

The Urban Memory of Socialist Women Reflected in Budapest Street Naming Practices

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Abstract: The paper examines the changes in street names honouring women who were active in the workers' movement in Hungary. It traces the urban memory of one eminent figure, Anna Koltói, across the main historical waves of street (re-)namings in Budapest between 1945 and 2022. Amidst the commemorations of socialist martyrs after the war, several streets were named after Koltói. The early 1990s saw the restoration of pre-war names, thus erasing her name from the inner districts of Budapest. In the recent memory politics after 2010, some districts continued to replace Koltói's name, while others restored it. Situating the analysis in the scholarship of post-socialist gender labour, I interrogate the ambivalent visibility and acknowledgement of socialist women. I reconstruct the arguments put forward in the proposals and debates over changing street names that took place in the Budapest City Council and the local district governments. I show that just as after the war stakeholders emphasised Koltói's participation in the workers' movement, in the early 1990s her name was associated with communism. Recent efforts to restore Koltói's memory have sought to emphasise her activism for women's rights as well as social democracy (as opposed to both conservatism and communism), doing so in order to make a political statement. The paper thus contributes to a critical analysis of women's exclusion and inclusion in the memory politics of different regimes.

Keywords: street names, memory politics, socialist women

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Naming streets after women

This paper examines the social processes of naming (and re-naming) streets commemorating socialist women in Hungary after the Second World War. I trace the use of female figures' names for street names in Budapest between 1945 and 2022 and provide insights into women's ambiguous representation. I focus on the memory politics of one central figure, Anna Koltói, as a case study and include a few others (Éva Kállai, Erika Szeles) to provide comparative context. Mapping out women's past and present urban visibility and the socio-political background of (re-)naming practices, I identify the arguments mobilised in the debates at historical turning points. The actual processes of decision-making always involved an interpretation of the women's biographies and served political purposes depending on the changing historical context.

The research is driven by the question of how socialist and feminist values have been translated into the urban landscape of post-socialist cities. Although historical, this question is more timely than ever in the current neoliberal socio-economic context (Rose-Redwood 2011; Rusu 2021a: 282), as it interrogates the dynamic relations between feminist, socialist, and neoliberal values and how they have been reinterpreted in political processes like street naming decisions. Street naming practices have continued to the present day and feature more and more women. To what extent this visibility is sending feminist messages is still an open question, as some names of non-communist, nationalist, or conservative female figures have re-appeared (see Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023). Embedded in a historical comparison, the research question is twofold: To what extent were socialist women acknowledged as women, not just workers, after the war and in state socialism? And to what extent are they acknowledged today for their socialism? The research can thus contribute to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between socialism and feminism, both as historical movements and as contemporary ideologies.

Socialism and feminism are contested concepts with complex histories that play a central role in this paper. Since the beginning of the 20th century, activist women have had divergent views on women's rights and their compatibility with communism and liberal democracy (Lóránd 2025). Although many of them rejected the label, they often shared the principles of their self-proclaimed feminist contemporaries (Lóránd 2024: 55). In the Hungarian discourse, the Feminists' Association was often viewed as prioritising bourgeois women over workers, especially when it came to census suffrage (see Gárdos 2024: 64). Some right-wing women also supported women's suffrage and education (Szapor 2025). Further, socialist politics, from the level of the trade union to the state, prioritised class struggle and remained masculinist (Çağatay et al. 2025: 186, 484–484; Sharp et al. 2022). Taking these into consideration, without applying the term to people distancing themselves from the label, I only use

‘feminism’ to describe the values that recognise women’s systemic oppression and advocate for women’s rights (the ‘minimal consensus’ in Lóránd et al. 2024: 5–6). I refer to union organisers like Koltói as women’s rights activists.

As for ‘socialist’ as an umbrella term, I follow Çağatay et al.’s definition (2025: 10) of it as ‘the world view informing the politics and activism of all left-wing movements and organizations other than anarchist-oriented ones, before ca. 1917, including social democratic movements and the precursors of the communist movement’. ‘Communist’ politics are specifically oriented towards instant transformation and working class–based power; the distinction from social democracy will be discussed later. I refer to the existing political regime as state socialism. Because place names express the value systems of regimes (Szívós 2021: 199), referencing ‘feminist and socialist values’ allows me to point to elements I identify as feminist and socialist in discourses and activities.

The Introduction to *Women’s Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Beyond* opens with a discussion of Anna Koltói in the context of the legacy and memory of the women’s labour movement. It asserts that ‘the region experienced frequent political rupture, numerous shifts of borders and multiple regime changes. Even the tiny detail of the street-naming policies around Anna Koltói in the Hungarian capital symbolizes these changes’ (Çağatay et al. 2025: 60). The present article foregrounds this ‘tiny detail’ and traces street renamings in the context of gendered labour memory politics from the post-war period up until today.

Street naming practices in Hungary, 1945–2022

My analysis focuses on three main waves of street renaming practices in Hungary. As for periodisation, first I identified six main waves, flagged by major historical and administrative milestones: 1945, 1950, 1956, 1990, 2010, and 2020. Budapest has become a city with an exceptionally high rate of street name changes, occurring in waves of re- (and de-)canonisation, compared not only to Paris and London but also to other Hungarian towns (Palonen 2003). The waves of changes generated either an increase or a decrease in streets named after socialist women, and most changes were politically-ideologically driven and aimed at re-canonisation. Nevertheless, the enlargement of Budapest in 1950 with towns in the suburbs generated the need for street name changes for administrative reasons. The related regulations were finalised in the late 1970s (Takáts 1985). Below, I limit my focus to 1945, 1990, and the most recent period, under the right-wing governments of the Fidesz Party (focusing specifically on 2011 and 2021).

