

Advocacy for Decolonization and Human Rights: Drafting an Anticolonial Human Rights
Platform around the United Nations Conference on International Organization

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On June 26, 1945, after two months of deliberations, the United Nations Charter was signed in San Francisco during the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO). Delegates representing fifty nations and commonwealths converged to discuss issues pertaining to the world after World War II. One issue not formally on the agenda was colonial independence.

The United States State Department in addition to sending official delegates to represent the U.S. at the conference also invited consultants from forty-two national, non-governmental organizations to provide input to the delegation. It did this to increase public support for the UN so that the U.S. would not repeat the mistake of non-participation that it previously made with the League of Nations. Other organizations beyond the forty-two also made their way to San Francisco in an unofficial capacity.¹ While there these organizations had their own sessions calling for the UN to add colonial independence to its agenda. These sessions served as a shadow conference of sorts,² whose purpose was to remind the U.S. government of its stated commitment to decolonization and human rights that it made in the Atlantic Charter.

The aims of this presentation are to examine the anticolonial human rights arguments presented at these *shadow conference* sessions and to look at how discussions about the drive to add colonial independence to the conference agenda galvanized anticolonial activists. While there were several organizations that engaged in anticolonial activism, my main focus will be on the efforts of the West Indies National Council represented by Dr. Charles Petioni and Richard B. Moore. It would be ahistorical to say that these sessions had a direct impact on the conference but these sessions were examples of post-war anticolonial activism that would pick up over the next several years.

Setting the Agenda of the Appeal to the UNCIO

The time before heading to San Francisco was used by these organizations to gather and refine ideas to present at the conference and to drum up grassroots support. Among the pre-conference activities was a colonial conference held at the Schomburg Center in New York City sponsored by W. E. B. Du Bois, representing the NAACP, one of the official forty-two consultants. Du Bois convened a committee to draft a resolution as the basis of the NAACP's advocacy agenda. The committee which included Dr. Petioni contained four items: the call for colonial independence; the formation of an independent body to oversee the transition to independence; the representation of colonial peoples on such a body; and a focus on the economic and social improvement of the colonial peoples³ Dr. Petioni sent back the recommendations to Du Bois with a handwritten note which said

The West Indies National Council is not in favor [of] items 3 & 4. They object to any degree of control or direction by any kind of international body.

This is to be emphasized in any [appeal?] made of the conference.⁴

Petioni wanted to emphasize that independence meant sovereignty without being beholden to another power.

During the conference, Moore unveiled the seven point "Appeal to the United Nations Conference on International Organization on Behalf of the Caribbean Peoples" ("The Appeal").⁵ "The Appeal" featured proposals the United Nations ought to take up to ensure the freedom and self-determination of the Caribbean peoples. For brevity I will only mention proposals one, two, six, and seven which called for:

1. Forthright recognition of the inalienable right of the Caribbean peoples to self-government and self-determination.
2. Practical recognition of the age-long objective of the West Indian peoples for voluntary federation...
6. Guarantees for the abolition of all discriminatory laws and practices based on race, religion, color or previous condition of servitude or oppression, and for assurance of full protection of life and liberty for the Caribbean peoples, for the African peoples, and for all peoples without regard to race, creed, or color.

7. Genuine equality of rights both in fact and in law for all peoples everywhere and full democratic citizenship rights, including universal adult suffrage for all people.⁶

The order of each proposal illustrated a progression from appeals for the collective rights of the nation to appeals for individual rights.⁷ This means the demand for national self-determination led to a demand for a collective federation of West Indian nations,⁸ progressing to a demand for the abolition of discrimination which led to a call for equal rights for individuals.⁹ Taken together The Appeal was advocating for the right of all peoples to take ownership of themselves as political beings.¹⁰

Advocating an Anticolonial Human Rights Agenda

Once in San Francisco, Moore spoke at various events furthering the points he made in “The Appeal,” linking a human rights agenda with an anticolonial one. While Moore was doing this, Dr. Petioni was attempting to get a formal hearing by the delegates at the conference. On May 20 at a forum at the First Congregational Church in San Francisco, Moore elaborated on the anti-imperialist nature of The Appeal stating that it

points to the “master race mania” and to the horrible atrocities of Dachau, etc., as inevitable developments of imperialism and of similar atrocities first perpetrated in the colonies.

