

---

## **‘Seeing’ India through GDR Newsreels : An exploration of DEFA productions at the Progress Archive, Berlin**

Reyazul Haque

In: *Archival Reflexicon*, Anandita Bajpai and Heike Liebau (eds.), pp.1-8

Year of Publication: 2023


DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2022-00063>

Year of Publication on [perspectiva.net](https://perspectiva.net): 2023

---

### Copyright



This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives 4.0 International License  (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/), which permits copying and redistributing the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material. You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

## **‘Seeing’ India through GDR Newsreels: An exploration of DEFA productions at the *Progress Archive*, Berlin**

**Reyazul Haque, *Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin***

In autumn 2018, while preparing a doctoral project proposal on relations between Germany and pre-independence India in the field of film production, a systematic online-research on potential archives and collections led me to the *Progress Archive* in Berlin. This is one of Germany’s most exhaustive film archives, which also incorporates DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) produced films from the German Democratic Republic in its collections. I was curious to find out if there were any entries related to India in the archive’s online database. To my fascination, entering simple-search terms such like “Indien” or “indisch” lead, besides other information, to an unexpectedly large number of entries. Noteworthy among these were entries on *Der Augenzeuge*, newsreels that were produced in the GDR. Between 1946 and 1980, DEFA produced about 2000 newsreels, 154 of which contain reports on India.<sup>1</sup> Screened before the main feature films in cinemas, *Der Augenzeuge* newsreels were part of the cinema programme and were meant to inform audiences about current affairs around the globe. This unique and hitherto largely unexplored material has eventually become the central focus of my ongoing PhD project.

This article zooms into the main features of the DEFA newsreel productions related to India. The first section introduces the different kinds of images of India in GDR’s newsreel films. It is based on certain recurring themes that may be instructive in categorizing and analyzing GDR newsreel films on India. The second section deals with the nature of the collections and the location of newsreels within the organizing structure of the *Progress Film Archive* as the official archive of DEFA productions. The last section discusses the significance of these sources for scholarship on the Cultural Cold War. In a digital world saturated with historical and contemporary material on past events, this understudied archive may provide insights into pasts, which are very much part of our present.

### **Newsreels on India in the *Progress Archive***

India features in the newsreels since the beginning of their production (1946), but it becomes a prominent topic with the official formation of the GDR (1949).<sup>2</sup> During the time-period under consideration, which marks the inception of newsreels in 1946 up to 1980, when the production of newsreels ended, India occurs in 154 reports in which it is often presented with prominence and palpable fraternity. Though there can be other ways to categorize these reports, three largely discernible rubrics emerge:<sup>3</sup>

1) India’s struggle for democracy and strength: This category refers to reports that describe contemporary India from the GDR’s perspective. Films that presented political, economic,

and social issues being faced in India, particularly as a country that had recently gained independence, and those describing the establishment of democratic institutions in the country belong to this category.

2) India and its networks of solidarity: This category consists of newsreel reports that situate India on the international map, particularly in the context of international solidarity among the still-colonized nations, the recent post-colonies, with the GDR, and the broader socialist world.

3) India as a land of the past and the future: This rubric brings together films that represent images of everyday life in India for audiences in the GDR. They rely on older familiar images of the country that had catered to East German viewers while simultaneously capturing a society that was seen as rapidly changing.

I follow this categorization with the awareness that placing the vast repertoire of newsreels into schematic categories has its own dangers and problems, which could include limiting their scope and producing preconceived notions about them. Indeed, newsreels are not, and also cannot, be categorized into any strictly defined rubrics also because representations of India in these films changed through time. The rubrics are porous and also overlapping, with the same newsreel often belonging to more than one category. They are thus intended as a heuristic tool, which can assist in undertaking a nuanced analysis of the films and the themes they cover, rather than being exclusive categories.

