

Transformations of place, memory and identity through urban place names in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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Abstract

The paper looks at the renaming of streets as a significant aspect of post-socialist change using an example of the city of Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. It discusses politics, processes and practices of (de-re)commemoration in street names, which reflect transformations of memory (remembering and forgetting), identity, heritage, power and resilience related to public space in a post-socialist city. Changing street names creates new connections between the past and the present and reflects political power struggles for control over contested space between various groups that tend to privatise their own history, heritage, memory, identity, places and symbols. The case of Banská Bystrica demonstrates strategies of the street renaming based on the decommunisation of names (done by restoration of the names from older periods or by introducing non-commemorative names), and on commemoration of names based primarily on local (or regional/national) heritage, events and personalities that might become areas of contested heritage.

Keywords: street renaming, urban space, memory, identity, heritage, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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Introduction

The objective of this article is to look at politics, processes and practices of the renaming of public spaces, particularly streets and squares in the city of Banská Bystrica in Slovakia in the post-socialist period. In the scholarly literature the most often used term is „street renaming“, although it covers also renaming of other public spaces of the city including squares and neighbourhoods or even institutions. In the paper I use the overarching term „street renaming“. Based on critical research on practices of street naming and renaming developed and summarised mainly (but not only) by ROSE-REDWOOD, R., ALDERMAN, D. and AZARYAHU, M., it focuses on relationships between heritage, memory, identity, location and power (ROSE-REDWOOD, R. *et al.* 2018a, b). Post-socialist transformation started numerous processes of diversi-

fication of Slovak society, accompanied also by diversification of memories, identities and symbols. The study deals with challenges of the street-renaming, related to remembering and forgetting in the post-1989 period. As ROSE-REDWOOD, R. *et al.* (2018a, 2) emphasise, the renaming of public spaces plays an important role in the remaking of urban commemorative landscapes. Indeed, various political regimes have been using street renaming as a strategy to show authority, ideological hegemony and symbolic power.

Street names primarily serve the purpose of orientation within the city, but they also have a broader significance. The names which commemorate key events or personalities from local, regional or national history or heritage are a manifestation of political order. They can also become expressions of local or national identity with a powerful symbolic importance (AZARYAHU, M. 1997;

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LIGHT, D. 2004). Street renaming is usually connected with a political regime change or other historic milestones. It has an impact on further symbolic transformation of urban space and on the (re)construction of urban memory. Along with monuments, street names (particularly commemorative names, based on local or national history and heritage) 'celebrate that which the governing authorities deem worthy of public remembrance' (ROSE-REDWOOD, R. *et al.* 2018b, 8).

Research objectives and methods

This article discusses politics, processes and practices of (de-re)commemoration in the city of Banská Bystrica in Slovakia on the example of the street renaming, which reflects transformations of memory (remembering and forgetting), identity, location, heritage, symbols, power and resilience related to public space in a post-socialist city. It focuses on the period of the first decade of the post-socialist urban transformation after the political change in 1989, however, it also builds on previous periods as they are crucial for understanding historic discontinuities and disruptions in Central Europe. It also briefly reflects on street-naming in the city in the 21st century.

The main research questions are: What have been the concepts used in the strategy of the street renaming in the early 1990s? Which concepts have been prevailing? How did the process of the renaming take place within the municipality and the City Council? What was the role of the street-renaming advisory body in the process? How did the power relations impact the street-renaming? How did the public participate in the process? Are there any consequences of the selected concept(s) in the street naming in the 21st century?

The paper is based on the results of qualitative ethnographic research carried out mainly in the period of 1990–1995 (participant observation and engaged research, 25 semi-formal/informal interviews with local inhabitants, experts – historians, geographers,

architects, linguists and ethnologists, and the city representatives), and the textual analysis of regional newspapers, scientific journals and archives documents. Meeting minutes from the advisory body (The Street-Naming Committee) and from the City Council in the 1990s (archived at the Registry Office of the Banská Bystrica Municipality), as well as regularly published articles of the Chair of the Street-Naming Committee in local and national newspapers (such as *Priekopník*, *Ludové noviny* and *Národná obroda*) addressing the public in order to encourage their participation in the process, were the main source of the data. My personal ethnographic diary as of a member of the Street-Naming Committee also contributed to the collection and analysis of research data. The nomination to be a member of the committee by the Mayor in the early 1990s led to numerous interactions with various stakeholders, particularly local citizens, municipality representatives and local interest groups. It also helped me to witness the dynamics of power relations in the new democratic state.

In addition, a methodology of spatial ethnography was partly used that allowed understanding of people and place relationships (based mainly on participant observation, interviews and analysis of textual documents – SEN, A. and SILVERMAN, L. 2014).

