Meyer, Gerald J.
PEDRO ALBIZU CAMPOS, GILBERTO CONCEPCIÓN DE GRACIA, AND VITO MARCANTONIO’S COLLABORATION IN THE CAUSE OF PUERTO RICO’S INDEPENDENCE
Centro Journal, vol. XXIII, núm. 1, 2011, pp. 87-123
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37722223004
Vito Marcantonio (front row in dark suit) arrives in Puerto Rico for the trial of Pedro Albizu Campos and the other seven Nationalists for conspiring to overthrow the government of the United States (1 August 1936). Photographer unknown. From the collection of Gerald J. Meyer. Reprinted by permission.
PEDRO ALBIZU CAMPOS, GILBERTO CONCEPCIÓN DE GRACIA, AND VITO MARCANTONIO’S COLLABORATION IN THE CAUSE OF PUERTO RICO’S INDEPENDENCE

Gerald J. Meyer

ABSTRACT

Pedro Albizu Campos (1891–1965), the leader of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico from 1930 until his death, Gilberto Concepción de Gracia (1909–1968), the founding president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party from 1946 until his death, and Vito Marcantonio (1902–1954), seven-term American Labor Party Congressman from East Harlem from 1934 to 1950 were the three major figures in the movement for Puerto Rico’s independence. This essay shows that despite their ideological differences these leaders were able to effectively collaborate in this cause. The story of their partnership uncovers the existence of widespread support for the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence both on the Island and in the diaspora, as well as considerable interest in this issue within the North American Left. At every point in this story, the heavy hand of repression and (the oft-times successful) fight-back are present. Albizu Campos, Concepción, and Marcantonio’s collaboration also reveals their deep humanity that demands a more nuanced perception of these purportedly fierce radicals. [Key words: Pedro Albizu Campos, Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, Vito Marcantonio, Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican Independence Party, Puerto Rico, New York City]
of the Nationalist Party (PN) Pedro Albizu Campos, on the charge of conspiring to overthrow the United States government, brought together the defendant and his co-attorneys, thirty-two-year-old Vito Marcantonio, radical Congressman from East Harlem, and twenty-seven-year-old Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, a Nationalist. From that point until Marcantonio’s defeat in a contest for an eighth term in November 1950, these three men were the most influential figures in the movement for Puerto Rico’s independence. This essay will explore the under-reported (and in parts, untold) story of their collaboration in the movement to liberate Puerto Rico from its colonial status. The story of their efforts challenges assumptions passed down as dogma on the Puerto Rican independence movement; it also reveals a deep humanity and more nuanced picture of these purportedly fierce radicals.

Pedro Albizu Campos (1891–1965)

Pedro Albizu Campos, who loomed over the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party for thirty-five years, became the premier independentista puertorriqueño of the twentieth century. Although never the leader of a mass movement, Albizu’s twenty-three year incarceration in U.S. earned him the status of martyrdom among many Puerto Ricans, a vast majority of whom did not fully share his views.

Pedro Albizu was abandoned at birth by his wealthy father, who had maintained an out-of-marriage relationship with an Afro-Puerto Rican mother. Pedro’s mother died soon after his birth, and he was raised in a working-class barrio of Ponce by his aunt, who struggled to survive by taking in wash. His maternal uncle, Juan Morel Campos (1857–1896), known as the “Father of Danza,” is widely considered to be the greatest composer of that musical genre. Unable to afford school, the self-taught Pedro presented himself to a school when he was twelve (Ribes Tovar 1993: 160). His scholastic achievements prompted members of Ponce’s Masonic Lodge to pay for Pedro’s education at the University of Vermont; after one year, he transferred to Harvard. In 1916, Albizu enlisted in the U.S. Army where he was assigned to an all-African-American regiment; he was discharged in 1919 as a first lieutenant. In 1922, Pedro graduated from Harvard with degrees in chemical engineering and law (Albizu Vive/Albizu Lives 1995: 17–8).

Pedro Albizu Campos joined the Nationalist Party (PN) in 1924; three years later, he became its vice president and in 1930, its president. His insistence on militant...
action resulted in the PN’s founding leadership resigning en masse. Albizu Campos was more than the PN’s official leader; he fashioned its ideology, which was closely based on his own experience. Both his fervent Catholicism and the PN’s paramilitary modus operandi related to his involvement at Harvard in support of Sein Fein in Boston’s enormous Irish-American community. It is not surprising that nationalist movements in two predominantly Catholic colonial islands fighting vastly more powerful imperial powers would develop similar political ideologies and strategies.

In 1934, Albizu organized the Cadets of the Republic, a paramilitary wing of the PN, whose members, wearing black shirts and carrying dummy rifles, marched in military formation. Shortly after, he determined that this entity would become the Army of Liberation (Rosado 2006: 96).

Albizu conveyed teachings in slogans, the most famous being, “La Patria es valor y sacrificio,” a call to battle that, given the extreme mismatch of power between the opposing forces, meant martyrdom. Albizu did not write extensively; however, phrases from his speeches encapsulated a large vision for this small island that captured the attention of his followers and others who loved Puerto Rico.

After the PN’s poor showing in the 1932 elections, in which it garnered only 5,257 votes, Albizu categorically rejected further participation in electoral activities under conditions of “colonial rule.” Thereafter, boycotting elections became a signature feature of the Party’s program and practice. On October 29, 1950, hundreds of Nationalists took up arms in San Juan and eight other Puerto Rican cities and towns; in Washington, D.C., two armed Nationalists attacked Blair House, the interim presidential residence while the White House was undergoing renovation. This uprising resulted in twenty-seven deaths, the arrest of 1,000 Nationalists and other Leftists, and the re-incarceration of Albizu. According to historian Federico Ribes Tovar, the Nationalist Insurrection of 1950 was not so much an attempt to seize power as it was “a supreme act of protest to attract the attention of the world to the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence” (1973: 110–1; see also Seijo Bruno 1989: 242, 260–63, 268).

Under Albizu’s leadership, the PN neither attempted to influence existing mass organizations nor to create new ones from which it could recruit new members and attract larger numbers of sympathizers. The Nationalists’ insurrectionary activities promoted “propaganda of the deed,” heroic actions intended to incite mass backing for “the Cause.” Unfortunately, the actions often resulted in a steady stream of militants “falling in battle” or becoming “prisoners” of the occupying power. Lolita Lebrón, who, on March 1, 1954, had joined three other Nationalists in an armed assault in the House of Representatives, explained at her trial, “I’ve come here to die, and not to kill” (Ribes Tovar 1973: 429, 526). Much activity of the PN, to this day, revolves around commemorating its martyrs and struggling to gather support for incarcerated independentistas.

While Albizu’s political career appears to be a trail of defeats, his activities promoted national symbols and observances that kept alive independentista sentiment in Puerto Rico’s cultural and political life. In 1965, Albizu was released from his sixty-year sentence a very sick, broken man; he died four months later. Sixty thousand mourners passed by his bier to pay their respects to the Afro-Puerto Rican nationalist who many believed had given his all to la patria (Ribes Tovar 1993: 285). After a requiem mass in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, he was buried next to the massive wall surrounding Old San Juan, nearby the grave of José de Diego the pioneering Puerto Rican independentista.
Gilberto Concepción de Gracia (1909–1968)

Gilberto Concepción de Gracia joined the PN’s youth group when he was enrolled in the Escuela Superior Central in the Santurce district of San Juan. Concepción, who was raised in an independentista family, was naturally attracted to Albizu, whose charisma was evident to adherents and detractors alike. While attending the University of Puerto Rico, a dramatic event sealed his dedication to the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence. On April 16, 1932, Concepción attended an assembly at the Plaza de Armas in Viejo San Juan, celebrating of the birth of José de Diego, a poet and statesman, whose devotion to the establishment of a republic in Puerto Rico earned him the title, “Father of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement.”

In a fiery address, Albizu Campos called upon the assembled participants to march to the Capitol Building to demand the adoption of the flag unfurled during El Grito de Lares, Puerto Rico’s first insurrection for independence on September 23, 1868, instead of the one in current use, which a majority of the Legislative Assembly had proposed. When the protesters arrived at the Capitol, they began to ascend the stairs leading to the legislative chambers. Before they could reach the entrance, police began to club the militants. During the mêlée, one of the young protestors, Manuel Rafael Suárez Díaz, fell from a second-floor interior balcony and died. That evening, Albizu chose Gilberto Concepción to join a small delegation to inform the family of the boy’s tragic fate.

From fall 1939 until summer 1946, Concepción lived in the U.S., where he worked closely with Vito Marcantonio. In addition to their collaboration in the legal defense of the Nationalist prisoners, he served as a “ghost writer” for Marcantonio’s bills and speeches on Puerto Rican issues (Concepción Súarez 2006: 161). Concepción also served from 1937 to 1939 as the editor-in-chief for La Voz, a Left-oriented, Spanish-language daily that boosted Marcantonio’s standing in this community.

In 1946, the delegates at the founding convention of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) chose Concepción as its president, a position he held until shortly before his death in Santurce on March 15, 1968, at the age of fifty-eight. Under Concepción’s leadership, the Puerto Rican Independence Party made impressive electoral gains. In 1948, running for governor against Luis Muñoz Marín, the leader of the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) and Puerto Rico’s pre-eminent political leader, Concepción received 65,351 (10.2 percent) of the votes. Under conditions of intense political repression in 1952, he obtained 126,228 votes (19 percent). When running for Senator-at-large in 1956, his total was a much reduced 86,386 votes (12.3 percent). In subsequent elections, a combination of circumstances caused the PIP’s electoral totals to collapse: in 1960, the PIP vote decreased further to 24,103 votes (3 percent of the electorate), and in the 1964 elections to 22,201 votes (2.64 percent) (Ortiz Ramos 2007: 580, 582, 584, 586, 588; Ribes Tovar 1973: 547, 586). Despite the PIP’s diminished electoral standing, Puerto Rico’s perennial “third party” has maintained a palpable presence in the Island’s political life.

Vito Marcantonio (1902–1954)

Beginning in 1934, Vito Marcantonio represented East Harlem in the U.S. House of Representatives. His district in Manhattan stretched from East 96th Street to East 125th Street and from Fifth Avenue to the East River, embracing Italian Harlem and El Barrio. In this period, these neighborhoods were respectively the largest Italian-American and Puerto Rican communities in the continental U.S. (Meyer 1999a; Sánchez-Korrol 1983). In the House, Marcantonio eloquently spoke
on a wide spectrum of issues. In short order, he was acknowledged as a national spokesperson for the Left. This in turn enabled him to call upon the resources of the Left to respond to his appeals.

Marcantonio emerged as the most prominent North American champion of Puerto Rico’s independence. On May 6, 1936, Congressman Marcantonio presented the first of five bills, each intended to achieve two major goals: “Genuine independence and recognition from the United States for its responsibility for the disastrous state of the economy of Puerto Rico and the abysmal poverty of its people.” From that point on, Marcantonio used every opportunity to condemn what he saw as the repression of Puerto Ricans, citing the Declaration of Independence: “whenever any form of government becomes destructive to [the consent of the governed], it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, to institute a new government.”

Marcantonio emerged as the most prominent North American champion of Puerto Rico’s independence.