Following are a few brief examples of the reports that would fall under these categories. The major theme of GDR newsreel reports on India from the early period is India's struggle for democracy, which also draws upon the German experience during the Second World War. For example, one of the early reports on India, released in October 1949, talks about unrest and the partition of British India in 1947 and the process of achieving independence from colonial rule. This newsreel's release in cinemas coincided with the year when the GDR was also formally established. It consists of eight reports on different topics. Among them there are reports mainly related to the GDR and communist parties in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Midway in the newsreel, a high-paced reportage from India about the aftermath of partition is presented. Titled as "Unruhen in Indien" (Riots in India), it opens with the view of a street with flags of Pakistan. The following shots also display such flags on houses and on the street. Thus, the existence of a new nation, Pakistan, is thematized, and the proceeding scenes show the political and administrative activities related to the formation of the country. We are shown Mohammad Ali Jinnah taking charge of the new nation from the last colonial Viceroy Mountbatten. This is followed by a Pakistani flag being waved in the parliament while a voiceover reminds the audience about the role of Britain that "prevented the unification of the Indian people and created two states – Pakistan and India".<sup>5</sup> The following scenes show the by now widely known carnage and destruction during partition. The historical moment partition, its ensuing violence and destruction, and a divided society – the report emphasizes these as the bitter fruits of colonial rule in India, and draws viewers' attention to the uncanny resemblance that partition has with the post-war situation in Germany at that moment. It is important to note that reports such as these do not draw direct parallels between the two countries, but they do attempt to portray close affinities in terms of their quest for peace and democracy.

The reports on India's standing in world politics not only deal with the GDR's official expectations of, and efforts towards, gaining political recognition in the world, but also show the influence of socialist ideology on formerly colonized nations. Indo-GDR relations were of significance in the political-cultural context of the Cold War, when former colonies became important for both the 'blocs'.<sup>6</sup> Newsreels often combined formal aspects of interstate affairs with shots from the side-lines of these activities and locations, and employed background music which emphasized the urgency and warmth of India-GDR relations. Cultural events and landscapes played a crucial role in these representations, and it is interesting to note how stereotypes produced by such images present an implicit tension between an anti-imperialist, socialist ideology and a conventional orientalist understanding of India. To make them appear authentic and close to reality, news on everyday life and culture was a prominent part of these reports. A mixture of stereotypes, dynamic, and spectacular images of India was repetitively utilized to produce a sense of everyday life in the country. India was depicted as a land of spectacles and paradoxes. Thus, for example, on the one hand, a report presented that there was a record temperature of 50 degrees in Calcutta (1958), and on the other, in a different report, couples were shown dancing waltz and skating on a frozen lake in the northern part of the country (1954). On one rare occasion, a newsreel opened with sports news, in which scenes from a hockey match between the national teams of India and GDR were shown (1968). Here, India was constructed as a country that was advancing, not only in politics and economy, but also in sports.

### **The Progress Film Archive**

Located today in central Berlin's Friedrichstraße, Progress was originally a German film distributor that was founded on August 1, 1950, as a German-Soviet film distribution company. According to the webpage of the archive, Progress was

the only film distributor in the German Democratic Republic [GDR] and brought around 12000 films to the country's 830 cinemas. Almost half of them were feature films and documentaries by DEFA, the only film studio in the GDR. With roughly 100 employees, progress released around four films a week. The DEFA documentaries and newsreels show the 20th century world from an Eastern perspective.<sup>7</sup>

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Progress inherited the films produced by DEFA, the state-owned GDR film production company, and became a unique archive that holds the complete cinematic productions of a "now entirely non-existent country".<sup>8</sup>

A domestic film distributor in the GDR, *Progress Filmverleih* went into oblivion for many years after German reunification until it was revived in the late 1990s. Presently, it is a film distribution company owned by Icestorm Entertainment. The archive works in tandem with the German Federal Film Archive (*Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv*), which functions as a film negative storage facility, and the DEFA-Stiftung, which has legal rights over all DEFA productions, and the responsibility to make them available to a wider public.<sup>9</sup> Progress's office in Berlin has DEFA produced films stored on DVD and other formats, which one can access upon request. However, not all DEFA films can be accessed in the archive due to technical limitations, such as limited film projection equipment, and one may need to visit the *Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv* for some film previews. The best way to access DEFA films is through Progress's online portal (<https://progress.film>), that offers almost the entire film

material via online-streaming. The portal's search option enables users to find films through their titles or key words and the results can be filtered based on the source (e.g. Historiathek, Cinezentrum, DEFA etc.), the year and the overarching category (e.g. newsreels, DDR Magazine, feature films etc.) of the production. The platform thus provides basic information about the productions such as the year of production and release, the directors, people and places mentioned, a description of the visuals, and a transcript of dialogues and voiceovers in German, which one hopes will improve in their accuracy and quality in the future with developing techniques, given that for instance some of the non-German names and places are not appropriately transcribed by the programme. The portal is continuously evolving and has recently also incorporated film materials from non-DEFA sources, like Cintec, Widoks, and West German newsreels etc. The *Progress Archive* provides interested users only limited access to the films and the abovementioned basic information about them. However, users need to consult the *Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv* or the DEFA-Stiftung for production documentation and any other details.

