

## Review – Building States

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAR 4 2023

### **Building States: The United Nations, Development, and Decolonization, 1945–1965**

**By Eva-Maria Muschik**

**Columbia University Press, 2022**

In *Building States*, Eva-Maria Muschik offers a ground-breaking study of the United Nations' (UN) impressive contributions to development and decolonization in the immediate post-World War II years. These topics have been addressed in several recent monographs, but rarely with the scholarly comprehensiveness or the copious attention to institutional records demonstrated by Muschik. As Patricia Clavin has shown, there is an inherent challenge in seeking to explain the pursuit one of the UN's greatest imbroglios, that of the transition to decolonization. Muschik rises to this challenge, and if there is contention about her approach it is probably only its ambitiousness – the author might have defined herself with greater regional circumspection. That said, her generalisations beyond well-evidenced case-studies are rarely leaden-footed.

Part of the challenge of writing such a global history is uncovering and using new material, and Muschik has made good use of some rarely previously consulted primary sources. She dissects the processes of UN-state collaboration as they sought to manage phased decolonization via international development assistance, and demonstrates how the UN's impressive roll-out of transitional advisors and support helped stabilise otherwise fragile governmental structures. Essentially, she shows how the UN pioneered post-World War II state-building, deftly neutralising political rancour, by concentrating on technical processes. While the examples chosen by Muschik (Libya, Somaliland, Bolivia, the Congo, and New York) are elaborately and copiously documented, there is also a wider significance to her work, way beyond the scope of these regional examples. While offering key case-studies, *Building States* has wider salience for our knowledge of the UN's potential role in state-building. There is surely enough material here for a further study, for example offering some additional decolonizing states as exemplars, ideally cases where the UN's intervention was perhaps less effective.

Muschik summarises the UN's ever more ambitious programme of technical assistance, launched in response to the clamours of a rapidly decolonizing world. There was also, as part of decolonization, an overt need for the organisation to challenge the persistence of residual racism – debates and issues which at times threatened to overwhelm the General Assembly, and which have been elaborated upon in a number of histories of individual UN missions. To its great credit, the UN has not shied away from self-criticism or review of its failings, such as in its own intellectual history project. A good example is demonstrated by the critique of UN statements in a recent analysis of West Papua, where UN staffers are candid about the gulf between the organisation's goals and the sacrifices made in the field in seeking to achieve them. One of the great strengths of *Building States* is that it offers a genuinely holistic synthesis in its analysis of these post-World War II events. Perhaps a little more detail could have been provided on recent research, which tends to support Muschik's conclusions beyond these regional cases.

Multilateral cooperation is oftentimes viewed as an antidote to the 'nation-state concept' which experienced so many post-World War II threats. That perspective often ignores the reality that in this post-war time, imperialism was still rampant. Therefore, against these enormous obstacles, Muschik explores the UN's unique (even at times desperately inadequate) role as European empires gradually withered in the 1950s and 1960s. Slowly, its officials began evolving the concept of international development and re-drawing the idea of state sovereignty. This was a

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much more ambitious task than often appreciated by International Relations scholars. Muschik therefore traces how UN personnel pioneered a new kind of state-building in the midst of decolonization. In so doing, she adds further quality to a vast bibliography of institutional histories of the UN and its specialised agencies. As she observes, the UN had to quickly posit alternatives to governance which would inevitably differ dramatically from one case-study to another, and with a timeliness hitherto rarely seen. An imperative of immediate action emerged, as states started to disintegrate and the risk of armed conflict prevailed across virtually all of a rapidly decolonizing geopolitical terrain. There is much merit in this well-documented study, not least the imaginative use of UN field minutes, and the idiosyncratic insights gleaned about situational decision-making. Naturally this takes us into a level of detail which at times could have benefited from a little more contextual explanation, such as information on the relevant UN resolutions.

As it stands, Muschik offers one of the very first studies to actively analyse the UN's operational performance as a substitute state. Very often, this effectively paved the way for the concept of transitional authority, which was to be attempted again in several peacekeeping missions from the late 1980s onwards. In the immediate post-World War II period, these tasks were a dramatic leap forward for the UN, and naturally tinged with the perils of failure. In many cases, UN officials had to effectively run disintegrating countries, and struggle to keep the vestiges of governance afloat so that basic services could be maintained. This necessitated UN staff acting as temporary governors – a departure from its mandate not to interfere in the domestic affairs of member-states. The outcome contributed positively to international development practice, peacekeeping, and post-conflict territorial administration, and showcased the potential of UN expertise in the governance of developing countries. This process has rarely been studied in such depth before.

Another topic that has received comparatively little attention is the fact that representatives of international organisations were often intimately involved in the constitution-writing processes, the formation of post-colonial governments, and the maintenance and restructuring of state bureaucracies. Muschik corrects this neglect. She correctly shows (for example) that 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 – in the colonies, in the metropolises, and on the international stage. Soon, as Muschik demonstrates, as the General Assembly and its subcommittees gained increasing political power due to the Cold War, this became the cockpit of the decolonization controversy.

It is also notable that *Building States* recurrently features in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Global History*, which locates Muschik's book in the historiographical context of the UN and the decolonization process. Decolonization and the expansion of international organisations are probably among International Relations' prescient subjects – yet their interaction is little explored. Sometimes even the UN is accused of overt neo-colonialism. Moreover, accounts of these years rarely explain the fundamental disagreements with regard to decolonization among the so-called Global South. UN membership became an important marker of recognition for statehood.

Muschik's study shows much merit in demonstrating how international organisations and their employees shaped the decolonization of specific locales through their activities – including standard-setting, military intervention, development assistance, and humanitarian relief. To advance this debate, further case studies that go beyond Geneva or New York are sorely needed. How did mediators, peacekeepers, technical experts and humanitarians affect outcomes? How did their engagement in the decolonizing world colour the emerging character of their own international organisations? There are already numerous studies of the UN in the field and on how the organisation grappled with decolonization, but most of these investigations fail to analyse the UN's operational task 'head on'. Muschik provides a starting point for this analysis.

With new insight into how international organisations became major players in governance and development, *Building States* has significant implications for the histories of decolonization, UN intervention and the Cold War. Muschik adds significantly to our understanding of the international history of the UN, and it also acts as a powerful corrective to past studies which have appeared somewhat self-celebratory. Her work is especially illuminating in the sphere of human rights; and about how a rights-based approach could be preserved amidst the imperative of nation-change and decolonization. Perhaps a little more might have been said about post-colonization human rights, but that

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certainly deserves another focused book.

The author does well to balance field research and theory. It is a portraiture of the UN's achievements in the thorny problem of decolonization. It also explores hitherto neglected avenues of research on the emergence of a development response, which was in time to be encapsulated in the refinement of standards of UN relief. This impressively researched monograph therefore significantly adds to our understanding of this key part of the International Relations curriculum. The case studies examined are all generously dissected with a host of original sources, offering salience beyond these vignettes of the field, and extending our wide-angle lens of UN operational history and how the organisation has creatively adapted over time. Finally, one must conclude that this study is somewhat victimised by its own success in tackling such a wide topic while inevitably being constrained by documentation depicting a finite cameo set of experiential governance. However, the case-studies are impressively delineated, and Muschik lays foundation for wider depictions of the de-colonizing narrative in International Relations research.

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### **About the author:**

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.