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POLITICAL RELIGION IN MODERN GERMANY: REFLECTIONS ON NATIONALISM, SOCIALISM, AND NATIONAL SOCIALISM

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How did Africans come to live in the German territories during the early modern era? What did they do after they got there, and what impressions did Germans and Africans have of each other? Unlike many other European states, none of the German states was a major sea power and none possessed colonies in the early modern period. German participation in the overseas slave trade was hardly noteworthy, and there were few scientific expeditions to foreign lands sponsored by German states during this time.¹ Yet, like in other European countries, in the early modern period many Africans and ex-slaves from the Americas lived with aristocratic families in the courts of German territories or with wealthy bourgeois families as highly regarded and privileged domestic servants. Outfitted in elaborate costumes, black servants added a fashionable, exotic element to households and could therefore be used to show off the significance and wealth of the people for whom they worked. For the same reason blacks also served in the military of many German states, most as splendidly dressed musicians; many were recruited by German troops in North America. Moravian missionaries from Saxony also brought ex-slaves with them to Germany from the Caribbean.

There were many German individuals and groups in the early modern period who could and did report on encounters with Africans, African Americans, and other foreign peoples while abroad. These included scholars and adventurers accompanying foreign expeditions, such as Reinhold and Georg Forster, who traveled with James Cook, and the Moravian missionaries who began working in the Caribbean, Suriname, and North America in the 1730s. In addition, tens of thousands of Germans emigrated to the North American colonies, and many wrote letters about their experiences to their home villages. Additionally, about thirty thousand "Hessian" soldiers served with the British troops in North America during the War of American Independence, and about half returned home to tell about it. German scholars and others could draw on second-hand sources such as English and French travel accounts, many of which were translated into German, for information about Africans. In short, contacts and impressions between Germans and Africans were not insignificant during this era, yet they have never been thoroughly studied.

African-American history is an important, well-established field, but

research on the black population in early modern Europe is still in its infancy, with most work concentrating on France, England, and the Netherlands.² This is surprising not only because blacks were so numerous, but also because they in many ways had an important cultural impact, as their presence in German art, literature, public debate, and daily life suggests.³ There are hundreds of paintings from this era portraying black and white people together.⁴ Black Africans in exotic dress were favorite motifs on porcelain, clocks, and in paintings, silhouettes of Africans appear in the coats of arms of several German cities and families, and blacks were popular characters in novels, poems, and plays.⁵ Furthermore, contemporary popular magazines and newspapers frequently engaged in the debate on slavery, and German Enlightenment thinkers followed closely the developments in other European countries and overseas. Many German scientists and philosophers also participated in the eighteenth-century discourse on defining the nature and history of human beings, which involved defining and classifying the differences among them.

During my fellowship at the GHI I plan to write a history of the relationship between Africans and Germans in the early modern period that includes an overview of the lives and living conditions of blacks in Germany as well as an analysis of what happened in a cultural sense when the two collided. This microhistorical approach relies on archival sources, visual images of the period, and contemporary scholarly texts, and aims to provide insight into individual experiences and perceptions in local societies. It also hopes to connect these findings to the broader questions concerning slavery, abolition, colonialism, the Atlantic world, scientific racism, religion, and the Enlightenment's search for a new definition of humanity.

Discovering sources for this project is no easy task: Few Africans in early modern Germany could write, which creates an imbalance between sources left by Africans and by Germans. One geographic region I decided to focus on was the Hesse and Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel area, where a relatively large number of Africans lived during this period. There had been a tradition of black servants and military musicians in these regions since the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century these two dukedoms provided the largest contingents of German soldiers fighting in the Revolutionary War in America. Numerous diaries left by these soldiers provide insight into their perceptions of slaves and slavery in America. Also, after the war many former slaves accompanied the German troops back to Europe, so that by the late 1780s the number of Africans in these two German states increased considerably. Hesse and Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel thus seem to provide ideal conditions for a microhistorical investigation of both the African and German experience, and perceptions of each other over the course of two centuries. Furthermore, I use more than four hundred paintings and other artworks found throughout Germany, which provide visual images of representations involving Africans. Reports by Moravian missionaries in

the Caribbean and the interviews they conducted with slaves add another perspective. In addition to archival sources, I also use contemporary journals, newspapers, and scholarly works, which are rich sources for German comments on slavery and emancipation, as well as anthropological research and attempts to define humanity.

