

# Book Review

- Daniel Laqua, Wouter Van Acker, and Christophe Verbruggen, Editors. *International Organizations and Global Civil Society: Histories of the Union of International Associations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pp. xiii + 260. \$108.00 (cloth).

Historical scholarship in a transnational key has become steadily more common over the course of the last twenty years, while producing works of uncommon insight. Its most compelling examples can encompass perspectives on a single topic that blend biographical, institutional, regional, national, and global scales to analyze it. The Union of International Associations (UIA), an organization created in 1907 that has persevered, adapted, and survived as a source of information—as well as an example—of the thickening web of transnational associations that form a “global civil society” provides opportunities for scholars like the contributors to this volume to engage in just such a multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary study. Daniel Laqua, Wouter Van Acker, and Christophe Verbruggen, the editors, each of whom also contribute a chapter, deserve recognition for managing a collaborative effort whose result reads more like a monograph than an edited collection comprising eleven chapters by fifteen authors representing seven countries and various disciplines. Each chapter speaks in its own voice and engages the topic from different angles, while still achieving a satisfying coherence in explaining the features, functions, and significance of the UIA across the past century of expanding international connections.

The first of the book’s three parts traces the UIA’s development from an idea among a heterogeneous network of Belgians in the late nineteenth century through its efforts at reinvention and revival amid a new wave of interest in international cooperation that followed World War II. Covering the initial phase that lasted until the eve of the First World War, W. Boyd Rayward’s chapter focuses on the “tangle of potentially conflicting political orientations, personal ties and institutional affiliations” of the UIA’s three founders: Henri La Fontaine, Cyrille van Overbergh, and Paul Otlet (17). These figures represented diverse political and cultural tendencies: La Fontaine—a senator and recipient of the 1913 Nobel Peace Prize—was a socialist and Overbergh an ultramontane Catholic who was politically well-connected. All three, though, shared a belief that the trend towards international organization and the accumulation of legal, social, and other knowledge presented a historic opportunity to improve the human condition. Rayward explains the complicated and

unexpected connections that evolved across a variety of organizations undertaken in the early 1890s as efforts to create a universal bibliographic system inspired by Melvil Dewey's classification scheme and La Fontaine and Otlet's own positivist worldview, that converged with the interests of Overbergh and a cohort associated with the University of Louvain. This (temporary) convergence resulted in the Central Office of International Institutions in 1907, then the UIA in 1910, conceived as a clearinghouse of information about international associations collected directly from surveys and made available in the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, first published in 1909, and an array of subsequent publications. Christophe Verbruggen recounts how the UIA attracted supporters, from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to the Belgian government to the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations—even the Third Reich, during the 1940–45 occupation—who recognized the value of this data for different reasons but ultimately reconsidered, withdrew, or redirected their patronage. This pattern is evident in Daniel Laqua's chapter that analyzes how the UIA refocused its mission towards international education during the interwar era when, especially during the 1920s, enthusiasm for internationalism gained wide purchase. Laqua asserts that a shift in the Belgian government's policies and the League of Nations' preference for advancing international cooperation through other organizations dealt a substantial blow to its ambitions in the short term, but the UIA's plans, such as an international university, became a reference point for similar endeavors revived after the Second World War. In the section's final chapter, Nico Randeraad and Philip Post concentrate on the period 1948–52, when the UIA had "high hopes" for re-establishing itself as the hub for information about international associations but instead reaped "bitter fruits" as it proved unable to overcome the constraints imposed by complex institutional, national, and international circumstances. The authors end their chapter with an observation that many of the contributions in this section seem to suggest as well: "Nevertheless, the Union persisted, and managed to conquer and keep a special place on the world stage" (88).

The book's middle section consists of three chapters that feature specific examples of how the UIA interacted with and, to varying degrees of effectiveness, contributed to specific constituencies in global civil society. Sarah Hellowell examines how the histories of such organizations as the International Council of Women and the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, the biographies of individuals like Léonie La Fontaine (Henri's sister) and Elise Boulding, and the efforts and interests of the women's movement overlapped and intersected with the UIA's mission. She concludes that internationalism since the late nineteenth century "was partly sustained by the motivation to collect documentation on women's situation and to assert female authority on issues relating to war and peace" (107). Wouter Van Acker analyzes the UIA's relationship with the International Union of Cities (or *Union Internationale des Villes*, UIV), formed in 1913 and known today as the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments, through the lens of

