

Chapters from the History of the Persecution of the Churches in Central Europe

Hidden Galleries. Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe. Edited by James A. Kapaló and Tatiana Vagramenko. Zurich: LIT, 2020. 104 pp.

The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe. Edited by James A. Kapaló and Kinga Povedák. New York–Abingdon: Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, 2022. 354 pp.

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Few situations in a person's life are more psychologically disturbing than when their daily practices become forbidden and persecuted overnight. A similar feeling must have been experienced by those whose religious practice was severely restricted after the communist takeovers in Central Europe: faith-based education, youth work, the distribution of religious literature and many other practices that had previously been part of everyday life were made impossible. Members of the various denominations were subjected to surveillance and harassment. In such situations, there was no need for defiant reactions or physical resistance: in standing up for their faith, ordinary people practicing their religion in everyday life could easily confront the oppressive regime without wishing to do so as a political act. From another angle, the churches in the countries of the Soviet bloc were forced to develop new ways of functioning; to find alternative ways of operating. These paradoxical situations—the methodology of repression and survival—are the subject of the book *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe* by James A. Kapaló and Kinga Povedák, and the closely related volume *Hidden Galleries. Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by James A. Kapaló and Tatiana Vagramenko.

Among the many virtues of *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, one of the most important is its excellently written introduction, which helps the reader to clarify both the historical

context and the conceptual framework. It addresses vital issues such as the religious underground and the notion of resistance through religion as the basis of the volume's studies.

The book itself is divided into four major structural units: the development of the legal environment and the hostility to religious groups and to the practice of religion, the anti-religious operations of the secret police, the methodology of researching secret police files, and the aftermath of the secret police archives.

Two of the five studies in the first part focus on the legal context of churches and a life of faith. Szilvia Köbel provides a comprehensive, detailed summary of the legal framework within which churches operated in Hungary during the Communist era, while Éva Petrás examined their functioning through the example of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Community, which operated outside the formal framework. The other three studies analyze the workings of the Soviet and Romanian secret police, providing a shocking picture of data collection, the use of this data by the bureaucracy, and the construction of cases for political and propaganda purposes. The study by Tatiana Vagramenko stands out. The author examines the activities of the Soviet secret police in constructing model cases of anti-state political conspiracies out of the popular religiosity of the peasant masses and the apocalyptic and chiliastic movements that emerged during the Russian Revolution of 1917. Dumitru Lisnic's study explores the changing image of Inochentism in Soviet Ukraine in secret police circles, guiding the reader through the different levels of propaganda and repression. Corneliu Pintilescu's study describes the repression of Jehovah's Witnesses in communist Romania: the way the Securitate constructed the latter's meetings, fundraising efforts, and document distributions as part of an anti-state conspiracy, and then handed over the members to the military prosecutor's office for court martial.

The second part of the volume deals with the methodology of secret police operations. Igor Cașu's study examines the infiltration of Soviet state security into the Jehovah's Witnesses and the preparations for their mass deportation. Maciej Krzywosz looks at the work of the Polish secret police in relation to the Marian apparition in Zabłudów in 1965 and the way the event was handled, the process of information gathering, fake news dissemination, and intimidation. Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson examines the KGB's activities aimed at dismantling the Hare Krishna movement in 1979–1989 from a similar perspective. Using archival sources and oral history interviews, she shows how Soviet state security tried to prevent the organized activity of Hare Krishna believers and the spread of their doctrines in the Soviet Union. At the same time, she describes the means and methodology of intimidation: the operational use of demoralization, expulsion from schools and workplaces, criminal suspicion, and even forced psychiatric treatment. In the closing section of this part of the book, which analyses the work of the secret police, Ondřej Matějka

outlines the history of Czech Protestant theological movements after 1945 and the image of the secret police. Matějka shows that the StB was unable to find its way in the Czech Protestant milieu, which organized itself according to a presbyterial structure. Another important lesson of the study is how the secret police narrative of the New Orientation lived on in the church's own publications after 1989.

