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Shades of Gray: Conscience and the Cold War

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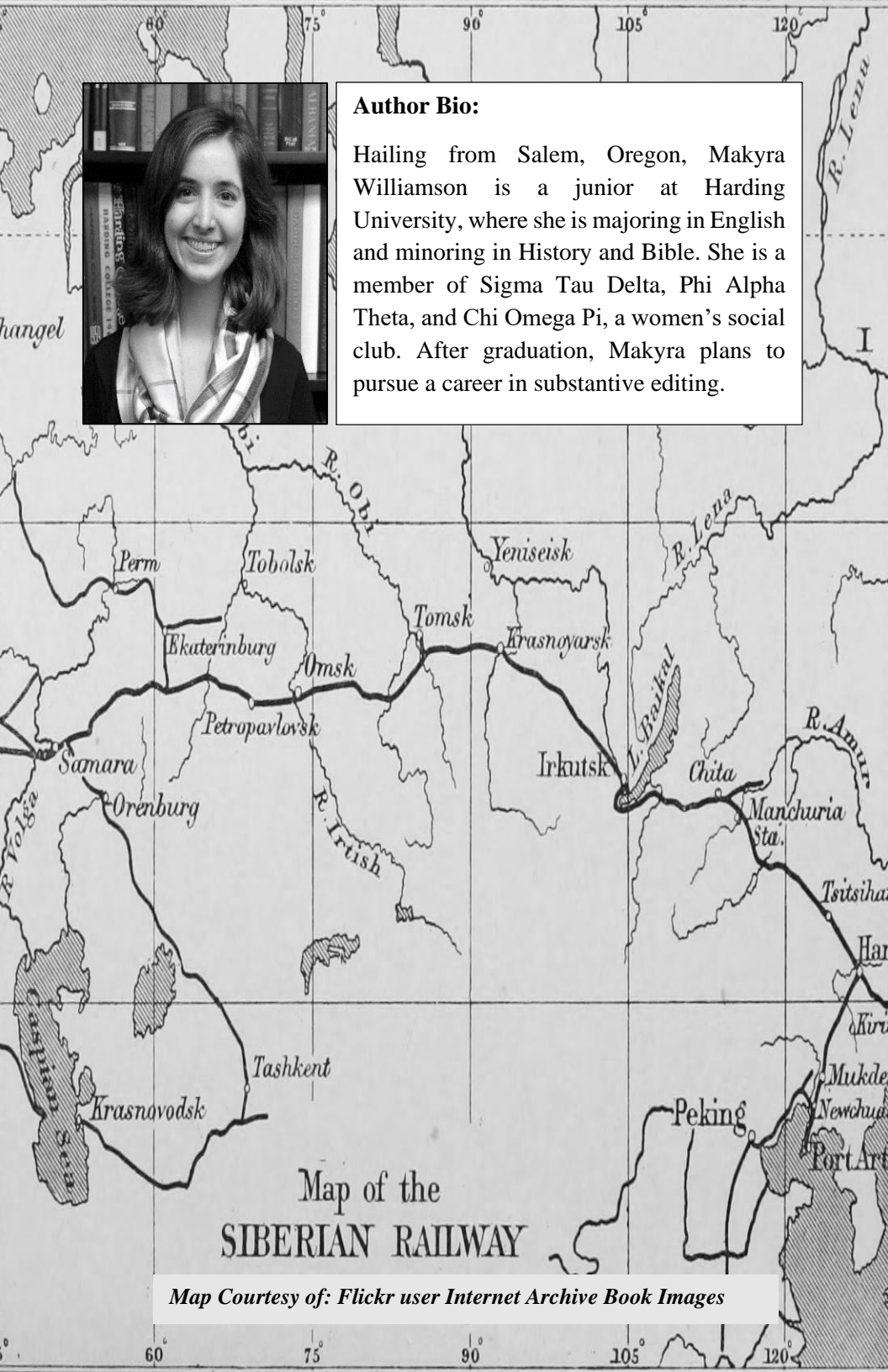
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SHADES OF GRAY: PERSONAL MORALITY AND TIMOTHY GARTON ASH'S *THE FILE: A PERSONAL HISTORY*

