

On the Inquisition in America

Alexandre Rios-Bordes, *Les savoirs de l'ombre. La surveillance militaire des populations aux États-Unis 1900-1941*, Éditions de l'EHESS

By Christian INGRAO

How does a democratic state manage to impose surveillance on its own population? Studying the case of the United States in the early 20th century, the historian A. Rios-Bordes uses social science tools to deconstruct the mechanisms of control and mistrust.

The issue of monitoring populations in democracies is doubly jeopardised as this wonderful book by Alexandre Rios-Bordes shows. Firstly, because surveillance contravenes the fundamental democratic right to privacy and to be left alone that citizens can use against the state. Second, because in a democracy, citizens or their potential representatives, have the prerogative to exert control over state institutions. In the case of surveillance, the relationship is reversed with state institutions exerting control over categories of individuals or social or political groups. Approached from this viewpoint, the state practice of police or military surveillance is a fascinating area in which to test democratic systems. Alexandre Rios-Bordes decides to explore this field using the context of the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, as the country entered the war in December 1941.

This type of survey is extremely challenging: the institutions involved, protected by reason of state and regalian authority, reveal few of their practices and often deny access to most of their documentation. Nonetheless, Alexandre Rios-

Bordes' study is a true success, based on a wide knowledge of the specialist bibliography and an intense usage of the most innovative social sciences. The author focuses on two military intelligence services, the Military Intelligence Division (MID) and the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), two agencies that have left behind hundreds of boxes of archives, which the author gained access to. But these archives were produced by specialists of clandestine operations and secrecy, who have a consummate tendency not to record a major part of their discourses and practices, so much so that Alexandre Rios-Bordes speaks of a real fear of the written word among people engaged in military intelligence. In a lively style, the author retraces the reflections that dot the complex relationship the services had with their own documentation during this period. He shows that beyond officially depositing the documentation in the Federal Archives, which were created in 1938, these records were the object of massive destruction, as a study of the daily life of these services indirectly reveals. However, Alexandre Rios-Bordes' work, which is a model of historical ingenuity, shows that destruction is not always an irremediable handicap.

The Socio-genesis and History of a State Practice

In the 19th century the intelligence services did not exist. The dawn of the following century gave birth to strategic military intelligence services and the MID and the ONI emerged progressively. America's colonial (mis)adventures were a first factor that transformed these institutions, which were extremely small at the time. Pacification and the maintenance of law and order underscored the desperate need for information on the Cuban or Filipino actors involved in the civil disobedience movement. When America entered the Great War, both these institutions were looking out into the distance, towards Europe, for strategic intelligence, or towards the colonies, developing what had not yet come to be known as counter-insurgency. But it was the Great War that provided the decisive impetus, as it coincided with a shift from the distant to the internal, and as a result both these services expanded vastly. It was in fact counter-espionage that motivated the services to turn to internal intelligence. The surveillance of bases, proactive collection of data and regional rationales of implantation related to military zones, dictated the growth of the two services, but did not increase their autonomy. However, the figures exist: in November 1918, the MID employed 280 officers and about a thousand civilians, although in May 1917, its only staff consisted of 4 officers and 2 office staff.

Logically, in peacetime the role of military intelligence services is not to carry out internal surveillance. These two services' continental infrastructures should hence have been dismantled in November 1918. But this pragmatism ignores the commonly held idea among many leaders that the armistice was not the end of the war: the elements that had to be monitored and identified would not disarm, and it was bad policy to lower their guard.

