As she puts in the Introduction, journalist and writer Kati Marton’s parents were forward-looking people who only looked back selectively. In contrast, Marton peers backward to dig into a surveillance past to try and gain control over her own family narrative and saga. Through a detailed account of twenty years of intense surveillance on her family conducted by the AVO – the Hungarian secret police – she sheds light on one of the most repressive forms of state surveillance. In the process, this outstanding book brings together two dimensions: macro-level historical and political dynamics, which she connects with micro-level impacts on her quite exceptional family.

Endre and Ilona Marton worked respectively for the Associated Press and the United Press in Budapest when Hungary was ruled by the communists, in particular under the harsh dictatorship of Rákosi (1945-1956). The Martons, of Jewish roots, bourgeois background and high education, immediately triggered official suspicion. Most of their friends were Western (English and American Ambassadors), they worked for the world’s leading press agencies and were too high-profile to not be under constant surveillance. Their file is one of biggest in the Hungarian Police Archives. It contains a detailed account of the lives of two independent journalists and their daughters Kati and Julia.

However, this is neither an academic nor a historical book. Rather, it is an important and exceptional family biography that is revealing by virtue of how it details the extensive surveillance apparatuses that orchestrated control without the benefit of contemporary cutting edge technologies. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, both in Europe and elsewhere, dedicated considerable efforts to develop widespread networks of informers to maintain control over their citizens. In this respect, the methods used by the Hungarian State Security Agency are not unique. What is rare is how those surveillance records could culminate in a book which is able to produce a powerful counter narrative.

Enemies of the People is a counter narrative because, as opposed to the “language of surveillance” that often reduces people to a single dimension, it conveys a multi-dimensional and complex story. It is in fact thanks to the police files that the author comes to learn about previously hidden aspects of both her parents’ and the family history. This includes revelations about ‘domestic dramas,’ such as her parents’ romantic involvements outside of marriage, and the shocking discovery that her maternal grandparents had been deported to Auschwitz – a fact that had been kept hidden from Kati and Julia. Sides of Endre and Ilona’s personalities which they had concealed also materialize through the surveillance records and provide psychological profiles that do not fit reductive descriptions. Hence, Enemies of the People is also a curious example of surveillance’s function creep, as here the personal data collected for totalitarian purposes came to fulfil other functions which, in this particular case, are not related to an intensification of control but rather entailed intimate insights into one family’s history.
In the absence of sophisticated surveillance technologies, monitoring was carried out by zealous agents, like the Martons’ French nanny, who spied on the family’s every movement and conversations since under Rákosi it “was literally a crime to publicly admire the West” (p.20). Working for well known news organizations, meeting foreign journalists and diplomats was unacceptable and, as it turned out, very dangerous. Thanks to a confession extorted under torture from a correspondent of the news service, by 1952 the Martons were deemed spies who transmitted intelligence data to the Americans. The Ministry of Interior recommended the arrest of Endre Marton but soon after Stalin’s death (1953) the Hungarian dictator handed power to the more moderate Imre Nagy. However, Rakosi’s men were still running the Hungarian Secret Police and it was only a matter of time for the Martons as the AVO was waiting for them to do something against the law.

When in 1954 Endre Marton passed a report on prices and productivity which had not been distributed to the press (the journalists could look at such reports inside the Parliament building) to attachés at the American legation, the stolen budget provided the evidence that the secret police had waited for. This “skilled spy,” as he was described in the surveillance records, was arrested in order to learn about his relationship to the West and, more surprisingly, to be recruited as an AVO agent.

The author describes both the brutal conditions in prison and how the tentacles of surveillance expanded in such an environment which not only contained listening devices but cell mates who were AVO informers. The all-seeing eye of the state effectively functioned everywhere. Surveillance and security also tightened around Mrs. Marton who also spent several months in prison. Both were arrested on charges of spying for U.S. intelligence and their story received international media attention.

Freedom, as the author emphasizes, came at a price. From the time of his being freed from prison until the Hungarian uprising (October 1956), Mr. Marton had to meet regularly with an AVO agent and even when they moved (1957) to the United States this surveillance continued. Once again, the main aim of surveillance was recruitment, and the accounts that were kept on the Martons in America included details on their characters, the financial situation of the family and their relationship with their children. Intense surveillance ended ten years after their arrival in the USA. The Martons’ file was officially closed in 1967. While *Enemies of the People* is undoubtedly suggestive to scholars in the surveillance studies field, it is also a remarkable book to readers interested in how historical processes can transform the “life of others.”