

ID Cards - an Historical View

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Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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This is one of two Global Research articles exploring the reasons for the introduction of electronic ID cards, worldwide. Already, over 2.2 billion people, or 33% of the world's population, have been issued with 'smart' ID cards. By 2012, the figure will be over 85%.

These are incredibly powerful systems and their implementation represents a profound social change, yet the public explanations for this project do not seem to add up. Surprisingly, there seems to have been little debate or exploration of the real reasons. To find the answer, we need to dig for ourselves.

The companion article, [ID Cards - a World View](#), tried to assess this from the political and technological contexts of current ID schemes. This article sets out to find what we can learn from historical precedents.

Does history tell us anything about the main purpose of ID schemes? History shows strong recurring themes.

Surprisingly, again and again, the main function has been controlling labour and the workforce, to serve the objective of creating a command economy. Suppression of political dissent has been in second place, although often a 'close second'.

Napoleon

The Napoleonic identity card was the main ancestor of all modern ID systems. Its main purpose was to hold down wages, by stopping workers moving around to find better jobs and higher wages.

Napoleon transformed the free society of the French Republic into the Empire, a tightly controlled police state.

The Republic had created a degree of freedom unheard of in Europe, allowing free speech and giving workers the right to change their job or go somewhere else. By contrast, in most of Europe at this time, including Britain, the majority of the population lived in various forms of bondage, such as indenture. Unfortunately, in France, a free market and mobility of labour were driving up wages.

In response, the French authorities criminalised industrial action and introduced an ID card for workers, which aimed to do two things: -

- i) make it impossible to change jobs without an employer's permission and
- ii) restrict movement, by requiring workers to get an impossible string of visas to move

legally.

In 1803, Napoleon's police chief reinstated the livret or worker's passbook, used by the Old Regime, updated with new identity features. To get a job, workers had to give the employer their livret ID card. To take a new job, workers had to get their card back, but this required getting their employer's permission to leave (1). This is a similar situation to human trafficking and slavery in Russia, Eastern Europe or Kuwait today, where gangs control workers by holding their passports.

The card also acted as an internal passport, making it very difficult to move to seek better work or better wages. Moving from one town to another required a set of visas in the livret card. Without these, employment was illegal.

Napoleon's ID scheme failed to be completely successful for two reasons: -

Firstly, there was a labour shortage, due to the war, which made employers willing to take on workers without a card;

Secondly, the workers had self-help groups, such as the *compagnonnages*, who helped their fellows find lodgings and employment (1). They helped each other get round the system. These networks also formed the basis of organising industrial action.

The authorities tried to introduce state welfare schemes and employment agencies, to supplant the *compagnonnages*, but these were only partially successful.

After the retreat of the French Empire, countries often retained the systems of census and control Napoleon had introduced - they were too useful and efficient to abolish.

Nazi Germany

By the 20th Century, Germany had become one of the most democratic, tolerant and liberal nations in Europe, with welfare, social insurance and a national health service. How did the Nazis manage to transform this into totalitarianism?

"By establishing a people's registration (Volkskartei - ID card) we will achieve complete supervision of the entire German people" Herman Göring, 1938, quoted in *The Nazi Census* (2)

"German Jewry did not understand how, but the Reich seemed to be all-knowing as it identified and encircled them... Indeed it was clear to world that the Reich always knew the names even if no one quite understood how it knew the names." IBM and the Holocaust (3)

The murderous Nazi people's register was hugely important in the evolution of ID schemes. It played an integral part not only in the genocide but in identifying and suppressing political opponents. Some of the main lessons from the Nazi scheme are listed below.

1) Registration started first with employment, regulating workers. The Nazis were obsessed with the economic value of workers, with keeping down pay, eliminating strikers, weaklings and those unable to work.

