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ERASED NAMES, DIVIDED MEMORIES: TOPONYMY AS A BATTLEFIELD IN EAST GERMANY

ABSTRACT: *The naming of objects, animals, and places transcends mere linguistic function, acting as a cultural mirror that reflects beliefs, values, and systems of world classification. Toponymy shapes the physical and symbolic landscapes where communities live and move, offering a unique lens to study socio-political transformations. This essay examines the emblematic case of East Germany, where toponymy underwent profound shifts during the 20th century, mirroring the region's turbulent political history. Under the Nazi regime (1933-1945), toponymy served as a tool of propaganda and control: Jewish names were erased, replaced by names glorifying militarism and National Socialist ideals. Following the establishment of communist East Germany (1949-1990), Nazi symbols were replaced with names celebrating socialism, equality, and internationalism, often honoring figures like Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Ernst Thälmann. Streets and squares bore names such as Platz der Befreiung ("Liberation Square") or Straße der Freundschaft ("Street of Friendship"), embedding ideological narratives into the urban fabric. After reunification (1990), historical, pre-communist names were often reinstated amid contentious public debates. The renaming of Karl-Marx-Stadt back to Chemnitz exemplifies the challenges of reconciling with the past while fostering an inclusive identity. The analysis of East German toponymy underscores the interplay between language, thought, and culture, revealing how names act as cognitive, social, and symbolic tools that shape human understanding of the world.*

KEYWORDS: Toponymy; East Germany; Political Ideology; Cultural Identity; Renaming Processes.

1. The city that speaks: toponymy, power and identity

Through a rhetorical device such as that of the "speaking city", which suggests that the city is not simply a cluster of buildings and spaces, but a living entity, which communicates through the traces left by the daily interactions of its inhabitants, it is possible to have a more immediate and vivid idea of the city as a dynamic social space (Ferguson 2006). In other words, every urban corner, every street and every square tell stories that reflect the values, struggles and social transformations of a community. Toponymy, in this sense, becomes a form of language that the city uses to express itself, where every name carries with it a profound meaning that is intertwined with collective and individual history.

The concept of the city as an entity that "speaks" is made even more significant when we consider the social dynamics that take place in public spaces. Cities are, in fact, places of constant negotiation and interaction, where people confront, clash and, at times, ignore each other, as shown in the work of Duneier and Molotch (1999). The social practices that emerge in these contexts highlight how social inequalities and interpersonal tensions are an integral part of the urban fabric. The city, therefore, "speaks" also through these conflicts, which are symptoms of a deeper malaise and social stratification that manifests itself in everyday

behaviour.

Cities also "speak" through their transformations, from the construction of new neighbourhoods that reflect economic and political changes, to gentrification that, while improving some spaces, ends up eliminating or marginalizing other urban realities. These transformations, while making the city more modern or more inclusive in some cases, bring with them a narrative of loss and replacement, where the memories of previous places and communities risk disappearing. Thus, the city not only tells its past history, but, in turn, writes the future through the choices made today.

Ultimately, cities "speak" when we listen carefully to the stories that emerge from its spaces and social dynamics. Place names and the experiences of its inhabitants are like words that, woven together, form a story that goes beyond the physical dimension of the city, revealing the complex political, social and cultural realities that define it.

In this context, toponymy, or the activity of naming places, is not just a descriptive practice, but a fundamental act that is part of human nature, a creative act that shapes our perception of the world. The need to give a name to what surrounds us is inherent in our way of being: naming objects, places, animals, plants, feelings, means giving them a reality. This act of naming, therefore, does not limit itself to recognizing or cataloguing what exists, but actively contributes to creating the meaning and existence of what is named.

Naming things is not the simple practice by which human groups attribute a label to what surrounds them, because the names attributed to objects, concepts, social practices and even supernatural entities reveal crucial aspects of a culture, offering a window into its beliefs, values, and systems of classifying the world. Therefore, toponymy plays a fundamental role, because it shapes the physical reality in which a population lives and moves.

In particular, toponymy is interesting because it reflects the vision of those who hold authority in a given territory: the names of cities, streets, rivers and mountains describe the history, culture and power relations of an area, because they refer to government figures (kings, queens, emperors or other political leaders), who are thus celebrated and legitimized, or to the history of conquests (whoever conquers a territory often imposes their own names, in order to erase the culture of the defeated people and affirm their own dominion), or, again, they refer to social differences or minority languages to be preserved and so on.