Across Eastern Europe, the year 1945 was marked by the proliferation of streets named after figures in the workers’ movement. Budapest was an eminent case: in

just the short democratic period before the communist takeover in 1948, more than 1,100 streets got new names (Takáts 1985: 301). As Erika Szívós (2021: 206) argues, the speed and volume of re-naming in Budapest demonstrates the symbolic power of street naming. She notes that among the first measures, after the annulment of the Jewish Laws, was the creation of a committee for street name revisions already in July 1945, when the city was still missing basic infrastructure. Political-ideological motives appeared as early as 1946 with Soviet pressure to honour the Red Army with new street names. A new canon was formed, commemorating not only political predecessors, but also specific historical, artistic, and literary figures (Palonen 2003; Szívós 2021; Takáts 1985: 300–301).

Systematic statistics are still not available on the exact number and proportion of streets named after women at specific historical moments in Budapest. However, there is no question that real women's names on street signs became more visible right after the war and throughout the state-socialist period from 1948 on, commemorating women in unprecedented numbers next to men, as they were also active in the communist and workers' movements.¹ In fact, the replacement of previous female names (such as that of clerical or royal figures like Maria Theresa) was politically motivated.

Giving official names to public places in Hungary historically lies within the authority of each town; however, in Budapest the question of jurisdiction is complicated by the capital's district system. Not only did the number and territory boundaries of districts undergo changes,² but their level of autonomy did, too. In practice, districts initiated (and debated) the proposed name change that either they or the Budapest City Council decided on. In the 1960s, Budapest had a street name committee in the City Council, with delegates from different institutions, including the Linguistic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Party History Institute (Szívós 2021: 209). The districts also had their own street name committees with the right to submit a proposal and these included representatives of the Women's Council as well (Takáts 1985: 303, 314 n. 71).

The political-economic transformations of the early 1990s led to a new wave of re-naming public spaces. In Budapest alone, 650 street names were changed between 1989 and 1992 (Szívós 2021: 210); 40% of the streets renamed in Budapest at the time actually saw their name restored to what it had originally been before the name

¹ In the Romanian town Sibiu, about which we have accurate data, the highest proportion of streets with women's names ever recorded was in 1948 at 7% (which had shrunk to 1.6% by 2020; see Rusu 2022: 19).

² From 1930, Budapest had 14 districts, and after the enlargement in 1950, 22. The last administrative restructuring in 1994 resulted in the formation of 23 local district governments.

changes that occurred after 1945, and this figure rises to 73% when it comes to the city centre (Palonen 2003). Replacing communist street names with names from the Habsburg era might have been intended as de-politicisation, but it in fact worked as re-canonisation (Palonen 2003: 158). This wave affected the women connected to leftist political movements, whose names had also been erased (Gelnarová, Pető 2016: 79). However, like in the earlier state-socialist period, the post-socialist erasure of socialist women's names often replaced them with other, typically not political, female names: old ones like restored Habsburg names, or new ones, typically of actresses like Edit Domján (see Palonen 2003: 156; for very similar Polish tendencies, see Walkowiak 2018: 347).

Socialist women's names continue to re-emerge in street naming to the present day: after the Fidesz takeover in 2010, some districts in Budapest erased the names of female socialists in some places, while restored them in others. In 2010 there was also a change in the administrative practice of street naming: instead of a specific committee devoted to naming questions, the new practice was for one of the departments of the City Council to revise the district proposals and for the Budapest Mayor to bring forward suggestions for the General Assembly to vote on. As I discuss later, in the early 2020s new female names, including socialist women's, appeared in some Budapest districts led by opposition parties. My temporal scope of investigation ends in 2022, before a realistic opposition alternative to Fidesz would have emerged. According to the latest data, 11% of Budapest streets named after actual people (the so-called eponymous names) are female names (Budapest street names data visualisation 2023). In international comparison, this is not a low rate (for example, we see lower rates in Bucharest, Sibiu, Vienna, Rome, and Paris, similar rates in Warsaw, and higher ones in Hamburg; see Rusu 2022).

Feminism, critical toponymy, and post-socialism

Examining the practices of naming streets after socialist women lies at the conjunction of socialist, feminist, and urban historiography. From the reconstruction of the processes of naming streets after communist women, specific herstories unfold, which, I argue, make us interrogate not only the public memory of women in the urban landscape, but also the contested relationship between feminism and socialism.

Examining women's public in/visibility in street names shows the gender power dynamics that are reflective of the changing historical-political landscape. The social scientific examination of female street names is informed by the field of critical toponymy, which examines the names of places in the context of naming as a social process. Critical toponymy understands urban memory in general, and public naming processes in particular, as the outcome of symbolic, political, and economical power

struggles (Palonen 2003, 2006; Rose-Redwood 2011; Rusu 2021a, 2022; Szívós 2021; Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023). Public place names operate as 'barometers' of the values and historical narratives of political regimes. With new names, streets make the new symbols an inevitable part of everyday life, symbolically taking over and re-coding places (Szívós 2021: 199). The Eastern European scholarship of critical toponymy records how the changes of street names (hodonyms) reflect the specific histories of the region, including the fall of state socialism, ethnic-national diversity, and changing state borders (Palonen 2003, 2006; Rusu 2021a). While authors agree on the vast scale and influence of authoritarian periods, including state socialism, some, like Szívós (2021), also point to the room to manoeuvre in negotiating specific place names.

In the study of female street names, several (non-exclusive) research directions are possible. Walkowiak and Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska (2023: 213) identify three main objectives: quantitative, qualitative, and ideological ones. Studies thus aim to reconstruct the (changing) number and ratio of streets named after women (see also Rusu 2022). In Poland, for example, 14% of new individual namesakes were female, including literary characters (Walkowiak 2018: 347). Beyond numbers, literature on memory politics analyses the national pantheon by examining the very figures commemorated in street names (Palonen 2003; Walkowiak 2018). Finally, studies identify 'the agents involved in the naming wars, as well as the driving forces responsible for the inner dynamics of the debate' (Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023: 213).

