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‘Resisting’ while Collaboratively Informing in Communist Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

Informers in the service of state secret police collaborate with authorities and thus contribute to the power of repressive regimes. Through a case-study of Communist Czechoslovakia (1945–1989)—and drawing from secret police archives— this article presents selected stories of informers who in one way or another also ‘resisted’ collaboration with the Czechoslovak State Security (StB). By doing so, we try to further complexify the notions of ‘everyday resistance’, on the one hand, and ‘collaboration’ on the other. We demonstrate that resistant acts, similar to collaborative acts, can be apolitically devoid of ideology, highly idiosyncratic, and motivated by private drivers. Informing can be a tool of social navigation—namely, making the most out of one’s circumstances—in repressive times. Hence, resisting while informing also can be approached as a method for an individual to maximize opportunities within the overlapping incentives—both public and private, personal and professional—that contour decision-making and social action in repressive regimes.

Keywords

collaboration with repressive regimes – Communist Czechoslovakia – informing – resistance – StB – state security police

1 Introduction

This special issue is dedicated to studying nonviolent resistance. In the public imagination the nonviolent resister tends to be infused with ideals of courage, commitment, and human rights conviction.¹ Certain spectacular images dominate public perceptions of resistance. For instance, the so-called ‘Tank Man’—an unidentified lone student facing down tanks at Tiananmen Square in June 1989 after the Chinese government had massacred hundreds of protesters—serves iconic purposes of the fight for freedom. Another is the ‘Otpor’ in Serbia, a youth civic movement in the late 1990’s credited for the overthrow of the Slobodan Milosevic’s regime in 2000.² Yet another are protestors in the Arab Spring, initially nonviolent mass demonstrations starting in 2011 organized largely through social media to overturn corrupt autocrats and dictators across the Middle East.³

Nonviolent resistance (NVR) is defined as organized social practices and/or movements (i.e. ‘unarmed organized civilians’⁴) who self-identify in juxtaposition to a governing (generally, but not necessarily repressive) regime or prevalent social practices. Organized NVR aims at achieving social and political goals such as regime change or political/social reforms

1 Parts of the article, in particular Sections 2 and 3, derive from our previous work: M.A. Drumbal and B. Holá, *Informers Up Close: Stories from Communist Prague* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2024) and its companion website: <https://www.nscr.nl/Informers-Up-Close>; and M.A. Drumbal and B. Holá, ‘Collaboration and Opportunism in Communist Czechoslovakia’, in J. Espindola Mata and L. Payne (eds), *Collaboration in Authoritarian and Armed Conflict Settings* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 87–111.

2 For reflections on the Otpor movement, see S. Popovic, S. Djinic and E. Mujic, ‘Nonviolent Struggle and Effective Tactics: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Otpor Movement’, in this special issue.

3 See, e.g., F. Zaki Khalil and Jacquelin van Stekelenburg, ‘Trajectories of Contestation: Motivational Dynamics in Repressive Regimes’, in this special issue.

4 E. Chenoweth and K.G. Cunningham, ‘Understanding nonviolent resistance: An introduction’, 50(3) *Journal of Peace Research* (2013) 271–276.

through nonviolent means, for instance by civilian protests, hunger strikes, or non-cooperation.⁵ In NVR literature, such forms of organized resistance are complemented by discussions and research on so-called 'day-to-day' or 'everyday resistance'.⁶ 'Everyday resistance' captures less grandiose and more 'subtle and diffused' practices of individual resistance, which can be 'hidden or disguised' and can entail 'a subtle change of everyday repetitions, [which might be] driven by a desire for escape and survival that is not framed as 'political' at all, in which the recognition by others of what one does is not wished for, and might even be something one actively tries to avoid'.⁷ Political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott, who coined the concept of everyday resistance in the late 1980s, included normal, day-to-day behaviour—'petty acts of insubordination and evasion'⁸—of relatively powerless individuals (such as foot-dragging, avoidance, sarcasm, passivity, ignorance, laziness, false compliance) as resistance.⁹ Everyday resistance, as set out by Scott, is among less developed areas of NVR research.¹⁰ This article aims to address this relative gap in the literature. Everyday resistance, in contrast to other forms of resistances, is 'about how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power'.¹¹ Therefore, NVR, and everyday resistance as its subset, is 'a response to power from below—a practice that might challenge, negotiate, and undermine power'.¹² Yet many of these challenges in the everyday may come from individuals whose motivations and intentions to resist may be very

5 The most recent scholarship on NVR interrogates the dichotomy between violent and nonviolent resistance as resistance movements are diverse, change tactics over time and are oftentimes difficult to classify as strictly violent or nonviolent. Cf. C.J. Beck, M. Bukovansky, E. Chenoweth, G. Lawson, S. Erickson Nepstad and D.P. Ritter, *On Revolutions, Unruly Politics in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022). See also E. Chenoweth and K.G. Cunningham, 'Guest Editors' introduction: Nonviolent resistance and its discontents,' 60(1) *Journal of Peace Research* (2023) 3–8.

6 Cf. J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1985); J.C. Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance,' 4 *Copenhagen Papers* (1989) 33–62; See also M. Lilja and S. Vinthagen, 'Dispersed resistance: unpacking the spectrum and properties of glaring and everyday resistance,' 11(2) *Journal of Political Power* (2018) 211–229.

7 Lilja and Vinthagen, *ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

8 Scott (1989), *supra* note 6, p. 49.

9 Scott (1989), *supra* note 6, p. 34.

10 S. Vinthagen and A. Johansson: "'Everyday Resistance' Exploration of the Concept and its Theories,' 1 *Resistance Studies Magazine* (2013) 1–46, p. 9, available online at resistance-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Vinthagen-Johansson-2013-Everyday-resistance-Concept-Theory.pdf (accessed 4 June 2024).

11 *Ibid.*, p.2.

12 Lilja and Vinthagen, *supra* note 6, p. 215.

complex and imprecise.¹³ Everyday resistance is typically ‘hidden or disguised, individual and not politically articulated.’¹⁴

This article thereby aims to add to discussions on ‘everyday resistance’. We focus on a group of individuals who would *prima facie* not so readily fall under the purview of a resistance lens, namely, informers engaged in the service of repressive regimes. Through a case-study of Communist Czechoslovakia (1945–1989)—and drawing from secret police archives—this article presents two stories of Czechoslovak State Security (StB) informers who, while engaging with the StB, also ‘challenged, negotiated or undermined’ the repressive power. By doing so, we try to further enrich the notions of ‘nonviolent resistance’ and ‘collaboration’. We demonstrate that individuals can simultaneously bolster/support and resist/undermine repressive regimes. Acts of resistance, similarly to acts of supplication, can indeed be motivated by ideological devotion or political ambition but can also (and much more commonly) be apolitically devoid of ideology, be highly idiosyncratic, and animated by deeply personal reasons, such as intimate affection, grudges, greed, apathy or simply ignorance.¹⁵ Resistance (while collaborating) then becomes an instrumental tactic and operational strategy to manage one’s life and sensibilities within repressive political systems.

In this respect our article also pertains to discussions of the fluidity of, and limitations to, various fixed categories and roles—such as perpetrators, bystanders or victims—in repressive times and during periods of collective violence.¹⁶

This explorative article relies and largely draws on archival research and conceptual arguments we present in our book *Informers Up Close: Stories from*

13 Cf. Vinthagen and Johansson, *supra* note 10, pp. 20–21: ‘([E]veryday) resistance is indeed done with intent, however, not with one type of intent: neither necessarily a political-ideological one, nor antagonistic class interest [...]. Actors’, intent might be to survive, solve a practical problem, fulfill immediate needs, follow a desire, or gain status among peers, take a pause, or something else’.

