German reunification and the politics of street names: the case of East Berlin

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Abstract: Commemorative street names conflate the political discourse of history and the political geography of a modern city. Renaming streets features prominently in revolutionary changes of political regime. As a ritual of revolution, the renaming of the past is also an effective demonstration of the reshaping of political power structures. This article examines the process of renaming East Berlin's communist past in the years 1990–4 and the subsequent reshaping of the city's postcommunist political geography as an aspect of the reunification of Germany, and of Berlin in particular. The article investigates the ideological dispositions and political configurations that controlled and directed the renaming process, elaborating on the renaming process as a discourse of German national identity that is articulated in terms of the canonization of a democratic historical heritage. It discusses the renamings accomplished in 1990–2 at the level of district assemblies and analyzes the attempt made in 1993–4 by the 'Independent Commission' nominated by the Berlin Senate to rename thoroughfares in the center of Berlin, designated to become the seat of the national government of a reunited and democratic Germany. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

Commemorative street names conflate the political discourse of history and the political geography of the modern city. Spatially configured and historically constructed, commemorative street names produce an authorized rendition of the past. Politically motivated renaming of streets is a common feature of periods of revolutionary changes. As a ritual of revolution, the 'renaming of the past' is a demonstrative act of substantial symbolic value and political resonance, introducing the political-ideological shift into ostensibly mundane and even intimate levels of human activities and settings.

This article examines the process of renaming East Berlin's communist past in the years 1990–4 and the subsequent reshaping of the city's postcommunist political geography. Emotionally laden, highly publicized and intensively debated, the renaming of East Berlin's communist past was an aspect of the integration of the former capital of the communist East Germany into the reunited Berlin, the designated capital of a reunited Germany. The context of a twofold reunification (on city and state levels) made the case of East Berlin different from the contemporary cases of other East European capitals, such as Prague, Budapest or Warsaw, where renamings also figured in the course of the establishment of the postcommunist order. From another perspective, renaming East Berlin's communist past was an essential chapter in the complex political history of Berlin street names—the
recurrrent renaming of streets in the 20th century in the course of changes of regime. In this sense, the renaming of East Berlin's GDR past was anchored in a German political tradition and embedded into the German discourse of national reunification.

The political aspect of a renaming operation involves both ideological considerations and decision-making procedures which control and direct the eventual process. In the case of East Berlin, both aspects were combined in the context of the democratization of political life and the commitment to a democratic historical heritage as the foundation of German national identity. Different ideological orientations and specific interests of district assemblies on the one hand, and those of the Berlin Senate and the national government on the other, were combined to produce a particularly complex political configuration that both complicated the decision-making procedure and prolonged the renaming process.

The ordering principle of the analysis is a time-space matrix of long and short historical periods and locations—the city and specific districts. This method of analysis provides for a contextualization of details and their evaluation in different contexts that highlights the dynamic interplay of ideological notions and political interests in different stages of the renaming process. The article begins with two introductory sections, the first elaborating on street names as commemorations and on politically motivated renamings, and the second comprising a brief presentation of the political history of Berlin's street names. The main body of the analysis is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the renamings debated and implemented in 1991 in three East Berlin districts. The second part examines the attempt made by the Berlin Senate in 1993–4 to rid the historical center of Berlin, the designated government district, of street names that further perpetuated the communist past of East Berlin.

**General considerations**

In the jungle of modern cities, street names are more than a means of facilitating spatial orientation. Often they are laden with political meanings and represent a certain theory of the world that is associated with and supportive of the hegemonic socio-political order. In this sense, street names are embedded into the structures of power and authority. Of prime significance is the manner in which street names that commemorate historical figures and events canonize and evince a version of the national past in the cityscape (on the French case see Milo, 1986; Ferguson, 1988). As Barry Schwartz (1982: 377) put it, commemoration provides a 'register of sacred history'. Commemorative street names are not only instrumental for the mapping of the geography of the city but also provide an official and authorized mapping of history; as 'mass-producing traditions' (Hobsbawm, 1983), they are a prominent feature of the age of modern nationalism.

