

## **Writing the History of the United Nations: Making the Past Relevant**

The intent behind this guidebook is to shed light on the innumerable approaches one can take when writing a history about the United Nations and to offer different perspectives from which one can write that history. It is meant to serve as a starting point from which to address relevant and often by-passed questions concerning the creation of the United Nations, its work and its future. When thinking about the history of the UN, many may think of dusty boxes of archives containing meeting minutes, resolutions, prepared speeches, and the like. Indeed, these sources can tell us much about the kind of work the United Nations does and the procedures involved in executing and implementing it. But at the same time, thinking about UN history in this way ignores the human and cultural histories of the men and women who help carry out that work – whether it be ambassadors, peacekeepers, translators, just to cite a few examples – and the histories of those who are the target of that work – such as refugees, victims of natural disasters, peoples whose cultures and historical sites have been preserved through the UN, peoples whose very nations were created through mandates sanctioned by the UN, peoples affected by the inaction of the UN.

When we combine the presumably dry records of UN archived history with equally relevant and enlightening sources that put UN work into context, we find that people influence and are affected by the UN in inspiring and multifaceted ways. It is in this way- looking at the multiple dynamics at play in the work of the UN- that we reach an enlightened understanding of just how the UN has come to define individuals, nations, even time periods and movements, and at the same time be shaped by them.

The significance in highlighting and telling these multifaceted and dynamic histories lies in the fundamental necessity to evaluate and define the role that the UN is to play in the future; to make the UN relevant to many who are skeptical; to see the UN as a keeper of the potential of humanity and not as an institution wrought by inefficiency or empty ideals, as many would like to think it is. It is the task of writing these different histories and addressing questions like the ones presented below to make the past relevant and consequential to us in the present. It is a process relevant for all of us as citizens of the world, but also of utmost significance for the United Nations itself- it is this kind of work that will inspire the self-reflection needed to confront its past and define its future; viewing its own work from alternative perspectives is crucial to its preservation and integrity.

Following, I list several of these kinds of perspectives from which to approach UN history such that they make the organization and its work relevant to us now and in the future. I pose a number of leading questions that will help guide the research and writing process, and additionally list the types of sources that may be used. Where I have been able to, I have added specific examples, but the lists are purposefully rather vague so that you may tailor them to your specific interests.

## **People at the United Nations**

**Relevant questions:** How do the dynamics and overlaps between individuals' personal histories, political affiliations, and religious backgrounds, for example, influence their work at the United Nations? How have social trends played out in the United Nations? What can these people's experiences tell us- not just about the UN, but about the time in which they lived? That is to say- what issues were important? What controversies? How did political alignments at a certain historical time play out at the United Nations?

**What kinds of people?** Translators, staff, ambassadors, women, families of ambassadors

**What kinds of UN sources?** Speeches; committee/organ participation- what kinds of issues were they vocal in? What was their voting record?; UN multimedia

### **Examples:**

Oral Histories: <http://www.unhistory.org/oralhistory/>

Word Search of UN archived documents: <http://archives-trim.un.org/>

Documents by organ/committee: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/index.shtml>

Guide to organ-specific documents: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/>

UN on-the-ground activities: <http://www.un.org/works/> and <http://unic.un.org/>

Multimedia: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/>

**What kinds of other sources?** Memoirs, biographies; interviews; newspaper articles; reports to governments; reach out to those on-the-ground organizing UN activities

### **Examples:**

Memoirs: *Doomed in Afghanistan : a UN officer's memoir of the fall of Kabul and Najibullah's failed escape* - Phillip Corwin; *In the service of peace : memories of Lebanon from the pages of An Cosantóir* - Brendan O'Shea (ed.)

Other: search "United Nations" or "United Nations - History" as Subject in a library search engine and sort by genre/form

**Example of historical work that takes this approach:** *UN Voices- the struggle for development and social justice* - Thomas Weiss (ed.)

## **The UN in Popular Culture**

**Relevant questions:** What does the use of the UN in popular culture tell us about its role in history and how people view it? How can this help shape the UN's public relations policies and influence future action? How do we disparage myth from reality? How can the UN use this study as a reflective process in which it acknowledges, analyzes, studies, questions, accepts or rebukes others' representations of itself/its work?

**What kinds of sources?** Movies- what are these movies based on? Are they true?; (political) cartoons- what kind of critiques of the UN are presented?; Documentaries

### **Examples:**

Movies: North by Northwest; The Interpreter.

