

JULY 1938

SURVEY

OF

CURRENT BUSINESS



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
BUREAU OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC COMMERCE
WASHINGTON

VOLUME 18

NUMBER 7

Economic Conditions

during the first 6 months of 1938 were less favorable than in 1937. The unfavorable trend was reflected in a continued recession in the national income, but the rate of decline showed definite signs of slackening after January of this year. The decline in primary business activity since December has been relatively moderate, in contrast to the abrupt curtailment in the final months of 1937. A review of business developments in the first half of 1938 is presented on page 3.

Toward the end of the second quarter some of the more sensitive business indicators turned upward. Stock prices rallied sharply and sensitive commodity prices were bid up. Government expenditures, which are expected to have a stimulating effect on numerous lines, were being pushed toward the end of the period under review. The resumption of the forward movement in construction activity was one of the brighter spots in the general business picture.

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SURVEY OF CURRENT BUSINESS

JULY 1938

Prepared in the
DIVISION OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH

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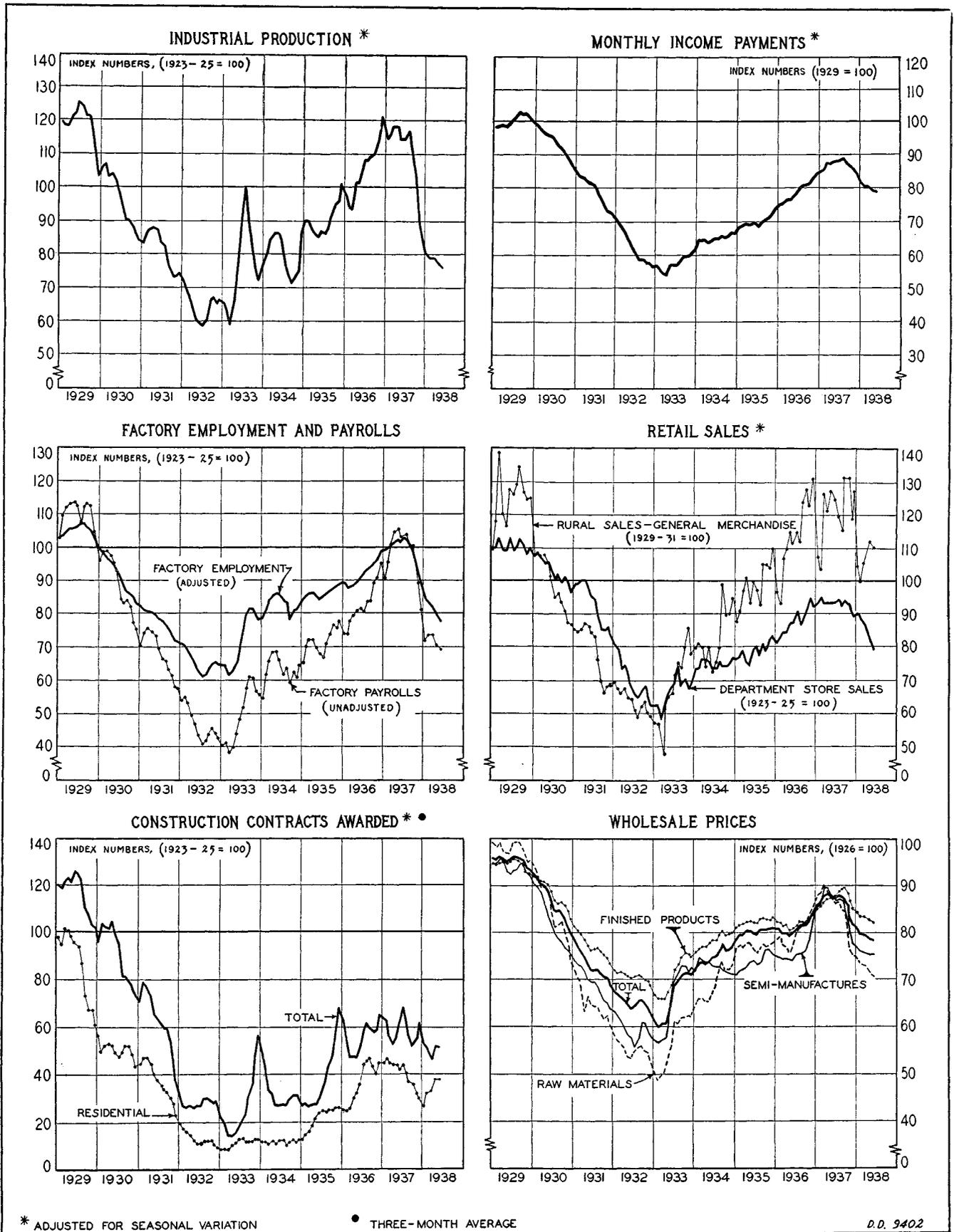
CONTENTS

