

Place in World History

Ruth Mostern

Director, World Historical Gazetteer project

Director, World History Center, University of Pittsburgh

February 1, 2022

Most of us use the word place without thinking too much about what it means, but for historians, place can be a powerful concept. According to the geographer John Agnew, when we say that something is a place, we are invoking three ideas. First, we are talking about something that has a location. A place exists somewhere on the surface of the earth. Second, we mean that it has a locale. A place is a location that is a setting for social relations. Third, we are referring to a sense of place, which means that some people have had experiences that they associate with that location. In other words, a place is a location in which memorable events have transpired.

People create a sense of place when they erect monuments and when they topple them, when they check passports or evade border guards, and when they share a kiss or throw a punch. The geographer Yi-fu Tuan has pointed out that a place may be as personal as a sofa in your home or as vast as a nation, just so long as it is a location that holds meaning.

The collection of meanings associated with a given place may change over time. One place may be known by many names at the same time, and names may succeed one another. Constantinople gradually became known as Istanbul after the Ottoman conquest in the fifteenth century. A 1961 Soviet proclamation made Stalingrad into Volgograd. Today Al-Quds and Jerusalem are two names that refer to the same location on the map. On the flip side, vast and muddy rivers like the Mississippi and the Yellow have maintained stable names, even when they have flooded and taken new courses. The locations of the rivers have shifted, but they have nonetheless maintained stable locales.

Since the concept of place combines location with social life, focusing on places and place names permits historians to tell stories that transpire over both space and time. Place names saturate physical landscapes with multiple meanings that maps cannot reflect. Any given map tells only a single story, whereas oral and written documents may describe the complex processes by which locations turn into places.

Geometry is necessary for making maps, but dots and shapes on a map tell only a small part of the story of a place. The rest of the information about it – for instance, what it has been called, by whom, and why; who has been there and what has occurred there; who has contended for authority over it, and what texts have referred to it – may be the province of gazetteers. Gazetteers are resources that index many place names and assemble information about places. They can put places into dialogue with one another.

Many gazetteers include the coordinate locations of places, permitting users to map places and navigate to them. Gazetteers may also incorporate vocabularies of place types so that people can easily determine whether a given name refers, for instance, to a settlement or to a mountain. When you query

Google Maps for directions to a restaurant or a gas station, you are sending a search to a gazetteer. Gazetteers are key infrastructure for the geospatial internet as well as powerful reference works and platforms for spatial history narratives.

The World Historical Gazetteer is a web-based platform that offers infrastructure and content for *linking knowledge about the past via place*. The global content of the WHG offers a platform for conducting world historical reasoning and teaching. Given that the names and attributes of places vary over time and between communities, and places often change names in the context of conquest or oppression, the World Historical Gazetteer is also a platform for sharing information about names and places that may be forgotten or suppressed.

In short, place names—their origins, change over time, and reflections of identity—are a critical lens through which to explore history. Used with the interactive tools of digital history, the study of place names brings new, deeper, and broader connections to our understanding of patterns of historical change.