

NaPol-Intel

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

DURATION
15/12/2019 – 15/03/2024

BUDGET
602 732 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The NaPol-Intel project examines the processes of centralization of the Belgian police services and their impact on police information from the end of the First World War to the early 1960s. Belgium in the 19th century was characterized by a strong tradition of local autonomy. The communal police forces, under the authority of the mayors, carried out most of the 'regular' police tasks, while the Gendarmerie still played a secondary role. After the First World War, in an increasingly tense socio-political context, the police services were progressively centralized at national level, with amongst other things the creation of the General Police of the Kingdom in 1934. The second German occupation and the post-World War II period saw these centralization processes reinforced even further. With the passing of the organic law on the Gendarmerie in 1957, this body became a central link in the Belgian police system.

The aim of this project is to analyze the links between the transformations of Belgian society and the centralization of police services during a period characterized by a fundamental contradiction between a process of democratization and pacification of social relations and the emergence of more and more radical antagonistic forces. It also examines how police information is created, managed and used, and how the data collected has shaped and legitimized police and security policies and practices. Two central themes have been identified to investigate these issues: the maintenance of public order and the preservation of moral order. These two themes are intended to provide a better understanding of the processes of democratization of Belgian society in the 20th century through questions concerning, in particular, the legitimization of the occupation of public space, the possibility of expressing opinions or exercising political activism, in a context of redefinition of the boundaries between the public and private spheres, due in particular to the increase in state intervention.



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This research has the great advantage of being carried out simultaneously with the processing and opening up to research of unpublished and hitherto inaccessible archives from both the General Police of the Kingdom and the Gendarmerie. This makes it possible to apply from the outset the most refined methods of historical analysis. The concept of police information is analyzed with the help of sources that allow a better understanding of their history, of the agents who created them and of the spaces in which they circulated. To this end, a precise mapping of the institutions involved in the Belgian police system is carried out. In addition, particular attention is paid to the individuals involved in these spaces of police centralization. Indeed, the archives mobilized within the framework of this project include numerous series of personal files that allow a prosopographical approach, facilitated by the collection of biographical data in the Digithemis database. The methods of processing and archiving police information can be better analyzed, with a view to capturing the bureaucratic practices that transform raw data into real security policies. Finally, the examination of the subjects of police information collection is also crucial to understand the nature of the risks perceived as such by the state in the construction of its security policy. They reflect the elements considered by the central power as social and political threats and constitute indispensable keys to understanding the construction of its security policy.

The opening up of these archives for research for the members of the project and the Belgian and international scientific community, as well as their exploitation, will allow the valorization of important parts of the collections of the National Archives of Belgium, as well as the opening up of new fields of historical research. Indeed, this project intends to lay the foundations for permanent and broader scientific discussions, through the organization of scientific seminars and workshops. The results of the project will be published (via scientific articles and the proceedings of the closing conference) and a "general public" communication will be set up via social networks. Important archives will be made available on the website of the State Archives. In addition, the expertise acquired within the project will be disseminated via contributions to MENEPOLHIS 2.0, a website dedicated to the study of policing and security concerns in a socio-historical perspective. Police services and security professionals will also be invited to discuss the research results and draft training modules will be proposed for police academies, the Federal Police and its peripheral organizations. Finally, research seminars and master's theses dedicated to the issues raised by the project will be organized at the partner universities, thus developing the knowledge of the police services in Belgium during the 20th century.

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