

‘Free and Equal Partners in Your Commonwealth’: The Atlantic Charter and Anticolonial Delegations to London, 1941-3

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Abstract:

This article examines the efforts of two politicians from the British Empire to mobilize the rhetoric of the Atlantic Charter (14 August 1941) in London in order to reform the Empire and secure self-government: Burma’s U Saw in 1941, and Nigeria’s Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1943. Rather than a ‘moment’ of global anticolonial agitation inspired by Western policymakers, these campaigns demonstrate that anticolonial forces long active across the Empire needed only the hint of a political opening to mount sophisticated political attacks which simultaneously intervened in the political environments of metropole and colonies. Both Saw and Azikiwe had been involved in anticolonial politics long before the Charter, but its appearance provided an opportunity to advance their position vis-à-vis political competitors as well as to win concessions from the imperial state. Through the use of visits to London as a bully pulpit, anticolonialists sought to advance their own careers and their causes. Their ability to do so attests to the power of anticolonial movements by the early 1940s, but also points to alternative policies which the Empire might have followed.

Keywords: Atlantic Charter; Burma; Nigeria; Anticolonialism

Upon hearing the eight-point joint statement which came to be known as the 'Atlantic Charter', Secretary of State for India and Burma Leo Amery confided in his diary, 'We shall no doubt pay dearly in the end for all this fluffy flapdoodle'.¹ News had just broken of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's secret meeting off the coast of Newfoundland, where they had agreed on the 'Charter' as 'common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world'. The third point aroused the most interest globally: that the United States and United Kingdom 'respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them'.² As Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee read it out over the BBC, Amery recognised that the document had many intended and unintended audiences, from Washington and London to Lagos and Rangoon.

For the remainder of the Second World War, anticolonialists from across the Empire would indeed make Churchill and his colleagues pay dearly for the lofty rhetoric of the Charter, especially its famous 'Article Three'. In many cases, activists mobilised the Charter in their own colonies or countries, but in a few cases anticolonialists wielded the Charter as a weapon while in London, the heart of the empire. This article looks at two moments when anticolonial leaders came to London motivated by their belief that the Atlantic Charter supported their political demands: the visit of U Saw, premier of Burma, in October and November 1941; and the West

¹ Leo Amery, entry for 14 August 1941, in John Barnes and David Nicholson (eds), *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries, 1929-1945* (London, 1988), 710.

² 'Atlantic Charter', <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>, accessed 8 April 2013.

African press delegation of August 1943 led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, the activist editor of the *West African Pilot* and future president of Nigeria.

Rather than naive idealists inspired by Anglo-American rhetoric, these were hard-nosed political actors with clear agendas, using the words of the imperial rulers against them. On the surface this sounds like the ‘Wilsonian moment’ of 1918-9, when Erez Manela argues Woodrow Wilson’s post-war vision inspired anticolonial action across Africa and Asia.³ However, Manela focuses too much on Wilson as a causal agent for anticolonial nationalism.⁴ Thus, rather than an ‘Atlantic Charter moment’, I argue that anticolonial actors were already mobilised, and the Charter provided a timely rhetorical tool upon its appearance. Instead of being inspired by the Atlantic Charter, anticolonialists co-opted the Charter into their ongoing projects. As such, the battle over the Charter between anti- and pro-colonial voices in Britain during the War offers useful insight into how much anticolonial forces had challenged British imperial power by 1941.

Prior studies of colonialism in the War have dealt with the Atlantic Charter, but their emphasis remained on diplomatic discussion between the U.S. and British governments.⁵

³ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007), 4-5, 8.

⁴ See, for example, the comments of Cemil Aydin, Matthew Connelly, and Odd Arne Westad in the H-Diplo Roundtable Review of *Wilsonian Moment*, *H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews* 10, no. 7 (March 2009), <https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-X-7.pdf>, accessed 2 April 2017. Although Manela acknowledges that Wilson’s rhetoric entered into ongoing debates (pp. 4-6), the narrative privileges Wilson and slips into portraying Wilson himself as a causal agent (or ‘the leading protagonist’ on p. 10).

⁵ For an exhaustive reconstruction of the Atlantic Conference, see Theodore A. Wilson, *The First Summit: Roosevelt and Churchill at Placentia Bay, 1941*, Revised Edition (Lawrence, Kansas, 1991), originally published in 1961; for an early postcolonial critique of Roosevelt and the Charter, see M.S. Venkataramani, ‘The United States, the colonial issue, and the Atlantic Charter hoax’, *International Studies* 13 (1974), 1–28. For excellent detail on the Anglo-American debates about how the Charter should apply, see Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (Oxford, 1978); Christopher G. Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain, and the War Against Japan, 1941-1945* (London, 1978); David

Historians of human rights have focused on what the Charter did or did not do for anticolonial claims, noting that anticolonialists far and wide cited it, but historians have not analyzed how or why these activists used the Charter in their own contexts.⁶ This article focuses not on what the Atlantic Charter did for anticolonialists, but what they did with the Charter, bringing what Amery called its ‘fluffy flapdoodle’ to the fore of discussions about the future of the empire.

I begin by laying out the initial reactions to the Charter upon its promulgation in August 1941, when many across the British Empire felt it offered hope for anticolonial agendas. When Churchill offered a more limited interpretation of the document in the House of Commons on 9 September, anticolonialists might have immediately dropped the Charter. But leaders continued to use Charter rhetoric for their own purposes, as demonstrated by U Saw’s visit in the fall of 1941 and Nnamdi Azikiwe’s tour in August 1943. While this article begins from the top-down political vantage point of Whitehall and Westminster in the Second World War, it reminds us

Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-1941* (Chapel Hill, 1982); and John J. Sbraga, *Anglo-American Relations and Colonialism in East Asia, 1941-1945* (New York, 1983). The 1990s saw a revival in interest in the Charter after its 50th anniversary, with scholars revisiting Wilson’s 1961 book and the debates of the 1970s-1980s: Douglas Brinkley and David R. Facey-Crowther (eds), *The Atlantic Charter* (New York, 1994); Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the U.N.* (New Haven, 1997), 36–42.

⁶ I refer especially to the work of Belizean international lawyer Edward A. Laing, ‘The contribution of the Atlantic Charter to human rights law and humanitarian universalism’, *Willamette Law Review* 26 (1989), 113–70; Laing, ‘Relevance of the Atlantic Charter for a new world order’, *Indian Journal of International Law* 29 (1989), 298–325; Laing, ‘The norm of self-determination, 1941-1991’, *California Western International Law Journal* 22 (1992), 209–308; and that of U.S. diplomatic and legal historian Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Borgwardt, ‘When you state a moral principle, you are stuck with it: The 1941 Atlantic Charter as a human rights instrument’, *Virginia Journal of International Law* 46 (2006). For a less sanguine view of the Charter’s contribution to human rights, see A.W. Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (Oxford, 2001) and Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). All agree, nevertheless, about the Charter’s significance for the history of anticolonialism.

that, for their part, imperial subjects saw that war quite differently, and brought their challenge to the seat of power.

