

Neutrality to Involvement: The Lead-Up to World War II

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Much of the world outside the United States was also impacted by the Great Depression. During the crisis, militaristic, totalitarian regimes came to power in Europe, while Japan expanded its borders in Asia. As the likelihood of another world war increased, President Roosevelt worked to convince Americans that international involvement was in their best interests.

This tutorial examines the origins of American involvement in World War II in four parts:

1. The Myth of American Isolationism

At the end of World War I, Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. As a result, the United States did not participate in the League of Nations—an international body that sought to resolve disputes through discussion and negotiation.

The fact that many Americans during the 1920s and 1930s were wary of international involvement has led some historians (and students) to conclude that the United States was isolationist or that it sought to withdraw from global affairs entirely during this period.

Some historians challenge this conclusion. The United States continued to oversee the affairs of Latin American nations during this period. As American troops withdrew from countries they temporarily occupied, the United States established relations with several dictators in the region. These leaders imposed authoritarian rule on their nations and enacted policies favorable to U.S. economic and agricultural interests.

In European affairs, the United States avoided agreements that might limit its ability to act independently. Some historians argue that this was in keeping with the foreign policy tradition of **unilateralism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Unilateralism

Conducting foreign affairs with minimal or no consultation with other nations, including allies.

In 1928, the United States and 14 European nations signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which declared war to be an international crime. One of the reasons that the United States supported the pact was that it did not require signatory nations to assist each other in the event of a military attack.

A series of international crises during the 1930s, each linked to the increasing militarism of Italy, Germany, and Japan, tested America's desire for nonintervention and independence in foreign policy.

2. Dictatorships and Militarism Abroad

Unlike the United States, many European nations struggled in the aftermath of World War I. In Italy and Germany, the economic and political climate supported the growth of nationalist, militaristic regimes.

2a. Italy

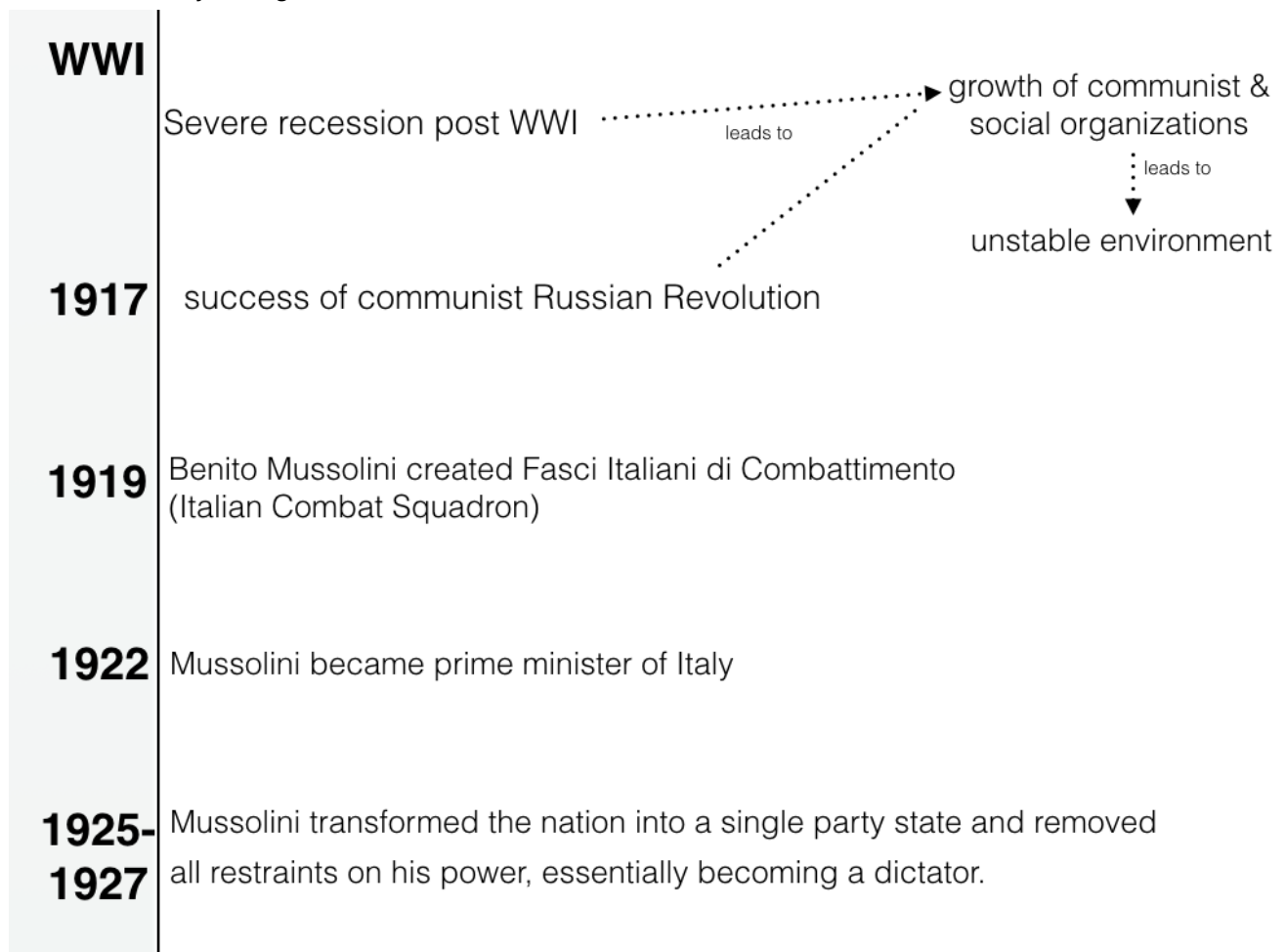
Italy's economy experienced a severe recession following World War I. This poor economic situation, combined with the Russian Revolution of 1917, created an unstable environment that facilitated the rise of **Benito Mussolini**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Benito Mussolini

