

CROSSING BORDERS: CARTOGRAPHIC AND MILITARY OPERATIONS AND THE INTERNATIONAL BORDERS IN THE LIBYAN DESERT BEFORE WW II

TÖRÖK Z.G.

Eötvös Loránd University, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

BACKGROUND

The history of colonial mapping of the Libyan Desert in the Eastern Sahara is a good case for the study of the historical contexts of cartography. In the first decades of the 20th century this huge region was still the largest of the few remaining blank spots on the map of the modern world. The harsh geographic conditions and the featureless terrain made traditional European surveys and cartographic representation difficult, so the route maps of the expeditions became important sources for cartographic and military intelligence.

EXPLORATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL BORDER

Until the post-WWI period the 1876 map of Gerhard Rohlfs' expedition was the only reliable source for the inner parts of the desert, especially the Great Sand Sea. Motor vehicles extended the range of the exploration expeditions and by the 1930s only the remotest areas remained unmapped. However, as the Bagnold expedition map (1932) demonstrates, the representation of the area was still based on route survey, actually route points and notes on a few important terrain features. European map makers had difficulties in the graphic representation of desert landscape and the maps typically included the field notes, rarely mentioning unusual map objects (e.g. dead camel).

The romantic period of exploration was strongly influenced by the ancient legends about hidden treasures and lost cities. The search for Zerzura, the legendary lost oasis, resulted in different cartographic hypotheses about the unknown desert. To locate the place Harding-King, a British explorer constructed a mental map of the highly unreliable information he could collect from native sources. After WWI Libya, formerly territory of the Ottoman Empire, became Italian colony and Egypt was a British protectorate. The international border was delimited and demarcated in 1925-26 by surveying and mapping commissions. Although only the northern section of the border was actually marked, the international border came into existence. The southern section of the border line divided the unknown region extending to the east from Kufra oasis, occupied by the Italian colonial army in 1931.

INTELLIGENCE, TOPOGRAPHIC MAPPING AND TERRITORIAL AMBITIONS

The character of 'Count Almásy' in the film *The English Patient* was based on the real László Almásy, who explored the Lybian desert in the 1930s. To find Zerzura Almásy led an expedition to the Gilf Kebir area in 1931. His expedition combined motor cars with a light aeroplane for reconnaissance and two of the legendary three desert valleys were located from the air. During this expedition, to fetch water and petrol, Almásy took a trip to Kufra.

This unexpected visit called the Italian colonial authorities' attention to the international border, and the topographical mapping of the region started. However, for the special conditions only smaller areas (e.g. Uweinat Mountains) were actually surveyed. The compilation of the Italian topographic maps relied on the contemporary expedition route maps. A careful analysis of their content reveals their original sources.

