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## TRAVERSING CENTRAL PRAGUE FROM JAN PALACH SQUARE TO UKRAINIAN HEROES' STREET: THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF PLACE NAMES IN A LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

This paper investigates the phenomenon of renaming public spaces so common in urban history since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The research focuses on instances of spontaneous renaming initiated by the general public rather than those brought about by the local self-government. A number of notable examples of Czech as well as Czechoslovak urbanonyms are provided, covering the period starting from the Second World War until the present. Special emphasis is put on the spontaneous origin of the urbanonym *náměstí Jana Palacha* (*Jan Palach Square*) commemorating the student who set himself on fire and burned himself to death in protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The conclusion addresses, among other things, the topical issue of renaming a range of public spaces in response to the Russian military aggression against Ukraine. In Prague, *Ukrajinských hrdinů* (*Ukrainian Heroes' [Street]*) and *Skakunův most* (*Skakun Bridge*) are among the commemorative place names to have appeared recently.

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, no other type of proper nouns can respond to impending political and social changes as quickly as urbanonyms. In urban areas, people, interests and relationships (social, economic, cultural, political, etc.) assemble in large numbers and in relatively small and clearly delineated spaces. These are all factors that shape the local systems of urbanonyms, though some to a greater extent than others. No longer mere practical tools that help inhabitants of cities to

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orient themselves, urbanonyms extend this basic framework and are increasingly becoming instruments of politics and ideology<sup>2</sup>, as well as shared pools of memories associated with given public spaces<sup>3</sup> and elements with a variety of functions.

Urban toponymy may be studied from a multitude of angles. Rather than providing a description of the historical development or the specifics of the urbanonyms of a given area, the paper focuses on the characteristic features of a particular group of urban toponyms, tracing both the motivations that gave rise to them, and all their functions<sup>4</sup>. The paper picks up on previous research on the phenomenon of spontaneous renaming of urban public spaces (compare Ptáčnicková 2018), pointing out the significant symbolic dimension of toponyms in a linguistic landscape. The study focuses on those toponyms that were created spontaneously by the inhabitants of the city rather than by a decision of the local authorities. A number of notable examples of Czech as well as Czechoslovak urbanonyms are provided as evidence, and attention is also paid to those place names that have emerged only recently in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## 2. Place names in a linguistic landscape

That the concept of a linguistic landscape is a dynamically developing field of sociolinguistics is evidenced by the growing number of scholarly works dedicated to it (compare e.g. Sloboda 2009; Gorter 2013; Satinská 2014; Ďuricová (ed.) 2020). Additionally, the concept of a linguistic landscape is addressed in onomastic research (compare e.g. Puzey 2011; David and Mácha 2014; Krško 2016; Bauko 2021; Odaloš 2021).

The term “linguistic landscape” is defined as the language of public road signs, billboards, commercial facility signs, and public signs on government buildings (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 25). In more general terms, a linguistic landscape comprises all the written messages one may encounter in a given public area (Backhaus 2007: 66). These include elements of the top-down (i.e. official, public) as well as the bottom up (i.e. unofficial, private) sphere. While the top-down sphere

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<sup>2</sup> The relationship between toponymy and political power was studied in detail as part of the so-called critical approach to toponymy (see e.g. Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010; compare also Azaryahu 1996).

<sup>3</sup> These are examples of what has become to be known as realms of memory in French historiography. Toponyms as realms of memory are addressed by Kojetínová (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Czech onomastic theory traditionally identifies the following functions of a place name: nominating, identifying, differentiating and localizing (Šrámek 1999: 32; compare also Knappová 1994). Urban place names (urbanonyms) are typically characterized by their commemorative (David 2011), system-forming (Štěpán 2012: 297), and advertising (David 2008) function although these far from exhaust all the functions an urbanonym can have. Additional functions are commonly identified that may overlap and complement one another without being fully utilized. This contribution focuses on the symbolic function of an urbanonym.

is regarded as being produced by public institutions of a variety of kinds, it is individuals and corporate bodies that create the bottom-up sphere (for more information see Ben-Rafael et al. 2006: 14; Gorter 2006: 2-3). A linguistic landscape comprises location signs, building signs, public transport timetables at, e.g., railway stations and bus stops, as well as messages written on signboards, shop windows, advertising structures, and even graffiti. The major aim of all these textual messages is to get information across using a variety of verbal and non-verbal expressions that draw the recipient's attention. Crucially, signs within a linguistic landscape may affect a recipient both on the conscious and unconscious level.