From a linguistic point of view, Ferdinand de Saussure (2009) taught us that the linguistic sign is arbitrary: the connection between the word (signifier) and the concept it evokes (signified) is not natural, but conventional. However, once this relationship is established, it becomes a creative force that defines and structures our reality. When a name is attributed to a place, an object or a phenomenon, that name becomes an integral part of the experience of that phenomenon. Toponymy, therefore, is not just a matter of labeling places, but of structuring our way of relating to them, of giving them an identity that resonates through language.

From a philosophical point of view, Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009) has deepened the notion of "language games", underlining that language is not simply a means to describe reality, but is an activity that constructs and shapes reality itself. According to Wittgenstein, every word, every linguistic expression, is inserted in a context of social and cultural practices that determine its meaning. Naming something is, therefore, not a neutral or passive act, but an active involvement in the creation of meaning. When we name a place, we are not only indicating a place, but we are participating in the process of defining that place and its identity.

In this sense, language not only reflects reality, but acts upon it. An emblematic example of this vision can be found in the act of naming a ship: when you say the phrase «I baptize this ship», you are not just making a statement, but you are carrying out a performative act that changes the state of the ship itself. The ship, in fact, takes on a new identity, a new reality, thanks to the act of naming.

Toponymy, therefore, represents a field in which language and reality are deeply intertwined. Naming a place is an act that not only reflects, but creates the reality of that place, attributing to it meaning and place in the world. This process is essential to understand how, through toponymy, we not only describe, but actively participate in the creation and evolution of places themselves. Starting from Guy Deutscher's intuition (2013) according to which «language colors the world», we can affirm that language is the means through which we not only understand the world, but contribute to forming it, and toponymy is one of the spaces in which this linguistic power manifests itself most clearly.

From an anthropological perspective, the process of naming a place goes beyond the simple description of a geographical space; it implies the attribution of an identity that is intertwined with the collective memory and cultural identity of a community (Dall'Ò 2019). Naming a place is, in fact, an act of possession and recognition, which embodies the profound relationship between people and the environment they inhabit. Place names are not just labels, but real vehicles of stories, myths, shared experiences and historical transformations. They reflect the changes and challenges of a community, such as migrations, conflicts and cultural changes, and, for this reason, they are considered one of the most powerful aspects of identity construction.

Anthropology has devoted a great deal of space to the exploration of how place names can reveal the ties of a people with their history, their culture and, no less importantly, with their politics. In this context, it is essential to consider the lesson of Michel Foucault (1990), according to whom power is not exercised only through laws or overt actions, but is also manifested in the control of language and knowledge. Therefore, place names are instruments of control: those who have the power to decide how a place is called, also have the power to determine how it is experienced and interpreted. Changing toponymy, for example, is not only a linguistic or historical issue, but a practice that reflects and consolidates power dynamics.

The changing of place names often accompanies processes of restructuring of political and social power and, as highlighted by Foucault, can be a means of shaping social reality. Toponymic changes are in fact

frequent during periods of political transition, where new regimes or ideologies seek to legitimize themselves through the modification of symbols and words that define public space. The ceremonies and rituals associated with the change of name of a place amplify this process, endowing the act with a symbolic meaning that reinforces the legitimacy of the new social order. In this sense, toponymy becomes a form of ritual of power, which reinforces and perpetuates the new vision of the world.

This dynamic is clearly visible in the toponymic changes of 20th-century Germany, which offer a prime example of how toponymy can both reflect and contribute to profound political, social and cultural changes. Following the end of the Second World War and the Allied occupation, and then during the period of division between West and East Germany, numerous changes in the names of cities and streets were implemented, both to remove traces of Nazism and to affirm new political ideologies. These changes reflected not only the desire to distance oneself from the past, but also the desire to build a new collective identity in line with the values of the new political order.

Ultimately, the act of naming is a practice that goes far beyond semantics: it is an act of creation, control, and legitimation. Every change in toponymy represents a change in the perception of the world, and through these changes societies reconstruct and reaffirm their identity and power. Language, and in particular toponymy, becomes a tool through which communities and governments construct the world they inhabit and, ultimately, the world they want others to see.

2. The metamorphosis of Germany: history and meaning of toponymy in the twentieth century

The German case represents one of the most complex and fascinating stories of political and social transformation of the twentieth century, a process that involved Germany in several phases, each of which left an indelible mark on its identity and geography. From the unification of the German Empire in 1871, through the birth of the Weimar Republic, the descent into totalitarianism of the Third Reich, the division into two opposing states after the Second World War, up to reunification in 1990, Germany has gone through historical events that have not only redesigned its politics and society, but have also left a profound imprint on its toponymy, the way in which cities and territories have been named and represented (Niven and Jordan 2003).

