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Technical conferences as a technique of internationalism

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Abstract

This paper looks at a genre of meetings that, while neither purely 'scientific' nor 'diplomatic', drew on elements from both professional spheres and gained prominence in the interwar decades and during the Second World War. It proposes to make sense of 'technical conferences' as a phenomenon that was made by and through scientific experts and politicians championing the organizing power of rationality, science and liberal internationalism. Against the background of swelling ranks of state-employed scientists, this paper documents the emergence of technical conferences as the forums where they got down to work. To make this case the paper traces the influence of a new way of thinking about the function and organization of conferences, originating in the time around the First World War, on one international organization in particular: the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), as a new hub of scientists and technicians.

'A *technical* field', according to Theodore Porter, is 'not just a difficult one, but one relying on concepts and vocabulary that matter only to specialists'. It was not until the twentieth century that science came to be 'regarded as fundamentally technical in nature'.[1] The technical conferences under review in this paper have a special place in the history of scientific conferencing. They differed from conferences of scientists that set out, as their major purpose, to define disciplinary models and practices: the international conference phenomenon went far beyond these field-specific meetings. In fact, technical conferences often brought together practitioners from different fields in order to solve concrete problems and find practical applications of their knowledge. Building on a tradition of scientists' employment by local and national governments, and increasingly also in international organizations, technical conferences relied on two things: politicians' recognition of 'experts' as carriers of specialist knowledge who could communicate with others via shared approaches, and experts' willingness to identify supposedly scientific, technical problems as distinct from their political applications. Against the background of swelling ranks of state-employed scientists, this paper documents the emergence of technical conferences as the forums where they got down to work.

In making this case I trace the influence of a new way of thinking about the function and organization of conferences, originating in the time around the First World War, on one international organization in particular: the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

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[1] Theodore M. Porter, 'How science became technical', *Isis* (2009) 100(2), pp. 292–309, 292, original emphasis. Many thanks to Charlotte Bigg for alerting me to this article.

Administration (UNRRA). Like many international bodies, UNRRA came to life at a big conference, and conferences became a major part of its identity and working schedule. As the first operating Allied international organization to be created during the Second World War, UNRRA was to manage the transition from war to peace by providing relief and the means for rehabilitation to populations under Axis control. As a 'technical organization', UNRRA represented the idea that a recovery from the worst effects of the war was necessary before wider international cooperation could be set in motion. UNRRA worked with thousands of scientific and medical experts, who regularly gathered at conferences.

This paper draws on and contributes to several different historiographies: the booming scholarship on the League of Nations and other international organizations; ongoing efforts to grapple with the histories of internationalism and to document continuities between the interwar, war and post-war eras; research on the emergence of scientific expertise and changes in scientific practice; and the evolving relationships between scientists and the state. Conferences have to date only been studied on the margins of these strands of research, but all of them will be enriched by a closer focus on international conferences as a fundamental practice and technique of professionals and administrators.

Consideration of interwar technical conferences and their culmination in UNRRA can therefore unlock at least two bigger sets of insights. First, they give us a better understanding of the lineage of international organizations, and their techniques, methods and practices, within which UNRRA was built. After 1919, civil servants, political scientists, legal scholars and other experts thought about international conferences as a 'technique' – as consisting of certain repeatable rules and procedures, the enactment of which provided a means for strengthening, regularizing and codifying international cooperation. They tended to be British or American scholars, rooted within a certain Anglo-American liberal internationalist mindset focused on spreading ideas about good governance, representative democracy and a liberal market economy to the world.[2] The conference technique, to them, was part of a broader 'civilizing mission'. Within this context, UNRRA, as a vessel for Anglo-American plans for the post-war order, inherited ideas not just about how to run intergovernmental organizations or humanitarian relief operations on foreign soil, but also about conferences as a technique in the toolkit of experts and diplomats. It also acquired technical experts who had been thinking about these problems for decades by the time they joined UNRRA.

Second, this research helps to connect conferences with mid-century expertise, technocracy and scientists employed in the service of government. Science broadly conceived played a crucial if often rhetorical role in the self-perception of 'technical' organizations like UNRRA. The growing appeal of technocracy and technical experts during the Second World War was accompanied by a flourishing scene of international conferences. UNRRA's conferences were amalgams of political and scientific conferences, which helps to reorient the search for their separate origins and parallel histories.

International relations via conference

By 1943, UNRRA officials inherited a body of ideas and a canon of texts written in the first four decades of the twentieth century about international conferences. Some of these predated the First World War, but most were written in its aftermath. In 1907, Simon Baldwin, American law professor and future Democratic governor of Connecticut, saw conferences

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as powerful forces 'working toward the solidarity of the world'.[3] Several years into the First World War, Richard Gilády Gruber, a jurist on the other side of the Atlantic, was considerably more muted, but shared Baldwin's belief in conferences as anchors of international relations. Conferences, he wrote, were a 'technique', 'means' or 'tool' to build peaceful inter-state relationships.[4]

After the war, Baldwin's and Gruber's analyses were joined by accounts of the Paris Peace Conference as a symbolic end of the old guard and beginning of a new, US-led, open form of diplomacy, and eventually by a new genre of publications on the transformative power of international conferences. These publications included textbooks, memoirs and scholarly articles in American and British international law and political-science journals. Authors included British and American diplomats writing about their personal experiences; others were scholars of diplomacy or international law explaining conferences as a coherent method and set of procedures. They saw themselves, more or less directly, as proponents of a wider Anglo-American liberal internationalist project, which provided a way of thinking about the reform of international affairs under the banner of science, rationality, progress, order and justice, and rested on a belief that the extension of Britain's and America's influence abroad was of universal benefit. In their writings, conferences featured as places and events where international relations could be taught, reformed and modernized. These appeared at the same time as a new academic discipline –'international relations' – emerged as the scientific study of international affairs and politics, with texts written for a new generation of students and colleagues.[5]

Collectively, these studies and textbooks rested on the identification of three historical turning points. First, some authors identified the aftermath of the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 as foundational for bringing to life 'threads of internationality in state relations'.[6] Second, many authors argued that the 1815 settlement of the Congress of Vienna had inaugurated a new era of international diplomacy, under the Concert of Europe, and had used the conference format to expand international connections between states.[7] Writing in 1918, Gruber thought that nobody would be able to deny the far-reaching outcomes of internationalism by conference over the previous century; after all, conferences had given rise to the Universal Postal Union, the coordination of international telegraph and rail traffic, the protection of industrial and intellectual property and the Geneva and Hague Conventions, which continued to prevent the worst excesses of violence and brought 'a certain moral sense and legal conscience' to the table.[8]

Third, most authors writing about conferences after 1919 considered the Paris Peace Conference as a significant moment of change, setting in motion a reassessment of conferences.[9] Alfred Zimmern, the first person to occupy a chair in international politics and

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[3] Simon E. Baldwin, 'The international congresses and conferences of the last century as forces working toward the solidarity of the world', *American Journal of International Law* (1907) 1(3), pp. 565–78.

