

## AFRICAN-AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS AND GERMANY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, October 1-4, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI and Vassar College. Conveners: Maria Höhn (Vassar College) and Martin Klimke (GHI). Made possible by the generous support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and Vassar College's President's Office, Dean of Faculty, Development Office, and the Departments of History, German Studies, American Culture, Africana Studies, International Studies, Art, and Political Science. Participants: Kenneth Barkin (University of California, Riverside), Leon Bass (Philadelphia), Manfred Berg (University of Heidelberg), Angela Davis (University of California, Santa Cruz, emerita), Eve Dunbar (Vassar College), Moritz Ege (Humboldt University, Berlin), Karl-Heinz Füssl (Technical University, Berlin), Katharina Gerund (University of Düsseldorf), Matt Herron (Taking Stock, San Rafael, CA), Hansjürgen Hilgert (Hilgert & Witsch KG, Krautscheid), Gerald Horne (Houston University), Andrew Hurley (University of Melbourne), S. Marina Jones (UNC-Chapel Hill/GHI), Helma Kaldewey (Tulane University), Wilfried Kaute (Cologne), Christine Knauer (University of Tübingen), Peter H. Koepf (*The Atlantic Times*, Berlin), Daniel Lee (University of California, Berkeley), Brian Mann (Vassar College), Mia Mask (Vassar College), Joe McPhee (Poughkeepsie), Frank Mehring (Free University of Berlin), Quincy Mills (Vassar College), Maggi Morehouse (University of South Carolina, Aiken), Eli Nathans (University of Western Ontario), Christina Oppel (University of Münster), Anke Ortlepp (GHI), Rosemarie Peña (Black German Cultural Society), Peggy Piesche (Vassar College), Dan Puckett (Troy University), Matthias Reiss (University of Exeter), Robert Sackett (University of Colorado), Christian Schmidt-Rost (Free University of Berlin), Alcyone Scott (Midland Lutheran College, Nebraska), Tyrone Simpson (Vassar College), Laura Stapane (Oldenburg/GHI), Roland Stolte (Marienkirche, Berlin), Debra Tanner Abell (Pittsburgh), Harriet Washington (Rochester), Judith Weisenfeld (Princeton University), Karl-Dietrich Wolff (Frankfurt).

The conference brought together scholars of history, literature, and cultural studies from Germany, the U.S., and Australia, as well as eyewitnesses, to explore the links between the African-American Civil Rights Movement and Germany throughout the twentieth century. The pre-conference program began on Wednesday afternoon with a screening of the film *The Negro Soldier* from 1944, directed by Stuart Heisler (U.S. War Department), and introduced

by Mia Mask. Subsequently, Leon Bass, a World War II veteran, gave a lecture, "Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: A Black Sergeant Remembers Buchenwald." As a nineteen-year-old, Bass served in the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, a segregated unit of the U.S. Army, and was among the soldiers who liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Bass gave a moving recollection of his own struggles with racism in the U.S. military during his training in the South, reflecting on the idea of putting his life on the line for a country that did not deem him "good enough." He recounted how seeing the atrocities committed at Buchenwald would lead him to become an agent for social change upon his return to the U.S.

The first conference day began with a panel discussion, "Tracing an Untold History: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Visit to Cold War Berlin in 1964," chaired by conveners Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke. Höhn and Klimke introduced King's largely forgotten visit to the divided city of September 1964, during the course of which he visited the Berlin Wall, opened the city's cultural festival, delivered a sermon to more than 20,000 West Berliners at an outdoor arena, and was awarded an honorary degree by the Theological School of the Protestant Church. Höhn and Klimke also played audio excerpts of a previously unreleased speech that King gave in East Berlin's St. Mary's Church in Alexander Square during the same visit. Roland Stolte further explored King's visit by discussing how Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt and Provost Heinrich Grüber facilitated it. Grüber, the former pastor at East Berlin's St. Mary's Church, had been an active opponent of the Nazi regime, and had gained international attention when he testified during the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961.

The panel continued with a vivid eyewitness account by Alcyone Scott, one of King's interpreters during his visit, who detailed King's border crossing at Checkpoint Charlie without a passport and described the impact of King's message of nonviolent resistance and hope during his sermon at the overcrowded St. Mary's Church. Discussing the primary and secondary sources related to King's visit, Laura Stapane introduced the digital archive of "The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs, and Germany" (<http://www.aacvr-germany.org>). The project, a collaboration of the GHI Washington, the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University, and Vassar College, serves as a platform for making

textual and audiovisual material (oral histories, images, films, etc.) on the relationship between the Civil Rights Movement, African-American GIs, and Germany, available online and free of charge, in an effort to increase scholarship and stimulate teaching on the global impact of the Civil Rights struggle. At the conclusion of this panel, the exhibition, “African-American Civil Rights and Germany,” was opened, which includes about fifty historical photographs and other materials from the digital archive, such as the guest book King signed in East Berlin, a full recording of his sermon, and a historical painting entitled “Dr. King and His Family” from East Germany.

