

NEW MEMORIALS IN BERLIN HONOR THE HOLOCAUST'S OVERLOOKED BLACK VICTIMS

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**TWO BRASS “STUMBLING STONES” ARE AMONG THE FIRST TO MEMORIALIZE THE
AFRO-GERMAN PEOPLE MURDERED BY THE NAZI’S.**



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Though people of African ancestry were among the millions murdered by the Nazis during World War II, their persecution is often overlooked in accounts of the Holocaust's horrors. As Jennifer Neal reports for *Atlas Obscura*, newly unveiled memorials in Berlin seek to bring attention to two of these oft-forgotten Black victims: Martha Ndumbe and Ferdinand James Allen.

Officials installed Stolpersteine, or “stumbling stones,” honoring Ndumbe and Allen earlier this year. A type of memorial common in Germany and other European countries, the brass plaques typically commemorate victims of the Holocaust. (see picture above). Though they number in the tens of thousands, few memorialized Black people—until now.

“The Black victims of the Nazis have long not been considered—neither by academic research nor by memorial politics,” Sophia Schmitz, a historian with the Berlin-based Stolpersteine project, tells *Atlas Obscura*. “But in a town like Berlin, a Black community in the 1920s and 1930s did exist, all of whom were at first harassed and later more often than not murdered during Nazi rule. It is our aim to uncover their stories and make them present again, late as it is.”

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Germany was home to around 1,500 to 2,000 Black residents, as well as a significant number of Black performers, athletes and diplomats who were temporarily living in the city, Robbie Aitken, a historian at Sheffield Hallam University, tells Harrison Mwilima of Deutsche Welle (DW).

The Stolpersteine monuments serve as everyday reminders of the lives lost during the Holocaust. Von Christian Michelides via Wikimedia Commons under CC BY-SA 4.0

“[A]lready around 1933, some Black men and their families had left Germany because of the rise of the Nazis,” Aitken says.

Some of the country’s permanent Black residents hailed from Germany’s colonies in Africa. Others were descendants of Black French Army personnel stationed in Germany after World War I—a group tarred with the racist label “Rhineland Bastards.” In 1937, notes the Wiener Holocaust Library, approximately 385 of these 600 to 800 children were forcibly sterilized by the Nazi regime.

Per the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, people of African descent in Nazi Germany were “socially and economically ostracized.”

They were barred from attending university, fired from their jobs and even deprived of their citizenship. An unknown number of Afro-Germans were imprisoned in concentration and death camps, but the majority of the country’s Black population “survived the Third Reich,” according to the Wiener Holocaust Library.



Ndumbe was born in Berlin in 1902. As the online Stolpersteine portal notes, her mother, Dorothea Grunwaldt, was from Hamburg, while her father, Jacob Ndumbe, was a native of Cameroon. He moved to Germany in 1896 to participate in a *Völkerschauen*, or “human zoo,” that exhibited Africans in racist, stereotypical contexts.

Aitken tells DW that discrimination made it difficult for Ndumbe to find work, so “she turned to prostitution and petty crimes for her survival.” The Nazis imprisoned her as an “asocial professional criminal” and eventually sent her to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she died in 1945.

Allen, meanwhile, was born in 1898 to James Cornelius Allen, a Black British musician from the Caribbean, and Lina Panzer, a resident of Berlin. He suffered from epilepsy and was killed at the Bernburg psychiatric hospital in 1941 as part of Aktion T4, the Nazis’ mass murder of disabled people.

As Lois Gilman reported for *Smithsonian* magazine in 2007, artist Gunter Demnig created the Stolpersteine project to recognize individual Holocaust victims. The 4- by 4-inch brass-covered blocks provide a bare outline of a person’s life—their name, date of birth, a word or two about their treatment under the Nazi regime, and the date of their murder. They stand in front of the last place where the person voluntarily lived.

“If the stone is in front of your house, you’re confronted,” Demnig told *Smithsonian*. “People start talking. To think about six million victims is abstract, but to think about a murdered family is concrete.”

Allen suffered from epilepsy and was killed as part of the Nazis’ mass murder of disabled people.

Aitken led the effort to place the Stolpersteine for Ndumbe and Allen as part of his work researching Germany’s Black community and compensation claims by Black Holocaust victims, reports Lisa Wong for the Sheffield-based *Star*. He argues that the invisibility of Black people in the history of the Nazi era reflects such factors as a lack of documentation and reluctance on the part of Germans to contend with the country’s colonial past.

“I hope these new memorials help to shed further light on the devastating impact that Nazi rule had on the lives of Germany’s Black residents,” says Aitken in a statement.

Prior to the installation of the new stones, only two other Stolpersteine recognized Black victims killed by the Nazis.

A plaque in Berlin honors Mahjub bin Adam Mohamed, a onetime child soldier for the German colonial army in East Africa. Mohamed moved to Berlin in 1929, working as a teacher, waiter and actor. The Nazis accused him of “transgression of racial barriers” for having relationships with German women and sent him to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he died in 1944.

A fourth stone in Frankfurt commemorates Hagar Martin Brown, a South African man who worked as a servant. Nazi doctors used him as a test subject for medical chemicals, leading to his death in 1940.

Aitken tells DW that he is continuing to investigate the stories of Black victims of the Holocaust.

“I hope there are more Stolpersteine to come at some point,” he says. “There were clearly more Black victims, but the difficulty is in finding concrete, documented evidence to prove victimhood. This is difficult because of the Nazis’ destruction of records.”