

What the Map Can Tell You.  
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I am of a generation that remembered geography as one of my favorite subjects in grade school, a subject no longer taught. We learned to read maps, study globes, and learn about the various cultures of the world. In art class, we drew pictures of the various peoples around the world with distinctive clothes (the Dutch with wooden shoes and pointy caps or the Chinese with silk pajamas and long pigtails). Geography was not just memorizing world capital cities.

Today, the world news gives us snapshots of trouble spots around the world which, to us who studied geography, gives us context. But too many Americans of the younger generations do not have a clue where most countries are. Even during the Vietnam War, sidewalk interviews found young people who thought Vietnam was next to Berlin.

When I taught World History to university freshmen, I discovered that using a Atlas of World History (Rand McNally) was the best basic text to use. My students began ignorant of the world map but ended by knowing it.

o Russia. Take the current issue of Russia and Ukraine, engaged in a dangerous struggle that could affect much more of the world than just those two countries. Who are they and what can we learn from the map?

We look at Russia. This is an enormous country (nine time zones compared to our four); it is largely open and flat; it is mostly far north (not really temperate zone); and has a long history of conflicts with all of its neighbors.

Just knowing these map facts can tell us that the size of this country makes it difficult to control; they have had to learn that without force to hold it together, there is anarchy. Being open and flat, it has always been vulnerable to nasty neighbors who invaded with the aim of conquest. Being so far north, it has difficulty in raising enough food to feed its population; it needs a more southern breadbasket (the Ukraine). Also, being so far north, it does not have any warm water ports; their seaports freeze up for much of the year, limiting their ability to trade (or defend themselves) by sea.

When we look at Geography's sister subject, History, we get the rest of the story. Russia has always been a rough place, always run by a dictatorial central government, always leery of its neighbors (which they have learned they must dominate) and with a very paranoid view of the rest of the world. This describes Russia today, as well as Russia 500 years ago.

o Ukraine. This neighbor of Russia was once an independent princely state but their independence was ended by the Russian Tsar, Catherine the Great, who just took it (because she could). Their geography also tells us who they are: a country larger than most of its European neighbors (Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria) but dwarfed by Russia. Its geography is, like Russia's, flat and wide open, which has left it vulnerable to attack.

But there is another fault-line that runs through this country: four religions that once vied for converts and wound up hating each other. The area closest to Russia is Russian Orthodox, an authoritarian church always allied with autocratic rulers and nobility. The region abutting Europe is Roman Catholic, a church that modernized (somewhat) during the Counter-Reformation. The third religion, Islam, was a remnant of the Muslim hordes from Central Asia. The Muslim Tatars, deported by Stalin but now back in the Crimea, were once part of the Ottoman Empire (Turkish). Crimea hosts Russia's only warm water port. The fourth religion, Judaism, was nearly wiped out by the Nazis during World War II.

o Prognosis. Unlike the short attention span of the modern West, the Russians remember and bear grievances forever. At the moment, they have an upper hand in their bullying Europe and Ukraine. However, several factors bode ill for the long term. Having only natural resources to sell, their economy suffers; they have nothing else anybody wants. Their birthrate has tanked and alcohol, drugs, and tobacco bode ill for maintaining an army or a civil society.

686 words

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