Place, memory and post-socialist change: A theoretical framework

Maurice HALBWACHS was one of the first scholars who stressed that the past was reflected and preserved in the built environment – a repository of conscious and unconscious collective memories (HALBWACHS, M. 1992). Since HALBWACHS, memory and its relation to place and identity has been attracting the attention of numerous scholars from different disciplines. Changing street names creates new links and connections between the past and the present and reflects political power struggles for control over contested space between various opposing groups that

tend to 'privatise' their own history, heritage, memory, identity, places and symbols. Both individual and collective memories of the city and its public spaces have a significant influence on the identification of urban inhabitants with their city and their sense of belonging.

Memory has become a popular keyword and topic not only in scholarly literature, but also in the marketing and branding strategies of cities all over the world. It is a consequence of what some authors call a general 'obsession with memory', a 'commemorative fever' or a 'remembrance epidemic' (HEWISON, R. 1987; MACDONALD, S. 2013). However, memory, especially collective memory is an important bond and a tool for socialisation and communication. It is the individuals as members of various groups who create, share and put forward collective memory through their individual personal memories. Collective memory is always localised and socially constructed within a particular political-economic context and it requires the support of a group in time and space (HALBWACHS, M. 1992).

According to BOYER, it is mainly physical artefacts, urban spaces, streets, monuments and architectural forms in which our memory is buried (BOYER, C.M. 1994). NORA who introduced the term *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) also stressed that memory is spatially constructed and it is attached to both tangible sites (streets, squares, buildings etc.) and intangible sites (rituals or celebrations) related to the past (NORA, P. 1989). The city is often defined as a physical space, made of squares, streets, parks, neighbourhoods, buildings, monuments, symbols and names of objects and spaces. However, the development of the city is not only in the hands of architects and urban planners, but especially of the people who use it: 'People make places, more than places make people' (WORPOLE, K. and KNOX, K. 2007, 2). The memory of each city resident reflects memories of different physical spaces in different periods. Previous generations' memories play an important role in the reinterpretation and redefinition of public spaces, reflected in their names.

AS ALDERMAN notes, (particularly) commemorative street naming and renaming is a vehicle for bringing the past to the present (ALDERMAN, D.H. 2003, 163).

Commemorative names of public spaces (streets and squares) in Central Europe do not have a long history and started to be introduced only at the end of the 18th century replacing descriptive names (mainly names inspired by the geographical place or direction such as Main Square, Lower or Upper Street etc.). A new way of street naming at the end of the 18th century followed a commemorative motivation to name public spaces after persons, events or ideas – usually those who were acceptable and supported by a leading political power (DAVID, J. 2013, 2). Commemorative names reflect important moments of history, local and national heritage (cultural and natural) or important personalities that played a role in local, national or international contexts, however, they are often built on contested narratives and memories. According to YEOH, street renaming can be seen as 'an uneven, negotiated process of constant mediations, in which people questioned, challenged, or came up with alternative readings of both the forms and meanings of street-names' (YEOH, B.S.A. 1996). AZARYAHU stresses that commemorative street names are a common feature of modern political culture. Together with commemorative monuments and heritage museums, they 'not only evince a particular version of history but are also participants in the ongoing cultural production of a shared past... Potentially contested and eventually challenged, commemorative street names concretize hegemonic structures of power and authority' (AZARYAHU, M. 1996, 312).

Dramatic change of physical structures, forms or functions of public spaces can lead to discontinuity and loss of memory, or to what SIMMEL refers as selective amnesia, which means selective and conscious forgetting in order to cope and survive the overwhelming memories of the past (SIMMEL, G. 1950). This has been a common case in most post-socialist societies. In this context,

VAN VREE uses the term ‘absent memory’, described as memories absent from public discourse at a specific moment in time and to emerge at another. He talks about ‘social forgetting’ (often based on shame, guilt or embarrassment) that can be understood as ‘a deliberate or non-deliberate exclusion or dilution of memories through framing, or, even, because of the very lack of proper frames’ (VAN VREE, F. 2013, 7).

In order to survive, people living in former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe had to learn to adopt such strategies of social forgetting by living double identities (public and private), suppressing publicly enforced memories of historical events and figures and creating counter-memories and counternarratives. In the context of the topic of the paper, the best example of these strategies was using the pre-socialist urban street names in everyday common language instead of using “new” street names introduced by the new communist municipalities.

According to MEUSBURGER, ‘the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population in socialist countries had such divided identities and counter-memories was one of the main reasons why Central and Eastern European communist systems, despite their military power and seemingly almighty secret services, collapsed within weeks after the development of mass public opposition in 1989’ (MEUSBURGER, P. 2011, 58).

A serious discontinuity of collective memory usually happens in the periods of crucial historic changes or natural disasters that can in a short time dramatically change the physical and social environment of the city. The post-socialist (post-1989) governing authorities faced a challenge to (re)build new urban identity upon the heritage of these historic discontinuities. They had to decide what the future vision and identity of the city should be based on. The construction of new identities was first built on the rejection of the socialist past (LIGHT, D. 2004).

