THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AS AN INSPIRATION FOR SOCIAL PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN WEST AND EAST GERMANY

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In memory of Ulli Thiel (1943-2014),
a “drum major for peace”

The March on Washington and Its Echo in the West German Media

In August 1963, the leading national newspapers of West Germany, as well as many local ones, published front-page articles on the goals, the preparation, and performance of the March on Washington. Conservative newspapers like Die Welt and liberal newspapers like the Frankfurter Rundschau essentially agreed that the fight against racial discrimination and the demand for equal rights for African Americans in the U.S. were justified. The journalists, even though some of them were probably not entirely free of racial prejudices themselves, praised the March for being such a positive event without any of the anticipated outbreaks of violence. The correspondent of Die Welt, for example, wrote, “A big and dignified demonstration... the ‘March for Jobs and Freedom’ of the black citizens of America, in which also many thousands of whites participated, the biggest mass demonstration for political and social demands that ever took place in the capital, proceeded in a dignified manner, peacefully, without violent incidents.”

Several newspapers also emphasized the fact that leading representatives of Protestant and Catholic churches, and of Jewish organizations, were key in the March. Martin Luther King Jr. was distinguished as “the most prominent of all Negro leaders,” and as a “champion of the freedom movement” who “drove the demonstration to its emotional peak” and garnered the greatest applause. Some newspapers and church-related periodicals also published quotes or passages of his “I Have a Dream” speech with its integrationist vision.

Most Germans heard the news about the march from their regional radio stations. Although in 1963 only 7 out of the 58 million West German citizens owned a television set (compared to 17 million radio owners), this new medium played an essential role in spreading the

1 As freedom of the press did not exist in East Germany (GDR) at the time of the March on Washington, I confine my analysis to West German media. If not noted otherwise, translations of original German sources are my own.


3 Surprisingly, the influential political magazine Der Spiegel did not mention the March on Washington in its editions of August and September 1963. On the other hand, an article with quotes by Malcolm X did appear under the title “Unity and a Razor-Blade — By Malcolm X. Chief Propagator of the Black Muslims in America” (Sept. 25, 1963: 80).


5 FAZ, Aug. 30, 1963: 2 and 3.

information, sounds, and images of the march throughout Germany. Via the news satellite “Telstar” many German citizens were able to view parts of the demonstration live. On the eve of the march, in a “Meet the Press” telecast, they could watch Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Martin Luther King Jr. being interviewed by German journalists in Washington, DC. On August 30, a second interview with King was shown on German TV, followed by an interview with the segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace.7

When German citizens learned about the march, many of them remembered the disturbing pictures of the brutal attacks on peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, only a few months earlier. Some newspapers and especially church publications in West Germany had published quotes from King’s prophetic “Letter from Birmingham Jail” during the preceding months.8 The impact of the march on Germans can therefore only be evaluated if it is not seen as an isolated event but as an important milestone of the American civil rights movement. The news media in Germany reported extensively on the sequence of events that began with the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956) and proceeded through the sit-ins (1960), the Freedom Rides (1961), the Birmingham Campaign, the March on Washington (1963), and the Mississippi Freedom Summer (1964) to the Selma Voting Rights Campaign (1965). In the summer of 1963, many Germans perceived the march as the culmination of all the previous efforts in the civil rights struggle and Martin Luther King Jr. as the undisputed and charismatic leader and icon of this movement.

The Goals of the March on Washington and the Political and Economic Situation of West Germany in 1963

The March on Washington was intended as a march “for jobs and freedom” that was to promote comprehensive civil rights legislation. From the perspective of West Germans, the march dealt with specific problems of the United States: the lack of employment, decent jobs, and equal rights for the black minority. In West Germany, in contrast, the early 1960s were a time of full employment thanks to the so-called economic miracle. In fact, the country was so prosperous that migrant workers from Spain, Greece, and Turkey were needed to fill positions in there.9 Germans could thus not relate to the U.S. job situation, and, although they understood the demand for freedom, their understanding of this was different from that of the African American

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7 See Hamburger Abendblatt, Aug. 28, 1963: 4, and Aug. 31, 1963: 4. In the telecast of Aug. 30, King was presented as the “Gandhi of Alabama.” Alabama Governor George Wallace (1919-1998) was interviewed because he had gained international notoriety as an outspoken defender of segregation. In his 1963 inaugural address he pledged: “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” In June 1963 he stood in a schoolhouse door and later at the entrance to the University of Alabama to block the admission of African American students. Unfortunately, no audio or written version of the “Meet the Press” interviews with King and Wallace have yet been found (Stefan Hertrampf, archivist of the Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, in a letter to the author, July 23, 2014).


9 In the 1960s they were called Gastarbeiter (guest workers).
minority as postwar Germany had no comparable underprivileged minority. When West Germans spoke of the lack of freedom, they primarily thought of their countrymen living in East Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), under a communist regime. The erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 symbolized this oppression to the West Germans.

