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# War & Civil Rights

The Negro Quarterly, 1942-1943

Chris Hobson

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The history of African American responses to World War II needs to be more widely known, and, within this overall topic, the *Negro Quarterly's* evolution during its brief lifetime presents a particularly fruitful case study. Both the overall history and this specific facet help to expand our understanding of our own past, and both present rich lessons for the present.

try under whatever type of government they choose. Within the limited situation “on the ground,” this is to some extent a contradictory right—to defend independence under the Saddam Hussein regime would normally mean defending the dictatorship, to fight for a new regime seemed to some to mean collaborating with the U.S. The solution, I think, was to accept the contradictory reality and not follow either position to its logical conclusion—not defend Saddam along with Iraq, not accept U.S. domination along with Saddam’s overthrow, but oppose the invasion and occupation yet reach out for democracy and independence. Because of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, it was difficult or impossible to do this in the best way, by overthrowing Hussein and then opposing the U.S. In the absence of this possibility there were two ways people might have responded: (1) by defending Iraq, as independently as possible from Hussein, and later opposing the occupation, or (2) by standing aside, not opposing the U.S., and later seizing democratic rights and opposing the occupation. I’m concerned here particularly with those Iraqis who did the second. Many may have genuinely believed the U.S. came to free them; only later, as the occupation troops stormed into their houses, shot or beat prisoners to death, and sadistically abused them on orders of Military Intelligence, did the full barbarism and antidemocratic character of the occupation become clear. But in other cases, I suspect, people were following a strategy of taking what they could from the U.S.—Saddam’s overthrow—and then fighting to reclaim their country. These strategies’ apparent contradictions—defending Iraq in a limited way, and later opposing the U.S.; standing aside during the U.S. invasion but opposing U.S. power—are, aren’t they, a sort of Iraqi “double V,” victory against fascism abroad and at home? At times this approach may seem to create dilemmas or contradictions. (For example: support the armed resistance or support the call for direct elections? In my view, both.) However, so at times did “double V” seem contradictory, yet out of it came the greatest force for democracy in the last century of U.S. history.

A little over sixty years ago, African Americans faced the question of how to respond to World War II. Most felt there were strong reasons for supporting the war; the question was whether one should concentrate single mindedly on victory, putting aside all other concerns “for the duration,” or should continue to fight for civil rights during the war. After some inevitable initial confusion broad sections of the African American public came round to the second view, despite inconsistent leadership on the national level and opposition by some major leadership groups. This response was a step toward establishing a politically independent African American movement and toward the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1950s.

One of the publications supporting this critical, pro-civil rights response to the war was the *Negro Quarterly*, a magazine that appeared for only four issues in 1942 and 1943 with the well known activist Angelo Herndon as editor and Ralph Ellison, the future author of *Invisible Man*, then just starting a career as essayist and short story writer, as managing editor. My interest in the *Negro Quarterly* grows out of work I am doing on Ellison, both on the broad issue of the social-political background of *Invisible Man* and on the specific topic of Ellison’s—and many other African American intellectuals’—relations to the Communist Party. The issue of the Communist Party (CP) is central to the larger topic of radical African Americans’ responses to the war because for many, including Herndon and Ellison, the CP had been the focus of their hopes for social justice and their effort to continue to work for civil rights in wartime necessitated separating themselves from its influence.

## African Americans, the Communist Party, and the War to 1942

During the Depression years of the 1930s, African Americans in considerable numbers had joined the CP. In the spring of 1938, for example, Black membership in the Harlem branches of the party was about 1000, though many stayed only for a few months.<sup>1</sup> *Black Boy*, the autobiography of Richard Wright, written partly as an exposé after he left the party, nonetheless provides testimony to the CP's power to attract young African Americans—through neighborhood work on Chicago's Black South Side, and in Wright's case through the John Reed Clubs, a literary circle that welcomed him and provided his first chances for professional publication in CP-friendly magazines.<sup>2</sup> In the year or so just before World War II, the CP seemed poised to become a mass force with a major segment of African American members.

For many intellectuals in and around the CP, the Stalin-Hitler non-aggression treaty of August 1939, which freed Hitler to attack Poland and Western Europe, and which all CPs supported, was a breaking point; they had oriented to the party in large part because it promoted a "People's Front" against fascism that it had now abandoned. But for many African American members and sympathizers, 1939 was not a crisis year. Many had come to the party primarily around issues of workers' and civil rights, and after the European war began the CP intensified work on these issues. Though the party's twists and turns did cost it some influence among the African American public, many members and sympathizers—notably Wright and the young Ellison—cemented

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 279.

<sup>2</sup> *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), in *Richard Wright: Later Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), chap. 18; Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (2nd ed., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), chaps. 5-6.

that the CP's policy and also what Ellison and Herndon called a "rejectionist" policy did not.

This was to a certain extent an "illogical" policy, one that pursued contradictory aims. To my mind that is not a weakness. The situation was contradictory: the U.S. and Britain were in fact defending against brutality and enslavement while practicing brutality and enslavement themselves. The "double V" conception merely recognized the contradiction. In contrast, each of the main competing ideas, absolute support for the war and nonsupport, started from one end of the contradiction and derived from it a logically consistent position that was only half correct. Put another way, "double V" simply means being for and struggling for the rights of all people—Europeans conquered by the Nazis, African Americans and Indians denied rights by the U.S. and Britain—even when those rights may seem to be in conflict. In this sense, "double V" and "critical participation" had a creative inconsistency: the Allies' war aims and the freedom of oppressed people were in conflict but to fight for both was to move closer to a world in which they would no longer be.

