Book Review

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

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Researchers studying the intelligence services of any country surely must wonder at some point in their careers if a file exists on them, and if so, what's in it? What do those individuals charged with secretly guarding the state think of a researcher's activities and research? While western intelligence services certainly had files constructed on academics in the past, in the case of illiberal states or in former Soviet ones during the Cold War catching the ire of the security services could prove to be dangerous. In *My Life as a Spy*, Katherine Verdery recounts her discovery and the contents of her once secret security file constructed by the Romanian security services, the Securitate, while doing her ethnographic field research in the country during the 1970s and 1980s. The Securitate constructed alternate identities of Verdery, believing their versions of her were the correct ones, that is, that she was a CIA spy. The book is a fascinating look at the role of surveillance in Romania during the Cold War, its role in constructing identities, its effect on individuals, and informers, and how power exercised by that surveillance relied on "colonizing Romanian sociality" (290).

The book is divided into two parts with the first one focusing on how Verdery came under the watch of the Securitate along with details about her ethnographic work, while the second half focuses on trying to understand the mindset of close friends who doubled as informers and the Securitate officers Verdery was able to track down in their retirement. While the book is about how the Securitate came to think Verdery was a spy after an innocent mistake of driving too close to a military base in the 1970s, central to the book is the role of human relationships, like the ones Verdery develops over the decades with Romanians. It skillfully highlights how those same relationships were twisted by the Securitate to try and exert control over Verdery and her research by trying to influence her to give a positive portrayal of Romania to the outside world. Perspective is an important theme in *My Life as a Spy*. Verdery skillfully organizes the book by showing the reader important portions of her security file and compares them to her field notes to demonstrate how her activities could very well have been viewed as those of a spy in the context of the Cold War, particularly in the 1980s as things heated up when Reagan entered the White House. Never far from Verdery's analysis is the role geopolitics played on the local level and how the level of interest in her activities changed as global forces did as did local variances such as when Verdery worked in rural versus urban settings later in her career. Officers differed in their impressions of her, and surveillance in the city was easier for the Securitate to conduct. It even led to a camera inserted in her room.

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Throughout *My Life as a Spy*, Verdery's level of honesty pulls the reader into her narrative. She does not shy away from criticizing her actions in the past, like taking that motorbike ride too close to that military base, and with how emotionally involved she became with individuals during her research. She documents everything from the friends she made to sexual encounters she had, primarily because these were documented by the Securitate. Verdery exposes how easily the Securitate constructed identities, versions of Verdery over decades such as "VERA," that based on their perspective were real people but doing very different things than ethnographic research. For instance, "VERA" was a presumed CIA agent living among locals collecting information about Romanian socio-political culture and society and would likely use it against the country. Through her honest account of her own actions she could see how her ethnographic research could have been understood to be what the Securitate thought it was.

The first section of *My Life as a Spy* requires the reader to invest in the book as it isn't entirely clear where Verdery is heading with her recounting of personal events as most of her best analysis appears in the last section of the book. While she does an excellent job of connecting the surveillance she faced and how it changed in relation to geo-political events and the election of leaders such as Ronald Reagan, there could have been more connecting the personal experience to broader conceptualizations of surveillance and statecraft. There are some discussions at the beginning and end of *My Life as a Spy*, but having more analysis and connection to theory throughout would have helped the reader interpret the significance of the events on a broader scale.

Verdery recounts how reading her file made her feel as if she was spying on herself and her detailed accounts of her past give the reader that feeling. As Verdery notes, if a secret file is the process of the state constructing a person, the question becomes what kind of person is being created as the minutiae of their daily life is documented and scrutinized? Relationships were the "currency" of the Securitate (174) and they used them to steer Verdery to a positive view of the country though the relationships she formed outlived the communist government. Some of the most fascinating discussions occur in the last section of the book where Verdery interviews her friends she knew were informers and even manages to speak to some of the officers who handled her file over the years. She explores how some individuals informed because of blackmail or compulsion but others because they were friends with some of the officers. This focus on human connections in surveillance, also of central importance to ethnographic study, is welcomed and may surprise readers at first, as surveillance in a Western context has often been equated with remote electronic forms. It enlightens readers to the idea that at the root of surveillance is the human connection. Verdery concludes that not only were human connections central to the agency but so was being visible. While many associate intelligence agencies with invisibility, Verdery notes how being both visible and invisible were central to the Securitate's power. Their methods and tactics were invisible to her as a target but not Romanian society. To Romanians they were very visible or rather as Verdery puts it, "entangled" (189) with the general population. People did favors for them, they did favors for people. Relationships with officers became a function of daily life and sometimes a means to a better one. There was surveillance and repression but also relationship building and trust over time, though she notes how Ceaușescu's regime tipped the balance toward suspicion and paranoia, though even in those difficult economic times people would turn to officers for help.

Katherine Verdery's *My Life as a Spy* is a fascinating exploration of how surveillance of foreigners was conducted by the KGB-trained Securitate of Romania during the Cold War where, as Asad has argued, "ordinary life" became "the domain of a search for hidden meaning" (24). As she recounts in her final pages, "VERA" enlightened her to the idea that the experiences of "VERA" are ones that all of us have when our lives are studied and scrutinized on paper and people search for the "hidden meaning" in the actions we take. As files are created so are identities, reinforcing the idea that our identities are not stable creations but shifting ones. As Professor Verdery concluded her secret file, she realized that it was "VERA" the spy that had taught her these lessons. Indeed, "VERA" must have certainly taken delight in the way she had managed to steer Verdery to accepting this perspective.