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Katherine Verdery. *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp xvi, 323. \$27.95.

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, scholars are still exploring how socialist states and institutions behind the Iron Curtain functioned, often drawing on previously secret documents that have gradually become available since the 1990s. Not least because it conjures up the spectre of international espionage and totalitarian control, few other institutions in socialist Eastern Europe have incited more interest than the secret police. Publications ranging from file-based autobiographies like Sheila Fitzpatrick's recent *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia* (2013) or Timothy Garton Ash's *The File: a Personal History* (1997), to histories and ethnographies such as Dennis Deletant's *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (1993) promise insights into the workings of the Soviet KGB, East German Stasi, or the Romanian Securitate. What does Katherine Verdery, a distinguished anthropologist of socialism and post-socialism in Romania and Eastern Europe, bring to the table with her most recent book?

A self-declaredly ‘hybrid’ book - part memoir, part autoethnography, part historical and ethnographic analysis - Katherine Verdery’s *My Life as a Spy* starts inquiry from the author’s voluminous Securitate file (occupying two of the twenty-six volumes on US scholars) to examine the mechanisms of surveillance of the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, under communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and the practice of ethnography under tense global power relations during the Cold War (28). The author arrived in Romania in 1973 as a 25 year-old doctoral student in anthropology from Stanford and conducted over three years of fieldwork in various rural and urban areas in Transylvania until 1988, being closely watched by the Securitate, which wrongly suspected her of being a spy. While ‘spy’ was the default identity for western scholars, Verdery’s ethnographic work increased suspicion, ensuring that she acquired no less than four different spying identities and pseudonyms in the Securitate surveillance files: as a CIA agent engaged in military espionage, gathering socio-political information, inciting the Hungarian opposition, and conspiring with dissidents. Much like other works in the genre of file-based memoirs, many of which Verdery engages in a fruitful dialogue, *My Life as a Spy* is born out of the author’s initial shock at reading a secret police file that challenged her very sense of self and the subsequent effort to work through the visceral emotions, especially the sense of betrayal, caused by the file’s revelations of the extent of surveillance, including the large number of seventy informers among friends, acquaintances and even intimates.<sup>1</sup> More than any existing work in the genre, however, Verdery’s is successful in harnessing the power of experience in the service of understanding, exploring the forms of vulnerability and betrayal at the heart of

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<sup>1</sup> Among the works referenced are Gabriel Liiceanu, *Dragul meu turnător [My Dear Snitch]*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014; Stelian Tănase, *Acasă se vorbește în șoaptă: Dosar și jurnal din anii târzii ai dictaturii [At home they speak in whispers: File and journal from the late years of the dictatorship]*. Bucharest: Compania, 2002; Dorin Tudoran, *Eu, fiul lor: Dosar de Securitate [I, their son: Securitate file]*. Iași: Polirom, 2010.

ethnography and offering a novel perspective on the Securitate that challenges the dominant view of a totalitarian and homogenous institution.

Although *My Life as a Spy* has many qualities, its winning strategy is using the self, its raw experiences and emotions, as ‘a research instrument’ that deepens our knowledge of ethnographic practice, the secret police and the Cold War (291). What makes *this* self particularly rich is the author’s refusal to see it as monolithic or unitary and her emphasis on the proliferation of identities occasioned not only by the constraining impact of the Securitate’s strategies of producing national enemies, but also by the liberating effect of doing fieldwork in a new culture. The multilayered character of the self is enabled by the author’s ‘polyphonic’ approach that gives Securitate officers the status of ‘co-authors’ and juxtaposes sources of diverse authorship and degree of contemporaneity with the events, including excerpts from secret police reports and informer notes, the author’s own field notes and letters from the field, interviews with friends, former informers and Securitate officers in the 2010s, photos and excerpts from a diary of reactions to the file that range from reflections to nightmares and dream analyses (27). The result is that the file is neither fetishized as the repository of truth nor simply cancelled out by the author’s omniscient voice. While the authorial ‘I’ remains in control of the narrative throughout, tying the fragments of the self together with analytical interventions, knowledge of the author’s character and the institution of the Securitate emerges from multiple, even competing, perspectives.

