

Borstelmann, Thomas: *The Cold War and the Color Line. American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003. ISBN: 0-674-00597-X; 369 S.

Rezensiert von: Beatrice Heuser, Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam

As Thomas Borstelmann rightly argues, this study is highly overdue. Borstelmann's ambition is to bring together the foreign policy of US Administrations since the Second World War with their domestic policies on race relations, segregation and desegregation. It highlights the schizophrenia with which large and important sectors of generations of Americans, including the US Presidents themselves, have treated human rights – from the very creation of the United States of America until the mid-20th century. Human rights were fine for whites (and in the period treated in this book, this included white women, and non-WASP whites), but not for blacks and other minorities. Alongside Frank Füredi's excellent study *The Silent War: Imperialism and the changing perception of race*¹, Borstelmann shows how powerful discriminatory thinking about non-whites was in the minds of American leaders at a time when they fought for human rights, equality, decolonisation and self-determination in the international arena.

Borstelmann's focus is particularly on US governments – from the Presidential libraries and archives, he brings to light ample proof of racial bias or at least flippant discriminatory remarks, spoken perhaps in jest, perhaps out of disregard for others, by America's leaders way into the 1970s. The first President in his account, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was on the whole sympathetic to the plight of non-whites the world over, but the main focus of his successive administrations tended to lie elsewhere – overcoming the worldwide economic crisis of the inter-war years, and then a world war. Harry S. Truman, by contrast, together with several of his chief advisers, was brimming with racial and cultural stereotypes and prejudices, although he did push for the racial integration of the (previously segregated) US armed forces and the civil service. This process was subsequently completed under Dwight D. Eisenhower, alt-

hough Eisenhower's support of the process was less than lukewarm, considering his historical sympathy with the „Confederate“ past and culture of the American South. John F. Kennedy's time in office was too short for him to develop a high profile on the issue of the equal rights movement as well as on the major Cold War issues which assured his lasting fame. But at least he seems to have approached the matter without historical baggage and with considerable sympathy.

It is his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who stands out as the hero of this story, strongly engaged in turning the tide by introducing affirmative action, a change of the previously clearly racist immigration legislation, and changing ideas of what was politically tolerable in his country. Complaining about Southern Democratic governors and their never-ending railing about the „Niggah“, he exclaimed in 1966, „If I don't achieve anything else while I'm President, I intend to wipe that word out of the English language.“ (p. 177). And indeed, he must be given credit for this achievement. Unfortunately for all sides, Johnson's attentions were increasingly deflected onto the Vietnam War, so that the achievements of his administration are little remembered. Nor did Richard Nixon have the mental makeup to take up the task where Johnson had left off. Like Truman, Nixon was free and easy with using derogatory terms about minorities of all hues and ethnic origins, and enjoyed needling even his „Realist“ soul-mate, Henry Kissinger, about his supposedly non-American (because he came from a Jewish and European background) views. A jocular remark Nixon was fond of making – as Borstelmann has found it in several sources – was that in his opinion, Africans had only recently come down from the trees, but he magnanimously approved of giving them grants to come to study in the US. But the long-standing US support for the apartheid government in South Africa continued under him.

According to Borstelmann's account, Jimmy Carter came closest to Johnson in supporting blacks, along with Bill Clinton three Administrations later. Ronald Reagan bet-

¹ Füredi, Frank, *The Silent War. Imperialism and the changing perception of race*, New Brunswick 1998.

ween them didn't much care, and thus completes the picture that it was essentially the presidents from Southern states who faced the colour problem in the US squarely, and did most to solve it.

But Borstelmann's account does not stop at the government level: he manages elegantly to tie in this highest-level study of the mentalities of leaders with the experiences of American blacks both within their own country and abroad, and foreign blacks in America. An important vehicle of self-consciousness and self-reappraisal for US blacks was their service in US armed forces abroad, in the First and Second World Wars as well as in Korea, and particularly in Vietnam. It has been shown that American white supremacists rightly feared the effect on black American soldiers of the encounter of Europeans – in both world wars, the French and the British overwhelmingly treated black American soldiers en par with their white colleagues, and even defended them against segregation and discriminatory treatment by their white US peers. Vietnam, the first war in which the US forces were racially integrated, seems to have been a quantum leap not only in the self-perception of black soldiers, but also in the realisation among many of their white peers that racial differences among themselves receded into insignificance when sitting together in a trench. Much confusion was caused in the minds of all involved about the nature of the enemy, however – since the Second World War, Asian adversaries were racially stereotyped and mentally dehumanised, which led to the sad fact that both black and white soldiers committed atrocities, the most famous but by no means only case being that of My Lai.

There are methodological problems with some of Borstelmann's more sweeping generalisations, such as when all we are given to prove that whole groups of people thought one thing or paid close attention to another, or when the evidence furnished does not exceed two or three individual examples (e.g. pp. 21, 41). This, however, is the standard problem of historians of mentalé, who are forever caught between the devil of sweeping generalisations and the deep blue sea of bland statistics or huge numbers of examples or footnotes (only then to be told that they had do-

ne no more than state the obvious). A few such generalisations, however, tended to leave this reviewer uneasy. One is the claim that the US did not push an anti-colonialist stance more strongly merely to please their European allies who still had colonies. The copious literature on the European great powers and their decolonisation struggle shows rather that they feared the pro-Communist leanings of the most vocal indigenous anti-colonial movements (and to some extent convinced their American allies of this dimension). The Cold War context made it difficult if not impossible to approach the issue of decolonisation with anything other than a zero-sum mind frame: independence from British, French, Dutch, Portuguese or any other European colonial rule more often than not meant a victory for the Communist camp. The US often sought to encourage anti-colonial leaders who did not fit this pattern, but the results of US policies did not always lend themselves to internal or external peace and harmony, if the divergent US and European policies over Egypt, Algeria, Indonesia and Pakistan are considered.

All in all, this is an elegantly written and eminently readable book, which ably bridges the great divide in research and teaching concerning „IR“ history on the one hand and domestic history on the other.

HistLit 2004-3-111 / Mike Kortmann über Borstelmann, Thomas: *The Cold War and the Color Line. American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. Cambridge 2003, in: H-Soz-Kult 23.08.2004.