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The Forgotten Alliance of African Nationalists and Western Pacifists

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This year, the West African nation of Ghana is celebrating fifty years of independence, based on the termination of British rule of the Gold Coast (as Ghana was called in the colonial era) in 1957.

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The independence ceremonies of March 6, 1957 had great symbolic significance. Ghana was the first country to throw off colonial rule in Black Africa. In addition, its first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, was a fiery African nationalist who had led a daring and unremitting campaign for independence. Proclaiming that Ghana would dedicate itself to "the struggle to emancipate other countries in Africa," Nkrumah argued that "our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent."

Today, with so many African nations mired in poverty, violence, AIDS, overseas debt, and subordination to multinational corporations, it is hard to recall the excitement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. At that time, a rising tide of African protest led nation after nation to throw off the chains of colonialism, to begin ambitious programs for social and economic development, and to reject Cold War military alliances. Ghana continued in their vanguard-at least until 1966, when Nkrumah was overthrown by a military coup.

Although most of this history is fairly well-known, a much lesser-known development of this heady era is the close alliance that developed between African nationalists and Western pacifists in the context of Africa's liberation.

In 1959, the French government was laying plans for the explosion of France's first atomic bomb-not in France, of course, but in that nation's colony of Algeria. The opinions of the Algerians (then engaged in a bloody struggle for independence from France) did not count for very much among French policymakers. Nor did the opinions of other African leaders and organizations, which protested bitterly against the irradiation of their continent with nuclear fallout and against France's latest display of colonialist arrogance.

Into this explosive situation came a small British pacifist group, the Direct Action Committee, which proposed dispatching an international protest team to the site of the French bomb test. Although the Moroccan government offered its nation as a staging area for the protest, Ghana seemed a better bet. Not only did Nkrumah's government appear thoroughly committed to anti-imperialism and anti-militarism, but with the assistance of Bill Sutherland, an American pacifist, a Ghana Council for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) had been launched. Unlike its Western counterparts, it had a semi-official status and enjoyed strong support from leading public figures, as well as from the Ghana Bar Association, the Ghana Medical Association, and the Ghana Federation of Women.

As a result, with the backing of the Direct Action Committee and its U.S. counterpart, the tiny Committee for Nonviolent Action, leading Western pacifists-among them Michael Randle, A.J. Muste, and Bayard Rustin-flew to Ghana to engage in intense planning sessions with the leaders of Ghana CND. Radio Ghana trumpeted their activities and they spoke before numerous mass meetings, with audiences in the tens of thousands. The protest team received the support of numerous African leaders, as well as the official backing of the All-African Trade Union Federation. Bowled over by the African enthusiasm for the venture, Rustin-who left it reluctantly when Martin Luther King, Jr and A. Philip Randolph pleaded for his help in organizing civil rights protests in the United States-later

remarked that this was the most significant pacifist activity with which he had ever been associated. It "tied together . . . militarism and political freedom in a way that people could understand and respond to."

Beginning in December 1959, a small protest team-composed mostly of Ghanaians, but with the remainder from Nigeria, Basutoland, Britain, France, and the United States-entered Upper Volta on the long journey to the site of the atomic bomb test in Algeria. In response, armed French troops swooped down upon them, arrested them, and deported them. Later that December, a reconstituted team entered Upper Volta, only to be suppressed once again by the French military. Protesters launched a more unconventional invasion-proceeding on foot and, later, by hitching rides-in mid-January 1960, but once more it was broken up by military action and arrests.

At this point, the activists could see little purpose in continuing, at least in part because they had already ignited a storm of protest against French policy. During the team's attempts to reach the test site, small demonstrations had broken out in Upper Volta, Ghana, Nigeria, Britain, West Germany, and the United States. Meanwhile, additional volunteers signed up for future missions. In late January, with the nuclear test date nearing, mass demonstrations erupted in Tunis and Tripoli. In Rabat, Morocco, thousands protested outside the French embassy, despite a government ban on demonstrations. In Paris, five hundred African students from French Community nations presented an anti-testing petition to the French government.

Although the French nuclear test went forward, in its aftermath Ghana CND issued a stinging declaration, declaring that France, by exploding an atomic bomb, had "resigned from the club of human decency and respect for the rights of others." Many other Africans and people around the world agreed.

Nor was this the end of it. The Reverend Michael Scott, a leading British peace activist, convinced Nkrumah to organize a meeting that would bring together leaders of overseas peace groups with representatives of African governments, liberation movements, and union federations to develop ongoing forms of peace activism on the African continent. Running from April 7 to 9, 1960, this Conference on Positive Action for Peace and Security in Africa drew prominent pacifists from around the world, including Muste and the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, King's top aide in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Advocates of armed struggle, such as Frantz Fanon, were also on hand, and played a role in the conference proceedings. Nonetheless, the pacifists emerged with considerable support. By a unanimous vote, the conference applauded the contribution made by the Algeria protest team to the liberation of Africa, urged heightened protest against French nuclear tests, and called for the establishment of training centers in nonviolent resistance. According to Sutherland, the conference represented "the height of influence of the world pacifist movement on the African liberation struggle."

After that, the Westerners had a more difficult time. Although Nkrumah told Muste and other pacifists that he was going to get started immediately on a new anti-testing project, have a nonviolent resistance training center built in Accra (his nation's capital), and hire Sutherland and Randle to work full-time on the project and for the center, none of these promises came to fruition. Instead, Nkrumah seemed to grow distracted and to focus increasingly on solidifying his personal power in Ghana. About all that remained of his commitment was his government's financial sponsorship of an assembly on disarmament, "The World Without the Bomb." Convened in Accra in June 1962, it drew together about a hundred participants from Western, Communist, and nonaligned countries, including fourteen from African nations.

Even so, ongoing independence struggles and the sprightly pacifist resistance to French nuclear tests opened possibilities for pacifist advances in other African countries. Kenneth Kaunda, the leader of Northern Rhodesia's independence movement impressed pacifists with his Gandhian fervor, and they impressed him, as well. In February 1962, at the fourth annual conference of the Pan-African Freedom Movements of East and Central Africa, Kaunda-the president of the organization-successfully headed off calls to rally behind a program of violent revolution, arguing that "we must find another way or perish." Rustin, Sutherland, and Scott worked closely with Kaunda and, ultimately, helped him pull together plans for a mass international march in support of universal suffrage in Northern Rhodesia. Embarrassed by talk of the forthcoming march, the colonial authorities in London successfully pressured

the white settler government in Northern Rhodesia to scrap its discriminatory election rules. With universal suffrage in place, Kaunda won nationwide elections and Northern Rhodesia became an independent nation, Zambia.

Once again, however, overseas pacifists were disappointed by the results. To be sure, Kaunda and Julius Nyerere, the president of neighboring Tanganyika, acted in March 1962 to set up a nonviolent resistance training center at Dar es Salaam, with Sutherland and other pacifists operating it. But without adequate financial support or a clear focus, the center did not get very far, and collapsed a year later. Furthermore, as Kaunda assumed governmental office in Zambia and as violent revolution escalated in southern Africa, he began discarding his pacifist views and became a more-or-less typical government official.

In general, then, Western pacifists, despite some dizzying successes in Africa during the late 1950s and early 1960s, failed to make the kind of dramatic breakthrough on the continent that they hoped for. Nevertheless, their forging of an alliance with African nationalists, even if only temporary, was a remarkable feat-one more indication of their influence on world affairs in the modern era.