

## Introduction to Nation-States

Although the definition, origins, and early history of nation-states are disputed, “nation-state” remains one of the central categories of the modern world.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Define a nation-state

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

#### Key Points

- The concept of a nation-state is notoriously difficult to define. A working and imprecise definition is: a type of state that conjoins the political entity of a state to the cultural entity of a nation, from which it aims to derive its political legitimacy to rule and potentially its status as a sovereign state.
- The origins and early history of nation-states are disputed. Two major theoretical questions have been debated. First, “Which came first, the nation or the nation-state?” Second, “Is nation-state a modern or an ancient idea?” Scholars continue to debate a number of possible hypotheses.
- Most commonly, the idea of a nation-state was and is associated with the rise of the modern system of states, often called the “Westphalian system” in reference to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648).
- Nation-states have their own characteristics that today may be taken-for-granted factors shaping a modern state, but that all developed in contrast to pre-national states.
- The most obvious impact of the nation-state is the creation of a uniform national culture through state policy. Its most demonstrative examples are national systems of compulsory primary education that usually popularize a common language and historical narratives.

#### Key Terms

- **Westphalian system:** A global system based on the principle of international law that each state has sovereignty over its territory and domestic affairs, to the exclusion of all external powers, on the principle of non-interference in another country’s domestic affairs, and that each state (no matter how large or small) is equal in international law. The doctrine is named after the Peace of Westphalia, signed in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years’ War.
- **constitutive theory of statehood:** A theory that defines a state as a person in international law if, and only if, it is recognized as sovereign by other states. This theory of recognition was developed in the 19th century. Under it, a state was sovereign if another sovereign state recognized it as such.
- **declarative theory of statehood:** A theory that defines a state as a person in international law if it meets the following criteria: 1) a defined territory; 2) a permanent population; 3) a government; and 4) a capacity to enter into relations with other states. According to it, an entity’s statehood is independent of its recognition by other states.

## Nation-State: Challenges of Definition

The concept of a nation-state is notoriously difficult to define.

Anthony Smith, one of the most influential scholars of nation-states and nationalism, argued that a state is a nation-state only if and when a single ethnic and cultural population inhabits the boundaries of a state, and the boundaries of that state are coextensive with the boundaries of that ethnic and cultural population. This is a very narrow definition that presumes the existence of the “one nation, one state” model. Consequently, less than 10% of states in the world meet its criteria.

The most obvious deviation from this largely ideal model is the presence of minorities, especially ethnic minorities, which ethnic and cultural nationalists exclude from the majority nation. The most illustrative historical examples of groups that have been specifically singled out as outsiders are the Roma and Jews in Europe. In legal terms, many nation-states today accept specific minorities as being part of the nation, which generally implies that members of minorities are citizens of a given nation-state and enjoy the same rights and liberties as members of the majority nation. However, nationalists and, consequently, symbolic narratives of the origins and history of nation-states often continue to exclude minorities from the nation-state and the nation.

According to a wider working definition, a nation-state is a type of state that conjoins the political entity of a state to the cultural entity of a nation, from which it aims to derive its political legitimacy to rule and potentially its status as a sovereign state if one accepts the declarative theory of statehood as opposed to the constitutive theory. A state is specifically a political and geopolitical entity, while a nation is a cultural and ethnic one. The term “nation-state” implies that the two coincide, in that a state has chosen to adopt and endorse a specific cultural group as associated with it. The concept of a nation-state can be compared and contrasted with that of the multinational state, city-state, empire, confederation, and other state formations with which it may overlap. The key distinction is the identification of a people with a polity in the nation-state.

