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The Audiovisual Legacy of the GDR's Ministry of State Security – collection, preservation, thematic focus

The GDR's Ministry of State Security left large quantities of records to posterity.[1] Although files constitute the core of these documents, millions of photographs as well as thousands of films, videos and audio recordings are also now stored in the archives of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic (BStU) They form an integral part of the archival material for State Security (Stasi, MfS).[2]

In this paper, we will first describe the audiovisual legacy and examine it in its overall dimension. In the second part, its conservation status as well as preservation measures, including its digitization, are discussed. Finally, the substantive dimension of the audiovisual collections in the context of the MfS' entire legacy is to be examined exemplarily and without any claim to its completeness.

1. The audiovisual collections in the Stasi Records Archive: An overview

The photograph collection in the Stasi Records Archive currently contains approximately 1.7 million positives, negatives and slides.[3] Approximately 1.1 million

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[1] This paper would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues Katri Jurichs, Katrin Rübenstrunk and Elke Steinbach, for which I thank them.

[2] Karsten Jedlitschka: *Managing Stasi Archives. Special tasks and challenges, in: The Documentation of Communist Authorities. Materials of the International Conference Warsaw, 4–5 October 2012*, ed. Wladyslaw Stepniak, Warschau 2014, p. 106–123; *idem: The Lives of Others: East German State Security Service's archival legacy*, in: *American Archivist 75 (Spring/Summer 2012)*, p. 81–108. For general information on the Ministry for State Security, see Jens Gieseke: *The History of the Stasi. East German's Secret Police, 1945–1990*, Oxford 2014.

[3] For information on the Stasi's photographs see: Volker Kuball, Sivia Oberhack, Katrin Rübenstrunk: *Die fotografische Überlieferung der Staatssicherheit. Eine Zwischenbilanz anläßlich des 50. Jahrestags des Mauerbaus*, in: "Rundbrief Fotografie" 18 (2011), Issue 3, p. 24–30.

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photographs are kept at the central office in Berlin; the rest are distributed among its twelve branches. The photo collection is mainly composed of photos which were found separately. That means they were not part of a formal record or there was no contextual relation between the record and the photo. Photo files and photo albums are also integrated into the collection. Photographs that are included in a file, are left in the file and not included in the photo collection. Thus, the total number of surviving Stasi photographs is much higher than the figures quoted here.

Nearly 70% of the photographs in the photo collection have been described to date. As photos are still transferred to the collection, the archival description process is ongoing.

Since 1990, a wealth of audio recordings has been uncovered in the offices of the Ministry of State Security. However, only a small portion of these records contain relevant content.[4] Of the nearly 170.00 audio recordings, more than 140.000 have been disposed because they were empty, the tapes erased or with contents unrelated to the Stasi. Approximately 6,500 recordings have yet to be described.

However, even if only 15% of the audio recordings actually have archival value, a collection of approximately 20,000 recordings is both quantitatively and qualitatively significant. The high proportion of empty and deleted tapes is explained by the internal processes of the Stasi: ca. 40% of the recordings are from Department 26, which was responsible for telephone monitoring. Written manuscripts of the recordings were made and the tapes then erased and reused. The same procedures were also applied for tapes used for room surveillance and the recording of meetings with unofficial collaborators. If there are still usable surveillance records, they usually date from the final period of the Stasi, when the internal work processes no longer functioned.

In addition to these rather disparate records, there are also numerous records that had already been archived by the Ministry of State Security. These are usually of better quality and of greater historical relevance, such as, for example, recordings of internal meetings, major criminal trials or speeches by Erich Mielke.

Audio recordings are only stored in the archives of the BStU's Central Office in Berlin because the regional offices do not have the equipment needed to listen to and digitize the recordings.

The Ministry of State Security mostly used magnetic tapes – both acetate and polyester tapes. However, the archives also hold compact cassettes and vinyl records as well as more exotic recording mediums, such as Nagra tapes and recording wires.

The description of the audio recordings is already nearing an end and will be completed over the next few years. In parallel, the most important and significant recordings will be described more intensely. That is, a detailed summary will be created and markers placed in the digital audio files to ensure easier access to their content.

The film and video records are comprised of 2,821 items, including 1,154 films and 1,667 videos.[5] The archival description is complete, although occasionally previously unknown tapes and films are still discovered in the files.[6]

[4] For information on the Stasi's audio recordings see also: Silvia Oberhack, Katri Jurichs, Elke Steinbach: *Die Töne der Staatssicherheit. Die Audioüberlieferung des MfS*, in: "Info" 7 (2010), Issue 2, p. 10–13.

