How the United Nations Beat Hitler and Prepared the Peace

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The United Nations was born in 1942, defeated the Axis Powers led by Germany, Italy and Japan and created today’s UN system. This reality has been lost in modern scholarship. We are taught that the Allied countries, mainly America and Britain, with the Soviet Union won the war and that the United Nations was created in 1945. In this way, the achievement of victory can be set in opposition to the United Nations and to multilateralism in general. But it should not be possible to separate victory in the war from the modern United Nations and its priorities, for these were the priorities set by the United Nations at war. America, Britain and the Soviet Union led a large coalition of states organised as the United Nations and this term was used routinely in military orders, in the instruments of surrender signed by the enemy and in political and social life. Bretton Woods and San Francisco were United Nations conferences, and interim United Nations organisations preceded the Charter. Understanding the wartime United Nations reframes our understanding of the second half of the last century and of our own. From UNESCO to the World Bank the primary purpose of the international system is conflict prevention and its wartime architects bequeathed us this system as a realist necessity vital in times of trial, not as a liberal accessory to be discarded when the going gets rough.

Introduction

The statement that, “The United Nations was established at the end of the Second World War . . .” has become an established fact of modern history. However, in 1945, an official publication from more than 30 countries stated that “The formal birth of the United Nations was the adoption in Washington D.C., on January 1, 1942, of the ‘Declaration by United Nations’. ” Today, the fact that the war was fought by this United Nations alliance has been forgotten.

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In this article the history of the United Nations between the Declaration of 1942 and the Charter agreed in 1945 is set out. The evidence demonstrates that the history told about the defeat of Nazism and the founding of the United Nations in the 1945 is incorrect. The creation of the United Nations Organisation (UNO) in 1945 is described as if it were separate from victory in the war, whereas records of the war years demonstrate that the creation of the UNO was the culmination of a war effort by United Nations that joined together in 1942. Today’s UN system of global institutions is called that because they were created by the wartime alliance of United Nations, not because bodies such as the World Bank were drawn into becoming satellites of the post-war UNO.

This is a strong and unusual argument to make nowadays. To support the argument consideration must be given to the:

- continuity between the wartime United Nations and the UNO created by the Charter;
- role of the United Nations in organising the war after the Declaration by United Nations in 1942;
- surrender of Germany, Japan, Italy, Finland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to the United Nations;
- presence of the United Nations in wartime society;
- United Nations civilian agencies before 1945;
- United Nations conferences that created the present UN system, including the UN Charter in 1945.

The purpose here is to summarise the primary evidence which concludes with observations on the reasons why this information is virtually unknown and the implications of these findings for International Relations today. In particular, the evidence suggests that the leaders of the victorious powers were agreed that realism required a liberal internationalist approach with a strong social democratic theme. It was the United States under President Roosevelt (FDR) that drove this approach as a strategy for both victory and peace. Consequently, an international policy based upon neo-liberal economics and unilateral international policy cannot claim historical legitimacy from the triumph of Western policy in the Second World War—quite the opposite.

This is not to suggest the absence of competition between the members of the wartime United Nations; still less does the evidence presented here either diminish national contributions to the victory in the Second World War or suggest the existence at this time of “blue helmet” troops.

**Sources**

A number of sources provide an introduction to the wartime United Nations. Chatham House’s book *United Nations Documents 1941–1945* provides a useful

3. The BBC history mentions the United Nations being created late in the war; see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/state/nations/league_nations_03.shtml> (accessed 1 September 2005). CNN starts its account of the United Nations with the Charter.

collection, but as it is forward looking, it selects only those relevant to preparations for the peace and deliberately omits United Nations documents concerned with fighting the war. The 376 page United Nations Agreements published in 1944 by the American Council on Public Affairs includes inter-Allied supply and war fighting agreements. These two sources are relatively difficult to access. In contrast, the Times Digital Archive is available in most major libraries and has over 4,000 references to the United Nations before the end of the war.

The New York Times digital archive apparently has more than 10,000 references to the United Nations in the same period. The now obscure pamphlet entitled The United Nations To-day and To-morrow, published by the British government for the United Nations Information Organisation (UNIO) in early 1945, is a readable and authoritative account of the wartime United Nations. The pamphlet explains:

Thus, principally, the United Nations are a fighting team. But, beyond victory on the battlefronts of to-day, the United Nations have a second great aim: to preserve the peace they are now fighting to win, and to solve problems such as those which led to the present war and the one that began in 1914.

This seems counter-intuitive as it is not what we are taught. The fighting role of the United Nations has been lost along with the idea that the post-war effort was itself the creation of the United Nations. Today, Michael Howard is one of the few historians to echo these priorities of the United Nations at war.

The Atlantic Charter and the Declaration by United Nations

The United Nations fighting team was put together by Winston S. Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt to win the war both militarily and politically, and to create the foundations for a lasting peace. Their first expression of American and British policy was the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. This Charter set out war aims that included freedom from want, social security, labour rights and disarmament as well as self-determination, free trade and freedom of religion. At this stage Churchill’s desire to include mention of a new international organisation was opposed by Roosevelt who feared a Republican, isolationist backlash at home.

5. United Nations Documents 1941–1945 (London and New York: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1946). This book was published in both London and New York since RIIA had offices in both cities at that time.


7. The Times did not apply a uniform system of capitalisation of proper names at this time, nevertheless the use of the term “the United Nations” became normal from early 1942, and I have found no use of “UN”.

8. The United Nations To-day and To-morrow, op. cit.


10. Theodore A. Wilson’s First Summit (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), provides a lasting analysis of the Charter, though he does not dwell on the substance of the wartime United Nations that was founded on the Charter.
The Charter was issued at the high point of Hitler’s success, one of the most dangerous moments in the history of European civilisation. The Nazis were on the road to Moscow and the Soviet Union was expected to collapse within weeks. Churchill anticipated that the Nazis would then turn their might back on to Britain, with the United States still neutral.

