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Processing the Past and the Renaming of Streets (September 18, 1991)

Street names have substantial symbolic and historical value, and conflicts over the naming – and renaming – of streets have become a regular part of regime changes. After the fall of the Communist regime in 1990, numerous Berlin streets were renamed, and many of the changes unleashed a crossfire of criticism. This article examines why certain street names were chosen while others were excluded.

Will Wilhelm Survive the Street Fight?

Pieck and the Hohenzollerns in a single city / Reflections before the final round of renaming

For months a “street fight” has been raging in the East. The quarrel over streets whose names carry the burden of GDR history has given rise to completely divergent views on coming to terms with the past. The issue is going to heat up again during the final round of renaming in the last quarter of this year. The following essay should offer additional points to think about and reflect upon before new facts are established.

In May, after the District Deputies' Assembly in Berlin-Mitte had – by a vote of 37 out of 68 – rejected the idea of either renaming Wilhelm-Pieck-Straße or restoring its original name, calls resounded throughout Berlin's House of Representatives: “tasteless,” “organized insanity,” “a slap in the face for Berlin.” The competency of the deputies in Mitte, and of the districts in general, was called into question. CDU Bundestag representative Jochen Feilcke, who had already symbolically pasted the name Wilhelmstraße over the street signs for Otto-Grotewohl-Straße, demanded that the responsibility for renaming streets be “transferred to the Senate at once.” The chairman of the CDU party faction in the House of Representatives, Landowsky, pushed for a change to Berlin's street-name legislation. The goal was a rapid and comprehensive renaming initiative in the Eastern part of the city. Start date: October 3rd. It would be similar to the “concerted action” in the Thuringian town of Gera, where sixty streets had been renamed by March 1st. Now, the renaming is to take place under the authority of the districts; and if at all possible it will occur in all of the districts simultaneously between October 1st and December 31st.

The Past is to be Quickly Cast aside

The heated arguments of the past few months have been highly effective in the media; after all, the issue revolved and revolves around symbols, which have always had great importance in times of profound upheaval. It would seem that there's a great rush where one might have hoped for distance and differentiated views. The city is to be "done with its past" in short order. As early as November 1990, a list of about 230 proposed names had already been chosen by the "Street Renaming" working group under the direction of the first deputy of the then-mayor of East Berlin; the list included names like Arnold Zweig, August Bebel, Bernhard Lichtenberg, the Paris Commune, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Scholl siblings, Heinrich Heine, Heinrich Mann, and Frank Wedekind. One thousand six hundred and seventy-three suggestions regarding 238 street names were submitted by mail. It was striking how little distinction seems to have been made between the "problematic Stalinist legacy" and the democratic, humanistic traditions that are also recalled by street names in the East.

Perhaps the new situation after the fall of the Wall could have offered all of Berlin a chance to figure out, without rancor and haste, which names stand for our common and divided history. There are many distinct voices in favor of doing just that – also in the Western part of the city. Professor Reinhard Rürup, a history professor at the Technical University, said in the House of Representatives' committee on cultural affairs: "The mere fact that a street was given a new name during GDR times isn't reason enough to change it back . . . We have a lot of political names in West Berlin. Therefore, one shouldn't look with consternation at the streets in the East today." The popular counterargument that street names in the West "evolved with history" obscures the impact that the great upheavals in Germany during this century have had on street names. For example, Königgrätzstraße in Berlin (referring to the site of a Prussian victory in 1866) was renamed Stresemannstraße during the Weimar Republic; in 1935, it was renamed Saarlandstraße (on the occasion of the annexation of the Saarland to the German Reich), and after the war it became Stresemannstraße once again. Reichskanzlerplatz (1932) became Adolf-Hitler-Platz (1939), then Reichskanzlerplatz once again; at the beginning of the sixties it became Theodor-Heuss-Platz.

Every system seeks to set itself apart from what came before through renamings. As early as 1926, a commission of city deputies was appointed to work on the renaming of streets and squares. A decree by the East German Council of Ministers dated March 30, 1950, "for the elimination of names of streets, roads, and squares that are no longer tolerable" initiated the renaming wave in the East. Names that were "militaristic, fascistic, or anti-democratic" in character were to disappear by July 31, 1950. The most important criterion for new names was a "close connection to the anti-fascist-democratic order."

