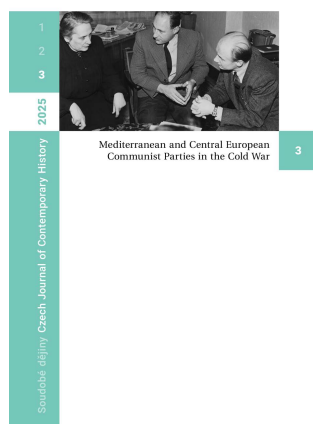


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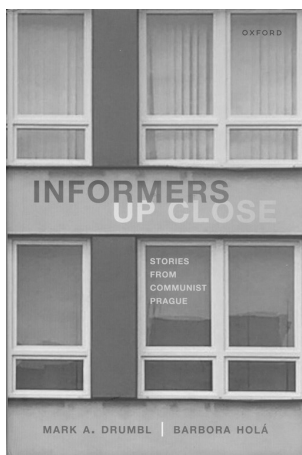
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“Informers” – between Victimhood and Guilt?

Foreign Authors on State Security Collaborators and the Limits of Interpretation

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DRUMBL, Mark A. – HOLÁ, Barbora:

Informers Up Close: Stories from Communist Prague.

Oxford, Oxford University Press 2024, 252 pages,
ISBN 978-0-19-285513-8.

The year 2024 saw the publication of a unique foreign monograph dedicated to the world of the Czechoslovak State Security's (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB) secret collaborators. A secret collaborator is an issue of great social interest in Czech history as well as in the present time. Despite several works that can be related to the issue,¹ an analysis of collaboration, its motives and the relationship between “informers” and the StB members still remains largely an unfulfilled task. Still, there are several studies that do focus on the issue of secret collaborators.² It is

¹ See mainly BÁRTA, Milan (ed.): *Člověk v soukolí StB*. Praha, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2020. However, even this collective monograph is a body of case studies rather than an analysis of the world of secret collaborators.

² BÍLEK, Libor: Zavazují se dobrovolně... Rezidenti, agenti, informátoři a další: Tajní spolupracovníci Státní bezpečnosti v letech 1945–1989. In: *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015), pp. 4–19; CORNWALL, Mark: *Tracking the Informer Network of the Czechoslovak Security Police (StB)*. Unpublished paper, author's personal archive, 2025.

certainly noteworthy that the issue has been chosen as a theme of a monograph by two academics working abroad, even though Barbora Holá is originally from the Czech Republic. And what is more, the two authors are not graduates in history, but in law, while Canadian Mark Drumbl is also a graduate in political sciences. In the long term, both are professionally interested in issues of international law, war crimes and mass violence, human rights, the search for justice in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and the process of coming to terms with a traumatic past (transitional justice). Drumbl is currently director of the Transnational Law Institute at the School of Law at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, USA. Holá is a professor in the Department of Criminal Law and Criminology of the Faculty of Law at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (*Nederlands Studiecentrum voor Criminaliteit en Rechtshandhaving*). The book itself may therefore become the object of examination. How have these undoubtedly reputable authors managed to grasp the issue despite living outside the country whose recent history they deal with and despite not being historians and not having dealt with this issue in the past? Will their conclusions be of any relevance? Their work will therefore also be a test of the epistemological possibilities and limits of research into the issue.

The book deals with the question of "informers", in Czech literally *informátoři*, during the period of communist Czechoslovakia. However, the usual term used in the context of the State Security is "secret collaborator" (*tajný spolupracovník*). The term "informer" (*informátor*) had another, specific meaning. Until 1972, it was used for one of the categories of secret collaborators of StB counter-intelligence. After that year it was no longer used as part of its terminology.³ The authors apply the term "informer" to a "common/ordinary citizen" (*běžný občan*), who collects information and subsequently passes it on to the authorities, usually in secret. They also define this category as different from an open "collaborator" (*kolaborant*) and the more sophisticated and professional "spy" (*špión*) (p. 3). In the context of secret collaboration with the State Security, the very definition of "common/ordinary citizen" (*běžný občan*) seems to make no sense, given that the "secret collaborator" (*tajný spolupracovník*) was supposed to comply with certain special criteria corresponding to the desired aims of the agency network.⁴ The arbitrary treatment of terminology is one of the book's shortcomings.

