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Verdery, Katherine. *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 344 pages.

Gediminas Lankauskas  
University of Regina

In the prologue to *My Life as a Spy*, Katherine Verdery states, "To be honest, I don't actually know what this book is" (28). Indeed, it is an unusual work, one that does not readily abide by the conventions of a single genre. Combining elements of history, memoir, reflexive auto-ethnography and anthropological analysis, *My Life as a Spy* offers an incisive and nuanced exploration of state surveillance in socialism undertaken by someone who was a target of that surveillance. Through a narrative of her own life story as an American researcher working in socialist Romania, Verdery addresses themes as diverse as identity and selfhood, relationships and trust, secrecy and authoritarianism, and authenticity and truth.

The volume was inspired by the author's surveillance file compiled by the Romanian secret police, or the Securitate, during her several research visits to Romania between 1973 and 1988. *My Life as a Spy* is a result of Verdery's efforts to domesticate and make sense of what is an unwieldy document co-authored by numerous rank-and-file secret agents, their supervisors and their informers. Excerpts from reports contributed by various Securitate cadres are incorporated into the book, along with Verdery's fieldnotes, letters, interviews and two dozen photographs and document facsimiles. What results is material that is rich in word and image presented as a polyphonic collage that narrates a compelling story, in which many voices vie to be heard and various plot lines intersect in unexpected ways.

This story begins in the early 1970s with the author's arrival in Ceaușescu's Romania to conduct ethnographic research for her doctoral dissertation. Her intelligence, curiosity and fluency in Romanian left little doubt in the minds of security agents, known as *securiști* or *secus*, that she was a mole planted by hostile capitalist America to gather information about the socialist state. Her public persona as a harmless *folclorista* interested in village life in the Transylvanian region was seen as merely a convenient cover for her "true" sinister self as a spy. As Verdery continued to research socialist Romania over the years, the secret police researched her with steadfast commitment.

Given the Cold War climate of the day, Verdery did not expect to remain unnoticed by the vast surveillance apparatus of the ever-vigilant party state. Yet when, in 2006, almost two decades after socialism's collapse, she opened her file in the archives, she was taken aback by its magnitude and thoroughness. Subdivided into 11 volumes and numbering 2,781 pages, the hefty dossier consisted of shadowing reports, transcripts

of wiretapped telephone conversations, translations of intercepted correspondence, clandestinely taken photographs and "informative notes" supplied by her friends and acquaintances who collaborated with the Securitate. Some of this material was profoundly personal, reaching deep into the author's most intimate experiences, feelings and thoughts. Most of it was marked "top secret." As occurred elsewhere in the European East, in post-socialist Romania, such files were declassified and made accessible to anyone who cared to see them, including citizens of any NATO country, after a special law was passed to aid so-called lustration, which was intended to vet persons seeking political office. Today, lustration remains part of the broader political process known as transitional justice, which East European nations have embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

While perusing her voluminous file, Verdery encounters a version of the self that she barely recognises. Fabricated by *securiști*, this alter ego appears as a doppelgänger in several guises: a closeted Hungarian with a malicious intent to stir up ethnic unrest, a friend and supporter of political dissidents, and a CIA infiltrator after Romania's military arsenal, to mention but a few. Unfamiliar and unsettling, the splintered persona that emerges was given many names: Vera, Katiusha, Vanessa and others. Ascribing multiple aliases to a surveillance target was a practice commonly used in espionage to protect collected intelligence. In addition to the many selves attributed to her by the *secus*, the author also acquired a host of identities from her Romanian respondents, colleagues and acquaintances. For some, she was "Mrs. Professor;" a friend and even an adopted family member. For others, she was a potential supplier of coveted western goods. Crafted with a hint of irony and humour, Verdery's eloquent account of her *dividual* self opens up an important discussion of issues pertaining to the production of the ethnographer's identity in the field. As fieldworkers, we may be keen observers of social life, but we should not forget that we are also observed, appraised, multiplied and divided by the people we encounter as they seek to apprehend us socially and morally in order to place us in broader frameworks of local knowledge and understanding. The author urges us to be mindful of the ways in which the selves we acquire in the field come to shape our ethnographic work, a pre-eminently intersubjective endeavour (see [Borneman and Masco 2015](#)).

Of considerable significance in this endeavour is also trust, which, as Verdery observes, is difficult to build and maintain in settings of panoptic surveillance because both researcher and respondent know that there is always the possibility of an invisible third – the state – being present. Usurping and manipulating social relationships was one of the main objectives of secret surveillance in socialism. Field research under such circumstances, she suggests, was hardly ever unproblematically constituted through a negotiated, dialogic exchange between the ethnographer and his or her respondents ([Clifford 1988](#)). Those who collect data under the watchful eye of an intrusive state know that it is a great deal more complicated. Fieldwork in locales where authoritarian power continuously asserts itself is not the same as data gathering in the highlands of Papua New Guinea or in the Amazonian rainforest.

