

BGN/PCGN Relationship: A Model of Cooperation and Efficiency

The long and close collaboration between the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) has influenced how the world, particularly the English language-speaking part of it, understands and processes foreign place names.

Many of the toponyms found on atlases and detailed world maps produced in the US and UK are influenced by decisions made by these 2 organisations. The strong personal and professional bonds between the staff and members of the BGN and the PCGN, forged by decades of common interests and mutual respect, have streamlined the efforts of each group and led to impressive efficiencies in workflow and output.

Even before the establishment of the BGN in 1890, the US Government looked to the British Admiralty system, adopted in 1885 by the Royal Geographical Society, as an authority on solving problems in spelling foreign toponyms.¹ In its early years the BGN focused on standardizing domestic names during a period of western expansion and did not spend much effort on foreign geographic names. The First World War changed that perspective and led to the BGN's *First Report on Foreign Geographic Names*, published in 1932. This report alludes to the early cooperation with the BGN's British partners, acknowledging the need to "avoid unnecessary duplication [of effort], and at the same time to utilize the excellent and more voluminous work of the PCGN"

The Second World War forced the BGN to confront the need for a more robust program of foreign toponym standardization, and in 1947 the BGN was reorganized into a new model that created 2 standing committees on domestic and foreign names. The 1947 reorganization enhanced the level of interaction between the BGN and PCGN, and that year gave birth to 2 important BGN/PCGN traditions, which have been critical to the ongoing success of the two organizations: joint conferences and joint Romanization systems.

The BGN and PCGN held their first formal conference in London in October 1947. In the next month, the newly-formed Foreign Names Committee (FNC) of the BGN held its first meeting in Washington. The report of that meeting attests to the rapidly burgeoning trans-Atlantic relationship:

"Mr. Adkinson [the newly elected FNC chairman] took the chair and called for the first order of business, consideration of the memorandum of agreement between the Permanent Committee on Geographic [sic] Names for British Official Use (PCGN) and the Board on Geographic Names (BGN) on geographic name usage."

This first meeting of the FNC also considered adoption of the first joint BGN/PCGN romanization system, for Russian Cyrillic, a topic of discussion at the conference the month before. This first

¹ Uniform System for Spelling Foreign Geographic Names, Hydrographic Office, U.S. Navy, 1891.

joint romanization system proved a critical tool for standardizing toponyms in the Soviet Union during the Cold War and remains in use today for toponyms in Russia.

From that seminal year, the BGN and PCGN have held 32 joint conferences and agreed to over 50 romanization systems. The two organizations continue their collaboration, liaising on a constant basis to increase efficiency and avoid duplication of effort. The BGN greatly values the perspective of the PCGN, and rarely makes important policy on foreign names without considering the PCGN's expert advice.

The BGN members and staff extend their sincerest congratulations to the PCGN on the occasion of its centennial and look forward to another century of personal and professional collaboration.