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Introduction – Controlling mobile guests where they rest. Comparative perspectives on hotel registration in Europe, 1840s–1930s

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ABSTRACT

At the intersection of tourism and migration history, this special issue focuses on the roles of registration documents and practices in European hotels during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite playing a key role in surveillance, the role of hotel registration has been less studied in a context of increasing migration and state control. Here, hotel registration is comparatively studied from three perspectives. Firstly, attention is given to politics, or the changing role of state authorities in relation to mobility and migration, and in particular to the selective implementation of bureaucratic practices. Secondly, attention shifts to people and how they were registered by the various non-governmental and governmental actors involved at different administrative levels. Thirdly, the articles deal with performances and the tensions between theory and practice: how registration practices varied between localities and how travellers themselves could use these practices as a tool for self-identification or protection. Through case studies covering Europe from Austria to Switzerland, Belgium and the United Kingdom, we reveal how hotel registration formed part of broader systems of population and migration control and demonstrate that the boundaries between ‘migrants’ and ‘tourists’ were fluid and varied over time and by region.

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In describing the life of the ‘hotel human’, Joseph Roth stated that ‘A foreigner first notices a change in regime at the doorman’.¹ Roth criticised the changing role of his Italian hotelier under the Mussolini regime. The growth of the Fascist police state and its requirements of hoteliers to ‘rob’ their guests of passports upon their arrival had made them unsympathetic in his eyes. The hotelier, he continued, ‘is not cut out to provide hand and glove services for the police’, and his ‘professional friendliness

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mixes with the poorly disguised curiosity that betrays the mediocre spy'.² For Roth, hospitality and politics needed to be strictly separate spheres. Benito Mussolini's demands for stricter hotel registration violently broke down such boundaries.

Roth was not alone in this sentiment. For centuries, travellers staying in European inns, hotels, and lodgings needed to demonstrate financial means, and also offer a statement of their identity upon arrival. This registration surely helped hoteliers in maintaining their accounting books, but behind the scenes state eyes were carefully watching and often dictating the rituals of arrival. Yet it would be facile to assume that hotel registration remained consistent throughout European space and time. Rather, as Roth aptly captured, paying attention to the ways travellers' information was constructed and compiled through hotels signals subtle changes in political ideologies and state-subject relations. Mussolini was himself at the receiving end of this relationship when his presence as a foreigner in Switzerland was noted in one of Lausanne's hotel registers in 1904.³ The inherent political dimension of hotel registration, then, makes it a valuable lens to understand the changes embodied by the rise of the nation-state, evolving bureaucracies, and dynamic relationships between states and mobile bodies. That is the first objective of this special issue. At the intersection of tourism and migration history, the issue aims to explore the politics, people, and performances of hotel registration in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, it teases out the potential roles these hotel registers can play in future histories of tourism and migration by highlighting their limits and potentials.

Raison d'être

The final decades of the nineteenth century and the opening ones of the twentieth saw significant changes in both the nature and character of human mobility, as well as in the ways that governments dealt with it. The onset of steamships and railways facilitated the movement of tens of thousands of Europeans.⁴ These new technologies not only expanded the accessible horizons of people; they also democratised mobility.⁵ More people moved, and more people were constantly *on the move*. The trans-Atlantic migrations and the birth of modern mass-tourism are both a case in point.⁶ This age of 'mass-migration', to quote Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey

Williamson, resulted in a growing and diversifying hospitality industry.⁷ Of course, inns of various standings had been accommodating travellers and merchants for centuries, but the increase in mobility put a new fire under the sector, leading to diversification, most notably in the booming tourist market. Working-class lodging houses became a staple of the nineteenth-century city, and modern hoteliers laid the foundations of what ultimately became powerful urban and national stakeholder groups.⁸ The commercial hospitality sector was marked by heterogeneity, carrying with it a high degree of conceptual ambiguities across time and space: hotel, lodging house, boarding house, inn, bed and breakfast, hostel, and so on. In this introduction, we will use ‘hotel’ as an umbrella-term for convenience unless otherwise specified.

