Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte
Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Historischen Institut Paris
(Institut historique allemand)
Band 21/2 (1994)

DOI: 10.11588/fr.1994.2.58873

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FROM PILLNITZ TO VALMY:

British foreign Policy and Revolutionary France 1791–1792

what may not be expected from a young republic of 25 millions, of which nearly one million is armed, animated by such enthusiasm and flushed with such success.

John Trevor, Envoy Extraordinary in Turin, 24 November 1792[1].

Periods of neutrality are often of great interest to subsequent scholarship as they offer a particularly valuable opportunity for assessing the factors influencing foreign policy. If other powers are in confrontation or conflict, then the pressure on a neutral state to intervene can be acute. It generally arises from two separate though often related sources: first, a sympathy, or even support, for the views or interests of one of the combatants; and, secondly, a sense that a failure to intervene may be to the detriment of the state's interests. The latter can, of course, be presented in very different fashions and, thus, the issue of neutrality can focus debates over the direction and means of foreign policy. British neutrality in the early states of the French Revolutionary War throws light on the nature both of British foreign policy and of international relations in this period. In addition, the reasons for and course of British neutrality were important, because, it can be suggested, this played a role in the opening stages of the war. The significance of those stages, both for developments in France and for European international relations, is readily apparent. The campaign of 1792 was the best opportunity for the German powers to defeat France; their opportunity to crush the Revolution. Britain's absence from that campaign was of importance.

The Declaration of Pillnitz, issued by the Emperor Leopold II and Frederick William II of Prussia on 27 August 1791, was a call for concerted action to restore the liberty of the French royal family. It was a call that was not echoed in Britain. George III and his ministry were scarcely sympathetic to Revolutionary France, but they made it clear that they were opposed to interference in the affairs of France. A number of reasons were offered by ministers and diplomats. Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary, feared that Austrian intervention in France, would lead to the French National Assembly inciting disorder in the Austrian Netherlands. His

I should like to acknowledge the assistance of the British Academy and the Staff Travel and Research Fund of Durham University. I am most grateful to the Earls of Elgin and Malmesbury and to Richard Head, for permission to cite material.

1 Trevor to Lord Grenville, Foreign Secretary, 24 Nov. 1791, London, Public Record Office, Foreign Office (hereafter PRO. FO.) 67/10.

colleague Lord Hawkesbury felt that the new French government would not act contrary to British interests. Earl Gower, Ambassador in Paris, argued that foreign intervention would only unite France against Louis XVI, who he presented as a cowardly, blundering fool, and lead to the creation of a stronger French state[2].

Intervention did not therefore seem to be in Britain's interest, but, in addition, there was uncertainty about the international context, especially the determination of Leopold and Frederick William to secure a counter-revolution. It was thought that Leopold in particular did not want war. British uncertainty reflected both the recent experience of the Pitt ministry and the more general nature of alliance politics, a fundamental problem that had faced British foreign policy over the previous century[3]. In the spring of 1791, the British government had, in alliance with Frederick William, come close, in the Ochakov crisis, to war with Catherine II of Russia. In the face of domestic criticism, this policy had been abandoned in April 1791, and this had led to the collapse of Anglo-Prussian co-operation. This was not, however, simply a response to domestic pressures, for the recent course of the alliance had revealed the difficulty of holding Frederick William to any line of policy that accorded with the views of the British government. In the spring of 1791, the ministry reaped the domestic whirlwind, but the very divisions in Cabinet and diplomatic ranks at that juncture were a product of the contradictions and problems of British diplomatic strategy.

After Ochakov, the British government became far more hesitant about taking an active role in international relations, a development encapsulated in and owing much to the attitude of the new Foreign Secretary, Grenville. In August 1791, Sir Murray Keith, Envoy Extraordinary in Vienna, was instructed to express, but only in general terms, George III's wishes for any event that might help Louis XVI. The additional reference to George's hope for *any opportunity of establishing with the court of Vienna such a system of good understanding and concert as may tend to promote and maintain the general and permanent tranquillity of Europe*[4] was very vague, and George had already written to Leopold to state that he would not take a role in internal French affairs[5].

Grenville's reference to a league for promoting peace offered in theory the basis for an alliance against Revolutionary France, but, aside from Grenville's caution in restricting his instruction to good intentions that, hopefully, could be some mollification for the refusal to act, it was clear that such a league would be aimed rather at preventing change outside France's borders than at effecting a counter revolution within them; in short, it would serve British ends in the Low Countries, not Austrian goals in France. This was in accordance with a fundamental premise of eighteenth-century British foreign policy: a lack of interest in intervening in the

2 Lord Grenville, Foreign Secretary, to Alexander Straton, Secretary of Legation in Vienna, 26 July 1791, PRO. FO. 7/24 f. 246–7; Grenville to Sir Robert Murray Keith, Envoy Extraordinary in Vienna, 19 Sept. 1791, PRO. FO 7/28; Hawkesbury, memoire, – Aug. 1791, Oxford Bodleian Library, Bland Burges papers (hereafter Bodl. BB) 61 p. 6; Gower to Grenville, 1 July 1791, London, British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Additional Manuscripts (hereafter BL. Add.) 59021 f. 1.

3 Grenville to Morton Eden, Envoy Extraordinary in Berlin, 27 Mar. 1792, PRO. FO. 64/24; J. M. Black, Britain's Foreign Alliances in the Eighteenth Century, in: Albion 20 (1988) pp. 573–602.

4 Grenville to Keith, 19. Aug. 1791, PRO. FO. 7/27 f. 182–3.

5 George III to Leopold II, 23 July 1791, Broomhall, Fife, Elgin papers 60/1/93.

domestic affairs of other states for ideological reasons. There were interventions, most recently in the United Provinces in 1787, in order to affect or influence the foreign policy of other powers, but there was a reluctance to go further. This reflected a number of factors. There was no sense that British systems were for export. The anglophilia that led some French thinkers and, subsequently, certain Revolutionaries to look to Britain for examples of constitutional and other arrangements, was not fostered or aided by the British gouvernment. There was no attempt to foster limited monarchy on the British model elsewhere.

Instead, successive British ministries had adopted a pragmatic approach. Allies were sought with reference to their geopolitical interests: whether autocratic Russia or the republican United Provinces. There was a reluctance to aid rebels and in 1786 George III had indicated his unwillingness to encourage opposition to Spanish rule in the New World[6], but this again was essentially pragmatic. The Corsicans had received encouragement; and there had been hopes of a rebellion in the New World when Britain was at war with Spain in 1779–1783 and close to conflict with her in the Nootka Sound crisis of 1790.