It is understandable that analyses of linguistic landscapes primarily concern the city as it is here that signs of a variety of kinds are more ubiquitous than in the country. Due to developments in advertising and marketing, urban public space is constantly being enriched by a multitude of new texts and thereby transformed into a highly competitive arena (compare Ben-Rafael 2009: 44).

The most prominent features of urban linguistic landscapes are proper nouns of many kinds (compare Puzey 2016; Sandst and Syrjälä 2020: 337), especially toponyms. In urban areas, names of municipalities, streets, squares and other public spaces are frequently visualised. They are displayed on direction and public transport stop signs, as well as in the names of restaurants, shops, companies and accommodation facilities. In addition to standardized (i.e. officially sanctioned) names, unofficial ones are also sometimes used.

The multifariousness of textual as well as visual sources means a linguistic landscape may be studied synchronically but also, and perhaps surprisingly, diachronically. As our research is also conceived diachronically, historical photographs were used to study an instance of a spontaneous renaming of an urban public space within the linguistic landscape of Prague.

### 3. Renaming the past for the future

Dynamics of toponyms within a linguistic landscape is determined by all cases of renaming. In Czech and Czechoslovak cities, renaming of public spaces has most commonly occurred in response to two events. The first one is the expansion of cities whose surrounding municipalities are swallowed up by them, which necessitates the removal of duplicate place names. The second reason why the number of cases of renaming grew was the increase in the percentage of commemorative urban public space names. While urban place names that aid orientation tend to be rather stable, frequent changes are characteristic of commemorative urbanonyms. Should the political and/or social system change and should they not be in line with the interests of those who seize power, there is a greater chance such urbanonyms will be replaced by new officially sanctioned ones that

reflect the topical “authorized” interpretation of the city’s or nation’s history (compare David 2011: 205-206).

Undoubtedly, every renaming of a public space is a manifestation of political power, probably more so than the act of naming as such. Indeed, if such a renaming comes from the will of the public, it makes such a manifestation all the stronger. Spontaneous renaming is indeed a remarkable phenomenon associated primarily with charged historic moments when newly created public space names substitute, often in a highly improvised fashion, the existing ones, without being officially sanctioned beforehand in any way.

#### 4. From the Second World War...

In the area of what became the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, spontaneous renaming was common at the end of the Second World War. Interestingly, Prague’s urbanonyms had started to reflect the changing political climate and street names imposed during the Protectorate had started to be removed before the Red Army ever entered the city, i.e., before the historic moment of the Nazi Germany’s defeat. People symbolically put an end to the outgoing Nazi regime as early as the very first few days of May 1945 by tearing down, covering or painting over signs with street names imposed upon them against their will. While most of these were written over with pre-war names, symbolizing the newly-regained control of the Czech people over the area of the city, new names cropped up too. These included the place name *Osvobozených vězňů* (*Freed Prisoners' [Street]*), which commemorates the people unjustly imprisoned during the Second World War, and *náměstí Barikád* (*Barricades Square*) that reminds one of the fighting involved in the liberation of the city of Prague. Out of these two spontaneously created place names only *Barricades Square* was officially sanctioned, which took as long as seven years.

Spontaneous changes of street signs, as well as other signs containing names such as names of municipalities – some of which included direction signs – also occurred during the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. To make orientation as complicated for the occupiers as possible, the Czechoslovak linguistic landscape virtually disappeared overnight. Thousands of place name signs disappeared; many others were moved to other places to ensure the Soviet soldiers could not find their way easily. At the same time, improvised street signs with names such as *Dubčekova třída* (*Dubček Avenue*) and *Svobodovo náměstí* (*Svoboda Square*) cropped up on street corners in Czechoslovak cities.<sup>5</sup> Rather

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<sup>5</sup> These names symbolically supported the domestic political representation. Alexandr Dubček was the main person behind the so-called Prague Spring, a period of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia that continued until, and was finally brought to an end by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact forces. Ludvík Svoboda was the president of Czechoslovakia in this era.

than aiding orientation, their function was primarily symbolic and commemorative. Their installation in the public space was short-lived: the Soviet occupiers would normally tear them down immediately.

Later, in the tumultuous beginning of 1969, inhabitants of the city once more played a similarly active part in naming public spaces. On January 19, the student Jan Palach immolated himself in protest against the suppression of freedoms after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. Two days after his death, *náměstí Krasnoarmějců* (*Red Army Square*) situated in central Prague right in front of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, where Palach studied, was spontaneously renamed to *Jan Palach Square*. Street signs with the officially sanctioned urbanonym disappeared overnight to be substituted by signs of the same size, colour and template as the official ones. Newly installed street signs with Palach's name were complemented by paper signs displayed behind the windows of the university buildings on the square, and the unofficial place name also appeared on the university buildings. Tram stops situated close to the square and carrying the same name were also spontaneously renamed at the same time. Indeed, when announcing stops, conductors called them *Jan Palach Square* rather than using the officially approved *náměstí Krasnoarmějců* (*Red Army Square*). Also, a number of demonstrations took place that reflected the resistance of the general public to the official urbanonym.

