CASE STUDY / Changing Borders in Europe

Daniel Lenig lives in the village of Rittershoffen and works at a Mercedes-Benz truck factory in the town of Worth, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) away. Lenig’s journey to work takes him across an international border, because Rittershoffen is in France, whereas Worth is in Germany. As a citizen of France, Lenig has no legal difficulty crossing the German–French border twice a day; no guards ask him to show his passport or require him to pay customs duties on goods he purchases on the other side. If he is delayed, the cause is heavy traffic on the bridge that spans the Rhine River, which serves as the border between the two countries.

The boundary between France and Germany has not always been so easy to cross peacefully. The French have long argued that the Rhine River forms the logical physical boundary between France and Germany. But the Germans once claimed that they should control the Rhine, including the lowlands on the French side between the west bank of the river and the Vosges Mountains, an area known as Alsace.

Alsace was initially inhabited by Germanic tribes but was annexed by France in 1670. Two centuries later, in 1870, Alsace and its neighboring province of Lorraine were captured by Prussia (which a year later formed the core of the newly proclaimed German Empire). France regained Alsace and Lorraine after Germany was defeated in World War I and has possessed them ever since, except between 1940 and 1945 when Germany controlled them during World War II.

With the end of the Cold War and the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, France and Germany now lie at the core of the world’s wealthiest market area. Most French and German people consider the pursuit of higher standards of living to be more important than rehashing centuries-old boundary disputes.

Although old boundaries between France and Germany have been virtually eliminated, new ones have been erected elsewhere in Europe. Travelers between Ljubljana and Zagreb now must show their passports and convert their cash into a different currency. These two cities were once part of the same country—Yugoslavia—but now they are the capitals of two separate countries, Slovenia and Croatia. Similarly, travelers between Vilnius and Moscow—both once part of the Soviet Union—now must show their passports and change money when they cross the international boundary between Lithuania and Russia.

For several decades during the Cold War, many countries belonged to one of two regions, one allied with the former Soviet Union and the other allied with the United States. With the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the global political landscape changed fundamentally.

Geographic concepts help us to understand this changing political organization of Earth’s surface. We can also use geographic methods to examine the causes of political change and instability and to anticipate potential trouble spots around the world.

When looking at satellite images of Earth, we easily distinguish places—landmasses and water bodies, mountains and rivers, deserts and fertile agricultural land, urban areas and forests. What we cannot see are where boundaries are located between countries. Boundary lines are not painted on Earth, but they might as well be, for these national divisions are very real.

To many, national boundaries are more meaningful than natural features. One of Earth’s most fundamental cultural characteristics—one that we take for granted—is the division of our planet’s surface into a collection of spaces occupied by individual countries.

In the post–Cold War era, the familiar division of the world into countries or states is crumbling. Geographers observe why this familiar division of the world is changing. Between the mid-1940s and the late 1980s two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—essentially “ruled” the world. As on superpowers, they competed at a global scale. But the United States is less dominant in the political landscape of the twenty-first century, and the Soviet Union no longer exists.

Today, globalization means more connections among states. Individual countries have transferred military, economic, and political authority to regional and worldwide collections of states. Power is exercised through connections among states created primarily for economic cooperation.

Despite (or perhaps because of) greater global political cooperation, local diversity has increased in political affairs, as individual cultural groups demand more control over the territory they inhabit. States have transferred power to local governments, but this does not placate cultural groups who seek complete independence.

Wars have broken out in recent years—both between small neighboring states and among cultural groups within countries—over political control of territory. Old countries have been broken up in a collection of smaller ones, some barely visible on world maps.

KEY ISSUE 1
Where Are States Located?

- Problems of Defining States
- Varying Size of States
- Development of the State Concept

The question posed in this key issue may seem self-evident, because a map of the world shows that virtually all habitable land belongs to a country. But for most of history, until recently, this was not so. As recently as the 1940s, the world
Problems of Defining States

A state is an area organized into a political unit and ruled by an established government that has control over its internal and foreign affairs. It occupies a defined territory on Earth's surface and contains a permanent population. The term country is a synonym for state. A state has sovereignty, which means independence from control of its internal affairs by other states. Because the entire area of a state is managed by its national government, laws, army, and leaders, it is a good example of a formal or uniform region. The term state, as used in political geography, does not refer to the 50 regional governments inside the United States. The 50 states of the United States are subdivisions within a single state—the United States of America.