Leader of the National Fascist Party of Italy from 1922 to 1945, who joined the Axis alliance with Germany during World War II.



Mussolini's *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* articulated a political philosophy known as **fascism**. With support from major Italian industrialists and the king, who feared the prospects of a communist revolution, Mussolini became prime minister of Italy in 1922. By 1927, he had removed all restraints on his power to become the dictatorial leader of the nation.



TERM TO KNOW

Fascism

A political ideology that focuses on national unity through dictatorial rule and militarism.

2b. Germany

Similar circumstances contributed to the rise of the National Socialist (or Nazi) Party, led by Adolf Hitler, in Germany.

Following World War I, German politics was fragmented by partisan divisions. The economy was devastated by the severe reparations that Germany owed to the Allied Powers according to the Treaty of Versailles. As a result, Germans resented the Allied Powers, particularly France and Great Britain. These conditions led to the growth of the German Communist Party, which frightened wealthy and middle-class Germans.

The Nazi Party gained many followers during the Great Depression, when Germany, like other industrialized nations, suffered from decreased production, declining consumption, and increased unemployment.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Nearly 30% of the German workforce was unemployed in 1932.

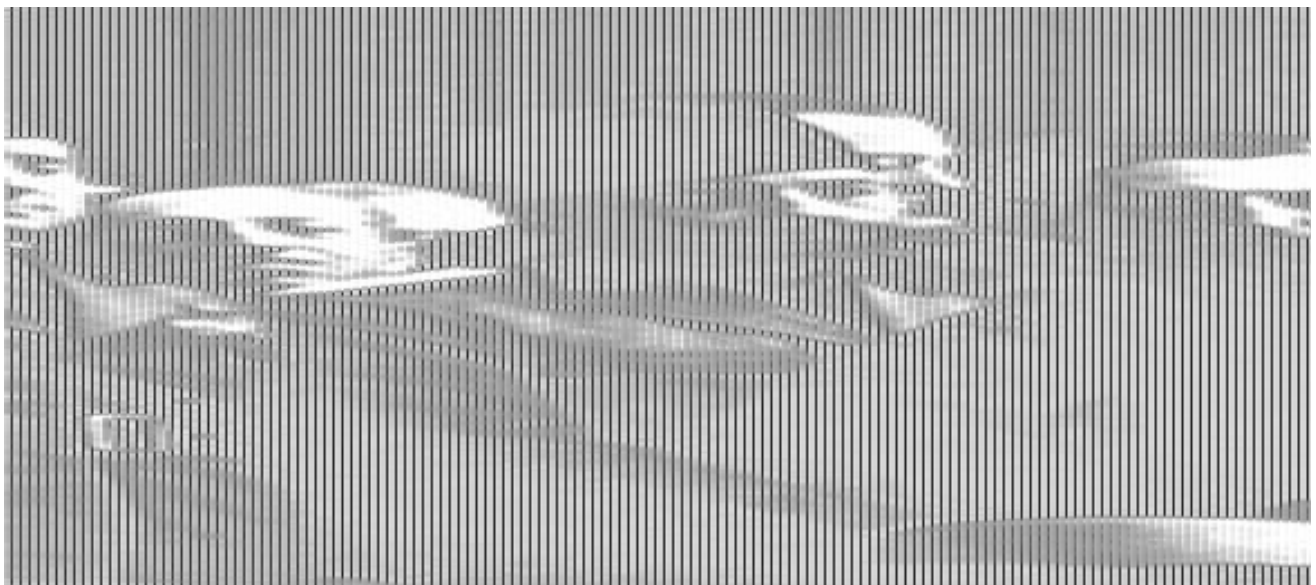
By early 1933, the Nazis had become the largest party in the German legislature. As the economy deteriorated and the fear of communist revolution spread, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed **Adolf Hitler** as chancellor (i.e., the head of government) in January 1933. In a subsequent election, Nazis in the legislature passed an Enabling Act, which granted Hitler dictatorial powers.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Adolf Hitler

German dictator and leader of the Nazi Party, who rose to power in 1933 and whose fascist and racist policies led to World War II and the Holocaust.



Italian Fascists, led by Benito Mussolini (a, center), and German Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler (b), dismantled democratic institutions and promoted militarization, racial supremacy, and aggressive nationalism in Europe during the 1920s and early 1930s.

Hitler blamed Jews and ethnic minorities for Germany's decline and promised to return the country to greatness. He revitalized German armed forces and began an aggressive program of territorial expansion that violated the Treaty of Versailles, as shown in the table below.

Date	Event
1935	Germany enacted the Nuremberg Laws, which deprived Jews of German citizenship and associated rights.
1936	Hitler sent army units to the Rhineland (which borders France). According to the Treaty of Versailles, this region was to remain a demilitarized zone.
March 1938	Germany invaded and occupied Austria.
November 9, 1938	Nazi gangs raided and destroyed Jewish homes/businesses/synagogues—an event that came to be known as Kristallnacht (the night of the broken glass).

The European powers responded to Germany's acquisition of the Sudetenland (a region of Czechoslovakia with a large German population) in the summer of 1938 with a policy of **appeasement**.