Despite these differences in perception between the U.S. and West Germany, the West German media coverage of the march undoubtedly increased West Germans’ knowledge about the situation of African Americans and white racism in the U.S. And in some cases it may have positively influenced their perception of the black minority in the U.S. especially as the German nation was still grappling with its own racist past. One must keep in mind that until the end of the Nazi regime in 1945, the German people had been indoctrinated with racist stereotypes of Neger (Negroes) or Schwarze (blacks). Not all Germans had renounced these racist stereotypes by 1963, although some did speak out against them and dedicated themselves to fighting racial injustice wherever it occurred. Prominent among them was the Protestant minister and church leader Heinrich Grüber (1891-1975). An active opponent of the Nazi regime who had been imprisoned in two concentration camps (1940-1943), Grüber testified during the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961. Two years later, after he had witnessed the civil rights struggle in the U.S., he invited Martin Luther King Jr. to visit Berlin. Grüber exchanged letters with King in which he compared King’s fight against racism to his own fight during the Nazi regime: “I write in the bond of the same faith and hope, knowing your experiences are the same as ours were. … During the time of Hitler, I was often ashamed of being a German, as today, I am ashamed of being white. I am grateful to you, dear brother, and to all who stand with you for this fight of justice, which you are conducting in the spirit of Jesus Christ.”

The March on Washington and the American Civil Rights Movement as an Inspiration for Social Protest Movements in West Germany

In the second half of the 1960s, West Germany, like many other countries, was shaken by unprecedented student protests. They were characterized by sharp controversies about activists’ use of violent means to change societal conditions. In many cases, the German student protest movement adopted techniques of the civil rights movement, as well as the student and anti-war movement in the U.S.


11 Heinrich Grüber to Martin Luther King Jr., July 15, 1963, cited in Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (New York, 2010), 92. For the relationship between King and Grüber, see the informative analysis by Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 89-105. Grüber wrote the afterword to the German edition of King’s book on the Montgomery bus boycott (Martin Luther King, *Freiheit*, Kassel, 1964, 203-205) and included King in the dedication to his memoirs *Erinnerungen aus sieben Jahrzehnten*.


In response to this situation, Theodor Ebert (b. 1937), a Christian pacifist and lecturer on politics, initiated a working group of students and assistant professors of the Kirchliche Hochschule and of the Otto-Suhr-Institut of the Free University in West Berlin to discuss how the “extra-parliamentary opposition” could “translate” and “make use of” the practices of the American civil rights movement.17 Ebert used teach-ins and other means of communication to pass on the experiences of the civil rights movement in the planning and execution of strictly nonviolent demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Ebert, together with the Protestant theologian Hans-Jürgen Benedict (b. 1941), published a collection of essays: *Macht von unten: Bürgerrechtsbewegung, außerparlamentarische Opposition und Kirchenreform* (Power from Below: civil rights movement, Extra-Parliamentary Opposition and Church Reform).18 In this book, the Protestant theologian Rüdiger Reitz (b. 1938), who had spent two years at the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana, analyzed the role Christian ministers played in the civil rights movement.19 His essay “The Minister as a Public Demonstrator” focuses on the lessons of the civil rights marches in the years between 1955 and 1968, especially including the March on Washington. Reitz’s intention was “to make the American experiences fruitful” for ministers and churches in Germany, challenging pastors who were content to live comfortably within the traditional church-state relationship.20 He reminded them of King’s words in a speech at the beginning of (e.g., direct action: sit-ins, teach-ins, go-ins).14 However, not all of the German activists believed in the power of nonviolence as much as King did.15 Within the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS — German Socialist Student League), a leading organization in the student protests in the 1960s originally inspired by the SNCC and the American SDS, there were always pronounced and controversial discussions about the use of violence.16
the bus boycott in Montgomery: “We will only say to the people, ‘Let your conscience be your guide.’”[21]

**Influences on German Activism**

While King’s death in 1968 is often regarded as marking the end of the American civil rights movement, the new West German social movements were just entering a peak phase that would continue throughout the late 1960s, the 1970s, and 1980s.[22] The initial impetus for these movements was student opposition to former Nazis holding respectable positions in the West German government and judiciary and to the emergency laws of 1968.[23] In the ensuing decades, protests against the use of nuclear energy for military or civilian purposes and protests against the arms race, especially the installation of missiles with nuclear warheads, stood at the center of these social movements. These protests formed the environmental movement and the peace movement in West Germany and took a great deal of inspiration from the American civil rights movement.