## Origins

The origins and early history of nation-states are disputed. Two major theoretical questions have been debated. First, “Which came first, the nation or the nation-state?” Second, “Is nation-state a modern or an ancient idea?” Some scholars have advanced the hypothesis that the nation-state was an inadvertent byproduct of 15th century intellectual discoveries in political economy, capitalism, mercantilism, political geography, and geography combined together with cartography and advances in map-making technologies. For others, the nation existed first, then nationalist movements arose for sovereignty, and the nation-state was created to meet that demand. Some “modernization theories” of nationalism see it as a product of government policies to unify and modernize an already existing state. Most theories see the nation-state as a modern European phenomenon, facilitated by developments such as state-mandated education, mass literacy, and mass media (including print). However, others look for the roots of nation-states in ancient times.

Most commonly, the idea of a nation-state was and is associated with the rise of the modern system of states, often called the “Westphalian system” in reference to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). The balance of power that characterized that system depended on its effectiveness upon clearly defined, centrally controlled, independent entities, whether empires or nation-states, that recognized each other’s sovereignty and territory. The Westphalian system did not create the nation-state, but the nation-state meets the criteria for its component states.



European boundaries set by the Congress of Vienna, 1815

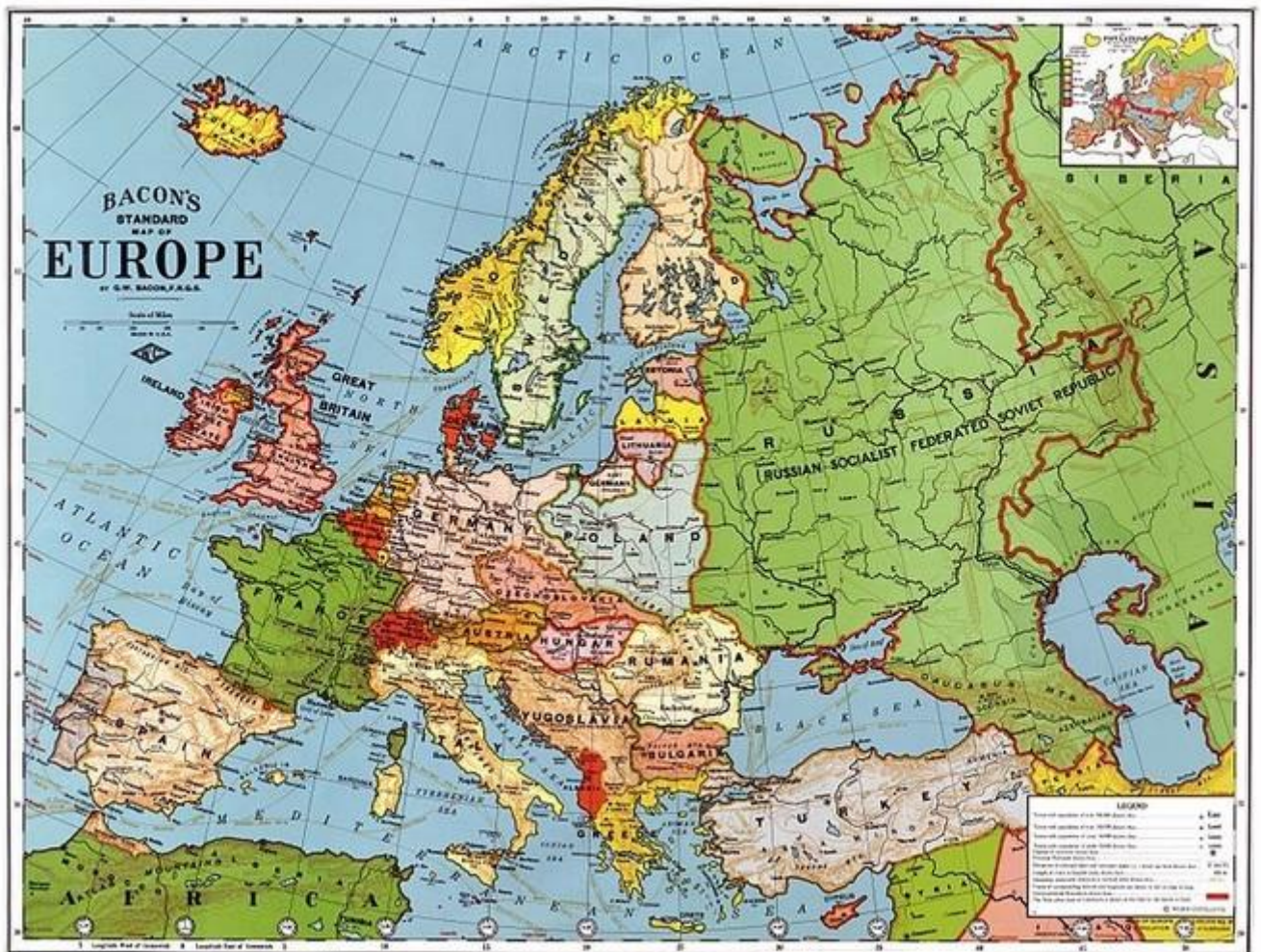
This map of Europe, outlining borders in 1815, demonstrates that still at the beginning of the 19th century, Europe was divided mostly into empires, kingdoms, and confederations. Hardly any of the entities on the map would meet the criteria of the nation-state.

