



Ethnography in the Securitate Archive

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Abstract. Throughout the former Soviet bloc, numerous countries have made available the archives of their communist-era secret police, often in connection with the practice of “lustration” aimed at cleansing the body politic of former secret police collaborators. Because the “truth” value of what is in these archives is often problematic, they are best viewed as sources of data about the organization that created them. This article provides some ideas toward illustrating what an ethnographic approach to the archives might consist of.

Keywords: Secret Police, communism, Romania, archives.

“In the socialist bloc, people and things exist only through their files. All our existence is in the hands of him who possesses files and is constituted by him who constructs them. Real people are but the reflection of their files” (*Belu Zilber*).¹

Following the disestablishment of Communist Party rule in the Soviet bloc, political pressure arose in nearly every East European country to cleanse the polity of legacies of the prior regime.² Former Party officials were to be banned from office, as was anyone known to have collaborated with communist power, especially with the secret police. These demands partook of a more broadly based movement for so-called transitional justice by which successor states to dictatorships of various kinds sought to address and overcome their repressive pasts. Applied to cases as varied as South Africa, Rwanda, Argentina, and Chile as well as the former Soviet sphere, transitional justice concerned such questions as how to exit from authoritarianism into democracy and the rule of law; how to bring the perpetrators of human rights violations to justice and compensate their victims; how to prevent supporters of the prior regime from corrupting or

1 Andrei Șerbulescu (Belu Zilber), *Monarhia de drept dialectic* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991).

2 This article is drawn from my book *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014) and is included here by permission.

destabilizing the new order; how to reconcile warring parties; and how to come to terms with deeply troubling histories and rewrite national narratives.

In the former Soviet bloc, where these procedures were instituted, they relied heavily (even if very problematically) on the files of the secret police. Beginning with Czechoslovakia and Germany in 1990–1991, laws were passed requiring that aspirants to political office and certain other posts be vetted through the secret police archive, to prove that they had not served as collaborators. This practice, often known as “lustration” (from the Czech *lustrace*), spread throughout the region to varying degrees over the subsequent two decades.³ With it emerged numerous disputes concerning the contents of the archives and their suitability for the purposes which they were being put to. The media in nearly every country of the region became saturated with informer scandals, debates over the truth value of the secret police files, arguments about whether transitional justice was being properly accomplished, etc. (see, for instance: Nalepa 2009; Sadurski 2005; Williams, Fowler and Szczerbiak 2005; for further discussions see Verdery 2012). Many citizens in Eastern Europe gained access to their files and experienced the shock of discovering that their best friends had informed on them. Accusations and denials followed.

In Hungary alone, a very partial reckoning gives us the Péter Medgyessy scandal, the István Szabó scandal, the Imre Mécs Commission, the libel suits against historian Krisztián Ungváry, the Kiss László affair, Péter Esterházy’s painful reflections in *Javított Kiadás* (*Corrected Edition*) on his revered father’s collaboration, and so on.⁴ In 2010, the Orbán government proposed dismantling the secret police archive by simply letting everyone take their own file home. Hungarians’ concern with secret police files was evident even in the U.S., where an article on the topic by celebrated historian Istvan Deak appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in 2006 and journalist Kati Marton published her *Enemies of the People*, based on her parents’ Hungarian secret police files (Deak 2006; Marton 2009). Comparable lists could easily be drawn up for other East European countries.

3 The literature on lustration is extensive. See the bibliography in Verdery (2012).

4 In 2002, it was revealed that Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy had collaborated with the secret police. Likewise, film director Szabó was discovered in 2006 to have written informer’s reports between 1957–1961, a fact for which he gave changing explanations. The Mécs Commission, formed by the socialists to investigate the secret police connections of government officials, was accused by the opposition FIDESZ party of being overzealous and trampling on people’s dignity. Another ardent accuser was historian Krisztián Ungváry, who decided to reveal the names of police collaborators, the most eminent of whom was archbishop László Paskai of Esztergom – Budapest, an elector in the papal conclave that selected Pope Benedict XVI. Some of Ungváry’s targets subsequently sued him, one of whom was László Kiss, a judge in the Constitutional Court whom Ungváry accused of having written secret police reports when he was a university administrator. In 2000, novelist Péter Esterházy published *Celestial Harmonies*, his tribute to his ancestors and especially his father, only to learn soon thereafter that his father had been an active police informer between 1957–1980; Esterházy then published *Javított Kiadás* (*Corrected Edition*), seeking to account for his father’s behaviour. For information on one or more of these scandals, see Deak (2006), Györffy (2002), Kiss (2006), Nadkarni (2011).

Romania, however, was slow to embark on lustration. Whereas Czechoslovakia and Germany were lustrating by 1990–1991, in Romania it was only in 1999 that legislation provided access to secret police files and a procedure for vetting public officials, and the process suffered numerous reversals. An organization, the National Council for Study of the Securitate Archives, known by its Romanian acronym CNSAS, was founded in 2000 to administer the archive and mediate public access to the files, which it took over from the various agencies (largely successor organizations to the Securitate) that had overseen them for the eleven years following Ceaușescu's overthrow.⁵

The procedures for taking over the archive were protracted and fraught, as the various agencies transferred their segments only piecemeal and in small numbers until after the elections of 2004, which brought a new political coalition to power. In 2005 over one million files were turned over, with more following thereafter, although the total corpus of the Securitate files is even now not fully under CNSAS control. Inadequate space and technology for managing the material, not to mention the purposeful “loss” of files, further hampered its transfer. As of 2013 the CNSAS archive consists of over 1,800,000 paper files in 2,300,000 volumes and a variety of other media; about 70% of the total archive is in paper files, 25% in microfilms, and 5% in audio and video material.⁶ As for lustration itself, in 2006 the first of several lustration laws was passed and then rejected as unconstitutional, a sequence repeated several times thereafter. Despite these ups and downs of the lustration law, the CNSAS has continued to make files available to many persons who request them—including citizens of NATO countries like myself, who are permitted access to their files.⁷

The Securitate Archive and its files

The archive is divided into multiple collections, the principal ones being surveillance files of targets (the term I will use for people under surveillance); files of people who collaborated with the Securitate in one form or another; documentary files on particular problems such as religion, foreign researchers, art,

5 The principal holders were the Romanian Intelligence Service (*Serviciul Român de Informații* – SRI), the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Serviciul de Informații Externe* – SIE), the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of National Defence, and the Ministry of Administration and Internal Affairs.

