Surveillance of Culture, Culture of Surveillance

Introduction

Muriel Blaive
University of Graz, Graz, Austria
muriel.blaive@gmail.com

José M. Faraldo
Department of Modern and Contemporary history, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain
jmfarald@ucm.es

The chiasmus in our title (“surveillance of culture, culture of surveillance”) was not meant as a frivolous, would-be elegant catchphrase: it is rife with meaning.1 The rhetorical figure of chiasmus involves the notion of reciprocity (Forsyth 2013), implying that the second arm of the formula is an unavoidable consequence of the first. It is precisely this reciprocity that is at the heart of our special issue of East Central Europe. Indeed, we mean to indicate that the surveillance of culture in a police regime does result in a culture of surveillance. Hence we chose here to study surveillance as a self-standing culture of its own. In fact we extended our reflection on surveillance all the way to our present democracies, as we took into account the current development of mass surveillance via the internet.

Work Group 1, “Culture Under Surveillance,” chaired by Muriel Blaive and James Kapaló, was one of six groups within the COST project New Exploratory Phase in Research on East European Cultures of Dissent, led in 2017–2022 by Maciej Maryl and Piotr Wciślik. The aim of the project was to study the cultures of dissent under socialism in a transnational and multidisciplinary perspective. The narrower aim of Work Group 1 was to "explore the effects of the

1 Note: This introduction reproduces or paraphrases a few passages from Muriel Blaive’s introduction to Chapter 1, “Culture under Surveillance” (Maciej Maryl et. al. 2019: 36–46), accessible here: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02144983/document. This research was part of the COST Action project CA16213, generously funded by the EU Horizon 2020 program, led by Maciej Maryl and Piotr Wciślik. We thank them both.
exposure of culture under socialism to state surveillance, ranging from monitoring through censorship to political and judiciary interventions, as well as the counter-surveillance activities and practices of Western cultural diplomacy, transnational institutions, such as Radio Free Europe, and émigré cultural centers” (Maryl and Wciślik, 2018: 8). The articles of the present special section stem from this research project and cover the former GDR, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Albania, and Estonia but also, for comparative purposes, the US and Western Europe.

In line with the findings of the revisionist school of communist studies (Lüdtke 1995; Fitzpatrick 1999; Goldman 2011), we have definitively shunned the Cold War assumption according to which the populations were “captive nations” – this is a reference to the American anticommunist advocacy group established in 1959 by President Eisenhower, the National Captive Nations Committee. On the contrary, we consider the populations we study as fully fledged social actors who co-determined, within the constraints of the communist dictatorship, the terms of their own domination and who led as ordinary an everyday life as they could manage. In consequence, we have tried to escape what WG1 member Jens Gieseke called “a certain binary perception of ‘the party-state’ against the dissident ‘heroes’” (Maryl et al., 2019: 60).

Our contributions are loosely structured around six issues, categories, or keywords that we collectively identified as being crucial to our methodology for researching surveillance practices over culture and/or as a culture of its own:

1. Periodization: the regimes under study evolved from mass repression to mass surveillance under late socialism. Situating research in a particular phase is thus crucial. As far as timing is concerned, Muriel Blaive even expands the study of surveillance to today’s democracies, considering the extent of mass surveillance that has taken hold of our current societies via the internet.

2. Social control: the regimes undertook the exercise of control over society by more varied means than simple police repression. Aigi Rahi-Tamm explores how the Soviet authorities attempted to establish social control mechanisms in Estonia in the 1960s, hoping in so doing to keep the population compliant. Her article assesses the various sanctions (in the sociological sense) that ensure social control, whether formal or informal, positive or negative. She accounts for the tactics of the authorities and sheds light on individual strategies and on the reactions of the public to surveillance. The manipulations of the KGB and its efforts to divide the Estonian community in exile through the promotion of festivals and tourism led to the end of what retrospectively appears as a liberal era.
José Faraldo conceptualizes the modern secret police in Spain, inserting it into a broader European context and comparing different models of surveillance. Social control under Francoism was not only necessary for the establishment and security of the regime, but it was part of its structure and conception. For her part, Muriel Blaive shows too how social control is not only a characteristic of dictatorships but of democracies. For Blaive, we have not yet learned the lessons of communism, and the COVID pandemic has led to the emergence of a new type of social control with the endorsement of the wider public.

3. Dissent: what type of social behavior was considered by the regime as infringing on its self-defined acceptable norm? Muriel Blaive questions the definition of dissent and the difference between resistance and dissent, while Anca Şincan shows how self-punishment and self-censorship were the means by which communities appropriated the rules imposed by the state. Şincan draws on numerous primary sources (memoirs, newspapers, various histories of religious communities) and discusses the interactions between the Orthodox metropolitan headquarters in Sibiu and the Romanian secret police, analyzing the behavior of a secret police officer in the face of self-policing and self-censorship by religious social actors. Konstantinos Giakoumis uses Albanian material culture as a source, focusing on certain artifacts: the relic and reliquary of the skull of St. Nikodemos of Vithkuq, the aer of Father Kozma Qirjo, a paper icon printed in the United States for the Evangelical Mission in Albania, and hand-copied excerpts from liturgical books preserved and used by Mihal Postoli in Durrës. On this basis, he demonstrates how surveillance and prosecution mobilize identity processes that often act in dissent to the political establishment. Some of them were used throughout the communist regime for the liturgical life of various clandestine Orthodox Christian community nuclei, showing how everyday life continued below or beyond what the Albanian regime allowed.

