

Map-Based Simulations: Group Activity

This is a **complete, classroom-ready group activity** for **Map-Based Simulations**—perfect for ANY unit involving geography, conquests, empire-building, migration, trade, alliances, colonization, or shifting borders. This simulation is flexible, structured, engaging, and works across ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern history

Students use maps to model conquests, migrations, border changes, trade routes, or alliances in real time.

Works For:

Ancient empires • Indigenous migrations • Mongol conquests • Silk Road networks • Age of Exploration • Scramble for Africa • World Wars • Cold War • Decolonization • Modern geopolitics.

I. Purpose of the Activity

This simulation develops:

- Geographic literacy
- Systems thinking (ecology + economy + politics)
- Understanding of spatial cause-and-effect
- Collaboration + argumentation
- Historical reasoning
- Creativity + scenario building
- Ability to connect events to place, environment, and resources

Maps become **dynamic models**, not static visuals.

II. Group Setup

Group Size: 4–6**

Roles:

1. **Cartographer** – draws changes on the map, proposes expansions, annotates evidence
2. **Strategist / General** – responsible for conquests, defense, movement, risks

3. **Economist / Trade Officer** – tracks resources, trade networks, supply routes
4. **Diplomat** – negotiates alliances, treaties, borders
5. **Migration Officer / Demographer** – manages population movement, push/pull factors
6. **Recorder / Historian** – logs decisions + consequences

(Adjust based on group size. Large classes can add "Propaganda Minister," "Explorer," "Colonial Governor," etc.)

III. Materials Needed

- Large blank world map OR regional map
- Transparent overlays (tracing paper or clear sheets)
- Colored markers/pencils
- Map icons: arrows, ships, borders, flags, trade goods, population tokens
- Scenario packet + clue cards
- Event cards (optional)
- Rubrics & reflection sheets

Digital option:

Google MyMaps • National Geographic MapMaker • ArcGIS for Schools • Canva map templates.

IV. Core Simulation Structure (60–90 minutes)

Step 1 — Scenario Assignment (5 minutes)

Choose one scenario OR have groups draw from a deck:

- **Track a conquest** (Mongols, Alexander, Romans, Ottomans)
- **Plan a migration** (Bantu migrations, Indo-Europeans, Indigenous Pacific voyaging)
- **Simulate a trade network** (Silk Road, Trans-Saharan, Indian Ocean, Columbian Exchange)
- **Map alliances before war** (WWI, WWII, Cold War blocs)
- **Redraw borders** (decolonization, fall of empires, Treaty of Versailles)
- **Model colonization** (European expansion, Scramble for Africa, imperial Japan)

Students receive:

- Historical time period
 - Starting territories
 - Resources
 - Environmental constraints
 - Cultural/linguistic/tribal boundaries
 - Rivals or allies
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Step 2 — Map Survey + Initial Analysis (10 minutes)

Groups analyze:

- Rivers, mountains, deserts, oceans
- Trade routes, natural harbors
- Population centers
- Climate zones
- Natural resources
- Strategic choke points (straits, passes, steppe routes)

Questions:

- “Where are we vulnerable?”
- “What geographic advantages do we have?”
- “What resources do we need?”
- “What population or cultural groups exist here?”

Cartographer outlines starting position on overlay.

Step 3 — Strategic Planning Round (10–15 minutes)

Groups make a **3-point plan** based on the scenario.

Examples:

Conquest Simulation

- Expand to ___ for grain + horses.
- Secure the mountain pass to prevent counterattack.
- Avoid dense forests; redirect forces south.

Migration Simulation

- Move toward warmer climate with pastureland.
- Follow river valleys to avoid desert.
- Establish seasonal camps along the route.

Trade Network Simulation

- Establish hubs at key crossroads.
- Protect caravans with military escorts.
- Form alliances with oasis or port cities.

Colonization Simulation

- Identify valuable export zones.
- Claim ports before rivals.
- Implement political boundaries (arbitrary or aligned).

Strategist and Economist collaborate on decisions; Recorder writes justifications.

Step 4 — Map Movement / Expansion Round 1 (10 minutes)

Groups draw:

- Arrows indicating movement
- New borders
- Trade routes
- Colonies
- Allied regions
- Conflict zones
- Resource extraction areas

They prepare to justify each choice with:

- Geography
 - Climate
 - Culture
 - Economy
 - Political alliances
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Step 5 — Event Cards (Optional but Highly Engaging) (10 minutes)

Teacher draws or allows groups to draw event cards.

Examples:

Conquest Scenario Events:

- “Harsh winter kills 20% of your army.”
- “City revolts due to cultural differences.”
- “Supply line breaks.”

Trade Scenario Events:

- “Bandits attack the Silk Road route.”
- “New technology: larger sails.”
- “Monsoon winds shift unexpectedly.”

Migration Scenario Events:

- “River floods destroy a settlement.”
- “Contact with new tribe—peaceful or hostile?”
- “Drought pushes you further than planned.”

Colonization Scenario Events:

- “Rival empire claims overlapping territory.”
- “Local resistance intensifies.”
- “New resource discovered.”

Groups must revise their maps to respond.

Step 6 — Map Movement / Expansion Round 2 (10 minutes)

Groups adapt plans:

- Advance
- Retreat
- Redirect
- Fortify

- Negotiate
- Abandon positions

Diplomat leads alliance decisions; Cartographer updates revised borders/routes.

Step 7 — Report-Out / Territorial Justification (5–10 minutes per group)

Each group presents:

1. Starting geography
2. Final borders/routes/networks
3. Key decisions
4. Evidence from geography and resources
5. How events changed their choices
6. Final “map story” summarizing the simulation

Presentations can be quick gallery walk or formal team briefing.

V. Optional Variations

1. “Alternate History” Mapping

Students predict how world history changes based on their new borders.

2. “Cultural Layer” Mapping

Add layers:

- language groups
- religions
- trade goods
- migration waves
- political alliances

3. Warfare Simulation Layer

Use tokens or color-coded arrows to simulate battles.

4. Decolonization Redraw

Students redraw borders **ethically** using:

- ethnic groups
- linguistic zones
- environmental regions
- historic trade routes

Then compare to **actual** colonial borders.

5. Resource Competition Mode

Groups compete for limited resources placed on the map.

VI. Assessment Options

Rubric Items Include:

- Geographic accuracy
 - Evidence-based reasoning
 - Creativity + realism
 - Collaboration
 - Responding to events
 - Strategic thinking
 - Presentation clarity
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VII. Ready-to-Use Scenario Packs (I can create any of these instantly)

1. Mongol Conquests Simulation Pack

Map of Eurasia + horse routes + steppe geography

2. Silk Road Trade Simulation

Caravans, oases, bandits, empires

3. Indigenous Migrations Simulation

Bantu • Polynesian voyagers • First Nations territorial shifts

4. World War I Alliance Mapping

Secret treaties + mobilization routes

5. Scramble for Africa

Colonial claims + rivers + mineral resources

6. Cold War Map Simulation

NATO vs. Warsaw Pact + coups + crisis cards

7. Decolonization Redraw Activity

Create fair borders after independence