



A HISTORY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN 100 MAPS

By Jeremy Black

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A History of the Second World War in 100 Maps brings together three distinct publishing trends: (1) the relatively recent popularity of books with titles in the format of “A History of X in Y Objects,” (2) the reliably prolific authorship of historian Jeremy Black, and (3) the continued public interest in information about the Second World War, nearly eighty years after the end of that conflict. This book follows Dr. Black’s *Maps of War: Mapping Conflict through the Centuries* (2016) and *Mapping Naval Warfare: A Visual History of Conflict at Sea* (2017) with all three being stated precursors to his more analytically focused *The Geographies of War* (2022), which references the preceding three for their maps. Who needs trilogies when you can have a tetralogy of related books! While an argument can be made for reviewing all four books together, the scope of such an endeavor would quickly exceed the expected length of a typical book review, so I will focus on the most recent of the three books of maps as a relevant exemplar.

The goal of *A History of the Second World War in 100 Maps*, hereafter referred to as *100 Maps*, is to pull together a range of contemporary maps as artifacts from a complex conflict in which “mapping was required in a more comprehensive and multipurpose fashion than hitherto” (6) on both the battlefronts and home fronts. This is not a book of newly produced maps that accompany a historical story, but rather a book on the history of cartography that highlights the intertwining of cartography and the events that occurred in the historical moment.

100 Maps is divided into eight sections, consisting of an “Introduction” followed by seven numbered chapters. The “Introduction” effectively lays out Black’s *raison d’être* for undertaking this work: “War inherently takes place in a spatial context and it is an activity that can only be conducted in that fashion. As a result, mapping is central to conflict, and at every level: from the most detailed (the tactical) to the most general (the strategic)” (7). He then uses this brief, seven-page preamble to run through a variety of cartographic concepts and issues. If any single section can be said to leave the reader wanting more, this is it. For example, Black claims “For most combat, we have no maps. Instead, mental mapping is the key . . . but any emphasis on mental mapping leads to the conclusion that the standard approach to war and cartography is teleological,” (7) but at no point does he explain what “mental mapping” is. A professional geographer, cartographer, or historian can be expected to have had the opportunity to previously encounter and develop an understanding of this concept, but a World War II history buff coming across this book at a library, a local bookstore, or online most likely has not, and will have to make what will be, at best, vague assumptions as to its meaning. Black may discuss mental mapping more fully in his *Geographies of War*, mentioned above—a book that I have not, to date, had an opportunity to read beyond its Preface—but regardless, covering it elsewhere would not be helpful to the casual reader of *100 Maps*. He does better at explaining some of the technological innovations of the time, such as infrared aerial photography, as



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well as the nature of, and attempts to rectify, the persistent issue of map shortages felt by all the combatant states. Many other technical aspects of cartography are similarly addressed throughout the book, often in sidebar boxes.

The next six sections, Chapters 1 through 6, organize the bulk of the map artifacts into six thematic groupings: “Geopolitics,” “Strategic,” “Operational,” “Tactical,” “Reportage,” and “Propaganda,” followed by a seventh, concluding, “Retrospective” chapter. Each of the thematic chapters begins with a brief overview that includes discussion of the general theme as well as any included sub-themes. Some sub-theme examples include “Ethnic and racial themes,” “Hitler geopolitics” (which includes a sidebar box on Karl Haushofer and his concept of *Geopolitik*), and “Allied geopolitics,” all from the “Geopolitics” chapter. The maps included in *100 Maps* represent a wide range of cartographic styles, scales, levels of detail, and purposes, resulting in a book to delight any cartophile interested in the variety of possibilities available with cartographic communication—whether the intended audience was a soldier, a general, or a person at the home front. Some of the maps are expected ones commonly seen elsewhere; the perspective maps of Richard Edes Harrison and maps showing the arrangement of forces on a battlefield for example. Others are rarer, including ones made by prisoners of war while in captivity—with POWs at one camp even using a makeshift printing press process that Black describes in detail—and the hand-drawn map made by the Mitsuo Fuchida, the ranking Japanese commander present at the attack on Pearl Harbor, to communicate to his superiors his estimates of the damage inflicted on the American forces during the attack. The book has a very striking visual quality with excellent, generous-sized reproductions of the maps and images, as is to be expected from the University of Chicago Press. Black’s accompanying discussions are succinct, yet both cartographically and historically informative, with generally at least half a page in this oversized book devoted to each discussion.

As much as I enjoy the presentation of *100 Maps*, there is an oversight that must be addressed. The term “Second World War” refers to a multiplicity of geographically dispersed conflicts that did not all start at the same time—with conflict in Asia beginning two years prior to the outbreak of war in Europe—but that, even as they progressed, came to be seen as essentially a single global conflict. To me, the use of that term in the title thus implies that the book will also be global in the scope of

its coverage; however, throughout *100 Maps* there is a very strong focus on the European theater and associated areas of operations such as North Africa. For example, the “Geopolitics” chapter contains 10 maps, with their accompanying discussions, from the European sphere of the conflict but only one from the Asian-Pacific, and that is an American-made map (the Fuchida map mentioned above is in a different chapter). No map or discussion of Japan’s geopolitical aims, such as the proposed Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, is provided in this chapter, or anywhere else in the book, which in my opinion constitutes a serious omission. Chapter 2, “Strategic,” likewise covers 10 maps from the European sphere and only one from the Asian-Pacific, and this later one is an American-made map of damage to Nagasaki made by the atomic bomb, accompanied with pre- and post-bombing aerial reconnaissance images. All told, only 24 of the 100 maps (taking the book’s title at its word) cover the Asian-Pacific sphere of the conflict and are presented and discussed on only 41 of the 237 substantive pages. Even more representative of this disparity is that only three of the maps displayed in the book were of Japanese origin, the hand-drawn map of the results of the attack on Pearl Harbor mentioned above being one of them, and none are from any other Asian or Pacific polity. Maybe the disparity reflects the relative availability of maps that represent the particular themes Black emphasizes, or it could be due to a paucity of paper-based cartographic artifacts that have survived use in the largely tropical Asia-Pacific area; Black does not address any aspect of the uneven coverage in the text, so the reader is simply left with the impression that the Asian-Pacific theater of the Second World War was either not as important or not as well mapped compared to the European and associated theaters, although the latter implication would run counter to his statement in the “Introduction” about mapping being central to the conflict.

100 Maps may not be without flaws, but still has much to recommend it, particularly for anyone interested in the history of cartography. The Second World War marked an important moment in the development of cartographic tools and in the use of maps to communicate complex geographical and spatial information on a regular basis—arguably on a scale and with a scope never before attempted. The overall design of *100 Maps*, along with its accessibility to a general audience, makes it an important contribution that can also help raise awareness of the role maps have played in such historical events.