Besides the newsreel films produced by DEFA, the *Progress Archive's* collections also include productions by Filmaktiv,<sup>10</sup> DEFA's predecessor, that was founded in October 1945 by communist filmmakers in exile with the aim of reviving German cinema. These films were screened before main feature films in cinema halls. The state-owned film production company DEFA was established in May 1946 with the mandate of "de-Nazification and political re-education in Germany".<sup>11</sup> It took over the production of the newsreel series *Der Augenzeuge* from Filmaktiv, which was initially released weekly, and later twice a week, with the purpose of educating audiences about "socialist working, learning, and living", with the USSR as its natural model.<sup>12</sup>

## **Cold War Research and Cinema Studies**

Newsreel reports in the *Progress Film Archive* present an unexplored opportunity to see India from a unique historical perspective which was not only close and sympathetic to the nation and its people, but also depicted a view that now belongs to a non-existent country. In these productions, we witness the GDR as the "other" Germany, a socialist Germany, which was trying to make sense of, and represent, an emerging postcolonial India for its own citizens. Newsreels can serve as a rich source-base in reframing and resituating frameworks utilized in historical as well as cinematic studies on the Cold War. Thus, in the *Progress Film Archive*, we find rich film material that might contribute to diversifying understandings of the Cold War and cinema's role in it. More so, because it is located in one of the countries that played a key role in the period, but does not exist anymore.

The Cold War did not end with the Cold War. Writing Cold War histories and therein shaping perspectives to situate and understand those pasts continues to be an ongoing effort after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, one can observe that historical scholarship on the Cold War, to some extent, reproduces Cold War dichotomies. Whereas New Cold War History has attempted to diversify perspectives by incorporating those from around the world, particularly those from former socialist countries,<sup>13</sup> such perspectives are still missing in the field of film and cinema studies. Histories that rely on films made during or on the Cold War as their source-base, still largely mirror Cold War historical positionalities whereby American and Western narratives are

still predominant, not least because of the overwhelming authoritative presence of the Hollywood film industry and US media discourse.<sup>14</sup>

In cinematic representations of the Cold War, this near monopoly of an American view can easily be discerned from the content of feature films, documentaries, as well as other genres of non-fiction films that also include newsreels films.<sup>15</sup> This not only leads to misrepresentation or non-representation in cultural production, but also contributes to the production of skewed knowledge and history around Cold War themes, as has been aptly discussed by Nora Alter in her research on German non-fiction cinema.<sup>16</sup> As Marc Ferro argues, as a medium, films are “an agent, product and source of history”, which not only influence the making of history but also historiography.<sup>17</sup>

In recent scholarship there has been a greater emphasis on identifying alternative source materials to contest undifferentiated and hegemonic discourses about the Cold War. This is especially needed in order to better understand and value the role of countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the Cold War. This not only incorporates analyzing how they were projected by Cold War ‘blocs’ (or within ‘bloc’ politics) but also, and even more so, how actors from ‘third world’ countries perceived their representation within Cold War discourses. DEFA newsreels provide an interesting set of materials in which one can map both national anxieties and international imaginations in how a socialist state (GDR) projected itself through the portrayal of countries like India by a state-owned film body. They also become a resource for decentralizing the exploration of the cinematic medium and imaginative politics. The portrayal of ‘developing nations’ in these films (and the shifts therein over time) become a rich repository for exploring the role and strategic significance of these nations for socialist states like the GDR. They also hint at transitions in the discourses and realpolitik of the Cold War. Portrayals of the ‘third world’ often still borrow from what was produced during the Cold War. Working with sources from a digitized archive like the *Progress Archive* can provide scholars the opportunity to explore continuities in the medium and how it creates its own recursive repertoires.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These ten to twelve minutes' long newsreels contained between 8 to 15 reports. They mostly began with a report on topics of national or local significance and ended with those on culture and sports. Reports that were placed in between mostly covered themes in international affairs; aspects of social, political, and cultural life in the GDR and the USSR, but also coverage on countries from around the world, where the GDR had strategic interests. In this paper, an entire newsreel film is referred to as 'film', and a complete segment of the newsreel, which deals with a particular topic is referred to as a 'report'.