The Ambiguities of the Atlantic Charter

Churchill's secret summit with Roosevelt off the coast of Newfoundland had been intended to secure the U.S. entry into the war against Germany, so anything less was bound to land with a thud. Thus, most Britons found the Charter's lofty ideals irrelevant, since the real need was for U.S. troops and materiel to reduce the British war burden.⁷ The Soviet government, reeling amid the worst of the German invasion in the summer of 1941, also looked askance at a document triumphantly proclaiming a capitalist world order.⁸ Churchill had brought a draft of the document to the meeting with Roosevelt and had written the third clause about restoring 'sovereign rights and self government', likely without a thought that Britain's subjects might read themselves into such language. The phrase occasioned little discussion between Churchill and Roosevelt.⁹

Beyond the choppy North Atlantic, though, the question of the Charter's applicability emerged immediately. The day after reading the Charter for the absent Churchill, Attlee addressed this issue as he spoke to the West African Students' Union (WASU) at their London hostel. On 15 August, he told the students that 'you will find [the Charter] principles will apply, I believe, to all the peoples of the world'.¹⁰ Such a possibility aroused anticolonialists around the

⁷ David Reynolds, 'The Atlantic "flop": British foreign policy and the Churchill-Roosevelt meeting of August 1941', in Brinkley and Facey-Crowther (eds), *The Atlantic Charter*, 129–50.

⁸ The question of free trade in the Charter's fourth clause had been the most contentious at the maritime meeting: L.S. Pressnell and Sheila V. Hopkins, 'A Canard out of time? Churchill, the War Cabinet, and the Atlantic Charter, August 1941', *Review of International Studies* 14 (1988), 223–35.

⁹ Wilson, *First Summit*, 163–5.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 16 August 1941. For more on WASU in this era, see Chibundu Onuzo's forthcoming PhD thesis from King's College London.

globe. After all, if the Charter's third point applied to colonies, colonised populations could choose their own form of government and have their sovereign rights restored after having been forcibly deprived of them. As the diplomatic historian Lloyd Gardner notes, 'even the first press reports of the [Atlantic Charter]...raised questions of universal applicability'.¹¹

On 9 September 1941, Churchill spoke in Parliament to answer the question of whether the Charter indeed applied to the colonised world--specifically India. He insisted that while drafting the Charter, 'we had in mind ... the States and nations of Europe now under the Nazi yoke', which Churchill determined 'quite a separate problem from the progressive evolution' of British colonial subjects. Moreover, he claimed that all British declarations on movement toward colonial self-government were 'complete in themselves' and 'entirely in harmony' with the Charter.¹² In the words of a British civil servant of the Raj, 'the maxims of international law' only applied to 'the relations of independent and co-equal European States'.¹³ To use Partha Chatterjee's term, Churchill applied 'the rule of colonial difference' to the Atlantic Charter, denying to colonised people the universality of rights proclaimed in the Charter.¹⁴ Like so many other universal rights declarations issued from the West, universalist language only really applied to Europeans or their descendants.

Roosevelt initially disagreed with Churchill's interpretation of the Charter, but later relented. In his Fireside Chat of 23 February 1942, Roosevelt responded to anticolonial agitation in the United States and declared, in no uncertain terms, that 'the Atlantic Charter applies not only to

¹¹ Lloyd C. Gardner, 'The Atlantic Charter: idea and reality, 1942-1945', in Brinkley and Facey-Crowther (eds), *The Atlantic Charter*, 50.

¹² *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 374, 9 Sept 1941, 68-9.

¹³ Quoted in Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York, 2008), 587.

¹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), 10, 16.

the parts of the world that border the Atlantic but to the whole world', including its provision about 'self-determination of Nations and peoples'.¹⁵ However, Roosevelt did not press for the implementation of this promise. In fact, as inevitable compromises with the British and the Soviets approached, Roosevelt began to back away from the Atlantic Charter as an achievable vision.¹⁶ Rather, he presented it as an ideal to strive for in the long term, especially as it became clear the U.S. military wanted to keep Pacific islands taken back from the Japanese as outposts. By late 1944, Roosevelt characterised the Charter as a mere 'objective' to be achieved in the range of centuries, or even millennia.¹⁷ To the extent that decolonisation proceeded during the war and after, it came from the efforts of anticolonialists and adjustments in the international system, not from Anglo-American policymakers honouring the Atlantic Charter.¹⁸

The disagreement in interpretation reminds us that, from its Anglo-American authors' perspective, 'the Atlantic Charter...was a deeply ambiguous document'.¹⁹ At face value, though, the Charter had very clear meaning: a universal right to self-determination. As political theorist Benjamin Gregg points out, despite repeated appeals, 'the effort to catch the West with its own moral language had failed'. Acknowledging these limits on Atlantic Charter rhetoric should not dissuade us from studying its mobilisation by anticolonialists. Gregg argues that simply to

¹⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'Fireside Chat, February 23, 1942', <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16224>, accessed 4 December 2013.

¹⁶ Shown recently by Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, 2012), 169, 185, 191, 210–211, and 227–229.

¹⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'Excerpts from the Press Conference, December 22, 1944', <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16484>, accessed 7 December 2013.

¹⁸ For more on this dynamic, see Mark Reeves, "'The Broad, toiling masses in all the continents': Anticolonial activists and the Atlantic Charter', MA thesis, Western Kentucky University, 2014.

¹⁹ Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, 2009), 55.

receive rights as pliant and passive subjects reduces those rights to ‘gratuitous grants from the powerful’, depriving ‘their recipients of autonomy and equality’. Instead of seeing themselves as ‘supernumeraries’, unintended consequences of universalist language, rights claimants should ‘self-regard as someone denied recognition’ of an already-possessed right.²⁰

The universalist language of the Atlantic Charter invited the colonised to place themselves within it and to question their exclusion.²¹ After all, ‘the high-toned abstractions in the Atlantic Charter’ only called attention to the ‘internal contradictions and hypocrisies within the democracies themselves’, such as the denial of rights to colonial subjects.²² Recently, historians have registered the importance of the Atlantic Charter not for the fact that it, or its Euro-American authors, granted something beneficently to the colonised. Rather, the Charter and the controversy around it opened the door to discussions of universal rights.²³ Despite Churchill’s defiance, U Saw and Nnamdi Azikiwe continued to articulate their claims using rights-talk.

U Saw’s Push for Dominion Status, October-November 1941

The first test of the anticolonial potential of the Atlantic Charter was launched by U Saw, a Burmese nationalist politician and premier of Burma since 1940. Born in 1900, Saw²⁴ had entered politics in the 1920s when nationalist movements advocated for reforms in Burma

²⁰ Benjamin Gregg, ‘Individuals as authors of human rights: Not only addressees’, *Theory and Society* 39 (2010), 645, 636–7.

²¹ Cf. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfield (Boston, 1991), 92; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007), 147ff. establishes a paradigm for this sort of ‘cascading’ rights thinking.

²² Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, 8.

²³ Andreas Eckert, ‘African nationalists and human rights, 1940s-1970s’, in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2011), 155, 157.

²⁴ In Burmese ‘U’ serves as an honorific like ‘Mr’, such that ‘U Saw’ and ‘Saw’ are interchangeable.

similar to the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in India, and eventually for separation from India. He joined the Burmese legislature in 1928, where he remained more or less continually throughout the 1930s. From 1938 forward, Saw explicitly sought the premiership of Burma for himself.²⁵ By September 1940, after building and abandoning a series of alliances, he finally rose to power.²⁶

Saw worked from within the system to pressure the British to offer more favourable terms to Burma on account of its participation in the war effort. Prior to his premiership, he had pressured the British to make a declaration in August 1940 promising that Britain ‘would continue to use their best endeavours to promote Burma’s attainment of Dominion status and that after the war they would be willing to discuss the problems to be solved in Burma’.²⁷ While not much compared to the calls for complete independence being thrown out by more youthful nationalists, this was the first time the British formally gave Dominion status as the goal for Burmese ‘constitutional advance’.²⁸ Once in the premiership, though, Saw had to navigate between privately cooperating with the British war effort and publicly appearing to press for more nationalist gains.²⁹

²⁵ After the 1935 Government of Burma Act, unlike in India, the British allowed Burmese politicians to take leadership of the government, albeit limited by the British governor’s power.

