AFRICAN AMERICANS AND GERMANY/ THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE, AFRICAN AMERICAN GIs, AND GERMANY

Since 2008, African American history and the experiences of African Americans in Germany have been a focal point of the GHI’s activities in U.S. and transatlantic history. This commitment to African American history was signaled by the spring 2008 lecture series “African Americans and Germans: Historical Encounters.” In collaboration with the Humanities Council of Washington, DC, Vassar College, and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, the GHI mounted the exhibition “African American Civil Rights and Germany” in November 2008. The opening of that exhibition featured a panel discussion on “Martin Luther King Jr. and Germany in the 1960s.” The exhibition travelled to nearly twenty cites in the U.S., Germany, and Great Britain between 2009 and 2011, and it is scheduled to be shown in at least another ten. To promote research on African American-German interactions and African American history generally, the GHI established a doctoral fellowship program that enables two graduate students to spend a year in residence at the GHI. The central project in the GHI’s efforts to promote research into the African American experience is the collaborative initiative “The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany,” which received the NAACP’s Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Award in 2009. Several events associated with the African Americans and Germany were jointly sponsored by the GHI and the Humanities Council of Washington, DC. In recognition for its contributions to public life and scholarship in the District, the Humanities Council bestowed its Partner Award on the GHI in 2010.

The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany

“The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany” is a joint project sponsored by the GHI, Vassar College, and Heidelberg Center for American Studies, and it is directed by Maria Höhn (Vassar College) and Martin Klimke (GHI Research Fellow 2009–2011). The project explores the connection between the U.S. military presence abroad and the advancement of civil rights in the U.S. It investigates the role that African-American GIs played in carrying the civil rights movement to Germany, which was host to the largest contingent of U.S. troops deployed abroad. The central activity of this multifaceted project is the creation of a digital archive and online research portal (www.aacvr-germany.org).
Between 1945 and the end of the Cold War, some 15–20 million American soldiers, families and civilian employees lived in Germany. Between 2–3 million of those Americans were African American. By giving voice to their experience and to that of the people who interacted with them, the project will expand the story of the African-American civil rights movement beyond the boundaries of the U.S.

The digital archive has three main goals: First, it will gather and preserve materials on an important, but little known chapter of American and African-American history as well as transatlantic relations after the Second World War. Second, it will make these materials available worldwide and free of charge to scholars and teachers in the humanities. Third, it will foster the growth of a community of scholars, teachers, and students who are engaged in exploring the African American civil rights movement and its reverberations beyond the United States.

**Why Germany? From the Project Mission Statement**

If nothing else, the election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008 underscored once more the many ways in which events in this country, for better or worse, can affect the hearts and minds of people across the globe. Writing shortly before the election, for example, British historian and commentator Timothy Garton Ash gave voice to the sense of hope the prospect of an Obama victory had aroused throughout Europe and, indeed, the rest of the world. “This is our election,” Garton Ash wrote, “The world’s election. Our future depends on it, and we live it as intensely as Americans do. All we lack is the vote.” In a very similar way, the civil rights movement
in the United States during the late fifties and, in particular, the early sixties, received the worldwide attention. With its spectacular nature and the imagery of civil rights actions, as well as its moral implications set in the propaganda battles of the Cold War, it transcended national borders and was formative for a variety of people outside the U.S. The iconography and content of the African-American struggle also seized the attention of many Germans, East and West. Its leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were very much aware of this global impact, which they used as leverage in their struggle to bring about domestic reform.

Few people saw this interconnectedness and the global dimension of American history clearer than Dr. King. When invited to Oslo in December 1964 to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, King circled around themes that were of global significance, then and now: racial injustice, poverty, and war. In a world threatened by nuclear extinction and the Cold War confrontation between East and West, Dr. King stressed that, “In one sense, the civil rights movement in the United States is a special American phenomenon which must be understood in the light of American history and dealt with in terms of the American situation. But on another and more important level, what is happening in the United States today is a relatively small part of a world development.” King argued that all human beings were tied together in a “worldwide fellowship” and that “However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers.”

Dr. King’s visit to Germany and the city of Berlin three months before had undoubtedly sharpened this belief. Invited by Mayor Willy Brandt to come to the city which had only one year before prepared a triumphant welcome for President John F. Kennedy, King completed a whirlwind tour in his only two and a half days in Berlin. Most importantly though, King used the opportunity to extend his spiritual message of brotherhood to the situation of Berlin in his sermon at
the Waldbühne, arguing that although the city “stands as a symbol of the division of men on the face of the earth,” it was clear that “on either side of the wall are god’s children and no man-made barrier can obliterate that fact.”

King even went a step further and compared the civil rights struggle in the U.S. to the political struggle of the divided city:

Here in Berlin, one cannot help being aware that you are the hub around which turns the wheel of history. For just as we are proving to be the testing ground of races living together in spite of their differences, you are testing the possibility of co-existence for the two ideologies which now compete for world dominance. If ever there were a people who should be constantly sensitive to their destiny, the people of Berlin, East and West, should be they.

Regrettably, historical memory has largely ignored King’s visit to Cold War Berlin at the invitation of Willy Brandt. Even when Barack Obama was welcomed by more than 200,000 enthusiastic Berliners in the summer of 2008, only very few people noted this historical connection. This lack of tradition is particularly astonishing given the role the civil rights movement and Dr. King played in Obama’s campaign rhetoric—not only as mere references, but also in terms of signature phrases such as “the fierce urgency of now.”

In fact, Obamas’s speech in Berlin reads like a response to Dr. King’s Nobel Peace Prize lecture on the “world house” from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. Obama not only presented himself as “a fellow citizen of the world,” but employed the same transatlantic connection and global vision when he proclaimed:

People of the world – look at Berlin, where a wall came down, a continent came together, and history proved that there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one.... While the 20th century taught us that we share a common destiny, the 21st has revealed a world more intertwined than at any time in human history.

The story of our research project and this digital archive is thus a story of this entanglement and shared destinies on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the twentieth century. By tracing the encounter between
African Americans and Germany, we seek to expand the geographical boundaries of the civil rights movement and are trying to illustrate how America’s struggle for democracy reverberated across the globe. Since American forces occupied Germany in 1945, almost 3 million African American soldiers, their families and civilian employees of the U.S. Department of Defense have lived and worked in the country.

For many African Americans, the encounter with Germany left a deep impression. Remembering his tour of duty in West Germany as a young officer in the U.S. Army, the later general and Secretary of State Colin Powell remarked in his memoirs that for black soldiers, “but especially those out of the South, Germany was a breath of freedom. [They could] go where they wanted, eat where they wanted, and date whom they wanted, just like other people.”

This “breath of freedom” and the interactions between African-American civil rights activists and Germans, East and West, will be documented by The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany project’s digital archive and web portal.

**Associated Publications**


Mischa Honeck, Martin Klimke, Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov, eds., *Germany and the Black Diaspora: Points of Contact, 1250-1914* (forthcoming)

**Conferences and Public Events**

* African Americans and Germans: Historical Encounters  
  GHI Spring Lecture Series 2008

  Martin Luther King Jr. and Germany in the 1960s  
  Panel discussion at the GHI  
  November 19, 2008

  Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries  
  Workshop at the GHI  
  March 19–21, 2009

  African American Civil Rights and Germany in the Twentieth Century  
  Conference held at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
  October 1–4, 2009
Crossing the Color Line: A Global History of the African American Freedom Struggle
GHI Spring Lecture Series 2011

Crossing the Color Line: Global Perspectives on the Black Freedom Struggle in the Twentieth Century
Conference at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research,
Harvard University
In preparation