

Nicholas, Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2022. Hardback. xiv + 434 pages.

The Economic Weapon investigates the emergence of trade and credit sanctions as a key instrument of international coercion through the two world wars. Nicholas Mulder, an assistant professor of history at Cornell University, organizes his book chronologically. Chapters 1 to 3 review the origins of sanctions in the blockades of World War I and the postwar settlement that gave rise to the League of Nations. The middle chapters, numbered 4 to 6, cover the period from the resumption of Allied trade with Russia (1921) to Japan's invasion of Manchuria (1931). In this period, sanctions were institutionalized as the League's first line of defence against aggressive war. Finally, Chapters 7 to 10 review the failure of the League as Japan, Italy, and Germany turned to full scale aggression. The culmination of that story was World War II and the creation of the United Nations, once again committed to peaceful conflict resolution with sanctions in the first line of defence.

The book's evidence base is the author's research in the archives of half a dozen countries, supported by a large secondary literature. The argumentation is fluent, accessible, and largely persuasive.

Several issues that are of more than purely historical interest run through the book. Are sanctions a tool of war avoidance or (as the book's title suggests) a tool of war? What rights can neutral countries aspire to in a world of sanctions? When used, do sanctions defend the weak or privilege the strong? Can they serve equally the many purposes to which they are now applied? How do sanctions work, how do political actors think they work, and if a gap emerges between reality and beliefs, does it matter? If unintended and perverse effects are frequent, why don't we learn to expect them? As a work of history, the book does not provide bullet-point answers, but it does show how the questions arose and the given answers evolved over the first half of the twentieth century.

The Economic Weapon sheds light on the power of sanctions from many angles. The generation of world leaders that had experienced World War I emerged convinced of the deadly, if gradual, effects of blockade. Sanctions appeared to be more powerful when the protagonists were unequal in size. Because of this bias, sanctions could be portrayed as a weapon of the strong against the weak. The leaders of the rising powers, Germany, Italy, Japan, and to some extent also Russia, wished to revise what they saw as the unjust frontiers of postwar Europe and the unjust division of African and Asian colonies among the established powers. But the established powers were strong in the present, while the rising powers planned to be strong in the future. They expected their efforts to

upend the international order to be faced with sanctions and blockades, which must therefore be neutralized somehow. The means they chose included industrial policies to reduce dependence on imported war materials, the focusing of aggression on territories that could supply the food and fuel that they lacked, and military policies to provide quick victories and avoid protracted struggles. In short, Mulder shows, the fear of sanctions did not pacify them or reconcile them to the existing international order. Instead, it shaped their warlike strategies and helped to decide the timing and the opening battles of World War II.

Given the formative influence of World War I, I looked for Mulder to evaluate the effects of the Allied blockade on the outcomes of the war, or at least to synthesize the investigations of others. The answer the book provides is roughly as follows. In World War I, the Allied blockade eventually killed close to a million Germans and Turks by hunger (pp. 5, 57); loss of trade with the Central Powers helped plunged Russia into revolution (p. 56). Yet, although the effects were terrible, the Allied blockade played only a “supporting role” in the outcome of the war (p. 80). This account does not adequately disentangle the effects of blockade on fighting power and civilian conditions from the effects of combat, mobilization, and countermeasures. In the same context the failure of the German submarine blockade to impose starvation on the British Isles should be puzzling, and the seminal work of Mançur Olson (cited only in passing) could have pointed to a solution. As for the main innovation of World War II, strategic bombing is described as an “accelerator” that “aggravated” naval blockades (p. 270). While these are plausible metaphors, by how much or through what channels are not considered.

The Economic Weapon takes a broad approach. It usefully discusses the paradox of liberal internationalism: for the sake of curbing aggression, the strongest supporters of the rule of law became most committed to measures that would override civilian property rights and the rights of neutral countries. Some resolved the paradox by preferring “positive sanctions”—that is, economic and military aid to the victims of aggression (p. 153). Positive sanctions, Mulder notes, found their fullest expression in United States Lease-Lease aid to Britain and the Soviet Union during World War II (p. 206). Also of note is the logical implication that aid to the victims should be understood as an analogue of sanctions on the perpetrators, but with the opposite sign.

Other notable topics include the interwar cases where the threat of sanctions worked—against Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece (p. 151), and Spain (p. 268) and the reasons for their failure against Italy (p. 222); the various popular movements for sanctions “from below” in the form of consumer boycotts and strikes to impede the trade of countries that caused outrage to popular opinion (p. 201); and “currency draining” versus “resource

draining” sanctions (p. 203), overlapping with the distinction between sanctions for deterrence and for attrition (p. 212).

In today’s era of “endless sanctions,” *The Economic Weapon* will be of great interest to general readers as well as scholars and students in many disciplines. For topics in twentieth century economic history, it provides essential context.

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