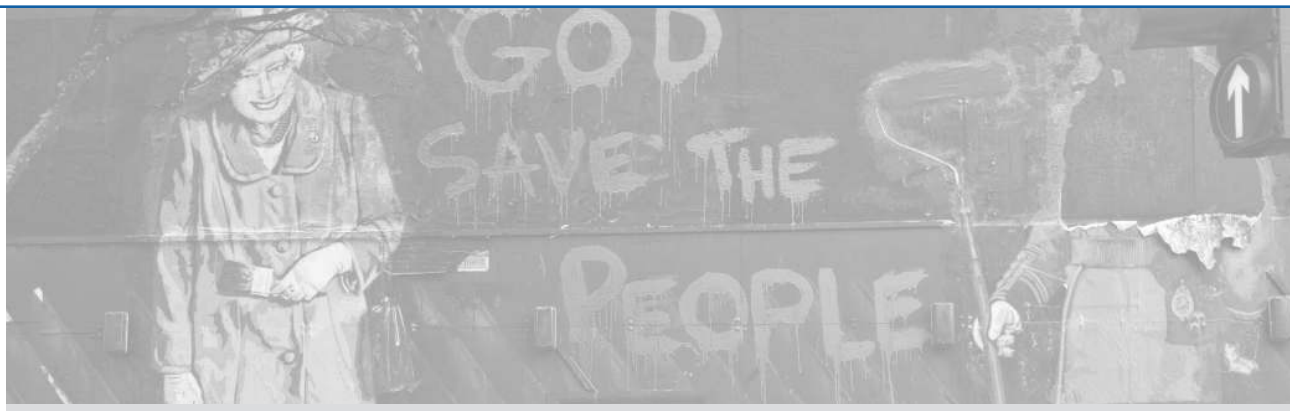
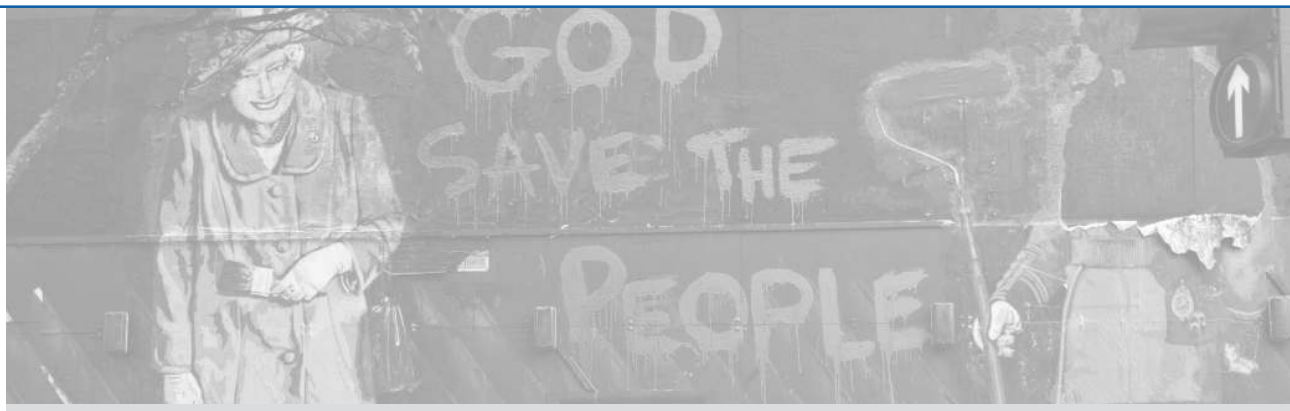



