



RENAMING THE MOHRENSTRASSE

Berlin, Germany

38.0318, 78.4805



Image by Laura Balthasar, courtesy of the author.

Executive Summary

This case study examines the renaming process of the street 'Mohrenstraße' to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße and its corresponding underground train station in Berlin, Germany. The decision to rename came after several years of debate and initiatives from various societal actors and academics, who stressed the racist character of the word 'Mohr' in 'Mohrenstraße.' The renaming is intended as a sign against racism and a tribute to Anton Wilhelm Amo, the first known German legal scholar and philosopher of African descent and the first person of colour to attend a European university. The renaming process signifies an important, albeit small, step in a more significant debate about Germany's colonial past.

Introduction

On August 20, 2020, the district council in Berlin decided to rename the street 'Mohrenstraße' to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße.¹ The decision came officially into force on 23 March 2021.² Additionally, the BVG (the company that operates the Berlin public transport) also announced its intent to change the name of the corresponding underground train station. As of the date of this study, neither name has yet been changed. But why change the name of a street and train station at all?

After the reunification of Germany in 1991 and most prominently in the 2010s, several societal actors and academics stressed the racist character of the word 'Mohr' in 'Mohrenstraße'.³ Mohr is a German word that historically described men with dark skin tones. Duden, an official German dictionary, defines the word as outdated and discriminating.⁴ Additionally, the term was associated with violent German and European colonial history, which continues to have racial resonance today.⁵ For several years and through numerous initiatives, the city decided to change the name of the street to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement. The association Berlin Postkolonial welcomes the decision and highlights the renaming as an internationally visible sign against racism in the public space and as a long overdue tribute to an outstanding personality of African descent in Germany. Anton Wilhelm Amo is the first African to receive a doctorate from a German university and believed to be the first known African to study in Europe. Amo, born in modern-day Ghana in 1700, was given as a baby to Duke Anton Ulrich of Brunswick and Lüneburg and his son and taken to Europe. He studied law and philosophy, learned multiple languages, and became a professor at the renowned Halle and Jena Prussian Universities. He published his first dissertation on the 'Rights of Black People in Europe' in 1729.⁶

While renaming a street and an underground train station may not be considered significant in a larger scope, it nevertheless indicates some progress in Germany's or, more specifically, Berlin's steps in dealing with the colonial past. Furthermore, given Amo's significant role in the progress of Germany history, the movement to rename the street in his honour represents more than an effort to remove vestiges of a colonial past. The statement behind the choice to rename the street after Amo represents a desire to equally emphasise symbols of historical change in Germany, echoing the wider global movement to reconcile with the past of Western colonialism.

Background

¹ Konstatin Zimmermann, "Berliner Mohrenstraße wird umbenannt," *Zeit Online*, August 21, 2020.

² Bezirksamt Mitte von Berlin, Bezirksamtsvorlage Nr. 1442 / 2021, March 16, 2021.

³ Eine Welt Stadt Berlin, "Mohrenstraße," Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag. No date.

⁴ Duden, "Mohr," Cornelsen Verlag GmbH. no date.

⁵ Regina Röhmhild, "Kein Rassismus vor unserer Haustür!." Philosophische Fakultät Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, 2020. 1.

⁶ Website, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, "Anton Wilhelm Amo," Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, October 12, 2021.

Definition of the word 'Mohr'

The definition and understanding of the word 'Mohr' is the main reason for the debate and contestation around 'Mohrenstraße.' Therefore, the definition of 'Mohr' is crucial to the renaming discussion. In English, the term is 'Moor', and spelling across languages can vary.

Mohr refers predominantly to men with darker skin tones or Black men.⁷ The word was initially used to describe dark-skinned North Africans native to Mauritania and later was used for any person with darker skin tones.⁸ It can also mean a person with dark hair. Additionally, it is also a somewhat common last name in Germany.⁹ Nevertheless, the word Mohr is described as obsolete and even discriminating in official German dictionaries.¹⁰

