

Arresting Biographies: The Secret Police File in the Soviet Union and Romania

SOON AFTER STARTING my research on personal files from the former secret police archives in Bucharest, I realized that I was often their second reader.¹ Because my predecessor, the secret police archivist, had left thick pencil marks that had survived through the decades, I could easily trace the trajectory of that first reading, with its narrow emphasis on the main narrative, the conclusive evidence, names, and court decisions. The archivist rushed to the inexorable closing of the files, intent on quelling any questions along the way. Following that red thread, I gradually learned to decode acronyms and pseudonyms and to read for the plot. Before long, however, I lost my place in this tedious, complicit reading. The file appeared as a disturbing collage of found objects still pregnant with untold stories: yellowed newspaper clippings, a love letter opened before reaching its intended destination, the transcript of an overheard conversation, scalloped-edged photographs, and fragments of literary manuscripts. If the suspicious gaze of the secret police had turned everything into incriminating evidence, I became interested in returning that gaze from the critical perspective of a reader of literature.

While my project initially focused on previously unpublished Romanian secret police files, it necessarily expanded to consider their explicit model, the Soviet file.² This essay examines the characteristics and development of those files from

¹ I would like to thank *Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității*, and in particular Mr. Csendes Ladislau, for granting me access to materials from the former *Securitate* archives, and The Davis Center for Russian Studies at Harvard University for supporting my field research in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, I am grateful to Susan Barba, Svetlana Boym, Julie Buckler, Barbara Johnson, Esther Liberman, Amy Powell, Lynne Rossi, George Rowe, William Mills Todd III, and the anonymous reviewers of *Comparative Literature* for their helpful comments on this essay.

² In Romania, the secret police closely followed the Soviet model, with representatives of the Soviet secret police supervising the foundation and development of the *Securitate* (Deletant 20, 54). In addition, Soviet agents provided hands-on instruction. A telling example is the investigation of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, the subject of the most well-known political trial in Romania. Between 1948 and 1954, Pătrășcanu "was kept in captivity and continuously interrogated . . . with the ubiquitous Soviet councilors directing the course and the methods used" (Deletant 48). The close relationship between the Soviet and Romanian secret police is also apparent in their coordinated action against the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. The Soviets abducted Hungarian leader Imre Nagy and took him to Romania for questioning. Several hundred Romanian *Securitate* agents were also sent to Hungary to help Soviet agents rebuild the decimated Hungarian secret service (Deletant 111).

the 1920s to the 1980s. It investigates how this genre was structured and how it in turn structured its protagonist/victim, two topics that are as inextricably related as life (*bios*) and writing (*graphike*) are in biography.

A Short Genealogy of the Secret Police File

As the name suggests, the secret police file is a variation on the traditional genre of the criminal record. Walter Benjamin wrote that the challenge of identifying a criminal shielded by the anonymity of the modern masses "is at the origin of the detective story" (43). The elusiveness of the criminal's identity is also at the origin of modern criminology, a discipline that developed in the late nineteenth century based on discoveries about matching traces such as fingerprints, bloodstains, and handwriting with the individual who had left them. In the 1870s, the pioneering criminologist Alphonse Bertillon proposed a method for identifying criminals that synthesized many of these discoveries.³ His police records combined mug shots, a spoken portrait (*portrait parlé*), and a record of peculiar characteristics (such as tattoos and accents). By the end of the nineteenth century, this prototype of the modern police file had been firmly established throughout Europe.⁴

Whereas a criminal record is usually limited to the investigation of a crime, the Soviet personal file provides an extensive biography of a suspect.⁵ Already in 1918, Martin Latsis, a leader of the Soviet secret police, instructs:

Ne ischite v sledstvennom materiale dokazatelstv togo, chto obviniaemyi deistvoval delom, ili slovom, protiv Sovetskoi vlasti. Pervyi vopros, kotoryi vy dolzhny emy predlozhit', k kakomu klassu on prinadlezhit, kakogo on proiskhozhdeniya, obrazovaniya, professii. Eti voprosy i dolzhny opredelit' sud'bu obviniaemogo. V etom smysle i sushchnost' krasnogo terrora. (Stepun 2:221)

³ Bertillon is often considered the father of both anthropometrics and judicial photography; see his studies *Identification anthropométrique. Instructions signalétiques* and *La photographie judiciaire*. However, Pinatel shows that Bertillon mainly synthesized the discoveries of a whole school of doctors, psychiatrists, and criminologists of the Italian school (45-46).

⁴ Russia appears to have been in line with these developments. A rogues' gallery (a record of criminals' photographs) already existed in Moscow by 1867, preceded only by the Danzig collection of 1864 (Gross 459).

⁵ See Roginskii and Okhotin; and Petrov. Roginskii and Petrov were part of the commission established in 1991 by Eltsin to investigate the status of the former KGB archives, which at that time contained 9.5 million files. Petrov gives figures for the main types of files (personal files, personnel files, files confiscated from Nazi camps, and administrative files), but warns that these figures are not reliable since many files have been legally or illegally destroyed. Roginskii and Okhotin provide a more detailed description of the typology of the files as well as of the activity of the commission and the power struggles that by 1992 had already hindered the ambitious plans to open the archives to the public. Today these collections are located mainly at the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service (Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi sluzhby bezopasnosti RF), which is essentially closed to independent researchers. A small part of these collections dealing with the early activity of the secret police (Fond r-393) has been transferred to the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). Unfortunately, Fond r-393 contains little information on the personal files that are the focus of this essay. Therefore, for information on Soviet personal files I rely mostly on materials published during the partial opening of the archives in the early 1990s. I am particularly indebted to Vitalii Shentalinskii's *Raby svobody* and *Les Surprises de la Loubianka. Nouvelles découvertes dans les archives littéraires du KGB*. All English translations of *Raby svobody* are taken from *Arrested Voices*, trans. John Crowfoot. All English translations of *Les Surprises* are mine.