Prague City Council was criticised by the superior authorities for tolerating such spontaneous campaigns. As a result, it distanced itself from the renaming efforts and designated them as illegal. In addition, it ordered that the original signs be reinstalled and requested that the perpetrators be identified. The Council also chose to disregard a large number of letters and petitions it had received from the citizens, despite the fact that they highlighted the uniqueness of the new name as one that reflected the true will of the people of Prague. Those that promoted the place name *Jan Palach Square* were informed in writing that to ensure the stability of the whole street system, central Prague place names could not be changed and therefore the proposed urbanonym would not be officially sanctioned. The real reason was, of course, the fact that Jan Palach was not on the list of people designated by the political regime of the late 1960s as acceptable (for more information see Ptáčnicková 2019 or Ptáčnicková 2021: 126-136).

Throughout spring 1969, similar spontaneous renaming events happened again several times although the results were always the same – unauthorized street signs with the name of Jan Palach would be removed by the Prague Police shortly after being installed. That said, despite having failed to include the name of Jan Palach in the system of Prague urbanonyms, the campaign was far from futile as it promoted Palach's burgeoning cult. The square was eventually renamed after Jan Palach in 1989, after the end of the communist rule. Notably,

*Jan Palach Square* was one of the first new street names officially sanctioned by the reinstated democratic regime.

## 5. ...to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

The last armed conflict that has brought public-initiated changes to the toponyms constituting the linguistic landscapes of Czech cities is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Only two days after the invasion had commenced, *Moscow [Street]* in Carlsbad, the West Bohemian town where a considerable Russian population lives, was symbolically taped over to read *Kiev [Street]*.

Slightly later, the taping over of street signs occurred within the linguistic landscape of the capital of Prague as well. A sign with the street name *Russian* was substituted by the Czech translation of the last communication made during the Russian attack on Snake Island by the Ukrainian fighters: *Russian warship, go fuck yourself*. Elsewhere, the signs with the street name *Russian* were taped over with Ukrainian flags. Simultaneously, *Betlémské náměstí (Bethlehem Square)* in the very heart of the city was spontaneously renamed using signs that read *Volodymyr Zelensky Square*.

An interesting example of a place name change in response to the war in Ukraine can be found in Uhříněves, a Prague suburb. This is where street signs with *Přátelství (Friendship [Street])* were temporarily taped over to read *Česko-ukrajinského přátelství (Czech-Ukrainian Friendship [Street])*. Rather than initiated by the general public, the temporary name change was ordered by the Uhříněves Municipal Authority. It should be noted that although this commemorative urbanonym seems neutral at first sight and few people are aware it is steeped in the ideology of the era, the reality is it originated during the communist rule in Czechoslovakia in 1978 to celebrate the friendly relationship with the Soviet Union. The steps that the municipal authority took can therefore be regarded as a show of disapproval of the name and an effort to define clearly what sort of friendship the name is meant to refer to. It also needs to be said that it had been announced beforehand that the amended signs with the explanatory modifier would only be installed for a fixed period of 1 month.

In response to the Russian military aggression, official name changes have also taken place in Prague. In April 2022, a section of *Korunovační (Coronation [Street])*, which is situated close to the Russian Embassy, was renamed *Ukrajinských hrdinů (Ukrainian Heroes' [Street])* while the road bridge that connects to the street was renamed *Skakun Bridge* to commemorate Vitalii Skakun, the Ukrainian national hero who sacrificed his life while blowing up a bridge to slow the advance of Russian troops during the Kherson offensive. These name changes have caused a predicament for the Russian Embassy: should the

Embassy decide to change its official address, it would have to sit on either *Boris Nemtsov Square* or *Anna Politkovskaya Promenade*, the two other public spaces that surround the Russian Mission. While the former commemorative place name is in honour of the Russian opposition politician Nemtsov, who was shot dead, the latter is in recognition of the murdered Russian journalist and activist.