The significance of street names as historical commemorations becomes apparent when the political role of history, as both a version and interpretation of the past, is considered. On the one hand, political regimes and elites utilize history to legitimate and consolidate their dominance and reinforce their authority. On the other hand, national history is a prime constituent of national identity, while a sense of shared past is crucial for the cultural viability and social cohesiveness of both ethnic communities and nation-states. However, the existence of a canonized history should not obscure the fact that other versions of history coexist, versions whose subversive potential affects their suppression or marginalization. A canonical version of history is celebrated and often apprehended as a definitive representation and interpretation of the past, yet its hegemonic status concretizes and reflects specific power relations and ideological dispositions.
Street signs are mundane objects. Accordingly, it seems that the impact of commemorative street names on the production of a sense of shared past and in evincing official versions of history is significantly less than that of historical monuments, historical museums or memorial ceremonies. However, commemorative street names (like other place names) conflate history and geography and merge the past they commemorate into ordinary settings of human life. Embedded into language, they are active participants in the construction and perception of social reality. The merit of street names is their ability to incorporate an official version of history into such spheres of human activity that seem to be entirely devoid of direct political manipulation. This transforms history into a feature of the ‘natural order of things’ and conceals its contrived character.

The selection of street names is a political procedure determined by ideological needs and political power relations. Even if it may be presented as a response to popular sentiments, it is always implemented by nominated agents of the ruling political order and the naming procedure is a manifest feature of authority (see Palonen, 1993: 103–112). Naming as a feature of political authority becomes clearly evident with politically motivated renamings, first introduced during the French Revolution. In 1793, for instance, the ‘Place Louis XV’ was renamed ‘Place de la Révolution’ (later becoming the ‘Place de la Concorde’). With this symbolic act, the monarchist past was renamed, replaced by a direct reference to the revolutionary regime.

The politics of naming also entails the issue of jurisdiction and specifically the legal status of local (district), city and state agencies in regard to the naming of streets. In 1813, the Prussian state secured its control over Berlin street names when these were practically nationalized and the city was denied any formal jurisdiction over naming procedures. In democratic regimes, local government is legally in charge of naming streets, even though the state may have some rights as to the names of streets in specific areas of the national capital that are rendered nationally representative. Such differences matter less in authoritarian regimes, where local and central authorities are only formally differentiated.

The French Revolution set a model, and renaming streets has since become a common feature of major changes in political regime and ruptures in political history. Renaming streets has become a conventional ‘ritual of revolution’, in David Kertzer’s suggestive phrase. According to Kertzer, ‘radical political shifts must have strong support if they are to be institutionalized, and this requires that people give up long-established habits and previously held conceptions of their world’ (Kertzer, 1988: 153). Renaming streets is no doubt a means of achieving such an objective. Of much relevance in this context is Henri Lefebvre’s observation that:

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed, it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions and political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space—though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas. (Lefebvre, 1991: 54)

While most of the structural changes in the socio-political order are relatively difficult to accomplish, the renaming of streets is a relatively simple act whose impact on human habitat and its perception is immediate. Renaming streets in the course of a revolutionary phase of political history is only one manifestation of the general process of political change and its institutionalization. Its power, however, lies also in the proclamationary value that a renaming has: it serves as an unequivocal political declaration, displaying and asserting the fact that significant political changes have occurred and that a new regime,
equipped with a distinct world view, has been instituted. Renamings force a change in human habits and practices and introduce the political shift into everyday realms of human activities, which makes this apparently symbolic act an effective and even indispensable ‘ritual of revolution’.

A renaming act is a twofold procedure. First, an existing name is eradicated, which amounts to de-commemoration, and second is the commemoration associated with the new name that replaces a former one. The relative importance of each procedure is case specific and is determined by particular political needs and ideological pressures (see Azaryahu, 1992: 361). The convergence of the two procedures, however, is a substantial part of the symbolic message of a renaming as a celebration of change and a demonstration of authority.

Historical background: Berlin’s street names, 1813–1989

This section presents a schematic presentation of the political history of Berlin’s street names as a set of spatial commemorations.

