
Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte
Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Historischen Institut Paris
(Institut historique allemand)
Band 22/2 (1995)

DOI: 10.11588/fr.1995.2.59377

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Forschungsgeschichte und Methodendiskussion

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HISTORICAL ATLASES: RECENT WORKS AND GENERAL REFLECTIONS

Given the degree to which historians and students use historical atlases it is surprising how little has been written about them. They are generally taken for granted, rather like chronologies, dictionaries and glossaries: their existence is assumed and their creation regarded as unproblematic. It is, however, appropriate to consider such atlases a topic for scholarly assessment. This is so far for three reasons. First, a large number of such works has appeared since 1945, more particularly since 1965. Secondly, their very existence as a means of portraying the past ensures that they provide a prime topic for historiographical examination. Thirdly, the recent attempt to ›deconstruct‹ modern and historic maps, to present them as representations of power¹, offers a new approach for considering such atlases.

In any review article it is only possible to sketch a few themes. There are serious problems in attempting to produce a survey in this field. The cost of atlases are such that major research libraries generally hold only a patchy collection of foreign historical atlases. As they are generally classed as reference works, it is not possible to borrow them by interlibrary loan. Microfilm collections are absent and they do not photocopy well. With growing interest in the technological transformation of mapping towards atlases on CD-ROM, it is possible that it will become far easier to consult them, but, as yet, progress is limited: most atlases are still produced in the conventional hard-copy format only, and this is also true of most historical atlases on which work is in progress.

Aside from these factors, there are other problems with working on historical atlases. Language is clearly a difficulty when working on the atlases produced in some countries. More seriously, there are serious methodological problems as the sole aspect of the atlas that can be judged is the finished product. It is far from clear how far this reflects the original intentions of the compiler. The extent to which these have been shaped by cartographic, or, more commonly, financial constraints is obscure unless the preface or introduction glances at them. This has certainly been my experience in working on two historical atlases, the »Times Atlas of European History« and the »Cambridge Atlas of Early-Modern Warfare«. Historical atlases are unusual in this respect in that the customary constraints presented to the scholar by the publication process are far more overt, direct and active from the outset. For most major historical atlases the cost of the cartography is far greater than the amount paid to the scholars involved, and this naturally conditions the attitude of the publishers. Thus historical mapping repeats the experience of contemporary mapping for, as has been noted of the eighteenth century, »the maps produced represented the publishers' sense of demand at the time«².

The views of publishers are crucial both in determining what is to be produced and in controlling its contents and appearance. Their rationale is overwhelmingly commercial. Thus

1 This can be best approached in J. B. HARLEY, *Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe*, in: *Imago Mundi* 40 (1988), p. 57–76, and D. WOOD, *The Power of Maps*, New York 1992.

2 K. NEBENZAHL and D. HIGGINBOTHAM, *Atlas of the American Revolution*, Chicago 1974, p. 9.

Times Books decided not to follow their »Atlas of the Second World War«, edited by John Keegan, London 1989, because the cost of the project was such that they needed commitment from other publishers for co-publication deals in other countries, but found no real interest when they made approaches at the Frankfurt Book Fair³. Over the last decade-or-so, publishers, particularly in Britain, France and the USA, have shown increasing support for atlases which are in fact books in atlas format, rather than atlases which accord with the conventional definition, i. e. page after page of maps. In publishing terms the definition of an historical atlas has thus altered. The cartographer or scholar may be worried about what seems to them to be the consequential excess of text, but the publisher gets the book that he or she wants.

A relative lack of maps is sometimes linked to an absence of cartographic quality, in particular clarity, and scholarly information in those that are produced. Thus »The National Trust Historical Atlas of Britain Prehistoric and Medieval«, edited by Nigel Saul, Stroud 1994, has an excellent text and well-chosen and produced illustrations, but the maps are a disappointment. There are only 31 and some are weak. The map of »The Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings« lacks locational specificity. That of the arrival of Gothic in England is overly crude in its depiction of the diffusion of architectural style, while that of industry and trade in the late Middle Ages would have benefited from some attempt to suggest quantities.

