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## Introduction

The history of Russia . . . could be considered from two points of view: first, as the evolution of the police . . . and second, as the development of a marvelous culture.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*<sup>1</sup>

### Zones of Contact: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police

Broadly defined, the two subjects of this book—twentieth-century Eastern European culture and the secret police—largely fit the plan of study that Nabokov suggests in my epigraph. However, while Nabokov emphasizes the unbridgeable chasm between the “marvelous culture” and “the police,” this book explores their entangled intersections. Indeed, I am intent on mapping a wide range of relationships between culture and policing, and probing their still unfathomed depth. Not only did the secret police shape many an artist’s biography; its personal files redefined the way a life, and thus biography itself, was to be written in Soviet times. How did the secret police write about its subjects in the infamous personal file? What impact did this powerful new genre of writing have on the literature of its times? How did the secret police’s penchant for confiscating diaries and extracting confessions influence writing in the first person? What uses did the secret police have for the cinema? And what fantasies did cinema harbor about policing? What role did cinema play in the first Soviet show trial? Why were avant-garde filmmakers mounting their cameras on top of machine guns? What were film cameras doing in the Gulag? And how was the moving image affected by its excursion through the camps? How did vision, visual technologies, and policing intersect in the foundational decades of the Soviet regime?

Before setting out in search of answers to these questions, I will address the first query that usually greets this project: How could the secret police, and its key artifacts, such as personal files and films, play a role in the culture of its times if it was indeed *secret*? The following anecdotes should give a

preliminary sense of the degree of awareness of the secret police in contemporary writers' circles. Two of the protagonists of my study, Isaac Babel and Mikhail Bulgakov, crossed paths early in their careers when they were asked to polish the prose of a top secret-police agent, Fedor Martinov, whose short stories were closely based on investigation files.<sup>2</sup> Bulgakov edited Martinov's story on Saban, self-defined as "universal criminal and fighter for freedom."<sup>3</sup> At the time, Bulgakov's work was showing a growing interest in criminality; he was "in the process of writing *Zoika's Apartment* (*Zoikina kvartira*), a play whose characters came out of criminal investigations. (In the first version of the play, an epidiascope was supposed to show the audience mug shots from actual files)."<sup>4</sup> Babel edited and wrote an introduction to Martinov's "The Bandits," a story based on the Cheka investigation of a holdup of Lenin's car.<sup>5</sup> Even before this incident, Babel was deemed well qualified to assist the secret police in its dealings with language. In his youth, he had worked as a translator for the Cheka. His interest in the secret police lasted until the tragic end of his life: before he was shot in the secret police headquarters, he was researching a book about the secret police using his strong personal connections with some of its leaders. Viktor Shklovsky, another strong presence in my study, traced his own infamous turn toward the establishment (a critical moment not only for his own oeuvre but for the Formalist movement in general) to the experience of reading a secret police file on himself. "Just before 1937. An acquaintance of mine who worked in the Cheka brought me a file he wanted to show me, with documents against me. I saw that they were doing a poor job, that there was a lot that they didn't know about me. But they knew enough to make me a center [of a conspiracy]."<sup>6</sup> Even if they did not have direct access to the files, most writers, indeed most of the population, had a vested interest in knowing what their file contained, and they could make educated guesses.

The word *secret* is then misleading—the police was never interested in hiding its existence, and instead put up a highly visible spectacle of secrecy. Indeed, the Soviet secret police was the subject of a carefully orchestrated public cult, in full force at the peak of the 1937 purges, when "the publicity for the NKVD flood[ing] the national press included poems about Ezhov [the head of the NKVD] and the police, articles about espionage techniques, photographs of police officials" and a grand gala celebration of the twenty-year anniversary of the secret police held in the Bol'shoi Theater and heavily covered in both print and film.<sup>7</sup> One of the models of socialist realist art, *Belomor* (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina*), a book written as celebration of a labor camp, was coedited by the OGPU camp chief together with two leading Soviet writers, Maxim Gorky and Leopold Averbakh.<sup>8</sup> The conversion stories of the various criminals are explicitly based on their secret police files

and illustrated with original mug shots, so that the OGPU is the most featured author in the bibliography.<sup>9</sup>

