Introduction

Iceland's geographical position gave this small nation a special strategic importance in the political and military chess game between east and west during the Cold War era. Placed in the mid Atlantic, Iceland constituted an important post for the NATO defence forces and surveillance activities. This importance can be seen in the presence of American troops at a NATO base in Keflavik from 1951 until 2004. The military base and the NATO alignment created stark divisions among the population and was one of two major cleavages that characterized Icelandic politics throughout the post- WWII era, especially during the Cold War. The other cleavage that marked Icelandic politics of the time was the left-right dimension. The four traditional parties of the Icelandic party system ranked in a different order on these two continuums, with the right wing Independence Party allying with the Social Democrats in its support for NATO and the military base, while the centre agrarian Progressive Party supported NATO membership but joined forces with the Socialist Party in the opposition to the military base. The Socialists however were stern opponents of both the base and NATO membership, while they expressed sympathetic views for the People's Democratic Republics in the eastern bloc.[1] Left wing socialists held up ties with their sister parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, while bourgeois politicians cultivated their links with western or mainly American liberal democracy. The political discussion was framed in terms of the Cold War and the press, which throughout most of the 20th century was a party press, continuously suggested that the political motives of their opponents were conspicuously linked to or derived from either the interests of Soviet or Eastern European communism or US capitalist imperialism.

It was in this circumstances that in the fifties and sixties young left wing people sought to undertake their university education in the Eastern block and more often than not the Socialist Party in Iceland (SEI) was in one way or another the go-between in arranging for such student positions. Many of these left wing students kept contact with each other even though they did not study in the same place or country. At a point in the late fifties these students had formed an organisation, SÍA, *Sósíalistafélag Íslendinga Austantjalds* (The Society of Socialist Icelanders in the Eastern Bloc) that had considerable influence within SEI, the Icelandic Socialist Party.[2] In 1962 members of the youth organisation of the

conservative Independence Party managed to get hold of – in fact steal – some of the internal correspondence of the SÍA group and subsequently the correspondence was published letter by letter in the daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið* along with some political explanations from a right wing standpoint. The correspondence was also published by the Conservative youth organization, Heimdallur, in a special booklet labelled the "Red Book". Remarkable as it may sound, the correspondence between the Icelandic students in SÍA shows a great deal of criticism of the socialist system as practiced in the Eastern bloc, though in general of course their views were very sympathetic to the People's Democratic Republics. From the standpoint of the conservatives in Iceland the purpose of the publication of the SÍA correspondence was to show that the students in Eastern Europe, along with the Socialist Party of Iceland, were plotting a communist takeover in cooperation with their communist allies in the east, even though they knew that the system was not working well and had all sorts of flaws.[3] This whole affair exemplifies the frenzy and the tone of the political discussion in Iceland during the Cold War and the suspicion that was created around the students that studied in the Eastern Bloc.

The legacy of heated feelings of the Cold War has in many ways survived the Cold War itself. The demand for some sort of reckoning or historical rectification has frequently come up, particularly in relation to the publication of documents that have become accessible after the fall of communism. This has been felt in Iceland mainly at a general political level but its implications have also been personal – putting the spotlight on the individuals that supported communism and in particular those who studied in the Democratic People's Republics, not the least the German Democratic Republic. This paper will examine to what extent demands for a historical reckoning are relevant by looking at a particular case that can be found in the Stasi archives. By conducting a case study of this kind, a light is shed on important factors that tend to be lost in the more ideological and normative public political discussion. The case examined is the one of a young student who became a Stasi informer in the early 1960s, know as "Kontakt Person Karlsson".

"Kontact Person (KP) Karlson"

According to the archives of East Germanys State security service (Stasi) one Icelandic

student cooperated with the Stasi while studying in East Germany.[4] His name was Guðmundur Ágústsson, who after returning to Iceland became a bank manager. In 1959 he arrived as a young student via Vienna in East Germany, where he first attended a language course in Leipzig before taking up his studies at the University of Economics in Berlin-Karlshorst. Later his sister followed him to East Berlin.