### Characteristics

Nation-states have their own characteristics that today may be taken-for-granted factors shaping a modern state, but that all developed in contrast to pre-national states. Their territory is considered semi-sacred and nontransferable. Nation-states use the state as an instrument of national unity, in economic, social, and cultural life. Nation-states typically have a more centralized and uniform public administration than their imperial predecessors because they are smaller and less diverse. After the 19th-century triumph of the nation-state in Europe, regional identity was usually subordinate to national identity. In many cases, the regional administration was also subordinate to central (national) government. This process has been partially reversed from the 1970s onward, with the introduction of various forms of regional autonomy in formerly centralized states (e.g., France).

The most obvious impact of the nation-state, as compared to its non-national predecessors, is the creation of a uniform national culture through state policy. The model of the nation-state implies that its population constitutes a nation, united by a common descent, a common language, and many forms of shared culture. When the implied unity was absent, the nation-state often tried to create it. The creation of national systems of compulsory primary education is usually linked with the

popularization of nationalist narratives. Even today, primary and secondary schools around the world often teach a mythologized version of national history.



Bacon's standard map of Europe, 1923

While some European nation-states emerged throughout the 19th century, the end of World War I meant the end of empires on the continent. They all broke down into a number of smaller states. However, not until the tragedy of World War II and the post-war shifts of borders and population resettlement did many European states become more ethnically and culturally homogeneous and thus closer to the ideal nation-state.

## The Peace of Westphalia and Sovereignty

Although the Peace of Westphalia did not end war in Europe, it established the precedent of peace reached by diplomatic congress and a new system of political order in Europe based upon the concept of co-existing sovereign states.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the significance of the Peace of Westphalia on European politics and diplomacy.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

## Key Points

- The Peace of Westphalia was a series of peace treaties signed between May and October 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster. The treaties ended the Thirty Years' War and the Eighty Years' War.
- The Thirty Years' War was a series of wars in Central Europe between 1618 and 1648. Initially a war between various Protestant and Catholic states in the fragmented Holy Roman Empire, it developed into a conflict involving most of the great powers.
- The Eighty Years' War, or Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648), was a revolt of the Seventeen Provinces against the political and religious hegemony of Philip II of Spain, the sovereign of the Habsburg Netherlands.
- According to the Peace of Westphalia, all parties would recognize the Peace of Augsburg of 1555; Christians of non-dominant denominations were guaranteed the right to practice their faith; and the exclusive sovereignty of each party over its lands, people, and agents abroad was recognized. Multiple territorial adjustments were also decided.
- The Peace of Westphalia established the precedent of peace reached by diplomatic congress and a new system of political order in Europe based upon the concept of co-existing sovereign states. The Westphalian principle of the recognition of another state's sovereignty and right to decide its own fate rests at the foundations of international law today.
- The European colonization of Asia and Africa in the 19th century and two global wars in the 20th century dramatically undermined the principles established in Westphalia.

