Spatiotemporal street name changes in Eastern Germany

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Summary

We present the results of an interdisciplinary project exploring street name changes in Leipzig (Germany), over the past 102 years. Our analysis focuses on the ways in which semantic choices in the streetscape express the national past and support the hegemonic socio-political order by visualising waves of street (re)naming during a century of political turmoil. Drawing on historical archival data allows us to interpret spatial and temporal patterns as the public embodiment of subsequent political state ideologies, demonstrating that the indexing of officially sanctioned identity and ideology as well as the appropriation of urban space are performed by and in turn index state-hegemonic politics of memory.

KEYWORDS: commemorative streetscapes; critical toponymy, Germany, visualisation

1. Introduction and Methodology

At the most mundane level, toponyms provide the daily spatial framework for human activities, allowing cities to function; but beyond their importance as spatial reference landmarks, they are also loaded with history, identity and ideology, commemorating the past and reflecting the present. To date, however, there is no research that attempts to sketch the historical dimension of street renaming in Eastern Germany across the political turmoil that characterised the last century. Most of Azaryahu's (1996, 2011, 2012) work explores renaming during individual political eras (such as Nazi Germany or the GRD) and it predates more recent attempts to redress some of the injustices of the past as it is currently enshrined in public memorialisation. Also, none of the critical toponomy research on Eastern Europe engages with geovisualisation methods that allow exploring the spatiality of such name changes. Our project fills these gaps by quantitatively investigating toponymic turnover in Leipzig, a large city the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), now the Eastern part of Germany, across the entire past century (1916-2018). The aim of this article is thus to open new horizons on the ways in which identity, social order and power have been linked and imprinted in the urban toponymy of an Eastern European city across the past 102 years.

The renaming of urban features is often the civic consequence of such shifts in worldview and commemorative toponymic (re)naming should be seen as the outcome of a complex interplay of forces, including the creation of memory, the indexing of officially sanctioned identity and ideology as well as the appropriation of human space. Similar to other Eastern European countries that have seen changes in state ideology, commemorative (re)naming in Germany has been indexing the political fluctuations summarised in **Figure 1**.
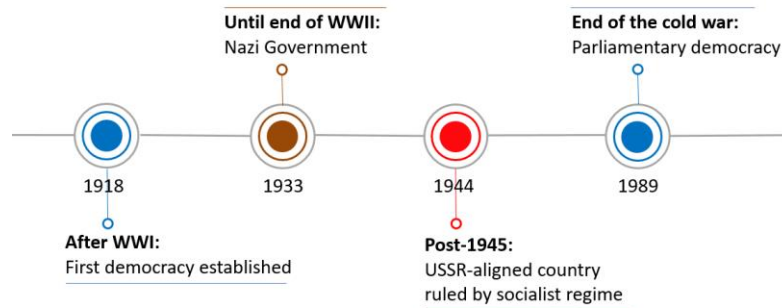
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Figure 1 Simplified political timeline of Germany for the 20th century

In addition to political changes, the City of Leipzig (**Figure 2a**) went through various stages of expansion and growth over the past 100 years. To control for the most recent expansion of the city this analysis focuses on the urbanised area up to the late 1980s, excluding the post-1990s annexation of villages and suburbs (shown in yellow in **Figure 2b**). The starting point for our analysis is the early 2019 version of OpenStreetMap (OSM) yielding 2150 unique street names for the study area shown in gray in **Figure 2b**. The Leipzig statistical office provided a database with information about the rationale for renaming and the semantics of the street names, the exact dates (where available) when the renaming was proposed in the city council and when the decision was passed.
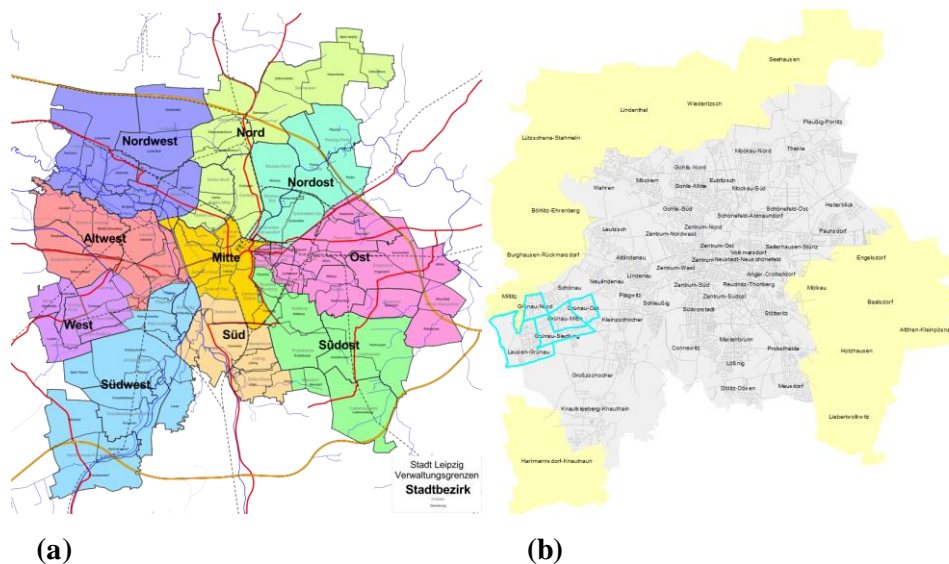

