



Vol. 11 Issue 1 Spring 2011

African-American GIs (cont.)

..... The situation was replete with ironies in that black soldiers, who were treated as second class citizens at home, were given substantial authority abroad to exercise their occupying role. Still, while American rhetoric about the values of freedom, democracy, and equality was promulgated in post-War Germany by the military, African-American GIs did not benefit from the full exercise of these rights in the US. Within the occupying forces, themselves, they also suffered discrimination. To cite one example of the convoluted logic of the times, the military administration suggested local German bars segregate according to race to mimic the culture the soldiers were used to back in the US.

The hypocrisy of this was not lost on the soldiers, nor on many Germans. Often black GIs availed themselves of greater freedom of association in Germany (especially the lack of segregation) and were not infrequently supported or assisted by local Germans, students, and German governmental authorities in their aspirations for fully equal treatment in all aspects of life from housing to marriage.

As the authors cite,

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.” 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.

In the 60s especially, struggles against segregation at home had come to a head and were mirrored by similar struggles on US military bases in Germany. Since deployments often lasted two to three years, black Americans frequently established strong friendships with local Germans and found student populations in university towns especially interested in learning about African-American culture, for instance, musical culture such as jazz and blues. GIs struggled for better treatment in Germany, and enlisted the support of the government in promoting equal housing and an end to segregation.

Communist East Germany in particular seized upon these hypocrisies to lambaste the West, and was publically very welcoming to such figures as Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc. The cultural reality was more nuanced, however, and often the level of acceptance at the level of the East German people did not necessarily equal the equality preached in the propaganda. Obama’s much reported-upon speech in Berlin was not only an echo of John F. Kennedy’s famous speech there, but also harkened back to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ground-breaking Berlin address (a parallel which was much less noted in the media).



Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy survey the Berlin Wall, West Berlin, 1964. (Landesarchiv, Berlin)

Chancellor Willy Brandt had invited Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak in Germany in 1964 to commemorate John F. Kennedy's assassination. He spoke both in East and West Berlin and in Munich. To quote from the [German-way website](#):

From the Berlin Wall, King [was driven] the short distance to the historic Marienkirche (St. Mary's Church) in East Berlin, where he offered a sermon to an overflow crowd and signed the church's guestbook.

King also took time to speak with black students at East Berlin's Humboldt University, not far from the Marienkirche, which may be the reason he arrived late at his next stop, the Sophienkirche. Because of the standing-room-only audience at the first church, a second one was arranged at the last minute. (In both cases, people learned of King's visit only by word of mouth.) It was midnight before King finally returned to West Berlin. No mention of his amazing visit to the capital of the GDR ever appeared in the East German media. GDR citizens were not allowed to hear or read words such as: "Here on either side of the Wall are God's children and no man-made barrier can obliterate that fact."

Thus the experience of African Americans in Germany, in terms of local support, cultural experimentation, a daily life filled with less strictures and social taboos than back home, was brought back in a very visceral way to the US, where it helped inform and fuel the struggle for full civil rights.

Höhn and Klimke's presentation in Dwinelle Hall utilized documentary photography from the period and teased out the many issues inherent in the American civil rights struggle on foreign soil. Interviews with retired soldiers provided a great deal of personal insight and specific data on the nature of life in Germany during that time, the authors and their students actively engage veterans in these interviews and have found, for many, the pain of the remembrances can still be quite raw.



Historian Maria Höhn responds to audience questions during her joint presentation with Martin Klimke in the Murray B. Emeneau Conference Room in Dwinelle Hall. (Eric Kotila)

A companion book to their presentation, entitled *A Breath of Freedom*, has been published by Palgrave Macmillan and an extensive website with archival and primary research materials has been developed by the authors.

— Eric Kotila

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