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Secrets And Truths (Natalie Zemon Davies Annual Lecture Series)



Synopsis

Nothing in Soviet-style communism was as shrouded in mystery as its secret police. Its paid employees were known to few and their actual numbers remain uncertain. Its informers and collaborators operated clandestinely under pseudonyms and met their officers in secret locations. Its files were inaccessible, even to most party members. The people the secret police recruited or interrogated were threatened so effectively that some never told even their spouses, and many have held their tongues to this day, long after the regimes fell. With the end of communism, many of the newly established governments among them Romania's opened their secret police archives. From those files, as well as her personal memories, the author has carried out historical ethnography of the Romanian Securitate. *Secrets and Truths* is not only of historical interest but has implications for understanding the rapidly developing security state of the neoliberal present.

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Customer Reviews

Katherine Verdery is the Julien J. Studley Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York

This book is well written but too academic for me. I was expecting a bit more of a narrative of the life of the person being spied upon.

Had George Orwell read this book, he would have changed a lot in his famous novel. The book is made up of three long essays and each focuses on another aspect in connection with the brutal and totalitarian Ceausescu regime. The first chapter is about the Securitate and its "conspirativity", that is: the compartmentalization or secrecy of its practices. Here Professor Verdely describes in great detail what the twenty-four kilometers of Securitate files contain and the characterization of these files. The second chapter discusses one main question; what did the secrecy for the Securitate mean? Here the author uses a term previously used by Hannah Arendt - a term which defined the secret police as a secret society. By using anthropological terms, Ms. Verdely gives the reader a very broad description of the consequences of secrecy for socialism's legitimation. The last chapter is about the field work of officers and informers of the Securitate. The author herself was subject to surveillance during her many years she had spent in Romania. She was regarded or suspected as a spy working for the CIA and she had the good luck of examining her own files culled from those newly opened archives. A word of caution merits to be written here: this is not an easy read and the reader is asked for a lot of patience for this book. There are many details and many analyses as well as the use of many terms taken from anthropology. Second, the author has done a great job in describing almost microscopically the daily routine and the modus operandi of the Securitate men and informers. Just to whet your appetite here are some statistics. There were 525000 Securitate workers for a country which had 23 million people. This meant one Securist for every 42 citizens. Compare this with the Stasi. They had 271000 workers for a population of 17 million. This meant one Stasi worker for every 62 citizens. Romania was well endowed with informers. This exceptional and well researched book, which has also many photostats, is more than highly recommended not only for its contents but also for a better understanding of what a security state can mean for the present.

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