CHARTS AND SUMMARIES		SPECIAL ARTICLE	
	Page		Page
Business indicators.....	2	Review of business conditions in the first half of 1938.....	3
Summary of business trends in June.....	13		
Commodity prices.....	14		
Domestic trade.....	15		
Employment.....	16		
Finance.....	17		
Foreign trade.....	18		
Construction and real estate.....	19		
Transportation.....	20		
		STATISTICAL DATA	
		Weekly business statistics through June 25.....	21
		Monthly business statistics.....	22
		General index.....	Inside back cover

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Business Indicators



Review of Business Conditions in the First Half of 1938

By Walter F. Crowder, Division of Economic Research

FURTHER deterioration in general economic conditions occurred in the first half of 1938, deepening and broadening the recession movement in progress since the late summer of 1937. The unfavorable trend was reflected in a continued recession in the national income, but the rate of decline showed definite signs of slackening after January of this year. The decline in primary business activity since December has been relatively moderate, in contrast to the abrupt curtailment in the final months of 1937. The contraction, however, has gradually extended to lines that usually show a lag during periods of recession. Consumer purchases, which declined only moderately during the final quarter of 1937, were substantially reduced in the January-June period. Industrial production, employment, and railroad freight traffic, on the other hand, declined only moderately, following the precipitous drop in the late months of 1937. Unemployment, which had been steadily reduced up to the fall of 1937, increased materially during the past 9 months. Construction contracts underwent a sharp curtailment between June 1937 and February 1938, but more recently the gain in both public and private operations has lifted building activity to approximately the average level prevailing in 1936 and 1937.

The trend of commodity prices was toward moderately lower levels during the first 6 months of the year. The downward movement, however, was apparently checked in the final weeks of June. Stock prices moved irregularly lower throughout most of the period, and bond prices, especially second-grade issues and railroads, evidenced further marked weakness. Stock prices moved upward at a rather rapid rate toward the end of the second quarter.

National Income Lower.

Monthly income payments have declined uninterruptedly so far during 1938, extending the downward movement which began late last summer. The seasonally adjusted index of total income payments in May was off 11 percent from the recovery peak of 88.6 (1929=100) in August 1937, according to the monthly index of income payments compiled by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. Total income payments for the first 5 months of 1938 were \$25,389,000,000, approximately 7 percent less than the \$27,279,000,000 estimate for the corresponding period of 1937. The margin of decline has widened as the year has progressed; income payments in May were 10 percent lower than those in May 1937, while the first quarter

of this year they averaged 5.4 percent less than a year earlier.

Labor income during the first 5 months of 1938 was 8.4 percent lower than in the comparable months of 1937. The decline from a year ago has been pronounced in the commodity-producing industries—manufacturing, mining, and construction—in which wages and salaries were down about one-fifth. Payments in the transportation and public-utility group dropped 7 percent, reflecting primarily the reduction in railroad pay rolls. Labor income in the trade and finance and in the government and service groups was only slightly lower than in the January-May period last year.

Income paid to property holders in the form of dividends and interest during the first 5 months of 1938 was about 6 percent below that in the comparable period of 1937. This reduction is in marked contrast to the experience in the early months of 1930 when dividend and interest payments were 9 percent higher than in the January-May period of 1929. Interest payments were well maintained, but dividends have declined sharply since the first of the year.

Entrepreneurial withdrawals were 2 percent below the levels of a year ago. The relatively well-sustained volume of net rents and royalties has been an important steadying influence upon this type of income payment, rental rates having shown only slight declines since last October. The contraction in farm prices and farm cash income has been the principal depressing influence upon total entrepreneurial income in recent months.

Income from Agriculture.

Income from farm marketings in the first 5 months of 1938 totaled \$2,568,000,000, a drop of 11 percent from receipts of \$2,895,000,000 in the corresponding period of 1937, according to estimates of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Government payments so far this year have totaled \$212,000,000, as compared with \$302,000,000 in the January-May period last year. Total cash income (including Government payments) was 13 percent lower than in the first 5 months of 1937. Receipts from crops in this period were 20 percent below those in the corresponding months of 1937, while receipts from livestock and livestock products were only 6 percent lower than last year. Increased sales of dairy products partially offset smaller receipts from meat animals, poultry, and poultry products.