It further recommends that UNCIO adopt a resolution requiring that all nations shall enact and enforces laws with adequate penalties against any and all overt manifestations of such racial, national and religious prejudices and shall undertake a vigorous campaign of education for the extirpation of such prejudices and animosities.¹¹

He effectively made the connection between human rights abuses and imperialism, implicitly saying that colonialism required the denial of the human rights of its colonial subjects in order to function. This statement prescribed the role the UN ought to play in the prevention of the escalation of human rights abuses in order to prevent the denial of rights and wide scale losses of life. At the same event Dr. Ramskrishna Shahu Modak, president of the Provisional World Council of Dominated Nations, spoke about how decolonialization could be achieved peacefully

while refuting the belief that colonial peoples were just not ready for self-government, let alone independence.

During a speech at the Free India meeting entitled “The Fate and Future of the Colonial Peoples,” Moore reiterated the WINC stance on the right to sovereignty for colonial people that Dr. Petioni stated in the note to Du Bois. Speaking on the prospect of a harmonious world, he said “there can be no peace unless the colonial peoples are accorded full independence.”¹² When Dr. Petioni’s efforts at obtaining a hearing at the conference failed Moore sent out “The Appeal” to UN Secretary General Alger Hiss and all the delegates on May 25.

The Battle over the Word “Independence”

Inside the conference itself the delegations of Great Britain and the United States were intent on not discussing colonial independence. They preferred to limit the discussion to what to do about territories held under trust.¹³

The United States working paper on trusteeship was used as the basis for the UN’s discussion.¹⁴ Paragraph B 2 stated that the objective of the trusteeship program was

to promote the political, economic, and social advancement of the trust territories and their inhabitants and their progressive development toward self-government *in forms appropriate to the varying circumstances of each territory...*(emphasis in the original)¹⁵

The term “self-government” did not necessarily imply independence, plus the determination of what were the appropriate circumstances of self-government were left up to the occupying power which made true independence unlikely.

While the Chinese and the Russian delegates had expressed objections to not having colonial independence on the agenda, the strongest objection was made by Brigadier General Carlos P. Romulo of the Philippine Commonwealth. General Romulo made a press statement in support of colonial independence on May 30.¹⁶ His definition of independence provided a compelling case as to why the word should be included in the UN Charter:

Independence has many meanings and all are bulwarks of human dignity. To be sovereign. To be not contingent or conditioned. Not to be dependent. To be uncontrolled, uncoerced, self-reliant. To be free.

The antithesis of independence is to be controlled and held subject.¹⁷

He espoused a belief similar to Moore's that it was only through the recognition of their freedom that colonial peoples could claim the full human rights that they are entitled to.

The Romulo Effect

Romulo's stance had made the anticolonial position more concrete since it came from a representative of a colonized territory. Thus activists such as Moore who were struggling to get the colonial question heard could more concretely state their objectives and push for the issue to be addressed by delegates. Moore in a letter to another WINC member dated June 7 mentioned that colonial independence "is now to the fore with Brigadier General Carlos P. Romulo leading the fight in Conference committees, and your representative mobilizing public pressure from the outside."¹⁸ This led to another attempt at sending the delegates copies of *The Appeal* on June 11 which added four goals the UNCIO ought to address which were influenced by Romulo's comments, the first two being

1. Specify "independence" as the just goal and inalienable right of the peoples of all colonial and dependent areas.
2. State clearly that "encouragement of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" shall apply to all colonial and dependent peoples.¹⁹

There was now an official template from which to make a plea for colonial independence which would start the road toward greater human rights.

During a speech on June 3, shortly after Romulo's statements became public, Moore put forth a reason why "self-government" as the end goal for dependent peoples was not sufficient noting

"Self-government" has been so abused that it has no meaning. Self-government means the right of peoples to govern themselves. But to Mr. Smuts, Mr. Churchill, Mr. Eden, and Mr. Stassen self government is something by which colonial

peoples may be able to express themselves in some measure but absolute veto power remains in the hands of the ruling imperialist powers.²⁰

There was too much imperialist history to say otherwise. The examples that Moore used in this and in other speeches bared that out. However, despite the galvanized efforts, activists did not succeed in influencing conference delegates regarding colonial independence.

