

SPYWARE

Prague Through the Lens of the Secret Police

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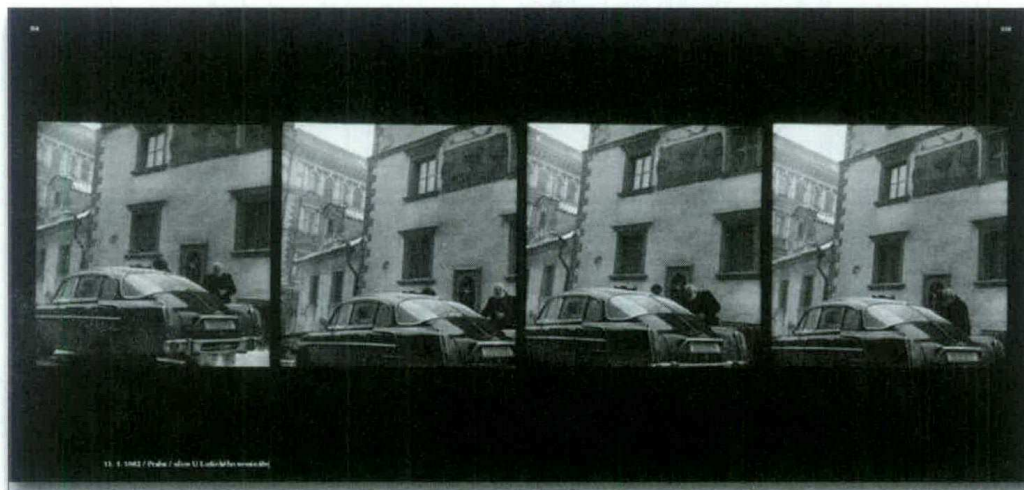
288 pp./\$16.17 (hb)

The men who were to head the Czech State Security Surveillance Directorate all seem rather weary-looking and average. This dreariness dates the photographs of these security apparatchiks (profiled by Miroslav Urbanek) to after the postwar Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia. Like in most police states, these men were simply cogs in a larger, hugely insecure machine where spying created a fragile daily existence, even for members of the security apparatus. Everyone was suspected of something. Crimes against the state—real and imagined—were sought out with a fierce energy, both bestial and comic. Only the most privileged were considered beyond reproach, and even then the

information-gathering agency tasked with the impossible. The people of Prague, unaware, yet conditioned to be wary, mitigate the spy's dogged work with a public liveliness that contradicts the oppression under which they live.

In one photograph taken outside a church, people emerge smiling, seemingly eager for interaction. And in a series of two photographs, a man and a woman talk while walking through a parking lot—both faces are illuminated by an invisible yet fiery spark of attraction. Prague's life is further exhibited as two men walk down the street with cigarettes dangling from their lips, one carrying a large vase. Here, one catches the sense of perceived mischief with which the State might have been concerned.

On the other hand, photographs of an empty cemetery leave viewers perplexed. Were the dead suspected of crimes against the state? Or perhaps, there was a conspiracy regarding headstones? One is left to wonder. And to some degree, that might be exactly the point.



In an introduction to *Prague Through the Lens of the Secret Police*, Pavel Zacek describes the secret police as the “state paparazzi.” He quotes directly from a security service directive: “Photography belongs among the important evidential instruments which can have a decisive impact on the successful outcome of agent operative efforts, on the detection and conviction of those committing criminal acts” (17). And there is more: “It is important that all moments in the behavior of the subject whose criminal activity is being documented be in the photographs” (17). The sheer

clumsiness of these translated formulations reflects a cloudy rationale in terms of the justification of spying. How can you define suspicious behavior after all? What images have the power to incriminate? Largely, one understands the game. Yet, the overall randomness of the surveillance is baffling; it could have been only marginally effective at best.

Recent exhibitions of the photographs at the Czech Center in New York City and at Harvard University add resonance to this book, which has slowly made its way to the United States. Given the increased surveillance Americans now face and how the government is outright spying on its own citizens (through such measures as the Patriot Act), its arrival could not be timelier. What is presented here is a cautionary tale about the ways in which freedom is undermined in the service of “protecting” democratically elected governments. Nothing calls that into question more than the essay by Jan H. Vitvar titled, “A Camera in The Hands of a Sick State.” Given current trends, books like this deserve close scrutiny, not for what the photographs capture, but rather for what they might predict.

tables could quickly turn. This pervasive surveillance and culture of informing destabilized Czech society and created an imbalance that strove to minimize internal opposition. One is reminded of the story of a well-respected East German general, a man the system considered beyond reproach, whose wife had been spying on him their entire married life together.

The truth of the “police state” has recently come to light after the collapse of the Soviet Union and democratization of many Eastern European countries and, as a result, the archives of many police states have been uncovered. A part of one such archive has recently come to attention—the photo surveillance of the people of Prague by the security services.

Prague Through the Lens of the Secret Police is an unnerving look at the end results of a regime's quest to capture everything and nothing. Individual photographs, like the ones taken from cameras in baby strollers or mounted on automobile engine blocks, only dance around a feeling of secrecy. However, once artfully arranged and combined into an entire collection, the photographs together expose an important historical representation of illicit surveillance. Seen together as arranged in this collection, they offer a notable, artful poise amid the chaos of an

Robert Moeller is a writer and painter living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A new exhibition of his paintings will be on view this July at HallSpace in Boston.