6 Source: “The European Network of Official Authorities in Charge of the Secret-Police Files: A Reader on their Legal Foundations, Structures and Activities,” 2009, available on the CNSAS website at <http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/reteaua%20EU/READER%20European%20Network.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2013). The microfilms are important because they may include some paper files that were destroyed.

7 All present and former Romanian citizens can ask for their files, but not all Romanians have files and not all files are “found” for those who do.

etc.; files from the Foreign Intelligence Service (D.I.E., renamed S.I.E.); internal administrative documents and the personnel files of Securitate employees; and confiscated manuscripts. The CNSAS archive's total volume is approximately 24 km⁸—surprisingly small, when one considers that the Polish SB files occupy about 80 km and the Stasi files well over 100 km, for a smaller population.⁹ At least part of the reason for the differences is that a sizable portion of the original Securitate documents were destroyed, both accidentally and intentionally¹⁰—either through normal administrative procedures during the communist period¹¹ or through events relating to the 1989 revolution, when buildings containing files caught fire and truckloads of documents were found burned and partially buried outside Bucharest.¹² More generally, however, it is impossible to say how large the archive was or is. At the time of the revolution it existed in various county offices around the country, sometimes with copies in the central archive in Bucharest but without precise collation. For someone like me to request a file could involve bringing volumes of papers not only from the depository on the city's outskirts to the CNSAS building in Bucharest but from several different county headquarters

8 Initial estimates were 35 km, but according to personnel at the CNSAS in 2012, the total is 24 km. It is uncertain whether this reflects initial error or differences between what the CNSAS now has and the total Securitate archive at the time of the revolution.

9 The figure for Poland is from the Polish Institute for National Remembrance (courtesy of Saygun Gökarıksel). It includes court files, prison records, and military intelligence files as well. The figure for the Stasi is from Glaeser (personal communication).

Glaeser questions the possibility of comparing these figures across countries. There are complicated measurement issues: should the number in question include personnel files, those of the guard regiment, the passport control, the bodyguards, the ordinary administrative files (officers' health records and pay records, etc.), as well as enormous numbers of duplicates (e.g., one informant report of a group meeting would go into all case files of members involved, the file of the informant). Should it include background checks on the official apparatus, on the sportsmen and women allowed to travel, on the trade representatives of state owned corporations, etc., etc.? The figure of 111 km on the official document center website (http://www.bstu.bund.de/DE/Archive/UeberDieArchive/Ueberlieferungslage-Erschliessung/uberlieferungslage_node.html, accessed May 30, 2013) seems to include every kind of document the Stasi ever produced, so it overestimates the total surveillance effort, while simultaneously underestimating it, because other kinds of surveillance efforts are not included.

10 See Oprea (2004). Olaru and Herbstritt (2003, 199–200) report: “When the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989, Securitate officers resident in Berlin were called back home to describe what was happening, and they told of the occupation of Stasi headquarters; rumors spread that planes were landing in Bucharest with documents from the Stasi archive.” The gap of six weeks between the fall of the wall and the Romanian events of December 22 gave the Securitate ample time to begin preemptive destruction of their own archive.

11 Normal administrative practice was to destroy documents periodically, after the passage of set periods of time or after handwritten notes had been typed up and approved (the originals might then be burned).

12 For example, the Central University Library of the University of Bucharest suffered heavy fire damage during the December 1989 “revolution,” and it was rumored that the attic of the building had contained Securitate documents. The most celebrated incident was reported in early 1990, when Securitate documents partially destroyed by fire were discovered loosely buried in the village of Berevoiești.

as well. Each such request entailed that someone look through the material and withhold anything considered to be critical to national security; what was then transferred to CNSAS would thus be only a partial file. The endless politicking around lustration as well as other peculiarities of the process of file transfer mean that the archive now under CNSAS control—what is usually meant by the term “Securitate archive”—is a heavily politicized remnant, the result of several political churnings of the original (Poenaru 2012, 3).

Twenty-four or so km is still a large archive. What more can we say about it? Romanian researcher Florin Poenaru offers several observations, drawing upon Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work *Silencing the Past*, which sees an archive as the sum not only of recorded documents but of silences (Trouillot 1995). One peculiarity of the Securitate archive, suggests Poenaru, is that it has at least *two* levels of “silences:” the one Trouillot describes, having to do with the ontological gap between a historical event and its recording, which leaves room for selective retention and processes of power, and a second level relating to the fact that the Securitate archive was created by and against the silence of the population being monitored. As it were, the role of the Securitate archive was to record everything that was being kept silent by the population. The task of the historian, in this case, might not necessarily be that of navigating and making sense of the silences inherent in the archives [as Trouillot would have it], or to put it differently, to historicize its gaps and selections, but to understand and deal with its loquacity, not with its lack but with its excess, not with what is missing but with what is already present there (Poenaru 2012, 11).

His reference to the archive’s “loquacity” reminds one of Stephen Kotkin’s observation, following upon Lefort’s comments about the loquaciousness of the Stalinist state: “Stalinism could not stop speaking about itself... The advent of Stalinism brought one of the greatest proliferations of documents the world has ever seen” (Kotkin 1995, 367; Lefort 1986, 297–302). It is to this habit that we owe the existence of this extensive archive.

Poenaru goes on to note another difference between a regular archive and the Securitate’s. Unlike a standard archive, which includes some people and obscures the voices, experiences and even existence of others (women, black people in the triumphal histories of colonialism, etc.), who therefore have to find ways of resisting their erasure, the Securitate archive reverses the situation: “people included in it have always felt the need to justify themselves, to give an account of this inclusion (either as ‘perpetrators,’ or as ‘victims’), or to erase their inclusion, to make it disappear” (Poenaru 2012, 11). In short, rather than resisting their exclusion, most people who find themselves in this archive would much rather not be there.

