Journal of Liberty and International Affairs · Volume 12 · Number 1 · 2026 · eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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Non-Peer-Reviewed
Book review
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/jlia.2025.2125
Received: 24.01.2026 • Accepted: 25.03.2026 • Published: 28.04.2026
Pages: 192-199

The Anatomy of Peace

By Emery Reves (Author) (Publisher: Association Press 1945)

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Published in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, *The Anatomy of Peace* is Emery Reves's radical critique of the sovereign state system and its capacity to sustain peace. Written in the intellectual spirit of the postwar period, the book reflects a view widely shared in scholarly discourse: that lasting peace requires the creation of a world federalist model in which states retain internal sovereignty while transferring exclusive authority over war, peace, and the use of coercive force to a supranational federal government.

This foundational work embodies the spirit of a historical era in which humanity, having confronted the horrors of fascism during the Second World War, came to recognize that states are often incapable of resisting evil in isolation. This awareness gave rise to the idea of establishing a supranational system grounded in a body of law common to all, designed to protect fundamental human rights.

In this intellectual context, Sir Hersch Lauterpacht argued in his 1945 work *An International Bill of the Rights of Man* that the relationship between a state and its citizens must be transformed into a matter of international legal obligation, subject to effective oversight by the international community. He famously observed that such developments would entail "restrictions on sovereignty more far-reaching in their implications than any yet propounded in the annals of international utopias" (Lauterpacht 2026).

Today, as genocide and crimes against humanity have once again returned to the forefront of the international agenda, states increasingly resort to the unilateral use of force without authorization from the Security Council – an institution originally entrusted with the maintenance of international peace and security – thereby rendering these proposals newly relevant.

In fact, international institutions, including the United Nations, have become hostages to geopolitical interests, allowing the "law of force" to drown out the "force of law." However, the problem does not lie in the supposed ephemerality of international law or its institutions as such, but rather in the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms, which remain dependent on the sovereign will of states as the primary subjects of international law.

In this context, renewed attention to *The Anatomy of Peace* becomes particularly timely. Reves begins from the stark premise that humanity continues to live without public law at the global level. In his view, humanity will drift toward ever greater barbarism unless it abolishes

what he terms "nation-feudalism" and establishes a social order grounded in the sovereignty of the global community.

For Reves, freedom and security can arise only under a single, supreme source of law. This claim rests on three foundational axioms. First, individual freedom and security emerge solely from law that is democratically created and effectively enforced. Second, individuals must be directly connected to institutions that express the sovereignty of the community at the global level. Third, any intermediary entity exercising sovereign power – whether the nation-state, church, province, or city – inevitably undermines individual rights and erodes democratic governance.

The central argument of the book is that war is not an accident of international politics but a structural consequence of state sovereignty. In Part One of *The Anatomy of Peace*, the author systematically examines the collapse of the principal economic, social, moral, and political frameworks of modern civilization – capitalism, socialism, religion, and nationalism – arguing that each fails not because of its internal ideals, but because all operate within the structurally defective framework of the sovereign nation-state. Finally, he presents fascism as the logical culmination of the aforementioned failures. Fascism is not treated as an ideological deviation, but as the inevitable political outcome of industrial society constrained by nationalism.

Reves contends that if states retain exclusive authority over the use of force, peace remains inherently unstable. In Chapter VI, which opens Part Two of the book, he introduces the concept of "nation-feudalism" to describe a fragmented global order in which sovereign entities exercise unchecked power, producing recurring cycles of violence. In Chapter VII, Reves defines war not as a product of human nature or ideology, but as the inevitable structural consequence of contact between non-integrated sovereign units in the absence of a superior legal authority capable of enforcing law.