Why then use the word *secret*, and in general the name “secret police”? It is certainly not for the lack of names. The dizzying succession of acronyms that have stood for the Soviet secret police (Cheka, GPU, OGPU, NKVD, NKGB, MGB, MVD, KGB) speaks of the institution’s attempts at creating a new language that does not reveal its referent but rather mystifies it. Even for Russian speakers, it takes a dictionary to remember what “OGPU” stands for, and when one sees that it is the “United Governmental Political Administration,” one is not much the wiser. In any case, the more the names changed, the more the fetishism of the secrecy-enshrouded acronyms stayed the same. The Romanian secret police, the other subject of this study, has displayed a similar inclination for frequent name changes, preserving however the key term that has become its standard abbreviation: the Securitate.<sup>10</sup> I use these particular names or acronyms when I refer to a specific period, but while writing a book that often refers to these institutions in synchronic and comparative ways, I needed one general appellation. Recent scholarly literature uses “political police,” “secret police,” and “security services,” often interchangeably.<sup>11</sup> No matter how much the secret police itself might bristle at this appellation, I do believe that *police* is a more accurately descriptive term than *organ*, *agency*, *commission*, *service*, or *administration*—the terms most often featured in the acronyms. Starting with the Cheka and ending with the KGB or Securitate, all of these “organs” engaged in policing activities—surveillance, investigation, arrest, detention—and in fact went beyond regular policing in ways that are usually associated with a secret police. In terms of their goals and their means, they were certainly policing the population more than they were doing it a service, or assuring its security, as “security services” suggests.<sup>12</sup> “Political police,” which calls the police by its name, also has the advantage that both the secret police and its contemporary critics and scholars use it. However, its common use by different parties usually bespeaks misunderstandings rather than dialogue—the regime meant it as a compliment to its security organs, while its critics use it from the perspective of a human rights discourse that sharply distinguishes between penal and political crimes. “Secret police” also creates its own misunderstandings, particularly the idea that the existence of the police was hidden, which was manifestly untrue. I keep the appellation, however, because I think that the histrionic show of secrecy and the actual investment in policing the population did define these institutions.

Such histrionic secrecy is aptly illustrated by a well-known Stalinist icon: the windows of the secret police headquarters (Lubianka), brightly lit throughout



Court secretaries reading a file. *Kino-Pravda* 7, 1922, frame enlargement.

the night. Lubyanka's windows correspond to a historical truth, since interrogations were often conducted at night. At the same time, they are a fitting symbol for the Stalinist spectacle of secrecy. While the brightly illuminated windows exposed nothing, the terror within was not eclipsed; instead, it was carefully framed in secrecy and exhibited as the monopoly spectacle of the Stalinist night. Although the details of the spectacle were impossible to make out, the lights alone were arresting enough. Lubyanka's windows invite comparison with the window that Ortega y Gasset made into a powerful metaphor for different modes of signification.<sup>13</sup> Realism invites the viewer to look straight through its signifiers—whether words or images—like through a window giving into a beautiful garden. Modernism invites the viewer to focus on the surface of the window, on the signifier itself. The Stalinist window stands for yet another regime of signification, where the shiny signifier captures the gaze only to refract it right back to the viewer. There is no garden in sight; and the light behind the shiny window can always turn into a searchlight, another stock image of the times.

The files were at the heart of this spectacle of secrecy. Like the secret police itself, the files were routinely paraded in front of the public. A sequence from Dziga Vertov's newsreel coverage of the 1924 trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, usually considered the earliest model of the Soviet show trial, showcases the secret police files as tantalizing visual spectacle. In another



Close-up perusal of a secret police file. *Solovki*, 1928, frame enlargements.

documentary film of the period, *Solovki* (1928), we see close-ups of police file covers, and hands browsing them at leisure, sometimes stopping to allow for a quick close-up of a particular page. This dramatic presentation of the file draws our attention to it but makes sure that we do not get close enough to actually read its contents.

Even if one did get close enough to read the files, secrecy still jealously shrouded their contents from prying eyes. Pseudonyms replaced names, and fictitious addresses obscured the secret meeting places, which were also the subject of “house files.”<sup>14</sup> The proliferation of nicknames, abbreviations, acronyms, and euphemisms actually makes the files largely illegible to laypeople, to the point that one needs a dictionary. In fact, the present-day custodians of the Romanian Securitate archives wisely posted on their website a dictionary of terms and abbreviations used in Securitate documents.<sup>15</sup> Some of the abbreviations and code words follow common logic, but many do not. Among my favorites is the baptism of the aural surveillance technology with the biblical-sounding name Teofil.<sup>16</sup> The code names for Soviet surveillance technology makes one think of reading the adventures of a *ménage à trois*, as Tat’iana, Sergei, and Ol’ga stand in for radio, telephone, and visual surveillance.<sup>17</sup> The ubiquitous “top secret” seal ritually showcases this brand of secrecy. In a dramatic illustration of Hannah Arendt’s theory that in totalitarian societies the spectacle of secrecy was necessary to camouflage the absence of a secret, this spectacle of secrecy was, at its height, meant to frame the uncovering of the (fabricated) anti-Stalinist plots.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of actual plots, the spectacle of secrecy remains like a highly wrought frame around an image that has long crumbled.

