

Friends of Freedom, Allies of Peace: African Americans, the Civil Rights Movement, and East Germany, 1949-1989

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FRIENDS OF FREEDOM, ALLIES OF PEACE: AFRICAN AMERICANS, THE
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, AND EAST GERMANY, 1949-1989

A dissertation

by

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“Friends of Freedom, Allies of Peace: African Americans, the Civil Rights Movement, and East Germany, 1949-1989”

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This dissertation examines the relationship between Black America and East Germany from 1949 to 1989, exploring the ways in which two unlikely partners used international solidarity to achieve goals of domestic importance. Despite the growing number of works addressing the black experience in and with Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, West Germany, and contemporary Germany, few studies have devoted attention to the black experience in and with East Germany. In this work, the outline of this transatlantic relationship is defined, detailing who was involved in the friendship, why they were involved, and what they hoped to gain from this alliance. This dissertation argues that the GDR’s ruling party utilized the relationship as a means of authenticating claims of East German anti-racism, a component of the Party’s efforts to acquire legitimacy and diplomatic recognition from the international community in the wake of World War II, the Holocaust, and the division of Germany. African American radical leftists saw in East Germany a means of support and solidarity in the struggle for rights at home, as well as a society that was allegedly racism-free, upon which they could model their own attempts to eradicate racism in the US. Utilizing a transnational framework and analyzing government documents, newspapers, correspondence, photographs, and autobiographies, this work probes the ways in which two groups, pushed to the margins, sought to navigate the geopolitics of an ideologically-charged world.

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Introduction: The “Other” Germany and the “Other” America

“U.S. ‘racism’ is hardly...threatening to East Germany....But at least it keeps the indoctrinated minds of the East Germans occupied until a more pressing issue comes along.”¹

--*Time Magazine*, 1972

In November 1963, like Americans elsewhere, a group of old friends sat down to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner. Sitting around the table were Paul and Eslanda Robeson, Oliver Harrington, and Aubrey and Kay Pankey. Each of the diners seated at the table were supporters of the African American civil rights movement; Paul was an internationally-renowned actor and folk singer, and Eslanda was a prolific writer. Harrington earned his living as a cartoonist, creating characters that exemplified the Black American struggle. Aubrey was a classically trained singer, while his wife Kay was an editor at a book publishing company.² It had been a dozen years, at least, since the friends and activists had last seen one another, and they spent the evening making up for lost time. Harrington regaled the group with stories about the exploits he and Paul had shared during their much younger years in Harlem. Meanwhile, the Pankeys were both silently noting how much Paul had aged in the years since they had last seen him, and were concerned about his health.³

Surely, this was a scene that played out similarly in many homes across the United States. This particular Thanksgiving dinner, however, was celebrated in East Berlin, East Germany. Not only were Harrington, the Pankeys, and the Robesons part of the civil rights struggle, they were also participants in a relationship between Black America and the communist Germany. This relationship has gone unnoticed by many historians and has been relegated to the status of historical curiosity by others, especially

¹ “East Germany: St. Angela,” *Time*, 3 April 1972.

² While Aubrey was African American, Kay was white American.

³ Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 518-519.

those writing in the English language. Nevertheless, the alliance that developed between Black America and East Germany was more than a passing fascination of little historical consequence. Instead, this relationship was a fundamental result of Cold War tensions, made possible by a long history of black internationalism.⁴ An analysis of this friendship reveals the ways in which African Americans and East Germans together sought to navigate a world riven by ideological conflict.

In examining the friendship between Black America and East Germany, this work has approached the alliance by asking: who in East Germany and among Black Americans was involved in this relationship, and how did these individuals influence the shape the relationship took? Why did the East German government reach out to Black America? What of value did African Americans see in a relationship with East Germany, a state closely associated with the United States' declared enemy, the Soviet Union? For a relationship that spanned nearly all of East Germany's forty-year life span, in what ways did an alliance with Black America actually impact the state's interests? Did African Americans acquire anything useful from their friendship with a state that was constantly fighting for its own relevancy among both international *and* domestic observers?

Utilizing a transnational approach, this study argues that the alliance between Black America and East Germany was a component of the East German struggle for legitimacy and diplomatic recognition, as well as a means of support and solidarity for black leftists struggling for rights in the US. The friendship was instigated by the East German government and, in East Germany, was primarily populated by members of the

⁴ Black internationalism will be defined in this work as the desire to look beyond one's national borders for cooperation, aid, and assistance in order to accomplish goals and objectives at home.

elite. Constantly engaged in a tug-of-war battle with West Germany for international influence and prestige as the true representative of all German citizens, East Germany was at pains to build a positive reputation among international and domestic observers. Friendship with Black America became part of this strategy to do so; for the East German government, the relationship was intended to underline its assertion of an anti-racist identity. This identity was a component of the government's claim of a commitment to anti-fascism, which was meant to justify its rule over a citizenry that had not voted them into power and to differentiate East Germany from its Nazi predecessors.⁵

In highlighting East Germany's alleged anti-racism, officials believed a relationship with America's blacks lent an authority to the claim, helping to garner international recognition in a world still reeling from the Nazis. Domestically, East German leaders intended the relationship to instill within its citizens pride and respect for the government, by flaunting the government's friendship with the "celebrities" of the movement. Within the government itself, the relationship also served as a means of self-justification, as officials' own sense of insecurity regarding their authority meant that they often understood their relationship with Black America as a measurement or reflection of the government's legitimacy.

Importantly, though East Germany's desperate search for international legitimacy drove the establishment of this relationship, without African Americans responding to

⁵ East German anti-racism followed from the communist rhetoric that in a society where only class mattered, racism could not exist. To be an East German anti-racist meant not only to oppose racism in all of its forms, but to work to eradicate racism and support racism's victims in their efforts to acquire social and economic equality. This was an approach utilized by various international communist parties since the 1920s, with the goal of finding allies in the anti-racism struggle, creating "fronts" that would allow Communists "to exert an influence far beyond their actual numbers." George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 179.

East German overtures and becoming active participants in this friendship, the relationship would have been of limited value to East German officials. It is this point that is often considered most puzzling about the friendship: what could possibly have driven African Americans to participate in an alliance with East Germany? What interest would they have in a state born on the ashes of Hitler's Germany, at a time when Cold War tensions meant that the consequences of socialist or communist associations could be disastrous? By reflecting on who was attracted to the East German overtures—black radical leftists—the answer becomes clearer. The SED's claims of support for the world's blacks and its Marxist-Leninist approach to eliminating racial discrimination held great appeal to African Americans subscribing to politics on the far-left. Quite often, these African Americans themselves were among the elite of black radicals.

Of great importance too was the belief that East Germany's anti-racist society was a model of sorts, proof that Black America's civil rights objectives were indeed attainable—through socialism or communism. Though the SED's view that racism grew out of the economic disadvantages wrought by capitalism was not new, East Germany provided an extraordinary model for African Americans, given the state's Nazi past. Those who were intrigued by the East German model were confident that if communism could achieve in just a few years what many had believed was impossible—the eradication of virulent Nazi racism—then surely the same could be done in the US.⁶ These African American friends of the GDR believed that with a case-study of East Germany, as well as the country's solidarity and support, they could accomplish the

⁶ As will become evident, racism was far from eradicated in East Germany, despite SED propaganda and testimonials from some African American visitors. The average East German still held on to their pre-1945 views on race, some in defiance of the SED's anti-racist rhetoric and others because it was a worldview to which they attributed a great deal of merit. Even within the ranks of the SED, racism remained entrenched among some of the Party's functionaries.

elimination of American racism.

Before going any further, however, it is necessary to define how this work will use the terms “relationship,” “friendship,” “alliance,” and “solidarity.” It is important to view these terms through the lens of the Cold War, not only to understand what could bring two seemingly disparate groups together, but also to acknowledge the slight shift taken by the traditional definitions of these every-day terms. A relationship should be understood as a bond formed between two groups with similar or shared attitudes, sentiments, or goals. Friendship is defined in this work similarly to “comradeship;” those who comprised a friendship shared a common adversary. Going further, a friendship implied the existence of reciprocal support—a notion that held great significance for the SED. Much like a comradeship, many Cold War friendships formed that would have been considered unlikely in previous years.⁷

This work’s definition of alliance takes the common understanding—a partnership between political entities with the goal of accomplishing jointly-held goals—and allows that groups and political entities can enter into alliances together to accomplish goals as well. Relationship, friendship, and alliance will be used interchangeably in this text. Lastly, solidarity will be used in this work to refer to a sense of unity between groups that define themselves similarly based on common objectives,

⁷ Yet, a friendship could be, and often was, more than a general expression of goodwill and mutual understanding. Many states utilized the notion of friendship—or, in German, *freundschaft*—as a means of diplomacy and a tool in managing foreign affairs. In the East German case, *freundschaft* often evoked negative feelings for the average citizen, as it was closely associated with the German-Soviet Friendship Society (*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*, or DSF), which attempted a Sovietization that many resisted, even if only passively, despite nearly-mandatory involvement in the society. In regards to the relationship with Black America, one finds that the SED’s notion of friendship may have been expressed as goodwill and support, but was certainly a tool in the SED’s attempts to position the GDR internationally. African Americans’ notion of friendship with the GDR was a political tool as well, utilizing support and solidarity in efforts to rethink American society.

desires, or interests. These feelings of unity are often used to offer support and work as deterrents against those who fall outside of the groups.

As this dissertation will show, the relationship in question was one between Black American leftists and East German elites. Why frame this as a project about Black America, the Civil Rights Movement, and East Germany, when it is really about two very specific groups of African Americans and East Germans? A broader framework is useful for several reasons: first, that is how the alliance was depicted—when the SED spoke publicly about its relationship with Black America, it rarely made the explicit distinction between African Americans more generally, and the group’s communist subset, just as black leftists usually spoke of their experiences with and observations about East Germans in sweeping terms. The fact that black leftists and civil rights activists will at times be referred to in this work as if they are the same is indicative of the SED’s depiction of the black freedom struggle in the US. Understanding the reality of the relationship is just as important as understanding the image both sides created.

To address this relationship, a variety of sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, government records, pamphlets, photographs, biographies and autobiographies, speeches, and personal remembrances have been utilized. Newspaper and magazine articles reveal the self-image that the East German government sought to portray as part of its legitimacy efforts. Newspaper and magazine articles were also a space where African Americans worked out their thoughts about East Germany, the same places where other blacks became acquainted with the GDR and its solidarity work. Government records and solidarity pamphlets from East Germany allow for an assessment of the ways the state utilized the rhetoric, language, and figures of the African

American civil rights movement to underline its own anti-racist identity and to what ends. Photographs offer a means of gauging societal response to visits made by African Americans, presenting visual testimony of citizens' reactions to the visitors. Where these photos have been staged by the government, they offer insight into the image the government sought to propagate. Biographies, autobiographies, and speeches reveal how each side understood both their role and their partner in this relationship.

While the lives of many of the African Americans to be discussed in this study have generally been well documented in the secondary literature, in many cases this does not extend to their time in East Germany. Records of personal remembrances will help to fill these holes, though it is important to acknowledge that these are memories of events that had occurred many years earlier and as such, are vulnerable to inaccuracies. Additionally, while many of the African Americans in this relationship were at one time dedicated to socialism or communism, many of these personal remembrances were recorded in a post-Soviet Union world, which may have influenced the recollection of their experiences or what they deemed suitable to share. The way incidents are remembered, however, can be just as revealing as more "factually accurate" accounts, allowing us to peer into the memories that have developed around African Americans, the civil rights struggle, and East Germany.

Methodologically, this project utilizes a transnational approach, examining the processes of transfer and interaction that occurred between African Americans and East Germans.⁸ While the nation-state is still important to this work, this transnational approach reveals something missed by a national framework. It has long been argued

⁸ In this case, transnationalism will refer to the exchange of ideas and people across national borders.

that the US and East Germany had a very limited relationship, yet, a transnational approach reveals that while the American government may have conducted little official business with East Germany, the same cannot be said of particular groups within the US, like African Americans. This methodology is also valuable in examining anti-racism in the Cold War, as it was a concept that was influenced by the transfer and flow of ideas between various groups, states, and government organizations.⁹

As the reader will notice, this dissertation's focus in East Germany is largely upon the ruling party, the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*/Socialist Unity Party). In large part, this owes to the fact that the SED comprised much of the East German side of the friendship. However, there were times when East German citizens weighed in on the alliance, African Americans, or topics of race more generally. Where possible, these sentiments from East German citizens are included, though because a free public discussion on the topic of racism was virtually impossible, there are few critical statements available on record from that time. Assessing proclamations about East German racism (or the lack thereof) made by East German citizens becomes challenging because many people were well aware that speaking against the SED in a public manner was unwise. East Germans quickly became skilled at saying what the SED wanted to hear, making it difficult to ascertain who was speaking honestly and who was merely reciting rhetoric.

Additionally, the number of people actually encompassed under the term "SED" was quite large, with "citizens" also operating as "functionaries," making it necessary to

⁹ For a discussion of the value of a transnational approach to the study of racism, see Simon Wendt, "Transnational Perspectives on the History of Racism in North America," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 54, no. 3 (2009): 473-98. I am utilizing this approach in my consideration of the study of anti-racism.

determine whether a statement was made as a citizen or as a representative of the Party. This is not to imply that the SED had full control over the beliefs of the average East German, but rather that the regime limited the sphere of acceptable *public* expression. Lastly, surveys or oral histories about East German racism were generally carried out after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as, ideologically, racism did not exist in East Germany, making a survey examining East German racism unnecessary. These particular comments must be read critically, as some are undoubtedly colored by the fall of Communism and a general pervasive sense in the early 1990s that communism was “bad,” creating an impetus to construct ideological distance between one’s self and the defunct SED regime.

Though German history has long been understood as one largely devoid of people of color, over the last twenty-five years historians have begun to acknowledge the role played by blacks in German history. Historical studies of Germany now include examinations of encounters between Germans and various groups of blacks, including blacks in Germany’s African colonies, the black French colonial troops who occupied the Rhineland after World War I, African Americans who occupied West Germany following World War II, as well as the Black Africans who arrived in West Germany as students and “guest workers” after WWII. The life experiences of mixed-race children born to white German women and foreign black men have also engaged historians.¹⁰ However, curiously, only a few have ventured beyond a superficial discussion of East Germany’s relationship with blacks. While offering a serious examination of East Germany’s

¹⁰ This text will refer to these individuals of mixed race as either Black German or Afro-German. In its current usage, Black German can sometimes encompass individuals who are not of African descent—a Turkish German, for instance. As it is used in this work, it will refer to Germans of African descent.

relationship with Black America, this dissertation will contribute to discussions about race and racism in East Germany, reflecting on changes and continuities in German race thinking, while contemplating how the East German understanding of race was affected and molded by Cold War pressures. Also important, this work will be an addition to the discussion about “red racism,” racism in communist or socialist states.¹¹

Cold War Alliances and the Beginnings of an Unexpected Friendship

Put simply, the friendship between Black America and East Germany was a consequence of the tensions and politics of the Cold War, one that became as robust as it did because of an African American tradition of internationalism. After the Second World War came to an end, the US and the Soviet Union quickly emerged as superpowers on opposite ends of political and ideological spectrums, resulting in decades of magnified international political consciousness. The ongoing struggle for supremacy between these two power blocs was never any clearer than in the middle of Europe, in a divided Germany. When WWII ended, the four Allied powers—the US, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—divided Germany into four zones of occupation. Eventually the American, British, and French zones were fused, and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG—West Germany) was established in 1949; several months later, the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany) was created on the soil of what had been the Soviet Zone of Occupation. Whereas West Germany was largely viewed as a legitimate state by members of the international community aligned with the capitalist

¹¹ For example, see Ian Law, *Red Racism: Racism in Communist and Post-Communist Contexts* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). Law discusses racism in a variety of communist states but does not include a significant discussion of East Germany.

West, East Germany was not; in fact, by the 1970s, only a handful of communist states and several in the Middle East had offered East Germany diplomatic recognition.

Without a more global recognition of East Germany, its government had little international influence and authority, rendering the state ineffective and inconsequential in the minds of many in both the capitalist and communist corners of the world.

Valuing the clear international diplomatic advantage that West Germany held over East Germany, the West German government expended substantial amounts of time, effort, and money to guarantee that foreign governments would continue to deny East Germany diplomatic recognition. Bonn, the seat of the West German government, ensured that foreign states limited their diplomatic and economic dealings with East Germany, isolating East Germany internationally.¹² Using an approach known as the Hallstein Doctrine, the FRG offered diplomatic recognition to countries that did *not* recognize the GDR, excepting the Soviet Union, which effectively politically and financially isolated East Germany. In response to the Hallstein Doctrine and East Germany's severely limited fount of legitimacy, East Germany's ruling party, the SED, worked relentlessly to convince non-Communist states to grant its government diplomatic recognition.

In doing so, the SED focused in part on the newly-emerging states in a decolonizing Africa that largely fell into the "non-aligned" category, meaning that they had yet to commit to either the American or the Soviet model.¹³ SED officials believed

¹² William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 2.

¹³ National liberation movements in Africa were worthwhile targets for the world's communists because they believed that "victories against Western imperialism could weaken the world capitalist system and bring it closer to collapse." Lenin had earlier written that communists might find these movements to be quite useful to their own goals, because the liberation movements marked the locations at which capitalism

that obtaining recognition from even just one non-Communist state would lead to an “avalanche of further recognitions and result in a more general acceptance of [East Germany] as an independent state.”¹⁴ The SED subscribed to what has been called a gradualist vision, in which the government simply offered the new African states solidarity and economic cooperation, believing that by *not* advertising its political ambitions up front, the SED would then obtain the diplomatic legitimacy it craved, thereby justifying its political objectives.¹⁵

In reality, however, East Germany could not compete with West Germany in a battle of financial assistance; as a result, East Germany’s emphasis on solidarity as a means of assistance grew. Part of this solidarity effort, observed Michael Sodaro, consisted of organizing a series of activities that included the creation of solidarity weeks and friendship days, in which guests from African nations visited East Berlin. The intention was to foster a relationship between people in East Germany and the target states, instituting a series of cross-cultural contacts.¹⁶ Officials hoped that these moments of friendship would lead to desirable, and diplomatically meaningful, responses to East German overtures. To a certain extent, this approach was successful; East Germany’s declarations about the evils of imperialism encouraged some newly-independent states to step forward and offer East Germany their support. Despite the fact that West Germany too declared itself to be against imperialism, its close relationship with the United States, as well as France, Belgium, Britain, and Portugal—the first practicing a foreign policy

was the most fragile and vulnerable. Fredrickson, “‘Self-Determination for Negroes’: Communists and Black Freedom Struggles, 1928-1948,” in *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 186.

¹⁴ Gray, *Germany’s Cold War*, 3.

¹⁵ Gray, *Germany’s Cold War*, 59.

¹⁶ Michael Sodaro, “The GDR and the Third World: Suppliant and Surrogate,” in *Eastern Europe and the Third World: East vs. South*, ed. Michael Radu (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), 115.

that many argued resembled imperialism, and the last four actual colonial powers in Africa—severely undermined any West German anti-imperialist declarations.¹⁷

Yet, regardless of the inroads made in Africa through East Germany's use of solidarity and anti-imperialist rhetoric, the threat of the Hallstein Doctrine meant that young African states had much more to lose from a relationship with East Germany than with West Germany. Important to note, however, is that for many states it was not a matter of politics or a consideration of the "German question"¹⁸ that influenced their decision to enter into a diplomatic or economic partnership with one of the Germanys.

As Christian Ostermann has noted, even African leaders who could have been labeled as left-leaning were rather "indifferent to the complexities of the German question."¹⁹

Instead, many states utilized the German power struggles as a bargaining chip, a means of acquiring the best possible deal regarding aid and diplomatic relations, by threatening to establish links with the other German state.²⁰ When it truly came down to it, what East Germany had to offer was a political and ideological worldview, in addition to solidarity and moral support.²¹ For many states, solidarity paled in comparison to financial aid.

Already faced with the limited success of its economic assistance and language of solidarity, the growth of a détente in the 1960s meant that the SED's anti-Western rhetoric increasingly accomplished less and less.²² By the late 1960s, official recognition of the East German state was still largely confined to communist corners of the world,

¹⁷ Sodaro, "The GDR and the Third World," 116, 122.

¹⁸ The German Question refers to the issues (political, ideological, financial, etc.) surrounding the division of Germany.

¹⁹ Christian F. Ostermann, "East Germany and the Horn Crisis: Documents of SED *Afrikapolitik*," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8/9 (n.d.), 48.

²⁰ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 124.

²¹ As this work will show, this is exactly what African American friends of the GDR were willing and able to accept.

²² Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 124, 149.

and would remain the status quo until the early 1970s. Change came about on 21 December 1972, when East and West Germany signed the Basic Treaty, which “laid the groundwork for practical cooperation between the two German states on cross-border issues.”²³ In informally acknowledging the East German state, West Germany implicitly conveyed to its allies that they could safely establish links with the socialist Germany. In the month of December alone, twenty-one states established diplomatic relations with East Germany, and two years later, the United States followed suit.²⁴

Yet, as William Glenn Gray cautions, “As satisfying as these milestones must have been for the SED leadership, the landslide recognitions should not be construed as a defeat for the Federal Republic [West Germany]. The East German regime had remained on the fringes of international life precisely as long as West Germans wanted it to.”²⁵ Owing to this, rather than relaxing after the flood of diplomatic recognitions, the SED embarked upon the “more nebulous pursuit of international renown as a model socialist society.”²⁶ Now, legitimacy in the form of international prominence was the goal. Writing in 1981, Michael Sodaro offered another reason for East Germany’s continued pursuit of legitimacy, arguing that despite the improvement in relations between East and West Germany, the SED believed that there was no guarantee that the *détente* would remain a fixture of inter-German relations. Likely for both these reasons, SED officials deemed it unnecessary to avoid ideological confrontation with West Germany in other parts of the world, and allowed their anti-Western propaganda campaign to continue

²³ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 218.

²⁴ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 218-19. The United States held out until 1974 in hopes of compelling East Germany to pay restitution to Israel.

²⁵ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 219.

²⁶ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 220.

unabated.²⁷ It is against this backdrop of East Germany's efforts to acquire legitimacy and its continual struggle for influence that the relationship between East Germany and Black America rested.

While East Germany struggled to navigate the realities of a Cold War world, African Americans involved in the civil rights movement were grappling with the tensions of this new world order as well. Just as the power struggle between the US and the Soviet Union was evident within a divided Germany, so too was it apparent within the civil rights movement. As with any group comprised of such a large number of people, various organizations within the civil rights movement gravitated toward different political poles. Some of these groups, whether with real or alleged connections to the far left, quickly discovered that falling victim to the communist witch hunt had dire implications for the group's survival. The willingness of some of the more popular groups, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to move closer toward the political right meant that left-leaning civil rights activists were often forced to look elsewhere for allies in the freedom struggle, especially as the NAACP's position came to be considered more and more "mainstream" in a country becoming ever more conservative.²⁸ Therefore, some of the civil rights movement's most outspoken and radical leaders looked to and accepted overtures from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc for assistance in their fight for civil rights at home.

This desire to look beyond American borders for a solution to an American

²⁷ Sodaro, "The GDR and the Third World," 135.

²⁸ For a discussion of the NAACP's response to the "anticommunist hysteria of the early Cold War," see Manfred Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," *The Journal of American History* 94:1 (June 2007): 75-96. For a discussion of leftist activists' situation in the US, see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

problem had precedent for African American activists; for example, in the years after WWI, disappointed that participation in the war effort had not garnered African Americans more civil rights, many blacks looked to the Soviet Union and its anti-racist rhetoric for a solution.²⁹ Just as they had before, after WWII civil rights activists understood that their goals and objectives, and the methods used to achieve them, coincided or overlapped with those of other states.³⁰ When international observers—especially communist ones—spoke out against American racism and in favor of black rights, a number of black activists happily embraced this support. The statements of international backing lent credence to Black America’s arguments in favor of equal rights and treatment, and in some cases, added to the “political momentum being generated against racial prejudice and discrimination in the presumed land of the free.”³¹ Whether out of an honest desire to help or a self-interest that profited from placing pressure on the American government, international commentary played a role in the government’s management of the race question.

The pressure was applied in several ways, but most importantly, international observers forced the American government to acknowledge the gross discrepancy between its bombastic proclamations that the US was home to a thriving democracy and its policies regarding racial and ethnic minorities.³² Racism came to represent a political problem for the American government as officials grew increasingly concerned about the ways in which reports of racist violence and the continued denial of black rights hurt the

²⁹ For a discussion about African Americans in the Soviet Union, see Maxim Matusevich, “Black in the U.S.S.R.: Africans, African Americans, and the Soviet Society,” *Transition*, Issue 100 (2009): 56-75.

³⁰ Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 5.

³¹ Paul Gordon Lauren, “Seen from the Outside: The International Perspective on America’s Dilemma,” in *Window on Freedom*, 35.

³² Lauren, “Seen from the Outside,” 36.

American reputation abroad.³³ Especially disconcerting was the idea that the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc could use American racism as a propaganda platform, not just creating negative press for the US, but also potentially winning over undecided governments and peoples. Mary Dudziak has argued that this international criticism and communist propaganda forced the American government to act in order to placate “foreign critics by reframing the narrative of race in America,” and to promote “some level of social change.” Going on, Dudziak maintained that it was clearly understood that some reform was needed “in order to make credible the [American] government’s argument about race and democracy.”³⁴

Other historians, however, are not convinced that the Cold War had as positive an influence on the civil rights movement as Dudziak argues, maintaining that the stark divisions that were drawn within the movement ultimately had a negative impact on the movement’s ability to achieve its goals. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore has argued that the positive effects of the Cold War on the civil rights movement have been overemphasized and that, in fact, “[s]een through the lens of African American history, the influence of the Cold War weakens further.”³⁵ Along these lines, for example, Carol Anderson’s discussion of Walter White, the leader of the NAACP, suggested that the Cold War’s anti-communist hysteria served to weaken the movement when figures like White became fixated on defending the US and pursuing an anti-communist agenda that misrepresented the state of American race relations.³⁶ In the case of the black leftists

³³ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 6.

³⁴ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 13-14.

³⁵ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 7-8.

³⁶ Carol Anderson, “Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War, 1948-1952,” in *Window on Freedom*, 93.

who would become friends with the GDR, it is evident that the Cold War had a negative impact on their efforts in the struggle.

This impact of the Cold War on the civil rights movement, however, created a situation in which a Black American-East German relationship and alliance became a possibility. Though the tensions of the Cold War greatly limited what black leftists were able to accomplish within American borders and with whom, it also opened up a number of opportunities for international alliances that black leftists used in attempts to accomplish their goals at home. It was this desire to work with peoples beyond American borders that was what, combined with the movement's general move toward the political right, created a situation in which certain members of the African American civil rights movement felt comfortable entering into a relationship with East Germany. Together, both East Germany and Black America were affected by the tensions created and exacerbated by the Cold War and found in each other an ally in their struggle to forge for themselves better circumstances.

Intertwining East German Legitimacy and the African American Civil Rights Movement

The East German concept of anti-racism was an oft-used outgrowth of the state's founding myth, anti-fascism. This myth proclaimed that East Germans were the inheritors of the resistance efforts carried out against the Nazis under the leadership of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD—Communist Party of Germany), which would later forcefully take over the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD—Social Democratic Party of Germany) and form the SED. As the successor to the KPD,

the SED believed that the myth gave them the legitimacy and authority necessary to assume rule over East Germany. This myth also maintained that the West German government was the successor to the Nazi Party and its fascism, from which the West German government acquired the authority it used to create policies and lead its people. Painted as such, East Germans were faced with the choice of supporting their state, which claimed to stand in favor of “peace, democracy, friendship among peoples, and humanity,” and “against militarism, imperialist war, terror, race-baiting, and mass murder,” or supporting West Germany, a state that allegedly wanted nothing more than to destroy those who stood opposed to fascism.³⁷

Part of being anti-fascist included standing in opposition to racism. Though anti-fascism was mentioned frequently in reference to the relationship with Black America, it was anti-racism that was often placed in the spotlight. One finds that SED propaganda aimed at black populations often emphasized the GDR’s anti-racism only to bring anti-fascism and class to the forefront later. Certainly, the SED’s heavy reliance on anti-racism in furthering a relationship with Black America is in part evidence of the Party molding its message to make it more attractive to its target audience(s). The focus on anti-racism more generally, however, also points quite specifically to the German context in which the SED ruled. At a time when there was plenty of blame to share for the sins of the Nazis, the SED was at pains to create the starkest of divisions between East Germany and Hitlerian Germany, which stipulated an anti-racist outlook.

Wrapped up in the SED’s notion of what it meant to be anti-racist was that one first and foremost had to be anti-capitalist, as the only effective way to eradicate racial

³⁷ Alan Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 93-96.

intolerance was to remove the capitalist competition that bred racism.³⁸ Because racism grew out of this competition, adherents to Marxist ideology “repudiated biological racism, characterizing it as a bourgeois ideological device to divide the working class along ethnic lines.”³⁹ Given this view, the connection between East Germany and the black freedom movement, in the US and elsewhere, was a rather logical one for East German officials to make (and an easy one for black communists to accept). They laid out this connection for their citizens, making news about the civil rights movement widely available in East Germany. A large portion of the information about the movement and African American history was delivered via newspapers, magazines, and books, as East German publishing houses requisitioned translations of key works by activists like W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King. East German authors also wrote their own African American histories, telling their readers of a working-class people who, despite many obstacles, fought back against capitalist oppression.⁴⁰

Before long, an East German discourse about American race relations emerged, spurring the growth of a number of government-supported and –sponsored organizations and associations created with the expressed purpose of pledging solidarity with and support for Black America. The propaganda that was created focused on both the

³⁸ For a contemporary (socialist) discussion of the remnants of racism or racial discrimination in a socialist state, see the following article about the Jose A. Aponte Commission in Cuba, which was created in order to address “the issue of racial discrimination and racial prejudices in the cultural context.” “Jose A. Aponte Commission: Defending what has been achieved,” *Digital Granma Internacional*, 28 June 2013, www.granma.cu/ingles/cuba-i/28jun-APONTE.html, accessed 12 July 2013.

³⁹ Fredrickson, ““Self-Determination for Negroes,”” 184.

⁴⁰ For example, see Prof. Dr. Klaus Bollinger, *Freedom now—Freiheit sofort! Die Negerbevölkerung der USA im Kampf um Demokratie*, (Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1968) and Horst Ihde, *Von der Plantage zum schwarzen Ghetto: Geschichte und Kultur der Afroamerikaner in den USA*, (Leipzig: Urania Verlag, 1975).

“reactionary” West German government in Bonn and the American government in Washington. Though the FRG was the SED’s main focus, the US is often the expressed target in much of the East German anti-racist propaganda. This focus on the US was two-pronged. In one respect, the US was a target because, in a practical sense, it needed to be. The civil rights movement was not struggling against the West German government, and successful propaganda needed to reflect a shared enemy for both Black Americans and East Germans. Yet, the US was also a target because it allowed the SED to portray West Germany’s alliance with the US as an acceptance, and even approval of, the American government’s racist policies.⁴¹ As we will see, the East German discourse on African Americans quite intimately intertwined the civil rights movement with the German-German struggle, the relationship that blossomed between Black America and East Germany becoming a weapon in that fight.

Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow outline the growth of the alliance between Black America and East Germany, as well as the peak of the relationship, which then leads into a discussion about the decline of the friendship. To better understand the relationship, as well as East German views on blacks, blackness, race, and racism, Chapter Two delves into Germany’s history with blacks, beginning in 1871. This chapter outlines German interactions with blacks in Imperial Germany, Weimar Germany, and Nazi Germany,

⁴¹ The power dynamics in the relationship between West Germany and the US were not reflected accurately in East German propaganda, which portrayed the relationship as far more voluntary than it actually was. On the relationship between the FRG and the US, see for example: Detlef Junker, ed., *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945-1968: A Handbook, Vol. 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Junker, ed., *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1968-1990: A Handbook, Vol. 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

arguing that Germans' perceptions of blacks tended to shift according to whether they saw these blacks as outsiders who would always remain separate from the German nation, or as interlopers who would disrupt the definition of German as white and European. It is this history upon which East German perceptions of blacks, as well as any racialized views of blacks, was built.

Chapter Three examines early thoughts on a Black American-East German friendship in the 1950s, contending that for much of this decade, the relationship was largely one that existed in the minds of the East German elite. This theoretical belief that East Germans and Black Americans were on parallel tracks seeking to overthrow the capitalist West made African Americans an attractive ally for these GDR elite. Though there were several African Americans who came to reside in East Germany, or at the very least passed through the country, the relationship long remained a theoretical one, as each African American lacked the necessary spark to make the relationship real. It was not until Paul Robeson visited the GDR in 1960 that East German citizens became interested in the alliance and African Americans began to explore the value of ties to East Germany.

Chapter Four looks at Robeson's visit, as well as East German efforts to organize the trip, in the face of rising numbers of East Germans fleeing for the West. Appreciating the fact that many East Germans were fond of Robeson for less-than-political reasons, the SED sought to associate itself with the African American in the minds of its citizens, in the hope that love for Robeson would rub off onto the Party. Chapter Four continues with an examination of East Germany's most extensive solidarity effort on behalf of an African American—Angela Davis—at which point the relationship between Black America and East Germany was at its most popular. Yet, despite the image of an anti-

racist East Germany that was painted by the SED, as well as Robeson and other visiting African Americans, blacks who resided in the GDR knew that the real situation for people of color was nothing like the propaganda stated. Anti-racism—a commitment to racial tolerance—existed only at the superficial level of policies and laws and was rarely enforced in East German society.

Though the early 1970s marked the peak of the friendship, by the mid-1970s, the relationship started slowly to deteriorate, as the civil rights movement began its own decline and East Germany acquired diplomatic recognition from a large portion of the international community. With the very glue that had held both sides together starting to loosen, there was little to hold the relationship together in a way that resembled the heyday of the friendship. Chapter Five examines this decline and the state of the relationship from the mid-1970s until the end of the 1980s, arguing that in this period, one finds a stagnation of sorts regarding what was left of the relationship, as the SED sought to maintain Paul Robeson's legacy while discounting East German interest in contemporary African American cultural products, like hip-hop.

A comparison between citizens' views on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the image of King painted by the SED in the late 1980s also highlights the ever growing distance between the SED and its people. A relationship that had once been used to bring the people and the SED closer would, by the end of the 1980s, come to emphasize the ever-growing chasm between the Party and East German citizens. Chapter Five closes with a look at the SED's general approach to the friendship to reveal the ways in which rhetoric about the civil rights movement failed to correspond to the SED's real views on the black freedom movement.

The conclusion closes out this work with a discussion about racism in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of East and West Germany. Many have sought an explanation for the escalating racism in Germany in the early 1990s by pointing to the racism that had “festered” in East Germany ever since Hitler’s defeat. Through the lens of the relationship between Black America and East Germany, one finds that East German views on blacks, race, and racism are more complicated than many have believed.

Chapter Two: On Blackness *with* Blacks **German Perceptions of Blackness Prior to 1945**

“...the Black remains a mythic figure in German thought.”
--Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks*⁴²

For many years, black history in Germany has been subtly, and sometimes not-so-subtly, erased or rendered invisible. Reflecting in the early 1980s on Germany's relationship with peoples of African descent, historian Sander L. Gilman declared that Germany had developed a conception of blackness that existed without blacks. In fact, it appeared to him and others that much of what Germany knew of blacks came from a series of very brief interactions with foreign blacks, which had had little influence upon Germans and their history. This view has persisted not only among scholars, but among general observers as well, leading to a perception of Germany largely as a “white” state unfamiliar with minorities, most especially blacks. Although the 1980s later gave rise to the recognition of the black historical figure in Germany, blacks often received inadequate academic treatment, if any at all, outside of specialized texts.

At the start of the 2000s, historians began to examine more closely the German interaction with blacks, finally disproving to a more mainstream academic audience the notion that Germans had developed a conception of blackness without blacks. Though Black Studies in Germany has since grown in popularity, the early hesitance to acknowledge the existence of blacks in German history can be attributed to several factors. First, blacks living in Germany have admittedly comprised a smaller proportion of the German population than have other minority groups, which lulled scholars into believing that any black/German interactions had an insignificant impact and were

⁴² Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), 128.

therefore of little consequence.⁴³ Instead, minority research in Germany has long focused on Jews, Roma and Sinti (the so-called “Gypsies”), and in the post-war years, primarily Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers). However, an examination of German responses to blacks has shown that blacks often bore a significance that was out of proportion to their actual numbers.⁴⁴ For example, when black French colonial troops occupied the Rhineland after World War I, though black numbers were small, blacks “became a convenient symbol for the alleged injustice of the French occupation regime and the Versailles peace order in general.”⁴⁵ As this chapter will show, since the colonial period, the symbolic importance of blacks in Germany often bore no relationship to their physical numbers. In many cases, blacks, as well as the images associated with blacks, were often tied to larger issues resonating within Germany.

Second, research on blacks and Germany in the years prior to Adolf Hitler’s reign have often become subsumed in a teleological discussion determined to reveal connections between German racism against blacks and the horrors of the Holocaust. Treating Germany’s behavior towards blacks in their African colonies, or later along the Rhineland after WWI, as simply a prelude to the Holocaust relegates these blacks and their experiences to nothing more than a “training grounds” for what would occur later.

⁴³ It is difficult to know the exact number of blacks that reside in the country today, as population statistics relating to race or ethnicity are no longer kept in Germany. However, as of 2008, the *Initiative Schwarzer Menschen in Deutschland* (ISD) estimated that there were nearly 500,000 Germans of African descent. David Gordon Smith, “‘Uncle Barack’s Cabin’: German Newspaper Slammed for Racist Cover,” *Spiegel Online International*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/uncle-barack-s-cabin-german-newspaper-slammed-for-racist-cover-a-557861.html>, retrieved 7 December 2012.

⁴⁴ The same can be said of Jews in this period, as well. In 1910, Jews represented just 1.07% of the German population, which in itself was a *decline* from 1.13% in 1871. Regardless of their low numbers, they still represented a great threat to German anti-Semites. Neil MacMaster, *Racism in Europe: 1870-2000* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 98.

⁴⁵ Raffael Scheck, “The Killing of Black Soldiers from the French Army by the Wehrmacht in 1940: The Question of Authorization,” *German Studies Review* 28:3 (Oct. 2005), 597.

For instance, many studies of German violence in colonial Africa in the late-nineteenth century have approached the topic with the expectation of linking the genocidal acts in Africa to the Holocaust nearly half a century later, in order to prove a tradition of German militarism and violence.⁴⁶ Yet, as Matti Bunzl and H. Glenn Penny argue in the introduction to their edited work on anthropology in Imperial Germany, “the concern to locate the nineteenth-century origins of Nazism in Germany’s colonial encounters invariably flattens the complexities inherent in these situations.”⁴⁷ As scholars sought a connection between German activity in the African colonies and the Holocaust, the Black Africans themselves became lost in the shuffle, as did anything about the Black African/German relationship that did not directly relate to the Holocaust. In this way, blacks were also rendered invisible in or subordinate to the dominant German historical narrative.⁴⁸

Third, what appeared to be a series of contradictory German attitudes towards blacks compelled many scholars to again write off the black experience in and with Germany as an aberration of sorts. The black relationship to and with Germany seemed to lack any sort of coherence, especially when scholars compared the black experience to that of other minority groups, like the Jews in the first half of the twentieth century, for which the German treatment carried a consistency of sorts. However, once historians

⁴⁶ For example, see Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Matti Bunzl and H. Glenn Penny, “Introduction: Rethinking German Anthropology, Colonialism, and Race,” in *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*, eds. Bunzl and Penny (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 29.

⁴⁸ For an example of a conversation about race rendering blacks invisible by or subordinating them to a discussion about anti-Semitism, see George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985). Though this chapter seeks to carve out a space for blacks in Germany, it will nevertheless include a discussion of German anti-Semitism, so as to place German anti-black racism in the context in which it lived in pre-1945 Germany.

began utilizing methodologies tailored to and growing out of Black and African diaspora studies, they discovered that there was in fact a continuity and consistency in German attitudes towards blacks.⁴⁹ Therefore, using methodologies pioneered by African American and African diaspora historians, and tweaking them to suit the German context, allowed for a proper examination of the black experience in Germany, and served to write back into the historical record all those of color who had passed through or called Germany home.⁵⁰

As this chapter will show, blacks were more than simply a “mythic figure in German thought,” as Gilman famously stated. When East Germans and African Americans first met, their relationship was built on the history of nearly a hundred years of interactions between Germans and blacks. Collectively, German attitudes towards blacks and shared memories of past relationships had an undeniable impact on the formation of an alliance between East Germany and Black America. Important too was the impact of previous German attitudes on the development and evolution of East German racism and conceptions of race. Beginning with the German colonial period (1884-1918), and continuing through the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), and ending with

⁴⁹ See Tina Campt on this approach in understanding the place of Black Germans in Nazi racial ideology in *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 5.

⁵⁰ It was the very application of a traditional understanding of African diaspora studies, which many have argued prioritizes the African American experience over others, that led to the development of a specific approach to the study of Black Germans. On reading the first publication devoted to Afro-Germans, *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, Michelle Wright has written: “What first struck me was that, whether in poetic or prosaic form, these different analyses of how Afro-German identity is interpolated by white Germans—or more accurately, not interpolated—speak to a unique set of circumstances which I had not found in the diverse array of 19th- and 20th-century African-American literature and theory. Indeed, even as my graduate and post-graduate studies moved to incorporate Black British and Black French communities for a comparative analysis of counter-discursive strategies in subject formation, the Afro-German situation remained unique.” Wright, “Others-From-Within From Without: Afro-German Subject Formation and the Challenge of a Counter-Discourse,” *Callaloo*, 26:2 (Spring 2003), 296. See also: Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

the Nazi era (1933-1945), this chapter will trace the growth and evolution of the varying German conceptions of blackness. In each period, German views on blacks hinged on the status of blacks as insiders or outsiders, a distinction that would bear significance in the GDR as well.

Imperial Germany, Colonization, and Blacks, 1871-1918

Though Germans had brief and irregular contact with blacks prior to the colonial period, interactions did not occur in significant numbers until Germans began to settle in the state's new African colonies. For those who did not travel to Africa, the colonies were brought to them through advertising, art, and traveling ethnographic and anthropological exhibitions. Prior to this intersection between the two groups, Germans had engaged in intellectual discussions and debates about those whom they considered racial Others⁵¹ (a concept that was broadly conceived and included other people of color who were not black), discussions that firmly placed the white German in a position of superiority.

Despite this belief in German power and authority, interactions with blacks soon unearthed a number of German racial anxieties. Whether it was German men engaging in sexual relationships with Black African women, or German women admiring Black African men, officials were eager to create a clear line of demarcation between the two racial groups. These officials believed that the “dangers” of crossing this line were most clearly seen in the bodies of the mixed-race children born in the colonies, citizens of Germany who, as many at that time argued, posed a threat to the future of the German

⁵¹ The use of the word “Other” in this text should be read as if it were framed by scare quotes. For ease of reading, I have removed the quotes from the text, because the word occurs with great frequency.

nation and what it meant to *be* German, defined in large part as being white and European.

Prior to 1884, when Germany established its first colonies in Africa, Germany's interactions with blacks were fairly sporadic.⁵² With the unification of Germany (or the *Kaiserreich*—Imperial Germany) in 1871, it was another thirteen years before Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of Germany, consented to the acquisition of colonies. In Africa, Germany established German East Africa, German South West Africa, German Togoland, and German Kamerun. Certainly, Germany's late entrée into European colonialism affected how Germans came to view racial others, since, as Susanne Zantop has argued, Germans had created images of the Other absent of any interactions with the Other.