²⁶ Robert H. Taylor, ‘Politics in late colonial Burma: The case of U Saw’, *Modern Asian Studies* 10 (1976), 163-78; Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (New York, 2004), 97. See also ‘Thumb Nail Biography of U Saw and U Tin Tut’, September 1941, 1, M/3/1113, British Library, India Office Records (IOR).

²⁷ L.S. Amery, ‘Burma: Constitutional Future’, 28 October 1941, 1, CAB 67/9/122, The National Archives, Kew (TNA). For the complex story of U Saw’s rise to the premiership, see Taylor, ‘The case of U Saw’.

²⁸ Taylor, ‘Politics in Late Colonial Burma’, 176-7; the ‘Freedom Bloc’ of which Aung San was the secretary demanded a deadline for independence in exchange for Burmese cooperation in the war: Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, 2009), 48.

²⁹ C.F.B. Pearce to J.C. Walton, 15 September 1941, 2–3, M/3/1113, IOR.

By late summer 1941, Saw hoped to pry another statement from the British, using his good relations with the new British governor, Reginald Dorman-Smith. On 29 July, Saw first floated the idea of travelling to London in order to try and get another commitment from the British. Saw claimed he needed such a declaration before he could lead Burma into full cooperation with the British war effort, especially with an Anglo-Japanese war looking increasingly likely.³⁰ Saw wanted a guarantee from the British government that Burma would absolutely be admitted to the Commonwealth as a self-governing Dominion after the war. He assured Dorman-Smith that, given the wartime conditions, he would press for nothing more; however, Saw faced the reality that nothing less would placate nationalist criticism.³¹ Over the next weeks, Saw and Dorman-Smith wrangled with Amery, who finally agreed to let Saw visit London in the fall.³²

Roosevelt and Churchill dropped the Atlantic Charter into this context. Dorman-Smith observed Saw's expectations rise just after the Charter appeared: on 16 August, two days after its promulgation, Saw presented Dorman-Smith with a statement lauding the document as 'a charter of liberties for all peoples of the World'. The Burmese, the statement carried on, 'cannot help but conclude from the universality of the expressions used in the Declaration ... that the principles declared thereby must have application to the people of Burma and that their acceptance by [the] Democracies must of necessity lead Burma to attainment of national freedom'.³³ The statement indicated the line that Saw would take once he went to London later

³⁰ Reginald Dorman-Smith to Leo Amery, 31 July 1941, and Dorman-Smith to Amery, 30 July 1941, M/3/733, IOR.

³¹ Dorman-Smith to Amery, 9 July 1941, 1, M/3/733, IOR; Dorman-Smith to Amery, 30 July 1941, 1.

³² Robert Henry Taylor, 'The relationship between Burmese social classes and British-Indian policy on the behavior of the Burmese political elite, 1937-1942', PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1974, 611-2, 618-21, 624.

³³ Dorman-Smith to Amery, 16 August 1941, 1-2, M/3/733, IOR.

that fall: that colonial domains such as Burma were the intended object of the Charter's language.³⁴ Dorman-Smith expressed reservations about the British Government's interpretation, but nonetheless, Saw seemed optimistic and thought his interpretation 'plausible until Churchill could return to London to make a fuller statement on the subject'.³⁵

Perhaps unfortunately for Saw, by the time he set out for London, Churchill had returned and made his 9 September rejection, discussed above, about the Charter applying only to Europe. The reaction within Burma was not positive.³⁶ Yet, despite many Burmese seeing the Atlantic Charter as a lost cause after Churchill's statement, Saw kept pushing for a trip to London in hopes of convincing the British Prime Minister that his vision of dominion status was reasonable.³⁷

Saw especially highlighted the Charter when speaking to the foreign media, and developed a press strategy before leaving Burma in late September. He established a pattern of using the Charter primarily when speaking to foreign journalists, with audiences in Britain and

³⁴ The Burmese Chamber of Commerce (a European body) wrote the Burma Office that specifically Attlee's speech to WASU excited Saw's interpretation of the Charter: T.L. Hughes, 'Memorandum on the Constitutional Position of Burma', 13 September 1941, 1, M/3/1113, IOR.

³⁵ Taylor, 'Burmese political elite', 616.

³⁶ Dorman-Smith to Amery, 26 September 1941, 1, M/3/733, IOR. Dorman-Smith informed Amery that 'during a mass meeting in Rangoon Jubilee Hall on 21st September audience observed a one minute silence as a mark of disappointment for Burma not being considered at Atlantic discussion'. Former Burmese premier Ba Maw wrote in his memoir, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution, 1939-1946* (New Haven, 1968), 37-8: 'To all for whom words, honestly used, must mean what they say, the words of the Atlantic Charter were clear. The Burmese believed that they meant what they said. Churchill, however, did not. Within a month or so of the Atlantic pledge he again announced that it did not apply to the British colonies. It was therefore a white man's charter meant to see that all white nations were free and sovereign. There was no clear promise of anything for the colonies, although they were called upon to throw themselves into the war as much as those who were promised everything'.

³⁷ Burmese nationalist newspapers urged Saw not to go to Britain as a result of Churchill's speech: C.G. Stewart, 'Review of Recent Activities of Premier U Saw and Deductions Therefrom', 15 September 1941, 7, M/3/1113, IOR.

the United States. Saw believed these publics might be sympathetic to uses of their own political languages, and he could then portray resistance from policymakers as rank hypocrisy.³⁸ Just before his departure for London, Saw spoke to an American journalist, taking the credulous line of his 16 August ministerial statement. He said ‘he anticipated no need to “negotiate” with London if Churchill lives up to what he said in the [Atlantic Charter]’.³⁹ Despite Churchill’s 9 September statement, Saw indicated he intended to hold him to what the Charter said. But by framing it as ‘what [Churchill] said’, Saw made the prospective dialogue a referendum on British honesty.⁴⁰

Once he arrived in London, Saw was wined and dined by high society, he met with ministers, and he even had an audience with the King, all without voicing his aims or arguments in the press; instead, he maintained the official line that the visit was an expression of Burmese support for war-racked Britain.⁴¹ His most meaningful meetings were with Churchill and Amery, where he achieved none of his goals. The Charter came up in his meeting with Churchill, but Churchill rejected Saw’s request for a declaration, noting that once Britain won the war, and only then, ‘liberal ideas would prevail on the lines of the Atlantic Charter’. Churchill even retreated

³⁸ Burma’s chief security officer claimed Saw had a media strategy including using American correspondents to publicise his message: Stewart, ‘Review of Recent Activities of Premier U Saw’, 7, M/3/1113, IOR.

³⁹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 September 1941.

⁴⁰ This moralistic tone falls into a long line of anticolonial rhetoric which sought to hold Western empires up to their own standards of self-justifications: see, for example, Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, 2007).

⁴¹ On October 13 he met with the Home Secretary: *The Times*, 14 October 1941; had a three hour after lunch meeting with Churchill on October 18th: Taylor, ‘Burmese political elite’, 627–8; HMG hosted a luncheon for Saw at Claridge’s on the 24th, after which he also visited *The Times*: *The Times*, 25 October 1941; he visited India House on October 27th: *The Times*, 28 October 1941; the Lord Mayor feted him at a luncheon on the 29th: *The Times*, 30 October 1941; the Imperial Institute hosted him on the 30th: *The Times*, 31 October 1941; and he had an audience with the King on October 31st: *The Times*, 1 November 1941.

slightly from this position, reminding Saw that the Charter ‘was an unilateral declaration which HMG must hold itself free to interpret’.⁴²

The only concrete achievement Saw could bring back to Burma was a letter drafted by Amery and approved by the War Cabinet, which simply offered what Amery called ‘a general and quite non-committal assurance’ of the British Government’s sincerity.⁴³ The letter reaffirmed the August 1940 declaration, promising yet again that ‘immediately [after] the war is brought to a victorious end [the British government] will be willing to discuss the problems to [be] solved in Burma’ in order to advance towards dominion status.⁴⁴ Amery and Churchill did not want to make any more commitments which Saw or his successors might hold over them.