The German Empire

Nationalized by the Prussian state in 1813 (Katzur, 1968: 5), the names given to Berlin’s streets and squares were intended to celebrate the Prussian dynasty and its military accomplishments. After the unification of Germany in 1871 and the institution of Berlin as de facto capital of the German Reich, street names also commemorated German national figures such as Schiller and Lessing and mythological heroes such as Arminius (the German hero who defeated three Roman legions in AD 9) and Barbarossa, the medieval emperor. The profound Prussian accent of the version of national history canonized by Berlin’s street names evinced the political hegemony of Prussia in the German Reich.

The Weimar Republic

The transition from the monarchy to a republic was not articulated by a corresponding erasing of the dynastic heritage from the street signs of the German capital, even though the matter was continuously raised by Communists and Social Democrats in the city council (see Azaryahu, 1988). Practically municipal resolutions were meaningless because street names were under the jurisdiction of Prussian state authorities rather than the municipal authorities. Prussia was governed by the Social Democrats, yet no comprehensive renaming of the dynastic and militaristic past was undertaken by the republican authorities. The Republic commemorated prominent statesmen, such as Friedrich Ebert, the first President, or Gustav Stresemann, its Foreign Minister, in the street signs of its capital. An act of much symbolic resonance was the renaming of the Koenigsplatz (King’s Square) in front of the Reichstag, the national parliament, as Platz der Republik (Square of the Republic). Carried out in 1926, at a time of relative political stability, this single renaming symbolically asserted the transition from a dynastic to a republican regime in the political geography of the national center.

The Third Reich

The Nazis, aware of the propaganda value of street names and determined to erase the traces of the Weimar Republic, were swift in their actions to rename all those streets that
were associated with the former regime and its history. National-Socialist political
mythology was evident in the commemorations of heroes of the regime, most prominent
among them being Adolf Hitler and Horst Wessel, the 'Martyr of the Movement' (see
Giese, 1934).

*Berlin 1945–7*

The renaming of the Nazi past was high on the political agenda of the reviving political
life of Berlin following the collapse of the Third Reich (see Karwelat, 1988; Azaryahu,
1990). Interestingly enough, the issue was already being discussed in the first meeting of
the provisional Berlin City Hall that convened on 24 May 1945. An important decision was
that the districts were responsible for naming streets, yet the right of City Hall to intervene
in special cases was formally acknowledged. Even though the need to 'democratize' the
street signs was a matter of consensus, two different approaches became apparent. The
moderate approach advocated by conservative circles was to erase the renamings
undertaken by the Nazis and to reinstate the old names. The communists, on the other
end of the political spectrum, supported a radical approach, according to which the
democratization of political life should include the renaming of both Nazi and Prussian
(namely military and dynastic) traditions. The long list of names that should be
decommemorated in order to accomplish a 'true' democratization of public space
included 1785 streets, 89 squares, 9 parks and 17 bridges.1 In June 1945 it was also
decided that the districts were in charge of the street names, with the exception that City
Hall had the right to name certain squares and streets after important contemporary
figures. Until February 1947, however, only 40 renamings were officially implemented
and formally registered.

*The GDR*

The conflict between the SED (the Socialist Unity Party, formed in 1946 as the heir of the
Communist Party) and the other parties in the Berlin City Hall led on 30 November 1948
to the administrative division of Berlin. The Soviet sector—East Berlin—became an
independent administrative and political unit, and the communist SED, as the hegemonic
political party, could implement its renamings in the part of the city it effectively
controlled. When the GDR was founded on 7 October 1949, East German street names
already evinced the claim of the communist state in-the-making to be 'the legitimate heir
of everything which is progressive in history' (Schmidt, 1978). Among the communist
heroes commemorated in East Berlin between 1949 and 1951 were Ernst Thaelmann, the
official hero of the German Communist Party; Stalin, after whom a central thoroughfare
was renamed in December 1949 Stalinallee on the occasion of his 70th birthday (in 1961,
in the course of the de-Stalinization process, it was again renamed); and Lenin, who was
commemorated in April 1950, on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The name of Wilhelm
Pieck, the first President of the GDR, was bestowed upon a central street in January 1951
on the occasion of his 75th birthday. These four names manifested the Stalinist order that
emerged in the GDR and canonized the historical heritage to which the communist state
was obligated. In April–May 1951, 159 'Prussian' names were eradicated, including those
of Bismarck and other prominent figures of German history considered by the communist
regime to represent reactionary aspects of German historical heritage (see Azaryahu,
1992: 361). In later years streets were named after leading figures of the communist state
and the ruling party, thereby fusing the history of the GDR and the political geography of
the East German capital.
Renaming the GDR past I: 1990–2