To an extent, Gilman's proclamation that Germany developed a conception of blackness without blacks is correct, though Zantop recognizes that this conception of blackness was eventually confronted by the German introduction to the actual Other. As she has argued, the images Germans created of the Other influenced future German dealings with those who appeared racially distinct from the German nation. These images, Zantop maintained, were developed by an educated German middle class, who

⁵² Probably the most well-known pre-colonial Black figure in Germany was a man named Anton Wilhelm Amo, who, according to historians' best guesses, was born in 1703. Originally from Ghana, the Dutch West India Company presented Amo as a gift to two German dukes in 1707. Considered status symbols, it was quite common at this time for Africans to be given as gifts to European nobility. Amo has become a storied figure in Black German history because after he acquired his freedom from the dukes, he attended the University of Wittenberg at Halle, Saxony and became a noted philosopher, often referred to as one of the greatest thinkers in Germany at this time. He earned a doctorate, and was fluent not only in German, but also in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Dutch, and French. Amo later returned to Ghana at the age of forty, but was unfortunately captured and re-enslaved, dying shortly afterward. Marilyn Sephogle, "Anton Wilhelm Amo," *Journal of Black Studies* 23:3, Special Issue: The Image of Africa in German Society (Dec. 1992), 182-183; Clarence Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims: The Historical Experiences of Afro-Germans, European Blacks, Africans, and African Americans in the Nazi Era* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 54. Lusane refers to Amo as "William Anthony Amo."

read and discussed the colonial experiences of the other European powers. These debates eventually contributed to a collective colonial imagination which outlined what the Other was “truly” like. This definition of the Other, however, hinged on the German definition of themselves as white Europeans.⁵³

With the creation of German colonies in Africa, German society would soon face their first large-scale experience with an erosion of identity via the black body. Unlike other European powers settling in Africa, Germany sent only a small group of Germans to the colonies; the majority of those who did go were men. As was the case in other colonies, the men developed relationships with the colonized women, relationships that sometimes led to marriage and/or the births of mixed-race children. For white Germans, these children represented a crisis in German identity, as one could not be both the Other and German, especially when the definition of German hinged precisely on not being the Other. Fatima el-Tayeb has argued that in categorizing various races, Germans “assigned opposite mentalities to the races,” and any race-mixing necessitated a “loss of ‘racial purity’” that “was therefore equated with a loss of identity.” As a result, for Germans to accept—or even to merely tolerate—the presence of a mixed-race population calling themselves German “would have shown that cultural identity is not connected to ‘race,’” thereby removing one—if not both—of the attributes that made one German.⁵⁴

Therefore, anxious to maintain a barrier between the colonized and the colonizers, the German government instituted a series of bans prohibiting mixed marriages, using

⁵³ Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 3- 5, 7.

⁵⁴ Fatima El-Tayeb, “‘Blood is a Very Special Juice’: Racialized Bodies and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Germany,” *International Review of Social History* 44: S7, Complicating Categories: Gender, Class, Race and Ethnicity (Dec. 1999), 169.

American anti-miscegenation laws as precedents.⁵⁵ One worth examining is the ban introduced in German South West Africa in 1905, which stated that any mixed-race marriage that occurred after the ordinance came into effect would no longer be consecrated by the German state, while marriages entered into prior to 1905 would remain lawful. Any children resulting from unlawful unions would be illegitimate, and the state would consider these children black. Any of the offspring from the pre-ordinance mixed-marriages were considered legitimate, and would be considered white by the German state regardless of their black parentage.⁵⁶

Evident in this ordinance is a clear desire to maintain a distance between the German male and the female Other.⁵⁷ What this example also, importantly, shows is a German perception of race in which the *state* determined one's racial designation, and could apparently change it at will. One finds in this ordinance an almost desperate desire to quite literally whitewash the "problem" in the colonies for the sake of maintaining the notion of German racial homogeneity. The reason for this need to precisely determine who was black and who was white becomes clearer when Germany's citizenship law is taken into consideration. This law, based on the notion of *jus sanguinis*, or, "right of

⁵⁵ The colonies in question were Southwest Africa, East Africa, and Samoa. Lora Wildenthal, "Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the German Colonial Empire," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 267.

⁵⁶ Helmut Walser Smith, "The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1909-1914," in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and its Legacy*, eds. Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 117. Despite using American anti-miscegenation laws as a precedent, this ordinance differs in the selective use of the "one drop rule," tying the state's recognition of one's supposed skin color to marriage and legitimacy.

⁵⁷ Though there were instances of white German women marrying black males in the colonies, these cases were far fewer, and understood differently. "Technically, such women assumed their husbands' citizenship, even if that meant colonial status. I have found no such case in which matters escalated to the point where that status was in fact definitively pronounced. In all cases, however, the women were roundly denounced for having forsaken German civilization. Individual women were expelled from the German colonies and forced to live in Germany or abroad." Wildenthal, "Race, Gender, and Citizenship," 265.

blood,” dictated that a child born to married parents received its father’s citizenship at birth. However, if the parents were not married and the father was not recognized by the mother at birth, the child received its mother’s citizenship.⁵⁸

While this particular conception of citizenship certainly had the potential to be incredibly exclusionary (one was not German merely because they were born in the country), it also created a problem that became evident when German men began dating the women in the colonies. Once a bloodline or race perceived as weak entered into the German “race,” as Germans increasingly came to understand themselves, these individuals and all of their offspring could be next to impossible to remove. What is more, this confrontation between a member of the German “race” and someone considered un-German posed serious threats to German identity and the definition of German. Such a conception of citizenship, and its inherent dangers, explains why the 1905 ordinance in German Southwest Africa was concerned with marriage and why it labeled the “legitimate” children as white and the “illegitimate” ones as black. The “white” children of the married couples had German citizenship while the “black” children of the unmarried couples did not. Despite all of this linguistic and racial maneuvering that kept the traditional definition of German intact, this decision to ignore the children’s black racial heritage was difficult for many Germans to abide by.

Discussions in the metropole about the mixed-race children born in the colonies, and the implications their existence had for the future of the German “race,” generally played out in the conservative mainstream press, while liberal and progressive

⁵⁸ Wildenthal, “Race, Gender, and Citizenship,” 267.

newspapers spilled little ink on the controversy.⁵⁹ The opinions expressed in the press were largely concerned with the potential dangers represented by these Germans of African descent. One group, influenced by social anthropologists, looked to the future, arguing that no matter the size of the mixed-race population in the colonies, or even Germany itself, one drop of black blood was enough to permanently contaminate the German nation. They argued that miscegenation was unnatural, and, as such, that all sexual contacts between races had to be outlawed.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, others addressed the ordinance's ruling which declared that mixed-race children born prior to the marriage ban were white, and focused their arguments and efforts on excluding these mixed-race children from any rights to the German nation.⁶¹

A third position, taken up by the Catholic and Protestant churches, maintained a strong opposition to *who* restricted marriage rights, rather than the restriction itself. El-Tayeb has described the churches' view as ambiguous because, while they opposed the marriage bans, the churches also opposed interracial marriages and race-mixing. The churches' main opposition to the marriage bans was not made on the basis of a belief in racial equality, but rather because they resented that the government had determined whether or not *religious* marriage ceremonies could take place. As this was a territory which the churches considered solely their own, they argued that officials had overstepped their bounds when issuing the ordinances.⁶² That a group of mixed-race children in the colonies, thousands of miles away from the metropole, could cause such

⁵⁹ El-Tayeb, "Blood is a Very Special Juice," 159.

⁶⁰ El-Tayeb, "Blood is a Very Special Juice," 159-160.

⁶¹ El-Tayeb, "Blood is a Very Special Juice," 160.

⁶² El-Tayeb, "Blood is a Very Special Juice," 161.

debate is a testament to the symbolic importance that blacks acquired within Germany.⁶³

Though few Germans had the ability to travel to the colonies and meet blacks for themselves, there were a number of ways in which the colonies were brought to Germany, allowing Germans in the metropole to have “interactions” with blacks that moved beyond mere debates. An avenue through which Germans were able to live out the role of colonial master without actually setting foot in the colonies was the ethnographic exhibition, then more commonly referred to as *Völkerschauen*. In an 1890 exhibition, the “Africa section” of the exhibition included “live palm trees” and “various colonial products from Africa: copra, palm oil, cloves, tobacco, cotton, palm nuts, ivory, animal horns and pelts, and the like.” Meanwhile, “strange masks and other startling artifacts of the primitive world shocked with their bizarre difference.”⁶⁴ Though these *Völkerschauen* defined themselves as scientific and serious intellectual pursuits, the carnivalesque and sensationalistic ways in which the *Völkerschauen* represented Black Africans served to confirm the image projected by the German public of the “savage” black.⁶⁵

⁶³ This fear of race-mixing extended to Jews as well. In language similar to that used to discuss the destruction of the German race through just one drop of black blood, an article in 1905 in the periodical *Hammer* confessed that Jewish blood was so strong that the inheritance of Jewish features and attributes was guaranteed. Christian S. Davis, *Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Germans of Jewish Descent in Imperial Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 103-4. Yet, despite this emphasis on the exaggerated characteristics that formed the backbone of many Jewish stereotypes, it was the very fact that many Western Jews were so difficult to identify that concerned Germans in a way that most Black Germans would not. These near-impossible to distinguish Western Jews were afforded an invisibility that many anti-Semites concluded was being used to operate “secretively and destructively within the bowels of society.” MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 95-96. Germans of African descent were almost always going to be easy to identify, and while the threat posed by these individuals to both the German race and identity was quite disconcerting, their visibility made the problem they presented seem containable, precisely because they were unable to move freely throughout German society while appearing “traditionally” German.

⁶⁴ David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 36.

⁶⁵ Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire*, 66.

The turn of the century, though, brought with it bans that forbade the import of peoples from the German colonies for the purposes of exhibition. These bans were not of a humanitarian concern, but rather were influenced by the “tacit recognition of the dangers in such real human contact.” Belief in these dangers grew out of the fear that the more familiar Africans became with Europeans and European practices, the less likely it was that they would willfully return to subordinate positions once they returned to the colonies. Authorities were also worried by their observation that white German women seemed highly susceptible to the “exotic charms” of the black men. Even in the contrived environment of the exhibitions, the contact between Germans and Africans had the ability to erode white status and esteem in both the colonies and the metropole.⁶⁶

At about the same time as the exhibitions arrived in Germany, African American entertainers were also traveling to the country. One of the most storied African American groups to travel to Germany was the Black Troubadours, a group that had splintered off of the well-known Fisk Jubilee singers.⁶⁷ The Black Troubadours toured much of Europe, but spent most of their time in Germany, where they soon picked up German and began performing songs in the language. While some German spectators enjoyed these performances in their native tongue, others believed that “the strange harmony of the voices” made it difficult for them to truly appreciate the performance, and suggested that

⁶⁶ Ciarlo, “Consuming Race, Envisioning Empire: Colonialism and German Mass Culture, 1887-1914,” (PhD diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003), 95.

⁶⁷ Rainer E. Lotz, “The Black Troubadours: Black Entertainers in Europe, 1896-1915,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 10:2 (Autumn 1990), 257. In addition to solo acts, joining the Black Troubadours in Germany were William’s Colored Singers of Chicago, the Utica Jubilee Singers, the Fisk Choir, and the Hampton Choir. Christine Naumann, “African American Performers and Culture in Weimar Germany,” in *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, eds. David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 96.

the Troubadours should stick to singing “Negro” music.⁶⁸ These blacks, unlike the black Africans in the *Völkerschauen*, had stepped outside of the bounds in which Germans preferred they remain. Despite this criticism, there were certainly Germans who quite enjoyed the black musical performances, evidenced by the fact that in 1896 alone, some one hundred African American performers poured into the country.⁶⁹ It is important, however, not to equate an enjoyment of black-performed music with a nuanced understanding and acceptance of people of color.

The relationship between blacks and white Germans under the Imperial and colonial governments was one marked by official efforts to maintain a suitable distance between blacks and Germany, Germans, and German culture. Though some Germans expressed an interest in blacks, whether through their participation in a romantic or friendly relationship, or by seeking out performances by black entertainers, this interest on its own was by no means an indication of racial enlightenment. Though German attitudes towards blacks were similar to those of other European states, Germany’s “history” with blacks was much shorter.⁷⁰ At a time when other Europeans were interacting with blacks in the colonies, Germans were developing perceptions of the racial Other, formed by reading travelogues and participating in spirited debates. With time, German conceptions of blackness came to be based on concrete interactions largely brought about by Germany’s foray into colonialism. From this stemmed national discussions in Imperial Germany about blacks and their impact on German national

⁶⁸ Lotz, “The Black Troubadours,” 260.

⁶⁹ Lotz, “The Black Troubadours,” 261-2.

⁷⁰ While the development of German racism ran a slightly different course than other European racisms, it should not be interpreted as the development of a distinctively different form of racism that could only have come about in Germany.

identity.

Weimar Germany and Blacks, 1918-1933

In the period between WWI and WWII, Germany yet again confronted racial anxiety over the future of the German race and what it meant to identify as German. Following the end of the First World War, black troops occupied the Rhineland in Germany and eventually fathered children with white German women. In this case, debates about the presence of these black occupying soldiers who were tied to Germany's defeat in WWI, and the children they fathered with white German women, built upon the discourse developed during Germany's colonial period. This time, however, there were several factors that made the interracial sexual relationships and the resulting mixed-race children appear even more dangerous: the relationships were between black *men* and white *women*, the children resided in Germany with their mothers, and both the relationships and the children were reminders of Germany's defeat, vulnerability, and weakness in the wake of WWI. At a time when Germany sought to rebuild, blacks in Germany were understood as impediments to making the state great once again.

After the German defeat in WWI, the Treaty of Versailles divested Germany of its colonies, but before long, Germans came face to face with yet another group of Black Africans. A condition of the Treaty gave France the option to occupy the Rhineland, an industrial region of Germany with rich mineral deposits. Before the finalization of the Treaty's terms in 1918, German negotiators attempted to ensure that France would not use any of its black troops if it chose to occupy the Rhine, but France was unwilling to

make any assurances.⁷¹ Just as Germany had feared, when France began its occupation of the Rhineland it used, among others, men from France's African colonies. Keith L. Nelson has estimated that among the occupation forces, there were 42,000 Africans in Germany by the spring of 1920, and 45,000 a year later. The bulk of these Africans were Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian; according to French records, the first blacks from sub-Saharan Africa arrived in Germany in April 1919. Nelson has pegged the number of black troops at 10,000, though the Germans "never tired of pointing out...that many of the *North* Africans were so black as to be indistinguishable from the Negroes."⁷² This opinion likely resulted in a higher number of *perceived* blacks in Germany.

Though this was not the first time that a black man had set foot on German soil, it was the first time that blacks had arrived in Germany in such numbers. Opposition in the early years of the occupation, though, did not center solely on the black troops, but rather on the French *decision* to use black troops. The French had originally chosen troops from its colonies not only for practical reasons—many of their white French troops had either been killed or injured during the war—but also because they wanted to underscore for the Germans the extent of their defeat.⁷³ Edmund Dene Morel, a British journalist and social activist, quickly took up the battle cry against this French policy, publishing in Britain several articles about the occupation.⁷⁴ He later expanded on these articles and published a pamphlet entitled "The Horror on the Rhine." In the preface to this pamphlet, Morel

⁷¹ Reiner Pommerin, "The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany," *German Studies Review* 5:3 (Oct. 1982), 316.

⁷² Keith L. Nelson, "The 'Black Horror on the Rhine': Race as a Factor in Post-World War I Diplomacy," *The Journal of Modern History* 42:4 (Dec. 1970), 610-11. Emphasis in the original.

⁷³ Nelson, "The 'Black Horror on the Rhine,'" 606.

⁷⁴ Morel was also known for his activism decrying the misrule and mistreatment of the Congolese, who were then under the rule of King Léopold II of Belgium. See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

claimed that his stance was not an attack on the black troops, but rather a concern that if “Europe is to become accustomed to the employment of coloured soldiers for political purposes, there is a danger in store for the African populations, as well as the European [populations]”⁷⁵

A large part of this danger, as perceived by those who opposed the French policy in the Rhineland, owed to the notion that the French had turned the “normal” racial hierarchy on its head, sending black troops to stand in authority over whites. With such rhetoric, Morel’s campaign against the “horror” on the Rhine not only engendered support in Europe, but also the United States.⁷⁶ Many groups, including the Rhenish Women’s League, spoke out against the occupation and published pamphlets in various languages, demanding that women everywhere “support as strongly as it is in their power the aim of the Rhenish Women’s League of ridding the Rhinelands [sic] of the coloured troops forced to occupy it by their white lords.”⁷⁷ Here, as with Morel, the blame rested not with the black soldiers, but rather with the French government for bringing them to Germany.

The blame, however, would soon be transferred to the black troops, as a number of these troops engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with white German women. In these years, many white Europeans and Americans were unable to fathom a situation in which a white woman would willingly engage in sexual relations with a black man—unless she were a woman of “loose” morals—and so the common assumption was that

⁷⁵ E.D. Morel, *The Black Horror on the Rhine, Eighth Edition* (London: Union of Democratic Control, Orchard House, 1921). No pagination in preface.

⁷⁶ Nelson, “The ‘Black Horror on the Rhine,’” 616-17.

⁷⁷ Rhenish Women’s League, eds., “Coloured French Troops on the Rhine,” Fourth, Revised and Extended Edition (Leipzig: Rudolph Hartmann, 1923), 4.

these women had been raped. The interracial sexual relations were yet another reminder of the occupation's inversion of the racial hierarchy, made especially egregious if one believed that the women had been raped (though it is telling that this belief was preferable to the idea that the women had willingly become sexually involved with the black men). As Tina Campt has argued, the "access of Blacks to white female bodies" represented "a sexual equality between Blacks and white men in relation to (or, perhaps, in the possession of) white women."⁷⁸ This assumption of racial *and* sexual parity was considered a consequence of Germany's physical defeat in WWI and the embarrassment of the Treaty of Versailles.

The sexual humiliation that German men experienced had far-reaching effects. In threatening white German masculinity, these black troops also presented a threat to the German military. Campt has argued that in the military, "*Wehrhaftigkeit* (the ability to perform military service and protect one's country and property) had long been regarded as a primary masculine attribute."⁷⁹ By extension, the emasculation of the German male translated into and in some ways reflected the weakness of the German military that had suffered defeat in WWI. When this combined with the cultural shame that Germans felt more generally at the presence of these black troops—with German cultural identity tied so closely to being white, the inversion of the racial hierarchy represented by the black occupation troops was significantly worrying—the resulting resentment and fears firmly established themselves within the German psyche, finding expression years later in WWII and beyond.

⁷⁸ Tina Campt, "Converging Spectres of An Other Within: Race and Gender in Prewar Afro-German History," *Callaloo*, 26:2 (Spring 2003), 334.

⁷⁹ Tina M. Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 56.

The sexual relationships, unsurprisingly, resulted in the births of a number of mixed-race children along the Rhine, often referred to pejoratively as the “Rhineland Bastards.” Reiner Pommerin has estimated the total number of mixed-race children born between 1919 and 1925 to have been 385: 201 male children and 182 female children.⁸⁰ Following the concept of *jus sanguinis*, these children were usually considered German citizens, because many of the troops did not marry the mothers nor did they remain in Germany. Utilizing the pre-existing public and political discourses on race mixing, many challenged the children’s status as German citizens. As in the colonies, but with a new intensity, the children were designated as a menace to the survival of the German nation.⁸¹ The danger this time was more pressing, however, because these children were German citizens who lived *in* Germany, unlike the Black Germans who resided in the German colonies.⁸²

Very quickly, the sense of defeat roused by the black troops was also associated with the children. The German quest to deal psychologically with the presence of black occupation troops, the Rhineland children, and the defeat both groups symbolized, contributed to the racialization of the interwar period.⁸³ In many ways, this negative, racialized perspective on the black presence influenced how Germans would subsequently understand blacks during the Nazi era and after—as savages with little self-

⁸⁰ Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 317. Pommerin’s math is incorrect, however, as the figures only total 383.

⁸¹ Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 322.

⁸² Adolf Hitler would later write that these children were actually part of a Jewish plot to destroy Germany through racial degeneration. Hitler believed that a Jewish conspiracy existed that “encouraged miscegenation between Aryans and the lowest forms of racial life,” the Rhineland children an example of this scheme. MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 147.

⁸³ This period also included the racialization of anti-Semitism in Germany. Anti-Semitic beliefs, which had previously been based on religious intolerance, became “racial attributes” with which all Jews were allegedly born.

control who were a danger to the future of the German people. In working to reassert its pre-war status as a great power, Germany felt compelled to reaffirm its racial superiority over these black “invaders,” and in so doing, project itself as the “last protector of the white race.” To do so, Germany sought to turn what it had once perceived of as victimization—France’s inversion of the racial hierarchy in Germany—into a martyrdom of sorts for the survival of the white race.⁸⁴

At the same time that the debate over Germany’s racial hierarchy raged, Germans were traveling to the US, observing America’s own race problem. In 1963, Earl R. Beck wrote about these visits in an article entitled “German Views of Negro Life in the United States, 1919-1933,” in which he argued that for the most part, German visitors generally expressed sympathy toward the plight of the Black American. While Beck’s article lacks any stringent analysis, he does provide several examples of German sentiments about American blacks in the interwar years before Hitler’s rise to power. One finds that many of the opinions about and attitudes towards Black Americans in this period were still present in the GDR many years later.

In his article, Beck described the travelers’ observations and opinions as an odd “mixture of objective and unobjective reporting, of superficial and penetrating analysis, of quatsch and profound wisdom.”⁸⁵ For the most part, Beck concluded that Germans under the Weimar government were sympathetic to the African American quest for rights. Beck believed that for many Germans this owed to a “bitterness of wartime experiences [that] was reflected in a general tendency to excessive criticism of American

⁸⁴ Campt, “Converging Spectres,” 335, 336.

⁸⁵ Earl R. Beck, “German Views of Negro Life in the United States, 1919-1933,” *The Journal of Negro History* 48:1 (Jan. 1963), 22.

ideals and the American way of life.” Pointing to fears of Americanization in the interwar period, Beck maintained that Europeans expressed this anxiety through “efforts to ‘debunk’ and disenchant” the US’ positive image. And because Germans, too, “were by no means free of racial prejudices,” Beck further suggested their motives for expressing sympathetic statements were not entirely altruistic.⁸⁶

According to Beck’s research, many of the Germans who traveled to the US were intellectuals who understood that the most pressing social problem facing Americans was the race question.⁸⁷ A refrain that would be uttered repeatedly in the Cold War years, many in this interwar period spoke of the contradiction between American claims of democracy and the ways in which Americans implemented it. Beck summed up German criticisms by quoting Agnes Salomon, “the chief woman-suffragist of her day,” as saying in 1924 that “[t]he racial problem is the sore spot on the body of American social life,”

“because all words of freedom, of equality, of democracy, all the idealistic viewpoints of the American constitution, the great and beautiful words of noble leaders, cannot be maintained when measured against the lot of the colored peoples.”⁸⁸

This acknowledgment of the impact of the race question on American life, however, did not necessarily correlate to a positive view of blacks for these German visitors. There were some who openly looked upon African Americans unfavorably, agreeing with American restrictions on black freedoms, judging that in the years after the Civil War, Americans had been “too hasty [in] freeing...the slaves.” Despite this support for the southern policies, Beck’s research showed that among most Germans, the South

⁸⁶ Beck, “German Views of Negro Life,” 23.

⁸⁷ Beck, “German Views of Negro Life,” 22.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Beck, “German Views of Negro Life,” 22.

generally fared poorly in their travel accounts.⁸⁹

Peering forward to Germany's Nazi years, Beck remarked that "in view of the later racist mania of Nazi Germany, the liberalism of German views of the Negro in the 1920's is surprising." Part of this surprise likely stems from the fact that Beck failed to engage with the undercurrents of racism and racialism contained in the examples he provided. For example, he has written that most of the German visitors to the US "denied the existence of real anthropological distinctions between black and white in America," yet the quote he provided to prove this showed that the German observer still believed in anthropological distinctions nonetheless. His German observer stated that, "the many handsome individuals which one finds among the Negroes are evidence against the often-maintained ethnical inferiority of the Negro, since bodily beauty is seldom an accompaniment of inferiority or degeneration."⁹⁰ Not only does this observer exoticize the African American body, he points to the "fact" that bodily beauty and inferiority are incongruous. Because bodily beauty is an apparent sign of a superiority of sorts, what is implied is that though Black Americans are as beautiful as other superior groups (whites?), they are anthropologically different from those the observer considered inferior.

In another example of Beck's failure to interrogate German racialism, Beck noted that German visitors remarked upon the large number of peoples of mixed race and

⁸⁹ Quoted in Beck, "German Views of Negro Life," 24. Christian Davis has noted that anti-Semites were known to compare the so-called "Negro Question" and policies of the American South to Germany's "Jewish Question." In one instance, the *Deutsch-Soziale Blätter* took an excerpt from a travel essay on the American South written by German playwright and publisher Paul Lindau, substituting "Jew" for "black" and "Germans" for "whites." "The *Blätter* insisted that altering the text in this way transformed it into 'an accurate picture of how it appears in our Germany and also the means for how it can become better.'" Davis, *Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Germans of Jewish Descent*, 117-118.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Beck, "German Views of Negro Life," 27.

“white Negroes” (those who were “technically” black but could pass for white) in the US. These individuals, wrote Beck, represented to the German observers an “absence of real physical repulsion between the races.” Though this would have been a good point for Beck to discuss the controversy about the Black African troops stationed in the Rhineland and the resulting mixed-race children, he oddly does not, only noting that the attraction between blacks and whites was a common topic of discussion for the German visitors.⁹¹ Given the debates raging at home, the reflection or belief that mixed-race children represented the “absence of real physical repulsion between the races” *in the US* might suggest that this observation was not necessarily meant to be a positive one.

Much as we will see in regards to East Germany, Beck’s German travelers “noted with interest and approval the growing tendency of Negroes to develop a social awareness of their own significance and worth.” Yet, in praising African Americans for their awareness, one again finds undertones of a superficial understanding of the Black American that Beck seemed to miss (in addition to a dose of condescension). One observer remarked that African Americans were beginning to embrace their “African individuality,” and the knowledge that their greatest contribution to American life would be not “the absorption into their own nature of what belongs to America, but the preservation of their African nature and its impression on the American mind.” Further, said the observer, African Americans wanted to “establish their Ethiopian culture in the heart of America, borrowing nothing from America but her technical forms.” This racially-stereotyped notion that African Americans had a true African nature tied in to the belief that Black Americans embodied a more “genuine creative culture” than did white

⁹¹ Beck, “German Views of Negro Life,” 27.

Americans, who for the most part lacked any culture.⁹² This (superficial) understanding of African Americans and their cultural forms would find expression in the GDR, both through the average East German and members of the SED.

Under the Weimar Republic, the relationship between white Germans and blacks was largely shaded by what many Germans understood as their nation's defeat in WWI. When France used black colonial troops to occupy the Rhineland, Germans first found the *presence* of the black troops insulting, initially focusing their ire on the French for their use of the black troops to drive home the consequences and reality of the German wartime defeat. However, once the black troops engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with white German women, fathering a population of mixed-race Germans, the German indignation was turned toward the black men. Not only had France placed these black men into a position of authority over white Germans, they had also assumed a sexual parity with German men that was considered absolutely unacceptable. The resulting mixed-race children, like their fathers, were also viewed as perpetual reminders of Germany's physical, racial, and sexual defeat in WWI. In their case, even more worryingly, the children were German citizens and technically a part of the German nation, further placing the fate of German identity in danger.

Yet, for all of the anger over the black occupation of the Rhineland and the birth of the so-called "Rhineland Bastards," African Americans appeared to have been viewed separately. This comparatively sympathetic, though racialized, approach to the African American situation owed to the fact that such sympathy was a means of emphasizing one

⁹² Beck, "German Views of Negro Life," 30. A similar sense of authenticity was tied to the body of the Black African in the *Völkerschauen*. The more "authentic" a person of African descent was (or at least seemed), the less European they were, maintaining a racial hierarchy that placed white Europeans at the top and sustaining the traditional perception of German identity.

of America's greatest problems, in a period that focused on Germany's wartime defeat. This tactic would find similar use in the GDR, employed in propaganda demanding East German legitimacy. As interwar Germans sought to right the hierarchical upset at home, they built upon previous discussions about preserving the German nation, a defense of the German "race" that would find easy expression under Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

Nazi Germany and Blacks, 1933-1945

Though race was most famously tied to Jewishness under the Nazis, Hitler and the Nazis expressed anti-black beliefs as well. While African Americans and Black Africans in a civilian capacity were often not *explicit* targets of Nazi racism, they were nevertheless victims of racism at the hands of the Nazis. Meanwhile, Allied blacks in the military were subjected to a governmental violence infused with racism that had often been cultivated through anti-black propaganda, though certain policy considerations had the ability to better or worsen treatment. The Nazis' primary worry regarding blacks, however, was the existence of Germans of African descent; for a government that fought to create and maintain racial purity, Black Germans most certainly had no future within the "Thousand Year Reich" that Hitler envisioned. Though the fates of Black Germans and foreign blacks under the Nazis may have varied, it was not because of a series of incoherent views towards blacks. Instead, Black Germans bore the brunt of Nazi attention because of their literal position within the German nation; foreign black civilians were deemed less dangerous because they could easily be removed from the nation if necessary, while the treatment of military blacks was often affected by German war policy considerations.

Black Germans

One of the concerns when the Nazis came to power was how to deal with the problems presented by the mixed-race children that had been born along the Rhine.⁹³ These children, according to Hitler's own racist worldview, hierarchically existed on a medium level between both parents. Mixed-race children could never reach the level of racial superiority afforded to their white parent, and in fact, if "race-mixing" were to continue on in further generations, these resulting individuals would lead to the destruction of the German "race," a destruction from which the nation would never be able to rebound. This owed to the belief that once wholly "polluted," the superior race could not be "cleaned;" the pollution could not be reversed.⁹⁴ Therefore, whatever solution was reached, it needed to ensure that there would be no further generations of Black Germans.

While searching for a solution, the Nazi government conducted research that "confirmed" just how dangerous the children were to the future of the Third Reich. In 1933, Herman Göring, then the Minister of the Interior, ordered an investigation into the exact number of mixed-race individuals living in Germany. As a part of this investigation, Dr. Wolfgang Abel, of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, traveled to Wiesbaden where he examined a group of mixed-race children and took photos and measurements of their lips, eyes, and heads. From this "research," Abel found the children to be uneducated, disorderly, and violent. Abel reported the results of

⁹³ Hybrid identities were generally a cause for concern for the Nazis, as evidenced most vividly in the Nuremberg Laws, which went to great pains to define exactly who was Jewish.

⁹⁴ MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 146.

his examinations in *Neues Volk*, a monthly publication released by the Nazi Office on Race Politics, referring to his research subjects as those “poor deplorable children, who through the racial peculiarity of their fathers are themselves living emblems of one of the most sorrowful betrayals of the white race....”⁹⁵

Abel went on: “Today there are about 600 bastards; we in the Rhineland know that tomorrow there will be more. They experience suffering, which will multiply through their children—a suffering that will never cease.” He warned that it was necessary to “open the eyes of those in whose hands it lies to prevent the proliferation of the suffering.”⁹⁶ While repeating Weimar-era beliefs that the children not only represented defeat, but importantly, also a betrayal of the white race, Abel painted the sterilization of the Rhineland children not as something that would benefit the white German nation, but rather, would protect mixed-race Germans from “suffering.”⁹⁷ Sterilization, a method the Nazis often turned to in order to maintain the purity of the Aryan German race (and plans were still in place as late as 1942 to sterilize the so-called *Mischlinge*, Germans of Jewish ancestry), was considered an excellent solution for these children, especially since it was inexpensive.⁹⁸ There was, however, a major obstacle for officials who advocated sterilizing the Rhineland children: the problem of obtaining

⁹⁵ Dr. Wolfgang Abel, “Bastarde am Rhein,” *Neues Volk*, 1 February 1934, no pagination.

⁹⁶ Abel, “Bastarde am Rhein.”

⁹⁷ Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 320. Despite all of his measurements and research, Abel, however, was unable to pinpoint any hereditary disease responsible for the children’s so-called affliction. At a time when most sterilizations were limited to those with hereditary diseases, finding an illness among the children would have made the sterilizations legal and would have removed the need for the children’s mothers to approve the operations.

⁹⁸ Jeremy Noakes, “Nazism and Eugenics: The Background to the Nazi Sterilization Law of 14 July 1933,” in *Ideas into Politics: Aspects of European History, 1880-1950*, eds. R.J. Bullen, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, and A.B. Polonsky (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1984), 80. In this period, the definition of racial degenerate included not only as those of mixed-race, but also people who were handicapped and mentally ill.

approval from the children's mothers.⁹⁹

About a year later, in March 1935, a group of race specialists were called to Berlin by the new Minister of the Interior, Wilhelm Frick, to discuss the future of the Rhineland children. The first suggestion made by this group was to create a law which would extend sterilization to these individuals (therefore avoiding the need to acquire the mothers' approval), though fears about foreign reactions were strong enough to prevent the proposal from moving beyond the suggestion stage.¹⁰⁰ A second recommendation suggested that the children be sent to countries with sizable black populations, where they would be brought up with the help of missionaries. Each child, under this plan, would be given 10,000 German marks upon leaving the country. For rather obvious reasons, this option was abandoned as too costly and impractical.¹⁰¹ Finally, the committee reached a decision: the children would be sterilized illegally by medical doctors who were either members or friends of the Nazi party. This would be a top-secret operation in order to

⁹⁹ Pommerin, "The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany," 320.

¹⁰⁰ Other laws had been implemented by this time that deprived non-Aryans of their civil rights. These new laws worried many foreign observers, and their reactions forced the German Foreign Ministry to stipulate that the laws concentrated only on Jews. It is important to note that the content of the laws did not change, but rather, the terminology. For instance, the September 1935 version of the Nuremberg Race Laws incorporated the request that "Jewish" replace what earlier would have read "non-Aryan." Despite the language of the Nuremberg Race Laws, Reiner Pommerin has argued that the "exclusion of black students from the public swimming pool at Tübingen and the cancellation of contracts with black musicians, among many other steps, revealed the true direction of Nazi race policy." Though the race laws spoke directly of Jews and Aryans, they were applied to racial Others as well, including blacks. Pommerin, "The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany," 320-1.

¹⁰¹ There was a similar plan floated by the Nazis regarding Jews, in which all of Europe's Jewish population would be uprooted and sent to Madagascar. At the time, France's defeat was inching closer and the possibility of a victory over the British seemed plausible to the Nazis. With France's empire and the merchant fleet that would have been at Hitler's disposal with the defeat of Great Britain, "a massive overseas expulsion of the European Jews" appeared a distinct possibility. Britain, however, was not to be defeated by the Nazis, forcing the plan to be shelved. Just as with the plan to send the Rhineland children abroad, "[t]he alacrity with which the Madagascar Plan was seized upon as a panacea for the Nazis' inability to solve the Jewish Question is a measure of the frustration level that had been reached." Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 81, 82, 88, 89.

avoid any possible domestic and foreign backlash.¹⁰² Even with the decision made to illegally conduct the sterilizations, the mothers remained the biggest obstacle authorities faced.¹⁰³

For all of the discussion about what to do with the Rhineland children, the first sterilization of a mixed-race individual was not carried out until 1937. Reiner Pommerin has ascertained that, ultimately, 90% of the mothers created no difficulties, “voluntarily” appreciating the need for the operation. Their acquiescence, however, was not at all voluntary, as it was often understood that the children would be sent for “re-education in a concentration camp,” should the mothers refuse the sterilization order.¹⁰⁴ In June and July of 1937, a Commission was created at the Gestapo headquarters at Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in Berlin, followed by three sub-commissions in Wiesbaden, Ludwigshafen, and Koblenz. A government representative and two doctors examined the Rhineland children and made official recommendations that they be sterilized.¹⁰⁵ In the case of a Black German only identified in records as A.A., the recommendation for his sterilization reads as follows:

A.A., of German nationality, born March 14, 1920, living in Duisburg, is a descendant of a member of the former Allied occupation forces, in this case a negro from Madagascar, and *shows corresponding typical anthropological characteristics, for which reason he shall be sterilized.*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 321-2

¹⁰³ It should be noted that contrary to policy concerning the Jews, the Nazis harbored no explicit desire to completely eradicate Black Germans. Neil MacMaster has argued that this is explained through the “traditional racist image of the black [that] was of a profoundly inferior type, ape-like, low in intelligence, driven by instinctual urges. Such a being posed no fundamental threat to the superior and masterful European, as long as he was segregated...and prevented from interbreeding and ‘polluting’ the Aryan.” In comparison, Jews were viewed as intelligent and clever, a dangerous threat “bent on the subversion and enslavement of the German race.” MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 132-133.

¹⁰⁴ Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 322.

¹⁰⁵ Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 322.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Pommerin, “The Fate of Mixed Blood Children in Germany,” 322. Emphasis my own.

In this report, A.A. was acknowledged as being German, even though at this point non-Aryans in Nazi Germany had lost their right to German citizenship.¹⁰⁷ Yet, the change in citizenship status did little to fix the fact that Afro-Germans were still present within the nation and remained a part of the German bloodline. The only way to preclude the birth of additional non-white Germans was to prevent the mixed-race population from ever procreating.¹⁰⁸ As the recommendation reads, AA was sterilized on the grounds that he exhibited “negro” anthropological characteristics; he would no longer be able to have children quite clearly for the reason than he was German and of African descent—two things that should have been impossible according to the generally-accepted definition of German.

Foreign Blacks

While mixed-race Germans were the physical manifestation of Germany’s various ideological, racial, sexual, and military defeats, non-German blacks in this period did not carry with them those reminders or stigmas. In fact, some of these non-German blacks found employment under the Nazis, working as entertainers. Placed alongside the Nazis’ years-long preoccupation with sterilizing the Rhineland children, this relative freedom of foreign blacks seems contradictory.¹⁰⁹ Attempting to understand this deep division in the way the Nazis treated blacks, Elisa von Joeden-Forgey has examined the *Deutsche Afrika*

¹⁰⁷ The loss of citizenship often opened the door to a range of atrocities, including the “deportation” of stateless Jews and the loss of property that was then used to fund the deportation and murder of Europe’s Jews. Losing one’s German citizenship placed that individual in an unstable and unsafe position, as they had nowhere to turn as a matter of recourse and no “right” to the German state and its support.

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of the longer-term consequences of these sterilizations upon the mixed-race population, see Camp’s *Other Germans*.

¹⁰⁹ Overall, one finds that the Nazis had long been careful to minimize negative treatment of foreigners due to foreign concerns, at least until the start of WWII.

Schau (DAS), which grew out of the tradition of the *Völkerschauen* that were popular prior to WWI. In her work, she has questioned how the show lasted for so long under the Nazis, only closing in 1940, when it was an institution that employed and placed “inferior” peoples on display at a time when the Nazis sought to remove most non-Aryans from society.

According to Joeden-Forgey, the Nazis understood the DAS as a way to provide unemployed foreign blacks with jobs. Joeden-Forgey has written that in the early years of the show, the Nazi government was involved in production only insofar as it officially supported the show’s existence, though it later became a part of the Nazi propaganda machine.¹¹⁰ Despite some initial opposition from those who believed that the DAS drew attention to Germany’s past racial corruption, Joeden-Forgey has argued that the show nevertheless survived because the Nazis viewed the black actors as *Vollblutneger* (“full-blooded Negroes”).¹¹¹ The Nazi preoccupation with “full-blooded” blacks was tied to the memory of Germany’s colonial experience in Africa. These blacks functioned in the Nazi mind as a constant reminder of Aryan racial domination, as people who had once been conquered by Imperial Germany and would again be conquered, this time by the Nazis.¹¹² Important was the plan to establish, at some point, colonies in Africa, at which point the Black Africans could be sent “back home,” and could perhaps even operate as ambassadors of sorts. As long as the foreign blacks remained segregated from the rest of German society, the Nazis could, at the very least, tolerate this particular group of blacks

¹¹⁰ Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, “The German Africa Show and the Nazi State,” in *Black Victims of the Nazis: A History of Black People and Nazis*, ed. Z Nia Reynolds (London: Black Stock Media, 2006), 87.

¹¹¹ Joeden-Forgey, “Race Power in Postcolonial Germany: The German Africa Show and the National Socialist State, 1935-1940,” in *Germany’s Colonial Pasts*, eds. Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz, and Lora Wildenthal (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 175-6.

¹¹² Joeden-Forgey, “Race Power in Postcolonial Germany,” 176.

for the moment.¹¹³ Ultimately, when the DAS was eventually canceled, it was in part due to questions about possible sexual relationships between members of the show and white Germans.¹¹⁴

Also writing on the *Deutsche Afrika Schau*, Gerwin Strobl has depicted the show not as an indirect means of protection for foreign blacks, but rather an attempt to restrict their movement. Strobl argues that “the difficulties the migrants encountered in finding employment amid escalating racism furnished the excuse for depriving them of their liberty.”¹¹⁵ Therefore, the show came about when the “Foreign Office, the *Kolonialpolitische* section of the Nazi party and the Propaganda Ministry jointly agreed to set up a theatrical venture, ostensibly to provide the ‘colonials’ with employment.”¹¹⁶ This decision to restrict the movement of foreign blacks stemmed from the Nazis’ fears about Black Africans freely roaming Germany and engaging in sexual relations with white German women, with officials understanding that the same sterilization methods used on Black Germans could not be used on Black Africans, Strobl has argued. The foreign fall-out that would likely result would become problematic in the face of German plans for “renewed colonial expansion” in Africa. “Thus was born the *Deutsche Afrika*

¹¹³ Despite welcoming blacks onto the stage, one area of entertainment that the Nazis fought to keep free of blacks and black influence was music. The Nazi campaign against jazz, as Michael H. Kater has argued, was largely due to the fact that those who produced jazz—blacks and Jews—were considered racially degenerate by the Nazis. In the first several years of the Nazi regime, jazz was debased and considered “inferior because of the constituent qualities of atonality and rhythmic chaos that were ascribed” to this African American music. Later, the Jew was placed alongside the African American in the Nazi denigration of jazz; whereas jazz was understood as being a “native” art that was natural to the African American, the Nazis believed that Jews created such music on purpose, which was considered even more offensive. However, rather than ban jazz outright and do away with the musical style and all that it represented, the Nazis created a Nazified, “watered-down version” of jazz, which was unsuccessful at garnering German jazz enthusiasts’ respect. Michael H. Kater, “Forbidden Fruit? Jazz in the Third Reich,” *American Historical Review* 94:1 (Feb. 1989), 13-15, 24.

¹¹⁴ Joeden-Forgey, “Race Power in Postcolonial Germany,” 178-9.

¹¹⁵ Gerwin Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage: German Theatre and Society, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115.

¹¹⁶ Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage*, 114-115.

Schau: a mixture of theatre, colonial exhibition and travelling circus....”¹¹⁷ The DAS closed suddenly in 1940, however, the same year that blacks were banned from performing on stage in Nazi Germany. Strobl has argued that by 1940, “Nazi racism had reached such a pitch that the mere sight of ‘negroes’ provoked open hostility from sections of the party and public alike.”¹¹⁸ Strobl, however, fails to see the longer arc of German anti-black racism, as by 1940 it was neither new nor merely “created” by the Nazis. Instead, it was something that was exacerbated and given further encouragement for expression by Nazi race ideology.

Though Joeden-Forgey and Strobl’s arguments differ markedly—one characterizes the DAS as essentially protecting blacks while the other emphasizes the DAS as a means of restricting black movement—black sexuality is a common denominator in both Strobl’s and Joeden-Forgey’s accounts of the *Deutsche Afrika Schau*. Strobl writes of a “bloody postscript” to the DAS, wherein an informer claimed that one of the actors, who had fought for the Germans during WWI and had even attempted to enlist in the German army in 1939, had had sexual relations with a white German woman. The actor was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he died. The example of the *Deutsche Afrika Schau* details both the Nazis’ fear of black sexuality, as well as an acceptance of foreign blacks (as it were), however temporary and opportunistic, so long as their (sexual) segregation from German society was maintained.

Though the examination of the *Deutsche Afrika Schau* provides some insight into Nazi German attitudes towards foreign blacks, it is also necessary to look beyond Germany-proper to acquire a more complete picture of Nazi sentiments. The Nazis not

¹¹⁷ Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage*, 114-115.

¹¹⁸ Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage*, 115.

only contended with a black population in Germany, but were also confronted with peoples of African descent outside of the country as they moved across Europe, most notably in France. During the interwar period, a number of African Americans had moved to Paris, establishing an expatriate community in France. In October 1939, just a month after war had broken out in Europe, the U.S. Embassy requested that all Americans leave France, and most heeded the warning. Some, however, stayed behind, including performers Arthur Briggs, Charlie Lewis, Edgar Wiggins, and Josephine Baker, all of whom, Clarence Lusane has noted, “viewed themselves as more French than African American.”¹¹⁹ Hitler was, not surprisingly, not keen on the African American community that had settled in Paris, believing that “the black presence in interwar Paris symbolized everything decadent and despicable about French culture, something they [the Nazis] would not tolerate while they remained in control.”¹²⁰

Despite the idealism that may have encouraged them to stay on in France, these African Americans were by no means exempt from the effects of the Nazi occupation. For some, the consequences of their decision to remain in France were severe, including imprisonment in German internment camps. Pianist Arthur Briggs hesitated to leave Paris, and was arrested and sent to an internment camp in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis on 17 October 1940. Briggs was imprisoned for nearly four years, and is said to have maintained his sense of optimism by forming a musical trio as well as a twenty-five piece classical orchestra in the camp. The orchestra garnered attention from the camp’s commandant, who even attended the orchestra’s rehearsals, in addition to its concerts.

¹¹⁹ Lusane, *Hitler’s Black Victims*, 117.

¹²⁰ Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), 126.

