

ARTICLE

Mapping the Nation, Building the Empire: The Development of Popular Maps and Atlases in Post-Unification Italy (Ca. 1860–1915)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of Italian popular and educational cartography following the national unification of 1861. While Italy had a long-standing cartographic tradition dating back to the Renaissance, this tradition had rapidly declined in the late modern age due to political fragmentation. The late 19th century saw a revival of map production, particularly through figures like Guido Cora and Giovanni De Agostini, who aimed to establish a national cartographic industry and make Italy's map production independent from foreign, especially German, publishing houses. Beyond the dissemination of geographical knowledge for scientific and educational purposes, the revival of cartography proved crucial in fostering the consolidation of the nation-state and constructing an imperial imagination that supported the establishment of a colonial domain.

1 | Introduction: The Image of Italy as a Country

In 2013, the Lithuanian satirical website Bored Panda published the results of a survey that tested U.S. participants' geographical knowledge by asking them to label a blank map of Europe. Participants were required to write down the names of countries on a map that displayed only state borders. The maps submitted, as reported in the article, revealed numerous hilarious inaccuracies, with many participants struggling to correctly position most European countries, including the UK. Interestingly, none of them made a mistake when labeling Italy on the Italian peninsula (Dovas 2013). While the unique morphology of Italy contributes to its recognizability—even when compared to country like the UK, which also has a distinct geographical shape and may resonate more with the cultural imaginary of U.S. citizens—the quoted survey emphasizes a different point to consider. This involves engaging with the historical process that resulted in associating a specific territory—a portion of the Earth's surface—with a toponym that conveys a national identity and reflects a form of state power.

Since the late 1980s, scholars in the field of history, political theory, geography and historical cartography have debated on the role of maps and their intersection with political processes since the early modern period. The development of modern cartography during the European Renaissance marked a radical shift in thinking that extended well beyond merely scientific aspects. This was closely linked to the establishment of a geographical imagination that underpinned European science, as well as the will for domination and the perceived political centrality that pervaded the following centuries, driving colonialism and imperialism. Maps served not only as instrument for long-distance navigation, paving the way for the so-called Age of Discovery, but the modern cartographic representation of the Earth also positioned Europe at the center of the world, fostering a Eurocentric perspective that viewed the rest of the world as an object of conquest (Gregory 1994; Cosgrove 2001).

Another aspect related to the development of modern cartography is its connection to internal state politics. Beyond fostering European expansionism, which culminated in the late

19th century, the advance of Western cartography also played a crucial role in the rise of a new political subject that emerged in the late medieval period and came to dominate European modernity: the territorial state. Cartography contributed to the consolidation of the modern state through representations in both large-scale topographical maps, which served military and administrative purposes, and small-scale educational and propaganda maps. Indeed, beyond enabling a series of governmental processes, maps contributed to the naturalization of the state in relation to its geographical features. This also facilitated the recognition of the relationship between a single population and the spatial extent of state territory, thereby contributing to the establishment of the nation-state (Anderson 1991; Wood 1992; Winichakul 1994; Withers 2001; P. Steinberg 2005).

Every country, beginning with the earliest political entities that solidified as territorial states, has been part of this process. It is no coincidence that France, likely the first European state to establish a centralized administrative apparatus during the reign of Louis the Great—a prerequisite for modern sovereignty—also created the first modern and standardized topographical map for the entire country during the same period (Petto 2007). However, maps—as highlighted by Scott (1998) - were not merely intended to represent a simplified version of reality for practical purposes: “Rather, they were maps that, when allied with state power, would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade” (3). This led us to a further set of problems related to the map as a tool for transforming the reality in accordance with a political vision foundational to the imperative of modern European sovereignty: recognizing power over a specific portion of the earth's surface. As stated by the French historian Jacob (2006), “The map is what allows a mental schema to be concretized, objectified and reproduced, with correction, additions, and commentary. This schema can also be turned into a social, communicable, and diffusable object” (28). This process spanned a long period, from the late Medieval era until the definitive establishment of national, territorial European states in the 19th century. It involved a complex network of actors, institutions, and interaction between human and the non-human spheres (P. Steinberg 2005; P. E. Steinberg 2009; Strandsbjerg 2008). In his recent investigation of the cartographic construction of *Mitteleuropa*, American historian Seegel (2018) coined the term “Map Men” to describe an interconnected group of geographers from the U.S., Germany and East Central Europe that was active between the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. These individuals represented “an educated class sharing in the projects and goals of forging a place called home, crafting narratives of belonging in life and in death, by the dissemination of maps as graphic tools and anxiously performed markers of multigenerational status and self-hood” (2). While being cosmopolitan and oriented toward an international arena, these scholars simultaneously “combined defenses of Western civilization with biological racism, anticommunism with anti-Semitism, discomfort in cities or academe with heightened provincialism, global applications of rights with sexism, liberal imperialism with frustrated revisionism” (*ibidem*). This account presents a compelling approach to investigating the role of cartography at the turn of the century. It stresses the importance of focusing on the stories of individuals, as well as their networks, technical knowledge, nationalist

