

Mapping the Unmappable

Cartography at war

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As I write this, we have just entered the third year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This anniversary brought the war briefly back to the front pages. This conflict has been lost in the news of war in Gaza. These, though, are just two of 32 active conflicts happening globally at the time of writing ([Global Conflict Tracker, 2024](#)). The world has been at constant war for centuries – since the founding of the United States of America, the country has only been at peace for 17 years. Similarly, Russia has waged war externally and internally for hundreds of years. Many other countries have similar track records, leading to a state of perpetual war. These forever wars are waged through active combat, misinformation, propaganda, media, and maps.

The intersection of maps and warfare represents a complex and historically significant relationship that transcends geographical boundaries and historical epochs. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine provides a contemporary lens through which to examine the connection between cartography, military strategy, propaganda, and media. In this conflict, like all conflicts, maps serve as not only navigational aids but also as potent instruments of power projection and territorial assertion, especially when reproduced in the media. The delineation of borders, the identification of strategic targets, and the visualization of military campaigns are all facilitated by cartographic representations, highlighting the indispensable role of maps in modern warfare. Beyond Ukraine, however, the influence of maps on war extends to a diverse array of conflicts spanning ancient conquests, colonial expansions, and contemporary insurgencies. Throughout history, maps have served as essential tools for military commanders, providing crucial spatial intelligence and aiding in the planning and execution of military operations. By examining the role of maps in various conflicts, this paper seeks to elucidate the enduring significance of cartography in shaping the conduct and outcomes of warfare, while also exploring the broader implications of the connection between maps and war for geopolitics and international relations.

Despite advances in technology and changes in warfare tactics, the fundamental role of maps in shaping the conduct and outcomes of conflicts remains unchanged. Beyond their

practical utility, maps also carry symbolic and ideological significance, reflecting broader narratives of power, dominance, and territorial sovereignty. To map is to take a measure of the world, to take the shifting complexity and liveliness of society and turn it into something fixed. From the Middle Ages onwards, the role of the cartographer increasingly became that of a mathematician, transforming datasets into 2D and 3D artefacts, producing ‘truth documents’ to aid in navigation, the fighting of wars and controlling property ownership. The world was condemned from then to misrepresentation, and cartography became embroiled in pernicious geopolitics, colonial ambition and imperial wars. The role of the cartographer became a normative one, to reduce errors and create every more effective maps through good design, this was done through careful scientific approach to representation of distance, direction, and symbols that reveal data. Aiming not only to depict the world graphically, but also to reveal hidden or imperceptible ideas about the world around us, the map became seen as a factual record of the world; a functional tool. Maps though are not factual; they are not scientific, and they are not representative. Rather than reflect reality, they create reality. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, ‘the map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious.’¹ A map then is not neutral, is not objective, but is laden with power, a power to create rather than reveal knowledge.

The map maker must make a thousand choices about what to include and what to leave off the map, making maps complex texts that are not authored in simple ways. It is though, not only the authorship that is complex, but the readership too. Barbara Petchenik argued in her essay on cognition in cartography, that the reader gives meaning to the map, that maps are interpreted and understood not through the eyes of the cartographer, but through the history, knowledge, prejudices and predispositions of the viewer.² This is well trodden ground, many scholars have revealed and put forth the issues of power, incompleteness and misrepresentation of maps, yet the map continues to be privileged, and the map maker persists in seeking a pseudo-scientific fidelity of appearance. To discuss our understanding of war through maps, we must then understand how we read maps, and also how we read the world around us.

In this vein, I would like to start with a quote from *A Fortunate Man*, by Berger and Mohr.³ Berger of course was a master of helping us understand how we view the world, not only through art, but through the social-political condition of our existence. They wrote, ‘landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place. For those

who, with the inhabitants, are behind the curtain, landmarks are no longer only geographic but also bio graphics and personal.’ This quote beautifully captures the multifaceted nature of landscapes and their relationship to the lives of those who inhabit them. What we see on the surface might not always reveal the true essence or significance of a place, but rather that the landscape serves as a backdrop or stage for human experiences rather than being the focus itself. The lives of the people who inhabit the landscape unfold against this backdrop, with their struggles, triumphs, and mishaps occurring behind the scenes, hidden from casual observation. For those intimately connected with the landscape and its inhabitants, landmarks - the physical features of the landscape - take on additional layers of meaning. They become imbued with personal stories, memories, and histories, transforming them from mere geographic features into symbols of individual and collective experiences.

