

Finding the Hidden UN

Brian Urquhart

**No Enchanted Palace:
The End of Empire and the Ideological
Origins of the United Nations**
by Mark Mazower.
Princeton University Press,
236 pp., \$24.95

UN Ideas That Changed the World
by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij,
and Thomas G. Weiss,
with a foreword by Kofi A. Annan.
Indiana University Press,
310 pp., \$65.00; \$24.95 (paper)
(and fourteen supporting volumes
in the United Nations Intellectual
History Project Series)

1.

In its first sixty-five years the United Nations has been called many things—“a permanent partnership... among the peoples of the world for their common peace and common well-being” (President Harry Truman) and a “cesspool” (a mayor of New York). In the memoirs of a recent US ambassador to the UN, we find the heading “There Is No Such Thing as the United Nations.” While surviving these and countless other characterizations, the UN has somehow continued to reinvent itself, never to the total satisfaction of anyone. The current demand for reinvention is as pressing as any the organization has faced.

The United Nations Charter is a mixture of great-power hardheadedness and a series of more or less idealistic notions about the future. The idea of giving the leaders of the victorious wartime alliance, which had been fighting since 1942 under the collective title “United Nations,” the task, as permanent members of the Security Council, of securing and if necessary enforcing the peace seemed in 1945 to be a logical course to follow.¹ With the onset of the cold war, however, it became a formula for political paralysis. Starting in the 1950s the organization improvised a new method, peacekeeping operations, to contain brushfire conflicts that might ignite an East-West confrontation, particularly in the Middle East. It also provided a forum where the contestants in the ideological and nuclear arms races, the two superpowers, could, as a last resort, meet without loss of face even during the most heated crisis, to stave off the ultimate horror of nuclear war.

The UN was the catalyst for decolonization, a process that went much faster than its founders had anticipated. Many of the new members that brought the membership from the original fifty to the present 192 were states that had just gained their independence. Economic and social development became the predominant task of the UN and its specialized agencies and programs—WHO, FAO, and UNICEF among them—that make up the so-called “UN system.” Not surprisingly, the new members were intensely protective of their newly acquired sovereignty.

¹I left the British army in July 1945 and joined the secretariat of the UN Preparatory Commission in London as private secretary of its executive secretary, Gladwyn Jebb.



UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and General Assembly President Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit at a meeting of the assembly, September 1953

When the cold war ended it seemed for a while as if the United Nations might at last be able to work as its founders had originally intended. But the nature of peace and war as well as the other challenges facing the organization were very different from those that governments thought they were facing in 1945 when the charter was written. The bloody conflicts that the public assumed should be the responsibility of the United Nations—in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Cambodia, and East Timor, for instance—were more frequently within the borders of a single state than between states.

So-called “global problems,” issues that no government can successfully deal with by itself, were virtually unknown in 1945. Now they include nuclear proliferation, the deterioration of the environment and global warming, international terrorism, pandemics, and a probable future shortage of such necessities as clean water. As a universal organization, the United Nations should be uniquely suited to provide leadership and coordinate action on such matters, but the capacity of its members to use it as a place for cooperating on dangerous global problems has been limited and disappointing, as was recently shown at the Copenhagen meeting on climate change. Some important groups object, in principle as well as in practice, to independent international organizations, and especially to an active, international secretariat.²

²A recent book, *ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives*, edited by Brett D. Schaefer and published in cooperation with the Heritage Foundation (Roman and Littlefield, 2009), provides in some of its chapters useful indications of this point of view.

2.

At its founding the United Nations was widely perceived by the public as a fundamentally idealistic institution that would change the way nations behaved. This was not the primary objective of the three governments—the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain—that had been most involved in drafting the UN Charter. In *No Enchanted Palace*, Mark Mazower, a professor of history and world order studies at Columbia, maintains that in the last few years a body of literature has appeared

that gives a very one-sided view of what the UN was set up to do and generates expectations that its founders never intended to be met. The result is, if anything, to deepen the crisis facing the world organization and to obscure rather than illuminate its real achievements and potential.

The historian C.K. Webster, a wartime adviser in the British Foreign Office, described the new UN as “an Alliance of the Great Powers embedded in a universal organization.” This definition, quoted by Mazower, describes both what the “Great Powers” may have thought they were creating and the unstable fault line on which the UN turned out to be founded.

