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British Public Opposition Surrounding the
Townshend Duties Crisis

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

On January 5, 1769, a letter was published in *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle* written anonymously by an author under the pseudonym Cassius which warned their fellow Englishmen of the ruin the current crisis could bring them.¹ As Cassius foretold in his letter, “Thus does it appear that measures are taking throughout all the colonies to shake off their dependance on Great-Britain; and that whilst the people of England are amused with false accounts that all is quiet in America... the mischief is spreading itself far and wide, and evils are suffered to accumulate till they grow too great for remedy, and general ruin becomes inevitable.”² This inevitable ruin was a sentiment shared by many other writers who similarly saw the growing tensions across the Atlantic as reaching a breaking point.

With hundreds of letters bearing news reaching Britain from the various American colonies recounting the persistence of the colonists in boycotting British goods, many merchants were well aware that the trade they had depended upon across the sea was potentially breaking down. Tales of the breakdown of trade relationships, the growth of American manufacturing, political instability in the American colonies, alongside the spreading boycott movement caused some in Britain to question the legality and risks of colonial legislation imposed by Parliament such as the Townshend Duties. These colonial issues accompanied growing political strife at home in Britain over parliamentary disputes which resulted in mass petitioning movements calling for the dissolution of Parliament and for the Townshend Duties to be repealed as had

¹ I would like to thank my advisor Prof. Steven Pincus for his support and advice throughout this project and research. Also, I would like to thank Prof. Adrian Johns, Prof. Edward Cook Jr., Prof. Ralph Austen, and Prof. James Vaughn for providing additional support throughout this project. Lastly, I would like to thank my preceptor Julius Jones for his guidance throughout the year.

² Quotes throughout this thesis have been updated to reflect modern spelling. *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, January 5, 1769

been their predecessor the Stamp Act. A press bustling with oppositional pamphlets and newspapers ultimately emerged out of this pre-existing public sphere. This thesis focuses on this sphere of opposition and what factors led to its emergence.

It is not hard to find opposition within the American colonies due to the Townshend Duties as they adversely affected their economy and governance. But the reasons behind opposition in Britain itself are less apparent. How they affected British individuals is open to investigation because the laws only related to the control of the American colonies. This thesis aims to understand this issue and answer the question: Why did members of the British public engage in written opposition to the Townshend Duties?

ARGUMENT

There were a myriad of issues within Britain that prompted public responses in relation to politics, commerce, and culture. Opposition to governmental policies extended beyond the governing of Britain itself to the overseas governance and legislation within Britain's early colonial empire. The issue of legislating the colonies came to a head following the events of the Seven Years War as the British government attempted to solve its debt crisis. Britain was in financial trouble with a national debt of around 140-145 million pounds after the war.³ The Cider

³ Contemporary accounts on the amount fluctuate somewhat but this value is in the general range reported. In 1765, Grenville reported the amount at 140 million pounds and in 1768 some newspapers reported the amount to be around 145 million pounds. Also, considering the three year difference, the British debt could have increased in that time.

Connecticut Historical Society, *Collections*, XVIII, 337-340 as quoted in Christie, Ian R. & Benjamin Woods Labaree, *Empire or Independence, 1760-1776*, W.W. North & Company Inc. New York, 1976, 50; *The Public Advertiser*, February 3, 1768; *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser*, January 29, 1768

Bill of 1763 was an effort to solve the debt problems through internal taxes in England, though this was unpopular in England and was met by internal opposition.⁴

The first of these tax laws was the Stamp Act of 1765 which resulted in the Stamp Act Crisis, a precursor to later colonial crises.⁵ While the tax laws passed in this period are probably the most infamous, there were other laws passed that aimed more at imposing control over the colonies such as the Quartering Act, the Commissioners of Customs Act, and the New York Restraining Act. These laws led to a fierce backlash among the colonists who sent hundreds of letters and petitions to Parliament and the King demonstrating their displeasure. When their letters and petitions were largely ignored, some colonists, predominately in Boston, called for a boycott of British goods. The resulting crisis around these laws in the 1760s would become known as the Townshend Duties Crisis.

This thesis aims to examine the circumstances around the Townshend Duties Crisis among individuals in Britain who expressed concern over these laws by exploring the various factors that led to this opposition. The Townshend Duties were a collection of four acts passed by the British Parliament from the summer of 1767 into 1768.⁶ These acts are commonly titled as follows: The New York Restraining Act, the Revenue Act, the Indemnity Act, and the

⁴ Gould, Eliga, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill, N.C & London, England Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 118

⁵ The Stamp Act was ultimately repealed, under Charles Watson-Wentworth, the Marquess of Rockingham as Prime Minister, with the Declaratory Act in 1766, almost exactly one year after its passing largely due to the public opposition in the colonies and among British merchants

⁶ These duties were passed while William Pitt was Prime Minister, however, he was largely against taxing the colonies as he viewed the action as unconstitutional. Instead, he supported maintaining supremacy over the colonies and policing the enforcement of the Navigation Acts. Due to his incapacity to lead throughout 1767 as a result of illness, legislation such as the Townshend Duties was able to pass. Whether Pitt supported these laws is debated among historians.

Marshall, P.J., *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America, 1750-1783*, Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 2005, 303-310

Commissioners of Customs Act.⁷ They were named for Charles Townshend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was a major supporter for these bills and argued for their passing in Parliament.⁸ They are commonly bundled together, not only due to Charles Townshend's influence upon all the acts, but also because they each related to the control of the American colonies in some form whether it be taxation, the formation of supervisory bodies, or political limitation. In particular, the Revenue Act swept up discontent within the colonies and in England leading to a crisis over the ability of Parliament to tax and otherwise legislate the American colonies.

