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Archive Watch: Civil Rights Over There

By [Jennifer Howard](#)

The domestic history of the American civil-rights movement is well known to scholars. Less familiar is the movement's international side, especially as it played out in Germany, where African-American GI's stationed after World War II helped spread its ideas. The transatlantic influence worked in the other direction, too, as those soldiers brought their experience in fighting for democracy home to the United States.

Two historians—Maria Höhn, an associate professor at Vassar College, and Martin Klimke, of Heidelberg University and the German Historical Institute in Washington—wanted to call attention to this underappreciated chapter of American history. So they established [The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GI's, and Germany](#), an online archive dedicated to gathering and digitizing primary-source material from the period. As they explain on the project's Web site, more than three million African-American GI's and their families, as well as civilian employees of the U.S. government, have been stationed in Germany since the end of World War II. Their experiences are what the archive seeks to document. The directors also see it as an excellent way to get students involved in research. In an e-mail interview, Ms. Höhn and Mr. Klimke answered some questions about the archive, its mission, and how it fits into the growing interest in "transnationalizing" African-American studies.

Q. What is the connection between the civil-rights struggle at home and African-American GI's in Germany?

A. By bringing a segregated army to military bases across Western Europe and other parts of the globe, the U.S. literally transposed its racial conflict and the actors in that conflict onto foreign soil. Despite more than 60 years of deployment of U.S. troops, both white and black, almost nothing is known about how the experiences, protests, and activities of black soldiers stationed outside the U.S. advanced the cause of civil rights at home. Yet those experiences abroad proved pivotal.

The distinguished African-American writer William Gardner Smith wrote about his 1947 service during the military occupation of Germany, for example, that after their encounters abroad, African-American GI's "will never go back to the old way again." Germany remained a "special" place for black soldiers even after America's military occupation (1945-49) ended and American soldiers took on the role of a protective force. As former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who served in Germany as a young officer in 1958, once observed, for many black soldiers, Germany was their first experience of a society without Jim Crow segregation. Thus, for black soldiers, Mr. Powell writes in his autobiography, "but especially those out of the South, Germany was a breath of freedom." It was this experience of freedom that prompted many African-American GI's not only to speak up for greater civil rights while stationed in Germany but also to join the civil-rights movement once they returned home to the U.S.

Significantly, the civil-rights struggle of African-American GI's in West Germany was not just a sideshow to the larger struggle taking place in the U.S. On the contrary: It was first during the occupation and re-education of defeated Nazi Germany (1945-49), and then in Cold War West Germany, that the contradictions between America's claim as the leader of the free world and its unresolved racial problems at home were most painfully revealed.... Thus, because of America's mission of democracy in Germany and its leadership role in Europe after 1945, the civil-rights aspirations of African-American GI's took on geopolitical dimensions and became an integral part of the larger movement.

Q. What's in the archive?

A. ... Our Web site contains digitized materials from the National Archives and the records of various civil-rights organizations. It also

includes material from private collections on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, we selected sources from a wide range of private, state, and local archives in Germany related to the civil-rights struggle of African-American GI's stationed in that country and the overall perception of the civil-rights movement in East and West Germany during the Cold War (we are in the process of uploading these). A rich collection of underground newspapers, posters, and flyers from the Archive for Soldiers' Rights in Berlin, for example, provides clues to the breadth of activities of African-American GI's and demonstrate the many alliances among German activists and citizens during the 1960s and early 1970s.

A second and major component of the digital archive will be 120 oral histories that we are collecting from African American servicemen who were stationed in Germany and from German activists who collaborated with those soldiers in pursuit of civil rights.... A third category of sources features an extensive collection of photographs and other images related to the experience of African American soldiers abroad, both as members of the U.S. military and as participants and activists in German society....

In a fourth category, we are gathering articles and images from African-American civil-rights publications such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and from the African-American press that covered the contribution of African-American GI's to the civil-rights struggle during World War II and the Cold War....

Q. How does the archive fit into the larger concerns of African-American studies?

A. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a growing trend toward transnationalizing African-American history. Scholars such as Mary Dudziak (*Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*), Thomas Borstelmann (*The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*), and Brenda Gayle Plummer (*Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960*), for example, have shown how U.S. foreign policy concerns and the American competition with the Soviet Union in the non-Western world forced policymakers in Washington to support the civil-rights agenda. What receives almost no attention in the Cold War interpretation of the civil-rights movement, however, is America's involvement in Europe and the role that the expansion of the American military base system after World War II played in the unfolding drama of the civil-rights struggle....

The reasons why this European shift is so late in coming are many. One reason for this neglect is academics' reluctance to research all things military, unless they are trained as military scholars. Just as important, scholars who do focus on the military are not generally interested in the protest activities of minority soldiers. Furthermore, because scholars have traditionally worked in the narrow frameworks of their respective disciplines and national histories, the transnational implications of many aspects of American history, but especially African-American history, have been largely ignored. The emergence of African-American Diaspora Studies, as well as the turn to transnational history, have also greatly expanded the boundaries of American history and African-American studies.... Scholarly networks, such as the Collegium for African American Research, the Association of the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora, the Black European Studies Program at the University of Mainz, as well as the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas, have also facilitated this geographical expansion and broadened the scope of such studies beyond U.S. slavery and its aftermath. Almost all of these publications and networks, however, have paid no attention to the black GI's stationed in Germany.

Q. How is the archive supported?

A. We were able to secure substantial support from the German Historical Institute in Washington, the Heidelberg Center of American Studies at Heidelberg University, and Vassar College.... The key for us now is to upload the wealth of materials that we have gathered already and to continue to use this site as a way to excite undergraduates about the transnational aspects of African-American history.

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