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AN EXAMINATION OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONALISM THROUGH PUBLIC OPINION, 1935-1939

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ABSTRACT
The 1930’s saw the widespread use of public opinion polling as a way to inform lawmakers and the general public alike of where the masses stood on issues. These polls, paired with newspapers and magazines from the time period, offer a rich glimpse into 1930’s United States. This paper will pull on this extensive pool of primary sources to illustrate the story of the United States’ shift from isolationism to interventionism in the era of Nazi Germany, appeasement, and World War II.
Between the Great Depression and the United States’ entrance into World War II, there was a drastic shift in American foreign policy. The 1930’s marked the height of American isolationism while the early 1940’s marked some of the most notable achievements of American interventionism. While the attitudes that drove foreign policy in the heart of isolationism were clear and the attitudes that brought the country into total war are commonly analyzed, what happened between these two distinct practices of foreign policy is often overlooked. What is the story of the United States’ transformation from isolationism to interventionism?

In 1940, an article in the widely read publication Reader’s Digest expressed the revolutionary nature of public opinion polling. American public opinion polls served as a “mirror” to the public and congressional lawmakers alike—the numbers demonstrated the desires and opinions of the people with new transparency. Lawmakers, the writer claimed, followed the polls—“from the White House to the Hill, and down through the departments and bureaus—avidly.”1 Polls revealed the truth of the public’s desires and
heavily influenced the decisions of Congress, discredited self-interest lobbyists, and forecasted election outcomes. Revolutionary, these public opinion polls of this author’s contemporary were highly regarded as accurate. Consequently, their accuracy reveals to the modern historian the attitudes that drove the country’s transformation from isolationism to interventionism.

Two polling agencies dominated the field. Beginning in 1935, George Gallup and the Gallup Poll were used as an authority after it correctly predicted the election of 1936 to go to Roosevelt. Elmo Roper was another major pollster, and his work was reflected in *Fortune* magazine. Both were heavily influential in Washington and Roosevelt himself often relied on them to glimpse into public opinion.

Newspapers were also reflective of regional opinions as well as key to illustrating the public sentiment. As often what one reads has great influence on their opinions, especially on such volatile issues as neutrality, papers reflected the opinions of their readers. Articles were closely examined to determine the tone and information that was being presented to the American public.

How did the United States transform from a staunchly isolationist nation to a staunchly interventionist one in a mere half decade? What were the emotions, ideas, and opinions that Americans held to be true? How did these ideas drastically change in such

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3 For more information on how Roosevelt’s decisions were affected by public opinion, see Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)
a short period of time? A study of public opinion has largely ignored the 1930’s and a comprehensive study has yet to be produced. This paper seeks to chart American public opinion during this time through examining regional newspapers and polls.

This paper explores three periods and events to illustrate the turning points of opinion. First, the Isolationist atmosphere of the 1930’s, from which interventionism was gradually reincarnated will be examined: what viewpoints and sentiments caused the United States to adopt a strict isolationist foreign policy from 1935-1939? What were those policies and how did the public support them? Next, the Nazi conquest of Czechoslovakia was the first significant and quantifiable turning point away from strict isolationism. The Czech Issue, and the Munich Conference that followed, will be dissected and the public reaction to both will be examined. Finally, when World War II started in the European Theater with the invasion of Poland, Americans had to decide what to do next. Opinion was cemented and a policy far different from the one of 1935 was established. These subtopics tell the story of the United States’ drastic shift from isolationism to interventionism from 1935-1940 through analysis of public opinion.

After the stock market crash in 1929, the United States was heavily focused on domestic issues as foreign policy took a backseat. As the country’s attention was on itself, isolationism was the prevailing attitude of both the public and policy makers. In November 1935, 71% of those surveyed stated that if a foreign nation attacked another nation, the United States should not even form with other nations to stop the attack. Such was the extent of noninvolvement—for the majority of the public, any international

intervention, let alone war, was distasteful. This pacifist attitude was widely recognized-and embraced-among the public. As one author wrote in the widely read pages of the August 1935 *Reader’s Digest*, “at no time in history has pacifist sentiment been so widespread and articulate.” With peace as the country’s utmost desire and itself as its first priority, the United States sought a strictly non-interventionist policy.