It is expected that the total income from farm marketings for the first half of 1938 will approximate \$3,050,000,000, as compared with \$3,503,000,000 in the

first 6 months of 1937. On the basis of the assumption that commodity prices remain at or near the present low levels, the Department of Agriculture estimates that farm income for the last 6 months of 1938 could not be expected to exceed \$4,500,000,000, making a total of \$7,550,000,000 for this year as compared with \$8,521,000,000 last year. The crop outlook for the summer and fall harvest, however, is very good. According to the June 1 crop report, growing conditions at that time were better than on the same date of any year since 1929.

Industrial Production Down.

The total volume of industrial production declined moderately during the first half of 1938, following the severe drop in the last 4 months of 1937. By reference to the chart on page 2, it will be seen that industrial output dropped from 117 (1923-25=100) in August to 80 in January and has moved slowly lower since then to 76 in May, according to the seasonally adjusted index compiled by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Preliminary estimates for June indicate no change in the adjusted index.

The decline in the output of manufactured products, which was quite general and severe in 1937, persisted in 1938. The course of the production of durable and nondurable manufactures, and the principal components of each group, over the past 3½ years is indicated in the accompanying chart.

Output of nondurable goods, which declined by somewhat more than one-fifth from the spring of last year to January 1938, has continued at that restricted level. Operations in this group of industries during the first 6 months of 1938 averaged about one-fifth lower than in the corresponding period of 1937, and were only 5 and 3 percent, respectively, above the output in these lines during the first half of 1932 and 1933. The severe curtailment in cotton consumption, woolen-mill activity, and boot and shoe production during the final months of 1937 indicated a rate of operations in finishing lines below the more steady rate of consumer purchases of the products of these industries.

Silk and rayon deliveries to mills (not shown on the chart) dropped sharply from midsummer to the end of 1937, then recovered about one-third of this decline in the first quarter of 1938, a recovery which was not fully sustained. Activity at meat-packing establishments has proceeded at a relatively even pace at about the average level of the preceding 2 years. Production of petroleum products has shown an extension of the downward trend which began last fall. Output of tobacco products, contrary to the general movement in the nondurable-goods industries, has moved irregularly upward.

Output of durable manufactures, although turning downward later in 1937 than the nondurable-goods industries, fell more rapidly during the final 4 months of the year. The usual seasonal rise was not fully experienced in these lines during the first half of 1938, resulting

in a moderate decline in the adjusted index. Operations in the durable goods industries averaged less than 50 percent of the 1937 rate for the comparable calendar period, but were 40 and 50 percent, respectively, above the averages for the first half of 1932 and 1933. The production of steel and iron manufactures and lumber items, after allowance for seasonal advances, has shown an irregular sidewise movement so far in 1938. Assemblies of automobiles did not experience the usual

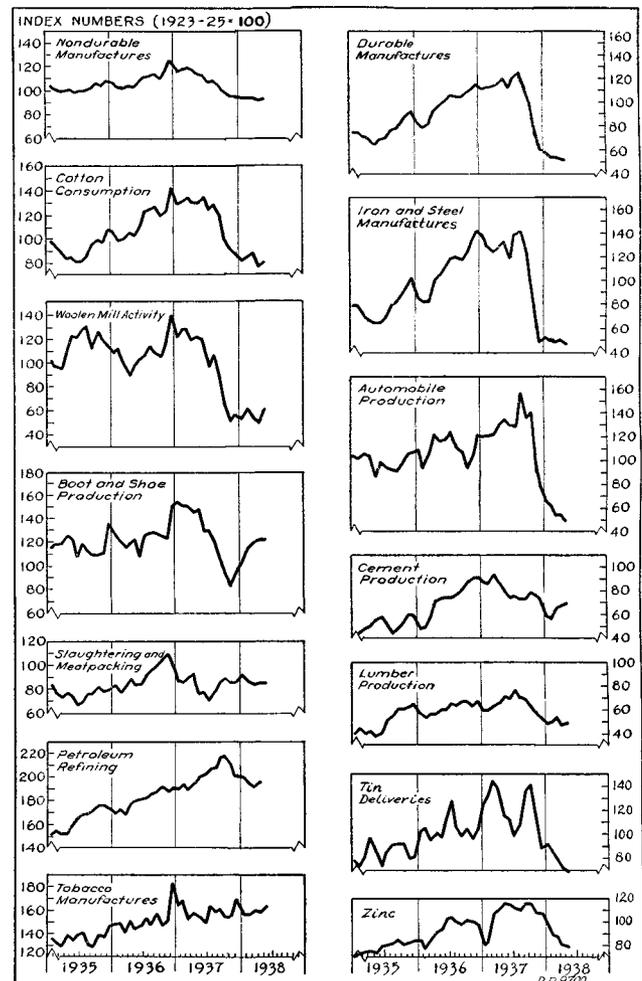


Figure 1.—Indexes of Durable and Nondurable Manufactures, Adjusted for Seasonal Variation, 1935-38 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

