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International Organizations

Margot Tudor

This chapter traces the evolution of historical writing on international organizations (IOs), laying out more traditional approaches before turning to more recent historical scholarship that focuses on the political agency and operations of IOs themselves. I argue that this recent scholarship has helped to uncover a plurality of ideological projects concealed within the "black box" bureaucracies of IOs. International histories of IOs have situated these organizations within broader contexts (such as decolonization, the Cold War, etc.) as well as through interactions with activists and communities around the world in order to better understand international relations beyond nation-state powers.

Moving beyond narratives that have focused on formal resolution or on debates centered in Europe or North America, recent scholarship has put IOs (and those who are employed by them) center stage in many international histories. These histories have taken a global approach to the *practices* of IOs, investigating IO employees (beyond leadership) seriously as historical agents with their own political agendas, prejudices, and – continually negotiated – powers beyond the diplomatic sphere of their headquarters. In turn, they have shown that IOs are historically contingent, reactive spaces that often emerged – as Hannah Arendt observed about the rush to establish new rights and protections in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust – only once

there was sufficient global urgency to formally recognize human rights *after* they had *already* been violated.[1]

Following a brief overview of the history of IOs and older historiographical trends, this chapter focuses on three key IO activities to which international historians recently have attended. These speak to the breadth and power of liberal IOs' agency in shaping the international order from the ground up. The first section, "Protecting," looks at the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and explores how the organization was designed to protect European combatants both legally and medically. In the second section, "Professionalizing," I explore how IO officials marketed themselves as valuable experts or technocrats on the basis of a Eurocentrist understanding of modernity and statehood. In turn, this legitimized IOs as the perfect conduits for issues of collective security and international conflict. Finally, in the third section on "Developing," I explore how IOs mobilized their professional credentials to design international development interventions across the decolonizing Global South. Even as IOs became increasingly staffed by officials from postcolonial states, employees dismissed "local" knowledge while upholding white supremacist and West-centered hegemony.

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Shocken Books, 1951).

The Emergence of IOs

With their roots in interstate developments of the mid nineteenth century, IOs are fundamentally modern. Arguably, the ICRC was the first modern IO, following the drafting of the 1864 Geneva Conventions, which established conventions for the treatment of the wounded in wartime. It helped popularize a shared international terminology of humanitarianism and associated legal practices that nevertheless allowed states to go to war.[2]

In the early twentieth century, war was again at the heart of discussions about IOs, but the focus shifted from amelioration to deterrence. In the aftermath of the First World War, which devastated much of Europe and resulted in the dissolution of the Ottoman, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian empires, governments from across the world – led by the Allied "Big Four," Britain, France, US, and Italy – agreed on the need for mechanisms to ensure peaceful relations, replacing the nineteenth-century system of secret treaties and alliances. The first iteration of such an institution was the League of Nations, founded in January 1920 during the Paris Peace Conference. Many of its key principles – including the principle of national self-determination – were adopted from US President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points," even though the US itself never ultimately became a member of the League. Wilson was a liberal internationalist – someone who believed a

[2] Melanie Oppenheimer, James Crossland, and Neville Wylie, eds., *The Red Cross Movement: Myths, Practices and Turning Points* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

world government like the League would provide a vital diplomatic space for the negotiation of new national borders in Europe, protect the freedom of the seas, and allow democratic governments to flourish.

In practice, the League's influence was limited. Wilson saw the League as a means to ensure international commitment to collective security: In basic terms, if one signatory was attacked, all members would react. Beyond strengthening the states' commitment to the League, this principle was also supposed to deter future wars. But in practice, this proved elusive. The League had few mechanisms for preventing such conflicts: It did not have its own militarized force, and its voting systems often left it hamstrung. Moreover, the unequal treaties that ended the First World War, taken in conjunction with the worldwide Great Depression, led many states to reembrace the notion of territorial expansion. Indeed, there were numerous wars, interventions, and invasions during the short life of the League, some of which involved one or more League members (notably the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935).

The formation of the United Nations after the outbreak of the Second World offered another chance at global governance and the preservation of Western colonial power in the chaos of the postwar moment. It was born of the wartime alliance between Britain, France, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The UN's different structures were intended to make up for the League's earlier weaknesses. For example, the creation of the Security Council, with a mix of permanent and rotating members, was intended to prevent impasses in the General Assembly. However, the fact that the

Security Council's permanent members were the Allied powers – who had the power to veto any Security Council resolutions – also marked this IO as a performance of victor's justice. The uneven politics of this instrument were already unpopular in 1945, and many member states (even those on the Security Council) believed it was only a temporary measure. Yet, as the Cold War swiftly fractured the tenuous postwar alliance between the Allied powers, most notably rupturing ties between the US and USSR, reshaping the Security Council went from being a topic for a future agenda to a political impossibility.

