

The geopolitics of territorial relativity. Poland seen by Rudolf Kjellén

Abstract

Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) discusses the birth, death, and possible rebirth of the state as a 'living organism'. His concept of *the nation*, based on Renan, as a voluntary community is linked to the attainment of statehood. Poland is an example in this discussion, beginning in his book *Stormakterna – The Great Powers* – in 1905, with the nation under subjugation by three of these powers, continuing with his *Staten som lifsform* in 1916 where the possibility of rebirth is in sight, and finalized in 1920 in questioning the future of the world geopolitical order. His writings also include statements on the vulnerability of borders, the need for domestic autarky, and, on the problems of territorial autonomy, discussions of importance for the post-World War I geopolitical history of Poland; but these have mostly been neglected by post-World War II discourses. The aim of this article is to analyse how Poland's geopolitical situation is reflected in the viewpoints of Rudolf Kjellén against the background of the historical, spatial development of the Polish state and Polish ethnicity.

Keywords

Geopolitics • Poland • Kjellén • nation • state • territory

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Received: 1 October 2021

Accepted: 24 June 2022

Introduction

The Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) discusses the birth, death, and possible rebirth of the state as a 'living organism' (Eberhardt 2012). His concept of *the nation*, based on Renan, as a voluntary community is linked to the attainment of statehood. Poland is mentioned in his book *Stormakterna – The Great Powers* – in 1905 and in several updates as a nation under subjugation by three of these powers. In *Staten som lifsform* (The State as a Form of Life) (1916), he discusses the concept of nation in relation to the constitutional state. A stable state needs either national cohesiveness or loyalty. In his last version of *The Great Powers*, in 1920, he questions the future of the world geopolitical order and the vulnerability of borders, the need for domestic autarky, and on the problems of territorial autonomy, discussions of importance for the post-World War I geopolitical history of Poland. Kjellén's writings on the concept of nation, loyalty, and statehood have mostly been neglected by post-World War II discourses.

Some notes on Kjellén's geopolitical concepts

Kjellén first used his concept of 'geopolitics' in a paper about Sweden's borders in 1899 (Alvstam & Lundén, 2021), but further defines it as the discipline of the state as a geographical organism or entity in space (Kjellén 1916 p. 39). Domestic geopolitics also influences relations with other states concerning resources and territory, but these are not necessarily inimical. Kjellén sees history as a game between great powers, in which smaller states and buffer states have to try to smoothly adapt to the realities (Marklund 2021). His reasoning includes a precise and important definition of 'state': a territory controlled by a centre of power

which is recognized in international law. The formation of new states was, to Kjellén, almost always a violation of the principles of law; this was a statement, not an evaluation. A new state had to make itself geopolitically viable by wisely exploiting its material and spiritual resources, where the national feeling was decisive. (Kjellén 1916 pp. 162–164). A 'nation' is a group of people with a feeling of togetherness created by the communication of ideas. It is a vague and volatile phenomenon, partly, but not always, dependent on a common religion and language, but also on the influence of the governance of the territorial state. The nation is bound together by emotion, by accepting the state, or by striving for a territory. In other words, an 'imagined community', or a 'daily plebiscite' – a reference to 'Rénan' (Renan 1882, Kjellén 1916 p. 90). Kjellén points out that while the state usually defines its inhabitants as a people, its inhabitants do not necessarily see themselves as *one* people of *one* state (Kjellén 1916 p. 106). The national feeling is dynamic. If pulled out of equilibrium, it is important for the state to bring it back into balance. Poland is given as an example of nationalism which sinks below a critical level, but Kjellén then sees hope for the rebirth of the Polish nation state (Kjellén 1916 p. 123; 171-72). To Kjellén, in 1914, Poland was not a state; it ceased to exist after the last partition at the end of the eighteenth century. 'But Poland was still a nation'. (Kjellén 1914, p. 6; Falkemark 2021, p. 178).

