018), X.

Thomas Lundén is emeritus professor of human geography at Södertörn University. His latest book is *Pommern: ett gränsfall i tid och rum* [Pomerania: A border case in time and space] (Lund University, 2016), and his earlier scholarship includes articles in political and social geography, border interaction and the history of geopolitics and Baltic relations, for example: ‘Geopolitics and Religion: A Mutual and Conflictual Relationship. Spatial Regulation of Creed in the Baltic Sea Region’, *International Review of Sociology / Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 25(2) (July 2015); ‘Border Twin Cities in the Baltic Area: Anomalies or Nexuses of Mutual Benefit?’, in John Garrard and Ekaterina Mikhailova (eds), *Twin Cities: Urban Communities, Borders and Relationships over Time* (Routledge, 2019); and ‘Turning towards the Inland Sea? Swedish “Soft Diplomacy” towards the Baltic Soviet Republics before Independence’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/03468755.2021.1896576.

Notes

1. For a review of this article, see Alvstam and Lundén, ‘Sweden’s Borders’, this volume.
2. Kjellén had published the book *Den stora Orienten* [The big Orient] in 1911 after a trip to Japan that took him around the world.
3. About his field research within geography, see Alvstam 2014.
4. The Mahan expert John H. Maurer has, in a recent article, pointed at other (often neglected) faces of Mahan’s scholarship, very much in line with Kjellén’s realist views on international relations. See Maurer 2017.

References

- Alvstam, Claes-Göran. 2014. 'Kjellén som geograf' [Kjellén as a geographer], in Edström, Björk and Lundén (eds), *Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitiken och konservatismen*. [Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitics and Conservatism]. Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 55–81.
- Edström, Bert. 2014. 'Resan till drömlandet – Japan' [Journey to the dreamland – Japan], in B. Edström, R. Björk and T. Lundén (eds), *Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitiken och konservatismen*. [Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitics and Conservatism]. Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 122–45.
- Edström, Bert, Ragnar Björk and Thomas Lundén (eds). 2014. *Rudolf Kjellén Geopolitiken och konservatismen*. [Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitics and Conservatism]. Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg.
- Elvander, Nils. 1956. 'Rudolf Kjellén och nationalsocialismen' [Rudolf Kjellén and National Socialism], *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 59: 15–41.
- . 1961. 'Harald Hjärke och konservatismen: Konservativ idédebatt i Sverige 1865–1922' [Harald Hjärke and Conservatism: Conservative debate of ideas in Sweden 1865–1922]. Skrifter utgivna av Statsvetenskapliga föreningen i Uppsala 42. Uppsala.
- Holdar, Sven. 1992. 'The Ideal State and the Power of Geography', *Political Geography Quarterly* 11(3): 307–23.
- Kjellén, Rudolf. (1976/77) 1899. 'Studier öfver Sveriges politiska gränser' [Studies on the political borders of Sweden], *Ymer* 19: 283–331, in abridged form in *Ymer Årsbok 1976/77*, 69–80, with a comment by Thomas Lundén.
- . 1911. *Den stora Orienten: resestudier i österväg* [The Great Orient: Travel studies heading Eastwards]. Gothenburg: Åhlen & Åkerlund.
- Kjellén-Björkquist, Ruth. 1970. *Rudolf Kjellén: En människa i tiden kring sekelskiftet I–II* [Rudolf Kjellén: An individual in the time of the turn of the century. I–II]. Stockholm: Verbum.
- Maurer, John H. 2017. 'Alfred Thayer Mahan, Geopolitics and Grand Strategy', in Kurt Almqvist, Alexander Linklater and Andrew Mackenzie (eds), *The Return of Geopolitics*. Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 111–22.
- Rosenblad, Jan Gunnar, and Gundel Söderholm. 2014. 'Nationalisten och boerbeundraren' [The nationalist and Boer admirer], in B. Edström, R. Björk and T. Lundén (eds), *Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitiken och konservatismen*. [Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitics and Conservatism]. Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 244–77.
- Söderholm, Gundel, and Jan Gunnar Rosenblad. 2014. 'Han tvivlade på det brittiska imperiet' [He mistrusted the British Empire], in B. Edström, R. Björk and T. Lundén (eds), *Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitiken och konservatismen* [Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitics and Conservatism]. Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 100–121.