In the mid-1970s self-proclaimed citizen initiatives successfully blocked the erection of a nuclear plant in Wyhl in southwestern Germany. They used nonviolent action techniques and forms of civil disobedience while occupying the construction site. A key figure in the resistance was Wolfgang Sternstein (b. 1939), a peace researcher and activist who was strongly influenced by the ideas and actions of King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Philip and Daniel Berrigan.[24] In spite of some opposing groups who refused to renounce violence as a means to reach their goal, Sternstein, in the tradition of Gandhi and King, always held fast to his conviction: “The way and the goal, means and ends, must correspond if the goal is to be reached.”[25]

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22 See Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht, ed., *Neue soziale Bewegungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 2nd ed. (Bonn, 1991), and Dieter Rucht, “The Study of Social Movements in West Germany: Between Activism and Social Science,” in *Research on Social Movements: The State of the Art in Western Europe and the USA*, ed. Dieter Rucht, 175-202 (Frankfurt/Main, 1991). As Rucht observed in this article, “there are large overlaps between the adherents of various movements” (187).
23 The Emergency Acts were passed by the West German parliament on May 30, 1968, as an amendment to the Basic Law to ensure the government’s ability to react to crises like uprisings or war. The Free Democratic Party, student groups, and labor unions were strongly opposed to these laws because they limited civil rights in an emergency.
24 In his autobiography, *Mein Weg zwischen Gewalt und Gewaltfreiheit* (My Way between Violence and Nonviolence [Norderstedt, 2005]), Sternstein spoke of these figures as his “spiritual sources” (385). The brothers Daniel (b. 1921) and Philip Berrigan (1923-2002), both ordained Roman Catholic priests (Philip later married and founded a family), became radical peace activists. They engaged in courageous nonviolent actions against the Vietnam War and against nuclear weapons. For example, in 1968, in Catonsville, MD, they doused draft cards in napalm and burned them in a group of nine activists (“The Catonsville Nine”). In 1980, they hammered on nuclear warhead nose cones in King of Prussia, PA, and poured blood on military documents. This marked the beginning of the Plowshares Movement against (nuclear) weapons. Daniel and Philip spent many years in prison for their acts of civil disobedience. See Murray Polner and Jim O’Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Life and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan* (New York, 1997).
25 O’Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous*, 255. Because of various acts of civil disobedience Sternstein was imprisoned several times, spending more than one year total in prison.
In 1975, environmental movement activists organized resistance to the building of a nuclear plant in Brokdorf (at the Elbe River near Hamburg). When at the end of 1976 conflicts around the construction site escalated, a group of Christian ministers and lay people founded the “Hamburg Initiative of Church Employees and Nonviolent Action.” To prepare for protest activities, they watched Ely Landau’s documentary film on King. Benedict, one of the pastors of the Martin Luther King congregation in Hamburg, described his reaction to the film: “All of this stirs me up, but it also strengthens my commitment. I realize the difference of our experiences compared to those of oppressed blacks in the U.S. — we protest as privileged and economically secure church officials. But I also see the parallels. To me the fight against nuclear energy — like King’s actions — is a protest of love for life and social justice.”

The Hamburg initiative organized nonviolent demonstrations against the nuclear plant and tried to prevent demonstrators from using violence against policemen. Yet in some cases they could not hinder the small minority of demonstrators in self-proclaimed “autonomous groups” from violently attacking their opponents. Benedict also drafted and distributed a flyer for the police: “Even if you hit us, you remain our human brother. We will not insult you or hit back.” Expecting the use of water guns by the police, the members of the initiative sang the protest song “We Shall Overcome.”

Plans for a new runway at the Frankfurt Airport (Startbahn West) became a central issue for the environmental movement in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. When the beginning of construction work led to war-like battles between the police and groups of demonstrators, citizens living in the vicinity (many of them active members of Christian congregations) organized nonviolent demonstrations, sit-ins, and special worship services. In the context of the “People’s Free University Startbahn West,” Egbert Jahn (b. 1941), a political scientist and peace researcher, delivered a speech entitled “Nonviolent Resistance in Parliamentary Democracies: The Experiences of Martin Luther King and the American Civil Rights Movement.” Jahn described the “six basic aspects of nonviolent resistance” King had developed. Invoking the example of the American civil rights movement, he emphasized the legitimacy of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience in the German democratic system and underlined the necessity of intensive training in nonviolent methods for activists.