Nevertheless, this work was a Book Club Choice in Britain in 1994. Publishers generally have fixed ideas about what they want and what they can sell and what will or will not be ruinously expensive to produce. Most have no particular interest in scholarly apparatus, such as commentary, footnotes, authorities, sources for individual maps, without which it can be very difficult to evaluate and interpret them. Instead, most publishers see atlases as visually attractive to potential buyers who are themselves on the look out for visual aids. Constraints are even stronger in the case of publishers working with the notion of a series, such as the Phaidon series on cultural history. In such cases the publisher devises a formula which is imposed on all new ventures: the publisher will only allow so many plates and generally insists on their size and the range of colour printing that can be employed.

Concern and complaints about publishers are not new. Last century Thomas Livingston Mitchell quarrelled over money and acknowledgements with his publisher, the cartographer James Wyld, over their »Atlas of the Peninsular War«⁴. What is more interesting is the impact of publishers on the literature available. They clearly play a major role in ensuring the variety in content and format that characterises the typology of historical atlases. In 1937 the introduction to the »Atlas Historique« published by the Presses Universitaires de France noted

»En France, comme à l'étranger, les Atlas historiques existants n'étaient conçus ni dans le même esprit, ni dans le même but. Les uns visaient à donner des renseignements plus nombreux mais moins précis, les autres à fournir quelques compléments d'informations seulement, mais plus détaillés, et tous avaient pu être établis avec une richesse de moyens à laquelle les auteurs du présent ouvrage ne pouvaient même pas songer«⁵.

These options are clearly affected by objectives and money. It is of course true that the makers of historical atlases relating to quite different periods and themes have been wrestling alone with the same types of problem: they all need to think about costs, colour, which themes can usefully be mapped and which cannot, how sophisticated the cartography in fact needs to be in each case etc. Yet the ability to confront these problems is clearly affected by cost, while the need to do so is a product of the range of the demands made by the publisher.

3 Conversation with Thomas Cussans of Times Books, London, 23 Febr. 1994.

4 T. C. SARGENT, Thomas Livingston Mitchell and Wyld's atlas of the Peninsular War, 1808–1814, in: *Cartography*, 13 (1984), pp. 257–258.

5 *Atlas Historique*, Paris 1937, pp. 5–6.

Text and illustrations are less expensive than maps; new cartography more pricey than essentially resorting to familiar maps. Bold new departures requiring extensive research and much new cartography, therefore, require considerable financial support. J. B. Harley noted

»the truth is that the »Atlas of Early American History« has not been subject to all of the everyday constraints of more mortal works. It is a splendid example of what fund raising on such a grand scale has involved. The basic arithmetic (as set out in *Publishers Weekly*, 21 June 1976) reveals the volume has absorbed sums totalling close to \$ 1,600,000 provided by 44 foundations, organisations and individuals for research and development, and at least \$ 250,000 – not a subsidy – invested by Princeton University Press for publication. The Press and the Newberry Library put a further \$ 115,000 into sales promotion. Some 7,500 copies were printed and 2,500 bound«⁶.

It is not surprising that only one volume appeared. Even with financial support the production of the Atlas was affected by the need to secure more funds: the dialectic of money and maps. As the cartographic editor recorded,

»it was not considered expedient to work exclusively on the general reference maps during the first few years of the Project. Had this been done, there would have been little to show for our efforts when additional funding for continuing work was sought. As it was, the funders were sufficiently encouraged by our apparent progress to allow us to continue; such long-term inefficiency produced shortterm gains that were simply essential«⁷.

Institutional sponsorship is crucial as most publishers simply cannot afford the size and duration of sponsorship required. Thus, for example, the Newberry Library is both headquarters and sponsor of the United States »Atlas of Historical County Boundaries project«. Aldo Dami's »Les Frontières Européennes de 1900 à 1975. Histoire territoriale de l'Europe. Atlas«, Geneva 1976, a valuable work not least because it records frontier changes during World War II, was published with help from the funds of the Swiss Council of Scientific Research. The »Carte Archéologique de la Gaule«, begun in 1930 by the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, has displayed more progress since 1992 when the Ministère de la Culture agreed to support it. Sponsorship is crucial to new projects, but may become less so as technological developments provide the possibility of desktop mapmaking. As important in certain respects are new editions of existing atlases. It is possible to study editions in order to throw light on shifts in historical consciousness or, at times, political pressure. Very little advantage has yet been taken of this possibility⁸; certainly the historical atlases published by Keith Johnston, George Philip, Larousse, Times Books and Rand McNally lend themselves to this approach.

