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# Embargoes in Historical Perspective

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Much of the analysis in open sources has been extremely optimistic about whether the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations against Iraq could have succeeded. Many analysts believe that the embargo eventually would have weakened Iraq, compelling Baghdad to accede to the UN's wishes without the necessity for armed intervention by Kuwait's allies. Operation Desert Storm launched by the multinational forces against Iraq in the early morning hours of 16 January 1991 has made a complete test of the embargo impossible. Historical experience, however, suggests that optimistic assumptions concerning the embargo may not be valid. Most blockades and embargoes have failed to force an opponent to yield, and states establishing an embargo—in an attempt to make it more effective—have been drawn on some occasions toward an undesirable strategy or course of action that otherwise may not have been chosen. To make matters more complicated, the effects of an embargo or the threat of an effective embargo have sometimes triggered acts of desperation from a state that believed it had no alternative.

Thus, history suggests that the United Nations' embargo would not have reduced Iraq's will to resist, particularly over a short period, and would not have compelled Hussein to leave Kuwait docilely. Instead, the embargo may have pulled the United States and its allies in unanticipated directions or may have contributed to Hussein's choosing an aggressive or radical action such as the surprise use of chemical weapons.

## *Leaking Embargoes*

Though used frequently throughout history, embargoes or blockades have provided very uneven results. Economic sanctions have achieved the most success when the goals of the state imposing them have been modest and have achieved notably less effective results when the goals have been ambitious.<sup>1</sup> As

the historian Frederic Smoler pointed out recently, embargoes have not always forced a belligerent to yield, even when they have had significant effects on its economy.<sup>2</sup>

For example, while the Union naval blockade of the Confederate States during the American Civil War had a devastating effect on the South's economy, it did not weaken the South's war effort as much as is sometimes thought. The Union blockade sharply curtailed the South's importation of manufactured goods and caused severe inflation. The most ruinous effect was on the export of Confederate cotton, which fell from 2.8 million bales during the 11 months from September 1860 to August 1861 (when the blockade was actually established), to some 400,000 bales during the remainder of the war.<sup>3</sup>

While this extreme disruption of the South's economy was occurring, significant amounts of military materiel managed to slip through the Union naval forces. During the six months preceding December 1864, the Confederate seaports of Charleston, South Carolina, and Wilmington, North Carolina, alone received from Europe over 500,000 pairs of shoes, 300,000 blankets, 3.5 million pounds of meat, 1.5 million pounds of lead, 2 million pounds of saltpeter, 50,000 rifles, and 43 cannons, plus large amounts of other essential items.<sup>4</sup> The South imported numerous other items during the war, including more than 60 percent of its total weapons, one-third of the lead required for its bullets, and three-fourths of the saltpeter required for its gunpowder. The Union naval blockade of the Confederate States was, therefore, of limited success. In a recent study of Southern blockade running, Stephen R. Wise concluded: "The Confederate soldiers had the equipment and food needed to meet their adversaries. . . . Defeat did not come from the lack of material; instead the Confederacy simply no longer had the manpower to resist, and the nation collapsed."<sup>5</sup>

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Another embargo that failed, but for different reasons, was that imposed upon Italy during the Abyssinian crisis of 1935.<sup>6</sup> After Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935, 50 of the 54 members of the League of Nations agreed to embargo exports to Italy of arms, rubber, iron ore, and important metals. The League's members also agreed to prohibit Italian imports and to provide her no loans or credits. Despite these sanctions, other important commodities—especially oil, pig iron, steel, and coal—were not banned from export to Italy, primarily because of the unwillingness of the British and French to tighten the economic noose further. Moreover, supplies continued to flow to Italy from Germany. Though the League considered imposing an oil embargo, sanctions were finally abandoned in 1936 when it became clear that Abyssinia could not be saved and that League members were unwilling to take the more assertive step of placing oil and other key materials on the list of embargoed items.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the embargo failed because self interests prevailed over collective interests. The end of sanctions against Italy marked a severe weakening of the League's influence in international affairs.

Similarly, the Allied blockade in World War II failed to drive Germany to her knees even though it severely disrupted her economy. Shortly after the war began, the Allies recognized that a blockade would deprive Germany of essential war supplies, and they quickly closed the North Sea to all enemy shipping. Within weeks the vast majority of Germany's overseas trading had been halted by the Allies, particularly by the Royal Navy.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the Germans continued to receive raw materials and food, and their economy continued to produce sufficient equipment and supplies for the war effort. Until the eve of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, important grain and petroleum supplies came from that source,<sup>9</sup> and after the invasion raw materials and goods continued to flow into Germany from the areas under Berlin's immediate control and from nearby neutral nations. Even the massive strategic bombing offensives by the Allies failed to choke off the expanding German economy, which did not reach maximum levels of production until the autumn of 1944.<sup>10</sup>