The secrecy that kept the Soviet-era file away from critical readings also knowingly framed it as the center of obsessive fascination. As a result of the carefully orchestrated presentation of the files, their number and reach

was not only constantly guessed at but often overestimated. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote that each Soviet citizen was believed to have a file.<sup>19</sup> The belief was widespread: the opening of the archives was a disappointment to many who found out that they did not have files, given the general perception that “everyone who was anyone had their own lengthy file.”<sup>20</sup> But chances were, even if not the subject of a lengthy file, a significant portion of the population was at least entered in a secret police registry. Approximately seven million people, or one third of the total adult population, appeared in the Securitate’s general registry already in 1965.<sup>21</sup> Writers and artists in general were singled out as subjects of files. Already in 1919, a Cheka document establishing categories of people to be put under surveillance places artists at the very top of the list, sandwiched between “specialists” and “speculators.”<sup>22</sup> Vitaly Shentalinsky put the point bluntly: “Lubianka did not neglect a single major writer.”<sup>23</sup> Romanian bard Alexandru Andrieş sang wryly, “I am a bit of an artist, so I have a guardian angel . . . securist.”<sup>24</sup>

The files were the objects of intense preoccupation and fascination, and I think it is fair to say that they exerted a stronger impact on the public and literary imagination than many books in the state libraries. As is well known, the secret police had a keen interest in and incommensurable power over men and women of letters. Writers, publishers, censors, or anyone having much to do with the written word were deeply affected by the words written about them within the gray binders. Furthermore, the police file sometimes grew precisely by devouring literary texts. It routinely incorporated manuscripts and turned them into incriminating evidence. Whole books or just isolated sentences perversely severed out of their context lived a second life within these binders, too often burying their authors. Personal letters, manuscripts, and published work acquired strange new configurations within the files. Sometimes all that is left of a lifetime’s collection of books are the lonely dedication pages, hastily ripped out during house searches and meticulously sewn together in the file. Dedication pages were high on the wanted list, as they unwittingly divulged, at a glance, connections that were (too) often deemed incriminating. (The police of that time eyed them as greedily as the present-day police eyes suspect cell phones.) However, the crossing of boundaries between files and literature was much more extensive and complex than this literal incorporation, and as such it deserves closer analysis than it has been hitherto given. The secret police file competed with propaganda as the largest area of state textual production, filling thousands of miles of archives. The file won the battle over propaganda in the fascination it exerted on the public. But propaganda certainly won the competition for the attention of literary critics, who unlike historians have largely overlooked the opening of the former secret police archives.<sup>25</sup>

This has not always been true. Contemporary literary critics were keenly interested in the relationship between literature and extra-artistic genres, including the secret police file. Leading Formalist critic Boris Tomashevskii cautioned against a kind of literary biography that could turn into a denunciation, and found it necessary to remind literary historians that “the biography they need was neither the curriculum vitae nor the investigation file [*sledstvennoe delo*]” of the writer.<sup>26</sup> Andrei Bely wrote to the GPU asking them to move his diary from the box of confiscated manuscripts to his file, so that it could be used for “the study of his literary and ideological character in its full complexity.”<sup>27</sup> To his satisfaction, the GPU agreed that the diary belonged in the file.<sup>28</sup> Tomashevskii’s and Bely’s comments are rooted in a keen awareness of their times and in a deep interest in the porosity between literature and nonliterary writing, an interest that defined contemporary literary theory and practice.