One of the criteria for renaming is understanding the word's historical meaning and how it was used throughout the last centuries. Several sources claim that the word Mohr was used negatively, for example, by referring to inferiority. Generally, the word is used to describe anyone of foreign designation; this could also mean anyone who is non-European.¹¹ Historian Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov argues that in the 17th and 18th centuries, the word was used to describe something unfamiliar or strange (in German *Fremdheit*) rather than a physical characteristic.¹² Some, like anglophone literature and cultural studies scholar Susan Arndt and the historian Ulrike Hamann argue that Mohr was a term used to belittle people or as an insult towards non-Christians.¹³ However, critics such as von der Heyden argue that there is no proof that the word up until the 1880s was used in a belittling or negative way in Berlin or Prussia.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are examples in literature where the term is used disparagingly, e.g. by attributing negative characteristics such as a person being lazy or unskilled. Other examples include connections to slavery or cannibalism.¹⁵

In the Age of Enlightenment, the use of the word as a reference to race and hierarchy became more common.¹⁶ An increasingly consolidated colonial-racist body of thought emerged in the 19th century by using the word Mohr in proverbs, e.g. 'Anyone who wants to be well served by a 'Mohr' must feed him well, make him work a lot and give him a good beating.'¹⁷ Generally, a subordinate meaning of the word was used throughout society by including the growing popularity of

⁷ Duden, "Mohr," Cornelsen Verlag GmbH, no date.

⁸ Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache, "Mohr," Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaft, no date.

⁹ Wortbedeutung Wörterbuch, "Mohr," Wortbedeutung.info Wörterbuch, No date.

¹⁰ Duden, "Mohr," Cornelsen Verlag GmbH, no date.

¹¹ Susan Arndt, and Ulrike Hamann, "Mohr_in," In *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Münster: Unrast, 2011), 649-653.

¹² Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov., *Schwarze Europäer im Alten Reich. Handel, Migration, Hof* (Berlin: V&R Unipress, 2013), 89, 247.

¹³ Susan Arndt, and Ulrike Hamann, "Mohr_in," In *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Münster: Unrast, 2011), 649.

¹⁴ Ulrich van der Heyden, „Der Mohr hat seine Schuldigkeit getan: Der sträfliche Umgang mit der Geschichte in der deutschen Hauptstadt,“ In *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin*, ed. Werner Breuning and Uwe Schaper (Gebr. Mann, 2014), 259.

¹⁵ Institut für Europäische Ethnologie. "Historische Bedeutung des Begriffs." Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. August 19, 2020.

¹⁶ Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov., *Schwarze Europäer im Alten Reich. Handel, Migration, Hof* (Berlin: V&R Unipress, 2013), 93.

¹⁷ Translated by author, Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Wander, "Lemma "Mohr",“ In *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexicon. Ein Hausschatz für das Deutsche Volk*, no editor (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1873); cited after: Ulrich van der Heyden, *Auf Afrikas Spuren in Berlin: Die Mohrenstraße und andere koloniale Erblasten* (Berlin: Tenea Verlag, 2008), 8.

evolution theories and the use of the term when comparing humans to other primates in children's books.¹⁸

In the 20th century, the name was also used to make exotic products, for example, pralines known as Drei-Mohren-Mischung (three Mohren Mix) were produced by the Sarotti company, which had an office in the Mohrenstraße.¹⁹ The term is still associated with servitude and connected to stereotypes of the word Mohr. The term is not only out-of-date in the eyes of its detractors, but it is also considered discriminatory today.²⁰ The Africa Council umbrella organisation (Afrika-Rat-Dachverband) stated the perception of the term: 'The German language is full of idioms that associate the term 'Mohr' with exoticism, also devaluation, subservience, stupidity and infantilism. The term, like the N-word, is undoubtedly a racist and insulting foreign name for black people.'²¹

While some argue that the word is only partially contested and racist because it was not used that way in the 17th century, it can undoubtedly be concluded that it is outdated and racist today.

History of the street

While the sources do not always agree on precisely when the street was named 'Mohrenstraße', several sources claim that it happened either in 1706 or 1707.²² Additionally, 'the reason for selecting the name is unclear. There are three possible explanations for the term Mohrenstraße:

First, Leopold Freiherr von Zedlitz wrote in 1834 that the name is based on a Mohr, meaning a Black servant of the Markgrafen von Schwedt who was able to afford and build a house in the street.²³ Second, the name is based on the Black residents of the street. There are two sources: the first is based on scholar Hermann Vogt, who wrote in 1885 about Berlin street names and their origins. He noted that the street was named after 'Mohren,' namely, Black people whom King Friedrich Wilhelm I received as a gift from the Dutch.²⁴ However, this explanation is questionable because King Friedrich Wilhelm I was crowned in 1713, and the street bore the name Mohrenstraße as early as 1710.²⁵ A more likely explanation is that it was named after formerly enslaved people who lived in the street during the reign of King Friedrich I from 1688-1713, who was also the ruler of the trading colony Groß Friedrichsburg in West Africa. King Friedrich I

¹⁸ Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, "Historische Bedeutung des Begriffs," Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, August 19, 2020.