Mazower has a disconcerting habit of setting up straw men to create an argument—for example, that there was an effort to disguise the connection between the League of Nations and the UN or that the United States had the UN Charter approved without due consultation with other governments. There is little or no substance in either of these canards, both of which Mazower gleefully demolishes. In tracing the intellectual and ideological threads that went into the creation of

both organizations, Mazower’s main theme is the importance of British imperial tradition and policy. A key figure in his account is General, later Field Marshal, Jan Smuts of South Africa, the Boer leader who became not only a devotee of the British Empire but also the revered counselor to some of its most conservative leaders, including Winston Churchill. Smuts regarded the British imperial order as a peak of civilization that must be preserved at all costs if human progress was to continue; he believed that it should eventually be wrapped in a wider eurocentric organization, inspired by the notion of commonwealth.

As World War I dragged on with appalling casualties but little decisive movement, the pressure for some radical change in international relations intensified. Several groups, official and unofficial, produced proposals, and in 1918 Smuts published a pamphlet entitled *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion*. In his magisterial *History of the League of Nations*, Frank Walters, formerly a senior official of the League, wrote:

Smuts’s work was from every point of view the climax of all the thought and labour expended on the League idea before the Paris Conference.... The contents of the pamphlet were even more remarkable than its source. Here at last was a work worthy of the greatness of its subject. Here, in language worthy of Milton or of Burke, were high idealism, acute political insight, a profound understanding of the hopes and sentiments of the rank and file of soldiers and civilians, clear and practical administrative planning. The purpose, and to a great extent the consequence, of Smuts’s proposals was to raise discussion on to a new plane.³

In order to limit the dangers of war, Smuts even suggested the abolition of conscript armies and the nationalization of arms industries. The plans of other officials took the form of dry and strictly limited draft treaties, much of whose substance Smuts included in his own draft. Walters comments, Smuts “show[ed] forth the League, not as a set of dry legal obligations, nor as a Utopian dream of peace, but as the natural and necessary development of the political institutions of civilized life.” “The very foundations,” Smuts wrote, “have been shaken and loosened.... The tents have been struck, and the great caravan of humanity is once more on the march.”

The British establishment disliked this sort of rhetoric, but Woodrow Wilson, who was in any case distressed at the lack of preparation for the Paris Conference, was won over by Smuts and his ideas. As Mazower writes, they were both “instinctive moralists,” and many of the ideas that Wilson put forward in Paris were based on Smuts’s *Practical Suggestion* and the British

³F. P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (Oxford University Press, 1952), Vol. 1, p. 27.

government draft. However, when it came to dealing with the colonies of the defeated powers, Germany and Turkey, Wilson rejected the notion of future dominion of an enlightened empire that would oppose the concept of national self-determination. The League of Nations system of mandates, of which Smuts was one of the creators, bridged these opposing ideas. In practice it enlarged British and French holdings overseas.

Particularly vulnerable in Smuts's internationalism was his unshakable belief that nonwhite people should remain in their "proper place," disenfranchised and segregated. He continued to believe that the British Empire and white rule within an international organization were the keys to world peace at a time when both ideas were increasingly perceived as unacceptable, even offensive. The Atlantic Charter, unveiled by Roosevelt and Churchill in August 1941, illuminated a fundamental disagreement between Britain and the United States. The British saw the charter's goal of restoring freedom and independence as applying to nations overrun by Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese; the United States saw it as eventually applying to all colonial territories as well. The Atlantic Charter marked the point at which the leadership of the Western world passed decisively from Britain to the United States.

Mazower overestimates the influence during World War II both of the British imperial idea and of Smuts himself, that "strange fusion of empire, liberal internationalism, and moral self-righteousness." He credits Smuts, for instance, with "persuading an unenthusiastic Churchill to save the critical four-power talks" at the Dumbarton Oaks conference in 1944 by accepting Stalin's insistence on a veto for the permanent members of the new Security Council. Smuts may have persuaded Churchill, but neither the US nor Britain was ready to let the conference fail on this issue, and in the end all three governments wanted the veto for their own reasons. Smuts did indeed write a draft, designed to attract public support, of the famous preamble to the UN Charter, but at San Francisco his text was modified with the intention of further exciting public interest and involvement. The preamble's first three words, "We the peoples," for instance, were contributed by a US delegate, Virginia Gildersleeve, the dean of Barnard College.

These are small matters compared with Smuts's earlier contributions to international organization, and indeed with his ultimate public humiliation, which Mazower vividly describes. At San Francisco the UN was still, if only just, an organization that accepted supposedly enlightened imperialism. W.E.B. Du Bois and other minority leaders had been outraged that the word "independence" did not appear in the charter in relation to "non-self-governing territories." This omission was perhaps the last victory of the imperialists, and the UN General Assembly, Mazower writes, soon turned into "a key forum for anti-colonialism." Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India provided the occasion for a change in direction.