A final observation about the form of the archive concerns how the authority of its contents is expressed. Former Party member and political prisoner Belu Zilber writes:

Handwriting doesn't inspire too much confidence in the ordinary reader, even if it carries an illustrious signature. The same handwritten item, when typed, gains clarity and authority... Files contain almost entirely sheets written on a typewriter. Their authority proceeds from this... The process that led to the consolidation of state formations through the appearance of the printing press repeated itself at the finalization of the Stalinist state through the appearance of the typewriter. Only thanks to Remington's invention could we arrive at the principle: a person and a file having the authority of the state. It is not by chance that until recently, in Russia only state offices had typewriters (Șerbulescu [Belu Zilber] 1991, 144, 146).

In Securitate files, an officer's handwritten notes are generally replaced (or doubled) with typed versions. Handwriting persists, of course, in the marginal notes of people to whom a file circulates, and sometimes in the notes of someone reporting on a telephone conversation. Informers' reports often remain in the informer's hand, however, preserving traces of the pedagogical process by which they were generated (the officer and the informer together working out what should go in the report, as one of my own informers described it to me).¹³ But informers and telephone operators are the lowliest of actors in this universe; anyone of importance will have his text typed. Indeed, in my own file and some others I have seen, the importance of the sender appears in the font: normal case reports are in a font resembling Times Roman 12 point, whereas documents coming from or directed to the top generals are in one resembling Tahoma 16 point.¹⁴

Unlike many administrative archives, such as the one described in Matthew Hull's fascinating *Government by Paper* about Pakistan's bureaucracy (Hull 2012), this one does not constitute primarily a record of administrative actions requested and taken, but a site at which knowledge about "reality" was concentrated through collecting endless amounts of information. This leads toward seeing the archive as a kind of ethnographic data base—not primarily concerning the lives of the people under surveillance, but concerning the inner workings of this branch of the Party-state. Literary scholar Cristina Vatulescu makes a similar point: "Sometimes wildly skewed records of historical fact, the files are at the same time priceless representations of the values, apprehensions, and fantasies entertained by the secret police. While 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" (Vatulescu 2010, 13). In the case of my own surveillance file,

13 For more information on officer-informer pedagogy, see Gökankşel, "Neither Immoral Opportunist," 11.

14 Alexei Yurchak (2011) describes several hoaxes in which people make a fraudulent claim by directing attention away from its intrinsic meaning and to the flawlessness of the documents supporting it. These hoaxes indicate that *how* something is presented outweighs *what* was presented, and they expose the hidden cultural principle that gives truth value to something because it is articulated in authoritative form.

my long-term goal is to treat its 2,780 pages as if they were someone's field notes, attempting to reconstruct from them the world view and practices of the officers and informers who produced them. What operation of power do these files reveal? What regime of truth or knowledge do they assume and attempt to serve, and how is it connected with power? What sort of knowledge-production enterprise do we see in them? How can we characterize what they are after? What common practices emerge from this body of evidence, and what categories and discursive frames? How do they define their object? What does the language of the files tell us about their makers' epistemology?

Conspirativity

Although I will not seek to answer these questions now through my file, let me briefly use it to illustrate the archive's potential for doing so. For example: my overall impression from reading my file—an opinion shared by others who have read theirs—is of an extraordinary expenditure of time, money, and effort.¹⁵ The Securitate's work is very labor-intensive. Officers not only photograph or copy my field notes: they translate them into Romanian in painstaking error-filled drafts, then have those typed. Someone then reads the notes and underlines certain passages (occasionally with a gratifying 'Yes!' or other commentary indicating that I am right). Endless hours are devoted to translating correspondence and transcribing recorded conversations that sometimes lasted an entire evening. Agents charged with following me spend 14-, 16-, 18-hour days, much of the time waiting for me to leave one building and go into another.¹⁶ Documents, accompanied by cover letters and marginal notations, are circulated up and back down the reporting hierarchy, where they are read and notated. Case officers meet with informers, then have to write their reports and (generally) have those typed. Having determined that my contact with villagers who were commuting to work in an armaments factory is a problem, they draw up a list of all people living in every nearby settlement who work there, so they can contact these people and warn them against me, as well as seeking to recruit informers among them. The list gives not only the people's names, but those of their parents, their places and dates of birth, and the specifics of

15 See, e.g., Tănase (2002) for Romania; Marton (2009) for Hungary. Marton observes concerning her parents' file in Hungary: "Such utterly wasted human effort. ... The hundreds of man-hours agents in two capitals devoted to assessing the best way to intercept my mother on her daily drive" (2009, 224). Radu Ioanid (2002) writing of his own file, says that the recordings of his telephone calls "indicates a tremendous waste of technical and human means, with embarrassing results for those who ordered it."

16 I wonder whether they *really did* wait — most Romanians of my acquaintance would have found a way to avoid doing that. Precisely this expectation on my part contributed to my not taking the Securitate's surveillance practices seriously enough.

their occupations (imagine how much time it took to get that for some 138 people); notations indicate those who already serve as informers.¹⁷

This was very time-consuming work; clearly I occupied enormous amounts of Securitate man-hours (see also Garton Ash 1997, 190; Glaeser, 2011). Moreover, the file betrays a remarkable duplication of effort. Similar texts provide similar information from different officers; wording is copied from one text to another and retyped. Sometimes it seems one department has no idea what others already know; they re-create the same discovery. As ex-informer Nicolae Corbeanu puts it in his memoir, *Recollections of a Coward*, “I always had the impression that in the Securitate, at least at the local level, the left hand didn’t much know what the right hand was doing” (Corbeanu 1998, 290).

What can we make of all this seemingly wasteful duplication of effort? Was it just good sleuthing—data that are replicated are more credible? Does it betray a pedagogical practice: the point was not (just) to get specific information about a person, but to train many people in a process of producing it, through the repetition and circulation of a limited set of categories and techniques? Perhaps the point was not to produce information efficiently at all, but rather to demonstrate that the officers were working hard; therefore the idea of “wasteful effort” makes no sense. In a system that rewarded people according to the fulfillment of production plans (which included plans for recruiting informers), proof of completing planned activity was indeed very important.¹⁸ But I think the most important cause of this duplicative effort is to be found in practices aimed both at specialization and at maintaining the secrecy of Securitate personnel—practices of what they called *conspirativitate*, or “conspirativity,” an aspect of the compartmentalization of intelligence work that is common to all secret services.

