

THE UNITED NATIONS

HISTORY

Born in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations was the world's second attempt at an organization aimed at preserving and promoting world peace through international cooperation. The first attempt, the League of Nations, was established in reaction to the atrocities of World War I. Unfortunately, the League was unsuccessful in its mandate, ultimately unable to halt the outbreak of a second global conflict. As such, it is worthwhile to briefly examine the League's failure in order to understand the importance of the United Nations 65-year history to date.

The central premise of the League was collective security, meaning that all members of the organization were required to accept joint responsibility for preserving peace. Collective security is based on the idea that a threat anywhere should be viewed as a threat to all and therefore its success hinges on two basic elements: first, all the great powers must participate; and second, they must act with an overriding conviction to preserve peace. Unfortunately, under the League, the great powers failed to follow these two cardinal rules; the United States never joined the League, while Japan, Germany, and Italy withdrew their membership when the League's ideals became misaligned with their respective countries' goals. Britain and France, the only two great powers left in the League, were unwilling to take any action to preserve peace until Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. Even after declaring war, neither Britain nor France took steps to restore world order, concentrating instead on strengthening their own defenses. The overarching problem with the League of Nations was that its charter contained no means of enforcing decisions; all of its recommendations were to be adopted voluntarily, with no international recourse if they were not.

Although the concept of collective security proved insufficient to hold the League of Nations together, its principles are still vital to the United Nations' efforts towards world peace. Furthermore, the failures and mistakes of the League of Nations served as an effective learning tool for the creation of the United Nations. Below is a brief timeline of some of the important conferences and documents that led to the creation of the United Nations:

January 1942: The signing of the Declaration of the United Nations marked the first use of the term "United Nations." This document, signed by the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, China, and 43 other nations was a statement of the Allied countries' victory aims. According to the Declaration, security in the postwar world was to be collective in nature. The Declaration also reaffirmed the 1941 Atlantic Charter between the United States and Great Britain, which expressed the hope for a postwar world in which "all the men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want."

October 1943: The next step toward the United Nations' establishment occurred with the release of the Moscow Declaration on General Security of 30 October 1943. This declaration contained an agreement by the Americans, British, Soviets, and Chinese (the "Big Four") that an international organization based upon the principles of collective security was desirable in the postwar world.

October 1944: The Dumbarton Oaks Conference, held from August to October in Washington D.C., was the first direct effort to create the United Nations. The Big Four met to discuss the structure of the organization. While much was accomplished, several notable disputes developed such as questions of when the veto in the Security Council could be used, whether member states could vote on issues in which they were directly involved, and whether the Soviets could include each of the fifteen Soviet Republics as member states.

February 1945: Compromise on the veto and representation issues were reached at the Yalta summit in February of 1945. In return for the admittance of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republics, it was agreed the procedural matters in the Security Council would not be subject to veto. With the significant disputes between the big powers settled, the Big Four decided to hold an additional conference that has come to be known as the San Francisco Conference. Its purpose was to write a charter for the proposed United Nations.

April 1945: The conference, which lasted from 25 April to 26 June, was attended by 46 nations. Most of the disputes at the conference were not within the “Big Five” (the “Big Four” plus France) but between the Big Five and the smaller powers present. The smaller nations felt that the great powers would have too much control over the proposed organization, particularly in possessing a veto over all actions taken by the Security Council. In the end, the veto was preserved, and in turn, the powers of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council were increased. The revised Charter was approved unanimously and went into effect on 24 October 1945.

STRUCTURE

The Charter split the United Nations into five main divisions, or “principal organs”: the General Assembly (GA), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Security Council, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and the Secretariat.

The General Assembly is the only principal organ of the United Nations in which all member states are represented and share equal voting rights. The General Assembly exercises the deliberative, supervisory, financial, and elective functions of the United Nations. As a deliberative body it can discuss and make recommendations on “any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs provided for in the present Charter.”

All other organs submit reports to the General Assembly, with the ECOSOC Council operating under its authority. The General Assembly plays a role in choosing members from organizations ranging from the ICJ to the Security Council. Six main committees (Disarmament and International Security, Economic and Financial, Social Cultural and Humanitarian, Special Political and Decolonization, Administrative and Budgetary, and Legal), numerous ad hoc committees, subsidiary bodies and a Plenary provide the forum in which the General Assembly's work is accomplished. Despite the broad scope of its authority, decisions made by the General Assembly are only recommendations, and rely on the weight of the Security Council and the cooperation of individual nations for enforcement.

