

OSTKREUZ—Agency of Photographers: Balancing Legacy and Adaptation in a Photographic Landscape after German Reunification

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Founded in 1990 by seven East German photographers, OSTKREUZ—Agency of Photographers emerged as a survival strategy in post-reunification Germany, drawing on its GDR identity to establish itself in a competitive market. The agency balances commissioned work with independent artistic projects, maintaining a commitment to author photography, humanism and collective solidarity—values rooted in the socialist photographic tradition. However, as commercial pressures mount and founding members leave, OSTKREUZ faces the challenge of preserving its historical ethos while adapting to a globalised industry. This article examines the tension between legacy and commercial adaptation from 1990 to 2017, analysing how the agency has navigated financial instability, the evolution of the media landscape and changes in its membership. While exhibitions serve as a key tool for reinforcing its identity, increasing reliance on alternative revenue streams—such as corporate collaborations—raises questions about the sustainability of its founding principles. The article also examines OSTKREUZ's links with Magnum, suggesting that embracing a broader humanist photographic ethos—rather than a strictly GDR-rooted identity—may offer a more sustainable way forward.

Keywords: OSTKREUZ—Agency of Photographers, GDR, photography, (post-) socialism, German reunification, identity.

As OSTKREUZ—Agency of Photographers (hereinafter Ostkreuz) has navigated a changing photographic landscape over the past twenty-four years, marked by commercial pressures and shifting market demands, it has faced the challenge of preserving its social and cultural identities associated with the former GDR. This raises the question of whether the agency can maintain its GDR-rooted identity, collective ethos, and commitment to authenticity while adapting to commercial and global pressures. Ostkreuz's journey epitomises a broader struggle to preserve a cultural legacy and social identities rooted in the socialist state, which serve as a defining feature, while responding to the changing demands of a capitalist economy. The article begins by detailing the socio-political background of the GDR to trace how the socialist state shaped the founding members' artistic values, including their emphasis on authenticity, social responsibility, and collective solidarity—values identified as specifically East German. This is followed by a discussion of the founding of the agency: I outline the main aims of Ostkreuz, the photographers' initial visions and plans, and briefly discuss the influence of Magnum Photos on the agency in terms of creating a platform for socially engaged and artistic documentary photography.

In a second section, I illustrate Ostkreuz's rise to prominence in reunified Germany, including the West German media's portrayal of the founding photographers as "experts on the East." In addition, I discuss their assignments and commissions in the 1990s, which were almost exclusively in East Germany, allowing the photographers to establish themselves in a pan-German market, but also presenting the challenge of retaining their GDR-rooted identity as the agency gained traction in a Western-dominated market. The subsequent section looks at the shifting media landscape and describes the technological and economic transformations in the photography market around the 2000s, which include the rise of digital media and increased commercial demands. I also analyse how Ostkreuz balanced commissions with personal photo projects, and consider the advantages and constraints of this working method in a competitive market. Furthermore, I examine internal conflicts over the balance between commercial success and artistic integrity, including disagreements over the future direction of the agency.

The article then investigates the tension between legacy and commercialisation: how does Ostkreuz maintain a GDR-rooted identity and collectivist spirit while adapting to the demands of a globalised market? How have commercial pressures tested the photographers' values and artistic integrity, raising the question of whether the social and cultural identities associated with the socialist state can coexist with the need for commercial success, or whether compromises have eroded the agency's original principles. In the final section, I examine the structural division between the Ostkreuz Agency, which handled commissions, and the Ostkreuz Association, which organised exhibitions, as a strategic response to financial pressures. I also discuss how Ostkreuz currently navigates this twin-track approach and whether this model remains viable in light of the eventual departure of the remaining founding members and the ongoing challenge of maintaining a GDR-rooted identity as new photographers join the collective. Finally, I condense the tension between Ostkreuz's GDR legacy and its adaptations to a globalised, competitive industry, considering whether the photographers' commitment to authenticity, collective solidarity, and artistic integrity can be sustained amid the demands of the contemporary photography market. Ultimately, the question arises as to how Ostkreuz will adapt to future market demands—and what broader implications this journey will have for other post-socialist collectives trying to preserve their cultural legacies in a global economy.

Historical context and founding principles

The agency was established in 1990 by seven photographers from the German Democratic Republic (GDR): Sibylle Bergemann, Ute Mahler, Werner Mahler, Harf Zimmermann, Jens Röttsch, Thomas Sandberg, and Harald Hauswald (fig. 1). The founding members wished to continue their work in reunified Germany and believed they would have better chances by joining forces—especially as sixty to seventy percent of photographers changed professions following the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).¹ Most of the founders had already known each other before the agency's creation: some had studied together, like Röttsch and

1 Interview with Harald Hauswald, December 29, 2017.



1. Werner Mahler, Jens Röttsch, Sibylle Bergemann, Ute Mahler, Thomas Sandberg, Harf Zimmermann, Harald Hauswald (from left to right), Berlin, 1990, photo by Frieda von Wild

Werner Mahler, Jens Röttsch, Sibylle Bergemann, Ute Mahler, Thomas Sandberg, Harf Zimmermann, Harald Hauswald (iš kairės į dešinę), Berlynas, 1990, Friedos von Wild nuotrauka

Zimmermann; others moved in the same social circles, such as Bergemann and Ute and Werner Mahler; while some met at exhibition openings or were members of the Association of Visual Artists in the GDR (VBK). From the beginning, the Ostkreuz photographers prioritised personal photo projects, often shown in self-organised exhibitions, which they considered more important than the “day-to-day” business of commissioned work, reflecting the working principles of freelance photographers in the GDR. In addition, Ostkreuz has retained certain social and cultural identities associated with the GDR—most notably the spirit of collectivism and mutual trust, passed on to new members and identified as specifically East German. Today, only Ute and Werner Mahler and Hauswald remain active members of the agency; Röttsch, Sandberg, and Zimmermann left during the 1990s, and Bergemann passed away in 2010. Meanwhile, Ostkreuz has grown to comprise twenty-five photographers and is now regarded as one of the most prestigious photo agencies in Germany.