¹⁹ Sarotti. "Eine Reise durch die Zeit," Stollwerck GmbH, 2022.; Institut für Europäische Ethnologie. "FAQ zur Umbenennung der "Mohrenstraße" (im Folgenden: M*-Straße)." Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. July 7, 2021.

²⁰ Duden, "Mohr," Cornelsen Verlag GmbH, no date; Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, "Historische Bedeutung des Begriffs," Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, August 19, 2020.

²¹ Translated by author, Moctar Kamara, "Offener Brief des Zentralrats der afrik. Gemeinde in Deutschland zur Berliner "Mohrenstraße"," Africavenir, No date.

²² Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, "FAQ zur Umbenennung der "Mohrenstraße" (im Folgenden: M*-Straße)," Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, July 7, 2021.

²³ Leopold von Zedlitz-Neukirch, "Mohren:straße," In *Neustes Conversations-Handbuch für Berlin und Potsdam zum täglichen Gebrauch der Einheimischen und Fremden aller Stände* ed. Leopold von Zedlitz-Neukirch (Berlin: Eisendorff, 1834), 492.

²⁴ Hermann Vogt, "Mohren-Straße," In *Die Strassen-Namen Berlins* ed. Hermann Vogt (Berlin: Verlag des Vereins für die Geschichte Berlins, 1885.), 63.

²⁵ Wolfgang Schneider, *Berlin* (Weimar/Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1983), 149.

commissioned the Friedrichstadt, a part of Berlin named after him. Mohrenstraße was a part of this project and was named with the other streets in 1706.²⁶

And lastly, according to historian Ulrich van der Heyden, the street was named after a distinguished delegation of African representatives from the Brandenburg colony of Großfriedrichsburg and had no racist or colonialist overtones at the time it was established. The African delegation, led by Chief Janke from the town of Pokesu, stayed in an inn outside of Berlin. When the protective treaties were signed at the end of the 17th century, they would have paid their respects to the Großen Kurfürsten (Great Elector). According to reports, the delegates spent four months in Berlin and travelled to the palace on foot, as was typical of the period. The route was often used; thus, the Berliners named it Mohrenweg.²⁷ Nevertheless, this explanation is heavily disputed and criticised by Christian Kopp, an activist and scholar from Berlin Postkolonial e. V. who claims that Heyden does not have historical proof for his theory. Chief Janke had come to Berlin alone, apart from one servant, to submit to the Great Elector. This visit would have occurred in 1684, years before Mohrenstraße was officially named. Additionally, there is no proof of the existence of the inn where the delegation would have stayed.²⁸

In conclusion, there is no definite proof of why the name Mohrenstraße was chosen.

In the 19th century, the street was used by insurance companies, bankers, master artisans, and wealthy merchants. Additionally, several hotels such as Hotel Kaiserhof, a telegraph station and a travel agency were also situated in the late 19th century in the Mohrenstraße.²⁹ Throughout time, many famous people stayed or lived in the Mohrenstraße, e.g., the poet Heinrich Stieglitz³⁰ and Karl Marx during his studies in Berlin.³¹ Mohrenstraße 31, also known as the Mohrenkolonaden, had different stores, a school, and a library. Additionally, the US-American delegation office was in Mohrenstraße.³²

During the Second World War, few houses were destroyed, and many could be renovated during the 20th century. As in the 19th century, the buildings were used for administrative, insurance and banking purposes. Most notably, during the German Democratic Republic, Mohrenstraße 36/37 was the International Press centrum (Internationale Pressezentrum) used to declare the opening of the Berlin Wall on the 9th November 1989 by Günter Schabowski.³³ Nowadays, several of the buildings in Mohrenstraße are architectural monuments.

²⁶ Friedrich Nicolai, *Beschreibung der Königlichen Residenzstädte Berlin und Potsdam und aller dasebst befindlicher Merkwürdigkeiten* (Berlin: Nicolai, 1779), 152, 153.