In essence, landscapes are not just inert backdrops but dynamic environments that shape and are shaped by the lives of those who inhabit them. It underscores the deeply personal and complex relationship between people and the places they call home, where the physical features of the land become intertwined with the narratives of human existence. This notion that the landscape is biographic and personal presents a huge challenge to cartographers who have at their disposal a very small range of tools to depict this.

Points. Lines. Polygons. That is all. Used in combination with maths and a few words, the cartographer must describe the world.⁴ These three fundamental geometric primitives—lines, points, and polygons—are combined and manipulated to create the complex visual representations that we see on maps. By using these basic elements in various combinations and configurations, cartographers can effectively convey spatial information, relationships, and patterns across different scales and contexts. The skilled cartographer can tell the most amazing and dynamic of stories. Can provide us with a view of the world so real, so accessible, and often so beautiful that they lure us into seeing a world that is not there. A world that cannot be reduced to lines and points. Somehow the cartographers’ tools have become so perfectly honed as to be unquestioned, while at the same time almost completely inadequate to do the job that is being asked of them.

Points are used to represent discrete locations or features on the map. These can include cities, towns, landmarks, and individual points of interest. Points are often symbolized with icons or symbols to distinguish between different types of features, such as airports, hospitals, or tourist attractions. Additionally, points can be used to denote specific coordinates or reference points on

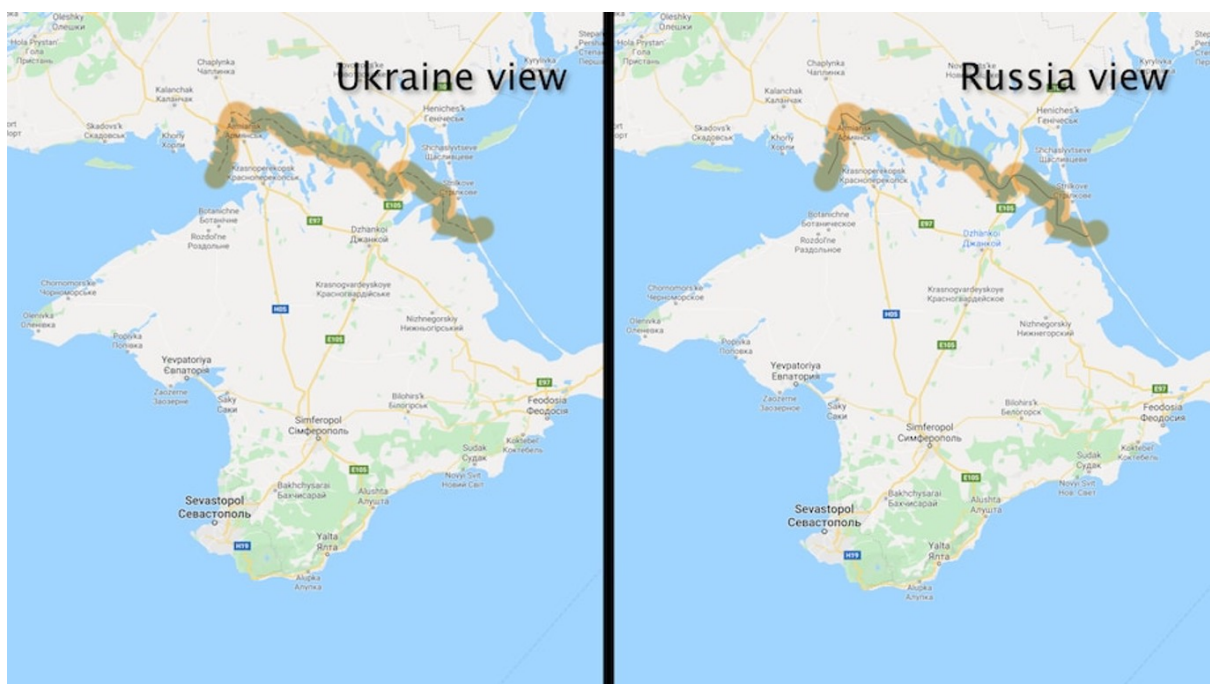
the map. Polygons are used to represent areas or regions on the map. They are typically formed by connecting a series of points to create closed shapes, which can represent land parcels, administrative boundaries, bodies of water, and other spatial entities. Polygons are often filled with colour or patterns to differentiate between different types of areas, such as land use categories (e.g., forests, agricultural land) or administrative divisions (e.g., counties, states).