Briggs later told a reporter that he was not discriminated against because of his color, and in fact, he had been well-respected—by everyone.¹²¹

To be sure, Briggs' experience was not the norm for those imprisoned in internment camps, and there were other black prisoners whose assessment of life in a German camp was far worse.¹²² It is unclear why Briggs' experience was far less negative than one would have expected, but it is likely that Briggs' musical talents and favorably-minded guards ensured his relatively positive experience. Certainly the fact that he fulfilled a stereotype of the black entertainer (as did the blacks in the *Deutsche Afrika Schau*) worked in his favor. He was what white Germans had come to expect of blacks—a form of entertainment, though one that was best kept at a distance.

Germans under the Nazis not only came face to face with civilian blacks, however. With the eruption of war, German men were confronted by black soldiers, often colonial troops fighting on behalf of France, and in later years, African American troops. Nazi propaganda reminded Germans of the “horrors” allegedly committed along the Rhine by black French colonial troops in the 1920s, revitalizing the image of the Black African as a savage and brutal man who attacked innocent Germans. The black soldier remained a convenient reservoir and symbol for all of the perceived injustices of the German defeat in WWI and the Treaty of Versailles, with propaganda suggesting that

¹²¹ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 123-4. The reporter's article: Rudolph Dunbar, “Trumpet Player Briggs Freed After Four Years in Nazi Camp Near Paris,” *Chicago Defender*, 23 September 1944.

¹²² For discussions about blacks in Nazi concentration camps, see Robert Kesting, “The Black Experience During the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, the Reexamined*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note,” *Journal of Negro History* 83:1 (1998), 84-99; Kesting, “Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust,” *Journal of Negro History* 77:1 (1992), 30-36. In French, see Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Des victimes oubliées du nazisme. Les Noirs et l'Allemagne dans la première moitié du XXe siècle* (Paris: le cherche midi, 2007) and Serge Bilé, *Noirs dans les camps nazis* (Monaco: Le serpent à plumes, 2005).

given another chance, these men would terrorize Germans mercilessly in the event of an Allied victory.¹²³

Therefore, as Raffael Scheck's research suggests, it was not surprising that the average member of the *Wehrmacht* (Nazi Germany's armed forces) had little respect for their black enemy on the battlefield.¹²⁴ Scheck has argued that when this preconceived notion of black savagery and inferiority was combined with the Nazis' anti-black propaganda, the Wehrmacht was inspired to commit heinous crimes against their black French colonial prisoners of war (POWs), many times killing black prisoners at rates that outpaced other prisoners.¹²⁵ Yet, despite the impact that Nazi propaganda had upon the execution of savage racist violence, in many cases practical considerations were just as important in determining black treatment by the German military.¹²⁶

According to Scheck, this owed in part to the fact that the colonial POWs were a cheap source of agricultural and industrial labor for the Wehrmacht. Blacks were usually assigned to *Arbeitskommandos* (work commandos), often employed in areas as far as 100 kilometers (a little more than 62 miles) away from the camps to which they were assigned.¹²⁷ Wehrmacht officials were unconcerned about the temptations this distance could encourage, because it was known that black POWs were far less likely to escape

¹²³ Maria Höhn, "Heimat in Turmoil: African-American GIs in 1950s West Germany," in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*, ed. Hanna Schissler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 150. The Nazis had employed a similar propaganda tactic regarding the Jews, telling Germans that should their greatest enemy win the war, they would suffer unspeakable horrors in retaliation. Therefore, support for the military and the war effort was imperative, as the safety of those on the home front depended on German victories on the front lines. Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 127.

¹²⁴ Scheck, "The Killing of Black Soldiers," 597.

¹²⁵ Scheck, "The Killing of Black Soldiers," 599.

¹²⁶ Raffael Scheck, "French Colonial Soldiers in German Prisoner-of-War Camps (1940-1945)," *French History* 24:3 (2010), 420.

¹²⁷ Scheck, "French Colonial Soldiers," 425, 426.

than other prisoners, for two reasons. First, their skin color meant that they could not “pass” for a typical French citizen and blend in to the surrounding communities (in the way that some North African, and certainly, white POWs, could). Second, their home countries were so far away that once they had escaped, easily reaching home was simply not an option.¹²⁸ As one former POW said: ““We didn’t know France. We had black skin. The French could save themselves by changing into civilian clothes. They could escape...We had no contacts, so we were always there.””¹²⁹

This example underlines something that was important to the Nazi German understanding of blacks versus Jews and others considered racially undesirable but phenotypically white: the visual appearance of blacks and many of those of mixed-race immediately set them apart from white Germans. As “dangerous” as blacks could be when they crossed the boundaries separating them from the German race, their presence was easy for Germans to spot. Though Afro-Germans represented both defeat and some of white Germany’s most deep-seated fears about identity and the future of the German nation, they too were easily visible, with the exception of anyone who was light-skinned enough to pass for white. What made Jews so “dangerous” to Germans in this period was precisely the fact that it was so easy for them to pass as a member of the so-called German race. Anti-black racists stood on much more secure ground when it came to identifying the enemy; blacks certainly had the ability to destroy the German nation, but not from the inside-out as Jews could.

Yet another important factor in determining the official German attitude toward

¹²⁸ Scheck, “French Colonial Soldiers,” 430.

¹²⁹ Quoted in David Killingray, “Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands,” in *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II*, eds. Bob Moore and Ken Fedorowich (Washington, D.C.: Berg, 1996), 189-190.

the black POWs was Hitler's desire for holdings in Africa.¹³⁰ Some white soldiers who were present in the camps, such as Hans Habe, noted a marked change in the German treatment of the black POWs, which he believed owed to Hitler's colonial ambitions.¹³¹ In a book and an article, both published in 1941, Habe wrote of a massacre that occurred at a camp in which he had been imprisoned. After being captured by German soldiers, Habe overheard several of them complaining about the snipers who had shot at them as they entered the town. As a punishment, the German soldiers decided that they would shoot the snipers; the only problem, however, was that they did not know which snipers had shot at them. They believed that the snipers had been black (whether they knew this for a fact or had merely convinced themselves of the case is not clear), and since they all looked alike to the German soldiers, the men decided to kill every one of the black prisoners.¹³² Habe claimed to have been unsettled by the fact that the Germans so easily perceived of the black men "not as soldiers but as 'ordinary murderers.'"¹³³

Some weeks later, Habe was moved to another camp, where he became a translator for the guards in that camp. One night, one of the black prisoners committed suicide by throwing himself off of a building. The next day at an assembly, the prisoners were told of the suicide and were advised that "only black subhumans could run away

¹³⁰ Scheck, "French Colonial Soldiers," 427, 428. Killingray, in his study of African and African American POWs held in Nazi-occupied France, has also noted that at the time that Hitler made his African colonial ambitions known, blacks accounted for a small percentage of Allied prisoners, "and this may also have helped save them from being singled out for harsh treatment." Killingray, "Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands," 199.

¹³¹ Hans Habe, a penname for Janos Békassy who was born in Austria-Hungary in 1911, went into exile in France following Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938. There he joined the French Foreign Legion and later fought against the Germans.

¹³² Hans Habe, *A Thousand Shall Fall* (New York: Harcourt, 1941), 230-231. According to Habe, the Germans chose forty blacks at random and shot them, just as news of the armistice between France and Germany arrived in the camp. See Habe, *A Thousand Shall Fall*, 236-237. In his article, "The Nazi Plan for Negroes," however, he states that "I do know that on the morning of June 25, eighty Negroes and Arabs were selected...." See Habe, "The Nazi Plan for Negroes," *The Nation*, 152:9, 1 March 1941, 233.

¹³³ Habe, "The Nazi Plan for Negroes," 233.

from life's duties so ignominiously." Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the next day, the men were then told that "the white prisoners had driven the poor Negro to his death," and as a punishment, they were to be deprived of their lunch rations, which would be given to the black prisoner's friends instead.¹³⁴ The camp's guards, however, had yet to unveil the most bewildering response to the prisoner's death. Habe was informed that he would be needed to serve as a translator, and was asked to "appoint twenty black comrades" to help escort the dead prisoner to a cemetery, where a guard of honor would assist in the burial ceremony.¹³⁵

Translating for the dead prisoner's "friends," Habe bore witness to an awkward ceremony, in which the camp's lieutenant spoke, proclaiming that as a soldier, he could not deny the prisoner his due honor. Contradicting the belief that had earlier driven German soldiers to massacre a group of Black African soldiers, the lieutenant declared that though the prisoner may have fought against the Germans, he had done what he had been taught to do as a soldier, and the Germans respected that. As if that were not perplexing enough, when Habe returned to the camp, he learned that "the camp commandant had set aside twenty portions of *ersatz* cheese and ten loaves of army bread for the twenty friends of the dead man."¹³⁶ Unable to control his curiosity any longer, Habe questioned a sergeant about the abrupt and total turnabout in the German treatment of the camp's blacks, and was told that: "Germany wants no dissatisfied slaves. Germany wants slaves who love their masters. Yesterday an order came through from

¹³⁴ Further puzzling to Habe was that the fence that had once pinned in the black prisoners was going to be removed, and two hundred shirts were to be distributed among just the black prisoners. Habe himself was tasked with the job of ensuring that not a single shirt fell into the possession of a white prisoner. Habe, *A Thousand Shall Fall*, 294-296.

¹³⁵ Habe, *A Thousand Shall Fall*, 296.

¹³⁶ Habe, *A Thousand Shall Fall*, 296-298.

the High Command: Germany is developing a colonial policy.’’¹³⁷

Even if Habe’s story has been embellished, it still conveys a theme that was in fact a reality—Hitler was planning ahead for life after a German victory, and Africa figured in to his post-war plans, thus affecting how the Nazis treated captured soldiers. Through this example we see the complex nature of the Nazis’ anti-black racism (though it was one that many across Europe also subscribed to): at both the same time, blacks were considered savage beasts unable to practice any restraint and who needed to be dealt with most violently, yet they were also noble in their savagery. This perception of nobility, however, ebbed and flowed, depending on the task at hand.

By the time African American soldiers came into contact with German soldiers near the end of the war, some of the policy considerations that had once saved black soldiers gave way to fears about the savagery of blacks in the event of an Allied victory. Many of the African American soldiers who were victims of Nazi violence were those who were captured following D-Day, while others were members of the Air Force that had been shot down while flying over Germany and other parts of central Europe.¹³⁸ The late Robert Kesting, an archivist at the National Archives, compiled a series of reports of executions that, in his mind, pointed to racist motivations on behalf of the German soldiers. What follows are several of his examples.

On 1 September 1944, records reveal that two former SS guards near Merzig, Germany, saw two African American soldiers being executed, and acknowledged that as members of the SS they had been issued the order that no blacks were to be taken prisoner. Because the investigators could not find the named suspects, the case was

¹³⁷ Habe, *A Thousand Shall Fall*, 299.

¹³⁸ Killingray, “Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands,” 197.

ultimately closed.¹³⁹ Several months later, on 17 December 1944, the disfigured bodies of eleven African American soldiers of the 33rd Field Artillery Battalion were discovered near Wereth, Belgium, in a cattle ditch. Autopsies were apparently performed some four months later, and statements were collected from townspeople who reported that “an unknown SS unit committed the heinous crimes.” Though investigators discovered later that the 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions had indeed operated in that area, the case was closed because the investigators were unable to ascertain who precisely had been involved.¹⁴⁰ A day after the bodies were discovered in December, records show that another African American soldier, while being marched to Stalag IV-B, in Muehlberg, Germany, was selected by an SS guard “for no apparent reason,” and killed. This case too was closed, “pending receipt of additional evidence.”¹⁴¹ While the motivations are not entirely clear, it appears possible that the violence African American soldiers faced was encouraged by a mixture of racism and the Germans’ own desperate savagery in the face of a defeat inching closer.

From 1933 to 1945, the Nazis embarked upon what many have viewed as a series of contradictory policies towards blacks, policies that were in reality grounded in the Nazis’ way of race thinking. Mixed-race blacks, those of African and German descent, were deemed most dangerous to the survival of the Nazis’ Aryan race. As such a critical threat, they were subjected to sterilizations. “Full-blooded blacks,” those without any German heritage, were still considered racially inferior, but were not deemed dangerous unless they entered into, or gave the appearance of entering into, sexual relationships

¹³⁹ Kesting, “Forgotten Victims,” 32.

¹⁴⁰ Kesting, “Forgotten Victims,” 31.

¹⁴¹ Kesting, “Forgotten Victims,” 32. It is not clear from Kesting’s article how hard the investigators attempted to find suspects or resolve the cases before ultimately closing them.

with Germans. As such, they largely escaped any concrete action on behalf of the Nazis, though some were sent to camps if they appeared to ignore directives from the state. Militarily, black soldiers who were captured by the Nazis were generally victimized. However, at times foreign policy considerations created situations in which the Nazis pulled back on the poor treatment they were meting out to black soldiers, if it meant that Germany could acquire some sort of diplomatic advantage in return. Nazi propaganda painting the black soldier as a savage beast also played a role in German treatment of black POWs, both in the years before colonial policy considerations came to the fore and at the end of the war when it became clear that defeat was rapidly becoming a reality.

Concluding Thoughts

Across the various periods of German history, the Imperial, Weimar, and Nazi eras had in common fears about the future of the German nation (and race) and the role that blacks would play in it. The position occupied by blacks within German society or within the German mind—as either an insider or an outsider to the nation, whether physically or figuratively—often influenced German sentiments towards blacks. In the case of Imperial Germany, blacks became a significant part of the discussion in the metropole once German men in the colonies began fathering mixed-race children, passing on to them their German citizenship and thereby making them a part of the German nation. While blacks from the *Völkerschauen* were welcomed in Germany within their capacity as actors, once officials believed that German women had taken too much of an interest in the black men, their presence became restricted. As far as Imperial Germans were concerned, blacks were suitable as forms of entertainment and as a counterpoint for

identifying oneself in a position of authority—as long as these blacks maintained a literal and figurative distance from Germany and Germans.

Though sexual relationships between blacks and white Germans had roots in the colonial period, the relationships took on a more sinister character when they predominantly came to exist between black men and white German women. During the Weimar period, these sexual relationships were not only seen as aberrations of nature—the only way to understand the idea of sex between a black man and white woman was either as rape or the decision of a woman lacking morals—but they were also closely tied to the German defeat in WWI. With the French occupation of the Rhineland the racial hierarchy, both in terms of power and sexuality, was turned upside down in Germany. The sight of black men with white women, and the children these relationships sometimes produced, was a constant reminder of a defeat many Germans did not believe was deserved.

Foreign policy considerations also had the ability to influence the official German stance toward blacks, best seen in Hitler's apparent about-face in his policy regarding Black Africans during wartime. When (re)claiming colonies in Africa looked like a possibility, Hitler decided that, while still inferior, Black Africans served a purpose that made a kinder policy regarding their treatment worthwhile. By improving Nazi behavior toward Black Africans, the goal was to create a population of Africans friendly to Germany to act as ambassadors for Hitler. Yet again, there is an application of insider versus outsider status; an assumed part of this plan regarding Black Africans was that these same blacks who were being placated in Europe would return to Africa, never to be a German problem in the way that Black Germans were and would be.

Taken all together, Germany's experience with Black Africans, African Americans, and Black Germans prior to 1945 highlights several characteristics of German racism and conceptions of race. German views on blacks had the potential to vary greatly, depending on the political climate, one's country of origin, policy considerations, the perception of sexual transgressions, and one's status as an insider or an outsider. It was from these views that East German anti-black racism developed and evolved—just as was the case in West Germany. As East Germany embarked upon a relationship with Black America, the previous years of German interactions with blacks, perceptions of blackness, and the concepts of and motivations for racism were important factors in defining this relationship.

As the coming chapters will show, though there were key factors particular to the East German situation that helped to define East German conceptions of race, racism, and blackness, these earlier periods of German history played an undeniable and considerable role as well. Though the SED denied any connection to the history laid out in this chapter and instead claimed that this legacy of racism belonged solely to the West Germans, the Party *was* influenced by this history. A denunciation of such views formed much of the SED's official stance towards the world's blacks, and despite the claim of a rupture in race-thinking, there *was* continuity between German conceptions of blackness prior to 1945 and East German conceptions of blackness after 1945. Though the SED would never have admitted it, these earlier views on blacks informed many East Germans' own opinions on peoples of African descent, views that were evident in action if not always in word.

Chapter Three: On Parallel Tracks

Genesis of a Friendship between Black America and East Germany, 1949-1959

In the aftermath of Germany's defeat in WWII, the Allied Powers once again found themselves contemplating the future of the German people. The four powers divided the country amongst themselves, with the US, Britain, and France each occupying a region in western Germany, while the Soviet Union occupied a zone in the east. In 1945, there were few who envisioned that this division was anything but temporary, but four years later any hopes that the German regions would soon reunite were dashed with the creation, just months apart, of two new German states: the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic.¹⁴² The iron curtain that former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had spoken of in 1946—the division of Europe, and the world, by the power struggles of the Cold War—became an everyday reality for Germans in both the East and West.

From the very beginning and until its collapse in 1989, the East German state struggled to prove its diplomatic worth and relevancy as a loyal member of the Soviet coalition contributing to the international community. Meanwhile, West Germany, comparatively, was easily accepted by most in the international community, quickly acquiring the legitimacy that East Germany long coveted.¹⁴³ Despite a range of efforts, it was East Germany's very association with the Soviet Union that made its own

¹⁴² On 1 June 1948, representatives from the US, Britain, and France met in London where it was revealed that they had plans to create a western German state. Stalin later disclosed his own plans for the creation of East Germany, which was established on 7 October. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 145, 147.

¹⁴³ It was not uncommon for those in the ideological West to purposefully refer to East Germany as the Soviet Occupied Zone, and to West Germany as simply "Germany," the latter a practice that many continue today. By calling East Germany the Soviet Occupied Zone, the speaker denied the legitimacy—and existence—of the East German state, while referring to the FRG as simply Germany too ignored East Germany's existence.

international acceptance difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, the SED utilized a variety of approaches and tactics in order to gain the legitimacy it craved, one of which was to style the GDR as anti-fascist and the FRG as the sole inheritor of the Nazi legacy.

At a time when accusations and allegations of fascism had the ability to erode one's reputation, the SED claimed to have succeeded where West Germany had not. According to the SED, the anti-fascist GDR was populated by communists who had opposed Hitler and the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis from the very start. Encompassed in the GDR's anti-fascism was anti-racism, which became important to the SED's understanding of itself and the GDR vis-à-vis the world's people of color. It was this anti-racist rhetoric that provided East Germans with the very grounds for a relationship with Black America and other international black freedom movements.

From the GDR's earliest years, a potential link between the African American struggle against race discrimination and the socialist state's commitment to defeating the evils of capitalism—of which racism was one—were acknowledged by East German officials. However, much of this discussion about shared aims took place amongst East German elites—namely, intellectuals, academics, individuals pursuing advanced degrees, the political elite, as well as those who circulated socially amongst these groups. Though the average East German citizen was exposed to news of the civil rights movement (a review of East German newspapers reveals that articles were published on a fairly regular basis detailing stories of American racism), the bulk of the conversation about African Americans took place among the elite. The impact of this limited group of East Germans should not be underestimated, though, as it was this group that would later mold for East German consumption the image of the ideal African American.

The chapter that follows will focus on the 1950s, examining East German views on Black America, as well as African Americans who visited or settled in the GDR in this period. At this point, a general African American interest in East Germany was rather scarce, as most Black Americans—and Americans in general—knew very little about the “other” Germany. Though there were several African Americans who settled in or passed through East Germany, none of them provided the spark necessary to engage the GDR and Black America in a series of meaningful exchanges. More than a black presence in East Germany was necessary for the relationship that the GDR elite had theorized about to become concrete. In that same vein, simply being in East Germany was not enough to spark a sense of solidarity for the African American travelers.

As this work argues, Paul Robeson’s 1960 visit to East Germany was a turning point for the relationship. In order to understand why this visit, and Robeson in general, was so influential to the development of the relationship between Black America and East Germany, it is necessary to consider the African Americans who were involved with the GDR prior to Paul Robeson, and why they failed to be the spark that would light a fire under this relationship. This chapter will examine the experiences of six African American military deserters in East Germany during the 1950s, as well as the arrival of musician and asylum seeker Aubrey Pankey in 1955, going on to examine W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1958 visit to East Germany, revealing how each failed to resonate with both the SED and the East German people, something that was vital to formally establishing a relationship between Black America and the GDR. One finds that the African American deserters and Aubrey Pankey were often *too close* to GDR society, experiencing isolation and racism in ways that later, visiting African Americans would not. Though Du Bois

had a set of devoted followers in the GDR, his appeal was largely limited to East German intellectuals. These factors would make the deserters, Pankey, and Du Bois less than ideal vehicles through which to create a tangible relationship between Black America and East Germany.

African American Discourse in East Germany after World War II

In the GDR, the notion of an affinity between Black America and East Germany was one generally confined to the SED and other members of the East German elite, and it was among this stratum of society that the movement would first become and long remain popular. For much of the 1950s, the East German elite developed a theoretical discourse about East Germany's connection to African Americans and the civil rights movement, one that would determine just exactly what type of African American East Germans should support. Though there is evidence that some members of the elite were fairly genuine in their exhortations about the connection between Black America and East Germany, others viewed the link between the two purely as a tool in the SED's legitimization campaign.

Intellectually—and politically—the connection between the GDR and Black America rested on the GDR's stated struggle against racism. That racism was forbidden by the East German constitution and punishable by law conveys how important it was to officials that East Germany gave the appearance of a commitment to anti-racism. Ideologically, this opposition to racism followed from the belief that racism “perpetuated social hierarchies in addition to those of economic class and prevented the ‘oppressed’ from uniting and rising up against their ‘oppressors.’” Racism was, therefore, directly

incompatible with communism. Though this formulation was nothing new for communism, it carried a heavy weight in East Germany, as the SED sought to throw off the shackles of a Hitlerian legacy. Therefore, East German support for the civil rights movement in the US, in addition to black freedom movements worldwide, was understood as a valuable tool in expressing a commitment to eradicating racism, not just in the GDR but elsewhere as well.¹⁴⁴

Among the world's black freedom movements, the African American civil rights movement acquired a special place in the minds of the East German elite because of "America's elevated role in the Cold War and the global reach of its political and military power...."¹⁴⁵ While support for anticolonial movements in Africa was also a tool for expressing East German anti-racism, members of the GDR's elite focused their support and interest on the American civil rights movement in part because of its very location in the US. Officials sought to use the evidence of their solidarity with Black America "in domestic and foreign policy matters to discredit the Western system of democracy and capitalism," thereby making a pointed statement about the diplomatic legitimacy officials believed East Germany had earned.¹⁴⁶

For some members of the elite, their knowledge of the civil rights movement stemmed from previously developed relationships with activists that were formed while they were in exile during the Nazi years. Yet, the majority of the East Germans who discussed the American race problem learned about it primarily through African American literature and other academic works, instead of direct contact with African

¹⁴⁴ Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 124.

¹⁴⁵ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 124.

¹⁴⁶ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 125.

Americans. In this period, literature was the greatest means of African American influence. In the years between 1949 and 1961, at least 100 texts were published in the GDR discussing Black America in some manner (and by the early 1970s that number had blossomed to 250¹⁴⁷), including works by African American writers like Langston Hughes and Alain Locke in their original English or translated into German. East German writers also penned books on African American history, the “Negro Question,” and key figures in the African American community.¹⁴⁸ Among East German literary critics, African American poetry was circulated and discussed, with critics framing the poetic works “as part of a larger narrative of suffering, one which could be connected to the GDR’s own Marxist struggles for legitimacy and statehood.”¹⁴⁹ Despite their popularity with East German elites, it was unlikely that such writings appealed to East Germans on a large scale, as they were generally viewed as academic works and therefore had a relatively small audience.

Though written works were the primary means of East German engagement with Black America at this time, there were some African Americans who came to the socialist Germany to speak, putting a face to the experiences written about so extensively. At this point, however, these visits were more about sharing information with a sympathetic ear, rather than a demonstration of kinship. One example of this is William Patterson’s January 1952 visit to the GDR. Patterson, who was in leadership in both the CPUSA and the Civil Rights Congress, came to East Germany to speak on the subject of

¹⁴⁷ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 128.

¹⁴⁸ For a list of the texts, see Ursula Dribbern and Horst Ihde, “Das Echo der Kultur und des Freiheitskampfes der Nordamerikanischen Neger in der DDR, 1945-1969,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 3:20 (1972), 429–442.

¹⁴⁹ Sara Lennox, “Reading Transnationally: the GDR and American Black Writers,” in *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture*, eds. Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski (New York: Rodopi, 2011), 116.

“The Other America.”¹⁵⁰ Just the previous month, in December 1951, Patterson had assisted in presenting a document entitled “We Charge Genocide” to the United Nations which, utilizing the UN’s Genocide Convention, accused the American government of genocide for its passive acceptance of the lynching of African Americans.¹⁵¹ Not long after, the petition was translated into German and published in East Berlin. Referring to the petition, the SED, “following communist dogma, blamed the continued existence of Jim Crow laws on ‘U.S. monopolies,’ which, it claimed, maintained racial discrimination ‘as a means of dividing and weakening the working class,’ including the use of African Americans as ‘wage depressers and strike breakers.’”¹⁵²

As the response to the “We Charge Genocide” document shows, despite the fact that race and racism were often at the forefront of East German discussions about black freedom movements, elites nevertheless viewed the black liberation struggle as one that was primarily about class, as their ideology dictated. To that end, East German officials “actively championed what they considered the ‘other America’ of black civil rights activists,” narrowing their focus to those who accepted or shared “Marxist and socialist convictions or were engaged in international peace activities....”¹⁵³ Ending racial domination by white Americans would come with the defeat of capitalism, these elites reasoned, and those who placed more emphasis on racial discrimination and domination missed the true point of the civil rights movement and its broader international

¹⁵⁰ Zentralkomitee der SED, Internes Parteiarchiv, Sekretariat des ZK, “Protokoll Nr. 129 der Sitzung des Sekretariats des ZK am 4. Januar 1952,” SAPMO-BArch DY 30/J IV 2/3/258, 19, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (hereafter SAPMO). The Civil Rights Congress was a civil rights organization with ties to the CPUSA, led by William Patterson.

¹⁵¹ For the text of the document, see: The Civil Rights Congress, *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief From a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People*, ed. William L. Patterson (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951).

¹⁵² Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 124.

¹⁵³ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 125.

applications.¹⁵⁴

In a very practical sense, therefore, African Americans who prioritized race over class were a danger to East Germany's propaganda and rhetoric inspired by the civil rights movement, because downplaying capitalism's destructive capabilities also downplayed communism's *raison d'être*. Therefore, for East German elites, one's blackness alone was not enough to elicit support. In fact, being black only mattered to the extent that it made one potentially a victim of racism in the US, and therefore, a potential ally against the capitalist West. Absent a commitment to communist ideology, these elites viewed American blacks as they viewed other Americans whom they criticized on a regular basis. One finds, however, that racism often made these attacks even worse than ones aimed at white Americans. Writes Sara Lennox:

...African-Americans who denied communism were generally subjected to a German racial discourse that had originated in the Enlightenment; in these accounts, they were portrayed either as hapless victims not yet able to seize control of their own lives or as primitive and barbarous savages who, for purely racial reasons, lacked the resources to do so.¹⁵⁵

Important to note here is that even though this brand of racism was thoroughly infused with socialist and communist ideology, it was rooted in earlier racial discourses, the very same discourses informing West German views on blacks as well. While justifications for the articulated racism differed, the views and basic language of expression were drawn from a common set of experiences.

The differentiating East German views on American blacks also extended to African American culture. Though elites regarded some aspects of African American

¹⁵⁴ Lennox, "Reading Transnationally," 114. Lennox makes this argument in regards to East German literary critics, but this was also true more broadly regarding other members of the East German elite who participated in this discourse on African Americans in the 1950s.

¹⁵⁵ Lennox, "Reading Transnationally," 113–114.

culture, rather condescendingly, as impressive achievements, much of what the SED attacked in American culture was actually rooted in the African American sub-culture. This made for tensions between the East German elite's intellectual acceptance of African Americans and the rejection of many of their cultural products. A prime example of this was the SED's staunch opposition to jazz in East Germany.¹⁵⁶ During the 1950s, East German officials discouraged the importation of jazz recordings, just as they discouraged the enjoyment of other Western imports. Proponents of the music argued that there were two types of jazz, one that was authentic and traditional, and another that had succumbed to the commercialization of capitalist industry.¹⁵⁷

Surely, they argued, the authentic form of jazz could—and ideologically, should—be embraced by the GDR.¹⁵⁸ This was because, the proponents argued, this form of jazz was actually a means of African American protest and should be celebrated as such in East Germany. In fact, the argument continued, jazz could play a role in the development of a new East German dance music that could be deemed “clean.” In 1956, even the state's youth group, the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*—FDJ) supported and endorsed this argument publicly.¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, officials were willing to allow East Germans to listen to what it considered traditional forms of jazz, “such as blues, Dixieland, and swing.”¹⁶⁰

There was, however, African American music that East German officials

¹⁵⁶ Uta Poiger, “American Music, Cold War Liberalism, and German Identities,” in *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformation: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan*, ed. Heide Fehrenbach and Uta Poiger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 130.

¹⁵⁷ Höhn and Klimke, *Breath of Freedom*, 128.

¹⁵⁸ Höhn and Klimke, *Breath of Freedom*, 128.

¹⁵⁹ Poiger, “American Music, Cold War Liberalism, and German Identities,” 131. It appears, however, that a number of these fans of the genre simply made this argument utilizing “language” that the SED would appreciate, while their support for the music was motivated by an enjoyment of jazz.

¹⁶⁰ Höhn and Klimke, *Breath of Freedom*, 128.

approved of, celebrating and supporting African American folk music wholeheartedly.¹⁶¹ The SED judged African American folk music as “the truest and most ‘authentic’ expressions” of oppression, and treated those who performed this music “almost like folk heroes.”¹⁶² The best example of African American folk music that the SED could hold up to its people was Paul Robeson’s work. Thomas Fuchs has described Robeson’s music as exemplifying “the musical tradition with which East German leadership had been familiar: traditional songs of international workers, the communist movement, and traditional folklore.”¹⁶³ It was the music of an oppressed group, resisting its capitalist oppressors. Again, one finds that GDR elites were very specific about whom and what from the African American community they were willing to accept into their largely theoretical friendship.

The East German African American discourse in the 1950s was generally an elite one, confined to those in the SED as well as individuals who socialized in intellectual or academic circles. What was clear to East German elites in the 1950s was that support for the African American struggle in the US could become part of the arsenal of East Germany’s efforts to become relevant. As commentary proclaimed, African Americans had yet to succumb to the “grip of modern materialism,” making them suitable allies

¹⁶¹ In a press conference with Paul Robeson in 1960, he was quoted as saying that jazz had originally grown out of African American music protesting oppression and slavery, i.e. folk music, and in that form was acceptable. However, the “commercialized” jazz of the period had apparently shed those origins and was now of a “destructive character.” “Paul Robeson hat Wort gehalten: Pressekonferenz mit dem großen Künstler und Kämpfer in Berlin,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 20 June 1960, clipping located in the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Paul-Robeson-Archiv (hereafter PRA), 9.5/3.112 mi 4 c.

¹⁶² Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 129.

¹⁶³ Thomas Fuchs, “Rock ‘n’ Roll in the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1961,” in *Here, There, and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*, eds. Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 194.

despite (and in many ways, because of) their location in the West.¹⁶⁴ This was an image that would change little over the remainder of the GDR's lifetime, with the elite projecting onto this "ideal" black individual the values considered most important to the SED at a particular moment in time.

African Americans in East Germany

Likely the first African Americans to arrive in East Germany were deserters from the US military stationed in West Germany. Before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, approximately 45 American soldiers deserted and fled to the GDR from West Germany. Six of these men were African American, and like the other deserters, had come to East Germany for a variety of reasons, none of the men ranking ideology very highly among these motivations.¹⁶⁵ Upon their arrival, these men were sent to Bautzen, near East Germany's border with Czechoslovakia, a village that would later become synonymous with a prison housing the SED's political opponents. The government placed the deserters in what was called the House of International Solidarity (hereafter HIS), where they were taught German, learned trades, and received political instruction. The men became part of an East German experiment that ultimately ended in 1963 when the HIS was permanently closed.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 88.

¹⁶⁵ According to SED records, there were six Black American men, though published sources refer to there being only five men. The men were Willie (sometimes spelled "Willy") Avent, Charles Lucas (sometimes referred to as "Karl Lukas"), Arthur Boyd, James Pulley, Raymond Hutto, and John Sykes. For a document listing all of the men: "Betr: Aufstellung aller Asylberechtigten, die durch die Abteilung Internationale Solidarität in Bautzen betreut werden," BArch DO 1/14642, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter BArch-Berlin).

¹⁶⁶ Victor Grossman, "Prologue: African Americans in the GDR," in *Germans and African Americans: Two Centuries of Exchange*, eds. Larry A. Greene and Anke Ortlepp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 14.

Among the deserters who sought asylum, the first African American to arrive in Bautzen was a man named Charles Lucas, from Ohio. According to Lucas, he was drafted by the US Navy in 1943, and after spending time in the Pacific theater he returned home. In the late 1940s he was again called to serve, this time as part of the occupation forces in Europe, though he soon learned that he was to be sent to Korea after a short furlough in the US. Not wanting to fight in Korea, he deserted the US military and came to East Germany with a young West German woman to whom he was engaged. He reached East Germany on 29 August 1951, and arrived in Bautzen on 12 September 1951. To the Stasi, he stated that he had come east because he “didn’t want to fight anymore wars. Because I don’t see what we are fighting for...”¹⁶⁷ An attraction to communism appears not to have played a role in his considerations.

Upon arriving in Bautzen, Lucas was employed in a bakery. In his spare time, he joined a boxing group and became known regionally as a boxing star.¹⁶⁸ As a foreigner from the West living in East Germany, Lucas was monitored by the Stasi, who collected status reports from his employer on his work performance and work ethic. Stasi officials noted that Lucas was a hard-worker who perhaps enjoyed the company of women a bit too much, but nonetheless pulled his weight at work. In fact, he and his boss apparently got along so well that they even socialized together. Lucas also joined the FDJ and the *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (Free German Trade Union Federation, FDGB)—though many East German workers belonged to these groups and membership did not

¹⁶⁷ Handwritten self-history by Charles Lucas, 1955, Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, Berlin (hereafter BStU), Personalakte, Nr. 1191/55, “Joe Baker,” 15, BStU.

¹⁶⁸ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 127.

necessarily signify a devotion to the state and what it represented.¹⁶⁹

Lucas eventually married and by all appearances made for an attractive asylum seeker. The only real negative was that Lucas' German was very poor, which made it difficult for him to interact with his co-workers and most East Germans in general.¹⁷⁰ A difficulty with speaking German would become a theme among the other deserters as well. Generally, when the deserters arrived at the HIS, they were given the opportunity to enroll in a three-month program in which they would study German and learn about socialism, as well as methods they could use to change conditions in their native countries, to which they were eventually expected to return. In 1956, SED officials finally realized that three months was not enough time to successfully master German, and sought to expand the program.¹⁷¹ Sadly, though Lucas seemed to have adjusted to his new life in the GDR as well as he possibly could have given his language difficulties, on 12 June 1956 Lucas was discovered dead in the apartment he shared with his wife, the result of what was ruled a suicide.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Update on Charles Lucas, BStU, MfS Zentralarchiv, Allg. S. 130/66, Band 3, 319, BStU.

¹⁷⁰ Aktennotiz, 26 May 1952, BStU, MfS, BV Dresden, AIM, 866/56, 19, BStU.

¹⁷¹ Ministerium des Innern, Hauptabteilung Innere Angelegenheiten, "Bericht der Überprüfung der Arbeit der Abteilung Internationale Solidarität in der Zeit vom 30.7.-1.8.1956," 1 August 1956, BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin. It seems possible, however, that from the SED's standpoint, the deserters' difficulty with German was only a handicap at work. Surely, their poor German limited their ability to socialize and move freely among East Germans outside of work. Yet, the Party likely found little problem with this limited ability to socialize, given their later efforts to retain a suitable distance between foreigners of color and East German citizens. For example, when Black Africans arrived in East Germany as laborers, the SED sought to limit interactions between these foreign workers and East Germans, outside of the normal contacts one would expect at work. Quite often this was done by restricting access to the hostels where many of the foreigners were housed. Mike Dennis, "Asian and African Workers in the Niches of Society," in *State and Minorities in Communist East Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 94-96. A survey conducted in 1990 confirms this separation, finding that "60 per cent of East Germans stated that they had no personal contact with foreigners and knew little about them; two-thirds of the foreign nationals did not spend their free time in the company of East Germans." Ibid., 107.

¹⁷² When Lucas failed to appear for work, a colleague went to Lucas' place, finding the door unlocked and Lucas' body stretched out on the sofa. The apartment smelled strongly of gas, and next to Lucas was a copy of the New Testament and a letter he had written. According to his wife, when she left to run errands that morning Lucas was still alive, apparently committing suicide not long after she left. The Stasi

Though Lucas' time in East Germany came to an unfortunate end, the other African American deserters lived to see the end of the East German state.¹⁷³ Several years after Lucas arrived in East Germany, Arthur Boyd, who was born in South Carolina but raised on Long Island, New York, deserted to the East in 1953 or 1954.¹⁷⁴ According to a newspaper article, it appears that Boyd defected to the East after meeting an East German woman named Ingeborg, while stationed in West Berlin. The two married and had six children, the first a girl named Karin who would go on to become an actress in both the GDR and the FRG.¹⁷⁵ Eventually, Ingeborg and Arthur divorced, though it is not clear exactly when.¹⁷⁶ After the divorce, Boyd remained in East Germany, never to return to the US. It appears that Boyd was more successful than some of the other deserters at learning German, as his daughter later stated in an interview that her English was poor because her father had always spoken German at home.¹⁷⁷

Another deserter, Raymond Hutto, a Georgia native, arrived in East Germany in

conducted an investigation, finding that the foreigners at the HIS had three theories as to Lucas' death. The first was that Lucas had become homesick, while the second theory blamed Lucas' wife, claiming that she offered her husband little "support." The third theory argued that Lucas was dealing with "financial difficulties" that were exacerbated by other factors, leading him to take his own life. The Stasi, however, concluded that Lucas had committed suicide because of "melancholy" (*Schwermut*). Hübner to Bezirksverwaltung Dresden, Abteilung II, 18 June 1956 (copy made on 20 July 1956), BStU, Personalakte, Nr. 119/55, 53-54, BStU.

¹⁷³ The only deserter I have been unable to find extensive information on is John Sykes, and it is not known how long he remained in East Germany.

¹⁷⁴ Several published sources (such as Höhn and Klimke, as well as a newspaper article cited immediately below) claim that Boyd arrived in East Germany in 1953, though East German records show his arrival as being in 1954. The month and day—29/30 April—are the same amongst the sources.

¹⁷⁵ Karin became an actress in East Germany, finding popularity despite difficulties in acquiring roles as a woman of mixed-race. She eventually left East Germany in 1983, telling officials that she needed to move to the US in order to help her grandmother who lived there; in reality, she moved to West Germany. Internationally, she is best known for her performance as Juliette in "Mephisto," which was nominated for an Academy Award. Kevin Costelloe, "Co-Star from 'Mephisto' Now Big on German TV," *The Free Lance-Star*, February 21, 1987.

¹⁷⁶ East German records from 1958 claim that their marriage dissolved while in Bautzen. Hausmitteilung von Ministerium des Innern, HA Innere Angelegenheiten an Genossen Staatssekretär Grünstein, "Reglung der Aufnahme und des Aufenthaltes von Angehörigen der in Westdeutschland stationierten NATO-Armeen und anderen Ausländern im Gebiet der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik," 21 May 1958, Anlage 3, BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin.

¹⁷⁷ Costelloe, "Co-Star from 'Mephisto' Now Big on German TV."

1954. According to *Jet*, Hutto had been in West Berlin awaiting a court martial when he escaped from his guard and crossed the border into East Germany; there, he requested political asylum. Per American military officials, Hutto was being court martialed on a larceny charge.¹⁷⁸ Upon his arrival in East Berlin, Hutto was transported to Bautzen where he studied a trade, and he later went on to earn his master's papers at the *Schwarze Pumpe* coal and gas complex, located not far from Dresden.¹⁷⁹ There is little known about Hutto, except that he married an East German woman named Sieglinde.¹⁸⁰ Hutto was one of several deserters or asylum seekers to flee to East Germany on the heels of criminal charges. In a 1956 report from the Ministry of Interior discussing the absence of political convictions among many of the asylum seekers at the HIS, officials noted that indeed some of the applicants were looking to avoid criminal charges in West Germany, thinking that the best way to evade the police was to head eastward.¹⁸¹

Another deserter, James Pulley, was probably the most publicly successful in building a life for himself in East Germany. As he later told the story, he had been stationed in Augsburg, West Germany when in July 1955 he and his girlfriend traveled to her hometown of Saxony-Anhalt, in East Germany. Apparently, he simply crossed the border on foot, wearing his uniform, and later checked in at a police station. Said Pulley, “Frankly, I didn’t have a clue about East or West and suddenly I was in the East...I wanted the girl-friend and didn’t bother worrying about other matters.”¹⁸² Much like the

¹⁷⁸ “Reds Say Negro GI Seeks Refuge in East Berlin,” *Jet*, July 29, 1954, no. 18, 13.

¹⁷⁹ Grossman, “Prologue: African Americans in the GDR,” 13.

¹⁸⁰ This author has assumed her East German citizenship, as in early reports, Hutto is listed as “single” (*ledig*). See Memo “Nachfolgende aufgeführte Freunde erhielten bis Dezember 1955 folgende Zuzahlungen...,” n.d., BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin.

¹⁸¹ “Bericht der Überprüfung der Arbeit der Abteilung Internationale Solidarität in der Zeit vom 30.7.-1.8.1956,” 1 August 1956, BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin.

¹⁸² Cited in Grossman, “Prologue: African Americans in the GDR,” 12.

other deserters, Pulley's motivations for coming to East Germany had nothing to do with a knowledge of or sympathy for the East German side of the German Question.

In East Germany, Pulley—unlike Lucas, Boyd, and Hutto—did not learn a trade. Instead, Pulley ultimately became a singer who performed with the Black and White Dance Orchestra. It is perhaps telling that the most “successful” deserter was one who pursued a career in entertainment, conforming to long-held German expectations for blacks as performers. According to Pulley, one evening in 1957 he and his wife attended a dance and sat themselves next to the stage where the band was performing. Keeping beat to the music with his hands, Pulley drew the attention of the pianist, who beckoned him over during a break. The pianist asked Pulley if he could sing; upon hearing that he could, he invited Pulley onto the stage where he performed songs that were “sort of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” According to Pulley, he was immediately hired to join the band right then and there.¹⁸³ The pianist's question, however, seems an odd one to ask of someone who was simply keeping beat to the music, suggesting that racial stereotypes about blacks and their affinity for rhythm and music prompted the pianist to ask Pulley that particular question.

In 1956, a year after Pulley defected to East Germany, Willie Avent arrived. He was a former sergeant in the US military who would go on to win the (East German) Silver Pin of the National Front, and belonged to the Society for German-Soviet Friendship.¹⁸⁴ In a 1995 interview with *Der Spiegel* Avent's German wife Erika spoke on behalf of her husband, who had passed away the previous year, telling of his affinity for the East German state, maintaining that Willie “was more of a GDR citizen than he was an American.” Though Erika claimed that her husband had been a “distinguished

¹⁸³ Grossman, “Prologue: African Americans in the GDR,” 12–13.

¹⁸⁴ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 127.

member” of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship,¹⁸⁵ this was in effect a society to which most East Germans were required to belong. It is difficult to know how Avent actually felt, as his wife’s proof comes down to an association with a group practically required of all workers in East Germany.

Lastly, the sixth African American to arrive in East Germany, about who very little is known, was a man named John Sykes. Though there are scant sources available, he is briefly mentioned in East German files. Sykes was born on 9 March 1925 and arrived in East Germany on 29 June 1957. As of November 1957 he had been employed in Leipzig as a machine operator.¹⁸⁶ The fact that so little information is available suggests that he did not arrive in East Germany for any ideological reasons, as the sources would likely have noted such a fact. He may have left the GDR not long after arriving, also possibly explaining why there are so few mentions of him in the archives.

Though the SED may have believed that they could use the deserters—black and white—for propaganda purposes, nothing materialized. In theory, these simple soldiers could have been very useful propaganda tools, at a time when East Germans were fleeing the country in worrying numbers. The notion of these men turning their backs on their military, country, and the West’s ideological worldview to request asylum in East Germany had the potential to not only reflect negatively on the US, but also to distract observers from the population drain in the GDR. Yet, it eventually became clear to both the SED and the Stasi that few of the deserters and asylum seekers had arrived in East Germany out of an affinity for the state or its political ideology.

¹⁸⁵ “Langes Gedächtnis,” *Der Spiegel*, 15/1995, 97.