The ultimate aim was to identify productivity as part of Eugenics. One Nazi census organiser

expressed this clearly, "The only value of a human being... is his economic value... the monetary worth of human labour productivity" (4)

The Nazis created a Work Book, which in turn created files recording the entire course of each person's life, including periods of unemployment and so-called breaches of work contracts, aiming to identify not only strikers, but also people who took too many days sick leave, changed their job to get better pay, or showed 'disloyalty' to their trained career, by working at something different (5). All of these traits were classified as 'anti-social' behaviour.

There was a planned 'final solution' for Aryans, based on social behaviour, aimed at the sick, weak and 'work-shy' and also the sexually promiscuous, "clandestine prostitutes" and the 'subproletariat' (6) (7). This was only abandoned in 1941-2 as the war turned against Germany.

Murdering middle-class Jews produced an income for the Reich, from their assets, whereas murdering the underclass did not.

2) The file and computer system were far more important than the ID card itself.

The ID card created personal files in an organised, computerised system, designed to gather and classify information, identifying groups of particular interest.

The majority of Germans refused to carry ID cards - Himmler continued to complain about this as late as 1945. It didn't matter - your ID card was part of a system that identified you, silently, even when you didn't carry it.

3) Census data was crucial to compiling the register. The organisation of the register was derived from census techniques. The computer technology used was developed for census use. Many of the key workers had come from the census.

When Holland was invaded, its census records and census workers were put to use identifying the nation's Jews, quickly and thoroughly.

Many census workers showed professional commitment to identification and registration of the population, indifferent to the human consequences. Not just in Nazi Germany - in Holland, for example, the head of the national census, Jacobus Lentz, was crucial to its 'success' of the identification and 'deportation' of Holland's Jews, working with enthusiastic professional zeal (8).

Census and statistical systems should not be regarded as something objective or neutral. The process of making statistics is not merely about gathering data, but mainly about analysing it - dividing the population into groups and segments. This means census statistics are by nature divisive, hence very political and potentially very dangerous.

4) Information was also brought into the new identity register from other existing data registers, such as health, insurance and welfare records, parish records, records of births and deaths.

Welfare and health schemes, originally for the workers' benefit, fed into the Nazi scheme, providing identifying information and productivity data. The Nazis then reversed the original

purpose, singling out the weak and unsuccessful for sterilisation and euthanasia.

In the final version of the Nazi register, the ID number, or 'Reich Personnel Number', became an index coordinating all other databases, to be able to gather and collate information from all government functions, with the aim of "Total Observation of Life" (9).

Although initially, this was about gathering more complete data, hence making the system inescapable, it also grew into a larger process: - coupling all these other functions to the political agenda. When health records could mark a person for euthanasia or sterilisation (e.g. for a case of TB), all doctors found themselves part of the political system.

5) Efficient division and classification of the population into sub-groups was essential to policies of 'divide and rule', to find necessary collaborators and to divide opposition. The census and registration systems made this possible, and the Nazi occupations and genocides utilised and depended upon this, as was clearly stated by Himmler himself (10).

The occupations and genocide may have been brutal, but they were not crude exercises in brute force - they had to operate extremely efficiently, with very limited resources.

6) Support from the US was crucial to the development of the Nazi system. This was multi-layered.

Before the Nazi's came to power, there was support for the German eugenics and genetics research from the Rockefeller Foundation (11), which enabled the development of statistical and census techniques, and sponsored key figures such as Siegfried Koller, who became central organisers in the registration and genocide.

There was extensive cooperation and technical support from IBM, providing the computing systems without which the whole project would have failed (3).

Finally there was Anglo-US support for Hitler and the Nazis' rise to power, with money and arms, featuring prominent bankers and industrialists, and figures such as Prescott Bush (12), later US Secretary of State and grandfather of President George W. Bush.

(The article [Profits über Alles! American Corporations and Hitler](#), by Dr. Jacques R. Pauwels, is a good introduction to this subject)7)

Development of 'successful' systems did not end with the war or the fall of the Nazis. The statisticians and bureaucrats who organised the genocide continued their work. For example, Siegfried Koller, became head of the German national census and department of population statistics, retiring in 1978. Post-war, he continued to develop the methods he had started under the Nazis, applying them to medical statistics and adapting them to new electronic computers (13).