The book then continues with Chapter VIII, which addresses the issue of sovereignty by reframing it as a historically contingent and functional concept whose democratic purpose is to secure law, peace, and individual freedom. In the following chapter, *Treaty or Law*, the author advances the claim that the failure of peace after both world wars stems not from defective treaties or misguided leaders but from a fundamental misunderstanding of peace itself. He argues that peace can exist only as a legal order, and that reliance on diplomacy and treaties between sovereign states merely perpetuates a disguised form of war in a world whose economic and technological interdependence has outgrown eighteenth-century political institutions. He contends that replacing the treaty-based system with a legal order endowed with international lawmaking authority, independent judicial institutions, and effective executive enforcement would be necessary for humanity to manage inevitable change without resorting to violence.

Chapter X is of particular interest for its direct engagement with the problem of human rights, as it examines how the structural logic of the sovereign nation-state increasingly undermines individual freedoms. Reves argues that in the modern industrial world, the nation-state has become not only the principal obstacle to world peace but also the primary threat to individual liberty. Far from protecting freedom, the sovereign nation-state increasingly destroys the very democratic rights it claims to defend. The author situates this argument within a recurring historical pattern linking sovereignty, war, and freedom.



Part Three of the book is dedicated to a systematic critique of the dominant postwar doctrines of peace, internationalism, national self-determination, and collective security, exposing them as conceptual fallacies that preserve the nation-state system and thereby perpetuate war rather than prevent it.

In Chapter XI, dedicated to the fallacy of internationalism, Reves argues that this phenomenon fails to transcend nationalism and instead reinforces the sovereign nation-state by operating between, rather than above, national units.

In the following chapter on the fallacy of self-determination, the author contends that the post-1919 embrace of national self-determination intensified conflict by fragmenting humanity into competing sovereign entities, rendering genuine freedom and independence impossible in an interdependent world.

Reves criticizes the League of Nations and similar systems for attempting to secure peace without law in Chapter XIII on the fallacy of collective security, demonstrating that collective security without supranational sovereignty leads to paralysis, selective enforcement, or war.

In Chapter XIV, he addresses and dismantles common objections to a universal legal order, such as fears of global domination, cultural incompatibility, and impracticality, arguing that diversity and scale necessitate law rather than preclude it.

In the final chapter, titled *Law or Conquest*, the book culminates in the stark claim that humanity faces an unavoidable choice between democratic unification through universal law or authoritarian unification through conquest, as security without law inevitably produces expansion and violence.

The postscript situates the book in the aftermath of Hiroshima, presenting atomic power as the ultimate test of sovereignty and the final confirmation of the work's central thesis. Reves rejects arms control, treaties, and the United Nations as illusory remedies, insisting that nuclear danger stems not from technology itself but from the continued existence of sovereign nation-states. Humanity, he argues, now faces an inescapable choice between unification through universal law or through catastrophic war.

The purpose of this review is to reassess Reves's ideas in light of the contemporary geopolitical context. The writing of this review coincided with what may be described as an unprecedented use of force by the US against Venezuela (Milanovic 2026), carried out in violation of fundamental principles of international law, most notably the prohibition of the use of force enshrined in the Charter of the UN. Unilateral military actions by states against the territory of other sovereign states, undertaken without authorization from the Security Council, have become a defining feature of today's international order, assuming such an order can still be said to exist.

In effect, the international community appears to be standing on the threshold of a new "normality." If such actions remain unanswered and unrestrained, there is a risk of normalizing a world in which the law of force replaces the force of law. It is precisely this dynamic that renders Reves's critique newly resonant rather than merely historical or philosophical.

Eighty years after the first publication of *The Anatomy of Peace*, the structural shortcomings of the United Nations as a universal center of international politics responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security have once again become evident, shortcomings that Reves already identified and criticized at the moment of the Organization's

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creation. Over the decades, the UN has sought, sporadically and largely ineffectively, to influence crises and armed conflicts ex post facto, that is, only once they have already erupted and exacted a high human cost. Today, more than ever, reliance on the UN's reactive role, often reduced to formal deliberation without enforcement, appears increasingly precarious.

Such a configuration of international life not only places the very relevance of the UN into question but also threatens to destabilize the existing balance of power in global politics. However, paradoxically, there is no alternative universal institution capable of replacing it. Reform of the UN thus appears inevitable (Mustafayeva 2017).