# I
# 1750–1819: The Ends of the Ancien Regime




# 1 The Imperial State

## Introduction

The **four nations** of the British Isles were torn apart by civil wars, rebellions and revolution during the seventeenth century. These were bloody and brutal conflicts. In the so-called first **Civil War in England** (1642–46), 14 per cent of adult males died as a result of the conflict, a higher proportion of fatalities than in the First World War. Even this paled in comparison to England's invasion of Ireland (1649–53) under Thomas Cromwell when between 25 and 50 per cent of the Irish population perished. At the heart of these dreadful conflicts was a series of questions that struck at the very legitimacy of the state. Should a monarch or a parliament rule? Who had the authority to raise taxes and armies? Should the state have the right to prescribe the religious practice of its subjects, whether Catholic or Protestant? How could Scotland and Ireland resist the imperial ambitions of England? These questions were raised again in 1688, when a small group of Whigs in Parliament enacted a coup. That coup, later described as the **Glorious Revolution**, displaced the Catholic king, James Stuart (he was James II in England and Ireland, but James VII in Scotland), in favour of his Protestant daughter Mary and her Dutch husband William of Orange. In the tumultuous months between William and his army arriving at Torbay in November and the installation of William and Mary as monarchs first of England and Wales in February and then Scotland in May 1689, few were sanguine that peace had arrived at last, let alone that the legitimacy and stability of the state had finally been secured. **Tories** were worried that the authority of the monarchy had been eroded and that they would be left out in the cold by the new regime. Some even sympathized with the **Jacobites**, those eager to restore James to the throne, who remained particularly strong in Ireland and Scotland where war and rebellion continued to foment. The absolute power of monarchs across the rest of Europe, except the Netherlands, was unchallenged. The prospects for the survival of the revolutionary state were not promising.

And yet by 1819 the British state was the most powerful in the world. It had transformed itself into a United Kingdom with the Acts of Union with Scotland (1707) and Ireland (1800). It had fought an almost perpetual series of wars (for over half of the years between 1688 and 1815 Britain was engaged in major conflicts), culminating with the defeat of its major rivals to become the dominant power in Europe at the **Congress of Vienna** (1814–15). And it had successfully extended its imperial territories and ambitions in the Caribbean, North America, South Asia and the Pacific. So robust was the state that, despite widespread dearth and the spread of increasingly radical ideas propagated by the revolutions in America and France, it could arm 450,000 Volunteers to defend the country from threatened invasion by Napoleonic France in 1804, without fear of revolt. It had not of course all been plain sailing. The growing power of the state generated protests and rebellions within Britain as well as across the Empire, which were increasingly met with unparalleled coercion and violence.

In the midst of the English **Civil War** Thomas Hobbes's *The Leviathan* (1651) outlined the chaotic nature of social life in the absence of a strong state. He argued that people would consent to the rule of a sovereign power to avoid their lives being 'nasty, brutish and short'. As you can see in Figure 1.1 the frontispiece of the book depicted a