14 Lilja and Vinthagen, *supra* note 6, p. 215.

15 See our arguments on various emotions, motivations and drivers of informing in Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1.

16 See, e.g., E. Jessee, ‘On the margins; role shifting in atrocity’, in B. Holá, H. Nyseth Nzitatira and M. Weerdesteijn (eds), *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022), pp. 329–350; K. Anderson, ‘The Margins of Perpetration Role-Shifting in Genocide’, in A. Smeulers, M. Weerdesteijn and B. Holá (eds), *Perpetrators of International Crimes* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020), pp. 132–152; M.A. Drumbl, ‘Victims who Victimise’ 4(2) *London Review of International Law* (2016) 217–246.

Communist Prague.¹⁷ The book studies informers¹⁸ in an authoritarian state—Czechoslovakia under Communist governance (1945–1989) and excavates why people collaborated with (i.e. informed to) the Communist secret police. We construct informing as intimacy—secret relationship between informers and their handlers—and explore human emotions (fear, devotion, resentment and desire) that catalyse and sustain these interactions. The basis for our findings are so-called ‘file-stories’¹⁹ of selected informers, which we compiled on the basis of their secret police files archived and now made publicly available at the Security Services Archive in Prague in the Czech Republic (ABS).²⁰

Our explorations therefore centre upon the ‘past’ as reproduced by the StB. Throughout the Communist rule, the StB meticulously collected, recorded, and archived millions of pages. These files—now stored at the ABS—offer a vibrant informational treasure trove of informer ‘file-stories’. While the ‘truthiness’ of information contained in the StB files has been intensely debated within Czech scholarship, politics, and society, secret police files still have been extensively used as sources for historical or social science research.²¹ For some the StB files are ‘products of a criminal organization’ that are ‘full of lies.’²² Others claim

17 Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1.

18 Informers can generally be seen as a subcategory of collaborators, i.e. individuals who in one way or another assist authority figures. While collaborators may openly assist authority figures, informing tends to be shrouded in secrecy. Moreover, collaborators may engage in a broader array of activities than informers. For more detailed discussion of terminology, see Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 3–4.

19 A file-story is a biographical narrative developed through careful interpretation of information found in secret police files. The term ‘file story’ was coined by Valentina Glajar. See A. Lewis, *A State of Secrecy, Stasi Informers and the Culture of Surveillance* (Potomac Books, Lincoln, NE, 2021) p. xxix. See also I. Luca, ‘Secret Police Files, Tangled Life Narratives: The 1.5 Generation of Communist Surveillance’, 38(3) *Biography* (2015), 363–394, p. 365 (observing that the files ‘store individual life stories’).

20 For an overview, see generally Security Services Archive, ‘Home Page’, *Security Services Archive* (2024), available online at <https://www.abscr.cz/en/> (accessed 7 January 2024). For the digital archive, see Security Services Archive, ‘eBadatelna of the Security Services Archives, Prague, Czech Republic’, *Security Services Archive* (2024), available online at <https://www.ebadatelna.cz> (accessed 7 January 2024).

21 See, e.g., Lewis, *supra* note 19; or P. Apor, S. Horváth and J. Mark (eds), *Secret Agents and the Memory of Everyday Collaboration in Communist Eastern Europe* (Anthem Press, London, 2017); or M. Bárta (ed.), *Člověk v soukolí StB* (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů Prague, 2020).

22 M. Kovanic, ‘Institutes of Memory in Slovakia and the Czech Republic: What Kind of Memory?’, in P. Apor, S. Horváth and J. Mark (eds), *Secret Agents and the Memory of Everyday Collaboration in Communist Eastern Europe* (Anthem Press, London, 2017), pp. 81–104, p. 96 (citing the Stenographic report of the 13th session of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic from 16 March 2007).

that 'StB officers were proper state officials, supervised by their superiors, by the inspection of the Ministry of the Interior, and by the military prosecution service, ... and therefore there is a very weak, very low [possibility] that there would be any untruth'.²³

For us, the microscopic accuracies ('facts') matter less than what can inductively and indicatively be traced through the archived files about how individuals approached the act and process of informing in Communist Czechoslovakia. The archived files, with all their distortions and omissions, still provide a colourful picture of the internal workings of a secretive and powerful organization. They shed light on what information the StB considered relevant. They reveal the workings of the surveillance state and the discursive interactions between the secret police and the public. As researchers, while being aware of and sensitive to potential biases, we agree with Alison Lewis, who studied Stasi files of Eastern Germany, and argued that they 'offer unprecedented insights into the secret world of informers' lives'.²⁴ For us, the StB files offer insights into the informer–officer relationship, *why* and *how* people spoke to the secret police, and *what motivated* them in these iterated interactions. Even if the reported facts might be untrue, fabricated, exaggerated, or minimized, we remain steadfast in our conviction that the ways in which the StB related to their informers, and in which informers related to the StB, can be discerned from the files.

In order to compile the file-stories, we used StB files (and information they contain) as texts of social performance and extracted therefrom not only individual histories and trajectories (cognizant of all possible omissions, gaps and biases) but also our perceptions of the emotions, sentiments, and motivations that catalysed and fuelled informing (and resisting) as a social practice. In this respect, our research is impressionistic and largely exploratory.²⁵

Initially, we chose, read, and reviewed files of approximately 100 different informers. We then selected 23 individuals, of which we present detailed file

23 *Ibid.*, p. 709 (citing Pavel Žáček). See also S. Ptáčnicková, 'Aspekty odpovědnosti archivářů a badatelů při nakládání s osobními údaji v archiváliích', 2 *Historie— Otázky— Problémy* (2017) 24–35, p. 32; See also generally Barbara Miller, *The Stasi Files Unveiled: Guilt and Compliance in a Unified Germany* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2017) pp. 14–15 (remarking that the contents of the Stasi files were largely 'truthful'). StB officers undoubtedly approached their job differently: Some would have been more assiduous and hence sought to corroborate more extensively, while others may simply have been more permissive, disinterested, or lazy.

24 Lewis, *supra* note 19, p. xxix.

25 For more detailed discussion on our methodology, see Druml and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 8–17.

stories in our book and online appendix. Each of these 23 files was read *in toto* by one of the authors and a research assistant—who are both native Czech speakers with proficiency in Slovak—and who summarized the contents (nearly all written in Czech, and on very rare occasion in Slovak) and then translated that summary from Czech to English. We intentionally selected file-stories of informers active during different time periods throughout the Communist regime and embodying diverse personal backgrounds. We explicitly took the following variables into account in our case selection: total length of time the informer cooperated with the StB; socio-economic status; occupation; gender; Communist Party membership; family situation; foreign ties or family members abroad; professed reasons for recruitment; stipulated grounds for termination of the informer relationship; who or which groups the informer was tasked to target, if any; and whether the informer had previous entanglements with the law. Our selection was thus purposive and not random. The two file-stories we present in this article are the most illustrative (out of the 23 other informers' stories) of the phenomenon we focus on here—resistant informers. The other file-stories we compiled, however, also contain incidents and indications of such form of everyday resistance, as we indicate below.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly introduces readers to the history of Communist Czechoslovakia, the StB, and StB informers. Section 3 then turns attention to 'resistant informers.' Deploying detailed file-stories of Dora and Karel, two of the Czechoslovak informers, this Section surfaces how individuals can simultaneously collaborate with and resist a repressive regime. These informers did not openly challenge the system. Rather, they entered the system and worked with(in) it. Yet they found ways to subtly undermine it, avoid it, or selectively ignore and parry its demands. The two file-stories also show how such 'everyday resistance from within' is more often than not motivated by highly personal reasons and emotions and far detached from any political aspirations, social justice goals, or ideological inclinations. The article ends with a conclusion presented in Section 4 where we reflect on the concept of 'resistant informers' and situate this phenomenon in contemporary discourse about 'the past' in the Czech Republic. These discourses tend to glorify resistance and vilify informers and, as a result, are far too crude to recognize the nuance of resisting while informing.