[4] 'Technik' and 'Mittel'. Richard Gilády Gruber, *Internationale Staatenkongresse und Konferenzen: Ihre Vorbereitung und Organisation*, Berlin: Puttkamer & Mühlbrecht, 1919, e.g. pp. xiii–xv. Also see Dr Charles Bach, *Zur Organisation internationaler Congresse: Eine Congreß-technische Studie*, Berlin: Allgemeine Medizinische Verlagsanstalt, 1911.

[5] For the history of international relations see esp. Jan Stöckmann, *The Architects of International Relations: Building a Discipline, Designing the World, 1914–1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

[6] 'Fäden der Internationalität der Staatenbeziehungen', in Gruber, op. cit. (4), p. 4.

[7] On the Concert of Europe see Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*, London: Penguin, 2012; on the Vienna Congress see Brian Vick, 'Ambassadors, experts and activists: internationalizing international relations from the Congress of Vienna to the twentieth century', in Stephen Legg, Mike Heffernan, Jake Hodder and Benjamin Thorpe (eds.), *Placing Internationalism: International Conferences and the Making of the Modern World*, London: Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 39–54.

[8] Gruber, op. cit. (4), pp. 5, 313–14.

[9] In the aftermath of the Paris conference, the British Foreign Office issued handbooks on other landmark conferences. E. L. Woodward, *Congress of Berlin, 1878, Handbook Prepared under Direction of the Historical Section of*

friend to several future UNRRA diplomats, thought the most significant flaw of the Concert of Europe had been its 'absence of a system of regular Conference' – an absence that was, 'in large measure', a cause of the First World War.[10] Others wrote about the deficiencies of the Concert system and the new institutions that replaced it as a way of abolishing the discredited old arrangements. In Mark Mazower's words, 'internationalist alternatives to traditional diplomacy set transparency above secrecy, and participation above exclusion'.[11] Identification of these particular watershed moments served, as Legg *et al.* have pointed out, as a rhetorical device to cement the idea that the post-1919 era was going to be different.[12] They represented a genealogy that foregrounded some past meetings and obscured others, thereby presenting an image of the archetypal conferences that were to be emulated: big, momentous, stately, fundamentally elitist affairs.

Some chapters on conferencing appeared as part of larger textbooks on the craft and profession of political diplomacy, such as Sir Ernest Satow's *Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, written initially as a report for the British delegation at Versailles; later editions became much-cited reference works.[13] Diplomats also wrote more personal accounts of conferences they had attended. In his 1920 lecture 'Diplomacy by conference', the senior British civil servant Maurice Hankey talked about his attendance at 'nearly five hundred international meetings since 1914'.[14] The most important feature of 'conducting diplomacy by conference' was 'the knowledge responsible statesmen acquire of one another'. Meeting physically in the same space was vital for forging lasting connections between political leaders. If the 'conference habit' had been more established in 1914, it might have prevented the war altogether. Overall, he concluded, there was 'no panacea, but the best hope appears to lie in the judicious development of diplomacy by conference'.[15]

Hankey's view of conferences as organized hubs of informality looked not all that different from Concert diplomacy, the tail end of which he had personally experienced. By contrast, studies by a new generation of scholars, teachers and practitioners of political science, international law and international relations at British and American institutions tried to distance themselves from the elitist, non-professional diplomacy of the past, and presented conferences as a new, regulated, standardized and teachable 'technique' of modern statecraft. They were less interested in the physicality of these meetings and more in the processes governing interactions at conferences and in the world at large, as a feature of the liberal internationalist project of organizing the world rationally and spreading ideas about good government. One example is the textbook published by Edward Eyre Hunt in 1925.[16] At that point Hunt already had personal experience of working in international organizations, before joining the US Department of Commerce and later becoming an UNRRA adviser.[17] His volume took readers through the steps and

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the *Foreign Office*, London: HM Stationery Office, 1920; *Congress of Vienna, 1814–1815: Handbook Prepared under Direction of the Historical Section of the Foreign Office*, London: HM Stationery Office, 1920.

[10] Alfred Zimmern, *The League of Nations and the Rule of Law, 1918–1935*, London: Macmillan, 1939, p. 190.

[11] Mazower, op. cit. (7), p. 116.

[12] Legg *et al.*, op. cit. (7), p. 18.

[13] Sir Ernest Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, 2 vols., London: Longmans, 1917, 2nd edn 1922 (ed. E. Satow). Four editions followed after Satow's death in 1929, all edited by retired British diplomats: 3rd edn 1932 ed. H. Ritchie, 4th edn 1957 ed. Sir Neville Bland, 5th edn 1979 ed. Lord Gore-Booth, 6th edn 2009 ed. Sir Ivor Roberts.

[14] Maurice Hankey, *Diplomacy by Conference*, London: British Institute of International Affairs, 1920.

[15] Hankey, op. cit. (14).

[16] Edward Eyre Hunt, *Conferences, Committees, Conventions, and How to Run Them*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925.

[17] During the First World War Hunt was American delegate in the Commission for Relief in Belgium, and later head of economic rehabilitation work of the Red Cross in France. In the 1920s he was secretary of the Conference

tasks associated with choreographing large group meetings, from issuing invitations to post-conference publications. The 'conference method' was not a new way of doing things, he explained, but had re-established itself in 'democratic' settings in the wake of the First World War.[18]

The interwar literature on conferences was substantial.[19] Together, many publications presented conferences as tools to teach a particular notion of how to conduct international affairs. Many authors noted the importance of group morale and the 'atmosphere' of meetings, which could lead to tension between the need for procedures, rules and structures on the one hand and for flexibility on the other – but even this tension could be handled, they argued, with an appropriate regard for rules. They identified a 'technique' of successful conferencing, applicable regardless of the subject matter under discussion. They did not claim that this technique would remove all sources of controversy: disagreements about memberships, language and different interpretations of the doctrine of equality of states would continue to play a role.[20] But the conference technique, they insisted, minimized conflict by structuring and regulating interactions. By designating potential disagreements 'problems of organization and procedure', they were deemed ultimately solvable.[21]

Technical conferences and expertise

Conferences featured centrally in the work of the League of Nations, the first international organization of its kind and scale, and UNRRA's predecessor. As public information guides and studies explained from its inception, the League operated via conference at a number of levels. In Alfred Zimmern's words, the League approximated 'a *standing inter-state Conference*, equipped with a permanent secretariat'.[22] The Assembly represented all members and met annually at a conference in Geneva; the Executive Council represented a selection of member states (beginning with four permanent and four rotating members, at the end it had fifteen members) and also met regularly. Conferences were fundamental to the League's work also in the form of the many non-diplomatic conferences convened by the League and the affiliated International Labour Organisation (ILO). The specific purposes of all these conferences varied, but overall they were conceived as devices for producing international consensus.