For the founding members, the GDR signifies not only a point of origin but also a point of departure. The ambiguous status of photography in the socialist state—both as a tool for agitation and as a medium for artistic expression—as well as its role in society influenced their understanding of photography. Scholars generally distinguish between artistic freelance photography and photojournalism in the GDR.² The latter was in line with official guidelines of the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED), while the former expressed the photographer’s individual and (often) political stance, thereby enabling an alternative public sphere. In art historical accounts that follow a Western perspective, these two strands of photography are often presented as being in opposition to each other.³ Yet, in practice, documentary photography was the leading style across both journalistic and artistic photography because its seemingly objective character appealed to

- 2 Sabine Schmid, *Fotografie zwischen Politik und Bild: Entwicklungen der Fotografie in der DDR* (Utz, 2014); Astrid Ihle, “Photography as Contemporary Document: Comments on the Conceptions of the Documentary in Germany after 1945,” in *Art of Two Germanys—Cold War Cultures*, ed. Stephanie Barron, Sabine Eckmann, and Eckhart Gillen (Los Angeles Museum of Art; Abrams, 2009); Karin Hartewig and Alf Lüdtkke, eds., *Die DDR im Bild: Zum Gebrauch der Fotografie im anderen deutschen Staat* (Wallstein, 2004).
- 3 Schmid, *Fotografie zwischen Politik und Bild*; Ihle, “Photography as Contemporary Document”; Hartewig und Lüdtkke, *Die DDR im Bild*; Jana Duda et al., eds., *Geschlossene Gesellschaft: künstlerische Fotografie in der DDR 1949–1989* (Kerber, 2012).

both Party officials and to the broader public in the socialist state. To sustain themselves financially, freelance photographers took on a wide range of work, including “advertising, fashion, portrait, product and architectural photography.”⁴ The relatively low cost of living in the GDR made it possible to work as a freelance photographer, even though that meant an irregular income, which often resulted in precarious labour situations.⁵ Working as freelancers, however, did not preclude photographing for state-sanctioned magazines, especially as many newspapers in the GDR supported artistic photography, despite having to abide by official regulations. This particular mode of working influenced Ostkreuz’s founding photographers.

According to Ute Mahler, the majority of freelance photographers in the GDR prioritised personal artistic projects aimed at exposing the gap between socialist propaganda and actual living conditions.⁶ They committed themselves to documenting their social environment in order to create an alternative image of life under socialism that contrasted with the official ideology of the SED. In retrospect, such artistic practices have been characterised as constituting a so-called “visual counter-public.”⁷ This concept is pivotal to understanding the importance of photographs within GDR society, as it attests to both the photographers’ attitude and their relationship with the audience. The contrasting and revealing images of this visual counter-public circulated among fellow photographers and friends, or were exhibited in galleries. The public generally perceived such photographs as credible, largely due to the documentary style that lent them a sense of authenticity. Photographs that may appear unspectacular today were explosive in the GDR because of their honesty and their capacity to democratise individual experiences—thereby countering official SED regulations.⁸

Within this context, the concept of *Autorenfotografie* (author photography) played a decisive role as photographers expressed a stance that

4 Brigitte Woischnik und Ingo Taubhorn, eds., *Ute Mahler und Werner Mahler* (Kehrer, 2014), 26.

5 Schmid, *Fotografie zwischen Politik und Bild*, 58.

6 Interview with Ute and Werner Mahler, December 13, 2017.

7 Regine Schiermeyer, *Greif zur Kamera, Kumpel!: die Geschichte der Betriebsfotograppen in der DDR*, 1st ed., *Forschungen zur DDR-Gesellschaft* (Ch. Links Verlag, 2015), 28; Hartewig and Lüdtkke, *Die DDR im Bild*, 9.

8 Bernd Lindner, “Ein Land – zwei Bildwelten. Fotografie und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR,” in Hartewig and Lüdtkke, *Die DDR im Bild*, 192–93.

opposed agitprop images.⁹ Author photography underlines the photographer's social responsibility to produce unaltered documents of temporal reality, which is mediated in an authentic and veritable manner through framing, perspective, and the specific moment in time captured in each image.¹⁰ The concept denoted a subjectivist photographic practice, characterised by sensitive, unadorned, and veristic depictions of everyday life.¹¹ The author photographer functioned as an artist who "puts their stamp on reality through subjective perception."¹² For Ostkreuz, a continued commitment to humanism, highlighting people and their personal struggles from an individual perspective is considered as specifically East German.¹³ Humanism functioned as a leitmotif, officially affirmed in 1977 by art scholar Berthold Beiler, who described photography as a moral task in which the photographer's commitment to humanism was central.¹⁴

Ostkreuz's founding photographers drew on this understanding of freelance photography in the GDR. Their use of a subjective point of view and attitude did not undermine their claim to authenticity. On the contrary, they remained committed to showing solidarity with the people and exposing the gap between the proclaimed and actual living conditions—just as they did in the GDR.¹⁵ This approach remains visible today, with Ostkreuz positioning itself as the backbone of trustworthy journalism: "Like the world, journalism is in a state of constant change. Events, news and images follow each other in rapid succession. Now more than ever, there is a need for photographers who pursue their own interests and themes, and who are

9 Ihle, "Photography as Contemporary Document," 198.

10 Cited in Wolfgang Pensold, *Eine Geschichte des Fotojournalismus: was zählt, sind die Bilder* (Springer VS, 2015), 94; Wolfgang Kemp, *1945–1980* (Schirmer/Mosel, 1983), 207–8.