Lines, though, are perhaps the most pertinent aspect of cartography when looking at the role of maps in war and conflict. After all, the front line is often perceived as just that – a line. Lines serve three functions on maps, the first to show liner features such as a road or river. The second to enclose a space, such as representing the extent of a forest, and the third to denote a change of something, such as ownership of territory at the borders of a country, or a change in height of land at a contour. Lines on maps are typically depicted with varying thickness, colour, and style to convey different attributes and characteristics of the features they represent.

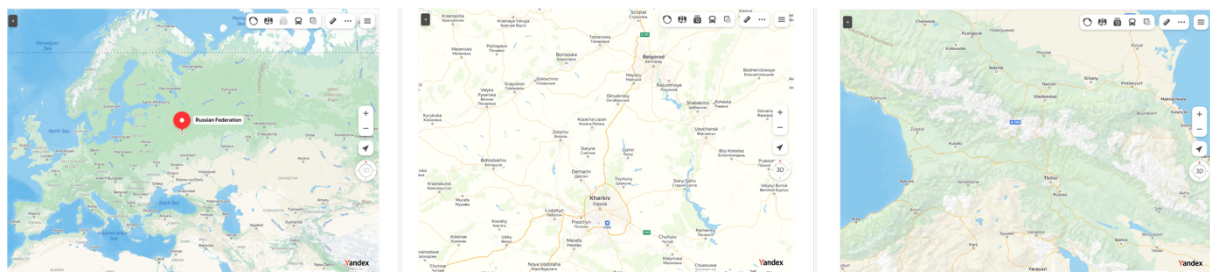
In the context of war and conflict the role of lines is to act as a fundamental symbol denoting change, delineating boundaries, routes, or transitions between different geographical or geopolitical entities. They facilitate spatial understanding of complex geopolitical situations by visually representing divisions, such as borders between countries or regions, which aids in navigation and comprehension of territorial demarcations. Additionally, they convey temporal shifts, illustrating alterations in infrastructure, land use, or administrative jurisdictions over time, thereby enabling the analysis of historical or contemporary transformations. However, this reliance on lines can be problematic, as it may oversimplify complex geopolitical realities, perpetuate territorial disputes, or reinforce artificial divisions that do not accurately reflect cultural or environmental boundaries. Moreover, lines on maps can exacerbate conflict by legitimizing territorial claims or exacerbating tensions between competing groups, leading to disputes over borders or contested territories, territorial control and self-determination.

The *frontline* in war mapping of course denotes this change from control of one party on one side, to control of another on its opposite. A clear demarcation of territories lost and gained, or movements forwards and retreat. These lines have been employed extensively in the telling of the war in Ukraine. Almost constant updates on the position of the frontline were fed to us through newspapers and social media in the first months of the war. And maps continue to be an important part of the narrative of this conflict, even when other conflicts have begun to overshadow the situation in Ukraine.

From the outset this was problematic. How to demark Crimea? As occupied? as Russia? as Ukraine? Which side of the frontline would it fall? The world had already accepted its annexation.⁵ Digital mapping services such as Google Maps solved this by changing its sovereignty depending on where in the world you accessed their service. The border changes from a solid to a dotted line.⁶ Russia ended up with some issues too, as it became less clear which areas were under Russian control. Their largest mapping app, Yandex maps, gave up and removed all borders, globally.⁷ Even where borders were seen as more static, what does it mean to be upon one side of the frontline or the other?



Google regularly changes how it depicts a boarder depending on where in the world the user accesses their mapping data. Author Screenshot



Yandex maps, Russia’s principle online mapping company, has removed boarders globally. Author Screenshot

Colour holds significant expressive power in cartography and often leaves a profound impact on our initial perception of a map. And in conflict each side of the frontline is usually coloured differently to highlight territorial control. These colours present a number of issues. Brighter or deeper hues tend to immediately capture our attention, and specific colours carry certain connotations. For Western map users, red typically signifies danger, evoking associations with blood and heat, while green suggests vitality, linked with vegetation and growth. Consequently, the choice of colours used to represent troops and territories can influence our interpretation of the conflict in Ukraine.