<sup>2</sup> See Haque, Reyazul. 2020. "Non-Fiction films produced by DEFA in the German Democratic Republic, 1946–1989. Collections of the Progress Film Archive, Berlin", *MIDA Thematische Ressource*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2022-00042>. Available online at <https://www.projekt-mida.de/en/thematicresources/list-of-non-fiction-films-produced-by-defa-in-the-german-democratic-republic-1946-1989-collections-of-the-progress-film-archive-berlin/>

It is noteworthy that other South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka also appear in the newsreels and exploring them can also open interesting research avenues.

<sup>3</sup> I have dealt with these rubrics and their contents in depth in the following publication: Haque, Reyazul. 2021. "A Witness to History - Production of Images of India in GDR Newsreels". In: Anandita Bajpai (ed.) *Cordial Cold War - Cultural Actors in India and the German Democratic Republic*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi: Sage, pp. 153-177. Available online at [https://spectrum.sagepub.in/\\_api/v1/products/6/variants/18/pdf\\_file](https://spectrum.sagepub.in/_api/v1/products/6/variants/18/pdf_file)

<sup>4</sup> *Der Augenzeuge* 1949/39, 1949. Available online at <http://www.progress-film.de/der-augenzeuge-1949-39.html>. Accessed on 29 February 2020.

<sup>5</sup> A transcription of the selected voiceover is provided in German on the website along with the video. The translation has been done by the author.

<sup>6</sup> See Benatar, Alexander. 2020. *Kalter Krieg auf dem indischen Subkontinent: Die deutsch-deutsche Diplomatie im Bangladeschkrieg 1971*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110682038>. Also Benatar's (2019) essay "Die Beziehungen zwischen Pakistan und der DDR bis 1973", *MIDA Archival Reflexicon*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2022-00011>. Available online at <https://www.projekt-mida.de/reflexicon/die-beziehungen-zwischen-pakistan-und-der-ddr-bis-1973/>.

<sup>7</sup> 'About Us', *Progress*, [https://progress.film/about\\_us](https://progress.film/about_us). Accessed online on 29th August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> 'About Us', *Progress*, [https://progress.film/about\\_us](https://progress.film/about_us). Accessed online on 29th August 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Heiduschke, Sebastian. 2013. *East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.33. DEFA Stiftung can be reached through its website: <https://www.defa-stiftung.de/defa/geschichte/>

<sup>10</sup> Heiduschke, Sebastian. 2013. *East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.10. It is interesting to note that idea of Filmaktiv was to make cinema to "promote a sense of respect for other people and other nations" (ibid).

<sup>11</sup> Allan, Seán. 2015. "DEFA's antifascist myths and the construction in East German cinema". In: K. Leeder (ed.), *Rereading East Germany: The Literature and Film of the GDR*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Lehnert, Sigrun. 2018. "German Newsreels as Agent of History". *Media History*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1544886>.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of different perspectives on historiography on Cold War, see for example, Romero, Federico. 2014. "Cold War Historiography at the Crossroads", *Cold War History* 14, 4, pp. 685-703, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.950249>.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Shaw, Tony. 2007. *Hollywood's Cold War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Also see Shain, Russell E. 1974. "Hollywood's Cold War", *Journal of Popular Film* 3, 4, pp. 334-350, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472719.1974.10661746>.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Alter, Nora M. 2002. *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema, 1967-2000*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. "The American avoidance of non-U.S. material manifests itself not only on the level of cultural production but also on the level of intellectual analysis. Most English-language articles on documentaries about the Vietnam War focus exclusively on American documentaries." (p.20)

<sup>16</sup> Alter, Nora M. 2002. *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema, 1967-2000*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Ferro, Marc. 1983. "Film as an Agent, Product and Source of History". *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, p. 357.



MIDA Langfristvorhaben, gefördert durch die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.  
*MIDA Long Term Project, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation).*

Herausgeber/*Editors:* Anandita Bajpai, Heike Liebau  
Layout: Monja Hofmann, Nico Putz  
Anbieter/*Host:* ZMO, Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin  
Kontakt/*Contact:* archival.reflexicon@zmo.de

ISSN 2628-5029

© MIDA 2023