The League sought not just to reform the international sphere via conferences, but also to standardize the conference format itself. The League's Committee of Experts for the Progressive Codification of International Law, established in 1924, was charged with the preparation of a list of subjects on which international regulation was 'desirable and realizable', and to report on questions considered 'sufficiently ripe' and potential solutions of

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on Unemployment, before serving on various US commissions and as an expert on scientific management at the League's World Economic Conference.

[18] Hunt, op. cit. (16), pp. ix–x.

[19] Including Raymond Leslie Buell, *International Relations*, London: Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1925; Frederick Sherwood Dunn, *The Practice and Procedure of International Conferences*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929; Norman L. Hill, *The Public International Conference: Its Function, Organization and Procedure*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1929; Pitman B. Potter and Roscoe L. West, *International Civics: The Community of Nations*, New York: Macmillan, 1927; Pitman B. Potter, *This World of Nations*, New York: Macmillan, 1929.

[20] On modifications of the equality doctrine in non-political conferences see Buell, op. cit. (19), pp. 687–8.

[21] Hill, op. cit. (19), pp. 168–99.

[22] Zimmern, op. cit. (10), p. 191, original emphasis. Also see Alfred Zimmern, *The League of Nations at Work: An Address by Alfred Zimmern*, Manchester: The Co-operative Union, 1924; P.J. Noel-Baker, *The League of Nations at Work*, London: Nisbet, 1926; and films such as *The League of Nations at Work*, 1937.

addressing them.[23] One of these subjects was conferences. Seventeen 'expert members' and their chair, Hjalmar Hammarskjöld (father of the future UN's second secretary general) deliberated how far conference formats and procedures could be codified. Eventually, the committee agreed that certain standardized rules of procedure and organization of international conferences were desirable, as long as they were flexible enough to be adaptable to particular purposes. Subsequently, the conference theme was dropped from the committee's work, as did most of the other questions originally identified as of potential for future codification.[24] Nonetheless, the committee's and the League's thinking and practice became a yardstick for what conferences should look like.[25]

It was here that a juxtaposition of so-called 'technical' and 'political' questions became pivotal, a distinction later adopted as a core component of UNRRA's *raison d'être*. Where Hunt and other textbook authors argued that the subject matter of conferences was secondary to the format and rules at play, League thinkers went further and cemented a division between 'political' and 'technical' problems. The category of technical work was not unique or specific to the League; it had existed before and continued to be deployed afterwards; in the course of the twentieth century this distinction came to feature in various scientists' justifications and presentations.[26] But the League's claim on this division proved to be highly influential.

Its usage built on a mechanical separation of its political, policy-making forums from its data-collecting and data-processing 'technical' organizations. Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, former member of the League Secretariat, noted in his history of the Secretariat that the League's technical work had its constitutional basis in Article 23 of the Covenant.[27] One of the first resolutions to be adopted by the Council in May 1920 (confirmed by the December 1920 Assembly) concerned the operation of its technical organizations: they were to keep 'enough independence and flexibility', while still remaining under the overall command of the Assembly.[28] The League's new technical committees were quick to adopt this language: their work was one of 'purely technical studies', they explained in their reports; their task was to provide 'the technical point of view' of questions handed to them, without restriction by thorny problems of how their findings might be translated into practice.[29]

This division was also applied to League conferences, where so-called 'technical conferences', with experts and scholars representing fields of knowledge rather than countries, were described very differently from the large and overtly political meetings

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[23] See Shabtai Rosenne (ed.), *League of Nations: Committee of Experts for the Progressive Codification of International Law, 1925–1928*, 2 vols., New York: Oceana Publications, 1972. For an overview see International Law Commission, https://legal.un.org/ilc/league.shtml (accessed 18 March 2022).

[24] The only concrete result of the committee's work was the first International Convention on the Conflict of Nationality Laws, agreed at the League of Nations Codification Conference at The Hague, 13 March–12 April 1930.

[25] In 1931 the League Assembly adopted new regulations on the preparation of conventions and treaties negotiated under the League's auspices. *Official Journal*, Special Supplement No. 92, pp. 11–12. The ILO also adopted a uniform procedure for drawing up conventions.

[26] On the separation of technical from political questions in interwar technocratic projects see Johan Schot and Vincent Lagendijk, 'Technocratic Internationalism in the interwar years', *Journal of Modern European History* (2008) 8(2), pp. 196–217.

[27] Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *The International Secretariat: A Great Experiment in International Administration*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945, 157. Article 23 listed the main areas of the League's technical work. See 'The Covenant of the League of Nations, including Amendments adopted to December, 1924', at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp (accessed 18 March 2022).

[28] 'Resolutions adopted by the Assembly during its First Session, November 15th–December 18th, 1920', *League of Nations Official Journal, Special Supplement*, January 1921, p. 12.

[29] E.g. League of Nations Communications and Transit Organisation, *Establishment of a League of Nations Radio-Telegraphic Station*, Geneva: League of Nations, 1928.

convened by the League.[30] Here, too, the League subsumed and expanded earlier work.[31] When a political conference did not produce the desired outcomes, the suggestion was to summon a technical conference to break the deadlock. Technical conferences were often described as 'preparatory', 'preliminary' or 'advisory', and they were usually smaller and less formal than the large diplomatic meetings. On the one hand, experts themselves asserted this distinction as a way of protecting their independence from what they saw as restrictive political interference. On the other hand, it also allowed them to identify a path for the application of their research in the messy world of politics. The figure of the impartial technical expert became increasingly popular and mythologized in the interwar decades.[32] A belief in the power and relevance of technical expertise was boosted by assessments such as those by the economist John Maynard Keynes, who insisted that the Paris peace settlement was flawed because economic experts' advice had been over-ridden by unsustainable political priorities.[33]

The idea of a 'method' or 'technique' was at the heart of many discussions about conferences as a tool for the regulation of international relations. Gruber and others wrote about conferences as fundamentally scientific, technical foundations of internationalism in practice. The American philosopher John Dewey, their contemporary, described 'the technique of scientific enquiry' as consisting of 'various processes that tend to exclude over-hasty "reading in" of meanings; devices that aim to give a purely "objective" unbiased rendering of the data to be interpreted'.[34] While not everyone could agree on whether a generalized method was viable or desirable in the context of growing scientific specialization, some shared assumptions did crystallize.[35] Many of the textbook authors insisted on the need for systematic, objective study and regulated processes as the only way that knowledge could be brought to and mobilized at the conference table. This was a scientific, objective process – very different from the irrational world of politics. Pitman Potter, an American professor of political science and international law, thought that although the distinction between political and technical fields was often muddled, it ultimately referred to 'two different forms or modes of treatment – itself a question of technique. It is the distinction between the volitional and the scientific attitude and action upon any given matter'. 'Technical', he argued, pertained to 'technique or to a mode – any mode – of process or treatment'.[36] In fact, to Potter and others, international cooperation was 'a method of action', and conferences were 'a method of carrying on international cooperation'.[37] Without such method, there would be chaos.

