

Toponymy and Geopolitics: The Political Use — and Misuse — of Geographical Names

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TOPONYMIC WARS

‘War is the continuation of political intercourse by other means’ wrote Carl von Clausewitz in 1828.¹ Is a war of names a precursor to actual physical warfare? The possibility, and even probability, was rather acute several years ago. In the 1980s the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which had held together under the leadership of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, fell apart and in some of these parts turned into a bloody battlefield. But its northernmost and southernmost constituents not only obtained (or rather declared) their independence, but remained unscathed — Slovenia completely, and Macedonia nearly so. There arose no political problems when the northern country named itself Republic of Slovenia. However, on Macedonia proclaiming its independence under the name Republic of Macedonia, tempers in nearby Greece began to boil. ‘The toponym Macedonia belongs to us and is, so to speak, covered by Greek copyright. It is the name of our northern province, native land of Philip and Alexander the Great. Claims of the South Yugoslavians (“south south Slavians”) to the name Macedonia might in time lead to political demands towards Greece, and finally to military aggression’. When Macedonia curtly refused to desist, Greece turned to the United Nations demanding that the freshly-independent country adopt another name. The international tribunal consented to this demand and coined the acronym FYROM — Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. One can observe that a geographical name nearly led to actual warfare. The majority of the international community disregarded this somewhat comical name. The present writer has seen a soccer team whose sports shirts were emblazoned with the double inscription MACEDONIA — FYROM in order to please everybody.

An actual and physical war which, although not caused by a geographical name, involved one was the Gulf War of 1991. Which gulf? The oil-polluted body of sea water projecting inland from the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman carries two different names. The ancient Persians on its eastern side used the name of their own country as the specific component, naming it Persian Gulf. This toponym was later employed by Greek geographers and cartographers in their maps — and in particular by the father of western cartography and astronomy — Claudios Ptolemaios, commonly known as Ptolemy. But at a later stage the Arab countries on

the western and southern side decided otherwise: for them it was the Arabian Gulf. This duality was carried over and in time came to denote a political rivalry, which culminated in the war between Iraq, former Mesopotamia, and Iran, heir to the former empire of Persia. On 20 September 1996 a note on the internet reflected a query by a Canadian surfer, who said as follows: ‘One producer of maps (John Bartholomew & Son) labeled the water body “Persian Gulf” on a 1977 map of Iran, and then “Arabian Gulf”, also in 1977, in a map which focused on the Gulf States. I would gather that this is an indication of the “politics of maps”, but I would be interested to know if this was done to avoid upsetting users of the Iran map and users of the map showing Arab Gulf States’.

This symbolizes a further aspect of our topic, namely the spilling over of the problem from the purely political to the economic sphere. With a view to pleasing two geographically and politically opposing markets — cartographic, educational and general — a producer of maps and atlases prints his otherwise identical or nearly identical products in two versions, an East of Gulf one and a West of Gulf one, differing in just one word, i.e. Persian/Arabian, thus ensuring maximum profits. All three parties are now happy — the map producer, counting his pounds or dollars, presumably happiest among them.

An excellent platform for observing political friction arising out of the use of contested geographical names are the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. These take place every five years, while several times in the intervening periods the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names holds its sessions. Whereas the tone at these meetings is strictly formal and (often coldly) polite, the undercurrents sometimes reach near boiling points.

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Some geographical regions are more prone to toponymic-political stress and strain than others. One of these is the Greco-Turkish area of the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. The bilingual and bicultural island of Cyprus (Kypros/Kibris) can serve as an example. One of the most extreme forms of toponymic warfare was fought over

geographical names on this island which is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of Aphrodite or Venus, goddess of beauty. The warring sides — on the one hand the Greek administration of the island republic backed by Greece, and on the other Turkey, champion of the Turkish sector of the Cypriot population — fought their verbal campaigns on the battlefield of the United Nations Conferences.

For hundreds, if not thousands, of years the population of Cyprus was (and still is) a multicultural and multilingual society, with Greek and Turkish linguistic influence dominant even under the British administration governing the island from 1878 to 1960. The relations between the Greek and Turkish populations, which had been none too good especially after the island attained independence in 1960, came to a head when Turkey occupied Cyprus' northern 40% in 1974. As a by-product of what Turkey named a peace operation and Greek Cyprus termed an invasion and act of aggression, a war of geographical names broke out.

