

Martina P t á č n í k o v á (Praha)

## JAN PALACH SQUARE – URBANONYM AS A SYMBOL OF PUBLIC PROTEST

This article is concerned with a specific example of a public place being spontaneously renamed, a seemingly one-of-a-kind example in the history of Prague public place naming. In early 1969, the urban toponymy of Prague experienced a moment the citizens took an active part in creating a name for a public space. Individuals as well as groups put forth effort with the objective to ensure the set of Prague place names included Jan Palach, who had sacrificed his life in protest against the occupation of former Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968. This article seeks to analyze archived documents (preserved requests, petitions, and municipal authorities meeting minutes) based on which the incentives and the argumentation used in the requests as well as the reactions from the municipal authorities are described.

### Keywords

Prague; Jan Palach; urban toponymy; non-standardized names; commemorative names; ideology

### Introduction

Urban toponyms (i.e. public place names, primarily street and square names) are generally considered to be essential components of an urban landscape. They are frequently so self-evident and omnipresent that people use them without thinking deeply about them or their meaning, not realizing they may constitute an imprint of the historical development of their city, town, region and, as the case may be, the whole country. They may be relics of spatial and/or social relationships gone by. In addition to being a practical aid to make orientation in urban spaces easier, they can serve as a means of applying political and ideological power.<sup>1</sup>

Local self-government authorities are usually initiators of changes in public space names. Urban toponyms may be created continuously or en masse at given points in time. En masse creation usually occurs when a town/city is spreading and it is necessary to ensure duplicate place names in the newly joined municipalities are substituted. Also, en masse changes at a given point in time frequently happen when a new political regime has taken power. It is an established practice that a new regime carries out “cleansing” with the objective to substitute problematic

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<sup>1</sup> Azaryahu (1996), Gill (2005), Light – Nicolae – Suditu (2002), Palonen (2008) or Rajić (2012) are among those sources that analyze relationships between political power and urban toponymy in specific European cities.

(i.e. conforming to past regimes) commemorative names<sup>2</sup> with those that glorify persons, events and phenomena that symbolize the new political regime.

In addition to official (i.e. initiated by local municipal authorities) name changes one can also identify spontaneous changes that reflect views and opinions held by local citizens. This is a sporadic phenomenon, mostly associated with rather explosive historical moments. It means existing place names are substituted (not infrequently in a highly improvised fashion) by new place names without the latter being approved, in any way, by the relevant authorities (see also Ptáčnicková, 2018a).

This contribution is dedicated to a specific example of a public place in Prague being spontaneously renamed, an example that seems to be highly significant as the Prague urban toponymy history includes few other names that have drawn as much public attention as *Jan Palach Square*. In addition to the incentives and the argumentation stated in the said requests, attention is paid to how Prague municipal authorities used their power to politically intervene so as to eliminate the spontaneously used public place name.

### **From Rejdiště (Fairgrounds) to Jan Palach**

At present, *Jan Palach Square* (*náměstí Jana Palacha*; known also under its non-standardized name *Palach/Palacháč*) is situated in the very centre of the city by the River Moldau (*Vltava*) embankment. In addition to the river, two university buildings (the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, and the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University) as well as the Museum of Applied Arts, and the Rudolfinum<sup>3</sup> demarcate the edge of the square. The area may – in terms of architecture, history and its location within Prague – be referred to as significant.

The first officially approved name of the place was *Na rejdišti (Fairgrounds)* (1894–1916; comp. Čarek et al., 1958) to commemorate the first municipal riding-school, which was built there in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The square obtained its name twenty years after it had been rebuilt to look the way it does today. In the course of the First World War, the space was renamed *Empress Zita Square* after the wife of Charles I of Austria, the last Emperor of Austria. This urbanonym was among those the Prague Town Hall used to express their loyalty to the ruling Habsburg Dynasty (see Křížová, 2017). This name, however, only lasted for three years as the newly-formed country of Czechoslovakia was far from inclined to using

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<sup>2</sup> J. David (David, 2011, pp. 166–185) analyzes commemorative motifs in Czech urban toponymy.

<sup>3</sup> This is the official seat of the Czech Philharmony as well as the place where classical music concerts are regularly held. Named after Rudolph, Crown Prince of Austria and the son of the Emperor Franz Joseph I, Rudolfinum used to be the meeting place of the Parliament of the Czechoslovak Republic.

