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Title	Introduction: Archives and Communities
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Publication date	2020-10-01
Original Citation	Kapaló, J. A. and Vagramenko, T. (2020) 'Introduction: Archives and Communities', in Kapaló, J. A. and Vagramenko, T. (eds)., Hidden Galleries: Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe, Münster: Lit Verlag, pp. 8-11. isbn: 978-3-643-91263-3
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://www.lit-verlag.de/isbn/978-3-643-91263-3
Download date	2026-11-02 02:33:56
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/11255



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INTRODUCTION

ARCHIVES AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

James Kapaló and Tatiana Vagramenko

During the twentieth century, some states in Central and Eastern Europe attempted to eliminate religious groups that were deemed dangerous or undesirable. Communist regimes pursued this policy with the aim of creating atheist societies free from religious influences whilst right-wing dictatorships targeted minority religious groups with the aim of homogenizing nation-states, often around the majority ethnic and religious identity. But a paradoxical thing happened: testimonies, photographs, personal and sacred items, and the ephemera of religious life were preserved by the very state institutions whose role it was to destroy them. The secret police played a pivotal role in these states' attempts to control and regulate the religious field, and their archives contain a rich collection of confiscated images, texts and items that were used to incriminate members of religious groups. Alongside these materials, the secret police produced their own representations of the communities they were tasked with surveilling and controlling. This book catalogues the ways in which totalitarian states tried to capture religion in images, graphics, texts and dossiers in order to control and eliminate those they deemed undesirable.

This collection grows out of the research project *Creative Agency and Religious Minorities: "Hidden Galleries" in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe*, funded by the European Research Council. The Hidden Galleries project aimed to uncover that which was hidden twice over—first by the religious groups who were forced underground, and second, by the secret police who found them and enclosed them in their archives. The materials presented here originate from the secret police and other state archives in Romania, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The citizens of these four countries shared a common experience of state repression and surveillance from the 1920s until the end of communism. Under both right-wing and left-wing dictatorships, religious difference or innovation became associated with enmity towards the state and in this context mainstream and majority religions also played a role in the repression of smaller and newer religious communities. In the 1930s and 1940s, as part of wide-ranging campaigns aimed at transforming the social order in the Soviet Union and under the nationalist regimes in Hungary and Romania, arrest, detention in labour camps and deportation became widespread means of dealing with banned religious groups and problematic religious leaders. During communism, periods of mass repression, which included the closure of many monasteries and places of worship of mainstream majority churches, including Orthodox, Catholic and others, deportations to the Gulag and forced labour camps (especially in the period from the 1920s to the early 1950s) were followed by the era of mass surveillance (roughly the late 1950s to the 1980s). In the Soviet Union, Stalin's short rapprochement with the Orthodox Church during the Second World War meant that most anti-religious operations and propaganda after this period were aimed at religious leaders and minority religious groups that were often western in origin, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Adventists, and who were accused of being spies and collaborating with external powers. From the 1950s, the same was true in communist Romania and Hungary. As a KGB report from 1953 states, "illegal" religious groups were considered "harmful to the state by the very fact of their existence and the character of their activity."

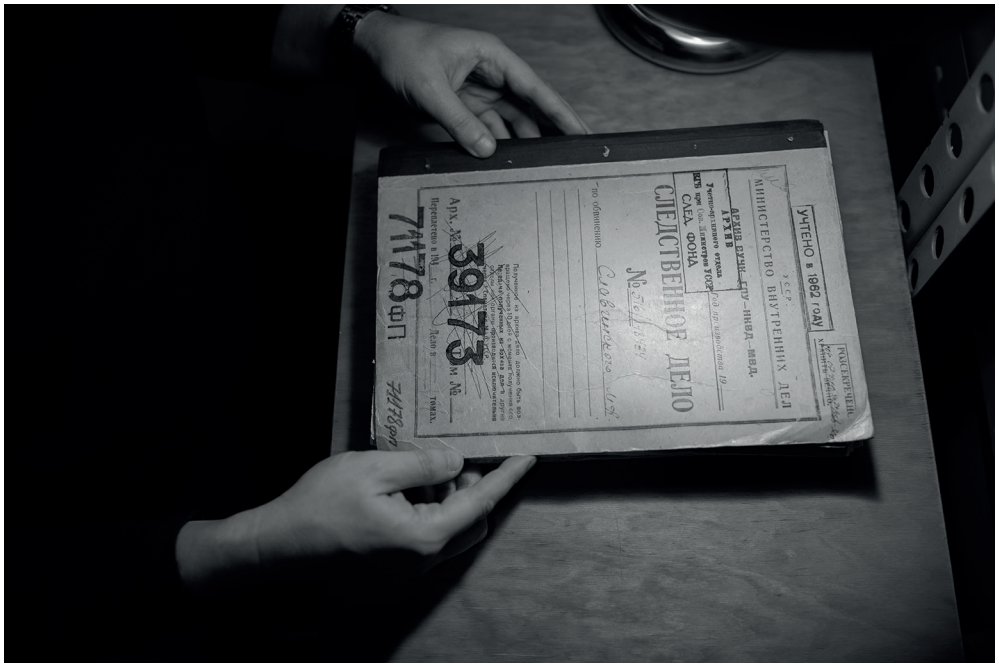
In the era of mass surveillance, the secret police moved from overt violent repression, executions and deportations to subtler means of controlling and ridding society of dissenters. This included discrediting, denouncing, persuading, blackmailing and tempting with favours individuals they sought to control. In this work, the secret police recruited and relied on large numbers of informers, some highly trained and dedicated, others informal, irregular and unreliable, many of whom had often been coerced into collaborating. In Romania, the number of informers rose from 73,000 in 1968 to 144,289 in 1989.[1] The task was even more complicated, as officially believers could not be persecuted directly for their religious beliefs, as was the case of the Soviet Union, where on paper the constitution granted religious freedom. The infamous article 58 of the Soviet penal code on "Anti-Soviet Agitation and Propaganda" was one of the most commonly used charges against religious believers. Penal cases tended to be based on fabricated or exaggerated charges that translated religious practices into extremist political activity. In the Soviet Union, the late 1950s also saw the return of extensive anti-religious propaganda campaigns that filled newspapers, magazines and newsreels with stories of dangerous sectarians and charlatan priests.