## Key Terms

- **The Thirty Years' War:** A series of wars in Central Europe between 1618 and 1648. Initially a war between various Protestant and Catholic states in the fragmented Holy Roman Empire, it gradually developed into a more general conflict involving most of the great powers.
- **The Peace of Westphalia:** A series of peace treaties signed between May and October 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster. The treaties ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) between Spain and the Dutch Republic, with Spain formally recognizing the independence of the Dutch Republic.
- **Westphalian sovereignty:** The principle of international law that each nation-state has sovereignty over its territory and domestic affairs, to the exclusion of all external powers, on the principle of non-interference in another country's domestic affairs, and that each state (no matter how large or small) is equal in international law. The doctrine is named after the Peace of Westphalia, signed in 1648.
- **Peace of Augsburg of 1555:** A treaty between Charles V and the forces of the Schmalkaldic League, an alliance of Lutheran princes, on September 25, 1555, at the imperial city of Augsburg, in present-day Bavaria, Germany. It officially ended the religious struggle between the two groups and made the legal division of Christendom permanent within the Holy Roman Empire.
- **cuius regio, eius religio:** A Latin phrase that literally means "Whose realm, his religion," meaning that the religion of the ruler was to dictate the religion of those ruled. At the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 the rulers of the German-speaking states and Charles V, the emperor, agreed to accept this principle.
- **The Eighty Years' War:** A revolt, known also as the Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648), of the Seventeen Provinces against the political and religious hegemony of Philip II of Spain, the sovereign of the Habsburg Netherlands.

## Introduction

The Peace of Westphalia was a series of peace treaties signed between May and October 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster. The treaties ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) between Spain and the Dutch Republic, with Spain formally recognizing the independence of the Dutch Republic. The peace negotiations involved a total of 109 delegations representing European powers. The treaties did not restore peace throughout Europe, but they did create a basis for national self-determination.

### **Background: Wars in Europe**

Two destructive wars were the major triggers behind signing the eventual Peace of Westphalia: the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch Republic.

The Thirty Years' War was a series of wars in Central Europe between 1618 and 1648. Initially a war between various Protestant and Catholic states in the fragmented Holy Roman Empire, it gradually developed into a more general conflict involving most of the great powers. The war began when the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, tried to impose religious uniformity on his domains, forcing Roman Catholicism on its peoples. The northern Protestant states, angered by the violation of their rights to choose granted in the Peace of Augsburg, banded together to form the Protestant Union. These events caused widespread fears throughout northern and Central Europe, and triggered the Protestant Bohemians living in the dominion of Habsburg Austria to revolt against their nominal ruler, Ferdinand II. They ousted the Habsburgs and instead elected Frederick V, Elector of Palatinate, as their monarch. Frederick took the offer without the support of the union. The southern states, mainly Roman Catholic, were angered by this. Led by Bavaria, these states formed the Catholic League to expel Frederick in support of the emperor.

The war became less about religion and more of a continuation of the France–Habsburg rivalry for European political preeminence. Sweden, a major military power in the day, intervened in 1630 under the great general Gustavus Adolphus and started the full-scale great war on the continent. Spain, wishing to finally crush the Dutch rebels in the Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, intervened under the pretext of helping their dynastic Habsburg ally, Austria. No longer able to tolerate the encirclement of two major Habsburg powers on its borders, Catholic France entered the coalition on the side of the Protestants to counter the Habsburgs.

The Thirty Years' War devastated entire regions, with famine and disease significantly decreasing the populations of the German and Italian states, the Crown of Bohemia, and the Southern Netherlands. The war altered the previous political order of European powers. The rise of Bourbon France, the curtailing of Habsburg ambition, and the ascendancy of Sweden as a great power created a new balance of power on the continent, with France emerging from the war strengthened and increasingly dominant in the latter part of the 17th century.