The Security Council was far from the only place where national interests impeded international cooperation in the UN. As early as 1943, the nascent UN took on the responsibility for the reconstruction of Europe through the creation of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which was intended to support displaced European populations through repatriation or resettlement. On the one hand, the work of UNRRA built on League of Nations activities, including its attempts to define national "minorities" and "majorities." On the other hand, it signaled that the UN intended to expand IO remits. It helped set the parameters for additional IO activities, particularly those undertaken in the name of human rights, refugees, and economic development (as discussed later). Post-1945 IOs like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) built upon decades of technocratic internationalism, developed under the auspices of the ICRC, the League of Nations, and other transnational organizations. But, as scholarship

has increasingly emphasized, they also drew on colonial practices that embedded systems of inequality and framed some peoples and markets as more or less civilized in order to make them targets of IO expertise and agency.

State of the Field

In recent decades, historical scholarship on modern IOs has proliferated. Traditional historiographies of IOs were limited to two main approaches: histories of member states acting within UN forums and histories of IO leaders (predominantly elite men) and their decision-making. This approach was due to histories of IOs, like international history itself, evolving from diplomatic studies. Paul Kennedy's *The Parliament of Man* exemplifies this approach.[3] Such historiography unsurprisingly retained – and reproduced – a fixation on the nation-state as the main ordering unit of the international political community. This has shaped the types of histories written (typically top-down) as well as the conclusions drawn about the agency, influence, and diversity of IOs. Prominent works in the 2000s and early 2010s thoroughly documented the diplomatic functions and cosmopolitan inequalities of IO headquarters and council forums since the mid nineteenth century.

Subsequent works by Akire Iriye, Mark Mazower, Erez Manela, and Patricia Clavin, among others, revealed how international forums such as the League of Nations

[3] Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (Random House, 2006).

and the UN actually reinforced international inequalities, providing fertile platforms for colonial power and the protection of Eurocentric forms of hegemony during periods of global conflict and reinvention.[4] As much as Wilson insisted on self-determination for Europe, he – and his fellow Big Four leaders – also supported the continued operation (and profit) of *their own* empires from the collapse of others. Susan Pedersen has shown in her critical work on the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) how League negotiations over colonial territories beyond Europe were swiftly reappropriated, mirroring the 1884 Berlin Conference that carved up Africa among European powers.[5] The League mandates system established a tiered system which was graded (A, B, C) by the perceived ability of local populations to self-govern. The PMC made European colonial powers "trustees" for the former colonies of Germany and the Ottoman Empire, so rather than giving local peoples across the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific independence, they were subsumed into existing empires as mandates with differing degrees of self-government. As Pedersen shows, rather than consistently applying the Wilsonian principle of self-determination to places beyond Europe, the League of

[4] Akira Iriye, *Global Community* (University of California Press, 2004); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[5] Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Nations designated territories such as Palestine and Cameroon as mandates or "protectorates" of Allied colonial powers without their consent.

Pedersen and Sunil Amrith also were responsible for more broadly urging scholars to rethink the role of IOs in international history. The introduction to their special issue of *Journal of World History*, "New Histories of the United Nations," rethought the history of IOs in the twentieth century, tracing ways in which the League of Nations was actually successful – for example in creating the predecessors to the Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization. They also urged scholars to look at the UN and its parts as both arenas of, and actors within, international relations – a point taken forward by Eva-Maria Muschik in her work on IOs and decolonization.[6]

Increasingly, scholarship influenced by interdisciplinary debates has taken a more critical view on IOs and their role in national and global politics. The transnational or global turn sought to challenge understanding of supposedly fixed ordering categories, opening more conceptual or thematic approaches to global networks and political connections beyond the diplomatic interactions of state governments. A vibrant subfield of recent scholarship on IOs thus has focused on actors that operated within or across liminal spaces between the scales of national and international, such as transnational

[6] Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga, "New Histories of the United Nations," *Journal of World History* 19, no. 3 (2008): 251–74; Eva-Maria Muschik, *Building States: The United Nations, Development, and Decolonization, 1945–1965* (Colombia University Press, 2022).

