PROBLEMS OF PLACE NAMES

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Another major problem of map compilation that the global nature of the war accentuated was that of place names. In 1799, W. Eton, an Englishman, clearly defined a difficulty that geography has so far failed to solve :—

" Where the orthography of place names is established by long custom, we must, I suppose, continue to use it... Where this is not the case, we must spell names as the natives do, if they make use of the Latin characters; if we do not, we must either write their character, or make use of letters of our own alphabet that will produce, as near as possible, the same sounds; or without any regard to the sounds that answer to their letters. I will not decide which method ought to be followed, or which is the real language of a people whose orthography is fixed, the oral or written. I will only observe that it is very difficult to render the principal sounds of one language by letters of another, not to mention modifications; and this is particularly so to the English, whose vowels have very uncertain pronunciation. "

The ensuing years of endeavour have failed to solve the problem of how to write geographical names for international use. Mr. Aurousseau, Secretary of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use, commenting on the problem, says :—

" The main question still remains open as Eton left it in 1799. Time has secured, however, a small negative advantage. Belief in the possibility of international romanization has been shaken. Without an internationally accepted Roman alphabet, international romanization cannot be achieved, but the different values assigned to c, g, h, j, v, w, x, y and z; the variety and inadequacy of devices for indicating aspirations, palatization, nasalization and yodization; and the poverty of means for indicating stress, quantity and tone, in western European alphabets, have defeated all efforts to establish one. "

In the past relatively little progress towards a satisfactory solution of the place-name problem has been made. War on a global scale made some sort of a solution necessary even though it might be temporary. Unfortunately, decisions had to be made under pressure of time, with comparatively little opportunity for research, and under influence of military requirements.

A geographical proper name serves to distinguish the place or feature to which it belongs from all other things. To prevent confusion in the use of military maps and in communications, there should be consistency in geographical nomenclature. But no international set of rules and principles has ever been agreed on and adopted. The result is that each country and publishing agency has adopted its own policy. The problem from a military standpoint is to establish a policy for treatment of place names that will lead toward consistency, if not actually achieve it: a policy that will enable the map maker in Washington, London or New Delhi to take source material made under various editorial practices and arrive at a common result. The problem is twofold: that of establishing a suitable working policy, and putting the policy into effect.

Some of the questions which must be answered by a comprehensive place-name policy indicate the scope of the problem :—

1. Should conventionalized names such as " Leghorn " for *Livorno* be used because they are so familiar ?

2. Should there be a policy of conventionalized names for small-scale atlas maps and of local names for maps at a larger scale ?

3. Should all names adopted by the International Postal Union be accepted ?

4. Should names be written so that they can be pronounced easily or at least so that we think we can pronounce them easily ?

5. Should all diacritical marks be eliminated because of cartographic and telegraphic transmission problems ?

6. Should generic parts of place names always be translated, or should they be translated in some languages and not in others ? Some people will not hesitate to translate the Russian word *Reka* into " river " in a place name, but will hesitate to render an Icelandic name such as *Vatnajokull* into " Vatna Ice-Cap " since the generic term and its associated specific part is written as a single word.

7. To go a step further, should the specific as well as the generic part be translated, especially if they are descriptive ?

8. If an Englishman discovers and names an island which later becomes a French possession, should the French translation of the name be used if it occurs on official government maps of the area ?

9. If the political sovereignty of an area changes should place names be affected ?

10. Should the official government name be used in preference to a local name if a difference exists between the two ?

11. When a country (such as Belgium or Switzerland) using the Roman alphabet has two or more official languages, which should be used ?

12. When two or more countries use the same native language, but fall into different spheres of political control (e.g. Egypt, Algeria, and Spanish Morocco), should a common system of transcription be applied ?

13. How should names of international zones and condominiums be treated ?

14. If a feature is common to two or more countries with different languages, what name should be applied ?

15. When should a local name be used and when should a conventional English name be used in referring to bodies of water ?

Non-Roman script languages and non-alphabet languages raise further problems :—

1. Should an official transcription system when offered by a country be accepted ?

2. Should transcription systems be letter for letter and reversible, should they be phonetic, or should some compromise be made between these extremes ? Should they be broad or narrow systems ?

3. If a system of transcription has been in existence for many years, should it be discarded in favour of a new and better system ?

4. When no system exists, how does one develop a system acceptable to the various interests involved ?

5. If numerous dialects of a language exist, or if it is spoken and not written, or if there is a difference between the spoken and written language, how should one proceed ?

6. In nonalphabetic languages, should hyphens be used to separate characters and what parts should be separated and capitalized ?

Every one of these questions arose in connection with the preparation of place names on maps in the last war. For some, satisfactory solutions for the duration were reached. For others, no completely satisfactory solution can be found until research on the ground can be carried out. The scope of the problem, involving millions of names, made it impossible in most cases to work on the basis of individual name decisions. It was a problem of establishing rules and principles that could be applied to names for whole areas or countries and that would result in a treatment of place names at least satisfactory for the duration. Unfortunately, mistakes made cannot be easily erased because of the millions of maps involved and because of the great cost of transcribing millions of names from nonalphabet and non-Roman script languages.

