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EXONYMS, ENDONYMS AND PSEUDONYMS  
IN THE WORK OF SIR NORMAN DAVIES

*Abstract.* Historians generally use whatever forms of personal and place names they think will be most familiar to their readers, ignoring the meaning these forms carry in themselves, and not worrying if their preferred forms are inexact, anachronistic, or offensive to certain groups of readers. An exception to this rule is Norman Davies, whose careful treatment of names stands in striking contrast to the traditional approach. In this paper, I discuss the several approaches to names Davies had taken in the major works he has published since 1972. These range from the traditional to the highly innovative, and, given the overall neglect of onomastic questions by historians, deserve the attention of all students name forms.

Most writers in English now prefer endonyms to exonyms, except in cases where the exonym is extremely familiar. This is the practice recommended by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and, generally speaking, it is the most efficient and fairest solution to the problem of multiple names.<sup>1</sup>

But one must ask if historians should be as closely bound by this rule as everyone else. The essential problem for them is that place names change over time, and many variants for each one may be found in source documents. Moreover, an onomastic decision taken by an historian may constitute, in itself, an essential interpretation of history. For example, if one were to write that *Bratislava* was the scene of a major imperial diet in 1741 and that it was bombarded by the French in 1809, one might be misleading one's readers. *Bratislava* is the Slovaks' current name for their capital city, but in 1741 and 1809, speakers of Slovak weren't yet dominant in the town, and exclusive use of their name for it could lead readers to exaggerate the importance of the Slovak-speaking population of the city's make-up in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. If, on the other hand, one were always to call the city by its German name, *Pressburg*, one would undoubtedly be misleading readers in another way. And if one chose to call the town in all periods by its Hungarian name, *Pozsony*, yet another misinterpretation could follow.

<sup>1</sup> The Group's recommendations may be found at: [www.unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/uncs-gnresolutions-en.pdf](http://www.unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/uncs-gnresolutions-en.pdf) (Section 14, p. 61).

The work of the distinguished British historian Sir Norman Davies stands out from that of other contemporary historians not only because of its general excellence, but also because he seems to be almost alone among his peers in understanding the innate power of names, and in exploring the problems they pose for historians. What follows is an examination of Davies' changing treatment of names over more than three decades.<sup>2</sup>

Davies's first major publication was a book about the 1919 war between Poland and the Soviet Union. *White Eagle, Red Star*, which came out in 1972, includes a prefatory note in which he sets out his position on names as follows:

"Where accepted English versions exist, as Warsaw, Kiev, Brest-Litovsk, Cracow, these have been used. Where different names have been accepted locally at different times, the version relevant to the period after 1921 has been preferred –Lwów not Lemberg or Lvov or Lviv, Wilno not Vilna or Vilnius..."<sup>3</sup>

As to personal names, he gives them in Polish if the person referred to considered himself Polish, in the normal transliterated form if he thought otherwise. Where nationality is unclear, as in the case of Feliks Dzierżyński, a Pole who became famous as a Russian policeman, he uses the form preferred in the person's land of birth.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the text, Davies follows these principles scrupulously.

When Davies came to publish, in 1982, *God's Playground*, his magisterial two-volume history of Poland, the range of onomastic problems he had to come to grips with was much greater. *White Eagle, Red Star* is about two more or less modern peoples during a five-year period; *God's Playground* covers more than a thousand years in the history of one of the most linguistically diverse regions in Europe. Not only do Poles and Russians figure prominently in the text, but also Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Yiddish-speaking Jews. Members of many other language-groups also play a role. And of course the names used by all these groups within their own language have changed, often many times, since the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> A version of this paper was given at the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Pisa, Italy, in August, 2005. The author would like to thank those who attended and made helpful comments.

<sup>3</sup> N. Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War 1919-1920* (London: Pimlico; 2003 reprint of original 1972 edition), p. xix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20

Davies discusses names at some length in the chapter on Poland's boundaries in the second volume of *God's Playground*. After explaining that the matter is both important and complicated, he lays out the four guidelines that he has followed.

1. "Place-names should be reviewed constantly to take cognizance of changes that are constantly occurring. Ideally, the 'name' should always reflect the dominant cultural and political connections of the 'place' at the moment in question. If this involves talking in Chapter Three of 'Vratislav', in Chapter Twenty of 'Breslau', and in Chapter Twenty-three of 'Wrocław', the searcher after precision should not be deterred".

2. "When speaking German, it is far simpler to talk of 'Breslau' than of 'Wrocław', if only because the established corpus of literature on the subject in the German language has always used that particular form. When speaking Polish it is always simpler for purely linguistic reasons to talk of Wrocław."

3. "Neutral versions, in English or Latin, themselves contain a distortion of reality. 'Warsaw' is clearly preferable to the native 'Warszawa' for scholars writing in English. But fully anglicized items of this sort are extremely rare. Most English forms were in fact taken from German or Russian usage."

