

How effectively did  
pitt deal with the  
external threats of the  
french revolution



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The French Revolution initially weakened France as a major power, as it had to deal with its internal problems before focusing on any external activity. However, after Louis XVI was overthrown in 1792, it became apparent France was becoming strong again. France was traditionally Britain's great rival, so a strong and powerful France meant Pitt would have to deal with various threats to Britain. It has been argued that Pitt dealt with these threats well, by doing things such as the blue water strategy, and winning various naval battles.

However, some historians have argued that Pitt, although dealing with the threats effectively as there was no successful invasion of Britain, wasn't as effective as others thought, for example, he failed to move troops onto the continent soon after the French Revolution and also had a couple of failed attempts to support counter-revolutionaries in France, for example Toulon. The argument that Pitt dealt with the external threats of the French Revolution is largely based around the fact that there was no successful invasion of Britain by the French. Although there were a couple of failed invasions, such as Pembrokeshire in 1797 and Ireland in 1796, the fact that they did not succeed surely must show that Pitt dealt with the threat effectively. However, the problem with this argument is how much these failed invasions were down to Pitt. The Irish invasion didn't succeed because of bad weather and the indecisiveness of French commanders, not Pitt's military skill, likewise the Pembrokeshire attempted invasion failed because the French mistook local civilians for soldiers and surrendered, not because of Pitt. Another way Pitt can be seen as being effective in dealing with the French Revolution is with his blue water strategy.

This was a strategy that was intended to weaken France with Britain's strong navy, by attacking its colonies or by other means. An example of this is Nelson's victories that he achieved; the Battle of the Nile in 1798, the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801. The first two were fought against the French, showing the British naval dominance over them, and the latter over the Danish, an enemy of Britain because of the Armed Neutrality of the North, which Russia, Sweden, Denmark and Prussia formed in 1800 in response to British interference in their trade. However, the blue water strategy wasn't a complete success.

Many soldiers were lost, for example around 70% of the 89,000 British troops sent to the Caribbean died. Also, the fighting capacity of France and its allies in the Caribbean weren't destroyed. Another problem with this argument is how much the victories of Britain's navy can be credited as an achievement by Pitt, instead of an achievement of the admiral at the time. For example, the victory in the Battle of Trafalgar, in which 22 French ships were destroyed, but not one British ship perished, was mainly due to Lord Nelson's naval tactics and execution, rather than Pitt's blue-water strategy.

The final way I think Pitt can be seen to be effective was in his alliances. Pitt offered various countries, such as Prussia, subsidies. Pitt was able to pay these because of National Revival in Britain. These subsidies meant that the longer the country was allied to Britain, the more they would get paid. Schemes like this from Pitt enabled alliances to be formed, for example the Triple Alliance with Prussia and the United Provinces in 1788.

These alliances allowed Britain increased security in Europe, and also gave it trade benefits. However, these alliances were not to last, because of various discrepancies. Austria and Prussia both had interests in central and eastern Europe that Britain did not share, for example. In 1797, Britain was the only European power at war with France. Some people have argued that, while Pitt was quite effective, he was not as effective at dealing with the external threats of the French Revolution as he might have been. I think the first reason this argument is valid is that Pitt didn't take advantage of the situation on the continent, and didn't import troops efficiently across the Channel.

By the time enough troops had been transported to mount any serious offence, France had recovered from its Revolution and was strong again, thus Pitt failed to capitalise on a weakened enemy. And when Pitt did import troops, they failed in their goals. For example, the Duke of York commanded around 40,000 British troops to fight the French in Flanders in 1793.

However, by 1795 the British had been forced to evacuate the mainland, and half the number of British troops that started the campaign had been killed.

Another way that Pitt didn't deal with the threats effectively was his failed attempts to encourage counter-revolutionaries in France. He planned to land troops at both Toulon in 1793 and on the Quiberon Peninsula in 1795.

However, both times the British failed to lead a widespread insurgency against the revolutionary government. Pitt misjudged the level of patriotism in France, as it seemed that most French people would have preferred any French government, be it Jacobin or Bourbon, to a monarchy that had been restored by France's great enemy. Another way Pitt could be seen as

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ineffective was his misjudgement over the length of the war. Pitt was sure that the war would be a short one, and based all his financial dispositions from 1793 to 1796 on this assumption.

As Evans points out, " Much national wealth was wasted by inadequate early financing of a war which turned out to be very different to the one originally envisaged. " Pitt also assumed that France would not be capable opponents in war and would be easily defeated, and therefore he didn't appreciate the need for more military and naval training for Britain. This question makes you consider if there were any factors that dealt with the external threats not involving Pitt. This can be linked back to the preceding part of the essay where I mentioned that the failed invasions of Britain and Ireland were down to other factors.

Also, something else worth mentioning is Pitt couldn't control the actions of his allies, so the fact that they wouldn't support him fully in his fighting of France was not really his fault. To conclude, I think that, while Pitt was obviously effective in dealing with the external threats of the French Revolution, he wasn't as effective as he could have been.