

Introduction

While serving in occupied Berlin in 1947, the distinguished African American writer William Gardner Smith realized that, after being treated as social equals in postwar Germany, African American GIs would “never go back to the old way again.”¹ Germany retained its reputation as a special place for black soldiers even after the American occupation ended in 1949 and the U.S. military took on the task of protector for the young Federal Republic. Former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was a newly commissioned second lieutenant when he arrived in Gelnhausen in 1958 and discovered, as he would later write in his autobiography, that “[f]or black GIs, especially those out of the South, Germany was a breath of freedom.”² Their encounter with a society free of Jim Crow-era segregation prompted many of these soldiers not only to demand equal rights while stationed in Germany but also to join the civil rights movement once they returned home to the United States. Their experiences in postwar and Cold War West Germany thus proved pivotal in the struggle against racial discrimination in America.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, historians have shown how American foreign policy concerns and U.S. competition with the Soviet Union in the non-Western world from the 1950s through the 1970s forced policymakers in Washington to support the civil rights agenda.³ What has received scant attention in these interpretations is America’s military presence in postwar Europe and the role played by the expanding U.S. military base system in the unfolding drama of the civil rights struggle. By bringing a segregated army to bases across Western Europe and other parts of the globe, the United States literally transported its racial conflict and the actors in that conflict onto foreign soil.⁴ Astonishingly, there has been almost no discussion of how the experiences of black troops overseas helped to advance the cause of civil rights at home during the twentieth century, in particular during the Cold War.⁵

To help launch this discussion, we have chosen to look at West Germany, not least because it hosted the largest deployment of American troops outside the United States following World War II. Until the drawdown that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, some 250,000 American soldiers were stationed in West Germany every year, accompanied by their families

and tens of thousands of civilian employees of the Department of Defense. Altogether, almost twenty million Americans have lived in West Germany since the end of World War II, with approximately three million of them African American. Furthermore, because of the postwar military occupation, and America's ambitious efforts to reshape German society after the defeat of Nazism, West Germany was more widely exposed to American political and social developments than other countries with U.S. bases.

West Germany is also a logical choice because American policymakers saw the country as the linchpin of Western defense during the Cold War. Given Germany's central role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defense strategies and its symbolic importance as the likely European battleground in a military conflict between the two superpowers, the politicization of black soldiers over civil rights took on particular significance. Thus, while the civil rights movement made itself felt wherever U.S. troops were stationed, West Germany was the country that was most intimately intertwined with this important chapter of American history.⁶

The civil rights battle of African American GIs in West Germany was not just a side effect of the larger contest taking place in the United States. On the contrary: it was during the postwar occupation of defeated Nazi Germany and in Cold War West Germany that the contradictions between America's claim to be the leader of the "Free World" and its own institutionalized racism became most painfully apparent to the global community. Indeed, when historian David Brion Davis later reflected on his military service as an eighteen-year-old in Mannheim, he recalled the Germany of 1946 as "a microcosm of the racial and civil rights struggle that would dominate America in the 1950s and 1960s." Germany was the place where he first "glimpsed the contours of the United States into which [he] would mature."⁷ In the context of America's mission to democratize German politics, the pursuit of civil rights by African American GIs took on geopolitical dimensions that became an integral part of the larger movement.

While President Truman had effected the *de jure* integration of the military when he issued Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, *de facto* integration would not come about until the Korean War. It was not achieved in the European Command until late 1954.⁸ To a significant degree, that milestone decision resulted directly from the unrelenting pressure exerted by American civil rights organizations and the black press.⁹ Their reports on the army's progress and setbacks in democratizing post-Nazi Germany convinced white liberals in the United States, as well as officials in the State Department, that the continued segregation of the military was unacceptable. Not only did it undermine America's political mission in Germany, but it also made the United States an easy target for Soviet and East German propagandists, who used the military's racist policies to expose American hypocrisy.

During the closing years of World War II and increasingly thereafter, African American GIs complained about the military's discriminatory practices, the brutality of the overwhelmingly white military police force,

and the lack of black officers. They protested loudly when military commanders, in order to preserve “racial peace,” instructed local pub owners to observe American-style racial boundaries, thus bringing Jim Crow segregation into German communities that bordered on military bases. Once the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1950s, black GIs deployed overseas proved to be crucial actors in that struggle. By 1960, sit-down strikes to integrate lunch counters were taking place not only in Greensboro, North Carolina, but also on and around U.S. military bases in Germany.