Studies with a feminist perspective in the Eastern European context provide regional analyses of urban landscapes and of the underrepresentation of women in street names. They note that politically active women of the modern era have especially been sidelined (Palonen 2003: 156). However, in my view, these studies do not give adequate attention to the ambiguities of the post-socialist transformation in their inquiry, assuming increasing democratisation and gender equality. Although identifying the 'qualitative objective' beyond the numerical representation of women, the extensive research on female names in public places in Polish cities situates the question in the context of a contemporary conservative governance *vis-à-vis* recent global movements towards gender parity (Walkowiak 2018; Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023). A diachronic examination of a Romanian city's female street names is framed in identity politics, but without critically engaging with it as a viable feminist agenda (Rusu 2022). Notwithstanding their important contributions, scholarship is missing the chance to use the regional transformations as a lens through which the competing democratisation projects of socialism and neoliberal capitalism, which both claim to represent women, could be critically analysed.

In contrast, my approach explores the question of female street names in gender labour history in general, and (post-)socialist feminist historiography in particular. I ar-

que that in the Eastern European context socialist women's historically shifting urban visibility complicates the question of gender equality beyond the contemporary competition of Western-led feminist and national conservative narratives. The question of women's urban visibility feeds into the examination of the complicated relationship between socialism and feminism. It entails the fundamental questions of gender labour scholarship (Çağatay et al. 2025; Gelnarová, Fousková 2016; Lóránd et al. 2024; Pető 2005; Zimmermann 2014): how to evaluate women's rights and visibility in state socialism? Reconstructing the position of women at the time, how can we find a balance between the anti-communist versus the feminist revisionist paradigms? These two paradigms, though often lacking full historical contextualisation and reflexivity, continue to inform scholarship on women in socialism both as a movement and as a political regime (Çağatay et al. 2024: 52–54). The anti-communist approach emphasises the limited agency of women and women's movements under state-socialist rule, while often ignoring important activities and advances. Feminist revisionism, on the other hand, risking a celebratory undertone, draws attention to the unprecedented surge in women's rights and power in state socialism, followed by their serious restriction in many ways under neoliberal capitalism. I consider the debate between the two paradigms a useful framework for analysing memory politics, including the remasculinisation of the public sphere in post-socialism (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2024).

After 1945, parties, including the communists, were appealing to the new voter base of women. Despite empowering policies and structures, even activist women were marginalised by sexist-traditionalist views inside socialist party organisations, including councils. Women's contributions to political developments (including suffrage in 1918) have been sidelined in historiography, contributing to a distorted memory of socialist women in Hungary (Sharp et al. 2022: 110, 119; Zimmermann 2014). Informed by this theoretical framing, this paper addresses the complexity of socialist women's visibility under state socialism. Further, it mobilises the two paradigms in the context of these women's contemporary memory. It seeks to answer the specific question as to what extent socialism and feminism were acknowledged in the commemorative practices of naming Budapest streets after a socialist-unionist woman, Anna Koltói, in different time periods since the end of the Second World War.

Methods

The analysis is centred on the processes of the commemoration of one figure, Anna Koltói, as a case study and an eminent example of the shifts characterising the main historical waves. Streets were already named after her in 1946 and were changed in 1990 and again in 2021. Other female figures (like Éva Kállai and Erika Szeles) were often treated together with her and the same way as her, while specific contexts –

the 1956 revolution in particular – shaped the memory politics around these names differently. Owing to word limits here, these figures will only be mentioned in terms of their similarity or contrast to Koltói. I will limit my discussion to one particular area of Budapest, the inner District 8 called *Józsefváros* (literally ‘Joseph town’), where most of the (re-)namings concerning Koltói were taking place, even though Koltói Anna streets³ also existed in other, outer districts of Budapest at some points in time during the period covered.

As this paper aims to reconstruct the agents and debates in naming practices (the ‘ideological objective’ in Walkowiak and Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023), I examined the official records of the proposals, debates, and resolutions. On the capital city, my main sources are the minutes and resolutions of the Budapest General Assembly between 1945 and 2022 (depending on the historical period, the exact name of the body changed a few times).⁴ On the districts, my main sources are the minutes from the discussions of proposals and debates in the general assemblies of the districts’ local governments (whose names also changed) between 1945 and 2022, especially minutes from District 8.⁵ I searched for all the debates and resolutions on street naming that concerned Koltói in the given period. Using a thematic analysis of these texts focused on the adjectives and nouns attributed to Koltói, I reconstructed how she was described as a woman, a women’s rights activist, a unionist, and a social democrat, respectively.

Further sources consulted were street name lexicons, often with biographical entries (see Figure 1 for an example; Buza et al. 1998; Gergely et al. 1973). Communist biographies (e.g. Bakó 1975), a thriving genre in state-socialist Hungary, provide a glance at how figures, including women, active in the workers’ movement were portrayed (Zimmermann 2014). I checked offline maps and their indices as well as online dynamic map visualisations to track the changes in public place names.

³ In the Hungarian order of names, the family name comes first; therefore a street named after Anna Koltói is officially Koltói Anna utca.

⁴ Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés törvényhatósági bizottsága 1873–1949, Budapest Fővárosi Tanács 1950–1990, Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1990-. For practical reasons, in this paper I refer to to all the versions of this government body as the Budapest General Assembly of the City Council. Minutes and resolutions before 1990 are available from the Budapest City Archive and can be accessed on two online historical databases, Arcanum and Hungaricana. For the period between 1945 and 1947, relevant for section 5, the minutes of the General Assembly have also been published in the Official Budapest Gazette (Fővárosi Közlöny). The minutes after 1990 are available through the portal Budapest.hu.

⁵ The minutes and resolutions of district local governments after 1990 are selectively available on the district websites, mostly from the early 2000s, and they are not displayed according to any consistent, unified system. For the period after 2010, I was able to access most of the minutes and resolutions of District 8 (*Józsefváros*) and District 21 (*Csepel*) on the district websites Jozsefvaros.hu and Csepel.hu, respectively.