4. "All place-names take their validity from the purposes for which they were invented. Within their own terms of reference, they are all equally appropriate.

Their propriety in any given situation can only be tested when the historian inquires for what purposes they are to be used, and in whose interest. All variations must always be kept in mind....Censors, who eliminate offending place-names from maps and records, in the pretence that the mode of the moment is somehow the eternal verdict of history, are deceiving both themselves and their charges. As in matters of more excitement, the reasonable man must always conclude: *Vive la différence!*"<sup>5</sup>

Davies succeeds admirably in applying his own guidelines. For example, the modern Cieszyn is a place that has been much fought over by speakers of German, Czech and Polish. Davies refers to it as Teschen in

<sup>5</sup> N. Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes* (New York: Columbia University Press; 1982) Vol. II, pp.510-517.

the context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and as Cieszyn in the post-World War Two period.<sup>6</sup> In the section where he deals with the war between Poland and Czechoslovakia over this place, Davies uses the Polish form, but with the Czech and German forms beside it in parentheses. Similarly, when he mentions the district of Orawa in Polish, he also gives the name in Polish, Czech, Slovak and Magyar.<sup>7</sup> This kind of sensitivity to names (and scrupulous fairness) is evident throughout the 1330 pages of *God's Playground*.

In *Heart of Europe*, which was completed in 1983 and came out the following year, Davies appears to be more worried about the difficulties of Polish orthography than he was in *God's Playground*. He writes: "The mere sight of Polish place-names is sufficient to deter many people who would otherwise take a closer look at Polish affairs."<sup>8</sup> His solution at this time was to recommend a good Polish grammar to his readers and to provide a slightly expanded version of the pronunciation key in *God's Playground*.

*Heart of Europe* also contains an interesting appendix on maps and place names in which Davies severely criticizes the sections in the standard works of reference that deal with Central and Eastern Europe. *The Penguin Atlas of World History*, he says, is taken from a German work, and uses in the text English exonyms for some places that are referred to by German names in the maps. *The Times Atlas of the World* is, according to Davies, even worse. "By using nineteenth-century Russian or German names on medieval maps which in the Middle Ages had no connection with Russia or Germany... (the editors) laid themselves open to charges of culpable anachronism."<sup>9</sup>

Davies's next book, *Europe*, published in 1996, is perhaps his most famous.<sup>10</sup> In this survey of more than two thousand years of the history of a vast continent, he paid less attention to names than in his earlier works. There is no further discussion of onomastic principles, and Davies's choice of name forms is for the most part conventional, that is, he uses a greater percentage of exonyms than he does in his previous works. This was perhaps inevitable, given the scope of the book. It is 1365 pages long, and it

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 104 and 481.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 495.

<sup>8</sup> N. Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; revised edition of the 1984 edition), p. xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>10</sup> N. Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1996).

would have been far longer if he had explained in detail all the possible name choices for the multitude of people and places he wrote about.

Yet Davies' deep interest in names, and his commitment to using them fairly are both evident in *Europe*. For instance, on his map showing the Italo-Slav border disputes of 1939 to 1992, one finds Videm as well as Udine, Krk as well as Veglia, and Rijeka as well as Fiume.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, his map of the Ottoman Empire and its neighbours uses the Turkish terms for Poland (Lehistan) and Greece (Yunanistan).<sup>12</sup>

*The Isles*, a history of what most people call the "British Isles" was published in 1999.<sup>13</sup> Here Davies returned to his rigorous insistence on the use of names contemporary with the events described. Thus he refers to the city in Northern England now called York as Eboracum when he is discussing its Roman phase, and Jorvik when his topic is the Viking settlement in that place. To alleviate any confusion that might be caused by the multitude of names he uses for geographical features, he provides an appendix where the names of major geographical features are given in up to eight languages.<sup>14</sup>

He is equally concerned to use only contemporary versions of people's names. There are no references to William the Conqueror or John Lackland in *The Isles*. Those monarchs, who of course lived mostly in France and could speak no English, are designated Guillaume le Bâtard and Jean Sans Terre, as indeed they might have been by their contemporaries. Davies is consistent in rejecting anachronistic names throughout the book's 1222 pages.

*The Isles* is notable also as the first of Davies' books to use invented names. He argues that if he is to discuss the islands in question in their prehistoric phase, he ought not to use names invented by peoples who inhabited them later on. In his view, calling the islands as they were in the year 2000 B.C. "British" distorts reality and perhaps also suggests that somehow they were destined eventually to become "British". Moreover, he notes the use of the term "British" is not accepted today by millions of people (most notably the Irish) who dwell in the archipelago. These con-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1313.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1259.

<sup>13</sup> N. Davies, *The Isles: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1997).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1093-1095. There can be few other histories of this part of the world in which one can discover that the Cornish for England is Pow Saws, and the Old Norse for Wales is Vair!

siderations lead Davies to use the entirely neutral term “The Isles” when he needs a general name, and to use the term “Midnight Isles” in reference to the pre-Celtic period.