Finalizing the Provisions Over Territories

In fact it is likely that conference delegates did not even know about the extent of advocacy efforts on behalf of colonial independence. Thus, when it came time for the delegates to discuss the provisions of the charter regarding dependent territories they stuck to the agenda of only discussing trusteeships. The final language of the trusteeship section, which became Article 76 of the UN Charter allowed for a road to independence for territories that were under trusteeship, which was the main goal of the major powers.²¹

What about independence for territories that was not under trusteeship? Under the section which became Article 73 (b), “Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories,” members who possess territories had the responsibility to ensure those territories aimed

to develop self-government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples, and to assist them in the progressive development of their free political institutions, according to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples, and their varying stages of advancement.²²

Notice there was no mention of “independence.” Despite its exclusion, General Romulo said he was pleased with the revision. He explained that during discussion with Commander Harold Stassen of the United States he was assured that the phraseology was meant to suggest “independence,” explaining that the clause

encompasses what I feel will give a soul to this charter, because therein lies the spirit of independence and because here we are trying to secure peace for one world and one humanity.²³

So why did Romulo accept this? The inclusion of the word “independence” was never even put up for discussion. Marika Sherwood speculated that General Romulo’s acceptance of this was due to the United States delegation “silencing” him.²⁴ While she may be right she offers no real historical proof beyond a diary entry by Lord Cranborne, leader of the British House of Lords, which said that “the US delegation has squared General Romulo about ‘independence.’”²⁵ All we know for a fact is that Romulo had a conversation with Stassen in which he learned about the revised paragraph on non-self-governing territories and was persuaded to accept it. Until there is more historical proof about how Romulo was persuaded not much else could be said about that.

Conclusion

It would be historically inaccurate to say that the lobbying efforts of Moore and his cohorts had any real impact. The major powers stuck to their agenda for the most part. They remained adamant that the UNCIO was not the place for serious consideration of decolonization. It would not be until 1960 that the United Nations would have a formal policy regarding decolonization when it adopted the Declaration of the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. These “shadow sessions” were obscure but there were many ideas expressed that gained currency in later years. A history of human rights would benefit from learning about the expression of these ideas. Also this was a small sampling of what were probably numerous sessions that was happening around the UNCIO. These sessions deserve to be discovered and scrutinized for the historical record.

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- ¹ Dorothy B. Robins, *Experiment in Democracy: The Story of U.S. Citizen Organizations in Forging the Charter of the United Nations* (New York: Parkside Press, 1971), 88-89.
- ² Marika Sherwood, "The United Nations: Caribbean and African American Attempts to Influence the Founding Conference in San Francisco in 1945," *Journal of Caribbean History* 29, no. 1 (1995): 25-58; Marika Sherwood, "'There is No New Deal for the Blackman in San Francisco': African Attempts to Influence the Founding Conference of the United Nations, April-July, 1945," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 29, no. 1 (1996), 84-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/221419>.
- ³ Committee on Resolutions for the Colonial Conference, 7 April 1944, *Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois*, reel 57, frame 809.
- ⁴ Charles Petioni to W. E. B. Du Bois, 14 April 1945, *ibid*, reel 58, frame 210.
- ⁵ "Demand End of Exploitation of Colonial People," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 14, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News.
- ⁶ Richard B. Moore, "Appeal to the United Nations Conference on International Organization on Behalf of the Caribbean Peoples," in *Richard B. Moore*, 276.
- ⁷ There are some who argue that anticolonialism is not a human rights struggle because it emphasizes the collective struggle for national sovereignty rather than individual rights. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), 84-119 in particular, is one among many scholars who advances this argument. This presentation argues that during the post-World War II period anticolonial activists saw anticolonialism as a human rights struggle.