(a)   **(b)**

Figure 2 (a) Leipzig municipalities (*Stadtbezirke*) and (b) Leipzig study area (in gray).

Leipzig experienced 2230 street name changes during the period 1916-2018, varying significantly over different years and political periods. It is also is important to point out that more than half of these changes were renamings of existing streets (1119) as opposed to new names (1111) resulting from new housing and urban sprawl. The time series with peaks of street renamings and new names are shown in **Figure 3,** alongside an indication of the different political periods and regime changes. The spike in semiotic modification during the Nazi period (years 1933-1939) was largely due to the naming of new streets i.e. streets that did not exist before. Similarly, numerous upward trends during the socialist GDR regime (most noticeably in 1977-1980, 1986-1988) were caused by an increase in the total number of streets, rather than by street re-naming. The time frame 1993-1997, a few years after the German reunification (*Wende*), is also dominated by naming of new streets. In addition, two peaks occur during particularly active phases of urban sprawl, indicated in **Figure 3** with red asterisks:, city expansions in the years 1925 and 1999 incorporated exceptionally large numbers of surrounding municipalities into the city boundary with about 15000 and 45000 people respectively becoming part of the Leipzig local authority during these years.
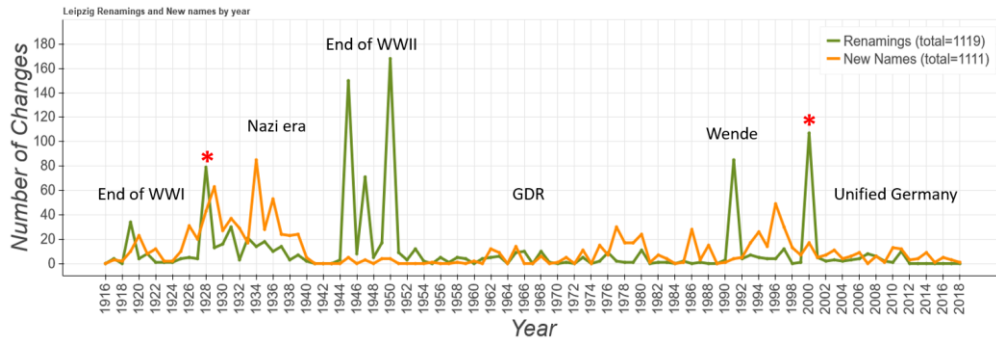
Figure 3 Street name changes over 102 years in Leipzig: renamings and new names.
*Peaks are at least partly due to urban expansion.

