



HINDENBURG STREET

Darmstadt, Germany

49.8677, 8.6428



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Executive Summary

After retiring from his military career, Paul von Hindenburg, acclaimed commander of the First World War, became president of the Weimar Republic in 1925. After his election to a second term in 1932, he appointed Adolf Hitler as Chancellor and authorised decrees that enabled the Nazis to circumvent democratic safeguards. Hindenburg died in 1934 and was not implicated in the worst Nazi atrocities. However, because of his key role in facilitating the Nazi seizure of power, his legacy remains controversial. Hindenburgstraße in Darmstadt, dedicated in 1915, was one of several memorials to Hindenburg built throughout Germany. After a decades-long political battle, in 2023, the street was finally renamed in honour of Fritz Bauer, a Jewish jurist who prosecuted Nazi crimes. This case study details a research-focused and democratically oriented process for the rededication of streets, while showing the increase in tensions that can be associated with a drawn-out renaming process.

Introduction

The development of Germany's memory culture after the atrocities of Nazi Germany and the Second World War stands as a paradigmatic case of national reckoning for the past. While it has long been evident that there was no place in a free and democratic Germany for celebrations of the Third Reich's top officials, other cases remain less clear-cut: Hindenburgstraße in Darmstadt was dedicated in 1915 in honour of Paul von Hindenburg's early accomplishments as a military commander during the First World War. After the war, however, he would promote narratives that cast blame for Germany's defeat on Jews and Socialists, contributing to political and social instability in the newly founded Weimar Republic. In 1933, when serving as the last president of the Weimar Republic, Hindenburg would facilitate the constitutionally valid transfer of power to the Nazi Party, naming Hitler chancellor and signing decrees that removed the few democratic safeguards that remained. Hindenburg's legacy presents a challenging case for those considering whom Germany should memorialise. While Hindenburg was a one-time national hero and an elected leader of a free and democratic German state, he contributed greatly to the downfall of a democratic Germany and undermined the national institutions that could have prevented the rise of National Socialism.

The controversy over Darmstadt's Hindenburgstraße lasted nearly two decades, from the initial complaint in 2005 to the adoption of the new name Fritz-Bauer-Straße in 2023. Throughout this saga, the municipal government polled residents of the street in 2007 and formed a committee of experts in 2013 to advise on renaming Hindenburgstraße, along with a number of other controversially named streets. Incidents where residents taped over the controversial street markers and hung signs that gave Hindenburg the title 'Henchman of Fascism' further fueled the flames of the debate. The rededication of the street to Fritz-Bauer-Straße in 2023 presented a long-awaited conclusion to this prolonged polemic. The process of rededicating Hindenburgstraße presents an example of a good-faith attempt by a municipality to include resident participation and extensive research in the renaming process. However, the project took nearly twenty years, likely in part because of the thoroughgoing approach of the municipality. The case of Hindenburgstraße highlights the importance of these aspects of a renaming process, while suggesting that a better balance may need to be found, particularly in cases where waiting twenty years for action is infeasible because of heightened tensions, extremely offensive monuments, or other factors leading to particularly intense contestations.

Background

Hindenburg and the Rise of National Socialism

Paul von Hindenburg was born in 1847 to a wealthy *Junker* family of minor Prussian nobility. After a long military career, Hindenburg retired in 1911. He was brought out of retirement in 1914 to serve as Field Marshal in the First World War. Although previously relatively unknown, in this role, he gained national prominence and was widely seen as a war hero for his defeat of the Russian Forces at Tannenberg in 1914. His decisions, made in partnership with General Erich Ludendorff, led to the capitulation of all Russian forces in 1917.

However, his leadership could not bring Germany to an ultimate victory; when reassigned to the Western Front, he saw great losses that eventually led to Germany's defeat.¹ Following the war, many Germans sought to explain why their forces had lost without impugning the German military. Hindenburg proved instrumental in propagating an explanation that became known as the 'Dolchstoßlegende' (stab-in-the-back myth).



Figure 1: "Hindenburg shakes the hand of Hitler at Potsdam Day (March 21 1933)"
Image by Theo Eisenhart via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

According to this false narrative, Jews and socialists were to blame for Germany's defeat rather than the decisions of its military or political leadership.² Hindenburg's promotion of this myth played to the same antisemitic and anti-socialist sentiments that would come to enable and define the Nazi seizure of power.

Hindenburg came to prominence again in 1925, when President Friedrich Ebert, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), died suddenly of appendicitis; Hindenburg won the election to replace the late president as a conservative monarchist candidate, representative of an older strain of Prussian militarism and aristocracy.³ In the years following his election, economic and social unrest continued to grow, and amidst the economic crisis, in 1930, Hindenburg appointed Heinrich Brüning, a member of the Centre Party, as Chancellor,

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Paul von Hindenburg," Holocaust Encyclopedia, Accessed June 25, 2025.

