

## HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY AND INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES

**Gideon BIGER**

Department of Geography and Human environment, Tel Aviv  
University, Israel.

E-mail: bigergideon@gmail.com

**Summary:** International boundaries are man made separation lines which divided between more than 200 different states which exist to day all over our globs. Anyhow, all of today's boundaries were created in the past; sometimes some years ago, sometimes some decades ago and some boundaries were even established some hundred years ago. By this, they are legitimate targets for historical geography research.

**Keywords:** international boundaries, historical-geography research, past situation, geographical relict, political geography

\* \* \*

Historical geography is dealing with past geography, with geographical processes which took place in the past, with the influence of historical events on the landscape and with relicts of the past which exist in the present landscape.

Political geography is dealing with the relations between political activities and the landscape, with the influence of political decisions on the processes of geographical changes (Jones 2004). One of the most significant geo-political phenomena is International boundaries which marked the territories of independent states (and some ruled areas) all over the world (Prescott 1978).

International boundaries are man made separation lines which divided between more than 200 different states which exist to day all over our globs (Biger 1996). These boundaries were described, a hundred years ago, by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, later the British foreign secretary, as "the razor's edge on which hangs suspended the modern issues of war and peace, or life or death to nations" (Curzon 1907).

International boundaries, their history, location, disputes concerning their exact delimitation, their strategically importance, and other facts led many scholars to deal with that important subject. International lawyers, geographers, historians, political scientists, researchers of international relations, cartographers, military people, all are concern with the location of a boundary, its legal status, its history, its defensible ability and so on (Schofield and al. 2002). Much was written about international boundaries in the rich literature of Political Geography, many books are dealing with the geography of frontiers and boundaries and many are dealing today with the future of the international boundaries in perhaps "borderless world" or the role of boundaries in the European Union.

Anyhow, all of today's boundaries were created in the past; sometimes some years ago, sometimes some decades ago and some boundaries like the boundary between France and Spain established in 1659 or the Mexican - US boundary established in 1853 (Robert 2001) were even established some hundred years ago. What attracts the historical geographer in dealing with international boundaries is their role as an historical geographical features, which were established in the past and still exists in the present.

In this presentation I would like to deal with international boundaries as an historical – geographical features and point to research opportunity which has been done and can be done on this subject. This will presents by looking at four main points:

1. International Boundaries as historical-geographical relicts.
2. Past international boundaries as a permanent phenomenon influencing the landscape.

3. International boundaries as limits to effective regimes dealing with the landscape.
4. The relation between international boundaries and nations.

### **International boundaries as geographical relicts**

International boundaries are the products of agreements between independent countries which established a line which marks each sovereign territory. Boundaries usually reflect the relation between those countries, their ambitions, their power, their ability. International boundaries reflect the historical moments in the life of a state, when its limits were made according to its force and ability at that time. Moreover, international boundaries reflect the physical landscape- location of rivers and mountain ranges, forests, deserts, marches etc. International boundaries sometimes follows physiographic boundaries, rivers (The Oder – Neisse boundary between Poland and Germany established after World War II), mountain ranges (the Andes range between Chile and Argentina) or escarpments, sometimes termed as "natural boundaries". These boundaries seem to be especially acceptable criteria as such pronounced physical features often also separate culturally distinct areas. In the early days of boundary establishment, physiographic features were useful as they were generally known, could be visually recognized and were easy to defend against outside aggressions. However, many of the boundary lines based on such physiographic features have created major difficulties concerning their exact location. Boundaries were located according the physical feature which later changed their location.

Historical geography research can present rivers that shifted their course and have changing breadth depth, and length which let to countless disputes over whether the boundary should be along one of the river banks, along the main navigation channel, through the median line of the water's surface or somewhere else, at the time it was established. Such a case is the boundary between United States and Mexico, established along the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo in the Mexican name) which was shifted during the years, producing a long dispute settled only 110 years after its establishment. Such a case is the Israel - Syria boundary line which according to the original 1923 agreement between

United Kingdom, which governed Palestine and The French Republic which govern Syria, runs 10 m. east of the water level of the Sea of Galilee (Biger 2004). The line was established when the water level was -208 m. below sea level, now it is about - 213 m. below sea level, placing the "10 m. line" in an unknown place. Other physiographic problems are those of mountain range boundary. Any mountain range has recognized crest line, but they rarely coincide with the region's watershed. The placing of boundaries along crest lines in mountainous area (France – Spain boundary along the Pyrenean range) has therefore led to water disputes concerning the use of rivers near their source.