China

Mao's China implemented Napoleon's two restrictions: - preventing workers from changing jobs without permission and preventing them from moving location. China operated two systems, one for each function.

Mao expanded the identity workbook into a system called the Dang-an or dossier, and compiled lifetime personal files, from school. Employees could not start a new job without

their Dang-an dossier being released by their former employer, hence without permission. (This new system should not be confused with an earlier historical system, also called Dang-an, which only monitored nobles.)

The dossier made the employer and workplace the focus of state data-gathering, with the employer also gathering information about the worker's views and attitudes.

The practice of keeping worker and professional files was borrowed from the former Soviet Union's worker records. ..to meet and satisfy... labour discipline and quality control in factories and work units. The initial form of files, resembling the Soviet workbook system, included such components as work registration cards, work guarantee books, and other duty- or performance-related recording and scrutinizing devices.

...the early form was overhauled with political, ideological and moral details added to its main body of content. ... the practice demonstrates the extension and intensification of the discipline regime.

Later years of politicisation under.. the Cultural revolution sent the political and ideological components to an even higher level ...for a better understanding of individual thoughts and acts... Individuals were given no escape from authority's scrutiny of their daily life and work activities.(14)

People came to self-censor their thoughts and actions, concerned that a careless remark could put a black mark on their dossier which could blight their promotion and possibly their whole lives.

A separate residential registration system also existed - so-called household registration - which prevented Chinese workers from moving to a different area, without permission.

There had been systems of self-help and mutual welfare in China - Mao was careful to supplant these, as potential sources of resistance. Welfare and support were part of a matrix of control, designed to produce dependence. Interestingly, by the 90s, the state felt no need to maintain these any longer, abolishing them in the economic reforms.

The Dang-an system started to break down in the 1990's due to forces produced by globalisation. Foreign firms entering China did not keep Dang-an records and also employed workers without Dang-an dossiers. Large-scale migration from rural areas was required, to provide a labour force for new urban industries. It was decided to encourage illegal, rather than legal, migration. The rural migrants were employed without Dang-an dossiers, either illegally or as so-called 'part-time' workers, exempt from Dang-an files.

The Maoists never pursued equality, preferring instead to create an unequal system, where some workers, such as those in large state industries (the Danwei), enjoyed generous benefits and privileges, from which the majority of workers were excluded. This had produced frequent major disturbances from the early 1950s onwards. Giving workers extra privileges was sometimes necessary, to maintain stability, but did not produce dependable loyalty (15).

It appears a decision had been made not to increase the privileged class more than necessary, but instead to create an excluded, disenfranchised underclass, living in furtive illegality. Illegal workers have no rights and no bargaining power. Just as the economy of

California depended on large numbers of illegal Mexican immigrants, so China would exploit illegal immigrants from rural areas, only on a much larger scale, designing their economy around this.

A new system was needed, that could track this mobile population, moving both geographically and between different employers, and could track people living illegally, trying to avoid attention from the authorities. The US offered China a technological solution, in the form of modern smart ID and database systems, just as it had helped the Nazis, 60 years earlier.

The Present Day – World ID Schemes

1) Employment is one of the spheres to be governed by ID schemes. This is happening under the guise of ‘controlling illegal migrant labour’. Workers will have to show an ID document to start work.

In the USA, eligibility to work will be determined by a system called E-Verify, currently in phased implementation. In Britain, to start a job, workers already have to produce one of the ‘designated’ ID documents (e.g. passport), which will be linked to the ID registration scheme.

2) Population registers are being compiled from existing databases, such as tax, health and national assistance, much as happened in Germany.

An example would be the [Citizen Information Register](#) in Britain : –

It will include their name, address, date of birth, sex, and a unique personal number to form a “more accurate and transparent” database than existing national insurance, tax, medical, passport, voter and driving licence records. ...