Glorious medieval history was seen as the least problematic and most attractive to be marketed by local authorities in the 1990s

and the majority of activities that aimed at the revitalisation of urban identities as well as at new marketing of the city have been based on the return to medieval (so called ‘golden’) history and heritage. It was clear that the socialist period did not fit into the ‘nice’ historic image of the city. This observation goes in line with the results of YOUNG’s and KACZMAREK’s research in Polish cities. They observed the return to a medieval ‘Golden Age’ in many cities in Poland and across Central Eastern Europe. Cities with such history can more easily ‘leave out or obscure their socialist pasts, or only refer to a history of resistance to socialism’ (YOUNG, C. and KACZMAREK, S. 2008, 56). Similar though not exactly the same development could be seen in the Romanian city of Oradea (in Hungarian: Nagyvárada) – the city with a significant proportion of Hungarian population – where after the collapse of communism many streets received either new or interwar period names, mainly ethnically neutral (ERŐSS, Á. and TÁTRAI, P. 2010, 57). The post-socialist urban developments have demonstrated trends towards revitalisation and strengthening of urban identities through the practices initiated mainly by local governments and increasingly also by local inhabitants and activists.

The focus and the locus of research: Banská Bystrica

Banská Bystrica is a medium-size city situated in a mountainous area of Central Slovakia. With almost 80,000 inhabitants, it is the sixth largest city in the country and the administrative centre of Banská Bystrica Region (*Figure 1*).

First urban development strategies in post-1989 Banská Bystrica were built mainly upon the return to history, cultural heritage and commemoration. They included the renaming of streets and squares, reconstruction of the historic city centre, organisation of urban festivals and parades based on historical events, (re)introduction of new symbols and the (de-)erection of new monuments.



Fig. 1. Geographical position of Banská Bystrica inside Slovakia

All these activities created space for the (re) construction of new collective memory and local identity. Following DE LA PRADELLE we can ask to what extent these activities really addressed local inhabitants' needs and made them feel proud and identified with their city (DE LA PRADELLE, M. 1996), and/or to what extent they were just a tool for the manipulation of collective memory, celebrating the 'right' heritage and the 'right' moments of history and consciously forgetting less glorious chapters of the city's history. As WILLIAMS stated: 'Such is the desire for communality that only "correct" memories will be tolerated, usually resulting in real history being forgotten. Removed from any political context, the result of urban memory practices is often simply the celebration of attachment to place for its own sake' (WILLIAMS, A. 2005). WILLIAMS continues that this kind of selection of historical memories could lead to a false urban memory syndrome. He provocatively adds that we can see a demand for collective memory at a time when collective reality has disappeared. Each urban government tries to revitalise urban memories and identities through the engagement of the inhabitants in various activities, but in fact 'we

never really see a campaign of local residents spontaneously demanding that their urban memory be protected' (WILLIAMS, A. 2005, 3).

Banská Bystrica was founded in 1255 when it became the free royal city (called *Nova villa Bystrice*) by being granted royal municipal and mining privileges by the Hungarian king Béla IV. In 1263, the first magyarised version of the name *Byzterchebana*, later *Beszterczebánya* appeared, at the same time the German settlers (mainly those in mining business) used the name *Neusohl* (JURKOVIČ, E. 2005, 16). Rich silver and copper deposits and extensive mining sustained the dynamic development of the city in the Middle Ages. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the city was called 'the Copper Banská Bystrica' and flourished as a significant European mining centre with a strong German influence. The medieval city, like many other European cities, developed its economic strength from trade and commerce, based on its multicultural characteristics. The Thurzo-Fugger Company, established in 1495 in Banská Bystrica, has been considered one of the first modern capitalist enterprises in the world, having a monopoly on the trade of copper in Europe and worldwide. The 'Golden Age'

of the mining city of Banská Bystrica lasted until the 17th century (JURKOVIČ, E. 2005).

During its rich mining history, the city – similarly to many other cities in the multi-ethnic Kingdom of Hungary – was characterised by multiethnicity and multiculturalism, based on cultures of a number of ethnic and religious groups living in the city (the Germans, the Slovaks, the Hungarians, the Jews, the Roman Catholics, the Protestants, the Greek Catholics etc.). All these ethnic and religious groups left traces in the historical tapestry and memory of the city, however, they have not always been reflected in local toponymy/ urbanonymy. After the decline of mining activities, Banská Bystrica became a centre of crafts, commerce and services. The city witnessed its most turbulent history in the 20th century. Similar to other cities in Central Europe (formerly part of the Kingdom of Hungary and from 1867 the Austro-Hungarian Empire), the city's population experienced seven major political regimes and states in the 20th century itself, which had a significant impact on people's memories and identities, on their remembering and forgetting (BITUŠIKOVÁ, A. 2018).