A prominent part of the volume is the studies on methodological approaches. They present the potential research methods and pitfalls of the intelligence files. In a detailed study, Ágnes Hesz examines the source value of the documents and the question of how reliable they are as sources of social history. Kinga Povedák discusses the methodology for analyzing photographs held in secret police archives. She describes in a practical way the process of photo elicitation, which is "in some ways similar to oral history, [which] places photographic images at the center of the research process." The last chapter in the third section is Kapaló's study on the use of secret police archives as anthropological sources. He uses an example from 1960s Romania to illustrate the way in which the agent reports were interpreted to examine the eating and fasting habits of the Inochentists.

The four papers that close the book offer a unique view of the fate of the politics of remembrance in Central Europe after the fall of communism. Through three examples from Romania and one from the post-Yugoslavian states the authors show how churches have confronted the legacy of the communist period, whether in the form of information gathered by the secret police, informers, the processing of the traumas associated with the dictatorship, or the desire to understand their past. Cristian Maria Vasile traces the history of the lobbying of the Romanian Orthodox Church connected to the Securitate archives in the 1990s and 2000s and the related debates about the politics of remembrance. He pays particular attention to the relations between the BOR and the Romanian state in the early 1990s, as well as to the functioning of the Comisia Prezidențială de Analiză a Dictaturii Comuniste, established in 2006, and the fate of its Final Report. A similar issue is addressed in the last essay of the volume. Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy explores the relationship of neo-Protestant churches to the communist past. Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, who contributes the second paper in the final section, deals with the documents compiled by the former Yugoslav secret police and the obstacles to their research. Milovanović outlines the institutional system set up to monitor and control churches in the former Yugoslavia and describes the possibility of accessing the archives held by the successor states, and then makes a very useful bridging suggestion: the use of documents—court documents and court orders—preserved by members of religious communities for research purposes after fieldwork. The third study in part four is somewhat different to the others. Anca Șincan deals with the moral side of researching the Securitate archives. She examines the concept of morality used by

the Romanian secret police, the representation of morality, sexuality, and privacy in secret police files, and the biased nature of research in this area.

Although not part of the volume, the book *Hidden Galleries: Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central Europe and Eastern Europe* is connected to it in many ways, both in its subject matter and through its authors and editors. This 104-page volume brings together sensational photographs and artefacts from the archives of the secret police in four structural units, bringing the themes of *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe* closer to the reader, adding nuances, illustrations, new details and stories.

The “Hidden Galleries” chapter takes us into a hidden world of underground churches, their users, secret monastic orders and youth circles, illegal religious education, and clandestine communications using location photos, group photographs, and secret correspondence. The chapter on Police aesthetics gives an insight into the methodology of secret police work through network schemes, crime-scene photos and photo albums, and the attitudes and methods applied to collecting used by the secret police to compile their own ‘collections.’ The third chapter of the volume presents photographs and writings confiscated by the police: photo icons, portraits of religious leaders, pilgrimages and festivals that present the religious life and rituals of the community that serve as components of communal memory. Complemented by mugshots, these objects and images also played a radically different role: they served as criminal evidence for the police. It is shocking to see a family album among the objects: the secret police saw in the expatriate relatives of the album’s owners an instrument for exploitation: a way to posit the existence of a cross-border network for a criminal. This chapter also contains confiscated religious documents and samizdat. A series of secretly reproduced manuscripts, pamphlets, and booklets show that, in addition to those officially recognized, there was also an underground public in the shadow of totalitarian state power. The chapter also draws our attention to the value of these documents—often the last surviving copies of a single work, and some of the few tangible memories of a community. The final chapter of the book gives a taste of the stories that emerged from the work and exhibitions that the collected objects and photographs revealed of the people who were involved, adding further nuance.

The two volumes have different virtues, but reading them together paints a relatively complete picture of religious life under a communist dictatorship. Even with the excellently written studies in *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, I missed the stories of illegal monastic orders, secret seminaries, and youth missionary work disguised as excursions. (However, I would not wish to present this as a critique to the editors of this

book, knowing how inexhaustible the subject of the religious underground is.) Many of these stories appear, albeit in short form, in the pages of *Hidden Galleries. Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe*, in a lavishly illustrated way. All in all, the reader is presented with two very good volumes that provide an excellent overview of the activities of the secret police in Eastern Europe in relation to churches, their working methods, and the techniques developed by various religious groups to survive.