¹⁸⁶ Hausmitteilung von Ministerium des Innern, HA Innere Angelegenheiten an Genossen Staatssekretär Grünstein, “Reglung der Aufnahme und des Aufenthaltes von Angehörigen der in Westdeutschland stationierten NATO-Armeen und anderen Ausländern im Gebiet der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” 21 May 1958, Anlage 2, BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin.

In fact, a 1956 report from the Ministry of the Interior's Department of Internal Affairs admitted that not only was this the case, but that many of the men had arrived knowing little about the state, most simply hoping to receive some sort of financial assistance.¹⁸⁷ Throughout much of this experiment at the HIS, East German reports painted a picture of the deserters and asylum seekers as people who were not fully engaged with the state when they arrived and who continued to maintain a distance from the East German socialist worldview. Certainly, a lack of commitment to the GDR's state ideology is only one of many reasons why the black asylum seekers (like other non-black deserters), failed to provide any useful propaganda for the SED. One of the most glaring reasons, however, owed to a general distrust directed at many of the deserters and asylum seekers by East German officials, suspicions that were proven true when in 1958 an asylum seeker was discovered to be a spy.¹⁸⁸

However, even if the black deserters had arrived in the GDR for ideological reasons, the hypocrisy of the SED's anti-racist rhetoric likely would have been a cause for concern. The men were often confronted by racism and an exoticization that served to single them out and underline their differences. According to a brief 1951 report in Lucas' Stasi file, he related to officials some of the "difficulties" he had had with citizens of Bautzen who referred to him using the word "*Neger*," which Lucas explained was an offensive term.¹⁸⁹ Though the word *Neger* can express the English word "negro," it is also sometimes used to express the word "nigger," likely the usage with which Lucas

¹⁸⁷ Ministerium des Innern, Hauptabteilung Innere Angelegenheiten, "Bericht der Überprüfung der Arbeit der Abteilung Internationale Solidarität in der Zeit vom 30.7.-1.8.1956," 1 August 1956, BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin.

¹⁸⁸ Grünstein to Mielke, 1958, BArch DO 1/14642, BArch-Berlin.

¹⁸⁹ "Kurze Charakteristik über Charles Lucas und [name redacted], 25 September 1951," BStU, MfS, BV Dresden, AIM, 866/56, 10, BStU.

took offense. The citizens of Bautzen were not the only ones who referred to Lucas using the word *Neger*; in a report from 1953 written by Stasi officials, Lucas' biographical information listed his previous citizenship as American and his nationality as "*Neger*."¹⁹⁰ By 1953, when the report was written, the negative connotation of the word *Neger* had long been established—in fact, "[b]y the 1920s, the pejorative or abusive sense of the [term] had become sufficiently well-established" in Germany¹⁹¹—such that the SED's continued use of a highly racialized term is indicative of an institutionalized racism that found expression in the most bureaucratic of ways.

A year later, a 1954 Soviet report about the HIS detailed a number of weaknesses in the program that led the deserters and asylum seekers to leave the country. The Soviet observers paid attention to the conditions for the asylum seekers in the community surrounding the HIS, noting that the locals often expressed racist sentiments towards the "Blacks and Moroccans." According to the report, life in Bautzen was extremely hostile and lonely for the men who sought asylum in East Germany.¹⁹² Yet, despite this Soviet report's frank discussion about East German racism, there was no further *East German* discussion about the racial discrimination that confronted the black asylum seekers in Bautzen. Even had the men taken honest oaths of loyalty, their experiences with East German racism would have made them unlikely spokesmen for and supporters of East Germany's anti-racist rhetoric.

Altogether, the experiences of these African American deserters in East Germany

¹⁹⁰ "Lucas, Charles (Neger), geb. Am 10.12.16, 21 August 1953," BStU, MfS, BV Dresden, AIM, 866/56, 27, BStU. The designation of Lucas' nationality as "*Neger*" even after identifying him as an American citizen is perhaps a nod to the socialist/communist notion that African Americans were a second nation within the US.

¹⁹¹ "Introduction," in *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960*, eds. Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

¹⁹² Soviet Report on House of International Solidarity, BArch DO 1/17056, BArch-Berlin.

signify why their arrival in the state failed to provide East German elites with the opportunity to take what was largely a theoretical relationship and turn it into a concrete and tangible one. The deserters provided the SED with little propaganda value, and in fact, they served to highlight the socialist Germany's legitimacy problems and holes in its rhetoric. Despite the fact that, on the face of it, a group of African Americans choosing to live in East Germany and remaining there until the Berlin Wall fell would suggest that perhaps there was some truth to East Germany's anti-racist rhetoric, this simply was not true. The anti-racist propaganda did nothing to attract the men, and in fact, nothing about the state's political ideology had been a magnet for these deserters. They arrived in East Germany because of their personal circumstances, often uneducated about the state, its politics, and its ideology. Though they remained, it is quite likely that it was because of the families that they had started, fears about the punishments they would face in the US for deserting the military, and an apprehension about the social stigma they would encounter for having defected to the Eastern Bloc. They may simply have perceived it as much easier to remain where they were.

Two asylum seekers who differed markedly from those housed in Bautzen were Aubrey Pankey and his wife Kay. Aubrey was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1905 and was orphaned by the age of fifteen. Determined to learn a trade in order to support himself, he entered the Hampton Institute where he focused on auto mechanics until it was discovered that he could sing, and quite well. He joined the Hampton choir, and upon graduation continued his studies at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Boston University, and the Hubbard Studios in Boston. Gaining recognition from performances in Boston and New York, he was described as "a singer with musical intelligence and

imagination.”¹⁹³ In May 1930 he left for Europe, where he trained in Paris and Vienna, and he eventually appeared in more than two hundred performances in twenty-four countries.¹⁹⁴ During World War II he returned to the US but left soon thereafter and settled in France. After divorcing his French wife of nine years, he married a white woman from the American south named Kathryn Weatherly.¹⁹⁵ The new Mrs. Pankey, who went by Kay, was noted by the African American magazine *Jet* for living “quietly in her fashionable Harlem apartment, socializ[ing] at cocktail parties, NAACP and Urban League functions,” and for being very active in Harlem society.¹⁹⁶

In early 1955, the Pankeys requested political asylum from East Germany. According to some Western news reports, Pankey and his wife took up permanent residence in East Germany after they were expelled from France for supporting Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who had been convicted of a conspiracy to commit wartime espionage in the United States.¹⁹⁷ East German records suggest that Kay’s refusal to submit to demands from her employer, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), for a declaration of capitalist and Western loyalty played a role in their request for asylum.¹⁹⁸ Whatever may have driven the application, the SED took the

¹⁹³ “Brilliant Baritone Was Once America’s Jack of All Trades,” *The Afro-American*, December 16, 1941, 10.

¹⁹⁴ Laurence A. Glasco, ed., *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 323–324.

¹⁹⁵ Texts often mistakenly claim that Kathryn was German-born.

¹⁹⁶ “Sorority Pledges White Member,” *Jet*, 5 June 1962, No. 6, 52-53.

¹⁹⁷ “Baritone Aubrey Pankey, 65, Killed in Berlin Car Mishap,” *Jet*, 27 May 1971, Vol. XL, No. 9, 58.

¹⁹⁸ According to news reports, Kay and three other female employees at UNESCO were scheduled to appear before an American loyalty board in Paris. Because they had refused to do so, they had been dismissed from their jobs. UNESCO defended the firings by stating that “the women’s attitude to the loyalty board caused serious damage to the organization.” A three-person tribunal later ruled that there was no basis to this claim and noted that examinations by “individual governments” as to the loyalty of people working internationally would “disrupt the administration” of organizations like UNESCO. The tribunal ordered that the women be given their jobs back and, predicting that UNESCO would be less than cooperative, also granted the women two years’ worth of salary, plus \$300 for court costs. Kay was said to

Pankeys' asylum request under consideration. In a letter from Karl Tümmler, of the Ministry of Culture, to another functionary, he cautioned that the issue be attended to with the utmost confidentiality. Aubrey was currently on tour in Europe, while Kay was still officially working in Paris at UNESCO. As her situation there had not yet been fully resolved, should news of their request leak before the details had been worked out it could create untold problems and worsen those that already existed for the couple. There were some questions, though, about the advisability of offering asylum to the couple, but not for political or ideological reasons.¹⁹⁹ Tümmler observed that Pankey was a gifted musician, but wondered how he would support himself in East Germany: would Pankey be able to make a living through his concerts, and if not, was he was capable of teaching at a music school?²⁰⁰

About a week after Tümmler sent his letter, he received a message informing him that the Secretary of State for Internal Affairs had devised a way for the Pankeys to receive asylum with little international fanfare. The Pankeys were encouraged to enter East Germany on a normal, limited visa, which would later be converted into a permanent one. In order to help facilitate and speed up the process, the Ministry of Internal Affairs would write a statement supporting the asylum request.²⁰¹ While this statement or any document officially granting the Pankeys asylum was not found in the archives, later documents make reference to the Pankeys having received asylum, and it appears that by

have come away with \$5,864. "Order UNESCO to Pay 4 Fired Women \$31,000," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30 October 1955.

¹⁹⁹ Since Pankey was not officially a member of any political party, Tümmler believed that there would not be any problem granting the couple asylum in that respect.

²⁰⁰ Karl Tümmler to Prof. Pischner, 31 March 1955, Ministerium für Kultur, Sekretariat des Ministers, Johannes R. Becher, BArch DR 1/8285, 166, BArch-Berlin.

²⁰¹ Kummert to Karl Tümmler, 7 April 1955, Ministerium für Kultur, Sekretariat des Ministers, Johannes R. Becher, BArch DR 1/8285, 167, BArch-Berlin.

April 1956 the Pankeys were official members of the East German state.²⁰²

By all accounts, the Pankeys settled in to East German society fairly well. As a singer of black spirituals and German *Lieder*, Pankey became popular in East Germany, and took a teaching job in East Berlin.²⁰³ Kay became an editor at Seven Seas Publishers in East Berlin, a job which included publishing texts written by African Americans.

What is striking about the Pankeys' asylum request is the fact that little was made of it, not only while the request was processing, but afterward as well. The Pankeys' disavowal of the West was not used for the creation of any significant international propaganda, though Pankey *was* tapped to speak domestically on the issue of democracy. In the late 1950s, Pankey participated in several local election events in which he discussed his perception of democracy, comparing that which he had experienced in the US with what allegedly existed in East Germany.

Before one election, Pankey wrote a piece for the *Freien Presse* in Zwickau, and told readers that it was false to assume that a state had to have multiple parties in order to be democratic. He used his native country as an example, arguing that both the Republicans and the Democrats served the interests of Wall Street and not the people, making the multi-party system moot as a means of ensuring democracy. To Pankey, true democracy was exemplified by a state where the people controlled the government, and a "struggle for peace and humanity" was the "prerequisite" for the success of the political system. The mere fact of an election did not ensure democracy, wrote Pankey, but rather democracy was found where the people had full and steady control over political

²⁰² Life narrative written by Kay Pankey, BStU, MfS, AOPK 13243/91, 263, BStU. When Pankey died in 1971 in a car accident, he had lived in East Germany for the last seventeen years of his life. "Aubrey Pankey Dies; Expatriate Singer," *New York Times*, 11 May 1971, 42.

²⁰³ "American Singer Takes Teaching Job in East Berlin," *Toledo Blade*, 23 August 1956, 4.

workings.²⁰⁴

That Pankey spoke publicly to East Germans about democracy and elections coincided with the SED's efforts to prove that the US was decidedly un-democratic and should not be used as the benchmark of a successful democratic state (and by extension, neither should the FRG, the US' own democracy "project"). However, Pankey was just as outspoken, if not more so, on the issue of racism. Given the SED's stated commitment to anti-racism, why did they not ask Pankey to speak on the topic, either domestically or internationally? The answer lies in the fact that Pankey was outspoken against *all* forms of racism, not just American racism.

In fact, he did not hesitate to speak out about his own experiences with East German racism. One complaint was filed in 1959, when Pankey was invited to participate in a program of American music to be conducted by the famed American director Earl Robinson at the State Opera in East Berlin. Being the only American singer in East Germany at the time, Pankey felt obliged to participate in the program, and in fact, was honored to have the opportunity to work with Robinson. However, he was sorely offended when he was offered the role of "Negro preacher." In a letter to Gerhart Eisler, the chief of East German radio, Pankey wrote:

I would have been happy to share in this evening of American music. What has made it impossible for me is the fact that, as it turns out, the invitation was extended to me not because I am a singer, or an American, but strictly because I am a Negro.... I can only regard this as an unfortunate instance of Jim Crow.²⁰⁵

It is not difficult to imagine that Pankey knew that tacking on his comment about "Jim

²⁰⁴ "Aubrey Pankey an die Bürger der DDR," *Freien Presse, Zwickau*, 29 May 1957 or 1958 [date unclear], clipping located at BArch DZ 9/241, fol. 1 von 2, BArch-Berlin.

²⁰⁵ Aubrey Pankey to Professor Gerhart Eisler, 19 April 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 128, SAPMO.

Crow” would be provocative, serving as an unfriendly comparison between East Germany and the US. Pankey closed his letter by noting his regret about not taking part in the American musical revue; what he regretted most, however, was that the “circumstances which force this refusal should have occurred here, in the Berlin which is my home.”²⁰⁶

Eisler forwarded the letter on to Albert Norden, a member of the SED’s Politburo who ran East Germany’s agitation department from 1955 until 1967.²⁰⁷ Norden in turn shared the letter with Alfred Kurella, who led a Politburo committee investigating questions concerning culture in East Germany. In a memo to Kurella, Norden noted that this would be a good opportunity to address the “situation” in East Germany in order to review the experiences of “people like Pankey.” As an aside, he commented that he seemed to remember an earlier discrimination complaint from Pankey.²⁰⁸ In response, Kurella remarked that this letter from Pankey finally gave them a chance to take a stand against those in East Germany who loudly proclaimed their support on behalf of the world’s blacks, only to retreat behind their racism.²⁰⁹ Kurella opted to respond to Pankey personally, and shared with him his disgust for those who expressed what he called “pseudosympathies” for blacks as a cover for their true racist beliefs and attitudes.²¹⁰

While Kurella was not sure how the matter would be resolved in the public

²⁰⁶ Aubrey Pankey to Professor Gerhart Eisler, 19 April 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 129, SAPMO.

²⁰⁷ With the exception of the years 1957-1961, the Departments of Agitation and Propaganda were separate entities.

²⁰⁸ Albert Norden to Alfred Kurella, 22 April 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 127, SAPMO. It is not clear to what previous complaint Norden was referring.

²⁰⁹ Alfred Kurella to Albert Norden, 2 May 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 126, SAPMO.

²¹⁰ Alfred Kurella to Aubrey Pankey, 2 May 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 125, SAPMO.

sphere, he did ask Pankey if he could use his letter to facilitate discussion.²¹¹ Pankey acquiesced, and offered to participate in any such discussion if Kurella deemed it appropriate.²¹² However, there is no evidence that Kurella or anyone else publicly dealt with the discrimination of “people like Pankey,” stemming from Pankey’s complaint. It is possible that Kurella intended to, but was unable to do so—it is unlikely that Kurella would have received approval from the SED to instigate a conversation about East German racism, given that racism did not officially exist in the GDR. It is also possible, though, that Kurella’s promise was nothing more than lip-service, an attempt to placate Pankey.

The mere existence of this particular discussion, though, suggests that Kurella may have had at least some genuine desire to address East German racism, as he did admit to the existence of racism in the GDR in a letter to another functionary, when the standard procedure would have been to deny that it existed at all. Certainly, Kurella and Norden, the first a critic of Walter Ulbricht (the First Secretary of the SED from 1950-1971) and the latter the son of a rabbi (in a state whose anti-fascism did *not* include anti-anti-Semitism²¹³), were perhaps better positioned than others to appreciate Pankey’s complaint and the strains of racism that ran through his experience with the musical revue. Though the two would ultimately end up defending the party line by their inaction, this is an example of the variety of perspectives on the GDR’s problem with racism.

In February 1961, Pankey wrote yet another letter of complaint, this time directly

²¹¹ Alfred Kurella to Aubrey Pankey, 2 May 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 125, SAPMO.

²¹² Aubrey Pankey to Alfred Kurella, 12 May 1959, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 124, SAPMO.

²¹³ For more on anti-anti-Semitism and anti-fascism in the SED, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

contacting Norden. In his complaint he included an article from the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* that critiqued a concert Pankey had given in Rostock, as well as the response he had sent to the newspaper. Pankey hoped that once Norden read the article, Norden would agree with him that the newspaper should publish a correction of the critique.²¹⁴ In the offending article, the author criticized Pankey for undervaluing the music of his “people,” and claimed that the small number of concert attendees owed to the fact that Pankey’s repertoire simply did not align with what Germans had come to expect a Black American to perform. Instead, of the twenty-four songs Pankey sang, ten were German *Kunstlieder*, five were labeled by the author as “international,” and three were Baroque songs, including one by German-born Händel. This was contrasted with the fact that Pankey had sung “only” six Negro spirituals. The author warned that Pankey would only find success if he remembered that his primary concern as a black performer should be to sing the music of his “people.”²¹⁵

Pankey, who had trained internationally and in many well-known musical centers, was outraged by this critique. In his letter to the newspaper, he argued that had the review been confined to “my voice, my interpretation and technique, there would be no reason for this letter.” Instead, he argued, the reviewer had chosen to write a political critique of his performance, in which he assigned Pankey a series of cultural and political responsibilities that were, frankly, racist. “I believe that it is a grave political error for music critics in the DDR to blow the horn of white chauvinists,” he went on. Though the

²¹⁴ Aubrey Pankey to Alfred Norden, 28 February 1961, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.028/94, 100, SAPMO.

²¹⁵ Abschrift, “Unterschätzung der eigenen Volkskunst,” *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 February 1961, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.028/94, 101, SAPMO. Of course, Pankey already *was* successful, so it is likely that this statement, offensive because of its claim that Pankey should stick to “black” music, was made even more so.

reporter may not have meant to write a critique with racist overtones, Pankey allowed, that was nevertheless the effect. Because the newspaper had a large distribution, Pankey believed it was vital that a correction be issued.²¹⁶ Unfortunately the archives do not show any response from either Norden or the newspaper's editor.

Just as with the deserters, Pankey's experience in East Germany reveals why his appeal for asylum did little to further a relationship between Black America and East Germany, while pointing to the precarious edge on which East Germany's struggle for legitimacy rested. Though Pankey had left the West in favor of East Germany, he was far too vocal against (East German) racism, making him a dangerous figure to use in anti-racist rhetoric, and one that the SED could not safely utilize as a propaganda vehicle for an international audience. To admit that racism existed in East Germany would, officials believed, create a tie to the Nazis, as well as contradict and lessen the effect of any East German propaganda condemning the "racist" Western powers, hampering the SED's efforts at obtaining legitimacy. It was simply easier instead to use Pankey to speak domestically about democracy in the GDR and the US.

The next noted African American to come to East Germany was the activist and academic W.E.B. Du Bois. By the time Du Bois traveled to East Germany in 1958, his long-held appreciation for Imperial Germany, as well as his inclination toward East Germany, was well-known. Du Bois, born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, had moved to Germany in 1892 to attend university. Enrolled at the Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm University of Berlin in the Philosophy department, Du Bois completed a doctoral dissertation, but was unable to defend his work due to university requirements

²¹⁶ Aubrey Pankey to the editor of the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 February 1961, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.028/94, 102, SAPMO.

and a lack of funding.²¹⁷ After returning to the US, Du Bois spoke and wrote often of his time in Germany, expressing an appreciation for the freedom he had experienced as a black man while traveling throughout the then-young German state.²¹⁸

Throughout the 1950s Du Bois kept himself apprised of the situation in the GDR, and even spoke out in favor of the state at a speech given on 8 October 1954 honoring East Germany's fifth anniversary. Du Bois spoke of his great regard for the state, maintaining that the true greatness of German civilization was centered in East Germany, as most of Germany's great thinkers had either been born in eastern Germany, had been educated there, or had carried out their activities in the region.²¹⁹ Du Bois went on to extol East Germany's virtues, applauding its efforts to unite East and West Germany, and doing so "through peace and not by war or preparation for war," making reference to West German remilitarization.²²⁰ Elaborating, he said:

...if a new Germany like Western Germany today is going to follow in the footsteps of Great Britain, France and the United States of America, and try to subdue the world so that the starved, the ignorant, and the sick majority of human beings are going to spend their lives working for a few leading countries, then there is no hope. [...] But we have a right today to have renewed faith in the emergence of Eastern Germany...into a new world which shall develop without war and exploitation and with peace and respect for humanity. It is the curse of our day that so many honest human beings have allowed themselves to be persuaded that salvation for

²¹⁷ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009), 98; 105-6. In order to graduate, students were required to complete a set amount of schooling before taking their doctoral examination, yet Du Bois was several semesters short. All but one professor approved his application for an exemption to the rule, and it was determined that another year and a half of schooling would be necessary. Unfortunately for Du Bois, the Slater Fund, which had financed Du Bois' education in Berlin up until that point, refused to extend his fellowship.

²¹⁸ Du Bois did have conflicting thoughts about the country when Hitler and the Nazis came to power. See Christina Oppel, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Nazi Germany, and the Black Atlantic," *GHI Bulletin Supplement 5* (2008): 99-122.

²¹⁹ "Germany," Speech delivered at the public meeting celebrating the fifth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, sponsored by *The German American*, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers at the University of Massachusetts Library, Amherst (microfilm edition) (hereafter W.E.B. Du Bois Papers) Reel 81, Frame 923.

²²⁰ "Germany," W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 81, Frame 923.

civilization lies in war and in endless preparation for war.²²¹

He implored world leaders to realize the value of diplomatically recognizing East Germany, as the international community needed a state that would advocate for peace, industry, and workers at the expense of exploitative capitalists, rather than the other way around.²²² This theme of decolonization and anti-imperialism would become a popular overlap for both African Americans and the SED, a point of discussion among both groups later on.²²³ At the time, though, little was made of this speech in East Germany, only to be briefly mentioned during a visit Du Bois made to the GDR in 1958.²²⁴

Though the background leading up to Du Bois' 1958 visit is somewhat convoluted, it appears that the notion of creating ties with the aging African American leader was first considered by East German officials in late 1957, with some outside urging. In December of that year, William Patterson had written a letter to the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin, in which he pointed out that Du Bois would be turning ninety the following year. Because he believed that this landmark birthday would go uncelebrated in the US, Patterson suggested that the Academy make Du Bois a corresponding member, and widely publicize the fact that they had bestowed upon him this honor. The Academy agreed with Patterson, praising the fact that, despite the

²²¹ "Germany," W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 81, Frame 923.

²²² "Germany," W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 81, Frame 924.

²²³ As noted previously, the SED, while pursuing a relationship with Black America, was also attempting to align itself with the newly emerging independent states in much of the previously-colonized world. The SED believed that such alignments would provide East Germany with geopolitical leverage, which it could use to acquire legitimacy and international recognition.

²²⁴ In this speech, Du Bois also makes the argument that Germany was not to blame for either of the world wars. In this formulation, the US, England, France, and Italy are blamed for trying to "organize their industry on the basis of colonies in Africa and Asia." Despite its best efforts, Germany was unable to stay out of the scramble for Africa, if it was ever to have any hope of becoming "a great nation equal to France and Britain..." Therefore, WWI was Germany's "bid for colonies." That effort failed, said Du Bois, and "led to a Second World War to make Russia a colonial nation under the Western Powers." "Germany," W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 81, Frames 922-923.

discrimination and persecution Du Bois had suffered throughout his nearly-ninety years, he had managed to hold on to his humanistic principles.²²⁵ In February 1958, the Academy of Sciences officially invited Du Bois to become a corresponding member.²²⁶

Du Bois' return to (East) Germany that same year, despite how the SED would later spin it, was initially greeted with little fanfare among those who knew he was coming. Documents suggest that Du Bois was in originally in East Germany to give a speech on pan-Africanism at Humboldt University, scheduled for 28 October 1958.²²⁷ Three days before the talk, the head of Humboldt University sent out a memo in which the faculty was asked to announce to its students that Du Bois would be giving a speech, noting that Du Bois had not long ago celebrated his ninetieth birthday, that after having his passport revoked he had recently been allowed to again travel outside of the US, and that he had studied at their university from 1892 to 1894.²²⁸

Then, on 28 October, the *same day* that Du Bois was scheduled to give his speech, Professor Heinz Mohrmann wrote to the State Secretary for Universities and Technical Schools, asking whether it would be possible to bestow upon Du Bois an honorary doctorate from Humboldt University. The school had formerly been known as the

²²⁵ Patterson's suggestion that the Academy honor Du Bois seems at least in part to be an effort to drum up press for Du Bois and create anti-American propaganda, especially in the way that Patterson presents his suggestion to the Academy. While on the face of things it comes across as a kindly gesture, the motivations for both Patterson and the Academy were likely political more than anything else.

²²⁶ Hamilton Beck, "Censoring Your Ally: W.E.B. Du Bois in the German Democratic Republic," in *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, eds. David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 200. Letter from Prof. Rienäcker to William Patterson, 27 February 1958, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 73, Frame 109, 1958D.

²²⁷ East German documents show the idea being tossed around in July 1958, in passing, whether they should invite Du Bois, "the father of the African freedom movement," to the GDR, since he and his wife were then in London. Aktennotiz from Buschinski, 30 Juli 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

²²⁸ Hartke, Werner: Du Bois, W.E.B.: Internal Memorandum Asking Faculty to Announce His 1958 Speech at Humboldt University, 25 October 1958, Humboldt University Archive/W.E.B. Du Bois Ehrenpromotion 3 November 1958, accessed at The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs and Germany Online Archive.

University of Berlin, the same school that Du Bois had attended sixty-six years earlier. In justifying the honorary degree, Mohrmann discussed Du Bois' "life's work," which included "the liberation of the peoples of Africa," followed by a discussion of Du Bois' life history and a sampling of his published works. Mohrmann closed by writing that Humboldt University was very different from the University of Berlin that had not allowed Du Bois to defend his PhD dissertation more than half a century earlier. As members of a socialist and progressive university, the Humboldt faculty was proud to forever be associated with Du Bois, wrote the professor, by extending to him the degree that the University of Berlin did not give him.²²⁹ The request was approved the next day and Mohrmann immediately issued a memo announcing that Du Bois would receive his degree from the Economics Department on 3 November.²³⁰

The same day that he received his honorary degree, Du Bois was also awarded the German Peace Medal. In his speech honoring Du Bois, the president of the [East] German Peace Council, Professor Walter Friedrich, explained that the values held dear by Du Bois were the same ones supported and advanced by the socialist Germany. Friedrich proclaimed that Du Bois was a fighter for peace and freedom, principles which East Germany enthusiastically defended. Friedrich also noted that Du Bois' struggle against the world's wrongs had included a protest against the remilitarization of West Germany,

²²⁹ Mohrmann, Heinz: Du Bois, W.E.B.: Letter by Humboldt University to GDR Official Seeking Permission to Award Du Bois Honorary Doctorate, Humboldt University Archive/W.E.B. Du Bois Ehrenpromotion 3 November 1958, accessed at The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs and Germany Online Archive.

²³⁰ On the degree's approval: Lemnitz: Du Bois, W.E.B.: Letter by East German Official about His Honorary Doctorate from Humboldt University, Humboldt University Archive/W.E.B. Du Bois Ehrenpromotion 3 November 1958, accessed at The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs and Germany Online Archive. On the announcement: Mohrmann, Heinz: Du Bois, W.E.B.: Announcement of Du Bois's Honorary Doctorate from Humboldt University, Humboldt University Archive/W.E.B. Du Bois Ehrenpromotion 3 November 1958, accessed at The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs and Germany Online Archive.

showing that Du Bois had long sided with the “right” Germany. In everything that Du Bois had done and stood for, said Friedrich, the African American activist had sought peaceful solutions, exemplifying the spirit of the peace movement to which the German Peace Council was devoted.²³¹

Du Bois’ wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, wrote of their trip to East Germany, though she made no mention of the speech that originally brought them to the socialist state. After landing at the airport in East Berlin, she recalled, their East German handlers were pleasantly surprised to see that Du Bois needed no translators and was able to converse with them in a “pure and concise ‘Berlinese’ German.”²³² When the couple reached their hotel, Du Bois stood at the window and remarked how new everything in the city looked, as well as how few people there were on the streets. Shirley wrote that, as they later learned, the quiet streets owed to the fact that “at this time of day all the people of East Berlin were at work—we were probably the only idle visitors in the vicinity.”²³³ In a trend that would be repeated by other visiting African Americans, Shirley presented to her readers an East Germany that was new and exciting, but also hard-working; in short, an example of the successes of communism.

After touring some of East Berlin, Du Bois announced to their entourage that he wanted to visit West Berlin, to take in some of the sights he had known in his earlier years in Imperial Germany. He was met with protestations from his hosts, who gently told him that many of the people he had known while attending university were no longer living, and the younger Germans he had met would have been “caught up in the wars.”

²³¹ Speech by Walter Friedrich, *Deutscher Friedensrat*, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 89, Frames 1823 and 1824.

²³² Shirley Graham Du Bois, *His Day is Marching On: A Memoir of W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1971), 254.

²³³ Du Bois, *His Day is Marching On*, 255.

When that tactic did not work, they warned him that, due to his contentious relationship with the American government, should he cross into West Berlin he risked losing his passport and being deported. Finally, one of his hosts asked him whether he would like to be the cause for World War III, after another had stated that they would not allow the American government to harm Du Bois in any way, ““even if it meant calling on Russian tanks!”” Shirley found this exchange amusing and laughed, seemingly breaking the tension in the room, and Du Bois stood down, claiming that he was a man of peace, never mentioning again the desire to travel to West Berlin.²³⁴

Despite the respect that members of the East German elite had for Du Bois, the majority of those who held the African American intellectual in high regard were intellectuals or academics themselves. Ideologically, Du Bois’ own views differed from the orthodox Marxist-Leninist worldview to which East Germany officially subscribed. This ideological distance is best seen in efforts to have Du Bois’ speech published in the GDR. Shortly after Du Bois’ visit was complete and he and his wife had left for the Soviet Union, his speech on pan-Africanism at Humboldt University was translated into German, and Mohrmann explored the possibility of having the speech published. While the journal *Deutsche Aussenpolitik* at first expressed some interest in the project, ultimately it was turned down because Du Bois strayed from East Germany’s orthodox

²³⁴ Du Bois, *His Day is Marching On*, 257. While this anecdote neatly portrays the “safety” of the communist world for Du Bois (and other blacks engaged in struggle with the US government), it also, perhaps inadvertently, portrays a certain ignorance of just how contentious the German Question was for the East German hosts. Even Du Bois, who had spoken about both German states, seems not to have anticipated the idea that his hosts would not want him to visit West Berlin. To have Du Bois come to East Berlin, and from there travel to the West, would have invited (possibly negative) comparisons between the two states.

Marxism-Leninism.²³⁵ Furthermore, Du Bois had praised in his speech black liberation movements that had already been deemed unacceptable by East German officials.²³⁶ Eventually the speech was published in the *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität*, and though it was a respected journal, it did not have the circulation that *Deutsche Aussenpolitik* did.²³⁷

Hamilton Beck has argued that because of *Deutsche Aussenpolitik*'s refusal to publish the speech, Du Bois' lecture at Humboldt University on pan-Africanism, the *actual* reason why he had come to East Berlin, was relegated to obscurity. Elaborating, Beck has written that the speech

was overlooked even by the GDR's own bibliographers. And this occurred because, in the eyes of the GDR's guardians of orthodoxy, Du Bois had expressed views that, to put it euphemistically, would cause "confusion" in the mind of the reader; in fact, the rejection occurred because Du Bois did not toe the SED's line on a number of key issues: the interpretation of Marcus Garvey, the relationship between socialism and communism, and the relationship between Pan-Africanism and movements of national liberation.²³⁸

While it was the case that Du Bois and the SED differed on various points ideologically, the idea of Du Bois being censored, as Beck has argued, falls flat when one considers that the very people who would have read the article were academics and intellectuals—not the average member of the East German public.

²³⁵ Aust, Hans: Du Bois, W.E.B.: Letter from German Publishing House Rejecting Publication of 1958 Speech at Humboldt University, Humboldt University Archive/W.E.B. Du Bois Ehrenpromotion 3 November 1958, accessed at The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs and Germany Online Archive.

²³⁶ Du Bois had "spoken with a mixture of admiration and criticism of [Marcus] Garvey," who had been characterized by East Germany as a "petty bourgeois nationalist leader" who simply wanted to create for blacks their own version of the white capitalist system, and opposed cooperation with unions as well as socialist or communist organizations because their leadership was white. Hamilton H. Beck, "Censoring Your Ally: W.E.B. Du Bois in the German Democratic Republic," in *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, eds. David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 213.

²³⁷ Beck, "Censoring Your Ally," 213.

²³⁸ Beck, "Censoring Your Ally," 213.

The archives clearly show East German academics' avid interest in Du Bois and his writings. In a letter dated 19 December 1958, a professor from Halle, Arno Lehmann, wrote to Du Bois, congratulating him on his honorary degree and relaying his praise for the African American's well-known book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Lehmann, however, was not the only one in the family who enjoyed Du Bois' work; his son was completing his PhD thesis on the topics covered in the book, and the two were anxiously awaiting the publication of his next work, *The Dark Flame*.²³⁹ Two years later in 1960, Humboldt University invited Du Bois to attend the university's 150th anniversary celebration. Unfortunately, Du Bois responded that he would be unable to attend, "on account of my age and on account of the attitude of my government."²⁴⁰

Also in 1960, Seven Seas Publishers was under contract to publish the *Du Bois Reader*, which would include extracts personally chosen by Du Bois from *Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP that he had cofounded in 1910.²⁴¹ A year later, in March 1961, Du Bois was asked to contribute to a university conference, this time at Karl Marx University in Leipzig, on the topic of the "Problems of Neo-Colonialism." In a letter to Du Bois the rector of the university, Dr. Georg Mayer, wrote that "Support for this struggle is regarded by Karl Marx University as one of its foremost duties. Because

²³⁹ Dean Professor Dr. Arno Lehmann to Du Bois, 19 December 1958, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 73, Frame 244, 1958L.

²⁴⁰ Du Bois to Professor Doctor Kurt Schroeder, 14 March 1960, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 74, Frame 356 1960H. Du Bois made a typo in his letter and addressed the letter to "Berlin, West Germany," which resulted in a response from Humboldt University informing him that the school was situated in East Germany, suggesting that perhaps another reason why he was not attending the anniversary was because he thought the school was in West Germany. Du Bois curtly replied: "Of course I know the fundamental difference between East and West Germany. The address 'West Germany' was simply a typographical error." Both letters between Professor Dr. Nathan and Du Bois, 11 April 1960 and 12 May 1960, respectively, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 74, Frame 357 1960H. It is not clear exactly what Du Bois meant by the "attitude of my government," especially since he made several other trips elsewhere in 1960. This comment may have been simply a polite way of declining the invitation.

²⁴¹ Du Bois to Mrs. Gertrude Heym, 15 January 1960, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 74, Frame 781 1960S.

of the international character of the conference and of the importance of what is to be discussed there, I should be glad if you would care to send your comments....”²⁴² The University was clearly attempting to position itself politically and ideologically through supporting anticolonialism, and Du Bois was an obvious contact with which the school sought to link itself. This type of linkage would also be used by the SED in later years with other African Americans who more adequately subscribed to similar political ideologies.

As these examples show, Du Bois appealed to an enthusiastic stratum of East German intellectual society, as well as one that was quite aware of the value of working together with the aging activist, even if only to use his name and his words. It is quite evident from the letters sent to Du Bois that these intellectuals were certainly hungry for his work, but this likely owed less to his position as an African American activist than to his status as an internationally respected intellectual. East German academics and intellectuals were generally isolated from emerging scholarship in the West; through Du Bois’ work (and that of other left-leaning Westerners) East German intellectuals were able to consume Western work without incurring the wrath of the SED. An expression of familiarity with Du Bois’ work also extended to these scholars a legitimacy of sorts internationally, by referencing the work of a major Western thinker.

These individuals, certainly, would have read the German translation of Du Bois’ speech at Humboldt University, and likely would have read it no matter what journal it appeared in, meaning that the so-called censorship of Du Bois really had little impact. It is also important to note that Du Bois was not censored completely, but rather that his

²⁴² Professor Dr. Georg Mayer to Du Bois, 9 March 1961, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 75, Frame 434 1961M.

speech was published in a journal with a smaller readership, one that likely would have had the ability to understand the nuances in his arguments and what deviated from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. The effort seems to have been focused more on keeping his statements from reaching a broader spectrum of the East German public, rather than striking them from the record entirely, though this effort was unnecessary on a logistical level. This does, though, explain the SED's delayed efforts to bring Du Bois into East Germany's pro-African American rhetoric: he became a part of the SED's African American discourse in later years, especially after his death, when the SED could mold an image of him that would not be contradicted by new statements from the African American intellectual.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout much of the 1950s, the notion of a connection between East Germany and the African American civil rights movement was one that largely existed within the minds of the East German elite. Indeed, the average East German was exposed to information about the movement. However, most of the interactions between East Germans and African Americans during the 1950s lacked the spark needed to extend the relationship beyond the theorization of the East German elite. Though the six African American military deserters may have remained in East Germany, they were quite isolated from the rest of East German society, largely because of their skin color but also because of difficulties with the German language and SED fears that the men might be spies. Although Aubrey Pankey came to East Germany as an asylum seeker and spoke approvingly of East German democracy, his vocal stand against racism—including East

German racism—ran the risk of “outing” the existence of something that was expressly forbidden in the state, going against rhetoric that comprised an important piece of East Germany’s foundational blocks.

While W.E.B. Du Bois and his affection for East Germany, built upon a nearly-lifelong appreciation of Germany and German culture, had the potential to make real an East German relationship with Black America, he failed to be the necessary spark. His take on socialist and communist ideology was at odds with the orthodox East German ideology, creating concerns among East German officials about spreading his words and offering an unapproved interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. While the figure of Du Bois would certainly be used in East German propaganda in later years, for the time-being, officials preferred to limit the spread of his particular stance on socialism. Yet, Du Bois remained a darling of the East German intellectual and academic community, largely maintaining a relationship with East Germany through those who devoured his works and begged for access to his words. As we will see in the next chapter, a Supreme Court ruling in the US would create a situation in which an alliance that had been worked out theoretically would finally become a reality.

Chapter Four: Bridge over the Ocean
**The Growth of the African American-East German Friendship,
1960-1975**

“[Paul Robeson] may indeed be the spark that moved hundreds of thousands of East Germans to send letters and greetings to Angela Davis and countless petitions and cards demanding freedom for political prisoners...”
--The Afro-American, 22 May 1971

For much of the 1950s, an alliance between East Germany and Black America largely remained abstract, though the dam began to break in 1960 with a visit by Paul Robeson. It is not clear whether East German officials fully realized the implications of crafting a relationship with Robeson, beyond the immediate gains propaganda would bring. Yet, in retrospect, Robeson’s visit in 1960 was a turning point for the alliance. What had largely existed in the minds of the East German elite was finally acted out, and blacks in the US began to show an interest in the GDR. By the 1970s, the SED understood exactly what it stood to gain as East Germans carried out the “Free Angela Davis” solidarity movement, in the aftermath of her arrest for her alleged role in a courthouse shooting. Where Robeson’s visit made the relationship real, Davis’ solidarity movement confirmed for Black Americans the GDR’s commitment to the freedom struggle, while legitimating for the SED its own strength.

The chapter that follows will trace the path to this first Robeson visit and reflect on the new friendship that formed between Black America and East Germany, examining who was involved in this relationship, and the ways in which both sides expressed their participation. With the Angela Davis solidarity movement in the early 1970s, the relationship between Black America and East Germany reached its peak, and this chapter will explore the development and significance of the solidarity demonstrations. The example of Oliver Harrington, which closes out the chapter, illustrates that despite the

growth of the relationship, little had actually changed since the 1950s for African Americans who resided in the GDR.

Paul Robeson in the GDR

Robeson's role in giving this friendship a breath of life relied on the fact that he possessed several attributes that the other African Americans discussed in the previous chapter did not. First, Robeson was a world-recognized singer and actor, and had been quite active performing in Europe prior to World War II. When news of a Robeson visit spread, his non-political popularity undoubtedly played a role in drawing East Germans out into the streets and to the various events he headlined. Second, Robeson's politics made him a key contender for "friend" of the GDR from the SED's point of view. Third, his views were easily accessible through speeches and performances, rather than academic works and lectures. Fourth, the fact that Robeson had a relatively strong popular and leftist international following meant that East German propaganda featuring the African American had the potential to travel far.

Important too was the fact that there were members of the elite who already knew Robeson, having become friends with the American while in exile during the Hitler years. These friends would ultimately be a driving reason behind convincing Robeson to visit the state, leading to a relationship that would last the remainder of the African American activist's life. As the remainder of this section will show, the SED did not hesitate to exploit the public's interest in Robeson with the hopes of transferring his popularity onto the Party. Robeson would not only benefit the SED at home, officials believed, but also internationally, as spinning a Robeson visit just right could contribute

to the GDR's drive for legitimacy abroad.²⁴³ These are key points, because at the same time that the SED was in the midst of arranging Robeson's visit, East Germans were fleeing the country in amazing numbers.²⁴⁴ The government desperately needed a way to appeal to its citizens, while also painting an image of a jubilant East German citizenry to trump reports of the GDR population drain.²⁴⁵

To understand the friendship that developed between East Germany and Robeson, it is necessary to briefly return to the early 1950s. In 1950, Robeson attempted to renew his passport, a necessity in order for him to travel abroad and fulfill performance contracts. Upon receiving his application, the US State Department demanded that Robeson, in an affidavit, declare that his loyalty lay with the US government and not the Communist Party, of which he was a reputed member.²⁴⁶ Robeson refused to do so, and was accordingly denied his passport. He filed a lawsuit in federal court, but at that time the court agreed with the State Department and upheld its decision. Though Robeson may have been one of the more famous victims of such a policy, his experience was by

²⁴³ Jiri Valenta and Shannon Butler, "East German Security Policies in Africa," in *Eastern Europe and the Third World: East vs. South*, ed. Michael Radu (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), 152. Valenta and Butler make this argument in reference to prestige gained from East Germany's involvement in Africa, but the same holds true for any prestige to be gained from a relationship with Robeson and the African American civil rights movement.

²⁴⁴ From 1949 to August 1961, East Germany lost in the neighborhood of three million citizens, which was roughly sixteen percent of the population. Many of these people had been educated professionals, farmers, and workers. In 1961, the rate of East Germans fleeing began to increase rapidly, with many of those leaving under the age of twenty-five. In light of these staggering statistics, East Berlin received permission from the Soviet Union to "draw a line, literally, separating the two sides once and for all." Judt, *Postwar*, 250, 252.

²⁴⁵ This is not meant to imply that the Robeson visit alone was supposed to solve East Germany's retention problem, but rather that the visit was one of many approaches taken by the SED to do so.

²⁴⁶ The proclamation of loyalty to the American government from Robeson was deemed necessary because he had long made his friendship with and affinity for the Soviet Union quite clear. He was also well-known for incorporating his politics and views about black rights into his performances, and rarely held back during public speaking engagements. When he performed or spoke internationally, some were of the mind that Robeson was airing his country's dirty laundry, something normally unacceptable but considered even more disturbing in the atmosphere of the Cold War. If Robeson was unwilling to declare his loyalty to the US government, then he would be unable to travel, thereby ensuring that his voice would not add to the anti-American rhetoric and propaganda abroad.

no means a rarity. In earlier years, this method had occasionally been used against dissenting Americans, but in the 1950s, it was increasingly used to deny presumed communists the ability to travel.²⁴⁷ When news of Robeson's struggle to reacquire his passport broke, East Germany proudly offered Robeson support through its international solidarity efforts.²⁴⁸

East Germans acknowledged what many viewed as Robeson's effective imprisonment within the borders of the US through letters written to the entertainer.²⁴⁹ In 1955, during the Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students for Freedom and Friendship in Warsaw, Prague, the East German delegation composed a letter to Robeson, referring to the State Department's "incomprehensible position," that had provoked in them "displeasure...anger...and...protest."²⁵⁰ East German newspapers kept their readers apprised of Robeson's legal situation in the US, and informed them of various protest efforts that took place internationally. In December 1956, the *Berliner Zeitung* published an article entitled "Freedom for Paul Robeson" that informed its readers of a conference being held by the English Paul Robeson Committee to demonstrate against Robeson's imprisonment and the negative effect that this had had on the performance of his art and his work against anti-black racism. The paper informed readers that a letter had been sent to the conference, written jointly by a number of East German cultural institutions that

²⁴⁷ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 388–389.

²⁴⁸ East Germany was not alone in its solidarity efforts, with the Soviet Union, England, India, and China, among others, publicly expressing support for Robeson.

²⁴⁹ It is important to note that, in this case, the SED's solidarity initially stemmed from the fact that Robeson had been denied his passport on the grounds that he was believed to be a communist. It was later that references to the civil rights movement were made in relation to the singer and activist.

