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Methods Short of War: The United States Reacts to the Rise of the Third Reich

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“METHODS SHORT OF WAR”: THE UNITED STATES REACTS TO THE
RISE OF THE THIRD REICH

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in History
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ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the various opinions in the United States of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis during the 1930s and studies the amount of information that was available in the United States regarding Nazi Germany before entering World War II. Specifically, it seeks to understand why the United States did relatively little to influence German and European affairs even in the face of increasing Nazi brutality and bellicosity. The analysis has been divided into three different categories. The first focuses on the United States government, and the President and Secretary of State in particular. The second category analyzes the minority opinion in the United States that had Nazi sympathies. Finally, the third deals with the American public in general.

The evidence suggests that there was enough information regarding Nazi Germany for Americans to make a reasonable judgment. Most of the United States was opposed to Nazism and the German government. In spite of this, the majority agreed that the United States should not intervene or enter war. This study is significant because it helps shed further light on a debate in the country that continues to the present day: what role should the United States have when it comes to world affairs? The research in this thesis suggests that, in spite of opposition by the American public, if there is enough verifiable evidence of a humanitarian crisis to justify intervention, the government should act.

DEDICATION

For the Negy and Alarcón family

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INTRODUCTION

On January 30th, 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. With this appointment came the death of the Weimar Republic and the birth of the Third Reich.¹ Oftentimes, seemingly insignificant events drastically change the path of history. The selection of Hitler as Chancellor is one such example. His rise to power confirmed for him and his followers their quest to fulfill the goals of the National Socialist Party, the Nazis. It gave them the opportunity to essentially overthrow the government of the Weimar Republic and turn Germany into a Nazi state.

Almost immediately after Hitler became Chancellor, he and his cohort, Hermann Göring, in an attempt for the Nazi Party to gain more control of the government, called for an immediate dissolution of the Reichstag, the German parliament. Using the arson attack on the Reichstag days later to their advantage, they blamed the members of the Communist Party for the crime and succeeded at passing a decree that eliminated the civil rights of the German people indefinitely and gave the Reich government the power to intervene to restore order in the German states. The latter section of the decree was ultimately used by the Nazis to round up

1. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 4.

political enemies and, in coordination with a well-planned propaganda campaign, it finally gave the Nazis full control of the country.²

As the Third Reich continued along its course, the Nazis began carrying out their plans for an Aryan empire. Any opposition to their increasingly tyrannical regime proved futile. Violence against Jews in Germany steadily increased. They were discriminated against and persecuted. In foreign affairs, Nazi Germany began a campaign to conquer neighboring regions and incorporate them into the Lebensraum (living-space) of the Germans.³ First, it began a program of rearmament, followed by the invasion and conquest of the Rhineland; both actions broke rules established in the Treaty of Versailles. Next, Nazi Germany annexed Austria to the empire. Then it claimed the German region of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland and afterward conquered all of Czechoslovakia. And finally, it invaded Poland, causing the Allied forces of Britain and France to declare war.⁴

The Third Reich played a significant role in World War II. Since the end of the war, there has been debate over the amount of blame Nazi Germany deserves.⁵ Regardless, it is certain that the Third Reich greatly influenced the war and its outcomes. The war lasted about six years, from the fall of 1939 to the spring of 1945. It was not until Hitler committed suicide in April of 1945 and Germany surrendered in May of that year that the war in the European theater

2. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 457-468.

3. *Ibid.*, 504-505.

4. James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1980), 54-66.

5. *Ibid.*, 54.

ended.⁶ Within those six years, Germany, along with the other Axis powers, threatened to dominate Europe. The war resulted in a death toll as high as seventy million, about half of them suffered by Europe. In addition, about five in seven of those killed were civilians.⁷ Along with the war came the Holocaust, Germany's Final Solution to their so-called Jewish problem. Over six million Jews died in the Nazi's genocide alongside millions of others, including gypsies, non-Aryans, and undesirables.⁸

In light of all this, this investigation will examine the role of the United States in the general state of inactivity when dealing with Hitler and Nazi Germany before World War II. There seems to be much more literature that exists on the other Allies' views of Nazi Germany than America's opinions. This is probably due to direct involvement of Britain and France, among other countries, in talks and negotiations with the Third Reich. Less has been written about the United States before World War II in relation to Nazi Germany; this is likely because of the lack of direct involvement in dealing with Germany. Also, in histories of the 1930s, when attention is given to the United States, it generally revolves around the Great Depression. Works that do study the United States and its relationship with Nazi Germany seem to be primarily focused on specific factions or people in the country. Therefore, this investigation will be an attempt to fill this gap with a comprehensive study that discusses the various views the country had on the Third Reich before entering World War II.

6. Ibid., 362-363.

7. Frank L. Kidner et al., *Making Europe: People, Politics, and Culture*, vol. 2, *Since 1550* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009), 795.

8. Robert H. Abzug, *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), vii.

The United States merits this in-depth look because of the role that it had on a global scale in the 1930s. Just over a decade earlier, the world emerged from the First World War. Even though it was not fully aware of it, the United States was on the path to becoming a world power; it had already proven its strength when it turned the tide of the war by deciding to fight alongside Britain and France and helping them win the war. Also, although it chose to remove itself from peace talks with Nazi Germany, the United States was certainly well respected and deemed powerful by the world's leaders. The memoirs of Cordell Hull support this view, illustrating the number of times Britain and France looked to the United States for advice, support, and influence in dealing with Hitler. The United States certainly had significant sway in world affairs and could have chosen to use it to influence Germany and European affairs more than it actually did.

In addition, this analysis could help shed further light on a debate in the country that continues to the present day: what role should the United States have when it comes to world affairs? It is easy to look back at the past and, in hindsight, deem a decision right or wrong. This is certainly the case for World War II: almost everyone looking back would agree that it was right for the United States to enter the war and support the Allies. The result was the defeat of the brutal Nazi regime and the rest of the Axis powers, the end of the Holocaust, and the liberation of the survivors of the war and the genocide. Even so, it did not act soon enough to prevent all of the death and destruction that the entire Nazi affair caused. The United States has continually faced crises similar to these. The most recent in memory include the genocides in Darfur and Bosnia and the threat of nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea, to name a few. From a humanitarian perspective, it is easy to justify intervening in other countries to stop or

prevent crimes against humanity. However, in reality, there are many factors that influence a country's decision on whether or not to act. A look at these factors in the United States before World War II when dealing with Nazi Germany could therefore prove beneficial to this ongoing debate.

The investigation into this topic has sought to answer two primary questions. One is how much did the United States know about Hitler, Nazism, and what was occurring in Nazi Germany before U.S. entry into World War II. Was there enough information available to Americans that could have convinced them to intervene? And two, how did the country respond to what it did know about the Nazi situation? Was there a consensus in opinions or was the country divided in its views? To organize the answers to these questions, the thesis will be divided into three chapters.

The first chapter will focus on the U.S. government and its role in the debate. This chapter will focus primarily on the president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the secretary of state, Cordell Hull, because of their top positions in the country's foreign affairs and foreign policies. It will also discuss other key players in the government, such as the ambassador to Germany and several congressmen.

The second chapter will discuss the section of the country that either outwardly supported the Nazis or sympathized with them. This chapter will discuss prominent figures in this movement such as Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and Father Coughlin.

Finally, the third chapter will deal with the American public. Specifically, it will look at the part of the country that was against Nazism. This section will utilize a combination of

newspaper and magazine articles and Gallup Poll results to come to a conclusion regarding American public opinion on Nazi Germany.

Ultimately, this investigation will address the following question: Why did the United States not intervene in European affairs and allow Nazi Germany to initiate and continue its program of tyranny, violence, anti-Semitism, and brutality?

CHAPTER ONE

The United States Government

To understand why the United States did not get more involved in European affairs in reaction to the rise of Nazi Germany, it is essential to focus on the role of the U.S. government in international diplomacy. The speeches, writing, and decisions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and the actions of some of the more prominent members of Congress may offer some insight into American foreign policy during the 1930s.

When dealing in foreign policy, the president has the most power and influence. In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became the 32nd president of the United States of America and was re-elected three more times. Despite his importance in terms of his role in international affairs at the end of the 1930s, he was elected based primarily on his domestic ideology; only in later years did his attention turn to the global theater.¹ Unfortunately for historians, Roosevelt did not write an autobiography or a memoir before he died in 1945 at the start of his 4th presidential term.² Therefore, it is necessary to look at his speeches, his writings, and what others who knew him said about him in order to try to better understand him and his decisions.

