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**Martin Luther King and Angela Davis:
Two Activists
In Germany
For the Black Civil Rights Movement**

Session 1 – “Eyes on the Prize”: The Struggle for Black Equality and Social Justice
in the United States and in Germany, 1960-1972

*Coming Together or Coming Apart?
Europe and the United States in 1960s*

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1. Martin Luther King's and Angela Davis's visits to West and East Germany: an Introduction

In the history of the Black Civil Rights Movement the names of Martin Luther King and Angela Davis are well known. What is less known is their visit to Berlin in 1964 and, respectively 1972. Even more, the speeches they gave are not so easy to be found or commonly taught at university. With the Cold War and the struggle for Black freedom as a background, the US social and political situation starts to show a few gaps that will definitely become more prominent with the end of the Vietnam War; protest movements from students to Black people have been spreading all over the country in the mid-1960s. Yet, there is one place where the international situation has direct effects on it: Berlin.

Symbol of the American democracy and last bulwark of the Western continent, Berlin is the only city within Europe where the East and West division is both ideological and physical. The building of the Wall in August 1961 by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) triggered USA's concentration of forces in order to keep the Red Army outside West Berlin. Here, the occupation by French, English and American armies in the aftermaths of the WWII has taught the Berliners what occupation and restriction mean. Then, the rising of the student protest movement during the '60s along with the rebellions within the U.S. army by African American GIs turns out to be a breeding ground for ideas of freedom and rights. The interdependence of the West and American government leads to a deep influence of American culture inside West Germany whereas in East Germany the Soviet Union strengthens his grip on the GDR. So, in this context of isolation and terror, the visits of Martin Luther King and Angela Davis acquire a great relevance both on domestic and international level.

Martin Luther King (1929-1968) is the first Black person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. That same year, another important fact quite unknown happens: his visit to West and East Berlin in September. As one of the major leaders and activists of the Black Civil Rights Movement, there are few doubts on whether the media actually silenced his visit on purpose, especially with regards to East Berlin. Luckily, recent studies have shed some light on the topic giving the chance to reconstruct the facts. But the reasons why King goes to Berlin in 1964 are still not clear.

After a life of studies and racial injustice, the religious vocation of Martin leads him to become priest following the steps of his father. Even if social violence is part of his everyday life, Gandhi and his non-violence theory as the best means of political pressure become the points of

reference together with the idea of civil disobedience taken from Thoreau¹. Furthermore, King's aim to reform the Black church following the original message of Jesus based on charity and brotherhood represents the gist of his mission and the origin of the movement for the achievement of Black rights. In fact, "King's critique of the white church in America embraced its whole history [...] with respect to slavery and segregation in the years before the Civil War"². As a consequence, the political function of the black church is crucial and must both provoke changes on a social level and renew itself in order to create a better and lasting collaboration with youngster movements occurring throughout the '60s.

From 1955 onwards, the Black movement for the achievement of the Civil Rights born in Montgomery reaches an increasing number of people that share their belief in freedom for all men. Then, in mid-1960s the movement grows so much that it overcomes national boundaries. Thanks to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, Martin Luther King consecrates himself as the official voice of the Black community with the "I Have a Dream" speech showing his strength and capacity to talk about civil rights and influencing people all over the world³. As a consequence, King's revolutionary message reaches Europe where protest movements, especially student unrest, against US War in Vietnam quickly embrace it.

Angela Yvonne Davis (1944-) is a well known Black activist, born in Birmingham, city of violence inflicted by the White community, where she has learned what segregation means since her childhood. After the university in New York, she receives a grant to study abroad in Frankfurt and takes the chance to bone up on her studies linked to the communist philosophy. In fact, she develops an idea of Black emancipation in the framework of the fight of classes described by Marx. While Herbert Marcuse's guided her in this multitude of theories, the political situation in the divided Germany strengthened Angela's belief that the GDR is a heavenly Father who actually guarantees freedom and civil rights for minorities⁴. In 1962 Davis went abroad to participate in the 8th World Festival of Youth and Students in Helsinki, where she enjoyed the possibility to meet other cultures and young revolutionaries with the chance to trace a clearer and more realistic picture of social segregation in her country.⁵

While the struggle for the Black movement is a common feature in Angela and Martin's activism, the political commitment and the acceptance of violent actions describe only Angela's. In her opinion, the concept of revolution is a serious issue, "the most serious in the life of a revolutionary" (Davis 2007, 180) and the willingness to fight all her life is an obvious implication.

