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RALPH BUNCHE AND THE BIRTH OF UN PEACEKEEPING.

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# RALPH BUNCHE AND THE BIRTH OF UN PEACEKEEPING

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In 2023 the United Nations will mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of its most significant—though arguably unintended—contributions. Scarred by the devastation of the Second World War, the framers of the UN Charter invoked the word “peace” nearly fifty times. By contrast, the word “peacekeeping” is nowhere to be found. Yet in the decades since the Charter was signed in San Francisco, peacekeeping has emerged as one of the most impactful of the UN’s activities—as well as one of the costliest. Born out of necessity, peacekeeping was an innovation and an evolution.

While no one person can claim the mantle of the creator of UN peacekeeping, a strong case can be made that one man did more than any other to develop and implement the concept. That man, the late American diplomat and Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche, became a legend in the 1950s for his mediation skills in hotspots around the globe. Yet it was peacekeeping that Bunche himself saw as his greatest accomplishment—and, as with many things, on this he was almost surely correct.

Previously a professor at Howard, Bunche moved into the Roosevelt administration in 1941 as the Second World War was raging. From there, after helping to negotiate the UN Charter, he joined the new organization’s secretariat, quickly becoming the most famous, able, and influential staffer in its early history. A rare Black man in a field that was notoriously “Pale, Male, and Yale,” Bunche went from a childhood in South Central LA to the very pinnacle of global diplomacy. His career and the history of UN peacekeeping are deeply intertwined. Drawing on my new [biography](#) of Bunche and the UN, this article explores the birth and evolution of peacekeeping through his life and legacy – as it was in large part Bunche who truly launched peacekeeping as a tool of stability, one that often proved critical in the essential, revolutionary, but at times violent, postwar process of decolonization.

## **Palestine and the First UN Military Observers**

UN peacekeeping began in one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world. 75 years ago, the General Assembly, in one of its first major decisions, passed a resolution that called for the division of the former British Mandate of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. The decision closely tracked

a report, ostensibly by the UN Special Committee on Palestine but in practice largely written by Bunche, which had advocated partition. When Arab states attacked Israel in the wake of its declaration of independence six months later, the Security Council responded by calling for a truce. In a significant decision, the Security Council added that the truce would be monitored by impartial military observers. This observer corps—known in the clunky UN style as [UNTSO](#), or the UN Trust Supervision Organization—is commonly viewed as the UN’s first peacekeeping mission. Remarkably, it is still operating today.

UNTSO’s claim as the first peacekeeping team is subject to some question, as its mission was and remains primarily observation. The following year a similar task was assigned to troops deployed at the India-Pakistan border (the [UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan](#)). These early efforts can be distinguished from the UN peacekeepers that followed, who at times had much more robust mandates. These later missions went well beyond observation into actual fighting—and sometimes, as with the Congo operation of 1960, even employed airpower.

Bunche, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his successful mediation of the fighting in the Middle East the year after UNTSO was created (the truce, despite its UN supervision, did not really hold) was present at the creation of all these early peacekeeping efforts. Indeed, formally the military observers in Palestine were there to assist the UN Mediator, a post Bunche took up in late 1948 after the first mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, was brazenly gunned down in an ambush in Jerusalem—an attack Bunche only narrowly missed.

### **Bunche and the UN Emergency Force**

In the dark of night in July of 1956, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered his troops to seize the Suez Canal. In response, French, British, and Israeli troops soon poured into Egypt, leading to what became known as the Suez Crisis. The General Assembly, meeting in special session for the first time that fall, responded by authorizing a [UN Emergency Force](#), or UNEF, to supervise a cessation of hostilities, including the withdrawal of foreign forces from Egyptian territory. (With two Permanent Members of the Security Council involved in Suez, the Security Council, later to be the usual home of peacekeeping authorizations, was stalemated.)

The Suez Crisis was a punctuation mark in the rapidly changing postwar politics of colonialism. The pressure to decolonize the globe was rapidly building, yet Britain and France acted in Suez as if it was 1906 rather than 1956. UNEF’s creation marked the moment when the international community made clear that the old order, of naked European dominance, was over.