It is evidence of the importance that the two leaders placed on political policy as a tool of military victory that they set out a far-reaching agenda—an agenda that, in 21st-century terms, is one of liberal social democracy. The other countries fighting the Axis soon declared their support. The Atlantic Charter is listed as the first “basic” or “antecedent” document in the archives of both the United Nations and NATO.11

The Atlantic Charter provided a political basis for countering Nazi ideology and, for FDR, of defeating the isolationists at home. It is easy to be cynical about it, given Churchill’s continued adherence to the British Empire and Roosevelt’s interest in expanding US influence.12 But consider Nelson Mandela’s recollection:

Change was in the air in the 1940s. The Atlantic Charter of 1941, issued by Roosevelt and Churchill, reaffirmed faith in the dignity of each human being and propagated a host of democratic principles. Some in the West saw the charter as empty promises, but not those of us in Africa. Inspired by the Atlantic Charter and the fight of the Allies against tyranny and oppression, the ANC created its own charter, called African Claims, which called for full citizenship for all Africans, the right to buy land and repeal of all discriminatory legislation.13

When, five months after the Charter was signed, the United States was attacked by Japan, Roosevelt and Churchill used it as the basis for a new international alliance. Within weeks of the attack they led 26 countries, including the Soviet Union and China, in making the “Declaration by United Nations” at the White House on New Year’s Day 1942.14 At this time the United Nations included Australia, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Haiti, Honduras, Indiación, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Haiti, Panama, Poland, South Africa and Yugoslavia. The declaration committed the signatories not to make a separate peace with the enemy and to the principles of the Atlantic Charter. The language in the Declaration bound the signatories to fight the states with whom they were at war and to general co-operation. This formula permitted the Soviet Union to remain out of the war with Japan until August 1945. France and Denmark were notable omissions and were allowed the status of “Associated States”. In France’s case the reason was that FDR did not recognise General de Gaulle’s Free French as the sole continuation

14. This was the nationalist Chinese government which was not only fighting Japan but also the communist organised forces that were eventually to defeat them in 1948.
of the French government, keeping relations with the Vichy government and factions in the French overseas territories. In Denmark’s case, the government had remained in Copenhagen under Nazi occupation.

The adherence of the Latin American states had the important effect of shutting down German and Italian influence in the region even though only Brazil sent an army to fight. Its expeditionary force fought in Italy. However, for the other Latin American states and others in the Middle East their role was economic and political and not military. FDR’s encouragement of anti-colonial movements can be seen in the signature of India as a separate state and is an example of the political interactions of the United Nations coalition that need further study, especially in shaping the politics of the post-war period.

Legal Continuity between the Declaration of 1942 and the Charter of 1945

The continuity between the Declaration in 1942 and the United Nations Organisation created in 1945 is clear legally. Article 3 of the UN Charter states that

The original Members of the United Nations shall be the states which, having participated in the United Nations Conference on International Organization at San Francisco, or having previously signed the Declaration by United Nations of 1 January 1942, sign the present Charter and ratify it in accordance with Article 110.

Article 3 makes it clear that the naming of today’s United Nations with the same title as that used by the wartime alliance was not a coincidence or a sentimental act of respect to Roosevelt’s wishes.

The political leaders of the states that joined the United Nations made frequent statements that spoke of the United Nations as the wartime alliance. For example, New Year messages between the leaders were fashionable during the war. In 1943 Chinese leader Chaing kai-shek’s message to Churchill spoke of the “solidarity of the United Nations”15 and Soviet Minister Litvinov explained that “the Soviet German front may be considered the common front of the United Nations”.16 The following year Stalin told Tito, the Yugoslav leader: “I am confident that 1944 will be a year of victories for the United Nations”.17 Roosevelt, as might be expected from a parent of the project, spoke routinely of the war as being fought by the United Nations.18

The Role of the United Nations in Organising the War

The Role of the United Nations in Command Structures from 1942

Immediately after the 1942 Declaration was made in Washington, the United Nations began to be officially described as an organising force in the war.

18. Russell D. Buhite and David W. Levy (eds.), *FDR’s Fireside Chats* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) pp. 210, 221, 238, 240ff, 251, 259, 262, 268, 277, 284, 313. Roosevelt also initiated monthly statements on United Nations efforts in the U-boat war in which a large number of the United Nations were engaged through their merchant shipping and convoy escorts.
Churchill made this clear in one of the critical speeches of his career. He returned from Washington to face a vote of no confidence in the House of Commons following a series of military disasters in Africa and the Far East. He replied to the motion with a detailed justification of his conduct of the war, including his recent meetings with Roosevelt. Churchill explained to a packed chamber that, “...we [Roosevelt and Churchill] formed the league of twenty-six United Nations” and described “...the bonds which unite us with the rest of the twenty-six United Nations”. Churchill went on to outline the co-ordination of military operations in the Far Eastern war theatres by means of international councils and the intention “to extend that system to all areas in which the forces of more than one of the United Nations—for that is the term we have adopted—will be operating”.

Churchill ended his speech by saying: “I make so bold now as to demand a declaration of confidence of the House of Commons as an additional weapon in the armoury of the United Nations.” For him to close his remarks in this way indicates both the importance he gave to the United Nations alliance, and the appeal that he thought reference to it would have in the House of Commons and in the country.

