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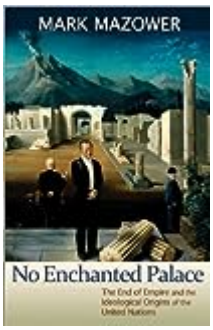

Mark Mazower. *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 236 S. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13521-2.

Reviewed by J. P. Daughton (Stanford University)

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Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

United but Conflicted: Internationalism, Imperialism, and the Origins of the United Nations

Few major institutions working today have a mandate more open to debate–and more susceptible to criticism from left, right, and center–than the United Nations (UN). It seems that everyone, from journalists and commentators to politicians and religious figures, has an opinion about the UN. News magazines, scholarly journals, and cable news channels freely portray the UN as a defender of universal human rights, an outmoded relic of the Cold War, or a tool of neoliberal imperialism. Its blue-helmeted peacekeepers are as often praised as heroes as they are scoffed at as symbols of the international communityâs complete inefficacy. Depending on whom you ask, the UN is a champion, a failure, a pariah. Many call to reform it; some to abolish it. No one seems entirely happy with the UN just the way it is.

Mark Mazowerâs provocative new book, *No Enchanted Palace*, suggests that the radically different interpretations of the UNâs value in world affairs today stem largely from the organizationâs own conflicted history. Central to Mazowerâs argument is that scholars and commentators have for too long imagined the UN as a creation of the post-â45 Cold War world. Instead, he argues that the ideological origins of the UN grew out of the concerns of European empires–especially Britainâs–in the interwar years. Looming large here is the predecessor to the UN, the League of Nations. By considering the long pedigree of internationalism, the history of the UN ceases to be solely about superpower (and especially American) politics and emerges as a story about the struggle to defend European hegemony in an era when empires were becoming politically and morally untenable.

Mazower, a distinguished historian of modern Europe, is best known for his epic studies of subjects ranging from the dynamics of Nazi rule to the history of Salonica; but in this book he shows himself equally adept at the art of the historical essay. *No Enchanted Palace* is nicely paced, with four short vignettes designed to reveal the hidden complexities of the origins of the UN. It is certainly not a complete institutional history; rather, the book focuses on a number of key figures and moments that shaped the UNâs rhetoric and offers some insights into what the future might hold for it.

At the heart of Mazowerâs argument are the paradoxes of internationalism, the concept that became increasingly popular in the first decades of the twentieth century. Ironically, in its early forms, internationalism more often than not was employed to defend the interests of nationalists, particularly white settlers in the British Empire who saw the League of Nations as a useful means to defend the primacy of European civilization against the mounting critics of imperialism. Key to this pursuit was Jan Smuts, the South African premier and advocate for racial segregation who was both formative in the League of Nations and helped draft the UNâs rousing preamble after the Second World War. Smuts saw the British Commonwealth as a model for what both the League and the UN could achieve: a form of government in which free, independent states were united by a shared belief in the power of European (and later âWesternâ) civilization. Such a vision of international cooperation made possible the creation of the League, an institution that welcomed involvement from non-Europeans while also defending the legitimacy of colonial rule.

The defense of empire was no less pressing for people like Smuts after the fall of Adolf Hitler when many founders of the new UN admitted that the organization was essentially a continuation of the League. But the UNâs initial support of empire was short-lived. By the late 1940s, Jawaharlal Nehru had emerged as the major critic of the Smutsian vision of a pro-imperial UN. The duel between Nehru and Smuts–ostensibly over ethnic Indiansâ rights in segregated South Africa, but really over the âsoul of the UNâ (p. 171)–makes for the most engaging reading of the book. Nehruâs ultimate triumph signaled a major shift in the trajectory of the UN and the emergence of a new vision of world order. A strong Asian lobby within the organization that denounced racism and colonialism undermined the primacy of European civilization in international affairs. Europeâs empires, once at the forefront of internationalist efforts, now found themselves in the minority. And with every colony that gained independence, Europeâs hold on the UN lessened even more.

Lest one think that the turn against empire was triumphant for the organization, Mazower cautions that âthe price for this globalization of membership was a high one–an excessive deference to the sovereignty of member states, an inability to live up to the UNâs own professed ideals, a sharp and growing gulf between the Security Council and the General Assembly–in short, increasing marginalization from world eventsâ (p. 189). The Cold War, in Mazowerâs assessment, helped hide many of the UNâs shortcomings. But once it ended, the organizationâs ideals were exposed for what they were: âdreams of a past that never existed and a poor guide to what might lie aheadâ (p. 189).

The most revisionist aspect of the book is Mazowerâs partial resuscitation of the League of Nations, so long dismissed by scholars and pundits as a failure. While in no way naÃ¯ve about the many shortcomings of the League, Mazower does suggest that its firmer commitment to international law in dealing with difficult issues like minority rights may well have been preferable–even in their failures–to the empty rhetoric and endless politicking surrounding the same issues at the UN. Time and again, the UN backed down from taking a hard line on the very ideals it promoted. Early on, it avoided a commitment to minority rights out of deference for national sovereignty. Despite Raphael Lemkinâs unwavering efforts, the Genocide Convention was ultimately watered down; the toughest clause that made âcultural genocideâ a crime was removed, in large part because too many major players feared being brought before an international court. Similar reservations kept the UN from adopting a human rights regime with any real legal ramifications, despite the much-heralded 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The organizationâs core values make for excellent fodder for inspiring speeches but in practice often fall far short of changing national policies or accepted norms of behavior.

While *No Enchanted Palace* convincingly exposes the hollowness of the UNâs rhetoric and ideals, it is not entirely pessimistic about the future. Mazower notes that one of the UNâs most redeeming qualities is its ability to reinvent itself. Though it has failed in many of its efforts–to defend European imperialism; to continue the alliance forged between the Allies after the Second World War; to solve minority rights issues; and to stop the horrors of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Darfur–it still has not met defeat. Its marginality on the world stage, Mazower concludes, has served it well, allowing it to evolve slowly with the times. Calls to revolutionize the organization now, he warns, are doomed to end in failure.

No Enchanted Palace is a model of the new international history. Forceful and engaged, it will likely provoke a wide range of readers. Certainly, some will take issue with Mazowerâs bolder assertions–about the primacy of empire, the centrality of Britain, and the relative unimportance of the Cold War in shaping the UN–but his erudition demands a more nuanced reassessment of the UN from scholars and the general public alike. Short,

readable, and challenging, *No Enchanted Palace* would make an ideal book for courses on internationalism, empire, global politics, and human rights.