



As Adolf Hitler devoured Europe, Americans hovered over their newspapers, magazines, and radios.

March 17, 1939/ After Hitler rolls into Czechoslovakia, the White House states: "[The U.S. condemns] the temporary extinguishment of the liberties of a free and independent people with whom the people of the United States have maintained specially close and friendly relations."

June 1939/ A committee of businessmen calls for a Keep America out of Foreign Wars Week: "Business does not want war. No conceivable profits can be worth the anxieties in every home, the loss of lives, the loss of liberties, and the loss of opportunities that all Americans would share if our country were at war."

September 3, 1939/ FDR lambasts the invasion of Poland in a radio fireside chat: "When peace has been broken anywhere, peace of all countries everywhere is in danger. This nation must remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well."

On December 7, 1941, Americans were blasted headlong into World War II when Japan launched a devastating attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. But for more than three years before the surprise attack, war clouds had already been in the air. And they came from Europe, not Asia.

After Adolf Hitler's bloodless takeover of Austria in March 1938, Americans had watched his German troops march into Czechoslovakia, Poland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, France, and finally, the Soviet Union. At some level, life in the United States went on as usual—people danced to the sounds of big-band swing and stood on unemployment lines, as they had throughout the 1930s. After all, the fighting was still 5,000 miles away.

TO FIGHT OR NOT TO FIGHT

But news reports of tank battles and air raids and refugees touched readers in America. Many citizens or their parents had only recently emigrated from one of the occupied countries in Europe. In addition, Hitler's onslaught made it appear as though America would soon be the only outpost of democracy in a world ruled by fascism.

The upheaval in Europe began to fuel a great debate at home. Officials and opinion leaders argued night and day about how to respond to events overseas, and they spoke out to try to get the public on their side. Isolationists like the pilot Charles Lindbergh felt the U.S. should build up its own defenses and steer clear of entanglements in Europe. Interventionists, on the other hand, insisted that if the U.S. did not aid the Allies with guns or even troops, all hope for democracy would be lost.

Into the latter camp fell President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although right up to Pearl Harbor, FDR promised to avoid sending troops, he consistently pushed for increased aid to the Allies. And in his public speeches, he never stopped trying to convince Americans that events in Europe were not as far from their door as it seemed. As it turned out, Japan and not Germany brought the war crashing in on Americans. But by the time of Pearl Harbor, news from Europe and the commentary of FDR and others had already prepared many Americans to join the fight.

What follows are newspaper, magazine, and radio reports of Hitler's advance through Europe between March 1939 and September 1940. They are accompanied by the words of public figures who tried to tell Americans how to respond to the news.



HITLER SELVES



Two Czech women salute the German army.

point, it was said that fifty-five of the more serious cases would be ready for business when the first day crowds arrive. The management promised that the streets in the

HITLER IN PRAGUE

In March 1939, Europe took a big step toward war when German dictator Adolf Hitler forced Emil Hacha, the president of Czechoslovakia, to sign his country away. With a large German-speaking population and an inferior army, Czechoslovakia offered little resistance. On March 27, 1939, Time magazine described the arrival of Hitler and his soldiers in Prague, the Czech capital.

From the East, a bitter wind bearing snowflakes bigger than bullets swept over the land of the Czechs and Slovaks last week. From the West came Hitler.

Wednesday, March 15, 1939. 6 a.m. "Attention! Attention!" blared Czech radios every five minutes all day. "German Army infantry and aircraft are beginning occupation of the republic. The slightest resistance will bring utter brutality."

From dawn until dusk, 200,000 tank troops and motorized infantry poured across the border. Meanwhile in Prague, Germans began arrogant demonstrations. Storm troopers posted themselves outside German schools. Squads of German students jostled their way through the bewildered crowds shouting "Heil Hitler! Sieg Heil!"

9:15 a.m. Repeatedly warned that resistance would be fatal, dazed by surprise, crowds greeted the first armored cars in Prague's streets in dumb despair. Later in the day they grew defiant. Whistles and jeers greeted each new squadron. Groups sang the Czech anthem and wept openly. Some shouted "Pfui! Pfui! Go back home!" But the only physical resistance Herr Hitler's tanks met was a volley of snowballs. Down in Prague's Jewish district there was terror. Two lovers shot themselves, a couple jumped from their apartment window. By week's end, suicides had mounted to 100.

The soldiers closed all banks, took over hotels, invaded barracks to disarm one of the best-equipped armies in Europe, and began to arrest political prisoners from a list of over 2,000. Residents were ordered to fly swastika flags, which had been systematically distributed a few days before.

President Hitler

emark to Roosevelt He S

WOLFE... it left the di... President... ed on Chaw... reply to his J... Berlin Axis... year gener... integrity of... State... called for... details of the... Chief Execu... nt, personal... portunities to... fed allies... a within the... istic's attack... is offered in... reaction from... the of the... of the spe... than fifty... issue of the... and some of... out the hab... handshaking... the Preside... with the Pre... Prince Oia... as they met... d dock at the... waiting for... to the royal... merita, chief

4 SEE P... ND TO I

War for... Do Not R... Good Issue

J. PHILIP... New York 20... Both in... the gather... Hitler's speech... it as widely... it state o... it does o...

ounded aggr... described as... 1921's present... use, carefully... d caution... shows in th... al to jurise... American... in judges... considered h... which, while... the Am... and... rd be the... open for full...

at at each... into reality... d twenty typ... a fifth of th... question a... to cut... as his statu... impacted thro... he becom... uncommon... including... contradictions.

During... importance to... tion of the... the account... race of the... uring Dan... the Pol... the center... of the ped... that that... coats of... an agree... foothold to... the doubt... is the re... ment by... co-Polish... for

May 26, 1940/ After the German Army's invasion of Western Europe, FDR appeals to American citizens for help: "Tonight over the once-peaceful roads of Belgium and France millions are now moving, running from their homes to escape bombs and shells and fire and machine-gunning. "Please—I beg you—please give according to your means to your nearest Red Cross chapter. I ask this in the name of our common humanity."

JUNE 10, 1940/ The Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies places this ad in New York Times: "We now know that every step the French and British fall back brings war closer to US—our country, our institutions; our homes, our hopes for peace.

"Send a postcard, a letter, or a telegram, at once—to the President of the United States, to your Senators and your Congressmen—urging that the real defense of our country begin NOW—with aid to the Allies in Europe."

NIGHTMARE OF ISOLATIONISM June 10, 1940/ FDR proposes aid to all countries under attack by Germany and Italy: "Some still hold to the delusion that we can safely permit the United States to become a lone island in a world dominated by force. Such an island may be the dream of isolationists.

"Such an island represents to me and to the majority of Americans today a helpless nightmare—the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars by the un pitying masters of other confinements. It is natural that we should ask ourselves how now we can prevent the building of that prison."