

Prague's Secret Police



Prague's Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and its Security Services Archive opened their doors in February 2008, with a government mandate to study and evaluate the period of Nazi occupation and Communist rule and to make public documents and archival materials from the security services of the former totalitarian regimes in Czechoslovakia.

The book *Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police* reveals state secret police surveillance photographs taken during the era of hard-line socialist entrenchment after the 1968 Soviet-led occupation of Czechoslovakia. Far from being random snapshots, these images are the result of precisely planned operations staged by the Surveillance Directorate of the Communist State Security Service.

The goal of the 'tailing-unit' policemen was to shadow persons of interest and to obtain documentary material for use as incriminating evidence against opponents of the regime. The resulting photographs now serve as chilling evidence of the state-prescribed 'struggle against the internal adversary,' which had agent operatives using variously disguised miniature cameras – concealed in briefcases, a playing transistor radio,

lighter, inkstand, and even a baby carriage – to monitor Czechoslovak citizens, emigrés and foreigners.

For more information, see www.ustrcr.cz

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He studied photography at Prague's FAMU and two years after graduating in 1978 he returned to that school as an adjunct teacher of Studio Photography and Design and Syntax of the Photographic Image. In 1990 he was selected to head its Photography Department. Vojtěchovský is a theoretician and curator of art exhibitions and organizes workshops on studio photography and historic photographic processes. From 1999 to 2003 he was a visiting professor at American University's School of Communication in Washington DC. Currently, in addition to maintaining his own studio at the Faculty of Art and Design in Ústí nad Labem and teaching at Prague's Orange Factory School of Art and Advertising, he deals intensively with the topic of visual culture, which he teaches at the Faculty at the Arts of Charles University in Prague.

Prague from the Perspective of the Pathological Powerful

By Miroslav Vojtěchovský

In one of her most well-known images, *Surveillance is your busywork*, Barbara Kruger criticizes the practices of tabloid photographers and picture editors. Armed with a loupe to review negatives, the picture editor embodies in Kruger's picture a world of twisted morality, in which the ordinary human desire to see the intimacies of the known and famous becomes the subject of dirty business. To us, that editor is rather a symbol of the world of the paparazzi. Anyone who has used photography as a medium of self-expression feels abased if, camera around his neck, he is considered a kind of spy, invading the private world of his victim, not leaving him in peace even for a moment. In defense of this kind of dishonest activity, we sometimes hear excuses that the public has a right to be familiar to the last detail with the lives of the famous, especially when it comes to politicians. Still, we cannot consider the repugnant snooping of the paparazzi to be voyeurism.

Voyeurism can take many forms, to be sure, starting with young boys secretly following an enamored couple to catch a glimpse of what adults

refuse to talk about with them. Yet this more or less innocent childish curiosity can of course develop into something much more dangerous if it becomes the manifestation of an abnormal lack of real, true love, and becomes criminal if it follows an order that contradicts the fundamental ethical values of humankind. Voyeurism is usually defined as a sexual deviation, subsisting in the perverse attempt to see various intimacies, especially the sexual organs, of other people and their activity, and is thus a kind of fatal attempt to substitute (confuse) affectionate manifestations of loving cohabitation with a physical sexual act – erotic athletics. Not at all a true experience, or even a fantasy, it is rather an envious gawking at the sexual act, the deriving of satisfaction from observing other people's genitals, etc. If the paparazzi is not a voyeur in this sense, but rather a day-laborer, serving for filthy lucre the perverse need of a warped society, then the author – or authors, in the case of the photographs we have in front of us – are that much less so.

This collection of photographs, selected from the publication *Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police*, and released by the Prague-based Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, was created on the basis of a work assignment. Secretly, with a hidden camera and using various tricks and technical aids, the professionals of the Czechoslovak secret police (Státní bezpečnost, or StB – literally State Security Service) used a camouflaged still or film camera to shadow individuals, suspected of 'anti-state activity'; that is, free-thinking people who demonstrated that they did not agree with the communist regime.

The surveillance unit of the communist political police was created on 1 March 1948, a few days after the victorious communist putsch with which the 'working class' took over the government in post-war Czechoslovakia for a long forty years, as institute director Pavel Žáček indicates in his introduction to the book, 'Why did they do it?' Looking through this

multitude of photographs, taken by policemen-tails of the Czechoslovak secret police with the assistance of various artifices and contrivances, we can't help but agree with Dr. Žáček in the contention that the answer to such a question will help us grasp, to a full extent, the absurdity and criminality conceived by the police.