These points may have some application in the present day, after the Iraq war. If anything in the African American response to World War II can be applied to the present, it is not the conclusion of supporting the Allies, which belongs to a different world situation, but the method of starting from the contradictory reality of world conflict and struggling for the rights of all people. In Iraq there are two sides to this reality: the aims of the U.S. and the rights of the peoples of Iraq. The United States's overall purpose in the war was the extension and consolidation of U.S. global power, and in particular its extension to Iraq, an area outside its immediate power orbit before the war. Within Iraq, to accomplish this extension, the U.S. had to overthrow a particularly brutal and disgusting regime and is now trying to construct a neocolonial U.S. dependency with a half-democratic facade. The right of the Iraqi people, on the other hand, is to have an independent coun-

slowly to challenge the policies, straining and finally tearing the activists' bonds with the party. In either telling, social development and mass sentiment diverged from the activists' picture of reality, but the second approach makes the added point that their readjustment was slow and often contradictory. Such points as *NQ*'s initial "tap Negro manpower for the war" stance and its continuing idealization of the Soviet Union in later issues do not contradict the idea that *NQ* was differentiating itself from the party; they are part of how political evolution occurs, by half-steps forward, then back and forward again.

Finally, the *Negro Quarterly*'s story is about the validity of political positions—what makes a political stand right in principle and gives it the potential to build active struggle. My approach to World War II starts from the utopian: we want a world with no states, no imperialism, no war, no oppression. From this starting point we still have to deal with the world as it is in order to get to the world we want. In my opinion, it is not true that World War II was, overall, a war for democracy. Britain and France were fighting not just to defend their territories but their empires—as Britain's refusal to make any concessions to India, which would have brought India into the war on the Allied side, shows. The U.S. had its imperialist aims (taking over as much of the British Empire as possible, among others) and Stalin's USSR had its own. Nevertheless, the savagery of Nazism and to a lesser extent Japanese militarism, and their global ambitions, were not a myth, and had to be defeated. This meant that in the immediate situation, when it wasn't yet possible to defeat imperialism as a system, it was right to favor an Allied victory in Europe and Asia while fighting to win independence for the colonies, civil rights for African Americans, and rights in general for the common people to the greatest extent possible. If this conception is true, then, from the vantage point of sixty years of later history, the "double V" idea, despite its illusions about the war's democratic character, had a profound truth

their ties to the party during this period of exceptional militancy.<sup>3</sup> Their crisis came later, provoked by the party's switch to a pro-war position and downgrading of civil rights work following Hitler's attack on the USSR, by the U.S. entry into the war, and—while all this was happening—by A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington movement for fair employment (1941-43).

When the German invasion brought Russia into the war, the U.S. and other CPs switched from a militantly antiwar stance to a fervently interventionist posture. The party's main task now was to get the U.S. into the war and, after Pearl Harbor, to win the war. To this end it focused on what it called "the Battle of Production," supported and carried out President Roosevelt's no-strike policy, and downplayed the same issues of Black civil rights it had highlighted a few months before. Of course all these shifts took some time to execute. Nonetheless, Maurice Isserman's generally pro-CP account summarizes, "By the fall of 1941, the Communists were arguing that a too militant defense of black rights at home would interfere with the war effort" (119). While the party did try to keep up work among African Americans, it mainly did so by emphasizing their role in the war.

James W. Ford, CP national committee member and three-time vice-presidential candidate, expressed the new position in two pamphlets in August 1941 and January 1942. The first, *The Negro People and the New World Situation*, written just after the USSR entered the war, devoted its first half to Hitler's attack and argued, "The oppressed Negro people are not, can-not be, indifferent to the threat to the Soviet Union" (7). The second half, on Negro positions and demands, included a section on "Jim-Crowism" in the armed forces which, in the middle of a paragraph, called for "an end to the segregation of Negro from white troops" (12).

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<sup>3</sup> See Naison, chap. 12; Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During World War II* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), chaps. 4-5.

However, the summary of the party's tasks included only a general formulation: "the right of the Negroes to bear arms on the basis of equality" (14). A historical reference to Frederick Douglass added apparent support for this softer position: during the Civil War, Ford wrote, Douglass had "demanded of Lincoln that Negro troops be placed in the Union army on the basis of receiving equal treatment with white troops" (11-12). Historically knowledgeable readers would know these had been all-Black units with white officers, as in the segregated army of 1941. Overall, Ford gave most attention to solidifying Negro support for the war and did not urge active struggle for Negro civil rights in any field.

The second pamphlet, *The War and the Negro People*, published the month after Pearl Harbor, was even vaguer. Ford argued, "No individual, no organization, must stand in the way of Negro unity behind the war effort" (9). In two paragraphs that contained the pamphlet's only discussion of civil rights, he urged that the "barriers of discrimination" be "done away with so that the entire manpower of the nation be put into winning the war"; he added, in italics, "Negro Americans must be fully integrated into every phase of the war effort, in the armed forces, in industry, in civilian defense, Allied and Russian war relief" (9). That sentence left it unclear whether Negroes should be "integrated" in the sense of ending segregation or simply in the sense, "made part of"; Ford deftly blurred over the issue of segregated units, and did not repeat the specific point on this issue from the earlier pamphlet. Though he admitted that Negro opinion was "not yet united" in favor of the war, Ford insisted that the overwhelming majority "stand ready to give their last drop of blood to defend their country," and he argued, "successful struggle against Nazi enslavement is a defense of the liberation and freedom of the Negro people" (7). Here too, Ford, an experienced political operative, chose his words carefully: saying struggle against the Nazis "is" a defense of the Negro people means no specific defense of African Americans is needed.

its characters, Ellison; the impact of African American wartime experiences, including his own on *NQ*, is felt repeatedly in *Invisible Man*'s portrayal of the Brotherhood (its fictional equivalent for the CP), the Harlem streets and rebellion (chaps. 20-25), and its effort to define a politically independent future course for African American struggle (Epilogue). *NQ*'s story is also significant as showing intellectual steps toward the political independence of the African American mass movement and toward the formation of the Civil Rights Movement a decade later. While *NQ*'s immediate influence was not great, its political evolution is significant as one instance of changing ideas in the intellectual milieu of young African American radicals, a milieu whose varied ideas were important influences on the next political generation.