Banská Bystrica has been constructing its new post-socialist image particularly on two selected chapters of its history – on the medieval mining history ('the Copper Bystrica') when the city was one of the biggest world producers and exporters of copper, and on the modern history of the Slovak National Uprising, the biggest anti-Nazi movement in Central Europe during the Second World War in which the city played a crucial role as the centre of the uprising ('the Insurgent Bystrica'). Representatives of 30 countries joined the uprising based mainly on partisan operations in the mountains. Although the uprising was defeated by the Germans, it has remained a symbol of moral victory of the Slovaks who at the time were living in the collaborationist Nazi „puppet state“ (SYRNÝ, M. *et al.* 2014). The municipality has been introducing the topic of these two historical periods in most cultural events and festivities organised in the city (City Days; The Radvaň Fair; Cultural Summer; and the

Slovak National Uprising commemoration). This approach has been reflected also in the renaming of public places.

Politics, processes and practices of street renaming in Banská Bystrica

The street renaming was one of the very first activities of the new municipality after the political change in Slovakia (then part of Czechoslovakia) in the late November 1989. The original historic street naming or toponymy used to serve primarily the purpose of geographical orientation reflected in names such as Central Square, Lower Street, Upper Street, Capitol Church Street etc. These names were used for several centuries since the foundation of the city (1255) until the end of the 19th century. The development in the late 19th century demonstrated the change towards the importance of commemoration naming based on key personalities and events of the city's or country's history and heritage. According to AZARYAHU, it was a measure of historic revision during periods of political change (AZARYAHU, M. 2011, 29). In the post-1948 socialist period, a new wave of street renaming started when majority of streets and squares in Czechoslovakia were renamed using commemorative names of the Soviet Union personalities: political figures, Red Army heroes, artists, writers, poets (e.g. Stalin's or Lenin's streets) as well as Russian geographical names, such as Moscow street, Russian street etc.

A number of scholars have written about toponymical cleansing and place renaming in post-socialist contexts (e.g. AZARYAHU, M. 1996, 1997; CZAPLICZKA, J. *et al.* 2003; LIGHT, D. 2004; GILL, G. 2005; KALTENBERG-KWIATKOWSKA, E. 2008; PALONEN, E. 2008; BUCHER, S. *et al.* 2013; LIGHT, D. and YOUNG, C. 2015a, b, 2018; BASIK, S. and RAHAUTSOU, D. 2019), however, most of the studies focused on country capitals (e.g. Budapest, Bucharest, Moscow, Warsaw, East Berlin, Minsk or Bratislava). Research of medium or small size cities in the region of Central and Eastern Europe has been rather rare

though it has been slowly increasing (e.g. ERŐSS, Á. and TÁTRAI, P. 2010; STIPERSKI, Z. *et al.* 2011; CRETAN, R. and MATTHEWS, P.W. 2016; MÁCHA, P. *et al.* 2018; PALMBERGER, M. 2018; CHLOUPEK, B.R. 2019; RUSU, M. 2020). AZARYAHU was one of the first scholars who proposed that it was important to broaden the study area to include smaller, provincial cities, too (AZARYAHU, M. 2011).

The study of the city of Banská Bystrica aims to fill the gap in such research orientation and on the basis of ethnographic methods to demonstrate specific local approaches to street renaming in a peripheral medium-size Slovak city.

In the city of Banská Bystrica, the most significant processes of street renaming since its foundation in the 13th century were connected with the following periods:

1. The end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (strengthening of Hungarian power and control over minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy);
2. Post-1918 (the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic);
3. Post-1948 (the communist coup and the foundation of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic);
4. Post-1989 (the collapse of communism and the establishment of the democratic Czecho-Slovak Republic and in 1993 the formation of the Slovak Republic after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia).

It is important to stress that the latest historical chapter – the foundation of the two separate states – the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic in January 1993 did not lead to any significant changes in place-naming/renaming in Slovakia. This might demonstrate that the ‘velvet’ split of the two countries with a common history did not have a traumatic impact on collective identity and memory that would lead to symbolic changes of place names – which was not the case in previous historical periods.

When looking at street renaming from a chronological perspective, it is obvious that two periods in the Slovak history when com-

memorative names were mostly preferred were the periods from the end of the 19th century to 1918 and the period from 1948 to 1989 (the communist period). It seems that political authorities during the democratic periods of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) and the post-1989 Czechoslovakia (and the Slovak Republic after 1993) preferred using non-commemorative place names in the processes of renaming, which I understand (based on my direct engagement in the Street-Naming Committee) as an approach or attempt towards a certain stability and resilience in the street-naming in the future.