11 The term "author photography" was coined in 1979 by West German art historian Klaus Honnef and adopted in the GDR. See Klaus Honnef and Wilhelm Schürmann, eds., *In Deutschland: Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentarfotografie. Johannes Bönsel, Ulrich Görlich, Candida Höfer, Kunst und Altertum Am Rhein*, no. 95 (Rheinland-Verlag, 1979), 8–32.

12 Kemp, *1945–1980*, 205.

13 Interview with Werner Mahler, October 11, 2017.

14 See Berthold Beiler, *Denken Über Fotografie* (Fotokinoverlag, 1977), 10, 13.

15 In 2017, Werner Mahler identified "empathising with people" and "photographing people's personal concerns truthfully" as East German characteristics that photographers implemented in the agency. According to Mahler, for the Ostkreuz photographers, the focus has always been on people, and this approach has not changed over time. See Mahler 2017.

persistent enough to develop their own attitudes.”¹⁶ Ostkreuz continues to promote authenticity and transparency in image production, emphasising that its core principle—documenting socially engaged, artistic projects while upholding author photography—has remained unchanged.¹⁷ Although the photographic and media landscape has evolved, Ostkreuz photographers do not aim to conform to these changes, but rather to shape them through community projects, book publications, exhibitions, and other initiatives.¹⁸ The agency’s commitment to humanism links it to both Eastern and Western photographic traditions: on the one hand, it reflects the efforts of GDR photographers to expose the gap between socialist propaganda and reality; on the other, it draws on the tradition of Western documentary photography, particularly that of Magnum Photos. This dual positioning reinforces Ostkreuz’s identity—rooting it in the GDR for its distinctiveness, while aligning it with an international humanist photographic tradition dating back to the 1920s. It also emphasises that its members are not merely photojournalists, but committed author photographers who dare to take a stand.¹⁹

The wider social, economic, political and cultural context of the GDR shaped not only the establishment and operation of Ostkreuz, but also the self-image of its members and the nature of the commissions they undertook. For example, the concept of author photography continued in the agency: new members were expected to authentically portray their

16 Sybille Fendt, “OSTKREUZ,” accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.ostkreuz.de/agentur>.

17 “OSTKREUZ.” See also interview with Michael Trippel, October 17, 2017; Ute and Werner Mahler, 2017.

18 “OSTKREUZ.”

19 For example, Stefanie Steinkopf’s series *Manhattan* captures the post-reunification struggles of the residents of a Brandenburg housing estate—the so-called “losers of reunification”—through intimate portraits of poverty and hopelessness. Reflecting Ostkreuz’s humanist ethos, she immersed herself in the community for over three years, fostering trust and embodying the agency’s role as “experts on the East.” See Stefanie Steinkopf, “Manhattan,” accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.ostkreuz.de/fotografen/stephanie-steinkopf/#r1465>. In 2009, Heinrich Völkel documented Gaza, capturing its destruction and the resilience of those living amidst the rubble. Rooted in humanist photography, *The Terrible City* aligns with Magnum’s mission to challenge dominant narratives, humanise conflict, and highlight the dignity of the individual. Völkel’s nuanced perspective reinforces photography’s power to shape collective memory and social consciousness. See Heinrich Völkel, “The Terrible City,” accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.ostkreuz.de/fotoserien/photographer/heinrich-voelkel/#r2952>.



2. Sibylle Bergemann, *Marisa und Liane*, Sellin,
1981, Estate of Sibylle Bergemann

Sibylle Bergemann, *Marisa ir Liane*, Zélinas,
1981, Estate Sibylle Bergemann

social environment, thus emphasising their responsibility to society. Furthermore, the visual counter-public in the GDR consisted of coded and ambiguous photographs that functioned as social documents that stimulated discourse in the private sphere. By capturing the actual living and working conditions of people in East Germany, these images challenged the official representation of the socialist state, and the founders of Ostkreuz were committed to exposing this divide. This understanding of photography, as well as the photographers' responsibility to their fellow citizens, influenced the establishment of the agency and continues to shape it today.

