

# The Most Fateful Declaration of War in December 1941

**It wasn't the U.S. against Japan.**

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The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, “a date which will live in infamy,” declared President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, triggered a congressional declaration of war against the Empire of Japan the next day. That monumental decision thrust America into World War II. But it was not the most significant declaration of war that month, or even that week.

With its attack, Tokyo brought the wrath of an aroused American public down upon it. While Congress was voting for war, young men were arriving at military recruiting stations, swelling armed forces already bolstered by the inauguration of conscription the year before. On December 8 it looked like there would be two wars: Germany versus the British Empire and Soviet Union, and Japan versus America, the United Kingdom, and other European powers with colonies in East Asia.

Although much brutal combat lay ahead, a Japanese military victory in the latter contest was always unlikely — indeed, almost impossible — even with much of America’s Pacific fleet on the bottom of Pearl Harbor. Once the industrial heartland turned the U.S. into the famed “Arsenal of Democracy,” Japan would be outproduced on every implement of war. Once the doughty youth across the country’s vast “fruited plain” were trained and ready for combat, the Japanese tide would inevitably and irrevocably recede.

Tokyo officials who assumed that Americans had no will to fight did not understand the psyche of Japan’s new enemy, including a powerful self-righteous certitude that energized people whose homeland had been treacherously attacked. Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, who commanded the attack, spent time in America and may have been almost alone in Toyko in realizing that the attack would arouse a terrible, even overwhelming, desire for revenge from a society ultimately far better prepared than Japan for the total war to come.

Ironically, though, this was not the war that FDR wanted. Ongoing Japanese aggression against China was awful but posed no military threat to America. The Pacific Ocean might not have shielded Hawaii from attack, but that wide expanse of water forestalled invasion of the U.S. homeland. Indeed, Imperial Japan was ill-prepared to even conquer and rule Asia, which itself mattered far less to America than did Europe. And the Second Sino-Japanese War, usually dated to the Marco Polo Bridge incident in July 1937, turned into a massive human abattoir, consuming prodigious quantities of Japanese men and materiel.

Instead of proving to be an easy conquest, as expected, courageous though ill-prepared Chinese forces resisted the invaders at great cost. Brutal atrocities, such as the Rape of Nanjing, stoked resistance. Even battlefield successes drew Tokyo’s military deeper into China, making victory

more distant. When Japan surrendered nearly four years after striking Pearl Harbor, the bulk of its army remained mired in China. Estimates of theater casualties for Japan range widely, with a Chinese reexamination of Tokyo figures running an astonishing 2.2 million.

*The U.S. and world were saved by the second declaration of war.*

But war with Japan did not mean war with Nazi Germany. The two were linked (along with Italy) only loosely by the Tripartite Pact. Germany was not bound to back its ally against America — after all, Tokyo did not join the assault on the Soviet Union six months before. And with Pearl Harbor the former chose to head south against the U.S. and European states rather than north against the USSR.

This left FDR with a significant problem. He was determined to sustain the United Kingdom, threatened with isolation and even starvation by the ongoing “Atlantic War,” and had made America an undeclared naval belligerent. But the incidents that resulted — with the U.S. Navy aiding British convoys — had been insufficient to justify war with an American public still determined to stay out of the military madness raging from the Atlantic to the Pacific in Eurasia. Without Washington involved in the European theater, that conflict still looked like a probable German victory.

Before launching Operation Barbarossa against the USSR, Adolf Hitler declared, “We have only to kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down.” He unleashed an invasion of four million soldiers and 3600 tanks; few observers believed that the Soviet Union would survive. The Wehrmacht won monumental victories in its more than five-month march across the vast Soviet plains. Fearing his capital’s capture, Joseph Stalin evacuated many government functions and industrial operations.

But the German offensive on Moscow halted on December 5. The Red Army paid an extraordinary price to save Moscow: Casualty estimates for the city’s defense ranged between 650,000 and a million. The USSR remained battered but standing. Pushed back by Soviet reinforcements drawn from Siberia — freed by Japan’s decision to attack America rather than the Soviet Union — the German military would never again threaten the Soviet capital.

Still, at the time it was not evident that this marked the Wehrmacht’s high-water mark. It was obvious that Germany would bid for victory again the following year when better weather arrived. As it was, Berlin continued to win significant victories and maintained the strategic initiative even through the (losing) battle of Kursk in July and August of 1943. The Red Army even ran short of new troops as it forced back the Wehrmacht. Suffering years of prodigious slaughter in what remains the most terrible, brutal, and cruel campaign of modern times, the Soviet Union found that its human resources were not inexhaustible.

Without America’s entry into the European war Berlin may well have triumphed. To be sure, there is a common assumption that Moscow’s victory was ensured once Stalin survived Hitler’s initial onslaught. But that reflects the performance of the USSR backed by the United States. Of course, it still was the Soviets who did the fighting — and suffered the most grievous human and materiel losses from nearly four years of vicious combat on a front that for a time extended nearly 2,000 miles. But the fact that the Red Army was able to fight so bravely so long highlighted the role of allied support, both direct and indirect.