According to Steven Casey in his book, *Cautious Crusade*, Roosevelt was aware of Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany from the very beginning of his presidency. He knew enough

1. Robert A. Divine, *Roosevelt and World War II* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1969), 2.

2. Stokesbury, *Short History*, 361.

about Hitler and the Nazis to be concerned about their rise to power considering the stark contrast between their values and ideas and his. Roosevelt was staunchly democratic; he supported free trade; and he wanted to improve living conditions for the general public. Hitler, on the other hand, was pushing to establish a one-party system with himself at its head; he wanted to separate the Third Reich from the international economic system; and he sought to persecute the Jews and other groups.³ FDR recognized, however, that when they first rose to power, Hitler and the Nazis posed little threat to the world outside Germany because he considered the country broken and weak.⁴ Further, Roosevelt refused to believe that the Nazi regime would gain enough power to become a real threat because, as he wrote to a friend, he still believed that “in every country the people themselves are more peaceably and liberally inclined than their governments.”⁵ According to Casey, Roosevelt’s naïve optimism helped create a state of inaction.

Reports from Ambassador William E. Dodd in Berlin stating that over half of the population opposed its government confirmed the president’s belief in the German people. Also, the vast amount of spending on the military convinced FDR that the German economy would soon plummet and result in bankruptcy; this would greatly weaken the Nazi government’s

3. Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War Against Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

4. Edgar B. Nixon, ed., *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs, January 1937-August 1939*, Second Series (New York: Garland Press, 1969), 8:1565.

5. Frank Ninkovitch, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 108.

strength. The combination of these two factors, he believed, would end Nazi rule quickly and without intervention from outside parties.⁶

In 1933, Roosevelt was given a copy of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's quasi-autobiographical book that delineated the ideals of Nazism and his goals for Germany. The copy, translated into English and abridged by E.T.S. Dugdale, was heavily criticized for omitting several sections discussing anti-Semitism. Roosevelt, to his credit, wrote on the book's flyleaf, "This translation is so expurgated as to give a wholly false view of what Hitler really is or says – The German original would make a different story."⁷ This demonstrates that, early in his presidency, FDR was aware of the dangers that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis could pose if they were to gain enough strength. However, he was optimistic in his view that they would weaken and hoped "that the type of government [in Germany] . . . is being severely tested from the inside, . . . and that there may be a break in the log jam."⁸

During the second half of the 1930s, Roosevelt continued his decision to not intervene in Europe due, increasingly, to the isolationist sentiment prominent in the United States at the time. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia and successfully conquered it within a year.⁹ In response to that conflict, Congress passed the first Neutrality Act. This legislation sought to keep the United States out of war by forcing the president to establish an embargo on the selling of arms to nations at war. Although FDR would have preferred to adapt it to give him more leeway to

6. Casey, *Crusade*, 7.

7. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933). (Note: This is FDR's copy of *Mein Kampf*, currently located in the Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park.)

8. Casey, *Crusade*, 8.

9. Stokesbury, *Short History*, 35-36.

decide if, when, and against whom he could levy an embargo, he decided to allow it to pass without any changes in order to avoid conflict domestically and internationally.¹⁰ Even though it would probably have been over-ridden by Congress had he vetoed it, The Neutrality Act was another missed opportunity for him to, at the very least, demonstrate his desire to support England and France with military supplies in case of war against Germany. During the same year, Germany announced its rearmament plans and invaded the Rhineland. Both of these actions violated the Treaty of Versailles. Roosevelt again chose to remain silent on the issue.¹¹

In 1936, the Olympic Games were set to be held in Germany for both the winter and summer games. In the months leading up to the games, more and more controversy developed over whether the United States should send a team to Germany or whether it should boycott the Olympics. Many people, including Ambassador Dodd, reported back to the government that Germany had been discriminating against Jews and would therefore not allow any to participate on their team; if challenged, they might allow a few to participate but only as a façade to mask the truth about the anti-Semitic conditions in Germany.¹² This clearly went against the policies of the International Olympic Committee: “The Olympic protocol provides that there shall be no restriction of competition because of class, color, or creed.”¹³

According to David Clay Large, Roosevelt had doubts about sending the U.S. team to Berlin and sympathized with the struggles of the Jews in Germany at the time. He decided, however, to put his personal opinions aside and did not weigh in on the matter. To support the

10. Divine, *Roosevelt*, 10-11.

11. *Ibid.*, 20.

12. David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 94.

13. *Ibid.*, 70.

boycott movement would have gotten flak from right-wing opponents, who already considered him to be too friendly to Jews, and from the U.S. Olympic Committee, who had already sent a delegation to Germany and had been promised that there would not be any discrimination. On the other hand, to come out and support the pro-participation movement would have also created controversy and would have gone against his personal views. Partly due to his failure to take a stand against Nazi Germany and Hitler when the opportunity to do so arose, the Olympics continued as planned and were an overall success.¹⁴ More significant, though, was FDR's missed opportunity to undermine the Nazi government and openly denounce it; an American boycott of the games would have potentially resulted in many other countries suit and quite possibly could have weakened Nazi popularity in Germany.¹⁵

In 1936, Roosevelt hinted at the possibility of intervention in the form of a general warning. In a speech given about a month after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, he said of the United States: "We are not isolationists except in so far as we seek to isolate ourselves completely from war. Yet we must remember that so long as war exists on earth there will be some danger that even the nation which most ardently desires peace may be drawn into war."¹⁶

Secretary of State Cordell Hull wrote later that he and the president were both in complete agreement over their policy of nonintervention in Spain.¹⁷ Their opinions on the matter did not change at all throughout the entire war. This was despite the fact that they knew that Germany and Italy, going against agreements to not get involved, were sending strong help to the

14. *Ibid.*, 97-98.

15. *Ibid.*, 108-109.

16. Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 479.

17. *Ibid.*, 481-482.

right-wing group under Francisco Franco, and the fact that FDR and Hull both privately sympathized with the opposing Royalists who supported the monarchy.

Ultimately, as the evidence clearly proves, Franklin D. Roosevelt was a president who battled with the idea of isolationism throughout his first two terms. While he recognized the danger posed by the Nazi government in Germany, his optimism in regard to their strength and longevity and the isolationist mindset prevented him from taking action. As 1939 approached, Roosevelt would do his best to intervene indirectly when he could against Nazi Germany and the Axis powers.

After the president, the secretary of state had the most power to deal with foreign issues. From 1933 until 1944, Cordell Hull assumed this role under the condition that he would “aid the President in every possible way in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy,” as opposed to simply overseeing communication with foreign governments.¹⁸ Unlike Roosevelt, Hull outlived World War II and published his memoirs in 1948. These memoirs give a first-person perspective of many events and controversies that occurred during his time in office. When focusing on issues related to Nazi Germany, the memoirs paint a picture of a man who was staunchly isolationist even though he was opposed to the Nazi Party.

Very early on in his memoirs, Hull mentions the Nazi Party and the rise of Adolf Hitler to power in Germany:

I had long been studying the purposes and effects of Nazism. In speeches back in 1930 and 1931 I had called attention to the growth of dictator movements abroad and the danger they offered to a peaceful world. There was little doubt in my mind in March, 1933, that Germany would provide one of my biggest problems in the years to come.¹⁹

18. Ibid., 158.

19. Ibid., 170.

This statement epitomized his personal opinions on the issue. While it may have been exaggerated to some degree due to hindsight, his documented conversations and actions affirm its overall veracity.

As early as March of 1933, Hull began confronting German officials regarding Nazi policies. Behind closed doors, he met with the German ambassador to the United States, Hans Luther, to discuss violence and abuse of American citizens in Germany and Nazi persecution of Jews. He urged Luther to persuade the German government to return the country to normalcy without Nazi brutality. In addition, he suggested that if things did not improve, he would make an official complaint to the Nazi regime, though this proved to be an unfounded threat.²⁰

Some days later, Hull responded to Germany's announcement that it would no longer pay debts to other countries including the United States. Hull confronted the head of the German Reichsbank, Dr. Schacht, once again behind closed doors; this, however, was also unsuccessful.²¹

As the year progressed, more and more U.S. companies began boycotting German goods to protest the treatment of Jews in Germany at the time. Both Ambassador Luther and the German Chargé d'Affaires, Rudolf Leitner, visited Hull to protest the boycott. Hull warned about possible legislation against Germany and more boycotts if the Jewish persecution problem were not solved.²² While Hull's actions towards Nazi Germany during this time were very

20. Ibid., 236-237.

21. Ibid., 237-238.

22. Ibid., 240-241.

subtle, they were also proof of his opposition to the changes occurring in Germany at the hands of the Nazis.

