

Plesch, Dan: *America, Hitler and the Un. How the Allies Won World War II and Forged a Peace*. London: I.B. Tauris 2010. ISBN: 9781848853089; 256 S.

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The beginnings of the United Nations trace back to January 1942 and not to 1945. This is the main conclusion of Dan Plesch's book on the origins of the UN. In contrast to conventional narratives, his study convincingly demonstrates that the notion and a part of the idea of the UN were already discussed and employed in the propaganda machine of the Allies to fight the Axis powers, particularly in US politics and media. Based on research in the UN archives, Dan Plesch, director of the Centre for International Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), provides an informative and enriching study on the origins of the „world organisation“.

The book is structured into an introduction, eight main chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 depicts the United States before the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and the following chapter deals with the entrance of the US into the war with the Axis powers, which constitutes the „creation of the United Nations“ for Plesch. In chapter 3 the book addresses mostly the Lend-Lease Act, with which US allies, including the Soviets, were supplied with weapons funded by the US taxpayers. In the following chapter (4), Plesch analyses the US effort to guarantee international support for the anti-Axis coalition at the gatherings in Casablanca and Tehran. While chapter 5 tackles the United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC) as an important, even though largely forgotten, institution to address war atrocities, chapter 6 deals with the more known United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to organise transborder tasks particularly in freed territories and prepare post-war reconstruction. The famous Bretton Woods and Havana conferences, which ushered in the creation of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, are the subjects of chapter 7. Finally, Plesch explains the security dimensi-

on at the conferences of Dumbarton Oaks, Yalta and San Francisco before he concludes his study.

Plesch offers an enriching and well-researched study on the origins of the UN and compliments other contributions on the history of the United Nations¹, the legacy of the League of Nations², the background of the UN Declaration of Human Rights³, and the diplomatic surroundings of the UN creation⁴, just to name a few.

Dan Plesch's starting point is that the „wartime UN“ has largely been forgotten because „it needed a new start in 1945, a UN born out of the 'ashes of war'" (p. 8). The political climate in the United States had changed in the late 1940s when it was inopportune to argue that the US, the British and the Soviets had been planning the UN together (p. 9). On the 28 December 1941, 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 (p. 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“ (p. 31).

After Roosevelt had led political „celebrations“ internationally, „...the ideas of the United Nations became embedded in wartime civilian culture, especially in the USA“ (p. 31). The outlook of the wartime „United Nations“ was debated mostly between the US, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. Once it was accepted, military communiqués and official statements in the US and Great Britain frequently referred to the United Nations (pp. 32, 36, 40ff).

¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man. The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations*, New York 2006.

² Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton 2009.

³ Roger Normand/Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN. The Political History of Universal Justice*. (= United Nations Intellectual History Project Series), Bloomington 2008.

⁴ Stephen Schlesinger, *Act of Creation. The Founding of the United Nations: The Untold Story of the Founding of the United Nations*, Boulder 2003.

Plesch quotes US President Truman, who praised the defeat of the Axis powers as a „victory for the United Nations“. But is it appropriate to regard the „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 US, Britain and the USSR, as „United Nations“ to support their cause morally. This was deemed necessary by Roosevelt to convince the isolationists and the public in the US of the need to take action, particularly with regard to the Lend-Lease agreement, with which the US supported the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, China and other Allies with material.

The author describes the UN Information Board as the first multinational UN organisation with an international staff and budget, which was already established in mid-1942. It was headquartered in New York City and in charge of information and „propaganda“ (p. 50). This passage can be seen as either a confirmation of Plesch’s pre-1945 UN thesis or as an illustration that the „United Nations“ before the 1945 Charter was signed constituted not much more than a public diplomacy tool to generate support for the war effort. Were it just this example alone, I would go for the second interpretation. However, there are other institutions, the better known was certainly the UNRRA (founded in 1943 by 44 nations), although the London-based UN War Crimes Commission (also created in 1943 by 17 countries) is also worth mentioning. Plesch possibly tends to overestimate the latter’s influence, which to some extent can only be postulated as its archives are apparently not entirely open (p. 101) leading to the nurturing of all kinds of scepticism. Nevertheless, the Nuremberg Trials and Tokyo Trials did have a strong impact on the public and the work of the UN-WCC was pioneering. Overall, this study convincingly demonstrates that the War Crimes Commission’s work needs to be re-evaluated and inserted into accounts on „universal justice“. Furthermore, it seems correct that the premature end of the UNRRA and the following promotion of the Marshall Plan were the main reasons why the institution has largely been forgotten by the public (pp. 120, 138). Accordingly, Plesch may be right when he as-

esses that the „...work of UNRRA should be used more fully in contemporary discussion of post-conflict reconstruction and international aid“ (p. 139).

Plesch admits that the idea of a general United Nations organisation for the coordination of military and economic matters encountered resistance from the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union until the very end of the war (p. 166)⁵. So, again, was the tale of the UN before 1945 rather a propaganda success story than the birth of the United Nations Organisation? Plesch certainly has a point, although to date the UN as we know it back to 1942 would seem a bit too adventurous. The planning of the United Nations certainly can be traced back to 1942, but then the ideas of the League of Nations must also be considered as ideological background for the UN.

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⁵ „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“ (p. 166).