

Roosevelt's World War II Lend-Lease Act: America's War Economy, US "Military Aid" to the Soviet Union

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The Lend-Lease Act, or "[An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States](#)," which was signed by President Roosevelt on March 11, 1941, gave the US president the right "to sell, transfer title to, exchange, lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of ... any defense article ... for the government of any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States." The term "any defense article" was understood to mean weapons, military equipment, munitions, strategic raw materials, ammunition, food, and civilian goods required by the army and homeland-defense forces, as well as any information of military significance.

The structure of the Lend-Lease Act required the recipient nation to meet a number of conditions:

- 1) payment is not required for any items that go missing or that are lost or destroyed during hostilities, but any property that survives and is suitable for civilian use must be paid for in full or in part, as repayment of a long-term loan granted by the US
- 2) military articles being stored in the recipient countries may remain there until the US requests their return
- 3), in turn, all leasees must assist the United States using all the resources and information in their possession

The Lend-Lease Act required countries requesting American assistance to provide the US with an exhaustive financial report. US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. was correct to recognize this requirement as something unprecedented in world affairs, claiming during a Senate Committee hearing that for the first time in history, one state and one government was willingly providing information to another about its own financial position.



President Roosevelt signs the Lend-Lease bill

With the help of the Lend-Lease Act, President Roosevelt's administration prepared to address a number of urgent issues, both foreign and domestic. First, its framework would make it possible to create new jobs in the US, which had not yet fully emerged from the extreme economic crisis of 1929-1933. Second, the Lend-Lease Act made it possible for the American government to exert a certain degree of influence over the countries on the

receiving end of the lend-lease assistance. And third, by sending his allies weapons, goods, and raw materials, but not boots on the ground, President Roosevelt was able to stay true to his campaign promise, in which he pledged, “Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.”

The lend-lease system was in no way designed to aid the USSR. The British were the first to request military assistance on the basis of this special leasing relationship (which was similar to an operating lease) at the end of May 1940, at a time when France’s crushing defeat had left Great Britain with no military allies on the European continent. London asked Washington for 40-50 “old” destroyers, offering three payment options: getting them for free, paying in cash, or leasing. President Roosevelt quickly accepted the third option, and that transaction was completed in late summer of 1940.

At that point, staffers inside the US Treasury Department came up with the idea of taking the concept behind that private deal and extending it to apply to all intergovernmental relations. The War and Navy Departments were brought in to help develop the lend-lease bill, and on Jan. 10, 1941 the US presidential administration brought that act for consideration before both houses of Congress, where it was approved on March 11. Plus, in September 1941, after much debate the US Congress approved what was known as the Victory Program, the essence of which, according to US military historians (Richard Leighton and Robert Coakley), was that “America’s contribution to the war would be in weapons, not armies.”



US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (R) meets with Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov (L) in the United States in 1942.

On Oct. 1, 1941, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov, British Minister of Supply Lord Beaverbrook, and US Special Envoy Averell Harriman signed the First (Moscow) Protocol, which marked the beginning of the expansion of the lend-lease program to the Soviet Union. Several additional protocols were subsequently signed.

How important was the US lend-lease?

During the war, Soviet factories produced more than 29.1 million small arms of all major types, while only 152,000 small arms (0.5% of the total) were manufactured by American, British, and Canadian plants. Looking at all types of artillery systems of all calibers we see a similar picture – 647,600 Soviet weapons and mortars vs. 9,400 of foreign origin, representing less than 1.5% of the total.

The numbers are less grim for other types of weapons: the ratio of domestic vs. allied tanks and self-propelled artillery was, respectively, 132,800 vs. 11,900 (8.96%), and for combat aircraft – 140,500 vs. 18,300 (13%).

Out of the almost \$46 billion that was spent on all lend-lease aid, the US allocated only \$9.1 billion, i.e., only a little more than 20% of the funds, to the Red Army, which defeated the vast majority of the divisions from Germany and her military satellites.

During that time the British Empire was given more than \$30.2 billion, France – \$1.4 billion, China – \$630 million, and even Latin America (!) received \$420 million. Lend-lease supplies were distributed to 42 different countries.



South American bomber A-20 “Boston» (Douglas A-20 Havoc/DB-7 Boston), crashed at the airport in Nome (Nome) in Alaska during the distillation in the Soviet Union under the Lend-Lease.

But perhaps, despite the fact that the quantities of transatlantic assistance were fairly negligible, is it possible that it did play a decisive role in 1941, when the Germans were at the very gates of Moscow and Leningrad, and within 24-40 km from the Red Square?

Let’s look at the statistics for arms shipments from that year. From the onset of the war until the end of 1941, the Red Army received 1.76 million rifles, automatic weapons, and machine guns, 53,700 artillery and mortars, 5,400 tanks, and 8,200 warplanes. Of these, our allies in the anti-Hitler coalition supplied only 82 artillery weapons (0.15%), 648 tanks (12.14%), and 915 airplanes (10.26%). In addition, much of the military equipment that was sent – in particular, 115 of the 466 tanks manufactured in the UK – did not even make it to the front in the first year of the war.

