

Berlin underground toponymy

Péter BAGOLY-SIMÓ* and Michael LEHMANN[§]

This paper takes a closer look at selected subway stations of the German capital city Berlin and reflects on toponymic inscription and cleansing in light of the political development before, during, and in the aftermath of Germany's political division. Following a brief overview of the Berlin subway system and its development, four case studies exemplify characteristic naming practices and trace back waves of commemorative (de-)politicisation of station names.

INTRODUCTION

Public transit station names stand for a number of things. Their primary role is to enable easy orientation and access to places travellers are more or less familiar with. Along these lines, station names often exhibit secondary nomination after the name of above-ground artefacts, such as streets, squares, and landmarks (e.g. parks, public or religious buildings, railway stations, airports etc.).

Station names, however, also reflect (local) identity and can be perceived as cultural heritage. Cultural politics of naming (Alderman and Inwood 2013) shaping collective and individual memory, belonging, and identity can also be mapped within the framework of power (cf. Vuolteenaho and Berg 2009). Research on critical toponymy (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010) explores practices of toponymic inscription (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). Two main developments seem to be crucial.

Toponymy, on the one hand, services specific political agendas by producing cultural landscapes. As Azaryahu (1996, 2009) argues, name attribution embeds political values into the complex interconnectedness of landscape, performance, power and identity. This becomes particularly prominent in times of radical political change when post-colonial (Whelan 2003) or post-socialist (Gill 2005) or post-apartheid (Swart 2008) toponymic cleansing (Azaryahu 2011) takes place.

* Professor, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany.

[§] Transportation engineer, Germany.

On the other hand, toponymy can also become commodity. As names stand for symbolic capital, place branding can create identities. At a certain point, symbolic capital can be (partially) converted into economic capital and become purchasable resource (Alderman 2008; Rose-Redwood 2008; Alderman et al. 2012; Shoval 2013).

This paper takes a closer look at selected subway stations of the German capital city Berlin and reflects on toponymy in light of the political development before, during, and in the aftermath of political division. Following a brief overview of the Berlin subway system and its development, four case studies will exemplify characteristic naming practices.

BERLIN UNDERGROUND

Early plans of the entrepreneur Werner Siemens from 1880 led to the opening of Berlin's first subway system on 18 February 1902. According to Lemke and Poppel (1996), three major steps shape the development of the subway system.

The first stage of development took place between 1880-1913 and resulted in the construction of the small profile network connecting Berlin, Charlottenburg, Schöneberg, and Wilmersdorf. The original three lines (1902) were expanded and resulted, by the end of stage one, in a total of six lines (K2-K7: later labeled as AI-III and BI-III).

The second stage spans over the time between 1914-1930 and encompasses the addition of a large profile network servicing North-South connections. By the end of the second stage, a total of nine lines, five small (AI, AII, AIII, BI, BII, B III) and four large profile (CI, CII, D, E), constituted the network. Following a shutdown during airstrikes, the network reopened on 14 May 1945. Small and large profile do not differ in rail gauge (1435 mm) but in vehicle envelope, comparable to London's small (Tube) and large (Surface) lines.

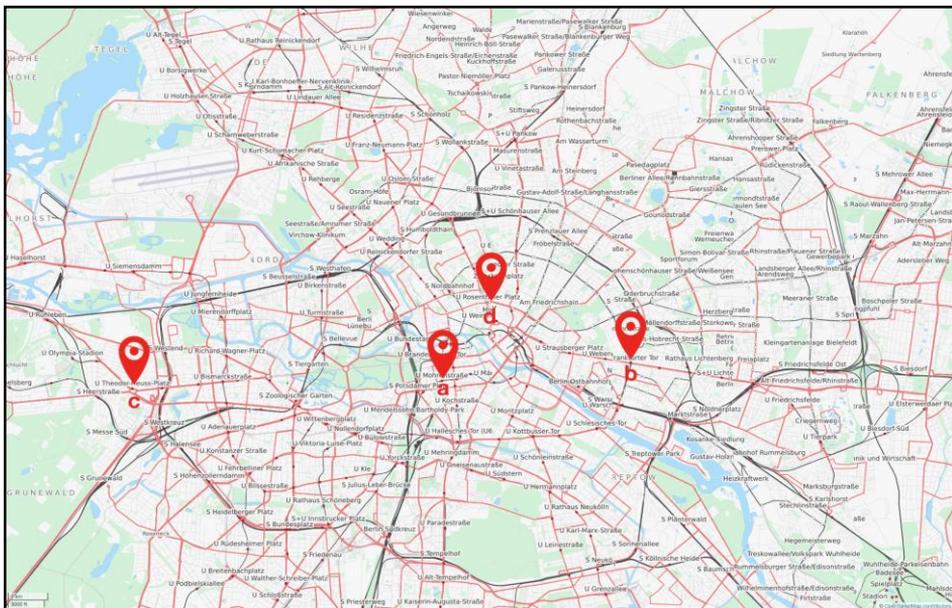


figure 1. Location of the four case studies (a: Mohrenstraße; b: Frankfurter Tor; c: Theodor-Heuss-Platz; d: Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz) (Source: openstreetmap.org)