Cordell Hull's aversion to Nazi policy, however, did little, if anything at all, to influence his foreign policy decisions. Isolationism dominated almost all of his decisions. When, in 1934, government official Hugh Johnson spoke out against a series of executions in Germany of Adolf Hitler's political opponents, Hull expressed fear of Johnson's views being attributed to an official position taken by the U.S. government. As such, he issued a statement clarifying the situation to avoid direct conflict with Germany.²³

When it became apparent that Japan and Germany were about to join forces as allies that same year, Hull gave a speech hinting at those dangerous developments that could threaten peace in the world. Even then he did not specify to whom or what exactly he was referring in those comments.²⁴ The following year, the ex-Chief Consul in Berlin, George Messersmith, sent a letter to the Secretary of State urging the government to speak out on the issue of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He stressed the importance of taking a stand against participation since a boycott of the games by the United States would be significant in undermining the international and German perception of Hitler and the Nazi government. Once again, Hull missed an opportunity to undermine Nazi policy and instead chose to remain neutral.²⁵

Over and over again, Secretary of State Cordell Hull avoided any action that would directly contest or reprimand Nazi Germany for their increasing bellicosity and aggression. More than anything else, he maintained neutrality until 1938 because of his own isolationist

23. Ibid., 242.

24. Ibid., 245.

25. Large, *Games*, 95-97.

mentality and the isolationism rampant in the United States. Even though his personal opinions on taking action seemingly changed in the mid-1930s, the isolationist support in the United States prevented him from acting in any other manner.²⁶ In a speech he gave to a graduating class at Brown University in 1936, Hull very clearly stated that war in almost any circumstance was unacceptable. In stark contrast to previous sentiments, though, he “appealed for public opinion to take an interest in these developments [of national aggrandizement, warring, and violations of international agreements] in an effort to turn their dangerous trend.”²⁷ In reference to the decision to remain neutral during the Spanish Civil War, knowing that both Germany and Italy were aiding the revolutionaries under fascist Francisco Franco, Hull wrote that the government’s neutrality policy did not reflect their views on who was right and who was wrong.²⁸ This view also applied to all other foreign policy in this time period.

Aside from President Franklin Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, there were several other government officials who had influence in American foreign policy and, contrary to Roosevelt and Hull, wanted the American government to take a stand against Nazi Germany. Two of particular significance were George S. Messersmith and William E. Dodd. George S. Messersmith was the consul general from 1930 to 1934 and also served as the U.S. ambassador to Austria for three years afterward.²⁹ William E. Dodd was the U.S. ambassador to Germany

26. Hull, *Memoirs*, 397.

27. *Ibid.*, 483.

28. *Ibid.*, 483.

29. Jesse Stiller, *George S. Messersmith: Diplomat of Democracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 26-95.

during the years 1933 and 1937.³⁰ Both men played a major role in informing the president and the secretary of state of the increasingly troublesome situation in Germany and were able to provide first-hand accounts of what they experienced and witnessed.

Ambassador Dodd and Consul General Messersmith were both steadfast in their disapproval and fear of the Nazi government. Their reports on the internal turmoil in Germany provided leading government officials with detailed information on the growing threat in Europe. In 1933, Messersmith warned the newcomers to the State Department that they must take caution when dealing with Nazi Germany. He went on to say that Germany was not a country interested in peace and that many of the leading government officials were “psychopathic cases [who] would ordinarily be receiving treatment somewhere.”³¹ In March of 1935, Dodd reported to Cordell Hull his discovery of a series of secret meetings between Japan and Germany that would ultimately result in rearmament and the formation of an alliance between the two countries.³² Later that year, in a message to Hull, Messersmith warned against U.S. participation in the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin and reiterated that there was increasing discrimination and oppression of “Jews, dissident Catholics, Protestants, professors, artists, and intellectuals”; Dodd’s own report to Hull confirmed Messersmith’s account.³³ These are just some of the many examples that shed light on their opinions of the Third Reich and also help to answer the question of what was known about Nazi Germany.

30. Casey, *Crusade*, 7.

31. George S. Messersmith, “Messersmith, G.S. Berlin. To William Phillips, Undersecretary of State, Washington,” *MSS 109 – George S. Messersmith papers* (Newark: University of Delaware Library, 1933), 26 June 1933, paper 0203-00, <http://dspace.udel.edu:8080/dspace/handle/19716/6176>.

32. Hull, *Memoirs*, 244-245.

33. Large, *Games*, 95-97.

Finally, most other government officials had little influence in foreign policy decisions related to Germany. According to Steven Casey, there were several outspoken members of the Roosevelt administration who opposed Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany, including Harold L. Ickes and Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of the Treasury, respectively.³⁴ Several congressmen also spoke out on the Nazi issue. Although individually they had about as much sway as the previously mentioned cabinet members, some were able to unite and helped keep the United States on its isolationist path. Of note were Senator Gerald Nye and Senator Pittman, who were both isolationists. The two men served on the Nye Committee, a Senate investigation committee with the purpose of discovering who or what was actually responsible for the United States entering World War I. The results of these investigations found that American bankers and businessmen were responsible; the committee thus undermined internationalist views and played a role in the continued support of isolationist policy in the late 1930s.³⁵

In sum, the United States government chose to maintain almost complete neutrality when dealing with Nazi Germany up until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Opinions did not vary much in terms of how Adolf Hitler and his regime were viewed; most government officials recognized Nazi Germany as a potential threat to the United States and opposed the increasing Nazi brutality against Jews, political opponents, neighboring countries, and others. They disagreed, however, when it came to the role of the United States in international politics. President Roosevelt began his presidency as an isolationist who underestimated the major role

34. Casey, *Crusade*, 36.

35. Hull, *Memoirs*, 398-399.

that Nazi Germany would have in global affairs. He then changed positions as he learned progressively more about the emerging conflicts in Europe. Secretary of State Hull followed a similar path, though with less enthusiasm for intervention than Roosevelt in the final years of the 1930s. Even though the government had access to information about the situation in Germany, primarily from the U.S. embassy and consulate in Germany and from other governments, it still remained neutral. Above all else, the reasons for the American neutrality before World War II was the support of isolationism that was prevalent in the United States and naïveté when it came to judging Nazi strength and power.

CHAPTER TWO

Nazi Sympathies

Although they were a small portion of the United States population, during the 1920s and 30s there were several Nazi-sympathizing factions that emerged within the country. While their opinions were not representative of the general sentiment at the time, several were able to voice their opinions to the public and contribute to the national debate over how best to deal with the problems arising in Europe.

Three of the most influential voices of this group were Henry Ford, Father Charles Coughlin, and Charles A. Lindbergh. Each of them expressed, to varying degrees, their approval of the Nazi government in Germany or of anti-Semitism, a core principle of Nazism. Through the use of newspapers, speeches, and other means, they were able to reach a relatively large audience in America.

Before taking a closer look at the Nazi-leaning sentiment at the time, it is important to recognize the existence of anti-Semitism in the United States long before the rise of the Third Reich. According to Leonard Dinnerstein, this negative attitude toward members of the Jewish community is the result of the strong Christian influence on American society and thus existed even during colonial times.¹ One additional factor that may have played a part in the rise of anti-Semitism during the late 1800s and the early 1900s is the rise of Jewish immigration into the

1. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), ix.

country. For comparison, the total number of documented immigrants who arrived in the United States prior to 1890 was 15,436,042; about 2% (roughly 300,000) were Jewish. From 1890 until 1914, however, there was a heavy influx of Jews from Europe, totaling almost 1,700,000.²

Animosity toward the Jewish community was also taught in school, as evinced in the use of *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers*. These were a set of educational books published from 1836 until, primarily, the end of the 19th century that utilized a combination of essays, poems, and narratives to teach children about the world around them and establish a set of morals by which to live. The books were so popular and widespread that, during their peak, they were the second most widely read books in the United States (the King James Bible being the first).³ In one edition of the Fifth Eclectic Reader, students read and discussed Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, a play about a stereotypically depicted Jewish character named Shylock, who gives a loan to a Christian character. When he is unable to repay his debt on time, Shylock is offered a choice between a larger sum of money and a pound of the Christian's flesh. He selects the pound of flesh but is prevented from collecting it and is ultimately forced to convert to Christianity. The *McGuffey Reader* followed the play with several reading comprehension and analysis questions, including, "Why did Shylock choose the pound of flesh rather than the payment of his debts?" and "How is Shylock punished? Was his punishment just?"⁴ Also, the Third and Fourth Eclectic Readers taught about the Jewish inability to follow the morals established in the Old Testament and that the Jews failed to recognize the predictions about the

2. Ibid., 58-59.

3. Elliott J. Gorn, ed., *The McGuffey Readers: Selections from the 1879 Edition* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1988), vii.