In 1946 the South African government adopted the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act, which

officially made South Africa's large Indian population second-class citizens. In June of that year, Nehru requested the inclusion of racial prejudice as a threat to peace in the agenda of the first annual meeting of the General Assembly to be held in New York in September. Also in June, Smuts put on the agenda a request for termination of the South African League of Nations mandate for South-West Africa and that territory's full incorporation into South Africa, thus providing Nehru with useful anticolonial ammunition. The Indian case in the Assembly was conducted by Nehru's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Her success in getting the question of racial prejudice included on the agenda was much more than just a voting victory and showed that the General Assembly could be a far more important forum for advocating important ideas like decolonization or human rights than the founders had realized.⁴ India's victory also signaled the beginning of the end of European colonialism.

Mazower comments that this episode demonstrated the UN's flexibility and a capacity for reinvention "as remarkable as its shortcomings." The organization was unable to embody the leadership of the great powers that Webster had described; it was also unable to resuscitate that arrangement at the end of the cold war. Instead, with the vast expansion of its membership, the UN had become the part creator and the defender of the new global order of nation-states, even if for some people this has entailed a loss of moral purpose. Such failures have not, Mazower writes, shackled the organization, which has inserted itself into international life through peacekeeping, increased humanitarian activity, and the vast expansion of the technological agencies inherited from the League of Nations. Now, with global problems predominant, it needs to reinvent itself once again.

3.

Since 1945 scarcely a year has gone by without the subject of UN reform surfacing in one way or another; and from time to time useful reforms, mostly in organization and in the Secretariat, have been made. The attitudes and responsibilities of the governments involved in the organization have seldom if ever been touched on. Thomas G. Weiss's book *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (for which I wrote a foreword) turns this practice on its head.⁵ It is by far the most readable and imaginative recent book I have seen on what can easily be a dull subject. Weiss writes with insight and humor, and is undeterred by current taboos. He discusses, for instance, the probable eventual need for some

⁴Emotions ran high in the General Assembly, and Smuts appeared to many as a discredited, sad old man. Madame Pandit played the victim's role with emotion and was observed at one point dabbing her eyes with her sari. A British official sitting near me sputtered, "That's not cricket."

⁵Polity, 2008. Weiss is professor of political science at the CUNY Graduate Center and director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, which is completely independent of the UN.

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form of world government, a respectable subject at least since the time of Grotius and Dante, but now widely regarded as a dangerous heresy in the Congress of the United States.

Weiss points out that although the UN's original purpose was to protect member states against external aggression, sovereignty and power remain vested in those states. Since the UN's founding the need for international management both of political crisis and of global problems has steadily grown, while the incidence of wars between states has steadily decreased. "Treating traditional sovereignty as a cornerstone for the United Nations," Weiss declares, "is a fundamental structural weakness in urgent need of replacement." The concept of sovereignty established by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 is 360 years old. "This venerable institution," Weiss writes, "remains a hearty enough virus. It is a chronic ailment for the United Nations, and perhaps a lethal one for the planet..." If governments really considered the effectiveness of the United Nations an urgent priority, this would be the first problem they would have to tackle. As it is, one can only wonder which of the great global problems will provide the cosmic disaster that will prove beyond doubt, and probably too late, that our present situation demands a post-Westphalian international order.

The UN Secretariat, an easy target, is also in continual and more or less urgent need of reform. In a chapter entitled "Overwhelming Bureaucracy and Underwhelming Leadership," Weiss denounces the UN tendency to appoint senior officials for political

reasons rather than for their competence and qualifications. In theory at least, the secretary-general is the only UN official selected by governments. This vital appointment has always been a political lottery controlled by the five permanent members of the Security Council, which selects a candidate for the approval of the General Assembly. Candidates now conduct worldwide election campaigns, which means that the council devotes little attention or effort to searching for the best possible man or woman for the job; the main preoccupation is often to find a noncontroversial candidate who will not be vetoed by any of the permanent members. It is largely a matter of luck whether the person appointed can do a good, or even an adequate, job in an extraordinarily demanding office. Correcting this situation is the indispensable first step in any serious reform of the Secretariat, not to mention for ensuring the quality of the leadership of the organization as a whole.