The last GDR renamings occurred in June 1989, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, with the renaming of streets after two radical French revolutionaries, Babeuf and Timbaud. In November 1989, the communist regime collapsed and in October 1990 Germany was reunited. The renaming of the GDR past was conducted in the framework of national (re)unification and the ‘democratization’ of political life. Notwithstanding the comprehensive adherence to democracy as the main pillar of the postcommunist order, there prevailed different interpretations as to what a ‘democratic' historical heritage actually consists of, and accordingly, which historical figures embody the democratic legacy of a reunited Germany and are hence entitled to be publicly commemorated. In East Berlin, unlike other former East German cities, the commemoration of historical figures was not on the agenda since these were already commemorated in West Berlin. Subsequently, the primary aspect of democratizing the street signs was the procedure of decommemoration.

It became apparent that two fundamental approaches were emerging: a moderate-minimalist and a radical-maximalist. Relating to two oppositional approaches is, of course, schematic since there was an entire spectrum of positions and attitudes. Yet the binary opposition between the minimalist and the maximalist approach corresponded to the polarization between conservative hard-liners in the West Berlin CDU on the one hand, and the former supporters of the Communist Party in East Berlin on the other. The divergent interpretations were evident in the proposed lists of renamings. A 'short list' presented in spring 1990, before the elections that put an end to the SED regime in East Germany, included 42 renamings. A 'long list' prepared in June 1991 by the Berlin Senate included 190 names.

The two approaches were also articulated by the terminology employed. The supporters of a radical approach referred to the legacy they sought to erase from the cityscape as 'the Stalinist legacy of the GDR regime' whose heroes were 'enemies of democracy' or even 'criminals'. The proponents of the radical approach were interested not only in erasing salient Soviet symbols (most prominent among them Lenin), but also targeted heroes of the revolutionary tradition of German socialism, such as Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg and Ernst Thälmann. The proponents of the moderate approach sufficed themselves with erasing the 'Stalinist' tradition represented by the names of state and party functionaries of the GDR, such as Otto Grotewohl, Otto Nuschke, Johannes Dieckmann, Albert Norden and Karl Maron. They also accepted the necessity to rid the cityscape of salient Soviet symbols. Their main concern, however, was to limit the 'damage' and to secure the further commemoration of the revolutionary legacy of German socialism in the street signs.

Before proceeding with the case of (East) Berlin, and in order to provide a comparative perspective, the renaming patterns in two former East German cities are presented and commented upon.

Rostock, the main seaport of the GDR and after reunification the capital of the province Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, provides an example of a radical-maximalist approach to the renaming of the GDR past. In January 1991, 80 streets and squares were renamed in what amounted to a comprehensive purge of the cityscape of the legacy of communist East Germany. The vacancies were filled by the names of German historical figures such as Bismarck and von Stauffenberg, the hero of the 20 July uprising against Hitler, who belonged to the West German historical myth. Konrad Adenauer, the founding father of the Federal Republic of Germany, was also commemorated.
Leipzig, the Saxon metropolis where 38 streets were renamed, is an example of a minimalist-moderate approach to the renaming of the GDR past. Among the decommemorated GDR heroes were Lenin, Wilhelm Pieck, Ernst Thaelmann, Ho-Chi-Minh and Maurice Thorez (a former leader of the French Communist Party). Significantly, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Rosa Luxemburg were not decommemorated. Prussian heroes already decommemorated in Leipzig in 1945 were not recommemorated, while no West German historical figures were recommemorated. While the theme of democratization was articulated by decommemorating the Stalinist past of the GDR, the theme of national reunification was mainly articulated in geographical terms, most notably by naming streets after former West German cities, such as Heidelberg, Ulm, Karlsruhe, Mannheim and Heilbronn. The 'new' geography thus inscribed into the street signs meant an extension of the national territory to include both East and West Germany in the framework of a united Germany.