Securitate actions were segmented into different branches—following people (“Service F”), censoring correspondence (“Service S”), intercepting telephone conversations (“Service T”), disinformation (“Service D”), and so on—as well as into different directorates specializing in internal information (Directorate I,) counterespionage (III), military counterespionage (IV), etc. Each of these had its corps of agents, divided by county and district. The principle of conspirativity dictated that agents from one branch not deal directly with agents from another, to reduce the possibility that someone’s identity would be discovered.¹⁹ According to

17 ACNSAS, FI, DUI 195851/1, 183-192 (from 1974).

18 See, for example, Albu (2008) giving a document that mentions a recruitment plan of 10 informers of which only three have been obtained; another document mentions the inflation of the recruitment plan for the subsequent year.

19 Conspirativity underlay the necessity of recruiting both informers (since targets were not supposed to know their case officers) and other collaborators—such as from the postal service, because other postal workers were not supposed to know about means of censoring correspondence. “Directiva referitoare la cenzura secretă a corespondenței, 1954,” in Anisescu et al., eds. (2007, 346, 347, 364).

Oprea, this kind of compartmentalization was a basic principle of the Securitate's work. It aimed to increase the secrecy surrounding its activity, known in its entirety only by the top leaders and those of the Interior Ministry. He writes, "Officers of one department could get data or information from another only by going through their chiefs. Any divulging of their own activity and its results to colleagues from other departments was drastically sanctioned, on the basis of violating conspirativity and the principle of 'compartmentalization of the work of the Securitate.' The levels of access to information concerning the activities of the Securitate were clearly delimited" (Oprea 2004, 52–53).

Conspirativity appears in multiple forms. One example comes from the Hungarian documentary film *Az Ügynök Élete* (*The Life of an Agent*), made from a top-secret collection of training films for secret police, which notes that after the projectionist started a film for the trainees, he had to leave the room in the interests of conspirativity. Another example from a case officer's report shows that the person who typed the report from the officer's notes was not given the names of the people about whom the report was written; she typed blank lines, onto which the officer would later fill in the names by hand. A third example comes from the instructions for relations between informers and their minders: If an informant on the way to meet his officer sees him on the street, he must cross the street and pretend he doesn't know him.²⁰

Conspirativity had two aspects, relating to inside and outside the organization: 1. Compartmentalization of work in the unit in such a way that each person knows only as much as needed, and each busies himself with his own cases and problems—about which no one should know, except those invested with this right. 2. Preserving the secret of one's work outside the unit, of actions taken, of the means used (Bălan 1977). The first of these referred to hiding the work of the apparatus from itself by disguising the work of officers from each other, the second to hiding the work of informers, whose identities (like those of the targets being followed) were disguised with pseudonyms. A document containing instructions for operative surveillance gives some examples:

[People doing this work] wear only civil clothing and are registered at their domicile as workers in one or another institution/firm, carrying special documents to this effect... Undercover workers are not allowed to live in houses of Interior Ministry organs or come into contact with uncovered Securitate workers, to be

20 See Ordinul Ministrului Afacerilor Interne al Republicii Populare Române nr. 85 și Instrucțiunile privind supravegherea operativă organelor M.A.I., in Anisescu et al., eds. (2007, 411). Gail Kligman reminds me that the practice of crossing streets was mirrored in everyday life. When people thought they detected a *securist*, they would cross the street. Kligman recalls turning it into a game, especially in the late '80s when she was tailed all the time and street crossing became part of her ritual. She would pretend to window shop (even though the stores were empty); across the street, her "tail" would stop. Then she would cross the street, and he would do the same.

photographed in groups, to participate in political manifestations of Securitate workers, or to be used in official actions of Securitate organs... Visiting the Securitate headquarters or workplaces by undercover workers is permitted only in exceptional cases and each case must be approved by the leadership of that organ... They must preserve strict conspirativity. [If it is breached, the consequences include] transferring the worker to another city or his removal from the Securitate. Units of the apparatus of operative surveillance are located in special under-cover headquarters, each with its own cover... It is categorically forbidden for uncovered operative workers to visit the under-cover headquarters in their Securitate uniforms... It is not permitted... to have phone conversations from which it might be concluded that the telephone belongs to the Securitate, nor to communicate to any person, including Securitate workers having no connection with the activity of operative surveillance, the addresses of the under-cover headquarters (Anisescu et al., eds., 2007, 401–402).

The true identity of officers of the most highly secretized units was known only by their hierarchical superiors and the head of the central personnel division. After the defection of General Pacepa, a special unit 0544 was formed that was completely under cover; its officers were not known to other Securitate officers, and even the head of it did not participate in its meetings for analysis (Olaru and Herbstritt 2003).

Here is a specific example of how problems of conspirativity might appear in a person's file. Mine contains a photograph of a Securitate officer, facing me in 1988 in the one episode during my more than three years in Romania when I knowingly stood face to face with a Securist. He stands in front of an apartment building in which I was to meet an important Romanian writer; he has just asked me for my papers and informed me that if this visit is not part of my officially approved research program, I do not have permission to enter the building. In his handwriting on these photos is the note, "Moment of warning 'VERA'" (my code name). When I showed this photo to two researchers at CNSAS, both were astonished: an officer should *never* appear in a photo with his target, not even in a secret file. It is a breach of conspirativity. One of these two researchers speculated that the officer's superior had made the mistake of not properly directing my shadow (the person following me), but of course that would have revealed the officer to my shadow, breaching conspirativity: the shadower should not know who my case officer was. Instead, the officer should have remained inside the building, *invisible* to my shadow, and then accosted me when I entered, thereby avoiding the camera. By walking out, he had uncovered (*deconspirat*) himself. In any case, the photo shows that whoever was in charge had not done what was necessary to preserving the officer's anonymity. Particularly interesting, however, is that as the handwriting on the note makes clear, the officer himself had placed the photograph in my file. My second CNSAS interlocutor attributed that to "an

excess of zeal: he wanted his superiors to know he had carried out his mission of giving you a warning.” Whatever the reason, having his photo means I now know who accosted me and can request his official “deconspiracy.”