Sometimes international boundaries reflect the ownership of land, as it was done in the Palestine-Lebanon border agreement which was signed between United Kingdom and France in 1923. Other past situations such as land use, the location of different strategically points, as well as economical resources, location of roads and railway, dispersion of different ethnic groups and lots more influenced the location of other boundaries all over the world. As all of the international boundaries were established in the past – sometimes in the recent past but sometimes hundreds of years ago, they are presenting the situation in the period, even the year, they were established. By this, today's boundaries are relicts from the past, which make them a target for historical geography research (Butlin 1993).

Those boundaries are real relicts of the past, exists in the present landscape. Thus they are legitimated historical geography phenomenon which historical geographers has to deal with. Of the many criteria for establishing a boundary line the ethnic criteria (Clarke 2002) are those applied most often in modern time, while in the further past, prominent physical features in the landscape were more important. Ethnic boundaries were created in order to separate culturally uniformed peoples so that a minimum of stress would be place upon them (Waterman 2002). The heterogeneous world population, however, could not define boundaries that are completely and exactly separated people of different character and as a result, there are ethnic minorities in almost every state. The definition of peoples, according to race, language or religion was used in several cases, especially in post World

War I Europe, when the boundaries of the new states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia were located mainly according those criteria. . Historical geography research dealing with the historical moment in which a boundary was established, can present the human geographical reasons for establishing such boundaries, which sometimes were located according to railway lines (Turkey – Syria boundary) or even village boundaries (Biger 2002).

Historical geography and political history research bringing to our knowledge that most of today political boundaries were established in the past by European nations, directly or as arbitrators. In fact, it is difficult to identify any international boundary that has not directly involved a European state or European people at some stage of its historical evolution. As most of today boundaries were established during the last 200 years it present the European hegemony in the world during the period between 1750 and 1950, a period in which is the main target for historical geographers who focused their attention to the activities of those European States in Europe and in the World as a whole.

### **International boundaries as a past permanent feature in the landscape**

When international boundaries were establishes, the whole idea were to establish a permanent boundary, which will never be changed. Although every boundary was changed through history, and tend to change, there are some boundaries which were "frozen", presenting geographical and political situation which existed long time ago. Landscapes were changed, political situations were changed but the location of the boundary was never change. Thus the boundary between Portugal and Spain was established in the 13th centaury and, although nearly everything was change, the location of it was never really changed, except some minor local changes. The same hold true for the French-Spain boundary of the 17th century, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century US-Canada boundary, Greece boundaries of early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Scandinavian boundaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of African boundaries, although dictated by European countries,

and not by the local independent regime, are presenting the political situation of late 19<sup>th</sup> Europe. Here and there some minor changes were done but as a whole- African boundaries were frozen in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus Namibia boundaries are the boundaries of the former German colony of South West Africa as well as the boundaries of Congo are those of the Belgian colony of Congo, established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even more recent boundaries, those of East Europe, were drawn after the second World war, but reflected past situation of the relation between the Soviet Union, United States and Britain in 1945. The existing of Austrian population in north Italy (South Tirol – Alto-Adige) is an outcome of the World War One, when Italy was with the winning Allies and Austria was with the Central Powers which were defeated and so Austria lost that area which was transfer to Italy. Although Italy was in the "wrong side" in the Second World War it never lost that area which is still inhabitant by lot of German speakers living in an "Austrian" town and village landscape.

