A Fascinating New History of the Birth of the United Nations

America, Hitler and the UN: How The Allies Won World War II And Forged A Peace by Dan Plesch (2011, I.B. Tauris)

Reviewed by Ian Shields, Research Associate, UK Defence Forum.

We all know that the UN came into being with the completion of the UN Charter in San Francisco in June 1945, don't we? WRONG! Likewise, we all know that the UN's starting point was to replace the discredited and defunct League of Nations, don't we? WRONG AGAIN! Like me, you are almost certainly unaware that the United Nations as a term and as a concept can be traced back at least as far as the meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt in America in December 1941, just after Pearl Harbour. In fact, the term the United Nations was originally coined by Roosevelt to represent that coalition or grouping of nations that banded together to defeat the Axis of Germany, Japan and Italy, and was adopted by both America and Britain (and progressively other nations too) to represent their joint effort to prevail. For these two master political strategists saw the need to draw together disparate political regimes under a common cause – victory in World War II – without dwelling on differences within the Alliance.

Before reading Dan Plesch's excellent new book I was totally ignorant of the role that the phrase "United Nations" had played in World War II, and had only the vaguest notion of how what we accept today as being a proper and correct mechanism within the world order – the UN as we know it – came into being. From the long-term political insight of Churchill and Roosevelt in identifying the need for something better than the League of Nations (and then coming up with a solution that has endured some 65 years), through the creation of mechanisms such the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank through the meetings at Bretton Woods and Havana, to the triumphal signing of the UN Charter, this is a much-neglected chapter of history that deserved a book of this stature and competency.

Not only does Dan Plesch cover the political aspects in readable prose, excellently supported with maps, pictures and references, but he rightly highlights the critical role that the United Nations (i.e. the Allies) played in addressing war crimes and in particular the Nuremburg trials (with their significance for International Law and relevancy today) and details the role that the United Nations played in post-war relief and reconstruction.

I do not intend giving a blow-by-blow account of the book's contents: read it yourself. Perhaps the thing that surprised me most about this book is how neglected this aspect of World War II has been, and how many misconceptions there are about the early days of what became the UN. That a former director of communications at the UN, in endorsing this book, proclaims that "Dan Plesch performs a great service in reminding us of this early history" merely underscores further how little understood the UN's origins are – and I say that as one who prides himself in his knowledge of history, especially military.

The book is not, I believe, without its faults: how France came to be awarded a permanent seat

on the UN Security Council is not made clear in this book (and when I discussed this with the author he suggested that that issue was probably worthy of another book in its own right!); more puzzling to me, though, is the title: I believe the sub-script (How the Allies Won World War II And Forged A Peace) is a more accurate clue as to the book's contents. But these are minor criticisms: Dan Plesch has written an excellent book that plugs a significant hole in conventionally-understood history. This book should be read by all interested in not only the history (military and otherwise) of World War II, but also by those with an interest in international politics and the working of today's international orders; to quote again from the endorsements, this time by Admiral Lord Boyce: "There are certainly many lessons in this book that statesmen and leaders in defence, security and international economics would do well to take on board today.". I strongly recommend this book.