

# Post-communist city text in Košice, Slovakia as a liminal landscape

## Abstract

During the communist period in Slovakia (1948-1989), street toponyms and monuments were a few of the many realms of ideological infusion by the communist government. Renaming streets and establishing monuments in honor of local and international socialist figures was intended to have an aggregate effect on public consciousness in a way that helped legitimize the political rule of the communist regime. However, because the nature of socialist commemorations is fundamentally more complex than those of other competing ideologies like nationalist movements, these commemorations took on complex and sometimes contradictory meanings in the public memory that, in some cases, cause them to persist to this day. This paper utilizes Turner's (1975) concept of 'liminality' to examine elements of city text like toponyms and statues in the eastern Slovak city of Košice to demonstrate why many of these communist-era elements of city text remain as leftover landscapes of the communist period.

## Keywords

Toponyms • liminality • Slovakia • Košice • city text • communism

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## Introduction

Important questions that have yet to be fully addressed in scholarship regarding the aftermath of the communist era in Central Europe include how long the so-called 'post-communist' period will last and what—if anything—will mark its conclusion (Czepczyński 2008)? Some of the most visible aspects of the post-communist period are elements of what Maoz Azaryahu (1990) originally called 'city text'. Today the concept of city text has been expanded to include not only commemorative street names or *toponyms*, but also monuments as well as other elements of architecture. So in addressing the question of when the post-communist period will end, unresolved issues of communist-era city text are certainly central to the debate. According to Light and Young (2014), the persistence of such elements of city text beyond the era in which they were created conflicts with much of the existing scholarship that emphasizes how important their removal usually is to successive regimes. So how then can we conceptualize and explain the persistence of some communist-era elements of a city text?

Mariusz Czepczyński suggested that Victor Turner's 1975 work on liminality could be adapted to explain this process of transitioning from one cultural modality to another. Turner described liminality as 'the state of being in between successive participations in social milieu dominated by social structural considerations, whether formal or unformalized...for it is a sphere or domain of action or thought rather than a social modality' (Turner 1975, p. 52). It is during such liminal states that a society gains perspective on the previous period while not yet fully participating in what will eventually come next. So one useful way we can approach the study of periods of political toponymic

change is to imagine the periods of political transition that have occurred throughout the former Eastern Bloc as liminal phases, exemplified by elements of the built environment that represent political power, such as city text. In this context, Czepczyński refers to them collectively as 'liminal landscapes' (Czepczyński 2008).

Imagining Košice's city text as a liminal landscape is one way to conceptualize this process of transition within the period of liminality. De-commemorations, as well as changes in the meanings and importance placed on certain elements of city text may help us identify when a liminal phase like post-communism may be drawing to a close. This paper draws on an author-created Historical Geographic Information Systems (HGIS) database of over 770 toponymic changes that occurred primarily in the symbolic center of Košice's old town derived from a collection of ten historical maps of the city spanning the years between 1854—present. Additionally, archival documents collected from Košice's City Archive (Archív mesta Košice) are able to contextualize some of the toponymic changes that occurred during the communist period.

## City text

Simon Harrison developed the concept of 'symbolic conflict' to describe a political competition in which opponents fight for control over symbolic space seeking power and legitimacy (1995). He said that such symbolic conflicts involve common strategies, among them the 'extinguishing' of opposing symbols while expanding one's own 'symbolic capital' (Harrison 1995). Street names and memorials can serve as powerful ideological and

propagandistic tools when they become politicized, functioning as a prime example of Harrison's symbolic capital. Geographers have long recognized that politicized urban elements are often made to serve the ideological purposes of regimes of all political orientations. In his 1990 work on street name changes in postwar Austria and Germany, Maoz Azaryahu popularized the concept of 'city text', which he identified as the arena of streets names 'which serve as a vehicle for commemorating heroes and glorious events' (Azaryahu 1990, p. 33). Ultimately, the reconfiguration of a city text, in Azaryahu's mind, was intended to help legitimize the ruling regime. Furthermore, the end results of such a reconfiguration of street names is the loss of their temporal qualities and the often anachronistic juxtaposition of street names commemorating historical figures and events from vastly different periods within the city text (Azaryahu 1990).