The third stage refers to the time between 1953 and the present. During this stage, several measures of maintenance and expansion were carried out both in East and West-Berlin. However, additions to the line in the East (former GDR) were the exception. In contrast, West-Berlin expanded its network considerably. This went along with a general abandonment of the tramway system.

The naming practices generally followed principles of secondary nomination after the name of above-ground elements, such as streets and squares. During National Socialism and later on, under the German Democratic Republic (GDR; *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*–DDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG; *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*–BRD), several waves of commemorative renaming took place leading to a certain politicisation of the namescape. In the aftermath of German reunification, the Berlin Senate carried out an extensive renaming on 3 October 1991.

Four case studies will exemplify characteristic naming practices. Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of the case studies.

MOHRENSTRAÙE

The station that has been part of Berlin’s subway system for a century experienced three name changes due to commemorative reasons under the socialist regime. Along these lines, it exhibits the transition from a toponymic name to commemorative and politicised alternatives during one political regime to return to yet another type of toponymic name.

Location and Urban Fabric

Mohrenstraße is located in Berlin’s central district Mitte (Fig. 2). The street displays relatively well preserved and restored architecture typical for the nineteenth century urban fabric (*Gründerzeit*). Due to the presence of embassies and government buildings, Mohrenstraße is part of Berlin’s administrative and political center. Expanding services and touristification progressively suppressed the residential function.

Name

The German noun ‘*Mohr*’ was used in Old and Middle High German to describe the population of Mauritania. Later on, intension and extension were expanded to describe people of color. The term, however, is missing from both current standard language and colloquial speech.

A number of theories with debatable evidence explain the toponymic origins of Mohrenstraße. Historical evidence (Schück 1889), however, only proves that boys and young men from Western African Prussian colonies were brought to Berlin between 1682-1717.

Historical Development

The subway station located under Wilhelmplatz opened on 1 October 1908 and was named *Kaiserhof*. Planners decided against the name Wilhelmplatz following standard procedure to avoid similar or identical station names. Not only carried a recently (1906) opened station in the district of Charlottenburg the name Wilhelmplatz, it was also on the same line as Kaiserhof. Being the most famous landmark on the square, the hotel Kaiserhof became, as a result of secondary nomination, the eponym of the new station. Both buildings exhibited a prominent art deco architecture.

Changes in the urban fabric led to *Kaiserhof's* first facelift (Meyer-Kronthaler 1995). During the 1930s, Wilhelmplatz was turned into a parade ground which required the removal of all overground art deco ornaments. *Kaiserhof* became one of the central stations located in Berlin's government district, which led to its complete destruction during the airstrikes hitting Berlin in April 1945.

The reopening of the completely redesigned station took place on 18 August 1950 (Meyer-Kronthaler 1995). Following the division of Germany, Kaiserhof became part of East Berlin's public transit network. The political system of the GDR influenced both name and architecture of the reopened station. The new name *Thälmannplatz* commemorated Ernst Thälmann, the leader of the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*–KPD), executed in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944. Regarding its architecture, Soviet aesthetics influenced *Thälmannplatz's* architecture. However, the granite–vernacularly referred to as red marble–used to decorate the underground segments of the station is believed to have originated from the building of the New Reich Chancellery (Mittig 2005). Hence, politicisation and commemoration affected both architecture and namescape.

The second name change from *Thälmannplatz* to *Otto-Grotewohl-Straße* (Meyer-Kronthaler 1995) originated, similar to the time of the station's inauguration, in naming consistency across the public transit network. Following the conclusion of an ideologically laden larger urban redesign project in the district Prenzlauer Berg, the rapid transit railway system (S-Bahn) station Greifswalder Straße was renamed into Ernst-Thälmann Park. In consequence, the smaller *Thälmannplatz* had to undergo renaming. Nonetheless, the new name remained highly political, as Otto Grotewohl served as GDR's first prime minister.



