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A JOURNEY THROUGH A COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF A CITY. NON-STANDARDIZED URBAN TOPONYMY AS A MEANS OF SILENT RESISTANCE AND COLLECTIVE HUMOUR DURING THE COMMUNIST ERA IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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***Abstract*:** Urban toponymy is characterized by its multi-layer structure. It does not only consist of officially sanctioned names that we can see on street signs and house corners. Also included are non-standardized names that emerged spontaneously and we primarily use them, in spoken communication, to substitute, in specific contexts, official names. Non-standardized urban toponyms constitute a distinctive imprint each generation of inhabitants leaves on a city area. In addition to being intangible legacy of urban societies they may, under certain circumstances, become an expression of a competitive historical discourse and, more generally, a symbol of emotions and sentiments of inhabitants of a city. This contribution is dedicated to selected non-standardized names used in Czechoslovakia, particularly in the capital of Prague, during the communist era. It is interested in urban toponyms that had, in addition to its primary function of identifying specific places in the city, another role: they ironized the regime and its representatives (e. g. *"Stalin's Sock", "Red Chopping Block", "Political Failures Boulevard"*). Despite not being included in contemporary maps or street signs, the inhabitants of the city knew these names well and, on many occasions, actually preferred using these to those names that had been officially sanctioned. 30 years after the communist regime toppled many of these names continue to be well-known and used today (even by younger generations).

Key words: urban toponymy, non-standardized names, commemorative names, ideology, Czechoslovakia, Prague.

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Introduction

Urbanonyms, i.e. names of public city areas, constitute linguistic material that may not be studied in isolation. Rather, relevant historical and cultural contexts as well as places being named need to be taken into consideration. In addition to being constituents of physical spaces represented by tangible features of cities (houses, streets, memorials, etc.) urbanonyms are presently seen as an inherent part of a political space. Cities have been usurped and controlled by elites and ideologies since it is here that large numbers of people cumulate in rather small spaces [David 2010: 132]. Public city areas can hardly be a neutral and apolitical backdrop against which everyday activities within cities take place. Quite on the contrary, urban landscapes form a barometer demonstrating the speed at which political convulsions occur [Light – Young 2015: 41–42]. Changing political regimes seek to transform, as soon as possible, urban landscapes into something that puts these regimes in a good light as well as manifests, as clearly as possible, the values held by the current regime while trying to erase the values of the past regime at the same time [Azaryahu 1996: 318]. Urban landscapes are repeatedly rewritten as a result of political changes because each newly-established regime seeks to erase those urbanonyms that represent the previous regime. This rewriting of urban landscapes can be compared, in metaphorical terms, to a palimpsest – writing material used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased [Graf 2011: 110]. The most susceptible to change are commemorative urbanonyms that could be defined, in onomastic theory, as those that seek to commemorate and/or pay homage to specific persons, institutions, historic events, places and/or abstract terms [see David 2011b for further information].[1] It should be noted while some officially sanctioned names (pertains especially to commemorative names) may prove to be highly unstable features of a toponymic space, non-standardized names may, in contrast, prove fairly invariable and immune to (repeated) political changes (see below).

Topical questions related to non-standardized urbanonymy research

Non-standardized urbanonymy has recently become a popular research area in a number of countries and languages (compare e. g. [Ainiala 2010; Balode 2016; Eskelinen 2009; Piotrowicz et al. 2013; Pires 2007; Vasiljeva 2011;

[1] As far as renaming is concerned, the commemorative motive has evolved from the appropriative motive [Bezlaj 1983: 174; Štěpán 1985], but does not express real ownership of an object exists [Šrámek 1999: 49].

Zujeva 2014]). However, it remains rather marginalized by Czech onomastics. Czech (formerly Czechoslovak) urbanonymy research dates back to the mid-1980s and has traditionally focused on standardized urban toponyms although exceptions can be identified. The recent exceptions include [David, Mácha 2014: 74–97] and [David, Místecký 2016], who are interested in Ostrava and Havířov (towns whose development accelerated dramatically during the Socialist Period), and a study by [Ptáčníková 2017, 2018a, 2018b] that is concerned with non-standardized urban toponymy of the capital of Prague. While non-standardized urbanonymy may be seen as an attractive topic for readers, it has not been properly addressed in Czech onomastic research.

