

2014

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume XV, No. 33 (2014)

5 May 2014

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Roundtable and Web Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Introduction by Warren F. Kimball

Dan Plesch. *America, Hitler and the UN: How the Allies Won World War II and Forged Peace.* I. B. Taurus, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-84885-308-9 (hardback, £20.00/\$37.00).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-33.pdf>

Contents

Introduction by Warren F. Kimball, Emeritus, Rutgers University	2
Review by Chris Bellamy, Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich	4
Review by Fabian Hilfrich, University of Edinburgh.....	8
Review by Craig N. Murphy, Wellesley College and University of Massachusetts Boston	13
Author's Response by Dan Plesch, Director, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS, University of London	17

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Introduction by Warren F. Kimball, Emeritus, Rutgers University

This roundtable is all about agency and agencies. The purpose of the book is to determine agency for the creation of the United Nations. Rather than focusing on great power politics, or the influence of Wilsonians, or President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fight against isolationism, Dan Plesch and the reviewers all agree that the various economic, social, and financial international agencies that sprang up during the Second World War acted as crucially effective agents for popularizing the creation of the United Nations Organization (UNO). The reviewers all agree that this focus offers a "largely forgotten" story that could "trigger a revitalization of the history of global international organizations . . . and thoughtful global governance." The reviewers praise the book's focus on various social and legal agencies (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), Bretton Woods, *et al.*) rather than the usual Big Three diplomacy. They point to Plesch's deep research in British and United Nations archives and published historical material, though one reviewer notes that the American archives were not consulted.

The January 1942 "Declaration of United Nations" (note the absence of 'the' before United) morphed easily and persuasively from a simple statement of alliance into a catchword for a postwar international organization. The author and the reviewers all conflate the term 'United Nations,' when used to describe the 'Grand Alliance,' with the peace-promoting (peace-keeping?) UNO that developed during the Second World War. What mattered was the overall impact of internationalism and/or globalism (though it is unclear whether or not those two words mean the same thing to the writers in this roundtable.)

Fabian Hilfrich states that Plesch's agenda is to "rekindle American interest in multinationalism." Hilfrich does question Plesch's depiction of a "golden age" of wartime cooperation, as opposed to an alliance characterized by suspicion and mistrust. He is also concerned that Plesch failed to pay enough attention to the vagaries of Roosevelt's anti-colonialism and the very notion that the UNO grew out of the wartime alliance, a concern that seems to go against the all-out praise of the other reviewers for Plesch's work.

According to Chris Bellamy, "Plesch's thesis that the 'United Nations' (which included Soviet Russia) won the war against Nazi Germany and that subsequent Cold War politics obscured this truth, is meticulously documented and supported." He further states that the book is "the most original and ground breaking reappraisal of the conduct of World War II in perhaps sixty years." High praise indeed. Craig Murphy suggests that while Plesch's book is quite useful, it is not very new since "even a cursory reading of the volumes from the recent UN history project will confirm the mainstream understanding by historians of the UN and the histories of various UN development agencies."

Whether you find the light provided by *America, Hitler and the UN* one that illuminates a small dark corner or a vast portrait, there seems little doubt on the part of the reviewers that they are glad Plesch turned on the switch.

Participants:

Dan Plesch is Director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS, University of London. He has his PhD from Keele and earlier studies social policy at Bristol and history at Nottingham. Prior to *America, Hitler and the UN*, his books include *The Beauty Queen's Guide to World Peace* (Politico's 2004) and a *Case to Answer* (Spokesman 2004). Previously he was Senior Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and, in Washington DC, founding Director of the British American Security Information Council.

Warren F. Kimball, author of *Forged in War* (1995), *The Juggler* (1991), and books on the Morgenthau Plan and the origins of Lend-Lease, edited *Churchill & Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence* (3 vols., 1984). He has published over 50 essays on Churchill, Roosevelt and the era of the Second World War. Robert Treat Professor (emeritus) at Rutgers University, he was Pitt Professor at Cambridge 1987-88, and is an academic adviser to The Churchill Centre.

Chris Bellamy (MA, Oxford and London, Ph.D., Edinburgh) is Professor of Maritime Security and Director of the Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich, London, UK. Bellamy is the author of *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (Macmillan and Knopf, 2007, Pan Military Classics, 2009), which has also been published in Italian, Spanish, Polish, Czech and Estonian, and, more recently, *The Gurkhas: Special Force* (John Murray, London, 2011). Since taking over the Greenwich Maritime Institute in 2010 he has been focusing on maritime security and particularly on the causes, characteristics of, and solutions to, maritime piracy throughout history and into the future.

Fabian Hilfrich is Senior Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. He completed undergraduate studies in modern history, medieval history, and political science at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, an M.A. in American history from Washington University in St. Louis, Ph.D. in history from the Freie Universität in Berlin. He taught U.S. history at the Freie Universität Berlin, German and European history in Riga, Latvia and joined the Institute for Contemporary History (foreign office branch in Berlin) as a research fellow in the fall of 2001. In September 2006, he joined the University of Edinburgh as lecturer in American history.