Ostkreuz was founded as a professional survival strategy to navigate challenges of reunification, address economic hardship facing East Germans, and seize emerging job opportunities.²⁰ The agency aimed to sustain photography as both a profession and a discursive practice, particularly as the VBK had dissolved and West German agencies were seen as overly commercial.²¹ The founding photographers chose each other based on marketability, industry connections, and personal rapport, aiming to combine diverse photographic styles to adapt to a new market.²² Despite their varied approaches—ranging from portrait and fashion (Bergemann, Ute Mahler, fig. 2) to documentary (Zimmermann), landscape and still life (Werner Mahler, fig. 3), street photography (Hauswald, fig 4), and distinctive irony (Röttsch, known as the “Martin Parr of the East,” fig. 5)—they were united by a shared commitment to artistic documentary photography, aligning with the author photography tradition developed in the GDR.²³

As a cooperative, Ostkreuz prioritised interpersonal relationships, functioning as a surrogate family (until new members were accepted), where trust, solidarity, and mutual critique were essential. Ostkreuz members valued collaboration and reflection, which they understood as setting them apart from West German photo agencies. With hindsight, the ability to accept criticism and view it as an opportunity for improvement has been identified by the photographers as a specifically East German quality.²⁴ Ute Mahler criticised capitalism for prioritising speed over depth, which reinforced the importance

20 Interview with Harf Zimmermann, December 6, 2017.

21 Werner Mahler 2017.

22 Hauswald 2017.

23 Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

24 Interview with Julian Röder, November 16, 2017.



3. Werner Mahler, *Mecklenburg*, 1989, Werner Mahler / OSTKREUZ

Werner Mahler, *Meklenburgas*, 1989, Werner Mahler / „Ostkreuz“

of collegial exchange for artistic and professional support.²⁵ While trust fostered growth, departures from the agency were perceived as betrayals, especially when they challenged its financial, social, or artistic ethos.²⁶

Following the formal establishment of Ostkreuz, the West German agency Bilderberg provided advice on technical and contractual matters, partly to ensure that Ostkreuz would not work at dumping prices and undercut important commissions.²⁷ Nevertheless, Ostkreuz photographers found themselves burdened with administrative tasks unrelated to photography.²⁸

²⁵ Interview with Ute Mahler, August 23, 2016.

²⁶ Interview with Annette Hauschild, December 07, 2017.

²⁷ Founded in Hamburg in 1983, Bilderberg consisted of approximately twenty photographers. It worked for West German journals and magazines such as Stern, GEO, and National Geographic. The style of LIFE magazine served as a role model for its understanding of photojournalism. The agency was liquidated in 2017 after years of facing bankruptcy due to a slump in the advertising business and falling prices. See Olaf Kunde, *Geschichte des modernen Fotojournalismus: Ursprünge und Entwicklung 1850–1990*, 1st ed. (disserta Verlag, 2014), 128; Karl Steinorth, ed., *Bilderberg: 20 Fotografen und ihre Reportagen* (Ed. Stemmler, 1989); “Agentur Bilderberg GmbH, Hamburg,” <https://www.northdata.de/Agentur%20Bilderberg%20GmbH,%20Hamburg/Amtsgericht%20Pinneberg%20HRB%208815%20PI> (accessed February 17, 2025); Werner Mahler 2017.

²⁸ Zimmermann 2017.



4. Harald Hauswald, *Underground Line A, East Berlin*, 1987, Harald Hauswald / OSTKREUZ

Harald Hauswald, *Metro linija A, Rytų Berlynas*, 1987, Harald Hauswald / „Ostkreuz“

Even so, there was a correlation between the division of labour and a sense of solidarity: the division of accruing tasks ensured the survival of Ostkreuz and created a sense of togetherness that encouraged members to contribute in different capacities. To introduce themselves, the group published a catalogue showcasing their diverse GDR-era work, which Werner Mahler promoted across Germany to attract commissions.

Ostkreuz has long modelled itself on Magnum Photos, sharing similarities in business structure, ethos, and photographic style.²⁹ Founded in 1947 by seven photographers (five men, two women), Magnum emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War with the aim of creating a visual history and a “human rights aesthetic.”³⁰ Ostkreuz was likewise born during

29 Magnum is considered the first cooperative of freelancer photographers. It spearheaded the movement for photographers’ copyright and remains one of the world’s most famous, enduring, and elite photo agencies. See Akhil Bhardwaj and Anastasia Sergeeva, “Values-Based Trust as a Shift Parameter for Collective Organizing: The Case of Magnum Photos,” *Journal of Management Studies* 60 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12820>. Magnum also served as a role model for several West German agencies such as Visum, Bilderberg, and laif.

30 Rita Vandivert, “co-editors, co-partners-co-workers, 1947,” in *Magnum Manifesto*, ed. Clément Chéroux and Clara Bouveresse (Thames & Hudson, 2017), 13–14, 346.

a period of historical change—between the fall of the GDR and German reunification—although its early socialist photography was initially valued more for its authenticity than as historical documentation. Both agencies are dedicated to author photography and humanism.³¹ Their thematic overlap is notable: in the 1970s–1980s, Magnum focused on “the *other*: the ‘mentally deranged,’ the ‘alien,’ (...) the ‘marginal,’ etc.”³² While in the 1990s, Ostkreuz documented East Germany, which was portrayed as the “other” in Western media narratives.

Structurally, Ostkreuz mirrored Magnum’s business model, with founding members investing and subsidising the agency.³³ The seven Ostkreuz founders each invested 1,000 Deutschmarks—a substantial sum for the photographers—and paid a monthly basic amount to keep the agency afloat, though this business model was intended only for the initial years.³⁴ Both agencies have also ensured that photographers retain copyright to their work and maintain a nomination process for admitting new members.³⁵ Despite Magnum’s international reach and Ostkreuz’s primarily German membership, both face challenges of diversity: Ostkreuz is East-West and gender-balanced but lacks BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) members, while female photographers make up only 15 percent of Magnum’s roster.³⁶ I argue that Susan Meiselas’s description of Magnum as a “community of individuals” also applies to Ostkreuz. Despite its claims of companionship, neoliberal policies and market demands favour the individual, which creates tension between the members’ individual identities and the agency’s collective identity.³⁷ Over time, both agencies have navigated economic pressures, shifts in membership, and the changes brought

31 Ibid., 15.

32 Ibid., 15.

33 Ibid., 346.

34 Interview with Thomas Sandberg, December 5, 2017.

35 Andréa Holzherr and Fotofestival Mannheim-Ludwigshafen-Heidelberg, eds., *Grenzgänge Magnum: Trans-Territories* (Kehrer, 2013), 14.

