

---

# Historical statistical atlases

Thomas Schulz

Swiss Federal Statistical Office FSO / International Cartographic Association ICA, [thomas.schulz@bfs.admin.ch](mailto:thomas.schulz@bfs.admin.ch)

---

**Keywords:** Thematic maps, Statistical maps, Atlas, Atlas Cartography, Thematic Cartography, Thematic Mapping, Historical Mapping, Historical Statistics, Atlas Classification, Typology

## Abstract:

Statistical atlases as a now established atlas category are «travel guides through societies» and have been portraying socio-economic contexts and facts of a country, region or city for over 160 years now. With their help, large amounts of regional statistical data sets can be paraphrased into generally simple, compact and attractive images, i.e. thematic maps. By using and combining colourful charts, maps, images, tables and text, they can turn often «dry» statistics into stunning stories about the state and the development of a country and its society. And this not only in the current context: over time, such atlases become valuable historical documents that can take us back to social and economic changes in the past, from which we can learn.

While in the past statistical atlases mostly presented material of a current time period or short time span with mostly data of results of ongoing surveys, for some years now more and more atlas producers have also been integrating historical statistical material into their works and have thus given rise to a new type of atlas: «historical statistical atlases». From Estonia to Israel, from Switzerland to the USA, from Poland to Australia – to name just a few examples – statistical atlases have appeared with increasing frequency in recent years, supplementing current results of public statistics with historical results and visualising entire time series of data in maps as far back as possible and methodologically justifiable.

These works were only made possible by the digitisation of large historical statistical data inventories in recent decades, which were often before only available as book publications or in the form of PDFs in the archives or in-house. Thanks to the increasing interest of researchers and citizens, financed by government programmes and strategies such as Open Government Data, an almost invisible evolution has taken place in statistics in recent years. There are now far more historical data from the 19th and 20th centuries available in databases that are open, digital and freely deployable for everyone than was the case 5 or 10 years ago. And, every day new data sets are added that are also suitable for visualisation in atlases.

All historical statistical atlases have the same goal: to make this rich material a) available and b) by linking comparable facts on the same topics (e.g. population, economy, politics and environment), to make the interested reader aware of long-term developments, interrelationships and ruptures in state and society as they happen(ed) – no matter where in the world they appear. In this way, they lift, as it were, the greatest and inherent treasure of public statistics, which distinguishes them so strongly from short-term private statistics: the possibility of comparing figures over the long term following the same methods and a continuous collection of data. Since the approach and production of such atlases are partly different in different areas of the world, different subcategories of historical statistical atlases have also emerged in recent years. Thus, there are atlases that only facsimile earlier atlases, those that reflect only one historical state, others that compare 2 or more important periods, still others that present continuous time series at the same intervals, and those that do so in a modern layout or historical design as retro atlases.

The presentation gives an overview of the origin, evolution and existence of this atlas type – based on theoretical considerations, but also on many attractive and practical examples of current historical statistical atlases. It also attempts to classify this in the context of other atlas types and to schematically encompass and structure the subcategories described above. While doing so, the author also concentrates on the excellent cartographic and graphic design of some of the atlases and the making available of the historical material, which is not limited to the visualisations in these atlases, but can often also be exploited by others at any time on the internet for further purposes in the future.



Figure 1. Examples of current historical statistical atlases: Poland, Austria, Switzerland, France (United States), Estonia.