On the second conference day, Kenneth Barkin examined W. E. B. DuBois’s time at Harvard University and in Germany (1892–94) as part of a panel on “Transatlantic Journeys.” Barkin investigated DuBois’s perceptions of Germany, arguing that DuBois’s everyday experiences in German society—and not his academic studies—exercised the strongest influence on his position on racism in the U.S., and made Prussia seem like a “racial paradise.” Karl-Heinz Füssl’s paper focused on Black Mountain College, NC, which was established in 1933 and became home to a number of prominent German and European refugees, such as Josef and Anni Albers. Füssl described how, from its inception, debates on whether to allow black students and faculty preoccupied people at the college, creating a rift within the faculty and similarly dividing the European refugees. Füssl argued that the campus integration project eventually failed in part, at least, because of the pervasive segregation surrounding the college community. Next, Harriet Washington explored the origins of prejudices against and stereotypes associated with black people from antiquity through modern slavery, demonstrating how these images and perceptions shaped the medical field and the research of German scientists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The second panel, “Black Soldiers, Germans, and World War II,” began with Matthias Reiss’s presentation on the experiences of German prisoners of war in the United States. Reiss complicated traditional narratives by highlighting the ways in which the presence of these POWs in American society “helped to undermine the legitimacy of racial segregation.” According to Reiss, the ambiguous status of the POWs was characterized by the fact that their direct relationships with African Americans, although temporary, were generally friendly. At the same time, Reiss noted, the white POWs

enjoyed privileges relative to black GIs, allowing the latter a lens through which they could compare Nazi racial discrimination to their own domestic discrimination in the U.S. In the next paper, Maggi Morehouse emphasized the importance of Truman's 1948 Executive Order desegregating the U.S. military. Morehouse made a case for reframing the meta-narrative of the civil rights movement by focusing on this landmark policy decision instead of the 1954 Supreme Court decision "Brown v. Board of Education" as the starting point.

The third panel, "Debating Civil Rights on Both Sides of the Atlantic," was opened by Christina Oppel's analysis of the role that Nazi Germany played in African-American discourse in the 1930s and 1940s. In Oppel's view, African-American intellectuals used the analogy between U.S. racism and German fascism not only to charge the U.S. with hypocrisy, but also to situate their struggle within the larger framework of human rights in the context of the Atlantic Charter and the formation of the United Nations. Christine Knauer addressed German and African-American interactions and media representations of interracial rape in postwar Germany. Pointing to the crucial role of race in each case, Knauer particularly examined how these sexual assaults were characterized in official reports, political discourse, and public debate. In the section's last paper, Robert Sackett explored West German media coverage of U.S. race relations from 1949-67. Sackett noted how the discourse on both racial discrimination and black militancy, especially from 1960 on, used Nazi Germany as a comparative reference to contextualize the situation on the other side of the Atlantic.

The second day of the conference concluded with a keynote lecture by Angela Davis on the topic "Between Critical Theory and Civil Rights: A Sixties' Journey from Boston to Frankfurt to San Diego." Before an audience of over four hundred, Davis reflected on meeting her academic mentor Herbert Marcuse at Brandeis University, studying with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer at the University of Frankfurt, and her visits to East Berlin in the 1960s and early 1970s. Davis underscored the importance of Critical Theory and her experiences abroad, citing their contributions to her political coming-of-age as an African-American activist. She also recounted the personal significance of the international outpouring of support she experienced during her trial and incarceration in the U.S.

The next conference day began with a panel on “Bringing the Cold War Home,” which opened with Helma Kaldewey’s examination of Louis Armstrong’s Eastern European tour in 1965. Kaldewey focused on Armstrong’s time in East Germany, his close relationship with jazz specialist and radio host Karl-Heinz Drechsel, and East Berlin’s attempt to use jazz to its own political advantage in the propaganda battles of the Cold War. Next, Daniel Lee investigated the debates and policies concerning relationships and marriages between African-American GIs and white German women, both in West Germany and the United States. Lee revealed a spectrum of attitudes on interracial marriage, including the staunch opposition of white segregationists, the conflicting opinions among African Americans, the myriad media representations, and the varying treatment of interracial couples by U.S. military and local German officials. Lee showed how the presence of these couples influenced discussions about racial equality and civil rights in the U.S. leading up to the landmark 1967 Supreme Court decision “Loving v. Virginia.”