Had America fought only Japan there would have been no second front, which ultimately occupied a third of Germany's army. As long as the British could feed themselves, they could dominate the seas and fight for North Africa, but alone could not contest Berlin's continental control. The lack of allied troops fighting in North Africa, Italy, and France would have allowed the Wehrmacht to even the odds on the Eastern front. And not just for the army. Without the U.S. bombing campaign to supplement the UK's air war, the Luftwaffe would not have needed to shift as many *luftflotte* westward to defend the homeland and especially the armaments industry. Germany might have been able to maintain air superiority over the Soviet Union throughout the contest.

Although the USSR's larger population ensured the Red Army's numerical edge, the loss of so much European territory denied the Soviet regime access to substantial manpower. The country's industrial capacity was still vast, but alone would not have overwhelmed a Nazi Germany able to concentrate on the Eastern front. Particularly important, there would have been no Lend-Lease shipments from the U.S. to the Soviet Union, which made the Red Army mobile, giving it a notable advantage over the Wehrmacht, which still relied on horses for much of its transport.

Adolf Hitler's misjudgments would still have hampered Germany's chances. He had lost his surprisingly deft political and military touch, evident before and early in World War II. For instance, his order that the Wehrmacht divert south into Ukraine lost the chance to take Moscow in late summer 1941. Nevertheless, the Wehrmacht remained a superior force and might have succeeded in creating a relatively stable front by gaining Moscow, Leningrad, and the Caucasus. Over the long term, Germany likely would have found such a vast and hostile empire impossible to sustain, but the world still would have looked very different than the one that emerged after Germany's actual surrender in May 1945.

Why did Germany lose when and how it did? Because of the second declaration of war.

Japan attacked the U.S. on Sunday, December 7, before its embassy in Washington was able to decipher the message from Tokyo for the Roosevelt administration ending negotiations and effectively breaking relations. On Monday, December 8, FDR addressed Congress, which declared war on Japan. The resolution's lengthy title, which was almost as long as the resolution, was clear: "Joint Resolution Declaring that a state of war exists between the Imperial Government of Japan and the Government and the people of the United States and making provisions to prosecute the same."

Germany was not mentioned. On Tuesday, December 9, however, Hitler told his closest associates that he intended to declare war on the United States. Alerted to this decision by intelligence intercepts, FDR gave a fireside chat in which he prepared the public: "Remember always that Germany and Italy, regardless of any formal declaration of war, consider themselves at war with the United States at this moment just as much as they consider themselves at war with Britain or Russia."

Still, nothing was inevitable. Roosevelt could not take military action without German action. Then, on Thursday, December 11, Adolf Hitler called the Reichstag into session and declared war on America.

Why did he do so? Several theories have been advanced over the years. One is loyalty to Japan, though, as noted earlier, he was under no obligation to join Tokyo against the United States.

More likely, the idea of a global struggle excited him, since he viewed himself as a man of destiny. His hubris was overweening and on full display before the Reichstag: “I can only be grateful to Providence that it entrusted me with the leadership in this historic struggle which, for the next five hundred or a thousand years, will be described as decisive, not only for the history of Germany, but for the whole of Europe and indeed the whole world.”

Indeed, he saw this as the culmination of his life’s work:

*When I decided 23 years ago to enter political life in order to lead the nation up from ruin, I was a nameless, unknown soldier. Many of you here know just how difficult those first years of that struggle really were. The way from a small movement of seven men to the taking of power on January 30, 1933, as the responsible government is so miraculous that only the blessing of Providence could have made it possible. Today I stand at the head of the mightiest army in the world, the most powerful air force and a proud navy. Behind and around me is a sacred community — the National Socialist Party — with which I have become great and which has become great through me.*

He also reportedly believed that the attack would improve Germany’s chances of winning the war. This delusion apparently was shared by some in the Wehrmacht leadership, whose focus was on the army, which seemed beyond America’s reach. Finally, he viewed the two nations already at war and probably expected the U.S. to enter more fully anyway. He preferred to take the initiative, even though the only blows that Germany could strike would be naval, in the Atlantic. Every day seemed to further detach him from reality, leading to his and his nation’s destruction.

Hitler gave a lengthy speech, discussing the course of the war and justifying his government’s actions as defensive. Then he got to the U.S.: “there are no territorial or political conflicts between the American and German nations that could possibly involve the existence or even the [vital] interests of the United States. The forms of government have always been different. But this cannot be a reason for hostility between different nations, as long as one form of government does not try to interfere with another, outside of its naturally ordained sphere.”

He followed with an extended attack on Roosevelt and the latter’s “Jewish supporters,” before moving on to describe FDR’s succession of belligerent steps. In this area Hitler had a legal case — the base for destroyers deal, Lend-Lease, limitations on German merchant ships, freeze of German assets, and, most importantly, undeclared Atlantic naval war.

