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Posted on 10 May 2019 By Timothy Garton Ash

`READ KINDLE ? The File: A Personal History ? PDF eBook or Kindle ePUB

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I came to read this because of my interest in memoir And there is memoir here, as the author moves between the things he discovers in the Stasi file kept on him during his time behind the wall in East Berlin during the early 1980s and his own journal of the period The writing here moves from the odd records of these files and his own journal entries, which he then follows with his attempts to track down the Stasi secret service informers now living in various states of retirement or obscurity who kept the file on him This was written in 1997, and Garton Ash's detailing of computer technology seems dated at this point, but his reflections on the tensions between a secret service in a communist dictatorship and secret services in liberal democracies raise questions about protecting freedoms and the right and need for privacy in a way that has a peculiarly current ring Edward Snowden, Apple's courtroom battle with the FBI over accessing a terrorist's cell phone records It is also interesting that he ends by reflecting on the lack of a father figure in the lives of many of the informants who followed him. That's right I tagged this as memoir and thriller It's an unlikely combination, but then *The File* chronicles an unlikely moment in history Not the police state of former East Germany Police states are a dime a dozen Nope, the unlikely bit is the moment in the mid 1990s when a newly re-unified Germany allowed everyone to apply to see the file that the East German secret police, the Stasi, kept on them For all that the KGB were designated by Hollywood as the Big Bad in today's television parlance, the Stasi kept records, kept thorough records, and compromised a greater percentage of their country's population Family informed on family, neighbors on neighbors, husbands and wives on their wives and husbands Everyone got a code name Everyone got a handler Everyone got a file everyone who informed, and everyone who was informed upon When I read this for the first time in early 2001, carrying out academic research in Prague, *The File* already felt like an anachronism, a peculiar book documenting a particular moment in history Then came 9/11 Then came the Patriot Act, and the War on Terror, and a mere 8 months later, the book felt like a cautionary tale In *The File*, Timothy Garton Ash documents how he retrieved his own file and methodically interviewed all of the people who had informed on him, people he barely knew, people he considered confidantes and friends He interviews members of the Stasi, a branch of the military, as far up the chain of command as he can go and gives them a voice even as he explores his own misgivings Historically speaking, from the perspective of the U.S., the Warsaw Pact were the Big Bad But for the Stasi themselves, they were protecting their country They were doing what our CIA do, ferreting out dangers to the country, to the society, to their heritage as they saw it He explores the inherent tension between freedom and law enforcement, and individual freedom versus national self-defense Inevitably, the greatest damage done by the police state driven to protect itself is to society and to the relationships between citizens Garton Ash himself betrays the trust of a former

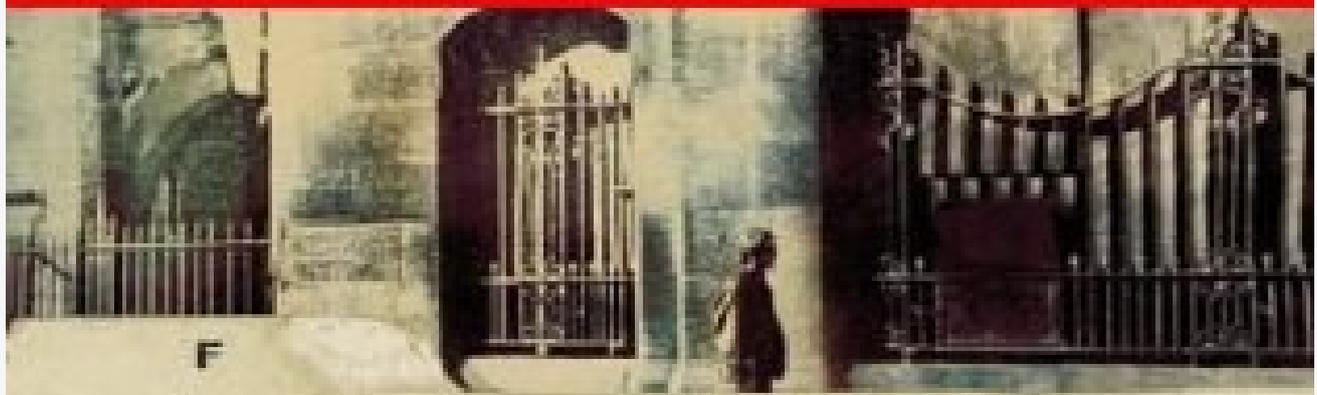
girlfriend who did something he never understood On the verge of making love one night, she threw back the curtains on the French doors of her apartment and turned the light on She is not listed in his file as an informant, but the circumstances have always puzzled him When he asks her about the event, she is deeply hurt that he could imagine she would have tried to set him up to be spied upon I don't remember opening the curtain, she says, but yes I turned on the light I wanted to see your face. Timothy Garton Ash's *The File: A Personal History* is an exploration of the author's own file that was kept on him by the East German secret police, the State Security Service, the Stasi Mr Ash lived in East Berlin for a few years in the late 70s and early 80s, ostensibly to finish his Ph.D thesis on the German Communist resistance to the Nazis Mr Ash, a British citizen, was getting his doctorate from St Antony's College at Oxford, but actually to report, as a journalist, on the East German dictatorship Therefore, Mr Ash was indeed a spy, albeit a spy for the media, rather than for MI5 or MI6 Upon the reunification of Germany, the Stasi's files were largely thrown open to the public A staggering number of people have applied, and been granted permission, to see their own files Upon reading them, they have found unwelcome and sometimes horrible truths wives finding that their own husbands informed on them for the Stasi, for example Mr Ash tells the story of delving into his own file, and comparing the informers reports with his own memory, or, indeed, with his diary entries from that time or with articles he then published under a pseudonym in West Berlin Mr Ash then tracked down, and interviewed, most of the informants in his file He questioned their motives for choosing to become Stasi informers, and compared those motives and choices with his own he came close to joining MI6 at one time, and he himself chose to clandestinely gather information and report it, although not to any secret police or government agency Mr Ash also draws necessary and unsettling parallels between the East German citizenry's acquiescence in and participation in the communist dictatorship and the German people's in the Nazi regime While I was reading this book, I was absolutely staggered by one of the numbers Mr Ash quoted 1 in 50 East Germans were informers for the Stasi When I told this to my husband, he said, Steph, don't be such a hypocrite the FBI and the American people are just as bad Now, I know in my bones that this is not so, and I set out to prove him wrong I submitted a FOIA request Freedom of Information Act request to the FBI, seeking a compilation of the numbers of FBI informants during the years J Edgar Hoover was the director of the FBI the darkest period, in my estimation, whether expressed as raw numbers or as a percentage of the American population Hah I thought, For one thing, there was no such thing as a FOIA request in East Germany While I waited for the results of my FOIA request, I finished the book And Mr Ash explored just that same territory, in Britain, that I was attempting to explore here in the U.S that is, to compare the workings of the state security service in a democracy with the workings of the Stasi in the East German dictatorship And the results were not altogether heartening I was also astounded to learn that in Britain, there is no such thing as a FOIA request British citizens cannot request to see the files that MI5 or MI6 hold on them Mr Ash