⁸ The idea of a West Indies Federation had circulated about in some form or another since the seventeenth century. Both the British government and West Indians supported the idea although for different reasons. Among West Indians, some believed that federation was the best way to self-government and independence while others believed it was just a way for Great Britain to maintain control amidst calls for independence. For Moore's thoughts on federation see Richard B. Moore, "Memorandum on Federation and Self-Government of the West Indies," in *Richard B. Moore*, 279-283. Federation was tried in the West Indies for three years, 1958-1961. Some of the works written on the West Indies Federation includes: George C. Abbott, "The Associated States and Independence." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1981), 69-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/165543>; Yereth Kahn Knowles, *Beyond the Caribbean States: A History of Regional Cooperation in the Commonwealth Caribbean* (San German, PR: Caribbean Institute and Study Center for Latin America, 1972).

⁹ A paraphrase of the first two and last two proposals of "The Appeal," *Richard B. Moore.*, 276.

¹⁰ Ingram, James D. "What Is a 'Right to Have Rights'? Three Images of the Politics of Human Rights." *American Political Science* 100, no. 4 (2008): 401-416. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27644535>.

¹¹ Press release dated 21 May 1945, 2, box 8, folder 1, Moore Papers.

¹² Richard B. Moore, "The Fate and Future of the Colonial Peoples," address, the Free India Meeting, Scottish Rite Hall, San Francisco, CA, May 24, 1945, 3, Moore Papers. Text of this speech was published as Richard B. Moore, "The Fate and Future of the Colonial Peoples," *New Voice* 1, no. 1 (July 1945).

¹³ U. S. Department of State, *The United Nations Conference on International Organization. San Francisco, California. April 25 to June 26, 1945. Selected Documents.* Conference Series, no. 83 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1946): 648. A good contemporaneous source about trusteeship at the UNCIO that was published shortly afterwards is Huntington Gilchrist, "Colonial Questions at the San Francisco Conference," *American Political Science Review* 39, no. 5 (1945), 982-992. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1950038>.

¹⁴ U.N. Conference on International Organization, San Francisco, 25 April-26 June 1945, *Summary Report of Third Meeting of Committee II/4, Veterans Building, Room 202 Held on 11 May 1945 at 5 p.m.* (Doc. 260 , II/4/8), 2

¹⁵ U.S. Dept. of State, *UNCIO*, 647-648.

¹⁶ "Romulo Champions Inserting 'Independence' in Objectives Preamble for Dependent Races," *New York Times*, June 2, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (107249204).

¹⁷ U.N. Conference on International Organization, *Extension of Remarks of Hon. Carlos P. Romulo, Resident Commissioner of the Philippines in the House of Representatives, July 20, 1945* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1945), 6, United Nations Archives.

¹⁸ Richard B. Moore to Lowe, 7 June 1945. Moore Papers.

¹⁹ Richard B. Moore to the Honorable Delegates of the UNCIO, San Francisco, California, 11 June 1945. Moore Papers; "Push Colonial Freedom Drive," *Chicago Defender*, June 23, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

²⁰ Richard B. Moore, "What the UNCIO has Accomplished (speech, First Congregational Church, San Francisco, CA, June 3, 1945), 2. Moore Papers.

²¹ U.N. Conference on International Organization, San Francisco, 25 April-26 June 1945, *Summary Report of the Thirteenth Meeting of Committee II/4, Veterans Building, Room 223 Held on 8 June 1945 at 8:35 p.m.* (Doc. 877 , II/4/35), 1-2; "Trusteeship Plan Nears Completion," *New York Times*, June 10, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (107230606); United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, Ch. XII, 76 (b), October 24, 1945, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter12.shtml>

²² U.N. Conference on International Organization, San Francisco, 25 April-26 June 1945, *Summary Report of the Fifteenth Meeting of Committee II/4, Veterans Building, Room 223 Held on 18 June 1945 at 8:30 p.m.* (Doc. 1090 , II/4/43), 2; UN, *Charter*, Ch. XI, 73 (b).

²³ U.N. Conference on International Organization, *Extension of Remarks of Hon. Carlos P. Romulo*, 9.

²⁴ Sherwood, "There is No New Deal for the Blackman in San Francisco," 84-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/221419>.

²⁵ Lord Cranborne, minute entry dated 14 June 1945, quoted in *Ibid.*