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The most impossible job in the world: UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie and the Cold War, 1946-1953

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Abstract

The UN secretary-general today plays important roles in preventive diplomacy and as an advocate for global issues and is widely seen as the UN’s foremost diplomatic and political representative, yet the UN Charter describes him merely as ‘the chief administrative office of the Organization.’ How did it become possible for the UN secretary-general to play such an autonomous role in international politics? What was the contribution of the first UN secretary-general, Trygve Lie, to this development? How did the Cold War conflict impede or facilitate the development of the UN secretary-general’s political role? Most of the literature on the UN secretary-general largely overlooks the contributions made by Lie, but this paper argues that several precedents for the political role of the UN secretary-general were set in this earliest period of UN history. Lie actively sought to expand the powers of his office, and to establish the secretary-general as an important mediator and negotiator between the member states. This paper examines Lie’s consistent attempts to seek an end to the growing Cold War tensions between the great powers during his tenure in office, 1946-1953, and discusses what precedents were set by his actions.

Résumé

Aujourd’hui, le Secrétaire général des Nations unies joue un rôle essentiel en matière de diplomatie préventive et de sensibilisation aux problématiques d’envergure mondiale. Pourtant, la Charte des Nations unies le présente simplement comme « le plus haut fonctionnaire de l’Organisation ». Comment en est-il venu à jouir d’une telle autonomie sur la scène politique internationale ? En quoi le premier Secrétaire général de l’ONU, Trygve Lie, a-t-il contribué au développement de cette fonction ? Dans quelle mesure la guerre froide a-t-elle entravé ou favorisé l’élargissement du rôle politique du Secrétaire général ? La littérature scientifique portant sur la fonction de Secrétaire général des Nations unies rend peu justice à l’héritage de Lie. Le présent article vise au contraire à montrer que plusieurs jalons de l’expansion du rôle de Secrétaire général ont été posés lors des premiers jours de l’histoire des Nations unies. Lie a travaillé activement à l’accroissement des pouvoirs associés à la fonction de Secrétaire général et à imposer cette dernière comme celle d’un médiateur et d’un négociateur majeur entre États membres. Le présent article passe en revue les efforts mis en œuvre par Lie tout au long de son mandat (1946—1953) pour apaiser les tensions entre grandes puissances, accrues dans le contexte de la guerre froide, et se propose d’examiner les précédents sur lesquels ont débouché ses choix.

Introduction

Trygve Lie had barely held the office of UN secretary-general for a month, when Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, declared the descent of the 'iron curtain' from Fulton, Missouri, on 5 March 1946. The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies – commonly known as the 'Cold War' – was to become the defining feature of international politics for the next four decades. The Security Council held its first meeting on 17 January 1946 and come February it was already embroiled in heated debates over the slow withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran and the presence of British troops in Greece. In Lie's own words; "The hard realities of world politics intruded. Like gusts of wind warning of future storms to come, they blew in the door of the new-built house of peace before the workmen had finished."¹ But what was the newly elected UN secretary-general to do in such a situation? How did the emerging superpower conflict impede or facilitate the development of the secretary-general's political role?

The UN Charter describes the secretary-general merely as the "chief administrative officer of the Organization,"² yet today he is widely regarded as the UN's chief diplomatic and political officer.³ Within scholarship on the UN secretary-general a common observation is that the end of the Cold War opened new opportunities, allowing Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan to play more active roles than their Cold War predecessors, particularly in the area of norm entrepreneurship.⁴ Yet despite the constraints imposed by the Cold War, some UN scholars have also highlighted the way the Cold War paradoxically provided opportunities for the secretary-general, because it made Security Council agreement more

¹ Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace: Seven Years with the United Nations*, New York, Macmillan, 1954, p. 28.

² UN Charter, article 97.

³ Kofi A. Annan, "Foreword," in: Simon Chesterman (ed), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. xi-xiii.

⁴ Ian Johnstone, "The Secretary-General as norm entrepreneur," *ibid*, p. 123-138; Simon Rushton, "The UN Secretary-General and Norm Entrepreneurship: Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Democracy Promotion," *Global governance*, 2008, 14, no. 1, p. 95-110.

elusive and allowed the secretary-general to balance the superpowers against each other.⁵ Although this literature recognises that the Cold War could be both constraining and empowering, few have undertaken in-depth studies of the mechanism behind this development.

This article explores how Lie, the UN's first secretary-general, sought to deal with conflicts between the member states, and how his role's scope and autonomy expanded as a result of it. In doing so the article challenges the dominant narrative within studies of the UN secretary-general that tends to focus on the important contribution of Dag Hammarskjöld, secretary-general from 1953 to 1961. Hammarskjöld is the object of numerous publications⁶ and is widely seen as the 'model' UN secretary-general. Kofi Annan said in a 2001 lecture that "there can be no better rule of thumb for a Secretary-General, as he approaches each new challenge or crisis, than to ask himself, 'how would Hammarskjöld have handled this?'"⁷ In striking contrast to this, the orthodox view on Lie is that he "did not achieve any particularly notable political or diplomatic feats at the United Nations, nor at that time was he expected to do so," and that his only noteworthy contribution was to ensure the construction of UN headquarters in Manhattan by some of the world's top architects.⁸ This paper challenges this view and details how Lie must properly be recognised for his instrumental role in expanding

⁵ Edward Newman, "Secretary-General," in Sam Daws and Thomas G. Weiss (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 175-192; James Cockayne and David M. Malone, "Relations with the Security Council," in: Simon Chesterman (ed), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 69-85.