In this context, many authors saw clear advantages of technical conferences lacking in meetings of other kinds. According to Potter, they invariably yielded better results than

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[30] One compendium listed over seventy-five 'technical' conferences convened by the League on a range of subjects (not including those of the ILO). See Hans Aufricht, *Guide to League of Nations Publications: A Bibliographic Survey of the Work of the League, 1920–1947*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1951.

[31] Though not always without controversy, e.g. the rivalries between the International Statistical Institute and the League of Nations on the matter of causes of death and disease, see Iris Borowy, 'Counting death and disease: classification of death and disease in the interwar years, 1919–1939', *Continuity and Change* (2003) 18(3), pp. 457–81. My thanks to Yi-Tang Lin for drawing my attention to this.

[32] Compare with Jessica Reinisch, 'What makes an expert? The view from UNRRA, 1943–47', in Frank Trentmann, Anna Barbara Sum and Manuel Rivera (eds), *Work in Progress: Economy and Environment in the Hands of Experts*, Munich: Oekom Verlag, 2018, pp. 103–30.

[33] John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, London: Macmillan, 1919.

[34] John Dewey, *How We Think*, Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Company, 1910, p. 87.

[35] For context on this debate see Porter, op. cit. (1).

[36] Pitman B. Potter, 'Note on the distinction between political and technical questions', *Political Science Quarterly* (1935) 50(2), pp. 264–71, 266.

[37] Pitman B. Potter, 'Progress in international cooperation', *Political Science Quarterly* (1935) 50(3), pp. 377–404, 379.

political meetings, because every delegate was not just an expert 'in his own estimation', but had expertise measurable by an objective and external standard. After all, 'technical questions can be subjected to statistical treatment and the knowledge and opinions of technicians can be utilized'.[38] The more technical the subject matter, the more it was 'capable of expert treatment'; legal conferences had the best results of all. The success of a conference ultimately depended on the setting of clear technical questions capable of solution; careful preparation of the agenda and discussion; effective organization of committees and qualified personnel; and efficient collection, study and organization of 'facts'.[39]

Alfred Zimmern described the communality of experts in similar but more explicitly social terms:

> When a group drawn from any of the recognised professions – doctors, teachers, chemists, engineers – meets in an international Conference, everyone is conscious of a common professional tie underlying and facilitating the proceedings. The members of the Conference are united by the possession of a common body of knowledge and of a common outlook – perhaps even a common practical purpose – resulting from that knowledge.

Diplomats, by contrast, were not 'fellow professionals': they had

> no common theme, no common attachment to a science or an art. Their attachment is to their own country and to its foreign service, on whose behalf and under whose instructions they are acting. Thus a Conference of diplomats, from the nature of the case, is not a Conference of fellow professionals united in a common cause, but a meeting of attorneys, each conscious of a separate purpose, their obligation towards their client.[40]

Finally, technical conferences had a further advantage: conferences of experts could supplement or even bypass political mechanisms, if they deemed them insufficient. As the historian Katharina Rietzler has pointed out, the US philanthropic foundations' support of academic projects after 1919 was in part driven by the fact that 'technical cooperation acted as a substitute for political cooperation, which was ruled out by domestic opposition', due to the US Senate's rejection of US membership of the League.[41]

It had long been a feature of the liberal internationalist programme to see increased international interactions as bringing about greater prospects of peace. By the early 1940s, theorists had developed arguments for what they called 'functional internationalism', which became another key element in preparations for UNRRA – the idea that the most effective and lasting mechanisms for cooperation were built organically around scientific or 'technical problems' on which governments wanted to find partners, and would grow from there. David Mitrany, an influential theorist of international relations, was an advocate of a functional organization of international activities as a basis for lasting international cooperation and future development of an 'international society'. Technical

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[38] Pitman B. Potter, *An Introduction to the Study of International Organization*, 5th revised edn, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948 (first published 1929), p. 119.

[39] Potter and West, op. cit. (19), pp. 134–5.

[40] Zimmern, op. cit. (10), pp. 19–20.

[41] Katharina Rietzler, 'Experts for peace: structures and motivations of philanthropic internationalism in the interwar years', in Daniel Laqua, *Internationalism Reconfigured*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011, pp. 45–66, 53.

exchanges of experts and international cooperation in functional agencies would create a much more solid base for peace than was otherwise achievable.[42]

Konni Zilliacus, a member of the League's Secretariat, was one of several authors who argued that the League's conference system was its primary tool for 'taming' international relations. At the outset, because international relations were still unorganized and anarchic, and disputes escalated easily, the purpose of the League was to conduct international relations 'according to new methods.' According to Zilliacus, the 'technique of the League is the art of organizing conferences': regular, carefully choreographed international conferences would reform international relations. Conferences on so-called 'technical subjects' were particularly effective, he argued, because they did not just produce agreement on the subject of discussion, but over time helped to form new habits of cooperation and trust that could spill into other, more contentious political areas.[43]

This approach was not without its critics, especially when different expert fields were pitted against each other. Nonetheless, the functionalist approach was widely favoured, and by the outbreak of the Second World War the genre of 'technical conferences' was well established. Hankey had already acknowledged that technical conferences often preceded and prepared the ground for conferences by heads of state.[44] And, as Potter and others observed, experts were important not just at their own technical conferences but also at the big diplomatic meetings. In 1927 he wrote that political conferences increasingly incorporated technical elements, and the lines between different types of meeting were therefore no longer easy to draw: 'The expert advisers of the delegates present their technical data and scientific judgment in committee; the diplomats make their speeches in plenary sessions.'[45] The right kind of conference choreography could strengthen even the most fractious conferences by providing structure, objectivity and the input of impartial experts. The reverse was also true: conferences had failed when 'the "experts" chosen were of dubious quality'.[46]

Dissections of conferences continued to be published after the outbreak of war in 1939, among them numerous accounts of the League's failings, including its conferences.[47] But at the same time, the League's technical work and staff were quietly incorporated into the new structures taking shape under the direction of Anglo-American planning groups. Public declarations about the League's evident failure to safeguard peace were accompanied by officials' recognition that any future organization would necessarily have to build on the League, even incorporate parts of it. Conferences appeared as perhaps the most resilient of the interwar advances in international relations that would directly inform the League's successors.

'Whatever may be the opinions held in regard to the achievements or failures of the international institutions' set up after 1919, wrote William O'Davoren in 1943 in a new handbook, it was surely uncontroversial to say that their international conferences 'were well run from a technical view' and their 'technical elements' were worthy of appreciation.[48] His insights drew on his professional experience as an ILO interpreter and long-

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42 David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System: An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organization*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, June 1943, repr. February 1944.

43 Roth Williams (Zilliacus's pseudonym), 'The technique of the League of Nations', *International Journal of Ethics* (1924) 34(2), pp. 127–45.