Complained the *führer*: “In a speech delivered on 11 September 1941, Roosevelt at last personally confirmed that he had given the order to fire against all Axis ships, and he repeated the order. On September 29, U.S. patrols attacked a German submarine east of Greenland with depth charges. On October 17 the U.S. destroyer Kearny, operating as an escort for the British, attacked a German submarine with depth charges, and on November 6 U.S. armed forces seized the German ship Odenwald in violation of international law, took it to an American port, and imprisoned its crew.” Thus, he explained, “Germany, Italy and Japan will together conduct the war that has been forced upon them by the United States of America and Britain with all the means at their command to a victorious conclusion.”

The foreign ministry’s official note to the U.S. embassy made the same argument:

*Although Germany on her part has strictly adhered to the rules of international law in her relations with the United States of America during every period of the present war, the government of the United States of America from initial violations of neutrality has finally proceeded to open acts of war against Germany. It has thereby virtually created a state of war. The government of the Reich consequently breaks off diplomatic relations with the United States of America and declares that under these circumstances brought about by President Roosevelt, Germany too, as from today, considers herself as being in a state of war with the United States of America.*

Hours later Congress responded unanimously with a declaration of war against Germany. Hitler had made the biggest mistake of his career. He had conquered much of Europe. No longer hemmed in, he could withstand the UK's naval blockade and probably would have taken North Africa, which he almost did anyway the following year. Even after blundering away his opportunity to seize Moscow in 1941, he retained a fair chance of prevailing against Stalin.

Then he brought the U.S. into the war.

Hitler underestimated and misunderstood America, viewing it as gangster-ridden, racially corrupted, and Jewish-controlled. Although he attacked his own military commanders for failing to understand economics when he diverted German forces to grab the Ukrainian breadbasket rather than take Moscow, he did not appreciate America's prodigious productive capacity. Nor did he recognize the courage and determination of a people who had taken on the world's greatest colonial power to win independence and in a dangerous world created a continental great power. A country that at World War II's conclusion was a superpower that spent decades shielding much of the globe from communist subversion and aggression.

The impact of Hitler's blunder was immediate. John Kenneth Galbraith observed,

*When Pearl Harbor happened, we [Roosevelt's advisers] were desperate.... We were all in agony. The mood of the American people was obvious — they were determined that the Japanese had to be punished. We could have been forced to concentrate all our efforts on the Pacific, unable from then on to give more than purely peripheral help to Britain. It was truly astounding when Hitler declared war on us three days later. I cannot tell you our feelings of triumph. It was a totally irrational thing for him to do, and I think it saved Europe.*

Although Americans still directed their ire at Japan, which had attacked militarily rather than just rhetorically — a disproportionate share of military recruits chose the U.S. Navy, which had suffered at Pearl Harbor and which would be the first weapon used against Japan — the public did not control the war effort. As commander-in-chief, Roosevelt decided on a Germany-first policy. This was the right decision. Tokyo's opportunity for further expansion and ability to do additional harm to America were limited. Germany's ambitions were more expansive and lethal, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and starvation of the UK, both possible, would have radically reshaped the military balance.

Nearly four years of war were necessary to defeat Berlin. The impact of Washington's entry, however, was immediate. Full participation in guarding convoys against German U-boats eased pressure on the UK while aiding its armed forces. Vast Lend-Lease shipments to the Soviet Union equipped the Red Army while rising air raids on the Germany dissipated Luftwaffe resources. In 1942, the USSR and Britain recorded signal victories — Stalingrad in the Soviet

Union and El Alamein in Egypt — which sapped Berlin's offensive power. Later that year Operation Torch brought U.S. ground forces into North Africa, from which they invaded Italy in 1943. The following year came Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion of France. Twelve years after its founding, Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich disappeared as he committed suicide in the rubble of his ruined capital.

Three months later, Japan also surrendered, its navy sunk after combat with scores of newly constructed U.S. aircraft carriers and battleships, its army trapped on isolated islands and the Chinese mainland, and its cities lit by multiple fire-bombing raids and wrecked by two atomic bombs. The Japanese, too, had sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind, underestimating the ferocity of Americans' will along with the enormity of their productivity.

In the end, the U.S. and world were saved by the second declaration of war in December 1941. The first, against Japan, was essential and inevitable, after the attack on Pearl Harbor. But the conflict that it initiated, though brutally and courageously fought, was of secondary strategic importance. In 1941, East Asia and the western Pacific were not the decisive battlefield.

The second declaration, by an uncomprehending Hitler, brought America into the European theater, preventing totalitarian domination of Eurasia, either by Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union. The world that emerged after victory in 1945 was ugly. But it could have been far worse. Ironically, it was Hitler, one of history's great moral monsters, who ensured the free world's survival.

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