Poland and The Great Powers before the war

Kjellén, in his studies of the great powers (*Stormakterna*), first appearing in 1905, discusses historically failed great powers such as Sweden and the Netherlands, but sees the Polish-

Lithuanian Commonwealth, which he called the 'Greater Polish ("Jagellonian")' idea, as wholly unrealistic, or in his words, 'fantastic' (Kjellén 1905 I, p. 206; Björk 2021b, p. 138). He comments on the Polish dilemma, that of being subjugated by three great powers. Kjellén is worried about the border situation in the East. And here the deeper conflict between 'races' – Germanic and Slavic – makes itself felt. But Kjellén does not see a Slavic brotherhood.

[In] Russia, the Poles, the 'little Russians' [Ukrainian or Ruthenian], Finns, Baltic peoples, Germans, Caucasians [e.g. Georgians] and others, are long since alienated with the Czarist rule and empire. They are more bent on emancipation into statehood than on integration into Russian society. This has prompted, and now, towards the end of the nineteenth century, deepened a policy of Russification. The old idea of a unifying pan-Slavism turns into a harsh, punishing pan-Russianism. (Kjellén 1905 II, p. 152; Björk 2021b, p. 147)

Discussing the Poles living within the German state, Kjellén begins using a metaphor for the Poles: the 'sea of people', populated by German language isles, so that 'the map looks like an archipelago'. The towns are mainly German. 'This is the type of an unfinished border between peoples' (Kjellén 1905:1, p. 205). 'The Poles count more than 3 million in Germany, and they are "a highly cultivated and socially developed nation, with rich literature, an educated or trained press, and proud traditions from a sovereign past"' (Kjellén 1905:1, p. 205, Björk 2021b, p. 137-38).

Kjellén in the middle of the war: death and rebirth of a nation, and perhaps of a state

An important discussion in *Staten som livsform* concerns the relation between the *nationality principle* and the *principle of loyalty*; he dismisses the power of Pan-Slavism and Pan-Germanism. He seems to prefer state-building to be dependent on the 'natural' loyalty of the population, a loyalty built up by confidence over centuries (Kjellén 1916, p. 106; pp. 111ff). Discussing loyalty to the state, he says: 'We see this conflict even in Germany, where Danes, Poles and Frenchmen in each corner react against the state and are attacked by the state' (Kjellén 1916, p. 82).

This policy

belonged in the concept of state, the practical mirror was cabinet politics, and the most radical fruit was the partition of Poland, a partition also of the people; if the people is a mechanical and temporary unification of individuals, then the misgivings to dissolve it will be less. (Kjellén 1916, p. 79)

Concerning the relation between nationalism and the territorial state, he says

that the principle of nationality has been and still is met with much resistance. The reaction shows in a conscious act in such phenomena of regimental politics as Russification, Magyarisation and Germanisation, all directed against alien minorities in the name of a ruling nationality and also in the name of loyalty, all aiming at, in a violent way, complete national unity at the expense of the nationality idea of the internalized elements. On this hostile trail we also find Germany, which, since, with its great idea, solved its own problem of unity, and in the lead of the most pronounced reaction (against the Poles in the East) the same great statesman that was the man for the nation at its unification. (Kjellén 1916, pp. 107-108)

In a note on page 108 (Kjellén 1916), he adds:

... Germanisation and similar phenomena can objectively be seen as another expression of the nationality principle itself as one thus apprehends the principle as implying an identity between state and nation, no difference by which means it is brought about. Germanisation aims at the same end – a nationally unified and purified realm, as, e.g., the Polish national movement.

Kjellén concludes that if the new Europe is founded on the principles of the peoples' right to unity and freedom, two peoples will be without either of them: 'the 33 million Ukrainians in Russia and Austria-Hungary, and the 20 million Poles in Russia, Austria, and Germany' (Kjellén 1916, p. 106). In discussing the life and death of states, he points to many European states which disappeared after Poland ceased to exist. 'There will be a European list of death from the last century, and then we have not [even] counted those artificial and therefore ephemeral polities like ... the creation of the Vienna Congress Krakau (1815–1846)' (Kjellén 1916, p. 168).