From Marcantonio’s first congressional speech on this topic, when he declared, “Puerto Rico is the most tragic victim of American imperialism” (Meyer 1989: 158), he focused on the goal of an independent Puerto Rico. Concurrently, he worked to defend Puerto Ricans from discrimination in the U.S., as well as to ensure fair treatment of Island residents. In the House, he (and not the nonvoting Resident Commissioner) represented Puerto Rico’s interests. Repeatedly, he insured that Congress equitably appropriated funds for public health, education, and so forth, for the Island. He prevented the Island’s workers from being excluded from the 1936 Wage and Hours Laws, which established federal standards for minimum wages, maximum hours, and overtime pay. Marcantonio deserves credit for the removal of arch-conservative Blanton Winship as Governor of Puerto Rico in 1939, and the recognition in 1948 of Spanish as the language of instruction in Puerto Rico’s public school system. Marcantonio won the ardent support of Puerto Ricans, regardless of their stance on the Island’s political status, because he advanced issues of general concern to Puerto Rico and its people.

Marcantonio was no less determined to obtain equal treatment for members of the Puerto Rican diaspora. As a result of a massive three-year campaign, led by Marcantonio and Leonard Covello (founding principal of East Harlem’s Benjamin Franklin High School), the East River Houses were constructed in Italian Harlem. When the housing project was completed in 1941, Marcantonio wrote to Edmundo Contento, one of his Puerto Rican aides, “I am most anxious to have the Puerto Rican people in that project.” To ensure that Puerto Ricans would be integrated into the new project, Marcantonio alerted another aide, “Make sure that all agencies distributing housing applications mark them with an ‘EH’, particularly in the Puerto Rican sections.” As a consequence of Marcantonio’s intervention, the residents of East River Houses, to a degree rarely found in other public-housing projects of the pre-war period, reflected the diversity of its community.
Differences in Politics

On purely political grounds, Albizu’s and Marcantonio’s relationship requires some exploration. Marcantonio’s politics paralleled the strategic outlook of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). In practice, this meant Marcantonio had to balance two poorly matched objectives; a domestic program of democratic reforms in the social and economic spheres feasible within the existing system; and radical opposition to U.S. foreign policy, which he viewed as inherently imperialistic. His politics, which rested on building electoral alliances and mass organizations, contrasted with the Nationalist Party’s strategy of direct action against the existing order. Vito Marcantonio’s and Pedro Albizu Campos’ alliance was held together by a dedication to independence for Puerto Rico and a large measure of personal trust, but by little else.

WHILE THE POLITICS OF ALBIZU CAMPOS DEFY CLASSIFICATION, CONCEPCIÓN EXPPOSTULATED ARGUMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE THEN-HEGEMONIC ANTI-COLONIAL AND SOCIALISTIC MOVEMENTS.

Concepción de Gracia’s political career evolved in ways that made him a politically distinct partner in this triad. The Puerto Rican Independence Party was dedicated to independence and social-democratic politics (the PIP officially enrolled in the Socialist International). While the politics of Albizu Campos defy classification, Concepción expostulated arguments associated with the then-hegemonic anti-colonial and socialistic movements. Marcantonio and Concepción’s politics were compatible. Any apparent political differences between them can readily be explained by the different political terrain in Puerto Rico and the mainland.

Arrest and Trial of Pedro Albizu Campos and Seven Comrades

In 1936, the Nationalists were charged with conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government. The government did not charge them with overt acts of sedition as there was insufficient evidence for this charge. In addition, charges of conspiracy fell within the jurisdiction of the Federal courts, whose jury pool included mainland Americans. A charge of overt acts would require a trial in Puerto Rican courts with Puerto Rican prosecutors and juries, who would presumably be less likely to convict the Nationalists on these charges. The eight Nationalist defendants were tried twice, since at the conclusion of the trial on July 14, 1936, the jury, whose panel included seven Puerto Ricans and five North Americans, could not arrive at a verdict (Kaner 1968: 49). The composition of the jury for the second trial—ten North Americans and two Puerto Ricans (both associated with U.S. corporate interests on the Island)—all but
ensured a guilty verdict. Symptomatic of the politically repressive climate in San Juan, no prominent lawyer was willing to represent Albizu and his comrades. Consequently, Concepción, who had graduated from the University of Puerto Rico with a major in Public Administration and Law only four years earlier, faced a hostile court on behalf of his comrades and his leader (Concepción Súarez 2006: 160).

On July 31, 1936, after a one-day trial, Federal Judge Robert Cooper handed down sentences of between six to ten years in prison for the eight accused Nationalists; the harshest sentence was reserved for Albizu Campos. Two other prisoners—Juan Antonio Corretjer, general secretary of the Nationalist Party and director of its newspaper La Palabra, and Clemente Soto Vélez (Meyer 1993/1994), an avant-garde poet later gained major reputations as writers. Puerto Rican poet Juan Manuel Rivera characterized the other five Nationalists—Juan Gallando Santiago, Erasmo Velázquez, Pablo Rosado Ortiz, and father and son, Luis and Julio Velázquez— as “good patriots.”

On August 1, 1936, less than three months after Marcantonio had submitted his first bill demanding Puerto Rico’s independence, he traveled to the Island for the purpose of defending Albizu Campos and his seven comrades. Reflecting the significance of the trial and interest in the radical Congressman, a 150-person welcoming committee, including Luis Muñoz Marín, man of letters and then an independentista, assembled at the airport to greet him; later that day, Marcantonio addressed a crowd of 750 from the balcony of San Juan’s City Hall. Almost certainly due to the Federal government’s complicity, the trial concluded a day before Marcantonio’s arrival in San Juan; his departure from New York City had been delayed by Pan-American Airways’ insistence that for a two-week period there were no tickets available to San Juan (Ojeda Reyes 1978: 25–6).
Pedro Albizu Campos and supporters of the independence movement throughout Puerto Rico welcomed Marcantonio’s involvement in their case. Prior to his trip to San Juan, Marcantonio had already contributed to this cause. The *New York Times* reported the Congressman stated he would go to the Island “to study the conditions affecting the sugar-field and needle workers...with a view to introducing...a bill for Puerto Rican independence.” Moreover, he was quoted as saying “...although I believe ... the overwhelming sentiment among Puerto Ricans [is] for independence [I wish to see for myself] just what the real sentiment is.”

These remarks epitomize Marcantonio’s views on and approach to Puerto Rico: his belief in independence as the long-term solution to the Island’s problems and his commitment to act within the existing political framework.

Marcantonio’s association with the Nationalists predated his trip to Puerto Rico. A letter dated February 25, 1936, from Leopoldo López, his aide in El Barrio, informed him, “A meeting sponsored by the Nationalists in Lexington Hall is being held to protest the deaths of two [young Nationalists] who were assassinated in San Juan at the hand of the Island police. I met with José Santiago [the leader of the CPUSA in El Barrio] at the Home Relief Bureau this afternoon and he informed me that the Nationalists were thinking of inviting you to it.”

The encounter between López and Santiago is illustrative of the significant involvement of the CPUSA in the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence (Espada and Pérez Bustillo 1991: 8). Harry Hefner, a Communist organizer who accompanied Marcantonio as his “personal secretary” during the Congressman’s two-week stay in Puerto Rico, had arrived in San Juan one month in advance of Marcantonio. During that time, Hefner mobilized the support of unions and Progressive organizations for the Congressman’s visit. Earlier, in 1934, at the behest of the CPUSA, Hefner had traveled to Puerto Rico. While there, he observed the great strikes of the sugarcane workers and attended the founding conference in Ponce of the Communist Party of Puerto Rico (PC de PR) (Ojeda Reyes 1978: 23–4).

The cooperative efforts of the CPUSA and the Nationalist Party in the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence and the defense of ever-increasing numbers of Nationalist prisoners became a persistent, albeit largely unacknowledged, pattern throughout this period.

Concepción welcomed Marcantonio’s offer to join the appeal to overturn the Nationalists’ conviction. On August 3, Marcantonio submitted a writ to the court arguing that the lower court’s verdict was contrary to the law. He argued further that the evidence did not sustain a guilty verdict and that three of the jurors had been prejudiced against the defendants. Marcantonio declared that a fellow employee of the jurors who worked for National City Bank was prepared to testify that prior to the completion of the trial they had expressed their belief in Albizu’s guilt and had characterized him as an “assassin and the leader of assassins.” Judge Cooper summarily dismissed this opening gambit of what was to become a protracted battle.

To his colleagues, Marcantonio expressed his appreciation of Albizu’s “honesty and serenity” in the face of what many Puerto Ricans and some Progressive North Americans were coming to believe to be a juridical lynching. In Marcantonio’s statement to the *New York Times*, he described the Nationalist leader as “reacting to [his conviction] with the composure of a soldier.” Indicative of sentiment on the Island, the Times reported that the prisoners were applauded by passers-by when they were being transferred from the court to the prison.

On August 11, accompanied by Concepción, Marcantonio left San Juan for New York City (Ojeda Reyes 1978: 29). They returned to a tumultuous welcome in El Barrio.
On August 30, the Times reported, “Spurred by Vito Marcantonio, who recently returned from a two-week visit to the island, [ten thousand Puerto Ricans] paraders shouted ‘Free Puerto Rico’ and ‘Down with Yankee Imperialism.’” Marcantonio and Concepción had become major leaders of a profoundly politicized community, whose activities were organized by a score of political and fraternal organizations.

The two men were never again to be long parted. Aside from other considerations, Marcantonio’s function as co-attorney on the appeal of the Nationalists’ convictions resolved a daunting practical problem for the defense, one that underscored the travail of Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Boston was the venue for the appeal, since Puerto Rico had been included in that Federal Court of Appeals circuit. In October 1936, the Court denied Concepción and Marcantonio’s request for bail for the convicted eight; on February 12, 1937, the Court upheld their sentences. In San Juan, Federal agents began transferring the Nationalists from the municipal jail to Atlanta Federal Prison, whose staff and inmates spoke only English, and whose physical distance and prohibition of the use of Spanish, even in letters from immediate family, effectively severed contact with families and colleagues (Ribes Tovar 1975: 204–7, 288–9; Ojeda Reyes 1978: 31–2). At the end of 1937, Marcantonio’s and Concepción’s subsequent appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was denied (Ribes Tovar 1975: 295).

During his stay in Puerto Rico, Marcantonio sought assistance with his work on behalf of the Nationalists from Ernest Gruening, head of the Puerto Rican Reconstruction Administration, whose work had earned him the reputation as a Progressive. Five days after their meeting, Marcantonio received a memorandum, marked “personal and confidential,” with this unanticipated declaration: “After reading the judicial papers, I have concluded that the trial was valid and sentence just and deserved.... Therefore, I do not agree with your sentiment that this is related to
another ‘Scottsboro case.’ On the contrary, additional investigations have convinced me that the sentence was very lenient.... My understanding of this case causes me to feel sad about your involvement in it. It seems to me that they have taken advantage of your generosity.”

It is worth noting that on the same day that Gruening met with Marcantonio, he told a New York Times reporter that from the Roosevelt administration’s point of view the upcoming election, which the pro-independence Liberal Party had announced as “a plebiscite on Puerto Rico’s independence,” would “not influence the administration’s course on the Island’s future status.”