2 Secret Police in Communist Czechoslovakia and Their Informers

The Communist Party governed Czechoslovakia for over 40 years between the 'Victorious February' in 1948 and the 'Velvet Revolution' in November

1989. The Czechoslovak Communist Party governance model was more or less comparable to those of many other socialist regimes in the Soviet sphere of influence at the time. Communist Czechoslovakia was a one-party state where basic civil and political human rights, such as right to free expression or right to free movement, were systematically repressed in the name of class struggle and the building of a putatively egalitarian and equitable society. In essence what that meant was that people had to behave according to the Party's ideology. They had to tow the line, else they got into trouble.

The 40 years of Communist reign were not monolithic, however. The regime underwent different stages that oscillated between more or less (violent) repression and more or less (moderate) liberalization. The Communist Party's grip over society ebbed, flowed, surged, receded, and stagnated through time. Levels of top-down repression and bottom-up engagement—along with contestation and cynicism—waxed and waned.

The 1950s were characterized by the most severe repression during the so-called period of Stalinization. At this time, the fight against 'class enemies' and 'enemies of the state', as a necessary stage of progress towards Communist society stood at its apex. Through extensive repression and violence, the Party sought to eradicate real and imagined opposition. By the end of the 1950's, the Communists slowly but surely relaxed their grip over society. The 1960s were characterized by progressive liberalization, which culminated in the 1968 Prague Spring. 'Socialism with human face', as the liberalizing movement dubbed itself, was however abruptly interrupted by the invasion of Soviet-led armies in August 1968. Disillusion ensued. The Communists, bending to pressure from Moscow, once again intensified their surveillance. Although Marxist-Leninist ideology became more or less irrelevant, the Czechoslovak Communist regime remained in power, and was girded by collective apathy and cynicism, for an additional twenty years. The regime and all it entailed simply became 'normalized.' In November 1989 the system, however, crumbled and rapidly collapsed during the so-called Velvet Revolution, which was a relatively nonviolent transition of power and overthrow of the Communists by mass popular protests in November 1989.²⁶

Along with systematic curtailment of basic political and civil rights, a centrally planned economy, forced collectivisation and censorship, Communist repression also manifested in systematic persecution of real and imagined regime opponents. Estimates suggest that somewhere between

26 For more elaborate history of Communist Czechoslovakia in English, see K. McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945–1989* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); see also Drumbal and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 25–68.

250 000²⁷ to 262 500²⁸ individuals were found guilty of political offenses and unjustly convicted in contrived show trials. Nearly half of these convicted individuals were judged *in absentia* for illegal emigration after fleeing the country, around 40 000 of whom were given suspended sentences.²⁹ The rest were incarcerated. About 20 000 individuals were placed in forced labour camps.³⁰ Around 3000³¹ to 4000³² political prisoners perished in these facilities because of torture and maltreatment. 262 people were executed for political reasons, with the vast majority of these executions occurring in the 1950s.³³ Futile border-crossing attempts resulted in 143 people shot to death, 95 electrocutions, and 11 drownings, with 17 people committing suicide rather than face arrest.³⁴ Communist repression also assumed more subtle forms, however. For instance, the state implemented a system of *kádrování* (cadre screening/assessment). Citizens were evaluated for their social fitness (such as for the purposes of employment or studies) based on their family background, political views, and public (and private) statements, among others.³⁵

One of the main pillars of this repression was the state secret police, known as the *Státní bezpečnost* (StB). The StB served a catalytic role in stoking the climate of fear that suffused Communist Czechoslovakia.³⁶ As Czech historian Karel Kaplan notes, the StB was a symbol, a backbone, and an executioner of Communist power.³⁷ For most of its history, the StB covertly and openly surveilled society.³⁸ The intensity of the StB's footprint hinged upon the intensity of the repressiveness of state political authorities generally. Czech

27 K. Williams, 'The StB in Czechoslovakia, 1945–89', in K. Williams and D. Deletant (eds), *Security Intelligence Services in New Democracies: The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania* (Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2001), pp. 24–54, p. 25.

28 R. David, *Communists and Their Victims: The Quest for Justice in the Czech Republic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2018) p. 27.

29 Williams, *supra* note 27, p. 25.

30 David, *supra* note 28, p. 27.

31 Williams, *supra* note 27, p. 25.

32 David, *supra* note 28, p. 26.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 26 (noting discrepancies in the estimates, which range from 248 to 262).

34 *Ibid.* Williams for his part reports that between 320 and 400 people were killed while trying to escape across the border. Williams, *supra* note 27, pp. 25–26.

35 M. Černá: 'Cadre Policy, Cadre Work and Screening in Communist Czechoslovakia—Simple Ideas, Complicated Practice,' 2 *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Studia Territorialis* (2011) 9–28.

36 See K. Kaplan, *Protistátní Bezpečnost, 1945–1948 Historie vzniku a působení StB jako mocenského nástroje KSČ* (Plus, Prague, 2015) p. 11; K. Kaplan, *Nebezpečná Bezpečnost, Historie působení StB jako mocenského nástroje KSČ 1948–1956* (Kniha Zlín, Zlín, 2021) p. 263.

37 Kaplan (2021), *ibid.*, p. 249.

38 Williams, *supra* note 27, p. 25.

historian Bílek notes how periods of increased threat perception were linked to tightening of repression and intensification of surveillance (e.g. period of Stalinization in the 1950s, or post-1968 following the Soviet-led invasion) and alternated with times of relative liberalization and easing of repression (1968 and preceding years).³⁹

The StB's general mission was to 'protect the state establishment',⁴⁰ prevent leakage of state secrets, uphold the spirit of Marxist-Leninism, and fight ostensible enemies of the state (notably external and internal elements suspected of anti-Communist sympathies). However, in reality the StB policed opinions, private lives, and individual behaviour. The StB's aims, tasks, methods, and standard operating procedures fluidly changed in response to the perceived needs of the Communist Party, extant socio-political realities, and the way in which the StB defined its own relationship with the state and the Party.⁴¹

Generally, the StB was akin to other political police units that had been established in various European Communist countries at the time, such as the KGB in the Soviet Union, the Stasi in East Germany, the Securitate in Romania, and the Służby Bezpieczeństwa in Poland.⁴² Notwithstanding variation among these national agencies, all were tasked with 'ideological policing.' All encouraged collaboration, informing and denunciation—the supposedly voluntary reporting of perceived wrongdoing—as patriotic duty and frequently relied on blackmail and threats to secure citizen cooperation (at least initially).

Therefore, much like its counterparts in the other states of the Soviet bloc, the StB relied on wide agglomerations of 'secret collaborators' (*tajní spolupracovníci*)—who we refer collectively to as informers⁴³—to function

39 L. Bílek, 'I undertake voluntarily ... —Residents, agents, informers and others. The State Security's secret collaborators, 1945–1989', in A. Medková (ed.) *Behind the Iron Curtain* (4) (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, Prague, 2016), p. 95, available online at <https://www.ceeol.com/search/chapter-detail?id=541338>.

