

Polish Whigs on the Moon: The Polish Revolution of 1791 and the British Whig Party

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In August 1791, Edmund Burke said of the Polish Revolution: “it probably is the most pure and defecated public good which ever has been conferred on mankind.” Burke referenced the events of 3 May 1791 when the Polish King instituted a new revolutionary constitution. Burke praised the new constitution because it strengthened the King’s position and “not one drop of blood was spilled.” If the Poles continued to improve, Burke concluded, they might aspire “towards the stable excellence of a British Constitution.”¹ Two years later in June 1793, Burke rose to speak in the British Parliament. This time his views of Poland were not so rosy. Burke dismissed the recent Russo-Prussian invasion of Poland as an unfortunate but ultimately unimportant event. Offering guarded praise for the orderliness of the Prussian invasion, Burke concluded “with respect to us...Poland might be...considered as a country in the moon.”² Poland was too far away to matter, in other words. By 1793 Burke needed to denigrate the Polish Revolution because he resented how his political opponents, the Whig Party, used Polish events to continue justifying opposition to the government. This paper argues that the Whigs used pro-Polish rhetoric to defend their traditional political goals. Without Poland’s Revolution, the bonds of party unity could not have survived the divisive effects of the French Revolution.

Before diverging views about the French revolution disintegrated party unity, the Whig party united around one theme. They believed that “the influence of the crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished.”³ Because property-owning, independent men remained the palladium of English liberty, growing executive influence, according to the Whigs, threatened the balanced British constitution secured in 1688.⁴ The Whigs pointed to the events of 1783, when George III conspired with William Pitt to throw them out of office. Instead of choosing his ministers to reflect the “the sense of his parliament, and the sense of his people,” George appointed a minority minister, Pitt, and then corrupted the election in 1784—buying votes and power.⁵

¹ Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs in consequence of some late Discussions in Parliament relative to the Reflections on the French Revolution* (London: J. Dodsley, 1791), 102-104.

² Parliamentary History, 30 (17 June 1793): 1009-1010.

³ Quoted from Lord Dunning’s famous 1780 motion made against Lord North’s ministry.

⁴ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 64. L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 118.

⁵ John Cannon, *The Fox-North Coalition: Crisis of the Constitution 1782-4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 69-71.

Rockingham Whigs unified around the paramount threat they opposed—resurgent absolutist principles in Britain. Attitudes towards executive power became the dominant political fissure of 1780s Britain.⁶

The French Revolution eventually destroyed the Whig party's anti-executive consensus. Edmund Burke, who helped found the party in the 1770s, played a key role in convincing opposition members that the French revolution was not a victory gained over tyrannical executive power—the party's initial interpretation. By 1793, the opposition could no longer unify by shoehorning interpretations of the French revolution into their own domestic struggle against executive power. The danger of popular disorder and licentiousness seemed far more poignant.

However, if the French Revolution destroyed Whig unity, the Polish Revolution provided a rich source of continuity construction for the Whigs who followed Charles James Fox and remained in opposition.⁷ Fox, Burke's former protégé and the most important Whig parliamentarian, refused to believe French revolutionary violence changed domestic political context. The Polish Revolution helped Fox and those Whigs who followed him, the Foxites, maintain their belief that they alone remained consistent to anti-executive Whig principles. Firstly, in 1791, Poland's revolution helped pro-French Whigs place themselves, the Polish, and the French in an imagined international movement. Whiggery at home struggled, but Whiggery abroad gave hope. Secondly, a Russo-Prussian invasion of Poland helped pro-French Whigs maintain a Manichean interpretation of politics; tyranny at home and abroad was growing and ought to be diminished.