Do not look in the materials you have gathered for evidence that a suspect acted or spoke against the Soviet authorities. The first question you should ask him is what class he belongs to, what is his origin, education, profession. These questions should determine his fate. This is the essence of the Red Terror." (qtd. in Tolczyk 19)

Romanian writer Nicolae Steinhardt summarizes the important shift documented in this directive: "you are not accused for what you have done, but rather for what you are" (240). Soviet detective stories (*detektivy*) exhibit a similar departure from the traditional Western genre of the detective story. Like these Soviet files, they disregard the particulars of any one crime to focus on the overall character of the suspect: "The Soviet *detektivy* were concerned less with the mechanics of specific crimes and much more with the broader causes of crime itself. Thus, the focus of a book had to be not so much the way in which a particular crime was accomplished, as much as the broader failings and shortcomings in a person that caused him, or her, to wish to bring harm to society" (Olcott 44). While the traditional police file can read like a Western detective story—the reader spurred on by a mystery whose solution is ideally crowned with the identification and punishment of the criminal—the Soviet secret police file reads like a peculiar biography.

Surveillance Files: Characterization through Collage

This mutation from record of a crime to biography can be traced back to the way in which secret police files were compiled. While some files were created from depositions made by suspects during interrogations or from voluntary denunciations,⁶ thousands of files were created without these personalized forms of suspect identification. A 1935 Soviet secret police circular "urged the Party grassroots organizations to track down any Oppositionist who had ever set foot in their midst so that they could be tried" (Halfin 246).⁷ Romanian secret police manuals likewise ordered that whole categories of people—from leaders of previous regimes to people who had relatives abroad—automatically be subject to personal files (Ministerul Afacerilor Interne, *Directivă* 6-7). Before the police had knowledge of any particular crime, they thus had the name and some basic incriminating description of the subject. In short, the first task was not to identify the author of a crime but to characterize suspects.

The characterization of the suspect was the task of the surveillance file, the first component of a personal file.⁸ Agents could use "all means available to the

⁶ A. Grigoriev argued that the most common starting point for an investigation file was a denunciation (229), but Sheila Fitzpatrick cites more recent research that shows that "most denunciations in investigation files are statements obtained by the police in the process of investigation, and only a few are voluntary 'signals' from members of the public" (88). Fitzpatrick also notes that in the late 1920s the regime decided to punish "whole categories of enemies, notably kulaks (prosperous peasants) and Nepmen" (87), and that denunciations were needed in those cases where such characters had to be "unmasked" by members of their communities.

⁷ In the wake of Kirov's death (1935), these "Oppositionists" included both Trotskyists, anathematized since the late 1920s, Zinovievists, Whites, spies, counterrevolutionaries, and cosmopolitans (Halfin 245). For a fascinating study of the constant shift in these accusations and their vocabulary, see Halfin 257-60.

⁸ In its turn, the surveillance file could be composed of several types of files. For example, in Romania three different files composed the surveillance file: "record," "check-up," and "trailing"

security services" in order to check previous information and further "gather the data that characterizes the individual from all points of view, his political views, his behavior, his relationships, and their character" (*Directivă* 10). The surveillance file cobbled together a variety of existing materials—without much processing or attention to the way they fit—to form a portrait of the suspect that had the appearance of a collage. For example, the typical contents of a surveillance file dealing with a writer included fragments of manuscripts next to fragments of published works, literary reviews, letters, denunciations, and informers' reports. The file of the Romanian poet Lucian Blaga is probably the most instructive example of a Romanian Stalinist surveillance file that has been published to date; a similar example in the Soviet Union is Mikhail Bulgakov's file.⁹

Given the eclectic interests and sources of the secret police, the surveillance files are characterized by abrupt shifts from one narrative voice to another. Some narrators maintained an impersonal distance, their comments restricted to the professional profile of the subject, his/her writings or public appearances. Other narrators poked through trash, attempting to inspect any traces left by the subject, from illegal contraceptives to aborted manuscripts. Yet others managed to come into direct contact with the subject, recording intimate conversations, gestures, even intonation. Strangely angled, impromptu photographs of the suspect receiving a compromising package or haggling over tomatoes suggest the use of a concealed camera. The narrative also jumps between miscellaneous angles and points of view, creating a portrait that is necessarily disjointed and patchy.

While at first this heterogeneous quality was what I found most striking about the files, that impression faded as I began to discern the rigid patterns of selection and interpretation that informed these collages. Often dormant when it came to long intellectual conversations—"In the morning, the subject [Nicolae Steinhardt] has conversed with Stan [code name for writer Alexandru Paleologu] for a very long time on literary and religious themes" (*DUI* 49342 11:34)¹⁰ is all that is said of one conversation between two major writers—the curiosity of both Romanian and Soviet secret services was unfailingly sparked by the mention of unfamiliar

files. Their succession outlines the phases of the suspect's characterization. The "record file" had as its primary goal "to gather information deemed necessary for the identification and characterization of the suspect, so that they are not allowed to occupy a job in key institutions" (*Directivă* 8). In case this characterization mentioned any inimical attitude (towards the regime), a "check-up" file was opened. Depending on the data received, the agent decided whether to continue with the last stage, the trailing file, which aimed at "establishing and documenting, in as much detail as possible, the practical criminal activity of the suspects" (*Directivă* 14). The vague, inclusive definition of "criminal activity" in the practice of the secret police, combined with the demand for great detail of documentation, meant that in practice agents recorded as much of the regular activity of the suspects as they could. Their field of interest again overflowed the limits of any particular crime towards a fantasy of full surveillance of the subject.

⁹ See Blaga and Balu. Blaga, a leading cultural figure in Romania (in 1956 he is said to have been a candidate for the Nobel Prize), was under surveillance from 1948 until his death in 1961. He embarrassed the Socialist regime through his discreet, yet uncompromising, resistance (162). Furthermore, there were rumors that Blaga would become Romania's next president in case the communists lost power (48). The *Securitate's* intention to arrest Blaga in 1961 was not carried out because of his death that year (46). For Bulgakov's story, see Shentalinskii, "Pod piatoi: Dos'e Mikhaila Bulgakova" in *Ruby svobody*, 103-26 ("Under the Heel: The File on Mikhail Bulgakov," *Arrested Voices* 72-95).

¹⁰ *DUI* is the acronym for *Dosar de urmărire informativă*, which means surveillance file.

names, with sometimes unintended comic effect. For instance, after a tea party at the house of Lev Tolstoy's daughter, one agent reported that the guests mentioned someone by the name of Socrates and suggested that this suspicious character be checked since he was not yet identified in police records (Shentalinskii, *Les Surprises* 50). Likewise, fascinating manuscripts were ignored or butchered except for a few lines that the regime had singled out as subversive. If many voices and points of view mingle in the police file, the hierarchy among them is only too apparent.

