

African American Civil Rights and Germany in the 20th Century

Conference at Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY), jointly organized by
the German Historical Institute Washington DC and Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY);
Conveners: Maria Höhn (Vassar College) and Martin Klimke (GHI Washington)
Poughkeepsie, NY, 1. bis 4. Oktober 2009

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Conference at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, Oct. 01 – 04, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI and Vassar College. Conveners: Maria Höhn (Vassar) and Martin Klimke (GHI).

Participants: *Kenneth Barkin* (University of California, Riverside), *Leon Bass* (Philadelphia), *Manfred Berg* (University of Heidelberg), *Angela Davis* (University of California, Santa Cruz, emerita), *Eve Dunbar* (Vassar College), *Moritz Ege* (Humboldt University of Berlin), *Karl-Heinz Füssl* (Technical University of Berlin), *Katharina Gerund* (University of Düsseldorf), *Matt Herron* (Taking Stock, San Rafael, CA), *Hansjürgen Hilgert* (Hilgert & Witsch KG, Krautscheid), *Gerald Horne* (Houston University), *Andrew Hurley* (University of Melbourne), *S. Marina Jones* (UNC-Chapel Hill/GHI), *Helma Kaldewey* (Tulane University), *Wilfried Kaute* (Cologne), *Christine Knauer* (University of Tübingen), *Peter H. Koepf* (The Atlantic Times, Berlin), *Daniel Lee* (University of California, Berkeley), *Brian Mann* (Vassar College), *Mia Mask* (Vassar College), *Joe McPhee* (Poughkeepsie), *Frank Mehring* (Free University of Berlin), *Quincy Mills* (Vassar College), *Maggi Morehouse* (University of South Carolina, Aiken), *Eli Nathans* (University of Western Ontario), *Christina Oppel* (University of Münster), *Anke Ortlepp* (GHI Washington, DC), *Rosemarie Peña* (Black German Cultural Society), *Peggy Piesche* (Vassar College), *Dan Puckett* (Troy University), *Matthias Reiss* (University of Exeter), *Robert Sackett* (University of Colorado), *Christian Schmidt-Rost* (Free University of Berlin), *Alcyone Scott* (Midland Lutheran College, Nebraska), *Tyrone Simpson* (Vassar College), *Laura Stapane* (Oldenburg/GHI Washington DC), *Roland Stolte* (Marienkirche, Berlin), *Debra Tanner Abell* (Pittsburgh), *Harriet Washington* (Rochester), *Judith Weisenfeld* (Princeton), *KD Wolff* (Frankfurt).

The conference brought together scholars of history, literature and cultural studies from Germany, the U.S., and Australia to explore the links between the African-American Civil Rights Movement and Germany throughout the twentieth century. The pre-conference program started on Wednesday afternoon with a screening of the film *The Negro Soldier* from 1944, directed by Stuart Heisler and U.S. War Department, and introduced by *Mia Mask*. Subsequently, *Leon Bass*, a World War II veteran, gave a lecture, „Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: A Black Sergeant Remembers Buchenwald“. As a nineteen-year-old, Bass served in the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, a segregated unit of the U.S. Army, and was among the soldiers who liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Bass gave a moving recollection of his own struggles with racism in the U.S. military during his training in the South, and of putting his life on the line for a country that did not deem him „good enough“. He recounted how seeing the atrocities committed at Buchenwald led him to become an agent for social change upon his return to the U.S.

The first conference day began with a panel discussion, „Tracing an Untold History: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Visit to Cold War Berlin in 1964”, chaired by conveners *Maria Höhn* and *Martin Klimke*. Höhn and Klimke introduced King's largely forgotten visit to the divided city in September 1964, during which he visited the Berlin Wall, opened the city's cultural festival, delivered a sermon to more than 20,000 West Berliners at an outdoor arena, and was awarded an honorary degree by the Theological School of the Protestant Church. They also played audio excerpts of a previously unreleased speech Dr. King gave in East Berlin's St. Mary's Church at Alexander Square during the same visit. *Roland Stolte* further illuminated King's visit by discussing how Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt and Provost Heinrich Grüber facilitated it. Grüber, the former pastor at East Berlin's St. Mary's Church, had been an active opponent of the Nazi regime and had gained international attention when he testified during the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961.