Habsburg names. As a result, the space was renamed *Smetana Square* in 1919 after the famous Czech music composer Bedřich Smetana, while during the Second World War (1942–1945) its name shifted to *Mozartplatz* to commemorate the famous Austrian composer. When the country had been liberated, the pre-war name of *Smetana Square* was reinstated. Another change came in 1952 when it was renamed *Red Army Square* to honour the Soviet Red Army soldiers who died while liberating Prague.

On December 20, 1989 (i.e. a month after what became known as the Velvet Revolution<sup>4</sup>), the square obtained its last officially approved name. It was named after Jan Palach, a student of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University who had burned himself to death in protest against the suppression of freedom and the passive reaction of the Czech public to occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces.<sup>5</sup> This was, however, not the first time the name *Jan Palach Square* was associated with this space. As early as late January 1969 (i.e. 20 years earlier), massive effort was put forth by the public to include the name of Jan Palach in the urban toponymy of Prague. The initiative lasted for as long as 4 months and may be regarded as far from futile despite the fact its objectives remained unfulfilled.

### Spontaneous emergence of an urbanonym<sup>6</sup>

The first time *Red Army Square* was spontaneously renamed was only two days after Palach's death. Street signs containing the officially approved name disappeared on the night between January 20 and 21 to be substituted with street signs which were the same size and colour and used the same template official street signs used at that time. Simultaneously, paper signs stating the unofficial street name emerged behind the windows of both university buildings on the square; the eponymous tram stops situated close to the square were renamed spontaneously as well. What was more, the tram stops were referred to as *Jan Palach Square* (not *Red Army Square*) by tram conductors. The significance of this renaming

<sup>4</sup> The Velvet Revolution was a non-violent transition of power in the Czechoslovakia, occurring from 17 November to 29 December 1989.

<sup>5</sup> The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, officially known as Operation Danube, was a joint invasion of Czechoslovakia by five Warsaw Pact countries – the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany and Hungary – on the night of 20–21 August 1968.

<sup>6</sup> The information stated below (particularly the excerpts from the requests) were obtained from archived documents kept by the Prague City Archives (Archiv hlavního města Prahy) in the file named “Jan Palach Square naming history – proposals, petitions, protest letters, excerpts from press, Prague Municipal Authority statement” (“Pojmenování nám. Jana Palacha – návrhy, petice, protestní dopisy, výstřižky z tisku, stanovisko NVP”), which constitutes part of “Local Self-Government After 1945 – Internal Affairs Committee of the Prague Municipal Authority” (“Městská samospráva po roce 1945 – Odbor pro vnitřní věci NVP”) (see bibliography).

initiative is evidenced by both its extent and the fact that it was covered in contemporary media (e.g. *Lidová demokracie*, *Mladá fronta*, and *Svobodné slovo*; *Rudé právo*, the official highly-propagandistic daily of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, also dedicated a short section of text to it).

The Prague Municipal Authority Council<sup>7</sup> were criticized for condoning such an initiative. They distanced themselves from the attempts at renaming the place, referred to them as illegal, had the original street signs returned and demanded the saboteurs be identified. In an attempt to prevent further provocations, an order was issued soon afterwards whose objective was to ensure suitable security measures were taken with respect to the statue of St. Wenceslaus at Wenceslaus Square (situated very close to where Palach burned himself to death).<sup>8</sup>

### Proposals, petitions and counter-petitions

In addition to attempts at spontaneously renaming what was then called *Red Army Square*, official proposals and petitions with the same objective emerged as well. Their authors ranged from individuals, associations, factory committees, students and student organizations to the Czechoslovak Association of Anti-Fascists. The rhetoric used in all the requests was virtually identical: the petitioners argued the public space in question should be associated with Palach both for its high degree of presentability and the presence of a personal connection with Palach. Palach was hailed as a “one-of-a-kind national hero and martyr who deserves to give name to such a presentable place – all the more so because this is where he had studied until the day he died”.

