BOOK REVIEW


It is, or so it seems, difficult to market books on the United Nations these days, at least in the US. Stephen C. Schlesinger, author of the book under review and quite possibly related to the distinguished historian Arthur Schlesinger, recalls that it took him quite a bit of time to find a publisher interested in a history of the drafting of the UN Charter, and the final product carries on its front page not just title and subtitle but also the type of blurb that would not look out of place on the cover of a Tom Clancy novel. It concerns, so we are informed, “A Story of Superpowers, Secret Agents, Wartime Allies and Enemies and their Quest for a Peaceful World”.

The most remarkable in that enumeration is the reference to secret agents, and indeed Schlesinger does present a nice, but rather inconsequential story according to which the US delegation at the UN Conference in San Francisco was usefully informed of most other delegations’ plans as the US had access to diplomatic cable traffic with the help of the US Army Signal Security Agency. Much of this may have been of some use on such burning issues as which Polish government to recognize (so much a bone of contention between the US and USSR that Poland ended up not participating at all) or whether to allow the participation of Argentina, suspected as it was of sympathizing with Nazism, but somehow does not seem to have influenced the course of history in any dramatic fashion.

It was, however, not only the US that engaged in espionage. Schlesinger suggests (without providing much hard and solid evidence, and candidly acknowledging as much) that also the USSR may have had some listening devices of its own, and then there is, of course, the Alger Hiss episode: secretary-general of the Conference establishing the UN and entrusted with personally carrying the authentic Charter from San Francisco to Washington DC, Hiss was suspected of espionage and forced out of the State Department in 1946. In 1950, he was found guilty not of espionage, but of perjury, and found himself in prison.

While these are nice anecdotes, Schlesinger’s book fortunately has a lot more to offer. Comfortably befitting his approach as typical of diplomatic history – he is more interested in who said what to whom than in why they said it – he is especially interesting on the characters that played a major role and on atmosphere. In particular Edward Stettinius, the somewhat hapless Secretary...
of State at the time, receives a boost and is acknowledged as the driving force behind the Conference. While forced upon president Truman after President Roosevelt’s death (Truman would rather see James Byrnes as Secretary of State, and managed to do so in 1945 after “promoting” Stettinius to become US Ambassador to the UN), Stettinius is credited as having navigated the Charter through some treacherous waters, with a little help from the likes of Adlai Stevenson (engaged in order to inform the press or, as he himself put it, to be “the official leak” (p. 150)) and the omniscient civil servant Leo Pasvolsky, to whom everyone turned when it was unclear how a word or phrase in any version of the draft was intended.

In the process, Schlesinger also sheds some interesting light on a number of interesting issues. Most prominent among these is perhaps the suggestion that the wording of Article 51 (outlining self-defence as an “inherent” right) was inspired not so much by lofty *jus naturale* motives or to anchor it firmly in customary international law, but rather to provide peace of mind to Latin American states afraid of Soviet interventions which would go unchallenged due to the USSR’s right to veto anything in the Security Council. Where much time and attention had been devoted to trying to work out a deal between advocates of a strong Security Council and those who favoured a strong role for regional organizations (which would have had the added value of keeping such creations as the Monroe Doctrine in place), Harold Stassen’s invention of self-defence as an inherent right (and possible in a collective version) turned out to be the ideal compromise.

On some points Schlesinger is a bit confusing. Thus, the reader never gets a clear idea as to how many states participated in the San Francisco Conference. Most often he mentions the number forty-nine (e.g., p. 138); but elsewhere he quotes Truman’s speech on the occasion of the signing of the Charter which refers to fifty-three states (p. 256) and at two points he speaks of the US delegation and “the other forty-nine delegations” (p. 252, similar wording p. 247), making a grand total of fifty.¹

Tantalizing is also his treatment of France’s role as a major power. There is no discussion as to why France was invited to become a permanent member of the Security Council (except that this was promised at Yalta); having consistently referred to the Big Four, all of a sudden these are joined by France. The

¹ This is the number usually cited: forty-six states were originally invited, and were joined by Denmark, Argentina, Belarus and Ukraine, the latter three only after considerable debate.