



SURVEY AND SPECULATION

International zones in global urban history

Anna Ross 

Department of History, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
Email: A.Ross.2@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

This survey introduces the reader to the history of international zones. It argues that they offer striking insights into peacekeeping during the transition from a world of formal empires to one dominated by sovereign states. While the study of international zones is not new, there has been little examination of internationalization in practice. The survey suggests some of the benefits of adopting this approach and findings it might unearth.

In 1919, as Europe's land empires imploded, delegates at the Paris Peace Conference experimented with a novel form of peacekeeping. They placed some of the most contested spaces on the continent under the direct administration of the League of Nations. Known as international zones, these spaces most famously included the Saar Basin and the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk).¹ The League also exercised partial control over Memel Harbour (Klaipėda), formerly part of the German empire and later annexed by Lithuania. In addition, League management was considered for a number of cities of the defunct Austro-Hungarian empire, as well as Alexandretta (İskenderun) in the Ottoman empire. International zones were soon created in regions beyond Europe too. In the 1930s, the League took control of the city of Leticia, as a means by which to secure peace between Colombia and Peru. Finally, although the Moroccan city of Tangier did not come under the direct auspices of the League, its members created an international zone whose politics were fundamentally shaped by reference to first the League and later the United Nations.²

This survey proposes that international zones offer striking insights into peacekeeping during the transition from a world of formal empires to one dominated by sovereign states. As Taoyu Yang discusses in his contribution to this collection of essays, collective oversight of cities had existed before the war, first in Central Europe and then by the mid-nineteenth century in China's treaty ports, particularly in

¹On the Free City of Danzig, see J.B. Mason, *The Danzig Dilemma: A Study in Peacemaking by Compromise* (Stanford, 1946). On the Saar Basin, see S. Matzerath and J. Siebeneich (eds.), *Die 20er Jahre: Leben zwischen Tradition und Moderne im internationalen Saargebiet, 1920–1935* (Petersberg, 2020); M. Zenner, *Parteien und Politik im Saargebiet unter dem Völkerbundsregime, 1920–1935* (Saarbrücken, 1966).

²G.H. Stuart, *The International City of Tangier* (2nd edn, Stanford, 1955).

Shanghai.³ Only with the creation of the League of Nations, however, did multistate administrations become more widespread and ambitious. League-appointed commissioners took up residence in international zones to ensure contested territory became neutral after the war. They oversaw dispute resolution and liaised with local authorities on a whole range of issues, especially the opening up of zones to neighbouring states to support free trade. This presence on the ground made international zones the most interventionist form of territorial administration used by the League during its existence and distinct from the better-known administration of the mandates or minorities protection system.⁴ For this reason, international zones offer a particularly clear view into the application of public law in peacekeeping, its breakdown and the ways in which local institutions, groups and/or individuals experimented with breakdown to long-lasting effects.

Rethinking international zones

International zones are not a new topic of enquiry. Scholars of international law and relations have long examined these entities, focusing on the novel legal structure of the zones. Public law is at the heart of much of the literature as it stands at present, with the most recent scholarship exploring what international treaties, legal debate and to a limited extent League of Nations/United Nations files can tell us about the administrative setup of zones or how zones can be used to tease out justifications for international rule.⁵ What we know, therefore, is a great deal about the agreed architecture of these spaces. But this knowledge is rarely matched by any understanding of what internationalization looked like in practice.⁶ Scholarship seldom draws on urban or local histories to give a sense of the places in which internationalization was anchored. Indeed, current research is particularly bad at providing insight into the populations which lived under international administration and the many ways in which they utilized international structures in everyday life.⁷

Shifting our focus to the local, often urban environment of international zones produces a very different image to that evoked at the peace talks. From Central Europe to South America, reconstructing life on a local scale palpably demonstrates the deep sense of frustration of those who were constantly waiting for clarifications of public law from international bodies. Years could go by before the most basic

³M. Ydit, *Internationalised Territories: From the 'Free City of Cracow' to the 'Free City of Berlin'* (Leyden, 1961); I. Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City* (Cambridge, 2018); R. Bickers and I. Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports in Modern China: Law, Land and Power* (London, 2016).

⁴S. Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015).

⁵C. Stahn, *The Law and Practice of International Territorial Administration* (Cambridge, 2010); R. Wilde, *International Territorial Administration: How Trusteeship and the Civilizing Mission Never Went Away* (Oxford, 2008); G.H. Fox, *Humanitarian Occupation* (Cambridge, 2008); A. Orford, *International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁶D. Brydan and J. Reinisch, 'Introduction: internationalists in European history', in D. Brydan and J. Reinisch (eds.), *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2021), 1–16.