The surveillance file typically ended with a "synthesis" written by the chief investigator, a description of the subject that subsumed all previous characterizations and reduced them to a cliché from an infamous stock of characters: the spy, the saboteur, the counter-revolutionary, the terrorist, etc. Thus, the surveillance file was articulated at the intersection of two conflicting practices: that of the informer, denouncer, literary reviewer, and mail censor, who shared an inclination for writing, collecting, and collating and produced a collage portrait of the subject, and that of the investigator, who wrote a synthetic portrait that reduced the cacophony of the collage to one incriminating conclusion.

This technique of cutting up previously existing material and pasting it into a portrait of a human being recalls contemporary experiments in montage. Take for example film director Dziga Vertov's famous account of his art:

I am kino-eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds.

I am kino-eye.

From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from the third, the most beautiful and expressive head—and through montage I create a new, perfect man. (Vertov 17)

Vertov's elated description casts some alarming shadows. He chooses to place the swiftest, strongest new man in a doubly enclosed space, for there are eight rather than four walls. If the camera is dynamic, traveling the world in search of the perfect nose, new Adam's muscles are in danger of becoming atrophied in his tight quarters. As with most utopias, the dynamism of Vertov's description of the perfect man is rooted in the exultant destruction of the old—here, the traditional, whole, human body. When it comes to actually suturing the fragments of this shattered world, however, Vertov chooses a rather common ideological blueprint, that of the new socialist man. Despite his strong muscles, it is questionable whether this new Adam will ever budge, or whether his movements will be graceful or uncoordinated, jarring, and out of control. After all, a Frankenstein, or its local impersonation, Sharikov, customarily hides in the shadow of utopian men.¹¹ In any case, as Vertov suggests, the perfect man is just one of "the many patterns and blueprints" available. There is no guarantee that this state-sponsored camera will not use its formidable power to make the human body fit a different ideological blueprint, say that of the state criminal. After all, Vertov tells us, the eye of the camera is made for "spying" just as its ear is made for "eavesdropping" (18).

¹¹ In Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *Sobache serdtse* (*Heart of a Dog*), a famous doctor attempts to find eternal youth by transforming a street dog into a man. The experiment only manages to turn a perfectly decent dog into an abominable communist, Sharikov.

However, if the secret police file collage similarly assumes that the human body is imperfect, malleable material out of which one can cut and paste a portrait that conforms to ideological clichés, there is a crucial difference between the avant-garde collage/montage and the police file collage. Even when the avant-garde collages suture fragments into a univocal, synthetic meaning, their solutions, as well as their violence, remain metaphorical. As Svetlana Boym notes, Vertov's "cutting is merely a cinematic metaphor. Nothing hurts; instead, the process displaces and cures by estrangement any emotional and physical pain" (90). The secret police, however, had the power to turn its metaphors literal. As Dariusz Tolczyk has shown, Stalinist repression was defined by the tendency "to take the metaphor to its real life conclusion." "Lenin's rhetoric [was] vague, class-based, allowing a changing referent. Stalin takes this rhetoric literally—agents of the bourgeoisie are now real spies" (Tolczyk 13). The surveillance file cut and pasted the collage portrait of the state criminal. It was then the sinister task of the investigation file to "work" the suspect so that s/he fit this image.

Investigation Files: From Autobiography to Confession

The suspect's synthetic characterization both closed the surveillance file and served as a basis for arrest. After the arrest the investigation file was opened, largely as a record of interrogation. According to Grigoriev, "[In] its 'classic' form an interrogation begins by having the prisoner fill out a detailed questionnaire and write his autobiography and a list of his acquaintances" (229). Up until this point the trajectory of the surveillance files has been like that of a camera panning closer and closer on the suspect. With the autobiography, the interior of the subject is breached, and from now on the file will contain first-person accounts by the suspect.

Taken upon arrest, the autobiography rarely offered any new information to a conscientious surveillance file. Mostly brief and to the point, these autobiographies read like curriculum vitae, except that educational achievements are played down. Next to his fingerprints and his last photograph, Isaak Babel's autobiography starts thus:

Rodilicia v tysiacha vosem'sot devianosto chetvertom godu v Odesse. Pisatel'. Bespartiinyi. Evrei. Poslednee mesto sluzhby—Soiuzdetfil'm, Goslitizdat. Obrazovanie—vysshee, Kievskii kommerchevskii institut . . .

Sostav sem'i: otets—torgovets, umer v tysiacha deviat'cot dvadtsat' chetvertom godu. Mat'—Babel' Fenya Aronovna, sem'desiat'piat' let, domashniaya khoziaika, prozhivaet v Bel'gii, zhena—Pirozhkova Antonina Nikolaevna, tridsat' let, inzhener Metrostroya; deti . . . (*Raby* 28)

Born, 1894, Odessa. Writer. Not a Party member. Jewish. Last place of work, USSR Children's Film Studio, State Publishing House. Higher education received at Kiev Commercial Institute.

Family: father, a commercial trader, died 1924; mother, Fenya Aronovna Babel, 75, a housewife, lives in Belgium; wife, Antonina Nikolaevna Pirozhkova, 30, engineer with the Metro Construction and Design Institute; children . . . (*Arrested Voices* 23)

Most autobiographies adopted a similarly impersonal, bureaucratic tone; a few however used a pathos-ridden, hyperbolic style when reaching certain episodes—such as one's service in the communist party or in the workplace. These auto-

biographies reveal much about the suspect's view of the secret police, a view that determined which life events would be included, carefully glossed over, or deliberately excluded from the autobiography. The differences in tone among these autobiographies also reveal a whole spectrum of perceptions of Soviet power and its repressive apparatus. The indignant tone of autobiographies that concluded with an address to various forums of Soviet justice attests to a belief that the present abuse is an isolated accident. At the opposite end of the spectrum lie the resigned, understated autobiographies of those who believed themselves to be just another victim of a mindlessly repressive regime. The suspect's expectations about the secret police decisively shaped her way of telling her life story. The remolding of her life into a police biography was under way.

