Special issue introduction: Towards a global history of international organizations and decolonization

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Abstract
Decolonization and the expansion of international organizations in the twentieth century are crucial developments in modern global history, yet scholars have seldom closely studied their impact on one another. While decolonization is often presented as the ‘success story’ of international organizations, these bodies have also been condemned as instruments of neocolonialism. This introduction and special issue moves beyond this binary and investigates the multifaceted roles that international organizations have played in decolonizing countries and how the dissolution of European empires has in turn affected the development of international organizations. International organizations were neither straightforward tools of empire or neocolonialism, nor natural instruments for ‘Third World’ liberation. Rather, the contributions collected here underline a history of decolonization that defies any teleological framing and emphasizes diverse trajectories of global interaction facilitated through international organizations. The introduction offers an overview of recent literature on the topic and discusses promising avenues for further research.

Keywords: International Organizations; Decolonization; League of Nations; United Nations

Membership in the United Nations has almost quadrupled since its founding in 1945, with the vast majority of new states admitted over this period resulting from the collapse of European imperial regimes. Decolonization or ‘the great transformation that brought into being the countries of the Third World’, and the expansion of international organizations (both non-governmental and inter-governmental) in the twentieth century are among the most momentous developments in modern global history, yet scholars have seldom closely studied their impact on one another.1 Statistics of UN membership are frequently cited as proof of decolonization in historical overviews, but such surveys pay little attention to the significance of international organizations for that process.2 While UN officials tend to present decolonization as the ‘success story’

†I am grateful to the authors, the reviewers and Heidi Tworek for making this special issue a reality. It grew out of a symposium that was sponsored by the 2018 International Research Award in Global History awarded by the Universities of Basel, Munich, and Sydney: https://iosdecolonization2019.wordpress.com/. I thank the workshop participants and sponsors; Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo for helping me improve the award application and workshop outline; and Jess Pearson and Bogdan Iacob for their input on this introduction.

1A recent exception being Nicole Eggers, Jessica L. Pearson, and Aurora Almada e Santos, eds., The United Nations and Decolonization (New York: Routledge, 2020).

2See for example Jan Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel, Dekolonisation: Das Ende der Imperien (München: C.H. Beck, 2013); Dane Kennedy, Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); similarly, the Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire seems to feature a photograph of UN member name tags on its cover, while no single chapter is devoted to the role of international organizations (though of course they surface in individual chapters), see Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, eds., The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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of the world organization, numerous scholars and commentators have condemned international organizations as instruments of neocolonialism.\textsuperscript{3}

This special issue moves beyond this binary and investigates the multifaceted roles that international organizations have played in decolonizing countries and how the dissolution of European empires has in turn affected the development of international organizations. Collectively, we ask how the end of empire has affected twentieth century processes of global integration through international cooperation.\textsuperscript{4} The contributions underline a broader history of decolonization that defies any teleological framing and emphasizes diverse trajectories of global interaction facilitated through international organizations. What emerges is not a story of international organizations as straightforward tools of empire or neocolonialism, or as natural instruments for 'Third World' liberation. Rather, the articles reveal the importance of the agency and coordination, but also fundamental disagreements with regard to decolonization among the broad swath of countries that are often lumped together as the Global South. They demonstrate that there were multiple projects folded into decolonization and international organizations, which served as incubators of challenges to the political, economic, and civilizational hierarchies of the day. Taken together, the articles reveal the plurality of chronologies and meanings of global decolonization in the twentieth century, which, we argue, cannot be separated from the history of international organizations.

What are international organizations? Rather than proceed from a narrow definition, we consciously use ‘international organization’ as a broad umbrella term for different types of organizations, both intergovernmental and non-governmental, that were active in multiple countries and/or composed of members – not necessarily states – from different countries. Each international organization encompasses multiple entities of its own (from intergovernmental forums, to expert communities, to international bureaucracies) and each entity had its own implicit or explicit vision of world order and decolonization. No IO, we suggest, was able to impose a coherent system of international order on the world. Taken together, the papers collected in this special issue, reveal the multiplicity of entities that make up any international organization, and accordingly, the different, often contradictory roles that they have played in processes of decolonization in the twentieth century.

For example, as the contributions by Disha Jani, Cindy Ewing and Elisabeth Leake show, international organizations have served as sounding boards and norm-setting spaces to reimagine and (re)formulate ideas about self-determination and decolonization. As Bogdan Iacob’s article demonstrates, IOs have also served as anchors for international expert communities that helped shape processes of decolonization in specific fields and locales. Or as Giorgio Potì’s contribution makes clear, they have served as mediators caught in-between competing interests of member states and even non-member states negotiating de- as well as ‘post-colonial re-colonization’. The most interesting contributions to the study of international organizations, we believe and hope to show with this special issue, pay close attention to this multiplicity of actors and functions contained within any IO, the complex interplay between these different entities, as well their interaction or relationship with each other, and, in some cases, with rival international organizations at the time.

\textsuperscript{3}For the neocolonialism argument see for example Antony Anghie, \textit{Colonialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law} (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2004); for decolonization as a success story of the UN see e.g. Brian Urquhart, \textit{Ralph Bunche: An American Life} (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 122. The UN Website ‘Decolonization’ reads: ‘The wave of decolonization, which changed the face of the planet, was born with the UN and represents the world body’s first great success.’

