For most people, the United Nations is a large, untidy organization, now having 192 member countries, which often disappoints and is rarely heard of when it succeeds. Only a few now remember that “the United Nations” came into being in 1942 just after Pearl Harbor. It was the brainchild of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill and described the alliance that was then fighting for its life against Hitler and his Axis allies.

The basis of the United Nations was the fight against Nazism and Fascism based on Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms. Roosevelt used the phrase with consummate skill to bring into that fight a steadily increasing number of governments who believed in the cause while not necessarily taking part in military operations. The alliance took the name “United Nations” in all its main announcements on the progress of the war. At the end, both Germany and Japan surrendered to the United Nations.

Thus, in 1945, the victorious alliance had a universal concept on which to build a peacetime organization also called the United Nations, whose Charter was already in an advanced stage of preparation. Its origin as a successful, largely military organization undoubtedly gave the new world organization a united and authoritative appearance which was soon belied by the peacetime differences of its members, in particular the 40-year East-West Cold War. But it also allowed the United Nations to hit the ground running in facing the immense problems of the post-war world.

Dr. Dan Plesch is doing a historically vital job in researching the huge, and virtually unvisited, archives of the wartime United Nations. His work will, I hope, for the first time show the present United Nations in the full context of its wartime parentage. In doings so, it will provide an important new dimension both for the world organization’s current and ever-growing responsibilities, and for those who are responsible for charting and developing its future.