44 Hankey, op. cit. (14).

45 Potter and West, op. cit. (19), p. 131.

46 Hill, op. cit. (19), p. 203.

47 Major General A.C. Temperley, *The Whispering Gallery of Europe*, London: Collins, 1938, was a long account of the League's shortcomings and why its disarmament conference 'was doomed to failure from the beginning' (p. 275). Also see E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, London: Macmillan, 1939.

48 William O'Davoren, *Post-war Reconstruction Conferences: The Technical Organisation of International Conferences*, London: Geneva School of Interpreters, 1943, p. 1.

standing conference participant. Right now, he wrote, the world needed most of all 'sound practical machinery for solving ... problems as they arise', thereby removing the causes of war and creating a peaceful world.[49]

Like Hunt and others before him, O'Davoren took readers through the steps of organizing a conference: from who summoned them, to the setting of the agenda and other preparatory work by the secretariat and administrative service that he saw as central to any well-run meeting, and the work done in special committees. Conferences' rules of procedure were crucial, covering subjects such as the right of admission to sittings, the checking of delegates' credentials, when and how discussions should take place, how motions were passed, how voting could proceed. Successful conferences were carefully choreographed events. In O'Davoren's words, 'An international conference without rules of procedure is very much like a ship without a chart of the seas she must sail.'[50] The ship metaphor appeared throughout the book: conferences had to be steered through tricky waters, or would they sink or get stuck on a sandbank. Here, too, the subject matter of conferences was less important than their process.[51]

By the end of the war, Vladimir Pastuhov, former member of the League Secretariat and ILO and future UNRRA official, argued that the League's efforts to standardize conferences were among its most significant achievements: they presented 'real progress in the unification of methods of preparation of *ad hoc* conferences'.[52] More generally, the League and ILO had developed 'a series of techniques in planning, budgeting, staffing, organizing, directing, coordinating, recording, and reviewing their meetings', and had simplified procedures such as the opening of sessions, the verification of credentials, the election of officers, the setting up of committees and even the language of reports and resolutions.[53]

Shortly before its formal closure in 1946, when League officials discussed a planned museum to present the organization's impact and legacy, the former League librarian proposed an exhibit to showcase the 'practical working of an international conference'. A display on conferences, he thought, would represent 'how the League's activities constituted a recent and specially spectacular phase of international relations'. The techniques used by the League and the ILO served as a 'prototype' for subsequent organizations.[54]

Enter UNRRA

UNRRA served as a bridge between interwar and post-war institutions: it was a direct heir and beneficiary of the work on international relations by conference. Some of the textbook authors ended up working with or for UNRRA.[55] More broadly, it inherited many ideas and concrete mechanisms, along with hundreds of former League staff, including both leading officials and relief workers on the ground.

UNRRA was conceived as a 'technical' organization, populated with an army of scientific experts to tackle a variety of pressing problems requiring specialist knowledge:

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[49] O'Davoren, op. cit. (48), pp. 157–8.

[50] O'Davoren, op. cit. (48), pp. 118.

[51] O'Davoren, op. cit. (48), pp. 13.

[52] Vladimir D. Pastuhov, *Guide to the Practice of International Conferences*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945, p. 5.

[53] Pastuhov, op. cit. (52), p. 6.

[54] League of Nations Archive RG5265, Arthur Breycha-Vauthier to Stencek, 23 May 1946, quoted in Jane Mumby, 'The quiet death of the League of Nations', PhD dissertation, University of London, 2022.

[55] Hunt became associate director of field operations of the US Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation (which pre-dated and had close links with UNRRA), before working with UNRRA as chief of the Italian Division of the Foreign Economic Administration. Pastuhov took up the post of special adviser on UNRRA procedures and council arrangements at UNRRA's Washington headquarters.

widespread malnutrition and starvation; the threat of epidemic diseases on the rampage; the devastation of farmland, industries and infrastructure; the repatriation of millions of displaced people. Planners argued that 'relief' and 'rehabilitation' were first and foremost technical, scientifically solvable problems best tackled by specialists removed from high politics. The more contentious question of longer-term 'reconstruction' was excluded from UNRRA's brief. But from the beginning this was combined with a functionalist argument that international agreement would radiate out from these technical fields and ultimately make reconstruction possible. As a *Nature* editorial put it, UNRRA's foundation 'foreshadows a general pattern of post-war co-operation', and UNRRA 'may be the most important executive agency in international reconstruction'.[56]

The image of practical, technical work and the application of common sense against the odds became a core thread of how UNRRA presented itself. One way to access this self-characterization is by looking at its conferences. From some vantage points, UNRRA was all about conferences. Its prehistory consisted of a series of meetings by British and American planning staffs. In 1941, these planners were joined by those from other Allied nations and exiled governments at the first and second Inter-Allied Conferences, held at St James's Palace in London in June and September 1941 respectively, which resulted in an agreement to adopt shared 'common principles', to pool food and raw materials for post-war needs, and to coordinate supply questions among each other.[57] The second meeting initiated the creation of the Inter-Allied Committee on Post-war Requirements (known as the Leith-Ross Committee, named after its chairman Frederick Leith-Ross, an eminent official at the UK Treasury), as a direct precursor to UNRRA. In a series of conferences, it tabulated the post-war needs and requirements of the liberated territories in Europe.

On the back of these meetings, UNRRA came to life, like so many other international organizations, at a big conference. On 9 November 1943, four years into the war, representatives from forty-four nations met in the East Room of the White House, Washington, to sign the UNRRA Agreement. As part of a publicity campaign to get the main funding countries' citizens (above all the US, but also the UK) behind the project, the event was widely reported by the press and in various air-dropped pamphlets, and President Roosevelt's speech was broadcast on radio. The coverage celebrated UNRRA's founding as an expression of a 'common cause', and part of a duty to act on the 'second chance'.[58] The next day, the delegates made their way from Washington to the Claridge Hotel in Atlantic City, many of them going in special trains, to take part in the first conference of UNRRA's Council (the organ where each member government was represented).

UNRRA's founding conference would have looked familiar to the authors writing about the conference technique in the preceding decades. The conference's task was to establish the scope of UNRRA's practical activities, the procedures for obtaining and distributing supplies, and any rules governing the conduct of the organization. Through all this, many hoped that the meeting would also create longer-term mechanisms for international cooperation.[59] Over a thousand delegates took part in the three week-long meeting, including representatives from each member state, along with their alternates, advisers and teams of specialists in their national delegations. Not unusually for the time, the vast majority of these formal participants were men: in the forty-four nations'

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[56] 'Relation of relief to reconstruction', *Nature* (1944) 153 (February 5), pp. 147–9, 147, 148.

[57] Inter-Allied Council Statement on the Principles of the Atlantic Charter, 24 September 1941, at https:// avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/interall.asp (accessed 18 March 2022).

[58] *UNRRA: In the Wake of the Armies*, National Film Board of Canada, 1944.