Representatives of the Greek community brought their toponymic grievances and accusations before the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The United Nations sent a peace-keeping force to the island in order to guard the UN demarcation line between the two sectors (not recognized by the — *de facto* Greek — Republic of Cyprus), but could not prevent mutual toponymic incursions. The main bone of contention was the Turkish administration's using Turkish place names for geographical features which previously had carried Greek names — primarily populated places such as towns and villages. The exchange of verbal missiles between the delegations of the two sides — chiefly Cyprus (nominally representing the entire island, but in reality only its Greek population) and Turkey, backing the Turkish sector — makes interesting reading. The following short excerpts, taken from official UN documents, are here quoted from Kadmon (2000).² They demonstrate that geographical names can constitute explosive items or, in popular terms, hot potatoes.

At the third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1977, Cyprus accused Turkey in a letter to the President of the Conference, of 'committing against the Greek population [of Cyprus] all kinds of unprecedented atrocities'. In its national report to the Conference Cyprus stated that 'the collection, standardization and transcription of names has been curtailed as a result of the Turkish invasion of 1974. . . . The forces of occupation have brought about a complete change of geographical names in the occupied area . . . which forms part of the cultural heritage of the people of Cyprus as a whole. The new names have been taken from the history and geography of Turkey'.

Turkey, which does not recognize the map sheets of the International Map of the World at the scale of 1:1 000 000 covering the country, because they are not produced by her and thus carry some Greek toponyms in Turkish areas, was not slow in responding in kind. To the Cypriot remarks quoted above the President of the 'Turkish Federated State of Cyprus' (not recognized by the United Nations) replied that 'in Cyprus, bi-communal and bilingual island since 1571, a great number of villages enjoyed either Greek or Turkish names . . . Some villages enjoyed two names, one in Greek and one in Turkish . . . The willful and unjustified change of names has been a political pastime (sic!) of the

Greek Cypriot leaders for a long number of years . . . The Turkish villages have used their ancient Turkish names. . . until the Greek Cypriot onslaught on the Turkish community. . . . Rehabilitation work [ensuing from the exchange of populations between Greek and Turkish areas in Cyprus] necessitated a consideration of Turkish names for the new habitations.' In a final letter, the Turkish Head of Delegation declared that the statements by Cyprus were 'unfounded provocation and malicious accusations and of a highly political character'.

Please note the stress on the term 'political'!

At the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea lies Israel — the 'Holy Land' of Judaism and Christianity. This country too has been, and still is, the site of toponymic strife, but in this case verbal war is accompanied by physical war — or vice versa. Thus, Falastinians have accused Israel of replacing the 'ever-existing' Arabic place names by Hebrew names. A typical and representative example cited by the Arab countries at the 3rd UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names was the city of Nablus in Samaria. The Jordanian delegate claimed that Israel had, in its maps, replaced the old Arabic name by the Hebrew name of Shechem; he was not aware of the great antiquity of the latter name which was in existence already some 3300 years ago, as documented in the Bible. During the Hellenistic occupation of Israel in the 4th century BC the name was changed to Neapolis, i.e. New City; only in the 7th century AD when the Arabs conquered the country they distorted the name to Nablus, Arabic having no letters for 'e', 'p' and 'o'. Similarly, biblical Hebron was changed to Arabic El-Khalil, Jericho to Arikha, Nazareth to An-Nasirah; and numerous other cases could be cited.

NAMES IN FORGED MAPS

A special instance of political tampering with geographical names can be found in forged maps. Here, again, Israel can serve as a case study. In the 1970s the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) photocopied the entire set of the official 1:100 000 scale topographic maps of Israel, produced by the Israeli Government's mapping authority and covered by State Copyright. With a view to using them in raids from Lebanon into Israel (for which, indeed, they were used), the PLO erased all Hebrew print and in particular the place names, and substituted Arabic script in their stead, leaving the rest of the maps intact. However, this was not done very skillfully, and in several places the original Hebrew print remained and can be faintly seen, thus disclosing the lawful owners. The conclusion? Even plagiarism should be executed with care . . . Moreover, while mostly Hebrew-to-Arabic transcription was used, in numerous places Israeli toponyms were replaced by politically-based Arabic ones. And finally, the Israeli copyright note was replaced by the PLO's slogan, emblem and flag.

