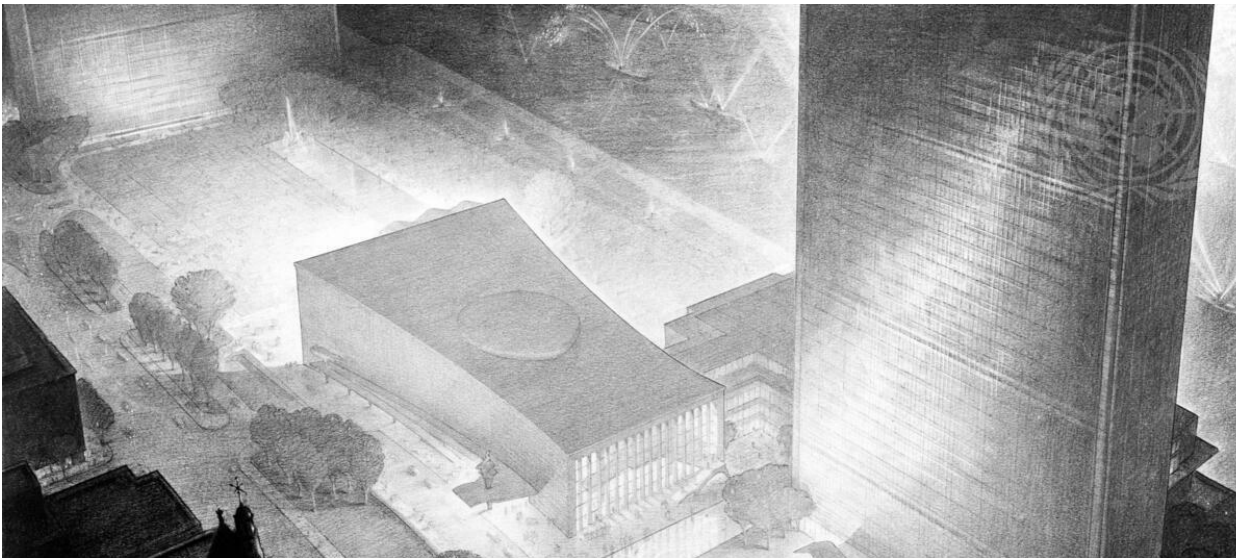




The Birth of the UN: Teaching Guide and Resources



A sketch of the planned UN Headquarters, c. 1949 @UN Photo

Historical Background

The idea of the United Nations was **born during the Second World War** (1939-1945). The name “United Nations,” coined by United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was first used in the Declaration by United Nations of 1 January 1942, when representatives of 26 nations pledged their governments to continue fighting together against the Axis Powers.

World leaders who had collaborated to end the war felt a strong need for **a mechanism that would help bring peace and stop future wars**. They realized that this was possible only if all nations worked together through a **global organization**. The United Nations was to be that organization.

The San Francisco Conference

In 1945, representatives of 50 countries met in San Francisco. Their main objective was to produce a document acceptable to all countries – the **United Nations Charter** – which would guide the work of the new organization.

The delegates at the San Francisco conference represented over eight percent of the world's population, including people of **every race, religion, and continent**. All of whom were determined to set up an organization that would preserve peace and help **build a better world**.

Disagreements and clashes of opinions were resolved only because every nation was determined to set up, if not the perfect international organization, at least the best one that could be made.

Finally, on **25 June 1945, the UN Charter was adopted** unanimously by all the delegations.



The San Francisco conference: A view of the delegation from the United States and Edward R. Stettinius Jr., Chairman of delegation of the United States of America
©UN Photo

The UN Charter

The UN Charter is the founding document of the United Nations. To this day, the UN operates under the guidelines and parameters laid out in the Charter.

According to its Charter, the UN aims include the following:

- Save succeeding generations from the scourge (=suffering) of war.
- Reaffirm faith in fundamental **human rights**.
- Establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of **international law** can be maintained.

Promote **social progress** and better standards of life in larger freedom.

Sources: [Essential UN](#); [History of the UN](#)

A Suggested Lesson Plan

Subject

Modern History; Social Studies

Grade Level

5-8; 9-12

Keywords

United Nations; Second World War; San Francisco Conference; UN Charter

Overview

This source-based lesson plan introduces students to the story of the UN, its history and mission. By learning about the founding of the UN and analyzing textual or visual primary sources from the early years of the Organization, students will learn about the place of the UN within the post-war era, and will appreciate the unique role of the UN in the global quest to ensure peaceful and prosperous life to all.

Goals

Students will be able to describe the origins of the UN, and to place the UN's establishment within its historical context.

Students will be able to explain the mission of the UN.

Students will be able to explain the role of the UN Charter in defining and constituting the UN's actions.

Key Questions

How did the first steps of the UN reflect the historical moment in which it was born?

What can we learn from the birth of the UN about the post-war world?

Process**Introduction**

Ask the students what they know about the UN.

Share background information about the birth of the UN (see above).

→ Optional: Share with students the [UN explainer](#).

Source-Based Inquiry

Depending on grade level and preference, choose one of the following primary sources options (see below):

→ *The UN Emblem and flag*

→ *The UN's Charter Preamble*

→ *Sights and Voices of the San Francisco Conference*

→ *San Francisco Conference in the first person*

Introduce the source to the students. Lead a close reading, analysis and discussion of the source based on the guiding questions, or have the students discuss them independently in small groups.

Creative Expression

Have the students complete the recommended activity that matches the chosen primary source (see below).

