



The United States' Policy toward Germany 1933--1938

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Abstract

After the First World War, and before the breakout of the Second World War, the conflict between the United States and Britain was the main conflict in the west. And the United States' policy toward Germany was subject to this conflict. In order to create in Europe a balance of power which was in the United States' favor, and to prevent Britain and France from controlling Europe completely, the United States adopted a neutral policy toward Germany, and did help the recovery of Germany. And Germany wanted to absorb a lot of fund to recover her economy and rebuild her army, with the hope of regaining the position as one of the western powers. So it was necessary for both two countries to maintain good relationship between them. But with the rise of Nazi Germany, Hitler did adopt a very aggressive diplomatic policy, which seriously harmed the United States' interests. So the United States' policy toward Germany began to change. This thesis tries to analyze the United States' policy toward Germany before the breakout of Second World War.

Keywords: Aggression, Neutral policy, Isolationism

1. The expansion of Nazi Germany

1.1 The rising of Nazi Germany

On January 30th, 1933, the Nazi regime came to power; Hitler became the chancellor of Germany. The Nazi regime very soon showed its real face by diminishing democracy in Germany, by glorifying war, and by threatening its weaker European neighbors. In October, 1933, Hitler's Nazi Germany withdrew from the Disarmament conference and from the League of Nations. On March 16th, 1935, Germany formally renounced the clauses of the Versailles Treaty concerning its disarmament, and openly announced that Germany would increase its army to 36 divisions. The rise of Nazi Germany had a very strong impact on the balance of power in Europe, and seriously hurt the United States' interests in Europe. So the relationship between the United States and Germany began to change. The United States' government had realized that the real purpose of Nazi was to control Europe, and farther more the whole world. Therefore with the growth of Hitler's increasing ambition of expanding German territory, the relationship between the United States and Germany became more and more subtle.

1.2 The formation of Rome-Berlin Axis

On Oct 2nd, 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia. In July, 1936, a rebellion led by Franco broke out in Spain. Nazi Germany and Italy immediately sent troops to Spain to help the rebels against the Republic of Spain. On October 24th, 1936, Nazi Germany and Italy signed an agreement to start a complete cooperation with each other. Germany recognized Italy's conquer of Ethiopia in return for economic concession. Hence, the Rome-Berlin Axis was formerly constituted. The following month Japan associated herself with the Axis by concluding anti-communist pacts with Germany and then with Italy. In the Far East, Japan used troop clashes at the Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937 as an excuse for her invasion of China. By the end of the month Japanese soldiers had seized Peking and Tientsin. Germany annexed Austria in March 1938,

2. The United States' neutral policy

2.1 The isolationism in America

"In the 1930s, isolationism became a kind of national secular religion in America." (Leuchlenburg, 1974, p.91). In the eyes of most American people, what was the best way to keep America out of war was the urgent question that the

Roosevelt administration had to answer. "Disillusionment with World War I not only strengthened the convictions of the isolationists but nourished a pacifist movement that won millions of supporters." (Leuchlenburg, 1974, p.91). Many American people were misled by Nazi Germany and believed that Versailles Treaty was an unfair treaty. So quite a lot of them showed sympathy for Nazi Germany and Italy, who, they thought, were just asking for enough living space for their people.

Under the pressure of domestic isolationists and pacifists, President Roosevelt was left with little room to adopt any actions against the expansion of Nazi Germany though he was clearly convinced that Hitler meant war. From 1933 to 1936, the United States was still suffering from the great depression of the 1930s, and at this time, Hitler's action still had not become a serious threat to the United States' interest in Europe, so Roosevelt administration had to attach prior importance on the American domestic affairs. Therefore the Roosevelt administration did not react to Hitler's actions of expansion actively, trying to immunize itself from Europe's quarrels. The government of the U.S. preferred a neutral policy toward Germany.

2.2 The neutral policy of the United States

After Italy invaded Ethiopia, on August 31st, 1935, the United States Congress passed its first Neutrality Act which stipulated an embargo on implements of war to belligerents. This act forbade American ships to carry munitions to nations at war and empowered the President at his discretion to deny protection to American citizens travelling on belligerent ships.

