



The Map, the Territory and the Fog of War

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This is an edited version of a talk given to the opening session of 'Cartography on the Front Line' seminar series, at the British Library on October 27th, 2022.

I thought I might kick off the proceedings by sharing with you some of issues and ideas which prompted us to put together this programme. Inevitably it was Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the role which cartography has played in representing that conflict, which provoked us to consider the different roles maps can play both forensically in the conduct on military operations

and rhetorically in the propaganda wars which are waged to legitimise or delegitimise war aims and conduct.

To grasp what is at stake here let us briefly eavesdrop on a meeting at Putin's palace on the Russian Black Sea Coast. Also present are General Sergei Shoigu, Russia's minister of defence and chief planner of the invasion of Ukraine and Professor Nicolai Sedrov, from the Institute of Cartographic Sciences in Moscow.

Putin Welcome, gentlemen. We are delighted that you could find time to leave your front line duties to come here today to brief me on how well our limited military operation in the Ukraine is going and how our inevitable victory can be best represented in the maps we make of it.

Shoigu: Well our glorious armed forces are making good progress, meeting some resistance from the neo-nazi militias, but overcoming them with our superior fire power, and receiving a warm welcome from the civilian populations who see us as liberating them from the oppressive yoke of Nato and the Western Imperialists.

Putin: As I expected (*Turning to Sedrov*). And how are our patriotic cartographers showing this progress to the world?

Sedrov: I have brought some maps to show you. As you can see, we have here used bold red arrows to indicate the advances of our armed forces on the ground, showing the key military installations and government institutions targeted by our tanks and missiles. You will notice that no residential centres or civilian sites, like hospitals, schools or cultural centres, are indicated because of course they are not targeted.

Putin: Good, red for the red army, and the image of unstoppable momentum conveyed by the arrows. Yes, I like that. But what are these stripey red and white areas?

Shedrov: They are where fighting is currently taking place and there is no overall ground control.

Shoigu: But of course even here our troops are making advances, Vladi...

Putin: Hmm... (to Sedrov). Perhaps you could add some small arrows to the red stripes showing the direction of advance? Like this? *He takes out a red felt tip pen to illustrate.*

Sedrov: Yes, of course. What a good idea!

Putin: I gather you are an expert in using maps to document place names?

Sedrov: Yes, that is correct. My major work was an atlas tracing the common Slavic origin of Russian and Ukrainian place names. As you know in our Slavic mother tongue the Ukraine, refers to a borderland or province so we are merely revising the map to emphasise this fact.

Putin: Splendid! What we need now is a new map of the Ukraine, getting rid of all street and place names that give credence to the myth that Ukraine is a separate nation and culture, and celebrating instead our common ancestry now parts of the country have been fully embraced into the bosom of Mother Russia.

Shoigu: Erm, if I might say something here, Vladi? How about we go one step further and actually rename some of the cities we have taken to mark the glorious sacrifices of our troops in liberating the country and perhaps also your inspiring leadership?

Putin Hmm... yes, well you certainly have a point there. As Napoleon once said, 'where our map is there shall be our territory.'

Sedrov: Wasn't it a British prime minister who said 'Roll up that map of Europe, it will not be wanted these ten years'?

Shoigu: Boris Johnson?

Putin: (bristling) No you idiot, it was Napoleon and can I remind you that was after Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz and Austerlitz was a Russian defeat! One of the few we have endured in our long and glorious history.

Shoigu: (hastily) I am sure what the Professor meant was that your victory in Ukraine will be redrawing the map of Europe, and indeed the world, for at least the next ten years. It will be your historic legacy to the Russian people, to have at last restored our sense of greatness, after all the humiliations since 1989 and not least to have halted the onward march of NATO.

Putin: (preening) Yes, yes you are right.

Sedrov: Perhaps if I might make a suggestion? Mariupolis could be renamed Putingrad once it is fully restored to its former state.

Putin: It's a good idea, but I am not so sure about the grad bit, too reminiscent of Lenin or Stalin for my liking. How about Putinopolis? **Putin:** (suddenly turning to Shoigu) Do you think at our next meeting we could have a sand map table made, you know like the one we used to

have for our limited military operation in Syria a few years ago. It's so much more fun to be able to move the tanks and missile carriers around, and plan how we are going to encircle the cities and destroy them without hurting anyone except the neo-nazi imperialists...