The demands of conspirativity vastly complicated the Securitate’s work, contributing to its inefficiencies and duplication of effort as well as to a considerable amount of organizational incoherence. For example, according to Troncotă, various units and compartments involved in counterinformation across the territory had their own systems of evidence and archives. Therefore, he suggests, if the Securitate was a hypercentralized institution, that was not true in the domain of the archives, where decentralization reigned owing to the principles of compartmentalization and secrecy (Troncotă 2003, 88). The workings of conspirativity as a practice, combined with my earlier comments about the factionalism within the organization and its complex relations with other branches of government, invites us to see the Securitate not as a monolith with a single overriding intention—the opinion of most Romanian citizens—but as a multicentric organization fragmented among many parts.

Properties of the Files

The segmentation of work practices is amply evident in the files themselves. My own consists of informers’ reports, letters that have been copied and often translated, often-lengthy transcripts of telephone conversations or conversations secretly recorded in one or another public place (sometimes these are verbatim, sometimes just summaries), photographs—of me, of people I am with, of my research notes—, painstaking translations of these notes, detailed logs of the officers who followed me on my daily rounds, action plans for dealing with me, lengthy reports by officers synthesizing the situation revealed by all this, and the marginal notes of one or more superior officers who read them. In a word, a Securitate file is a heteroglossic body of documents, nearly all of it obtained in secret, produced by a variety of people using a range of linguistic conventions. It is polyphonic as well, not only because so many different services contribute to it, but because of the multiple notations in the margins by people who have read any given document; thus, any one page can contain the voices of several readers.

Let me dwell for a moment on the file’s heteroglossia, in connection with Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia in the novel (Bakhtin 1981). This is not a completely nonsensical move, for the files are replete with fantasy and invented characters, though not from conscious authorial intent. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia—the coexistence of multiple speech varieties or voices within a single text, utterance, or national language, reflecting multiple points of view—was the defining characteristic of the novel and the source of its power. That power, in turn, was used

to call into question authoritative discourse, a form that demands unconditional acceptance by the hearer and permits no alternative interpretation. The “officialese” of Communist Party enunciations is a typical instance of authoritative discourse. Securitate files contain multiple voices and viewpoints—the voice of the target, of the case officers and other operative workers, of superior officers in the hierarchy, of the informers (who sometimes parrot the voice of the Party as they understand it), and so on. But unlike a novel, the work of the file is to *decontextualize* those other voices and subject them to a single dominant interpretation, by attributing meanings to the target as viewed through the lenses of the various workers and by reinterpreting the target’s own utterances and acts. If in Bakhtin’s view the novel’s effectiveness comes from the coexistence of and conflict among different types of utterance, with authors’ intentions expressed only indirectly through the way they yoke different voices, the effectiveness of the file in its context lies in its goal of reducing the variety of meanings in the multiple voices it contains so as to leave only one interpretation: the target’s identification as an enemy.

The organization of a surveillance file is not chronological but activity-based. As described by Troncotă (2003, 129–130), the first item is not the reports that caused a person to be followed, but a case officer’s proposal to set up a surveillance file; after it come informational reports generally dated prior to that proposal and justifying it (the elapsed time indicates the period necessary to verify the information in them). Then comes the action plan (*plan de măsură*), laying out the measures to be taken so as to verify the danger the target posed, and after that the periodic reports of the case officer and his superiors presenting conclusions to date and further measures to be taken.²¹ A given file would usually group all these action plans together, likewise the analytic reports, even if they were separated in time by several months. After this group of documents came

21 Not all these measures worked out as planned. For instance, a marginal note on one document from 1985 reported a lunch I had with a friend, commenting: “Because of poor quality microphones, the recording was bad, so we lost lots of data that could have clarified the preoccupations of these two people.” In another case, despite a massive mobilization of forces, they apparently forgot to request permission to install microphones and lost the content of a crucial conversation. See ACNSAS, DUI 195847/4, 85–86. Concerning the latter example, writer George Ardeleanu, reporting on my visit to Nicolae Steinhardt in October 1988, provides the following piquant summary: “In the end, observing this episode in retrospect, we find a comic note as well. We have the image of a tremendous machinery being unleashed (The First and Third Directorates, the Bucharest Headquarters Inspectorate and the Cluj County Inspectorate, Military Unit 0800, the Special Unit T for intercepting conversations, the special services for following (“F”), correspondence (“S”), and “111,” the heavies [generals] Gianu Bucurescu, Aurelian Mortoiu, col. Gheorghe Ardeleanu the commandant of the Special Unit for Antiterrorist Warfare, etc. etc.) for *what?* To record a simple meeting between two people in which the essential element—the conversation in Steinhardt’s house—slipped through their fingers [for lack of microphones in Steinhardt’s residence]. A striking contradiction between effort and its results, calling to mind Kant’s famous definition of laughter: *an effect arising from the sudden transformation of a tension-filled expectation into nothing*” (Ardeleanu 2009, 276).

others resulting from the action plan, in chronological order but grouped by the service that produced them: all informers' notes together, all logs of shadowing the suspect, all censored correspondence, all overheard conversations, and so on. As a result, Troncotă notes, research into a file is very cumbersome since one cannot follow the thread of an action from beginning to end; the system was apparently useful, however, for the work of the operative who wanted to work with it and who wanted not to read the entire file but merely to look for a specific kind of information (informer's reports, correspondence, etc.), which he would find all together. The final page in the file would be a proposal to close the surveillance action, giving the reason for opening it, the measures taken, and the reason for closing it, along with the approval of superior officers. After this, the file went to the archivists, who would read the entire thing, remove extraneous items, perhaps underline important passages, ensure that the documents were in the specified order, collate and number the pages, and sew them into covers to create volumes of 300–400 pages each. Subsequent operations on the file might lead to removing items, crossing out page numbers and renumbering.

