In general discussion, a nation-state is variously called a “country,” a “nation,” or a “state.” But technically, it is a specific form of sovereign state (a political entity on a territory) that is guided by a nation (a cultural entity), and which derives its legitimacy from successfully serving all its citizens. In general, scholars define nation-state as “a sovereign state of which most of the citizens or subjects are united also by factors which define a nation, such as language or common descent.” The nation-state implies that a state and a nation coincide.

The modern state is relatively new to human history, emerging after the Renaissance and Reformation. It was given impetus by the throwing off of kings (for example, in the Netherlands and the United States) and the rise of efficient state bureaucracies that could govern large groups of people impersonally. Frederick the Great (Frederick II of Prussia 1740-1786) is frequently cited as one of the originators of modern state bureaucracy. It is based on the idea that the state can treat large numbers of people equally by efficient application of the law through the bureaucratic machinery of the state.

Some modern nation-states, for example in Europe or North America, prospered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were promoted as a model form of governance. The [League of Nations](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/League_of_Nations) (1919) and the [United Nations](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/United_Nations) are predicated on the concept of a community of nation-states. However, the concept of a modern nation-state is more an ideal than a reality. The majority of the world's people do not feel that the ruling elite in their state promotes their own national interest, but only that of the ruling party. As a result, most of the world's population does not feel their nation (cultural identity) is represented at the United Nations.

There are very few geographic territories in which a single ethnic, religious, or other culturally homogeneous group resides. This has been increasingly true as a result of [globalization](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Globalization) and the dispersion of people of countless national cultures all over the world displaced as refugees from national conflicts within states. The attempt to impose cultural homogeneity on all minority groups within a country has been one of the greatest scourges on human society, but it has taken on a particularly onerous quality in an increasingly pluralistic world. [Genocides](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Genocide), [civil wars](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Civil_war), ethnic cleansing, and religious persecutions are rooted in the concept of creating a unified nation-state by force—a state in which a specific set of cultural norms are imposed either by the ruling elite, or by the majority.

**RISE OF THE NATION-STATE: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT**

The idea of a nation-state is associated with the rise of the modern system of states, usually dated to the **Treaty of Westphalia (1648)**. The balance of power, which characterizes that system, depends for its effectiveness on clearly-defined, centrally controlled, independent powers, whether empires or nation-states. Today, the nation-states are the most powerful political actors in the world. A **nation-state** is *a ruling organization which consists of a group of people that maintain a national identity, occupy a bounded territory, and possess their own government*. Countries like France, Japan, and the United States are examples of modern nation-states. The modern nation-state system began in Western Europe and would eventually encompass the globe. Today there are about 190 nation-states and *these states comprise the major political actors on the world stage*.

The nation-state system came about in medieval Western Europe as a result of the waning political dominance held by the feudal lords and the Catholic Church. Both the **Renaissance** and the **Reformation** were breaking the back of the Church’s political power. The men of the Renaissance (the “rebirth”) began to look to the classical forms for guidance in learning. As for the Reformation, it proposed that men need not get to heaven through the Church. Each believer was a priest before God. So now, both the road to knowledge and to heaven need not go through Rome. The Protestant Reformation would also work to bring about a state transformation throughout Europe:

*The Protestant Reformation helped shatter the religious unity of Europe, and it was linked with the emergence of nation-states with their own boundaries, legislatures, jurisdiction—and therefore laws. It was a time of growing national consciousness. Vernaculars began to be used in universities, replacing Latin. There was a development of interest in national rather than Roman-based law. In Europe, legal nationalism eventually took the form of written national law codes. In place of the authority of Rome or the papacy or some universal principle, the source of the law’s authority now became the state.*

Coupled with the decline of the Roman Church, Europe also began to see the decline of feudalism. A major stress on feudalism came as a result of a rising bourgeoisie middle class in Europe. After the Crusades, the crusaders began to return to the west, bringing with them stories of the wealth in the east and bringing some of that wealth with them.

This desire for wealth led to the development of improved trade routes between the east and west. As a result of the increased trade, towns began to develop as centers of commerce. Over time, some of these towns demanded independence (or at least semi-independence) from their feudal masters. Sometimes the leaders of the towns would revolt against their feudal overlords; at others times, they might buy their independence from their lord who was always in need of money.

