

Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police. By Katherine Verdery. Budapest: CEU Press, 2014. 294 pp.

Katherine Verdery's ethnographic study of the file containing 2,780 pages kept by the Romanian Secret Police (the *Securitate*) on her activities in Romania between 1973 and 1989 is a thought-provoking analysis of this organization's approach. The American author is Julien J. Studley Faculty Scholar and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Verdery, who has a broad understanding and personal experience of Romanian society, has authored several important volumes. Her book entitled *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (1991) was a groundbreaking analysis of the ways in which nationalism was used in the cultural sphere and of the strategies adopted by artists who were competing for limited resources and thus willingly adapted to the trends that were imposed from above.

In her analysis of her own files, Verdery makes a compelling argument that “the Communist Party tried to create a new kind of family, a political one encompassing the whole society,” and “[t]he Securitate's job was to implement this vision” (p.205). From the perspective of the scholarship on the role of the Securitate, Verdery's analysis is interesting because it affords us access to a specific case, that of the author, which is also a scholar. Thus she treats her experience like a case study and applies a scientific approach to it, which is a rarity in the discussions of these kinds of files, discussions which are usually of interest only to those directly involved. Verdery reminds us of how “the Securitate's fundamental working assumption was that *people are not who they seem*; its job [...] was to find out *who people really were*” (p.xiv).

In Romania, gaining access to the files of the former secret police, the Securitate, was not a simple task, and it only began to become easier after 2005, when Traian Băseșcu, who served as president for a decade (2004–14), allowed the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS, established in 2000) to make more extensive use of the resources of the former surveillance institution. Katherine Verdery underlines the triple function given to archives of the secret police after 1989: political, research and personal. She also examines how they “involved potential revisions of history in the service of a transformed present” (xi-xii), as well as the revision of the truths they really encompass. In recent years, Romanian society and politics have been marked by

an instrumental use of the archives of the Securitate files, and the truth-value of these files has only rarely been questioned. For example, the latest troubling discovery at the beginning of 2015 was that Dinu Zamfirescu, honorary director of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER) and a member of the directive college of CNSAS, had himself given information to the Securitate before leaving the country in the 1970s. He has been one of the leaders of the emigration, and he founded the Institute for the Memory of the Romanian Exile, which merged with the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes (IICCR) to become the IICCMER. Zamfirescu declared he feels no pressure to resign from the CNSAS or the IICCMER, as he was himself questioned by the Securitate and did not inform, although documents indicate that this is not the case. The study that Verdery has done of her own file advances some important issues and addresses significant questions related to the meaning of the work that was done by the Securitate.

The Introduction to the volume first presents Verdery's approach to the study of the Securitate files. In the second part, the author asks as a subtitle "What Was the Securitate?" She offers a history of the institution since 1948. Her goal is to study the files themselves and to see what they can tell us about the socialist system that we didn't already know (p.4). By adopting an ethnographic approach, she intends to shed light on the way her methods and those of the Securitate bear affinities. In other words, she considers how both an ethnographer and a secret police examine "everyday behaviors and interpret what they found" (p.7). The historical approach of the Securitate underlines the organization's importance as one of the largest intelligence services in the Eastern bloc in proportion to the population (p.9). The ascent of Ceaușescu to power is also acknowledged, and Verdery emphasizes how the role of the Securitate was transformed by this change, "from 'destroying the class enemy' to 'preventing infractions against state security' and 'defending fundamental national values'" (p.16). Verdery makes the very important observation that, in the last period of the socialist system, "the Securitate increasingly became a pedagogical or didactic rather than a punitive institution" (p.17). In fact, the Securitate sought to influence a large part of the population through indirect means, using more refined types of surveillance, instead of relying on the kinds of direct repressive measures that had been in pervasive use before.

