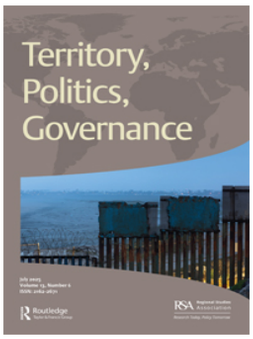

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Capturing dissent: forensic photography of graffiti in the late German Democratic Republic

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ABSTRACT

Through a document analysis of archival materials, this paper explores visual landscapes of graffiti, produced by the German Democratic Republic's Ministry for State Security (MfS) photographers in Leipzig from 1980 to 1989. Capturing visual dissent through forensic photography and its subsequent displacement from public view are two entwined territorial practices that appear to concern aesthetics yet are inherently political. Four selected photographs illustrate the main findings: First, a logic of invisibilisation as a means of deterritorialisation, and second, contradictions in MfS photo practices that highlight the contingent character of repairs to the brittle architecture of state sovereignty in the late GDR.

KEYWORDS
Archive; graffiti; Ministry for State Security; deterritorialisation; visual politics
JEL
P37; Z00; Z18

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1. INTRODUCTION

In early 1982, the Leipzig district branch of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) Ministry for State Security received a written complaint. In a machine-written letter dated 22 March 1982, a private citizen requests the return of a confiscated roll of film:

> I would like to request the immediate return of an ORWO black-and-white negative film (24 × 36 mm) which was taken from me on the morning of 18 February 1982 by an alleged member of your Ministry. I was assured that I would receive the developed film plus a new one the following day! The film was confiscated because of a photo taken on 18 February 1982, which shows the graffiti 'Make peace without weapons' (…). During the night, this slogan was written on the wall of the building by perpetrators unknown to me. I did not receive a receipt for the confiscation of the film material! As I still need the other footage on the film, I would like to ask you to return it to the above-mentioned address. (author's translation from BArch MfS BV Leipzig BdL 9844: 38)

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Given incomplete records on this particular case, we can only speculate as to why agents of the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* – more commonly known by their German acronym *Stasi* – hindered the work of an amateur photographer snapping pictures in downtown Leipzig. Neither do we know whether the film roll was returned to its rightful owner in the end. However, not only amateurs took pictures in 1980s Leipzig. The relevance of photography for the work of the GDR Ministry for State Security (MfS)[1] itself can hardly be overstated (e.g., Hartewig, 2004; Springer, 2020). From the 1970s onwards, photography was considered an important instrument of surveillance, state-led repression of dissent and criminal persecution in Eastern Germany. These functions are clearly outlined in contemporary training materials and textbooks aimed at would-be MfS photographers. Photography was one of the key activities of MfS, as reflected in its institutional structure; the ministry ran its own photo labs and employed professional photographers. Ordinary agents were also expected to be able to take pictures during operations if need be. Enormous amounts of image material were produced in that manner. Most recent estimates by the German Federal Archives are of approximately 2 million uncontextualised photographs in the MfS archives – and an even larger number contained in individual case files (The Federal Archives, 2024). With some of the audiovisual archival material not yet indexed, that number is likely to rise further. Graffiti and political slogans found in public spaces feature prominently among the photo motifs MfS agents captured via forensic photography. Also known as crime scene photography, this specific form of visual documentation aims to produce evidence for criminal prosecution through a form of objective visual storytelling and is a widespread technique employed by law enforcement agents to this day. The resulting images of political graffiti in the GDR – as seen through the eyes of the Stasi – form part of the preserved MfS records in unspecified quantities. So far, such MfS photographs of graffiti have received scant attention from researchers, with cataloguing efforts by Zöger (2019) and Springer (2020) being the exceptions. The present paper addresses that gap and looks at the ways in which photography of graffiti and political slogans was employed by the MfS in the GDR's final years as a means of quelling dissent. The 1982 confiscation of an ORWO film roll in downtown Leipzig, cited above, inspired the following lead question: *How did the Ministry for State Security mobilise photography to capture visualised dissent and stabilise fragmenting state sovereignties in late 1980s Leipzig?*

To address this question, this paper links ongoing debates over territorialisation, political discontent and visual politics. This study on the forensic photography of graffiti in the late GDR aims to add a visual angle on the ways in which state and non-state actors are working to produce, permeate or subvert territorial sovereignties. I use the term 'fragmenting state sovereignty' to refer to a move towards a state of rigidness and calcification of institutional structures of authority that results in their increasing brittleness, and ultimately, fragility. Attempts to repair and stabilise this brittle architecture of state sovereignty also speak to previous research on urban (in)formality and (il)licitly (e.g., Davis, 2017; Müller & Weegels, 2022), and include the photographic practices of the MfS. Material cultures of graffiti in the late GDR – and MfS photography thereof – remain under-researched. This research gap becomes clear when considering the relevance of graffiti writing as an explicit visibilisation of dissent and an attempt at questioning authority. I consider the visualisation of dissent as a subversive practice in itself (rather than a mere expression), and follow Bleiker (2017) and Armstrong et al. (2024) to read these aesthetics as a performance of politics. Applying that to the ways in which urban space in the late GDR was organised through the visual politics of graffiti writing, I start from a number of observations and framings for the Leipzig case. Namely, political slogans and graffiti acted as visual challenges to state sovereignty – and were legally framed as dissenting practices that need to be 'captured' by state agents. To that end, MfS employed forensic photography as a technology of disciplination – a reading that corresponds with reflections on photography as a political technology (Mateo Leivas, 2021). Such images are typically produced in order to create and stabilise some form of 'truth' in the shape of veracious accounts, materials and images as evidence to be subsequently used for purposes of reconnaissance and eventual criminal prosecution. Forensic photography hence

produces images that speak to, or allege, veracity, feeding to a narrative of photography as a mirror of truth that corresponds with a central debate in research on the history of photography. In the late GDR, forensic photography served to construct a visual discourse about dissent in order to project an illusion of control over 'enemies to the state', thus attempting to reaffirm a sense of unfragmented state sovereignty. However, the surveillance of graffiti and potential graffiti writers also seems to have provided reaffirmation of the role and relevance of MfS activities – with forensic photography taking center stage. The perspective taken in this paper adds to conceptualisations of territory as a 'political corollary of the notion of space' (Elden, 2022, p. 25), in two ways. First, it applies a socio-territorial perspective – a proposal to take various subjects and their practices into focus when analysing processes of urban de- and reterritorialisation (Schwarz & Streule, 2022 and 2024). Second, it reads these territorialisations as non-exclusive – multiple state and non-state actors are involved in the making of territories, which are contingent and overlapping. In the case of late-GDR graffiti, this feeds, I would argue, into a visual politics of territoriality – one that challenges the fiction of homogenous territorial sovereignty.