As these towns became more politically powerful and as their rulers became wealthier, feudalism’s grip as a political force grew slack. Some serfs, seeing these towns as havens of freedom, would leave their manor and flee to the towns where they could become freemen after a time. After a while, the lord of the manor had to convince his serfs to stay on at the manor and allow them to farm their land as tenets. The flight of the serfs, coupled with the rising wealth among the new merchant classes participating in the emerging commercial society had the effect of bringing an end to feudal domination in western Europe and giving impetus to centralized national power. Land had been the source of wealth and status under feudalism, but that system was yielding to a rising commercial class that found its wealth in trade and money. Slowly, the feudal manors were losing their political dominance to trade and accumulation of money. Mobile capital was a resource for a new type of emerging state.

This power vacuum created by the waning of the feudal lord’s power gave rise to a new type of ruler: a single national monarch. In Western Europe, territory began to consolidate as the merchant classes desired powerful rulers that could protect them and their wares as the traveled from one destination to the next. Increasingly, people were no longer bound to their ruler by an oath; rather they were citizens of cities and towns that had certain privileges and rights because of their attachment to that city. Since the towns were sources of wealth, they were prime candidates for taxation by powerful rulers in exchange for protection. Over time, these rulers could consolidate more and more land under their control.

But not only was feudalism stressed by the rising commercial society, it also stood in the way of commerce. As merchants would travel throughout Europe, they constantly had to pay the tolls and fees to travel through a lord’s domain. Since there were so many of these petty fiefdoms, the merchants desired fewer of these domains which gave rise to the desire for a more consolidated Europe with fewer rulers, but greater protection for the merchants.

**Sovereignty and the Nation-State**

It was these conditions, feudalism, the Church’s hegemonic decline, and the rise of a bourgeoisie class that set the stage for the rise of powerful monarchs and, with them, the modern nation-state system. If the nation-state system has a birthday, it would have to be 1648, the year of the **Treaty of Westphalia** (1648), which effectively brought an end to the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The Thirty Years War had been a bloody religious war between the Catholics and Protestants. As a resolution to the war, the Treaty of Westphalia allowed the German princes to decide the official religion of their domain be that religion Catholic, Calvinist, or Lutheran. More important throughout Europe,Westphalia signalled the beginning of state sovereignty that each of these kings would be the sole sovereign in hisdomain. **Sovereignty** *is that power of which there is no higher appeal*.

While the general understanding was that God was the sovereign and that rulers governed as God’s ministers, there was the attempt by some to sever government from the domain of heaven. Such was the effort of the English political philosopher **Thomas Hobbes** (1588-1679). In his work *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes lays the foundation for a ruler that is not under God, but is the absolute ruler in his domain. According to political theorist, Walter Berns, Hobbes was “the first political philosopher to argue openly that government may be founded on an anti-religious basis.”

Hobbes was born in 1588, the time when Spain was sailing its “Invincible Armada” to the shores of England to place the island-nation under Rome and popery. Hobbes tells the story that his mother, upon hearing that Spain’s armada was about to attack England, gone into premature labor and gave birth to Hobbes. On the day of his birth, said Hobbes, "my mother gave birth to twins, myself and fear." Hobbes’ absolute state is one based on fear, a fear of chaos and disorder where life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Therefore, man's only recourse is to surrender his natural rights to an absolute monarch that will protect him from chaos, but he must obey him absolutely. Hobbes' prescribed monarch was an absolute ruler who imposed order, in top-down fashion, upon his domain.

While others (like the Christian **John Locke**) modified Hobbes’ theory of an absolute monarch, Hobbes still helped lay the foundation for the modern state and the coming Beast by advancing a monarch above whom there was no higher appeal. Today, sovereignty is a central concept that nation-states claim for themselves. However, democratic states tend not to say that the ruler is sovereign. Sovereignty might be resident either in the legislature (as in the United Kingdom) or in the people (as in the United States).

**Evolution of the Nation-States**

By the time the United States ratified the Constitution in 1788, there were only about twenty nation-states in the world. However, that was soon to change as the nineteenth century approached with a series of independence movements against colonial powers like **Spain** and **France** that spurred the creation of new states. The nineteenth century also saw the rise in **nationalism**, sometimes referred to as the “gravedigger of empires.” This demolishing of empires continued into the twentieth century as more ethnic groups embraced national solidarity, and claimed the right of determining their political destiny. The years following World War I saw a large number of new nation-states and a corresponding decline in world empires such as the **Ottoman** and **Austro-Hungarian empires**. However, even after World War II, only about half of the modern states were in place. New anti-colonial movements led to the creation of more states after World War II. During 1944-1984, there were about ninety new states created. Coupled with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a series of republics, the world had about 190 nation-states by the turn of the millennium.

**Conclusion**

It had been thought that with the creation of international organizations like the United Nations and regional states like the European Union, the nation-state system would collapse just as did the feudal order from which the Westphalian system sprang. However, this has not happened. The nation-states still remain the most powerful political players on the international stage.