³ Směrnice pro agenturně operativní práci Státní bezpečnosti z 16. 5. 1962 [Directive on the Operational Work of Agents of the State Security of 16 May 1962]. In: *Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů – Rozkazy a směrnice* [online]. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/rozказы/smernice/rmv_13_1962.pdf.

⁴ Směrnice pro práci se spolupracovníky kontrarozvědky (A-oper-I-3) z 25. 1. 1978 [Directive for Those Cooperating with Counterintelligence (A-oper-I-3) of 25 January 1978]. In: *Ibidem*

Judging by the subtitle *Stories from Communist Prague*, this should in the first place be virtually an extensive case study based on the Czechoslovak sources from a certain period (p. 7). Nevertheless, right at the beginning, the authors also state two other extensive and widely different aims. Firstly, there is the surprising ambition of formulating generally valid conclusions about the extremely interesting phenomenon of “informer” as an individual type or actor – regardless of any specific kind of regime that the informer serves – with the main goal of defining the motives of his or her actions. However, in order to search for such a universal response, it would be necessary to explore not only the Czechoslovak State Security sources, but naturally, and at least to the same extent, also similar sources and practices of, for example, some liberal democracy. Informers have of course sparked interest for centuries. The term has a mostly negative content, related to the betrayal of ideals or trust and/or greed. Yet, sometimes informers can be also seen in a positive sense, such as in the case of “whistle-blowers”, that is, someone reporting in the interest of the general good (p. 1). On the other hand, even “informers” of the secret services in oppressive regimes may have subjectively positive motives. The authors’ goal is to present this so far neglected phenomenon in academic work, yet right at the outset they abandon any attempts to describe its mechanisms. Their intention is to focus on understanding the motives of acts and the related emotions of “informers”. They also feel the need to deal with the limits between “us” and “them”, between actors and victims, between voluntary acts and coercion. These limits are relativized by the authors *a priori* as permeable.

However, Drumbl and Holá also have another aim, which is clearly related to their previous research. This aim is to explore the position of “informers” during the process of transitional justice. The authors are therefore interested in the further fate of the phenomenon of “informers” of the Czechoslovak StB even after the system organized by the secret police came to its end. They claim *a priori* that a politicized, negative view of “informers” does not correspond to reality and that an academic analysis should offer a more balanced view. As an example of victimization of “informers”, however, they cite the case of the alleged denouncement of Miroslav Dvořáček by the writer Milan Kundera in the early 1950s (p. 6). The case was widely publicized (but not fully clarified) and given the gravity of its social consequences it may seem at first to represent a solid and comprehensive example. However, this is again a point where we encounter the authors’ methodological fumbling. Based on published data, Milan Kundera was not a regular (recruited) “informer”, in the sense of being an StB

[online]. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/rozkazy/smer-nice/rmv_3_1978.pdf.

secret collaborator, but at most a one-time informer who in this case came into contact only with the uniformed Public Security (*Veřejná bezpečnost*, VB) officers.⁵

What seems to have attracted the authors most was the seemingly great potential of the sources contained in the State Security files. They admit that for them, "facts" matter less (!) than "what can inductively and indicatively be traced" (p. 13). Work with these sources clearly requires a critical approach. Nonetheless, the authors are interested in the "spirit of the source", which is supposed to record communication between an "informer" and a recipient of the information (StB member). The problem is that this communication was recorded and interpreted by a member of the repressive apparatus. To consider State Security files to be a faithful record of communication is greatly misleading, because the perspectives and strategies of both sides were usually substantially different. The files, quite logically, do not contain the directly recorded authentic perspective of an "informer". Even the authors themselves express their doubts about the StB sources, which critics consider to be incomplete, untrustworthy and imprecise (p. 12).⁶