NAME CHANGES

Politically-motivated name replacements can be found in any region suffering from administrative instability, and especially from changes in local regime. Whenever a new

political system comes into power, or wherever a geographical region ‘acquires’ a new ruler, toponyms (and heads) begin to topple. Perhaps the example which first comes to mind is the stage-wise transition from the Russian Czarist Empire to the USSR. Sankt Petersburg was changed to Petrograd, then into Leningrad, and finally (may one phrase it thus?) christened Sankt Peterburg, omitting the German genitive’s ‘s’. Whoever the *faqir* was for whom ‘Eyn al-Faqir in Iran was named — the place became Ahmad-e Khomeyni. Politically-based name changes seem to come in clusters, and two outstanding periods of re-naming in the second half of the 20th century can be noticed. In the first, the late 1940s and early 50s, following in the wake of the Second World War, many countries, chiefly in Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific region, obtained their independence from former colonial powers, and in an outbreak of patriotic-toponymic fervour replaced their ‘non-native’ names and those of their cities and other geographical objects by local ones. The other occurred in the political upheavals of the early 1990s, when Eastern Europe erupted in a bevy of new states.

SCRIPT

Some cases of the political use of geographical names involve script. Just two examples will be quoted. In Eire the present writer came across many official road signs which carried the Irish Gaelic place name first, and the English name in second place — so acceding to the national feeling. But the Irish name appeared in small letters, while the English form which catered to the majority of road users, appeared in a much larger font.

Turkey, under Kemal Ataturk and on his initiative, replaced the Arabic-based Turkish writing by Latin script. This required the addition of a diacritic sign, the upper double dot on the letters ‘o’ and ‘u’ (similar to the German Umlaute ö and ü) — but also the adaptation of some place names such as Ankara for Angora.

EXONYMS OR CONVENTIONAL NAMES

One of the difficulties leading to problems between countries, and even between different nationalities or different linguistic cultures within a single country, is that of exonyms. According to the United Nations glossary of toponymic terminology³ the definition of an exonym is

Name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language has official status, and differing in its form from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated.

Example: the English exonym for København is Copenhagen, the German for Ljubljana is Laibach.

Exonyms come into existence chiefly as a result of four processes or causes. The first is historical; in many cases early

explorers, unaware of existing local names, gave names in their own languages, and these names were ‘transported’ to their own countries. The second is military conquest: victors being not just unaware but unmindful of existing names, substituting their own. The third reason stems solely from problems of pronunciation; ‘outsiders’ who are unable to pronounce a name, modify it or even replace it by one which agrees with their own phonological system. There is a fourth reason: if a geographical feature extends over more than one country, such as the river Danube, it may have a different endonym or local name in each — in this example Donau, Dunaj, Duna, Dunav and Dunarea. In such cases an exonym is usually substituted by other countries, in this one the English exonym Danube.

Now some exonyms are more objectionable, and even offensive, than others; it depends, of course, to whom. Citizens of country A do not like citizens of country B to call their (A’s) cities by names which, in the past, were given by the armies of country B when they got temporary control of country A. During the discussion on exonyms at the 6th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names it was mentioned that cases such as that of a reputable and modern German atlas still using German exonyms for cities and other geographical features in areas which, in the past, constituted the Great German Reich — might be regarded (and are indeed regarded by affected countries) as ‘cultural aggression’, and should be discouraged. The United Nations have, in several resolutions,⁴ strongly recommended that within the international standardization of geographical names, the use of exonyms, particularly those ‘giving rise to international problems’, should be minimized. Furthermore, countries are requested to intensify their efforts to persuade private and public organizations such as educational institutions and the media, to reduce the use of exonyms and increase the use of the relevant endonyms.

I will close with an example taken from TIME Magazine for Dec. 1986, which quoted Urho Kekkonen, President of Finland, as stating that the ‘the vital issue for the Finnish people has always been the relationship with their eastern neighbour, whether its name was Novgorod, Muskovy, Russia or the Soviet Union.’ This has now been peacefully settled in the modern Russia and the CIS, at least for the time being.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Clausewitz, Carl von (1828). *Vom Kriege (On War)*, English translation by J. J. Graham, 1940.
- ² Kadmon, N. (2000). *Toponymy — the Lore, Laws and Language of Geographical Names*, Vantage Press, New York.
- ³ Kadmon, N. (ed.) (2002). *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names*, United Nations, New York.
- ⁴ See (2004). *Resolutions adopted at the six United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names*, Prepared for the United Nations by the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, Ottawa.

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