An ancient Czech wisdom says: 'One can govern with bayonets, but cannot sit on them...' This curious saying comes from historical experience, but also from faith that no even supposedly irreversible regime can be maintained *ad infinitum*. The more force is required to keep a regime in power, the more it is internally vulnerable in its disparateness. Anything can put it in danger; everything is suspicious. A totalitarian regime senses danger behind every corner.

Why was it necessary to tail and secretly photograph the well-known philosopher and natural scientist, Zdeněk Neubauer, practically at his every step? During his walks around Prague, on the way to the grocery store – simply everywhere, absolutely everywhere? Because within the scope of his research, Neubauer stated that science alone cannot answer all the questions of existence, and that, like religion, it must raise objection to dogmas of an axiomatic nature. Certainly such free expression on the part of an educated person, and moreover a scientist of indisputable quality in his field, must have made the totalitarian regime very nervous. He was dangerous in every respect. With his ability to formulate his own truth, his willingness to participate in and hold private seminars on themes of free thought that were dangerous to the regime, over which only with difficulty could the StB gain control and into which it succeeded in smuggling its informant only with the greatest

effort. This 'subject' of observation was suspicious due to his articulated unwillingness to acquiesce to the regime, but even those with whom he came into contact by chance became suspicious. Incriminating materials were necessary, and in this sense, photography became a valuable aid.

Disclosing the documents in the archive of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes brings to mind the opening of Pandora's box. It can be highly risky, and we are afraid of it, because we are afraid of what all will jump out at us, what we will have to grapple with. But to open Pandora's box with courage and pure intentions, in an attempt to transform the negative – which we have to face – into something positive is almost a categorical imperative for a society which wants to come to terms with any kind of totalitarian regime through which it has passed.

It is an edict grounded on the necessity to heal a sick society, pointing out what always accompanies the past for us, and of which we must be reminded. Whether we are Christians or simply and 'only' sensitive beings, we desire to forgive human mistakes and transgressions, but this doesn't mean that we should allow ourselves the luxury of forgetting. We must be able to warn off future leaders from taking calamitous steps.

Looking through the photographs from the secret police archives, the world of the past comes alive before us, but the photographs lack for us the magic of old, 'golden', bygone days. Only with difficulty can we take in the picturesqueness of Prague, which even in those sinister times had not lost the atmosphere of a magic city. Rather than the monumentality of the city, we see pictures of malice, enmity – pictures with a warped perspective. In these photographs there is nothing of the poetic cityscapes of Josef Sudek, not a trace of the humor of the hidden camera that we perceive with delight in the pictures of Robert Doisneau. Sudek knew how to play on the poetic or lyrical string, but dozens more



Zdeněk NEUBAUER, Prague 1984



Zdeněk NEUBAUER, Prague 1984

magnificent authors also tell of the Prague of bygone times, while the camera of Robert Doisneau, hidden in the shop window of Mrs. Doisneau, knew how to amuse, and gently warn of human pettiness, at the same time lovingly pointing out the comical foolishness of human doings.

In contrast to Jacob Riis, Lewis W. Hine, Margaret Bourke-White, William Eugene Smith and a long line of other humanistic photographers who made public the squalor of the world in an attempt to help the people in their pictures, the photographers of the Czechoslovak state secret police turned their hidden cameras, their technical skill, and their professional dexterity against the very people in their photographs.

The medium simply does not have a conscience. A conscience either possesses, or does not possess, the human being holding the camera in his hand, and all else depends on that person's decision, to what end the camera will serve.

Keeping track of the technical gimmicks used by StB employees to achieve their heinous aims can, in its own way, amuse us. A film camera placed in a child's baby carriage could become part of some kind of memorial dishonoring the totalitarian regime, in the style of Ed Kienholz's *Portable War Memorial* from 1968; so, too, could an office-worker's briefcase artfully hiding a camera. Both of these 'ready-made' objects would serve above all as a lasting memento to the sad statement that human skillfulness and the human heart, as well as the innocent medium created by a person for the taking of a precise picture of reality, can be used against a defenseless person who 'committed an offense'

p.1 Person surveilled: ADAM. A cover name for the training of new State Security Service officers. Those surveilled were always simply identified as ADAM. Prague, 1988, ADAM (man in the waistcoat with a bag under his left arm).

p.2 Left: Person surveilled: Stephane Rene Yves COCHET, born 1960. Developed by the Counterintelligence Directorate for the Struggle against the Internal Adversary in the years 1985-86. Prague, 1985.