learned that MI5 maintained a file on him through interviewing a gentleman at MI5, and by asking the question point blank The gentleman, in his discretion, chose to answer, although he could rightfully have chosen to neither confirm nor deny the existence of a file on Mr Ash. And then when I got the results of my FOIA request, I was further disheartened This is what I got The FOIA does not require federal agencies to answer inquiries, create records, conduct research, or draw conclusions concerning queried data Rather the FOIA requires agencies to provide access to reasonably described, nonexempt records The questions posed in the referenced letter are not FOIA requests because they do not comply with the FOIA and its regulations Now, I know damn well that my request was broad enough to describe at least one document that certainly must already exist in the FBI's files there must be, at least in the FBI's accounting records, line items of the moneys paid out year by year to confidential informants, and such a document would provide me with the information I sought, in addition to other, irrelevant for my purposes information If I were litigating, and not merely doing a FOIA request in order to prove a point in a discussion with my husband, I would fight this denial and I would win If I were personally a litigious person, I would investigate federal law to confirm whether I could sue and recover damages for the FBI's failure to comply with FOIA But the FBI's response to my FOIA request is an answer of a different sort by narrowly interpreting my request and denying me the existing records I asked for, the FBI is undermining the scope and reach of FOIA and on the spectrum ranging from democracy to dictatorship, is edging itself further to the right, that is, closer to the Stasi And one passage from Mr Ash's book has stayed with me The domestic spies in a free country live this professional paradox they infringe our liberties in order to protect them But we have another paradox we support the system by questioning it I support my free country, the United States, by questioning it and by submitting my FOIA request I would be a greater supporter, and a truer patriot, if I were to pursue my FOIA request and fight the FBI's denial.

3.5 I read some of Timothy Garton Ash's analysis of postwar Germany many many years ago as an undergraduate, and was intrigued recently to come across his now over twenty year old memoir Its focus is narrow as a young man in the late 70s early 80s, he spent time doing research and writing in East Germany After the Berlin Wall came down, Garton Ash learned that he, like so many East Germans, was the subject of a Stasi file, and that a number of people with whom he interacted were informers for the East German secret service He applies to see his file, matches up what appears in it with his patchy memories and his diaries, visits his informers and the Stasi officers involved in his surveillance, and thinks about the socio historical and moral implications of the whole thing. I found the author's visits to informers and officers, and his thoughts about the big picture very interesting And it's quite amazing, the extent to which the reunified Germany opened up the Stasi files He muses interestingly about the effect on the staffers of the agency tasked with permitting individuals access to their files However sober minded and responsible the people, the procedures and the whole atmosphere, there is still a