²⁵⁰ Deutschen Delegation zu den V. Weltfestspielen der Jugend und Studenten für Frieden und Freundschaft to Paul Robeson, 14.8.1955, Paul Robeson Papers, Paul Robeson/Itineraries/Organizations, Box 39, "Organizations; World Youth Festival," Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (hereafter MSRC), Manuscript Division, Howard University.

expressed their support for Robeson and spoke of what an honor it would be to greet him in Berlin someday.²⁵¹

In another show of solidarity, in 1958 *Deutscher Fernsehfunk* ([East] German Television Broadcasting) commissioned a film by Robeson, with writer G.F. Alexan driving the project from East Berlin.²⁵² The film was a recording of a performance by Robeson, which allowed him to perform “internationally” despite his travel restrictions. The request for this film came just a year after Robeson had famously performed a concert for listeners at London’s St. Pancras Town Hall over a telephone connection from New York City, organized by the English Paul Robeson Committee. Robeson and director Earl Robinson created the film, which was called “Bridge Over the Ocean,” (*Brücke über den Ozean*), and in this forty minute film Robeson and Robinson addressed East Germans directly and Robeson performed songs.²⁵³

As Robeson’s wife Eslanda later explained in a letter to friends, Robeson and Robinson received “money by cable, to cover the cost of a film to be made immediately...and to be sent at once for use on television in East Germany.” The film was completed within one week, and Eslanda was quite impressed with the quality of the work in the film. She believed that “Paul has never looked better, nor sung better, and the widescreen stuff is just made for him. Earl is awfully good, too, and together they are excellent....It is beautiful technically, too, and was a labor of love by the best technicians

²⁵¹ “Freiheit für Paul Robeson,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 2 December 1956, clipping located in PRA 9.5/3.153 mi 4 k.

²⁵² Günter Jordan, “Bridges over Rivers, Borders and Oceans: Paul Robeson and Joris Ivens,” *European Foundation Joris Ivens* (2002), 18

²⁵³ Sindermann to Büro des Politbüros Genossen Schön, 15 January 1958, Barch-SAPMO DY30/ IV 2/2.01/67, 17, SAPMO.

in the field.”²⁵⁴ The intention was to present the film in East Germany on 9 April 1958, during the state’s celebrations of Robeson’s sixtieth birthday. The film was shown not only in the GDR, but copies were also lent to peace committees in Austria, Britain, Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, Ghana, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, and Switzerland.²⁵⁵

Accompanying the film and the birthday celebration, East Germans sent letters and greetings to Robeson wishing him a happy birthday and declaring their enjoyment of his music. Some of the letters came from students (one telling Robeson that, “I am amazed that you, at sixty years old, can sing so well”²⁵⁶), and appear to have been part of a class assignment, while other letters came from private citizens seemingly of their own initiative.²⁵⁷ In the American media, this celebration of Robeson was, unsurprisingly, interpreted negatively for the performer and activist. In *Variety*, one reporter wrote: “At a time when his American manager is trying to reestablish Paul Robeson as a U.S. boxoffice [sic] attraction, the kind of attention he is receiving around the world from Communist ‘befrienders’ may not help his professional comeback. The Communists are perhaps, in terms of their own propaganda advantage, being quite clever. That the word

²⁵⁴ Eslanda Robeson to Peggy and Cedric [presumably Peggy Middleton and Cedric Belfrage], 5 February 1958, PRA 7.2/77.

²⁵⁵ Koll. Pohl, Finanzabteilung, to Koll. Rutsch, Filmredaktion, 22 April 1958, BArch DC 1/5077, 270, BArch-Berlin. For examples of the details of the film’s lending agreements see: “Contract between Deutsches Paul-Robeson-Komitee and Comité Roumain Paix,” 13 March 1958; “Vertrag zwischen dem Deutschen Paul-Robeson-Komitee und dem Friedenskomitee, Prag (CSR),” 18 March 1958; “Vertrag zwischen dem Deutschen Paul-Robeson-Komitee und Herrn Hans-Jörg Hofer—Kultur und Volk--, Basel (Schweiz),” 23 March 1958; “Contract between Deutsches Paul-Robeson-Komitee and Comité Paix Bulgare, Sofia,” 23 March 1958; “Vertrag zwischen dem Deutschen Paul-Robeson-Komitee und dem Österreichischen Friedensrat, Wien,” 24 March 1958, all located at BArch DC 1/5077, 277, 278, 274, 275, 281 respectively, BArch-Berlin.

²⁵⁶ Letter from “einem Berliner Schüler,” Adlershof, 14 April 1958, Paul Robeson Papers, Correspondence—Fan Mail, Foreign Countries, Box 10, Fan Mail—other countries, MSRC, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

²⁵⁷ For a sampling of the letters sent to Robeson, see: Paul Robeson Papers, Correspondence—Fan Mail, Foreign Countries, Box 10, Fan Mail—other countries, MSRC, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

was out of Robeson's recent 60th birthday to use the incident to embarrass the Yanks appears clear."²⁵⁸ It would seem that this propaganda effort was indeed successful, if this reporter's words were representative of other Westerner's views.

Meanwhile in the US, in a judgment that would benefit Robeson, the Supreme Court handed down decisions in June 1958 on cases brought forward by Rockwell Kent and Walter Briehl, Americans who had also had their passports revoked. The Court stated that the Secretary of State had no ability to deny a citizen his or her passport simply because of their political beliefs. The decision went on to state that the Passport Division could not demand of applicants that they sign oaths of loyalty to the American government in exchange for their traveling document.²⁵⁹ Thus, with this ruling, Robeson's passport was returned and he was again allowed to travel internationally. In East Germany, officials painted a self-satisfied picture in which their solidarity actions played an important role in obtaining Robeson's passport. "Paul Robeson's courageous stand as well as world-wide pressure of democratic opinion to 'let Paul Robeson sing'... [have] had its telling effects....Indeed a great victory for the arts and international friendship... [has] been won."²⁶⁰ Not long after Robeson received his passport, East Germany began in earnest its efforts to arrange for Robeson to visit the country. Foremost among these efforts was G.F. Alexan, who was intent on Robeson attending a festival to be held in July 1958.

Alexan reached out to anyone and everyone who was in some way associated with the Robesons, who were by then residing in London. He wrote a series of letters to

²⁵⁸ "Robeson: Boxoffice vs. Politics," *Variety*, 23 April 1958, Miscellany, clipping located in PRA 9.5/1.140.

²⁵⁹ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 463.

²⁶⁰ Friedensrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, *Days with Paul Robeson* (Berlin: Deutscher Friedensrat, 1961), 15.

the Robesons' acquaintances, which highlight not only the less-than-altruistic nature of East Germany's international solidarity, but also the desperation evident in securing a visit from the American entertainer. In Alexan's letter to John Williamson, of the English Paul Robeson Committee, he wrote that:

I am confident that you could convince him that he should not say no to the hundreds of thousands of people in Berlin. They would be extremely happy to see and hear him in person and to show him how they love and admire him. They have really actively participated in our great campaign on his behalf and I think Paul owes it to them.²⁶¹

Here, Alexan presents an appearance by Robeson in East Berlin as something owed to the people of East Germany, for their continued support throughout the 1950s. While the GDR's international solidarity was painted as simply the provision of assistance to those who needed it, clearly something was expected in return.

In a letter to Peggy Middleton, another member of the English Paul Robeson Committee, Alexan took on a slightly more aggressive tone, writing: "I am confident that you will this time again do your best to help us in convincing Paul that he really should not disappoint our people, who belong certainly to the good people whom he might wish as a public."²⁶² Here, Alexan makes a reference to the creation of a public for Robeson; given the troubles Robeson had had with his passport, his career had taken a steep dive as he was unable to perform as he once had. Upon receiving his passport, it was clear that Robeson would need to rebuild a fan base that had perhaps forgotten about him and/or gotten older over the course of nearly a decade. As Alexan suggested, the East German

²⁶¹ G.F. Alexan to John Williamson, 6 July 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

²⁶² G.F. Alexan to Peggy Middleton, 6 July 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

people could become a part of this public.²⁶³ Not only was something expected in return for the solidarity that had been offered in the past, but it was also implied that any future demonstrations of solidarity could also be held back unless Robeson complied.

In a letter to Robeson himself, Alexan returned to his previous approach—Robeson's presence was something owed to the East German people for their solidarity—writing:

It is certainly no exaggeration to say that our whole population has taken part actively in the campaign of our committee on your behalf. It goes without saying that the whole population of Berlin would be extremely happy to have the opportunity to see and hear you and to show you how they love and admire you. So please, dear Paul Robeson, don't say no to these many hundreds of thousands of people. They are good folks and they really deserve your favor.²⁶⁴

In an example of East Germany's sense of importance and contribution to the black freedom struggle, Alexan suggests that Robeson really had East Germans to thank for his freedom, even though it seems unlikely that the Supreme Court took into consideration what people in East Germany had to say regarding Robeson's passport. Regardless, this guilt-trip was ultimately unsuccessful in convincing Robeson to visit.²⁶⁵ However, in a

²⁶³ During the years that Robeson had been without his passport, he performed little as a result of being blacklisted. After receiving his passport, Robeson left for London, and spent the next few years performing and touring Europe. Robeson visited the Soviet Union in the fall of 1958, one of several trips he would make before returning to the US in 1963, where he was fêted, "housed...in the finest of accommodations," and given "access to the most senior of Soviet officials." He met with black expatriates and made frequent speeches that were broadcast in the USSR and abroad, the Soviets' efforts to give Robeson the stage he had been deprived of in the US. Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 150.

²⁶⁴ G.F. Alexan to Paul Robeson, 7 July 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin. What kind of role the average East German played in solidarity actions will be discussed later in this chapter.

²⁶⁵ In September of 1958, Peggy Middleton met with Phyllis Rosner, then the East Berlin correspondent for the English *Daily Mail*. Middleton told Rosner that the Robesons were becoming quite weary of the constant visitors trying to convince them to visit East Berlin. They were especially exasperated with Alexan, and wanted nothing to do with him, making it clear that the prospect of Paul's visit was in danger if Alexan continued to contact them. Rosner also learned that Eslanda, who was in charge of coordinating her husband's schedule, had a fear of Germans that dated back to a frightening experience in Dusseldorf in 1938 while the Nazis were in power. Letter to Neukranz, Betr.: Paul Robeson, 24 September 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin. In a letter from Alexan to a comrade in the Ministry of Culture, Alexan was

personal conversation between Robeson and an East German friend, Franz Loeser, Robeson revealed that he would be interested in visiting the GDR in late August or early September, staying for four to six days.²⁶⁶ In this case, it appears that it was Loeser's close friendship with Robeson, rather than a sense of obligation, that influenced Robeson's decision to visit the socialist state.

In the meantime, word of a possible visit spread, and various East German youth and work groups jockeyed for an opportunity to meet the African American legend. The *Kinderradio DDR* (Children's Radio of the GDR) contacted the Ministry of Culture and declared that if they could have Robeson say a few words about the "better America" or even sing some children's songs over the radio, it would be incredibly valuable in the state's efforts to teach children the value of international solidarity.²⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the *Klubhaus der Gewerkschaften Halle* (Halle Union Clubhouse) of the FDGB contacted Alexan, maintaining that if they were given the chance to see Robeson perform, the workers would surely respond with enthusiasm, as so many of them wished to attend a meeting or event headlined by the celebrity.²⁶⁸ In these and other letters, the writers

indignant about the Robesons' claims of being hassled. He suggested that some of this annoyance with him probably had something to do with the English Paul Robeson Committee (to which Middleton belonged), which was, according to Alexan, quite jealous of the GDR's efforts to help Robeson. G.F. Alexan to Erich Wendt, 14 Oct. 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

²⁶⁶ Albert Norden to Alfred Kurella, 17 July 1958, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105, 79, SAPMO. Franz Loeser is occasionally noted in sources by the anglicized version of his first name, Frank. Loeser had long participated in pro-Robeson work, having been involved in the "Let Paul Robeson sing" movement in England, when Robeson's passport had been revoked by the US government. He eventually settled in East Germany in 1956, taking a teaching position at Humboldt University as a Professor of Philosophy. Loeser defected to the West 27 years later, in 1983. Rudolf Muhs, "Jews of German Background in British Politics," in *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, eds. Werner E. Mosse, Julius Carlebach, Gerhard Hirschfeld, Aubrey Newman, Arnold Paucker, and Peter Pulzer, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1991), 189. Loeser's wife Diana was a good friend of Robeson's wife Eslanda.

²⁶⁷ Otto Bark, Leiter des Kinderradio DDR, to Ministerium für Kultur, 28 July 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

²⁶⁸ Bierbaum, Klubleitung, Klubhaus der Gewerkschaften Halle (Saale) to GFA Alexa [sic], 1 August 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

expressed their desire to meet Robeson or attend an event of his, while cloaking their interest in key buzzwords to which the SED was sure to respond. These letters become even more significant when one considers how they played off of the state's obvious efforts to acquire legitimacy, by promising further involvement in the state's solidarity campaigns. Ultimately, though, Robeson's potential trip to East Berlin was canceled when officials received news that Robeson had fallen ill during a trip to Moscow.²⁶⁹

After the cancellation of Robeson's impending visit, the SED continued to pursue the entertainer, despite difficulties with scheduling. During a trip Robeson's wife Eslanda (Essie) made to East Germany in 1959, she and Deputy Minister of Culture Hans Pischner discussed the possibility of the couple attending a celebration, the *Berliner Festtage*, in October 1960. According to an East German report, Eslanda stated that she was unable to foresee any difficulties in fitting the visit into her husband's schedule. However, she cautioned, Paul was in poor health, something that needed to be taken into consideration when planning their visit.²⁷⁰ Surely to the delight of the SED, however, Robeson traveled to East Germany prior to the *Berliner Festtage* in order to participate in the *Neues Deutschland* Press Festival, in June 1960.²⁷¹ His son later characterized this visit as a "defiant political statement," noting that the timing was "especially provocative, since Berlin was arguably the most sensitive European flashpoint in East-West

²⁶⁹ Kundermann to Stellvertretenden Minister für Kultur der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Genossen Wendt, 19 August 1958, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin. In many of the attempts to bring Robeson to the GDR, the documents show that he was often either in London or Moscow, and it is clear that a priority had been placed on his engagements in both cities.

²⁷⁰ Aktenvermerk from Nicke, Abt. Kult. Beziehungen, Sektor III, 16 September 1959, BArch DR 1/19183, BArch-Berlin.

²⁷¹ *Neues Deutschland* was the official newspaper of the SED.

relations.”²⁷²

Throughout the rest of the summer, the SED worked on Robeson’s itinerary for his October visit, carefully accounting for nearly every moment Robeson would spend in the GDR. When October finally came, Robeson was a propagandist’s dream, saying and doing all of the “right” things, creating numerous publicity opportunities for the SED.²⁷³ During a speech given at Humboldt University, Robeson thanked the audience for making it possible for him to travel to their country, acknowledging the East Germans’ solidarity during the eight years that he had struggled to obtain his passport. Speaking of the freedom struggles in which the world’s blacks were engaged, Robeson proclaimed that without the support of the East Germans and other socialist states, blacks would be unable to carry on their fight for freedom. Then, looking out over the audience, he remarked how proud he was to see his African “brothers” sitting in the crowd, and thanked East Germany for “giving them the opportunity to study,” and to return to their native countries and build a life there.²⁷⁴ He also spoke out against imperialism, warning that the “gentlemen in Wall Street [the US], the gentlemen in various lands of imperialism, including those just across the way [West Germany], might as well realize.... [that] Africa will not be theirs to cut up and to divide.”²⁷⁵ He later promised to tell others of what he had experienced in East Germany—a warm-hearted and humanist

²⁷² Paul Robeson, Jr, *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 305. Robeson’s biographer has noted that this trip to East Germany “was a considerable gesture, with the GDR unrecognized in the West and thought to be near collapse (soon after, the Berlin Wall went up).” Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 483–484.

²⁷³ Some of Robeson’s statements, quoted below, are so on-point with the SED’s own propaganda that one wonders whether his statements were influenced or suggested by the SED beforehand. Documents do not clarify this point, unfortunately.

²⁷⁴ Blatt 1 Humboldt Universität ab Blatt 2 Akademie, BArch DZ 9/39, BArch-Berlin.

²⁷⁵ Sporthalle Band I, BArch DZ 9/1186, BArch-Berlin.

Germany, where “[a]ll men were brothers.”²⁷⁶

While in East Berlin, following in the footsteps of W.E.B. Du Bois, Robeson was given an honorary degree from Humboldt University, as well as the German Peace Medal from the Peace Council. In another ceremony, Robeson received the Great Star of People’s Friendship (*Großer Stern der Völkerfreundschaft*), which noted his commitment to anti-imperialism:

“In honouring you, dear Paul Robeson, we reaffirm our solidarity with those who suffered under colonial oppression in the past and those who are still compelled to live in colonial bondage today. Like you, we shall not rest until freedom and human dignity are guaranteed to all peoples.”²⁷⁷

In addition, Robeson formally became a corresponding member of the German Academy of Arts, an honor that had originally been extended in 1956 while he was still “imprisoned” in the US. The FDJ also invited the entertainer to a performance of folk music and dances presented in his honor, with an audience that included Walter Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl, both men leading members of the SED.²⁷⁸

A review of East German newspapers during and after Robeson’s stay reveals numerous articles dedicated to intricately detailing Robeson’s entire visit, providing “evidence” of East Germany’s tolerant, open, and understanding nature, which was posited to be in stark contrast to their western neighbor. As Mark Landsman has noted, *Neues Deutschland*, “cited the appearance of...the American singer Paul Robeson...as ‘the most obvious symbol of the world-openness of our capital.’ Another observer might have looked elsewhere for openness, perhaps to the as yet unsealed border over which more and more East Germans were crossing with no intention of returning, at least not

²⁷⁶ Blatt 1 Humboldt Universität ab Blatt 2 Akademie, BArch DZ 9/39, BArch-Berlin.

²⁷⁷ Quoted in Friedensrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, *Days with Paul Robeson*, 22.

²⁷⁸ Friedensrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, *Days with Paul Robeson*, 20–21.

anytime soon.”²⁷⁹ Yet, it was precisely for this reason that Robeson’s visit was presented in such a manner; at the very least, the SED could present the visit internationally as a unifying moment for East Germans, rallying around their “shared” values of racial tolerance and international solidarity. It surely presented a much more palatable image than reports of East Germans leaving for the West in droves.

Robeson vowed many times throughout his trip to share with the world this image of racial tolerance, and it is little surprise that the SED responded with excitement to those promises. Robeson stated that he was keen to discuss East Germany in the African American press, leading an East German report to note the potential for these articles to clarify for the African American community the role East Germany (claimed that it) played in the struggle for their freedom. There was a clear belief among the SED that if African Americans believed that East Germany wanted to help them and could be an ally in the black freedom movement, then perhaps when black artists, journalists, and the like were traveling in Western Europe, they would consider making a trip to the GDR as well. The report also expressed the hope that the articles in the black press could eventually lead to a situation wherein African American “ambassadors” of sorts would be directly invited to East Germany.²⁸⁰ The notion of an entrée into the African American community through the black press should not be underestimated. Though it would ultimately do little to convert the unconvinced, the belief that the SED finally had a means of reaching the African American public went a long way in turning what had long been thought of as a theoretical and abstract alliance into a relationship whose

²⁷⁹ Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 206.

²⁸⁰ “Bericht über den Aufenthalt Paul Robesons in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik in der Zeit vom 4.-8. Okt. 1960,” BArch DZ 9/1186, BArch-Berlin.

propagation was firmly within the SED's reach.

Robeson's desire to share his news of his visit with the world was not the only way this newly established friendship supported the SED. Sara Lennox has argued that because Robeson "embraced and disseminated the beliefs that the GDR avowed," he confirmed "their own self-understanding...."²⁸¹ For example, during a press conference in East Germany, Robeson was asked whether he had come across any racial discrimination during his travels throughout East Germany and other socialist states. Robeson responded that he had been lucky to visit many socialist states, and "everywhere I have never found any kind or form of race discrimination." He also went on to state that he knew that "the very basis of your society could not lead under any circumstances to such phenomena." He did, however, go on to praise the "brave fighters in West Germany" who stood against racial discrimination. While he praised these West Germans, he did note that they were standing up to racism "despite the greatest difficulties," implying that these "brave fighters" faced an uphill battle in their struggle against race discrimination.²⁸² Placed next to his formulation of an East German society in which fighting racism was natural, not something one must struggle to do, the praise for the West German fighters nicely "confirmed" East Germany's own view of itself as anti-racist, thereby legitimating an element of the SED's justifying myth.

Robeson's 1960 visit certainly sparked a fire under the relationship with Black America that East German elites had only ever discussed in theory. While his celebrity appeal was important, it was more than this attraction that contributed to pushing the friendship forward. Though East Germans had long been involved in international

²⁸¹ Lennox, "Reading Transnationally," 125.

²⁸² Philip S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1978), 467.

solidarity efforts more generally—as the next section will show, this involvement was often compulsory—the mental image of East Germans at desks writing protest letters lacks much of the dynamism conveyed by actual photos of throngs of East Germans packed into an auditorium listening to a “brother” or “sister” in solidarity speak. Therefore, while Robeson’s celebrity may have made attending these solidarity rallies that much more exciting, it was his physical presence that allowed the SED figuratively and literally to create an image of mass East German support for the civil rights movement in a way it had until then been unable to do. This illustration of solidarity and support, coupled with Robeson’s own portrayal of the East German state, made some African Americans think twice about the communist Germany, as the remainder of the chapter will show.

The “Who” of the Relationship

Once the relationship began to gather some steam, just who was involved in it? As the last chapter has shown, East Germany’s socialist ideology dictated that only African Americans who accepted a socialist, specifically Marxist-Leninist, worldview were deemed acceptable by East German officials. Without these ideological beliefs—or at least a worldview that did not stand in competition with the SED’s own understanding of the world—there was little chance of being invited or permitted entry to the state.²⁸³ Even without that “requirement,” given the importance of ideology during the Cold War, it is not surprising that the majority of the African Americans interested in a relationship

²⁸³ The SED made an exception at least once when it allowed several African American newspaper editors and reporters to visit the state in the hopes of changing their minds about East Germany, with an eye to the positive publicity such a change in opinion could garner the GDR, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

with East Germany were communists, socialists, or adherents of the political far-left.²⁸⁴

Though many African American visitors did return home to speak of their positive experience in the GDR, their audience was quite often other like-minded Black Americans. Therefore, it was quite common to see a cycle in which an African American would visit, enjoy East Germany, return home to speak/write about their thoughts on the trip, only to convince other leftists to visit or support the state. While more East German admirers were always welcome, these were not people with any great deal of influence outside of their leftist circles. Meanwhile, African Americans—and of course, Americans in general—without communist inclinations often knew very little about the GDR aside from its relationship with the Soviet Union and its Nazi past, the latter a fact of which East German officials were painfully aware. This same group was unlikely to be swayed by anything Black Americans returning from East Germany would have to say, making for a message that never would travel very far.

While African American involvement in the alliance with East Germany was obviously voluntary, the same cannot be said for East German citizens. Even though all East Germans in theory participated in the friendship, there were different levels of participation. East German involvement can be divided into four groupings: intellectuals and elites, dutiful attendees, celebrity fans, and willing anti-racists. As the last chapter showed, intellectuals and elites within East Germany had long been interested in a relationship with Black America. They were responsible for coordinating the majority of the solidarity actions, while the dutiful attendees, celebrity fans, and willing anti-racists

²⁸⁴ Regardless of this, the SED still referred to their African American friends in general terms. While they would note when individuals were communists, they spoke broadly of their support for the civil rights movement, even if they were primarily interested in black radicals. It was a much stronger point to make that the SED supported the civil rights movement rather than the leftists of the movement.

generally made up the “face” of solidarity. As the “face” of solidarity, these East Germans did things like attend events, sign petitions, and send letters of support to activists and letters of protest to the American government, which the Party transformed into propaganda for international use, depicting these fans as devotees of East Germany’s socialist ideology.

The celebrity fans comprised a portion of those who willfully attended the events planned by the SED.²⁸⁵ One finds that people like Robeson, who was to many people around the world not just an activist but also a celebrity, garnered crowds far larger than those who lacked a similar popular appeal. The largest group participating in the relationship, however, was the dutiful attendees, citizens who became involved because it was required of them. Most were indifferent, contributing the bare minimum asked of them. While some SED functionaries could be grouped among the elite in terms of their views on the relationship, others were indifferent at best and anti-black at worst. Though these dutiful attendees were in the majority, it is important to acknowledge that there were also people who actually subscribed to anti-racist beliefs (even when the state itself did not) and unequivocally advocated racial tolerance and equality, though their anti-racist contributions were often complicated by paternalism. As the dutiful attendees characterized much of East German society and the willful anti-racists have often been overlooked, these two groups will be the focus of the remainder of this section.

Much of the East German public’s involvement in the relationship with Black America stemmed from its participation in a series of organizations to which most of

²⁸⁵ Mary Fulbrook has noted that while mass organizations were at times “coercive,” they “were for many people at one time or another enabling, and experienced as a provider of entertainment and facilitator of holidays, hobbies and interest groups.” Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 87.

those employed in the GDR belonged. The organizations were generally considered extensions of East German work life, and in most cases, participation was mandatory. As members of these organizations, citizens were expected to partake in, among other things, solidarity actions, which were “placed within a political context that demanded a political response from participants.”²⁸⁶ Many times, citizens were indifferent to the causes they participated in, viewing their involvement as yet another act expected of them. For example, every month, workers were required to contribute a few marks from their paychecks, which were supposed to go toward “solidarity.” Despite the SED’s claims that East Germans were actively contributing to the state’s solidarity actions, many remained apathetic about their contributions because they knew very little about how the Party actually spent the money. Many speculated that the SED used the money its workers had “donated” for political propaganda instead of solidarity.²⁸⁷

Others were indifferent to the solidarity causes in which they participated because the peoples for whom they “struggled” were closely associated with an ideology and a state they did not support. Regarding East German solidarity with socialist Cuban and Latin American “heroes,” Jennifer Ruth Hosek has argued that “paradoxically, precisely because orthodox socialist heroes embodied the establishment, they were ineffectual in reaching the disaffected; youth critical of the GDR accepted both their nation and their nation’s heroes half-heartedly.”²⁸⁸ This general attitude was not only directed at the “heroes” of the movement, but also toward many blacks (and other foreigners) living in

²⁸⁶ Dorothy Wierling, “Work, Workers, and Politics in the German Democratic Republic,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 50, Labor under Communist Regimes (Fall 1996), 57.

²⁸⁷ Bernd Bröskamp, Gabriele Jaschok, and Andreas Noschak, eds., *Schwarz-Weiße Zeiten: AusländerInnen in Ostdeutschland vor und nach der Wende: Erfahrungen der Vertragsarbeiter aus Mosambik: Interviews—Berichte--Analysen*, (Bremen: Informationszentrum Afrika, 1993), 75.

²⁸⁸ Jennifer Ruth Hosek, *Sun, Sex, and Socialism: Cuba in the German Imaginary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 147.

East Germany. Because it was difficult to migrate across the “Iron Curtain,” East Germans perceived those who made it through “as an exception that had to be approved by the regime.” It was assumed that the immigrants must have been loyal adherents to socialism or communism at home, otherwise the SED would not have approved of their entry to the GDR. Therefore, there “remained largely...a culture of mutual distrust between regime, population and immigrants....”²⁸⁹ When one considers this attitude towards both “heroes” and resident blacks, it is not unreasonable to make the assumption that for some East Germans, African Americans could quickly be stripped of any appeal they might have had, especially since in many cases the close ties to the SED were explicitly laid out in the media.

The one group that ran afoul of the SED, however, was the willing anti-racists, a group that the SED had long called for, but did not truly want. Though that may seem paradoxical, the last thing the ruling party desired was for East German citizens to undertake any spontaneous action from “below,” and as such, the SED made it quite difficult for East Germans to embark upon any of their own solidarity initiatives. Those who actually subscribed to the SED’s rhetoric of fighting for peace and ending fascism, imperialism, and racism came to the same conclusion as those who were generally indifferent—the SED’s proclamations of solidarity were little more than propaganda.

In an oral history study completed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a former-East German woman identified as “Cornelia” shared her own experience, which exemplifies that of the willful anti-racist. One way that East German bureaucratic roadblocks made it

²⁸⁹ Jan C. Behrends and Patrice C. Poutus, “Xenophobia in the Former GDR—Explorations and Explanations from a Historical Perspective,” in *Nationalisms Across the Globe: An Overview of Nationalisms in State-Endowed and Stateless Nations, Volume 1, Europe*, eds. Wojciech J. Burszta, Tomasz Kamusella, and Sebastian Wojciechowski (Poland: Abedik, 2005), 161.

difficult for the average East German to undertake any solidarity actions was by requiring permits, which were expensive to obtain. Raising money through other East Germans was near impossible, Cornelia related, as many people were quite hesitant to contribute any funds in light of the doubts they already had regarding the SED's use of their monthly contributions. Though Cornelia's solidarity action was ultimately successful, when she and her fellow organizers requested an extension for their permit, they were denied. She wisely believed it owed to the fact that they were a group of "private" people doing this work.²⁹⁰ Given the state's disapproval of action planned by the people, anyone who sought to help the African American cause outside of state-sanctioned solidarity actions would have found themselves facing deterrent after deterrent.

Over time it became patently obvious to Cornelia that the SED's claims of solidarity were self-serving, and many of the so-called solidarity actions exploited the vulnerability of the people who were used to propagate images of solidarity and progressiveness.²⁹¹ In one instance, a member of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) had traveled to an East German university to accept a donation from the state. When the program began, instead of immediately introducing the SWAPO delegate, officials introduced the university's rector, the professors in attendance and the official visitors from the SED before they mentioned the African guest. Cornelia detected no sincerity in the words of solidarity that the officials were relaying; it became quite obvious to her that the visitor had simply been used as a

²⁹⁰ Bröskamp, *Schwarz-Weiße Zeiten*, 76-77.

²⁹¹ The SED expressed its support for emerging African states in a variety of ways, as discussed in the introduction. These demonstrations of solidarity included the creation of organizations intended to foster friendship with Africans and "advertise East Germany's interest in Third World problems." The purpose of these efforts to reach out to emerging African states was to express solidarity that would hopefully result in reciprocal support for the East German state. Sodaro, "The GDR and the Third World," 115.

backdrop against which the SED could display its allegedly progressive nature.²⁹²

Such propagandistic presentations many times served to distance East Germans from the solidarity initiatives the SED claimed to undertake, and incidents of this sort proved to Cornelia and others that actual solidarity was a low priority. This also helped to distance East Germans more generally from the Party itself, as each instance of hypocrisy chipped away at what little legitimacy the SED had among its people. Much like the African guest in this example, most African American visitors were used in similar ways. If East Germans believed that the state's solidarity with Black America was a farce, what was there to encourage their real engagement with the group if it would only be met with roadblocks? Interestingly, the very thing meant to draw East Germans closer to the state accomplished quite the opposite.

East German Expressions of Solidarity and Friendship

As the Paul Robeson example at the start of this chapter showed, on the whole, the relationship between East Germany and Black America was the result of the GDR's efforts to reach out to various figures in the African American community. East German elites used a variety of tactics to engage these civil rights activists, ranging from simple invitations to visit the state, to the ego-boosting bestowal of awards and honors, naming schools and streets after African Americans. Most popular, however, were ostentatious shows of solidarity and unity. These approaches were presented as benefiting the African American recipient or recipients of the solidarity action, yet in each case, the benefit also fell squarely on the shoulders of the East German government. The section that follows

²⁹² Bröskamp, *Schwarz-Weiße Zeiten*, 79.

will examine the GDR's efforts to acquire African American friendship in the years following Robeson's "inaugural" visit. These efforts resembled a series of tactics that the SED used to convey its solidarity with Black Africans in the wake of decolonization.

As noted previously, this solidarity with Black Africa fulfilled an important function for the SED, as it was conceived of as a "fundamental part of the GDR's self-definition as the antifascist German state."²⁹³ The SED hoped that the solidarity would result not only in official recognition from the emerging African states, but would suitably impress leaders in other countries, who would then offer their official recognition as well. Another important element of solidarity with Black Africa—which included proclamations of friendship with a decolonizing Black Africa and highly-publicized meetings and awards ceremonies—was the fact that the SED attempted to insert East Germany into an international discussion by connecting its name to much-discussed hotspots in Africa.²⁹⁴ Of course, East Germany was no stranger to international dialogue, but most of it was decidedly negative. By inserting itself into the "good" side of the debates surrounding decolonization and other discussions about Africa, the SED believed that it could improve its reputation and ensure that others would realize what the Party had long claimed—that East Germany was the moral and upstanding Germany.²⁹⁵

The SED's goals were much the same in its solidarity efforts with Black America and the civil rights movement, though the means by which they sought to accomplish these objectives were different, because of an important set of underlying distinctions. In

²⁹³ Loren Kruger, "Seeing through Race: Athol Fugard, (East) Germany, and the Limits of Solidarity," *Modern Philology* 100:4 (May 2003), 620.

²⁹⁴ Kruger, "Seeing through Race," 624.

²⁹⁵ Lennox, "Reading Transnationally," 113.

Africa, the SED often interacted with governments or groups seeking to create governing bodies; the African Americans the SED dealt with did not occupy any comparable positions of power within the American government. East Germany offered financial and military assistance to its African “friends;” to Black America the GDR offered its moral support and voice. This seeming financial and military disparity actually created no problems; African Americans would have had little use for the GDR’s financial assistance in the form of trade agreements, and they were not looking for military assistance either. Rather, they were looking for moral support and statements and demonstrations of solidarity, which the SED was willing to give in heaps. In turn, the SED was not looking for diplomatic recognition or legitimation from Black America in any direct sense.²⁹⁶

A cornerstone of the relationship between African Americans and East Germany was the bestowal of honors and tributes, whether they were prestigious state awards, ceremonies conferring the activists’ names upon brigades, groups, schools, and streets, or rallies and meetings at which the activists’ legacies were celebrated. These celebrations served a number of purposes, not only to honor the activists, but to generate publicity for the SED and to act as anti-Western propaganda by reaffirming East Germany’s proclaimed struggle against fascism and racism, both domestically and internationally. This was achieved by tying the GDR and what it stood for to the legacy, and thus the

²⁹⁶ While the SED delighted in promises from African Americans to speak on behalf of the GDR’s official recognition, they were not in any position to enter into any agreements between their government and the SED. Some of the Africans the SED courted, however, could. While this friendship with Black America was an element of the SED’s drive for legitimacy, its impact was intended to be indirect.

reputation, of the activists, while also neatly underlining East German involvement in the solidarity movements supporting them.²⁹⁷

Before an activist could be honored, those nominating him or her had to provide officials with a justification for doing so. These justifications generally painted the recipient as a “good leftist” and tied their life’s work and principles to values held by the SED. For instance, when Eslanda Robeson was nominated for the Clara Zetkin Medal in 1961, her nominators argued that Robeson had long been a staunch advocate the world over for the preservation of peace.²⁹⁸ They noted that she had spent many years in the US fighting racial discrimination and was against nuclear war. Robeson had also fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War alongside her husband, driving an ambulance and bringing thousands of wounded soldiers to the hospital.²⁹⁹ When Claude Lightfoot was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Rostock in 1973, the honor was justified by his “scientific contributions to the struggle against racist ideology and for

²⁹⁷ Some of these approaches were very significant to African American observers. One reporter, Art Carter, traveled to the GDR as part of a newspaper delegation in 1975 and upon his return wrote that: “A school has been named for Robeson here, and the pupils there know about his career far better than most United States students.” This was, to Carter, an example of the way that the GDR had “adopted numerous American black heroes,” proof that East Germany deserved the praise it had received as “the brightest star in the socialistic firmament....” Carter, “East Germans seek peace, friendship,” *Washington Afro-American*, 9 Aug. 1975.

²⁹⁸ Barbara Ransby, Robeson’s biographer, wrote that, “Essie was especially proud to receive in 1963 Germany’s Clara Zetkin medal for her ‘services in the struggle for peace and human equality.’ Zetkin had been a communist, feminist, and anti-fascist heroine in the 1930s, and the medal was awarded by the German Democratic Republic’s Council of Ministers....During her 1963 trip to accept her award, Essie addressed a large crowd of more than ten thousand East Germans who had assembled to mark the ‘Memorial Day for the Victims of Fascism.’ In her speech, Essie delivered a message to the German people that she had articulated in multiple articles and speeches over the years. She urged her listeners to see a connection between the struggle against fascism in Europe, which was so compelling in their own lives, and Black Americans’ ongoing fight against racial tyranny and terror in the United States.” Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 271-2.

²⁹⁹ “Vorlage an das Sekretariat: Auszeichnung der Frau Eslanda Robeson mit der ‘Clara-Zetkin-Medaille,’” 10 June 1961, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/3A/787, 73, SAPMO.

showing why socialism is necessary for today's world.”³⁰⁰ As with any of the accolades and solidarity offered by the GDR, the East German state also profited, often in the form of propaganda that tightly entwined the values of the East German state with the respect and esteem given to members of the African American civil rights movement.

Organizations within East Germany also used a practice of naming themselves after members of the civil rights movement as a means of conferring this same respect and esteem upon themselves, while seemingly honoring the activist and expressing their solidarity with both the individual and African Americans in general. In 1961, the Robesons received a letter requesting permission for a Leipzig railway work brigade to use Paul's name for their team.³⁰¹ Though the Robesons did not respond immediately, plans were put into place for a celebration in December 1961, in the hopes that the couple would be in touch in the meantime. According to the official plans, present at the celebration would be the brigade, of course, as well as “many Africans.” A Paul Robeson film, detailing an earlier visit to East Germany, would also be shown at this naming ceremony.³⁰² Officials do not elaborate as to why “many Africans” needed to be present at this ceremony, but it is fair to speculate that officials sought to make a not-so-subtle connection between solidarity with Robeson, African Americans, and Black Africa, as well as East Germany's general drive against fascism, racism, and imperialism.

In 1964, yet another East German organization bearing Robeson's name was created—this time, the Paul Robeson Committee—with the goal of building the Paul

³⁰⁰ “An honor for Lightfoot,” *Daily World (World Magazine)*, 19 May 1973, M-9.

³⁰¹ Richard Zänker to Eslanda Robeson, 13 November 1961, BArch DZ 9/1760, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

³⁰² Kurt Hälker to Colin Sweet, 6 December 1961, BArch DZ 9/1760, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

Robeson Archive in East Berlin.³⁰³ Most African American guests visited the Archive, which they often viewed as proof that Robeson was better understood and appreciated in East Germany than he was at home. One of those behind the creation of the Committee and archive was Franz Loeser, the Robesons' old friend. On 26 June 1964, the German Academy of Arts approved the request that it house the archive, and so began work on the project in earnest.³⁰⁴ The Committee appointed Victor Grossman (an American military deserter) as director, and set out to acquire any and every item that related to the Robesons.³⁰⁵

In a long document written by the Committee detailing its plans for the archive, there were a number of reasons given for embarking on the project, one of which was driven by the acknowledgment that blacks in the US knew very little about the GDR. The Committee's members noted that in their experiences and through their own research, it had become clear to them that people of color in the US knew just one thing about Germany: that six million people whom Germans had considered racially inferior had been brutally murdered there. In fact, Eslanda Robeson—one of the archive's very own subjects—had herself once been afraid to travel to the GDR because she held what the Committee referred to as a “prejudice” against Germans.³⁰⁶ Yet, when she visited

³⁰³ Albert Norden to Franz Loeser, 17 January 1964, BArch DZ 9/1858, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

³⁰⁴ Karl Hossinger to Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Gen. Alexander Abusch, 20 August 1964, BArch DC 20/7693, BArch-Berlin.

³⁰⁵ The search also extended to the Robesons themselves. The committee asked that the couple send “in short, everything you wish us to preserve and register,” making it clear that the archive wanted material pertaining to *both* of the Robesons. “We should stress here,” Loeser and Karl Hossinger wrote in a letter to the pair, “that we wish material on both your lives and careers, firstly because, as is known to all your friends, Mrs. Robeson has been of such immense support and help to Mr. Robeson in his work, and secondly, because of Mrs. Robeson's work, in her own right, as journalist, writer and scientist.” Loeser and Hossinger to Paul and Eslanda Robeson, 1 November 1965, PRA 7.4/1. Hossinger was the director of the German Academy of Arts in East Berlin.

³⁰⁶ This likely owed to an experience her husband had in Nazi Germany on 23 December 1934. On their way to Moscow, she and her husband were at a Berlin train station, having stopped in the city for a brief

East Germany, she learned about the state's "true nature." Eventually, she and her husband would come to applaud the state's "greatest achievement," the "abolishment of racism, anti-Semitism and chauvinism."³⁰⁷ The archive's founders understood that East Germany desperately needed to duplicate such reversals in opinion if it hoped to form a friendship with Black Americans that would accomplish anything significant. Therefore, the archive would be a vehicle through which African Americans could learn more about East Germany, namely its allegedly anti-racist character.

Of course, the Committee recognized, one could (and likely would) question why *East Germany*, of all places, should house the Robesons' work and other materials related to the couple. To this, the Committee pointed out that the GDR was actually specially qualified to do so because of personal ties to the family. Importantly, it was also noted, the GDR had a very long experience with and connection to Paul Robeson's struggles. Not surprisingly, the Committee tied the creation of the archive to East Germany's competition with the West, arguing that it was necessary for the GDR to take the initiative of safe-guarding the Robesons' material from the "reactionary powers in the imperialist countries."³⁰⁸ The Committee also noted that the Robesons' work belonged to all of humanity, rather than any one state or people. Lest this seem contradictory, the archive would be established with an "international character" in mind.³⁰⁹ Here, East

visit. When Eslanda left to gather their bags, "two groups of brown-shirted Nazi storm troopers formed a semi-circle" around Robeson. The Nazis began yelling slurs at Robeson, but when Eslanda returned they were able to safely board the train. Robeson is said to have remarked that, "I never understood what fascism was before. I'll fight it wherever I find it from now on." Scott Allen Nollen, *Paul Robeson: Film Pioneer* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 52. When the SED had engaged in efforts to bring Paul Robeson to the GDR in 1958, records made note of this fear, but claimed that it was in Dusseldorf in 1938 that the bad experience (which is not elaborated upon) had occurred. See footnote 265.

³⁰⁷ "Konzeption," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV A 2/2.028/124, 9, SAPMO.

³⁰⁸ "Konzeption," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV A 2/2.028/124, 3, SAPMO.

³⁰⁹ "Konzeption," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV A 2/2.028/124, 6, SAPMO.

Germany's position as guardian—as it commonly depicted itself in this relationship—was a propaganda opportunity to yet again internationally paint the state in a positive light vis-à-vis the FRG and the US.

The archive, though, was not the Committee's only efforts to connect the legacy and legend of Robeson to the East German state, in order to glean a propaganda advantage. The Committee also organized various meetings and celebrations honoring Robeson, and though these events were generally meant to coincide with or mark Robeson's birthday, there was always the intent that they would signify much more than another passing year in Robeson's life. For example, in 1967, the Committee initiated plans to celebrate Robeson's 70th birthday the following year. Yet, according to organizers, the real significance of the event was to demonstrate solidarity with everyone who was "against imperialist reaction and aggression," as well as those struggling for freedom, independence, and peace for all people.³¹⁰ Additionally, the celebration's coordinators wanted to paint a picture of Robeson that portrayed him as a fighter not only for his people, but for all "colonial" peoples, as well as a warrior for "peace and friendship with the Soviet Union and other socialist states."³¹¹ Not just another birthday celebration, these commemorations were meant to signal to foreign observers the high esteem with which the GDR held the black freedom movement, as well as to indicate to East Germans that support for Robeson and the black freedom movement was the equivalent of supporting the (deserved) ruin of the capitalist West.

³¹⁰ Vorlage für das Sekretariat des ZK, "Würdigung des 70. Geburtstages von Paul Robeson," 15 December 1967, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/3A/1530, 58-59, SAPMO.

³¹¹ "Konzept für die Robeson Ausstellung im April 1968," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV A 2/2.028/124, 54, SAPMO.