Based on archival materials from the 1980 to 1989 period, this paper traces the visual landscapes of slogans and graffiti produced by MfS photographers in the district of Leipzig. Working with this particular historical material necessitates a methodological approach that draws mainly on primary sources from the German Federal Archive. A special authority, the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic, was created in 1990 to manage all MfS records. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the materials produced under an authoritarian regime, namely the human rights violations and heavy surveillance under which significant parts of the materials were obtained, access to that archive is severely restricted. Academic research can only be done on specific portions of the archival material – namely the material that does not form part of personalised records. The approximately two million uncontextualised photographs in the MfS archives form part of a large body of *Loseblattakten*. These contain most of the records that were still in active use across all MfS district headquarters when these were stormed by protesters and taken over in November and December 1989. Found in disorderly piles without having been systematically filed away, and earmarked for shredding, indexing of these records only began *after* system change, from 1990 onwards. While these files are often fragmentary and lack the coherent systematisation that characterises much of the MfS' bureaucratic regime, they are an invaluable source for historical and sociological research on everyday lives and social dynamics in the GDR (e.g., Poutrus, 2007). Set outside the personal records, which make up the bulk of MfS files, (academic) access is less restricted as data protection requirements are a little lower. Journalists and researchers need to apply to gain access to this portion of MfS records, with all materials pre-screened by archival personnel to guarantee adequate data protection. Any copies of texts and photographs are scanned in-house by the Federal Archive and anonymised where necessary before being handed over to researchers. In effect, this meant that each of the hundreds of photographs and all related files analysed for the present paper went through the hands of an archivist before being screened by myself. Previous research in the MfS archive has already given an extensive overview on records that address incidents of graffiti and illicit political slogans across a number of GDR districts (Zöger, 2019). The present study specifically explores the visual landscapes of graffiti produced by MfS photographers in the district of Leipzig, conducting a document analysis that draws on case files from the 1980 to 1989 period (Rose, 2016, p. 190 ff.). To gather images and related empirical sources and build my case, I consulted a large body of archival materials in the Leipzig branches reading room during 13 visits between 2021 and 2023, with a focus on photographs of political slogans contained in the MfS records.[2] As an entry point to the material, I identified the file IDs of a first cache of photographs of political graffiti via the ARGUS digital database catalogue, applying two keywords from the MfS legalistic terminology: *Hetzlosungen* (derogatory slogans) and *Schmierereien*.[3] During my visits to the reading room, the

archivist assigned to my case supported me in identifying the often rather brief and cursory catalogue entries of more than 700 district of Leipzig case files for each of the keywords. As much of this material is not yet digitalised, and some of it had not been studied before, the screening of each file held potential surprises. Photographs in particular were usually listed in quantities not content, so there was no way of discerning the actual photo motif without viewing the material itself. To narrow down the search and broaden the scope, I excluded the most prominent categories of graffiti and slogans directly pertaining to the much-studied civil rights and pacifist movement as well as the events immediately leading up to the so-called 'peaceful revolution' – such as the mass demonstrations in Leipzig and elsewhere in the fall of 1989. The actual 'visual narrative analysis' (Carrabine, 2016) of the identified material consisted of a systematic screening of photographs (tagging with keywords, documenting the wording of slogans, and, if available, location, time and other contextualising information contained in the file), followed by a selection of images to be scanned by the archival personnel. I selected 182 images from dozens of records that showcase Stasi photo practices as well as different forms of graffiti, and highlight tensions, ambiguities and contradictions in these images themselves as well as in the practices from which this visual narrative emerges. For the present paper, reading these pictures in the manner of a visual discourse analysis (Rose, 2016, p. 220 ff.) translates into looking at ways in which MfS agents put images to work for purposes of (re)establishing territorial sovereignty, in particular the visual agenda reflected in motifs and image composition, and MfS' ways of displaying and distributing these photos. Each of the four images reproduced in this paper showcase specific photographic practices by MfS agents. While being products of a trained gaze, a perspective materially framed by internal manuals instructing the production of 'proper' and 'precise' photographic evidence, the four reproductions also serve to illustrate that there is no straight-forward, monolithic MfS perspective on graffiti. Instead, the archive obscures an unfathomable number of authors of this visual narrative, as photographers' names remain absent in the files. Overall, my being in the archive was strongly shaped by the specific character of the MfS records and what Rose (2000, p. 559) calls the disciplined yet contradictory space of the archive. Archival research requires not only inspection but also introspection on the relations between researcher and image, she argues, as 'the recovery of the historical past can only be managed in relation to a particular contemporary present' (Rose, 2000, p. 567) of the self and the other. Each archival body hence contains not one but many different archives that emerge in relation to the viewer. My own positionality was certainly at play during those repeated visits to the reading room in the former MfS headquarters at Dittrichring in Leipzig. Overwhelmed by the sheer amount of semi-structured material and discomforted yet somehow fascinated by following the often extremely petty yet harsh Stasi gaze, I also felt inspired by the multiplicity, creativity and disruptive aesthetics of 1980s subcultures that these images transported. There was a lingering sense of loss, of being unable to fully grasp the meaning of these photographs for the present moment – a sensation reinforced by a strict access policy that inhibits sharing with others.

The paper is structured as follows: After briefly situating the research in debates over socio-territorial practices and the links between territory, politics and visual narratives created through photography, findings from the archive are presented in Section 3. Drawing on local MfS records, it provides an overview on graffiti in the late GDR through the eyes of the Stasi, and I present four images that provide insights on the visual discourse of dissent created by MfS photographers in the district of Leipzig. Following a discussion of findings, including a particular technique of visual deterritorialisation, I conclude with some thoughts towards future research.

2. THE POLITICS OF VISUAL DETERRITORIALISATION

The paper draws on three bodies of literature, namely geographical research on graffiti, territorialisation as a way of organising urban space through (visual) politics, and studies on MfS forensic

photography as a political technology. Territorial perspectives are nothing new in graffiti research, generally speaking. Graffiti has long been analysed as a territorial marker of boundaries, establishing and delimiting areas of identity and identification, hegemony and control – this is the 'classic' take in papers such as Ley & Cybriwsky's, 1974 study on graffiti writing in Philadelphia's inner city. These early conceptualisations seem to reflect a somehow mechanistic approach to territory, one that appears to be informed by ideas of territoriality derived from developmental and behavioural biology. In contrast, much of the existing literature on geographies of graffiti revolves around the neoliberal city, and the criminalisation of graffiti writing in the context of 'broken windows' and 'zero tolerance' policies, while also noting the parallel commodification of visual transgression as an art form (e.g., Arnold, 2019; Cresswell, 1992; Kramer, 2010). In this context, questions of spatial perception, territorial identities, social struggles and urban transformation have also been raised (e.g., Brighenti, 2010; Vogel et al., 2020). However, as this paper will show, framing graffiti through a 'discourse of disorder' (Cresswell, 1992, p. 329) is not exclusive to late capitalist societies but was also practiced widely in the GDR. To this day, authoritarian regimes continue to engage in disciplining and suppressing subversive expression through political graffiti – often in combination with more openly neoliberal urban policies that treat cities as an indispensable 'spatial fix' to facilitate capital accumulation (e.g., Evered, 2018).

