



Mapping under the Third Reich: Nazi Restrictions on Map Content and Distribution*

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Abstract

A 99-page 1947 State Department report discovered in the NOAA Central Library summarized sixty map-related regulations issued by the German government between July 1934 and June 1944. Although the Third Reich pursued cartographic unification and uniformity more vigorously than earlier central governments, regional diversity and the distractions of a multi-front war hindered attempts to standardize map series and develop a national base map at 1:5,000. Pragmatism trumped propaganda when Nazi rule-makers decided to retain Latin lettering for maps, rather than require the more ornate German script used in official government publications and strongly promoted for books and newspapers. Official mapmaking had numerous niches in diverse government departments. In restricting distribution of detailed maps to the public, Nazi cartographic policy recognized the importance of scale by drawing a sharp line at 1:300,000. Covering both large- and small-scale products, a 1937 law gave the Ministry of the Interior authority over private mapmakers, who now had to conform to official policy on geographic names as well as the colors used on political maps.

Keywords: cartography, Germany, map scale, map symbols, mapping policy, military secrecy, Nazi authority, rules and regulations.

Academic research has changed markedly in the last ten or fifteen years. Online catalogs let researchers canvass collections hundreds of miles away, and interlibrary loans often arrive as scanned documents in a matter of hours. Despite the obvious advantages of electronic research, virtual browsing is no substitute for being there, especially when a purposeful collection promises serendipitous discoveries like the State Department's assessment of cartography under the Third Reich that I discovered in summer 2002 at the NOAA Central Library in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Anyone seriously interested in American geodesy or meteorology during the nineteenth or twentieth centuries knows the collection, formed by combining the headquarters libraries of the Coast and Geodetic Survey and the Weather Bureau after President Richard Nixon merged these agencies into the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1970. Journals and post-merger acquisitions form an integrated collection, while books and reports in the two heritage collections survive separately in different parts of the library, cramped for shelf space but untainted by culling.

My find was Intelligence Research Report no. OCL-2996.1, prepared by the Division of Map Intelligence and Cartography and distributed by the Office of Intelligence Coordination and Liaison. According to a rubber-stamped date on the title page, the Coast and Geodetic Survey "Library and Archives" acquired its copy on March 27, 1947, less than two months after the official release date, February 5. Titled "German Cartographic and Map Collecting Agencies: Controlling Laws and Regulatory Statutes," the 99-page report includes translations or summaries of sixty regulations issued between July 1934 and June 1944. Had it been shelved sequentially, rather than wedged among unrelated materials on map projection, I would never have noticed it.

An introductory section describes Nazi efforts to centralize mapping. Despite noteworthy advances in instrumentation and technique during the nineteenth century, German cartography in the early 1930s was distinguished by a diversity of products and procedures. The nation's former principalities retained a surprising degree of cartographic autonomy, readily apparent in the assorted map series produced by provincial surveying and mapping services according to their own technical standards and bureaucratic traditions. Although the Third Reich pursued cartographic unification and uniformity more vigorously than earlier central governments, regional diversity and the later distractions of a multi-front war hindered attempts to standardize. A notable casualty was the ambitious 1:5,000 *Deutsche Grundkarte* (German basic map), a standard map framework that individual provinces were to produce according to the Reich's specifications. A square grid laid on a conformal projection would promote compilation of smaller-scale products as well as serve military users eager for reliable rectangular coordinates. A few provinces had 1:5,000 or 1:2,500 topographic maps for some areas, but most did not—the previous goal, quite adequate even today, was nationwide topographic coverage at 1:25,000. Long-range plans called for standardizing Germany's cadastral maps, which could then be used to compile the 1:5,000 basic topographic map. For parts of the country not requiring more immediate attention, *Katasterplankarte* (cadastral maps) complied at 1:5,000 on a matching geodetic framework could eventually be converted to *Grundkarten* by adding contour lines and deleting features relevant only to land registration and valuation. By 1938 only 570 of the 144,000 topographic map sheets required for nationwide coverage had been completed. Additional quadrangle maps were no doubt produced, but diversion of cartographic resources to military needs curtailed systematic development of the 1:5,000 series.

Regulations adopted in 1937 standardized the symbols and format of 1:5,000 and 1:25,000 maps. If the prescribed symbols did not address a particular need, mapmakers were to consult Bavarian maps, which tended to be more detailed and complete. Because of its comparatively accurate maps and surveys, Bavaria was allowed to retain its older symbols for churches as well as use different contour intervals, no doubt to avoid the huge cost of revamping suitably reliable existing maps. Uniformity, the report observed, was an inherently elusive goal, impossible without complete revision of all existing maps.

Pragmatism trumped propaganda when the rule-makers decided to retain Latin script for maps, rather than require the more ornate German script used in official government publications and strongly promoted for books and newspapers. Whether to signal the virtues of uniformity or underscore the point that legibility mattered, the Reichsamt für Landesaufnahme (Reich's Agency for Surveying) continued to use Latin script for its official reports.