Although debates over reform have accompanied the Organization since its inception, the issue has taken on renewed urgency as the UN enters its eighth decade. Nevertheless, like many fundamental questions on the Organization's agenda, reform continues to collide with the entrenched veto power, which has effectively paralyzed the Security Council.

As noted earlier, Reves's vision of a supranational legal order was not an isolated intellectual project but part of a broader postwar tradition advocating global governance through law. In his open letter to the United Nations General Assembly of October 1947, Albert Einstein, like Reves, a committed peace activist and advocate of global federalism, emphasized the urgent necessity of international cooperation and the establishment of a world government grounded in world law.

A similar argument was developed in the influential 1960 work by Grenville Clark and Louis Sohn, *World Peace Through World Law* (Grenville and Sohn 1962), which explicitly justified the transformation of the UN into a form of "world government." This idea was further elaborated by prominent Western scholars, including Philip Jessup, Richard Falk, and Georg Schwarzenberger. Comparable views, albeit expressed more cautiously, could also be found in Soviet international legal scholarship.

Among them, S. A. Malinin, examining the prospects of transforming the United Nations into a world government, wrote about the possibility of the Organization adopting so-called "norm-creating decisions" (Malinin 1965). Together with V. P. Kirilenko, he also emphasized the "objective growth of the common interests of all humanity, their priority over class interests, and the consequent qualitative reorientation of international law" (Kirilenko and Malinin 1994). These authors argued that certain elements, or embryonic forms, of world governmental authority were already present within the UN at that stage of its development. Looking forward, they stressed that any move toward endowing the UN with features of a world government would have to take into account the tension between two opposing tendencies characterizing international relations: the tendency toward separation and reinforcement of sovereignty, and the countervailing tendency toward interdependence.

Viewed from this perspective, the embryonic elements of universal or global governance identified by these authors may today be understood as reflected in the development of *jus cogens* (peremptory) norms of international law and *erga omnes* obligations, normative structures that gesture toward a legal order transcending the will of individual sovereign states, even if they remain critically under-institutionalized.

The emergence of these normative developments is closely linked to a broader shift toward the protection of common goods within a fundamentally state-centric system of international law inherited from the Peace of Westphalia. As Villalpando observes, after the Peace of Westphalia, "relations between states were relatively limited," cooperation was minimal,

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and "most international norms were centred on the preservation of each state's personal interest on its own territory, that is, of its sovereign rights" (Villalpando 2010, 390-391).

It is precisely this system, so sharply criticized by Reves, that has begun to undergo an existential transformation, as relations among sovereign states have expanded beyond the pursuit of exclusively national interests toward the protection of so-called "community interests." (Jessup 1948, 12-37). Foremost among these are peace and the security of humanity, values that, by their very nature, require collective protection and, consequently, a distinct category of legal norms capable of regulating them (Villalpando 2010).

These norms are reflected in the emergence of peremptory norms of international law (*jus cogens*), defined in Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), which is widely regarded as the first formal recognition of *jus cogens* in international treaty law. Closely related to *jus cogens* are obligations *erga omnes*, which likewise occupy a special status within the international legal order. Under this normative regime, "all States can be held to have a legal interest in their protection," (Barcelona Traction) signaling an important, albeit incomplete, departure from the purely voluntarist logic of classical sovereignty.

It should nevertheless be emphasized that *jus cogens* norms and *erga omnes* obligations, although formally articulated in treaties criticized by Reves, as well as in decisions of international courts, are not reducible to treaty-based commitments. They also exist as obligations under customary international law, binding upon states independently of treaty consent and without the need for interpretative incorporation through specific treaty regimes.

When addressing the role of treaties, particular attention must be paid to Reves's juxtaposition of "treaty" and "law" in Chapter IX of the book. From the standpoint of positive international law, treaties constitute a primary source of law, on an equal footing with other sources listed in Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice. Accordingly, the opposition between treaty and law cannot be sustained in a strictly doctrinal sense.