The specific role of non-standardized urbanonyms

Urban toponymy can be characterized as a multi-layer structure [David, Mácha 2014: 54–55]. Its basic constituents are names that we see on street signs and at house corners (i.e. those names that have officially been sanctionned by a local self-government office). These are complemented by non-standardized names (also referred to as "unofficial" or "live") that originate spontaneously and are primarily used in spoken language as substitutes for standardized names. Non-standardized urban toponyms have no official status and are not shown on street signs or city maps and do not appear in addresses. Instead, they are stored in the minds of those who live in the city and, together with standardized names, become components of what may be called virtual networks (or more precisely, imaginary maps stored in human minds)[1].

Non-standardized urbanonyms frequently originate when an object already has an officially sanctioned name, but a need exists to rename it. This might be due to the fact the officially approved name is malfunctional in one way or another (e. g. it is too long or ideologically coloured), or because people feel the urge to further specify the urban space in question [Ptáčníková 2018b] offers an analysis of non-standardized urbanonyms related to the expansive area of Wenceslaus Square in central Prague.

Material basis for the research

The contribution is based, in material terms, on a list of Prague non-standardized urban toponyms compiled by us. The list is an outcome of research for which narrative testimonies, which had to do with period maps and which were obtained from 192 respondents, were primarily used. Material for the research was obtained during moderated interviews. Some non-standardized names were obtained from other sources (primarily literature – encyclopaedic sources and memoirs) and the respondents were asked to confirm whether they actually used the names. Over 200 Prague non-standardized urbanonyms were gathered between early 2016 through August 2017 during this research.

This rich and highly diverse material may be separated into two basic groups [David, Mácha 2014: 65–66]. The first group are names that have origi-

[1] Győrffy 2016 is among those scholars who are concerned with cognitive (mental) maps as instruments that can be used to enter into a subjective model of perception of a city and names of its public spaces.

nated by shortening their standardized counterparts for the purposes of linguistic economy. In Czech urbanonymy this is usually achieved by usual suffixes such as *-ák*, *-áč*, *-ka* or *-árna*: *Klement Gottwald Bridge (CZ: Most Klementa Gottwalda)* > *Gottwalďák*, *Maxim Gorký Square (CZ: náměstí Maxima Gorkého)* > *Gorkáč*, *Masaryk Train Station (CZ: Masarykovo nádraží)* > *Masaryčka*, *Julius Fučík Culture and Leisure Park (CZ: Park kultury a oddechu Julia Fučíka)* > *Fučíkárna,* and so on.

The second group is made up of names that are in no way based on their standardized counterparts and can therefore be seen, in one way or another, as unique (compare e.g. *Mordor* – the name given to the Central Telecommunications Building (CZ: Ústřední komunikační budova) in Prague, whose byzantine corridor system and high tower remind the inhabitants of Prague of the realm and base of the arch-villain Sauron in J.R.R. Tolkien's books). The group of unique names also includes original standardized names that have been removed by renaming. Once removed, a considerable number of such names continue to be used by inhabitants of a city in everyday communication for a long period of time. A record holder is arguably *Belcredi Street (CZ: Belcrediho ulice)* in Prague. Currently called *Milada Horáková Street (CZ: ulice Milady Horákové),* the street bore this name from the 1880s through 1946 (with a break during the war). And although it has been renamed twice the *Belcredi* name (incl. modified forms *Belkrédka* and *Belgretka*) continues to be used by oldest inhabitants of the city until today.

The set of non-standardized urbanonyms also includes a fair number of names that, in addition to fulfilling their primary function of identifying a specific public space in a city, had an additional role: during the Communist Era in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989) they were used as a means of silent resistance against the ruling party (in combination with folk humour, irony, and boundless imagination of those who created them).

The following lines focus on three such name groups. First-type names ridiculed features of an urban landscape (buildings using socialist architecture and socialist memorials) while second-type names caricatured public figures of the time. Finally, third-type non-standardized urbanonyms ironized the regime as such as well as its decisions and repressions. As our research focused primarily on non-standardized urban toponymy of the capital of Prague, a majority of the examples given in this contribution have been selected from the urban toponymy of the capital. That being said, a number of examples from other places in former Czechoslovakia are also provided to complement the examples situated within Prague.