4. Harvey C. Minnich, ed., *Old Favorites from the McGuffey Readers* (Cincinnati: The American Book Company, 1936), 247-252.

rise of Jesus Christ and the spread of Christianity that could be found within the Old Testament.⁵ Thus, American children were taught early on about the stereotypical Jewish figure as being inferior to Christians and being shrewd, greedy, and inhuman.

In another instance of the Jewish stereotype being promulgated in textbooks, the entry for “Jews” in the *New International Encyclopædia*, published in 1902, depicted members of the Jewish community in a similar fashion:

Among the distinguishing mental and moral traits of the Jews may be mentioned: a strong distaste for hard or violent physical labor; a strong family sense and philoprogenitiveness [the trait of having many offspring]; a marked religious instinct; . . . remarkable power to survive in adverse environments, combined with great ability to retain racial solidarity; capacity for exploitation, both individual and social; shrewdness and astuteness in speculation and money matters generally; an Oriental love of display and a full appreciation of the power and pleasure of social position; a very high average of intellectual ability.⁶

Just like *McGuffey’s Readers*, the Shylock stereotype was passed off as a factual description of Jews.

Many examples of the effects of this indoctrination appeared in the early 20th century. In one instance, a woman from Chicago married a Jewish man and was forced to move several times due to the severe persecution they experienced, ranging from the loss of friends to acts of vandalism by neighborhood children.⁷ In 1911, a group of Irish men and teenagers attacked Jews in Malden, Massachusetts using “iron bars, wagon spokes, stones, jagged bottles, and sticks” and chanting “Beat the Jews” and “Kill the Jews”. In response to the assault, only a few

5. Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 3.

6. *The New International Encyclopædia*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Jews.”

7. Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism*, 69-70.

were arrested, the police captain praised them for being “fine citizens,” and in court, even though the judge was convinced they were guilty, only four of the sixteen attackers were convicted.⁸

It was in this environment that Henry Ford grew up. Ford was born in 1863 in southeastern Michigan into a family of farmers. They were Protestant and of Irish descent. At the age of seventeen, Ford left his family’s farm to begin what would become his lifelong career working with automobiles and factory machinery in Detroit.⁹ He would ultimately go on to found the Ford Motor Company, use the assembly line to mass-produce affordable Model-T cars, and revolutionize the auto-industry.¹⁰

Less widely known than his work with automobiles was Ford’s anti-Semitism. His antipathy toward Jews stemmed, at least in part, from McGuffey. Ford, like many other children at the time, had grown up learning from *McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers*. McGuffey was his favorite author even as an adult: he could recite passages from the books perfectly. In 1934, Ford had McGuffey’s entire estate in Pennsylvania moved to his museum in Michigan. Two years later, Ford served on a panel that was in charge of organizing and publishing *Old Favorites from McGuffey Readers*. Out of the many Shakespeare passages that had been included in the *Readers*, only three were selected: one of them was *The Merchant of Venice*. How much influence Ford had when selecting this piece for the collection is unknown; however, it is likely that he did have great influence in the entire selection process considering his role as associate editor and the book’s dedication to him. In 1914, when the Anti-Defamation League petitioned

8. Ibid., 70-71.

9. Baldwin, *Ford*, 8-15.

10. Ibid., 21-22.

and lobbied to remove *The Merchant of Venice* from the classroom because it “serves to increase misunderstanding of Jews by non-Jews . . . because Shylock . . . has become an unhappy symbol of Jewish vindictiveness, malice and hatred,” Ford rejected the action as a personal offense to McGuffey.¹¹

It was not until 1920, however, that Ford tried to spread his anti-Semitic ideas to the public. Throughout the year, he published a series of articles in the Ford newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*. These articles collectively came to be known as *The International Jew*.¹² *The Dearborn Independent* was established by Henry Ford years earlier in order to spread his ideas on politics and life and to shape public opinion in a way he saw fit.¹³ The newspaper’s tirades against Jews began the year after it was first published. Some have suggested that after the initial year’s failure, Ford began writing about the Jews because of a recommendation that he add sensationalism to the stories in *Dearborn*. However, according to Albert Lee, a writer for Ford Motor Company publications and author of *Henry Ford and the Jews*, it is certain that Ford was set on publishing his anti-Semitic ideas from the start; when new employees of the newspaper were hired, they were told “Ford’s going to start in on the Jews.”¹⁴

By and large, *The International Jew* was based on the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.¹⁵ This was a document that was published in Russia first in 1903, then again in 1917 at the

11. Ibid., 5-7.

12. Albert Lee, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1980), 13-14.

13. Baldwin, *Ford*, 69.

14. Lee, *Ford*, 17.

15. Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 149.

time of the Bolshevik Revolution. *Protocols* was an alleged document that claimed there was a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world and force non-Jews into submission.¹⁶ This was, of course, disproven, but it was reported and republished several times, including in *The Dearborn Independent*.¹⁷ *The International Jew* also expanded on the supposed Jewish problem. In the article “Germany’s Reaction Against the Jew,” it described the relationship between the German and the Jew as one of host and guest, respectively; although this was to be expected, Jews wanted to be in power, and thus worked together to overthrow the German Empire in World War I. It placed responsibility for the Bolshevik Revolution on Russian Jews and gave the Bolshevik government the title, “dictatorship of Jews.”¹⁸ In addition, it described the supposed Jewish problem, claiming that Jews feel superior to Gentiles (non-Jews) and that they consider Gentiles their enemies.¹⁹ Through *The International Jew*, Ford was able to express his anti-Semitism to the general public and spread his ideas.

During the 1930s, Henry Ford became much less public about his anti-Jewish sentiments. This was the result of the stigma surrounding a lawsuit against Ford, in which he was sued for libel against a Jewish farmer. He rejected this claim and subsequently apologized for *The International Jew*.²⁰ Although Ford distanced himself from the publication, he continued to be recognized for it. The Nazis, in particular, held Ford in high regard for his efforts in spreading

16. Baldwin, *Ford*, 82-83.

17. *Ibid.*, 101-103.

18. Dearborn Independent, eds. *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem* (Dearborn: Dearborn Publishing Co., 1920), 23, 28-29.

19. *Ibid.*, 49, 65.

20. Baldwin, *Ford*, 204-240.

his anti-Semitic ideas to the American public. In 1931, a *Detroit News* reporter asked Adolf Hitler about a portrait of Henry Ford that hung behind his desk. Hitler responded that it was because Ford was his inspiration.²¹

In 1933, *The International Jew* was republished in Germany as *Der Internationale Jude* with Henry Ford given high praise for being the first person to expose the “Jewish Question” in America. When confronted about the publication, he expressed his recognition of its danger but refused to restate his rejection of *The International Jew*.²² In 1938, he was awarded the Verdienstkreuz Deutscher Adler (the Grand Service Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle) by the Nazis for his work with the automobile. Although the award was not (ostensibly) in recognition of his anti-Semitic publications, Ford received much criticism within the United States for it, especially after it became apparent that he would not return or decline it.²³ Finally, in 1940, in a survey conducted by one of Ford’s advertising agencies, it was found that 80% of all men questioned had heard that Ford was anti-Semitic.²⁴ Ultimately, as demonstrated by the 1940 survey, Ford was successful at publicizing his anti-Semitic beliefs within the United States and aligning himself in this regard with the Nazis.

Father Coughlin, like Ford, was anti-Semitic, but he had access to an even larger audience. Charles E. Coughlin was born in 1891 in Canada. His family was devoutly Catholic and they were of Irish descent. In 1916 he was ordained a Catholic priest. During the 1920s, he

21. Lee, *Ford*, 46.

22. Baldwin, *Ford*, 271-273.

23. *Ibid.*, 283-287.