On the 9 February 1963, four years after entering East Germany, a note is found in the Stasi files concerning "making contact with the person".[5] Before this remark in the files, the Stasi had already gathered information about Guðmundur Ágústsson , since a report explains that he seemed to be "open towards our problems".[6] In this first description of Guðmundur Ágústsson to be found in the files, his appearance is described as "modest and dutiful", also his "perfect moral conduct" is underlined,[7] contrary to the one of his sister who, according to the report, is "in some cases very impulsive".[8]

According to the minutes of the first meeting between the Lieutenant Koch as representative of the Stasi and Guðmundur Ágústsson, Koch explained to the Icelandic student that lately pubic disorder in East Germany was increasingly initiated through West Berlin and therefore it was necessary for GDR "to take measures against the enemy's intentions. In order to do so we have to involve foreigners, and since we knew that he [Guðmundur Ágústsson] was a member of our brother party SEI, we have turned to his person".[9] According to the minutes Guðmundur Ágústsson answered positively to the request of the Stasi; he agreed to visit West Berlin and establish contacts with students there as well as to report on activities at the University of Economics where he studied.

Guðmundur Ágústsson was, according to the Stasi files, one of 25 Icelandic students studying at the time in the GDR. All were members of the SEI. They all came to East Germany through the mediation of the SEI or the Federation of Icelandic Trade Unions. During their first meeting Lieutenant Koch asked Guðmundur Ágústsson not to talk with anyone about his contact to the Stasi and they agreed to use the codename "Karlson" for him. After this meeting the Stasi run "Karlson" as a "Kontakt Person" (KP) in its files. "Kontakt Persons" were individuals used by the Stasi, sometimes without their knowledge, but also, as in this case, people who knowingly cooperated with the Stasi. "Karlson" knew, as the documents indicate, that his interlocutors were working for the Stasi.

"Karlson's" first job assignment consisted of establishing a contact with an Icelandic student in West Berlin, "with the aim of assessing if this contact could be further exploited". In order to do so "Karlson" should find out, "with whom he [the friend] has contact", and further, he should report about groups and "their participation in actions against the anti-fascist protective barrier" (meaning the Berlin Wall)[10] and evaluate the general mood in West Berlin. "Karlson", according to the minutes, agreed to do so. But he did not agree to introduce his acquaintances in West Berlin to the Stasi.[11] The reason he gave was that in his opinion the friend "was politically not ready".[12] However "Karlson" proposed approaching another Icelander in West Berlin who might be willing to cooperate with the Stasi. According to "Karlson" this was a friend who had gotten an invitation from the Free University of Berlin to become a lecturer. The minutes state that at this time it had not yet been decided whether the acquaintance would accept the job at the Free University or not, because in the words of "Karlson", a "decision on this matter would be made by the SEI".[13]

Five weeks later at the following meeting "Karlson" could not report much, because he had not traveled to West Berlin. However, he had by now learned that his friend would take the position at the Free University in West Berlin. Until the year 1962 the acquaintance had been working as a lecturer at the University of Greifswald. Both he and his wife were members of the SEI. "The KP estimated the [name blackened] as a very humorous and outgoing person, who sometimes because of his comical appearance, his physique and his facial expressions is viewed as ridiculous."[14]

Furthermore, "Karlson" reported in this meeting that he had recently received another visit from an Icelander, but he was politically not organized and in "his political development not yet mature". Therefore "Karlson" declined bringing him into contact with the Stasi. In addition the Stasi noted in the minutes of the meeting that the KP would "soon get his own flat on the basis of his collaboration and his political work."[15]

In May 1963 Lieutenant Koch gave his first evaluation of his Icelandic spy:

The [Kontact Person] is honest in the cooperation, but had not yet been reviewed. He takes his tasks seriously, makes his own proposals and he is venturous. His [cooperation] is based on conviction.

Control: Regular meetings every 14 days in the CA [Conspiratorial Apartment].