The first chapter, "An archive and its fictions," describes first the resources the CNSAS has at its disposal, namely "as of 2013 (...) 1,800,000 paper files," which

would stretch twenty-four kilometers (pp.32–33). Verdery stresses an important detail. Many of the documents that were created or kept by the Securitate were destroyed, either accidentally or intentionally (p.33). The chapter contains a description of the work that was performed by the agents in the construction of a file. Verdery shares an impression I also had as a researcher at the CNSAS, namely the “extraordinary expenditure of time, money, and effort” (p.41) put into the Securitate’s activities. Moreover, “the organization of a surveillance file is not chronological but activity-based” (p.52). At the same time, Verdery’s approach is ethnographic and extends beyond the file itself. She quotes Cristina Vătulescu’s conclusion, according to which “[w]hile a personal file can mislead about the particulars of a victim’s fate, its close reading can be abundantly revealing about what the secret police understood by evidence, record, writing, human nature, and criminality” (p.40). Verdery considers that “the truth-value of what is in the file may not be the most interesting question we can entertain about it,” nor is the question of “whether [the] files tell ‘what really happened’” the most significant aspect. Rather, she is interested in “the agency of the file: what social effects does it have? What [...] does it fashion” (pp.62, 63). These questions are in the forefront of the distinct approach Verdery proposes in her study of the files, far more so than the one that dominates public discourse in Romania today, where “files can make ‘informers’ out of people who staunchly deny that they ever held this role” (p.66). Indeed, in this public discourse the files have been transformed into sources for political or moral capital because “they are seen as repositories of truth” (p.72). Verdery throws into question the truth-value with which the files have been invested, both by considering the ways in which the files were constructed by the agents and addressing the motives of the informers, “who reported under duress, out of malice, or inaccurately,” and the case officers (the officers responsible for the informers), who “made tendentious interpretations that suited their ends.” Equally important in this regard is the fact that the “destruction of files left enormous lacunae in the corpus; agents opened files on people even when their ‘recruits’ refused to cooperate; the demands of the planned economy set performance targets that compelled sloppy work; competition among officers and branches of the secret service aggravated that tendency and so forth” (pp.72–73).

In the second chapter, “The Secrets of the Secret Police,” Verdery embarks on a comparison of the Securitate with secret societies of New Guinea and Africa, taking some ideas from the anthropological literature on secrecy with the goal of “disrupt[ing] our accustomed way of thinking about it” (p.82). The

essential point, one worth repeating, is that “[f]rom the anthropology of secrecy we learn that what counts is not the content of a secret but the structure it is embedded in” (p.112). Verdery underlines the oppositions between the different institutions of the communist regime, the party and the secret police and the distinct types of secrets they handled. The author emphasizes the paradoxical condition of the Securitate and asks, “[h]ow are we to put these two things together: the sometimes chaotic view from inside the organization and the fearful view from the populace,” two groups that were always separated by secrecy (p.80). The analysis continues with a detailed examination of the content of secrets that were kept by the Securitate and Verdery’s emphasis on the nature of the organization as a “SECRET police” and not a “secret POLICE,” which was mainly preoccupied with the task of unmasking secrets (p.85). The parallel with the secret societies in Africa and New Guinea is based on an “‘Ur-secret’ representing what the community most fears” (p.88), which, in the case of communist regimes, was the “enemy within” (p.89). Examining secrecy as a social-structural and cultural system, Verdery analyzes how this functioned inside the Securitate. The initiation practices for officers and informers had in common “the signature acts of secret societies: a loyalty oath and one or more new names,” which were essential for “the fabrication of an alternative reality” (p.99).