Poland has not been absorbed into any higher organic unit, it has not abandoned its existence to the advantage of nationality, it has not either died a natural death: it has been eradicated from history by other hands, where it, for centuries, was an immense realm – its voice in the world is silenced by force, and its homeless nation is now housed in three alien abodes. ... Poland was cut up according to treaty Such legal procedures should, however, not distract from the essential in a destiny like that of Poland. It was prepared from inside, before the cut fell. The destruction of the Polish state is an object lesson of the 'pernicious anaemia' The cause of death was not the treaties of partition of 1772 and 1793 and 1795; they were only parts in the execution; death was in the heart of this state, where *nationality had worked out*. The result was in the eyes of contemporaneity: 'where there were two Poles, there were three different opinions'. Deprived of the carrying and supporting element of self-sacrificing for the common good, the Polish people dissolved itself into the unbridled self-indulgence; in this way the state became a hot bed for anarchy, contagious to the environment that, for this reason, got the opportunity of involvement, and then fell an easy prey. ... our natural compassion at the great suffering should not seduce us into disregarding the organic in this destiny. It was a regular execution over a decrepit people that pronounced its verdict itself. (Kjellén 1916, p. 170)

In a note on page 170 (Kjellén 1916), he adds:

These notations are indeed not intended to exonerate Poland's executioners from guilt. As a part in the contemporary national renaissance one can regard Balzer, (1916): an attempt at an 'Ehrenrettung' of the old republic in its most vulnerable area, the constitution.

Unlike human beings, states can reappear:

... under certain circumstances can states that have died, be born anew, into participation in a later system of states. ... foreign slavery can to a nation become a suffering baptism into improvement. Here is a hope also for Poland – that the World War now seems to bring into fulfilment. (Kjellén 1916, p. 171-72)

¹Kjellén is referring to the 'Wolne, Niepodległe i Ścisłe Neutralne Miasto Kraków z Okręgiem' [Free, Independent, and Strictly Neutral City of Cracow with its Territory] (See e.g. Davies 1981, pp. 334-339).

Judging by Kjellén's perspective in 1916, Poland is a victim of decisions taken by the great powers of the day without considering international law, but adds 'perhaps we might enjoy the glimpses of international law that, in spite of everything, has been accomplished' (Kjellén 1916, p. 176).

Kjellén's post-war analysis

The third, 1920, edition of *Stormakterna*, now with the title *Stormakterna och världskrisen* (The Great Powers and the World Crisis), contains a short analysis of the great powers after the war (Björk 2021a, p. 99). The section on Austria-Hungary includes a statement which says that the population of Galicia and Bukovina would lack national individuality. The 5 million Poles and 4 million Ruthenians would not be attracted by Russian irredentism, they would rather prefer Austrian rule; but Kjellén remarks on the national controversy between Poles and Ruthenians in Galicia, strengthened by confessional differences (Kjellén 1920, pp. 10-12) '... a great power can bear "one Ireland", yes even three, as in Imperial Germany with Poland, Alsace, and Schleswig' (Kjellén 1920, p. 18). On Germany, Kjellén asserts that the Reich contains almost 4 million Poles, plus 100,000 Lithuanians in the east. Kjellén returns to his 1905 allegory:

There the Polish ethnic sea went into Germany, flooding 'Oberschlesien, Posen', and Western Prussia, almost isolating German East Prussia. This sea was certainly filled with German language islands so that the ethnic map looked like an archipelago, which on the other hand stretched into Russian Poland, where especially the towns were German strongholds. ... Weichsel is the river of the Poles... Poles are a cultural people, [they have] their social development, rich literature, educated press, and great traditions from an independent past. Only within Germany's borders were thus all conditions for a national separation movement. The racial strife was thus going on within the realm, and this with an earnest[ness] that made the Polish question perhaps the greatest trouble of German (Prussian) domestic politics. (Kjellén 1920, p. 52)

Discussing the Polish national awakening, Kjellén puts Germany in an intermediate position between an oppressive Russia and a more liberal Austria, leading to a more open conflict:

The Polish question became particularly virulent because Poland's 15 million people concentrated their fight for independence in this, while in Russia the oppressive power of the state, and in Austria its great accommodation put particular checks on it. Germany also from the 1880's found itself obliged to take to special defence measures in the part of the country in the form of colonization paid by the state. But the result did not meet the expectations, the Polish element increased even more; if the parts in Posen were fairly equal half a century ago, the Germans had by the entrance of our century sunk down to the same minority position as in Bohemia, and the position was still on the decline. (Kjellén 1920, p. 53)

Kjellén is usually rather sceptical about the role of religion in forming nationalism, but in the Polish case he mentions the political role of the Catholic Church in the Polish areas of Germany as being 'the main hearth of agitation' (Kjellén 1920, p. 56).

On Russia, Kjellén asserts the following, after discussing possible Russian irredentism concerning the Galician Ruthenians:

From a pan-Slavic viewpoint, Russia could have similar claims on the rest of Galicia plus Posen etc., on behalf

of the Poles (9 million, almost as many as within the Russian border). But such claims do not correspond to any sympathetic currents beyond the border; on the contrary, the centrifugal power is valid in Russia's Polish and Ukrainian question, at least in the first case as pure separatism. (Kjellén 1920, p. 124)

The Russification policy is seen by Kjellén as an old-fashioned reaction against the subjugated nations' attempts at revolt, fighting for independence and self-determination:

Two modern West European ideas, nationalism and freedom of conscience have thus, in the rim of Europe, mobilized against Oldrussia, that through counterattack and violence has intended to master them. 'The policy of Russification' became programmatic after the last Polish revolt and continued in a full half century, steadily increasing its scope and its energy. After the revolution of 1905 ... came the reaction, stronger than ever.... Its victims were, above all, Poland and Finland, the first through the excretion of a new government, Kolm ('Poland's fourth partition'). (Kjellén 1920, p. 126)

In the final part of the book, written shortly after the 1919–20 Treaty of Versailles, Kjellén comments on the dichotomy between a principle of nation states based on professed ethnicity or allegiance (as proposed by President Wilson) and claims for German reparations and territorial truncations. Wilson's 'fourteen points' are generally accepted by Kjellén; they

included the establishment of a Polish nation state with free access to the sea. It is clear that this program deprives Germany [of] its future as a world power, and even in certain points, (Lothringia, Poland) even truncates its territorial stato quo. (Kjellén 1920, p. 169)

But the Peace agreement does not solve all problems, it creates new ones:

The Peace thus creates more evil from an objective point of view than it cures. If there was of irredenta in Germany one great case (Poland) and two small (Schleswig, Lothringia), there are now at least seven (Alsace, Saar and Rhen[ania]) in the west, Schleswig, Danzig, Oberschlesien and E-Prussia in the east. (Kjellén 1920, p. 180)

Kjellén on Poland as a form of life

The rebirth of Poland was a fact in 1920, but the eastern delimitation was still unsolved. There is no mention of Poland's Jewish and Protestant populations, but by mentioning the political agitation of the Catholic Church, Kjellén indirectly points to the relation between Polishness and Catholicism. (Kjellén 1920, p. 56). Protestant Polish speakers mainly voted for Germany in the plebiscites, or with their feet in the Polish-West German agreements after World War II (Kossert 2001, p.2006). In the case of the Jews, Kjellén asserts that in the states of Western Europe, they 'appear as fully naturalized, as embedded into the local nationality', while the Eastern Jews are 'Orientals' and should therefore be seen as a nation in their own right, however not likely to form a state because of their racial purity' (Kjellén 1916, p. 114).

What is specific to Kjellén's geopolitics is his focus on autarky – for a country to be self-sufficient in resources (Björk 2021a, p. 126). The state territory should not be uniform but harmonic, and the state can make its realm 'more natural than it *fundamentally* is'. Weak boundaries can be strengthened from the inside through fitting communication (Kjellén 1916, pp. 56-62, Lundén 2021a, p. 165).

