

Volume 22, Number 2, November 2019

Revision

Britain and the French Revolution, 1789–94

Nicholas Fellows

Consider the following question on the British response to the French Revolution, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How successfully did Pitt the Younger handle the challenge of the French Revolution in the period from 1789 to 1801?

Student answer with commentary

Pitt handled the challenge of the French Revolution very successfully, particularly after war broke out with France in 1793, as it enabled him to rally the country against its traditional enemy. However, the French Revolution and its ideas of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' did find some support among radical groups and even among Whig politicians, but Pitt's government was able to nullify any threat they presented to the political order. The greatest challenge to the government was the result of the revolution coinciding with a period of industrial and urban growth that coincided with a series of poor harvests and high prices and therefore its ideas, at least initially, appealed to those in the new factory towns who were suffering and wanted change to the political system.

The opening paragraph offers a clear view, seen in the first sentence. The response does recognise that events in France were a threat but argues that this was more because of the economic conditions in England.

The threat posed by high prices and poor harvests was a concern for the government. In France such developments had led to mob violence and radical developments, which it was feared might spread to Britain. However, the execution of the French king and the outbreak of 'terror' in France did much to diminish support for radical ideas. Loss of support for radicalism was aided by the outbreak of war with France in 1793 as Pitt was now able to appeal to British patriotism and raise the fear of a French invasion, which was given even greater credence following the landing of French troops in Ireland in 1798. While the war encouraged revolutionary activity in France it encouraged loyalism in Britain. Pitt was able to exploit the substantial anti-French sentiment that had developed during the wars of the eighteenth century and particularly as a result of French aid to the American colonists. A strong movement in support of the crown and established Church developed which helped to lessen any potential threat. It was therefore not just developments in Britain, but the increasing radicalisation of the French Revolution, that allowed Pitt to deal successfully with the threat.

The paragraph considers the situation in Britain and argues that there was actually limited support for the ideas of the Revolution. It argues that the outbreak of war in 1793 was a crucial element in weakening support for revolutionary ideas.

The government also introduced a series of measures that were successful in weakening and driving underground radicals in Britain who were sympathetic to the revolutionary ideas. The measures, sometimes described as ‘terror’, were particularly successful in dealing with the threat, or perceived threat, of the Revolution. The government was able to deploy a wide range of measures to prevent the spread of the new ideas. In December 1792 a royal proclamation was issued against seditious publications and this was soon followed by a series of trials and heavy punishments, which discouraged others. Leading radicals were arrested and Habeas Corpus was suspended, which resulted in radicals being held without trial and removed a fundamental right. However, it was the Gagging Acts, introduced in 1795, that were particularly effective. The Treasonable Practices Act forbade meetings that were likely to bring either the government or monarch into contempt, while the Seditious Meetings and Assemblies Act meant that gatherings of more than 50 people needed permission, preventing the gathering together of large numbers of opponents that could threaten the government. It might be argued that these actions were not completely successful as in April and May 1797 the government faced two naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, but the mutineers’ demands were not overtly political and the threat of revolutionary ideas infiltrating the armed forces appears to have been limited. Moreover, the government was also able to suppress the mutinies through the Seduction from Duty and Allegiance Act and the Act against Administering Unlawful Oaths. The spread of revolutionary ideas was further limited by regulation of radical newspapers by taxation and the banning of radical societies, which were driven underground, lessening any potential for widespread appeal. Even Thomas Paine, whose work *The Rights of Man* was widely read, was forced to flee to France, clear evidence of the success of Pitt’s measures and the lack of widespread support for change.

Pitt’s measures are also seen as playing an important role in limiting the impact of the revolution. The paragraph argues that his measures prevented radical activity from gaining mass support as the spread of new ideas through newspapers was prevented and many leaders were arrested. It does acknowledge that the government did face some challenges, suggesting the measures were not completely successful, however it balances this against the quick response taken.

However, it was not just legislation that was successful in handling the challenge as the government used a variety of resources. Agents were used to influence opinion by subsidising newspapers and loyalist associations, such as the so-called Pitt clubs, which were loyalist groups intended to rival radical clubs, such as the London Corresponding Society. Attacks on radicals were allowed locally with ‘Church and King’ mobs attacking radicals and dissenters.

The response also suggests that it was not just the government response that was important in the defeat of radicalism.

Although it appears as if Pitt’s measures were very successful with the radical threat only ever serious in the years of poor economic conditions, it might be that the threat of radicalism was weakened more by the divisions within the movement rather than Pitt’s policies. Many of the early radical societies, which were inspired by the ideas of the French revolution, were just discussion groups which had a small membership because of their high subscriptions and were dominated by the educated middle class, who did not want to overthrow the British system but wanted moderate change. These organisations simply lacked the numbers to be a threat and abandoned their ideals when the

revolution became violent and more radical in the period after 1793. There were more popular groups, such as the London Corresponding Society, which attracted some 3,000 members by 1795. However, the bulk of radical activity was undertaken by urban craftsmen and small masters, not by the majority of the country, which still lived and worked in the countryside under the influence of landowners and the elite. The execution of Louis XVI and the outbreak of 'the terror' caused more shock than inspiration and the government was able to exploit this and use propaganda to create alarm and panic about revolution. The government was further aided by the divisions over aims and methods of those who wanted change.

The response suggests that actually it was the weakness of the radical movement that limited its impact and provides some examples in a balanced discussion, placing the growth of the London Corresponding Society in a wider context.

However, the government's position was somewhat weakened by the attitude of the Whig party under Charles Fox, as they failed to support the government, even though their numbers had shrunk to just 50 in the House of Commons. The government also faced the problem that it depended on laws and not just actions to suppress revolutionary activity, and laws needed parliamentary approval and could be criticised by Fox and his supporters. Juries were also reluctant to convict for offences which were obviously political in nature, and although Pitt had spies, informers and agents provocateurs working for him, he did not have an extensive police force.

The response does note that there were some limits to Pitt's success because of the circumstances under which any government of the eighteenth century had to work.

Despite some of the difficulties Pitt faced it would be difficult to argue that he was not successful in handling the challenge of the French Revolution. The threat was greater than it might have been because of it coinciding with a period of bad harvests and high prices, but after the early enthusiasm for the revolution support for it declined as violence developed. This was particularly true after 'the terror' and then the Directory, which seemed to be more corrupt than idealistic. After 1799, with the rise of Napoleon, it seemed that France was ruled by a military dictator and these changes may have been just as important in the decline in radicalism and support for revolution as the government measures.

The conclusion is particularly strong and builds on earlier comments made about developments in France, suggesting that support for revolutionary ideas declined as events in France became more violent and revolutionary and that developments there were probably just as important as measures taken by the government.

The response considers the nature of the challenge that Pitt faced and offers a clear view that the government was very successful. However, it weighs up the government measures against the weakness of the radical threat and developments in France before concluding that developments in France were just as important as Pitt's measures in his success. The response remains focused and provides good supporting detail as well as showing an awareness of the context within which the government had to act. There is a clear judgement in the conclusion, although some of the interim judgements could be clearer and more developed.

This resource is part of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: <http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreview>