

“A Negro Soldier Experiences Germany” (May 28, 1949)

Abstract

Last of the Conquerors was William Gardner Smith's debut novel; it was based on his experience as a clerk-typist in Berlin between 1947 and 1948. *Last of the Conquerors* was in many ways a rebuttal to American rhetoric that the United States should serve as a model for the rest of the world, especially postwar states like Germany that were attempting to rebuild. The novel contends that postwar Germany was less racist than the United States and points out the irony of the U.S. presenting itself as a role model for the rest of the world while maintaining a brutal and racist Jim Crow system at home. This book was not the first, and certainly not the last, to point out this irony; in fact, during the Cold War, Soviet propaganda relied heavily on pointing out America's history of racism, and was often aided by American artists, who contended that they had been treated better during tours of Soviet countries than they were at home. This article in the West German daily newspaper *Nürnberger Nachrichten* focuses more, however, on what the book says about Germany, taking comfort in the fact that Smith has presented Germans as humans instead of monsters. As Germans grappled with the fallout of the war, and what it meant to be part of a nation that had perpetrated one of the greatest evils in human history, they were sometimes comforted by reminders that not everyone in Germany had been a Nazi, and that even foreigners like Smith could find some good in German society.

Source

A Negro Soldier Experiences Germany

From our New York Correspondent

Much has been written about the “Negro question” in the USA since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Now a very new type of book about the American Negro has appeared, in which, after many conflicts, hope emerges—in Germany, of all places! *Last of the Conquerors* tells the story of a Negro GI serving in the occupying forces in Germany who, like thousands of others, in the land of the Nazis experienced for the first time what it was like to be treated as an equal. Not yet twenty years old, William Gardner Smith wrote this book on a troop ship on his way back to America from Germany. An exhilarating book, but not a political one in the strict sense of the word. Nevertheless, its value is not literary. Unbearably sentimental love scenes and “philosophical” commonplaces repeatedly interrupt succinct and impressive depictions drawn from real life.

What makes the book as a whole a significant psycho-political document is the absolute honesty, decency and seriousness with which, albeit only within the framework of the protagonist's own urgent issues, propagandistic generalizations are measured against real life and attributed to their double vision. As sharply as the author sometimes criticizes the separate treatment of Negroes in the U.S. Army and the separate social position of colored people in everyday life back home, he always counteracts bitterness with examples demonstrating the opposite. The blacks are by no means “whitewashed” and the whites by no means “painted black.”

Both in Berlin and in the small town near the large Negro camp, the black soldier/sergeant is continually amazed and moved that German families do not regard him as a “problem” at all. They accept him. They ask no questions, address him as Herr (he had never before encountered a white person who called him Mr.) and treat him as a friend. And so, characteristically enough, the insight derived from this experience is not “anti-white.” The author, who incidentally never meets a single Nazi or anti-Nazi in Germany, but

only the average, faceless apolitical type of person, merely considers life among “friendly” people to be more pleasant than among hostile ones. The Germans he meets are friendly. The result is emotional responses unsullied by rationality.

As a sort of epigraph, the book begins with a brief paragraph from the *Pittsburgh Courier* (where the author is now a reporter):

The MARINE ROBIN pulled slowly into the harbor and the Negro GIs, crowded on the foredeck, could see clearly the lights of New York City. It was night. On the left, the Statue of Liberty blazed her welcome home to the men who had waved goodbye to her that day, so long ago, when they had sailed for the first time across the “big pond”. But the men, crowded together on the ship, did not wave back.

“Well,” one brown-skinned soldier said with a sigh, “We’re home.” He said it to no one in particular. It was merely a statement of fact.

No one said anything. Oddly, as I stood there among the men, I seemed to sense a feeling of gloom.

“Someday,” a soldier said softly on this, the day of his homecoming, “someday I’m going back to Germany.”

Naturally, this statement does not signal an impending wave of emigration to Germany by American Negroes. One way or another, for good or ill, the returnees will find their way back to life in their homeland.

What remains is a sense of astonishment, which also stays with the reader, that after a war fought in the main against the Nazis’ false racial doctrines, the stepchildren of the victors, who are fighting for their rights as a minority, associate a dream of equality with the country to which they were sent to bring democracy. The ordinary unknown German turned out to be a human being. This is comforting. Especially for those who have frequently pointed out that not everyone in Germany was a Nazi.

Source of original German text: “Ein Negersoldat erlebt Deutschland,” *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, May 28, 1949.

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Recommended Citation: “A Negro Soldier Experiences Germany” (May 28, 1949), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-5254>> [July 06, 2025].