How maps are used and abused in times of conflict

April 29 2024, by Doug Specht

A map of Europe produced in Germany at the outbreak of the first world war depicting each country as a satirical human figure. Credit: US Library of Congress / Wikimedia

Maps, although seemingly objective representations of the world, hold immense power. They shape our understanding of space, navigate our journeys and define political boundaries. But beneath the veneer of neutrality lies a potential for manipulation.

The history of warfare is littered with examples of maps used to dehumanize the enemy. Some of these are very explicit. Satirical maps were produced by all sides in the [first world war](#), depicting Europe as a series of caricatures to dehumanize enemy states and push a victorious war narrative.

Other examples are less obvious. In the Vietnam war, the US military produced maps that designated specific regions of Vietnam as "[free-fire zones](#)," meaning any person or activity within that zone could be considered hostile and targeted with military force. This tactic effectively erased the [civilian population](#) from the map, treating the entire area as an enemy stronghold.

The dehumanizing effect of maps stems from their inherent abstraction. Maps simplify reality by reducing a complex landscape teeming with life and history into lines, symbols and colors. While necessary for clarity, this simplification often has the consequence of stripping away the human element.

For example, a map published by the Associated Press showed the locations of known Russian military strikes and ground attacks after its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The map used symbols to simplify the conflict. Later we would learn that one of these cartoon-like icons represented the [Bucha massacre](#) in which 458 Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war were reportedly killed by Russian forces.

Fueling conflict

Maps can also be used to reinforce the "us v them" mentality that fuels conflict. They create a visual distinction between "our side" and "theirs" by starkly delineating enemy territory.

In the lead-up to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, extremist Hutu media outlets produced maps that categorized Rwandans by ethnicity: Hutu and Tutsi. These maps weren't just geographical representations, they were tools for identification and targeting.

The maps often used contrasting colors to sharply divide Hutu and Tutsi areas. This visual distinction created a clear separation between the in-group (Hutu) and the out-group (Tutsi), promoting the idea that Tutsis were not part of the Rwandan fabric.

Some maps went further, using symbols like machetes or snakes to represent Tutsis, portraying them as violent and dangerous. These maps were widely distributed through newspapers and radio broadcasts. They not only identified Tutsis but also served as visual propaganda that justified violence against them.

This visual separation fosters a sense of distance and difference, making it easier to view the enemy as an abstract threat rather than fellow human beings. Propaganda maps exploit this effect by exaggerating the size of enemy territory or depicting enemy populations as faceless masses.

Removing the human from the map

The Israel Defense Force's introduction of grid maps to Gaza in December 2023 has introduced another way of dehumanizing populations. Similar to the free-fire zones of the Vietnam war, Israel has divided Gaza into more than 600 blocks, ostensibly to aid in evacuating civilians.

Each block on the map, which can be accessed through a QR code on leaflets and social media posts, can receive evacuation warnings before the bombardment of a given square. However, aid workers have warned that the map risks turning life in Gaza into a "game of battleships" in which the flattening of any grid square is justified under the pretense that it is an empty space on a map.

Maps also have an impact on the way we, as observers, view conflict. This can extend beyond the battlefield. Maps often depict refugees as a homogeneous mass, neglecting the individual stories and desires that drove them from their homes.

In the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, the BBC came under fire for one map in which it used arrows to depict the movement of refugees. People on social media suggested that these symbols insinuated invasion rather than fleeing. Following criticism, the BBC updated the map to use proportional circles instead.

Lessons are being learned

The dehumanization inherent in war maps is not inevitable. Including civilian infrastructure and population density on military maps, for instance, can serve as a constant reminder of the human cost of conflict. Oral histories and community mapping projects can also offer alternative perspectives on the land, highlighting the human stories often erased by military cartography.

The Gaza conflict has shown that lessons are being learned about how better to use maps during conflict. Reuters, for example, has employed maps alongside other text and visual elements to help tell a fuller story and complete what maps alone might never be able to do.

Ultimately, maps are tools that can be used for good or ill. We must

strive to see beyond the lines and symbols, and remember the human beings whose lives are impacted by the conflicts depicted on maps.

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