Figure 2. Mohrenstraße (Source: openstreetmap.org)

In the aftermath of German reunification, on 3 October 1991, the station was renamed yet again following the principles of secondary nomination based on above-ground structures and received its current name *Mohrenstraße*. While both street and station carry the same name, recent protests claiming linguistic decolonisation in Berlin's central district Mitte repeatedly requested renaming. Suggestions for possible new names include Nelson Mandela, Queen of Sheba, and Anton Wilhelm Amo.

Summing up, *Mohrenstraße* stands for a traditional example of secondary nomination connected to a landmark turned into political symbol during socialism. As a result of post-reunification de-politicisation and de-commemoration, the station underwent yet another time secondary nomination. However, this time the street name served as eponym.

FRANKFURTER TOR

This station exemplifies the main patterns of station naming in the German capital under three political systems. It shows, on the one hand, typical patterns of commemorative naming under an agenda sought with propaganda. On the other hand, it also depicts how disambiguation can require several renaming steps. Along this process, the role of landmarks and street names becomes visible.

Location and Urban Fabric

The station *Frankfurter Tor* is located at the crossing of Frankfurter Allee, Karl-Marx-Allee, Petersburger Straße, and Warschauer Straße in the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg (Fig. 3). Initially designed to be a connecting station, *Frankfurter Tor* serves today as junction between the Berlin subway and tram system. However, plans to extend the U1 subway line through *Frankfurter Tor* are part of the urban development plan.

The urban fabric around *Frankfurter Tor* is a mixture of historical and socialist residential buildings. While Warschauer Straße and parts of Petersburger Straße still exhibit the original nineteenth-century fabric, Karl-Marx-Allee and segments of Frankfurter Allee carry the influence of socialist architecture. Today, the area around the subway station is still mainly residential, though services are growing fast.

Name

Saint Petersburg gave the street, and subsequently also the station, its original name *Petersburger Straße*. While the inauguration of the first uninterrupted railroad connection between the Russian capital and Berlin led to this secondary nomination decision, which became effective on 23 April 1874, the terminal of the line, Küstriner Bahnhof, was located somewhat off the street.

Frankfurter Tor is a toponymic name linked to one of the 18 gates of the Berlin Customs Wall (1732-1868) located on the historical road providing access to the road leading to Frankfurt/Oder. The current location of the square lies approximately 850 m east from Frankfurter Tor's original position.

Historical Development

Designed as a connecting station, *Petersburger Straße* opened on 21 December 1930. Its name followed the traditional patterns of toponymy in public transit, namely secondary nomination after the name of the above-ground object street. Nonetheless, the name is indirectly commemorative, as the street name itself is commemorative. Over the course of its existence of 87 years, the station changed names seven times.

After a temporary shutdown between April and June 1945, *Petersburger Straße*, located in the Soviet sector, received its new name *Bersarinstraße*. The name change in effect starting with 3 June 1946 stands for a strong politicisation as it commemorates Nikolai Erastovich Bersarin, the first city mayor of Berlin's Soviet sector.

The station experienced a third change of name on 1 January 1958 as city administration added *Frankfurter Tor*, creating an auxiliary name, only to subsequently remove *Bersarinstraße* as part of a de-politicisation act on 1 June 1958.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, city administration renamed the station a fourth time. The new name, *Rathaus Friedrichshain*, was a secondary nomination after an above-ground landmark and referred to the location of the district's city hall. As public transit stations located in the immediate proximity of district city halls were the norm in the capital of reunified Germany, the decision was reasonable and aimed at an overall consistency in toponymy by means of disambiguation.

It was the same reasoning that led to the fifth renaming. Following the relocation of the city hall in 1996, *Rathaus Friedrichshain* was no longer an appropriate station name. In consequence, city administration changed the station name back to *Frankfurter Tor*. However, in the same year, the original name *Petersburger Straße* replaced the intermediary name given during socialist times. The seventh, and until today, most recent renaming happened in 1998 and led to the reinstatement of *Frankfurter Tor*.