In July, 1936, when German and Italian troops intervened in Spain to help Franco against the Republic of Spain, the President of the United States decided a neutral policy toward Spain. In May 1937, the American Congress passed a new Neutrality Act which extended the arms embargo and the ban on loans to include civil conflict. However, fearing that a total embargo will harm American economy, the American Congress worked out a policy of "cash-and-carry" "which provided that once the President had proclaimed the existence of a state of war, no nonmilitary goods could be shipped to a belligerent until the purchaser acquired full title and took them away himself." (Harcourt, 1968, pp.713-714). As a matter of fact, this Act, instead of deterring the aggressor, deterred the victims. Leo Huberman (1947, pp.330-331) said, "We helped Franco. We helped him by continuing to export arms – to Germany and Italy – arms which were used by Franco to fight the legally constituted democratic government and to bomb and shoot women and children. In January, 1939, the President himself admitted that our policy had worked – in reverse. The aggressor, not the victim, had been aided."

3. President Roosevelt struggled to preserve world peace

3.1 The change of diplomatic balance in Europe and Far East

From the weakness of the United States and other western countries in the face of German and Italian aggression in Spain, Hitler and Mussolini had seen that they had little to fear when they launched their next offensive. By the end of 1936, the diplomatic situation in Europe was entirely different from what it had been when Hitler first came into office. The balance had been broken. Italy, Germany and Japan now had a working partnership. France had lost her former strong power and declined into a relatively isolated nation. Her old allies in Central Europe were departing her, while the new partnership with the Soviet Union was still far from reality. Likewise, the relationship between France and Britain was no longer close or trustful. Such change in diplomatic relations in Europe enabled the Rome-Berlin Axis to seize the initiative during the next three years and to score triumph after triumph with virtually no opposition. In the Far East, Japan used troop clashes at the Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937 as an excuse for her invasion of China. By the end of the month Japanese soldiers had seized Peking and Tientsin.

From the American point of view, the change of international situation, on one hand meant the danger of war; on the other hand, it might give her a good opportunity to emerge as the leader of the world. This is because that, for one thing, the expansion of Nazi Germany was a challenge to the United States' interests in Europe and a potential threat to her security; and for another, the target of the expansion of Nazi Germany was first directed at Britain and France, not the United States, leaving the United States a good opportunity to strengthen her influence over the world.

3.2 The United States' policy toward Europe

In the middle of 1930s, the main challenge that the United States faced came from Europe. Though, in July, 1937, Japan openly went to war against China and directly harmed the United States' interests in the Far East, the United States paid more attention on Nazi Germany. The Roosevelt administration didn't want to be a leader in solving the Far East crisis because, from the United States' point of view, its interests in Europe were much more important than its interests in the Far East.

Under the pressure of isolationists and because of the limits of Neutrality Acts, President Roosevelt had to declare openly for several times that the United States would not intervene in the European affairs. But he had been preparing a plan to preserve the world peace since 1936. By preserving the peace in the world, especially in Europe, and

restructuring the League of Nations, which was then dominated by Britain and France, President Roosevelt wanted to make the United States a leading force in the final settlement of the European crisis; thus solve the conflict between the United States and Germany, and then, to create a new order of powers which would be under the control of the United States.

3.3 Roosevelt's effort to preserve peace

President Roosevelt never gave up efforts to preserve peace in the world, especially in Europe because it was in the United States' interest. From 1936 to 1937, Roosevelt had made the following proposals to the leaders of the countries concerned, attempting to avoid war in Europe. He proposed to "give consideration to the possibility of the restoration of German colonies; meanwhile, providing a economic outlet to Germany in central and eastern Europe to prevent her from expanding for markets and economic resources; thereafter, on the condition of neither letting Germany achieve the hegemony in European continent nor being at war with her, to achieve the final settlement of the European crisis politically and economically." (MacDonald, 1981, p.14) and then "convene a conference of neutral nations to set forth a peace program based on certain standards of international behavior to solve European crisis." (Harcourt, 1968, p.715)

From what have been mentioned above, we can say that President Roosevelt's adopted a policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany in order to preserve peace in Europe. Roosevelt tempted to satisfy Nazi Germany's demand to some extent so that the United States' interests in Europe could be saved.