The present study adds a historical perspective and reaches towards a pre-neoliberal urban context, approaching graffiti in the GDR through archival materials. My argument is twofold: capturing visual dissent through forensic photography – by preserving and displacing it onto film and photographic paper – and its subsequent removal from public view and invisibilisation – through cover-up and buffing – can be read, I argue, as two entwined territorial practices that appear to concern aesthetics but are inherently political. They serve an ordering of urban space that seeks to maintain and repair – in the sense of Graham and Thrift (2007) – the brittle architecture of state sovereignty. Sovereignty here refers to the authority of the state to govern the display of political slogans in public spaces, or what Karlander (2018, p. 7) calls a 'semiotic regimentation'. Consequently, this paper draws on a relational approach to processes of territorial contestation (e.g., Clare et al., 2018; Haesbaert, 2020). I am interested in the politics of visual territorialisation through photography of graffiti – as a set of visual practices of territory-making. As a continuous process of de- and reterritorialisation by various actors, the social production of territory is steeped in asymmetrical power relations (e.g., Porto Gonçalves, 2001). Territorial disengagement and encroachment (*déprise et emprise territoriale*), as Raffestin (1986, p. 92) aptly coined this, involve a powerful set of practices. Territories emerge and are being stabilised upon and across the remains of other territories through these dynamics of de- and reterritorialisation. To grasp the relevance of graffiti – and MfS' eagerness in documenting and suppressing it – this paper pays attention to the ways in which different (collective) subjects implement diverse, overlapping, even contradictory, territorial imaginations and practices (Schwarz & Streule, 2024). Such a socio-territorial perspective seems helpful to analyse multiple sources of power, and various actors wrestling over some degree of authority and sovereignty in urban space. Following this logic, forensic photography of graffiti can be understood as one of the myriad branches in the material foundations of power – and a targeted visualisation of dissent that typically aims at repression but also self-justification of state security agents' efforts at stabilising a mostly unbroken image of state sovereignty. Setting a focus on territory from this relational angle helps to grasp the relevance of invisibilisations of discontent and the ways in which graffiti writers are marked as deviant and subversive by hegemonic institutions through the photographic lens.

Photography as institutional and political technology takes on an important role in such processes of state-dominated territorialisations. The purposeful material practices of graffiti writing on the one hand, and photography on the other thus resonate with a logic of de- and reterritorialisation. In the GDR as elsewhere, observational and forensic photography were key technologies of state surveillance (e.g., Hartewig, 2004; West Brett, 2019). Forensic photography

formed part of the vast apparatus that the Ministry for State Security mobilised to produce a persuasive visual discourse around 'derogatory slogans' and graffiti as 'enemy action' for propaganda purposes (e.g., BArch MfS BV Leipzig KuSch 4295: 6-7). To that end, the MfS trained and employed their own professional photographers and photo lab technicians, as well as providing introductory photo classes to many ordinary members of the service. Contrary to the common imagination, Stasi photography was not limited to surveillance purposes. In a 2020 book on Stasi photography, Springer outlines several genres or 'types' of MfS photography while also emphasising the open-endedness of that list due to the complex, fragmented and incomplete characteristics of all materials stored in the MfS archives. Springer identifies photographs of covert observations, (potential) crime scenes and court proceedings, of technologies and workplaces of MfS agents, as well as polaroid series of house raids, and portraits of prisoners and MfS personnel (BArch MfS BV Leipzig KuSch 4295: 12 ff.). The recurrence of prospective crime scene photography – picturing places of potential transgression, such as border installations and transit routes (BArch MfS BV Leipzig KuSch 4295: 168) – is particularly remarkable. It serves, in my view, as an indication that MfS photography at times had a more proactive role than producing materials for a 'scientifically correct' ex-post documentation of (potential) evidence. Training materials such as Siebert (1979a) also put an emphasis on creating visual intelligence prior to the fact – an objective that seems to point to the ways in which MfS photography served as a technology to produce, stabilise and communicate sovereignty. As Siebert (1979a, p. 12; author's translation) has it, a 'photographic documentation of the enemy's means and methods (…) plays a critical role as irrefutable evidence of hostile activity with a high degree of persuasiveness in the courtroom and public relations'. It is worth considering the relevance of such photographic storytelling, of the narrativity of images (Carrabine, 2016, p. 259) – perhaps in particular with respect to forensic photography, a form of image-making that puts such a strong emphasis on claims of objectivity and truthfulness. This quest for veracity in photographic image-production resonates with the wider literature on the materialities of forensic photography and links back to relational territorial perspectives. After briefly situating of the research in relevant bodies of literature, we turn to the specific practice of MfS photography of political graffiti in late 1980s Leipzig.

3. CREATING EVIDENCE AND CAPTURING DISSENT IN LEIPZIG

Leipzig, an important industrial and commercial hub and the former GDR's second-largest city in terms of population, is of interest to this research, as it was not only a prominent focal point of dissent and anti-governmental demonstrations in 1989/1990. By the mid-1980s, it had already become a place of thriving sub- and youth-cultures such as squatters, hippies, anarchists, punks and Goths – while also being home to a growing presence of neo-Nazis and skinheads (e.g., Gericke, 2024; Mühlberg & Stock, 1990). This conflictive plurality of political and (sub)cultural styles and stances is reflected in the range of graffiti and slogans documented by MfS officers in the district of Leipzig over the last decade of the GDR's existence. In an attempt to uphold a state-monopoly on displaying political slogans in public space, these practices were labelled as deviant and anti-state, deliberately avoiding a clear distinction between delinquency and crime, as Brauer (2012) argues. Punks in particular were categorised as 'negative/decadent' and 'antisocial' and harshly persecuted. In 1983, for instance, a 17-year-old punk from Leipzig and her three peers spent 9 months in juvenile detention for spraying various anarchist slogans across the Grünau housing estate (Mareth & Schneider, 2022, p. 100 f.) – an event that was itself triggered by the paradigmatic imprisonment of several members of *Namenlos*, a Berlin punk band, earlier that year (Brauer, 2012, p. 54). According to the contemporary criminal code, 'derogatory slogans' and 'graffiti' were punishable as public disparagement, a criminal offence according to GDR law (§ 220 StGB), with up to three years in prison. MfS records show that in 1988, a total of six persons were sentenced for creating 'written negative statements' in the district of