Recent developments in the production of atlases and the use of innovative graphical methods, ensure that many atlases do not look like their forbears. The obviously computer-generated maps in some recent French historical atlases are a case in point. This is true of Stéphane Sinclair's effective »Atlas de Géographie Historique de la France et de la Gaule de la conquête césarienne à nos jours«, Paris 1985; of John Day, Serge Bonin, Itria Calia and Aline Jelinski, »Atlas de la Sardaigne rurale aux 17e et 18e siècles«, Paris 1993, a work that reveals the possibility of using maps and text to recreate the agrarian world of the past; and of the superb series »Atlas de la Révolution française«, Paris, 1987, 7 vols. to date. It is precisely because of

6 Harley review.

7 B. B. PETCHENIK, *Cartography and the Making of a Historical Atlas: A Memoir*, in: *The American Cartographer*, 4 (1977), p. 17. An idealistic note was struck by L. J. CAPPON, *The case for a new historical atlas of Early America*, in: *William and Mary Quarterly*, 28 (1971), p. 122.

8 A. WOLF, *100 Jahre Putzger – 100 Jahre Geschichtsbild in Deutschland 1877–1977*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 29 (1978), S. 701–718; M. PARISSÉ, *George Westermann Atlas*, in: *Bulletin d'Information de la Mission Historique Française en Allemagne*, 21 (1990), pp. 97–99.

this dynamic element that doubt can be thrown on pushing the attempt to deconstruct maps, and to present them as reflections of power relationships. Such an attempt downplays the autonomy of the production process. In addition, at a time when the attempt, associated in particular with D  rida, to downplay the authorial role and indeed authorial independence is under challenge and itself seems both contingent and flawed, it is necessary to be cautious before accepting this analysis as a basis for our understanding of maps.

Clearly power does play a role in the selection of topics to depict and in the depiction of them. As a result, it is arresting to see a depiction that contrasts greatly with the generally prevailing one. Just as the equal area projection of the world in Arno Peters' »The Peters Atlas of the World«, London 1989, with the resulting prominence of the Third World, is arresting, and indeed controversial, so a similar impact can be produced with historical atlases. For someone accustomed to modern Western works this is certainly the effect of consulting Nazi or Soviet historical atlases. More specifically, the clearly anti-Communist »Poland. A Historical Atlas« of Iwo Pogonowski, New York 1987, is also arresting as is the »Historical Atlas of Armenia« produced by the Armenian National Education Committee, New York 1987.

Armenia, like Ethiopia, is also an example of a developed culture with a long history that is commonly elided in historical atlases in favour of others that were apparently of greater longterm significance. This point is made vividly in the »Times Atlas of the Second World War« which offers a number of very different global battlefield perspectives, for example »The American War«. »The Polish War« is also presented, ably making the point in the caption that »The experience of war was neither clear-cut nor decisive for many peoples and nations, especially those chosen by the major powers as targets for ideological policies«⁹.

There are other examples of a similar process in other fields. For example, it is possible to stress or ignore heresy or popular rebellion. Communist atlases were especially prone to emphasize the latter. Thus, »Školn   Atlas   skoslovenskych D  jin«, Prague 1959, contains a map of the 1775 Bohemian rising. The »Atlas I Historise se Kohes se Mesne«, Tirana 1963, prominently indicated the Hussite wars, the areas of Germany affected by the Peasants War of 1524–25, popular risings in England and Spain in the sixteenth century and also in Europe in the seventeenth¹⁰. A similar emphasis can be found in East German and Soviet historical atlases.

Conversely, atlases produced in the West maintained the nineteenth-century emphasis on territoriality: they were primarily about state development and state competition. Classic maps in the former category showed the extension of royal power in medieval France and the rise of Prussia; the latter was depicted largely through wars and resulting territorial shifts. Both can be seen as limited in their conception of power, not least because they exaggerate the scope of central government¹¹. In spatial terms they also exaggerate the degree of precision with which many frontiers were understood by contemporaries and also fail to present the frequent reality of shared sovereignty, which was very difficult for contemporaries to map¹².

With every historical atlas it is possible to point to omissions or to suggest a different basis for compilation. Why for example does the »Historical Atlas of Lincolnshire«, edited by R. S. & N. Bennet, Hull 1993, ignore post-1931 politics and unemployment trends? It is that modern politics are seen as too contentious or at least divisive a topic for works that are supposed in some way to represent the unity of their subject? This must be a particular

9 KEEGAN (ed.), *The Times Atlas of the Second World War*, London 1989, p. 206.

10 *Atlas I Historise Se Kohes Se Mesme*, Tirana 1963, pp. 16, 24, 28–30, 36.