The *Negro Quarterly*'s story is also one of how consciousness changes. There are two ways (if not more) in which I might have recounted the events covered in this article, especially in its early pages. One would be to begin with the conditions African Americans lived through and their responses to the war, and then turn to the CP. This would throw a glaring light on the inadequacy and dishonesty of the party's stances and would be a more "polemical" approach, offering the lessons to the reader in bite-size. The second is to begin from the experiences of the party's members and periphery. In this telling, the party's policies, which the story's characters at one time believed in wholeheartedly, occupy the foreground and the base-level African American response to the war emerges

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security" (17). However, there is not even one specific call for a struggle (by Negroes led by the CP, or in any other form) for any specific civil right. There is no call to work for Negro voting rights, desegregation of the armed forces, nondiscrimination in housing, or desegregation of public facilities and/or schools, even as distant goals. There is a principled subordination of Negro rights to war victory and the victory of progressive (i.e., pro-Soviet) capitalism during and after the war: "[I]n this period of national crisis, the Communist Party has put aside all partisan interests of its own, even its historic advocacy of socialism. Our sole practical program during the war and on into the peace which will follow is to strengthen the democratic camp of national unity" (19-20; also see 13, 14, 17).



such as that African Americans are a nation.<sup>16</sup> Strategic ideas as well, like those of an African American movement that would cooperate with other social groups on an independent and equal basis, and of African American leadership in the trade unions, may have been influenced by the March on Washington Movement, by the substantial though circumscribed power wielded by A. Philip Randolph as head of a Negro union, etc. Finally, *NQ*'s emphasis on Negroes' making "decisions relevant to [their own] national aspirations" and on the importance of street-level beliefs and myths may also reflect the March on Washington Movement's successful if short-lived mass organization and the evidence of deep ferment, anger, soul-searching and strategy-searching found in the African American press.

The *Negro Quarterly*'s story is one of how African Americans responded in their own lives to the conflicting pressures of a democratic war (as most believed) waged by an undemocratic society and military, and it is, secondarily, a story of how some politically savvy African Americans moved under the impact of this mass response from the political tent of the Communist Party to an independent position closer to that of the African American mass movement.<sup>17</sup> This story is of enormous significance in the life of one of

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<sup>16</sup> In later years Ellison dropped this conception, regarding African Americans as a people culturally entwined with as well as distinct from overall U.S. culture. I do not know how Herndon's views on this point evolved.

<sup>17</sup> Since the CP documents I have been quoting date from 1941 and 1942, it may be of interest that the CP's unconditional support for Roosevelt only deepened later in the war. Doxey Wilkerson's pamphlet of April 1944, *The Negro People and the Communists*, makes this clear. The pamphlet seems to have two purposes: to state the CP stance on Negro issues in preparation for the 1944 elections, justifying an all-out support for Roosevelt, and to win support from African American members for Earl Browder's policy of preparing to dissolve the party in favor of a "Communist Political Association" (19-20). On pages 7-10 there are some quotations from party statements in favor of civil rights together with references to ongoing social developments favoring Negro rights; and on 17-18 there is a general call to "intensify our fight for [...] democratic rights, not solely on the grounds of justice and fair play, but primarily on the broader grounds of national

While the CP was subordinating a militant defense of Black rights to its "win the war" stance, African American anger over the blatant contradiction between U.S. segregation and what many accepted as the war's democratic aims was growing. One early expression of this anger was A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington movement for equal employment in defense industries, which began in 1941 and remained a major force through 1942 before declining as its early victories proved hollow. In early 1941 the U.S. was already gearing up war production both to increase U.S. preparedness and to supply Britain under the terms of the Lend-Lease Act, passed in March. Defense industries were segregated south and north, either not employing African American at all or doing so only as janitors and the like. In January 1941, Randolph, longtime head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a leader in the Socialist Party, called for a Negro march on Washington July 1 for equal employment in defense industries. Though Randolph's promise to mobilize 100,000 marchers was probably a bluff, he held the bluff down the line and in a face-to-face meeting won Roosevelt's pledge to establish a Fair Employment Practices Commission with authority over defense industries. As part of the agreement, Randolph called off the march, but the next year, with the U.S. in the war and the FEPC floundering, here activated the movement, this time organizing mass rallies in New York, Chicago, and St. Louis. New York's rally at Madison Square Garden, June 16, attracted 16,000 angry, vocal people. The highlight of a very long evening, all agreed, was a dramatic sketch in which the well-known actor Canada Lee, as a Negro draftee, roused cheers and yells by declaring, "I'll fight Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japs all at the same time, but I'm

telling you,I'll give those crackers down South the same damn medicine!"<sup>4</sup>

As this response indicated, African American anger about discrimination was seething. Common grievances included the army's segregation of African American troops and the navy's refusal to recruit Blacks in combat positions at all. Once Negroes were drafted in large numbers, the segregated training camps in the south, in which Black draftees were routinely beaten and sometimes killed, were added to the list. In the north, white MPs and civilian cops harassed Black GIs, Black defense workers were forced into substandard housing, and Roosevelt's own Executive Order 8802 on fair employment was mostly ignored. In the Pacific, African Americans segregated into the Army Corps of Engineers under white officers fought in half-construction, half-combat roles in the New Guinea campaign, then were forced into segregated facilities when on leave in Australia—by the Army, not the Australians—and in several cases were killed in protests and riots.<sup>5</sup> Even the blood supply was segregated.