Secret police files belong to the genre of the criminal record, but in Vatulescu's opinion, the remarkable variety of sources shows how they depart from it: officers do not simply look for evidence of a particular crime, but rather examine a person's entire biography for suspect tendencies (Vatulescu 2010, 32). As Nicolae Steinhardt wrote, "You are not accused for what you have done, but for who you are" (Vatulescu 2010, 23)—specifically, for being a particular kind of person: an enemy. *What kind* of enemy might vary over time: if we read a file as autobiography, it shows how the Securitate was constantly changing its view of its subjects, rewriting them repeatedly. In my case, I go from being suspected of military spying to being seen as a Hungarian in disguise, fomenting unrest among Hungarians in Cluj, to being a spy for the dissident movement—though in each of these scenarios I remain a presumed CIA agent. Because officers did not want simply to "solve" a crime but to inspect a complete life history for tell-tale patterns, no detail was insignificant: they recorded as much as possible of the person's life and activity (Vatulescu 2010, 35)—much as an ethnographer would. (They themselves note this similarity in my file.)

Such a file is thus a product of collective authorship, engaging the efforts of many different operatives, including the archivist. As a type of writing, files have linguistic and narrative conventions peculiar to them, though like the wider corpus of Communist Party archives they are full of the characteristic "wooden language," with its ritualistic invocations (class struggle, liquidation of enemies of the people, unmasking, threat, etc.), its lack of the pronoun "I" and frequent use of passive verbs and depersonalizing constructions,²² its military metaphors

22 This is not a property only of Securitate files but appears in bureaucratic documents from many places. For example, Doyle (2007, 61) writes of the same feature in Guatemalan police

(the person under surveillance is referred to as an “obiectiv,” in the sense of military objective or target), and so on. The subdivision of the file by types of action (correspondence, eavesdropping, informer reports), Vatulescu observes, produces abrupt shifts in narrative voice, juxtaposing the report by the target’s close friend, for instance, with the mechanical account of her being followed. Because the narrative voice jumps around, we get a disjointed portrait of the subject (Vatulescu 2010, 37).

In this sense, the experience of reading one’s own file is disorienting, for it lacks a single narrative thread organized as a biography (in my case, I felt compelled to rearrange the entire thing chronologically so that I could find myself and my experience in it). Better said, it *is* a biography, but not one its subject fully recognizes—and in this sense, it is fiction. Nonetheless, Vatulescu continues, the file’s heteroglossia is tamed by rigid selection patterns, as the officers’ reports reduce the portrait “to a cliché from an infamous stock of characters: the spy, the saboteur, the counter-revolutionary, the terrorist, and so on”—in a word, an enemy of the state (Vatulescu 2010, 38). Only with changes in surveillance technology, she observes, does the cacophony of the file diminish, since telephone wiretaps fixed a central viewpoint from a constant perspective. Although the new technology did not eliminate the need for informers, it helped to set a more impersonal tone that distinguishes files of the 1980s, say, from those of two decades earlier, while further reducing narrative coherence and progression (Vatulescu 2010, 46–49).

If a person’s file has a fragmenting effect on his or her sense of identity, this is not only from the lack of a biographical narrative but from a proliferation of the file’s subject, through the use of multiple code names. Each case officer assigns a code name to his target, and if a person is a target in more than one time or location, there may be code names for each. If the file is closed and later a new one is opened, it may use a new code name. Thus, I am “Folclorista” for my Hunedoara county case officers in the 1970s, “Vera” for my case officers in Cluj in the 1980s, “Katy” for the city of Iași in the late ‘70s and 1980s, “Vanesa” for the Foreign Intelligence Service. The different services also assign code names, particularly the shadowing service: I am “Kora” for the one in Cluj, “Viky” for Timișoara, “Venera” for Hunedoara, “Valy” and “Vadu” for the D.I.E.. Nine names, four of them with rich activity logs. “Disguises,” indeed!

In talking of “my” file, I assume that somehow my own sense of being a constant presence across time gives unity to my piece of the archive—that is, I assume that its object unifies the file. But the object has many names and could thus be different people. Maybe I am not the same person in 1985 as in 1973; maybe the Securitate were postmodernists *avant la lettre*, recognizing that people have multiple identities. In Romanian, people refer to it as “dosarul meu,” “my

documents, in which an agent was chastised by his superior for *not* using the passive: “Never personify—the third person must always be used.”

dossier/file,” even when it contains multiple volumes from multiple years (as mine does). This takes the *ex post facto* view that a single unified human being or personality holds the whole thing together. But this is to project onto the file a unity that cannot be presumed as it is formed. When an officer is shadowing a target, he doesn’t necessarily know “whom” he is following; likewise the person transcribing phone conversations or letters. Conspirativity—the segmentation of the Securitate labor process—thus segments the social world it appropriates.

The Files as Agents

So far I have been speaking of the Securitate and its officers as creators of the files. In this final section I will entertain the opposite question: to what extent are the files themselves social agents? Ever since the 1986 publication of Michel Callon’s celebrated paper on scallop-fishing in France, which treated the scallops as actors on par with the fisherman and the conservation scientists he studied, and with the increasing popularity of actor-network theory and science studies, it has become possible to ask questions about the efficacy of objects in the world—objects such as surveillance files. What effects have these files had? I do not refer specifically to the effects of surveillance practices themselves, though they may enter into this discussion, but rather the effects of the existence of these files and the manner in which they are made, circulate, and act.

The theoretical perspective I draw upon now challenges referential theories of language. For example, Matthew Hull, who draws upon semiotic theory and science studies to analyze what he calls Pakistan’s “Government of paper,” observes of the writing he finds in Pakistani government files, “graphic artifacts are not simply the instruments of already existing social organizations. Instead, their specific discourses and material forms precipitate the formation of shifting networks and groups of official and unofficial people and things” (Hull 2012, 21). I confess that this is not a way of thinking in which I am fully at home; I am still basically a referential-theory kind of person and find it difficult to hoist myself out of the assumption that when we speak, our words refer to existing things in the world. But I have decided to accept the challenge posed by Hull and others to try on something different—because the whole matter of files is itself something in which I do not feel at home. I have a file; it contains words, which ought to refer to a reality in the world. But I find the reality those words purport to represent alien, since I am their object. So to try on a *modality of analysis* in which I am uncomfortable seems just the thing. In pursuing this line of thought, I am asking questions about sources, something that historians always ask about, but I pose them in a somewhat different form.