The films were mostly produced in 16-mm format, which the MfS used for both instructional films and surveillance footage. Surveillance recordings are usually in black and white and without sound. Many other archived films also lack sound. In addition to 16-mm films, films in other formats (8 mm, 35 mm, Super 8) have also been preserved. As in other areas, the Stasi Records Archive needs to preserve various playback devices as well. Only for the 35-mm films does the BStU lack the appropriate equipment. Such films are stored in the Federal Film Archives.

Ten different video formats are represented in the archive, although most of the preserved videos are in VCR and VHS formats. Different video systems (PAL and SECAM) were also used. Thus, the need to have a variety of equipment for use with analogue technology is particularly great.

2. Preservation and Digitization

The archive holds audiovisual records in different forms and on different data carriers. The conservation thus requires a number of different approaches. In many cases, the preservation of the original data carriers is difficult or even impossible.

The highest priority for conservation in analogue mediums is the establishment of optimum storage conditions according to ISO 11799. Thus, certain kinds of archived material, such as films and black and white photographs, can be preserved for a very long time. Others, however, can only be preserved for a few decades. Therefore, the conservation of audiovisual material means that certain types of analogue media must be replaced. The BStU pursues the policy to systematically digitize the audio and video recordings. The digital representations will be preserved over time replacing the original analogue media. Even with other materials, for example nitrocellulose negatives, the aim in the future may be their substitution in digital form.

Audio tapes are in a particularly precarious state of preservation. Since further deterioration in the playback quality is to be expected, the decision was made to preserve all audio recordings in digital form. The digitization began in 2007 and is carried out in four recording studios that the BStU established for this purpose. All audio recordings, which are requested for use by internal or external users, are being digitized. Hence, no original tapes are made available to users under any circumstances. This is particularly important because some of the tapes are in such bad condition that they may only be re-played a few times. Additionally, all the tapes deemed to be in critical condition are digitized. In the case of polyester tapes, this applies to all tapes that exhibit adhesion and suffer from so-called "sticky shed" syndrome. Sticky-shed syndrome is a condition created by the deterioration of the binders in a magnetic tape, which hold the iron oxide magnetizable coating to its plastic carrier, making the tape illegible. Acetate tapes, in contrast, are subject to the "vinegar syndrome", a decomposition process that is caused

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[5] For information on the Stasi's films and videos see also: Silvia Oberhack, Katrin Rübenstrunk: *Die bewegten Bildes des ehemaligen Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit: Filme und Videos*, in: "Info" 7 (2010), Issue. 1, p. 15–19.

[6] Verzeichnis der Filme und Videos des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit, compiled by Renate Hedli, Berlin 2009, online at: http://www.bstu.bund.de/DE/Archive/Findmittel/Findbuch/aktenverzeichnis-mfs_filme_videos.pdf.

Audio recording studio at the BStU (photo: BStU)

by the chemical reaction when the substrate comes into contact with moist air. In order to detect the respective damage, polyester tapes are spooled regularly, acetate tapes are examined with special tests (Acid Detection stripes). Tapes suffering from vinegar syndrome are destroyed after digitization, since the chemical reaction that occurred on them can spread to adjacent tapes.

The digitization of the video tapes will begin in 2015. In general, this will not be carried out by the BStU but outsourced. This is necessary because many video tapes are in poor condition and need to be cleaned before they are digitized; special equipment is needed to do this.

A digital archive for the digitized audio and video recordings will be developed over the coming years. As long as an OAIS[7]-compliant digital archive does not exist, the digital representations must still be stored securely and redundantly in archival formats along with their associated metadata.

Table: The file formats for usage and digital preservation

	Format for usage	**Format for digital archiving**
Photograph	JPEG/TIFF 300 ppi (A4)	TIFF 600 ppi (A4)
Film/Video	Video-DVD, MPEG 4	10 Bit uncompressed (4:4:2) MXF
Audio	MP3 128 kBit/s	24 Bit uncompressed 48 kHz WAV

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[7] OAIS (Open Archival Information System) is an international standard (ISO 14721) and reference model for digital archives.

3. The Collections: subject matter and its significance

The use of the Stasi records remains high. Thousands of applications to view files are submitted each year, whereby the audiovisual collections are used mainly by the media, by academic researchers and in the context of historical and political education.