British policy in 1791 was similarly pragmatic. The creation of a security system aimed against France was not then a priority: France did not appear a threat and such a goal would be hopelessly compromised by the interest of other powers in counter-revolution. The most influential British diplomat, William, Lord Auckland, Ambassador at The Hague, wrote thence in September 1791 to his friend Lord Scheffield,

The general tranquillity of the moment in the different Cabinets of Europe has tempted me to seek retirement for a few weeks at least ... I have watched the whole detail of what is called the French revolution ... I rejoice exceedingly in the belief that it will be left to its own fate, undisturbed (for the present at least) by foreign interruption: – my satisfaction in this respect does not arise from any Democratic leaning; on the contrary I incline to believe that if anything could have cemented and established the new constitution, the assembling of foreign armies upon the frontiers would have done it. – It appears to me for the benefit of surrounding nations, and of mankind in general that the experiment should have fair play, at the same time my belief is that it will defeat itself and its undertakers; – as to the consequences however which are to result from its failure they are beyond all speculation.

Such views were of limited appeal to the other European powers. They increasingly saw a counter-revolution as crucial to stability in western Europe. In the short term, they were wrong: although French instability threatened her neighbours and did so increasingly, a counter-revolution effected by foreign troops could not but be bloody, and might not be successful. Indeed, in September 1792, Auckland observed, *I am satisfied that France would have been completely ruined and desolated if the foreign powers had not engaged in the business*[7]. The passive British response, however, offered scant guarantee of western European stability, and yet any collective security system could not but be dangerous for Britain. Not only would she surrender much of her diplomatic independence, but the other principal participant in the scheme would be Leopold II. As ruler of the Austrian Netherlands and

6 Pitt to George III, 1 July 1786, A. ASPINALL, The Later Correspondence of George III, 5 vols., Cambridge 1962, I, 233; George III to Pitt, 3 July 1786, 5th Earl STANHOPE, Life of Pitt, 3rd ed., London 1879, I, 480.

7 Auckland to Sheffield, 7 Sept. 1791, 28 Sept. 1792, BL. Add. 45728 f. 124–5, 143.

the Breisgau, he shared a long frontier with France. As Emperor, Leopold was the protector both of the Imperial constitution and of the interests of the weak rulers near France such as the Archbishop-Elector of Trier. Thanks to his rule of the Duchy of Milan, Leopold was also the most powerful ruler in northern Italy and thus the protector of the Italian states against France.

Leopold II, however, was also the brother-in-law of Louis XVI, while the principal dynamic of the Revolutionaries in foreign policy was provided by their rejection of the Austrian alliance. Alliance with Leopold, whether it was part of a collective security system or not, thus threatened to involve Britain in an unwanted degree of confrontation with France. Furthermore, Leopold had already reimposed his authority in the Austrian Netherlands without consulting the British who had been seeking a negotiated seetlement in his dispute with the Belgian Patriots. Thus, Leopold had already demonstrated his unwillingness to subordinate his own views, and indeed, from the British perspective, both there and in eastern Europe, a marked degree of unreliability. In addition, the British government did not wish, as part of any new agreement, to guarantee Leopold's position in the Austrian Netherlands.

The cautious response of the British government to French developments and her exclusion from the diplomatic process in eastern Europe, ensured that British became increasingly isolated. The motives of the Pitt ministry were, as so often, distrusted by the French, François de Barthélemy, the Minister Plenipotentiary, reported that the ministry wanted to see France the victim of anarchy, in order that it should be best placed to seize her West Indian possessions, a charge repeated by the Russian Ambassador, Vorontsov, but denied by Grenville. Barthélemy was also mistakenly certain that the British were responsible for the Austro-Prussian reconciliation[8]: the major problem for Anglo-French relations posed by misleading reports from French envoys and agents long preceded the crisis in the winter of 1792/93.

The British policy of non-intervention was not to change essentially until late 1792. There was little sense of any need for British action. Caution led the ministry to discourage Britain's principal ally, the United Provinces, from entering into a mutual guarantee of its governmental system with the Austrian Netherlands[9]. The British were, in fact, committed to supporting the position of the house of Orange in the United Netherlands. Disenchantment with Leopold II, suspicion about the possible consequences of his French policy and caution about foreign commitments, combined to restrict the ministry's willingness to accept new undertakings. A Dutch guarantee of the Austrian Netherlands might lead to war between France and Austria spreading to include the Dutch and their ally, Britain. Yet, by deterring the Dutch, who did not wish to follow the British lead on this matter, from such a guarantee and now showing little interest in the Austrian Netherlands, the British government was

8 Barthélemy to Montmorin, French foreign minister, 9, 16, 23 Sept. 1791, Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique Angleterre (hereafter AE. CP. Ang.) 578 f. 230–8, 249–58, 281–2; J. W. Marcum, Vorontsov and Pitt: The Russian Assessment of a British Statesman, 1785–1792, in: Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal 10 (1973) p. 54; Gower to Grenville, 26 Aug., Grenville to Gower, 31 Aug. 1791, BL. Add. 59021 f. 9–10.

9 Grenville to Lord Auckland, Ambassador at The Hague, 29 Oct., Duke of Richmond, Master General of the Ordnance, to Grenville, and reply, both 5 Nov. 1791, BL. Add. 58920 f. 26–7, 58937 f. 151–2; Grenville to Keith, 1 Nov. 1791, PRO. FO. 7/28.

sending out an unclear message about the extent to which its interest in the Low Countries included a commitment to the integrity of the Austrian Netherlands. Grenville wrote in March 1792 of *the Guaranty of the Tranquility of the Netherlands* as *a point of the greatest delicacy and importance*. The former consideration prevailed in 1791 and for most of 1792[10]. The British position did not satisfy Leopold and it was not to deter the French in 1792. Arguably, neither could have been done, but the government did not explore the possibilities, nor did it clarify its attitude towards the region that was to provide the occasion for the crisis in Anglo-French relations in the winter of 1792/93.

To criticise a power for neglecting deterrence in a situation that did not at the time appear to require it might appear anachronistic. It can be argued that it was to be past commitments in the Low Countries that led to the crisis in Anglo-French relations: the British alliance with the United Provinces and the cementing of the closure of the Scheldt in the Westphalia settlement. It can also be suggested both that peace-time offered an opportunity for assessing them critically, and that, whatever the nature of British commitments, there would have been a crisis in Anglo-French relations. This would have arisen as a result of the French overrunning of the Austrian Netherlands in November 1792 and the public policies of the Revolutionaries that winter, both in foreign affairs and the trial and execution of Louis XVI. More to the point, by late 1792 the governments of both Austria and France were different to those of a year earlier: any understandings reached in late 1791 or any strategy of deterrence devised then could but have been short term. A sense of transience was indeed already present then. In December 1791 Earl Cornwallis, Governor General and Commander-in-Chief in India, queried whether *any such thing as government exists at present in France*. The unexpected death of Joseph II in early 1790 scarcely encouraged a sense of the permanence of Austrian councils and indeed Leopold II was to die on 1 March 1792. Eden emphasised divisions in the senior ranks of the Prussian elite over relations with both Austria and France[11].