Range of duty: Supply of suitable candidates for recruitment. Naming appropriate candidates, as well as being used on special occasions in West Berlin."[16]

In the following meeting "Karlson" and his Stasi officer discussed mainly how to establish the actual contact with the Icelandic lecturer at the Free University in Berlin. First of all, it was agreed that there was "no need to pretend to be a member of the press, but the KP should just contact him as an employee of the Stasi".[17] "Karlson" agreed to organize the meeting. During the meeting they discussed three more Icelandic students living in West Berlin, but the minutes state that "Karlson" did not want to be the person who "arranges the meeting".[18] Therefore they agreed on a different approach: while "Karlson" would celebrate the moving into his new apartment with the Icelanders from West Berlin, he would contact the Stasi as soon as his Icelandic friends would leave. On the way back to West Berlin the Stasi would have then the possibility "to address" the Icelanders at the checkpoint in *Friedrichstraße*: "this way the (KP) would be kept out from the conversation and the staff can safely carry out their own conversation."[19]

At this meeting it was further agreed that "Karlson" would participate at the upcoming regional Social Democratic Party Congress as a member of the media and report to the Stasi about it. Furthermore he should monitor the preparations for the rallies on May 1 in West Berlin. One day before the first of May "Karlson" received specific instructions. In particular, he should find out where the loudspeaker van with the "inflammatory agitation" was stationed that was supposed to "disturb the activities on May 1 in democratic Berlin".[20]

During this meeting the status of the recruitment of the Icelandic lecturer was also discussed. According to "Karlson" the Icelandic lecturer wanted to find out whether the people whom he would meet were "really from the Stasi".[21] Furthermore, the Icelandic lecturer informed "Karlson" that the Senate of the Free University of Berlin had told him that they were informed about his membership in the SEI. They also warned him not to get involved with "Russian agents".[22]

At the next meeting, on the 1st of May, "the Kontakt Person 'Karlson' had returned from his excursion to West Berlin and shared his observations about the deployment of the police,

the position of the radio car, the tribune and more, which were then immediately submitted to the headquarter."[23]

According to the minutes of the meetings "Karlson" reported about his intended trip to England, France and Italy. The minutes end with the note that the next meetings will be arranged by phone. Although there are no further minutes of meetings to be found in the archives, one can assume that the contact continued, since a receipt exists for the 28 January 1964 with the note: "The Kontakt Person 'Karlson' was given 50 DM for costs."[24]

On 20th of November 1964, Lieutenant Koch closed the file, since "Karlson" had returned to Iceland. The file contains also the exact statistics of the border crossings by "Karlson" to West Berlin, and thanks to the collection of data by the Stasi, we also know that "Karlson" for example, on the 4th of February 1964, brought "2 nylon shirts; 2 pairs of women's stockings, 20 PCs. cigarillos (Intershop); 250 gr coffee and 1 kg bananas"[25] from West Berlin to East Berlin.

The Icelandic lecturer at the Free University in West Berlin refused being recruited by the Stasi. On the 19 December 1963 one meeting had taken place between the lecturer and the Stasi at Café Sofia in East Berlin. At this meeting the Icelander stressed the "security of his person". He said that "if the contact should become known it would have serious consequences for the party and him." He also pointed out in this context the "unprofessional work of the security organs of the Soviet Union concerning the radar station in Iceland, where arrests had been made and which greatly damaged the reputation of the Soviet Union and caused great dismay for the comrades of the SEI."[26] Lieutenant Koch was not very optimistic about a possible cooperation, since the Icelandic lecturer said that he "does not want to have anything to do with the secret service".[27] But at least the reader of the files learns that the Icelander was very "sloppily dressed", wore summer shoes in December and "a grey suit, a red shirt and a blue tie".[28]

"Kontakt Person Karlson" revisited

In Iceland a discussion of the relations between Icelanders, Communist parties and secret

service organizations in the eastern bloc have regularly surfaced – not only throughout the Cold War but also in the post Cold War era. Several times the issue has come up whether some Icelander had been working for Stasi.[29]

In early February 1995 a documentary film, "*Í nafni sósíalismans*", (In the Name of Socialism) by the historian Valur Ingimundarsson and the journalist Árni Snævarr was shown by RÚV, the Icelandic State Broadcasting Television. The film was based on some documents that the authors had had access to after the opening of the Stasi archives in Germany and it spurred some discussion in the Icelandic media.[30] The name of the banker Guðmundur Ágústsson came up, as it appeared that he had been a Stasi agent in the period 1963-1964. The documentary claimed that Guðmundur Ágústsson had the codename "Karlson" in the Stasi files, and that one of his missions was to recruit Árni Björnsson, who at the time was a guest lecturer at the Free University in West Berlin. Árni acknowledges in the film that he had had some encounters with the Stasi, but that he had not answered indirect requests for him to become an informer for the secret organization. He does however mention an incident when his nice had been visiting him and had gone to a theatre show in East Berlin. When she did not return, Árni Björnsson became worried and went to a border control gate to ask about her. There Árni was detained for a while, until a Stasi officer came and asked if he had not received a message from them some while ago. Árni Björnsson acknowledged that and asked about his nice. There were no news of the girl, but in light of the circumstances Árni Björnsson thought it would be wise to agree to meet with the officer two weeks later. He says that he met with a Stasi officer two weeks later in a coffee shop and that was the end of it.