36 As of 2025, Magnum comprised 97 photographers, with only fifteen women. Ostkreuz consists of twenty-five photographers (thirteen men and twelve women), twelve of whom are from the Eastern Bloc, including East Germany and the Soviet Union. See <https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographers/> and <https://www.ostkreuz.de/fotografen/> (both accessed February 2, 2025).

37 Susan Meiselas, *MagnumTime* interview with Jimmy Fox, March 20, 2010, in Chéroux and Bouveresse, *Magnum Manifesto*, 12, 333.



5. Jens Röttsch, *Untitled*, Budapest, 1988

Jens Röttsch, *Be pavadinimo*, Budapeštas, 1988

about by digitalisation by focusing on exhibitions, photobooks, and archival work.³⁸ Economists Akhil Bhardwaj and Anastasia Sergeeva note that Magnum upholds “values such as autonomy, integrity, humanism, and professional excellence,” which are manifested in the photographers’ behaviour and guide the assessment of potential new members.³⁹ These shared values foster trust and enable coordination and collaboration between members.⁴⁰ Ostkreuz’s enduring “commitment to humanism” thus aligns it with Magnum Photos, anchoring it in Western art history and ensuring its continued

38 Clara Bouveresse, “‘Nothing but Champagne. Magnum Photos,’ 1947–2017,” in Chéroux and Bouveresse, *Magnum Manifesto*, 24; Chéroux and Bouveresse, *Magnum Manifesto*, 16.

39 Bhardwaj and Sergeeva, “Values-Based Trust.”

40 Ibid.

relevance in the international media, where it positions itself as the “German Magnum.”⁴¹ This influence is evident in Ostkreuz’s website structure, its valorisation of archival photographs, and its commercial strategy for exhibitions, photobooks, exclusive prints, and posters.

Establishing a reputation as “Experts of the East” (1990s)

The early years were prosperous for Ostkreuz, as Western media, eager for insight into the former Eastern Bloc, sought images of East Germany. The founders’ GDR background gave them unique expertise and built trust with East Germans, making the production of images easier, faster, and ultimately cheaper.⁴² Hailed as “experts of the East,” the founding photographers were predominantly commissioned by West German and European magazines to portray their country of origin.⁴³ Acting as mediators between media stereotypes and the realities of reunification, they carried most assignments focused on the GDR until 1999, working either through archival photography or reporting on the effects of reunification. However, some members grew frustrated by the lack of international opportunities.⁴⁴

The printed catalogue and Western contacts boosted Ostkreuz’s early recognition, but initially, assignments were given to the agency rather than to individual photographers. Work was shared to ensure all members could earn a living, despite daunting financial pressures, as money had played a lesser role in the GDR.⁴⁵ Despite the economic challenges, they refused to cut staff, determined to avoid Western-style neoliberal policies contrary to their (work) ethics.⁴⁶ To gain international exposure, Ostkreuz attended photojournalism festivals like Arles and Perpignan. Recognising the need for global reach, Ute Mahler and Sandberg enrolled in an English course in 1991. Following its rapid rise, Ostkreuz secured regular assignments with major German and European magazines. Interest in GDR-era photographs grew, fuelled by *Ostalgie*—a nostalgia for life in the GDR—that set in motion a process of historicisation, transforming the images into historical documents

41 Werner Mahler 2017.

42 Werner Mahler 2017; Hauswald 2017.

43 Werner Mahler 2017.

44 Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

45 Sandberg 2017; Hauswald 2017; Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

46 Trippel 2017.

and the photographers into chroniclers of their era.⁴⁷ As assignments declined with the increasing historicalisation of the socialist state in the late 1990s, the sale of archival images became a crucial revenue stream.⁴⁸

To sustain the agency, Ostkreuz expanded by admitting younger members from West Germany. This decision aimed to counter declining commissions, increase market visibility, and ensure financial stability. However, it sparked tensions among the founders, as new members received equal shares after paying an entrance fee, which devalued the original photographers' stakes. The policy was later revised to cap the number of equal shareholders. Nevertheless, the "flippant" admission of new members was seen by some, including Sandberg, as a futile attempt to adjust to the changing conditions of photojournalism. He argued that Ostkreuz should have offered "more" (such as being more proactive towards clients) rather than relying on a business model of "rejuvenation."⁴⁹ For new members, joining the agency was a career opportunity that opened the doors to the market: by the mid-1990s, Ostkreuz was already well known and highly regarded by the media, securing assignments with major magazines. Over the years, the number of photographers has increased continually, and the question of whether to set a fixed membership limit is frequently debated. In 2017, Werner Mahler pointed out that the number was never fixed from the outset; a younger generation was needed to navigate the changes brought about by the digitisation of photography and to bring a fresh perspective instead of "stewing in one's own juice."⁵⁰ Indeed, the number of new members has increased since then. In contrast, Zimmermann expressed that the founding members represented a particular type and style of photography that was novel in the West German market, and that the influx of non-East German photographers diminished this uniqueness.⁵¹ The frequent turnover of new members reflected these tensions as the agency sought to find its place in a Western-dominated market.