¹ Martin Luther King Jr, "I Have a Dream" (Milano: Mondadori, 2000)

² Lewis Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 9.

³ Martin Luther King Jr, "I Have a Dream" (Milano: Mondadori, 2000)

⁴ Angela Davis, *Autobiografia di una rivoluzionaria* (Roma: Edizioni Minimum Fax, 2007)

⁵ Angela Davis, *Autobiografia di una rivoluzionaria* (Roma: Edizioni Minimum Fax, 2007), 138.

Everyday meetings, rallies and campaigns ask for a deep political and social commitment to Davis; furthermore, she organised many movements such as the Student Union at university and the Black Confederation of San Diego due to the necessity to contribute concretely to the fight and her blind observance of the communist creed leads her to be enrolled both in the US Communist and the Black Panther Party whose means are questionable. At the time of her imprisonment in October 1970, Davis has become so popular that autonomous and self-organised initiatives to free her are quickly spreading in USA and Europe, especially in East Germany thanks to student movements. As it was written in the New York Times:

On Oct. 15, 1970, two days after Angela Davis was captured by F.B.I. agents in a New York City motel, a press conference was called in Los Angeles by the Communist party to announce that it was going to build "the largest, broadest, most all-encompassing people's movement the country has ever seen to free our comrade, Angela Davis-- political prisoner." The speaker was Franklin Alexander, a close friend of Angela's and chairman of the party's all-black Che-Lumumba Club. The National United Committee to Free Angela Davis was formed shortly thereafter, with Alexander and Fania Davis Jordan, Angela's 23-year-old younger sister, as national coordinators.⁶

With regards to the visits to the German capital, it is yet to understand the reason why both Martin Luther King in 1964 and Angela Davis in 1972 decide to give their speeches to such an audience. In fact, what they chose to tell is quite relevant due to their fame as activists and to the political context of the cold war. Words are not useless; indeed, they are full of political and social references. Moreover, Berlin – core of Europe – is under the eyes of everyone in 1960s and 1970s, especially for the activism that characterises student unrest whose echo is heard beyond the Ocean.

2. Context

2.1. The Cold War, the Black Freedom Struggle and King's and Davis's visits to Berlin

The city of Berlin represents one of the hot spots of the Cold War era in Europe. More specifically, in the aftermaths of the WW2, the raise of Germany becomes a priority in US foreign agenda; with the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine, the USA promise “support to “free people” struggling against communist repression”⁷ both on economic and political level. As a reaction, the Soviet Union starts taking control of its satellite states that become the boundaries of the communist empire. Meanwhile, the Soviet Blockade of Berlin in 1948-49 worsens the weak relations between the two blocks leading to the division of Germany in the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East. Nonetheless, Berlin remains the main problem since it is entirely part of the East German territory. Whereas the Missile Crisis is about to burst out and the cold war comes close to a “Hot War”, the Second Berlin Crisis

⁶ Sol Stern, “The Campaign to Free Angela Davis and Ruchell Magee”, *New York Times*, 1971, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/08/home/davis-campaign.html>

⁷ Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 69.

of 1961 brings the attention back to the city occupied by Western and American troops and within few days the Berliners find themselves living in a city split in two by a Wall. Not surprisingly, those repeated crisis bound West Germany to American decisions as “from the American perspective, Berlin was a symbol of U.S. leadership of the Western alliance in the cold war and its commitment to freedom”⁸.