Rather than uncritically supporting the war effort, as urged by the CP, or opposing it on pacifist, revolutionary, or pro-Japanese grounds—each of which had some support in the community—most African Americans had decidedly mixed responses. They were ready to support the war as a struggle for democracy against fascism but they flared up at segregation in the armed forces and society at large and backed any efforts against them. Some offered to accept induction into any branch of the services that would take them on an integrated basis—then refused induction since no

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<sup>4</sup> See Herbert Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March On Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for the FEPC* (1959;New York: Atheneum, 1969), 37-96.

<sup>5</sup> See John Oliver Killens' novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, loosely based on this history. There is also a nonfiction record, *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored)*, the diaries of a white Jewish officer in this service, Capt. Hyman Samuelson, edited by his niece, Rutgers historian Gwendolyn M. Hall.

Herndon enunciated two specific demands—modest enough, but far-reaching in implication—and a more general conclusion. One demand was for the voluntary formation of racially integrated Army divisions. The other proposed replacing the dying Fair Employment Practices Commission with an enforcement body drawn from“unions and Negro organizations”; the significance here is the independent role Herndon envisioned for the latter (321). And in his more general conclusion, Herndon provided a ringing call for active struggle that a careful reader would also understand as an indictment of the CP:

Still do you say “Now is not the time to insist upon our freedom. It might hurt the war effort?” To insist upon freedom where it does not exist is proper at all times. [...]Still again do you say “But be patient. Things are being done and we are making gains?” [...] There is no record in the history of mankind where freedom has ever been given to anybody. Those who have it, have invariably been the ones who strongly and clearly asserted their right to have it. (323)

Fine words, and a legacy for the future.

The *Negro Quarterly's* evolution shows the impact of African American struggles in the early part of World War II, particularly the March on Washington Movement, and of the “double V” campaign. The ideas of “critical participation” in the war, that the “main task” for African Americans was to “work unceasingly toward creating [...] democratic conditions,” and that insisting on freedom “is proper at all times” generalized and rephrased what African Americans had done in action and the African American press had called for, although the editors used their own CP-influenced language and included their particular conceptions,

Herndon, apparently, wanted partly to correct the CP's current image of Douglass—and more broadly to reclaim Douglass as a *Negro* figure whose legacy was not to be traded back and forth by a largely white organization—and partly to illustrate and elaborate the ideas in the Editorial Comment. So he began by reiterating the attitudes of “rejection” and “unqualified acceptance” of participation in the war, went on to discuss Douglass historically, and drew political inferences in his conclusion. The historical discussion gave some attention to Douglass's early career and to his view after 1852 that the U.S. Constitution, far from permitting slavery as the Garrisonian wing of abolitionism believed, was “a warrant for the abolition of slavery in every state of the Union” (309). Thus Herndon embraced or at least noted the longstanding view of most African Americans that stated U.S. ideals can become an instrument for African American freedom, a view Ellison would also stress in *Invisible Man*. Herndon further suggested that Douglass's new position represented a Negro declaration of independence from white organizations—“I am not sure that I was not under the influence of something like a slavish adoration of these good people,” he quotes Douglass as saying<sup>15</sup>—implying that the Negro *Quarterly*'s developing position was likewise a blow for race independence. Herndon devoted the most space, however—four pages and three sizable appendices—to Douglass's conduct during the war and specifically his temporary withdrawal of support for recruiting Negro troops until the government gave credible assurances that it could and would protect their rights (315-18, 324-29). In effect, though he didn't use this term, Herndon was taking a position of conditional support for World War II, i.e., support if and only if the federal government implemented Negro rights; and in his hands, the history became an argument against the CP's unquestioning support of Roosevelt. Finally,

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<sup>15</sup> He is quoting *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, the third version of Douglass's autobiography, chap. 7.

such branch existed. Some served in the merchant marine, which carried draft exemption, partly because merchant ship service was less dangerous but also because the merchant marine was not as segregated as the navy. The zoot suit, a sartorial style that originated among Blacks and spread to Mexican Americans as well as white hipsters, became a badge of rebellious attitudes.<sup>6</sup> African Americans in general remained angry, bitter, and ready to fight if pushed by whites—as they ultimately did in Detroit and Harlem in the summer of 1943. With all these responses in mind, in February 1942 the Pittsburgh *Courier*, then one of the country's leading Black newspapers, launched the slogan “Double V”—victory against fascism at home and abroad—to crystallize the stance of supporting the war while fighting for civil rights.

All these developments—the rising anger among African Americans at the segregationist conduct of the war, their own party's virtual inaction on Black rights, the presence of supportable mass actions for civil rights and of an alternative way of looking at the war—fed the misgivings of some African American CP members and sympathizers. The party's reversals over the March on Washington movement were particularly vivid. In early 1941, with the Stalin-Hitler pact still in force and the party sticking hard to an antiwar line, the *Daily Worker* ignored the march movement as long as possible and then tepidly endorsed it shortly before the march date, while attacking Randolph and other leaders for betraying “the just aims of the Negro people” by favoring U.S. entry into the war. A year later, on the eve of the renewed actions, the *Daily Worker* again kept silent until just before the rally dates, again endorsed halfheartedly, and again lashed out at Randolph—this time because he and the “defeatist” SP would turn Negroes “against the war” (June 10, 1941; June 16, 1942). Covering the New York rally

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<sup>6</sup> See Stuart Cosgrove, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare,” *History Workshop Journal* 18 (autumn 1984): 77-91; online at <<http://www.edc.org/CCT/lemcen/u7sf/u7materials/cos-grove.html>>

a day late—perhaps a sign of uncertainty about how to respond—Ben Davis, Jr., a leading African American member, praised several speakers’ “splendid win-the-war addresses” but attacked Canada Lee’s skit as “insidious poison” (June 18, 1942).