Despite not meeting Saw’s political needs at all, Amery felt that this letter would offer him ‘a general assurance of the sincerity of our intentions’, and this would be enough for the time being.⁴⁵ But Amery, much less Churchill, never considered that this foot-dragging might undermine their attempt to convince their interlocutor of British sincerity – which, within the government, had been the main justification for agreeing to let Saw take the trip at all. British officials thought Saw’s visit to London would allow a personal conveyance of British sincerity, and have ‘educative value’ on him.⁴⁶ Saw may have learned the wrong lesson.

⁴² ‘Prime Minister’s Interview with U Saw and U Tin Tut’, 18 October 1941, 2, M/3/733, IOR. Also available in PREM 4/50/1, TNA.

⁴³ Amery, ‘Burma: Constitutional Future’, 2, CAB 67/9/122, TNA.

⁴⁴ Draft Letter to U Saw, 1, attached to Amery, ‘Burma: Constitutional Future’, CAB 67/9/122, TNA.

⁴⁵ Draft Letter to U Saw, 1, CAB 67/9/122, TNA.

⁴⁶ Draft Letter to U Saw, 1, CAB 67/9/122, TNA; ‘Report for the Month of August 1941 for the Dominions, India, Burma and the Colonies and Mandated Territories’, September 1941, 11, CAB 68/8/58, TNA. Taylor, ‘Burmese political elite’, 618–9, 625; Taylor, ‘Politics in late colonial Burma’, 189–90; cf. Amery’s 5 November speech, quoted in *The Times*, 5 November 1941.

After receiving Amery's letter, Saw broke his silence in the press, and turned to the Atlantic Charter. Expressing his intense disappointment with the trip, on 3 November, Saw claimed that the Charter 'gave as a war aim the liberation and freedom of small nations', prompting him to ask 'that before they [the British Government] free the countries under Hitler let them free the countries which are in the British Empire'.⁴⁷

The next day at a wrap-up lunch for the visit, Amery attempted to answer Saw's critique by highlighting yet again British good will and sincerity. Saw's public reply was more conciliatory than his comments the previous day, but again he returned to the Atlantic Charter. In this appeal, Saw spoke above the British government to a potentially anticolonial British public, claiming that he had found 'a body of public opinion in England which ... believes that famous third paragraph of the Atlantic Charter ... should be applied not only to the countries ... of the now extensive German Empire but also the subject countries of the British Empire'. In addition to this implicit equation of the British Empire and Nazi conquests, Saw expanded his critique of British policy, voicing a hope that not only Burma but India and 'all the Asiatic and African countries that are in the British Empire without being free and equal partners in your Commonwealth, hope that in Great Britain's dealings with Empire countries not peopled by their kith and kin she will exercise the same large-heartedness and statesmanship which characterise her dealings with the countries which now form the self-governing Dominions of the British Commonwealth'.⁴⁸ This latter statement explicitly raised the racial disparity within the British Empire – with countries 'peopled by...kith and kin' offered dominion status while the non-white colonies continued to be kept out.

⁴⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 November 1941; cf. also *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 November 1941; *New York Times*, 4 November 1941.

⁴⁸ U Saw, quoted in *The Times*, 5 November 1941.

Saw also printed a pamphlet for distribution to the press and Members of Parliament stating Burma's case.⁴⁹ In the pamphlet, Saw restated his case, basing Burma's claim for self-government on the Atlantic Charter. However, Saw also extended the argument, claiming that if the Charter were 'applied without reservation to Burma' it 'would entitle her people to claim the restoration of their country to the status of an independent kingdom as it was conquered by force' by the British in the 1880s. However, Saw abandoned this historical claim in favour of self-government within the British Commonwealth, presenting this demand as a concession from what the Atlantic Charter ought to oblige.⁵⁰ Though the pamphlet did not gain traction or even press coverage, with this parting shot Saw had played every political card he could muster. As Saw left for the United States, the Foreign Office cabled Washington warning about the pamphlet, with a newfound understanding that 'U Saw ... is skilled (not to say unscrupulous) in the art of propaganda and it may be anticipated that he will do everything possible to exploit the opportunity of publicity for the Burmese Nationalist cause'.⁵¹

That the British had missed an opportunity with the visit became clear shortly thereafter. Saw proceeded to the United States and continued to make soundings on the Atlantic Charter in press interviews in New York and Washington.⁵² He also raised the issue in a visit with Roosevelt, only to be rebuffed along the same lines he had met in Britain.⁵³ In fact, the Burma Office and Foreign Office coordinated to request that Roosevelt echo Churchill's interpretation

⁴⁹ J.C. Walton to C.F.B. Pearce, 6 November 1941, M/3/732, IOR.

⁵⁰ U Saw, *Burma's Case for Full Self-Government* (London: Alfred Ashley & Son, 1941), 2–3, M/3/732, IOR.

⁵¹ Joyce to Lord Halifax, 6 November 1941, 1, 3, M/3/732, IOR.

⁵² *New York Times*, 14 November 1941; *Washington Post*, 16 November 1941.

⁵³ Amery to Churchill, 8 November 1941, PREM 4/50/1, TNA; Halifax to Amery, 16 November 1941, 1, M/3/1111, IOR; Memorandum of conversation, Halifax with Sumner Welles, 12 November 1941, RG 59 033.45C11/2, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA).

of the Charter when he met with Saw.⁵⁴ Despite stonewalling from the U.S. government as well as the British, as late as 26 November Saw sent a telegram to President Roosevelt requesting that he and Churchill issue another joint statement ‘to the effect “that the Atlantic Charter applies to all peoples, without exception”’. Roosevelt wrote to his State Department asking about the inquiry on 5 December, but the State Department recommended not replying.⁵⁵

Two days after Roosevelt’s inquiry, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Also on 7 December, U Saw’s ship taking him from Los Angeles to Singapore was diverted to Honolulu.⁵⁶ Prevented from returning to Burma across the Pacific, Saw returned across the Atlantic. En route, while in Lisbon, he visited the home of the Japanese consul. According to U.S. naval intelligence passed to the British, upon his return to Burma Saw planned ‘to get in touch with the Japanese, and with their assistance set up a Quisling or Free Burmese Government’.⁵⁷ Once the British caught up with Saw in Palestine, they arrested him. Saw flatly denied the allegations, insisting he had gone to see the Japanese consul at his home about Burmese students in Japan, whom he feared ‘would also be tortured by the Japanese military authorities’.⁵⁸ After Saw’s traveling companion could not corroborate U Saw’s explanation, since Saw did not tell him about his visit to the Japanese consul, the British decided to go public with their detention of Saw, explaining that ‘he has been in contact with Japanese authorities since the outbreak of war with Japan...by his own admission’.⁵⁹ After some frantic discussions within the Cabinet fearing

⁵⁴ Amery to Anthony Eden, 3 November 1941, 1–2, M/3/1111, IOR.

⁵⁵ Wallace Murray to Welles and Cordell Hull, memorandum, 13 December 1941, RG 59 845C.002/11, NARA.

⁵⁶ Joyce to J.C. Walton, 9 December 1941, M/3/1110, IOR: the Foreign Office estimated that Saw’s ship would have been around Wake Island or Midway Island when the Japanese attack began.