²⁷ Ulrich van der Heyden, *Auf Afrikas Spuren in Berlin: Die Mohrenstraße und andere koloniale Erblasten* (Berlin: Tenea Verlag, 2008); Ulrich van der Heyden, „Der Mohr hat seine Schuldigkeit getan: Der sträfliche Umgang mit der Geschichte in der deutschen Hauptstadt,“ In *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin*, ed. Werner Breuning and Uwe Schaper (Gebr. Mann, 2014).

²⁸ Christian Kopp, „White Myths - Black History: Der Fall der Berliner „Mohrenstraße“,“ *Lernen aus der Geschichte*, October 7, 2015.

²⁹ *Adressbuch für Berlin und seine Vororte* (Berlin: August Scherl, 1900) 423.

³⁰ Boicke, Johann Wilhelm. *Allgemeiner Wohnungsanzeiger für Berlin und dessen nächste Umgebungen mit Einschluß von Charlottenburg*. Berlin: Boicke, 1829.

³¹ Vorwärts. „Berlin ehrt Karl Marx.“ *Vorwärts*. September 1, 1929. No 409.

³² N.a., *Berliner Adreß Buch für das Jahr 1890* (Berlin: Loewenthal, 1890) 326.

³³ Thomas Goldau, „So war das damals mit Herrn Schabowski,“ *Aktiv*. October 18, 2019.

History of the train station

The train station U-Bahnhof Mohrenstraße (Underground train station Mohrenstraße) is at the west end of Mohrenstraße and was opened in 1908. Initially, the train station was named Kaiserhof, likely after the Hotel Kaiserhof that was in the vicinity. Later, the regime of the German Democratic Republic renamed the train station U-Bahnhof Thälmannplatz.³⁴ After a couple of years the regime renamed some streets, and after rebuilding the train station, it was named after the adjacent Otto-Grotewohl-Straße.³⁵ In 1991, the train station was renamed Mohrenstraße.³⁶ However, this was heavily criticised by several societal actors. With the renaming of Mohrenstraße, the BVG (the company that operates the Berlin public transport) is also in the process of renaming the train station. The BVG proposed the name U-Bahnhof Glinkastraße, corresponding to the adjacent street Glinkastraße, which is the street where the composer Michail Iwanowitsch Glinka died.³⁷ However, this was also criticised because the composer held anti-Semitic views, which are reflected in his work.³⁸ In their announcement that the renaming to Glinkastraße will not take place, the BVG stated that they were open to suggestions.³⁹



Figure 1: "Entrance to the Underground Train Station Mohrenstraße" Image courtesy of the author.

History of the Contestation

The origins of the Contestation

Contestation over the name Mohrenstrasse and other street names in Berlin began in the 1990s.⁴⁰

³⁴ Berliner Zeitung, "Der Mythos vom Hitler-Marmor am U-Bahnhof Mohrenstraße," Berliner Zeitung, April 4, 2016.

³⁵ Michael Bee, "U-Bahnhof Mohrenstraße wird umbenannt," Berliner Morgenpost, July 7, 2020.

³⁶ Der Spiegel, "Der blasse Eberhard muß weg," Der Spiegel, October 27, 1991. 44/1991.

³⁷ BBC, "Mohrenstrasse: Berlin farce over renaming of 'racist' station," BBC, July 9, 2020.

³⁸ Judith Kessler, "Warum es keine gute Idee ist, den Berliner U-Bahnhof »Mohrenstraße« nach Michail Iwanowitsch Glinka zu benennen," Jüdische Allgemeine, July 6, 2020; Eugen Epp, "U-Bahnhof Mohrenstraße soll Glinkastraße heißen – auch am neuen Namensgeber gibt es Kritik," Stern, July 7, 2020; Sören Kittel and Christian Latz, "Mohren- oder Glinkastraße – das ist hier die Frage," Berliner Morgenpost, July 8, 2020.

³⁹ Eve Bennett, "A great day: Berlin street name to be changed after anti-racism protests," The Local, August 21, 2020.

⁴⁰ Bundesstiftung Magnus Hirschfeld, "Die Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße in Berlin," Bundesstiftung Magnus Hirschfeld, February 15, 2021.