Leipzig, four of whom were convicted under § 220 StGB to either a prison sentence of one month to seven months on probation or fined 300 to 1000 Mark (BArch MfS BV Leipzig AKG 2081: 5). In spite of such repressive attempts at monopolising the display of political content, dissenting slogans and graffiti were continuously produced by various non-state actors catering to a broad range of discourses, as is well-documented in the archival material. A recent study of MfS records for the 1961 to 1989 period identified 1779 documented incidents of graffiti writing in the Leipzig district (Zöger, 2019, p. 52), with a notable increase in (officially recorded) cases from 1982 onwards (Zöger, 2019, p. 77). Quarterly statistical reports on 'written negative statements' produced by the MfS Leipzig district office paint a picture of constancy: Stasi agents recorded a total of 32, 33 and 37 cases of graffiti[4] respectively for the years 1986 to 1988 (BArch MfS BV Leipzig AKG 2079, 2080, 2081). While the captured graffiti content ranged widely, MfS agents tended to label a variety of statements as 'negative': pacifist, environmentalist and anarchist slogans, Satanist and neofascist content as well as more specific critiques of state policies – such as the expatriation of prominent dissidents or the recurrence of shortages of consumer goods or housing. With respect to neofascist content in particular, an inclination to conflate fascist and anarchist slogans can be found in some local MfS sources (e.g., BArch MfS BV Leipzig AKG 2079: 5). This corresponds with similar reports accumulating data for the entire territory of the German Democratic Republic, which also note an increase in the number of recorded cases of 'negative written statements' overall, and more (recorded) neofascist content in the late 1980s (e.g., BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 3120: 8). This should not come as a surprise: contrary to the official imaginary of an 'antifascist state', incidents of racist and neofascist violence and other activities (including graffiti), are documented in the literature from locations all over the GDR across four decades of its existence (e.g., Fulbrook, 1993; Poutrus et al., 2000; Süß, 1993). I will return to this aspect in the discussion section. How visible were such heterogenous forms of dissent from an everyday perspective? The number of recorded cases for Leipzig seem relatively low during the 1980s (30 to 40 incidents per year), and instructions to MfS agents and police were to swiftly restrict access to any 'derogatory' slogans found in public prior to initiating any work on the crime scene, then photographing and removing them (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 1873: 4-5). In Leipzig, this combination seems to have been relatively effective in aiding the near invisibility of graffiti in public space. Both contemporary witnesses I spoke to recall the production of a 'tidy' if decaying urban image in Leipzig's inner city, and orderly public and semi-public spaces in the prefabricated housing units in Leipzig-Grünau. It would seem as if, during the 1980s, slogans and graffiti in Leipzig's public space had a highly ephemeral quality. Control over the public image was heavily imposed, by a range of state actors and others with supporting roles – such as janitors and dedicated MfS informants per each housing unit of 50 flats in Grünau. As the vignette of the confiscated film roll cited earlier indicates, amateur photographers did document graffiti but were sometimes prevented from doing so, or their materials confiscated. Police and state security agents themselves also worked extensively with cameras. The following section mainly draws on one specific investigative case opened by MfS agents in Leipzig in 1987 and additional materials from the archive to excavate some of the ways in which MfS sought to create – and erase – visual narratives of dissent with the help of photography. *Operativer Vorgang* (OV) 'Müll' was set up in reaction to repeated reports on anarchist graffiti in the Neuschönefeld area to the East of Leipzig's city centre. The 10 folders of OV Müll[5] form part of the extensive body of records that were still in active use at the local MfS headquarters when these were stormed by protesters and taken over in December 1989. In what follows, I will present four selected photographs – three images that I obtained directly from the Leipzig files in OV Müll, and one that was reproduced in *Lehrbuch Kriminalistische Fotografie* (Siebert, 1979a, 1979b), a confidential manual widely used in the training of operative MfS agents at Juristische Hochschule Potsdam – to trace ways in which forensic photography mattered to the MfS.

3.1. Picturing façades as crime scenes

Image 1 is a black-and-white exterior photograph in landscape format that shows parts of the façades of two buildings (Figure 1). It is taken during daylight from a frontal perspective shifting the line of sight to a slightly upward angle, producing a composition with lines that fall askew both vertically and horizontally. The building fronts fill the entire image frame, with neither sky, street or persons visible. Starting from the left-hand side of image, about five sixths of the frame are taken up by the greying façade of a Wilhelminian building, specifically the upper half of the windows of two commercial sites on the ground floor, and four windows of a flat or flats on the first floor. A spray-painted encircled 'A' is visible between the second and third window on the first floor, partly overlapping with the contemporary mass-produced neo-classic plaster columns adorning the window frames. The composition of the image places this graffito in the upper third of the vertical middle axis, presenting it as the image's central element. The graffito-bearing building shows some signs of disrepair. Two windowpanes are broken, as are some of the plaster arcs above the windows. Bricks are visible where other parts of the plaster are missing or have been patched up with slightly brighter material. All first-floor windows seem dust-covered, and there are no curtains. The large left-hand shop window on the ground floor is covered up by patterned fabrics, the exterior door ajar. To the right, a sign above a closed door reads 'Gaststätte Tauchaer Tor'. As can be deducted from the awkwardly falling lines of the façades across the entire image frame, this photograph seems to have been taken to serve primarily functional rather than aesthetic purposes: to 'correctly' document the location and immediate surroundings of the graffiti. The black-and-white reproduction on photographic paper, mounted on a yellowing card base and accurately hand-marked in a red felt pen is indeed a reference image for one of the incidents included in OV Müll. It is a textbook example of 'conventional' crime scene photography, specifically an overview shot. As can be gathered from written reports in the accompanying file, the photo shows an anarchist graffito sprayed on the façade of the first floor of a vacant building on Rosa-Luxemburg-Straße 42 in Leipzig. The file reports a 'symbolic

Figure 1. Detail of a file page contained in special operation file OV Müll, June 1989.
Source: MfS BV Leipzig XX 2252, Vol. 1: 69 – detail. Courtesy of BArch Federal Archive, Leipzig.[9]

representation of an encircled A (…) all graffiti were applied with red paint from spray cans. Due to the time of observation as well as the territorial location, a public impact of the graffito can be assumed' (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 2254, Vol. 1: 41, author's translation). This graffito was first reported by a police officer at 3:20 am on 1 June 1989, according to the file. The photograph itself is undated but was taken during daylight hours. At that point, OV Müll had been running since more than a year, containing a considerable amount of material allegedly pertaining to the wider case. However, local MfS agents were apparently at pains to decipher the meaning of the 'undefinable symbol' (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 2254, Vol. 1: 60, author's translation), at one point describing it as a 'sign of opponents of nuclear weapons' ('Atomwaffengegnerzeichen') (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 2254, Vol. 1: 55, author's translation). When finally identified as anarchist content, the incident was catalogued as a criminal offence committed by an unknown person or persons, pertaining to the charge of public disparagement according to GDR law (§ 220 StGB). The kind of photograph presented in Figure 1 thus is typical and central not only to MfS activities but also to other organs and agents of law enforcement relying on forensic photography.

