

Chapter 3

Isolationists, Internationalists and Lend-Lease

In the previous chapter we saw that between 1936 and March 1939, Germany had taken the Rhineland, Austria, and most of Czechoslovakia without firing a shot. In the summer of 1939, Hitler began to demand that Poland return any territory it had been given under the Versailles Treaty. This region, the Polish Corridor, separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. When the Poles refused, Hitler launched an awesome attack on Poland on September 1, 1939. Cut off and outnumbered 3 to 1 by German troops, the Poles surrendered in less than four weeks. Unable to help Poland directly, Britain and France nevertheless declared war on Germany. The British Corps and the French Army manned defensive positions on Germany's borders.

Hitler appeased the Soviet Union in the east by the secret agreements in the Non-Aggression Pact, which gave Stalin Germany's permission to invade Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and eastern Poland. Linked to Stalin's absence at the Munich Conference, the pact played a vital role in Hitler's success. Hitler protected Germany's northern border by conquering Denmark and Norway in April 1940. Meanwhile, behind the Siegfried (defensive) Line, German generals concentrated the German army's strength for a massive blow against British and French positions.

At this point the United States became the only country in the world that could rescue Britain and its Empire. British pleas for American aid sparked a lively national debate over U.S. foreign policy. This chapter asks: Should the United States give up the security of 3,000 miles of ocean to help save Britain from Hitler's Germany?



Hitler in Paris

The Fall of France

On May 10, 1940, the German army made the first maneuver in the battle of France by invading neutral Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg. The Allied armies on the French-Belgium border hurried north to aid the embattled neutrals. As one Germany army was confronting the Allies in Holland, however, another prepared to break through Allied lines to the east. In the Ardennes Forest on May 13, 430,000 German soldiers lined up behind a battering ram of 7 panzer (armored or tank) divisions through French colonial troops and forded the Meuse River. Within hours, a 50-mile-long column of German tanks and troop trucks was racing across northern France, closely supported by dive bombers.

The Allies were taken completely by surprise. Their front lines collapsed as dug-in Allied divisions were encircled from the rear or forced to retreat. Expecting a replay of World War I warfare, French generals had committed all their armored divisions to front-line

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positions. As a result, they only had cavalry and infantry to counter-attack against German tanks that broke through their defenses. The Germans were simply moving too fast for Allied generals. Employing blitzkrieg (lightening war) tactics German paratroopers landed behind Allied lines, seizing bridgeheads and other strategic choke points such as railroad junctions. Terror and confusion were further spread by the Luftwaffe, the German air force. Their planes routinely machine-gunned civilian refugees to tie up Allied supply routes.

With breakneck speed, the Germans drove west, reaching the English Channel on May 20th. The entire British army and a French army, a total of 35 divisions, were thereby cut off in Belgium from the main French force. Their backs were to the sea.

At this point, Hitler could have destroyed the surrounded Allied armies in Belgium by cutting off their escape route to the English Channel. Instead, he called a halt to his panzer column advance. The British seized on this opportunity to pull their army back to Dunkirk. There, between May 26 and June 4, 1940, the Allies evacuated 338,000 British and French troops across the channel to safety; 860 boats and ships carried out this escape, assisted by bad weather and a temporary halt in Luftwaffe raids.

The Battle of Britain

The Luftwaffe had 998 heavy bombers, 316 dive bombers, and 1,056 fighters within range of Britain. The Royal Air Force (RAF) had only 640 fighters. At the end of July 1940, Hitler's air war against the RAF



**St. Paul's Cathedral, London,
December 29, 1940**

began. For two perilous months, the battle raged, with the Luftwaffe launching around-the-clock attacks on RAF aircraft, airfields, and radar installations. Then, in response to British Bomber Command attacks on Berlin, Hitler changed his strategy. Just as the German air force was winning the battle to destroy the RAF, Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to bomb British cities.

September 7, 1940, witnessed the first massive air raid against London with 300 Luftwaffe bombers escorted by 648 fighters. That same night, a second wave of attackers bombed London. In all, 4,400,000 pounds of explosives were dropped on Britain's capital that day. Subsequent German air raids reduced large parts of London and other British cities to blackened rubble.

In the autumn of 1940, the Luftwaffe "Blitz" continued to pound British cities. German submarines, called U-boats, sank increasing numbers of ships transporting arms and food to the besieged island. German (Wehrmacht) soldiers, singing "We March Against England," trooped into channel ports. At this point, the British realized, that only the United States could save them.

Britain's Plight

By the fall of 1940, Britain possessed fewer than 1,000 field artillery and anti-tank guns and fewer than 260 tanks. These weapons could only equip two divisions to defend the British Isles. The German invading force was expected to be 20 times larger. The RAF now numbered less than half the size of the Luftwaffe. And the Royal Navy consisted of but 100 destroyers, aircraft carriers, and battleships. This force was overextended in trying both to shield Britain from the German army and to keep worldwide supply routes open.

Meanwhile, the British treasury was as empty as Mother Hubbard's fabled cupboard. By October 1940, only \$2 billion remained in the treasury. This amount was already slated for partial payment for an order of \$5 billion worth of arms and supplies from the United States. Without a US loan, the British had no way of buying the supplies absolutely essential to their defense. As British Ambassador Lord Lothian told New York reporters, "Well, boys, Britain's broke. It's your money we want." Britain, however, was running up against an old American tradition, isolationism.