In addition to the Great Depression, another major factor were the fresh memories of the First World War. With the traumas of war fresh in mind, the Lost Generation sought to do everything to prevent another. People also viewed entering in the war as a mistake: Contemporary historians popularized the belief that World War I had been orchestrated by merchant elites to gain profit. In the September 1935 issue of *Reader’s Digest*, the historian Walter Millis’ *Road to War* was the supplement. His work blamed the munitions industry and other business elites, as well as the sensationalist press, for convincing “innumerable sensible Americans” that “Germans were a peculiarly fiendish and brutal race.” His work was also demonstrative of the sympathetic, revisionist view Americans held about the Versailles Treaty: Americans had “received, in the very first days, what was to be perfected as the Allied thesis of the war. It was all due to the undemocratic machinations of the Central European “autocracies.” Americans were now to be surprised, shocked (and naturally pleased) to discover how everything they read simply confirmed their first judgment.” The “stupefied Germans discovered themselves


7 Walter Millis, “Road to War,” *Reader’s Digest*, 26:161(September 1935), 118-124.
convicted before world opinion on the evidence of a few writers whom the vast majority of Germans had never read or even heard of.” Millis painted the Germans as victims of World War 1. While there is truth in his statement, this image convinced the American public that the Treaty of Versailles was unfair, and sympathy excused Hitler’s nationalist claims to territory. Many Americans held this attitude, and in August 1937, 31%--a substantial portion of the public--believed that the Treaty of Versailles was “too severe.”

These scholarly accounts complemented the work of the Nye Committee, whose 93 hearings of munitions business officials from 1934-1936 further convinced the public that the country had been wrongly manipulated into World War I. The credibility of the government and Wilsonian-interventionist ideals was greatly reduced. Such sentiments ensured that the country was not ready to engage in another war anytime soon.

The findings of the Nye Committee and this historical assessment of World War I carried Congress to action. Legislators passed the Neutrality Acts of 1935-1939, which prohibited trade and loans to all belligerent nations and restricted American travel on belligerent ships; and to propose the Ludlow Amendment--which would have made Congress only able to declare war through national referendum. The public backed both pieces of legislation. At an end of 1935, neutrality was listed as the third most “vital issue before the American people” in the Gallup Poll. This served as evidence that the public was in support of legislation that addressed what was cited as such a major problem.

8 American Institute of Public Opinion, 65.


10 American Institute of Public Opinion, 5.
Additionally, a November 1935 Gallup Poll showed 75% of people in favor of the Ludlow Amendment.\(^{11}\) There was widespread support for such an amendment among all parts of the country, and this pattern was mirrored in the support for the Neutrality Laws. However, both laws did not see the end of the decade in their original form, and the Ludlow Amendment was scrapped all together—a product of the country’s turn to interventionism.

To explain neutrality’s eventual defeat, one has to have a complete picture of the policy’s thriving years. While Americans were isolationist and valued neutrality, only a small portion was actually in support of Hitler’s policies.\(^{12}\) This later compelled many to convert to war, as most were not blind to the rising monster of Europe. Intellectuals, politicians, and the general public watched the Nazi phenomenon from afar, noting its disturbing nature and their malpractice.\(^{13}\) From the start of the Third Reich, newspapers had criticized fascism, noting its clash with American values of democracy, and cartoonists never missed an opportunity to illustrate Hitler as a cartoon villain. Doctor SeussThe morality of the public was largely against fascism, and these attitudes contributed to the country’s turn to neutrality when the time came.

As Europe drew closer to the eve of war, several events shifted American public opinion from neutrality to interventionism. From 1935-1938, a steady decrease in

\(^{11}\) _Ibid_. , 3.

\(^{12}\) This portion can be reflected in those 8,500,000 people who both listened and stated that they agreed with Father Charles Coughlin in a May 8, 1938 Gallup Poll. _Ibid_. , 114.

isolationist sentiment swept the country. What happened between 1935-1938 to cause isolationism to lose some of its momentum? Increasing reports from Europe and Asia were one factor. The press, though not pro-interventionist, highlighted the atrocities done by the fascists and was sympathetic towards the European nations. However, the attitude of major American newspapers was sure to distinguish these problems as European and contained in Europe, and alluded to the “whole broad ocean” that separated the United States from Europe.  

This was key to revealing the isolationist undercurrent of the country and was reflected in the polls: while most of the public recognized the atrocities being committed and sympathized with a non-fascist side, the general consensus was that the country should not get involved.