The new modalities of mobility introduced challenges for the political and administrative entities migrants continuously passed through. At first, studies were largely optimistic about nineteenth-century registration practices. After an initial ‘registration offensive’ in the early decades of the century – made possible by an expanding bureaucracy and necessitated by political revolutions – the second half of the century is often characterised as rather *laissez-faire*. This ultimately ended with the closure of borders following the outbreak of the First World War.⁹ More revisionist histories have called this narrative into question by interrogating how ‘open’ the nineteenth century truly was, and, consequently, how far the First World War can be considered a turning point. From this perspective, the nineteenth century can be considered a century of ‘experimentation’ which, although relatively open, definitively laid the foundations of post-First World War surveillance systems.¹⁰

Yet rather than constructing a paper mirror of state participants and intruders, systems of identification could become worlds in their own right. Fabrice Langrognet, in his recent book, illustrates this point by zooming in on a Parisian tenement and reconstructing the microhistories of its inhabitants between 1882 and 1932. Despite the state’s efforts to clearly distinguish between French nationals and foreigners, such theoretical categories were more complex in social reality, and constantly in flux well into the twentieth century.¹¹ It is this categorical fluidity that has also led Langrognet to call for more interaction between migration and refugee studies.¹² In this issue, we would not only like to highlight the benefit of writing migration histories from the perspective of buildings (i.e., hotels and similar establishments), but also to push Langrognet’s call beyond

refugee studies, urging for greater dialogue between migration and tourism historians.

In the context of diversifying mobility and experimental registration, analysing the role of hotels not only becomes relevant, but central to our understanding of mobility patterns and state-migrant relationships during this period. Building on Sari Nauman et al.'s call to centre notions of hospitality in migration history, our aim is to firmly establish hotel registration as a key research area.¹³ Although our special issue forwards this agenda for comparative research, we are greatly indebted to earlier work on the subject. Research on Venice and Paris has highlighted how lodgings have long been essential to pre-modern urban registration and control systems.¹⁴ For the modern period, fewer studies exist, and most focus on aspects of hygiene and sanitation in controlling lodgings.¹⁵ In her work on Versailles, Claire Lévy-Vroelant demonstrates that surveillance of the lodging sector was highly episodic, following the exigencies of urban and national politics.¹⁶ Torsten Feys' research on the Belgian seaside resort of Ostend revealed that tourists were only superficially controlled, while hotel workers faced strict and extensive registration procedures.¹⁷ Meanwhile, İlkay Yilmaz's work on the Ottoman Empire shows that, although this polity had a longer history of recording guests in lodgings, such controls became fundamentally entangled in much wider transnational European discussions about tracking dangerous criminals.¹⁸ By the start of the First World War, even Britain – long a defender of anonymous hospitality – had adopted a hotel registration system, as Kevin James previously argued in this journal and explores further in his contribution to this issue.¹⁹

In the issue, we aim systematically to explore some of the questions raised by earlier studies, as well as outline the agenda for future research. To achieve this, we propose a framework for research on hotel registration in modern Europe based on three P's: politics, people, and performance.

As outlined above, hotel registration provides a useful lens to study European **politics**, and in particular the changing attitudes of the state towards mobile lives. Several articles in this issue deal with the rise of the nation-state, its interrelated tensions with supra-national levels, and the opportunities created by new bureaucratic practices and technologies. In so doing, the issue builds on recent trends in migration historiography, which advance the materialities of documentation and registration as subjects of analysis in their own right.²⁰ The articles address the frequently neglected yet highly contentious processes of migrant