### **International boundaries as limits of different political regimes**

International boundaries are used as marking the limit of different political entities. As such, international boundaries can become lines that defined, and still define, between two different human landscape, each influence and dictates by different political entities. Historical political changes can be done in one night; geographical changes can takes years to be activated. This is why some old patterns of fields, streets, buildings etc. are stay longer then the location of the boundaries. East Berlin residential buildings are not like those one can find in Western Berlin. Only understanding the influence of boundary which was abolished more then 20 years ago can explain the difference. Many building in Polish villages and towns, located in the area which was a German area before 1945, are still show the German building style and the German road pattern. American town situated along the border with Mexico, although mostly inhabitants now by the same people, have a totally other city plan then their "twin cities" in the Mexican side. They have no PLAZA, where lots of people are gathering during lunch-time and evening, which is typical for Mexican cities. Only the location of the boundary,

established in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, can explain that phenomena. Only past boundaries between Spanish and Portuguese colonial regime in South America can explain the difference between the language and cultural patterns between Brazil and other South America countries. Thus, historical-geographical knowledge of past international boundaries can help in the research of different past landscape and different geographical processes.

### **Boundaries and Nations**

Our political world was created through a long historical process. Today we have nearly 200 independent states sharing more than 300 land boundaries between them. It seem that the location of those boundaries, were mainly established as to create a series of nation states. Thus Czechia is the state of the Czech people, Slovakia of the Slovaks, Poland for the Poles, Japan for the Japanese people and The Netherlands for the Dutch people. We can say that in those examples, nations created the boundaries. Anyhow, there are countries which were not based on one nation but the opposite process happened.

The boundaries established nations inside their location. Such as it are most of South and Central America countries as most of the African States. There was no Chilean nation of Bolivian nation as well as a Nigerian nation or Ghanaian nation before Chile, Bolivia, Nigeria and Ghana was established as an independent states. Thus a world-wide view can present two main models for the relation between nations and state's international boundaries. The one is the European-Asian (The Old World) model of Nation Created Boundaries – The Nation State model, and the American – African (The new world) Model of Boundaries created Nations, The multi-cultural which tries to use the melting pot technique in order to build a nation in its dictate boundaries. Thus the American Nation is a nation of those who were born or settled in a defined territory – between Canada and Mexico (as well as Alaska and Hawaii), along lines that were established in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although this model cannot predict anything about the future, it can point to the way the independent states of today were established in the past.

## **Conclusions**

Whenever one looks at a political map of today or of some past period, boundary lines are the main items to be discussed. Those boundaries, some of them were born, lived, sometimes changed and sometimes died, while other boundaries survived. Thus any research which will try to understand the location, the continuation, the existence or disappearing of an international boundary is making an historical-geography research.

The historical geographers, who are combining in their research area studies with knowledge of the past, can, and have to have their place in the scholarly world of boundary research.

To sum up – International boundaries are man- made changeable features influencing the landscape. By this, they are legitimate targets for historical geography research. Moreover, as there are still a great many (over 100) boundary and territorial disputes around the world, historical geography research can help to solve them by presenting the past geographical situation and the evolution of the boundary through the ages.

## **REFERENCES**

Biger, G., 1995, *The Encyclopedia of International Boundaries*, Facts on Files, New York.

Biger, G., 2002, *Village boundaries as a factor in Delimiting International Boundaries*, In: *The Middle East*, pp. 463-472; in Schofield and al. (eds.), 2002, *The Razor's Edge*, Kluwer Law International, London.

Biger G., 2004, *The Boundaries of Modern Palestine*, Routledge Curzon, London.

Butlin, R., 1993, *Historical Geography through the gates of space and time*, Edward Arnold, London.

Clarke, J., 2002, *Boundaries as demographic Divides*, in: Schofield and al. (eds.), *The Razor's Edge*, Kluwer Law International, London, pp. 259-268.



Curzon of Kedleston, Lord, 1907, *Frontiers*, The Romanes Lecture, Oxford.

Jones, M. (et. al.), 2004, *An Introduction to Political Geography*, Rotledge, London, 2004).

Prescott, J.R.V., 1978, *Boundaries and Frontiers*, London, 1978.

Robert, P., 2001, *La Gran Linea – mapping the United States – Mexico boundary 1949-1857*, “University of Texas Press”.

Schofield and al. (eds.), 2002, *The Razor's Edge – International boundaries and Political Geography*, Kluwer Law international, London.

Waterman, S., 2002, *States of Segregation*, in Schofield and al. (eds.) *The Razor's Edge*, Kluwer Law International, London, pp. 57-76.