The secret police file emerged and acquired its overwhelming authority precisely at a time when the authority of literary texts was in deep crisis.<sup>29</sup> A wide-ranging modernist phenomenon, this crisis in the authority of the text was in the Soviet Union exacerbated and fundamentally shaped by a distinct political course. As contemporary writers were deeply aware, the authority of the text as well as of its author was radically undermined by censorship and political persecution. In 1929, shortly before his one-man journal was closed down, Boris Eikhenbaum wrote:

A writer cuts today a grotesque figure. He is by definition inferior to the average reader, since the latter, as a professional citizen, is assumed to have a consistent, stable and clear-cut ideology. As for our reviewers—critics we do not have anymore, since no differences of opinions are permissible—they are certain to be infinitely superior to, and more important than, the writer in the same way in which the judge is always superior to, and more important than, the defendant.<sup>30</sup>

Responding to the politicized crisis in the authority of the literary texts, another Formalist, Iurii Tynianov, expressed a popular new idea when he argued, “The novel finds itself in an impasse: what is needed today is a sense of a new genre, i.e., a sense of decisive novelty in literature.”<sup>31</sup> According to Formalist theory, when a literary genre finds itself in an impasse, the way is paved for subliterary or extraliterary genres to infiltrate it and infuse new life into it. The Formalists believed that the way out of the contemporary impasse of the novel was through factography (*literatura fakta*), “a mixture of half-fictional, half-documentary genres” which emphasized the use of reportage, documents, statistics, and diaries.<sup>32</sup>

In literary practice as in theory, the 1920s were a time when the boundaries between literature and nonliterature appeared manifestly fluid. Influential

members of the avant-garde dramatically proclaimed the end of the separation between art and life. Nikolai Evreinov theorized the breaking of the fourth wall in theater, arguing that “to make life theatrical, this will be the duty of every artist. A new breed of directors will appear—directors of life.”<sup>33</sup> His famous 1920 in situ reconstruction of the Revolution’s iconic moment—*The Storming of the Winter Palace*—put some of these ideas into practice. Another intriguing application of his theories was suggested in an article advertising theater’s uses for policemen and secret investigators.<sup>34</sup> It is significant that even the Formalists, long criticized for their defense of the autonomy of art, came to argue that “there is no unbridgeable chasm, indeed, no fixed boundary, between the esthetic and the non-esthetic.”<sup>35</sup> While the Formalists maintained their critique of the mimetic function of art, they became avidly interested in the shifting boundaries between literature and nonliterature: “The notion of literature changes all the time. . . . Literature never mirrors life, but it often overlaps with it.”<sup>36</sup> According to Tynianov, it was precisely when the literary system was in crisis that it tended to shift its boundaries by overlapping with other “systems” that dominated society at a particular time. Some favorite Formalist examples from literary history include the influence of the “system of polite society” and its textual practices—such as album and letter writing—on Pushkin’s lyrics; and the influence of “the system of popular culture,” with its feuilletons, on Chekhov’s short stories and on Dostoevsky’s novels. Following in their footsteps, I will attempt to understand how a defining “system” of Soviet society—the secret police—and its main textual and visual practices overlapped with the dramatically shifting boundaries of contemporary literature and film.

Building from Russian Formalist as well as Bakhtinian theories about the intersection of aesthetic and extra-aesthetic genres, part of this study traces the relationship between the personal file and key representatives of two literary genres: the novel and autobiography.<sup>37</sup> The personal file brought together some of Bakhtin’s favorite examples of extra-artistic genres, “the confession, the diary, travel notes, biography, the personal letter,” “the shopping list, telephone conversations,” “public rumor, gossip, [and] slander,”<sup>38</sup> and became the most widespread and authoritative account of an individual life in Soviet times. It did so at a time when, as we have seen, the novel was undergoing a major crisis of authority, while first-person narratives proliferated in myriad attempts to come to terms with the radical transformations of the self and its position in a society undergoing profound changes.<sup>39</sup> I trace the ways in which selected literary authors came to terms with this powerful genre, whether through strategies of appropriation, adaptation, parody, exorcism, or exposure. I have tried to go beyond a catalogue of explicit secret police file



cameos in literature toward close readings aimed to identify the files' influence not only on what was or was not written but also on *how* literary texts were written. Since I am interested in showing just how deep-seated this "zone of contact" between the files and literature was, I have tried to go beyond the most obvious choices of texts that famously feature the secret police. There will be relatively few references to Alexander Solzhenitsyn and other famous Gulag memoirists; instead, I have chosen to focus on writers whose relationship to the secret police and to politics in general was more ambiguous, such as Isaac Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Maxim Gorky, and Viktor Shklovsky.