Nevertheless, although the policy of the British government can be explained readily, it had a negative reception abroad. British policy was seen as unfriendly by the French, and unsatisfactory by the European monarchs increasingly concerned about France but keen to share the burden of confronting her. Hanoverian conduct was also criticised in Vienna, for, as Elector, George III was reluctant to play a major role against France, and his position affected the policies of other North German rulers[12]. The British ministry was not alone in its cautious approach to any such confrontation. Conscious of Spain's military weakness, her government was also unwilling to do much in practice[13]. Yet, despite the desire to improve relations with Spain, the British ministry no more sought to explore common ground with

10 Grenville to Auckland, 17, 19 Dec. 1791, BL. Add. 58920 f. 42–3, 48; Grenville to Eden, 27 Mar. 1792, PRO. FO. 64/24.

11 Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 24 Dec. 1791, PRO. 30/11/151 f. 101; Eden to Grenville, 19 June, 10, 17, 28 July 1792, PRO. FO. 64/25.

12 Keith to Grenville, 31 Dec. 1791, PRO. FO. 7/28.

13 Anthony Merry, Consul in Madrid, to Robert Liston, Envoy Extraordinary in Stockholm, 10 Oct. 1791, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS. 5568 f. 44; J.-R. Aymes, Spain and the French Revolution, in: Mediterranean Historical Review 6 (1991) p. 65.

likeminded rulers than to join the Pillnitz powers. Louis XVI's acceptance of the new constitution on 13 September 1791 led to a repetition of the British government's wishes for good relations with France, but care was taken not to commend the step[14]. Signs of French aggression and instability – the annexation of the Papal territory of Avignon in September 1791 and the growing calls for war against Austria and the German protectors of the émigrés, the tension between Louis XVI and the new Legislative Assembly which followed his vetoing of the decree against the émigrés passed on 9 November 1791 – did not meet with a response from the British ministry. Pitt and his colleagues adopted a non-committal attitude towards the growing tension between France and the Empire over the shelter given to the émigrés. They were fortunate that Hanover was not close to the French frontier.

In early 1792, war on the Continent seemed increasingly likely, but French defeat was regarded as very probable. Other than for the fallout of the Ochakov affair, which engaged Parliament, there seemed little for British politicians to do over foreign affairs; even less for the ministers to do as far as foreign policy was concerned. Thus, a government that as recently as the previous spring had devoted so much effort to trying to bring peace and enforce a particular territorial settlement to the Balkans did not stir to prevent war in western Europe. That it could have done little was a measure of diplomatic failure – the collapse of Britain's alliance system after Ochakov, but this was also a product of a wider change of mood in the British ministry, from confidence and intervention to caution and circumspection. The Ochakov crisis had led the government to a marked reaction against earlier policies. The contrast between the surviving Anglo-Prussian diplomatic correspondence for early 1791 and that for early 1792 is marked. In early 1792, until 27 March, British instructions were limited to details of the marital settlement of Frederick, Duke of York. This shift was prudent, in light of uncertainties about Continental developments, not least within France, and yet it also limited Britain's options. Not being part of a powerful alliance system, she was unable to bring much influence to bear, other than by acting negatively. On the other hand, the expericence of her involvement in eastern European diplomacy in 1788–1791 suggested that British influence could be no more than precarious, subject to the exigencies and expedients of others.

The easing of tension in eastern Europe in 1791 did not lead to relations between Austria, Prussia and Russia that were as close as those at the time of the First Partition of Poland in 1772, but, as then, George III, his ministers and diplomats found themselves excluded from any real influence in Continental affairs. In 1772/73 this had led to consideration of closer relations with France[15], and again this was to be repeated in 1792, but this time, not by George III and British ministers. In the often wild speculation and the plethora of suggestions that characterised both public and official discussion of foreign policy in Revolutionary France, the notion of closer relations with Britain, indeed of co-operation in the face of the partitioning powers, was advanced. Such an idea was also discussed by British radicals, although it struck no chord with the British government. This contrasted with the situation in 1772/73

14 Grenville to Gower, 5 Oct. 1791, PRO. FO. 27/37; George III to Grenville, 6 Oct. 1791, BL. Add. 58856 f. 100.

15 H. M. Scott, British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution, Oxford 1990, pp. 184–6.

when George III had at least been interested in D'Aiguillon's approach, but, as then, though far more so, it was not practical in either domestic or international terms.

There was no real French option in 1792. Her alliance was dangerous for Britain and her government too unstable to encourage any attempt to reach an understanding. That did not prevent an attempt to do so in early 1792 by a French mission, whose most prominent member was Talleyrand. It was also designed to prevent Britain from joining Austria. The chances of serious negotiations, however, were compromised by Talleyrand's credentials which presented him as a person well informed of French policy with whom it was hoped Grenville would discuss matters, rather than as an envoy with a diplomatic character. Grenville also complained that Talleyrand's conversation was general, not specific[16].

Talleyrand was more optimistic. He reported that Britain was less hostile than was generally believed in France, and that it was essential that France insist on a declaration of neutrality, if necessary intimidating Britain into what it was her interest to offer. This notion of intimidation, specifically of arming a squadron at Brest, was, however, wisely rejected in Paris, where it was argued that Britain would act through conviction and interest, not fear. Amidst unrealistic talk of the possibility of an Anglo-French alliance, there was the growing problem of how Britain was going to respond to the likely outbreak of war on the Continent. On 15 February 1792 Talleyrand suggested to Grenville a mutual guarantee of European and colonial territories. He argued that only prejudice could separate the two countries: that their natural interests dictated alliance[17].

Such arguments were not new, the product of some revolutionary reassessment of foreign policy as ancien régime ideas collaped in France. Instead, they reflected the characteristic presentation of international relations during the eighteenth century[18]. Such arguments had been advanced for Anglo-French relations as recently as 1786/87 when the negotiation of a commercial treaty, the Eden Treaty, had been advocated by Vergennes in these terms, and then defended, though somewhat more uncertainly, by the British ministry. Then, however, it had proved easier to suggest such an alignment, than to appreciate how it would work in practice or to forsake old rivalries. The same was to prove even more the case in 1792. It was all too easy in a spirit of Enlightenment optimism or Revolutionary enthusiasm to call for a new international order based on true interests, rational alliances and open diplomacy; and to suggest that anything that opposed this process was reactionary, redundant and repellent; a corollary of the superstition that was held to characterise religious practices judged unattractive. Such an analysis was, however, both naive and dangerous, naive for it underrated the complexities of situations and dangerous

16 Grenville to Lord Henry Spencer, envoy in The Hague, 31 Jan., Grenville to Gower, 10 Feb. 1792, BL. Add. 34441 f. 258, PRO. FO. 27/38; Auckland to Grenville, 17 Jan. 1792, Auckland to Pitt, [1792], BL. Add. 58920 f. 59, PRO. 30/8/110 f. 215; Sir Ralph Payne to James, 1st Lord Malmesbury, 17 Feb. 1792, Winchester, Hampshire County Record Office, Malmesbury papers vol. 162; St. James's Chronicle 24 Jan., Gazetteer 6 Feb. 1792.

