6 The Demonization of Pitt

A state of war between Britain and France was something with which everyone was familiar. It was only ten years since they had last been fighting each other. In the past these conflicts had been concerned with national security or competition for imperial markets. They had been government affairs, although they had inevitably generated feelings of national antipathy on both sides. These had been most pronounced at the popular level; politicians exploited them and intellectuals were inclined to treat them as matters of vulgar prejudice. Pitt still inhabited this mental world. He was unimpressed by Burke’s appeal for a crusade in defence of civilization and more concerned with the possibility of annexing sugar islands. Nevertheless, even from his point of view, this was more than just another Anglo-French contest. The revolution had divided French society; there was a civil war in the west and unrest in other parts of the country that he could hope to exploit, by means of agents, subsidies and perhaps the landing of troops. The revolutionary government was bound to see this as interference in French politics, and to extend to the British the feelings of passionate hostility that it applied to French royalists. In these circumstances it was likely that the British government would also be contaminated by the civil war mentality, to the point of discarding the elastic but meaningful restraints that states normally imposed upon themselves in the conduct of eighteenth-century wars.

To understand how the war appeared to the revolutionaries it is necessary to take a brief look at the politics of the Convention. Girondins and Montagnards were not political parties in the modern sense, with their own organization and interior discipline. Although the two groups became more and more sharply defined by their mutual hostility, the majority of the deputies never adhered to either and tended to fall in with whatever the prevailing mood in the Assembly happened to be. Girondins and Montagnards shared initial ideological assumptions and their divergence was largely a product of the political situation. The Montagnards’ Parisian power-base committed them to the endorsement of radicalism and they came to see themselves as the defenders of the sansculottes and of revolutionary egalitarianism. Driven to look for electoral support
in the provinces, the Girondins played the national card, denounced the violence of the capital, as manifested during the September massacres, and gradually came to see themselves as representing republican order, which tended to align them with the defenders of the status quo, in opposition to both popular agitation and economic levelling.

Ideology had its part to play, not so much in defining the identity of each group as in determining the way in which they regarded each other. Committed to an exclusive conception of the general will, which each claimed to embody, they began by denying the legitimacy of opposition and soon came to suspect their opponents of being counter-revolutionaries. It was a short step from this to the assumption that they would participate in plots against what each side called 'the revolution', even if this meant co-operation with its foreign enemies. This belief drew sustenance from the suspicions about the duplicity and intrigue of the British government which, as we have seen, had never been far below the surface of revolutionary politics. Accusations of connivance with Pitt, whether genuinely believed or cynically invented for the purposes of party propaganda, were both a consequence and a cause of the intensity of party animosity.

The unexpected reversal of the military situation provided a fertile climate for suspicion, besides generating a genuine national emergency. In March 1793 the attempt to enforce conscription detonated a revolt in the west of France, which had been disaffected for some time, largely on account of the revolutionaries' religious policy. The 'Vendée', as it became known, escaped from the control of the revolutionary government and the long and bloody campaign for its recovery was fought with extreme bitterness and widespread atrocities on both sides. On 18 March the main French army in the Low Countries was defeated at Neerwinden and its commander, Dumouriez, after failing to persuade his troops to march on Paris, fled to the camp of the Austrian commander-in-chief, Cobourg. Faced with this crisis, the Convention created the institutions that were to form the infrastructure of the Terror: a revolutionary tribunal on 10 March; 'revolutionary' police committees in every commune on the 21st; and, on 6 April, the Committee of Public Safety, an embryonic war cabinet. The antipathy between Girondins and