Also, the petitioners did not fail to mention the ideological underlying message of this commemorative name that was referred to as “contributing to hail freedom of thought intrinsic to the humanity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” arguing Jan Palach was “a man of clean character and clean aims”. The petitioners accentuated the fact the name had emerged spontaneously, arguing “such a situation is extremely rare and may not be repeated”. What is more, the petitioners stated the name “has already

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<sup>7</sup> The Prague Municipal Authority was a Prague self-government body. A set of elected members (incl. the mayor) thereof constituted a council subject to whose decision new urban toponyms were approved.

<sup>8</sup> As the statue, as well as the whole square in which it is situated, has traditionally been a place where spontaneous gatherings and manifestations take place, the city self-government authorities sought to take preventive measures to avoid possible problems. To that end, they had the equestrian statue of St. Wenceslaus surrounded by wooden kegs with conifers. These were placed close to one another to form a barrier that prevented memorial candles from being lit. This highly inaesthetic bulwark soon started to be referred to ironically as *Štrougal's Orchard* (see Ptáčníková 2018b) as the decision to install it was attributed to Lubomír Štrougal, the then Prime Minister.

appeared on one of the houses and its taking it down can be considered a highly irreverent act on the border of being insulting and scandalous”.

The authors of the petitions also complained they had been receiving such names from the municipal authorities they had not felt any affiliation with. It was quite upsetting, argued the petitioners, that “the Prague Municipal Authority failed to respect the wishes of the public” at the time when a consensus finally emerged as to how the public space should be named.

The Place Names Commission with the Internal Affairs Committee of the Prague Municipal Authority had to respond to the pressure from the public. The outcome of one of its meetings that took place in late January 1969 was the recommendation not to rename *Red Army Square* after Palach but to choose a different place to bear his name instead. There were two different places associated with Palach that were taken into consideration. The first was *Gustav Kliment Square* where Palach had studied the economical faculty. This suggestion was rejected by the Internal Affairs Committee who argued the name of a significant working-class official could not be removed. The second suggestion of the Place Names Commission, which was backed by the Internal Affairs Committee, sought to rename one of the streets near the place Palach had burned himself to death. The third suggestion of the Place Names Commission was to substitute those Prague urban toponyms that were problematic for one reason or another. These included e.g. *Křižovnická Street* whose renaming sought to remove duplicity (a square nearby was named *Křižovnické Square*), and *Legerova Street*, whose pronunciation was improperly Czechicized [leʒerova], [leʒerova]. It must be noted that renaming these two streets would have been seen as a sort of last resort only.

Having said that, the Internal Affairs Committee also received requests and petitions demanding that the unapproved street signs be removed and the name that had spontaneously emerged be rejected, arguing this was “an anti-Soviet provocation amateurishly disguised in funeral cloth”. The petitions were the most negative about the fact that the name hailing Red Army soldiers had been arbitrarily removed: “we are deeply insulted if *Red Army Square* is chosen to be renamed; we still remember – and some of us actively fought on the Prague barricades and as well as witnessed the memorial service for the fallen Soviet liberators of Prague, which took place in this square in May 1945. Even if we allow for the arguments contained in the petitions to rename *Red Army Square*, we cannot help asking the question whether this is a mere coincidence or a refined attempt to express anti-Soviet sentiments.” Another group of counter-petitioners emphasized the name *Red Army Square* was a significant symbol that needed to be protected as such: “we must protect all the symbols, memorials and names of streets and other public spaces that are named after those who have contributed to the fact that today we can call this country a socialist country.” Few petitioners protested against Palach’s name as such but demanded a different place be named after him: “we believe



**Figure 1:** One of the spontaneous renaming of the *Red Army Square* in 1969 (Blažek – Eichler – Jareš, 2009, p. 9)

there are a large number of buildings and spaces associated with students that could be named after the deceased in question.”

## Decision

The Internal Affairs Committee agreed with the proposal of the Place Names Commission consisting in either renaming one of the spaces near the place Palach had burned himself to death or substituting one of the existing problematic urban toponyms. In spite of there being such a proposal the Prague Municipal Authority Council refused to take it into consideration, assigning its chairman to state no urban toponym commemorating Jan Palach were to be used. The council justified its decision by saying the large-scale renaming that had taken place in the early 1950s had brought chaos into Prague public spaces names, and the council declared they wished to complicate orientation in the city no more.