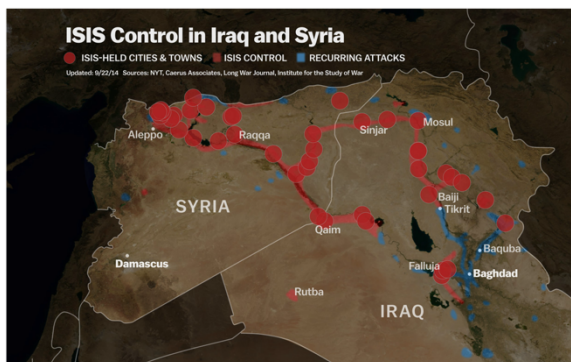
Many recent maps featured in the media portray Russian forces and their territorial advancements in red, evoking connotations of menace and aggression. This use of red also invokes historical connections with the Red Army and the Soviet Union, rekindling apprehensions regarding the threat posed by this Cold War-era superpower. By accentuating the sense of peril, these maps depict Ukraine as a victim—a sovereign state vulnerable to violation by acts of Russian aggression. However, they also imply that this threat surpasses other setbacks to Russian military expansion in the twenty-first century. Conversely, green has been introduced on numerous maps to denote Ukrainian counterattacks and their endeavours to ‘neutralize’ the perceived Russian threat portrayed in red.

Portraying territorial shifts in a rapidly evolving conflict poses challenges, particularly when an invading force heavily relies on road infrastructure. Although extensive portions of eastern Ukraine have been marked in red to indicate Russian military control, this broad categorization, or spatial homogenization, can be deceptive. Since most advancing Russian forces primarily stick to road networks, their actual occupation of contiguous territory beyond these travel routes is minimal. Consequently, many areas highlighted in red on maps are not genuinely under Russian governance. Furthermore, even in regions where Ukrainian military presence is lacking, civilian populations continue to resist.

The uniform graphical representation on maps, determined by data classification methods, stems from traditional paper mapping practices and reflects the constraints of that static medium. Oversimplification, a common aspect for map users, fails to capture the dynamic nature of the invasion or the sporadic efforts to besiege and seize cities. Territories exhibit considerable variation, both topographically and thematically, and rarely conform to uniform patterns.

We saw these difficulties discussed at length as ISIS worked to establish a caliphate across the Middle East. At its peak in 2014, the Islamic State (ISIS) controlled large swathes of territory

across Iraq and Syria, including major cities like Mosul and Raqqa. Estimates vary, but at its height, ISIS is said to have controlled approximately 100,000 square kilometres (around 39,000 square miles) of territory, encompassing millions of people. However, it's important to note that the exact extent of ISIS-controlled territory fluctuated over time due to military offensives by various forces, including the Iraqi and Syrian governments, Kurdish militias, and international coalition forces. Politicians, media outlets and armchair pundits also argued as to whether ISIS controlled areas, or merely the roads. With early reports of Russian movements being primarily along road and rail infrastructure might the same issue apply at times. Perhaps the argument that when you control the roads you control the territory wins out.



Variations in how ISIS' territorial control was represented by news outlets. Author Screenshot

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the green line delineating the boundary between Israel and the West Bank has been a source of contention, symbolizing competing claims to land and sovereignty and perpetuating conflict over territorial control and self-determination. In Latin America the longstanding border dispute between Belize and Guatemala revolves around the delineation of the boundary between the two countries. The border was originally defined by a series of treaties between the British Empire and Guatemala during the 19th century, but Guatemala never recognized the borders established after Belize gained independence in 1981. The primary source of contention is the interpretation of the borders outlined in historical documents, leading to disputes over territory, particularly in the southern region of Belize. Lines on maps, such as those marking the borders according to different interpretations, exacerbate tensions and hinder efforts to resolve the issue diplomatically. The lack of a clear, agreed-upon border has resulted in occasional incidents of cross-border tensions, affecting relations between the two countries and impeding opportunities for regional cooperation and development.

Lines demark change on a map, this is how we read them. All things on one side of a line are the same. And everything across that line is different. Maps seek to show us where things change. Not where they stay the same. Land becomes sea. Forest becomes road. River becomes marsh. Free becomes occupied. Yet what does occupation mean in this sense. The map is clear. Perhaps too clear. The neat lines masks fraudulent referendum, human atrocity, destruction and pain. They sanitise conflict, and at the same time make it easy for armchair generals, both those with medals on their chests and those on X (formally Twitter) to make sweeping statements on behalf of populations. 'If Russia already occupies that area, perhaps they should keep it under a peace agreement' – again we ask what does it really mean to now be on the other side of a line on a map?

Each side of these lines is in effect blank space. Nothingness. Perhaps shaded one colour or another, but ultimately blank, empty until the next point of change. Most maps are empty space. The cartographers job is after all to tell a story and stories only exist at the interface of change. But these blank spaces are never truly blank, as we gaze upon a map, we fill them in. The bigger the space the more we complete the story ourselves.