\textsuperscript{4}See also the emphasis of the authors of the introduction to the Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empires on writing a global history of decolonization and their insistence on seeing ‘the end of empires as geopolitical force just as profound as globalization, and not merely a function of it’. Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, ‘Rethinking Decolonization: A New Research Agenda for the Twenty-First Century,’ in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire}, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18.
Collectively, we would like to advance an understanding of IOs as more than passive international forums, but rather as multi-body entities that fundamentally shaped processes and outcomes of decolonization.

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of excellent historical studies of international organizations, especially the League of Nations, the UN and affiliated agencies, as well as internationalism and globalism broadly defined. These ‘new histories’ approach international organizations as ‘observation points’ for studying the plurality of intellectual, cultural and political phenomena that transcend the borders of nations – such as development, human rights, or anti-colonialism, and, increasingly, also focus on the changing nature of these institutions themselves. Scholarship on decolonization, meanwhile, has shifted away from a primary focus on understanding the reasons for the dissolution of European empires that resulted in the political independence of former colonies. Rather, the broader transformation itself – changes in culture, economics, law, the state bureaucracy and so on – that both preceded and outlasted constitutional independence has become a central scholarly concern. The special issue brings these two important strands of historical scholarship into conversation to better illuminate the world created by decolonization and the global institutions that seek to govern it.

At the most basic level, decolonization has been described as a global ‘apparatus for the production of sovereignties, . . . a sovereignty machine that produces political entities according to international law: states with demarcated territory, a constitution, a legal framework, a government, police, a flag, and a national anthem’. In the postwar period, UN membership became an important marker of recognition for statehood. What has received comparatively little attention, however, is that representatives of international organizations were often intimately involved in the constitution-writing processes, the formation of post-colonial governments, and the maintenance

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8Jansen and Osterhammel, Dekolonisation, 12.
and restructuring of state bureaucracies. Scholars have begun to push back against the notion of a simple extension of a ‘Westphalian system’ of nominal nation-based sovereignty from Europe to the rest of the globe. The task for historians going forward in writing a truly global history of decolonization, we argue, is to look more closely at what kind of sovereignties were produced and the multifaceted roles that international organizations have come to play in them since.

Richard Drayton and David Motadel argued in these pages that global history as we know it is itself as result of postwar decolonization. They also suggest that national history still remains the primary mode through which most contributions to ‘world history’ or ‘international history’ happen. This special issue avoids such ‘container-based’ histories (be it national or imperial), by using international organizations as observations points for global history, as both ‘protagonists and seismographs of global decolonization’, as Daniel Maul puts it. Yet, global history is necessarily concerned with more than connections and entanglements, namely with increasing global integration. We argue that international organizations must be seen as important vehicles for integration in the twentieth century. Yet, as this special issue illustrates, integration was neither a quasi-natural process nor an imposition of ‘the West on the rest’, but the work of diverse historical actors, with a variety of often-times competing agendas.

### A brief history of international organizations and decolonization

International organizations have a long history, but their proliferation reached unprecedented heights at the beginning of the last century. Similarly, decolonization is not strictly a twentieth century phenomenon: a first wave of decolonization swept the Americas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet it took two world wars to usher in the wave of decolonization, we argue, is to look more closely at what kind of sovereignties were produced and the multifaceted roles that international organizations have come to play in them since.

- Parts of this section overlap with the introduction to Muschik, *Building States*.
- On the inadequacy of distinguishing between subsequent regional waves of decolonization see Schayegh and Di-Capua, ‘Why Decolonization?,’ 143.
much of Africa, Asia and the Pacific that we still inhabit today.\textsuperscript{20} The wars, too, proved a catalyst for international cooperation, but the relationship between the newly created institutions aspiring to global governance and the proliferation of independent states was not as straightforward as one might assume.

Despite a ‘Wilsonian moment’ in 1919, when anti-colonial leaders converged on Europe to demand self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference, the premier institution of global governance that emerged from World War One – the League of Nations – was designed by the victorious allied states to protect the interests of empire.\textsuperscript{21} The League, much like its successor organization the UN, was a multilateral organization that brought member states together to solve issues on an intergovernmental basis. Unlike the UN, the League included non-sovereign polities such as British India as member states and required restrictions on their sovereignty from others upon entry (e.g. in the form of minority protection contracts).\textsuperscript{22} As Adom Getachew insists: unequal membership was a key feature of the League; though more inclusive and universal than prior projects of international organization, inclusion in Geneva operated through a process of unequal integration.\textsuperscript{23}

In addition to the main intergovernmental bodies – the League Assembly and Council –, where national representatives convened, the League also featured the first permanent international bureaucracy composed of civil servants who carried out the day-to-day work of the organization. Reflecting international power hierarchies at the time, it was dominated by Western Europeans, especially from imperial powers, who shaped the organization’s work.\textsuperscript{24} There were also a number of boards, offices, commissions and organizations that were officially affiliated with the League, most prominently the still-existing International Labor Organization (ILO), as well as several expert networks that were more or less loosely connected with the world organization.\textsuperscript{25} If we want to better understand the League’s role in decolonization, we thus need be explicit about which particular entity we study as a stand-in for ‘the League’.

At the heart of the League effort to protect empire was the mandates system, which provided for international oversight of the administration of former Ottoman and German colonial

\textsuperscript{20}Kennedy broadly distinguishes between ‘New World’ decolonization of the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ‘Old World’ decolonization of the Russian and Habsburg Eurasian land empires, and ‘Third World’ decolonization following the two world wars. He notes that ‘decolonization of a sort’ occurred across much of the Ottoman Empire in southeastern Europe before the wars, as Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania gained independence, but notes that rival empires played crucial roles in these upheavals. Kennedy, Decolonization, Chapter 1 ‘Waves of decolonization’; on the relatively recent vintage of the nation-state system see Vergerio, ‘Beyond the Nation-State’.