From January 1942 onwards, military communiqués were studded with references to the United Nations. For example, on 3 February 1942 The Times reported: “from the headquarters of the united nations in the south-west Pacific, it was announced that United States bombers had scored another success yesterday”. The Combat Chronology of US Army Air Forces in World War II entry for 17 March 1942 states: “Gen MacArthur arrives in Australia to assume cmd of United Nations forces in SWPA. He actually assumed cmd on 18 Apr.” Henry Stimson, the US Secretary of War, explained: “MacArthur’s command closely approximates to that which the United Nations gave to General Wavell in much the same area. It is also the same type of command as the allies in the Great War finally entrusted to Marshal Foch in 1918.”

The British government published White Papers on Defence in 1942. The Co-ordination of the Allied War Effort dealt with the agreements made between Churchill and Roosevelt. This White Paper explains how

[t]o further co-ordination of the Allied War Effort, the President and Prime Minister have set up bodies to deal with Munitions Assignments, Shipping, Adjustment and Raw Materials ... These bodies will confer with representatives of the U.S.S.R., China and others of the United Nations as are necessary to attain common purposes and provide for the most effective utilization of the joint resources of the United Nations.

21. The Times (18 April 1942), p. 3.
22. Co-ordination of the Allied War Effort, Agreements between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America (London: Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, Cmd 6332, 1942).
In this description major policy was determined by the major powers and the United Nations served both as a legitimating title and a device for engaging other states, large and small, in the war effort.

The British White Paper on The Organisation of Joint Planning provided a detailed breakdown of the headquarters staff arrangement amongst British forces. It included an explanation of the use of the word “Joint”: “To avoid confusion, the terminology agreed by the United Nations is that the term ‘Joint’ should be used to denote the Inter-Service collaboration of one nation; and the term ‘Combined’ should be used to denote collaboration between two or more of the United Nations.”

It is worth emphasising the point that here, in a British Command Paper of 1942, a decision is recorded as having been made by the United Nations that is followed to this day in UN, NATO and allied militaries.

General George C. Marshall, lecturing in 1942 on the Unity of Command of the United Nations, remarked: “... despite all of these difficulties the most heartening factor of the war to date, in my opinion, is the remarkable success which thus far has been achieved in coordinating and directing the military and allied interests of the United Nations”; his colleague Admiral Ernest J. King wryly advised the same audience that it could “busy itself for some time with the political relationship among the United Nations of which there are now some thirty”. In this way King reflected the impatience of the powerful in having to manage relations with many small and weak states.

And it should not be thought that I am arguing that such states were by virtue of their membership of the United Nations privy to the great strategic issues of the time. Nevertheless, the importance of the political unity provided by the United Nations and the Atlantic Charter to the Allies strengthened the war effort on all fronts. There is much more research needed but, especially in the critical years of 1942 and 1943, outcomes in Africa, the Atlantic and in India might have been far worse without the enthusiastic participation of smaller states and peoples.

“Allies” and “United Nations”

After the Declaration by United Nations, the term “United Nations” encompassed the term “the Allies”. Article 38 of the Italian Instrument of Surrender of 29 September 1943 provides an example of the definition, “The term “United Nations” in the present instrument includes the Allied Commander-in-Chief, the Control Commission and any other authority which the United Nations may designate.”

“Chatham House’s wartime index of newspaper cuttings held by the British Library directs the reader who looks up “Allied Forces” to properly seek: “United Nations: Allied Forces”.

The United Nations and D-Day

One of the most famous military operations of the Second World War was the D-Day landing on 6 June 1944 under the command of US General Dwight D. Eisenhower. His orders from the Anglo-American Chiefs of Staff instructed: “You will enter the continent of Europe and in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.”\(^{27}\)

The description of the unit shoulder-patch of his Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force states that, “The heraldic chief of azure (BLUE) above the rainbow is emblematic of a state of peace and tranquillity the restoration of which to the enslaved people is the objective of the United Nations.”\(^{28}\)

This may be the first association of light blue with the United Nations. Eisenhower reminded his troops as they embarked for France that: “… the United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man to man”.\(^{29}\) The Times editorial marking the landings described how: “… four years after the rescue at Dunkirk of that gallant defeated army without which nucleus the forces of liberation could never have been rebuilt, the United Nations returned yesterday to the soil of France”. A contemporary Canadian official history stated: “The sector held at the end of July by First Cdn Army, and in particular by 2 Cdn Corps, was in a strategic sense undoubtedly the most important part of the entire United Nations line in Northern France.”\(^{30}\)

These references are not now included in histories of D-Day. Restoring them is necessary to provide an accurate account. Such references would place the war effort in a broader multilateral context that was both military and politically aspirational.

As the troops fought their way into Germany, Major George B. Woods, chaplain to a “band of brothers” in the 82nd Airborne Division, gave an address for the burial of the dead at Wobbelin concentration camp. He explained that “these crimes were never clearly brought to light until the armies of the United Nations overran Germany”.\(^{31}\) While his statement seems out of place in our present perception of the armies liberating Germany, it would have seemed quite normal at the time.


28. “Upon a field of heraldic sable (BLACK), representing the darkness of Nazi oppression, is shown the sword of liberation in the form of a crusader’s sword, the flames arising from the hilt and leaping up the blade. This represents avenging justice by which the enemy power will be broken in Nazi-dominated Europe. Above the sword is a rainbow emblematic of hope containing all the colors of which the National Flags of the Allies are composed. The heraldic chief of azure (BLUE) above the rainbow is emblematic of a state of peace and tranquillity the restoration of which to the enslaved people is the objective of the United Nations.” History of Chief of Staff to Supreme Allied Commander, US Army Center of Military History Historical Manuscripts Collection (HMC) file number 8-3.6A CA, available: [http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/documents/cossac/Cossac.htm> (accessed 1 September 2005).