Even where blank spaces are not truly blank it is symbols that are employed to depict various features, ranging from churches, playgrounds, and walking routes to roads and museums. Recent portrayals of Ukraine in the news media have highlighted crucial military objectives, such as major cities, nuclear power plants, and airports. In instances where these sites come under attack or are seized, their symbols may be replaced with representations resembling explosions. These symbols often give the impression of a checklist, where the explosion symbols over cities function similarly to blocks of red territory, indicating locations that have suffered extensive destruction and obscuring the complexities of resistance and control. While such symbols provide an efficient means of conveying information about the overall course of conflict on a small-scale map, they also have a dehumanizing effect, distancing viewers from the human toll and horrors of war and ultimately leaving the spaces blank.

Learning from Artists

Like cartographers, artists too long sought a pseudo-scientific representation of the world. Alberti's *Della Pittura* (1435) drew up the rules for painting that would transform the art world, leading the way for every more realistic depictions of the world, drawing upon the rationality of the enlightenment to create 'true' renderings of the world. In 1910, a new artistic revolution

began at an exhibition entitled *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*. The show organised by critic Roger Fry at London's Grafton Galleries introduced England to the work of Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, and the notion of post-impressionism itself – the term was coined for this exhibition. The exhibition was a public and critical disaster, yet it became one of the most important moments in the history of modern art.

While the show named Monet in the title, the star of this show was in many ways Paul Cézanne. His work caused outrage, and turned the crowd against Fry, who they declared insane for including him. Cézanne's paintings were denounced as an ugly untruth. Cézanne had dared to break with attempts to paint the world as a scientific representation. Instead, his paintings, notably *La Montage sainte Victoire vue des Lauves* (1901-1906) appeared unfinished. Large expanses of blank canvas were presented to the viewer. Cézanne called this technique *nonfinito*, borrowing the term from sculpture where it describes the process pioneered by Donatello of leaving some of the block of stone unsculpted and raw.



Mont Sainte Victoire seen from les Lauves, by Paul Cezanne, 1904 - 1905

Cézanne's post-impressionist work was similarly dismissed in his home country of France, and they were never seen for their genius in his lifetime. Although these paintings were impossible to sell, unfazed Cézanne spent the last years of his life painting landscapes comprised of ever more blank canvas. While the paintings were by most measures incomplete, they were also more complete than anything that had come before them; 'finished or unfinished, it always was what

looked like the very essence of an oil painting, because everything was there' noted American novelist, Gertrude Stein. What Cézanne was experimenting with was placing the viewer of his paintings within them, into the landscape. Forcing the viewer to acknowledge that something was missing, and that the brain would complete the picture itself. Each person who gazed upon these works would see the truest of landscapes, but they would understand that it was they, the observer, rather than Cézanne, who was completing the image. Cézanne understood that when we see a landscape, we situate ourselves in it, and where this is missing, we are deprived. Rather than depriving us of a completed picture, Cézanne gifted us a new way of understanding how we see the world around us. In the words of Roger Fry who opened the 1910 exhibition, he had escaped the 'the cliché' of representation'.

Cézanne then understood how to reimagine representations that had long been imbued with power, prejudice and misrepresentation – that 'landscapes can be deceptive'.⁸ In this respect Cézanne's works can teach us much about how to deconstruct the creation and reading of maps and cartographic artifacts. While it is well acknowledged that maps are symbolically charged, filled with signs and *mythologies*, it is the absences that should most draw the critical attention.⁹ Maps are by their nature laden with *nonfinito*. The cartographer, just as the artist must make choices about what to include, and what to leave off. No map can be anything more than a fraction of its real subject, to do that would require a map of 1:1 scale which included every feature of the land replicated perfectly, a feat only achievable in the fictional world of Borges' celebrated story *On the Exactitude of Science*. The choices about what to include, and what to leave off, do not just affect how the artifact is created, but also how it is read.

Even when the best of intentions are applied to the creation of a map, the gulfs between what (and who) the creator thinks they are representing, the feelings of the represented, and the reading of the viewer, are often huge. The reader can only view the map through their own history, knowledge, preconceptions, and these leak into every gap of *nonfinito*. All hope that the creator and the reader might find consensus in what the map represents vanishes. To borrow from Wittgenstein, the meaning of the map is not just injected in its creation, but even more so in its use, or reading.

Representations of reality, be they maps or paintings, are invariably projections in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Projecting onto the world the subjective, abstract and emotionally charged ideas of the creator about what is real and meaningful. To understand these abstractions, we have long looked at what was included in maps and how it was represented, but

to understand these processes fully we must also look to the voids. Not just what is missing, but to how the reader will fill those voids. Cézanne's work forces us to acknowledge that nothing is complete, that the mind works to fill the voids with memories, prejudices and our own histories and geographies. At the time they called Cézanne's work an ugly untruth, but to read as map as we read his paintings would be to reveal that both are indeed beautiful untruths of the viewers making.