In Russia literature has traditionally epitomized the arts' relationship to power, with Alexander Solzhenitsyn famously commenting that major writers served as a second government.<sup>40</sup> My focus on literature then almost goes without saying. Additionally, given my twentieth-century time line, it seemed important to understand how cinema—the new "most important of all arts," according to Lenin—also fared in relationship to power and its police. It turns out that after a short period of hesitation between treating cinema as a potential suspect or seeing it as a precious propagandist, the secret police arrived at an appreciation for the importance of this "ideological weapon," founding the popular association the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (Obshchestvo družei sovetского kino, or ODSK), which was led by none other than the first head of the Cheka, Felix Dzerzhinsky. A strong presence in the first decades of Soviet cinema, ODSK was particularly interested in monitoring cinema reception, to the point where it even pioneered scientific audience surveys.<sup>41</sup> And as "all cinemas and theaters" had, by law, "to put at the disposal of the 'political control department' of the OGPU permanent seats (no further than the fourth row)," few film critics can rival secret police data on early cinema reception.<sup>42</sup>

The legendary beginnings of director Fridrikh Ermler show that a Chekist could not only get free admission to the cinema but also had a good shot at film school.<sup>43</sup> In 1915, as a seventeen-year-old "almost illiterate" errand-boy, Vladimir Markovich Breslav traveled to Moscow in the hopes of becoming a film star.<sup>44</sup> Quickly disappointed, in 1918 he was already working as a spy under the name "Fridrikh Ermler" in German-occupied territories. By 1920 Ermler transferred to the Petrograd Cheka, keeping his spy name to the end of his life.<sup>45</sup> Still dreaming of becoming a movie actor, in 1923 the now seasoned Chekist walked up to the Institute of the Screen Arts, where the student-policeman informed him that he had to apply and be selected to matriculate. Ermler pulled out his Browning pistol and walked right in saying, "*This* has selected me." As Ermler proudly recounted, his job at the Cheka continued to help him in his cinema career.<sup>46</sup> So he held on to his revolver

and even pulled it out again while directing *Fragment of an Empire* (1929), when he threatened to shoot his star, Fedor Nikitin, for “insubordination on the set.”<sup>47</sup> To the surprise of Ermler aficionados, it has transpired from Lenfil’m production papers that Ermler’s last film, *Judged by History* (*Pered sudom istorii*, 1965), was also “made with the active assistance of the KGB [*pri aktivnom sodeistvii KGB*].”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, a letter written by Ermler to the KGB on May 9, 1965, expresses his “pride for being creatively linked to the KGB,” and his belief that “without you, Chekists, it wouldn’t have been possible to realize my last film, *Judged by History*.”<sup>49</sup> While Ermler’s career is certainly not typical, it vividly shows that the secret police’s influence on cinema went far beyond censorship. My study traces the various roles that the secret police played in the foundational decades of Soviet cinema, from censor, to self-styled model spectator, audience watchdog, sponsor, protagonist, and auteur.

The secret police openly or covertly supported, commissioned, or authored films that ranged from short newsreels to full-length documentaries and feature films. Some training films, such as demonstrations of how to conduct an apartment search, an arrest, or a surveillance assignment, were meant only for internal circulation. While we know about the existence of these films from secret police documents or criminology manuals, they remain even more inaccessible than the files. Even when the law specifies that all the collections of the former secret police have to be passed into the public domain, the visual materials are the last to surface. I spent years searching for such films with only limited success. For example, while working in the Open Society Archives in Budapest, I came across a collection of training films made by the Hungarian Interior Ministry.<sup>50</sup> But I soon realized that arguably the most important secret police films, like the purloined letter, were not in closed archives but out in the open. For example, the secret police ordered the first feature-length Russian sound film, *Road to Life* (*Putevka v zhizn'*). Openly dedicated to the founding head of the secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky, *Road to Life* not only made more money at the box office than any other Soviet film before but also won accolades at the first Venice Film Festival and is still shown in art houses as a vintage treat. *Road to Life* was part of a series of early films about the Gulag that the secret police supported in order to mold popular opinion about the camps. My analysis of this fascinating, if largely forgotten, cinematic corpus follows its ever-shifting representation of the Soviet antihero—whether petty criminal or state enemy—and the crafty manipulation of the audience. Furthermore, it reveals highly influential contemporary positions toward vision and visual technologies, such as the promotion of the most fashionable way to look in the Stalinist 1930s; watchfulness or vigilance (*bditel'nost'*); the cultivated suspicion toward empirical vision; and the gradual privileging of fiction film, especially melodrama, over documentaries.