Right: Person surveilled: Jiří NÁPRAVNÍK. Developed and registered by the Prague StB Directorate in the years 1974-75 and 1975-84. Prague, 1979, possibly Wenceslas Square, Jiří Nápravník (in white sweater and dark glasses) and an unidentified man.

p.3 Left and right: Person surveilled: Jiří NÁPRAVNÍK, born 1941. Developed and registered by the Prague StB Directorate in the years 1974-75 and 1975-84.

Prague, 1979, the square called Náměstí bratří Synků, from left: Jiří Nápravník and the contact KAREL (identified as Miloš Típek).

p.4 Person surveilled: Cardinal František TOMÁŠEK (1899-1992). Registered and developed by the political counterintelligence department of the Ministry of the Interior, among others, in the years 1954, 1960-65 and 1974-89.

Left: Prague, 1988, the square called Loretánské náměstí, from right: Cardinal František Tomášek and his driver.

Right: Prague, Loretánské náměstí, nuns leaving the Church of Our Lady of Angels.

p.5 Left: Person surveilled: Kitty HAWLEY, born 1943. Developed and registered by the Counterintelligence Directorate for the Struggle against the International Adversary, among others, in the years 1974-87. Prague, Wenceslas Square, from left, two random pedestrians, the contact HUGO (identified as John Earl) and Kitty Hawley.

Right: Person surveilled: Alena HROMÁDKOVÁ, born 1943. Developed by the Prague State Security Directorate, among others, in the years 1977-89.

only by what differentiates the human being from other animate beings; that is, free thinking.

In his work *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, the provocative philosopher and well-known theoretician of interpersonal communication, Vilém Flusser, uses creative photography as an example of the search for freedom in the automated post-industrial world. The philosopher – who was by coincidence born in Prague, but who, like a nomad, sought out new sanctuaries in the face of the threat of totalitarian regimes his entire life only to paradoxically die in an automobile accident in the 1990s near 'free' Prague – discerns in the ability of a photographer to win over the pre-programmed photographic apparatus a symbol of 'the last form of revolution which is still accessible for us... to give meaning to human life in the face of the accidental necessity of death...' in a world governed by the apparatus of the powerful.

No doubt. That very photography of Flusser's, in the pictures of StB servicemen, turns against its own potential; and thus, above all, against the human being. It becomes a symbol and reminder of the possible abuse of any kind of apparatus. This is what we should remember when looking through the photographs from the publication *Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police*, which represent a small fraction of the thousands of photographs in the one-time secret archives whose contents served the political establishment of the day.

We would be wise to view these photographs with heed, so that never and nowhere do we again permit in this world the misuse of any kind of apparatus against an innocent person. +

Prague, 1987, beside the statue of St. Wenceslas on Wenceslas Square, the contact EMA (not identified).

p.6 Person surveilled: Věra VRÁNOVÁ, born 1931. Developed and registered in the years 1972-74, 1974-76, 1977-88 by the Prague StB Directorate.

Left: Prague, in the U Tunelu wine bar on Koněvova Street, the contact LACO (identified as Ladislav Vagner).

Right: from left: Věra Vránová (with her back to the camera in a chequered jacket), the contact LACO and a waitress.

p.7 Left and right: Kitty HAWLEY, born 1943. Developed and registered by the Counterintelligence Directorate for the Struggle against the International Adversary, among others, in the years 1974-87. Prague, 1976, in the hall of Prague-Ruzyně Airport, from left: Kitty Hawley, with a buggy and a contact (the man standing behind her, not identified in the file)

p.8 Person surveilled: Oto MÁDR, born 1917. Developed by the Prague StB Directorate and the Counterintelligence Directorate for the Struggle against the Internal Adversary, among others, in the years 1973-1989. Left: Prague, 1981, a small park in front of the bridge called Jiráskův most on the Smíchov-district side of the Vltava River (view of the Janackovo nábřeží embankment). photos 2, 3 from left: the contact EDA (identified as Jan Altrichter) and Oto Mádr.

Right: same date and location, Oto Mádr.

p.9 Person surveilled: Zdeněk NEUBAUER, born 1942. Developed by the Counterintelligence Directorate for the Struggle against the Internal Adversary, among others, in the years 1975-79 and 1980-88. Prague, 1984, Podolská Street, Zdeněk Neubaauer.

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