African American Expressions of Solidarity and Friendship

In comparison to the GDR, African American expressions of solidarity were far less ostentatious. Often, these demonstrations of solidarity came in the form of praise for the state and its efforts to bring an end to racism everywhere. For example, in 1963, the Robeson couple returned to the GDR for several months while Paul received medical treatment from East German doctors. The Robesons' stay in East Germany gave Eslanda a chance examine her connection to and relationship with the socialist Germany, experiences she would later write about. Eslanda took advantage of opportunities to meet with East Germans and discuss the international black freedom movement, visiting the Herder Institute at Leipzig University in November 1963, speaking about the race problem in the US and her experiences in Africa, which was then followed by what she termed a "long, lively and very interesting question-and-answer discussion period."³¹²

In December she took part in a forum at Humboldt University in East Berlin, participating in a panel entitled "The Negro in the United States." That same month, she visited the Händel School in East Berlin, speaking with students and teachers about the race problem in the US, and about Africa and the United Nations. According to Eslanda, "A gratifying outcome of this evening...was the spontaneous request, enthusiastically and unanimously endorsed by students and faculty, to establish contact with an American Negro school through correspondence, and to exchange views and news, thus building up understanding and friendship."³¹³ All of these experiences were assembled in an article

³¹² Eslanda Robeson, "Eslanda Robeson visits East Germany," *New World Review*, April 1964, 14-16, clipping located in Eslanda Robeson Papers, Writings by, 1960-65, Box 14, Writings by-1964 April, MSRC, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

³¹³ Robeson, "Eslanda Robeson visits East Germany," *New World Review*, April 1964, 14-16, clipping located in Eslanda Robeson Papers, Writings by, 1960-65, Box 14, Writings by-1964 April, MSRC, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

Eslanda wrote for the *New World Review* after she returned to the US. In the article she noted that “[i]t is interesting and heart-warming to see how the German Democratic Republic is giving aid to the African people and others. Nowadays we hear of millions and billions spent in foreign aid, often so badly administered that it is wasted, it is good to hear about such very direct and practical help.”³¹⁴

Certainly, returning to the US and writing about East Germany in such positive terms was understood as an expression of solidarity, a contribution to the East German recognition campaign, though, there was a very limited audience that this material reached (the *New World Review* was a pro-Soviet journal). What Eslanda’s article did do, in addition to her speaking engagements in East Germany, was contribute to the notion that the GDR was a logical place in which to hold such discussions about race, racism, and peoples of African descent. Implied was that East Germany was qualified to host such symposia and meetings because the state and its people possessed the interest and knowledge necessary to participate in these events. Importantly, however, the state was also a qualified host because of its commitment to supporting the African American civil rights movement and the freedom of the world’s blacks.

An African American whose support from East Germany also prompted advocacy for East German recognition was Ralph Abernathy.³¹⁵ Abernathy had once been Martin Luther King, Jr.’s right-hand-man in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

³¹⁴ Robeson, “Eslanda Robeson visits East Germany,” *New World Review*, April 1964, 17, clipping located in Eslanda Robeson Papers, Writings by, 1960-65, Box 14, Writings by-1964 April, MSRC, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

³¹⁵ An article in the *New York Times* in 1972 would note the shift in Abernathy’s approach to acquiring rights for blacks, writing that “The continuing search for racial and economic justice has taken some of Dr. King’s friends to nations unfriendly to the United States. Mr. Abernathy traveled last summer to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He praised East Germany, where he found no hungry or ‘superrich’ people, as embodying ‘that for which we in the world are striving.’” Roy Reed, “Dr. King’s Followers Modify His Approach in Their Continuing Pursuit of Social Change,” *New York Times*, 7 January 1972.

(SCLC), ultimately assuming King's position upon his assassination. In September 1971, Abernathy visited the GDR, where he was billed as a "close friend and comrade-in-arms" by Albert Norden, and honored by the German Peace Council for his "struggle against imperialism, racism, and war."³¹⁶ While in East Berlin, Abernathy gave a sermon at St. Mary's Church, and during the sermon, thanked his hosts for their "warm hospitality far beyond words of expression," a welcome that would send him back to the US "with a greater determination to fight for justice and equality."³¹⁷ The SED's Central Committee noted that in the wake of such "rejuvenation," Abernathy left the GDR promising to campaign for international recognition on the state's behalf, so thankful was he.³¹⁸

As has been noted, many of East Germany's African American friends were communist supporters or sympathizers. There were, however, instances when blacks of more moderate politics expressed some level of support for the East German state, adding to the African American voices of solidarity. In 1975, a delegation of Black American journalists and editors from the Black Press of America, also known as the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), traveled to East Germany. Some members of the delegation were already convinced of East Germany's allegedly positive attributes (like Claude Lightfoot, who will be discussed in more detail shortly), but there were more than a few holdouts.

³¹⁶ "GDR Peace Medal Awarded to Rev. Ralph Abernathy," *Foreign Affairs Bulletin*, No. 28/71, clipping located in BArch-Berlin DZ 9/929, fol. 1; Friedensmedaille für Reverend D. Ralph Abernathy, BArch-Berlin DZ 9/929.

³¹⁷ Abernathy, Ralph, East Berlin: Sermon Held at St. Mary's Church, 28 September 1971, The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive.

³¹⁸ Information für die Genossen des Politbüros über den Aufenthalt Dr. Ralph Abernathys und seiner Begleitung vom 27.-29.9.1971 in der Hauptstadt der DDR, Berlin, BArch-Berlin, SAPMO, DY 30/430, 270. In fact, in 1974 Abernathy received an award for his commitment to the "normalization and improvement of relations between the GDR and the USA..." "Friedensbewegung der DDR ehrte Ralph Abernathy: Albert Norden verabschiedete Friedenskämpfer aus den USA," *Neues Deutschland*, 15 September 1974, clipping located in BArch DZ 9/79, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

While many of the holdouts were ultimately not convinced that the GDR had succeeded in removing all forms of racism, they were willing to admit that East Germany was at least making strides towards doing so. Though he criticized a lack of freedom in East Germany, one journalist, Louis Martin,³¹⁹ conceded that: “Today the officials of this part of Germany under a socialist government are trying to destroy the old racial myths and create what they believe is a more humane and civilized social order. I could not help but wish them luck.” Further, he told his readers that if it really were possible to create a society free of racism, East Germany would “before long find out.”³²⁰

Meanwhile, for those who had witnessed the ravages of WWII on Berlin in the early days after the conflict ended, the reconstruction and rebuilding of East Berlin was considered astonishing. As African Americans struggled for equal access to adequate housing, journalist delegate William O. Walker told his readers that what he had seen in East Berlin was “remarkable.”³²¹ In fact, “reconstructed East Berlin is a modern, beautiful city with hundreds of newly built apartments....” Furthermore, he wrote: “The German Democratic Republic...has done a phenomenal job of physical restoration and human rehabilitation....The number of modern apartments put to shame housing in most of our American cities.”³²² If war-torn Berlin could rebuild and create housing for its people, then certainly American cities—which had not been ravaged in the same way

³¹⁹ Louis Martin was also a journalist who became editor-in-chief of the *Chicago Daily Defender* in 1947, and later served as Deputy Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, as well as a political advisor to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

³²⁰ Louis Martin, “From Behind the ‘Iron Curtain’,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 May 1975.

³²¹ William O. Walker, a black Republican publisher, first managed and then owned the *Cleveland Call & Post*. Though he subscribed to conservative politics, he made exceptions when he believed it was in the best interests of the African American community, sometimes supporting more liberal projects. “Walker, William Otis,” *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, ech.cwru.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=WWO, accessed 29 May 2013.

³²² William O. Walker, “War-torn Berlin all but forgotten due to city’s remarkable rebuilding,” *The Afro-American*, 16 August 1975.

Berlin had—could do the same. The silent point was made that the American government had to take the initiative to do so.³²³

In the examples above, Eslanda's and Abernathy's support for the GDR was a reaction to the solidarity they had received over the years from East Germans. For the members of the newspaper delegation, their support for the GDR came from an educational tour (however distorted that education may have been) of East Germany—something that East German officials longed to do with other African Americans as well. Yet, for some, their solidarity with the GDR was more directly a means of furthering their own agenda, an approach the SED had itself perfected. In the early 1970s, black communist Claude Lightfoot began writing a book about East German anti-racism, which he would later entitle *Racism and Human Survival: Lessons of Nazi Germany for Today's World*.

Based on his travels through East and West Germany, Lightfoot supplemented his experiences by reading several hundred books on German history. In a letter from May 1971, Lightfoot informed an SED official that he was making great progress on his manuscript, and that in conducting his literary inquiry, he had “come away from the research with a firm conviction that the real story of what happened in the Third Reich and also a contrast of the DDR and Bonn Governments has yet to be told.”³²⁴ Through his praise for East German anti-racism, and condemnation of West German race thinking, Lightfoot made an argument in favor of American communism: if the US had any hope

³²³ In reality, “housing was...a central problem of the SED regime, and one of the chief causes of popular dissatisfaction...” Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 51.

³²⁴ Claude Lightfoot to Comrade Munch, 3 May 1971, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV A 2/20/605, 416, SAPMO.

of solving the problem of American racism, a change in ideology was essential.³²⁵

A common theme throughout African American observations and discussions of GDR anti-racism was that the East German example provided proof that the eradication of racism in the US *was* in fact possible. More broadly, the example of East Germany proved that with communism it was possible to make the necessary social and economic improvements to American society that would benefit America as a whole, but most especially African Americans. These African American observers often implied—or stated it directly—that if the GDR could make these improvements in the wake of Germany’s destruction in WWII and the racism of Hitler’s regime, then the US could certainly do the same. Viewed in comparison to the allegedly racist and capitalist West Germany, it was clear to observers like Lightfoot that socialism and communism lay at the heart of these necessary changes.³²⁶ While in some cases the example of East Germany operated simply as inspiration (like that of Carter and Walker), in other cases it was used to make explicit arguments in favor of a socialist or communist approach to acquiring a host of rights for African Americans.

In *Racism and Human Survival*, Lightfoot highlighted several elements of East German society as he made his argument for American communism. He told his readers of the GDR’s eradication of racism, writing that it “came about and flourished in the

³²⁵ In Lightfoot’s autobiography, he also speaks highly of East Germany, recounting his first time in the state in 1969. “When I went to the GDR I had not read or heard very much about developments there; so when I arrived, I was stunned by what I saw. I saw a great program of reconstruction that I had not dreamed was possible in such a short period of time. East Berlin was beginning to look like a paradise. [...] Thus a new romance began in my life. I spent the next ten years studying German history.” Claude Lightfoot, edited by Timothy V. Johnson, *Chicago Slums to World Politics: Autobiography of Claude Lightfoot* (New York: New Outlook Publishers and Distributors, 1985), 174.

³²⁶ Stefan Berger and Norman LaPorte make a similar argument regarding the British Left and East Germany, writing that, “Those who advocated socialist measures at home could, and did, investigate the GDR’s policy of ‘constructing socialism’ as a potential political model.” Berger and LaPorte, *Friendly Enemies: Britain and the GDR, 1949-1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 4.

context of changes in the entire social, economic and political environment of people.”³²⁷

In fact, the new person created in the GDR was “in direct contrast to the kind of person bred by the insecurity of capitalism, a society which thrives on ‘dog-eat-dog,’ a system that supports everything selfish in man.”³²⁸ Though Lightfoot would have preferred to see the institution of a socialist or communist government in the US, he did allow that “even short of socialism, advanced progressive-minded people can make substantial progress against racist poison and imperialism.”³²⁹ Change of some sort, whatever it might be, was vitally necessary.

The GDR, Lightfoot believed, provided undeniable proof that racism was the product of capitalism, something that became all the more evident when placed alongside a “racist” West Germany.³³⁰ Though Lightfoot had made a similar argument in other works—including *Ghetto Rebellion to Black Liberation*, based on trips to the USSR and Cuba—upon visiting the GDR he realized that the two Germanys provided him with a perfect case-study opportunity to make his point more strongly.³³¹ Lightfoot was not the first to make this argument about East Germany, however. In a 1968 interview with the American communist newspaper *Daily World*, Henry Winston (who was African American and Chairman of the CPUSA) addressed his view that East German communism had spurred a recovery from the evils of Hitler and the Nazis. He told the reporter:

What impressed me most is that in such a brief period racism and anti-semitism have been virtually wiped out. [...] Many people throughout the

³²⁷ Lightfoot, *Racism and Human Survival: Lessons of Nazi Germany for Today's World* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 71.

³²⁸ Lightfoot, *Racism and Human Survival*, 75.

³²⁹ Lightfoot, *Racism and Human Survival*, 233.

³³⁰ Lightfoot, *Racism and Human Survival*, 71, 13.

³³¹ Lightfoot, *Chicago Slums to World Politics*, 191.

world still think that racist and anti-semitic attitudes are part of the 'German character.' But human nature has changed for 17 million Germans, because its basis, capitalism, has been uprooted. There are people in our country who say that racism cannot be successfully wiped out. [...] People must understand that such a change is possible, but only when, as in the GDR, its capitalist soil has been removed. Once people realize that racism and chauvinism in any form are class weapons, they can deal with them effectively.³³²

What made the East German case so compelling, even though the Soviet Union had long asserted the relationship between capitalism and racism, was East Germany's Nazi past. Having apparently eradicated a virulent form of racism through the establishment of a communist government was significant, and considered highly relevant to the American situation.³³³ As much as the SED tried to outrun the GDR's Nazi past, in this instance it served to buoy the Party's claims of anti-racism by acting as a sharp means of comparison.

As the relationship between East Germany and Black America flourished over the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s, both sides expressed their solidarity with each other. East German examples of support for the civil rights movement and particular activists tended toward ostentatious and flashy, though that should not come as a surprise.

³³² "Where 'human nature' was changed," *Daily World Magazine*, 5-6 October 1968, clipping located in BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV A 2/20/605, 167, SAPMO. Winston's interactions with the GDR differed slightly from the other African American friends given his role as Chairman of the CPUSA.

³³³ Not everyone was convinced, however, and quite often East Germany's Nazi past served to keep many African Americans away, sometimes even those ideologically oriented toward the political Left. For example, Langston Hughes, a celebrated African American author who had long flirted with communism, visited both East and West Berlin in 1965 and later wrote about his thoughts on the divided city in the *Chicago National Defender*. From the article, it is clear that Hughes' thoughts on both Germanys caused some uneasy reflection, thoughts that undermined even the slimmest possibility that East German claims of anti-racism could be true. "Perhaps," he later wrote, "I should have come to Berlin without prejudice. I am sorry I couldn't quite forget the past. I could not put Hitler out of my mind." The divided German state also reminded Hughes of racial division in the US, comparing the Berlin Wall to the "wire fences the whites had erected the last time I was in the Birmingham station, the separate COLORED travelers from WHITE in Alabama," certainly a most unflattering association. Where for some African Americans the Nazi past had helped to validate the legitimacy of the East German state, for Hughes it loomed so large that he was unable to assess East Germany without considering its heinous past. Langston Hughes, "Berlin Today," *The Chicago National Defender* (National Edition), 3 April 1965.

The SED's main purpose for this relationship, in addition to garnering influential contacts in the US, was to publicize it. The SED needed for the international community to be intimately aware of the GDR's commitment to the struggle against oppression, if it had any hopes of earning diplomatic recognition. African Americans, on the other hand, generally expressed support and praise for the GDR in response to East German solidarity, though some Black Americans used their endorsement of GDR society in order to further their own arguments about the need for political and ideological upheaval in the US.

Angela Davis and East German Solidarity

By the end of the 1960s, the SED had become more adept at carrying out pro-African American solidarity movements and arranging visits from activists. Perhaps the most extravagant and all-encompassing example of unity between East Germany and a Black American was the GDR's solidarity campaign for the black communist Angela Davis, in the aftermath of the 1970 arrest for her alleged involvement in a courthouse shootout in California. To better understand Davis' arrest and the solidarity actions undertaken by East Germany, it is necessary to first examine the events that preceded her arrest.

On 13 January 1970 at Soledad Prison in California, a fight broke out in the prison yard and three black prisoners were shot by a white guard. The shooting was judged a justifiable homicide, infuriating the prison's black population. Three days later, when a white guard was killed, prison authorities believed it was an act of retaliation for the prison yard deaths. Three black inmates—John Clutchette, Fleeta Drumgo, and George Jackson—were charged with the murder, and later became known as the Soledad

Brothers, though they were of no actual relation. Protests on their behalf were quickly arranged, and Davis was one of many who worked in support of the so-called Brothers.³³⁴

It was her support for the Soledad Brothers that brought Davis together with Jackson's younger brother, Jonathan. This friendship would take a tragic turn when, on 7 August 1970, Jonathan entered a courtroom at the Marin County Courthouse, carrying a bag with several pistols and wearing a coat that hid a carbine. The courtroom's judge, Harold J. Haley, was then hearing the case of James D. McClain, a black inmate who had been charged with stabbing a San Quentin guard. Several other black convicts from San Quentin, two of whom were William Christmas and Ruchell Magee, were also present as witnesses for McClain's case. According to the narrative in newspapers at the time, Jonathan jumped out of his seat brandishing his carbine and ordered the black prisoners freed. McClain, Christmas, and Magee joined Jackson, and taking Haley, an assistant district attorney, and three jurors as hostages, Jackson and the inmates attempted to flee. According to one source, Jackson was alleged to have stated that "we want the Soledad brothers freed by 12:30!" before leaving the courtroom.

Once outside, the men and their hostages climbed into a rented van and were leaving the area when gunfire broke out. The judge, McClain, Christmas, and Jackson all died. Meanwhile, Magee and the assistant district attorney were seriously injured. Though McClain's case had nothing to do with the Soledad Brothers', it was theorized by some that the younger Jackson had organized the armed getaway in an attempt to save his brother who had recently been transferred to San Quentin in Marin County, believing that

³³⁴ Earl Caldwell, "Courthouse Shootout Linked With Radical Movement and Killings of Black Inmates," *New York Times*, 24 August 1970.

it was likely that George would receive the death penalty for the guard's death.³³⁵ The narrative of 7 August as told by Bettina Aptheker (at one time a member of the CPUSA), in her book *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis*, is decidedly more sympathetic to Jackson. Aptheker writes:

Jonathan Jackson entered the courtroom quietly. He took a seat in the spectators section. A few minutes later he stood up, held a pistol firmly in his hands and said: "All right, gentlemen. This is it. I'm taking over now." Jonathan died in a hail of bullets an hour later. [...] Jonathan had never fired a shot. Neither had McClain, Christmas or Magee to whom Jonathan had given guns. Four San Quentin guards and the prosecutor had done all the shooting.³³⁶

Aptheker also spoke to the claim that Jackson demanded that the Soledad Brothers be freed by 12:30, arguing that only one person—a news photographer—claimed to have heard it. Even though "initial reports of the event did not mention it," Aptheker argued, public officials latched on to the notion that this was a plot to free Jackson's brother and his fellow inmates.³³⁷

Shortly after, police publicly alleged that Davis had purchased the guns used in the breakout, and that she had been seen riding in the rented van prior to the shootings. Davis was charged with murder and kidnapping, and because she fled the jurisdiction, she was also charged with flight to avoid prosecution.³³⁸ Though Davis was not present at the courthouse shootout, under California law, anyone who "aid[ed] or abet[ted] in a major crime [wa]s equally guilty with the direct participants." Since police believed that Davis had purchased the guns used in the crime, under the law she too was responsible

³³⁵ "Courthouse Shootout."

³³⁶ Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 16.

³³⁷ Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks*, 20. One does question why Jackson did this, if not to free his brother, then.

³³⁸ "Courthouse Shootout."

for the attack.³³⁹ A national manhunt ensued, during which Davis was added to the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitive List, only the third woman to appear on the list. She was eventually arrested on 13 October at a motel in New York City.³⁴⁰ She was taken to the Women's House of Detention in New York City, where her lawyers claimed that she had been placed in solitary confinement and went on a hunger strike.³⁴¹ Ultimately, Davis was extradited to California, where she faced charges of murder and kidnapping.³⁴²

During her time in jail in California, hundreds of committees and organizations across the US and beyond, including groups in the GDR, spoke up in defense of Davis. As a black communist and the latest victim of the so-called reactionary American government, Davis became a symbol on the Left of all that was wrong with the US and the capitalist West.³⁴³ Almost immediately after Davis' arrest, letters of protest against both the Californian and American governments poured in from East Germany.³⁴⁴ The notes were written by various groups and organizations, expressing outrage at Davis' arrest. For example, the Textile-, Garment-, and Leatherworkers of the GDR sent a letter billing Davis' accusers as "race fanatics" who had imprisoned her under "false pretenses"

³³⁹ "Angela Davis Is Sought."

³⁴⁰ "F.B.I. Seizes Angela Davis in Motel Here: Suspect Sought for Two Months in Slaying of a California Judge," Linda Charlton, *New York Times*, 14 October 1970.

³⁴¹ "Angela in solitary, attorneys charge," *Boston Globe*, 25 October 1970. These claims of ill treatment, which would multiply while Davis was imprisoned in California, are significant because in later years Davis would be criticized for seemingly ignoring the cause of political prisoners in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, despite her own identification as a political prisoner.

³⁴² "Miss Davis ordered extradited to California to face charges," *Boston Globe*, 4 December 1970.

³⁴³ Daisy Weßel maintains that the military-industrial complex in the US was blamed by East Germany for everything—Davis' imprisonment included—ranging from joblessness and poverty to racial intolerance, and of course, Vietnam. Weßel, *Bild und Gegenbild: Die USA in der Belletristik der SBZ und der DDR (bis 1987)* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1989), 110.

³⁴⁴ International letter-writing campaigns on behalf of African Americans were rooted in a long tradition. For example, the 1931 arrest of the Scottsboro Boys, who were accused of raping two white women, spurred demonstrations and protests across Europe. Protestors also "sent petitions and letters to the governor of Alabama and to the White House, demanding the boys' release." Steven J. Niven, "Scottsboro Boys," in *Harlem Renaissance Lives*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 446.

in order to “illegally murder” the young black communist with the death penalty. The letter went on to argue that the arrest was really just a means of quieting an extremely vocal Davis and others like her; significantly, the letter-writers noted, every day that Davis remained in jail was another day that humanity remained in danger.³⁴⁵ Protest also came from academic circles: in January 1971, *Neues Deutschland* published an article claiming that more than 4,500 faculty members, students, and staff at the Technical University of Dresden had demanded Davis’ release, attaching their signatures to a protest resolution.³⁴⁶

Of course, there were many who questioned what the movement could possibly mean to those abroad and whether these international committees, as well as the American “Free Angela” committee, truly believed that the pressure they placed on the American government would actually result in Davis’ freedom. In 1972, *Time* magazine sought an explanation, commenting that nowhere in the world was there a nation as consumed by “Angelamania” as East Germany. “Why,” the article’s author questioned, “did the East Germans decide to champion her cause?”³⁴⁷ To the author, East Germans supported Angela Davis because it was their government’s way of keeping them preoccupied while waiting for a more important, and propaganda-worthy, crisis to develop:

Until recently the East German regime concentrated its propaganda attacks on West Germany, whose free society and economic prosperity have for years exerted an almost irresistible magnetism on Germany’s poorer half. In the past year, however, as Moscow and Bonn have sought to establish better relations, East Germany has had no choice but to tone down its

³⁴⁵ Teilnehmer der 9. Zentralvorstandssitzung der IG Textil-Bekleidung-Leder im FDGB to President Nixon, 17 November 1970, BArch-SAPMO DY 49/134, SAPMO.

³⁴⁶ “Die fortschrittliche Welt verurteilt Nixons Klassenjustiz,” *Neues Deutschland*, 6 January 1971, clipping located at BArch DZ 9/246, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

³⁴⁷ “East Germany: St. Angela,” *Time*, 3 April 1972.

attacks on the Federal Republic. [...] U.S. “racism” is hardly as threatening to East Germany as the visions that the propagandists once conjured up of a neo-Nazi invasion from the West. But at least it keeps the indoctrinated minds of the East Germans occupied until a more pressing issue comes along.³⁴⁸

This explanation is far too simple, but is indicative of the West’s dismissive view of the GDR’s campaign for Davis’ freedom. The SED, for its part, painted its involvement in the Free Angela Davis movement as altruistic, a struggle against oppression in keeping with the GDR’s long-held commitment to defeating racism and supporting Black America. East Germany’s approach—as it was laid out in propaganda—is best summed up by Davis’ lawyer, Howard Moore, who told a reporter that Davis “is in the clutches of the law.... Given the deep-seated hatred and the political nature of the trial, the only way she can be freed is to bring enough pressure to insure that she has a fair trial. The outside pressure forces them to be more scrupulous. It *is* salutary.”³⁴⁹

It was in this vein that East Germans communicated with the judge for Davis’ case, Richard Arnason. In an effort to ensure that the judge knew that the eyes of the world were upon him, they warned that the GDR would sound the alarm at the slightest misstep that might harm Davis, and thereby the rights of all Black Americans. In his letter to the judge, the East German attorney and professor Dr. Friedrich Karl Kaul³⁵⁰ opened by stating that “the attention of the majority of the decent people of the world is focused on you. This will continue to be the case until the conclusion of this trial.”

Further, he wrote that “[i]t is incumbent upon you as the judge in the case to guarantee

³⁴⁸ “East Germany: St. Angela.”

³⁴⁹ Sol Stern, “The Campaign To Free Angela Davis and Ruchell Magee,” *New York Times*, 27 June 1971.

³⁵⁰ Kaul was a lawyer for the SED. On behalf of the Party, he defended communists in political trials in West Germany during the 1950s, and defended the Communist Party itself when it was banned in the FRG. Devin Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965: Genocide, History, and the Limits of the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 92. It is quite likely that he was operating on behalf of the SED when he sent this letter to Arnason.

that this case...will be conducted strictly according to the law.” Unfortunately, Kaul believed, “there is reason to doubt that this will be the case.”³⁵¹

Kaul likewise asserted that Davis was receiving an unfair trial, biased by the statement from the American president praising J. Edgar Hoover for having captured a “terrorist” and setting a warning for her compatriots. No one, argued Kaul, could expect a fair trial with such “condemnation pronounced by the nation’s Chief Executive,” one which was then repeated continually by the American media. Kaul ended his letter by declaring that:

The President, public opinion, the prosecutor, the judge and the jury, are against Angela Davis, even before a verdict has been returned. The designation of the case “United States versus Angela Davis,” has thus taken on a different, a terrible meaning. It is the American ruling circles who have put Angela Davis on trial. If they have their way, they will make short work of her.³⁵²

In another letter to Arnason in June 1972, the GDR Committee for Human Rights struck a similar chord. The committee accused “certain political quarters” in America of trying to hurt the “whole of the American labor movement,” as well as everyone struggling for black rights, and anyone against “the war of aggression in Vietnam,” all by punishing Davis. Just as Kaul warned Arnason, the Committee for Human Rights cautioned the judge that everyone around the world was watching the trial, and that “as the representative of the American judiciary,” it was his job to “ensure that justice is done to Angela Davis...as your conscience should demand.”³⁵³

East Germans also protested Davis’ arrest and trial through demonstrations of

³⁵¹ “United States versus Angela Davis: Open Letter addressed by Attorney Professor Dr. Friedrich Karl Kaul to Judge Richard E. Arnason,” *DDR Komitee für Menschenrechte*, 1972, no pagination.

³⁵² “United States versus Angela Davis.”

³⁵³ Friedel Malter to Judge Arnason, 2 June 1972, BArch DZ 7/27, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

solidarity with the imprisoned black communist. One of the most all-encompassing national solidarity actions embarked upon by the GDR on behalf of Davis was a campaign known as “1,000,000 Roses for Angela!” The brainchild of FDJ member Angelika Löffler, this action was also coordinated to coincide with Davis’ 27th birthday. Youth were asked to send Davis postcards with roses on them, the ultimate goal being to send one million postcards—hence, the one million roses. In *Junge Welt*, the FDJ’s newspaper, readers were told that these postcards were crucial to the solidarity effort because they, unlike Davis, could travel beyond prison walls, and would serve as a reminder that she was not alone in her struggle.³⁵⁴

In the grip of “Angelamania,” the Davis case quickly became a topic over which African American visitors and the SED bonded. Most importantly, impressed by the exhaustive expression of solidarity with Davis, African Americans thanked and praised East Germans for their involvement. For instance, when Ralph Abernathy visited East Germany in 1971, he participated in a rally at Humboldt University calling for Angela Davis’ release. He later spoke at St. Mary’s Church, wherein he told the crowd gathered that:

You have convinced me that we are not alone in our struggle, for we have many friends here in Berlin. I will go back knowing that in the German Democratic Republic we have countless numbers of friends, who will help us to free Angela Davis and to solve the problems of racism, poverty, and war in the world.³⁵⁵

Abernathy keyed in on a crucial point: the GDR’s work to free Angela Davis was not merely about winning her release from jail. It was meant to further underline the image

³⁵⁴ The rose of solidarity found on the postcards was a means of acknowledging and thanking Davis for her “courage and determination” in her struggle, according to the article. “1 000 000 Rosen für Angela!” *Junge Welt*, 19 January 1971, clipping located at BArch DZ 9/246, BArch-Berlin.

³⁵⁵ “Ralph Abernathy, East Berlin: Sermon Held at St. Mary’s Church,” 28 September 1971, Transcript, Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive.

of East Germany's broader support of the civil rights movement and its tireless work on behalf of victims of oppression all over the world.

When Davis' case ultimately ended in an acquittal, organizations in East Germany were eager to congratulate the young black communist on her victory, most certainly because her triumph was one for them as well. The First Secretary of the SED, Erich Honecker, sent Davis a congratulatory letter, the text of which was published in East German newspapers. The FDJ's First Secretary, Günther Jahn, sent his "most heartfelt greetings" and expressed the happiness felt by the "progressive youth from all over the world" at her release.³⁵⁶ Time and again, East German officials declared that the acquittal was not only a victory for Davis herself, but also for all of the peace-loving and progressive peoples of the world, namely the socialist and communist states.³⁵⁷ It is in this assessment that one finds the incredible importance of Davis' release from prison for the SED: the release symbolized the sheer power of the East German people—at the behest of the Party—in demanding that forces in the West back down. In congratulating Davis, the SED was embracing the justification of its political ideology and the validation of East Germany's existence.

This self-proclaimed East German "victory" was certainly trotted out on many occasions, and a visit from Davis while on a victory tour provided the SED with yet another opportunity to remind East Germans and international observers of the alleged role played by the state in securing Davis' release from jail. In September 1972, Davis and two of her comrades, Kendra and Franklin Alexander, visited East Germany

³⁵⁶ Telegramm from Erich Honecker to Angela Davis, 5 June 1972, BArch-SAPMO DY 30/IV B 2/20/227, 126, SAPMO; Letter from Guenther Jahn to Angela Davis (via the United National Committee to Free Angela Davis), 5 June 1972, BArch-SAPMO DY 24/22327, SAPMO.

³⁵⁷ For example, see Informationsbericht, Nationale Front der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 14 June 1972, BArch-SAPMO DY 6/4684, SAPMO.

following a trip to the Soviet Union. On Davis' behalf, this trip, like the one to the USSR, was intended to thank East Germany for its support during her trial. Future African American visitors would do much the same as well, celebrating East Germany's support for the activist. Davis also added her voice in solidarity with the East German socialist experiment, reciprocating the backing and encouragement given to her by the GDR. Davis proclaimed: "'We find ourselves, indeed, in a new historical era, when we compare life in the socialist countries with that in the United States. We see here what it means for the working class to wield the power.'"³⁵⁸

The Party used this visit from Davis to further cement the state's link to the activist by honoring her with the Great Star of People's Friendship in Gold, making Davis an honorary citizen of Magdeburg, and bestowing upon her an honorary degree from Karl Marx University in Leipzig.³⁵⁹ As G.F. Alexan had encouraged Robeson in 1958, Davis had come to the GDR to thank East Germans for their help, further cementing their linkage. Davis made several more trips to East Germany in coming years, attending the Tenth World Youth Festival in 1973 and making an appearance at the World Congress for International Women's Year held in East Berlin in 1975. To this day, like Robeson, Davis' name is one that has long been linked with the East German state.

Oliver Harrington: The more things change, the more they stay the same

³⁵⁸ Quoted in Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 137.

³⁵⁹ On the Great Star of People's Friendship in Gold: "Reinschriftsprotokoll Nr. 36 vom 5 Sept. 1972," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/2/1410, SAPMO; on the honorary citizenship and honorary degree: "Anlage Nr. 13 zum Protokoll Nr. 88 vom 31.8.1972, Besuch der Genossin Angela Davis, Mitglied des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei der USA, in der DDR vom 10. Bis 14. September 1972," BArch-SAPMO, DY 30/J IV 2/3/1911, 198-200, SAPMO.

Despite the image painted by examining the experiences of Paul Robeson and Angela Davis, the 1960s and 1970s in East Germany were not entirely friendly to all African Americans. For someone like Oliver Harrington, the stories of East Germany as a model society were generally canceled out by his own, far different, experience as a resident of the GDR. It is this status as resident that, just like the military deserters and Aubrey Pankey, influenced his perception of East Germany's relationship to peoples of color. Because Robeson, Davis, and other African American friends of the GDR were *visitors*, they rarely stayed in East Germany for any extended period of time. Harrington, meanwhile, lived out much of his later years in the communist Germany (and later in a unified Germany), and saw first-hand the dismal reality of life in East Germany. An examination of statements from Harrington and his wife Helma reveal a set of ambiguous feelings toward East Germany.

These statements are admittedly somewhat complicated by the fact that many of them came *after* the Berlin Wall fell, and the state ideology that they had long lived under no longer existed, quite possibly influencing their statements about the GDR. Documents in Harrington's Stasi file, however, provide some insight into his feelings while living under the SED's rule, suggesting that the distancing one finds in his post-GDR statements was not far off from his earlier views of East German society.³⁶⁰ Through Harrington one finds that, on the African American side, the relationship thrived as long as one maintained (willingly or not) a surface understanding of East German views on race. The

³⁶⁰ "Stasi" was shorthand for the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (MfS, Ministry for State Security). Utilizing information from Harrington's Stasi file presents some difficulties. While it is a useful record of correspondence Harrington received, it is by no means complete and often lacks Harrington's response, if there was one. Reports written by informants about the cartoonist must also be read critically, as there is no guarantee that what was reported by informants was entirely true. Wherever possible, statements from reports are placed in context with other sources in order to ascertain their truthfulness.

less one knew about everyday life, the better.

When Harrington arrived in East Germany in 1961, he was already celebrated internationally as a cartoonist whose work focused on American racism. His arrival in East Berlin, however, was many years in the making, with roots in a public debate that took place in 1946. Harrington, then the director of the NAACP's public relations department, had been invited to speak at a forum sponsored by the *Herald Tribune*, where he engaged in a debate with Attorney General Tom Clark, who accused Harrington of being a communist. Harrington later argued that Clark had labeled him a communist in order to hurt the NAACP; the suggestion that an NAACP executive was a communist would certainly do the group no favors, regardless of the claim's veracity. Not surprisingly, in the years that followed this debate, Harrington came under increased scrutiny by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In an essay detailing his reasons for leaving the US, Harrington recounted in detail the night in 1951 when he was told by a friend that he should leave the country. Over drinks this friend, who belonged to Army Intelligence, told Harrington that he should take a trip to Europe for six months or so until things blew over. Three weeks later Harrington sailed to Europe, settling in Paris only to return to the US once for a short visit before 1989.³⁶¹

Ten years after arriving in Paris, Harrington traveled to East Berlin to engage in talks with publishers about creating illustrations for American and English literary classics. According to Harrington, his actual settlement in East Berlin was dramatic and unplanned:

³⁶¹ Oliver Harrington, "Why I Left America," in *Why I Left America and Other Essays*, ed. M. Thomas Inge, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 103-104. Harrington claims that he did not return to the US until after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but he visited the US—Chicago—in 1972. See "Bootsie artist visits U.S." *Chicago Daily Defender* (Big Weekend Edition), 21 October 1972.

...while I was there, in August, I heard a very sinister sound in the streets. I looked out of my tiny hotel window and down below there was a stream of tanks going along. They were Soviet tanks. That gave me a bad feeling because I'd seen that before. I went down out of my room and walked in the direction the tanks were going for about a mile. On the edge of the place which has since become known as Checkpoint Charlie there was a line of US tanks. I knew I was right in the middle of World War III...I went back to my hotel, but found that I couldn't leave there. I lost my French apartment, I lost everything. I had to stay there.³⁶²

Harrington did admit, however, that this was not the worst possible outcome; he went on to start a line of political cartoons that were "entirely different from what [he]'d been doing." Gradually his cartoons were published in the top satirical magazines in East Germany, as well as magazines and newspapers in the US and the Soviet Union. Though he was at times tempted to leave the country, he claimed to have stayed because he liked the work.³⁶³

Aribert Schroeder, however, has questioned the validity of Harrington's claim that he became "stuck" behind the Berlin Wall. He points to the fact that the tank crisis Harrington referred to occurred in October 1961, while the construction of the Wall began in August 1961, concluding that since Stasi records do not show Harrington arriving in the country until November 1961, these two events occurred *before* Harrington had even arrived in East Berlin. Schroeder goes on to note that, as an American citizen, Harrington could have easily left East Berlin via Checkpoint Charlie, further giving lie to the notion that Harrington was unable to leave the country.³⁶⁴ In fact, Harrington often traveled to West Berlin to deliver cartoons to be shipped to a newspaper in the US. Harrington's own wife, Helma, shoots down the notion that Oliver was stuck

³⁶² Harrington, "Why I Left America," 108-09.

³⁶³ Harrington, "Why I Left America," 109.

³⁶⁴ Aribert Schroeder, "Ollie Harrington: His Portrait Drawn on the Basis of East German (GDR) Secret Service Files," in *Germans and African Americans: Two Centuries of Exchange*, eds. Larry A. Greene and Anke Ortlepp, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 187.

in East Germany, suggesting that his past experiences in France and the US made staying in Berlin the best option, if not his originally preferred one.³⁶⁵

Clearly Harrington's explication about his arrival in East Germany has some logistical and factual problems, and was likely told that way in order to place his residency in East Germany in as positive a light as possible. His essay explaining his departure from the US, entitled "Why I Left America," was published in 1993, *after* the collapse of communism, a time when it is quite possible that he would have sought alternative ways to explain why he had left the US and never returned, living for many years behind the Iron Curtain. According to Harrington, nothing about his departure from the US was voluntary. Owing to the communist witch hunt, he was forced to leave the US—lest one think otherwise, he was not abandoning his country, nor was he abandoning the civil rights movement, but rather leaving to ensure his safety and livelihood (the latter an argument that is plausible considering Paul Robeson's later experience). His later settlement in the communist Germany was also depicted as due to circumstances outside of his control, resulting in Harrington remaining there permanently. Though Harrington has clearly whitewashed his settlement in the GDR, what *is* true regardless is that the Cold War and its political consequences made him a resident of East Berlin.

³⁶⁵ Stephanie Brown, "'Bootsie in Berlin: An Interview with Helma Harrington on Oliver Harrington's Life and Work in East Germany, 1961-1995,'" *African American Review*, 44:3 (Fall 2011), 355. Helma also said that "I think that when he came he didn't have in mind to stay for any length of time. At least, he wasn't decided." Ibid. Regarding "his past experiences in France," Helma might have been referring to the fact that "The [Algerian] war divided the African American community [in France], and Harrington became embroiled in a series of disputes with other expatriates. His visit to the Soviet Union in 1959 as a guest of the humor magazine *Krokodil* again attracted intelligence officials." Christine G. McKay, "Harrington, Oliver," in *African American Lives*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 377. Harrington was also very vocal about what he believed to be the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of his close friend Richard Wright, in Paris.

Whatever the real reasons for remaining in East Germany, Harrington's cartoons were nevertheless quite popular in the GDR, and many were keen to employ his skills as a cartoonist.³⁶⁶ The majority of Harrington's cartoons dealt with American policies towards Vietnam, South Africa, and Latin America, criticizing the racist and imperialist policies of the American government. Harrington also, of course, condemned the government's failings regarding Black Americans, providing East Germans with an "authentic" window into American society. Many of his cartoons appeared in the satirical magazine *Eulenspiegel* and the general interest magazine *Das Magazin*, and quite a few of them were printed in color—something Harrington noted in a number of interviews—certainly a luxury for a cartoonist at this time.³⁶⁷ Harrington was often one of the few foreign cartoonists to contribute to these East German periodicals, and his cartoons occupied prime real estate in the magazines, a testimony to the value placed on Harrington's work by East German editors and those to whom they answered.³⁶⁸ It is little surprise, though, that many white East German cartoonists were not fond of

³⁶⁶ According to Helma, there was a time when he stopped getting work, but that eventually passed. She said in an interview that, "sometimes there had been some interruptions; that had to do with....You never could figure it out....I don't even know when it was. Anyhow, somebody didn't like it. There was a time when he suddenly didn't get any work, but then it got going again." Later in the interview she speculated that their relationship with writer Stefan Heym was to blame. "...in the house of Stefan Heym naturally you met all kinds of artists who had trouble with the system, not for philosophical reasons because they were all socialists, you know, but for practical, cultural reasons....So naturally when the American is mixing with these...you get into trouble yourself." Brown, "Bootsie in Berlin," 359, 360.

³⁶⁷ M. Thomas Inge, *Dark Laughter: The Satiric Art of Oliver W. Harrington*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), xxiv-xxv.

³⁶⁸ Harrington's appearance in *Eulenspiegel* on a regular basis should not be underestimated. The satirical magazine had a weekly circulation of 490,000. The magazine's editorial staff estimated that each magazine was read by three East Germans, meaning that 1.5 million people (out of a population of 17 million) read the magazine and saw Harrington's work. Important too is that *Eulenspiegel* used satire as a means of presenting and discussing the limitations and failures of capitalist societies; Harrington's work went a long way toward fulfilling this objective. Randall L. Bytwerk, "Official Satire in Propaganda: The Treatment of the United States in the GDR's *Eulenspiegel*," *Central States Speech Journal*, 39:3&4 (Fall/Winter 1988), 305; 306-307.

Harrington, their Black American competitor.³⁶⁹

Even though Harrington's settlement in East Germany may not have been as accidental as he claimed, he was not entirely enamored with his new country and its government. According to Helma, Harrington had "philosophically"

always been a socialist, for the ideals of socialism. It comes also with his being partly black: men are created equal, social justice and so on. But, naturally, as a philosophy is then put into politics and practice, this is a completely different thing. In general, politics, as far as the G.D.R. was concerned, he was not so interested....³⁷⁰

Since Harrington was a foreigner living in East Germany, the Stasi maintained a file on the cartoonist, which included reports submitted by agents and mail that the Stasi had intercepted and opened. One report noted a conversation an informant had had with Harrington, during which the cartoonist had apparently remarked that the warm welcome he had received from the GDR upon his arrival had certainly cooled.³⁷¹ This was perhaps in response to Harrington's cool reception of the SED as a political party, but may also have been influenced by another factor. Harrington was quoted in yet another report as stating that East Germany understated the black problem in the US, and that the situation for African Americans was much worse in reality. Contrasting what African American visitors friendly to East Germany believed about East German people, Harrington went on to complain that a large portion of East Germans knew very little about the circumstances in the US, which was "terrifying" for him as an American citizen.³⁷²

Though much of what Harrington said was true, speaking so frankly about East Germany's failure to understand American racism certainly did little to raise officials'

³⁶⁹ Inge, *Dark Laughter*, xxxix.

³⁷⁰ Brown, "'Bootsie in Berlin,'" 357.

³⁷¹ Bericht, 16 March 1968, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 85, BStU.

³⁷² Bericht, 8 May 1968, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 87-88, BStU.

opinions of the American artist.

Harrington also criticized the GDR's lack of services and organizations that served foreigners, pointing out that there was nowhere for him, and others, to take their problems.³⁷³ This perhaps contributed to the loneliness noted in a report almost a year later, which was attributed to Harrington not being able to return to the US and that he felt uncomfortable in the GDR.³⁷⁴ Still another report later noted that though Harrington clearly had very strong views about the African American civil rights movement, he had yet to become involved in any East German organizations—apparently an unspoken expectation the SED had held for Harrington. This was put down to the likely development of a prejudice or bias against the GDR's *Kulturpolitik*, a series of cultural policies that placed limits on what East German artists were allowed to create.³⁷⁵

Helma seems to support this notion, later stating that: "...there were some ups and downs....We were friends of [G.D.R. writer]³⁷⁶ Stefan Heym. He had trouble. And so you had contact with difficult things."³⁷⁷ For the Stasi, proof of this came down to the close relationships Harrington had formed with foreign artists, the fact that he had connections to "Zionist circles," and subscribed to an ambiguous world view.³⁷⁸ Harrington was also noted as associating with controversial East German dissidents like Ingeborg Hunzinger, Robert Havemann, and Wolf Biermann.³⁷⁹ Yet, for all of the criticisms of the GDR and the SED that Harrington expressed, he was careful and only

³⁷³ Bericht, 8 May 1968, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 87-88, BStU.

³⁷⁴ Abschrift, 20 February 1969, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 98, BStU.

³⁷⁵ Report, 22 March 1968, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 83, BStU.

³⁷⁶ In the original.

³⁷⁷ Brown, "Bootsie in Berlin," 357.

³⁷⁸ Report, 22 March 1968, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 83, BStU.