Reves's argument appears instead to envisage "world laws" modeled on national legislation, common norms adopted by a centralized legislative body, such as national parliaments, and binding independently of individual state consent. In fact, international law remains a fundamentally state-centric legal system, lacking any supranational legislative authority capable of producing such norms.

Nor does the United Nations Security Council fill this legislative void. The Security Council is neither a legislative body nor an independent enforcement mechanism, despite widespread misinterpretations of Article 25 of the UN Charter. While its decisions may be binding upon member states, this binding force does not transform the Council into a global legislature; rather, it reflects a limited and politically contingent enforcement mechanism operating within the constraints of state sovereignty.

Consequently, international law remains structurally subordinate to national political interests, confirming Reves's prediction that peace entrusted to sovereign states is ultimately illusory. Violence, in his account, cannot be eradicated so long as it emerges as the inevitable result of contact between non-integrated sovereign units.

On this basis, in Chapter VII, Reves dismisses both disarmament and militarization as fundamentally misguided approaches to peace. Arms, he argues, neither cause war nor prevent it. Disarmament failed in the aftermath of the First World War, just as the existence of massive

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standing armies failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War. According to Reves, war, therefore, is not a technical or military problem, but a political and legal one.

This line of reasoning closely resonates with Carl von Clausewitz's classical formulation of war as "the continuation of politics by other means" (Clausewitz 1918), underscoring Reves's central claim that without a transformation of the political and legal structure of international relations, violence remains an inherent feature of the sovereign state system.

Nevertheless, there is no alternative international law, just as there is no alternative to the United Nations, available to us today. This prompts an unavoidable question: perhaps new institutions are not what is needed. The core problem may lie not in international law or the UN as such, but in the persistent lack of effective enforcement mechanisms. Instead of mourning the "death" of international law, which, in fact, remains very much alive, the focus should shift toward strengthening its foundational pillars: those that sustain the international legal order and prevent the world from sliding into complete chaos.

These reflections are written at a moment when the President of the United States, Donald Trump, himself has publicly expressed frustration with the perceived ineffectiveness of the UN despite its considerable potential, and has reportedly proposed an "alternative" in the form of a so-called "Board of Peace," (White House 2026) a development widely discussed in recent news coverage. Whatever the political motivations behind such initiatives, they underscore a broader and increasingly visible impatience with existing multilateral structures.

Critics have already voiced concerns that the proliferation of parallel or ad hoc alternatives risks further fragmenting an already fragile international legal order and poses a direct threat to the authority and coherence of the United Nations (DW 2026).

Taking into account the realities of the contemporary international order, the creation of the higher, unified sovereignty envisioned by Reves appears largely utopian. The political and social conditions required for such a transformation are conspicuously absent. By contrast, the development and refinement of mechanisms for enforcing existing *jus cogens* norms and *erga omnes* obligations seems to offer a more tangible point of departure, one of the few remaining levers in a world that appears to be sliding toward normative disintegration.

Whether Reves's project is politically attainable remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that without confronting the structural relationship between sovereignty, law, and enforcement, international law risks becoming increasingly detached from the very purpose it was meant to serve.

In conclusion, *The Anatomy of Peace* remains a singular work whose relevance has not diminished over time. For scholars of international law, political theory, and global governance, the book offers more than a historical artifact of postwar idealism. It serves as a diagnostic framework for understanding why repeated efforts to secure peace through international organizations, treaties, and collective security continue to fall short. For students and readers seeking to comprehend the deeper structures of the contemporary world, Reves provides a lens through which the recurring crises of the international system appear not as anomalies but as predictable outcomes.

Reves's work is not merely a book about the past or an unattainable future; it is a challenge addressed to the present, one that concerns the fate of the international legal order and of a world that may still not be too late to save.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

AI Declaration:
The author acknowledges the use of AI tools, specifically ChatGPT-5, to assist with translation and to improve the clarity and quality of the English language in this book review. These tools were used exclusively for linguistic refinement and did not contribute to the conceptualization, analysis, or development of the scholarly content. The author assumes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, validity, and integrity of the work.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

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