

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 535

9 November 2023

Kal Raustiala, *The Absolutely Indispensable Man: Ralph Bunche, the United Nations, and the Fight to End Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). ISBN: 9780197602232

PDF: <https://hdiplo.org/to/E535> | Twitter: [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/HDiplo)

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Michelle D. Paranzino, US Naval War College

In this sweeping biography of Ralph Bunche, Kal Raustiala combines the best of history and biography to shed light on the man and his times and to show how each influenced the other. Bunche played an outsized role in the United Nations (UN), which became the venue for his lifelong quest to bring an end to colonialism. This quest involved him in some of the twentieth century's most profound political debates and the Cold War's most divisive conflicts. As a scholar, diplomat, and peacemaker, Bunche was a man ahead of his times, frequently espousing views that would become popular years, if not decades, later. The book is a phenomenal achievement and an invaluable contribution to the literature on the United Nations and the Cold War, phenomena that scholars have tended to treat separately and that have therefore developed distinct historiographies.¹

As a young scholar, Bunche was interested in the political structure and ground-level administration of colonialism in Africa. His PhD dissertation, based on extensive fieldwork in West Africa, examined the practical aspects of the transition to independence in post-colonial societies. The two assumptions governing his dissertation, which compared Dahomey, a colony, with French Togoland, a League of Nations mandate, were that "racial consciousness" would continue to exert a powerful force in international politics, and that the independence of African colonies was a long-term endeavor (30). Like many African American scholars during the interwar years, he dabbled with Marxism-Leninism; the Soviet Union was outspoken about racial oppression in the United States, and the American Communist Party was one of the few domestic political organizations that asserted an unambiguously egalitarian ethos.²

Bunche's fieldwork in Africa was transformative and convinced him of the necessity of keeping local people foremost in the decisions of central governments. His travels around Africa also impressed upon him a desire for "an international approach to the problems of the American Negro" (46) and he presciently warned that racial oppression in the United States could have serious national security implications. In his book *A World View of Race*,³ he called out the Western hypocrisy of governing others deemed inferior while professing an egalitarian philosophy, arguing that "European imperialism reflected a distinctive politics grounded in race" (51). Provocatively, he identified the class divide as the real schism in twentieth century politics, though he

¹ Noteworthy exceptions include Ilya Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945-1965* (California: Stanford University Press, 2013); Michelle Denise Getchell [Paranzino], "Revisiting the 1954 Coup in Guatemala: The Soviet Union, the United Nations, and 'Hemispheric Solidarity,'" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17:2 (2015): 73-102; and Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain, and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis, 1960-1964* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018).

² See Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

³ Bunche, *A World View of Race* (Washington: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936).

later dismissed the book as “hastily written” and admitted that he was not very proud of it (53). As president of the American Political Science Association in 1953, he lamented the lack of interest in colonialism as a topic of study, as the field moved away from considerations of race in international politics and toward more ostensibly “scientific principles” (56). The subfield of international relations within the discipline of political science quietly erased its own history of viewing international politics through the lens of a clearly defined and essentialist racial hierarchy.⁴

Interestingly, Bunche’s thinking evolved similarly, and while he never repudiated the importance of race in international affairs, the menace of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party drove him to embrace a politics of anti-fascism and anti-communism. During the war, he worked on North Africa as an intelligence officer for the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency. As a delegate to the Mont Tremblant and San Francisco conferences tasked with formulating proposals for a new and more robust international collective security organization for the post-war world, Bunche identified one of the key tensions that came to plague international relations in the twentieth century: “international vs. the encouragement to *new* nationalisms” (115, emphasis in the original). As former colonies and mandates moved toward independence, nationalism took on a heightened fervor. At the same time, the existence of the United Nations implied the subjugation of national interests to the higher principles of collective security and international cooperation. Western imperialist powers such as France, moreover, emphasized the *lack* of nationalism in formerly colonized territories to argue that self-determination and independence would be difficult if not downright dangerous to world peace. Though no one could have predicted how rapidly the membership of the United Nations would expand during subsequent postwar waves of decolonization, Bunche was more focused on the issue than most.

As a UN mediator between Israel and Palestine, Bunch established a precedent for the international organization as an “honest broker” in a conflict that reflected a dilemma plaguing the postwar world about *whose* self-determination should predominate (161). Although lacking experience or expertise in the Middle East, Bunche’s entanglement with the politics of the region outlasted his first peacekeeping mission there and made him a household name after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. During a return trip to the area, Bunche narrowly escaped assassination when a radical Zionist group opposed to the partition of Palestine and to UN involvement attacked the limousine in which he was supposed to be a passenger. The assassin, Yehoshua Cohen, admitted years later that Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte was not the correct target—“the black man was the right man. He was the man with the ideas” (195). Bunche’s work in the region set the standard for postwar conflict resolution and carved out a central role for the UN in the process. The armistice accords he negotiated became the basis of a later gang truce negotiated in Los Angeles, the Watts Gang Treaty of 1992.

