

From Phantom Maps to Real Boundaries. Comparison of the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav context (14th Blankensee Colloquium)

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Maps can be powerful instruments and even weapons in the context of war and violent conflict such as in Ukraine and in the former Yugoslavia. The 14th Blankensee Colloquium „From Phantom Maps to real boundaries, comparison of the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav context“ devoted two days to analyzing the role of maps in these conflicts. Organized by Humboldt University historian Nenad Stefanov and Sabine von Löwis, geographer at the March Bloch Center, both members of the research network „Phantom Borders in Eastern Central Europe“, the conference additionally benefited from broad institutional support.¹

The conference drew on a cross-disciplinary and comparative approach, where historians, geographers, political scientists, anthropologists and cartographers from Europe and the United States debated how the power of maps work in the context of contemporary European conflict: how and by whom they are designed, used, and distributed. Indeed, the power of maps appears linked to the subjective choices of their „maker“: he creates a projection ranging from „white lie“ deriving from the difficult adaptation of our three-dimensional world on a piece of paper, to weapon of propaganda.

A rich intellectual panorama emerged out of the panel discussions. It reconsidered the role of the cartographer in contemporary communication to different audiences, the actual process of map-making, its abuse through ethnicist and historicist narratives in the years leading to the Bosnian and Kosovo wars (1992–95; 1998–99), and those leading to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Beyond these risks and limitations, maps still constitute an

essential means of simplifying complex realities. Used wisely, maps still show a way to contemplate about complex social and territorial realities.

The „Phantom Borders in Eastern and Central Europe“ Project project gave the initial impetus to the colloquium by reflecting on how historical national and state borders seem to reappear in social practices, institutions, norms and values as an empiric phenomenon, SABINE VON LÖWIS (Berlin) noted in her introduction. The project's ethnographic approach is underlined in von Löwis' own field research in Ukrainian villages to investigate voting practices. Are there any similarities about how maps as social constructs are used in conflicts where it seems they appear more often than in times of peace? How can one design and apply maps to illustrate complex social spatial information such as Ukraine and Yugoslavia? she asked, setting the stage for the conference discussions.

In his keynote speech, PETER HASLINGER (Marburg) overviewed the theoretical framework, analyzing in powerful terms the performativity of borders as creator of institutions and the nature of maps themselves. Though maps, as a knowledge media, are meant to „simplify“ reality by translating complex geographical, historical or other phenomena into a „common frame“ that anyone can read, they are complex objects, steeped in meanings, at times in hidden agendas, and consequently need to be read in context. Maps represent a „created“ reality, embedded in discourses through the choices made by mapmakers. So not only do mapmakers create reality, they „choose“ the reality.

A line on a map, is more than a line.

Delving into the micro processes of „making“ maps, ERIC LOSANG (Leipzig) defined the cartographic process as a projection of a three-dimensional world on a plane in such a way that the user understands it and that it fulfills his needs in a variety of ways: maps that define empires, navigational maps that focused on orientation rather than borders, da-

¹ Funded by the Kooperationsfonds at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin and the Ministry for Education and Research. In cooperation with Phantomgrenzen, the Herder Institute, and Leibniz-Institute für Länderkunde.

ta driven maps, thematic maps. The traditional „Mercator map“ intended for navigation was later misused through its distortion of the northern hemisphere to represent the domination of Europe. That is why the „purpose“ of the map, the usage that will be made of it, is a core aspect of map-making (and map reading), as participants observed during the discussion. The map maker’s craft is about making choices based on contingencies like paper size as he progresses through the making of a map: selecting – and therefore reducing – what information to depict, determining which symbols (arrows, full or dotted lines) to use, as each is packed with meanings. These are all stages in the process from geographical reality to map.

Maps in context of the Ukrainian and Balkan conflicts: the ethnicity bias

The comparative perspective on the role of cartography in the Ukrainian and Yugoslav conflicts were investigated in three panels on the dynamics of conflict and maps and on visualisation of complex social and historical phenomena. Presentations and ensuing discussions underlined the misuse of maps as a tool for ethnicist and historicist manipulation. Historian NENAD STEFANOV (Berlin) drew on 19th and 20th century cartography to demonstrate the force of historicist and ethnic argumentation of maps of the Balkans. Going back to the mapping of the Balkans when this meant traveling on horse-back and bivouacking in the outback, he showed that these representations of Balkan ethnic communities laid the ground for the creation of Yugoslav borders at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. These ethnological maps were set aside by socialist Yugoslavia, to be „returned“ in the late 1980s for instance in the form of maps published by the Serbian magazine *Nin*, depicting ethnic borders and claims. DIANA MISHKOVA (Sofia) underlined how prevalent the ethnographic perspective was well into the 20th century beyond the Balkan space, a rare example of transfer of experience from East to West.