German toponymy is therefore a direct reflection of the different ideologies, regimes and visions that have shaped the nation, offering a mirror through which to observe not only political history, but also changes in collective values and identities. Each historical phase, from the Kaiserreich to the Third Reich, from the divided Germany of the Cold War to reunification, has brought with it a new symbolic language, which has found expression in the names of streets, squares and cities. These changes have not only been a way to honor political and historical figures, but also to legitimize or, on the contrary, dissociate themselves from the prevailing ideologies, as the many transformations of Germany in the last century testify. The history of Germany,

therefore, is also a history of places, signs and symbols, which tell of the complexity and contradiction of a country capable of going through wars, dictatorships, ideological divisions and, finally, a long and difficult reunification.

This reflection on toponymy is not limited to the mere chronicle of name changes, but becomes a tool for understanding how Germany has sought, through the passage from one era to another, to build and consolidate new identities and values, moving from monarchy to democracy, from Nazism to socialism, from division to recomposition. The "German case" is, therefore, the story of a country that, like its toponymy, is always evolving, constantly grappling with the memory of the past and the construction of the future.

a) Kaiserreich (German Empire, 1871-1918)

The Kaiserreich, or German Empire, was founded in 1871 after the victory in the Franco-Prussian War. This event marked the unification of Germany under the leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm I, and later his grandson Wilhelm II. The empire was characterized by strong nationalism and a centralization of power, with the aim of consolidating the new German nation under an authoritarian monarchy.

Place names during the Kaiserreich period largely reflected the influence of the monarchy and the military victories that had led to the unification of Germany. Many street, square, and city names were changed or created to celebrate the royal family and historical figures associated with the monarchy. For example, names such as "Kaiserstraße" (Kaiser's Road) and "Bismarckplatz" (Bismarck Square) became common, commemorating the emperor and first chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the architect of German unification, respectively. The Franco-Prussian War and other military conquests were celebrated through the naming of public places, with names that reflected the national pride and military might of the new nation. "Siegesallee" (Victory Avenue) in Berlin is a prime example, embodying the triumph and unity of the empire.

This phase of nationalism and monarchical celebration through toponymy not only strengthened national identity, but also served as a propaganda tool to legitimize and glorify the imperial regime.

b) Weimar Republic (1919-1933)

With its defeat in World War I, Germany went through a period of profound political and social change. The war caused the fall of the Kaiserreich and the abdication of Wilhelm II in 1918, leading to the birth of the Weimar Republic in 1919. This transition marked the passage from an authoritarian monarchy to a democratic republic.

During the Weimar Republic, there was a clear effort to distance oneself from the symbols of the monarchy and the aristocracy, a change that was also reflected in toponymy. Many place names were changed to reflect the new democratic values. Streets and squares previously named after royal or military figures were renamed to honour figures of the revolution and democracy, as well as to express ideals of freedom and social

justice. Names such as "Friedensplatz" (Peace Square) and "Republikstraße" (Republic Street) became frequent, symbolizing the new democratic order.

Furthermore, the Weimar Republic commemorated the martyrs of the revolution and political figures who had fought for democracy. Figures such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, both assassinated in 1919, were celebrated through toponymy, with streets and squares bearing their names, thus reflecting an acknowledgement of the social and political struggles of the period.

These toponymic changes not only represented a break with the monarchic past, but also an attempt to build a new national identity based on democratic and progressive values. In this context, toponymy served to promote and consolidate the new republican ideology, trying to anchor the principles of freedom, peace and democracy in the collective memory.

c) The Third Reich

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933 marked the beginning of a dark and tumultuous period in German history. The Nazi regime used various tools to consolidate its control over society, and place names were a key tool in this process. With the advent of the Third Reich, Germany saw a wave of place name changes designed to reflect and promote Nazi ideology.

One of the most visible aspects of this transformation was the introduction of names inspired by central figures of the Nazi movement and the ideologies of the regime. Streets, squares and even cities were renamed to honor party leaders and to celebrate key events and concepts of Nazism. For example, numerous streets were named after Adolf Hitler, such as "Adolf-Hitler-Straße", and other leading figures of the Nazi party, such as Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels. These changes were not random, but designed to create an everyday environment permeated by Nazi ideology, thus reinforcing the presence of the regime in everyday life.

For entire cities there were no changes of name, but "honorary" titles were added. Five cities were "Fuhrer cities" (Führerstadt) and many others were cities of particular importance to the Nazi regime.