America's Dilemma

In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington advised Americans to avoid "entangl[ing] our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition" a policy that had been followed for 120 years. During this time, the United States grew and prospered without becoming overly involved in overseas wars. More than 130 years later many Americans believed that the United States was dragged into World War I by acting as Britain's arms supplier, transporter, and banker. The resulting 160,000 US casualties and the unpopular Treaty of Versailles subsequently turned many Americans against participation in international politics.

Isolationist legislators tried to avoid a similar US military engagement in the 1930's by passing neutrality legislation. These laws, like the McReynolds Neutrality Act of 1937, specifically required the US to follow a policy of "cash and carry" for products sold to nations at war. The purchaser of equipment had to pay in cash and carry the supplies in its own ships. The British lacked the ships and the money to meet these requirements.

To get around the restrictions of such neutrality legislation, President Roosevelt devised a clever plan. He would simply lend Britain war materials. Britain would not have to return the materials until the war was over. Roosevelt made a simple analogy to explain this concept to the American people. He reduced Britain's problem with Germany to a situation of a neighbor whose house was on fire:

If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help put out the fire. Now what do I do in such a crisis? I don't say to him before the operation, "Neighbor, my garden hose cost me \$15.00. You have to pay me \$15.00 for it." I don't want \$15.00. I want my garden hose back after the fire is over.

The Lend-Lease Act, HR Bill 1776, an act to further promote the defense of the United States, was drafted in January 1941. It would give the President the power to "sell, transfer title to, exchange, lend, and otherwise dispose of any defense article to any country whose defense the President believes vital to the defense of the United States."

Roosevelt's plan to lend Britain arms and supplies split the country into opposing camps. Internationalists thought that the Lend-Lease Act would enable the president to lend Britain the arms to

defeat Hitler before Germany became a danger to America. Thus, the British, and not Americans, would do the fighting to stop Hitler. Borrowing from Roosevelt's analogy, isolationists countered by asking what would happen to the lender's house if his neighbor lost his hose in trying, and failing, to put out the fire. They declared that the Atlantic Ocean, not the English Channel, was the US's real line of defense against Germany.

Internationalists

The people of Europe who are defending themselves do not ask us to do their fighting. They ask us for the implements of war which will enable them to fight for their liberty and our security. Emphatically we must get those weapons to them in sufficient volume and quickly enough so that we and our children will be saved the agony and suffering of war which others have to endure....We must be the great arsenal of democracy³
President Franklin Roosevelt

Grant Hitler the gigantic prestige of a victory over Britain, and who can doubt that the first result on our side of the ocean would be the prompt appearance of imitation Nazi governments in a half-dozen Latin American nations, forced to be on the winning side, begging for favors, clamoring for the admission to the Axis [Germany and Italy]. What shall we do? Make war upon these neighbors; send armies to fight in the jungles of Central and South America; run the risk of outraging native sentiment and turning the whole continent against us? Or shall we sit tight while the area of Nazi influence draws ever closer to the Panama Canal and a spreading checkerboard of Nazi airfields provides ports of call for German planes that may choose to bomb our cities?⁴
Editorial in *The New York Times*

Isolationists

We are divided because we are asked to fight over issues that are Europe's and not our own — issues that Europe created by her own short-sightedness. We are divided because many of us do not wish to fight again for England's balance of power or for her domination of India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, or for the Polish Corridor or for another treaty like Versailles. We are divided because we do not want to cross an ocean to fight on a foreign continent for foreign causes against an entire world combined against us.⁵

We must turn our eyes and our faith back to our own country before it is too late. And when we do this a different vista opens before us. Practically every difficulty we would face in invading Europe becomes an asset to us in defending America. Our enemy, and not we, would have the problem of transporting millions of troops across the ocean and landing them on a hostile shore. They, and not we, would have to furnish the convoys to transport guns and trucks and munitions and fuel across three thousand miles of water. Our battleships and submarines would be fighting close to home bases; we would then do the bombing from the air and the torpedoing at sea. If any part of an enemy convoy should ever pass our navy and our air force, they would still be faced with the guns of our coast artillery and behind them in the divisions of our army.⁶

Charles Lindbergh

3 The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. 640.

4 The New York Times (April 30, 1941), p. 18

5 The New York Times (April 24, 1941), p. 12

6 Charles Lindbergh, *An Autobiography of Values* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 194.

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Suggested Student Exercises:⁷

1. Identify or define and briefly tell the importance to this chapter of each of the following:

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|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. Polish Corridor | g. Lord Lothian | m. internationalists |
| b. Ardennes Forest | h. "European ambition" | n. Arsenal for Democracy |
| c. blitzkrieg | i. "cash and carry" | p. They, not we |
| d. Dunkirk | j. garden hose | p. The Jungles of ... |
| e. the "blitz" | k. Lend-Lease Act | q. Europe's Problems |
| f. England's plight | l. isolationists | |

2. Describe the course of World War II from September 1939 to September 1940. Write your description from the British perspective.

3. As your teacher directs, prepare an argument favoring the isolationists' or internationalists' position. You should consider the following points:

- the self-interest argument : is it better to fight in Europe with the help of allies, or use 3000 miles of ocean as its chief line of defense?
- the tradition argument : should the US continue following a policy of 'not entangl(ing) our peace and prosperity ...'?
- the morality argument: should the US leave millions of Europeans to live and die under a harsh Nazi dictatorship.