Drawing on Gilbert Herdt’s “theory of secrecy based on an analysis of male secret societies” in the United States “as a response to major social transformations in gender and class relations” (p.107), Verdery discusses the Securitate as a secret society that had to compete with others at the time (p.110). Summarizing what the parallel with secret societies brought to the understanding of the Securitate, Verdery recalls how she showed that “secrecy in the form of conspirativity promoted inequality in the organization,” as well as how the ritual character of recruitment helped create “an exciting parallel world” (p.115). Finally, she showed how the Securitate competed with other similar organizations in a context that was favorable to the flourishing of such societies (p.115). In the subchapter of chapter 2, “The lives of agents,” Verdery sheds some light on the officers of the Securitate. Interestingly, the Securitate had only limited resources compared to other similar organizations in Eastern Europe. While it numbered only 39,000 officers, compared to the 93,000 members of the Stasi in the German Democratic Republic (p.129), the Securitate seemed omnipresent to the citizenry of Romania. As Verdery writes, “[n]o one was certain who the officers were, who was informing, how much information was being obtained,

or how it would be used” (p.150). Verdery underlines at the same time how “the ‘mask’ of secrecy – its state effect” was able to conceal from most Romanians the fact that the Romanian Party-state “was not a coherent, unified actor”, and “the field of power at the center was highly fragmented among disparate competing groups” (p.149).

The third chapter, “Knowledge Practices and the Social Relations of Surveillance,” addresses the situation of the 486,000 informers who helped the 39,000 officers of the Securitate. Verdery discusses the “practices whereby the Securitate sought to create knowledge about reality, uncovering the secrets that might prove dangerous to the government” (p.158). She argues that “their most important methods for producing knowledge were at the same time socially transformative, aiming to produce a new social landscape, with implications for creating the ‘new socialist person’ and a new society” (p.159). Verdery notes that “many people (...) became informers because they were deeply embedded in social ties” (p.176). This is important because the strategy of the Securitate developed into an approach that sought to influence larger social groups and thus targeted those who had strong social relations. At the same time, Verdery’s analysis provides important details on the different aspects of collaboration and the refusal to collaborate, as well as the termination of collaboration with the Securitate. “I have been showing that the regime was not simply disintegrating social relations but *striving to reforge them*, thereby altering the kinds of human beings they enmeshed. *Securisti* intended to create new contacts for people while disrupting older ones: their aim was not just to obtain knowledge but to transform the conditions under which information would be produced (...) they sought to induce networks around their targets” (p.201). She argues that “personalistic ties were the currency of social life in socialism” (p.188). Thus, “it was networks, not individuals, that the Securitate pursued” (p.189). Finally, the author acknowledges how her analysis aims to critique lustration in transitional justice, which, “targets not categories (p.all forms of collaboration), but individual persons who collaborated” (p.210). As she observes, “if collaboration was quintessentially a networked phenomenon, not an individual one [...], such interventions appear misguided” (pp.210–11). Finally, the author insists on the problematic nature of the use, in the service of truth during democratization, of the files produced by the Securitate (p.211).

In her “Conclusions,” subtitled “The Radiant Future?”, Verdery discusses the relevance of the surveillance conducted by the Securitate for today’s world, especially in the case of the United States. She addresses the issue of voluntary

online surveillance on social networks such as Facebook, but also the more problematic surveillance deployed by the United States in the aftermath of September 11 by the National Security Agency.

The volume authored by Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, is a good overview of the approaches used by the secret police in Romania in which the author uses her own files, but also information from other files either directly or in a published form, as well as recent scholarship on secret police forces in Eastern Europe. The book is well organized in three distinct chapters that consider the truths encompassed in the secret archives, the type of work undertaken by the secret agents, and, finally, the ways in which informers were manipulated by the Securitate in the creation of new ties within society. The volume provides detailed information on the Securitate and its activities that helps further a deconstruction of many of the myths on its approach.

The author compares her ethnographic method to that of the Securitate operations, and at the same she time compares the Securitate to secret (male) societies. While the former is useful in her analysis of the secret police in Romania because it shows the type of knowledge and practices they used, the latter is less immediately pertinent, except perhaps to the anthropological study of secrecy practices.

*Secrets and Truths* provides an understanding of the Securitate that does not take it as a provider of truth, but rather shows the multiplicity of aspects included in the practices of this institution. Verdery's ultimate purpose is to criticize the ways in which the archives have been used since the transition to democracy as a source of truth in a manner that continues to follow the logic of the Securitate itself.

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