


Map Propaganda

Yaakov Astor

A photograph of a hand in a dark suit jacket and white shirt, using a white marker to draw the outline of a world map on a dark blue background. The map is a simple white line drawing of the continents.

Cartography is the study and practice of making maps. What could be more straightforward than making a map? If we can trust anything, it is surely the basic world map—especially modern maps that rely on science, math and advanced technology to draw them.

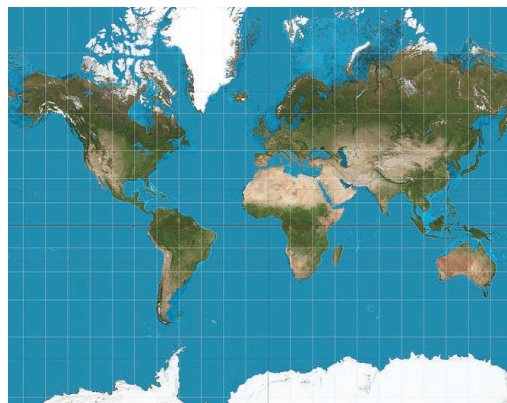
Sorry to burst your bubble, but it is simply not so. Just this January, a major international Western publisher wiped Israel off the map. Intentionally. And that is only one example. Read about that and other shocking revelations of how map making even today is often an exercise in propaganda.

Just in case you thought that there were things in life you could be certain about, such as, say, the basic map of the world, think again.

In truth, maps have long been used (and abused) for political propaganda. For instance, in 1921, when the infant USSR was threatened with invasion, famine and social unrest, a Soviet cartographer named Dmitriy Moor devised a map that promoted the Bolshevik cause. Moor's map included the image of a heroic "Red Army" guard defending Mother Russia against the invading "White Army," thus helping brainwash—err, influence—the minds of Russians, young and old, to the cause of the communist revolution.

Other cartographers in history totally distorted maps—not only out of ignorance but to promote an ego-centric view of their societies' place in the world. The Chinese were notoriously Sino-centric to an absurd degree. They had a tendency to show the world as a square plain consisting almost exclusively of China, with a few "barbarian" countries and small off-shore islands tacked on around the side.

Most of us can readily understand that such inaccuracies were perpetrated in the past. Today's maps, though, are created based on sound scientific principles and using modern technology. No one today can get away with making an inaccurate map, or at least foist upon an educated, modern public a map that is pure propaganda....



The Mercator map, still commonly seen in textbooks and hanging in classrooms.

Well, I hate to burst your bubble... but today's maps—even those hanging on the wall of the average school classroom and in the typical school textbook—can be biased, distorted and tools of propaganda no less than in the past.

Mercator

In 1569, the German cartographer Gerardus Mercator designed the map now known by his name. He created it as a navigational tool for European sailors. His map enlarges areas at the poles to create straight lines of constant bearing or geographic direction. This made it easier for captains to navigate their ships across the ocean.

However, at the same time, it distorts the relative size of nations and continents. Consider, for instance, Greenland and Africa. On the Mercator map, the two landmasses appear to be roughly the same size. In reality, Africa is 14 times larger.

On Mercator, Europe appears considerably larger than South America, when, at 6.9 million square miles, South America is almost double the size of Europe's 3.8 million. Alaska appears three times as large as Mexico, when Mexico is really larger. The map suggests that Scandinavian countries are larger than India, whereas in reality, India is three times the size of all Scandinavian countries put together.

Germany appears in the middle of the map, when it's in the northernmost quarter of the Earth....

Wait! Wait! Relative size is one thing, but are you telling me that Germany isn't where we think it is?!

The answer is that nothing is where we think it is.

Where is it, then?

Peters Projection

In 1974, a German filmmaker and journalist named Arno Peters created an alternative to the Mercator map, the "Peters Projection." (A map "projection" is the process of transforming and representing positions from the



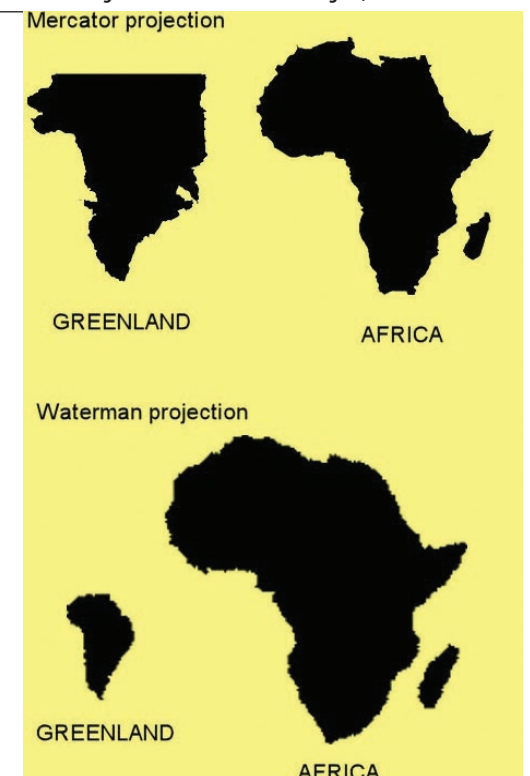
Dmitriy Moor created a pro-Bolshevik propaganda map. Moor's image of a heroic "Red" guard defeating the invading "Whites" helped define the Soviet Union in the Russian popular imagination. Right: The Chinese Globe, presented to the Chinese emperor in 1623, finally offered an accurate picture of China and its place in the world. (However, note the inscription at the bottom which blotted out much of Antarctica, about which the globe-makers were rather vague.)



Earth's three-dimensional curved surface to a two-dimensional [flat] surface.) The Peters Projection makes it much easier to see the relative size of places. On it, you can fit North America into Africa and still have space for India, Argentina, Tunisia and some left over. Greenland appears in its correct proportion of land mass to the continents. And so forth.

For these reasons, almost immediately upon its publication the Peters Projection won widespread recognition—so much so that people began calling for an all-out ban on the Mercator. Their justification was not just for the sake of map accuracy. They claimed that the Mercator was a form of propaganda. Placing Europe in the middle and exaggerating its size was an expression of colonialism and promoted a Western view of the world to the detriment of other views. Even the fact that the Mercator map put the Northern Hemisphere on *top* and the Southern Hemisphere on the *bottom* exaggerated the importance of Western civilization, Peters supporters claimed.

Wait! Wait! Where else could you put the Northern Hemisphere but on the top?



The Mercator map grossly distorts the sizes of Greenland and Africa. The Waterman projection is one of the ones that more accurately displays their relative sizes.