The general protest movement of the ‘60s is the background for Kennedy’s visit to Frankfurt in June 1963 and his speech famously known for the “Ich bin ein Berliner” statement. Besides, Sabine Lietzmann, U.S. correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, defines the “1963 the “Year of the Negro” in the light of the events”⁹ recently occurred such as the demonstrations in Birmingham and the March on Washington when King gives the “I Have a Dream” speech. In this social and political context of global protest, King’s visit to Berlin in September 1964 acquires high relevance especially because of the deep involvement of German students in the African American civil rights struggle. Welcomed by the mayor of West Berlin, Willy Brandt, King holds a press conference, is entered into the Golden Book of the City of Berlin, opens the city’s cultural festival with a memorial service for President Kennedy – murdered in November 1963 – and gives a speech on the “Day of the Church” after being awarded an honorary degree by the Theological Seminary¹⁰. The following day, without an official invitation from the GDR, King manages to cross the Wall even without his passport and gives that same speech twice in two different churches because there are too many East Berliners who don’t want to miss his sermon. No doubts, it “constituted an unforgettable occasion offering them comfort and encouragement in the needy time”¹¹.

The little coverage given to King’s visit by GDR media highlights the political implications of it. Since there are no official relationship between the USA and the Soviet Union, the visit of the Black struggle movement leader should have been a success within East Germany because it represents the “other” America, the voice of the minorities segregated by the society. Nevertheless, one possible explanation to the absence of GDR officials is the one given by Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke:

East German officials failed, for whatever reason, to seize upon the opportunity of King’s visit to underscore the image of the “other America”. Although certainly well aware of King’s imminent arrival, functionaries in East Berlin were either too surprised by the actual course of events or too concerned about the possible political impact of King’s words and charisma on their own citizens to exploit his visit ideologically. Above all, they may have feared that King would inspire East

⁸ Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 161.

⁹ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 90.

¹⁰ The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany Online Digital Archive. “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964 in Berlin”. The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany. http://www.aacvr-germany.org/AACVR.ORG/images/stories/stolte_english.pdf

¹¹ See note 9.

Germans to articulate their own dissent using the passive resistance King espoused for the civil rights movement.¹²

The 1968 is a turning point in the black civil rights struggle; the youth revolution spreads all over the world and the protest movements within West Germany shows a direct bound with American rebellions. Moreover, the raise of the “New Left” giving voice to dissidents officially turns into a dark shadow within the FRG; put it simply, the anti-American sentiment asks for a shift in the U.S. foreign policy that now has to face inner problems such as demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Even in Berlin, the situation seems so unbearable that “anti-war protest and student disorder, whether imported from the US or locally developed, now became political and security issues the Allies could hardly to avoid taking into account in their administration of the divided city”¹³.

In the late 1960s, student protest activism is both an anti-war movement and a request for university reform throughout Europe; thus, the African American civil rights struggle is the perfect background that allows students to reach black minorities and fight for and with them – as it happens with the African GIs in Berlin. While this new alliance seems to represent a threat to the US mission within West Germany, Angela Davis is turned into an icon by the GDR. Black and communist, she is the perfect bait to stir up demonstrations against the Western block and its foreign politics and to create a solidarity movement as opposed to “western racism”. This is the reason why a public information campaign is organized right after Angela’s imprisonment in 1970 and the Angela Davis Solidarity Committee is founded in 1971.

Public events such as the congress “Am Beispiel Angela Davis” (The Example of Angela Davis) in June 1972 bring so much attention to her case that when freed, she decides to visit the Soviet block to express her gratitude to a government that definitely consecrates her as the “heroine of the other America”¹⁴. In particular, in September 1972, Davis receives an honorary degree and an honorary citizenship in the city of Magdeburg and she is awarded the “Great Star of Friendship among the Peoples” by the chairman of the Council of State of the GDR. When delivering the speech entitled “Not Only My Victory” in East Berlin, she highlights “the international solidarity among the socialist countries [that] had played a major role in her acquittal”¹⁵. Thus, there is any evidence that the political use of Angela’s case and the solidarity campaign led by the GDR officials are part of a bigger plan; as a matter of fact, it represents a way to “distance themselves from West Germany and to discredit the United States by pointing to the failure and hypocrisies of

¹² Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104.

¹³ Davis, Belind, Wilfried Mausback et al., eds. *Changing the World, Changing Oneself*: (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 112.

