

How government directly responsible for the popular unrest



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Although much of the legislation passed and many of the tactics used by Lord Liverpool's government in response to the unrest in the years 1815-1820 aggravated the situation, they were not directly responsible for the popular discontent. Some of the reasons for discontent pre-dated the Liverpool administration. Lord Liverpool's government took office in 1812, when the Luddite movement was already at its peak - the first major and open displays of radical discontent.

Not only did industrialisation cause new technological advances to replace workers, but the remaining workers (particularly in major cities) experienced worsening working conditions and lower pay at the hands of ruthless employers who wanted to meet the increasing demand for heavy goods. Another reason for discontent that was largely beyond government control, was the population growth of the time and the subsequent migration to newly industrialised urban areas for employment opportunities. The high population in poor urban areas resulted in social problems such as poor sanitation, squalor, disease and over-crowding. These problems were exacerbated by the end of the Napoleonic war, which marked the end of the economic 'boom' period that the country had enjoyed due to demands on the armament and other war associated industries, causing acute depression to hit soon after.

This caused widespread unemployment, poverty and poor standard of living. In the countryside, low crop prices due to good harvests and the influx of foreign corn, caused farmers and the farming industry to be in crisis conditions by the mid 1810s. Although government response to these problems aggravated situation, they were not directly responsible for the

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consequences of the war's end. These acute social and economic problems caused an intensification of the radical movement in order to win over the suffering working classes by capitalising on the popular unrest and increasing the movement's popularity. The radical message was spread in a number of ways during this period in order to increase awareness of radical aims amongst the working classes.

The radical press was circulated nation-wide, with newspapers such as The Political Register, Black Dwarf and The Republican working to translate and criticise government action from a radical viewpoint. With increasing literacy rates, this was an effective way of stirring political unrest among the working classes and presenting evocative anti-government propaganda such as political cartoons which would present Lord Liverpool's administration as oppressive, corrupt and totally undemocratic. Through these radical publications, the workforce was able to form their own political organisations and demand a more open debate on the existing political and social system, which deprived them of their rights. Major Cartwright's, (a prominent figure in the radical movement), introduction of well over a hundred debating societies known as Hampden Clubs increased political awareness and they presented their grievances with the system in the form of petition to Parliament. The Mass Platform enabled effective orators such as Henry Hunt, to address huge crowds (60 000 people on average) with radical speeches and present potent radical symbols such as the Cap of Liberty to make reference to the influence of the French revolution on the British radical movement.

Although the British radical movement remained constitutional, and merely underlyingly threatened violence through the force of numbers, many radicals saw the French Revolution as a sign of the need for political change, even if they were not prepared to advocate extreme bloodshed and violence of revolution in Britain. The identification of the British radical movement with the French Revolution posed a very serious threat to Lord Liverpool's government and the existing system - they feared what happened in France would happen in Britain. The radicals added to the social unrest through the stirring of discontent and indicating to the working classes that by pressing the government for political reform, an end to their problems would come, thus encouraging them to participate in Radical activity. For example, the Luddite movement and Spa Field Riots (open-air meetings as a form of protest). Lord Liverpool's response to the popular unrest further aggravated the situation. The introduction of the Corn Law in 1815 was in order to guarantee landowner profits at a level to which they had become accustomed during the boom years of the war.

However the radicals and working classes saw it as a piece of class legislation by saving upper class landowners from cheaper foreign grain, stabilising prices and making it more expensive for the consumer. The consequences were riots, petitions and demonstrations, thus worsening general discontent. Another piece of legislation that was viewed by the radicals as being blatant protection of the upper classes, was the Income Tax Repeal of 1816. This saw the income-based tax (the more you earn, the more you pay) being abolished by the aristocratically dominated government, who had born the brunt of the tax.

In order to fill the gap in the revenue, indirect taxation was increased on popular items such as beer and sugar, a measure which hit the poor even harder than the Corn Law as they used these items on a regular basis. The toughening of the Game Laws in 1816, making poaching an offence punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment was hugely unpopular among the working classes for whom poaching had always been considered a legitimate way of supplementing income. According to the historian E. P. Thompson the new Game Laws were, 'as much as sign of the continued ascendancy of the landowners as was the protection of the Corn Law itself'. This obvious use of class legislation to protect the interests of the rich while oppressing the poor contributed hugely to the growing unrest, strengthening radical politics and support.

In order to establish whether Liverpool's government were directly or indirectly responsible for the popular unrest, it is necessary to determine exactly what the government were to blame for. In desperate fear of the Radical movement ever assimilating to the extremism of the French revolution, Lord Liverpool's government used spies to infiltrate the radicals. They did this to both orchestrate rebellious, non-constitutional acts (so that they could be crushed) and to control and be aware of their plans to prevent any threat of revolt. This is one of the ways in which the government could be seen as directly responsible for the unrest, because they were stirring it themselves. The government also contributed indirectly to the unrest economically, in their introduction of legislation which made the already poor working classes poorer, eg. Corn Laws and Income Tax Repeal, which strengthened radical feeling by worsening the situation.

They contributed indirectly to the social and political unrest by fuelling the radical position. Legislation such as The Suspension of the Habeas Corpus (1817- the suspension of the law that stated one had the right not to be arrested and detained without trial), and The Six Acts (1819 - outlawing mass meetings and restricting radical press) were seen as direct repression of the basic human rights of all British people on the part of the government. Such legislation by the government enabled the radical movement to strengthen their case for the government being oppressive and in the government's defence many of the problems they faced were unprecedented. For example urbanisation and industrialisation were new social occurrences in the name of progress.

It would have been unprecedented for a government to behave any differently to the way in which Lord Liverpool's administration did. The government passed legislation such as the Suspension of the Habeas Corpus in order to attempt to maintain law and order, which they, and any government of the time felt was their primary responsibility (above the solving causes of the unrest itself). This heavy-handed approach to dealing with the discontented situation would have been directly related to fear of a revolution similar to the French occurring in Britain and in protection of the upper classes who were the support and make-up of Lord Liverpool's administration, and thus to be expected. In addition, the extent of the government use of spies is questionable, because there was much differing of opinion in the interpretations of their use, with some believing that some spies took it upon themselves to incite radical behaviour, outside of their governmental orders (just to spy on radical operations).

Another major issue, is that the government was not directly responsible for the unrepresentative electoral system which was the radical movement's major opposition to the administration, as it pre-dated them. The economic legislation that they passed, did not make them directly responsible because it was the post-war depression and good corn harvests that caused the economic problems, their laws aggravated the situation rather than caused it.