² James Russell, "What was the 'Stab-in-the-Back' Myth that Tormented Inter-War Germany?" *History is Now Magazine*, April 5, 2025.

³ Mary Fullbrook, *A History of Germany 1918 – 2008* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), 82.

following the collapse of a Social-Democratic coalition government.⁴ Throughout Brüning's tenure as chancellor, Hindenburg invoked article 48 of the Weimar constitution countless times, a process through which the President could declare a national emergency and allow the Chancellor to rule by decree within constitutional limits; while this provision was meant to serve as a last resort in true emergencies, Brüning came to rely on this antidemocratic provision as a means to rule when a parliamentary consensus could not be reached.⁵

Although by the July 1932 election, Hindenburg was increasingly senile,⁶ he won another presidential term as an independent candidate, earning fifty-three per cent of the vote.⁷ Adolf Hitler placed second as the Nazi Party candidate, earning almost thirty-seven per cent.⁸ While Hindenburg held disdain for Hitler, who was not of a sufficiently noble background for Hindenburg's *Junker* sensibilities, he offered the Vice Chancellorship to him, in part because the Nazi Party had earned 230 of the 608 seats in the *Reichstag* (its greatest electoral success thus far and those most of any party in that election) as a kind of consolation prize and acknowledgement of the party's success. However, Hitler declined this offer, seeing accepting 'second-best' as beneath him.⁹ After yet another election in November 1932 and subsequent parliamentary disarray, however, Hindenburg would be convinced to appoint Hitler as Chancellor in a last-ditch effort to increase popular support for the government. Hindenburg and the other conservatives were convinced that if Hitler and a handful of Nazis could be included in a parliament alongside more moderate members, they could be effectively 'tamed' and disabused of their more radical agenda.¹⁰ On January 30, 1933, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor, handing power over to Hitler and the Nazi Party through a completely legal and constitutional process.

Two days later, on February 1, 1933, Hitler delivered the 'Proclamation of the Reich Government to the German People,' which complained of how fourteen years of 'Marxist' rule under the Weimar Republic had turned Germany into 'a heap of ruins.'¹¹ While the proclamation called on Germans to remain 'loyal to the command of the Field-Marshal [Hindenburg],'¹² It remains notable that Hindenburg did not respond to the criticism of the Weimar Republic, during which he had played a pivotal political role.¹³ Moreover, in early 1933, party officials paid homage to Hindenburg in their speeches, emphasising his alleged confidence in the new regime and implying that he was supportive of their agenda.¹⁴

⁴ Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, *Weimar Centennial Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 350.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁷ Facing History and Ourselves, "1932 Election Results," Facing History, Accessed June 26, 2025.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Mary Fullbrook, *A History of Germany 1918 – 2008* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), 102–103.

¹⁰ Mary Fullbrook, *A History of Germany 1918 – 2008* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), 70–73.

¹¹ Translation Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919-1945, Vol. 1, The Rise to Power 1919-1934* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), 131–134.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Andreas Dorpalen, *Hindenburg and the Weimar Republic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), 450.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 454.

Hindenburg's image was used to legitimise the Nazi consolidation of power. Yet, Hindenburg was not uniformly a supporter of the Nazi agenda. After the enactment of the so-called 'Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service' on April 7, 1933, which removed Jewish, Social-Democrat, and Communist civil servants from their posts, Hindenburg successfully pressured Hitler to exempt those who had fought on the front lines in the First World War, those who had lost a father or son in combat, and wounded or disabled veterans.¹⁵ While Hindenburg was indeed instrumental in the Nazi seizure of power and at one time promoted a particularly destructive antisemitic conspiracy theory, he also served as an occasional moderating (albeit conservative) influence on the National Socialists' extremist agenda.

