World War II

Origins in Europe, 1936-1941

The origins and unfolding of the Second World War had very little to do with the United States. The World War II memorial in Washington, DC gives the dates of the war as “1941-1945.” Though those were the years of direct U.S. participation in the military conflict, the war in Europe was well underway long before the U.S. was even a factor.

Contrary to Hollywood-generated mythology that presents the war as almost solely an American triumph, the Soviet Union bore the brunt of the Nazi war machine, and its armed forces – assisted by U.S. aid – deserve much of the credit for breaking the back of the Third Reich.

In many respects the Second World War was simply a continuation of the First World War.

The Treaty of Versailles (1919) may have ended hostilities, but it did not entirely resolve the underlying sources of conflict. German resentment over the Treaty in part set the stage for the emergence of Adolf Hitler. (Similarly, Japanese resentment of the Treaty terms partially explain the origins of the war in Asia.)

Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party stoked feelings of resentment among many in the German middle classes who had suffered economically and psychologically in the wake of World War I. He rode this resentment to power in 1933.

Hitler also co-opted the Allies’ “self-determination” rhetoric to make the case for mobilizing German military power and expanding the German borders (seeking “lebensraum”). Citing U.S. President Woodrow Wilson who had preached that all peoples should have a government of their own choosing that represented the people’s interests, Hitler set his sights on gathering all German speakers under the sovereignty of the German government.

This began with the re-occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936. Hitler demanded that French and British troops withdraw and allow the Germans who lived in this region full sovereignty.

Determined to avoid another conflict and preoccupied with domestic economic problems, London and Paris agreed to withdraw. Hitler soon began to use the natural and industrial resources now back under German control to fuel his military machine.
Two years later, in March 1938, Hitler negotiated the “Anschluss” (“Connection”) between Germany and Austria. This move, he claimed, was not aggressive or expansionist but merely made legal the cultural reality – the Austrians and the Germans were one people (or so Hitler believed).

The West registered only a muted protest since Hitler justified his actions based on the self-determination ideology that the Western nations themselves had embraced.

Many Austrians (though certainly not all) welcomed the Anschluss, believing that they would benefit from German protection. Jews, of course, were the notable exception. It soon became clear that the Nazis were a threat to them since they did not consider them “German,” but rather of some inferior race whose influence had to be curbed, if not eliminated.

Six months later, Hitler met with the leaders of France, Great Britain, and Italy in Munich. There, he promised them that his goals were limited – to bring German speaking peoples under German control. Once he had achieved this, he would forego any further expansion.

The governments of France and England chose to “appease” Hitler, not because they trusted his word, but because they knew they were in no position to defeat the Germans in a war. First, the Germans were stronger militarily; and second, public opinion was so anti-war that even attempts to mobilize for a potential war could get the ruling parties voted out of office.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain came to be the “face” of appeasement and his ever-present umbrella its symbol. History has not been kind to Chamberlain. Many later accused him of cowardice and naivete; but his policies were more realistic and less cowardly than some of his critics have claimed. Through signing the Munich Agreement (and appeasing Hitler), Chamberlain believed he was “buying time” for the British to mobilize so that when the time came to face the Germans on the battlefield, the British armed forces would have a better chance of success.

Less than a month after the Munich Agreement, Hitler’s forces moved into the Sudetenland – a region of Czechoslovakia in which German speakers were numerous (but also a region in which some non-German speakers resided.) Again, Hitler justified his move in terms of “self-determination” – the German speakers had a right to be ruled by a German government.

A look at the map, however (See Powerpoint slide), shows that Hitler was positioning his troops to take over all of Czechoslovakia. The Czechs saw the writing on the wall and desperately appealed to Great Britain and France to protect them. They got no response.

All the while, Stalin in the Soviet Union was watching the unfolding of events. He urged the Western governments to join the Soviet Union in pursuing a policy of “Collective
Security” in opposition to Hitler. London and Paris showed little interest in Stalin’s strategy.

Stalin concluded the Western governments were weak and would do (and could do) nothing to stop Hitler. He also suspected he was being set up – by “appeasing” the German leader as he cast his eyes toward the east, the West (or so Stalin believed) was indirectly urging Hitler to attack the Soviet Union.

By mid-1939 Stalin abandoned his efforts to join with the West in Collective Security and was looking for other options.

Meanwhile, Hitler was laying out his plans. Determined not to fight a two-front war, he indicated his willingness to sign a non-aggression pact with the Soviets, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had been ardently anti-Nazi in its rhetoric (and Hitler had been ardently anti-communist in his rhetoric).

Putting aside ideological differences for military and strategic considerations, the Germans and the Russians sign the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939.

This agreement immediately puts Poland in jeopardy. (Russia in the East; Germany in the West – see map on the Powerpoint slides – both threatened to invade.) The French and British governments announce that if Germany attacks Poland, this will force them to declare war on Germany. Germany is not intimidated. Hitler’s armies invade Poland on September 1, 1939.

Additionally, Soviet troops moved to occupy the eastern half of Poland (in part to expand Soviet influence but also to create a fortified buffer zone between the German army and Soviet territory.)