activists, refugees or displaced people, healthcare workers, and humanitarian organizations. By shining light on these liminal historical agents, new approaches to IOs have similarly considered how to contextualize different levels, functions, and ideological interests of IOs outside of headquarters offices. This scholarship has been integral in shaping the new generation of international history that has focused on IOs as historical subjects themselves: exploring internal tensions, recruitment biases, and political evolution within the global bureaucratic structure. By building upon the proliferation of postglobal-turn scholarship, these new international histories have sought to bring nuance to the study of IOs, contextualizing organizational logics, practices, and developments within major geopolitical or regional shifts of the time. In short, they have approached these organizations as *part* of international history rather than as just forums for state actors or apolitical sites of global governance.

Nevertheless, a lacuna remains: there remains a tendency to frame IOs and their staffs as largely impotent actors who have struggled to impose checks upon bellicose states, promoting the assumption that IOs and their staff were weak, rather than, as has often been the case, broadly empowered by – and indeed, structured to exceptionalize – Western state interests. In turn, this has trapped scholars in the minutiae of Global North headquarter forums, conferences, or meetings. In the following sections, I demonstrate how perspectives potentially change when we move into the "field" – thinking about how IOs actually functioned internationally and what, in turn, their impacts were for many people living across the world. This, in turn, reveals fundamental tensions between the

rhetoric and practice of IOs, showing the deep embeddedness of Western imperial legacies.

Protecting

Returning to their early origins, we see a long history of "protecting" as a key modus operandi for IOs. The ICRC functioned as the first modern IO. From its origin in 1864, the ICRC was designed as an IIO, working in collaboration with state militaries, recruiting European military figures in committee leadership, and receiving most of its funding from member states.[7] It popularized humanitarianism as a legalistic practice that was compatible with states' militaries. The ICRC originated from Swiss businessman Henri Dunant's travels through the violent aftermath of the Battle of Solferino, during the Second Italian War of Independence (1859). Dunant proposed to European leaders a two-pronged approach for a new humanitarian organization: First, to establish legal protections for combatants and any medics or nurses, and second, to establish a volunteer relief agency that would provide medical relief to all combatants injured in conflict.

For Dunant and his allies, "saving" lives was about making war a more "humane" endeavor rather than about the pursuit of pacifism or ending war itself. Within a decade of the publication of Dunant's memoir *A Memory of Solferino*, the symbol of the red

[7] Cedric Cotter and Daniel Palmieri, "A Special Relationship? The Military Origins of the International Committee of the Red Cross," in Margot Tudor and Brian Drohan, eds., *Military Humanitarianism: Histories and Practices* (Cornell University Press, 2026).

cross on a white background had become recognizable across the world, frequently included in late nineteenth-century paintings and battle reports. The red cross "evoked romanticized ideas about battlefield medical aid in the harshest of conditions."[8] The ICRC also – by virtue of promoting its own efficacy – served to frame state militaries as "civilized," law-abiding, and respectful belligerents. In a period of pervasive imperial conflicts between European, Russian, and Ottoman empires – and frequent skirmishes with guerilla groups – complying with international humanitarian law promised a practical form of moral and legal accountability for European armies that was also weaponized into racialized claims of civilizational supremacy. It was this ICRC propaganda of a protected "humanitarian space on the battlefield" that forged assumptions of European traditional militaries honorably protecting medics whilst "barbarous" enemy forces (often racialized or anticolonial forces) were censured for violating this space and targeting humanitarian staff. Early IO activities thus were far from apolitical.

This era of ICRC popularity and influence, however, was intentionally limited to the protection of European populations. Most of the signatories to the 1864 Geneva Conventions were also colonial powers who were deeply involved in territorial conquest and the exploitation and extraction of cheap labor and resources in the colonies. The

[8] Shai M. Dromi, *Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 3.

