

zeitgeschichte

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Black GI Children in Post-World War II Europe

edited by
Ingrid Bauer and Philipp Rohrbach

Kelly Condit-Shrestha
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The Intersection of Race, Empire, and Kinship in U.S. Transnational Adoption

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"This Has Finally Freed the Welfare Agency from a Considerable Burden":
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"I Had a Dark Skin Color, That Was a Problem":
Race and Racism in the Child Welfare System in Postwar West Germany

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Post-World War II Interracial Relationships, Mothers of Black Occupation Children,
and Prejudices in White Societies: Austria in Comparative Perspective

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Editorial

This volume of *zeitgeschichte* goes back to the international workshop “Tabooed History: The Life Stories of Black GI Children in Europe” that took place in Vienna in November 2017. The workshop brought together scholars, journalists, and activists from various countries – including Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States – who conduct research on this topic in the contexts of World War II and postwar Allied occupation. The workshop aimed to create a network for the exchange of preliminary findings and to discuss commonalities and differences in the social as well as political treatment of children born to Black GIs and White local women. In particular, the workshop focused on these children’s personal experiences with racism and social exclusion in societies that defined themselves as White as well as their peculiar situation of being simultaneously visible and invisible; of standing out individually as the Other on account of their skin color, yet at the same time not being recognized as a social group. The workshop also intended to serve the initiation of further collaborative projects, including among other things the acquisition of authors for a volume of the journal *zeitgeschichte*.

The workshop was initiated and held in the framework of the research project “Lost in Administration” (LIA), which was based at the Center for Jewish Cultural History at the University of Salzburg¹ (from 2013 to 2017) and pursued the goal of exploring the Austrian dimension of the tabooed and suppressed history of Black ‘occupation children’. The research project focused on two key aspects: First, it aimed on the basis of sources from Austrian and American archives to determine as exactly as possible the number of these children and to reconstruct their

1 This project was financed by the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria. Albert Lichtblau (from the University of Salzburg) served as the academic head of the project while Ingrid Bauer (also from the University of Salzburg) acted as academic advisor. The project team consisted of Philipp Rohrbach and Niko Wahl, who were supported in the individual project phases by various research associates, including Marion Krammer, Regina Fritz, and Vanessa Spanbauer. Since 2018, Philipp Rohrbach and Ingrid Bauer have been conducting further archival and interview-based research as well as analyzing the sources collected hitherto.

treatment by both the Austrian and American authorities as well as the appertaining state (welfare) politics. Second, through the creation of narrative biographical (video) interviews, the project aimed to document the children's multifaceted and widely unknown life stories, thereby also to establish a basis on which to pursue further scholarly research.

In their biographical research, the Austrian project team had experiences comparable to those of some of the contributors to this volume, what the historian Lucy Bland in her contribution on British war babies described as the experience of being "both investigator and engaged participant": In conducting their research, the project team was careful to remain sensitive to the concerns of the interviewees. Aside from the scholarly exploration of their life stories, the interviewees were especially invested in finally having their voices heard and their stories inscribed into public memory. Having discovered for the first time through this research project that there were other individuals with a similar background, the interviewees were also particularly invested in communicating with one another.

Within the Austrian context, these concerns were addressed in a large exhibition entitled "SchwarzÖsterreich. Die Kinder afroamerikanischer Besatzungssoldaten" (Black Austria: The Children of African American Occupation Soldiers), which was developed in parallel to the research project and in cooperation with the interviewees.² The exhibition was shown in Vienna for four months in 2016 and drew considerable public attention, both in the media – all the major Austrian newspapers reported on the exhibition and there were also numerous international reviews³ – and in the number of visitors, with altogether about 17,000 people attending the exhibition. In the framework of the exhibition, a three-day networking meeting also took place in Vienna, which brought together the Austrian and American interviewees (the latter consisted of children had been given up for adoption in the United States by the Austrian authorities). This network continues to be a point of ongoing contact to this day, including also the establishment of

2 The exhibition, which was shown in the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, was created in collaboration with the artist Tal Adler (Israel/Vienna/Berlin) and was supported by the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (WVI), which is dedicated to research, documentation, and dissemination on all questions relating to antisemitism, racism, and the Holocaust, including its antecedents and aftermath. Another important cooperation partner was the journalist and editor-in-chief of "Fresh – Black Austrian Lifestyle Magazin", Vanessa Spanbauer.