Marcantonio’s and Concepción’s collaboration extended beyond their defense of the eight Nationalist prisoners. On March 21, 1937 (Palm Sunday), a throng gathered on a corner two blocks from the La Plaza de las Delicias in the center of Ponce with the intention of staging a march to commemorate the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico on 1873 (an event officially celebrated on the following day, March 22), and to demand the release from prison of Albizu Campos the other Nationalists. A police fusillade aimed at Nationalists and their sympathizers resulted in nineteen deaths, including a seven-year-old girl and a woman, and as many as two hundred wounded. Henceforth, this carnage has been known as the Ponce Massacre.

The day after, Marcantonio and Concepción issued a joint statement expressing their outrage at what they considered “part of the campaign to suppress civil liberties in Puerto Rico.” A few days later in El Barrio, Marcantonio and Concepción spoke at a huge assembly soon followed by an even larger outdoor rally, called by a wide array or organizations, to protest this atrocity (Meyer 1989: 155).

Placing responsibility for the massacre directly on Governor Blanton Winship, Marcantonio and Concepción characterized this event as “an act of terrorism...that is most shocking to every liberal-minded and progressive person in America.”

Placing responsibility for the massacre directly on Governor Blanton Winship, Marcantonio and Concepción characterized this event as “an act of terrorism...that is most shocking to every liberal-minded and progressive person in America” (Ribes Tovar 1975: 15). Using every source of power at his disposal, Marcantonio pushed for the removal of Winship. Writing in the May 1939 issue of Equal Rights,
In the Defense of the Puerto Rican Nationalists

Before returning to New York City, Marcantonio expressed his determination to make the convictions of Albizu and the other Nationalists for conspiracy nationally known and to enlist large numbers of North Americans in a campaign for their acquittal. The Congressman’s ability to fulfill this pledge increased when, in June 1937, he was elected president of the International Labor Defense. The CPUSA had founded the ILD in 1925, as the American branch of International Red Aid, which the Comintern launched in 1922 to provide material and moral aid to “labor martyrs,” that is, the victims of the on-going “class war.” On behalf of Leftists who had been imprisoned for their activities, the ILD projected a two-front defense strategy: providing first-class legal assistance and mobilizing mass movements. The ILD achieved an unrivaled record of successes in fulfilling its mission; the most important of these was the vast international campaign that saved the Scottsboro Boys, nine African-American youths who faced death penalties for the purported rape of two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931. In a full-page article published in Equal Rights, Marcantonio detailed the Nationalists’ legal treatment as “no more a trial by jury, than if the defendants had been tried by a lynching meeting in some town in Georgia or South Carolina.” Marcantonio’s article emphasized a neglected area of criticism for the conduct of the Nationalists’ trials—the atmosphere of militaristic intimidation enveloping the judicial proceedings. He wrote, “The building [where the trial had taken place] was filled with police forces and detectives and officers of the court and their friends…. The police surrounded the Federal building with machine guns, rifles, and tear gas bombs…. More than forty sub-marshals… armed to the teeth, escorted the prisoners.”

Despite Marcantonio’s efforts, the campaign to win amnesty for the Nationalist prisoners failed in its primary goal and attained only a moderate degree of political success. One notable intervention on their behalf was a petition, signed by 100 prominent Americans, which urged President Roosevelt to grant clemency. Signatories included authors Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Langston Hughes, and Theodore Dreiser, as well as anthropologist Ruth
Benedict, labor leader Joseph Curran, and African-American political leader Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The petition explained that the signatories sought clemency because the Nationalist prisoners “declined to apply for pardons or commutations in the usual route on the grounds that they were convicted for their political beliefs and activities, [therefore] it would compromise their principles to ask the U.S. government to grant them clemency.... It is because of this attitude that we, as Americans interested in the issues involved, urge upon you clemency in their behalf.” (This circumlocution muted the Nationalists’ strident refusal to engage with the juridical and political apparatus of what they regarded as an occupying power.) After alluding to the dubious legality of the juridical process that had convicted the Nationalists, the petition further noted: “In a majority of countries, imprisonment is considered sufficient punishment for political prisoners.... Don Pedro Albizu Campos and his co-nationals not only have been imprisoned, but in addition they have had to suffer exile.... One significant fact is that a majority of the international congresses in Latin America—such as: the Peace Conference, in Buenos Aires (1936); The Pan-American Congress of the Press, in Santiago, Chile (1937); the World Youth Congress at Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York (1939); and two important congresses held in Mexico City—have unanimously declared their support for freeing the Puerto Rican prisoners.”

47 Manifestations of Latin American solidarity with the Puerto Rican Nationalist prisoners were linked, at times, with expressions of appreciation for Marcantonio. Mauricio Magdeleno, a Mexican writer, wrote: “The Mexican Committee for the Liberation of Pedro Albizu Campos and His Comrades and for the Independence of Puerto Rico has the honor to direct this message to the one who, at the moment, represents the most noble and pure ideal of an authentically democratic North America...through his efforts in favor the Puerto Rican cause. We salute him as an individual with the most elevated values..... Neither Mexicans nor North Americans can overlook the nobility and transcendence of his labors for the human revindication of Puerto Rico.... Great voices are joining him throughout the continent to demand that the tragedy of Puerto Rico be rectified.”

48 On August 5, 1939, in Marcantonio’s extraordinary report to Congress on the miserable state of civil liberties in Puerto Rico, he made one of his most forceful pleas on behalf of Albizu: “The frame-up [of Albizu Campos and the other Nationalists] is one of the blackest pages in the history of American jurisprudence. The continuation of this incarceration is repugnant to our democratic form of government [and] our Bill of Rights.... Only a complete and immediate unconditional pardon will...right this historical wrong.”49 Despite Marcantonio’s growing influence in the House and his prominence in the American Labor Party, an entity critical for Roosevelt’s chances of winning New York State in the 1940 presidential elections, Roosevelt did not offer a presidential pardon.

Marcantonio’s best efforts to free Albizu Campos and his comrades never transformed their case into the cause célèbre he had once anticipated. Nonetheless, his effective use of his podium in the House, the resources of the ILD, and other Left organizations such as the National Lawyers Guild, helped enable the Nationalists to persist in their struggle for independence while its leadership was incarcerated.50

Marcantonio’s Humanitarian Efforts on Behalf of Albizu and His Comrades
In his duel capacity as the President of the International Labor Defense and as the Nationalists’ attorney, Marcantonio traveled six times to Atlanta to visit Albizu and his comrades. Corretjer recalled that prison rules restricted visitors to “spouses, parents,
siblings, and their lawyers. Letters, which had to be written in English, were limited to once per week" (Corretjer 1950: 170). The Nationalists’ family members lived in Puerto Rico and (except for Albizu’s wife, Laura Meneses de Albizu) their English was limited; consequently, Marcantonio’s visits and written communications were enormously meaningful to the prisoners in purely human terms. Marcantonio’s visits bolstered the spirits of the exiled prisoners and reassured their supporters.

In the same vein, on the 15th of every month, the ILD sent small relief checks to “labor’s prisoners and their families.” During Christmas time, the ILD took advantage of the prison system’s relaxation of its tight restriction on the prisoners’ mailing privileges, by encouraging supporters to send greeting cards to the prisoners.55 In 1943, Marcantonio sent the warden postcard May Day greetings solicited by the ILD for the Nationalist prisoners. He explained, “In previous years, some prisons have returned them [thereby] preventing the prisoners from receiving them. It seems to me that this is an excessively severe interpretation of the rules regarding the prisoners.” Unable to succeed in court or to move the masses, these acts of concern should not be underestimated. In their correspondence with Marcantonio, the Nationalist prisoners frequently expressed their gratitude for these small gifts, which, in addition to meeting some of their physical needs, demonstrated that they were not forgotten.52 Marcantonio regularly interceded with prison authorities to protect the narrow range of rights the prisoners had within the limits of the U.S. Federal prison system. He raised many objections on the men’s behalf. For example, he protested the refusal of the prison authorities to deliver Laura Meneses de Albizu Campos’ letters to her husband on the grounds that they contained political references.53
Despite Laura’s urgent concerns about the deterioration of Albizu’s health, James Bennett, the warden of Atlanta Federal Prison, refused to allow a private doctor to examine Albizu. Finally, however, Marcantonio managed to persuade Bennett to accept medication from outside the prison for Albizu.54

Much of Marcantonio’s humanitarian efforts focused on Julio Velázquez, the son of Luis, who had been arrested while he was still in high school. His mother, Julia, sent Marcantonio a series of letters pleading for his intervention to convince Bennett to permit a private doctor to examine her son. She wrote, “For the prison’s doctors, Julio has a psychological sickness, and I am sure that he does not.” She was also fearful of the prison authorities’ plans to transfer Julio (along with Soto Vélez and Corretjer) to another prison, where he would be separated from his father. Julia informed Marcantonio, “The Association of Teachers [of which she was a member] has communicated these concerns to the President.” Marcantonio reassured her, “I am expecting to see the President [Roosevelt] very soon. When this happens, I will bring up the matter of your son and I will communicate with you.”55 In March 1941, Marcantonio received a letter from Bennett informing him, “Julio is getting better. His health does not need special attention. His blood pressure is a little low for someone of his age…. He is not happy and suffers—as do the majority of the prisoners—and has an inclination to magnify his disagreeable sensations and some symptoms and experiences much more that he would under more normal circumstances. I am very interested, in a personal sense, in Julio’s progress.” Later, Julio’s mother informed Marcantonio that her son had been transferred to the “educational department.”56

When Marcantonio was informed that Julio was to be paroled on July 31, 1941, Marcantonio wrote Julio, “I am unable to do anything [further to have the prison authorities accede to your requests] except to protest in Congress, I think that what has happened is an atrocity. I am preparing a letter for the Attorney General, and I will insert a copy of it in the Congressional Record. You can be assured that I will continue to bring this struggle to the people. I have no other place to appeal for justice.” Julio responded, “Before anything else, I want to express my great appreciation for what you and the ILD have done and continue to do for me. In the institution that I am presently in I miss the presence of my father…. But that does not bother me.” Julio assured Marcantonio, “I have sufficient strength to endure this and anything else that destiny has in store for me.” Marcantonio sent a lawyer, residing in Atlanta, a memorandum insisting, “It is necessary that you are present when he is freed to defend his rights in this matter.” (Other Nationalists, including Albizu, refused to cooperate with the authorities of the Federal government, from the prison and other agencies, whom they deigned illegitimate. Marcantonio was referring to Julio’s objection to signing any papers stipulating the conditions of his parole. Before this could occur, the prison authorities transferred Julio to another prison in Chillicalte, Ohio, because he refused to appear for his parole hearing.)57

The Nationalist prisoners’ imprisonment and exile dramatically affected their families. Julia Velázquez’s letters reported, “I have become very sick and my sister-in-law has had to be placed in an insane asylum because she can’t stop crying about her brother. Luis’s mother is very old and you can’t imagine how horrible it is to have to constantly hear her say that she will soon die and will not have seen her son. I am continuing with my plans to go to the United States. For me, everything has been destroyed. Much time has passed since my last visit to my husband. [The prisoners] are feeling that they have been forgotten by everyone. Would it be possible to have someone in Atlanta who would visit them at least once a month?” Marcantonio
responded, “I assure you I will do everything that I can in my power to free them. Don’t doubt that a part of my work will be to look after the well being of your son.”

In addition to ensuring that someone would be there to greet them, when one-by-one, the Nationalist prisoners were about to be released, Marcantonio (through the ILD and other contacts) provided a wide range of substantive support. Shortly before Luis Velázquez’s release, he wrote an aide, “Could you do something with the unions to find him some clerical work?” Marcantonio also helped present Soto Vélez’s re-incarceration when, after his release, he refused to sign up for the draft.