The Economic and Social Council consists of three basic parts: subsidiary bodies, non-governmental organizations and specialized agencies. Each of these parts is further divided. The subsidiary bodies include:

- **Eight functional commissions:** Narcotic Drugs, Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Science and Technology for Development, Sustainable Development, Population and Development, Social Development, Statistical, and Status of Women;
- **Five regional commissions:** Economic Committee for Africa, Economic and Social Committee for Asia and the Pacific, Economic Committee for Europe, Economic Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Economic Committee for Western Asia;
- **Six standing committees:** Human Settlements, Energy and Natural Resources, Non Governmental Organizations, Negotiations with Inter-Governmental Agencies, Programme and Coordination; and

- A growing number of standing expert bodies on topics such as indigenous issues, development policy, international cooperation in tax matters, and economic, social and cultural rights.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may be consulted by the Economic and Social Council if they are concerned with matters within the Council's competence. The over six hundred NGOs that have consultative status with the council are classified into three groups:

- *Category I* organizations are concerned with most of the Council's activities;
- *Category II* organizations have special competence in specific fields of the Council's activity; and
- Organizations on the roster can make occasional contributions to the Council, its subsidiary organs, or other United Nations bodies.

Non-governmental organizations, which have been given consultative status, may send observers to public meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies, and may submit written statements relevant to the Council's work.

Finally, organizations known as "specialized agencies" report annually to the Economic and Social Council. They include agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The Security Council is entrusted with the primary responsibility for keeping world peace. Because of the magnitude of this responsibility and the severity of the actions that may be required, only the Security Council can impose mandatory economic sanctions or use military force in order to enforce its decisions. There are five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States), with another ten members elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms. Each of the five permanent members has the power to veto a substantive decision of the council and all decisions of the Council require nine votes in the affirmative in order to pass. Members of the United Nations agree to abide by the decisions of the Security Council when they join.

The International Court of Justice is the principal judicial body set up by the United Nations. The Court has 15 judges, serving nine-year terms. Justices are elected by individual votes from the General Assembly and Security Council. The Court sits in The Hague and gives judgments in cases brought before it by United Nations members and legal opinions to the General Assembly and Security Council. No nation is forced either to take a case to the International Court of Justice or to accept its rulings. A few nations, by formal declaration, accept the compulsory jurisdiction of the Court in specified categories of disputes.

The Secretariat is the administrative body of the United Nations. The Secretary-General, elected by the General Assembly for a five-year term, serves as the leader of the Secretariat and appoints United Nations' staff. The staff prepares material for meetings, conducts expert studies, and performs the office work of the United Nations. The Secretary-General is also considered a member of the Secretariat, and acts as an intermediary in international disputes. It is also the duty of the Secretary-General to bring before the United Nations any matter that threatens international peace and security.

In a span of more than 50 years, the United Nations has made great strides in aiding the world. Along with serving as a daily forum for international negotiations, the UN has also contributed to advancements in political, social, and economic arenas. Marked accomplishments include the

eradication of smallpox by the World Health Organization, protection and aid for refugees, protection of human rights, decolonization, peacekeeping (for which it won the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize), and efforts toward disarmament. The United Nations' less publicized work has included increasing air traffic safety through the International Civil Aviation Organization and preserving global cultural heritage through UNESCO.

The millennium marked the 55th Anniversary of the United Nations, and provided a time for reflection on past accomplishments as well as planning for the future. In 2000 the UN adopted an ambitious set of eight goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals, to be achieved by 2015. These far reaching goals include: halving the number of people living in extreme poverty, achieving universal primary education, ensure environmental sustainability and to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS. These far-reaching goals represent a new direction for the UN at the turn of the 21st century, protecting not only the collective security of the world's people but also promoting development and a more equal distribution of resources and opportunity among the nations of the world. The General Assembly closed the Millennium Declaration with the following statement, "we solemnly reaffirm, on this historic occasion, that the United Nations is the indispensable common house of the entire human family, through which we will seek to realize our universal aspirations for peace, cooperation and development. We therefore pledge our unstinting support for these common objectives and our determination to achieve them." By shifting its focus to development aims, the UN has been able to maintain its relevance as an international forum for more than a half century.

For information about the UN's current work, visit the UN online at www.un.org.