



DR-KARL-LUEGER-RING / UNIVERSITÄTSRING

Vienna, Austria

48.210033, 16.363449



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Executive Summary

In Vienna, over 160 streets bear the names of controversial historical figures. One of these streets, once called Dr-Karl-Leuger-Ring, was named after a prominent anti-Semitic agitator whose ideology inspired the dogmatic policies of Adolf Hitler. In 2011, an archival report investigated the acts of controversial historical figures with names in public spaces. A year later, the city government of Vienna voted to rename the street Universitätsring. This case study examines the importance and consequences of altering controversial street names in light of revised historical narratives.

Introduction

Vienna's problematic street names represent collective cultural amnesia regarding Europe's fascist history.¹ Many streets in Vienna are named after controversial historical figures, and many of these avenues' titles could be legally changed if local councils and residents agreed on a solution.² An important example is Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring, named after an anti-Semitic instigator. In 2011, Dr Andreas Mailath-Pokorny, a government official, spearheaded an investigation into Vienna's place names.³ The initiative intended to encourage more constructive policies that acknowledge the relationship of many historical individuals prominent in the early 1900s to the Nazi Party and anti-Semitism.⁴ In 2012, after years of debate, the Vienna city council renamed Dr-Karl-Leuger-Ring to Universitätsring.⁵ This case study speaks to the complexities of investigating the past within the context of Austrian *Erinnerungspolitik* (memory culture).

Background

Karl Lueger

Karl Lueger was an Austrian politician and Mayor of Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century. As the leader of the Christian Social Party, Lueger championed conservative politics. Though he has been credited with bringing modern infrastructure to Vienna, including schools, hospitals, and an expansion of the water supply, he has also been associated with anti-Semitism and demagoguery.⁶ Key to Lueger's popular success was his usage of the economically successful Jewish middle class as a scapegoat for the complaints of the Christian lower classes.⁷

Hitler drew significant inspiration from Lueger and the policies of the Christian Social Party. While living in Vienna, Hitler observed the Austrian Christian-Social Party at its height. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler praised Lueger and noted that the Christian Social Party demonstrated 'shrewd judgement concerning the worth of the popular masses,' referencing its populist strategies.⁸

Austrian Erinnerungskultur

Austrian *Erinnerungskultur* (memory culture) is trapped in the complex web of Austrian and Pan-German identity. Many Austrian national holidays are contested, divided by two contrasting narratives. For example, November 12, marks the establishment of the Austrian First Republic in 1918. While the Social Democrats celebrated the beginning of a democratic republic, many

¹ Liam Hoare, "Why do Vienna's Street Signs Honor So Many Anti-Semites?" *Forward*, February 2, 2018.

² Local, "159 Vienna street names have dubious History," *Local*, September 24, 2014.

³ Geschäftsgruppe Kultur und Wissenschaft des Magistrats der Stadt Wien, "Wissenschaftsbericht der Stadt Wien 2011," Magistrat der Stadt Wien, 2012.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Local, "159 Vienna street names have dubious History," *Local*, September 24, 2014.

⁶ Robert S. Wistrich, "Karl Lueger and the Ambiguities of Viennese Antisemitism," *Jewish Social Studies* 45, no. ¾ (1983): 251-252.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁸ Adolf Hitler cited in *ibid.*, 252.

conservatives lamented the fall of the Habsburg monarchy. Today, November 12, is no longer celebrated as a national holiday.⁹

Though the early 1900s in Austria saw a rise in Pan-Germanism¹⁰ or the celebration of German cultural heritage, the Third Reich's annexation of the First Republic of Austria complicated this popular ideology. Because the Third Reich annexed Austria against its will, many Austrian citizens still regard themselves as victims, rather than coconspirators, of the Nazi Party. This belief is known as the *Opfermythos* (victim myth).¹¹

In the 1980s, because of a scandal in which *Profil* magazine revealed that UN General Secretary and presidential candidate Dr Kurt Waldheim was a member of the Nazi Party, Austria began to reevaluate its role in the Holocaust.¹² The decades since have seen an investigation of anti-Semitic policies and historical figures,¹³ including Karl Lueger.