East Berlin

In the winter of 1989–90, when the authority of the communist government was waning, streets were spontaneously 'renamed' by defiant acts such as overpainting of old names or by the putting up of signs with alternative names. In most cases these were the old, pre-GDR names, and as such articulated a preference for the restoration of traditional names. Even though the renaming of streets was on the public agenda, the expectations for rapid official changes were muted. Actual measures were taken only after the December 1990 elections of district and city assemblies had sealed both the reunification of Berlin and the democratization of government. Only one street was renamed before the GDR formally ceased to exist on 3 October 1990. On 9 September 1990, the Klement-Gottwald-Strasse (renamed in 1954 after the founding father of communist Czechoslovakia) regained its old name, Berliner Allee. The message of the renaming was both the name decommemorated and its coincidence with the 'Velvet Revolution' in Prague that effected the collapse of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia.

The renaming of the GDR past in East Berlin was also conducted in the context of the transfer of the federal capital from Bonn to Berlin (or differently formulated, the restoration of Berlin as the national capital), which was formally concluded by the German Bundestag in June 1991. The debate and the decision not only highlighted the national relevance and symbolic significance of Berlin's political geography but also pressured the Senate of Berlin, led by the conservative CDU, to accomplish the renaming of the communist past in East Berlin as quickly as possible. This meant exerting pressure on the district governments of the former East Berlin, formally in charge of the matter, to accomplish the necessary renamings. The renaming patterns in three former East Berlin districts (Figure 1) are outlined in the following sections.

Berlin-Mitte (the historical center). In May 1991, the district council voted in favor of 12 renamings in this district, which as the historical center of Berlin was permeated with profound historical associations and political symbolism. The renaming pattern demonstrated a differential assessment of prominent figures of GDR history and a critical approach to the old names that were erased by the GDR regime. One important decision was to retain the Wilhelm-Pieck-Strasse. Another decision was to decommemorate Otto Grotewohl, the first Prime Minister of the GDR, a former Social Democrat who joined forces with the communists in 1946 and hence was considered as a traitor by the western SPD.
Lichtenberg. The Lichtenberg district council approved 8 renamings in June 1991. The cooperation between the local CDU and SPD produced a broad political agreement concerning the historical heritage that should be represented in the street signs. The Lentsinallei regained its former name. The same applied to streets named after GDR politicians and foreign communist leaders. Also renamed were the Babelfstrasse and Timbaudstrasse, the last two names introduced by the communist authorities in June 1989 into the political geography of East Berlin.

Marzahn. Built and populated in the 1970s, this district was a bastion of the Communist Party. At the beginning of June 1991, the special committee on behalf of the district government presented its recommendations in regard to the renamings. The head of the commission was a representative of the PDS, the heir party of the SED. It is not surprising that this committee recommended the decommemoration of only two communist functionaries. In August 1991, however, the district council voted in favor of eradicating all traces of the Stalinist past from the local street signs. This meant the renaming of 10 streets. It should be noted that since Marzahn was a new district, almost no former names could be restored, as was the case with older districts. The new names that replaced those of communist functionaries were apolitical. The Heinrich-Rau-Strasse, for example, was renamed Maerkischeallee, a local-geographical rather than an historical-political name. A significant exception was the decision to name a street after Robert Havemann, a prominent intellectual and a central figure of the East German opposition.
Renaming the GDR past II: 1993–4

The first stage of renaming the GDR past in East Berlin, in the course of which 60 streets were renamed, was conducted by the district authorities. The renamings approved by the former East Berlin district councils signaled a basic approval of the historical legacy of German revolutionary socialism appropriated and celebrated by the GDR, albeit without such prominent elements of the GDR heritage as were directly associated with the state itself and the ideological hegemony of the Soviet Union. Significantly, the district authorities were careful not to decommemorate the mainly communist martyrs of anti-Nazi resistance movements who were prominent heroes of the anti-fascist mythology of the GDR.

