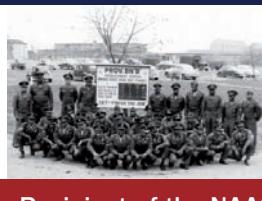




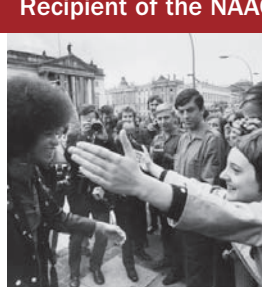
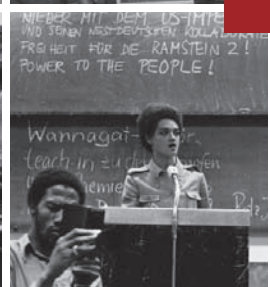
The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs, and **Germany**

Digital Archive, Oral History Collection and Research Project

A collaborative project of



Recipient of the NAACP Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Award 2009



"[A]s we see so many of our World War II veterans coming to the twilight of their years, it is especially important for us to remember, to record, remind ourselves of how much that generation did on all of our behalves."

U.S. President Barack Obama in Dresden, Germany, after visiting the Buchenwald concentration camp on June 5, 2009

"[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."

Colin Powell about his tour of duty in West Germany in 1958, from *My American Journey* (1995)

Until recently, the story of the African-American civil rights movement has been told largely within the context of American history. Our research project and digital archive shows how Germany emerged as a critical point of reference in African-American demands for an end to segregation and for equal rights.

From as early as 1933, African-American civil rights activists used white America's condemnation of Nazi racism to expose and indict the extent of Jim Crow racism at home and to argue that "separate" can never be "equal." America's entry into the war allowed these activists to step up their rhetoric significantly and to call for an end to segregation.

Drawing on the experience of soldiers stationed in Germany, these activists claimed that it was in post-Nazi Germany that black GIs found the equality and democracy denied them in their own country. Once the civil rights movement gained momentum in the late 1950s, black GIs deployed overseas became crucial actors in the civil rights struggle. By the early 1960s, sit-ins to integrate lunch counters were taking place not only in Greensboro, NC, but also in establishments on and around U.S. military bases in Germany.

After Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to Berlin in 1964, the rise of the Black Power movement, and Angela Davis's solidarity campaigns in both East and West Germany in the early 1970s, African-American GIs only intensified their collaboration with German student activists to fight racism both in the U.S. military and in German communities.

Since 1945 almost 20 million American soldiers, along with their families and civilian employees, have served tours of duty in Germany, and about 3 million of those Americans have been African American.

By giving voice to their experience and to that of the people who interacted with them, we will expand the story of the African-American civil rights movement beyond the boundaries of the U.S., hoping to advance a more nuanced and sophisticated sense of how America's struggle for democracy reverberated across the globe.

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For further information, if you want to share your personal experience by contributing to our oral history collection or support our research in any other way, please contact us at:

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