

Call for Papers

Informal Communication in Occupied Societies: World War II, Postwar Transitions, and the Search for Meaning in Societies at War

Across Europe, World War II gave rise to profoundly altered communicative landscapes. War and occupation devastated established sources of information and public spheres, while in many territories, dictatorial regimes implemented unprecedented degrees of censorship, propaganda, and surveillance to constrict, mold, and (re)direct public opinion. Particularly in moments of crisis — when individuals were violently pulled out of their accustomed environments and previous channels of communication collapsed — reliable, verifiable information became sparse. As a result, World War II became a breeding ground for alternate, informal information channels, in which rumors, gossip, and tall tales helped shape individuals’ actions and sense of reality.

Taking an interdisciplinary, transnational approach, this workshop explores the role of informal communication in different European societies, focusing especially on its relationship to official state communications “from above” and its embeddedness in particular social realities and wartime mentalities “from below.” More broadly, it asks how individuals made sense of an ever-changing, often threatening global situation by specific practices of communication and interpretation. It aims to bring together scholars from diverse areas of expertise to explore the following (non-exhaustive) questions:

- What role did informal communication play in particular wartime contexts? Among which populations, in which situations, and for what purposes did certain forms of informal communication become particularly salient?
- What can be known about specific practices of sense-making among civilian populations living under conditions of war and occupation? How did ordinary women and men try to explain a world turned upside down by the global conflict? What role did experiences of previous conflicts (e.g. World War I) play in these processes? To what extent did such practices endure into the postwar period, as societies transitioned into new realities?
- How do we conceptualize “informal,” “unofficial,” and “from below” communication and its relationship to its “formal,” “official,” and “from above” counterparts? What are the parameters of informal communication? How do these concepts relate to larger questions of “informality,” particularly in contexts of war, occupation, and dictatorial surveillance?
- What kinds of parallels can be drawn between the communicative ecosystems of different political regimes and the communicative practices that these fostered? To what degree can we compare Nazi Germany, Vichy France, or Europe’s various aligned or occupied territories? What can be said about the specificity of informal communication under dictatorial rule in comparison to democracies?

- In which way did the specific context of French (or other) colonial domination change the structure of (in)formal communication, given the coexistence of various ethnic groups and languages?
- To what extent and in which contexts were informal communication and sense-making a product of curiosity and a human desire to locate oneself? How did states react to these informal spheres of communication? What efforts did the Nazi and other regimes mobilize to denote informal communication as deviant behavior?
- What do the forms, contents, and modes of informal communication and sense-making reveal about social relations, the creation or destruction of groupness, gender, or individual and collective agency in conditions of violence and upheaval? How are these related to practices of accommodation or opposition to particular regimes?
- What kinds of sources are at our disposal for studying informal communication? How do we problematize and contextualize these? On what epistemological basis can historians make generalizations based on fragmentary evidence? How do these questions relate to larger questions of credibility and veracity, in their historic contexts and retrospectively?
- What kinds of perspectives can historic explorations of topics such as informal communication, “fake news,” and challenges to established notions of veracity and factuality provide for current controversies on these issues?

To examine these questions, this workshop welcomes perspectives from scholars working on World War II, its precursors and immediate aftermath, and its more long-term memorial and historiographic reverberations. It seeks studies on diverse geographic contexts, with a special emphasis on France (and its colonies) and Western Europe under dictatorial occupation. However, to encourage comparative and transnational approaches, the workshop welcomes contributions on World War II and postwar European societies more broadly. In exploring these subjects, the workshop aims to provide a modern, transnational approach to communications in conditions of war and occupation, while historicizing ongoing debates on media, factuality, and truth.

Practical Information:

This third workshop of the INFOCOM Project (Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, IfZ) will take place at the German Historical Institute Paris on **November 23-25, 2022**. Workshop participants will be asked to submit an extended, English-language abstract (ca. 500 words) for internal circulation prior to the workshop. Presentations should last no more than 20 minutes to allow for ample discussion time. The working language is English, however, participants may choose to hold their formal presentations in French or German. Invited speakers’ travel and accommodation costs will be covered by the organizers.

Organizers: Caroline Mezger and Manuel Mork (IfZ), Jürgen Finger (DHIP), Florent Brayard (CRH/EHESS)

To Apply:

Please submit a short biography (max. 150 words) as well as the title and an English-language abstract (max. 250 words) of your intended contribution by e-mail to Manuel Mork (**mork@ifz-muenchen.de**) by Monday, **May 16, 2022**. You will be notified about your participation by the end of June 2022.