Shoigu: Of course, Mr President, it will be just like old times. We look forward to it.

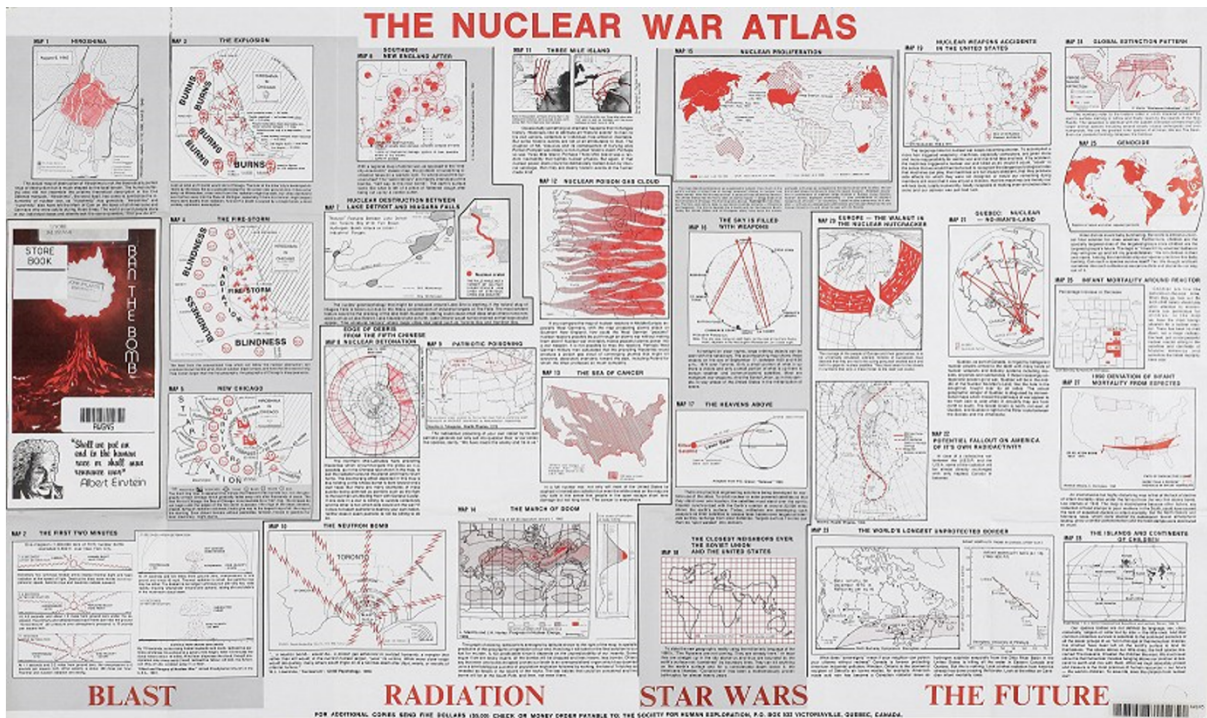
Mapmaking and war making

The making and use of maps to name and claim territory is central to the historical development of cartography over the past two hundred and fifty years. It has served to rationalise and administer multiple forms of expropriation from the enclosure movement in the English countryside in the 18th century to the land grabs and deforestation which are today destroying Indigenous economy and ecology in the Amazonian rain forest. As the so-called natives used to say to the colonial authorities: once upon a time we had the territory, and you had the maps. Now we have your maps, and you have our territory.

Map making has all too often been war making by other means, a form of symbolic violence enacted to disguise or legitimise the use of physical force by the state against its own citizens (the so called enemy within), or against other states and their populations perceived to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of the homeland nation. But it has also been an affordance of resistance to such application. In this series we want to explore both sides of this story.

Here I draw your attention to a two of the links between map making and war making which point towards this tension. The first is the way war emphasises the rhetorical function of maps. Every map, even the most functional is a rhetorical proposition about the world, which normalises one particular form of navigation and closes off other possibilities. Your car Sat-Nav tells you how to drive from A to B by the quickest possible route, but its algorithms also radically foreclose other ways of finding your way around, for example by exploring the world using your own line(s) of desire, or drawing on your own cognitive mappings and memoryscapes to create a more personal geography.

