

# African American Civil Rights and Germany

## America Day & Photography Exhibition at the University of Augsburg

On July 15, 2010, the University of Augsburg celebrates its 40th birthday. On the same day, the first America Day will take place and the exhibition "African American Civil Rights and Germany" will be opened (available for viewing until August 15th on the third floor of University Building A). The America Day and exhibition deal with the impact that African American GIs had on the Germans and vice versa: the effect that soldier experiences in Germany had on the civil rights movement in the United States. Research in recent years has shown that these two events are interconnected – something one might not expect when looking at them separately. The history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the African American GIs in Germany are interconnected. When the U.S. joined the European Allies in the WWII in 1942 to defeat Nazi Germany under Hitler, there were around 3 million African American soldiers among the total of 20

million GIs that stayed in Germany with their families after 1945 until the end of the Cold War. For the African American GIs it was a strange situation: in Germany they fought for civil rights and democracy, while at home in the US, they themselves were not granted these same rights. In fact, African Americans in the Southern States of the United States had virtually no civil rights at this time when racial segregation was typical in everyday life; certain public bathrooms, benches and entrances to public buildings were for example for black or white people only. Therefore, it was astonishing for the Americans back home to see pictures of black soldiers defeating the Nazis and spreading freedom and democracy in Germany, whilst in the U.S. they were regarded as weak and dangerous. Maria Höhn writes in her essay "When Negro-Soldiers Bring Home White Brides" that many African American GIs experienced this new kind of freedom far away from the Jim Crow race laws

at home and therefore extended their service in Germany.

After 1945, when Germany had lost the war, GIs experienced something new; especially in Southeast Germany, where several military bases were located, African Americans experienced a kind of freedom they did not know before from life in the States – they could go wherever they wanted to, eat wherever they liked to and date whoever they wished.

Back home, the Ku Klux Klan reformed in the 1950s and fought brutally against all non-white citizens. In Germany, despite some discrimination against the American soldiers, they were safe and it wasn't nearly as extreme.

Many men and women of the U.S. army fell in love with Germans and were allowed to marry them, but often the political marriage rules of racial segregation in the U.S. made it impossible for them to move back to the U.S. together where interracial relationships were still forbidden in 30 states. The fact that it was allowed in Germany and that relationships between white Germans and African Americans were actually quite frequent was celebrated as a step towards democracy and equal rights and was highlighted in African

American magazines, such as 'Ebony'. Germany was also affected by the civil rights movement that gained popularity under Dr. Martin Luther King in the 1960s. In the early 60s, protests against racial segregation and discrimination not only took place in the U.S. (mainly in Greensboro, North Carolina), but also in Germany, where many GIs that had to serve in Vietnam were based. Soon after Dr. King's visit to Berlin in 1964, the Black Panther movement collaborated intensively with the German student protests. The protests against segregation and discrimination were carried out in both Germany and in the U.S., where former GIs worked together towards

achieving civil rights in these organisations or the NAACP. They finally achieved their goals for civil rights in the 1970s.

The CGI photography exhibition, together with workshops and discussions with politicians and eye-witnesses focusses on a part of history that Germany and the United States share. The influence that the American GIs had on Augsburg is still visible today and many eye-witnesses are still living here. The exhibition and the America Day is therefore not only a global topic but also a local one, which makes it very interesting to visit! Admission to the exhibition is free, so take the chance and drop by whenever you have time and immerse yourself in a different period!

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Very interesting further reading on this topic: Maria Höhn "Amis, Cadillacs und "Negerliebchen": GIs im Nachkriegsdeutschland"



### Jim Crow laws:

The Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States between 1876 and 1965. They imposed racial segregation in all public facilities, with a supposedly "separate but equal" status for black Americans. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were usually inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing a number of economic, educational and social disadvantages.