29. General Eisenhower, Order of the Day, 6 June 1944, SHAPE.

30. Canadian Army, REPORT NO. 146, HISTORICAL SECTION, CANADIAN MILITARY HEADQUARTERS, OPERATIONS OF FIRST CANADIAN ARMY IN NORTH-WEST EUROPE, 31 JUL–1 OCT 44 (PRELIMINARY REPORT) Para. 8.

Consider the summary of the organisation of the war, given in *The United Nations To-Day and To-morrow*: “Military co-operation between the United Nations has been planned in a series of conferences between United Nations leaders—particularly between Mr. Churchill, President Roosevelt, Marshal Stalin and Generalissimo Chaing-kai-shek and their staffs”, and goes on to describe the meetings in Washington, Casablanca, Quebec, Moscow, Cairo, Tehran and Yalta.32 “Under the direction of the heads of United Nations the Combined Chiefs of Staff collaborate in the formulation and execution of the policy and plans decided on by those leaders at these conferences.” The pamphlet skates over the relationships between the big three or four and the lesser powers.

Surveying the international forces fighting in the various theatres of the global war, the pamphlet concludes: “Such is a brief account of the general United Nations machinery ... all the plans and experience of United Nations boards and agencies, civilian and military, have to be brought together and woven into a pattern for the final defeat of the aggressors.” One critical area of co-operation that is often overlooked is the free supply of US equipment to Russia. In the anti-communist political environment prevalent in the United States, FDR needed the political goals of the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations to gather the political basis for the huge transfers of food, vehicles and trains that helped keep the Red Army fed and on the move.

Without lend lease to Russia under the framework of the United Nations the war in the East, the war as a whole and the Holocaust could have been prolonged, the outcome of the war in doubt.

**The Surrender of Enemy States to the United Nations**

In 1943, Churchill explained to an audience in London’s Guildhall that “We, the United Nations, demand from the Nazi, Fascist and Japanese tyrannies unconditional surrender ... they must yield themselves absolutely to our justice and mercy.”33 And so, as the enemy states began to surrender, they did so to the United Nations.

**The Italian Surrender**

Eisenhower accepted the surrender of fascist Italy in September 1943.34 Declaring: “Hostilities between the armed forces of the United Nations and those of Italy terminate at once. All Italians who now act to help eject the German aggressor from Italian soil will have the assistance and the support of the United Nations.” The Italian Armistice Agreement reads:

1. Immediate cessation of all hostile activity by the Italian armed forces.
2. Italy will use its best endeavours to deny, to the Germans, facilities that might be used against the United Nations.

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32. *The United Nations To-day and To-morrow*, op. cit.
34. *The Armistice was agreed on 3 September 1943 and then a document of surrender was signed on 29 September.*
3. All prisoners or internees of the United Nations to be immediately turned over to the Allied Commander-in-Chief, and none of these may now or at any time be evacuated to Germany.

The subsequent Instrument of Surrender of Italy refers to: “the United Nations Land, Sea or Air Forces”, “directions by the United Nations”, “forces of the United Nations”, “officials of the United Nations” and specifies that “the United Nations will exercise all the rights of an occupying power.”

The Surrender of the Smaller European States

Similar wording was used in the Romanian, Bulgarian and Hungarian Armistice Agreements of 1944 and 1945. Specific mention was made of stopping persecution of the Jews and the interests of neighbouring states—Greece and Yugoslavia in the case of Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the case of Hungary. The conduct of the war by the United Nations and their commitment not to make separate peace deals meant that in each case the countries surrendered to the entire anti-fascist alliance, even where only one state’s representative signed the document, as was the case with General Eisenhower with respect to Italy and Marshal R.Y. Malinovski with respect to the surrender of Romania.

The Romanian Armistice of 12 September 1944 states that the agreement is between the Romanians and the United Kingdom, Soviet Union and United States “... acting in the interests of all the United Nations”. The Armistice specifies that Romania “… has withdrawn from the war against the United Nations.” and that

The Rumanian Government will immediately set free, irrespective of citizenship and nationality, all persons held in confinement on account of their activities in favor of the United Nations or because of their sympathies with the cause of the United Nations ... undertake to hand over to the Allied (Soviet) High Command all vessels belonging or having belonged to the United Nations which are located in Rumanian ports ... The Rumanian Government undertake to restore all legal rights and interests of the United Nations and their nationals on Rumanian territory as they existed before the war and to restore their property in complete good order.

Finland signed an Armistice in Moscow in September 1944. The United Kingdom signed on behalf of all the United Nations at war with Finland. A formula repeating the original United Nations Declaration of 1942, and in this instance implicitly recognising that the United States had never declared war on Finland though not through oversight but because of the Soviet assault on that country in 1940 and Finland’s unique action in repaying its monetary debt to the United States from the period following the First World War.

36. Department of State Bulletin, Vol. XI, No. 273 (17 September 1944). These Bulletins were short daily summaries.
The big three accepted the Bulgarian surrender at the end of October 1944 “... acting on behalf of all the United Nations at war with Bulgaria”. The agreement specified that

The Government of Bulgaria will immediately release, regardless of citizenship or nationality, all persons held in confinement in connection with their activities in favor of the United Nations or because of their sympathies with the United Nations ... [dissolve] organizations on Bulgarian territory conducting propaganda hostile to the United Nations ... restore all property of the United Nations and their nationals and will make such reparation for loss and damage caused by the war to the United Nations ... restore all rights and interests of the United Nations and their nationals in Bulgaria [and] return to the Soviet Union, to Greece and Yugoslavia and to the other United Nations, by the dates specified by the Allied Control Commission and in a good state of preservation, all valuables and materials removed during the war by Germany or Bulgaria from United Nations territory.38

The provisional government of Hungary surrendered on 20 January 1945 to representatives of the big three also “… acting on behalf of all the United Nations which are in a state of war with Hungary”. The government of Hungary agreed to