17 Talleyrand to Lessart, foreign minister, 27, 31 Jan., 3, 7, 17 Feb., Lessart to Talleyrand, 15 Feb. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. sup. 29 f. 189–95, 219–20, 202–6; G. Pallain, La Mission de Talleyrand à Londres en 1792. Correspondance inédite de Talleyrand avec le Département des Affaires Étrangères, Paris 1889.

18 J. Black, The Theory of the balance of power in the first half of the eighteenth century: a note on sources, in: Review of International Studies 9 (1983), pp. 55–61.

because it suggested that those with contrary values were obscurantist and unnecessary, if not worse. These views were to help lead the Revolutionaries to misunderstand badly the situation in Britain in 1792.

Attacking the government's policy, Charles James Fox, the leader of the opposition Whigs in the House of Commons, was to tell the Commons on 15 December 1792 that British diplomatic action might have prevented the outbreak of war between Austria and France, but this was wishful thinking and a characteristically opportunistic political ploy, rather than a realistic assessment of the situation. Charles, 3rd Earl Stanhope, a radical peer, attempted, in conjunction with Talleyrand, to persuade the government to arbitrate Austro-French differences, but Grenville was cool and Pitt, Stanhope's brother-in-law, rejected the idea[19]. Throughout the course of Anglo-French relations in 1792, the government was to insist on negotiations through formal diplomatic channels. This insistence was relaxed temporarily in late 1792, but earlier that year the ministry was to keep its French counterpart at a distance.

Grenville replied to Talleyrand's suggestion of a treaty of mutual guarantee with a bland assurance of good intentions. He stated that it was not the wish of the British government to foment or prolong disorder in France in order to serve British interests. Gower was instructed that he was only to reply to French approaches about Britain's position if war broke out, specifically whether she would be formally neutral or mediate, if they came from the minister of foreign affairs and if he said he was instructed to make them. If so, Gower was to reply that he did not know, but that he was ready to transmit any application made to him in writing. Grenville ordered Gower not to begin any discussion about the British position nor even to do anything that might appear to lead to any[20]. The cautious British stress on what Grenville termed *regular official channels* was explained in part by reference to the need for accurate communications, but the insistence on written applications reflected mistrust. Such applications fostered precision, but they were also designed to enable the British government to clarify and defend its position if necessary. And yet, in the volatile state of France, where denunciation of rivals was a means as well as an end of politics, and where ministers held office at the mercy of a fortune more fickle and deadly than that of a monarch's smiles, such a clarification on the French part was hazardous.

The British position was understandable because too pliable an attitude might serve to increase French demands, because the terms of any Anglo-French understanding might lead to difficulties with Austria, especially if Britain undertook to act as mediator, and because the British government did not wish to further the French objective of creating an alliance system directed against Austria. As ever, it is misleading to consider Anglo-French relations simply in bilateral terms. This was not their context in 1792, nor, until late in 1792, their vital dynamic. For French ministers and politicians, relations with Britain were necessarily subordinate to the more urgent and important question of the fate of the Franco-Austrian struggle. Good relations with Britain and Prussia were sought in order to limit the possibility of a successful Austrian-led counter-revolution.

19 G. P. Gooch and G. Stanhope, The Life of Charles, Third Earl Stanhope, London 1914, pp. 117–19.
20 Grenville to Gower, 9 Mar. 1792, PRO. FO. 27/38.

The British government neither wished nor thought it prudent to serve this purpose. Arguably, the ministry could have used the French need for good relations or an understanding, in order to make its views on the Low Countries clearer, but it was difficult to do so without running the risk of committing itself in the Franco-Austrian struggle. Grenville was opposed to what he termed *gratuitous and unnecessary guarantees*[21]. The different treatment of the territorial integrity of the United Provinces, an ally, and the Austrian Netherlands, was central to the unwillingness to subordinate British policy to the Franco-Austrian struggle. As ever, proximity ensured that the issue of the control of lands on France's eastern frontier was seen in thems of the Low Countries. This attitude had characterised the British response to French gains from the fifteenth century onwards. It had been true of the fate of the Burgundian inheritance, of Louis XIV's conquests – the fate of Flanders being more serious to Britain than that of Franche-Comté or northern Alsace, and of Lorraine.

Van de Spiegel, the Dutch Grand Pensionary, suggested that Britain should make a declaration to France stating her determination to be neutral, but emphasising that she could not see the Austrian Netherlands invaded. In reply, Grenville complained about a lack of Austrian and Prussian confidence in Britain over the Austrian Netherlands, whose affairs had been settled without reference to Britain. He also expressed an unwillingness to become committed to an Austro-French struggle *even in defence of the tranquillity of the Netherlands*[22].

The likely British response to a French conquest of the Austrian Netherlands – the crucial issue in November 1792 – was still unclear when war broke out on 20 April 1792. Though the British press expected a speedy Austrian victory, the possibility of British intervention in response to a French invasion of the Austrian Netherlands was mentioned[23]. Grenville made clear his unhappiness about such a prospect to the new French envoy, the Marquis de Chauvelin[24]. The Austrian government said that it could not defend Ostend, a port from which British control of the North Sea could be challenged, if France sent a large force to attack it[25]. French forces did in fact advance on 28 and 29 April and in mid-June, but they withdrew in a disorderly fashion, murdering one of their commanders[26].

At the same time, the outbreak of war ended any possibility that the accession of Francis II could serve, as that of Leopold had done, as an opportunity to explore the prospect for better Anglo-Austrian relations. Austria was both at war and had been attacked by France; this was seen as an insuperable bar to any alliance given the British determination to remain neutral. On 24 May Grenville sent Chauvelin an official note promising neutrality as long as France respected Britain's obligations and rights under her existing treaties. In his report, Chauvelin pointed out that this would mean respecting the territorial integrity of Prussia and the United Provinces. He saw the note as offering an opportunity for better relations, though he also

21 Grenville to Auckland, 17 Jan. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 62.
22 Spencer to Grenville, 23 Mar., Grenville to Spencer, 27 Mar. 1792, BL. Add. 34441 f. 496, 509–10.
23 Times 25 Ap., St. James's Chronicle 28 Ap. 1790.
24 Chauvelin to Dumouriez, foreign minister, 1 May 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 580 f. 263.
25 Keith to Grenville, 8 May 1792, PRO. FO. 7/30.
26 A. Lynn, The Bayonets of the Republic. Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France 1791–94, Urbana 1984, pp. 4–6.

stressed sensibly the need both to stop press attacks on the British government and to persuade the National Assembly to distinguish between enemy and neutral powers, in other words to replace the discourse of opposition to a hostile social and political order by a measured discussion of the realities of international relations[27].