24. David Lanier Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), 153.

immigrated to the United States where he would gain fame and notoriety for his public speeches and religious sermons, particularly over the radio.²⁵ His radio program began in 1927, just one year after the first network radio station, NBC, had been established. The program was titled the “Golden Hour of the Shrine of the Little Flower,” and he soon began calling his audience “The Radio League of the Little Flower.”²⁶

In spite of Coughlin’s attempts to justify his comments and ideas, he was rather explicitly anti-Semitic. In speeches he gave in the early 1930s, he criticized and attacked the Jewish community for their supposed exploitation of the working class and for allegedly causing the global economic problems. During these sermons, he used the terms Shylock and Rothschilds as synonyms for his true targets: Shylock being the name of the Jewish character previously discussed and Rothschild being the name of a wealthy family of Jewish bankers in Europe.²⁷ During the mid-1930s, after having supported President Roosevelt for several years, Coughlin turned on him for acting in a manner that he believed would lead the United States into the European conflict. He later attributed his change of heart to Roosevelt’s determination to defeat Hitler and save the Jews; Coughlin also claimed Roosevelt, himself, was a Jew.²⁸ Around the same time as their falling out, Coughlin gave a speech in which he told his audience, “while we love each other, we’re so open-minded [to] Jews [and] Mohammedans . . . remember this is a Christian nation! Let’s not overwork this democracy.” Soon thereafter, he criticized the Jewish

25. Warren, *Radio Priest*, 8-13.

26. *Ibid.*, 23-24.

27. *Ibid.*, 132-133.

28. *Ibid.*, 141.

belief system and challenged Jews to accept the Christian belief of loving “thy neighbor as thyself.”²⁹ Coughlin was also aware of Ford’s work with *The International Jew* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He published his own version of the documents in the summer of 1938. In a similar fashion to Ford, he blamed Jews and other factions within the United States for trying to drag the country into war due to a selfish concern for the Jews in Europe.³⁰ Finally, as Europe was on the brink of entering World War II, Coughlin blamed anti-Semitism on the Jews because of their silence in the face of communism, and he demanded that refugee Jews from Europe be denied entry into the United States because of their role in the spread of communism.³¹ These were just some of the examples of his anti-Semitism.

In addition, Father Coughlin exhibited many signs of actual sympathy with the Nazis and was perceived in this way by many within the general public. First and foremost, after comparing speeches given by both Coughlin and Adolf Hitler, it becomes apparent that, aside from the language difference, their oratory is similar. Both spoke in a very passionate way with an aggressive tone, and both used expressive mannerisms to rally their audiences. Further, their ideas and speeches were, in many ways, similar in regard to their anti-Semitism and their support of fascism. The striking similarities between the two were obvious even to contemporary listeners, as demonstrated by a letter Coughlin received that described the two of them as “alike as peas in a pod,” and by one of his other followers, who stated that “when he spoke it was a

29. Ibid., 137.

30. Ibid., 149, 162.

31. Ronald H. Carpenter, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 114-115.

thrill like Hitler. And the magnetism was uncanny.”³² As with Ford, Coughlin was also heavily praised in Nazi Germany for exposing the truth about the Jews.³³ In 1939, when Hitler broke an agreement regarding the annexing of a portion of Czechoslovakia, Coughlin defended him. He blamed the signatories of the Treaty of Versailles for eliminating the German Empire and causing nearly insurmountable economic problems for the country. He concluded that Hitlerism would not be stopped.³⁴ Also, it was discovered in the late 1930s that Father Coughlin had published an article in 1938 that was an almost exact copy of a speech given by Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, three years earlier:

Goebbels’ speech: “On the 26th of December, 1918, one of the Socialist members of the Reichstag, the Jew, Dr. Ozkar Cohn, declared that on the 5th of the previous month, he had received 4,000,000 rubles from Joffe for the purpose of the German revolution.”

Coughlin’s article: “On December 26, 1918, one of the Socialist members of the Reichstag, the eminent Jew, Dr. Oskar Cohn, declared that on the 5th of the previous month he had received 4,000,000 rubles from Joffe for the purpose of instigating a revolution in Germany.”³⁵

As this sample shows, the two texts are virtually indistinguishable. This demonstrates that Coughlin paid attention to the Nazi government and sympathized with (at the very least) its anti-Semitic ideology enough to plagiarize this anti-Jewish speech.

Father Coughlin played a small, but significant, role in the national debate over Nazism due to the size of his audience. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 1938, over six million families with radios listened to his broadcasts. In a follow up question, these families were asked

32. Warren, *Radio Priest*, 74-76.

33. *Ibid.*, 160.

34. *Ibid.*, 184-185.

35. General Jewish Council, *Father Coughlin: His “Facts” and Arguments* (New York: General Jewish Council, 1939), 32-35.

their opinion of what was said on the programs: 83% approved.³⁶ In another public opinion poll, it was estimated that he had a regular audience of three million people every Sunday and up to fifteen million in 1939.³⁷ Due mainly to his opposition to FDR and his access to a large audience, the Roosevelt administration successfully pressured the Catholic Church in the Vatican City to take action against Coughlin. As a result, he was silenced by the Vatican in 1942.³⁸

Finally, the other leading figure who showed signs of Nazi sympathy was Charles Augustus Lindbergh. He was born in 1902 in Detroit, Michigan. He was of Swedish origin on his father's side and a mixture of English, Irish, and Scottish ancestry on his mother's side.³⁹ His rise to fame came from being the first pilot to ever fly non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean between New York City and Paris, which he accomplished in 1927. Tragically, he was also widely known because of the "Crime of the Century", when his son was kidnapped and was never found alive.⁴⁰

Consequently, Lindbergh and his wife moved to Europe to seclude themselves from the public. It was during this phase of his life that he began his association with Nazi Germany. In 1936, the Military Attaché to the American Embassy in Berlin, Major Truman Smith approached Charles Lindbergh out of fear of the new air force that Nazi Germany was developing, called the Luftwaffe. On account of Lindbergh's experience with aviation, he was asked to inspect German

36. George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971*, vol. 1, 1935-1948 (New York: Random House, 1972), 100-101.

37. Carpenter, *Spokesperson*, 77.

38. Warren, *Radio Priest*, 264-268.

39. A. Scott Berg, *Lindbergh* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1998), 26.

40. *Ibid.*, 3-7.

air factories and to secretly report back intelligence to the U.S. military. As a result, he traveled to Germany several times during the late 1930s.⁴¹

His first trip to Germany took place in 1936. While there, he was escorted through several German factories, met with the leader of the Luftwaffe, General Hermann Goering, and attended the 1936 Berlin Olympics. While many praised him for helping improve American-German relations, some feared that the Nazi leaders would interpret his visit as an approval of their government. In addition, when reporting his impressions of Germany to Major Smith, he praised Hitler, writing that “the condition of the country, and the appearance of the average person whom I saw, leaves with me the impression that Hitler must have far more character and vision that I thought [he would based on] the accounts in America and England.”⁴²

His second trip in 1937 only improved his view of Germany and Hitler. In his report to Smith, he estimated that based on the contemporary trends in air power development in the United States and Germany, they would be equally matched by 1941. The report was widely distributed in the United States.⁴³ The following year, Lindbergh wrote a letter stating that Germany should be allowed to expand further into the east instead of risking entering England and France into a war for which they were unprepared. This letter was ultimately sent to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Lindbergh also believed that Germany was essential to impeding the oncoming threat of the Soviet Union.⁴⁴

41. Ibid., 355-368, 377.

42. Ibid., 356-361.

43. Ibid., 367-368.

44. Ibid., 374-375, 376.

In 1938, like Henry Ford, Lindbergh was awarded the Verdienstkreuz Deutscher Adler for his aviation services. As with Ford, there was much outcry over his acceptance of the award and his refusal to return or decline it, especially after *Kristallnacht*, one of the worst pogroms of Jews that Nazi Germany had seen. He would never understand the controversy behind his decision to keep the award; returning the award, which was given during a time of peace, would have been “an unnecessary insult,” in his view.⁴⁵

Although Charles Lindbergh was infatuated with Nazi Germany because of his interest in the Luftwaffe and the progress Germany had made technologically under the Nazis, his views on the problems Jews were facing in the country were less obvious. In a journal entry from 1938, he responded to a news report of increasing Jewish problems by questioning the reasoning behind the German aggression towards Jews. He wondered why they were so “unreasonable” in how they were treating the Jews but recognized that Germany did have a severe Jewish problem.