Have the students present their creative expression projects with the class.

Conclusion

Ask the students whether and how the primary source analysis and creative expression project changes their perception of the UN.

Share the students' projects with the Visitor Services Section. We love to hear from our teachers and students!

Primary Source #1: The UN Flag and Emblem



Background

The original UN emblem (=logo) was created by a team of designers, led by Oliver Lincoln Lundquist, for the 1945 San Francisco conference.

The design is a “map of the world representing an azimuthal equidistant projection centered on the North Pole inscribed in a wreath consisting of crossed conventionalized branches of the olive tree. The map extends 60 degrees south latitude and includes five concentric circles” (from the original description of the emblem).

The UN flag is the emblem of the UN in white, centered on a light blue background.

Source: [UN flag](#)

Inquiry and Analysis	Creative Expression
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- Describe the flag. What colors do you see? What objects or elements?
- What do you think each element symbolizes?
- What is the UN flag used for? Where could you find it in the world, in the past and in the present? Look for answers in the [UN Photo](#) website!
- Do you think the UN flag is a good choice for the UN? Why or why not?

If you could design a new emblem and flag for the UN, how would they look? Consider colors, shapes, symbolic elements, and composition!

Primary Source #2: The Charter's Preamble

The preamble to the UN Charter reads as follows (You can also have your students listen to a [recording of the preamble being read by Sir Lawrence Olivier](#)):

CHARTER OF THE UNITED NATIONS

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS
DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and

to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and

to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and

to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and

to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS
TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS.

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

Inquiry and Analysis	Creative Expression
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- Who do you think is the audience of the text? How do you know?
- What is the purpose of the UN according to the preamble? Use your own words.
- The Charter opens with the words “WE THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS.” What do the words “UNITED NATIONS” mean in this context?
- For whom does the Charter speak? Does its voice reflect the identity of the signatories of the Charter (diplomats and politicians from different countries)?
- Do the words of the Preamble allude to other historical documents? Search for word combinations online if necessary. What do you think is the meaning of the similarity?
- **Challenge question:** Reflect upon global history from the establishment of the UN until now. Do you think that the UN has been successful in its mission, as it has been defined in the Preamble? Base your argument on concrete examples.

If you could design a new emblem and flag for the UN, how would they look? Consider colors, shapes, symbolic elements, and composition!

Primary Source #3: Sights and Voices from the San Francisco Conference

The San Francisco conference was a well-covered public event. Watch these videos from the conference:

1. [Lord Halifax of Britain calls the UN Charter to vote.](#)
2. [The American President Harry Truman Addresses the delegates.](#)

Inquiry and Analysis	Creative Expression
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▫ What do you see in the videos? Describe the mood of the scenes. Are they joyous? Solemn? Excited? Other?▫ Who are the people featured in the videos? What are their genders, ages, and ethnicities? How are they dressed? What are their facial expressions? What are they doing?▫ What can you learn from your previous answers about the San Francisco conference, its atmosphere and historical significance?▫ What do Lord Halifax and President Truman say? Summarize in your own words.	<p>Look up the list of countries that participated in the conference. Choose one country. Imagine you were a conference delegate from that country. Choose one of the following activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Draft your own speech for the conference. What message would you like to convey to your fellow delegates and the wider public?2. Write a letter home, or create a social media post describing your experience at the conference and your impressions of the event, the people you met, and the overall atmosphere (you can use the UN Photo website or visual inspiration).

Primary Source #4: The San Francisco Conference in First Person - Harold Edward Stassen

Listen to Harrold Edward Stassen, a US delegate to the San Francisco conference, recounts his experience, and read the following excerpts from his interview:

- “There was a war still going on, and there were presidents and heads of state that had made commitments, so we had to think ‘How do we shape a charter under those circumstances?’.”
- “There was a certain amount of viewpoint in the world, that the whole thing was a waste of time because there would certainly be another world war in 15 or 20 years. There was a lot of that kind of expression, that no way could 40 or 50 countries reach an agreement.”
- It was a very dramatic and very moving time [...] some of the delegates would be arriving from Europe just about as fast as their countries were liberated in the war itself [...] there was a really strong sense of what a war really meant.”
- “One thing that was very evident was that the translations into different languages were quite a problem in those early stages [...] at first it was very difficult to get a real communication going [...] it was all coming out of different cultures, different forms of government, that you would find that the same word translated could have a very different meaning [...] We not only had to agree on the English language [but also] to agree on how that would be translated into French, and Russian, and Chinese, and Spanish.”

Source: United Nations Oral History Project, 29 April 1983.

[Interview with Governor Harold Edward Stassen / \(un.org\)](#)

Inquiry and Analysis	Creative Expression
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▫ In what historical context does Stassen situate the San Francisco conference? According to his statements, what was the significance of the conference? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Look up the list of countries that participated in the conference. Choose one country. Imagine you were a conference delegate from that country. Choose one of the following activities: |
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- What, according to Stassen's statements, were the challenges facing the delegates to the conference?
 - The interview with Stassen was conducted in 1983. How do you think this fact affected his account? Consider factors such as his age (at the time of the conference and of the interview), professional trajectory, and historical developments that occurred over the years.
1. Draft your own speech for the conference. What message would you like to convey to your fellow delegates and the wider public?
 2. Write a letter home, or create a social media post describing your experience at the conference and your impressions of the event, the people you met, and the overall atmosphere (you can use the [UN Photo](#) website or visual inspiration).

