

History 295: From the KGB to the Elf on the Shelf
Surveillance in Modern History

Spring 2021: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, 3:00-5:00 CDT

Edward Cohn
Mears 316 (X3107)

cohned@grinnell.edu
Office hours: Monday and
Friday from 11-12;
Wednesday from 3-5

Course Overview

This course examines the political, social, and cultural history of mass surveillance in America, Britain, the USSR, China, and several European countries, looking at the use of informers and secret agents in authoritarian regimes, the efforts of governments across the industrialized world to shape their citizens through mass information-gathering, modern cultures of state secrecy and surveillance, and technology's growing role in the monitoring of everyday citizens by governments and corporations alike. What role did World War I and American empire in the Philippines play in the growth of US surveillance? Why did a British group called Mass Observation pay "observers" to spy on everyday citizens in pubs in the decade before World War II? How did the KGB balance its goals of planting secret agents in the population and convincing citizens to report on each other to the regime, and how did East Germany's Stasi convince husbands and wives to spy on each other? These are just a few of the questions we'll ask as we study the history of mass surveillance from the rise of the modern state to the rise of Google.

Brief Note on the Unusual Circumstances Surrounding the Class

When I first designed this class, and when you first thought about which courses in history you might like to take, no one imagined that Grinnell College and other institutions would be holding classes online. This isn't the way that any of us would like to be holding class, but I'm confident that we can make this course a rewarding experience for everyone. Here are some important principles that will guide the class:

- Whether we're all in Grinnell or we're all scattered across the country, it's my job to help you learn. I will be as accessible as I can in the weeks ahead. I will hold regular office hours, but please feel free to contact me at any time if there are issues connected with the class (or with your Grinnell education) that you'd like to discuss. Send me an email, and we can arrange a time to talk by phone or by Webex.
- Technology and online learning will present challenges very different from those connected to regular classes. Please do not hesitate to let me know at any point if you're running into any kind of difficulty with the course, whether you're experiencing a technological problem or find that some kind of adjustment might help you given your particular learning style. I'll do everything I can to make virtual learning as effective as possible for everyone, so please don't hesitate to let me know if things aren't working or if there's anything additional I can do to help you or your classmates.
- Given that we're all new to online college courses, I may need to make changes to the syllabus to improve the learning experience for the class. If I do so, however, I will do so in a way that makes things more flexible or that takes advantage of technology in more effective ways.

- I hope we can all agree on the following guideline for online learning: if one of our pets appears on screen, we're all encouraged to (unobtrusively) ask the animal's name, but if a friend or family member does something embarrassing in the background, we'll all agree to pretend it never happened and to proceed as usual with class.
- Finally, I will make an effort to create an asynchronous alternative to our synchronous class sessions if technology issues, the pandemic, or other challenges of the current moment lead to problems for you. Just be in touch.

Learning Goals

This course has three broad objectives: to help students understand the modern history of surveillance (in many of its different forms), to enable them to critically read both primary documents and secondary sources, and to help them improve their analytical writing skills. But it also has several more specific goals:

Historical Analysis Goals

By the end of the semester, students who have completed this course will be able to:

- explain the meaning of three different concepts (surveillance state, surveillance society, and surveillance capitalism) while discussing the relationship between these phenomena and the factors driving the development of each phenomenon;
- explain how and why the concept of surveillance has changed over time. To what extent is political surveillance in 18th-century France the same as political surveillance in 21st-century China?
- explain the role of technology, state formation, empire-building, war, and economic change in the development of surveillance around the world.

Critical Reading Goals

By the end of the course, students will have refined their ability to:

- interpret a primary source (historical document) by analyzing its structure, audience, goals, and biases;
- identify and critique the argument of a secondary text (a book or article by a present-day historian), while situating that text within a larger historical debate or literature.

Analytical Writing Goals

By the end of the semester, students will have improved their ability to:

- craft a clear, specific, and nuanced thesis statement in response to a historical question;
- construct a well-organized, evidence-rich, and cohesive paper in defense of a central argument.

Course Readings

The readings for this course are all available online. They can be found either on our Pioneerweb page or via a link (provided either on P-Web or in an email.)