stances and international ambitions, in their contribution to shaping geographical ideas through representation in an era in which “maps reduced citizens to pixels, geography to geopolitics, language to nationality, and race to space” (*idem*, 232).

Returning to Italy, its current geographical image and perception are the results of a complex, layered history that is inextricably linked to its cartographical representation and the lengthy process of defining its identity since the Renaissance, a process that intensified during and after the establishment of the modern territorial (and national) state in this geographical space.

This contribution aims to highlight significant issues related to the topic. Firstly, it examines the development of cartographic representation in Italy and its role in the political process of national unification between the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Secondly, drawing on Seegel's definition of “Map men”, it explores key cartographers who contributed to nation-building through map production following the political unification of the country. This occurred during the last decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, a period when the newly unified state sought to join other European powers in the imperialist endeavor of extending national sovereignty over overseas territories, particularly in Africa.

Therefore, it is challenging to separate the role of cartographers in representing the space of the nation-state and its connection to nationhood from their contributions to overseas exploration and the mapping of the otherness. In fact, the relationship between travel, and exploration, and the advancement of European sciences—and more broadly, European cultural identity and civilisation—has been evident since the Age of Discovery (Cosgrove 2001; Ramachandran 2015) and was further reaffirmed by the progress of Humboldtian science with the emergence of modern geography (Rupke 2005). As Timothy Mitchell (2002) states, the focus here is not on emphasizing the state's role in exploiting cartography or the individual perspectives of cartographers in representing the state. Rather, it is on the “kinds of social and political practice that produce simultaneously the powers of science and the powers of modern states” (312).

2 | Mapping Italy Before Italy. The Italian Cartographic Tradition and Its Representation of the Country

Although the scientific and technical elements on which the development of topography and cartography depend were cultivated in Italy from a very early stage—especially in mathematics, astronomy, drawing and engraving [...]—progress in these fields was likely slowed for a long time due to state fragmentation and political turbulence (Von Sydow 1857, 19. Translated by the author).

Italy is generally regarded as the birthplace of modern European cartography, which began to take shape in the early 15th century, beginning with Filippo Brunelleschi's studies on linear

perspective and Leon Battista Alberti's invention of triangulation and culminating but, at the same time, starting to decline, with the production of atlases and globus in Venice by Vincenzo Maria Coronelli in the late 17th century (Woodward 2007; see also Giovannini 2024). These advancements led to the development of techniques and methodologies for drawing scientific maps, which were subsequently implemented in other countries such as France, the Netherlands, the German states, and eventually spread worldwide.

The process of establishing a correspondence between the ideal conceptualization of Italy and its territorial extent began as early as the 16th century, coinciding with the rise and development of modern cartography. At this stage, the idea of Italy as a region—a peninsula surrounded by the sea and the Alps—was revived from ancient representations, such as Ptolemy's *Geographia* and the Roman *Tabula Peutingeriana*, evolving into the modern depiction of the land and creating an unparalleled image of the country closely tied to its geography. A significant example of this is the atlas realized by the cartographer Giovanni Antonio Magini (1555–1617) since the late 16th century and published posthumously by his son in 1620 with the title *Italia*. This work represents one of the first examples of a chorographical atlas dedicated to a single country, created by compiling several original chorographical maps, mostly drawn by Magini himself, to produce a new geographical map of Italy titled *Italia nuova* (Woodward 2007). Much later, with the emergence of nationalist intellectual trends in the late 18th century, these works were viewed as pioneering and innovative efforts to represent the nation through its geographical shape (Gambi et al. 1996; see also Pecout 2002; Proto 2014).

