Historical Context (Issue Guide for Lend-Lease):
- Events—World War I, the interwar period, economic, and social context—that shaped American attitudes toward isolation and intervention
- Events in America that shaped Americans’ debates about whether or not to aid our allies and eventually whether or not to go to war
- Events in Europe related to the start of World War II
- Holocaust Encyclopedia Article

Eight American soldiers wearing gas masks at the front line trenches. 1917-1918, Imperial War Museum.

World War I took place from July 1914 to November 1918, but the United States was neutral until April 1917. After the war, many Americans came to believe that US involvement had been a mistake. The United States spent more than $20 billion on the war and more than 53,000 Americans were killed in battle. By 1939, the United States had demilitarized and the US Army was the 17th largest in the world. American politics and culture between 1918 and 1933 reflected isolationism from world affairs, prejudice, and the Great Depression.
The stock market crash and a serious economic depression began worldwide. At the height of the Great Depression, one quarter of the American workforce was unemployed. 

In this context, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president in 1932. Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. After Roosevelt was sworn in as US president on March 4, 1933, the world had two leaders offering different solutions to the similar problems plaguing their countries. Also in March, Germany established a Ministry of Propaganda. During his inaugural address, Roosevelt told Americans, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”
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

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**November 1936 Public Opinion Poll**

- **Do you think there will be another serious depression?**
  - Yes: 33%
  - No: 67%

Source: AIPO Poll

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**January 1937 Public Opinion Poll**

- **Do you think it was a mistake for the United States to enter World War I?**
  - Yes: 70%
  - No: 30%
A new recession, which lasted from May 1937 until June 1938, was America's third major economic downturn in 20 years. Real GDP dropped 10 percent and unemployment hit 20 percent.


March 11–13, 1938: Anschluss

German troops occupied Austria and incorporated it into the German Reich, an event known as the Anschluss. Nazi sympathizers attacked Jewish people and destroyed their property throughout the spring, summer, and autumn of 1938.

Austrian Nazis and local residents look on as Jews are forced to get on their hands and knees and scrub the pavement. March 1938–April 1938, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

Germans pass by the broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during Kristallnacht. November 10, 1938, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.
Germany invaded Poland, starting World War II. Honoring an alliance with Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Soviet forces invaded Poland from the east a few weeks later. After Poland's defeat, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union partitioned the country.

German soldiers parade through Warsaw, Poland, on October 5, 1939. Source: National Archives and Records Administration

September 1, 1939: The Beginning of World War II

November 1939: Final Neutrality Act Passed

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


May 1940 Public Opinion Poll

“Do you think the United States should declare war on Germany and send our army and navy abroad to fight?”

7%
93%
In the summer of 1940, students at Yale University founded the Committee for America First, opposing US intervention in the war. America First, which grew to have 800,000 members, included isolationist, peace, and anti-war activists.

Charles Lindbergh speaks in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on October 3, 1941. Source: Library of Congress

This bill required all male citizens between the ages of 26 and 36 to register for the country's first peacetime military draft. While the United States was not yet involved in World War II, Congress voted to train American men for military service so the country could defend itself against the growing threat of the Axis powers.

Men stand in line to register for the draft in Seattle on October 16, 1940. Source: Museum of History and Industry, Seattle

In a radio address, President Roosevelt said: "We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war. We have furnished the British great material support and we will furnish far more in the future."
The Museum wishes to acknowledge and thank the following donors to the Americans and the Holocaust Initiative:

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