Subjective voids

Voids can be forgotten in mapping. In some ways satellite imagery has satisfied the appetite for a perceived 'totality' of geographic knowledge, but this leaves us in ever more danger of forgetting the significant and potentially dangerous role that voids might play. Voids in maps are filled with our own subjective thoughts. But subjectivity, as Emmanuel Levinas' notes is 'precarious'.¹⁰ Our existence is not anchored in a will. Our minds, our rights, our freedoms, our individual capacities are dependent on others.

Our subjective is always changing though our encounters with others. Our bodies change, said Spinoza, always in relation to other bodies, and even in the mundane of everyday repetition.¹¹ In the paintings of Cézanne, the voids are filled with our own understanding. Each time we gaze upon these paintings, we fill the voids differently, influenced by those around us and our experiences. Each time we gaze upon a map, we will fill these blank spaces too.

Few, if any of us, will have travelled to those regions of Ukraine embroiled in war, even less during the last two years. So, what fills our understanding of what is happening in those spaces must appear to us through other means. To fill in the voids in the maps we must draw upon other sources, videos, photos, news reports, our understanding of other conflicts and battles.

We are aware of course that all wars have, do, and will always be fought as much with propaganda as with guns. Indeed, much was written in the early days of the conflict on how Ukraine had already won the propaganda war.¹² It is though, worth noting that propaganda is at its most effective when creating or filling voids.

During World War I, war reporting in the UK was heavily censored, with the government exercising strict control over the dissemination of information to the public. C. P. Scott, the influential editor of *The Manchester Guardian* (now *The Guardian*), played a significant role in navigating the challenges of reporting during this period.

Scott believed in the importance of press freedom and the public's right to know, but he also recognized the need for responsible journalism during wartime. He worked closely with the British government to comply with wartime censorship regulations while still striving to provide accurate and informative reporting to his readers.

Under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), passed in 1914, the British government had broad powers to control the flow of information and suppress anything deemed detrimental to the war effort. This included reports that could potentially undermine morale, reveal military strategies, or expose government incompetence. Scott and other editors faced pressure to toe the government line and refrain from publishing anything that could be seen as critical or damaging. However, Scott remained committed to maintaining the integrity of his newspaper and insisted on verifying information to the best of his ability before publication.

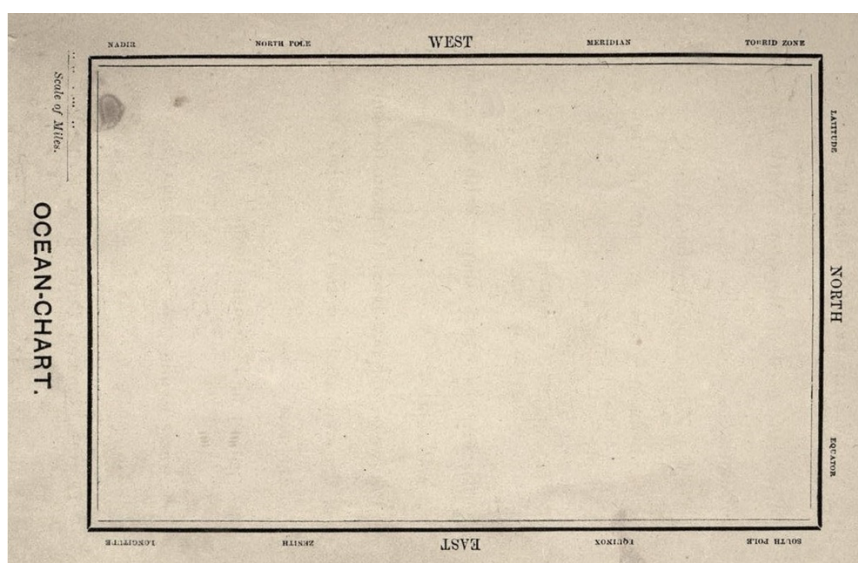
Despite the censorship challenges, Scott and *The Manchester Guardian* continued to provide valuable insights into the war, reporting on the human cost of conflict, the conditions faced by soldiers on the front lines, and the broader social and political implications of the war. Scott's approach to war reporting reflected a delicate balancing act between upholding press freedom and fulfilling his duty as a responsible journalist during a time of national crisis. His commitment to accuracy, integrity, and transparency set a standard for wartime journalism and earned him respect both within the industry and among the public. Even Scott new the importance of some voids noting that, 'If people really knew [the truth], the war would be stopped tomorrow, they don't know and can't know.'

