

# THE UNITED STATES AND THE COMING OF WORLD WAR II

## The Approach of the War, 1933-1939

- The rise of militarism
  - Due to economic and political chaos resulting from World War I, authoritarian political regimes, based on a quasi-military structure, arise in Europe: the common thread is that of the individual as having no rights and the state as being supreme (*cf.* Declaration of Independence)
    - The U.S.S.R (Communism 1918/Josef Stalin 1924)
    - Italy (Fascism/Benito Mussolini 1922)
    - Germany (Nazism/Adolph Hitler 1933)
      - N.B.: Germany and Russia are both dictatorships, but ideologically the two hate each other violently
- Germany re-arms and expands
  - Germany resents the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles and wishes to rise to greatness as a nation again; Hitler, promising to restore Germany to glory, wins popular election as chancellor, 1933
    - 1933-45, Hitler and the Nazis adopt increasingly brutal laws designed to repress political opposition, promote racial and genetic purity (ranging from sterilization of “defectives” to the Holocaust), and increase military and economic power
    - N.B. Insofar as these are internal measures, prior to war they aren’t traditional grounds for foreign intervention; later developments in international law regarding human rights will change this to a degree.
  - 1933, Germany withdraws from League of Nations
  - Mid-1930s, Germany begins expanding the size of the German army beyond treaty-imposed limits
  - 1936, Hitler moves troops into the Rhineland, a region of Germany adjacent to France where the treaty forbade German army units
    - The burning question that should be by now be occurring to you: Why aren’t Britain and France letting Germany do all of this?
    - The answer: Their belief that anything is better than another war of the sort that happened 1914-1918, together with their hope that once Hitler has annexed all German-populated territory, his expansion will stop. This is the policy of appeasement.
  - 1936, Germany and Italy enter into a treaty of friendship: this is the beginning of the Axis Powers (i.e., an axis around which the world will soon turn)
  - 1936-37, Germany sends troops to fight in support of fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War; this is good on-the-job training for German military and direct action in aid of fascism’s spread

- Early 1938, Germany annexes Austria after threatening to take it by force; thousands of Austrian Nazis enthusiastically welcome German rule
- Late 1938, Germany prepares to annex the Sudetenland (a heavily German region of Czechoslovakia)
  - 1938, Munich Conference
    - British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French President Daladier agree not to oppose Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland in light of Hitler's assurance that this is his last territorial demand
    - Germany is bluffing: Hitler's army isn't nearly strong enough yet to fight Britain and France, but Chamberlain has bad intelligence on this point, and is afraid of another war anyway
- Late 1938, Hitler annexes the rest of Czechoslovakia, completely disregarding the Munich Agreement and the Allies
- Poland
  - 1939, Hitler demands annexation of a region of Poland known as the Polish Corridor; Poland refuses and prepares to defend itself
  - Summer 1939, Hitler reveals the amazing news of a German/Russian non-aggression pact, which will safely let Germany strike east at Poland without fear of Russian reprisal
  - England and France, now seeing that armed conflict is inevitable, threaten war if Hitler invades Poland
- 1 September 1939, World War II begins: Germany invades Poland, conquering it in 6 weeks through new tactics of Blitzkrieg, dividing it with USSR
  - Blitzkrieg ("lightning war"): highly mechanized and mobile warfare dependent on tanks and air power, and rapid maneuver very different from the static, stationary warfare that characterized World War I.
  - World War I was trench warfare; World War II is mechanized warfare
- The U.S. response to rising tensions in Europe
  - US, safe behind the Atlantic barrier, is unwilling to get involved diplomatically or financially, taking steps to avoid the economic commitment that led to its involvement in World War I
    - 1935, Congress passes the Neutrality Act:
      - Arms embargo on all warring states
      - U.S. citizens may not travel on vessels of warring states
  - 1939, after German invasion of Poland, Congress recognizes general U.S. sympathy for Allied cause and revises act to allow some support of Allied cause

- Sales of war materiel to warring states are permissible but only on a cash basis, and to be carried in non-US shipping (“cash and carry”)

## • **The war explodes outward, 1939-1941**

- 1939-40, U-Boat campaign begins
- Spring 1940, Hitler unleashes Blitzkrieg on France, overrunning it in a matter of weeks
- Summer 1940, the Battle of Britain: Hitler begins bombing Royal Air Force bases in Britain to gain air superiority, which will allow him to sink Royal Navy and invade England itself; by fall 1940, England’s position is desperate
  - From this point on in modern warfare, gaining air superiority over enemy territory as a means of neutralizing enemy air and ground defenses prior to a ground invasion becomes a major element of warfare (*cf.* Persian Gulf Wars I and II, 1991 and 2003)
- Spring 1941, Germany, having failed to win air superiority over England, abandons English invasion plans and launches massive attack of U.S.S.R., closing to within 15 miles of Moscow by the end of the year
- The U.S. response:
  - Spring 1940, Roosevelt, on his own executive authority, trades Britain 50 old destroyers for anti-submarine warfare in exchange for leases on British naval bases in the Caribbean, an act highly favorable to British war effort
  - 1941, Congress passes the Lend-Lease Act, allowing Roosevelt to sell, lend, lease, or give war supplies to any state whose defense was vital to US interests (i.e. Britain and later U.S.S.R.)
  - Summer 1941, Roosevelt declares Western Atlantic to be neutral zone under the protection of the U.S. Navy, which would escort convoys of Allied shipping (thus freeing up the Royal Navy for other tasks)
    - September/October 1941, German U-boats begin to fire on U.S. destroyers; this likely would have resulted in war between U.S. and Germany had not events in the Pacific intervened . . .

## **The U.S. and Japan**

- A history of tension
  - Prior to 1850, Japan is isolated and feudal
  - 1853-1910, after initial contact with U.S., Japan modernizes rapidly through industrialization and war (with China and then Russia)
  - U.S. and Japan both have economic/imperial ambitions in Far East, leading to frequent diplomatic conflict
  - 1920s, Japanese Army assumes heightened role in Japanese politics
  - 1931, Japan invades Chinese province of Manchuria
  - 1937, Japan expands military action against China
  - Early 1941, U.S. responds to continued Japanese aggression by halting all sales of U.S. scrap iron (military supplies) to Japan

- summer 1941, Japan invades other regions, including Indo-China (Viet Nam); U.S. responds by ceasing sales of oil (military supplies) to Japan
  - October 1941, new military government under General Hideki Tojo comes to power in Japan, determined to prevent U.S. from stopping further Japanese expansion
  
- Fall 1941, Japanese government prepares to neutralize American power in the Pacific in order to give Japan freedom to conquer and expand other regions in Far East
  - The plan: use aircraft carrier-based planes to destroy U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
  - The plan is novel: aircraft carriers had never been used in this fashion before
  - The plan is audacious: U.S. doesn't expect an attack so far to the east, instead anticipating an attack on the Philippines
  - The plan is successful: December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft sink or severely damage eight out of eight battleships, destroying the heart of U.S. offensive power in the Pacific; U.S. will now have great difficulty preventing Japanese expansion
  
- December 8, 1941, U.S. declares war against Japan
- December 11, 1941, Germany and Italy declare war against the United States