Despite this early engagement with cartography, Italian map production and innovation in the field declined significantly during the late modern age. Meanwhile, the centers of map production in Europe shifted to the north and north-west, spurred by ocean routes opened through the so-called geographical discoveries that supported the European colonization of overseas countries (Livingstone 1993; Driver 2001; Livingstone and Withers 2011). Italian fragmented and weak states, along with the decline of the Mediterranean as a center of European trades and travel routes, were excluded from both the development of maps and the western imperialist conquest of the rest of the world (Horden and Kinoshita 2014; see also Petrella and Proto 2024).

The age of revolution, beginning in the late 18th century, significantly influenced Italian map production, primarily due to the conquest of the peninsula during the Napoleonic wars and the introduction of the French-style of topographical map-making in Italy. These innovations led to a notable shift in topographical representation, which positively impacted the production of large-scale topographical maps in the Italian states reestablished after the Congress of Vienna (Cantile 2013). On the contrary, and despite some exceptions (such as the monumental Atlas published in the 1840s by Attilio Zuccagni-Orlandini), the production of popular maps and atlases remained limited and of lower quality compared to those from northern and western Europe. This aspect is particularly significant due to the role of such publications in public debates and education in the so-called age of printed capitalism (Anderson 1991). The same atlas

produced by Zuccagni-Orlandini was a monumental and expensive work consisting of 10 volumes and, although of high quality, its diffusion and impact were very limited—largely because of its prohibitive costs, compared to coeval atlases published by German printers.

Notwithstanding this situation, the historical period following the Congress of Vienna—which led to the political unification of the country, known in the national historiography as the age of *Risorgimento* (resurgence)—was marked by an increasing influence of scientific discourses and academic networks in shaping the idea of a national community, particularly among the political and social elites who were the key players of the unification process (Casalena 2007; Ferretti 2014). Geography and cartography also played an important role in a context where political communication supporting the unification of Italy faced censorship of the governmental and police apparatus of pre-unitarian states. Maps were particularly effective in spreading a national discourse by addressing seemingly neutral topics. For example, the statistical chart in Figure 1, published in 1830, presents various quantitative data, both physical and anthropic, to provide a comprehensive description of the Italian territory, including its natural features, resources and socio-economic aspects, and therefore its political significance.

While fragmented and less evolved than the more structured German publishers of that period, such as Justus Perthes in Gotha or Heinrich Kiepert in Weimar, map production was somehow significant, especially in the northern Italian cities of Milan and Turin, with the Milanese publishers Antonio and Francesco Vallardi leading the way (Sturani 1998; Boria 2007). It is hard to retrace the histories and geographies of these productions, which were often linked to international networks and independent, free-lance cartographers. Recently, Italian scholars have brought to the international audience one of these figures, the cartographer Evangelista Azzi (1793–1848) (Castaldi and Gallia 2023; Gallia and Castaldi 2023). Azzi worked in the Duchy of Parma, Piacenza, and Guastalla, which was governed at the time by Marie Louise of Habsburg-Lorraine, Napoleon's last wife, who promoted a reformist agenda focused on infrastructure development and education. In this context, Azzi contributed to the dissemination of geographical knowledge through cartography, engaging in dialogue with notable Italian geographers of the time, such as Adriano Balbi (1782–1848). Their works aimed to exploit geography and cartography as educational tools to inform society about scientific advancement as well as the political changes and challenges occurring in Europe: “Through the map, the concept—visualized graphically—manages to impose itself as a common/public concept and thus contribute to the construction of the users' mental maps” (217).