The most important reasons for the blockade's having fallen so far short of the high hopes placed on it have been offered by Alan S. Millward, who has pointed out that the "tools" for implementing the blockade were not as "efficient" as envisaged.<sup>11</sup> The Germans proved to be exceptionally adept at developing synthetic substitutes for those items—such as oil—that were curbed. Synthetics provided 32 percent of Germany's total oil supplies in 1940 and 47 percent in 1944.<sup>12</sup> Even after weaknesses in the German economy—such as the shortage of oil—were discovered, the Allies failed to focus sufficient effort on these weaknesses to compound their effect. Of 509,206 tons of Allied bombs dropped by May 1944, only 5670 tons (or 1.1 percent) were directed against German petroleum targets.<sup>13</sup> Another factor in the Nazis'

favor was that they recognized their vulnerability and accumulated large stores of strategic materials. Finally, the German economy and the international economy proved to be far more complex than initially recognized by Allied planners. Most notably, international trade continued despite the division of most of the world into two armed camps, and the Germans continued to receive small but important supplies. Thus, despite a strong blockade and a heavy bombing campaign, the German economy continued to produce or obtain critical war supplies until the very end. Perhaps the most important effect of the blockade and the strategic bombing campaign was that it caused the Germans to divert resources into air defenses and to disperse their factories and means of production, thus preventing their arms production from being even greater than it was.<sup>14</sup>

Other instances abound. During the two World Wars, the Germans attempted to restrict the flow of food into Great Britain, but despite shortages the British war effort in both instances remained essentially unscathed. When the United States established an embargo in 1973 on the export of wheat to the Soviet Union, the main result was greater sales by Canada and Australia.<sup>15</sup> Other recent embargoes, such as those against Rhodesia, South Africa, and Cuba, have also had limited effect. As Professor Smoler has noted, "Greediness, neediness, misplaced loyalty, and fear make embargoes and blockades leak."<sup>16</sup>

### *Sealing a Leaking Embargo*

When embargoes begin to leak, leaders of the imposing side may decide to seal the leaks, even though preventing or sealing leaks can become an extraordinarily onerous task. Ultimately, they may find themselves in a worse situation than when they established the embargo. An example occurred during the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Following the declaration of war against the British by the French National Convention in 1793, the British blockaded France and her allies. Since the area under the control of France and her allies permitted her to remain self-sufficient in food and armaments, Great Britain did not attempt to destroy her enemy by starvation or by depriving her of essential war-making goods. Rather, her objective was to weaken France's economy and reduce her commerce and shipping by chasing the French merchant marine from the high seas.<sup>17</sup> By doing this, Great Britain sought simply to reduce the war-making powers of France and to improve her own position in the world's markets.

Partially in response to Great Britain's blockade and the near total destruction of the French fleet by the British at Trafalgar in 1805, Napoleon established the Continental System in November 1806. His system was essentially a countervailing "landward continental blockade against British commerce."<sup>18</sup> By preventing Great Britain from exporting her goods to the continent, Napoleon sought to increase France's economic influence throughout Europe and

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to weaken Great Britain's commerce, credit, and revenues. He believed that the Continental System could enable Europe—under the hegemony of France—to become economically more powerful and self-sufficient, thereby enabling France to expand her influence at the expense of Great Britain.

The ineffectiveness of Napoleon's Continental System can be demonstrated by an assessment of Great Britain's imports and exports during this period. Between 1808 and 1809 British domestic exports to northern Europe increased from £2.2 million to £5.7 million, and exports of colonial produce rose from £3.3 million to £8.9 million.<sup>19</sup> During the first few years of the Continental System, agricultural production in Great Britain, especially of wheat, was very good, but a series of poor harvests, starting in 1809, required huge wheat imports. In 1810, Great Britain's wheat imports reached a record high figure of 12.5 million bushels, with 1.8 million bushels being imported, ironically, from France. Throughout the Napoleonic wars, the import of raw cotton and export of cotton products remained a major component of Britain's industrial economy. During the period 1803-1806, immediately preceding the imposition of the Continental System, imports of raw cotton averaged 58.4 million pounds per year; in the period 1807-1812 cotton imports averaged 83.1 million pounds per year, an increase of 42 percent. Exports of cotton goods during 1803-1806 averaged £8.2 million in value per year, and increased to £14.3 million per year during 1807-1812.<sup>20</sup> Napoleon's Continental System was thus very unsuccessful in its attempts to instigate Great Britain's internal economic collapse.

