“A mule of a map: Combined Map (of part Belgium and France), 1913”

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A mule of a map: Combined Map
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Wars are frequently fought along international boundaries. This provides challenges for the mapmaker. Maps will be needed speedily and, while national mapping may already exist separately each side of the boundary, it is likely to have been produced by different mapping organisations to dissimilar specifications.

This was particularly true for the Western Front at the start of World War I. By 1911 detailed plans had been made to land a British expeditionary force in France and to concentrate it in an area close to the Belgian border. In advance of the war, the Geographical Section of the General Staff (GSGS) had prepared 1:100,000, five-colour mapping, GSGS 2364, covering the major part of Belgium. These sheets were based on comparatively up-to-date Belgian maps on the Bonne Projection, with an origin at the intersection of 56 grad N latitude and the meridian of the Old Observatory of Brussels (50° 24’ N, 4° 22’ 12.7” E). A graticule was printed at 10' intervals of both latitude and Greenwich longitude; relief was shown by contours.

On the French side of the border the situation was less happy. All that was available was GSGS 2526, a 1:80,000, out-of-date monochrome ‘photographic reproduction’ of the French Carte de l’Etat Major. The original map is not always easy to read owing to the heavy black hachures. The British edition suffered in the process of reproduction, and is still less clear. ... This map was produced by request of the Geographical Section, War Office, at the Ordnance Survey’. GSGS 2526 was also on a Bonne Projection, but with the origin at the intersection of 50 grad N and the Paris Meridian (45° N, 2° 20' 14” E). The graticule was printed at 0.18 intervals of latitude and Paris longitude; relief shown solely by hachures.

A single map sheet to cover the area of the planned force concentration and likely early manoeuvres was highly desirable. No time to draw a completely new map; what to do? The one solution that that you would think should definitely not be attempted would be a composite of the totally dissimilar GSGS 2364 and GSGS 2526 mapping in a single sheet. It would be like trying to combine one-inch Old Series mapping printed from a badly worn plate with, say, one-inch Popular Edition mapping in full colour.

Thus, it was with incredulity that I saw the picture of a sad copy of an “Ordnance Survey map of Belgium and France” advertised on eBay a couple of years ago. Surely, they could not have ...

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1 Peter Chasseaud, Artillery’s Astrologers, Lewes: Mapbooks, 1999.
2 Report on Survey on the Western Front, 1914-18, London: HMSO, 1920. This is one of the few reliable references for the details of the projections used in French and Belgian mapping of the time.
3 Some printings do have red contours added by GSGS. These were very much ‘guesstimates’!
There are some maps that you have to buy, whatever their condition, and this was one of them. When the cloth-mounted map arrived, it was in a sorry condition: badly misfolded and, judging by the pungent aroma and nicotine stains, it had spent many years being marinaded in smoke filled rooms. But it was absolutely fascinating.

The upper section was printed in four colours: black outline, red road infill, green woods and brown contours. There was no blue plate. As you leave this coloured section the style changes abruptly to the French monochrome black, with hachures rather than contours.

The only marginalia are bottom left, the title, ‘COMBINED MAP. (of part of Belgium and France).’; bottom right, ‘Printed at the Ordnance Survey Office, Southampton. 1913.’ and in the centre two 1:100,000 scale bars showing the scale as 1 inch to 1.58 miles or as 1 centimetre to 1 kilometre.

There is no GSGS serial number and, perhaps wisely, no squaring nor labelling of latitude and longitude. Indeed, it looks as though the mismatched lines of the two different graticules may have been deliberately weakened to avoid confusion. Figure 1 shows the overall layout and the presumed source material for the different parts of the map.

Figure 1. General layout and presumed source material.

Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, The National Library of Wales, has scanned a copy of the Combined Map and the best way of studying the whole sheet (without nicotine stains) is to go to their website and admire it there.4

A section of the break in the mapping is shown in figure 2. At first sight, the two sides appear to join up surprisingly convincingly. The differing French

4 http://hdl.handle.net/10107/5003875; accessed 20 September, 2023. The index page on the National Library of Wales website at https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/maps also allows access to both this and other digitised maps in their collection.
and Belgian projections are not a real problem at this scale. By reducing the scale of the French mapping and rotating by about 1.5°, the GSGS 2364 and GSGS 2526 mapping can be brought into alignment with a negligible theoretical error of around 0.3 mm. There are anomalies, for example the railway through Sémeries disappears at the mapping boundary. Presumably, the line was not yet in existence when the Carte de l’Etat Major was surveyed.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 2.** Detail showing the two styles of mapping.

The name of the village itself appears in full on the coloured Belgian mapping, but is bisected on the French side. There must have been complaints. Both the NLW copy of the sheet and my copy have an official red sticker gummed to the bottom margin *(figure 3)*, ‘The place names along the junction of the coloured and uncoloured portions of this map have in certain cases been cut in half and are consequently illegible.’

Closer inspection shows that some ‘fudging’ has taken place to make roads join up neatly. If we compare a section of the southern margin of GSGS 2364, sheet 8, 1910 in *figure 4* with the corresponding section of the Combined Map, it will be seen that in two places a few millimetres of road fill have been scraped off the red plate. Here, and elsewhere, the black plate has then been modified to join up the roads, but the green plate is untouched, giving an effect of woodland clearings along the old line of the road.
For want of anything better, and despite its deficiencies, this would have been a useable short-term expedient, albeit one of the most bizarre maps ever to be printed at the Ordnance Survey Office, Southampton.

**GSGS 2364 Sheet 8, 1910**

*Figure 3. Enlarged detail showing how the roads were joined up.*

**Combined Map**

*Figure 4. The marginal warning sticker.*