3.4 The reaction of Britain and Germany toward the Roosevelt's effort

However, preserving peace in Europe wasn't an easy job. It depended on the response of European countries. Because of the United States' domestic isolationism and economic problems, Roosevelt administration didn't want to intervene in European affairs directly by political means. If he wanted to preserve peace in Europe, he had to depend on the cooperation of Britain, Nazi Germany, Italy, and France, especially Britain and Germany. However, at that time, the relationship between the United States and Britain was not good. Britain did not trust the United States. Chamberlain suspected that the real purpose of Roosevelt's effort was to break the balance of power formed after the First World War and create a new one which was under the dominance of the United States. So Chamberlain preferred to deal with the Germany and Italian directly by himself, without the intervention of the United States. And by improving British relationship with Germany and Italy, Chamberlain wanted to preserve the balance of power which was in the interests of Britain. Thereafter, Chamberlain's policy of appeasement toward Germany excluded the United States. In January 1938, Roosevelt sent a letter to Chamberlain suggesting convening an international conference to discuss a peace program in Europe. "But the British prime minister, now wholly absorbed in the appeasement policy, briskly rejected the American initiative on the ground that it ran the danger of 'Cutting across our efforts here'." (Harcourt, 1968, p.715) Hitler didn't show much enthusiasm about Roosevelt's effort, either. His attention was focused on central and eastern Europe. He thought Britain and France were two countries that were the key elements in realizing his European dream. So he did not attach great importance on the relationship between Nazi Germany and the United States.

3.5 Roosevelt's insistence on preserving peace in Europe

The respond from Britain and Germany discouraged Roosevelt from keeping making his peace preserving effort. So in 1938, the United States took the policy of "watching the change" in Europe. But, as a matter of fact, Roosevelt did not really give up his effort. This is because the Roosevelt administration did not wish the balance of power to be so seriously broken as to harm the United States' interests. In September, 1938, when the Czech crisis deepened, Roosevelt made another try. On September 26th, 1938, Roosevelt sent telegram to the heads of Britain, France, Czechoslovakia, and Germany asking them to solve problem through negotiation. He said: "The traditional policy of the United States has been the furtherance of the settlement of international disputes by pacific means. It is my conviction that all people under the threat of war today pray that peace may be made before, rather than after, war." (Richard, 2005), and this "On behalf of the 130 millions of people of the United States of America and for the sake of humanity everywhere I most earnestly appeal to you not to break off negotiations looking to a peaceful, fair, and constructive settlement of the questions at issue. I earnestly repeat that so long as negotiations continue, differences may be reconciled." (Richard, 2005) And on September 27th, 1938, Roosevelt sent the following message to Hitler: "The two points I sought to emphasize were, first, that all matters of difference between the German Government and the Czechoslovak Government could and should be settled by pacific methods; and, second, that the threatened alternative of the use of force on a scale likely to result in a general war is as unnecessary as it is unjustifiable. It is, therefore, supremely important that negotiations should continue without interruption until a fair and constructive solution is reached. My conviction on these two points is deepened because responsible statesmen have officially stated that an agreement in principle has already been reached between the Government of the German Reich and the Government of Czechoslovakia, although the precise time, method and detail of carrying out that agreement remain at issue." (Richard, 2005)

Roosevelt wanted to solve the Czech crisis forever. However, both Britain and Germany, which were then standing on

the centre of the political stage of Europe, did not want the intervention of the United States. On September 29th, 1938, under the manipulation of Hitler and Chamberlain, the Munich settlement came into being.

End

Nazi Germany was the prim culprit who launched the Second World War. The United States was an economically strong country who had long wanted to be the leader of the whole world. The German expansion was sure to threaten the United States' most important political and economic interests in Europe. But because of the strong pressure of isolationism within its own country, plus the unprecedented economic crisis, and because there were still some contradictions among the United States, Britain, France and Soviet Union, the Roosevelt administration had limited measures to intervene in the European affairs. The United States government had to carry out a neutral policy toward Europe.

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