The ostensibly moderate-minimalist approach adopted by the former East Berlin districts regarding the renaming of the GDR past had the effect of further canonizing the history of revolutionary socialism in the names of main thoroughfares in the city center, the designated government district. From a conservative perspective, the main flaw in the situation was that through their honoring in the street signs, Wilhelm Pieck as well as salient founders of German communism, such as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin, were symbolically integrated into the political geography of the national center of the Federal Republic.

The second stage of the renaming project, intended to eliminate the traces of the communist legacy, was initiated and promoted by the Senate of Berlin, in its capacity as the government of the city-state of Berlin. Though the district councils were sovereign to determine the street names in the respective districts, the ‘Capital City Treaty’ (Hauptstadtvertrag) specifically asserted the right of the Senate to determine street names in ‘areas with capital city function’ (the government district in the city center).

Wilhelmstrasse

The first direct intervention of the Senate in the naming procedure followed in the summer of 1993 in regard to the renaming of the Otto-Grotewohl-Strasse in Berlin-Mitte. The district council had already debated the decommemoration of Otto Grotewohl in the autumn of 1990, yet this specific renaming proved to be an extraordinary case. Exceptionally the issue at stake was the new rather than the old name of this important thoroughfare in the center of the city. The ‘natural’ option was to restore the historical name, Wilhelmstrasse. The problem, however, was that this traditional name was laden with historical associations and nationalistic meanings unequivocally linked to the German Reich. A restoration of the old name, therefore, could also be understood as an attempt to imply that German reunification also meant the restoration of the Reich. After a long debate and repeated voting, the district council decided in favor of Toleranzstrasse (Tolerance Street), a demonstrative negation of the legacy associated with the former names of the thoroughfare.

In 1992 the name Toleranzstrasse had begun to appear on the revised city and public transportation maps, yet the street signs had not been changed accordingly. The reason for the confusion was that the name was challenged in court. Another option that was seriously debated was to name the street after Willy Brandt, the former SPD Mayor of Berlin and German Chancellor, who died in the autumn of 1992. As it emerged, however, this option was not viable because of the legal requirement that at least five years should elapse between the death of a person and his public honoring in street signs. The
stalemate was ended when in June 1993 the Senator for Transport made use of his prerogative by declaring 15 August 1993 as the deadline for restoring the name Wilhelmsstrasse.

The ‘Independent Commission’

Setting up a commission. In an attempt to regulate the street names in the city center, the Senator for Transport nominated an ‘independent commission for the renaming of streets’ in autumn 1993, whose ‘task was to examine the street names in Berlin’s historical center and if necessary to recommend the restoration of names or to suggest new ones’. The first session was held in September 1993, while its recommendations were presented in March 1994. According to the senator in charge, setting up the ‘Independent Commission’, as its name implied, was intended to prevent an ‘unproductive’ and ‘ provincially and undignified’ political struggle between the districts and the Senate and to withdraw the matter of street names from the arena of political wrangling’. Its charter was legitimated by the view allegedly shared by many Berliners that there are still many street names that should urgently be examined because they contradict democratic traditions and damage us in the context of the Berlin–Bonn debate. The approval of the chairpersons of the SPD and the CDU factions in the Berlin-Mitte district council further ensured the legitimacy of the commission and its recommendations. The commission comprised seven members, among them three academic historians and the head of the German Historical Museum. The chairperson was Professor Heinrich August Winkler, a West German historian teaching at the Humboldt University in the former East Berlin and an expert on the Weimar Republic. The academic expertise of a majority of its members was meant to endow the commission with the authority that had been denied to the politicians.