The NATO decision to locate cruise missiles in Western Europe, codified in its 1979 Double-Track Decision, led to unprecedented...
mass demonstrations in the German peace movement. On October 10, 1981, about 300,000 concerned citizens gathered in Bonn, then the capital of West Germany, demonstrating against the installation of missiles with nuclear warheads. The most-applauded speaker during this rally was Dr. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King. She had flown to Germany for this special event and told her German audience: “It is the spirit of peace and nonviolence that brings you together today. I can assure you that you have strong moral support in the United States. ... Our fight is your fight; our movement is your movement.” Mrs. King emphasized that her experience had taught her that a nonviolent mass movement can be successful.32 Huge peace marches at the biannual church conventions in Hamburg in 1981 and in Hanover in 1983, and the annual peace weeks in more than 3,000 congregations, showed that Protestant laypersons and clergy were crucial to the peace movement of the 1980s.33 In the urban congregation I ministered to in the “Volkswagen City” of Wolfsburg, for example, I organized a seminar on the ideas and actions of Henry David Thoreau, Gandhi, King, and the Berrigans,34 and we got training in the use of nonviolent techniques in workshops. The church council and other members of this liberal, peace- and justice-oriented (Lutheran) congregation with a tradition of community organizing participated in peace demonstrations and conducted “peace weeks.”

In the movement against nuclear rearmament, activists organized blockades of military installations of the U.S. Army in southwestern Germany — specifically, in Mutlangen, Großengstingen, and Büchel where nuclear missiles or bombs were stored. In Großengstingen all participants of the blockade were organized in small local groups and had to undergo thorough training in the theory and practice of nonviolent action.35 Sternstein declared: “The blockade of Großengstingen stands in the tradition of civil disobedience against an unjust government as it was initiated by H. D. Thoreau, M. K. Gandhi and M. L. King.”36 In 1983 and 1986 a small group around Sternstein even intruded into U.S. Army locations with symbolic actions following the example of the “Plowshares” movement in the U.S. They also sang “We Shall Overcome.”37

It was a dedicated Christian pacifist and conscientious objector, teacher Ulli Thiel (1943-2014) from Karlsruhe in southern Germany, who


33 For the German translation of Coretta Scott King’s speech, see ibid., 99-100. »

34 See note 24.

35 See Sternstein, Mein Weg, 282-98.


37 See Ulrich Philipp, Politik von unten. Wolfgang Sternstein — Erfahrungen eines Grassuweltpolitikers und Aktionsforschers (Berlin, 2006), 110-17. Sternstein’s radicalism was atypical for the German peace movement in the 1970s and 1980s. In retrospect, Sternstein wrote: “The German peace movement was miles away from the radicalism and readiness to make sacrifices of the campaigns for independence in India or the civil rights movement around Martin Luther King.” (Sternstein, Mein Weg, 265).
coined the motto of the German peace movement — *Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen* (create peace without weapons) — and who initiated human chains as a mass signal against the arms race in 1983.\(^{38}\) The fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington in 2013 prompted him to write an article with the title “Prägung durch Martin Luther King” (Inspired by Martin Luther King). The autobiographical statement begins with the words: “Nobody has influenced my thinking and acting as much as the US-American civil rights activist Martin Luther King. For me, his nonviolent direct actions ... have always been an important orientation for the planning and execution of local as well as supra-regional peace actions.”\(^{39}\)

From the American civil rights movement, German peace and environmental activists learned that in order to be successful, nonviolent direct actions must be thoroughly planned and must include prior training. To that aim, courses or centers for learning about and training in nonviolent direct action were founded throughout Germany, as the following two examples illustrate. In 1980, the Bildungs- und Begegnungsstätte für gewaltfreie Aktion (Center for Education and Training for Nonviolent Action) was established in Wustrow, a small village in northeastern Lower Saxony. This institution grew out of the protests against the nuclear waste disposal site in nearby Gorleben. The center aims to “to help to translate concern about military conflicts, ecological destruction and social injustice into nonviolent action.”\(^{40}\) The Werkstatt für gewaltfreie Aktion Baden (Workshop for Nonviolent Action in Baden) was founded in 1984, after nuclear missiles were installed on German soil in 1983. The initiative offered (and still offers) seminars and training sessions. Centers like these were established because “many [German] activists who conducted training sessions in nonviolent action had come into contact with people who lived and practiced nonviolence in the USA. ... The contact with American trainers like Bill Moyers, who had still worked with Martin Luther King Jr. himself, with their enthusiasm and creativity, inspired and animated the then still nascent nonviolent movement in West Germany.”\(^{41}\) Benedict even goes further in expressly linking the civil rights movement to the use of direct action techniques in German protest movements, though he also notes the absence of spirituality in the German adoption of many of them: “Manifold and imaginative actions of civil disobedience have been developed in the environmental movement and in the peace movement. This variety directly and indirectly is an effect of the nonviolent actions

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38 The most famous human chain with probably more than 400,000 participants on Oct. 22, 1983, stretched over 67 miles from Stuttgart to Neu-Ulm.


of the American civil rights movement and the peace movement. The spiritual dimension of most of King’s actions was, however, not adopted in many cases. The corresponding spirituality does not exist in many of the nonviolent groups (in Germany).”