Maps made to either support or resist war mongering tend to proclaim their rhetoric openly. I think that the most effective anti-war maps are those which utilise forensics to show all too graphically what the impact is likely to be on civilian populations and infrastructure. For example, these by William Bunge from his Nuclear War Atlas.



Sometimes the ideological function of war maps is more subtle. They can be very effective as hidden persuaders. Military mapping is supposed to be primarily forensic. It is about extracting data from an actual or potential battlefield to represent the strategic or tactical aspect of front line operations so that rational judgements can be made. Yet this capacity is greatly overestimated. It is rather the case that the co-curation of war maps, for let us not forget that they are compiled from many disparate sources and are the work of many hands, has the undeclared but vital role of providing a space and time in which those in command HQ can gather together and persuade themselves and each other that that they are in control of the situation, when in many cases they are clearly not.

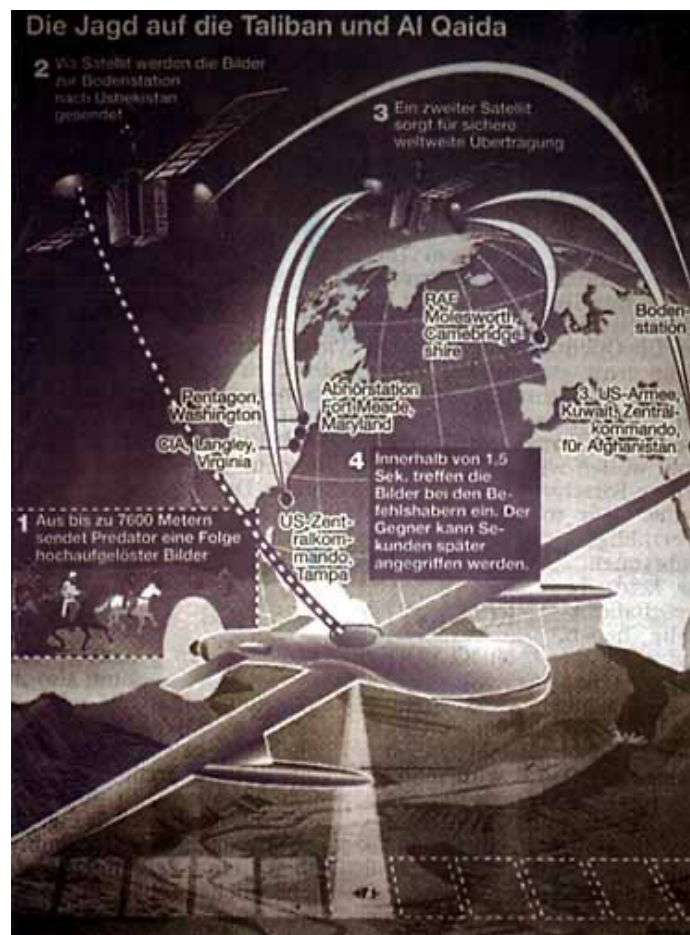
The war map provides at once an illusory refuge from the storm of battle and a no less illusory prospect on it, a simulation of the front line in the backyards of war. Perhaps in some cases it can even offer an alternative home front for the combatants. Stanley Spencer's painting from the trenches of the Western Front in WWI depicts an a cosy enough scene, the troops gathered around the map reader, as if around a fire, listening to a bed time story. The reality might have been different, but indeed maps were made in which the strange desolate no-mans land and trenches of Flanders were re-named to invest them with familiar and homely associations.



Mapping the fog of war

This brings me to the core of my argument about the fog of war and how it turns on the special relationship between map and territory. Fog is at once a material effect of military operations and a description of the space time compression of their impact. Fog is information overload, but it is also tear gas, chemical warfare, napalm, the weaponisation of the biosphere, clouds made up of exploded particles of human and non-human beings, organic and organic matter. Fog is the noise of battle but it is also brain fog, the mental time bomb of post-traumatic stress disorder, the clouds of unknowing which descend on official memoryscapes and obscure the true obscenity of war in the name of heroism and sacrifice.