By Makyra Williamson

In the opening chapter of *The File*, Timothy Garton Ash acknowledges that he is not simply investigating a file, but a life.¹ Garton Ash's narrative is a well-written personal history in which he retraces the origins of a file containing the information that the secret police, or Stasi, had collected about him. Throughout the work, Garton Ash examines the motivations of those who participated in the spy network for the Stasi. Ideally, moral fiber is too sturdy to be frayed by stressors, and ideologies are too high for society to scale. In reality, fear produces moral relativity, as evinced by the actions of the informers. The ideas of motivation and moral relativity play key roles in *The File* as Timothy Garton Ash interprets the contents of his own file and the justifications of those who contributed to it. However, Garton Ash's narrative is weakened by the very aspect that strengthens it—personal perspective.

Suspicion reigned rampant during the Cold War, and, considering that approximately one in twenty-five adults in East Germany were directing information to the secret police, those suspicions were well founded.² During this reign of suspicion, Timothy Garton Ash lived in Berlin and worked on his doctoral thesis about that city under the Third Reich; he also contributed as a journalist to *The Spectator*, an English publication. Garton Ash began studying in West Berlin in 1978, and traveled in Eastern Europe during the summers of 1978 and 1979. In January 1980, he moved to East Berlin, where he stayed until October of the same year. Between Garton Ash's activities as a journalist and his study of Berlin's history, the East German government found reason to monitor him. *The File* recounts Garton Ash's experience when he returned years later and reviewed the information that the Stasi had compiled about him. Garton Ash compared his personal records with those of the Stasi and took the opportunity to

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (New York, NY: Vintage Books), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 84.

meet with some of the *Inofizielle Mitarbeiter* (unofficial collaborators), or IMs, who had informed on him.³ Garton Ash's interactions with a select group of IMs reveal the ways that they justified their choices to participate in the Stasi's network of surveillance.

Garton Ash discovered that not all who were involved with the Stasi had to justify their actions to themselves. Some of them wholeheartedly supported the system. A child of World War II, Major Gerhard Kaulfluss eventually became the head of counterintelligence department II/9 of the German Democratic Republic.⁴ When Garton Ash asked Kaulfluss if he remembered working on Garton Ash's case, the former Major said he did not recall it. Garton Ash found Kaulfluss unremorseful; in fact, the former Major professed that the State Security Service had provided exactly what was needed—security for “ordinary people.” Despite general recognition of the failings of the GDR, Kaulfluss retained “a sense of quiet satisfaction,” resting assured in the idea that he had contributed to the growth of the GDP in East Germany.⁵

Garton Ash paints Kurt Zeiseweis, the man who supervised the Stasi's monitoring of Berlin, as more forthcoming about his role in the government of East Berlin. He grew up with his father away fighting; his communist mother's guidance helped him procure a job in State Security. In Berlin, Zeiseweis spent thirty years promoting the work of Main Department XX, the department that Klaus Risse, a Stasi officer who worked on Garton Ash's file, attributed “bad things” to.⁶ During his discussion with Garton Ash, Zeiseweis explained carefully that “he had high standards of conduct and decency.”⁷ Zeiseweis thought that the morality that prevented him from being unfaithful to his wife, guided him in raising children, and guarded him from the poison of Western television served as the ultimate safeguard against wrongdoing.⁸ Garton Ash described him as “a decent man.”⁹ However, he found Zeiseweis' personal standards almost entertaining when contrasted with the

³ Ash, 13-14, 28-29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 181.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 169, 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

machinations of the government that he had served, and called him “a perfect textbook example of the petty bureaucratic executor of evil.”¹⁰