One of the first significant campaigns for the renaming of Mohrenstraße was organised i.a. by Yonas Endrias, an activist at the organisation Black Community and then vice-president of the League for Human Rights (Liga für Menschenrechte) in 2004.⁴¹ This request was supported by the PDS-Party (left party).⁴² Part of the campaign was also to reach the goal of bringing attention to the Prussian slave trade and colonialism. Additionally, the campaign highlighted how African people were linguistically labelled with racist attributions. The BVV (Berlinervertreterversammlung, part of the Berlin district administration) held two public sessions regarding renaming where experts such as van der Heyden argued against the renaming. At the same time, Berlin's Black and African associations could only attend the meetings and write an open declaration in favour of the renaming.⁴³ Proposed alternative names for 'Mohrenstraße' at that time were 'Königin-von-Seba-Straße' (Queen of Seba Street) or 'Nelson-Mandela-Straße' (Nelson Mandela Street).⁴⁴

One year later, in 2005, the Grüne Fraktion (green faction) within the Berlin district council again pushed an agenda with the committee for education and culture to rename 'Mohrenstraße.' This was meant to be the starting point of several renamings in Wedding, another district in Berlin, referred to as the Afrikanisches Viertel (African quarter). This neighbourhood has several street names linked to Germany's colonial history in Africa and hence is called the African Quarter. Additionally, the renaming was supposed to foster a critical debate regarding German colonialism.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this campaign to build a forum to foster essential discussion was fruitless, even though the activists and civil society organisations for the renaming of 'Mohrenstraße' had the support of two political parties and the then-incumbent Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland, SPD, Social Democratic Party).⁴⁶

In 2006, students at the Institute for European Ethnology at the Humboldt University in Berlin – one of the critical initiators strengthening and working towards renaming 'Mohrenstraße' – which is also located on 'Mohrenstraße' – were able to show in a student research project that the majority of the German-speaking passers-by who were interviewed on the street had derogatory, exoticising and racist associations with the term.⁴⁷ This study strengthened the claim for renaming 'Mohrenstraße.'

Three years later, the group Naturfreundejugend-Berlin (nature Friends youth) included protests against the name 'Mohrenstraße' in their anti-capitalist PinkRabbit protest series in which a pink rabbit changed the name to 'Möhrenstraße' (Carrot Street) by adding dots to the o.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Joshua K. Aikens, Chandra-M. Danielzik and Matti Steinitz, "Wie weiß ist der Elfenbeinturm?," In *Rassismus by Huch*, Special Edition 2008/2009 (2008), 8.

⁴² Torben Ibs, "Das unrühmliche Erbe der Kolonien," *Taz*, November 13, 2004.

⁴³ Joshua K. Aikens, Chandra-M. Danielzik and Steinitz, Matti, "Wie weiß ist der Elfenbeinturm?," In *Rassismus by Huch*. Special Edition. 2008/2009 (2008), 8.

⁴⁴ Rainer Hein, "Nicht nur der Mohr soll gehen," *Die Welt*, November 13, 2004.

⁴⁵ Rainer Hain and Steffen Pletl, "Ausschuß will Forum zur Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße," *Berliner Morgenpost*, February 11, 2005.

⁴⁶ Rainer Hain and Steffen Pletl, "Kulturausschuß will ein Forum zur Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße," *Die Welt*, February 11, 2005.

⁴⁷ Eine Welt Stadt Berlin, "Mohrenstraße," *Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag*, No date.

⁴⁸ Svenja Bergt, "Mir Mohrrüben gegen die Nation.," *Taz*, February 13, 2009.

Over the following years, several organisations and activists tried to change the street name. The debate about renaming got new traction in 2014 when Decolonize Berlin started an annual festival of the renaming of the Mohrenstraße. The first festival occurred on the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition.⁴⁹ Despite their continued work together with Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (Initiative of Black People in Germany), Association Decolonizing the City, Berlin Postcolonial and many other organisations and activists, it took a few years until in 2020 it was possible to convince the city that the name is not only outdated but also racist and evokes colonial implications. During 2020, especially in the light of the George Floyd protests, a petition with 10.000 signatures was reached to rename the street.⁵⁰ The last festival, Decolonize Berlin, organised in August 2021 as an anti-colonial Amo celebration, renamed after the new name for 'Mohrenstraße,' Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße.⁵¹

During the time, experts such as van der Heyden, historians and journalists like Götz Aly and the initiative 'Pro Mohrenstraße' fought against the renaming of the street and for the preservation of the historical name, claiming that the term had no racist or derogatory connotations at the time. Aly argued in a column of the Berliner Zeitung for keeping the name 'Mohrenstraße.'⁵²⁵³ The residents' initiative 'Pro Mohrenstraße,' therefore, wants historical classification and explanation instead of erasing the name.⁵⁴

Decision-Making Processes

The decision to change the name of a street or public square in Berlin is complex and requires political support. Specific criteria must be met in Berlin for the district council to begin the renaming process. In Berlin, a renaming can be undertaken to eliminate double or multiple entries in the area. Additional possible reasons include the fact that the name of a street was given during the Nazi or German Democratic Republic eras and was linked to people who were both active opponents of democracy and supporters of Nazi ideology or dictatorship.