¹⁴ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁵ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 137.

these Western capitalist, liberal democracies [...] Consequently, the displays of solidarity with the cause of the African American civil rights became a fundamental ideological tool for East Germany in the propaganda battles of the Cold War.”¹⁶

2.2. The German Social Protest Movement and the “Other Alliance”

The first decades of the Cold War are years of containment and tensions between the two blocks; apart from that, German reconstruction is the core problem in American and European agendas as well as the issue for many ideological and political fights. As the division of West and East Berlin becomes a matter of fact in 1961, it provides also a good reason for student protests. Whereas the ‘50s in West Germany are characterized by a widespread consensus on American occupation with the aim to revitalize country economy, it is of course not surprising that during the mid-1960s students and other dissidents start to bring the US army presence into question; in fact, they “did not perceive the US as a liberating, but rather as an imperialist and colonialist force.”¹⁷ The positive image of America clashes with a reality where democracy and freedom are valuable only in the process of reinventing the identity of Germany and Western Europe; therefore, the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War protest are symptoms of future fractures and of the disillusionment within the Western block.

In West Germany, the social protest movement acquires some anti-American features due to the slow erosion of the pro-American sentiment; feeling in direct contact with the protest in USA, secondary and unofficial alliances are stipulated with that “other America” with the aim to create an international brotherhood. In contrast with the anticommunist policy of the FRG that leads to the ban of the Communist Party in 1956, that new consciousness brings about the birth of the New Left in 1968 as long as the commitment to the civil rights cause is more and more evident because of the segregation present in military bases. One of the most important organizations that give voice to these views is the SDS (Student for a Democratic Society); originally part of the Social Democratic Party, in 1962 it is expelled and moves closer to the international New Left¹⁸. Among the leaders, Karl Dietrich Wolff (German SDS president from 1967-68) always is in constant contact with his peers in the US learning about the civil rights campaigns and promoting demonstrations against to the War in Vietnam.

¹⁶ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 140.

¹⁷ Davis, Belind, Wilfried Mausback et al., eds. *Changing the World, Changing Oneself*: (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 71.

¹⁸ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 111.

There have been a lot of rallies inside West Germany against US racial policy such as the 1963 demonstration during the President Kennedy's visit with a petition asking for equal rights for African Americans or the Free Speech Movement born in 1965 in Berkeley. Among these events, the Vietnam Congress taking place in Berlin on February 17-18, 1968 is "the most visible peak of antiwar sentiment in West Germany" attracting "5000 students and activists from Europe and overseas"¹⁹ such as Dale Smith, black representative of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Besides, the murder of Martin Luther King in April 1968 is used as the perfect excuse to pass from a nonviolence strategy to the use of violent methods so that, "despite the previous criticism of King, his killing now became a clarion call for revolutionary action on behalf of his legacy."²⁰ In 1969, after a long trip to the US to meet the Black Panthers members, Wolff starts to create a network in Europe and West Germany. What is more, he launches the Black Panther Solidarity Committee in Frankfurt with the task to translate and facilitate the circulation of key texts sharing the anti-imperialistic ideology which united youth generations. In other words, the solidarity in West Germany becomes institutionalized.²¹

Another fundamental aspect of student activism for the civil rights movement in US is the collaboration established with African GIs living in West Germany. Contradictions between the role of the USA as leader of the "free world" and its racial policy still present at home are evident to the black GIs that are experiencing a life abroad. Although in the army discriminatory practices are accepted, they as Americans are promoters of a message of freedom and democracy within the Western block as opposed to the Soviet bloc ideology. Besides, it is crucial the fact that students turn out to be good allies for black GIs; the influence of American culture and music inside West Germany brings them closer to civilians, in particular with those who studied abroad, so that in the late 1960s "African American GIs in Germany intensified their collaboration with the local university students to fight racism both in the U.S. army and in German communities."²²

Events such as the "Call for Justice" organized on July 4, 1970 characterize that unusual alliance with the aim to reach an international echo and create a transnational movement; this period is therefore considered a kind of "breath of freedom" for black people who experience a life without segregation or racial injustices. What is more important is that at the time of coming back home, they transform themselves into great activists. So, engaged with the Black Panther Party praxis, the SDS begins to approach black GIs in bars explaining their ideas about international solidarity and struggle against racism. Actually, the collaboration lasts from late 1969-1972, although what changes the most – thanks to this experience – are GIs' expectations for a better life in US.