While issues of identity and trust figure prominently throughout *My Life as a Spy*, its commanding theme is secrecy. Without such secrecy, Verdery's Securitate file would not exist, nor would her book. Bringing in "the big picture" of socialism,

as she does so expertly in all of her work, Verdery argues not only that secrecy was fundamental to the opaque parallel worlds created by the Securitate but that it was part and parcel of the very cosmology of the communist Romanian state. She instructs us that making and harbouring secret knowledge, along with practices of concealing, deceiving and surveilling, were used as means to set up boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, and to make up pernicious “others,” as well as to spread uncertainty and fear, all of which were important technologies of governance and state power under communist rule. Yet, as in her earlier writings, Verdery cautions against reductionist conceptualisations of the Marxist-Leninist state and its supporting institutions in terms of ironclad centralisation and totalitarianism. Through a close reading of her file, Verdery shows how the Securitate never really operated with a single monologic script. Rather, multi-voicedness, fragmentation and disjunction were part of the *modus operandi* of this clandestine organisation. Neither the Securitate nor the oppressive state it served were rigid totalities. For an in-depth theoretical discussion of such secrecy, see Verdery’s historical ethnography *Secrets and Truths* (2014), a prequel and companion volume to *My Life as a Spy*.

What is surprisingly absent from this deeply personal book is an expression of the author’s stance toward the Securitate. Ceaușescu’s spy service may not have been as monolithic, efficient or ruthless as some of us would like to believe, but it did cause tremendous harm to Verdery’s respondents and to countless other Romanians. Moreover, its agents unscrupulously interfered with the author’s research and violated her personal life in most invasive and disruptive ways, as the book so vividly reveals. Yet Verdery remains a detached, if never “objective,” observer, for the sake of a more penetrating scholarly insight into Romanian surveillance and its secret operatives. She passes no judgment, she does not condemn, and nor does she express much indignation toward the *secus*, seeking instead “to understand them *as part of a social system*” (270; original emphasis). Yet one wonders whether a more robust expression of the author’s position vis-à-vis Securitate agents and their actions might not add another dimension to the volume that could further enhance our understanding of *secu* lifeworlds and of the larger political system in which they were embedded. Our affective and moral responses in the field hold much potential to produce valuable new insights and revelations.

Seasoned scholars working in Eastern Europe, graduate students preparing for fieldwork (especially in authoritarian settings) and researchers in expanding surveillance studies, as well as anyone interested in the machinery of state socialism in Romania and elsewhere, would benefit greatly from reading *My Life as a Spy*.

## References

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Biruk, Crystal. *Cooking Data: Culture and Politics in an African Research World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 277 pages.

Arianna Huhn  
California State University, San Bernardino

Data are ubiquitous in global health. Charts, statistical calculations and trends provide evidence for intervention need, for policy direction and of program effectiveness. But where do the underlying numbers come from? And, central to Crystal Biruk’s *Cooking Data*, what kinds of worlds and persons do quantitative health data reflect and bring into being?

*Cooking Data* is an ethnography of demographic survey research in Malawi. It is “research on research” (15), as the Malawian fieldworkers, who Biruk embedded herself among, so often joked. In a context where rural residents widely associate the term *AIDS* with the word *kafukufuku* – Chichewa for *research* or *survey* – Biruk follows the life course and materiality of public health data: from crafting of survey instruments in Chapter 1, to training Malawian fieldworkers in Chapter 2, to deployment in the field in Chapter 3, to “raw” data’s return to the office for data entry in Chapter 4 and to the dissemination of data in Chapter 5.

Biruk’s volume takes its title from the concept of *cooking data*, the falsification or fudging of information by presumably lazy or incompetent fieldworkers, an often-racialised accusation long levelled against African research assistants. Resultant “dirty data” are unreliable (neither accurate nor valid). But, Biruk argues, the idea of raw, “clean” data – representative of reality, measured and counted accurately and bias-free, in standardised units, comparable across time and space – is fictional. All data are produced, negotiated and thus “cooked,” often through demographers’ own processes and practices of production to fit research templates. Only, in fact, through African fieldworkers’ responsiveness to the messiness of lived reality, which requires improvisation, creativity and other diversions from research protocols and survey “recipes,” and only because of their dedication to and embodiment of clean data paradigms can demographers obtain their clean data at all.

On that point, it is worth noting the quiet symbolism found in the cover image of the volume – cardboard boxes of yellowing survey forms in a project storage room. On the outside of the repurposed boxes, three prominent brand names are visible: Xerox, Kazinga and Omo. The Xerox paper was necessary to produce data collection forms. Kazinga is a popular brand of oil and an essential ingredient in Malawian cooking. Omo is a popular brand of washing powder. Combined, these products embody Biruk’s central argument – that it is only *through the process of cooking*, by demographers and fieldworkers both, that clean data can be produced. The metaphor is splendid.

While encouraging scepticism of numbers, especially when reality is quantified by those seeking to control a population, and a wariness of fetishising statistics as representative of lived realities, the volume is notably not a polemic delivered against demography and the enterprise of statistical assessment. Indeed, Biruk adopts demographic standards for clean data when she carries out and reports the results of a randomised survey. A good portion of Chapter 5 also defends the validity