A topography of ugliness

The Communist Party and its propaganda took control of post-World War Two Czechoslovakia in February 1948. Ideology seized public spaces in Czechoslovak municipalities by means of e. g. memorials, commemorative plaques, traditional Communist symbols: red stars (five-pointed and filled),

colours – and officially sanctioned urbanonyms. A tendency to monumentalize has shortly gripped towns and cities of Czechoslovakia: new megalomaniacal buildings cropped up whose height dramatically exceeded local development levels as a result of which existing (urban) landscapes were disrupted; highly popular were also oversized memorials and monuments. Many of these gigantic constructions were assessed as aesthetically inappropriate and were therefore deliberately given defamatory names by the public [David, Mácha 2014: 84].

Culture Palace (CZ: Palác kultury) serves as an example of megalomaniacal architecture in Prague. Its designated purpose was to become the most expansive palace for the Communist party assemblies in Czechoslovakia. Comprising 70 halls, it accommodated nearly 10,000 people. Considering the size and grandeur of the palace it was expected to become a worthy competitor of such significant historical complexes as Prague Castle and Vyšehrad. The problem was this dominant feature of socialist architecture resembled a large piece of wood when seen from distance so it obtained an ironizing name *Red Chopping Block (CZ: Rudý špalek)*. It should be noted the adjective *red* reflected the traditional colour of the Communist party rather than the actual colour of the building.

While *Culture Palace* was an expansive building of exceptional width, the Prague television tower, which dates from the 1980s, was among buildings seeking to impress by their height. Standing at the height of over 200 metres, the building is characterized by its slim structure for which three-column reinforced concrete was used. According to official declarations it was supposed to resemble a rocket that is taking off although non-standardized urban toponyms people of Prague chose to refer to it suggest it reminded them of something entirely different. It was called e. g. *Husák's Finger, Jakeš's Pitchfork, and Biľak's Penis* (Gustav Husák was a Czechoslovak President while Miloš Jakeš and Vasil Biľak were among top officials of the Communist party).

Using the names given to the male sexual organ to refer to buildings prominent in terms of their height is a common practice in non-standardized urbanonymy. What is more, it is a practice that is far from confined to urban landscapes. A hotel named *Horizont* was built in a picturesque valley in Krkonoše (Czechoslovak mountains situated on the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland) in the 1970s. However, its exceptionally high building in no way fitted the established aesthetic of the buildings in the area, so it shortly obtained a defamatory name *Štrougal's Prick* (Lubomír Štrougal was a Czechoslovak Prime Minister).

In addition to oversized buildings the tendency to monumentalize Czechoslovak towns and cities also manifested itself in oversized memorials. A sculptural group headed by the Soviet leader Stalin became the most prominent memorial within Prague. It was designed to become the largest sculptural group in Central Europe. It was inaugurated in 1955 and shortly thereafter be-

came to be named *Meat Queue*. This non-standardized urbanonym was a reference to the unusual composition of the memorial (the figures actually queued in a line) but it also ironized supply issues typical of the period (one of the typical features of life during the Socialist Period was people had to queue for virtually everything). The sculptural group was quietly (in political terms) demolished only 7 years later in the context of Stalin's cult of personality being deconstructed.

Although a period of nearly 60 years has passed since the demolition inhabitants of Prague continue to refer to the place as *Stalin's (CZ: U Stalina)*. A poll targeted at respondents aged 17 to 25 has showed the place is well-known even among young inhabitants of the city. 45 out of 76 respondents knew and were able to localize the place. In contrast, the defamatory urbanonym *Cult (CZ: U kultíku)* that used to refer to a tram stop near the sculptural group has ceased to be used in everyday communication (the implied meaning of the shortened form *Cult* was "Cult of Stalin's Personality"). Similarly, the name *Stalin's Sock (CZ: Stalinova ponožka)*, which referred to a pedestal that remained when the sculptural group had been demolished, has also ceased to be used. No longer in use is also the name *Hiney Hole Woods (CZ: Záprdelí)* that used to refer to the area behind the memorial.