“immediately release ... all persons held in confinement in connection with their activities in favor of the United Nations or because of their sympathies with the United Nations’ cause ... to return to the Soviet Union, and also to Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and to the other United Nations ... all valuables and materials removed during the war to Hungary from United Nations’ territory ... all vessels belonging or having belonged to the United Nations which are located in Hungarian Danubian ports ... taking into consideration that Hungary has not only withdrawn from the war against the United Nations but has declared war against Germany, the parties agree that compensation for the indicated losses will be made by Hungary not in full but only in part; to restore all legal rights and interests of the United Nations ... to dissolve organizations on Hungarian territory conducting propaganda hostile to the United Nations.39

The German Surrender

The German surrender document is just a page and half long. Article IV includes the sentence: “This Act of Military Surrender is without prejudice to, and will be superseded by, any general instrument of surrender imposed by, or on behalf of, the United Nations on Germany ...”40 President Truman broadcast on 8 May 1945 that “General Eisenhower informs me that the forces of Germany have

surrendered to the United Nations”. The broadcast is available online at the Library of Congress.

**The Japanese Surrender**

The Japanese surrender document is distinct from those signed by the other Axis Powers. After the initial surrender to the United States all the other major states at war with Japan appended their signatures at the end of which there is a statement that this also includes other United Nations at war with Japan.

This summary of the official documentary account of how the war was conducted demonstrates that the individual countries fought as the alliance of United Nations and to some extent organised themselves on this basis.

**The Role of the United Nations in Wartime Society**

The formal references to the United Nations fighting the war had a strong resonance with broader society, at least in the United Kingdom and the United States. The United Nations had a significant place in advertising, academia, religion and literature.

**Advertising**

Rolls Royce proclaimed: “The first and so far the only Jet-propelled Aircraft of the United Nations to go into action against the enemy is the Gloster Meteor . . . powered with Rolls Royce Engines . . . more efficient and of longer life than the Jumo Engine of the German M.E. 262.” Earlier in the war, Rolls Royce had advertised the Merlin engine which powered Spitfire fighters: “It has played a more consistently conspicuous part than any other type in the United Nations establishment of air supremacy . . .”

In early 1943, Ford was already explaining its role in the post-war world: “For beyond victory there is a bigger and better job ahead for us all—the building of the New World. Already the United Nations are preparing for that future . . . Ford Marches On.” The Goodyear rubber company explained that its Industrial Rubber Belting “made a very valuable contribution to the war effort of the United Nations”.

In 1943, Simpson’s of Piccadilly proclaimed: “Piccadilly Circus has been called the hub of the universe. Half a minute away from it is a hub of the United Nations . . . a warm welcome to all officers, men and women of the United Nations.”

Burberrys, the manufacturer of raincoats and uniforms, explained that they “take just pride in sharing in the united effort to ultimate Victory of the United Nations”. The Daily Express, with a relish familiar to readers of today’s tabloids,
held a “Panorama of the United Nations at war” featuring images of the Germany city of Essen—“Essen Aflame”—at the Royal Academy in the autumn of 1943.  

Publishers were keen to find new talent suppressed by the war. In 1943 Hutchison’s announced £10,000 of prizes for a “United Nations Literary Competition” and amongst the judges were Rebecca West and Sir Max Beerbohm. As the war drew to a close, Harraps, Thomas Crowell and Columbia Pictures offered a £1,500 prize in a book contest for men and women who “have served in the Armed Forces of the United Nations”.  

Music and Religion

Music, both secular and religious, was composed for the United Nations. The most famous composition was Dmitri Shostakovich’s “United Nations March” that was used as the finale of the 1943 Gene Kelly movie *Thousands Cheer.*  

The United Nations was also a focus of religious life. In the United States, prayers were said across the country on D-Day for the United Nations. In Britain, the World’s Evangelical Alliance published an address given at a “United Nations Service of Thanksgiving and Prayer” by the Dean of St Paul’s, the Very Reverend W.R. Matthews.  

At the end of the war in Europe, the Church of England printed a glossy brochure of *The Form & Order Of The Service Of Thanksgiving For The Victory In Europe Of The Arms Of The United Nations.* The Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London printed the “SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING for the FINAL VICTORY of the UNITED NATIONS in the WORLD WAR OF 1939–1945 and for the ENSUING PEACE”. The Rabbi’s words include the remark “As we prayed to him for help when we were engaged in the struggle, so we thank him now for the triumph of the United Nations which has delivered humanity from a grave danger and restored it to the possession of peace.”

Wartime United Nations Civil Society Organisations from 1942

In 1943 the University of London created a United Nations University Centre based at the London School of Hygiene. It was run by an educationalist,
A. Clow Ford, and organised lectures on the individual countries and the post-war plans.53

Today we are familiar with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the UN system. They were at work years before the Charter was signed. For example, at the end of 1942 the Keswick United Nations Committee, in England’s Lake District, raised £186 in aid for China.54 In 1943, Eleanor Roosevelt, the president’s wife, began the American Association for the United Nations.55 In 1944 a coalition was formed in the United States to work on the proposals for a United Nations Organisation that had come from the Dumbarton Oaks conference that we shall discuss below. These NGO coalitions involved both secular and religious groups56 and evolved into the current United Nations Association;57 some had origins in organisations supporting the now defunct League of Nations.