The Poles fought valiantly but were quickly vanquished by the superior German forces. (That the Poles sent men armed with sabers on horseback into the teeth of the German tanks is an exaggeration, but the fact remains that the Poles were no match for Hitler’s Blitzkrieg.)

Having conquered the western half of Poland and insured that the Soviets would not move against German forces from the east, Hitler turns his attention once again to the west.

In 1940, his troops rapidly defeat the armed forces of Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Luxemburg. Next in his path is France, which falls in June 1940. The world sees the grim images of Nazi troops marching down Paris’s Champs Elysees.

The French had a substantial and well-equipped army, so the French defeat at the hands of the Nazis came as a great shock – particularly given how quickly it occurred.
British troops sent to supplement the French forces beat a hasty retreat after the battle of Dunkirk in northern France. Most made it safely back across the English Channel insuring the British would survive to fight another day, but British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (who replaced Neville Chamberlain in 1940) reminds his people that “wars are not won by evacuations.”

Hitler, pressing his advantage, begins an aerial bombardment of British cities (especially London). The Brits vow to fight on. Queen Elizabeth (mother of the current queen) announces her children will stay with her; she will stay with the King; and the King “will never leave” London. Churchill speaks to the nation from underground – “We will never surrender.”

The British Royal Air Force out fought the German Luftwaffe and Hitler paused his attack. The Germans come close, but they are unable to deliver a knock out blow to the British.

At this point, Hitler makes the first of two colossal blunders that will ultimately lose him the war. Rather than continuing to focus on defeating the British, he assumes that they are so close to defeat that he can finish them off later. Instead, he mobilizes his forces to attack the Soviet Union.

Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt warn Stalin that the Germans are preparing to invade his country. Stalin, wary of the deceptive ways of “capitalists and imperialists,” ignores the warnings….until it is too late.

Even worse, during the previous year Stalin had conducted a ferocious purge of Soviet generals and other senior officers. At the very moment when war against Germany loomed, Stalin was decimating the upper ranks of his military.

On June 22, 1941 German troops crossed into Soviet territory. Unprepared and ill-equipped, Soviet troops were no match for heavily armed, mechanized German tank divisions. The Soviets, some fighting with broom sticks, were mercilessly slaughtered. Wave after wave of Soviet infantry are thrown at the advancing German line. Over the next two years, the Germans march relentlessly across Soviet territory (the same distance as if they had landed on the east coast of the U.S. and marched as far as Chicago). Those Soviet troops who try to retreat are shot down by the Soviet secret police (NKVD). By the end of the war, the NKVD had killed a million Soviet citizens who tried to flee the German advances. Overall, the Soviets lose more than 20 million people.

In time, however, Hitler’s forces would fall victim to the same Russian winter that had thwarted Napoleon Bonaparte’s ill-fated invasion more than a century before. The tide would turn and the Soviets would go on the offensive, not stopping until they had marched all the way to Berlin – where they arrived in the summer of 1945.
THE U.S. ROLE?

Since the Munich Agreement of 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt suspected that the approaching conflict in Europe would likely draw in the United States. He could not say so publicly since public opinion was adamantly opposed to the nation involving itself in yet another “European war.”

Roosevelt, however, recognized long before most Americans the threat that Nazi Germany posed to U.S. national interests. If Hitler were to gain control of the entire European continent and then neutralize the British navy (or, even worse, put the British navy in the service of Germany), the U.S. would be cut off from its main trading partners and be vulnerable to a trans-Atlantic attack. This represented both an economic threat and a military threat.

Though Roosevelt would have liked to have begun mobilizing the U.S. for war against Germany in 1938, he knew this was politically impossible. Once he decided to run for a third term in 1940, he realized he could not give any indication that he believed war with Germany was inevitable. Instead, he repeatedly assured the American public that under no circumstances would “their boys” be fighting in any foreign wars. Though he knew this was a lie, it was a lie the public wanted to hear and therefore was a lie he needed to tell if he was to be re-elected.

Safely re-elected in November, 1940, Roosevelt could afford to be a bit more honest with the people. He tried to “educate” them on events in Europe and to make the case for why all-out U.S. support for Great Britain was necessary. Roosevelt insisted that only by helping Britain to defeat the Nazis could the U.S. itself avoid being drawn into the war. Those who supported the President’s views became known as “interventionists.”

Still, Roosevelt faced opposition from non-interventionists who argued that if Germany posed such a significant threat to the U.S. (as Roosevelt claimed), then U.S. policy should be to throw all available resources into defending the nation’s coastline from German attack. Sending military supplies to Great Britain was unwise since the U.S. needed those supplies (weapons, ships, ammunition, etc.) for its own defenses.

Moreover, if Germany defeated Britain (which seemed likely in 1940 and early 1941), those supplies would fall into German hands and could conceivably be used against the United States.

Many Americans found the non-interventionists’ arguments persuasive, so Roosevelt had to develop a more compelling case for his views.

