

**Rudolf Kjellén: geopolitiken och konservatismen, edited by Ragnar Björk, Bert Edström, Thomas Lundén, Stockholm, Hjalmarson & Högberg Bokförlag, 2014, 337 pp, 198 kr, ISBN-10: 9172241969, ISBN-13: 978-9172241961.**

The Swedish political scientist, geographer and politician Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922) was an original, even pioneering thinker for his time. He is best known for his grand theory of statehood, abandoning the narrowly legal definition of the state and choosing instead to define and analyze states as something akin to living organisms (although this generalization hardly does his views full justice). However, Kjellén's ideas largely fell out of favor after his death and even more so after World War II, when his radical conservatism and Social Darwinism had become tainted by their connection to Nazism. As shown by the authors of the book under discussion, Kjellén's theories did go on to have a separate, more reverential reception abroad (for example, in Brazil), but in his native Sweden, Kjellén's post-war fate was to be consigned to the what-do-you-know type of footnotes pointing out that it had been this Swedish arch-conservative who originally came up with the notions of *folkhemmet* ('People's home', one of the central concepts in the history of Swedish welfare state), *nationalsocialismen* ('national socialism,' which Kjellén suggested would be a good thing and preferable to internationalist socialism) and *geopolitik* (geopolitics).

Whereas the attribution of the first two terms to Kjellén is either misleading or at least less significant than might appear (in the book, this is admirably explained by Bert Edström), the last of the three, geopolitics, is indeed rightfully his. An inversion of Friedrich Ratzel's "political geography" and originally just a single component in Kjellén's ambitious theoretical constellation, the idea of geopolitics came to inspire a whole field of thought which is still highly relevant today and could be expected to claim Kjellén as a father figure. Why this has not always been the case and why Kjellén has often been forgotten – perhaps nowhere else more so than in Sweden – are questions dealt with in this recent collection of articles, which, as the authors point out, is the first book dedicated entirely to Kjellén since his daughter Ruth Kjellén-Björkquist's two-volume biography published in 1970.

What both this book and its predecessor have in common is that they each in their own way amount to an *Ehrenrettung* of the subject. The biography, wordy and detailed to the point of being almost unreadable, does so by humanizing Kjellén as a sensitive intellectual and a family man. The twelve contributions and nine contributors to the present collection of articles accomplish the same by taking a long-missing sober look at how original Kjellén's ideas actually were and how well they have stood the test of time.

In such a way, this book certainly fills a gap in scholarship, but not necessarily so for international audiences. Written in Swedish, it is meant for a domestic readership and I would venture to say that only perhaps about a half of the articles featured therein would be of interest for a broader readership even in translation. Furthermore, while certain unevenness is always unavoidable in an edited volume, the differences in kind and quality between the different chapters are often striking, making the individual contributions certainly work better on their own terms rather than as parts of a cohesive whole. There also seems to have been limited editorial intervention in the contents of the texts, leading to many repetitions across different articles – something that goes against the expectations of (relative) unity with which a reader might have approaching this book. Finally, it is doubtful that the choice and breadth of the topics here does full justice to Kjellén's life and work, even though there is certainly an

ambition to cover multiple aspects of his activities. One can only assume that the task of the editors putting this book together must have been an unenviable one, as there is probably a very small number of scholars in Sweden who are even interested in Kjellén, not to speak of considering themselves to be experts on any facet of his thought. Therefore, while this book certainly gives the reader a strong sense that a proper biography of Kjellén would be highly desirable, it does not amount to one itself, the strength of some individual contributions notwithstanding.

Among the latter, I would like to mention three in particular. Firstly, Bert Edström's long and extremely useful introduction to Kjellén's life, work and ideas is probably the only modern summary of its kind and should be required reading for anyone interested in getting an well-rounded picture of Kjellén's ideas. Secondly, I would highlight the contributions by Carl Marklund and Ola Tunander concerning, respectively, Kjellén's "Baltic program" in the years before World War I, and his ideas vis-à-vis a possible future European federation of states – one that Tunander finds to have a striking resemblance to NATO. For the audience of this review, i. e. scholars of Baltic Studies, these two articles are probably the most significant parts in the book, contributing to at least two different topics of significance for 20<sup>th</sup> century Baltic history, which I will now make brief reference to.

In the first place, if one is interested in Baltic-Scandinavian relations, it is important to realize that "Baltic orientation" (as opposed to western-focused and international, rather than regional outlook) in Swedish political thinking was an overwhelmingly conservative viewpoint, associated with nostalgia for the 17<sup>th</sup> century great power era and various undemocratic and illiberal values. The representatives of the newly independent Baltic States were thus naturally unsuccessful in their attempts to court Swedish political favor in the first decades of their independence, as they faced an uphill climb against the prejudices of both the ever-more dominant internationalist left and the waning traditionalist right – the latter of which was, of course, always inclined to distrust political upstarts, especially those suspected of socialist sympathies. Rudolf Kjellén was one of the most important proponents of the idea that "Sweden's natural face was turned towards the east", and the failure of his Baltic program to be implemented, as well as its basic incompatibility with Baltic nationalism, is an important clue as to why Baltic-Nordic regionalism failed as a project in the interwar period.

Furthermore, Kjellén's theory of the state as a living organism ended up having a belated reception in the Baltic states, where his radical conservative version of federalism wrapped on a hard-boiled realist core was found attractive by 1930s far right circles such as Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubi (ERK, 'The Club of Estonian Nationalists', the subject of a recent MA-thesis by Paris Pin-Yu Chen). During the last days of pre-war Estonian independence in 1940, a translation of Kjellén's main work "Staten som liffsform" (1916) was published in Estonian, prefaced by geographer Edgar Kant as "an introduction to political reality" that was supposedly especially important "at a time that is harsh, harsh to everyone but especially harsh to these with heads in the clouds".<sup>1</sup> As we now know, the times indeed turned out to be harsher than anyone could imagine, but whether Kjellén's theories were of any consolation is perhaps more doubtful.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Kjellén, *Riik kui eluvorm*. Tallinn: Kirjastus-Osaühing "Kultuurkoondis", 1940. Translated by Martin Kuldkepp, preface by Edgar Kant, p. 10

To wrap up, I would suggest that there is much work left to be done on Kjellén, and I hope it will among others also be undertaken by scholars of Baltic Studies. This book, while it has some flaws, is a certainly a very welcome basis that could and should enable further studies.

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