Memorialising Hindenburg

During the First World War, as Hindenburg rose to prominence because of his successes in battle, monuments began to spring up to him around Germany.¹⁶ The Hindenburgstraße in Darmstadt was named during this first wave of Hindenburg monuments in 1915.¹⁷ A second wave of monuments to Hindenburg came about in 1927, the occasion of his eightieth birthday, followed by a third wave after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, when streets and plazas throughout the country were renamed in honour of Hitler and Hindenburg.¹⁸ Hindenburg's image and memory were tied to the memory of battlefield successes in the First World War: In 1924 Hindenburg laid the cornerstone of the Tannenberg monument in 1924 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of what was known as the 'Second Battle of Tannenberg,' an important battle of the First World War in which German forces scored a near-absolute victory over the Russian Army under Hindenburg's command.¹⁹ Ten years later, upon Hindenburg's death in 1934, the site would gain an even stronger connection to him: Although, in his will, he had requested to have his funeral held at the Garrison Church in Potsdam and to be buried on the Neubeck estate (his birthplace), Hitler turned the affair into a political spectacle of nationalist grandeur.²⁰ A military ceremony and funeral were hosted at the Tannenberg monument, where Hindenburg was laid to rest. Hitler himself delivered the eulogy, concluding with, 'Departed General! Enter now into Valhalla!'²¹ After Hindenburg's death, the roles of chancellor and president were merged into one, and Hitler was given the new title of *Führer* (Leader).

While not all memorials to Hindenburg were constructed in memory of a leader who had facilitated the Nazi seizure of power or served to propagate Nazi ideology – many such memorials predating the rise of National Socialism altogether, including the Darmstadt

¹⁵ Michael J. Geheran, "Remasculinizing the Shirker: The Jewish Frontkämpfer under Hitler," *Central European History* 51, no. 3 (2018): 450.

¹⁶ Büro für Erinnerungskultur, "Projekt Darmstädter Straßennamen," Hypotheses, May 23, 2019.

¹⁷ Bündnis gegen Rechts Darmstadt, "Redebeitrag zur Kundgebung: 'Umbenennung der Hindenburgstraße jetzt,'" Bündnis gegen Rechts Darmstadt, January 30, 2020.

¹⁸ Büro für Erinnerungskultur, "Projekt Darmstädter Straßennamen," Hypotheses, May 23, 2019.

¹⁹ Peter K. Gessner, "Tannenberg: a Monument of German Pride," Info Poland, Accessed June 25, 2025.

²⁰ Maurice Laarman, "Tannenberg Memorial," Traces of War, Accessed June 24, 2025.

²¹ Otto D. Tolischus, "Hindenburg Rests on Site of Victory after Hero's Rites," *New York Times*, August 8, 1934, News.

Hindenburgstraße – how Hindenburg’s legacy was used to give an almost religious significance to the Nazi rise to power makes the existence of even these earlier memorials troubling. Moreover, setting aside the close connection between Hindenburg and the Third Reich, Hindenburg’s legacy remains mixed as a conservative monarchist who undermined the democratic vision of the fledgling Weimar Republic.

History of the Contestation

Since 1945, Germany has faced the challenge of reckoning with its perpetrator role in the Second World War and the atrocities of the Nazi regime. The process of renaming Hindenburgstraße in Darmstadt fits into a wider context of Germany’s development of its memory culture, which has been a matter of continued discourse over the last decades. More narrowly speaking, the process proved to be a long and protracted affair, taking almost two decades to resolve complaints first officially registered in the early 2000s.

In 2005, *Die Linke* (a left-wing political party) made a motion in the Darmstadt city parliament to rename Hindenburgstraße.²² Later that year, an advisory committee recommended the renaming of the street to the city council, which approved the proposal in July 2006, contingent on the results of a poll of the residents and businesses affected.²³ When polled, however, a majority – ninety per cent – indicated they did not wish to see the street renamed, and no further action was taken by the city government.²⁴

February 2013 saw an attempt from the *Bündnis gegen rechts Darmstadt und Umgebung* (Alliance Against the Right in the Greater Darmstadt Area) to rename the street. However, in October of that year, the city council rejected the proposal, instead forming a committee to conduct research and advise on the matter before a final decision was to be made.²⁵ A committee was formed, but it would not release results for over five years.

Not patient to wait for the results of a committee investigation, around midnight on January 30 2018 – the eighty-fifth anniversary of Hindenburg’s appointment of Hitler as Chancellor – three senior citizens taped over *Hindenburgstraße*’s signs, renaming them after Halit Yozgat.²⁶ Yozgat was the victim of a series of murders carried out by the NSU, a neo-Nazi group.²⁷

On January 22 2019, the SPD put out a statement advocating for the renaming of the street for the then-recently deceased Mirjam Pressler, a Jewish author born in Darmstadt, who

²² Annette Schlegl, "Hindenburgstraße ist in Darmstadt passé," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 2, 2025.

²³ Wissenschaftsstadt Darmstadt, "Befragung der betroffenen Anwohner und Firmen zur möglichen Umbenennung der Hindenburgstraße startet," Wissenschaftsstadt Darmstadt, February 2, 2007.

²⁴ Annette Schlegl, "Hindenburgstraße ist in Darmstadt passé," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 2, 2025.

