

Exploring the commemorative streetscape through time and space

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The recent debates about the names of streets, army barracks and airports as part of the #BlackLivesMatter movement has brought to the fore the potent symbolism of public commemoration. The current debates about memorial hegemony and the ideologies enshrined in the city space present us with a vivid illustration that the act of changing public denotation can function as a powerful mechanism to obliterate “the memory [and the legacy] of ... [a] former [world view and/or] regime” (Azaryahu 2012:387). Street names are particularly revelatory for tracing changes in representational politics since their commemorative potential is more subversive than the denotational semantics of heroes on horseback, statues on pedestals, and military infrastructure.

This talk reports on the results of an interdisciplinary project which aims to chart longitudinal patterns in commemorative street (re) naming in Poland and Eastern Germany across the last century. Central and Eastern Europe offers an unparalleled case study for exploring transformations in representational politics as a result of changes in state-ideology. Having established their first democracies after WWI, these states were occupied and/or governed by Nazi Germany until the end of WWII. Post-1945, the USSR-aligned countries were ruled by communist/socialist regimes until the end of the cold war brought parliamentary democracy.

We explore the ongoing “battle for the representation” (Trumper-Hecht 2009:238) of competing state ideologies as they find expression on the street names of Poznań, Poland and Leipzig, Germany. Drawing on methods developed in quantitative geolinguistics (Buchstaller & Alvanides 2013) and geospatial visualisation techniques (Oueslati, Alvanides, Garrod 2015) we approach the toponymic traces of “ruptures in political history” (Azaryahu 1997:481) across time and space. Our findings reveal that some geospatial patterns of (re) naming practices show relative similarities, such as the purging of Nazi semiotics after WWII. Others remain highly locally specific, such as the speed and the completeness with which communist semiotics was encoded and eradicated in urban toponymy. Triangulating these spatio-temporal trends with critical discourse analysis of the media and ethnographic interviews contextualises our quantitative findings in terms of their relevance for memorialisation processes during the eventful 20th century (Fabiszak 2016, Fabiszak, Gruszecka, Brzezińska 2019).

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