



# PRELUDE TO WAR

THE YEARS 1931–1941

The two principal antagonists of World War II came to power at almost the same time. Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist Party, the largest party in the Reichstag, became chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected by a large majority of his fellow Americans, took office on March 4, 1933, at the height of the Great Depression. They were two totally different leaders: one seeking war and world domination, the other hoping to preserve peace in the world.

The origins of World War II, in large part, resided in Adolf Hitler's twisted and apocalyptic vision of world supremacy. Hitler, mortified by Germany's defeat in World War I, wanted to reverse what he saw as the crippling legacy of the Treaty of Versailles, which had saddled the Weimar Republic with an insurmountable debt and had virtually eliminated Germany's military power. In order to exact revenge for the unfair terms of the Versailles Treaty, Hitler founded the National Socialist or Nazi Party. An articulate and fiery orator, Hitler aroused German nationalistic fervor and blamed Germany's economic ills on the Versailles Treaty and a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. He pledged to revive German economic and military power, to eliminate the Bolshevik threat from Russia, and to purify the "Aryan race" from the contamination of Jewish influence.

Hitler's powerful diatribes began to attract thousands of adherents. As the Nazi Party grew in influence in 1932, Herr Hitler became the most

powerful political leader in Germany. In what John Keegan described as “the most remarkable and complete economic, political and military revolutions ever carried through by one man in a comparable space of time,” Hitler became chancellor of Germany and quickly consolidated his power.<sup>1</sup> The new Führer (leader) became the undisputed dictator of Germany. Every aspect of German life was brought under Nazi rule. Hitler enforced his authority through the military, the Gestapo, and local party officials.

Once securely in power, Hitler set out to undermine the Treaty of Versailles by withdrawing from the League of Nations, rearming the German military, and secretly planning for the conquest of Europe. His first step in controlling Germany’s borders was the reoccupation of the Rhineland in March 1936. France and the other European countries issued warnings but accepted the German action, which emboldened Hitler to continue his plan to subjugate the rest of Europe. Most leaders in the United States and other Western countries did not understand Hitler’s fanaticism and did not take his ambitions seriously.

Fascism was on the move in Europe and had triumphed in Italy with the emergence of the boisterous dictator Benito Mussolini, who came to power in 1922. In 1937 Germany and Italy signed an agreement known as the Rome-Berlin Axis. Now Hitler had a partner in arms—a decision that he would later regret. These two fascist nations were joined by Japan, a rapidly growing Asian power. Japan, with expansionist plans of its own, had invaded Manchuria in 1931 and would later ruthlessly attack China in July 1937. The League of Nations formally proclaimed that Japan was an aggressor for its actions in Manchuria and China but did nothing more. The Americans were upset and angry at the Japanese depredations but were generally powerless to act because of strong isolationist sentiment in the country and because Congress passed a series of strict neutrality bills that restricted President Roosevelt’s actions.

American public opinion in the 1930s overwhelmingly opposed any action that might lead to an entanglement with foreign powers. Many believed that America had been unwillingly and unwittingly drawn into World War I and thought that the United States, separated from Europe by a vast ocean, could and should remain aloof from any European conflicts. The isolationists favored security through a fortress America and espoused their views in such organizations as America First. Supported by luminaries such as Charles Lindbergh, America First had a powerful influence on Congress and public opinion.<sup>2</sup>

The Neutrality Act of 1935 occurred against a backdrop of war between

Italy and Ethiopia, Germany's military resurgence, an expansionist Japan, and a deepening pacifism at home. The act outlined a firm position of neutrality, warned Americans not to travel on vessels from either Italy or Ethiopia, and declared an arms, munitions, and trade embargo against both countries. Roosevelt signed the legislation, although he thought that aggressors should be barred from buying munitions and lamented that the act did not give him enough discretionary power to decide which belligerents would fall into that category.

One of the most vociferous proponents of isolationism was the first-term senator from North Carolina, Robert "Our Bob" Reynolds. Reynolds opposed any involvement with any other nation under any circumstances. He recognized that "the world has gone crazy, . . . but it shall not get the wealth and flesh of this country in a war." Until December 7, 1941, Reynolds would rail against any proposal, including membership in the World Court, that might lead America into an unwanted war.<sup>3</sup>

President Franklin Roosevelt understood that America could not long remain out of international conflicts and wanted to prepare for possible hostilities, but Congress was adamant in support of neutrality. By 1936 the fight was essentially over who would control U.S. policy in wartime—the president or the Congress. Because public opinion was strongly in favor of neutrality, Congress held the upper hand. Although Roosevelt felt stymied, he continued to demand the repeal of the mandatory embargo policy so that he would have the authority to use embargoes against those he considered America's enemies while not punishing America's allies.

