

Philatelic Propaganda: Stamps in Territorial Disputes

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Stamps and Sovereignty

Anyone who sends or receives mail will know that stamps are used as postage. Stamps can serve other purposes, though, besides the very practical one of being used to post letters and packages in the mail. Not the least of these additional purposes, of course, is to raise revenue for a nation by having collectors buy its stamps. Stamps can also contribute to more specialised purposes however, and certainly a less common purpose is to serve as propaganda in territorial disputes. Since the first postage stamps were issued by Great Britain in 1840, several nations have used stamps as an opportunity to buttress claims to disputed lands. One important reason for this behaviour is that stamps express sovereignty.

Any complete stamp catalogue will support this point. Browsing a stamp catalogue is a good way to learn political geography, past and present, for listed along with modern nations are the nations and colonies that have not survived to this day. The pages can read like an obituary of states and nations: Afars and Isas, Zanzibar, Katanga, the Straits Settlements, North Ingermanland, and Tannu Tuva, among others. The outdated names appear because all these jurisdictions at one time or another printed stamps that were accepted in the international mail.

With the exception of stamps from Great Britain, a stamp always carries the name of the area from which it is issued, thereby saying 'this area exists'. More importantly, the stamp also says 'this area is claimed', either by the local government, as an independent country, or by a distant government, as a colony or territory. In either case, the implication is clear – 'don't mess with this area'.

This link between stamps and sovereignty was recognised as soon as stamps were first widely used. A colonial power in the 1800s almost always issued stamps for its territories, thereby strengthening its claim to the colonies. Once a colony became independent, the new nation usually started printing its own stamps as soon as possible.

Such behaviour is still seen today. Every new nation that emerged from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the USSR started issuing its own stamps within a year of independence.

Newly formed nations often issue stamps with important symbols, thereby further strengthening its expression of sovereignty. Flags, national heroes and maps of the nation are commonly put on stamps, as are excerpts from the nation's constitution or governing charter. A good example of a stamp used to express sovereignty was issued by Indonesia in 1963. The stamp shows a map of Indonesia with two flags located at the eastern and western extremities of the nation. The stamp was released shortly after the Indonesian government took West Irian from the Netherlands and was meant to express Indonesian sovereignty from 'Sabang to Merauke'.

When a nation moves from issuing stamps for its own area, to issuing stamps showing disputed areas, or even issuing stamps for a disputed area, then that nation has added propaganda to its expression of sovereignty. The resulting mix of propaganda and sovereignty is seen in stamps from several nations. A few examples are described below. These examples are not exhaustive but are meant to illustrate the use of stamps as propaganda in territorial disputes.

Argentina and the Falkland Islands

Argentina has a long-standing claim to the Falkland Islands, known on the mainland as *Islas Malvinas*. To support this claim, Argentina issued a stamp in 1964, shown in Figure 1. Argentina issued another stamp the same year, shown in Figure 2, that claimed the South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands.

When Argentina briefly took the Falklands from the United Kingdom, the victorious nation issued a stamp in 1983 celebrating the 'recovery' of the islands. Since the war, Argentina issued stamps in 1994 showing the wildlife of the Islands. The expression of sovereignty in these stamps is more

subtle than in the 1964 stamps, but is still present. The British, for their part, issued a series of stamps after the war to celebrate the ‘liberation’ of the Islands and to raise money for their recovery. These stamps were issued from the Falklands and from its dependencies, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Guatemala

Guatemala has claimed the entire nation of Belize since the late 1800s. In 1939, Guatemala issued a stamp showing a map of the nation that included Belize. Since then, Guatemala has issued four more stamps (in 1954, 1958, 1967, and 1971) that contain a map of Guatemala including Belize. The maps do not indicate that Belize is actually another county, and these stamps do not emphasise the claim to Belize.

Thus, these stamps indicate that the claim to Belize has reached such a level of acceptance that it no longer needs explanation, at least among the Guatemalan government. Figure 3 shows the 1954 stamp, issued to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Rotary Club. The majority of these stamps have been air mail stamps, probably to ensure the claim to Belize reaches a wide international audience.

Figure 3



Pakistan

Pakistan and India have been locked in a dispute over Jammu and Kashmir since independence. In 1960, Pakistan issued a stamp stating ‘final status not yet determined’ for these areas. This stamp is shown in Figure 4. Another stamp was issued by Pakistan in 1974, again showing Jammu and Kashmir.

Figure 4



Venezuela

Venezuela claims the part of Guyana west of the Essequibo River. In 1965, Venezuela issued a series of stamps showing maps made in the 18th and 19th centuries which support the claim to Guyana. An air mail stamp of 1970 explicitly states the claim to the disputed land. Stamps issued in 1973 and 1981 depict maps of Venezuela that include the disputed part of Guyana. These two recent stamps actually commemorate other subjects – the United Postal Union, shown in Figure 5, and the national census. Thus, like Guatemala, Venezuela feels its territorial claim no longer needs explicit statement.

Figure 5



Antarctica

Since the Antarctic Treaty was signed in 1959, claims to this continent have been put in abeyance. The Treaty has not stopped signatory nations from expressing their claims through stamps, however. Six different countries have issues stamps for their Antarctic claims.

Argentina has issued several stamps showing a map of its claim to Antarctica. The first one, in 1951, merely stated the claim. Other stamps have combined the claim with the celebration of related events: in 1958, the International Geophysical Year; in 1960, the National Census; in 1966, the expedition that planted the Argentine flag at the South Pole; in 1971, the fifth anniversary of that expedition; and in 1979, the centenary of the Instituto Geografico Militar, shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6



Australia issued stamps in 1957 showing its claim to Antarctica. These stamps were issued with the name Australian Antarctic Territory, underscoring the claim by giving a name to the area. Figure 7 shows one of these stamps. Australia continues to issue stamps for the Territory for use by scientists at Australian bases in Antarctica.

Figure 7



Chile issued two stamps before the Treaty, in 1947 and 1958, showing its claim to Antarctica. Figure 8 shows the stamp issued in 1947. Chile also issued a stamp in 1973 celebrating the 25th anniversary of its Antarctic base. A stamp issued in 1991 celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Treaty. All these stamps included a map of the claimed area.

Figure 8



France started issuing stamps labelled French Southern and Antarctic Territories in 1955. The stamps are used for scientists at French bases in the Antarctic and the Southern Indian Ocean. None of these stamps have included a map explicitly showing France's claim. Figure 9 shows a typical stamp for these Territories.

Figure 9



New Zealand calls its Antarctic claim the Ross Dependency. Stamps with that name appeared in 1957. Two stamps issued in that year included a map showing the claim; Figure 10 shows one of them. New Zealand still issues stamps for the Ross Dependency for use by scientists at its Antarctic bases.

Figure 10



The United Kingdom has taken an approach similar to that of Australia and New Zealand. Stamps labelled British Antarctic Territory started appearing in 1963 and are still issued for use by scientists on British bases. A stamp issued for the Falkland Islands Dependencies, shown in Figure 11, also shows the Antarctic area claimed by Britain.

Figure 11



References

Scott's Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue, 1996. The Whole World Stamp Catalogue, Richard West and Robin Ellis, 1981.

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