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On the Success of Efforts to Retain the Names of Several American Communities in the Two World Wars

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There are two ways that scholars have viewed place name-changing. Some have contended that "names, while not ephemeral, are not sacrosanct either but are susceptible to changes in the experiences and attitudes of residents. Names may be shortened or corrupted, either by the natural 'abrasion of common speech'[1] or in deliberate response to the recognized need for simplicity or convenience, or else replaced outright by more meaningful designations."[2] Others, like the late John Goff, have maintained that names "are persistent things and once. . . applied. . . usually continued permanently in use. . . . The number of changed . . . (names) is relatively. . small."[3] If a place – especially a populated place or community – has long borne its name and that name has some special historic significance that still keeps residents bound to it, it will likely persist despite strong demands to change it.

Goff's position may be exemplified by the experiences in the World Wars of several American communities with German and Japanese names.

World War One: Among the aggressive acts of anti-German hostility during the First World War was the campaign to deGermanize U.S. place names. On May 6, 1918, Michigan Representative John M.C. Smith introduced, in the 65th Congress, H.R. 11950 to change the names of all towns, cities, counties, streets, and highways in the country from *Germany*, *Berlin*, etc. to *Victoria*, *Liberty*, or other "patriotic designations." When these names were first adopted, he pointed out, "it was with the view of expressing preference (for them) over any other names which might have been given (these places), or of showing loyalty or devotion to the fatherland." The bill further insisted that "all. . . mail addressed to any person residing in any municipality called *Berlin* or *Germany*. . . be prohibited from transportation or delivery in the United States, its territories, or possessions." Cooler heads prevailed and the bill was never passed.[4]

Before the First World War, no fewer than 28 communities in the United States included some form of *German* in their names while thirty were called *Berlin* or some variant of that name. Nine of either of these names were in Ohio, six were in Iowa, five in Pennsylvania, and three in Wisconsin. There was a *German* in New York, Ohio, and West Virginia; a *German City* in Iowa; a *Germania* in Iowa, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin; a *German Station* in Pennsylvania; a *Germano* in Ohio; a *Germanton* in North Carolina; a *Germanville* in Iowa; and *Germantowns* in California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin.

Similarly, there were *Berlins* in Alabama, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. There was also a *Berlin Center*, a *Berlin Crossroads*, a *Berlin Heights*, and a *Berlin Junction* all in Ohio; a *Berlin Mills* in New Hampshire, a *Berlin Station* in Connecticut, and a *Berlinsville* in Pennsylvania. In all, some 27 states had towns and cities with some form of these "German" names which would have had to be changed if Smith's bill had passed.

Though the bill was not enacted, some places did succeed in changing their own names. *Berlin*, Iowa became *Lincoln*, while *East Germantown*, Indiana took the name *Pershing*.[5] In addition, *Kiel*, Oklahoma became *Loyal* to express loyalty to our country; *Brandenburg*, Texas was replaced by *Old Glory*; and *Thalheim*, California was translated to *Valley Home*.[6] After the war, *Potsdam*, Missouri also took the name *Pershing*.[7] Portland, Oregon changed the German names of several of her streets.[8] Several places followed the suggestion that the names of Belgian and French towns that had been occupied by the Germans during the war be substituted for the German names removed from American towns.[9]

Yet the large majority of the names mentioned above were not changed. And neither were the many *Bismarcks, Hamburgs, Frankforts, Hanovers, Bremens,* and *Brunswicks* that have also long appeared on American maps. Most towns seemed little disposed toward shedding names that, over the years, had come to mean home and thus something special to their residents – "it's our home now," they said, whatever its derivation or original significance may have been.[10]

Furthermore, some of the towns returned to their original names after the war. *Lens*, Georgia, which had adopted the name of a French city occupied by the Germans in 1917, again became *Berlin*.[11] The people of *Meekin*, Illinois once more became residents of *German Valley*.[12] While

the *Pershing* name still applies to the local post office, that Indiana town is again identified as *East Germantown* on state highway maps and this name was confirmed by the *Board on Geographic Names* in 1964. According to Wayne County historian, Cecil Charles, "after the First World War, local people allowed their anti-German feelings to subside a bit, and in consideration of the German families who still lived there, they changed the name of their town back to *Germantown*. . . . Actually very few people even refer to it as *East Germantown* any more."[13]

World War Two: Before America entered this war, two place name-changes expressed our sympathy for the Allied cause: *Germania*, Washington took the name *Wellpinit*, allegedly adapted from an Indian word "referring to two small creeks in a valley";[14] and *Swastika*, New Mexico became *Brilliant*.[15] But that was it. In spite of two organized efforts at wholesale name-changing during the war, only one other "German-named" town in this country is known to have changed its name as a result of our enmity toward Germany.

In response to the German destruction of two small towns – the Bohemian community of *Lidice* in 1942 and the Greek village of *Distomo* in 1944 – efforts again were made by patriotic Americans to *deGermanize* or *DeBerlinize* American place names. On June 10, 1942 the Germans demolished the small mining town of *Lidice*, some twelve miles east of Prague, in retaliation for the assassination of Reich "Protector" Reinhard Heydrich by Czech patriots. For allegedly "aiding and sheltering" the assassins, the town's male population was summarily executed, its women and children deported, and its buildings destroyed; its name, by decree, was annulled. Thereafter, any reference to such a place was "verboten."