Other informers were ignorant of the role they played in providing information to the Stasi. Laurenz Demps, a historian at the Humboldt University Berlin, served as an advisor for Garton Ash.¹¹ According to Garton Ash’s file, Demps had viewed Garton Ash as having a “bourgeois-liberal attitude” with, as Demps stated, “no commitment to the working class.”¹² The information provided did not negatively affect Garton Ash, but it was surprising that Demps had retained his position at the university when other employees were discharged due to Stasi involvement.¹³ When Garton Ash met with Demps, he found Demps shocked by the news of his supposed involvement with the Stasi.¹⁴ As the two historians analyzed the document, Garton Ash saw the evidence as indicating that Demps had not been an IM. However, one of his colleagues in the International Department had passed along Demps’ evaluation of Garton Ash’s character.¹⁵ The information in the document corroborated Demps’ denial of involvement, for Demps did not know that Ash was communicating with Mr. Wildash of the British embassy, a piece of information included in the report.¹⁶

Others who informed on Garton Ash, such as “Michaela,” appeared to be willing recruits of the secret police. For “Michaela,” her cooperation with the Stasi originated because she had taken “hard currency out of the country illegally”, and becoming an informer provided an opportunity to avoid repercussions for her actions.¹⁷ When Garton Ash told “Michaela” why he had asked to meet with her, she did not hesitate to lay the blame elsewhere, saying that “one was obliged to in my position.”¹⁸ As the discussion continued, however, and the woman

¹⁰ Ash, 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

realized just how much she had disclosed, she became sickened by the information she had supplied—details about her husband, about Garton Ash, about her stepdaughter, and more. Yet, even then, she placed the blame on her circumstances. As “Michaela” stated, what else could “one” do? According to Garton Ash, “Michaela” never took responsibility by referring to her role in a more personal sense—no, she was just “one.” He said that “She seems halfway to seeing herself as an object of Stasi surveillance, almost as a dissident.” Garton Ash pieced together fragments of her jumbled thoughts and diagnosed “Michaela” as collaborating with the Stasi due to a “residual belief in the system,” her feeling of obligation, and the hope that cooperation could help her leave the GDR. Though in retrospect she was nauseated by her actions, Garton Ash viewed “Michaela” as placing the blame on her position, her duty, and what she called a “shit-scared” fear of the system.¹⁹

As a primary source, *The File* is limited by the same aspect that lends it intrigue—the personal element. While valuable in analyzing the way that the Stasi monitored a single individual, it is hard to apply it to the greater discussion about espionage in the Cold War. Though Garton Ash attempted to be unbiased, recognition of the potential for bias does not remove it completely. Garton Ash found the idea of surveillance repugnant, and the fact that he met with those who had intruded on his privacy tainted his view of them as people. Much of the information Ash supplies about the informants is subjective; he relates the way that he interpreted body language, words, and expressions. Regarding his conversation with Major Klaus Risse, Ash writes that he took away “the impression of an intelligent, fundamentally decent man”, but also acknowledges that, if he had suffered in a more tangible way from Risse’s actions, he might not have been so kind.²⁰ The term “impression” is key—Garton Ash cannot know the exact motives that came into play, and personal historical revisionism may have colored Risse’s account. Impressions are not enough. The quotes from former IMs are revealing, but are still placed within the framework of Garton Ash’s opinion about the speaker, inevitably coloring the reader’s perspective.

¹⁹ Ash, 112-116.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

Garton Ash found that the informers had a variety of motivations, and his impression after talking with the IMs led him to categorize them: honest believers in the GDR, innocent bystanders who were drawn into the fray, willing recruits of the secret police. What made some rebel and others conform to the system? Garton Ash concludes that “our conduct is influenced by our circumstances.”²¹ Sociologically, his statement is accurate. Realistically, it is impossible to be certain that Garton Ash’s interpretation of the motivations of the informers is accurate. Nevertheless, *The File* provides a valuable glimpse into the motivations of the IMs and the intricacies of Cold War espionage.

²¹ Ash, 252.