As stressed above and examined for the Italian context by the French historian Gilles Pecout (2002), the maps that circulated during the age of *Risorgimento* helped forge a sense of belonging and national identity tied to a specific territory, similar to what occurred in various contexts related to nation-building processes (see also Anderson 1991; Winichakul 1994). Therefore, despite its limitations in quality compared to other European contexts, the resurgence of popular cartography in the first half of the 19th century contributed to the rise of a nationalist sentiment, which corroborated the political and military struggle to establish a

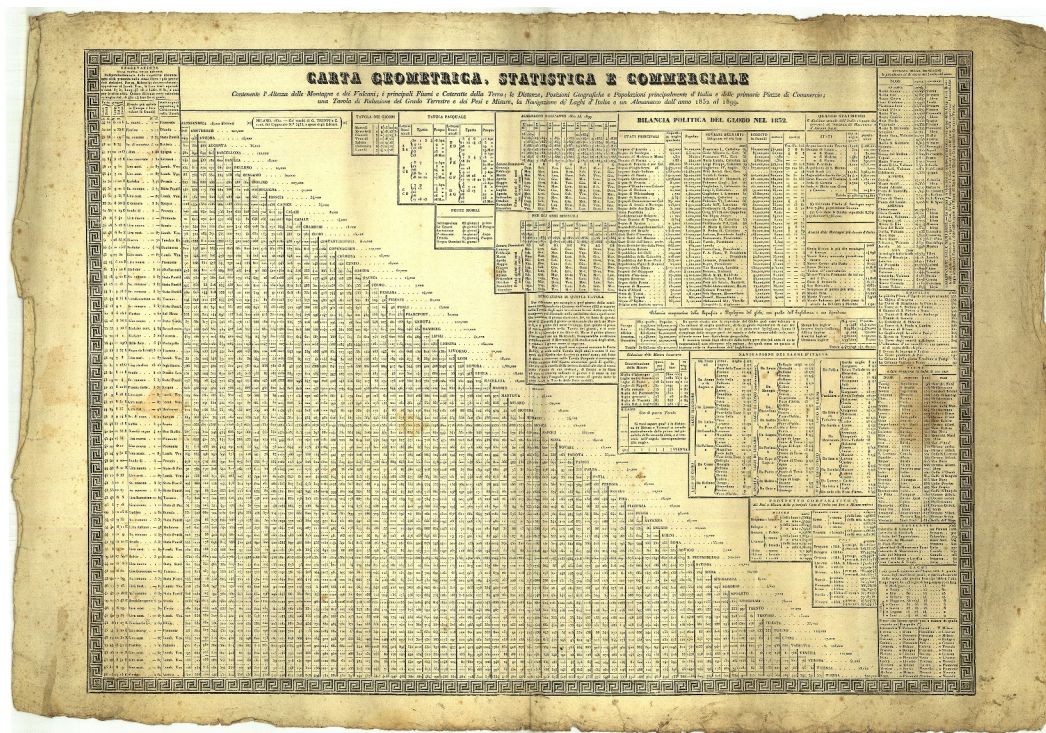


FIGURE 1 | Statistical map of Italy, 1832 (By courtesy of the Library of the Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna).

modern, national, and territorial state in Italy. Moreover, as mentioned above, the role of cartography was not circumscribed to support the consolidation of the state but it also served to meet technical needs and to foster the geographical imagination essential for exploration and colonialism, thereby facilitating the rise of European imperialism.

Not coincidentally, the maps and atlases created by cartographers like Evangelista Azzi helped establish Italy's position in the world alongside other great European nations and imperial powers. As we will see in the next paragraph, the political unification of 1861 laid the foundation for a revolution in cartography that supported the internal consolidation of the country and its ambition to become an imperial power.