47 Benjamin Nölting, Carolin Schröder und Sören Marotz, "Von 'blühenden Landschaften,' dem 'Jammertal Ost' und 'Neuland.' Der Einigungsprozess im Spiegel von Bildern und ihrer Diskurse," in *Diskurse der deutschen Einheit: Kritik und Alternativen*, ed. Raj Kollmorgen et al., 1st ed. (VS-Verlag, 2011), 211.

48 Hauswald 2017.

49 Sandberg 2017.

50 Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

51 Zimmermann 2017.

Evolution of practices and market adjustments (2000s)

In the early 2000s, Ostkreuz faced its first financial crisis due to shifting media priorities and technological advancements.⁵² Interest in the GDR waned as its historical reappraisal was considered complete, leading to a steady decline in East Germany-focused commissions.⁵³ By the late 1990s, such assignments accounted for only half of the agency's work, and this proportion continued to dwindle in the 2000s, despite hopes for renewed interest. Simultaneously, the transition from analogue to digital photography posed challenges, particularly for the founding members, as DSLR cameras altered their established practices. This digital shift also impacted Ostkreuz's tradition of collectively reviewing printed photographs. In response, the agency introduced a monthly *jour fixe*—a meeting where members present and discuss ongoing projects—an initiative that continues to this day.⁵⁴ The changing landscape of production and distribution plunged Ostkreuz into financial turmoil, as its shareholding business model depended on a regular influx of funds.⁵⁵ Photographers with more assignments contributed more financially, which led to tensions within the agency.⁵⁶ While disparities in workload had always existed, this first major financial crisis strained the collective spirit.

Ostkreuz grappled with the thematic, technical, and operational changes: shrinking magazine space and tighter deadlines compromised creative autonomy, leading to a perceived “forfeiture of authorship.”⁵⁷ To reinforce solidarity, the agency reaffirmed its commitment to author

52 The digitisation of photography in the early 2000s brought fundamental changes to Ostkreuz's operations, altering technical requirements and market conditions for assignments, such as time as a scarce commodity. Some Ostkreuz members saw this transition as a threat to the authenticity and truthfulness of photography. The spontaneity, speed and immediacy associated with digital media were at odds with the working mechanisms of Ostkreuz's founding photographers in the GDR. See Bodo von Dewitz and Robert Lebeck, eds., *Kiosk: Eine Geschichte der Fotoreportage 1839–1973; A History of Photojournalism 1839–1973* (Steidl, 2001), 294.

53 Werner Mahler 2017.

54 The *jours fixes* are restricted to Ostkreuz employees but are opened twice a year to external guests.

55 Röttsch 2017.

56 Trippel 2017.

57 Urs Stahel, *Weltenblicke: Reportagefotografie und ihre Medien* (Offizin-Verlag, 1997), 8–9.

photography.⁵⁸ However, founding members struggled as their expertise became less relevant, outdated methods proved impractical, and online distribution heightened competition. Despite these challenges, Ostkreuz remained committed to balancing commissioned work with freelance projects—a defining feature of its identity. The death of founding member Sibylle Bergemann in 2010 marked a turning point. She embodied the “original feeling of where [Ostkreuz] came from, what constituted [them], why and what photo stories [they] told.”⁵⁹ Her absence, particularly among newer members who had never known her, further strained internal cohesion and deepened the agency’s growing identity crisis.⁶⁰

In response to its first financial crisis, Ostkreuz sought to separate its commercial and exhibition activities by hiring a manager to oversee exhibitions. Initially, these showcased members’ archival works, with thematic exhibitions emerging later in the mid-1990s. However, photographers financed all exhibition projects upfront, relying on retrospective sales, which placed a heavy financial strain on the agency. As commissioned work declined, it became clear that Ostkreuz’s twin-track approach—balancing commercial and artistic photography—was not financially sustainable. The ongoing struggle to fund self-initiated artistic projects while maintaining solvency deepened internal divisions and widened the gap between photojournalism and artistic photography.⁶¹ Disputes over the agency’s direction led to member departures.⁶² By 2015, Ostkreuz faced a second major financial crisis and sought professional guidance. A business consultancy concluded that sustaining both artistic photography and photojournalism was unfeasible, urging the agency to commit to one path for long-term viability. Despite financial concerns, Ostkreuz remained committed to its dual approach, leading to the creation of the Ostkreuz Agency and the Ostkreuz Association. The agency managed the day-to-day business, while the association organised exhibitions and sought to professionalise the artistic side of Ostkreuz—as evidenced by the employment of two art historians to run the association. Ute Mahler described the association as a passionate artists’

58 Hauschild 2017.

59 Interview with Betty Fink, May 17, 2018.

60 Hauschild 2017; Fink 2018.

61 Röder 2017.

62 Röder 2017.

collective, although its long-term viability and profitability remained uncertain in 2017.⁶³ Ostkreuz's experience highlights the challenge freelance photographers face in balancing artistic projects with commissioned work in a market economy. Nonetheless, the split was a strategic move to preserve the twin-track working method rooted in GDR traditions.

