

Black History

African-American GIs of WWII: Fighting for Democracy Abroad and at Home

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For The Conversation

Until the 21st century, the contributions of African American soldiers in World War II barely registered in America’s collective memory of that war.

The “tan soldiers,” as the Black press affectionately called them, were also for the most part left out of the triumphant narrative of America’s “Greatest Generation.” In order to tell their story of helping defeat Nazi Germany in my 2010 book, “Breath of Freedom,” I had to conduct research in more than 40 different archives in the U.S. and Germany.

When a German TV production company, together with Smithsonian TV, turned that book into a documentary, the filmmakers searched U.S. media and military archives for two years for footage of Black GIs in the final push into Germany and during the occupation of post-war Germany.

They watched hundreds of hours of film and discovered less than 10 minutes of footage. This despite the fact that among the 16 million U.S. soldiers who fought in World War II, there were about one million African American soldiers.

They fought in the Pacific,

and they were part of the victorious army that liberated Europe from Nazi rule. Black soldiers were also part of the U.S. Army of occupation in Germany after the war. Still serving in strictly segregated units, they were sent to democratize the Germans and expunge all forms of racism.

It was that experience that convinced many of these veterans to continue their struggle for equality when they returned home to the U.S. They were to become the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement – a movement that changed the face of our nation and inspired millions of repressed people across the globe.

As a scholar of German history and of the more than 70-year U.S. military presence in Germany, I have marveled at the men and women of that generation. They were willing to fight for democracy abroad, while being denied democratic rights at home in the U.S. Because of their belief in America’s “democratic promise” and their sacrifices on behalf of those ideals, I was born into a free and democratic West Germany, just 10 years after that horrific war.

Fighting racism at home and abroad

By deploying troops abroad

as warriors for and emissaries of American democracy, the military literally exported the African American freedom struggle.

Beginning in 1933, when Adolf Hitler came to power, African American activists and the Black press used white America’s condemnation of Nazi racism to expose and indict the abuses of Jim Crow at home. America’s entry into the war and the struggle against Nazi Germany allowed civil rights activists to significantly step up their rhetoric.

Langston Hughes’ 1943 poem, “From Beaumont to Detroit,” addressed to America, eloquently expressed that sentiment:

“You jim crowed me / Before hitler rose to power- / And you are still jim crowing me- / Right now this very hour.”

Believing that fighting for American democracy abroad would finally grant African-Americans full citizenship at home, civil rights activists put pressure on the U.S. government to allow African American soldiers to “fight like men,” side by side with White troops.

The military brass, disproportionately dominated by white Southern officers, refused. They argued that such a step would undermine military efficiency and negatively



Corporal William E. Thomas and Private First Class Joseph Jackson on Easter morning, 1945.

impact the morale of White soldiers. In an integrated military, Black officers or NCOs might also end up commanding white troops. Such a challenge to the Jim Crow racial order based on white supremacy was seen as unacceptable.

The manpower of Black soldiers was needed in order to win the war, but the military brass got its way; America’s Jim Crow order was to be upheld. African Americans were allowed to train as pilots in the segregated Tuskegee Airmen. The 92nd Buffalo Soldiers and 93rd Blue Helmets all-Black

divisions were activated and sent abroad under the command of white officers.

Despite these concessions, 90 percent of Black troops were forced to serve in labor and supply units, rather than the more prestigious combat units. Except for a few short weeks during the Battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944 when commanders were desperate for manpower, all U.S. soldiers served in strictly segregated units. Even the blood banks were segregated.

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