⁵⁷ LC Hollis, Ministry of Defence, to Churchill, 7 January 1942, PREM 4/50/2, TNA.

⁵⁸ Report of U Saw’s interrogation on 13 January 1942, in High Commissioner, Jerusalem, to Cairo, 14 January 1942, 2, PREM 4/50/2, TNA.

⁵⁹ Cairo to Foreign Office, 17 January 1942; Press Release, 18 January 1942, PREM 4/50/2, TNA.

that the British might have to bring Saw to public trial, and thus reveal their source, the Cabinet decided their public explanation sufficed, and U Saw spent the remainder of the war in a detention centre in Uganda, only returning to Burma in 1946.⁶⁰

While the rejection of Saw's interpretation of the Atlantic Charter did not cause his alleged turn to the Japanese in early 1942, it must have been at least a contributing factor: after all, his mission, framed in Churchill's own words, had gotten nowhere. Saw had dallied with the Japanese before, visiting there in 1935 and allegedly receiving funding from Japan until he acceded to the premiership in 1941.⁶¹ Saw's minders in Rangoon and London had not feared he would turn back to the Japanese, but in the face of British intransigence and the onset of a Japanese sweep across Asia, it is possible to see why Saw would have thought he could risk changing sides. The risk did not pay off, leaving Saw in obscurity in Uganda for the four most important years of Burmese political development of his lifetime.

From 1942 to 1945, the Japanese occupation transformed Burma and accelerated the rise of a charismatic young nationalist named Aung San. Ironically, whereas Saw's demands had been too extreme in 1941, by 1946, the British brought him back to Burma as a possible counterweight to Aung San. For Aung San and the nationalists who had filled the void left by Saw and others, the demands he had taken to London in 1941 were the bare minimum. Indeed, Britain would not even get that. In this sense, then, the failure of Saw's 1941 mission to London and Washington represented the disappearance of a potential Burma in the Commonwealth,

⁶⁰ Foreign Office to Cairo, 27 January 1942, PREM 4/50/2, TNA. Veteran anti-imperialist Reginald Bridgeman believed U Saw had been framed by the British to remove him from the scene, citing his conversation with U Saw on 19 October 1941: Reginald Bridgeman, 'Political Freedom in Burma', 9 April 1942, 1, 4bis, National Council for Civil Liberties Papers, U DCL 99/1, Hull History Centre.

⁶¹ Stewart, 'Review of Recent Activities of Premier U Saw', 1-2, M/3/1113, IOR.

completing the bifurcation Saw identified in 1941 between British government dealings with ‘kith and kin’ and Burma.

Moreover, the failure of Saw’s mission and his years in Uganda meant that this incredibly ambitious man returned to a Burma which had passed him by. This frustration likely drove Saw to eliminate Aung San, his most powerful political rival, on 19 July 1947.⁶² While that lost future for Burma has dominated the historical and public imagination ever since, Saw also had a role in another lost future – that of an ‘anticolonial’ Atlantic Charter.

Nnamdi Azikiwe’s Debut on the British Stage, August 1943

Two years after U Saw’s anticolonial campaign in London, Nigerian newspaper editor Nnamdi Azikiwe encountered a British government still under wartime stress but with considerably more stability. The 1943 Colonial Office (CO), unlike the 1941 Burma Office, could safely assume that the Axis would not threaten British West Africa, and thus the government began planning for post-war reforms. Its invitation of eight West African editors to visit the UK in the summer of 1943 reflected a desire to secure cooperation from potential political agitators, looking toward the challenge of a post-war world where colonial peoples in Africa would likely not accept the pre-war status quo.⁶³ For Azikiwe, the 1943 Press Tour represented a turning point in his career, though not in the same extreme sense as U Saw’s 1941 visit.

Nnamdi Azikiwe was born to Igbo parents in 1904, and his father’s position as a civil servant gave him the experience of living in each of the three regions which would become Nigeria in

⁶² Cady, *Modern Burma*, 557; Charney, *Modern Burma*, 68.

⁶³ For an interpretation of a longtime cordiality in Anglo-Azikiwe relations, see John E. Flint, “‘Managing nationalism’: The Colonial Office and Nnamdi Azikiwe, 1932–43”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 27 (1999), 143–58.

1914.⁶⁴ From a young age Azikiwe had been intrigued by America in opposition to Britain, and aspired to study there, inspired by Garveyites and James Aggrey, a Gold Coast-born missionary who had studied in the United States.⁶⁵ After working in the Gold Coast briefly as a policeman, Azikiwe made his way to the United States in 1925. There, he enrolled at Storer College in West Virginia, Howard University in Washington, D.C., and finally Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he finished a bachelor's degree. Azikiwe also completed a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania while teaching politics and African history at Lincoln. Returning to Africa in 1934, 'Zik' stopped over in London, where he began research for a textbook of African history and finished the proof of his first book, *Liberia in World Politics*.⁶⁶

Azikiwe returned to West Africa (after attempting to join the foreign services of both Liberia and Ethiopia⁶⁷) to take up the editorship of a new daily in Accra, the *African Morning Post*, where he began a long friendship with Frances (Kwame) Nkrumah, and encouraged him to follow his path to Lincoln University in the U.S. At the *Morning Post*, Zik worked with the labour activist I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, whose article 'Has the African a God?' would get

⁶⁴ James Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley, Ca., 1958), 221; Adele E. Afigbo, 'Nnamdi Azikiwe: His cultural and historical roots', in Miriam Ijejiani-Clark and Michael S.O. Olisa (eds), *Azikiwe and the African Revolution* (Onitsha, 1989), 12; John Oriji, 'Nnamdi Azikiwe: The triumph of knowledge', in Gloria Chuku (ed.), *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition: Creative Conflict in African and African Diasporic Thought* (New York, 2013), 69.

⁶⁵ Gene Ulansky, 'Nnamdi Azikiwe and the myth of America', PhD thesis, University of California, 1980, 24–39.

⁶⁶ Oriji, 'Triumph of Knowledge', 70–2; Ulansky, 'Myth of America', 41–2, 47–51; for the influence of several notable African-American intellectuals, especially Alain Locke, on Azikiwe, see Jason C. Parker, "'Made-in-America Revolutions'": The "Black University" and the American role in the decolonization of the Black Atlantic', *Journal of American History* 96 (2009): 727–50; Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Liberia in World Politics* (London, 1934).

⁶⁷ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (London, 1970), 164, 170. I use 'Zik' and 'Azikiwe' interchangeably, as did Azikiwe; on the powerful implications of his use of this pseudonym, see Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa* (Athens, Ohio, 2013).

himself and Azikiwe into hot water with the British authorities.⁶⁸ Hounded out of the Gold Coast, Zik returned to his native Nigeria and established a newspaper, the *West African Pilot*, which from 1937 to 1943 quickly became one of the highest circulating newspapers in the region.⁶⁹

1941 would prove an important year for Zik as a political actor. In February 1941, Azikiwe split from the recently founded Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), a pan-Nigerian organisation in line with Zik's youth-oriented call for a 'New Africa', pushing for greater educational opportunities and advancement within Nigeria.⁷⁰ One of the first political organisations promoting ethnic unity among Nigeria's diverse population, the NYM's split came to be seen as the demise of a hoped-for united anticolonial movement. After the split, Azikiwe generally attracted Igbo supporters while Yoruba rivals waged a press war with the *Pilot* and railed against Zik's criticisms of their candidates for the Lagos Municipal Council.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (New York, 2008), 313–6; Nike L. Edun Adebisi, 'Radical nationalism in British West Africa, 1945-1960', PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2008, 130; Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race, and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London, 1999), 117 notes the stimulating context of the Ethiopia Crisis. Ray Jenkins examines another episode from this period in his 'William Ofori Atta, Nnamdi Azikiwe, J.B. Danquah and the "Grilling" of W.E.F. Ward of Achimota in 1935', *History in Africa* 21 (1994), 171–89. See also correspondence between Azikiwe and George Padmore during the episode in KV 2/1817, TNA.