voyeuristic thrill to knowing such intimate details of other people's lives. And later, How to work with poison every day and not yourself be poisoned. These were passages that resonated significantly for me. Garton Ash's memories of the time when he was under surveillance were less gripping. Stasi surveillance extended so broadly that the fact one was being watched doesn't necessarily make what one was doing at the time all that interesting. Fantastic personal account of what it is like to read your Stasi file. Beautifully written, and a compelling mix of memoirs and history, which brought me to tears during then one passage I place a compact disc in the computer's CD drive, and click the play button on screen. From a loudspeaker somewhere behind the text I have just typed there comes the voice of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, recorded in 1958, at the height of the Cold War, singing Schubert's great dark song. Can any father hear it and not be moved. Through night and wind the father rides, his child in his arms. He holds him fast, he keeps him warm. The voice is strong and firm. Then the elf king comes out of the night, and woos the child with such beautiful lines about those bright flowers, golden robes and great games, about his daughters who will cradle you and dance with you and sing to sleep. And if you're not willing the voice is suddenly harsh he must then use force. Against the music's threatening insistence, the child cries out. Oh father, father, he's seizing me now. The father rides for dear life. He reaches home at last. The voice sinks almost to nothing. In his arms the child was dead. p 226-227. Not that any of us wants to be watched by secret police but if you were, wouldn't you want to read the file they kept. After Germany was reunified, the files of the East German Stasi secret police were made available to the file subjects. Timothy Garton Ash is a Briton who lived in East Germany as a student and journalist. He wasn't a spy but managed to make the Stasi nervous enough to open a file. When the records were opened, he obtained his Stasi file and compared it to his fairly detailed diary. He found that the file was reasonably accurate in reporting his activities. But the Stasi's institutional paranoia caused it to misinterpret his motives and intentions. In the file, it's pretty easy to figure out who informed on him the question is why. He locates and interviews several people who informed on him and some former Stasi staff who were assigned to his file. For the most part, they have the usual, lame rationalizations. It was my job, We were under constant attack by the West, I didn't tell them anything important, Someone else did the really bad stuff not me. No surprises there. More interesting are the moral dilemmas that Garton Ash has to face. Publicly identifying a former collaborator can turn the informer into an unemployable social pariah. It can destroy family ties and friendships. It changes the nature of memories. In Garton Ash's case, the informers did him little real harm. Do they deserve that kind of payback. And what if the file is incorrect or is misinterpreted. How much investigation is required before an accusation is made. This is what happens when a state encourages its people to violate basic trust. This is how difficult it is to clean up the mess. A dull account of tedious snitching during a pivotal time in history. I expected. 3.5 stars. A very interesting, quick reading little book. Timothy Garton Ash seems like he might be a little

insufferable in real life but he's tolerable enough in 200 odd pages that it didn't get on my nerves enough to wreck the book. And it's a fascinating little history. Highly recommend if you're at all interested in the Stasi and/or Cold War intelligence surveillance.



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A PERSONAL HISTORY

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BY TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

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'A chilling portrait of treachery and compromise; an invaluable document for our time, bravely and beautifully written; and an unresolved human riddle that will not let me go.'

JOHN LE CARRÉ

A terrific read for anyone who likes history, especially that of the Cold War, and does not mind a different sort of narration of it. In this book, Garton Ash examines the file that the Stasi built on him between 1978 and 1989, which he was able to access after the fall of East Germany. I loved this book, because it is not only a very good history book, but it is also a reflection about memory and about human nature. The author meets most of the people who either informed the Stasi on him during his stay in Germany, as well as the people who worked on his file, and reports how the meetings go. He also tells us about his life in Berlin in the late 70s, and what happened when he left. He does all this while sharing acute observations of how people look, talk and think while he is with them, as well as his reflections on the possible motives that brought them to inform on him. I very much appreciated this unusual take on history, and the humanity with which Garton Ash observed and did not just blindly condemn, but tried to understand the deeds of the people around him.

Recommended `READ KINDLE`  The File: A Personal History ? When Timothy Garton Ash Graduated From Oxford In , He Went To Live In Berlin, Ostensibly To Research And Write About Nazism But Once There, He Gradually Immersed Himself In A Study Of The Repressive Political Culture Of East Germany As If To Return The Favor, That Culture In The Form Of The Dreaded East German Secret Police, The Stasi Secretly Began Studying Him As Was Stasi S Practice, Over The Years Its Study Produced A Considerable Paper Trail After The Fall Of The East German Communist Regime, A Government Apparatus Was Established To Allow Those Targeted To See Their Stasi Files, And Garton Ash Discovered And Pored Over His He Then Set About To Interview The People Who Made This Gross Intrusion Possible, The Several Case Officers, And The Numerous Regular Citizen Informers The Result Is Nothing Short Of A Journey Into The Darkest Recesses Of The Totalitarian Mind, Taking Its Place Honorably Alongside And Darkness At Noon

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