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Meghanne Barker, University of Chicago

Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 344 pp.

Katherine Verdery introduces *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* as a “polyphonic” work. Indeed, it masterfully interweaves Verdery’s voice at the moment of writing, that of herself during her fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s, and the voice of the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, who were surveilling her throughout her research. *My Life as a Spy* works through Verdery’s many identities—those produced by the secret police and those that emerge as she changes over time. She shows how the intimate friendships made in her fieldwork profoundly transform who she is and have important implications for others, ultimately revealing that the preoccupation of the Securitate with whether or not she was a spy was a less preposterous notion than she originally expected. By reading her Securitate file and working through it with many who appear within it, Verdery finds that, in fact, ethnography and spying have much in common.

A rigorous scholar through and through, even in her autoethnography, Verdery could not be accused of navel gazing. She frequently relates her own encounter with her file to others’ accounts of the topic, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick’s *A Spy in the Archives* (2015) or Timothy Garton Ash’s *The File: A Personal History* (1998). Nonetheless, *My Life as a Spy* has the ability to continually humble the nascent ethnographer with the realization or reminder that only an extraordinary field worker would have achieved such a file as Verdery’s. The archive is no less than 2,781 pages, beginning with her first visit as a graduate student in 1973, when a 25-year-old Verdery on a motorbike accidentally goes down a road she doesn’t know is forbidden to her, a mistake that has lasting repercussions. The file follows her into the 1980s, when she gets herself into new trouble by beginning her monograph with jokes reflecting on ethnic relations that were not hers to retell, and by having a suspiciously Hungarian-seeming name.

These accounts of Verdery’s fieldwork offer instruction to the young anthropologist, but Verdery recounts these more in order to help the reader understand the repercussions they had for the Romanian secret police’s beliefs about her. Stylistically, the book is consistently engaging, mixing humor, pathos, and acute political commentary. Verdery expertly blends the intrigue of the secret police file with painfully honest reflections on the complexity of intimate relations in the field. She makes herself vulnerable, while always pushing toward a rigorous analysis of her own conduct and its consequences.

The book is divided into two parts: “Research under Surveillance” and “Inside the Mechanisms of Surveillance.” Structurally, the organization of the first chapters into decades (with Chapter 1 focusing on the 1970s and Chapter 2 on the 1980s) seems less elegant than the rest of the book. However, the split between decades aligns with a number of differences: Cold War tensions increased; Romania’s World Bank loan led to severe austerity measures on the local population; Verdery shifted field sites; and, moreover, her position within the community changed with the publication of her controversial first book. These issues were all interconnected to the Securitate’s impressions of her and the actions taken against her and her associates. In later chapters of Part II, “Reflections” and “Revelations,” Verdery works to understand how reading her file revealed who was informing on her, ultimately allowing her

to realize that her actions not only motivated reactions from the Securitate surveilling her, but that the Securitate's interest in her had far more profound consequences for those around her than she ever imagined.

By the end of the book, having worked through her file and having sat down with friends who informed on her and even a few Securitate officers involved in her surveillance, Verdery observes that these latter—the Romanian secret police—were not the invisible, aloof specters she had imagined but were in fact enmeshed in a complex field of social relations. And we see, by then, that the same is true, of course, for Verdery. One thing that made her case so thick was this very fact—that she was an excellent ethnographer, eager to forge social relations and diligent in maintaining them, whether these were village families who hosted her, intellectuals who mentored her, or a range of other friends at varied ages, with different connections bringing them together. Rather than being able simply to relish the fruits of her fieldwork, Verdery must confront the various ways friendship strained those closest to her, making them susceptible to pressure from the Securitate to inform on her. As Verdery reads through her file and discusses it with those close to her in Romania, she becomes painfully aware of the impossible dilemmas her friends often faced because of her.

Verdery also flags the many ways she—and, by extension, all anthropologists—did resemble a spy, depending on how one defined the term. Her own work mirrored that of the Securitate surveilling her, as well; she realizes that she was quite useful for them, as she gathered information that was “sociopolitical” (and thus potentially dangerous) in nature and worked to understand social relations through methods of observation and recording. This observation—of the ways she came to resemble a spy by becoming a competent anthropologist—invites us to reflect on the unwitting consequences our own work has for those we study, whether it is through the way we affect people's lives during our fieldwork or through the knowledge produced in our writing.

However, Verdery more than once invokes Margaret Mead's statement on the import of reflection in fieldwork, which then becomes key for distinguishing herself from the Securitate: “In matters of ethos, the surest and most perfect instrument of understanding is our own emotional response, provided that we can make a disciplined use of it” (Mead 2002:266, quoted in Verdery 111). Verdery reflects that the Securitate failed to understand this, and that this marks an important difference between ethnography and surveillance, as the latter “does not take the extra step of interrogating its own reactions” (291). Verdery not only does this, but takes Mead's call seriously to make disciplined use of her own emotional responses. She is rarely content to let her initial response rest as final, instead discussing her response with others, revisiting a range of possible explanations or justifications for why one friend became an informant. She struggles to understand who the victim is when it sometimes seemed that everyone—Securitate included—were cogs in a massive system. Part of Verdery's disciplined use of her emotional responses involves ongoing conversations with her friends in Romania, and she is always ready to offer others an alternative interpretation to the information that she discovers in going through her file and discussing it with those who informed on her, surveilled her, or were otherwise part of the complex field of social relations that comprised her fieldwork.

Because of the ways the book offers specific insight regarding the relationship between the researcher, the Romanian secret police in the 1970s and 1980s, and the researcher's interlocutors, this book works at several levels. I wouldn't hesitate to assign it to any graduate student preparing to go into the field as a guide for navigating the complex personal and political relationships that emerge in one's fieldwork. Readers working in the region of postsocialist Eastern Europe will find much to ponder concerning the history of communism and the ways Cold War stereotypes shaped attitudes and expectations of researchers heading into the Eastern Bloc for the first time.

More broadly, as Verdery points out in her preface and toward the end of the book, we are all increasingly under surveillance. However, the kinds of surveillance we face in the 21st century clearly differ in important ways. It is worth using the book to consider aspects of surveillance we might be taking for granted, both as citizens and as ethnographers. How do new technologies enable new information sources for us, as well as for others? How can we be certain that we're not harming others with the knowledge we collect and produce? Verdery doesn't necessarily offer the answers to all of these questions. Her work challenges us, however, to grapple with the complexity of it, to have the courage to face others in our field site when we have erred, and to continue seeking out contact with friends, informants, and interlocutors with appropriate doses of curiosity, discipline, and gratitude.

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