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*An Anthropologist under Surveillance in Ceaușescu's Romania**

Abstract U.S. anthropologists working in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s were under surveillance by the Romanian Securitate, as they probably were in other communist countries as well. This article is based on the author's Securitate file, which a law passed in 1999 made available to anyone whom the Securitate had followed. It discusses similarities between the work of ethnographers and that of the Securitate, the question whether villagers believed that she was really a spy and the effects of the surveillance on the author's own work and on the villagers she studied.

Keywords surveillance, secret police, Romania, anthropology

Imagine yourself as the object of the following surveillance report, found in the file the Romanian Secret Police (Securitate) kept on me from 1973–1988. I came into possession of this file in 2008, through the provisions of a Romanian law that gave people access to their surveillance files from the communist period. I had spent more than three years conducting research in Romania during that period.

"5 January 1985. Katherine Verdery, 36 years old, Professor … of Anthropology … Baltimore, USA, [is] identified as being an agent of the American espionage services … From the surveillance measures undertaken concerning her, the following has resulted: her proposed research theme represents merely a cover for unfolding an intense espionage activity, materialized in collecting socio-political information, studying and inciting certain Romanian citizens' antisocial activity by encouraging their hostile attitudes and manifestations.

In collecting information, Katherine Verdery focuses especially on the following themes [long list], [all of which are beyond the scope of her official research project].

To obtain the data of interest to her, she makes contact with [various kinds of people]. The discussions carried on with them are written in shorthand or tape recorded. After she gathers and verifies the information, she synthesizes it in numbered daily reports, typed in three copies, which she sends periodically to the U.S. Embassy in Bucharest … With the help of informers, our organs were able to copy 165 pages of these reports … . We note that she does not keep a single copy for herself, as would be normal if she were using them to write a scientific work…

Analysis of the reports demonstrates that she has rich experience in intelligence work … Thus: The people contacted are called "informers," [for whom she uses] conspiratorial names …

Alongside the information collected, she mentions the place and context of the discussion, the informer's "attitude," the direct and

subsidiary questions she asks in directing the conversation toward the subject of interest. [examples …]

Analysis of her reports shows that the information she gathers is exclusively in the category of what can be used in developing hostile propaganda against our country. Likewise, she interprets all the data in a tendentious manner …

With a view to finalizing this case, together with following her via all available professional means, we will act to investigate her contacts, toward the aim of obtaining certain proof necessary to interrupting her activity…"[1]

In response to this report, Romania's deputy Securitate chief (general Iulian Vlad) wrote to his two immediate subordinates:

"*Comrade General Alexie, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel Diaconescu, 1) The case is very important and any negative developments, any proliferation must be stopped immediately. 2) It is urgent that you submit concrete proposals to conclude this case.*"[2]

In short, not only was I the object of intense surveillance, but also among those watching me were the country's top-secret police generals. It is almost as if you obtained your FBI file and found documents about yourself signed by J. Edgar Hoover.

Coming into possession of one's surveillance file raises both interesting possibilities and a host of questions. The possibilities include the chance to conduct ethnographies of the secret police, using its files as a database. My surveillance file consists of officers' notes and syntheses, informers' reports, as well as reports from my being tailed and from intercepted phone conversations and correspondence. Very importantly, it also includes the marginal notes of superior officers who read the reports as well as the orders they sent down. Because it was never intended – never ***imagined*** – that the targets of surveillance would see the notes taken on them, the notes are unaffected by any concerns about intersubjectivity. I believe we can read the notes for the officers' worldviews, their system of knowledge-producing categories, their bureaucratic communication paths, their practices and expectations, and how they projected themselves into a world of imagined capitalist enemies. This database does not tell us much about the officers' private thoughts (nor are they themselves likely to tell us even now), and some content is inaccurate, as is true of our own field notes. But the files do show the discourses and practices that the officers mastered by doing surveillance.

Among the questions raised by these files are: Is the information in them "true" – are the Securitate good ethnographers? How do they go about collecting data and constructing knowledge? Why do they think I am a spy? Then there are more speculative questions, such as, what are the consequences of ethnographers being followed as spies? What are the effects on their social relations, the kinds of information they can gather, and the knowledge they can produce? How does being followed involve ethnographers in a regime's practices and affect respondents' relationships with the regime?

Ethnographers as Spies

During the Cold War, Romania was the only Eastern European country to include anthropologists on its list of welcome Fulbright scholars. As a consequence, more US ethnographers went there than to any other Soviet bloc country. I was one of about 10 such people to work in Romania between the early 1970s and 1989, when the communist regime fell. From that work, I published several articles and two

[1] Archive of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, Bucharest, Romania (ACNSAS), Fond Documentar File 12618. vol. 1. 245–246.