⁶⁹ Sam O. Idemili, 'What the West African Pilot did in the movement for Nigerian nationalism between 1937 and 1957', *Black American Literature Forum* 12 (1978): 84–91; Samuel Okafor Idemili, 'The "West African Pilot" and the movement for Nigerian nationalism, 1937-1960', PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1980.

⁷⁰ Flint, "Managing Nationalism", 147–51 usefully points out the NYM's relative moderation, and its close relationship with Governor Bernard Bourdillon. The NYM served as the mechanism for Zik's close and warm relationship with Bourdillon, proving once more for Flint the non-antagonism between Azikiwe and the colonial government.

⁷¹ Coleman, *Background to Nationalism*, 227; Michael Crowder, *A Short History of Nigeria* (New York, 1962), 237–41; Gabriel Olakunle Olusanya, 'The Impact of the Second World War on Nigeria's political evolution', PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1964, 285-91; Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu, 1978), 142–3;

If Zik's departure from the NYM closed one political path for him, the Atlantic Charter soon opened another. Perhaps more important than the Charter itself, Attlee's 15 August 1941 pronouncement to WASU opened the possibility of the Charter's applicability to West Africa, an opening Zik exploited as much as U Saw. In November 1941, he sent a telegram to Churchill himself asking whether the Charter applied to British West Africa. The CO never responded to the telegram, but Azikiwe plastered it across the front page of his newspaper.⁷² In 1942, Zik used the Atlantic Charter in speeches on his 'goodwill' football tours around Nigeria, tours which both raised money for the British war effort and provided Zik a platform to promote himself and his message of colonial reform.⁷³ Thus, by the time of Zik's opportunity to travel to London in 1943, the Atlantic Charter had become a part of his political repertoire.

In June 1943, the British Council announced a tour of Britain for eight newspaper editors from across British West Africa. The Council offered the tour as intended to give 'a view of life in England', 'explain and demonstrate "England at War"', 'give opportunities of personal contact with persons of prominence in various walks of life', and 'show what British local Government has done for Britain and how it has been done', all with the unstated aim of educating potentially restive West Africans, much as the Burma Office had hoped to educate U Saw.⁷⁴ The Press Delegation tour was never going to be a one-way street, though. As the editors' CO handler noted in his report, 'the visit had been accepted as a cheap way of doing their own business in

Saheed Aderinto and Toyin Falola, *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History* (Rochester, NY, 2010), 256–7. The split did not directly concern ethnicity, interestingly enough, but a disputed election to the presidency of the NYM, with Azikiwe backing the losing candidate and following him when he angrily left the movement.

⁷² *West African Pilot*, 13 November 1941 (hereafter *Pilot*).

⁷³ Wiebe Karl Boer, 'Nation Building Exercise: Sporting culture and the rise of football in colonial Nigeria', PhD thesis, Yale University, 2003, 310-2.

⁷⁴ CR Niven, 'Visit to England by West African Delegation, August, 1943', cover letter, CO 554/133/3, TNA.

England'.⁷⁵ Or, one might see the editors, especially Azikiwe, using the visit as a political platform.

Azikiwe trumpeted the announcement of the tour as an answer to his own calls for such a visit.⁷⁶ Azikiwe's primary interest in the Delegation lay in its proximity to what many perceived as an accelerating political momentum on colonial reform, especially given Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley's 13 July 1943 declaration which explicitly committed British colonial policy to eventual self-government, a bombshell even to his own staff.⁷⁷ The *Pilot's* editorial on the tour appreciated the delegation's timing 'when things are being resolved at a speedy rate', and the opportunity for colonial subjects to shape perception 'when opinions about Colonies are rapidly changing'.⁷⁸ Within this excitement for change, though, the tone remained cordial and fraternal given the wartime circumstances. Azikiwe was keen to portray his interest in the Delegation as an interest in the wellbeing of the British Commonwealth, not its collapse. Rather, the delegation would 'cement goodwill and fellowship between this part of the world and the Mother Country', allowing the West Africans 'to exchange ideas and give free play to a spirit of comradeship with those who control the destiny of the British Commonwealth of Nations'.⁷⁹

Azikiwe certainly intended to exchange his ideas with the leaders of the British Commonwealth. When the eight editors (himself, a Yoruba and a Hausa editor from Nigeria, two editors each from the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, and one from the Gambia) departed for London in late July 1943, Azikiwe quickly took the lead. He presented himself as a secretary for

⁷⁵ Niven, 'Visit', 17, CO 554/133/3, TNA.

⁷⁶ *Pilot*, 23 June 1943.

⁷⁷ Cf. Louis, *Imperialism at Bay*.

⁷⁸ *Pilot*, 23 June 1943.

⁷⁹ *Pilot*, 23 June 1943. Zik's regular column 'Inside Stuff' commented on the tour alongside the editorial.

the group (to which the others assented), and then put forward a memorandum he had developed beforehand out of editorials run in the *Pilot* earlier in 1943.⁸⁰

This memorandum, entitled ‘The Atlantic Charter and British West Africa’, proposed numerous social, educational, and economic reforms for the various territories in West Africa. Most provocatively, the document proposed internal self-government for British West Africa within ten years and complete self-government within fifteen years. Indeed, with its description of the proper separation of powers, delineation of rights for citizens, and plan for a transfer of powers, the memorandum resembled a constitution. Thus, even though Azikiwe came to London in a much lower political position than U Saw, he proposed a political agenda on the same scale. Like Saw, Zik articulated this agenda under the banner of the Atlantic Charter, with the memorandum declaring the editors were ‘basing out [sic] claims upon the declaration of Clause 3 of the Atlantic Charter’.⁸¹

The memo was signed by six of the editors, though one of them offered 19 reservations to his signature, while the Hausa editor Mallam Abubakar Imam and the Gambian editor refused to sign. Dated 1 August 1943, Azikiwe would keep the document private until publishing it near the end of the delegation’s visit, when George Padmore and volunteers from WASU helped him distribute it to the British press and parliamentary figures.⁸²

After the delegation’s arrival in Liverpool on 1 August, the British Council kept them busy with visits to the House of Commons, the Colonial Office, the Ministry of Information, St. Paul’s

⁸⁰ Azikiwe’s authorship is corroborated by Imam in *Pilot*, 9 November 1943. Azikiwe had claimed the memorandum had been a group effort: *Pilot*, 30 October 1943.

⁸¹ ‘The Atlantic Charter and British West Africa: Memorandum on Post-War Reconstruction of the Colonies and Protectorates of British West Africa, Prepared under the Auspices of the West African Press Delegation to Great Britain, August, 1943’, 3, CO 554/133/3, TNA.

⁸² *Pilot*, 16 November 1943.

Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and side trips to Birmingham, Oxford, and Epsom.⁸³ Azikiwe spoke for the delegation on several occasions, including at a banquet held by the League of Coloured Peoples, where the CO handler noted that Azikiwe made ‘a very suitable reply ... in which self-government raised its inevitable head, though obscured with a decent veil of uncertainty’.⁸⁴ Azikiwe again spoke for the group during the visit to Birmingham, where he delivered the official reply to the Lord Mayor, and in the handler’s words, his speech ‘was considerably abler and certainly more grammatical than that given by the Lord Mayor’. The handler, one CR Niven, felt that Azikiwe had ‘moderated his tone’ on self-government for West Africa, portraying his speech as having ‘made passing reference to self-government - and I see no harm in that - he made it in a far more reasonable manner than expected’.⁸⁵

Niven thought Azikiwe had softened over the course of the visit, and thus that the British Council’s aims had been met, that these proto-nationalists had been convinced by the rational arguments and evidence marshalled by their British hosts. According to Niven, on the topic of self-government, the editors’ ‘aggressiveness disappeared’ and ‘after they had seen the Local Governments’ achievements ... they began to conceive an entirely different picture of their aims and objects for the future’. Niven noted approvingly that this would surely reduce ‘vague and vapid vapourings on self-government’. However, he did not refer to, and may not have been aware of, the Memorandum when he wrote his report, which was likely shortly after the official program ended around August 21. Even so, his evaluation of Azikiwe at this point left him suspicious of the Nigerian. He summarised Zik as ‘sincere in his opinions, but unscrupulous in his way of getting them across. A very clever man used to skating on thin ice. Very eloquent and

⁸³ See Zik’s columns in the *Pilot* of 13, 27-28, 31 August, 1-2, 4, 6 September 1943.

⁸⁴ Niven, ‘Visit’, 8, CO 554/133/3, TNA.

⁸⁵ Niven, ‘Visit’, 9, CO 554/133/3, TNA.

like other West Africans inclined to be carried away by his own eloquence. ... Outstandingly the most vital figure of the party'.⁸⁶

Niven might have felt confirmed in this opinion had he observed Zik on August 22, when the delegation attended a party given by WASU at its London hostel. Here, Azikiwe finally publicly referenced the Memorandum, and then expounded on it further when he attended WASU's second annual conference several days later, as he had decided to stay in London after the other delegates returned to West Africa.⁸⁷ WASU was both a natural and an odd place to debut the Memorandum. It made sense given WASU's connection to the Atlantic Charter through Attlee's speech on 15 August 1941. Moreover, in April 1942 WASU had passed a resolution calling for the British to grant their West African colonies immediate internal self-government and complete self-government within five years of the war's end.⁸⁸ Thus, WASU called for an even more ambitious timetable than Zik—indeed, when WASU had passed the resolution in April 1942, Azikiwe had criticised it as vague and naive.⁸⁹ By August 1943, though, Azikiwe would take a very similar line, simply adding ten years to WASU's 1942 proposal.

In recounting his presentation of the Memorandum at WASU, Zik portrayed his ideas as leading the way, rather than acknowledging how WASU's own policy had been more ambitious and had preceded his own. The *Pilot* write-up of the 1943 WASU conference said that the memorandum 'was exactly or substantially the same as that arrived at by WASU without the one previously conferring with one another'.⁹⁰ Azikiwe repeated this characterisation in his 95-part

⁸⁶ Niven, 'Visit', 19, CO 554/133/3, TNA.

⁸⁷ *Pilot*, 15 January 1944.

⁸⁸ 'Resolutions on Political Problems', *Wasu (Preach)*, May 1943, 7–8.

⁸⁹ *Pilot*, 21 April 1942; Azikiwe to Blaize (WASU, London), 2 July 1942, CO 554/127/11, TNA.

⁹⁰ *Pilot*, 30 October 1943.

series of columns detailing the press tour, observing that ‘strangely...the views of the Press Delegates and WASU were identical in almost all respects’.⁹¹

These subtle reformulations of the chronology of 1942 and 1943 helped Zik create the image of himself as the primary actor in challenging the British state from West Africa. By subsuming WASU’s challenges to the British into his own ambitions, Zik could project himself as the main Nigerian leader challenging the British. Ever since his departure from the NYM in 1941, Azikiwe needed to supplant other organisations which claimed to represent Nigerian anticolonialism, and his manoeuvre to outflank WASU fit into this pattern.

Circumstantial evidence suggests some forethought on Azikiwe’s part for the timing of his Memorandum. The Memorandum strongly echoed Zik’s earlier proposals for Nigerian political advancement, published first as articles in the *Pilot* and then as a pamphlet.⁹² By moving himself closer to WASU and drafting the Memorandum in preparation to unveil it once on ‘stage’ in London, Azikiwe seems to have recognised the Press Delegation as a bully pulpit. Just before leaving Britain in 1943, Zik had hinted at his imminent political plans, acknowledging that ‘I was only 39 years old’, but ‘felt that my public life should begin at 40’.⁹³ Just in time, in 1944 Azikiwe emerged as the leader of a new political party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC).

⁹¹ *Pilot*, 20 January 1944. The U.S. consul in Lagos, Andrew Lynch, described ‘Ambassadors of Goodwill’ as a ‘seemingly never-ending series’. Andrew G. Lynch, ‘Objectionable Articles in the *West African Pilot*’, 28 January 1944, RG 84, Lagos Classified General Records, 1940-1963, Box 1, Folder 5, NARA.

⁹² *Pilot*, 25 March 1943 to 15 April 1943. Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Political Blueprint of Nigeria* (Lagos: African Book Company, 1943).

⁹³ *Pilot*, 22 January 1944.

Some scholars have looked back on the 1943 Press Delegation as a turning point because the British did not respond sufficiently to the Memorandum.⁹⁴ However, this does not assign enough agency to Azikiwe. The CO did not deign to respond to the Memorandum, dismissing it as ‘clap-trap’ and ‘a disappointing production which shows no recognition of how small a proportion of West Africans can be expected even to understand the views in it’.⁹⁵ But shortly after having received the Memorandum, the CO and the Nigerian Government spoke about Azikiwe in respectful tones: another CO official recognised that his recommendations ‘no doubt [represent] the general aspirations of the educated Africans’ and the Governor of Nigeria dismissed another Nigerian group, saying that ‘were it led by a man of Azikiwe’s calibre it might count for more’.⁹⁶ If nothing else, the CO saw Zik as a force to be reckoned with: after the 1943 tour, Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley saw Azikiwe as ‘the biggest danger of the lot’ and CO officials realised that Azikiwe had seized the opportunity to become the star of the Delegation.⁹⁷ An official in the Nigerian government, writing to London in October 1943, wrote that ‘the sooner Zikism...[is] debunked the better for West Africa’.⁹⁸ Not one to disappoint these fears, Zik led the NCNC into governing Nigeria’s Eastern Region in the mid-1950s, on the way to serving as Nigeria’s first independent Governor-General and President through the mid-1960s.

⁹⁴ John Hargreaves, *Decolonization in Africa* (London, 1988), 71; Emmanuel Nwafor Mordi, ‘Wartime propaganda, devious officialdom, and the challenge of nationalism during the Second World War in Nigeria’, *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 18 (2009), 247–8.

⁹⁵ ‘Note on Memo by W.A. Delegation’, 9 September 1943 and O.G.R. Williams, ‘Note on Memo by W.A. Delegation’, 13 September 1943, CO 554/113/3, TNA.

⁹⁶ ‘Note by Andrew Cohen’, 13 October 1943, CO 583/261/8, TNA; Sir Bernard Bourdillon, ‘Minute by Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies’, 10 September 1943, CO 583/263/18, TNA.

⁹⁷ ‘Notes on Points Arising in Discussions with the Secretary of State (Stanley) on Wednesday, 27th October and Thursday, 28th October, 1943’, CO 554/132/18, TNA.

⁹⁸ A.G. Grantham to Sir Arthur Dawe, 11 October 1943, 2, CO 554/132/20, TNA.