Since Azaryahu's original work, the scope of what is considered part of a symbolic space of city text has been expanded through the work of others, including Duncan (1990), Goh & Yeoh (2003) and Palonen (2006; 2008), to include architecture, memorials, and monuments. This broadening of the definition of city text links conceptually with Mariusz Czepczynski's (2008, p. 41) work on the cultural landscapes of post-socialist cities. He notes that, 'every cultural landscape is metaphoric in some sense, and conveys memories, histories, experiences, as well as the wishes, needs, and structures of authorities'. According to Czepczynski:

There is a strong tendency to demonstrate and perform power over people and landscapes. The tendency appears in every social system, but becomes remarkably strong in totalitarian and non-democratic regimes. Power over practically any aspect of social and economic life has to be materialized and visualized, so nobody could doubt who is in power. Every totalitarian regime of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much focused on transferring its powers into visual forms and meanings of cultural landscape (Czepczynski 2008, p. 59).

In the case of Košice, many of the earlier liminal stages between regimes was quite short—for instance, the transition from Austro-Hungarian monarchy to interwar Czechoslovak state was relatively rapid after the conclusion of World War I, when compared to the persistence of the current transitional period out of the communist modality. I suggest that a partial explanation for why the post-socialist liminal stage has persisted for so long in European cities is that socialist commemorations in city text are fundamentally more complex and thus take longer to interpret (Chloupek 2019). This is in contrast to elements of nationalist city texts which were much easier to identify and delete during earlier liminal periods. Elements of communist city texts are harder to identify, interpret or delete because their meanings are often more nebulous and open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, the transition from communist period is not being rushed along in the same way that many previous transition periods were by a successive, strongly-ideological modality like a nationalist movement. In aggregate, this has caused the post-communist period to persist longer than previous liminal stages.

### Liminal stages in the city text of Košice

Taking Košice, Slovakia as an example, it is relatively easy to track the history and geography of city text reorientation through the array of political regimes that controlled the city at various points in time. After the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867, streets and monuments in Košice were reconfigured into what Creţan and Matthews (2016) called a 'martyr city-text' which commemorated Hungarian figures from the numerous anti-Habsburg uprisings who had died fighting for independence. This reconfiguration even involved the repatriation of the earthly remains of Francis II Rákóczi and one of his leading generals

from the 1703 uprising into the crypt in St. Elizabeth's Cathedral located at the *axis mundi* of the city itself.

After Czechoslovakia's creation following World War I, the city texts of Košice and other Slovak cities were once again fully reoriented to reflect the new Czechoslovak political regime that emphasized both Slavic ethnicities and removed German and Hungarian commemorations. Elements of the city text that necessarily needed to be reoriented were easily identified on the basis of language and ethnicity. In Košice, virtually all toponyms from the Austro-Hungarian era were removed in favor of new ones commemorating Czech and Slovak founding fathers, poets, composers, and other cultural and political figures. The transformation from Hungarian to Slovak city text was practically total in its reconfiguration, which is common when one nationally-oriented political regime supplants a previous one. It also does the job of expediting the transition and shortening the length of the liminal stage. The juxtaposition of new and old Czechoslovak nationalist toponyms and monuments may have been anachronistic in many cases, but as Azaryahu (1996, p. 312) demonstrated, politicized elements of city text are not intended to present an objective retelling of the past, but to 'evidence a particular version of history' and 'concretize hegemonic structures of power and authority'.

The same basic explanation holds for the reconfiguration of Košice's city text following the First Vienna Award in November 1938, which ceded much of the southern Slovak territory to Hungary. The city text was once again textually reconfigured as nationally and culturally Hungarian and this reconfiguration was once again nearly total in its scope.

### The development of a communist city text in Košice

In the postwar years between 1945 and 1949, an exceedingly complex city text began to emerge in Košice. Toponyms commemorating Czechoslovak founding fathers and national leaders like Tomáš Masaryk and Edvard Beneš reappeared, but so too did those of Lenin, Stalin, Molotov, Malinovsky, and Klement Gottwald. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1949, the interior commission in Bratislava (*povereníctva vnútra*) sent a directive to all region and local government offices in the Slovak territory providing guidance on street renaming that would lead to older Slovak political figures being phased out from within the city text. It warned that:

The names of the streets and public spaces which are not in accordance with the historiography and current relations of the Republic are not allowed to commemorate those who have expressed hostility to the Czechoslovak people or to the peoples connected to or who remind us of the events of an anti-state character. The Interior Ministry draws attention to this provision and asks the National Committees to see and act on it in all cases in spirit and in accordance with the Government's policy, and do not allow the naming of statesmen and capabilities whose present or past attitude to our state gives us doubts (*Pomenovanie ulíc o verejných priestranstiev meno prezidenta republiky a menami hláv o iných významných osobností cudzích štátov*, NVVK, Archív Mesta Košíc, Rok 1949-1950, Box 10).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, a process to remove many of the pre-war toponyms that were viewed as nationalist was formalized. Other elements of city text were constructed in the same spirit. A large statue of 'Generalissimo Stalin' was placed at the north end of the main street in a square also renamed for him in Košice's old town and unveiled to celebrate his seventieth birthday in 1949. Two large war memorials were constructed at the south end of the

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own.

main street. The first was a cenotaph celebrating the 'liberators of Košice' who were members of the Soviet Red Army that died retaking the city. The second was a large tomb of the unknown soldier that again commemorated Soviet Red Army troops that died during the war and remained unidentified. The adjacent square was also renamed *Námestie Osloboditeľov* (Liberators' Square) (Fig. 1).

These monuments are exemplary of the thousands of similar war memorials intended to commemorate the Soviet victory and symbolize the 'eternal friendship' between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia (Czepczyński 2008).

The first years of the 1950s marked the most intensively ideological street naming period in the history of Košice. By 1950, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) had set about aggressively persecuting its perceived ideological enemies and this persecution extended to an aggressive reorientation of city texts. First and foremost among these enemies was the Catholic Church in Slovakia due to its significant political and social influence (Korec 2003). Virtually all religious orders within Košice's old town had street names that corresponded to their buildings, so when they were raided and closed in 1950, their removal was not complete until the street names could be revised to eliminate all evidence that they had existed in those locations. All formerly-religious street and square names were replaced with names presenting a communist worldview. *Dominikánske námestie* (Dominican Square) was the most significant of these changes, as the square is a traditional site of the city's outdoor produce market and many people gathered there daily. The square was renamed *Dimitrovovo námestie* (Dimitrov Square) in honor of Georgi Dimitrov, the first leader of communist Bulgaria. This name would have made little sense to people gathering in the square given that the Dominican church, which dates from 1290 and is the oldest preserved building in the city, towers over the market and that the square itself is formed by the front façade of the church.

*Františkánska ulica* (Franciscan Street) was renamed *Attilu Józsefa ulica* (Joseph Attila Street) in honor of Hungary's 'great proletarian poet.' *Jezuitská ulica* (Jesuit Street) was renamed *Adyho ulica* (Ady Street) for Endre Ady, the famous Hungarian poet whose work fit the communist message of internationalism and anti-clericalism. Even generically religious street names were changed. *Modlitebna ulica* (Chapel Street) became *A. Ždanova ulica* (Andrei Zhdanov Street), *Kalvárska ulica* (Calvary Street) became *ulica Československej armády* (Czechoslovak Army Street), and *Mníšok ulica* (Nun Street) became *Urxova ulica* (Urx Street) to commemorate Eduard Urx, a Czech communist writer who was arrested and executed by the Gestapo. A major theme in commemorations from this period was the glorification of proto-communist martyrs who had fought and died for the socialist cause prior to and during World War II. Once again, the city text of Košice became an example of what Creţan and Matthews call a 'street martyr landscape'. In addition to the commemoration of Urx, this landscape was exemplified by street names like *Protifašistických Bojovníkov* (Antifascist freedom fighters' street), *ulica Janka Bačíka* (Jan Bačík street), and *ulica E. Thälmana* (Ernst Thälmann street). Bačík was a young Slovak communist who was imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp by the Gestapo and later killed (Fig. 2). Thälmann had been the leader of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in the Weimar Republic until he was imprisoned at the Buchenwald camp before being executed.

