

8. Roosevelt and Hitler. Struggle for World Power, 1940–1941

The history of American-German relations from the founding of the Reich in 1871 to the present is the story of a dramatic alternation between conflict and cooperation. Until 1945, its main theme was the strategic and economic conflict between the twofold attempt of the post-Bismarck German Reich to break out of its semi-hegemonic position in the center of Europe and become a world power among world powers, and the twofold response of the United States to prevent this and to keep Germany in the position of a middle state in Europe. The legal, moral, economic, and political conflict between democracy and autocracy, between democracy and National Socialism formed an integral part of this conflict. That is why the United States and the Kaiserreich faced each other as enemies in World War I, why the United States and the Third Reich faced each other as enemies in World War II, why the United States twice became the co-founder of a bourgeois democratic republic on German soil, the Weimar Republic, and the Federal Republic. The rise to world hegemonic power and the establishment of Pax Americana in the immediate postwar period were a consequence of the double German challenge.

Without a doubt, the years 1939 to 1941 represent the watershed of this century because Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan threatened to revolutionize the Eurasian double continent, putting the future of Western, that is, Judeo-Christian, liberal, and capitalist civilization at stake.

The United States declared its neutrality on September 3, 1939, and remained neutral in the sense of international law until the German declaration of war on December 11, 1941, although American policy repeatedly broke the neutrality rules of classical international law and very soon took sides with the Allies in the political sense. Diplomatic relations continued to exist officially from 1939 to 1941, although they were almost devoid of content and downgraded to the level of *chargés*

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d'affaires. Moreover, consulates in both countries were closed in July 1941. Neither Roosevelt nor Hitler ever thought of involving the United States as a peace broker in the European war. Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles's exploratory mission to Rome, Paris, London, and Berlin in February 1940 was primarily related to Roosevelt's domestic political considerations in the 1940 presidential election. Hitler himself had not the slightest interest in peace talks at that time. Roosevelt, like the British after the outbreak of war in Europe, was never willing to agree to a peace plan that could lead to the consolidation of Nazi rule over parts of Europe or, indeed, all of Europe. Such a "Super-Munich" would have represented the worst of all possible cases for Roosevelt. Conversely, Hitler would have been willing to negotiate peace only under such a condition.

More important than the level of international law was that of the actual power-politics of both states. For, although their actions remained related to each other and, at the latest since the summer of 1940, took place on both sides within the context of global visions and conflicts of interest, they were carried out independently of each other, without any interactions to speak of. One has therefore rightly described the dynamic of "two roads to war" (M. Jonas).

The overriding goal of Hitler's America policy was to keep the United States out of the European war without letting the United States prevent him from conquering continental Europe. At the same time, since September 3, 1939, the United States became a decisive factor in Hitler's repeated attempts to force England to recognize his "New Order" in Europe and to make peace on his terms. The stronger the actual U.S. aid to the British Empire became, the longer the American shadow grew over the Atlantic. When Hitler realized in July 1940 that England was not willing to make peace on his terms in large part because of American support, the United States, contrary to Hitler's original plans, moved more and more into the center of his "world blitzkrieg strategy." Roosevelt put Hitler in a time crunch. The "Führer" had to "solve" the continental European problems before the U.S. would be in a political and military position to intervene in Europe.

Thus, he made considerable efforts to keep America out of Europe. Hitler showed determination in keeping the German Navy on a tight leash in the U-boat war to avoid anything in the Atlantic that could serve as a pretext for the U.S. to enter the war. On this point, he had learned from World War I. He adhered to the rules of law for naval warfare in the naval war against the formally neutral but actually partisan USA; German propaganda was strictly forbidden to even

use the term “unrestricted submarine warfare”; and even when the first armed incident between the USA and the Third Reich occurred on September 4, 1941, between the American destroyer “Greer” and a German submarine, Hitler stuck to this basic line against the advice of Grand Admiral Raeder.

Finally, U.S. deterrence became a central component of Hitler’s global strategy beginning in the summer of 1940.

Two statements by him in July 1940 and July 1941 make this problem situation particularly clear: “England’s hope is Russia and America. If hope in Russia falls away, America also falls away, because [on the] removal of Russia there will be a revaluation of Japan in East Asia on a tremendous scale” (July 31, 1940). “If we can keep the U.S. out of the war at all, it will be only by destroying Russia, and then only if Japan and Germany take an ice-cold and unequivocal stand” (July 14, 1941). What a change in the assessment of America from September 1939 to July 1940! Ten months after the outbreak of war in Europe, England’s refusal to make peace was forcing Hitler to integrate the five world powers of the time—England, the United States, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the Third Reich—into wishful projections of global proportions in order to find any kind of concept against the United States. The realization of his main foreign policy goal, which had been fixed since the 1920s, of creating living space in the East by destroying the Soviet Union, was now at the same time to free Hitler from the nightmarish pressure of an American entry into the war. Victory over the Soviet Union was to destroy England’s hopes of help from Russia and America, and force Hitler’s “desired ally,” England, to finally recognize a National Socialist continental empire. At the same time, Hitler sought to win Japan as an ally in the struggle to deter America: to tie the United States, like Britain, in East Asia; to divert its energies from Europe; and to unsettle the United States with the possibility of a two-front war. The most striking expression of this policy was the Three-Power Pact concluded on September 27, 1940, between Germany, Japan, and Italy.

In it, the parties pledged to recognize and respect “the leadership of Germany and Italy in creating a new order in Europe” and the “leadership of Japan in creating a new order in the Greater East Asian region.” The case for alliance was to occur if Germany, Italy, or Japan were attacked by a power “not presently engaged in a European war or in the Sino-Japanese conflict”—that is, by the United States.

From Hitler’s point of view, therefore, the negotiations on a *modus vivendi* in the Pacific that had begun between Japan and the United

States in the spring of 1941 must have seemed particularly threatening. An agreement between the two states would have destroyed his entire concept and would have conjured up the danger of a repetition of the situation of World War I—America’s entry into the war against Germany with its Pacific shore secured. The likelihood of such a development was also great in the spring of 1941 because, with Roosevelt’s reelection in November 1940, it became apparent that the Three-Power Pact had not had a deterrent effect on American policy but, on the contrary, had strengthened the American will to support the Allies. Presumably, the failure of the deterrence concept and the increasingly likely eventuality of American entry into the war—Hitler expected the U.S. to be ready for war in 1942—were the main reasons why Hitler, in a conversation with Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka on April 4, 1941, went beyond the commitment of the Three-Power Pact and promised Japan Germany’s support even in the event of a Japanese attack against the United States.

But as long as the Eastern campaign was not finished, an entry of the USA into the war had to be avoided and America’s provocations in the Atlantic had to be ignored. Since the summer of 1940, Hitler no longer had any conception of America without Japan. Without Japan, it was neither possible to deter the U.S. from entering the war in Europe, nor to wage war against the U.S., let alone win it. This basic fact is probably also the key to answering the question, which is disputed in research and can only be answered hypothetically due to the lack of detailed sources, why Germany declared war on the United States on December 11, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, even though the German armies were bogged down in the mud outside Moscow. This move by Hitler is puzzling because it seems to make no sense even in the only language Hitler claimed to understand, the language of power, and because it ran counter to Hitler’s own world political constructions and hopes he had developed since the summer of 1940. Neither the British Empire nor the Soviet Union had been defeated, and, in such a situation, it must have seemed like megalomania, like a suicidal loss of touch with reality, and like playing with the existence of the German Reich to declare war on potentially the strongest state on earth. If there is any explanation at all that is rational in terms of power politics, it lies in the Japanese alliance.

On December 4, 1941, at the latest, Hitler, without being informed of the planned attack on Pearl Harbor, decided to give in to Japanese insistence and, in the event of Japan going to war with the United

States, to agree to a German-Japanese-Italian alliance pact on a reciprocal basis—provided that the other two powers would also commit to fight together until victory and not make any special peace deals with their enemies. This treaty was signed in Berlin on December 11, shortly before the German declaration of war was delivered in Washington and Hitler's speech in the German Reichstag. Hitler's calculation seems to have been that war with the United States would come anyway. The Third Reich's only chance of surviving in such a war and keeping the U.S. out of Europe was to engage the U.S. in a two-front war simultaneously in Europe and Asia, in the Atlantic and the Pacific; for, as he told Ambassador Oshima on Jan. 3, 1942, Hitler believed that England could be destroyed. How to defeat the USA, on the other hand, he did not yet know.

America's road to war, the "second road" to war, led through the gradual abandonment of a neutral position and ever-intensifying U.S. aid to states threatened by the aggressors. Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt and the internationalists had led the American nation to a point where it was no longer questionable whether, but only when, how, and where—in the Atlantic or Pacific—the United States would enter World War II. At this point, they were committed to a concept of defense, war, and victory that could be described as a strategy of global forward defense, in which the distinction between defensive and offensive in the *geographic sense* had become blurred beyond recognition.

The buildup of the U.S. global presence from the outbreak of the European war to December 1941 has often been recounted by historians. Here we need only recall its most important stages: the proclamation of a 300-mile security zone around the entire Western Hemisphere (with the exception of Canada, which was already at war), by the Pan-American States Declaration in Panama on October 3, 1939; the renewed cash-and-carry clause in the Fourth Neutrality Act of November 4, 1939, which lifted the arms embargo and permitted the purchase of arms with cash by those states that could carry them on their own ships; the exchange of fifty American destroyers for military bases on British territories from Newfoundland to British Guiana on September 2, 1940; the Lend-Lease Act of March 11, 1941, which gave the President general authority to sell, lend, or lease all arms, goods, and commodities that were in any way vital to the war effort to those nations whose defense, in the President's view, was of vital interest to the defense of the United States; the secret British-American staff

briefings in February and March 1941; the Atlantic meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill in August 1941, at which the Atlantic Charter was published; the securing of British convoys by the American fleet beginning 17. September 1941; the limited and undeclared naval war between Germany and the United States in the North Atlantic; and finally, the freezing of Japanese assets in the United States on July 26, 1941, which, together with sanctions by Great Britain and the Netherlands, effectively constituted a worldwide oil embargo and presented Japan with the alternative of war or surrender.

All of these steps occurred against the backdrop of a massive rearmament program, the introduction of selective conscription in the fall of 1940, and Roosevelt's proclamation of an "unlimited national emergency" on May 27, 1941. By December 1941, American troops were stationed outside the Western Hemisphere and the insular territories of the United States in Greenland, Iceland, China, and Dutch Guinea. After his reelection, Roosevelt, on December 29, 1940, proclaimed the United States should become the "arsenal of democracy." Even before December 1941, under his general authorization in the Lend-Lease Act, he had declared that the defense of Great Britain, India, Burma, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (virtually the entire British Empire), Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Egypt, China, and Russia was of "vital interest" to the defense of the United States.

The American nation was led into war on promises of non-entry. In deference to the isolationists, Roosevelt avoided openly confronting the American people with the alternative that had been America's only foreign policy issue since 1939: whether or not the United States should enter the wars of Europe and Asia.

On both sides of the Atlantic, self-image and conception of threat, analysis of the present and anticipation of the future culminated in *antagonistic conceptions of world power* that allow the American-German relationship from 1939 to 1941 to be characterized as an anticipated struggle for world power. However, even in this case, the American objective can be described more precisely and unequivocally than Hitler's much-discussed "ultimate goals." This greater clarity on the American side is also related to the fact that the United States, as the only great power on earth, enjoyed the privilege of being able to discuss for some years whether or not the vital interests of the country were threatened by the Axis powers and Japan. This privilege was due to the country's strategically secure position in the Western Hemisphere.

The Atlantic and Pacific guaranteed an open decision-making situation and the discussion of alternatives that were not dictated *solely* by the will of the aggressor nations. Those who ask about the circumstances and causes of the American entry into the war are therefore well advised to consider the domestic political struggle between the so-called isolationists on the one hand, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the internationalists on the other.

The core of the struggle was not the moral and democratic problem of whether Roosevelt dealt tactically with the American people on the question of war and peace, concealed parts of the truth from them or even lied to them (all of which he did), nor the problem of whether the isolationists misrepresented Roosevelt's motives and labeled him a warmonger with dictatorial tendencies (all of which they did), but the irreconcilable opposition between the two camps over the position of the United States in the world. Between 1937 and 1941, the fourth major domestic debate was conducted over the foreign policy question of whether the U.S. should be a world power in the literal sense or should be content with the role of a major regional power in the Western Hemisphere—the fourth debate after those of 1898, 1914–1917, and 1920. In this debate, the assessment of the Nazi threat to the U.S.—less so the Japanese threat—played a central role. The conflict centered on the threat potential of Hitler and National Socialist Germany to the United States.¹

From a historical perspective, it is a central question whether Roosevelt's contemporary view was correct and whether Hitler really planned world domination, which—as a final stage, as it were—envisaged an invasion of the Western Hemisphere and an attack on the continental USA. This question aims at the center of a discussion that has been controversial in international research for more than twenty-five years, and it would be presumptuous to try to answer it exhaustively within the framework of a short text. Here are just a few key points:

1. The radicalism and the literally mass-murderous consequences of Hitler's worldview had their basis in the certainty of action and the fanatical sense of mission that Hitler drew from the "granite foundation" of his worldview. This foundation was a simplified and primitive but nevertheless clearly recognizable historical teleology,

1 See Detlef Junker, *Kampf um die Weltmacht. Die USA und das „Dritte Reich“ 1933–1945*. Düsseldorf 1988.

from which Hitler derived for himself and the National Socialist movement a world-historical mission and a potentially universal, in the truest sense of the word “unbounded,” claim. Hitler interpreted world history along the lines of a principle that necessarily had to end in universal projections.

What was the content of this teleology of history? The law and sense of motion of all history so far lies in the war and fight between races and peoples for scarce living space. In history, as in nature, there is a merciless struggle of all against all. Every nation is faced at every moment of history with the alternative of fighting or perishing. The earth, according to Hitler, is a challenge cup and therefore has the desire to always come into the hands of the strongest.

For him, evil, the quintessentially diabolical element of world history, was embodied in the Jews. The mission of the National Socialist movement was to call the German people to the final struggle against Jewry. Therefore, Hitler considered the extermination of the Jews to be the central mission of his life, along with the conquest of *Lebensraum*. Hitler’s statements about a future “world domination,” about the future “Lord of the Earth,” about “the greatest Germanic revolution in world history” were anticipations of Hitler’s desired period after the end of his struggle, anticipations of a lasting racial domination of the Germanic peoples, which, after the extermination of the Jews, would bring the previous dialectic of history to a standstill. This vision of world domination was at once universal and placeless, not global in the concrete sense.

2. The concrete goal of Hitler’s policy and alliance planning in the 1920s and 1930s, on the other hand, was domination of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. In Hitler’s mind, however, such domination over Europe would automatically put the Third Reich in the position of a world leader, which even the democratic naval powers, the British Empire and the United States, would have to recognize and tolerate, if necessary, by force.
3. Even in July and August of 1941, at the height of his power and in view of the supposed imminent victory over the Soviet Union, Hitler did not speak of an invasion of the western hemisphere and an attack on the continental USA. Invasion plans to conquer the United States were never developed, and even if they had existed in 1940–41, they would have been mere pipe dreams. The fear or propaganda of American interventionists of a Nazi invasion proves to be without substance in the cold light of historical distance.

4. The war of the Third Reich against the USA, predicted by Hitler in 1928 for the distant future and then becoming more probable in 1941, was for him politically and militarily a war to keep the USA out of Europe and to force it to recognize the National Socialist empire. I am not aware of any statement so far that would permit the conclusion that the impending war was to be interpreted as a means of dominating the Western Hemisphere. Hitler's concrete design of a racially based world power always remained Europe-centric, in contrast to Roosevelt's liberal model of one world, which already in anticipation of the future encompassed five continents and seven oceans.
5. The measures contemplated by Hitler at the height of his hope for victory in July and August 1941, to build up a system of military bases in the Atlantic after the defeat of the Soviet Union, to create a strong surface fleet, and to develop long-range bombers, would have been sufficient, in the best but still unlikely case, to force the United States and Great Britain into a *modus vivendi* with Hitler's Europe. His famous statement to Japanese Ambassador Oshima on July 14, 1941, that both countries would have to "destroy the United States together" would have been devoid of reality even years after a defeat of the Soviet Union. This evaluation is based on experience, measure, and possibility, because any "destruction" of the United States would require the conquest of the Western Hemisphere and/or the invention of an intercontinental ballistic missile with an atomic explosive charge. Both possibilities lay beyond the horizon of Hitler's life.