categorisations. The criteria used to divide hotel guests into ‘tourists’ and ‘migrants’ were often contested and highly arbitrary. In Belgium, for instance, the legal distinction was based on the duration of stay, rather than the motivation to move. In local practices, however, other implicit criteria determined the necessity and level of control. The implementation of ‘national’ rules could therefore differ according to economic needs, political relations, and the level of bureaucratic resources in localities. Although categorisations were often arbitrary and implemented selectively, their implications carried real, often class-based, inequalities. Analysing this difficult balancing act of categorisation not only brings such political power dynamics into focus, but also helps in understanding similarities between different types of movement. The growth of tourism industries, for instance, generally entailed a rising demand for a seasonal migrant workforce, whose worlds of accommodation could overlap with tourists – think of grand hotels providing lodgings for their staff – but whose registration differed considerably. Consequently, hotel registration provides a valuable yet underexplored entryway to bridge the subfields of migration and tourism history. So far, scholars have paid little attention to the effect of tourism on migration policies, and vice versa.

Second, focusing on hotel registration highlights a wide range of **people** who are usually not associated with migrant registration. The various articles demonstrate the usefulness of unpacking the monolithic ‘nation-state’ and point to different governmental actors involved at various administrative levels. Hotel registration regimes did not exist in isolation; they were part of much broader record-keeping systems and need to be studied as such. As will be pointed out throughout the issue, registration never constituted a direct relationship between the state and the individual, as other governmental and non-governmental actors at different levels were involved. Of particular interest here is the role of hoteliers as non-governmental local actors in mediating the creation and transmission of information. Both tourism-oriented hoteliers and lodging housekeepers catering for working-class guests had their own motivations in participating in registration practices according to their needs and those of their guests. The publication of hotel registers in local newspapers in tourist resorts, for example, served as an excellent way for hoteliers to showcase their notable guests, who for their part sought greater social visibility. The roles of other intermediaries, like philanthropic organisations, employers, transport companies, and tourism offices are only touched upon here and still need to be systematically explored.

Their perspectives are much more difficult to trace in the archives, yet they are crucial to countering narratives that portray registration as a purely top-down process. The visitors' book, a token of nineteenth-century British tourism society, is a case in point.²¹

This automatically leads to the final point of **performance**. The diverse set of actors involved cautions us against taking legislative texts at face value, and several articles in this issue engage with the differentiation between theory and practice. Understanding historical registration regimes requires empathy, and forces researchers to consider seemingly mundane practical elements, such as who wrote down what, based on which information, and with which intentions. The frequently incomplete, contradictory, and often outright false information in hotel registers posed a challenge to authorities in the past, just as much as to historians today.²² Some authors conclude that the performance of registration served a goal in itself: the ritualisation of state power, and the creation of an impression of control. While the authors in the issue sometimes disagree on the extent of this goal, it is clear that the mere presence of such registration variations points to differentiated treatment of mobile groups along social, ethnic, gender and even age axes. Women and children were almost by default considered as appendices to their adult male co-travellers. For those with fewer financial resources, identity documents were significantly more important than for wealthy travellers. Registration was not solely an oppressive hierarchical performance, however. Although more difficult to reconstruct, this issue shows how bottom-up practices were developed and how subjects used registration as a form of cultural capital, as a tool of self-identification, or even to claim access to public welfare. Hoteliers, for their part, could take pride in publishing content from their guestlists or visitors' books in local newspapers as advertisements for their success. The multitude of actors involved in registration practices ensured that these processes were highly multivalent, serving different purposes for all those involved.

The special issue

At the base of this agenda and special issue lies a workshop we organised in May 2023 in Ostend in Belgium. The coastal city, which grew into a tourist resort in the late nineteenth century, formed the perfect historical location for a workshop on hotel registration. Titled *'Hotels and the Registration of Travellers, Migrants and Tourists: Comparative Historical*

Perspectives', it brought together researchers from our network across Europe. Although some were disappointed they did not have to procure identity documents upon arrival at the hotel (even though Belgian law theoretically mandated it), the discussions were certainly topical. It was our deliberate goal to connect migration historians with their tourism counterparts: for each migration historian, we sought a tourism commentator, and vice versa.²³ The goals were to explore the shared interest of both groups on human mobility and to break down the boundaries between their hitherto largely parallel debates.

