

likely to win the war and become a European hegemon.⁵⁶ America's buck-passing strategy, in other words, was unraveling after two and a half years of war. The Russian army, which had been badly mauled in almost every engagement it had with the German army, was on the verge of disintegration by March 12, 1917, when revolution broke out and the tsar was removed from power.⁵⁷ The French army was also in precarious shape, and it suffered mutinies in May 1917, shortly after the United States entered the war.⁵⁸ The British army was in the best shape of the three allied armies, mainly because it spent the first two years of the war expanding into a mass army and thus had not been bled white like the French and Russian armies. The United Kingdom was nevertheless in desperate straits by April 1917, because Germany had launched an unrestricted submarine campaign against British shipping in February 1917 that was threatening to knock the United Kingdom out of the war by the early fall.⁵⁹ Consequently, the United States was forced to enter the war in the spring of 1917 to bolster the Triple Entente and prevent a German victory.⁶⁰

The third period covers the years from 1923 to the summer of 1940. The United States committed no forces to Europe during those years. Indeed, isolationism was the word commonly used to describe American policy during the years between the world wars.⁶¹ The 1920s and early 1930s were relatively peaceful years in Europe, mainly because Germany remained shackled by the strictures of the Versailles Treaty. But Adolf Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933, and soon thereafter Europe was in turmoil again. By the late 1930s, American policymakers recognized that Nazi Germany was a potential hegemon and that Hitler was likely to attempt to conquer Europe. World War II began on September 1, 1939, when Germany attacked Poland and the United Kingdom and France responded by declaring war against Germany. However, the United States made no serious move toward a continental commitment when the war broke out. As in World War I, it initially relied on Europe's other great powers to contain the German threat.⁶²

The fourth period covers the five years from the summer of 1940, when Germany decisively defeated France and sent the British army back

home via Dunkirk, until the European half of World War II ended in early May 1945. American policymakers had expected the British and French armies to stop a Wehrmacht offensive on the western front and force a protracted war of attrition that would sap Germany's military might.⁶³ Josef Stalin expected the same outcome, but the Wehrmacht shocked the world by winning a quick and decisive victory in France.⁶⁴ With this victory, Germany was well-positioned to threaten the United Kingdom.

More important, however, Hitler could use most of his army to invade the Soviet Union, because he had no western front to worry about. It was widely believed in the United Kingdom and the United States that the Wehrmacht was likely to defeat the Red Army and establish hegemony in Europe.⁶⁵ After all, Germany had knocked Russia out of World War I, and in that case Germany was fighting a two-front war and had substantially more divisions fighting against the British and French armies than against the Russian army.⁶⁶ This time the Germans would be essentially fighting a one-front war. Also, Stalin's purge of the Red Army between 1937 and 1941 had markedly reduced its fighting power. This weakness was on display in the winter of 1939–40, when the Red Army had trouble defeating the badly outnumbered Finnish army. In short, there was ample reason to think in the summer of 1940 that Germany was on the threshold of dominating continental Europe.

The collapse of France precipitated a dramatic change in American thinking about a continental commitment.⁶⁷ Suddenly there was widespread support for providing substantial aid to the United Kingdom, which now stood alone against Germany, and for preparing the American military for a possible war with Germany. By early fall of 1940, public opinion polls showed that for the first time since Hitler came to power, a majority of Americans believed it was more important to ensure that the United Kingdom defeat Germany than to avoid a European war.⁶⁸ The U.S. Congress also drastically increased defense spending in the summer of 1940, making it possible to start building an expeditionary force for Europe: on June 30, 1940, the size of the American army was 267,767; one year later, roughly five months before Pearl Harbor, the strength of the army had grown to 1,460,998.⁶⁹