The geographical distribution and intensity of street name changes over the 102-year period is shown in **Figure 4**. To explore how changes in the official streetscape are recruited to index hegemonic state ideology, we collated information in the database with documents retrieved from the city archives and libraries, as well as information available online. We then coded every street name change as to whether the incoming and the outgoing name were ideological in nature, as described in detail by Fabiszak et al. (2021). The first group of processes resulted in the infusion of a *new* political ideology into the linguistic landscape and we will refer to them as "ideological processes". On the other side are processes that do not infuse a new ideology into the streetscape referred to here as "non-ideological". These processes include the naming of a new street with a non-ideological name or the renaming of a non-ideological street by another non-ideological street. Condensing the processes (and motivations) underlying street renaming allows us to explore to which extent subsequent political regimes mobilize the streetscape for their ideological purposes. The two time series in **Figure 5** showing ideological and non-ideological changes in street names, provide the missing evidence for interpreting the longitudinal trajectory we observed in Figure 3. High values in the red line pinpoint those temporal zones with the largest influx of commemorative ideology in the Leipzig streetscape.
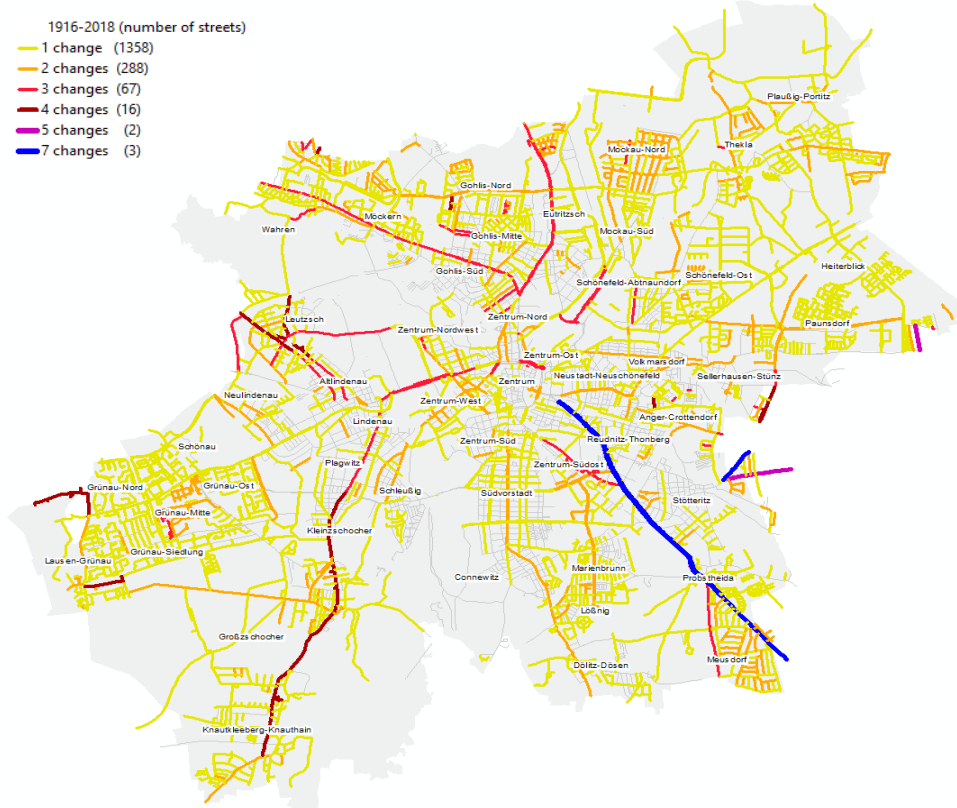