[2] ACNSAS, Fond Informativ, File 195847. vol. 1, 193. Vlad was then deputy head of Romania's Securitate, soon to become its head (1987).

books: *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change* (California, 1983) and *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (California, 1991).

Despite the Romanian government's welcome, virtually every US scholar or lecturer was under surveillance and has at least a few notes about him or her in the Securitate files. Most have several hundred pages. In the Securitate archive, I consulted a massive 26-volume dossier covering US lecturers, researchers and Ph.D. students. The dossier shows that many if not most of them were suspected of working for US intelligence under the cover of their research. Not one of the US anthropologists whom I know has been left out of this large dossier. It is clear that Romanian intelligence officers assumed there could be no disinterested research, that foreigners were there to stir up trouble, and that we had been trained in counterintelligence.

That assumption was reinforced by the similarity of my ethnographic research methods to the Securitate's. As the excerpt I quoted from my surveillance report makes clear, officers thought they recognized in my ethnographic practices their own norms of professional conduct. They too used pseudonyms for "informers," coded notes, tape recorders, and a comprehensive data-gathering strategy that went beyond the confines of a single project statement. Like me, they generated a wealth of typed data, producing from their observations an enormous body of field notes (their file on me contains 2,780 pages). And like me, they generated interpretations and conclusions: that I am a CIA agent, that I am feeding the US propaganda machine against socialism, that I am fomenting discontent among Romania's minority Hungarians, and that therefore I should be sent home.

I had certainly given them reason for suspicion. During my first visit to the county I planned to work in, in September 1973, I managed to ride my motorbike right past a sign that prohibited foreigners from travelling on that route (it led to a military base). Then, trying to repair the damage, I asked county officials to assign me to a safe area and picked one of its villages, Aurel Vlaicu. But Vlaicu turned out to contain a number of people who commuted to work in an armaments factory 20 kilometres away – a "coincidence" the Securitate took to mean that I was really a spy. The climate of the Cold War made these errors much more serious than they might have been otherwise, feeding the Securitate's belief that I was up to no good.

How did this belief play out in Aurel Vlaicu? A number of my respondents there told me, both before and after the regime fell in 1989, that everyone knew I was a spy, though they did not really know what for. They just knew that everyone said I was one. This was partly the consequence of the Communist Party's efforts to spread information (and disinformation), including through films and literature that, as in western countries, popularized the notion of the spy. A Romanian acquaintance observed to me,

Children in school and everyone else were socialized into the idea of infiltration by foreign bodies as the cause of our problems. Now here you were, parachuting in. After all this abstract attribution, you were palpable. The police could say, "THIS is what a spy looks like. Here she is, in flesh and bone." You were a godsend for the Securitate.

Whereas before, spies were something one saw in the movies, something that might have been made up, now people could point their fingers at one.

I suspect that the Securitate planted the idea that I was spying. They did it first through the local police, as I realized one day in 1985 when a respondent told me that one of the policeman had been telling everyone to be careful what they said to me, since I was a spy and carried a concealed tape recorder. They also

did it through the informers they recruited, who were instructed about how to recognize a spy. (Even people not recruited as informers might receive similar instruction. For instance, because Vlaicu was near an armaments factory, Securitate officers noted the names of everyone in every nearby village who worked in that factory, so as to give them all instruction regarding how to deal with me.) These informers, along with the police, might also have been told to plant rumours that I was spying.

Did villagers believe it? As I already indicated, some of them told me they did, but further evidence comes from a Romanian scholar, Cosmin Budeanca, who is exploring how foreign researchers were received during the communist period. He went to Vlaicu and asked some people there what was said about me and whether they thought I was a spy. One answer he received was:

"Yes, people said she was a spy. But then after that they got used to her. She stayed a long time, and they got used to her."

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This idea recurs in other interviews. Note the respondent's assumption that I could be a spy only if I remained unknown, hidden. If I kept coming back and talking with everyone all the time, then I couldn't be a spy.

Another response given to Cosmin Budeanca was:

"People said she was a spy, but if she was one, they wouldn't have let her into the country. And she didn't have anything to spy on, 'cause we just talked about the collective farm. So if she's sent here from Bucharest, why should she be a spy? … What would she have wanted to do, overthrow our government? No. (So who said this kind of thing? …) Bad people! I had a brother-in-law … he was in the army, and he knew she was a spy. People just talked, because they're bad."

This respondent sees rumours of my spying as part of local politics and of people's character, not as the truth about me. The respondent also has a very narrow understanding of spying: it has to do with military matters and government overthrow. That differs from what Securitate officers worried about in the 1985 report quoted above, which is that I collected "socio-political information" and created hostile propaganda to undermine Romania's image in the world.