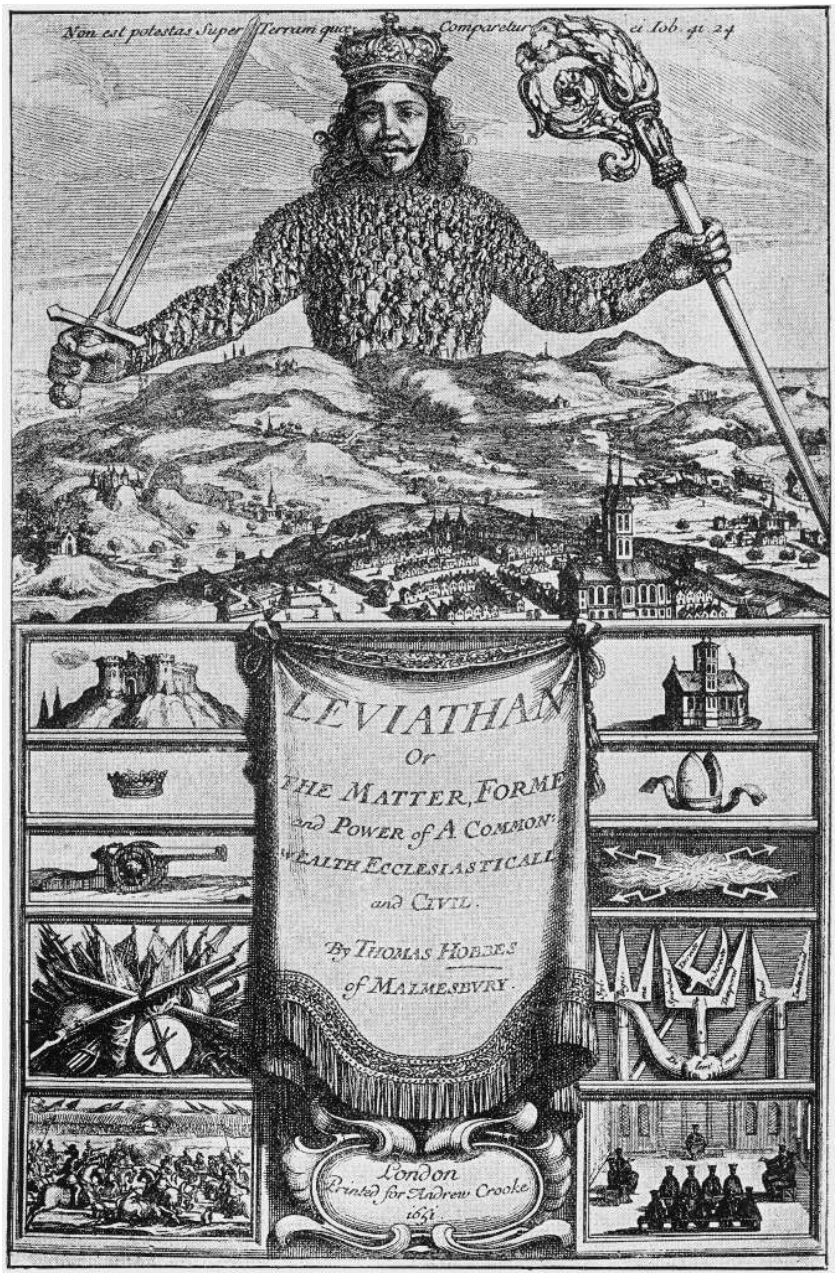



**Figure 1.1** Frontispiece to Hobbes's Leviathan, 1651

monstrous sovereign rising above the landscape sword in hand with a quote from the Book of Job declaring 'There is no power on earth to be compared to him.' By 1819 the imperial British state had become a Leviathan. This chapter examines this remarkable transformation.

## TIMELINE

| | |
|---|---|
| **1688–9** | The 'Glorious' Revolution |
| **1689** | Bill of Rights and Act of Toleration |
| **1689–97** | Nine Years' War |
| **1694** | Bank of England established |
| **1702–13** | War of Spanish Succession |
| **1707** | Act of Union between Scotland and England |
| **1715** | Septennial Act |
| **1756–63** | Seven Years' War |
| **1757** | Battle of Plassey |
| **1769** | Arrest of John Wilkes MP |
| **1773** | Regulating Act (of East India Company) |
| **1775–83** | American War of Independence |
| **1778** | Impeachment of Warren Hastings |
| **1780** | Gordon Riots |
| **1792** | Friends of the People, London Corresponding Society, United Irishmen<br>King's Proclamation Against Seditious Writings<br>Association for Preserving Liberty and Property Against Republicans and Levellers |
| **1795** | Gagging Acts |
| **1814–15** | Congress of Vienna |
| **1819** | The Peterloo Massacre Six Acts |