ICRC's humanitarian impulse to protect injured European soldiers was never intended to provide protection for combatants from the colonies. Instead, the wording of the Geneva Conventions and other similar international humanitarian legal instruments during this period, such as the Saint Petersburg Declaration of 1868 and the Hague Convention in 1901, were carefully drafted to protect co-signatories while continuing to permit extreme violence over colonial subjects.[9]

This legal double standard reemerged in the mid twentieth century, fostering a dehumanizing delineation between those whose suffering did and did not matter. In the context of UNRRA, which dealt most immediately with widespread displacements across Europe as a consequence of the Second World War, Allied nations applied different political interpretations of UNRRA's operations. Many governments worried about issues of repatriation and resettlement, leading UNRRA staff to develop political opinions about displaced peoples, which infused into the purpose of the agency. Workers of UNRRA were recruited on the basis of their careers and skills (social work, medicine, education, etc.), but this same expertise also encouraged a strong sense of superiority and suspicion towards displaced people, prompting officials to decontextualize them from their experiences of war and violence. The motto of UNRRA, "help them to help themselves," encouraged an imaginary of refugees as helpless communities who needed protection –

[9] Elena Kempf, "Humanitarian Calculus: The Workings of Weapons Prohibitions in International Law, 1868–1925," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley (2021).

not just from the context of war but also their own inability to help themselves. The design of UNRRA operations forced staff to "essentialize the difference between those who needed assistance, and those who gave it," creating a moral hierarchy between humanitarians and recipients. In other words, "relief workers came to see DPs [displaced persons] as recipients and themselves as rescuers."[10] In turn, this meant that campsites in Europe became key generators of internationally recognized notions regarding refugees' dependency and anticommunism, thus embedding them in future discussions about displacement within UN field-based agencies, such as the International Relief Organization and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Such perceptions were also exacerbated by other racialized prejudices, such as antisemitism and anti-Romani discrimination, which persisted in postwar Europe. This was especially evident with the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the work of its related IO, the UNHCR. The UNHCR drew on the League of Nations' earlier work with the ICRC, through which a high commissioner for refugees was established for Russians fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the UNHCR insisted its remit remained Europe, excluding forced migration crises caused by the Second World War in the Pacific and the Chinese Civil War (1927–49). It was not until 1967 that a new protocol expanded the UNHCR's

[10] Silvia Salvatici, "'Help the People to Help Themselves': UNRRA Relief Workers and European Displaced Persons," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 3 (2012): 429.

activities into the decolonizing world, demonstrating that for the first half of the twentieth century, the only "refugee" eligible for "protection" originated from Europe.

Ironically, in the context of decolonization conflicts in Southeast Asia and Africa, the "refugee" in the second half of the twentieth century came to be closely associated with the "Third World" rather than Europe. In turn, this reinforced implicit binaries in the international system – between Global North and Global South, between states who could care for their citizens and those who could not. What was particularly clear, however, was that it was the UNHCR's activities among families who fled the violence of the Algerian War of independence or the Vietnam War that reshaped categories of (un)belonging, rather than decision-making in Geneva or New York.

Even once the Geneva Conventions' protections expanded beyond European conflicts, imperial powers, such as Britain and France, continued to benefit from legal loopholes that enabled them to limit external investigation into their military conduct. For example, colonial states often characterized counterinsurgencies in places such as Malaya and Kenya as "emergencies," which exempted them from IO jurisdiction. As such, the "who" – the people who were subject to global governance in the form of IOs – remained exclusionary depending on terminology and context. It was the beginning of an era of professionalized of both war and peace. But at the same time, as Julie Billaud has questioned: What if, "relying on numbers to realize the utopia of 'humanising war' makes

the very 'humans' who are supposed to benefit from it disappear from view?"[11] In the aftermath of such incomprehensible loss of human life (much of which had taken place on European battlefields), pacifists and internationalists alike began to question whether the ICRC's experiment of making war "more humane" had done anything to deter aggression that catalyzed the two World Wars in the first place – or whether, instead, it had provided a new moral guise and "emergency" lexicon for fighting wars.

Professionalizing

Changes in the professionalization of IOs also shifted the relationships between IOs, states, and peoples. The twentieth century saw the rapid expansion and formalization of the technocratic IO sector, building upon scientific and academic networks in Europe.[12] In turn, IOs shifted from largely volunteer-based organizations to professionalized institutions with a permanent, paid, professional staff.

Employees of IOs positioned themselves as experts with technical solutions for society, recasting crises into opportunities for development and progress and IOs as

[11] Julie Billaud, "Masters of Disorder: Rituals of Communication and Monitoring at the International Committee of the Red Cross," *Social Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2020): 96–111.

