

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

The city of Berlin during the Cold War era represents the bulwark of Western democracy, freedom and equality as opposed to the communist creed of the Soviet block; due to its position within the East German territory, the presence of American troops inside West Germany and West Berlin becomes more and more a matter of fact as the two blocks take form during the 1950s. Thus, the choice of Berlin as the only European city where to deliver the social and political messages of King and Davis is not accidental; instead, both of them are highly aware of the international role this place has and also of the political pressure it could put on American foreign policy, especially within Europe.

The visit of Martin Luther King to West and East Berlin in September 1964 is less known despite the relevance it acquires in the framework of the black civil rights protests within Germany; thanks to the collaboration established amongst students and African GIs, this topic spreads throughout the country and in mid-1960s it starts to keep direct contacts with American correspondent organizations. Thus, the presence of King as movement black leader and his message of hope bound to the request of support to Berliners is the first step to the creation of an international brotherhood of men that fights for their rights following the nonviolence ideology. Besides, it is not less important the fact that King delivers the same sermon both in West and East Berlin; in the latter, the audience turns out to be more curious and responsive to King's message because of the social and political situation within the GDR. In fact, the absence of any official welcome ceremony by it can be seen as a demonstration of the revolutionary impact that King's visit could have had on East Berliners (but it didn't).

When Angela Davis visits East Berlin in 1972, the campaign that has been promoted by the GDR for her release is part of East Berliners everyday life. Documentaries, songs on the radio and rallies are used as a political tool to contrast American foreign politics; so, Angela represents the best bail to condemn the social internal situation within the USA and its acceptance of segregation as opposed to the democratic system it exports abroad. As a consequence, the speech she gives is unsurprisingly full of political references to the



proletarian revolution that happened within the Soviet Union and underlines the fact that they became an example to American communists. Moreover, the union they achieved in order to free her represents a great victory since this transnational collaboration will be used to defeat the “Yankee imperialism” as well.

Photos: Martin Luther King in West Berlin in 1964 and Angela Davis in East Berlin in 1972

Quotations

I am grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle. (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*)

Revolution is a serious matter. When you commit yourself to the fight, it must be forever. (Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*)

In a real sense we are all one in Christ Jesus, for in Christ there is no East, no West, no North, no South, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole, wide world. (Martin Luther King, Jr., “East or West – God’s Children”, sermon in Berlin in 1964)

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. (Angela Davis, “Not Only My Victory”, speech in East Berlin in 1972)

Suggestions for further readings

Höhn, Maria and Klimke, Martin. *A Breath of Freedom. The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs and German*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Klimke, Martin. *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010.

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.

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

Davis, Angela. *Autobiografia di una rivoluzionaria*, (original title: *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*), Roma; Edizioni Minimum Fax, 2007.

King, Martin Luther Jr, *“I Have a Dream”*: *l'autobiografia del profeta dell'uguaglianza*. A cura di Clayborne Carson. Milano, Mondadori, 2000.