The status of "Führer cities" was based on Hitler's vision of undertaking gigantic urban transformation projects in these cities, carried out by German architects, including Albert Speer, Paul Ludwig Troost, Leonhard Gall, Paul Otto August Baumgarten and others. The initial idea called for reconstruction projects in 35 cities, but some were to have as many as 50; however, most of these plans were not realized due to the outbreak of World War II. The five Führer cities were:

- Linz: the city where Adolf Hitler spent his youth and where he planned to retire after the war. Hitler wanted to transform Linz into a "German Budapest", more beautiful than the other German cities on the Danube (especially more beautiful than Vienna, which he hated).
- Berlin: Welthauptstadt Germany (World Capital Germany)
- Munich: The "Capital of the [Nazi] Movement"

- Hamburg: The "Capital of German Shipping"
- Nuremberg: The "City of the Reich Party Conventions"

This practice served not only to glorify Nazi leaders, but also to rewrite the national geography to reflect the values and goals of the regime. Clearly, the Nazi regime's use of toponymy had profoundly propagandistic purposes. Renaming streets and squares was not only a matter of honoring party leaders, but also of consolidating ideological control over the population. Every time a German citizen walked down an "Adolf-Hitler-Straße" or went to a "Platz der SA" (Square of the Sturmabteilung, the paramilitary forces of the Nazi Party), was constantly reminded of the presence and power of the regime.

Toponymy thus became a tool to normalize and legitimize Nazi ideology, making it appear as an integral and immutable part of the social fabric. This process of normalization was fundamental to the Nazi project of creating a homogeneous society that was ideologically aligned with the principles of the regime. Continuous exposure to symbols and names linked to Nazism helped create an environment in which the party's ideology seemed natural and indisputable.

In addition to the names of key party figures, Nazi place names also included propaganda symbols and concepts. Terms such as "Reich", "Führer", and "Volksgemeinschaft" (people's community) were frequently used to name public places, thus reinforcing the central concepts of Nazi propaganda. These names not only glorified the regime, but also helped to spread and inculcate Nazi values into the collective consciousness of the German population.

d) Post-World War II

With the fall of the Third Reich in 1945, Germany entered a phase of radical political, social and cultural reorganization. One of the first measures taken by the Allies was the removal of Nazi place names that had permeated the urban and rural landscape during Hitler's regime. Denazification, the process of purging Nazi influences from German society, also included changing the names of streets, squares and cities that glorified the regime and its leaders.

The removal of Nazi toponyms often involved the restitution of pre -existing names, which had been erased or altered by the regime. In many cases, old names, linked to historical and cultural figures of pre -Nazi Germany, were restored to re-establish a sense of historical continuity and identity. However, in other cases, new names were introduced to mark a clear break with the past and to represent new democratic and humanistic values. This process of renaming was aimed at removing the ideological legacy of Nazism and promoting a new national identity based on the principles of democracy and peace. As is well known, at this stage history bifurcated, with one path taken by West Germany and a radically different one taken by East Germany.

In the first case, that of West Germany, known as the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD), the renaming process was an integral part of the democratic reconstruction of the country. The democratic approach adopted

by the BRD was reflected in toponymy, which aimed to recover historical memory and celebrate figures and events that represented the values of democracy, freedom and human rights.

Many place names were changed to honour figures of the resistance to Nazism and to commemorate the victims of the regime. Streets and squares were named after people such as Sophie Scholl and Claus von Stauffenberg, who had fought against the Nazi regime. In addition, names that recalled democratic and humanitarian concepts, such as "Freiheitsplatz" (Freedom Square) and "Demokratieallee" (Democracy Avenue), were introduced to emphasize the commitment of the new German state to building a free and just society.

Adopting a democratic approach to toponymy not only helped restore a sense of normality and historical continuity, but also educated future generations about the fundamental values of democracy and the dangers of totalitarianism.

In the second case, that of East Germany, known as the German Democratic Republic (DDR), the approach to toponymy was completely different, strongly influenced by socialist ideology and the Soviet presence. The GDR, under the influence of the Soviet Union, introduced toponyms that reflected the values of socialism and communism, and which served to consolidate the ideological control of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) over the population.

Many street and square names were changed to honor key figures of the socialist and communist movement, both German and international. Case in point are "Karl-Marx-Allee" in East Berlin and "Leninallee", which commemorated Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, respectively, central figures of communist ideology. These changes not only celebrated the socialist legacy, but also aimed to inculcate the principles of Marxism-Leninism in the population.