\textsuperscript{23}Getachew, Worldmaking After Empire, 41, 51.


\textsuperscript{25}For an introduction to League historiography see Pedersen, ‘Back to the League of Nations’; for the ILO see Maul, Human Rights, Development and Decolonization; Daniel Maul, The International Labour Organization: 100 Years of Global Social Policy (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019).
territories that were distributed among the victors of World War One.\textsuperscript{26} The mandates system, as Susan Pedersen has shown, was intended as a project of imperial reconciliation and legitimation – despite its pronounced goal to benefit ‘native peoples’. Above all, it was meant to foster constructive cooperation among the existing imperial powers. Beyond that, it was an attempt to turn imperialism into a transnational project that all League members – in different ways – could partake in.\textsuperscript{27} Yet as Pedersen points out, intentions were not institutions. Though the League covenant, by promising ‘wellbeing and development’ to the inhabitants of the mandates and alluding to a (far-away) time when they might be ‘able to stand by themselves’, legitimized imperial hierarchies and the civilizing mission at the international level; it also provided an opening for claim-making.\textsuperscript{28}

More importantly perhaps, the Permanent Mandates Commission in Geneva, the League body staffed with ‘colonial experts’, which reviewed reports from the mandate territories on a regular basis, functioned as an international stage on which imperial matters were publicly scrutinized. This novel mechanism normalized the notion that empire required defense and made imperial governance in the mandates burdensome.\textsuperscript{29} Nominal independent statehood thus soon seemed like a preferable alternative to imperial powers and also appealed to revisionist League member states such as Germany, as well as anti-colonialists in the territories alike. That the mandates system thus became a force for decolonization, or, as Susan Pedersen puts it, that it ‘lurch[ed] towards normative statehood’, was unintended and inadvertent: sovereignty for ‘dependent territories’ was not the result of, but an alternative to international oversight.\textsuperscript{30} Accordingly, but often missing from celebratory accounts of decolonization: the sovereign states that emerged from this process often featured economic arrangements ‘that would do the work of empire’ beyond independence.\textsuperscript{31}

As the contributions to this special issue reveal, the League also had important effects on the colonial world beyond the immediate confines of the mandates system, and even beyond the confines of its limited membership: as Giorgio Potì shows, for both Egypt (which was only admitted to the League in 1937) and Great Britain, the League was an important site for mediating competing claims of sovereignty in the Nile Valley in the early 1920s. Bogdan Iacob in turn reveals how the League of Nations Health Organization – a predecessor to today’s World Health Organization – facilitated the circulation of public health knowledge and practices across colonial territories and encouraged colonial administrators to expand health care to a broader population. Inadvertently, the League thus became a forum and sounding board for both Europeans and colonial peoples to reimagine the world and their place in it, thus breaking the monopoly of empires as the premier site for these negotiations.\textsuperscript{32}

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\item[26] The mandatory powers were Australia, Belgium, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Japan. Mandates in the Middle East included Palestine and Transjordan, Syria and Lebanon, as well as Iraq; in Africa: British and French Togo, British and French Cameroon, Ruanda-Urundi, Tanganyika, South West Africa; in the Pacific: the Japanese Mandated Islands, New Guinea, Nauru and Western Samoa. See also Cyrus Schayegh, ‘The Mandates and/as Decolonization,’ in The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates, ed. Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (London: Routledge, 2015), 412–19; the main study of the mandates system is Pedersen, The Guardians; for more recent reflections see Pedersen, ‘An International Regime in an Age of Empire’; and Wempe, ‘A League to Preserve Empires’ as well as other contributions to the AHR forum by Sherene Seikaly, Carol Hakim, Yiigit Akin, Tze M. Loo, Molly McCullers, Meredith Terretta and Benjamin N. Lawrence, and George N. Njung.
\item[27] Pedersen, The Guardians, 403.
\item[31] Pedersen, ‘An International Regime in an Age of Empire,’ 1678 building on; Anghee, Colonialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law; also see Getachew, Worldmaking After Empire, 62.
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At the same time, the interwar period saw the emergence of anti-imperialism as a global movement that went well beyond the League.33 Political activists from around the world increasingly sought to coordinate and connect their anti-colonial efforts through international meetings and novel organizations. The multiple pan-African and pan-Asian congresses, which took place in the 1920s, must be seen in that context. Participants called for regional unity and an end to European colonialism, condemning the League for its complicity in empire. The League Against Imperialism (LAI), established in Brussels in 1927, was one effort to institutionalize the anti-colonial movement at the global level. As the name suggests, it was intended as antidote to the League of Nations.34 Supported by the Communist International – itself an avowedly anti-imperialist international organization – the LAI brought together anti-colonial leaders, as well as a motley crew of left-leaning activists, politicians and intellectuals from around the world.35 A permanent Secretariat was set up in Berlin (the German communist Willi Münzenberg had been a driving force in establishing the LAI) and twenty-two local chapters were established by 1927. However, the organization broke apart in the early 1930s, after the Comintern increasingly sought to control the activities of its members and affiliates.36 Nevertheless, the LAI, as Disha Jani argues in her contribution to this issue, was an important catalyst and incubator for anti-colonial networking and ideas regarding political as well as economic sovereignty that would prove influential well beyond the organization’s relatively short-lived existence.37