Spurred by newspaper editorials, however, *Lidice* became a rallying cry, and a campaign was very shortly underway in Allied countries to encourage the adoption of that name to show the world that the place and the event that had made it history would never be forgotten. The *New York Times*, for instance, "proposed to some American community (with) a German name it does not need the substitution of the name of that heroic, martyred town."[16]

To my knowledge, only one town in this country accepted the *Times'* challenge. Not a *Germany* or *Berlin* but the Federal housing development of *Stern Park Gardens* near Joliet, Illinois, officially assumed the *Lidice* name in a public ceremony on July 12, 1942.[17] But this was comparatively short-lived for, in 1960, *Lidice* and five other communities combined to form the incorporated city of *Crest Hill*.[18]

Canada fared no better in attempts to perpetuate the memory of the demolished town. Typical was the unsuccessful effort to secure a change

in the name of the Quebec community of *Frelighsburg*. In spite of press announcement that such a change would occur on October 25, 1942,[19] the village council vetoed the change, presumably because the residents preferred their original name.[20]

Yet at least two successful attempts to preserve the *Lidice* name occurred in Latin America. On August 30, 1942 the Mexican farming village of *San Geronimo* changed its name to *Lidice*,[21] and on June 11, 1943 that name was applied to an attractive community near Rio de Janeiro.[22]

Early in June 1944, near the town of *Distomo* (or *Distomon*) at the foot of Mt. Parnassus in central Greece, a Greek guerrilla unit engaged the Germans in fierce combat, killing thirty of the enemy. Since many of the town's 1100 residents had participated in the battle, the Germans ordered its destruction. One male member of every family was publicly executed and, on June 10, exactly two years after the razing of Lidice, Distomo, too, was demolished. When, four days later, Red Cross workers were allowed to visit the site, they found "100 fear-maddened women and children, who had managed to escape, hiding in the nearby woods."[23]

On August 30, 1944 the *Committee for the Rebirth of Distomo* was organized by a number of distinguished Americans (Maxwell Anderson, the dramatist, was its chairman) to encourage the replacement of the several *Berlins* in the U.S. with the *Distomo* name as a symbol of the preservation of Greek democracy in our country. To this end, telephone calls were made to the officials of most of the country's 23 *Berlins* to ask which would be willing to make the change. [24] But their efforts also failed as citizens again stubbornly refused to change their communities' names.

One of the Berlins, a town in Linn County, Oregon, some 65 miles south of Portland, typified the often underhanded way the committee is said to have gone about its task. Curiously, this town had not even been named for the German capital, but its name was a corruption of *Burl Inn*, in turn, derived from *Burrell's Inn* for a Mr. Burrell who used to entertain visitors to a nearby race track.[25] In early October, following the Linn County Court's tentative approval of its name change, Berlin's residents submitted a petition to rescind the action since it had been taken without their consent. Lewis McArthur later reflected their collective sentiment on the proposed change by stating that while it was "to be in the interest of democracy. . . the promoters of the plan were not sufficiently interested in practical democracy to ask the local residents for their views about the business."[26] One resident is said to have asked how to pronounce the name and another pointed out that "most of us would have to look up the spelling each time the name was used."[27] Responding that he had been

assured by the mayor that the residents had unanimously favored the change, Anderson, for the Committee, suggested a referendum. On October 11 the residents voted unanimously to reject the change and the Court yielded to their decision.[28]

The Anderson Committee's efforts, however, did not wholly go for nought. While they did not succeed in getting any existing *Berlins* to replace their names, they did arrange for a new veterans' subdivision opposite the Atlantic City (N.J.) airport to be named *Village of Distomo*.[29]

Anti-Japanese sentiment was even less successful in generating name-changes in the Second World War. In spite of attempts to change these names after Pearl Harbor, all post offices bearing the names *Japan* and *Tokio (Tokyo)*[30] in 1941 retained these names through the war.[31] As with the examples of the German name-change efforts discussed above, the failures to bring about these changes were due primarily to the fact that they originated outside the particular communities and did not consider local sentimental attachments to the names. Moreover, no attempts were made to determine how the places had come to bear their names. Usually, with the revelation of the true origin of the name, as in the case of the Franklin County, Missouri post office of *Japan*, and its local pronunciation as [ˈǰeɪpen], agitation for its change would end.