¹⁹ Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 91.

²⁰ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 113.

²¹ Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 120.

²² Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

On the contrary, in East Germany there are no GIs and the protest movement is promoted by the GDR itself in the political framework of the fight to US Western leadership; in fact:

solidarity with the African American cause even took on the form of government-funded domestic and international campaign based on the state's ideological commitment to combat imperialism, colonialism, and racism. The East German government hailed civil rights activists as the heroes of the "other America" – the America of the oppressed. Despite the lack of diplomatic relations between East Berlin and Washington, the German Democratic Republic welcomed African American deserters as well as representatives of the civil rights struggle with open arms.²³

So, the GDR involvement in the civil rights movement is linked to its political aim of demolishing US from within; the help GDR officials offer to GIs in order to desert and their organization of campaigns against the war in Vietnam as clear signs of it. The solidarity demonstration done to support Angela Davis as black woman and civil rights activist has to be considered with reference to the international class struggle context.

3. The Speeches: a Comparison

3.1. Martin Luther King and Angela Davis: a message to Berliners

Martin Luther King arrives in West Berlin on September 12, 1964; after attending some official duties, he delivers his sermon purposely written with title: "East or West – God's Children". In fact, whether it has been previously decided or not, King crosses the Wall the following day and delivers that same sermon in two different churches in East Berlin. One big difference, of course, is that here no official ceremony has been organized by the GDR, but the reception of his speech meets with more success. In fact, there is nobody to welcome him because Heinrich Grüber, the man who invites King to St. Mary's Church, is a dissident priest who has been prohibited to enter East Berlin. Behind this surface, it is possible to read King's conscious intention to visit Berlin (West and East part) so as to give his message to the city "which stands as a symbol of the divisions of men on the face of the earth."²⁴

As leader of the non violent movement, King seizes the time and speaks to West and East Berliners with thoughtfulness and simplicity; beginning by stressing the similarity that bound Berliners with their brothers beyond the Wall and the Ocean, he refers to them as a united community that could offer support and respect to their American brothers following the Christian values of love and solidarity which bound them together. Though King prefers not to judge the social and political situation in Berlin, he calls for reconciliation and responsibility that anyone has

²³ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

²⁴ The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany Online Digital Archive.

"East or West – God's Children. A Sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr". The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany. http://www.aacvr-germany.org/AACVR.ORG/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=94&Itemid=7

to show “regardless of the differences of race and nation.”²⁵ Talking about the destiny of a nation, he traces the timeline of the Civil Rights movement’s most important events with the intention to raise a social consciousness. In fact, King is perfectly aware of the social protests that are taking place within West and East Berlin and the possible support that the black struggle could receive from them. As a conclusion, he underlines that if a community stands united under the grace of God, it gains the opportunity to achieve its goals despite all the despair, violence and bitterness it has been through – which represents a hopeful prospect for a divided population.

When still a student, Angela Davis studies in West Germany but takes also the chance to visit East Berlin; then, as she goes on a tour just after her release in 1972, her reception “in East Germany was marked by mass rallies with thousands of people, by meetings with government officials, as well as tours through the country’s universities and industrial centers.”²⁶ Thus, it is comprehensible that the speech she delivers during a rally on September 11 is a success; the title “Not Only my Victory” is already meaningful since from the beginning Angela underlines the fact that she is finally in the socialist Germany, the place where the communist revolution has successfully happened. Referring to Berliners as “comrades”²⁷, the political content and context of the speech yet emerges with the idea of a “proletarian internationalism” that has put pressure on the US government.

As a matter of fact, Angela Davis is a fervent communist that admires the GDR and its commitment to the transnational protest struggle as much as she admires the Soviet Union and the people of the socialist countries. This is the reason why her personal victory represented by her release is described as following by Davis:

(It) is not only my victory, and it was not about freeing just one prisoner from the clutches of political repression in the USA. This victory is a lesson for all the people in the world: if the repressed throughout the world band together, then we have the power that will enable us one day to defeat imperialism.²⁸

The dichotomy that emerges is between the USA as a country of segregation, terror and the war in Vietnam, and the East Europe as the country of social revolution and freedom. So, this tour she is doing represents the best way to charge herself with hope for a different future in her motherland too, where communists and civil rights leaders are still condemned for their commitment to that cause. As a conclusion, there is the reading of the black movement as a class struggle; in Angela’s opinion, this is the reason why the Soviet and Berlin experience could teach African Americans new

²⁵ See Note 24.