As this thesis will demonstrate through newspaper articles, letters, and petitions, the core reason for public opposition in the newspapers comes down to economics and more specifically trade. The most pressing concerns of British writers were the potential issues with a breakdown of trade across the Atlantic, boycotts reducing British exports, and difficulties with colonists paying off their debts. Public opposition also arose out of future-looking concern for British industry as the potential for manufacturing growth in the colonies threatened Britain's previous manufacturing dominance. These concerns were all occurring within the context of significant internal British political turmoil inspired by the popular politician John Wilkes that demonstrated

⁷ There was a fifth act, The Vice-Admiralty Court Act, which was passed a year later on July 6, 1768. It is often included within the Townshend Duties due to its similar nature in being a law aimed at controlling the colonies, however, it was passed long after Charles Townshend, passed away in fall of 1767 so some do not include it. For the investigation of this thesis, considering it largely went undiscussed in newspapers and other pamphlet literature it will not be the focus of any lengthy discussion. For a comprehensive account of this act see Ubbelohde, Carl, *The Vice-admiralty Courts and the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by The University of North Carolina Press, 1960

⁸ This thesis will not discuss Charles Townshend any further, for an account of his involvement in the Townshend Duties Crisis see Thomas, Peter D.G., *The Townshend Duties Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution 1767-1773*; Griffin, Patrick. *The Townshend Moment: The Making of Empire and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017

the lack of political consensus among the British public and the ideological divides over how the British government should approach its colonial empire.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

There has been significant historical work done on the other colonial crises of the era, such as the Stamp Act Crisis and the Tea Act Crisis, however historical studies specifically concerning the Townshend Duties have been less prevalent in the historiography. Often within books focused on colonial relations with England before the American Revolution the Townshend Duties are allocated a few paragraphs and at most a chapter or two. Whatever the cause of this gap in the historiography, the Townshend Duties crisis remains a largely unexamined event. While this thesis is certainly not an expansive history of the circumstances around the Townshend Duties, it is still a significant foray into the topic considering the limited historiography. Other historians who have worked on this topic have grappled with questions surrounding why the duties were passed and why some British parliamentarians engaged in opposition against their passing or enforcement. Historians such as Peter Thomas, John Brewer, T.H. Breen, and Lewis Namier all approached this topic in some form. However, there has not been, in the prevalent historiography, an examination of the opposition by the general British public specific to the Townshend Duties.

In trying to understand the response to the Townshend Duties Crisis among British politicians some historians have argued that factional conflict was the main driver of opposition. Political figures such as Edmund Burke had loyalties to different political camps such as the Rockinghamites or Chathamites.⁹ These political alliances and factions, therefore, have been the

⁹ David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole, et al. *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012

focus of a significant portion of the historical work done on this topic. Peter D. G. Thomas' research is centrally focused around the political situation of the Townshend Duties and their accompanying crisis both within Britain and the colonies themselves. While Thomas does discuss both supportive and oppositional reactions in Britain to the Townshend Duties, he primarily discusses politicians because his analysis is centered on the political history of the crisis. He does, however, discuss the British public during the John Wilkes crisis and its adjoining petitioning movement. Where he discusses opposition, it is mainly through a factional framework, building off of the way Lewis Namier described British politics in the 1760s. In Thomas's narrative, opposition does not come from economic or even unconstitutional concerns but rather from the possibility of causing the current administration more chaos. As he stated, "the parties of Rockingham and Grenville, despite their differences in stance over America... could unite in criticizing whatever the ministry had done or was thought to be planning."¹⁰ Factional conflict, therefore, takes central stage in his narrative.

There was some concern among politicians about the economic impact that these laws could have on trade, for example, the Earl of Hillsborough and some of his colleagues expressed their fear over the Townshend Duties risk to Britain's economy in Parliament.¹¹ However, what took precedence in the political debate was the issue of the supremacy and rights of parliament to control the American colonies. The economic situation of Britain and the fracturing relationship with its colonies was less important than maintaining the pre-existing authority over Britain's colonial subjects. This authority, as T. H. Breen identifies, was based on partisan, seemingly vindictive legislation designed to assert the sovereignty of Parliament."¹²

¹⁰ Thomas, 99

¹¹ Thomas, 95

¹² Breen, 239

Public opposition to the government's policies such as the Stamp Act existed but it was accompanied by a reaffirmation of Parliament's dominion and ability to continue to legislate the colonies.¹³ Peter D. G. Thomas and Eliga Gould both identified this in their studies of the colonial crises of the period. Even within this already restrained public opposition, as Gould emphasizes, there had to be public political consensus and "British patriotism." This emphasis on maintaining control meant that even among those who expressed some political opposition a complete repeal was not a solution. Many British viewed a repeal of the Townshend Duties as acceding to the demands of the American public. This would place parliament's rights to tax or have supremacy over the colonies into question limiting Britain's control over its empire.¹⁴ The argument about maintaining supremacy and control over Britain's empire provides an answer to the question of why some politicians were inclined to engage in opposition but it fails to answer the question of why anyone outside of the halls of Westminster would be opposed to the Townshend Duties.

A component of some partisan and factional debate is the issue of constitutionality. Specifically, whether the Townshend Duties were constitutional was one reason for the emergence of opposition to the duties among the American colonists. Patrick Griffin argues that the colonist's desire to be seen as true British citizens and to have their rights protected led to their engagement with public opposition.¹⁵ The Revolution of 1688 became a major discussion point among some American colonists as they believed it affirmed their rights to representation and self-governance. This concern over constitutionality extended beyond the colonists and was

¹³ Gould, 123

¹⁴ Thomas, 99

¹⁵ Griffin, 142-151. He also expands on this topic through a discussion of John Dickinson's pamphlets, see Griffin, 151-164; Griffin, 144

also found among some British politicians. Griffin highlights Edmund Burke in particular for his public opposition to the Townshend Duties as originating out of a constitutional concern.