## War and the Reach of the State

After the Revolution of 1688–9 the first job of the fledgling state was to survive. The post-revolutionary settlement sought to address the outstanding constitutional causes of the conflict with the Bill of Rights (1689) and the Acts of Toleration (1689) and Settlement (1701). The Bill of Rights helped establish a new type of constitutional monarchy unable to raise armies or taxes and unable to interfere in the conduct of law or parliamentary procedures and elections. Together with the Act of Settlement in 1701, it also enshrined the Protestant nature of the monarchy, barring Catholics from that office and ensuring that the throne would pass to Mary's heirs and then only to those of James's heirs who had married into the Protestant German House of Hanover. Parliament, not the hereditary principle of monarchy, determined the issue of succession – a truly revolutionary principle in a dynastic Europe ruled by monarchs who claimed (if rarely practised) absolute power. John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) theorized that this new contract between Parliament and the monarchy endowed Englishmen with certain minimal rights and rested the legitimacy of government on their shoulders. The leading philosopher and political theorist of the age, Locke argued that the legitimacy of government resided in its ability to represent the people, with whom sovereignty lay. Finally, the Act of Toleration (1689) allowed freedom of worship to both Dissenting and non-conformist Protestants (those who chose not to join the congregation of the state's **Church of England**), but specifically excluded Catholics. All these groups remained barred from holding public office or being educated at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

This was a very English settlement. The Revolution was less than Glorious in Ireland and Scotland. In Ireland, where the Revolution effectively amounted to a military occupation, support for James was always yoked to a defence of Catholicism. Having initially fled to France, James quickly joined the armed resistance in Ireland, which was not finally defeated by William's troops until 1691. There followed a series of measures that ensured the so-called '**Ascendancy**' of the minority Protestant landowning class. Catholics were excluded from Parliament and public office (including the army) and were prevented from possessing firearms or buying and inheriting property. Over the following decades the Irish Parliament entrenched the interests of the Ascendancy, as well as that elite's peculiarly Anglo-Irish identity, as they sought to preserve and extend the government of Ireland independently of London.

In Scotland the **Jacobite** cause to restore the deposed James was especially strong in the Highlands where wars continued sporadically until 1694. Fuelled by French support, Jacobitism remained a potent force well into the eighteenth century, especially in the **Scottish Highlands** where the Risings of 1715 and 1745–6 were hatched. Even in England, chiefly in the northeast, there was support for the Jacobites among

Catholics and those who supported a restoration of the monarchy's authority over Parliament. However, while the Revolution had been militarily imposed upon Ireland, it had, despite the Jacobites, found important sources of support in Scotland, especially amongst Presbyterians. With the power and status of the Scottish Parliament heightened by the Revolution, it passed the Acts of Peace and War (1703) and Security (1704) to demonstrate its independence from both the monarch and Parliament south of the border. When the English Parliament responded by declaring all Scots south of the border as Aliens in 1705, the stage was set for negotiations that culminated in 1706 with the Scottish Parliament supporting the **Act of Union** between England and Scotland that came into effect the following year. To secure the votes £20,000 was sent north of the border and peerages and promotions liberally dispensed to supporters of Union. Yet Union also bought other advantages to Scotland. It provided the thriving tobacco and linen trades access to English colonial markets, while also enabling many Scots to build careers in the military and administrative service of the imperial state across the Empire. Eventually even the **Jacobite** clansmen of the Highlands formed regiments of the British army and became imperial warriors.

## *A Fiscal-Military Regime*

Given the fragility of this peace, it was quickly apparent that the foundations of a new type of **fiscal-military state** had to be laid if the regime were to survive and secure itself against internal and external threats alike. The fiscal component of this state was a novel mode of debt-financing: the **national debt**. In recent decades our governments and international financial institutions have grown allergic to the idea of public borrowing, that is, a state borrowing money and going into debt in order to spend on things it otherwise could not afford. Yet without the invention of debt-financing in the late seventeenth century Britain would probably have remained an inconsequential and insecure state on the northwest fringes of Europe. There were three critical innovations that made debt-financing of the state possible. The first was the creation of the **Bank of England**. The Bank of England was formed in 1694, when the new state, effectively close to bankruptcy, and facing the prospect of imminent invasion by the French if its navy were not reinforced, needed to raise funds fast. In return for a loan of £1.2 million the government gave its creditors exclusive rights to form a bank with limited liability and to issue their own bank notes. As a debtor, the state now also had to prove to its creditors that it was fiscally competent, and so the second key feature of this new system was transparency and public accountability. The state of the state's finances was henceforward to be made available to, and vetted in, Parliament. Thus the post-revolutionary British state struck a Faustian bargain: in return for loans that would allow it to secure itself financially and militarily, it not only made itself dependent upon its creditors in the **City of London** but ensured that its

future capacity for credit rested on a reputation for sound governance that was now a legitimate subject of public debate.