The Polish Sejm proclaimed a new constitution on the third of May 1791. The new constitution established a hereditary monarchy, toleration of religion, and seemingly ameliorated the condition of Polish serfs. News of Polish events reached England just as divisions over the French revolution began to fracture the Rockingham Whig party. Edmund Burke broke with the Whig party on the sixth of May. Burke insisted that French events changed the context of domestic politics. French principles celebrating the rights of man falsely echoed the rights established in 1688. Burke despised the French ideal of rights which he described as the notion that “all men are by nature free...and continue so in society.”⁸ Placing emphasis on the notion that rights “continued” in men, Burke differentiated French notions from British ones. If men always ‘continued’ free in society, then there could be no legitimate authority.⁹ Burke believed French ideas represented a

⁶ According to L.G. Mitchell, the struggle between William Pitt and Charles James Fox begun in 1783 “determined the political allegiance of a whole generation.” See L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 92.

⁷ Historians Frank O’Gorman and L.G. Mitchell have established the immense challenge the French Revolution represented to the Whig Opposition. O’Gorman concludes that the French Revolution caused irreversible schism and confusion within the Whig opposition. “External events drove members of the opposition to adopt attitudes and to take actions which frequently defy all attempts at categorization.” Mitchell similarly concludes that the French Revolution made the Whig party of 1791 and the Whig party of 1794 fundamentally different entities. This paper builds on their conclusion by arguing that Polish events and rhetoric helped one portion of an already divided Whig party inherit the title to ‘true Whiggery’. See Frank O’Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 238 and Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party*, 239.

⁸ Parliamentary History, 29 (6 May 1791): 364.

⁹ Burke believed logically if rights always remained with the people, then they could always choose to “alter at pleasure” their government like a “dirty shirt.” Historian Dan Edelstein argues that by the late eighteenth-century everyone agreed human beings had natural rights. Debates about rights centered on “what happened to these rights in political society.” Edelstein describes three different paradigms or “regimes” of answers to this fundamental question. The “preservation regime” insisted human beings always maintain all of their rights in any circumstance. The “abridgement regime” proposed that human beings abandon their rights as the cost of entering political society.

new threat, rendering as obsolete Whig party commitment to anti-executive principles. Throughout 1791, however, Burke's challenge faltered because continental upheaval still fit into domestically driven, anti-executive Whiggish platitudes.¹⁰

Events in Poland undercut Burke's arguments and reinforced Whig dogmas. For example, Polish and French reforms allowed Whigs to hint that Britain's own domestic liberty was lacking. A report in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* extolled the Poles for instituting freedom of the press. Referring to the then current Parliamentary debate about changing the definition of libel, the article hoped that, with the example of Poland and France, "the degrading enormities of our own law upon the subject will no longer be permitted to continue."¹¹ Such rhetoric used perception of foreign constitutionalism to advance the Whigs' own domestic attempts at reform.

Opposition papers used Poland to comment on what an ideal monarch should look like.¹² An article in the *Morning Post* celebrated a monarch of liberty. Stanislas Augustus was a unique monarch capable of calling up "the lowest ranks of men into political ...importance." He was a King who, "unsolicited and unintimidated," voluntarily surrendered his power. The article concluded that Stanislas Augustus was not a "king of robes and sceptres...diadems and prerogatives"—implicitly unlike George III.¹³ Missing that the new Polish constitution actually empowered the King, the *Post's* article used the Polish king as a foil for George III.

Whig papers connected their domestic politics to both the Polish and French revolutions, positioning everything as part of a common struggle for liberty. Opposition papers, confident that "the spirit of Liberty is roused" and celebrating the second anniversary of the French Revolution, commonly referred to both revolutions simultaneously. A commemoration of the French Revolution on the 14th of July 1791 first toasted the rights of man, then the British nation, then France, and then Poland. Popular songs to liberty followed.¹⁴ In Dublin, men marched under a banner "indicating that the revolution in America was the source of those in France and Poland."¹⁵ Meetings could feature Polish guest speakers and include toasts calling for "the British, Irish, American, French and Polish nations" to unite against the enemies of liberty and the rights of man.¹⁶ British Whigs took comfort in foreign allies who, sharing similar enemies and goals, fought and won Whiggish victories over executive power.

Opposition Whigs analyzed the Polish and French revolutions through the lens of their own anti-executive principles. Throughout 1791, the foreigners stuck to their roles. Unfortunately for party unity, events in 1792 quickly undermined the Whig script. Over the winter of 1791, tension between France, Austria, and Prussia increased. Austria and Prussia set aside their differences and, by May, all three were at war. In July the Duke of Brunswick issued a manifesto threatening French

Finally, the "transfer regime" proposed that rights become the *droit* of the state. Under certain conditions individuals might reassert their rights if the state violates its responsibility. In general terms Burke championed the "transfer regime" against the "preservation regime." See Dan Edelstein, *On the Spirit of Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1-2.

¹⁰ Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party*, 164-176.

¹¹ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 18 May 1791.

¹² For more information on the Whig Party's subsidization of the Whig press, see Arthur Aspinall, *Politics and the Press, 1780-1850* (London: Home & Van Thal Ltd, 1949), 270-298. Ivon Asquith, "James Perry and the Morning Chronicle 1790-1821," (Doctoral Thesis, University of London, 1973), 6-75.

¹³ *Morning Post*, 20 June 1791.

¹⁴ *Morning Herald*, 15 July 1791. *Morning Post* 15 July 1791.

¹⁵ *Morning Post*, 22 July 1791.

¹⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 15 October 1791, *London Chronicle* 19-21 July 1791.

revolutionists before invading.¹⁷ In France, as a result, a second revolution began months of disorder and violence. The August revolution made it impossible for the more conservative Whigs to interpret French events according to Whig dogmas. The simultaneous growth of popular, pro-French societies at home seemingly presaged a domestic revolution.¹⁸ A large portion of the Whig party now began believing France might represent a new threat worse than executive corruption at home.

Some members of the party, however, continued to insist that secretive executive power remained the paramount threat. Developments in Poland over summer 1792 helped them maintain their beliefs. Poland's new constitution threatened to break decades of Russian suzerainty. Catherine II of Russia found this unacceptable. In May 1792, she prompted a group of Polish noblemen to declare for the old constitution. By August, the Russian military, with Prussian help, crushed the small Polish army and captured Warsaw. Months of complicated diplomatic horse trading followed, but two things became clear by the autumn of 1792. There would be another Polish partition and the Polish Constitution of 1791 was no more.¹⁹

The constellation of forces arrayed against France and Poland made it possible for pro-French Whigs to portray continental events as part of an international conspiracy against liberty. Poland reinforced their commitment to anti-executive principles—what might the despotical confederacy do to the British constitution if unchecked?²⁰ A series of newspaper editorials by a “Calm Observer” spent weeks outlining the conspiracy.²¹ Over the summer and autumn of 1792, Benjamin Vaughan, the author, used the invasion of Poland to argue that Whiggish interpretations of international events still held true.

Vaughn argued the invasion of Poland violated the natural right of a nation to govern itself and to decide its own constitution.²² Revolution, Vaughn believed, remained an effective and important means for peoples to improve their governments and gain liberty. “There are few good governments in the world...even [Britain's] has required more than one successful revolution to produce...its perfection.”²³ To Vaughn, Poland's fate signified a “new scene” because two princes agreed to “concert” their forces together against the liberties of the people in a third country. The concert of princes selfishly combined to ensure “that no nation shall ever be able to right its own wrongs.”²⁴ The plot ought to focus British attention because success might “ripen the views of the parties into farther projects ...dangerous...to our existence.”²⁵ In other words, a conspiracy of

¹⁷ H.M. Scott, *Birth of a Great Power System: 1740-1815* (London: Pearson Education, 2006), 254-258.

¹⁸ John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Reluctant Transition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 104-108. See also Chapter 12 in Micah Alpaugh, *Friends of Freedom: The Rise of Social Movements in the Age of the Atlantic Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 311-337.

¹⁹ Jerzy Lukowski, *The Partitions of Poland 1772, 1793, 1795* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 139-158.

²⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, 8 June 1792. “The invasion of Poland by...Russia, proclaims to the world the conspiracy which [is] now forming in the Cabinets of Despots against the felicity of nations.” “Every *Revolution*” “which extends the influence of the people by limiting the domination of Princes” offended the tyrants of Europe. The article concludes with an ominous hint that Britain might be the next target.

²¹ The author, Benjamin Vaughan, was a junior member of Parliament who voted with the Whig opposition. A follower of the 1st Marquess of Lansdowne, Lord Shelburne, Vaughn traveled with Shelburne's son to France in 1790. R.G. Thorne, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1790-1820*, “Benjamin Vaughan” (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), 442-443.

²² *Morning Chronicle*, 20 July 1792.

²³ *Morning Chronicle*, 25 July 1792.

²⁴ *Morning Chronicle*, 25 July 1792.

²⁵ *Morning Chronicle*, 25 July 1792.

despots abroad might next target Britain because a free nation amongst a neighborhood of slave nations was a “dangerous example.”²⁶

Talking about a union of princes also played on British fears of universal monarchy—a long established trope. The very concept of the balance of power achieved widespread use in British political rhetoric because of the early eighteenth-century fears of universal monarchy embodied by Louis XIV.²⁷ Eighteenth-century British foreign policy centered on countering supposedly unabated French aggression. Vaughn encouraged his readers to see that now the concert of princes threatened the balance of power, not France. What might become of Britain, Vaughn asked, if the “triumvers” seized on the resources and power of both Poland and France? “Will...[Britain] who used to protect others, herself find any protectors?”²⁸ The threat to the balance of power demanded that Britain resume her traditional role protecting the liberties of other nations—this time with a rejuvenated French ally.²⁹

Poland’s situation also influenced Charles James Fox; the most important Whig leader still interpreting French events positively. Belief in a continental conspiracy of despots informed Fox’s continued pro-French stance. Personally, Fox lamented Jacobin bloodletting, but in letters to his nephew, he pointed to the Duke of Brunswick’s invasion and the fate of “poor Poland” as far worse than the French terror.³⁰ Louis XVI, according to Fox, invited the second revolution in 1792 by conspiring with foreign forces against his own constitution. “An English Whig,” Fox concluded, “must disapprove...or quit his English principles.”³¹ Fox explained away the September massacres in Whig terms: the king acted against the will of the nation expressed in the Assembly. The attack against Poland illustrated what might have happened if the French people had not acted. Poland, for pro-French Whigs, acted as a counter to the effects of the September massacres.

By late November 1792, William Pitt and his ministers, alarmed at their perception of a growing series of potentially revolutionary dangers, decided to call out the militia and assemble Parliament.³² Divisions in the Whig opposition might now become publicly visible. Pitt’s actions enraged Fox. Pitt was a “monster” who “would not scruple to the risque [sic] of a civil war” to destroy “the honorable connection of the Whigs.”³³ Most of the Whig party leadership decided to

²⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 6 August 1792.

²⁷ Tony Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England 1660-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 194.

²⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 13 August 1792.

²⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, 28 July 1792.

³⁰ Fox to Lord Holland, 20 August 1792. Cited in *Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, ed. Lord John Russell, II (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), 366-368.

³¹ Fox to Lord Holland, 12 October 1792. Cited in *Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, ed. Lord John Russell, II (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), 374.

³² Ehrman, 96. Ministerial actions in November stemmed from a combination of both domestic worries and the effect of French decrees seemingly presaging an invasion of the Netherlands. Domestically, the French victory at Valmy led to a resurgent growth of pro-French popular societies. According to Lord Grenville, sedition had been “completely quelled” until “the Duke of Brunswick’s retreat.” Grenville to Buckingham 14 November 1792. Quoted in Ehrman 224 fn. Additionally, the autumn and winter of 1792 saw the beginning of a sharp economic downturn. Ehrman, 93-94. This domestic unrest combined with the minister’s concern about two French decrees issued that winter. First the French broke long established international treaties by declaring free navigation on the river Scheldt. Three days later the National Assembly issued a decree of amity and friendship to all peoples seeking liberty.

