

On the Origins of the United Nations: When and How Did it Begin?

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Mazower, Mark (2009). *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, ISBN 978-0-691-13521-2 Plesch, Dan (2011). *America, Hitler, and the UN: How the Allies Won World War II and Forged A Peace*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co., ISBN: 978-1-848-85308-9

The mainstream narrative of the United Nations has long been that its creation in 1945 was an almost revolutionary act that constituted a seminal answer to the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust and must be seen as an unprecedented universal (even though U.S.-led) attempt to achieve world peace and guarantee human rights (see Amrith and Sluga 2008). In this context, the positive accounts on the UN's history in recent years seem to be due to the "New World Order" proclaimed by former U.S. President George H.W. Bush and the intellectual reaction to Goerge W. Bush's unilateralism in order to show that the UN does matter (Mazower 2009: 5). Apparently, however, not only historians, also international relations (IR) scholars failed to appropriately address the complex nature of the ideas and ideologies constituting the basis of the UN (Mazower 2009: 9).

The British historians Mark Mazower and Dan Plesch have initiated interesting debates about the origins and thus, implicitly, the very nature of the United Nations organization. Here, two main questions shall guide us: To what extent do we have to contest the narrative that the creation of the United Nations in 1945 constituted a radical shift in world history? And secondly, did the UN rather perpetuate colonial ideas or was it, in contrast, designed to end colonialism?

While Plesch argues that 1942 was the birth date of the United Nations, Mazower observes some continuity since the early twentieth century and the League of Nations. Both authors approach the subject quite differently: Dan Plesch provides an archive-based narrative of a UN already established during the war, and Mazower illustrates the ideological origins of the organization with the intellectual setting of its leading figures. Mazower looks at specific persons he considers as key figures: The South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts, the English internationalist Sir Alfred Zimmern, the Jewish emigrants Joseph Schechtman and Raphael Lemkin, and last but not least the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In contrast to Mazower, who in comparison rather tends to neglect the most obvious documents and meetings, Plesch focuses very much on the Atlantic Charter (1941), the talks at Dumbarton Oaks (1944), as well as the conferences in Yalta and San Francisco (1945) that led finally to the establishment of the United Nations organization.

According to Plesch, the "wartime UN" has largely been forgotten, because "it needed a new start in 1945, a UN born out of the 'ashes of war'" (Plesch 2011: 8). The political climate in the United States changed in the late 1940s, when it had become inopportune to argue that the

U.S., the British, and the Soviets had been planning the UN together (Plesch 2011: 9). Nonetheless, it was on 28 December 1941 when Roosevelt came up with the idea to use “United Nations” instead of Associated Powers to depict the alliance fighting Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Japan (Plesch 2011: 32). Already in early 1942, Roosevelt and Churchill made military and political plans. While the former were naturally held as secrets, the political arrangements “had a vital public dimension in rallying domestic and international support for the war effort” (Plesch 2011: 31). The assessment of a contemporary advocate of the UN supports Plesch’s thesis: “The Declaration of the United Nations [of 1942, K.D.] . . . brought the United Nations into being” (Straight 1943: 62).¹ After Roosevelt had led political “celebrations” internationally, “The ideas of the United Nations became embedded in wartime civilian culture, especially in the USA” (Plesch 2011: 31). The outlook of the wartime “United Nations” was debated mostly between the U.S., the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. Once, it was accepted, military communiqués and official statements in the U.S. and Great Britain frequently referred to the United Nations (Plesch 2011: 32, 36, 40ff). Plesch stresses the discussions between Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill with regard to a new post-war world order, based on the British–U.S. American Atlantic Charter of 1941. The idea emerged that these three great powers should, together with China, manage world affairs as the “four policemen” (Plesch 2011: 82). Plesch further regards the focus of wartime United Nations initiatives (food, relief, health care etc.) on the social, economic, and humanitarian dimensions as proof for the United Nations’ encompassing approach to global security and global governance within World War II (Plesch 2011: 87/88).

With regard to Plesch’s argument that the creation of the UN can be dated back to 1942, we must ask: Is it appropriate to consider this “wartime UN” as much more than a public relations invention to guarantee public support? Some argue that it was rather the success of the propaganda strategy to label the Allies, led by the U.S., Britain, and the USSR, as “United Nations” to support their cause morally (Mawdsley 2012). This was deemed necessary by Roosevelt to convince the isolationists and the public in the U.S., particularly with regard to the Lend-Lease agreement, with which the U.S. supported the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, China, and other Allies with material. The important question seems to be the level of institutionalization and perspective beyond the war-related public relations and public diplomacy dimension of the “United Nations” notion. And there were institutions: The better known was certainly the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, founded in 1943 by forty-four nations), but also the London-based UN War Crimes Commission (also created in 1943 by seventeen countries) is worth mentioning. The author emphasizes that “as part of the cooperative process under the United Nations framework, the UN War Crimes Commission and the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, both internationally staffed and funded, were up and running in 1943. They began to turn the political rhetoric of the United Nations about the postwar world into something tangible that the public could relate to” (Plesch 2011: 99). So we could argue that besides the wartime rhetoric tool, the United Nations also seemed to have been embedded in an institutional framework. This is an important aspect, although I tend to interpret these institutions as

