The Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807

The Peace of Tilsit

The Peace of Tilsit between Russia and France on 9 July 1807 changed everything. The Russians entered into an alliance with Napoleon and joined the Continental Blockade, and the general assumption was that attempts would be made to force neutral countries to follow suit. This created a dilemma for the Danish government. Rejecting the expected Franco-Russian demand would lead to the occupation of the duchies and Jutland. Acceding to the demand would mean that the British navy would cut the connection to Norway, and the state would run the risk of losing it. The government could cling to neutrality as long as possible, but, as far as Great Britain and France were concerned, the war had now entered a phase in which neutrality was no longer an acceptable option.

The demand made by France and Russia of the neutral states was formulated in a secret supplementary clause to the Peace of Tilsit, but at the end of July the French began to reveal its contents to the neutral countries. On 30 July Portugal was instructed to join the Continental Blockade. Napoleon had also ordered his Foreign Minister to present Denmark-Norway with an ultimatum to choose to side either with France or with Great Britain, while Marshal Bernadotte in northern Germany received an order to prepare an attack on Denmark-Norway. But the French Foreign Minister Talleyrand, who did, in fact, resign a few days later in protest against the Peace of Tilsit, ignored the Emperor’s order when he met the Danish emissary in Paris on 6 August. In a subsequent conversation Talleyrand, now resigned, allayed the fears of the Danish emissary by assuring him that the Danish-Norwegian government would be permitted to continue its existing foreign policy. The reason for Talleyrand’s disobedience is still unknown, but it could
possibly be due to the fact that he knew that the British were preparing an attack and therefore expected that Denmark-Norway would end up in the French camp under any circumstances. In this case, a French ultimatum could be used as a justification for an action by the British.¹

The British government also knew nothing of the supplementary clause to the Peace of Tilsit but quite accurately guessed what it contained and decided to steal a march on the French by sending a fleet to Copenhagen. In an attempt to prevent the Danes and Norwegians from learning about the impending expedition, a total prohibition was imposed on sailing from British ports. This was only partially successful. Members of the Danish Ministry of Trade as well as merchants in the duchies were convinced that the British aims were hostile, but it was assumed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the expedition was bound for the Swedish town of Stralsund in northern Germany, where British troops were already stationed. Joachim Bernstorff, the Foreign Minister’s brother and permanent secretary, brushed aside a warning from the Danish consul in Portsmouth in a similar manner.

But why did the actions of Great Britain come as such a surprise to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the foreign minister and the crown prince? One explanation was that even though the Danish-Norwegian government was not exactly enthusiastic about Great Britain, it did not believe it had acted in such a way as to be considered hostile. But this was precisely what the British did feel. The British had long feared that the Danes would not be capable of preventing the French from taking possession of the Danish-Norwegian fleet, but now they had begun to doubt whether they were even willing so to do.

On the face of it, it could be asked whether Denmark-Norway and its fleet really could constitute a threat to the mighty Royal Navy, but the British fleet was stretched almost to the limit on the seven seas. In 1805 Denmark-Norway’s fleet was the fifth largest in the world and was manned by skilled seamen. In addition, it would easily be able to collaborate with the state’s traditional protector – and Napoleon’s new ally – Russia, whose Baltic fleet was the fourth largest in the world. They were incapable of challenging British mastery of the seas either individually or collectively, but at home the Danes would be capable of cutting off British trade in the Baltic, which was vital for the British economy, for British corn imports and for the Royal Navy, whose supplies of naval stores came from the Baltic. In addition, if the Danish-Norwegian fleet fell into Napoleon’s hands, the French could employ it in an attempt to challenge British naval dominance or to mount a landing in the British Isles to provide support for an Irish rebellion.²