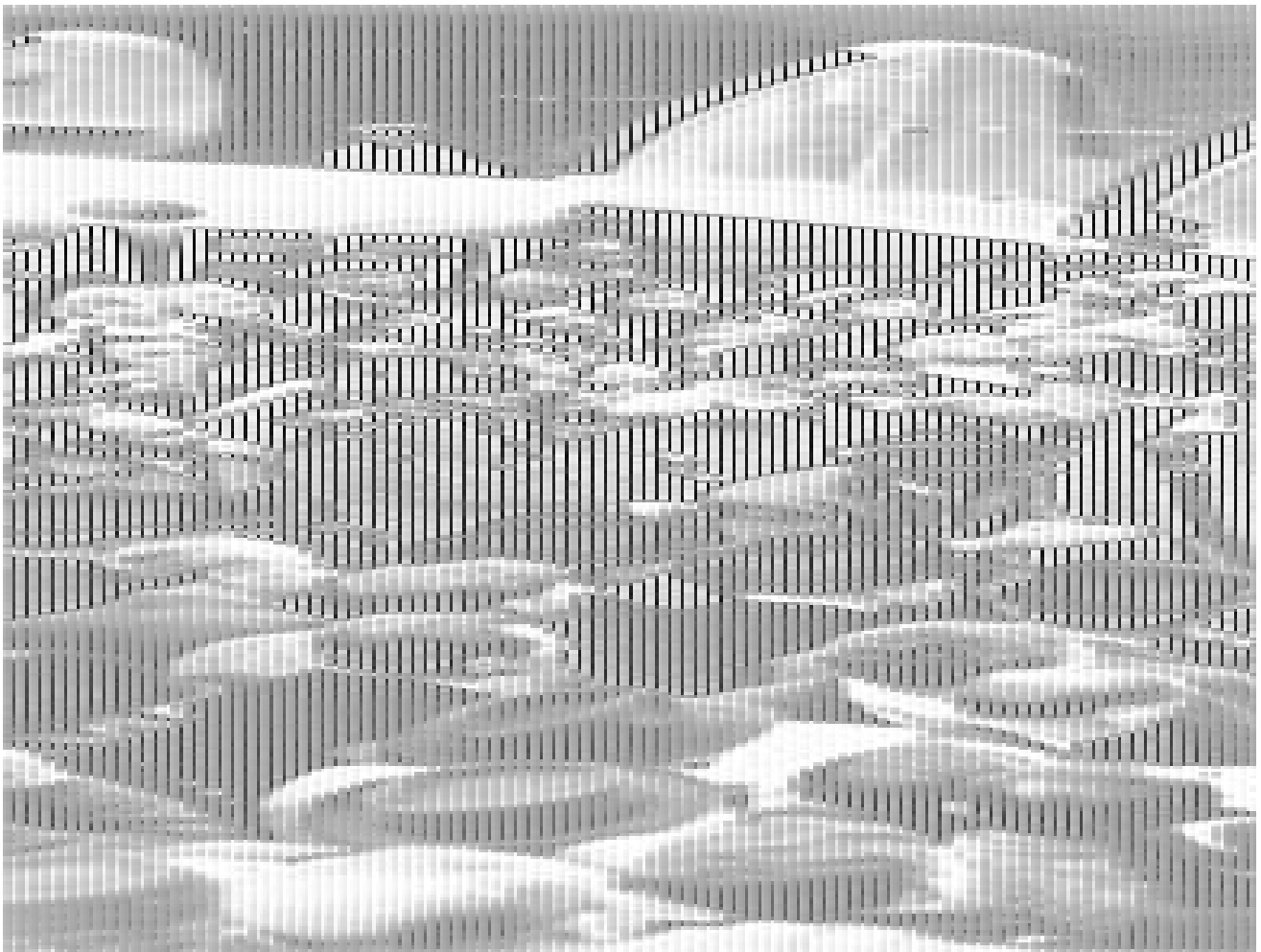


TERM TO KNOW

Appeasement

The policy of making concessions to aggressor nations, hoping that they will be satisfied with what has been conceded and will make no more demands.

At a conference in Munich in September 1938, Great Britain's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, and France's prime minister, Édouard Daladier, accepted German occupation of the Sudetenland, hoping that Hitler's appetite for expansion would be satisfied with this concession.



Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain arrives in England after negotiating the German occupation of the Sudetenland, proclaiming he had achieved “peace for our time.”

Not long after the Sudetenland agreement, however, Germany occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia and prepared to expand further into Eastern Europe.

2c. Japan

Unlike Germany or Italy, Japan was a prosperous nation at the end of World War I. It had developed a modern, industrial, capitalist economy like the United States and other industrial powers. Like Mussolini and Hitler, however, Japanese political and military leaders viewed the spread of communism with great concern, especially in China, where civil war raged during the late 1920s. Japan also sought to acquire territory that would provide raw materials for its industrial economy. In 1931, Japanese troops occupied the northeastern region of China known as Manchuria.