The Soviet influence in the choice of names was evident, as many toponyms reflected the close alliance between the GDR and the Soviet Union. Streets and squares were named after Soviet leaders and events of the Russian Revolution, emphasizing the role of the USSR as a model and protector of the German socialist state. This use of toponymy as a tool of ideological propaganda was an integral part of the SED's strategy to maintain control over society and to promote adherence to the values of socialism.

e) Germany after Reunification

All this changed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, which was an epochal event that marked the beginning of the end of the division of Germany and led, less than a year later, to official reunification on 3 October 1990. This period of political and social transformation brought about a new wave of toponymic changes, particularly evident in the former regions of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

One of the priorities after reunification was the removal of names associated with the communist regime. In cities and towns of the former GDR, many place names celebrating figures and symbols of socialism and communism were changed. Streets, squares, and buildings named after Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and other

communist leaders were renamed to reflect the new democratic values and unified identity of post-communist Germany. This renaming process, also common in other parts of the former Soviet bloc (Jones 2006; BBC 2008), was not only a matter of eliminating symbols of the past, but also of fostering a sense of national cohesion and integration between the two Germanies.

3. Ideological legacy and urban transformation in post-reunification East Germany

The case of East Germany (GDR) offers a fundamental starting point for understanding how political ideologies and authoritarian regimes influence not only everyday life, but also the urban layout and toponymy of a nation (Yoder 1999). The onomastics of the GDR closely reflected socialist ideology, making visible, through the naming of streets, squares and stations, the values and symbolic figures of the regime. The names of public places did not simply commemorate historical events or political figures, but were also a means of celebrating the principles and structures of the socialist system. The "Youth Road", the "Unity Road" and the "Friendship Road" were not simple toponyms, but expressions of a political project that aimed to unite the population under the aegis of values such as socialist youth, international cooperation and solidarity between peoples. In this context, the names were not neutral, but tools to educate and remember the community.

The choice of names was not limited to historical figures or events of international importance, but also extended to more everyday areas. For example, streets named "work" commemorated the post-war reconstruction years, when the GDR was trying to revive the economy devastated by the Second World War. Streets such as those dedicated to agricultural cooperatives (LPG) and tractor-machine stations (MTS) testified to the importance of agriculture and industry in everyday life and the functioning of the country. Furthermore, many squares and streets were named after Lenin or Ernst Thälmann, a symbol of the socialist struggle, as evidence of a personality cult that permeated the public sphere, reinforcing the image of the GDR as a bastion of socialism.

Despite the end of the communist regime and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the process of de-communization of toponymy was neither rapid nor complete. In many areas, especially in rural areas, the memory of the socialist past remained firmly rooted. A survey conducted in 2006 by the Stasi Victims Memorial in Berlin (Knabe 2006) revealed that the GDR still had a significant presence in the urban landscape, with thousands of streets named after Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Liebknecht and Thälmann, among others. The persistent presence of these toponyms, confirmed in 2019 again by Hubertus Knabe, testifies not only to the difficulty of dismantling such a deep-rooted ideological legacy, but also to the resistance to change that characterized the process of transition towards a new national identity.

Indeed, German reunification marked the beginning of a long and complex process of urban transformation, which saw an abandonment of the centralized planning of the GDR in favor of a more market-oriented

and private property-oriented model (Brandstetter 2003; Wiest 2005). The cities of Eastern Germany were subject to extensive restructuring interventions, with particular attention to the enhancement of historic centres and the redevelopment of residential neighbourhoods (Herlyn 2002). The "Plattenbau", the large, prefabricated complexes that were symbols of socialism, were renovated, but the difficulties related to their structure prevented a complete redevelopment. In many cities, the difficulties related to demographic decline and peri-urbanization made the revitalization of some neighbourhoods problematic.

Another relevant aspect concerns the urban heritage, often ignored or destroyed during the socialist period, but which after reunification began to receive more attention. In fact, East Germany found itself having to reconcile modernization and the recovery of the past, a process that entailed not only economic challenges (Kauffmann 2015), but also cultural and identity challenges (Ferguson 2006). The speed of transformation and the need to integrate into the market economy highlighted the difficulties related to the adaptation of cities to a completely different context.

Another interesting element concerns the scarcity of toponyms linked to the resistance against the GDR regime. Despite numerous appeals by democratic activists and requests to honour the victims of the regime by dedicating streets and squares, only a handful of streets have been named after these figures (Knabe 2006). This silence on the resistance, together with the persistence of names linked to the regime, indicates how the process of memorialization of the GDR has been partial and fragmented. The tensions between official memory and alternative memory continue to mark East Germany's relationship with its past, while cities are confronted with the difficult legacy of a system that, although collapsed, has left indelible marks on the urban fabric and collective memory (Knabe 2019).

The reunification of Germany and the modernization process of its eastern cities, therefore, reveal the complexity of an adaptation that cannot be limited to the simple copying of the Western model. The cities of eastern Germany must deal with a unique history and identity, which cannot be erased or rewritten in a linear way (Ertman 2000; Buchstaller et al. 2024). The future of these cities depends on their ability to balance new economic and social needs with respect for their historical heritage, to prevent the past from becoming only an obstacle, but can instead become a resource for the construction of a new urban identity.