The second chapter provides the historical context of the development of the State Security, its structures and its place in the system of governance and is clearly intended for a foreign reader. Despite being quite accurate, it nevertheless contains some distortions, as well as occasional mistakes. To give one example, it is not clear how the authors arrived at the questionable claim that normalization lasted until 1988 when students clashed with the security forces at the Lennon wall in Prague (p. 35). The year 1968 in Czechoslovakia is characterized by the authors as the culmination of the liberalization development of the 1960s and as an attempt at reform by the governing communist party. The enforced deployment of Soviet units after the crash of the Prague Spring, which subsequently helped to create the normalization atmosphere, is omitted by the authors. However, they do note that the experience with communism in Czechoslovakia was not a foreign element of post-war social development and in general evaluate this period as participative dictatorship. The resulting image of the State Security is therefore an oversimplification. For example, their narrative seems to suggest that until the early 1950s, the building of this institution was

⁵ See HRADILEK, Adam – TICHÝ, Martin: Osudová mise Moravcova kurýra: Příběh plukovníka letectva ve výslužbě Miroslava Dvořáčka. In: *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), pp. 72–85.

⁶ See KŘEN, Jan: Dokumenty StB jako pramen poznání minulosti. In: *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 12, No. 3–4 (2005), pp. 708–733; IDEM: Historky StB a paměť. In: *Ibidem*, Vol. 13, No. 1–2 (2006), pp. 243–265. The second contribution was part of the journal discussion "Concerning the Archives of the StB and History Ethics".

mostly accompanied by failures, fumbling and incompetence. Yet, we should not forget, for example, its successful infiltration into non-communist political parties before February 1948 or successful provocations, such as “action Scout” (*akce „Skaut“*).⁷ For the authors, the then society was basically passive, resigned and satisfied. However, they also describe a strange fear reigning in this allegedly satisfied society. On the one hand, “the [Czechoslovak] regime typically had to secure its (slender/transient/fragile) legitimacy through complex forms of negotiation and persuasion rather than relying on straightforward societal obedience toward police and governmental authority” (p. 25). However, at the same time, “StB members and their informers infiltrated all parts of society from embassies to offices, schools, and sports clubs. The StB crafted a dense surveillance network and thereby curried betrayal, mistrust, fear, phlegmatism, and cynicism throughout society; the StB was simultaneously ‘nowhere and everywhere’. It stewed and brewed unease by turning citizens against citizens; loyalties frayed and individuals pettily looked out for themselves.” (pp. 50–51)

There is a clear ongoing effort throughout the text to blur the lines between the actors. The two authors claim that the motives people had for collaborating were diverse. By collaborating they entered a space (whether consciously or not) which allowed them the opportunity to rise professionally and socially and to gain certain advantages. In this way they show that people had a choice and could act autonomously. At the same time, they construe this normality against the backdrop of an absurd and obscure system of collaboration, created to exploit people. The authors also contrast this variable space, interwoven by individual paths, with a narrative of heroism and betrayal, which, they claim, remains dominant in the Czech Republic with regard to the past. Although the theme of the book evolves around betrayal, the authors also observe that at the same time people satisfied their needs, and that this was done in a much more colourful and independent way than in the simple black-and-white terms that the past is presented in today (p. 66).

The third chapter deals with the issue of coming to terms and settling accounts with “informers” and the communist past. Drumbl and Holá list not only the “velvety” way of handing over power, social exclusion of culprits and lustrations, revealing of the tabooed past and transparency in making it public, but also rehabilitation and property restitution, the creation of memory institutes and changes in the public space (renaming of streets and squares and the removal of monuments). The authors emphasize (sometimes repeatedly) that for Václav

⁷ See SVOBODA, Petr: *Odboj, nebo provokace? Provokace StB prováděné proti třetímu odboji v rámci akce „Skaut“ na příkladu skupiny „Za svobodu“ v letech 1948–1951*. Praha, Academia 2020.

Havel, guilt and responsibility for communist conditions represented a moral category in principle affecting all people (pp. 4, 69, 204, 221). Nonetheless, what they probably do not know is that in the early 1990s, Havel himself as President had his share in wild lustrations and that he even described StB secret collaborators as "an ulcer which must be cut open and removed, no matter how much it hurts".⁸ He was also involved in the case of the Vienna mayor Helmut Zilk (1927–2008), to whom he refused to award a state decoration on the grounds that Zilk had been a secret collaborator of Czechoslovak intelligence. Only later did it emerge that the case was much more complex and Havel eventually apologized to Zilk.⁹ Nevertheless, the authors only mention the fact that Havel denounced the Lustration Act, vetoing it in 1995 and 2000 as President (p. 75).