The Eighty Years' War or Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648) was a revolt of the Seventeen Provinces against the political and religious hegemony of Philip II of Spain, the sovereign of the Habsburg Netherlands. After the initial stages, Philip II deployed his armies and regained control over most of the rebelling provinces. However, under the leadership of the exiled William the Silent, the northern provinces continued their resistance. They were eventually able to oust the Habsburg armies, and in 1581 they established the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands. The war continued in other areas, although the heartland of the republic was no longer threatened. After a twelve-year truce, hostilities broke out again around 1619, which coincided with the Thirty Years' War.

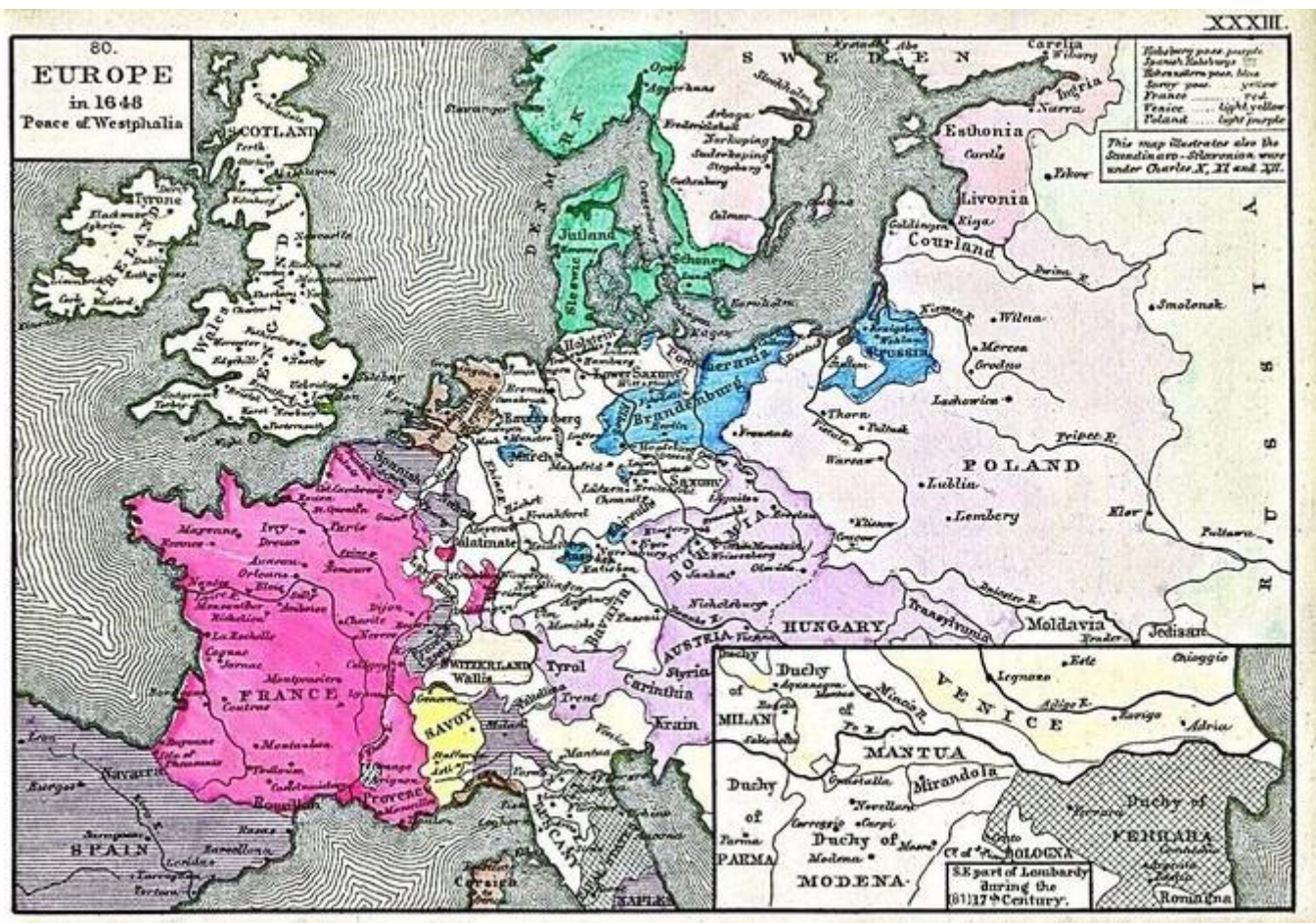
### **The Peace of Westphalia**

Since Lutheran Sweden preferred Osnabrück as a conference venue, its peace negotiations with the Holy Roman Empire, including the allies of both sides, took place in Osnabrück. The empire and its opponent France, including the allies of each, as well as the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands and its opponent Spain (and their respective allies), negotiated in Münster. The peace

negotiations had no exact beginning and ending, because the participating total of 109 delegations never met in a plenary session, but arrived between 1643 and 1646 and left between 1647 and 1649.

According to the Peace of Westphalia, all parties would recognize the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, in which each prince would have the right to determine the religion of his own state (the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*). Christians living in principalities where their denomination was *not* the established church were guaranteed the right to practice their faith in public during allotted hours and in private at their will. The delegates also recognized the exclusive sovereignty of each party over its lands, people, and agents abroad, and responsibility for the warlike acts of any of its citizens or agents.

Multiple territorial adjustments were also decided. Among the most important ones was the recognition of the independence of Switzerland from the Holy Roman Empire and the expansion of the territories of France, Sweden, and Brandenburg-Prussia (later Prussia). The independence of the city of Bremen was clarified. Also, barriers to trade and commerce erected during the war were abolished, and “a degree” of free navigation was guaranteed on the Rhine.