He landed on the policy of “Lend Lease.” Britain needed supplies (particularly ships, oil, food, and ammunition) if it was to continue fighting against the Germans. Roosevelt proposed “lending” the British these supplies in exchange for “leases” on military bases that belonged to the British where the U.S. would be permitted to station its ships and
troops. That way, the U.S. itself would not join the war, but it would do everything it could to insure the Germans did not defeat the British. And, if war came, the U.S. could project its power by making use of the military bases it leased from the British.

Roosevelt, as he often did, explained his policy to the people in the form of a story taken from everyday life: “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t keep your hose from him; you lend him the hose so that he can put out the fire before it spreads to your house.” This argument began to make inroads by 1941 and Congress passed the Lend Lease legislation in March 1941. Even so, it was clear to Roosevelt that the nation was still opposed to any U.S. declaration of war on Germany.

THE WAR IN ASIA

Meanwhile, the Japanese empire had been aggressively expanding since 1931, invading China, French Indochina (Vietnam), Korea, and chains of islands colonized by the western powers (Britain, the Netherlands, etc.). The Japanese sought access to natural resources and raw materials needed to fuel their industrial and military machine. In particular, they needed steady access to oil.

Ironically, much of Japan’s military and industrial expansion had been funded by U.S. bankers who during the 1920s and 1930s saw Japan as a lucrative investment – in particular the Japanese seemed like a better investment than the Chinese. American oil companies also kept the oil flowing steadily to Japan – because the Japanese paid, and paid on time.

As Japanese militarism began to worry the U.S. government, Washington rethought the wisdom of allowing private companies to invest in and supply the Japanese military. By 1940, the Roosevelt administration had decided to use access to American oil as diplomatic leverage against the Japanese. The U.S. would only permit continued oil exports to Japan if the Japanese government promised to end its expansionist and aggressive policies. The Japanese tried to reassure Washington that it would curb its expansion, but it soon became clear such assurances were insincere.

In 1941, the U.S. severely limited Japan’s access to U.S. oil. Ironically, this policy did not stop Japanese expansion; rather it made the Japanese even more aggressive. Unable to rely on U.S. oil, the Japanese had to find alternative sources closer to home. They set their sites on conquering the oil-rich Dutch East Indies and other strategic areas that had been colonized by the British.

This worried Roosevelt. He feared that the Brits would divert military resources from Europe to defend their colonies in Asia. If this happened, it increased Hitler’s chances of dominating the European continent and cutting off trade with the US. The economic depression in the US could become permanent and a “garrison state” could develop in which Americans’ liberties were curtailed in order to prevent revolutionary turmoil sparked by economic deprivation.
Also, the Japanese military considered the U.S. a weak and inferior society. They remained convinced that a sudden and devastating attack on the U.S. military base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii would so frighten the American public that the people would demand U.S. withdrawal from Hawaii and the Japanese would then have a free hand to expand at will in Asia without fear of the U.S. launching a military attack on them from Hawaii.

Some Japanese politicians (and even the officer put in charge of planning the Pearl Harbor invasion) questioned the wisdom of such a move. They pointed out that if the Americans, rather than retreating out of the Pacific, instead declared war on Japan in response to an attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese would have no chance against the Americans, whose economy was exponentially larger than that of Japan.

On the other hand, American officials, succumbing to racist notions that the Japanese, an “inferior race,” could never summon the courage or the know how to project their military power all the way to Pearl Harbor, left the U.S. military base wide open to attack. Planes were lined up wing to wing in the air fields; ships sat side by side like sitting ducks in the harbor. The Americans, fearing sabotage rather than a full scale attack, believed it wise to cluster its forces so as to keep an eye on them.

As a result, when the Japanese attack came on December 7, 1941, the U.S. military was taken entirely by surprise and the U.S. navy suffered considerable losses.

That said, however, the Japanese hardly achieved their goal. The U.S. did not retreat; it declared war. The fears of the Japanese politicians would prove correct. By 1945 the Japanese empire, and Japan itself, lay in ruins. But there would be hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides before then.

The attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into World War II, but not in the way Roosevelt would have liked. He knew the real danger was losing the war in Europe and that the U.S. must pursue a “Europe first” strategy. After Pearl Harbor, however, most Americans were fixated on achieving revenge against the Japanese. The “Europe first” strategy would have been a tough sell. Luckily for Roosevelt – and he was indeed the luckiest of politicians – Hitler handed him a gift.

On December 11, 1941, Germany declared war on the United States. Though allied with Japan, Germany had no treaty obligation to do so. This decision was Hitler’s second monumentally stupid mistake (the first being his invasion of the Soviet Union the previous June). Hitler’s declaration of war enabled Roosevelt to make a convincing case to the public that winning in Europe was equally (if not more) important than winning the war in the Pacific. This meant that the Germans would soon face the military might of the United States.

It would take time, however, to mobilize the U.S. armed forces. Though Roosevelt had done all he could to pursue a campaign of preparedness between 1938 and 1941, public opinion had limited his efforts. The army was ill-equipped; the soldiers were
poorly trained; the navy lacked ships; available weapons and ammunition fell well short of what was needed. Eventually, the U.S. mobilization would be one of the great success stories of the war, but in early 1942, this was a long way off.