

# Should They Be Allowed?

What happens when German historians research racism in America?

**M**aria Höhn and Martin Klimke, both German historians, are causing quite a stir in the U.S. with their field of research: the relationship between black American soldiers that served in Germany and the civil rights struggle in the U.S. In the former land of the Nazis of all places, black American GIs learned that their lives could be better than back home, where the law supported racial segregation. In Germany, they came and went as they pleased and could even date white women. This “unexpected freedom” that the soldiers experienced ended up stoking the civil rights movement back home.

The oldest, most renowned civil rights organization in the U.S., the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), will be officially presenting the Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Award to Höhn and Klimke’s umbrella project (The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany) in July.

The Atlantic Times spoke with Höhn.

**Ms. Höhn, you teach and do research on racism and the occupying U.S. troops in postwar Germany. Should a German be allowed to write about that?**

Maria Höhn: The main subject of my dissertation, which I completed in 1995, was racism between Germans and black American soldiers, particularly focusing on the Americans in Rhineland-Palatinate. During subsequent research, American war veterans told me that they had experienced Germany as a kind of liberation. They encouraged me to further explore the topic of American racism and the racial segregation that still existed in the military back then.

Of course, sometimes members of my American audience became outraged and indignant. I will never forget a woman who stood up and asked me how I, as a German, could dare to speak about racism in America. My findings have also put a few dents in the myth of the “Greatest Generation.”

**To what extent did the “German experience” impact the civil rights movement in the U.S.?**

Germany was a very special place for black soldiers because in Germany, they experienced a society without legal restrictions based on race for the first time. When they came to Germany, the land of Hitler and Nazism, they thought they would have a rough time as black soldiers. But in reality, they experienced the exact opposite. The “black” press in the U.S. reported that the soldiers were being treated very well and that they could go into any bar or restaurant – and even date white women. Logically, the question that followed was: Why could Germany abolish segregationist legislation but not America?

Many of the great civil rights activists were in the military before



*Milestones on the long way to equal rights: soldiers of an all-black flying squadron in World War II (above). The March on Washington on Aug. 13, 1963 (below).*



they joined the civil rights movement. They came back to America and although they had not been politically active previously, decided to commit their lives to civil rights. The NAACP had a growth spurt like never before at that time.

**And racism had disappeared from Germany with the swish of a magic wand?**

Of course not! In Rhineland-Palatinate for example, Holocaust survivors – the Eastern European Jews who arrived there with the Americans – ran many of the restaurants and clubs frequented by the soldiers. Anti-Semitism and racism in regard to the African American soldiers came to a head in the debates surrounding these clubs. Some people argued that by running clubs for black soldiers, the Jews were opening up the floodgates for immorality in Germany.

This is just one example of the persistence of racism in Germany at this time and how it impacted the black soldiers and their acquaintances.

**Black Americans reduced the situation to a pithy phrase: in Germany, the “Sturmabteilung” (SA) persecuted the Jews and in America, the blacks were lynched. Is that a fair comparison?**

In the 1930s, before anyone had any idea of the extent to which the Nazis would ignite racial hatred, the American press was reporting on the comparison. The Urban League magazine *Opportunity* for example, wrote that it of course understood the difference between American racism and the race laws in Germany. The former represented the laws and “traditions” of discrimination and violence in force in the South and the latter were enacted by the German state. But for the victim of a lynch mob, what is the difference between a society that doesn’t care about a black American’s life and a murder that appears to be backed by national law?

**Journalists working for the black press certainly had to use strong words to promote their cause. But once again, was the Nazi comparison appropriate?**

Let me make the issue more straightforward. After 1945, when the photos of the Holocaust were published, black soldiers said that the situation had been much worse than they had imagined. But they also recognized it as a consequence of racism – something that they also had at home.

At the time, Hitler’s Germany was in the international spotlight, because of the Nuremberg Laws as well as the genocide it perpetrated. At the same time, Americans immediately abolished Germany’s race laws in 1945. However, after this, the American black press questioned why their government couldn’t do in Washington what it did in Germany; America’s South did not get rid of the Jim Crow laws until the 1960s. *Peter H. Koepf*



German historian Maria Höhn (picture) has taught at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York since 1996. Her book “GIs and Fräuleins” was published in 2002 (published in German as “Amis, Cadillac und ‘Negerliebchen’” by the Publishing Company for Berlin-Brandenburg in 2008).

Martin Klimke is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University. They have co-curated a photography exhibition currently at the Westrich Museum in Ramstein. Starting on July 19, it will travel to Frankfurt/Main, Munich, Heidelberg, Augsburg and Mainz and ultimately be hosted by the Representation of the State of Rhineland-Palatinate in Berlin as of Nov. 26. They are also in the process of compiling a digital archive (The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany) that documents the link between the experience of black soldiers in Germany and the progress of the civil rights movement in the U.S.: [www.aacvr-germany.org](http://www.aacvr-germany.org). From Oct. 1-4, Vassar College will host the African American Civil Rights and Germany in the 20th Century conference.