3.2. Disrupting disruptors

Image 2 is a black-and-white exterior photograph in landscape format that shows a multi-layered street scene photographed in daylight. The image is dominated by a street scene with tram rails, covering the frontal part of the image in a diagonal line slightly inclined towards the right-hand side of the image frame. In the middle ground, there is a metal railing and a grey metal wall consisting of five individual wall panels. Two white posters of different sizes are fixed to the second and fourth panel from the left. A bit of dark paint is visible on the edges of the white paper. A number of bare-branched trees of various sizes stand in the background; through the branches, two shacks and part of the upper floor of an elongated housing unit is visible towards the left, an industrial chimney in the middle, and a warehouse with a barrel-shaped elongated roof towards the right of the image. The sky is of a uniformly whitish colour. Again, the image forms part of the OV Müll files, where it is contained in several reproductions on glossy photo paper, about palm-sized. The reproduction shown in Figure 2 is mounted on a file card, along with two other motifs photographed on the same area, and contains a handwritten note in red ink marking the location, *S-Bahn Brücke am Haltepunkt Coppiplatz*. The related records provide some context to this image. When an MfS agent detected that an 'encircled A' had been painted on a wall at the light rail bridge in Leipzig-Gohlis on 11 November 1987, they created a lengthy handwritten report, noting that, following the incident, 'white posters were put up to cover up the symbols' (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 2252, Vol.11: 16, author's translation). Figure 2 is a reproduction of a photograph of that very scene: A visualisation of dissent in the form of a street shot of two white posters plastered to a metal divider. The original graffiti – done in black spray paint according to the written report – is not legible in that image, but still prominently pictured through the rather obvious visual mark created by the posters. Indeed, putting up posters is a practice recommended in MfS manuals, such as a flow-diagram included in BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 1873. The image reproduced as Figure 2 appears to be one of the rare occasions in which this practice has been visually documented. That this was a common MfS and police practice at the time becomes clear when similar attention to quelling public impact and visibility is documented elsewhere in the OV Müll files (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 2254, Vol. 1: 41) and other case records. For instance, MfS agents were reported to have covered 'democratic slogans' daubed on a wall at centrally located Wilhelm-Leuschner-Platz in February 1988 temporarily with posters until they could be properly removed (BArch MfS BV Leipzig IX 22, Vol. 4: 38-40). All this was done 'according to the books': MfS training materials and regulations repeatedly stress the importance of a timely and swift reduction of the publicity and visibility of derogatory slogans (e.g., BArch MfS BV Leipzig KuSch 4295: 18). Consequently, a 1988 report to the

Figure 2. Photograph of white posters covering up unspecified 'anarchist' graffiti at Coppiplatz light rail bridge, Leipzig-Gohlis, November 1987.
Source: MfS BV Leipzig XX 2252 Vol. 10: 14 – detail. Courtesy of BArch Federal Archive, Leipzig.

Minister for State Security, Erich Mielke, regretfully states that 'not in all cases has it been possible to reduce – by (…) covering up the slogans – the aims and effects intended by the perpetrators' (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 3120: 4, author's translation). On this backdrop, the photo from the 1987 Coppiplatz case hints at several layers of contested visibility while narrating the disruption of a disruption. At first glance, it appears as a common forensic photograph – yet the file does not contain any picture of the original graffiti itself, which would have been produced as evidence of a transgression and for purposes of prosecution. One could reflect upon the photographer's intention – what kind of message was to be transported by this image? Perhaps it was taken to produce visual proof to higher-ups in the MfS hierarchy – not as forensic evidence of a criminal offence but of a job well done: publicity and visibility of dissent have been successfully quelled? Ironically, and adding another layer of meaning, that same act of covering up and disrupting dissent provides a fresh canvas, now available for the application of further graffiti.

3.3. Self-portrait

Image 3 is a black-and-white exterior photograph in landscape format that shows a large windowpane, on which two words written in black felt pen are legible at eye line level: 'Leute geht' ('Guys, let's go') (Figure 3). A reflection of the anonymous photographer in action, analogue mirror reflex camera in both hands and covering the better part of their face, in a knitted pullover and visible from the waist up, makes up the centre part of the image. The background is blurry but seems to show a street behind the photographer in the middle ground of the image, which is focused on the words on the window pane. The photo is reproduced on yellowing photographic paper and has a blurry, grainy quality with irregular borders. It is mounted on

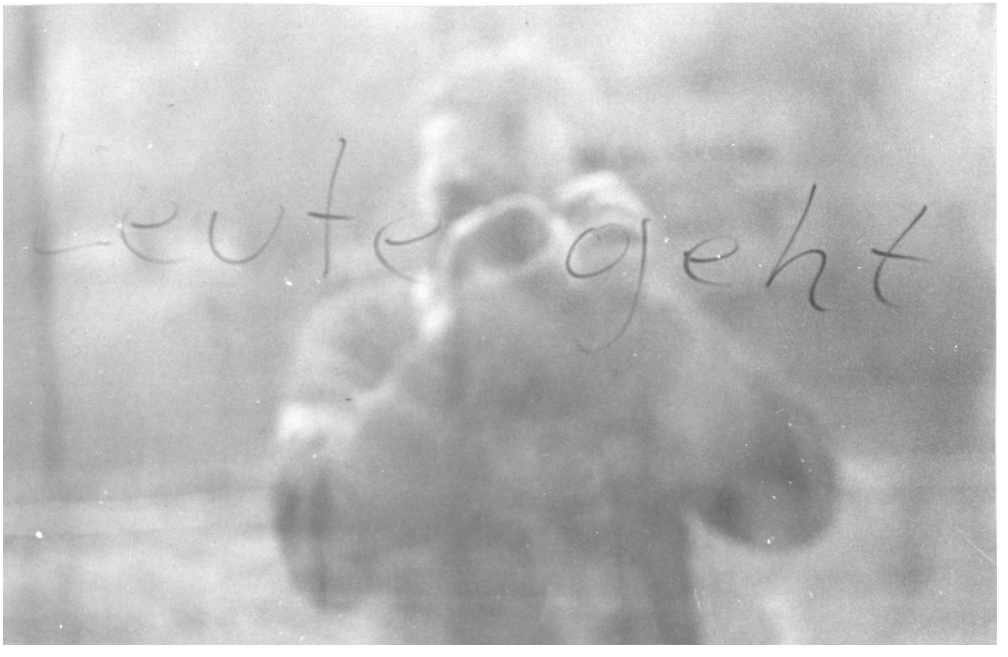

Figure 3. Unmarked photograph of anti-Semitic slogan on windowpane, contained in OAM 'Paul', 30.09.1988, Leipzig Floßplatz.
Source: MfS BV Leipzig XX 1990, image 004_1. Courtesy of BArch Federal Archive, Leipzig.