Edmund Burke was one of the first to make a speech in Parliament publically arguing against the duties.¹⁶ Edmund Burke's main concern was that the proposed legislation, "asserted the authority of Parliament; but they ignored the consent of colonial assemblies."¹⁷

Factional and constitutional debates over the Townshend Duties Crisis have both been prevalent arguments about why opposition emerged among the American colonists and some British politicians. However, Timothy Breen also identifies an economic justification on the part of the colonists that played into their decision to boycott, petition, and publically oppose the Townshend Duties. He argues that the consumer revolution of the mid-eighteenth century, which transformed the colonists into consumers, allowed them to use the tool of a boycott as a new form of political mass action and protest.¹⁸ The use of newspapers to spread news of people supporting and encouraging the boycotts invited other colonists to join their protest creating a "consumer public sphere."¹⁹ The value of the colonists as consumers was also important to some British politicians, specifically Edmund Burke, who believed that "commerce brought most Americans into a closer, more harmonious relationship with the mother country than could naked coercion."²⁰ T. H. Breen establishes why the American colonists believed boycotts and building up their own manufacturing could lead to a public British reaction, however, he does not actually delve into what debates were occurring in the British public sphere.

¹⁶ Burke, Edmund "Speech on the Townshend Duties, May 15, 1767" in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke V. II*, edited by Paul Langford, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, 61-64

¹⁷ Griffin, 129.

¹⁸ Breen, xv

¹⁹ Breen, 239; Breen 248

²⁰ Breen, 75

The Townshend Duties Crisis demonstrates the ability of the British public to engage in written opposition to their government's policies. This incident, therefore, brings up the question: "Did extensive political opposition exist in 1760s Britain or, as some historians have suggested, was there a broader political consensus amongst the public?" Linda Colley and Eliga Gould both argue for the latter interpretation of public support for the British government's policies, something Gould attributes to "British patriotism."²¹ Gould connects this public patriotism to the popular support within Parliament towards the government's proposed policies. Linda Colley identifies that throughout the eighteenth century the growth of a nationalist spirit within the British public and a coalescing around support for the government's policies within this loyalist turn.²² Colley recognizes "dissenting voices" but her goal is to "rescue" conformists or patriots with her argument instead of highlighting why opposition occurred. Therefore, her depiction of the British public sphere emphasizes where people supported the government agenda but did not challenge it. Both of these historians, therefore, see political consensus among the British public with limited ideological or partisan divisions. However, this thesis aims to prove there was not a consensus among the public concerning the politics associated with the Townshend Duties Crisis, thus demonstrating the ability of the public to disagree ideologically and to have debates within the public sphere.

It would be easy then, as some historians do, to conclude that to the British government the only path forward seemed to be to turn away from internal taxation and instead to look to the colonies to solve the British debt crisis. Eliga Gould makes one such assertion as he claims, "what made the Stamp Act seem so urgent, however, was the crushing debt that commentators

²¹ Gould, xvi-xvii

²² Colley, Linda, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, London, Pimlico, 2003, 1-5

were sure would otherwise descend on the British themselves.”²³ However, as Justin du Rivage argued in response to Gould, that these types of arguments do little to answer the question of “why” parliament chose to tax the colonies in the first place considering there was no requirement to do so.²⁴ The turn towards taxing the colonies therefore was not an inevitability as there were other potential paths that could have been taken to solve Britain’s debt and economic issues.²⁵ Opposition to the Townshend Duties and also other pieces of colonial legislation within Britain emphasized the danger of the taxation path and tried to encourage the repeal of the legislation or turn away from colonial taxation. The goal of oppositional writings, many of which were written by merchants, was to repair the tensions across the Atlantic and to encourage the trade of goods to the American colonies, which as the Stamp Act Crisis had shown would be harmed by legislation such as the Townshend Duties. Therefore, the argument of inevitability or public consensus view towards supporting the government’s taxation policies seems less viable with the addition of public opposition.

Although there were alternative paths, the British government under George Grenville eventually did put forth taxation legislation for the colonies that would be repeated by later prime ministers creating the crises of the 1760s and 1770s. The question of why George Grenville turned to taxing the colonies is worthy of exploration. Grenville and his government had to find a way to resolve the fiscal complications that had emerged out of the Seven Years War. His government attempted different changes within Britain such as improving revenue collection and

²³ Gould, 118

²⁴ Du Rivage, Justin. *Revolution Against Empire: Taxes, Politics, and the Origins of American Independence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, 14-15

²⁵ As Steven Pincus argues in George Grenville’s writings to the Duke of Bedford in the early 1760s suggested other solutions to alleviate Britain’s debt by reducing governmental expenses, raising credit, and extracting value from its imperial dominions.

Pincus, Steven. *The Heart of the Declaration: The Founders’ Case for an Activist Government*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. 2016, 56-58

lessening governmental spending. The Stamp Act was one component of a larger “imperial reform” effort undertaken by Grenville that sought to ensure “austerity and obedience” in the American colonies.²⁶ Justin du Rivage argues that the Stamp Act’s passing was a tool of empire alongside a legitimate method to reduce Britain’s debts. Britain needed the raw materials from its colonies to manufacture goods and then also needed the colonies to be a market for these British manufactured goods. These same economic and imperial justifications would appear when Charles Townshend and his fellow MPs argued for and passed the Townshend Duties a few years later.

It is due to the limited historical study on these topics that the question this thesis explores is so important: “Why did members of the British public engage in written opposition to the Townshend Duties?” Historians have grappled with and explored how politicians and politics played into the debate around these pieces of legislation. However, the role of the British public has mostly been left out of their historical studies. Considering how little the economic situation of Britain came up in the reasons for opposition among politicians, whereas how prevalent they are within sources from the British general public, there has been a gap in the historiography. This thesis will highlight how economic concerns over trade and debt with the American colonies and fears of a worsening relationship across the Atlantic were the justifications behind public opposition in the British press. Here we will examine newspapers and petitions, sources that have not been systematically examined before for this topic, as representations and examples of British public opinion expressed throughout the Townshend Duties Crisis.