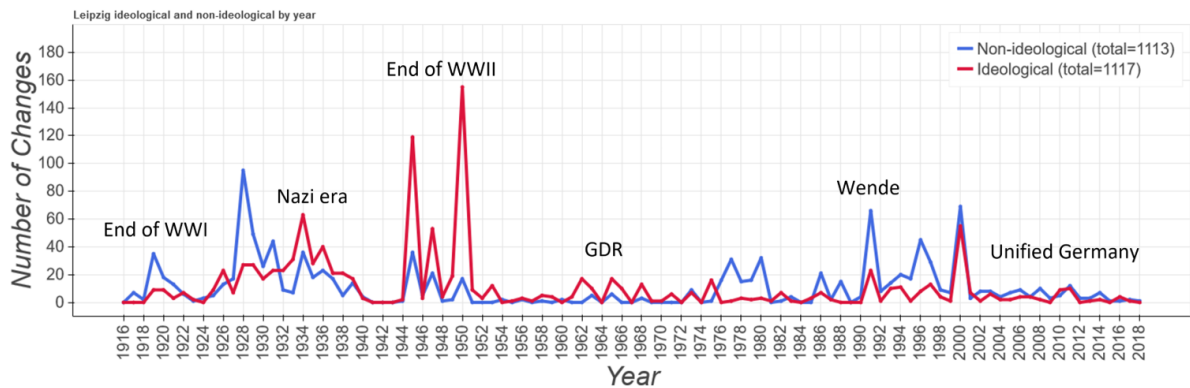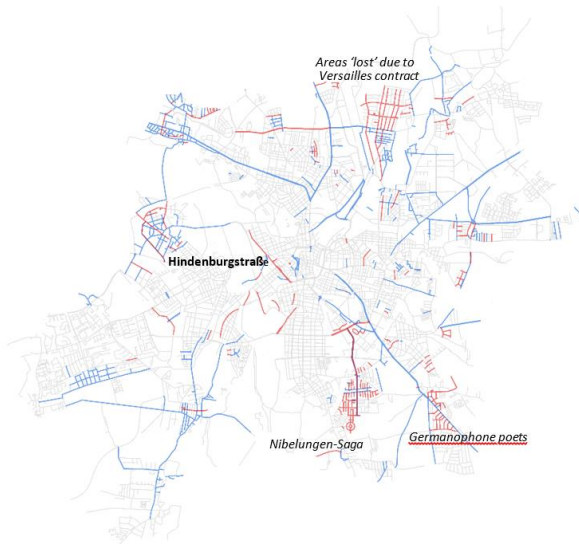**Figure 4** Street name changes in Leipzig, Germany: number of changes.

Figure 5 Street name changes in Leipzig by ideological outcome

## 2. Mapping streetscape ideology over time

The maps in **Figure 6** should be considered alongside the detailed time series in Figure 5. **Figure 6a** reveals that a majority (63%) of street (re)namings during the Weimar Republic is non-ideological (and hence blue) in nature. The spike in non-ideological renamings in 1919, immediately after the first world war and as Germany was establishing its first democracy, is a reflection of the fact that the street names reflecting the dynastic state ideology of the Prussian Kaiserreich were purged from the semiotic landscape. The equally short Nazi regime (**Figure 6b**) also exhibits a high tally of odonymic activity, of which a large proportion (73%) is again new and thus due to city growth. Contrary to the Weimar Republic, the vast majority of (re)naming processes during this era (64%) aim at the infusion of nationalist ideology into the streetscape. Most iconically, the key traffic artery from the south towards the city centre bearing the name *Adolf-Hitler-Straße* (since 1933). Several other large streets approaching the ring are renamed to encode personages that memorialize 3rd Reich officials, which includes commemorating heroes of the armed forces and Nazi "martyrs".

As we see in **Figure 6c**, the opposite strategy to commemorative semioticisation seems to have been deployed during the GDR regime. The end of the war, and with it Soviet occupation followed by a USSR-controlled government, brought a dramatic ideological transformation in commemorative street (re-)naming practices. Overall 789 streets, the largest total number, were (re-) named between 1945 and 1988. Undesirable commemoration was eliminated, being replaced by antifascist, antimilitaristic and of course socialist-communist street names. The massive and swift resemioticisation at the beginning of this era is thus tantamount to an official disavowal of the previous regime whereby the losers vanquish from the cityscape and with them their publicly encoded ideology. During the subsequent political transformation (known as the *Wende*), street names and public symbols that reflected the GDR's understanding of socialist tradition were called into question and locally specific debates ensued as to which ones ought to be changed.