Such reversals, and growing unwillingness to fight for Black demands, were a sign of the CP’s bankruptcy for at least one prominent African American member, Richard Wright. Constance Webb’s early biography of Wright recounts a meeting between him, Ben Davis, and James Ford. According to Webb, after hearing of the projected March on Washington, Wright met with Davis to propose supporting the march.

Before Davis could speak, Ford angrily strode over to Richard and said: “The alternative to support of the war and of Roosevelt is the support of reaction! You’re an obstinate, subjective fool!” Anger engulfed Richard; a shade more and he would have smashed Ford in the face. Instead, trembling inside from the effort at control, he looked at Davis and ignored Ford. [After Ford left,] Davis clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly manner and commanded: “Go back to your writing, Dick, and leave the politics to the Party.”

A few weeks later, according to Webb, Wright made his mind up: “He was holding a tainted instrument in his hands and he would drop it.”<sup>7</sup>

Though the details are garbled—when the march was organized in 1941, the CP was still antiwar, and so Webb must be referring to the 1942 MOW rallies—Webb is undoubtedly writing some version of what she heard from Wright, whoms he met around this time. Wright left the party silently in 1942 and made his break public two years later. Others in the party’s membership and periphery, at

<sup>7</sup> Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1968), 154-55.

it untiringly toward true freedom,” a belief Ellison would later advocate in his novels and essays (298).

From these assumptions Herndon and Ellison derived several related political and cultural ideas. First, they advocated fighting unequivocally for civil rights during the war: “[p]rograms which would sacrifice the Negro or any other people are [i.e., should be] considered dangerous for the United Nations; and the only honorable course for Negroes to take is first to protest and then to fight against them.” Second, they hoped for “centralization of [Negroes’] political power,” building an independent African American leadership, maximizing African Americans’ economic leverage by gaining skilled positions that would allow them to “give leadership to the working class,” and “participating along with labor and other progressive groups as equals” so that “all policies are formulated and coordinated with full consideration of the complexities of the Negro situation” (298, 299, 301-2). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, they pressed for “learning the meaning of the myths and symbols which abound among the Negro masses.” In words often quoted because of Ellison’s later use of the zoot suit in *Invisible Man*, they noted, “Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power—if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle” (301). In sum, they wished to build a working-class based African American movement that could act as a component force for reform or revolution rather than being an appendage of the white labor movement or the CP, and they wished it to be based on a greater awareness of the beliefs and culture of poor and working class African Americans than earlier movements.

Herndon expanded on the “critical participation” idea in a lengthy article that was also an unstated polemic against the CP, “Frederick Douglass: Negro Leadership and War.” As noted earlier, African American CP leaders such as James Ford had used Douglass’s support of the Civil War to justify the party’s positions.

“By way of group self-examination,” the Editorial Comment began, “it might be profitable to list a few of the general attitudes held by Negroes toward their war-time experiences.” There were three. First, the editors listed “unqualified acceptance of the limited opportunities for Negro participation in the conflict.” This attitude, they charged, went together with “acceptance of the violence and discrimination which so contradicts a war for the Four Freedoms” and was “justified by the theory that for Negroes to speak out in their own self-interest would be to follow a ‘narrow Negro approach’ and to disrupt war-unity.” Though granting that this attitude was “sometimes honestly held,” Herndon and Ellison felt it arose “out of a lack of group self-consciousness” and led to “the most disgusting forms of self-abasement” (295). Though not saying so directly, the editors were taking aim at statements like Wilkerson’s on “the all-important Battle of Production,” Pittman’s comments on the importance of colonial production, and Ben Davis’s view that the militant sketch at the June 1942 MOW rally was “insidious poison.” Opposite to this approach, the editors continued, was an attitude of “unqualified rejection” of the war, Allied war aims, and African American participation. Herndon and Ellison treated this view at greater length and with much more sympathy. However, they felt it did not recognize “that Negroes *have their own stake in the defeat of fascism*” and, in addition, that in fighting for “a free America and a free world,” African Americans “are also creating themselves as a free people and as a nation” (296-98).

Finally, Herndon and Ellison defined their own stand as one of “critical participation, based upon a sharp sense of the Negro people’s group personality.” This attitude, “while affirming the justice of the Allies’ cause, [...] never loses sight of the Negro people’s stake in the struggle.” Overall, Herndon and Ellison felt that “the main task of the Negro people is to work unceasingly toward creating those democratic conditions in which it can live and recreate itself.” And they further-more defined “the historical role of Negroes to be that of integrating the larger American nation and compelling

first still loyal to it and/or seeing no alternative to it as a fulcrum for change, still moved to a more critical and independent stance during this same period. These were the circumstances in which the *Negro Quarterly* was launched in early 1942.