NOTE.—Durable manufactures include iron and steel, automobiles, lumber, ship-building, locomotives, nonferrous metals, cement, polished plate glass, and coke; nondurable manufactures include textiles, leather and products, foods, tobacco products, paper and printing, petroleum refining, and automobile tires and tubes.

seasonal rise in the first half of 1938. Cement production, contrary to the movement of other durable manufactures, advanced in the first half of 1938.

In terms of actual quantity of output, steel ingot production in the first 5 months of 1938 totaled 9,181,000 tons, as compared with 24,574,000 tons in the corresponding period of 1937. The industry operated at 29 percent of ingot capacity in January, moved up by March to 34 percent, and declined in subsequent months to 30 percent in May and to less than 29 per-

cent in June. Automobile assemblies in the United States during the first 5 months just topped 1 million units as compared with over 2¼ million in the same months last year. Lumber production has shown a smaller relative decline from the comparable months last year. Output in this industry at the high point last year, however, was low when compared with the predepression years, as the construction industry, especially residential building, experienced less of a rise in the recovery period than other lines.

Employment and Pay Rolls Lower.

Total nonagricultural employment recorded a contra-seasonal decline in May, after having failed to record the usual rise during the first 4 months of the year. After allowance for seasonal changes, employment has receded steadily since early last fall and is currently at

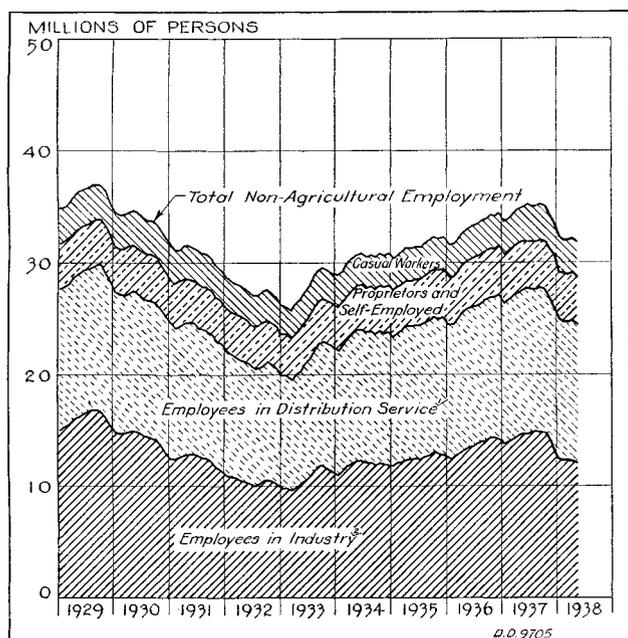


Figure 2.—Total Nonagricultural Employment in the United States, 1929-38 (U. S. Department of Labor).

¹ Includes trade, finance, service, and miscellaneous industries, and Government, education, and professional services.

² Includes manufacturing, mining, construction, transportation, and public utilities

the lowest point since February 1936. These data, which cover all persons engaged in gainful work outside of agriculture (excluding employment on W. P. A. and other emergency projects), indicate that the drop in employment since September 1937 has amounted to about 3,300,000 workers.

The decline in factory employment continued throughout the first 5 months of 1938. On a seasonally adjusted basis, employment dropped 18 percent during the last 6 months of 1937, and 8 percent further during the first 5 months of 1938. Pay rolls have shown a more abrupt decline since the fall of 1937.