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In April of 1939, he indirectly defended Germany’s actions by claiming that every country had been breaking agreements and promises; the only difference was that she was doing so faster than the others.⁴⁷ Later that month, he wrote that he believed “a few Jews add strength and character to a country, but too many create chaos.” Also, in 1940, after having struck up a friendship with Henry Ford more than ten years earlier, Ford revealed to a former FBI agent that

45. Ibid., 377-381.

46. Charles A. Lindbergh, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), 115-116.

47. Ibid., 173.

whenever the two of them got together, they would talk about nothing else but “the Jews.”⁴⁸ Most likely, Charles Lindbergh did hold some anti-Semitic beliefs; however, he was certainly put off by the harsh persecution that was occurring in Germany and instead focused his attention on German air power and the Nazi government.

In short, during the 1930s, there was a small percentage in the United States that was sympathetic to Nazi ideology and the Nazi government. Among those who fell into this category were: the German-American Bund (also known as the Friends of the New Germany), which was a Nazi organization that attempted to spread Nazism within America;⁴⁹ William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Shirts/Christian Party; and Reverend Gerald Burton Winrod’s Defenders of the Christian Faith.⁵⁰ However, the three people who had the most influential voices in favor of Nazi Germany or anti-Semitism were Henry Ford, Father Charles Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh. The former two were anti-Semites who regularly voiced their opinions through the use of periodicals, speeches, and radio broadcasts, while the latter was infatuated with Nazi Germany and had direct communication with the United States Army. Therefore, they had a small but significant collective impact on the national reaction to the rise of Nazi Germany.

48. Baldwin, *Ford*, 288.

49. Warren, *Radio Priest*, 175-178.

50. Baldwin, *Ford*, 278-279.

CHAPTER THREE

The American Majority

In stark contrast to the anti-Semitic or Nazi-leaning ideas of the few vocal figures discussed in the previous chapter, the opinions of the majority in the United States regarding Nazi Germany were less apparent and varied slightly based on a multitude of factors. Regardless, a general sense of the opinions of most of the American public can be derived through an analysis of newspaper and magazine articles and Gallup poll results from the 1930s.

First and foremost, *The New York Times* was arguably the most influential and widely read newspaper in the United States during this time. It was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1941 for its foreign news reports. In 1943, *Time* magazine emphasized its importance, writing, “What Harvard is to U.S. education, what the House of Morgan has been to U.S. finance, *The New York Times* is to U.S. journalism.” Secretary of State Cordell Hull praised the newspaper for its “magnificent public service” in informing the American public, particularly concerning foreign affairs. It had a readership of about 440,000 on weekdays and 805,000 on Sundays. In addition, it sent its articles to 525 newspapers around the country, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. A poll in 1939 found that 100% of the 200 journalists surveyed read the *Times*.¹ Because of its significance, *The New York Times* serves as an indicator of how much

1. Laurel Leff, *Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9-11.

information regarding the problems in Germany was available to the American public and offers a sense of the sentiment of the time.

The *Times* frequently wrote on the occurrences and events from within Germany; and with a staff of 30 foreign correspondents in Europe, it was able to do so in a timely and accurate manner.² However, Laurel Leff, professor of journalism at Northeastern University and ex-journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*, criticized the newspaper for its treatment of the Jewish persecution in Germany. According to her, the *Times* publisher, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, actively worked to downplay the problems Jews were facing during the 1930s and even through World War II. This was due to his Jewish background. Concerned that the anti-Jewish community would dismiss *The New York Times* as a Jewish newspaper, he set out to establish complete objectivity and neutrality when working on Jewish related articles. According to Leff, Sulzberger was, in part, responsible for the lack of complete awareness in the United States regarding the problems facing the Jews. He was staunchly opposed to the persecutions but stressed that the victims should not be viewed as primarily composed of Jews but instead as a variety of minorities.³ Not only did Sulzberger alter the wording used in his articles; he also suppressed any editorials that addressed the rise of Nazism. He even went so far as to pressure a new Jewish journalist on the *Times* to reject an award he was set to receive for his work exposing the Jewish problems in Germany.⁴

2. Ibid., 9.

3. Ibid., 20-21, 30.

4. Ibid., 32-33.

Regardless, *The New York Times* printed many articles on the rise of the Nazis; and even if they were not wholly familiar with the plight of Jews in Germany, readers were certainly aware of the increasing tension in Europe. The day after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, the *Times* printed several articles on the event. One naively reported that his acceptance of the position was a rejection of his previously expressed desire to be a dictator, or as he called it, “the Mussolini of Germany”.⁵ Later that year, following controversy over the approaching 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the Amateur Athletic Union, an organization responsible for certifying track-and-field athletes for the games, put forth a statement refusing to certify athletes unless German-Jewish athletes were allowed and encouraged to participate. The *Times* responded with an article titled “AAU Boycotts 1936 Olympics Because of Nazi Ban on Jews” in a mischaracterization of the actual statement that portrayed the threat to boycott the Olympics as a real boycott.⁶ Despite the misleading title, here was an example of the newspaper reporting on an issue related to the Jewish condition in Germany and the controversy surrounding it. Also, during the winter Olympics of 1936, which were also held in Germany, Frederick Birchall, a *Times* correspondent, wrote an article confirming the success of the Nazis in keeping their word on eliminating prejudice from the games. At the end of the article, he wrote:

This world gathering [the Winter Olympics] is not being used *for any* active propaganda . . . However, this is really the most efficient propaganda conceivable. There is probably no tourist here who will not go home averring that Germany is the most peace-loving,

5. “Hitler Puts Aside Aim To Be Dictator: German Cabinet Also Reveals Shift by Conservatives Who Once Barred Him. Nazi’s Rise Was Rapid: Imprisoned for Munich Revolt in 1923, He Later Led 6,000,000 in National Election. Long An Alien In Reich Industrialists of Rhineland and the Ruhr Are Believed to Have Forced Coalition Rule,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 1933, 3.

6. Large, *Games*, 94.

unmilitaristic, hospitable and tolerant country in Europe and that all the foreign correspondents stationed here are liars.⁷

Some, such as David Clay Large, professor at Montana State University, have understood this statement to mean Birchall had been blinded to the real state of affairs in Germany because of the “Nazis’ ‘efficient propaganda’.”⁸ However, Birchall’s statement was more likely an acknowledgment of the Nazi Olympics serving as merely a façade masking the true conditions in Germany.

Two other *New York Times* articles are also worth mentioning because they dealt specifically with Nazi anti-Semitism and Jewish issues. The first was published in 1935 following anti-Jewish riots in Germany. Originally, it was stated by the Nazi government that the riots occurred because Jews had hissed at a Swedish film. The article reported that Dr. Ernst Hanfstaengl, Hitler’s press advisor, had admitted in secret that, on the contrary, Nazi Storm Troopers had been responsible for the hissing and had blamed it on the Jews. The riots were said to be a “party affair” and quickly turned violent as participants attacked any Jews who crossed their path.⁹ Two days after this article appeared in the paper, another was published in which Rev. L. M. Birkhead reported on what he discovered while visiting Nürnberg, Germany. He wrote that aside from their goal of eliminating “Jews from Germany’s cultural and political life,”

7. Frederick T. Birchall, “Crowded Program at the Games Keeps Garmisch Visitors on Jump: Olympic Throngs, Apparently Tireless, Rush to Scenes of Varied Activities and Then Dance at Night -- Goering Watches Women Figure Skaters Open Their Competition,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 1936, 26.

8. Large, *Games*, 142.

9. “Editor Holds Riots Inspired by Nazis: Varian Fry says Hanfstaengl admitted Storm Troopers, Not Jews, Hissed Film. Insists Police Looked On; American Seized for Blocking Party Propaganda by Removing Anti-Semitic Posters,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1935, 8.

the Nazis were also working to spread anti-Semitism to other countries.¹⁰ These two articles demonstrate that the United States, by means of reports such as these, was indeed exposed to information regarding Jewish persecution and anti-Semitism in Germany.

In spite of the heavy focus on Nazi anti-Semitism in the previously mentioned articles, in 1939, when several refugee ships from Germany sought refuge in the United States and other countries, *The New York Times* virtually ignored the fact that the majority of the refugees were Jewish. The *St. Louis* was, possibly, the most widely known refugee ship. A *Times* editorial characterized it as “the saddest ship afloat today, the Hamburg-American liner *St. Louis*, with 900 Jewish refugees aboard, is steaming back toward Germany after a tragic week of frustration at Havana and off the coast of Florida.”¹¹ Even after acknowledging that the ship carried primarily Jewish refugees, a few days later another editorial was published that dismissed this fact. In discussing the problem of refugees from Germany, the editorial stated that, “it has nothing to do with race or creed. It is not a Jewish problem or a Gentile problem . . . It is the problem of mankind.”¹² As these reports show, *The New York Times* was critical of the Nazi government, yet it did at times fail to properly inform readers about the racial climate in Germany.