In response to the Russian invasion, names of public spaces surrounding Russian embassies have changed elsewhere too, such as in Vilnius, where the road leading to the Russian Mission was renamed *Ukrainos didvyrių gatvė* (*Ukrainian Heroes' Street*). In Riga, the street adjacent to the embassy was renamed *Ukrainas neatkarības iela* (*Ukrainian Independence Street*) while in Tirana, it is now called *Rruga Ukraina e Lirë* (*Free Ukraine Street*). In Oslo, the Russian Embassy is now located next to *Ukrainas plass* (*Ukraine Square*).

All of these commemorative place names seek to honour Ukrainian soldiers fighting against Russians, as well as Ukrainian victims of the war. On top of that, they are vehicles for the expression of spite intended for the Russian Embassy staff, who must now include in their official address an urbanonym that reminds them of the military enemy of their country. Also, these names are a testament to the significance of extralinguistic circumstances (including, but not limited to, the location, appearance and nature of the building or premises in question) in the process of naming public spaces.

## 6. Conclusion

A linguistic landscape is an interesting interpretivist paradigm that is gradually finding its way to onomastic research. It is characterized by a considerable degree of interdisciplinarity, offering a multitude of new impulses to study urban societies. Despite being omnipresent and integral part of the everyday world, a linguistic landscape tends to be overlooked. Attention is typically only drawn to it when it is updated, such as when signs are removed against the will of the public or a toponym is changed, which usually happens against the backdrop of charged historic events. This is one of the reasons why examples of the studied phenomenon come from the tumultuous eras such as the end of the Second World War, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and, most recently, the war in Ukraine.

The phenomenon of spontaneous renaming of urban public spaces is not one that can easily be documented using a considerable amount of evidence. That is what makes it all the more worthy of attention. Urbanonyms that crop up in the public sphere spontaneously have a strong symbolic function. They symbolize the emotions present in the urban society thus adding sentimental value while also embodying the national or other interests. They may refer to territorial integrity, national identity, historical truth and rights of a specific group of people. They



pack a very strong political and emotional charge. In addition to names as such, newly installed and often improvised street signs also serve a symbolic function, since visual fixation of a name in an urban area is (not only in charged historical moments) at least as important as the name as such.

This study focuses on a particular segment of the linguistic landscape – urbanonyms that, rather than being elements of the officially sanctioned top-down sphere, constitute the bottom-up sphere. Their emergence is accompanied by emotions, and they are not primarily intended as aids to facilitate orientation. The analysed place names have not been introduced to make it easier for the inhabitants to orient themselves in the city. Instead, it is the symbolic function that overshadows their function as tools for orientation.



Figure 1. An example of a public space being spontaneously renamed. This photograph titled *Dubčekova třída* (*Dubček Avenue*) was taken in Prague on August 21, 1968.



Figure 2. *Náměstí Krasnoarmějců* (*Red Army Square*) being renamed to *náměstí Jana Palacha* (*Jan Palach Square*)





Figure 3. A street sign within the linguistic landscape of Prague.  
On *Ruská* (*Russian [Street]*), the street sign was partially covered by a blue and yellow tape symbolizing the flag of Ukraine.



Figure 4. Another street sign on *Russian Street* was amended to read:  
*Russian warship, go fuck yourself!*

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(All internet sources were accessed on April 22, 2022.)

## Putovanje središtem Praga od *Trga Jana Palacha* do *Ulice ukrajinskih heroja*: Simbolička funkcija toponima u jezičnome krajoliku

### Sažetak

U radu se istražuje preimenovanje javnih prostora – česta pojava u urbanoj povijesti od druge polovice 19. stoljeća. Istraživanje je usmjereno na slučajeve spontanoga preimenovanja što ih je potaknula šira javnost, a ne na one koje je donijela lokalna samouprava. Naveden je niz primjera čeških i čehoslovačkih urbanonima u razdoblju od Drugoga svjetskog rata do danas. Poseban naglasak stavljen je na nastanak imena *náměstí Jana Palacha* (*Trg Jana Palacha*), koje je dano u spomen na studenta koji se spalio u znak prosvjeda protiv sovjetske invazije na Čehoslovačku 1968. U zaključku se, između ostaloga, osvrće na preimenovanje niza javnih prostora kao odgovor na rusku vojnu agresiju na Ukrajinu. U Pragu su *Ukrajinských hrdinů* (*Ulica ukrajinskih heroja*) i *Skakunův most* (*Skakunov most*) neka od imena koja su se nedavno pojavila.

Keywords: toponymy, street name, renaming, urban toponyms, commemorative names, Prague, Czech Republic, Ukraine

Ključne riječi: toponimija, ime ulice, preimenovanje, urbani toponimi, komemorativna imena, Prag, Češka Republika, Ukrajina