The scope of my investigation is limited, mainly in terms of comparisons, as this is the first study from a larger research project. This paper focuses on one female figure, Anna Koltói, and discusses how she was portrayed in the debates around 1945, 1990, and 2020. Future research will systematically compare the debates about naming streets after male and female public figures.⁶ Further comparative analysis could also discuss how women not associated with socialism were portrayed in these debates. With access to comprehensive, sex-disaggregated data on public places in Budapest on a historical scale, a quantitative analysis (following Rusu 2021b) could reveal the changing number and proportion of relevant namesakes.

The new urban memory landscape after the war

Anna Koltói

Anna Koltói (1891–1944), formerly Zeller and Kristóf, was born out of wedlock to a single mother. Koltói worked from her teens, first as a domestic servant, then as a metal factory worker (Bakó 1975: 340–341; Gergely et al. 1973: 109). She took leadership positions in the social democratic women’s movement as an organiser in the union. In this role, she was a delegate to the Board of the Hungarian Social Insurance Institution (*OTI*) (Çağatay et al. 2025: 57–60). During the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, Koltói as trade union trustee was responsible for public supply of food and clothing. After 1920, she was imprisoned for two years for her activities. Koltói became a member of the Budapest City Council in 1941, when a representative had to resign. On 17 October 1944, members of the Hungarian national socialist Arrow Cross Party shot her in the head at the door of her house in Mária-Terézia tér.

The commemoration of Anna Koltói as a *social democrat* was first embraced by the Social Democratic Party soon after the war. Demonstrating the complexity of the memory politics of socialist women, her public remembrance continued with the communist takeover in 1948 and throughout state socialism, despite political ruptures. The social democrats not only looked for a compromise with the Horthy rule, differentiating themselves from the communists, they also sidelined women’s issues even inside the party institutional framework (Lóránd 2024: 56).

One of the first commemorative events took place in June 1945. It referenced Koltói and other activists as martyr women (*Népszava* 1945). In 1946, the hospital of the Social Insurance Institution (*OTI*) in the building next to Koltói’s former workplace, was named after her. Several institutions and informal groups also took her name during state socialism (Feitl 2024). This shows not only the remarkable role her fig-

⁶ I thank the reviewers and Cristina Raț for drawing my attention to this.

Figure 1. Photo of Anna Koltói and her entry in a 1973 street name lexicon (Gergely et al. 1973: 109)



Source: Author

ure played in the memory politics of the period, but also that the democratic years before 1948 mark both a rupture and a transition (Lóránd 2025). Between 1946 and 1948, streets across the country were named after Koltói. Five small towns around Budapest (including Csepel), which became new districts of the enlarged capital in 1950, also each gave Koltói's name to one of their streets (Budapest Fővárosi Önkormányzat 2023).

Since 1945 Koltói has been commemorated in the Budapest City Council in various ways, such as the placing of a wreath on her grave. On 28 November 1945, at the inaugural sitting of the City General Assembly, Koltói was remembered by a representative of the Social Democratic Party as a former assembly member together with

Mrs Pál Knurr (née Anna Kovács), and both were recalled as ‘two fine fighters, two proletarian women, who came here from the factories and were fighting for their woman siblings’⁷. Next year, Árpád Szakasits, a respected figure, President of the Social Democratic Party, de facto interim mayor of Budapest, and soon-to-be President of the Republic, proposed commemorating the anniversary of Koltói’s ‘martyr death’ (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1946b, no. 500).

The first proposal to honour Koltói with a public place name is documented from 6 March 1946 (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1946a: 390). The City General Assembly discussed the proposal to rename Mária-Terézia tér (a square named after the Habsburg Maria Theresa), where Koltói lived and died. The social democratic councillor who proposed the renaming of four streets in District 8 called Koltói ‘a martyr woman of justice and freedom’, who was killed by the ‘fascist mob’ merely for the ‘sin of speaking up for love for humanity, justice, and freedom’.⁸ In five days, the proposal was accepted by the mayor and sent to the Budapest Public Works Council (*Fővárosi Közmunkák Tanácsa*), the body responsible for naming public places in the capital at that time.

At a meeting on 16 May 1947, the Budapest Public Works Council passed a resolution stating that instead of the proposed Mária-Terézia tér, Magdolna utca would be changed to Koltói Anna utca (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1947: 594). I could not find any justification for or comment as to why this change was to be made. Magdolna utca runs from Koltói’s house through the metalworkers’ union headquarters to her OTI workplace. The street name references the common female name Magdolna for the Biblical figure Maria Magdalena, a follower of Jesus. Magdolna utca is documented in the German form Magdalenen Gasse as early as 1817, and later in the Hungarian form Magdolna utca in 1874. In 1947, it was named for Koltói Anna utca (and, as I will discuss, on 25 April 1991, it was renamed again for Magdolna utca). In 1951, Maria Theresa square was renamed after Mihály Horváth, a priest and teacher active in the 1848 revolution. Anna Koltói was not mentioned in that discussion⁹ or in any other from the 1950s through to the 1990s. As the Social Democratic Party was facing destruction by the communists, and members like President Árpád Szakasits were falling victim to the show trials of the 1950s, Koltói was easily appropriated in the cultural memory.

⁷ ‘Knurr Pálné és Koltói Anna, a két derék harcos, a két proletáraszony, akik a gyárakból jöttek ide és harcoltak az asszonytestvéreikért’ (Sándor Millok, see Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1945, no. 136.) I thank the Reviewers for their help in the precise translation. If not stated otherwise, translations are provided by the author.

⁸ Gyula Dabronaki (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1946a: 390)

⁹ HU BFL XXIII.102.a.1, 1951: 29.

The 1956 revolution

Street name changes continued throughout the state-socialist period. The main turning points are reflected in the changes commemorating Stalin in Budapest's honyms, as Szívós observed (2021: 207–209). After months of negotiation with the Soviet Union, the central symbolic avenue named (then and today) Andrásy út became Sztálin út. One of the key symbolic acts of the 1956 revolution was the demolition of the statue of Stalin. For the days of the revolution, the avenue was also renamed Magyar Ifjúság útja (Hungarian Youth Road). After the revolution was crushed by the Soviet Union, the road was named Népköztársaság útja (People's Republic Road), as a double gesture during the Kádár era aimed at erasing the memory of the (young) revolutionaries but also keeping a distance from Stalinism.