Although the state was now able to borrow money from the Bank of England, it still lacked the means to service the often prohibitive interest rates on those loans. It was the third key innovation – new techniques for collecting taxes – that made this possible. The state needed a reliable flow of tax revenues to service its debts. This was easier said than done, given that just decades before, attempts to raise taxes by the Stuart monarchy had helped to trigger the English **Civil War**. Yet before the **Revolution**, James II had created a more centralized and efficient system for collecting **excise duties**. Whereas other taxes were collected by local assessors paid on commission, the Board of Excise appointed salaried and centrally coordinated officers as collectors (there were over 2,000 by 1708). So effective was the system that after 1690 excise duties were extended to an increasing number of commodities and came to account for a growing percentage of taxation revenue – 29 per cent in 1710 and 52 per cent by 1795. Other taxes were also important to help the state service its loans. **Customs duties** steadily increased during the eighteenth century. By the 1780s some 400 customs officers were tracking the imports of around 1,200 goods on the London docks alone. Between 1690 and 1760 there were 800 Acts of Parliament regarding customs but from 1760 to 1830 there were an additional 1,300. In addition, taxes were raised on almost anything that moved and plenty that did not, from the sale of property to the number of windows, horses, dogs and women-servants on your property. Britain's tax revenue increased sixteenfold between 1660 and 1815 while its national income only tripled. Only the Dutch were taxed more heavily. Raising and collecting tax was critical to the new system of debt-financing constructed by the state around the Bank of England. Tax was the lifeblood that flowed through the veins of the Leviathan.

Chiefly this new fiscal system for raising monies was used to secure the state militarily against its dynastic and confessional rivals, as well as to extend its reach at home and abroad. The Bank of England's first loan was to rebuild a navy that over the following century became the most powerful in the world, projecting British power across the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans. During the first half of the eighteenth century the navy doubled its manpower and tonnage. It was an expensive and big business. By 1750 the navy's fleet amounted to a capital investment of almost £2.25 million (at least five times more that the fixed capital costs of the entire woollen industry and its 243 mills). Just maintaining that fleet cost half a million pounds a year. And this was just the cost of the ships. The major dockyards needed to build, repair and supply these ships were continually developed through the eighteenth century. By the 1770s they employed over 8,000 men; 2,000 men worked at each of the major docks of Portsmouth and Plymouth, dwarfing the size of any civilian enterprise. Given that the navy's yards also had to be supplied with wood, metal, guns, rope, sails and food, the **fiscal-military state** spawned an almost industrial complex.

Supplying the shipboard population was also a major exercise. By 1755 it had reached 40,000 men but four years later, at the height of the **Seven Years' War**, had almost doubled, making it the size of the two largest provincial cities of Bristol and Norwich *combined*. The navy was always short of men and relied heavily, especially at times of war, on the controversial practice of impressment, where men were involuntarily pressed into service by a press gang. At the start of the Seven Years' War up to half of naval seamen had been impressed, although half of those may have subsequently agreed to volunteer in return for a signing-on bonus or payment in advance. The navy had to recruit more men because as many of a quarter of seamen deserted every year, so intolerable were the conditions on board. Supplying ships with even a miserable level of supplies at sea was a colossal undertaking. The navy's shipboard population consumed almost 4 million pounds of flour and 11 million pounds of beef, over 4.5 million pounds of biscuits, and 2.5 million pounds of cheese.