If the typical investigation file started with an autobiography, it ended with a confession. While the autobiography reductively presented the portrait of a socialist citizen, more or less dedicated to the party, with a particular professional and personal history, the confession all too often presented the portrait of a socialist criminal. The road in between is usually described in prison memoirs as the most painful part of the overall experience of confinement. In the absence of costly surveillance work or particular accusations, secret police agents of the 1930s would start interrogations with the standard question: "Why do you think you were arrested?" The common dismay of those arrested would provoke the routine wrath of the interrogator, who then would ask if the accused knew that the secret police never made mistakes. In order to confirm this axiom, the accused was supposed to erase his/her life story and instead offer the particulars of a crime that would fit secret police scenarios.

Thus, from the start, two portraits of the self—the secret police's vague criminal scenario and the victim's own perception of his/her life—were pitted against each other. The balance of power was of course totally disproportionate, and the individual had value only inasmuch as s/he could fill in the details of the secret police case against her/him. This relationship between one's self and one's file appears in all of its literal horror in the file of director Vsevolod Meyerhold in his description of his torture at the hands of the secret police: "Sledovatel' vse vremia tverdil, ugrozhaya: 'Ne budesh' pisat', (to est'—sochiniat', znachit?!), budem bit' opiat', ostavim netronutymi golovu i pravuyu ruku, ostal'noe prevratim v kusok besformennogo, okrovavlenno, iskromsannogo tela.' I ya vse podpisывал . . ." (*Raby* 60) ("[C]onstantly the interrogator repeated, threateningly, 'If you won't write (invent, in other words?!), then we shall beat you again, leaving your head and your right hand untouched but reducing the rest to a hacked, bleeding and shapeless body.' And I signed everything . . ." [*Arrested Voices* 53]). The head and the right hand were spared inasmuch as they were necessary to the creation of the file. Not coincidentally, the head and the right hand are also the fundamental elements of police identification. Indeed, early mug shots routinely showed the hand together with the face (Hawkins i-ii). Later, the hand disappeared from mug shots only to be better showcased in the practice of fingerprinting. The secret police in effect reduced the individual's identity to this identification; apart from it, the individual and his/her body were neither on the record nor useful for the record. Inasmuch as the individual exceeded or challenged the

confines of the file, s/he was in danger of being destroyed or remolded.

Victims of the secret police have often seen this "breaking of the self" as the main goal of the investigation (Andreevich 103). However, the secret police did not stop at breaking its victims and then reassembling them to fit its ideological scenarios. As Meyerhold's description attests, victims had to carry out this operation themselves. They were not just written about or, as in Kafka's *Penal Colony*, written on; rather they became the authors of their own files. This required victims to internalize the ideology of the secret police, an accomplishment which did not come easily, even when, under the pressure of the investigation, victims were ready to write and sign anything. Prisoners often went through tens of drafts before they guessed the criminal scenario that the agent found satisfactory. Indeed, the capacity to concoct such a scenario and identity—whether the victim believed it or not—provided proof that the victim had grasped the logic of the secret police and adopted its rules of composition.

The subject's introjection of police ideology produced a ventriloquized confession. The abstract logic of the secret police took over the body of the victim; it determined not only perceptions of the world but also of the self. In other words, ideology became embodied and as such re-organized the victim's structure of feeling and perception (*aisthesis*).¹² The secret police's aesthetic re-education of the socialist man was thus well under way. The investigation file was the artifact in which the elusive precepts of this aesthetic were made manifest.

Stalinist Files: Histrionic Secrecy¹³

While this model of the file—with its progression from surveillance collage, synthetic characterization, autobiography, and interrogation records to confession—lasted throughout the Soviet regime, there were shifts in the emphasis placed on one or another element of the file. Stalinist secret police archives are characterized by a sharp imbalance between the low number of surveillance files and the exceptionally high number of investigation files, a trend that was radically reversed in post-Stalinist files. In Stalinist files, characterization remained the basis for arrests, but it was often reduced to a bare minimum: people were arrested simply for belonging to a blacklisted group. Being a White, a kulak, or even a member of the old guard in the secret police constituted both a sufficient characterization and an accusation. Confession became the centerpiece of the file.

It should then come as no surprise that during the 1930s Mikhail Bakhtin chose the "confession of a person being investigated for trial" as a primary example of an extra-artistic genre deeply relevant to the study of literature. Bakhtin

¹² Here, my use of "aesthetic" follows Terry Eagleton's archeology of the term in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*: "In its original formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, the term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought" (13).

¹³ This section refers to the Stalinist period in the Soviet Union and Romania. The Stalinist model files described in this section survived in Romania until 1962, when political prisoners started to be amnestied and the secret police underwent the fundamental changes discussed in the next section.

noticed that "confession had so far been interpreted only "at the level of laws, ethics and psychology" (350). He called for an interpretation "at the level of the philosophy of language (of discourse)" (350). Bakhtin's prime example was a false confession, Ivan Karamazov's, which he used to raise the question of "the role of the other in formulating discourse, problems surrounding an inquest and so forth" (350). Indeed, the proliferation of false confessions that marked the 1930s offer a troubling example of double-voiced discourse. They testify to a dialogism gone wrong, where the voice of the other does not bring a liberating double-voiceness into one's discourse; rather, it turns discourse against its enunciator. Isaak Babel's confession provides a disturbing example that deserves to be quoted at length:

... v bumagakh moikh mozhno naiti nachatyte nabroski komedii rasskazov o samom sebe, popytku besposhchadnogo samorazoblacheniya, otchayannuyu i pozdniuyu popytku zagladit' vred, prichinennyi mnoiu sovetskoiu isskustvu. Chustvo dolga, soznanie obshchestvennogo sluzheniya nikogda ne rukovodilo literaturnoi moei rabotoi. Liudi isskustva, prikhodivshiye v soprikosnoveniye so mnoi, ispytyvali na sebe gibel'noe vliyanie vykhodivshennogo, besplodnogo etogo mirosozertsaniia. Nel'zia opredelit' konkretno, kolichestvenno vred ot etoi moei deyatel'nosti, no on byl velik. Odin iz soldat literaturnogo fronta, nachavshii svoiu rabotu pri podderzhke i vnimanii sovetskogo chitatelia, rabotavshii pod rukovodstvom velichaishego pisatel'ia nashei epokhi Gor'kogo, ia dezertiroval s fronta, otkryl front sovetskoi literaturoi dlia nastroeniia upadnicheskikh, porazhencheskikh... (Raby 61, emphasis mine)