In accordance with the political trends during state socialism, female figures' names were applied to and removed from public places, while radical changes were occurring in women's life conditions and political status, including a ban on all women's organisations by 1951 (Gelnarová, Pető 2016). The great historical turning points outlined above left their mark in street name changes. One example is Éva Kállai, the urban memory of whom became intertwined with that of Koltói at some point, even though in their biographies as socialists they took drastically different turns. Éva Kállai (1917–1957), under her official married name, Mrs Miklós Szántó, was also involved in the youth group of the metalworkers' union before the war, and she was sentenced to one year in prison. After the war, she became a party functionary and worked as a party committee member for the ruling Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP) in Budapest until her death.

Memory of Kállai is intertwined with the contested memory of the 1956 revolution, which had been silenced, labelled counter-revolution, or glorified up to the present day (Pető 2017: 42–44). Different meaning-making practices also rely on evaluations of the violence committed on both sides. In one of the most contested events, the party headquarters in District 8 were attacked by revolutionaries in October 1956. As party functionaries were already being lynched, fearful of experiencing the same, Kállai jumped out of the window. She suffered serious injuries, which led to her death in April 1957 (Bakó 1975: 299–300). The same year, a nearby street, formerly Alföldi utca, named after the Great Plain of Hungary, was renamed for Kállai Éva utca.

After 1956, during the consolidation period, party control was continuous, and the Street Name Committee had representatives from the Party History Institute, while renaming suggestions also arrived from grassroot actors like local residents (Szívós 2021: 209–210). To my knowledge, Kállai was the only example of female victims of 1956 being commemorated in a Budapest street name under Hungarian state socialism. Typically, like Koltói, the women commemorated with street names in Budapest in the 1960s and 1970s were women who were active in the workers' movement

during the interwar period and died before 1945, in line with the martyr tradition of memory politics (e.g. Eta Geisler, Kató Hámán, Flóra Martos, and Piroska Szalmás, with the notable exception of Mariska Gárdos; see Lóránd 2024).

The post-socialist wave of re-namings sweeping away female street names

The period between 1990 and 1992 saw a massive wave of public place renamings, informed by anti-communist sentiment, to which the earlier (albeit ambiguous) interest in women's rights and history also fell victim (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2024; Zimmermann 2014). Together with most of the socialist men, women's names rapidly disappeared from the streets of Budapest. The first decree related to street names came out of the Budapest City Council as early as 10 April 1989. A temporary committee dedicated to coordinating public place renamings was established inside the City Council in 1990.¹⁰ The committee revised the street renaming proposals submitted by the district local governments and then proposed their selection of new names for the City Council to vote on. In the hope that most of the changes would take place in two years, the City Council decided to work on street renaming only once a year after 31 March 1992 (and the practice remained in place until 2003) (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1991b, Resolution 1326/1991). The council cited the frequency and number of renaming requests and administrative challenges, including for cartography and the official address registry. The early regulation, the establishment of the committee, and the volume of renamings this latter decision attest to, all show the symbolic significance of street names in Budapest in the 1990s.

In District 8, the General Assembly of the new local government held its inaugural meeting in October, and they were already discussing street naming on 4 December 1990.¹¹ The Cultural Committee proposed changing 22 street names in the district, including Koltói Anna utca and Kállai Éva utca. They proposed the former name, Alföldi utca instead of Kállai Éva, noting that it had been given by the Budapest Public Works Council. I see this as a legitimising move, referring to the predecessor in title of the freshly formed assembly, similar to the discussions in 1947.

The District 8 Cultural Committee proposal contains two alternatives for Koltói Anna utca: keeping the original or re-naming it as Magdolna utca. They briefly describe Anna

¹⁰ *Városrész-, közterület-elnevezésekkel és fővárosi szimbólumokkal foglalkozó ideiglenes bizottság* (Temporary committee for naming neighbourhoods and public places as well as symbols in the capital). The name of the committee changed slightly a few times until it ceased operating in 2010, when its tasks were taken over by the Mayor's Office. The minutes and resolutions of the committee are preserved in the Budapest Capital Archives but they are classified until 2051.

¹¹ HU BFL XXXVI. 541.a.1.1.

Koltói as ‘the leader of the women’s movement of the Vasas metal factory trade union, who represented workers’ interests in the pre-war City Council and she was executed by the *nyilasok*’ (members of the Nazi Arrow Cross Party). In this biographical summary, the elements emphasised are the ones that might support the justification to actually keep her name in the post-socialist cultural climate as well: falling victim to Nazis, being a member of the body that was the predecessor of the General Assembly. According to the assembly minutes, there was only one remark during the General Assembly: a councillor from the right argued against re-naming Magdolna utca in the district on the grounds that another district already had a street named Magdolna utca.

The amount of name proposals that the temporary street naming committee and the City Council General Assembly had to decide on explains why most of the names and the historical figures concerned were not even discussed during the meetings (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyműlés 1991a). According to the minutes, they discussed a few very prominent and controversial figures, such as Prime Minister Pál Teleki, responsible for the anti-Jewish laws and Hungary’s involvement in the Second World War. This is probably the reason why Anna Koltói and Éva Kállai were not mentioned individually. On 25 April 1991, the City Council General Assembly voted on the street name proposals of two districts grouped together, and the street names honouring Koltói and Kállai were voted on together with another 16 names only in District 8. Thus the former Magdolna utca in District 8 has regained its original name (while some other Anna Koltói streets in the country kept their names for longer or even till today). Kállai Éva utca has also regained its old name, Alföldi utca (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyműlés 1991a, Resolution no. 471).