[12] Jessica Reinisch, "Technical Conferences as a Technique of Internationalism," *British Journal for the History of Science* 56, no. 4 (2023): 485–502.

incubators of "technocratic utopia."[13] The expansion of IO scientific conferences and growing technocratic internationalism built on developments in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, scientific and engineering innovations during this period emerged from collaborations between international experts on international committees, such the Suez Canal Commission. As Jan Eijking has explored, technocracy became linked to internationalism: "an internationality that could be achieved only with the help of experts: a circular logic, chiefly empowering those who convinced their audiences that the experts sided with their goals."[14] By the early twentieth century, technocrats (a malleable category including scientists, demographers, academics, and entrepreneurs) convincingly claimed they were best placed to make recommendations for IO operations and, using Eijking's term, to "scientifically sanctify" policy decisions. This served to associate the term "international" with "impartial," framing IO operations as expert, legitimate, and apolitical.

Technocratic commissions within the League began to plan projects that would target "underdeveloped nations" around the world in the hopes that "modernity" offered the solution for global peace. For example, Daniel Maul has shown how the League's International Labour Organization (ILO) operated as both a forum and an independent

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[13] Jens Steffek, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[14] Jan Eijking, "Historical Claims to the International: The Case of the Suez Canal Experts," *International Studies Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2023): 2.

actor in seeking to tackle the issue of forced labor in colonized spaces during the interwar period. Maul argues that the dominance of imperial actors within the organization limited the oversight of the ILO in colonial contexts – a trend replicated in the post-1945 UN Trusteeship Council, which replaced the League mandates system.[15] Such activities helped IOs to market themselves as global regulators of rights, responsibilities, and relations between states, but it also revealed ongoing inequalities within these organizations in terms of who evaluated and lamented "modernity."

On a military level, League of Nations experiments in collective security provided the blueprint for future multilateral missions. Formative ideas of peacekeeping began in the Saar, a disputed territory between France and Germany. In 1934, the League established a multinational military force of 3,300 troops to send to the region whilst the League Voting Commission carried out a plebiscite to determine its future sovereignty.[16] After the Second World War, peacekeeping became a key activity of the UN. Initially deployed as unarmed observers to defend ceasefires, peacekeeping missions expanded into armed military actors in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis in 1956. As the Cold War

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[15] Daniel Maul, "The International Labour Organization and the Struggle against Forced Labour from 1919 to the Present," *Labor History* 48, no. 4 (2007): 477–500; Jessica Pearson, "Defending Empire at the United Nations: The Politics of International Colonial Oversight in the Era of Decolonisation," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45, no. 3 (2017): 525–49.

[16] Margot Tudor, *Blue Helmet Bureaucrats* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 33.

intensified and territorial disputes developed from decolonization processes, the UN promoted peacekeeping missions as a professional yet nonaligned form of conflict response. Within each multilateral mission, every battalion represented a different middle-power nation that had been vetted and approved on the basis of its perceived neutrality. Troops were outfitted with blue berets or helmets, visually displaying the shared cosmopolitan ideals and martial values that underpinned the missions.

As the UN established armed missions – in countries such as Egypt, Congo, West Papua, and Cyprus – leadership worked closely with host state governments to install and protect ceasefires – often through formalizing partitions and establishing buffer zones. But the ceasefire-and-partition solution often failed to resolve conflicts and instead provoked new humanitarian crises. This separation model put conflicts on "freeze," entrenching divisions between groups and often requiring a permanent armed presence to monitor it.

As much as this model resulted in several perpetual missions, such as that in Kashmir, peacekeeping also gave UN leaders long-term access to high-level state discussions beyond their own diplomatic forums, empowering officials with a seat at the table and a role in discussing the future of the regions where peacekeeping forces were deployed (as well as these conflicts' global implications). For a young organization seeking an active role in conflict resolution – and to escape the failures of its predecessor – peacekeeping missions offered the UN not only proximity to important conflicts, but also the power to intervene militarily and politically in conflicts. Even when attracting

global criticism for decision-making on the ground, UN leadership decided that being seen to be doing something was reputationally better than returning to a noninterventionist model of collective security.

Developing

Finally, the focus on development aid and projects in the Global South as an international security issue intensified during the period of decolonization after the Second World War. In turn, this offered opportunities for IOs to experiment in field-based operations after 1945. This aligned with the focus of both IOs and nonstate international networks on "development" – economic and political – in imperial and postimperial contexts.