3 | Italian Cartography After Unification: Searching for a National Geographical Publisher

Shortly after the proclamation of the unified Kingdom of Italy in 1861, the production of official cartography was reorganized to create a standardized topographical map that should cover the entire territory of the country. The reorganization culminated in 1872 with the establishment of the *Military Topographical* (later *Geographical*) *Institute* in Florence (Lodovisi and Torrè-sani 1996; Atkinson et al. 2025). While topographical survey and map production advanced rapidly in the following decades, resulting in the making of the Italian topographical map at three distinct scales (1:100,000, 1:50,000, 1:25,000) by the late 1890s, popular map production remained fragmented and heavily reliant on foreign sources. As it had occurred before the unification, many maps and atlases for the Italian market were produced abroad, particularly in German-speaking countries, by

publishers such as Perthes and Kiepert in Germany, or the renowned Artaria publisher in Vienna. This condition seemed to mirror the general decline of Italian culture compared to other modern European countries, and this irritated Italian geographers, which were acutely aware not only of the inadequacy of national map production but also of the fact that many geographical works circulating in Italy, as well as representing Italy, were Germans. Moreover, Italian scholars noted a distinct German perspective on portraying Italy, whereby the northern regions, including the Alpine chain and the Po plain, were depicted as extensions of (German) continental Europe, while Italy was somewhat relegated to the Apennine peninsula (Sturani 1998; Proto 2014).

In fact, at that time, German geography and map production were leading worldwide, with the publisher Justus Perthes in Gotha serving as the primary hub in Europe—and likely the world—for the publication of maps, atlases and geographical journals. One of the most notable publications from Perthes was the well renowned *Petermann's Mitteilungen*, which became the most important scientific and popular geographical journal in the second half of the 19th century (Lentz and Ormeling 2008; see also Smits 2004).

Therefore, despite the annoyance caused by their inferiority complex regarding German maps, Italian geographers and cartographers focused their effort on the German world to relaunch and reinvigorate Italian map production.

The first geographer to devote himself to the advancement of Italian cartography, particularly focusing on small-scale educational and popular maps, as well as atlases and globes, was Guido Cora (1851–1917), an almost self-trained scholar who secured a chair in geography at the university of Torino in 1881 after a

decade of apprenticeship, fieldtrips, and publishing initiatives.¹ Cora belonged to a wealthy, secular, and liberal upper-class family, which was representative of the social environment that had played a prominent role in the Italian unification process of the previous decades. Thanks to his parents' money, he was able to travel to Germany after finishing high school in 1870, when he was just 19. There he received training in Gotha at the Justus Perthes publisher by scholars such as August Petermann (1822–1878) and Ernst Behm (1830–1884), maybe the most prominent cartographers of the time. The experience at the Perthes publisher was twofold for Cora. On the one hand, he had the opportunity to refine his map-drawing skills and adopt the so-called Gotha style, which was regarded at the time as the highest quality method for creating maps, thereby introducing this technique to Italy. On the other hand, upon returning to his hometown, he could leverage the international network established through the Perthes publisher, gaining access to valuable geographical information and new cartographic material to enhance his own work (Sereno 2017).

All this merged into his own geographical journal, named *Cosmos*, after the masterpiece of Alexander von Humboldt, and fully developed drawing on the structure and content of *Petermann's Mitteilungen*. The first issue was published in 1873, shortly after his second stay in Gotha, and the publication continued in the following years, despite frequent delays and interruptions. Cora envisioned the foundation of this journal as the first step toward establishing an Italian national geographical publisher, akin to Perthes in Germany, that would promote geographical culture by informing the society about advancements in geographical knowledge, fieldtrips, and explorations, while also producing maps and atlases for commercial use and education. Here another significant topic in Cora's cultural and scientific initiatives emerges that reflects the political context of the time. Notably, both *Cosmos* and *Petermann's Mitteilungen* featured a substantial portion of their articles and maps dedicated to overseas fieldtrips and colonial conquests. In particular, *Cosmos*, along with information about scientific progresses in geography and articles on homeland geography, dedicated a dominant percentage of its articles and maps to Africa's explorations and colonization. In fact, the newly unified Germany and Italy were both eager to join other European imperial powers in their overseas expansionism, particularly toward Africa (Labanca 2002; see also Atkinson 2005). These publications provided useful information that facilitate Western exploration and conquest of overseas lands while also informing European society about the characteristics of these regions, thereby shaping an orientalist fascination and imperialist imagination. Of course, the improvement in the production and circulation of maps and geographical information began to impact society particularly among the cultural elites who read scientific journals and attended conferences and other cultural events. Additionally, it influenced the new generation that started attending school following the enhancements to the educational system that accompanied political unification.