²⁶ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 136.

²⁷ “Not Only My Victory”, Speech by Angela Davis on September 11, 1972. Berlin – Friedrichstadt-Palast (translated from German by Lenore Bartko)

²⁸ See Note 27.

and effective ways of fighting and resistance and offer the needy strength to stand up and defeat imperialism thanks to the just learned spirit of proletarian internationalism.

3.2. Other Speeches and Actions

In the civil rights movement context, Martin Luther King and Angela Davis are two very different activists: the former is a Christian priest that promotes the non-violence protest following the ideals of love and brotherhood as values of reference; the latter is an international activist that studies in Germany and a communist that joins the Communist Party and the Black Panther movement for which revolution has to be achieved by any means. The 1963 year is called “the Year of the Negro”; in fact, the March on Washington in August is fundamental in the development of the black movement as it eventually succeeds in catching the attention of the government – also thanks to the close collaboration between King and Kennedy. As King says in his speech, the time is come to “open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children” because “there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights.”²⁹ Besides, the concept of the American Dream is clearly recalled with the idea that everyone deserves the opportunity to be free and vote, notwithstanding the color of their skin; King has that dream, the dream that “all men are created equal”³⁰ and that, thanks to brotherhood feelings, a change in attitudes will be possible both for Black and White People.

When in 1967 Martin Luther King talks about the War in Vietnam, his point of view of the international situation and its repercussions on America totally differs from Angela’s. More specifically, the need to leave Vietnam is bound to the domestic situation in US; pillars of King’s position against that dirty war are the belief that Vietnam is a source of distraction for the US government joined to the fact that the widespread use of violence is reproachful³¹. On the contrary, Angela Davis in her 1969 speech undoubtedly declares that “in order for the anti-war movement to be effective, it has to link up with the struggle for black and brown liberation in this country with the struggle of the exploited white workers.”³² So, she believes that the success of the international situation will probably affect the one at home; as she will be declaring in Berlin in 1972, the fact is that people are fighting a much bigger enemy, which is “Yankee Imperialism”, and a positive result could be achieved if they bound together in a transnational movement.³³

²⁹ Martin Luther King Online – Speeches. “I Have Dream Speech. Martin Luther King's Adress at March on Washington.” Martin Luther King Online. <http://www.mlkonline.net/dream.html>

³⁰ See Note 29.

³¹ Martin Luther King Online – Speeches. “Beyond Vietnam / A Time to Break Silence.” Martin Luther King Online. <http://www.mlkonline.net/vietnam.html>

³² IndyBay. “Speech by Angela Davis at a Black Panther Rally in Bobby Hutton Park, Oakland, 11/12/69. The Liberation of Our People”. San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center. <http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2009/04/15/18589458.php>

³³ See Note 32.

Revolution as a means to fight is taken into consideration both by King and Davis; for him, the revolutionary spirit is a consequence of the revolution of values that promotes love as the unifying force that links all men.³⁴ On the contrary, as Angela says in a 1974 interview, revolution “is going to come utilizing different strategies” such as the organization of masses of people³⁵; moreover, the strength she gives to the transnational dimension of the fight implies the acceptance of violent methods to create disorder and destabilize the system. So, it is obvious that the message they send to Berliners is different; apart from the interpretation of the international situation, the fight of the black civil rights is a common fight with leads to support and help in King’s point of view – and could of course create a brotherhood of men; for Angela, Berliners and East Germans in general are a sort of teachers towards Americans thanks to their successful proletarian revolution; thus, the collaboration is accepted because it leads to the destruction of the capitalist system.