In reorienting the city text, the Slovak communist regime had to juxtapose a reasonable number of national communist figures like Gottwald and Bačík with toponyms representative of the international communist community (Fig 3). The risk for misinterpretation of such communist commemorations was



Figure 1. *Námestie Osloboditeľov* (Liberators' Square) was renamed following World War II and included a cenotaph to soldiers to who died liberating the city. Adjacent to the cenotaph (pictured) is a tomb of the unknown soldier. Source: Author's photograph.

twofold. First, there was a real risk that national communist figures would be understood in national rather than ideological terms. Second, while comprehension of most national commemorations in the city text was naturally reinforced through a study of Slovak history in the educational curriculum, obscure international communist figures were unlikely to be recognized or understood at all. Or even in cases when they were understood at a given point in time, they were soon forgotten if no mechanism (such as the school system) kept their memory alive.

An excellent example of this problem of comprehension in Košice was the commemoration of Patrice Lumumba who was the first prime minister of the Republic of the Congo. Following Lumumba's assassination in 1961, he briefly became a cause célèbre throughout the second world and was commemorated widely throughout the Eastern Bloc. In Košice, *námestie Patricea Lumumbu* (Patrice Lumumba Square) was established in the same place that had once been known as Mussolini Square during World War II. While his commemorations throughout Eastern Europe were meant to place him in the pantheon of international socialist martyrs, in reality he was more associated with African nationalism and although his toponym remained until the end of the communist period in 1989, he was effectively long forgotten by that time (Chloupek 2019).

### The leftover landscape of communism in Košice as a liminal landscape

The question remains: how long will the current liminal phase that is called post-communism continue—or at least what may signal its conclusion? A possible answer may be: as long as elements of the communist city-text are still viable as sources of political meaning and serve the purpose of calling to mind the old system for those people who are able to remember. Czepczyński





Figure 2. Janko Bačik was a young communist who was imprisoned at Mauthausen Concentration Camp where he died. This plaque commemorates the location of the school he attended in Košice's old town, where he is also commemorated with a street toponym. Source: Author's photograph.