Cora's work came into relationship with other coeval scholars and organizations that were trying to develop geographical knowledge and map production such as the Italian Geographical Society (IGS). Established in Florence in 1867, in the early 1870s IGS started to improve its map production. An interesting figure in

this context is the German cartographer Wilhelm Heinrich Frietzche (1858–1895). After gaining experience in Berlin and Saint Petersburg, he collaborated with Guido Cora on *Cosmos* in Turin from 1880 to 1883, following a recommendation from the staff at Perthes Publisher. After parting ways with Cora, Frietzche moved to Rome, where he began working with the Italian Geographical Society and other public institutions. He also established his own cartographical institute, the *Istituto cartografico Italiano* (Italian Cartographic Institute), with the aim of becoming a national leader in map production, as the name suggests (Cerreti 1996).

Despite the brief experience of his publishing house, Frietzche played a significant role in consolidating the network between Italy and Germany, particularly in the circulation of geographical information and the implementation of maps related to exploration and colonial mapping. The two maps in Figure 2, related to an Italian expedition in Eastern Africa between Ethiopia and Somalia, illustrate this aspect well. The expeditions gathered morphological and geological information that was essential for the knowledge of these regions to facilitate their conquest and assimilation. Not coincidentally, this part of Africa, still untouched by the scramble for the continent among imperial powers like Britain and France, became a clear target for emerging imperial powers such as Italy and Germany.

Notwithstanding the advancements in intellectual networks and progress in map representation, these efforts failed to establish a permanent geo-cartographical organization in Italy that could replicate those found abroad, such as Perthes in Germany. Returning to Cora and his experience, it was not only a financial failure—*Cosmos* could survive only thanks to Cora's family money—but also the result of a significant shift in the geographical paradigm that occurred in the second half of the 19th century. This shift moved away from the Humboldtian tradition, which was humanistic and historically oriented, toward a positivist geography informed by natural sciences, closely aligned with geology and biology (Proto 2023; Klink 2023). In parallel, the application of evolutionary theories to the social sphere led to a dramatic shift toward imperialist and ultra nationalist stances. This shift, on one hand, significantly influenced the geographical debate; and, on the other hand, turned geography increasingly into a form of knowledge that supported aggressive nationalism and imperialism (Chiantera Stutte 2018; Jureit 2018). Scholars such as Guido Cora and August Petermann in Germany remained anchored to the Humboldtian tradition of field research and mapping that, although being Eurocentric, was still infused with a cosmopolitan perspective and aimed at fostering global knowledge for the emancipation of humanity (Rupke 2005; see also Schröder 2011). This was no longer suited to the political dynamics of the late 19th century, as the revolutionary and progressive stances the Age of Revolutions gave way to the Age of Empire (see also Hobsbawm 1987).

The scholar who realized Cora's dream of establishing a national geographical publisher was his pupil, Giovanni De Agostini (1863–1941). Between 1883 and 1885, De Agostini attended Cora's courses at the University of Turin. With Cora's assistance, he moved to Gotha to train in map production at the Perthes Publisher under the mentorship of Bruno Hassenstein

