

*The File: A Personal History*. By TIMOTHY GARTON ASH. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Pp. 259.

In *The File: A Personal History*, Timothy Garton Ash provides a compelling and thought-provoking account of his experiences uncovering the secret Stasi file that the East German government kept on him during the Cold War. Through a combination of personal recollections, historical context, and analysis, Ash delves into the complexities of surveillance, privacy, memory, and the impact of living under a repressive regime. In this memoir, Ash recounts his experiences with the Stasi, the notorious secret police of the former German Democratic Republic, and reflects on the lasting impact that such intense surveillance had on individuals and society as a whole.

The author begins by recounting his own experience of requesting and reading through the extensive file that the Stasi kept on him during his time studying in East Berlin. This sets off a journey of self-discovery as Garton Ash delves into the intricacies of his surveillance and the ways in which it shaped his life. He elucidates: “I must explore not just a file but a life: the life of the person I was then” (22). The author skillfully weaves together his own narrative with the broader historical context of East Germany, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of both his personal experiences and the political climate of the time, as he offers the readers a question: “can the files, and the men and women behind them, tell us anything more about communism, the Cold War and the sense or nonsense of spying?” (23) His file becomes the central thread that ties together the various narratives and reflections in the book, as Garton Ash delves into the ways in which surveillance and paranoia permeated every aspect of life in East Germany.

One of the key themes of the book is the notion of memory and how it can be distorted or manipulated by external forces. The author deliberates, “the experience may even teach us

something about history and memory, about ourselves, about human nature [...] I am but a window, a sample, a means to an end, the object in this experiment” (23). Garton Ash reflects on the ways in which his own memories of his time in East Germany were influenced by the information contained in his Stasi file, highlighting the power of surveillance to shape perceptions and narratives. This raises important questions about the nature of truth and the reliability of memory, forcing readers to confront the ways in which their own memories may be influenced by external factors. For example, Ash contacts his former academic advisor, Professor Demps, to arrange a meeting in Berlin (89). Ash reveals that the Stasi had labeled Demps as an informer, but they later discover it was a case of mistaken identity (89–91). Another central theme of the book is the impact of surveillance on individual autonomy and freedom. Garton Ash discusses the ways in which living under constant surveillance can breed fear, self-censorship, and paranoia, leading individuals to alter their behavior in order to avoid scrutiny (63–64; 115). The author reflects on the ways in which his own sense of self was shaped by the knowledge that he was being watched, highlighting the insidious ways in which surveillance can erode personal freedoms and autonomy (21). After this uncomfortable encounter with “Michaela,” Ash speaks to his readers, stating, “painful encounters, truth-telling, friendship-demolishing, life-haunting. Hundreds, thousands of such encounters, as the awful power of knowledge is slowly passed down from the Stasi [...]” (117). At its core, *The File* is a deeply personal account of Ash’s discovery of his own Stasi file, which was compiled during his time as a student and researcher in East Germany in the 1980s. The author describes the shock and disbelief he felt upon learning of the extensive surveillance conducted by the Stasi, as well as the profound sense of violation and betrayal that accompanied this discovery (7, 10–12, 121, 235). Through a series of interviews with former Stasi officers and those who knew him during his time in East Germany,

Ash reconstructs the events and interactions that led to the creation of his file, shedding light on the methods and motives of the Stasi in their monitoring of individuals deemed to be a threat to the regime.

In terms of style and structure, *The File* is a well-crafted and engaging work that combines elements of narrative nonfiction, memoir, and investigative journalism. Ash's prose is clear and fluid, imbued with a sense of urgency and intensity that propels the reader forward through the narrative. As a personal narrative in his self-journey, Ash is both the author and the protagonist. His use of dialogue and descriptive detail brings the characters and settings of his story vividly to life, while his analytical insights and reflections provide depth and complexity to the overall narrative arc. He weaves together personal anecdotes, historical analysis, and interviews with individuals who lived through the Stasi regime to create a comprehensive and multi-faceted portrait of life in East Germany.

One of the strengths of *The File* is Ash's evocative writing style, which brings the past to life and immerses readers in the world of Cold War-era East Germany. The author's personal anecdotes and reflections add a human element to the historical narrative, allowing readers to connect on a personal level with the struggles and triumphs of individuals living under a repressive regime. Ash's prose is both insightful and engaging, making for a compelling read that is sure to resonate with readers interested in history, politics, and human rights. However, despite its strengths, *The File* is not without its flaws. Some readers may find the narrative at times meandering or disjointed, with the author delving into tangential topics that detract from the central story. Additionally, Ash's introspective reflections may come across as self-indulgent or overly introspective to some readers, detracting from the overall impact of the book. Despite these criticisms, *The File* remains a powerful and thought-provoking account of one man's

journey to uncover the truth about his past and the ways in which surveillance can shape and distort memory.

*The File: A Personal History* by Timothy Garton Ash is a compelling and insightful exploration of the impact of surveillance on individual autonomy, memory, and freedom. Through a combination of personal anecdotes, historical context, and analysis, Garton Ash delves into the complexities of living under a repressive regime and the ways in which surveillance can shape perceptions and narratives. By sharing his own experiences with the Stasi, Ash invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of state surveillance and the ways in which it can shape our perceptions, actions, and relationships. Through his candid and introspective storytelling, the author challenges us to consider our own roles in upholding or challenging systems of power and control, ultimately urging us to confront the complex ethical dilemmas that arise in the quest for memory and freedom.