Ostracization of secret collaborators was part of an inevitable development of society. Lustrations were to represent a way of coming to terms with the past in a situation where the communist party could not be banned. Lustrations were meant to free the politics and state administration of "old structures", and economic transformation was also meant to exclude them from playing any major role in the economy. However, it was naive to expect this to succeed.¹⁰ The problem is that the authors perceive the process of transitional justice statically and their insight into the historical development of Czechoslovakia is only superficial. This leads to erroneous conclusions relating to this comprehensive and long period.

Another thing not sufficiently taken into account by the authors is the entire development of transitional justice. The possible abolition of the Lustration Act at the present time could have a certain symbolic value, but it would lack virtually any significance. During 2024, that is, thirty-three years after the adoption of Act No. 451/1991 Coll., only 699 people were subjected to lustration, resulting in only seven positive lustration certificates.¹¹ Most of the lustration petitions and a higher number of positive lustration certificates occurred in the years immediately after the Act came into effect. Moreover, the number of people in

⁸ SÚK, Jiří: Prezident Václav Havel a břemeno (komunistické) minulosti: Lustrace jako politický a morální problém 1989–1992. In: GJURIČOVÁ, Adéla – KOPEČEK, Michal – ROUBAL, Petr – SÚK, Jiří – ZAHRADNÍČEK, Tomáš: *Rozdělení minulosti: Vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989*. Praha, Knihovna Václava Havla 2011, pp. 135–181.

⁹ GABAL, Peter: Havel se omluvil bývalému vídeňskému starostovi Zilkovi. In: *Radio Prague International* [online], 08. 11. 2008. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: <https://cesky.radio.cz/havel-se-omluvil-byvalemu-videnskemu-starostovi-zilkovi-8434400>.

¹⁰ SÚK, J.: Prezident Václav Havel a břemeno (komunistické) minulosti.

¹¹ Statistika vydaných lustračních osvědčení – 2025 [Statistics of Issued Lustration Certificates – 2025]. In: *Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky* [online], 03. 06. 2025. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/lustrace-29644.aspx?q=Y2hudW09MTC%3d>.

the age group who could be affected by the lustration problem is constantly falling. These are people born before 31 November 1971, that is, those who are now fifty-four years and older.

Drumbl and Holá correctly point out that whereas “informers” were ostracized, other, less visible supporters of the former regime with a clean lustration certificate were able to have careers. On the other hand, the Czech lustration model does not apply to the sphere of politics. This means that even someone with a positive lustration certificate can become a candidate and a member of representative bodies, which is not possible in Poland or Latvia. A positively lustrated person also faces no restrictions in the private sphere, whereas in Poland and Lithuania this is not the case.¹² The Czech lustration laws¹³ do not concern only secret collaborators of the State Security. These were only one of the categories of screened people pursuant to Act No. 451/1991 Coll. The disqualification from holding major public positions also applied to StB members, higher officials of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ), members of the People’s Militia (*Lidové milice*) and graduates of Soviet security schools. Quite understandably, the lustration laws do not apply to occasional, vulgo “informers”. The claim that lustration was a common practice in Czech history and that such ostracization from society occurred after 1948 or after 1969 is historically unacceptable and an oversimplification (p. 73).

The fourth part of the book presents the content of the files of six StB “informers” (secret collaborators). As the authors mention in one part, they read approximately a hundred different files and finally selected twenty-three. Six are presented in the book and a summary of the other seventeen was made available

¹² See KOSARĚ, David: Lustrace a běh času. In: BOBEK, Michal – MOLEK, Pavel – ŠIMÍČEK, Vojtěch (eds.): *Komunistické právo v Československu: Kapitoly z dějin bezpráví*. Brno, Masarykova univerzita – Mezinárodní politologický ústav 2009, pp. 228–258, here p. 240.

