



Big Brother's Family Album

Secret police photographs evoke the oppression of communist Czechoslovakia

The recently published *Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police*, a project by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, shows the city and its people as framed by the cameras of the StB. The Czech-English book comprises more than 200 photos, most of which are grouped together according to the files of the monitored individuals from which they were pulled. The photographs are accompanied by brief captions stating the names of the files, the dates when they were taken and the places. Many of the photographs captured people accidentally as one learns from the index, which identifies some of the subjects and specifies the periods during which they were monitored.

The book can be approached from an artistic, as well as historical point of view. On one level, there is the aesthetic value of the black and white photographs; on another, there is the documentation value as the photos powerfully convey the atmosphere of communist-era Prague.

The police photographers' aim was to gather documentation that could be used in convicting the monitored people of anti-government activities. In some chapters, the book offers an inside look into the operational system and development of the Surveillance Directorate and profiles the division's chiefs. An English-speaking reader will find special notes on the text placed at the very end of the book dedicated to further clarifying the hierarchy of the various institutions and an explanation of the translations used.

The book's photo editor, Vladimír Bosák, explains in an introductory chapter that he picked the photographs from approximately 7,000 files put together by the Security Services Archives according to the "criteria of the photographs' aesthetic quality, their falling within the period of normalization (1969-1989), and their capturing the image of the Prague of that time". Bosák did not use the photographs developed by the secret service but made his own from the negatives.



Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police

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Available in bookshops, the library of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes at Siwecova 2, Prague 3, or online at www.kosmas.cz/knihy/146632/praha-objektivem-tajne-policie/

Price: CZK 390

Because the book can be interpreted on several different levels, it requires the reader's active participation. Although most of the photographs can very well stand on their own, especially those that include famous Czechs such as Milan Kundera and Miloš Forman, more information would be welcome.

An index at the end of the book groups the photos according to the names of the particular files they were taken from, and an introductory paragraph gives you the name of the monitored person, but that is all. Half of the people in the photographs are foreigners, and one would naturally like to know who they are and what they were doing here. But the book fails to provide any of this information, and the reader is left hanging.

As Jan H. Vitvar notes in the opening chapter, the photographs do a very good job of showcasing the "grey, dead city" that was communist-era Prague. The photographs come across as sombre and grim, though this may be due to the tonal scale chosen by Bosák, who writes that it "adds atmosphere and further transforms the meaning". One must wonder whether the viewer is thus being invited to perceive the atmosphere of that era as much bleaker than it was in reality.

Vitvar also remarks on the contrast that becomes obvious when comparing the postures and facial expressions of those monitored (supposedly for subversive activities) with the accidentally captured people: "The only people who appear relatively relaxed in the pictures are the 'subjects' of surveillance themselves. ... It is evident from the pictures taken throughout this tiresome pursuit that those being monitored retained their inner freedom." Looking through the photographs, one has to agree. Examples include Hadrovský and Viola, on page 211, who even smile for the camera. We're left to guess whether this was knowingly or accidental: Does the inner freedom spring from the liberating certainty of being watched? Here again, it would be fitting to introduce the stories of the people so that one learns what happened to them and how they fared.

But the many levels on which the book can be read come at a price and ultimately the project feels like a compromise. For an art book offering a historical view of the communist times, there is a disturbing burden attached to each of the pictures, since the viewer cannot escape the reality and the purpose for which they were taken in the first place. For a testimony of secret police practices and the disclosure of how intensely it surveilled the lives of the individuals portrayed, it lacks enough background information to let the viewer understand the full story. •

