
Book Reviews

Shirley Hazzard, **Defeat of an Ideal. A study of the self-destruction of the United Nations.** Macmillan, London, 1973, pp. xv+286. £3.95.

H. W. Singer

Now that a new period of international uncertainty and flux is upon us, with talk of the need for a new international order, a number of familiar questions are posed with a new force. Why does the United Nations not play the role of pioneering new international solutions to world problems? Why does it not by now speak with the authority based on self-confidence, expertise and recognized high quality of its work, which the founders of the organization hoped for when they drafted the Charter? Why is this true of the UN, whether considered as a governmental organization and also, more specifically, in relation to the role of the Secretary-General and the UN staff? Why is it that even in relationship to other parts of the UN system, especially to the World Bank, the IMF and some of the major agencies the leadership seems clearly to have passed out of the hands of the UN itself?

Shirley Hazzard explores these questions concentrating almost entirely on the role of the Secretary-General and especially that of the UN Secretariat. She explains that its diminished role, its timidity and ineffectiveness, are largely a result of the McCarthy troubles of, say, 1949 to 1954, when the Secretariat's spirit was destroyed by the attack from the McCarthyites outside combined with betrayal by a weak and unprincipled Secretary-General and senior administration officials inside.

Nobody who lived through those years in the Secretariat will deny that there is a great deal of truth in this. Even those who survived, and possibly benefited from, the fate which overtook some of their colleagues, will agree with this in their inner hearts, though they might not wish to place themselves on record. The first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie and his American kitchen cabinet were a disaster. Dag Hammarskjöld's arrival was a turning point—Shirley Hazzard somewhat underrates how momentous this was. In her analysis of Hammarskjöld, perceptive though it is, she shows a failure to appreciate him fully. Her comments on him are often

based on notes from Brian Urquhart, whose book on Hammarskjöld has since become available and gives a fuller and better-balanced picture of the man.

But by and large, one must agree with Shirley Hazzard. The Secretariat has never really recovered from the blows of those days. The bridge between the Administration and the '38th Floor' on the one hand, and the bulk of the Secretariat on the other, has never been rebuilt. The US Security Clearance system is still operating to the present day and undermining the status of US staff members in the eyes of their colleagues from other countries. Perhaps the US Administration will one day realize how this prejudices their own position. Admittedly, the Soviet bloc countries do the same and in addition rotate their staff members rapidly, but that is hardly an argument to be happily used by the country which should be the main pillar of the UN.

One must also agree fully with what Shirley Hazzard says about the absurd distinctions between different levels and grades of service within the Secretariat, the lack of training facilities for younger people, the lack of fair promotion and career prospects, etc. However, there is one point on which I have reservations. She is dead set against the principle of geographical representation which she denounces sharply, again and again. Here, I believe she is barking up the wrong tree. The **principle** of geographical representation is right. It is **right** that the Secretariat should reflect the traditions, experiences, instincts and outlook of the many member countries, and the best way to assure this is a fairly balanced composition. But what has happened is that only too often the other essential requirements, of competence, experience and integrity, have been sacrificed to government nomination. It is by no means only the Secretariat members from under-represented countries or regions which have been improperly recruited, although this may have been particularly flagrant and obvious. It is the absence of proper selection which Shirley Hazzard should attack and not the principle of geographical representation.

In fact, there is an inconsistency in her reasoning on this point, since on the one hand she emphasizes the demoralization, loss of better-quality

staff, timidity, etc. etc. of the (mainly Western) survivors of the McCarthy era, whilst on the other hand taking it for granted that those selected on 'geographical' grounds are less competent. The only real argument against geographical representation is that people of the required competence and experience in many of the under-represented countries are particularly scarce and that their work in their own countries is more important than their work in the UN could be. This argument, however, Shirley Hazzard is presumably too much of an internationalist to use.

Anybody reading Shirley Hazzard's passionate and essentially true denunciation of Trygve Lie and those around him cannot fail to be struck by the analogy with Watergate—even down to the dispensation of 'hush money' in the form of generous indemnities for those staff members who were willing to knuckle under and go quietly away.

In the last resort, of course, Shirley Hazzard cannot **prove** her point since it is essentially incapable of proof (or disproof, either). Nobody can be quite certain what would have happened in the UN Secretariat in the absence of the McCarthy disaster. Perhaps similar problems would have erupted from a different cause. Staff weaknesses are not exactly unknown in many other organizations unaffected by McCarthyism. However, to me Shirley Hazzard seems plausible, although perhaps in a slightly more complex sense than she may realize. The decline in the status and authority of the Secretariat due to the McCarthyite troubles started a vicious circle. As the machine weakened there was an increasing tendency to bypass it—both on the part of governments and of world opinion, and even from the inside on the part of the Secretary-General himself, as was clearly the case in the days of Dag Hammarskjöld. And as the machine was not being used it consequently further declined in status, in its power to attract high-calibre people, and in experience of the real world, thus limiting the Secretariat to an unreal paper world which was then invested, especially by means of an uncontrollable and pyramiding documentation, with the Orwellian attributes of a new reality.

Shirley Hazzard writes beautifully. She can well afford to be contemptuous of the style and colourlessness of all too many UN documents. But here again I would have some reservations. UN documents are not meant to engage the passions of the reader. They are meant to list arguments *pro* and *con*; it is often a legitimate function of a Secretariat document to 'take the steam out of

the argument'. But where Shirley Hazzard is right is that too often the argument is taken out with the steam, and that the Secretariat may be forgetting its other function, equally essential although perhaps less frequent, where its proper role should be to put the steam back into an argument, to stir things up where an important discussion or decision is in danger of being lost in formalistic or legalistic detail.

Shirley Hazzard somewhat grudgingly acknowledges that the UN seems now ready to respond to serious criticism in a more adult manner than before. Sir Robert Jackson was **not** nailed to the cross for his capacity study (although I happen to believe that he drew fundamentally wrong conclusions from his fundamentally correct comments on Secretariat capacity). The author could have been a little more generous in acknowledging that there were and are a number of people within the Secretariat who tried, and sometimes tried desperately, to maintain standards and to fulfil the Secretariat function of pioneering new and progressive ideas. The Secretariat is not quite such a non-differentiated morass of futility as many of Shirley Hazzard's readers must conclude.

And now once again there is much talk of a 'New International Order'—as there was under more favourable auspices in 1945-47. A New International Order will require strengthened and improved international institutions—not least a strengthened and improved United Nations staff. This is where the lessons of the past drawn in Shirley Hazzard's book become important for the future.