Historical map of Europe after the Peace of Westphalia: From “An Historical Atlas Containing a Chronological Series of One Hundred and Four Maps, at Successive Periods, from the Dawn of History to the Present Day” by Robert H. Labberton, 1884.

The map shows the possessions of the two branches of the house of Habsburg [purple]; the possessions of the house of Hohenzollern (union of Prussia with Brandenburg) [blue]; the Swedish empire on both shores of the Baltic and in northern Germany; the Danish monarchy, Denmark, Norway, and Scania; the British isles, with the battlefields of the civil wars; France, with the battlefields of the civil wars [red]; Germany with the battlefields of the Thirty Years’ War; the republic of Poland at its greatest extent; the western boundary of Russia.

## Legacy

The Peace of Westphalia established the precedent of peace reached by diplomatic congress and a new system of political order in Europe based upon the concept of co-existing sovereign states. Inter-state aggression was to be held in check by a balance of power. A norm was established against interference in another state's domestic affairs, known as the principle of Westphalian sovereignty. This principle of international law presumes that each state has sovereignty over its territory and domestic affairs, to the exclusion of all external powers, on the principle of non-interference in another country's domestic affairs, and that each state (no matter how large or small) is equal in international law.

As European influence spread across the globe, these Westphalian principles, especially the concept of sovereign states, became central to international law and to the prevailing world order. However, the European colonization of Asia and Africa in the 19th century and two global wars in the 20th century dramatically undermined the principles established in Westphalia.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, power was seen as unipolar with the United States in absolute control, though nuclear proliferation and the rise of Japan, the European Union, the Middle East, China, and a resurgent Russia have begun to recreate a multipolar political environment. Instead of a traditional balance of power, inter-state aggression may now be checked by the preponderance of power, a sharp contrast to the Westphalian principle.



The Ratification of the Treaty of Münster, 15 May 1648 (1648) by Gerard ter Borch.



Two cities, Osnabrück and Münster, were chosen to host the peace talks based on religious divisions between the participating delegations.

**LICENSES AND ATTRIBUTIONS**

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