Craig N. Murphy (Ph.D., UNC-Chapel Hill) is M. Margaret Ball Professor of International Relations, Wellesley College and Professor of Global Governance, John W. McCormack Graduate School of Global and Policy Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston. Murphy is the author of *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and *The UN Development Programme: A Better Way* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He is currently working with JoAnne Yates of MIT's Sloan School of Management on a history of international voluntary consensus standard setting.

On the eve of D-Day in June 1944, General Dwight D Eisenhower, the U.S. Supreme commander of Operation *Overlord*, broadcast a short message to the waiting U.S., British, Canadian, Free French, and other nations' troops waiting to begin their assault, and also to their Russian Allies poised to thrust into Belarus:

Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man to man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our home fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to victory!¹

In a world where the reputation of the 'United Nations' has been badly tarnished, and where the most powerful nations resist attempts by the UN to assert its authority, the use of the term 'United Nations' here will strike a strange chord with many. It would, of course, be easy to take the linguistic similarity to assert, superficially, that Eisenhower was, in fact, referring to the same organization. But Dan Plesch's meticulous research and analysis remind us that, to a surprising extent, he was. *America, Hitler and the UN* is the most original and ground breaking reappraisal of the conduct of World War II in perhaps sixty years. Plesch's thesis that the 'United Nations' (which included Soviet Russia) won the war against Nazi Germany and that subsequent Cold War politics obscured this truth, is meticulously documented and supported.

The Cold War did not, as might be assumed, rapidly dismantle the wartime United Nations alliance. On the contrary, the five nations that make up the permanent members of the UN Security Council were, and still are, the five main victorious powers: China (albeit Communist from 1949 rather than Nationalist), France, the Soviet Union (now succeeded by Russia), the U.S., and the UK. The whole conduct of the Cold War took place in a bizarre framework created by the circumstances of the Allied victory. It was possible to reach the three western Allies' sectors in Berlin through Soviet dominated territory, because that had been agreed by the Four Powers in 1945. One could travel across the 'iron curtain' which ran right through Berlin, from one side of the city to the other, on the underground railway. And both sides' intelligence was facilitated by military missions that had free access across the other's territory: the British Military Mission (Brixmis) to the Commander of Soviet Forces in Germany, for example, was free to roam around eastern Germany, and its Soviet counterpart, Soxmis, around the British sector in the west.²

¹ Available at <http://www.army.mil/d-day/message.html> accessed 12 August 2013

² Tony Geraghty, *Brixmis: The Untold Exploits of Britain's Most Daring Cold War Spy Mission* (London, HarperCollins, 1996), esp. pp.1-16.

Plesch's account is based on extensive archival research particularly in the UK and the U.S. His research in the U.S. unearthed papers from sources as diverse as the Citizens' Committee of Philadelphia, welcoming the delegates to the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, as well as UN-related files. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (UNFAO), the UN Monetary and Financial Conference (UNMFC), with files from the U.S. Department of State and Treasury, all feature prominently in the bibliography. So does the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). However, there is only one reference to the UN War Crimes Commission, emanating from the UN Information Office in London in 1943. While researching the book, Plesch stumbled on a collection of files retained in New York. There are 10,000 files relating to War Crimes charges against Germany and Germans, clearly indicating that the UN was well aware of Nazi atrocities. Plesch was told they were not available, and this began a campaign he pursued after the book was published. In 2013, Plesch was awarded the Oak Foundation grant for war crimes research. He hopes this will make the entire 400,000 page archive publicly available including the still largely classified 36,000 charge files.

Plesch's account also draws heavily on British public records. It is well crafted, complete with graphic description and humour. He describes how on 1 January 1942, President Franklin D Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill were wrestling with what to call the 'Alliance' that was fighting Hitler. The problem was partly with the U.S. Constitution, which forbade 'entangling Alliances.' They considered 'Associated Powers', which Churchill later described as 'flat', and the word 'Combined' also featured, but then Roosevelt had a brainwave. He was so keen to tell Churchill that he had his wheelchair pushed straight in to Churchill's suite to find the Prime Minister sitting, like a nude cherub, in the bath. Churchill, ever a literary man, later recalled the name Byron used to describe the Allies at the Battle of Waterloo in his narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

*Here, where the sword United Nations drew,
Our countrymen were warring on that day!
And this much—and all—which will not pass away³*

Much depends on a name, and Roosevelt had hit on the right one. It did not pass away, in spite of post-war political changes. Soon, the United Nations became universally known by the acronym UN – or its equivalent in other languages – ONU in French, OON in Russian. One possible alternative, 'combined', is still used to describe multi-national armed forces, as opposed to 'joint', which means the interworking of sea, land and air forces.