World War II sent the League of Nations and affiliated agencies by and large into hibernation.38 Somewhat paradoxically, however, the war also brought forth new forms of international cooperation, including a number of inter-imperial configurations, such as the Middle East Supply Center and the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission.39 Thus, it was no foregone conclusion that another world organization would be set up after the war, and that, despite all the rhetoric of new beginnings, it would be fairly closely modeled on the League.40 Much like the League in 1919,
the founding of the United Nations at San Francisco in 1945 offered ‘no New Deal for the Black man’.\textsuperscript{41} Washington, the principal sponsor of the new world organization, had floated proposals to internationalize all imperial administrations during the war and even briefly considered securing immediate independence for all colonies.\textsuperscript{42} Ultimately, however, the League of Nations mandates system was slightly revised (petitioning from and visits to the territories in question, for example, became standard procedure); it was applied to even fewer territories in Africa and the Pacific, and was rebranded as the UN trusteeship system.\textsuperscript{43} Going beyond the League Covenant, however, the UN Charter offered a codification of general principles of colonial rule applicable to all colonies – the so-called Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories.\textsuperscript{44} This declaration, which was signed by all UN member states, explicitly posited self-government (if not independent statehood) as the ultimate goal of colonial trusteeship, thus rendering imperial governance in general – at least nominally – temporal and finite. With the trusteeship system, however, the UN continued the system of unequal international integration pioneered by the League.\textsuperscript{45}

To be clear: independence for former colonies did not follow automatically from the letter of the UN Charter; it would take protracted battles and negotiations at multiple levels – the colonies, the metropoles, and on the international stage.\textsuperscript{46} Within the UN system, the main arena for this struggle was not so much the Trusteeship Council (the intergovernmental successor body to the important Permanent Mandates Commission of the League), but rather the General Assembly and its various subcommittees, which gained increasing political power due to the Cold War stalemate in the Security Council. Most important perhaps was the Committee on Information from Non-Self-Governing Territories, which was set up by the first General Assembly in 1946, against

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\item \textsuperscript{43}In further contrast to the League’s mandates system, the UN trusteeship system comprised a special category of ‘strategic’ UN trust territories. These territories in the Pacific were reserved for US military purposes and nominally overseen by the Security Council, where Washington could veto any interference. While the strategic trust territories have received little scholarly attention, a book-length historical study of the trusteeship system as such is also sorely lacking. UN Trust Territories included: British Togoland, which, united with the British Gold Coast, achieved independence in 1957 as Ghana; Somaliland under Italian Administration, which, united with the British Somaliland Protectorate, formed the independent state of Somalia in 1960; French Togoland, which became independent Togo in 1960; French Cameroons, which gained independence as Cameroon in 1960; British Cameroons, whose northern part joined Nigeria, while the southern part joined Cameroon in 1961; British Tanganyika, which gained independence in 1961 and, in union with the former British Protectorate of Zanzibar, became Tanzania in 1963; Belgian Ruanda-Burundi, which a plebiscite divided into the two sovereign States of Rwanda and Burundi in 1962; Western Samoa which gained independence from New Zealand as Samoa in 1962; Nauru, administered by Australia, which became independent in 1968; Australian New Guinea, which together with the Australian colony of Papua formed the independent State of Papua New Guinea in 1975; as well as the US Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands, compromising the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and, lastly, Palau, which became ‘fully self-governing in free Association with the United States’ in 1990 and 1994, respectively. ‘Trust Territories that Have Achieved Self-Determination’ \url{http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/selfdet.shtml}, last accessed 18 July 2016. For strategic trust territories, see Ganeshwar Chand, ‘The United States and the Origins of the Trusteeship System,’ Review (Fernand Braudel Center) 14, no. 2 (1991): 171–230; for a recent history of US overseas expansion see Daniel Immerwahr, How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019); for recent research on UN trusteeship, see Julius Heise, Maria Ketzermerick, and Jan Lüdert, eds., The United Nations Trusteeship System: Legacies, Continuities, and Change, Global Institutions (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
\item \textsuperscript{45}On the latter point see Getachew, Worldmaking After Empire, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{46}For the battle at the UN, see Getachew, Chapter 3.
\end{itemize}
the wishes of the imperial powers. Featuring imperial powers and non-imperial powers in equal measure, it would henceforth review and discuss reports relating to ostensibly technical matters in ‘dependent territories’ (that is economic, social and educational conditions), which were submitted to the UN by the colonial powers on a regular basis. The Committee became an important site for both pro- and anti-colonial government representatives to discuss which territories would be considered colonies, as well as how and to what end colonial rule should be practiced. In Jessica L. Pearson’s words, it created a significant opening that allowed the world to see ‘the inner lives of empires’.48

In addition to scrutinizing colonial rule and holding imperial powers accountable to lofty promises of protection and development, delegates from the Middle East, Asia and Africa – aided by the Soviet Union and its satellite states – mounted an active campaign within the UN (as well as outside of it, of course) to end formal ‘saltwater’ colonialism, i.e. instances of alien rule of geographically distant territories.49 This campaign – the beginnings of which are explored in Cindy Ewing’s contribution to this special issue – culminated in the 1960 UN General Assembly Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Peoples, which called for the immediate transfer of power ‘without any conditions or reservations’ and thus marked a watershed in the history of decolonization.50 The UN General Assembly Committee of twenty-four that was established to oversee the implementation of the Declaration featured an overwhelming number of anti-colonial powers. It became a year-round source of critique of imperial rule.51