In the fifth panel, “Framing Civil Rights,” Eli Nathans examined the radio and television commentaries of conservative West German journalist Peter von Zahn in the 1950s and early 1960s, which focused largely on the United States. As Nathans revealed, the first two years of Zahn’s broadcasts were funded by the United States Information Agency (USIA). Nathans contended that Zahn’s sympathetic but critical broadcasts contributed to the liberalization of West German society, fundamentally shaping the ways in which the racial situation in the U.S. was perceived in Germany. Frank Mehring investigated how the Marshall Plan’s re-education films aimed to propagate democracy, free trade, international cooperation, and a vision of multiracial tolerance in Europe. Using the example of Georg Tressler’s “Wie die Jungen sangen” (1954), directly referencing the civil rights struggle in the U.S., Mehring demonstrated how the racial encounters of ethnically European and African children in an international school in Vienna fostered colorblindness and integration while mirroring the creation of a new, collective European identity.

The panel “Jazz and Civil Rights in a Divided Germany” began with Christian Schmidt-Rost’s analysis of the discourse on jazz in East Germany. Examining jazz magazines and concert series, Schmidt-Rost traced the changing political interpretations of jazz

in East Germany from the postwar period to the mid-1960s, relating these interpretations to their intersection with the civil rights struggle. Andrew Hurley scrutinized the jazz discourse in West Germany from the 1950s to the 1970s, focusing on the example of Joachim-Ernst Berendt. Hurley demonstrated that Berendt, initially fascinated with the musical qualities of jazz, came to view it as a tool for liberalizing West German postwar society. Berendt commented on the alliance between jazz and the civil rights movements of the 1950/60s, openly criticizing the ideology of Black Power and Black Nationalism at the beginning of the 1970s, which he regarded as fascist. This presentation illustrated another instance in which the German past overshadowed perceptions of the civil rights struggle.

A roundtable on “Expanding the African-American Diaspora” concluded the conference day, focusing on lacunae in scholarship. Judith Weisenfeld proposed several areas that require closer examination: the religious dimension, for instance, links between Germany and Black Caribbean Moravians, some African-American artists’ appropriation of European culture as African-American culture, or the history of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps in Germany. Matt Heron described his life as a photographer during the U.S. civil rights movement, his support of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and his project, “National Archive for Civil Rights Movement Photography,” which underscores the crucial role of visual representations for both the domestic dynamic and transnational attraction of the civil rights struggle. Sara Lennox called for more interdisciplinary and transnational work, emphasizing the need to apply the ideas of “race” and “whiteness” to the German case. Gerald Horne applauded the call for a stronger concentration on interdisciplinary studies, suggesting closer cooperation between African-American studies and German departments, and outlining potential topics of research in this area. The subsequent discussion encouraged researchers to further address gender, especially concerning dependents of U.S. military personnel in Germany.

The last session of the day started with the panel entitled “The Commodification of Civil Rights.” Katharina Gerund examined Angela Davis’s impact on the “West German imagination.” Gerund argued that, as a black female student, Davis defied the traditional discursive categories of “Black Panther” or “black GI,” and emerged as one of the leading representatives of the “other” America. Moritz Ege

analyzed representations of African Americans in advertisements, books, and magazines, and the “Afroamericanophilia” expressed in West German visual culture in the late 1960s. Ege contended that members of the German student movement attempted to emulate African Americans in language and style and pursued interracial relationships as a means of demonstrating anti-racism.

The conference concluded with a panel on “History and Memory across the Atlantic,” in which several participants shared their transatlantic experiences related to the civil rights struggle. As a composer, improviser, and instrumentalist employed by the U.S. army, Joe McPhee was stationed in Germany from 1964-65 and often returned to participate in jazz concerts. Debra Tanner Abell, born in Germany and raised in the U.S. as the daughter of a white German mother from Lower Bavaria and an African-American GI from Philadelphia, talked about her childhood in the U.S. and about returning to Germany as a seventeen-year-old to trace her parents’ love story and visit her place of birth. Participating via videoconferencing, Karl-Dietrich Wolff, former president of the German Socialist Student League (SDS), shared his perceptions of the African-American civil rights struggle when he visited the U.S. and spoke about his role in establishing the Black Panther Solidarity Committee in West Germany.

The conference sparked lively discussions about the transnational connection between the U.S. civil rights movement and Germany, as well as aspects of the theory and methodology of writing this history. It underlined the crucial need for scholars to further examine the global impact of the U.S. civil rights movement, and to investigate how the experiences of African Americans abroad affected it.

S. Marina Jones (GHI) and Martin Klimke (GHI)