11 Other aspects of the mapping of the period are covered in J. M. BLACK, *Mapping Early-Modern Europe*, in: *European History Quarterly*, 25 (1995).

12 BLACK, *Boundaries and Conflict. International relations in ancien r  gime Europe*, in: C. GRUNDY-WARR (ed.), *World Boundaries 3 in: Eurasia*, London 1994, pp. 19–54; P. BARBER and BLACK, *Maps and the Complexities of Eighteenth-Century European Territorial Divisions: Holstein in 1762*, in: *Archives* 22 (1995).

problem with works in receipt of public subsidy, for example the »Historical Atlas of Canada«, the third volume of which, »Addressing the Twentieth Century 1891–1961«, edited by D. Kerr and D. W. Holdsworth, Toronto 1990, failed to address postwar politics and such sensitive issues as the rise of Quebecois separation. Any schematic basis for the choice of contents, however, faces problems and Armin Wolf's attempt to suggest one in the closing pages of his »Das Bild der europäischen Geschichte in Geschichtsatlantiken verschiedener Länder«, »Internationales Jahrbuch für Geschichts- und Geographieunterricht«, 13 (1970/71), does not really proceed beyond generalities. To take an obvious point, if there was an attempt to lessen the scope for authorial choice by having maps all drawn for a standard base but at a regular sequence the result could be seriously misleading. Paul Magocsi's valuable »Historical Atlas of East Central Europe«, Seattle 1993, includes 11 full-page maps showing »the changing boundaries at certain key historical dates: c. 1050, c. 1250, c. 1480, c. 1570, 1648, c. 1721, 1815, 1910, 1918–1923, c. 1950, 1992, while the other maps, such as World War II, 1939–1942, World War II, 1943–1945, and East Central Europe after World War II, have a similar effect. Such a scheme could of course be replaced by maps at say regular fifty-year intervals, for example 1750, 1800, 1850, 1900, 1950 or 1740, 1790, 1840, 1890, 1940, 1990, yet this limitation of authorial independence would gravely restrict the flow of information offered to the reader: the first would omit the two world wars and the impact of the Versailles settlement, the second the Napoleonic world and the Versailles settlement. Both in truth were shortlived, but this selection would seem remarkable to most readers.

Magocsi also includes much non-territorial material. That is clearly a central aspect of the modern historical atlas; the broadening out of the agenda. This reflects both shifts in modern atlases and in the study of history. A lively example of the former is presented by »Fragments d'Europe. Atlas de L'Europe médiane et orientale«, edited by M. Foucher, Paris 1993. Foucher seeks to integrate eastern Europe into the rest of the Continent and does so with a variety of cartographic strategies. This is a volume in which everything from papal visits to olympic medals can be mapped in order to depict links and boundaries. A valid criticism of many atlases, modern and historical, is that they are essentially static and descriptive, but Foucher's is an atlas where the variety of material depicted and the topicality of the treatment helps to obviate such criticisms. Among the interesting maps is that devoted to German influence in the lands of the former Soviet Union: a map that comprehends banks, airlinks, diplomatic, demographic and journalistic relations. French influence is similarly charted. Foucher's volume indicates the degree to which cartography can throw fresh light on dynamic relationships and offer an illuminating spatial account of the political, demographic, economic and cultural world.

If modern atlases can do this, there is no reason why historical atlases should not have similar success, especially as the very focus of the past is change. The visual imagery of maps can make many points as effectively as text, some more so. There are, of course, problems with the accuracy, availability and uniformity of the data. This naturally affects what can be mapped and makes certain subjects impossible, but it does not prevent historical cartography; and it is not as though data problems do not affect other means of analysis and representation. As already discussed, choice, and thus implicit power relationships, play a role in selectivity that is inherent in mapping, but, again, this is true of the entire historical enterprise: Clio is of the world, not an ethereal muse. The process of selection offers a rich field for historiographical enquiry, but it should not deter others from the scholarly excitement of making maps in order to add to the range and vitality of our understanding of history and to make the past visible¹³.

13 I should like to thank the University of Durham for granting me a mid-career award for my work on historical atlases.