In addition to these written manifestations of the influence of the American civil rights movement and the obvious adoption of its techniques, we must not forget or underestimate its cultural influence, especially in the field of music: freedom songs and black music were critical inspiration and motivation for West German protest movements. Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, Bob Dylan, and others gave live concerts in West (and less often in East) Germany in front of enthusiastic crowds. Their records and CDs — for example, the live recording of Pete Seeger’s famous Carnegie Hall Concert of June 8, 1963, with many songs referring to the civil rights movement in the South — were very popular. Songs like “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” “Blowing in the Wind,” “This Land Is Your Land,” and, of course, “We Shall Overcome” were often sung by peace and environmental activists. Joan Baez even participated in the anti-military “Easter Marches” in West Germany.

The March on Washington and the American Civil Rights Movement as an Inspiration for Social Protest in East Germany

The political rulers of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were ambivalent about the American civil rights movement. As they regarded the U.S. as an exponent of racism and imperialism, they officially expressed solidarity with this movement as well as with the American peace movement to end the war in Vietnam. GDR party leaders praised King as a hero of international anti-imperialism. On the other hand, the government feared that the message of nonviolent methods for conflict resolution would undermine the official doctrine of the necessity of military means for the protection of socialism. This ambivalence became especially obvious in September 1964, when King visited West and East Berlin. King, the

44 In an official commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 10, 1968, the president of the East » German CDU, Gerald Götzting, spoke of “the simple truth that race war equals class war and that both, like the struggle for world peace, are directly connected to the revolutionary fight against imperialism” (Gerd Götzting, “Ein Leben für Menschlichkeit und Brüderlichkeit,” in Martin Luther Kings Vermächtnis, ed. Sekretariat der Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands (Berlin, 1968), 9). In her memoirs, Anneliese Kaminski (née Vahl) reports that she was asked by the CDU in 1974 to write an article about “Martin Luther King as a communist leader in the USA.” She declined and emphasized that “Martin Luther King had acted as a committed Christian.” See Anneliese Kaminski, Erfülltes Leben (Berlin, 2007), 53; and her King biography: Anneliese Vahl, Martin Luther King. Stationen auf dem Wege, Berichte und Selbstzeugnisse (Berlin, 1968).
45 In retrospect, Günther Wirth, an influential member of the East German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and chief editor of the state-owned publishing house Union-Verlag in the 1960s, wrote: “In the GDR, the nonviolence of Martin Luther King … generally stood under the ideological verdict of being close to ‘feeblish pacifism’.” (Günther Wirth, “Die neue Richtung unseres Zeitalters — Martin Luther Kings Traum von Gerechtigkeit, Gleichheit und Gewalthosigkeit,” Jan. 15, 1999, 2-3, http://www.kingzentrum.de. The motto of the state-controlled youth organization Freie Deutsche Jugend was: “Peace must be defended — peace must be armed.”
American civil rights movement in both German states, was permitted to enter East Berlin although he had no passport with him, but his appearances in two East Berlin churches, in St. Mary’s Church and in Sophia Church right in the center of Berlin, were not publicly announced. In his speech on the occasion of the Tag der Kirche (Day of the Church) in front of more than 20,000 citizens at the Waldbühne, an amphitheater in West Berlin, and in his sermons in East Berlin in overcrowded churches, King presented an overview of the civil rights struggle in the United States and emphasized the necessity of nonviolent protest to bring about social change.

It is not easy to assess the impact of King’s only visit to Germany on East Germans. I agree with Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson: “The event may not have had any immediate visible effect in 1964, but it certainly had a long-term impact. King’s visit and message gave the Christian minority in the GDR new hope. His theology and the method of nonviolent resistance doubtlessly inspired the GDR opposition in the following decades and thus — at least to some degree — contributed to the eventual downfall of the communist regime there.” As the East German government tried to keep tight control over all citizens, large social movements were not able to develop. Nevertheless, small dissident, “alternative groups” arose at the end of the 1960s. In an authoritarian state, they demanded basic civil rights (free elections, freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly) and protested the militarization of education, especially the so-called Wehrunterricht (teaching defense politics to children), as well as the arms race in East and West and growing ecological grievances in the GDR.

The churches in East Germany were the only organizations that had a certain degree of independence from state control, so they became more significant as pockets of resistance in the 1970s and 1980s. This was especially true of the Protestant churches, where more freedom of expression was allowed than in the Roman Catholic Church, which followed a policy of “political abstinence” secured

46 For King’s visit to West and East Berlin on Sept. 12-14, 1964, see the excellent documentation and analysis by Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke in A Breath of Freedom, chapter 5: “Bringing Civil Rights to East and West: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Cold War Berlin,” 89-105, where they assert: “King’s visit to the East is particularly striking in two respects: First, apart from his adventurous border crossing, he did not encounter East German government representatives, and second, his visit generated relatively little coverage in the East German media” (102). See also Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, “‘We Shall Overcome’: The Impact of the African American Freedom Struggle on Race Relations and Social Protest in Germany after World War II,” in The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade, ed. Grzegorz Kosci, Clara Juncker, Sharon Monteith, and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, 66-97 (Bielefeld, 2013).