Yet as Adom Getachew points out, there were limits to the success of the specific right to anti-colonial self-determination won within the UN: it provided no solution for settler colonial contexts, for secessionist movements within post-colonial states, or neocolonial arrangements.52 As the contributions to this issue also underline, the fight for global decolonization was not simply a straightforward extension of national liberation struggles to the international level. In her study of Arab-Asian coordination at the UN in the late 1940s, Cindy Ewing shows that even though the UN was a formative setting for the emergence of post-colonial internationalism and Global South solidarity, the common goals pursued by these states at the UN did not translate into uniformity or consensus on specific instances of decolonization or a common understanding of the word itself. Similarly, Elisabeth Leake recovers Afghanistan’s fight at the UN against a growing global consensus otherwise promoted in the General Assembly that self-determination in the era of decolonization equaled the establishment of a sovereign nation-state within colonial era boundaries.

While international organizations played a vital role in shaping postwar decolonization, the dissolution of European empires also dramatically changed both the composition as well as the focus and work of international organizations themselves, especially of the UN and its

47The Committee was initially called ‘Ad hoc Committee on Information transmitted under Article 73e.’
49Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, 86.
50Getachew, 90. For recent research on the Declaration see contributions to 2021 conference ‘Reckoning with Empire: The Right to Self-Determination in Historical View’ organized by Charlotte Kiechel at Yale University, [https://resolution1514.yale.edu/](https://resolution1514.yale.edu/), last accessed 30 July 2021.


affiliated agencies and programs, but also of European institutions. Of the fifty-one UN founding member states, only three had recently emerged from colonial rule or were about to do so (India, Lebanon and Syria) – though others like China, Egypt, Iran and Iraq, too, had been subjected to semi-colonial status. Within twenty years, almost 50 out of 119 member states were recent formal ‘dependent territories’, while at least half a dozen others had experienced a form of foreign tutelage little different from colonial rule. The change in membership shifted the power relations within the UN system, and according to one standard account of UN history, ended the years of ‘Western domination’ within a decade. Interestingly, earlier studies suggest that the United States nevertheless continued to be able to rally majority support for virtually all General Assembly decisions dealing with Cold War issues, while remaining in opposition on colonial questions until well into the 1960s.

During 1960s, mobilizations from the Global South, for which the 1955 Asian-African conference in Bandung had been an important turning point, gained increasing momentum: the Non-Alignment Movement, which was founded in Belgrade in 1961 and later institutionalized, and the Group of 77, an ever expanding alliance of mostly post-colonial, self-described ‘developing countries’, born at the first UN Conference on Trade and Development in 1964, carved an intermediate space in postwar geographies, an alternative to the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Decolonization in Asia and Africa increasingly restructured policies and conceptualizations within international organizations along a North-South rather than an East-West axis. This development reached its apex in 1976, when at UNCTAD IV, post-colonial states stopped differentiating ideologically between the socialist and capitalist states of the northern hemisphere.

Already from 1955 onwards, however, the great majority of conflicts that the UN considered had to do with the end of the colonial era, either because independence struggles reached a climax, as they did in Algeria, or, because conflicts arose in the aftermath of independence, as in the case of the Congo. Even issues that were not in the strictest sense colonial, such as the war over Suez, concerned relationships between Western powers and their former ‘dependencies’. In addition to considering specific political crises resulting from the demise of empire, the UN turned its attention to different issues as a result of decolonization, above all to global economic inequalities.


54Another 20 had been colonies in a former age. Luard, The Age of Decolonization, 2:2.


60Luard, The Age of Decolonization, 2:2f.
In UN informational materials, so-called ‘underdeveloped’ territories, as they were initially called, broadly mapped onto the world’s colonies and former ‘dependencies’. In the early years of the UN, campaigns for the transfer of knowledge and funds to foster national development dominated the discussions; obscuring the fact that problems faced by the (post)colonial world were in large part a result of empire.\(^61\) By the 1960s, Global South delegates, who were influenced in their thinking by the research of UN personnel such as Hans Singer and Raúl Prebisch, increasingly shifted their attention from the question of national development to the unfair terms of world trade, culminating in the General Assembly call for a New International Economic Order in 1973.\(^62\)

The increasing focus on international inequalities within the UN, not only fostered intergovernmental discussions but also prompted the expansion and reinvention of new international programs and activities, from the provision of development assistance to peacekeeping.\(^63\) The first UN peacekeeping missions were dispatched to mediate post-imperial or ‘decolonization conflicts’ in 1948: one relating to the creation of Israel and the subsequent outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli about the future of administrating the contested territory was never realized, another such attempt was made in the wake of the Congo Crisis in the early 1960s.\(^64\) Though the UN intervention in the former Belgian colony proved a political and financial disaster for the organization (and did little to ‘stabilize’ the newly independent country as promised), the developmental peacekeeping practices that were pioneered in the Congo enjoyed an unprecedented comeback in post-1989 experiments of ‘international territorial administration’, from Kosovo to East Timor.\(^66\)

Decolonization thus triggered global debates and activities within international organizations that – to a degree – reflected the agency and interests of newly sovereign peoples, weakened the hierarchies of the Cold War, and ultimately laid the ground for the post-1989 world. In this sense, one might agree with Akira Iriye, who considered the Cold War a mere footnote in the longer and ultimately more consequential story of decolonization.\(^67\) Seeing the twentieth century, and

\(^{61}\) Wempe, ‘A League to Preserve Empires,’ 1728.