The high social instability during the transition that took place against the backdrop of the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of insurrectional sequences in Europe decisively reinforced the conviction that it was necessary to maintain a continental military surveillance system. Maybe necessity knows no law, but what passes for law is not necessarily legitimate: this is the paradox Alexandre Rios-Bordes studies in a beautifully comprehensive approach, employing a free indirect style with great talent. In a few maxims he reconstructs the moral and functional argument the officers provided to justify their curious position. We have to admit that the situation was complicated by a truly paradoxical order, formulated at one of the investigation commissions that caught the MID in the act of monitoring trade union leaders. This directive forced all the actors involved to accept the idea of banning "any activity that could in the slightest way, suggest that our own people were involved in military espionage".¹

So who are the men who worked for these shadow entities? This is the final question raised in the first section of the study. Here, creating successive circles, Alexandre Rios-Bordes describes the world of intelligence like a military society, with a group of officers and professional non-commissioned officers at the centre. The author uses vocabulary taken from the world of astronomy, to describe a "closed universe socially divided and ideologically conformist that moreover, at the national and more so at the local levels, are part of partially underground social worlds". This closed universe is also aware of its uniqueness and its existence as a group. It is a uniformly masculine White world, with a high income but nonetheless not comparable to the management level salaries in the private sector. This group belongs to the generally well-educated, upper middle class that considers itself apolitical, but more or less consciously shares a conservative political ethos, quick to amalgamate pink and red "liberals", and not without racist and/or anti-Semitic prejudices. A second belt of asteroids, made up of civil auxiliaries, gravitates around the core of this nebula. It is made up of young men, "loyal" and patriotic men, very often belonging to the highest

¹ Reviewer's emphasis. A Rios-Bordes uses a *sic*...

society, and graduates from Ivy League universities. Recruited during the war, most of them were victims of the staff reductions when it ended. The lively account of this universe is accompanied by a penetrating analysis of what the author calls “a social world of surveillance”, difficult to grasp, as it is partly underground, but it mingles surveillance groups, dens of propaganda, private investigation services and employers’ organisations. What emerges is a whole society that gravitates informally but tenaciously, around the military intelligence structure and its auxiliaries, an underworld often inhabited by the veterans of these services.

To sum up, the military structures born in the colonial context underwent a continental shift and a matrix growth during the war, and when it ended they ensured their survival but at the cost of becoming fundamentally illegitimate in the eyes of an external world deeply attached to constitutional freedoms. This paradox also partially explains the adaptive transformation these structures underwent, but the price they paid was to become ideologically and sociologically closed.

The Ethnography of the Manufacturing of Skills

The second axis of Alexandre Rios-Bordes’ study is a history of the practices employed to develop state skills and intelligence, structuring his approach around three wide fields of practices.

Research and investigation are the two main activities underpinning the manufacturing of the skills of the shadow world. And investigation starts with, and is often limited to, open sources, mainly grey literature and publications, as well as summaries of public political meetings. On the fringes of the latter, however, agents and intelligence officers know how to blend into informal groups, wander through workers’ neighbourhoods or “take the temperature” of a demonstration. There is an apparent porosity between the exploitation of open sources and confidential intelligence practices and the author describes this skilfully. Inquisitional activity is part of the latter category of activities, based on denunciation and an exploitation of informer networks. While it is extremely difficult for a historian to gain access to this type of activity, Alexandre Rios-Bordes clearly shows how informer networks are key to the acquisition of information. More or less informal institutional collaboration with police services as well as private detective agencies also fall within this category.

But how does one carry out research on the MID and the ONI? It is in this that the historian becomes an ethnographer, defining the material frames of the investigative activity, describing payments made to investigators in terms of clothing or travel and subsistence costs. Developing their inquisitional skills practically *ex nihilo*, the services made massive use of private agencies and slowly established their own procedures described as routines, including illegal and clandestine practices, opening mail, infractions, or phone tapping. Between 1937 and 1939, these investigative and surveillance routines were sufficiently defined for each of the services to envisage creating a school responsible for establishing and spreading these procedures.

