

Exhibit focuses on black GIs

09.06.11 - 03:00 pm



By Cliff Bellamy

cbellamy@heraldsun.com; 419-6744

“Easter Eggs for Hitler” reads a sign in a 1945 photograph of two black soldiers taken on Easter morning that year. One of the soldiers holds a mortar shell with the words “Happy Easter Adolph.” In another image, a black soldier hands out candy to German children.

Other photos document a speech by Kathleen Cleaver in Frankfurt, Germany, and two black GIs with fists raised as a white soldier salutes them. They are among some 54 images from a traveling exhibit that will go on view this week at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History at UNC titled “The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany.”

The exhibit is an extension of a website, digital archive and scholarship project of the same title that offers groundbreaking research into the connection between this country’s civil rights movement and the U.S. military’s presence in Germany after 1945 (www.aacvr-germany.org/). The website – a project of Vassar College, the German Historical Institute of Washington, D.C., and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies – has images, films, documents, oral histories and more for scholars and the public to study and ponder.

The exhibit represents “just a tiny sliver of what’s in the digital archive and the website,” said Maria Höhn, a professor of history at Vassar. Höhn and Martin Klimke of the German Historical Institute curated the exhibit, and have written a companion book titled “A Breath of Freedom.”

Höhn grew up in Rhine-Palatinate, an area of Germany that was heavily military. Her scholarly research stems from that experience. Her original intention was to examine the overall experience of American soldiers in Germany during the post-World War II period, but soon she discovered a separate story related to African-American history. During the civil rights struggle, both Germany and the United States were transformed, Höhn said.

Germany at the time was divided between East and West, and the American government wanted to make Germany a showcase for democracy, Höhn said. In keeping with that policy, many young Germans were encouraged to study in the

United States, which proved an often transforming experience. “A lot of German students fell in love with the promise of America, but they were also shocked by the incredible racism” they saw during that period, she said. Many of these same students later expressed solidarity with the Black Power Movement, and the protests against the war in Vietnam, Höhn said.

Many black GIs were impressed by the freedom they had in Germany, which did not have segregation laws. As GIs watched the sit-ins and other events at home, they also began to ask the military to incorporate those changes, Höhn said.

As the exhibit has traveled, several images draw an immediate response from visitors, Höhn said. The image of the American soldier handing out candy draws a strong response from German audiences, she said. In the United States, the photo of the raised fists and the “Easter Eggs for Hitler” photos draw strong responses. The latter image illustrates the pride that black troops took during the war effort, even under segregation, she said.

The Stone Center has localized this exhibit with added information about Floyd McKissick of Durham and Charles McAdams of Asheville, said Joseph Jordan, director of the center. Both men served in World War II and were later instrumental in the movement for equality and civil rights at home, he said.

Visitors to the exhibit will see a different dimension of post-war Germany, Jordan said. Many Americans may not know of Germans’ awareness of the civil rights struggle, and this exhibit shows how Germans “responded in ways that we would not have considered.” He cites as examples several photos of Martin Luther King Jr.’s visit to Berlin (when he was given the keys to the city), and a photo of a spontaneous candlelight vigil that took place the night he was assassinated.

“What we’re seeing is that these were people who longed for peace, and identified with other struggles,” Jordan said.

Go and Do

WHAT: Exhibit “The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany”

WHEN: Opens Thursday and continues through Oct. 28

WHERE: Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History

ADMISSION: Free

ALSO: An opening reception will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. at the Stone Center, with curator Maria Höhn, and representatives of the National Association of

Black Veterans, Montford Point Marines, Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers.

© heraldsun.com 2011