As early as the late 1950s, African American GIs had urged civil rights leaders and American media representatives to come to Germany to investigate the widespread discrimination within the military and the system of “informal” segregation that defined American garrison towns across Germany. These protest activities, in turn, led to high-level government investigations, such as the one that in 1964 produced *The President’s Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Forces, Final Report: Military Personnel Stationed Overseas*, which constituted the government’s first concerted effort to tackle entrenched racism and discrimination in the military.

Unlike black GIs elsewhere in the world, those stationed in Germany found allies among local civilians, who supported them in their fight for racial equality.¹⁰ Because military deployments to Germany usually lasted two to three years, African American GIs came to know and in many cases form friendships with local residents. Such associations were especially prevalent in German university towns that also hosted U.S. military bases. Shared interests in African American musical forms, such as jazz and blues, and the burgeoning civil rights movement in the United States, encouraged such relationships. In the early 1960s, for example, black GIs began to collaborate with German students who had spent time in the United States and with African American students studying at German universities to propagate the goals of the movement. Often students of color from non-Western countries who were enrolled at German universities joined in this unusual partnership. In university centers like Frankfurt, Heidelberg, and Berlin, soldiers and students united to publicly protest racism and voice support for civil rights in the United States.

After the emergence of the Black Power movement in the mid-1960s and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968, African American GIs in Germany intensified their collaboration with local university students to fight racism both in the U.S. military and in German communities. Among the most important events was the “Call for Justice” meeting held on July 4, 1970, in the auditorium of Heidelberg University. This event was also endorsed by the president of Heidelberg University, who provided a venue for the meeting and would make university buildings available when the U.S. military prohibited demonstrations on its bases. Similar protests took place in smaller garrison towns like Kaiserslautern (with a population of 80,000), where more than 40,000 U.S. troops were

posted. Frankfurt University was the site of several large solidarity protests, which were carried out on behalf of Angela Davis—an activist who had been a student there between 1965 and 1966—that brought together African American servicemen, exchange students, and German students.

In East Germany, solidarity with the African American cause even took on the form of a government-funded domestic and international campaign based on the state's ideological commitment to combat imperialism, colonialism, and racism. The East German government hailed civil rights activists as the heroes of the “other America”—the America of the oppressed. Despite the lack of diplomatic relations between East Berlin and Washington, the German Democratic Republic welcomed African American deserters as well as representatives of the civil rights struggle with open arms. The regime hosted extensive receptions for W. E. B. Du Bois in 1958 as well as singer and intellectual Paul Robeson in 1960. It produced a flood of literature on the black freedom struggle in the decades after World War II and allowed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964 and Dr. Ralph Abernathy in 1971 to deliver sermons in East Berlin churches. At the beginning of the 1970s, East German officials also engineered a comprehensive solidarity campaign for Angela Davis, which involved all segments of society, turning her into a communist pop star.

Despite these propaganda efforts, it was the collaboration between Black Panther GIs and radical students in the Federal Republic that most provoked the American and West German governments to implement the unfulfilled civil rights agenda. The radicalization of black GIs, and the support they received from students throughout Germany, led to comprehensive investigations by the Pentagon (the “Render Report”), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Congressional Black Caucus.¹¹ To address the U.S. military's racist policies, as well as the individual grievances of black GIs, the Federal Republic initiated a wide-ranging project to improve housing and repair barracks for U.S. military personnel and their families. It also began a broad educational program designed to deter discriminatory practices by West German landlords, restaurateurs, and bar owners. Significantly, the NAACP established a branch office in Frankfurt in 1971 to deal with the complaints of black soldiers, both on base and off.

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African American GIs and their activism in Germany played a vital role in the broader struggle against racism and for civil rights. Their experiences abroad convinced many of them to join the struggle once they returned home, and others continued their protests in Cold War Germany. Their deployment in racially segregated units, at a time when the United States claimed to be the leader of the “Free World,” gave rise to Truman's 1948 Executive Order, and by the late 1960s and early 1970s, their activities in West Germany had led to substantial reform that had reverberations in other military commands abroad as well as in the continental United States. To a considerable extent, it was the protest activities of African American

GI activists stationed in Germany that transformed the U.S. military into the most integrated institution of the United States by the mid-1970s.