Guidelines and criteria. Asserting that street names at the political center of the national capital should ‘in the widest possible sense reflect all traditions that have place in the memory of a pluralistic, tolerant democracy’, the commission also concluded that the Federal Republic, in its capacity as the second German democracy, should not publicly honor those who contributed to the destruction of the first German democracy. Practically, it meant that all veteran communists who were active in the Communist Party in the later years of the Weimar Republic were denied the right to be commemorated.

Recommendations. Altogether the commission recommended 11 renamings (Figure 2). The most prominent decommemorations proposed were those of Wilhelm Pieck and Clara Zetkin. The commission also recommended renaming the Marx-Engels-Platz in the center of Berlin, a square that had been the symbolic center of communist East Berlin. Two significant proposals concerned Karl Marx and Karl Liebknecht, after whom main thoroughfares were named in the center of Berlin. In an unusual step, the commission recommended dividing each street into two toponymic units. While one part of the Karl-Marx-Allee would further commemorate Karl Marx, the other part was intended to serve the commemoration of Friedrich Hegel, the famous German philosopher whose work substantially influenced Marx’s philosophical works. With this, the role of Marx as a philosopher rather than as political revolutionary was accentuated. Similarly, while one part of the Karl-Liebknecht-Straße, an extension of Unter den Linden, the central thoroughfare at the historical center of Berlin, could retain this name, the other part was to be renamed Schinkelstrasse, after the famous 19th-century architect whose buildings
Figure 2. Recommendations of the Independent Commission for street renamings in the centre of Berlin.
constitute a substantial part of the architectural legacy of Prussian Berlin. Significantly, the parts that were to be renamed were those closer to the historical center, thereby implying a substantial reduction in the status assigned to Karl Liebknecht and Karl Marx in the reshaped symbolic texture of the federal capital.

A decision of much importance was not to rename the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. In contrast to Karl Liebknecht, however, a co-founder of German communism, Rosa Luxemburg was an important Marxist theoretician who opposed the Leninist conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The acknowledgment of Rosa Luxemburg as a legitimate member of the national pantheon also balanced the decommemoration of Clara Zetkin and reduced the possibility of a gender-orientated criticism against the proposed renaming.17

Apparently the commission did not seek to completely erase the heritage of German revolutionary socialism but rather to eliminate from the cityscape those elements that were unequivocally Stalinist. The other side of the same democratic coin was the recommendation to commemorate Rudolf Hilferding and Matthias Erzberger, two finance ministers of the Weimar Republic and 'committed democrats' according to the Independent Commission. Their commemoration was meant to honor the memory of the first German democracy, hitherto under-represented in the index of national history evinced by the capital's street names.

'Pieck, Marx and Engels must disappear'.18 Despite the determination demonstrated by the senator in charge, specific political circumstances rendered the application of the Independent Commission's proposals virtually impossible. Formally the approach of two successive elections—to the European parliament and to the Bundestag—left little time for changes in the official index of street names. More serious were the political implications of the objections raised against the intervention of the Senate in what was allegedly a district affair.19 The Berliner Zeitung, whose readers were mainly residents of the former East Berlin, maintained that the local population felt patronized by the Senate.20 Such criticism resonated with and evinced the growing dissatisfaction of substantial segments of the East German population with the reunification process and the prevalent notion that the former East Germany was colonized by West Germany. In East Berlin, in particular, such sentiments resulted in growing support for the PDS (Table 1).

For PDS district politicians, the objection to the proposed renamings was a 'ritual of resistance' and an opportunity to reinforce the claim of the PDS to be an authentic representative of the local population and guardian of local traditions against western colonization. PDS activists collected signatures against the proposed renaming of the

