

Legitimate Means of Movement? (Un-)wanted Use of Identity Documents in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Austria.

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Historical research often emphasizes that identity documents represent both control and empowerment. Nevertheless, identity documents are more often reflected as a means of restricting (labour) migration, and rarely depicted as “the workers’ palladium of freedom.”, as a 19th century commentator polemically put it.

For workers in 19th and early 20th century Austria identity documents were more or less indispensable; they allowed travelling, they opened doors and provided access to support for those who came into their possession, including those who were not supposed to benefit from this freedom and support. Various sources point out to widespread practices of theft, illegal appropriation and forgery of documents. Such practices were facilitated through the enormous variety of types and formats of documents in use within the Habsburg Empire. Efforts to regulate documents, to prohibit the circulation of forms, to improve the design of documents and to make them tamper-proof appear to have had limited success. Personal details and descriptions of appearance (if included in the documents at all) were so vague that they could credibly apply to different people. With a few exceptions (e.g. documents for prostitutes, civil servants etc.) photographs were not required in identity documents until World War I. Apart from security concerns, pragmatism and the costs of papers obligatory for larger sections of the population also played a role in identification regimes.

Workers’ memoirs, present such practices of forgery and “misuse” of documents as common and -- in apparent contrast to the dominant perspective which deplored abuse and danger -- as *legitimate* means to move, to protect oneself, to find support, to overcome obstacles such as the compulsion to accept any work and to avoid arrest or forceful removal as a vagabond. At the same time, such narratives emphasized distinctions and hierarchies among workers. They highlight the limits and the risks of illegal practices. Hence, they also provide insight into the ways in which documents could be and/or were verified in practices: through interactions and interrogations, through reference to registers and through official reconfirmation.

Using examples of labour booklets and certificates of local citizenship (*Heimatscheine*) the paper will address the divergent notions of identity documents and the possibilities of (un-)wanted use in late 19th and early 20th century Austria.