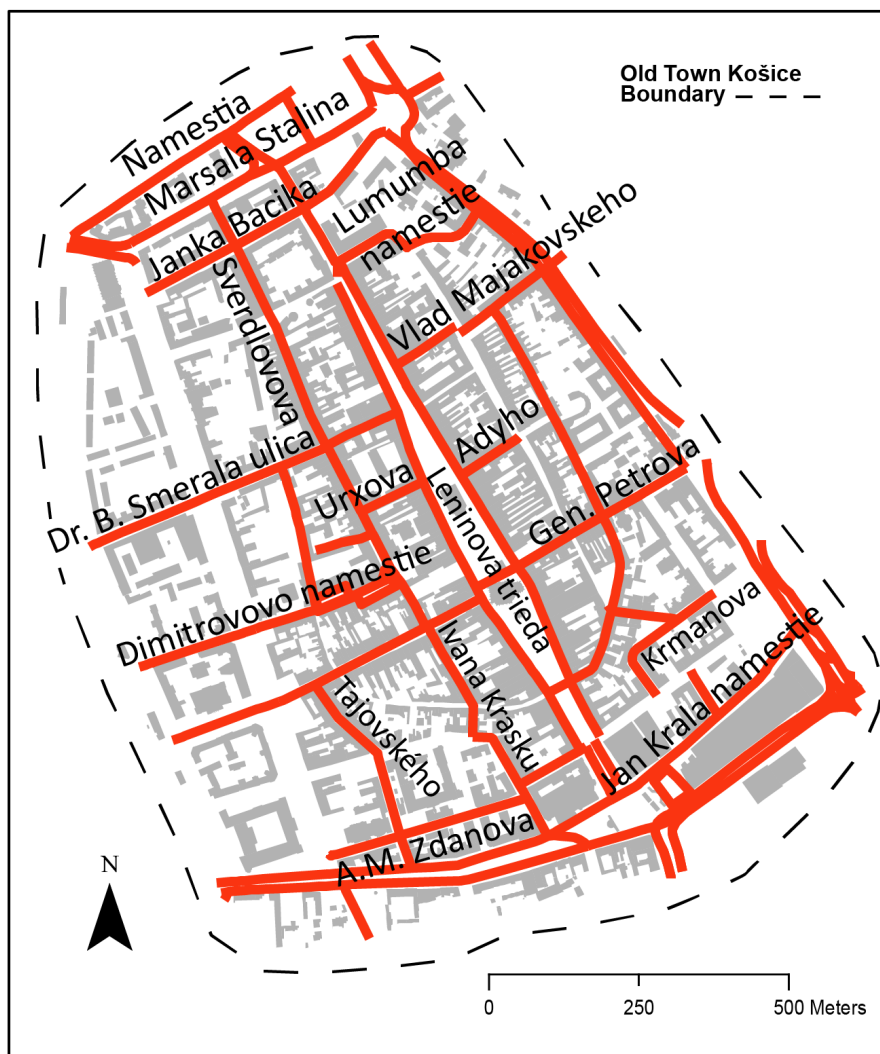


Figure 3. The city text of Košice's old town was significantly reoriented following World War II to commemorate both domestic and international communist figures. Source: Author's map.

modified Turner's explanations of the three phases of liminality in order to apply them to these kinds of societal transitions (Czepczyński, 2008). First, a pre-liminal 'separation' phase exists in which the transitional society breaks away from the existing modality. Within a liminal city text, the most unacceptable elements are often removed during this phase. In the case of Košice, names like Lenin, Gottwald, Majakovsky, and Lumumba quickly disappeared from the city text because they represented the most egregious commemorations of the former system.

In the second liminal phase known as 'transition', elements of the liminal landscape either lose their meaning (and thus, political efficacy), or are re-interpreted in new ways. In Košice, this phase is epitomized by the existence of streets like *Protifašistických Bojovníkov* (Antifascist freedom fighters' street) and *ulica Janka Bačíka* (Jan Bačík street). Their meanings and histories are complex. On one hand, their historical legacy is one of anti-Nazi resistance. On the other, they were commemorated less for their anti-Nazism than for their value as local proto-communist figures. Such commemorations are in the process of being re-interpreted and may in the future be removed if their meanings cannot be reinterpreted in a way that fits with the future social modality.

In some cases, the most politically-useful remaining elements of the liminal city text are carefully preserved in order to prevent the former modality from being completely forgotten. While studies of transition periods tend to emphasize political and cultural change, during the post-communist period in the Eastern Bloc there was a high degree of continuity among the political and cultural elites (Light & Young 2014). In the case of Slovakia, the most dominant political party in the post-communist period has been *Smer-Sociálna Demokracia* (Direction-Social Democracy), which is the direct descendant of the Communist Party of Slovakia and is led by a former communist party member. Until 2014, all former presidents of Slovakia had been former communist party members. So even though a major political transition occurred in Slovakia, the fundamental political leadership of the country—whose leadership role extends deep into local politics—remained relatively unchanged. In Košice, *Námestie Osloboditeľov* (Liberators' Square) with its associated WWII-era cenotaph

and tomb of the unknown soldier are excellent examples of city text elements that are being preserved—and renovated at considerable expense to the city—precisely in order to cause people to recall the old system (Ogurčáková 2018). This is most likely due to the fact that *Smer* relies heavily on older voters who still retain some nostalgia for the communist system. It seems likely, however, that time will eventually cause virtually all elements of the liminal city text to lose their former political efficacy and bring about Turner's third phase of 'reaggregation'. Czepczyński says that this third phase will occur in the former Eastern Bloc when the remaining historical elements of communist city text will hardly be distinguished from those that harken back to the earlier nationalist or imperialist commemorations like those of Rákóczi or Masaryk. That is to say, they will be viewed more as historical artifacts than political signifiers. So in addressing the question of how long the post-communist period will last, attentiveness to changes and reinterpretations in a liminal city text like Košice is a particularly useful method.

### Conclusion

Countries like Slovakia are slowly casting off their communist legacy, however many stark reminders of that system remain in the built environment as well as in the semiosphere. How can we explain the persistence of communist-era place names and monuments when much of the existing research emphasizes the importance of change? Czepczyński's adaptation of Turner's work on liminality provides a conceptual framework by which we can imagine the way the built environment reflects the gradual process of symbolic change. A liminal landscape like the old city of Košice is simultaneously backward and forward looking. In the case of transition from a communist era city text, the process is particularly gradual because many elements of city text are open to multiple meanings and interpretations. I suggest that when distinctions are no longer made between elements of the communist-era city text and those signifying earlier regimes can we begin to argue that the end of the liminal phase called post-communism may be at hand.

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