International Relations organisations and commentators were much concerned with how the United Nations would win the peace.58 Chatham House published a report of a conference in December 1942 on the wartime and post-war co-operation of the United Nations in the Pacific and the Far East.59 Chatham House linked with the US Council on Foreign Relations as both organisations engaged in intensive work on ideas for the post-war system. The Twentieth Century Fund published Postwar Plans of the United Nations in 1943.60 It surveyed the national plans of the individual states and discussed how far they were in line with the established war aims of the United Nations alliance and how they might be brought into better harmony. Other books, such as Linton Wells’s Salute to Valor: Heroes of the United Nations, were designed to support the war effort.61

The United Nations featured in cultural life barely connected to the war. In the United States there was a United Nations jigsaw puzzle,62 and at the Chicago Art Institute an exhibition of Art of the United Nations.63 In Britain, Irene Veal’s Recipes of the United Nations were published in 1944.64 And that September, Mr Cuthbert’s Garden Talk in The Times observed that, “… the smashing victories of the United Nations … seems to be a signal to some of my Gardening Friends to start thinking about a special show of garden flowers next Spring”.65

56. See, for example, Joseph L. Samuel, American Catholics and the Formation of the United Nations (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993).
65. The Times (9 September 1944), p. 1.
Civilian Agencies of the United Nations before 1945

The United Nations organised a range of civilian activities during the war.66 These activities included organisations for information, food and agriculture, relief and rehabilitation and war crimes.67 These were mostly led by the United States and often grew from earlier British initiatives, but it would be a mistake to regard other participants as merely passengers; other states contributed intellectually, in personnel and material support. Soviet participation was patchy.

These organisations required considerable scarce resources. These included highly skilled labour, including high-quality management, and money. These commitments by states of all strengths provide tangible evidence both that the wartime United Nations was not some legal and propaganda device and that post-conflict reconstruction through state-run organisations was a priority for the war leaders that had great success.

Information Organisations and Clubs

In London and New York, official United Nations Information Boards, Organisations and Offices were established. In 1943 the New York office franked its stationery: “In War and Peace: United Nations”.68 The London office in Russell Square organised publications on German crimes and exhibitions at Dorland Hall on Regent Street on the United Nations effort. Some were artistic, but “Germany the Evidence” has a chilling tone even now.69

The current UNO Archives describe how the

United Nations Information Organization (UNIO) was established by the Inter-Allied Information Committee in New York as the Inter-Allied Information Center in 1940. In 1942, it became the United Nations Information Office, and in 1944, together with a parallel information center in London, it became the United Nations Information Organization. When the United Nations Conference on International Organization convened in San Francisco in 1945, UNIO became its official information organ. In 1946, UNIO was absorbed into the United Nations Secretariat’s Dept. of Public Information.

The continuity from wartime to post-war United Nations is expressed explicitly in the United Nations’ archive description and gives a hint of the scale of the

66. They are listed in a US Government Manual of Emergency War Agencies; this includes both the mainly bi-lateral organisations with the United Kingdom and at pages 177–184 the United Nations organisations; available: <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/ATO/USGM/EWA.html> (accessed 20 September 2005).
67. This section excludes both pre-existing organisations such as the International Labour Organisation of the League of Nations which associated itself with the United Nations and the wartime creation of international bodies with no direct United Nations component such as the international agreement on civil aviation. UNESCO has its origins in inter-Allied meetings prior to the end of the war.
69. The Times (9 November 1944), p. 3.
information work being carried out under the auspices of the United Nations during the war:


Canteens and clubs for the troops were another type of service organised under the banner of the United Nations. For example, in London, the United Nations Services Officers Club opened its doors at 41 Portland Place in September 1942, organised by the United Nations Forces Fellowship under the British War Charities Act of 1942. By 1944 it was advertising for funds for new premises after its junior officers’ club had been “blitzed”.

The First United Nations Days


In London, the Royal Family is joined by the exiled heads-of-state of Norway, Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia on the stand [at Buckingham Palace] to review a parade of Civilian Defence Service contingents, workmen and women, merchant seamen, Royal Navy, RAF, Commonwealth troops, Home Guard and British Army; in Aylesbury, the Lady Mayoress (Mrs Olive Paterson) reads the Prime Minister’s proclamation adopting President Roosevelt’s idea that June 14th (previously marked in the USA for honouring the national flag) should be a day of honouring all of the flags.

Roosevelt initiated this first United Nations Day as a global political event, with huge parades in New York and Chicago and smaller events in almost every community in the United States. In 1943 the COI featured the United Nations parade in Cairo and a mayor in New York State who declared not merely a United Nations day but a United Nations week. At a talk I gave on the subject, one

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70. The Times (20 March 1942, p. 1; 11 August 1942, p. 1).
72. ID Number: COI 145 Item Name: UNITED NATIONS: a record of the first United Nations Day in Great Britain, 14th June 1942, Imperial War Museum collections record.
man recalled his British school cadet force United Nations Day parade in 1944. Without the benefit of satellites and television these United Nations Days were global expressions of political will unmatched before or since; they make Western self-satisfaction in the contributions to global wellbeing made by Live Aid and Live Eight appear grotesque.

**United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration**

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was the largest co-operative international relief effort ever conceived: created in 1943 it closed in 1948.\(^{75}\) In mid-1945 it had some 7,500 employees in purchasing offices across Latin America, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent and assistance operations from China to Denmark. The resources came from voluntary national contributions of 1% of national income from the 44 United Nations. Most contributions were from the United States, consisting of $2.1 billion in 1944, $1.9 billion in 1945 and $600 million in 1946. Brazil contributed 2% of national income.

When the war ended, the liberated European states contributed what they could, with Czechoslovak contributions of sugar and Polish coal going to Austria and Yugoslavia. The work of UNRRA should be used more fully in contemporary assessments of post-conflict reconstruction and international aid. For example, the wartime commitments of national income to UNRRA provide an interesting precedent for the contemporary commitment of 0.7% of GDP to development.