Another article that covered Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany was *TIME* magazine’s Man of the Year feature in 1939, for which Hitler was selected. Contrary to the positive connotations

10. Rev. L. M. Birkhead, “Nazis Ask World to Combat Jews: American Clergyman Learns Streicher’s Plans at Secret Office in Nuremberg. Links to U.S. Discovered: Rev. L. M. Birkhead of Kansas City Finds British Group Also Allied With Hitler’s Aide,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 1935, 2.

11. “Refugee Ship,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1939, 24.

12. “Living Room’ For Germans,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1939, 7.

of the title, he was selected for Man of the Year, 1938, because of how influential he was in international affairs. He was heavily criticized in the piece. It described him as a “moody, brooding, unprepossessing, 49-year-old Austrian-born ascetic with a Charlie Chapin mustache” who was “raised as a spoiled child” and “grew up a half-educated young man.” Despite these characteristics, *TIME* recognized the fear he instilled in the world by threatening war over Czechoslovakia. The article also mentioned his use of concentration camps for Jews, Socialists, Communists, and other dissidents. It ended with a disturbingly accurate prediction: “It [seems] more than probable that the Man of 1938 may make 1939 a year to be remembered.”¹³ This article, thus, helps shed light on American sentiment towards Hitler and the Nazis. It should also be noted that *Life* magazine was also very critical of the Third Reich. This was likely due, at least in part, to the influence of cofounder and editor-in-chief of both magazines, Henry Luce, who was an active advocate of American intervention in Europe.¹⁴

In addition to newspaper and magazine articles, public opinion polls and surveys offer another measure of popular sentiment. In 1935, the Gallup Poll was created by George Gallup to measure public opinion on a myriad of topics. Along with questions about internal and domestic affairs, the polls also included questions about foreign affairs. These questions are possibly the best indicator of American public opinion regarding the Third Reich.

Although foreign affairs questions were rarely asked more than once, the three that were asked on several different occasions help show the changing public opinions in the few years before World War II. The first dealt with U.S. involvement in a foreign war. It asked

13. “Man of the Year,” *TIME*, January 2, 1939, 13-18.

14. James L. Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 114-115.

respondents whether they thought the country would be drawn into a European war if there were to be one (this was generally stated or implied as a war between England and France on one side and Germany and Italy on the other). This was first asked in 1936; over 60% answered “no.” As more polls were taken, opinions changed and ultimately resulted in nearly 80% answering “yes” shortly before World War II began (Figure 1).¹⁵

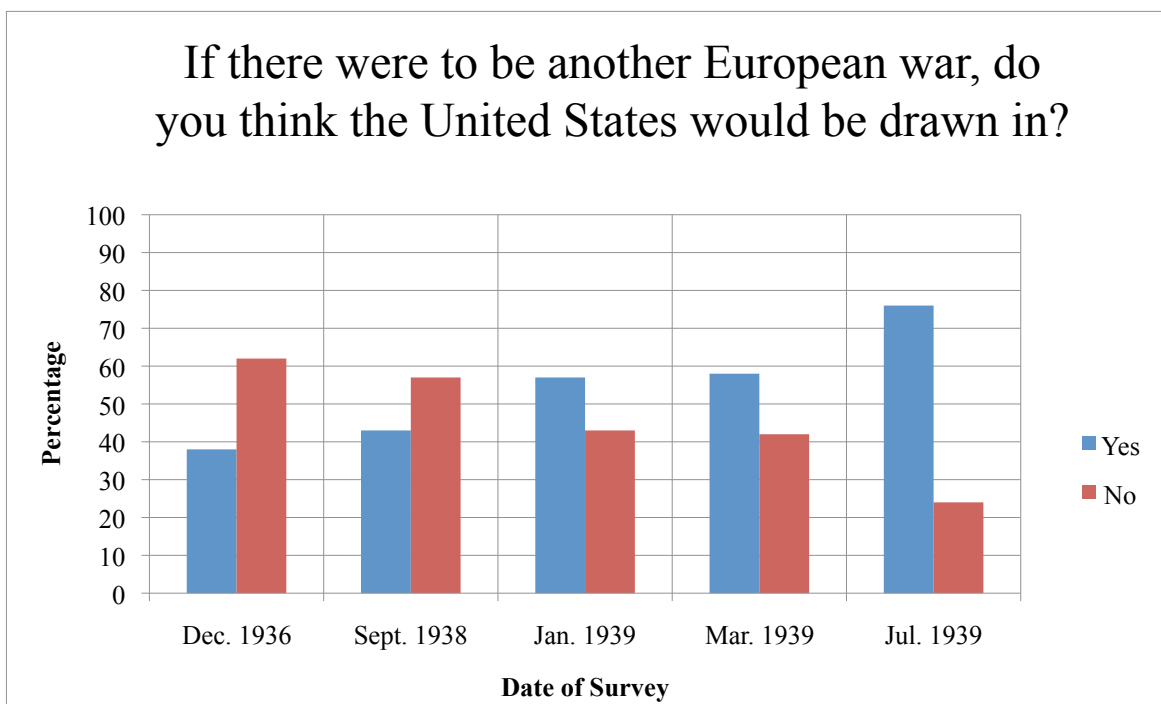


Figure 1 Gallup Poll results. Note: The specific wording of the question varied slightly based on when and how it was posed. The results have been standardized for comparison.

The second question asked whether the people surveyed thought that there would be another large war in the near future. These results showed no trends: the last poll had the highest percentage of respondents answering “no,” despite its greater chronological proximity to the start of the war (Figure 2).¹⁶ Of those who responded “yes” in the January, 1939 poll, however, the

15. Gallup, *Gallup Poll*, 46, 120, 137, 150, 175.

majority believed Germany would be responsible for starting the future war.¹⁷ Overall, results in Figure 2 reflect a country divided on the seriousness of the conflicts in Europe.

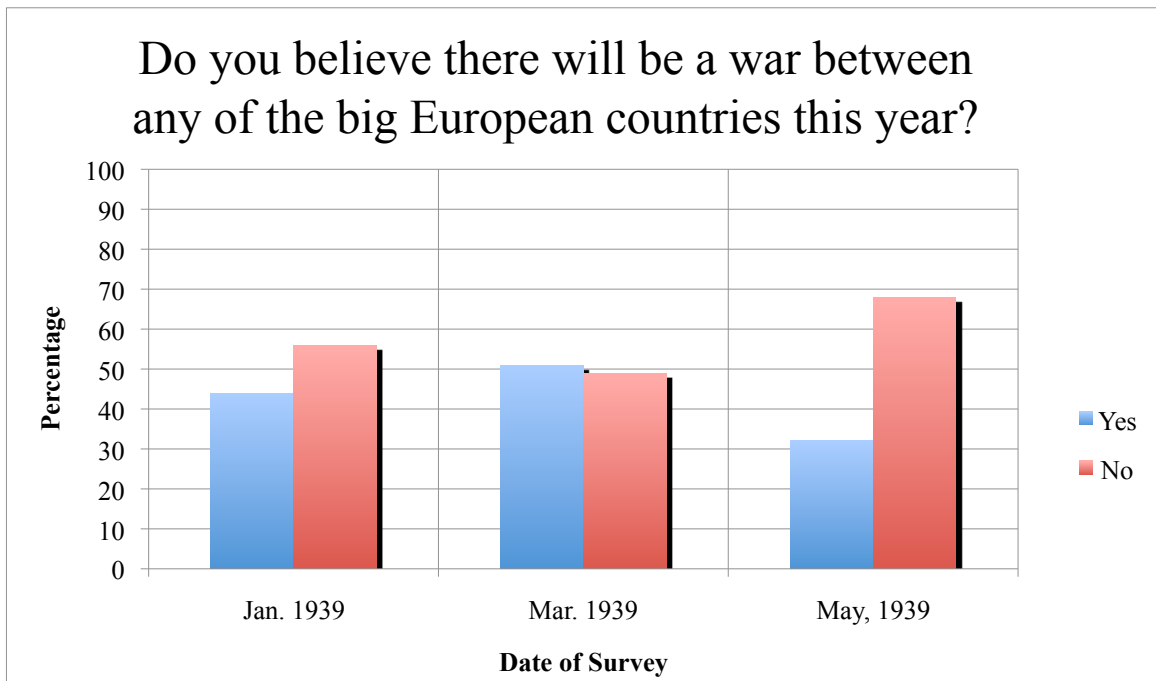


Figure 2 Gallup Poll results.