The book interweaves the evolution of the UN from the wartime Alliance and two sets of conferences. Plesch emphasizes that today's UN system of global institutions is called that because they were created by the wartime alliance of United Nations, and not because bodies such as the World Bank were drawn into becoming satellites of the post-war UNO. The first of these conferences was the series of meetings known as the Dumbarton Oaks

³ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 3, Couplet 35.

Conference between August and October 1944. These meetings were attended by representatives of the Soviet Union, the UK, the U.S., France and China, who discussed the structure and form of a post-war security organisation to succeed the League of Nations, although the primary issue was the make-up of the Security Council and what its relationship would be to the League, which was still formally in existence. The main issue at stake was the use of the power of veto in the Security Council. This issue was to feature at the Yalta meeting in February 1945, and continued at the San Francisco conference from April to June. The veto, where one Permanent Member can block any resolution, has remained a constant issue ever since.

The other set of meetings was the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, known as the Bretton Woods Conference, after the location of the New Hampshire hotel where it was held, in July 1944. Plesch devotes an entire Chapter, Chapter 7, to the Bretton Woods and Havana Conferences. His coverage is insightful and pithy, including the observation that one reason why the Bretton Woods Hotel was chosen was that it was one of the few five-star hotels in the realm of the U.S. political elite that would accept Jews as guests. As Plesch observes, that says a lot about the time. Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau was duly grateful. The Conference was designed to restore the world economy after the trauma of the Second World War. It established the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are known as the 'Bretton woods organisations.' These became operational in 1945 after sufficient countries had ratified the agreement. Here, too, the United Nations of World War II shaped the world today. However, there have since been changes. The chief features of the Bretton Woods system were an obligation for each country to adopt a monetary policy which maintained the exchange rate by tying its currency to the U.S. dollar and the ability of the IMF to bridge temporary payment imbalances. However, on 15 August 1971, the United States decoupled the U.S. dollar from the value of gold. This was referred to as the 'Nixon shock,' and brought the Bretton Woods system to an end. Instead, the U.S. dollar itself became the reserve currency used by many countries. Plesch emphasizes how the UN Monetary and Financial Conference (UNMFC) at Bretton Woods was the historical reference point for the study of post-war economic planning.

In his opening speech at the Bretton Woods conference, Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, said the wilderment and bitterness' resulting from the Depression became 'the breeders of fascism, and finally, of war'".⁴ Proponents of the new institutions felt that global economic interaction was necessary to maintain international peace and security. The institutions would facilitate, in Morgenthau's words, "[the] creation of a dynamic world community in which the peoples of every nation will be able to realise their potentialities in peace".⁵ The idea that international peace and security were

⁴ Department of State (Ed.). United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference: Bretton Woods, Final act and related documents, New Hampshire, July 1 to July 22, 1944. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1944. 121 p. p. 3-6.

⁵ <http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/item.shtml?x=320747> accessed 12 August 2013.

dependent on economic interaction was from new: in 1898 the Polish banker Jan (Ivan) Bloch had written, in a widely-read book, that protracted war between the major powers would be virtually impossible because it would cripple their economies.⁶ However, that did not stop them going to war in 1914, and again in 1939. However, after World War II the message got home. In 1950 the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed the setting up of the European Coal and Steel Commission to cement peace between France and Germany. Coal and steel were then, after all, still the principal commodities needed to wage war. Later, the Commission evolved into the European Economic Community, and now the European Union.

However, many of the ideas that shaped the post-war world and United Nations went back to much earlier in the war. The 'Four Freedoms' were articulated by Roosevelt in his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941. These were freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from Fear. The legacy of these ideas is also pursued in the book. Freedom from want and freedom from fear became the principal definitions of what was known, following the UN *Human Development Report* of 1994, as Human Security.⁷ It is interesting that it took fifty-three years, from 1941 to 1994, for these aspects of Roosevelt's vision to coalesce into a concept of security that focusses on the individual and the family, rather than on the nation-state, its armed and security forces, and government institutions. The concept of freedom of worship is also of renewed relevance today. Roosevelt's second 'freedom' was no doubt inspired by his own knowledge of religious persecutions throughout history, but it is of renewed relevance in a world where forms of religious extremism are rife, and where in many countries freedom of worship is non-existent. It is ironic that the heirs the creators of the UN – the liberal, free-thinking countries, who promote religious tolerance, thereby place themselves at a disadvantage. Religious extremist groups exploit the freedom they are granted as a result, to promote the very opposite. Whilst Plesch does not make this point specifically, it underscores his emphasis on how the principles espoused by the 'United Nations' that won the war are still relevant, though sometimes problematic, today.

Plesch's book set out to remind us that our modern view of the UN has been distorted by the experience of the Cold War and the era of sometimes unsuccessful, sometimes disastrous intervention under the auspices of the UN that followed it. He argues persuasively, on the basis of solid research, that the UN was created and evolved with the very aims that its detractors now pursue. This has been obscured by the intervening story of the Cold War. This book is a 'must read' for every student of modern and contemporary history, international politics and international relations, and modern international policy makers.