³⁷⁹ Information, 31 October 1968, BStU, Archiv der Zentralstelle, MfS, AP 55229/92, 96, BStU.

ever willing to discuss these views in private.³⁸⁰ He avoided expressing his true thoughts in public, his wife noting that while he never joined the SED, he never created a single cartoon that criticized the Party either.³⁸¹

Certainly, from Helma's description of her husband's politics it is clear that Harrington was not a perfect fit ideologically in East Germany. Harrington was likely understood as ambiguous by East German authorities because in addition to his continued foreign contacts, he held views that touched upon, but did not necessarily coincide with, those officially supported by the SED. Though no one explicitly stated it, the conflict here arises from the fact that Harrington's black radicalism strayed from the SED's more orthodox approach to communism, which was similar to that expressed by Robeson and Davis during their visits.³⁸² Yet, despite the ideological uncertainty he represented, Harrington was of value to the SED; not only through his cartoons but also his mere presence, as African American visitors often dropped in on Harrington, someone they either knew well or knew of quite well.³⁸³ This sense of familiarity often translated into a positive view of their time in East Germany.³⁸⁴

³⁸⁰ Though Harrington clearly misestimated those to whom he was speaking, as there was at least one of his confidantes who reported his statements to the Stasi.

³⁸¹ Brown, "'Bootsie in Berlin,'" 357.

³⁸² Davis' expressions of orthodoxy while in the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

³⁸³ Helma says that "we often had visitors from the States. I remember Langston Hughes, John Killens." Also, there were "a group of American Indians who were here for some kind of congress. [...] And then also some wild women. There was an international women's congress and the Americans, they had several extreme feminists." Brown, "Bootsie in Berlin," 369.

³⁸⁴ See for example Elizabeth Murrell, who visited East Germany in 1975 for the World Congress for the International Women's Year (the women's congress referenced above by Helma). She noted that Harrington helped one of the delegates cross from West to East Berlin when she arrived at Checkpoint Charlie without the appropriate paperwork. He found housing for one reporter, and helped another reporter who had "arrived in East Berlin with nothing but her return ticket." Harrington also spent an evening speaking with the younger black delegates who knew little of the cartoonist and his work, sharing stories. Murrell, "Many Women—One Goal: World Congress For the International Women's Year," *Freedomways*, 15:4 (1975—Fourth Quarter), 256. Jim Cleaver, part of the newspaper delegation that visited East Germany in 1975 wrote in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*: Ollie Harrington had been brought to the

The example of Oliver Harrington is a good illustration of the limits that bound the friendship between Black America and East Germany. It was at best a relationship that could thrive only so long as one did not look too closely at the SED and the GDR, and compare that with officials' rhetoric about what supposedly bound Black America and East Germany. On the surface, Harrington's existence in East Germany appears positive—he found a home where he could continue his work as a cartoonist, safe from the specters that chased him in the West. His work occupied prime real estate in East German periodicals, and he was able to critique the American government in a place where he was free from the communist witch hunts plaguing the American political landscape.

Yet, Harrington resided in a state which he, at best, felt ambiguous toward. His artistic freedom was limited by *Kulturpolitik*, he never really embraced the politics of the SED, and he felt isolated among a group of people he believed did not truly understand the black freedom struggle. Even though Harrington lived out his final years in the GDR, and later in a unified Germany, it is far more likely that he remained not because of a deep attachment to East Germany and the SED, but because of the life he had built for himself there. With a wife and son, and quite possibly the notion that he could not return to the US, it would not be surprising to discover that Harrington found it easiest to remain where he was. For the SED's part, it seems likely that any of the "ideological disagreements" Harrington had with the SED were not apparent until after he had lived in the GDR for some time. Harrington's contributions as an African American cartoonist

East Berlin Press Club to partake of the evening's festivities.... [Harrington] was the star of the evening....the essence of the evening was that Ollie Harrington was there and everybody remembered both him and Bootsie." Cleaver, "East Berlin: Journalists, Ham Hocks, Vodka Bottles," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 5 June 1975.

seemed to make up for his provocative views, regardless.

Concluding Thoughts

After Paul Robeson visited East Germany in October 1960, the relationship that East German elites had long envisioned became a reality. With Robeson, the SED finally felt comfortable presenting to its citizens an African American whom it believed represented the Black America elites had long conceived of as an ally. In the coming years, Robeson would pave the way for other civil rights activists to visit East Germany, while members of the East German public began to express an interest in their so-called brothers and sisters in the struggle against capitalism, though not always for ideological reasons, and not always willingly. The SED used Robeson's visit in international propaganda as well as domestic, and the message was the same: the SED was legitimate.

Perfecting its approach to the relationship, by the early 1970s the SED had become quite proficient at organizing solidarity campaigns on behalf of Black America and the civil rights movement. When the "Free Angela Davis" solidarity movement "culminated" in Davis' acquittal, the alliance found itself facing yet another defining moment. For some African Americans, the movement had become concrete proof of the GDR's commitment to supporting Black America's struggle for rights. For the SED, the acquittal was a self-justification of the Party's reason for existing, confirming the SED's own beliefs about itself and its abilities.

Friends like Robeson and Davis helped to drive this relationship by quite simply reciprocating East German overtures and accepting offers of solidarity. By visiting East Germany, African Americans lent a legitimacy to the relationship and claims of kinship

that would not have been there had it merely been a friendship marked on the African American side by statements of praise for the East German state, instead of action.

Important, however, is that like Robeson, most of the GDR's African American friends only *visited* East Germany; those who resided more or less permanently in the state often came away with opinions that were at odds with visiting Black Americans. Because the majority of East Germany's African American friends were visitors, this in itself helped to keep the relationship alive, as their positive opinion of the apparent changes that East Germany had undergone kept them engaged.

Chapter Five: Disintegration **The Friendship in Decline, 1972-1989**

Despite the shot of energy injected into the relationship between Black America and East Germany during the 1960s and into the 1970s, the very ties that had once bound the two groups began to fray. With the relative decline of the civil rights movement in the US, visits to East Germany from African American friends for reasons of solidarity virtually came to halt. Meanwhile, after years of struggling for legitimacy and diplomatic recognition, by the mid-1970s the SED had received both from a significant portion of the international community. The combination of these two developments ushered in the decline of the Black American-East German friendship, as the two issues that had brought them together no longer provided the momentum necessary to keep both sides actively in contact. By 1989, the relationship was a ghost of what it had once been.

These developments had several consequences: though the majority of East Germany's African American friends were leftists and subscribed to an internationalist worldview, as the civil rights movement began to decline, so too did their need to look internationally to states like the GDR for assistance in the struggle. Though the GDR would continue for the rest of its lifetime to engage in a struggle with the FRG for supremacy, *contemporary* Black America failed to provide the ammunition necessary for the SED's struggles of the late 1970s and 1980s. The chapter that follows will examine how, rather than engaging with contemporary African Americans, the SED sought to preserve and revive the legacies of two Black Americans whose connection to the GDR dated back to the 1960s—the heyday of its relationship with Black America. This preservation highlights what was the ever-growing distance between the SED and its

citizens, as portions of East German society found themselves relating to Black America in ways the SED had not encouraged. A relationship that had once been intended to bring East Germans together with the SED was now underlining the very differences that kept them apart. Lastly, an examination of the mechanics behind the SED's approach to cultivating a relationship with Black America will close out the chapter. If we were to take the SED's rhetoric at face value, the alliance between Black America and East Germany should have survived until, at least, the death of racism in the US. Yet, this was not the case, and an analysis of the SED's attempts to engage in solidarity with Black America underline why this was the case.³⁸⁵

The SED and Black Power

By the early-1970s, the civil rights movement had entered into a decline and the black power movement was on the rise. With African American attention focused elsewhere, there were no longer visits and exchanges of solidarity on the same scale seen in previous years. There was increasingly little for the SED to capitalize on within the black freedom struggle in the US, and increasingly less need for the SED to do so, as states began to recognize the GDR. One finds that in this last stretch of the GDR's existence, the few African Americans who did venture to the communist Germany or maintain some sort of contact with East German officials generally did so on the basis of ideology. While issues plaguing the African American community were sometimes discussed, they were done so in the context of providing updates about the American

³⁸⁵ The period under consideration in this chapter overlaps with that of the previous chapter. One finds the decline first began to take root in the early-1970s, even though the effects would not be seen until slightly later.

communist party. For example, in 1980 the Chairman of the CPUSA, Henry Winston, visited East Germany to speak with First Secretary Erich Honecker. Minutes of the meeting include a long discussion that touched on the black situation in the US, yet that was just a small part of the overall conversation, which largely focused on communism more broadly.³⁸⁶

By the early 1970s, black power had come to dominate the American struggle for black freedoms. Despite a few public discussions in East Germany about black power, there was little about this subsection of the black freedom struggle that appealed to the SED, regardless of certain black power groups' interest in socialism. Even if the advances made by East Germany in acquiring diplomatic recognition had not occurred, it is likely that this move toward black power in the US would have elicited some level of drawback from the SED. That this would be the case is not surprising: for a movement that many identified with a strong black racial pride, it was not uncommon to see an alienation of white "friends," whether in the US or elsewhere. How correct these "friends" may have been in emphasizing the role played by racial pride is less important than the fact that these "friends" believed racial pride to be a stumbling block for their cooperation.

For example, in 1982, two African American union officials visited East Germany, ostensibly to study the role of unions in the GDR. There for two weeks, Eric Pace and James Johnson were first-time visitors to the socialist Germany. East German records noted that Johnson was a member of the CPUSA, while Pace self-identified as a

³⁸⁶ "Vermerk über das Gespräch des Genossen Erich Honecker, Generalsekretär des Zentralkomitees der SED, mit Genossen Henry Winston, Nationaler Vorsitzender der Kommunistischen Partei der USA, am 23.10.1980," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/13654, fol. 1-161, 93-4, SAPMO.

communist sympathizer. After the trip, GDR officials commented that while Pace's education would have enabled him to appreciate and understand the information they shared with the two men, his "racism" against everything "white", combined with an American nationalist arrogance, meant that he did not take the trip very seriously, even missing several of the talks that had been arranged. Johnson, on the other hand, though interested in the material, was deemed by officials as not intelligent enough to fully grasp the already "over-simplified" material they shared with the men.³⁸⁷ The disdain with which the officials spoke of Pace was in keeping with the Party's stance on black power.

In a "strictly confidential" report drawn up by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in March 1971, an extensive report (by an unnamed author) laid out background information about the Black Panther Party (BPP), which was a largely negative depiction of the Black Panthers. In this confidential report, the author expressed a thorough contempt for the BPP that centered on its demands and general organization. For example, the author referred to the BPP's ten point party program,³⁸⁸ and noted that only *some* of the mandates were "reasonable" in that they demanded "social and political liberation." Yet, these same reasonable demands were juxtaposed against ones that "might lead to black racism."³⁸⁹ In particular, the report pointed to the demands decreeing "We want full employment for our people," "We want all black men to be exempt from military service," and "We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails," as some of the most divisive. These demands,

³⁸⁷ "Information über den DDR-Aufenthalt von zwei afroamerikanischen Gewerkschaftsfunktionären zum Studium der Rolle der Gewerkschaften in der DDR, 30.4-13.5.1982 (Deleg.-Nr. 2-02 Db)," 12 Juli 1982, Koblenz Endarchiv, BArch-SAPMO DY 13/3188, fol. 1, SAPMO.

³⁸⁸ A copy of the program (both the 1966 and 1972 versions) can be found at: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/history.shtml>, accessed on 21 August 2013.

³⁸⁹ i.e., racism held by blacks against whites.

the report continued, completely denied the value of working with all oppressed peoples, as well as “the necessity of a joint class struggle against the imperialist system....”

Furthermore, it was argued, the BPP very rarely worked with “white organizations with corresponding political objectives.”³⁹⁰ Clearly, a group *perceived* as placing a strong emphasis on race, and not class, would find few friends among the SED.³⁹¹

Unmistakably unimpressed with the BPP, the report continued on to point out inconsistencies in its organization, noting that the comparative youth of the party, as well as their quick growth, had managed to create an incredibly heterogeneous group. The report discerned three different strands within the BPP which often clashed, and more than once emphasized the negative impact of this lack of homogeneity. Adding to the perceived problems of the group was the general lack of ideological maturity compounded by the leaders’ apparent absence of domestic and foreign political knowledge. The report also remarked that while the BPP wanted a socialist state, it had no real idea how this should happen. Furthermore, though the CPUSA supported the BPP, said the report, even the American Communist Party saw room for improvement within the group.³⁹² Closing the report, its author remarked that the BPP was at a crossroads, in which it would have to decide whether it would become “an influential mass party of the black population,” or “an anarchist underground organization.”³⁹³ This confidential report makes it quite clear that if the Black Panthers, and any other black

³⁹⁰ “Über die Black Panther Party, Quelle: Abt. USA/Kanada/Japan, 17 March 1971,” BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/2J/3391, 1-2, SAPMO.

³⁹¹ Daisy Weßel has argued that the SED was against all forms of black extremism, since any group that was anti-white ignored the importance of class in the struggle against oppression. Weßel, *Bild und Gegenbild*, 110.

³⁹² “Über die Black Panther Party, Quelle: Abt. USA/Kanada/Japan, 17 March 1971,” BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/2J/3391, 2-4, SAPMO.

³⁹³ “Über die Black Panther Party, Quelle: Abt. USA/Kanada/Japan, 17 March 1971,” BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/2J/3391, 6, SAPMO.

power groups, were to be the future of the civil rights movement, East Germany would not be providing the kind of solidarity to Black America that it once had.

Yet, if the SED was not particularly fond of the BPP, how does one explain the GDR's massive solidarity campaign and its friendliness with Angela Davis that would continue on into the 1980s? The reason becomes clear with a comparison between the Angela Davis solidarity campaigns in both the FRG and the GDR. In West Germany, Davis' connection to the Black Panthers and the black power movement was well-documented. In the West German solidarity campaign, she "emerged as the undisputed icon of the black power struggle at the beginning of the 1970s," write Höhn and Klimke.³⁹⁴ Davis' supporters condemned the American dedication to upholding and preserving a power structure that subjugated people of color, which they feared would be used to "murder" Davis through the death penalty. Höhn and Klimke regard this condemnation as evidence of the belief among her West German supporters that "Angela Davis's case represented a concerted attempt by U.S. authorities to criminalize and silence the Black Power movement...."³⁹⁵

Meanwhile, in the GDR, the narrative was slightly, but importantly, different. Indeed, East Germans also spoke of what they understood as the American government's attempts to murder Davis through the death penalty, and supporters spoke of the arrest and trial as the American government's effort to crush the country's black freedom movement. However, in the East German narrative, Davis was simply a communist. She was rarely depicted as a Black Panther or a particularly devoted member of the black power movement, though officials were willing to admit to her associations with the

³⁹⁴ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 118.

³⁹⁵ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 120.

movement. For example, in a pamphlet entitled *Kämpft Angela Davis frei!*, Davis' development into a black radical is detailed, starting with her childhood in Birmingham, Alabama and culminating in her arrest and trial. In the pamphlet it is acknowledged that Davis had *worked on behalf of* the BPP protesting various arrests, but her association with the BPP is never further defined. Instead, she is continually referred to as a communist.³⁹⁶

Davis herself would further cement this identity as a communist during her victory tour through the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, leading observers in the West to question the extreme orthodoxy of the statements she had made during this trip. A report from Radio Free Europe Research noted that during her trip to the GDR in September 1972, "some of her statements in the GDR exceeded even the anticipated degree of orthodoxy," even going so far as to praise the Berlin Wall. Regarding her trip to the Soviet Union, this same report remarked that "one Moscow dissident asked a New York Times reporter: 'Is she a fool or is she dishonest? It seems to me she is doing a disservice to her own countrymen by her statements here.'" Further, the report noted that a Black Panther paper in the US had accused Davis of deserting America's blacks in favor of the Communist Party.³⁹⁷

In this comparison, one finds that while the West may have viewed Davis as embodying the black power movement, the same was not true behind the Iron Curtain. As an incredibly vocal communist fighting for black rights, and with a case that had

³⁹⁶ Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland, ed., *Kämpft Angela Davis frei!* (Suhl: Freies Wort, 1971), 24.

³⁹⁷ Dorothy Miller, "Angela Davis in the GDR," Radio Free Europe Research, 18 Sep. 1972, 3. Many observers questioned Davis' intent—why would she strike such an orthodox Marxist-Leninist stance, when she had long been identified with the New Left and black power?—and her silence on political prisoners in the Eastern Bloc despite promises to work on behalf of such prisoners after her acquittal.

enraptured much of the international community, there was little chance of the SED bypassing the opportunity for propaganda through proclamations of solidarity with Davis. This could explain why they originally downplayed Davis' connection to black power. Yet, when Davis visited the GDR, she committed herself to an orthodoxy that pleased officials, confirming the picture East German officials had painted of her, further cementing herself as a friend of the GDR. Rather than contradicting the opinions expressed in the report about the BPP, East Germany's depiction of Davis underlined the SED's wishes to distance itself from black power.

A Fork in the Road

With the conclusion of the "Free Angela Davis!" movement, there would be no other East German solidarity action on behalf of an African American that would come close to matching its scale and intensity.³⁹⁸ In the absence of such ostentatious expressions of solidarity, the SED's biggest contribution to the relationship in this period was the preservation of the legacies of two figures—Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the case of Robeson, one finds that the tensions inherent in officials' efforts to maintain an older version of Black America becomes all too apparent when compared to East Germans' interest in more current elements of African American culture, like hip-hop. Though the SED's celebration of King and his legacy was in step with other international efforts to do the same, the very essentials that had once made King appealing to the East German people were no longer present in the SED's version of the African American by the 1980s. In both cases, a very clear disconnect between the SED

³⁹⁸ There was a movement to free the Wilmington 10, though that solidarity action never reached the heights of the campaign for Davis' freedom.

and the average East German is painfully obvious. What had at one time given the *appearance* of a Party and its people in agreement very clearly proved the opposite. A theme common to both the celebration of Robeson and King is the implication of a continued bond between the GDR and Black America, despite the fact that contacts between both groups were increasingly on the decline. This examination, however, also reveals a solidarity with Black America that the SED had not counted on.

Paul Robeson

On 23 January 1976, Robeson died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania of complications following a stroke. Though the sometimes larger-than-life figure that had served as a bridge between Black America and East Germany had passed away, his legacy continued to find a home in East Germany. One week after his passing, a group of students and teachers from the Paul Robeson High School in the Berlin borough of Köpenick honored Robeson, the students singing his songs and attendees listening to his recordings. According to news reports in the GDR, there were approximately 890 Pioneers and members of the FDJ, as well as 58 teachers, present at the mournful celebration.³⁹⁹ The *Daily World* reported on this East German celebration in April 1976, writing that while “formally the evening was held under the auspices of the World Peace Council, the Academy of Art and the Paul Robeson Committee of the GDR,” in reality, “the whole country was paying its respects” to Robeson. The article, written by Bob Lumer,⁴⁰⁰ noted that it was “only fitting that this memorial was held in the GDR.” The

³⁹⁹ “Robeson-Ehrung,” *Der Morgen*, 30 January 1976, clipping located at PRA 9.5_3.559.

⁴⁰⁰ Bob Lumer, an American, was the son of communist writer Hy Lumer. Bob was married to a German woman named Helga, and resided in the GDR.

message was that Robeson's love for the GDR ran deep and was an affection that East Germany also felt.⁴⁰¹

Referencing Robeson's decline in popularity in the US, Lumer praised East Germany, writing that the "GDR kept the memory of this great man alive while the American ruling class tried to blot it out of the public consciousness in the United States." In contrast, wrote Lumer, "the average GDR school child has known more about Paul Robeson than the average Black child in the U.S. ghetto." By preserving the memory of Robeson—as well as his image—and teaching East German children about Robeson's legacy, the GDR was "also carrying on the struggle which Paul Robeson wages. It is striking out against racism, war and exploitations."⁴⁰² Even in death, the GDR continued to exploit its connection to and support for Paul Robeson.

Two years after his death, the GDR celebrated what would have been Robeson's eightieth birthday, naming an East Berlin street after him, as well as a school in Leipzig, which was unveiled in April 1978.⁴⁰³ Officials also introduced a commemorative medal in Robeson's name, to be awarded to people who embodied the values and objectives for which the African American had fought.⁴⁰⁴ In justifying the large-scale celebration that marked Robeson's eightieth birthday, Robeson's image was once again used to demonstrate the GDR's "humanist character" and to illustrate its role in the struggle

⁴⁰¹ "GDR Honors beloved anti-fascist hero Paul Robeson," *Daily World*, 28 April 1976, clipping located at PRA 9.5/1.392.

⁴⁰² "GDR Honors beloved anti-fascist hero Paul Robeson," *Daily World*, 28 April 1976, clipping located at PRA 9.5/1.392.

⁴⁰³ Two years later the *Daily World* would publish a photo of children walking down Paul Robeson Street, captioning the photo: "Kindergarten children in the German Democratic Republic are learning their way around Berlin by walking from their school on Paul Robeson Street. Berlin has many streets named for world progressive figures." "Paul Robeson St. Berlin," *Daily World*, 17 Apr. 1980, clipping located at PRA 9.5/1.496.

⁴⁰⁴ "Ehrung für Robeson: Festveranstaltung zum 80. Geburtstag des Künstlers und Friedenskämpfers," *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 Apr. 1978.

against racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism.⁴⁰⁵ The planned celebration also provided an opportunity for East Germany to “reiterate our support for the struggle of the peaceful and democratic forces in the USA....”⁴⁰⁶ Following the celebration of Robeson’s birthday, the Academy of Arts of the German Democratic Republic, through an effort spearheaded by Brigitte Boegelsack, published a book in both English and German comprised of speeches given by the speakers at the event. These speakers included East Germans who had been well-acquainted with the activist and entertainer, as well as some friends from a variety of other countries.⁴⁰⁷ The creation of both an English and German version suggests that this bit of propaganda was intended for domestic and international audiences.

In 1982, efforts to preserve Robeson’s legacy continued with the Paul Robeson Committee marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the famed Robeson concert that was broadcast from New York via telephone to an audience in London while his passport had been revoked. On the agenda at this formal meeting marking the concert’s anniversary were plans to organize the celebration of Robeson’s eighty-fifth birthday the following year.⁴⁰⁸ As a part of this birthday celebration, a Paul Robeson exhibit opened in April 1983, which was housed at the main public library in Berlin.⁴⁰⁹ That same year, East

⁴⁰⁵ “Vorlage an das Sekretariat des ZK der SED, Betr.: Würdigung des 80. Geburtstages von Paul Robeson, 17 January 1978,” BArch-Berlin DZ 9/3858, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁰⁶ “Vorlage für das Sekretariat des ZK der SED, 20 February 1978,” BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/3A/3133, 17, SAPMO.

⁴⁰⁷ Brigitte Boegelsack, ed., *Paul Robeson, April 9, 1898-January 23, 1976: For His 80th Birthday* (Berlin: Academy of Arts of the German Democratic Republic, 1978).

⁴⁰⁸ Invitation from Franz Loeser to the Akademie der Künste der DDR, Paul-Robeson-Archiv, 31 March 1982, BArch-SAPMO DY 17/3752, SAPMO.

⁴⁰⁹ “GDR citizens meet Paul Robeson,” *Daily World*, 1 August 1984, clipping located at PRA 1/22.

Germany released a stamp with his image, inscribed with ““For Peace Against Racism, Paul Robeson 1898-1976.””⁴¹⁰

That Robeson was still significant to the East German elite some twenty-four years after his first visit to the state speaks to the place of honor he occupied among them. It also speaks to how “stale” things were intellectually in East Germany, as some of the same people who had sought to make Robeson a household name in the 1950s and 1960s were still behind efforts to keep him in the East German imagination in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴¹¹ In highlighting the “contemporary significance of his struggle,” the library exhibit’s organizers were using a figure that embodied a much earlier time in the perspective of the East German youth. Just as much of the GDR youth found SED rhetoric to miss the mark, their use of an older African American who had been popular in their parents’ youth adds to the ever-growing mountain of evidence highlighting the disconnect between a sclerotic SED elite and East German citizens, especially in the 1980s.

Hip-Hop in the GDR

The effort to keep Robeson’s image alive can be contrasted with East Germans’ interest in hip-hop, and the SED’s efforts to limit and restrict the consumption of the African American musical art form, reminiscent of its struggles against jazz many years

⁴¹⁰ Quoted in Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 132.

⁴¹¹ It is certainly the case that some of those who “honored” Robeson did so because it seemed to be the right move, whether for political or personal gain. It would be a mistake, however, to take the cynical stance that this affection for Robeson was entirely for show. Robeson had a number of friends among the East German elite, while other East Germans admired him for his entertainment talents and/or political stance.

earlier.⁴¹² This was done by trying to create a “system to support and encourage the practice of hip-hop”⁴¹³ under the SED’s auspices, attempting to “control its practice in order to make it conducive to their Socialist cause.” The SED provided locations where “hip-hop heads” could train and practice breakdancing, all under the watchful eye of East German authorities. This, in theory, gave officials the opportunity to watch and control the development of the art form.⁴¹⁴ Not surprisingly, most East Germans with an interest in the musical craft looked elsewhere to satisfy their cravings, in a more authentic fashion. The SED’s fears about and desires to contain hip-hop were apparently justified, however. According to Leonard Schmieding, the “performance of GDR hip-hop culture functioned as a form of imaginary and temporary *Republikflucht*, or flight from the GDR.”⁴¹⁵

Whereas African American folk music, like that performed by Robeson, had been utilized by the SED as part of an effort to create a desire to *remain* in East Germany, African American-inspired East German hip-hop was instead being used to *leave* the GDR, even if only in their minds. Schmieding has argued that such “escape” and “traveling” through hip-hop occurred with the use of musical samples from songs that were obtained from the West. In addition to their western pedigrees, these samples were a representative form of protest because sampling undercut East German policies

⁴¹² Mike Dennis and Norman LaPorte write that culture, which includes music, “was part of the struggle between East and West, in the absence of military engagement, for ideological, moral and political ascendancy.” Dennis and LaPorte, “State, Society, and Minority Groups in the GDR,” in *State and Minorities in Communist East Germany*, eds. Dennis and LaPorte (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 7. In this context, the GDR’s efforts to keep western forms of culture to a minimum take on an added gravity.

⁴¹³ Leonard Schmieding, “Boom Boxes and Backward Caps: Hip-Hop Culture in the GDR,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington DC*, S7 (2011), 67.

⁴¹⁴ Schmieding, “Of Windmills, Headspins, and Powermoves: Hip-hop in the GDR 1983-1989,” in *Ambivalent Americanizations: Popular and Consumer Culture in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Anne Koenen, Zoë A. Kusmierz, and Leonard Schmieding (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008), 66.

⁴¹⁵ Schmieding, “Boom Boxes,” 68.

regulating the number of songs that could be played by Western entertainers on the radio, allowing DJs to create music that was defined as East German, even though it used samples from Western musicians.⁴¹⁶

Despite efforts by the SED to create in the minds of East Germans a connection between the African American oppression expressed in hip-hop and the evils of America, East German hip-hop fans rarely did so. Some enjoyed the music much less for political and ideological reasons and more so simply as a means of entertainment. Examining the East German reception of *Beat Street*, a 1984 film produced and with music by Harry Belafonte exploring the hip-hop scene in New York City,⁴¹⁷ Schmieding has shown that despite the SED's efforts to use the movie as a teachable moment about the US, many East Germans turned to the film because they enjoyed "its style rather than any political message in its story."⁴¹⁸ Much like the "fans" discussed in Chapter Four, these examples show that East German affection for African American visitors or their culture did not necessarily signal an acceptance of the SED's ideological offerings.

For those who did find that politics or ideology drove their interest in hip hop, in most cases these GDR citizens were identifying with African American oppression in a

⁴¹⁶ Schmieding, "Boom Boxes," 72-73.

⁴¹⁷ Harry Belafonte had traveled to East Germany in 1983 to perform in a concert alongside the infamous West German rocker Udo Lindenberg (Lindenberg's *Sonderzug nach Pankow* was a hit in both East and West Germany, a song that grew out of East Germany's prior refusal to allow him to perform in the GDR. In the song, Lindenberg is having a "conversation" with Erich "Honey" Honecker, asserting that the East German leader is really a fan of rock, slipping on a leather jacket and listening to western rock in his bathroom in secret). According to Belafonte, *he* is the reason why Lindenberg was allowed to perform in the GDR, writing in his memoirs that upon being invited to perform in East Germany, "I said I'd go on one condition: that I be allowed to share the stage with another act of my choosing. I didn't say who. A few days before the concert, my German promoter let slip to the East German press that I'd be sharing the stage with...Udo Lindenberg." Harry Belafonte with Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 355.

⁴¹⁸ Schmieding, "Boom Boxes," 75. Certainly, some East German hip-hop enthusiasts consumed the music merely as a form of entertainment, owing in part to the fact that not all hip-hop was engrained with a political message. It would stand to reason that others disregarded political message where present because they failed to speak to their own experiences as white East Germans, or perhaps as a means of subtle protest, because the message was one with which the SED had long claimed an affinity.

way unintended by authorities. Despite the fact that hip-hop had been created as an expression of resistance against oppression in America—and was the message the SED wanted its citizens to come away with—East German fans understood this resistance as reflecting positively upon the US. Even though it was an African American cultural product that protested oppression in America, to East Germans this cultural product was *American* nonetheless. “For countless youth, the ‘land of unlimited opportunities’ became a myth and a symbol; they worshipped cultural goods such as jeans, rock ‘n’ roll and Beatnik poetry ‘as bearers of emancipatory energies.’” Of course, the more the SED protested, the more attractive such music became.⁴¹⁹ Further, the fact that African Americans could freely engage in such art in protest of the American government, something East Germans themselves could not readily do, was important; even the state-approved hip hop was, quite obviously, state mandated. This did not preclude East German rappers from attempting to utilize its emancipatory symbolism, but doing so was made all the more difficult because of SED regulations on the art form.

Michael Rauhut has made a similar argument in regards to blues, which had been popular years earlier: “African-American music projected the craving for ‘authenticity’ and ‘pure emotion,’ and young misfits considered the oppression of ‘the black’ as an ancestral example of historical suffering. The blues became an escape, idealized as a counter-world to the GDR system of social tutelage.”⁴²⁰ It is through examples like this that we see the formation of a sense of solidarity with Black America for some East Germans, yet outside of the official boundaries set by the SED.

⁴¹⁹ Michael Rauhut, “The Voice of the Other America: African-American Music and Political Protest in the German Democratic Republic,” in *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present*, eds. Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 102.

⁴²⁰ Rauhut, “The Voice of the Other America,” 105-107.

This sense of solidarity, for some East German rappers and rap fans, stemmed from their view that the African American experience was quite similar to their own in the GDR. Timothy S. Brown writes that, “in contrast to many West German rappers, who (to their credit) recognized that as educated, middle-class Germans they enjoyed a position of privilege that gave them little in common with oppressed Blacks in the U.S., East German rap fans tended to see a real parallel between ghetto life and their oppression as citizens of a communist dictatorship.”⁴²¹ He quotes Joy, a rapper from a group called Zoo Sound, as saying about *Beat Street* that, “We felt almost exactly like [the people portrayed in the movie]. Of course we had cash for a doctor, and here it didn’t rain [through the roof of] the apartment, and we didn’t have any gangsters on the street, but our life was just as dreary.”⁴²²

Certainly, Joy’s formulation that life in East Germany was comparable to the oppression faced by Black Americans is debatable, and even Joy’s own quote seems to reveal a certain understanding, even if subconsciously, that the lives of East Germans and the African Americans in the movie were not all that similar. What is clear here though is that, as Brown argues, “...the “Blackness” of hip hop is less important for its ethnic nationalist charge than for *its ability to stand in for various types of oppression*,” for many of the East German rappers and rap fans.⁴²³ Though they came at it from different perspectives, these East German rappers and fans of the art and the SED similarly appropriated elements of the black struggle for rights; blackness and the oppression that accompanied it in much of the world was never truly understood but rather utilized as a

⁴²¹ Timothy S. Brown, “‘Keeping it Real’ in a Different ‘Hood: (African-)Americanization and Hip Hop in Germany, in *The Vinyl Ain’t Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, eds. Dipannita Basu and Sidney J. Lemelle (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2006), 139.

⁴²² Brown, “‘Keeping it Real’ in a Different ‘Hood,” 139.

⁴²³ Brown, “‘Keeping it Real’ in a Different ‘Hood,” 146. Emphasis my own.

means of expressing distaste for oppression in general, to various ends. For this reason, both the SED and those seeking an escape from East German society were able to utilize blackness and the protest against oppression it often represented for different goals.

In its efforts to harness hip-hop for its own use, Schmieding has argued that the SED's "strategy of fighting the influences of American popular culture by actually (and paradoxically) embracing hiphop required quite some ideological twists." In support of this point Schmieding noted that, because officials viewed hip-hop through a Marxist-Leninist frame that "ignores race as an analytic category," they were often unsure of "how to respond to African-American cultural products."⁴²⁴ What Schmieding has overlooked, however, is that the SED—as this work has shown—had long had a history of appropriating elements of *African American* culture to fight the influences of *American* culture. In reality, such "ideological twists" as perceived by Schmieding actually required little effort for the SED of the 1980s. While the SED may have considered the solution to racism to lie in class struggle, they were not blind to the propaganda opportunities that became available through discussions of the race struggle.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In examining the SED's preservation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy, we find yet another example of the ways in which Black America's oppression could mean two different things to the East German public and the SED. In preserving the legacy of yet another African American figure, this period bore witness to the re-characterization of the relationship between East Germany and Martin Luther King, Jr. Contrary to propaganda

⁴²⁴ Schmieding, "Of Windmills, Headspins, and Powermoves," 73, 75.

of the 1980s, the SED did not welcome King with open arms when he visited East Berlin in September 1964. What makes King's integration into the SED's propaganda and doctrine especially significant is that his 1964 visit to East Germany was virtually ignored by the East German elite both before and immediately after his visit.⁴²⁵

Upon learning that King had been invited to West Berlin by the city's then-mayor (and future chancellor of West Germany) Willy Brandt in September 1964, Gerald Götting, a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in East Germany and Vice-President of the German-African Society, invited King to the GDR.⁴²⁶ At the time, letters show that King regretfully declined the invitation.⁴²⁷ At the same time that Götting was corresponding with King, Heinrich Grüber, the provost of St. Mary's Church in East Berlin, also invited King to the city.⁴²⁸ Ultimately, it is not clear what made King change his mind and when, because he did, at some point, decide to travel to the GDR and give a sermon.

After participating in several events in West Berlin, King and his colleagues arrived at Checkpoint Charlie on the evening of 13 September 1964, though King did not have his passport with him.⁴²⁹ According to Alcyone Scott, who accompanied King to the east as a translator, when the East German border guards discovered that King was missing his passport, they stated that he was not allowed to enter the country.⁴³⁰ Scott

⁴²⁵ Though the SED was generally hostile toward religion, the churches were allowed to remain.

⁴²⁶ While the CDU was one of several political parties that comprised the National Front in the GDR, the notion that these parties exercised any real independence from the SED's party-line was largely nominal.

⁴²⁷ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 91; *Martin Luther King's Vermächtnis* (Berlin: Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands, 1968), 57-58.

⁴²⁸ Roland Stolte, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964 in Berlin," Evangelical Parish of St. Petri—St. Mary's Church, Berlin, *The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive*.

⁴²⁹ Alcyone Scott, interview with Martin Klimke, Sturgeon Bay, WI, 8 June 2009, "A Hushed Atmosphere of Awesome Stillness," *The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive*.

⁴³⁰ Scott, interview.

claims that she then argued with one of the guards, telling him that refusing King entry would be a bad idea because of all of the people waiting to hear him speak. Then, “he then turns around and we go back in [to the barracks] and after a while he fills out some papers or a paper and our passports and he hands it all to me. I didn’t read the documents or even look at them I just held on to them. He had given us permission to go in, and that was the way we got through the wall.”⁴³¹

Ebony magazine gave a simpler recounting of the story, writing that though King was initially denied entry to the state, one of the guards recognized him from television, and King was then admitted without his passport. The article summed up the encounter at Checkpoint Charlie, writing that: “It was the first time on record since the erection of the wall that anyone other than a defector had been allowed to enter East Berlin without presenting an official document.”⁴³² The Stasi’s reporting on the incident, not surprisingly, differs from that of both Scott and *Ebony*. According to the official report, when King and his entourage reached Checkpoint Charlie, two of the people with him approached the guards, and without making explicit reference to King’s identity, declared that their guest had no passport with him. The guards responded with the official line, which was that one could not enter “democratic Berlin” without a passport. Eventually, another guard recognized King and asked him if he had any other form of identification, ultimately accepting one of King’s credit cards as a proof of identity.⁴³³

Of course, the Stasi version paints the state in a positive light, asserting that the guards simply were unaware that King was the guest in question. Once made aware of

⁴³¹ Scott, interview.

⁴³² “Red Berlin Admits Popular Rights Leader without Pass,” *Ebony*, November 1964.

⁴³³ Hauptabteilung Paßkontrolle und Fahndung, 13 September 1964, BStU, MfS 20721/92 175, 2, BStU. Remarkably, King was permitted entry to the communist state using his credit card—a symbol of capitalist excess.

this fact, the guards bent the rules to allow King into the country. The real story is likely a mixture of the three versions presented above, but regardless, what is quite clear is that King was not officially “expected” by the SED. This is a point that cannot be overstated; when one considers King’s international renown and his position vis-à-vis the American government, the fact that the SED passed up the opportunity to invite King to East Berlin was significant. The reason why becomes clear when one considers what King meant to those clamoring to hear him speak.

Though the SED was silent about King’s visit, East German citizens were well-aware through word-of-mouth that the activist was to visit their capital, and many turned out to hear him speak at St. Mary’s Church, in East Berlin. In fact, so many people turned out that organizers were unexpectedly forced to funnel extra attendees into a second church, where King gave the same sermon for a second time in East Germany (after giving it earlier that day in West Berlin). Upon arriving at St. Mary’s Church, Scott recalled the scene as one befitting the arrival of a rock star:

...I could not get out of the van because people were pressing against the van to get to King. And you thought you were with the Beatles because the people mobbed him, they just mobbed him. [...] I’d never been in that excited a situation, where people were clamoring to be near somebody. And, that made you very aware of the import of this visit for them.⁴³⁴

After entering the church, Scott noted that it was packed to the rafters, filled with people who were anxiously awaiting King’s arrival. Scott had also been present when King spoke to West Germans earlier in the day, and was able to compare their responses with those of the East Germans. Unlike the West Germans, the crowd at St. Mary’s Church

⁴³⁴ Scott, interview.

did not “have any freedom to claim,” observed Scott, who believed that the East Germans absorbed King’s words about passive resistance and struggle quite hungrily.⁴³⁵

In his sermon, King remarked that the situation of East German citizens behind the Berlin Wall, and that of African Americans in the US, was quite different, though they did share some similarities. “There is a common humanity,” King stated, “which makes us sensitive to the sufferings of one another.” Indeed, the wall that divided Germans was a “symbol of the divisions of men on the face of the earth.” Despite these similarities, King was hesitant to “attempt to bring you God’s word for your situation. (I am not familiar with your plight. I don’t know your politics.)” Instead, he chose to speak about the African American situation, and the “way in which the spirit moves our midst in the freedom struggle in the southern United States.”⁴³⁶

In offering a brief history of the black freedom movement in the US, as well as the modes of resistance the non-violent segment of the movement had supported, King noted that:

It will not be easy, and one of the things we have learned is the necessity for a group action in the public sector of life. [...] Group action, even mass action, in the public realms of politics and economics is the only way that we can get hope to confront the tremendous forces of our time.⁴³⁷

Despite his insistence that their situations were different and that “you must discern that which is relevant to your place here in Germany,” East Germans’ response to his sermon was electrifying. Scott observed that “Everybody in that church was totally wrapped up in someone whose story they knew and who represented the shame of America and its

⁴³⁵ Scott, interview.

⁴³⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “East Berlin: Sermon Held at St. Mary’s Church,” 13 September 1964, Transcript, The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive.

⁴³⁷ King, “East Berlin,” The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive.

oppression but who had the courage to resist, and ask others, in their situations, also to resist.” She went on to state that for East Germans in that church, people who felt that they really had no future, such words were stirring and captivating. “I don’t think,” said Scott, that, “I’ve ever been present where all of those things that one wants to believe in and desperately hope for are given expression with such resonance.”⁴³⁸

An examination of King’s sermon, and East German citizens’ reaction to it, provides some insight into the SED’s failure to invite King to the state and its decision to remain silent about the visit afterward. Given the SED’s problematic relationship with its people, it is obvious that King’s rhetoric of resistance, even though non-violent, was not something the SED wanted to hand to its citizens on a platter. For a ruling party that already had a tenuous hold on its public, officials were at pains *not* to encourage any other forms of resistance to which the people had not already resorted.⁴³⁹ Höhn and Klimke also suggest that perhaps East German officials’ silence at King’s arrival owed to the fact that they may have been “too surprised by the actual course of events,” though this would not explain why very little was said about the visit in its immediate aftermath.⁴⁴⁰

Since the SED had seemingly chosen to distance itself from King, it was the churches, then, that ultimately brought King into the East German mainstream, argue Höhn and Klimke.⁴⁴¹ In the immediate aftermath of King’s visit, he was heavily

⁴³⁸ Scott, interview.

⁴³⁹ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 104.

⁴⁴⁰ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 104.

⁴⁴¹ The churches in East Germany had a very fraught relationship with the SED. Though subjected to repressive measures, 1978 marked an official separation of church and state. Roland Stolte suggests that the sermons held at St. Mary’s Church and St. Sophia’s Church, and King’s meetings with members of administration from the Evangelical Churches of Berlin-Brandenburg, “came to be regarded as a sign that the Church in the GDR could anticipate complete freedom of speech, removed from state interference.” He

discussed in religious circles, and Höhn and Klimke believe that King's popularity among the East German religious was a signal to GDR publishing houses to publish his texts. In doing so, however, they still needed to present King in a manner palatable to the SED. Therefore religious figures and publishers made the argument that socialism's humanist outlook was not at odds with Christianity, and claimed that King himself was a staunch humanist. According to Höhn and Klimke, this helped to eventually integrate King into the state's officially-accepted doctrine.⁴⁴² Worth considering, too, is that King's assassination in 1968 helped to cement his integration into the state's doctrine, as one could now paint him as a victim of the imperialist West.⁴⁴³

Though the SED may have, at the outset, issued radio silence in response to King's September 1964 visit, by the end of the 1980s it had taken on the mantle of preserving his legacy by celebrating Martin Luther King Day. King's widow Coretta Scott King and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center had worked for years to establish a federal holiday in the US honoring the fallen civil rights leader.⁴⁴⁴ On 20 January 1986, Americans celebrated the first national King Holiday, though at that time, only seventeen states officially observed it.⁴⁴⁵ In September of that same year, Coretta,

also goes on to note that though a more thorough analysis is needed, "the Church's reception of King's idea of non-violent resistance to any and all injustice contributed to the peaceful character of the 1989 revolution." Stolte, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964 in Berlin," The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany Digital Archive.

⁴⁴² Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 104.

⁴⁴³ Beginning *Martin Luther Kings Vermächtnis* is a copy of a speech given by Gerald Götting nearly a week after King's assassination. He opens by stating that "Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King...has become the victim of a brutal assassination [by] the ruling imperialist and racist circles in the USA." Götting, "Ein Leben für Menschlichkeit und Brüderlichkeit," in *Martin Luther Kings Vermächtnis*, 5.

⁴⁴⁴ After years of rallying in the US Congress for a public holiday to celebrate the fallen civil rights activist's birthday, the holiday was finally signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1983, marking the third Monday in January as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The first celebration of the holiday was in 1986.