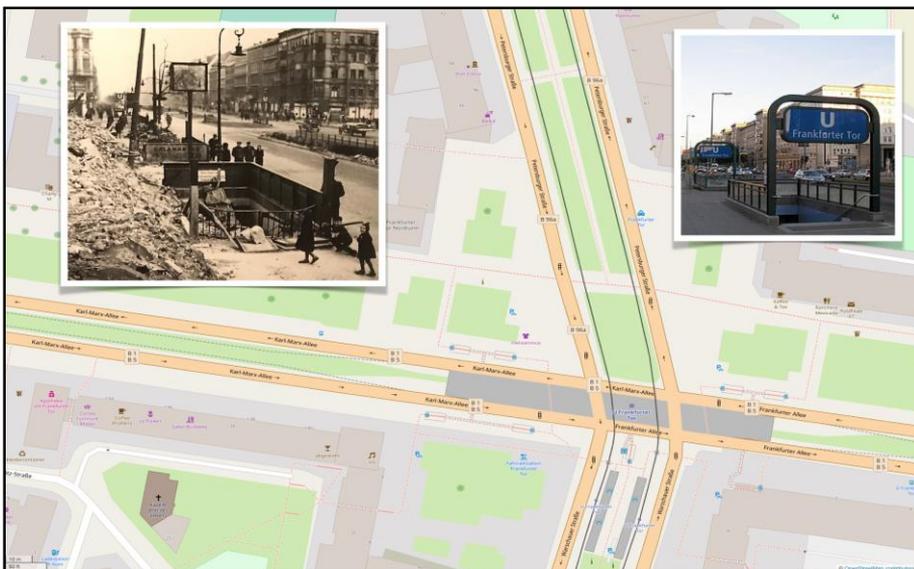


Figure 3. Frankfurter Tor (Source: openstreetmap.org)

Overall, *Frankfurter Tor* exemplifies a number of naming decisions characteristic to the German capital. Following an initial secondary naming (street), a strong commemorative and politicised renaming happened under the socialist GDR regime. In an attempt of successive de-politicisation, an auxiliary toponymic name commemorating one of the city's original gates was added. The next step concluded the process of de-politicisation by removing the commemorative name connected to Berzarin. What follows, are repeated secondary nomination steps bouncing between landmarks and streets in service of disambiguation.

THEODOR-HEUSS-PLATZ

The name of this century old station stands for political commemorative naming based on symbolic personification. Merely three steps of renaming set up a strong contrast of impersonated values of German history.

Location and Urban Fabric

Located in the residential Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district (Fig. 4), the station serves a residential area with additional services. Originally planned to stimulate growth in the city's Westend area, the greenfield development received a politically laden name and induced an intensive process of urbanisation.

Name

Theodor Heuss (1884-1963) served as the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany during the chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer. He greatly contributed to the consolidation of modern post-war democracy.

Historical Development

The station opened on 29 March 1908 as *Reichskanzlerplatz* and marked the end of the westbound subway line. The nomination process aimed at commemorating the chancellor of the German Reich, a key political position during early German democracy. Originally located on undeveloped land, the station's architecture was spacious. As plans of an additional subway branch already existed, *Reichskanzlerplatz* was conceived as a connecting station.

The first renaming into *Adolf-Hitler-Platz* was politically motivated and became effective on 24 April 1933. The station conserved its second name throughout Nazi Germany and shut down on 26 April 1945 under this very name. The reopening on 17 May 1945 brought along the second change of name consisting of a return to its original name *Reichskanzlerplatz*. In essence, the naming used the neutral commemoration by personification.

In the aftermath of the German division, the station became part of West Berlin and received its third name—*Theodor-Heuss-Platz*—within a fourth round of renaming on 18 December 1963. This third renaming remains as political as the first one was by commemorating the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany

Summing up, *Theodor-Heuss-Platz* is a typical commemorative station name that experienced two waves of politicisation. Both steps of renaming follow a clear pattern of commemorative personification. The re-politicised third name carries as strong of a symbolic value as does the first one.



Figure 4. Theodor-Heuss-Platz (Source: openstreetmap.org)

ROSA-LUXEMBURG-PLATZ

For the last 95 years, the station served Berlin's public transit mainly as a multimodal connecting station. Its name displays the transition from a toponymic name to commemorative and politicised alternatives during two political regimes.

Location and Urban Fabric

The station is located in Berlin's central district Mitte (Fig. 5) and serves as a junction between the capital city's subway and tram service.

The urban fabric in the proximity of the station mainly consists of traditional *Gründerzeit* architecture dotted with modern buildings. While mainly residential, the area is rapidly turning into one of the highly touristified places of the city. Services progressively replaced residential use over the last two decades.

Name

Schönhauser Tor is a toponymic name linked to one of the 18 gates of the Berlin Customs Wall (1732-1868) located on the historical road connecting the city with Niederschönhausen.

Historical Development

The station *Schönhauser Tor* opened on 27 July 1913 as a regular station on the line connecting the city center with the northern ring exhibiting standard architecture (Meyer-Kronthaler 1995).

The first re-commemorative renaming into *Horst-Wessel-Platz* on 1 May 1934 stands for a clear politicisation. The new name commemorates Horst Wessel, a local Nazi Party stormtrooper made into a martyr after his murder in 1930 by members of the Communist Party of Germany. The station kept its second name until its temporary closure in April 1945 during the allied airstrikes.

