

[H-Diplo Review Essay 409- "Hitler's American Gamble"](#)

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Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman. *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and Germany's March to Global War*. New York: Basic Books, 2021. ISBN: 9781541619098 (hardcover, \$35.00)

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In the days that followed the surprise Japanese attack against Pearl Harbor, the United States government found itself in a difficult position. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration technically remained neutral in the ongoing conflict in Europe, but simultaneously had to begin planning a coalition war alongside the British Empire in the Pacific. That strategically messy predicament threatened to force Roosevelt away from his preference for a Germany-first war, while complicating ongoing Lend-Lease aid to Great Britain and the USSR. Nazi Germany's leader, Adolf Hitler, it seemed, enjoyed a sudden stroke of good fortune.

Then, on the afternoon of December 11, the German Foreign Minister delivered a note to the U.S. Embassy, declaring that the United States had "virtually created a state of war" by violating its neutrality, arming Germany's opponents, and attacking German warships and merchant vessels on the high seas. In response, it stated that "Germany....considers herself as being in a state of war with the United States."^[1] Hitler delivered a more theatrical performance two hours later, declaring that "the Jews and their Franklin Roosevelt intend to destroy one state after another....and they seek to destroy the National Socialist Germany of today."^[2] His declaration united two regional wars into a single world war. Hitler's decision came just as the German offensive to take Moscow foundered, turning into a disastrous retreat, marking Germany's first great military set-back on the continent. Why, historians have asked, would Hitler suddenly decide to declare war on the world's largest industrial power in the midst of disaster? In retrospect, it has seemed nothing short of grand strategic suicide.

A number of historians and biographers have offered explanations of Hitler's decision for war. One of the very early portraits of Hitler, by William Shirer, concluded that the German Führer had declared war on the U.S. for three reasons. First, Hitler considered the U.S. and Germany to already functionally be at war, given growing clashes at sea in the North Atlantic. Second, he believed that

the U.S. would soon declare war on Germany, and wanted to declare war on the U.S. first for propagandistic reasons. Third, he significantly overestimated the Japanese navy and “disastrously underestimate[d] the potential strength of the United States,” encouraging him to believe the U.S. would remain relatively absent from the European theater for at least a year or two.^[3] These basic arguments have continued to dominate the literature.^[4]

A revisionist argument emerged in the decades that followed, centering on ideology. Gerhard Weinberg, for instance, suggested Hitler’s government was swayed as much by “blind ignorance” and enthusiasm about war with “plutocratic America” as any strategic calculation.^[5] Largely unaware of American industrial potential, Hitler declared war with little consideration for the consequences, he argued.

Some new strains of thought have appeared in the historiography over the last thirty years, which collectively suggest a lingering puzzle. As Bernd Wegner has shown, Hitler clearly sought to avoid a clash with the U.S. between 1939 and late 1941.^[6] Contra Weinberg, Wegner argued that the decision for war against the United States was only made some time in late November or early December 1941, with full awareness of U.S. industrial potential and the dangers it posed. That leaves something of a mystery. If Hitler sought to avoid U.S. belligerency in Europe for two years, why did he suddenly decide shortly before Pearl Harbor that American entry into the war was to be encouraged, instead of avoided?

Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman aim to address that question in *Hitler’s American Gamble*. Their book, covering five intensive days of diplomacy between December 6 and 11, is organized into eight chapters. The first brings the reader up-to-date on the war immediately prior to Pearl Harbor. The second chapter covers the frantic diplomacy and military preparations that took place on December 6. Chapters 3 through 7 each cover one twenty-four hour cycle, with the day starting and ending in London. The final chapter explores the world on December 12, the point in time when two regional wars had finally become a singular world war, united thanks to Germany’s declaration of war upon the United States.

The archival base upon which they base their re-evaluation of Hitler’s decision is broad. Citations include references to published archival materials alongside the papers of Hitler’s Headquarters, the High Command of the German Armed Forces, the German Foreign Ministry, the Roosevelt Presidential Library, the UK National Archives, the Library of Congress and Congressional records, as well as the papers of dozens of less well-known participants in the crucial events of early December. Most of the book’s references are primary sources. As a result of this source base, *Hitler’s American Gamble* reveals many voices: average citizens in all the major (and some of the minor) powers; leading statesmen; and many in between. The amount of detail can in some places be overwhelming. But the cumulative effect is to effectively recreate the environment and worldview from the perspectives of the major players on the eve of what the authors identify as the perhaps the most momentous decision of the war.

As mentioned, central to the entire story is why, in the face of much evidence that American entry into the war might be disastrous for Germany, Hitler declared war. Perhaps surprisingly, Hitler

enters the story with the decision for war clearly made, and the only question in his mind being one of timing; nevertheless, his logic becomes clear in the book's pages. The authors argue that Hitler's reason for declaring war was based on his fear of American industrial might, not in spite of it. In essence, Hitler believed that U.S. entry into the European war was inevitable, and that, with the U.S. distracted by the Japanese in East Asia, he might have a window in which to win the war in Europe, building a continental empire strong enough to resist the eventual arrival of vast quantities of American men and materiel into the European theater. By declaring war himself, he would be able to target American shipping, and also bind Japan not to negotiate an end to the war without German agreement, thus possibly prolonging his strategic window for success. That strategy was also deeply colored by his own ideological preferences, particularly his view of the world as divided between the Anglo-Saxon 'haves,' and the Axis 'have-nots,' a division he believed was at least partially a product of Jewish control of the international system.