²⁵ Büro für Erinnerungskultur, "Projekt Darmstädter Straßennamen," Hypotheses, May 23, 2019.

²⁶ *Echo* Editorial Staff, "Protest gegen Darmstädter Hindenburgstraße drei Senioren überkleben Straßenschild," *Echo*, January 30, 2018, Lokales.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

translated the Diaries of Anne Frank.²⁸ Acting Darmstadt SPD Chair Tim Huß remarked that it was plainly evident that to have a street named for a man representative of early-twentieth-century German militarism and instrumental in Hitler's rise to power was incompatible with the free and democratic German society of today.²⁹ Just days later, activists in Darmstadt made another unauthorised intervention, zip-tying signs underneath the street signs on Hindenburgstraße. These read: '*Steigbügelhalter des Faschismus*' (Henchman of Fascism).³⁰

The advisory committee that the city council had voted to form in 2013 released its report in May 2019, detailing the lives of 110 individuals whose names were displayed on public roads in Darmstadt and making recommendations on whether to rename the streets named in honour of them.³¹ Ultimately, the committee was divided on the question of whether to rename Hindenburgstraße, with a minority opposed to the renaming. Those opposed focused on the fact that his decision to appoint Hitler as Chancellor was partly a result of pressure from his advisors and not a reflection of a full-throated endorsement of National Socialism.³² Nevertheless, the city council voted to rename Hindenburgstraße, given the committee's assessment that although Hindenburg's associations with Nazism needed to be put in the broader context of his political career, his strongly anti-democratic stances and his desire to undermine Weimar democracy made his record such that removal was appropriate.³³

Officials in Darmstadt included public education efforts as part of the renaming process: On June 1 2021, an online symposium was held with experts on similar cases in other cities. This symposium was followed by a public exhibition and informational event in October, where residents provided over 170 suggestions to the advisory committee responsible for the renaming project.³⁴ In November 2022, the Darmstadt city council decided upon the street's new name: Fritz-Bauer-Straße, chosen to honour Fritz Bauer, a Jewish judge who was dismissed from his role shortly after the Nazis came to power in the 1930s.³⁵ After returning from exile following the War, Bauer became a key figure in the prosecution of former Nazi leaders and provided information that led to the capture of SS officer Adolf Eichmann in Argentina in 1960.³⁶ Before the change of name could be implemented, however, yet another unauthorised modification was made to the signs. This time on the ninetieth anniversary of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, on January 30 2023, unknown actors

²⁸ Sozialdemokratische Partei Darmstadt, "SPD: Hindenburgstraße in Mirjam-Pressler-Straße umbenennen – Jüdische Autorin soll in ihrer Geburtsstadt gewürdigt werden - Infotafel soll Umbenennung erklären," Sozialdemokratische Partei Darmstadt, January 22, 2019.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bündnis gegen Rechts Darmstadt, "Hindenburgstraße: Hindenburg – von Aktivist*innen mit Zusatzschild kurz erklärt," Politnetz-Darmstadt, February 12, 2019.

³¹ Rebekka Friedrich, "Prüfung und Umbenennung Darmstädter Straßennamen," Stadtarchiv Darmstadt, May 23, 2019.

³² Büro für Erinnerungskultur, "Fachbeirat Straßennamen," Hypotheses, May 23, 2019.

³³ Rebekka Friedrich, "Prüfung und Umbenennung Darmstädter Straßennamen," Stadtarchiv Darmstadt, May 23, 2019.

³⁴ Rhein Main Verlag Editorial Staff, "Acht Straßen in Darmstadt bekommen einen neuen Namen," Rhein Main Verlag, November 10, 2022, Südhessen.

³⁵ Jens Joachim, "Darmstadt: Fritz Bauer statt Hindenburg," Frankfurter Rundschau, November 9, 2022, Rhein-Main.

³⁶ Fritz Bauer Institut, "Fritz Bauer," Fritz Bauer Institut, Accessed June 25, 2025.

covered the signs with lettering displaying the street's soon-to-be-official name.³⁷ Just over 4 months later, the long-awaited change was made, and the street officially became known as Fritz-Bauer-Straße.³⁸ Darmstadt mayor Jochen Partsch and head of the municipality's Department of Public Order visited Hindenburgstraße (and the other streets being renamed) for an official rededication ceremony.³⁹

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making process, in this case, was characterised by a largely bureaucratic approach: Throughout the contestation, most objections and proposed interventions occurred through official channels, with the notable exceptions of the 2018 defacement of the street signs along Hindenburgstraße and the unauthorised signs hung in 2019. Early on, when the city council accepted the suggestion to rename the street, an attempt was made to integrate democratic decision-making into the process by polling the residents and businesses affected by the changes. However, the decision to poll only those residing or conducting business on the street was not wholly democratic, since it considered only the views of those in immediate proximity to the street rather than taking the name to be representative of the city as a whole.