Part of UNRRA's work was assistance to the millions of displaced persons roaming Europe at the end of the war. The official history’s self-assessment was that UNRRA had been successful in ensuring that its camps were self-governing with elected councils, courts and fire services which would not “have been possible if UNRRA had pursued a policy of efficient command”.\(^{76}\) Helping people to help themselves was the theme. It would be interesting to know how far modern UN reconstruction and development agencies are aware of the practices of the mid-1940s.

**The Interim Food and Agriculture Organisation**

The interim United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (UNFAO) was created at a conference in the United States in 1943 chaired by Dean Acheson.\(^{77}\) It was concerned mainly with developing best practice at national level to address the global food shortage after the end of the war.\(^{78}\) The UNO created

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73. ID Number: NMV 735 A Item Name: BRITISH MOVIETONE NEWS ISSUE 735A (8 JULY 1943), Imperial War Museum collections record.
74. ID Number: CUS 214 Item Name: OSWEGO (NO 3) [Main]/the AMERICAN SCENE [series], Imperial War Museum collections record.
by the Charter in 1945 recognised the interim UNFAO as a permanent specialised agency, providing the clearest institutional connection between wartime and post-war United Nations.

The United Nations War Crimes Commission

The United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC) came into existence in October 1943 and was an outgrowth of earlier London-based inter-allied statements on war crimes. The Soviet Union did not join, though the trial of war criminals was Soviet national policy. The Commission gathered evidence of crimes committed in the invaded countries to give to national governments and through them to the international tribunal that was convened at Nuremberg. UNWCC gathered summary information for charges to be made against thousands of war criminals and provided the foundation for much of modern international law on war crimes. It was not until the end of the war that the victorious powers decided that crimes committed by the Nazis in Germany should also be considered as crimes subject to international jurisdiction. A number of states and NGOs pressed for the creation of a permanent international criminal court but it was rejected by the United Kingdom and United States.

Wartime United Nations Conferences for Post-war Organisation

The two major conferences that planned the post-war world are now normally known by the places where they were held. Bretton Woods set up the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 1944, while San Francisco created the United Nations Organisation in 1945. Formally, the Bretton Woods meeting was called “The United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference” (UNMFC) and San Francisco “The United Nations Conference on International Organisation” (UNCIO). In addition, from 1942 Inter-Allied Conferences prepared the United Nations Educational, Scientific Cultural Organisation. Today, the economic institutions follow mainly a neo-liberal economic line. It is forgotten that when these organisations were founded unregulated and dominant business,

and trade barriers were considered to be two of the principal causes of world war. For those who held the political views that prevailed in the 1940s, the connection of the types of conflicts plaguing the 21st century to neo-liberal economic policies would seem obvious. The shock that those who built the United Nations would have today would be to find that the organisations that were supposed to remove these structural economic problems were in fact imposing or permitting them.

Twenty-first-century scholars can be forgiven for overlooking the history, for the standard works they rely on have let them down. Works that deal with the issues discussed at UNMFC and UNCIO include: *FDR and the Creation of the UN*, by Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley,85 *A History of the United Nations*86 and *Act of Creation*.87 These studies neither use the official titles of the conferences nor mention the existence of the United Nations as an organising force in the war, although Luard does mention both UNRRA and UNFAO. Schlesinger takes time to mention the boy scouts helping with the organisation but not that the San Francisco conference was formally a “United Nations Conference on International Organisation”. Hoopes and Brinkley refer to Bretton Woods merely as being convened by the US Treasury even though that department’s published paper calling for an international financial conference is entitled: “Joint Statement by Experts on the Establishment of an International Monetary Fund of the United and Associated Nations”.88 At the time, *The Times* headline referred to a United Nations bank and studies of the agreement used the conference’s formal title.89 Unfortunately, even the Avalon project at Yale University, which is used widely as an Internet source of record, uses the informal place names for these conferences, not their formal titles. In this way reality is lost to generations.

The political process that reached its culmination in UNCIO at San Francisco has its origins in American and British internal governmental discussions and then in discussions with their allies and the United Nations as a whole. Hoopes and Brinkley, and Schlesinger show the development of US policy while Adam Roberts describes how by 1943 the British Foreign Office was hard at work producing papers such as “The United Nations Plan” and the “United Nations Plan for Organising Peace”.90

Great Power meetings in Moscow, Dumbarton Oaks and Yalta led up to UNCIO at San Francisco. The declarations of policy made at these meetings had a good deal to say about the United Nations. The Moscow Conference of October 1943 issued a Four Power declaration from China, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union that stated that the four:

85. Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the UN* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) see especially pp. 75, 129.
88. The term “Associated Nations” included states such as France that for political reasons were not formally members of the United Nations.
recognise the necessity of establishing at the earliest possible date a
general international organisation . . . for the maintenance of international
peace and security . . . That they will confer and co-operate with one
another and with the other members of the United Nations to bring
about a practicable general agreement with respect to the regulation of
armaments in the post-war period.

Few, if any, modern descriptions of this meeting discuss the reference to consul-
tations with the other United Nations. Reference to the meeting is made in
Article 106 of the UN Charter.91 At the time Churchill explained the process in
this way:

In our Grand Alliance of thirty-three States or Governments constituting
the United Nations, we try all we can by correspondence and consultation
to preserve harmony and intimacy and to procure concerted action. As
you may imagine, it is not possible to consult with every member about
the details of all military movements or plans. These must be confined
to as few persons as possible. The high aims we set before ourselves
were first outlined in the Atlantic Charter, and now we have published
in Moscow the all-important Four-Power-Agreement, which looks to
the future foundations of world peace after these storms are over.92

The US Senate overwhelmingly adopted the Moscow formulae, ending months
of debate. At the Dumbarton Oaks meeting in 1944, China, the United Kingdom,
the United States and the Soviet Union issued a joint statement that “There should
be established an international organisation under the title of The United
Nations.”93 These proposals produced a mountain of suggestions from NGOs
and governments, amidst widespread public interest in the plans for securing
the peace. Once the reality of what took place at UNCIO is understood then it
becomes clear that the supposed “new diplomacy” of the post-Cold War era is
nothing of the kind but is rather a return to the politics that created the inter-
national system we have today.