That calculation also linked Hitler's decision for war with a major shift in the Holocaust. In the words of the authors, "a Rubicon had been crossed" following Hitler's declaration of war in December 1941: "most European Jews were still alive at the start of 1942; by the end of the year, most of them would be dead" (387). This was no coincidence. Hitler had held Europe's Jews hostages, in his own words, in exchange for America's 'good behavior.' In addition, rudimentary plans for mass deportations to Madagascar or into Siberia following a Soviet defeat were impossible following the failure of Operation Barbarossa and American entry into the war. The violence of the *Einsatzgruppen* against primarily Soviet Jews would be expanded to include the intentional extermination of all of Europe's Jews in Germany's growing network of concentration camps. The infamous Wannsee conference, where the process of extermination was outlined in detail, took place just weeks after Germany's declaration of war against the United States.

Hitler's American Gamble provides a great deal of insight on the strategic calculus in London, Washington, Tokyo, and Moscow as well. In fact, there appears to have been much more uncertainty in those capitals than in Berlin. For instance, the United Kingdom had only been able to maintain war production by using up its stocks of raw materials, and thus grew increasingly dependent on the United States to maintain a constant flow of fresh supplies. When news of Pearl Harbor broke, one immediate consequence was the halting of all Lend-Lease and raw material shipments. Some aircraft and key component parts were actually taken off loaded transports about to depart for the United Kingdom (193-195). Thus, the story that British Prime Minister Churchill 'slept the sleep of the saved' following the Japanese attack against the U.S. looks very much like an anecdote told only in hindsight. At the moment, there was in fact great anxiety in London that the new war in the Pacific would divert desperately needed supplies, as well as finished products and chemicals. Moscow, too, showed great concern that the U.S. would enter the war in Asia, but not Europe. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin went so far as to suggest to U.S. diplomats he might consider immediate entry into the war against Japan in exchange for American entry to the war in Europe, an offer that conveniently evaporated the day after Germany declared war on the United States. Not until December 11 did the picture clear with full American entry into the European theater, and even then, it was some time before the full American commitment to Europe would ease British and Soviet anxieties.

The authors argue at the book's end that December 11, 1941 was "arguably the most important 24 hours in history" (354). On December 10, two regional wars had metastasized, but no global world war had yet begun. Without the latter, the survival of the USSR and UK were very much in doubt,

they imply. Afterwards, in the words of General Charles de Gaulle, “this war is over” (342). In a war of “engines,” the United States could (and would) out-produce all three major Axis powers by itself, which meant that their victory was likely impossible (178).

Was December 11 as dramatic a turning point as the authors suggest? While it is true that Hitler’s declaration of war greatly simplified the American position, the United States and Germany had crept towards war throughout 1941. In March, the U.S. had initiated Lend-Lease to Germany’s adversary in Great Britain. Throughout the summer of 1941, the two sides had sparred at sea. On September 11, Roosevelt ordered U.S. warships to “shoot on sight” any Axis naval vessels, an act that Hitler considered tantamount to a declaration of war.^[7] On October 31, a German U-Boat sank the USS Reuben James. By December 9, the German navy was told to begin unrestricted submarine warfare and to treat American ships as belligerents. As the authors themselves note, Hitler’s declaration of war was as much “a recognition of a war already under way” as a dramatic break (338).

How likely was it that the U.S. would have remained neutral much longer, even in the event that Japan never struck at Pearl Harbor, and Hitler never formally declared war? That counterfactual always lurks beneath the surface of the story. Only occasionally do the authors address it, positing that if Japan had attacked Great Britain but not the United States, the war that then unfolded would “have been an even greater disaster” (396). Nevertheless, they do acknowledge in their conclusion that “the future was not actually as open as it seemed on December 6, 1941” (398). Hitler was already dedicated to declaring war on the United States in the event of a Japanese attack, and both Churchill and Roosevelt were likely aware of this fact thanks to intelligence intercepts. And, as the authors compellingly show, much of the U.S. public credited Germany with being behind the attack on Pearl Harbor, even, in some instances, believing that German pilots had flown Japanese planes. That meant Roosevelt’s difficulty convincing an isolationist public that the conflicts in Europe and in Asia were fundamentally connected was already easing, something he made clear in a radio address on December 9 (247). In other words, once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, a world war involving the U.S. in both Europe and Asia was likely, if not certain.

Regardless, the reader will come away from *Hitler’s American Gamble* with fresh appreciation for the broader strategic landscape that made the Second World War a global conflagration unlike any conflict before or since. Numerous complexities and connections emerge in this deeply contextual history, as the five days under examination are brought vividly to life in clear, crisp prose from dozens of vantage points. Above all, the book demonstrates clearly the centrality of America’s role in the war. American policy led Japan to war, and played an outsized role in Hitler’s strategic thinking. And while the Soviets and British needed American Lend-Lease to survive the initial Axis onslaught, they also required full American belligerency to actually defeat the Axis. Hitler’s fatal miscalculation guaranteed the latter, and with it, doomed Nazi Germany and its allies.

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Notes

[1] ___ "German Declaration of War with the United States," December 11, 1941, Avalon Project- Yale University, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/gerdec41.asp>.

[2] ___ "Adolf Hitler Rede vor dem Großdeutschen Reichstag" [Adolf Hitler Speech to the German Reichstag], December 11, 1941, *World Future Fund*, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/reading/hitler%20speeches/hitler%20rede%201941.12.11.htm>.

[3] ___ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 895.

[4] ___ See, for instance, Ian Kershaw's summary in *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949* (New York: Viking, 2015), 352.

[5] ___ Gerhard Weinberg, *America and the Germans, Volume II* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 51.

[6] ___ Bernd Wegner "Facing the Global War: Germany's Strategic Dilemma After the Failure of 'Blitzkrieg,' 611-627 in Bernd Wegner, ed., *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia and the World, 1939-1941* (Providence: Berghahn Books), 612-614.

[7] ___ Wegner, "Facing the Global War," 613.