The tension between legacy and commercialisation

Ostkreuz tries to balance its GDR-rooted identity with the demands of a globalised market. While uncertainty about the agency's future—especially after the departure of founding members—fuels internal conflicts, references to the GDR serve as a unifying foundation. This identity is preserved through values of collectivism, trust, and a commitment to author photography. The agency also maintains its dual approach of freelance and editorial photography, resisting market pressures to abandon it. These elements distinguish Ostkreuz from other agencies, even as they sidestep unresolved questions about its future direction. Commercial pressures have tested Ostkreuz's values, leading to controversial collaborations such as the 2017 photo blog project *The New Next*, supported by Deutsche Bank.⁶⁴

The partnership sparked backlash from both current and former members, who viewed it as a threat to Ostkreuz's authenticity. Ute Mahler emphasised that certain commissions—such as propaganda, advertising, or PR for large corporations—were traditionally off-limits, a stance rooted in GDR-era freelance ethics.⁶⁵ In response to criticism, Ostkreuz clarified that Deutsche Bank merely funded the project without influencing its artistic vision.⁶⁶ However, the collaboration risked undermining the agency's credibility, as the bank sought to leverage Ostkreuz's humanist ethos for its own image, aiming to “show the many facets of economic and social upheaval through a variety of visual signatures.”⁶⁷ Despite claiming independence

63 Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

64 “The New Next,” URL: <http://thenewnext.db.com/de/index.html> (accessed December 30, 2020). Since 1979, Deutsche Bank has collected contemporary art with a special focus on photography. The chosen works are publicly displayed in cities such as Frankfurt, Berlin, and London. The collaboration with Ostkreuz, however, is not part of this art programme.

65 Ute Mahler 2016.

66 <https://www.facebook.com/agenturostkreuz/posts/10155495675320630>, September 28, 2017.

67 “The New Next.”

from commercial interests, Ostkreuz faces the ongoing challenge of financial survival. While it has resisted further collaboration with Deutsche Bank, the pressure to secure funding remains, making alternative revenue streams increasingly necessary. Whether the agency will maintain its founding principles or adapt to financial realities remains an open question. Partnerships such as that with Deutsche Bank challenge Ostkreuz's "humanist approach," raising questions about the authenticity and stance of its photographers. When large corporations act as commissioners serving their own business agendas, questions of authorship arise, prompting concerns over whether photographers can uphold their principles of authenticity and transparency as outlined above. These collaborations fall neither within the GDR tradition to which the agency refers nor within the Western humanist photographic tradition that foregrounds people and their everyday lives.

Sustaining identity and artistic integrity amid ongoing change

Ostkreuz maintains its dual focus on artistic and commercial photography, although most members primarily work within one realm. Commercial photographers receive steady assignments, while artistic photographers face financial uncertainty, often supplementing their income through teaching. Despite financial pressures, personal projects remain central to Ostkreuz's identity, with exhibitions affirming members' status as artistic photographers.⁶⁸ These exhibitions serve as the agency's backbone but are costly and can no longer be sustained solely through commissions.⁶⁹ To address financial instability, Ostkreuz applies for exhibition funding—an increasingly competitive process—and admits new members to maintain cash flow. However, with over twenty photographers, decision-making has become slower, raising concerns about individuality and distinctiveness.⁷⁰ While the founders prioritised unique styles and versatility, the growing membership tends to blur these distinctions. The commercial side's increasing dominance has also fuelled internal tensions among photographers, breeding envy and discontent.⁷¹ Nonetheless, there is a shared

68 Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

69 Hauschild describes the exhibition as a way of connecting the members. See Hauschild 2017; interview with Wolfgang Kil, December 12, 2017.

70 Hauschild 2017.

71 Cf. Hauschild 2017.

understanding that membership should not be capped if new members contribute positively to the group, and remain invested and business-oriented.⁷² Over the years, the commercial side has become the financially profitable part, harbouring emotions such as envy, dissatisfaction, and resentment within the collective.⁷³

Nowadays, Ostkreuz can be described as a truly pan-German agency, with an even balance of East and West German members.⁷⁴ Interestingly, while the founders claim to have moved beyond their GDR identity, younger members continue to embrace it. This raises the question of whether the agency's proclaimed values will endure as the last of its original members depart. Is its GDR legacy an authentic foundation, or has it become a nostalgic myth—a unique selling point that shapes Ostkreuz's brand and identity?⁷⁵ In 2021, Ostkreuz dismantled the association due to capacity constraints, indicating that it was not as profitable as hoped. Nevertheless, the agency retained its dual focus on exhibitions and commissions but instead of having two separate entities, the exhibition arm is now housed under the agency's umbrella.⁷⁶ Freelance exhibition projects are the backbone of Ostkreuz, both internally for the photographers and externally for supporters and the media. They sustain the group's solidarity while reinforcing the agency's identity as artistic photographers who also work as photojournalists. Exhibitions uphold photographic quality, a commitment to truth, and a pledge to humanism. They highlight individual author photographers who take a stance, following the traditions of the GDR era, while their humanist approach also links them to Magnum and Western photographic heritage. I argue that these exhibitions underscore Ostkreuz's uniqueness and provide its members with validation beyond what they may receive as individual photojournalists. In doing so, they reinforce Ostkreuz's self-image—a perception echoed by scholars and the media alike.