40 T. Prokop, *Estébáckou Prahou, Průvodce po pražských sídlech Státní bezpečnosti*, 2nd edn (Academia Průvodce, Prague, 2020) p. 12.

41 Kaplan (2021), *supra* note 36, p. 4.

42 Considerable literature exists on these surveillance agencies, their tactics, and how they assembled information. See generally J. Espíndola Mata, *Transitional Justice After German Reunification* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015); Lewis, *supra* note 19; Apor et al., *supra* note 21; Miller, *supra* note 23; L. Stan and L. Turcescu, 'The Devil's Confessors: Priests, Communists, Spies, and Informers', 19 *East European Politics and Society* (2005) 655–685, p. 656; J.W. Heinzen, 'Informers and the State Under Late Stalinism: Informer Networks and Crimes Against 'Socialist Property' 1940–1953', 8 *Kritika* (2007) 789–815.

43 For more elaborate discussion on typology of secret collaborators see Drumbal and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 57–59.

effectively and sustain its reputation of omniscience. The StB regarded its network of informers as 'the main weapon in its fight against enemies.'⁴⁴ Informers were considered the core tool of the StB's activities and the most important component of its operational outreach.⁴⁵

Estimates of the aggregate number of StB informers throughout its forty-year existence vary. Indeed, data are a bit fuzzy. František Koudelka, a Czech historian, states that by the end of 1968, 153 000 individuals had passed through the ranks of informers.⁴⁶ Moran, for his part, identifies 18 000 full-time StB workers and 140 000 informers.⁴⁷ Other reports put the StB informer figure as hovering between 150 000 or 160 000.⁴⁸ Regardless of exact totals, the informer network in Czechoslovakia was in any case less dense than in other Warsaw Pact countries.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, StB members and their informers infiltrated all parts of society: embassies, offices, schools, apartment complexes, enterprises, and sports clubs.⁵⁰ The StB crafted a thick surveillance network and thereby curried betrayal, mistrust, fear, phlegmatism, and cynicism throughout society. The StB was simultaneously 'nowhere and everywhere.'⁵¹ It stewed and brewed unease by turning citizens against citizens; loyalties frayed, and individuals pettily looked out for themselves.

Categories of informers and StB methods of work and recruitment continuously evolved.⁵² According to StB directives, prospective informers were

44 Tajný rozkaz ministra vnitra—'Rozkaz o práci s agentami' a 'Smernice o agentúrne-operatívnej práci' [Secret Order of the Minister of the Interior—'Order Regarding Work with Agents' and 'Directive on Agency-Operational Work'] Vhl č 72/1954 Sb (Czech) 4 (issued 20 April 1954) (hereafter Order 72/1954) 4. See also Tajný rozkaz ministra národní bezpečnosti—'Práce s agenty' [Secret Order of the Minister of National Security—'Work with Agents'], Vhl č 36/1951 Sb (Czech) (issued 10 December 1951) 132 (identifying informers as the 'primary' tool in this regard) (hereafter Order 36/1951).

45 F. Koudelka, *Státní bezpečnost 1954–1968: Základní údaje* 13 (Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, Prague, 1993), p. 45.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

47 J.P. Moran, 'The Communist Torturers of Eastern Europe: Prosecute and Punish or Forgive and Forget?', 27(1) *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (1994) 95–109, pp. 95, 104.

48 M. Hauner, 'Crime and Punishment in Communist Czechoslovakia: The Case of General Heliodor Pika and His Prosecutor Karel Vas', 8 *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (2008) 335–354, pp. 335, 346.

49 Moran, *supra* note 47, p. 104.

50 Kaplan (2021), *supra* note 36, p. 115.

51 Prokop, *supra* note 40, p. 9.

52 The Minister of Interior issued confidential orders and directives, which were regulating aims of work with secret collaborators, their recruitment, methods and stipulated different categories of collaborators. Such regulations were issued for example in 1948,

to be selected based on personal characteristics (including their intellectual, psychological, and physical dispositions) along with their perceived abilities to infiltrate enemy and émigré circles.⁵³ All candidates were subjected to background checks and had to be approved by StB superior officers. Potential informers were to decide of their own volition whether to cooperate or not. Voluntariness was emphasized as an integral pillar of recruitment.⁵⁴ The reality, of course, was far more complex.

The 1954 Ministry of Interior directive had formalized three bases for recruitment, which continued to be used by the StB until 1989: (i) Compromising material, meaning information of a person's criminal activities or other material which could be used to blackmail an individual; (ii) patriotic reasons and sympathies for the official peoples' democratic establishment; and (iii) material advantages (monetary benefits, gifts, job promotions, university admission).⁵⁵ StB agents were instructed to use compromising material, albeit on a limited basis. Such material, according to the guidelines, could include information relating to a person's reputation in public life, at work, in private, or any information which could ordinarily lead to criminal prosecution for misdemeanours.⁵⁶

Williams notes that the majority of informers were not coerced into signing up.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, blackmail was not uncommon, and compromising material was leveraged by the StB, particularly in the early years before it realized that informers recruited in this way could not be dependably harnessed.⁵⁸ David

1954, 1962, 1972 and 1978. P. Žáček, 'Ostrá zbraň' Státní bezpečnosti. Spolupracovníci StB ve směrnicích pro agenturně operativní práci 1947–1989', *Opozice a odpor proti komunistickému režimu v Československu 1968–1989* (Filozofická fakulta UK, Praha, 2005), pp. 180–222.

53 *Rozkaz ministra vnitra—'Směrnice pro práci s tajnými spolupracovníky československé kontrarozvědky'* [Order of the Minister of the Interior—'Directive for Work with Secret Collaborators of the Czechoslovak Counter-Intelligence'], Vhyl č 8/1972 Sb (Czech) (issued 16 February 1972) (hereafter Order 8/1972) arts 40, 41; *Rozkaz ministra vnitra—'Směrnice pro práci se spolupracovníky kontrarozvědky (A-oper-I-3)'* [Order of the Minister of the Interior—'Directive for Work with Collaborators of the Counter-Intelligence A-oper-I-3'], Vhyl č 3/1978 Sb (Czech) (issued 25 January 1978) (hereafter Order 3/1978), Articles 27–29.

54 Order 8/1972, *ibid.*, Article 49; Order 3/1978, *ibid.*, Article 37.

55 Financial benefits and material gains were in general limited to minor monetary rewards or material gifts. Williams, *supra* note 27, p. 34.

56 Order 8/1972, *supra* note 53, Articles 40, 41.

57 Williams, *supra* note 27, p. 34.

58 J. Urban, 'Pedagog, Agronom a Úředník Mlékárny: Agenti Státní bezpečnosti proti odpůrcům kolektivizace', in M. Bárta (ed.), *Člověk v soukolí StB* (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů Prague, 2020), p. 195.

reports that 85.8% of informers were men, and 10.2% were women.⁵⁹ Women and men were recruited in similar ways, but the StB considered women to be particularly susceptible to threats and blackmail.⁶⁰ The StB noted women's 'gender specific' intelligence capabilities, which included 'their ability to induce compassion and solidarity (woman to woman), their art of capturing [the] interest of men and gain their trust,' and thereby being able to infiltrate very private spheres.⁶¹ Although not without exception, informers were typically over the age of 18 at the time of their recruitment.⁶²

All in all, however, as we demonstrate in our previous work,⁶³ the drivers to enter into a relationship with the StB and to continue cooperating with StB officers—often extending over decades—were highly idiosyncratic to each and every informer. Motivations driving informers were fluid, dynamic, and variable with time and individual tasks.⁶⁴ Bílek posits that a 'majority of people were 'asked' to collaborate (albeit perhaps covertly or ambiguously, as officers acted in such a way as to get the committed person make the actual proposal) and rejecting such an 'offer' was in view of the reputation that accompanied the State Security very difficult and in some cases virtually impossible.⁶⁵

Whether the 'offers' by the StB could be declined remains a contested question to both ask and answer in the post-Communist Czechia. According to Koudelka, in a surprisingly high number of cases, an informer rejected an offer to cooperate⁶⁶ and did not face any (major) repercussions. Many informers

59 David, *supra* note 28, pp. 38–39 (noting that in the remaining four per cent of cases it was not possible to determine gender).

