CHAPTER 33

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Shadow of War, 1933–1941

# focus questions

. What were the main characteristics of Roosevelt’s foreign policy and why was the American public bent on isolationism during the 1930s?

. What were the steps that America took to try and remain neutral as Europe headed into World War II?

. What steps did Germany and Japan take to lead America into the European conflict?

# Chapter Theme

**Theme:** In the early and mid-1930s, the United States attempted to isolate itself from foreign involvements and wars. But by the end of the decade, the spread of totalitarianism and war in Europe forced Roosevelt to provide more and more assistance to desperate Britain, despite strong isolationist opposition.

chapter summary

Roosevelt’s early foreign policies, such as wrecking the London economic conference and establishing the Good Neighbor policy in Latin America, were governed by concern for domestic recovery and reflected America’s desire for a less active role in the world. America virtually withdrew from all European affairs, and promised independence to the Philippines as an attempt to avoid Asian commitments.

Depression-spawned chaos in Europe and Asia strengthened the isolationist impulse, as Congress passed a series of Neutrality Acts designed to prevent America from being drawn into foreign wars. The United States adhered to the policy for a time, despite the aggression of Italy, Germany, and Japan. But after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Roosevelt began to provide some aid to the Allies.

After the fall of France, Roosevelt gave greater assistance to desperate Britain in the destroyers-for-bases deal and in lend-lease. Still-powerful isolationists protested these measures, but Wendell Willkie refrained from attacking Roosevelt’s foreign policy in the 1940 campaign.

Roosevelt and Winston Churchill issued the Atlantic Charter, and by the summer of 1941, the United States was fighting an undeclared naval war with Germany in the North Atlantic. After negotiations with Japan failed, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into World War II.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Explain the causes of American isolationism in the 1930s: domestic depression, disillusion with World War I, hostility to arms dealers and other merchants of death.

REFERENCE: Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935–1941* (1966).

* Examine the erosion of isolationism in response to the aggressions of Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and the Japanese warlords. Show the transition in American thinking from indifference to fear for democracy, as appeasement only fed the dictators’ appetites.

REFERENCE: David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (1999).

* Describe the fierce debates between internationalists and isolationists, especially from 1939 to 1941. The emphasis might be on Roosevelt’s carefully calibrated strategy of increasing aid at each stage, but never so rapidly as to hand the isolationists a political victory.

REFERENCE: Kenneth S. Davis, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Into the Storm, 1937–1941* (1993).

* Discuss the Japanese-American negotiations and the conflicts that set the stage for Pearl Harbor.

REFERENCE: Donald Cameron Watt, *How the War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (1989).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on the merchants of death Nye hearings. Discuss how 1930s isolationism was strongly aimed at the factors that had supposedly led the United States into World War I.
* Examine the rise of Mussolini, Hitler, and the Japanese militarists. Consider why Americans were appalled by their doctrines, even if they did not want to fight them. (See boxed quotes on pages 773 and 776.)
* Analyze the isolationist-internationalist debate, especially over lend-lease. Point out the isolationists’ argument that such aid would inevitably lead to war and the internationalists’ argument that helping Britain was the way to stay out of war. Consider whether FDR acted wisely in moving the United States closer to involvement. (See boxed quotes on pages 774 and 784.)
* Discuss the causes of the Pacific war from the Japanese point of view. Consider whether the war was inevitable.
* Conduct a class debate on a topic such as The United States Should Give Lend-Lease Aid to Great Britain. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Show students the following video: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume II: 1936–1941: Over the Edge*. “As Adolph Hitler’s feared Third Reich cuts a deadly path through Europe, Americans must weigh the option of becoming involved in another bloody, global conflict.”
* Show the students Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). Discuss the imagery and symbolism in the movie—what was Chaplin’s purpose of satirizing Adolph Hitler? Was it effective? Why do you think the movie was so controversial?
* Use various aids (photographs, films, documents) to illustrate the Holocaust. Consider why many of the refugees felt grateful to America for providing a haven, but frustrated at their inability to do more for their fellow Jews.
* Use some examples of the work of Jewish refugee artists, composers, scientists, or writers (for example, Marc Chagall, Kurt Weill, Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt, and Erich Fromm) to illustrate the refugee immigrants’ cultural contribution to America. Consider how such contributions may have differed from the second- and third-generation cultural achievements of some other immigrant groups.

