3. THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The missionary, the conqueror, the farmer and, of late the engineer, have followed so closely in the traveller’s footsteps that the world, in its remoter borders, has hardly been revealed before one must record its virtually complete political appropriation. (Mackinder, 1904, 421)

Mackinder was speaking at the close of the most intensive period of boundary construction in world history. It was a period that had enclosed even barren tropical deserts and unexplored equatorial forests. International boundaries have now replaced frontiers in all the continents including Antarctica. This chapter examines the ways by which states created boundaries. The past tense is appropriate because only rarely in the future will two governments have the opportunity to draw a new international boundary on land.

First this chapter considers the contrasts and similarities of boundary construction on the world’s continents. Second it reviews the procedures by which boundaries have been drawn between adjacent territories. Third it examines the possibilities for the determination of new boundaries in the future. Fourth it provides a case-study of boundary evolution between Thailand and Laos and Cambodia.

THE CONTRASTS AND SIMILARITIES OF INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY CONSTRUCTION ON THE WORLD’S CONTINENTS

Alsace-Lorraine was acquired by the French through the methods which have led to the consolidation of most modern States, namely, conquest, trickery and cession. (Temperley, 1920, 159)

The brutal honesty of this statement would be preserved if names such as Tacna, Bornu and Primorskiy Kray were substituted for Alsace-Lorraine and the charge was made against Chile, Britain and Russia respectively. However, it would be an error to assume that because European states had similar territorial ambitions in Europe and other continents and sub-continental regions and used similar polices to achieve them, that there are close similarities between the evolution of boundaries in Europe and in the other continents. There are more important
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The differences between Europe and the rest of the world than there are between any other two continents.

Boundary evolution in Europe was entirely an indigenous process. The changing patterns of major and minor political divisions of considerable areas of the continent have been recorded without a break, certainly since the Roman period, say 510 BC. Useful perspectives can be found in general atlases produced by Shepherd (1922), Ward, Prothero and Leathes (1924), Engel (1957), Treherne and Fullard (1965) and Barraclough (1978). Menke (1865) and Smith and Grove (1874) provided detailed representations of classical Europe. There are also regional atlases including the remarkably detailed Geschiedkundige Atlas van Nederland (1913-32) and the monumental atlas of southeastern France by Baratier et alia (1969).

In the other continents, apart from Antarctica, the indigenous processes of boundary evolution were generally overlain and halted by colonial activities of the imperial powers, such as Spain and Portugal in South America, Germany and France in Africa, China, Britain and Russia in Asia and Turkey, Britain and France in the southern part of the Middle East.

Using a geological analogy, the advent of imperial power in these lands may be likened to a political unconformity. The processes by which the Incas, Amandebeles, Sioux, Turkomans, K rens and Aborigines determined boundaries, effectively ended when the imperial powers acquired authority in their regions. In some cases, approximations of the indigenous boundaries that existed at that time were preserved in comparatively short sections by the imperial powers. Thus the British drew the boundary, between Northern and Southern Nigeria, in the vicinity of the most southern advance of the Hausa and Fulani against the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo.

Even a superficial acquaintance with the evolution of international boundaries in continents outside Europe makes it clear that many problems arose from genuine uncertainties about the distribution of geographical features and the patterns of political authority. These problems may have existed in pre-historic times in Europe, but for the past 2000 years there is no evidence that such problems caused significant problems. The high densities of population, the considerable interregional trade, conquests, migrations, the clearing of forests, the draining of swamps and the absence of entirely inhospitable terrain ensured that the physical geography of Europe was generally known to the regional authorities at an early time.

Regional geographical knowledge necessary for boundary construction was certainly completed during the feudal age in Europe. Strayer (1965, 17) pointed out that effective feudal government is local since it requires the performance of political functions based on personal agreements between small numbers of people. He and other writers also showed that in any particular parcel of land different lords might exercise different authorities related to justice, taxes, the various uses of forests and forced labour. Genicot (1970) provided a very illuminating account of this type of situation. Thus it follows that the areas within