In Clausewitz's terms, 'War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty'. Military analysts influenced by Clausewitz continue to argue that by improving technologies of mapping and tracking, especially through the use of drones and satellites, the fog of war can somehow be dispelled and they will finally attain the promised land of what they call full spectrum dominance: total air and ground control rendered transparently in real time. Sigmar Polke's painting depicts with graphic precision the project of creating a global communication system engineered to conduct the so called 'war against terror'; this may have made it possible to take out individual leaders but completely ignored the actual ground conditions which enabled first, Qaida and then Isis, to gain local support and ultimately create an infrastructure of radical Islamic governance.



My argument is that the project of mapping the electronic battlefield through a network of remote robotic sensors or orbiting satellites comes up against a set of internal constraints

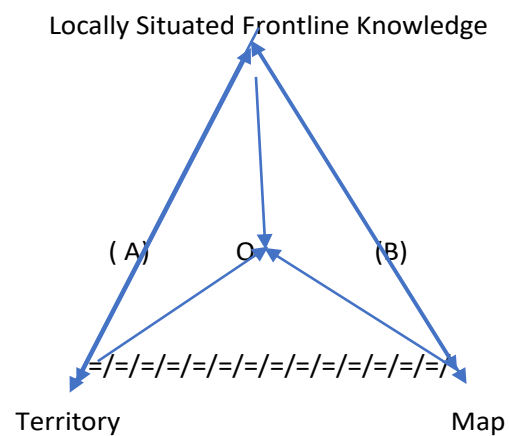
embedded in Map/ territory relations, and how these relations are interpreted and lived. The relationship between map and territory is not as straightforward as it might seem. There is for example no easy principle of correspondence between the rendition of events via military maps of whatever kind and the embodied experience of the war zone, the two are often in open contradiction, a fact which is exploited by disinformation campaigns.

Korzybski was the first to assert that the map is no more the territory than the word sugar is sweet. Indeed that particular word leaves a peculiarly bitter taste, in view of its connection with slavery and ill health. Korzybski argued that where the map is confused with territory, a semantic disturbance arises and that disturbance - in this context, what I am calling the fog of war- continues until the limits of the map are recognised.

In my view, the category errors which arise, mistaking the map for the territory and vice versa, however contingent, are not idiosyncratic. They are embedded in interpretive routines built into both command and control systems. This clearly occurred in the infamous case of the Charge of Light Brigade in the Crimea War where it never occurred to the general who gave the original order that it would get truncated in transit, or that his subaltern officers would obey it so blindly that they would fail to check the plan against the actual circumstances and realise that they were trotting into a deadly trap. In contemporary video war games, which are often popular amongst front line troops, a different problem arises when players become so immersed in its operational procedures as they navigate various hazards and attack enemy positions, that they do indeed mistake the game for the real thing (i.e. the map for the territory), only to discover, when it is usually too late, that the logic of gaming and the logistics of war follow two very different trajectories.



A schematic rendition



A Wayfinding

B Posting

O 'Ground Control' or the fog of war

() Bracketing out

= 'as if' : imaginary correspondence

In this model I have tried to depict, schematically enough, the sets of relations which obtain in these circumstances. Front line troops are continually updating their locally situated knowledge of the war zone, through foot patrols, supplemented by drone reconnaissance and actual encounters with the enemy; in the light of this information, they construct their mental (which are also highly embodied), maps of the war zone as field of safe and dangerous sites, linked by improvised pathways. The difficulty here is that such maps do not register the wider strategic picture. The process of what is here called wayfaring, i.e. finding your way around the battlefield, necessarily brackets out these wider dimensions and as a result frontliners may not be able to see the wood for the trees.

Meanwhile the maps being compiled at HQ, which draw on a large number of such local reports, have the opposite problem, of being able to grasp the 'wood' but not the trees; for example they may be able to construct a fairly accurate picture of the overall disposition of the enemy forces, but are often quite unable to grasp the presence of hidden or camouflaged equipment or troops, which may be suddenly and rapidly deployed, appearing, as it were, out of nowhere, and even behind what is supposed to be the front line. In fact, in certain kinds of armed conflict, notably in guerrilla warfare and in civil wars, the very definition and location of 'the front line' becomes obscure and contested. Moreover the process of posting through which territorial information is abstracted and codified through specific cartographic devices is not allowed to enter into the reckoning.