Thus was the attitude in August 1938. Hitler had been having a successful few years. Reports of the Rhineland remilitarization and the Anschluss showed the United States’ Germany’s aggressiveness. Subsequently, Germany began planning an attack on Czechoslovakia. Three and a quarter million Germans lived in the Czech Sudetenland, many of whom caught the “virus of National Socialism.” By 1938, the majority of Sudeten Germans were Czech Nazis, and had been taking orders from Berlin for three years. They wreaked havoc in the country and protested to be united with Germany.

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15 American Institute of Public Opinion, 62.


17 Ibid.
Hitler used this majority as a pretext for assuming the Sudetenland and eventually all of Czechoslovakia. Unaware of Hitler’s larger goal of grabbing all of the country, many Europeans believed that “all Hitler wanted was justice for his kinsfolk in Czechoslovakia.” However, opinions in the United States saw straight through Hitler’s demands and postulated that the issue would lead to war. “It is here that the world war will start if it is to come within 1938 to 1939,” wrote the Oregonian of Portland, Oregon. All around the country, people believed that the issue would result in war if not solved.

Hitler had planned his attack for October 1st. But when the Czech government began to mobilize on their German borders after hearing Germany’s intentions, the issue was given a sense of urgency. As the European powers struggled with negotiations, the prospect of war was flipped on and off: sometimes it seemed as though war was certain while others peace was found. First, on September 15, Chamberlain came to negotiate with Hitler in an effort to keep the world out of war. Armed with an urging of the Czechs to follow “self determination”, Chamberlain drafted a plan to negotiate secession with the Czechs if that meant the continent would stay out of war. For the next week, Chamberlain and Europe gave a sigh of relief: it seemed as though the prime minister had kept the continent out of war. The anxiety of American newspapers slightly alleviated. As Nonpareil of Council Bluffs, Iowa put it, Chamberlain “at least gained delay” and elongated the peace. But when Chamberlain returned again to talk over

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}} \text{ Ibid., 360.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{19}} \text{“Villard on Politics,” The Oregonian, 77:19 (May 8, 1938), sec. VI, 49.}\]
plans with Hitler on September 22, Hitler rejected his proposal, as he wanted to invade Czechoslovakia before October 1st rather than to wait for the Sudetenland to be handed over to him. Thus he “burned his bridges” and Europe was again on the edge of war.\textsuperscript{21} Newspapers began to print headlines such as “The Crisis Remains”\textsuperscript{22} and began to worry for war. On September 25, Hitler gave a fiery speech that promised an invasion. The world, and the United States, was deeply troubled with the thought of another war. But Hitler quickly changed his mind at the advice of Mussolini, and sought to once again negotiate. On September 29-30, the Munich Agreement was the product of such negotiations, and the Sudetenland was handed over to Hitler after negotiations with Britain, France, and Italy. As Hitler promised that this was his last territorial grab, the watching world relaxed and rejoiced as they thought war was avoided.

What did Americans think of this scheme? Opinion was split. Many praised Chamberlain for maintaining peace. Polls showed that at the end of the Sudeten negotiations, 59\% of the population agreed that appeasement was better than going to war. However, an equal amount thought that the Munich Agreement would not lead to peace but to war.\textsuperscript{23} The attitude was that of a recognized betrayal of Czechoslovakia but an acceptance of that as a necessity to maintain peace. To the majority Americans, it was “the best thing to do” at the time.\textsuperscript{24} As The Bangor Daily News of Maine said, “betrayal

\textsuperscript{20} What America Thinks Inc., 179.
\textsuperscript{21} Shirer, 397.
\textsuperscript{22} What America Thinks Inc., 397.
\textsuperscript{23} American Institute of Public Opinion, 121.
is a disagreeable word, especially when coupled with considerations of price, even when the price may be avoidance of war...betrayal is perhaps too strong a word to be applied to its course...but this is not a thing about which Americans can afford to be smug. We are not so keen about rescuing distressed sister democracies that we want to go to war on their account.25 Americans felt sympathetic towards letting their sister democracy down but acknowledged the Czechs as a sacrifice to peace, that in the “general rejoicing”, a “word of sympathy is expressed here and there for Czechoslovakia...”26 Part of the sentiment was directed towards Britain and France for breaking the Czech-Franco alliance treaties, but the relief of avoiding war overrode this feeling.