There is some disagreement about the actual number of sovereign states. Among places that test the definition of a state are Korea, China, and Western Sahara (Sahrawi Republic).

Korea: One State or Two?

A colony of Japan for many years, Korea was divided into two occupation zones by the United States and the former Soviet Union after they defeated Japan in World War II (Figure 8-1). The country was divided into northern and southern sections along 38° north latitude. The division of these zones became permanent in the late 1940s, when the two superpowers established separate governments and withdrew their armies. The new government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) then invaded the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1950, touching off a 3-year war that ended with a cease-fire line near the 38th parallel.

Both Korean governments are committed to reuniting the country into one sovereign state. Leaders of the two countries agreed in 2000 to allow exchange visits of families separated for a half century by the division and to increase economic cooperation. However, progress toward reconciliation was halted by North Korea’s decision to build nuclear weapons, even though the country lacked the ability to provide its citizens with food, electricity, and other basic needs. Meanwhile, in 1992, North Korea and South Korea were admitted to the United Nations as separate countries.

China and Taiwan: One State or Two?

Are China and the island of Taiwan two sovereign states or one? Most other countries consider China (officially, the People’s Republic of China) and Taiwan (officially, the Republic of China) as separate and sovereign states. According to China’s government, Taiwan is not sovereign, but a part of China. This confusing situation arose from a civil war in China during the late 1940s between the Nationalists and the Communists. After losing, nationalist leaders in 1949 fled to Taiwan, 200 kilometers (120 miles) off the Chinese coast.

The Nationalists proclaimed that they were still the legitimate rulers of the entire country of China. Until some future occasion when they could defeat the Communists and capture all of China, the Nationalists argued, at least they could continue to govern one island of the country. In 1999, Taiwan’s president announced that Taiwan would regard itself as a sovereign independent state, but the government of China viewed that announcement as a dangerous departure from the long-standing arrangement between the two.

The question of who constituted the legitimate government of China plagued U.S. officials during the 1950s and 1960s. The United States had supported the Nationalists during the civil war, so many Americans opposed acknowledging that China was firmly under the control of the Communists. Consequently, the United States continued to regard the Nationalists as the official government of China until 1971, when U.S. policy finally changed and the United Nations voted to transfer China’s seat from the Nationalists to the Communists. Taiwan is now the most populous state not in the United Nations.

Western Sahara (Sahrawi Republic)

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, also known as Western Sahara, is considered by most African countries as a sovereign state. Morocco, however, claims the territory and to prove it has built a 2,700-kilometer wall around the territory to keep out rebels (Figure 8-2).
Spain controlled the territory on the continent’s west coast between Morocco and Mauritania until withdrawing in 1976. An independent Sahrawi Republic was declared by the Polisario Front and recognized by most African countries, but Morocco and Mauritania annexed the northern and southern portions, respectively. Three years later Mauritania withdrew, and Morocco claimed the entire territory.

Morocco controls most of the populated area, but the Polisario Front operates in the vast, sparsely inhabited deserts, especially the one-fifth of the territory that lies east of Morocco’s wall. The United Nations has tried but failed to reach a resolution among the parties.

Polar Regions: Many Claims

The South polar region contains the only large landmasses on Earth’s surface that are not part of a state. Several states claim portions of the region, and some claims are overlapping and conflicting.

Several states, including Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom, claim portions of Antarctica (Figure 8-3). Argentina, Chile, and the United Kingdom have made conflicting, overlapping claims. The United States, Russia, and a number of other states do not recognize the claims of any country to Antarctica. The Antarctic Treaty, signed in 1959, provides a legal framework for managing Antarctica. States may establish research stations there for scientific investigations, but no military activities are permitted. The Treaty has been signed by 47 states.

As for the Arctic, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea permitted countries to submit claims inside the Arctic Circle by 2009 (Figure 8-4). The Arctic region is thought to be rich in energy resources.

Varying Size of States

The land area occupied by the states of the world varies considerably. The largest state is Russia, which encompasses 17.1 million square kilometers (6.6 million square miles), or 11 percent of the world’s entire land area (Figure 8-5). Other states with more than 5 million square kilometers (2 million square miles) include Canada, the United States, China, Brazil, and Australia.

At the other extreme are about two dozen microstates, which are states with very small land areas. If Russia were the size of this page, the a microstate would be the size of a single letter. The smallest microstate in the United Nations—Monaco—encompasses only 1.5 square kilometers (0.6 square miles). See Figure 8-17 for an image of Monaco.