1. Michael Straight, a US citizen who served in the Air Force during World War II, then became editor of *The New Republican*, but was also a KGB informant, expressed Plesch’s main arguments already in 1943: the UN was founded in 1942 and it should support decolonisation and human rights. Maybe a Mazower-style analysis of persons like Straight may have enriched Plesch’s book further.

temporary, as these central wartime agencies, once the UN was created in 1945, ceased to exist in their own right.

Another aspect that can be mentioned against the wartime UN is actually presented by the author himself. Plesch admits that the idea of a general United Nations organization for the coordination of military and economic matters encountered resistance from the United States, Great Britain, and the USSR until shortly before the end of the war:

Until late in the war, the idea of making a general organization of the United Nations to coordinate military and economic affairs was resisted by the Big Three. Roosevelt regarded it as creating an unnecessary target for his opponents at home and did not publicly endorse the idea until after D-Day had succeeded. Churchill was more concerned with US-UK bilateral agreements, and sought to elevate Australia and Canada as auxiliaries of the Empire and arrange regional rather than global structures. Stalin, having given strong support to the League of Nations, was now more concerned to secure a territorial buffer zone against further attacks from Germany” (Plesch 2011: 166).

So, again, was the tale of the “United Nations” before 1945 rather a propaganda success story than the birth of the United Nations Organization? Plesch certainly has a point, although to date back the UN as we know it to 1942 would be a bit too adventurous. The planning of the United Nations Organization certainly can be traced back to 1942, but then also the ideas of the League of Nations must be considered as ideological background for the UN—and this is what Mark Mazower does.

In his introduction, Mazower sharply analyzes the deficiencies and blind spots of existing accounts on the UN’s origins as mixed motivations that had rather been neglected and international cooperation as such taken for granted as something basically positive:

Their guiding assumption seems to be that the emergence of some kind of global community is not only desirable but inevitable, whether through the acts of states, or non-state actors, or perhaps through the work of international organizations themselves, staffed by impartial and high-minded civil servants (Mazower 2009: 5) (see Iriye 2002).

Mazower’s main argument is that in contrast to repeated laudations of the UN as the only authentic world organization with idealistic goals (and, on the other hand, categorical repudiations and assessments of the overall failure of the United Nations), the UN’s origins trace back to old-fashioned national and great power interests and imperial motives, but then developed in a different direction as its mostly Western creators had anticipated. Mazower manages magnificently to exemplify his narrative of the UN as a creature of U.S. global power ambitions and particularly British colonial interests. He does so by examining the convictions and motives that drove Jan Smuts and internationalist Sir Alfred Zimmern (both had already played a significant role in designing the League of Nations) in the UN’s establishment, supplemented by the impact Mazower attributes to the Indian independence hero and first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru with regard to the unexpected non-Western orientation.

Mazower challenges two important interpretations of the UN’s history: He concludes that the UN was not so different from the League of Nations and that it was not, as often assumed, a mostly U.S. American enterprise only (see, for example, Schlesinger 2003). Both theses are supported by a closer look at the relationship between empires—with the British empire in

particular—and connected ideas of global order, and the respective intellectual origin of the League of Nations and the UN (Mazower 2009: 14). Also, Plesch discusses briefly Churchill’s “flirt” with the idea of an Anglo-Saxon world empire (Plesch 2011: 165). In contrast to other authors who certainly acknowledge some heritage of the League in the UN (see, for instance, Kennedy 2006, or MacKenzie 2010: 53), Mazower goes further and identifies a clear continuity between the two institutions.

Mazower’s first two chapters deal with Jan Smuts and Alfred Zimmern, with which the author illustrates the ideological roots of colonialism and the racist belief in the superiority of the white man as essential aspects of the internationalism that inspired the League’s foundation. It seems contradictory that Smuts, who spoke on behalf of equal rights in the UN context, increasingly followed a more racist line in his South African Apartheid regime. But from a contemporary reading of internationalism, it was not such a paradox, argues Mazower. Smuts and Zimmern envisioned the British Commonwealth—and then the League as a variation of it—as the institution with which the (white) civilization should be spread throughout the world.

