**Lecture 02**

**danger at home, 1815—32**

Until about 1850, Britain was in greater danger at home than abroad. The Napoleonic Wars had turned the nation from thoughts of revolution to the need to defeat the French. They had also hidden the social effects of the industrial revolution. Britain had sold clothes, guns, and other necessary war supplies to its allies’ armies as well as its own. At the same time, corn had been imported to keep the nation and its army fed.

All this changed when peace came in 1815. Suddenly there was no longer such a need for factory-made goods, and many lost their jobs. Unemployment was made worse by 300,000 men from Britain’s army and navy who were now looking for work. At the same time, the landowning farmers’ own income had suffered because of cheaper imported corn. These farmers persuaded the government to introduce laws to protect locally grown corn and the price at which it was sold. The cost of bread rose quickly, and this led to increases in the price of almost everything. While prices doubled, wages remained the same. New methods of farming also reduced the number of workers on the land.

The general misery began to cause trouble. In 1830, for example, starving farmworkers in the south of England rioted for increased wages. People tried to add to their food supply by catching wild birds and animals. But almost all the woods had been enclosed by the local landlord and new laws were made to stop people hunting animals for food. Many had to choose between watching their family go hungry and risking the severe punishment of those who were caught. A man found with nets in his home could be transported to the new “penal” colony in Australia for seven years. A man caught hunting with a gun or a knife might be hanged, and until 1823 thieves caught entering houses and stealing were also hanged. These laws showed how

much the rich feared the poor, and although they were slowly softened, the fear remained. There were good reasons for this fear. A new poor law in 1834 was intended to improve the help given to the needy. But central government did not provide the necessary money and many people received even less help than before. Now, only those who actually lived in the workhouse were given any help at all. The workhouses were feared and hated. They were crowded and dirty, with barely enough food to keep people alive. The inhabitants had to work from early morning till late at night. The sexes were separated, so families were divided. Charles Dickens wrote about the workhouse in his novels. His descriptions of the life of crime and misery into which poor people were forced shocked the richer classes, and conditions slowly improved.

In order to avoid the workhouse, many looked fora better life in the towns. Between 1815 and 1835 Britain changed from being a nation of country people to a nation mainly of townspeople. In the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, cities Above: Sheffield was little more than a large village in the early eighteenth Below: England’s population distribution. Even by 1801, the drift to the century. By 1858 it was one of the fastest growing towns of the industrial towns in the Midlands and northwest of England was considerable, and this revolution, with hundreds of factory chimneys creating a new skyline. movement increased during the first half of the nineteenth century.

If the rich feared the poor in the countryside, they feared even more those in the fast-growing towns. These were harder to control. If they had been organised, a revolution like that in France might have happened. But they were not organised, and had no leaders. Only a few radical politicians spoke for the poor, but they failed to work in close co- operation with the workers who could have supported them. Several riots did, however, take place, and the government reacted nervously. In 1819, for example, a large crowd of working people and their families gathered in Manchester to protest against their conditions and to listen to a radical speech in favour of change. Suddenly they were attacked by soldiers on horses. Eleven people were killed and more than one hundred wounded. The struggle between the government, frightened of revolution, and those who wanted change became greater.

**Reform**

The Whigs understood better than the Tories the need to reform the law in order to improve social conditions. Like the Tories they feared revolution, but unlike the Tories they believed it could only be avoided by reform. Indeed, the idea of reform to make the parliamentary system fairer had begun in the eighteenth century. It had been started by early radicals, and encouraged by the American War of Independence, and by the French Revolution.

The Tories believed that Parliament should represent “property” and the property owners, an idea that is still associated by some with today’s Tory Party. The radicals believed that Parliament should represent the people. The Whigs, or Liberals as they later became known, were in the middle, wanting enough change to avoid revolution but little more. The Tories hoped that the House of Lords would protect the interests of the property owners. When the Commons agreed on reform in 1830 it was turned down by the House of Lords. But the Tories fell from power the same year, and Lord Grey formed a Whig government. Grey himself had supported the call for reform as a radical in 1792. In 1832 the Lords accepted the Reform Bill, but more because they were frightened by the riots in the streets outside than because they now accepted the idea of reform. They feared that the collapse of political and civil order might lead to revolution.

At first sight the Reform Bill itself seemed almost a political revolution. Scotland’s voters increased from 5,000 to 65,000. Forty-one English towns, including the large cities of Manchester, Birmingham and Bradford, were represented in Parliament for the very first time. But there were limits to the progress made. The total number of voters increased by only 50 per cent. The 349 electors of the small town of Buckingham still had as many MPs to represent them as the 4, 192 electors of the city of Leeds. And England, with only 54 per cent of the British population, continued to have over 70 per cent of MPs as it had done before. However, in spite of its shortcomings, the 1832 Reform Bill was a political recognition that Britain had become an urban society.

Workers revolt

Since 1824 workers had been allowed to join together in unions. Most of these unions were small and weak. Although one of their aims was to make sure employers paid reasonable wages, they also tried to prevent other people from working in their particular trade. As a result the working classes still found it difficult to act together. Determined employers could still quite easily defeat strikers who refused to work until their pay was improved, and often did so with cruelty and violence. Soldiers

**The years of power and danger**

In 1834, there was an event of great importance in trade union history. Six farmworkers in the Dorset village of Tolpuddle joined together, promising to be loyal to their “union”. Their employer managed to find a law by which they could be punished. A judge had been specially appointed by the government to find the six men guilty, and this he did. In London 30,000 workers and radicals gathered to ask the government to pardon the “Tolpuddle Martyrs”. The government, afraid of seeming weak, did not do so until the “martyrs” had completed part of their punishment. It was a bad mistake. Tolpuddle became a symbol of employers’ cruelty, and of the working classes’ need to defend themselves through trade union strength.