A 1944 FBI MEMORANDUM INDICATED THAT ALBIZU CAMPOS HAD BEEN “WARNED BY ONE MOTHER SUPERIOR BARTHOLOMEW THAT HIS WIRES WERE TAPPED.... VITO MARCANTONIO [WAS INFORMED OF THIS AND AT ONCE CAME TO THE HOSPITAL AND] RIPPED OUT THE MICROPHONE AND THREATENED TO PRODUCE IT ON THE FLOOR OF THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.”

After Albizu Campos served the minimum six years of his ten-year sentence, on July 3, 1943, Atlanta Federal Prison authorities released him on probation. Albizu was forbidden from returning to Puerto Rico under his parole terms. Albizu’s health had been gravely compromised during his incarceration. Marcantonio gained Albizu’s admission to New York’s Columbus Hospital, which was located in Manhattan on East 19th Street; he remained hospitalized there for two years. Marcantonio frequently visited Albizu at Columbus Hospital. A 1944 FBI memorandum indicated that Albizu Campos had been “warned by one Mother Superior Bartholomew that his wires were tapped.... Vito Marcantonio [was informed of this and at once came to the hospital and] ripped out the microphone and threatened to produce it on the floor of the United States House of Representatives.” The FBI report failed to
note that before disabling the device, he spewed into it a long string of obscenities.
After his discharge from Columbus Hospital until he returned to Puerto Rico at the
end of his parole on November 9, 1945, Albizu lived in an apartment at East 112th
Street and Lexington Avenue, in East Harlem (Workers of the Federal Writers’

The Movement for Independence and World War II
Strategic and tactical shifts in the world Communist movement in the mid-
1930s affected the strength and nature of support for the Puerto Rican cause.
Though not himself a Communist, Marcantonio (like so many popular leaders
and intellectuals of the period) was drawn into the world of the wider Left,
within which the CPUSA had the greatest influence. In 1935, the Comintern
(the Communist International) instituted the Popular Front against fascism;
its General Secretary Georgi Dimitrov called upon Communists and their allies
to put aside the movement’s revolutionary goals and to join with Progressives
to defend democracy against fascism. In 1937, Marcantonio himself justified the
new strategy by pointing out, “The reactionaries are banding together. We must
too” (Meyer 1989: 53–9). By moving millions of Socialists and radical republicans
to the Left, the Popular Front created a political ambiance favorable to anti-
colonial movements and sympathy for political prisoners. During this period,
independence sentiment increased among Puerto Ricans on the Island and
perhaps to an even larger degree in the diaspora.

The failure of the Western democracies to sell arms to the legally elected Spanish
Republic, then threatened by a Falangist-led rebellion (Graham 2005), and their
unwillingness to coalesce with the Soviet Union against the expansion of Nazi
Germany caused Joseph Stalin, on August 24, 1939, to endorse the German-Soviet
Non-Aggression Pact. The CPUSA now insisted that the impending war represented a
mortal contest between competing imperialisms (as had been true in World War I). Marcantonio, who became a national spokesperson for this position, encapsulated this
new strategy with the slogan, “The American workers want overalls not uniforms.”

While the twenty-two-month period of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression
Pact caused much consternation in (and a significant number of defections from)
the Communist ranks, this policy also found supporters. During this period,
the Comintern depicted Western democracies, which it called the Wall Street-
Downing Street Axis, and the Anti-Comintern powers as equal menaces to
humanity (Ryan 1997: 159–69). The most immediate enemy of the Puerto Rican
Independence movement, after all, was not Nazi Germany.

The convergence in the priorities of the CPUSA and Nationalist Party facilitated
the decisions of Soto Vélez and Corretjer to join the CPUSA. Once a member,
Corretjer became editor for Los Pueblos Hispanos, a weekly closely connected with
the CPUSA, and served as The Daily Worker’s correspondent for Puerto Rico.
Soto Vélez worked as contributing editor for Los Pueblos Hispanos, and also wrote
for its successor Liberación. Soto Vélez organized American Labor Party (ALP)
clubs for Puerto Ricans; in El Barrio, the ALP club was named for Eugenio María
de Hostos, the Puerto Rican man of letters and fervent independentista. The ALP
was enormously popular with New York City’s Puerto Ricans; El Barrio was the only
community in New York City where it became the leading party. Corretjer resigned
from the CPUSA in 1945; Soto Vélez remained in the CPUSA until sometime in the
Despite these defections from the PN to the CPUSA, relations between the two organizations remained cordial. In New York City, the Puerto Rican community met the release of Pedro Albizu Campos from the Atlanta Federal Prison in 1943 with great satisfaction. On June 25, the Communist Party organized a mass meeting “celebrating the liberation of Albizu Campos,” whose featured speakers were Marcantonio, Corretjer, and Benjamin Davis, Jr., who was twice elected to the City Council from Manhattan while running on the Communist Party ticket.

The invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany and its allies, on June 22, 1941, caused another sudden turn in the politics of the world Communist movement that threatened the close relationship between the Nationalist Party and the Communist-led Left. For Communists and their allies, the possible defeat of the one country where socialism had triumphed represented an unthinkable catastrophe. Marcantonio justified this shift by explaining, “An unconquered Soviet Union constitutes a most important defense of the United States from the physical and ideological conquest of the United States on the part of the Nazis.” He noted in the same speech that this fight could best be won by “emancipation from all sorts of imperialism…. I refer specifically to Puerto Rico.”

Marcantonio’s prognostication was correct; the post-World War II settlement led directly into worldwide anti-colonial struggles, which were successful everywhere, except Puerto Rico.

Marcantonio characterized World War II as an “international civil war” that would culminate in an historic victory for the Left. From his perspective, the defeat of the Axis would inevitably benefit the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence and result in clemency for the Nationalist prisoners. In 1944, he affirmed: “The people, who have everywhere fought against Fascism, are now determined that no Fascist relic…shall remain. Colonialism is Fascism…. [They demand] the extirpation of the colonial system throughout the world...not only in the territories formerly controlled
by the Nazis, but likewise in the territories controlled by the democracies. 

[This movement] is connected to the destiny of Puerto Rico. The question of Puerto Rico’s independence has arrived at its historical moment. [No one can] postpone that which the march of events has made inevitable and its fruition immediate.”

Marcantonio’s interpretation of the nature of the war and its aftermath manifested itself in the tactical shift he proposed in the unending struggle to free the Nationalist prisoners and advance the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence. When Roger Baldwin, the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, asked Marcantonio about the possibility of enlisting Luis Muñoz Marín in a renewed campaign on behalf of the Nationalist prisoners, Marcantonio responded positively. He expressed his belief that Muñoz Marín could be convinced to join in this effort because its success would convert the Nationalists into “valuable collaborators in the struggle against reaction in Puerto Rico.” In a subsequent letter, he reiterated his belief that freeing Albizu and the other prisoners would contribute greatly to winning over the people of Latin America to the Allies’ cause.

WHILE EXPRESSING A PROFOUND APPRECIATION OF ALBIZU’S SACRIFICES FOR THE STRUGGLE FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF PUERTO RICO, CONCEPCIÓN DE GRACIA CATEGORICALLY CONDEMNED VIOLENCE AND EMPHASIZED THAT THE PUERTO RICAN INDEPENDENCE PARTY ACCEPTED THE DECISION OF THE ELECTIONS.

Events in Puerto Rico appeared to justify Marcantonio’s assertion that the war against fascism would benefit the independence cause. The First Congress for Puerto Rican Independence, which opened on August 15, 1943, in San Juan, coalesced almost all the streams of pro-independence sentiment (except the much-weakened Puerto Rican Nationalist Party) into one force. Even Muñoz Marín, founder of the Partido Popular Democratico (PPD), sent greetings that described “the ideals” (presumably of the conference) as “undeniably those of the majority of the Puerto Rican people” (Ortiz Ramos 2007: 576). Gilberto Concepción de Gracia could not be present at this historic assembly; however, in recognition of his status in the broader movement, he was named its legal counsel (Ortiz Ramos 2007: 576).
In 1944, at the Second Congress for Puerto Rican Independence, also held in San Juan, Concepción argued, “The alternative is clear: either we struggle for independence or we continue living the life of a colony. An intermediate formula, such as the Commonwealth, is a colonial formula. Independence is necessary for us in order to live, organize our economy, defend our culture, and complete our destiny in America” (Alsina Orozco 2010). While expressing a profound appreciation of Albizu’s sacrifices for the struggle for the independence of Puerto Rico, Concepción de Gracia categorically condemned violence and emphasized that the Puerto Rican Independence Party accepted the decision of the elections (Concepción de Gracia 2007: 450–1).

Marcantonio sent a three-page statement of solidarity for the Second Congress. In addition to its unusually fiery rhetoric, his message included a thoroughly Marxist-Leninist formulation of Puerto Rico’s right to independence. He enumerated the “cardinal principles” underlying the demand for independence. He affirmed that Puerto Ricans “have the indefeasible right to self-determination because they had occupied the same geographic area for centuries, experienced identical economic and social conditions, and [have become] united by several centuries of history and tradition. They have developed into a nation of people.”

The Nationalists’ Conditional Response to Marcantonio on the Character of World War II
Julio Santiago, the acting president of the Nationalist Party, communicated to Marcantonio a resolution passed, on December 14, 1941, by the leadership of the PN, explaining its stance on the war. While declaring the Party’s allegiance to the “Democratic Nations,” the resolution noted an insistence on its “right to struggle in defense of the Puerto Rican flag.” How, the leadership asked, could “enslaved mercenaries be real defenders of Liberty?” Santiago then went on to inform Marcantonio that two Nationalists had been sentenced to three years in prison for refusing to perform military service in the U.S Army and that the majority of the members of the PN’s “junta” had received summons to appear before a grand jury. This letter starkly revealed the contradictions between the Nationalists’ stated desire to join the forces arrayed against the Axis Powers and their commitment to struggle for independence from the leading force in the Allies, that is, the United States of America. While the language of Santiago’s letter was circumspect, its central point was clear: The Nationalists would continue to evade military service until Puerto Rico’s independence was achieved. Santiago continued, “If the U.S. wants the Puerto Ricans to fight shoulder to shoulder with the other free Americans for Liberty and Democracy, it should, before anything else, unconditionally free our political prisoners.” Marcantonio’s response recapitulated his position that an Axis victory could only mean the loss of the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence. Consequently he proposed that “the colonialized peoples translate their struggle for independence into a struggle for the immediate defeat of the Axis Powers.”

