

Between Nadia Biography and History of Ceaușescu's Dreaded Secret Police

Advertised as a biography of Romanian gymnastics legend, Nadia Comăneci, Stejărel Olaru's book promises to tell the engrossing tale of the athlete's life and career through the lens of the communist secret police, whose extensive surveillance gifted the historian with numerous intelligence documents and wiretappings. Olaru opens with the story's conclusion, Nadia's flight to 'freedom' by illegally crossing the border into Hungary and defecting to the United States in November 1989, just weeks before the collapse of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. Drawing on secret police archives, but also on interviews and published autobiographies, the following chapters reconstruct Nadia's career chronologically, from her 'discovery' in Onești in the early 1970s to her rise to fame on winning the first 10 in gymnastics history at only fourteen at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. The book tracks the gymnast's degrading relationship with her abusive coaches, Béla and Marta Károlyi, her spectacular recovery for the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the Ceaușescu's ban on her international travel after her retirement from sports.

While Nadia's life functions as the book's running thread, readers learn surprisingly little about Nadia herself, her family and friends, her motivations and interests, with the possible exception of her teenage depression and suicide attempt in 1978, explored as a reaction to the oppressive adult monitoring by the Securitate, but also by her coaches, whose physical and psychological abuse is amply documented. This is likely because, although the author consulted Nadia, she had already remembered her story in *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, her 2003 autobiography. Olaru's disclaimer - "we have not set out in this book to examine Nadia's personal life, since it has nothing to do with her career" (279) - comes too late for readers expecting a biographical approach and draws an artificial border between personal and professional life that his own book inevitably crosses.

Olaru however deftly uses Nadia's life as a strategic lens into other (hi)stories, most notably the history of the Securitate's 'draconian surveillance of the populace' (88) and the history of Romanian gymnastics. Some of the book's most valuable insights come in the chapters on the emergence of the Onești school of Gymnastics at the initiative of individuals marginalized by the Romanian Gymnastics Federation, the Karolyis' cultivation of legends about their 'discovery' of Nadia or 'the Karolyi method,' the relations of friendship and enmity among Romanian sports officials who navigated a complex hierarchy of party and secret police power, and the tensions between Romanian and Soviet gymnastics.

Despite revelations about the dizzying extent of the Securitate surveillance of the sports world, however, the book does not revolutionise our understanding of the secret police. Olaru expertly paints the picture of 'Romanian gymnastics as one big family' (129), reconstructing the dense networks of 'Securitate officers, both known and unknown' (297) and their army of informers recruited from coaches, choreographers, and sports officials that monitored gymnasts in Onesti, Deva, Bucharest and abroad. Specialists in Cold War history will appreciate the breadth of archival documentation, but general readers might find it hard to navigate the litany of informants' names and aliases, whose stories of the Karolyis' abuse of young gymnasts piled on. It is surprising that even though these sources show how deeply embedded the Securitate was in Romanian society, the author still resorts to tired generalizations about the Securitate as an omnipresent and omniscient force dominating Romanian society from above. Autobiographical works like that of US anthropologist, Katherine Verdery, *My Life as A Spy*, have successfully challenged this view, showing how the Securitate inserted itself into people's relations, being woven into the very fabric of

socialist society. This view is also questioned by Olaru's own accounts of colleagues, friends, and spouses in 'the big family' of Romanian gymnastics informing on each other to settle scores, often using the Securitate to derive benefits from the communist regime.

Grappling with the tensions between Nadia, her coaches, and the communist regime as well as tensions between Romanian and Soviet gymnastics, the book is truly an engrossing read. While the thrilling topic will likely attract many readers, the uneasy balance between biography and history of secret police surveillance as well as the occasionally cumbersome prose, translation and poor editing might discourage some readers.