



2009 CONFERENCE

IDENTIFYING THE PERSON: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Abstract

'Behind the *Ausweis*: Keeping Track in Nazi Germany'

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Behind the identity card lies a forest of identificatory data whose root system includes the registers of civil status. Keeping a civil status system up-to-date and accurate is a Sisyphean task for any administration, requiring repeated interventions to maintain the match between the individual and his or her paper records of identity, and that between different sets of official records. This is especially liable to be the case whenever rules are significantly extended or changed. Both human subjects and papers are unruly and liable to confusion, and the discrepancies that arise reveal the pressure points in the system: what errors matter, how they can be corrected and with what effects on individuals and the system. This paper considers the history of these processes in Nazi Germany, and asks the standard historians' question – what was new and specific to this period in terms of policy, official practice and implications for people's lives – as well as raising more general questions about the norms of registration and identification in different political systems.

The Documentation of Individual Identity:

Historical and Comparative Perspectives since 1500

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