

Where did the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) come from?

Resource sheet

The 1948 UDHR came out of 1939-1945 (World War II).

Before the start of the war there were a number of countries, particularly Germany and Japan, which were dictatorships – countries in which the people had no say over the government. Those governments were both expansionist – that is, they wanted to expand their own territories by taking over other countries by force – and they were both ruthless in their treatment of those who disagreed with them.

In 1939, Germany's policy of seizing other countries led to war. Japan became involved in 1941.

During the war there were millions of soldiers and civilians killed or maimed. The Nazi Party that ran the government of Germany created concentration and extermination camps for certain groups – communists, gypsies, Jews, homosexuals and political opponents. Some were used as slave labour under appalling conditions. Many were simply killed in mass executions, by shooting or poison gas. Millions more died either from starvation, disease or brutal beatings.

The Japanese military government were equally brutal to its opponents. Japanese troops tortured and executed millions of the inhabitants of the countries they seized to 'liberate' from the European colonial powers. They also took hundreds of thousands of captured troops, including thousands of Australian soldiers, and worked them as slave labour, with no medical treatment and inadequate food. Many men and women died in agony under these conditions.

The war ended in 1945 only after the destruction of millions of homes and lives by fighting and bombing, including the use of atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Countries were left devastated. Millions of people became homeless refugees. There was civil war and revolution in many of the countries which had been freed from rule by European colonial governments, but which had not been prepared for self-rule by their colonial masters.

Shock followed the end of World War II. During the war crimes trials in Nuremburg, many of the German and Japanese leaders claimed justification for their brutal actions with the defence that they were only acting under orders. The world demanded that people accept responsibility for their own actions, regardless of their rank.

In 1945, the United Nations was created, with a dream of securing peace and justice in the world by international co-operation. Part of the Charter of the UN – Article 55 – called for the establishment of a set of universally accepted and observed basic human rights, so that people would never again have to go through the abuses that they had just suffered.

By 1948, those nations of the world who were part of the UN adopted a document that would set out for the first time a set of fundamental human rights for everybody. They drew on great documents from the past that had set out people's rights – such as the United States Declaration of Independence (1776), and the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789). But for the first time this would be an international document created and agreed to by the nations of the world and not just one nation's document. And so the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created.