In all these situations of uncertainty, the relevant actors continue to behave *as if* map and territory were in some kind of stable relation of correspondence founded on external reality principles. Anything which unsettles this *a priori* arrangement is bracketed out from the operational scenario. The cartographic pact depends on a tacit consensus that there is a fixed standardised form of representation (the map) which enables its makers and users to make rational choices about how best to navigate the physical terrain they occupy in order to lay claim to or defend its existence as 'territory'. Yet in this continuous toing and froing between map and territory, there is a void, a lacuna, at the centre of what should be 'ground control', not just a missing piece in the jigsaw of information being assembled, but a constitutive gap, covered over and acerbated by the 'as ifness' of the pact. It is this vacuum which is filled by the fog of war.

All at sea: a note on weaponising the airwaves

All this may seem excessively abstract so let me end with a concrete example of how category error can be built into operational data and/or its interpretation when wayfaring, or in this case, seafaring, and the posting mechanisms associated with a specific mapping technology, in this case radar, are edited out of consideration and give rise to a potentially catastrophic misreading of the situation.

What follows is the transcript of an actual radio conversation which took place between Galician coastguards and the US navy on 16 October 1997, broadcast on Channel 106 of the Spanish Maritime Agency, on the Costa Finisterre.

Galician: This is A -853 calling you. Please alter your course to 15 degrees South to avoid a collision. You are sailing directly towards us – distance 25 nautical miles.

US naval officer: We advise you to alter course to 15 degrees North to avoid a collision.

Galician: Answer negative. We repeat: alter your course 15 degrees South to avoid a collision.

US naval officer: This is the Captain of a ship of the navy of the United States speaking to you. We insist that you alter your course immediately to 15 degrees North to avoid a collision.

Galician: We see this as not possible nor useful. We recommend that you alter course to 15 degrees south to avoid a collision

US naval officer (loudly): THIS IS CAPTAIN RICHARD JAMES HOWARD, COMMANDER OF THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER “USS LINCOLN” OF THE NAVY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, THE SECOND LARGEST WARSHIP OF THE NORTH AMERICAN FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY TWO ARMoured CRUISERS, SIX DESTROYERS, 4 SUBMARINES AND OTHER SHIPS THAT CAN SUPPORT US AT ANY TIME.

WE ARE ON THE SHORTEST ROUTE TO THE PERSIAN GULF TO PREPARE FOR A MILITARY MANOEUVRE THAT COULD LEAD TO AN OFFENSIVE OPERATION AGAINST IRAQ.

WE HAVE THE WORLDS MOST SOPHISTATED RADAR EQUIPMENT ON BOARD AND IT IS TELLING US THAT YOU ARE ON A COLLISION COURSE...

I ORDER YOU TO ALTER YOUR COURSE TO 15 DEGREES NORTH!!

IF YOU DO NOT COMPLY, WE SHALL FIND OURSELVES FORCED TO TAKE WHATEVER ACTION IS NECESSARY TO GUARANTEE THE SECURITY OF THIS AIRCRAFT CARRIER AND ENTIRE STRIKE FORCE.

PLEASE OBEY WITHOUT DELAY AND GET OUT OF OUR WAY!!!

Galician: This is Juan Manuel Salas Alcantara. We are two people. With us is our dog and food, two beers and a man from the Canaries who is already asleep. We have the support of the transmitter Cadena Dial de la Coruna and the Maritime Emergency Channel 16.

We are going nowhere since we are speaking to you from the land. We are in lighthouse A-853 Finisterre, on the Galician coast. We have no shitting idea of where we rank in the Spanish Lighthouse Service.

And you can take whatever steps you consider necessary and which you find sexy, to guarantee the safety of your shitting aircraft carrier, but you are about to split open your ship on the coastal reefs of Galicia and on these grounds we urge you, and wish once more to issue a heartfelt plea that it is the best, the healthiest and cleverest move for you and your people to alter your course to 15 degrees south to avoid a collision