47 Waldschmidt-Nelson, “‘We Shall Overcome,” 77. Höhn and Klimke state: “King’s visit to Berlin in the fall of 1964, only a month before winning the Nobel Peace Prize, stands out as an important point in the reception of the African American civil rights movement in Germany. … In the shorter term, the repercussions of King’s visit were felt primarily in the religious sphere. East German publishing houses thus considered it politically safe to extensively publish texts by and about him in the following years. In this way, these publishers helped to incorporate King into the official doctrine by insisting that ‘Christianity and the humanistic goals of socialism’ were not opposed to one another. This ideological usurpation notwithstanding, King’s writings and actions, as well as his theology, did undoubtedly serve as an inspiration for the East German opposition movement in the long run” (A Breath of Freedom, 89 and 104). Bishop Markus Dröge (of the Protestant Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz) wrote to the author on Nov. 6, 2013: “The visit of Martin Luther King in Berlin sowed a seed that 25 years later resulted in the ‘peaceful revolution.’ His call for freedom later encouraged many Christians in the GDR to stand up to the lack of freedom and the injustice in the GDR.”
by its hierarchical structure. About 27 percent of the population of East Germany, the “motherland of the Reformation,” belonged to the Protestant churches compared to about 6 percent in the Roman Catholic Church. In them, nonconformist thoughts and opposition could be expressed “under the umbrella” of local and regional churches. In church-owned rooms small dissident groups openly discussed issues of political participation and human rights and — like their West German counterparts — questions about peace, justice, and the environment. This does not mean that there were no conflicts or tensions between politically alternative groups, on the one hand, and leading representatives of the churches or members of local congregations, on the other. Besides, like the majority of the population of the GDR, many of the dissidents and courageous activists were not church members.

In the 1970s and 1980s such dissident groups came into being not only in larger cities like Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig, but also in smaller towns and rural areas. An impressive example is the Christliches Friedensseminar (Christian Peace Seminar) in the small village of Königswalde near Chemnitz (known as Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1953 to 1990). The peace seminar was founded in 1973 by electrician Hans-Jörg Weigel (b. 1943) and other Christians who were critical of the militarization of their society and the world nuclear arms situation. Nearly all of them were former “construction soldiers” (conscripts who did construction work in lieu of military service). Personal testimonials from these courageous dissenters show that many of them were inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States, and presentations, musical compositions, artworks and in an exhibition on King, they commemorated this legacy of nonviolent action as alternative to war and violence and of the mobilizing power of the “dream.”

With admirable perseverance and creativity, Georg Meusel (b. 1942), another electrician, from the small town of Werdau in Saxony, who


49 See Neubert, Geschichte, esp. 539-50; Pollack, Politischer Protest, 197-200; and Thomas Mayer, Der nicht aufgibt. Christoph Wonneberger — eine Biographie (Leipzig, 2014).


51 The activists of the peace seminar established contacts to the peace movement in West Germany and in the Netherlands. See Raum für Güte und Gewissen, 13. “The groups of construction soldiers and conscientious objectors ... were the germ of the developing independent ‘peace movement’ in the GDR.” (Pollack, Politischer Protest, 68).

52 One such testimonial was a presentation in May 1979 by Georg Meusel in Königswalde entitled “Nonviolent Action — Alternative to War and Violence, to Indifference and Resignation” (Pollack, Politischer Protest, 59).

53 This was an exhibition in St. Jacob’s Church of Königswalde from Oct. 7 to Nov. 10, 1989.
was a founding member of the Christian Peace Seminar in Königswalde, spread the ideas of nonviolent social change in the GDR. A pacifist who was strongly opposed to the militarization of education in the GDR, he was very impressed by a presentation about the Montgomery bus boycott as well as by King’s book “Why We Can’t Wait.”

Meusel was fascinated by King’s adherence to nonviolence and “the way in which he related the biblical message to societal problems.” After King’s assassination, Meusel used stamp exhibitions to promote pacifist ideas. It took him four years (to 1987) to raise enough money and obtain permission to show Landau’s documentary film about King in the GDR. The state security service of the GDR, the Stasi, wrote about Meusel in 1977: “There is reason to believe that M. intends to transfer the fighting method of nonviolent resistance, which has been developed for capitalistic conditions, to the socialist conditions in the GDR and to initiate a civil rights movement.”

Although the communist regime was eager to celebrate the civil rights movement to indict the capitalist enemy, it feared its very methods might be used against its own regime.