The articles in this issue are listed chronologically and per geographical unit. Temporally, they span from the early nineteenth century until the 1930s, with a deliberate focus on the decades around the turn of the century. Geographically, they cover Europe from Austria in the centre, across Switzerland and Belgium to the United Kingdom in the west. It is needless to point out that much of the European puzzle remains obscure. The absence of France is especially regrettable, since it appeared to have played a pioneering role in developing the hotel registration system, and heavily influenced neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, the case studies show some striking similarities, as well as clearly important diverging national and local policies. Although focused on a shared interest, the articles in this issue adopt diverse perspectives using a wide range of sources and methodologies.

Jasper Segerink's contribution focuses on the governance of lodging houses and hotels in the globalising port city of Antwerp, Belgium, during the long nineteenth century. He suggests using the concept of 'hospitality governance' to look beyond some of the classic themes in migration studies like settlement and welfare and explore the realms of migrant categorisation and power dynamics in hospitality spaces. His analysis shows how actors at different scales of governance had different motivations to regulate mobile bodies through the commercial hospitality sector. In the second half of the century, urban authorities sought to control these hosts out of fear of the spread of epidemic diseases. However, these controls ultimately bore little fruit since the profession was strongly protected by Belgian legislation, which prided itself on notions of hospitality and professional liberalism. When it came to controlling guests, his analysis reveals a shift from strict enforcement at the urban level before Belgian independence in 1830, to one that was increasingly *imposed* by the state afterwards. Although the registration was often called into question, it survived the experimentalism and growing bureaucratic

complexity of the period. By reading some of the hotel registers against the grain, Segerink furthermore unearths how elite hoteliers and working-class lodging housekeepers had their own strategies for participating in the regime. Registration, although legislatively universal, was highly unequal in practice.

The contribution by **Torsten Feys** also focuses on Belgium, but he shifts the perspective by looking beyond the often-studied urban centres into the neglected countryside. By adopting the perspective of Belgium's intelligence agency, his analysis compares how the system of hotel registration differed across the country, and how it was deeply embedded in a broader registration architecture. His analysis uncovers a general compliance in different urban settings with the guidelines of registration, although this did not withstand variation based on local interests and on the overlapping but often competing needs of the authorities, the hotel sector, and its guests. By contrast, the non-compliance of rural authorities was countered by systematic visits, not least of lodging houses, by the gendarmerie, a sort of national countryside police. Feys argues that the vast dataflow resulting from these controls was to some extent performative, albeit also occasionally processed and acted upon. In particular, it allowed the authorities to trace and expel foreign 'vagrants'. A rural-urban division between misrule and rule is thus too reductive. Instead, Feys proposes that we think of these spaces as parts of a complementary system of tourist and migrant control with different practices, but similar outcomes.

Laurent Tissot uses the example of the tourist and medical resort of Lausanne in French-speaking Switzerland as a case to analyse how a booming tourist resort and migration hub monitored its foreign populations through all types of lodging facilities during the Belle Epoque. While this diverse foreign population brought prosperity and work, it was also viewed with suspicion and accused of importing social unrest, crime, diseases, and pauperism. Using police reports, legal texts and lodging registers, he assesses how these concerns led to the introduction of mechanisms for neutralising people deemed suspicious. The mobile bodies under control were as diverse as they were numerous, and ranged from university students to medical tourists, hospitality workers, construction labourers and political refugees. Requirements for those remaining were more elaborate than those just passing through, highlighting the importance of distinguishing migrants from travellers, although exact criteria were never formulated. Similarly to Antwerp, Lausanne's

registration practices were deeply influenced by the city's changing morphology and hospitality industry. Police reports indicate that hosts were often interrogated as privileged witnesses, much more so than the university authorities, and also that they held firm opinions about the character of their guests in one way or another.

