Panel report:

(In)visible Lines of Division. The Power of Maps and the Scramble for Territory in Post-Habsburg East Central Europe, 1918–1939

Lucerne, July 8, 2025, Seventh Swiss Historical Congress

Organizers: Julia Richers / Philippe Thomet
Participants: Péter Balogh / Philippe Thomet / Isabelle Davion
Commentary: Steven Seegel

Report by: Berenika Zeller and Michèle Häfliger (University of Bern)

The panel on the (in)visibilities of maps, their inherent power and hierarchies, and the complexities of map making was introduced by **JULIA RICHERS** (Bern). Maps have the "ability to reveal and conceal information," and must therefore be critically examined considering their diverse functions and forms. Ethnographic, political, and linguistic maps all emphasize certain elements while omitting others. As Richers noted, "maps always simplify, however, the choice of what is being made (in)visible is intended". During the Paris Peace Conference (1919 - 1920), new national narratives and imaginaries shaped the process of border demarcation, actively reconfiguring polyethnic landscapes within Central and Eastern Europe.

In his presentation, **PÉTER BALOGH** (Budapest) explored how maps were instrumentalized to support national claims in interwar Hungary. Examining several historical maps, Balogh showed how the Hungarian Geographical Society promoted the adoption of the term 'Carpathian Basin' to reinforce the idea of historical Hungary as a geographically and economically cohesive unit encircled by natural boundaries. Aligning with Hungarian state ideas, it included rivers, trade routes, and natural borders, justified with hydro-geographical arguments. The famous 'Carte Rouge', coined by Pál Teleki, the society's leader, indicated areas with a Hungarian ethnic majority in red, which extended far beyond the borders of historical Hungary and underrepresented other ethnic groups. This ethnographic map aimed to prove the same claim by different means than the Carpathian Basin: to defend and expand Hungary's territorial integrity. This mirrored Hungary's position at the Trianon negotiations, where it claimed that recognizing new nation-states, such as Slovakia, would fracture the young state of Hungary and damage its territorial integrity. In Hungary, the Carte Rouge and maps of the Carpathian Basin entered public life, appearing in textbooks, board games, and on monuments, fuelling revanchist and irredentist sentiments. Balogh argued that these cartographic narratives served to foster

national consciousness and divert attention from Hungary's severe socioeconomic problems during the interwar period.

PHILIPPE THOMET (Bern) presented on the border demarcation of Carpatho-Ukraine, a region that experienced multiple state and border changes. He argued that, after WWI, this formerly marginalized and little-known area shifted from a blind spot to a hot spot of territorial claims. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon, the region was detached from Hungary and incorporated into the First Czechoslovak Republic. Drawing on various delegations' maps, Thomet showed the competing visions for the region's future: as part of Hungary, as an independent Ruthenian state or as part of Czechoslovakia. Several political interests were at play, ranging from those of the Allies, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks, to the region's American diaspora. Another hindrance was the region's complex history. Up to this point, it had never been a single unit, having been composed of four counties under Hungarian rule. Its eventual incorporation into Czechoslovakia was not considered ideal, but rather a pragmatic compromise.

ISABELLE DAVION (Paris) explored the case of the Teschen District and its border demarcations during the Paris Peace Conference. Prior to the negotiations, Teschen had belonged to Austria. The region was ethnically and religiously diverse, consisting of Poles, Czechs, Germans and Silesians; Protestants, Catholics and Jews. This, paired with economic interests, resulted into a territorial dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Poland pointed to the district's Polish-speaking majority, whereas Czechoslovakia referred to its historical ties with the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. Davion showed how shifting demarcation lines were depicted on maps, illustrating how changing interests, loyalties, and even invisible borders shaped negotiations. Although a plebiscite had been planned, the Allies ultimately stopped it in favour of Czechoslovakia, which gained the economically important coal mines and strategic railway junction in the disputed area. Poland, for its part, received the larger Polish-speaking areas and most of the city of Teschen. Davion concluded that this territorial dispute exemplifies the friction between the interests of the central governments of Czechoslovakia and Poland and local realities and that it is often the invisible lines – historical, social, strategic – that truly shape borders.

In his comment, STEVEN SEEGEL (Austin) reflected on the panel by defining key terms, aiming to contextualize the history of cartography. He highlighted sovereignty as a central issue: in the 20th century, maps became tools of power, and sovereignty required cartographic legitimacy. Another key theme was the divide between winners and losers at the Paris Peace Conference. Figures like Woodrow Wilson's cartographer Isaiah Bowman, who shaped postwar maps despite lacking knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe, represented the dominant "winner's voice." Bowman's work, Seegel noted, contributed to a mapping of civilization and fostered prejudice, echoing Larry Wolff's critique[1] of how the West framed Eastern Europe. Hungary as a political identity was excluded

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[1] Wolff, Larry: Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment, Stanford 1994.

from decision making during the peace talks, becoming a "loser" on the map of the new political order in Europe. Finally, Seegel formulated questions that should be discussed further when considering post-Habsburg East Central Europe: Did the collapse of empires inevitably lead to new conflicts, maybe even culminating in WWII? Are territorial settlements just temporary ceasefires? The legacy of the Paris Peace Conference appears to have left more unresolved territorial questions than clarity and stability. Who defines the frameworks of peace negotiations, and who gets excluded? What about democratic processes such as plebiscites? Who asked the people in borderlands, such as Teschen, where they wanted to belong? Do we, as scientists, reproduce logics of power, control, and prejudice?

The panel demonstrated that the complex history of border demarcation in Central and Eastern Europe requires multiple perspectives, including those of minorities. As such, the case studies offered diverse viewpoints on visible and invisible divisions. The history of peace negotiations and border demarcation processes, the transition from multi-ethnic empires to nation-states dominated by state diplomacy and by ethnic majorities is still being written. Hence the need for further scientific exchange using multi-perspective approaches and involving researchers with diverse expertise to continue writing the complex history of interwar Central and Eastern Europe.

Berenika Zeller and Michèle Häfliger

Panel overview:

Péter Balogh: The Battle of the Visibles and Invisibles: Hungary's post-WWI Map Mania and some Counter-Projects thereto

Philippe Thomet: Mapping an (In)visible Borderland: Carpatho-Ukraine and its Shifting Borders, 1918–1922

Isabelle Davion: France and the Delimitation of the Polish-Czechoslovak Border (1918–1920)

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