³³ Fox to Portland, 1 December 1792. Quoted in Mitchell *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party*, 200.

tacitly support Pitt, but Fox, determined to maintain a Whig party united against growing despotism, at home and now abroad, refused to vote for Pitt's measures.

It was in this context that Polish developments entered parliamentary rhetoric. In his opening speech on the thirteenth of December 1792, Fox interwove the theme of ministerial conspiracy at home with an international crisis threatening the "happiness of mankind."³⁴ Fox believed that Pitt threw up the threat of insurrection at home as a "fraud" to cover up a bid to expand his power.³⁵ Pitt falsely associated domestic reforming societies with French violence to inspire fear. His machinations essentially made it a crime to talk about domestic political reform. If the commons did not check the ministers, then "we shall give to the king, that is, to the executive government, complete power over our thoughts."³⁶ To prove his accusation, Fox mocked Pitt's description of the threat France posed to Britain and Europe. Instead of French principles, Fox raised up the real threat—the concert of princes. Pitt "saw no danger in the union concerted between them" and "gave away Poland with as little compunction as honour [sic]."³⁷ The Polish situation helped Fox argue that the minister's fear of 'the French threat' was a pretext.

By February 1793, with Britain now at war with France, Fox depended on Polish rhetoric to undermine Pitt's justifications for refusing to negotiate peace. According to historian L.G. Mitchell, for Fox "the war was the final stage in a campaign to find an extension of executive power on mounting hysteria."³⁸ On the first of February, Pitt spoke of the "despotism of Jacobin societies," which threatened to proselytize their principles to every nation.³⁹ But what, retorted Fox, of the continental "combination" arrayed against European liberty? Austria and Prussia "saw a new form of government establishing in France, and they agreed to invade the kingdom to mould [sic] its government according to their own caprice" just as they had done to Poland.⁴⁰ Pitt spoke of how France endangered the balance of power, but Pitt's own inattention to Poland gave the lie to this ministerial argument.⁴¹ Poland served Fox because events there helped him argue the Whig party still needed to champion the anti-executive cause. As Fox put it in June, the "combination of despots" was "more dangerous" to Europe because, carried on with more secrecy and more consistency, it would outlast French anarchy—especially with British help.⁴²

Fox failed to convince the more conservative Whigs to return to the fold, not least because Burke and other ministerial supporters could all too easily mock his support for Poland as highly disingenuous. "France was near; Prussia and Poland were distant"—distant as the moon, according to Burke.⁴³ To Burke and most of the Whigs from 1793 onwards, executive corruption no longer

³⁴ Parliamentary History, 30 (13 December 1792), 13.

³⁵ Parliamentary History, 30 (13 December 1792), 23.

³⁶ Parliamentary History, 30 (13 December 1792), 19-20.

³⁷ Parliamentary History, 30 (13 December 1792), 27.

³⁸ Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party 1782-1784*, 217.

³⁹ Parliamentary History, 30 (1 February 1793), 279.

⁴⁰ Parliamentary History, 30 (1 February 1793), 304.

⁴¹ Parliamentary History, 30 (1 February 1793), 307.

⁴² Parliamentary History, 30 (17 June 1793), 998.

⁴³ Parliamentary History, 30 (18 February 1793), 433. Parliamentary History, 30 (17 June 1793): 1009-1010. Pro-Polish rhetoric may have helped the pro-French Whigs, but it also helped their detractors. The ministerial papers also used pro-Polish rhetoric throughout 1791. By praising Poland's revolution for its bloodlessness and for changing an elective monarchy into a hereditary monarchy, ministerial supporters implied that those praising the French revolution had sinister motives. Burke himself powerfully contributed to this rhetorical mode of attack in his pamphlet, quoted above, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, published in August 1791.

justified opposition. After December 1792, the Whig opposition declined in strength from “about 180 MPs to about fifty-five.”⁴⁴

