

Who does it belong to? How atlas maps show border changes

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Abstract:

Maps have long been recognized as powerful tools for shaping political reality, particularly in the context of territorial conflicts and border changes (Blacksell 2008, Wood 1992). They have been used to legitimize territorial claims, influence public opinion, and build national identities (Solarz 2015). Furthermore, works by Winichakul (1994) and Anderson (1991) underscore the role of maps in shaping national identity. However, much has been investigated on the political use of maps in general (Field 2025, Muehlenhaus 2023, 2021, 2014, 2013a, 2013b, Monmonier 1996), as well as in web cartography (Muehlenhaus 2014), there is a gap in the research on persuasiveness of maps published in geographical atlases. Despite an important role of atlases in education and a geopolitical discourse, their role as political instruments has not yet been extensively examined, particularly in the context of the representation of territorial changes after World War I and World War II.

This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the geographical atlases, with a case study of German territories annexed to Poland in 1918–1922 and in 1945. The research involves an in-depth analysis of atlases published in Germany, between 1918 and 2018, with the aim of analysing cartographic and graphic solutions applied to areas of changed proprietary. Atlases published in Poland and Czechoslovakia (as the most involved countries) were analysed, as well as those published in USA, Russia, France and Great Britain (as one of most influential in international politics) were also included in the analysis as context. The study particularly focuses on how geographical atlases might have reflected the political agendas of the publishing states.

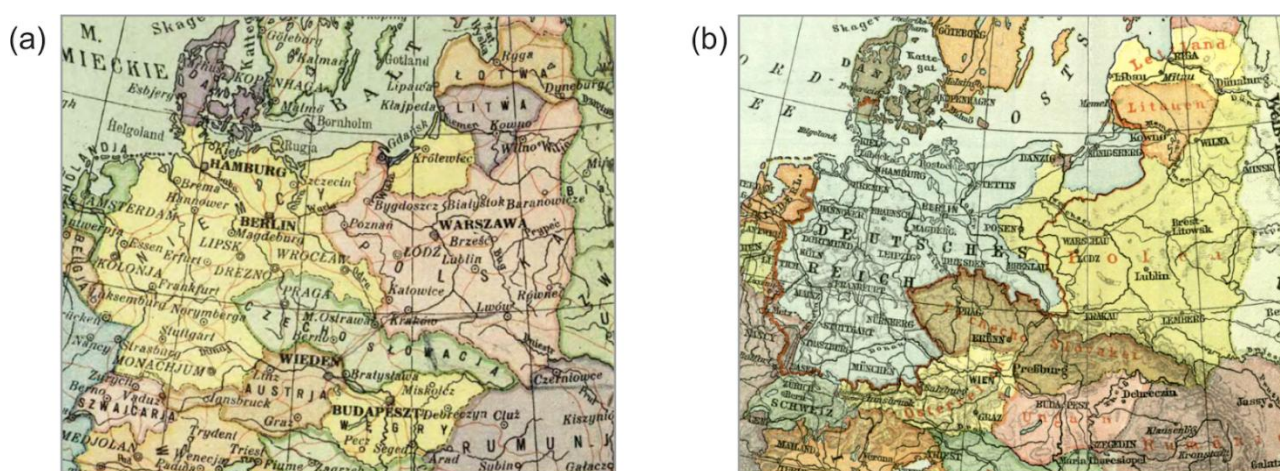


Figure 1. Differences in presentation of the same territory by different atlas maps (a) *Powszechny atlas geograficzny* [Common geographical atlas], 1928, Książnica-Atlas and (b) *Diercke Schulatlas* [Diercke's School Atlas], 1925, George Westermann.

The analysis concerns political maps published in the selected geographical atlases. The maps have been analysed according to the following aspects: the representation of contemporary political boundaries, the depiction of previous political boundaries, with particular emphasis on preceding boundary, the color of disputed territories, the labelling of disputed areas, the linguistic version of toponymy, and the placement of state names.

The study covered a total of 626 atlases, including 370 German atlases, of which 56% contained editorial practices that can be classified as cartographic misdesign. In German atlases from the interwar and post-war periods, the analysed territories were often portrayed as temporarily lost, aligning with revisionist policies in Germany (G. H. Herb, 1997). In disputed areas, some atlases included the label “Unter polnischer Verwaltung” (“under Polish administration”), often

accompanied by the depiction of both former and contemporary boundaries marked with dashed lines, in contrast to other political borders. Graphic design elements, such as colour schemes and the type of contour, also played a role in reflecting political narratives.

A different model of representation was observed in Poland and, more broadly, in the Eastern Bloc (Warsaw Pact countries), including the German Democratic Republic. Atlases published in these countries consistently depicted the annexed territories as an integral part of Poland, accepting the current course of borders and reinforcing their perceived stability. Particularly noteworthy is that atlases published in the GDR did not challenge the course of the Oder–Neisse border in any way. Among the 66 atlases from the remaining analysed countries (France, the United States, and Great Britain), approximately 23% contained persuasiveness elements, but these were applied in a non-systematic manner and to a lesser extent.

This case study plays as a field for investigating a general phenomenon occurring in all disputed territories. As a result of this on-going study, we seek to list and classify the cartographic design solutions applied on political maps published in geographical atlases to reflect on current political goals of analysed countries. Finally, we aim at contributing to the debate on persuasive cartography by including atlas maps.

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