60 M. Doležalová, 'Věra Hložková: Žena, Přítelkyně Ministrů, Agentka StB', in M. Bárta (ed.), *Člověk v soukollí StB (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů Prague, 2020)*, p. 198.

61 *Ibid.*

62 In the 1980s, the StB also used teenagers, aged 15 to 18, in its counter-intelligence activities, but did so only sparingly. Matúš Burčík, 'Child Agents of the ŠtB Escaped Even Historians', *SME* (20 November 2011), available online at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/6147564/detski-agenti-stb-unikli-aj-historikom.html> (accessed 3 January 2024) (interviewing Milan Bárta). See also 'File no 745498 MV,' registration no 33360 (Ivana). Ivana's file describes a girl who began her informing career at the age of seventeen. She supplied the StB with information about her peers who were unable to graduate high school as a result of her informing. Ivana's story also features in J. Plachý, 'Operace Kněz a Zahradník, Dvojité úspěch Mělnické StB v boji s vnitřním nepřitelem', 10 *Securitas Imperii* (2003), p. 59. For a more granular discussion of Ivana, see B. Holá and M.A. Druml, 'Children as Informers and Denouncers', in C. Molima, J. Barrett, M. Kamara, K. Hanson and M.A. Druml (eds), *Children's Fights: Commonalities and Differences Across Time, Space and Place* (Routledge, Abingdon, forthcoming, 2024).

63 Druml and Holá (2022, 2024), *supra* note 1.

64 See also Koudelka, *supra* note 45; Bílek, *supra* note 39, p. 100.

65 Bílek, *supra* note 39, p. 100.

66 Koudelka, *supra* note 45, p. 63.

were spurred by their own ambition or self-preservation (for example, demonstrating willingness to fulfil the demands that the StB placed on them in order to retain their jobs, social status, or their way of living⁶⁷). And, as we will illustrate in the next section, some informers also used various means and ways to stall, ignore, contest, or mislead the StB. We explore this as a form of everyday ‘resistance’.

3 Resisting while Informing

Informers in the service of a repressive state are certainly not a category of individuals that spring to mind when speaking of resistance. Far from it. Essentially, informers are rather seen as a backbone of repression, not as its counterforce. Indeed, their existence and actions are often indispensable for a repressive regime to run—they make its wheels turn, so to speak—and they are key to the proliferation of endemic human rights abuses.⁶⁸ Their actions can cause significant harm to others. While informers in repressive regimes may themselves be victims, and are enlisted by the state, they are not entirely powerless. On the contrary, informers often exercise considerable agency.⁶⁹ This in itself offers potential for contestation and subtle resistant actions within collaboration. Consequently, informers can potentially employ what Sharp called ‘methods of political non-cooperation’ such as (selective) refusal of assistance to enforcement agents or reluctant and slow compliance.⁷⁰ Arguably, such ‘political’ non-cooperation can theoretically be based on apolitical motives and pursue personal goals.

In Communist Czechoslovakia some informers exercised their agency in support of the regime. They eagerly and enthusiastically conspired with the regime above and beyond what was expected and requested of them. There were others, however, who, while entering a pact with the StB simultaneously defied the StB. They partially exercised their agency *in resistance to* the StB and their officers. These informers found ways to engage the StB while

67 Bilek, *supra* note 39, p. 100.

68 See literature cited in *supra* note 42.

69 See Miller, *supra* note 23, p. 48 (in the case of East Germany, noting that ‘evidence does seem to suggest that refusing to agree to work for the Stasi [...] rarely led to any negative repercussions for the person concerned.’).

70 See G. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (3 Vols.) (Porter Sargent, Boston, MA, 1973). The list of 198 methods of nonviolent actions can be accessed online at <https://www.brandeis.edu/peace-conflict/pdfs/198-methods-non-violent-action.pdf> (accessed 4 June 2024).

simultaneously hemming and hawing. In their own 'little' ways they were thus resisters. They navigated their complex positionality on the edge of weakness and circumscribed power to their best capabilities. They were 'playing' the system from the inside, so to say. For instance, some informers at times evaded the StB, avoided their officers, and ignored their requests. Others explicitly set conditions for their collaboration at the outset and were quite clear about their no-go zones, such as overtly specifying that they would never inform upon certain people. Others misinformed the StB, silenced certain issues, supplied streams of bullshit, or lied outright. Misinforming, disinforming, and (selectively) not informing could thus in its own way be seen as a way of resistance. Yet these 'little' acts of 'resistance from within' were far from heroic. Rather, they were very often apolitical, mundane, opportunistic and deeply personal.

In the following paragraphs we present two detailed file-stories—of Dora and Karel—to illustrate what we mean by 'resistant informers'.⁷¹

3.1 *Dora*⁷²

Dora was born in Prague in 1954. After completing her elementary school education, she enrolled in a training school for sales assistants. Dora only attended this school for three and a half years, and, as such, she failed to obtain her diploma. Afterwards, Dora frequently changed jobs. She occasionally worked in different capacities, such as a cleaner or a manual labourer in a factory. Most of the time, however, she was jobless.

Dora's collaboration with the StB began in 1978 when she was 24 years-old, single, and a mother to a three-year old daughter. Her daughter's father was reputedly a Swedish citizen, and Dora had litigated alimony and paternity recognition against him. According to one of the reports in her file, Dora was financially supported by her parents.

Dora's picture in her file shows a young woman, stoically smiling, dreamingly gazing over a photographer's shoulder far into the distance; however,

71 For more file-stories of other individuals, who at times also resisted or avoided the StB, see Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, including its online appendix available at <https://www.nscr.nl/Informers-Up-Close>. For ethical reasons, we have pseudonymized the file-stories and are using only StB cover names of all the individuals, which are not unique. We have also deleted any potentially identifying information, including exact dates or places and addresses. For more detail, see Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, p. 17.

72 All the information and quotations in this section come from StB File No.: 731052; Registration No.: 29292, Archives of Security Forces, Prague. File created: 1978; File archived: 1982; Page count: 196 pages. Many documents from Dora's file have been destroyed. Another cover name used in her file is 'Tereza.' All the quotations were translated from Czech to English by one of the authors.

documents in her file paint a more sinister portrait of a troubled life. Her file is scattered, many documents are missing, and information is provided on a piecemeal basis. Notwithstanding the multiple missing pieces, the contours of her file-story surface: Dora comes across as a passionate person who had a lust for life and a blatant disregard for existing social conventions and rules. She lived a hedonistic lifestyle: she partied and drank a lot; enjoyed the company of men—particularly foreigners from the West; was regularly arrested by police for disorderly conduct, including for a personal assault; and, had a very troubled—and at times violent—relationship with her father, who seemed to have physically abused her.

As opposed to many other informers' files, which are filled to the top with information on and about them that had been gathered by other informers and the StB officers themselves, Dora's file contains only one such report. This report, authored by 'Zuzana'—another informer—revealed that Dora had the following reputation: she took a lot of money from foreigners; she was an alcoholic who misbehaved when drunk; she habitually incited conflicts among her colleagues; and, she did not take care of her toddler daughter.