... among my papers can be found the draft I had begun to make of a comedy and of tales about myself that were an attempt at merciless self-denunciation, a desperate and belated attempt to make good the harm that I had done to Soviet Art. A feeling of duty and a sense of public service never guided my literary work. Artists who came into contact with me felt the fatal influence of this emasculated and sterile view of the world. The harm my activities caused cannot be quantitatively assessed, but it was great. One of the soldiers on the literary front who enjoyed the support and attention of the Soviet reader when he began his work, and who had been guided by Gorky, the greatest writer of our era, I deserted my post and opened the front of Soviet literature to decadent and defeatist emotions... (Arrested Voices 54, emphasis mine)

Babel's confession reproduces *ad literam* some of the clichés of his time, such as "Gorky, the greatest writer of our era." But the confession becomes much more disturbing when some of Babel's most profound preoccupations—the relationship between the writer and the soldier as explored in *Konarmia* (*Red Cavalry*)—blend with the language of the secret police, so that it is hard to tell who really wrote the last sentence, Babel or the interrogator. This blending was not restricted to the extreme conditions of the interrogation room; rather, Babel admitted to having switched the genre of his creations to self-denunciation even before his arrest. Writing in this new genre, Babel confesses his guilt about contaminating young writers with his worldview and atones for it by taking on the official discourse. In essence, Babel's confession revolves around one theme: mixing his discourse with the discourse of others. Turning Bakhtin on his head, the sins of dialogism are here atoned for by a conversion to authoritative discourse.

Typically, the Stalinist confession exhibits the opposite characteristics of the file autobiography. In sharp contrast to the autobiography, it tends to be prolix and muddled with excessive detail, and it often reads like a jumbled mix of fantastic stories. Babel's confession is once again representative: he admits to being not only a decadent individualist writer, but also a French spy recruited by André Malraux, an Austrian spy, an associate of the now compromised Yezhov, a co-conspirator in Yezhov's wife's "plot" to assassinate Stalin, and, finally, a terrorist

Trotskyist (*Raby* 43-52).

There is a sick logic to this madness, a new definition of crime: "Tsarskoe pravitel'stvo . . . ono nakazyvalo za uzhe sovershennye prestupleniya, a my predotvrashchat' dolzhny . . ." (*Raby* 162) ("The tsarist government . . . punished people for an already committed crime. Our job is to prevent . . ." [*Arrested Voices* 119]). Lenin himself supported this idea, proudly explaining to Gorky that some people "are in prison to prevent plots" (*Arrested Voices* 229; *Raby* 307). Thus the investigation file started with a synthetic characterization—such as bourgeois background—and attempted to match it to all potential criminal profiles: spy, counterrevolutionary, saboteur, etc. This was a slippery slope because, according to the extreme voluntarism espoused by Soviet science in the 1930s, people could turn into anything. In his thorough account of the fashioning of the Communist self, Igal Halfin argues that "according to early 1930s Soviet science, plasticity of human nature, its susceptibility to radical reworking, was the key trait that distinguishes proletarian psychology from the bourgeois one" (Halfin 231). The latter was derided for its exaggerated belief in the influence of the environment on the psyche. In the late 1930s, this voluntarism was taken even further: Soviet people were believed capable of making and remaking themselves, refashioning their old selves into communist New Men. The darker side of the voluntarist approach was that individuals were believed to just as easily fashion and refashion themselves into various criminal selves.

As Walter Benjamin, and later Michel Foucault, have suggested, modern criminology typically attempted to break up suspicious, threatening crowds and isolate the individual criminal. As such, it was a reductive, linear narrative driven by identification. At the opposite end, the Stalinist file was sinisterly productive, as it split one individual into a variety of criminal profiles. The diverging orientations of these narratives are based on radical differences in their understanding of the individual criminal. As John Bender has argued, the development of modern criminology and confinement was founded on a new understanding of the individual rooted in the realist novels of the eighteenth century, which charted the development and transformations of changing characters, influenced by their environments. In a parallel fashion the modern penal system developed gradations of punishment that replaced the dominance of the death penalty in the pre-modern prison system, acting on the belief that each particular crime required a commensurate punishment. Administered in the right doses, these new sentences were conceived not only as punishment but also as a fitting corrective for the malleable character of the criminal.

The secret police file did not employ gradual narratives to account for the transformation of a socialist citizen into a criminal. The communist psyche, like the Soviet Union in general, was believed to be able to skip whole stages of development; as Halfin argues, "development . . . was [seen as] a set of qualitative leaps.' Emphasis on revolution in the psyche was not new, of course, but now this transformation was conceptualized as an event, not as a process . . ." (240). By the late 1930s, this attack on the gradual growth of the psyche had reached its apogee, and Stalinist discourse was characterized by an essentialization of moral features (262), all of which could be subsumed within two basic categories: the

good and the evil (257).¹⁴

As a result, the switch from socialist subject to socialist criminal was necessarily dramatic. Those whose masks were stripped off by the interrogation to reveal the evil beneath were often called *dvurushniki* (double-dealers), a word that betrays a rigid binary understanding of guilt and innocence. The Stalinist files thus show little interest in observing and recording the individual's every gesture and investigating each particular crime in order to chart the gradual developments and transformations so central to Western criminology.

To further distinguish between Stalinist and Western discourses on criminology and confinement, I will focus on two founding illusions: transparency and secrecy. Central to both the realist novel and the modern prison was the illusion of transparency: the all-seeing eyes of both Panopticon guard and realist narrator claimed to register effortlessly the actions and thoughts of their subjects. The narrators of the secret police file, on the other hand, compiled secrets that they had painstakingly obtained. The secret police file teems with fragmented, often contradictory, images framed through peepholes. Even the investigator who oversaw this collection of secrets could only boast a modest, local brand of omnipresence, one that was indeed realistic: he simply collated the reports of two or more agents working simultaneously.