Our selection of materials is not intended to present a history of the repression itself, but rather to illustrate how the secret police represented, visualized and systematized the groups that they were pursuing. The images and materials presented, which were all confiscated, collated or created by the police or secret police and originate from diverse, so-called anti-religious operations, have a dual character: they were used by the secret police as incriminating evidence against religious communities, which could also be utilized in propaganda campaigns; and they also represent the memory, cultural

patrimony and creative spirit of these groups and individuals.

The archives paradoxically preserved these materials despite the regimes intention to eradicate the people, beliefs and cultures that produced them. Most of the materials you will find here, which represent a small fraction of the vast materials to be found in secret police and state archives, were located by a team of researchers who conducted archival research in the secret police and other state archives between 2016 and 2019. The team sifted through hundreds of thousands of pages of files in order to find these often uncatalogued, hidden visual and material traces of communities that had been targeted by the state. The images are of differing character, are of varied provenance and served diverse functions. However, once placed within the secret police archives, they were all submitted to an internal "bureaucratic logic of classification" that shaped the lives of religious believers.[2] Be they confiscated religious materials, personal notebooks, letters or surveillance photographs taken by a hidden camera, these materials were converted into the physical evidence of criminal activity of communities and believers. They entered a specific knowledge-generating space that constructed the religious other as politically dangerous and socially harmful. Our task as researchers was both to examine the logic of the production, curation and archival classification of visual and material religion in the secret police archives and to trace the original life of images and materials enclosed there back to their source communities.

The various archives have different regimes of access that impact who can read a file, when and under what circumstances. Rarely do members of the communities that were targeted know about their presence in the archives or how to gain access. Whenever possible, the researchers on the Hidden Galleries project approached individuals and communities in order to inform them of the existence of materials that relate to them and to discuss their experience of repression. In this book, we have included the stories and accounts of some of our encounters with individuals targeted by the state and with descendant communities. Connecting the archival past with the present lives of religious communities opened up a unique opportunity to hear believers' memories, their reflections on the personal and communal impact of surveillance, interrogations and house searches, and to hear stories that did not make it into the secret police archives or those that had been told in files that were later destroyed or disappeared. Our ethnographic work with communities enabled what Sonja Luehrmann refers to as an "oppositional reading" of such a biased, multi-layered and multi-voiced historical source



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[1] Lavinia Stan. *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 62.

[2] Sonja Luehrmann. *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

like the secret police archives.[3] A young girl who appeared in a confiscated photograph of her baptism learned nearly fifty years later that her image was preserved in the archives and was able to tell us the story of what happened to her community after the police raided their house church in 1972. A Tudorist pastor was able to see the first songbook produced by his community, which had been confiscated by the police many years earlier. A Hungarian Calvinist Church choir discovered that the documents, photographs and official stamp confiscated from them in the 1960s had been meticulously copied and compiled, by the secret police officer that stole them, into an impressive photo album. None of these confiscated items have been returned to these communities.

Secret police archives represent a problematic source for historians and researchers, from both an epistemological and ethical perspective. The overreliance on the texts they contain in the search for truth and justice in postcommunism has been the cause of numerous controversies due to the tendency to search them for black and white evidence of victimhood or collaboration, dissent or compliance. The ubiquitous fabrications, ideologically-driven misrepresentations and exaggerations make them unsuitable as stand-alone sources. The ethnographic approach taken by the Hidden Galleries project—starting with the visual and material religious presence in the archives, rather than the secret police's texts, and then working with faith communities—is designed to help overcome these ethical and interpretational dilemmas.

