



Book Review

My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File.

Katherine Verdery. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. 344 pp.

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In 1999, Romania passed Law 187, which granted access to surveillance files compiled by the Securitate, Communist Romania's secret police. While doing research in the Securitate Archives in 2006, Katherine Verdery learned from the reading room supervisor that as a citizen of a NATO country, she could make an access request. This memoir resulted from her encounter with her file. Immediately after she arrived in the Transylvanian county of Hunedoara in 1973, as a graduate student pursuing anthropological research, an inadvertent motorbike ride into a restricted area put Verdery under observation. During that and subsequent study stays in Romania, which totaled over three years until 1988, her file grew into a 2,781-page body of evidence. Containing informative notes from more than 70 persons as well as investigation, search, surveillance, and operative reports by several case officers and memorandums pointing to multiple lines of investigation, Verdery's file documented her supposed identity as, successively, a CIA agent, a Hungarian agitator, and a dissident ally. *My Life as a Spy* reads like a self-analysis—a working through of the profound trauma caused by examining its contents.

Joining a growing body of literature based on secret police archival documents, Verdery's book stands out as she deploys her craft of anthropologist to examine the unexpected material. Generated by her presence in the field and her interactions with the villagers, the file operates an inversion. It is an ethnography of her own person that makes herself the object of investigation and source of data. Verdery notes the striking similarity between the means and instruments of the anthropologist and of the secret police operatives—the use of informants and informers, incessant questioning, detailed note taking on sociopolitical aspects, the use of specific abbreviations and pseudonyms. The supposition that she was, after all, a spy appears ever so plausible in a context where both sides shared the suspicion that foreign researchers were spies in disguise.

A second inversion happens when one of Verdery's informers, a woman she had counted as a close friend, agrees to discuss her experience. She recalls the dread and queasiness she felt after her interactions with Verdery in anticipation of the ensuing meetings with the Securitate officer, the disgust and panic after giving the reports, the shame and concealment. At one point, she rancorously tells Verdery that she caused her a lot of harm. From the betrayed, Verdery became the betrayer; from victim, perpetrator. This painful revelation exposes the difficulties of ethnography as a method when trust relations are compromised. The Securitate mapped and permeated social relations and used them to compel Romanians to comply. It inverted sociability into internal loneliness, affection into threat. The anthropologist's work inflected the whole relational space of her subjects—their rapport with others, their links with the authorities, their relationship with their own selves. This revelation also exposes the fact that transparency and honesty do not win the trust of a system that rules through surveillance. This is a lesson well worth learning for technology-intensive security governance systems as well.

Verdery refrains from denouncing or assigning blame. Quite to the contrary, she starts by noting that doing fieldwork in a Communist country during the Cold War situated anthropologists at the intersection of global political forces that required specific interpretations of their acts and identity. It is in this key that she struggles to interpret the Securitate's informative reports, collected evidence, and operative directives and integrate them into her own field notes, diary entries, and letters. It is also in this key that she strives to know, to learn, and to obtain closure in speaking with those who informed on her and with the Securitate officers responsible for her case. All these identities are generally maintained and protectively marked in the book: the author as a young anthropologist, her several doppelgängers talking through Securitate's voices from the file, her present reflexive self as seasoned scholar.

By investigating one of its most elusive yet powerful apparatuses, the Securitate, Verdery creates an enthralling ethnography of the Communist state. Populated by a secretive species, the *securiști*, it functioned by producing files. When someone raised suspicions, surveillance began with a specific kind of file, the DUI, *dosar de urmărire informativă* or “dossier of informative pursuit.”

Then various individuals were co-opted, cajoled, and coerced into becoming informers to contribute material to the file, which could develop into several files, following distinct leads and different territorial jurisdictions. Securitate operatives worked continuously at its content, which was transcribed, interpreted, corrected, purged, and rewritten. Mirroring the Cold War's global division, the Securitate's worldview comprised two categories of persons: the country's friends and its evil enemies. The latter needed to be detected, controlled, expelled, or even eliminated when they proved too dangerous. They could also be used to unwittingly and unknowingly contribute to the whole surveillance enterprise. Thus, despite being unmasked as a spy, Verdery was permitted to stay and to come back repeatedly, presumably because the ethnographic data she was collecting on the local population were useful to the Securitate.

My Life as a Spy will teach anthropology, sociology, and history students much about methodology, and it is exemplary in exposing the dilemmas inherent in that methodology. Anthropological knowledge is possible only by building a common space of signification between the researcher and the Other, which requires enormous effort, as the few existing candid and reflexive reports of fieldwork experience teach us. Verdery's striking account expands such scrutiny through several objectifying moments. Confronting her informers and meeting her case operatives were grueling, yet they allowed her a certain distance from which to decenter her perspective. While she ponders the various ways that the Securitate altered her relationships, her trust, her professional career, and her life, Verdery's stance is unswerving. The wisdom she imparts in this engrossing and thrilling memoir is that the ethnographer is her own work instrument. She should not hold back.