4. Rebirth and identity: the meaning of city name changes

In the novel "Invisible Cities", the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1994) tells that «Sometimes different cities succeed one another on the same soil and under the same name, they are born and die without having known each other, incommunicable», as in the case of the city of "Maurilia", which is not better or worse than the old "Maurilia", but simply different.

Other times, however, the same city – continues Italo Calvino – can have different names, as in the case

of the city of "Irene", which is always the same, but takes on different names: "Irene" is a name of a city from afar, and if you get closer it changes. The city for those who pass by without entering is one, and another for those who are taken by it and do not leave; one is the city you arrive in for the first time, another is the one you leave and never return; each deserves a different name.

Throughout history, many cities have changed their names, often due to significant historical events, such as colonialism, nationalism or political transformations. These changes reflect not only the historical and political vicissitudes, but also the different perceptions and identities that a city can assume over time (Williamson 2023). For example, in India, cities such as Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata have seen their identity change from colonial to post-colonial, with previous names linked to European rule, such as Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, being used by British colonizers. These new names, in fact, represent a return to India's historical and cultural roots, detaching themselves from the colonial past.

Similarly, in Africa, cities such as Harare in Zimbabwe, Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Maputo in Mozambique have changed their names to distance themselves from their European colonial heritage. Harare, for example, was previously known as Salisbury, a name that recalled the British colonial era, while Kinshasa was Léopoldville, a name that evoked Belgian rule, while Maputo was called Lourenço Marques until 1976, after the Portuguese navigator of the same name who explored the area in 1544. These changes are not just a matter of words, but mark the recovery of political and cultural autonomy, seeking to break with the colonial past (Santos 2022).

In Turkey, the case of Istanbul shows how the name of a city can evolve to reflect changes in culture and national identity. From Byzantium, a name of Greek origin, to Constantinople, a Roman name, to the current Istanbul, the change of name reflects the passage from one empire to another, but also the transformation of the city into a symbol of the new Turkish identity, more closely linked to Islamic culture and the secular republic founded by Atatürk (Georgacas 1947).

Another interesting example comes from Russia, with the cases of Volgograd and St. Petersburg, which have undergone significant name changes in response to political and ideological changes. Volgograd, once Tsaritsyn, then Stalingrad, underwent the change to mark the end of the Soviet era and Stalin's personality cult, thus returning the city to its original name (Jones 2006). Similarly, St. Petersburg has seen its name change several times throughout its history, from Saint- Pieterburch to St. Petersburg, then Petrograd, Leningrad, and finally back to St. Petersburg, in a continuous reflection of the oscillations between monarchy, revolution, and the Soviet regime.

Finally, in Germany, cities like Wolfsburg and Chemnitz are examples of how name changes can be tied to the dominant political ideology. Wolfsburg, in fact, went from the Nazi name "Stadt from KdF-Wagens bei Fallersleben" to a name derived from a medieval castle (NDR 2023), while Chemnitz reverted to its original

Slavic name after the period in which it was known as Karl-Marx- Stadt, a tribute to the communist regime (Karababa Demirkan 2021).

In all these cases, the change of names of cities is not just a superficial change, but a symbolic act that reflects the changing identities and political, cultural and social transformations. As Calvino says, every city deserves a different name, because every change modifies its perception and its very nature, making it unique for those who live there in that historical moment.

City name changes are often a reflection of profound political, social and cultural changes. Each transformation brings with it motivations that range from the need to break with the past, to a celebration of new ideologies, to a simple linguistic change.

One of the main reasons why cities change their names is to renounce their colonial legacy and return to their roots. In many former colonies, such as Mumbai (formerly Bombay), Chennai (Madras) and Calcutta (Kolkata), changing their names is a symbolic act of detachment from British colonial powers and the recovery of a new national identity. These changes are not only linguistic, but also a liberation from imperialist influences and a reaffirmation of local cultural traditions. In this sense, new names become symbols of sovereignty and independence, reflecting a journey of self-definition.

Another significant reason why a city may change its name is to celebrate political or ideological figures. For example, Stalingrad and Leningrad were names imposed during the Soviet regime in honor of Stalin and Lenin, two of the most central figures of communism. These changes had a strong symbolic charge, using the name of the city to glorify the ideology and the regime in a period of strong political control. The city itself became a living monument to the dominant politics.

Political propaganda is another common reason for name changes, as in the case of cities during the Nazi era. In Germany, many cities were renamed with names that expressed Nazi power and ideology, as in the case of Wolfsburg, which initially bore a name that evoked the regime's industry. These changes were instruments of control, creating a link between the city and the regime that administered it.