The 1943 Press Delegation did not create a pliable partner for Anglo-Nigerian cooperation, even if Zik's departure from the fold of cooperation did not prove as dramatic as U Saw's betrayal. In both cases, trips to London served as platforms to promote political careers in particular colonial contexts, as Saw and Zik consciously exploited colonial and metropolitan media to amplify their messages, their own importance, and their political leverage. Both men failed to secure their immediate political aims, even though they framed them in the terms laid down by the British government. While Saw and Burma slipped from British control almost as soon as the 1941 mission concluded, Azikiwe and Nigeria would wait to challenge British rule on a massive scale until two years after the press tour, in summer 1945's Lagos general strike.⁹⁹ Entering politics at 40, Azikiwe would lead an independent Nigeria by age 60.

Conclusion: Lost Futures

Compared to the immediate obscurity of most press releases, the Atlantic Charter has fared remarkably well. Most statements released by government leaders, even those of major geopolitical powers, fade into obscurity amid the piles of papers generated by the bureaucracy of administration. The Charter's longevity stems directly from the fact that documents take on lives of their own, beyond the intentions of their authors.¹⁰⁰

This is not to establish the Atlantic Charter itself as an agent in transnational politics.¹⁰¹ Instead, the Charter entered into complex political situations all across the world, both inside and

⁹⁹ On the strike, see Lisa A. Lindsay, 'Domesticity and difference: Male breadwinners, working women, and colonial citizenship in the 1945 Nigerian general strike', *American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 783–812.

¹⁰⁰ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*; David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

¹⁰¹ Cf. Borgwardt, 'When you state a moral principle', 532. Borgwardt claims that 'anti-colonialist writers in Africa, India, Asia, and Latin America alike advanced ... the "Mandela" interpretation with equal enthusiasm', referring to

outside of the British Empire, from South Africa, India, and Trinidad, to Madagascar and Algeria.¹⁰²

This article has drawn attention to two of those situations, and how two very particular actors used the Charter in their contexts. The fact that a premier presiding over an active self-government regime in a colony directly threatened by warfare, and an ambitious newspaper editor from a colony far from the fighting, could both use the Charter does not tell us that it awakened anticolonialism around the Empire. Instead, it demonstrates that anticolonial forces long active across the Empire needed only the hint of a political opening to mount sophisticated political attacks which simultaneously intervened in the politics of the metropole and the colonies. Saw and Azikiwe's visits to London serve as testaments to the profound instability of the Empire during the Second World War, and they show how the forces unleashed after 1945 had mobilised long before then, with the war and post-war providing them a platform.

Nelson Mandela's citation of the Charter as a global, non-racial manifesto for individual rights (quoting his 1994 memoir). Laing, 'Relevance of the Atlantic Charter', 310; Laing, 'Norm of self-determination', 258, 261.

¹⁰² For a sampling of Atlantic Charter-talk in the British world, see Saul Dubow, 'South Africa and South Africans: Nationality, belonging, citizenship', in Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 2, 1885-1994 (Cambridge, 2011), 52; Michael O. West, 'Ndabaningi Sithole, Garfield Todd and the Dadaya School Strike of 1947', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18 (1992), 299; Rosaleen Smyth, 'War propaganda during the Second World War in Northern Rhodesia', *African Affairs* 83 (1984), 356-8; Tony Martin, 'Eric Williams and the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission: Trinidad's future nationalist leader as aspiring imperial bureaucrat, 1942-1944', *Journal of African American History* 88 (2003), 285. For India, see Auriol Weigold, *Churchill, Roosevelt and India: Propaganda During World War II* (London, 2008), chs. 1-2; Sarah Ellen Graham, 'American propaganda, the Anglo-American alliance, and the "Delicate Question" of Indian self-determination', *Diplomatic History* 33 (2009), 223-59. For Madagascar see Douglas Little, 'Cold War and Colonialism in Africa: The United States, France and the Madagascar Revolt of 1947', *Pacific Historical Review* 59 (1990), 533-5; for Algeria, see Fabian Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria* (Philadelphia, 2013), 24-5.

To take the Burmese example first: young nationalists, willing to use violence and to ally with the Japanese, had been putting pressure on British rule in Burma since the mid-1930s, and Japan's expansion into Southeast Asia in 1940-1 only increased the perception that Britain's days in Burma were numbered. Therefore, Saw was walking a thin line when he came to London in 1941, trying to achieve meaningful self-government while retaining the prospect of British defence and diplomatic protection against an expanding Japan. Had Churchill been able to see the Atlantic Charter as Saw presented it, as an opportunity to reform the Empire through devolution in order to gain allies against Japan, perhaps Burma might not have fallen so easily to Japan in 1942.¹⁰³ Moreover, perhaps after the war, the idea of Burma remaining in a British Commonwealth would not have been the non-starter it became by 1946, when Saw returned. U Saw had used the Charter in 1941 to buttress his own nationalist credentials, but in retrospect his proposal might have also saved British influence in Burma.

By the mid-1940s, British policymakers recognised that they needed to cultivate allies in their colonies in order to prevent others following the Burmese path of jettisoning Britain entirely. The invitation of pressmen from West Africa thus looked toward the post-war era, but like the Burma Office's belief that it could control the political trajectory of a nation by charming a small delegation of leaders, the CO believed they could manage West Africa through editors like Azikiwe. As with Saw, the CO officials did not reckon on facilitating the rise of anticolonial figures. In August 1943, the Atlantic Charter again served as the rhetorical tool for an ambitious self-aggrandiser to attempt to propel himself to the head of local anticolonial politics. Azikiwe's

¹⁰³ U.S. and Chinese officials raised exactly this point when meeting with Reginald Dorman-Smith once he had fled Burma in early 1942; Dorman-Smith bristled at the suggestion, though he admitted 'several months ago he would have favored some form of dominion status for Burma but that it was now too late'. John Davies, Jr., 'Conditions in Burma', 3 April 1942, 2, RG 59 845C.00/59, NARA.

proposals went no further in Whitehall than Saw's had, but the post-war escalation of nationalist agitation in Nigeria would reveal that Azikiwe's 1943 offer was the best the British would ever get from their Nigerian interlocutors. Nigeria would remain in the Commonwealth after its independence in 1960, but the 1940s and 1950s would see intense and sometimes bloody contestation over Nigeria's relationship with Britain, ending with Azikiwe as Nigeria's president.

As the cases of Burma and Nigeria show, the Atlantic Charter-based proposals which appeared during the war represented a transition point for the possible futures of the British Empire. The Charter proposals brought by Saw and Azikiwe were the last in a long tradition of requests for the metropole to devolve power to local leaders in the colonies, who would govern their territories in firm alliance with Britain. After the war, anticolonialists continued to forward similar proposals, but they were increasingly competing with more radical and drastic programs of full, immediate independence. Anticolonial interpretations of the Atlantic Charter articulated a non-nationalist framework for decolonisation earlier, but the failure of these proposals during the war made them seem less plausible in the post-war than the nationalist framework.¹⁰⁴ If the Empire was already showing signs of coming apart before August 1941, after the British rejected ideas of reform along the lines proposed by figures like Saw and Azikiwe, dissolution became ever more likely.

The crisis of British power signalled by the Nazi victories in 1940 was fully in swing after 1941, as figures like Saw and then Azikiwe took advantage of weakness at the centre to promote their own agendas. The very force with which Churchill's government rejected these proposals testified to the Empire's weakness, not its strength, since only the exigency of wartime

¹⁰⁴ For similar developments in French West Africa, see Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton, 2014).

had led Churchill to put out the Charter in the first place. The empire's feet of clay would come crashing down in the years after Churchill's 'fluffy flapdoodle', and the empire's die-hards did pay dearly in the end.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Word Count: 10585 (footnotes included).