The territorial configuration of Poland has, over the centuries, often been strategically and economically unfavourable. Great cities – Riga, Kiev, Kraków, Gdańsk, Szczecin – have, during Poland's history, through the drawing of state borders close to these cities, lost their importance for both neighbouring states. Even after the plebiscites which were held around 1919, and partly as a result of the ethnic disparities between towns and their surroundings, the economic landscape became truncated. The redrawing of the railways, and the foundation of Gdynia are obvious examples of territorial adaptation in order to attain autarky.

Concerning the use of rivers as borders between independent states, Kjellén points out that even if a river has an advantage as a definition of a boundary, it also has strong disadvantages:

By its character as a communication artery, the river works to *densify* the population instead of dispersing it, and it thus directly violates the preconditions for a good boundary. It is thus clear that the growth of communication has a tendency to decrease the use of rivers as state boundaries. (Kjellén 1899, pp. 326-327, Alvstam & Lundén 2021, p. 56)

The Oder-Neisse delimitation was definitely a political rather than an economic adaptation. It was not only the border towns but also Szczecin and Świnoujście which would lose much of their economic areas of influence. 'The good boundary... must not be absolute or exclusive ... but the right middle line between seclusion and mediation.... The seashell is not an ideal for the house of the state' (Kjellén 1916, pp. 56f).

Kjellén is pessimistic about the possibility of solving territorial issues through arbitration. In Poland's case, the relatively small border rectifications with Czechoslovakia in 1920 seem to be the only case which was handled by arbitration by an international legal organization (Davies 1981, p. 496; Jesenský 2014). Almost anticipating the coming conflicts over territories (Memel, Danzig), Kjellén points to the awkward situation of a state having part of their territory under superimposed legislation from other powers or international bodies: 'Nobody can obey two masters'. And he refutes, as being stillborn, a proposal by Grabowsky (1916) aimed at a type of German-Polish condominium (Kjellén 1916, p. 49). The Pölitz/Police exclave in Poland in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany (1945–1946) (Aischmann 2008, pp. 135-149), and the Soviet military base at Świnoujście (1945–1991) (Jędrusik 2013, p.144) confirms Kjellén's observation.

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Kjellén's legacy: the case for Poland as a state and a nation

Kjellén's treatment of Poland as a state and the Polish people as a nation has been more or less neglected. In his discussion on the state as a realm, he deplores that the ethnic element, being historically earlier than the territorial one, has long been neglected by scientists (Kjellén 1914 p. 77; 1916 p. 41). His discussion on ethnopolitics (1916 p. 77-121) is a light and essayistic forerunner to Anthony D. Smith's opus of 1986. His concept of nation as an imagined community resembles that of Benedict Anderson's (1983 p. 6) and Gellner's (1983, p. 1). Kjellén's discussion about the formation of nationhood was developed and interpreted as a result of social communication by Karl Deutsch (1953). In his condemnation of Russification and Germanisation efforts by territorial powers attempting to create loyalty, he precludes Brubaker's (1995, 1996) discussion about nationalising states. It is remarkable, however, that none of these Anglo-Saxon scholars refer to Kjellén. Only Ladis Kristof, (Kristof 1960 p. 21–28) touches on Kjellén's discussion on these matters, while most later scholars only mention Kjellén as the father of geopolitics (Lundén 2021b).

Conclusion

Poland has, since 1945, and particularly after 1991, reached an existence as a nation-state without any significant ethnic (or even religious) minorities. This goal was, however, attained through external pressures and decisions, and after enormous sufferings: by territorial truncation and extension. These changes also implied an ethnic Polonization of the areas at the expense of almost all ethnic and religious minorities, through the Nazi extermination policies in occupied Poland, the expulsion of Germans, and the exodus of protestants and the remaining Jews. Unlike the geopolitical situation during the 1000 years of Polish identity, the country has now reached a territorial status which is accepted by both its inhabitants and its neighbours. In this way, Poland seems to have fulfilled Kjellén's two principles – of an accepted national identity and of popular loyalty to the territorial state, but certainly did not attain it in the peaceful way he had hoped.

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