Figure 6d reveals the summative result of the post-GDR de-commemoration effort: most of the street (re)namings are blue, with the highest percentage (68%) of non-ideological outcomes of all eras investigated. By 2000, the year with ample ideological encoding, there are seven streets giving visibility to women scientists, artists and women's rights activists, ten streets are anti-anti-Semitic in denotation, commemorating either Jewish personages or people standing up to anti-Semitic acts, while, for the first time, commemorations that are explicitly critical of the GDR regime. These semiotic choices include non-left-leaning intellectuals, journalists who stood up for the free press and Wolfgang Zill, a young man who died during an attempted East-to-West border crossing.
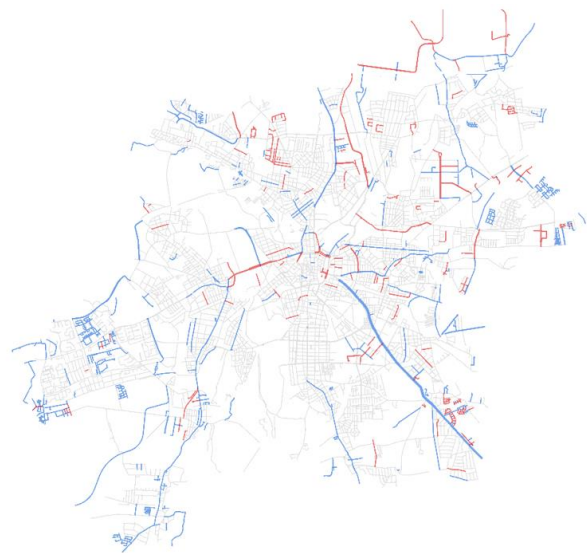
(a) 1916-1932
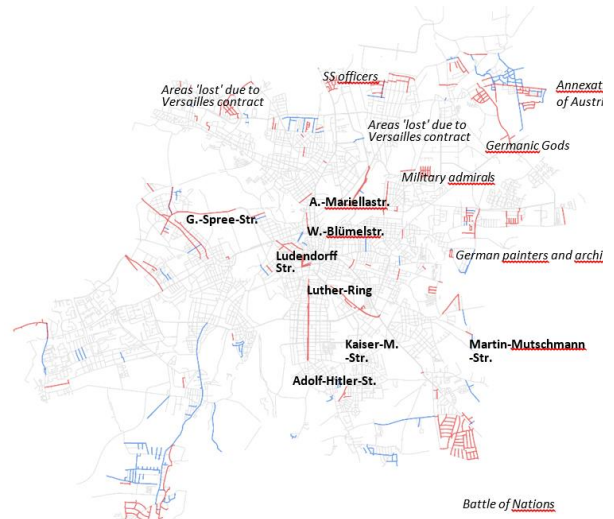
(b) 1933-1944
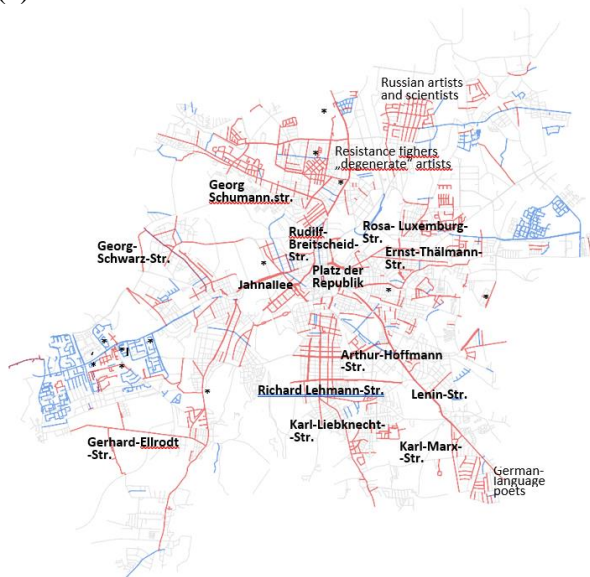
(c) 1945-1988

(d) 1989-2018

Figure 6 Street name changes in Leipzig by ideological outcome during major political periods.
Blue: non-ideological   Red: ideological

3. Acknowledgements

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Biographies

Seraphim Alvanides is a social geographer with expertise in quantitative methods and GIS/Sc. His research interests involve the analysis of large spatial data related to urban sprawl, land use change, health inequalities and active transport. The substantive question driving his research is to what extent the environment influences individual behaviours and outcomes.

Isabelle Buchstaller is a variationist sociolinguist with main areas of expertise in language variation and change, corpus linguistics and models and methods for collecting and analysing various types of linguistic data. She is particularly interested in dialectal morpho-syntactic and discourse phenomena, as well as in linguistic landscapes research.

Frauke Griese is a doctoral researcher with interests in linguistic landscapes, language and ideology (in particular war correspondence and propaganda), English in Ireland and Scotland and conceptual semantics. Her PhD research concerns Irish and Scottish soldier's letters from the First World War.