## **The *Negro Quarterly*, the War, and Civil Rights (1942)**

The *Negro Quarterly* began with the spring 1942 issue, under Angelo Herndon’s editorship. Herndon, who had been sentenced to a chain gang in Georgia in 1932 for organizing unemployed councils, and successfully defended by the CP, remained close to the party on his release. He wrote an auto-biography, *Let Me Live* (1937). He is less well known today than he might be because he left politics after the *Negro Quarterly* failed and lived most of the rest of his life in deliberate obscurity. Ellison, closely involved with *NQ* from the start, was listed as managing editor starting with the second issue. Then in his late twenties, he had been close to the CP since being introduced to it in 1937 by Wright, his closest friend at this time, but he never joined. Ellison was known as a promising writer who had published a few stories and a large number of reviews and cultural articles in the CP-run *New Masses* and other pro-party magazines.<sup>8</sup>

Herndon and Ellison founded *NQ* with help from the CP; its first issue included articles and reviews by prominent writers in and close to the party, including Herbert Aptheker, Doxey A. Wilkerson, and Henrietta Buckmaster, who would not have contributed if the CP had opposed the project. Other well-known names, such as Sterling A. Brown of Howard University, author of *Southern Road*

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<sup>8</sup> The best source on Ellison in this period (though unreliable on dates) is Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: Wiley, 2002). As far as I know there is no biography of Herndon. There is some information on him and Ellison in Frederick T. Griffiths, “Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Case of Angelo Herndon,” *African American Review* 35.4 (winter 2001):615-36.

and an editor of the recent anthology *Negro Caravan*, and L.D. Reddick, curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature (now the Schomburg Division) at the New York Public Library, were not as close to the CP but were probably attracted as much by the idea of a forum for liberal-CP dialogue as by the credentials of the editorial team. And the “Statement of Policy” in the first issue, discussed below, stuck close to the CP conception of the war. But the “Statement” also began with an implied step toward independence:

The rapid change introduced by the war makes apparent the need of reflecting upon the genuine attitudes, thoughts and opinions of Negroes[...] (3)<sup>9</sup>

This, in reality, is what the CP was not doing. In subsequent issues, though never criticizing the CP by name, *NQ* developed more and more independently, laying out policies that knowing readers would understand as moving away from those of the party. It did so on two key, related issues, African American civil rights in the United States and international anti-colonial struggle.

In its “Statement of Policy,” in the spring 1942 issue, *NQ* had called for expanding Negro rights in the context of the war effort, in terms similar to the CP’s: “Because our country is now engaged in an all-out war with the Axis forces, the full capacity of its man power must be thrown into the battle in order to insure final victory. This can be done more effectively when the barriers of Jim Crow in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and other national defense bodies are removed” (3). This tack was close to Doxey Wilkerson’s in his article “Negro Education and the War” in the same issue. Focusing on the “all-important Battle of Production,” Wilkerson called for dismantling “racial barriers to the quick and effective provision of adequate and trained personnel for the armed forces,” and he noted,

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<sup>9</sup> References to *NQ* are given by page numbers, which were consecutive in the four issues except for the “Editorial Comment” in Issue 2, which was numbered i-v.

(345-46). He insisted, instead, that Africans were ready to assume leadership. He emphasized the “political maturity of [African] peoples,” their “ability to participate intelligently in the political and economic development of their country,” and the need “to consult African opinion” in all matters (345, 353, 359). While quite moderate in its politics, Gardiner’s article both embodied and advocated, in regard to Africans, the point *NQ*’s editors had made about African Americans, “Why should not decisions relative to the national aspirations” of Africans “rest with themselves[?]” (summer 1942: iii).<sup>14</sup>

## The Negro Quarterly and the Future: The Final Issue

Herndon and Ellison summed up what they had learned so far in the Editorial Comment in *NQ* 4, the issue that also included Gardiner’s article. By now *NQ* was in serious trouble. There were fewer contributions—the editors maintained the magazine’s 5-by-8 inch 96-page format but switched to a larger typeface—and the issue was delayed; announced in a “house ad” in *NQ* 3 as the winter 1942 issue, it appeared dated winter-spring 1943. Of the three essays (there had been an average of six in issues 1-3), one was by an editor, Herndon. It’s fairly plain that the CP had pulled the plug; while Henrietta Buckmaster still contributed a review, gone were the articles by Wilkerson, Aptheker, Harry Slochower, and other prominent writers in and close to the party that helped bulk up previous issues. Herndon and Ellison may have understood that this would be the last issue, though this can’t be known for sure.

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<sup>14</sup> Gardiner, born in Kumasi, Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1914, graduated with honors from Cambridge University in 1941. After the war he was an academic in Nigeria, then a member of the Gold Coast and Ghana governments, and finally a United Nations official.

the importance of the colonial exploitation system—“has leaped incalculably” (207). About half the article focused on how colonial governments were supplying food, strategic materials, and troops to the Allies. The second half explored political “barriers to Africa’s full integration in the war effort” and did criticize the colonial system, though it went no further than endorsing the call of English “trade unions, liberals, leftists, and churchmen, for the extension of democracy among the native subjects of the Empire” (213, 217). Pittman did not mention African political organization at all.

Though its basic approach contradicted Herndon and Ellison’s own criticisms of “paternalism” and emphasis on oppressed people determining their own demands, the editors appended a note saying that though written “before the present African offensive,” most of the article’s “facts and conclusions are still valid”(207). This endorsement, however, may have been meant only to reassure readers about the article’s timeliness. In any case, *NQ*’s next issue featured a followup, “African Opinion and World Peace,” by a Ghanaian newly arrived in the U.S., Kweku Attah Gardiner. Gardiner’s article took no definite position on African independence and is best understood as an implied corrective to Pittman’s. Gardiner’s focus was on African political activity and leadership, including the presence of African leaders in the legislatures of some colonies, and on the potential for Africans’ development of their own economies—all topics unmentioned in the earlier article. While not referring to the several Pan-African Congresses held in Europe since 1900, Gardiner mentioned a series of African leaders who were, in fact, giants in the pre-independence (and sometimes post independence) histories of their countries—Casely Hayford and Nana Ofori Atta in the Gold Coast (Ghana), Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, and others. He gave the impression that Africans were fully capable of taking rapid steps toward greater control of their countries. Overall, Gardiner rejected the need for “education and training [of Africans] for leadership,” as stated in a liberal U.S. study he cited

“‘history is on our side’ in the creation of job opportunities” for African Americans because labor shortages were creating openings (24, 25). Wilkerson did not call for any organized action for any civil rights demand, or for ending segregated education, even as a distant goal. In essence, while favoring civil rights, he was pressing for them only so far as would fulfill the government’s war needs.

