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International Zones in Global-Urban History

In 1919, delegates at the postwar Paris Peace Conference experimented with a new idea. They placed some of the most contested spaces in Europe, all of which belonged to rapidly unravelling European land empires, under the direct administration of the League of Nations. Known as international zones, these spaces most famously included the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk) and the Saar Basin, located in the Polish-German and French-German borderlands respectively.[1] Once indeed in charge, the League also exercised partial control over Memel Harbour (Klaipėda), in Lithuania, and League management was considered an option for a number of cities of the defunct Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. In addition, international zones were soon created in regions beyond Europe. In the 1930s, the League took control of the city of Leticia, as a means by which to secure peace between Colombia and Peru. And although Tangier, in Morocco, did not come under the direct auspices of the League, League members created an International Zone whose politics were fundamentally shaped by reference to the League and later, the United Nations.[2] In international zones—as opposed to earlier iterations of governance involving multiple states discussed by Taoyu Yang's contribution to this collection of articles—League-appointed commissioners oversaw dispute resolution and in some instances, important aspects of governance. They were meant to keep the peace.

These post-World War One international zones are valuable spaces for analysing internationalism. As scholars of international law and relations have shown, they can be used to help tease out justifications for international rule.[3] Others have examined the nature of administration and the tasks assigned to administrators in international zones.[4] But while such literature is important, it tells us little about what internationalisation looked like in practice.[5] That is, it gives us no sense of how this tool of peace keeping became anchored in local, often urban, environments. This leaves the historian wondering: Which institutions were established in international zones and more importantly, how did they work? Who manned them? And what conditions, including the making of new opportunities, did zonal laws create for those living under international regimes?[6]

Examining international peace keeping in its local urban iterations is important because it helps to broaden our vision of who was involved in internationalism and the range of agendas they brought to their work. For example, we know that League appointees moved to disputed regions and implemented vital forms of peace keeping. In the Saar, this took the form of a five-person governing commission. In Danzig, an appointed high commissioner arbitrated between the interests of the German population on one hand, and on the other, the interests of the Polish minority living in the city and the revived Polish state.[7] But we have very little knowledge about the prominent residents, businessmen, chambers of commerce, and others they worked with. In Tangier, peacekeeping went even further. 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 here, too, 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 cooperation would result in the fostering of new loyalties and identities, thereby defusing tensions caused by the collapse of European land empires in the First World War.

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

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

[3] Anne Orford, *International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge, 2011).

[4] Carsten Stahn, *The Law and Practice of International Territorial Administration* (Cambridge, 2010); Ralph Wilde, *International Territorial Administration: How Trusteeship and the Civilizing Mission Never Went Away* (Oxford, 2008); Meir Ydit, *Internationalised Territories* (Leiden, 1961); Gregory H. Fox, *Humanitarian Occupation* (Cambridge, 2008).

[5] On 'doing internationalism', see David Brydan and Jessica Reinisch, "Introduction: Internationalists in European History'" in David Brydan and Jessica Reinisch, eds., *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2021).

[6] For the lack of legal/international relations research into populations living under international regimes see Brett Bowden, Hillary Charlesworth, and Farrell Jeremy, "Introduction," in Brett Bowden, Hillary Charlesworth, and Farrell Jeremy, eds., *The Role of International Law in Rebuilding Societies after Conflict: Great Expectations* (Cambridge, 2009), 13.

In my current work, I revisit the institutions established in international zones to offer a wider view of those persons involved in internationalisation.[8] For example, leading residents across all the zones could be found embracing new international structures to protect private fortunes made during empire. In the Saar and Danzig, German and other capitalists sought to exploit and clean-up financially among the ruins of empire, before it became apparent that the creation of international zones often actually stifled money making.[9] Similar developments could be observed in zones outside Europe. An extended examination of the Tangerine resident Isaac A. Abensur provides a case in point (Figure 1).[10] Abensur had been president of the Jewish community in Tangier for over thirty years by the time World War I broke out. In addition, he was a protégé of the Austrian consulate and, later, of the British embassy, which employed him to carry out translations and represent them on the proto-international organisation known as the Hygiene Commission (Figure 2). On the basis of his protégé rights and deep 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.[11]

Residents like Abensur formed an important part of Tangier's investment landscape before the First World War. With the outbreak of war came renewed attempts to internationalise the city. Abensur profited handsomely from this process. With the backing of the British, he assumed the position of international representative to the newly established Legislative Assembly (Figure 3). Abensur sat in the Legislative Assembly 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 and development as an international zone. These residents, including French, Spanish, and British citizens, as well as a handful of representatives from the Moroccan Jewish and Arab populations, refused to raise taxes for the international zone, turning it into one of the least taxed and regulated spaces around the world.[12] In other words, rather than acting as a space of strategic neutrality, as intended by the European consuls who crafted the Tangier Zone, its residents ensured that it functioned more like a proto tax haven.[13]

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[7] Arbitration involved addressing disputes that were deeply entangled in the urban fabric, such as the right of the Polish state to run post offices in Danzig. Marcus M. Payk, 'The Internationalization of Danzig and the Polish Post Office Dispute, 1919-25', in Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher (eds.), *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Indiana, 2019).

[8] I am also interested in wider processes such as the reallocation of imperial property. See Anna Ross, 'Property and the End of Empire in International Zones, 1919-1947' (forthcoming with *Past&Present*).

[9] See my forthcoming work in *Contemporary European History*.

[10] On Abensur see Angel Puido, *Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardi* (Madrid, 1905).

[11] Susan Gilson Miller, "Making Tangier Modern: Ethnicity and Urban Development, 1880-1930," in Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, eds., *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa* (Bloomington, IN, 2011), 128-149, here 143-4.

The ensuing movement of firms, banks, capital, and finance's big cats in and out of Tangier adhered to a rhythm at odds with a zone's political life. European businessmen made eyewatering profits by establishing companies in the city. During the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, 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 Tangier (and other offshore areas) rather than back to European metropoles. Their actions were governed by the desire to avoid the new tax regimes introduced on the Continent in support of post-war reconstruction and the development of the welfare state.[14] In other words, business sought continued profits in line with what they had experienced during the age of empire in international zones.

Resident fortunes is just one aspect of the financial side to the story of internationalism that we can begin to illuminate if we examine internationalisation in practice. An essential part of this analysis involves keeping a close eye on the history of empire, given that international zones facilitated the continuation of numerous activities and investments first propagated in colonised territories. Indeed, the financial afterlives of empire could carry on untouched by tax regimes in spaces designed originally to keep the peace but which by the mid-twentieth century were part of a growing offshore world. Businessmen of many different nationalities worked with each other to maximise their profits in these spaces and focusing on their lives and pursuits in the city helps us to see this in a way that a strict focus on other categories or different levels of analysis, does not.

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[12] Gabriel Delore, "Regarding the violation by Spain of the Tangier Statute and its Consequences vis-à-vis the U.S.A.," to Department of State, December 2, 1940, RG59/881.00/1802, United States National Archives, College Park, MD.

[13] Anna Ross, 'Between Empires: Tangier, International Zones, and Internationalisation in Practice, 1923-56' (paper in progress).

[14] Vanessa Ogle, "Archipelago Capitalism: Tax Havens, Offshore Money, and the State, 1950s-1970s," *AHR* 122 (2017): 1431-1458; Vanessa Ogle, "'Funk Money': The End of Empires, the Expansion of Tax havens, and Decolonisation as an Economic and Financial Event," *Past & Present* 249 (2000): 213-49.