Though the public rejoiced at the present peace, praise of Munich was usually followed by an expression of the uncertainty of the future and the possibility of war further on. Only 8% of the public believed that Hitler had no more territorial ambitions in Europe.27 The newspapers acknowledged the uneasy peace, saying that “war has been prevented; peace remains to be perfected.”28 Some felt hopeful that Germany and its people wanted to avoid war in the future. When Hitler rolled the military down the streets of Berlin, Germans met the display of aggression with negative public sentiment.29

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25 Ibid., 379.

26 Ibid., 491.

27 American Institute of Public Opinion, 125.

28 What America Thinks Inc., 489.

29 Shirer, 399.
Many people took this as a sign of Germany’s ability to be better in the future and some even went as far to say that Munich demonstrated that Hitler could be controlled in the future.\textsuperscript{30} Others called for more implementations of peace, such as more negotiations towards peace.

For American public opinion, Hitler’s conquest of Czechoslovakia left the country more convinced a war would occur. This translated into a new push for rearmament: in February of 1938, half of the population had been willing to give up the Navy for disarmament, and in July of that year 68% had expressed desire for a world disarmament conference. After the Munich crisis, this 71% now wanted a larger navy instead of a smaller one, and this number only kept on growing as 1939 approached. The public wanted more adequate defense. As the \textit{Daily Hawkeye Gazette} of Burlington, Iowa put it, “And so America itself….has to arm with the rest [of the world powers].”\textsuperscript{31} While people certainly did not want to fight in a European war, many grew convinced that if a war occurred, the United States would be swept into it. Rearmament made the country prepared and marked effect of the Munich crisis.

After the conquest of Czechoslovakia, Poland was next on Hitler’s agenda. The Treaty of Versailles cut out East Prussia from the Reich, giving it to Poland. The Polish Corridor, which would have given Germany access to the sea, and Danzig, which was an important port city and historically part of Germany, had been carved out by Versailles and given to Poland, or put under heavy Polish economic influence. To most Germans, these were the highest offenses of the treaty and Poland was the “most hated and despised

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 493, 533.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 667.
enemy.”

From the very beginning of his rule, Hitler had wanted to seek vengeance on Poland.

But since the Polish-German Pact of 1934, Poland had supported Germany in their endeavors. What changed in January of 1939 was Hitler’s insistence to retaking the Polish Corridor and Danzig. Poland was only willing to replace the League of Nations’ guarantee of Danzig with a German-Polish agreement about the status of Danzig, but not willing to violate the pact and insisted that any German attempt to “incorporate the Free City into the Reich must inevitably lead to conflict.”

Still, Hitler persisted. When Germany occupied Bohemia and Moravia on March 15, German forces flanked Poland. War was looming on the horizon. On March 22, Poland suggested a secret Anglo-Polish agreement for mutual assistance. This led to Chamberlain’s declaration on March 31 that Britain and France would lend “all support in their power” if Poland was attacked. This marked the Allies’ turn to interventionism. How did the American public react to this? Most papers commended Chamberlain’s sudden shift in foreign policy, recognizing its importance to Poland and the world: “Do not underestimate the announcement of Prime Minister Chamberlain…the British French guarantee actually means something,” said the Oregonian. Some recognized that Chamberlain was too late in his policies. A Richmond Times Dispatch cartoon agreed as

32 Shirer, 212.

33 Ibid., 456.

34 “Allies Pledge Aid if Poles Assailed,” The Oregonian, 78:24,467 (April 1, 1938), sec. II, 10.
they published a tiny Chamberlain trying to rope a bloated Nazi foot back.\textsuperscript{35} All the while, the papers recognized that the world was closer to another war. Still, publications continued in their detached tone—these were still far off problems, not the main issue of the United States’ concern.

While this was the sentiment of the general public, Roosevelt had sent Hitler a telegram bluntly asking if Germany could “give assurance that your [German] armed forces will not attack or invade the territory of the following independent nations”\textsuperscript{36} and, then, listed 31 nations.

Interestingly, in May 1939 the polls showed a dramatic 19\% decrease in people who believed that a war would take place in the next year.\textsuperscript{37} What suddenly shifted the country to have more confidence in peace? Did France and Britain’s pledge to get involved if aggression occurred convince the United States that Germany was too intimidated to attack Poland? The opposite sentiment was found in the newspapers. Chamberlain had told the House of Commons that Poland was “not worth war” on May 3. The press took this to mean that Britain and France had moved to negotiations, and the public seemed to believe that another Munich was possible.\textsuperscript{38}

Whatever the reason, the United States underestimated Hitler. All throughout the summer, Hitler and his generals were making preparations towards war. Negotiations occurred behind closed doors and the only major news that was widely discussed was the

\textsuperscript{35} What America Thinks Inc., 767.
\textsuperscript{36} Shirer, 470.
\textsuperscript{37} American Institute of Public Opinion, 154.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.; What America Thinks Inc., 707, 709.
Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. From May, June, and July saw a significant drop in discussion of Hitler in papers.