3 A particularly noteworthy example is the review by Kira Thurman from the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, which not only discusses the exhibition in detail, but also compares the life stories of Black Austrian GI children with those of their peers in West Germany: <<https://networks.h-net.org/node/113394/discussions/135319/exhibit-review-thurman-black-austria-children-african-american%20>> (30 October 2020).

contact with the younger generation of Black Austrians and/or Austrians of Color and their lived realities.

This volume of *zeitgeschichte* presents the most up-to-date research findings on the topic “Black GI Children in Post-World War II Europe”. It focuses on Austria and Germany, where U.S. troops were stationed as an occupying force from 1945 onward, but also includes a focus on the United Kingdom, where U.S. troops were stationed from 1942 to 1945 as an Allied force. By the end of the war, about ten percent of the U.S. troops stationed in Europe were African American, albeit that Black U.S. servicemen with other roots, for example originating in the Caribbean or Central America, also served in the racially segregated units. The contributions in this volume therefore do not always use the term “African Americans”, but rather refer more generally to “Black GIs”. Concerning the number of children of war and occupation who were born as a result of relations between Black U.S. soldiers and White local women, the contributions are based on the following figures: around 2,000 in the United Kingdom, around 5,000 in West Germany, and around 400 in Austria. Although these children thus constituted a very small group in each of their respective countries – also only making up a tiny percentage of the total number of so-called occupation children – they were very publicly visible in postwar societies on account of their skin color, a society that highlighted their foreign Black roots, thus emphasizing the heritage of their fathers and not that of their White mothers.⁴

The authors of the contributions collected here examine the manner in which these ‘mixed-race’ children and their mothers were treated by their societies and the respective authorities. They moreover assess the experiences and self-understandings of the individuals affected and discuss their experiences growing up, their frequent placement in care as wards of the state, and the strategy practiced by the youth welfare agencies of giving these children up for adoption abroad. This also opens up a transatlantic perspective and raises the question of what positions and initiatives existed in the United States with regard to these “brown babies,” as they were called in the African American press. Within the African American community, for example, the adoption of these children by Black couples was often interpreted as resistance against White supremacy.

This special volume of *zeitgeschichte* also takes into account the discussion currently being held in the field of Critical Race Studies regarding appropriate and non-discriminatory language. This includes a critical usage of the terms Black and White, not merely as a description of ostensible skin colors, but also as social categories and constructs, the attributions and various effects of which

4 See Heide Fehrenbach, “Of German Mothers and ‘Negermischlingskinder’: Race, Sex, and the Postwar Nation,” in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968*, edited by Hanna Schissler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 164–186, 177.

need to be taken into account: specifically concerning what it means to be White or Black in a society dominated by White privilege. The authors of the contributions collected here have adopted various approaches to achieve such a reflective distance: either the consistent capitalization of the terms Black and White or the use of “Black” as a nominalized “political term”,⁵ which has by today become an empowering self-definition for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color). This kind of self-positioning also becomes evident in the case of the Black GI children examined in this volume, who now self-consciously use the term Black as a form of resistance and in contradistinction to racist exonyms imposed from outside.

Finally, the editors would like to thank Tim Corbett for his translations and/or copy-editing of the contributions in this volume, as well as Béla Rásky and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), who made a significant financial contribution to the realization of this volume.

5 Marion Kraft (ed., trans.), *Children of the Liberation: Transatlantic Experiences and Perspectives of Black Germans of the Post-War Generation* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2020), Introduction, 3.

Articles