\(^{63}\) On the UN technical assistance programs see Digambar Bhouraskar, United Nations Development Aid: A Study in History and Politics (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007); Murphy, The UNDP; Olav Stokke, The UN and Development: From Aid to Cooperation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Muschik, Building States.


especially its post-1945 years from the vantage point of decolonization brings into focus actors as well as turning points and chronologies that for a long time have been considered outsiders or peripheral to global history.\textsuperscript{68} The contributions to this special issue show that such a perspective is necessary to understand the diversity and importance of Global South agency in restructuring the postwar world.\textsuperscript{69}

A brief overview of the recent historiography and possible avenues for future research

This special issue builds on a spate of new research that looks at the relationship between international organizations and decolonization in more depth.\textsuperscript{70} There are a number of case studies, focused above all on specific League mandates and UN trust territories, but also on states and territories, where the UN assumed a kind of transitional authority, or where member states assumed a ‘special responsibility’, such as with regard to Palestine, South West Africa (former League mandates) or South Africa.\textsuperscript{71} There are studies of the mandates system more generally and edited volumes on UN trusteeship.\textsuperscript{72} There is work on anti-colonial powers at the UN, especially on India’s preeminent role.\textsuperscript{73} And there is research on specific fields of IO activity in the context of decolonization – including economic development, public health, refugees and international law (with most work on the latter topic focusing either on the issue of self-determination or on human rights).\textsuperscript{74} This research can also be divided according to the functions that international organizations played in the process of decolonization. We propose to distinguish three

\begin{itemize}
  \item Drayton and Motadel, ‘Discussion: The Futures of Global History,’ 10.
  \item For a similar emphasis see Matthew Hilton and Rana Mitter, ‘Introduction,’ Past & Present, Supplement, no. 8 (2013): 8.
  \item On the mandates system see footnotes 26 and 27 on the trusteeship system see footnote 44.
\end{itemize}
approaches, though some of the most interesting work combines them. (1) The most prevalent approach views international organizations as public forums for negotiating the meaning of decolonization more generally and the decolonization of specific places in particular. (2) Another approach examines international organizations as hubs for forging both anti-colonial and inter-imperial alliances. (3) A third presents international organizations and their employees as historical actors in their own right, who sought to respond to and shape the process of decolonization, rather than simply follow the lead of government representatives.75 Below, we discuss some examples and interesting recent trends with regard to these three approaches, before suggesting promising avenues for further research.

A pioneering example of the first (‘international public forum’) approach is Matthew Connelly’s study of the Front de Libération Nationale’s success in using international organizations to delegitimize French colonialism and win recognition as Algeria’s legitimate rulers.76 More recently, however, scholarly attention has turned to histories of what one might call ‘frustrated decolonization’. Tracey Banivanua Mar, for example, recovered Pacific peoples’ struggles to be heard within the halls of the League of Nations to demand self-determination. Though not conventionally successful, she writes, they form part of a longer anti-colonial struggle of appealing to an international public and thus putting empire on the defensive.77 Petitioning by inhabitants from ‘dependent territories’ indeed became a formal feature of the UN Trusteeship System, but this did not ensure that petitioners were in fact always heard or that they received redress from the world organization, as Meredith Terretta has shown with regard to British and French Cameroons and Julius Heise with regard to British and French Togoland.78 Still others, with no official means to petition the UN, were likewise unsuccessful in their campaigns for self-determination, as Emma Kluge demonstrated in her study of West Papuan activists.79

The example of Papua or Western New Guinea, which was ‘transferred’ to Indonesia from the Dutch after a brief UN interim regnum in the early 1960s, as Margot Tudor reminds us, should also prompt us to further think about the roles played by IOs in cases of ‘post-colonial re-colonization’ that are often left out of standard accounts of decolonization (but discussed in Poti’s contribution here).80 It also raises the broader question about the roles played by the UN (and other IOs) in the often-times frustrated quest for decolonization or self-determination by minorities and indigenous peoples within states, and especially settler colonies – both newly sovereign as well as long established ones.81 Taken together, this research complicates facile assessments of decolonization as a rare success story of the postwar UN system.

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75 Alanna O’Malley similarly distinguishes between three dimensions of UN history: the UN as a public stage, the UN as an actor; and the UN as a socializing space. Alanna O’Malley, Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960–64 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 2f.


77 Banivanua-Mar, Decolonisation and the Pacific.


80 Tudor, ‘Gatekeepers to Decolonisation’.

Arguments about the UN as a force of decolonization usually point to anti-colonial alliances formed within the world organization – (the ‘hub approach’). States emerging from colonial rule often did not have personnel and funding to maintain diplomatic missions in more than a few countries. The regular meetings of international organizations thus provided important opportunities for informal diplomatic networking outside of the conference halls. Vijay Prashad’s *The Darker Nations*, for example, offers an early assessment of the role of international organizations in facilitating a “Third World” movement.  

Perhaps more surprising is that colonial powers, too, seized on international organizations, such as the UN, as instruments to defend empire. (Though this might be less surprising if we consider the League of Nations attempt to internationalize empire by way the mandates system and see the UN as building on the League.) Jessica Lynne Pearson, for example, has examined how European imperial powers, when confronted with anti-colonial sentiment in various UN committees, joined forces on the international stage, both in New York and through technical cooperation in public health in Africa.  

