

BLITZKRIEG



The date: September 1, 1939

The place: Poland

The action: German armies attack Poland

This was a new kind of war. The Germans called it *blitzkrieg*, which means lightning war. Blitzkrieg meant speed and surprise-armies that traveled fast, and sudden death came from the skies. Luftwaffe bombers led the way. They smashed Polish cities and towns and destroyed supply lines and communications. *Stuka* bombers, often called “dive bombers,” dived low dropping bombs and gunning soldiers and civilians alike.

On the ground, German Panzer Divisions and motorized vehicles raced along Polish roads. Nazi troops, taking orders by radio and telephone, spread fire and death. Polish forces fought back bravely, but their guns and equipment were obsolete. The Polish army was outdated. It was a good army for World War I, but not against modern tactics with fast moving tanks. Polish soldiers on horses even charged the German tanks-and were wiped out.

On September 3, Britain and France declared war on Germany just a few days after the German invasion. But they were not much help to Poland. The Germans smashed the Polish army within weeks. Then the Russian armies moved in and grabbed eastern Poland. The Polish capital, Warsaw, fell on September 28 and the Poles surrendered. Hitler and his Russian ally, Joseph Stalin, divided the country between them.

To most Americans, the war still seemed a long way off. They weren't in any danger, they felt. Some Americans felt the U.S. should act to help Britain and France. The President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, wanted to help Britain and France. He was sure that the Axis Powers-Germany, Italy, and Japan planned to take over

all of Europe and Asia. He was worried and did not want the U.S. to sit back and let this happen. He said, "When you see a rattlesnake getting ready to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him."

Slowly, President Roosevelt got Congress to help in the fight against Hitler. First, Britain and France were allowed to buy U.S. ships and weapons through the Neutrality Act of 1939. Then, the President asked Congress for money to start building thousands of planes to strengthen the American Air Force. Before the war was over, Americans had built 296,000 planes.

In June of 1940, the Nazi blitzkrieg crushed France in only six weeks. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, exclaimed, "The Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin." Now, Roosevelt was really worried. Britain stood alone against Hitler's forces. If it were beaten, the U.S. would be without any friendly allies in Western Europe.

Although the U.S. was still officially neutral, the U.S. gave Britain 50 older ships called destroyers to help boost its fleet in September of 1940. In return, Britain allowed the U.S. to use naval bases in the West Indies. Then the U.S. began drafting men into the Army. It was America's first peacetime draft, but the President believed the country had to get ready to defend itself. Later, Roosevelt had another idea. Britain was going broke. It could not afford to pay the U.S. for weapons to continue the war effort. Roosevelt wanted to lend or lease ships and other war materials to Britain. Congress agreed. Soon American weapons and supplies were speeding across the Atlantic to Britain through the Lend-Lease Act.

In November of 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for President the third time. His Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie, was also "for Britain against Hitler." But some Republicans said that Roosevelt was leading the country into war. Some Democrats said that the Republicans wanted to go easy on Hitler. Willkie fought hard, but Roosevelt won easily. He was the first President to be elected for a third term.

By 1941, American factories were busy day and night turning out all kinds of weapons and other war materials. Our aim the President said, was to give Britain all help "short of war." But before long, the U.S. would be fighting, too.