Yet, the very moment that Chauvelin was warning of the danger of a presentation of relations in an ideological fashion, the British government was taking a step that appeared to justify such an analysis. Against the background of rising concern within the social and political elite about signs of increasing domestic radicalism, a Royal Proclamation against seditious meetings and publications was issued[28]. There were discussions about a political re-alignment to produce in effect a united elite.

Such concern and discussions were, however, essentially a response to domestic radicalism, rather than to any success by Revolutionary French forces, a marked contrast to the position that November. Indeed, the failure of the French advance into the Austrian Netherlands and the British declaration of neutrality brought an easing in British governmental anxiety[29]. Furthermore, Grenville told Chauvelin that George III had principally the United Provinces in view when he referred to his allies and that his commitments were only defensive, so that Prussia, which had come to Austria's assistance, was not comprehended. Chauvelin also pointed out that Britain was not obliged to come to the defence of the Austrian Netherlands as the Convention of The Hague of 10 December 1790 had not been ratified by Austria[30], but this was no longer apparently an important issue. As the focus of attention switched to France's eastern frontier there was a marked relaxation in the pace and tone of British diplomacy. In both Turin and London, the Sardinian government pressed the British on an alleged French scheme to sponsor a popular rising in Genoa and then attack Piedmont, but Grenville's response amounted to nothing more than fair words. The Sardinian envoy, the Marquis St. Martin de Front, told Grenville that the French government was of such a nature that even if circumstances did not permit it to display its malevolent nature by attacking, there was always the danger that an attack would be mounted as soon as a favourable occasion was discerned. Grenville saw the force of this argument, but refused to respond to reiterated approaches from Front for the dispatch of more British warships to the Mediterranean to protect the Italian states against possible attack. A Tuscan approach to George III to the same end was also unsuccessful. Front concluded that Britain would only come to the assistance of the Dutch. In his reports from Turin, John Trevor emphasised the degree to which domestic problems could encourage a cautious international position,

neither the state of its finances or army, the complexion of its administration, the character of the Sovereign, or his immediate successor, are equal to any great exertion, or in a situation to

27 Chauvelin to Dumouriez, 28 May 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 581 f. 86–9.

28 Auckland to Grenville, 14 Mar. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 77; J. EHRMANN, The Younger Pitt. The Reluctant Transition, London 1983, pp. 91, 176–89.

29 Auckland to Burges, 20 July 1792, Bodl. BB 30 f. 172; Marquis St. Martin de Front, Sardinian envoy in London, to Victor Amadeus III, 21 July 1792, Turin, Archivio di Stato, Lettere Ministri Inghilterra (hereafter AST. LM. Ing.) 93.

30 Chauvelin to Dumouriez, 5 June, Chauvelin to Chambonas, foreign minister, 18 June 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 581 f. 130, 177–8.

make any dangerous experiment. Any considerable check or disappointment might be fatal to the internal tranquillity of the country; for however quiet things in appearance are, it cannot be denied, that there is a strong disposition to discontent among the Middle Class of the People[31].

Concern about the domestic situation might explain Sardinian policy, but it was not responsible for that of Britain. Far from Revolutionary France appearing a threat to Britain in the early summer of 1792, a different problem suggested itself, a stronger, monarchical France within the system of the partitioning powers. Eden reported in June that if Austria, Prussia and Russia succeeded in re-establishing order and good government in France, she would probably be invited to join in an alliance with them. The previous year, Hawkesbury had pointed out that a restored Louis XVI would be more attached *to his ancient allies ... than ever*[32]. Such an alliance would have looked both forward to the Holy Alliance (1815), the Quadruple Alliance (1815), the Congress System of 1818–1822 and the restoration of the authority of Ferdinand VII of Spain (1823), and back to the restoration both of the old constitution in Geneva (1782) and the Austrian Netherlands and Prince-Bishopric of Liège (1790), and the reimposition of the house of Orange in the United Provinces (1787). The last had been followed in 1788 by Dutch alliances with both Britain and Prussia, part of the misnamed Triple Alliance, by which the new political settlement had been guaranteed and the Dutch committed to supporting her allies' international goals.

From the British point of view, such a settlement of the French crisis would not be welcome. Britain would be excluded from a system uniting most of Europe. It would comprehend Prussia, and, therefore, Austria would not be challenged in the Empire. As a result of Catherine II's successes, Poland and Turkey would be cowed, and Sweden part of the system. In July 1792, the Marquis de Chambonas, the new French foreign minister, suggested to Chauvelin that, by destroying the balance in the Empire, the new Austro-Prussian alignment threatened its independence and liberties, both of which were of concern to Britain[33]. That month, Guillaume de Bonnecarrère, Director General of the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry, secretly approached Gower and told him that he would be ready to negotiate better Anglo-French relations if he received suitable encouragement from the British government. Having consulted Pitt, Grenville authorised Gower to investigate what could be obtained[34]. This approach was but one of a number of French initiatives in this period. Chambonas made approaches to Prussia and, though to a lesser extent, Austria; Lafayette negotiated with the Austrians[35].

31 Front to Victor Amadeus, 13, 21 July 1792, AST. LM. Ing. 93; Trevor to Grenville, 11 Aug. 1792, PRO. FO. 67/10.

32 Eden to Grenville, 19 June 1792, PRO. FO. 64/25; Hawkesbury, memoire, – Aug. 1791, Bodl. BB 61 p. 4.

33 Chambonas to Chauvelin, 2 July 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 581 f. 218–19.

34 Gower to Grenville, 6 July, Grenville to Gower, 13 July 1792, BL. Add. 59021 f. 31–3.

35 A. Mathiez, L'intrigue de Lafayette et des généraux au début de la guerre de 1792, in: Annales Révolutionnaires 13 (1921), pp. 89–105; G. Wolf, Le Marquis Scipion de Chambonas, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères de Louis XVI, in: Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française 259 (1985), pp. 25–45, Le dernier ministère Feuillant et la politique étrangère du Marquis Scipion de Chambonas, in: Actes du 110e Congres National des Sociétés Savantes, Montpellier 1985. Hist. Mod. et Cont., Paris 1986, I, 265–71, Juin 1792: Faut-il négocier avec la Prusse ou avec l'Autriche?, in: L'Information

These approaches led nowhere, and, unsurprisingly, are commonly forgotten, not least in the general accounts of international relations. The latter, faced with the need to explain so much in such little space, concentrate on what occurred, rather than on what might have happened, and thus fail to present the options and unpredictability that so greatly affected both decision-makers and commentators[36]. Instead, there seems in most accounts, to have been an inevitability in the changes gathering pace that summer, an almost mechanical shifting of gears towards a bloody culmination of the developing international and French domestic crises. And yet, as William Gardiner, agent in Brussels, pointed out, *we live in an age when such extraordinary events arrive, that all reasonable foresight is totally derouted*[37]. The outbreak of war narrowed the range of options for combattants, but the very nature of the conflict made the situation more than ordinarily uncertain to contemporaries. This was true not only of the unpredictability of international developments, variously demonstrated by the death of Leopold II, the assassination in March 1792 of Gustavus III of Sweden and the surprising failure of the Prussian invasion of France; but also of the role of domestic changes in France.