²⁶ du Rivage, 103

THE PRINTING PRESS INDUSTRY AND COMMUNICATION

With the lapsing of the 1662 Licensing Act in 1685 no longer limiting the ability of newspapers to be founded or stopping the creation of provincial presses, the newspaper industry exploded across the early eighteenth century.²⁷ By the 1760s there were around 200 regular weekly issues of newspapers being published across Britain.²⁸ Readership estimates argue that by 1776, approximately one-third of the British population had regular access to printed news. It is estimated about 12.6 million copies of newspapers circulated annually.²⁹ Historians have found it difficult to estimate the exact readership of British newspapers considering that individual issues may have been spread around in communities. Additionally, public places such as coffee houses or social clubs may have only had one copy of a newspaper, however it is likely they would have been read by many of the patrons.³⁰ Contemporary accounts from newspaper editors, such as from Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*, claimed that for every paper sold it was read by about 20-30 people.³¹ Therefore, news was quite regularly reaching the British population during this period.³² Many in Britain were, therefore, actively aware of information coming out of the American colonies considering that news concerning Britain's colonies was very prevalent in many London and other British newspapers.³³

²⁷ For further discussion of the Licensing Act see: Steele, Ian K., *English Atlantic, 1675-1740: an Exploration of Communication and Community*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, 134-135; Black, Jeremy, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*, London & Sydney, Croom Helm, 1987, 1-23; Ferdinand, C.Y. *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, 5-11

²⁸ Bickham, Troy, *Making Headlines: The American Revolution as seen through the British Press*, Illinois, Northern Illinois University Press, 2009, 10-11

²⁹ Bickham, 10-21

³⁰ Ferdinand, 21

³¹ Black, 105; Bickham, 29

³² Literacy is a different question here entirely which D.H. Robinson estimates was around 57-67% in England and around 78% in Scotland in the mid to late eighteenth century. Literacy in the American colonies was generally higher, numbers found in Robinson, D.H., *The Idea of Europe and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 105.

³³ While not the focus of this thesis, other European countries were also receiving news and information concerning these colonial crises. As an example, Choiseul, the Secretary of State for War of France, sent an agent to the

The first provincial newspaper in England was founded in 1701 in Norwich and throughout the eighteenth century was followed by the founding of dozens more provincially-based newspapers.³⁴ Many of these newspapers were centered in other large urban areas such as *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, *The Manchester Mercury and Harrop's General Advertiser*, and *The Reading Mercury*, and *Oxford Gazette*. Though there were others founded in less prominent places such as *The Weekly Worcester Journal*, *The Stamford Mercury*, and *The Ludlow Post Man or Weekly Journal*.³⁵ The 1662 Licensing Act had prohibited the creation of provincial presses but with its lapsing, newspapers across England were founded to serve their local populations and to provide a place for advertisements.³⁶ For example a newspaper editor of the *Reading Mercury* wrote in 1797, "The Profits of a newspaper arise *only* from Advertisements."³⁷ Many newspapers titled themselves as "Advertisers" which made the content of their papers easy to identify. Two such examples are *The Public Advertiser* and *The Belfast Newsletter and General Advertiser*.³⁸ However, even among all these advertisements, which often made up one or more entire pages, there was substantial local, British, and foreign news distributed across the provinces through the press. Outside of local news, a majority of the reporting on London or foreign news came directly from the London papers with many stories being copied from papers

colonies to report on the growing tensions amongst the British colonists, from Shovlin, John. *Trading with the Enemy: Britain, France, and the 18th-Century Quest for a Peaceful World Order*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, 205-206

³⁴ Knights, Mark, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, 140

³⁵ These newspaper examples were taken from the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection

³⁶ The provincial press in the eighteenth century has been examined by several historians. The books that proved the most informative to this study were C.Y. Ferdinand's *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century*; Barker, Hannah, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, 95-179

³⁷ Italicization is from the original newspaper, *The Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette*, July 10, 1797, quoted in Ferdinand, C.Y., *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth-Century*, 74

³⁸ For further discussion of advertising in the presses see Black, Jeremy, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*, London & Sydney, Croom Helm, 1987, 51-66

such as *The London Gazette* or the *London Evening Post*. Even with most of this news being copied from London, these newspapers represent a peek into the political information available in a particular locality not only through their local news section but most importantly in the letters published from their readership. Scotland and Ireland also had several newspapers that served their cities. These newspapers functioned similarly to English provincial newspapers by giving preference to news from London but still including local and foreign news.³⁹

The emergence of a colonial press throughout the eighteenth century paralleled its development in the English provinces. American colonists were economically and socially connected to their fellow British countrymen. Therefore, news from London was more important to colonial readers than local or international news. Throughout the eighteenth century it was common to see entire pages of a colonial newspaper concerning news from Britain.⁴⁰ In 1704, the first newspaper founded in the American colonies was the *Boston News-letter* in Massachusetts. For fourteen years it was the only newspaper in the colonies.⁴¹ However, throughout the eighteenth century more newspapers were created. Though they were largely concentrated in the Boston and Philadelphia areas, two of the largest cities in the colonies. These newspapers were essential to how British readers understood the colonial positions on political, economic, and social issues.⁴² These colonial newspapers were a significant vehicle through which information pertaining to colonial legislation was spread throughout the American colonies.

³⁹ Some examples of these newspapers and magazines include *The Hibernian Chronicle*, *The Dublin Evening Post*, and *The Scots Magazine*.