On the other hand, Guðmundur Ágústsson, alias "Karlson", had refused to talk to the makers of the documentary, so his side of the story appeared in a newspaper only after the film had been shown on national TV. In an exclusive interview with the newspaper DV, Guðmundur Ágústsson explains that he had agreed to do some trivial exercises for Stasi in order to secure his own peace and eventually a safe passage home for him, his German wife and their child. Guðmundur Ágústsson refers to his contact person at Stasi (Lieutenant Koch) as the "young man with the cigarette". He tells of a "spy mission" to West Berlin in the following way:

I met the young man with the cigarette and he asked me if I could go over to West Berlin

and check if there was a military truck convoy in a certain boulevard in the southern part of the city. I was also supposed to stop by the Wall there in the neighborhood and see if a big hole was being dug in the ground behind a hill. I went to these places, but there were no army trucks, no digging and no hole. So I stood there like a fool. I went back and told the young man that nothing was there. That was the last I heard from Stasi. I probably did not pass the test or possibly Stasi was just training the young man in talking to somebody.[31]

Later in the interview Guðmundur Ágústsson reflects on the documentary value of the Stasi files about himself. "I understand that there is a large folder on me in the Stasi archives. I do not think I want to see it. But the documents are there and people must then remember that the text that is written there is just what a man with a cigarette thought about me. He might even have been trying to look good in the eyes of his superiors. I never wrote a single letter for them."

As it is apparent by now, two parallel stories have been told of the same course of actions involving "Karlson". On the one hand there are the files written by Lieutenant Koch, whilst on the other there are the stories and experiences as these are remembered by both Guðmundur Ágústsson, the student, and Árni Björnsson, the lecturer. Much of the factual evidence comes forth in both stories, but the interpretation and explanations of what actually happened and what it meant is very different.

Whose truth? – a discussion

After the Berlin wall came down and the Stasi archives were opened the news came to Iceland that Guðmundur Ágústsson had been a Stasi informer in 1963-1964. More than 30 years later, in 1995, Guðmundur Ágústsson had to explain to the Icelandic press that by cooperating with Stasi he had "secured himself peace and a safe passage home with his German wife and child".[32] And still just over ten years after the explanations in the DV newspaper, Árni Björnsson, who was the friend of Guðmundur Ágústsson that worked and lived in West Berlin in 1963-1964, came forth in the scholarly magazine *Þjóðmá*l to explain his involvement with Guðmundur Ágústsson and Stasi. Árni Björnsson was reacting to another article in the magazine where he was named as a likely Stasi informant.[33] The title of Árni Björnsson's article is "Stasi and I. What is the truth?" He does not takes issue with the Stasi files themselves or even the reports by the Stasi officer that approached him, but points out that they are based on the officer´s personal interpretation, social conditions and

circumstances. He therefore asks whether that interpretation is necessarily the whole truth. In other words, Árni Björnsson is suggesting a cautious approach in interpreting the files and documents that can be found in the Stasi archives.

At least two lessons can be derived from comparing the two different accounts at issue. Firstly, it seems clear that Stasi did not necessarily ask its Icelandic informers to collect sensitive or hidden information, but asked for all sorts of public information, such as reporting about public student meetings and the curriculum of the Free University. This could make the Stasi request for cooperation look almost trivial to the student in question, so much that it would seem irrational to refuse such a small favour and risk being considered uncooperative by such a powerful organization as Stasi was then.