Along with anti-authoritarianism, the new democratic capitalist regimes displayed neoliberal tendencies, characterised by the withdrawal of the state from welfare services, privatisation and marketisation, and the undermining of important socialist policies and institutions like trade unions (Pető 2017: 44; Zimmermann 2014). The de-communisation spirit of the early 1990s in public place naming (Walkowiak 2018: 346–347) erased important differences between the trade-unionist social democrats and members of repressive state institutions; it similarly erased the differences among streets that received their names any time after 1945. Given the volume of changes proposed, there was not even enough room or time to discuss the differences between periods, contexts, and figures. This is most visible in the case of the two women in question: Anna Koltói was killed by Nazis in 1944 and Éva Kállai died because she feared she would be killed by revolutionaries in 1956. Thus, the commemoration of them by the city administration in 1947 and 1957 happened in entirely different political contexts, contexts that were overlooked by the erasures in 1991. For the new regime, it was more important to get rid of the *names* associated with the state socialist period than to rethink their relationship to the actual *figures*.

The wave of renamings subsided after the 1990s, but that also meant the *status quo* of gendered memory structures was then maintained. For twenty years, Budapest had a mayor from a liberal party that championed human rights, but the specific needs or visibility of women in the urban space did not become part of the public discourse.

Symbolic struggles under right-wing capitalism

The takeover by Fidesz marked the beginning of a remarkable new wave in the ‘fight over street names’ (Szívós 2021: 210–211), one characterised by impactful renamings. After alternating governments, in 2010, the conservative right-wing Fidesz Party (in coalition with the Christian Democrats) came into power with a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian Parliament. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán remained in power for four terms. Liberal-leftist parties were splitting up, were newly established, or tried to form coalitions in vain; their popularity has been shrinking ever since. Yet, Budapest traditionally has more leftist-liberal voters than the rest of the country, electing most of the opposition¹² Members of Parliament and district mayors in the municipal elections.

This political context has framed the street naming practices of the past 15 years, which reflect the government’s preferences in memory politics (Szívós 2021). In populist and illiberal memory politics, historical events are interpreted for the identity-building purposes of anti-communism and victimhood. This era has also been marked by masculinising tendencies (Pető 2017: 47–48). The centenary commemorations of the 1918–1919 revolutions and the Treaty of Trianon paid no attention to women’s suffrage, let alone female council members (Sharp et al. 2022: 129). Similarly, under the right-wing government in Poland in the 2010s, there was a growing tendency to reevaluate the past. New street names typically honoured representatives of masculine institutions such as the army and the church or those women who strengthened the nationalist narrative (Walkowiak 2018: 347–348).

In the following, I interpret the re- and dis-appearance of socialist women among Budapest’s street names as part of the symbolic struggles in the capital’s political arena. In the spirit of the ‘ideological objective’ (Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023), I will show the role played, alongside party political interests, by the values of feminism, socialism, and anti-communism in the decision-making processes that affect the naming of streets after women.

¹² Extreme right-wing parties have also dissolved and been formed again, formally becoming the strongest opposition to Fidesz without ever challenging its rule. Up until 2024, no party had managed to recruit enough voter support to realistically beat Fidesz. For these reasons, by ‘opposition’ I refer here to the parties that until 2024 constituted the politically and culturally leftist alternative to Fidesz. Although they are widely called leftist or liberal in the Hungarian discourse, labels I also use for contextual unambiguity, their politics is often neoliberal.

Erasing socialist memories in the Orbán era

The early 2010s saw the establishment of the autocratic elements of the Fidesz government, with a significant wave of street renamings generating public debate. The wave was sanctioned by a decree on the use of the symbols of totalitarian regimes. The law (Act CLXVII of 2012)¹³ prohibits the use of names 'associated with totalitarian regimes of the 20th century', including the street naming practices of municipalities. In the case of disagreement, local governments, including Budapest's districts, should consult the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for a recommendation on whether the person in question 'participated in the establishment, development, or maintenance of totalitarian political regimes of the 20th century' (§ 4). For the law, the Academy of Sciences compiled (and continuously updates) a list of names with short biographies, together with their recommendation. The list includes Anna Koltói, described as someone who 'did not participate in the establishment, development, or maintenance of authoritarian political regimes of the 20th century, therefore her name can be used for naming public spaces'.¹⁴ Among the figures of the workers' movement who died before 1945, some were rejected on the basis that their name was 'often used in communist propaganda' (like Kató Hámán), while others were permitted (like Flóra Martos) (MTA 2024: 21, 31–32, 38).

The law and the list itself generated a heated political and public debate. They also contributed to a new wave of renaming in the Budapest districts with right-wing leadership. As I interpret the process, in their ambition to get rid of the remaining street names associated with communism, the right has re-created their symbolic power in a context where Budapest's politics traditionally stand in opposition to Fidesz, embedded in a country governed by a two-thirds right-wing majority. The new law gave new impetus to granting visibility to figures who strengthen the position of the right in the symbolic and cultural struggles taking place in Budapest. The Academy of Science's list continues to be used as a reference.

In 2011, there were still three streets in Budapest named after Anna Koltói, all of which were then renamed: one after an actress, another after a male writer. The third street was in District 21, on Csepel Island, where Koltói had worked during the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. This renaming has nationwide significance, as the mayor was Szilárd Németh, a Fidesz vice president, who himself changed the name

¹³ Act CLXVII of 2012 titled '2012. évi CLXVII. törvény egyes törvényeknek a XX. századi önkényuralmi rendszerekhez köthető elnevezések tilalmával összefüggő módosításáról' (Act on the amendment of certain laws in connection with the prohibition of names associated with the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century). This legislation interprets the Act on local municipalities from 2011 (Act CLXXXIX of 2011, § 14).

¹⁴ 'Koltói nem vett részt XX. századi önkényuralmi politikai rendszer megalapozásában, kiépítésében és fenntartásában, így neve közterület elnevezésére használható.'

of a metal street sign from Koltói to Miklós Vermes, a male physician with local roots. According to District 21's meeting minutes, his proposal was met with no comments or questions (Csepeli Képviselő-testület 2011: 50, Resolution 613/2011 (IX.29) Kt).