As aforementioned, the proposal to create Dora's file as 'an StB person of interest' was drafted in 1978. The proposal described Dora as someone who 'kept relations with many tourists and businessmen coming to Czechoslovakia from BRD (*n.b. Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, namely, West Germany)' and who had 'personal connections with employees at the BRD Embassy in Prague.' No other reason for Dora's recruitment was provided. However, after canvassing her 200-page file, one can discern that Dora was a prostitute. During Communism, prostitution was prohibited. The 1950s Czechoslovak Criminal Code stipulated an offence of 'parasitism' which was deployed to prosecute prostitutes and other jobless individuals. This offense persisted throughout the Communist era as all citizens were legally obliged to have a 'proper' job. The StB used prostitutes to gather intelligence on their clients in exchange for shielding them from the police and criminal investigations. Dora was no exception.

Dora was particularly keen on foreigners from the 'imperialist' West. She regularly met up with them in Prague's high-end hotels, such as the Hotel International or the Hotel Alcron. Accordingly, the StB was interested in getting information on her clients, and they instructed Dora to 'focus in particular on clients from [West Germany].' However, the StB's pinpointed interests seemingly broadened over time insofar as it began to engage Dora in operations against representatives of the US Embassy, Finnish diplomats, Italian and Japanese tourists, Austrian businessmen, and Czechs living abroad. The StB regularly asked Dora to initiate contact with these types of individuals for the purpose of gathering information on and from them.

All in all, however, Dora's relationship with the StB and the StB's relationship with Dora seems to have been rather volatile: engaged and keen at times, while cold and dismissive at others. In other words, her informing was akin to a wily cat and mouse game. Dora avoided the StB from time to time, while the StB chased her, insistent on further contacts. She missed many meetings, and kept her StB officer waiting and hanging, only to come up with excuses for her absence. On several occasions, Dora seemed to report sketchily and briefly that she had not met anyone of interest; or she provided only very general, vague, or banal information without supplying any names or anything of substance. For example, in January 1981 she described her new 'friend' from West Germany without providing his name or any further details about him. However, Dora did state that this friend had allegedly made acquaintance with a woman nicknamed 'Brambora'—meaning *potato* in Czech⁷³—in the Lucerna bar in Prague and, following this encounter, he intended to marry her. Dora did not provide any further details on the situation, even though the StB had asked her to inquire about the name and identity of Brambora. One can only wonder to what extent Dora just fed the StB with irrelevant and petty information to keep them off her back.

At other times, however, Dora provided the StB with more detailed accounts. It seems that she wanted to keep them interested and sufficiently engaged to reap eventual benefits from her informing. Dora named individuals, described their family circumstances, age, the frequency of their visits to Czechoslovakia, among other personal details. At one meeting, she stated that she really enjoyed collecting and reporting information to the StB. According to the reports filed by her officers, she realized that her relationship with the StB afforded her many benefits, and terminating it would have been 'a great personal tragedy for her [,] as it would not be long until she [had] trouble with the Police again.'

Similarly, the StB's relationship to Dora oscillated between appreciative and supportive on the one hand and reprimanding and demanding on the other. At times, Dora was chided for her 'irresponsible' attitude toward the StB— her officer was unable to contact her on numerous occasions and she failed to show up for meetings. The StB threatened to terminate the cooperative arrangement unless she behaved. In his sternly paternal role, Dora's StB officer encouraged her to adjust her lifestyle toward more 'responsible activities,' and that she 'should avoid any public disturbances, excessive drinking and fluctuation in her jobs, which characterized her earlier behaviour.' Dora was repeatedly reminded that she should find 'a proper [day] job' and take better care of her reputation.

73 'Brambora' is at times used in the Czech language as a nickname for Barbora.

Her file does not reveal any open threats or blackmail until the very end of Dora's cooperation. In July 1982, the StB threatened to transfer her file to the regular police. Dora told the StB that, due to her new relationship with her boyfriend, who was very jealous and insisted on accompanying her anytime she left the house, her work for the StB had become almost impossible. As far as we know, she faced no consequences. The informing stopped. She resisted the StB's entreaties and she did so to placate her private life.

Dora's informing to the StB ended in September 1982 due to her 'unserious attitude,' 'stagnating cooperation since 1981,' and her provision of increasingly useless information. Looking at her cooperation, Dora seems to have 'played' with the StB—keeping them sufficiently interested but not giving out much. She occasionally manipulated the StB officers, and gave out only as much as absolutely necessary to keep the StB engaged but also at bay. Despite her lax attitude and avoidance, Dora's informing lasted for more than three years.

All in all, Dora's cooperation did not seem to bear any fruit for the StB. From the perspective of supplying information related to national security, she simply wasted the StB's time. In this sense, Dora is an example of everyday resistant informing. Dora did not conscientiously object to the political system. Her motivations and behaviour seem to be largely apolitical and devoid of any ideology. Dora's 'resistance' within the deeply circumscribed constraints that she faced was dovetailed with her lifestyle and life choices. When she no longer needed the StB, or when it became too privately problematic to meet with the StB because of her boyfriend's jealousy towards other men, she eschewed the StB and faced neither consequence nor recrimination. The StB simply dropped her, which is what she arguably also wanted. Dora's reluctance was strategic and tactical, and in no ways principled. Dora just lived her life as best she could, and her tango with the StB—one step forward and one step back—was simply a way for her to get by and make do.

3.2 *Karel*⁷⁴

Karel was born in 1940 in Vsetín, a town in North-East Moravia. He studied German and was reportedly among the best students in his graduating class. In 1968, he received a PhD in Germanic studies from the Faculty of Arts at Palacký University in Olomouc.

74 All the information and quotations in this section comes from StB File No.: 789645; Registration No.: 21213, Archives of Security Forces, Prague; File created: 1981; File archived: 1987; Page count: 576 pages. Although Karel's file was officially created in 1981, it contains older documents from the 1970s. Karel's other code name used in the file is 'Havel Jiří'. All the quotations were translated from Czech to English by one of the authors.

Karel is described in the file as 'a quiet, but generally happy man, with a sense of humour; [when] interested in an issue, he [was] devoted and took initiative.' He enjoyed sports, and was considered to be polite, intelligent, trustworthy and social individual. He had 'a natural talent for improvisation,' and the StB stated that '[Karel's] virtue was his logical thinking and his considered reaction in any situation, be it in private or in operational activities.'

Karel was particularly passionate about his research and anything and everything German. He regularly travelled to different universities in West Germany. He also devoured German literature, be it popular or academic, and he took every opportunity to speak German and socialize with German speakers. Karel's passion for Germany, in conjunction with the contacts he had with foreigners in Czechoslovakia and abroad, triggered the StB's interest in him.

Karel's file contains a photograph of him in which only half of his face is visible. The other half hides in a shadow: it is somewhat eerie, as if he were only halfway there. This half in, half out depiction reveals Karel's relationship with the StB. Karel seems to be a prime example of a resistant informer. Owing to Karel's passion for Germans and Germany the StB set altitudinous ambitions for him: they trained him to use spy equipment, and they even deployed him to Austria so that he could inform there on a long-term basis. Karel, however, did not seem to fully satisfy the lofty expectations that had been set for him. Indeed, he interacted with the StB, attended meetings, and submitted handwritten reports, but he never completed anything beyond that which was (absolutely) necessary. Karel consistently resisted any attempts by the StB to make him more useful and efficient. He frequently misreported, held back, and avoided the StB.