⁴⁰ See as an example of such a phenomenon in *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, August 31, 1767; *The Pennsylvania Chronicle*, and *Universal Advertiser*, August 15, 1768

⁴¹ Steele, 147

⁴² See as an example of these excerpts *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser*, January 24, 1767; *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser*, January 29, 1768

PART II: THE REASONS FOR OPPOSITION

As the Revenue Act was fundamentally a tax on importation and exportation in the colonies, it would then follow that the most common expressions of discontent found in newspapers originated out of concern for the trans-Atlantic trade. Britons were not only reliant on the colonies as a place to sell their manufactured goods but also, in the context of the acute grain shortage of the later 1760s, they were dependent on the provisions provided by the colonies. Many colonists engaged in an organized boycott against British goods, when the British government refused to repeal the new laws, thus harming British merchants and manufacturers. These concerns, alongside a growing fear that the colonists would refuse or be incapable of paying back debts owed to British merchants, certainly explains why so many individuals discussing the Townshend Duties in newspapers self-identified as merchants or focused on trade.

CONCERNS OVER TRADE BREAKDOWNS

The Townshend Duties were passed during a period of grain shortage in Britain. *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser* warned that “the principal cause of this calamity is the failure in the last harvest... What rather adds to the public apprehension, is the present scarcity of corn throughout Europe. The only part of the world from which we hear of no want in this article is America: From thence we might ere this have been amply supplied.”⁴³ The news of this shortage continued to dominate press coverage of the mid to late 1760s with some people writing into their local newspapers expressing their discontent over the impending difficulties, “there is not a more popular Subject in Politics at present than Dissertations on the high Prices of

⁴³ *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser*, December 4, 1767

Provisions, Distresses of the Poor, and the Decline of Trade... Tis a considerable Time ere Corn and Provisions can arrive from North-America."⁴⁴ As this author explained, the concerns over the grain shortages were an incredibly widespread subject throughout Britain. But the trade with North America is proposed here as the solution to their problem.⁴⁵

The crisis was ultimately relieved in part by the influx of American grain, corn, and other goods, thus stressing the importance of this trade relationship to people in Britain. As one gentleman wrote in a letter published in the *Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, "We have a greater scarcity of provisions of all sorts this season in Ireland, than has been felt for over 30 years past, insomuch that unless we are supplied from America our poor will be in great danger of suffering dreadfully; our last crop greatly failed, whereas we find you had a plentiful one, we have got a few cargoes of flour and wheat, but expect more."⁴⁶ When the famine and shortages largely subsided, many authors and newspaper articles recognized how suddenly Britain had found itself more dependent on the trade relationships with the colonies that provided Britain with its necessary supplies. The author of one letter written by A Friend of Truth to the *Archer's Bath Chronicle*, argued that Britain did not necessarily need the products of the American Colonies anymore, but they still acknowledged that at a point of scarcity the colonies provided them essential goods, "the produce of that country, which consists of corn and cattle, neither of which (last year excepted) are wanted here."⁴⁷ With Britons dependent on the American colonies to provide them supplies and materials, it was not unrealistic to suggest that such a situation

⁴⁴ *The Public Advertiser*, February 1, 1768

⁴⁵ Some further examples of this include: *The Public Advertiser*, February 1, 1768; *The London Chronicle*, October 15, 1765; *Westminster Journal and London Political Miscellany*, May 4, 1765

⁴⁶ *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, October 19, 1767

⁴⁷ *Archer's Bath Chronicle*, August 4, 1768

could occur again. It is within this context that the Townshend Duties emerged as a threat to Britain's future well-being.

The Stamp Act had already demonstrated the potential fragility of Britain's trans-Atlantic trading system. Some export items had already lost significant market share in the years leading up to the passing of the Townshend Duties. One such product was tea which saw its exports to the colonies from Britain falling from 515,477 lbs. in 1765 to 358,392 lbs. in 1766, a decline owing to the boycotts during the Stamp Act Crisis.⁴⁸ These differences in the quantity of trade were not exclusive to any one product but instead were felt across Britain's total exports. As laid out in *The Public Advertiser*, "By these Means, our Exports to North America, which amounted to 2,600,000 l. a Year, when the Stamp Act was passed in 1764, have fallen above one half. Thus we are likely to lose the Benefit of our Colonies, by our own Acts and Regulations, which will afford but little Satisfaction for our empty Triumph, in obliging them to comply with them."⁴⁹ Considering that the North American colonies were one of the most important markets for British manufactured goods, this drastic fall in exports was already affecting the economic potential of British merchants long before discussion of the Townshend Duties-related boycotts began.⁵⁰

The Townshend Duties only accelerated this decline in British exports to the American colonies. Britain had already seen a substantial economic loss with A British Merchant writing in late May 1767, "The Nation has already lost a Million and a Half a Year by these Proceedings against the Colonies."⁵¹ This downward trend in the economic relationship between Britain and

⁴⁸ Thomas, 28

⁴⁹ The use of "l." here and in future uses refers to pounds. *The Public Advertiser*, July 31, 1767; *The London Evening Post*, August 1, 1767

⁵⁰ *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, October 19, 1767

⁵¹ *The Public Advertiser*, May 29, 1767

its American colonies would only be made worse throughout the crisis, “We are assured, that since the late unhappy dissention between England and her Colonies have taken place, the entries in a certain government office have fallen short no less a sum than 100,000l. A year,” lamented the editor of *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, “Surely the deficiency of so large a sum in the balance of our trade, must greatly affect our domestic commerce.”⁵² As this report indicates the disconnect in trade from before the colonial conflicts to 1769 was growing. Considering the extensive economic difficulties Britain had found itself in after the Seven Years War the loss of exports was not only a problem for merchants but also for the government who needed the tax revenue that trade provided. This decreasing trade was also making itself known across manufacturing and shops in Britain, as one observer noted, “Amusements in general promote Trade... and at a time when every Artificer and Shop-keeper is with Justice complaining of a want of circulation in Business... These are more melancholy Proofs of a decay in trade.”⁵³ This “decay in trade” was a part of the larger declining trend in exports to the colonies as the relationship between Britain and its dominions soured.