These answers came 20 years after the fall of communism from women who had been my long-time friends. My constant returns had given them ample opportunity to "get used to" me. In contrast, during my shorter stay in another village, Geoagiu, the fact that the police were following me (as I learned after four months of work there in 1985) so disrupted my research that I had to abort it, once I understood why people there seemed so much more reticent than those in Vlaicu. Geoagiu villagers were most likely reticent not from thinking I was a spy, but for fear of police interrogation following my visits, which happened shortly after I began work there. So I left Geoagiu for the city, where I limited my work to reading in libraries and talking with urban intellectuals, who were better able to defend themselves against such police actions.

Effects on Knowledge Production

During my research in the 1970s, I did not realize the extent of the surveillance I was under but knew I could get people into trouble by what I might write. I was concerned about how I would keep my publications from jeopardizing innocent villagers when I could not anticipate what the government would find offensive, sensitive, or problematic. Even though I gathered ethnographic data on a number of contemporary topics, these dilemmas, combined with the fact that I had always been interested in historical big-picture questions, tilted my first book in a historical direction, away from the ethnography of the socialist period. My in-

terpretations dealt with an earlier time and relied extensively on published and archival material, compromising my respondents less. In the 1980s, surveillance forced the research for my second book even more toward use of published sources supplemented by conversations with urban intellectuals. I was not the only anthropologist of socialism to be caught in such dilemmas. Several other scholars did not publish the books from their 1970s fieldwork until after 1989, if at all.

Although the regime's repression altered my entire research program, I think the knowledge I produced was perhaps of greater validity. This is because it rested less completely on the fragile kinds of face-to-face relationships ethnography normally employs to excellent effect, but my circumstances were not normal. It is disturbing to have to admit that the Securitate not only changed my disciplinary profile away from ethnography and toward history, but also rechanneled my research and possibly improved its accuracy. Still, I believe this paradoxical and unexpected conclusion may be correct. It follows from what the possibility of surveillance did to my personal relationships.

Effects of Surveillance on Villagers

What effects might Securitate surveillance have had on villagers? A man who informed on me in the 1970s is willing to discuss that now, unlike many others who were also reporting on me at the time. The man was recruited at while still in high school. His officer told him that I was a spy and it was his patriotic duty to report on my actions. The officer insinuated that my friend would not get into college, if he refused to cooperate. Although a top student, he was from a modest family and did not have the self-confidence to believe in his own capacities. He agreed to inform on me, because he wanted to have a future, which the officer was threatening. Before every biweekly meeting, my friend told me, he was awake all night because he was so terrified, and when his roommate would ask what was wrong he couldn't respond, for informers were ordered never to reveal their work to anyone.

The officer would begin their sessions by catching him off guard with some piece of information he was unlikely to have (such as an allegation about my sex life) and then press him for what else he could add. Because, according to the officer, they already knew everything I was doing, he had better tell them the truth: they would know it, if he did not. Thus, the officers used the man's reports as a test of his relationship with them. In addition to catching me conducting espionage, the officer's goal was to use me to forge trust with him so he would report on other people as well. My presence and "spying" had enabled this recruitment.

My files contain reports from about 13 informers from Vlaicu. Of these, several were probably not recruited just to watch me, as this person was. Given the injunction to silence, what they learned through spying did not enter village knowledge except as intentional disinformation. But the villagers knew that the Securitate recruited informers and they knew there were informers in their midst, as did I. Who these were was uncertain, but my constant presence kept the possibility more visible than it otherwise would have been. A cloud of unease swirled around me as I made my way from house to house.

Surveillance substantially shifted the terrain of fieldwork. Underpinning the work of ethnography is that precious and fragile relationship: trust. Although ethnography is possible in trust's absence, our best work rests upon it. In a climate of surveillance, it is much more difficult to establish trusting relations, for there is a constant current of mistrust and doubt. Every interaction was anchored by the presence of a hidden third with whom I could develop no relationship: the Securitate officer. That third maintained a constant drag on the growth of other relationships, pulling each of them off

centre, just as an illicit affair decentres a person's marriage. Sometimes that hidden third was actually involved with my respondents; sometimes he was just a hidden possibility.

By subjecting Romanians to this possibility, we "spies" drew them into a different feeling of relating with others, a feeling based on fear that sometimes isolated them by prohibiting their speech. Although we ethnographer-spies were not the only form of "enemies" that the Securitate controlled this way, we were particularly helpful to them. Anthropologists enabled the Securitate to increase its penetration into rural areas, which had much fewer informers than urban centres did. Thus, we provided unprecedented access to villagers who might otherwise have remained outside the system of relations the police were trying to create.

It is difficult to avoid the question as to whether ethnography is justified in circumstances like these. One might argue that precisely such revelations justify it, in the name of a freer world. Knowing how the police operate will help people resist the installation of such a system in the future. Perhaps the positive effects of the villagers' exposure to another society (through their connection with me) counterbalanced some of the negative effects of Securitate repression. What is certain is that this example of an anthropologist under surveillance challenges us, once again, to place ethnographic practice in a critical light. ❋