Residents of the Missouri community had never identified their post office with the country but with the local Catholic church when that office was established in 1860. *The Church of the Holy Martyrs of Japan*, in turn, was named for the six Franciscan friars and their 17 Japanese converts who were publicly executed in Nagasaki in 1597 in the first of the great anti-Christian persecutions that led to the near total destruction of Japanese Christianity.[32]

Even a name like *Rising Sun* could not escape the name-changing crusaders. But again local pride-in-name was to prevail when, in February, 1942, residents of this Indiana county seat on the Ohio River protested the suggestion of an Indianapolis man, Edmund J. Rocker, that they replace the town's name with *Pearl Harbor*. The mayor publicly stated that he could see no reason why a place that had borne a name so proudly since the early nineteenth century should consider changing it just because it "happens to describe the emblem on the Japanese flag." (The name probably derives from an early settler's exclamation on the grandeur of an early morning sunrise over the distant Kentucky hills.)[33]

The local Rotary Club and the American Legion post passed resolutions favoring retention of the name. The local postmaster received cards and letters of support from all over the country, many with the request that they be mailed from the *Rising Run* post office, while a Brooklyn, New

York stamp collector sent 150 letters asking that they be postmarked 2:30 P.M., December 7, 1941, to commemorate the attack on Pearl Harbor. Only two apparent criticisms of the name were received. A Danville, Illinois woman, who had formerly lived in Rising Sun, admitted she had never cared for the name and asked that it be changed to *MacArthur*. A man from Hammond, Indiana addressed a letter to "the Emperor of Japan, Rising Sun, Indiana" reminding "To whom it may concern" therein to "Buy United States Defense Stamps and Bonds." In general, the citizens of Rising Sun and elsewhere tended to consider Rocker's proposal a big joke, and the town still proudly bears this name.[34]

Schools and other strictly local, and often impermanent, features with German and Japanese names fared slightly better than communities in World War Two. For instance just after Pearl Harbor, the now extinct *Japan School* at Collista, Kentucky, which had actually been named for the profusion of japanese clover there – and was also pronounced [ˈje-ˌpen] – became the *America* School.

We have seen, in the examples given in this paper, how the residents of several American communities and one Canadian town sought to retain their place names in spite of patriotic, and often concerted, efforts to change them. In only a few cases, mostly during the First World War, were changes actually made in response to patriotic sentiment, and some of these were only temporary, for when the tempers cooled and hostilities were relaxed, if not actually forgotten, these places resumed their former names.

Notes

[1]Howard F. Barker, "Surnames in the United States," *American Mercury*, 26 (1932), 223–30.

[2]Robert M. Rennick, unpub. manuscript on Indiana Place-Name Changes, 1970, pp. 1–2.

[3]*Placenames of Georgia: Essays of John H. Goff*, ed. Francis Lee Utley and Marion R. Hemperley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), 470.

[4]*New York Times*, June 2, 1918, IV, p. 12, cols. 1–2.

[5]Carl Wittke, *German-Americans and the World War* (Columbus: Ohio State University Archaeological and Historical Society, 1936), 184.

[6]George R. Stewart, *Names on the Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 373.

[7]Robert Lee Ramsay, *Our Storehouse of Missouri Place Names*. University of Missouri Bulletin (Columbia, MO), 53, No. 34, Arts and Sciences Series No. 7, 1952, p. 61.

[8]*New York Times*, p. 12, cols. 1–2.

[9]Wittke, 184.

[10]Stewart, 373.

[11]Kenneth Krakow, *Georgia Place-Names* (Macon: Winship Press, 1975), 17, 131.

[12]Stewart, 373.

[13]Rennick, 26–7.

[14]James W. Phillips, *Washington State Place Names* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), 157.

[15]George R. Stewart, *American Place Names* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 467.

[16]*New York Times,* June 13, 1942, p. 14, col. 3.

[17]*New York Times,* June 30, 1942, p. 20, col. 2.

[18]Laurence E. Seits, Sugar Grove, IL, letter to author, Sept. 26, 1982.

[19]Associated Press release, Montreal, Quebec, Sept. 17, 1942.

[20]United Press release, Quebec, Quebec, Sept. 23, 1942.

[21]*New York Times,* Aug. 31, 1942, p. 2, col. 8.

[22]United Press release, June 11, 1943. A final word on *Lidice:* In 1947 a new village of that name was built near the original site on which the Czech goverment later erected a national monument.

[23]*New York Times,* Aug. 31, 1944, p. 19, cols. 5–6.

[24]*Ibid.* It was also suggested, though never acted upon, that after the war, towns in the Axis nations be forcibly renamed for *Distomo,* and *Lidice,* too.

[25]Lewis A. McArthur, *Oregon Geographic Names,* Fourth Edition, rev. and enl. by Lewis L. McArthur (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1974), p. 59.

[26]*Ibid.*

[27]United Press release, Oct. 10, 1944.

[28]Associated Press release, Oct. 11, 1944.

[29]*New York Times,* June 10, 1946, p. 3, col. 4.

[30]There were *Tokios (Tokyos)* in Arkansas, North Dakota, Ohio, and Texas.

[31]Stewart, *Names on the Land,* 379.

[32]Robert Lee Ramsay, *The Place Names of Franklin County, Missouri.* University of Missouri Studies, XXVI, No. 3 (1954), 20.

[33]See Robert M. Rennick, "The Folklore of Place-Naming in Indiana," *Indiana Folklore,* III, No. 1 (1970), 35–94 (48–9).

[34]*Indianapolis Star,* Feb. 17, 1942, and *Indianapolis News,* Feb. 5, 1942, Feb. 25, 1952.