Marcantonio’s articulation of a new political strategy did not abandon the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence to the anti-Fascist struggle. In 1943, he submitted a new bill to Congress demanding independence; he attempted to attract additional support for this cause by situating the question of independence within the context of the United States’ on-going effort to enlist the peoples of Latin America in the war against the Nazis. Marcantonio proposed that the recognition of independence for Puerto Rico would substantiate the U.S. declaration of desiring improved relations with 100,000,000 Latin Americans (Ojeda Reyes 1978: 97, 103).
In 1944, Marcantonio sent a letter to Albizu inquiring about a radio broadcast by the notorious, news commentator, Walter Winchell, who reported that “the Nationalist Party intends to picket the White House.” “To be clear,” Marcantonio wrote, “this decision seems to me to be an error of historical perspective. In deference to my personal request, [I implore you] to postpone this activity until I can meet with you.” Albizu’s response was summarized in a memorandum, dated September 18: “The Nationalist Party will not picket anyone. Certain North Americans have tried to interest us in the matter. I have seen and told them that I could answer neither in the affirmative nor the negative. My friend, Señor Marcantonio ought to know that the Nationalist Party never petitions nor pickets, as these are things we do not do.” In short, these tactics were not congruent with the direct-action modus operandi of the PN. Marcantonio’s strong reaction to the rumored plans of the Nationalists’ picketing the White House in 1944 was aroused by the fear of the Left that the gravely ill Roosevelt would lose his election for an unprecedented fourth term. At stake, the Progressives, like Marcantonio, believed were the accomplishments of the New Deal and a post-World War II settlement based on cooperation with the Soviet Union.

This exchange between Marcantonio and Albizu is the only documented instance where the Congressman tried to use his credibility with Albizu and the Nationalists to influence their political behavior or decisions. Even when, on November 1, 1950 (two days before the election in which Marcantonio was finally defeated), two Nationalists attacked Blair House in the attempt to assassinate Harry S. Truman, Marcantonio neither criticized nor disassociated himself from the Nationalists.

For its part, the Nationalist Party bent its abstentionist policy to find ways to advance Marcantonio’s electoral chances. In 1936, Pedro Pacheco, a Nationalist leader, issued a statement with the heading “An Urgent Request,” calling for “one vote from all the Puerto Ricans for only one candidate, at this moment, because it is a Puerto Rican necessity. I ask for political help for Vito Marcantonio.”

In September 1938, under the headline, “The Campaign for Marcantonio Has Already Begun in Harlem,” La Voz, a Left-wing daily, directed by Concepción de Gracia, reported, “Before a gathering of more than two thousand persons, the Puerto Rican [Nationalist Party] Junta of New York celebrated its first mass meeting for the candidacy of Vito Marcantonio.” In September 1943, at a public meeting in El Barrio at which Marcantonio headed the speaker’s list (it also included Earl Browder and Juan Antonio Correjier), the PN’s Junta Puertorriqueña celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of El Grito de Lares, that is, the first proclamation of the aborted attempt to establish a republic. Ruth Reynolds, a North American who dedicated herself to the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence, recalled that some time in 1945, the Nationalist Party held a special dinner in honor of Marcantonio, which without mentioning the elections, honored Marcantonio. She further noted, “Albizu Campos and the Nationalists did not believe in participating in the elections here or Puerto Rico, [nonetheless] they did everything they could do to make sure that it be known that Marcantonio was a friend of the Puerto Rican people.”

Marcantonio, Albizu Campos, and Concepción de Gracia: The Post-War Period
In the post-World War II period, Marcantonio used his exceptional oratorical and rhetorical talents to fight in the House of Representatives against the process to codify Puerto Rico’s colonial status. In addition to his extended remarks on emerging topics related to Puerto Rico, he gained the unanimous consent of the
Marcantonio’s advocacy for independence had brought him into a no-holds-barred fight with Luis Muñoz Marín, his erstwhile comrade-in-arms in the struggle for Puerto Rico’s independence. He subsequently became the chief architect of the Island’s status as an entity governed by the laws of the U.S., whose residents were ineligible to vote in Federal elections. In Puerto Rico, Concepción carried out the fight against the “Free Associated State” or the “Commonwealth” (as it was more commonly called), tagging them, “la farsa del Estado Libre Asociado” and “la colonia perfumada.”

On the floor of the House, Marcantonio vigorously opposed this project. During the debate on adopting this remedy for the Island’s colonial status, Marcantonio tagged Muñoz Marín as “The Nero of La Forteleza” (that is, the Governor’s mansion in Old San Juan). On July 3, 1950, Marcantonio cast the sole opposing ballot to the bill leading to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

DURING THE DEBATE ON ADOPTING THIS REMEDY FOR THE ISLAND’S COLONIAL STATUS, MARCANTONIO TAGGED MUÑOZ MARÍN AS “THE NERO OF LA FORTELEZA” (THAT IS, THE GOVERNOR’S MANSION IN OLD SAN JUAN).

Reynolds recalled having delivered messages, on three or four occasions, from Albizu to Marcantonio. In 1949, Reynolds drafted a memorandum dictated by Albizu, which expressed his belief that the U.S. government intended to liquidate the Nationalist Party. Security considerations also accounted for Marcantonio and Albizu using couriers to communicate. When Albizu wanted Marcantonio to denounce this policy, Marcantonio sent his most important Puerto Rican lieutenant, Manuel Medina, to Puerto Rico to confer with Albizu. Marcantonio complied with this request. In June 19, 1948, while addressing a wide range of economic and political topics relating to Puerto Rico in a speech on the floor of the House, Marcantonio reminded his colleagues, “[Pedro Albizu Campos] has spent eleven years in exile and imprisonment. He has been Puerto Rico’s No. 1 victim of Wall Street imperialism.”

Vito Marcantonio ran for mayor of New York City in 1949 as the candidate for the American Labor Party, in a field of three candidates, against the incumbent
Democrat William O'Dwyer and Newbold Morris, who ran on Republican and Liberal party lines. Remarkably, during this local race, issues of national—even international—importance relating to Puerto Rico were fought over in the daily press and radio, as well as at street-corner rallies and door-to-door canvassing.

Luis Muñoz Marín used his enormous prestige and the resources of the government of Puerto Rico to help defeat Marcantonio. In a carefully crafted letter mailed to 25,000 Puerto Ricans, Muñoz Marín urged Puerto Ricans to support O'Dwyer’s candidacy thereby defeating his former comrade in the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence. Given Marcantonio’s exemplary record of support for and O'Dwyer’s indifference to Puerto Ricans, Muñoz Marín could argue neither on the basis of the candidates’ qualifications nor their policy proposals. So, in an unusually convoluted manner, he joined in the McCarthyite political culture, which promoted guilt by association. Muñoz Marín warned the Puerto Rican people that their association with Marcantonio, who the general public connected with the Communist Party, had brought down upon them discrimination and defamation. Only by joining into the election campaign against Marcantonio could they hope to remove “the red tinge [that has] created such harmful hostility against the whole group... [resulting from a] false identification of the whole Puerto Rican people with Marcantonio’s political ideology” (Meléndez 2010). Marcantonio responded to Muñoz Marín’s attack by accusing him of “double-crossing the Puerto Ricans, and [that his] administration [was] filled with graft and corruption.” Marcantonio summed up Muñoz Marín’s letter as a maneuver that under the “pretenses of friendship for the Puerto Ricans...uses my friendship for the Puerto Ricans against me” (Meléndez 2010: 221).

On October 26 at New York City’s La Guardia Airport, Marcantonio greeted Concepción de Gracia, who had come to New York City to campaign for Marcantonio. His arrival was duly noted in a front-page article in the New York Times, whose headline blared, “Muñoz Marín’s Foe Comes to Steer Puerto Ricans; Vote to Marcantonio,” and in a photograph published in Life (magazine). At a press conference held at the airport, Concepción characterized Marcantonio as, “The best friend Puerto Rico ever had in this country.” He explained that he had been moved to come to New York to campaign for Marcantonio by the actions of Muñoz Marín, who he charged with “throwing the whole machinery of the Puerto Rican government to the support of O'Dwyer.” Concepción said that until Election Day, “I will make speeches, I will write articles, go to meetings, see my friends. I will do everything in my power to help the Puerto Rican people to vote for Marcantonio.” The evening of his arrival, Concepción accompanied Marcantonio on a speaking tour of Manhattan and the Bronx. During his speeches, the radical Congressman asked the assembled crowds, “What has [O'Dwyer] done [for you]? What have your various city departments and city agencies done to protect them?”

Marcantonio spoke the final words on the subject. In a speech, delivered first in Italian and then in Spanish, and broadcast over the radio, Marcantonio reminded his listeners: “The Puerto Ricans are subjected to all sorts of discrimination, the last to be hired and the first to be fired.” At a rally in City Center, Marcantonio attacked O'Dwyer “for suddenly discovering the plight of the Puerto Ricans.... There is a concerted attempt to get at Marcantonio by hitting at those of Puerto Rican descent. There is a sudden and shameful activity on the part of O'Dwyer...that is too concerted and too near election time to avoid the deepest suspicion.... Dirty politics is being played with the Puerto Ricans as the scapegoats.” Once the polls closed, it became evident that Muñoz Marín’s best efforts had failed. Marcantonio’s 9,358 votes in El Barrio exceeded his opponents’ combined total of 8,893.
Oscar Collazo and Vito Marcantonio

Nothing better illustrates the profundity of Marcantonio’s convictions and the strength of his character than his work to prevent the execution of Oscar Collazo. On October 29, 1950, fearing that the enactment of a bill by the Congress codifying Puerto Rico’s status as a Free Associated State would indefinitely curtail independence, Albizu Campos set into motion a full-scale insurrection on the Island, with outbreaks in Puerto Rico’s four major cities (San Juan, Ponce, Mayagüez, and Arecibo) and five towns located along the Cordillera Central, a mountainous range which proved to be more propitious sites for rebellions. Two days later in Washington, D.C., on November 1, 1950, with his comrade Griselio Torresola, Collazo carried out the armed attack on Blair House, temporary residence of President Truman, whom Collazo called “a symbol of the system.” Handgun fire from both assailants and the police resulted in the mortal wounding of one Secret Service guard, the wounding of two other agents, Torresola’s instant death at the scene, and the wounding of Collazo. Torresola, an accomplished marksman, fired all the shots (except one) that caused death or injury; Collazo, who had never before fired a pistol, could plausibly claim his intentions were to further a cause and not to assassinate the President. He later explained, “[We hoped] our action would revive the struggle [then taking place in Puerto Rico] with greater fervor.” Nonetheless, in the subsequent trial, the court sentenced Collazo to death.\(^{92}\)
Marcantonio’s defeat (which also signified a defeat for the Left and most especially the ALP) occurred six days after the Blair House event. Though not the major cause for the end of his political career, Marcantonio’s relationship with Collazo and his support for the independence cause, gravely damaged whatever chances he had for re-election. His efforts to obtain clemency for Collazo, whose act was viewed by all but a few as nefarious, threatened further to isolate the embattled the ex-Congressman. Nonetheless, Marcantonio expended his energies to defend the Puerto Rican community and to save Collazo from execution. The Nationalists’ attempted assassination of the President aroused widespread suspicion and animosity towards the already embattled Puerto Rican people.

Marcantonio responded to this misbegotten outrage by immediately issuing a flier, in Spanish, to the people of El Barrio, which declared: “Now is the time for the true friends of Puerto Rico to gather to its side. Now is the hour for those who believe in democracy, liberty, and the self-determination of all peoples, to rise in the struggle for the liberation of Puerto Rico... Puerto Ricans: I was with you yesterday, I am with you today, and I will be there tomorrow all the days of my life.” On Election Day, almost every block in El Barrio gave Marcantonio over 60 percent of its vote. On the ALP line, he garnered 5,347 votes; his opponent, James Donovan, who was running on the Democratic, Republican, and Liberal Party lines received 2,855. (Sixty-two percent of Italian Harlem’s voters backed their “favorite son”; however, East Harlem’s pro-Marcantonio vote was swamped by overwhelming majorities for Donovan in Yorkville [Meyer 1989: 47, 170, 141].)

