

Civil rights and the world

A photograph in an exhibit at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center at UNC depicts two American GIs stationed in post-World War II Germany posing with their dates.

The photo, taken in the late 1940s, could not have been taken in the U.S., because the scene it depicts would have all but inconceivable: The men in the photo are black. Their dates, two smiling German women, are white.

The image, one of the 54 photos, cartoons and political posters in "The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs, and Germany," is a striking illustration of one of the paradoxes of the postwar world:

"To the astonishment of many white Americans, black soldiers serving in segregated units described post-Nazi Germany as a place where they experienced more equality and freedom than in their own country," reads a portion of the text from the exhibit.

The exhibit, by Vassar history professor Maria Hoehn and Martin Klimke of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., explores the experience of one particular segment of the Greatest Generation in postwar Germany. Many of them found it to be, as the young Colin Powell said in 1957 while serving there, a "breath of freedom."

Klimke said Germany was not a paradigm of tolerance, but "it was different because there was not a legalized system of apartheid. That was certainly striking to soldiers. They could date white women, and there were no segregated water fountains in public."

As the exhibit also makes clear, many African American GIs came home from their experience in Germany and, unwilling to settle for less at home, became involved in the Civil Rights movement.

"The exhibition is important because it reveals how certain elements of African American life and history have been influential in other parts of the world, and how those international



American GIs in an image from an exhibit at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center.
National Archives



Kathleen Cleaver speaks at Frankfurt University in an image from an exhibit about postwar Germany.
Barbara Klemm

communities have influenced African American political life in various ways," said Joseph Jordan, director of the Stone Center.

A little known story

The exhibit, on display at the Stone Center through Oct. 28, grew out of research Hoehn and Klimke have pursued for a number of years.

Hoehn in 2002 published a book, "GIs and Frauleins: The German American Encounter in 1950s West Germany," by the University of North Carolina Press.

"While I was interviewing Germans for my first book, they mentioned that even in the early 1950s 'Negro Units' were stationed in their towns," Hoehn said. "I thought that this couldn't be right, since the military was integrated in 1948. Soldiers were in Germany to teach Germans to be democratic and not racist, yet the military was doing the job with a Jim Crow army. I was stunned to find out there was no research on this."

Shared vision

Five years ago Hoehn met Klimke, who was then at the Center of American Studies at Heidelberg University, and the two decided to join forces.

They created a website, "The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany (www.aacvr-Germany.org), featuring oral history and a digital archive.

Out of that project grew the current exhibit, which has traveled internationally.

The images and materials in the exhibit offer a stunning glimpse at how African-American GIs and Germans joined forces over a shared vision that America needed to offer equal rights to all Americans, at a time when Germany was struggling to create new identities and hold onto old ones.

Hoehn said she's been surprised at how emotional the exhibit is for some viewers.

"I've talked to a lot of African-American veterans who said they are written out of the story of the Greatest Generation," Hoehn said.

A remarkable find

To see this exhibit is to learn about a part of history that has largely been

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scattered in bits and pieces around the world, in memories, and in storage boxes.

Something extraordinary happened while Hoehn and Klimke were searching for historical records and interviewing Germans.

On Sept. 13, 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke before 20,000 Berliners at Waldbuhne, Berlin. He had been invited by West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt to open the city's annual cultural festival.

After speaking in West Berlin, King somehow got past Checkpoint Charlie at the border and got into East Berlin where he preached at St. Mary's Church about the Civil Rights Movement.

"Maria and I thought that there must be recordings of his speech at St. Mary's," Klimke said. "The people at the church began searching and found recordings in the basement."

A snippet of this speech can be heard at the exhibit.

Hoehn and Klimke said they are still hearing new stories from veterans.

"But there is a race against time at this stage as people are getting on in age," Klimke said. "The families and veterans are so grateful that they are acknowledged as part of something larger - namely the history of the African American freedom struggle on both sides of the Atlantic," Klimke said.

To share stories, contact Klimke and Hoehn at klimke@ghi-dc.org and mahoehn@vassar.edu.

The gallery is open 9:30 a.m.- 8 p.m. Monday through Friday. Call 962-9001 or visit www.unc.edu/depts/stonecenter.

Meyer: 919-942-3252

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