The editors’ and Wilkerson’s statements were actually far more conservative than some by other contributors. “If you read the Afro [the Baltimore Afro-American] if you read the Amsterdam News,” Waring Cuney wrote in the first of two poems in imitation blues stanzas, “Then you know what makes the colored folks always have the blues.” One stanza focused on Georgia governor Eugene Talmadge:

He’s all puffed up with white superiority pride  
Puffed up with what they call white superiority pride  
Says black children and white can’t sit in school side  
by side. (40)

This was straight pre-June 1941 CP politics and aesthetics, down to the fake-folk style, but Cuney was saying what Wilkerson wouldn’t in 1942. In a second poem Cuney invoked Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman—CP icons—but he was reading the Black press and his closing stanza made the essential point:

If our dead heroes could see us in ’42  
If our dead heroes could see us in ’42  
They’d say we did our part what you going to do?  
(41)10

It is unclear whether Herndon and Ellison were embarrassed by poems like Cuney’s, which would have reminded them of their own underlying politics, or if, possibly, they deliberately printed such work to offset views like Wilkerson’s (and their own). In

either case, their tone and approach changed sharply in later issues. The “Editorial Comment” in the second issue (summer 1942) declared bluntly, “Negroes do not support the war wholeheartedly, and all statements that Negroes ‘are over-whelmingly’ in back of the efforts of the Allies are not only not true, but are misleading” (ii).<sup>10</sup> This was a tacit rebuke to claims like James Ford’s, quoted earlier, that Negroes were ready to “give their last drop of blood” for war victory. The editors went on to take aim at the rationale offered by Ford and Wilkerson (and *NQ* itself in the previous issue) for the civil rights they did support: Negro leaders and their white allies, they wrote, should work “not merely with the idea of securing more jobs in the present situation, or of enlisting Negro aid in fighting for their own objectives but with the aim of obtaining a real representative government which includes Negro members of the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Supreme Court, the President’s Cabinet and all other powerful governmental committees” (v). Further, repeating the common CP definition of the war as a “people’s war for national liberation,” they declared that African Americans were “a nation” within the U.S.—a long-held CP position that the party itself was de-emphasizing. The implication was that African American liberation should be a fundamental war goal, essentially the “double V” position restated in Marxist language (i, iv).

Moreover, in an audacious claim that implicitly rejected the CP belief in the necessity of its own leadership, the editors declared that working class African Americans, in particular, must define their own social-political goals:

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<sup>10</sup> *NQ*’s editorial statements were unsigned. Some scholars have concluded that Ellison wrote the statement in issue no. 4, because of similarities with Ellison’s later views, but there is no conclusive evidence of single or joint authorship for any of them. I assume that all four statements represent a common editorial position.

And the editors themselves criticized as an example of “paternalism” the “democratic peoples’ haste in blaming the Indian leaders for the failure of the Cripps mission before the content of the proposals had been revealed” (v). Neither comment mentioned Communist positions directly. But “millions of people of the United Nations” and “the democratic peoples” were political formulas that anyone in the CP orbit understood to include Russia and the Communist movement. The inclusion of this criticism in the “Editorial Comment” and the placing of Wright’s statement in unused page space make it likely that both were late decisions made because Herndon and Ellison concluded that some at least indirect rebuttal of CP positions was needed. And both comments strengthened *NQ*’s support for Indian independence.

In his second article, Goshal took the lid off concerning CP politics, though only in a half sentence, mentioning without comment that the resolution had been passed “with thirteen Communist members dissenting” (220). And he strongly endorsed the independence movement and the Quit India resolution, ending with the call for a “Provisional National Government now” (226). In however gingerly a way, Goshal and *NQ* were repudiating the CP position and saying the independence struggle could and must go on in wartime.<sup>13</sup>

On a second international topic, Africa, *Negro Quarterly* 3 (autumn 1942) ran a truly wretched article, “Africa Against the Axis,” by John Pittman, foreign editor of the Los Angeles *People’s World*, the CP’s west coast newspaper. Most of the article concentrated on the material contribution to the war by African colonies: in the last year, Pittman boasted, “the relative importance of Africa as a source of vital food stuffs and the sinews of war”—in other words,

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<sup>13</sup> Goshal’s full career is not known to me. Online sources show him as an actor in two New York theatre productions, in 1927 and 1942 (the former with Archie Leach, the future Cary Grant, in a minor role). He remained in the CP periphery, collaborating on a 1964 book, *Bitter End in Southeast Asia*, with Victor Perlo, an economist very close to the CPUSA leadership.



other Congress leaders and held them prisoner until late in the war.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular interest to me, the Indian CP members on the Congress executive voted against the Quit India resolution. In common with other Communist parties, since June 1942 the Indian party had been militantly in favor of the war and British or “Allied” victory. In line with this policy much of the world’s Communist press, like the liberal and conservative press, blamed Cripps’s failure on Indian inflexibility and regarded Congress’s demand for immediate self-government as premature at best.