Marcantonio had had many dealings with Oscar Collazo; soon after his arrival in El Barrio in 1941, Collazo became head of the New York chapter of the Nationalist Party. When Marcantonio ran for Mayor of New York in 1949, Collazo, wrote this encomium: “The sincere comradeship that for so many years you have maintained, working shoulder to shoulder, for the common cause for liberty and you offer us a good reason to continue going forward—regardless of the reverses we encounter—in the long and difficult struggle against the enemies of so many people such as yourself. We wish to reiterate our sincere intentions of giving you all the necessary help in the long struggle against tyranny and oppression that are for us a common cause.” Clearly, Collazo was committing the New York branch of the PN to do everything possible to support his election short of directly advocating voting, something which the Nationalist Party proscribed. Later that month, Marcantonio sent Collazo a $500 contribution for the defense of Puerto Rican political prisoners.\[93\]

Marcantonio succeeded in engaging Abraham Unger, a founder and officer of the National Lawyers Guild, to represent Collazo.\[94\] The most immediate consequence of this was the CPUSA’s suspension of Unger’s Party membership; at the time, the Party was fighting a losing battle in the courts and before the public to prove it did not advocate acts of violence against the U.S. government. Despite the CPUSA’s care to avoid being identified with the Nationalists’ attack on Blair House, on November 3, the Daily Worker published a statement by the head of the PC de PR César Andreu Iglesias sympathetic to Torresola and Collazo: “The Nationalists have acted heroically. They gave their lives for love of liberty.”\[95\] On July 9, 1952, Marcantonio was the major speaker at an invitation-only meeting to launch a drive to urge President Truman to commute the death sentence for Collazo. An FBI informant of “known reliability” reported that at this meeting Marcantonio compared Collazo with “John Brown at Harper’s Ferry.” Marcantonio further insisted on the authenticity of Collazo’s (and by extension that of Albizu Campos’ and the other Nationalists’) patriotism. He called on
his listeners to join “our Latin American brothers” in demanding a commutation in the death penalty.” On July 23, 1952, the day before Truman announced the commutation of Collazo’s sentence to life in prison, Marcantonio was preparing to travel with Rosa Collazo, Oscar’s wife, who was active in the campaigns for clemency and later for amnesty, to appeal directly to President Truman to commute Oscar’s sentence to life imprisonment. Upon hearing of Truman’s act, Marcantonio commented, “Our great country has obeyed the laws of civilized society.”

The major consequences of crushing the insurrection were: hundreds of arrests (including Concepción de Gracia, César Andreu Iglesias, Ruth Reynolds, and many others who had not participated in the uprising); twenty-seven deaths; and the destruction of the Nationalist Party. Much of the sentiment for independence flowed into the Puerto Rican Independence Party, whose strategy of “working within the regime against the regime” was enunciated by its leader Concepción de Gracia (Carr 1984: 179).

**Conclusion**

Albizu Campos’ appraisal of Marcantonio is best captured by a single, otherwise trivial incident. In 1943, a functionary from the Workers’ Defense League (the Socialist Party’s much smaller and less effective analogue of the ILD) informed Albizu that Norman Thomas, the leader of the Socialist Party, would only appear at a mass rally in defense of Albizu’s right to probation (he had refused to sign the probation papers) if Albizu would withdraw an invitation to Marcantonio to speak. Albizu rejected this petition out-of-hand saying, “The worst of all sins is ingratitude. Once he joined our defense, Marcantonio defended Puerto Rico at the risk of his own life. Marcantonio will be welcomed wherever we are and if Marcantonio comes where we are and there are those who don’t like that, they will have to remain outside.” Soto Vélez affirmed, “There was no other North American whom Albizu respected more. Albizu believed that Marcantonio could be trusted completely.” Ruth Reynolds reported, “Albizu had absolute respect for Marcantonio. There was no American he respected more. He felt he could be relied upon completely.”

Concepción and Marcantonio remained close; in 1940 Marcantonio became the godfather of his friend’s daughter, Alma (Ortíz Ramos 2007: 575, fn 12). On August 9, 1954—four months before his fifty-second birthday—Concepción acted as a pallbearer at Marcantonio’s funeral. At a memorial meeting held in New York City on December 7, 1954, Concepción de Gracia eulogized Marcantonio: “Marcantonio is alive. He is an idea of liberty and justice for all the world—an eternal idea. [There are] tears in the Puerto Ricans’ eyes [for the man] who was the greatest friend of the cause of Puerto Rican independence ever had in Congress and in the streets” (Meyer 1997b: 112; Meyer 2002: xx–xxi).

In 1946 at a closed session, the House Committee on Campaign Spending investigated purported irregularities in Marcantonio’s 1944 campaign (they found none). At this time, the Chairman asked Marcantonio about his relationship with Clemente Soto Vélez. Under these hostile and threatening circumstances, Marcantonio expressed his heartfelt sentiments about Soto Vélez and Albizu Campos. He explained, “I am proud of my friendship with Clemente Soto Vélez. This man served a term in prison for his Nationalist activities in Puerto Rico... I was associated in his defense and that of Dr. Albizu Campos. This is a matter of public record. I am proud to know Dr. Albizu Campos and I agree with him that Puerto Rico ought to have its independence and I have presented bills in Congress to these ends. So it is natural, therefore that the independentistas support me.”
Marcantonio, Albizu Campos, and Concepción de Gracia were defeated by overpowering forces arrayed against them. Nonetheless, their mutual efforts to advance the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence continue to engage our interest. They found ways to overcome differences—of ideology, political style, even nationality—to continue their fight to end what they viewed as the United States’ occupation of Puerto Rico. Through their work, Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the Puerto Rican diaspora as well as progressive North Americans in significant numbers, joined this cause. Even when the possibilities of success receded, these resolute fighters retained their respect and affection for one another. Their relationships remind us in our contemporary, largely nonpolitical, culture that comradeship often outlasts friendship. This courageous trinity supported each other in what they believed was a crusade for the rights and interests of the Puerto Rican people. Their words and their work were, and will forever be, intertwined.
This essay is an expanded, updated version of “Vito Marcantonio y el partido nacionalista puertorriqueño,” which appeared in Signos (Spring 1980): 2–9.

His father did not acknowledge him until Pedro was enrolled at Harvard University.

The unfortunate circumstances of Pedro’s birth and upbringing extended to an uncertainty as to the date of his birth (see Rosado 2006: 91–2).

Running as the Nationalist Party’s candidate for an at-large seat in the Senate, Albizu attracted a paltry 11,882 votes (Ribes Tovar 1973: 456).

Juan Antonio Corretjer has described Albizu Campos’s politics as, “a mixture of Catholicism and patriotism, of mysticism and abnegation, typical of Irish nationalism; a degree of practical materialism necessary to participate in politics; an awareness of law and combat, equal to a Providential view of history” (1950: 77). Albizu’s enthusiasm for the cause of the Irish Republic further suggests a direct link between Sinn Fein’s adoption of armed struggle as the primary means to Ireland’s independence and the PN’s embrace of a semi-military mode of organization and an insurrectionary modus operandi. See also Ribes Tovar (1975: 44–7) and Carr (1984: 164).

From the perspective of the socialist/communist movements, the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico would be classified as “Blanqui-ist,” viz., following the teachings and practices of Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881), a post-French Revolution radical who assumed that insurrections conducted by a relative handful of revolutionaries would arouse the presumed latent revolutionary potential of the masses (Wilson 2003: 164, 232, 257–8, 270, 277, 280–1).

José de Diego (1886–1918) birthday remains an important date on the independentista calendar.

After Gilberto reached the Suárez home, the first family member to open the door was José’s sister, Ada Suárez Díaz. They immediately bonded and, soon after, married (Concepción Suárez 2006: 159–60). In its stead, a majority of the Senate proposed adoption of the flag in current use, which had no association with the Island’s revolutionary movement. (Although their protest failed, subsequently the Nationalists and other independentistas have displayed the la bandera de Lares alongside the la bandera de Puerto Rico at political rallies of all sorts.)

Rarely cited, La Voz awaits its scholar.

The spike in the PIP’s 1952 vote can be explained, in part, by its activities in opposition to the Korean War, a bloody conflict over which Puerto Ricans, who accounted for 756 dead and 3,630 wounded, had no say and no apparent interest. Later, before the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonialization, Concepción demanded that Puerto Ricans have the right to consultation before they were sent to war (Concepción Suárez 2004). Voting totals undercount independence sentiment. The decline of the Independence movement has led many independentistas to vote for the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), which advocates the maintenance of its present status, because they fear that a victory of the New Progressive Party (PNN), the pro-statehood party, would eliminate any further hope for independence.

The durability of the PIP, to some large extent, has depended on a provision of Puerto Rico’s election laws known as “The Law of Minorities,” a variant of proportional representation, which reserves a percentage of seats in both houses of its Representative Assembly, for election at-large. This hybrid electoral system that makes possible representation for third parties unable to garner pluralities in specific districts. At least for that sector of legislators elected at large, every vote counts toward representation. Consequently, this electoral system helps to explain the extremely high voter turnout in Puerto Rico (Green Armytage 2003).

Marcantonio’s influence is impossible to quantify; however, the 1950 senatorial race in California between Richard Nixon and Helen Gahagan Douglas substantiates his status as a national spokesperson for the Left. Nixon’s campaign apparatus distributed 600,000 copies of a flyer printed on pink-colored paper (the now oft-cited, and notorious, “pink sheet”), which in parallel columns listed a selection of 354 identical votes on House bills cast by Congresswoman...
Gahagan Douglas and Congressman Marcantonio, who was identified as “the notorious [Communist] party liner.” In this way, Nixon’s campaign manager succeeded in convincing many California voters that Helen Gahagan Douglas was (as was widely believed of Marcantonio) a sympathizer of the Communist Party (CPUSA) (Meyer 1999b).

Fiorello La Guardia and Henry Wallace are also ideal candidates for the sobriquet “national spokes person for the Left”; however, neither served for as long as Marcantonio in that somewhat indeterminate role nor were they as far Left as the “radical Congressman.” During his ten-year stint (1922–1932) as Congressman for East Harlem, La Guardia had served as spokesperson for a unique Left position that one of his biographers has characterized as “urban populism” (Zinn 1958; Bayor 1999). From 1940, when he was elected Vice President for FDR’s third term until 1950 when he objected to the Progressive Party’s opposition to United States involvement in the Korean War, Wallace rivaled Marcantonio as the Left’s titular spokesperson (Culver and Hyde 2000).

Marcantonio’s political influence greatly exceeded that of other Congressmen because of his leadership of the American Labor Party (ALP), which was a powerful force in New York politics. From it founding in 1936, he led the ALP’s left wing. He became its unrivaled leader in 1944, as a result of a hard-fought primary, a Left-Center coalition defeated by a two-to-three margin the extremely anti-Communist social-democratic leadership, who then in turn founded the Liberal Party (Meyer 1989: 22–52, 144–72).