In 1936, Japan and Germany signed a mutual defense treaty in which they pledged to support each other in their expansionist projects. Italy joined the pact a year later, forming the foundation of a military alliance known as the **Axis Powers**.



TERM TO KNOW

Axis Powers

Military alliance between Germany, Japan, and Italy during the Second World War.

Japan invaded China in 1937. Chinese troops suffered significant defeats, and Japanese conduct sparked an

international outcry. When Japan captured the city of Nanjing (also known as Nanking) in December of 1937, Japanese soldiers raped Chinese women and massacred approximately 300,000 Chinese prisoners of war and civilians.

3. From American Neutrality . . .

The United States was alarmed by the rise of fascism in Europe and Japanese militarism in the Pacific. However, many Americans supported nonintervention, also known as neutrality, for several reasons:

- The belief of many Americans that U.S. involvement in the First World War had been a mistake
- Failure to fully comprehend the scale of Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism
- Passage of the Neutrality Acts

3a. The Belief That U.S. Involvement Was a Mistake

In 1934 and 1935, the **Nye Commission**, headed by Senator **Gerald P. Nye** of North Dakota, held hearings in which it concluded that a small group of bankers and industrialists had pressured Woodrow Wilson into deciding to enter the First World War. This group profited from the war by making loans or selling arms and ammunition to the Allied Powers.



TERM TO KNOW

Nye Commission

A Senate committee that discovered American bankers and arms manufacturers had lobbied President Wilson to involve the United States in World War I.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Gerald P. Nye

Senator from North Dakota who led the Senate hearings on American involvement in World War I (known as the Nye Commission) in 1934 and 1935.

The findings of the Nye Commission indicated that a profit motive was behind American entry into World War I rather than a desire to win peace and spread democracy. Based on its findings, the commission concluded that the United States should not be drawn into another international dispute.

3b. Misjudging the Scale of Adolf Hitler's Anti-Semitism

Although President **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** and Congress were aware of the Nazi persecution of Jews, they failed to relax immigration restrictions that could have allowed more refugees to enter the United States. Anti-Semitism in the United States, embodied by the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s, limited the desire of many Americans to relieve the growing refugee crisis.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Democratic U.S. president from 1933 until his death in 1945, who was elected for an unprecedented four terms; led the United States through the Great Depression and World War II; member of the Allied Powers' "Big Three" leaders.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1939, when German refugees aboard the S.S. *St. Louis*, most of them Jews, were refused permission to land in Cuba and turned to the United States for help, the State Department informed them that the immigration quota for Germany had already been filled. They were forced to return to Europe.

Additional Resource

Visit the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) to listen to audio interviews of 48 Holocaust survivors.

3c. Passage of the Neutrality Acts

During the second half of the 1930s, Congress passed a series of **Neutrality Acts** (see the table below) to limit American involvement overseas.



TERM TO KNOW

Neutrality Acts

Legislation intended to limit American involvement in the affairs of warring nations.

Neutrality Acts	
The Neutrality Act of 1935	Prohibited the sale of arms to warring nations
The Neutrality Act of 1936	Prohibited American banks from loaning money to countries currently at war
The Neutrality Act of 1937	Forbade the transportation of weapons or passengers to warring nations on American ships; also prohibited American citizens from traveling on the ships of nations at war



BRAINSTORM

Recall the factors that led to American intervention in World War I. In what ways did the Neutrality Acts attempt to prevent the United States from entering another war?



This protest sign indicates the unwillingness of many Americans to become involved in foreign conflicts prior to World War II.

4. . . . to American Involvement

Events in Europe forced the United States to reconsider neutrality and to develop a foreign policy based on international cooperation.

On September 1, 1939, Germany began a Blitzkrieg, or “lightning war,” against Poland. Swift, surprise attacks by infantry, tanks, and aircraft quickly overwhelmed the Polish defenders. Finally realizing that Hitler could not be trusted and that his nation’s territorial demands could not be satisfied, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. The European phase of World War II had begun.