On the Internet, the audiovisual collections already enjoy a notable presence, which will be significantly increased in 2015 when the "Stasi Mediathek" goes online. Furthermore, online search aids for the audiovisual collections will be provided via the ARGUS platform.[8]

The media's interest in the history of the GDR and specifically in the Ministry of State Security is constant. Features about the construction and fall of the Wall, research on MfS employees and collaborators or contributions on the opposition and resistance to the regime are still numerous. Even discoveries of previously unknown photographs of the Berlin Wall find their way into the daily press. The interest of newspapers and magazines, television and radio stations is generally high, rising considerably in anniversary years, such as in 2014/15, the 25th anniversary of the peaceful revolution.

The other important user group are scholars and researchers. In many cases, illustrations for printed and online publications are what is being sought. However, historians are also increasingly using audiovisual records as the main sources of their research. Since the „iconic turn" in the humanities in the 1990s, images have been at the

Films in the Stasi Records Archive (photo: BStU)

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[8] The "Stasi Mediathek" and the ARGUS platform are accessible online at http://www.bstu.bund.de.

heart of historical research. For the history of the Ministry of State Security, the stock of photographs has already been examined in a monograph which was methodologically inspired by "visual studies".[9] In addition, there are sub-disciplines, such as film history and "acoustic studies", which focus on moving images and sound recordings and examine these regarding their cultural and historical aspects.

Also noteworthy is the fact that some artists have explored MfS photographs and used them as inspiration for their artistic work.[10]

The BStU's audiovisual collections are heterogeneous and cover a wide range of subject matter, thus contributing to many potential research projects. Below, we would like to present the collections under five different headings. They do not cover all our audiovisual records, but may give an impression of our archive's holdings.

The Wall, the border and the fall of the Wall

The GDR defined itself through its border: The Berlin Wall was the most famous East German structure. The prevention of escapes and illegal border crossings was a task that involved many state institutions. Accordingly, this subject also assumes a prominent position in the MfS' audiovisual legacy. The photograph collection contains numerous images of border installations, especially of the Berlin Wall. Checkpoints and border security systems are well documented, and panorama and aerial photographs impressively attest to the division of Berlin.[11] The detailed photographic documentation of the monstrous structure is particularly valuable for research purposes. Especially since the public is still largely unfamiliar with the view of the Wall from the east.

The Stasi's instructional and training films also show border security installations at border crossings and detected escape attempts. The escape attempts were simulated in part for the filming; other images show the hiding places of the escapees in vehicles with which escape attempts were made via water or air. The films expand our knowledge of the events at the German-German border and give form to the often desperate attempts to escape. The rich legacy also demonstrates how intensely and obsessively concerned the GDR's security forces were with the country's border and what resources they spent securing it.

Surveillance: Objects and techniques

Thousands of photographs of people and buildings, snapshots of people on the street, recordings of private telephone conversations: monitoring and collecting information about people constituted the basis of the Stasi's activities. This is reflected in various ways in the audiovisual collections.

Photographs, films and audio recordings give – often clearer than the written records – information about surveillance techniques: the photographic practice, and the equipment and the methods that were used are presented. Hidden cameras, filming techniques and

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[9] Karin Hartewig: *Das Auge der Partei. Fotografie und Staatssicherheit*, Berlin 2004.

[10] Arwed Messmer: *Reenactment MfS*, Ostfildern 2014; Simon Menner: *Top Secret. Bilder aus den Archiven der Staatssicherheit*, Ostfildern 2013.

[11] Kuball/Oberhack/Rübenstrunk, p. 27–29.

**View of Pariser Platz, the Brandenburg Gate and the Berlin Wall in 1989
(BStU, MfS, HA I, Fo, Nr. 365, Bild 32)**

the installation of hidden listening devices in people's homes – the audiovisual materials illustrate how the State Security Service worked, its level of professionalism and its strategies. Insights can be gained into the intelligence techniques in general, and in particular into the unique conditions in the GDR. The Stasi used, for example, East German products as well as imports from the West, which demonstrates both the shortage economy of the GDR and the organization's creative procurement practices.

The focus, however, is on the objects of observation. The photographs indicate the spatial and temporal circumstances in which the MfS monitored certain individuals. This allows conclusions to be drawn about the intensity of the Stasi's surveillance activities, as well as about their motives and resources. The number of surveillance photographs, for example, provides an indication of how important a specific place was to the Stasi. Particularly with respect to the case of monitoring individuals, the written documents frequently provide equally good or even better information about the Stasi's monitoring activities. The images and film footage, however, emphasize in an exceptional way an additional dimension. They visualize the intensity with which the MfS invaded the private spheres of their victims.