[59] 'Introductory note', in *First Session of the Council of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration: Selected Documents, Atlantic City, New Jersey, November 10–December 1, 1943* Washington, DC, 1944.

delegations, there were only three women: two members of the US delegation, and one technical adviser to the delegation from Greece.[60] Also present were external observers (including from other organizations), journalists, clerks, assistants, messengers, interpreters, typists and stenographers. Lists of attendees were sent to Washington in advance, and a special detachment of American soldiers at the hotel only permitted those with proper credentials to enter.[61]

As host, the American government appointed a secretariat to run the conference (led by Warren Kelchner, chief of the US Department of State's Division of International Conferences) and put a staff of technical advisers and assistants at its disposal. The secretariat prepared a draft agenda and plans for four working committees, and coordinated arrangements with the delegations in advance. It was also charged with drafting 'rules of procedure', to specify how exactly the conference was to be conducted: who was allowed to take part and who could observe the proceedings? How were the committees' reports to be presented? How were delegates going to vote and how would their votes be counted?[62] By the time participants met in Atlantic City, preparations had been going on for months.

The trusty 'conference technique' became a tool for inaugurating a new technical organization and navigating the choppy political waters of wartime international collaboration. Just as the textbooks had described the process, the conference began with the election and appointment of officials, and the approval of the rules of procedure. Dean Acheson was appointed conference chairman. The bulk of the work in Atlantic City took place in the four main committees and various expert subcommittees. The official conference record tells us the conference passed forty-one resolutions on UNRRA's scope and principles of work.[63] Although there were real controversies, such as the decision to exclude relief supplies for India from UNRRA's remit, even though Bengal was in the grip of a devastating famine, the conference technique provided a means of managing them – and, handily for the American hosts, getting the outcomes they wanted. In his closing words, newly appointed director general Herbert Lehman declared that 'the work accomplished' at the conference was 'evidence of statesmanship of the highest order': it had established concrete policies to put flesh on the bare bones of the UNRRA Agreement, and had formulated principles that provided 'a sound basis of working arrangements'.[64]

After the closing ceremony, the *New York Times* reported, 'Two special trains took 600 members of the delegations, advisers, experts and secretariat staffs back to Washington … many of them to return to the embassies of their governments, others to help Mr. Lehman start his organizational work.'[65] Newspaper editorials and articles had reported on proceedings and daily dramas throughout.[66] In the English-language press much of the coverage was tied to the question whether and how the US, Britain and its dominions could get their populations and politicians to agree to fund the project.[67] Some pieces also tried to

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[60] 'Only two women on UNRRA Council', *New York Times*, 22 November 1943, p. 2.

[61] See description in Louis L. Kaplan and Theodor Schuchat, *Justice – Not Charity: A Biography of Harry Greenstein*, New York: Crown, 1967, p. 79.

[62] George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, 3 vols., New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, vol. 1, p. 24.

[63] *First Session*, op. cit. (59).

[64] Woodbridge, op. cit. (62), vol. 1, p. 32.

[65] 'UNRRA Recognizes India's food crises', *New York Times*, 2 December 1943, p. 167.

[66] Delegates did not always agree on their accuracy, e.g. NA CAB 115/587, 'From British delegation, Atlantic City to Foreign Office', 23 November 1943, and other correspondence in this file.

[67] 'Funds for U.S. participation in UNRRA urged by Hull', *Evening Star* (Washington DC), 7 December 1943, p. 1.

assess the broader significance of the meeting at a time in the war when an Allied victory began to seem possible.[68]

Many conference attendees had high hopes for a new internationalism built on technical expertise. President Roosevelt declared that the conference allowed UNRRA to make 'the first bold steps toward the practicable, workable realization of a thing called freedom from want' – here, finally, the Allied nations could find concrete solutions to both short- and long-term problems.[69] Dean Acheson later testified to the US Congress that the committees had worked efficiently and thereby achieved 'remarkable beginnings in international cooperation'.[70]

It was this 'air of internationalism' achievable by impartial experts that captured many attendees' imagination. Harry Greenstein, American director of UNRRA's welfare division, remembered that the 'dining room of the Claridge Hotel in Atlantic City, where the conference met, resembled the cross-roads of the world; and those of us who participated in the conference had an unusual and rare experience which we will not soon forget'. Overall, he concluded, the conference had demonstrated 'that UNRRA represents a practical and realistic approach to one of the most important of post-war problems'.[71]

Other delegates were less upbeat. The American welfare specialist Ellen Woodward had come to the conference with a specific agenda: to give greater visibility to the problem of 'welfare', broadly understood as 'services for the personal rehabilitation of individuals requiring special help', as opposed to economic and medical questions, which had dominated the relief agenda to date. Woodward's understanding of welfare reflected that of 'the highly trained United States social worker with a field of specialization in child care, psychiatry, nutrition, or the like'.[72] She came prepared with a list of welfare objectives to be incorporated into UNRRA's mandate. Woodward found the conference itself rather exhausting, and was dismayed to find that not all technical subjects were considered equal. Technical standing committees were established on agriculture, health and industrial recovery, but none for welfare. She drafted a statement on what such a committee would look like and the contributions it would make, but didn't have the support within her own delegation. Her biographer noted that she 'worked long hours during the two weeks in Atlantic City and returned to Washington physically drained. She had developed a "terrible cold and bronchitis" that left her "limping around" her ... office'.[73]

Woodward knew that conferences were not just exhibitions of expertise, but also battlegrounds. She regretted the lack of 'social thinking among the men on the US delegation', none of whom had any sense of how important social welfare was going to be and how, in practice, displaced persons were going to be helped by UNRRA on a daily basis. As one of only three women in an official capacity at the conference, she insisted that UNRRA's programmes urgently required a cohort of female specialists – people like her. As she complained to Eleanor Roosevelt, 'Men who do not know anything about social welfare seem to think that all that needs to be done is to buy supplies and see that they are shipped – that somehow or other everything else will "just happen".'[74] Her late appointment to the American UNRRA delegation and her resulting ability to participate

[68] Frederick Leith-Ross, *Money Talks: Fifty Years of International Finance*, London: Hutchinson & Co, 1968, p. 302.

[69] 'Address of the president of the United States of America', in *First Session*, op. cit. (59).

[70] Woodbridge, op. cit. (62), vol. 1, p. 28.

[71] Harry Greenstein, 'The Atlantic City conference and the UNRRA program', *The Compass* (1944) 25(4), pp. 20–4, 20. Also see Philip C. Jessup, 'The first session of the Council of UNRRA', *American Journal of International Law* (1944) 38(1), pp. 101–6.

[72] Woodbridge, op. cit. (62), vol. 2, pp. 26–7.

[73] Martha H. Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, p. 172.