When people from the U.S. learn about my file, they tend to ask the same question: “did they get the truth or is it all made up, all lies?” This question points

to the fact that we (or my U.S. interlocutors, anyway) tend to take the file as an object for granted. We assume that it contains reports of various kinds, which are more or less true—that is, we posit a truth relation between the words in the file and the persons or behaviors described in them, through the agency of the officer and his paper. We posit, in other words, a referential theory of the file in relation to the reality of the person it is about, and we ask about the nature of that relation. Romanian readers of files share this assumption—as we gather, for example, from Poenaru’s report of an episode witnessed one day in the CNSAS reading room. A man reading his own file “took out a pen and started to make his own annotations on the original, marking those things that were factually true and crossing out those that were false or incorrect—to the horror of the archive’s guardians. This is perhaps the perfect metaphor, the extreme case, of how the files were generally read in post-communism: with an eye to their correspondence to reality, to their trueness in relation to facticity” (Poenaru 2013, 35). He goes on to argue that this reveals two different logics to the files: the logic under which they were composed—“as ‘structural biographies,’ as accounts of an overall social structure comprised of many levels and interlinked plots”—and the logic of the postsocialist reading, more autobiographical and concerned with truth (Poenaru 2013, 40).

Following Poenaru and Hull, it is apparent that the truth value of what is in the file may not be the most interesting question we can entertain about it. Although we can profitably ask by what techniques and assumptions the officers produce *what they consider* its truth, that is different from the more common preoccupation with whether files tell “what really happened.” That preoccupation has the consequence of effacing the file itself, of reducing it to a paper form of the officer’s relation to the person under surveillance. It is to avoid this that I ask about the agency of the file: what social effects does it have? What (to maintain the “fiction” of my essay title) does it fashion? These effects include aspects of the very physicality that have been overlooked, and to which I will briefly draw attention here.

One way to begin thinking about this is through performative theories of language, which a number of scholars have found particularly persuasive for analyzing socialist societies (e.g., Kligman and Verdery 2011; Nadkarni 2011; Oushakine 2001; Vatulescu 2010; Yurchak 2006). Here is former Romanian communist and political prisoner Belu Zilber, on how he came to think about Securitate files.

The first great socialist industry was that of the production of files... This new industry has an army of workers: the informers. It works with ultramodern electronic equipment (microphones, tape recorders, etc.), plus an army of typists with their typewriters. Without all this, socialism could not have survived... In the socialist bloc, people and things exist only through their files. All our existence is in the hands of him who possesses files and is constituted by him

who constructs them. Real people are but the reflection of their files... For the first time since the creation of the world demiurges have appeared on the earth. The masters of all the files are our masters, the silent fabricators of files—our creators (Șerbulescu 1991, 136, 137–138, 147).

This puts us in mind of Ian Hacking's felicitous notion of "making up people" (Hacking 2006), which, as I indicated above, was one of the Securitate's main tasks: their job was to produce the category of "enemy," including spies and various other types of enemies, and to populate it with real people. The files were a principal means of doing so, a repository containing the tracks of that process. The materiality of the file somehow guarantees the reality of the person produced through it.

Florin Poenaru offers a wonderful example of making up people in his description of how the Securitate made writer Dorin Tudoran into a dissident. Tudoran published parts of his file under the title *I, Their Son* (appropriately, for my purposes, opening it with the lines, "I didn't write this book—it wrote me" [Tudoran 2010, 9]). From it, Poenaru finds ample evidence for how a person who began by simply complaining about not being able to travel and not having the job he wanted is increasingly "discovered" to be a dissident: to have contacts in the West, to be writing "socio-political tracts" that are picked up by Radio Free Europe, and finally to be "at the center of a wide web of spies, French connections and illegal trade of manuscripts" (Poenaru 2013, 37–38). Finally, he is forced to emigrate (Romania's preferred way of dealing with dissidents). Poenaru (2013, 41) concludes, "Only by reading them as 'fiction,' as 'detective novels' from the Cold War do we get to the true political level of the files: that is, their performativity, their creation and recreation of reality." Reinforcing this message, Tudoran's file later served as the basis for Gianina Carbuariu's theatrical production "X mm of Y km," in which the actors keep changing roles and starting over so that "ultimately, the characters, their identities and social roles are effectively suspended and what seems to matter is only discourse, performatively creating the reality of the meeting. The content of the utterances becomes irrelevant, so does the actual identity of those doing the utterance: the text and the script prevails by virtue of its sheer repetition" (Poenaru 2013, 42). One is reminded, in this description, of the infamous show trials of the 1950s, which performatively turned loyal Party members into enemies of the state.

Belu Zilber's file makes him a traitor, Tudoran's makes him a dissident, mine makes me a CIA agent, and countless other people's files make them other kinds of enemies. Files can also make "informers" out of people who staunchly deny that they ever held this role. For example, the Czechoslovak StB created collaborator cards simply from making contact with someone, even if that person refused to collaborate with them. One might argue that in this kind of "making up people," the files are not fully agents but mere accomplices. Even as accomplices, however, files can act. For one thing, they can recruit people unwittingly into the service

of the organization. My own file recruits me into the Securitate, making me an integral part of it even while excluding me from the file's production, in ways I will suggest in my third chapter. So even as an American, I help to constitute the Securitate arm of the Romanian Party-state.

Let me take another approach to the agency of files by returning to the earlier discussion of conspirativity. As I indicated there, the compartmentalization of the labor process in the interests of maintaining the secrecy of officers' identities and work practices meant that in any one location, many members of the organization were unknown to each other; this had consequences for organizational cohesion, further undermined by factionalism and backbiting that made careers unstable. A very few senior officers—each county's Securitate chief; the head of the Inspectorate for Police, Securitate, and Penal Investigations; their deputies; and the organization's top generals in Bucharest to whom they reported—were in a position to know who the operatives were and what they were doing. As Poenaru writes: "Only the top echelon of the Securitate had access to the *entire* file: the rest of the employees just contributed pieces... Ultimately, the file is nothing other than a huge puzzle that only a handful of people could see in its entirety" (Poenaru 2013, 44). Understandably, the workload of such people likely exceeded their ability to keep track of everything.