Like the navy, the army grew exponentially during the eighteenth century: from an unprecedented 48,000 during the **Nine Years' War** (1689–97), 100,000 during the **War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13)**, 200,000 during the **American War of Independence** (1775–83), to 400,000 during the **Napoleonic Wars (1803–15)**. The further afield it went, and the more stretched its resources became over different continents and theatres of war, the more dependent it was upon local allies and mercenaries to help fight its battles. Twenty-five per cent of the army's budget went on hiring foreign troops up to the 1760s. Thus in 1757, when Britain was also fighting in Europe and North America, the decisive battle in the colonization of India at Plassey was fought with just 750 British soldiers employed by the **East India Company** and some 2,000 Indian sepoys. Overall the army and navy accounted for more than half of all government expenditure during the eighteenth century and reached over 70 per cent in the decade after the Revolution and during the Seven Years' War.

## *Building the Nation-State*

All of this new fiscal capacity and military might was not just projected abroad. It was also used to secure the new nation-state of Britain. The construction of a new road system was critical here for it allowed troops to be sent to quell rebellions and created a new national network of transport and communication. The continuing **Jacobite** threat in Scotland was the initial catalyst. Between 1726 and 1750 military surveyors, engineers and soldiers laid 900 miles of paved road linking up the Highland forts of William and Augustus to Inverness as well as the lowland fortifications at Dumbarton and Stirling castles. The new techniques for planning and laying roads pioneered in Scotland found their way back to England, as **turnpike roads** proliferated from the 1750s to facilitate and capitalize on the movement of people and goods. As these roads remained regional in scale, it was the government's own **General Post Office** (GPO)

that began prospecting a national network with standardized road surfaces that would allow its mail coaches to deliver a faster and more reliable service. It was only after the **Act of Union** with Ireland in 1800 that the **GPO** got its wish with the provision of two state-funded trunk roads that stretched 1,700 miles. One connected England to Wales and Wales to Ireland (via Holyhead); the other improved the Great North Road between London and Edinburgh. The rest of the 120,000-mile road network, 98 per cent of which was maintained by local **parishes** and turnpike trusts, only had to meet central standards – of smooth macadamized paving (named after McAdam, its engineer) mounded in the middle to assist drainage and set on a foundation of ten inches of gravel – after the Highways Act of 1835. The extension of the road network, the improved quality of road surfaces and stagecoach design slowly improved journey times and knit the nation more closely together. There was no shortage of stage coaches in the first half of the eighteenth century but their passengers endured long and gruelling journeys: by 1760, if the weather was kind, it still took two weeks to get from London to Edinburgh; whereas by the 1830s, 1,500 coaches left London each week and travelled around a national road network four to five times faster than had been possible in the 1750s.

The roads were essential to the business of the state, extending the reach of its eyes, ears and arms across the country. Soldiers, judges, tax collectors and mail coaches carrying government post travelled around the network, grasping control of the expanded and still unruly nation. Despite the terms of the Bill of Rights, the misleadingly titled Disbanding Act of 1699 legalized a peacetime standing army. This force, up to 15,000 strong, was highly mobile as it consisted primarily of horse regiments whose barracks were stationed strategically by trunk roads and scattered around the country. Intended to be conspicuously visible, it was hoped that their mere presence would prevent disorder, insurrection and smuggling along the coast that threatened to deprive the state of revenue. In a society that lacked any form of policing except occasionally by the most rudimentary work of local Watch Committees or **parish** constables, the army's crucial role in maintaining public order was formalized by the Riot Act of 1715. That Act enabled local mayors, magistrates or **Justices of the Peace** (JPs) to order the dispersal of twelve or more people considered 'unlawfully, riotously, and tumultuously assembled together'. Once a public proclamation had been read troops were allowed to intervene. And intervene they did to suppress any number of riots, whether over unpopular legislation, the price of food, insufficient wages or changes to working practices, the **enclosure** of common land, the introduction of tolls on **turnpike** roads, agitation for or against a candidate at an election, or a religious cause. In moments of political and economic crisis their resources were stretched. In 1757 twenty regiments were deployed to suppress riots across the country and in 1766 they intervened in no less that sixty-eight towns across twenty counties. In the **Gordon Riots** of 1780, when a march upon Parliament of 60,000 anti-Catholic