From a military standpoint, the treatment of place names should accomplish at least five purposes :—

1. A place name should always be spelled in the same way, not only on large-scale maps but also on small-scale ones. This consistency of spelling is of first importance ;

2. Spelling insofar as possible should be that given on official government maps of the country involved. This is necessary because the maps provided for operations in an area may be partially compilations and partially fac-simile copies of original official topographics ;

3. A name that will be recognized locally is preferable to a name foreign to the area ;

4. If possible the name should be written so that the soldier will be apt to give at least an approximation of the local pronunciation ;

5. The rule or rules should be such that they are mechanically feasible in their fulfilment.

The United States Board on Geographical Names and the British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names each has established principles and laid down rules with respect to place names. They have been stated respectively in the *Sixth Report of the United States Geographic Board,* 1890 to 1932, and in the British report : *Alphabets of Foreign Languages.* Unfortunately, they apply only to English-speaking countries and have not necessarily been followed by other countries. In addition, the basic principles and rules are not sufficient to cover many existing problems. They provide an excellent foundation on which policies can be built.

It is not possible to examine each of these principles and rules here, but several of them should be mentioned. The local-name principle and Roman-alphabet rule are perhaps the more important. The seventh International Geographical Congress in Berlin, in 1899, decided that native names, established as accurately as possible, should prevail over all others. This principle has had its ups and downs. To-day it is supported by both Britain and the United States. From it developed the Roman-alphabet rule, that local geographical names in each country, dominion, colony, protectorate, or possession in which a Roman alphabet (including Latin alphabets with modified or extra letters) is habitually used, shall be spelled in accordance with local official usage. In addition, accents and diacriticals should be retained if employed in the language of the country involved.

In practice this rule greatly simplifies the treatment of names over large parts of the earth's surface. It means that when compiling a map one can copy geographical names, with only minor reservations, directly from official maps published by the country that governs the area involved. Difficulty is encountered when there have been changes in the orthography of a country, as in the case of Norway, and when the official local policy of a country is not clearly defined, so that its own maps do not agree. When these problems arise it is necessary to adopt some expedient. As an example, the Dutch about 1935 adopted a change in their system of Malayan transcription involving the substitution of the letter " o " for the letter " ā ". On Army Map Service large-scale maps in the area it was mechanically impossible to make the change because many of the maps were facsimile reproductions. In addition, there are comparatively few people technically qualified to identify these Malay names among the thirty or forty other native languages in the area. On smaller-scale regional maps, International Maps on the scale of 1 : 1 000 000 and even on the scale of 1 : 250 000, the necessary changes have been made.

A second principle is that names written in non-Roman script should be transliterated or transcribed into our alphabet with as little loss of identity, either of sound or appearance, as is consistent with the process. This sounds simple; the accomplishment is difficult indeed. The rule that resulted from this principle is that names in countries which use non-Roman alphabets or scripts, or which have no system of writing, should be rendered in the English form according to the R.G.S. II system. This system is an alphabet, not strictly speaking an English one because it represents vowels as in Italian, developed by the Royal Geographical Society. It is followed also by the U.S. Board on Geographical Names. This alphabet, for which comparative tables have been prepared for many non-Roman languages, does not completely solve the problem. Special tables have been prepared recently for Russian, Greek and Serb. In a nonalphabetic language such as Chinese, a completely satisfactory transcription system is difficult to devise. In southern Asia it is expedient to adopt the names used by the Survey of India, which has carried on ground surveys and published most of the large-scale maps in the area. These are a few of the exceptions to the general rule.

Space does not permit further discussion of the problem of place names. The revival of the Board on Geographical Names, with a large staff to do the necessary research in connection with existing problems, will help make satisfactory solutions available and will bring about consistency between map-producing agencies, at least in this country. There are other problems in connection with map editing that are as interesting and vital as the two I have discussed. Problems in connection with map design, the interpretation of foreign signs, symbols and conventions, the preparation of glossaries, the size and style of type, and problems in connection with geodesy, such as projections and military grids, are examples of these.

In conclusion one should remember that map making is not wholly a science; it is partly a subjective process involving qualities of integrity, judgment and critical acumen. Unfortunately, a well-drafted and printed map has an appearance of accuracy. It is not like a printed text, in which statements can be carefully qualified, and it should be used, therefore, critically as well as with understanding. Mr. John Wright, of the American Geographical Society, has stated the situation excellently :—

> " Like carpenters tools, maps should not be misused. More should not be expected of them than they can perform. Sometimes when a critic damns a compiled map because he has found errors on it in a region that he has visited, his condemnation may reveal ignorance of the nature of cartography on his part rather than carelessness on the part of the map maker. Not all maps can be based on new surveys. Errors that originated in the sources of a compiled map frequently could have been avoided only by not making the map. "