Following the production trends, the number at work in durable-goods manufacturing industries recorded a sharper drop than employment in nondurable-goods

industries. Since the peak last July, employment in factories producing durable goods dropped 33 percent, while employment in nondurable-goods lines declined 17 percent, on the basis of the seasonally adjusted indexes. Among the durable-goods classifications, the sharpest decline was recorded in railroad car-building shops (58 percent); in nondurable-goods lines, the greatest decline was in rubber tires and tubes (32 percent). The best showing has been made for stone, clay, and glass products in the first group of industries, and tobacco manufactures in the second group, where the declines since last summer have amounted to 22 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

Employment in the various trade lines has experienced a relatively small decline as compared with that in manufacturing industries. In wholesale trade, the number at work in the middle of May was about 4 percent below May 1937, and in retail trade the decline amounted to 7 percent. The general-merchandising

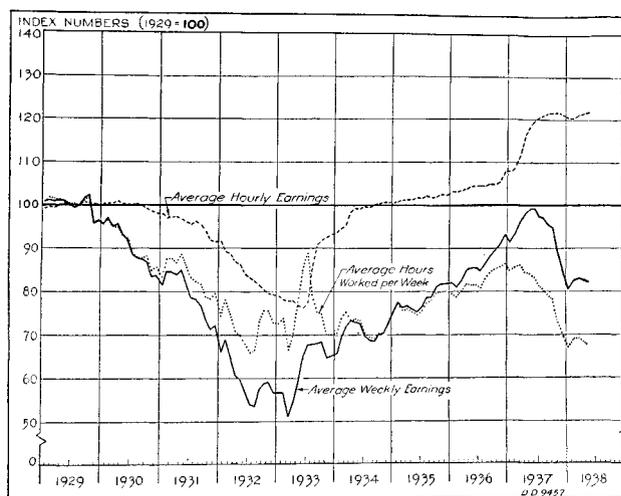


Figure 3.—Indexes of Average Hourly and Weekly Earnings and Hours Worked per Week in 25 Manufacturing Industries, 1929-38.

NOTE.—Computed from the original data of the National Industrial Conference Board, using 1929 as a base.

classification of retail trade experienced the sharpest decline (10 percent).

Average hourly earnings (wage rates) in manufacturing industries have shown little change since last summer and are currently at near record highs, as is indicated in figure 3. Average hours worked per week have shown little change so far this year, following a decline of more than one-fifth since early 1937. Under the influence of these forces weekly earnings have also moved narrowly this year.

Prices Decline.

Wholesale prices, as measured by the index of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, moved downward rather sharply in the first 4 months of 1938 but leveled off in May and advanced slightly in the late weeks of June, although the average for the month was unchanged. The general index stood at 78.2 percent of the 1926 aver-

were also severely hit, and this was reflected in the rapid drop in foreign trade. Although there has been some contraction in business activity in leading foreign countries during the past few months, the current domestic recession has not had a counterpart in other nations, and the sustained foreign demand has thus acted as a support to export trade. The continued high level of exports and the downward trend of imports during the first 5 months of this year have resulted in building up an excess of exports over imports of more than \$544,000,000, the largest export balance for this period since 1921.

Exports in the January-May period this year were 7 percent above those in the corresponding period last year. Agricultural exports, reflecting the good harvest

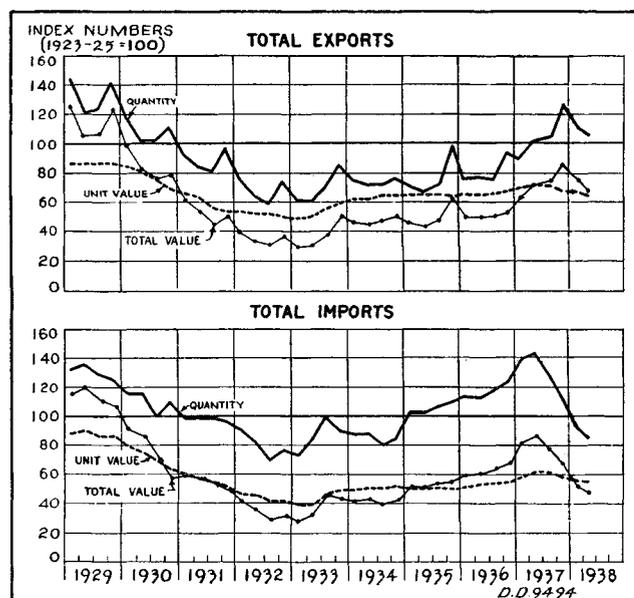


Figure 6.—Changes in Quantity, Unit Value (Prices), and Total Value of Exports and Imports, by Quarters, 1929-38 (U. S. Department of Commerce).

in 1937 and the drought shortage in 1936, were up 29 percent. Nonagricultural exports advanced 1 percent, largely because heavy shipments of machinery (up 16 percent) and petroleum and products (up 18 percent) offset declines in other lines.