[74] Ellen Woodward to Eleanor Roosevelt, 21 July 1944, quoted in Swain, op. cit. (73), p. 174.

in the conferences had been a win for her, but now she had to fight her corner. In the end, a welfare committee was indeed established, after her friend Eleanor Roosevelt's intervention. Woodward was appointed to it and continued her campaign at subsequent UNRRA conferences.[75] But the whole episode demonstrated to her and others that there was a hierarchy of technical expertise and experts, and the very definition of 'technical questions' was often highly political.[76]

Although leaving with mixed feelings about personal successes and failures, few participants seem to have challenged the conference outcomes, and many echoed the sentiment of an exciting new start to both the relief project and post-war international cooperation. In their recollections, it is striking that delegates often used the same words to describe their time: the work had been 'intense', 'hard' and 'important'; it had rested on 'competence' and 'expertise', establishing 'ambitious' but 'realistic' principles; they had begun to identify 'urgent problems' and 'practical solutions'.

UNRRA as a conference hub

UNRRA's Council conferences became a major part of the organization's identity and working schedule. Subsequent meetings took part in other Allied hubs: Montreal (September 1944), London (August 1945), again in Atlantic City (March 1946), Geneva (August 1946) and, finally, Washington (December 1946). Like the first gathering in Atlantic City, each of them functioned as a publicity stunt as much as a hub for intense, practical, 'technical' work, by combining high-level political drama with many weeks of backroom committee work by specialists.

However, conferences also appeared in many other guises. UNRRA's archive is filled with notes on meetings, from high-level supply conferences to conferences with mission chiefs, district supervisors, voluntary societies, local governments. UNRRA's thousands of specialists – in economics, industry, agriculture, nutrition, sanitation, epidemiology, nursing, pharmaceutical production, welfare and many other fields – regularly convened small or large conferences. Some conferences gave UNRRA the formal tasks of upholding international conventions, or were a means of connecting UNRRA delegates with lobbyists and organizations trying influence its policy.[77] Others were primarily internal affairs. Conferences took place on many technical subjects, from timber management, shipping routes and refugee repatriation transports, to the importation of specific foodstuffs, child-feeding practices, sanitation work and pharmaceutical production. All manner of meetings were labelled 'conferences'.

Some conferences involved the coordination of specialists working in different parts of the administration.[78] Sometimes conferences simply took the form of minuted small group meetings to address specific problems.[79] At other times, conferences were thinly veiled excuses for social gatherings of physically dispersed staff.[80] Some so-called conferences barely looked like conferences at all: the series of meetings known as the 'DEEP

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[75] Swain, op. cit. (73), pp. 169–72.

[76] On the hierarchies of expert fields, gender and salaries within UNRRA, see Reinisch, op. cit. (32).

[77] E.g. P.G. Stock, 'The International Sanitary Convention of 1944', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* (1945) 38(7), pp. 309–16; UN S-1241-0000-0078-00001, correspondence about 4th Women's Conference on International Affairs in Washington, October 1944.

[78] NA WO 204/10724, 'Conference on UNRRA imports through north Italian ports, Rome, 18 January 1946', and following reports.

[79] UN S-1301-0000-1721-00001, memorandum from acting general counsel to acting director general, UNRRA, subject: Office of the General Counsel, report for June 1946.

[80] UN S-0434-0003-07, 'Meeting of all UNRRA nurses of entire Schleswig-Holstein region held on January 8th, 1947, at 3 p.m. UNRRA HQ Mess, Lübeck', pp. 2, 4.

UNRRA Conferences', run by UNRRA and the British Control Commission in Germany in 1946, simply involved small groups of officials meeting with national liaison officers.[81] The flexibility and capaciousness of the term 'conference' in UNRRA's files is striking. It was used to describe meetings of various forms and formats, from large and formal events to gatherings of staff from different departments, sometimes just involving a handful of people.

Does the slippery terminology matter? Although some writers later insisted on the purity of the true 'conference' format, this doesn't seem helpful here.[82] It is significant that, in spite of their variety, UNRRA's conferences had several things in common. First, conferences tended to generate written records (minutes, reports, motions passed) that were distributed to participants and filed away. Second, these records usually began with the identification of the aim, object and terms of reference and a clear delineation of what would be outside the conference's scope. They were accompanied by references to objectivity and facts, often written in passive and impersonal language. Third, they usually involved other, less formal meetings alongside the recorded proceedings – meals, drinks, celebrations, town visits. These were important for developing personal connections, though at times it was stated explicitly that the formality of the main event was precious: there was a perceived safety in conferences as regulated forms of exchange, much safer than unplanned 'personal encounters'. Finally, the outcome was invariably a date of the next meeting or future production of a memorandum, and the release of the conference minutes and reports.

In the UNRRA files, participants often referred to their work as 'technical' or 'specialist'; sometimes they described it as 'scientific'. In this emphasis on experts as holders of specialist knowledge, science appeared as the fabled antidote to political limitations and obstacles. It was the voice of reason, common sense, clarity of thought and progress that could cut through any political morass. This was not so much about any particular, actual science, but about science and expertise as a powerful rhetorical device. This portrayal suited both conference organizers and participants. For UNRRA, conferences not only provided a method of how difficult problems are solved, but also advertised the status of the outcomes that these meetings produced: objective, informed, regulated, international – just like science itself.

In practice, these conferences served a number of functions: to bring together dispersed professional groups, to pass down instructions from headquarters to the relief teams, to report on ongoing work, to identify 'technical' solutions and scientific approaches, to celebrate expertise. Conferences were a coordination device, and UNRRA was all about coordination – of different national interests; civilian and military interests; administrative departments; donor and receiving countries; and global resources, supplies, transport. Coordination was the magic process which could bring food, drugs or clothing to populations in need; it could reduce waste and delay.[83]

But these conferences were about more than a practical coordination of supplies or Allied agendas. UNRRA appeared at a delicate time in international relations. '[A]s the first operating organization created by the United Nations during war', one of UNRRA's own publicity pamphlets stated, it 'became from the outset a testing ground of the ability of the United Nations to cooperate at common tasks during peace. Its success has given all

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[81] NA FO 1052/394, 'Minutes of the "DEEPUNRRA" conference held at Bad Salzuflen, Thursday, 15 August 46 at 1500 hrs'.

[82] For one attempt at organizing the names given to meetings of different types, see Georges Scelle, 'The evolution of international conferences', in *UNESCO: International Science Bulletin* (1953) 5(2), special issue, *The Technique of International Conferences*, pp. 241–56.

[83] Compare with Jessica Reinisch, 'Relief in the aftermath of war', *Journal of Contemporary History* (2008) 43(2), pp. 371–404.

nations fresh assurance that they can work together at other, and longer-range, tasks'.[84] UNRRA's conferences were an advertisement of the technocratically minded liberal internationalism which expanded interwar arrangements. Unlike the League, it tied both the US and the USSR into its organization. Its forty-four initial signatories represented 'four-fifths of the people in the world, gathered about a long table';[85] by 1946 four more governments had joined.