The Home Office... admitted a national identity card scheme will have to be “underpinned by a database of all UK residents” and asked for views on whether the citizens information register should be used for this purpose ...(16)

3) The ID number will become a central index for accessing personal information from all other databases, much like the Reich Personnel Number in Germany.

4) There is an intention to integrate and coordinate different services, such as health and education, to make them function together as part of one system, sharing data. This is clearly expressed in projects such as ‘[Transformational Government](#)’ in Britain, which place great emphasis on [sharing data](#) between different services, departments, national and local government.

5) The new ID systems will compile lifetime dossiers on every individual, automatically.

6) US population registration in Iraq, with biometric ID cards, has helped to divide the community into ethnic groups, now at war with each other, where no meaningful ethnic divisions existed before. US [military anthropology](#) programmes study community dynamics, classify and divide communities into sub-groups, assessed for usefulness, willingness to collaborate, to find allies, and to ‘divide and rule’.

This is comparable to Nazi use of census and registration, to ‘divide and rule’ in occupied

territories.

Resisting the Agenda

It simply isn't true there is nothing we can do, even though we have left it pretty late.

A few hours before Adolf Eichmann was executed, a prison warden asked him, "What should the Jews have done? How could they have resisted?"

Eichmann replied "...We would have been at a loss if they had disappeared before being registered... The number of our commandos was very small, and even if the police had helped us with all they had, their chances would have been at least fifty-fifty. ...A mass flight would have been disastrous for us." (17)

A few thousand Jews survived in Germany through it all, to see the Nazis out. Predominantly, these were people who avoided identification by changing address and identity at the time of registration. Those who escaped identification and 'isolation' in ghettos generally escaped altogether.

The Census is an integral part of the identity registration system, something dangerous, to be avoided. Bureaucrats have killed people, just as surely as soldiers with guns.

Another lesson from history is that identity systems require dependency to provide control. They have to be inescapable to work. Both Napoleon and Mao felt their authority undermined by workers' self-help and welfare groups, where people helped each other out and disseminated information on how to get around the system. Effective organisations that were independent of state monitoring or control ran counter to the aims of identity controls.

The Nazis didn't have to overcome self-help groups, ironically because a previous liberal regime had supplanted them with effective state welfare. Is it a coincidence that the Nazis targeted groups with their own self-help and information networks, such as the Freemasons?

In a situation today, where corporate and government power have fused in symbiosis, self-help would need to avoid dependence on either government or corporations, and perhaps even avoid dependence on money.

However, the main lesson is that once modern systems of population registration are implemented, they become progressively more developed and secure, until they have an inescapable, vice-like control. It is essential to prevent them from being introduced at all.

Notes

1) Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the legacy of the French Revolution*, London, Macmillan 1994, p. 119

2) Gotz Aly and K H Roth,, [The Nazi Census - Identification and Control in the Third Reich](#) Temple University Press, 2004, p.43

3) Edwin Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, Crown Publishers, 2001, p. 125

4) Gotz Aly and K H Roth, op cit, p. 94.

5) Ibid, p. 109.

6)Ibid, pp. 109-113

7) Edwin Black, op cit.

8) Gotz Aly and K H Roth, op cit, p. 77.

9) Ibid, p. 106

10) ibid, p. 4- 5

11) ibid, p. 101

12) Webster G Tarpley and A Chaitkin, George Bush - The Unauthorised Biography, Executive Intelligence Review, 1992, pp 30 - 40

13) Gotz Aly and K H Roth, op cit

14) Victor N. Shaw, [Social Control in China: A Study of Chinese Work Units](#), Praeger Publishers, June 30, 1996, Chapter 6, Control through Confidential Records, p. 82.

15)Elizabeth J Perry [From Native Place to Workplace: Labour Origins and Outcomes of China's Danwei System](#), Chapter 2, in Xiaobo Lu and Elizabeth J. Perry (editors), Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective.

M. E. Sharpe, 1997

16) Alan Travis, [Secret go-ahead for ID card database](#), The Guardian, 30 Sep 2003

17) Gotz Aly and K H Roth,, op cit, p. 92.

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