Even though difficulties existed with both the British blockade and the French Continental System from the moment they were established, the problems were most serious for the French, leading Napoleon into several disastrous military campaigns. To ensure that British goods could not be brought into Europe, Napoleon was drawn into bloody fighting on the Iberian Peninsula from 1808 to 1813 and into the fateful invasion of Russia in June 1812. His decision to invade Russia occurred after Russia formally withdrew from the Continental System in December 1810 and resumed commercial relations with Great Britain. This action infuriated Napoleon, who saw it as a challenge to his authority and prestige. In June 1812 he led his *Grande Armée* into the vast spaces of the east. Of the more than 600,000 troops who followed Napoleon into Russia, fewer than 100,000 returned.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, maintaining the “landward continental blockade” drew Napoleon into a series of subsequent decisions and campaigns that he undoubtedly never envisaged when the original decision was made. Had he foreseen the difficulties of the Iberian Campaign and the Russian invasion, he may never have established the Continental System.

### *Choosing a Desperate Course of Action*

In those cases when an embargo is effective or appears to have the potential to be effective, a state suffering from the embargo may adopt a radical strategy and embark on a desperate course of action. Forced to choose between the slow strangulation of their country or an extremely risky operation, leaders have sometimes chosen seemingly undesirable alternatives. Viewed most positively, this could be considered an indicator of an embargo’s success, for the selection of a radical alternative has usually pushed the embargoed country down a disastrous path. On the other hand, reckless actions clearly raise the stakes for all belligerents, and their outcomes cannot be predicted with certainty.

An example can be found during World War I, when the Allied embargo created conditions that led German leaders to launch the unrestricted U-boat campaign of 1917 and the desperate spring offensive of 1918. The blockade, which began on 20 August 1914, quickly reduced the supply of important items normally shipped to and from Germany.<sup>22</sup> Partially as a response to the British blockade, the Germans launched their own blockade and began, in October 1914, the indiscriminate laying of mines on the high seas and the mining of the entrances to Allied commercial harbors and naval bases. In February 1915 the Germans initiated their first submarine warfare campaign on commercial vessels, and the British reacted the following month by expanding their embargo and bringing into British ports any goods for which the destination, ownership, or origin was presumed to be hostile.<sup>23</sup> In March 1915, the British added food to the list of contraband materials, and thus the naval blockade of Germany became total. Although Germany began achieving success with her U-boats against British shipping, the sinking of several ships which carried American citizens outraged the United States, which threatened to hold Berlin to “strict accountability” for its violation of American neutrality rights. Germany saw no choice in September 1915 but to abandon unrestricted submarine warfare.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the effects of the blockade began to strangle Germany’s economy and war-making effort. She was dependent on imports of food, fats, oils, and chemicals such as nitrates. As vital war-making goods became scarce or unavailable, German scientists developed substitute materials to take the place of supplies unavailable to the German war economy. Due to a lack of imported fertilizers, however, the yields of German harvests diminished

greatly. The wheat harvest fell from 4.4 million tons in 1913 to under 3 million tons in 1916, and the rye harvest also fell sharply, from 11.2 million tons in 1913 to 8.9 million tons in 1916.<sup>25</sup> In addition to price controls, two meatless days a week were decreed, and a system of rationing was established. The winter of 1916-1917 became known as the "turnip winter" because German citizens were required to eat turnips which were usually fed to cattle.

The civilian German population suffered severely, with well over 50 food riots occurring at different locations throughout Germany in 1916. One analyst has attributed to the blockade the deaths of more than 750,000 German civilians during the war.<sup>26</sup> As the huge losses and costs of the war mounted, and as the pressure of decreasing food supplies took its toll, war weariness intensified among the public. German leaders soon concluded that desperate actions were necessary if Germany was to achieve victory before she was completely paralyzed by the blockade.<sup>27</sup>

As German leaders considered the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, they recognized that the United States would probably be brought into the war, but they chose to risk American intervention in exchange for the use of a strategic weapon they believed could provide victory. In January 1917, Germany notified the United States and the Allies of the resumption of unrestricted submarine attacks, and after several attacks on American ships, the United States declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917. Despite huge losses in Allied shipping, Great Britain continued her important role in the war, and thousands of American soldiers soon began disembarking in France. To the dismay of German leaders, the use of convoys and other defensive measures by the Allies prevented the U-boat campaign from achieving decisive results.

The worsening strategic situation encouraged the German High Command to undertake a great offensive on the western front in the spring of 1918. General Erich Ludendorff believed that Germany had to achieve a major victory and thus force the Allied powers to recognize that continuing the war offered no chance of success, even if the Americans were beginning to arrive. He concluded that there was no alternative except to launch a final desperate offensive with the hope that a great victory would quiet the despair in the German population.<sup>28</sup> The 1918 offensives failed, however, as huge numbers of American soldiers arrived to participate in the final Allied counteroffensives. An exhausted Germany surrendered in November 1918, months earlier than some of the Allies' most optimistic forecasts. Thus, through a series of unforeseen ripple effects, the German gamble to overcome the embargo yielded ultimate disaster rather than success.

