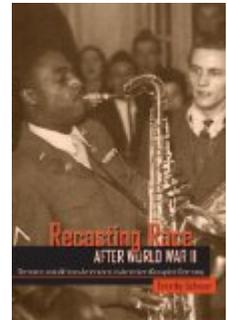


**Timothy L. Schroer.** *Recasting Race After World War II: Germans and African Americans in American-Occupied Germany.* Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007. xiv + 295 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87081-869-1.



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This book is the latest installment in a flurry of recent scholarship examining the postwar period through the lens of social history. The author has taken on the daunting task of describing the experiences of African American occupation soldiers in an attempt to show that their interactions with the German population brought about changes in the way the concept of "race" was viewed, both in Germany and within the U.S. military establishment. This territory is not necessarily virgin. Most notably, Petra Goedde touched upon the experience of African American soldiers in occupied Germany in her work *GIs and Germans* (2003); Maria Höhn's book, *GIs and Fräuleins* (2002), related the experiences of African American soldiers in West Germany during the 1950s. Schroer's work is a welcome expansion on Goedde's cursory treatment, however, and positions itself well as a prequel to Höhn's volume by providing an in-depth look at the experiences of African American soldiers during the foundational years of the West German state.

The book's title is a direct enough expression of the subject writ large, but the subtitle only hints at the wide variety of issues the author tackles. Definitions of whiteness and blackness, gender and power relationships, occupation strategy, and military organization all come under Schroer's scrutiny. The first hurdle Schroer had to overcome may have been the most difficult of all; namely, assigning meaning to the word "race." Here, Schroer wisely recognizes the elusiveness of biologically based definitions and instead prefers a sociological definition, according to which race is seen as the underpinning justification for specific codes of conduct. In his opening chapter, entitled "Germans, Blacks, and Race through 1945," Schroer skillfully brings together information from a myriad of sources to describe the origins and development of German attitudes toward "the other." Then, Schroer briefly examines Germany's first major exchange with black African soldiers during the occupation following World War I. Many Germans considered the presence of the African occupation troops to be an insulting

punishment inflicted upon them by vindictive Western victors. Schroer agrees with the interpretation that the public displeasure with the presence of black troops on German soil was not only an example of xenophobia and race hatred, but an attempt to enlist the sympathy of other white groups to Germany's postwar economic suffering. Thus, as the nascent National Socialist party spread its ideological message in the early 1920s, it found success in casting its *Feindbilder* in racial terms, since the ideas of "race" and "the enemy" had already been connected in the public consciousness.

The defeat of the National Socialists in 1945 precipitated yet another such "unpleasant" occupation experience. This time, however, the complete collapse of civil government allowed the victors to recast Germany as they saw fit, and among the many occupation goals were the eradication of discriminatory laws and the creation of a more tolerant German society. Herein lies a fascinating dilemma, one that Schroer makes a central theme of his book. How could the racially segregated units of the United States Armed Forces be an agent of "democratization" in post-Nazi Germany? What moral authority could the United States claim as the scourge of Nazi racial policy in Bavaria and Württemberg while it condoned Jim Crow in Alabama and Mississippi? Schroer shows that the army had anticipated this difficulty and tried to find solutions. Pre-surrender army policy documents warned that Germans might attempt to sow discord among the occupiers by appealing to the "mutual whiteness" of Germans and the U.S. occupation forces, and ordered officers to resist such subterfuge. Unfortunately, policy directives could not change personal biases, so the racism already in the army's rank and file was transmitted relatively unchecked into the occupation. Consequently, not only were African American troops seen with suspicion by Germans conditioned to think of them as oversexed and racially charged, those fellow countrymen who saw them as social and mental inferiors also shunned them. Clearly,

the Office of Military Government (OMGUS) had some critical decisions to make. How should black troops be utilized? Should African American soldiers be mainstreamed in deference to the democratization mission, or should the troops be given special duty on the periphery of the occupation effort in order to prevent possible racial violence? If it chose the latter, what message would that send about "democratization" to the German population?

Obviously, OMGUS was caught in a vicious conundrum of its own that pitted the lofty ideals of racial harmony and pure democracy against the potency of race hatred and injustice on both sides. Schroer's second chapter presents a picture of a United States military stumbling to decide what it should do. In the end, the army deliberately relegated black soldiers to the *Hintergrund* of the occupation rather than risk German backlash. It is possible to argue that this decision was the product of racism within the high levels OMGUS, but one must also remember that the military brass tended primarily to think in terms of mission; consequently, they could justify (or rationalize) their actions as necessary for the occupation's overall success. Regardless of the reason, their decision allowed critics to claim that the United States was (at best) hypocritical in its approach to ending discrimination in Germany and (at worst) subliminally encouraging continued propagation of Nazi racial doctrine. A German backlash against African American troops never materialized, perhaps because the concept of "race" as a tool of social distinction was sufficiently discredited by the Nazi defeat. Indeed, the occupation experience proved so benign for most African American troops that many soldiers felt better off in Germany than back home. Suddenly, they had both power and standing over a predominantly white population. As one document put it, they "never had it so good."