The station reopened on 15 May 1945 under its old name *Schönhauser Tor*. Thus, by means of toponymic name reinstatement, a strong de-politicisation took place.

Following the division of Berlin, the station became part of East Berlin's public transit infrastructure. The socialist regime replaced the toponymic name within a larger re-commemorative process aimed at a strong re-politicisation of station names. Starting with 27 February 1950, *Schönhauser Tor* was renamed *Luxemburgplatz* to commemorate the Marxist revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg killed in 1919 and extensively idolised as a martyr in the GDR.

The fifth and last renaming targeted an overall disambiguation. As a measure against possible unwanted polysemy with the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg and a consolidation of commemorative nomination, on 1 May 1978, Luxemburg's surname was added to the station name resulting in *Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz*.



Figure 5. Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz (Source: openstreetmap.org)

Overall, the station exemplifies the transition from a toponymic name resulting from secondary nomination to commemorative names under two political systems, namely National Socialism and Socialism. In the aftermath of German reunification, the political role of Rosa Luxemburg remained, despite several critical voices regarding her Marxist work, uncontested. In consequence, city administration decided against a de-commemorative de-politicisation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Berlin experienced six changes of its political system over the course of the twentieth century. Toponymic inscription (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010) and cleansing (Azaryahu 2011) experienced several waves of commemorative (de-)politicisation. In contrast, mainline and rapid transit railway stations seem to be more stable and remained tied to secondary nomination patterns.

The overall toponymic inscription and cleansing, however, happened on a different scale and targeted the Berlin Wall strip and places of high symbolic value, such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

REFERENCES

- Alderman, D. H. (2008). Place, naming and the interpretation of cultural landscapes. In Howard, P., and Graham, B. J. (eds.), *The Ashgate research companion to heritage and identity* (pp. 195-213). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Alderman, D. H., Benjamin, S. K., and Scheider, P. P. (2012). Transforming Mount Airy into Mayberry: Film-induced tourism as place-making. *Southeastern Geographer*, 52(2), pp. 212-239.
- Alderman, D. H., and Inwood, J. (2013). Street naming and the politics of belonging: Spatial injustices in the toponymic commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 14(2), pp. 211-233.
- Azaryahu, M. (1996). The power of commemorative street names. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14(3), pp. 311-330.
- Azaryahu, M. (2009). Naming the past: The significance of commemorative street names. In Berg, L., and Vuolteenaho, J. (eds.), *Critical toponymies: The contested politics of place naming* (pp. 53-70). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Azaryahu, M. (2011). The critical turn and beyond: The case of commemorative street naming. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 10(1), pp. 28-33.
- Berg, L., and Vuolteenaho, J. (eds.) (2009). *Critical toponymies: The contested politics of place naming*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Gill, G. (2005). Changing symbols: The renovation of Moscow place names. *The Russian Review*, 64(3), pp. 480-503.
- Lemke, U., and Poppel, U. (1996). *Berliner U-Bahn*. Munich: Alba.
- Meyer-Kronthaler, J. (1995). *Berlins U-Bahnhöfe. Die ersten hundert Jahre*. Berlin: be.bra.
- Mittig, H.-E. (2005). "Marmor der Reichskanzlei". In Bingen, D. And Hinz, H.-M. (eds.), *Die Schleifung/Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau historischer Bauten in Deutschland und Polen* (pp. 174-187). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Rose-Redwood, R. (2008). From number to name: Symbolic capital, places of memory and the politics of street renaming in New York City. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9(4), pp. 431-452.

- Rose-Redwood, R., Alderman, D., and Azaryahu, M. (2010). Geographies of toponymic inscription: New directions in critical place-name studies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(4), pp. 453-470.
- Schück, R. (1889). *Brandenburg-Preußens Kolonialpolitik unter dem Großen Kurfürsten und seinen Nachfolgern (1647–1721)*. Leipzig: Verlag von F. W. Grunow.
- Shoval, N. (2013). Street naming, tourism development and cultural conflict: the case of the Old City of Acre/Akko/Akka. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38(4), pp. 612-626.
- Swart, M. (2008). Name changes as symbolic reparation after transition: The examples of Germany and South Africa. *German Law Journal*, 9(2), pp. 105-120.
- Vuolteenaho, J., and Berg, L. (2009). Towards critical toponymies. In Berg, L., and Vuolteenaho, J. (eds.), *Critical toponymies: The contested politics of place naming* (pp. 1-18). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Whelan, Y. (2003). *Reinventing modern Dublin: Streetscape, iconography and the politics of identity*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.