Molly Pucci. *Security Empire: The Secret Police in Communist Eastern Europe.* Yale University Press: Yale-Hoover Series on Authoritarian Regimes. New Haven, 2020. Pp. xiv+378.

Security Empire recounts the origins and early histories of three communist secret police agencies. The book covers Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany from 1945 through 1954. In this period each country came under Soviet influence, but the routes by which they arrived at what seemed like the common destination differed greatly. One of the hallmarks of this influence was the great emphasis on secret policing as an instrument of rule. The wider issue that the book addresses, therefore, is the extent to which communist rule was truly the same everywhere. The evidence base is primary documentation from archives in all three countries as well as a rich array of memoirs and secondary publications. The author, Molly Pucci, now an assistant professor of history at Trinity College, Dublin, based the book on her Stanford PhD dissertation.

In the introduction Pucci sets out her method, which is to triangulate the national histories of the period by various means. Organizations, procedures, and outcomes mattered, she argues, but to focus on them exclusively may bias the investigator to the conclusion that communist rule predestined East European societies to conform to a shared model. By patiently following the biographies of many participants, Pucci wishes to show that people high and low entered the secret police from an extraordinary range of backgrounds and experiences; all were conditioned by war, but the war itself had many sides. The varying personal and national experiences that these people brought with them into the secret police were factors in the different routes each society followed into communism. Having arrived, these differences were not obliterated by their societies' outward convergence to a common model. They reappeared later at key turning points such as 1949, 1956, 1968, and 1970, and they helped decide why East Germany eventually went one way, Poland another, and Czechoslovakia in yet a third direction.

The transnational and comparative aspects of *Security Empire* set it apart, therefore, from the many excellent country-based studies of the Soviet KGB, the East German Stasi, the Polish SB and Czech StB, the Romanian Securitate of recent years. *Security Empire* also transcends the powerfully written but dramatically simplified story of Anne Applebaum's *Iron Curtain*.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the secret police in the brief era of national roads to socialism, which lasted from 1945 through 1948. Three chapters deal with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany respectively. In each country the secret police had different origins. In Poland, the problem was to monopolize violence in a country saturated with weapons, alcohol, and anti-communism. The Polish communists overcame the chaos of 1945 by hoovering up former

partisans, ex-soldiers and anyone willing into an armed security service that was able to establish a blanket surveillance capacity.

In postwar Czechoslovakia, in contrast, the secret police were relatively marginal to the communist revolution. The communist faction in state security, although organized from the start, limited itself to information gathering, while the party leaders thought they would be free to develop a model of socialism, just as politicized as Stalin's, but with more local initiative and less hunting for enemies. And a third variant is provided by East Germany, where secret policing had its origins in denazification under Soviet occupation. The result was a security agency with a restricted purview and limited prerogatives.

In the late 1940s, common factors drove state-building forward in each country. The Cold War set in everywhere, especially in divided Germany. Soviet politics turned towards confrontation at home and abroad. Yugoslavia was expelled from the international communist movement. Postwar reconstruction plans and projects ran into unexpected difficulties, raising the question: who was to blame? As national roads to socialism were abandoned, secret policing everywhere moved towards a common model. There were diktats from Moscow but, as Pucci takes pain to point out, it was more than just Moscow. The secret police of each country shared best practices and contributed lessons.

This period is the subject of Part II, which again has a chapter for each of the three countries. Unquestioning loyalty to the party was demanded everywhere, but unquestioning loyalty was not enough as the search for hidden class enemies acquired anti-intellectual and anti-semitic overtones. Confirming guilt took priority over establishing innocence. In every country the party found the security police wanting in different dimensions. In Poland the deficit was one of discipline and submission to the party; in Czechoslovakia it was lack of capacity for surveillance and repression; in East Germany it was lack of authority, which arose partly because nothing of importance could be decided without reference to the Soviet "friends."

In due course these deficits were made up through a process that was at least partly planned and directed by training, by unifying the language of state security, and by participation in mass purges and the preparation of show trials. But it was also driven by personal hatreds, social pressures, cultural adaptations, and misunderstandings that were unique to every situation.

Concluding, Pucci writes about three things. First, history mattered. State-building and secret-police organization in every country in the late 1940s did not have a predestined goal. It was as experimental and tentative as it had been in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution. At the same time, Soviet history loomed over the events described in the book; I was surprised to read about independent uses of the transcripts of the Shakhty trial (in the Soviet Donbass region in 1928) as training

materials for secret policemen in Czechoslovakia and East Germany twenty years later.

Second, the formative years of East European secret policing had lasting consequences. The ways of thinking in which later generations of secret policemen were inculcated continually referred back to the events, personal records, vocabulary and concepts laid down in the early years. The legacy contributed to the later successes and the failures.

Third, nominally at least, the era of nationally distinct roads to socialism lasted only a few years. By the 1950s it seemed as if Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany were all being stamped out of the same Stalinist template. But the differences of their original formation did not go away, however. Because of them, forty years later, each country would each take a different road out of socialism.

Security Empire is the book I have been waiting for. Observation of the practice of secret policing in a single country is not enough to separate the general from the specific and the idiosyncratic. My personal experience of studying the activities and working arrangements of the Soviet KGB convinced me long ago that it was impossible to fully grasp the historical roots of its activities and evaluate its effectiveness without comparative study. But comparative study is hard! It is difficult to acquire familiarity with the subject matter offered by one country, let alone by several. I believed that only a team of country specialists working together over a period of several years would overcome the barriers. Therefore, I was greatly surprised to find that a single scholar could succeed so well on her own.

I was surprised in another way as well. Trained in social science, my rule has generally been to look for trends and patterns of behaviour that were representative (or routine, or everyday, or typical), and to discount whatever appeared salient or idiosyncratic on the grounds that whatever is exceptional is unrepresentative by definition. Based in part on the variety of many individual biographies, Molly Pucci's scholarship shows the value of working against my rule by gathering exceptions. In her hands, an approach that I was predisposed to write off as a recipe for failure has been rewarded by a success that I would not have anticipated.

Security Empire is a wonderful first book. As I have already mentioned, it surprised me in several ways. It is not one of those books that just substantiates in detail what was already generally known. Its research is comprehensive. Its scholarship is mature. It is clearly and powerfully written. It offers many fascinating stories. It includes passing insights that deserve to enter the wider social science of state-building and of language as a political instrument. It is undeniably complex, and this makes it a tough book to read through from the first to the last page. I doubt that any reader will absorb it all on first contact. Having read it, I will return to it. It will more than repay the effort.

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