⁶ See for example Robert S. Jordan (ed), *Dag Hammarskjöld Revisited: The UN Secretary-General as a Force in World Politics*, Durham, NC, Carolina Academic Press, 1983; Brian E. Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1994; Sten Ask and Anna Mark-Jungkvist (eds.), *The Adventure of Peace: Dag Hammarskjöld and the Future of the UN*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Manuel Fröhlich, *Political Ethics and the United Nations: Dag Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General*, London, Routledge, 2008; Roger Lipsey, *Hammarskjöld: A Life*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013; Carsten Stahn and Henning Melber (eds.), *Peace Diplomacy, Global Justice and International Agency: Rethinking Human Security and Ethics in the Spirit of Dag Hammarskjöld*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

⁷ Kofi A. Annan, "Dag Hammarskjöld and the 21st Century," The Fourth Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture, Uppsala, Sweden, 6 September 2001, www.dhf.uu.se/pdf/ffiler/Kofi%20Annan.pdf.

⁸ Brian E. Urquhart, "The Evolution of the Secretary-General," in: Simon Chesterman (ed), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 18.

the scope and autonomy of the office of UN secretary-general and turning it into a central actor in international politics.

The article argues that Lie's actions were largely shaped by the institutional position of the UN secretary-general. The secretary-general, more than any other actor within the UN, 'represents' the UN overall. He can be described as "a living symbol and embodiment of the United Nations,"⁹ and as "the bearer of a sacred trust, and ... the guardian of the principles of the Charter."¹⁰ Therefore the secretary-general has a duty to protect and defend the organisation and its Charter. Lie's actions as secretary-general are consistent with such a view of the secretary-general's responsibilities and duties. The Cold War posed an existential threat to the United Nations. Not only was there a dire chance that the two sides might end up going to war against each other, but there was also an ever-present risk that one side (usually the Soviet Union) might decide to leave the organisation altogether, thus condemning it to irrelevance. The secretary-general sought as best he could to counter these dangers by mediating between the two sides and keeping UN activities going. In November 1947 Lie observed of the Cold War that: "My motto is still: Patience. My main task is to keep the machinery going. I should be content as long as I have Mr. Vyshinsky and Mr. Marshall sitting around the green table at Lake Success."¹¹ For, after all, "as long as we sit and talk together, at least there'll be no war."¹²

This paper is divided into three sections. The first explores the formal institutional position of the UN secretary-general and Lie's first attempts to gain recognition from the Security Council for the secretary-general's position. The second and third parts examine Lie's initiatives in relation to two high-profile episodes during the early Cold War – the

⁹ Kent J. Kille, "Moral Authority and the UN Secretary-General's Ethical Framework," in: Kent J. Kille (ed), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2007, p. 11.

¹⁰ Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, "The Role of the UN Secretary-General," in: Adam Roberts and Benedict Kingsbury (eds.), *United Nations, Divided World: The UN's Roles in International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 126.

¹¹ Norway, Oslo, the National Library (hereafter NLN), Brevs. 434, Lie to Falkberget, 30 Nov 1947.

¹² NLN, Brevs. 434, Lie to Falkberget, 8 Dec 1948.

Berlin blockade of 1948-49 and the outbreak of the Korean War in the summer of 1950 – and what these tell us about the secretary-general’s role. Lastly the conclusion offers an assessment of how Lie’s actions in relation to the Cold War contributed to an expansion of the UN secretary-general’s role.

Setting the stage

The office of UN secretary-general was a largely unprecedented innovation, although it shared some similarities with the office of the secretary-general of the League of Nations.¹³ Of particular importance in signifying the political potential of the new UN office was Article 99 of the UN Charter, which gave the secretary-general the right to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”¹⁴ The Preparatory Commission for the UN in its report of December 1945 noted that Article 99 had given the secretary-general “a quite special right which goes beyond any power previously accorded to the head of an international organization.”¹⁵ In the early years of the UN it was far from certain how this power would develop, but Lie was determined that the secretary-general should play a central role both within the UN system and in international politics more broadly, and wrote that his goal was to develop the office as “a force for peace.”¹⁶

The first instance where Lie explored his rights and responsibilities under article 99 was in relation to the Security Council’s treatment of the Iranian complaint against the Soviet

¹³ On differences between the offices of secretary-general in the UN and the League of Nations, and the political activities of the League of Nations secretary-general, see Ruth B. Russell, *A History of the United Nations Charter: The Role of the United States 1940-1945*, Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 1958; Leon Gordenker, *The UN Secretary-General and the Maintenance of Peace*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1967; Arthur W. Rovine, *The first fifty years: The Secretary-General in World Politics 1920-1970*, Leyden, A. W. Sijthoff, 1970; James Barros, *Betrayal From Within: Joseph Avenol, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, 1933-1940*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1969; James Barros, *Office Without Power: Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond, 1919-1933*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979.

