

Self-archived manuscript: Unedited “Hitler and the United States” contribution by Mark R. Stoneman (markstoneman.com), published in *History in Dispute*, vol. 5, *World War II*, ed. Dennis E. Showalter (Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2001), 132–35.

68. Was it wise for Hitler to declare war on the United States after Pearl Harbor?

Viewpoint: Yes, Hitler’s declaration of war was “wise” within the context of his world-view and war aims.

On December 11, 1941, Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States. In retrospect, this action made little sense, for it brought the world’s largest economy and military potential to bear against Germany, which was already bogged down in a vast military undertaking against the Soviet Union. How could Hitler have been so foolish? On the other hand, if he was indeed foolish, why have so many writers attributed an almost demonic genius to him? Rationality is a category of often limited efficacy for understanding people’s actions. We should never assume that individuals in other cultures (and times) share the same values and think in the same “rational” terms that we do. Instead of damning the stupidity and infamy of Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States with the benefit of hindsight, we should examine his decision from his own point of view. Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States can be shown to have made sense, if we achieve the following feats of historical imagination: we must proceed from the assumptions of Hitler’s despicable racist world-view; we must accept his false understanding of the United States’ military potential; and we must recall that Germany and Japan appeared to be winning their wars prior to Stalingrad, Midway, and Guadalcanal.

During the Weimar period, Hitler’s foreign policy aims differed fundamentally from those of most Germans who hated the Versailles treaty. He agreed that this treaty enslaved Germany and needed to be overcome, but he maintained that mere border corrections made little sense. As he demanded in a foreign policy speech in 1928, “No drop of blood for goals that are not in the [German] people’s interest. . . . Our goals are to gain liberty and land. We do not want any border corrections. 10 or 20 kilometers will not improve the future of our nation. That can never be the aim of a healthy foreign policy” (Weinberg, ed., 1961, 27–28). German soldiers should only be sacrificed for truly worthwhile goals.

Hitler described his far-reaching foreign policy aims in 1924 in *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) and again in 1928 in his untitled “Second Book,” which was not published during his lifetime. These books did not set out a fixed course for his future actions, but they did show the general direction he would take Germany, should he come to power. Hitler believed that a grand vision was prerequisite to great accomplishments. Not in his time, but in the next generation or more, Germany’s racial destiny was to rule the world. His job was to set Germany well on its violent course towards this goal. His vision was nourished by a distinct view of world history, which for him consisted of a struggle among nations for survival and predominance. (The anti-Jewish component of his world-view was central to this struggle, but this subject is discussed elsewhere in this volume.) This struggle was about trade and manufacturing on one level, but more important was each nation’s ability to feed itself with its own agricultural resources. In order to achieve self-sufficiency, nations had to fight wars. Armed conflict was a fundamental reality of international relations. According to Hitler, “The final outcome of the struggle for the world market will lie with force and not with the economy itself. . . . The sword must stand before the plow and an army before the economy” (Weinberg, ed., 1961, 124).

Hitler described the worldwide hegemonic threat that he believed the United States posed in his second book. “The only state that will be able to defy North America [read: the United States] in the future is the one that knows how . . . racially to enhance the value of its national qualities and governmentally to bring them into the form best suited to this purpose. . . . It is again the task of the National Socialist movement to strengthen and prepare its fatherland for this task to the utmost” (Weinberg, ed., 1961, 130). These statements do not explain why Hitler declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941, but they signal his potential willingness to do so.

His writings in the 1920s were not a mere episode, but the formal expressions of a coherent world-view to which he remained true. He mentioned his worldwide ambitions in speeches to *Wehrmacht* officers several times in 1939—before invading Poland, but after having accomplished liberation from the armaments restrictions mandated by Versailles, the remilitarization of the Rhine, and the *Anschluss* of Austria and a large chunk of Czechoslovakia. Hitler did not discuss a precise plan, but he spoke in global terms, justifying his megalomaniacal vision with the German people’s superior racial value, numerical

strength, and proven ability to fight. After the campaign against Poland, he reiterated his vision in a talk in the Reich chancellery in November 1939. “A racial struggle has erupted [to decide] who should rule in Europe and therefore in the world” (Thies, 1976, 121). Germany would win, of course, because the German soldier was inherently superior to all others. “One can do [read: accomplish] anything with the German soldier” (Thies, 1976, 121).