Although a mystery surrounds the Panopticon guard—no one knows who the guard is, and no one can be certain that the watchtower is in fact occupied—both the modern prison and realist narrative disguise the mysterious/fictitious source of their authority under a show of transparency. Conversely, the secret police file, based on credible technologies of information gathering, nevertheless puts on a show of mystifying secrecy. Indeed, the secret police spent as much effort on the appearance of secrecy as the prison reformers of the eighteenth century—and their novelist contemporaries—spent on the appearance of transparency. As opposed to the disembodied central gaze of the Panopticon/realist novel, the narrators of the secret police file were flesh and blood people, with names and idiosyncrasies. However, there was a concerted effort to mystify these narrators. Pseudonyms replaced names, and fictitious addresses obscured the informer's actual address. The obsequious "strictly secret" seal on these files ritually showcases this secrecy. As Hannah Arendt argues, in totalitarian societies the spectacle of secrecy is necessary to camouflage the absence of a secret (351-73). In a dramatic illustration of her theory, this spectacle of secrecy was meant to frame the uncovering of the fabricated anti-Stalinist plots. But in the absence of actual plots, the spectacle of terror and secrecy is all that remains, an authentic frame around a fake image.

Secrecy, then, is a defining presence in both the realist novel and the Stalinist file—but with some key differences. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E.M. Forster ascribed the contemporary allure of the novel to its predilection for shedding light on the "secret life which each of us lives privately" (qtd. in Brooks 5). The novel opens the door of the reader's private space with the promise of an indis-

¹⁴ It is no accident that millions of prisoners in the Stalinist camps fell under one article in the Penal Code, the infamous Article 58 that covered "counterrevolutionary crimes" inclusive enough to cover both Babel and Yezhov (Pohl 19).

cretion towards someone else's private space—namely, the character's. Indeed, as early as 1857, Hyppolyte Babou had noticed the kinship between the novel and the police: "When Balzac breaks through walls to give free rein to observation, people listen at the doors . . . In short, they behave, as our English neighbors in their prudery put it, like *police detectives*" (qtd. in Benjamin 42). Both the realist novel and modern forms of policing specialize in uncovering secrets, and the more powerful they are, the more transparent the world becomes.

Unlike the novel, the personal file does not reveal secrets, since it was not even meant to be read. Instead, it brews secrets. In Stalinist times, the work of surveillance was eclipsed by feverish efforts to misinform and to concoct secrets, plots, sabotages, and criminals (Andreevich 101). The job of the secret police was not to infiltrate bedrooms and uncover private secrets as much as to concoct world conspiracies. Everyday trifles became state secrets once they were extracted from their private places and dragged into the giant public spectacle of Stalinist secrecy, which kept the Stalinist file out of view while at once framing it as the center of obsessive fascination. Such histrionic secrecy is perfectly illustrated by a well-known Stalinist icon: the windows of the secret police headquarters (Lubianka), which remain brightly lit throughout the night. On the one hand, Lubianka's windows point to historical truth: interrogations were routinely conducted at night. At the same time, they are a fitting symbol for the Stalinist spectacle of secrecy. While the brightly illuminated windows exposed nothing, the terror within was not hidden; instead, it was carefully framed and exhibited as the central spectacle of the Stalinist night.

This secrecy also defines a peculiar relationship between the readers and writers of the secret police file. As we have seen, the graphomania of the informers was controlled by the censorious reading practices of the investigator. In the practice of confession, the imbalance of power between victim (writer) and investigator (reader) was taken to a painful extreme. Behind the investigator, there could be two more readers. In exceptionally important cases, one reader might even be Stalin or the Secret Police Chief, whose decision of course overwrote, or rather overread, the decision of the investigator presenting the case. In Romania, according to the secret police regulations, the last reader of the file was the archivist.¹⁵ Behind the scenes, these *éminences grises* had unsuspected powers. My findings from unpublished secret police manuals challenge the lack of attention formerly paid to secret police archivists.¹⁶ According to these manuals, archivists

¹⁵ These regulations are from the *Instrucțiuni pentru organizarea și funcționarea Birourilor și Secțiilor de Evidență din cadrul Regiunilor de Securitate* [*Instructions for the Organization and the Functioning of the Archival Bureaus around the Securitate Regions*], which were written in 1951 when the Securitate found its archives to be in poor order. The instructions mention that the desirable number of archivists in each regional bureau was five or six (a region was usually the area around a large town), p. 5. Vitalii Shentalinskii's description of his interaction with the Soviet secret police archivists also testifies to their past, as well as present, power over their holdings (15-16). One of the top archivists, Colonel Krayushkin, explained that he was "the first to begin the present rehabilitation. Long before the perestroika began, Krayushkin had been quietly filling a separate card index with materials about writers, actors and artists who had been arrested or shot" (*Raby* 100). The practice of copying described below is documented in the Soviet Union as well as in Romania (*Raby* 113). It is unclear, however, whether Soviet archivists were expected to check files for overlooked suspects and propose the opening of new files.

¹⁶ See *Directivă* 20.

were not only asked to write biographical cards for all individuals mentioned in the files; they also had the obligation, and extraordinary power, to propose that files be opened on previously overlooked individuals, a category that could include not only passing acquaintances of the suspects, but also informers and even the investigators themselves.

The archivists' activities thus challenged the passivity of the traditional reader. Their reading literally recreated the text: finishing the work of the investigators, they cut, pasted, and then sewed together various fragments from miscellaneous texts inside the binders of the files. However, this performative reading is even more visible in the practice of copying. Manuscripts were customarily copied. And these sometimes incomplete, tendentious copies superseded the original, which was either destroyed or returned to its owner. The copy thus became the final variant of the text, for the original manuscript, even if returned to its author, became so suspect once confiscated that it was practically unpublishable. One such example is Nicolae Steinhardt's *Jurnalul Fericii* (*Happiness Journal*), which was confiscated and copied by the secret police and then returned to its author. (It is significant that some of the key literary texts published after the fall of the Iron Curtain came from the secret police archives.) Another famous case is Mikhail Bulgakov's *Dnevnik* (*Diary*); confiscated in 1921, the diary was copied by the secret police and then returned to Bulgakov, who burned it as a tainted, compromising document (*Raby* 113).