Divided into two well-balanced parts, ‘Research Under Surveillance’ and ‘Inside the Mechanisms of Surveillance,’ the book juxtaposes experience and analysis throughout. Doctoral students and young scholars in the social sciences will find the first part a relatable introduction to the possibilities and pitfalls of fieldwork, including the murky terrains of ethics, responsibility,

and power dynamics in the field. Focused on young Katherine's formative experiences of crossing the Iron Curtain, navigating a new culture, and experimenting with new identities as an anthropologist and scholar, but also with 'an expanded sexuality' and a 'more adventurous' self, the first part chronicles the gradual emergence of her Securitate-generated doppelgangers, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, in response to the shifting anxieties of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime about its international image, the population's dissatisfaction with the economy of scarcity, and the specter of intellectual dissidence (81-2). This section draws attention to the ways in which the global power relations of the Cold War informed even the most intimate and personal aspects of fieldwork. Unbeknownst to Katherine, the Securitate's practices of surveillance fundamentally transformed her research, not only forcing her to change the location of fieldwork and her doctoral topic, but also fracturing her relations of trust and friendship with the villagers, colonizing her sexuality, and purposefully instilling self-doubt. There is a productive tension in the text between the distrust-sowing networks of the Securitate and the meaning-making, nurturing relations of mentorship and friendship, often expressed in terms of kinship in the village as young Kathy was 'adopted' by her hosts and community (55).

To make sense of this tension and understand the Securitate's logic, Verdery explores the affinity between ethnography and espionage, both of which involve passing for an insider, cultivating social relations and networks, extracting data of socio-political relevance from informers, and keeping informers anonymous. What distinguishes the two, the author argues persuasively, is the ethnographers' propensity for self-reflection and reliance on relations to deepen knowledge. It is indeed self-reflexivity, both autobiographical and scholarly, that accounts for the most moving acts of reckoning in the book, when the author considers her personal responsibility alongside 'victimhood' in relation to the Securitate. The mature author

reflects, for example, on the 'naïve' young Kathy, who ventured beyond the Iron Curtain with little knowledge of Romania or the culture of secrecy and surveillance that governed social interactions, and with an ethnocentric view of the value of transparency and honesty that could endanger friends and intimates, exposing them to the Securitate. Similarly, Verdery considers the impact of international scholarly exchange, arguing that US anthropologists working in villages inadvertently enabled the Securitate to penetrate rural areas, where the latter did not have a stronghold yet.

Shifting from autoethnography to fieldwork, the second part explores the Securitate's mechanisms of surveillance and its successor's role in post-socialist Romania through revealing encounters and conversations with former Securitate informers and officers in the 2010s. While Verdery denounces the destructive actions of the institution, she opts for understanding over outing and confronting former Securitate actors, admitting that this would dissatisfy her Romanian readers. She argues convincingly that morally stark debates over the role of the Securitate in the post-socialist period obscure our understanding of the institution. Challenging the view that the Securitate was totalitarian and homogenous, Verdery indicates that it did not operate with a master narrative, being 'fragmented across territory and time periods, as well as by its own practices of compartmentalization' (29). Tellingly, Securitate officers differed even in their definition of a 'spy,' prompting Verdery to argue that there was 'no specific content to their notion of spy' (132) and elaborate on how the 'target function' enabled the Securitate to contain resistance under socialism (291-4).

Using the self as a research instrument also allows the author to refine her previous work, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's secret police* (2014). While the latter addresses the centrality of secrecy in the Securitate's practices, the memoir examines how

the dialectics of secrecy and visibility enhanced the institution's power over society. Making the shocking discovery that some of her much-feared Securitate case officers were smart and charming, often maintaining friendly relations with their (former) informers, leads the author to the fundamental insight of this book: that, starting with the 1960s, the Securitate was deeply embedded in society rather than ruling it from above by terror and coercion. To the extent that everybody knew Securitate workers among colleagues, family and friends, the institution effectively colonized social relations: '*Securisti* were not isolated from the general population but entangled with it. Relations with them were of a piece with people's efforts to form usable and positive social relations over their lifetimes, the basis of their civic culture' (289).

A work of brutal honesty and incisive analysis, *My Life as a Spy* is an engaging must read for students and scholars interested in the Cold War and its aftermath, the institution of the secret police, the constraints and possibilities of anthropology as well as socialist and post-socialist societies more broadly.

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