The radicals and workers were greatly helped in their efforts by the introduction of a cheap postage system in 1840. This enabled them to organise themselves across the country far better than before. For one penny a letter could be sent to anyone, anywhere in Britain.

Working together for the first time, unions, workers and radicals put forward a People’s Charter in 1838. The Charter demanded rights that are now accepted by everyone: the vote for all adults; the right for a man without property of his own to be an MP; voting in secret (so that people could not be forced to vote for their landlord or his party); payment for MPs, and an election every year (which everyone today recognises as impractical). All of these demands were refused by the House of Commons.

The “Chartists” were not united for long. They were divided between those ready to use violence and those who believed in change by lawful means only. Many did not like the idea of women also getting the vote, partly because they believed it would make it harder to obtain voting rights for all men, and this demand, which had been included in the wording to the very first Charter, was quietly forgotten. But riots and political meetings continued. In 1839 fourteen men were killed by soldiers in a riot in Newport, Wales, and many others sent to one of Britain’s colonies as prisoners.

Many parts of London and other large cities were very dangerous, particularly after dark. It was for this reason that the first regular police fora was established by Sir Robert “Bob" Peel, after whom the new police were nicknamed “bobbies". The government’s severe actions showed how much it feared that the poor might take power, and establish a republic. The government was saved partly by the skill of Robert Peel, the Prime Minister of the time. Peel believed that changes should be made slowly but steadily. He was able to use the improved economic conditions in the 1840s to weaken the Chartist movement, which slowly died. In 1846 he abolished the unpopular Corn Law of 1815, which had kept the price of corn higher than necessary. Not only had this made life hard for those with little money, but it had brought their employers, the growing class of industrialists, into conflict with the landlord class.

These industrialists neither wished to pay higher wages, nor employ an underfed workforce. In this way, Peel’s decision to repeal the Corn Law was a sign of the way power was passing out of the hands of the eighteenth-century gentry class. These had kept their power in the early years of the nineteenth century. But now power decisively passed into the hands of the growing number of industrialists and traders.

Besides hunger, crime was the mark of poverty. Peel had turned his attention to this problem already, by establishing a regular police force for London in 1829. At first people had laughed at his blue-uniformed men in their top hats. But during the next thirty years almost every other town and county started its own police force. The new police forces soon proved themselves successful, as much

crime was pushed out of the larger cities, then out of towns and then out of the countryside. Peel was able to show that certainty of punishment was far more effective than cruelty of punishment.

Britain’s success in avoiding the storm of revolution in Europe in 1848 was admired almost everywhere. European monarchs wished they were as safe on their thrones as the British queen seemed to be. And liberals and revolutionaries wished they could act as freely as radicals in Britain were able to do. Britain had been a political model in the eigh- teenth century, but with the War of Independence in America and revolution in France interest in liberalism and democracy turned to these two countries. Now it moved back to Britain, as a model both of industrial success and of free constitutional government. For much of the nine- teenth century Britain was the envy of the world.

**Queen and empire**

Britain’s empire had first been built on trade and the need to defend this against rival European ! countries. After the loss of the American colonies in 1783, the idea of creating new colonies remained unpopular until the 1830s. Instead, Britain watched the oceans carefully to make sure its trade routes were safe, and fought wars in order to protect its "areas of interest”. In 1839 it attacked China and forced it to allow the profitable British trade in opium from India to China. The “Opium Wars” were one of the more shameful events in British colonial history.

After about 1850 Britain was driven more by fear of growing European competition than by commercial need. This led to the taking of land, the creation of colonies, and to colonial wars that were extremely expensive. Fear that Russia would advance southwards towards India resulted in a disastrous war in Afghanistan (1839-42), in which one army was completely destroyed by Afghan forces in the mountains. Soon after, Britain was fighting a war in Sindh, a part of modern Pakistan, then another against Sikhs in the Punjab, in northwest India.

The Russian danger also affected south Europe and the Middle East. Britain feared that Russia would destroy the weak Ottoman Empire, which controlled Turkey and the Arab countries. This would change the balance of power in Europe, and be a danger to Britain’s sea and land routes to India. When Russia and Ottoman Turkey went to war Britain joined the Turks against Russia in Crimea in 1854, in order to stop Russian expansion

into Asiatic Turkey in the Black Sea area.

It was the first, and last, time that newspapers were able to report freely on a British war without army control. They told some unwelcome truths; for example, they wrote about the courage of the ordinary soldiers, and the poor quality of their officers. They also reported the shocking conditions in army hospitals, and the remarkable work of the nurse Florence Nightingale.

In India, the unwise treatment of Indian soldiers in British pay resulted in revolt in 1857. Known in Britain as the “Indian Mutiny”, this revolt quickly became a national movement against foreign rule, led by a number of Hindu and Muslim princes. Many of these had recently lost power and land to the British rulers. If they had been better organised, they would have been able to throw the British out of India. Both British and Indians behaved with great violence, and the British cruelly punished the defeated rebels. The friendship between the British and the Indians never fully recovered. A feeling of distrust and distance between ruler and ruled grew into the Indian independence movement of the

twentieth century.

In Africa, Britain’s first interest had been the slave trade on the west coast. It then took over the Cape of Good Hope at the southern point, because it needed a port there to service the sea route to India. Britain s interest in Africa was increased by reports sent back by European travellers and explorers. The most famous of these was David Livingstone, who was a Scottish doctor, a Christian missionary and an explorer. In many ways, Livingstone was a “man of his age”. No one could doubt his courage, or his honesty. His journeys from the east coast into

“darkest” Africa excited the British. They greatly admired him. Livingstone discovered areas of Africa unknown to Europeans, and “opened” these areas to Christianity, to European ideas and to European trade.