

## When Prague Spied on Its Own

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The close of summer offers the perfect opportunity to catch exhibits that are both free and never before seen in the U.S.

One such exhibit to catch before it departs on Sept. 20 is "Prague Through the Lens of the Secret Police." Hosted by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the exhibit is well worth a visit to the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center on Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

As the world approaches the 20th- anniversary celebrations of the fall of communism, this show represents one of many exhibits cropping up throughout Eastern Europe in remembrance of that era.

Although the exhibit certainly offers visitors the rare opportunity to see what life was like for Czechs under the Iron Curtain, organizers said its timing to the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution was more coincidental.

"The anniversary of the Czechs' overthrow of communism is not until November, so the exhibit is really more about the photos themselves," said Mircea Munteanu, a program associate at the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project.

Part history lesson and part spy drama, the photos themselves offer enough of a thrill.

The large poster-board displays include both information on the secret police's history and spying methods, as well as images of Czech citizens trailed by the State Security secret police, or the StB.

Each poster features several photos of an individual captured in everyday activities, accompanied by a caption that details the trail's code name, actual name, the time of day and excerpts from spies' reports. Police assiduously noted the behavior of their trails, often recording whether a subject seemed calm or unnerved, along with their alleged suspicious activities.

All the photos featured were taken in Prague and were developed in black-and-white from StB negatives. The effect magnifies the city's gray, lifeless feel, in contrast to the Prague's characteristic vibrancy today. The era featured is the "normalization" period of hard-line Soviet entrenchment following the 1968 Soviet-led occupation.

Munteanu said historians are increasingly incorporating Soviet documents and photos into the historical record. Previously, accounts on the Cold War primarily relied on U.S. documents to write the history of Soviet totalitarianism.

"It's not that the history was wrong, it just was not complete," Munteanu said. "Recently recovered intelligence documents have allowed for a more complete Cold War history, especially with the digitizing of Soviet archives."

The exhibit was assembled in 2008 by two Czech research institutes — the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and the Security Services Archive — to coincide with the Czech presidency of the European Union. With previous collaboration between the Wilson Center and the two Czech institutes, Munteanu said it made sense to bring the exhibit to Washington, D.C.

There is a certain aesthetic value to the photos beyond the obvious historical significance. Although the aim of the photos was to gather enough information to convict those participating in anti-government activities, 20 years out they seem ironically artistic. There is also an authentic quality to the individuals captured in the most mundane of activities walking and talking throughout the streets of Prague.

The tonal quality of the photos certainly helps to create a somber feel, but it is hard to escape the reality of why they were taken. At the same time, those viewing the exhibit can be found wanting more, wishing to know what happened to the

Czechs who were trailed. Today, if Czech citizens want to review their records from the Soviet era, they are free to do so.

Because the secret police took photos at eye level — using craftily disguised cameras in briefcases, radios, lighters, inkstands and even a baby carriage — people seldom noticed they were being photographed. Even so, hints can be seen on some faces casting sly glances.

Many people trailed seem to retain their sense of freedom despite the police efforts. One banner shows blurry photos of a young man Xavier Rouard, or “Alice 84,” walking and laughing alongside a young woman as they both cross the street.

Beyond offering a small glimpse into just how great state suspicion was, the exhibit also shows how the average person was pivotal to the nexus of Soviet control. Although fairly small with about 20 individual displays, the exhibit offers an accurate, albeit accidental, reflection of the pre-revolutionary era. The photos are raw and the feelings on display are open for exploration.