The establishment of the United Nations in 1945 was heralded across the international community as an institutional solution for world peace and the maintenance of international security and human rights, especially as anxieties about communist aggression from the Soviet Union began to pervade the West. Diplomatic histories of the postwar period have shown how the international order was deeply fractured by Cold War rivalries and alliance blocs. New specialized UN organizations, agencies, and commissions were established as a response to the devastation of the Second World War and the conflicts that erupted across the Global South as a consequence of decolonization struggles and Cold War interventions. Subsequent territorial and political disputes provided an opportunity for great powers and IO officials alike to shape the economic future and ideological allegiance of dozens of new nation-states.

In this postwar period, prevalent IOs established a framework that provided guidance and established standards for global development. Indeed, the UN declared the 1960s as the first "Development Decade." The new era of postwar liberal internationalists argued IOs needed to be more interventionist and active beyond their headquarters than the failed League, while the rapid expansion of state development politics created opportunities for increased IO interference in domestic infrastructural and economic goals. Beyond reports from committees such as ECOSOC, IO officials implemented a wave of development and state-building projects through specialized agencies such as UNESCO and the WHO, particularly targeting colonized populations, industrialization projects, and improving GDP. Early on, the UN Secretariat itself provided extensive technical assistance – defined by Eva-Maria Muschik as, "the dispatch of experts to assist requesting governments with any number of issues."[17] Later the UN would establish the United Nations Development Programme to lead these efforts, though many different UN agencies continued to undertake development projects or technical assistance, such as the ILO, the Special United Nations Fund for Economic Development, UNHCR, United Nations Technical Assistance Programme (UNTAO), as well as UN peacekeeping missions.

These agencies often were staffed by many of the technocrats who had populated the League of Nations during the interwar period, bringing with them many of the same



[17] Muschik, *Building States*.

structures, cultures, and logics that had informed the workings of that now defunct IO. The majority of other staff members were Western Europeans who were directly recruited from former colonial administrations or Americans who worked in New Deal programs (both in the US and in the Philippines). For example, Sture Linner, a Swedish businessman and mining executive, was hired to lead the civilian wing of the UN peacekeeping mission to Congo in 1960, on the basis of a recommendation from the Secretary-General's brother. IOs recruited their own staff with the same standards and expectation as colonial administrators, seeking people with a strong understanding of local languages, geographies, and political communities. This inheritance prided experience of field-based contexts, but this inevitably reinforced imperial experiences and knowledge hierarchies. As the UN approved more member states in the wake of decolonization, the organization made a concerted effort to hire officials from postcolonial nations, especially for projects in other Global South states. However, staff from newly independent states were recruited on the basis of their familial background or elite – predominantly European – education, ensuring that new officials aligned with the perceived "civilizational" standards of the organization.[18]

Postwar interventions sought to paternalistically guide postcolonial nations to "advancement." But development aid usually came with strings attached or on conditional terms that tied postcolonial states to the organizations' broader ideological

[18] Bronwen Everill, *Africonomics: A History of Western Ignorance* (HarperCollins, 2024).

and institutional interests. Inspired by the "civilizing mission" and development ethos of colonial administrations, new IOs during the 1940s and 1950s used aid projects as tools to guide postcolonial states along what they believed was a linear process towards European capitalist modernity. Just as small and large states across the globe were experimenting with rapid industrialization projects in their own countries, IOs were recognizing the value in marketing their technocratic credentials within the growing development sector. Advisors would be sent by IOs to consult with governments on strengthening their economies and infrastructure, such as UNTAO technicians deployed to support city planning in Lagos, Nigeria, during the 1960s. As Ryan Glauser has shown, whilst employed to collaborate with state representatives, many technical officials caused domestic political turmoil in their consultations, as well as reinforcing racism and paternalism in their reports.[19] These behaviors built on a colonial tradition of approaching Global South spaces as laboratories without serious regard for long-term social or ecological harm. Often imposing a one-size-fits-all approach, IO technocrats might translate the same infrastructural or agricultural project to several different countries without considering regional conditions, cultures, or requirements. As postcolonial scholars like James Ferguson and Meera Sabaratnam have explored, international development was shaped by white supremacy and civilizational ideas of modernity,

[19] Ryan Glauser, "'A Right to Live Better': Right to Development, the Nigerian–Biafran War, and the United Nations, 1960–1975," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan (2025).

disregarding area experiences and non-Western knowledge in pursuit of "bureaucratic power."[20] It was as evident in IOs as in state politics.