The ethnic „reading“ of maps is a core factor in the building of the conflict in Ukraine. The narrative of a „divided“ Ukraine illustrated by bicolored maps was often put forward

as an explanatory by political and media actors. Language maps and voting maps used to describe „divided“ Ukraine, operate a fallacious semiotic shift from voting and language practices to „identity“, as STEVEN SEE-GEL (University of Northern Colorado) noted. Drawing on the representation of Ukraine in Western media, he demonstrated how false interpretation of data can relay a politically charged and false picture of „two Ukraines“, distinctly divided along linguistic and cultural, and geographical lines. Why are mostly electoral maps and more specifically, second round presidential election voting maps used to represent alleged Ukrainian identities? When considering identity narratives the choice of the data used is crucial, he noted.

Analyzing contemporary Russian use of maps on Ukraine, GUIDO HAUSMANN (Munich) turned to a cartographic history of Novorossiia, the ephemeral entity created at the Kremlin’s behest on the separatist territories of the Donbas (May 2014-May 2015). Building on a genealogy of the narratives about Novorossiia, he showed the Kremlin’s historicist argumentation. A succession of maps of „Novorossiia“ showed moving borders across centuries and across narratives. The visualization of contemporary „Novorossiia“ has, in fact, little in common with that of its 18th century imperial namesake. The first Novorossiia was the „factual representation“ of an administrative unit merging newly conquered territories of Crimea and north of the Black Sea, whereas contemporary Novorossiia is a political fiction and evocative example of using maps to serve the argument of historical „continuity.“

This discussion of the dramatic human implications of the misuse of maps serving ethnic and territorial claims were carried on in the evening during a podium discussion on „Maps at War: The Conflict in Ukraine and Yugoslavia compared“, closing the first day of the colloquium. Held at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the discussion moderated by Peter Haslinger featured, among other participants, first-hand accounts by Ukrainian photographer Yevgenia Belorusetz, VADIM OSWALT (Gießen), KARL SCHLÖGEL (Berlin), and NENAD STEFANOV (Berlin). German parlia-

mentarian Marieluise Beck (Alliance '90/ die Grünen) traveled extensively to Bosnia and the Donbas to alert the public and politicians about the plight of civilians. She warned how diffusing the cartographic portrayal of conflicts through an exclusively ethnic prism is dangerous because it creates an argument for non-intervention in portrayed „historical“ and „ethnic“ strife.

Does map-making of the digital age create more information, competition, or confusion? A bit of all, agreed many of the participants.

The quality of socio-economic and other data, its accessibility, and the transparency, consequently constitute a core issue to „better“ maps. However, quality data is particularly a problem in countries like those of former Yugoslavia and Ukraine where public policy institutions are barely emerging and where private or other interests might „capture“ institutions producing data. Therefore, issues of financing data collection and governance play a role in creating a broader variety of maps, as participants pointed out.

Another important factor to consider is how technological progress brought basic map making within the reach of amateurs. Grassroot maps gained enormously in diffusion, as SRDJAN RADOVIC (Belgrade) showed in his communication on popular cartographic imagery in the Balkans where „mapping has long been viewed as a means of strengthening or establishing a sense of attachment to one's community, especially ethno-national community“. The risks of such grassroot cartography is that it is „becoming a growing source“ through the force of internet search engines. Such popular cartography can misrepresent data, transferring century-old cartographic categories into mis-translations of contemporary realities.

As TANJA PETROVIC (Ljubljana) pointed out in the ensuing discussion how „democratization of making [and diffusing] maps“ blurs the boundaries between the map maker and the audience, creating new challenges and changes for the profession, all the more so in the context of conflict and war linked to expanding national territorial claims and that perhaps still resonate as a danger today.

A roadmap to better maps?

„Though never innocent“, can maps be made better? ask PHILIPPE REKACEWICZ (visionscarto.net), and ULRICH SCHMID (St Gallen) as they both engaged in alternative cartography approaches. A core issue concerns the „production regime of maps“. More often than not maps are the result of a collaborative process of various specialists; lobbyists, editors, and other decision-makers all „whispering in the cartographer's ear“. One perspective is that of a cartographer as a „craft“, producing what others designed. Editorials thus intervene as protective buffers filtering the information coming from those actors who commission the design of maps. Sometimes cartographers are given the data directly and left to make „choices“ that can nevertheless be unilaterally revised by editorials. Former cartographer for *Le Monde diplomatique*, Rekacewicz, recounted as an example the implications of representing or not in the newspaper, the border of the disputed territory of the Western-Sahara, claimed by the Sahrawi state, but under de facto control by Morocco. Beyond the seriously debated subject of lines, dotted lines and arrows, as participants underlined, even color-coding cannot be innocent: the choice of the color green often looks to imply a relation to Islam, or the choice of the strongest and brightest color to represent one's own ethnicity, visually drowning out other colors.

