

Roads to Revision.
Disputes over Street Names Referring to the
German Eastern Territories after the First and Second World Wars
in the Cities of Dresden and Mainz, 1921–1972

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Introduction

On a sunny morning in May 1964, Genosse Fritz Müller, a member of the local communist party in the borough of Dresden-Bühlau, prepared himself for a party meeting in Leipzig that afternoon. He took his small briefcase, closed the door, walked through the front garden, and stepped out onto Insterburger Straße. He walked down the street, turned left into Elbinger Straße, crossing Kolberger and Ortelsburger Straße, reached Bautzner Landstraße, turned left again, and followed the street passing Memelstraße, Braunsberger Straße, and Königsberger Straße before he reached the tram station between Thorner and Bromberger Straße. He took tram No. 11, going all the way down to Dresden-Neustadt, where he got off at the Schlesischer Platz to take his train to Leipzig.

Taking into account Mr. Müller's morning walk, it is surprising that today many historians conceive the history of flight and expulsion and the history of Eastern Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia as taboo in the GDR. By exploring the history of street names in East and West Germany, this paper attempts to shed light on the specific ways of commemorating the history of expulsion of Germans and the loss of territory after 1945. It seeks to outline the different politics of memory, as well as interrelations between both German states.

[...]

Conclusion

In Dresden, street or square names that referred eastwards for geographical reasons, such as the Schlesischer Platz at the railway station in Dresden Neustadt, have existed

since the 1880s. In Dresden and in Mainz during the 1920s, streets in new town boroughs were given street names referring to the loss of territory after 1918, such as Bromberg, Posen, or Beuthen. After 1945, those eastbound street names were kept in both cities, except for singular cases.

However, geographical names from the Eastern Borderlands of the German Empire were – beside other topics – a heavily frequented field of debate in post-war Germany. Expellee representatives urged the use of German instead of the Polish place names, for example Danzig instead of Gdańsk, because they perceived German place names to be a proof for the German history of those territories and therefore an argument to support the reclaiming of this territory. In contrast, communists argued for the use of Polish place names to refer to Polish history, thereby confirming Polish claims on these territories.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the debate became more and more intense. Almost every aspect of German or Polish history within the debated territories could be used as an argument in favour or against the Oder–Neisse border. The counterparts in that conflict unwittingly formed an alliance that politicised the history of that region. Thus a kind of undertow within the politics of memory occurred, in which aspects of history could be transformed into strong, useful arguments in the debate about the German–Polish border.

Concerning street names in Mainz and in Dresden, lively debates about politically suitable or unsuitable names started right after the Second World War. However, it took about twenty years for street names to gain or regain their strong political connotations. The fight of communist propaganda against the use of German place names from the Eastern Borderlands because of their perceived expression of German revisionism was not the only reason for that. Also, the expellee organisations' propaganda, which sought to use those names with obviously revisionist intentions, and, moreover, the decision of the Mainz city council to keep even those names such as Annaberg that explicitly referred to armed German–Polish confrontations, have to be taken into account.