Marcantonio was an exceptionally active Congressman. He participated in debates on the full range of legislation presented in the House of Representatives. Hence the Congressional Record is a major source for any discussion of his political career. Citations from the Congressional Record will be shown here by “CR” plus the page(s). Excerpts of the text of this bill can be found in I Vote My Conscience: Debates, Speeches, Writings of Vito Marcantonio Rubinstein 2002: 376). First published in 1956, two years after Marcantonio’s death, by The Vito Marcantonio Memorial Association, Rubinstein organized significant aspects of Marcantonio’s Congressional speeches and debates chronologically into the seven two-year sessions he served. Rubinstein brought together Marcantonio’s monumental work for Puerto Rico in a separate chapter, “Puerto Rico and Its People, 1935–1950,” which later was reprinted as Vito Marcantonio: Fighter for Puerto Rico’s Independence (undated), a pamphlet sponsored by The Latin American Task Force with the help of El Comité/Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño.

In a text of a speech aimed at a Puerto Rican audience (likely intended for radio broadcast), Marcantonio reminded his listeners: “I have defended, without fee, the Puerto Rican patriot, Don Pedro Albizu Campos and his companions, whose only crime has been to get for his country what George Washington obtained for our country, freedom and self-determination.” Vito Marcantonio Papers, 1935–1973, Box 22 (Folder, Misc.1 of 2). This collection, which is deposited in the Manuscript and Archives Division of the New York Public Library, consists of eighty-six boxes. Subsequent citations from the collection will be noted by “MP,” the number of the box, followed by the name of the folder in parentheses.


A press release noted that “in his visit to the President [Truman, Marcantonio] urged him to sign the bill passed by the Puerto Rican Legislature providing for the use of Spanish as a means of instruction in the public schools.” To the Editor of La Prensa, signature illegible, May 22, 1946. MP 15 (General Correspondence).

On Marcantonio’s advocacy on behalf of New York City’s Puerto Ricans, see Meyer (1992). On Marcantonio’s prodigious work for the social and educational needs of Puerto Rico, see Meyer (1982).

On Covello, an important (albeit neglected) figure in the history of the Puerto Rican migration, see Meyer (1985).

East River Houses was the fourth public-housing project constructed in Manhattan and the first
to consist of high-rise buildings surrounded by extensive open spaces. Its desirable location facing the East River and its modern amenities rescued 1,170 families from tenement apartments, which often lacked central heating and private bathroom facilities (Cinotto 2010: 53, 67, 71, 73; Meyer 1989: 73).

22 On Marcantonio’s relationship with the CPUSA see Meyer (1989: 53–86).

23 Luis Velázquez, who attained some momentary notice for having slapped a judge in the face, assumed the position of Treasurer General of the Republic, that is, the shadow governmental structure erected within the Nationalist Party. At the time of the Nationalist Revolt, in 1950, he was mentioned in a police report as forming part of the nacionalista leadership of San Juan. This same report shows that Luis Velázquez’s son (Luis F. Velázquez, Jr.), a student at the University of Puerto Rico, was also a member of the PN. Juan Manuel Rivera further noted, “As far as I know, the others went on to be Nationalists to the end. Corretjer and Soto Vélez did it in their own way. But they were poets, a troublesome club, difficult to handle under any regime. They were red and black [when they publicly assembled, the Nationalist “cadets” wore black shirts and white pants] at once, and sometimes one of the colors came on top only to lose to the other in the next round. The other five were more albizuistas, rank-and-file men, not artists. (Albizu was always very close to a number of poets: Julia de Burgos, Francisco Matos Paoli, Graciany Miranda Archilla, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Clemente Soto Vélez).” Correspondance from Juan Manuel Rivera to Gerald Meyer, 27 April 2010. See Rivera (2010).

24 Marcantonio’s 1936 journey to Puerto Rico was the first and only time he ever traveled outside the continental United States. Even within the American mainland, his traveling was limited. He only visited the West Coast once, and after his visits with the Nationalists in Atlanta Federal Prison, he never traveled to the American South again.


27 While the two Nationalists were in police custody for assassinating Colonel Francis Riggs, Chief of the Puerto Rican Police; the Nationalists accused him of orchestrating the “Massacre of Río Piedras,” a protracted clash between students and the police, that had erupted on February 23, 1936, on the campus of the University of Puerto Rico that resulted in the death of one policeman and four Nationalists, the wounding of forty participants and bystanders (Ribes Tovar 1973: 466). Río Piedras is a large sprawling city adjacent to San Juan, which was incorporated into San Juan in 1951.

28 López and Santiago were in the Home Relief Bureau to assist and advocate for residents to obtain benefits to which they were legally entitled and desperately needed. Organizers like López and Santiago assisted recipients as part of the Left’s agenda to organize them (along with those employed by the Works Project Administration) into the Workers’ Alliance, a Communist-led organization of the unemployed. Efforts by Communist-led organizations and increasingly by Marcantonio’s own apparatus to help East Harlem residents obtain Home Relief (and many other types of assistance) solidified support for Marcantonio (Meyer 1989: 69–70, 87–96).


30 New York City’s Puerto Rican community was deeply drawn into Left politics, including into the CPUSA, which created a thick network of organizations of various sorts that responded to their material needs and political aspirations. By the 1930s the Communist Party claimed as many as 1,400 members in El Barrio and maintained a presence there much later than other communities (Proceedings 1957: 154–5). Bernardo Vega reported, “In this period the Communist Section in Harlem had great influence [and] its local leaders, Negroes and Puerto Ricans, were outstanding figures in the community” (1977: 237; see also Meyer 1989: 148–52).

31 Harry Hafner’s wife, Ida, worked as Marcantonio’s executive secretary in the Congressman’s
home office, on East 116th Street in Italian Harlem. During an interview I conducted with Harry, he showed me a leather cigarette case Albizu made for him when he was in prison. The CPUSA hoped Hafner would recruit volunteers to join the International Brigade. Harry Hafner related that there was so much enthusiasm for the Spanish Republic’s cause on the Island, “I could have recruited an army.” Ida Hafner, interview with Gerald Meyer, New York City, 13 August 1975; Harry Hafner, interview with Gerald Meyer, New York City, 18 July 1976; see also Graham (2005: 42–9).


34 Roosevelt appointed Ernest Gruening (1887–1974) Director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions (at that time a branch of the Department of the Interior) and later, territorial governor of Alaska in 1939, a position he held until 1953. Running as the Democratic candidate, he won election to the Senate from Alaska in 1959. In August 1964, Sens. Wayne Morse (D-OR) and Gruening (D-AK) cast the only ballots against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave President Lyndon B. Johnson powers to greatly expand U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War. In part because of their ardent opposition to the Viet Nam war, Gruening and Morse were defeated in the 1968 Democratic primaries in their states (Johnson 1998).

35 Memorandum Aug. 15, 1936, MP: Box 2.


37 The house outside of which the Nationalists had gathered had served as the venue for Nationalist Party meetings. Since 2005, this two-story building has been converted to El Museo del Masacre de Ponce, a facility that honors the victims and commemorates this infamous event.

38 Concepción quickly became political active. On September 20, 1936, he addressed a public meeting in downtown Brooklyn on “El Proyecto de Ley Tydings y Puerto Rico,” sponsored by Vanguardia Puertorriqeña, a political arm of the Cervantes Federation, the Spanish-language section of the International Workers Order, a Communist Party-led umbrella group of fifteen nationality sections. Concepción was identified as “one of the lawyers in defense of the famous case of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos and the other political prisoners of Puerto Rico” (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 2001: 76).


41 “Five Years of Tyranny.” MP 16 (PR Investigation).


44 The International Labor Defense conducted many other successful campaigns. The ILD’s contributions to the defense of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, especially in the areas of mobilizing international support and enlisting celebrities to the cause, earned it enormous prestige. The ILD was instrumental in gaining a pardon in 1939 for Tom Mooney, who had served twenty-two years in prison on the charge of planting a bomb in 1916 at a San Francisco Preparedness Parade, one of many staged throughout the country to build enthusiasm for US intervention in the Great
War. The ILD had taken up the case that led, in 1937, to the Supreme Court overturning the eighteen-to-twenty-year sentence of Angelo Herndon, an African-American Communist, who had been charged in 1932 with insurrection for organizing a biracial demonstration demanding home relief or work in Atlanta, Georgia. The ILD enormously increased its influence (and enhanced the prestige of the CPUSA) when it organized mass campaigns that joined anti-lynching activity to its work in labor defense. In 1946, the CPUSA merged the ILD with the National Negro Congress and the National Federation for Civil Liberties to form the Civil Rights Congress, which ceased operating in 1956 (Meyer 2009, 2008).


46 Hemingway is the only unexpected signatory on the petition. Although Hemingway was more attached to the American Left than generally acknowledged, he was not knitted into the Communist Party-led cultural-political infrastructure to the same extent as the other signatories.

47 Marcantonio Papers: Box 2.

48 Magdelano to Marcantonio, July 1939, MP: Box 2.

49 Marcantonio, “Five Years of Tyranny,” p. 4066.

50 In contrast with the weak North American response to the plight of the Nationalist prisoners, Latin American Leftists embraced the cause of the Nationalists. The continent-wide activities to the movement to free Albizu and his comrades epitomized the pervasive bolivarian consciousness of Latinos. The independentistas were able to draw upon this widespread support from the deep well of anti-colonial sentiment among the working and middle classes. Consequently, a small political party, from a small country, attracted broad attention, support, and admiration throughout Latin America. The underpinnings for Latin American support for the Nationalist prisoners was fostered by Albizu’s travels, from 1927 until 1930, to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba (more than once), Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, and Peru in support of the cause of Puerto Rico’s independence (Ribes Tovar 1975: 119–28).

51 Marcantonio to Bennett, April 28, 1943. MP 2.

52 See, for example, the insert at the bottom of p. 2 of Equal Justice (May 1939). Starting in 1921, the function of providing for the physical needs of “labor martyrs” fell within the purview of the Workers International Relief, an arm of the Comintern, which was headed by the venerable Communist leader Clara Zetkin. Overwhelmed by the rise of Hitler in 1933, its functions were assumed in the United States by the closely related ILD.

53 Laura Meneses de Albizu Campos to Marcantonio, Nov. 2, 1938. MP 2 (Campos).

54 MP 2 (Campos).

55 Letters dated June 6, 1938 and June 8, 1938. MP 2 (Campos).

56 Bennett to Marcantonio, March 17, 1941. MP 2 (Campos).

57 Julio Velázquez to Marcantonio; Marcantonio to Julio Velázquez. Letters undated. MP 3 (Velázquez).

58 Julia Velázquez to Marcantonio, June, 31, 1940; Oct. 19, 1941; March 3, 1942. From Marcantonio to Julia Velázquez, Nov. 29, 1940; March 28, 1942. MP 3 (Velázquez).

59 Letters from Marcantonio to Aide: Nov. 29, 1940; Oct. 6, 1941; Mar 3, 1942; and March 28, 1942.

60 Clemente Soto Vélez, interview with Gerald Meyer, 26 September 1975.

61 Oscar Collazo noted, “It was through Mr. Marcantonio’s good offices that we managed to get [Albizu] admitted to Columbus Hospital.” Collazo to Gerald Meyer, 22 September 1976. Columbus Hospital, which was a major component of the relatively (at that time) scanty Italian-American social infrastructure in New York City, was founded in 1892 by Catholic nuns from the congregation of Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, an order led by Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, a legendary Italian mother superior responsible for the establishment of numerous charitable institutions designed to meet the needs of the Italian immigrants.