According to the regulations, street names before 1933 can also be renamed if, according to today's understanding of democracy, they have a negative impact on the community and maintaining them would damage Berlin's reputation in the long term.⁵⁵ The part regarding the current understanding of democracy and the reputation of Berlin as a cosmopolitan capital is the crucial part to be proven for the renaming of 'Mohrenstraße.'

Starting at the end of May 2020, protests fighting racism under the motto Black Lives Matter reemerged and gained international resonance. During May, June and July, several Black Lives

⁴⁹ Decolonize-mitte, "STRASSENUMBENENNUNGSFEST 23.08.2014," Decolonize-mitte, August 13, 2014.

⁵⁰ BBC, "Mohrenstrasse: Berlin farce over renaming of 'racist' station," BBC, July 9, 2020.

⁵¹ Decolonize Berlin, "Antikoloniales Amofest am 22.08.21.," Decolonize Berlin e.V., August 18, 2021.

⁵² Götz Aly, "Rettet die Berliner Mohrenstraße," Berliner Zeitung, May 18, 2021.

⁵³ Dirk Jericho, "BVG will den U-Bahnhof Mohrenstraße umbenennen," Berliner Woche, July 13, 2020.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bezirksamt Mitte, "Neu- und Umbenennungen von Straßen und Plätzen," Bezirksamt Mitte Fachbereich Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, no date.

Matter protests were organised in Berlin and around Germany.⁵⁶ Additionally, in June 2020, the Philosophy Faculty and the Institute for European Ethnology released an open letter to re-mobilize the renaming of 'Mohrenstraße'.⁵⁷ In the course of the re-ignited debate on racism in Germany, the Green Party, with support of the SPD of the Bezirksverordnetenversammlung (BVV, district assembly), reformulated a request to change the name from 'Mohrenstraße' to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße, based on the proposal of the organisation Decolonize Berlin.⁵⁸ The BVV approved this request on the evening of 20 August 2020. The decision states that the district office is asked to 'immediately start the process of renaming.' According to today's understanding of democracy, 'the existing racist core of the name is burdensome and damages Berlin's national and international reputation.'⁵⁹ While activists and organisations welcomed the decision, others, such as the political party AfD (Alternative for Germany), declared that renaming the street is a 'sin against the cultural identity of the city.'⁶⁰ Also, the Christlich-demokratische Union (CDU, Christian democratic party) in Berlin disapproved regarding the 'obsession with renaming things'⁶¹ Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, an activist from Berlin Postkolonial welcomed the decision by stating: 'This is a great day: Berlin is banishing an offensive word from the city, and with Amo is honouring a campaigning scholar from Africa.'^{62,63}

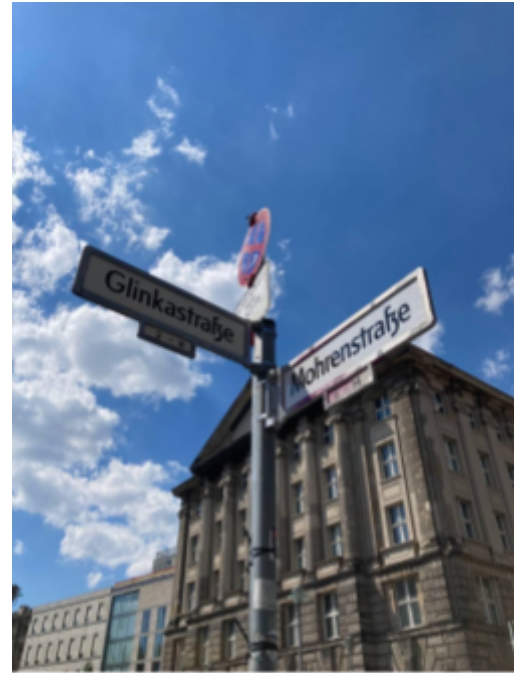


Figure 2: "Mohren- and Glinkastraße" Image courtesy of the author.