the top of a cardboard file page along with another image of a series of three, topped with a handwritten header that tags the crime scene as an upholsterers' shop front in downtown Leipzig. The entire record is marked as 30 September 1988. The two other images in the same series take a slightly different angle, showing other parts of the slogan, and the reflection of a second person in MfS or People's Police uniform with formal shirt, tie and dark coat standing next to the photographer. The series forms part of an MfS record that contains images of five different handwritten slogans from locations in Leipzig. From the context and the full photo series in the accompanying file, the assumption can be drawn that the image shows part of a historically documented anti-Semitic slogan, specifically calling for a boycott of Jewish shops. The file contains images of three other graffiti with anti-Semitic, racist, fascist and anticommunist content, as MfS compiled this file in order to investigate via font comparison whether these slogans could have been created by the same perpetrator. The image is notable for providing a rare, and most likely involuntary, self-portrait of an anonymous MfS photographer or MfS agent in civilian clothes. Adding another layer of meaning to a common crime scene photograph, the image in its multilayered reflectiveness unveils its author, who trained the camera objective's focus on the two words penned on the windowpane but could not completely blur out their own identity and disappear into the background of the image, and even less hide behind the camera. In another echo, the anti-Semitic slogan daubed on this shop front in the centre of Leipzig, directly resonates with National Socialist (NS) ideology and historical attacks on local Jewish businesses in the 1930s.

3.4. Stasi writers

Image 4 is a black-and-white interior photograph in portrait format that shows the front doors of a wooden wall unit, which cover about three quarters of the image from the right-hand side (Figure 4). On the upper third of the left cabinet door, the word 'Freiheit' (freedom) is barely discernible in dark handwritten letters. To the left of the cabinet, there is an open shelf with

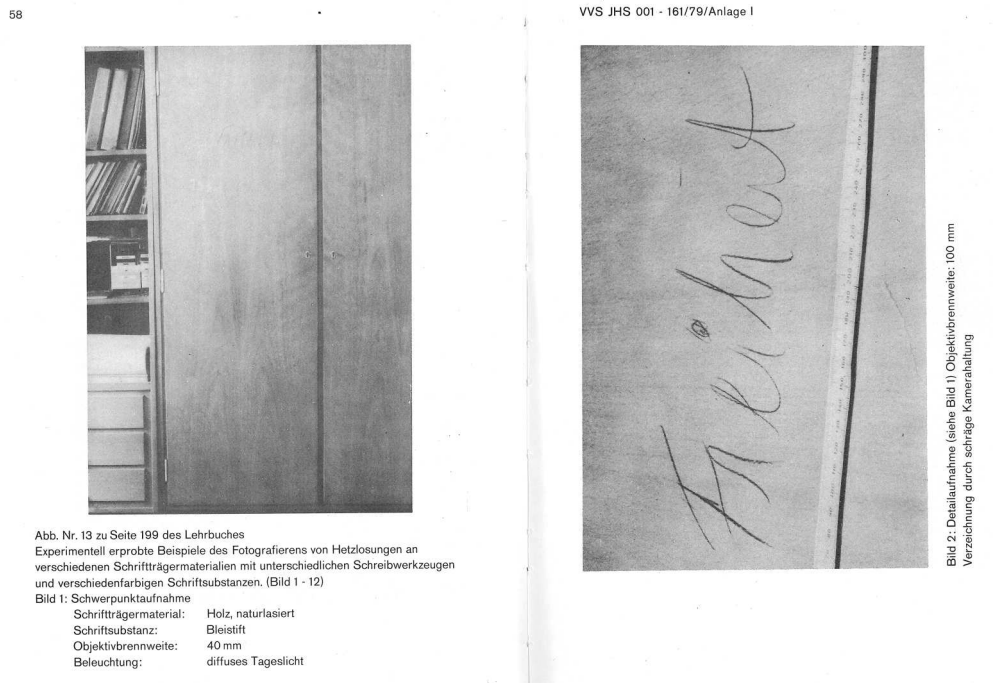

Figure 4. Excerpt from training materials: Experimental set-up to practice photographing 'derogatory slogans'.
Source: Siebert, 1979b, pp. 58/59. Reproduced with permission from the German Federal Archives. (The GDR-state-owned publisher of the grey literature in question ceased to exist in 1990.)

four open compartments at the top and three closed drawers below. The upper two open compartments hold files and folders of various sizes, stacked upright at varying angles. The third compartment from the top contains two index cardholders facing the photographer, while the lowermost is partially covered up with a white sheet of unknown material. Together, these elements give the impression of a contemporary office environment. Reproduced in monochrome print in the 1979 publication *Bildanhang zum Lehrbuch Kriminalistische Fotografie und ihre Anwendung in der politisch-operativen Arbeit des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit* (Siebert, 1979b), this photograph forms part of a series apparently created for internal training purposes of the MfS at Juristische Hochschule Potsdam. Figure 4 shows the spread of pages 58 and 59 in Siebert's monography containing the image as described above, and a close-up shot of the same slogan including a tape measure on the opposite page.

What is remarkable about this image is its specific method of production which is directly related to its didactic function. The slogan 'Freedom' appears to be staged in a contemporary office set-up to demonstrate photo techniques. According to the inscription below the image, it forms part of a series of 'experimentally trialled examples of photographing derogatory slogans on various kinds of surface materials, employing various types of writing utensils and writing substances'. From the indicated purpose of these photographs – training agents to produce usable and evaluable photographs of criminal evidence, in the ministry's logic – it can be assumed that these images were specifically taken for Siebert's book. Moreover, it is possible that in this particular case, MfS agents themselves acted as graffiti writers, apparently making use of their ordinary office environment. This seems even more compelling as interiors such as the wooden wall unit depicted in Figure 4 are an unlikely location for placing a political slogan aimed at a wider audience. The photograph adds an element of irritation and subversion to the rather

technical genre of training manuals. Whereas photo-didactic literature aims to train the gaze, to guide and aid the technically 'correct' production of accounts of veracity, grounding ideas of the scientific nature and truthfulness of photographic evidence, this image raises a different kind of question. How does a potential act of graffiti writing – even, or especially, if 'only' for training purposes – affect MfS agents engaged in this performative practice? Might the performativity of graffiti provide glimpses of a latent transformation, creating space for ambivalence, for contingent openings in the monolithic imagination of state sovereignty?

In this section, I have argued that through photography, state actors strive to uphold the illusion of an absolute visual hegemony, where the camera serves to support a regime of truth about dissenting visual narratives. Such photography as one core element of repressive MfS praxis, fed MfS archives while seeking to promote an authoritarian reterritorialisation. However, ambivalence lays at the core of a material foundation of state power through something as apparently ephemeral as photography, which other actors also employ to amplify dissenting voices.

4. DISCUSSION

Two aspects stand out with respect to the ways in which the Ministry for State Security mobilised photography to capture visualised dissent. The photographic material of political graffiti from the 1980 to 1989 period contained in MfS records for the district of Leipzig enables us to identify, first, a logic of invisibilisation as a means of deterritorialisation, and second, an evident set of contradictions in MfS photo practices that highlight the contingent character of attempts to repair the brittle architecture of state sovereignty in the late GDR.