<table>
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<th>Party</th>
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<th>Lichtenberg (4 districts)</th>
<th>Marzahn (5 districts)</th>
<th>Berlin (90 districts)</th>
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<td>19.6 (31.7)</td>
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Note: The corresponding results of the elections held on 2 December 1990 are given in parentheses. Since only the three big parties were taken into account, the results do not sum up to 100.
Clara-Zetkin-Strasse. A PDS district councilor from Prenzlauer Berg promptly maintained that ‘instead of expensive renamings, the money could be better used for the development of kindergartens and reducing traffic noise’. Furthermore, critical attitudes were also articulated by other political forces in the Berlin Senate. The Green faction denounced the renamings as being a ‘historical and international embarrassment’. Even the SPD, the coalition partner of the CDU in the Berlin Senate, maintained that the proposed renamings should not be enforced. In June 1994 the senator in charge explained that in order to avoid a ‘culture war’ with the (East Berlin) districts, the implementation of the proposed renamings was suspended. For members of the CDU faction in the Senate, the political compromise meant that the senator was giving in to the PDS. It was also argued that ‘if the names remain there also remains a piece of the “capital of the GDR”’, alluding to the formula used by East German propaganda in its effort to assert East Berlin as the capital of the GDR.

At this stage, two commemorations were formally executed when Marx-Engels-Platz and Wilhelm-Pieck-Strasse were renamed and their former names, Schloßplatz and Torstrasse, were restored. The symbolic significance of these two renamings was substantial. The Marx-Engels-Platz was the symbolic center of the political geography of the communist East Berlin, while the renaming of the Wilhelm-Pieck-Strasse and the decommemoration of the official founder of the GDR erased the last trace of the former communist German state from the cityscape.

Concluding remarks

The collapse of the communist regime in the GDR and the German reunification that followed were also evinced in specific and conventional ‘rituals of revolution’, among them the renaming of East Berlin’s GDR past. The renamings demonstrated the political transformation and emphasized the aspect of democratization as the quintessence of the process. Furthermore, the actual and debated renamings highlighted different approaches to the historical legacy of the reunited Germany and to the reassessment of the historical traditions associated with the GDR in particular, and in this sense pertained to the discourse of national reunification.

The renamings accomplished in the course of 1991 represented the effort of the district politicians to rid the cityscape of salient manifestations of the Stalinist past. This mainly meant the eradication of appellations that directly pertained to Soviet political hegemony and to the political history of the GDR. These renamings, however, were not intended to bring about a total eradication of the revolutionary heritage of German socialism from the cityscape. Compared to other former East German cities, Rostock being one example, the East Berlin districts applied a moderate-minimalist approach in regard to renamings. One of the most significant results of this was that East Berlin preserved substantial elements of the historical legacy of German communism, which also belonged to the symbolic foundations of East German statehood.

The second stage of the renaming process, though less effective in its impact upon local toponymy, was prompted by the Senate in an effort to rid the historical center of Berlin, the designated government district, of symbolic allusions to the GDR past. Setting up the Independent Commission was meant to render the renamings legitimate by dissociating them from party politics, yet as became apparent, this strategy failed. Although in 1994 the renaming of the communist past seemed to have been halted, renewed attempts to efface prominent communist commemorations from Berlin’s historical center were nevertheless to be expected. In 1995 the Senate attempted a renaming of Clara-Zetkin-Strasse (as
proposed by the Independent Commission), despite the fierce opposition of the district council. The influential German weekly magazine Der Spiegel commented that the renaming of Clara-Zeitkin-Strasse was on the brink of becoming 'a culture-war [Kulturkampf] for a world view on the black–white Enamel signs'. With the imminent relocation of the federal government to Berlin, it is to be anticipated that further attempts will be made to efface the last residues of the GDR past from the street signs of the center of Berlin. Legitimated by the Independent Commission, the aim of such future renamings will be to further integrate a democratic version of German history into the political geography of German national government.

Notes

1. This list included all proposals submitted by the districts; see Karwelat (1988: 14); Berliner Zeitung, 27 September 1945.
4. A term used by a functionary of the Christian-Democratic Junge Union; see Der Tagesspiegel, 16 June 1991.
6. Der Tagesspiegel, 23 January 1991 referred to that as the 'erasing of prominent figures of the SED from the cityscape'.
17. In this respect it is worth noting that altogether 46 streets in Berlin were named after women; see Berliner Zeitung, 7 July 1994.
19. Most outspoken against the proposed renamings was Berlin-Mitte; see Berliner Zeitung, 30 March 1994.

References


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