Therefore, the StB recurrently suspected Karel of dishonest and evasive behaviour. Notwithstanding these reservations, the StB nevertheless believed that, due to his foreign contacts within the West German Embassy, Karel provided them with information that they would not have otherwise had. In return, the StB gave Karel 'cover' to pursue his personal interests without repercussion, including collecting German books and socializing with foreigners from capitalist states. Thus, even though the informing relationship was replete with disappointment, both the StB and Karel seemed to have mutually benefitted therefrom.

Karel's contacts with the StB started in the early 1970s after he returned from a stay in West Germany. At the time, Karel's performance aligned with the StB's expectations for him, as his initial StB evaluation reports were very positive. He was described as 'a serious collaborator' who 'actively fulfilled given tasks,' was 'considerate' in fulfilling them, was 'not hasty,' and 'acted strictly according

to instructions.' Indeed, StB officers must have been content with Karel's performance, as in 1975 they began preparing him for permanent resettlement in Austria. The StB trained him intensely in the art of defense techniques and secret communication and provided him with extensive political education. However, much to the StB's dismay, Karel returned to Czechoslovakia after only a one-month-long stay in Austria to tend to his sick mother. Karel unilaterally terminated the mission on his own volition without consulting the StB. As a result, the StB decided to halt the cooperation immediately. However, that was not the end of Karel's engagement with the StB.

In 1978, Karel began maintaining regular contacts with an employee in the cultural department at the West German Embassy in Prague. Without specific reason or motivation provided in the file, Karel approached his former StB officer and divulged this connection. After a couple of meetings, the StB decided that Karel could be usefully resuscitated as an informer. In 1979, the StB renewed their cooperation with him.

The StB, however, did not fully trust Karel's reporting. His file reveals that—despite his extensive reporting—the StB suspected that he was not disclosing the full extent of his discoveries. For example, in an extensive report from a meeting in April 1980, StB officers expressed their general dissatisfaction with Karel's performance; allegedly, he had supplied them only with generic information about Embassy employees. The report describes how Karel's StB officer was angry with him; frustrated with his passivity; put additional pressure on him; and chastised him for not following directions. Karel's behaviour disappointed both his StB officer and senior StB bosses. Karel's StB officer threatened Karel that, if he did not 'truthfully report about the materials he was getting⁷⁵ [...] [the StB] [would] stop covering [him,] and he [would] bear the potential consequences.' He reminded Karel that the StB did not fully trust him, as he 'never report[ed] everything, [and] always [wanted] to take without giving.'

Karel's StB officer summarized his reporting thus far from his time at the Embassy as general and non-serious. The StB reasoned that, either: (i) 'Karel knows more and does not want to talk'; (ii) 'Karel knows more and must not talk'; or (iii) 'Karel is not interested in knowing more.' His StB officer emphasized that there was 'a general dissatisfaction with his results'. Karel was concerned, however, that the West Germans had already found out about his work for the StB. Karel's file pithily observes that 'he fears [Germans] more,' yet he continues to cooperate with the StB because he 'enjoys it. It brings [him]

75 At the time, Karel had been exchanging German brochures and books with some of the Embassy employees.

change and excitement, and he would not like it to end. One reason [for Karel's reluctance to end his cooperation with the StB] is the financial effect and possible personal benefits (concerning his stays abroad).'

In October 1980, a report from another meeting stated that Karel's description of his encounter with a West German Embassy employee was, in 'many respects [,] arid and brief,' and that, even after further probing by the StB, Karel failed to share any relevant intelligence. Thus, his StB officer continued to worry that Karel had a different agenda and questioned his allegiance to the Czechoslovak regime. He noted that Karel's political stance was unclear and his support for the socialist establishment uncertain. Moreover, Karel's StB officer stated that Karel did not seem to be 'identified with Party politics and this negatively influences his work with [the StB].' He also suspected that Karel sought only personal enrichment, particularly in the form of collecting German literature and securing opportunities for travel to West Germany.

Notwithstanding these reservations, Karel's important contacts abroad and at the West German Embassy rendered the StB reluctant to sever their ties with him. Karel seemingly realized that his situation was precarious. In 1981, he provided the StB with multiple reports on the various meetings and encounters he had with Embassy staff. He even produced a sketch of the apartment which belonged to one of his German acquaintances. Karel later gave the StB the keys to this apartment and was subsequently awarded 1500 Czech Crowns (Kčs) for 'his positive approach to cooperation.'

Karel's rapport with the StB nevertheless remained variable. Despite his generally subpar performance, he was constantly testing whether the StB would assist him with his personal matters. For example, in 1981, Karel showed up drunk to a meeting with the StB, where 'at the beginning [of the meeting] [,] he refused the refreshments that had been offered to him, as he had been drinking [with two students] since the morning [,] and intended to continue doing so.' Moreover, Karel was apparently 'embittered' because he 'did not expect to get a foreign exchange promise [,]'⁷⁶ as there was 'a lack of foreign currency [,] and only persons that have not been abroad were allowed to travel.' Thus, Karel inquired whether the StB could help him to get a foreign travel permit. The StB, however, hesitated to assist Karel in his affairs due to their continued suspicions of him.

76 In Czech, a *devizový příslib* was the permit required to officially obtain foreign currency for travel to non-socialist countries, including Yugoslavia; alone, this 'foreign exchange promise' was insufficient for travel. Czechoslovak citizens who wanted to visit the West also needed a special administrative permission called *výjezdní doložka*, which may be loosely translated as 'exit clause.'

A report from September 1984 noted how Karel constantly tried to ‘outsmart’ the StB. Ultimately, Karel had:

[E]xaggerated some information [,] and in its evaluation [,] he is using his knowledge of methods and aims of the StB, which he gained during his [previous contact with the StB]. By doing that, he attempts to make an impression of successfully fulfilling the tasks, by which he wants to create conditions for getting material rewards. It cannot be excluded that [,] by doing this [,] he is trying to divert the attention from the real nature of his contacts [at the Embassy], which might be motivated by material gains.

In the second half of the 1980s Karel continued to meet with the StB, although the intensity of their meetings dipped. The StB continued to be wary of Karel’s performance. For instance, an evaluation report from March 1987 again remarked that Karel ‘[did] not share all information’; that his intelligence was solely of ‘a general character’; and that he had a tendency only to ‘roughly’ fulfil his assigned tasks.

In late December 1987, the StB terminated its cooperation with Karel on a less-than-positive note; the final report lists his ‘negative characteristics—un-seriousness, greediness, not fulfilling tasks, difficulties in his management, pursuing his personal interest in contacts with his targets’.

Overall, during his cooperation Karel appeared to be very acquisitional and utilitarian, yet simultaneously reluctant and resistant. Throughout his career as an informer, the StB suspected Karel of foul play. Karel indeed repeatedly misinformed the StB, did not follow instructions, ‘forgot’ to report or ‘did not remember’ important details from his frequent contacts with Western Germans. Yet, he was still sufficiently useful and forthcoming towards the StB, in particular when he personally benefitted. Like Dora, Karel’s StB cooperation seemingly gave him the space to conduct his so-called ‘shady affairs’—in the eyes of the Communist security services—without any repercussions. Karel only did what was necessary to placate the StB. He fed the system, but only as much as absolutely necessary. Similar to Dora, Karel found his own small ways to resist while still cooperating. Despite his sub-par performance and repeated ‘resistances’, Karel nevertheless supplied information that the StB likely would not have otherwise acquired; therefore, both parties kept the wheel of their relationship turning for quite some time.

