

Creation of the UN

A visual history of this international organisation

Early signatories

The United Nations had its origins during the Second World War as part of the vision for the postwar world set out by Britain, China, the Soviet Union and the USA. The failure of the League of Nations, established after the First World War to prevent another world war, did not mean that the principle of a multinational body was wrong – rather, that it had been implemented poorly. The leaders who pushed the most for the creation of a new international body were US president Franklin Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill.

The wartime declarations of the United Nations set out the core principles by which the Allies would conduct the war. In the summer of 1941, that included a commitment that they would support each other and not conclude a separate peace with the enemy. There was also a commitment that the future of Europe would be determined by the 'willing cooperation of free peoples'.

With the addition of the Soviet Union and China to the Allied side, the four major powers signed the Declaration by the United Nations on 1 January 1942, stating 'that complete victory over their enemies is essential to defend life, liberty, independence and religious freedom, and to preserve human rights and justice in their own lands as well as in other lands, and that they are now engaged in a common struggle against savage and brutal forces seeking to subjugate the world'.

China signs the United Nations charter in 1945 in San Francisco, USA

Postwar charter and ratification

By the middle of 1943, with the tide of the war gradually turning in favour of the Allies, attention began to turn to the postwar era. The Declaration of the Four Nations on General Security in October 1943 proposed the creation of 'a general international organisation'. At Dumbarton Oaks the following year, the structure of the United Nations was agreed upon, including the formation of the security council with only the permanent members (Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union and the USA) having a veto.

With the final details about the organisation of the UN agreed by the spring of 1945 at the San Francisco Conference, the United Nations Charter was issued on 26 June and countries invited to sign it. It was formally ratified on 24 October 1945 when the five permanent members and a majority of the 51 other members had signed it, and this day became 'United Nations Day'. To date, 193 states have signed the charter and are members of the UN. The most contentious non-member is Taiwan, which held the Chinese permanent seat until 1971 when it was replaced by mainland China.

1941

1942

1943

1944

1945

1946

12 June 1941

Declaration of St James's Palace

24 September 1941

Eight governments in exile adopt the principles

1 January 1942

Declaration by United Nations signed by Britain, China, Soviet Union and USA. On 2 January, 22 other nations sign

30 October 1943

Declaration of the Four Nations on General Security

September 1944

Dumbarton Oaks conference

April 1945

San Francisco Conference

26 June 1945

UN Charter issued

24 October 1945

UN Charter ratified

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