legitimacy—that is, how “the UIV used its interactions with the UIA to position itself as an authoritative international organization in an increasingly complex field of international power formation” (114). The chapter addresses these interactions in social, scientific, and political-bureaucratic contexts, revealing the “multi-faceted and unstable” relationship between the two organizations with the nation-state as they negotiated “transnational . . . and other spaces of decision-making” in their quest to delineate “a new cosmopolis” where the authority of the “transnational associative expert” was recognized and legitimized (126–7). In the section’s final chapter, Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann consider the International Committee of Historical Sciences (*Comité International des Sciences Historiques*, CISH), founded in 1926, as an international non-governmental organization for the historical profession. Despite connections between the CISH and the UIA being “thin,” especially compared to the relationship the UIA had with the UIV explored in the previous chapter, the authors examine the CISH as an exemplar of the kind of constituent of global society central to the UIA’s purpose (139).

The data collected by the UIA, the ways it has been organized and made available, and the possibilities and limitations that attend its use provide the focus of the book’s final section. Thomas Davies’ chapter on “The UIA and the Development of International Relations Theory” might well fit in the previous section, but it is no less true that most chapters intersect enough that other organizational arrangements might have been chosen. Davies points to the UIA’s contributions to the field of International Relations (IR) as a source of information used by scholars as well as to IR theory itself by, for instance, “delineating definitional and structural characteristics of international non-governmental organizations” (164). He cautions, however, that the UIA risks falling behind the global developments it purports to document if it continues to overlook “the rise of non-institutionalized transnational social mobilization” and the geographic and cultural expansion of global civil society in the data it gathers and reports (165).

Pierre-Yves Saunier critiques the information presented in the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, the UIA’s flagship product, throughout its history, taking into consideration its function as a commercial venture, the contingent circumstances that affected its production, and the methodology used to collect data. He concludes that the value of the information found in the *Yearbook* has been “overstated” by scholars, who ought to approach it with a critical eye, fortified perhaps with the caveats convincingly supported in this chapter (194). The last two chapters exemplify how information from the *Yearbook* and other sources could be used by scholars to draw critically fortified conclusions.

Bob Reinalda’s chapter on data about the secretariats of international governmental and non-governmental organizations echoes Saunier’s advice about the limitations of *Yearbook* data and suggests supplementing it with the UIA’s monthly journal (published under different titles since 1949) and other publications. Martin Grandjean and Marco H.D. van Leeuwen use the UIA’s digital database (<https://uia.org/allpubs>) to analyze international

Congress and organizations since the nineteenth century through an assortment of graphs, charts, tables, maps, and word clouds that effectively demonstrate the value of what the UIA has been doing over the course of its existence. The last chapter in the book is an epilogue contributed by Nancy Carfrae, a UIA senior staff member, who brings the study up to date by surveying its current activities, inviting the reader to contemplate any patterns of continuity and change pertaining to its publications, methods of data collection, international gatherings, and educational endeavors.

This book has several virtues. For one, it draws attention to the UIA as a subject worthy of historical study and demonstrates the diverse ways that it can be approached. The book's third section in particular may prompt researchers to avail themselves (critically) of the abundant information collected, organized, and published by the UIA over the past century, while each chapter's endnotes may inspire a few visits to the Mundaneum, in Mons, Belgium, the archival site of the UIA's founders. The authors of the various chapters demonstrate how that material can be combined with myriad other sources to shed greater light on and expand information about the transnational sphere as a unit of historical analysis.

Surprisingly, aside from a passing reference in the introduction and some discussion in Davies' chapter, the editors and contributors barely engage the slippery phrase "global civil society," which signifies a concept whose very existence has been contested, especially among earlier IR scholars, who tended heavily towards Realism. The volume's contributions clarify its meaning through their carefully articulated scholarship and effectively validate it as a framework for analysis in the different fields represented in the volume. Still, the editors might have raised the issue of "global civil society" as problematic and explained how they resolved it, rather than advancing it as an assumption.

The volume's virtues far outweigh this limited concern, however. Research scholars interested in the dynamics of global civil society and its history and graduate students who could benefit from an example of transnational history done well are those who will find *International Organizations and Global Civil Society* most valuable. They might recommend the cloth edition for acquisition by their university libraries or purchase the more accessibly priced paper or e-book editions for themselves.

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