

AJ Muste's Christian nonviolence

Once a household name among progressives, the activist and minister influenced generations that followed.

by [J. Y. Lee](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue



AJ Muste, center, sits with fellow activists Miriam Levine, left, and Judith Malina at the Atomic Energy Commission in August 1963. (Courtesy of the AJ Muste Memorial Institute / War Resisters League)

During a quaker meeting in 1940, Abraham Johannes Muste, whom *Time* magazine declared “America’s #1 pacifist,” proclaimed that “if I can’t love Hitler, I can’t love at all.”

Imagine saying such a thing about Vladimir Putin. It’s difficult, perhaps because the depth of pacifism that Muste embodied feels passé. As American weapons are airlifted into Ukraine and American drones roam the deserts for our foes, national security feels paramount.

Today, a declaration of love for Hitler by a lanky, bespectacled minister would seem a prime target for cancellation. But Muste’s wholehearted and full-bodied devotion

to creative, direct action for peace and justice made him a linchpin in the peace movement and a model for generations of activists.

For several decades in the 20th century, AJ, as he was known, was a household name among progressives. Martin Luther King Jr. told Muste's biographer that "the current emphasis on nonviolent direct action in the race relations field is due more to AJ than to anyone else in the country." In his 1967 *New York Times* review of Muste's posthumous essays, his lifelong nemesis Reinhold Niebuhr paid homage to the "creative career of a pacifist who was also a revolutionary Christian." Linguist and activist Noam Chomsky christened Muste an "intellectual par excellence" and "one of the great figures of 20th-century America."

While many of the pacifists who were his contemporaries were blue-blooded, Muste's roots were more modest. After migrating from the Netherlands to Michigan as a child of a factory worker, Muste spoke Dutch at home. He studied at New Brunswick and Union theological seminaries and was ordained in the Dutch Reformed tradition of his childhood. He then pastored Reformed, Congregationalist, and Quaker churches in New York and New England. His unwavering commitment to pacifism ended his parish ministry prematurely when America entered World War I, as he found himself unable to console the families of soldiers. So he returned to his roots in factory work.

Muste's breakout act in labor was spearheading the strike of 30,000 textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He then directed Brookwood Labor College, known as "labor's Harvard," and also administered the Presbyterian Labor Temple in New York. He founded the American Workers Party, which merged with Trotskyists to become the Workers Party of the United States with Muste at its helm. After his meteoric rise, however, factionalism following the merger "brought out the worst in Muste," notes religion scholar Albert Raboteau, in *American Prophets* (2016). He became bitter toward his rivals and expressed "outright sympathy" to violence.

Feeling what he called "titanic glooms of chasmed fears"—a quote from Francis Thompson's poem "The Hound of Heaven"—Muste and his wife sailed for Europe in 1936. A month later in Paris, at a dilapidated church, Muste had a mystical experience of the hand of God lifting him up. "A singing peace came over me," Muste recalled. "The sudden new sensation was one of a deepened, a fathomless peace."

This reconversion took Muste back to the American chapter of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, which he had led with Nobel Peace laureate Jane Addams. FOR-USA had been founded during World War I to deter American involvement in Europe. On the eve of American entry into World War II, the group welcomed Muste as its national secretary. Its present-day US-based director of organizing, Ethan Vesely-Flad, notes Muste's work as "extraordinary," "creative," and "intersectional" and of continued importance to the organization.

FOR-USA has been a venerable and versatile mother ship of pacifism. Its star-studded membership included Niebuhr, King, and Thomas Merton, and its staff included civil rights activist James Farmer and Presbyterian minister Norman Thomas, a six-time presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America. At FOR-USA, Muste mentored James Lawson and Bayard Rustin, who became seminal leaders of both FOR-USA and the civil rights movement.

In partnership with its global chapters, FOR-USA sent Christian pacifists to Nicaragua to protest American imperialism, to the USSR to examine the Communist experiment, and to British India to probe Gandhi's independence movement. During the current war, FOR-USA has partnered with IFOR branches in Russia and Ukraine to support conscientious objectors. It has also challenged the prevailing US consensus in favor of military aid to Ukraine, while championing Ukraine's right to self-defense.

Historian Joseph Kip Kosek argues that although 20th-century nonviolence movements are commonly perceived as secular, FOR-USA's Christian culture served as the group's fount. Its membership rose steadily during the 1940s and '50s under Muste's leadership, and its scope encompassed not only pacifism but also racial equality and labor rights. Kosek laments the increasingly secular peace movement because, from his point of view, the waning of FOR-USA's distinctive Christian voice led to an "impoverishment of political discourse about violence."

After his work with FOR-USA, Muste gathered pacifists from FOR-USA, the Catholic Worker movement, and the Quakers to form the nimble Committee for Non-Violent Action. This group orchestrated theatrical direct action to win public sympathy, and it became an influence on Philip and Daniel Berrigan when the two Catholic priests and activists met Muste at a peace retreat hosted by Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

CNVA's first action was a vigil at the Atomic Energy Commission's Mercury project near Las Vegas to mark the 12th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. Two years later, Muste led CNVA's Omaha Action targeting a missile base in Mead, Nebraska. After a weeklong vigil of fasting and prayer, Muste preached on US disarmament from Isaiah before hopping over the fence to trespass. He was arrested, but he refused bail. The 74-year-old spent nine days in jail.

In 1958 Muste worked behind the scenes to arrange for the former US Navy commander Albert Bigelow to attempt to sail his boat, the *Golden Rule*, into a hydrogen bomb testing zone in the Marshall Islands. Although Bigelow and his crew were arrested en route near Hawaii, signs proclaiming "Stop the tests, not the Golden Rule" proliferated outside federal buildings across the country. Bigelow also inspired anthropologist Earle Reynolds and his family to successfully sail the first civilian vessel into a nuclear testing area. In turn, Reynolds's action sparked a Vancouver-based organization that would become Greenpeace to adopt nonviolent direct action as its modus operandi.