In the first 5 months of 1938, 52 percent of the orders for machine tools was from foreign sources as compared with 21 percent of a much larger total volume last year; 14 percent of the total automobile production was exported as compared with 7 percent last year; and 11 percent of total steel products (data for first quarter only) was exported as compared with 4 percent last year. Advances in the relative importance of export trade in these lines were due to the curtailment in domestic demand as compared with a relatively steady volume of shipments to foreign buyers.

Imports of merchandise, seasonally adjusted, have declined almost without interruption since the spring of 1937. The drop from June 1937 through May 1938 in

the adjusted index exceeded 50 percent. Imports in the first 5 months of 1938 were 42 percent below those in the corresponding months of 1937, when imports of crude materials and foodstuffs were at high levels under the stimuli of rising prices, the high rate of industrial activity, and the drought-shortened supplies of domestic foodstuffs. The lowered volume of import trade this year resulted largely from a reverse situation—prices were lower, industrial demand was slack, and ample supplies of agricultural products were available. Imports of agricultural products in the January-May period this year were down 46 percent from the same months last year; nonagricultural imports were down 33 percent.

Retail Trade.

The effect of the business recession was not felt to a significant degree in retail trade until late in 1937; then became pronounced in the first half of 1938. Although consumer purchasing was somewhat retarded during the third quarter of 1937, not until November did the dollar volume of sales fall below that in the comparative month of the previous year.

The deepening business recession was reflected in the monthly series of decreases in retail sales through May of 1938 (the latest period for which data are complete), with the relative decline in comparison with a year ago increasing as the period advanced. Sales in May were down 20 percent from May 1937, whereas trade in January of this year was 12 percent below that in the same month last year. Statistics for June are not yet complete, but available data indicate some improvement in trade activity.

Preliminary estimates for the first 6 months of 1938 indicate a decline in the total dollar volume of retail sales of about 18 percent from the same period of 1937. Sales of durable goods experienced the greatest relative decline. The decrease was especially marked in new passenger automobile sales, the dollar volume of which dropped 45 percent during the first 5 months of the year as compared with the similar period of 1937; lumber and building materials, hardware, and furniture and household appliances also recorded substantial declines, General merchandise sales decreased about 12 percent, while grocery store sales, which move narrowly, were down about 6 percent. The decrease in dollar volume of general merchandise sold can be accounted for in part by lowered prices.

Although retail activity was generally depressed during the first 5 months of the year and consumer income averaged about 7 percent below the estimated amount for the first half of 1937, the recession pattern was not uniform throughout the Nation. The margin of change varied greatly in the different regions and among the different States; the largest declines occurred in those States where purchasing power was more closely tied in with industrial activity. Sales in the Central Western and Southern States were less de-

pressed than in other regions, while the East North Central States showed the largest relative declines.

Wholesale Trade.

The margin by which wholesalers' sales this year have fallen below sales last year, when activity was relatively steady, has continued to widen as the year has progressed. Beginning last October, sales fell below those of the corresponding month a year earlier. In January they were down 12 percent from January 1937 and in May 16 percent from May 1937. Preliminary estimates indicate that wholesale sales during the first 5 months of 1938 averaged about 15 percent below those in the comparable period last year.

Among the various lines of wholesaling activity, the largest declines during the first 5 months from the same months in 1937 were recorded by firms selling electrical goods, hardware, furniture, and jewelry, while the least severe contractions were shown by those selling drugs, tobacco, petroleum products, and meats. Wholesalers' inventories in May were down 14 percent from May 1937, when stocks were generally high, while sales were off 16 percent from May last year.

Banking and Credit.¹

Major financial developments during the first half of 1938 included the shifts in the gold and credit policies of the Federal monetary authorities, and the change in the fiscal program of the Government. During more than a year, as a means of preventing increases in monetary gold stock from further expanding bank reserves, gold purchases by the Treasury had been made out of the proceeds of the sale of additional public-debt obligations; and, in pursuance of this policy, gold acquisitions had been placed in an inactive account in the Treasury. On February 14 it was announced that, retroactive to January 1, 1938, gold acquisitions would be placed in the inactive account only to the extent that they exceeded \$100,000,000 in any quarter.

¹ This review of financial developments during the first half of 1938 was prepared by Dr. August Maffry of the Finance Division of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce.

Since gold imports and other gold purchases were running currently below this level, the effect of the new policy was to permit acquisitions after the beginning of the year to increase bank reserves.