The stress of war led to the sweeping away of the French monarchy. The Tuileries was stormed on 10 August, and the monarchy suspended by the Legislative Assembly. On 19 August the Prussian army under Duke Karl Wilhelm of Brunswick, George III's brother-in-law, crossed the French frontier. That day, Lafayette fled to the allies. Initially it looked as though France would collapse as the United Provinces had done, before Brunswick's forces, in 1787 and the Austrian Netherlands in 1790. Longwy surrendered on 23 August, Verdun on 3 September. The September Massacres in Paris appeared the death throes of a collapsing regime; the response of the Revolution to invasion and betrayal.

Foreign diplomats had been accredited to Louis XVI. His imprisonment and the collapse of his government led to a break in formal diplomatic relations, not least because it was unclear who was now wielding authority in Paris and what the effect of Brunswick's advance would be. The British envoy left, but so also did his Danish, Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Swiss and Venetian counterparts. The Cabinet met on 17 August and decided to recall Gower, in part because of the danger to his life: his Swiss guard had been killed. That day, Henry Dundas, who was acting as Secretary of State in the absence of Grenville, wrote to Gower that *the present state of the* [French] *Government supersedes all your official powers*. Gower's credentials were no longer valid as executive power had been withdrawn from Louis, and, *His Majesty judges it proper on this account, as well as most conformable to the principles of neutrality which His Majesty has hitherto observed that you should no longer remain at Paris*[38].

Historique 49 (1987), pp. 191–3, Un Oublié de la Diplomatie sous la Révolution Française. Le Marquis Scipion de Chambonas, in: Bulletin de la Société des Sciences Historiques et Naturelles de l'Yonne 123 (1991), pp. 76–9.

36 J. Black, A System of Ambition? British Foreign Policy 1660–1793, Harlow 1991, pp. xiv, 1–2.

37 Gardiner to Duke of Dorset, formerly Ambassador in Paris, 17 May 1792, Maidstone, Kent Archives Office, C 180.

38 James Bland Burges, Under Secretary, to Grenville, 15 Aug., 3 Sept., Dundas to George III, 17 Aug., Burges to Grenville, 15, 17 Aug., Dundas to Gower, 17 Aug., Burges to Auckland, 17 Aug. 1792, BL. Add. 58857 f. 18, 58968 f. 29, 31, 54, 34444 f. 88, 90, 59064 f. 35–6, 51.

Despite concern that he had been stopped en route for the Channel, Gower reached London on 1 September. The Secretary of Embassy, William Lindsay, followed a week later, after his threat to leave anyway and let the French take the consequences if he was detained or killed led to his finally receiving his passport[39].

The recall was, according to Grenville, *most conformable to the principles of neutrality* on which British policy was based. The British ministry would not therefore be required to recognise any new French government, a step that would alienate Austria and Prussia, and also deviate from the course that the Dutch government had already outlined. In addition, it would be easier, if relations were broken, to maintain a cool response to French approaches, such as that in mid-August from Chauvelin for British interposition to persuade the invaders to leave France. The British government thus followed a path in which her response to the Prussian invasion and the developments in Paris made her neutrality clearer and accentuated her distance from the combatants. On 21 August Grenville explained the new policy towards Chauvelin, who had initially condemned the events of 10 August[40], and then persuaded Pitt to return the note he had delivered. Chauvelin was not to be expelled, but the government had decided,

> *not to consider ... as official, any communications except in the usual form and through the usual channel of a Minister accredited by His Most Christian Majesty, nor to receive any new minister having credentials from any other authority or power in that Kingdom erected on the suspension or abolition of the Monarchy ... it is by no means the King's intention to depart from the line of neutrality which he has observed, or to interfere in the internal affairs of France or in the settlement of the future government of that kingdom*[41].

Such distinctions appeared academic as the Prussians, supported by Austrian, Hessian and émigré units, advanced on Paris, but they were to be necessary because the new French government had decided to seek better relations with Britain. The new foreign minister, Pierre Lebrun, told the Legislative Assembly on 23 August that it was reasonably content with British inactivity and had decided to retain Chauvelin in London and not to allow *miserables querelles d'etiquette*, in the form of retaliation for Gower's recall, to harm relations. François Noël, an unfrocked priest sent as a special agent to supplement and check on Chauvelin, was instructed not to seek to inspire domestic opposition to the government. Instead, he was ordered to press for the consolidation of a natural union between Britain and France, by means of an extension of the Eden treaty into a defensive alliance. In return for British government assistance with a loan of £3–4 million, the cession of Tobago was to be offered, though, in a new note, the consent of its inhabitants was seen as necessary. A crucial distinction was also drawn between the Austrian Netherlands and the United Provinces. Noël was to say that neither the Belgian *Patriots* nor the French supported the cause of Dutch revolution, and was to announce that the Batavian

39 George Aust, Under Secretary, to Grenville, [27 Aug.?], [28 Aug.?], 8 Sept., Burges to Grenville, 1, 8 Sept. 1792, BL. Add. 58968 f. 41, 47, 58, 51, 60–1; Pitt to Edward Eliot, 31 Aug. 1792, Ipswich, East Suffolk County Record Office (hereafter CRO.) HA 119 T 108/39 no. 279; Auckland to Burges, 21 Aug., Lindsay to Burges, 3, 5 Sept. 1792, Bodl. BB 30 f. 179, 45 f. 118, 120.

40 Chauvelin to Grenville, 16 Aug. 1792, Historical Manuscripts Commission, The Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue at Dropmore, III, 460–1.

41 Grenville to Auckland, 21 Aug., BL. Add. 34444 f. 114–15.

Legion of Dutch *Patriot* exiles was to be dissolved[42]. Noël's instructions were at once naive – there was no chance of a British loan – and perspicacious in their appreciation of British sensitivity over the United Provinces. They were followed up by the foolish suggestion that Chauvelin encourage Britain to mount a colonial war on Spain[43]. The state of France was such, however, that no British move towards her was possible. The September Massacres inspired widespread repulsion. Indeed, the British government departed from its neutral path by warning that if Louis XVI was treated with violence, those responsible would not receive asylum[44].