CNVA's two most ambitious projects were peace walks from Delhi to Beijing and from San Francisco to Moscow. Ten activists left San Francisco in December 1960 for a "walk of penance" and picketed at the Pentagon before reaching New York six months later. Their numbers swelled on the road, reinforced by citizens such as John Beecher, who resigned from his teaching post at Arizona State University to march with his wife. "My example in joining the peace walk will be more effective than anything I might accomplish in the classroom," he explained.

From New York, 15 marchers flew to London to be welcomed by Great Britain's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which rallied some 4,000 peace activists in Trafalgar Square. When CNVA was denied entry to France, French activists completed the walk's itinerary there. Thirty marchers continued through Belgium, two Germanies, and Poland before entering the Soviet Union. Ten months and 6,000 miles later, they arrived in Moscow.

"When one country disarms first, it opens the way for others to do the same," stated one of their multilingual leaflets. Muste was nicknamed the march's "advance pillar of fire and smoke," as he negotiated with European governments and civic groups. Despite the Berlin Crisis of 1961, the Kremlin allowed the marchers to hold a vigil in Red Square against nuclear testing, to present at Moscow State University, and to meet with the Soviet Peace Committee.

In her 2014 biography of Muste, historian Leilah Danielson observes that his leadership stemmed from a capacious heart that could embrace all. Muste was equally at home among rough-edged labor radicals and well-heeled pacifists. He was a mystical existentialist esteemed by secular Marxists and an old leftist celebrated by the new left. “I believe men are meant to lead abundant life,” wrote Muste. “And this means physically, aesthetically, intellectually, spiritually”—and with “variety, nonconformity, experimentation.”

“Muste had a deep sense of sin and importance of God’s grace,” writes Danielson. “He was always a bridge between the Christian left and the secular left.” After his strict Calvinist upbringing, Muste “smoked and danced” and delighted in “Broadway shows, baseball, and the Marx Brothers.” A student and friend of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, Muste tempered his pacifism to support anti-colonial struggles, and when the United States was at war he focused on guarding civil liberties at home.

Muste’s sundry activism gave birth to an entire generation of activists. His collaborator Dorothy Day paid this tribute to his legacy: “The name Abraham means Father of a multitude, and he was that.” Building on Muste’s tactics, the Berrigan brothers pioneered a new aesthetic of nonviolent direct action by refining its “existential, ritual, and spectacular dimensions,” according to Kosek. Banded together with other Christian activists as the Baltimore Four, they poured blood on the draft files of a Selective Service office in Baltimore. Then, as the Catonsville Nine, they stole and burned draft files with homemade napalm while reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

Shane Claiborne may have inherited a piece of Muste’s mantle of creative direct action. The evangelical activist helped establish an intentional community for the poor in Philadelphia and toured Iraq in 2003 on a peacemaking mission; more recently he’s been crisscrossing America on a retrofitted school bus with Mennonite blacksmith Michael Martin. In communal enactments of the prophetic imperative to beat swords into plowshares, the duo turns guns into gardening tools using Martin’s forge. Claiborne’s rhetorically sharp and ritually dramatic pacifism certainly evokes the activism of Muste and the Berrigans.

But not everyone sees Muste’s influence the same way. When pacifist theologian Stanley Hauerwas encountered his work in seminary, he deemed Muste an idealist who could not withstand the critiques of Niebuhr’s Christian realism. Unlike Muste,

who had roots in the Social Gospel, Hauerwas said that he himself and his pacifist mentor John Howard Yoder (who met Muste through Merton) were more influenced by Karl Barth's Christocentrism. "Muste's legacy seems to be more as an activist than a thinker," Hauerwas said.

When Barth quipped to Muste in 1955, "So what shall we do—stand on the street corner and cry: 'Madness, madness, madness?'" Muste replied, "Perhaps that is what the Old Testament prophets did." Like a tireless Hebrew prophet, 82-year-old Muste flew to Hanoi against a State Department injunction to meet Ho Chi Minh and deliver Ho's invitation to Lyndon B. Johnson. That would be Muste's swan song, as he died a few weeks after the trip. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that Muste "inspired millions of people" with his deeds and words to understand that "there is no way to peace, peace is the way."

"If Muste were around today," says historian Heath Carter, "I think he would be worried about the militarization of ordinary life in the US, with police having tanks and citizens carrying AR-15 rifles." Carter attributes Muste's relative obscurity to the eclipse of peace and labor movements, as only a sliver of Americans bear the brunt of war today and once-mighty unions have been dismantled. "But there seems to be a flicker of a new labor movement, with unions at Starbucks and Amazon, so Muste may come to be timely."

Danielson speculated that Muste today might have flown to Russia, as he had a preternatural knack for transnational solidarities. "Muste would definitely condemn what Russia is doing as brutal and illegal," she said. "But he would take a historical, analytical, and critical approach to examine the ways America has contributed to aggression of Russia by rejecting multilateralism and building up NATO unilaterally."

In 1943, Muste wrote, "Whenever love that will suffer unto death is manifested, whenever a true Crucifixion takes place, unconquerable power is released into the stream of history." Perhaps that is what he meant by loving Hitler. Although we may not be able to love Putin or our own military-industrial complex, maybe it's more important for us to be willing to bleed for our foes to rust the cog of war. Tertullian wrote that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Muste teaches us that the sweat and tears of pacifists are the seeds of peace.