But such inter-imperial cooperation predated and went beyond the UN; the resulting institutions, such as the (Anglo-American) Caribbean Commission, another Allied cooperation that extended into the postwar period, for example, still remain to be studied.  

How exactly international organizations and their employees shaped the decolonization of specific locales through their activities – including standard setting, military intervention, development assistance, advocacy or humanitarian aid – is only beginning to be examined. Yet, research in this vein (the ‘agency-centered approach’) seems particular important to probe generalizing arguments about the neocolonial nature of international organizations. There is a related body of literature that invokes a ‘rule’, or even a ‘tyranny of experts’, suggesting that representatives of international organizations (among others) enjoyed unprecedented powers in the decolonizing world in the postwar period. Empirical historical research, however, suggests that this ‘rule’ came in multiple forms and was seldom straightforward.  

Aldwin Roes, for example, has shown how World Bank survey missions indeed helped shape the monetary and financial arrangements of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya – states that emerged from the British East Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s – in line with British expectations. Focusing on excavations in Egypt and Sudan, William Carruthers, by contrast, has demonstrated how India was able to ‘decolonize’ or rearrange colonial logics of archeological knowledge production under UNESCO’s auspices.

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82 Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World*.


86 Writing about the Washington-based agencies that became increasingly active across the postcolonial world, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and USAID, Timothy Mitchell, too, suggests that ‘they were seldom able to impose new policies, still less control the outcome when their interventions were successful. Where they did achieve results, however, was in the monopoly of their expertise’. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Expert: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 211; for further arguments about the triumph and tyranny of development experts, see Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, 2013.


The proliferation of recent research on international organizations and decolonization should not suggest that the field is nearing saturation. To the contrary, there are many areas left to explore if we aim for a more global history of international organizations and decolonization. Within the broader League and UN systems, the work of a number of specialized agencies, and programs, as well as the regional economic commissions, their impact on decolonization and vice versa remains to be explored.\textsuperscript{89} Moreover, it seems essential to look beyond the League and the UN, as Jani does in this issue with the League against Imperialism. Others might ask: What role(s) did the Organization of African Unity play in the process of decolonization, or the Organization of American States?\textsuperscript{90}

The Arab League, for example, was born of British efforts to play a ‘father-figure’ for Arab cooperation.\textsuperscript{91} However, much like other international organizations, too, this League based in Cairo quickly developed a life its own. Member states took an active interest in the decolonization of the former Italian colony of Libya, for example, which was administered by the British and the French, but overseen by the UN. In 1951, as Libya was about to emerge as a sovereign state, the Arab League organized demonstrations against the imperial powers’ appointment of representatives to the Libyan National Assembly, leading UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie to cancel his visit to the territory to avoid drawing international public attention to the lack of elections and thus embarrass colonial, UN and Libyan officials.\textsuperscript{92} As much as it is important to go beyond the League of Nations and the UN, it is thus also vital to connect, compare and contrast the approaches of different international organizations and their respective roles in decolonization.

Likewise, it is important to connect, compare and contrast the interwar and the postwar periods as Jani, Iacob, and Leake do in their papers. By the 1930s, the League of Nations was an influential center for norm-making and technocratic knowledge production. The interwar years were formative in the conceptualization and institutionalization of technical assistance, laying the groundwork for a vision of development that linked social change with economic growth and shaped the UN-system’s approach to newly independent states. Continuities and discontinuities from the League to the United Nations remain under-researched, yet they are central to understanding


Comparing the interwar and postwar periods, Cemil Aydin has posed the question of why states emerging from colonial rule so heavily invested in the UN system. Given the imperial DNA of the UN Charter, he writes, why did anti-colonial leaders not challenge this system and look for a better alternative, as many did during the interwar period?\footnote{Cemil Aydin, ‘Review of Mark Mazower: No Enchanted Palace,’ H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews XI, no. 47 (2010): 7.} Perhaps, as the history of Anglophone anti-colonial activism suggests, the contrast was not as stark? Or rather, the anti-colonial challenge to the UN system was simply more successful.\footnote{Getachew, Worldmaking After Empire, 52, 87f.} But if the UN really became the lodestar of decolonization in the postwar period as some research assumes, when and why did anti-colonial stalwarts grow disenchanted with the world organization? Should we trace it to the UN’s controversial intervention in the Congo crisis in the early 1960s, the protracted struggle against Apartheid, the inability to find a solution for Palestine, or the disappointed hopes for a New International Economic Order in the late 1970s, early 1980s?\footnote{On the Congo crisis see e.g. Alanna O’Malley, ‘Ghana, India, and the Transnational Dynamics of the Congo Crisis at the United Nations, 1960–1,’ International History Review 37, no. 5 (2015): 970–90; also see Irwin, ‘Imagining Nation, State, and Order in the Mid-Twentieth Century’; Irwin, Gordian Knot; on the NIEO see special issue introduced by Gilman, ‘The New International Economic Order: A Re-Introduction’.} Probing such questions will lead us to new chronologies of and insights on twentieth century history.