In 1980, the youth pastor of the Lutheran Church of Saxony, Harald Bretschneider (b. 1942), initiated the first so-called decade of peace in the GDR. He had the creative idea of producing bookmarks and cloth badges with the words “swords into plowshares” and “Micah 4” alongside a stylized version of the famous sculpture by the Russian artist Evgeniy Vuchetich, thus openly challenging the militaristic ideology of the GDR.

Highly impressed by two of King’s texts, “Why We Can’t Wait” and his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, which had been published in the GDR in 1965 and 1966, Bretschneider became a conscientious objector and later a “construction soldier.” He passed these texts on to his companions.

As a parish minister and youth pastor he had many occasions to share the ideas and methods of the civil rights movement. Bretschneider regularly brought together state-independent peace groups, human rights groups, and environmental groups in Saxony.

Pastor Christoph Wonneberger (b. 1944), who was inspired by the “Prague Spring,” Solidarnosc in Poland, and Theodor Ebert’s publications about the concept of civil as opposed to military defense, publicly demanded in the early 1980s the installation of a Sozialer Friedensdienst (SoFD, social peace service) in the GDR. He founded the Gruppe Menschenrechte (group for human rights) and organized peace prayers in Dresden. In 1985 he became a pastor at St. Luke’s...
Church in Leipzig and was soon coordinating the peace prayers in Leipzig in which opposition groups, including human rights, peace, and environmental groups, expressed their grievances and visions. The weekly Monday Prayers in St. Nicholas Church became the starting point for mass demonstrations for change in the GDR. This connection between religious worship, political information, and peaceful demonstrations is strongly reminiscent of the mass meetings and demonstrations of the black freedom struggle in the South. Many activists and historians see Wonneberger’s sermon in the peace prayer on September 25, 1989, as a decisive call for the “peaceful revolution” in the GDR in October 1989. This peace prayer ended with the singing of the “Internationale” and “We Shall Overcome.” Wonneberger later reflected on the figures who had most influenced him: “I learned back then in India from Gandhi how nonviolent action functions. I learned back then in the USA from King the ten commandments for the civil rights movement.”

The parish pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Christian Führer (1943-2014), also played a key role in the Monday Prayers. He praised King as one of the few Christians who took the Sermon on the Mount seriously and had training in and exercised nonviolent resistance. He reminded his listeners of King’s vision. In his autobiography he states: “The ‘Peaceful Revolution’... belongs to the real experiences with the Sermon on the Mount, with the power of nonviolence. It was expressed in the mighty call: ‘No violence!’”

On many occasions, GDR opposition groups sang “We Shall Overcome.” This hymn had special meaning for the GDR activists as an allusion to King and the influence of his nonviolent protests, as Uwe Koch explained: “The civil rights movement and the peace movement in the GDR referred to the experienced transformative power of nonviolence that had emerged from King. [The] hymn ‘We Shall Overcome’ was in the hearts and on the lips of many who went into the streets in the fall of 1989 in the GDR.” One Monday Prayer participant in 1989 described the effect that singing this hymn communally had on him and many others: “When I sang ... the American civil rights song, tears came to my eyes. I didn’t feel left alone. We learned to walk upright.” Interestingly, this song was also incorporated into the songbook of the official youth organization of the GDR, the Free German Youth, which provides an example of the ideological usurpation of the civil rights movement by the East German regime.
On the 9th of October 1989 in Leipzig, the crucial Tag der Angst (day of fear), it was not clear whether the expected mass demonstration after the Monday Prayer would be violently suppressed by the army and the police and end in bloodshed. In the Monday Prayer of that day, the pastor of the Reformed Church, Hans-Jürgen Sievers (b. 1943), who had heard King preach in St. Mary’s Church of Berlin in 1964, purposely referred to a famous passage of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.

It was the same one Reverend Bob Graetz had chosen for his sermon when the Montgomery bus boycott had successfully ended. Sievers reminded his listeners of how the protesters in Montgomery had won new human dignity and assured them that they, too, would gain dignity and respect as long as they stuck to nonviolent methods: “we will not allow ourselves to be treated like children either. ... As we have a good goal, the way toward it and the means we apply must be good.”

A month later, November 9, on the very day when the Berlin Wall was torn down, the pastor of an East German congregation near Leipzig, which had a partnership with our congregation in Wolfsburg (West Germany), wrote me a postcard in which he explicitly addressed King’s influence as a model for the movement: “Since Oct. 2, my son Tobias has taken part in every Monday Prayer in Leipzig. I think Martin Luther King accompanied many of them as a role model.” In April 1990, after the collapse of the GDR, Horst Sindermann, who had been one of the most powerful functionaries of East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party, confessed that it was the nonviolence that had been most effective in disarming the state: “We were prepared for anything, but not for candles and prayers.”