In some ways the treatment of black musicians, soldiers, and servants was similar to that of their white colleagues, but there were fundamental differences. The lives of many Africans can basically be described in terms of "privileged dependency." Unlike France and England, none of the German states had a legally defined status for people who had been bought as slaves in other countries and then brought into Germany. Blacks were subject to property relationships and were considered valuable possessions, however they could move about freely within white society; their de facto slave status was quite different than it was for African slaves in other Western countries.⁶ For example, many Africans and the African Americans who came with the Hessian soldiers married into local families of all social strata and had children. Religion played a critical role in their integration into German society: One of the most decisive criteria in early modern Germany for judging strangers in general was whether or not they were Christian. Thus it is not surprising that the act of baptism was of central importance for most Africans living in Germany. Most who were not already Christians were baptized on their arrival.⁷ Baptized soldiers and court moors thus no longer were threatening savages but were united in faith with Christian society. This did not mean that they were equals, but baptism became a rite of passage that allowed blacks to be accepted into German society, in marked contrast to other countries.⁸ The close relationship of the act of baptism, social integration, and sponsored social status is made clear when one examines the names of those who served as godparents for the soldiers, including dukes, landgraves, other aristocrats, and high-ranking military officers. Also, baptism was the only prerequisite for blacks intending to marry local women. This is noteworthy, considering the difficult, bureaucratic procedure normally required by the authorities for marriage. In the stratified, hierarchical society of early modern Germany, "mixed" marriages of social unequals usually were undesired, yet such marriages between blacks and whites did not produce hostile reactions. The numerous examples of intermarriage are an indicator of social integration.

Throughout the early modern period German states welcomed Africans and maintained a generally positive image of them. Besides acceptance and integration into daily life, their presumed beauty and the darkness of their skin also elevated them to the status of privileged, highly valued, exotic attractions. Splendid, colorful costumes of Oriental rather than African origin made them stand out. Labeled as showpieces, blacks had to fulfill the specific task of representing the wealth and social standing of their sponsor. This is obvious in numerous paintings from the eighteenth century: Many are group portraits of a family or children, or portraits of

aristocrats, emperors, dukes, duchesses, and so forth, accompanied by a black servant. On the one hand, black persons are part of an almost intimate scene, showing their closeness to the sponsor and the esteem in which they are held. On the other hand, the black person is used as an "exoticized" token of wealth. Some paintings, particularly the ones depicting aristocratic white women with their black servants, clearly involve sexual connotations. In others, the color scheme of the painting emphasizes the contrast between black and white skin color.

Regarding the perspectives or feelings of the Africans themselves, the sources provide few clues. The African-American soldiers escaped a cruel system of slavery and came to a strange land with unheard-of possibilities for social integration. However, this also involved abandoning their home and leaving behind people like themselves. Many others led short lives as dependent objects of their protector's fancy, and being accepted and integrated was often accompanied by the experience of alienation rather than acculturation.

With none of the German states involved in slavery and the slave trade, these topics nonetheless were constantly debated among Enlightenment thinkers. Many Germans followed closely the discussions in England, France, and North America, translated and reprinted many articles from foreign-language publications, and themselves wrote long articles concerning slavery. German intellectuals almost uniformly condemned slavery because they viewed it as incompatible with the principles of humanity and Christianity. Condemnations were made not only by intellectuals: Through fortunate coincidence, the diaries of the Hessian and Brunswick soldiers and officers fighting in the Revolutionary War in North America allow us to trace the thoughts of common people and members of the lower aristocracy. Some soldiers probably had at least some experience with Africans at home because there had been a long tradition of blacks living in the German states before the war. Hessian soldiers spoke out time and again against slavery, condemning it for the same reasons propounded by the Enlightenment thinkers.