There is also much work to be done in overcoming the colonial-post-colonial divide in historical scholarship on international organizations: we need to further examine continuities in personnel, ideas, and inequalities, and inquire about the ways in which colonial frameworks and the legacies of decolonization continue to inform doctrines and practices of international organizations. As empires were crumbling, (former) colonial servants constituted the prime recruiting ground for international organizations. For example, about one third of all UN development experts in the 1950s were recruited from European colonial powers.\footnote{Stokke, The UN and Development, 74.} Some scholars have convincingly argued that the development narratives and frameworks laid out during the last years of empire were therefore reproduced after the formal end of colonialism to become part of the conventional wisdom and lexicon of international organizations and post-colonial states.\footnote{See e.g. Joseph Hodge, ‘British Colonial Expertise, Post-Colonial Careering and the Early History of International Development,’ Journal of Modern European History 8, no. 1 (2010): 24–46.} While acknowledging important imperial genealogies, others have argued that the process of decolonization \textit{remade} the development knowledge and practices that informed the work of international organizations in important ways.\footnote{Eva-Maria Muschik, ‘The Art of Chameleon Politics: From Colonial Servant to International Development Expert,’ Humanity 9, no. 2 (2018): 219–44.} Emily Baughan for example has examined how the British and (former) colonies.\footnote{Emily Baughan, ‘Decolonising Development? The International Council of Child Welfare in Western Nigeria, 1963–1970’ (International Organizations and Decolonization in Historical Perspective, Munich, 2019); Emily Baughan, Saving the Children Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).}
in the Congo in 1960, a UN official quipped that the world organization had its first own colony.101 Soviet representatives, too, accused the world organization of establishing ‘a new form of [Western] colonial enslavement . . . under cover of the United Nations flag’.102 Yet, in 1962, for example, Haitians – largely working as educators – constituted the second largest contingent of UN expert staff working to transform a decolonizing Congo.103 What impact did they have on the newly emerging sovereign state? How did their activities on the ground – as well as UN officials from non-aligned countries – help transform the UN mission in the Congo, and thus likely help shape the work of later peacekeeping missions as well? Going beyond Geneva and New York will also allow us to arrive at a better understanding of how people around the world understood international organizations, how they interacted with them and, how this in turn, impacted debates and activities within IOs and the territories they were engaged in.

To look beyond Geneva and New York, means further exploring how actors from South America, Eastern Europe, China and other actors from the Global South shaped decolonization through international organizations and how they in turn were affected by this engagement.104 New scholarship on Eastern European countries, for example, has demonstrated that their involvement with the post-colonial world, particularly through UN institutions, did not necessarily deepen Cold War divides. Paradoxically, these interactions also facilitated inter-European cooperation across the iron curtain, as East and West rediscovered each other through expert cooperation in international organizations or in development projects in the South. The so-called ‘return to Europe’ of the socialist camp that began at the end of the 1970s then was premised on its distancing from the decolonized world in what Algerian intellectual Zaki Laidi called in 1990 ‘l’autocentrage du Nord’ – ‘the self-centering of the North’.105

Part of the challenge of writing a global history of international organizations and decolonization is uncovering and using new sets of sources. Much of the earlier scholarship on international organizations, often written by political scientists, legal scholars or former international civil servants, drew above all on the published records of the various organizations.106 In many cases, historians are only beginning to examine the archival papers of the organizations themselves.107 Of course, combing through the various organizational archives does not suffice to tackle the research agenda outlined above. Studying multiple sources and archives, from personal papers of civil servants and experts, to national and local archives in the imperial metropoles and former colonies, the former Cold War superpowers and their allies, as well as non-aligned countries is essential.

102See Security Council Verbatim Records (proces-verbaux), meeting 889 (S/PV.889), 21 August 1960, paragraphs 57–60.
106See for example many of the contributions to the UN Intellectual History Project at http://www.unhistory.org/publications/, last accessed 23 January 2020. For an exception see Toye and Toye, The UN and Global Political Economy.
107For a helpful introduction to the archives of international organizations see the UN History Project website: Home>Research > Archives at https://www.histecon.magd.cam.ac.uk/unhist/research/archives.html, last accessed 23 January 2020.
Research of this kind requires time, money and mobility. To foster a more inclusive scholarly conversation that includes voices from the beyond the trans-Atlantic triangle – and to avoid excessive carbon footprints – historians should consider joint research efforts in the future in order to write a more global history of decolonization and international organizations.\textsuperscript{108}

The goal of this special issue, of course, is not to deliver a final assessment of the topic, but to showcase a variety of methodological approaches, subjects and times frames that advance current scholarly conversations. Taken together, the collection of articles illuminate the variety of – sometimes contradictory – functions that international organizations had in the process of global decolonization: from serving as forum for debating the meaning of decolonization, to serving as a tool for imperial ambitions, rivalry or cooperation, reform or abolishment. The collection features actors from regions that have received little attention in the study of twentieth-century decolonization, such as Eastern Europe or Central Asia, and shines the spotlight on less known organizations such as the League Against Imperialism. Expanding beyond the heyday of postwar decolonization, it covers a broad timeline from the 1920s to the early 1980s. The articles bring together scholars from diverse regional and thematic historical subfields and introduce a range of different actors who shaped processes of decolonization and the development of international organizations: from colonial subjects, to representatives of new states and imperial powers, bureaucrats and experts. As a whole, this special issue cautions against whigish histories of international organizations as engines of global decolonization, while also guarding against simplistic arguments that present international organizations in general as instruments of neocolonialism. Rather, we argue that decolonization fundamentally remade the postwar world and that international organizations served as important instruments in that process, while also developing a life of their own. Hopefully, this issue will be a starting point for further research on an important topic in global history.

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\textsuperscript{108}For an emphasis on collaboration, see Drayton and Motadel, ‘Discussion: The Futures of Global History,’ 15.