Alexandre Rios-Bordes then looks at what he calls 'central skills' fundamental to successful investigations. The expression is purposely ambiguous: are these skills central because they are exercised in central institutions? Because they are of key importance in the procedures the services are setting up? Because they are determining for the group representations these shadow institutions generate? The answer lies in the two latter questions. Infiltration techniques and the management of the officer/agent duo, and their relationship, are central features of these skills, and the latter is largely shaped by the decisive moment of recruitment and the way the officer later treats his agent. The study shows the strong impact of political and moral issues on the relationship and how the valorisation of work, respect and the emotional trappings of friendship—overplayed or not—are a constant imperative, along with indispensable and relatively comfortable financial compensation as well as constraints. The officers' treatment of their sources can include threats and the need to protect them, particularly when the reports the agents provide their officers are circulated.

At this stage, everything gathered from open sources, thanks to the actions of informers and agents, or through surveillance and tapping is only information. Alexandre Rios-Bordes shows how intelligence is then manufactured: "Weighing, digesting, interpreting", these are the key words in the process of producing knowledge in the shadow world. The historian describes the virtues and talents that preside over these operations: prudence, "perspicacity", and the tracking of clues are scattered through a discourse that sketches the operations that serve to constitute knowledge. But the confrontation between reality and the way the services interpret it, is sometimes cruel. For example "General Smith, the Commander of unit [...] is overtly Communist", although cross-referencing the sources clearly reveals that the

individual in question is more of a vaguely Mussolinian second-rate adventurer. The job of interpreter is difficult: the documentation is filled with biases.

However, once the knowledge is established, it has to be spread and communicated, the hierarchies have to be convinced. And this is where the terrible “internal test of truth” intervenes. We see that plausibility is established through the writing process, which undergoes a series of operations: formatting, classification and finally identification. The latter, restricted by the way taxonomies work, reflects the institution and its staff’s ideological biases, conferring another dimension upon the military activity carried out by internal intelligence.

The study would be incomplete if it neglected the channels by which the hundreds of reports circulate. The corpus of knowledge developed in the shadow world circulates along internal hierarchical paths, as well as inexorably, in external circuits that constitute one of the challenging aspects of the services’ activities. Here, the author is forced to make a twofold observation. On the one hand, knowledge from the shadow world has to circulate, and it represents the services’ *raison d’être*, but this circulation also unquestionably undermines the need for confidentiality. On the other hand, far from representing a difficulty for the historian, the biased and ideological nature of the documentation makes it an interesting entry point for a study of the rationales behind the way society is represented, and provides a powerful vision of the images internalised by the officers who populate these services.

In the final chapters of his work, the author provides a study of the Constitution through the documentation of these services. He also examines the image of subversion and the adversaries whom the latter silently monitor and confront, the “hostile elements” the reds, the radicals, in short, Communists. The MID and the ONI’s interest shifts from the supposedly driven enemies of the Great War, to the trade unions that the services are convinced are on the verge of Bolshevisation. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s they also carefully monitor all “radical” and “subversive activity”, with “Communism” as danger number one, followed closely by the “pacifists”. The latter are often seen as manipulated by the former. The presumed omnipresence of various radical left wing movements becomes sufficiently obsessional for all the forms of radical right subversion, influenced by fascism or Nazism, to remain in the shadows or in a blind spot. Finally the book ends on the battles the services may have to fight one day against the subversive forces. Here the study describes the anticipation of future threats and opens the door wide to what we could call (even if, to the best of

our knowledge Alexandre Rios Bordes does not) a security imagination that justifies maintaining war level surveillance in a democratic society.

Overall, this is a beautiful essay, in which the diversity of the approaches is striking. The author proves a comprehensive and pragmatic social history of the state; a history of the practices that serve to develop state skills; and a history of the representations and imagination that emanate from the documentation produced by the institutions of secrecy and representation. The reflection is also tinted with political philosophy, as it evaluates the extent of the shadows in democracy. It examines the ambiguity the two institutions studied maintained between the war context and peacetime agitations, seeking to legitimise a combination of control and suspicion that represents the exact opposite of what a democratic system should claim to be.

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