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The images and materials in this collection are divided into four parts. The first part traces the variety of forms and appearances of what became known as the "religious underground." In order to escape the attention of the state and the eyes and ears of the secret police, some religious groups attempted to hide their activities, forming underground networks and clandestine communities. Such religious communities, however, were not solely the product of communist repression; many of them had come into existence earlier under the right-wing regimes that preceded them.

In some cases, religious communities chose to hide and worship in spaces dug underground, a practice that began before and continued during communism. Other groups chose to avoid detection by escaping to remote places to practice their beliefs, conducting services and rituals during hiking trips to the mountains or in forest hide-outs. Groups of ex-monks and ex-nuns, belonging to both Orthodox and Catholic traditions, who had been forced to give up their religious life when the state closed their monasteries, secretly set up house churches and communities. Some Evangelical, Pentecostal and Adventist groups who refused to accept oversight by the state also set up their own churches in their homes. But as the images you will see here show, the secret police were often able to uncover their hidden places of worship. Despite the attempts to evade surveillance, secret police officers managed to follow or infiltrate groups and to raid their clandestine places of worship, operations which were often captured on camera. In the Soviet Union, there was a close cooperation between the state security apparatus and public media. Images found in these files collected, produced and curated by the secret police were often later published in newspapers, in anti-religious teaching materials and in propaganda films.

The second part of this collection revolves around what Cristina Vățulescu refers to as police aesthetics.[4] Here we present the various forms of visual representation that the secret police employed in their information and evidence gathering operations. The graphics, maps, images and texts produced by the secret police about religious groups are the result of a distinct logic and set of practices. They served specific functions and were deployed in different contexts in order to fulfil their mission of gaining complete control over society through the gathering of information and the production of knowledge. These images also have a distinct aesthetic of their own, a police aesthetics. Photographs, whether produced by the secret police or confiscated and interpreted by officers, were the most common medium used to capture evidence and represent visually the targets of the state, from the simple mugshot to surveillance photographs, crime scene photographs and complex reconstructions involving whole photo albums. The photographic practices of the secret police were remarkably similar across Central and Eastern Europe and are all based on models and principles devised and taught by KGB officers.

The third part of the book presents examples of heretofore under-researched creative practices of religious movements under the oppressive regimes of the twentieth century. The creative visual and literary material represented here constitutes the lost or stolen cultural patrimony of repressed groups. The secret police were mostly interested in people, not in preserving objects and images, but inadvertently and paradoxically that is precisely what they have done. Unintentionally, they created the possibility for

the personal artefacts and cultural patrimony of communities to experience a new life. Some of the materials you will see in the pages that follow are the result of confiscations, intrusive operations and the desecration of sacred places and objects that happened during the course of secret police operations. The personal photographs were created by the people themselves even though they were later used as weapons of incrimination. They show individuals and religious communities as they themselves wished to be portrayed, sometimes smiling and celebrating, at other times solemnly worshiping or mourning. Reflecting on these materials in particular, we may question whether they still belong in the archive or if they should be returned to communities. Unlike the texts written by the secret police, which have been mined for "facts" in the search for the truth about the repressive regimes of the past, the confiscated images and objects represent a very different legacy of the archives that can help tell other stories and histories.

The last section in this book is dedicated to reflections on the whole research process that led to this book, which was made complete by our engagement with, and contributions made by, our research participants. Many representatives of faith communities joined us at the opening of the project's first public exhibition titled *Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives* (Imagini din galerii secrete: religia clandestină în arhivele poliției secrete / Rejtett galériák: Az üldözött vallásosság képei a titkosszolgálati levéltárakban), which took place at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania from 21 November to 29 December 2019. It was only when the research entered this final stage, when we were able to stand amongst the materials we had gathered together over three years, that the dispersed images and objects and the fragmented memories and precious stories eventually were rejoined. This is when the dusty archival folders and crumpled images truly came back to life as the faith communities themselves reconnected the broken threads of their past and voiced their views on their stolen patrimony.

[3] Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives*, 75.

[4] Cristina Vățulescu. *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

The Hidden Galleries Digital Archive

The images and stories presented in this book have been selected from the Hidden Galleries Digital Archive (http://hiddengalleries.eu/digitalarchive/), which presents more detailed analyses of these and many other materials. Each story in this book corresponds to one or more digital archive entries, references to which can be found at the end of each text.

The rationale behind the digital archive, and by extension the public exhibitions and this volume which grew out of it, is to present visual and textual materials relating to the creative practices and material culture of the religious underground within the archives of the secret police. These materials have in many cases not been preserved elsewhere and are also difficult to access and locate within the secret police archives. The collection is indicative rather than comprehensive, with examples selected for the collection designed to demonstrate the kinds of materials produced by and about the religious underground. It is hoped that the digital archive will be used by researchers, the public and, most importantly, by members of the communities that were targeted by the secret police.

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