UNRRA represented a fragile and temporary alliance of various political agendas, but it was above all a product of the Anglo-American liberal internationalist programme, with all its limitations. Although women made up a significant portion of relief workers in the field, at its conferences UNRRA represented an internationalism of men in leading political and professional positions. Axis powers or supporters were excluded – this was an 'Allied internationalism'. The work focused on the sixteen receiving countries in Europe, where the majority of UNRRA field staff were employed and most resources were used, far exceeding a separate branch of the organization in China and the Philippines, and the small missions in Korea and Ethiopia. But both within and outside Europe enormous need was deemed beyond UNRRA's remit. Anglo-American dominance on economic and supply questions cast into doubt a genuine multilateral internationalism. UNRRA's conferences did not disguise these limitations. But to champions of the conference method, they were evidence of systematic attempts to inaugurate a more technically grounded era of internationalism. UNRRA ultimately embodied the recognition that intergovernmental, multilateral internationalism had to be 'done' by conference.

Conclusion and outlook

UNRRA routinized the use of conferences as an administrative tool and as a means for exchanging and branding technical knowledge. In this sense, studying conferences can shed light on the 'mechanics of internationalism', or what Pierre-Yves Saunier has called the 'scientific operatics of globalisation'.[86] Conferences are often an integral part of international organizations' existence, and UNRRA was no exception. But more than that, UNRRA's conferences reveal both the organization's foundational links with the interwar liberal internationalist project and the central roles played by scientific experts within it.

Since the First World War, scholars presented the conference 'technique' as a means to stabilize international relations and bring scientific government and democracy to the world. Many of the authors writing about conferences were American or English, and both the League and UNRRA operated within the world of Anglo-Saxon liberal internationalism. But the League–UNRRA–UN conference heritage proved crucial also for conferences that served different political agendas. As Legg *et al.* note, even the radical politics of 'anti-colonial, non-aligned and activist conferencing … expressed themselves through a conference format forged in the liberal tradition'.[87] UNRRA itself, even as an Anglo-American project, served as an umbrella for different political traditions and interpretations of internationalism. Conferences reinforced a shared language of expertise, science and technocracy that enabled different factions to communicate, if they wanted to.

The assumptions underlying the interwar conference handbooks proved to be remarkably flexible and durable. Ultimately, the 'technique' of conferences was so flexible that it

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[84] *Fifty Facts about UNRRA*, Washington: UNRRA, 15 February 1947, p. 35.

[85] Allan Nevins, *Herbert H. Lehman and His Era*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, p. 234.

[86] In the volume by the same name, conferences feature in virtually of the chapters, but the authors fall short of identifying them as a core component of the 'mechanics' of internationalism. Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann, *The Mechanics of Internationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pierre-Yves Saunier, 'Taking up the bet on connections: a municipal contribution', *Contemporary European History* (2002) 11(4), pp. 507–27, 512.

[87] Legg *et al.*, op. cit. (7), p. 25.

could serve a variety of purposes. Calling a meeting a 'conference' was an explicit choice, and served to advertise the meetings' assumptions (dealing with solvable problems), methods (systematic, technically informed, non-ideological) and outcomes. Even as international organizations and political systems became discredited by war, economic depression or collapse, conferences as a process or technique did not. This had been the case in 1919, and was true again in 1945. Each crisis was evidence not so much of the failure of the conference technique as, rather, that it was needed more than ever.

UNRRA's conferences drew upon the combined heritage of scientific and diplomatic meetings which, as this special issue shows, were intricately connected. UNRRA particularly refined the form of the 'technical conference' embraced by its predecessor. Not only did diplomatic and technical, expert-led conferences share significant common ground and history, but, by the time UNRRA came on the scene, the boundaries between them had become increasingly blurred. As commentators like Pitman Potter noted in the 1920s, with the growing involvement of experts and their reliance on 'data', diplomatic conferences were becoming more technical. At the same time, as we show in this issue, debates about membership and international representation within scientific disciplines had long aligned scientific conferences with explicit geopolitical and diplomatic agendas. UNRRA's apotheosis of specialist experts tells us much about the mid-century appeal of technocracy and the widely held conviction that science and technical knowledge could help to create a world without war.

After the end of the Second World War, as international organizations multiplied and technical conferences were held in ever larger numbers, some of UNRRA's ideas, processes and staff lived on in its successor organizations. At its dissolution in 1948, its 'know-how', assets and personnel were distributed among the new so-called specialized agencies of the UN: the IRO (precursor of the UNHCR), FAO, WHO and UNICEF.[88] Hankey's 1946 edition of his *Diplomacy by Conference* was hailed by a *Nature* reviewer as a work of great relevance to current political questions.[89] Several years later, UNESCO set out to study the conference 'technique' to make it more relevant to Cold War lives, reiterating many of the interwar ideas and assumptions, including the relevance of expert-led conference studies. As part of the project, Walter Sharp, chief of the International Cooperation Division in UNESCO's Social Science Department and former UNRRA official, reinforced the value of 'studying international conferences as a medium and measure of international collaboration' with particular emphasis on 'administrative and operational problems'.[90] One contributor, the jurist Lazare Kopelmanas, thought that the 'importance of the technique of conferences in the life of international organizations' was surely, by now, 'unquestioned'.[91]

Even among the ranks of UNRRA's relief workers conferences continued to play a role. Ella Wentworth Dyne Steel, one of UNRRA's first relief workers to be sent into Germany, went on to run a newly created 'Scientific Conference Secretariat' unit at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva.[92] To her, organizing conferences was above all a matter of systematic organization and administration. She was remembered as 'a wizard with card indexes and had everyone and everything into her files in

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[88] 'UNRRA's "know-how" will be passed on to UN', in *Fifty Facts about UNRRA*, op. cit. (84), p. 34.

[89] R. Brightman, 'Theory and practice of government', *Nature* (30 November 1946) 158, pp. 770–1, discussing Lord Hankey, *Diplomacy by Conference: Studies in Public Affairs, 1920–1946*, London: Ernest Benn, 1946.

[90] W. Line, 'A functional approach to the study of international conferences', *UNESCO: International Science Bulletin* (1953) 5(2), pp. 300–11, 300; W.R. Sharp, 'A check list of subjects for systematic study of international conferences', *UNESCO: International Science Bulletin* (1953) 5(2), pp. 311–42, 384.

[91] L. Kopelmanas, 'The technique of international conferences and the experience of the Economic Commission for Europe', *UNESCO: International Science Bulletin* (1953) 5(2), pp. 343–60, 343.

[92] Dyne Steel, *A 'One and Only' Looks Back*, Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1992.

no time with all the information people might need to know and all scrupulously up to date'.[93] Perhaps this was not a typical post-UNRRA career path, but Steel was far from alone in crediting her time with UNRRA for having given her insights into the complex logistics of the technical work of international relations in practice.

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[93] Melvyn Hume, Foreword, in Dyne Steel, *A 'One and Only' Looks Back,* Edinburgh: Pentland, 1992 , pp. xiii–xiv. Also see Steel's report on how she organized the Super Proton Synchroton's 40th anniversary conference: 'The SPS inauguration bible: a step by step account of the operation', 23 May 1977, at https://home.cern/news/news/cern/behind-scenes-spss-40th-birthday (accessed 18 March 2022).