The Suez crisis of 1956 provided further opportunity for Bunche to shape the UN, with the creation of the UN Emergency Force and formulation of rules and guidelines governing its conduct and remit. Indeed, Bunche would later be known as the “father of peacekeeping” for his efforts to resolve the crisis (334) and would remember it as among his most significant achievements. Only a few years later, Bunche was tasked with peacekeeping in the Congo, where an incipient civil war threatened to destabilize the leadership of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Forces led by Moïse Tshombe fought for the secession of mineral-rich Katanga province, as Bunche and the UN sought to restore peace without taking sides. The Congo conflict produced a clash of principles and ideals that were not easily reconciled—between sovereignty and respect for territorial integrity on the one hand, and the legacies of European colonialism on the other. As Raustiala notes, it was only “narrowly correct to say that the province was attempting to secede”; after all, “what did it mean for a distant province to break away from a vast and thinly populated nation that was only three weeks old and contained a diverse set of peoples speaking some 200 different languages and dialects and representing nearly 500 ethnic groups?” (381). Given the artificiality of African borders, and the lack of national spirit in Congo,

⁴ Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Bunche himself had argued that “independence along European-chosen borders was probably the most tragic legacy of colonialism” (382). Nevertheless, respect for the principles of the UN Charter demanded territorial integrity regardless of how artificial the borders of a state might seem. Once again, Bunche narrowly escaped death—a chance incident had kept him off the fateful flight that crashed and killed everyone aboard, including UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, whose body was found mysteriously intact and removed from the crash site, with an ace of spades tucked into his shirt collar. The circumstances of the crash remain murky.⁵

Raustiala does not confine his analysis to Bunche’s efforts abroad but also evaluates his leadership at home as part of the civil rights movement. Though radical Black leaders sometimes dismissed him as an “Uncle Tom,” Raustiala argues that his middle-class politics of respectability “made it harder for mainstream America to reject his message” (250-1), which was undeniably critical of racial injustice—so much so that he became a target of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee’s investigations into disloyalty among American citizens working at the United Nations. As an international civil servant, Bunche consistently relayed the message that racial injustice at home damaged the reputation of the United States abroad. He also actively participated in the civil rights movement, joining Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington in 1963 and in the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery. He rejected the white mainstream view that counseled patience for Black people in the struggle for racial justice; he likewise rejected the Black separatism of the Nation of Islam. As King became more outspoken in his opposition to the US war in Vietnam, linking the issue to civil rights, Bunche disputed his public relations tactics but nevertheless came to agree that the two issues were inextricably intertwined. Although Bunche opposed the war, he did not (as even many in power who supported the war did) seek an exemption from military duty for his son, Ralph, Jr., who was deployed to Vietnam in 1969.

The book ends with a thought-provoking meditation on Bunche’s legacy, inviting scholars to consider that legacy as it relates to the contemporary political environment, both domestic and international. Raustiala notes that Bunche might have been disappointed that the Camp David accords resulted not from UN efforts but from US President Jimmy Carter’s personal diplomatic interventions. Though the accords represented a positive step in the direction of peace, the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict down to the present day would probably not surprise Bunche, cognizant as he was of the tenacious complexities of the region’s history and politics. Nor would he likely be surprised that US policymakers and pundits continue to view Africa not on its own terms but through the lens of great-power competition with Russia and especially China. Would Bunche view a role for the United Nations in mediating the current Russia-Ukraine war or was he sufficiently disillusioned with the great-power politics of the Security Council during his own lifetime to doubt the possibilities of international peacekeeping in a conflict involving a nuclear-armed former imperial state?

Finally, how would Bunche assess the current state of “race relations” in the United States? Though the Obama presidency consolidated a “post-racial” consensus in mainstream white American society that trumpeted the end of racism, the 2020 killing of George Floyd spotlighted police brutality as an ongoing problem, even while other structural issues around lack of access to affordable housing, healthcare, and education persist. What would a man whose entire life was devoted to ending empire think about the post-Cold War world and the so-called “unipolar moment” when the United States ostensibly viewed itself as the unchallenged global hegemon? What would he think about the endless wars on drugs and terrorism, in whose names countless human rights violations have been perpetrated? In essence, would Bunche’s fight to end empire ever have encountered the United States as the “final boss”? Though these questions are ultimately

⁵ Susan Williams, *Who Killed Hammarskjöld?: The UN, the Cold War and White Supremacy in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2011).

unanswerable, they remain among the most pressing issues of domestic and international politics and part of Raustiala's own scholarly legacy—one that will endure through the contribution of this remarkable book.⁶

Michelle Paranzino is Associate Professor in the Strategy & Policy department and director of the Latin American regional studies program at the US Naval War College. She is the author of *The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War: A Short History with Documents* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018) and is currently working on a book about Ronald Reagan and the war on drugs.

⁶ See also Kal Raustiala, *Does the Constitution Follow the Flag? The Evolution of Territoriality in American Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Raustiala and Christopher Sprigman, *The Knockoff Economy: How Imitation Sparks Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Michael N. Barnett, Jon C.W. Pevehouse, and Raustiala, eds., *Global Governance in a World of Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).