During this debate on slavery Africans also became the object of a fierce debate among German intellectuals over the nature of human beings: What is human? By what criteria does one distinguish humans from animals? What are races and how are they defined and distinguished from one another? With the dissolution of the Christian worldview that had put everything in its proper place, purely theological definitions of human beings no longer seemed satisfactory, and learned people everywhere sought new scientific explanations. The presence of black people in the German territories influenced this debate, in which many prominent German Enlightenment thinkers were involved, among them Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), Georg Forster (1754-1794), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Some, such as Samuel Thomas Soemmerring (1755-1830), a professor of anatomy in Hesse-Kassel, conducted their own anthropological research. Soemmerring dissected the corpses of four black soldiers who after the

war had accompanied the returning Hessians and died shortly thereafter.⁹

The results of this anthropological debate were contradictory and did not provide any definitive answers. Those involved employed diverse methods in various fields and debated whether the differences they found were based on "race" - a concept based on skin color - natural-environmental factors, or culture. The German position in the debate on difference was a developing consensus that there were differences in groups of humans but that these differences did not imply any moral or intellectual inequalities between them. In other words, they strongly agreed on difference without hierarchical ranking. There were those who deviated from this position, like Soemmerring, who concluded in his book that Africans belonged to a lower order of humans, closer to apes than to the higher order of humans, or the historian Christoph Meiners (1747-1810), who saw Africans as rightly enslaved because of their low standing in the human hierarchy since Creation. But these exceptions were heavily criticized or, in the case of Meiners, not even taken seriously by their colleagues.

German Enlightenment thinkers were motivated by the quest to understand and classify (and dissect) everything in the living world, and their anatomical and physiological research was not limited to black and white people; it included, for example, the exploration of differences between the sexes as well. But there was no need to assign rank or connect findings of difference with any evaluation of inherent morality and/or mental abilities. Therefore, the connection frequently made between the emergence of scientific racism and the abolition movement in studies on slavery in France, England, and North America does not work in the case of the German states.¹⁰ The new empirical studies did represent a transitional phase between older theological views and new racist theories of the nineteenth century; however, the generally accepted notion of African cultural deficiency together with scientific racism did not develop until the late nineteenth century, when Germany participated directly in colonialism.

It is interesting that this anthropological debate was carried out with such intensity at a time and place not directly affected by slavery.¹¹ Yet perhaps this response could occur in the German states precisely because here there was no danger that the discussion would directly challenge social, political, and economic arrangements, for the threat of ideological crisis might have limited the terms of the debate. Further, presumably free from any responsibility in these matters, it was easy for participants to condemn others for their contradictory claims. Criticizing others offered an opportunity for German intellectuals to openly discuss the concepts of "freedom," "equality," and the problem of bound labor in general - touchy issues in a society that still relied heavily on various forms of dependency and servitude. They could voice abstract, veiled criticism directed at their own society without being censored. In that way, investigating "difference" and opposing slavery met an important

need of German Enlightenment thinkers to define their own identity. The contrast with other races and their social conditions assisted these thinkers in their attempts to understand themselves.

From a comparative perspective, the encounter between Africans and Germans clearly developed along different lines than in other countries within the Atlantic system. Having no economic, political, or social dependency on slavery meant less racist views and a greater focus on the positive, exotic appeal of Africans. Nonetheless, the German focus on the exoticism of Africans and acceptance of their status of privileged dependency reveals that tolerance and exploitation were closely related.

NOTES

¹A few Germans did take part in the slave trade during this time. For a short period the Great Elector, Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg, planned to make Prussia a sea power and to this end instigated a plan to participate in the slave trade on the Guinea coast. The trading company he founded in 1679 failed, however, because the lack of colonies made it difficult to turn a profit. After enduring heavy financial losses for a number of years the company was sold to Dutch interests in 1698. Also, some Germans did sail on Dutch and Danish slave ships. See Albert Hüne, *Vollständige historisch-philosophische Darstellung aller Veränderungen des Negersklavenhandels von dessen Ursprüngen an bis zu seiner gänzlichen Aufhebung* (Göttingen, 1820), 1:421-30; and Catharina Lüden, *Sklavenfahrt mit Seeleuten aus Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg und Lübeck im 18. Jahrhundert* (Heide, 1983).