UN cartoon history: Le testament de Genève by Aloysius Derso and Emery Kelen (1931, about the League of Nations) <http://info-libraries.mit.edu/150books/1931/1431/>; United Nations Sketchbook by Derso and Kelen; A Cartoon History of the United Nations (1950) [www.fulltable.com/vts/f/fortune/ills/derso/a.htm](http://www.fulltable.com/vts/f/fortune/ills/derso/a.htm); UN Cartoon Awards <http://www.lurieunaward.com/home.htm>; <http://www.cartooningforpeace.org/en> ;

Documentaries: The United Nations and the New World Order; Sergio;

### **See a list at:**

[https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_in\\_popular\\_culture](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/United_Nations_in_popular_culture)

## **Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Organizations at the UN**

**Relevant questions:** What is the relationship between civil society and the UN? What are the political and social dynamics that make NGOs/CSOs come to the UN? What does this tell us about how *they* view the UN; what potential do they see at the UN? On the other hand, how does the UN work with/use civil society to bypass sovereignty issues? In this way, how does it work to influence culture/society on-the-ground?

**What kinds of UN sources?** Registration of NGOs/CSOs; conferences.

**Examples:**

Resources guide: <http://www.un.org/en/civilsociety/index.shtml>

**What kinds of other sources?** Interviews with NGO members; newspaper articles concerning protests and marches organized by non-UN groups

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*Following, I present a brief example of the kind of relevant and dynamic UN history that can be created when we tackle one of these approaches. In this case, I asked myself, “what did representing Lebanon mean to Charles Malik?” in the context of the UN’s role in the creation of Lebanon and his personal experience as philosopher and Christian. I draw on his memoir in addition to his work at the UN as presented in online UN sources.*

## **Dr. Charles Malik at the United Nations:**

### **Confronting Lebanon's Past and Defining its Future**

“Peace in the international field is in the end nothing but agreement. [...] Man in the struggle for peace at the United Nations is precisely a slave of this regulative idea. What happens now to this poor or happy man? How does he give effect to this regulative idea? What modes of being does he get himself into? What does he concretely go through? What does he come up against, both in himself and in the world?” (xx)

In his memoir, *Man in the Struggle for Peace*<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Charles Habib Malik sets out to document his “most inner, intimate, and intense” experiences at the United Nations that spanned well over a decade. As a philosophical, deeply personal text, Malik’s memoir sheds light on much more than his achievements<sup>2</sup> as signatory to the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, or as a significant contributor to the writing of the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, or as President of the Economic and Social Council the same year, or as Lebanese ambassador to the United Nations and the United States, or even as President of the thirteenth General Assembly in 1958. In his text, we see how his personal narrative as a deeply faithful Christian, a patriotic Lebanese, a trained philosopher and a champion of humanity both informed and challenged his involvement as a member of Lebanon’s delegation, and as an officer in various bodies of the United Nations. What we find is that the stories of Dr. Malik and his involvement in the early United Nations run parallel to-and in fact are

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<sup>1</sup> Malik, Charles. *Man in the Struggle for Peace*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/ga/55/president/bio13.htm>

determined by- Lebanon's historical relationship to the organization and its predecessor. To Charles Malik, representing Lebanon and advancing her cause in the international arena symbolized coming to terms with her past, as well as defining her future. As such, this memoir encompasses his personal role in that process, and the excerpt quoted above captures both the burden and hope that a quest for peace through the UN carries.

At the time when he signed the Charter of the United Nations in San Francisco, California in June 1945, Dr. Charles Malik had already studied mathematics and philosophy at the American University of Beirut, completed a Ph.D. in Philosophy at Harvard, lived in Egypt, the United States and Germany, and taught as a professor in various universities. When he became ambassador to the US and the UN in 1945, the country he was representing was but two years old- a legacy of the French Mandate created out of the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France in 1918 after World War I, and endorsed and managed by the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, until the independent states of Lebanon and Syria were created in 1943. In his memoir, Dr. Malik affirms the contingency of Lebanon's existence to the organization of the UN. He observes that "the United Nations appears to be peculiarly fitted to treat problems of intermediate areas, such as in the Middle East and Africa" while "huge political systems as the United States [...] are quite competent to look after their own affairs independently of the United Nations" (83). He argues that in contested regions, however, that "lie astride conflicting spheres of influence, [...] wisdom has determined that they be turned over, in some aspects of their existence at least, to the care of the United Nations"

(84). As such, he highlights the critical and indispensable role that the United Nations must play in the future of the nascent country. Thus, as he signed the Charter in the Veterans' War Memorial Building in San Francisco (see photo below), there are multiple historical and political dynamics at play, as well as a vested interest in the efficiency and success of the organization.