Moreover, it is unclear whether the opposition of residents and business owners to the change shown in the poll was based on a genuine support for Hindenburg's legacy; as the city's 2023 decision to reimburse residents for the cost of replacing key documents where an updated address is required suggests, it is entirely possible that the opposition was upheld on the practical issues raised by changing the name of the street.⁴⁰ This decision to reimburse residents, on the other hand, serves as a good example of how municipalities can make changes to contested sites as easy as possible for residents worried about practical ramifications who might be otherwise unopposed.

The time between when the recent contestation began – in 2005 – and when the city finally took action amounted to almost two decades. It is reasonable to assume that the unauthorised interventions that occurred in 2018 and 2019 are partially a result of the lack of formal action over ten years following the initial complaint. While the government's decision not to take immediate action can be seen as a legitimate response to the wishes of nearby property holders, the issue of delayed action remains a real worry. This delay may also be explained in part by the decision to conduct extensive research on the streets under consideration for renaming, including Hindenburgstraße. The decision to undertake a

³⁷ Jens Joachim, "Darmstadt: Hindenburg auf Straßenschilder durch Fritz Bauer ersetzt," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, January 30, 2023, Rhein-Main

³⁸ Annette Schlegel, "Hindenburgstraße ist in Darmstadt passé," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 2, 2025. Rhein-Main.

³⁹ Zusammen in der Postsiedlung e.V., "Quartier: Umbenennung der Hindenburgstraße in Fritz-Bauer-Straße ist erfolgt!" Zusammen in der Postsiedlung e.V., May 5, 2023.

⁴⁰ Jens Joachim, "Darmstadt: Hindenburg auf Straßenschilder durch Fritz Bauer ersetzt," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, January 30, 2023, Rhein-Main

years-long research project highlights a strong desire that an accurate historical narrative be the fundamental determinant of which persons to honour; while the delays in progress during the investigation were far from ideal, the research portion of the process remains vital. Especially since the decision to rename the street was a decision that resulted from a vote of the city council and not from a poll of citizens, there was a need for a shared set of facts to justify the decision from above. Even in cases where the ultimate decision is put to a public vote, a similar process of research is useful, since it allows citizens to be fully and equally informed.

Conclusion

Although the Hindenburgstraße contestation was particularly prolonged and saw multiple instances of vandalism in protest of the street name, it is a particularly good example of how democratic decision-making and careful research can serve to ensure a responsible and factual approach to addressing controversial monuments. It is also a complicated case from the standpoint of historical memory, since the person whose legacy is disputed holds an ambivalent position in German history; neither a Nazi nor a defender of Weimar Democracy, Hindenburg's decisions highlight his particular circumstances as a figurehead for a now-long gone aristocracy, an acclaimed military commander, and a political leader in a time of crisis and instability. This complexity may explain why the ultimate decision took so long to render; unlike in cases of monuments to sworn Nazis, whether modern-day Germany ought to host monuments to Hindenburg is a question without a crystal-clear answer. There was a need, in this case, for extensive historical consideration and research.

This case study also stands out in part for the fact that the memorialisation of the individual in question occurred while he was still living. In 1915, when the monument was constructed, Hindenburg may have represented Prussian (and more broadly, German) militarism and a traditional, monarchist outlook on Germany. However, while these values may not be those of Germany today, they are doubtless far less grave allegations than what can be considered Hindenburg's support of National Socialism. The question that this case raises is whether there is any way to ignore Hindenburg's pivotal role in the Nazi seizure of power if his role in the First World War proves worth memorialising. At the same time, as the debate around the monument shows, if we take the names of public locations to be representative of current values, there is a compelling case for renaming streets not only when we discover profound misdeeds of the original honouree, but also when the memorialised figure no longer stands for the values of today.

While the extended process pursued by the Darmstadt city government may be infeasible or unpreferable in general – not every street should wait twenty years to be renamed – the extensive research and consultation process highlights the importance of accurate historical memory in resolving naming disputes. At the same time, the 2007 vote against renaming the

street raises the question of who ought to decide whom we memorialise. While those living directly adjacent to a street or monument may be particularly affected by changes made, it is important to consider that street names may represent more than the values of particular individuals; indeed, it seems as if the relevant constituency to poll is the city as a whole. While in general, this case moved particularly slowly, it includes two key aspects of well-executed renaming projects: democratic participation and a care for a truthful representation of the past.

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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.

About IHJR at EuroClio

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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