The U.S. Civil Rights Movements and Its Impact on the East German Struggle for Freedom
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Referring to the events of 1989 when people demonstrated in the streets of Leipzig and elsewhere against the East German communist dictatorship, we speak of a “Peaceful Revolution” as the culmination of the East German civil rights movement. The civil courage of those people brought down an oppressive regime, which was symbolized on November 9 by the fall of the Berlin Wall and, less than a year later, the German reunification.

The concept of a “peaceful revolution” appears to be slightly paradoxical. What exactly does it mean? It actually refers to the idea of people opposing an injustice by nonviolent means. But nonviolent resistance isn’t an invention of the year 1989. In fact, it is an intriguing concept that, in its contemporary form, is at least a century old. Its roots, though, are even older and date back thousands of years. The idea of nonviolent resistance is reflected in some of the teachings of the Bible as well as in Asian spirituality such as for example in Hinduism, a religion even older than Christianity. Nonviolence was popularized in modernity by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, better known as “Mahatma Gandhi.” It brings us right to the struggle against racism and injustice in former colonies in Asia and Africa.

In other words, the East German Peaceful Revolution stands in the tradition of larger and older movements. While this might sound like the theoretical construct of a bookworm-scholar, it is indeed possible to trace these traditions up to the peace prayers in Leipzig’s St. Nikolai Church back in 1989, where people gathered before the demonstrations. Contemporary witnesses recount that during the prayer meetings, people sang songs such as “We Shall Overcome,” which is also known as a protest song from the US Civil Rights Movement. Or maybe I should say Civil Rights Movements, as different protest movements occurred especially in the 1960s and early 1970s. The fight against racism and legal segregation and the protest against the Vietnam war would be two prominent examples.

Such movements did not only influence the East German opposition in various ways. They are also reflected in the West German peace movement of the 1980s as well as in protests against transporting nuclear waste that continued after the reunification and flared up again on a regularly basis, as happened once again last fall. I am particularly interested in the connection between the African American Civil Rights Movement and the East German civil rights movement. I had the opportunity to study civil rights movements both as a scholar of US history who lived and worked for several years in Nashville, Tennessee, and
thus in the South of the US, and as a former coordinator of memorial sights in Berlin, where I worked for the Federal German Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED-dictatorship. I am thus familiar with scholarship on the one hand and public history as represented for instance in museums and memorial sites on the other.

My goal in this presentation is twofold. First of all, I would like to highlight that fact that on the level of a public collective memory, Germans appear to be unaware of their participating in broader movements such as the tradition of nonviolent resistance. This also plays into the fact that Germans know very few representatives of the African American Civil Rights Movement, most notably the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who was also the best-known representative of nonviolence in the US context (as contrasted by for example Malcolm X, who favored much more radical forms of civil disobedience to overcome racial injustice).

Second, I would like to discuss how the African American Civil Rights movement was perceived specifically in Eastern Germany. I discern two different aspects: on the one hand, East German propaganda used the conflicts of the Black freedom fight to demonize the United States of America in the context of the Cold War. On the other hand, people in the East German opposition cherished the example of Rev. King. At the MLK-Center in Werdau (Saxony), many objects, artifacts, and documents are preserved that illustrate to what extent Rev. King and the movement for which he stood inspired oppositional movements not simply in Eastern Germany but in the Eastern block during the Cold War.

Among memorial sights and documentation centers, the MLK-Center is somewhat exceptional with its special collection focus on Rev. King. But the connection between East Germany and Black history is nonetheless present in museums and memorial sites on the East German Peaceful Revolution in more or less subtle ways: A few years ago, a temporary exhibit on caricatures and censorship in East Germany at Leipzig’s Forum of Contemporary History also featured a few propaganda caricatures on African liberation movements, and the Stasi-Museum in the “Round Corner,” of course, prepared an exhibit on Leipzig and the Peaceful Revolution in 2009 to commemorate its 20th anniversary, which brings us back to discussing the events in East Germany of 1989 as forming part of larger traditions. By broadening the idea of memorial sites to embrace places other than museums, even more examples may be found, such as the bust of the Black Intellectual W.E.B. DuBois at Humboldt University in Berlin. DuBois had been honored there in 1958.