² Most recently, Peabody, Gerzina, Myers, and Blakely studied race relations between black and white people in these two countries within the framework of slavery. See Sue Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York, 1996); Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995); Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780-1830* (London, 1996); Alison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993).

³ See Peter Martin, *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren: Afrikaner in Bewußtsein und Geschichte der Deutschen* (Hamburg, 1993). This book provides insight into early modern German attitudes toward blacks, gives an overview of the sources available, and is the only monograph to date dealing with the African presence in early modern Germany. Additionally, two articles give a first insight into the living conditions of Africans in two eighteenth-century German residence towns: See Ingeborg Kittel, "Mohren als Hofbediente und Soldaten im Herzogtum Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel," *Braunschweigisches Jahrbuch* 46 (1965): 78-103; Wolfgang Schäfer, "Von 'Kammermohren,' 'Mohren'-Tambouren und 'Ost-Indianern': Anmerkungen zu Existenzbedingungen und Lebensformen einer Minderheit im 18. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Residenzstadt Kassel," *Hessische Blätter für Volks- und Kulturforschung* 23 (1988): 35-79.

⁴ A research project at Harvard University, *"The Image of the Black in Western Art,"* analyzes the presence of black people in works of art (published in a series of books with the same name) and has an extensive collection of references to artworks

throughout the world, including Europe and Germany.

⁵ See Uta Sadji, *Der Mohr auf der deutschen Bühne des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Anif, 1992).

⁶ Legally, however, blacks in Germany could find themselves in an ambiguous position. The lack of legal regulations in the German territories could serve as a disadvantage to Africans, who could not use the courts to defend themselves, as they could in England and France. For example, when a black man, who was bought in Copenhagen, instituted proceedings for his freedom in the Prussian courts in 1780 - a unique case - the obviously helpless court referred to the "natural law" to possess property and rejected his case. See Martin, *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren*, 133-4. On the situation of blacks in early modern England and France, see Gerzina, *Black London*, and Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France*.

⁷ For example, a thirty-year-old black man named Ludwig Wallis was a Presbyterian when he joined Brunswick troops in America in 1781. He died three years later in Brunswick. See Kittel, "Mohren als Hofbediente und Soldaten," 94.

⁸ Less than a third of the blacks registered in France in the second half of the eighteenth century were baptized. See Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France*, 82.

⁹ Soemmerring published his research findings in 1784 in a book called *Über die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mohren vom Europäer* (*On the Physical Difference between the Moor and the European*). Eighteenth-century German texts refer to black peoples in different, often not clearly defined terms: Contemporaries usually referred to black persons as *Mohren*, but this word was also used as a catch-all concept for non-white, non-Christians (Chinese, Indians et al.). Further, they also began using the term *Neger*, from the French *nègre*, which had specific reference to the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa. All this reflects the general problem in eighteenth-century Germany of identifying and classifying non-European peoples. On the eighteenth-century etymology of the term *Mohren*, see Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness Without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston, 1982), xii.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France*, 8, or Seymour Drescher, "The Ending of the Slave Trade and the Evolution of European Scientific Racism," in Joseph E. Inkori and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham, N.C., 1992), 362.

¹¹ John C. Greene argued that the main interest of the Americans on anthropological

questions before 1800 was religiously motivated, in order to use the Bible to justify slavery. He therefore refers to Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on Virginia," the "History of Jamaica" by Edward Long (republished in the United States in 1788), the work of Benjamin Rush from 1792, and to professor of anatomy John Augustine Smith's work from 1808. See John C. Greene, "The American Debate on the Negro's Place in Nature, 1780-1815," Journal of the History of Ideas 15 (1954): 384-96.