Sigrid Wadauer's piece centres on the creation of migrant categories in Habsburg Austria around the turn of the twentieth century. These decades, she argues, marked a crucial turning point in the region's registration practices. Whereas early modern policies generally focused on specific mobile groups, this period saw a growing effort towards ubiquitous monitoring or *totale Evidenz*. This shift was, however, not a direct break with the past. Rather, the registration system embodied the legacy of a previous focus on targeted mobility, resulting in a complex web of parallel registrations along occupational, temporal, accommodation-type, and welfare categories. Registers for hotels and inns existed alongside those for summer tourists, soldiers, railway employees, and artisans seeking relief, to name just a few. Wadauer's broad approach uncovers high levels of regional variation, similar to those found by Feys for Belgium. Her article also emphasises the co-production of registration from the perspective of registered individuals themselves. An analysis of ego-documents reveals that while some travellers perceived registration as a nuisance, others took pride in documenting their stay in prestigious hotels alongside other famous guests. By contrast, for wayfarers lower on the social ladder, registering at a relief station was often an oppressive and even humiliating affair, as they had to undress. Even so, for them too, the migration trajectories detailed in their workers' booklet could offer a certain prestige, since it evidenced experience and education. The performance of registration was crucial for *self*-identification too.

The final two articles focus our attention on the United Kingdom, a peculiar case in European history. As mentioned earlier, Britain only established a formal system of hotel registration during the First World War, previously taking pride in having hotels 'where the law upheld the anonymity of the paying guest'. This did not mean, however, that guests effectively stayed anonymously in British hotels. The contribution by **Kevin James and Alan McNee** precisely makes this point, by investigating the texts and contexts of the British visitors' book before and after the War. The visitors' book has often been characterised as the opposite of continental hotel registers: it was voluntary, independent of state control, and above all, frivolous. Yet James and McNee convincingly demonstrate

that it makes little sense to separate the two analytically into different textual worlds, and do so by making three arguments. First, they demonstrate that, despite their voluntary nature, there were strong cultural norms in place that dictated visitors mark their inscription. Some books were remarkably democratic, embodying a great social heterogeneity, while other hoteliers kept separate books for different standings of guests. Second, they argue that the practice of visitors' books was far from an exclusively British affair, drawing on different examples across France and Switzerland. This leads to the third point, namely that visitors' books and hotel registers did not preclude one another. Rather, they could and did coexist, each fulfilling different societal needs. This is further demonstrated by the continued prevalence of visitors' books long after the War.

Finally, **Kevin James** demonstrates how, during the First World War, the British state mandated the formal collection of information on all visitors to British commercial accommodations, a system that did not exist prior to the war. This system progressively defined distinctions between British subjects, friendly aliens and enemy aliens, and it remained in place to a certain extent after the war when policies regarding the surveillance of 'alien newcomers' were further developed. Drawing on government records and the local press, the article traces the development of the documentary architecture of post-war surveillance, focusing on the hotel register as a record-keeping tool. James shows how the regime was enacted haltingly and unevenly as different governmental and non-governmental actors became accustomed to unfamiliar peacetime practices. He reveals that the distinctions between British subjects and foreigners were central to its operation. The article also demonstrates how these practices were contested and questioned by various stakeholders, including hoteliers, guests, police officers, and local administrations. By focusing on hotel registration as a documentary practice, the article highlights the need for research into the tourist industry and its administrative practices in relation to the shifting bureaucracies developed and implemented by the state to control and monitor foreigners and mobile groups.

In conclusion, this special issue reveals how hotel registration was deeply embedded in broader systems of population and migration control, and how it has been applied unevenly through time and space to favour those forms of mobility deemed most beneficial to specific local societies. Historically, this generally entailed raising

barriers for migrants with unstable prospects and easing them for well-to-do tourists. Distinctions rested not only on class and purpose of movement, but also on the length of stay: the prospect of durable settlement by migrants provoked more anxiety than the fleeting and temporary presence of tourists. Yet the boundaries between ‘migrants’ and ‘tourists’ were far from fixed and often overlapped in practice.