As of October 2022, the renaming process is still ongoing, since a decision by the city, such as the renaming of a street, can be appealed. Within the first year after the decision, 1134 objections were filed and submitted to the district office in Berlin-Mitte. Due to the high number of complaints, the renaming process remains ongoing. However, it is significant that only 30 of these objections came from residents of the street.⁶⁴

In total, 237 notices of objections were sent out by the district office to Berlin residents who objected to the renaming. The district office rejected all counterarguments. Subsequently several

⁵⁶ Deutsche Welle, "Curfews ignored as US race protests rage," Deutsche Welle, May 31, 2020; Deutsche Welle, "Floyd killing spurs fresh protests across Europe," Deutsche Welle, June 6, 2020; The World, "People take part in a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Berlin, Germany," The World, July 18, 2020.

⁵⁷ Regina Röhmhild, "Kein Rassismus vor unserer Haustür!," Philosophische Fakultät Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, June, 2020.

⁵⁸ Kate Connolly, "Berlin to rename 'Moor Street' after black philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo," The Guardian, August 21, 2020.

⁵⁹ Die Welt, "„Berlin schreibt Weltgeschichte“ – Mohrenstraße wird „unverzüglich“ umbenannt," *Die Welt*, August 21, 2020.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Kate Connolly, "Berlin to rename 'Moor Street' after black philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo," The Guardian, August 21, 2020.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Julia Weiss, Julia, "1134 Widersprüche gegen die Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße," Tagesspiegel Bezirke Mitte, June 30, 2021.

residents filed a lawsuit in court.⁶⁵ The court cases are mostly unresolved. Nevertheless, the first decisions were reached in August 2022, when the administrative court dismissed a lawsuit due to the lack of legal standing. Street renaming is only subject to judicial control if there is a violation of the ban on arbitrary decisions or a violation of constitutionally protected rights. However, this can only be claimed by district residents.⁶⁶ The court dismissed the case of a man from another Berlin district due to his lack of 'standing to sue.' An appeal to a higher court is possible. Furthermore, the man had to pay a court fee of 150€.⁶⁷

At the time of this study, a renaming has not happened yet, and it is unclear when and how the train station will be renamed.

Summary and Conclusions

The renaming to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße is based on a decades-long protest highlighting the racist and colonial implications of the name 'Mohrenstraße.' At best, 'Mohr' is an outdated term. Nevertheless, as several researchers highlighted, it is also racist and was likely historically used as a derogatory term for Black people. Additionally, the term is associated with violent German and European colonial history.

Despite several decades of non-violent protests, activism, and many organisations underscoring the contestation over the word 'Mohr,' the city and district council opposed the renaming until 2020. In light of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and the subsequent revived debate regarding Germany's colonial past and history of racism, the district council finally approved the request to rename the street. The district council argued that the term 'Mohr' is problematic and racist in the present understanding of democracy; hence, the criteria for renaming were satisfied. Additionally, it was said to potentially damage Berlin's reputation.

On August 20, 2020, the district council in Berlin decided to rename 'Mohrenstraße' to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo Straße. The new street name is meant to honour the achievement of Anton Wilhelm Amo, Germany's first known legal scholar of African descent. He wrote his dissertation about the 'Rights of Black People in Europe' 1729.

Furthermore, the corresponding underground train station is also set to be renamed. Even though the decision was reached in 2020 and was scheduled to come into force on 23 March 2021, the process of renaming the street remains ongoing since residents filed complaints opposing the renaming. As of October 2022, lawsuits against the renaming continue. The renaming can be implemented once the court cases are settled or dismissed. The case study indicates that despite administrative and societal hurdles, some progress in Germany's or, more specifically, Berlin's, debate over its colonial history is possible, thereby paving the way for similar cases involving racist and problematic street names.

⁶⁵ Ulrike Kiefert. "Streit um Mohrenstraße geht weiter," Berliner Woche, March 3, 2022.

⁶⁶ RBB24. "Verwaltungsgericht Berlin weist Klage gegen Umbenennung der Mohrenstraße ab." RBB24, August 18, 2022.

⁶⁷ Global News. "Only residents can take action against the renaming of Berlin's Mohrenstrasse." Global News, August 18, 2022.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. 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.

Contested Histories 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. 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 the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) 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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