Meanwhile, in Germany Hitler recognized that the impotent League of Nations would not enforce the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. He noted that the other world powers had also ignored invasions and depredations by Germany, Japan, and Italy. Because of this inaction by the world's military powers, Hitler became more aggressive in his expansionist strategy. On March 12, 1938, German troops marched into Vienna and Hitler declared an *Anschluss* (union) with the German-speaking people of Austria. As he had anticipated, Britain and France protested but did little else. The European nations decided that the best strategy was to appease Hitler by allowing him to take control of some German-speaking countries in hopes that this would satisfy his territorial demands. This appeasement strategy played into Hitler's hands and merely heightened his lust for more territory.

Hitler next demanded the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland. When Czechoslovakia refused to cede the territory, Hit-

ler threatened to invade. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain and French premier Edouard Daladier met with the Czech president, Eduard Benes, at the Munich Conference in 1938 and persuaded Benes to give up the Sudetenland in exchange for Hitler's promise that "this is the last territorial claim I have to make in Europe." The Munich Agreement was the high point and greatest failure of appeasement diplomacy. No country wanted to go to war over the Sudetenland and in 1939 no European country, especially Czechoslovakia, had the military might to stop Hitler. Had the European powers intervened after Germany took the Rhineland, they might have halted Hitler's expansion. By 1939 it was too late. The appeasement strategy could only delay war, not prevent it. Chamberlain hailed the Munich agreement, claiming that it meant "Peace for our time." Winston Churchill knew better: "England and France had to choose between war and dishonor. They chose dishonor; they will have war."<sup>4</sup>

Six months later Hitler marched into Prague and took the rest of Czechoslovakia, while Mussolini seized Albania. Now Hitler was poised to move against Poland. Britain and France, at last fully aware of Hitler's goals, concluded security treaties with Poland, guaranteeing its independence and territorial integrity in case of an invasion. The rape of Czechoslovakia had persuaded the French and British that Hitler's next move had to be stopped. Roosevelt did his best to accept the neutrality acts, although he thought that the legislation would end up hurting America's allies rather than keeping America out of a war that it could not ultimately avoid. As the neutrality acts currently stood, the embargoes would apply not only to Germany and Italy but also to America's friends, Britain and France. FDR wanted the neutrality acts revised so that Britain and France could purchase arms from the United States.

Undeterred by Britain's and France's guarantee of Poland's borders, on August 22, 1939, Hitler cleverly prevented the possibility of a two-front war by agreeing to a nonaggression pact with Russia. The United States and the Allied nations were caught off guard by Germany's bold maneuver. At this juncture Poland was doomed. At 4:45 a.m. on September 1, 1939, German guns fired on Polish troops as German tanks crossed the border into Poland. The first shots of World War II had been fired. Germany's blitzkrieg (lightning warfare) quickly wiped out all Polish resistance by October 6. Poland had been conquered in five weeks. Contrary to their promises, France and England had done very little to protect the integrity of Poland. Hitler now sent his forces to enforce the Siegfried line and to prepare for an attack on France and Britain.<sup>5</sup>

The residents of North Carolina were not unduly alarmed about the beginning of World War II. They knew that the fighting would impact travel and trade, but most considered themselves safe because they were thousands of miles away from what was essentially a European quarrel. Citizens in Charlotte could see no direct threat to the United States and thought that the war was irrelevant to their vital interests.<sup>6</sup>

Two days after the invasion of Poland, President Roosevelt made an appeal for national unity in a “Fireside Chat” and declared: “This nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.” The president said that he hoped America would be able to stay out of this war, although he knew that was unlikely, and most Americans agreed with that sentiment.<sup>7</sup>

For a period during 1939–1940, in what became known as the “phony war,” Tar Heels began to believe that there would be no more fighting and that Hitler would be satisfied with his current territorial gains. Hitler, however, was merely gathering strength for his next objective. In April 1940 Denmark and Norway fell to the German juggernaut. The Allies did little other than to denounce the incursions. On May 10, 1940, the hammer fell. The Germans invaded Holland and the German blitzkrieg overwhelmed the valiant Dutch army. When the Nazis crushed Belgium, Britain and France finally responded militarily. But German air superiority was complete, and the German panzers pummeled the French and British resisters, forcing them back to the channel port of Dunkirk. Fortunately for the Allies, Hitler called a two-day halt to the attack, so some 337,000 French and British soldiers were able to escape capture. This miracle evacuation at Dunkirk happened because hundreds of naval ships and small civilian craft, facing withering fire from the Luftwaffe, managed to ferry the soldiers to safety. If these 337,000 troops had been captured, the war would have been much more difficult for the Allies.