Office Hours

I strongly encourage students to come talk to me during my office hours, so we can discuss course readings, assignments, the study of history, or related issues. I meet with students in my Webex personal room—the same link we use for class. I will lock this room during office hours (to meet with students one at a time), so you may need to wait a few minutes to be admitted.

These are drop-in hours; you are welcome to come by without an appointment (and, in fact, I will leave these hours free for drop-ins.) You are also welcome to email me to arrange a different time to meet. I will most likely cancel my regular office hours a couple weeks each semester (say, during registration week) and instead offer meetings by appointment only. I can always find time to meet with you!

Students are welcome to meet with me to discuss any questions they might have about this course, the study of history, or other academic issues at Grinnell. If you're having trouble with a written assignment, I particularly encourage you to come: If you get stuck writing a thesis statement or can't figure out what you want to say in a paper, it's often better to meet with someone about it than to try to just push yourself to get something done. I'm also happy to discuss course readings in more detail, to answer questions, to talk about the history major, or to discuss any academic questions that might concern you.

Assignments and Grading

Your grade in this class will be based on the following requirements. Note that you must hand in every assignment listed below in order to pass the class, and that if your grades improve steadily over the course of the semester, I will take that into consideration in deciding your final grade.

- A 2-page paper providing a definition of surveillance (10% of your final grade)
- A 3-page paper (20% of your final grade)
- A 6-to-8-page analysis of documents from the Mass-Observation movement in the United Kingdom (25% of your final grade)
- A take-home exam (with essay questions) (20% of your final grade)
- Class participation (25% of your grade)

Extension policy

Each student in the class can have one (and, in most cases, only one) 48-hour extension on a writing assignment over the course of the semester. (The one exception is that the deadline for the take-home final is a campus-wide deadline and can't be changed.) To claim this extension, send me a brief email asking for extra time before the assignment's deadline. I will grant this extension automatically, so there is no need for you to explain why you need more time. Keep in mind, however, that once you've been given an extension on an assignment, I will not give you an extension on another except in the case of a documented emergency. Note, too, that you can have one extension of up to 48 hours; you cannot break your extension into two 24-hour extensions, for example. In the absence of an extension, late assignments will be penalized one

third of a letter grade per day.

Important notes

My goal is to create as inclusive a classroom as possible and to meet the needs of all of my students. I therefore encourage students with documented disabilities, including invisible or non-apparent disabilities such as chronic illness, learning disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities, to discuss reasonable accommodations with me. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, John Hirschman, who is located on the 3rd floor of Goodnow Hall (x3089).

I will also, of course, excuse absences related to religious observance and will be flexible with deadlines that conflict with any religious holidays. Please let me know early in the semester if you expect to miss class because of a religious observance.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Unit One: The Theory of Surveillance—and Surveillance before the 20th Century

Thursday, April 1: Theories of Surveillance

Reading: Josh Lauer, *Creditworthy*, 3-25
David Lyon, “Situating Surveillance: History, Technology, Culture” [Pioneerweb]

Friday, April 2: The Origins of the Information State

Reading: Edward Higgs, *The Information State in England*, 1-63 [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 5: Foucault and the Panopticon

Reading: Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, April 6: Surveillance in Early America

Reading: Lauer, *Creditworthy*, pp. 26-78
Sarah Igo, *The Known Citizen*, pp. 17-54 [Pioneerweb]

Thursday, April 8: State Surveillance in Twentieth-Century Britain

Reading: Edward Higgs, *The Information State in England*, 99-167 [Pioneerweb]

Unit Two: War, Empire, and the Rise of Surveillance

Friday, April 10: Progressivism, War, and Surveillance

Reading: William Thomas, *Unsafe for Democracy: World War I and the U.S. Justice*

Department's Covert Campaign to Suppress Dissent, pp. 3-67, 172-177
[Pioneerweb]

Assignment: **2-page essay is due at 10:00 PM CDT**

Monday, April 12: Empire and Surveillance in the US

Reading: Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire*, pp. 293-346 [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, April 13: Social Security and Surveillance

Reading: Sarah Igo, *The Known Citizen*, pp. 55-99 [Pioneerweb]