⁴⁴⁵ For a timeline of efforts to enact a federal King Holiday, see www.thekingcenter.org/making-king-holiday, accessed 30 April 2013.

on behalf of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, sent a letter to Willi Stoph, the Prime Minister of the GDR, as part of an effort to broaden international commemoration of the holiday the following year. She noted that earlier in 1986, “more than one hundred countries” had participated in the celebration in their own ways, some co-hosting events with the American embassies in their countries, while “in others, local governmental authorities declared a holiday in honor of Martin and held official ceremonies.”⁴⁴⁶

She went on to note that “in some instances, schools, religious organizations, and many private organizations concerned with peace and human rights held observances of their own.” For the second observance of King’s holiday, his widow sought to involve more celebrants, “asking people all over the world to make Martin’s Day a day of peace, a day of amnesty and a day for reaching out to the most needy among us—the poor, the hungry, the homeless and the disenfranchised.” King even requested of Stoph that the GDR “consider declaring the third Monday of each January a holiday in honor of Dr. King in your country.”⁴⁴⁷

Six days before the holiday was set to be observed in the US, Stoph responded to King, thanking her for her letter from the previous September. He assured her that in the GDR, East Germans held the “unforgettable pioneer of the American Civil Rights- and Peace Movement” in the highest regard. Since, wrote Stoph, East Germany was dedicated to disarmament and friendly coexistence and sought to avoid a nuclear holocaust, a King celebration in his country was an obvious next-step. Stoph believed that the GDR was well-placed to fully embody King’s dream for “a world without war,

⁴⁴⁶ Coretta Scott King to Willi Stoph, 16 September 1986, BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁴⁷ Coretta Scott King to Willi Stoph, 16 September 1986, BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

oppression, hunger, and poverty.” He closed his letter by informing Coretta that the Peace Council had plans for a memorial honoring her husband’s life and work.⁴⁴⁸ This memorial, held on 22 January 1987, began at 10am and included performances by the Paul Robeson Choir singing “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “John Brown’s Body”, followed by speeches and the reading of a letter that the Peace Council had sent to King’s widow. The Paul Robeson Choir closed out the service by singing “When the Saints Go Marching In” and “We Shall Overcome,” the latter a song popularly associated in East Germany with Black America, and Paul Robeson specifically.⁴⁴⁹

In the wake of the celebration, a press release noted that the event’s speakers had, while fêting King, expressed the GDR’s support for the Soviet Union’s proposal for a reduction of nuclear arms by the year 2000. East Germany also renounced the creation—on both sides—of any new weapons for use on earth and in space, referencing American president Ronald Reagan’s (thoroughly mocked) Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, or “Star Wars”), a program that would use weapons systems based both on the ground and in space. In essence, the message was that the GDR stood against all forms of war, just as the late African American civil rights activist had.⁴⁵⁰ This focus on nuclear war and its weapons was not a new one for the GDR, though it had not always been connected to civil rights activists by SED propaganda. Arguments about nuclear war would continue to frame the SED’s discussion of King for the next two years.

⁴⁴⁸ Willi Stoph to Coretta Scott King, 13 January 1987, BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁴⁹ “Friedensrat der DDR, Ablaufplan für die Veranstaltung zur Würdigung von Dr. Martin Luther King anlässlich seines Geburtstages und im Zusammenhang mit dem seinem Andenken gewidmeten Nationalen Feiertag in den USA, 22 January 1987,” BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁵⁰ “Pressemitteilung anlässlich der Gedenkveranstaltung des Friedensrates der DDR zu Ehren von Dr. Martin Luther King am 23.1.1987 in Berlin, 22 January 1987,” BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

The following year, in April 1988, the Peace Council marked the twentieth anniversary of King's death, in association with the League for People's Friendship in the GDR (*Liga für Völkerfreundschaft der DDR*) and the Executive Board of the German Christian Democratic Union. In the plans drawn up for the remembrance, it was noted that the organizations had several goals, one of which was to convey the ways in which King's dreams for "peace, détente, disarmament, and peaceful coexistence" were being fulfilled in the GDR. Scheduled to participate in the event were again members of the Paul Robeson Choir, as well as delegates from brigades and other organizations bearing both King's and Paul Robeson's names.⁴⁵¹

Götting, one of the men who had extended an invitation to King in 1964, spoke at the commemoration ceremony. In his speech he declared that King was "alive in his legacy," a legacy that was carried along as an example by everyone struggling for "peace and social justice," i.e., East Germans. Again drawing a link between King and nuclear war, Götting noted that King was often quoted not only at "peace conferences" and at "church services," but also at "protest marches against racism and nuclear proliferation (*Hochrüstung*)."⁴⁵² Following the completion of the commemoration service, Günther Drefahl, president of the GDR's Peace Council, sent a telegram to Coretta Scott King informing her of the meeting. He closed out the telegram by writing that "We are confident that the legacy" of Martin Luther King, Jr. had found "fulfillment in our common struggle for a peaceful and just world."⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ "Konzeption für die Gedenkveranstaltung des Friedensrates der DDR, der Liga für Völkerfreundschaft der DDR und des Hauptvorstandes der Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands anlässlich des 20. Todestages von Dr. Martin Luther King," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁵² Gerald Götting, 4 April 1988, BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁵³ Telegram, Günther Drefahl to Mrs. Coretta Scott King, BArch DZ 9/3865, BArch-Berlin.

In November 1988, the SED once again began planning their King celebration for the following year. As in previous years, the SED sought to spotlight their proclaimed stance on world issues by commemorating King's work and legacy. In 1989, the ceremony was held at the Apollo Hall in the German State Opera. That year, a polytechnic high school and a work collective were to be given the name "Martin Luther King."⁴⁵⁴ There would also be special guests at the celebration: an American delegation that included Dr. Joseph Lowery and his wife Evelyn, as well as Acie Byrd.⁴⁵⁵ The American guests were in East Berlin for five days, from 6-11 January 1989.⁴⁵⁶

On 9 January, the name "Martin Luther King" was bestowed upon a polytechnic school in the Berlin borough of Marzahn.⁴⁵⁷ The American delegation attended this naming ceremony, at which Werner Rumpel, the First Vice President and Secretary General of the GDR's Peace Council, spoke. Rumpel used the occasion to remind his audience about the hardships America's blacks had faced, transitioning into an oft-repeated refrain, noting that "in our humanist, socialist society, racial hatred and racial discrimination" had forever been eradicated. In its place, "equality, brotherhood, peace, friendship, and solidarity" were not only celebrated by the government, but the people as well, both young and old. It was this, Rumpel continued, that "also impressed Martin

⁴⁵⁴ Friedensrat der DDR, Abt. Auslandsinformation, "Vorlage für das Sekretariat des ZK der SED, Betr: Würdigung des 60. Geburtstages von Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King in der DDR (15. Januar 1989), 28 November 1988," BArch-SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/3A/4768, 113, SAPMO.

⁴⁵⁵ "Rede von Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Günther Drefahl, Präsident des Friedensrates der DDR, auf der festlichen Veranstaltung am 10. Januar 1989 aus Anlaß des 60. Geburtstages von Dr. Martin Luther King jr.," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin. Dr. Lowery was the third president and co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Like King and Ralph Abernathy before him, Lowery was also a minister and civil rights activist in the US. Evelyn Lowery, the daughter of civil rights activists, was herself an activist and involved in the SCLC. Byrd too was an activist, veteran, and political scientist, as well as a member of the SCLC.

⁴⁵⁶ "Aktivitäten des Friedensrates der DDR aus Anlaß des 60. Geburtstages von Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., am 15. Januar 1989," BArch DZ 2652, fol. 1, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁵⁷ "Aktivitäten des Friedensrates der DDR aus Anlaß des 60. Geburtstages von Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., am 15. Januar 1989," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

Luther King,” during his trip to East Berlin in 1964. “Here he saw his dreams become a reality,” an obvious reference to King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.⁴⁵⁸

That Rumpel would argue that King “saw his dreams become a reality” in East Germany (and implicitly, *not* in the US) is in itself not surprising—he was certainly not the first East German official to stretch the truth in order to praise the East German socialist experiment. Despite the image of the close friendship that Rumpel painted, though, King spent very little time in East Germany (several hours, as a matter of fact) and had said very little on the record about the state, even remarking in his 1964 sermons in East Berlin that he knew little about the Germans’ situation. It is, however, indicative of an effort to retroactively write King into the SED’s version of East German history, and importantly, to write East Germany into King’s history as well.

The following day, on 10 January 1989, Doreen Müller, a teacher at the newly-minted Martin Luther King High School (*Martin-Luther-King-Oberschule*), spoke at the ceremony at the German State Opera.⁴⁵⁹ The teachers and students of the high school, she announced, had prepared for the honor of the renaming by “familiarizing” themselves with King’s life. Acknowledging King’s commitment to social justice and peace, Müller declared that an understanding of King’s struggle had fostered in them a drive to become active in solidarity movements. As evidence of this drive, Müller referenced their

⁴⁵⁸ “Ansprache des 1. Vizepräsidenten und Generalsekretärs des Friedensrates der DDR, Werner Rumpel, anlässlich der Verleihung des Namens ‘Martin Luther King’ an die 16. POS in Berlin-Marzahn,” BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁵⁹ The naming of schools after individuals was an old German tradition. According to the GDR’s version of this tradition, most schools were typically expected to bear the name of communist revolutionaries or anti-fascist resistance fighters, who could come from anywhere in the world as long as they lived up to East German ideological values. Pragmatically, the names supplemented the GDR’s numerical naming system for the schools, but ideologically, the intent was to infuse the students with the political values of the school’s namesake, as the school officials dedicated time to teaching the students about the individual for which their school was named. Catherine Plum, “Contested Namesakes: East Berlin School Names under Communism and in Reunified Germany,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 45:4 (Winter 2005), 626, 627.

involvement in pushing for a pardon of the Sharpeville Six through protest resolutions and petitions.⁴⁶⁰ She closed her speech by stating that the students and teachers of the school would give their all to make sure that they honored and lived up to the name and legacy bestowed upon their school.⁴⁶¹

When Günther Drefahl spoke at this same ceremony, he began by praising the late activist and explained why King's legacy and his life's goals were so compatible with East Germany's. In this explanation we see more clearly how officials created an *image* of King that fit into the SED's worldview.⁴⁶² Drefahl openly admitted that King's humanism grew out of his Christian beliefs; obviously, for a man so clearly devoted to God and religion, the SED could not ignore this aspect of King's background. Yet, it was in scientific socialism, stated Drefahl, that King found many similarities to his Christian worldview (*Weltanschauung*). Upon reading Marx and Lenin, King, according to Drefahl, was able to grasp why so many people had turned to communism. Drefahl was sure to convey the image of King coming to this conclusion as a young man in his twenties, suggesting a long-held understanding of the appeal of the works of Marx and Lenin and their theories.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ The Sharpeville Six were six South Africans who had been arrested for the murder of Sharpeville's Deputy Mayor Kuzwayo Jacob Dlamini in the wake of a violent protest march. The Six were sentenced to death, a ruling that angered much of the international community. Ultimately, the sentences were commuted and instead the Six were to serve sentences of 18-25 years. Between 1991 and 1992, the Six were released from prison early.

⁴⁶¹ "Rede von Doreen Müller—Gedenkveranstaltung Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, 10.1.1989," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁶² Though Drefahl was a member of the Peace Council, this organization, like many others, was so closely entwined with the SED that he would not have painted an image of King that stood at odds with that of the SED.

⁴⁶³ "Rede von Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Günther Drefahl, Präsident des Friedensrates der DDR, auf der festlichen Veranstaltung am 10. Januar 1989 aus Anlaß des 60. Geburtstages von Dr. Martin Luther King jr.," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin. In a speech given at a "peace meeting" (*Friedensmeeting*) at a children's hospital in Berlin-Friedrichshain that same day, Deba Wieland, a journalist and vice president of the Peace Council, made this same point, almost word-for-word. Deba Wieland, Vizepräsidentin des Friedensrates

In keeping with the GDR's previous connection made between King and nuclear war, Drefahl also reiterated that East Germany and its citizens only wanted disarmament, a world safe from war, as well as international development. Drefahl looked back on King's 1964 visit to East Berlin, slightly altering the story to create the impression that East Germans had long stood behind King and offered "moral support" for his struggle, "offering...great sympathy," to "King and his friends...." This was evidenced by the "warm welcome" he had received in September 1964 from the East German people; Drefahl clearly glossed over the absence of the SED and the fact that some of that "warm welcome" may have owed to sentiments that pit the citizens *against* the SED instead of *with* it.⁴⁶⁴

In the GDR's efforts to preserve the legacies of Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King, Jr., the SED sought to maintain ties to two figures that had loomed large not only in the African American civil rights movement and internationally as well, but among the East German population. While efforts to preserve Robeson's legacy was at odds with younger East Germans' desires to consume contemporary African American cultural products, the upholding of King's legacy in the GDR was indeed keyed into a contemporary movement to do the same elsewhere. Yet, the SED very neatly rewrote its history with the activist, using an enthusiastic public reaction to King's visit as proof of the SED's own long-standing support for the late activist. The public's excitement about King and his speech likely owed not to a sense of socialist solidarity, but rather a solidarity linked by a call for the resistance of government oppression. Preserving the

der DDR, "Ansprache auf dem Friedensmeeting in der Kinderklinik Berlin-Friedrichshain am 10. Januar 1989," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

⁴⁶⁴ "Rede von Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Günther Drefahl, Präsident des Friedensrates der DDR, auf der festlichen Veranstaltung am 10. Januar 1989 aus Anlaß des 60. Geburtstages von Dr. Martin Luther King jr.," BArch DZ 9/2652, BArch-Berlin.

legacies of King and Robeson simply highlighted the ever-growing distance between the SED and its citizens.

The SED's Approach to the Friendship

A major theme present throughout this work has been the SED's proclamation of solidarity with Black America and other people of color struggling for rights. The section that follows will delve further into this theme; though the existence of the civil rights movement and East Germany's yearning for legitimacy drove this relationship, ultimately the SED's approach to the relationship and its real views on blacks are both what made the alliance possible and part of the reason why it eventually fizzled out. If we were to take the SED's rhetoric at face-value—assertions of a commitment to anti-racism and therefore a shared struggle with African Americans against the capitalist West—even with the loss of a highly-publicized African American civil rights movement and the GDR's large-scale receipt of diplomatic legitimacy, the bonds that tied East Germans to African Americans should have remained. Ultimately, the relationship weakened, but the capitalist West still existed and blacks remained oppressed.

Looking beyond the patina of East German rhetoric and propaganda, one finds that contrary to the Party's stated claims, the SED's primary interest had not been in creating links with broad swathes of African Americans, but rather with an incredibly selective group of African Americans. Philip Matthes has argued that this narrow focus owed to the fact that the Party's main interest was in befriending those who could

influence opinion.⁴⁶⁵ A large part of the Party's problem, however, was that they often overestimated the influence of their African American friends. The very criteria that made these figures the perfect representatives of the evils of American (and by extension, Western) tyranny constituted the very reasons why they would be unable to influence anyone in a position of authority in any appreciable way. It seems that the SED often equated popularity with influence, and to a certain extent, this popularity was useful domestically, as the example of Paul Robeson shows. However, it was Robeson's communist ties that had severely damaged his reputation in the US. No matter how positively Robeson or his wife spoke of the GDR, no one in a position of power in the American government was going to change their stance on the legitimacy of the East German state because of what the couple had to say.

Significant too was the SED's seeming-ignorance of the friction between many organizations in the civil rights movement and the CPUSA.⁴⁶⁶ The SED's approach to creating sympathy among influential African Americans was largely done through the CPUSA and radical black leftists. Yet, the SED failed to understand that the relationship between the CPUSA and many of the organizations that fell under the umbrella of the civil rights movement was quite poor, making the American Communist Party's sphere of influence rather small. What is more, the emphasis on class oppression rather than anti-black racism seriously undermined what for many African Americans was their reason for fighting. The assumption that its own view, which subsumed race struggle

⁴⁶⁵ Philip Matthes, "David und Goliath: Der Anerkennungslobbyismus der DDR in den USA von 1964 bis 1974," in *Umworbener Klassenfeind: Das Verhältnis der DDR zu den USA*, eds. Uta A. Balbier and Christiane Rösch (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2006), 43.

⁴⁶⁶ Matthes, "David und Goliath," 46.

within class struggle, predominated, serves as yet another reminder that the SED failed to understand the nuances of the civil rights struggle.

Additionally, this approach also overlooked the fact that the civil rights movement's driving focus was on domestic issues.⁴⁶⁷ For a state that was allegedly so anti-racist as to seek out racism abroad and remove it everywhere it was present, an elementary understanding of the civil rights movement prevailed. It is in this that we see both why the SED's views on blacks made the relationship possible and why it fell apart: officials were able to utilize the message of the civil rights movement in order to accomplish their own goals because they too saw blacks as a commodity. This way of thinking also ensured a superficial understanding of blacks and their freedom movements, failing to foster any real, lasting friendship. Once the two factors that spawned the relationship, East Germany's search for legitimacy and the American civil rights movement, began to decline in need and intensity so too did the friendship, because it was not based on any real "kinship" or "brotherhood," but rather the urgency of the current situation.

A brief examination of Black America's exchanges with the Soviet Union further brings into relief the SED's own approach to the alliance with African American activists and makes the approach to the friendship clearer. With the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the subsequent creation of the USSR, the Soviet Union's intersection with Black America reached its zenith in the interwar period, though there were still Black Americans who traveled to or lived there in the years after WWII. The Soviet Union determined that championing racial equality had the potential to operate as an "important

⁴⁶⁷ Matthes, "David und Goliath," 46.

weapon in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism,” understanding that by supporting equal rights for blacks, it could carve for itself a path to international support.⁴⁶⁸ Though the USSR never attracted large numbers of African Americans and the CPUSA never counted among its members a particularly large constituent of blacks, this factor was not important. What was, however, was that the value “of the Soviets’ emphasis on the race question lay not so much in recruiting blacks to their cause but in using racial injustice as a powerful critique of American society as a whole.”⁴⁶⁹

Similarly, if we are to assess how East Germany profited from the relationship with Black America by how many blacks actually belonged to this relationship, then the results would be dismal. However, if we consider the friendship in terms of the critique it enabled the GDR to make of the US and West Germany, then it was quite a profitable relationship.⁴⁷⁰ Furthermore, the SED’s ability to defend, campaign, and advocate for the world’s blacks while quietly supporting a racist worldview at home was far from contradictory because its real goal had never been to attain rights for blacks, nor had it been to provide blacks with a permanent place within the East German orbit. These efforts had been about affecting a sea change in international opinion by positioning East Germany as the opposite of the allegedly corrupt, fascist, and racist West Germany, the objective being to provide the SED with the legitimacy it needed and carve out a place for the GDR as an important international actor and economic power. In theory, at least.

Quite like the SED in the 1960s, the Soviet Union spent much of the 1930s

“trying to convince black visitors to the Soviet Union and their compatriots at home that

⁴⁶⁸ Barbara Keys, “An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in International Perspective,” *The Historian*, 71:1 (Spring 2009), 35.

⁴⁶⁹ Keys, “An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union,” 36.

⁴⁷⁰ The benefits to both Black America and East Germany will be considered in more detail in the conclusion.

the Soviet Union represented not simply a ‘workers’ paradise’ but a paradise for all races.”⁴⁷¹ When well-known or influential Black Americans visited the Soviet Union, just as was the case in East Germany, they were generally treated quite well by the Soviets. It is not surprising that many left impressed by the Soviets’ “lack of institutionalized racism,” and feeling as if they actually had stepped foot in paradise.⁴⁷² In assessing the truth of these claims of Soviet anti-racism, Maxim Matusevich has argued for a correlation between the Soviet rhetoric and reality, at least during the first wave of what he refers to as “black travelers,” those who arrived prior to WWII. Citing a study by Terry Martin, Matusevich maintained that “the Soviets practiced what they preached and even promulgated an affirmative action empire of sorts. One testimony after another indicates that black travellers yearning for a place free of racism had largely found what they were looking for upon their arrival in the USSR.”⁴⁷³ He concluded that, after reading numerous accounts of a Soviet distaste for (American) racism,

one gets a distinct impression that the anti-racist rhetoric of the government, the lofty internationalism of the Comintern did in fact penetrate the fabric of Soviet society. Not only the majority of Soviet citizens appeared to their black visitors to be immune to Western-style racism, but they also apparently set out to shame and educate by example an occasional American or European racist wading into their midst.⁴⁷⁴

Though Soviet anti-racism may have been borne of genuine racial tolerance, we should be careful not to assume the same about the East German case. There were indeed many African Americans, as we have seen in earlier chapters, who attested to the “fact” that East Germans lived out the anti-racism its government so enthusiastically advertised.

⁴⁷¹ Keys, “An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union,” 37.

⁴⁷² Keys, “An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union,” 38, 40.

⁴⁷³ Maxim Matusevich, “Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society,” *Diaspora* 1 (2008), 61-2.

⁴⁷⁴ Matusevich, “Journeys of Hope,” 62-3.

Yet, as the black military deserters or Aubrey Pankey, for example, also attested to, racism was certainly alive and well in East Germany.

Instead, the East German case is most similar to that of Matusevich's second wave of "black travelers" to arrive in the USSR, those who came in the 1960s and later. At that point, argued Matusevich, much of the anti-racist propaganda that had characterized the Soviet Union's early days had, under "Stalin's reign of terror," become "ossified and streamlined to represent the official Soviet line in ongoing cold war bickering with the West...." As such, it failed to correspond to any real feelings held by Soviet populations.⁴⁷⁵ Also similarly, both East Germany and the Soviet Union shared a sense of unease, and sometimes distaste, for certain elements of the African American civil rights movement, though, according to Matusevich this Soviet distaste seemed to be more far-reaching. "[T]hough the Soviet regime rarely failed to showcase its anti-racist and anti-colonial credentials it harbored ambivalent attitudes towards liberation movements whose direction it couldn't control and whose rhetoric evoked sentiments (i.e., strong religious undertones of the Civil Rights movement in the US) alien to the Soviets."⁴⁷⁶

On the African American side, their approach was generally a reactive one. There were some who were proactive in reaching out to East Germany, but by and large Black Americans came into the relationship on the heels of an East German expression of solidarity or an invitation to the state. While the relationship would never have reached the heights it did without the involvement of African Americans, it was in large part the SED that kept the relationship going. The SED's superficial understanding of the civil

⁴⁷⁵ Matusevich, "Journeys of Hope," 68.

⁴⁷⁶ Matusevich, "Journeys of Hope," 74.

rights movement, the use of an anti-racist rhetoric that did not always ring true, and the limits surrounding the motivations on both sides (the achievement of black rights in the US and East German legitimacy, for Black America and the SED, respectively), meant that it was never a relationship that would maintain the fervor of the Robeson and Davis years.⁴⁷⁷ For all of the discussion about Black Americans and East Germans being on parallel tracks in their struggles, there was actually little else to connect them.

Concluding Thoughts

The 1960s and early 1970s in East Germany saw a parade of well-known African American visitors. In the years that followed, all of that came to a fairly abrupt halt; very few Black Americans set foot on East German soil, and though the SED always had their familiar refrain of anti-racism and solidarity with the civil rights movement at the ready, the energy that had previously accompanied the relationship was no longer there. This was no longer the relationship as Paul Robeson and Angela Davis knew it. As the intensity of the civil rights movement began to wane, so too did a continued East German interest in the struggle for black rights. At the same time, the East German need for their Black American friends also began to fade, though it did not disappear completely.

There were still benefits to be had from preserving the legacies of Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King, Jr., as opportunities to showcase the GDR's progressive nature were always welcome. With these efforts to memorialize Robeson, however, one finds the SED's intellectual stagnation laid bare. Preserving the legacy and image of a figure from a much earlier period contrasted with East German interest in a contemporary Black

⁴⁷⁷ The limits of the self-interested motivations, in this case, refer to the decline of the civil rights movement in the US and the achievement of diplomatic recognition for the GDR.

American cultural product, hip-hop. Ironically, after years of (hollow) exhortations for East Germans to stand in solidarity with oppressed Black Americans, some East Germans were finally doing so. Yet, this appropriation of hip-hop and its struggle was a means for East Germans to protest their own oppression, and to “escape” from the confines of the East German borders, even if only in their minds. Meanwhile, King’s integration into the SED’s rhetoric, culminating in several celebrations of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, only served to highlight the distance between the Party and the citizens of the GDR. The very reasons for which East Germans had eagerly absorbed King’s message in 1964 were glossed over in the late 1980s by the SED.

Removing the veil of anti-racism, an examination of the SED’s approach to its relationship with Black America reveals a fairly debilitating misunderstanding of the African American civil rights movement and the various alliances formed within the movement. The SED’s decision to appeal to elite black leftists within the civil rights movement—in the hopes that these individuals would then use their influence to spread positive information about the GDR and how it deserved legitimacy—was flawed. It assumed a level of authority that many of the civil rights activists on the far left simply did not have, and was based on the assumption that the CPUSA had a far better relationship with the civil rights movement than it really did.

Soon enough, though, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the eventual unification of East and West Germany rendered the alliance between Black America and East Germany moot, though it seems unlikely that anything of importance would have developed had the GDR survived. The remnants of the relationship were, in East Germany, relegated to the archives, while many of the African Americans involved in the relationship had by

1989 either passed away or chose not to revisit in any significant way their interactions with the communist Germany.⁴⁷⁸ In the years that followed the unification of the two Germanys, the racism that came to characterize Germany, most especially in the eastern portion of the state, seemed to contemporaries to be at intense odds with the anti-racist state the SED had long touted. The following chapter, the conclusion, will address these tensions.

⁴⁷⁸ The exception appears to be Angela Davis, who has often spoken of her relationship with East Germany.

Chapter Six: Conclusion **A Racism Retrospective**

“...as a person who came from a country where racial discrimination is regarded as a law and is being practiced publicly, I say honestly that there is nothing like racial discrimination in the German Democratic Republic.”
—David O. Ongiro⁴⁷⁹

“Propaganda told an entirely different story about socialist relationships with Blacks, which was a completely false story.”
—Oliver Harrington⁴⁸⁰

In 1989, the political and ideological landscape of Eastern Europe changed drastically as communist governments lost their hold in the Eastern Bloc. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, there was no arguing against the reality of race tensions in eastern Germany—or in all of Germany, for that matter. As the two Germanys began the process of deciding what would come next politically, economically, and socially, people of color—whether German citizens or foreign residents—became the target of what many considered a surprisingly violent and virulent form of racism. Upon unification of East and West Germany, one incident that has long stood out in public memory took place in Hoyerswerda, an important industrial town in what had been East Germany, near the border with Poland. During this period of transition, the status of immigrants and asylum seekers was uncertain, and while they awaited the government’s response to their requests for political asylum, some of these individuals were assigned temporary housing at shelters in Hoyerswerda.

There, for five nights in September 1991, a gang of young skinheads attacked the shelters, throwing Molotov cocktails, stones, bottles, and explosives. Eventually the

⁴⁷⁹ David O. Ongiro, “Racial Discrimination,” *Information Bulletin*, FDGB, 5/63, 8, clipping located at BArch-SAPMO DY 34/458, SAPMO.

⁴⁸⁰ Yonas Endrias and Heenan Bhati, “Interview with Oliver Harrington,” *Archive of Soldiers’ Rights*, e.V. Berlin, 21.

foreigners were forced to leave the shelter, to the approval and delight of their attackers and onlookers. This particular attack was followed by still more assaults on foreigners, as well as those perceived as foreigners, in the newly united Germany. These confrontations and assaults, and others like them, gave rise to a spirited discussion about racism and xenophobia in Germany, as well as its root causes.

As observers—the media, German citizens, academics, and international onlookers alike—considered the underlying motives for these attacks, many could not help but notice that the majority of the confrontations seemed to occur in the eastern part of the country (and too late, many would subsequently note that western Germany saw its fair share of racist incidents as well). That this would be the case was particularly remarkable, given the anti-racist society that the SED had claimed to have built. Fairly quickly, the notion of the racist East German developed, and was implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, compared to the idea of the racially-enlightened West German.⁴⁸¹ This characterization took hold, a trope that exists within German society today, leading many to depict the eastern portion of Germany as unwelcoming to those perceived as non-German, i.e., non-white.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸¹ This stereotype has had negative consequences, as Jonathan Zatlin has noted: “The notion that racism among East Germans is somehow more virulent than among West Germans conveniently understates the daily instances of aggression and violence toward foreigners tolerated in the urban centers of West Germany.” Zatlin, “Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1971-1989,” *Central European History* 40 (2007), 695n47. Having identified racism as an eastern German problem, observers, academic and casual, as well as the media, looked to the former East Germany to explain post-unification racism, de-valuing and even “erasing” the racism many blacks experienced in West Germany.

⁴⁸² For example, in preparation for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, a former government spokesman and the head of an anti-racism lobby, Uwe-Karsten Heye, advised visitors with dark skin to avoid the eastern part of Germany, because of its racism. “There are small and medium-sized towns in Brandenburg, as well as elsewhere,” he said, “which I would advise a visitor of another skin color to avoid going to....It is possible he wouldn’t get out alive.” “Racism Warning Has German Hackles Raised,” *Spiegel Online International*, 18 May 2006, www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,416904,00.html, accessed 18 April 2011. Heye’s statement was seemingly backed up with evidence. In April 2006, an Ethiopian-born man was attacked in Potsdam, beaten so viciously that he fell into a coma. Meanwhile, in Berlin, a German

Amid the considerable speculation as to how an allegedly anti-racist state could become the hotbed of German racism seemingly overnight, early academic work on the topic was problematic. In an effort to explain post-1990 racism, many turned to the study of East German racism with a tunnel vision of sorts that concentrated primarily on the 1980s and the foreign laborers who came to work in the GDR in those years. As Damian Mac Con Uladh has noted, “Many 1990 publications were teleological attempts to explain the rise in violent and open racism in the East. Taking state directives and labor agreements at face value and focusing on the situation in the late 1980s, they have produced an unrepresentative picture of the historical experience of foreigners in the GDR.”⁴⁸³ This teleological and historically short-sighted examination of racism in East Germany dominated the academic approach until historians began to apply a longer historical eye to the question, which in itself involved the admission that East Germany’s history with people of color stretched back further than previously believed.⁴⁸⁴

politician of Turkish ancestry was attacked, suffering “serious head injuries.” His attackers were said to have shouted ““dirty foreigner”” as he was mugged. Heye was not the only one to issue a warning; the Africa Council, “a group which represents Africans in Germany,” also announced plans to publish a list of areas for non-white visitors to avoid during the World Cup. Laura Smith-Spark, “Racism fears dog World Cup build-up,” *BBC News Online*, 26 May 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5012182.stm>, accessed 14 January 2014.

⁴⁸³ Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation? Foreign Students and Workers in the GDR, 1949-1990” (PhD diss., University College of London, 2005), 12.

⁴⁸⁴ The discussion that follows is a brief summarization of the historiography surrounding East German racism and its contribution to post-unification and present-day racism in Germany. For further readings (that together give a sense of the development of the historiography over time), please see: Panikos Panayi, “Racial Violence in the New Germany, 1990-93,” in “Theme Issue: Race and Violence in Germany and Europe,” *Contemporary European History*, 3:3 (Nov. 1994), 265-287; Meredith W. Watts, *Xenophobia in United Germany: Generations, Modernization, and Ideology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); John A. Clark and Jerome S. Legge, Jr., “Economics, Racism, and Attitudes toward Immigration in the New Germany,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 50:4 (Dec. 1997), 901-917; Patrick R. Ireland, “Unification Policy and the Rise of Racism in Eastern Germany,” *International Migration Review*, 31:3 (Autumn 1997) 541-568; Anke Pinkert, “‘Postcolonial Legacies’: The Rhetoric of Race in the East/West German Nationality Debate of the Late 1990s,” in “Translating in and across Cultures,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 35:2 (Autumn 2002) 13-32; Behrends and Poutrus, “Xenophobia in the Former GDR: Explorations and Explanation from a Historical Perspective”; Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation? Foreign Students and Workers in the GDR, 1949-1990”; Zatlin, “Scarcity and

What has resulted is a general agreement among historians on the importance of the SED's anti-racist rhetoric in understanding the nature of East German racism. Many have highlighted the fact that because the SED's justification for the state's existence and the Party's rule centered on an elaborate anti-fascist myth that encompassed anti-racism, racism "officially" did not exist in the GDR. Since racism allegedly did not exist, there was nothing to "fix," even though in reality there was plenty to which East German officials needed to attend. This meant that, as Mac Con Uladh has observed, East German functionaries worked within an ideological rhetoric that not only made racist rehabilitation impossible, but also allowed them to hide their own discriminatory beliefs behind empty proclamations of solidarity and support for the GDR's black "brothers and sisters." This refusal to accept that racism was in fact a problem within East Germany meant that officials left "racist prejudice to fester among the East German public," Mac Con Uladh has argued.⁴⁸⁵

What follows will examine more closely what the relationship between East Germany and Black America can indicate or confirm about East German conceptions of race and racism. Throughout the 1950s, the notion of a kinship between Black America and East Germany existed largely in theory, with members of the East German elite discussing, intellectually and politically, the ways in which both groups were on similar paths. In these discussions, the elite argued that East Germans and African Americans were both engaged in a struggle against racism that would necessitate the ruin of the capitalist West. These elite were sure to note that only certain African Americans—those

Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1971-1989"; Dennis, "Asian and African Workers in the Niches of Society."

⁴⁸⁵ Mac Con Uladh, "Guests of the Socialist Nation?" 184.

who subscribed to an ideological worldview similar to that of the SED—were considered kindred spirits, however. African Americans who, in the minds of the elite, emphasized the race struggle to the detriment of the class struggle were often treated to a racism that was reminiscent of German views of earlier years. Whatever the value in utilizing America's race problem to further their own goals, discussions about race were always to be subsumed by class, as the SED's Marxist-Leninist ideology demanded.⁴⁸⁶

In these years, the relationship that the GDR elite envisioned was largely theoretical. These discussions about Black America, generally based off of readings of African American literature, often did not spill over into the citizenry. On the African American side, what engagement there was with East Germany was not understood as an expression of solidarity. What was needed, ultimately, to make this professed “brotherhood” attractive was an individual who not only satisfied the SED's own definition of the ideal African American, but who appealed to the East German citizenry, and could enthusiastically spur the interest of African Americans as well. Paul Robeson would fill this role beautifully. When Robeson was finally granted his passport after nearly a decade of effective imprisonment within the borders of the US, his visit to the GDR would prove to be the spark needed to take what had largely existed as a proposed bond of friendship and turn it into a relationship with participants in East Germany and Black America.

East German citizens, attracted by the appeal of a Western, well-known figure on East German soil, began to embrace the notion of a relationship, even if only for the access it gave them to figures like Robeson. That his popularity, rather than his ideology,

⁴⁸⁶ Despite the distinctions made between African Americans, officials spoke in broad terms about their support for the civil rights movement, rather than labeling those they supported as black leftists.

was the draw for many citizens did not deter the SED as it sought to capitalize on East German interest. Citizens' attraction to the celebrities of the American black freedom movement allowed East German officials to present to others the image of East German citizens engaging in productive conversations about race. This affection for Robeson often created a point of entry for African Americans to join the discussion, if not also the relationship, about the GDR.

In turn, the SED utilized the official East German rhetoric professing support for Black America, as well as Black America's support for East Germany's allegedly anti-racist society, as a substitute for any significant conversations about the Nazis, the Holocaust, and elements of Germany's racist/racial past. By supporting the American civil rights movement, the SED was at pains to convey that only a state that had fully rejected the legacy of the Nazis could and would bind itself so closely to the struggle for black rights. As much as this was a show put on for international observers, it was also a show for East Germans themselves, a self-justification for the existence of the state and, most importantly, the SED as well.

While Robeson was not the first African American to venture into East Germany, he was the first to truly attract the interest of East German citizens while also thoroughly fulfilling the image the SED had created of the ideal African American. After Robeson made his first visit to East Germany, the next decade-and-a-half represented the peak of the friendship between East Germany and Black America. With visits from well-known civil rights activists like Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Angela Davis, and of course, Robeson and his wife Essie, the SED asserted itself in propaganda and rhetoric as presiding over a state that mattered enough to draw the likes of such civil rights

celebrities. East Germany was without a doubt, according to the SED, a legitimate state, and deserved the international community's diplomatic recognition, for (among other reasons) the state's commitment to anti-racism. The relationship with Black America was offered as proof of this commitment and the improvements the SED alleged East German society had made through communism.

Of course, the African American experience(s) in and with East Germany reveal that East Germany's stance on racism was not as clear-cut as officials made it out to be. Despite the hearty rhetoric, though authentic anti-racist attitudes existed, they were not as widespread as propaganda suggested. Certainly, anti-racist programs, policies, and pedagogy were spread throughout the East German state, but their existence did not translate into their application in a consistent or necessarily genuine manner. In reality, an anti-racist East Germany was an image that the SED could only sustain if one did not examine East German society too closely or remain in the country for long. As we have seen, African American visitors were rarely in East Germany long enough to see the cracks in East Germany's anti-racist armor (nor would their itineraries planned by East German officials have allowed them to). Meanwhile, those who were residents of the GDR learned quite intimately that East Germany was not nearly as racially-enlightened as the SED would have had the world believe.

The voices that traveled the furthest, however, were those of the visitors. Most of these African American travelers to the GDR supported the SED's assertions of an anti-racist society based on what they had witnessed during their visit. Those who knew the least about East German racism and anti-racism would paradoxically be the ones to speak most confidently about the improvements made in the GDR. The comfortable and anti-

racist experience in East Germany of figures like the Robesons and Angela Davis contrasts quite starkly with the experiences of Aubrey Pankey and the African American military deserters. While the Robesons and Davis praised East Germany's racial tolerance, the latter knew all too well the reality for people of color in the GDR. Even when Pankey—an accomplished international musician and celebrity—twice informed the SED of racist incidents, nothing was done by East German officials to rectify the situation. The SED's disinclination to address East German racism meant that, as in Pankey's case, acts of discrimination often went unpunished. This had far-reaching effects. This silence marked, if not the SED's explicit approval, then the fact that the SED was at least willing to accept such behavior.

East German racism, however, did not find its genesis with the creation of the East German state. Though some incidents of racism in the GDR could certainly be traced back to particular developments within East German society, competition for goods being one example, there are many other instances of racism—like that of Pankey—where it was clear that such beliefs were long-ingrained in the way *Germans* viewed or perceived the Other.⁴⁸⁷ These beliefs quite clearly drew upon earlier German interpretations of race and views on blackness, revealing a continuity in thinking that stretched beyond the divide that 1945 provided. For East German racism to bear a lineage of sorts that descends from earlier types of German racism signifies that we must remove the essentialized lens through which East German racism is often viewed, if we are to better understand it. Much of the recent historiography on racism in the GDR has made attempts to de-essentialize East German racism, by noting similarities shared with

⁴⁸⁷ This emphasis on Germans is placed here not to suggest a special type of German racism, but rather to draw the connection between East German and West German racism as having the same roots.

West Germany or by pointing out the ways in which the essentialization of East German racism neglects the West German experience for minorities.⁴⁸⁸ This examination of the relationship between Black America and East Germany provides another means of de-essentializing East German racism in a rather simple, yet important way: by providing the evidence necessary that allows one to compare and contrast the ways in which African Americans experienced racism in East Germany with the scholarship available on West Germany.

While the relationship between Black American leftists and the East German elite brings into relief certain aspects of East German racism, the particular nature of the friendship only tells a part of the story. In the realm of economics and the rise of particular far-right groups, the relationship can tell us little. The reason for why this is, however, underlines an important element of the SED's views on blacks. A continuation of a theme found throughout Germany's history with blacks, the SED distinguished between blacks who were considered insiders and those who were outsiders. African Americans occupied a place of relative importance (among people of color) for the East German elite, because they were, with few exceptions, not residents of the GDR. Though citizenship should not be ignored—as Americans, African Americans occupied a position in the West that gave their struggle an added poignancy for the GDR's anti-Western propaganda—one's status as insider or outsider was important. Viewing African Americans as outsiders, the SED regarded its relationship with them as one of moral support—not financial support—and beyond the (relatively modest) costs of solidarity, African Americans were not considered to be a “drain” on society. Black African

⁴⁸⁸ For the latter, see footnote 481 above.

workers and students residing in the GDR, the “insiders” in this formulation, were often viewed competitively in economic and sexual terms, leading to, as some argue, a build-up of racist sentiment that would eventually overflow.⁴⁸⁹ As African Americans living in East Germany as insiders could attest to, they were not immune either.

Further Research

As noted at the start of this work, the parameters of this research project were such that a detailed assessment of East German citizens and their personal views on African Americans, the African American civil rights movement, and racism more generally, were difficult to pinpoint in great detail. This and other works have often extrapolated, based on the governmental archival material available, in order to postulate how the average (white) East German viewed people of color. Yet, there is very little currently available that allows historians to draw conclusions that are based directly on the peoples’ own words. Problems range from issues with archival sources (many East Germans knew well enough how to “speak” to the SED, making the truth of recorded statements about race and racism difficult to decipher) to a general lack of said archival sources (having ascertained that racism was not an East German problem, there were to

⁴⁸⁹ Many of the arguments that dominated in the years after unification focused on economic dislocation, both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. These arguments concentrated on job competition, which became heightened with the collapse of the East German economy. Jonathan Zatlin has argued that we should refocus our attention: instead of job competition—given the population drain suffered by the GDR, there was no shortage of jobs—Zatlin maintains that we should focus on competition for scarce *consumer goods*. While such competition contributed to the growth and intensification of ill-will toward the apparent consumer interlopers, Zatlin holds that it was the SED’s attitude toward non-white workers that encouraged a translation of this ill-will into racist violence. Perceptive to the SED’s “barely concealed disdain for people of color,” there was little, aside from a rhetoric many viewed as hollow, to suggest that the government would seek to seriously punish anyone for racist attacks. Such actions passively encouraged—or at the very least failed to discourage—the public’s racism. That it was fairly well hidden from the public discourse is a testament to the compartmentalization within the society the SED built. Panayi, “Racial Violence in the New Germany, 1990-93,” 265. Zatlin, “Scarcity and Resentment,” 703-4.

be no wide-reaching surveys on racism prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall) to new, post-unification influences on official surveys and research projects (just as the presence of a communist government could influence one's statements, its sudden demise could also have a similar effect).

As has likely become clear, much more than archival research will be necessary in order to complete a study that more intimately details East German views on race, racism, and blackness in the GDR—quite likely an oral history study. There are several commonly-held assumptions that this dissertation has called into question that would be useful avenues of investigation. Firstly, it is commonly held that East Germans who worked toward establishing solidarity between East Germany and Black America did so because it was expected of them. However, as this work has discussed, there were some who did so willingly. Jennifer Ruth Hosek also suggests that such solidarity was actually a means of protest against the state.⁴⁹⁰ In that case, the relationship becomes more complicated, as we must consider more thoroughly what their personal motivations were for supporting African Americans and their struggle for civil rights, what drove those motivations, and the ways in which they were or were not successful in pursuing their own goals within the context of a socialist society. Even if their number was small, they still represented a group of East Germans who deviated from the “norm” (even while adhering to SED propaganda) and why they would do so in a society that discouraged bucking trends is an important question to answer.

Similarly, future research should consider the impact of East Germans' anti-fascist and anti-racist educations upon the evolution and development of East German

⁴⁹⁰ Hosek, *Sun, Sex, and Socialism*, 26.

racism. Though much of this education consisted of propaganda, its effects regarding racism still need to be measured. Not only does the acceptance of the tenets offered in this education need to be considered, but so does the effect that a general rejection of this education had upon East Germans' views of blacks. For example, an East German who chafed at the SED's intrusion into their life with pro-black propaganda entwined in anti-fascist and anti-racist education could very well have viewed the African American subjects of the propaganda as the SED's willing cohorts. This perceived cozy connection could spur the transference of negative attitudes towards the SED onto the GDR's black friends, or serve to simply reinforce and underline one's existing racist beliefs. Though the GDR never had an honest discussion about race and racism in East Germany, discussions about race and racism *in the West* did occur, and their impact still needs to be measured.

Concluding Thoughts

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to make the assumption that the relationship between Black America and East Germany failed to achieve its goals in any significant manner, certainly when one considers the long-term impact (or lack thereof) of the relationship. For scholars of both East Germany and Black America, this relationship is one that tends to be filed under interesting but ultimately unimportant, because there are few clearly evident lasting effects of the friendship. East Germany had a negligible impact on any of the achievements of the civil rights movement, beyond any sort of personal benefits the visiting activists may have received. In turn, African

Americans bore no direct responsibility for the American—or more generally, Western—diplomatic recognition of East Germany.

What this view assumes, however, is that what both sides received was less than what they actually wanted. East German leaders utilized a variety of approaches to acquire legitimacy and change international opinion about the GDR. The relationship with Black America was never intended to be the sole means of acquiring diplomatic recognition, but rather one avenue of chipping away at international resistance to the East German state. In that regard, the relationship was useful. For African American leftists—specifically those who visited the state—they never expected their relationship with the communist Germany to result in equal rights at home, but rather appreciated the solidarity and support offered by the GDR. Those who advocated a change in government and the way society functioned saw in East Germany an example, a model that supported their arguments. Those who were likely the most disappointed and whose goals were not fully met were the African Americans who settled in the GDR. Despite promises of an anti-racist society, they were met with a racism that ran throughout society and the government. That was not all, however. Life in East Germany was far from ideal, even in the best of circumstances; at the core of things, they lived in a crumbling, poor, and repressive state.

For the SED and the African American visitors, in the short-term, there were enough positive outcomes to keep the relationship going, and for that reason, we should consider their goals ultimately fulfilled. The friendship provided African Americans with an outlet, a place to turn when the civil rights movement at home began to shift toward the political right. For a group that placed an emphasis on the value of solidarity and

encouragement in fighting the civil rights struggle, the proclamations of support were vitally important. For the SED, this relationship provided them with the necessary propaganda, which would find repeated use even in later years as the friendship's earlier interactions were recalled and referred to as if they had just recently occurred.

Regardless of the lack of long-term achievements stemming from the relationship between the SED and Black American leftists, the friendship marked an effort by two groups, both pushed to a secondary position and considered the "other," to navigate the Cold War world. These efforts were just as important as those put forth by members of the political West.

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