Other UN member states that are smaller than 1,000 square kilometers include Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahrain,
Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Kiribati, Liechtenstein, Maldives, Malta, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, San Marino, São Tomé e Príncipe, the Seychelles, Singapore, Tonga, and Tuvalu. Many of the microstates are islands, which explains both their small size and sovereignty.

ANCIENT STATES. The ancient Fertile Crescent formed an arc between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 8-6). The eastern end, Mesopotamia, was centered in the valley formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in present-day Iraq. The Fertile Crescent then curved westward over the desert, turning southward to encompass the Mediterranean coast through present-day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. The Nile River valley of Egypt is sometimes regarded as an extension of the Fertile Crescent. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Fertile Crescent was a center for land and sea communications in ancient times.

The first states to evolve in Mesopotamia were known as city-states. A city-state is a sovereign state that comprises a town and the surrounding countryside. Walls clearly delineated the boundaries of the city, and outside the walls the city controlled agricultural land to produce food for urban residents. The countryside also provided the city with an outer line of defense against attack by other city-states. Periodically, one city or tribe in Mesopotamia would gain military dominance over the others and form an empire. Mesopotamia was organized into a succession of empires by the Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians.

Meanwhile, the state of Egypt emerged as a separate empire to the west of the Fertile Crescent. Egypt controlled a long, narrow region along the banks of the Nile River, extending from the Nile Delta at the Mediterranean Sea southward for several hundred kilometers. Egypt’s empire lasted from approximately 3000 B.C. until the fourth century B.C.

EARLY EUROPEAN STATES. Political unity in the ancient world reached its height with the establishment of the Roman Empire, which controlled most of Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia, from modern-day Spain to Iran and from Egypt to England. At its maximum extent, the empire comprised 38 provinces, each using the same set of laws that had been created in Rome. Massive walls helped the Roman army defend many of the empire’s frontiers.

The Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century after a series of attacks by people living on its frontiers and because of internal disputes. The European portion of the Roman Empire was fragmented into a large number of estates owned by competing kings, dukes, barons, and other nobles. Beginning about the year 1100, a handful of powerful kings emerged as rulers over large numbers of these European estates. The consolidation of neighboring estates under the unified control of a king formed the basis for the development of such modern Western European states as England, France, and Spain. Much of central Europe, however—notably present-day Germany and Italy—remained fragmented into a large number of estates that were not consolidated into states until the nineteenth century.

Colonies

A colony is a territory that is legally tied to a sovereign state rather than being completely independent. In some cases, a sovereign state runs only the colony’s military and foreign policy. In others, it also controls the colony’s internal affairs.
The Cultural Landscape

To establish relative power through the number of their colonies.

The three motives could be summarized as God, gold, and glory.

The colonial era began in the 1400s, when European explorers sailed westward for Asia but encountered and settled in the Western Hemisphere instead. Eventually, the European states lost most of their Western Hemisphere colonies: Independence
was declared by the United States in 1776 and by most Latin American states between 1800 and 1824. European states then turned their attention to Africa and Asia (Figure 8-8). This European colonization of Africa and Asia is often termed *imperialism*, which is control of territory already occupied and organized by an indigenous society, whereas colonialism is control of previously uninhabited or sparsely inhabited land.

The British planted colonies on every continent, including much of eastern and southern Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and Canada. With by far the largest colonial empire, the British proclaimed that the “Sun never set” on their empire. France had the second-largest overseas territory, primarily in West Africa and Southeast Asia. The colonial practices of European states varied. France attempted to assimilate its colonies into French culture and
educate an elite group to provide local administrative leadership. After independence, most of these leaders retained close ties with France. The British created different government structures and policies for various territories of their empire. This decentralized approach helped to protect the diverse cultures, local customs, and educational systems in their extensive empire. British colonies generally made peaceful transitions to independence, although exceptions can be found in the Middle East, Southern Africa, and Ireland, where recent conflicts can be traced in part to the legacy of British rule.

Most African and Asian colonies became independent after World War II. Only 15 African and Asian states were members of the United Nations when it was established in 1945, compared to 106 in 2010. The boundaries of the new states frequently coincide with former colonial provinces, although not always.