Those who requested the Internal Affairs Committee to ensure Prague had a place named after Jan Palach received the following answer: “first, a detailed analysis of the development and Jan Palach’s act needs to be prepared” and only after that his name might be included in the set of Prague urban toponyms.<sup>9</sup> The second

<sup>9</sup> I. Lutterer is among those that deal with the principle of not naming public spaces after those who have only passed away recently: “We should wait for a period of time before we name a public space after a politician or a person with cultural influence to see whether such a person – after passage of time – is still relevant to us, and we have grounds to believe he or she will be relevant for generations to come, whether such a person is, decades after his/her death, still worthy of public commemoration” (Lutterer, 1992, pp. 75–76; translation – MP).

stated reason had to do with stability of place names: it was alleged it was undesirable to change place names in the centre of Prague where *Red Army Square* was situated.

That being said, it could be argued the actual reason for not including the said name in the urban toponymy of Prague was the fact that what Palach's name represented was not congruous with the political dogmas of the late 1960s. In 1969, all of the attempts at ensuring his name was officially included in Prague urban toponymy remained proposals only. One had to wait 20 more years to see the name *Jan Palach Square* being officially sanctioned.

The whole renaming initiative, which culminated in January and February, had a sort of an epilogue consisting in two more instances of the space in question being arbitrarily renamed in April of the same year. Illegally installed street signs were immediately removed in both cases. As the May anniversary of liberation of Prague by the Red Army forces was approaching, the Prague Municipal Authority Council issued an order demanding street signs be installed in such a way as to make it impossible to steal them. At the same time the council ensured police were put on patrol in the area. As a result, no street signs were exchanged after 1969.

## Conclusion

Using one specific example, the aim of this article was to study how public spaces in cities are spontaneously renamed. This phenomenon, which usually takes place in explosive historical periods<sup>10</sup> and which normally affects spaces with higher cultural and historical potential (such as spaces in city centres), expresses the wishes of the public – in our specific case such wishes that could not become reality on account of political circumstances. *Jan Palach Square* shows us how important the role of visual fixation of a name in a city area is with respect to the phenomenon of spontaneous name changes. Newly installed and frequently highly improvised street signs become a symbol no less important than the actual name written on them.

While the 1969 attempts at including Palach's name in the urban toponymy of Prague were unsuccessful, it could be argued they bolstered what was already happening – Palach's name was becoming a cult.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it should be noted Palach's name was far from being forgotten 20 years later. In fact, *Jan Palach Square* was among the first three names officially sanctioned after the Velvet Revolution.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Compare late World War Two examples from the Prague area – Ptáčníková, 2018a.

<sup>11</sup> David – Davidová Glogarová 2018 are among those who discuss cult of personality creation by means of geographic names.

<sup>12</sup> Referred to as so called *Palach Week*, the period of civil unrest of early 1989 that ushered in the end of the communist era in Czechoslovakia also bears the name of Jan Palach.

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## NÁMĚSTÍ JANA PALACHA – URBANONYMUM JAKO SYMBOL LIDOVÉHO PROTESTU

Článek se zabývá jedním konkrétním dokladem fenoménu spontánního přejmenování městského prostoru, a to dokladem, který nemá v dějinách pojmenovávání pražských veřejných míst obdoby. V první polovině roku 1969 zažila pražská urbanonymie moment aktivní účasti obyvatel města při vzniku názvu veřejného prostranství, když se do ní obyvatelé (jednotlivci i celé skupiny) pokoušeli prosadit jméno studenta Jana Palacha, jenž obětoval svůj život na protest proti potlačování svobod a pasivnímu přístupu veřejnosti po okupaci Československa armádami států Varšavské smlouvy v roce 1968. Tento příspěvek analyzuje archivní materiály (dochované žádosti a petice i zápisy z jednání městských orgánů), na jejichž základě sleduje argumentaci použitou v návrzích a na druhé straně pak reakci městské samosprávy.

### **Klíčová slova**

Praha; Jan Palach; urbanonymie; nestandardizovaná jména; honorifikační jména; ideologie

*Martina Ptáčnicková*

*ptacnikova@ujc.cas.cz*

*Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences*

*Department of Onomastics*

*Valentinská 1*

*116 46 Praha 1*

*CZECH REPUBLIC*