Thursday, April 15: World War I and Surveillance in Russia and Beyond

Reading: Peter Holquist, "Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work": Bolshevik Surveillance in its Pan-European Context" [Pioneerweb]
Catherine Katz, "Shadows of the First World War: Surveillance, Censorship, and the Right to Privacy" [Pioneerweb]

Friday, April 16: Stalinist Surveillance

Reading: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, pp. 164-194 [Pioneerweb]
Jan T. Gross, "A Note on the Nature of Soviet Totalitarianism" [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 19: Surveillance and Crime in Germany

Reading: Sace Elder, "Murder, Denunciation, and Criminal Policing in Weimar Berlin" [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, April 20: Surveillance and Dictatorship in Twentieth-Century Germany

Reading: Robert Gellately, "Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany: Aspects of Self-Policing in the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic" [Pioneerweb]

Unit Three: Mass-Observation

Thursday, April 22: Mass-Observation: An Introduction

Reading: *Mass-Observation* by Charles Madge and Tom Harrison
"Mass-Observation: A Nation-Wide Intelligence Service"

Friday, April 23: Scholars on Mass-Observation

Readings: J. Michael Hogan, "The Road Not Taken in Opinion Research: Mass-Observation in Great Britain, 1937-1940" [Pioneerweb]

Peter Gurney, "'Intersex' and 'Dirty Girls': Mass-Observation and Working-Class Sexuality in England in the 1930s" [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 26: Observers among Workers

Reading: Report from Mass-Observation on "Demolition in London, 1941"

Tuesday, April 27: Did World War II Propaganda Posters Work?

Reading: "Government Posters in War-Time: Report from Mass-Observation"

Wednesday, April 28: **3-page paper is due by 10:00 PM**

Thursday, April 29: Surveillance and War-Time Morale

Reading: reports on British morale during World War II

Unit Four: Communist Surveillance

Friday, April 30: Soviet secret policing and the KGB

Reading: Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security*, pp. 1-57 [Pioneerweb]

Monday, May 3: The KGB and Surveillance

Reading: Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
Edward Cohn, "Coercion, Reeducation, and the Prophylactic Chat: *Profilaktika* and the KGB's Struggle with Political Unrest in Lithuania" [Pioneerweb]
Mark Harrison and Inga Zaksauskienė, "Counter-Intelligence in a Planned Economy" [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, May 4: Introducing the Stasi

Reading: Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi*, intro and ch. 1
Stephen Kinzer, "East Germans Face their Accusers" [Pioneerweb]

Thursday, May 6: Stasi Employees and Informants

Reading: Bruce, *The Firm*, ch. 2-3

Friday, May 7: Under the Stasi's Eyes

Reading: Bruce, *The Firm*, ch. 4-6 and conclusion

Monday, May 10: The Stasi and Spy Technology

Reading: Kristie Macrakis, *Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi's Spy-Tech World*, pp. 225-280 [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, May 11: The Stasi on Film

Film screening: *The Lives of Others* (screening to be arranged)

Thursday, May 13: Espionage and Ethnography

Reading: Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Unit Five: The Late 20th-Century American Surveillance State

Friday, May 14: Reining in the US Security State

Reading: Kathryn Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Monday, May 17: FBI Surveillance and MLK

Reading: David Garrow, "The Troubling Legacy of Martin Luther King" [Pioneerweb]
Jennifer Schuessler, "His Martin Luther King Biography Was a Classic. His Latest King Piece Is Causing a Furor" [Pioneerweb]
Caleb Crain, "Don't Believe Everything You Read in an FBI File" [Pioneerweb]
Daniel Chard, "When the FBI Targeted the Poor People's Campaign" [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, May 18: FBI Surveillance at Grinnell in the 1970s

Reading: documents from the archives on the surveillance of Grinnell student activists in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, May 19: **Mass-Observation paper is due by 10:00 PM**

Thursday, May 20: The Future of Surveillance?

Reading: Laura Pinto and Selena Nemorin, "Who's the Boss? 'The Elf on the Shelf' and the Normalization of Surveillance" [Pioneerweb]
"Surveillance and the 'New Normal' of COVID-19: Public Health, Data, and Justice" [Pioneerweb]
Sheena Greitens, "Surveillance, Security, and Liberal Democracy in the Post-COVID World" [Pioneerweb]

Tuesday, May 25: **take home exam is due by midnight (the end of the day)**