⁷For the lack of legal/international relations research into populations living under international regimes, see B. Bowden, H. Charlesworth and J. Farrall, 'Introduction', in B. Bowden, H. Charlesworth and J. Farrall (eds.), *The Role of International Law in Rebuilding Societies after Conflict: Great Expectations* (Cambridge, 2009), 13.

questions of statehood were answered. Equally, when we delve into the political institutions established in the zones, we are able to see what it looked like for administrations to have no or unclear guidance on many of the basic functions of government. Even the ownership of countless public and private buildings was held in suspension. The Treaty of Versailles and later international agreements such as the Paris Convention of 1923 created roadmaps for the internationalization of imperial property after the war, but these were neither detailed enough nor sufficient for the realization of property transfers. Transfers required finding people, gathering records and conducting auctions, all of which were time consuming.⁸ If ownership of infrastructure was unclear, so too was responsibility for municipal services. As Marcus Payk has shown for the case of Danzig, the question of who had the right to run post offices was hotly contested.⁹ In Tangier, where multiple postal systems had existed before the war, according to each empire active in the region, the inability of representatives to agree on an internationalized postal service meant that old imperial systems continued right into the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the transition in zones from imperial to free trade, as was outlined in the peace treaties, was a bumpy process. Dictates on free trade exposed businesses to battering global economic currents. As the president of the Saar Basin Governing Commission wrote for the League of Nations in December 1921, 'The Saar Basin is essentially a border territory; its area is so small and its frontiers are so open that it is inevitably affected by outside events, and particularly by the great economic movements taking place in the neighbouring countries.'¹¹

Such testimonies raise questions about the gaps between what the peacemakers claimed they were putting in place and what actually occurred. Some scholars, such as Jonathan Wyrzten, have suggested that divergence in peacekeeping took place at this juncture because the actors in Paris did not have complete control when designing new states and mandates. As war and revolution continued in a number of regions after 1918, and right up to 1934 in the former Ottoman empire, the 'worldmaking' projects of a whole range of people took on significance. In these post-imperial environments, he claims, both colonial and local groups played an important role in determining the political future of their homelands.¹² Given the particular inflection of international zones to maintain neutrality and to realize free trade in a world of multiplying states with ever hardening borders, we might expand this line of thinking

⁸A. Ross, 'Property and the end of empire in international zones, 1919–1947', *Past & Present* (2024) on advanced access at <https://academic.oup.com/past/advance-article/doi/10.1093/pastj/gtad024/7634307> accessed 2 Apr. 2024; M. Rigó, *Capitalism in Chaos: How the Business Elites of Europe Prospered in the Era of the Great War* (Ithaca, NY, 2022), ch. 5; D. Gosewinkel and S. Meyer, 'Citizenship, property rights and dispossession in postwar Poland (1918 and 1945)', *European Review of History*, 16 (2009), 575–95; D. Gosewinkel, R. Holec and M. Řezník (eds.), *Eigentumsregime und Eigentumskonflikte im 20. Jahrhundert: Deutschland und die Tschechoslowakei im internationalen Kontext* (Essen, 2018).

⁹M.M. Payk, 'The internationalization of Danzig and the Polish post office dispute, 1919–25', in M.M. Payk and R. Pergher (eds.), *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Politics after the Great War* (Bloomington, IN, 2019), 215–36.

¹⁰D.A. Stotter, *A Postcard from Tangier: A Postal & Social History of Tangier, 1880–1958* (Saffron Walden, 2015).

¹¹League of Nations Archive, United Nations Library and Archives, Geneva, C-556-M-392-1921-I_BI, special report from the governing commission on the economic situation in the territory of the Saar Basin, 30 Dec. 1921, 10.

¹²J. Wyrzten, *How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East* (New York, 2022).

beyond the political.¹³ We might explore the broader social, confessional, cultural and economic undertakings which complicated the realization of international governance. Certainly, the material difficulties of implementing international zones should be considered.

Addressing the gaps between intentions and reality

To begin to tease out why international zones differed so much from their intended forms, we need to return to the zones themselves and explore who was caught up in these new, seemingly suspended forms of governance. For example, we know that League appointees moved to disputed regions from various corners of the imperial world, especially from the British empire. But we have very little knowledge about the prominent residents, businessmen, chambers of commerce and others they worked with. In the Saar Basin and Danzig, commissioners worked alongside local administrative bodies and political parties which were particularly important to shaping life in the zones. In Tangier, European consuls collaborated with a Legislative Assembly composed of residential and commercial elites to develop the city's legal codes. They also liaised with a range of subsidiary bodies involved in everyday matters of governance. But we know barely anything about the local populations who worked in these institutions. This is all despite the fact that the peacemakers at Paris in 1919 hoped such international co-operation would result in the fostering of new loyalties and identities, thereby defusing tensions caused by the collapse of European land empires in World War I.

Individuals and groups in the zones experimented with the evolving peace structures. While the political focus in the zones was set on preventing expansionist nationalism, their porous borders meant that certain political groups could find space to develop alternative futures and systems of government for their regions. In World War II, the mix of Allied and Axis spies working next to one another is a striking history to emerge from international zones. Certainly in Tangier, this mix of competing European actors and the arrival of a robust American presence in the zone allowed Moroccan nationalists to not only explore which powers might be more useful allies than others to their cause, they also used the disfunction in the zone to develop their own agendas for a decolonized state. Meanwhile, porous borders meant that refugees could and did move through international zones when other routes to safety were shut. Onwards migration also took a different course in these spaces thanks to the generous quotas often assigned to them by leading international powers.