Events have occasionally driven the UN to adopt new principles. The horror of the Rwandan genocide, for instance, impelled Secretary-General Kofi Annan to put forward the concept of "responsibility to protect," which, after being cautiously approved by a summit meeting of heads of state in 2005, opened a possible door for the international rescue of groups in unbearable misery or under lethal harassment in their own country. (So far, the counterprinciple of the primacy of national sovereignty—in places like Zimbabwe or Myanmar, for instance—has kept

the door firmly shut.) The International Criminal Court was created in 1998 to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression. Although denounced, as Weiss puts it, "more for ideological than logical reasons" by the George W. Bush administration as a threat to American sovereignty, the ICC, as Hillary Clinton has acknowledged, is certainly a valuable addition to the international system. It might even provide an appropriate and convenient place for trying captured international terrorists.

Peacekeeping, an improvisation not mentioned in the UN Charter, is now universally accepted. More than 100,000 peacekeeping soldiers are at present on duty in many parts of the world, although no progress has been made toward a standing UN rapid deployment force, which, in an ideal or even rational world, would be the obvious way to provide for the speedy deployment of well-trained troops and civilians in an emergency.

Weiss closes with a rumination on the dispiriting word "governance," a word used "in the absence of any overarching political authority" to describe the attempts by states and international organizations to deal cooperatively with such problems as war, poverty, and environmental degradation. With such a weak concept, he writes, "About the best that we can hope for is playing catch-up in the face of life-menacing threats." He quotes Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning: "Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: 'Too late.'"

In discussions on UN reform, government representatives tend to avoid mentioning this debilitating powerlessness. Weiss makes a stirring argument for dropping the current coyness about steps that might lead, in the distant future, to world government and for starting to discuss seriously what is needed to establish a stable, peaceful, and unthreatened international society in an age of potentially terminal global problems.

4.

International organizations are often disparaged as talking shops. That, among other things, is what they are and requires no apology. The UN contribution to the ideas and concepts that are the driving force of human progress, however, has been very largely ignored. Eleven years ago, Thomas Weiss joined up with Richard Jolly from Sussex University, who had worked for twenty years as a senior official in UNICEF and in the UN Development Program, and Louis Emmerij, a Dutch economist with wide experience in international organizations, to remedy this failing. They founded the United Nations Intellectual History Project.

This vast labor, supported by eight governments and seven foundations—but independent of the UN itself—covers the entire range of UN activity, and especially economic and social development, which has generally received far less attention than the more newsworthy field of international peace and security. Nine volumes (the last two are still to come) by individual experts cover the ideas and concepts that are central to UN activity.

These "topical studies" deal with such matters as statistics (*Quantifying the World*), the theory and practice of development, the UN and global political economy, progress on the status of women, human rights, preventive diplomacy, and transnational corporations and the UN. Four other volumes are more in the nature of syntheses, and another (*UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*) is based on carefully organized extracts from oral history interviews with individuals who have had an important part in contributing ideas to the UN over the years. The final volume (*UN Ideas That Changed the World*) gives an overall evaluation of the entire project. These studies will stand as an invaluable work of reference on important parts of the UN's agenda that are mostly not well known (although it may be observed that the UN's work so far has been acknowledged by twenty-three Nobel Prizes).

UN Ideas That Changed the World provides a telling account of ideas in action. In the chapter on "Peace and Security," for example, the concept of preventive diplomacy is illustrated by a succinct but dramatic account of UN Secretary-General U Thant's little-known but essential contribution to the defusing of the Cuban missile crisis, history's most dangerous confrontation.

5.

It is often said that the United Nations is becoming marginalized in the affairs of a globalized world. The very large global threats to the preservation—even the survival—of organized life on the planet demand a much more authoritative global organization than has hitherto been thought necessary. The UN lives to a considerable extent in a political past when independent national sovereignty was the gold standard of international affairs. That the organization is to some extent an anachronism, however, is not what its member governments discuss when they consider reform. What is needed now is not to abolish national sovereignty but to reconcile it with the demands of human survival and decency in the astonishingly dangerous world we have absentmindedly created.

Great organizations or movements do not thrive without leadership of the highest order. In the outside world the search for the best possible leader and the most competent possible workers is a major priority, and much effort and resources are devoted to it. In the UN this is not the case. Those most responsible for selecting the secretary-general, for instance, are likely to explain that the selection is an "intensely political decision" and therefore the main preoccupation is not with finding the best possible person. As a result of this approach, the organization can pay a very high price in inadequate performance and loss of respect and authority.

If organized life on the planet is indeed seriously threatened by even one of the often cited potential global catastrophes, it is all the more surprising that UN members are not trying to upgrade the world organization to a level at which it could be a leading, even a decisive, influence in managing global problems. If such an effort involves sensitive and fundamental political questions, the stakes are now surely high enough for nations to take that risk. □

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