As it is the City Council that makes the final decision on street naming based on the districts' proposals, the Budapest General Assembly discussed and accepted the proposal from District 21, together with other proposed street name changes, including changes to women's names (*Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés* 2011, Resolution 3752/2011 (XII.14)). In the discussion, a representative of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP, Magyar Szocialista Párt) framed the Fidesz proposals as erasing the predecessors of the socialist party (2011: 34). And they were probably right. In these symbolic struggles, all aspects of Koltói's life and person could play a part. Still, the debates between the political stakeholders suggest that it was her political-ideological commitments and activities that mainly influenced how she was characterised in the discourse. The fact that she was a woman and a women's rights activist seems to have been secondary in the debates of the 1990s. As I show in the following section, this framing has shifted since 2019, and women's visibility has become a more important element in the discourse.

The leftist agenda of honouring women

In 2019, in the 10th year of the Fidesz government in Hungary, most Budapest districts elected opposition mayors. This marked a smaller turning point in both the self-identification and the activities of the shrinking liberal-leftist parties. This is the framework in which, I propose, recent street renamings are best interpreted. On 1 September 2021, a formerly unnamed square¹⁵ in District 8 was named after Anna Koltói. In the following, I address a few aspects of this renaming: the location; the decision-making process; and the justifications.

The choice of location reflects a new approach in street naming, different from the waves in 1945 and 1989, typically not aiming to replace former names. Stakeholders rather find unnamed spots in the district, typically small squares, which can be named after historical figures without taking away existing names. Politically, this might be a strategic move to avoid social controversy. This might also mark a new memory politics approach, according to which, existing street names represent a cultural-historical value in themselves, a value worth preserving as heritage (the reference to which is also part of the legitimisation strategies of any political power; see Szívós 2021: 199).

A main figure in the process is the newly elected district mayor András Pikó, who was supported by grassroots activists of a newly forming left, carefully negotiating

¹⁵ Although officially unnamed, the square was informally called *FiDo tér* as it is located at the intersection of Fiumei út and Dobozi utca. Both the proposal and the resolution use this unofficial name.

with the neoliberal-leaning opposition parties to win against the Fidesz's candidate. The proposal of February 2021 was signed by a local representative of the Socialist Party (MSZP)¹⁶ (Józsefvárosi Képviselőtestület 2021a). It referenced the Hungarian Antifascists as initiators, although their webpage does not take credit for that; they only happily welcome the initiative of the local government (Magyar Antifasiszták és Ellenállók Szövetsége 2021). The decision-making process took place during the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, which granted exceptional rights to municipalities, including Budapest's district governments. With this authorisation, Pikó decided on and sent the proposal to the City Council in March 2021 (Józsefvárosi Képviselőtestület 2021a, Resolution 109/2021 (III.11)).

In the proposal's justifications and the commemorative texts on Anna Koltói in this period, women's representation and visibility appears as a legitimate purpose. This differs from the way the social democratic commemorations framed Koltói's activities after the war, but also from how in the 1990s women labour activists commemorated her as founder of the first trade union committee for female metal workers (Çağatay et al. 2025: 57). Framing Koltói's commemoration in a women's rights perspective coincides with the issue becoming a topic in party politics – which stems from the fact that street naming lies at the authority of district and city local governments.

Without mentioning 'feminism', the original proposal by the councillor (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021a) openly declared the need to show respect for women who worked for a better society in the city by street names, 'breaking a fake memory politics' that honour women with only 5% of the street nomenclature. It also referenced the initiation of the Community Participation Office in the local government on Women's Day in 2020 to name public places after 'respectable women' as a tradition to follow. In 2020, two historical female figures from the 19th century were commemorated by new public place names in the district. After accepting the proposal, in the ceremony of naming the square for after Anna Koltói, she was commemorated, among others, as someone who 'fought for only one goal: more rights for women (...) for women's equality, thus rejected any totalitarian idea' (by a female MP from the Socialist Party¹⁷; see Pálincás 2021). The emphasis on women's representation, I argue, can also serve as showcasing the distance of social democracy from communist activism. In the Hungarian political context, the right-wing successfully mobilises against the left with charges of communism. In Koltói's case, the combination of

¹⁶ Ferenc Camara-Bereczki, currently independent.

¹⁷ This was Zita Gurmai. She only used the word 'feminist' in reference to another martyr, Mrs Meller, née Eugénia Miskolczy, who was founding member of the Feminists' Association in 1904. The avoidance of the term replicates similar concerns about the name of the Association in the first half of the century (see Lóránd 2024: 63).

Figure 2. Erika Szeles on the cover of *Billed Bladet*, published 13 November 1956



Source: Author

honouring the fight against poverty, union activism, and party politics, on the one hand, and women's rights, a contemporary liberal-progressive idea, on the other, can strengthen the legitimacy of a discredited social democracy.

Directly reacting on the decision of District 8 to name a square after Koltói, a few months later a Fidesz representative in the City Council proposed that instead, the same (still unnamed) square be named after another woman (Józsefvárosi Képviselőtestület 2021b). The female figure in question is an internationally known person, certainly recognisable by her face. Erika Szeles came from a poor background and was 16 years old when she participated in the 1956 revolution (Pető 2017). A photo of her holding a gun by Danish photographer Vagn Hansen, published on the cover of *Billed Bladet* on 13 November 1956, went worldwide (see Figure 2). Not long after the picture was taken, she was killed in the fighting.

Following Fidesz's proposal, the leftist mayor of Budapest proposed that two different public places in District 8 be named after Anna Koltói and Erika Szeles, respectively, which the District 8 Council accepted (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021b, Resolution 473/2021 (VII.22)). Thus, the City Council finalised the decision on both Koltói Anna tér and Szeles Erika tér on 1 September 2021, and it came into effect on the very same day (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 2021, Resolution 1296/2021 (09.01)).

