

This Day in History... August 24, 1949

Founding of NATO

On August 24, 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty came into force, officially establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The stability of world politics took a dramatic turn at the end of World War II. The Soviet Union was gaining power in Europe. Military strength became a leading concern among non-communist countries that feared they would be unable to defend against Soviet aggression.

On March 17, 1948, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, and the United Kingdom signed the Treaty of Brussels. This treaty expanded on the defense pledge of the Dunkirk Treaty of the year before. Three months later the Soviets began their blockade of Berlin, blocking supply routes to the area of Berlin under Western control. This led to the formation of the Western Union Defense Organization in September 1948. Realizing the military strength of the United States would be necessary to stop a potential communist attack, talks began for a new alliance.



Stamp issued on the third anniversary of the treaty's signing.



Stamp pictures the NATO emblem – a compass rose symbolizing the path of peace.

In 1948, European leaders traveled to the United States to meet with American military leaders and diplomats to discuss a new treaty. They met with President Harry Truman's secretary of State, Dean Acheson. The resulting North Atlantic Treaty was signed on April 4, 1949, in Washington, DC. The participating nations were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. After all of the nations ratified the treaty, it came into effect on August 24, 1949.

Member countries agreed to maintain a unified military force to defend against Soviet invasion, and pledged to consider an attack on one as an attack on all of them. NATO's first secretary general stated the organization's goal as to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down."

The Korean War was the first test of the alliance. Though it was not on the soil of any NATO country, it demonstrated the threat of communist expansion. The organization responded with a military plan establishing the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) as the command structure. Sixteen UN countries joined South Korea in its fight to stop the advance.

In 1954, the Soviet Union asked to join NATO to ensure peace in Europe. Seen as a ploy to weaken the alliance, the country's request was rejected. The following year, the Soviets joined with seven other communist nations to form the Warsaw Pact. This led to two opposing sides during the Cold War. After the Revolutions of 1989 that brought an end to communism in Eastern Europe, NATO sought to improve relationships with former Warsaw Pact countries.



Stamp issued for Dean Acheson's 100th birthday in 1993.



The issue of this stamp in 1999 was delayed due to the NATO-led Operation Allied Force, which involved air strikes staged against Yugoslavia.

Though NATO was established to provide mutual military support, the combined forces were never called upon to fight on European or American soil during the Cold War. Most of NATO's money and troops have come from the US, which has greatly increased American influence in Europe. Past NATO commanders have included generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and Alexander Haig. Today, NATO consists of the twelve original member states plus 18 that have been added since then. This includes former members of the Warsaw Pact, with some of the new NATO members formerly part of the Soviet Union. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Finland and Sweden were officially invited to join NATO. Their accession must be approved by all current NATO members, which as of this date, 23 members have. Furthermore, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine have expressed interest in joining. The organization's headquarters are in Brussels, Belgium.

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