However, the rump Foxite Whigs inherited Whiggery, not Burke and the conservative Whigs who joined the ministry. Because so much of the Rockingham Whig party’s original identity revolved around opposing executive power, Fox and his followers maintained the rhetorical high ground merely by remaining in opposition. Foxites took pride in their consistent attachment to “the cause of the people” over the cause of Kings. After 1792, Charles Fox found himself the social and intellectual master of a much smaller group of men. Moving forward, his views influenced many of the young men who remained part of the opposition. Foxite acolytes like Earl Grey and Lord Holland “carried the politics of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth.”⁴⁵

Poland served as an important rhetorical tool at a key moment for the surviving opposition. Firmly believing that monarchical power threatened the “total annihilation of all principles of liberty and resistance,” Fox deployed all available means to justify continued opposition, and Polish events demonstrated that conspiratorial despotism remained the real threat to British liberty.⁴⁶ Opposition to the war remained a fundamental part of the Foxite creed for the next twenty years.⁴⁷ An important part of how the Whigs justified opposing the war hinged on the easy association between the “concert of princes” and Pitt’s foreign policy. Poland enabled Foxite Whigs to argue Pitt’s war had nothing to do with a French threat to unbalance European power relations. What else might the minister be lying about?

In the short term, rhetorical variations on the theme of guilt by association did not help Foxite Whigs into office. But the Polish situation did help the Foxite Whigs maintain a self-perception of their own party as the committed guardians of European liberty. By 1793, Whig papers began to argue that Britain ought to wage war in favor of European liberty. A war in favor of the Poles would have been more honorable, and it would have been “more acceptable to the People.” Instead, Pitt turned Britain into a “bully.”⁴⁸ Whig papers played on a genuine sort of British sympathy for the downtrodden and enslaved.⁴⁹ A true British foreign policy would instead foster foreign liberty as the surest safeguard of Britain’s constitution.⁵⁰ Britain ought to guide foreigners in their struggles, benignly employing a moderating hand. Such action would secure esteem from European peoples. Peace and security would follow. Foxite rhetoric presenting Britain as the possible savior of European liberty would, when adapted to early nineteenth century politics, have important effects. The Revolutions of 1820 and 1830 dredged earlier Foxite rhetoric.

⁴⁴ Hilton, 64.

⁴⁵ L.G. Mitchell, “Foxite Politics and the Great Reform Bill,” *English Historical Review* 108 no. 427 (1992): 338.

⁴⁶ Hilton, 64.

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party 1782-1784*, 265.

⁴⁸ *Morning Post*, 24 July 1793.

⁴⁹ Such sympathy had important political effects—not least in the growing anti-slavery movement that garnered support from both Fox and Pitt in the 1790s. British evangelicalism drove much of the anti-slavery campaign. It is interesting to note that Evangelicals attacked continental despots and slave traders using similar language. Both despots and slave owners restricted the moral freedom of the individual, and essentially interfered with the individual’s ability to succeed or fail according to God’s will. See Hilton, 187

⁵⁰ It would go too far to argue that the Foxite Whig vision truly amounted to an alternative foreign policy because when the Whigs did secure command of the ministry, in 1806-1807 and again in 1830, little about foreign policy goals changed. See John Clarke, *British Diplomacy and Foreign Policy 1782-1865: The National Interest* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989), 113-114, 184-189.

New revolutions combined with earlier explanations and helped create a sense of international crisis which proved a component of British parliamentary reform.

This paper shows that while the French Revolution led many Whigs to re-evaluate their opposition principles, the Polish Revolution and subsequent partition helped a small cadre of Whigs to continue insisting that the paramount political fissure at home remained the threat of executive influence. At a crucial moment, when most of the wealth and prestige of the Rockingham Whig opposition had accepted that foreign exigencies required coalition with the hated William Pitt, Poland served a purpose for the Foxites who remained in opposition. Polish Whigs could be powerful allies, even if they lived on the moon.