

ORWO film

since 1909

Welcome to the Analogue Revolution!

ORWO is a 115 year old company and brand. Founded in Wolfen, in 1909, as an off-shoot of the AGFA film company ORWO is renowned for its cutting-edge range of black and white film products. The factory produces negative film for motion picture production, duplicating film, print film, sound recording film, and film leaders for the processing and distribution business.

Fast forward to 2022, ORWO released the first professionally finished photographic films launched by the company in 50 years, alongside new and improved classic motion picture emulsions.

The Choice of Photojournalists

During the Cold War, ORWO became the primary film supplier for the Eastern Bloc and developing socialist nations, gaining particular prominence in India where it competed with Kodak. The film was widely used by press photographers and documentarians throughout the Eastern Bloc, capturing key moments of Soviet-era history.

East German documentary filmmakers and photojournalists relied heavily on ORWO, with its distinctive color rendition becoming synonymous with Eastern European cinema of the 1960s-80s. The film was notably used to document the construction and life around the Berlin Wall.

Thus it was that in 1969, mysterious photos of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia appeared in Magnum Photos, credited to "P.P." (Prague

Photographer). This anonymous photographer went on to win the Robert Capa Gold Medal, but couldn't reveal his identity for fear of arrest. Sixteen years later, Josef Koudelka finally emerged as the brave photojournalist behind these historic images. And that he shot these immortal sequence of images on what was then dismissed as "rolls of East German film". This black and white film stock, that accompanied him everywhere and that he would push in a hot developer to as much as 3200 ASA, was ORWO NP27.

Another renowned photographer who used ORWO Film was Helga Paris. In 1984 she captured over 1,500 portraits of female workers at a state-run clothing factory in East Berlin. She wanted to document the everyday life of women—something rarely shown in the GDR. Under the regime, only carefully curated, favorable images of happy citizens were presented to the public. Real life, with all its complexity, was hidden. Paris rejected this sanitized narrative, focusing instead on the working-class women the state claimed to represent but often exploited. Her raw, unfiltered images subverted the regime's propaganda, offering a rare, honest glimpse of life under authoritarianism.

Here also are two closeups of her actual contact sheets with the ORWO NP27 mark still visible. You can find more of these contact sheets with her notes at the Akademie der Künste archive online.

PHOTOS ATTACHED:

1. 1969 Soviet invasion of Prague series. Joseph Koudelka, credit: Magnum photos.
2. Helga Paris, from "Women at the Clothing Factory VEB Treff-Modelle Berlin"
3. Contact sheets of Helga Paris from the Akademie der Künste archive.