



## Book Review

Glajar, Valentina, Alison Lewis, and Corina L. Petrescu, eds. 2016. *Secret Police Files from the Eastern Bloc: Between Surveillance and Life Writing*. Rochester, NY: Camden House.

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I imagine a meeting held sometime in the 2010s in an American university. Eight women, all literary scholars, are reflecting and exchanging on the ways to read the files of the secret police of three Communist regimes they know well: Germany, Romania, and Hungary. The age of constant media attention and explosive denunciations of the 1990s is long gone; the scholars have access to files and benefit from the necessary distance to look at them anew. If they all are well aware that this material has been constituted toward a political end, they are nonetheless drawn to the vast possibilities such archives offer in terms of storytelling: in spite of the banal, everyday situations often reported in the files, they see them as an opportunity to retrieve thrilling stories of surveillance and collaboration.

At the meeting, our eight authors discuss methodological questions: how can literary scholars deal with secret police files and what can they contribute to their interpretation? Although they all stem from different areas of expertise, they obviously share an interest for literary figures and works (novels, theater plays, documentaries) as objects of investigation and reflection. Here, they set out to take full advantage of this lens. Though he or she is not specifically told as much, the reader of *Secret Police Files from the Eastern Bloc* soon realizes that each author chose one or more cases studies to examine, following one of the three main leads of the volume: “file stories” in the first section, surveillance overlapping literature in the second and, in the third, the experience and representation of surveillance on stage and on film. The volume points to a broad range of experiences of surveillance and collaboration each related—or so the reader surmises—to particular time periods, secret service agencies, countries, and experiences made in the post-communist years. The three-acts structure leads us to think that *there is a hidden chronology pertaining to the overall treatment of collaboration as seen in the files: from individual, historical or biographical experiences, to more collective reflections*.

The three chapters of the first section, penned by the editors (Lewis, Glajar and Petrescu), focus on the reconstruction of cases based on archives material: what they call “file stories.” Lewis examines three writers (Paul Wien, Sascha Anderson, Maja Wien) belonging to different generations whom she presents as three typical examples of collaboration. Glajar and Petrescu, for their part, limit themselves to the content of the files they investigate (while some of the protagonists’ voices are sometimes heard, in the footnotes for example) to reconstruct two connected cases within German-speaking circles of Romania, thus attempting to capture fragments of lives under communism. The second section is concerned with works of novelists (Maron and Wolf in one chapter, Döhring in another) who were involved with the East German

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secret police, both—to various degrees—as victim and as collaborator. Ring and Costabile-Heming (chapters 4 and 5 respectively) deal with their life writing, autobiographical and autofictional, shedding light on possible ways to come to terms with the release of information on collaboration while pointing to a genre, which experienced a renaissance after the fall of communism and the opening of the archives. These two chapters are the ones that allude the most to the idea expanded in the second part of the volume title: existences “between surveillance and life writing.”

In the last section, the authors dedicate themselves to the use of files as material and of real actors of surveillance in theater performances (Szucs, Garde) and a documentary film (Komska). This is where the book turns away from the individual to look toward more collective dimensions of memory. Garde reports in chapter 7 on two productions (a theater play and a radio play), in which victims of surveillance perform, while in chapter 8, Komska chronicles a documentary on the Romanian section of Radio Free Europe. Szucs' piece (chapter 6) stands out as a reflection on memory: an analysis of a Hungarian theater play (*Apaches on the Danube*), it portrays an example of “how contemporary society chooses to tell their stories to future generations” (pg. 170). Once again, we seem to stumble upon strategies of dealing with the weight of the files, this time at a collective level, by “creat[ing] a fictitious but historically authentic narrative” (pg. 154). While reading the third section of the volume, *a second hidden chronology comes to light: one spanning from the search for “facts” and personal accounts of facts to outright fiction*. As Szucs shows, it often seems to be in combining facts and fiction that one can best “take the stories from the archives to the general public” (pg. 14).

I imagine the authors out of the room where I pictured their meeting. After extensive work in the archives, they present *Secret Police Files from the Eastern Bloc* to the public. The comments they receive acknowledge the strength of a volume offering a vast array of empirical material from no less than three languages, to portray some fascinating cases pointing to multiple motivations in different countries and eras ranging from Transylvania in the 1950s to present-day Budapest. It is regrettable that the introduction does not attempt more to connect the cases and discuss the very specific nature of the files as source material; offering more a general overview than a methodological discussion on the use of cases and comparisons, the introduction would have given the impression of having been written even before the individual chapters have been handed in, were it not for the detailed abstracts it offers. In the absence of a conclusion, *Secret Police Files from the Eastern Bloc* leaves the reader with a feeling of incompleteness reflected in the vague and general title given to the volume, an unfortunate contrast with the quality of the cases presented.