But UNEF, largely put together by Ralph Bunche, was also on a scale and scope unlike any observation mission that had come before. While it built on the innovation of the UNTSO, it went well beyond. Indeed, in explaining the new force, then-Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld underscored that UNEF was “paramilitary in character and much more than an observers’ corps.” Still, with Egyptian sensitivities in mind—the troops were stationed only on Egyptian soil—he [stressed](#) it was to be “in no way a military force temporarily controlling the territory” in which it was deployed. Nonetheless UNEF was a military force. Its [remit](#) was not simply to observe, but to “secure and supervise” the end of hostilities and to serve as a buffer between opposing forces. This, Bunche believed, made UNEF clearly distinct from what came before.

Yet because the UN Charter did not specifically discuss or authorize peacekeeping, UNEF's conceptual basis remained murky, even behind closed doors. In a meeting of the newly-formed "Advisory Committee on UNEF" in the fall of 1956, Hammarskjöld, Bunche, Lester Pearson of Canada, and other UN ambassadors debated UNEF's foundation. Was it grounded in international law, or something else? Many have noted that peace operations fit in neither Chapter VI nor Chapter VII of the UN Charter. As Bunche himself later remarked, peacekeeping falls "somewhere between" the two, and indeed is sometimes referred to as a "Chapter VI and a half" procedure.

"Colloquially, I think you can say it is an agreement," Hammarskjöld [suggested](#) to the group, referring to Egypt's consent to allow the UNEF peacekeepers onto its territory. But "legally, Mr. Pearson is right that it is not." We are "drifting into metaphysics," Hammarskjöld continued—a zone he often liked—but "it is necessary to be careful about words." Lester Pearson then made an even more metaphysical statement:

This is not a UN force in the sense that we are setting up something agreed by the UN with an indefinite tenure and principles that have been accepted. That is quite right. This is something of an emergency nature for an ad hoc purpose. [Still] I feel that the composition of the force, even for this purpose, is the responsibility and power of the UN itself.

The creators of UNEF were clearly struggling to define and explain what they were doing in Egypt. Yet the uncertain legal basis did not seem to bother many governments at the time. What was striking, and proved rare in the future career of UN peacekeeping, was that—perhaps because of the novelty of the new force, or perhaps because of the general enthusiasm many states had for the UN in the early years—so many nations were excited to participate in UNEF. "We couldn't even use half" of the troops that were offered, Ralph Bunche would later say.

### **Peacekeeping's Postwar Progress**

In the years that followed the Suez Crisis, UN peacekeeping grew into a robust practice. Peacekeeping proved quite useful in a Cold War world. And it became even more useful after the Cold War ended. In roughly the first two decades of its history, a total of ten UN peacekeeping missions were created. (Bunche's office on the 38<sup>th</sup> floor at UN headquarters, filled with maps of these troop deployments, became known as his "war room.") By the 1990s, a peak era for peacekeeping, on average nearly four missions were established each year. In recent years the pace has slowed somewhat—since 2000, the UN has averaged closer to one new mission a year—but peacekeeping's political importance has not waned, even as controversy has often ensued. And [studies](#) by political scientists have shown that UN peacekeeping has a large, positive, and statistically significant effect.

The postwar birth of UN peacekeeping reflected significant changes in geopolitics. Newly independent states were proliferating by the late 1950s; by definition they had new and untested ruling coalitions. The Cold War often intensified power struggles in these states, as the Congo Crisis of 1960, in which the vast and newly-independent state was riven by civil war and foreign intervention, tragically demonstrated. The UN Charter at first appeared ill-equipped to address these problems; it was designed to outlaw aggressive war by one state against another, not to police internecine conflicts. Yet outside of a few notable instances, such as the Suez Crisis, the 1961 invasion of the Portuguese colony of Goa by India, the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, and a handful of others, the actual invasion or seizure of territory by

one of state from another—a hallmark of previous centuries—became relatively rare after 1945. (Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is obviously a tragic exception to this trend.)

In its place arose a different form of warfare. Non-international armed conflict became the norm. Beginning in the 1960s the number of civil wars and secessionist movements grew dramatically, sometimes stirred or even instigated by foreign intervention, [peaking](#) in 1991 with over fifty such internal conflicts ongoing. The most recent data show closer to thirty such wars occurring today. And because the resulting fighting could and often did spill over into neighboring states, the international community took a strong interest. This could lead to an invitation from a challenged government to external allies for help—perhaps, in the 1960s especially, to one of the Cold War antagonists—but increasingly it led to a UN peacekeeping mission.