This is not to say that newly independent states did not try to use IOs for their own ends. Diplomatic forums, such as the UN General Assembly and Third Committee became important spaces of Global South solidarity and anticolonialism during this period, even while the ideological underpinning and practices of many IOs continued to uphold industrialized economies' supremacy. Newly independent states used IOs to amplify more political understandings of development. In the postcolonial world, many leaders and technocrats sought to meet Eurocentric development standards of industrialization so as to compete on the global capitalist market. Others, such as Ghanian President Kwame Nkrumah and Burkina Faso's President Thomas Sankara, sought to resist them, for example by adopting a Pan-African approach to development. Global development debates shifted with the establishment of the UN Conference on Trade and Development in 1964 to include recognition of structural inequalities between hemispheres.

As decolonial and Marxist critics, such as Walter Rodney, grew in strength and number in the 1960s and 1970s, national development became a rallying call for left-

[20] Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018); James Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

wing activists and politicians who sought to eliminate perceptions of "dependency."[21] The proposal in the UN General Assembly for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 sought to leverage the collective power of Global South nations and challenge the economic power of the West. Drafted with national development as a critical issue, the NIEO identified ways in which the organizations governing the liberal international order and global monetary system were fundamentally unequal in their treatment of different states' sovereign powers. Although this critique failed to remake the global economy in the egalitarian spirit of the UN Charter, it marked a pivotal moment of revolutionary potential for Global South nations and the UN as both forum and agent for future radical change – although it remained limited by its nation-state paradigm.

As issues of national independence and economic sovereignty continued to dominate Global South debates about development from the mid 1970s onwards, IOs, especially the World Bank and the IMF, began to embed neoliberal policies into their practices. Structural adjustment policies – in basic terms, loans to countries with conditional policies (such as increased privatization) – had been popular at Bretton Woods in the aftermath of the Second World War, but it was not until the 1980s that these strings-attached loans began to suffocate national development across perceived "underdeveloped countries." Whilst the US rapidly expanded its global capital share

[21] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Undeveloped Africa* (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

during this period, many newly independent states struggled and turned to the World Bank or the IMF for loans. This had widescale ramifications for the global economy; it meant that (largely) Global South states were fiscally precarious, while the US was able to protect its disproportionate flow of capital. This had deep societal consequences, while also reinforcing the notion that IOs upheld, rather than reshaped, an unequal global order.

Conclusion

The chapter has explored the politics and practices of a range of IOs in modern history. Traditionally conceived as static forums with "black box" bureaucracies, this chapter has shown how IOs are agents (and products) of international processes and ideologies in their own right – and beyond their New York or European offices. A vibrant generation of new international historical scholarship has begun to expand on the global connections and practices of IOs, drawing back the curtains on a longer durée and geographic reach of IOs' operations. These recent historical interventions have helped to piece together the granular and often messy ways that IO officials have sought to protect Western interests under the guise of technocratic or humanitarian mandates. Far from impotent, apolitical, or passive, IOs are now being meaningfully approached in international historiography as agents with impact in *and* beyond the diplomatic sphere. Further work remains to be done on IO activities in the field. But by concentrating on the political projects and interests of IOs and their staff, we – as international historians – can better understand the ways in which hegemonic power has not been exclusively the purview of nation-state actors and has often been wielded in the name of peace.

chapter-further-reading

Further Reading

For those interested in learning more about recent historiographical trends regarding IO activities and politics, I suggest diving into these three recent edited volumes: Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muschik, and Elisabeth Roehrlich, eds., *International Organizations and the Cold War: Competition, Cooperation, and Convergence* (Bloomsbury, 2025); Negar Mansouri and Daniel R. Quiroga-Villamarin, eds., *Ways of Seeing International Organisations: New Perspectives for International Institutional Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2025); and Maria Ketzmerick, Julius Heise, and Jan Ludert, eds., *The United Nations Trusteeship System: Legacies, Continuities, and Change* (Routledge, 2022). In addition to the scholars cited in this chapter, scholarship by Roland Burke, Meredith Terretta, and Emma Kluge provide excellent insight into the ways in which Global South actors negotiated with the UN and shaped the international human rights regime during decolonization. See Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Meredith Terretta, "'We Had Been Fooled into Thinking That the UN Watches over the Entire World': Human Rights, UN Trust Territories, and Africa's Decolonization," *Human Rights Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2014); Emma Kluge, "Papuan Petitions as an Archive of Decolonisation," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 53, no. 3 (2025): 658–83.