Secondly, the Stasi files give us a fragmented and indeed limited view of what really was going on. This is due to three main factors:

a) The nature of the reports to be filled out gives limited space for accounting for different and sometimes complex situations.
b) The evaluation and interpretation of the writer of the report is subjective and coloured by Marxist ideological phrases. Furthermore the reports are written by officers for their superiors and it can be expected that things that might be thought interesting for the secret police are overemphasized.
c) The fact that some of the files and reports may be missing limits their comprehensiveness.

In light of the latter point, an important lesson can be learned about the way in which documents and reports of official agencies not meant for publication, be they secret agencies or ordinary embassies, should be interpreted. To be sure, uncovering such secret files can provide valuable and important information, as recent WikiLeaks documents on embassies have shown, for instance. However, such documents call for careful consideration of the circumstances in which they were written and of the values and motivations of those who wrote the files. The limitation of the files makes them useful for political polemics, since they leave so much space for interpretation, but not for careful, detailed historical accounts of the past. And last but not the least, one may also just be stunned by their banality.

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Endnotes

[1] Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson (1977) The Icelandic Multilevel Coalition System. Expanded version of a chapter in E. Browne (ed) Cabinet Coalitions in Western Democracies. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.

[2] Ólafsson, Jón , 1999, Kæru félagar.Íslenskir sósíalistar og Sovétríkin 1920-1960¸ Mál og menning, Reykjavík bls. 212-213

[3] Ibid pp. 214

[4] In the archives of the Stasi there are approximately 250 pages concerning Iceland. Among the material is one folder concerning the collaboration of an Icelander with the secret service. A complete overview over the material found is given in Icelandic in the article: Birgir Guðmundsson and Markus Meckl, Á sumarskóm í desember. Ísland í skýrslum

austurþýsku öryggislögreglunnar Stasi, in *Saga,* Tímarit Sögufélags, XLVI: 2, 2008, pp. 86 – 113.

[5] Report on the contact of the person, BStU, central archives, 1496/65, BL. 9.

[6] Investigation report, ibid. 3.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. p. 5

[9] Report on the contact of the person, BStU, central archives, 1496/65, BL. 10.

[10] Minutes of the Meeting, 20. 2. 1963, ibid. 13.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid. 14

[14] Minutes of the Meeting for the 15.3.1963, p. 15-16.

[15] Ibid p. 16.

[16] Assessment of “Carlsson”, dated on the 7.5. 1963, ibid p. 18. In the documents one can find different spellings for “Karlson”.

[17] Minutes of the Meeting for the 19. 4. 1963, ibid. 19.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid. 20.

[20] Minutes of the meeting, 30. 4.1963, p. 21.

[21] Ibid. 21.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Report from 6 May 1963, ibid, page 23.

[24] Recipt, 28.1.1964, ibid., page 27.

[25] BStU 12225/66

[26] Report of the 20 12 1963, BStU, central archives, 1496/65, p. 29 f. The matter the lecturer might be referring to here is an episode often called "The Hafravatns case" that came up in February 1963. Two deputies from the Soviet Embassy were expelled from Iceland for trying to recruit an Icelandic man as a spy. See: "Miklu fargi af mér létt", Morgunblaðið 28th February, 1963 pp. 23-24

[27] Ibid. 33.

[28] Ibid.

[29] For a discussion of these connections between Icelanders and the Eastern Bloc see e.g.: Árni Snævarr and Valur Ingimundarson, 1992, Liðsmenn Moskvu, Almenna bókafélagið, Reykjavík; Jón Ólafsson, 1999, Kæru félagar, Mál og menning, reykjavík ; Rauða bókin :leyniskýrslur SÍA, 1984, Heimdallur, Reykjaví k; Helgi Hannesson, 1989, "Sósíalistafélag Íslendinga austantjalds og SÍA skjölin 1956-63", Háskóli Íslands. Sagnfræðistofnun Ritröð sagnfræðinema, Reykjavík.

[30] See Morgunblaðið web page: http://www.mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/grein.html?grein_id=176466 and DV, daily on the 6th and the 7th of February 1995.

[31] „Fékk frið og heimferð fyrir konu og barn", DV 7th of February 1995

[32] DV, daily newspaper. 7.th of February, 1995 pp. 1-2

[33] Árni Björnsson, „Stasi og ég. Hvað er sannleikur“. Þjóðmál II:4 (Winter 2006), pp. 28