If we convert these shipments of arms and military equipment into their monetary equivalent, then, according to the well-known historian Mikhail Frolov, DSc (*Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voina 1941-1945 v Nemetskoj Istoriografii*. [Great Patriotic War 1941-1945 in German historiography], St. Petersburg: 1994), “up until the end of 1941 – the most difficult period for the Soviet state – under the Lend-Lease Act, the US sent the USSR materials worth \$545,000, out of the \$741 million worth of supplies shipped to all the countries that were part of the anti-Hitler coalition. This means that during this extraordinarily difficult period, less than 0.1% of America’s aid went to the Soviet Union.

“In addition, the first lend-lease shipments during the winter of 1941-1942 reached the USSR very late, although during those critical months Russia was able to put up an impressive fight against the German aggressors all on her own, without any assistance to speak of from the democracies of the West. By the end of 1942 only 55% of the scheduled deliveries had made it to the USSR.”

For example, in 1941 the United States promised to send 600 tanks and 750 aircraft, but actually sent only 182 and 204, respectively.



PQ-17 defeat

In November 1942, i.e., at the height of the battle for the Caucasus and [Stalingrad](#), the arms deliveries practically came to a complete halt. Disruptions in shipments had already begun in the summer of 1942, when German aircraft and submarines almost entirely wiped out the infamous Convoy PQ 17 that was abandoned (at the order of the Admiralty) by the British destroyers assigned to escort it. Tragically only 11 of the original 35 ships arrived safely into

Soviet ports – a catastrophe that was used as a pretext to suspend subsequent convoys from Britain until September 1942.

A new convoy, the PQ 18, lost 10 of its 37 vessels along its route, and another convoy was not sent until mid-December 1942. Thus, for three and a half months, when one of the most decisive battles of the entire Second World War was being waged on the Volga, fewer than 40 ships carrying lend-lease cargo arrived intermittently in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. For this reason, many were understandably suspicious that London and Washington were spending that time just waiting to see who would be left standing after the battle of Stalingrad.

As a result, between 1941 and 1942 only 7% of the wartime cargo shipped from the US made it to the Soviet Union. The bulk of the weapons and other materials arrived in the Soviet Union in 1944-1945, once the winds of war had decisively shifted.

What was the quality of the lend-lease military equipment?

Out of the 711 fighter planes that had arrived in the USSR from the UK by the end of 1941, 700 were hopelessly antiquated models such as the Kittyhawk, Tomahawk, and Hurricane, which were significantly inferior to the German Messerschmitts and the Soviet Yakolev Yaks, both in speed and agility, and were not even equipped with guns. Even if a Soviet pilot managed to get a German flying ace positioned in the sights of his machine gun, those rifle-caliber guns were often completely useless against the German plane's rugged armor. As for the newest Airacobra fighter planes, only 11 were delivered in 1941. And the first Airacobra arrived in the Soviet Union disassembled, without any sort of documentation, having already long outlived its service life.



Bell P-39Q Airacobra

Incidentally, this was also the case with the two squadrons of Hurricane fighters that were armed with 40-mm tank guns designed to engage German armored vehicles. But these fighter planes turned out to be so completely useless that they sat out the war mothballed in the USSR because no Red Army pilots could be found willing to fly them.

A similar situation was observed with the much-vaunted British light Valentine tanks that Soviet tank operators nicknamed "Valentinas," and the medium Matilda tanks, for which those tank operators reserved a more scathing epithet: "Farewell to Our Homeland." Their thin armor, highly-flammable gasoline-powered engines, and positively prehistoric transmissions made them easy prey for German gunners and grenade launchers.

According to Valentin Berezhkov, an interpreter for Joseph Stalin who took part in all the negotiations between Soviet leaders and Anglo-American visitors, Stalin was often deeply offended by British actions such as offering obsolete aircraft like the Hurricane as lend-lease handouts, instead of newer fighters like the Spitfire. Moreover, in September 1942, in a conversation with Wendell Willkie, a leader in the US Republican Party, Stalin asked him point-blank in front of the American and British ambassadors, William Standley and Archibald Clark Kerr: why were the British and American governments supplying such poor-quality equipment to the Soviet Union?

He explained that he was primarily speaking of shipments of American P-40s instead of the much more up-to-date Airacobras, and added that the British were providing completely unsuitable Hurricane fighters, which were far inferior to what the Germans had. Stalin claimed that once when the Americans were preparing to ship 150 Airacobras to the Soviet Union, the British had intervened and kept them for themselves. "We know that the Americans and British have planes that are equal to or better than the German models, but for some reason many of those are not making it into the Soviet Union."

The American ambassador, Admiral Standley, knew nothing about this, but the British ambassador, Archibald Clark Kerr, admitted that he was aware of the Airacobra event, but he defended their redirection with the excuse that in British hands those fighters would be much more valuable to their common Allied cause than if they ended up in the Soviet Union...

[To be continued...](#)



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