AMERICANS
AND THE HOLOCAUST
ISOLATION OR INTERVENTION?
A CASE STUDY ON
THE LEND-LEASE ACT
The Impact of World War I

American soldiers wear gas masks at a frontline trench, circa 1917–1918.

Source: Imperial War Museum
On August 31, 1935, Congress passed the first in a series of laws designed to prevent the United States from being embroiled in a foreign war. The 1935 Neutrality Act prohibited the export of “arms, ammunition, and implements of war” from the United States to foreign nations at war and required US arms manufacturers to apply for an export license.

Senator Gerald Nye of Nebraska argued that the Neutrality Act of 1935 would help the United States stay out of future wars. Source: Library of Congress
January 1937 Public Opinion Poll

“Do you think it was a mistake for the United States to enter World War I?”

Source: Gallup
1937–1938 Recession

A migrant family walks down a road, pulling its belongings in carts and wagons, in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, in June 1938.

Source: Library of Congress
November 1938: Kristallnacht (“The Night of Broken Glass”)

Germans pass by the broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during the “Night of Broken Glass.” November 10, 1938.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration
German soldiers parade through Warsaw a month after Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939.

October 5, 1939. Source: US Holocaust Memorial Museum
Neutrality Act of 1939

The Neutrality Act of 1939 lifted the arms embargo and put all trade with belligerent nations (Great Britain, France) under the terms of “cash-and-carry.” The ban on loans remained in effect, and American ships were barred from transporting goods to belligerent ports.

December 1940–September 1941: US Public Opinion about Going to War

If you were asked to vote today on the question of the United States entering the war against Germany and Italy, how would you vote - to go into the war or to stay out of the war?

Source: Gallup
Non-Interventionist Groups

Charles Lindbergh speaks at an America First rally in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on October 5, 1941.

Source: Library of Congress
Interventionist Groups

A poster created by the Committee to Defend America By Aiding the Allies on June 10, 1940.

Source: US Holocaust Memorial Museum
In September 1940, Congress approved the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. The act, which instituted the first peacetime military draft in US history, required men between the ages of 21 and 36 to register for the draft.
In December 1940, Great Britain’s prime minister, Winston Churchill, informed President Roosevelt that soon Britain would run out of cash to pay for transporting necessary war supplies. In response, Roosevelt told Americans during a “fireside chat” radio address on December 29 that the United States “must be the great arsenal of democracy,” and needed to manufacture planes, ships, guns, and ammunition for Great Britain.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivers “Fireside Chat Number 18” on September 11, 1941.

Source: FDR Presidential Library and Museum
Document Analysis

• What group or individual did you read about?
• Summarize this person’s or group’s stance on the bill.
• What evidence (if any) does your individual or group provide to support their/its argument?
• What external factors might have shaped this perspective? Consider political, social, and economic conditions.
Class Discussion

• How would you characterize public opinion in America regarding the lead-up to and start of World War II from 1939–1941? As Americans engaged in debates over US involvement, what was happening in Europe?

• What factors influenced Americans’ attitudes and opinions on these issues?

• Were there particular arguments that you found convincing? Why? Was there additional information you would need to accurately assess the validity of these arguments?
Class Discussion

- What is the role of informed public debate about policy decisions in a democracy?
- What questions does this case study raise about America's role in the world?
The Lend-Lease Act passed both houses of Congress by wide margins on March 11, 1941. By the end of the war, the United States had transferred a total of $50 billion to 38 Allied countries and had received goods valued at about $8 billion.

Source: Idaho Evening Times, March 11, 1941
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