DID YOU KNOW

Knowing that his country was unprepared to fight a major war against Germany, **Joseph Stalin**, the leader of the Soviet Union, signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler in August 1939. In it, both nations promised not to wage war against each other and to divide Poland between them.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Joseph Stalin

Leader of the Soviet Union from 1929 to 1953; member of the Allied Powers’ “Big Three” leaders. From that point on, President Roosevelt worked to convince Congress and the American people that assisting Great Britain and the other **Allies** was in the nation’s best interests.



TERM TO KNOW

Allies

Nations that fought against the Axis Powers, most notably Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

In November 1939, Roosevelt succeeded in altering the Neutrality Acts by implementing a policy known as **cash and carry**.



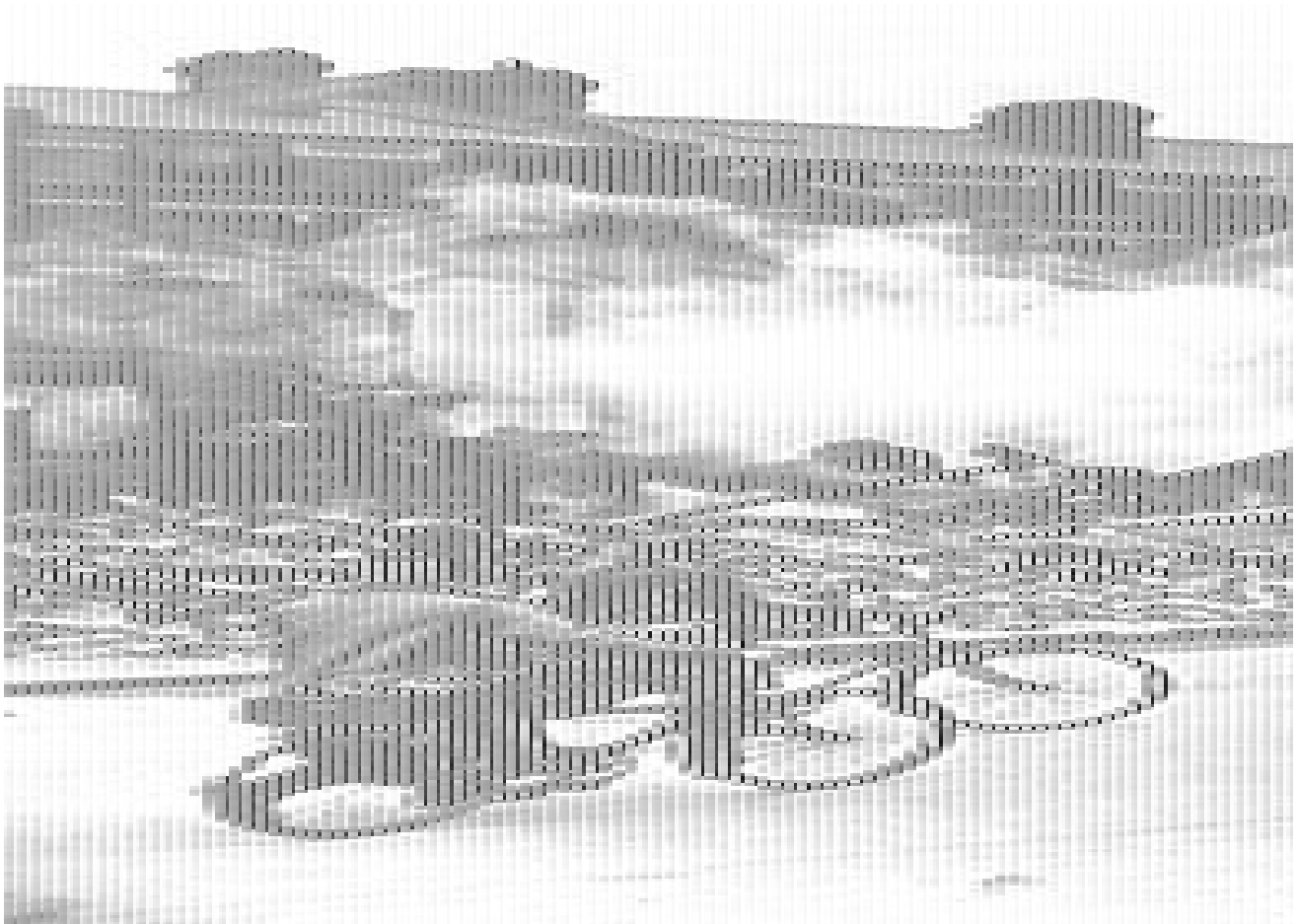
TERM TO KNOW

Cash and Carry

A U.S. policy that permitted Great Britain to purchase military equipment and supplies if it could pay for them in cash and arrange for their transportation on board its own ships.

The situation was dire for the Allies during the early years of the war.

➔ **EXAMPLE** During its spring offensive in 1940, the German army conquered much of Scandinavia and defeated France in 6 weeks, leaving Great Britain to stand alone against German aggression.



London and other major British cities suffered extensive damage as a result of bombing raids during the **Battle of Britain** in 1940. Over 1 million houses were destroyed or damaged during the **Blitz**, and almost 20,000 Londoners were killed.

As Europe confronted the Axis Powers, the opponents of American involvement in World War II formed the **America First Committee**.



TERM TO KNOW

America First Committee

Opponents of American involvement in World War II.

The committee included prominent citizens (e.g., Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh) who opposed U.S. involvement for the following reasons:

- They believed that economic aid to Great Britain would inevitably require U.S. military intervention.
- They viewed the war as a struggle between Europeans in which the United States had no interest.
- Many committee members minimized the German threat; some, most notably **Charles Lindbergh**, believed the United States should support Germany's desire for additional territory in Europe.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Charles Lindbergh

Famous American aviator who successfully completed the first solo transatlantic airplane flight in