Countering the dominant narrative of „two Ukraines“, Schmid presented 3-D cartographic visualizations of Ukraine's cultural heterogeneity as overlapping layers of cultural attachments (Russian, Ukrainian, European and often a mix of two or all). Political scientist NADIYA KRAVETS (Cambridge, Mass.) collaborates closely with cartographers to rethink conceptual approaches to studying Ukrainians' identities in order to understand why Ukrainian identity has been so misrepresented (HURI Ukraine GIS Project, <http://arccgis.com>). She pointed out the discrepancies between the ethnicist paradigm of a divided Ukraine and the HURI mapping project demonstrating a non-polarized, more harmonized attitude towards Russia, Europe and other allegedly divisive issues, based on surveys done in regular intervals

over a twenty- year period on how they perceive the border with Russia (open or closed). Do these results reflect the existence of a civic-based identity, rather than language or ethnic-based? These maps are not an answer or an explanation of Ukrainian identity, Kravets insisted, but rather the basis to explore new hypotheses and „to define the right research question.“ In other words, maps can be the *starting point* of scientific enquiry.

Conclusion

Agency transpired most panel communications, that of the *map maker* in a broad sense as the designer, or ideologist of a map, the crafter, and that of the *users* of maps – media, political institutions etc. Summing up the two day conference, DENIS ECKERT (Toulouse) pointed out that ethnicity dangerously becomes „the single explanatory factor“ of complex realities, for instance through „diffusion of standardized maps“ about Ukraine and Yugoslavia by actors with „hidden agendas“. It is a strategy that keeps the audience „from remembering the real forces behind the conflict“. Participants agreed that both conflicts share a common feature: the overuse of ethno-linguistic maps contributing to building a twisted narrative of „ethnic“ conflict, thereby legitimizing the bloody emergence of ethnically homogenous territories.

The combined force of digital media, social networks and technological simplifications of map-making further de-multiply the power of maps that are still perceived by the broader audience as evidence, as a form of objective „truth.“ However, propaganda maps are offset by multidisciplinary approaches to designing maps and the rich scholarship in experimental mapping. This diversity, participants agreed, shows how to go on: by fostering „new stories“ through maps that are as diverse as possible by employing a collaborative approach with historical science and other disciplines.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:

Sabine von Löwis (CMB Berlin): From Phantom Maps to Real Boundaries. Comparison of the post-Soviet and post- Yugoslav context

Keynote 1

Chair: Nenad Stefanov (HU Berlin)

Peter Haslinger (Herder-Institute Marburg): Are Maps Phantoms? Are Borders Real?

Panel 1 : Visualisation, Cartography, and Space. Theoretical Reflections

Chair: Peter Haslinger

Eric Losang (Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography Leipzig): Bordering and Ordering – The Line as Cartographic Imperative

Discussant: Vadim Oswalt (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen)

Panel 2: Dynamics of Conflicts and Maps in the post-Yugoslav Space

Chair: Christian Voß (HU Berlin)

Nenad Stefanov (HU Berlin): Cartography and Political Power. Developments since the 19th Century in the Balkans

Discussant: Diana Mishkova (Center for Advanced Study, Sofia)

Panel 3: Dynamics of Conflicts and Maps in the post-Soviet Space

Chair: Yvonne Kleinmann (Aleksander Brückner Center for Polish Studies, Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg)

Steven Seegel (University of Northern Colorado): Ethnic Maps as Geospatial Battleground: Cartography, Identity Politics, and the History of Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

Guido Hausmann (LMU München): Novorosiya Old and New: Cartography as Politics

Discussant: Sabine von Löwis

Public panel discussion Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Einstein Hall: Karten im Krieg: Die Konflikte in der Ukraine und Jugoslawien im Vergleich

Discussants:

Marieluise Beck (MP, Alliance '90/The Greens)

Yevgenia Belorusets (Photographer, Kiev)

Vadim Oswalt (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen)

Karl Schlögel (Fellow Carl-Friedrich-von-Siemens-Stiftung)

Nenad Stefanov (HU Berlin); Moderation: Peter Haslinger (Herder-Institut, Marburg)

Keynote 2

Chair: Sabine v. Löwis (CMB Berlin)

Philippe Rekacewicz (Swiss journal *La Cité* and co-editor of *Visionscarto.net*): Mapping Conflict and Geopolitical Changes in the Media: Somewhere Between Imaginary and Reality

Panel 4: The post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet Space - Visualisations of Complex Socio-Cultural Phenomena and History

Chair: Sabine v. Löwis (CMB Berlin)

Nadiya Kravets (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute): Politics of Mapping Ukrainian Identity during Crisis and War

Ulrich Schmid (University of St. Gallen): Two- or Three-dimensional Maps? New Forms of Visualisations of Cultural Heterogeneity in Ukraine

Srdjan Radovic (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade): Popular Cartographic Imagery and Practices. Meaning of Maps in the Post-Yugoslav Space

Discussant: Tanja Petrovic (Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana)

Roundtable: Comparison and Perspectives of Cartographic Representation of Complex Socio-Cultural Phenomena. Chair: Sabine v. Löwis (CMB Berlin) / Nenad Stefanov (HU Berlin)

Discussant: Denis Eckert (CNRS Toulouse)

Conclusions

Tagungsbericht *From Phantom Maps to Real Boundaries. Comparison of the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav context (14th Blankensee Colloquium)*. 10.03.2016–11.03.2016, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 05.07.2016.