

## Exhibition on Blacks in Nazi Germany A wasted opportunity



Right is Jean (Johnny) Voste, from the then Belgian Congo. The photograph was taken during the liberation of the concentration camp Dachau on 29 April 1945 by units of the American army

knowledge. Interestingly, the organisers have responded to criticism in certain instances and subsequently erased some offensive passages (as in the case of the subtitle to Jesse Owen's picture). The blatant omission of people's names on their portrayals may be cited as another trait of inconsistency as well as lack of respect.

The organisers of this exhibition themselves stated that they wanted to lay open lines of conti-

nuity, "which ever too often and alarmingly lead right into our present times". In order to meet this self-proclaimed standard, it would have been feasible to explore the German colonial era (officially 1884-1918) by tracing historical lines of continuity in chronology as well as in thought.

Whereas in the exhibition, the colonial era has been reduced to a mere footnote. The early development of African-German history has also been completely omitted. Consequently, the exhibition fails in outlining the link between colonial concepts and the later established school of thought of eugenics.

These concepts are important because they have provided the ideological foundation for the distressing deprivation of people's rights; for forced sterilisation; and other means of genocide which the African or Asian-Germans suffered under Nazi rule.

For decades now, anthropological expertise had been instrumental in justifying racially-biased legislation. Let us face but a few: heated discussions on the prohibition of so-called "mixed marriages" within the colonial context (at the turn of the centuries); debates about innovations of the law on nationality (1912/1913); systematic registration of African-German children, mainly those born in the Rhineland (from 1923 onwards); law on the prevention of birth of "offspring afflicted with a hereditary disease" (passed in 1933); mostly illegal and therefore clandestine sterilisations carried out on Germans of African descent (from 1937 onwards); and exclusion of African-Germans from secondary school education (starting in 1939). All these glaring issues affected the lives of African-German families to a great extent and yet, they have been neglected in the exhibition.

The Black perspectives, their strategies of survival, their achievements in cultural and social terms, and their contributions to society need to be included in any (historical) assessment of Black life. The organisers however, have missed this

opportunity as well.

On the contrary, the abundant material collected by the perpetrators has not once been juxtaposed against any document citing the Black people's perspectives. The exhibition's layout, imagery and wording merely follow a racist and/or fascist terminology.

Film interviews with Black witnesses/survivors can be cited in this context. The insensitive questions notwithstanding, interviewees had little chance to narrate their life-stories from their own perspectives. A similar approach with regard to other victimised groups might have caused a public uproar, but in the case of misrepresentation of Black people, public anger is slow to be aroused.

Although the organisers pride themselves on being the first to have touched the issue of Black persecution under Nazism, they could have taken into account the recent works of other researchers.

In Berlin for example, the historian Paulette Reed-Anderson has collected material documenting Black life in Germany over the past century, including the Nazi era. She has not only presented her findings in a local exhibition, but also published a brochure under the auspices of the Berlin senate entitled, "Rewriting the footnotes: Berlin and The African Diaspora".

International researchers from Britain, France as well as the USA have issued articles, books, and even film documentaries. Thus the documentary, "Hitler's Forgotten Victims", first shown on British TV, has widely been recognised. It would have been a sign of sincerity if the historians responsible for "Distinguishing Marks: ..." had adhered to actual standards in historical writing and research, and if they had in the first place, dealt with prevailing historical biases. Sadly, this has not been the case.

Given the anomalies and drawbacks of this exhibition, it is not surprising that the people on the streets of Cologne have derided it as the "Negro-exhibition". And though the exponents of the exhibition have not reacted to any criticism as yet, several discussions among historians, interest groups, persons of public interest, and anti-racist groups have been spawned in response to the exhibition.

Some Black survivors are even considering withdrawing their personal material such as old photographs from their private collections, audio- and videotaped documentaries, etc. because they feel entirely misrepresented in a lingering discriminatory context.

In summary, one can state that the exhibition in Cologne has shamelessly wasted many a historical opportunity. Although it adopted the Black people's plight as the main and supposedly innovative theme, it has blatantly disrespected the unique experiences and perspectives of Black people.

The most distinguishing mark of this exhibition is the fact that it needs to be critically reviewed. Whoever has doubts about this ought to be aware that racially biased persecution during the Nazi era should be viewed in a broader context of national and international racist traditions, including the Black Holocaust.

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Acknowledgement: This review is largely based on an article by Nicola Lauré al-Samarai, published in *Kölnher Stadtrevue*, in December 2002.

It has been acknowledged without much argument that exhibitions dealing with Holocaust and persecution under the racist German Nazi government are particularly touchy. More so, when they deal with persecuted groups whose life-stories and histories have not yet been included into the official canon of (a people's) remembrance.

In this context, the ongoing exhibition in the documentation centre on Nazism in Cologne, EL-DE Haus, has lost the opportunity even before it opened its doors to the public in early November 2002. The eye-catcher in the exhibition's title "Besondere Kennzeichen: Neger" (Distinguishing Marks: Negro) is especially shocking since it gives public attention to the original Nazi language.

While the organisers responsible for the exhibition claim to be the first to display Black people's experiences under Nazism, they have failed entirely in this respect. This is not so much due to the layout or the design, which, in fact, are both non-existent. Indeed, the person whom the organisers tried to blame for the lapses, has since long openly distanced himself from this project. Therefore, the failure of the exhibition is basically due to an essential lack of a conceptual, scientific approach within the historically critical context of the Holocaust.

As a visitor to the exhibition, one would search in vain for an introduction to the unacquainted theme of recent (African-)German history. Instead, visitors are confronted with excessive reproductions of Nazi propaganda material with repetitive racial (*völkisch*) imagery in word and vision.

Furthermore, no red thread helps to understand the rather inconsistent accentuation of periods or chosen topics. The lump of pictures and graphics is rather poorly accompanied by written explanations.

Where such explanations can be found, they display a thorough lack of profound background