4. Receptions and Reactions

4.1. The General Public, the Media and Governments in FRG and GDR

It is of course clear at this point that the city of Berlin has been chosen by the two civil rights activists for its strategic position in the heart of Europe and its uncommon social interest towards global themes; in fact, symbolically speaking, “with its western section embedded deep inside of the Soviet sphere it also represented both the threat of communism and the vital importance of Western capitalism as a counterbalance and bulwark.”³⁶ Then, the German population that happens to hear King’s sermon in East Berlin has a different reaction to the West Berliners; apart from the advertisement made by the FRG, the impact King produces within East Berlin has a major social weight because of his message of hope, brotherhood and non-violent resistance.

There is any evidence that King’s visit to East and West Berlin signs a turning point in the perception of the civil rights struggle in Germany but in the first 1960s GDR is not ready to embrace his cause yet. As a matter of fact, the ideological mindset of that period characterized by a strong anti-communism imprinting could be a good explanation for the lack of an official ceremony by GDR officials. No doubts that his message of freedom has scared them and brought the idea of a possible protest within the population, although

it appears [however] that such fears were unfounded because it would be more than twenty years before the GDR citizens would employ such tactics in large numbers. In the shorter term, the repercussions of King’s visit were felt primarily in the religious sphere [...]. In this way, these publishers helped incorporate King into official doctrine by insisting that “Christianity and the

³⁴ See Note 31.

³⁵ KQED. “Angela Davis on Revolution.” San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive. <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/189467>

³⁶ Davis, Belind, Wilfried Mausback et al., eds. *Changing the World, Changing Oneself*: (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 86.

humanistic goals of socialism” were not opposed to one another. This ideological usurpation notwithstanding, King’s writings and actions, as well as his theology, did undoubtedly serve as an inspiration for the East German opposition movement in the long run.³⁷

In general, the visit in 1964 has been probably overshadowed by King’s visit to the Pope and the Nobel Peace Prize received the following November. In contrast to the East German press, the African American press does notice his visit defining it “a major success and an indicator of the crucial progress Germany had made in race relations since the end of the World War II.”³⁸

In West Berlin the political and social context is different; in 1964 Willy Brandt invites King after meeting him in a previous visit to President Kennedy in the USA and the civil rights struggle topic with its demonstrations and historical analyses often appears inside West German periodicals. As long as the collaboration between university students and African American GIs increases, press opinion is louder and louder and starts to question US policy and its democratic mission saying that “American can’t teach democracy abroad and practice bigotry at home. The two theories are diametrically opposed.”³⁹ A negative image of the US emerged as well as from the protest movement whose radicalization is becoming a threat to the security of West German and American position in the framework of the Cold War. Besides, the fact that GDR is supporting American GIs to desert and escape via East Berlin starts to concern American officials about a possible future involvement of communism inside student activity.⁴⁰

It is not surprising that student unrest is soon becoming an important topic in German-American bilateral talks due to the fact that there is a challenge also to the FDR promoted by New Left dissidents especially in the late 1960s. With the eruption of the 1968 protest in Paris in May, the American government need to response to this widespread anti-Americanism attitude and in September 1970 it sponsors a commission with the task to read the social situation in West Germany. The “Render Report” as it is called presents “a stunning indictment of the discrimination and racism that African American soldiers faced both in the army and in German communities”⁴¹; as a solution, US collaborates with FRG in order to promote respect and equality inside and outside the army and increases the number of exchange programs so as to stimulate the encounter between German and American culture and to eradicate the disillusionment for US international role that characterized young generations. Thanks to the ongoing détente with East Germany (Ostpolitik), Willy Brandt is the first to cooperate with the Eastern bloc so as to reduce social and political tensions; with regards to the presence of U.S. troops and whether they should remain or not, he clearly tells “Germans to stop criticizing other countries, such as the United States or South Africa,

³⁷ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104.

³⁸ See Note 37.

³⁹ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 55.

⁴⁰ Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 177.