The panel continued with a vivid eyewitness account by *Alcyone Scott*, one of King's interpreters during his visit, who detailed King's border crossing at Checkpoint Charlie without a passport and described the impact of his message of nonviolent resistance and hope during his sermon at the overcrowded St. Mary's Church. Discussing the primary and secondary sources related to King's visit, *Laura Stapane* explained the digital archive of The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs, and Germany. The project, a collaboration of the GHI Washington, the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University, and Vassar College, serves as a platform to make textual and audiovisual material (oral histories, images, films, etc.) on the relationship between the Civil Rights Movement, African-American GIs, and Germany available online and free of charge to increase scholarship and teaching on the global impact of the civil rights struggle. After this panel, the exhibition „African-American Civil Rights and Germany” was opened, which includes about fifty historical photographs and other materials from the digital archive, such as the guest book King signed in East Berlin, the full recording of his sermon, and a historical painting of „Dr. King and His Family” from East Germany.

On the second conference day, *Kenneth Barkin* examined W.E.B. Du Bois's time at Harvard University and in Germany (1892-94), as well as his subsequent perceptions of the country, in a panel on „Transatlantic Journeys”. Barkin argued that it was not his studies, but Du Bois's everyday experiences in German society that exercised the most influence on his position on racism in the U.S. and made Prussia seem like a „racial paradise”. *Karl-Heinz Füssl's* paper focused on Black Mountain College, NC, established in 1933 and home to a number of prominent German and European refugees (e.g., Josef and Anni Albers). Füssl described how, from its foundation, debates on whether to allow black students and faculty preoccupied people at the college and created a rift within the faculty, similarly dividing the European refugees. He argued that the campus integration project eventually failed at least in part because of the pervasive segregation surrounding the college community. *Harriet Washington* subsequently explored the origins of prejudices against and stereotypes associated with black people from antiquity through to modern slavery, demonstrating how the respective images and imaginations shaped the medical field and German scientists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Section II, „Black Soldiers, Germans, and World War II”, started with *Matthias Reiss's* presentation on the experiences of German prisoners of war in the U.S. Reiss complicated traditional narratives by highlighting the ways in which the presence of these POWs in American society „helped to undermine the legitimacy of racial segregation”. According to Reiss, their ambivalent status was marked by the fact that their direct relationships with African-Americans, although temporary, were generally friendly. At the same time, white POWs enjoyed privileges in comparison to black GIs that allowed the latter to compare Nazi racial discrimination to their own discrimination in the US. *Maggi Morehouse* in turn emphasized the importance of Truman's Executive Order of 1948 to desegregate the U.S. military. Morehouse made the case for reframing

the master narrative of the civil rights movement using this landmark policy decision instead of looking at the 1954 Supreme Court decision „Brown vs. Board of Education” as the starting point.

Christina Oppel opened section three, „Debating Civil Rights on Both Sides of the Atlantic”, with an analysis of the role Nazi Germany played in African-American discourse in the 1930/40s. In Oppel's view, African-American intellectuals not only used the analogy to fascism to charge the U.S. with hypocrisy, but also attempted to situate their struggle within the larger framework of human rights in the context of the Atlantic Charter and the formation of the United Nations. *Christine Knauer* then addressed German and African-American interactions and media representations of interracial rape in postwar Germany. Pointing to the crucial role of race in each case, Knauer particularly examined how these sexual assaults were characterized in official reports, political discourse, and the public debate. In the section's last paper, *Robert Sackett* explored the West German media coverage of U.S. race relations from 1949-67. Sackett noted how this discourse both on racial discrimination and black militancy, especially from 1960 on, utilized Nazi Germany as a comparative frame for viewing the situation on the other side of the Atlantic.

A keynote lecture by *Angela Davis*, „Between Critical Theory and Civil Rights: A Sixties' Journey from Boston to Frankfurt to San Diego”, concluded the second day of the conference. Before an audience of over four hundred, Davis reflected on meeting her academic mentor Herbert Marcuse at Brandeis University, studying with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer at the University of Frankfurt, and her visits to East Berlin in the 1960s and early 1970s. Underscoring the importance of Critical Theory and her experience abroad for her political coming-of-age as an African-American activist, she also recounted the personal significance the international outpouring of support she experienced during her trial and incarceration in the U.S.

Helma Kaldewey opened the next conference day and the section on „Bringing the Cold War Home” with an examination of Louis Armstrong's Eastern European tour in 1965. Kaldewey focused on Armstrong's time in East Germany, his close relationship with jazz specialist and radio host Karl-Heinz Drechsel, and East Berlin's attempt to use jazz to its own political advantage in the propaganda wars of the Cold War. Based on his dissertation, *Daniel Lee* investigated the debates and official positions about relationships and marriages between African-American GIs and white German women both in West Germany and the U.S. Illustrating the staunch opposition to interracial marriage by white segregationists, the differing opinions on it among African Americans, as well as its media representations and treatment in the U.S. military and by local German officials, Lee's results once again showed how the presence of these couples influenced discussions about racial equality and civil rights in the U.S. up to the landmark 1967 Supreme Court decision „Loving v. Virginia”.