⁶ Jan Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible?, being an Abridgement of 'The War of the Future in its Technical, Economic and Political relations'*, (Grant Richards, London, 1899).

⁷ *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1994/>, accessed 11 August 2013.

At a time when the United Nations is reviled for failing to stop the bloodshed in Syria and Eastern Congo and accused of introducing cholera into Haiti, Dan Plesch's *America, Hitler and the UN* is a welcome antidote. In an eminently readable and admirably brief fashion, Plesch reminds his readers of the often-neglected origins of the term 'United Nations' in the midst of the Second World War. This is far more than an academic argument about dating the birth of the global organization. By connecting these origins to the successful multinational alliance against Hitler in the Second World War, Plesch seeks to replace the historical association of the organization with Cold War gridlock and a lack of effectiveness. The presentist and political purpose of the book emerges when he emphasizes that close wartime cooperation "is a lesson in need of re-learning in the twenty-first century" (85). As Plesch explains further in the preface, the book grew out of his writing about the Atlantic Charter of 1941 in the face of the War on Terror in 2004: "The tragedy of our time would be that the USA and other powers stumble into further economic and military crises, ignorant of the techniques of war prevention and economic and social development learnt at such great cost in World Wars I and II" (xv). The focus on President Franklin D. Roosevelt as primary architect of the United Nations (UN) throughout the book confirms the impression that Plesch's real target audience is American. By linking the UN to the positive memories of the Second World War, to the so-called 'greatest generation,' he implicitly hopes to rekindle American interest in multinationalism, which suffered greatly in the period of President George W. Bush's *ad hoc* 'coalition of the willing.'

Plesch begins his story with the invention of the term 'United Nations' at one of those legendary marathon meetings between British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Roosevelt in late December 1941. This was followed by a 'Declaration of United Nations' in January 1942, designed to popularize the cause of the Allies *in* the war and to provide a blueprint for a comprehensive peace *after* the war, based on the principles of the Atlantic Charter (1-2). At the heart of Plesch's argument is the claim that the United Nations should be credited with winning the war by providing the glue and popularity for the wartime alliance. The root cause of the United Nations' later disrepute and unpopularity, Plesch continues, was the idea's and the organization's decline in the early Cold War. The author blames this development primarily on American "conservatives" (a term that would have benefited from further explanation in an American context) who took over after FDR's death (8-11). With that claim, Plesch implicitly aligns himself with those revisionist scholars who blame the outbreak of the Cold War on President Harry S. Truman's inexperience and lack of sophistication.¹

The book is divided into seven chapters, which highlight the origins of the effort and detail particular aspects of practical cooperation during the war. Drawing predominantly on primary sources from the United Nations and from the British National Archives, Plesch is

¹ See, for example, Arnold Offner, "'Another Such Victory': President Truman, American Foreign Policy, and the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 23.2 (1999), 127-55; Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

at his best when he focuses on the work to popularize the United Nations and on specific UN efforts and organizations, such as the work of the United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC), the relief efforts of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and the financial reorganization of the (Western) world at Bretton Woods.

Plesch provides fascinating detail on the successful efforts to propagandize the United Nations in the United States and beyond – with parades and cultural events, specially designed flags, religious services, etc. (47-57). The elaborate government propaganda efforts and the palpable public enthusiasm about the UN contrast considerably with the way the organization has been discussed during and after the Cold War. In chapters on the smaller UN bodies, Plesch clarifies that the UN was not only a propaganda exercise, but that it already spawned sub-organizations providing concrete instances of successful multi- and international cooperation during the war. The UNWCC, for example, had been created to deal with Nazi war crimes and thereby to deter further atrocities. Plesch claims that this organization, much more than the Nuremberg tribunal, was the nucleus of post-war conceptions of international laws and courts, which continue to influence our thinking about global justice. Perhaps even more interesting is his finding that the UNWCC exemplifies the role of smaller allies in the UN effort, a welcome corrective to the usual focus on the ‘Big Three.’ Countries like Poland or Czechoslovakia were instrumental in realizing its genesis, often against the skepticism of the more powerful allied nations (103, 110-1).

The work of UNRAA was another practical example of successful international cooperation during and after the war, even though Indian petitions for relief in the midst of severe famine went unanswered (124). At the same time, however, post-war help for Germany proceeded despite virulent opposition from some of the allied powers. As Plesch describes it, UNRAA was most successful in helping displaced persons after the war. Although the organization ultimately succumbed to criticism from both left and right and to internal corruption, Plesch’s ultimate verdict is positive. These chapters bolster Plesch’s central argument that the Allies in the Second World War were intent on creating a global system that would lessen the chance of future wars and help preserve global peace. As Plesch summarizes in modern-day terminology in relation to discussions about food security in 1943, “the political focus on economic, social and humanitarian issues during World War II provides a broad and far-reaching approach to global security and global governance” (87-8). Plesch thus underlines how advanced international thinking and cooperation were in the later stages of the Second World War – clearly an important and often underestimated fact in much of the historiography that focuses on the post-war era as the birthdate of the United Nations.