**THE FEW REMAINING COLONIES.** At one time, colonies were widespread over Earth’s surface, but only a handful remain. The U.S. Department of State lists 43 colonies with indigenous populations (Figure 8-9).
Most current colonies are islands in the Pacific Ocean or Caribbean Sea. The most populous is Puerto Rico, a Commonwealth of the United States, with 4 million residents on an island of 8,870 square kilometers (3,500 square miles). Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, but do not participate in U.S. elections, nor have a voting member of Congress.

One of the world’s least populated colonies is Pitcairn Island, a 47-square-kilometer (18-square-mile) possession of the United Kingdom. The island in the South Pacific was settled in 1790 by British mutineers from the ship Bounty, commanded by Captain William Bligh. Its 48 islanders survive by selling fish, as well as postage stamps to collectors.

The State Department list does not include several inhabited islands considered by other sources to be colonies, including Australia’s Lord Howe Island, Britain’s Ascension Island, and Chile’s Easter Island. On the other hand, the State Department list includes several entities that others do not classify as colonies, including Greenland, Hong Kong, and Macao. Greenland regards the Queen of Denmark as its head of state. But it has a high degree of autonomy and self-rule and makes even foreign policy decisions independently of Denmark. Hong Kong and Macao, attached to the mainland of China, were colonies of the United Kingdom and Portugal, respectively. The British returned Hong Kong to China in 1997 and the Portuguese returned Macao to China 2 years later. These two areas are classified as Special Administrative Regions with autonomy from the rest of China in economic matters but not in foreign and military affairs.

**KEY ISSUE 2**

**Why Do Boundaries Between States Cause Problems?**

- Shapes of States
- Types of Boundaries
- Boundaries Inside States

A state is separated from its neighbors by a boundary, an invisible line marking the extent of a state’s territory. Boundaries completely surround an individual state to mark the outer limits of its territorial control and to give it a distinctive shape. Boundaries interest geographers because the process of selecting their location is frequently difficult.

**Shapes of States**

The shape of a state controls the length of its boundaries with other states. The shape therefore affects the potential for communication and conflict with neighbors. The shape also, as in the outline of the United States or Canada, is part of its unique identity. Beyond its value as a centripetal force, the shape of a state can influence the ease or difficulty of internal administration and can affect social unity.

**Five Basic Shapes**

Countries have one of five basic shapes—compact, prorupted, elongated, fragmented, or perforated—examples of each can be seen in southern Africa (Figure 8-10). Each shape displays distinctive characteristics and challenges.

**COMPACT STATES: EFFICIENT.** In a compact state, the distance from the center to any boundary does not vary significantly. The ideal theoretical compact state would be shaped like a circle, with the capital at the center and with the shortest possible boundaries to defend.

Compactness can be a beneficial characteristic for smaller states, because good communications can be more easily established to all regions, especially if the capital is located near the center. However, compactness does not necessarily mean peacefulness, as compact states are just as likely as others to experience civil wars and ethnic rivalries.

**ELONGATED STATES: POTENTIAL ISOLATION.** A handful of elongated states have a long and narrow shape. Examples include:

- Malawi, which measures about 850 kilometers (530 miles) north–south but only 100 kilometers (60 miles) east–west (refer to Figure 8–9).
- Chile, which stretches north–south for more than 4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles) but rarely exceeds an east–west distance of 150 kilometers (90 miles); Chile is wedged between the Pacific Coast of South America and the rugged Andes Mountains, which rise more than 6,700 meters (20,000 feet).
- Italy, which extends more than 1,100 kilometers (700 miles) from northwest to southeast but is only approximately 200 kilometers (120 miles) wide in most places.
- Gambia, which extends along the banks of the Gambia River about 500 kilometers (300 miles) east–west but is only about 25 kilometers (15 miles) north–south.

Elongated states may suffer from poor internal communications. A region located at an extreme end of the elongation might be isolated from the capital, which is usually placed near the center.

**PRORUPTED STATES: ACCESS OR DISRUPTION.** An otherwise compact state with a large projecting extension is a prorupted state. Prorruptions are created for two principal reasons:

1. **To provide a state with access to a resource, such as water.** For example, in southern Africa, Congo has a 500-kilometer (300-mile) prorruption to the west along the Zaire (Congo) River. The Belgians created the prorruption to give their colony access to the Atlantic.
2. **To separate two states that otherwise would share a boundary.** For example, in southern Africa, Namibia has a 500-kilometer (300-mile) prorruption to the east.