Kumar Goshal, an Indian writer and actor living in New York, reported on the Cripps mission in the summer 1942 issue of *NQ* and on the Quit India resolution in the autumn issue. In the first article, he mainly filled in the background of Indian conditions, the independence movement’s history, etc., but also stated directly, “The real reason for the failure of the Cripps mission was the refusal to make any changes in the present governmental set-up” (136). He did not comment at all on the Communists’ stance. Neither did the *NQ* editors. But they did print, without any explanation, an untitled statement by Richard Wright in the empty half-page at the article’s end:

One of the most disgraceful episodes of the war was the widespread expression of disgust by millions of people of the United Nations over the failure of the native leaders of India to accept the proposals of the British government as outlined by Sir Stafford Cripps[...] It seems not to have occurred to even people of good will that the spirit of this war makes it imperative that we not attempt to define what India should do, but rather that we support the national will of the natives of India. (140)

<sup>12</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, abridged and edited by Robert I. Crane (New York: Anchor, 1959), 364-81, quotation on 381; Goshal.

[I]n the new light of the Four Freedoms: why should not decisions relative to the national aspirations of American Negroes rest with themselves rather than with those out-side their own group? [...] [W]hile the Negro middle class, for the most part, strives to adapt itself to programs outlined for it from above, the Negro people seek to define the world in their own terms, rejecting or accepting the values of our society as best suit their own needs.(iii)

The basis for doing this, they wrote even more explosively, lay in the common outlook of ordinary African Americans and other dark-skinned people: Negroes, together with the world’s “darker peoples” in general, “have created a culture and the basic outlines of a truly democratic vision of life” (v). The implication was that African Americans themselves already possessed, independently of any political party, the capacity to move toward greater democracy for themselves and others.

Besides the editors’ own views, *Negro Quarterly* no. 2 included paired essays on “Anti-Negroism Among Jews,” by Louis Harap, managing editor of *The Jewish Survey*, and “Anti-Semitism Among Negroes,” by L.D. Reddick; an excerpt from Wright’s recently published *Twelve Million Black Voices*; articles on housing discrimination in Detroit, racial divisions in Cuba, and the movement for Indian independence; a literary essay, “What Should We Demand from Historical Fiction,” by Henrietta Buckmaster—which argued that historical fiction should be objective and non-propagandist and that this could only happen when it was written from a Marxist viewpoint—and poems and fiction by writers both close to and independent of the CP, including a remarkable short verse drama on Samson as an emblem of slaves’ liberation, “Somday We’re Gonna Tear Th Pillars Down,” by Owen Dodson, then a young teacher at Hampton Institute and later head of drama at Howard Univer-

sity.<sup>11</sup> As a group—regardless of individual quality—these contributions embodied the editors’ idea that Negroes must define their own goals and culture, and specified the magazine’s scope as all national and international issues of interest to Negroes rather than just “Negro issues.”

Herndon and Ellison moved farther toward an independent viewpoint, and toward support for an independent African American mass movement for civil rights, in their third issue. At a time—autumn 1942—when the *Daily Worker* was urging all-out support for Roosevelt Democrats in the congressional elections, the editors laid the blame for the Senate’s defeat of an anti-poll tax bill squarely on Roosevelt’s shoulders, and went on to declare, “[T]he key to a world victory for democracy lies in the victory of full democracy in the U. S. and in British territories” (195). Ellison and Herndon pictured Roosevelt and Churchill as divided men, “mocked by the vision of a world they flirt with but fear to embrace,” and asked, “What are we fighting for?” (196). Demanding a commitment to full civil rights, *NQ* promised, “American Negroes shall continue to seek democratic freedom regardless of where it lies, and the ‘common man’ of the world will be with them” (240).

## The Negro Quarterly and Internationalism (1942)

These remarks, especially on Britain, point to another aspect of the *Negro Quarterly*’s reorientation, its internationalism. *NQ* devoted considerable space to international articles and literature in each of its four issues. Members and sympathizers of the CP, of course, were bred up as internationalists: they “knew” that the USSR was leading a “people’s war” (Ford, *The Negro People and the New World Situation*, 7 ; *NQ* 2, 136), that China’s anti-Japanese resistance (led

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<sup>11</sup> The poem was reprinted with some changes in Dodson’s *Powerful Long Ladder* (1946).

by Communists, though this was not said aloud) was a positive model for other oppressed peoples (Kumar Goshal, “India and the People’s War,” *NQ* 2, 136), etc., and they “knew” a great deal about politics in a great many countries they didn’t really know much about. But *NQ* made international issues part of its move away from CP views on the war, and argued that African Americans should see themselves as part of an inter-national anti-colonial movement continuing during the war.

Already in their second issue (summer 1942) Herndon and Ellison had projected a future article (never completed) that would “examine, in the light of the true aspirations of American Negroes [...] their unity of interest with India, China, Africa, the Philippines, Latin America, and all other darker peoples of the world” (v). In addition, *NQ* distanced itself from Communist positions without saying so explicitly on at least two major issues of international politics.

The first was Indian independence, and in particular, critical events in India that occurred during 1942. India, then part of the British empire, had a large, active mass movement that was pressing for immediate self-government. In March 1942 a British Cabinet official, Sir Stafford Cripps, came to the country with government proposals that amounted to freezing the current power setup in return for a promise of slight revisions after the war. The major nationalist group, the Indian National Congress led by Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, rejected the proposals, Cripps went home, and on August 7-8, 1942, a special session of the Congress executive passed what came to be called the “Quit India” resolution. This asked Britain to establish a Provisional National Government that would enter the war with Britain “as allies,” and warned that if this were not done Congress would mobilize a mass nonviolent struggle “for the vindication of India’s inalienable political right to freedom and independence.” In response the British government arrested Gandhi, Nehru, and