Despite these considerable achievements, a few questions remain, both on a methodological and a substantive level. Methodologically speaking, particularly given Plesch’s interest in U.S. attitudes, it is surprising that he did not draw more prominently on U.S. archival material, even though he does great pioneering work in using much neglected UN and UK materials. On a substantive level, one could ask whether, in his efforts to contrast wartime enthusiasm for the United Nations with contemporary apathy

or even scorn, Plesch sometimes exaggerates the former. Finally, his inquiry into the reasons for the idea's and organization's declining popularity leads the author towards a very personalized reading of early Cold War history. Essentially, Plesch argues that Roosevelt (and with him a contemporary majority of the American people) was a fervent internationalist, even backing the transfer of "the authority of Congress to declare war into the hands of the US delegate to the United Nations" (163), whereas Truman and "conservative forces" in the United States undermined this multilateralism and bore the primary responsibility for the outbreak of the Cold War (e.g. 91, 177). This point of view may have been logically required by the author's case for the birth of the United Nations in the midst of war. In the context of Cold War historiography, it echoes revisionist literature, which blames the United States for the long conflict that determined the rest of the twentieth century. Plesch's interpretation also implies that there actually was a 'golden age' of allied cooperation in the Second World War.

Yet, is this the only possible explanation of allied cooperation during the war and of the origins of the Cold War? In a more structural vein, is it not more appropriate to describe the wartime cooperation between the U.S. and the UK on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other as the exception, rather than the rule between 'capitalist' and 'communist' powers before 1945? The alliance against Hitler only papered over differences, which were bound to reassert themselves after the successful conclusion of the war. The United States initiated diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union only in 1933; mutual suspicion persisted throughout the 1930s and was only deepened by the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. In addition, the experience of UN cooperation during the war did not seem to be as harmonious as the moniker and Plesch's larger argument imply. In fact, Plesch furnishes substantial evidence illustrating how mistrust continued to color the relationship between the Western allies and Moscow. This was particularly true of the security aspects of the relationship, which Plesch discusses in the remaining chapters of the book. U.S.-UK relations throughout the war were consistently easier and closer than either nation's relations with the Soviet Union. In the chapter on Lend Lease, for example, Plesch highlights the significance of U.S. contributions to the Soviet war effort, which he interprets as "the beginning of [a] multinational and sharing culture" (62). Nevertheless, he also concedes that only one third of Lend Lease provisions went to the Soviet Union, whereas the UK received two thirds – hardly reflective of Soviet needs when they were the only force fighting Hitler on the European continent. The fact that Roosevelt was struggling to overcome domestic resistance to Lend Lease for the Russians also raises questions about a popularly-accepted 'golden age' in allied relations (83). More importantly, Plesch furnishes further indications of how the mistrust between the Allies persisted throughout the war – most prominently anchored in the discussions of a second front in Europe, which did not materialize until 1944 (92). This delay did little to allay Joseph Stalin's suspicions that his Western allies secretly welcomed the weakening of his nation in the fight against Hitler.

In his praise for Roosevelt's committed internationalism, Plesch also neglects recent works that question the extent of this commitment, above all to the principle of anti-colonialism. Plesch considers Roosevelt's backing for the idea as genuine and consequently interprets the early United Nations as being fundamentally anti-colonial. In the context of this discussion, Plesch explicitly dismisses the argument of Mark Mazowert (91), who has asked

whether it was possible “that the United Nations started out life not as the instrument to end colonialism, but rather... as the means to preserve it?”² There has also been a growing body of literature – above all in connection with U.S. support for France in the First Indochina War – that has raised doubts about Roosevelt’s anti-colonialist pledge. Mark Bradley in particular has emphasized that Roosevelt remained opposed to immediate independence for most colonial peoples, instead advocating temporary trusteeships. At least in the context of Vietnam, the advocacy of trusteeship instead of immediate independence made it easier for U.S. policymakers to reconcile themselves to the return of the French. Findings such as these complicate assessments of Roosevelt’s commitment to the abrogation of colonialism in the UN framework.³

These thoughts do not necessarily weaken Plesch’s argument, but they raise the question in how far the wartime alliance really was the nucleus of potential post-war cooperation. Structurally speaking, it is equally possible that the extreme circumstances of the war forced partners into an alliance of necessity rather than choice. Once the emergency subsided, old suspicions reasserted themselves, putting the continued success of the United Nations in serious doubt. In this more structural reading of the turn from the wartime alliance to the post-war era, it seems too one-sided to blame only Harry Truman. Stalin had not shown much of a commitment to multilateral cooperation in the post-war era either. By the same token, Plesch’s argument about Roosevelt’s commitment to the UN seems exaggerated at times. This is also true for the plan to transfer constitutional war powers to the UN. In all likelihood, if realized at all, this idea would have applied only to very specific and closely circumscribed cases of international aggression. The *Washington Post* editorialist Merlo Pusey, whom Plesch cites in this context (186), also considered Roosevelt’s 1944 statement as too vague to serve as a clear guide to his intentions. Pusey concluded: “Mr. Roosevelt has not committed himself to an attempt to transfer the war power from Congress to a delegate who would be responsible to the President.”⁴

² Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 30-1.

³ Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and “Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and US Exceptionalism: Reconsidering the American Vision of Postcolonial Vietnam,” in Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco, eds., *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 130-145. Anne Foster, “Before the War: Legacies from the Early Twentieth Century in United States-Vietnam Relations,” in Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco, eds., *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2002). On the debate concerning Roosevelt’s preferences, compare also Mark Atwood Lawrence, “Explaining the Early Decisions: The United States and the French War, 1945-1954,” in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25-29. Even more strongly, Robert J. McMahon has suggested that Roosevelt had shifted course in late 1944, no longer opposing “the reimposition of colonial rule in Southeast Asia,” “Harry S. Truman and the Roots of U.S. Involvement in Indochina, 1945-1953,” in David L. Anderson, ed., *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 23.

⁴ Pusey, “Delegate’s Powers,” *Washington Post*, October 31, 1944, 7

But even if the extent of UN wartime cooperation is perhaps exaggerated at times, Plesch has made a significant contribution to the discussion of the origins of the United Nations. In the process, he has uncovered a long-forgotten story that connects the UN to the positive story of the Allied victory in the Second World War. Perhaps most importantly in an age of increasing skepticism towards multilateral and international cooperation, the book reminds us that even the most powerful nations need allies and that such cooperation yields beneficial results for all and may even help preserve the peace.

Dan Plesch's book is of great significance, not only because the story it recounts is largely forgotten, or because he makes a plausible case that idea of the 'United Nations' played an essential role in the allied victory, but also because the book may trigger a revitalization of the history of global international organizations, something that would be particularly useful at this time when there is a critical need for more reflective and thoughtful global governance.

America, Hitler and the UN argues that the modern United Nations (UN) system grew directly from the wartime alliance against Adolf Hitler. In late 1941 and early 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill made a number of critical decisions about how to organize the anti-fascist alliance after the attack on Pearl Harbor. They named the alliance – which included the U.S. and its Latin American allies in addition to the British Empire, its Dominions, and the Soviet Union – the “United Nations” and they pledged the UN to create a postwar world in which the people's currently under occupation, and even the German and the Japanese people, would be guaranteed a much better life. This idea had been outlined in Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address, the “Four Freedoms” speech, in which Roosevelt proposed four fundamental freedoms that everyone in the world should enjoy: freedom of speech and worship and from want and fear.

Plesch convincingly demonstrates that the United Nations idea actually motivated much of the alliance's activities throughout the war including the massive campaign of humanitarian assistance to newly-liberated areas through the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), an extensive system of war crimes' tribunals throughout the liberated areas (something that extended well beyond the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials), and an extensive, global propaganda campaign including UN parades, celebration of UN Day, and the flying of the original UN flag: four vertical red bars on a white field, each bar representing one of the Four Freedoms.

Plesch's story of the wartime United Nations is all but unknown to most of those living in Britain, the United States, Russia, Germany, or Japan today, which is one reason the book is so important. Nonetheless, it is equally important to recognize that the story had *not* been forgotten by many of those who work inside the UN system, especially in the development field. In the early part of the last decade when Kofi Annan, the only UN Secretary General to come up through the ranks of the international civil service, attempted a massive, system-wide reform, he (and his Deputy, Mark Malloch-Brown, also someone with a long UN-system career) framed their entire proposal within Roosevelt's Four Freedoms.

Nor have most historians of the international development system or of the United Nations forgotten this history. Even a cursory reading of the volumes from the recent UN history project will confirm the mainstream understanding by historians of the UN and the histories of various UN development agencies (such as Maggie Black's studies of UNICEF or

my own work on the UN Development Programme)¹ make very clear the connection between the UN development system, the UNRRA, and other aspects of the wartime alliance, especially the Middle East Supply Center (MESC). The wartime United Nations provided much of the staff, organizational models, procedures, and even the funding for the early UN development system.

Nevertheless, the connection between the wartime United Nations and the system of today is not widely understood by historians outside of these relatively narrow fields, as evidenced by the reception of Mark Mazower's important Lawrence Stone Lectures.² Few of the reviews in general publications identified Mazower's argument -- which emphasizes the degree to which the colonial powers involved in negotiating the UN Charter shaped the postwar organization in order to help preserve empire -- as something of a revisionist account of the origins of the UN that contrasts with those accounts that (incorrectly) see an unbroken continuity between the Four Freedoms and the consistent advocacy of decolonization and development in the General Assembly and the Secretariat since the early 1960s.³ *America, Hitler and the UN* does not contradict Mazower's thesis, but Plesch's book would have been stronger if it had discussed how the negotiation of the Charter led to its protection of the oligarchy of the great powers and its attempt to preserve the imperial system.