¹⁴ UN Charter, article 99.

¹⁵ Report of the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations, UN Doc. PC/20, 23 December 1945, p. 87.

¹⁶ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 42.

Union in 1946. In April, after Iran had withdrawn its complaint, Lie handed the Security Council a legal memorandum giving his opinion that the Council had no right to keep the item on its agenda. The Council disagreed with the legal opinion formulated in the memorandum, but nevertheless recognised that the secretary-general had the right to express his opinion to them in this way. The incident led the Security Council to amend its rules of procedure to acknowledge this, and the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council soon followed suit to give the secretary-general the same unlimited right to present his opinions to them.¹⁷ With this the secretary-general had secured recognition for his right to take part in all discussions in the Security Council.

A few months later Lie would also secure recognition of the secretary-general's independent right of investigation. Like the right to address the Council, the right of investigation is implied in article 99. If the secretary-general is to be in a position to bring matters affecting peace and security to the attention of the Security Council, he needs to be informed of what is going on in the world. This gives the secretary-general an independent right to ask questions and to form fact-finding committees.¹⁸ During the Council's discussion of the situation in Greece in September 1946, just before a US proposal to send an investigative committee was about to be vetoed, Lie asked for the floor and told the Council:

Just a few words to make clear my own position as Secretary-General and the rights of this office under the Charter. Should the proposal of the United States representative not be carried, I hope that the Council will understand that the Secretary-General must reserve his right to make such enquiries or investigations as he may think necessary, in order to determine whether or not he should consider bringing any aspect of this matter to the attention of the Council under the provisions of the Charter.¹⁹

Immediately the Soviet representative, Andrei Gromyko, expressed his support for Lie's statement: "I think that Mr. Lie was right in raising the question of his rights. It seems to me

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 79-88.

¹⁸ Leland M. Goodrich, Edvard Hambro, and Anne Patricia Simons, *Charter of the United Nations: Commentary and Documents*, 3rd ed., New York, Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 576; Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government*, London, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 44; Bertrand G. Ramcharan, *Preventive Diplomacy at the UN*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Security Council Official Records* (hereafter *SCOR*), 1st year, 70th mtg., 20 Sept 1946.

that in this case, as in all other cases, the Secretary-General must act. I have no doubt that he will do so in accordance with the rights and powers of the Secretary-General as defined in the Charter of the United Nations."²⁰ None of the other delegates present said anything against this interpretation, and Lie “had thus established a solid base in the record” for his investigative powers.²¹ Although Lie never sent a committee to Greece, the secretary-general’s services as an investigator would become very important over the coming decades.

The Berlin Blockade, 1948-1949

The Berlin Blockade was one instance where secretary-general Lie sought to mediate a high-stakes conflict between East and West. When the Soviet Union in June 1948 – ostensibly in response to the introduction of a new currency in the three western occupation zones of Germany – closed off all access to West Berlin, the most dangerous and tense Cold War crisis to date started. Gradually, the United States, Britain, and France built up an airlift in response to the blockade, but the situation remained tense and unresolved. Secretary-general Lie followed the situation closely from the start, but despite his interest in the question, Berlin would not formally become a UN concern until October 1948. Once it was on the agenda, however, at various stages over the next few months, not only the secretary-general, but also the president of the General Assembly, the president of the Security Council, and the non-permanent members of the Council (the ‘neutrals’) tried to negotiate an end to the Berlin blockade.

Negotiation between the four occupying states having brought no results, on 29 September the United States, Britain and France, claiming that the Berlin blockade constituted

²⁰ *SCOR*, 1st year, 70th mtg., 20 Sept 1946.

²¹ Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote, eds., *Public papers of the Secretaries-general of the United Nations: Vol. I: Trygve Lie, 1946-1953*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 47.

a threat to peace and security, asked that the matter be put on the Security Council's agenda.²² The United States decided to forego its right to take the presidency of the Security Council for October, allowing the Argentine foreign minister, Juan Atilio Bramuglia, to take the presidency instead.²³ Over Soviet protests, the Council voted to take up the Berlin question on 5 October.²⁴ After a brief debate on 6 October, the process continued behind the scenes as Bramuglia and the group of six 'neutrals' started negotiations between the two sides.²⁵ The group addressed questionnaires to the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, and drafted a resolution which was introduced in the Council on 22 Oct.²⁶ Throughout, the three Western states were kept well-informed of the progress of the neutrals by the Canadians, who also at one point stalled the resolution for a few days to allow the United States and Britain to reach a common position with France.²⁷ Before the resolution was introduced in the Council, the three were also given the chance to suggest changes.²⁸ It was therefore no great surprise that the United States, Britain and France, along with the six neutrals, voted in favour of the resolution on 25 October while the Soviet Union vetoed it, only supported by the Ukraine.²⁹

When the Security Council rejected Bramuglia's suggested solution, Lie decided the time had come for him to take on a more active role in negotiating a solution to the Berlin blockade. As secretary-general he felt a duty to do everything he could to build bridges between the two sides in the Cold War, and in Berlin there was an obvious need for someone to take an initiative. "The result was as expected with the Berlin situation," Lie wrote to his

²² "Identical notification from the governments of the French Republic, the United States of America and the United Kingdom to the Secretary-General," UN doc. S/1020, 29 Sept 1948.

²³ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, 202.

²⁴ SCOR, 3rd year, 362nd mtg., 5 Oct 1948.

²⁵ The six 'neutrals' were the states on the Council that were not directly involved in Berlin: Argentina, Belgium, Canada, China, Colombia, and Syria.

²⁶ SCOR, 3rd year, 370th mtg., 22 Oct 1948.

²⁷ Daniel F. Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink: The Blockade, the Airlift, and the Early Cold War*, Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2012, p. 197-98.

²⁸ Philip C. Jessup, "The Berlin Blockade and the Use of the United Nations," *Foreign Affairs*, 1971, 50, no. 1, p. 170; Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink*, p. 198-99.

²⁹ SCOR, 3rd year, 372nd mtg., 25 Oct 1948.

daughter, but he remained hopeful for a solution; “Sooner or later it will have to be solved, and as I have said many times before, I don’t think it will lead to a war ... At the moment I’m in the middle of conversations ... to see if I can do something useful.”³⁰ In an early example of the secretary-general’s use of special representatives, Lie suggested using Abraham Feller, his American legal adviser, and Arkady Sobolev, the Soviet assistant secretary-general in charge of Security Council affairs, to work out a suggestion on the currency issue with American and Soviet economic experts. The goal was to find an agreement which would allow the blockade to be lifted simultaneously with the introduction of the Soviet-supported mark in all sectors of Berlin.³¹

The four received Lie’s engagement with caution, before ultimately rejecting the suggestion. Coincidentally, the United States had already considered the option of asking a third party, like the United Nations, to work out a solution of the currency issue,³² and Philip Jessup of the US delegation at first expressed cautious support for Lie’s plan.³³ On the other hand, Andrey Vyshinsky, Soviet deputy foreign minister, initially greeted Lie’s suggestion negatively,³⁴ but a few days later had obviously received different instructions from Moscow, and informed Lie that the Soviet Union now welcomed the secretary-general’s efforts to mediate.³⁵ By this point, however, the United States had decided against Lie’s involvement, and the western states started to create obstacles for the secretary-general. Jessup insisted that Britain and France be brought into the conversations,³⁶ and Lie duly informed their delegations. The French ambassador greeted Lie’s suggestion positively, while the British ambassador, “as I had feared,” wrote Lie, “reflected the Foreign Office’s traditional coolness

³⁰ Lie to Sissel Bratz, 27 Oct 1948. Letter in the Bratz family’s possession. Copy provided by Guri Hjeltnes.

³¹ Norway, Oslo, the National Archives (hereafter NAN), PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie, Berlin note #1, 29 Oct 1948.

³² Jessup, “Berlin Blockade,” p. 172.

³³ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie, Berlin note #1, 29 Oct 1948.

³⁴ Ibid., Lie, Berlin note #3, 29 Oct 1948.

³⁵ Ibid., Lie, Berlin note #4, 31 Oct 1948.

³⁶ Ibid., Lie, Berlin note #5, 2 Nov 1948.

toward any independent United Nations initiative.”³⁷ Britain and the United States feared that Lie’s involvement could not be kept secret,³⁸ and were furthermore “anxious not to give the impression that they were running around looking for a settlement.”³⁹ Overall, the two Western allies were concerned not to be seen as consenting to ‘negotiation under duress,’⁴⁰ and wanted to leave all mediation to the Security Council and Bramuglia.⁴¹ They therefore rejected Lie’s offer of help.⁴² Thus the secretary-general’s proposal came to nothing, and when the *New York Times* learned of Lie’s search for a currency plan on 9 November,⁴³ Lie was forced to issue a press release denying that he was participating in negotiations on Berlin. The secretary-general claimed that, “as part of his duty to keep himself informed of all matters before the United Nations,” he had merely asked the Secretariat for a study of the currency issue.⁴⁴ Although Lie’s offer to negotiate was rejected, the four states never challenged his right to make such an offer. This episode therefore provide one more step in the process of expanding the secretary-general’s scope and autonomy to allow him an independent right to act as a mediator in international politics.

With the failure of his currency study proposal, secretary-general Lie adopted a new tactic – to issue a public appeal with the President of the General Assembly, Herbert Evatt of Australia. Evatt first learned of Lie’s activity in Berlin when the British Foreign Office, against Lie’s explicit request to keep the matter secret, informed all the Commonwealth countries of the secretary-general’s proposals.⁴⁵ At first Evatt was quite upset with Lie because he had been kept in the dark, but the secretary-general responded that he had every

³⁷ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 211.

³⁸ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie, Berlin note #5, 2 Nov 1948; United Kingdom, Kew Gardens, the National Archives (hereafter UKNA), FO 371/70520, FO telegram to Cadogan, 4 Nov 1948.

³⁹ UKNA, FO 371/70520, Cadogan to FO, 3 Nov 1948.

⁴⁰ Ibid., FO telegram to Cadogan, 4 Nov 1948. See also Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink*; Jessup, "Berlin Blockade."

⁴¹ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie, Berlin note #7, 10 Nov 1948.

⁴² Ibid., Lie, Berlin note #8, 11 Nov 1948.

⁴³ Thomas J. Hamilton, "New Compromises Drafted to Settle the Berlin Crisis – Lie and Bramuglia Preparing Proposals as Time Grows Short for Getting the Issue Before the U.N. Assembly," *New York Times*, 9 Nov 1948.

⁴⁴ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, UN press release P/PM/142, 9 Nov 1948.

⁴⁵ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 212.

right to do this without telling anyone, and furthermore Berlin was a Security Council matter, not a General Assembly concern.⁴⁶ However, neither Lie nor Evatt held a grudge for long, and within a few days they were talking of sending a joint appeal to the four states involved. Lie felt Evatt's reasoning in support of the appeal was "quite good," and told his wife that "as far as Evatt and I are concerned, that matter is now settled up most satisfactorily."⁴⁷ On 13 November 1948 the two UN officials sent a letter to the chairmen of the delegations of the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, requesting that the letter be forwarded to their chiefs of government, thus sidestepping the foreign offices and foreign ministers.⁴⁸ The letter reminded the four states that they had all spoken out in favour of and voted for the General Assembly's 3 November resolution which had asked them to "redouble their efforts ... to secure in the briefest possible time the final settlement of the war."⁴⁹ Evatt and Lie went on to observe that in their opinion the first priority was to solve the Berlin problem. They therefore urged the four governments to start "immediate conversations and [take] all other necessary steps toward the solution of the Berlin question, thus opening the way to a prompt resumption of negotiations for the conclusion of the remaining peace settlements." They also encouraged the four states to "lend their full and active support" to Bramuglia's mediation efforts, and declared themselves ready to offer further assistance as and when needed, specifically mentioning the example of Lie's currency study.⁵⁰

With their statement the two UN officials unleashed a storm of criticism which neither of them had expected, yet several smaller states agreed with the sentiment behind the appeal. Lie and Evatt had taken care to distinguish between 'immediate conversations' and 'resumption of negotiations' to forestall expected criticism from the Western states, however,

⁴⁶ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie, Berlin note #7, 10 Nov 1948.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Lie to Hjørdis and Mette, 10 Nov 1948.

⁴⁸ Simultaneously Evatt also sent the appeal directly to the four heads of government. United States, New York, Columbia University, the Andrew W. Cordiew Collection (hereafter CCC), box 129, folder 7, Evatt telegrams to Truman, Attlee, Queuille, and Stalin, 13 Nov 1948.

⁴⁹ General Assembly resolution 190 (III), 3 Nov 1948.

⁵⁰ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie and Evatt to Marshall, 13 Nov 1948.

these carefully chosen words were not enough for Britain and the United States. The American Secretary of State and his aides saw the Lie-Evatt initiative as “ill-advised and disturbing” because it seemed to apportion blame equally to the West and the Soviet Union,⁵¹ and attributed the appeal to “self-seeking”; Evatt had been eager for headlines and had “duped” Lie into signing the letter with him.⁵² The British reacted in similar ways. Lie wrote home that, “needless to say, the English were little pleased with this initiative and the British press has been rather sour – naturally at the bidding of the British Government.”⁵³ The Norwegian delegation to the General Assembly reported back to Oslo that many delegations, especially the Western states, were “of the opinion that both the president and the secretary-general should have stuck to their tasks as respectively an elected representative and an official of the United Nations and avoid interfering in the delegations’ politics.”⁵⁴ Indeed, the secretary-general had been in doubt about the wisdom and propriety in signing the appeal alongside the president of the Assembly. But Bramuglia, the Council president, had persuaded Lie to sign the letter, saying that in his opinion the secretary-general “stood beside the President of the General Assembly,” and furthermore the letter would be “a big help in his work in getting the Berlin crisis settled.”⁵⁵ Bramuglia continued to support Lie and Evatt after the publication of the letter and defended them against criticism. The *New York Times* reported that the appeal “reflected the general feeling of many nations not directly involved in the Berlin dispute,” and that it had been “heartily endorsed” by Bramuglia “because it interprets the peaceful aspirations of the peoples of the world.”⁵⁶ The Soviet Union likewise welcomed the suggestion of Lie and Evatt for renewed conversations about a postwar

⁵¹ Avi Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade, 1948-1949: A Study in Crisis Decision-Making*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 371.

⁵² Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink*, p. 200-01.

⁵³ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie to Hjørdis and Mette, 15 Nov 1949.

⁵⁴ NAN, RA/S-2259/Dye/L10917, Dons to MFA, 15 Nov 1948.

⁵⁵ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie, Berlin note #9, 16 Nov 1948.

⁵⁶ Camille M. Cianfarra, “Parlay Soon Asked – Letter Asserts Failure to Reach Agreement Will Endanger Peace – Marshall Plans Reply – British Cool to Proposal – French are Noncommittal – Bramuglia Hails Move,” *New York Times*, 14 Nov 1948.

settlement, and said it shared the belief that “the solution of the Berlin question will have a positive effect on the settlement of other questions such as those of peace settlement for Germany, Austria and Japan.”⁵⁷ Summing up the whole affair, Lie wrote in a letter:

On the surface the whole thing can look like a defeat for Evatt and me, but in reality our initiative means another step forward in that all parties have declared themselves willing to seek a solution to the Berlin crisis in the Security Council ... My purpose in signing together with Evatt was that we had to hoard as many glowing coals as possible on the heads of these statesmen in order to get them to understand that the world does not want war.⁵⁸

Although nothing much came of the Evatt-Lie appeal, it represents one example of the emerging alliance between the secretary-general and the peoples of the world, as evidenced in the widespread public support for the secretary-general’s letter. In this instance he served as ‘a spokesman for world interest,’ seeking to put pressure on states to negotiate an end to their conflicts in the interest of world peace.

Lie’s direct involvement with the Berlin negotiations ended in mid-November 1948, yet he was invited to send a representative to a currency committee formed by Bramuglia in late November. Bramuglia’s idea essentially combined his group of ‘neutrals’ with the secretary-general’s currency study, and established a committee of ‘technical experts’ to negotiate with the two sides and suggest a solution to the currency problems. The committee met in Geneva during the winter of 1948-49, but was unable to find a solution acceptable to both sides in the conflict. Thus ended the UN’s attempt to negotiate an end to the Berlin blockade. By this stage, however, the United States and the Soviet Union had started direct negotiations. Jessup and Yakov Malik held a number of secret informal meetings that eventually led to the lifting of the blockade in May 1949.⁵⁹

The deal ending the Berlin blockade was negotiated at the United Nations, but without the formal use of UN machinery or the involvement of UN representatives. Nevertheless, the

⁵⁷ CCC, box 129, folder 7, Vyshinsky to Evatt and Lie, 16 Nov 1948.

⁵⁸ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0014, Lie to Hjørdis and Mette, 19 Nov 1948.

⁵⁹ Philip C. Jessup, "Park Avenue Diplomacy--Ending the Berlin Blockade," *Political Science Quarterly*, 1972, 87, no. 3, p. 377-400.

Berlin blockade demonstrated the usefulness of the United Nations. First of all, the United Nations provided the forum where representatives of the two sides could meet and work out their differences. This was an early example of the value of the Security Council as a ‘concert’ between the great powers.⁶⁰ The Berlin blockade demonstrated “the value of proximity” of diplomatic staff being present in New York and regularly interacting with each other.⁶¹ Secondly, the earlier attempts by Lie, Bramuglia, Evatt, and the currency committee, all served to buy time and defuse tension, which allowed for a solution to be worked out. These UN efforts can be seen as “a necessary failure” which prepared the way for direct negotiations on a more realistic basis.⁶² In this case, therefore, the UN secretary-general, and others within the UN system, had helped in solving a dangerous Cold War problem.

The outbreak of the Korean War, 1950

During the Berlin blockade and other early Cold War crisis, secretary-general Lie had sought to play the role of impartial mediator between East and West, however, his stance would change when the Korean War broke out. Faced with what he saw as a clear case of North Korean aggression in direct contravention of the UN Charter, Lie perceived it to be his duty to strongly oppose the North Korean aggression and urge UN support for South Korea. The Korean issue had been on the UN agenda since 1947, and in early 1948 a UN commission supervised elections in the southern part of the country (the Soviet Union would not let them operate in the north) which led to the establishment of the government of the Republic of Korea. South Korea had thus been established as a result of UN involvement, and this was important when the Korean War broke out in June 1950.

⁶⁰ The value of the UN as a ‘concert’ is explored in detail by David L. Bosco, *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁶¹ David L. Bosco, "Assessing the UN Security Council: A Concert Perspective," *Global Governance*, 2014, 20, no. 4, p. 554.

⁶² Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink*, p. 185.

Secretary-general Lie was first informed of the North Korean attack shortly before midnight (New York time) on 24 June 1950, when he received a phone call to his home from John D. Hickerson of the US delegation. According to Hickerson, Lie immediately responded: “My God, Jack, that’s against the Charter of the United Nations!”⁶³ The secretary-general forthwith requested a report from the UN commission in Korea (UNCOK), and asked the Secretariat to prepare for an emergency Security Council meeting. Later at night he had further telephone conversations with the American delegation, which formally requested that he convene the Security Council.⁶⁴ When the Council met in the afternoon on 25 June, the secretary-general spoke first, recounting the history of the UN’s activities in Korea, and stating that the reported military actions were:

a direct violation of the resolution of the General Assembly ... as well as a violation of the principles of the Charter. The present situation is a serious one and is a threat to international peace ... I consider it the clear duty of the Security Council to take steps necessary to re-establish peace in that area.⁶⁵

It was highly unusual for the secretary-general to speak first, and it was neither “necessary [n]or expected” in this situation.⁶⁶ Although Lie later claimed to have decided during the night to invoke article 99, legal scholars argue that article 99 was not invoked because the United States had asked for a Council meeting to be called.⁶⁷ This should not detract from the important role secretary-general Lie would play over the coming weeks to legitimate and coordinate the UN response in Korea.

One of the duties Lie saw for himself in the situation was to coordinate the UN response and serve as an “executive” of the Security Council’s decisions.⁶⁸ To this end, already before the first Council meeting on 25 June, Lie met with Ernest Gross of the US

⁶³ Oral history interview with John D. Hickerson, 1972-1973, Harry S. Truman Library, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/hickerson.htm> (accessed 11.05.2015).

⁶⁴ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 327-28.

⁶⁵ *SCOR*, 5th year, 473rd mtg., 25 June 1950.

⁶⁶ Cordier and Foote, *Public papers, vol. 1: Trygve Lie*, p. 20.

⁶⁷ Simon Chesterman, "Article 99," in Bruno Simma, et al. (eds.), *The Charter of the United Nations: A Commentary, Volume 2*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 2016.

⁶⁸ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 333.

delegation to formulate a plan for the meeting and discuss the statements they were each going to make.⁶⁹ In the interest of unity, Lie also claimed to have helped persuade the Egyptian and Indian delegations, which both lacked instructions from their home governments, to vote in favour of the US draft resolution.⁷⁰ Over the next few days Lie continued to urge member states to come to the aid of South Korea, and he took it upon himself to send out telegrams asking member states to inform him of what help they could give. Referring to the Council's second resolution of 27 June⁷¹ Lie's telegram asked all governments, "in the event that your government is in a position to provide assistance ... if you were to be so good as to provide me with an early reply as to type of assistance." The secretary-general would then submit the states' replies to the Council and to the Korean government.⁷²

Lie sent the telegram in the interest of coordinating the UN's response and to facilitate the process of providing aid to South Korea. He may also have thought it more likely that states would respond in the positive when the request came from the secretary-general rather than one of the member states. Indeed some states later complained that Lie had overstepped his authority and that they were embarrassed when they had to say no to the secretary-general's requests.⁷³ The United States government was happy to have the secretary-general send out the telegram because it thought "it was a good idea to use the United Nations umbrella as much as possible," but the State Department also "felt however that Lie should function as no more than a post office."⁷⁴ Not content to serve merely as a 'post office,' Lie continued to urge greater coordination of the Korean operation, and increased use of UN machinery. He set about drafting a new Council resolution to give the United States formal

⁶⁹ United States, New York, the Columbia Center for Oral History Collection, Reminiscences of Ernest A. Gross (13 January 1965), p. 569-572.

⁷⁰ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 329.

⁷¹ Security Council resolution 83, 27 June 1950.

⁷² Text reprinted in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*, VII, p. 221n.

⁷³ Memorandum of conversation (Holmes, Ordonneau, Ross, Hyde), 18 July 1950, *ibid.*, p. 416.

⁷⁴ Memorandum of conversation (Ross, Hickerson), 28 June 1950, *ibid.*, p. 221-222.

responsibility for directing the UN response; give the American command the right to use the UN flag; and to establish of a coordination committee (consisting of Australia, France, India, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) which could receive all offers of aid, review them, and transmit the offers to the US government.⁷⁵ Although the Council chose to adopt a similar resolution proposed by the United States,⁷⁶ rather than establish the coordination committee proposed by Lie, no state challenged the secretary-general's right to draft Security Council resolutions. The episode therefore served to further expand the scope of the secretary-general's role and to assign him near-equal status with the members of the Council.

In addition to the interest in coordinating the UN response because of his executive responsibilities, Lie's actions were motivated by his concern to protect and defend the UN Charter and for greater unity of the UN's member states. As the above quote of Lie's statement on 25 June revealed, the secretary-general saw the North Korean invasion as a clear breach of the UN Charter. He therefore chose to speak first at the Council meeting "because the response of the Security Council would be more certain and more in the spirit of the Organization as a whole were the Secretary-General to take the lead."⁷⁷ Lie's understanding of his role in the proceedings would therefore fit well with the reason the United States sought the support of the United Nations – "to rally the world community's support" and give "international sanction to what the United States would have done anyway."⁷⁸ In this particular instance, therefore, the interests of the United States and the UN secretary-general overlapped, and in this period Lie worked closely with the US delegation to coordinate the UN response.

⁷⁵ NAN, PA-1407/D/L0030, Cordier to Gross, Sunde, Jebb, and Chauvel, 3 July 1950.

⁷⁶ Security Council resolution 84, 7 July 1950.

⁷⁷ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 329.

⁷⁸ Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945-1965*, Washington, DC, and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 166.

The secretary-general's active support for the American policies in Korea helped give legitimacy to the US-led intervention and ensure that it was a 'UN' response. In doing so, Lie would become the focal point of UN policies in Korea, and a symbol of the organisation's unity in the face of North Korean aggression. This strengthened his position as 'representing' the United Nations, and provided the main motivation behind the General Assembly's decision to extend Lie's term in office in November 1950. Simultaneously, however, Lie's actions completely destroyed his relationship with the Soviet Union, and even though he would serve as secretary-general until April 1953, he could not really function effectively in his job because of the Soviet boycott. The Soviet government also recognised that the secretary-general 'represented' the policies of the majority of the UN, yet because it disagreed with those policies, the logical conclusion was to also oppose the secretary-general. This illustrates how narrow a space the secretary-general had in which to operate as the Cold War hardened. Whatever he did, one or more of the superpowers were bound to disagree and resent him for trying to meddle in their affairs. Nevertheless, because of the importance of stopping North Korean aggression in contravention of the UN Charter, Lie would "consider [his] stand on Korea the best justified act of seven years in the service of peace."⁷⁹

Conclusion

Despite the UN Charter's minimal description of the secretary-general as the organisation's 'chief administrative officer,' the secretary-general today plays an important political role. The secretary-general is an autonomous actor who is expected to have independent opinions and to act upon those opinions. Through his 'good offices' function, the secretary-general operates alongside the Security Council to fulfil the UN's primary mission to maintain

⁷⁹ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 323.

international peace and security.⁸⁰ This expansion from an administrative to a political role started while Trygve Lie held the office during 1946 to 1953 in the early years of the Cold War.

Lie's tenure in office saw the formation of important precedents for the role of the secretary-general and his relationship with the Security Council and the member states. In relation to the Iranian question in 1946, Lie secured recognition for the secretary-general's right to address the Council on any matter under consideration by it. During discussions on Greece later the same year, he stated the secretary-general's independent right of investigation, to which no state openly protested. The Berlin case of 1948-49 illustrated that the secretary-general can play an independent role as a mediator between states, that he can delegate his authority to special representatives, and also hinted at the beginnings of an alliance between the secretary-general and the world's peoples to put pressure on states to fulfil the UN Charter's principles. Lastly, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 saw Lie assign to himself the role of a coordinator of the UN's response to the crisis. In pursuance of this goal he sought to coordinate communications between the member states and also drafted a Security Council resolution. Although Lie's specific proposals in most of these cases were unsuccessful – the Security Council disagreed with his legal opinion on Iran, he never sent an investigative committee to Greece, states ignored his proposal for a currency committee for Berlin and resented his attempt to influence them through a public appeal, no UN coordination committee for Korea was established – the fact that states didn't contest the secretary-general's right to undertake such activities, established important precedents for the future. A form of 'path dependency' of 'lock-in' operates here.⁸¹ By accepting that the

⁸⁰ Teresa Whitfield, "Good offices and 'groups of friends'," in: Simon Chesterman (ed), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 86-101.

⁸¹ The idea of 'path dependency' has been developed most fully within historical institutionalism. See e.g. Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *The American Political Science Review*, 2000, 94, no. 2, p. 251-267; B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre, and Desmond S. King, "The Politics of Path

secretary-general could present his opinion on Iran, it was difficult to later prevent him presenting an opinion on Berlin.

This paper has argued that the secretary-general's role expanded, i.e. acquired broader scope and more autonomy in political matters, under Lie. There are two reasons that help explain this expansion. The first factor is that Lie himself actively pushed to expand the secretary-general's role. Like his successor Hammarskjöld, Lie held a broad view of the rights and responsibilities of the secretary-general, and sought every opportunity to inject his office into UN proceedings. By doing so, Lie was instrumental in securing recognition for a number of important precedents which served to expand the office of UN secretary-general.

The second factor which helps explain why the role of the UN secretary-general expanded in this period is the historical geopolitical context of the Cold War conflict. The United Nations had been founded on the assumption that the great powers – as the P5 – would continue to cooperate to keep the peace. Instead conflicts between them quickly put obstacles in the way of the Security Council's work. But as one part of the UN froze, other actors within the UN were 'pulled in' to fill the vacuum left by Security Council inaction. During this period the General Assembly sought a work-around to the veto in the Security Council through setting up an Interim Committee and passing the 'uniting for peace' resolution.⁸² The secretary-general's role too expanded to compensate for the failure of the Security Council. Faced with increasing conflict between East and West, states came to recognise the value of having an independent secretary-general who could talk to both sides. In this way the Cold War served to facilitate an expansion of the UN secretary-general's office as he was pulled in to help fill the vacuum left by Security Council inaction.

Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism," *The Journal of Politics*, 2005, 67, no. 4, p. 1275-1300.

⁸² *UN Yearbook 1947-1948*, p. 75; Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations: Volume 1: The Years of Western Domination, 1945-1955*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1982, p. 94-95.

Yet it would be wrong to say that the Cold War was a uniform blessing for the secretary-general. The Cold War necessitated a difficult balancing act for the secretary-general who wished to remain effective in his job. It highlighted the importance of an impartial secretary-general as a potential go-between between the two sides, yet this all-encompassing conflict also meant that in nearly every question the secretary-general was forced to choose sides and whoever he disagreed with would see him as biased. As Lie noted in his memoirs: “When he agrees with us, governments tend to feel, the Secretary-General is within his rights, and is a good fellow besides; when his views differ from ours he clearly is exceeding his authority, his reasoning is bad, and even his motives may be suspect.”⁸³ Lie himself ultimately failed at this task, when he annoyed too many powerful states at the same time. Taking the consequence, Lie resigned from office in November 1952, becoming the only secretary-general who ever resigned from office, though not the only one to face pressure to do so. In April 1953 Lie welcomed his successor with the warning that he was taking on “the most impossible job in the world.”⁸⁴ Indeed, with continuing inter- and intra-state conflict and an expanding agenda of social, economic, and environmental questions, the job facing Ban Ki-moon and his successor today has not become any easier over the intervening decades.

⁸³ Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 75-76.

⁸⁴ “Statement by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld at a General Meeting of the Staff,” UN Press Release SG/299, 1 May 1953.