Street Names in Vienna

In 2011, the Institut für Zeitgeschichte der Universität Wien (University of Vienna Institute for Contemporary History) started working with the Verein zur Wissenschaftlichen Aufarbeitung der Zeitgeschichte (Group for the Scientific Processing of Contemporary History) to research Viennese street names from 1860 onwards. Vienna has approximately 6,600 street and park names, 4,379 named after individuals.¹⁴ The research project focused on 400 names deemed problematic, around 10% of the total titled streets in Vienna.¹⁵

These 400 names were divided into three categories. The first, Group A, the most contested, consisted of individuals connected with racism or anti-Semitism, including those who occupied relatively high positions in the Nazi Party or spread anti-democratic sentiments. Group B included individuals who indirectly but actively strengthened or attempted to gain more power in the Nazi Party. Group C examined those who engaged in anti-Semitism or racism before 1914 or were members or supporters of the Nazi Party.¹⁶

The study's central question was whether individuals immortalised on the streets advanced themselves or their careers by participating in or supporting anti-Semitism, racism, or fascism. The content and purpose of the report speak to the recent efforts of the Austrian government to improve and reflect on its *Erinnerungskultur*.

⁹ Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, "Österreichs Erinnerungskultur ist einige Sonderwege gegangen," Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, May 4, 2020.

¹⁰ Robert S. Wistrich, "Karl Lueger and the Ambiguities of Viennese Antisemitism," *Jewish Social Studies* 45, no. ¾ (1983): 252.

¹¹ Karla Engelhard, "Der Opfermythos in Österreichs Erinnerungskultur," Deutschlandfunk, July 23, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Oliver Rathkolb et al., "Forschungsprojektendbericht: Straßennamen Wiens seit 1860 als ‚Politische Erinnerungsorte,“ Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, July 2013, 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring

The Ringstraße is a prominent street circling Vienna. In 1934, part of the Ringstraße became known as Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring. The section includes some of Vienna's most iconic buildings, like the Burgtheater, or city theatre, and the main offices of the University of Vienna.¹⁷

History of the Contestation

Renaming Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring

In 2000, neuropsychiatrist Eric Kandel won the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Kandel was born in Austria and studied at the University of Vienna. However, he claimed that the Nobel Prize was 'certainly not an Austrian Nobel; it was a Jewish-American Nobel.'¹⁸ When Austrian President Thomas Klestil asked Kandel what he could do to remedy the situation, Kandel replied that Lueger's name should be removed from the Ringstraße.¹⁹

Around the same time, the Green Party, then an oppositional party in the government, raised an unsuccessful motion to have Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring renamed. The University of Vienna, close to Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring, also held an internal investigation into the history and implications of the street. The investigation failed to reach an agreement, as the committee members could not come to a consensus on a new name for the street.²⁰

In 2011, over a decade after the first serious contestations over Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring, the commission to review Vienna's street names began. It concluded in 2013, a year after Dr-Karl-Lueger Ring became Universitätsring.²¹

Karl Lueger Monument

Dr-Karl-Lueger Ring is not the only contentious site named for Lueger in Vienna. Notably, the Karl Lueger Monument on Dr-Karl-Lueger-Platz has been the target of significant debate. In 2016, the city placed a plaque explaining Lueger's problematic legacy in front of the statue.²² Four years later, in 2020, protestors sprayed the word *Schande* (shame) on the statue; after city workers initially removed it, the phrase reappeared again shortly after that. This became a pattern over a series of several months. Individuals who wanted to preserve the graffiti formed the *Schandwache* (vigil of disgrace) group in October 2020.²³

¹⁷ Bethany Bell, "Vienna street severs anti-Semite link," *BBC News*, April 21, 2012.

¹⁸ Eric Kandel cited in Kate Abnett, "Renaming the Ring: A Reconciliation," *Vienna Review*, September 13, 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Liam Hoare, "Disgraced: Whither Vienna's Monument to Karl Lueger?," *K.*, October 7, 2021.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Liam Hoare, "Students demand Lueger statue goes," *Jewish Chronicle*, June 26, 2020.

²³ *Ibid.*

In May of 2021, #aufstehn (get up), a protest organization, released a series of recommendations for the Lueger Monument. According to #aufstehn, Dr-Karl-Lueger-Platz should be renamed and turned into a place of educational reflection about *Erinnerungskultur* and Austrian history, the bronze figure of Lueger should be removed from its pedestal, and the city should open up a competition for a new work of art.²⁴ As of 2022, the statue remains in its place.

