FEATURED REVIEWS

Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police. By Katherine Verdery. The Natalie Zemon Davis Annual Lecture Series. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014. xix, 289 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. $24.95, paper.

"If you rely *solely* on the documents, you may not get it right." So William Deakin, warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford, cautioned this reviewer early in his academic career, a stark warning that is validated by Katherine Verdery's penetrating and compelling analysis her own Securitate file. Verdery spent more than three years in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s conducting ethnographical research in the province of Transylvania, and her presence and activity generated almost three thousand pages of informer reports, surveillance logs, and transcriptions of telephone conversations. In 2006, Verdery requested a copy of her file, and her dissection and exegesis of it forms the inspiration for, and the basis of, this stimulating and riveting collection of essays. "Stimulating" because by subjecting her files to an ethnographical analysis, the author challenges the conventional reading of secret police files, thereby inviting us to reconsider the values accorded them; "riveting" because she uses her file to show how the Securitate's fears of espionage dogged her research and how she unwittingly fed those fears. In effect, Verdery turns the focus of the Securitate on itself, commenting wryly in a footnote that "turnabout is fair play" (241n86). Ironically, secret police surveillance redirected her research projects in such a manner that, as a distinguished anthropologist of socialism with a focus on Romania, she has come to write a number of seminal studies that have offered a fresh understanding of communist Romania and its past.[1]

These essays, in effect, provide us with a veritable ethnography of the Securitate. On a personal level, the files offer a selective diary of an individual's activities, and in doing so can restore to history experiences that may otherwise have been overlooked by the subject. On a collective level, following the model of the Siguranța, the interwar Romanian secret police, the Securitate produced monthly reports county by county, each containing a section on the population's *starea de spirit* (state of mind), some of which have a markedly anthropological character. In chapter 1, "An Archive and Its Fictions," Verdery explains that in the case of her own file, her "long-term goal is to treat its 2,780 pages as if they were someone's field-notes, attempting to reconstruct from them the world view and practices of the officers and informers who produced them" (40). One of the Securitate's main tasks was to provide "the category of 'enemy,' including spies and various other types of enemies, and to populate it with real people. The files were a principal means of doing so" (64). Verdery's contention is supported by Securitate practice in the late 1940s

1. Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change* (Berkeley, 1983); Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley, 1991); Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996); and Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania* (Ithaca, 2003).

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and early 1950s. Exceptionally heavy penalties were levied for what were described as "antistate activities," but their definition was so loose that they were a constant noose dangling over all citizens' heads.

The experience of George Tomaziu, an artist arrested in 1949 on charges of being a spy for France and Britain, gives an idea of the "principles" adopted by the communist authorities in determining citizens' "guilt." To Tomaziu's affirmation that at university he learned it was preferable to let one guilty man go free rather than imprison ten innocent suspects, his interrogator replied, "That was bourgeois justice and the reason why the bourgeois system collapsed. In the communist case the reverse is true. To avoid the risk of letting one guilty person slip through our hands, it is preferable to imprison him along with the other nine suspects."[2] In political trials, defendants were often found guilty not because they had committed an offence but because they stood accused. And because they were accused, they had to be removed. In Verdery's case, she was the target and the assumed enemy, and the Securitate set itself the task of producing evidence to determine "what kind of enemy" she was (162).

In analyzing the Securitate's practices based on the reading of her file, Verdery is aware, as others are when consulting theirs, of an extraordinary expenditure of time, money, and effort. The need for "conspiracy" (*conspirativitate*) required compartmentation that kept all officers' activities and their informers a secret from both colleagues and the public. But such compartmentalization led to duplication of officers' efforts, inefficiency, and often incoherence. In this regard, the Securitate carried conspiracy to an extreme compared with political police practices in other communist regimes in east central Europe.

This compartmentalization prompts Verdery to give us several interesting reflections on the agency of files. The process of their regular circulation "made files complete and constituted the Securitate as an organization, a collective actor, rather than as scattered individuals, writing reports" (68). Such a verdict leads her to ask whether it is going too far "to say that only now, with the opening of the files, can we fully perceive that unity, as the gaze of file readers turns the Securitate and its archive into coherent, unified entities, which they were not before" (68). A "collective actor," yes, but not always a competent one, as Verdery herself demonstrates.

In chapter 2, "The Secrets of a Secret Police," Verdery uses her discussion of the consequences of conspiracy to adopt an anthropological approach to secrecy by drawing parallels between "secret societies" and the secret police. She then launches into a consideration of a conundrum that emerges from her research. On the one hand, the Securitate kept its secrets from the public and maintained a climate of fear and anxiety among them; on the other, what we can glimpse from its inner workings suggests a degree of inefficiency that must surely have compromised its effectiveness. "How are we to put these two things together: the sometimes-chaotic view from inside the organization and the fearful view of the populace?" she asks. Her answer is a memorable one: "secrecy was the membrane separating them" (80).

2. George Tomaziu, *Jurnalul unui Figurant: 1939–1964*, trans. Mariana and Gabriel Mardare (Bucharest, 1995), 173.

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In her third and final chapter, "Knowledge Practices and the Social Relations of Surveillance," Verdery analyzes the knowledge practices revealed in the files. Proceeding from the premise that personhood in socialist societies was socially embedded rather than autonomous, she argues that the true object of state surveillance was not individuals but their social networks. This contention invites reformulation, for it was only through surveillance social networks could be uncovered. Reading my own Securitate file shows that the secret police used surveillance as a means of discovering with whom I came into contact; as a result, some of my friends were "persuaded" to become informants. In the case of the most prolific informer in my file during the early 1970s, the lure of a passport for emigration to West Germany—he was a Saxon from Transylvania—was the inducement. After the revival of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's provision, introduced in 1958 and revived under Decree no. 408 of December 1985, that failure to report a conversation with a foreign citizen was deemed a criminal offence, this measure was used to pressure persons into informing. Officers were also instructed to appeal to patriotic sentiment as a ploy but could also use blackmail "in exceptional circumstances."[3] In fact, many informers were trapped in this way when presented with evidence of their own malpractice at work, sexual indiscretion, or former membership in the antisemitic Iron Guard. The result was that at the time of the December 1989 revolution, there were, according to Virgil Măgureanu, head of the SRI (the successor to the Securitate), approximately 450,000 informers, of whom some 130,000 were active.

A common thread that draws together Verdery's chapters is a critique of the importance accorded to secret police files in the exercise of transitional justice. The approach taken by international organizations "to individualize lustration—that is to target not *categories* (all former collaborators) but *individual persons* who collaborated"—is, Verdery argues, misguided, since collaboration was quintessentially a networked phenomenon, not an individual one. "The effect of individualizing accountability is to impose notions of truth-getting that do not fit the crime" (210–11). In her conclusion, "The Radiant Future?," Verdery reminds us that surveillance is not the monopoly of communist regimes, although its nature in western democracies and the techniques employed are more sophisticated. Different, too, are the attitudes of the subjects, the majority of whom regard surveillance as the price to be paid for thwarting terrorism.

Secrets and Truths, in its bold test of assumptions, is an exceptional contribution to our reading and understanding of the role of the file in the work of a communist secret police. As such, it not only offers an invaluable personal reflection by the subject of such a file but also enriches the interdisciplinary scholarship on the politics of knowledge.

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3. Instructions, no. D-00180/1987, regarding the creation and use of an information network of the security apparatus, Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1987.

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