The British government thus clearly revealed an attitude that was not likely to please its Revolutionary counterpart; there was already a marked lack of sympathy even though, in September, there did not yet appear to be any clash of interests. This attitude was not sufficient to please the émigrés, who might soon compose the government of France, or, more seriously, their foreign supporters. A copy of the instructions for Gower's recall was sent to Eden for the information of the Prussian government, but this was not seen as an opportunity to make an approach for closer relations. And yet, the British government wanted Brunswick to succeed, and feared the consequences of failure. In response to a discussion between Brunswick and Major-General Sir James Murray, who was reporting on his advance to the British government, Henry Dundas, who was acting as Foreign Secretary, sent Murray instructions that reflected the ministry's views. In line with British neutrality, Murray was to seek the views of the invading powers, but he was also informed of British hopes,

> *that the result of the present interference of the powers of Germany may be the re-establishment of such a government in France, as, on the one hand, would protect other powers from a renewal of that spirit of restlessness and intrigue, which had so often been fatal to the tranquillity of Europe, and, on the other hand, secure to the executive government such a degree of energy and vigour, as might enable it to extirpate those seeds of anarchy and misrule, which had so peculiarly of late characterised the whole transactions of that distracted country*[45].

Brunswick, who sought a more committed British position, found the instructions unsatisfactory, while British commentators were themselves concerned about the Duke's slow progress. The intractable terrain of the Argonne, logistical problems, the effect of rain on the roads, and sickness, especially dysentery, among his troops, caused Brunswick serious problems, and at Valmy on 20 September 1792 he found his advance checked by a larger French army that did not disintegrate when threatened[46]. Brunswick's failure and his subsequent retreat, which began on the 30th, were so surprising that there were reports of secret objectives on the part of Frederick William II, and indeed there were negotiations for a cessation of arms

42 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 28 Aug., Lebrun to Noël, 29 Aug., 11 Sept. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 580 f. 39–42, 46–52, 113; J. T. Murley, The Origin and Outbreak of the Anglo-French War of 1793, DPhil. Oxford 1959, pp. 36–7.

43 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 14 Sept., Lebrun to Noël, 18 Sept. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 582 f. 137, 167.

44 Burges to Elgin, 21 Sept. 1792, Broomhall 60/2/32.

45 Grenville to Eden, 21 Aug. 1792, PRO. FO. 64/25; Dundas to Murray, 12 Sept. 1792, PRO. FO. 26/19.

46 J.-P. Bertaud, Valmy, la démocratie en armes, Paris 1970; E. Hublot, Valmy ou la défense de la nation par les armes, Paris 1987; Lynn, Valmy, in: Military History Quarterly, 5, 1 (1992), pp. 88–97.

between Dumouriez and the Prussians[47]. The French government hoped for a separate Franco-Prussian peace as a possible prelude to a quadruple alliance of the two powers, Britain and the Dutch.

The British ministry was disturbed by Valmy and its consequences, not least because it was assumed that Austria could not afford a second campaign and that Prussia might abandon the war. Grenville thought the retreat *truly unfortunate in every point of view*. Lord Auckland, Ambassador at The Hague, was fearful that Valmy had opened a new chapter in the social, and thus political, context of military power,

> *In the experience which I have had of life, I never recollect any event which occasioned so great and so general an astonishment – it is a severe blow to the cause ... to put it in the power of the Jacobin clubs to say that an undisciplined rabble of new republicans greatly inferior in honour, has foiled the greatest armies and best generals in Europe*[48].

The full extent of the imminent crisis was not yet, however, apparent. Campaigning usually drew to its close in the autumn. The French had not yet revealed any capacity for mounting a successful offensive. Their debacle in the Austrian Netherlands in April and June was scarcely an auspicious example and since then the French government appeared to have collapsed. Thus, in early October, there were signs of a possible new international situation, whose course and configurations could not be predicted; but not of an imminent crisis caused by the unexpected advance of French armies.

Whatever the hopes of British radicals and French ministers, closer Anglo-French relations had not been an option in the period since Pillnitz. That did not, however, preclude an attempt to clarify potential points of discord. Indeed, the Pitt ministry had followed a not totally dissimilar policy in 1786/87 when it had negotiated both the Eden Treaty and an agreement over differing interests in India. It was to be possible for critics, such as Fox, to maintain that not enough was done in this manner in 1792/93. Yet, such an argument had several flaws. The instability of French government and diplomacy was scarcely encouraging. Two recent foreign ministers, Montmorin and Lessart, were killed in the September Massacres, and officials who indicated an interest in negotiating, such as Chambonas and Bonnecarrère, lost their posts in the political changes of 1792. There were five French foreign ministers in 1792. France did not, therefore, appear stable, but continuity was essential if the nuances entailed in clarifying potential sources of discord and establishing what was negotiable and where compromise was impossible were to be appreciated and to serve as the basis of acceptable relations.

More seriously, there was no real prospect of the British government taking steps that would outrage the partitioning powers. The government was scarcely a supporter of the policies of these powers. The Ochakov Crisis had left it feeling defeated and humiliated by Russia and tricked by Austria. Catherine II's favourable reception of Robert Adair, suspected of being an unofficial envoy from the British opposition,

47 Burges to Grenville, 11 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58968 f. 74; N. Hampson, Danton, London 1978, pp. 92–3.

48 Grenville to Richmond, 11 Oct. 1792, BL. Add. 58937 f. 164; Auckland to Straton, 9 Oct. 1792, Ipswich CRO. HA 239/2/283.

angered the ministry, and in 1792 growing Russian intervention in Poland led to concern. Charles Whitworth, Envoy Extraordinary in St. Petersburg, saw a partition of Poland as the essential objective of any league designed apparently only against France[49].

An absence of good relations did not, however, mean that the British were in any way seeking to take steps that would cause further bitterness. There was not only no interest in closer relations with Revolutionary France, but also no desire for a league against the partitioning powers. Counterfactual history is always problematic, but there are no grounds to suggest that had there not been a revolution in France, the Pitt government would have sought her as an ally against Austria, Prussia and Russia. Partly this was a matter of the deep divide between the two powers, but it was also the case that there was no desire for such a confrontation. Britain had come close to war with Russia in 1791, but that was unwillingly, and also both a response to a particular conjuncture and, then, as part of an alliance that centred militarily on the Prussian army. There was no real question in 1792/93 of any repetition of the thoughts twenty years earlier of opposing the partitioning powers.

