

NaPol-Intel

Nationalizing Police Intelligence in Belgium (1918-1961):
Democratization Processes and Bureaucratic Knowledge
Practices

Contract - B2/191/P2/NaPol-Intel

Summary

Context

Historical research on the history of the Belgian police services has made significant progress since the early 2000s. However, compared to the historiographies of most European countries, many areas of research remained little known. While the police services are regularly the subject of debates involving lawyers and criminologists, their historical dimension was very often neglected due to a lack of sources. This was partly due to the lack of sources and data accessible to researchers. To complicate matters further, the Belgian Federal Police has the distinctive feature of having been created in a context of crisis, which has largely contributed to erasing its own memory. In this context, the aim of the project was to remedy this situation by placing the police services in a long-term perspective.

Objectives and methodology

For a very long time, the history of Belgian police forces was studied exclusively from a local perspective. The Napol-Intel project broke new ground by examining the history of the Belgian police in a context marked by increased centralisation. Based on an essentially local organisation in the 19th century, the Belgian police underwent a process of centralisation from the First World War onwards, marked above all by the strengthening of the Gendarmerie. The project sought to better understand how this process influenced the functioning of the police and its legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities and citizens. It explored the tensions between the democratisation of society and the emergence of new forms of activism, focusing on two main themes: law enforcement and police intelligence management.

The identification and availability of a large number of previously unknown sources went hand in hand with historical research that advanced knowledge on the subject and provided a better understanding of the transformations of the Belgian police system and their impact on the state and society. Throughout the project, tools were created to provide access to thousands of reports, registers, minutes and files, which bear witness

to processes and practices that still influence the current functioning of the police services. Finally, part of these archives were digitised as part of the project and made available online on the State Archives research platform, where they can be accessed by anyone.

Results and conclusions

The results of the historical research carried out as part of the project were disseminated at conferences organised in Belgium and elsewhere, which attracted a large audience. In addition, they were published in widely distributed academic journals. Thanks to the archives made available online, the general public was able to delve into the reports and minutes produced by the Gendarmerie during the Second World War and the immediate post-war period. Furthermore, the project laid the foundations for increased cooperation with the Federal Police with a view to anchoring its history in its concerns. Thanks to the project, the integration of police archives into the training of young police officers and into the teaching materials made available to them has been achieved. Furthermore, within the police hierarchy, the project has raised awareness of the scientific value of the archives and data produced. This awareness has led to the establishment of concrete projects, carried out in collaboration with the National Archives of Belgium, as well as good practices within the central services of the Federal Police, which will enable the preservation of valuable archival heritage in the future.

Keywords: Archives, History, Police, Intelligence agencies