

German declaration of war against the United States

On 11 December 1941, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States declaration of war against the Japanese Empire, **Nazi Germany declared war against the United States**, in response to

what was claimed to be a series of provocations by the United States government when the US was still officially neutral during World War II. The decision to declare war was made by Adolf Hitler, apparently offhand, almost without consultation. Later that day, the United States declared war on Germany.

Hitler announces the declaration of war against the United States to the Reichstag on 11 December 1941

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Background

The course of relations between Germany and the United States had deteriorated since the beginning of World War II, inevitably so given the increasing cooperation between the United States and the United Kingdom. The Destroyers for Bases Agreement, Lend-Lease, the Atlantic Charter, the hand-over of military control of Iceland from the United Kingdom to the United States, the extension of the Pan-American Security Zone, and many other results of the special relationship which had developed between the two countries had put a strain on relations between the US, still technically a neutral country, and Nazi Germany. US destroyers escorting American supply vessels bound for the UK were already engaged in a *de facto* war with German U-Boats.^[1] Roosevelt's desire to help the UK, despite the objections of the influential US isolationist lobby, and legal impediments imposed by Congress which prevented direct involvement in the war, brought the US to push hard against the traditional boundaries of neutrality.

On December 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan launched an attack on the US naval and army base on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, beginning a war between Japan and the United States. Japan had not informed its ally, Germany, in advance of the attack, although the Japanese ambassador had informed the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, at the beginning of December that relations between the US and the Japanese Empire were at a breaking point, and that war was imminent. He was instructed to ask Germany for commitment to declare war under the terms of the Tripartite Pact should that occur. Hitler and Ribbentrop had been urging Japan to attack and take over Singapore from the British, on the theory that doing so would not only hurt the UK, but would also serve to help keep the US out of the war.^[2]

According to the terms of their agreements, Germany was obliged to come to the aid of Japan if a third country attacked Japan, but not if Japan attacked a third country. Ribbentrop reminded Hitler of this, and pointed out that to declare war against the US would add to the number of enemies Germany was fighting against, but Hitler dismissed this concern as not being important,^[2] and, almost entirely without consultation, chose to declare war against the US,

wanting to do so before, he thought, Roosevelt would declare war on Germany.^{[3][4][5]}

Closeup of Hitler as war is declared upon the United States, 11 Dec. 1941

In fact, Hitler's declaration of war came as a great relief to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who feared the possibility of two parallel but disconnected wars – the UK and Soviet Union versus Germany in Europe, and the US and the British Empire versus Japan in the Far East and the Pacific. With Nazi Germany's declaration against the United States in effect, American assistance for Britain in both theaters of war as a full ally was assured. It also simplified matters for the American government, as John Kenneth Galbraith recalled:

When Pearl Harbor happened, we [Roosevelt's advisors] were desperate. ... We were all in agony. The mood of the American people was obvious – they were determined that the Japanese had to be punished. We could have been forced to concentrate all our efforts on the Pacific, unable from then on to give more than purely peripheral help to Britain. It was truly astounding when Hitler declared war on us three days later. I cannot tell you our feelings of triumph. It was a totally irrational thing for him to do, and I think it saved Europe."^[6]

Hitler's reasons for declaring war against the US when he was not obligated to were numerous. One was an emotional response: the Japanese tactic of using a surprise attack without making a declaration of war appealed to him – he had done the same thing when he attacked the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa in June 1941; indeed, he told the Japanese ambassador "[O]ne should strike – as hard as possible – and not waste time declaring war."^[2] Also, the prospect of a worldwide war fed Hitler's tendency towards grandiose thinking, and reinforced his feeling that he was a world-historical figure of destiny. As he said in his declaration speech to the Reichstag:

I can only be grateful to Providence that it entrusted me with the leadership in this historic struggle which, for the next five hundred or a thousand years, will be described as decisive, not only for the history of Germany, but for the whole of Europe and indeed the whole world.^[2]

Hitler's lack of knowledge about the US and its industrial and demographic capacity for mounting a war on two fronts also entered into his decision.^[2] As early as mid-March 1941 – nine months before the Japanese attack – President Roosevelt was acutely aware of Hitler's hostility towards the United States, and the destructive potential it presented. Due to this attitude within the White House, and the rapidly progressing efforts of the Americans' industrial capacity before and through 1941 to start providing its armed forces with the ordnance, combat aircraft and ships that would be required to defeat the Axis as a whole, the US was already well on its way towards the full-scale wartime economy which would make it the "arsenal of democracy" for itself and its allies.

Finally, Hitler's deeply-held racial prejudices made him see the US as a decadent bourgeois democracy filled with people of mixed race, a population heavily under the influence of Jews and "Negroes", with no history of authoritarian discipline to control and direct them, interested only in luxury and living the "good life" while dancing, drinking and enjoying "negrofied" music. Such a country, in Hitler's mind, would never be willing to make the economic and human sacrifices necessary to threaten National Socialist Germany^[2] – and thus set the stage for a dangerously inaccurate view of the very nation that Hitler had stated in his unpublished Zweites Buch (*Second Book*, 1928) would be the Third Reich's most serious challenge beyond his intended defeat of the Soviet Union.^[7]

The economic potential and racial composition of America had implications for Hitler's own ideological construct, indeed, how he saw Germany's current problems and future hopes. His central ideas of 'living space' and race held the key to his image of the United States. In the United States' country, with a white 'Nordic' racial core, to which he attributed its economic success and standard of living, he saw a model for his vision of German 'living space' in Europe.^[8]

The one advantage of the declaration of war against the US provided for Hitler was as a propaganda diversion for the German public, to distract them from the state of the war against the Soviet Union, in which Germany had suffered severe setbacks and an unexpectedly prolonged engagement. Hitler had assured the German people that the Soviet Union would be crushed well before the onset of winter, but that, in fact, did not happen, and there was little in the way of good news. The timing of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor enabled Hitler to angle his planned speech to the Reichstag in a more positive fashion, squeezing as much propaganda value out of it as possible. Hitler, in fact, put off the speech – and the declaration of war – for several days, trying to arrive at the proper psychological moment to make the announcement.^[9] Still, the propaganda motive was hardly sufficient to justify declaring war on the US, especially considering that doing so would create an otherwise "unnatural alliance" between two disparate and heretofore antagonistic polities, the United States and the Soviet Union. Joachim C. Fest, one of Hitler's biographers, has argued that Hitler's decision was "really no longer an act of his own volition, but a gesture governed by a sudden awareness of his own impotence. That gesture was Hitler's last strategic initiative of any importance."^[4]

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's signing of the declaration of war against Germany, the response of the United States to Hitler's declaration

Regardless of Hitler's reasons for the declaration, the decision is generally seen as an enormous strategic blunder on his part, as it allowed the United States to enter the European war in support of the United Kingdom and the Allies without much public opposition, while still facing the Japanese threat in the Pacific. Hitler had, in fact, committed Germany to fight the US while in the midst of a war of extermination against Russia, and without having first defeated the UK, instead of taking the option of putting off a conflict with the US for as long as possible, forcing it to concentrate on the war in the Pacific against Japan, and making it much more difficult for it to become involved in the European war. At least to some extent he had held in his hands the power to control the timing of the intervention of the US, and instead, by declaring war against America, he freed Roosevelt and Churchill to act as they saw fit.^{[1][4][5][10][11][12][13]}

From the point of view of Hitler and much of the German political and military elite, declaring war against the U.S. in response to the Pearl Harbor attack was a calculated risk in fighting the U.S. before they were prepared to effectively defend themselves. By that time, the German leadership believed that the United States was effectively acting as a belligerent in the conflict, given actions such as Lend-Lease of supplies to Britain to sustain their war effort, President Roosevelt's public statements, the deployment of American soldiers and Marines to Iceland, and U.S. Navy escorts of convoys across the Atlantic, which sometimes came into contact with U-boats; these acts, as well as America's previous intervention in World War I, led to the assumption that war between them was inevitable. As such, the decision was made to use the attack as a rationale for an official declaration of war in order to drive Britain out of the conflict by widening submarine operations and directly attacking U.S. commercial shipping. While Hitler's declaration of war against the United States eventually led to his downfall, initially it seemed successful in its objective of more effectively cutting Britain's supply lines, as the U.S. military's lack of tactics, equipment, and procedures for fighting U-boats caused 1942 to be the most devastating year of the war for shipping losses;^[14] the war declaration made the Second Happy Time possible for U-boats.^[15]

According to Hitler's Naval Adjutant, Admiral von Puttkamer, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor actually buoyed Hitler's assurance in winning the war, and improved morale among the high leadership of the armed forces. Peter Padfield writes:

The news [of Pearl Harbor] came as a surprise to Hitler although he knew of their intention to attack somewhere at some time and had made up his mind to support them if they attacked the United States. Now frivolously disregarding the huge financial and productive power of America and, according to ... von Puttkamer, blind to the realization that this power could be projected across the Atlantic, he gained

renewed confidence in a victorious outcome to the war. His generals suffered from the same land-locked hallucination: his entire headquarters staff gave themselves up to 'an ecstasy of rejoicing'; the few who saw further 'became even lonelier'. Naval officers saw no more clearly than the generals.^[16]

Text of the German declaration

On December 11, 1941, American *Chargé d'Affaires* Leland B. Morris, the highest ranking American diplomat in Germany, was summoned to Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop's office where Ribbentrop read Morris the formal declaration.^[17] The text was:

MR. CHARGE D'AFFAIRES:

The Government of the United States having violated in the most flagrant manner and in ever increasing measure all rules of neutrality in favor of the adversaries of Germany and having continually been guilty of the most severe provocations toward Germany ever since the outbreak of the European war, provoked by the British declaration of war against Germany on September 3, 1939, has finally resorted to open military acts of aggression.

On September 11, 1941, the President of the United States publicly declared that he had ordered the American Navy and Air Force to shoot on sight at any German war vessel. In his speech of October 27, 1941, he once more expressly affirmed that this order was in force. Acting under this order, vessels of the American Navy, since early September 1941, have systematically attacked German naval forces. Thus, American destroyers, as for instance the Greer, the Kearney and the Reuben James, have opened fire on German submarines according to plan. The Secretary of the American Navy, Mr. Knox, himself confirmed that American destroyers attacked German submarines.

Furthermore, the naval forces of the United States, under order of their Government and contrary to international law have treated and seized German merchant vessels on the high seas as enemy ships.

The German Government therefore establishes the following facts:

Although Germany on her part has strictly adhered to the rules of international law in her relations with the United States during every period of the present war, the Government of the United States from initial violations of neutrality has finally proceeded to open acts of war against Germany. The Government of the United States has thereby virtually created a state of war.

The German Government, consequently, discontinues diplomatic relations with the United States of America and declares that under these circumstances brought about by President Roosevelt Germany too, as from today, considers herself as being in a state of war with the United States of America.

Accept, Mr. Charge d'Affaires, the expression of my high consideration.

December 11, 1941.

RIBBENTROP.^[18]

See also

- Kellogg–Briand Pact

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Notes

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6. Galbraith, John Kenneth, interviewed by Gitta Sereny (1995) *Albert Speer: His Battle with the Truth* New York, Knopf. p.267-8. ISBN 0-394-52915-4
7. Hillgruber (1981), pp.50-51
8. As late as 24 February 1945, Hitler spoke of the 'vast territory' of the United States in America, 'ample to absorb the energies of all their people', as the model which he hoped to emulate for Germany in Europe, 'to ensure for her complete economic independence inside a territory of a size compatible with her population', adding that 'a great people has need of broad acres' Genoud, Francois (ed.) (1961) *The Testament of Adolf Hitler. The Hitler–Bormann Documents, February–April 1945*. London. p.88. For problems with this source, see Kershaw (2000), n.121, pp. 1024–5.
9. Kershaw (2000), pp.444-45
10. Alexander, Bevin. (2000) *How Hitler Could Have Won World War II* New York: Crown. p.108 ISBN 0-8129-3202-1
11. Kershaw, (2007), pp.382-430
12. Shirer, William L. (1960) *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* New York: Simon and Schuster. p.900
13. Hillgruber (1981) p.95. Quote: "Hitler's declaration of war on the United States ... was not an objective foreign policy move. ... Rather, it was a gesture designed to conceal the fact that he could no longer control the direction of the war... His admission...on January 3, 1942, that he did 'not yet' know 'how America could be defeated' speaks for itself."
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External links

- Excerpts from original speech with English subtitles (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUIYZwSHheA>)

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