The American embargo against Japan on the eve of World War II also seems to have stimulated a radical strategic choice on the part of Tokyo. The conflict between the United States and Japan in the Pacific was rooted in the



juxtaposition of their interests and in Japan's pursuit of what was called the "New Order in East Asia" or the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." Tensions between the United States and Japan steadily increased in the late 1930s until the United States began in July 1940 to limit the export of selected strategic materials to Japan—scrap iron, steel, and most oil products. After the Japanese announced in July 1941 the establishment of a protectorate over Indochina, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order freezing all Japanese assets in the United States and cutting off all exports of oil to Japan.<sup>29</sup> The Japanese depended on the United States for more than half of their imported oil, and their situation was worsened by the quick agreement of the British and Dutch to support the freeze and the embargo. The Japanese came to view themselves—to use the analogy of Robert H. Ferrell—as a patient who was certain to die if nothing was done, but one who could be "saved by a dangerous operation."<sup>30</sup>

By depriving Japan of her vital oil supplies and metals, the United States and her allies placed Japan in the position of having to choose between fighting for additional oil reserves or abandoning her scheme for a "New Order" in the Pacific. B. H. Liddell Hart has said that the future allies recognized that their action would "force Japan to fight."<sup>31</sup> Just as she had begun her wars in 1894, 1904, and 1914 without a formal declaration of hostilities, Japan attacked American naval forces at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 without warning, inflicting an unprecedented naval disaster on her opponent. Though blockades or embargoes do not always result in an act of recklessness or miscalculation of such apocalyptic consequences, Japan in this case faced the specter of serious materiel shortages.<sup>32</sup> She thus chose a desperate option rather than the abandonment of her grandiose scheme.

In his important work on Pearl Harbor, Gordon W. Prange searched for an explanation for the success of the Japanese surprise attack. While crediting the Japanese for the excellent preparation and execution of their plan, and while acknowledging the Americans' general awareness of the imminence of hostilities, he found nonetheless a "fundamental" American disbelief in the likelihood of a bold Japanese strike. He concluded, "Pearl Harbor demonstrated one enduring lesson: The unexpected can happen and often does."<sup>33</sup>

### *To Sum Up*

The experience of the past thus clearly suggests that blockades or embargoes do not always produce the results originally sought when the decision for action was made. In those cases such as the American South during the Civil War or Germany during World War II, a blockade may leak, or a belligerent may have access to sufficient goods in the area under its own control. History also indicates the improbability of conducting an embargo

that has an immediate effect or attains decisive results by itself within a few months. In particular, the case of Germany during World War I demonstrates that some nations may suffer terribly from a blockade and still continue to resist. One recent study concluded that embargoes with ambitious goals require an average of nearly two years to achieve success.<sup>34</sup> And as a state becomes frustrated with the lack of progress its embargo has imposed on an opponent, its efforts to increase the effectiveness of the embargo—as illustrated by Napoleon's efforts to maintain the Continental System—may also lead to unanticipated results.

On the other side of the equation, shortages or suffering inflicted by an effective embargo, or the threat of such effects, may trigger an act of desperation. As the noose tightens on a state's economy, the victim may pursue a highly risky course of action—such as Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare or Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor—that it otherwise would not have hazarded. While it is true that the consequences of such actions may well be disastrous for the state that makes the gamble, it is also true that the costs will likely be much greater for all concerned. That an opponent could be driven to an act of desperation by an embargo is arguably a sign of the embargo's potency, but it must be borne in mind that the fruits may also be an escalation of the conflict in undesirable and unpredictable ways. Today, with the proliferation of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, any such escalation could be extremely problematic if not outright dangerous.

The study of the past, however, is not like gazing into a crystal ball, for history provides us insights, not firm and precise visions of the future. Consequently, history does *not* demonstrate conclusively that the United Nations' embargo against Iraq would have failed, that the United States would have taken unwise action to increase its effectiveness, or that Iraq would have lunged out in an unanticipated act of desperation. Given the tightness of the sanctions and the breadth of international support for their continuance, it is conceivable that the embargo may have induced Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait or weakened his dictatorial control over Iraq. Nevertheless, historical experience argues against overly optimistic assertions that the United Nations' embargo would have succeeded. It also argues for the prudent maintenance of military readiness to provide a hedge against an embargoed state's resort to rashness and irrationality. Above all, historical experience suggests that embargoes may include actions or reactions that are neither orderly nor predictable and that they are not simple, safe, and controllable substitutes for war.

#### NOTES

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5. Wise, pp. 7, 226.
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