The renaming of streets and squares in Banská Bystrica has been (throughout the history) most significant in the central historic district of the city, which has been the National Urban Heritage Site since 1955. This is in line with what GNATIUK and GLYBOVETS emphasise that commemorative names have been generally more common in central parts of a city than in the city’s peripheries, which means that different locations in the city show different symbolic significance and ‘naming and renaming of urban space often implies categorization of streets according to the perceived “importance” of a person, geographic name, idea or event’ (GNATIUK, O. and GLYBOVETS, V. 2020).

The Banská Bystrica historic city centre: from the Kingdom of Hungary to the end of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1255–1989)

In the city of Banská Bystrica, the historic central square has always been considered the heart of the city and the source of pride for local people, and one of the most beautiful urban squares in Slovakia. The name of the square changed several times throughout history, reflecting political powers as well as the dominant language of the time. For more than 600 years, from the 13th to the 19th century, the square held the German name *Ring* (the Square, known in the local Slovak dialect as *Rínok*). This name was changed in the 1860s to a Hungarian version *Fő tér* (in Slovak

Hlavné námestie – Central Square) and in 1886 to a commemorative Hungarian name *Béla Király tér* (in Slovak *Námestie kráľa Bela IV.* – King Béla IV Square).

After the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the square gained for the first time an official Slovak name *Hlavné námestie* (The Central Square), based on a local narrative using the simple name *Námestie* (The Square) when referring to the central square despite of its former commemorative names. At the end of the 1920s, with the development of the democratic Czechoslovak Republic led by the President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (who was half-Czech and half-Slovak by origin), the square was renamed *Masarykovo námestie* (The Masaryk Square).

After the establishment of the Slovak Republic (also known as the Slovak State) in 1939 which was a client state of Nazi Germany, the square was given a new name in the process of recommemoration: *Námestie Andreja Hlinku* (The Andrej Hlinka Square), named after the leader of the autonomist Hlinka's Slovak People's Party from the 1920s to 1930s.

The end of the WW2 with the Red Army and the Romanian Army as liberators of Banská Bystrica on March 25, 1945, clearly marked the further symbolic developments of the central square (Bitušíková, A. 1998). Only a few days after the liberation, a black obelisk made of marble imported from the Soviet Union and dedicated to the WW2 liberators of the city, (however, dedicated only to the Soviet Red Army, and 'forgetting' the Romanian Army liberators) was forced on by the Soviet representatives and eventually built in the lower part of the central square (Bitušíková, A. 2018). The renaming of the main square was a further challenge (Photo 1).

The central square was first renamed in the period 1945–1948 as *Námestie Národného povstania* (The National Uprising Square), and after 1949 (up to the present) *Námestie Slovenského Národného povstania* (The Slovak National Uprising Square). Only twice in history the square had a general, non-commemorative name (*Ring* from the establishment

of the city in the 13th century to the 19th century, and *Hlavné námestie* – Central Square from 1919 to 1923). Despite all official names, in everyday local communication only one name has always been used up till the present: '*Námestie*' (The Square), which has been seen as the heart and the symbol of the city by local population. This language is part of understanding of local toponymy and local memory. The common name '*Námestie*' (The Square) clearly defines the place on the basis of an easy identification and orientation without any confusion caused by changes of commemorative names.

The same practice of renaming public spaces referred to the adjacent streets that also changed their names several times. For instance, originally *Untere Gasse* or *Dolná ulica* (The Lower Street) changed to *Spitalgasse*, *Kossuth Lajos utca*, *Malinovského ulica* (Malinovsky Street) until it returned to the old non-commemorative name *Dolná ulica* (The Lower Street) again after 1989 (Photo 2).

The ideologically-motivated names of streets and squares bearing usually names of Soviet political or cultural figures or events that were introduced during the socialist period were rarely accepted and used by local population and were only presented in official documents and maps. That was the case of all streets in the central city area. Already mentioned *Malinovského ulica* named after the Soviet marshal Malinovsky was known by local inhabitants only as *Dolná ulica* (The Lower Street); *Ulica Februárového víťazstva* (The Victorious February Street) as *Národná ulica* (The National Street); *Polevého ulica* (Polevoj's Street named after the Soviet writer) as *Kapitulská* (The Church Street); *Jilemnického ulica* (Jilemnický Street) as *Kuzmányho ulica* (Kuzmány Street); or *Námestie 1. mája* (The May Day Square) as *Strieborné* (The Silver Square) (ROHÁRIK, J. 1995). Many local inhabitants were even not aware of the official (communist) names of the streets in the city centre and used pre-communist names as the main way of communication, geographical orientation, and sometimes also as a sort of resistance against the regime.



Photo 1. Slovak National Uprising Square (formerly Ring, Fő tér, Béla Király tér, Hlavné námestie, Námestie Masarykovo námestie, Námestie Andreja Hlinku, Námestie Národného povstania) in Banská Bystrica. Photo by Brrušíková, A. 2021.