It was not the secret police, however, that first discovered cinema's potential for policing but some of the most resourceful young Soviet filmmakers. As Boris Groys has influentially shown, despite their many glaring differences, Soviet avant-garde and socialist realist artists shared a passionate rejection of the autonomy of art: artists, freed from the burden of slavishly representing reality, were to play a great role in the construction of the new society.<sup>51</sup> What this role would be, exactly, was up for heated debate, and various models were proposed. While Stalin later famously granted artists the role of "engineers of the human soul," the three Soviet filmmakers featured in Chapter 3—Dziga Vertov, Alexander Medvedkin, and Ivan Pyr'ev—sometimes chose the secret police agent, state prosecutor, and criminologist as their role models. This study, then, sheds light on one particular way in which early Soviet cinema engaged with contemporary reality—by aiming to police it. This was certainly not a monolithic or even coherent movement: Ivan Pyr'ev is remembered as a prolific socialist realist director, while Dziga Vertov and Alexander Medvedkin have been repeatedly appropriated as pioneers of avant-garde, modernist, experimental, and cinema vérité movements. While Vertov and Medvedkin's mythology has continuously developed, it has persistently ignored some of the artistic personae that they themselves carefully cultivated. In exploring the policing fantasies entertained by these filmmakers, I do not aim to paint over their now canonical portraits as cinematic visionaries who suffered censorship and even persecution. Instead, I aim to add another layer of complexity to that portrait, carefully foregrounding the differences between their various cinematic fantasies, theories, and practices. For indeed, while some of these early Soviet filmmakers' experiments in "kino policing" were complicit with the secret police, others exposed or parodied the work of policing. It is precisely because of these differences that the story of cinema's fantasies about policing deserves to be told along with the story of the secret police's fantasies about cinema.

### Reading a Secret Police File

My project is rooted in a reading dilemma. It took four often-frustrating years since I first started my search for access to secret police materials until I finally sat down in front of a desk overflowing with gray binders—the files of some of my favorite Romanian writers. The suspense was long in the making, and this was no doubt one of the most exhilarating moments of my life; but soon after opening the binders, I realized that I had no idea how to read the thousands of pages of wiretapping logs, mangled literary manuscripts, love letters, newspaper clippings, informers' reports, and scalloped-edged photo-

graphs. I had not been at such a loss in front of a written text since the age of fourteen, when in the wake of the 1989 Romanian revolution a new literature teacher led a class, whose students had been raised on socialist realism, in analyzing the stories of Jorge Luis Borges.

I soon discovered that I was the second reader for most of these files. My predecessor, either a supervising investigator or a secret police archivist, had left thick red pencil marks, which had survived the decades. I could thus easily trace the trajectory of that first reading, with its narrow emphasis on the main narrative and the conclusive evidence, names, and court decisions. The red thread rushed to the inexorable closing of the files, intent on quelling any questions along the way. Following it, I gradually learned to decode acronyms and pseudonyms, and to read for the plot. However, I soon lost my place in this tedious, complicit reading, which might have helped make some preliminary sense of these puzzling texts but was far from doing them justice. Devising a way of reading the files, and later watching secret police films, turned out to be no less exacting, if more intellectually absorbing, a challenge than getting access to the archives had been. In this process, I came to rely on insights and approaches from a variety of disciplines. I delved into criminology and history to understand how police records have been structured and altered through time. Following the changing narrative of the files also required an excursion into Soviet psychology, whose shifting views of human nature are closely reflected in the files. Most often, however, I rallied reading strategies I had gleaned from my own field, literary studies, building particularly on work that broaches the question: "Do we have a way of thinking reading as other than an encounter with a book?" How can we responsibly read what urgently presents itself to us—whether the testimonies of apartheid victims or secret police files? Far from a mechanical application of existent reading tools, the interpretation of these challenging texts tests both the potentials and the limits of literary studies, "alter[ing] our very concept of reading."<sup>52</sup>

A few pages into his fascinating essay on prerevolutionary French police files, Robert Darnton notes that his analysis would have ended right there had not "literary historians taught historians to beware of texts, which can be dissolved into 'discourse' by critical reading, no matter how solid they may seem. So the historian should hesitate before treating police reports as hard nuggets of irreducible reality, which he has only to mine out of the archives, sift, and piece together in order to create a solid reconstruction of the past."<sup>53</sup> My readings of the secret police files draw on the rich corpus of scholarship which both theorizes and demonstrates the uses of literarily informed readings that focus on the rhetoric of historical and legal documents, while also questioning the clear-cut distinction between rhetoric and those "hard nuggets of irreducible reality."<sup>54</sup>