Leni Riefenstahl, a German filmmaker known for her work during the Nazi era, notably her documentary films promoting Nazi ideology, acknowledged her films were successful because of a 'submissive void' into which they were played. This idea pertains to the aesthetic and thematic elements present in her films, particularly in her documentary *Triumph of the Will* (1935). The concept of the submissive void revolves around the portrayal of mass gatherings and the individual's role within them. In Riefenstahl's films, particularly *Triumph of the Will*, large crowds are often depicted in awe-inspiring and meticulously choreographed scenes, where individuals seem to willingly submit themselves to the collective might of the group or the leader. Riefenstahl's camera angles, editing techniques, and use of light and shadow create a sense of grandeur and power, emphasizing the overwhelming presence of the collective over the individual. Within this context, the individual appears small and insignificant, willingly surrendering themselves to the greater whole. The term 'submissive void' suggests a sense of

surrender or submission to a higher authority or collective identity, often associated with the totalitarian ideology of the Nazi regime. Through their portrayal of mass rallies and ceremonies, Riefenstahl aimed to evoke a sense of unity, strength, and submission to the ideology and leadership of the Nazi Party. Critics of her work argue that the concept of the submissive void reflects her complicity in propagating Nazi propaganda and promoting a vision of society built on conformity and obedience to authority. However, Riefenstahl herself maintained that her films were purely artistic endeavours, separate from political ideology, though this viewpoint has been widely contested. The use of voids here is one reason for the contestation, but it is also clear that the voids referred to were the real power of the film. Like Cézanne's work, they enabled people to fill the gaps with their own worldview – be this submitting themselves to the collective or rallying against the ideas of the Nazis.

Politics and maps

Being misled by politicians or the media is hardly a new trend, especially in times of conflict. Nor, indeed, is being misled by maps. The power of maps, and why they appeal so much is that maps are seen by many as objective truth. They are seen as the landscape paintings of old rather than being closer to Cézanne's unfinished versions of the world. Something rather peculiar happens with maps, though. Because of their scientific nature and our in-built belief that they are an objective truth, as we fill their voids, our subjective ideas become transformed into objective ones.



Bellman's Ocean Chart, *The Hunting of the Snark*, Lewis Carroll

We are lured into seeing a scientific confirmation of our beliefs as they become surrounded by lines points and colours. That is not to say everything we project onto a map is false. Far from it. But it is also to say that a map is not a single truth for anything more than one reader, and that reader must be careful to note where the map ends, and their worldview begins – and what else might have influenced that world view.

This belief that maps are true representations of the world is not due to failings on our part necessarily, but are borne of a range of factors that have been baked into the cartographic ideal and the modes of creating and consuming maps that have developed over time. Throughout history, maps have been used as tools for navigation, exploration, and territorial demarcation. This historical precedent has contributed to the perception of maps as accurate representations of reality. This has given maps a visual authority. Maps are visually compelling and are often perceived as authoritative sources of information due to their detailed depictions of geographic features, landmarks, and boundaries. In schools, students are taught to trust maps as reliable sources of information, further reinforcing the belief in their accuracy. This is further reinforced by the idea that cartographers adhere to certain standards and conventions to ensure the accuracy and consistency of maps, such as using scale, legend, and projection methods. These standards give maps an air of credibility and authenticity, while still being just lines, points and polygons. All of these have been made more acute due to technological advances in the field which pull us towards illusions of completeness. With advancements in technology, such as satellite imagery and Geographic Information Systems (GIS), maps have become increasingly detailed and precise. The use of advanced technology can further enhance the perception of maps as accurate and complete representations of reality.

This makes it all the more important to recognize that maps are not infallible and are subject to various limitations and biases. Cartographic decisions, such as projection methods, symbolization, and generalization, can influence how information is represented on a map. Additionally, maps are inherently selective in what they choose to depict and may not always capture the full complexity of a geographical area, especially in times of conflict and flux. Therefore, while maps can be valuable tools for navigation and understanding spatial relationships, it's essential to approach them critically and recognize their limitations as interpretations of reality rather than absolute truths.