Given the centrality of black soldiers' experience overseas—and especially in West Germany—to the larger history of the American civil rights movement, it is puzzling that we know relatively little about this important chapter of American and African American history. One reason for this neglect may be reluctance on the part of scholars not trained as military historians to do research on military topics. By the same token, those who do focus on military history often gloss over its social and cultural dimensions, concentrating on strategy and efficiency rather than the complaints of low-ranking GIs. Furthermore, because historians have traditionally worked within narrowly defined disciplines or geographical and chronological boundaries, the transnational character of many aspects of American history, and especially African American history, have only begun to fully emerge within the past decade.¹² For similar reasons, the American military presence has failed to attract the attention of many German historians. While dozens of volumes have been produced on America's impact on German society, the deployment of more than two million African American GIs and their families to Germany since 1945 has remained, for the most part, an untold story.

Leaders and participants in the civil rights struggle, on the other hand, were very much aware of this international impact, which they repeatedly used as leverage in their efforts to bring about domestic reform.¹³ Few people saw this interconnectedness of American history more clearly than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In a lecture delivered in Oslo on December 11, 1964, after accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, King sought to place America's journey toward racial justice in a global context:

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.¹⁴

In the same lecture, King asserted that all human beings are united in a "worldwide fellowship," a belief that had undoubtedly been reinforced during his visit to Berlin three months earlier. Invited by Mayor Willy Brandt to come to the city that just a year before had so enthusiastically welcomed President John F. Kennedy, King toured numerous sites during his two and a half days there and, most importantly, held a sermon at the Waldbühne, a large outdoor amphitheater, before 20,000 people. King used this sermon to connect his spiritual message of brotherhood to the situation in Berlin: "[This city] stands as a symbol of the divisions of men on the face of the earth. For here on either side of the wall are God's children, and no man-made barrier can obliterate that fact." He went a step further and compared the civil rights struggle in the United States to the political struggle

of the divided city, arguing that just as the United States was proving to be “the testing ground of races living together in spite of their differences,” the people of Berlin were “testing the possibility of co-existence for the two ideologies” then competing for world dominance.¹⁵

Regrettably, historical memory has largely ignored Dr. King’s visit to Cold War Berlin. Even when more than 200,000 Berliners turned out to hear then-presidential candidate Barack Obama speak in Berlin’s Tiergarten on July 24, 2008, few commentators in the United States or Germany noted the connection. This is particularly astonishing given the prominence of Dr. King and the civil rights movement in Obama’s campaign rhetoric, which he invoked as an essential reference point in such signature phrases as “the fierce urgency of now.”

In fact, Obama’s speech in the Tiergarten reads like a response to King’s Nobel lecture on the “world house,” delivered from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. Obama not only presented himself as “a fellow citizen of the world” but also 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 twentieth century taught us that we share a common destiny, the twenty-first has revealed a world more intertwined than at any time in human history.¹⁶

The narrative of this book is thus one of entanglements and shared destinies on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the twentieth century. Although we focus on the period after 1945, we begin with W. E. B. Du Bois, whose experience as a graduate student in late nineteenth-century Berlin transformed his thinking about race and the color line, and World War I, which set the stage for the budding civil rights movement of the 1920s and 1930s. That movement was given tremendous momentum by the rise of Nazism and white America’s revulsion for that racist regime.

By tracing the encounter between African Americans and Germany, we aim to broaden the understanding of how America’s struggle against Nazi Germany and its leadership role in Europe after 1945, specifically in West Germany, were essential to advancing the cause of civil rights in the United States. At the same time, our goal is to move beyond the high-level politics and policymakers in Washington and Bonn to the activists on the ground. Their voices and the response to their demands from military and government representatives, as well as the media, make clear how the African American GI experience in Germany enunciated and spurred the struggle for civil rights. In telling that story, we hope to take a critical first step toward a more nuanced and sophisticated awareness of how America’s struggle for racial justice reverberated across the globe.¹⁷