¹³ Zákon č. 451/1991 Sb., kterým se stanoví některé další předpoklady pro výkon některých funkcí ve státních orgánech a organizacích České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky, České republiky a Slovenské republiky [Act No. 451/1991 Coll.: On Standards Required for Holding Specific Positions in the State Administration of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic]. In: *Zákony pro lidi: Sbírka zákonů* [online], with effect from 5th November 1991. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1991-451>; Zákon č. 279/1992 Sb. České národní rady o některých dalších předpokladech pro výkon některých funkcí obsazovaných ustanovením nebo jmenováním příslušníků Policie České republiky a příslušníků Sboru nápravné výchovy České republiky [Act No. 279/1992 Coll.: On Certain Other Prerequisites for the Exercise of Certain Offices Filled by Designation or Appointment of Members of the Police of the Czech Republic and Members of the Corrections Corps of the Czech Republic]. In: *Ibidem* [online], with effect from 1st July 1992. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1992-279>.

on a special educational website.¹⁴ The authors do not delve into the method of their selection. The main purpose was to give different examples in order to undermine the assumed homogeneity of the group of "informers". Individual examples were presented anonymously, but specific files can easily be identified thanks to the cited archival numbers.

In the fifth chapter, the authors' intention is to give a full description of the relationship between "informers" and the State Security members. They primarily identified emotions, such as fear, allegiance, desire and resentment. They also recorded how "informers" sought advantages or tried to settle accounts through their relationship with the StB, or how their secret collaboration developed during life cycles and with regard to life changes. The authors see cooperation as a contractual relationship, in which "informers" established relationships, occasionally even close relationships, with the supervising officers and adapted to informing, perceiving it as an activity they had committed to. However, they also reveal this world as a space which allowed some individuals to pursue their morally problematic needs. At the same time, they sometimes ascribe a positive role to the State Security in solving problems for "informers". In general, the chapter gives the impression that the position of "informers" was ambiguous, seeing them as somewhere between culprits and victims. Nevertheless, the study of the secret police archives also leads the authors to more general conclusions on Czechoslovak society in the past regime: "The archived StB files we reviewed present a portrayal of life in Communist Czechoslovakia in which nearly everyone is having an affair, is stealing from the workplace, has alcohol or drug dependencies, and is otherwise in routine default and delict. These vignettes contrast with portrayals of life in Communist Czechoslovakia as refracted through ex post oral histories (among ordinary citizens, not informers) which elevate family life as sacrosanct and make no mention of affairs or endemic substance abuse, but indeed emphasize that everyone to some degree was swindling the state." (p. 161) The authors themselves are not sure which view is more true to reality.

The sixth chapter offers a recommendation on how to approach "informers" in the transitional period between dictatorship and a free society. The authors urge circumspection, an individual approach and a search for individual motives instead of an overall denunciation of "informers", turning them into scapegoats. The subsequent, seventh chapter outlines proposals on how to treat specific cases of "informers". The authors here even introduce the concept of "a just or unjust informing theory". This theory aims to contribute to re-evaluating the public

¹⁴ DRUMBL, Mark A. – HOLÁ, Barbora: *Informers up Close: Stories from Communist Prague. Online Appendix* [online]. [Accessed 2025-11-04.] Available at: https://nscr.nl/app/uploads/2024/01/Informers-Up-Close_Online_Appendix_8-January-2024.pdf.

perception of those individuals who help the authorities in democratic states to enforce the law by informing on people who break it (p. 236).

There are many parts in the book *Informers Up Close* that may stir controversy. Mark A. Drumbl and Barbora Holá outline provocative, but poorly substantiated arguments without a second thought. These, together with several clichés that they repeat, create a new interpretation of the communist past. They focus on forced relationships between “informers” and State Security members. However, what they fail to take into account are social conditions and the power that is wielded and the substantial role that a repressive apparatus played in establishing these conditions. In general, they perceive StB “informers” as tragic victims, who subsequently inflicted harm on others (p. 198). Only history will show whether such an interpretation will become accepted. However, it is unlikely that “stories from the communist Prague” as captured in the book *Informers Up Close* will provide answers to questions that are now still being raised by the world of StB secret collaborators. This book is the result of research conducted at a distance, apparently with the corresponding methodological set of instruments and based on a vast range of literature, yet without long-term research into this issue and a sufficient knowledge of the conditions and historical context. For an unbiased reader, this book will be a disappointment.

Translated by Blanka Medková

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; State Security (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB); Czech society; communism; transitional justice; secret collaborators; “informers”; lustrations

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