Photo 2. Entrance to Dolná ulica (Lower Street). Photo by Brrušíková, A. 2017.

Post-1989 period: the processes and practices of street renaming in a new democratic Banská Bystrica

The process of the street renaming in Banská Bystrica was one of the earliest responses to the collapse of communism, as also Light observed in other cities (LIGHT, D. 2004). The renaming of public spaces in post-socialist cities commonly involved processes of de-commemoration and/or new re-commemoration (AZARYAHU, M. 1997, 482; BITUŠÍKOVÁ, A. 2018, 156) and became important in forming a new identity of many cities.

In Banská Bystrica, on the 19 January 1990, the Street-Naming Committee (*Názvoslovná komisia*) was established as an advisory board commissioned by the Mayor and the District Office to provide expertise in the field of naming/renaming of streets and squares. Its establishment was based on the Act No. 369/1990 that explicitly prescribed the way of functioning of Street-Naming Committees as advisory bodies within local municipalities and the Act No. 517/1990. The first Street-Naming Committee in Banská Bystrica consisted of nine members - historians, urban planners, architects, linguists, ethnologists and lawyers. The members were independent experts nominated by the Mayor that did not represent any political parties or interest groups. I was nominated as one of the members.

The Street-Naming Committee had regular meetings several times a year from 1990 to 1995 (most frequently in the first two years of the 1990s) and its task was to propose and discuss new names for streets and squares based on the expert proposals, discussion and public participation. The first step towards starting the process of the renaming was to define key concepts of the new renaming, based on the following principles:

- The Act 93/1970 about names of places and their streets (still in practice at the time);
- To build on historical identity of old original street names (often geographically-based);
- To propose new street names based on local/regional personalities or historic events;

- To build on historical and cultural traditions of the city and the region.²

Following these principles, the initial criterion of the street renaming was the ‘decommunisation’ of street names and their replacement with ideologically neutral names (where possible) in order to achieve a certain level of sustainability and resilience. Sustainability and resilience in this context can be understood as a capacity of the city and its residents to resist and avoid name changes in the future and to build on the names that are stable and undisputable, which meant either using non-commemorative names or names reflecting local natural, historical and cultural heritage that was not connected to contested history and memory.

The very first wave of the street renaming was done by a direct restoration of the names from the pre-socialist and older periods, based on geographical orientation. The second important criterion was taking into account the historical identity of public spaces and local topography, and commemorating heritage of the city, the region and the country.

The members of the committee agreed to bring old, locally used names back to the city centre and in particular cases to introduce new commemorative names. At the same time they proposed to use preferably non-commemorative names with a long(er)-term validity in the neighbourhoods further outside the city centre,³ which is in line with the observations of GNATIUK, O. and GLYBOVETS, V. (2020).

Despite the approach of the committee, which did not expect any political intervention in their expert recommendations, the renaming of streets and squares in the central area turned into a power struggle for control over space and names between various ‘old’ and

² Minutes from the Street-Naming Committee, 12 January 1990. Archives of the Banská Bystrica Municipality.

³ Streets and squares in several neighbourhoods were given new names based on geographical identification (often following old topography names), industrial-heritage based names (following older economies of the neighbourhood such as mining or trading), names based on significant objects (such as the Court) or nature (garden, forest, trees, flowers etc.).

‘new’ groups. As AZARYAHU has stated, ‘the selection of street names is a political procedure determined by ideological needs and political power relations’ (AZARYAHU, M. 1997, 481).

All new proposals made either by the committee experts or individual citizens were published in local newspapers and open for public participation and debate, which was a very new idea in the early 1990s. Following this objective, the chair of the committee regularly published new street name proposals in the main local newspaper (*Priekopník*) with the aim to motivate the general public in taking part in a new process of participative street-naming (e.g. OĐALOŠ, P. 1990a, b, c, d, e, 1991a, b, c, d).

Soon after the November 1989, two groups emerged as the most active opponents to any change regarding street renaming: 1. the former communist city representatives, and 2. the Anti-Fascist Fighters Union (*Zväz protifašistických bojovníkov*) members. The former communist officials protested against new names, especially those replacing the names of cities, events or figures of the former Soviet Union or the names of the communist leaders (particularly Lenin). The other group – the former partisans who fought in the anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising during the WW2 – wanted to protect mainly ‘revolutionary’ names related to the Red Army as the liberator. These two groups managed to stop the renaming of the main square (the Slovak National Uprising Square). The proposal of the expert committee to change the square name to the commonly used *Námestie* (The Square) was motivated by the fact that the name was used by the local population in the local toponymy and local language for several centuries. The expert committee proposed to transfer the name of the Slovak National Uprising Square to another public space in the city, near the Slovak National Uprising Museum, however, after numerous discussions between the committee and two opposing groups, the expert committee gave up and agreed to keep the square name from the socialist period. The final argument was based on the fact that the Slovak National Uprising was internationally a highly respect-

ed anti-Nazi movement of the WW2, and for these reasons its name was an acceptable and respected name for the central square name.