It has been discovered, while collecting Prague non-standardized urbanonymy used during the Communist Period, memorials are typical urbanonymical objects connected with non-standardized names. In addition to often a questionable artistic quality of a memorial the motivation to establish such a name may have also been stiff gesticulations of sculptures and/or uncanny clothes. The Prague sculpture of the communist politician Jan Šverma characterized by a stretched arm which is unnaturally held in front of the body gave rise to alternative names such as *Feeding the Birds* (it looked as if the sculpture was feeding small birds).

Its appearance also gave a non-standardized name to an artistically questionable sculpture of *the workers'* President Klement Gottwald situated in Prague by the Moldau River bank. Made of white marble, the statue became to be known as *Hopkirk* as it reminded the inhabitants of the city of a ghost character from the popular British series Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased), who wears white clothes symbolizing he is now a ghost.

Similar examples were also found in other Czechoslovak towns and cities during the Communist Period. Symbolizing the end of the World War Two bloodshed, a memorial of a Red Army soldier giving a ceasefire gesture appeared in the city of Brno. The problem was the statue resembled more a person who is hitchhiking, and shortly received a defamatory name *Hitchhiker.* Another example is a sculpture of Stalin in the West Bohemian city of Pilsen that was nicknamed *Fish Warden* as it wore a long raincoat and wellingtons, and stared at a watercourse in a contemplative way. Finally, the public space around a sculpture of Lenin situated in the South Bohemian city of Budweis

obtained a non-standardized name *Hobo's* due to Lenin's apparently ragged clothes and looks.

A name as a means of ironizing public figures

In addition to buildings and memorials public figures (and their actions and decisions) were also frequently ridiculed by non-standardized urbanonyms. Arguably the most well-known of such names is *Husák's Silence (CZ: Husákovo ticho)* – the name given to a tunnel built on the Moldau River bank in the 1970s. The tunnel had no purpose whatsoever in terms of urban planning. It was only built on President Husák's request with an objective to reduce noise created by cars driving past the building housing the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He complained cars driving past the building disturbed assemblies taking place inside the building and argued an underground tunnel for traffic needed to be constructed. The non-standardized name *Husák's Silence* was also associated with a popular rumour of the time. The rumour had it there were wiretaps installed in the tunnel, so people often stopped talking when they entered the tunnel and only resumed conversation when they had left it – similar myths, (urban) legends, and folk stories are part of what is called onomastic folklore [Rudnyćkyj 1966]. *Husák's Silence* is a non-standardized name that has stood the test of time and continues to be known and used by people even today.

While *Husák's Silence* may be seen as a non-standardized name that only slightly ironizes President Husák, *Marta* is a name that is meant to defame. *Marta* is a non-standardized name born by one of Prague's gas holders which is characterized by its large size and regularly spherical shape. While the toponymic object as such was built as early as the 1930s it was renamed, in the 1950s, after the unpopular and rather plump wife of Klement Gottwald, *the workers'* President. The defamatory non-standardized name sought to address an apparent visual similarity between the two.

A name ironizing actions of the regime

When the Communist Regime took power in 1948 it started to execute street name purges. Over a hundred street names were changed in the late 1940s and in the 1950s in Prague alone. In practical terms, this only brought one thing – chaos in street names (this was the third large-scale renaming in the previous twenty years). The first occurred in 1939 when Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi forces and a Protectorate was established. The second took place in May 1945 when the World War Two had ended. The frequent changes in urbanonyms as well as uneasy orientation in the city were ironized e.g. by non-standardized names. An affluent boulevard in the centre of Prague that had changed its name four times between 1939 and 1962 started to be called *Political Failures Boulevard (CZ: Třída politických omylů.*

The repressive nature of the regime was also frequently ironized. People started to refer to one of Prague's many panel building housing estates as *Truncheon (CZ: Obušek)* or *Baton Grounds (CZ: Na pendreku)* because the flats

in these housing estates were designated for employees of the Ministry of the Interior (the communist police came under the authority of this ministry). What is more, political prisoners were forced to help to construct the estates. A similar example is *Intelligentsia Bridge (CZ: Most inteligence)*. This Prague railway bridge spontaneously started to be called thus because intelligentsia (e.g. lawyers, doctors, historians) were among those who had helped to build it. The Communist Regime put forth effort to silence intelligentsia and "re-educate" them by assigning work to them. This meant university alumni were forced to start working manually after 1948. This non-standardized urbanonym continues to be actively used in everyday communication; however, a poll targeting young respondents (inhabitants of the city) has showed nearly a third of a total of 76 respondents aged 17 to 25 do not know the name is non-standardized and initially ironic. Instead, they consider the name *Intelligentsia Bridge* to be an officially sanctioned commemorative urbanonym hailing university educated classes.