The secret police copy was in addition shielded from rereading, and the public at large was typically reduced to guessing and fantasizing about files that were out of reach. While the archives were hopelessly closed, nothing seemed to challenge more the freezing Medusa gaze of the archivist than the *samizdat* reader.¹⁷ As opposed to the archivist, who arrested suspicious manuscripts and made a master copy to be held by the secret police, the *samizdat* reader feverishly copied and disseminated the banned manuscripts. The continuing resistance of the heirs of the secret police to the opening of the archives reveals the threat of any reading that would challenge the archivist's position as a file's last reader and the secret police's definitive interpretation of its archives. To paraphrase Joseph Brodsky, it is just this resistance that should keep us reading (Brodsky 494).

Post-Stalinist Files: The Age of Surveillance and Bathroom Revolt

After Stalin's death, Khrushchev's critiques about "past excesses" brought significant changes to the Soviet secret police, and arrests were curbed while prisoners started returning home from the camps. The Romanian secret services underwent a similar process of de-Stalinization, but almost a decade later (see note 2). The holdings of the secret police archives also underwent a fundamental change. As repression became less overt, the number of arrests dwindled, and with them the number of investigation files. At the same time, the number of surveillance files soared.¹⁸ As we have seen, theoretically the surveillance file was

¹⁷ *Samizdat* (literally, self-publication) was the illegal dissemination of banned literature which flourished in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s.

¹⁸ Given the similarity in the structure and development of the two secret services, it is likely that the changes I describe concerning post-Stalinist Romanian files also took place in the Soviet Union.

meant to provide the basis for opening the investigation file. However, at this time surveillance files often dragged on for lifetimes, without leading to either arrests or investigation files. Nicolae Steinhardt's files provide a telling example (*DUI 49342*).¹⁹ They were opened in the late 1950s and lead to a prison sentence in 1959, which was amnestied in 1964. The surveillance file continued while Steinhardt was in prison (with cellmate reports [*DUI 49342*, 3:123]) and throughout his life, with small interruptions, until 1989, a day after his death, when the file closed laconically on a tapped phone conversation as Steinhardt's maid announced his death to a friend (*DUI 49342*, 03.30.1989).²⁰

Advances in surveillance technology constituted the second major reason for the spectacular increase in the volume of surveillance files. In particular, the 1970s registered an international boom in surveillance technologies and their wide adoption by police agencies.²¹ The surveillance of dissident writer Paul Goma by the Romanian secret police between 1972 and 1978 resulted in no less than 20 volumes of files, each at least 200 pages long (*DUI 226083*). The character of Nicolae Steinhardt's files also changed dramatically in 1972, when the secret police installed a bugging device in his apartment that allowed them to monitor the suspect's every move (*DUI 49342*, 7:11.30.1972-12.10.1972). At this time, the files began to overflow with detailed transcriptions of daily activities and conversations, routinely starting and ending with a record of teeth brushing, and rarely failing to mention any sound captured by the tapping devices in between, such as nocturnal trips to the bathroom.

Spanning entire lives in extraordinary detail, these surveillance files provided endless material for the characterization of the subject. In contrast to the hasty name-calling of Stalinist files, late surveillance files often attempted to give intimate psychological portraits. Thus, for example, Marin Preda, one of Romania's foremost writers, kept the secret police agents busy with a prolific publication record, three wives, and dozens of school mates. In an attempt to find potential informers and blackmail material, the secret police went so far as to take a field

Indeed, the few published fragments of Soviet files from the 1960s and 1970s support these conclusions (see, for example, the precious documents made public by Vladimir Bukovskii on <http://psi.ece.jhu.edu/~kaplan/IRUSS/BUK/GBARC/buk.html>, and partly published in his *Moskovskii protsess*). However, given the extreme paucity of post-Stalinist Soviet secret police personal files available in their complete version, we cannot rush to any conclusions until the archives become fully open.

¹⁹ Steinhardt was investigated as part of the Noica-Pillat group in the most infamous trial of the intelligentsia in Romania. For more information on the Noica-Pillat case, complete with fragments from the relevant secret police files and interviews with the participants in the events, see Tănase. For another valuable collection of documents focused on the relationship between the secret police and Romanian intellectuals, see Arhiva SRI.

²⁰ Not all files have coherent pagination. In cases where a page number was not available, I note the date of the document.

²¹ In her comprehensive *Understanding Surveillance Technologies*, Julie K. Petersen argues that "In the early 1970s, government and press disclosures made it seem as though everyone was bugging everyone else and this may have been true . . . As soon as the miniature technology [bugging] became widely available, it appears to have become widely used" (2-38). "An important characteristic of the late 1970s and early 1980s was the increasing sophistication and variety of communications and surveillance devices. Bugs, pen registers, surveillance cameras, and other devices were filtering out into the marketplace and being adopted by law enforcement agencies" (2-39).

trip to the writer's village in order to meet his former elementary school friends. They returned with a story about Preda's horrified reaction to accidentally seeing his father's genitals while the latter urinated. Psychology-savvy agents drew complex analyses of the writer's relationship to his wives, with the account of his last marriage concluding: "weighing the profits and disadvantages of this marriage it is clear that the profits are larger, for Marin Preda and for literature" (*DUI nr. 761423.10.1971*, 2:61).²² Preda specialists would likely envy the detailed bibliography of his works and their contemporary reviews in his file. The police routinely asked a literary critic to provide a synthesis of these reviews, which often sealed the fate of the book that was their subject. The crafty synthesis of contemporary reviews to Preda's *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* (*The Most Beloved of Humans*) in the file might even shock generations of Romanian readers who have considered this novel legendary for its subversiveness: "this volume is far better propaganda for the present leadership of the country than any other form of ideological agitation, first of all because of the condemnation of an epoch full of abuses [the Stalinist-style precursors of the present government]. Things said in a symbolic manner are better remembered than those said in party meetings or written in newspapers" (*DUI nr. 761423.10.1971*, 1:71).²³

Instead of the patchy image of the suspect offered by early files, where a friend's close perspective on the suspect might have been pasted next to a literary review, late surveillance files provide a steady picture. The tapping device establishes the main point of view from which the suspect is observed and this distance stays constant day in and day out. With this new form of surveillance, came two main types of narrators: the scribes, who simply took down the information recorded on the tapping machines, and those of higher rank who synthesized that information every once in a while. The tape transcriptions are sometimes complemented by the text of a censored letter or an informer's report of a conversation beyond the reach of the tapping devices, literary critics are still asked to comment on a manuscript, and friends and relatives are asked for more personal information. However, the narrative cacophony of the earlier surveillance files tends to be superseded by the impersonal tone of the new technology.

