

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Jason D. Hansen.** *Mapping the Germans: Statistical Science, Cartography, and the Visualization of the German Nation, 1848-1914.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 232 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-871439-2.

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The field of social studies of science (SSS), the study of science as an institution that makes what are ultimately subjective decisions within cultural and social contexts, is fascinating and continues to burrow its way into the work of historians. Jason Hansen's excellent SSS-like study of the evolution of the statistical science of cartography in the nineteenth century is a most welcome intervention. Despite the sophistication of David Thomas Murphy's *The Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918-1933* (1997), many historians continue to have a rather binary idea that there were legitimate, honest mapmakers, and then there were evil propagandists knowingly making up their own rules in order to underhandedly draw maps showing a huge, historic Germany dominating central Europe. Subtle works like Hansen's show us how an entire field, which includes statisticians and cartographers of all political stripes and personal motivations, was shaped by the demands and expectations of the social world in which it found itself. He explains how its practitioners moved through a nineteenth-century paradigm shift (à la Thomas Kuhn) and functioned, together, with a new set of shared norms and practices. There was no cabal of Pan-German mapmakers deciding to fool their audience. Mapmakers *tout court* were operating under a set of norms that counted people certain ways, and understood borders in certain ways.

Hansen tells the story of how mapping became a tool to help Germans envision Germany. Nations are constructs, they do not exist a priori, and thus we need social scientists to help us create them. I often ask my students in Windsor, if we took a boat out to the middle

of the Detroit River, would we see the international border? Yes, the US helicopters buzzing our boat would go some way toward constructing a border in our minds, but in most ways it would be the institutions, like the Department of Homeland Security, and specifically its practitioners, border agents, that would make real the nation and its boundaries sitting adjacent to our Canadian university. Nineteenth-century German cartographers had to make visible the emerging nation of Germany, and thus their discipline had to produce rigorous techniques to make a nation legible to its citizens. Hansen details in his first chapter the perhaps most momentous decision that was made with regard to what major variable would be used by mapmakers to draw borders: who spoke what language and where they spoke it. As Hansen helpfully reminds us, this was a rational decision-making process by practitioners within an evolving field, not mere cynical, political calculus. All scientists need norms in order to conduct their research and to be able to speak to one another. Overall, using language to demarcate borders made a lot of sense, though borderlands are notoriously difficult linguistic zones, from the seemingly mundane, such as what is Alsatian? to the exotic, for example, Lithuanian nationalists who spoke only Polish. These scientists had the task of untangling how to determine what someone's mother tongue actually was. To make matters even more complex and fraught, did mother tongue always indicate nationality? What about German-speaking Jews?

Like many stories in the history of scientific disciplines, mapping received a major boost from that greatest engine of innovation, war. Modern mapping came to

the fore during the Franco-Prussian War, initially for the actual movement of troops, but then also for the post-war negotiation. Following this conflict, the new nation of Germany saw its statisticians and cartographers continue to develop their norms and practices in the colonial world, both overseas, but also, intriguingly, in the colonial East, where German/Polish linguistic borders, and incoming German settlers, were framed in a colonial discourse of pioneers and stubborn natives.

Hansen's book ends with the career height and perhaps simultaneous total failure of map-based nation making and unmaking, the negotiations at Versailles in 1919. Each side continuously refined their maps in order to make what they believed were objective arguments about facts on the ground. Hansen argues that this could be (and traditionally and dismissively is) seen as cynically political. But, having walked us through the long and slowly evolving history of mapmaking as an aca-

demic institution, Hansen is able to show us that the vast majority of these players were simply behaving within the norms and practices of their cartographic and demographic standards. In fact, Hansen puts forward the bold and seemingly counterintuitive argument that Germany's failure to hold on to the mixed German-Polish eastern province of Posen at Versailles may well have happened because German cartographers were *too* honest in their calculations.

Weighing in at a very approachable 161 pages not counting the bibliography, endnotes, and index, Hansen's monograph would make for an excellent addition to an upper-level undergraduate or, especially, graduate seminar on social studies of science or spatial history. I can only hope that this book is a harbinger of more SSS-like studies of scientific institutions, a field from which historians have a lot to learn.

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