In 2002, a book called *Microcosm* came out with Davies’ name on the cover.<sup>15</sup> It is a history of the town now called Wrocław, formerly known as Breslau, and it was co-authored by Roger Morehouse. This work requires little attention from the student of names, because it follows closely the onomastic principles Davies had previously laid out.

The most recent book by Norman Davies, however, requires more attention. *Rising ’44*, which came out in 2003, is about the attempt of the Poles to seize Warsaw from the Germans in the fall of 1944, and the onomastic decisions taken in this book have made it very controversial.<sup>16</sup>

In his preface, Davies indicates that he has at last come to the conclusion, after three decades of trying to interest English-speakers in the history of Poland, that the difficulties of Polish orthography form “a near insurmountable barrier...If readers cannot retain the names in a narrative, they cannot follow the plot. And if they cannot follow the plot, they cannot be expected to analyze or to understand it”.<sup>17</sup>

To get over this barrier, Davies decided that he would have to *translate* most place names and people’s names into English, or use English nicknames. Some names are left in Polish or in their normal exonymic form, such as Warsaw, Cracow, Sikorski, Wałęsa and Wojtyła, because they are well known. In all other cases he invents names for places and people that would be unrecognizable to the subjects of his narrative. For example, General Okulicki becomes “Bear Cub”; Premier Mikołajczyk is referred to as “Premier Mick”; and Maria Dąbrowska is called “Maria D”; Ulica Koszykowa becomes “Basket Street”; Ulica Gęsia turns into Goose Street; and Krakowskie Przedmieście appears as “Cracow Faubourg”.

The treatment of town names and the names of districts within towns involves either use of the German exonym or the invention of a new English exonym. Thus we encounter Bromberg for Bydgoszcz, Danzig for Gdańsk and Stettin for Szczecin, as well as Reshov for Rzeszów, Jolibord for Żolibórz and Poznan for Poznań.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> N. Davies and R. Moorhouse, *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City* (London: Jonathon Cape; 2002).

<sup>16</sup> N. Davies, *Rising ’44: “The Battle for Warsaw”* (London: Macmillan; 2003)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>18</sup> These pseudonyms and the real names they represent are among hundreds given in parallel columns in an appendix. *Ibid.*, pp. 689-702.

Davies might have anticipated that his abandonment of onomastic exactitude would be unpopular for two reasons.

First, pseudonyms by their very nature detract from the memorial aspect of history. If a person behaves heroically, many feel that posterity ought to preserve the memory of that person's name. Davies's method not only suppresses individual names, it also tends to make the story abstract by removing it from its real-world setting. Indeed, the very Polishness of the story is diminished when the *dramatis personae* are called Stag, Tony Flamethrower, and Air Commodore R. And we could be in some city of the American Midwest when we read about Independence Boulevard (Aleje Niepodległości), Market Street (Ulica Targowa) and Washington Avenue (Aleja Waszyntona). Some readers may indeed find that the pseudonyms make the story flow better, but it's not surprising that others were dissatisfied.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, the use of pseudonyms makes it difficult or impossible for the reader to relate *Rising '44* to other books about Poland during this period. If one has read elsewhere about Father (later Cardinal) Wyszyński, will he or she realize that the "Father Stefan" mentioned here is the same person? Will one know that Grunberg is the same as Zielona Góra? Surely one of the characteristics of professional history is its comparability. One is best able to form a balanced view of the past only after encountering it from the varying perspectives of many historians (and eye-witnesses). If each author invents names for all the people and places he mentions, such a view can never be formed.

Despite what many regard as onomastic aberrations of *Rising '44*, Davies is, of the all historians writing in English today, the most sensitive to the importance of names. He provided in *God's Playground* an excellent set of onomastic principles for history writing, and he adhered to them strictly – even courageously – in all his subsequent works but one. And these works have had a great impact. They have represented Poland to the English-speaking world in a way that celebrates the nation's real achievements, without minimizing the contributions of its neighbours and internal minorities. They have shown the British the limitations of anglocentricity and anachronistic reading of the past. And they have helped to

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Sumlinski, Review of *Rising '44*, published by the Polish Library in Washington, [www.polishlibrary.org/review/rising'44.htm](http://www.polishlibrary.org/review/rising'44.htm); D. Pryce-Jones, Review of *Rising '44* in the *National Review*, [www.nationalreview.com/books/prycejones200407131547.asp](http://www.nationalreview.com/books/prycejones200407131547.asp).

create, not just for Poland and Britain, but for Europe itself, a post-nationalist history that is appropriate for the age of integration that Europe has now entered upon.

What is notable from our point of view as students of names is that, in constructing his brilliant versions of the past, Sir Norman has understood the importance of names and made them integral to his approach to history. Moreover, he alone among the major historians of our day has explored thoroughly and offered solutions to the problems of diachronic nomenclature. For these reasons he deserves the attention – and the thanks – of students of onomastics everywhere.