The most striking example of this newfound status was the access black soldiers had to white

women. Schroer's third chapter examines sexual relationships between African American soldiers and German women and the impact such fraternization had on German society and army internal affairs. Although most Germans found such liaisons distasteful, civilian authorities did not have the power or jurisdiction to intervene against them. The only tactic the Germans could employ to deter what many saw as distasteful interracial dalliances was to frame the issue in terms of morality. By arguing that consorting females were "loose women," German officials could vent their racism in a more acceptable guise.[1] This approach proved doubly useful. Existing German laws against prostitution and venereal disease could now be applied, thereby allowing the occupation army to assist local authorities in "policing" such liaisons. Schroer cites examples of VD raids by the U.S. Constabulary on the women of several small German towns and advances the claim that such efforts were racially motivated.[2] Clearly, the old tactic of appealing to "mutual whiteness" was working. In one tantalizing section of the chapter, Schroer describes how the "German church" (which he does not define further) also used morality to hide latent racial prejudices, as clergymen condemned interracial sex from the pulpit. Unfortunately, the space he devotes to this topic is much too limited. Did different confessions approach interracial relationships distinctively? Which "German church officials" were most vocal, and why? A more developed discussion about race hatred from the clergy would have helped amplify his otherwise cogent conclusions about the "underground racism" still pervasive in German postwar society.

Schroer then approaches the issue from the view of German women. The analysis in chapter 4, "Fräuleins and Black GIs," is especially instructive. German woman who consorted with black GIs came from all social strata, not just the lower classes--an unsurprising result, given the privations of the occupation. Even so, German women who consorted with black soldiers lost whatever

status they had with their friends. So then, Schroer asks, why do it? Hardship was only one reason. German women could avoid work by relying on their boyfriends for food. Many liked the idea of rebelling against norms, and some simply preferred black companions to white ones, either because of the appearance or their demeanor. For whatever reason, the fraternization between German women and black American soldiers had important consequences for the concept of social justice. For the first time, black soldiers could see themselves as equals to whites, and access to white women afforded them an opportunity to see themselves truly as "men," perhaps for the first time.

The last chapter, on the interplay between black music and German culture, comes off as something of a deviation from the rest of the book. Here, Schroer picks up on the work of Uta Poiger and claims that jazz music was not well received in postwar Germany because Germans linked jazz with black (and therefore foreign) culture.[3] Yet, Schroer himself points out that Negro spiritual music was well received in comparison. If one is alien, why not the other? Schroer explains this contradiction by arguing that Germans valued spirituals as a reflection of an "authentic" folk culture, whereas jazz was seen as a corruption of traditional musical styles. This argument rings true; perhaps those who disliked jazz simply didn't like its discordant, spontaneous, and unpredictable nature (a perception still current in contemporary American society). Using the connection to black culture as a rationale for disliking jazz makes for an interesting argument, but even so, many readers will find it no more persuasive than contemporary assertions that individuals who do not listen to rap or hip-hop reject them because they emerged from African American culture.

This disconnect between German dislike of jazz and acceptance of Negro spiritual music is only one of many dualisms in Schroer's analysis.

For example, he mentions that blacks "occupied the lowest position" in Nazi racial thinking and that the interracial children of the French African colonial troops were a "perceived threat to the Aryan race," but "there nevertheless remained ambivalence in Nazi policies toward blacks" (pp. 20-21). Similarly, Schroer quotes official army reports that declared that "[the Negro] is admittedly of inferior mentality ... inherently weak in character" (p. 55) but then cites other reports that claimed "not a great deal of difference exists between white and Negro troops" (p. 56). Such apparent inconsistencies are not failings, but rather complications engendered by the author's laudable attempt to be thorough in his analysis. Schroer should receive high marks for presenting all sides of a complicated issue, but the end result is an exposition that sometimes leaves the reader wondering which evidence presents the clearer picture of reality.

Such minor difficulties aside, Schroer's conclusions are sound and well crafted. The influx of African American soldiers and their culture and music into postwar Germany forced a redefinition of "Germanness." Aryanism gave way to "whiteness." Thus, Schroer proves that the racial distinctions the Nazis once celebrated did not completely disappear; they were simply transformed into a larger framework of whites and nonwhites. Since much of American culture also condoned this framework, the American democratization effort, at least as far as race relations was concerned, was doomed to failure. Hatreds simply went underground and reemerged in different forms.

Although scholars of the German occupation period will be immediately drawn to this work, American history specialists and historians of race relations should not overlook it since it has much to offer in these areas. Indeed it raises many questions relevant to our understanding of American history. Did the freedom and power African Americans enjoyed as soldiers in occupied Germany affect their lives back home in seg-

regated America? Did the experience embolden African American veterans to seek greater justice at home and be active in the civil rights movement? Schroer's fine book is not only a welcome addition to the historiography of the occupation period and our understanding of intercultural race relations, it should also encourage further exploration into the how the experiences of African American soldiers in occupied Germany may have influenced America's long march toward racial justice in the six decades after the occupation's end.

#### Notes

[1]. This fact raises an interesting issue for the study of gender relationships, as the opprobrium for interracial affairs now fell on the women, not on the soldiers.

[2]. There is certainly much truth to this assertion, even though it may be somewhat overstated. The use of public health laws as a means to harass and/or punish civilians whose conduct was deemed "improper" was a fact, and the U.S. occupation armies were more than willing to assist German officials in executing such tactics. However, such "sweeps" of the population were conducted for a wide variety of reasons, not just racial ones.

[3]. See Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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