Decision-Making Processes

Universitätsring

In 2012, the Viennese city government, then dominated by a leftist Social Democrats-Greens coalition, voted to change the name of Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring to Universitätsring (University Ring). Andreas Mailath Pokorny, who led the archival investigation into some of Vienna's problematic street names and served as Vienna's Councillor for Cultural Affairs, noted that while it was unusual for the city to rename a street, Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring warranted an exception.²⁵

The decision to rename the street received criticism from the political right. Heinz-Christian Strache, leader of the Freedom Party, then the far-right opposition party, denounced the decision, calling it a 'scandal.'²⁶ Other conservative politicians wondered if the renaming might not point to the dangers of cancel culture.²⁷ By contrast, the leader of the Austrian Jewish community, Oskar Deutsch, supported the street's name change.²⁸

The investigation into Vienna's public space names, which concluded in 2013, was complex because it dealt with whether names should be changed but also of *which* names should be changed. Because problematic street names were categorised and ranked in order of contention, the study implicitly asked at what level of involvement in anti-Semitism, racism, or fascism an individual's name should be removed. Recommendations made by the study included renaming, reallocation, explanatory contextualisation (such as additional plaques or markers), and artistic intervention (like counter monuments).²⁹

One important additional recommendation in the report referenced gender. Of the 4,379 public spaces named after individuals, only 361 honour women.³⁰ The study recommends that more spaces be named after women to reflect a more modern perspective.³¹

The report received a degree of criticism for overlooking some problematic names. In an interview with the newspaper *Der Profil*, Oliver Rathkolb, who helped to write the report, was

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bethany Bell, "Vienna street severs anti-Semite link," *BBC News*, April 21, 2012.

²⁶ Heinz-Christian Strache cited in Bethany Bell, "Vienna street severs anti-Semite link," *BBC News*, April 21, 2012.

²⁷ Erhard Fürst, "Cancel-Kultur: Rückkehr zur Barbarei?," *Wiener Zeitung*, July 20, 2020.

²⁸ Bethany Bell, "Vienna street severs anti-Semite link," *BBC News*, April 21, 2012.

²⁹ Oliver Rathkolb et al., "Forschungsprojektendbericht: Straßennamen Wiens seit 1860 als ‚Politische Erinnerungsorte,“ Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, July 2013, 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 11.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

asked why the investigation did not mention the streets Großen and Kleinen Mohrengasse (Great and Small Moor Lanes), which hold racist connotations. Rathkolb admitted to overlooking the case and failing to mention Robert-Hamerling-Park, which pays homage to an anti-Semitic writer.³²

Beyond Universitätsring

Since the renaming of Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring, the city government has taken other steps to address problematic street titles in Vienna. Mailath-Pokorny announced his intention to add plaques to contentious street names explaining their connection to anti-Semitism, racism, or fascism, rather than renaming them together. Some names, however, have been completely altered. For example, in 2018, Richard-Kuhn-Weg (Richard Kuhn Way), named for anti-Semitic biochemist Richard Kuhn, was renamed Stadt-des-Kindes-Weg (City of the Children Way).³³

Similarly, in 2015, the district council of Leopoldstadt voted to rename the Ferry-Dusika-Stadion, an indoor arena. Initially named for Ferry Dusika, a cyclist, the title became disputed due to Dusika's Nazi past. The council previously agreed to rename the stadium after Stephanie Endres, a female sports scientist and promoter of women's athletics. However, in March 2021, the SPÖ party voted to postpone the final decision, much to the dismay of the Green Party. With the stadium scheduled for massive construction in 2022, there will be no further discussion until 2023.³⁴

Summary and Conclusions

The issue of renaming public spaces in Vienna has been uniquely complicated by the complexities of Austria's *Erinnerungskultur*. However, due to the efforts of city councils, government officials, and investigative committees, progress has been made, histories have become uncovered and unravelled, and narratives have been reshaped. Though there is more to be done to confront the contentious names occupying Vienna's street corners, the work already done in changing the name of Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring to Universitätsring points to a hopeful future. Lessons can be learned from research's depth and local governments' continued response.

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³³ Liam Hoare, "Disgraced: Whither Vienna's Monument to Karl Lueger?," *K.*, October 7, 2021.

³⁴ Andreas Puschautz and Julia Schrenk, "Rot-grüner Namensstreit um das Ferry-Dusika-Stadion," *Kurier*, March 17, 2021.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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