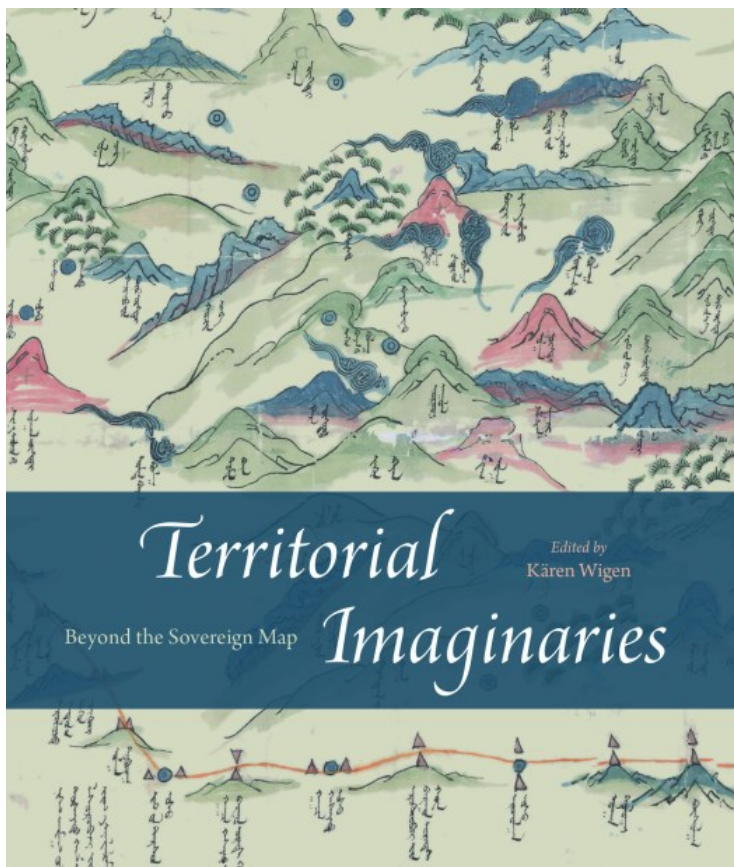




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Book review: Territorial Imaginaries: Beyond the Sovereign Map

reviewed by Aimée C. Quinn



Wigen, Kären. *Territorial Imaginaries: Beyond the Sovereign Map*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 280 pages, 51 color plates, \$45.00. ISBN-13: 9780226839004, ISBN-10: 0226839001.

What is a boundary and who actually determines them? Is it the conqueror who hires someone to map out their territory or the people who live in the space? In this lively and beautifully illustrative volume, Kären Wigen leads a group of scholars to explore their ideas of geopolitical sovereignty.



Wigen was one of the organizers of 2022 conference about new visions or representations of geopolitical sovereignty to be held at Stanford University's David Rumsey Map Center. One of the goals of this conference was to gather scholars of various disciplines to engage and develop an interdisciplinary text, which is what is being reviewed here. Through evaluative essays and case studies, this volume begins a conversation of reimagining territory and redefining sovereignty. This atlas is not one which follows time or spaces; rather, it follows ideas. Widen credits Jen Ward West with "flagging" the four central themes of this book in her map *Øhøne Stanford Lands* (p. 3): territoriality, sovereignty, documentation, and mapping practice including counter-cartography and laying the foundation for both the conference and for this volume. As a result, this atlas may be viewed as a continuation of her map (p. 7).

Divided into three broad sections, these scholars explore sovereignty through diverse theoretical lenses, utilizing cartography as a methodological tool to challenge and reframe conventional understandings of power. Beginning with the rule of Peter the Great, the question of what exactly is "territory" as the maps developed by his lead mapmaker, Semen Ul'ianovich Remezov, who did not indicate borders, per se, but rather relied on natural elements such as "dark wavy line that encircles the orange semicircle of the Land of Great Muscovy . . . represents the Volga River" or "[t]he curvy ribbons of white and yellow indicate mountain ranges" (p.18). From there, Remezov's *Sketchbook (Chertezhnaia kniga)* published around 1701 depicts Serbia's rivers, streams, natural landmarks, and the human settlements around them. He "drew on the cartographic efforts and geographic knowledge of many other people" (p.17) indicating that prior cartographers also relied on natural elements to indicate borders rather than geopolitical boundaries. This "tradition" speaks more to ideas of territory rather than formal indications of borders or boundaries between nations or states.

Other case studies in part 1 look at the shift from power over people to the control over territory to border wars when the people say "no" to the sovereign. The four essays in part one move from Russia to Mongolia. The maps used to showcase these arguments are quite persuasive, especially Peter Bol's two engraved maps, *Map of the Traces of Yu* (1136) and *Map of the Chongde Township, Jinhua Prefecture, Jinhua Province* from the *Yiwu Gazetteer* (1640). Bol uses these two maps to illustrate failed nation-states five hundred years apart but both demonstrating their own importance to territoriality in their own time.

Part two focuses on nationalism, borders, and war to define "territory" and



“sovereignty”. In these three case studies, the reader is taken to a philosophical maze of geopolitical hegemony especially in Europe and the United States of America in the twentieth century. In these studies, the authors discuss ethno-nationalism, infrastructure, authority, representation, and above all, the map, without really coming to a definitive conclusion. There are more photos in addition to maps in this section. One illustration in particular which struck me is of a 5-centavo postage stamp from 1938 issued by the Ecuadoran government commemorating the country’s going into the Amazon. It is a beautiful token of nationalism and fits within the essay on territorial imaginary and interpretative legality of Spanish colonial decrees. This particular essay also examines the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine with Vladimir Putin insisting that they are essentially one people and a single nation-state while the people of Ukraine thoroughly refuting that claim. This war is a continued reminder of the stakes of “territory” and the challenges between countries and borders. The last two case studies in part two re-evaluate the concept of “states” and “borders”. The author in essay three posits redefining “states as the combination of diverse elements draws on existing arguments holding that social and political organizations or institutions can be constituted by disparate components” (p. 94) yet recognized that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, this kind of reframing falls short. The final essay in part further discusses the challenge of defining “sovereignty”, “border”, and “territory” during a pandemic which does not recognize these terms. Conventional mapping practices, which had a pivotal role in statecraft, may be taken over by digital photography.

From these critiques of mapping, the volume concludes with digital design, map as art, and critical counter-culture. The final three case studies examine “the other” – whether it is the indigenous sovereign or dilution of the power of the Holy Roman Emperor. This volume is rather a wonder to read. The aims and purposes get a bit lost in the complexities of the central argument: can territory be reimagined against our current understanding of nationalism? The fifty-one color plates are used carefully throughout the text to really underscore each argument.

I strongly recommend this atlas for anyone interested in geopolitical theory, world history, international studies, policy, cartography, geography, art history, and many other disciplines. It is a masterful work.

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