This action by the Treasury was followed on April 14 by the desterilization of approximately \$1,400,000,000 of inactive gold, representing the net accumulation since the beginning of sterilization on December 21, 1936. Desterilization was accomplished through the deposit of gold certificates with the Federal Reserve Banks, and the desired effect upon bank reserves was

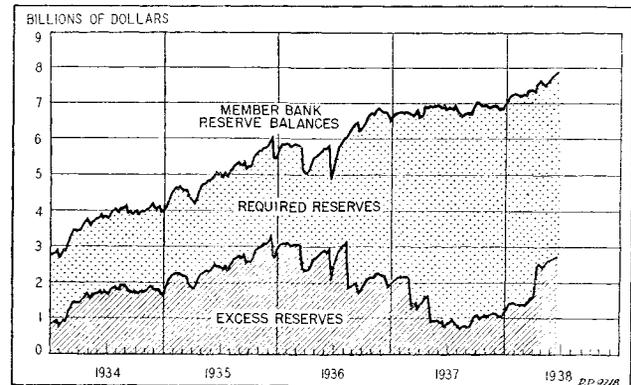


Figure 7.—Total Member-Bank Reserve Balances at Federal Reserve Banks, with Estimates of Acquired and Excess Reserves, 1934-38 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

produced by drawing down the resulting Treasury deposits through the retirement of Treasury bills with cash at the rate of \$50,000,000 weekly.

The change in the gold policy of the Treasury was supplemented by a reduction of approximately 13 1/4 percent in the reserve requirements on all classes of deposits for all member banks announced by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System on April 15. This action followed the doubling of requirements during 1936 and 1937. The effect of the order was to raise the excess reserves of member banks by about \$750,000,000 to \$2,492,000,000 on April 20. Largely as a result of the disbursement by the Treasury of the

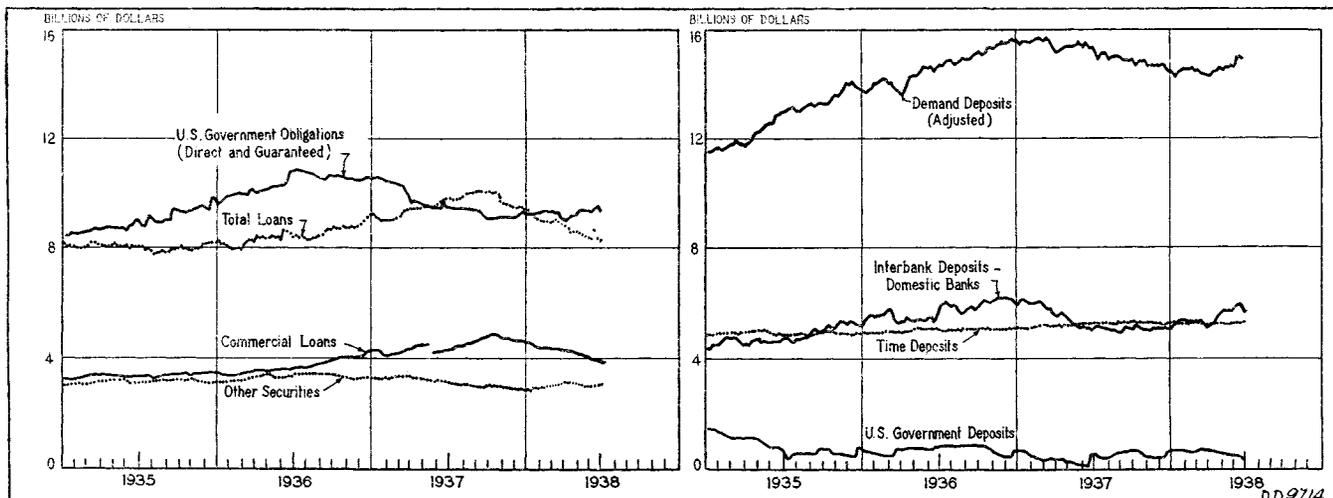


Figure 8.—Bank Credit of Reporting Member Banks in 101 Cities, 1935-38. Wednesday Figures (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

according to a compilation by Moody's Investors Service. Treasury quarterly financing in March was confined to the refunding of maturing notes, and in June to the exchange of bonds and notes for obligations maturing on June 15 and on September 15. Interest rates on the securities offered in the recent exchange, 2¾ percent on 25-year bonds and 1½ percent on 5-year notes, were the lowest which have been quoted for Government obligations of similar maturities. The extreme ease in the money market was indicated also by the fall in the Treasury bill rate to 0.016 for the offering of June 20.