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Training of agents

A significant proportion of the audiovisual records focuses on the training and education of Stasi employees or other groups. This applies particularly to the stock of instructional and training films in the BStU archive. These often focus on individual espionage cases and demonstrate the methods and means that led to the discovery of activities by enemy agents or successful operations performed against ideological opponents. The films' subjects range from instructions for conducting house searches to monitoring techniques, methods of investigation and interrogation techniques.

The most well known Stasi training film, which is frequently used by the BStU in its educational work, is "Revisor".[12] The film depicts a real case from 1985 in which an individual draws the suspicion of the Stasi when he makes contact with a West German journalist. The film depicts operational measures such as surveillance, house searches and, finally, the man's arrest. The man, to whom the State Security Service gave the alias "Revisor", was not a member of the opposition or a dissident, but, ultimately, only someone who could not fully appreciate the consequences of his actions. In this respect, "Revisor" demonstrates how the Stasi's degradation measures could affect anyone.

Monitoring of the dissident Robert Havemann, ca. 1975
(BStU, MfS, HA XX, Fo, No. 1383, Bild 3)

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[12] BStU (ed.): "Revisor". Überwachung, Verfolgung, Inhaftierung durch das MfS. Ein Fallbeispiel für den Unterricht. Film-DVD mit einem original Lehrfilm des MfS und Bildungs-DVD mit didaktischen Hinweisen und Aktenauszug, Berlin 2007.

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Training materials: The art of camouflage, ca. 1980
(BStU, MfS, HA VIII, Fo, Nr. 448, Bild 29, 31, 32)

The instructional films provide detailed information on individual cases which are still of great historical interest. Additionally, these films reveal interesting facts about intelligence techniques and methods practiced during the Cold War. Finally, the films' educational content reveals what the State Security Service wanted to convey to its employees, which, in turn, provides insight into the organization's own self-image and self-conception.[13]

Self-perception and stereotypes of the enemy

The Stasi's photographic and audio records permit investigations of a classical field of "visual studies", i.e. how the Ministry of State Security perceived itself and its opponents.

The Stasi's self-image can be explored based on numerous materials and thematic priorities. An outstanding example is the internal and media presentation of longtime Minister of State Security, Erich Mielke. Unlike his deputy, Markus Wolf, the head of foreign intelligence, Mielke did not shy away from the public and was, as a member of the Politburo and representative of the East German Volkskammer, a public figure. He staged his public perception accordingly. There are photographs of him in uniform, hunting, with foreign officials, with Honecker and Ulbricht, as well as with ordinary workers, for example, when visiting his constituency – images that simultaneously emphasize his position, his power and his closeness to the people.

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[13] Research has already been conducted on the Stasi's training and instructional films. See Sophie Meyer: *The Instruction Films of the GDR Ministry for State Security and for the Állambiztonság of the People's Republic of Hungary, 1959–1989*, Master Thesis, Central European University, Budapest 2011.

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Of particular interest with regards to the creation of identity and community are Mielke's speeches at internal conferences or other official events; many of these were archived by the Stasi as audio files and have thus been preserved. The speeches also illustrate the added value of the audio recordings compared to the manuscripts of the speeches, which are, at least partly, also in the archives: Mielke often deviated from his manuscripts and spoke freely to his employees. These improvised sections in particular allow for interesting conclusions to be drawn about the MfS' self-perception: Mielke's speeches include aspects of community building, e.g. alleged selflessness, which is expressed, for example, in one's willingness to lead a life of secrecy. The willingness to use force, which was conveyed in a pronounced cult of weapons as part of the Stasi's self-image, is also evident in Mielke speeches.

Not only is the Stasi's self-image apparent in such audiovisual records, but the image of the enemy as well. This particularly applies to instructional and training films that focus on the recruiting and espionage methods employed by Western intelligence agencies, which are represented as ideological opponents in the films and portrayed with the negative characteristics befitting the ideological enemy. The opponents are degraded, for example, and described as "rats" or a "cross between a fox and pig" and thus excluded from the human community. This image of the enemy served as an outward demarcation

Erich Mielke with Erich Honecker and Walter Ulbricht, 1970
(BStU, MfS, SdM, Fo, Nr. 173, Bild 40)

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Trial before the Berlin Municipal Court for escaping the republic and aiding an escape, 1976 (BStU, MfS, ZAIG, Fo, Nr. 662, Bild 19)

and, thus, the image of the Stasi employees. Films and photographs transported these mechanisms in a particularly effective way.[14]

The voices of the victims and perpetrators

The BStU archives contain numerous recordings of court trials. Almost all major political criminal cases against opposition activists and dissidents are completely or partially preserved. A series of espionage trials is preserved as well, including those used against Stasi defectors, which were so confidential that very few in the Ministry knew about them. In addition to the audio recordings, there are some, although fewer, films of

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[14] Holger Kulick: *Feindbilder. Die Fotos und Videos der Stasi*, DVD, Berlin 2006.