3.3 *Resistant Informers*

Dora and Karel can be seen as just two of the many resistant informers who cooperated with the secret police and thus supported the regime, but in

various situations and for various (most of the time highly idiosyncratic and personal) reasons also stalled, avoided and stymied cooperation. These everyday resistances gummed up the system, slowed the state down, and in tiny ways distracted and deflected the repressive efforts of the state. The StB archives contain other examples of this day-to-day 'resistance'.

As our file-stories demonstrate, quite a number of the initially cajoled or threatened informers indeed came to play a similar 'cat and mouse' game with the StB as Dora and Karel in order to socially navigate their fraught situation.⁷⁷ At times, informers collude with authorities to get or keep certain things, at times they resist because they do not want to give up or compromise certain things. In some instances, resisting to inform may also satisfy a personal ethical standard about what feels right, a broader political goal, or also simply be a product of antipathy towards a certain specific secret police officer. Indeed, on this latter note, our book demonstrates that how the informer feels about his or her specific StB handler bears materially on the information provided: when the relationship is a positive one, the informer may be more forthcoming, when the relationship is a negative or lacklustre one, then the informer may resist, stall, or vacillate.⁷⁸ This adds an important interpersonal dynamic to resistance.

Informers operate within different ecosystems: their relationships with state officials, on the one hand, their relationships with private parties, on another hand, and their relationship with themselves, on yet another hand. Supplying information, and resisting the information supply, can be determined by multiple levers pulled to maintain presence and legitimacy and credibility within these overlapping but also separate systems. Resistance then becomes an instrumental tactic and operational strategy to manage one's life and sensibilities within repressive political systems. Once the repressive regime falls, and is replaced with a 'better' one, assertions of resistance in the 'terrible old days' also becomes a tactic to survive, and thrive, in the new political order as well as to convince oneself, and loved ones, of one's value as a human being. Indeed, reports arise of individuals who expressed embarrassment, or lost face, when their names did not appear in the secret police files as having been targeted as opponents of the repressive regime.⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, the amount

77 For other examples, such as Eva, Hájek or Zuzana, see https://nscrl.nl/app/uploads/2024/01/Informers-Up-Close_Online_Appendix_8-January-2024.pdf (accessed 4 June 2024).

78 Drumbly and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 151–196.

79 Miller, *supra* note 23, p. 96.

of purported resistance in the ‘terrible old days’ tends to inflate in revisionist perceptions.⁸⁰

4 Conclusion

In this article we presented two file-stories of informers who collaborated with the StB and who simultaneously resisted the StB. In our research we encountered many other similar individuals who collaborated with the StB and at the same time in certain situations or consistently resisted collaboration. These individuals therefore concurrently ‘confirm[ed] the system, fulfil[ed] the system, ma[de] the system, [were] the system’⁸¹ and—we add—defied the system. In this sense, we aimed to further nuance and complexify discussions on day-to-day resistance, victimhood and collaboration in repressive times, and acknowledge that reality in such contexts is compound.⁸² There is much more going on here than that these individuals were useless or bad informers, or failures, insofar as their interface with the state security apparatus was far more agentic and tactical, even at times in desperate contexts.

In his scholarship, Scott compared his everyday resisters to ‘opponents of a law who estimate that it is more convenient to evade it or bribe their way around it rather than change it’.⁸³ In the same way our resistant informers did not openly challenge the StB and their standard operating procedures. They entered the network of informers and worked with and within it but also found ways how to subtly undermine it, avoid it, or selectively ignore its demands. Their behavior and actions thus at times ‘negotiated and undermined

80 Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 65–67.

81 V. Havel, ‘The Power of the Powerless’, in P. Wilson (ed.): *Václav Havel, Open Letters, Selected Prose 1965–1990* (Faber and Faber, London, 1991), p. 136.

82 Cf. Rosenberg (T. Rosenberg, ‘Overcoming the Legacies of Dictatorship’, 74 *Foreign Affairs* (1995) 134–152, p. 138) arguing that:

Just as almost everyone was a victim of communism by virtue of living under it, almost everyone also participated in repression. Inside a communist regime, lines of complicity ran like veins and arteries inside the human body. Even the most natural responses of self-preservation were also, in a sense, acts of collaboration. The eighth-grade history teacher who taught students of the glorious march of the proletariat and its vanguard, the Communist Party; the journalist who wrote positive articles because she knew she would be fired for writing negative ones; the millions who fooled their leaders into thinking they were beloved by granting them their votes and cheering at party rallies—all were complicit. Their complicity was hidden, even from themselves, by that fact that every ordinary citizen behaved the same way. It seemed normal. But such ‘normal’ collaboration kept the regime alive.

83 Scott (1989), *supra* note 6, p. 57.

power'.⁸⁴ However, their resistances were relatively subtle, ambiguous, and were 'accompanied by a [...] discursive affirmations of the very arrangements being resisted'.⁸⁵ Resistant informing therefore '[left] dominant symbolic [and power] structures intact'.⁸⁶ We have also illustrated that in case of the informers we studied, their motivations for resisting the system and demands of the secret police were more often than not devoid of political aspirations or ideological connotations. Their behavior—as much resistant as supplicative—was largely motivated by banal, day-to-day human concerns and issues, such as opportunism, affection, laziness, convenience, ignorance, apathy, or balancing the private and public constraints on their lives.

In the contemporary Czech Republic, popular and official histories of Communist repression and life under Communism postulate an 'evil regime' imposed on the populace mainly from the outside with the help of a limited number of 'rotten' insiders who oppressed ordinary citizens. Resistances of various (back in the time relatively marginal) civic movements and individuals became overblown and wildly romanticized.⁸⁷ Simultaneously, StB informers became vilified, ostracized and scapegoated because they were considered dangerous for democracy.⁸⁸ The iconography of brave resistance thus contrasts with the generally snivelling and obsequious portraits of collaborative informers who are stylized as snitches, moles, and finks.⁸⁹ This article aims to show that both of these caricatures are overdrawn. Indeed, resistance and connivance may overlap. Informers may not merit unmitigated scapegoating and resisters may not merit unrequited adulation. The motivations of resistant informers may be far from noble.

The informers we discussed were definitely not heroic resisters aiming to challenge the Communist reign. Neither were they brutal evil regime supporters and believers. They were just humans stuck in complex situations. Their 'resistances' were uneventful and at times rather cowardly. They still actively cooperated, largely for banal and personal reasons, although they often, too, were victims of the times. They nonetheless fed the system and nurtured an informer network that was essential for Communist repression and for keeping people in check. At the same time, however, they frustrated

84 Lilja and Vinthagen, *supra* note 6, p. 215.

85 Scott (1989), *supra* note 6, p. 56.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 57

87 See, for example, McDermott, *supra* note 26, p. 16; David, *supra* note 28, p. 118, both questioning the prevailing interpretations of history.

88 See Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp. 69–85.

89 Drumbl and Holá (2024), *supra* note 1, pp.1–4.

and undermined the system, whether intentionally or casually, and often in an opportunistic, conniving, or selfish manner.

This article is based on—and also extrapolates from—research in Czechoslovakia and departs from extant narratives that circulate about NVR while also offering a nuanced and humanized view about what resistance may look like *in the everyday* and why it arises. There is much more, and also much less, to resistance than may meet the eye. Therefore, with this article we would rather like to open new windows for further inquiry to problematize essentialized imagery of heroic nonviolent resisters as well as evil spineless supplicants. More often than not, human reality and human actions are messy and evade parsimonious categorizations and binary reductiveness. One can be a collaborator and a resister at the same time. Informing and resistance can both constitute tools of social navigation and mechanisms of interest protection. Hence, there might be cause to pause before reflexively turning resisters into heroes, and informers into demons, in particular in the everyday.