In some cases, name change reflects a departure from a negative past. This is the case of Volgograd, which was known as Stalingrad during the Soviet era. After Stalin's death and the process of de-Stalinization, the city regained its original name of Tsaritsyn. This change symbolized not only the end of Stalin's personality cult, but also an attempt to distance itself from a past that, while marked by heroic resistance during World War II, was also associated with brutality and repression.

Other changes, such as Istanbul, are related to simple linguistic evolution. Istanbul is a name that has evolved over time, from Byzantium to Constantinople to its current form. This change is not necessarily related to political change, but rather to a natural process of linguistic evolution, reflecting the city's adaptation to new cultural and historical realities.

All these name changes are not just a superficial change of label, but are often full of symbolic and identity meaning. They reflect the desire of each city to tell its own story, to reaffirm its identity and to mark a separation from a past that it no longer wants to relive. However, these changes can also be controversial, since not all citizens always agree with the intention behind the new name. In some cases, the old names can evoke strong emotions, linked to historical or emotional memory, creating divisions between those who feel that the change represents liberation and those who perceive it as an unjustified cancellation of a significant past.

The changes in the names of cities – or monuments and memorials – are a powerful symbolic tool that reflects political, cultural and social transformations (Pistolesi 2022). Each city, through its name, tells a part of its history and its evolutionary process, sometimes with broad consensus, other times with controversy.

5. The Chemnitz case: memory, identity and historical transition

Chemnitz, located in the state of Saxony, is a city with a complex and multi-layered history, marked by political, cultural and social change (Weber 2000). Famous for its mechanical and textile industries, the city experienced a period of great transformation after the Second World War. In the context of the division of Germany, Chemnitz became part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a socialist regime under the influence of the Soviet Union. This new political structure would have a profound impact on the city's identity, culminating in the city's name change to "Karl-Marx-Stadt" in 1953. The choice to name the city after Karl Marx, a symbolic figure of communism, reflected the GDR government's intention to inextricably link its identity to a socialist ideology. This gesture, however, was not only a symbolic act, but also a propaganda strategy that sought to consolidate the political order in the context of the Cold War.

The Karl Marx Monument, erected in 1971, with its gigantic 13-meter-high bust, became the visible symbol of the city and its most recognizable landmark. The city, now a testimony to an ideological past that had dominated East Germany for almost four decades, had to face radical change after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. With the end of the communist regime and the reunification of Germany, the country embarked on a process of rediscovery and reconciliation with its historical and cultural roots, and Chemnitz was not immune to this change. In 1990, a referendum, promoted by a group of citizens, decided to return the city to its original name, demonstrating how historical memory and collective identity could be recovered from the bottom, through democratic participation (Mangasarian 1990). The referendum, which saw 76.1% of citizens in favour of restoring the name "Chemnitz", was symbolic not only for its political dimension, but also as an act of cultural and historical reappropriation (Bundesregierung 1990; MDR 2021). The decision to abandon the name "Karl-Marx-Stadt" represented an attempt to distance itself from the socialist past and to reaffirm the city's historical identity, based on centuries of industrial and cultural tradition (Karababa Demircan 2021).

This move marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new chapter for the city, a reappropriation that reflected the population's desire to separate themselves from an ideological past that, while having been an integral part of their recent history, no longer represented their future (Azaryahu 2012).

Despite this act of reappropriation by Chemnitz, the East German past, with its deep political and social scars, has not been easily erased. Many rural areas and cities of the former GDR still retain traces of that history through toponymy. The streets and squares of many of these cities are named after figures and ideals of the communist regime, a sign that the collective memory of the socialist past has not been completely overcome. Walking through these cities is, in a sense, a journey through time, where the regime of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) still seems present in everyday life.

The continued celebration of these Soviet symbols in the streets is a topic of debate and reflection. While other nations celebrate heroes, artists and historical events in their public spaces, East German cities seem to preserve a selective and problematic memory of the past. There is no uniform process of reworking the communist past, and this carries the risk of normalizing a regime that committed acts of repression and human rights violations. The memory of those who opposed the regime, of those who suffered its oppressions, is often overlooked. The figures of dissidents such as Robert Havemann and the victims of the 1953 uprising are almost invisible in the urban landscapes, while symbols of communism continue to dominate.

The issue of street names goes far beyond the simple question of toponymy. It is a question of collective identity and how a nation deals with its past. In many areas of the former GDR, the memory of the regime seems to be treated with a certain ambivalence, as if the weight of history is not fully understood or addressed. Street names that celebrate communism are not just a remnant of the past, but a way in which East Germany continues to negotiate its post-communist identity. The cities and villages that preserve these traces of history offer a kind of testimony to the difficult transition from dictatorship to a democratic system.

