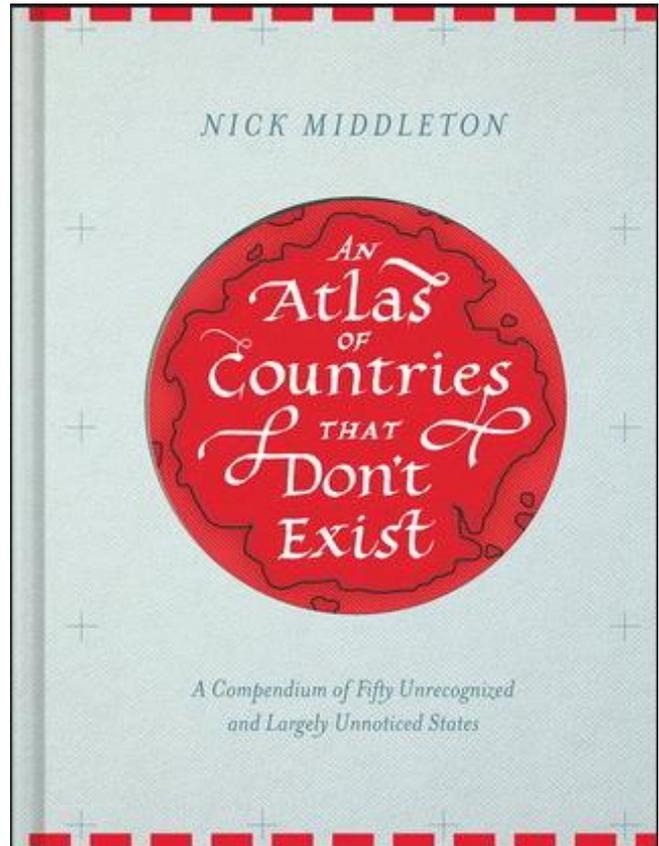


Nick Middleton

An Atlas of Countries That Don't Exist

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Daniel Dobson
dandob@outlook.com



Map books have seen a publishing boom in recent years so it is hardly surprising that geographers have used the form to their advantage, providing them with a break from the arduous task of academic writing and an opportunity to reach a wider audience. Two strands seem to have emerged, one using the map as a theatre or cartoon impression of a place or region, the other combining an informed subject analysis with visually arresting maps used as infographics.

Straddling the two, light on information and with simple but eye-catching maps is Nick Middleton's *An Atlas of Countries That Don't Exist*. Marking a departure from his usual accounts of living in extreme environmental conditions around the world, Middleton – a physical geographer at Oxford University – presents a timely compendium of fifty unrecognized and unnoticed states.

Whilst the debate on what constitutes a country will be familiar to geographers, some of the ideas behind them, until recently believed to be relegated to the political fringe, have now been thrust into the mainstream. Growing separatism in Europe, Britain's vote to leave the European Union, calls to "make our country great again" and "take back control" as well as tensions over territorial rights around the world, have resulted in a resurgence of nationalist politics. Political debate, at least in the West, has broadly fractured between those who identify with an internationalist, multilateral way of seeing the world, comfortable with the trends of globalisation, and those who feel that these processes undermine the roots of their identity, their nation or country. The consequences, whether with positive or negative outcomes, will be far reaching. However, though important, such a singular focus can offer a false sense of permanency to boundaries that can sometimes seem to shift with the wind. As Middleton notes in his introduction, the very concept of country is a notoriously slippery one. "Countries come and go" and the political map is far from static.

Think up a rule to describe a country and enough exceptions emerge to render the rule deficient. The rules of United Nations membership are far too anomalous to be used as an indicator of

country status alone. International recognition or a seat at the General Assembly do not guarantee one another, and several countries exist in the UN within larger groups (the United Kingdom has a seat but its individual countries do not). Add to the equation the concept of 'nation' and definitions move beyond defined territory to shared social and ethnic cultures. States, according to Max Weber, hold "claim to the monopoly of legitimated use of physical force... [over] a certain geographical area", yet many lack such an internal capability, or rely on larger powers to maintain defence. Perhaps one of the most widely used criteria set out in the Montevideo Convention in the 1930s requires a state to have "a permanent population; a defined territory; government; and capacity to enter into relations with other states".

A full treatment of all Middleton's nations in waiting would require a tome to account for those that don't fit neatly into these categories. This compendium selects fifty, each of which have failed to secure a seat at the United Nations General Assembly and receive little if any international recognition as a sovereign state. All fit roughly within the Montevideo Convention and possess "the outward trappings of national consciousness... as well as a seriousness of purpose". Included are, at one end of the spectrum, semi-autonomous provinces such as Catalonia, which will have a popular ballot on independence next year, to tiny Akhzivland, a one-man state among the ruins of an old fishing village in Israel "whose national anthem is the gentle sound of ocean waves" at the other.

It is a thoroughly entertaining read full of colourful characters with nationalists, chancers and businessmen, libertarians and transnational humanitarians, often in possession of the strongest sense of human defiance. These states may be characterised by territorial disputes, but theirs are also intensely human stories. At the very point of the Horn of Africa, Somaliland, a relatively developed region with its own parliament, currency, car registrations and biometric passports, aspires to recognised independence from chaotic, lawless Somalia, but is currently recognised by no other state. Christiania, a hippy community founded in 1971 on an abandoned government site in Copenhagen, remains an inherently rebellious collective with powers to make its own laws. The long dissolved Moresnet sat at the border confluence between Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands and was founded by the settlements that developed around the giant Moresnet zinc mine. Barotseland is a region in western Zambia which seeks independence from a central government which, in the eyes of the Barotse, has failed to carry out a post-independence autonomy agreement. It is populated by a migratory people that moves between the uplands and lowlands depending on the season. Moroc-Songhrati-Meads is a chain of islands in the South China Sea which was claimed by a Victorian British naval captain not as an island home for Bounty-esque mutineers as on Pitcairn, but as a home for the downtrodden and persecuted.

The book's main deficiency arises from the need to be concise. The barest information is provided, less than a single page for each nation-in-waiting. We are given only a glimpse of the human story behind each of these seekers-of-sovereignty. With so much richness left out, it is difficult at times to describe the book as much beyond a collection of facts. While the maps are pleasing in their simplicity, they provide little information save for the border line and the locations of one or two nearby well-known cities or countries. They serve as a stylized minimal identifier of the space occupied by these unrecognized states. *An Atlas of Countries That Don't Exist* remains an enjoyable read and easily accessible and this is to its credit but more historical detail would have added life to its pages. An opportunity has been missed to further engage readers in a vibrant, fascinating and very contemporary area of interest.