4.1. Invisibilisation as deterritorialisation

Deterritorialisation via the creation of (in)visibility of such non-state-produced slogans appears to have been a central concern to state actors in the GDR. MfS and police would make it an operational priority and go to great lengths to prevent, preclude and limit the publicity of political slogans and graffiti, as the collected materials show. In MfS records, these writings were presented as an expression of deviation, insubordination and potential hostility towards state technologies of disciplination and the wider ideological framework. Attempts at curtailing visual dissent through their removal hence highlight the rather powerful latent agency of graffiti. Graffiti removal, it is argued in the literature, is a morally charged act, 'a way of re-appropriating the space, both taking back the space from the graffiti writer, and returning the space to a condition of propriety' (Halsey & Young, 2002, p. 175). Distinct from – but related to – a practice known as 'going over' or 'crossing' amongst graffiti writers and in contemporary studies of graffiti and street art, it involves a marking, a visual contestation (Cooper & Chalfant, 2002, p. 27), thus preparing the ground for a semiotic re-appropriation of space. I would argue that this form of invisibilisation is a rather powerful form of deterritorialisation of dissent. Not least the frameworks of zero tolerance policies first established prominently in New York City and spreading to other cities over the past three decades to promote the rigorous abatement of graffiti, or so-called 'buffing' (Kramer, 2010; Arnold, 2019). Such acts of rendering invisible are a common practice in contested urban territories, as Schwarz and Streule (2022) have discussed along with the example of the removal of a political mural in Mexico. Practices of visual 'sanitation' such as buffing hence feed not only into upholding an illusion of total control over public aesthetics and 'proper' image. Crucially, a complete voiding, a perfect invisibilisation does not always appear to be the aim of this form of visual politics. Instead, one apparent impetus behind buffing and crossing is to set a mark of dominance and being-in-control – with parts or at least traces of the original image or slogan remaining visible. Read that way, the photograph reproduced as Figure 2 could illuminate ways in which 'governing authorities strategically use informality to pursue their own state interests' (Davis, 2017, p. 8). In this case, that interest would be to legitimise MfS activities, and more generally, the MfS as an institution. Images such as this one may have served to create evidence of the agency's own efforts to protect

state interests threatened by what was imagined as a hostile antagonist – the 'ever smarter enemy' (Siebert, 1979a, X; author's translation) being constructed in MfS manuals. On another layer of visibility, the posters depicted in the photograph, meanwhile, serve to demonstrate publicly (performatively) that dissent has been quelled – while leaving a mark, a kind of visual warning and reassertion of control. With respect to the confiscated roll of ORWO film described in the introduction to this paper, a similar logic of invisibilisation seems to have guided the curtailing of some kinds or motifs of amateur photography. Amateur photography, it seems from the confiscation of the film roll, was not seen by the MfS as a legitimate agent to participate in the creation of a visual narrative of dissent. Discursively constructing an authoritative account of graffiti and political slogans in the (late) GDR was reserved to MfS and police photographers, in an attempt at upholding state sovereignty over image (re)production. As historians studying criminology, police archives and forensic photography have long argued, photography can be understood as serving the state security apparatus as a crucial technology not only of disciplination but of composing the prosecuted 'other' in the first place (Sekula, 1986). Producing a visual narrative (discourse) of dissent, photography here serves to render practices and expressions illicit, aiding their criminalisation.

4.2. Contradictions, fragments and repair

The empirical material presented in this paper outlines some of the ways in which MfS photographers sought to construct 'truthful accounts' of visual dissent in the late 1980s in Leipzig. These expressions were presented in the MfS records as threats to the authority and integrity of the state. By unflinchingly marking any deviant or subversive protagonists as 'the enemy' (Siebert, 1979a, p. 11; author's translation), this provided ample grounds for a criminalisation of (political) graffiti writing practices. However, this construction process also highlights the ambiguous and fragile relation between the stabilisation of state sovereignty and these Othered protagonists. This finding runs parallel to Davis' argument on the relation between state formation and informality:

> decisions that local states make to either banish or tolerate informality (…) literally embody [the state's priorities] and (…) tell us something about the state's own character and self-definition as a source of authority. (…) informality serves as the driving force in determining the nature and contours of the state. (Davis, 2017, p. 7)

Through this lens, we can read MfS' mobilisation of photography – and in particular, photography of graffiti – as a material practice that supports and drives a process of state formation. It thus reflects what West Brett (2019) calls a 'deep infiltration' of everyday life of citizens and provides glimpses of 'state paranoia' (Glaeser, 2004). The analysed materials point towards several contradictory moments of 'capturing dissent' that are more than a mere matter of state-led pre-emption of (visual) dissent. As we have already discussed, MfS agents covered up graffiti, thus muting and highlighting it at the same time. A similar contradiction arises from the ways in which photography was framed by MfS discourse as a way of ascertaining 'truth', with detailed instructions on how to construct evidence characterised by veracity and objectivity. Yet these images were also used for propaganda purposes and as a means of emotional politics of deterrence.[6] It also seems likely that MfS agents performed (professionally) as graffiti writers for the camera, if only for training purposes. In a further blurring of boundaries, amateur (street) photography of graffiti was at times suppressed by MfS, as the introductory vignette shows, and some of the confiscated private photo material may have been filed away by MfS agencies for subsequent surveillance and prosecution.[7] The ambiguity and contradictory nature of these assertions of state power only gains strength when analysing the wider societal context of the photographs that have been studied for this paper. For instance, in the same period as MfS agents in Leipzig went to considerable lengths to investigate and criminalise anarchist slogans and mark punks as Others, all while conflating anarchist, pacifist and fascist symbology and (US-American) graffiti writing

styles, some of the official state culture policies sought to nurture these very same subcultures. In 1985, hip-hop culture was more or less officially imported to the GDR with the screening of Belafonte's *Beat Street* in cinemas across the country. Officially presented as not only an expression of Black (US-American) urban culture but a wider critique of capitalist exploitation and alienation, the movie attracted an audience of three million viewers, and fostered the rise of rap, breakdance and graffiti-writing crews all over the GDR, with a particular strength in the Dresden area (Schmieding, 2015). It can be assumed that a photograph from Leipzig-Gohlis, capturing a graffiti in throw-up style that reads 'Run DMC' (BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 2252, Vol. 10: 16), directly corresponds to this uptick in local hip-hop culture – even though MfS agents arbitrarily included it in the files of the OV Müll case.