Many in the British press immediately responded with outrage to the passing of the Townshend Duties.⁵⁴ Only a day after the news of the bills receiving royal assent had been widely circulated, newspapers were publishing letters condemning the potential effects of these laws.⁵⁵ *Publicus*, a regular contributor to *The London Evening Post*, wrote, “as Taxes grow heavier, Provisions will grow dearer, and Trade and Commerce decrease.”⁵⁶ The lasting effects

⁵² *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, July 13, 1769

⁵³ *The Public Advertiser*, March 5, 1768

⁵⁴ Parliament passed the law on June 13, 1767, but it did not receive royal assent until June 29, 1767. News of the law was sent to the colonists as of the first date, not the second as shown in *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, September 7, 1767

⁵⁵ The letters were likely responding to the news they had been passed by parliament not the news they had received royal assent due to the general timelines of newspaper publishing.

⁵⁶ *London Evening Post*, June 30, 1767. *Publicus* can translate to “the people” or “the public” from Latin

of the recent grain and corn shortages alongside the Stamp Act Crisis were clearly on the minds of early respondents to the Townshend Duties. As another writer, L., wrote in the August 6, 1768 issue of *The North Briton*, “If they do submit to them, tis more than probable, that their resentment of the ill usage they may think they have met with, will induce them to break off all commercial connections with Great-Britain; and thus we shall be deprived of the only real advantage, which a mother-state can derive from her colonies.”⁵⁷ Here the writer L. identifies the essential predicament around the crisis. Britain could continue to try and enforce these laws which would only cause the colonist’s anger to rise. The power then would be in the colonists’ hands as they then cut off their own trade to Britain. L.’s warning, therefore, implies that there is no path open to Britain except to either repeal the laws or not to enforce them in the colonies. Unlike some who encouraged forcing the colonists to comply, Britain could rid itself of this crisis before they lose their “advantage.”

L. was not the only author to offer a potential warning of the future should there be a trade breakdown. In a letter written by Charles Clavey to Sir Robert Ladbroke, one of the London MPs, Clavey warned of the potential doom the crisis could bring, “in the British American Colonies, the only profitable trade this kingdom enjoys unrivaled by other nations; for which purpose we recommend your utmost endeavors to reconcile the unhappy differences subsisting between the mother country and her colonies, the fatal effects of which have, in part, been severely felt by the manufacturer, and the commercial part of this kingdom.”⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ The trade relationship between Britain and its colonies was one of its most important as they had control

⁵⁷ *The North Briton*, August 6, 1768

⁵⁸ Brooke, John. “LADBROKE, Sir Robert (?1713-73), of Idlicote, Warws” *The History of Parliament: British Political, Social, & Local History*, <http://www.histparl.ac.uk/volume/1754-1790/member/ladbroke-sir-robert-1713-73>.

⁵⁹ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, February 16, 1769

over who the colonists could trade with, what products they could trade, and set the rates or duties to benefit themselves over the colonists.⁶⁰ Unlike its trade with other European nations, the colonies were wholly dependent on the goods that Britain traded with them largely due to their underdeveloped manufacturing capacity.

British writers during this period increasingly warned their readers that the current crisis was not going to end peacefully. These prophetic letters about the future of the trade relationships in Britain all shared a similar vision, the Townshend Duties and by extension, the laws concerning taxation in the colonies would only bring harm to Britain. While many of the letters did not explicitly call for repealing the Townshend Duties, they still expressed that the relationship Britain had once shared with its colonies was heading for collapse. The breakdown of trade was not just a possibility, as many would come to discover, but instead would become a reality beginning with the boycotts of 1769.

BOYCOTTS

The American boycotts against the Townshend Duties soon confirmed those dire prophecies.⁶¹ News reached the colonists of the passing of the Revenue Act and the other Townshend Duties legislation around two months after the bills received royal assent.⁶² By early October and November 1767, meetings had already begun in Boston mooting the idea of a boycott. The resolutions passed during these meetings were later published in Britain around late

⁶⁰ This is perhaps best seen in the Molasses Act of 1733 which limited the ability of the American colonies to import molasses, sugar, and rum from non-British colonies

⁶¹ This paper chooses to use “boycott” even though the term is a more modern phrase because it more accurately portrays the events. Contemporary accounts described it more as “frugality” or just no longer importing goods from Britain. Considering it was a coordinated effort across different cities and colonies a larger scale term such as “boycott” feels the most fitting.

⁶² *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, August 31, 1767

December 1767.⁶³ Mercator quickly responded to this news of the boycotts in *The London Evening Post*, “From the Resolutions which the People of Boston in New England have lately taken of not importing or using any longer such a Number of European Goods and Manufactures, the Trade and Commerce of this Kingdom must certainly suffer greatly.”⁶⁴ If Britain wanted to avoid catastrophe, Parliament might need to relent on the legislation just as they had done in the Stamp Act Crisis.

While the boycott in the American colonies would not begin until January 1, 1769, colonial purchasing of British manufactured good already began to slow in 1768.⁶⁵ As one merchant wrote in a letter to his correspondent in Glasgow in August of 1768, “We would have sent you an order for some goods by this opportunity, not all the merchants of this, and some other provinces, have signed an agreement not to import any more goods from Britain; which agreement I was obliged to come into.”⁶⁶

British newspapers anxiously reported on the spread of the American boycott movement beyond Boston throughout 1768. The British press continuously published news of the growing spread of discontent among the colonies as more cities and colonies agreed to comply with the Boston resolutions. In a letter from Boston sent on November 23, 1767, but received in Britain in early 1768, the writer wrote, “We now learn, that the Southern Colonies, as well as the people of New-England, much approve of the late Measures taken by this Metropolis [Boston] Town-Meetings are called and calling to promote the Frugality and Manufactures, as the best Method to