That left, however, the question of Britain's response to first the prospect, and then the outbreak, of war between France and the leading German powers. This conflict marked the recurrence of the western question after a period in which much of western Europe had been peaceful: there had been no hostilities between France and the Kingdom of Sardinia (Savoy-Piedmont) or the Austrian Netherlands since 1748, while the Pyrenean frontier had been peaceful since 1720. Britain had played a role in preventing the eastward advance of France since the Triple Alliance of 1668, and a central role from 1689 onwards. Indeed the very political geography of western Europe owed much to Britain. At the Peace of Utrecht (1713) she had played a role both in securing Sardinia's frontier and, more importantly, in ensuring that the former Spanish Netherlands be ruled by a dynasty capable of resisting France, the Austrian Habsburgs, and that their position be strengthened both by the Dutch-garrisoned Border forts and by the return of some of the territories conquered by Louis XIV, including Ypres and Tournai. In the Nine Years' (dates of British involvement: 1689–1697), Spanish Succession (1702–1713) and Austrian succession (1743–1748) Wars, Britain had devoted much of her military effort and spent millions of pounds to prevent France's eastward advance. Although her efforts had been concentrated in the Low Countries, British military campaigns in Germany had been crucial in both 1704 und 1743. The Blenheim and Dettingen campaigns had both thwarted French schemes and been followed by the expulsion of French forces from Germany. Britain's role in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) was very different in type, but in 1757 British-subsidised German forces under the Duke of Cumberland and from 1758 British troops had sought to prevent French advances into northern Germany and thus had helped to protect Frederick the Great's western flank.

In 1792 the British sought no such role. France, of course, did not appear to pose the threat that she had done on earlier occasions, though that was not the crucial issue. When, after Valmy, French forces advanced into the middle Rhineland,

49 Whitworth to Grenville, 24 Feb. 1792, PRO. FO. 65/23 f. 34.

capturing, by 22 October, Speyer, Worms, Mainz and Frankfurt, the British proposed no response, no more than they did when Savoy and Nice were overrun the previous month, or the Austrian Netherlands in early November. Grenville replied to a Sardinian request for help by stating that Britain was unable to do so, and had decided not to join the alliance against France,

Ses sentimens sont toujours les mêmes, et sa conduite ne pourra être changée que par des événemens qui pourroient ou affecter les interêts immediats de ses sujets, ou bien produire des suites trop importantes par rapport à la balance générale de pouvoir en Europe pour qu'elle en restât spectateur tranquille[50].

The British government was thus prepared to accept a situation in which Britain did not play a major military role in resisting the drawing of a new political map. This had been clear from the spring of 1792 when the ministry essentially failed to respond to the possibility that France, by conquest or subversion, would gain the Austrian Netherlands.

In military terms, Brunswick's advance was not matched by a thrust against Paris from Flanders or Hainault. The ineffective Austrian siege of Lille was mounted with inadequate forces. 15000 Austrian troops under Count von Clerfayt were moved south east from Namur in order to cover Brunswick's right flank. This lack of pressure enabled the French Armée du Nord under Dumouriez to move south in order to block Brunswick. A British force comparable to that deployed in the Spanish/Austrian Netherlands in 1678 or during the Nine Years' War or the Wars of the Spanish and Austrian Succession or that which was sent after Britain entered the French Revolutionary War in 1793 might well have prevented such a transfer of forces. Sir Edward Newenham, an Irish politician, suggested that *an English fleet, with a few regiments on board, ought to threaten St. Malo and Brest in order to draw part of the forces to those places*[51], but there were no such moves.

The British position can be viewed in a number of lights. In conjuncture with Brunswick's campaign, it can be seen as prefiguring the establishment of Prussia on the middle Rhine in the Vienna settlement: only thus, it might seem, could France be resisted and the Empire protected. The policy of the Pitt ministry can also be presented as a departure from the interventionism of the period 1689–1762. This can then be discussed with reference to the growing importance of colonial and maritime themes.

Yet, the situation was more complex. When, in 1733–1735, Austrian Italy and the Rhineland had been invaded by the French during the War of the Polish Succession, the Walpole government had ignored its defensive obligations under the Second Treaty of Vienna of 1731. The Tory ministry that signed the Peace of Utrecht abandoned the Emperor Charles VI and his German allies who fought on against Louis XIV until 1714. Thus, British foreign policy in the period somewhat misleadingly termed the Second Hundred Years War was considerably more complex than is generally appreciated, and it is against this background of different tendencies and competing strategies in the period 1689–1762, that subsequent developments should

50 Grenville to Front, 18 Oct. 1792, PRO. FO. 67/10.

51 Newenham to William Miles, 13 Oct. 1792, in C. P. Miles ed., The Correspondence of William Augustus Miles on the French Revolution 1789–1817, 2 vols. London 1890, I, 336.

be judged. As with French foreign policy[52] and, more generally, international relations, it is necessary to appreciate the far from rigid and uniform nature of the ancien régime situation[53] when discussing the issue of change in the Revolutionary period.

The crucial issue in common in both 1733–1735 and in summer of 1792 was that the Low Countries appeared to be in no immediate danger. In 1733 the French agreed to respect the neutrality of the Austrian Netherlands. Similarly, in 1741 they attacked Maria Theresa in the Habsburg hereditary lands but not the Austrian Netherlands, a measure deliberately taken in order to limit the chance of Anglo-Dutch intervention. This strategy only worked up to a point. Walpole and the Dutch refused to intervene in both 1733–1735 and 1741, but in 1742 the Carteret ministry that replaced that of Walpole sent troops to the Continent despite French inactivity in the Low Countries. In 1792, the British government's definition of its vital interests there was restricted to the integrity and governmental system of the United Provinces. The source of this disengagement from the Austrian Netherlands was the longterm collapse in Anglo-Austrian relations that dated from mid-century. This distance ensured, however, that when France declared war on 20 April 1792 and subsequently attacked the Austrian Netherlands there was no casus belli for Britain.

British neutrality could be sustained while a struggle that was seminal in its consequences was being waged in the summer of 1792, because, with the exception essentially of a small group of anti-revolutionary zealots inspired by Burke, there was no constituency for intervention, no sense that vital interests were being threatened. Indeed, public discussion of foreign policy, which had been so vocal at the time of the Ochakov crisis, was muted for much of the summer of 1792, certainly in contrast to the controversy over the alleged threat from indigenous radicals. The September Massacres led to a marked rise in the discussion of French developments, but the government was still under little pressure to intervene. The bulk of the political nation continued to want peace, and French weakness seemed, as it had done since the Dutch crises of 1787, to be a crucial aspect of this. The speed with which this situation was to disintegrate was not anticipated. Attitudes were formed and decisions taken on the basis of an assumption that the Revolution would be contained within France's borders, if not suppressed. Though inaccurate, this was a supposition that the history of other episodes in what was later to be termed the ›Atlantic Revolution‹ appeared to support. Pitt's famous prediction to the House of Commons on 17 February 1792, *there never was a time in the history of this country when from the situation of Europe we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace than we may at the present moment*, was to be proved inaccurate, but in order to understand British policy in 1792, it is necessary to appreciate why it seemed reasonable.

52 O. T. Murphy, Louis XVI and the Pattern and Costs of a Policy Dilemma: Russia and the Eastern Question, 1787–1788, in: The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe: Proceedings (1987), pp. 264–74.
53 J. Black, The Rise of the European Powers 1679–1793, London 1990.