

War and the Public Sphere. European Examples from the Seven Years War to the First World War

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Wars are a deadly and ever-present extreme state of human existence. Not least for this reason, they are also media and communication events which have had an enormous impact since the beginnings of a historical tradition.

The media and communication sciences can contribute to research on the close inter-connections between a media culture and war (and do so), but the historical sciences also have a part to play. Over the last ten years, the concept of 'Erfahrungsgeschichte' (the history of experience) has expanded beyond the evidence of actors, eye witnesses and those directly affected ('the experience of war') to include the processes of medial transmission to a wider audience. The mass media have a key function in shaping the knowledge that is current in society: they create images of reality that stamp experience and become particularly effective in certain contexts, especially when these media enjoy privileged access to information, as is (or seems to be) the case in times of war.

In modern times societies are increasingly integrated, in terms of communication, via the mass media. The European wars of the 1850s and 1860s gave the role of the mass press a sudden boost, and placed newspapers at the centre of public communications. By 1850 at the latest, politics recognized that the press was indispensable as an instrument of political mobilization. Thus war became a fixed component of the contemporary world of the imagination – not only as a military event, but also in its political, social and historical contexts. Wars and crises were not only communicative events of the first rank, but also screens on which the clash of opinions between political world images and various social views were projected.

In this lecture four European examples between 1750 and 1918 shall be presented in order to outline the techniques and forms in which the media reported war.