The declaration from the Yalta meeting of the big three in 1945 is full of refer-
ences to the forthcoming conference being a United Nations conference and spec-
cifies that those entitled to attend are principally the existing members of the
United Nations. It leaves open the question of the name of the new organisation,
which, along with key issues such as the veto, had yet to be settled.94

These statements from the wartime conferences were addressed to official and
public audiences that expected to hear about a role for the United Nations. Public
and private discussions on the need for a new international organisation had gone
on from early in the war and often assumed that the United Nations would either
be the new organisation or would be the organising force behind it.

In October 1942 Chinese Foreign Minister M.V. Soong explained: “We want to
do something now so that the society of the future will not have to be an armed

91. Ibid.
93. The Dumbarton Oaks Proposals (London: Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, Session 1944–45,
Cmd 6560, 1944).
camp. From this stems the natural desire of China to see set up as quickly as possible an Executive Council of the United Nations.\textsuperscript{95} Two months later, S.M. Bruce, the Australian High Commissioner in London, sent an urgent cable to his prime minister, John Curtin, explaining that planning for the post-war world was going better than he had dared to hope: “... it is recognised that time would be required before the point was reached when an International Police Force could be set up. This period of delay, it is contemplated, should be filled by the United Nations undertaking the task of policing until an International Police Force could be established.”\textsuperscript{96} In March 1943 Churchill explained: “... it would be our hope that the United Nations, headed by the three great victorious Powers ... should immediately begin to confer upon the future world organization ...”\textsuperscript{97}

The discussions over the form that organisation would take were intense and by the time the Charter was agreed the International Police Force in Bruce’s memo was just one idea that did not stay the course. The point to be made is that these negotiations took place in a political and popular context where it was normal to think that the United Nations alliance that then existed would create the permanent international organisation for peace and security.

Conclusion

The United Nations Declaration of January 1942 was not a one-off political gesture that later gave its name to the Charter in 1945. The Declaration, and the Atlantic Charter that preceded it, provided the political basis for winning the war and securing the peace. The creation of the United Nations as what Churchill called a “Grand Alliance” provided a framework for inter-Allied war planning upon which were built both specialised organisations and conferences for post-war planning. The political values represented by the United Nations at war took form in UNFAO, UNRRA and UNWCC and then at UNMFC and UNCIO. This is why the present array of institutions is called the “UN system” even though the IMF and the World Bank do not have United Nations in their names. The United Nations Organisation of the Charter was the political culmination of the unified war effort.

Why does the wartime United Nations matter? The question of the continued relevance of the United Nations has become a matter of serious political debate. This debate does not acknowledge the role of the wartime United Nations in preserving freedom and laying the foundations of post-war peace and prosperity. Once the reality of the wartime United Nations is understood a number of ideas become clear.

First, Anglo-American international political legitimacy based upon the defeat of the Axis should be regarded as inseparable from the United Nations because the Anglo-Americans fought the war as the United Nations and to create the United Nations Organisation. It is more accurate to describe efforts to marginalise

\textsuperscript{95} New York Times (11 October 1942), p. 36.


the United Nations Organisation as marginalising and betraying the legacy of those who fought and won the war.

Second, the example of the development of the United Nations when countries were fighting for their very existence undermines the idea that modern problems and leaders are too difficult to make a multilateral organisation work. Presidents Ahmadinejad and Putin are scarcely tougher customers than Stalin and de Gaulle.

Third, today, policies such as social security, freedom from want, labour rights, free trade, disarmament and even human rights tend to be marginalised in international and especially US politics. However, the peoples and governments that fought the war generally regarded liberal social democratic policies as vital to rallying support to defeat violent extremism and prevent future conflict.

Fourth, the United Nations was first a fighting alliance and was created as an organisation with an expectation both that compromise between the powerful was necessary and that violence might again have to be met with violence. The idea that the United Nations exists as an ideal aside from these harsh realities has no basis in history.

Why has this history been lost? While there is no clear answer, some suggestions can be offered. The new United Nations Organisation (UNO) wanted a clean start unencumbered by the wartime experience. The many new states created as the British and French empires collapsed regarded the UNO as a new organisation, whose wartime origins seemed of little relevance. Everyone knew the UNO had been created out of the ashes of the war; there was no need to labour the point.

More importantly, the creation of images of competing evil empires in the Cold War meant that neither right nor left wanted to give credit to the other side’s contribution in defeating the Axis. Nowadays, journalists assigned to cover anniversaries of wartime events may come across the occasional reference to the United Nations and omit it as an oddity—or even a mistake.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that people are at first incredulous that the United Nations fought and won the war and then outraged that they have been lied to about their history. Whether that history has been stolen or was simply discarded is not clear. As we consider the origins and value of the United Nations today do we think the present organisation more or less worthy of support when we recall the wartime history?

More will need to be done to redress the record. There is a wealth of unexamined primary source material that will help the process. It may also be useful to find some terminology. Formally, the UN we have today is the UNO, an abbreviation no longer much used, but which originally differentiated it from the wartime alliance. Perhaps “WUN” for the wartime United Nations could be used.

An assessment from Churchill is apt. In September 1944, while the battle of Arnhem raged, Churchill had a private conversation with his First Sea Lord, Admiral Cunningham, on the proposed United Nations Organisation. He replied to Cunningham, who had dared to say that it would not amount to anything, with the admonition “It is the only hope of the world.”