As rules for geographic names issued in 1937 indicate, typography had other ways of connoting cultural claims and military conquest. In areas lost in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles, for instance, “the German names are to be printed in a bold type, the other [local names] in smaller type and in parentheses.” Bilingual labeling became standard for cities and towns, but it was acceptable to use only the German version where space was tight on a small-scale map. By contrast, only the German toponym was attached to countries, larger provinces, “the seas near Germany and around Great Britain,” and most (but not all) mountain ranges—Mont Blanc, for instance, remained “Mont Blanc.” Although a river crossing, entering, or leaving the country was to be identified by its German name throughout its full length, labels outside German territory were to include the foreign name in parentheses. Although most of the report examines the regulation of large-scale mapping by the Ministry of the Interior and its provincial collaborators, a short section based on an October 22, 1938 lecture by an otherwise unidentified Dr. K. Frenzel lists the cartographic roles assigned various government departments. For example, the Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, headed by the infamous Joseph Goebbels, controlled national and linguistic maps as well as political and historical maps, and shared responsibility for “colonial maps” with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Appropriately perhaps, the Deputy Führer for Prehistory—I never knew there was one—authored “maps of prehistory.” Intriguingly ominous in the absence of fuller detail are the “racial maps” produced by the Agency for Racial Policy and the Party Examination Board for Protection of National Socialist Literature. The latter agency, apparently an official censorship organization, shared an interest in school maps with the Reich Ministry of Science, Education and Popular Culture. An order issued in 1939 refers to another department with a cartographic mission, the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture, which had devised detailed procedures for compiling seven different types of map used in redistributing farmland.

Surprisingly few of the regulations addressed militarily sensitive details, perhaps because existing laws, characteristically stringent, were deemed adequate. An August 1939 directive prohibited “the showing of the exact locations of bench marks.” The following February the government ordered that “cartographic works of any kind showing parts of the Greater Germany [and] accessible to the public . . . shall contain no information whose publication might be detrimental to the common good.” Specifically prohibited were labels or symbols identifying military installations, defense plants, pipelines, and power lines as well as rail spurs or roads leading to fortified locations. Maps could not show the outlines of blast furnaces and other buildings with uniquely revealing shapes or differentiate military installations in built-up areas from other

buildings. Compilers, editors, and printers were responsible for compliance, and all maps had to list “the name, office or place of residence of [the] editor, printer, or producer, and the year of publication.” In 1942 censorship was extended to include tourists guides, hiking maps, and other descriptive works even if no maps were included.

Aerial photography was extremely sensitive, especially if photogrammetry was involved. A 1943 ruling allowed photogrammetric measurement only by the Hauptvermessungsabteilungen (Main Surveying Offices) or the Reichsamt. The same regulation placed strict controls on original film negatives from aerial surveys and ordered that air photos taken before January 1, 1938 be sent to the Air Ministry for review.

Nazi cartographic police recognized the importance of scale by drawing a sharp line at 1:300,000. A February 20, 1944 ruling restricted all maps at scales larger than 1:300,000, even older maps and those showing no sensitive features, by limiting distribution to government agencies and the military, Nazi organizations, schools, and the Red Cross. The following day a companion ruling recognized the pointlessness of censoring highly generalized maps. Maps produced before 1933 at scales less than 1:300,000 could be distributed freely, as could more recent small-scale maps that showed no censored features. Specifically exempt were schematic railway maps, sketchy bird’s-eye-views, and tourist maps at scales of 1:300,000 or smaller—as long as they omitted the scale and included no industrial plants.



[Figure 1](#)

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The most enigmatic regulation I found was issued in 1941 and also deals with scale. As summarized in the report, “The compilation of maps at scales between 1:5,000 and 1:25,000 is strictly prohibited. If they are required for special purposes, they are to be produced either by enlargement or reduction of maps at the two scales mentioned.” One way, I suppose, of avoiding dicey questions about what features could be included on intermediate-scale maps. Despite the report’s fascinating title, most of the regulations listed deal with bureaucratic responsibilities and personnel qualifications. Although a 1940 regulation extending German surveying into “eastern areas” recognized prior licensing only for private surveyors “of German

blood,” most statutes addressed comparatively mundane matters, such as the establishment of a state surveying office in Prague in 1942. And none were as revealing as the 1934 law giving the Ministry of the Interior authority over private mapmakers, who now had to conform to official policy governing not only geographic names but also the colors to be used for political maps, on which Germany, not the British Empire, was to be shown in red ([Figure 1](#)). “Characteristically,” the report’s authors opined, “German cartographers under the totalitarian regime did not ask for greater freedom of choice but requested new, rigid, and concise directives in order to avoid the danger of straying from the approved path.”