While Stalinist files rushed in narrative succession along a set path—from characterization, to autobiography, to confession—post-Stalinist files have hardly any narrative progression at all. It is difficult to distinguish the beginning, middle, and end of a file that was collated from daily records. As with some contemporary novels, the reader can justifiably begin reading on any page. Instead of narrative progression, we have a repetitive alternation between surveillance transcripts and periodic syntheses. More often than not, the synthesis does not lead to the opening of an investigation file, but to yet another surveillance transcript. Furthermore, many surveillance transcripts were never synthesized, accumulat-

²² The Romanian original reads "cumpănind profiturile și dezavantajele acestei căsătorii e clar că profiturile sunt mai mari, pentru Marin Preda și pentru literatură."

²³ The Romanian original reads: "Acest volum face propagandă mult mai bună decât orice altă formă de agitație conducerii actuale a țării, în primul rând prin faptul desolidarizării de o epocă plină de abuzuri. Lucrurile spuse la modul simbolic se rețin mai bine decât cele spuse în ședințe sau scrise în ziar."

ing into unwieldy piles of paper hundreds of pages long. This negligence marks the opposite end of the spectrum from the far-fetched interpretations, projections, and unmaskings of the Stalinist files, where an innocuous surveillance observation was enough for the creation of a suspect. While the Stalinist secret police file was a biography that took over the life of the individual, rewriting it into a histrionic, clichéd criminal narrative that, as we have seen, radically departed from the realist aesthetic of the modern prison, post-Stalinist files seem to return to a realist aesthetic based on observation and description. For instance, in the post-Stalinist file, the narrative appears to follow dutifully the life of the individual, the denouement often coinciding with the (natural) death of the suspect. The smallest increments of the file—daily transcripts—are framed by the particular waking hours of each suspect. Roland Barthes has singled out details that do not advance the narrative or easily lend themselves to symbolic interpretation as a key ingredient of what he terms *l'effet de réel* (realist effect) (141-46). In the post-Stalinist secret police file, such details proliferate to the point where they choke the already hardly visible narrative—producing instead a singularly drab hyperrealism.

Thanks to the newer surveillance technology, the secret police could afford an unremitting, dull containment of the subject that was a far cry from the histrionic rewriting of the Stalinist criminal. The new files were certainly not limited to objective recording, however. These later secret police biographies also remolded the individual but in a manner radically different from their Stalinist predecessors. While constantly following suspects through even the most intimate hours of their lives, the surveillance file usually lacks first person accounts by the subject. There are few monologues in these police files. Ventriloquized confessions were no longer extorted from victims during excruciating interrogation sessions. True, the suspect might still be subjected to an intimidation session at the secret police quarters, during which he/she would have to confirm a personal detail that the police always already knew. But these intimidation sessions did not extort the confession or fabrication of crimes unknown to the secret police; rather, they reminded suspects that all of their actions, criminal or not, were known.

The fact that the secret police curbed its interest in molding the subjects' self-expressions, even while registering all their actions, gestures, or words, helps to explain Nicolae Steinhardt's otherwise paradoxical defense of his highly subversive prison memoir. Both Steinhardt and the secret police seem to have shared the belief that the complex process of religious conversion that the writer underwent while in prison was a personal matter and as such deserved no reprimand. However, sharing the contents of that memoir, even if only with the typist, constituted a crime. Writing thus trod a thin line between criminal and innocent behavior. As a personal memoir it could be tolerated; however, inasmuch as its existence opened the possibility of a reader, writing was condemned. In other words, while the secret police no longer asked the suspect to write in its own genre, that of the incriminating confession, it still aimed to be the suspect's sole reader. As a result, even writings like Steinhardt's, labeled an "unrepentant hostile element" and known to be irremediably subversive, could be tolerated so long as they remained

divorced from any links to the exterior world. Once isolated, the interiority of the suspect was deemed harmless. The power of the police was so ubiquitous that it needed no showdown with those it controlled.

Thus, confined behind a wall likely filled with the best tapping devices, the individual was allowed to express himself/herself. As a child, I once eavesdropped on a friend of my father's who confessed that every night he went home, locked all the doors and windows, hid in the bathroom, and ranted against the regime. Growing up in the 1980s in Romania, this image became my shorthand for that faceless abstraction, the "socialist man." His rants were most likely carefully recorded, but his precautions probably convinced those who listened that he was harmless. In this way the regime cynically granted my father's friend a sort of closeted freedom. It didn't even need to spare resources to stamp out once and for all hostile individuals, for it could afford an unending surveillance. Or maybe by the 1980s there were so many people screaming in their bathrooms that arresting them would have meant depopulating the communal apartments. At any rate, the control of the secret police was so overreaching as to wall off subversive individuals in helpless isolation.²⁴

Conclusion

Read as a biography, the secret police file reveals the repressive state's ever changing view of its citizens. Taking the biographer's prerogatives to an extreme, the secret police did not stop at passively depicting its subjects, but rather attempted to rewrite them. This rewriting was taken to an extreme in the Stalinist file, where the police cut and pasted a collage portrait of the individual that fit its criminal clichés. In the Stalinist practice of confession, the victim was asked to internalize such a cliché and become the author of his/her file, as well as of a new criminal self. Post-Stalinist files renounced this Stalinist aesthetic, framed as it was in secrecy and based on unmasking, projections, and ventriloquized confessions. Instead these post-Stalinist files shifted their emphasis from the reforging of the subject towards a hyperrealist description of the subject. From a privileged observation point made possible by its new surveillance technology, the secret police worked to isolate and confine the subject in a less visible, if more insidious, manner than its Stalinist predecessor.

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²⁴ In the 1980s, the Romanian secret police took surveillance to an extreme. The degree of isolation that I describe might have varied from country to country, as people ranted alone in their bathrooms or in small circles in their communal kitchens.

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