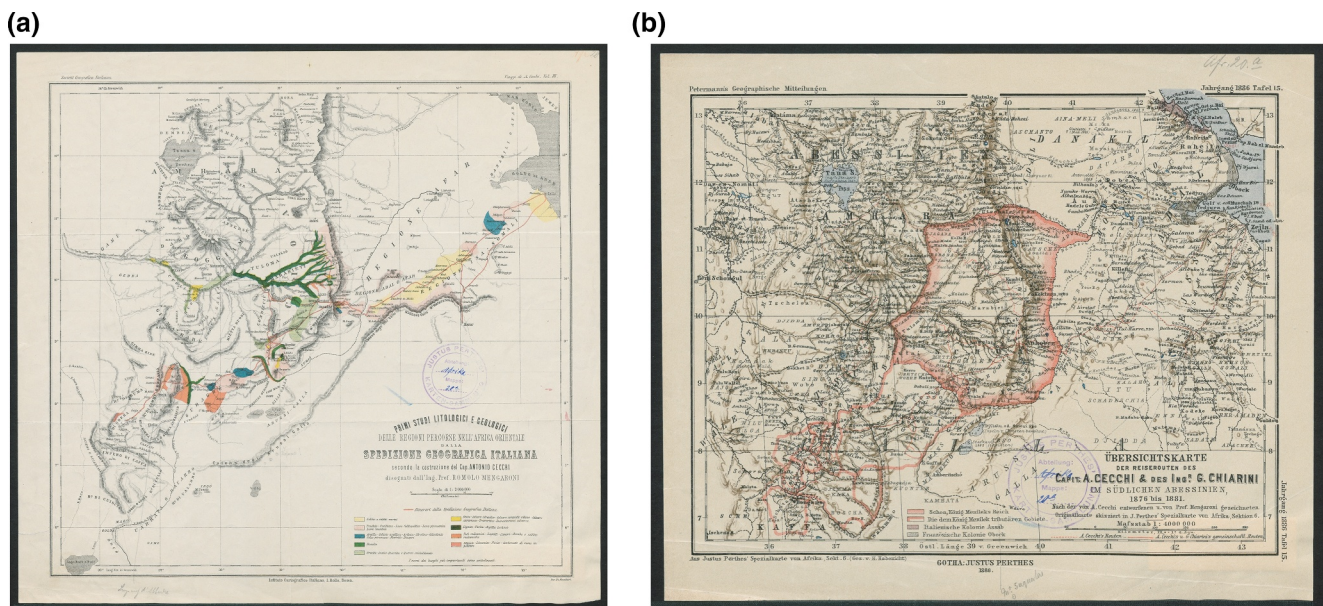


FIGURE 2 | (A) R. Mengaroni & W. H. Frietzsche, *Geological Map of Eastern Africa upon A. Cecchi expedition*, 1885, Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana (By courtesy of the Research Library of the University of Erfurt in Gotha). (B) Cecchi and Chiarini fieldtrip in Abissinia 1876–1881 upon the map made by R. Mengaroni, 1886, Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen (By courtesy of the Research Library of the University of Erfurt in Gotha).

(1839–1902). After returning to Italy and spending a few years conducting research at the University, he abandoned his academic career to found a geographical publisher in Rome, the *Istituto Geografico De Agostini*, also taking over the remnants of Frietzsche Institute, which had been established 2 decades earlier. De Agostini successfully created a prominent geographical publishing house comparable to Perthes, at least within the Italian market. He produced some of the most significant cartographic works in Italian, including the first travel map of Italy, created between 1907 and 1913 in collaboration with the Italian Touring Club (see Bosworth 1996), which achieved remarkable success. His masterpiece, the first Italian world atlas, *Grande Atlante Geografico*, was published in 1922 and became a model also for foreign publications, remaining in circulation through new editions until the 1970s.

Beyond disseminating geographical culture in the country through educational works such as the great atlas and spreading knowledge of the homeland through travel maps, De Agostini was also deeply involved in fostering nationalist sentiments and imperial thinking. Firstly, since the onset of the First World War, the publisher dedicated various works to disseminate in the society the reasons and dynamics of Italy's involvement in the great conflict. This initiative began with a series of atlases focused on the so-called unredeemed lands—specifically the northeast and eastern regions and cities, including Trento, South Tyrol, Trieste, Istria and Dalmatia—which were regarded as Italian and whose claim was essential for Italy's decision to join the Triple Entente against the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Proto 2016). De Agostini's pro-war propaganda culminated in 1916 with the publication of the *Atlante della nostra guerra*—Our War Atlas,—(Dardano and De Magistris 1916). This work celebrated Italian claims and chronicled the ongoing conflict, featuring a written component accompanied by 16 maps created

by Achille Dardano (1870–1938), one of the foremost Italian cartographers of this period (Proto 2014).

Secondly, the colonial question also became a topic in De Agostini's popularization of cartography. In 1928, the publisher realized the first Italian colonial atlas, *Atlante delle colonie italiane* (Baratta and Visintin 1928), which celebrated Italy's colonization of Africa as a form of civilization designed to help Italian people—as Halford Mackinder would have said—to think themselves as an imperial people.