Another contested site in the renaming conflict was a site square in the castle area next to the central square named after the Soviet Red Army (*Námestie Červenej Armády*) – the army that liberated the city on 26 March 1945 together with the Romanian Army. After long discussions within the Street-Naming Committee and following public discussions, the square was given a new name: *Námestie Banického povstania* (The Miners’ Uprising Square), which referred to an important milestone in the medieval history of the city (1525–1526). Soon after the new street signs were installed on all corners of the square, the City Council suddenly rejected the expert committee’s decision and the next day new signs were installed, carrying the name *Námestie Štefana Moyzesa* (The Štefan Moyzes Square) (*Photo 3*), named after the Roman-Catholic bishop and the first chair of *Matica slovenská* (the cultural institution of the Slovaks in the 19th century). The Street-Naming Committee published a protest in the local newspaper and sent a letter to the Mayor. The City Council responded that the change was done as a response to citizens’ protests who lived on the square. In fact, there were no residential buildings on the square, it was only the Roman-Catholic Bishop’s Office that intervened in this case and managed to enforce the change of the square name (OĐALOŠ, P. 1990d; RADA MsNV v Banskej Bystrici 1990).

The examples of above mentioned practices demonstrate that the processes of renaming streets and squares in Banská Bystrica were marked by a power struggle between various groups presenting or occupying different power positions that tried to put a stamp of their collective memory, identity and heritage on public spaces and by doing so to gain a symbolic ownership of them.

Michael ROTHENBERG describes this as a competitive nature of contemporary public memory when different groups fight for representation in the public sphere and fear that their histories will be blocked out by the histories of other groups (ROTHENBERG, M. 2009).



Photo 3. The Štefan Moyzes Square. Photo by Bitušíková, A. 2019.

The processes and practices of the street renaming were most turbulent in the first months and years of the 1990s. They showed lack of experiences in managing participatory methods of engaging citizens in local policies and practices, however, they were the first attempts of involving local inhabitants into local governance.

Power groups from the socialist period, but also new emerging groups (such as the church or other interest groups) were using their influence through the City Council as well as through print media in order to gain a symbolic control over public space. The process of the renaming was more or less finalised within five years after 1989. In Banská Bystrica, by the end of January 1990, the first thirteen streets were renamed in the city centre; by the end of September 1991, another nineteen streets were renamed in the suburbs, and by the end of 1995 – the last large wave of renaming happened – another eight streets were given new names (FORGÁCS, J.

2020). This means that forty public spaces were given new name out of hundred and fifty public places at the time (*Table 1*).

In the years of the late 1990s, the target of public interest and criticism moved to the introduction of the names of newly developed neighbourhoods, buildings and complexes that rarely respect local topography and toponymy and carry mainly foreign names (such as Europa Shopping Center, Belveder, Antea, Proxima, and so on). This was closely related to the commodification of urban toponymy resulting from privatisation and commercialisation of public places and place naming rights (LIGHT, D. and YOUNG, C. 2015a, b). According to the information from the municipality⁴, there have been 290 streets and squares in Banská Bystrica in 2022. The names in recently built neighbourhoods are primarily of non-commemorative nature, based on geography or geology related to mining history.

⁴ Interviews in March 2022.

Table 1. *Examples of changes of street and square names in central city area*

Around 1589 (first city map)	1896–1919	1919–1940s	1950s–1990	1990–
Ring	IV. Béla Király tér	Hlavné námestie; Masarykovo námestie, Námestie A. Hlinku, Námestie Národného povstania	Námestie Slovenského národného povstania	Námestie Banického povstania, Námestie Štefana Moysessa
(no name)	Mátyás tér	Horné námestie, Námestie Červenej armády	Námestie Červenej armády	
Untere Gasse, Spitalgasse	Kossuth Lajos utca	Dolná ulica, Malinovského ulica	Malinovského ulica	Dolná
Obere Gasse	Bethlen Gábor utca	Horná ulica, Benešova ulica	Ulica V. Širokého, Horná	Horná
(no name)	Szent István tér	Dolné námestie, Hušíák, Námestie S. H. Vajanského	Námestie S. H. Vajanského	
Badengasse	Károlyi Péter utca	Lazovná, Ulica M. Rázusa	Ulica M. Gorkého, Lazovná	Lazovná
Obere Silbergasse	Heinczmann András utca	Horná Strieborná	Ulica K. Kalužava, Horná Strieborná	Horná Strieborná
Untere Silbergasse	Alsó ezüst utca	Dolná Strieborná	Strieborná, Dolná Strieborná	Dolná Strieborná
(no name)	Ezüst Kapu tér	Strieborné námestie, Námestie 1. mája	Námestie 1. mája	Strieborné námestie
(no name)	Körfal utca	Katovná	Katovná	
(no name)	Kereszt utca	Križna	Ulica J. Wolkra, Križna	Križna
(no name)	Deák Ferencz utca	Súdobná, Ulica A. Hitlera, Stalinova ulica	Stalinova, Obrancov miesu	Skuteckého ulica
Grauer Gasse	Wesselényi Ferencz utca	Kapitulská, Ulica S. Moysessa	Ulica Borisa Polevého, Ulica Š. Moyesosa	Kapitulská

Source: ROHÁRIK, J. 1995.