⁴¹ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 156.

for their racism, and to take a hard look at the situation “at home” instead”. Moreover, he exhorts “Germans to practice a new kind of patriotism based not on the feelings of superiority but on open-mindedness toward individuals who come to Germany from other continents, whether as soldiers or as students”.⁴²

During these years, Angela Davis visits for the second time in her life the city of East Berlin in 1972; what she finds is a society that knows everything about her and her imprisonment, for the GDR has decided to champion her cause and population is getting used to hearing songs about her on the radio, watching documentaries on TV and signing petitions for her release at exhibitions.⁴³ Behind the ideal commitment of the GDR for a communist activist as is Angela, the *Time* magazine of that period suggests that

the real explanation for the growth of her cult lies in the shifting pattern of East-West relations. 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 poorest half. In the past years, however, as Moscow and Bonn have sought to establish better relations, East Germany has had no choice but to tone down its attacks on the Federal Republic.

This explains why GDR needs a new reason to arise enthusiasm among its population; as for the Tenth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1973, Angela Davis’s presence is used “even more extensively for propaganda purposes”⁴⁴. Solidarity campaigns such as “A million roses for Angela Davis” spread all over East Germany and media are said how she has to be represented by the government itself; in the framework of the anti-capitalist agenda, the intensity of their effort leads the *Time* magazine to conclude that the country is “deeply in the grip of Angelamania.”⁴⁵

As briefly described in his book, Victor Grossman underlines the use of TV as the principal means of propaganda shaped by the GDR; with reference to Angela’s story, the media use her cause in order to stimulate demonstrations with mass campaign such as “Free Angela” and in Grossman’s opinion “the way such cases were officially encouraged to make political points has been disparaged or ridiculed”.⁴⁶ Another important point is the special status that occupies the church in East Berlin and all the Eastern block; since “it could call for help from its Western German sister church”⁴⁷, she enjoys quite a liberty with respect to the GDR policy and the invitation of Martin Luther King in 1964 is a meaningful example of this laissez-faire modus vivendi.

⁴² Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 169.

⁴³ “East Germany: St. Angela”, *TIME Magazine* U.S. (1972), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,903405,00.html>

⁴⁴ The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany Online Digital Archive. “Angela Davis”. The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany. http://www.aacvr-germany.org/AACVR.ORG/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=70

⁴⁵ Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 135.

⁴⁶ Grossman, Victor. *Crossing the River* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 197.

⁴⁷ Grossman, Victor. *Crossing the River* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 223.

5. Conclusion

In my opinion I strongly believe that the visits by King and Davis to Berlin during the 1960s have been planned for a specific purpose: the former is the leader of the nonviolent movement in America that wants to send a clear message to the world through Berliners; the latter is a black communist woman who sees the Soviet Union as the only European country where the social revolution ever successfully happened in the 20th century. Furthermore, Berlin is the city whose major symbol is the Wall, where the will to come together overcomes the imposed division by the Cold War. Thus, the student protest movement with African American GIs gives undoubtedly voice to that message of freedom and democracy that is spreading all over the world during the 1960s.

The messages of the two black activists are also important; Martin Luther King asks for help and support to Berliners in order to create a brotherhood of men that could eventually put some pressure both on the West German and the American government. On the other hand, there is Angela Davis interpretation of the black fight as a class struggle where the collaboration among socialist countries leads only to the defeat of imperialism embodied by the “evil” America. Despite their differing views of the black civil rights movement, they both perceive the political relevance of Berlin as bulwark of Western democracy inside the GDR. Besides, their speeches represent the will to connect the United States and the Western Europe in the city that bounds them together due to its strategic position in the heart of Europe.

As a conclusion, I would like to stress the fact that ever since King’s sermon in West and East Berlin hasn’t caused a great stir on a global level due to the little coverage given by Western press; as a proof, the visit of Obama to Berlin in 2008 during his campaign for the Presidency acquires a deep relevance, especially for his words “I know I don’t look like the Americans who’ve previously spoken in this great city”⁴⁸. Thus, the reference to the color of his skin, whether as a mistake or not, underlines the unknown visit of King by the running President who built his campaign on the successful black civil rights movement of the 1960s. On the contrary, Angela Davis’s speech in Berlin has been used by the GDR with an anti-American aim so that her commitment is widely known even in this day and age although she completely lacked any real perception of the social and political situation within the Soviet Union where the basic civil rights weren’t on the top of their domestic agenda.

⁴⁸ The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany Online Digital Archive. “German Lessons”. The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and Germany. http://www.aacvr-germany.org/AACVR.ORG/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=77&Itemid=41

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