1927; member of the America First Committee, which opposed American involvement in World War II.

As the America First Committee argued against American intervention, President Roosevelt worried that Great Britain might be overwhelmed by German forces. The crisis prompted him to run for a third term as president. Roosevelt won the 1940 election over Republican challenger Wendell Wilkie easily. In a December 1940 "fireside chat," he announced that the United States would serve as an "arsenal of democracy" for Great Britain and the other Allies, by providing them with the supplies they needed to fight the Axis Powers.

In his State of the Union address in January 1941, Roosevelt outlined war objectives for the Allies by outlining the "four freedoms":

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the "Four Freedoms"

"The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Who is Roosevelt referring to when he mentions the "new order of tyranny"?

2. Why does Roosevelt claim that the four freedoms can be attained “everywhere in the world”?

By March 1941, with Great Britain nearly bankrupt and concern growing over its ability to defend itself, Congress passed the **Lend-Lease Act**.



TERM TO KNOW

Lend-Lease Act

Authorized the United States to sell, lease, or transfer armaments to any nation deemed important to the defense of the United States.

The Lend-Lease Act ended America’s neutrality. Through Lend-Lease, the United States transported billions of dollars in aid and material to Great Britain and other Allies. Congress also began to increase annual expenditures for national defense. By the fall of 1941, the United States was fully committed to doing all that it could to contain Nazi aggression—short of direct military intervention.



SUMMARY

The rise of fascism and militarism abroad challenged the core tenets of American foreign policy. During the 1930s, while Italy, Germany, and Japan pursued imperial expansion, the United States sought to avoid conflicts similar to the First World War. As the Second World War began, Germany’s rapid advances in Europe revealed that this conflict would be different from World War I. Despite the efforts of nonintervention groups like America First, the United States abandoned unilateralism for a foreign policy based on international aid and assistance.

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REFERENCES

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Four Freedoms Speech, January 6, 1941, Retrieved from the Miller Center on 5/1/17: bit.ly/2qpnBwx



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America First Committee

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