62 I heard about this incident from two unimpeachable sources: Ruth Reynolds (26 August 1975) and Ida Hafner (13 August 1975). This incident was also reported by an unidentified informant. Under the
In an attempt to forestall the inevitable onslaught, the Soviets agreed, in a secret protocol in the Pact, to cease all agitation against their erstwhile archenemies—Nazi Germany and its allies. In congruence with this drastic political shift, Communists everywhere (with various degrees of conviction and enthusiasm) opposed the impeding war.

Marcantonio’s victory in 1940 is indicative of the appeal of the CPUSA’s anti-intervention policy, especially among his Italian-American constituents. While running on the American Labor and Republican Party lines he defeated James Lanzetta, the Democratic Party candidate, with 65 percent of the vote, an unprecedented landslide for the district. Despite the expansion of Marcantonio’s Congressional District in 1944 to include Yorkville, a community whose major ethnic groups—German- and Irish-Americans—were generally hostile to Left politics, he continued (albeit with lower margins) to win. In 1947 the New York State Legislature effectively barred Marcantonio from running on either of the major party lines when it passed the Wilson-Pakula Act, which prevented candidates from running in primaries of parties of which they were not registered members unless they had the approval of those parties’ county committees. In 1948 and in 1950, he ran solely as the ALP endorsed candidate: in the first election, he narrowly won; in the second, he was defeated by the Democrat-Republican-Liberal party candidate, James Donovan, by a margin of 58 to 42 percent of the vote (Meyer 1989: 29–30, 35–6, 45–7).

Soto Vélez and Corretjer had extensive discussions about Marxism with Earl Browder, the Secretary General of the CPUSA, who was serving a four-year sentence at Atlanta Federal Prison resulting from a passport violation from many years previous (Ryan 1997: 195–223). On the stationery of Pueblos Hispanos: Semanario Progresista, Corretjer signed an appeal (dated February 8, 1944) for contributions, which lists Corretjer as “director” and Soto Vélez as “editor-in-chief” (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández 2001: 60); “Puerto Rican Rebels [and] U.S. Communists Are Old Fellow Travelers,” New York Daily Mirror (Nov. 5, 1950), p. 2.

Flier deposited in Vito Marcantonio’s FBI File. From 1937 until 1947, New York’s City Council was elected by proportional representation. This resulted in the election of American Labor, Liberal, and (two) Communist Party candidates (Meyer 1997a: 48–9).

From a speech delivered on October 15, 1941, before an assembly in Brooklyn sponsored by the left-wing caucus of the ALP (Meyer 1989: 58–9, 218 fn 38). Marcantonio had this speech inserted into the Congressional Record.

Vito Marcantonio, “President’s Report,” Legislative Service (Sept. 1944), MP 22: (Miscellaneous 5 or 8).

Baldwin to Marcantonio, March 31, 1942; Marcantonio to Baldwin, April 4, 1942; [Baldwin’s response is missing from this correspondence]; Marcantonio to Baldwin, April 13, 1942. MP 2 (Roger Baldwin). Roger Baldwin was a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), who after a trip to the Soviet Union in 1927 became stridently anti-Communist. In 1940, he led a purge of suspected Communists from the ACLU’s national board, including long-term member, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (Camp 1995: 152–65).

La alternativa es clara: o luchamos por la independencia o seguimos viviendo la vida de la colonia. Una fórmula intermedia, como el Commonwealth, es fórmula colonial. Necesitamos la independencia para vivir, para organizar nuestra economía, para defender nuestra cultura, para cumplir nuestra destino en América.

While eschewing acts of violence, Concepción even more strongly condemned the political coercion and threats of Muñoz Marín’s administration against the supporters of independence.

“From Vito Marcantonio to the First Congress for Puerto Rico Independence” (Aug. 15, 1943), p. 15. MP 2 (General Correspondence), p. 3. Marcantonio’s advocacy for Puerto Rico’s independence in this document enunciated the historical-materialist definition of a nation—that
it required a common territory, culture, and history. In this paradigm, a people who had a common culture and history but who lacked territory were termed “minorities,” that is, a people deserving support for the maintenance of their own cultures, but who could not claim the right to self-determination. The seemingly arcane issues as to whether the Puerto Rican diaspora was a minority or a part of the Puerto Rican nation embody major political implications, which have led to divisions within the independence movement. In 1912, at the behest of Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin developed this formulation on “the nationality question,” for the Russian Social Democratic Party, whose majority branch that evolved into the Bolshevik Party (Stalin 1975).

75 Marcantonio to Santiago, May 14, 1942 and May 20, 1942. MP 2.
76 Marcantonio’s letter to Albizu is not dated; the memorandum from Albizu is dated Sept. 18, 1944. MP 4 (Ca-Cl) (Meyer 1978: 169–70). The Nationalists’ reservations about the “reformist” tendencies inherent in the CPUSA’s single-minded focus on winning the war proved to be prescient. In 1944, based on the common assumption that the wartime alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies would continue into the postwar period, on May 20, 1944, Earl Browder convinced the CPUSA’s Central Committee to dissolve Communist Party and replace it with the Communist Political Association (CPA). This brought about the abandonment of two fundamental features of the Communist Party’s program. It replaced the CPUSA’s program, which was based on class struggle at home and opposition to imperialism abroad with the goal of helping build an all-class coalition to rebuild the United States, and support for the efforts of the Allied Powers to maintain the peace. By the end of July 1945, the same Central Committee ended the fourteen-month experiment of the CPA and restored the CPUSA; simultaneously it replaced Browder with William Z. Foster as the Party’s General Secretary. The CPUSA’s members and its supporters now tilted their political activities toward a more militant, less accommodating, mode. This political shift had the effect of lessening the divide between Communists and the independentistas (Starobin 1972: 51–106; Isserman 1965: 203–37).

77 Election flier: “My Position on Marcantonio.” MP 1 (Election Campaign 1936).
79 Los Pueblos Hispanos, Sept. 18, 1943. FBI File.
82 Juventud PIP Presente, “Articulo sobre Gilberto Concepción de Gracia” (July 8, 2008).
85 Congressional Record, p. 9282.
86 William O’Dwyer, whose brother Paul O’Dwyer in 1948 ran for Congress with ALP support, had himself accepted the endorsement of the ALP when he ran for his first term in 1945. Newbold Morris, who had served as President of the City Council from 1938 to 1945 during Fiorello LaGuardia’s second and third terms, had impeccable liberal credentials. O’Dwyer, who was a product of the Democratic Party’s political machine, had by this point become rabidly anti-Communist.


“Election Results,” *New York Times* (Nov. 10, 1949), p. 8. In the 1949 mayoral election, citywide Marcantonio garnered almost 15 percent of the vote; he carried East Harlem (both El Barrio and Italian Harlem by nearly 60 of the vote), and won one-third the vote in central Harlem and most of the City’s Little Italies (Meyer 1989: 139).

After his release, Collazo explained that once Torresola and he realized that the uprising in Puerto Rico was failing, they decided to commit an act which “would focus the world’s attention on the events in Puerto Rico. . . . We believed that our action would revive the struggle [in Puerto Rico] with more fervor” (Seijo Bruno 1989: 210–1, 260–3).

Oscar Collazo to Marcantonio, Nov. 16, 1949; Marcantonio to Collazo, Nov. 22, 1949. MP 2.


Alexander, “Puerto Rican Rebels, U.S. Communists Are Old Fellow Travelers, p. 2. In the wake of the 1950 insurrection, Andreu Iglesias, and his North American wife Jane Speed, were arrested and imprisoned for some months during the government’s roundup of radicals. In addition to his leadership of the Communist Party of Puerto Rico (PC de PR), Andreu Iglesias is remembered as the author of *Los derrotados*, a novel constructed around the story of three nationalists plotting to attack and US army base, and his work as the co-founder of *Claridad*, an independentista weekly that still publishes in Puerto Rico. Grupo Editorial EPRL, “César Andreu Iglesias (1915–1976),” *Puerto Rican Encyclopedia* (Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades), enciclopediapr.org. Andreu Iglesias’ formulation of the PC de PR’s perspective focused on the need for mass organization and mass action. He reminded his fellow independentistas, “From small victories, you go on to major battles. Without the people, nothing is possible. You must know them and understand their drama” (Carr 1984: 167, 188). Other major figures of the CP de PR were Félix Ojeda (senior), Juan Santos, and José Enamorado Cuesta. Important Puerto Rican leaders of CPUSA included Jesús Colón, Bernardo Vega, Gilberto Gerena Valentín, and Evelina López Antonetty (Márquez 2006: 144; Pérez 2006: 48).

Informant’s Report, FBI Files. Jésus Galíndez, a Spanish exile, has been identified as the FBI informant in the entities dedicated to saving Oscar Collazo and many other left organizations (Bosque-Pérez 2006: 29).


While Concepción and the PIP renounced violence as the means to Puerto Rico’s independence, they never denounced Albizu and the Nationalists. Instead they blamed the politically repressive policies of Muñoz Marín and the PPD for provoking violent acts of resistance to colonialism (Carr 1984: 174, 179–80). There are widely varying estimates of the number of arrests
following the suppression of the 1950 insurrection. There are, however, more accurate figures on the numbers imprisoned: 119 combatants were jailed and sixty-seven others were declared guilty of violating Puerto Rico’s version of the Smith Act (Paralitici 2006: 77). The death toll of the insurrection was thirty-two: twenty-one Nationalists, nine policemen, and one National Guardsman (Carr 1984: 167, 427 n12.

100 Ruth Reynolds, interview with Gerald Meyer, New York City, Aug. 26, 1975. Reynolds (1916–1983) was the most important North American activist in the Puerto Rican Independence movement. In 1943, she embarked on an intense life-long commitment to the independence movement through an encounter with Julio Pinto Gandía, Acting President of the PN. While Albizu was in prison, he introduced her to “El Maestro,” as the Nationalists referred to Albizu Campos. Raised in Deadwood, South Dakota, Reynolds took up residence in the Harlem Ashram, an interracial, pacifist community dedicated to the development and application of nonviolent strategies for social change, located in Central Harlem. Albizu Campos’ abiding association with Reynolds was formed, in part, by his meetings, while serving as president of the Cosmopolitan Club at Harvard, with Indian Nationalists including Radindranath Tagore, the prolific writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 (Ribes Tovar 1975: 44). The Cosmopolitan Club was founded by John Reed, who is best remembered for his extraordinary reportage, Ten Day That Shock the World and his major role in founding the CPUSA (Corretjer, 1950: 167).

In 1948, Reynolds visited Puerto Rico to report on the student strike in the University of Puerto Rico, which ignited when the University’s administration refused to allow Albizu the right to speak on campus after he had returned to the Island in 1947. She soon expanded her investigation into a full-length book, which was not published until long after these events (see Reynolds 1989). After the Nationalist uprising in 1950, Reynolds was sentenced to six years; she was released on bail in 1952 and had her conviction overturned. Until four years before her death, Reynolds worked for the Vieques Support Network. Guide for the Ruth Reynolds Papers, 1915–1989, processed by Nelly Cruz, Center of Puerto Rican Studies Library (Hunter College/CUNY).

101 Clemente Soto Vélez, interview with Gerald Meyer, New York City, 26 September 1975. 102 Ruth Reynolds, interview with Gerald Meyer, New York City, 26 August 1975. 103 Transcript of the investigation into the expenditures of Marcantonio’s 1946 campaign, copies of which are deposited in the MP and (significantly) in Marcantonio’s FBI File.

REFERENCES