⁶³ *The Public Advertiser*, December 14, 1767

⁶⁴ *London Evening Post*, December 22, 1767

⁶⁵ The resolutions for a boycott were voted on as of October 28, 1767, but after several failed votes throughout early 1768 to start the boycott, it was ultimately pushed toward the beginning of 1769. For a discussion of the timeline of the boycott see Thomas, 86-87

⁶⁶ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, November 3, 1768

convince our Mother Country of their Mistakes.”⁶⁷ Another letter from Boston arrived in England within a month claiming, “We hear that the Towns of Falmouth, Scarbrough, Pepperborough, Biddeford, Welles, Kittery, Old-York, Arundel, and other Towns in the Counties of Lincoln and Cumberland; as also Newbury-Port, Billerica, Medfield, Abington and Westborough, have unanimously come into the same Regulations as this Town, respecting Frugality.”⁶⁸

The spread of the boycott was starting to make itself felt in the pockets of the merchants as their previous order totals were not being met going into 1769, “We are informed that two houses only in the city, who have for some years past exported goods to North America to the amount of 25,000l, will not, this spring, send over more articles than exceed the sum of 300l. from each house.”⁶⁹ Another report of the growing problem of the boycotts claimed, “Many vessels that have as yet set out for New-York, or New-England, this spring, have gone back in ballast, without an article of our manufactures on board.”⁷⁰ In this context, many merchants began to write letters calling for an end to the laws that were causing these problems. A group of Bristol merchants sent a letter to their parliamentary representatives calling for them to repeal the Townshend duties due to their potentially negative effects on the exportation of British manufactures to the colonies, telling them to, “support and extend the trade and manufactures of this nation in every branch. That you will heartily join in all measures, for reconciling the differences, unhappily subsisting, between this kingdom and its colonies; and that you will be strenuously active in obtaining a repeal of the laws, imposing duties on British manufactures

⁶⁷ *The Public Advertiser*, January 27, 1768

⁶⁸ *The Public Advertiser*, February 13, 1768. For other examples of similar reporting see *The Public Advertiser*, January 19, 1768; *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, April 27, 1769

⁶⁹ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, February 16, 1769

⁷⁰ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, February 16, 1769

exported to America, which has been found highly prejudicial to the nation in general and to this city in particular."⁷¹

GROWTH OF AMERICAN MANUFACTURING

The breakdown of trade across the Atlantic was not the only step in the colonies' push against their dependence on Britain, instead, it accompanied something which proved to be of greater concern to many British merchants and citizenry, the growth of American manufacturing.⁷² Newspapers across Britain reported letters and other communications from the colonies bragging of the growth of their manufacturing in cloth, guns, and paper, among many other products and goods.⁷³ With some Boston colonists going as far as to assert that the quality of the products made in the American colonies had equaled or surpassed that of Britain. The fact remained that the colonies were progressing forward in their internal manufacturing, regardless of the quality of the manufactured goods. As a letter from Boston claimed, "within the last Year, Thirty thousand Yards of Cloth were manufactured in one small Country Town in this Province."⁷⁴ It could be disastrous for British merchants and manufacturers if the colonies were successful in the growth of their own manufacturing. During the Stamp Act crisis, the government had managed to avoid a complete breakdown of the trade relationships by appeasing the colonists by repealing the law, therefore, ending the boycott. However, the growth of internal manufacturing would not be a temporary fix, as in the case of the boycott, instead it would be a permanent change to the relationship of Britain with its own colonies. The colonies potentially

⁷¹ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, March 16, 1769

⁷² Manufacturing in this context should be seen as "small m manufacturing." This means they are not discussing factory complexes such as in 19th century England. Instead, by manufacturing this paper means any production of goods regardless of its scale.

⁷³ See for examples of this reporting. *London Evening Post*, November 17, 1767; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, February 15, 1768

⁷⁴ *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, November 2, 1767

would have always pushed for their own manufacturing regardless of the legislation passed, the narrative received in Britain was that this new manufacturing effort was a direct and almost necessary consequence of the new laws.

British readers were aware of this push for independence among the American colonies. In a letter from Cassius in *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, pointed out the ultimate goal of these manufacturing efforts, “Thus does it appear that measures are taking throughout all the colonies to shake off their dependance on Great-Britain.”⁷⁵ This quote was preceded by a list of news from various colonies of refusing to comply with trade officers, denying ships coming to shore, and more areas committing themselves to “frugality.” To use a common expression, as far as Cassius was concerned, the genie was out of the bottle, and this was not going to go well in Britain. One of the limitations in Britain was that its manufacturing was outpacing demand within Britain and so if British manufacturing was going to continue to expand and innovate it would need a market to continue to expand into. The American colonies, with their growing population and limited manufacturing infrastructure, had seemed to be the ideal outlet for British manufactures. If British merchants were to lose this market, they would likely be unable to pay their debts and fall into general economic disarray. This concern was emphasized in a letter published in *The London Evening Post* on December 22, 1767, “If ever there was a time for the great men of the Land to be united, to throw aside all past distinctions and animosities, it is now... America, is now almost the only Market for our Manufactories; and if they are cramped in their Trade, and affronted about trifles, it will induce them to set up manufacturing for themselves.”⁷⁶ In this letter the author drew a clear line between the Townshend Duties Crisis

⁷⁵ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, January 5, 1769

⁷⁶ *London Evening Post*, December 22, 1767

and the growth of manufacturing, a connection many other British merchants and manufacturers were also making.

Finally, it is important to note that not all peoples were concerned over the growth of colonial manufacturing even if it cost British exports. Instead, some, at least in Belfast, wanted to encourage the further growth of manufacturing, and perhaps even importing those colonial goods to Britain. As A Linen-Draper wrote in *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser* in response to the boycott resolutions published by a group of Bostonians that had only just reached British newspapers, “they determine to establish a linen manufacture. This is so far from being any prejudice to England, that I as a linen-draper, think they ought... New-England could remit their linens to England.”⁷⁷ Another writer, while calling for the colonists to calm their disagreements, placed among the conditions for the end of the crisis, “The English are to afford all due encouragement to American manufactures and improvements.”⁷⁸ Some individuals saw encouragement of American manufacturing as a positive way to broker peace and commit to compromise, even with the possibility that American manufacturing would compete with British manufacturing.