Conspirativity made the Securitate a "virtual community" ahead of its time. If the operatives involved in shadowing, censoring letters, transcribing taped conversations, etc. were all disguised, the circulation of the material files was the principal instrument of their cohesion. Files traveled from the hands of the case officer up the hierarchy, accumulating marginal notes from various superiors on the way, and came back down with the superiors' observations and instructions, like this document with an informer's note and three levels of commentary—that of the informer's case officer, then of the officer's immediate superior, and of an even higher-level officer at the top of the page. Their trajectory materialized among various levels of the Securitate a conversation that would never or rarely happen in person. In this manner, Hull suggests, file circulation helps to produce collective agency and to distribute responsibility. These effects are also achieved by certain linguistic conventions that distribute authorship ambiguously (the use of passive and reflexive constructions, for example, and absence of the pronoun "I"—a common feature of ritual speech – Hull 2012, 181, 317). In brief, the process of their regular circulation made files complete and constituted the Securitate as an organization, a collective actor, rather than as a bunch of individuals writing reports. Is it going too far to say that only now, with the opening of the files, can we perceive that fully, as the gaze of file readers turns the Securitate and its archive into coherent, unified entities, which they were not before?

Even *without* the constraints of conspirativity one can make such an argument, as has Richard Harper in his ground-breaking study of the International Monetary

Fund (Harper 1998). Writing about staff reports, he states that their paramount function “is to act as instruments to cohere and control the organisation” (Harper 1998, 11-12). Every file has multiple authors as well as many readers; the organization tasked with setting world economic policy—or with ensuring the security of the Romanian state—uses this body of material to do so, and is itself made as a collective actor by the circulation of its files. An advantage of this line of thinking is that we do not have to accept the organization’s own rationale or definition of itself in order to define it: we can look to its behavior. Such an approach helps us to *bound* the organization, by following what Harper refers to as “document careers.” This is a useful reminder, given the fragmentation of the intelligence services: Where are the boundaries of the Securitate as an organization? They are indicated by the aggregate trajectories of files, which set the Securitate apart from other segments of the communist bureaucracy, into which these files rarely if ever circulated.²³

In a fascinating discussion, Harper pushes these questions further by asking about the difference between paper and electronic files. He is not thinking only of the difference between paper that creates trajectories through its travels in the organization and people who turn on a computer to access a central data bank that everyone can visit. Rather, he draws on research about differences between these two media in the kinds of embodied reading practices they entail. This work indicates that paper documents affect how readers *impute relationships* among sections of a document, allowing them “to get to grips” with it in ways that are harder with hypertext (Harper 1998, 22). The stability of a printed text enables building a cognitive map of it more easily, and its linearity on the page facilitates building and inferring cohesion, by both author and readers. Because readers tend to make inferences based on adjacent text, hypertext can generate inferences, less likely with paper text, that the author did not intend (Harper 1998, 23). All these considerations underscore the vital significance of the files’ materiality and give special meaning to the fact that despite the Securitate’s endowment with powerful computers, most of its files remained in paper rather than electronic form until the regime’s end.

In case this actor-network approach to the Securitate archive seems a bit far-fetched, I will end with one final aspect of the agency of files that is incontestable: their effects in post-1989 politics. Matthew Hull quotes a Pakistani bureaucrat who told him, “Files are always ready to talk, if not now while you are in your seat then later... Files are time bombs” (Hull 2012, 167). Almost every East European reader would surely agree with that image. These archives, unlike many

23 There might be some sharing of documents between the Securitate and the Foreign Intelligence Service (as is clear from my own file), and documents might go to Party organs or the Ministry of Justice for penal cases, but for the most part, files produced by Securitate officers circulated only among them.

government archives in the world, were never imagined to have any readers other than the security apparatus. It is one thing to ask about the archive's efficacy in the context of its own norms, including the possible effects of circulating its files. But the events of 1989 have radically recontextualized these archives, lending them effects that were never anticipated by their makers. Since 1989, files have wrecked lives, destroyed family relationships and friendships, made and broken careers in politics and other domains, sought and failed to achieve "transitional justice" and "democratization," and otherwise produced boundless mayhem as well as tremendous opportunity. They have caused profound self-doubt on the part of persons who have read their own files—leading them to ask, as I have, for instance, whether they were unwitting spies after all, and why they were so trusting of friends, spouses, or kin who informed on them.²⁴ The files have become sources both for generating forms of political or moral capital (as people use them to "prove" that they were not collaborators or were victimized by those who were), and for *preventing* people from acquiring it (through exposing or threatening to expose their presence in the files) (Poenaru 2012, 6).

Files acquire this kind of "time bomb" agency mainly if they are seen as repositories of truth. But everything we know about how the files were put together diminishes their likely truth value. Informers reported under duress, out of malice, or inaccurately; case officers made tendentious interpretations that suited their ends; 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. Moreover, as Poenaru (2012, 6) has observed, the insistence on seeing the files as matters of truth has, in a dialectical reversal, "led to the proliferation of a widespread climate of suspicion, fear and denunciation, that is, precisely of what the former Securitate was mainly blamed for and the lustration mechanisms were hoping to eliminate from the public life of post-communism. By inscribing the Securitate archive as a site of truth about the past, post-communism simply prolonged its logic into the present."

With these observations, we come full circle to the concerns with which I opened this essay: the problematic use of files for postcommunist "justice". As I have written elsewhere (Verdery 2012), the political uses of these files for personal vendettas seem to be outstripping their possibilities for bringing closure through truth and reconciliation. This leaves us with the conclusion that the best uses of

24 Timothy Garton Ash (1997, 65) in his ruminations on his Stasi file, comes to a similar conclusion. As his file forces him to ask himself what the differences are between being a spy and working sometimes secretly as a writer, he finds "disconcerting affinities between the two pursuits." If a newspaper's job is "to convey intelligence," then "I was a spy for 'intelligence'... I was a spy for the reader".

these files are to carry out ethnography of the secret police—how they conceived their task, how they understood their targets, and how they categorized the world in which they pursued those targets. In this essay I have begun to suggest what an ethnographic approach to these files might look like.

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