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‘A Faithful Steward of these Values’: The Valorisation of a Translocated German Sound Collection

Abstract

This paper traces the journey of a collection of German sound recordings to its current home at the British Library and examines how changing perceptions of the collection’s value in the eyes of its holders have influenced its preservation. Initially founded as a Weimar-era radio repository, the collection was then adopted as a means of recording the early years of National Socialism before being seized by British troops in 1945 and submitted as possible evidence for prosecutors at Nuremberg. It was then used as a resource for post-war BBC broadcasting before passing into British sound archives. The collection has passed through multiple institutions and has been re-evaluated by generations of broadcasters, civil servants and archivists, each time posing different questions as to the legal, historical, national and entertainment value of such recordings, providing a case study of how archival value is determined by the context in which the objects are assessed.

Keywords

Radio archives, Germany, Britain, Second World War, archival value

Introduction

This case study focuses on the journey of a collection of German sound recordings through a variety of different institutions, examining the changing assessment of its value through time and across different locations. The collection in question is currently held by the British Library (BL) and comprises some 9,000 German-language recordings dating from 1930 to 1943, including a number of political speeches by high-profile Nazis, recordings from public events such as party rallies, and the occasional piece of music or drama.¹ These recordings are held on approximately 4,500 double-sided shellac discs which are thought to be a subset of a collection intended for the National Socialists’ unrealised *Reichsschallarchiv* [Reich Sound Archive], the central sound archive that was intended to preserve the sounds of Hitler’s Germany. To

