The Transformation of Local Public Spheres: German, Belgian and Dutch Border Towns during the First World War Compared

Bernhard Liemann

Public spheres are the central spheres of social life during times of peace and in wartime. If we want to understand the various changes, and their consequences for everyday life, it is absolutely necessary to examine the transformation of the public spheres during wartime. Inspired by the two volumes of Jay Winter's studies about capital cities in wartime, we can regard a town as being the meeting point between the imagined community of the nation and the experienced community of the neighbourhood. Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the war experience beyond and below the national level. According to Jürgen Habermas, public spheres must be regarded as a network for the communication of contents, opinions and representations, which are established and reproduced by Communicative Action (Kommunikatives Handeln).


3 Using the term ‘Communicative Action’ (Kommunikatives Handeln) we have to be aware that Habermas understands the term in a way that is not power-ridden (vermachtet). Of course, during a war we have to consider the opposite. See Jürgen Habermas, Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 436–444. Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). Originally published as Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Unter-
Until the time of the breakthrough of the cultural turn, social scientists and historical scholars had not paid much attention to the formations and transformations of the public sphere. This is now changing, and in addition, research on the First World War in recent years has been paying more attention to civilians. By using the method of comparative urban history, towns are ideally suited for investigating the transformation of public spheres during wartime. Even though it is obvious that research on the First World War is internationalized today, to some extent the historiographic traditions of the countries in-


