

Review of the file by timothy garton ash

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



' A fascinating account of a fascinating period.' How far do you agree with this judgement of your chosen book? Explain your answer. The dictionary definition of the word fascinating is simply ' extremely interesting' and that is exactly what Timothy Garton Ash's *The File; A Personal History* is. It is a compelling excavation of the Stasi and the people who came into contact with it, including his younger self; for, as a student and journalist working and living in East Germany, he was placed under surveillance and his movements tracked and filed. It opens when he returns to East Berlin, fifteen years after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, to look inside the three hundred and twenty-five pages long buff-coloured binder. The rest of the book is a personal and sociological working-through of this information, which includes interviews with those who informed on him, as he works to " investigate their investigation of me" and attempts to reconstruct his own past. The Ministry for State Security commonly known as the Stasi , was the official state security service of the German Democratic Republic. Headquartered in East Berlin, it was widely regarded as one of the most effective and repressive intelligence and secret police agencies in the world. With the German reunification in 1990, the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives opened the Stasi records to public access, leading people to look for their files. Timothy Garton Ash, an English historian, wrote *The File: A Personal History* after reading the file compiled about him while he completed his dissertation research in East Berlin. The most fascinating thing, as well as the most peculiar, is that Garton Ash begins to track down " all the members of the triangle"; for he and his friends were the first side of the triangle and then the informers were the second and the officers the

third. " Gradually, like a detective" he starts to " build up a mental picture of them and begins to track them down". One of the principal informants in The File was IM " Michaela"-- Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter, " unofficial collaborator" with the Stasi. Out of the many she reported, on was that Garton Ash was asking suspicious questions about a Bauhaus museum exhibit: " Why was there only now a Bauhaus exhibition organized in the GDR?" and " What is the attitude of the GDR to the Bauhaus?" This cultural interest was interpreted as political curiosity; the police considered whether Garton Ash could be prosecuted under the criminal code as someone passing secret information to a foreign power. In his research he reads not only his own file as a suspect, but also the file of the " unofficial collaborator," in which " Michaela" makes reports on everyone from her stepdaughter's boyfriend to a rude waiter in a hotel restaurant. Garton Ash confronts " Michaela" fifteen years later, and whilst reading the photocopies from his file, she cries, she half apologizes, she worries about being identifiable in his book: " Ah well, perhaps I can sue you and I'll win a lot of money. No, no, sorry, that was only a joke". Her reason for reporting on Garton-Ash as well as her loved ones; " I was sure they were building a better Germany", " I could get to go to America" - the chance to have a better lifestyle. Garton Ash relates their meeting and dialogue to extrapolate the moral convulsions of post-Communist society: " You must imagine conversations like this taking place every evening, in kitchens and sitting rooms all over Germany. Painful encounters, truth-telling, friendship-demolishing, life-haunting". After an abashing encounter with his prime informant, ' Michaela', Garton Ash moves on to those higher up the hierarchy in the Stasi; the officers. The result of Garton Ash's questioning with them

were a few intriguing chapters to read as the backgrounds of Kratsch, Kaulfuss, Fritz and Risse are explored. Garton Ash learns that each had some sort of a troubled childhood: there is the absent father away at the war, killed on active service, or somewhere in a prisoner-of-war camp. There is the father who was a Nazi or the father who was a victim of the Nazis. Or there is the loss of other family members in the war or having experienced poverty in life since a very young age. These hardships coupled with the State luring them by saying "according to the constitution of the GDR, every GDR citizen is co-Responsible for the defence of our state; we turn to him and need his support", they joined the Stasi out of patriotism, whilst others saw it as a means of "travelling" and a chance to get out of the confinement of the GDR. When asked whether they felt any remorse for the "crimes" they committed, he is faced with a familiar defence: "I was only doing my job, my duty, obeying orders" and "what we were doing was more like what 'normal' secret services do". Some even felt that their job helped "to keep peace in Europe"; for each side knew so much that it was impossible for one to prepare an aggressive action without the other learning about it in advance. Whilst others felt that people were grateful for the sense of security they achieved and so "didn't mind giving up a little liberty in exchange". However, it was refreshing to learn that there were a few individuals who questioned the world-view they were fed from above. One such person was Major Klaus Risse, who said "People can't be transformed, turned into something other than they are. Communism failed to allow for what he calls the 'inner Schweinehund'." "It could only have worked if people had been angels". Although his judgement is simple, it most

emphatically is not shallow; that was communism's basic flaw. What is more fascinating is Garton Ash's exploration of the essential difference between the Security Service of a communist state like East Germany and the Security Service of a democracy like Britain. In his meeting with David Cornwell (alias John le Carré), he discusses the reasons that motivated a Briton to join the secret service and learns that they are what one would expect: "the myth, the curiosity, love of adventure". However, the two that strike me as the most significant are "travel" and "doing something for the country, as father had in the last war" both of which, as aforementioned, motivated the Stasi officers as well as the informers. So was it the different ends that justified the same means? "Good when done for a free country, bad when done for a dictatorship? Right for us, wrong for them", for doesn't spying on your own citizens directly infringes the very freedoms it is supposed to defend? The seemingly simple and somewhat interesting conclusion he comes to is that "the Stasi was not just an all pervasive secret police"; its first task was to keep a single party in perpetual power and so by the end it was trying to keep the whole system working. One often finds complaints made by an organisation regarding a foreigner coming into their country and publishing books and articles that are far too partial and a negative representation of what they deem the truth to be. In this case, Garton Ash is unlikely to find himself in such a situation as the Stasi, now considered to be a criminal organisation, is non-existent. In addition, Garton has very skilfully attempted to justify the actions of the informers and the officers by presenting them to be although wrong but also weak and vulnerable. For when the informers and officers tell their stories one can so

clearly see how they came to do what they did: in a different time, different place and a different world. Ash considers all of them to be “ just weak, shaped by circumstance, self-deceiving and human-all too human. Yet the sum of all their actions was a great evil". As if questioning the choices of the Stasi employees wasn't enough, Garton Ash then presents his readers with a great moral dilemma of deciding who we ought to forgive. “ We, who never faced these choices, can never know how we would have acted in their position, or would act in another dictatorship. So who are we to condemn? But equally: who are we to forgive? " Conclusion After long contemplation, I've come to the conclusion that *The File; A Personal History* is not a fascinating account of a fascinating period. This is because it gives an insight as to how the East German secret service tracked Garton-Ash, how it appealed to the civilians' patriotism leading them to join as well as what the personal reasons were that caused them to join. It gives an insight into how some of the workers of the Stasi gradually became disillusioned by the whole concept of communism. However, Garton-Ash only focuses on this one aspect, rather than exploring the entire period and rightly so, for he doesn't mislead his audience into thinking otherwise. The political unimportance of the suspects and the apparent triviality of the reports serve to illustrate the routine pervasiveness of such secret surveillance, the ambitiously comprehensive but strategically haphazard program of the Communist state to gather information about German society. Stasi " watched not just for Western spies but also ordinary Western diplomats, Western journalists, Western scholars, Western artists, Western anyone who might potentially subvert the communist system" (I want to put this in somewhere but don't

know where, or shall I just leave it) Extra: How deeply our conduct is influenced by our circumstances/The psychological legacy of Nazism and war prepares the candidates for another round of dictatorship/Sometimes, quite often in fact, the Stasi comes as a substitute father. You are invited into the headmaster's office. He introduces you to an elderly man, dignified, inspiring, a war veteran. The old man appeals to your patriotism, youthful ambition and thirst for adventure. . ----- Fasiha Raza