# character sketches

## Adolf Hitler (1889–1945)

Hitler was regarded as a vulgar laughingstock in Germany in the 1920s, but he eventually ruled more of Europe than anyone since Napoleon.

The son of a minor Austrian bureaucrat who was over fifty years old when Adolf was born, Hitler constantly envisioned himself as a great artist, but his grades and talent were so poor that he failed to get into a Vienna art school. He later painted pictures and baked them so he could sell them for high prices as valuable works by old masters.

Hitler was a total failure until he joined the German army during World War I and became completely caught up in the German cause. Through long years of speaking in beer halls, Hitler became adept at reading audiences. His emotional, ranting speeches had great hypnotic power. Except on matters of war and politics, Hitler was totally ignorant and had banal or vicious views that he nevertheless considered the thoughts of genius.

**Quote:** “Man has become great through struggle.… Whatever goal man has reached is due to his originality plus his brutality.… Through all the centuries force and power are the determining factors.…” (*Mein Kampf,* 1924)

REFERENCE: Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1962).

## Winston Churchill (1874–1965)

Churchill was a powerful British politician and statesman, long before his heroic leadership against the Nazis in World War II.

Churchill’s father was Lord Randolph Churchill, a descendant of the seventeenth-century duke of Marlborough. Churchill later wrote a biography of his distinguished ancestor, Marlborough. His mother was an American, and he always cherished his half-American ancestry.

The brash young Churchill dashed around the remote spots of the British Empire at its height in the 1890s, seeking adventure and glory. He found it during the Boer War and wrote dramatic accounts of how he escaped from Boers by hiding under floorboards.

Churchill became the powerful first lord of the admiralty during World War I at age thirty-nine, but the daring Gallipoli campaign in Turkey that he organized proved a disaster. Churchill then lost influence and spent much of the 1920s and 1930s as a political outcast, until the rise of Nazism gave him a new opportunity. He was stubborn and self-willed and almost childish in his vanity and outbursts of temper. Yet he was warm-hearted, generous, courageous, and capable of strong sympathy with others. During the London blitz, he insisted on sharing the hardships of the people and often wept when he saw bombed-out houses and churches.

**Quote:** “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.” (Speech, 1940)

REFERENCE: William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill*, 2 vols. (1983, 1988).

## Joseph Stalin (1879–1953)

Stalin’s name and picture were everywhere in Russia during his brutal rule, but after de-Stalinization, his name and image were completely erased from the Soviet Union.

Stalin’s real name was Joseph Dzhugashvili. He later chose Stalin (steel) as his revolutionary name. Stalin’s parents sent him to a seminary to become a priest, but he joined revolutionary movements and was expelled.

At the height of his tyranny in the 1930s, Stalin exiled or killed millions of people, including even his closest associates and one of his own family members. His second wife committed suicide in 1932, leaving a letter accusing him of numerous crimes. For many years, all Soviet artists, writers, musicians, scientists, and others had to sing Stalin’s praises and have their work approved by him. He was suspicious, cruel, and paranoid but could exude great charm on occasion.

**Quote:** “It may be asked how could the Soviet government have consented to conclude a non-aggression pact with such perfidious…fiends as Hitler and Ribbentrop? Was this not an error on the part of the Soviet government? No.… We secured to our country peace for a year and a half and the opportunity of preparing our forces.” (1941)

REFERENCE: Adam Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (1973).

# great debates in american history

## Great Debate (1939–1941)

Isolationism versus internationalism. Should the United States move away from isolationist neutrality and toward aiding the Allies in the fight against Hitler?

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| ***Yes:*** The internationalists, led by President Roosevelt and the administration; most big-business leaders and cosmopolitan city-dwellers; the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, led by William Allen White. |  | ***No:*** The isolationists, led by the America First Committee and Charles A. Lindbergh; some senators and representatives, led by William Borah, Robert Taft, and Hamilton Fish; some writers, like Charles Beard and Harry Elmer Barnes; some small-business and ethnic groups, especially in the Midwest; some leftists and socialists, led by Norman Thomas. |

ISSUE #1: Isolation. Should the United States have any interest in events overseas?

