

This Day in History... December 10, 1948

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This date is now celebrated as Human Rights Day.

When delegates from 50 nations gathered in San Francisco on April 25, 1945, they were exhausted from the extended war and disheartened by the inhumanity they'd seen. The delegates were determined to prevent future generations from experiencing what they had witnessed firsthand. Their goal was to form an international organization that would have the power to maintain security, foster prosperity, and give human rights an international legal status.

A group of non-governmental and governmental organizations lobbied vigorously for a strong commitment to human rights in the UN Charter. In particular, several small Latin American countries were committed to including such a guarantee. A Pan-American conference held in Mexico City produced a group united in their determination to see such goals met. Several American non-governmental groups also pushed for a type of "bill of rights" in the charter. Over 1,300 organizations placed ads in newspapers demanding human rights be an integral part of the international organization.



FDR's Four Freedoms was a major influence for the document, stating that people should have Freedom of Speech and Expression, Freedom of Religion, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear.

When the member nations met in San Francisco in April of 1945, their proposal fell short of the clear and concise commitment to human rights these groups sought. Forty-two American groups serving as consultants to the US delegation convinced participating governments of the need to clearly state a policy of protection for individual human rights. They were persuasive, and the result was a legal commitment by governments around the world to promote and encourage respect for the inalienable human rights of every man, woman, and child.

Canadian John Peters Humphrey, the first Director of the Human Rights Division of the United Nations, was put in charge of a group to write the Declaration of Human Rights. An international committee of such prominent people as Chinese philosopher P.C. Chang, and former US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, assisted Humphrey. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was ratified by a vote of 48-0 on December 10, 1948.

The UDHR, consistent with civil law tradition, begins with a preamble that is followed by thirty articles. The Declaration's purpose, as described in the preamble and proceeding articles, serves as an outline of objectives for governments to follow. The Assembly ordered that all Member countries display the Declaration, especially in schools and other educational institutions, regardless of the political status of a country.

The preamble begins with a series of statements of all human rights. Among them are the people's right to freedom and justice, and the goal of peace the world over. It also states that everyone has the freedom of speech and the right to be protected by the rule of law. In addition, "friendly relations between nations" and the respect of people of other nations are essential.

The thirty articles show a sharper focus on each of these issues, as well as many others. Slavery, torture, and arbitrary arrest are all prohibited. Everyone has the right to equal protection under the law, and is presumed innocent until proven guilty. In addition, everyone has the right to work, marry, own land, and receive an education. These are only a few of the many rights outlined in the UDHR.

In 1950, the UN formally established Human Rights Day on December 10 to commemorate this milestone event. It is now celebrated around the globe with special events. At the UN's New York headquarters, Human Rights Day is given special consideration with cultural events and exhibits centering on human rights issues. In addition, five UN prizes in the field of human rights are awarded that day. Over the years, the UN has issued many stamps honoring the declaration. Among these was a neat series issued from 1989 to 1993 that illustrated each of the document's articles.



These stamps were issued in 1953 to mark Human Rights Day.



This stamp was issued for the 70th anniversary and pictures Eleanor Roosevelt with the declaration.

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