A Broken Relationship to Victims of the Nazi Period

The streets in the East also denote a certain course of political development and a radical turning point in this century. History cannot be twisted into what we would like it to be. In the Western districts of Berlin, it is perfectly fine for Adenauer, Marx, and Kaiser Wilhelm to adorn street signs at the same time. Why shouldn't the East contribute some democratic-humanistic traditions, which it undoubtedly also possesses, and which are characterized by names like Heine, Bebel, Tucholsky, Ossietzky, or by the large number of anti-Fascists who lost their lives during the Nazi period? What a signal Berlin could send by acknowledging murder victims like Lilo Herrmann, a twenty-eight-year-old student who, in 1938, having been found guilty of resistance by the *Volksgeschichtshof*, became the first woman executed in Germany. Many of these names are now supposed to simply disappear. As one woman author has written: "The victims of Nazism are put on a par with those of Stalinism and the Stasi. There's a mixing, a blurring, a leveling going on . . . People are probably supposed to doubt the dignity of the victims and the necessity of remembering." And so the "Straße der Befreiung" ["Street of Liberation"] in Lichtenberg also disappears.

No doubt, there are many who welcome the return of names that refer to the city and to history, like Rathausstraße, Gendarmenmarkt, Alt-Friedrichsfelde, or Breite Straße. But there's also the view that history has made its mark, certainly not a final mark, and that one should ask oneself in complete equanimity which names bestowed under the old system are indeed no longer tolerable. Maybe the time has come for us to learn to live with our entire history. In April 1967, 100,000 West Berliners signed a petition to prevent Kaiserdamm from being renamed Adenauerdamm. They were probably less interested in Kaiser Wilhelm than in preserving a traditional name that has played a role – however one might assess it – in history. Another example: at a citizens' meeting on July 13, 1991, about 150 residents of Friedrichshain voted against the renaming of Leninplatz.

Corrections Called for in East and West

The parliamentary faction for Alliance 90/ The Greens (Alternative List)/ Independent Women's League has requested that street names that "stand for historical situations of injustice" be changed, both in the East and the West, as a way of working through the past. A new, binding definition now applies – in addition to Nazi street names from 1933 to 1945, which are already covered by law – to "street names from the period from 1945 to 1989 that refer to active opponents of democracy and at the same time to the intellectual-political pioneers and advocates of Stalinist despotism, the GDR regime, and other unjust Communist regimes . . ."

The direction has thus been set. A person who is responsible for crimes against humanity surely doesn't belong on a street sign. But how do we decide today about the historical assessment of individuals? The historian Klaus Mammach has written: "If one wants to commemorate Schulze-

Delitzsch (a name to be given to a square in Mitte – T.H.), why do liberals like Wilhelm Külz and Otto Nuschke have to be stricken from the memory of Berliners . . . ?” Is their cooperation with the Communists after 1945 the only thing that counts here? After all, Külz was a leading liberal politician of the Weimar Republic and Reich Interior Minister in 1926/27. He died in 1948 (!), that’s to say, before the founding of the GDR. Nuschke was a Christian politician of the Weimar Republic who, after January 30, 1933, denounced measures taken by the Nazi regime. In connection with this, one female reader wrote the following about Theodor Heuss, after whom a square and a street are named in Berlin: “The fact that he was the first federal president does not undo the terrible political mistake he committed, with horrible consequences, in voting for Hitler’s Enabling Act in 1933 . . .”

“Anti-democrats existed not only in the SED,” says one deputy. “Intellectual-political pioneers” adorn street signs all over Berlin. What is the verdict on Kaiser Wilhelm, who gave his name three times to streets and squares, or Bismarck (ten times), or the Hohenzollerns (eleven times), not to count the Prussians, princes, and prince-regents? There’s a Hindenburgdamm, a Tannenbergallee, two Sedanstraßen, one Reichssportfeldstraße, a “Fliegerviertel” with sixteen streets named by the Nazis after “aces” of World War I, the most prominent being Manfred von Richthofen.

That, too, is our history – except evidently a very different one.

Source: Torsten Harmsen, “Überlebt Wilhelm die Straßen-Schlacht?” [“Will Wilhelm Survive the Street Fight?”], *Berliner Zeitung*, no. 218, September 18, 1991, p. 22.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap