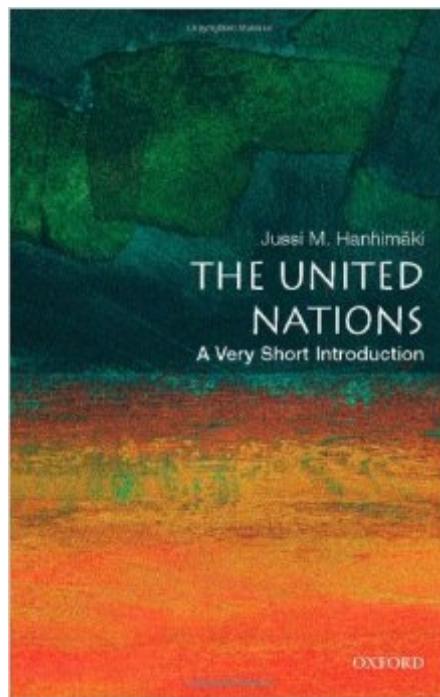


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The United Nations: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

The United Nations has been called everything from "the best hope of mankind" to "irrelevant" and "obsolete." With this much-needed introduction to the UN, Jussi Hanhimäki engages the current debate over the organization's effectiveness as he provides a clear understanding of how it was originally conceived, how it has come to its present form, and how it must confront new challenges in a rapidly changing world. After a brief history of the United Nations and its predecessor, the League of Nations, the author examines the UN's successes and failures as a guardian of international peace and security, as a promoter of human rights, as a protector of international law, and as an engineer of socio-economic development. Hanhimäki stresses that the UN's greatest problem has been the impossibly wide gap between its ambitions and capabilities. In the area of international security, for instance, the UN has to settle conflicts--be they between or within states--without offending the national sovereignty of its member states, and without being sidelined by strong countries, as happened in the 2003 intervention of Iraq. Hanhimäki also provides a clear accounting of the UN and its various arms and organizations (such as UNESCO and UNICEF), and he offers a critical overview of how effective it has been in the recent crises in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, for example--and how likely it is to meet its overall goals in the future. The United Nations, Hanhimäki concludes, is an indispensable organization that has made the world a better place. But it is also a deeply flawed institution, in need of constant reform.

About the Series: Oxford's Very Short Introductions series offers concise and original introductions to a wide range of subjects--from Islam to Sociology, Politics to Classics, Literary Theory to History, and Archaeology to the Bible. Not simply a textbook of definitions, each volume in this series provides trenchant and provocative--yet always balanced and complete--discussions of the central issues in a given discipline or field. Every Very Short Introduction gives a readable evolution of the subject in question, demonstrating how the subject has developed and how it has influenced society. Eventually, the series will encompass every major academic discipline, offering all students an accessible and abundant reference library. Whatever the area of study that one deems important or appealing, whatever the topic that fascinates the general reader, the Very Short Introductions series has a handy and affordable guide that will likely prove indispensable.

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Customer Reviews

A tremendously informative -- and informed -- overview of the United Nations system. This is an overview that emphasizes both the history and sprawling expanse of the UN as a checkered but inter-linked system. It avoids the journalistic fallacy of personalizing either the Office of Secretary General or the institution itself, and is rock-solid on important details and relevant problems. It accepts the UN as a necessary world institution without in any sense ignoring its yawning structural problems. Highly recommended. I will use it as the basic introductory text for my undergraduate "The Future of the United Nations" class at university. By the way, as the series title would suggest...it is pointedly concise. In an age of wasted Internet and Blog words...BRAVO!

The title says it all -- this book's a short summary of the history behind the UN, the structure of the UN, the challenges facing it, and the avenues for future reform. It's a reasonably short read, although not quite one to breeze through, acronym-laden as it is (pretty much by necessity, given how the UN works). As the author acknowledges, he's writing the book as a UN apologist. Yet at the same time, he doesn't hesitate to discuss the many times and ways the UN's fallen short of its original lofty goals. I tend to think it won't change many people's minds about the value or futility of the UN (it doesn't seem to have been written with an explicit goal of that sort), but at least it'll leave people better informed as to what the UN does and doesn't do, effectively and incompetently.

This is by far the best book on the United Nations system. The author give us a an overview of the U.N.'s roots and the challenges the organization is facing today. I recommend it for everyone interested in U.N. It could be a little bit larger as a book however. The Oxford Uni Press could have given this gift to the reader.

A must read, neither apologetic or firebrand critical. In one word: well-balanced. And its brevity is a welcome change from the ponderous volumes that the UN seems to inspire - perhaps understandably so given its complexity. No human institution comes close, if you go beyond the UN in New York (its political face) and take into account, as this book does, all the other aspects of the UN system. The author also makes clear how the rest of the UN keeps functioning when the center - the Security Council in New York - stops functioning. Perhaps the only weak part of the book is the conclusion, the need for reform is correctly underlined but one would have wished to see a deeper analysis and more imaginative suggestions for change. On the other hand, this is a book that only pretends to be "a very short introduction" and not the definitive work on the UN. In that sense, it delivers beautifully. Highly recommended.

The book is very easy to read. I bought it less than 24 hours ago and I have finished it. It is very systematic. The topic order is well-selected. Although it is a short introduction, it covers all fundamental areas related to the structure and the functions of the UN. Another aspect which made me give 5 star is that the topics are professionally explained from a historic-perspective. I would strongly recommend this book to the student interested in one of the topics (IR, UN, human rights, environment etc.) An updated version of the book would include the development since 2007.

This introduction to the UN takes a historical perspective, and is written by an academic in his field. It is very informative about the way the UN is structured, how it operates, how effective previous projects have been and the issues that face the organization internally and externally.

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