4 | Aftermath: The Geographical Imagination of Italy

The historical period surrounding the First World War saw a significant expansion of Italian territory. This included the annexation of former Austrian territories such as Trento, Trieste and the Istrian peninsula, the conquest of several Aegean islands from the Ottoman Empire, Italian concessions in Tianjin and Shanghai, alongside ongoing colonisation in Africa. Furthermore, during the interwar period, expansionist ambitions—beginning with the eastern Adriatic coast and encompassing Dalmatia and Albania—fueled the infamous imperialist project of fascist Italy. As a result, the perception of Italy as a geographical entity changed dramatically, extending far beyond the confines of the Italian peninsula and the southern Alpine region, as it had been envisioned and depicted in maps during the unification process (Cattaruzza 2016; Proto and Buscemi 2025). Consequently, the concept of Italy as a region, as a naturalized geographical space, also evolved, revealing its inconsistency and ubiquity. After 1945, as a consequence of the Second World War, Italy lost all its overseas

territories and significant portions of its continental land, which were given to Yugoslavia. This ultimately defined Italy's present territorial extensions and borders.

In the post-war period, De Agostini publisher expanded its activities, becoming a leading producer of maps both in Italy and abroad. Its maps, atlases, and school handbooks significantly shaped geographical education. In recent decades, the company has gradually transformed into a multinational group engaged in various sectors, including education, finance, real estate investments, gambling, and pharmaceuticals, while progressively dismantling its publisher branch and cartography production.

Today, as exemplified in the introduction, Italy's image as a distinct land has become ingrained in the global imagination, shaped by both the iconic silhouette of the Italian boot and the physical-geographical feature of the peninsula, which lies at the center of the Mediterranean and is separated from continental Europe by the Alpine chain (see Figures 3 and 4). It is, therefore, a cartographical image that has been translated into very different

contexts, becoming an icon that often feels distant from its original meaning, as it can be seen on a piece of art, such as the one portrayed in Figure 4, as well as on a placemat in any Italian restaurants around the world. Of course, this occurred for many nation-states, highlighting the connection between the invention of European cartography and the development of modern territorial state. However, this process has been particularly pronounced in Italy, where, as stressed by Agnew (2002), the geocartographical shape of the country conveys an image of unity, despite the enduring economic, socio-cultural and political fragmentation and anxieties that have characterized contemporary Italian history (see also Shin and Agnew 2008).

As I tried to recall through these examples from the history of cartography, the Italian case stands out as typical yet prominent illustration of how the imagination surrounding the historical construction of the state, as the political subject of European modernity, has been interrelated with advancements in map production. This occurred since the age of Renaissance, when cartography, emerging as a science, began to play a crucial role



FIGURE 3 | G. Cora, *Italia*, 1888 (By courtesy of the Research Library of the University of Erfurt in Gotha).



FIGURE 4 | P. Fischli and D. Weiss, *Italy, more or less*, 55th Venice Biennale, 2013 (Author's photo).

in defining the image of the world and making it accessible to knowledge (Farinelli 2018). Through a scientific, seemingly neutral, and objective perspective, cartography could support the political project of the territorial state by framing it as a natural outcome of a civilisation process. In fact, stressing the significance of its natural-geographical characteristics, allowed cartography to demonstrate that the state could embody a universal condition of humanity in its political organisation. Notably, this aligned with the European project of overseas expansionism and imperialist colonisation.

To conclude, maps as the one produced by Guido Cora, that in the last decades of the 19th century started to appear on classroom walls and school books, on travel guides, magazines and newspapers, contributed to build this imaginary that nourished the process of nationalisation of the masses (Mosse 1975). These maps served not only to define and understand the boundaries of the territorial state—that is to create an internal definition of the state—but also to perceive its external environments. As a result, cartography fostered an imagination linked to the state's

position in the world, in relation to other distinct state entities, while also paving the way to envision potential spaces for conquest and colonial expansionism.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ In addition to the existing secondary literature sources in Italian, information about Guido Cora's life and scientific activities is derived from archival research conducted by the author at the Gotha Perthes Collection in Germany (Signature: SPA ARCH PGM 132 Prof. Guido Cora).

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