Furthermore, the insufficient memory of the regime's victims and the omission of events such as the 1953 uprising raise important questions about the nature of post-war reconciliation. How do you build a collective identity in a society that has been divided for decades by a totalitarian regime? The difficulty of dealing with the communist past in East Germany reflects a tension between the desire to forget and the need to remember. This debate concerns not only Germany, but all countries that have lived under totalitarian regimes. Historical memory, if not elaborated, risks becoming a force that hinders progress, fueling divisions and preventing true reconciliation.

The case of Chemnitz, with its historic decision to revert to its original name and the ongoing debate over the streets, is a powerful reminder of the importance of addressing and understanding one's past to build an inclusive, democratic and just future.

6. Conclusions: the power of toponymy

The naming of public places, and of cities and streets, has never been a purely linguistic or geographical matter; it has been, and continues to be, a deeply political and cultural practice (Borer 2013). The name of a place is much more than a simple label: it is a powerful tool for the construction and legitimization of collective identity. As emphasized by anthropological theory and urban sociology, places are not only physical spaces, but are imbued with symbolic meanings that influence the behavior and perception of those who inhabit them. Every change of name is an act of re-signification that reflects a change in power relations, social values, and collective aspirations. Toponymy, in other words, is a means through which communities define themselves and their place in the world.

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (2005), in his idea of social space, suggests that urban space is never neutral, but is the product of power dynamics and social conflicts. The changes in the name of cities or streets can be read as strategies of social control, through which a dominant group attempts to impose itself on others or consolidate its own domination. In this sense, the power to "name" is linked to the possibility of constructing reality, of drawing the boundaries between what is considered legitimate and what is to be excluded. The case of cities that were renamed following regime changes, such as Stalingrad, Leningrad or the transformation of German cities during Nazism, clearly illustrates this dynamic of ideological legitimation. The name, in these circumstances, becomes a tool to establish a symbolic order that reflects the imposition of a new vision of the world.

Toponymy is also a means through which the collective memory of a city is constructed, since every change of name brings with it the removal or valorization of certain historical and social memories, and often the new names are accompanied by a reinterpretation of history. As Pierre Nora (1984) suggests in his theory of "places of memory", public places that retain certain names become vehicles of collective identity. When the name of a place changes, its perception by the community changes, and with it also the historical memory that is associated with that place. This is particularly visible in post-colonial contexts, where the recovery of an original name represents an attempt to liberate itself from external domination and to reinvent one's own history.

The change of name, moreover, can be interpreted as a reflection on the concept of fluid and evolving identity. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1982) have explored how power manifests itself in everyday details, practices and structures that are apparently not political but are deeply political. Foucault has underlined how power acts through the control and manipulation of language, and the name of a city is a perfect example of how language shapes our perception of the world. The same city can have a multiplicity of identities depending on how it is called and how it is experienced by the people who inhabit it and, evidently, this plays a central role in the formation of individual and collective consciences.

In the context of the philosophy of urbanism, one can reflect on how the name of a city not only speaks of its history, but also of the processes of power that shape its development. Cities, in fact, are concrete representations of political, economic and cultural ideas. For example, the name of a city can symbolize the will of a government to establish a new order, as in the case of the post-communist revival in Eastern Europe, where cities were renamed to mark a symbolic break with the Soviet past. In this way, toponymy becomes one of the main tools through which a society re-creates itself, rejecting or embracing certain historical legacies.

Ultimately, the naming of public places is a practice that goes far beyond the simple act of "naming". It is a manifestation of the symbolic power that governs social and cultural dynamics, creating and recreating urban reality and collective memory. Cities are never neutral, and their names are the result of political and ideological choices that reflect struggles for power, memory, and identity. As Edward Said (1979) highlighted in his analysis of colonialism, the naming of a city is closely linked to symbolic violence, a process that Pierre Bourdieu defines as a coercion of the body and mind that is often unaware of its coercive nature. Said, drawing on Gramsci's concepts of cultural hegemony and Foucault's notion of power as rooted in discourse, illustrates how symbolic violence is never neutral. Every change of name involves an act of selection and removal, an interpretation of what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. This process, which is part of an epistemic and civilizing project, often operates through educational and cultural systems that transform the named places into repositories of a presumed objective truth.

In this sense, the naming of a city can be seen as a political action aimed at imposing a doctrine that elides cultural differences in the name of an alleged epistemic dominance. Talking about changes in the name of cities therefore means recognizing the government of collective memory as a process that profoundly shapes the way in which communities perceive themselves, narrate themselves and place themselves within a global order that continues to be marked by unequal power dynamics.

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