**Dr. Charles Habib Malik of the Lebanese Delegation, San Francisco Conference, 26 June 1945**  
<http://www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/842/0084205.html>

From this first direct experience at the United Nations would follow many more. In his various roles over fourteen years at the UN, Malik would work with the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt on the fundamental document of the Human Rights Declaration; he would meet with groups ranging from student visitors to Native



Americans;<sup>3</sup> his profound dedication to the Question of Palestine would be a central tenant of his work at the UN. In his memoir, he recounts the “phenomenon of frustration” that he claims all invariably feel- “We get frustrated because we expect too much from the United Nations, way beyond anything it can reasonably deliver. We become frustrated because we idolize the United Nations and think that it is a panacea for the ills of the world” (28). But despite the frustrations and burdens he speaks of, genuine hope is present throughout the memoir. While his writings here bypass a recitation of his achievements and successes, instead focusing on their effects on his life as an individual, we can see this kind of hope in action- for both the organization and Lebanon specifically- through other sources.

In 1948, as President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Dr. Malik contributed to the promotion his Lebanese culture<sup>4</sup>. In a UNESCO Courier front-page article in November 1948 accurately noted the appropriate location for such a meeting, “devoted to the idea that the peoples of the world can live together in peace and understanding despite their differences.” With the presence and participation of the then-President of Lebanon and leading cultural, educational officials, the 44 member states of UNESCO, 76 inter- or non-governmental organizations and many other guests to the conference would experience the dynamic progress that was occurring in such a young country. While the agenda topics feature UNESCO-specific items, the Conference itself allows Lebanon an opportunity to show itself to the international community- with “elaborate

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<sup>3</sup> Photo Archives: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/140/0140579.html> and <http://www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/140/0140569.html>

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO Publications: UNESCO Courier, November 1948, Volume 1, No. 10, “Conference opens in Lebanon on November 17<sup>th</sup>” (Search “Charles Malik” on <http://www.unesco.org/ulis/en/index.shtml>)

preparations” taking place and the organization of a “series of cultural manifestations [...] and a number of exhibitions [...] which will feature Arab culture in general and that of the Lebanon in particular.” Featured in this same newsletter is the proposal to be brought to the conference of opening up a UNESCO cultural liaison office in the region: “The Middle East presents a two-fold interest to Unesco, just as Unesco presents a multifarious interest to the Governments and peoples of the Middle East.” Malik, as part of the Lebanese delegation and President of ECOSOC, no doubt had much to do with the planning and preparation of this conference<sup>5</sup>. In fact, in a significant article in this same edition titled “Conditions of Intellectual Activity in the Arab World,” Malik highlights the relevance of this conference to the progress of Lebanon. He affirms, “That Unesco is holding its conference in the Lebanon this year is no insignificant event. [...] It means that the Arab world is no longer a mere geographical expression, or nothing more than an important strategical point or a fertile field for colonial exploitation.” The arena of international dialogue and cooperation has been vital for this development: “The coming to the Lebanon [...] shows that the Arab world [...] is gradually coming of their mental isolation [...]and] trying also to respond to the daring example given them by other nations and peoples, to become fit for cultural exchanges and collaboration.” In his view, the participation of Lebanon in the UN and vice-versa, is the key to promoting advancement and taking Lebanon out of isolation so that they may “realize thoroughly [their] importance and possibilities and to play an active part in the great world pageant of thought.”

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<sup>5</sup> He is featured in a picture on the front page of this newspaper edition.

This is but one example of the promises that Dr. Malik held for Lebanon and humanity through the work of the United Nations and its international forum. To look back on what the United Nations represented to Malik and Lebanon is to challenge us to look at the current state of the organization, and to gauge to what extent these kinds of hopes and dreams have been realized. It is difficult to say (and beyond the scope of this brief history) to understand what the general stance of the Lebanese- whether at the civil or government level- is vis-à-vis the United Nations now. However, a long history of recurrent wars and lack of solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian refugee problem have surely done much to sour and sever the trust, hopes and aspirations once espoused by Dr. Malik. It is the task of this history, then, to look to the past for possibilities in the future so that we may understand how and why individuals' and states' relationships to the United Nations have evolved.