What Plesch understands extremely well is the importance of the larger United Nations idea during the war and immediately after. The Four Freedoms, the vision of a better world, helped rally Europe at the point of Nazi Germany's greatest advance. It provided the ideological basis for the postwar agreement among the non-communist victors to support each other's welfare state policies even while pursuing a more liberal international economic order -- the system that John Ruggie calls "embedded liberalism," the system that helped assure the widespread, relatively egalitarian economic growth throughout the OECD in the three decades following the war.⁴ The UN idea also gave hope to oppressed peoples and to governments in Latin America and in the colonized nations. It also set the stage for bitter resentment on the part of the wartime generation throughout the

¹ Maggie Black, *The Children and the Nations* (New York: Unicef, 1986); Maggie Black, *The Story of Unicef, Past, Present, and Future* (New York: United Nations, 1998); Craig N. Murphy, *UNDP: A Better Way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

³ This argument is found both in memoirs of US officials such as Mason Sears, *Years of High Purpose* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980) as well as in the account of the UN's history provided in Secretary General Kofi Annan's plan for the organization's future, Kofi Annan, *In Larger Freedom: Toward Security, Development, and Human Rights for All* (New York: United Nations, 2005).

⁴ One of the best assessments of the continuing value of Ruggie's analysis is Andrew T. F. Lang, "Reconstructing Embedded Liberalism: John Gerard Ruggie and Constructivist Approaches to the Study of International Trade," in *Embedding Global Markets: An Enduring Challenge*, John Gerard Ruggie, ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 13-45.

developing world when their expectations were not met, as I discovered when researching *The Emergence of the NIEO Ideology*.⁵ Finally, the wartime UN provided the institutional foundations not only for the postwar UN development and humanitarian systems, but also for the international legal system that now holds even (some) national leaders accountable violating their citizens' right to freedom from fear (but, not yet, for violating their rights to the other three freedoms).

The book is not just significant because it is bringing these important stories to a much larger public. Plesch's well-written narrative and the lively, engaging way he discusses his sources, his detective work, and the historian's craft will be especially attractive to undergraduates and to younger scholars and will, through them, lead to a revitalization of scholarship on mid-twentieth century international organizations. The book comes at a time when many of the documents needed to make the connections among the prewar, wartime, and postwar international organization systems are becoming much more accessible through new electronic tools such as the League of Nations Search Engine,⁶ through better models of how to use the materials in multiple languages that appear in the documents of the wartime trials, such as the work of Yuma Totani,⁷ and through the new accessibility of massive collections of personal papers such as those at Columbia and Oxford universities of Sir Robert G. A. Jackson, who played a central role in MESC, UNRRA, the early years of the Secretariat, and the operation of the UN development system almost until his death in 1991.

There are other, larger questions that scholars of the global history of the mid-twentieth century, inspired by Plesch, need to address. First, it is important to reexamine the wartime United Nations, and the promise that Churchill and Roosevelt made through the UN idea, from the standpoint of people in the colonized world. Pankaj Mishra has recently argued that, for all the horror of Japan's occupation throughout the war, Japanese victories over Western imperial powers did more to shape the worldviews that ultimately defeated colonialism than did any one set of ideas invented in the West.⁸ In the future, Kofi Annan's (unsuccessful) UN reforms may be remembered as the first *serious* attempt to make the Four Freedoms something that actually apply to all of humanity. Annan's program was, of course, defeated by one country, the United States, with the grudging support of its closest allies in the "War on Terror" -- something in keeping with a pattern that goes back to 1946. *America, Hitler and the UN* was written, in part, to remind Americans and their allies their governments once espoused a different vision of world order, perhaps with the hope reviving that wartime vision. If that was the hope, I suspect it was unfounded. Yet, if any

⁵ Craig N. Murphy, *The Emergence of the NIEO Ideology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984).

⁶ League of Nations Search Engine, <http://www.lonsea.de>.

⁷ Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2008).

⁸ Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

book retelling that wartime history could have that power, it would be this one.

Author's Response by Dan Plesch, Director, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS, University of London

I would like to thank H-Diplo, and especially Thomas Maddux for his kind patience in bringing this roundtable review to fruition. I am delighted by the responses from Chris Bellamy, Fabian Hilfrich and Craig Murphy, and welcome the opportunity for further debate.

