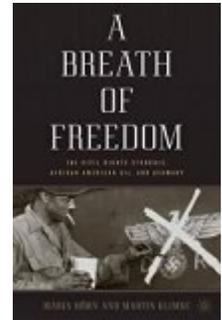


Maria Höhn, Martin Klimke. *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Illustrations. xxvii + 254 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-230-10473-0.



Reviewed by John J. Munro

Published on H-1960s (May, 2011)

Commissioned by Ian Rocksborough-Smith (University of Toronto / University of the Fraser Valley)

Sometimes movies and history books complement one another. As a recent succession of films, such as *Windtalkers* (2002), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), *Indigènes* (2006), and *The Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), indicate, there is an audience for works that deal with racism within the Allied ranks during World War II. In a particularly powerful scene in Spike Lee's *The Miracle at St. Anna*, the skeptical Bishop Cummings (played by Michael Ealy) and his superior Aubrey Stamps (Derek Luke) debate the link between the campaigns against Nazi Germany and Jim Crow. During the course of their argument, Stamps forcefully intones that "this is about progress," giving what might have served as a title for a new book that brings an academic voice to this discussion. Befitting the improvement theme, as well as patriotic interpretations of U.S. history, historians Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke draw the title of *A Breath of Freedom* from the words of Colin Powell, who "uniquely embodies" the connections that *A Breath of Freedom* makes (p. 175). This book does the important work of documenting the ex-

periences of black GIs in Germany, especially during the Cold War and therefore especially in the Federal Republic of Germany. It also argues that those experiences not only mattered to the African American freedom struggle in the United States, but also helped resolve "the discrepancy between America's ideals of democracy on the one hand and the reality of daily life for African Americans on the other" (p. 7).

Like Lee's recent war film, Höhn and Klimke's book is intended for, and deserves, a wide audience. But in contrast to *The Miracle at St. Anna's* emphasis on World War II, *A Breath of Freedom* takes in the full sweep of the twentieth century and more. This is welcome, since although existing works, like Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* (1999), Daniel Kryder's *Divided Arsenal* (2001), or Melani McAlister's *Epic Encounters* (2005), tell important parts of the story of race and the U.S. military, *A Breath of Freedom's* geographic focus and temporal range will be useful to many. And clearly not only historians are interested in the dramatic story of African American GIs in Germany,

so it is all the more gratifying to see the captivating photographs and attractive Web site (www.aacvr-germany.org) that accompany this project.

A Breath of Freedom begins with a discussion of the pivotal World War I years, when the crisis engendered by European colonialism and the black expectations raised by the Great Migration internationalized and urbanized African American struggles for justice. But it was World War II and its attendant politicizations, as Höhn and Klimke make clear, that ensured the impossibility of a return to the racial status quo ante. After the victory over fascism, many returning black soldiers, a majority of whom were headed back to homes in the U.S. South, were changed, more defiant. Many others in occupied Germany after V-E Day became acquainted with freedoms not to be found in the United States. Although the Soviet challenge made desegregation a Cold War imperative for the United States, Jim Crow was not issued discharge papers after 1945. Rather, military discipline, fraternization, and advancement through the ranks were all shaped by white supremacist structures of domination into the 1970s, Harry Truman's signing of Executive Order 9981 in 1948 notwithstanding. By the late 1960s, black GIs' contestation of white supremacy had become more militant, due to events in the United States, to Martin Luther King's visit to both Berlins in 1964, to transatlantic Black Power and New Left solidarities, and to ideological pressure from the German Democratic Republic.

The impact of this radicalization was to once and for all awaken the military state apparatus elite to recognize the threat that racial discord posed to their prospects for international dominance, not least their war against Vietnam. As Höhn and Klimke explain, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sent a delegation to Germany to find out what was going on from the troops and other personnel themselves, and not only did the State Department and

Pentagon listen to the association's findings of widespread, systemic discrimination, but the army itself also took concrete steps to institute reform. In like manner, the West German bureaucracy came to modify its attitudes toward racial discrimination. As they shift from the 1970s to President Barack Obama's 2009 trip to Europe, which commemorated the landings at Normandy and horror at Buchenwald, the authors make two things clear: first, Germany and African American GIs stationed there played an integral role in the black freedom struggle; and second, for the authors, this story is largely one of discrimination overcome.

It is difficult to quarrel with the first of these arguments, thanks to Höhn and Klimke's strong evidence and convincing argumentation. *A Breath of Freedom* does a commendable job of accomplishing its principal tasks: demonstrating Germany's importance and documenting the experience and contributions of African American GIs to the black quest for justice and dignity. Indeed, as the authors point out, it is surprising that more scholarly attention has not been paid to this subject before. Their second argument, that white supremacy has been primarily an issue of discrimination and that struggles against it have been primarily about attitudinal transformation, jars with what else we know about both past and present. Had *A Breath of Freedom* engaged more with the strains of black radicalism that were integral to the freedom struggle throughout and since the twentieth century, or with critical analyses of racial capitalism from, for example, Cedric Robinson, Kimberlé Crenshaw, George Lipsitz, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, or Nancy MacLean, the narrative arc might have been less neat, but richer for it. Although the biography of Powell is a compelling one, it might not be representative of substantive racial democracy in light of immense impact of such factors as the racial wealth gap, the Katrina circumstance, the racial disparities in housing, and the prison industrial-complex. Still, *A Breath of Freedom* is a well-presented book that

makes a convincing case for the importance of its subject. Scholars will like the new transnational angle. Popular audiences will like the writing and presentation. Teachers will like the Web site and the book's easy pairing with works of popular culture, such as recent films about race and the Allied military. It is a good time for this book. It is also a good time for the more critical treatments of this important subject that are sure to follow.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

Citation: John J. Munro. Review of Höhn, Maria; Klimke, Martin. *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31947>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.