Businesses and chambers of commerce had ideas about how to make international zones profitable, often exploiting their limits and breakdown too. In both the Saar Basin and Danzig, German, French, Polish and British capitalists sought to prosper financially among the ruins of empire. Beginning in 1920, branches and banks took advantage of freedom from national jurisdictions, a lack of regulation and low tariffs. International concerns swarmed to Danzig in particular, 'expecting that [the zone]... would become a clearinghouse for exchange between eastern and western Europe'.¹⁴

¹³T. Zahra, *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars* (New York, 2023).

¹⁴C.M. Kimmich, *The Free City: Danzig and Germany Foreign Policy, 1919–1934* (New Haven, 1968), 46.

Similar developments could be observed in Tangier, where businesses were drawn to the lack of taxation and oversight in the zone.

Some residents, too, found ways of making zones work for them. An extended examination of the Tangerine resident Isaac A. Abensur provides a case in point.¹⁵ Abensur had been president of the Jewish community in Tangier for over 30 years by the time World War I broke out. In addition, he was a protégé of first the Austrian consulate and later the British consulate general, which employed him to carry out translations and represent them on the proto-international organization known as the Hygiene Commission. On the basis of his protégé's rights and networks in the city, Abensur amassed an extensive banking and property portfolio. Indeed, he used these networks to create the International Syndicate for the Development of Tangier – a private consortium which thrived in Tangier's booming real estate sector.¹⁶ With the outbreak of war and internationalization of the city, Abensur profited handsomely. Backed by the British, he assumed the position of international representative to the newly established Legislative Assembly. Here, Abensur sat for decades, as did later generations of family members. And here, he was able to exercise a leading influence. He and others with similar property, banking and trade interests did everything they could to protect their fortunes through the city's transition to an international zone. These residents, including French, Spanish and British citizens, as well as a handful of representatives from the Moroccan Jewish and Muslim populations, refused to raise taxes for the international zone over the course of its existence, turning it into one of the least taxed and regulated spaces around the world.¹⁷ In other words, rather than acting as a space of strategic neutrality, as intended by the European consuls who crafted the Tangier Zone, its Legislative Assembly ensured that it functioned more like a proto tax haven.

The ensuing movement of firms, banks, capital and financial elites in and out of Tangier adhered to a rhythm at odds with a zone's political life. European businessmen made eye-watering profits by establishing companies in the city. From the 1920s to the 1950s, they were able to avoid the taxes levied by the French and Spanish governments in the rest of Morocco and neighbouring states as part of their colonial empires. In the 1950s, as empires crumbled in Africa, further European businessmen moved their assets out of empire and into offshore sites like Tangier rather than back to European metropolises. Their actions were governed by a desire to avoid the new tax regimes introduced on the continent in support of post-war reconstruction and the development of the welfare state.¹⁸ In other words, business sought out continued profits in line with what they had experienced during the age of empire in international zones.

¹⁵On Abensur, see A. Puido, *Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardi* (Madrid, 1905).

¹⁶S.G. Miller, 'Making Tangier modern: ethnicity and urban development, 1880–1930', in E. Benichou Gottreich and D.J. Schroeter (eds.), *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa* (Bloomington, IN, 2011), 128–49, at 143–4.

¹⁷United States National Archives, College Park, MD, RG59/881.00/1802, G. Delore, 'Regarding the violation by Spain of the Tangier Statute and its consequences vis-à-vis the U.S.A.', to Department of State, 2 Dec. 1940.

¹⁸V. Ogle, 'Archipelago capitalism: tax havens, offshore money, and the state, 1950s–1970s', *American Historical Review*, 122 (2017), 1431–58; V. Ogle, '“Funk money”: the end of empires, the expansion of tax havens, and decolonisation as an economic and financial event', *Past & Present*, 249 (2020), 213–49.

Focusing on the end of empire and its internationalization in cities helps us to see more clearly peacekeeping in practice. International zones when viewed from a local scale bring to light the application of public law and most palpably, its breakdown and its limits. It creates a powerful picture of stasis within a much more familiar panorama of rapid change in the inter-war period. But as this survey has suggested, examining the breakdown of public law did not mean everything stopped in international zones. Rather, when we zoom in on individuals experimenting with breakdown, we can begin to see the unintended consequences of internationalization, which in some cases resulted in massive fortunes. Drawing attention to these unlikely stories is important as it gestures towards the ways in which peacekeeping could stimulate processes of 'freedom' unbound by nation-states which were in many ways a continuation or transformation of former imperial realities.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to Cyrus Schayegh for his comments on previous versions of this survey and to the authors in this Survey and Speculation collection for their lively discussion of our work at the conference '50 Years of the Urban History Journal' in 2023.

Funding statement. Research for this survey was supported by the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant (SG170192) and Arts and Humanities Research Council research grant 'Imperial Afterlives' (AH/W002981/1).