The dispute over naming a square after Koltói shows that the naming processes have a stark political meaning as they are part of party-political symbolic fights. The illiberal memory politics of Fidesz relies on re-writing narratives about 1956 as anti-communist and erasing its leftist legacy, and this strategy includes foregrounding female figures of the revolution (Pető 2017). Female figures, I argue, are mobilised as a tool inside the debates around communism. According to the minutes from a meeting of the District 8 General Assembly on Koltói and Szeles, a Fidesz representative said that Koltói as a functionary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was a 'member of the same ideological community' that killed Erika Szeles, and the contemporary members of which are his leftist colleagues in the district local government (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021b: 45–46).

Although the main debate still revolved around socialist women being communists, socialists, or anti-communists, I argue that it has become more important than ever that these figures were women. Leftist stakeholders started to emphasise not just them being women but also (in Koltói's case) being women's rights activists – in order to address a liberal-leftist voter base who care more about feminism. Leftist-liberal parties in the past 30 years have had a problematic relationship with traditional socialist institutions as these parties often support neoliberalism. As a consequence, the histories of women's labour activism remain partial and politically biased, as evidenced by Koltói being less remembered for her trade-union activism (Çağatay et al. 2025: 59). The most recent leftist street naming justifications mention her union work as a women's organiser, but mostly re-frame it as general women's rights activism, which resonates more with contemporary liberal feminist vocabulary.

Interestingly, the right plays along to some extent. Although they are far from being feminists, they nevertheless proposed an outstanding female figure as an alternative for a street name. One of the reasons may be that they need women as a voter base. In this particular case, streets were eventually named after both of the proposed women. District 8 even references Erika Szeles as part of its tradition of naming public places after women (Jozsefvaros.hu 2022), even if this specific proposal on Erika Szeles did not emerge out of their circle. With that move, the opposition in District 8 took advantage of Fidesz's tactic and managed to contain it. At the same time, Fidesz may also have accounted for some win, as they managed to symbolically (and spatially) position themselves as pro-1956, therefore nationalist and anti-communist.

Szeles Erika tér is located on the corner of a highly symbolic square¹⁸ where the bloody fights in 1956 resulted in Éva Kállai's death. The dynamics of these memory politics tactics imply that women's historiography is embedded in the specific socio-political context in which invested actors, often with opposing interests, continuously re-interpret female historical figures in reaction to one another and to fit their framing.

Conclusions

This paper traced the changes in street names in Budapest commemorating trade-unionist worker Anna Koltói, who was killed in 1944 by Hungarian Nazis. Between 1945 and 2022, public places in the city were named and re-named after her, following the different waves of memory politics generated by political turns in Budapest. I specifically focused on downtown District 8 and the changes concerning streets named after Koltói in 1947, 1990, 2011, and 2021. Given the multiplication of female street namesakes during the state-socialist period, I proposed examining street naming practices as framed in post-socialist studies, analysing to what extent feminism and socialism have been acknowledged in urban memory politics to the present day.

I examined the documents of the city and district councils, the bodies authorised to name streets, in order to reconstruct the stakeholders' justifications in favour of or against honouring Koltói in the different time periods. In 1947, a street was re-named Koltói Anna utca in the city centre, and by 1953 the administratively and territorially enlarged Budapest had 6 Koltói Anna streets in six different districts, attesting to her legacy. The sources show that decision makers' portrayal of Koltói during state socialism primarily emphasised her martyrdom and participation in the workers' movement. Her womanhood was only implicitly mobilised as an aggravating factor for victimhood.

The heavily anti-communist wave of restoring pre-war street names in the early 1990s swept away Koltói's name as that of a communist from the streets of District 8. In the 2000s, street naming became a battlefield of party politics. The first years of Fidesz rule after 2010 saw another wave of purging street names associated with communism. As a political response, the 2020s have seen efforts in some opposition-led local governments in Budapest districts to restore the memory of some early socialist women like Koltói, with District 8 naming a small, formerly unnamed square after her. These recent practices, I suggest, can be understood as conveying several messages: as a political statement against the Orbán government; as an identification with the social democratic legacy; and as an expression of progressive politics com-

¹⁸ Today this is Pope John Paul II square, but it was named the Square of the Republic (Köztársaság tér) between 1946 and 2011.

mitted to women's acknowledgement and public visibility. The arguments of the left typically emphasise Koltói's commitment to social democracy and women's rights efforts. These are mobilised for today's leftist parties to identify as progressive in terms of social democracy, featured as opposed to both conservatism *and* communism. In this sense, the contemporary discourse repeats some elements from the tensions between communists and social democrats in the first half of the 20th century.

Answering the question to what extent socialism and feminism were acknowledged in commemorative practices, I argue that a greater emphasis has been placed on the womanhood and women's rights activism of figures like Koltói in contemporary commemorations compared to earlier periods since the end of the war. The political position arguing for women's representation in urban spaces flags a contemporary progressive politics, which frames women's rights activism primarily as anti-authoritarianism, thus diverting charges of communism. However, such inclusion has limited transformative power if it remains at the level of representativity and visibility, without addressing the structural bases of women's social disadvantages, with a critique of identity politics. As studies on the multiplication of right-wing women's names in street nomenclature (Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023) or on the masculinist billboard visibility of female revolutionaries (Pető 2017) show, women's visibility *per se* does not necessarily generate feminist changes. In this sense, the memory politics of female street names can inform the debates between liberal and socialist/radical feminism.

The ambivalent historical dynamics I outlined above show the complexities of gender and labour beyond the revisionist and anti-communism debate. Taking into account the revisionist perspective, we can be more attentive to the efforts of right-wing memory politics today to erase socialism and its feminist legacy. It helps us be cautious about the feminist significance we attribute to female street namesakes at large. Gendered *exclusions* are important to analyse, but a similar critical rigour and local contextualisation should address *inclusion*, too. Women's mere inclusion or visibility might as well serve anti-feminist tendencies, from sexually objectifying public images in neoliberal capitalism to conservative masculinist memory politics. Similarly, the anti-communist position can remind us of the superficial elements of women's inclusion in socialist structures. I therefore argue for a feminist labour history that moves beyond contemporary Western standards of inclusivity and representation and analyses the material and ideological conditions of women's memory.

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