The idea of examining the history of passports originally suggested itself, in the early 1990s, as a way to think about changes then taking place on the international scene as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and of Yugoslavia. In that context, the question arose once again of the "nationality" of people whose state had dissolved around them or who were set adrift as a consequence of war and conflict. There were echoes of the processes that followed World War I, about which Hannah Arendt wrote in an effort to make sense of the status of those abandoned by history after the collapse of the European empires. "What" were these people, nationally speaking? To what state were they connected, what did they owe that state, and what did that state have to do for them? It occurred to me as I thought about these issues that they reflected an older, epochal change in human affairs. This shift I called the "monopolization of the legitimate 'means of movement'" by states and their imposition of mechanisms aiming to tie persons to political orders and to constrain or facilitate movement, as they saw fit at various times and places.

The passport – that little paper booklet with the power to open international doors – seemed the perfect vehicle through which to explore some of the most important features of modern nation-states. Although I had little knowledge of the literature on migration when I started out, I became willy-nilly a contributor to the discussions about migration that were gathering pace at that time. Ultimately, I was a lapsed Marxist and now dyed-in-the-wool Weberian trying to make sense of the meaning of modern states and their preoccupation with nationality in both the objective and subjective senses. The inclusion of the term "surveillance" in the subtitle was somewhat off-handed, a paean to the often puzzling ascendancy of Foucault in the American academy during and after my years in graduate school (1985–1992).

Yet the book proved to be part of a burgeoning literature on identification practices and their spread during the modern (and postmodern) period. This outcome was a product in part of my collaboration with Jane Caplan on a companion volume, Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World (2001), that appeared a year after The Invention of the Passport. The volume with Jane Caplan examined identification practices, documentary controls on movement, and the like across a range of settings around the world and across historical time. Approximately