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| ***Yes:*** Internationalist Roosevelt: “It becomes clearer and clearer that the world will be a shabby and dangerous place to live in—yes, even for Americans to live in—if it is ruled by force in the hands of a few.… I hope that we shall have fewer American ostriches in our midst. It is not good for the ultimate health of ostriches to bury their heads in the sand.” |  | ***No:*** Isolationist poet Oliver Allstrom:  “Over there,” there’s mud and shedding of blood  And tongues confusing and strange.  So why lend a hand to an alien band  Whose dreams we can never change?  “No, no,” comes the cry from the U.S. sky,  “We’ll never be Allied tools.  Nor again parade in a foreign brigade  Like saps in a squad of fools.”  “And Europe may strut through its bloody rut  And scheme with her Babel-snares.  But we’ll stay home, this side of the foam  And mind our own affairs!” |

ISSUE #2: Democracy. Are the Allies fighting for the democratic principles America believes in?

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| ***Yes:*** Internationalist Congressman Jerry Voorhis: “I have an interest in the way of life wherein free men can freely struggle to better their conditions, freely worship and believe according to their own conscience.… I know that this is not possible in a Nazi- or Communist-dominated nation. So…to aid Great Britain and the other nations attempting to resist the totalitarians has become part of American policy.” |  | ***No:*** Isolationist Congressman Hamilton Fish: “The cause for which Hitler has thrown the German masses into war is damnably unholy. But the war of Chamberlain and Reynaud is not thereby rendered holy. The fact that Hitler is the opponent does not make the Allied war a fight for democracy.… The Allied governments have no idealism in the conflict, no war aims worthy of the sacrifice…of their peoples.…” |

ISSUE #3: War. Will aiding the Allies inevitably lead the United States into war?

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| ***No:*** Internationalist Roosevelt: “There is a far less chance of the United States getting into war if we do all we can now to support the nations defending themselves against attack by the Axis than if we acquiesce in their defeat, submit tamely to an Axis victory, and wait our turn to be the object of attack in another war later on.… There is no demand for sending an American Expeditionary Force outside our own borders. There is no intention by any member of your government to send such a force. You can, therefore, nail any talk about sending armies to Europe as deliberate untruth.” |  | ***Yes:*** Isolationist Senator Arthur Vandenberg: “When H.R. 1776 [lend-lease] passed the Senate…we did vastly more than ‘aid Britain.’ We have thrown ourselves squarely into the power politics and the power wars of Europe, Asia, and Africa.… We have said to Britain, ‘We will see you through to victory.’ And it would be unbelievably dishonorable for us to stop short of full participation in the war if that be necessary to a victory.… But I fear this means we must actively engage in the war ourselves.” |

ISSUE #4: War and democracy. Would another war require dictatorial methods and destroy democracy within the United States?

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| ***No:*** Internationalist Roosevelt: “I reject the idea that only by abandoning our freedom, our ideals, our way of life, can we build our defenses adequately, can we match the strength of the aggressors.… I do not share these fears.” |  | ***Yes:*** Isolationist socialist Norman Thomas: “The method of modern totalitarian warfare is self-defeating in terms of ideal ends. War itself is the only victor. Each particular war begets its more deadly successors. Intolerance, dictatorship, brutality, are its inevitable accompaniments.…” |

REFERENCES: William Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation, 1937–1940* (1952); Kenneth Davis, *FDR: Into the Storm, 1937–1940* (1993); Wayne Cole, *Charles Lindbergh and the Battle Against American Intervention in World War II* (1974).

# questions for class discussion

. Why did the neutrality laws fail to prevent America’s growing involvement with the military conflicts in Europe and Asia?

. How did the process of American entry into World War II compare with the entry into World War I? (See boxed quotes on pages 776 and 786.)

. Would it have been more straightforward of Roosevelt to have openly called for a declaration of war against Hitler rather than increasing involvement gradually while claiming that he did not want war? (See Examining the Evidence section on page 778.)

. Would the United States have entered World War II even if the Japanese had not attacked Pearl Harbor?

# CONTENDING VOICES: STERLING MORTON VS. FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. What traditional U.S. foreign policies did Morton cite to oppose any U.S. action to oppose aggressive nations in 1940?

2. What did Roosevelt argue would be the result of following the policies of Morton and the isolationist America First Committee?