The Legacy of the American Civil Rights Movement in Unified Germany

After the so-called Wende (turnaround/change) in the GDR, the unification of Germany, and the end of the Cold War, economic and resource problems caused by unemployment, low wages, deficits in the social systems, and cuts in social services became more important to many citizens, especially in East Germany, than environmental or peace or human rights questions. These problems were caused or exacerbated by global economic and ideological neoliberalism. At the same time, an unprecedented number of migrants and asylum-seeking refugees, mainly from eastern European and African countries, entered Germany. Right-wing extremists and xenophobic groups reacted to this situation with street marches carrying racist symbols and with violent, sometimes fatal, attacks.

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66  “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11).
67  See Martin Luther King Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York, 1964), 141.
69  Postcard in author’s possession.
70  Horst Sindermann in an interview with the political magazine Der Spiegel on April 20, 1990, qtd. in Martin-Luther-King-Zentrum, ed., Raum für Güte und Gewissen, 26. In 2003 about 150 persons who had been active in opposition groups in the GDR were interviewed about their role models in the 1980s. The name most often mentioned as “very important” was Martin Luther King Jr. See Christof Geisel, Auf der Suche nach einem dritten Weg (Berlin, 2005), 253.
71  See Roth and Rucht, eds., Die sozialen Bewegungen, 29-34.
on members of these unwanted minorities. For the first time since the end of World War II, the German population was confronted with widespread and violent manifestations of racism in its own country.72 The quantitative and qualitative growth of social injustices and of open racism was a new challenge for protest movements in unified Germany.

In recent times, there seem to have been fewer initiatives for social justice influenced by the American civil rights movement. I know of two examples: The “Workshop for Nonviolent Action” in Baden initiated a campaign against cuts in social services inspired by “the campaign concept of the American civil rights movement.”73 Secondly, the Monday Prayers and demonstrations in Leipzig, so clearly influenced by the civil rights movement, did continue after the Wende as well, focusing their attention on economic questions, especially the problems of the unemployed, the working poor, and welfare recipients.

Initiatives and groups opposing the growing racism in unified Germany in most cases do not explicitly refer to or recognize the legacy of the American civil rights movement or Martin Luther King Jr. as a source of their inspiration.74 But their strategies and methods — nonviolent demonstrations and direct or symbolic actions, such as Lichterketten (lines of demonstrators carrying lights) against xenophobia or prayer vigils for asylum-seekers in pre-deportation detention, acts of civil disobedience in sanctuary work — are probably often indirectly influenced by that legacy.

Moreover, there are other examples of how the American civil rights movement has inspired actions against xenophobia and racism in Germany. In 1998 the “Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolence and Civil Courage” was founded in Werdau, Saxony, with the following mission: “In an increasingly violent world, the center promotes the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and other pioneers of nonviolence. Drawing on the experience of the 1989 peaceful revolution in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), we aim to apply lessons from history to present-day conflicts, particularly in the field of right-wing extremism.”75 At the biannual Protestant Church congress in Munich in 1993, one day was dedicated to the theme of “Walking on with Martin Luther King” and involved the presentation of examples

72 See Kirchenamt der EKD and Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, eds., Gemeinsames Wort der Kirchen zu den Herausforderungen durch Migration und Flucht (Bonn, 1997), esp. 9–13, which states: “In the early 1990s, fear of and hostility to foreigners became societal problems of »


74 Anne Broden of the Informations- und Dokumentationszentrum für Antirassismusarbeit (IDA, Information and Documentation Center for Anti-Racism Work, founded in 1990) stated: “The movement against racism in Germany is a very young movement, existing perhaps twenty or even fewer years. During this time, the civil rights movement of the USA was not as much in the focus...” (e-mail to the author, Aug. 7, 2013).

75 Flyer of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Werdau (in English).
of nonviolent action and civil disobedience against racism and manifestations of social injustice in Germany.

In Germany today, there are a number of streets, as well as about two dozen institutions and edifices, mainly church-owned buildings and state schools, named after Martin Luther King Jr. Curricula and books for high school students deal with the civil rights movement and King’s life and work. “We Shall Overcome” has even found its way into the Lutheran hymnal. Since November 2013 an exhibition “Hewing out of the Mountain of Despair a Stone of Hope — Martin Luther King and the GDR” has been circulating throughout Germany, and in September 2014 the fiftieth anniversary of King’s visit to West and East Berlin was commemorated with a variety of events. Still the question remains: Will the various ways in which Martin Luther King Jr. and the American civil rights movement are commemorated in Germany end up being just an excuse for not really taking more decisive action against racism, xenophobia, and social injustice? Or will their legacy further inspire Germans to actively “go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism”?

At any rate, in a time when many concerned citizens all over the world are critical of many aspects of U.S. politics, it is encouraging and challenging to keep “the other America” in mind, the United States of the March on Washington and the civil rights movement, which has helped Germany overcome its authoritarian heritage and has shaped its social protest movements and groups over the past five decades and continues to do so today.

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