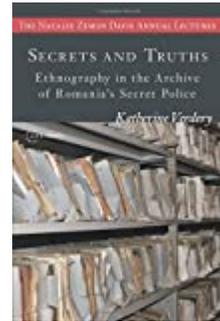




Katherine Verdery. *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013. 294 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-615522599-4.



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Published on H-Romania (January, 2016)

Commissioned by R. Chris Davis (Lone Star College - Kingwood)

Of Spies and Ethnographers

Since the appearance of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), scholars have dedicated much attention to the politics of the archives. In post-communist eastern Europe, in particular, artists and scholars alike have generated an impressive amount of fiction, film, art, and indeed academic literature about the prevalence of the communist-era secret police under various forms and denominations. Katherine Verdery's *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* adds to these cultural outputs, exploring the topic as seen from the archives of the communist-era Romanian secret police, known as the Securitate.

Verdery has succumbed to the irresistible temptation of recounting her own story, as have many other targets of the secret police's surveillance.[1] But unlike most accounts that justifiably seek to denounce the reports of the secret police as untrue, Verdery's effort is to tell a story that goes not against but along the grain of the archive. Using a theoretical perspective developed by Ann Laura Stoler (*Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, 2010), Verdery takes the docu-

ments and the intentions of their authors on their own terms. Like Stoler, Verdery sees the archive as a site of knowledge production and concept formation, a repository of and generator of social relationships (p. 5). To do this, her own work embraces the physicality of the archives and the material aspects of the written text, which makes this book stand out among other analyses of the communist secret police and the politics of memory.

Secrets and Truths is a relatively short book, published originally in paperback and printed in large font, in which the reader finds a satisfying presence of photographs from the author's own Securitate file. The book moves effortlessly between past and present, between different sites where the written sources in the archive occasionally meet fictional accounts, often with the memories of the author or else of the people she involved in her research. Verdery's musings about the work of the secret police bring about a reflection on the anthropologist's own endeavors: "For example, a 1985 Securitate report concludes that I undoubtedly have intel-

ligence experience because in writing my fieldnotes I use a special code; I call the people I speak with "informers" and give them "conspiratorial names"; (â) I keep taking fieldnotes on things well outside the limits of my research proposal, indicating something suspicious; in writing my notes I use a special code and I take them all to the US Embassy, keeping none to use in writing my book, as would be normal. Reading this was a revelation, for I could see the point. Were they right: was I a spy? Were Securitate officers (Securitate officers) and I doing the same thing?" (p. 6).

In this way, Verdery raises questions about practice and performance, which proves a more revealing path than a simple focus on the declared political allegiances and actions of the Securitate. The author also extends in the other direction the comparison between herself and those who surveilled her, as she seeks to "understand the police as ethnographers, to ask about their techniques for getting beneath the "disguises" of those they followed, to inspect their categories of thought and the kind of knowledge they were trying to create" (p. 8).

The reader will find chilling evidence of how the author was constantly under surveillance, and how, at any time, the "evidence" of her actions might have put her in real danger. But there are also humorous accounts of the shoddiness of spying organizations. Both these types of accounts help the author illustrate the arbitrary power of the state. Verdery's writing is often speculative, moving between different sources and narrative styles. Because the time frame of the Securitate archive is very much within the living memory of the "scriptwriters" (the Securitate officers) and of the people they describe, the author writes at once about the past and about the present.

Nevertheless, most of the book focuses on the work of the secret police during the socialist period; moreover, Verdery does not offer a detailed account of present-day contests over the past. Although influenced by recent scholarship analyzing the power and politics of archives, Verdery only occasionally discusses the treatment of the archives in contemporary Romania.^[2] And because she is not interested in the "truth value" of the archives, there is no need to reconcile different voices. For instance, in her analysis of her own file, made up of all of the reports that officers produced about her, plurivocality itself is of interest, countering prevailing notions that the Securitate was a powerful monolith that spoke with a singular voice. Here she makes her point that the Securitate did not maintain its power by observing people and writing either false or true things about them; rather, the Securitate maintained its power simply by way of perfor-

mance and the production of files. Perhaps a drawback in her work, acknowledged by the author herself, is the absence of interviews with former Securitate officers, aside from the ones who repented by publishing their cathartic memoirs—her main source for the *Securisti* voices.

Despite Verdery's deliberate mingling of sources and disciplinary practices, her style is as clear as ever. Her movement back and forth between past and present is done through recourse to her own memory, making the narrator a visible character, much more than a participant observer. *Secrets and Truths* is yet another one of Verdery's texts ripe for appearing on university reading lists on post-socialism. It is, moreover, an excellent ethnographic illustration of surveillance, the politics of memory, anthropological and historical entanglements, and, not least, of the methodological relevance of Stoler's theoretical grid. Readers will also find plenty of references to, and discussions of, academic works and personal memoirs focused on the communist-era secret police. A strong point is her discussion of very recent literature produced by a new generation of eastern European scholars, whose work is given due credit.

The book is divided into three chapters, each dealing with the archives from a different vantage point. In the introduction, Verdery situates her own study within the secret police "file fever" that emerged once the archives became available across former communist countries. A more linear overview of the history of the secret police is followed by a discussion of the affective state of living in a country where the secret police was so pervasive.

Chapter 1, the most compelling part of the book, elaborates on the Securitate's practices designed to maintain the secrecy of its operations. Her focus here is on discursive categories and ontologies that come to the fore when analyzing material aspects of the archive, such as the excess of files produced and the internal hierarchies that emerge through the typeface of the reports. She not only exposes the fictional quality and the plurivocality of the texts produced by Securitate officers, but also analyzes the assembly of these texts as truth production, with overbearing effects. Chapter 2 looks at the social order instituted by the alleged existence and protection of a national "secret," which confers on the secret police its power. The author uses anthropological theories of secrecy and religion to analyze hierarchies and structures of power within the Romanian secret police. Chapter 3 looks at technologies employed by the Securitate in producing knowledge, and how these practices were intertwined with the mandate of the communist regime to

to realize the scientific management of the whole of social life" (p. 161). A particularly interesting aspect of the secret police that comes through in this chapter is the social embeddedness of the surveillance practices and the social networks that were opened or closed off for the officers.

Verdery uses the conclusion as a kind of warning, drawing comparisons between the secret police under communist regimes and the present-day global spur of commercial and state surveillance. This is surprising, for the two situations seem quite different. Throughout the book, the author highlights the importance of considering specific technologies and material aspects of working with information. Yet the world of surveillance today is shaped by different materialities and technologies that generate and proliferate recorded information. Given this new material situation, one might expect concluding remarks that suggest very different dynamics between

states, their citizens, and other organizations than those existing in the last years of socialist Romania. Nevertheless, Verdery's study is certainly relevant for the researchers of surveillance and state control in the present time.

Notes

[1]. See Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (London: Atlantic Books, 1997); and Stelian Tănase, *Acasă se vorbește în Eoaptă. Dosar în jurnal din anii tinerzii ai dictaturii* (Bucharest: Compania, 2002).

[2]. See Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); and Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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Citation: Alexandra Urdea. Review of Verdery, Katherine, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police*. H-Romania, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

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