The issue has also demonstrated how easily hotel registration could be moulded to adapt to changing political, economic and social climates – a flexibility that persists today. Recent concerns with overtourism are quickly undermining hitherto relatively robust bureaucratic preferences, fundamentally dislodging the privileged position of tourists with it. Despite their economic importance, excessive numbers of tourists are straining local communities in urban tourist hotspots, with accommodation being one of the core issues at play. In this sense, the bureaucratic tools designed to control and restrict migration may be used to neutralise overtourism, just as anti-immigrant sentiments could be projected on tourists. The current controversy surrounding terms such as ‘medical tourism’ and ‘benefits tourism’, although, as shown here, certainly not new types of mobility, point in this direction. Conversely, the negative focus on short stays can benefit the perception of more permanent migration, for instance, when slogans such as: ‘Tourists go home, refugees welcome!’, popped up during recent protests in Barcelona.²⁴ The implication of overtourism on entangling migration and tourism studies should be put high on the agenda, and is best understood if placed in a broader and long-term historical perspective. That perspective reminds us that the *performance* of hotel registration is always *political*, and enacted by a range of *people* with often conflicting agendas.

Notes

1. Roth, *Hotelmens*.
2. Ibid.
3. See the article by Laurent Tissot in this special issue.
4. Lucassen and Lucassen, “The Mobility Transition Revisited”; and Osterhammel, *The Transformation*.
5. Greefs and Winter, “The Democratization.”
6. Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact*, 331–65; Zuelow, *Touring Beyond the Nation*.
7. Hatton and Williamson, *Global Migration*.
8. Faure and Lévy-Vroelant, *Une chambre*; Andrieux and Harismendy, *Pension Complète!*; Larrinaga and Strangio, *The Development*; Zanini and Teodori, “Les

- Organisations”; Jourdain, “L’hôtellerie Bruxelloise”; Tissot, “Exclusively”; and Segerink and Greefs, “Lodgings Located.”
9. Strikwerda, “Tides of Migration”; Caestecker, *Alien Policy*; and Winter, *Migrants and Urban Change*.
 10. Lucassen, “A Many-Headed Monster”; and Torpey, “Passports.” On migration and the First World War generally, see also the previous special issue in this journal: Maguire and Daly, “Introduction.”
 11. Langrognet, *Neighbours of Passage*, 126–29.
 12. Langrognet, “The Refugee-Migrant Distinction.”
 13. Nauman et al., *Baltic Hospitality*.
 14. Salzberg, “Controlling and Documenting Migration”; Bernardi and Pompermaier, “Hospitality and Registration”; Milliot, “La Surveillance.” Taking an even deeper dive into history, Olivia Remy Constable explores how states taxed and controlled ancient and medieval forms of lodgings – see Constable, *Housing the Stranger*.
 15. Crook, “Accommodating the Outcast.”
 16. Lévy-Vroelant, Claire, “Un Siècle de Surveillance.”
 17. Feys, “From Queen of Seaside Resorts.”
 18. Yilmaz, “Propaganda by the Deed,” 146.
 19. James, “Aliens, Subjects and the State.”
 20. Torpey, *The Invention*; About and Denis, *Histoire*; Breckenridge and Szepter, *Registration and Recognition*; Greefs and Winter, *Migration Policies*; and Reimann, “People on Lists.”
 21. See the article by Kevin James and Alan McNee in this special issue.
 22. See, for instance, Fahrmeir, “Governments and Forgers.”
 23. We would like to take the opportunity to express our gratitude to the participants who are not included as authors in this Special Issue for their valuable contributions during the workshop: Serge Jaumain, Anne Winter, Ilja Van Damme, Frank Caestecker, Matthew Stibbe, Margo De Koster, İlkay Yilmaz, Céline Regnard, Léa Leboissetier, Magaly Rodriguez, Marjolein Schepers, Jan-Hein Furnée, Gerrit Verhoeven, Silke Geven, Matteo De Vuyst and Michel Dahan. We want to explicitly thank Matthew Stibbe for his patience and guidance in publishing this special issue.
 24. Dodds and Butler, *Overtourism*.

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