

Paperwork Histories: Uses and Abuses of Identity Documents in Modern Europe

Organisers: Beate Althammer, Sigrid Wadauer

The rise of the modern “administrative state” was inextricably linked with growing ambitions to identify, register and categorize the people present on the state territory. Especially in the context of intensifying mobility and migration, the identification and traceability of individuals became a constant challenge, which expanding state bureaucracies tried to tackle with ever more refined methods. Establishing the identity of persons was (and is) fundamental to a broad scope of state operations, from levying taxes, recruiting soldiers and prosecuting criminals to monitoring individuals’ access to various rights and social benefits. In the course of the last centuries, central state authorities have regulated essential forms of identity documentation ever more precisely, and they have increasingly monopolized powers in this domain. Yet, at the same time, practices of identification, registration and categorization were never *exclusively* a matter of statehood and citizenship, subject to the logics of governmentality, bureaucracy, surveillance, and migration control. Identity papers were not *exclusively* produced and used by or vis-à-vis state authorities. Historically, various parties could be (and remained) involved, ranging from religious communities, municipal corporations, guilds, employers, unions, political organizations, landlords, welfare associations to recreation clubs. Such entities provided information, produced data, checked documents, or even issued their own papers. Partly, they fulfilled tasks assigned to them by the state with more or less enthusiasm and accuracy; partly, they pursued their own agendas and purposes. Ordinary people – whom historiography, in the wake of Foucault, has mostly seen only as the objects of state surveillance and control – contributed to the (co-)production of their own official identities in a variety of ways as well. They did so by complying with official directives, responding to the requests of authorities, and by initiating administrative processes themselves; they also did so by struggling with missing or incoherent documents, by manipulating or forging papers, and by avoiding or boycotting identification. In such complex entanglements, it is not always evident where state bureaucracy started or ended.

This panel addresses the co-production, uses and abuses of identity documents in a historical perspective, with a focus on late nineteenth and (early) twentieth century Europe. It asks why certain forms of identification functioned successfully, why others failed, and how they evolved over time and varied internationally. The four papers reflect on four different contexts and constellations that show how various actors cooperated or impeded each other in ascertaining the identity of specific categories of persons. Particularly, we are interested in the strategies of individuals to make use of identity papers in officially unintended ways, e.g. for making “false” claims or “tricking” the authorities.