Third, another Gallup poll asked whether the United States should send its military to Europe to help fight if a war were to break out between England and France on one side and Germany on the other (the hypothetical assumption was removed from the question after the war began). Overwhelmingly, respondents answered no to this question. After the war began, almost 95% of all those asked thought the United States should not send out its military (Figure 3), though they increasingly favored assisting England and Britain by other means.¹⁸ Most

16. Ibid., 137, 150, 154.

17. Ibid., 137.

18. Ibid., 145, 149, 180, 184.

likely, this can be attributed to the economic troubles facing the country and to the bitter interpretation of World War I as a war the United States was tricked into entering by corrupt politicians and greedy military arms manufacturers.¹⁹

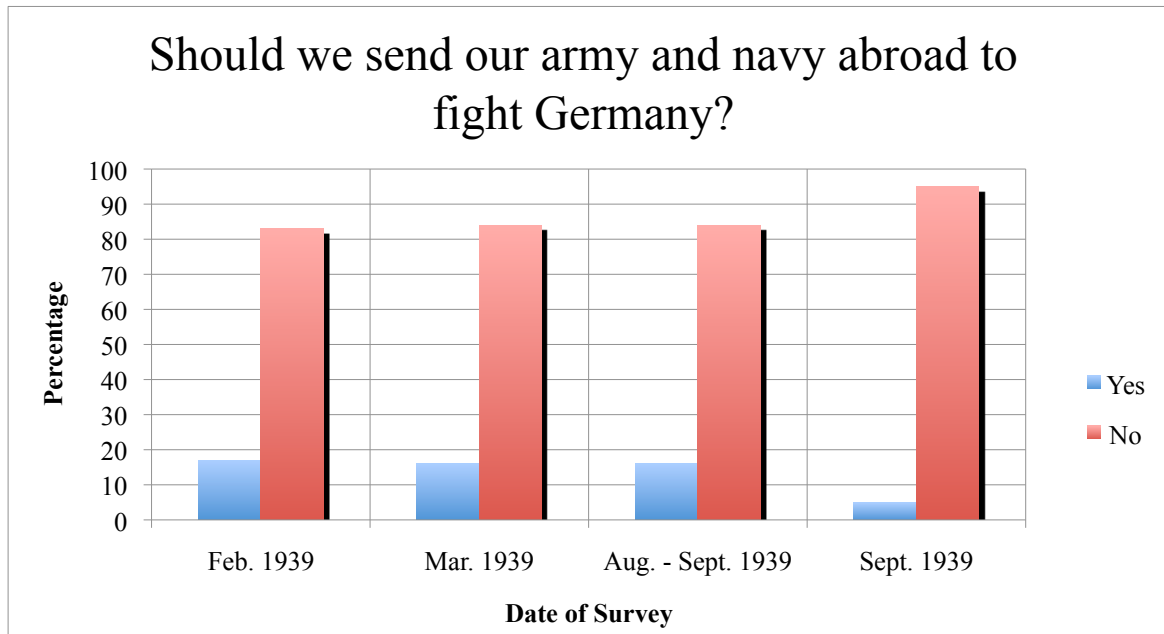


Figure 3 Gallup Poll results. Note: The question in the first two polls was posed hypothetically if war were to break out. The September 1939 poll was conducted following the start of the war on the first of September that same year.

Finally, aside from these three questions, several other Gallup Polls proved significant. In May of 1938, 65% of people surveyed answered that they would support England and France if they were to go to war against Germany and Italy. Only 3% would have favored Germany and Italy.²⁰ Later, when asked if they believed Hitler when he said he had “no more territorial ambitions in Europe,” 92% of people did not believe him.²¹ In November of that same year, a

19. Stokesbury, *Short History*, 50-51.

20. Gallup, *Gallup Poll*, 112.

21. *Ibid.*, 125.

Gallup poll asked about approval of “Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany.” Only 6% approved, while 94% disapproved.²² Finally, in July of 1939, respondents were asked two questions: 1) “What country do you like least?” and 2) “Which foreign statesman do you least like?” The top answers for both questions were Germany and Adolf Hitler, respectively.²³

In sum, although there is no exact way of determining what the American public knew and what their opinions were regarding Nazi Germany, analyzing newspaper and magazine articles and Gallup polls helps lead to an answer. *The New York Times* and *TIME* articles prove that the events that took place in Nazi Germany during the 1930s were not well-kept secrets; even though the *Times* did not always fully address the situation, there was enough information available to the public for them to make informed judgments. The Gallup polls, on the other hand, show that, in general, most Americans disapproved of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis but remained steadfast in their anti-war position.

22. Ibid., 128.

23. Ibid., 167-168.

CONCLUSION

As the previous chapters show, although the United States in general did relatively little to take a collective stance for or against the Nazi government in Germany, its inaction was not due to a lack of information available. On the whole, most Americans were strongly opposed to the Nazi regime and its policies, and they recognized Germany's growing threat to peace and democracy. Regardless, they disapproved of any direct involvement in European politics and believed the country should not be drawn into another war.

Information about Nazism and Adolf Hitler was more or less widely available, particularly in the late 1930s. First, the entire set of ideas and plans that guided Hitler's Germany had been published more than a full decade before the start of World War II in his semi-autobiographical book, *Mein Kampf*. An English translation, while somewhat faulty, was in existence as early as 1933. Second, many newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times*, regularly published articles that covered Nazi Germany and its bellicosity and violence towards Jews, communists, and political opponents. As reports of Jewish persecution emerged, anti-Nazi organizations helped raise awareness and voiced their opinions through protests, boycotts, and publications. Third, the United States government had privileged access to information from their own officials stationed in Germany, such as Ambassador Dodd and George S. Messersmith, and to information from the British and French governments.

Within the United States government, the opinions paralleled those in the American public. Most government officials sympathized with the Jews and other victims of the Nazi persecutions. They also recognized the threat of Nazi Germany. In spite of this, there was general opposition to war or direct action. Even officials such as President Franklin Roosevelt, who would ultimately push for involvement in the European conflict, were hesitant to act.

In the general population, only a small percentage approved of the Nazi government. The three figures that, arguably, had the most influence and ability to disseminate their ideas were Henry Ford, Father Charles Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh. Ford and Coughlin, as did most of the Nazi sympathizers, sympathized with the Nazis because of their anti-Semitic agenda and their hatred of communism. Lindbergh, on the other hand, was primarily wooed over by the Nazi officials on his visits to Germany and was infatuated with their air force, the Luftwaffe.

The majority of the American public disliked Hitler and Nazi Germany. They were against Nazi ideology and the Jewish persecutions. They almost completely approved of indirect support of England and France by means of food and supplies. Nonetheless, like the government, they overwhelmingly agreed that the United States should not wage war or send its troops to help in the European struggle.

The research in this thesis has given insight into how Nazi Germany was perceived before World War II. It helps explain how much was known about the Third Reich at the time and how America responded.

Further, this thesis also sheds light on an ongoing debate over America's role in international affairs and the relationship between public opinion and government policy-making. Since its emergence from World War II as a world power, the United States has had significant

influence in international affairs. However, primarily since the failure of the Vietnam War, the country's role internationally has been brought into question. In recent memory, the government has come under fire for its actions or inactions globally in places like Iraq, in Darfur, and Syria. While there is certainly no clear-cut answer to when the United States should intervene itself in foreign affairs and to what degree, the research in this thesis suggests that, in spite of opposition by the American public, if there is enough verifiable evidence of a humanitarian crisis to justify intervention, the government should act. Especially with hindsight, this certainly applies to World War II.

As with most debates, though, this one cannot be easily resolved. To make a better judgment, it would be beneficial to also research American opinions of World War II *after* the war had ended to gauge shifts in public opinion over foreign policy decisions. This could be incorporated into a larger body of research on public opinion before and after other major wars and international conflicts in United States history. Ultimately, the goal would be to try to find a general relationship between the views of the American public on foreign affairs and the decision by the government to ignore or heed those views and to analyze their outcomes.

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