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trials. Both are unusual in the German archiving tradition: As a rule, in Germany audio recordings of court hearings are only made for internal purposes; thus, it is rare to find fragments or complete records of court proceedings in German archives.

In addition to the legal proceedings, recordings of interrogations are held in the BStU archive. The stock includes both secretly and openly made recordings. In some cases, these include entire investigations with interrogations conducted by the judiciary and investigative bodies or, in other cases, just a single interrogation conducted in a Stasi detention centre.

The files also usually contain written documents on all court proceedings and hearings. However, the audiovisual collections have an added value compared to the written documents: The voices of judges and prosecutors, defendants and witnesses, Stasi officers and their victims can be heard. How fanatical were the prosecutors, how anxious or confident the defendants, how were subjects pressured during interrogations? Volume, tone and direct speech provide information about the nature of the litigation process, the treatment of the accused and his or her constitution. A systematic evaluation of these audio recordings has not yet been conducted. However, radio and television have used another essential feature that emphasizes the difference between audio and film recordings and written documents: The listener directly experiences the historical source, the feelings and emotions of the individuals, unfiltered by transcription and notation.

The importance of the audiovisual collections in the Stasi archive for academic research on the history of the GDR is obvious. The photographs, films and audio tapes are outstanding sources of the SED dictatorship, the opposition and the intelligence operations in East Germany. Their use and examination in a scholarly context is still – compared with the written documents – relatively new. In the media and the educational field, these testaments, however, are very common and serve – in an exceptional way – the illustration and disseminating of knowledge about the East German dictatorship.

Streszczenie

Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Państwowego NRD (Stasi) pozostawiło po sobie ogromny zasób archiwalny. Choć materiały aktowe stanowią jego trzon, to razem z nimi przechowywane są w obecnym archiwum Pełnomocnika Federalnego do spraw Materiałów Państwowej Służby Bezpieczeństwa NRD (BStU) miliony zdjęć, tysiące filmów i nagrań dźwiękowych. Znaczenie tych zbiorów audiowizualnych zachowanych po działalności Stasi jest oczywiste dla naukowców zajmujących się historią NRD. Fotografie, filmy i materiały dźwiękowe mogą być istotnym źródłem do badań dyktatury Socjalistycznej Partii Jedności Niemiec (SED), działalności opozycji demokratycznej i aktywności operacyjnej wschodnioniemieckiej „bezpieki". Ich wykorzystywanie w badaniach naukowych w Niemczech pozostaje jednak – w porównaniu z materiałami aktowymi – stosunkowo nowym procesem. Dlatego w niniejszym artykule opisano stan, metody opracowania, zabezpieczania i wartość historyczną zasobu audiowizualnego przechowywanego obecnie w archiwum BStU.

Słowa kluczowe: NRD, Pełnomocnik Federalny do spraw Materiałów Państwowej Służby Bezpieczeństwa NRD (BStU), Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Państwowego NRD (Stasi), Socjalistyczna Partia Jedności Niemiec (SED), materiały audiowizualne.

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Summary

The Ministry for State Security of the German Democratic Republic (the Stasi) left behind a huge archival collection. Although files are its core resource, they are stored with millions of photographs, thousands of films and audio recordings in the current archive of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the German Democratic Republic (BStU). Scientists dealing with the history of the German Democratic Republic acknowledge the significance of the audio-visual collections from the former Stasi. Photographs, films and sound material may be an important source to study the dictatorship of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), the activities of the democratic opposition and the operations of the East German Security Service. However, their use in scientific studies in Germany is still relatively new, if compared with the use of the files. Therefore, this article presents the status, preparation and securing methods, as well as the historic value of the audio-visual collection which is currently stored in the archives of the State Security Service.

Key words: German Democratic Republic, Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the German Democratic Republic (BStU), Ministry for State Security of the German Democratic Republic (the Stasi), Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), audiovisual materials.