Conclusions

The renaming of streets during periods of social upheaval and transformation is hardly a new phenomenon. It has happened many times in history and is always related to power, identity and memory. We might witness changes of public spaces and their names all over the world, yet, in post-socialist countries and their cities they showed specific features. According to VERDERY, it is mainly the large extent, the sheer number (*of torn down symbols*) and magnitude of the changes that led to radical reorganisation of socialist state systems and spatial and temporal orders in many countries, and – such as in the case of Czechoslovakia – even gave way to new nation-states (VERDERY, K. 2000, 6).

The struggle for new identity and memory in the city of Banská Bystrica did not differ significantly from similar struggles in other Central and Eastern European cities. It is mainly narratives and oral histories that differentiate one city from another, stories that produce and reproduce the past and bring it to the present. People have a tendency to return to history, to celebrate what is not there any more, to idealise the past (or selected parts of the past), to remember 'old' places and events with nostalgia. Each of us builds and preserves our own, individual memories based on experiences that have been lived and accepted by a group in certain time and space. These memories are changeable. One of the characteristic features of memory is that it is selective, it may delete unpleasant moments, even rewrite history and lead to what WILLIAMS calls a false urban memory syndrome (WILLIAMS, A. 2005, 3). This process can be assisted and even enforced by various interest groups that fight for 'their' history, memory, places and symbols, e.g. by former communists or the church in case of Banská Bystrica.

Experience from the former, but also existing totalitarian regimes of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Russia or Belarus) clearly shows that collective memory and identity often become a tool of manipulation and power games. Facts and figures are re-

written, changed, deleted or silenced in order to strengthen or change collective identity of certain power groups or to mobilise people against an enemy or opposition. As ŠUBRT and MASŁOWSKI noted, explorations of memory always have important political connotations and implications as numerous passionate discussions about history and identity across Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate (ŠUBRT, J. and MASŁOWSKI, N. 2014, 281).

Official institutions, particularly municipality representatives, try to re-produce collective memory and strengthen the feeling of local identity by reconstructing and re- or decommemorating public spaces, introducing new names (but also erecting new memorials, or organising activities and events), however, they often succumb to the pressures of various groups when it comes to symbolic control over public space. In this article I examined mainly processes and practices of the renaming of streets and squares in the early post-socialist period by presenting empirical material from the medium-size Slovak city of Banská Bystrica. I tried to demonstrate the process of street renaming and power struggles related to it that used heritage, memory and identity as a tool for gaining symbolic ownership over certain parts of history, and I also wanted to emphasise a growing involvement of the public in these processes.

The renaming of streets in Banská Bystrica showed two main strategies. First, it was the decommunisation of names which was done either by the restoration of street names from the pre-socialist periods that were always used by the local population (particularly in the historic city centre) or by the introduction of ideologically neutral new names (especially in the neighbourhoods), based on geography or natural characteristics of the locality or the region (such as Green Street, Sunny Street, Chestnut Street, Tatra Street etc.). Second, the renaming of some streets or naming of newly developed squares or streets followed commemoration of personalities, events or cultural, historical and natural heritage of the city, the region and the country. Unlike in some other post-socialist

cities (e.g. Budapest or Bucharest) that used the opportunity to introduce a large number of commemorative names from the pre-socialist periods (mainly from the so called ‘Golden Eras’ (e.g. LIGHT, D. 2004; PALONEN, E. 2008), in Banská Bystrica the ratio of commemorative names remained rather low. The prevailing approach supported by the Street-Naming Committee was the restoration of pre-socialist commonly used names in central city areas and the introduction of non-commemorative names in the neighbourhoods. This might be a difference between country capitals that tend to use more commemorative names in central areas of the city, and smaller or medium size cities that follow different naming strategies, emphasising more local and regional personalities or events, or – more often – non-commemorative names.

At the time of rewriting this study (2022), it was impossible to ignore the Russian aggression in Ukraine that already had serious impact not only on collective identity and memory of the Ukrainians, but also – in line with the topic of this paper – on the renaming of public spaces (GNATIUK, O. 2018). At the 31st anniversary of the Ukrainian independence (24 August 2022), 95 street and square names in the capital of Kyiv were changed in order to „derussificate“ public space (TASR 2022). The stories of renaming go on...

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