Hitler’s vision was more than mere raving. The navy had far-reaching plans for the whole Atlantic, although its ideas were never realized, because its ship-building programs always had to make way for the growing material needs of the army. Striking the United States by air appeared to hold more promise. Jochen Thies shows that in 1937 Willy Messerschmidt revealed to Hitler and Göring a full-sized model of a four-engine airplane whose range would be transcontinental. In 1940 the Luftwaffe placed an order for the development of six versions of the Me 264, which were supposed to be able to carry heavy loads of bombs to the United States’ eastern seaboard and do reconnaissance work as far as the west coast. In November 1940, when Hitler’s successes had seduced him into believing everything was possible, the Führer stated that, should the United States enter the war, he would send bombers against it from the Azores, in order to force it to defend its own airspace instead of coming to Britain’s aid. This defensive strategy had some merit from a purely theoretical point of view; however, Germany’s economic, industrial, military, and governmental capacity was more limited than Hitler’s imagination. The Me 264 never came on line, despite repeated efforts throughout the war.

Viewed from the end of the twentieth century, these military preparations and Germany’s declaration of war against the United States appear bizarre. But the United States’ superpower role had not yet emerged. Germany had experienced the United States’ ability to field, equip, and feed a substantial army in 1917–18, but Hitler and many millions of other Germans did not acknowledge the United States’ military contribution to the Allied victory. Following the infamous stab-in-the-back legend, Hitler believed that Germany had never been defeated militarily. Rather, internal enemies behind the front had turned on the German army and undermined its achievements, for which so much German blood had flowed.

Why did Hitler choose December 11, 1941, to declare war on the United States? Gerhard Weinberg’s explanation is the most convincing one. Proceeding from Hitler’s world-view, his overestimation of Germany, and his underestimation of the United States, and also

taking into account German armaments policy, Weinberg places Hitler's decision into the global context in which the German chancellor thought. According to Weinberg, Hitler wanted to avoid war with the United States in 1939 and 1940, so he kept his navy on a tight enough leash to ensure that its actions against shipping in the Atlantic would not give the United States cause to enter the war. Germany would first defeat the Soviet Union, then it would build a blue-water navy big enough to take on the United States. But the war against the Soviet Union could not be ended in 1941, Britain was still in the war, and the United States was supplying both of these countries. One way to deal with Britain, Hitler thought, would be to encourage Japan to move south against vulnerable British possessions. Such a move would also keep the United States occupied in the Pacific. Japan wanted to take advantage of British weakness, but needed German support against the United States, which Hitler gladly promised, since he thought the United States could do little more than continue to send goods to Britain and the Soviet Union. Germany could make up for its insufficient naval power with the Japanese navy. Japan never revealed its precise plans to Germany, but Hitler welcomed its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. He immediately ordered his navy to sink all ships it encountered from the United States or from countries who declared their solidarity with the United States. It took him a few more days to officially declare war, because he was on the eastern front. He had to return to Berlin, and the Reichstag and public opinion had to be prepared.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Hitler's declaration of war, as Weinberg points out, was that it received near unanimous support among Germany's military and political leadership, which had not been the case with his other military undertakings. This support did not mean that Germany's entire leadership shared Hitler's world-wide ambitions, but it did believe that Hitler's declaration of war on the United States was the correct, indeed the "rational" thing to do at the time. Germany's move against the United States was not initiated on an insane or suicidal whim. It was clearly thought out. That the premises upon which it was based were false did not make it any less "wise" in the eyes of Hitler and the rest of Germany's military and political leadership.

References

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