At the same time, the MfS files showcase blind spots regarding widespread xenophobic and far-right slogans. This should serve as an indication of the ways in which contestations over visibility, affects and representations of dissent are not by definition emancipatory or democratically 'licit' deviations from an authoritarian state logic. We could further investigate the fragmentation of official antifascist discourse, its subversion through fascist graffiti, and follow up on far-right continuities. Earlier literature points at a widespread reluctance of GDR officials to report far-right incidents and everyday racism, and at the ways in which public institutions themselves engaged in the categorical Othering of foreigners (Poutrus et al., 2000). Given its self-conception as 'the first anti-fascist state on German soil', dealing with actual racism and neofascism was often seen as a challenge to state doctrine and seems to have been widely downplayed by officials up to the late 1980s, as work by Weiss (1989), Waibel (2014) and others indicates. There was structural racism such as a policy of residential and social segregation of foreign contract workers, whereas incidents involving far-right violence and graffiti were typically regarded as harmless youthful dissent and 'rowdiness' without criminal intent (e.g., Süß, 1993). Incidents of open violence such as the racist attacks on Algerian contract workers in Erfurt in 1975 (e.g., Poutrus et al., 2000) were filed as exceptions, even though there were numerous similar incidents in all parts of the GDR over the years. It was the brutal, much reported 1987 attack on visitors at a punk concert at Zionskirche in Berlin by neo-Nazi hooligans that marked a turning point in official policy. Some claim that this change only came about because some of the perpetrators were from West Berlin and the case was reported in the international press. Subsequently, representatives of the responsible GDR agencies admitted to a growing domestic neo-Nazi problem. Indeed, more cases of far-right graffiti were documented in the MfS records in the months after this course adaption by the Minister for State Security, Erich Mielke.[8] The continued presence of far-right slogans and symbols in the MfS records speaks to their vernacular nature and relative normalisation. Moreover, there are indications of localised historical continuities that call for further investigation, such as the intensity of far-right violence and brutal attempts at establishing a far-right hegemony in Leipzig-Grünau and other places in the early 1990s (e.g., Zschocke, 2020).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Reading graffiti through the lens of Ministry of State Security photographs as a visual challenge to state sovereignty, as this paper has done, leads to a number of findings. As the Leipzig case shows, MfS agents mobilised photography to capture visualised dissent, attempting to stabilise and repair fragmenting state sovereignties through an invisibilisation, and ultimately, re-enforce hegemony over the authorship of political slogans in public space. To engage with the politics of visuality in the past and present making of urban territories, namely the dialectics of displacement and preservation of visual discourses through photography, the notion of 'narrative disruption – an overlay (…) of countering, elaborating, competing and/or satirising narrative' (Ross et al., 2017, p. 5) from geographical graffiti studies is of value. The photographic displacement of visual dissent aided a semiotic marginalisation but paradoxically, in the GDR case, also the preservation of these images, as the

closed institutional archive became publicly accessible to researchers after 1990. This holds true even if that access needs to be strictly regulated to guarantee an end to further privacy violations of those observed and spied on in the most ordinary and intimate moments and aspects of their lives during GDR times. Such photographic displacement of the image into the archival, and increasingly, the algorithmic realm, invites further reflection and research on what Brigstocke et al. (2021) propose to read as dispersed geographies of authority. For instance, one could dive into the material and affective atmospheres tied to the 'algorithmic authority' of the photo-technical assemblage which simultaneously displaces and preserves visual dissent. Moreover, MfS forensic photography also holds another layer of ambiguity, as the resulting images seem to have served to legitimise MfS as an institution. I would argue that this brought MfS into a reciprocal relationship with – and perhaps even making it somehow dependent on – the continued presence of practices and actors that the ministry considered 'disorderly', 'dissident' or 'negative-decadent'. Such a performative character of forensic photography is perhaps most evident in those (rare) cases where MfS agents themselves may have served as writers of slogans for training purposes. Future research could engage in a more subject-centred approach and contribute to ongoing endeavours to link processes of territorialisation and political subjectivation (MacLeavy et al., 2021; Schwarz & Streule, 2024) by tracing the subjects involved in and emerging from territorial practices behind MfS photography. In spite of limitations in access and pertinent ethical issues that need to be considered when working with this highly sensitive historical material, the enormous cache of forensic photographs contained in the MfS archives holds strong potential for future studies interested in the ephemera of everyday life in the GDR. The collection of photographic material, in particular, produced by various unnamed MfS photographers across different media, such as black-and-white film, polaroid and microfilm, speaks to the notion that there are many different archives contained in each archival body – nuances that manifest themselves through positionality, level of access and approach of both the photographer and the archive's contemporary user. Whether these images show graffiti or other motives more directly revealing the traumatic and violent dynamics of state surveillance and coercion, and the ambiguities of collaboration: the photographs assembled in the Ministry for State Security's records certainly support a re-tracing and reconstruction of specific visual narratives that were created by state agents. However, as this paper hopes to have illustrated, these images can also serve to reach beyond the Stasi gaze and unveil contemporary visual threads in the urban fabric that speak of emancipatory dynamics, irritations and subversions to hegemonic politics and aesthetics.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

NOTES

1. In what follows, MfS for short.
2. GDR state territory was subdivided into 15 administrative districts, with corresponding MfS and other governmental structures. After 1990, the Stasi Records Archive was structured accordingly, with a central part of the archive located in Berlin at the former MfS headquarters, and 11 regional branches. The Stasi Records Archive was institutionally integrated into the Federal Archives in 2021.

3. Employed by MfS as a master category for several forms of graffiti, the German term *Schmierereien* has a decidedly negative connotation, roughly translating as 'taint' or 'smear'.
4. The 'negative written statements' category distinguishes three subgroups: Slogans (*Losungen*), leaflets (*Flugschriften*) and letters. For purposes of comparison and identification, a case file typically lists not just one but several slogans in similar handwriting detected by MfS at a specific time and location.
5. Stasi case files typically bear such descriptive names; OV 'Müll' (trash) seems to refer to one of the early incidents included in this file, in which graffiti was daubed on some trash cans in Neuschönefeld.
6. MfS training materials highlight the potent propagandistic function of photographs, and a former detainee writes of the shame they faced when their private items were publicly exhibited by MfS agents as forensic evidence at a press event in Leipzig (Mareth & Schneider, 2022, p. 102).
7. Springer (2020) claims that MfS employees were also using MfS-run photo laboratories to have their amateur films developed and reproduced. It remains an open question whether any of these private images were copyfiled and analysed by their employer.
8. After the neo-Nazi attack at Zionskirche, a comprehensive internal report for the year 1988 prepared on the order of Mielke reports an increase in the number of derogatory slogans across the GDR. It has to remain an open question whether this is due to an overall increase in cases, or merely an increase in *reported* cases. In a typical conflation, the report states that 14% of these slogans related to the 'glorification of fascist ideology, and the spreading of nationalist and Anarchist *(sic!)* thought' (author's translation from BArch MfS BV Leipzig XX 3120: 8).
9. The author confirms that they have obtained permission from The German Federal Archive, as the copyright holder, to publish all images included in the manuscript.

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