

Little more than 50 years ago ...

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An interesting encounter in London last week: Mark Sealy, Director of Autograph APB (formerly the Association of Black Photographers), is showing me around the exhibition he curated called *Human Rights Human Wrongs*. In choosing the exhibits, Sealy had his pick from over 290,000 photos held in the Black Star Collection. The Black Star agency was founded in New York in 1935 by exiled Jewish photographers Ernest Mayer, Kurt Safranski and Kurt Kornfeld and supplied some now legendary black and white images to Life magazine and a range of other publications.

In the foyer of the photographer's gallery dozens of girls on a school trip are reading the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights which has been reproduced on the wall. In his presentation of the work Sealy puts particular emphasis on Article 6: "Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law."

This epochal catalogue of norms from 1948 is generally understood as a counter model to Nazi barbarism. Sealy, though, takes a different approach, one based on postcolonial theory. He looks at another history of World War Two, the story of the 'Third World' during the war.

In their efforts to defeat Hitler's Germany, the Allied Powers moved to mobilize their colonies. The victorious Allies were aided by many other states around the world that spilled much blood to free the world from fascism. Thousands of black soldiers from the USA, Cameroon and Algeria fought among the ranks of the French, English and US armies. These soldiers were inspired by the Allies' egalitarian and antiracist rhetoric.

After the war, they sought to use their new confidence and combat experience to turn human rights and the right to self-determination into universal principles. What they encountered, however, proved to be a very rude awakening. In 1944 French troops opened fire at a demonstration by returned Senegalese soldiers in Thiaroye near Dakar, killing and injuring dozens of Senegalese soldiers who had fought alongside the French during WWII. Worse was to come in Algeria, where the French colonial army responded brutally to victory celebrations on 8 May 1945 and went on to kill tens of thousands of Algerians in the space of one month.

The violation repression of emergent liberation movements in French, British, Belgian and Dutch colonies took millions of lives in Africa and Asia over the course of decolonisation. The exhibition in London shows black and white images of torture, racist violence and defiled bodies – products of this Western bigotry.

Interspersed are grim images from the American South, placards with the message "Nigger, you cannot vote", police officers beating black demonstrators: whites aiming their batons at unarmed blacks, white men leaning on cars, their faces betraying a readiness for violence mixed with an uncertainty about the future.

But the resistance was already building, as reflected in the photos: the US civil rights movement, Martin Luther King and not least the powerful scenes from 29 June 1960 showing Belgian King Baudouin I. standing in his white uniform as he is driven in a motorcade, while a young black man approaches and takes the King's ceremonial sword, the embodiment of colonial and patriarchal power. Disempowering the Belgians – temporarily at least.

The former colonial rulers fought back. In a speech later that day, the Belgian King lauded his great uncle, colonial mass murderer King Leopold II. Elected president of the fledgling Congolese state Patrice Lumumba countered with a passionate anticolonial speech, essentially securing his own death warrant. Seven months later, on 17 January 1961, Lumumba was murdered by his adversaries, who were aided by the Belgians.

All of this occurred little more than fifty years ago and is, like many of the events depicted in the exhibition, all too often forgotten. This forgetting makes it impossible to understand the present. Mark Sealy's skill lies in helping us to remember.