By the end of August, war was again on the horizon as all sides militarized. In Berlin, the press felt that war was inevitable.\(^39\) While Hitler hoped the Soviet turn to neutrality dissuaded the British and cleared his way for his attack, Britain was firm in their opposition. Hitler too was firm and went ahead with the attack anyway; falsely listing that Germany had first been provoked by Poland as an excuse. Britain and France declared war two days later—September 3—when the German attack continued. World War II had begun, and the American press, now more than ever, had a heightened uncertainty about American neutrality.

Though the public stressed how they did not want to get involved in another messy European conflict, the country was now ready for peaceful interventionism: only 1% wanted to enter the war, but 50% now supported some form of selling supplies—later manifested as the Lend-Lease Act.\(^40\) While it took an attack on American soil to convince the country to engage in violent interventionism, the end of the Polish conflict marked the beginning of formal American interventionism into World War II. Supported by the polls, Roosevelt called on Congress to revise the neutrality laws with one that allowed arms to be bought and carried on belligerent ships. Passed in December 4, 1939, the cash-and-carry neutrality law marked the United States’ peaceful interventionism and transformation from isolationism.

\(^39\) Shirer, 562.

From 1935 to 1939, the polls showed heavy favor of noninterventionism. Neutrality was on the minds of the American public and viewed as a crucial issue. In 1935, when asked what the most important issue at the time was by Gallup, both Democratic and Republican members of the voting public put neutrality in their top five concerns. Additionally, 1935 was the year of the most isolationist sentiment. Roughly 30% of the public felt that the United States should join if a war was involved. The attitude at the time was that of strong anti-war as people were still shaken from World War I. This was paired with calls for disarmament and a general desire for pacifism.

When Czechoslovakia occurred, a shift happened. The United States had not thought a European war would arise. Now, the public felt that war was bound to occur. The United States just wanted to stay out of it. This caused the public to advocate for self-defense, a change from rearmament. However, it was not until Poland and the European start of the war, that the United States decided to engage in non-violent interventionism through the selling of supplies to any belligerent nation. Thus, the turn from isolationism was complete.

These sentiments were largely universal, with only slight fluctuations between region and party. Largely, these shifts were bipartisan as numbers in support for interventionism went up among Democrats and Republicans alike. And while some accused the Gallup Poll of being too Republican and the Roper Poll of being too Democratic in leaning, these party affiliations did not interfere with the opinions they recorded—both showed a public willing to intervene.

All throughout these years, slight regional differences were demonstrated. 1935-1936 showed regions farther West, such as the Mountain, Pacific Coast, and the
Midwestern (called East Central by agencies) leaning more isolationist while New England and the Mid-Atlantic had more interventionist sentiments. Consistently, the South was the most interventionist out of all the regions. When asked about needing the approval of the people to declare war, only 70% of Southerners felt that this was necessary, 9% lower than the 79% percent of Mountain region dwellers who said yes.\textsuperscript{41}

Why were Southerners more interventionist than their countrymen? There is a correlation between this and party affiliation. The South was the most supportive of the Democratic Party and Roosevelt, and Roosevelt was an advocate for interventionism. Conversely, the overwhelming majority of Southern papers were Democratic and supported Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{42} Roosevelt was a more interventionist than many of his contemporaries, pushing for the change in the Neutrality Acts.\textsuperscript{43}

In a short four years, the country shifted from heavily isolationist to in clear support of the Allies. Examining sources as reactionary to the global events that occurred saw how this happened. Allowing these sources and data to speak for themselves, clear connections were made, mapping out the story of American isolationism to interventionism through the use of primary sources. What was discovered was far more complex than one voice of opinion, but several that were heard together to shape the United States’ path from isolationism to interventionism.

\textsuperscript{41} American Institute of Public Opinion, 3.

\textsuperscript{42} American Institute of Public Opinion, 85.

\textsuperscript{43} Casey, 43.
“Allies Pledge Aid if Poles Assailed.” *The Oregonian*, 78:24,467 (April 1, 1938), sec. II, 10.