In section five, „Framing Civil Rights”, *Eli Nathans* examined the radio and TV broadcasts on the U.S. made by conservative West German journalist Peter von Zahn in the 1950s and early 1960s. Revealing that the United States Information Agency (USIA) funded the first two years of these programs, Nathans argued that Zahn's sympathetic but critical broadcasts contributed to the liberalization of West German society and fundamentally shaped the ways the racial situation in the U.S. was perceived. *Frank Mehring* investigated how the Marshall Plan re-education films in Europe propagated democracy, free trade, international cooperation, and a vision of multi-racial tolerance. Using the example of Georg Tressler's „Wie die Jungen sungen” (1954), and directly referring to the civil rights struggle in the U.S., Mehring demonstrated how racial encounters among children of European and African background in an international school in Vienna are used to foster color blindness, integration, and the creation of a new, collective European identity.

The section „Jazz and Civil Rights in a Divided Germany” opened with *Christian Schmidt-Rost's* analysis of the discourse on jazz in East Germany. Looking at jazz magazines and concert series, Schmidt-Rost traced the ways the political interpretation of jazz in East Germany changed from the postwar period to the mid-1960s

and how it intersected with the civil rights struggle. *Andrew Hurley*, on the other hand, scrutinized the jazz discourse in West Germany from the 1950s to the 1970s on the example of Joachim-Ernst Berendt. Hurley demonstrated that Berendt, initially fascinated with the musical qualities of jazz, came to view it as a tool for liberalizing postwar West German society. Berendt commented on the alliance between jazz and the civil rights movements of the 1950/60s and openly criticized the ideology of black power and black nationalism at the beginning of the 1970s, regarding it as fascism. This presented another illustration of the German past overshadowing the perceptions of the civil rights struggle.

A roundtable on „Expanding the African-American Diaspora” concluded the conference day, focusing on lacunae in scholarship. *Judith Weisenfeld* proposed several areas that require closer examination: the religious dimension, e.g., links between Germany and Black Caribbean Moravians, some African-American artists' appropriation of European culture as African-American culture, or the history of the Women's Auxiliary Corps's history in Germany. *Matt Heron* described his life as a photographer during the U.S. civil rights movement, his support of SNCC, as well as his project, „National Archive for Civil Rights Movement Photography”, which underscores the crucial role of visual representations for both the domestic dynamic and transnational attraction of the civil rights struggle. Sara Lennox called for more interdisciplinary and transnational work, emphasizing the need to use the categories of „race” and „whiteness” in the German case. Gerald Horne seconded the call for more interdisciplinary studies and suggested closer cooperation between African-American Studies and German Departments and laid out further topics of research in this area. The subsequent discussion encouraged researchers to further address gender, especially concerning dependents of U.S. military personnel in Germany.

The last conference day started with the section entitled „The Commodification of Civil Rights”. *Katharina Gerund* examined Angela Davis's impact on the „West German imagination”. Gerund argued that, as a black female student, Davis defied the traditional discursive categories of „Black Panther” or „black GI” and emerged as one of the leading representatives of the „other” America. *Moritz Ege* analyzed representations of African Americans in advertisements, books, and magazines, and the „Afroamericanophilia” expressed within West German visual culture in the late 1960s. Ege argued that members of the German student movement attempted to emulate African Americans in language and style and conceived of interracial relationships as a means of demonstrating anti-racism.

The conference concluded with a panel on „History and Memory across the Atlantic”, in which several participants shared their transatlantic experience related to the civil rights struggle. As a composer, improviser, and instrumentalist employed by the U.S. army, *Joe McPhee* was stationed in Germany from 1964-65 and often returned to participate in jazz concerts. *Debra Tanner Abell*, born in Germany and raised in the U.S. as the daughter of a white German mother from Lower Bavaria and an African-American GI from Philadelphia, talked about her childhood in the U.S. and about returning to Germany as a seventeen-year-old to trace her parents' love story and visit her place of birth. Participating via videoconferencing, *Karl-Dietrich Wolff*, former president of the German Socialist Student League (SDS), shared his perceptions of the African-American civil rights struggle when he visited the U.S. and spoke about his role in establishing the Black Panther Solidarity Committee in West Germany.

The conference sparked lively discussions about the transnational impact of the history of the U.S. civil rights movement and Germany, as well as aspects of the theory and methodology of writing this history. It underlined the crucial need for scholars to further examine the global impact of the U.S. civil rights movement and how experiences of African Americans abroad affected the civil rights movement at home.

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