4. Surveillance in everyday life: this includes the social categorization of people, curatorial practices of the archives, the study of emotions, and any other untraditional method adept at refining our image of the past and helping us to understand social behavior. From the early twentieth century to the present, both dictatorships and liberal democratic regimes have carved surveillance institutions designed to collect vast amounts of information about their citizens, classify this information, and use it to prosecute suspected enemies of the system. Today, historians have a variety of means at their disposal to examine and interpret the implementation and the purposes of this massive data collection. We can now
distinguish various cultures of surveillance. Some countries already had a long tradition of repressive policing they could tap into; others had to improvise after winning a civil war, driving out an invader, or putting an end to a dictatorship. Some of the inherited structures were transferred to the new institutions of control and surveillance; in other cases, the surveillance systems were modernized with the help or participation of the police of other states or friendly regimes (Gestapo, CIA, NKVD, and others). Konstantinos Giakoumis explores the importance of religious material culture for identity processes during periods of surveillance in Albania, when anti-religious state action intensified, and religion was excluded from everyday life. Anca Șincan shows how different actors, such as communities, hierarchy, and clergy, used self-blame to solve minor problems, with the aim of creating a self-regulating culture by deferring punishment. Muriel Blaive assesses our contemporaneity to show how surveillance, which we used to think of as a phenomenon only describing an outdated totalitarian past, is now part of our everyday lives. Western democracies remind us of the former communist dictatorships in terms of surveillance more than we would like to think.

The institution of the political (or secret) police: it is a classic surveillance institution, emblematic of the twentieth century all in itself. The historical analysis of surveillance has long focused on its various avatars and on the repression and violence they have generated. After the fall of communism in Europe, researchers worked primarily on collaborators, files, records, repressive institutions, concentration camps, and prisons. Other aspects of policing that can be considered equally or more important, such as propaganda and the instrumentalization of the media, have been neglected in comparison. But our contemporary way of life, with the emergence of the internet and new technologies, prompts us to go beyond the usual focus on violence and repression and to rethink the surveillance practices of the totalitarian and authoritarian systems of the last century from the perspective of information gathering. It is no longer the number of deaths caused by repression that is the focus of attention – a number which already seems to be established – but the way in which the information was collected, processed, and used.

The regimes of the interwar period established the police as an essential part of their systems of domination, but the functions and performance of the police were somewhat different compared to the Cold War dictatorships that succeeded them. There are notable differences between left- and right-wing dictatorships as well as between surveillance in liberal democracies and non-democratic systems. One of the great tasks
facing historians is precisely to examine in detail these different forms of policing and their consequences. This is how it occurred to us that the concept of "surveillance culture" would be very useful for this analysis. The twentieth century has seen many examples of entanglement between different police forces – the case of the Gestapo and Franco's Spain is paradigmatic in this respect, as José Faraldo shows in his article. There have also been many instances of the imposition of surveillance models on other satellite or subjugated countries – the construction of the communist secret police in Central Europe on the KGB model is an obvious example – as well as transnational assistance between police agencies or the formation of international models, shared by different agencies (Faraldo 2018; Droit 2019; Gieseke 2006).

6. Source criticism: we address the methodological issue of how to approach a secret police file as a historian or social scientist. The archive as a source is, in general, crucial for the historian and their work on any subject, but it is especially so in their endeavor to understand the communist political police. The archive collects information, preserves it, sorts it, separates it, disposes of it: this was one of the most essential tasks of these secret police forces. The exercise of terror, on the other hand, was almost incidental. In order to exercise terror, it is not necessary to count on the institution of the secret police per se: any police force, the army, militias, volunteers, can do it. The modus operandi of the secret police is specific precisely as it benefits from information collected in the most diverse ways. The secret police appropriates, creates, and manages archives. José Faraldo describes how Franco's troops seized the archives of organizations and institutions in the cities they occupied during the Spanish Civil War and how these materials were made available to the secret police in order to arrest and annihilate the Republicans, just like the Nazis had done in the territories they occupied in East-Central Europe. The Soviet Cheka, the first Bolshevik secret police, had also used the archives of the Tsarist secret police in order to persecute its political enemies. This is why understanding the exact nature and complexity of the files and materials kept in these archives, how they were compiled, and how they survived the transition after the end of communism as well as the end of the institutions that had justified their creation, is fundamental if we are to understand the essence of the communist secret police. It is also impossible to understand the meaning and importance for repression and surveillance of each document or each file if we do not know what these files represented and where they were located within the chain of surveillance.
These considerations led us to analyze the way in which many of these countries followed a rather similar path and homogeneous model in the years following state socialism, although the end of communism had created the potential for a much more plural and multifaceted development: every country inscribed itself in a heroic framework of struggle against communism. This model was inherited from the past dissidence, but it was also exacerbated by the new elites who used memory politics to position themselves in the new political field. These elites have used and instrumentalized archival documents, lobbed various accusations of a general nature, and promoted a revised interpretation of historical events as a weapon in their political struggle. These actions gave shape to a collective memory of the communist era that confers the identity privilege of the “real patriot” onto one small section of the population only.

One of the conclusions of this special issue is that historians should start to pay more attention to the post-socialist era and not leave this field to sociologists and political scientists only. More than three decades after the fall of communism, it is time for the methodological tools of history as a discipline to be applied to this period. Many of the problems of the new non-democracies or illiberal democracies date from state socialism and the way it was transformed after 1989. Historians must not shy from studying the cultural transformation of the post-socialist era and the legacy of the communist secret police. Even though it is not an easy task, this special issue has endeavored to take one small step forward on this path.

Bibliography


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