It is possible that I exaggerate President Franklin D. Roosevelt's internationalism and underplay the structural dynamics that led the U.S. and USSR to be allies against a mutual enemy and then to fall out soon after. What I hope I have argued throughout *America, Hitler and the UN* is that U.S. support for the anti-Axis cause was not a certainty and that pro-German and pro-Nazi views in the U.S. before and during the war were far more influential than is convenient to recall today. I cannot reprise the argument here, but Roosevelt himself was pretty blunt, not least in his November 1944 addresses in which he pointed to the Congressional Republican opposition both to the League of Nations and then to all his numerous attempts to stand up to the dictators. He poured particular scorn on those red-baiters who sought to smear anyone supporting progressive approaches, either at home or in foreign policy. From the mid-1930s onwards, Roosevelt's repeated attempts to move against the dictators were opposed in Congress by those who did not see the dictators as a problem or saw socialism and communism as the greater threat at home and abroad.

Hilfrich argues that Roosevelt did not really mean it when, at the height of the 1944 election, he proposed transferring the Congressional power to make war to the U.S. envoy to the United Nations (UN). Hilfrich may be correct, but we will never know. My point though is that we can demonstrate that Roosevelt used this argument to effectively rally support in the election when he was facing criticism that he was little more than a Soviet agent; a tune that had been playing for a decade. Rather than trim and evade, Roosevelt chose to raise the internationalist stakes and secured victory, not least because of the way he shaped the debate.

The issue of the genuine nature of Roosevelt's anti-colonialism, and how far there was a shift in favour of Empire in the fall of 1944, certainly deserves greater attention. I was startled, though, to find that the U.S. proposal on decolonisation, which I quote at some length, was repeatedly thrust by Roosevelt on the British. It contained a proposal that timetables be established for full de-colonisation of the European Empires, but has been overlooked. For example, Mark Mazower's *No Enchanted Palace* does not discuss it.¹ It is one thing to argue that making trusteeships of colonies would not bring effective change, but the inclusion of

¹ Mark Mazower does not mention this paper of FDR's in his *No Enchanted Palace, The end of Empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

timetables, I think, changes the analysis. As Craig Murphy points out, the expectation created by Roosevelt has a lasting and bitter ending, but this is disillusionment came after his death.

I sought to argue that there was a great shift away from multilateral internationalism to bi-lateral anti-communist internationalism under President Harry Truman, and I cite Secretary of State James Byrnes making exactly the argument that the U.S. should deal directly and bi-laterally with states in reference to Truman's change of policy on the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). I assume that Roosevelt must have known that Truman was likely to take policy in this direction at some point in the course of his fourth term, but, we may suppose, expected to be able to live long enough to set the course of the peace more firmly than he did.

To my mind, having worked around Capitol Hill for the best part of two decades in the 1980s and 1990s, it is not credible that Truman was an *ingénu*. He chaired the Senate's Lend Lease Committee. In this role he voted to use Lend Lease to provide France with a huge loan in February 1945, an act which the *Wall Street Journal* opined should not be repeated with the Soviet Union as it was less deserving.² What is surprising to my mind is that Truman's experience on the Lend Lease Committee is not more closely linked to the analysis of his actions in the abrupt termination of the programme.

I came across the wartime UN by accident, having been an avid student of the war as a youth, even corresponding in the 1960s with one of Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery's generals. I was, and am, startled by the removal of the UN from almost all histories of the war, especially given how many sources have long been in the public domain. The overlooked evidence of the wartime UN also pointed me to surprises in U.S.-Soviet relations. Far from Roosevelt getting nothing from Joseph Stalin in return for Lend Lease (other than the defeat of the Wehrmacht, of course), one can point to the restoration of religion, the closure of the Comintern, the joining of the capitalist economic order at Bretton Woods. Also, Bulgaria, Finland, Poland, Romania and Hungary did not simply become absorbed as Soviet Socialist Republics like the Baltic states.

The development of the UN Charter has been the subject of many studies. To my mind, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles's notes on Roosevelt's concentration on the role of the major powers in the discussions at the Atlantic Charter meeting show his core concern as to the nature of the future organisation. The fact that he only 'came out' for this after D-Day indicates not reluctance, but rather astute political timing, having since 1942 done everything he could to prepare to ground.

² I refer to this in Chapter 7, fn 31: 'Lend-Lease Beyond War', *Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 1945, 6.

Murphy hopes, as I do, that a restoration of the idea of internationalism as necessity rather than accessory will have some traction in public policy. This has started to happen. I am delighted to have been able to develop the United Nations War Crimes Commission Project (www.unwcc.org) and am honoured to be guest editing the 25th Anniversary special issue of the journal *Criminal Law Forum*. This forms part of a broader project Wartime History for the Future UN which I am leading with Professor Thomas G. Weiss of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and which will produce a volume with this title next year. I offer a range of info-graphics for the use of students and faculty alike. I have also been delighted to work with the Wiener Library in London on the overlooked UN Declaration on the Persecution of the Jews. The project with CUNY was launched at London's Lancaster House and received a message of support from the UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon. We are also working with the Roosevelt Centre in the Netherlands on research projects to mark the seventieth anniversaries of Dumbarton Oaks and Bretton Woods.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.