Plesch takes a very different stand on the question whether the UN was a new form of empire. While World War II historians have long paid little attention to colonial repression, it is obvious that European colonialism based on the conviction of European supremacy, which also found expression in the subjugation of African-Americans in the United States. Therefore, in Plesch’s opinion, Roosevelt’s resolve to apply the Atlantic Charter principles worldwide—including the right to self-determination—was volatile in colonial nations and in the U.S. itself:

Roosevelt’s anti-colonial policy did not outlast him and it is not properly acknowledged. The main achievements were the promotion of an Asian nation, China, to great power status and the inclusion of India as a separate country in the Declaration of January 1942 and in the wartime UN conferences (Plesch 2011: 88).

In Plesch’s view, the missing set-up of a schedule for the end of British and French colonies was the main lost opportunity, although Roosevelt tried to push it (Plesch 2011: 89/90). Roosevelt came up with a plan that envisioned several regional commissions with representatives of the colonizers and the colonized to deal with the independence process—but it did not convince Churchill. Plesch concludes that “the post-war world would well have been more peaceful and prosperous had this declaration been pursued as Roosevelt intended” and judges Roosevelt’s declaration as a vision of the “end of empire,” which would have included fixed dates (Plesch 2011: 90/91). At the same time, it meant a radical shift that China was elevated as one of the four big powers: “Back at the time of the creation of the League of Nations, the white nations had refused to include language on racial equality, humiliating delegates from Japan and elsewhere” (Plesch 2011: 89). Plesch thus regards China’s elevation and the plan for a scheduled end of colonies as the reinforcement of “the anti-imperial origins of the UN” and explicitly distances this narrative from Mark Mazower’s interpretation of the UN’s ideological basis. However, as Plesch continues, after his death, Roosevelt’s anti-colonial ideas and economic policies to endorse the “developing world” soon became obsolete when President Truman took office (Plesch 2011: 91). Plesch thus

strengthens the argument that the United Nations was designed to become a major anti-colonial force—unlike Mark Mazower.

Mazower's book questions the all too uncritical Western belief in the UN as a truly universal and global caretaker that despite a Western dominance at its origins pursued international goals for the best of all. Mazower presents how this belief was anchored in a perpetuated civilizing mission of the colonial powers and now also the United States. It was then Jawaharlal Nehru and increasing anti-colonialism that challenged the UN's colonial heritage—to the surprise of the Western powers. Nehru turned the UN into an anticolonial forum that nevertheless then converted into a defender of national sovereignty again. Here one of the decisive differences between the league and the UN comes into play: The UN gave the "great powers" much more say, even a de-facto veto right, so all rhetoric praise of human rights protection, for instance, seemed in reality nothing more than lip service as these big countries did not imagine to be subject to any meddling in their domestic affairs. This sacrosanct principle of sovereignty then became important again and was revived with the entry of all the newly independent countries that turned the UN—at least the General Assembly—into a Third World forum rather than a great power concert.

While the "Eleanor-Roosevelt narrative" that human rights at the UN were mainly a consequence of the war cruelties and the Holocaust in particular, has already been appropriately demystified (see, for instance, Normand/Zaidi 2008), both authors shed some new light on the issue. Mazower looks at two Jewish emigrants, Raphael Lemkin and Joseph Schechtman, and thereby shows the transition from the league's minority rights system to the rather loosely defined right of self-determination of peoples in the UN. While Mazower convincingly illustrates the role of these activists in the making of universal rights, Plesch demonstrates that the United Nations War Criminals Commission (UNWCC, created in 1943) merits more attention and could possibly be seen as more important than even the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials on the way to the establishment of the International Criminal Court. He describes the UNWCC as the "main legal response to Nazi crimes during the war" that laid the groundwork for the Nuremberg trials. It further implicitly seems to prove that the Allies were aware of the Holocaust (*The Jewish Chronicle* 2011). UNWCC, with a secretariat in London, was promoted mostly by smaller countries that had been invaded by Germany, as well as by civil society and some "principled" officials from the U.S. and British governments but less so by the great powers (Plesch 2011: 101, 102, 116). Here, Mazower is more skeptical about the "troubled history" of UNWCC as it seemed unlikely that the great powers would promote an international criminal law (Mazower 2009: 127).

In conclusion, while Plesch argues that the UN was planned already in 1942, Mazower would identify its ideological roots in the League of Nations and the British desire to perpetuate empire. Thus, Mazower argues that the UN's creation stood for a continuation of colonialism by other means that ended surprisingly with the action taken by Nehru and his allies later on. In contrast, Plesch interprets the UN as designed to terminate colonialism and eventually only Roosevelt's death prevented it to set exact dates to "end empire."

In sum, these are very inspiring books, which not only show that common narratives of the UN are too simplistic and often idealistic, but also in more general terms, how the general study of international organizations can also benefit from historical accounts.

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