Hitler forced France, weakened by inadequate defense and heavy losses, into an ignominious surrender on June 25, 1940. He now turned his attention to the island of Great Britain and put in place his plan to conquer it, code-named Operation Sea Lion. Desirous of air superiority, the German Luftwaffe launched a long-term, devastating bombing attack on British cities and air bases. Only the heroic action of the Royal Air Force (RAF), radar, and the leadership of the new prime minister, Winston Churchill, enabled the British to survive the Battle of Britain to fight another day.

The RAF suffered massive losses during the Battle of Britain, especially during the critical months of August and September 1940. If Hitler and Hermann Goering had realized how effective their attacks had been, they might have accelerated them and could have defeated England. Hitler, in a strategic error, decided to shift the attack from the radar stations and fighter bases and committed the Luftwaffe to a terror bombing on British cities. Hitler expected British morale to collapse, but the British people refused to break. Hitler, who was losing many planes, admitted defeat and gave up the fight. The survival of an independent Britain was a huge turning point in the war.<sup>8</sup>

The defeat of France finally ended American illusions and awakened the country to the real threat of a German Empire. If Britain collapsed, then Germany would control the powerful British fleet and the Atlantic Ocean would no longer be a barrier to German expansion. Now Roosevelt shifted foreign policy from neutrality to the status of a nonbelligerent and committed the United States to give all aid to the Allies short of war. By 1939 FDR had recognized that his nation was woefully unprepared to fight a global war. Despite protests from a large number of isolationists, Roosevelt moved boldly, calling for a military buildup and the production of 50,000 planes per year. Congress voted the unheard-of sum of \$17 billion for defense. Soon American factories were humming for the first time since the 1920s, turning out 17,000 planes and 9,000 tanks before the end of 1940.

When Churchill wrote FDR asking for some destroyers to protect British convoys in the Atlantic, Roosevelt responded by giving the British fifty older destroyers in exchange for leases to eight British military bases. By giving military aid to one of the belligerents America had now moved from neutrality into a state of limited war.<sup>9</sup> At the president's request, Congress enacted the first peacetime military draft in the nation's history. The Burke-Wadsworth bill, passed in September 1940, required the registration of all males between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-six. The isolationists fought the bill because they believed that a peacetime draft was a major step toward involving America in the European war. Senator Bob Reynolds, at this time the ranking member of the powerful Military Affairs Committee, surprised his critics by voting for the bill, since a strong defense was the best way to keep the country out of war.<sup>10</sup>

In the midst of the ongoing debate over America's willingness to come to the aid of Great Britain, Roosevelt decided to run for a third term as president. Although there was no constitutional limitation on the number

of terms served by a president, the tradition had been to restrict presidents to two terms. FDR's decision was unprecedented in American history. But the nation was in a severe crisis, and FDR believed that America needed a steady and experienced hand at the helm. With the Republican nominee, Wendell Willkie, gaining momentum by attacking FDR as a war-monger whose policies would force America into the war, Roosevelt made unqualified assurances of peace. "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again, your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign war." FDR, however, knew that America would eventually enter the war and hoped that sooner or later an attack by the totalitarian powers would force such a decision. In 1940 reelection was the most important goal. In order to win, FDR felt he had to mislead the American people.<sup>11</sup>

By late in 1940 North Carolinians began to realize that they were in a serious world crisis and that the state had to prepare for a war that was rapidly closing in on them. Charlotteans responded with a dramatic increase in patriotic fervor and reverence for the American flag. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the American Legion sponsored rallies promoting patriotism. The city put American flags in every classroom and all over the city and encouraged teachers to emphasize patriotic themes in class. Charlotte bragged about being ultrapatriotic. The *Charlotte Observer* attacked those who failed to display the proper zeal for their country. "Anybody who fails to contribute is in a fair way to be thought of as a Nazi-sympathizer, Hitler-lover or just a plain tight-wad and cheap-skate."<sup>12</sup> FDR won a huge electoral victory in 1944 by a margin of 449 to 82 for Willkie. Bolstered by a public mandate and a third term, FDR recognized that it was essential for England to stay in the war and knew that he had to act quickly because the British had run out of funds to pay for U.S. military goods that it needed to stay in the war. Roosevelt devised a clever approach to overcome the restrictions of the various Neutrality Acts. Rather than sell goods to the Allies, he would lend or lease the supplies to Britain, which would repay the United States after the war ended. Urging America to be "the great arsenal of democracy," FDR asked Congress to revise America's neutrality policy.<sup>13</sup>

Under Roosevelt's prodding, Congress passed a bill "To Promote the Defense of the United States," emphasizing the defense aspect of the aid and downplaying any American military intervention. While the isolationists vigorously opposed the measure, public opinion favored aid to America's allies. After two months of contentious debate, the "Cash and Carry" bill allowed Britain and France to purchase American goods if they