In a sense this development reflected an undeniable success story: the remarkably rapid process of decolonization. In the course of just a couple of decades empires built over centuries were dismantled. To be sure, peacekeeping missions have no necessary connection to decolonization. Yet because the retreat of colonial rule was so often imbued with political strife, the UN was frequently forced to step in to try to manage, dampen, and even avert conflict where possible. It is unsurprising that Africa, the most colonized continent, has also been the location of the largest number of peacekeeping missions. While the Western Hemisphere has [had](#) eight missions total, and Europe and Asia each nine, Africa has had 25. As John Foster Dulles [noted](#) at the UN as early as 1947, colonialism had borne some “very evil fruit.”

Indeed, the fragility of many postcolonial states was apparent almost from the start. As decolonization gathered steam, Frantz Fanon, the influential theorist of colonialism, [became](#) “obsessed with the ‘curse of independence’: the possibility that nationhood in the Global South, though inevitable, could become an ‘empty shell,’ a receptacle for ethnic and tribal antagonisms, ultranationalism, chauvinism, and racism.” Fanon’s fears were sadly often realized in the decades to come. Some postcolonial states transitioned well. But others, especially those subjected to continued external domination and intervention, became cauldrons of internal violence or—and--subject to rapacious rule by tyrannical regimes who, either through kleptocracy or simple mismanagement, impoverished their peoples.

Congo was perhaps the most arresting example. Joseph Mobuto’s three decades of brutal dictatorship and garish looting of the national wealth came on the heels of nearly a century of horrific Belgian rule, and was almost immediately followed by a metastasizing conflict in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that some have called Africa’s Great War. Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), has indeed been the subject of several UN peacekeeping missions, the most recent established in 2010.

And while the UN’s peacekeeping missions have been concentrated in the postcolonial world, they have also increasingly been staffed by the postcolonial world. The initial peacekeepers that Ralph Bunche gathered and deployed in the Suez Crisis came from a wide array of states that nonetheless reflected the UN’s early Western bias. From the 1990s onward, however, most peacekeepers have come from outside the West. Had he lived to see it, Bunche’s deputy Brian Urquhart noted in the early 2000s, Bunche “would have been appalled at the current tendency of Western governments to allot peacekeeping duties more and more exclusively to third-world governments.”

Still, major powers often play a role in peace-building, referred to within the UN system as “friends”: states with an interest in the outcome of a conflict. In a small group, and in coordination with the Secretary-General, they help backstop and nudge the process of peace forward. As former Assistant

Secretary-General Michael Doyle has written, through the mechanism of a friends group the UN's "scarce attention and even scarcer resources can be supplemented by the diplomacy, finances, and clout of powerful, interested actors." The UN in turn lends legitimacy to their interventions, taking something that was in the past often unilateral and self-aggrandizing and checking its worst tendencies.

### **Peacekeeping's Enduring Utility**

To be sure, UN peacekeeping has many flaws. Some are structural: as Ralph Bunche presciently asked in 1964, "how can a successfully functioning UN peace force ever be withdrawn without disastrous consequences?" And in recent decades peacekeeping has been criticized for overly-reflecting the desires of the Security Council and its permanent five members, for entrenching great power control over small states, for wreaking havoc on poor populations—such as the terrible tragedy of Haiti and cholera in the 2000s—and for malfeasance by peacekeepers themselves, from petty smuggling to sexual abuse.

Nonetheless, the political utility of multinational peacekeeping in a crisis often renders it an attractive, even irresistible, option. This is one reason the Security Council, frequently depicted as deadlocked in the postwar decades, in fact turned again and again to authorize peacekeeping missions—and still does today.

Echoing Secretary of State Madeline Albright's famous line that if the UN didn't exist, the world would have to invent it, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once [explained](#) that peacekeeping—whether it had been contemplated by the UN Charter or not--simply "had to be invented." Ralph Bunche, who did as much to invent peacekeeping as anyone, would later [argue](#) that one of the key differences between the UN and its predecessor, the League of Nations, was that the UN had demonstrated the courage to "step in and tackle the buzz saw."