Conclusion

Using examples from Czechoslovak toponymy, this contribution seeks to draw attention to a special group of non-standardized names, more specifically those urbanonyms that played a significant social role during the historical period characterized by suppression of freedom. They served as what could be called counter-nomenclature people used to make the repressive nature of the regime seem less acute. One of the functions of the analyzed names was to ironize (sometimes even defame) urban landscape features, prominent public figures and, more generally, the ruling regime as such including its actions. Their underlying characteristics were humour combined with irony, i.e. instruments that have caricatured political regimes from time immemorial.

Non-standardized urbanonyms provide a large amount of information about how a city has changed as well as about its inhabitants. This is why they are regarded as a suitable means of reconstructing their history. What is more, the group of names we have focused on confirm an inter-disciplinary approach is necessary. They can hardly be studied and interpreted out of the context of their history or social history, and attention must also be paid to everyday life of a person during the Socialist Period. There are a number of issues associated with researching non-standardized urbanonymy (and even more so urbanonymy of the past). The most serious of these is not the fact that non-standardized urbanonymy is highly unstable (names appear and disappear and may be transferred to other objects). It is human memory that seems to bring the largest number of difficulties. That being said, a more suitable source than memories of living persons can hardly be identified.

This name group demonstrates there is a need to collect all non-standardized urbanonymy. Only the oldest persons are familiar with a majority of the examples given herein (exceptions are *Husák's Silence, Stalin's,* and *Intelligentsia Bridge*). It is clear once these people are gone these names, which accu-

rately portray the respective historical periods and the collective memory of the city, will be forever erased from history. They will be substituted by newer historical layers made up of newer non-standardized names used by younger generations. This is why such urbanonymy needs to be archived (i.e. collected and recorded) so as to ensure it is protected from the natural process of human forgetting.

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ПО ПУТИ ПАМЯТИ ГОРОДА. НЕСТАНДАРТНАЯ УРБАНОНИМИЯ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ ТИХОГО СОПРОТИВЛЕНИЯ И КОЛЛЕКТИВНОГО ЮМОРА В ПЕРИОД ЭРЫ КОММУНИЗМА В ЧЕХОСЛОВАКИИ

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Аннотация: Городская топонимика – многослойная структура. Ее составляющими являются не только официально одобренные названия улиц на табличках домов, но также нестандартные названия, возникающие абсолютно спонтанно, использующиеся в первую очередь в разговорной речи и заменяющие в определенном контексте официальные названия. Нестандартные урбанонимы представляют собой самобытный след, который в городском пространстве оставила каждая генерация его жителей. Более того, они являются богатством нематериального характера городского общества, которое при определенных обстоятельствах может стать выражением конкурентоспособного дискурса или, иными словами, – символом ощущений и настроений жителей города. Статья посвящена избранным нестандартным названиям, которые были использованы в Чехословакии, главным образом, в ее столице – Праге, в период эры коммунизма. Предметом станут урбанонимы, которые кроме своей главной функции – идентификации конкретного места, – имеют еще одну функцию – иронизировать режим и его представителей (например, «Носок сталина», «Красный чурбан», «Площадь политических ошибок»). Несмотря на то, что выше указанные названия никогда не появлялись ни на картах, ни на уличных табличках, жители города их очень хорошо знали и в большинстве случаев использовали вместо официально одобренных названий. Ряд таких названий используется до сих пор, 30 лет спустя после падения коммунистического режима (названия используются даже среди молодежи).

Ключевые слова: городская топонимика, урбанонимия, нестандартные названия, почетные имена, идеология, Чехословакия, Прага.

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