Jokes about ‘keeping the map makers busy’ are not popular with publishers of atlases. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, cartographers are having to change the names of towns and the borders of countries as well as their colour schemes and, in many instances, the spelling and alphabet they use. Along with increasing the demand for maps, the most radical changes in geography since at least the first world war are also increasing the cost of map publishing and drastically reducing the lead time available for production and distribution.

Times Books, which also publishes Bartholomew and Collins, is among those groaning about the extra costs. Thanks to the unification of Germany, last year’s reprint of the ‘Times World Atlas’ cost the company £50,000 ($95,000) for colour corrections and a revised index. Moreover, the reprint schedule for the new version—commonly used by international conferences as the definitive geographical source—has had to be speeded up in 1990, from every five years to every two years. George Philip, another map publisher, tells a similar story.

How do map makers cope with the turmoil? Publishers of atlases say that they are meticulous in their research and diplomatic in their choice of names. The name of a country or its borders are changed only when its independence has been recognised by the European Community, the United Nations or another international authority of similar standing. They are wise to be cautious. It is hard to avoid offending somebody with a new map. The threatened dissolution of Czechoslovakia is a case in point. Although Slovakia has long existed as a region, the Czech half was not formed until after the first world war and has yet to declare a proper name. The Royal Geographical Society suggests that Britain’s Foreign Office, and those map makers who cannot wait until the dust settles should opt meanwhile for the bland but reasonably safe name of Czech Lands.

Boundaries are still more tricky, especially in the Balkans. Once the European Community recognised Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina as independent states, publishers got ready to redraw the borders of old Yugoslavia. A question mark still hovers over Macedonia. The EC has agreed to recognise it, but insists that it must change its name.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union presents an even greater challenge for map makers. Although no borders have yet been redrawn, the refutation of communism is causing lots of changes in the names of cities, towns, villages, mountains and rivers. According to the Royal Geographical Society’s Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN), 4-5% of the 300,000 names of places or geographical features in the most detailed maps of the former Soviet Union are politically communist in nature. Thus map makers face the prospect of 12,000–15,000 adjustments. Even the detailed addresses on letters to friends are likely to require drastic revision as they are decommunised. Paul Woodman, the secretary of the PCGN, makes the point by quoting a typical household address in the former Soviet Union: Flat 24, Socialism Apartment, Lenin Prospect, Car Factory Suburb, Electoral Town.

Also under threat, if they have not been changed already, are the names of places called after political dinosaurs (Kirov, Kalinin); politically incorrect organisations (Young Communist League, Proletarians); important Marxist dates (Red October; May 1st); and any names that owe their origin to the ‘perceived quality of Soviet life’ (Truth, Freedom, Glory, Progress, Path of Lenin and so on). Map makers sigh too over what spelling and what alphabet to use. Before 1990, spelling in the Soviet Union was laid down by the central government, and all official documents had to be standardised in Russian Cyrillic. Ukraine now insists that as many as 30,000 names be translated into Ukrainian. Armenia and Azerbaijan are returning to Roman script. Other similar changes are threatened or pending.

Inaccurate records complicate matters. From 1953 to 1990, Soviet maps—printed without latitude or longitude readings—were regularly and randomly falsified. Militarily sensitive places were moved, or left out altogether. For instance, Nevel, a strategic railway junction in northwestern Russia, was shifted by several miles in each successive edition of the official map of the area. The purpose of these attempts at deception puzzles Mr Woodman. Western cartographers, he says, have had access to accurate maps of the former Soviet Union since at least 1945, when the western powers captured them from the Germans at the end of the second world war.

At the moment the PCGN and its American counterpart, the United States Board on Geographic Names, are divided on certain matters of language and dialect. British map publishers are, for example, opposed to the use of Belarus for Belorussia and Moldova for Moldavia (it is like referring to Germany as Deutschland, they say). A compromise applied in other parts of the world suggests itself: some publishers are willing to place Myanmar in the index beside Burma, but not on the map.

With all this work in hand, some publishers are talking, hopefully, about persuading the United Nations to create a fund to subsidise cartographers. Their cheek is astonishing. By the end of this year, every atlas that still contains the Soviet Union will be obsolete, and map sales will see a big increase. And with continuing troubles in the Balkans, the absorption of Hong Kong by China in 1997 and the possibility that South Africa will get another name, map makers look set to be recession-proofed throughout the 1990s.

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