Conclusion

In today's post-truth world, where the line between fact and fiction is increasingly blurred, maps play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and influencing narratives. As tools of representation, maps have the power to construct and reinforce certain realities while omitting or distorting others. In this context, maps are not merely neutral depictions of geographic space but are instead imbued with layers of subjectivity and bias. Cartographers make decisions about what to include or exclude, how to symbolize features, and which narratives to prioritize, all of which can shape the way we perceive the world around us. In the era of misinformation and alternative facts, maps can be weaponized to serve political agendas or perpetuate false narratives, exploiting their perceived authority to lend legitimacy to distorted versions of reality.

Moreover, the digital age has democratized mapmaking, allowing individuals and organizations to create and disseminate maps with unprecedented ease. While this democratization of cartography has led to greater accessibility and diversity of perspectives, it has also raised concerns about the proliferation of misinformation and the manipulation of spatial data. In a post-truth landscape where anyone can create and share maps online, the line between fact and fiction becomes increasingly blurred, and the role of critical thinking becomes paramount. The democratization of mapmaking highlights the need for media literacy and digital literacy skills to navigate the complex and often deceptive terrain of modern cartography, where maps can simultaneously inform, mislead, and shape public opinion.

If we are living in an era of post-truth, where strong opinions appear to carry more appeal than facts, particularly regarding emotive subjects, then both the cartographer and the reader need to be more vigilant to the meaning we apply to the voids in these maps that pertain to transform complex situations into simple digestible, objective truths.

Cartography will always involve a struggle between the opposing forces of personal, subjective artistic expression and of impersonal, objective spatial communication. Maps will always lie between certainty and uncertainty, between knowledge and faith. Indeed, maps need both to work. The cartographers' tools have become so perfectly honed as to be unquestioned, while at the same time almost completely inadequate to do the job we ask of them. So, what is the role of maps? What is their function?

We turn to maps for certainty and knowledge, yet the world is in flux and maps show us what we cannot immediately experience or verify. Maps exercise our faith by encouraging us to believe what we cannot see. But if we are lured into a belief that a map serves *only* the purpose of

showing us a scientific, accurate and true vision of the world, then we are destined to always be deserved, first by the map maker, then then by those who seek to influence the way in which we each fill the voids in maps with stories.

The intricate relationship between maps, cartography, and war reflects the profound interplay between spatial representation, military strategy, and geopolitical dynamics. Throughout history, maps have served as indispensable tools for military commanders, providing crucial spatial intelligence and aiding in the planning and execution of military operations. From ancient conquests to modern conflicts, maps have played a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of wars, influencing territorial disputes, and reflecting broader narratives of power and control. As exemplified by the ongoing tensions in Ukraine and other conflicts worldwide, maps serve not only as navigational aids but also as potent symbols of territorial sovereignty and strategic objectives and tools of conscious and unconscious propaganda.

I will end with another quote from Berger's, this from *Stories Walk Like Men*; 'The story does not depend on any fixed repertoire of ideas and habits: it depends upon its stride over spaces. In these spaces lies the meaning it bestows on events. Most of these meanings come from the common aspirations of both characters and reader. Then in the silent spaces of his story both past and future will combine to indict the present.'¹³ Here Berger again helps us see the complex interplay between maps, cartography, and war. Within the spatial representations depicted on maps, lies the narrative of conflicts past, present, and future. These maps provide a canvas upon which the aspirations and struggles of nations and peoples are laid bare, shaping our understanding of events and influencing the course of history. Moreover, the silent spaces between the lines and symbols on maps hold the potential to indict the present, as they bear witness to the legacies of past conflicts and the potential ramifications of current geopolitical tensions.

Advances in technology, such as GIS and satellite imagery, have revolutionized the field of cartography, providing unprecedented levels of detail and accuracy in mapping military operations and territorial boundaries. However, with these advancements also come new challenges and ethical considerations, such as concerns over surveillance, privacy, and the potential for maps to be manipulated for political ends. As we navigate the complexities of modern warfare and geopolitical rivalries, it is imperative to approach maps and cartography with a critical eye, recognizing their potential as both tools of empowerment and instruments of oppression.

Moving forward, the study of maps, cartography, and war offers valuable insights into the intersections of power, knowledge, and representation. By interrogating the ways in which maps shape our understanding of conflict and influence decision-making processes, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the role of spatial representation in shaping the course of history. Moreover, by engaging in critical dialogue and interdisciplinary inquiry, we can work towards harnessing the potential of maps and cartography as tools for peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the promotion of human rights and social justice on a global scale. Ultimately, the story of maps, cartography, and war is one that transcends borders and boundaries, encompassing the shared aspirations and struggles of humanity as we navigate the complex terrain of geopolitics and international relations.

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