The question remains: who benefits from Ostkreuz's claim to a GDR-rooted identity? Initially, the founders used their East German origins as a market distinction, reinforced through media narratives. Over

72 Hauschild 2017.

73 Hauschild 2017.

74 Interview with Jörg Brüggemann, December 7, 2017.

75 Trippel 2017; Brüggemann 2017.

76 Email from Christian Pankratz, office manager at Ostkreuz, October 29, 2024.

time, this claim has evolved into a myth, as new West German members and shifting market demands challenge its authenticity. Yet, it endures as the agency's unique selling point—transforming an East German legacy into a commodity that simplifies socialism into “unrealized aspiration, trauma or travesty” that persists in reunified Germany.⁷⁷ In the process, GDR-rooted identity becomes a form of “symbolic capital,” “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability.”⁷⁸ Ostkreuz's exhibitions display the agency's cultural and social capital—that is, knowledge, skills, and companionship—while also carrying the symbolic capital of an identity rooted in the GDR.⁷⁹ In the past, they helped the agency to gain status and generate profit; today, they serve to maintain that position. With the eventual departure of the remaining founders, a younger generation from the former GDR and the Eastern Bloc remains. However, they were too young to have lived under socialism and thus do not fully embody the GDR-rooted characteristics. As a result, the cultural capital, such as the photographic skills rooted in the GDR, risks becoming an empty shell, raising questions about how it will affect the agency's reputation and prestige.

Founders Ute and Werner Mahler envision Ostkreuz as a balance between journalism, commercial photography, and an artist collective dedicated to exhibitions and financial support for creative projects.⁸⁰ This structure aims to adapt to both members' evolving careers and market demands, ensuring Ostkreuz's continuity while navigating its shifting identity. The agency's financial instability necessitates alternative funding sources, such as secondary sales and advertising—an approach already seen in the Deutsche Bank commission. Similar collaborations are likely, as relying on new members' contributions alone is unsustainable. In a market that prioritises individuality over collectivism, proving Ostkreuz's uniqueness becomes increasingly difficult as membership grows. Moreover, with younger

77 Karen J. Leeder, ed., *Rereading East Germany: The Literature and Film of the GDR* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

78 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 291. See also Frédéric Lebaron, “Symbolic Capital,” in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, ed. Alex C. Michalos (Springer, 2014), 6537–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5>.

79 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson, 1st ed. (Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58.

80 Ute and Werner Mahler 2017.

members without firsthand experience of Germany's division, maintaining a GDR-rooted identity through exhibitions is becoming less viable and credible. To stay afloat, Ostkreuz has turned to selling the photographers' photobooks, special editions, posters, and workshops, following Magnum's model. As noted earlier, the principles of authenticity, social responsibility, and collective solidarity in author photography—along with the values of collectivism, solidarity, and trust—can be linked to identities associated with both the GDR and Magnum Photos, allowing Ostkreuz to position its values within both Eastern and Western photographic traditions. For Ostkreuz's newer generation, embracing a universal humanist photographic ethos would honour the vision of the agency's founders and pave the way for the future.

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Santrauka

Fotografų agentūra „Ostkreuz“: fotografija po Vokietijos susivienijimo tarp tradicijos ir prisitaikymo

Anne Pfautsch

Reikšminiai žodžiai: fotografų agentūra „Ostkreuz“, VDR, fotografija, (post)socializmas, Vokietijos susivienijimas, tapatybė.

1990 m. septynių Rytų Vokietijos fotografų įkurta fotografų agentūra „Ostkreuz“ iš pradžių jiems tapo išlikimo strategija po Vokietijos susivienijimo. Siekdami įsitvirtinti kapitalistinėje rinkoje, steigėjai pasitelkė savo VDR tapatybę, tačiau kartu išsaugojo kolektyvizmo, solidarumo ir humanistinės fotografijos principus. Laikui bėgant, „Ostkreuz“ tapo viena labiausiai gerbiamų Vokietijos fotoagentūrų, derinančių užsakomuosius darbus su nepriklausomais parodų projektais, taip siekiant išlaikyti savo meninį vientisumą. Vis dėlto, fotografijos rinkai kintant, agentūra susidūrė su didėjančiu komerciniu spaudimu ir finansiniu nestabilumu, todėl buvo priversta ieškoti alternatyvių pajamų šaltinių, tokių kaip antriniai pardavimai ir bendradarbiavimas su įmonėmis. Šis pokytis paskatino vidines diskusijas apie tai, ar komercinio išlikimo reikalavimai neprieštarauja jos įkūrimo principams. Nors parodos, pristatančios VDR tradicijomis paremtą autorinę fotografiją, išlieka svarbiausia agentūros tapatybės dalimi, didėjanti priklausomybė nuo išorinio finansavimo kelia iššūkį jos nepriklausomybės siekiui.

Naujų narių, ypač iš Vakarų Vokietijos, prisijungimas dar labiau apsunkino „Ostkreuz“ pastangas išsaugoti Rytų Vokietijos palikimą. Kadangi lieka vis mažiau steigėjų, o jaunesni fotografai nebeturi tiesioginės gyvenimo VDR patirties, agentūros tapatybė gali tapti ne gyva patirtimi, o preke paverstu mitu. Pagrindinis ateities iššūkis – ar „Ostkreuz“ sugebės išsaugoti savo istorinę tapatybę, kartu prisitaikydama prie globalizuotos fotografijos rinkos? Sekdama „Magnum Photos“ pavyzdžiu, „Ostkreuz“ gali būti priversta keisti savo pagrindinį naratyvą, pereinant nuo griežtos VDR tapatybės prie platesnio humanistinės fotografijos etoso, leidžiančio naujai kartai, nevaržomai praeities, tęsti agentūros tradicijas. Jos ateitis priklausys nuo gebėjimo subalansuoti meninį vientisumą su komerciniais reikalavimais, užtikrinant, kad įsipareigojimas humanistinei fotografijai išliktų aktualus besivystančiame fotografijos versle.