Foreign Exchange Markets and Gold Movements.

As in other recent years, the foreign exchanges were strongly affected during the first half of 1938 by the repercussions of political developments at home and abroad. During January and February, the dollar showed weakness in terms of the principal European currencies, with the usual exception of the French franc; and the liquidation of dollar balances in February growing out of the fear of dollar devaluation carried the pound sterling, the guilder, and the Swiss franc to the highest levels since the Tripartite Declaration of September 1936. In March, at the time of the union of Austria with Germany, the European currencies were under severe pressure, although fluctuations in rates were kept within fairly narrow limits by virtue of official supporting operations. Gold engagements at that time in London and in Brussels for American account were the first reported acquisitions in Europe since September 1937. Both the strength of the dollar and the movement of gold signified at least a brief resumption of the flow of capital funds from European centers to the United States.

The continued weakness of the French franc, arising from the prolongation of domestic financial difficulties and accentuated by the strained international situation, culminated in a further depreciation of the franc in early May. Renewed pressure upon the European currencies was evident until the reappearance in June of rumors of a reduction in the gold buying price of the United States Treasury. Under the influence of these rumors the dollar was generally weak on the foreign exchanges, and another of the spasmodic flights to gold was indicated by a strong demand in the London market for gold for hoarding purposes. Following the "complete and formal" denial by the Secretary of the Treasury on June 20 that further devaluation of the dollar was contemplated and his reminder that the matter rested between the President and himself, both of whom

had issued frequent denials, the exchanges moved again in favor of the dollar.

Gold Movement at Lower Rate.

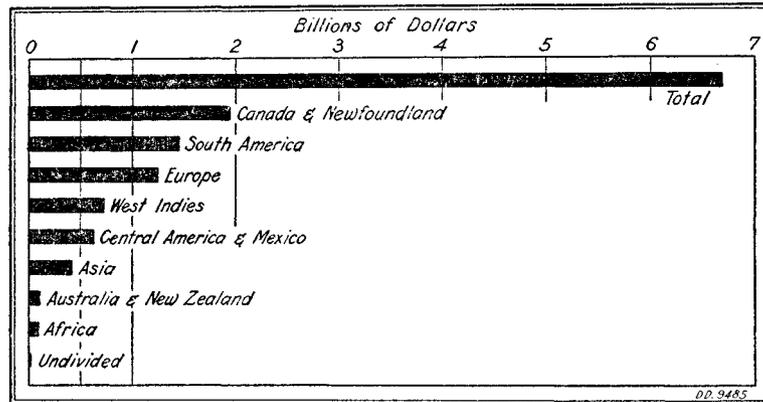
Gold imports into the United States in the period from January to the middle of June, which amounted to \$234,000,000, were much reduced in comparison with the extremely heavy inflow during the same period of 1937, which aggregated \$948,000,000. The persistence of the inward movement was attributable to the large excess of merchandise exports from this country, which was accumulating at the rate of more than \$100,000,000 per month, while the reduction in the size of the reported inflow reflected the reversal in the movement of capital funds which appeared in the last quarter of 1937 and continued into the early months of 1938. Gold acquisitions in the London market, which were \$658,000,000 in the period from January to mid-June in 1937, fell to only \$90,000,000 in the corresponding period of 1938, and substantial engagements for American account were confined to the period of marked weakness in the principal European currencies in March, April, and late May. In June, the movement of gold from London to New York ceased with the liquidation of foreign dollar balances and with the simultaneous appearance of a heavy demand for gold growing out of fears of a further devaluation of the dollar.

Gold imports from Belgium during January-June represented a part of the gold lost by the National Bank of Belgium in the defense of the belga, which was under severe pressure in March and again in May. Those from Sweden, which began in May, were reported to be for safekeeping. Arrivals from producing countries were much smaller than in 1937, especially in the case of Canada and British India. Receipts from Japan totaled \$55,500,000 up to June 17, as compared with \$43,000,000 in the same period of 1937 and with \$246,000,000 during the whole of the preceding year.

Capital Movements During First Quarter.

The statistics of capital movements between the United States and foreign countries during the first quarter of 1938, issued by the Treasury Department on June 30, showed a continuation of the outward movement of short-term banking funds which featured the final quarter of 1937. This outflow, consisting almost entirely of a reduction in foreign dollar balances, was placed at \$233,000,000 during January-March, as compared with \$644,000,000 during the preceding period. The outward movement, which became progressively heavier on a monthly basis, was unbroken

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