INABILITY OF COLONISTS TO PAY OFF BRITISH DEBT

Economic concerns in Britain extended far beyond the sale of British goods and other trade to the American colonies. Merchants, predominately in London, had legitimate concerns that the deteriorating relationship across the Atlantic, made worse during the Townshend Duties Crisis, would lead the colonists to renege on their debts. As observed in early 1769 in *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, “Some late proceedings have struck a great damp upon the spirits of the

⁷⁷ *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser*, December 29, 1767

⁷⁸ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, February 16, 1769

merchants in this metropolis, who have immense sums owing to them from our American colonies; insomuch that they now despair not only of recovering any part of the debts due to them, but of having any future trade or commerce to that vast continent."⁷⁹ British merchants, therefore, had more to be fearful about than just the potential of trade loss. Continuing to antagonize the colonists through taxation and other legislation certainly was not going to lead to their debts being paid. It would be hard to estimate the debts of private colonists to individual British merchants using the sources available for this thesis. Instead, this thesis will highlight a more overarching debt that the colonies as a whole owed to the British government. In one report in the summer of 1768, it was estimated that, "they [the colonies] are now supposed to be four or five millions in our debt."⁸⁰ If the colonists were as close to bankruptcy as they seemed to be, there was a real risk the colonies' debt, a component of the much larger British debt discussed earlier in this thesis, plaguing the kingdom in the period, would go unsatisfied.

The issues concerning money within the American colonies was not a new issue arising solely out of taxation, but rather a consistent problem throughout the eighteenth century. Some in the colonies had suggested the use of paper money and other tools of banking as a method of bolstering their economy and paying off their debts. This method, however, was forbidden by the British government through the New England Currency Act of 1751, which further exacerbated tensions far into the Townshend Duties Crisis period.⁸¹ As of late 1767, the American colonists were still lamenting their inability to use paper currency and, as one writer from New Jersey wrote in their letter to a friend in London published in *The Manchester Mercury*, there were, "great Complaints about not repealing the Act which prohibits Paper Money from being a legal

⁷⁹ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, February 16, 1769

⁸⁰ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, August 25, 1768

⁸¹ For further discussion of the New England Currency Act of 1751 and the accompanying currency problems within the American colonies, see Labaree & Christie, 31-32

Tender; but the People in England, especially the Manufacturers, must suffer by this injudicious."⁸² Interestingly, the writer not only highlights the consequences the continued oppression of the colonist's economic venture had on the colonies but also how they could be harmful to Britain, particularly its manufacturing base, a very present fear among British merchants as discussed earlier. While the money issues of the American colonies were not necessarily exclusive to the Townshend Duties Crisis, they were a concern within larger trends such as the decreasing trade that would have created a riskier environment for merchants concerned over their own profits during this period.

Letters were being sent from the colonies privately from merchants and others to be published in British newspapers that complained of the already dire, and subsequently worsening, economic problems of the colonists. An economic situation made worse with the new taxes and legislation. One such letter sent from Boston to a correspondent in London on August 6, 1768, took the problem of the colonist's financial problems and placed it on the English, "And now give me leave to ask what our mother country intends to do with us with regard to our public affairs? Is she determined to ruin us? In doing that they must hurt themselves. The present acts of parliament relating to the duty on glass, tea, &c, if continued, will effectually drain us of all the cash... I fear the Merchants in England will meet with heavy losses."⁸³ The potential for bankruptcy on the part of the colonists is once again highlighted in this letter as a concern that Britain should pay attention to. Bankruptcy, of course, significantly limits a lender's ability to receive any compensation for the money they have lent. Perhaps all the news lamenting the financial situations of the colonists, particularly in response to the recent Townshend Duties, was

⁸² *The Manchester Mercury and Harrop's General Advertiser*, January 5, 1768

⁸³ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, October 6, 1768

beginning to spread fear over the future ability of merchants to receive their money. This concern seemed to be the case in one piece of news, seemingly important enough to publish in the newspaper that, “we are informed that a Gentleman in the City sold off last Week all the Debts due to him in one of the American Colonies at the Rate of 4s. in the Pound.”⁸⁴ The exact circumstances of this debt being sold off are not elaborated on further in the newspaper, but it may signal that some merchants, recognizing the risks, no longer wanted to be involved in the colonial economic situation.

CONCERN OVER PARTY POLITICS AND GOVERNMENTAL OVERREACH

Economic concerns over the Townshend Duties made up the initial oppositional responses in the public sphere. However, by 1769, partisan conflict and political division became a major justifier of public opposition to the British government and its colonial policies or approach to maintaining its empire. Concerns of governmental overreach and questions of constitutionality had appeared among some politicians in the early responses to the Townshend Duties crisis but were not prevalent among public reactions. This form of opposition did not dominate British newspapers until the crisis over John Wilkes and the Middlesex Election of 1768.⁸⁵ John Wilkes had long since been the founder and major contributor to *The North Briton*, an openly oppositional newspaper that criticized the government on many issues, including its governing of the British empire.⁸⁶ When he was denied entry into Parliament, his supporters, who commonly titled themselves “freeholders,” began a mass petitioning movement to support

⁸⁴ *London Journal*, September 17, 1768

⁸⁵ Thomas, 113-114

⁸⁶ For further reading concerning John Wilkes see Brewer, John, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, 163-200; Maier, Pauline, “John Wilkes and American Disillusionment with Britain,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, July, 1963, Vol. 20, No. 3, 373-395; Cash, Arthur H. *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006; Reich, 33-39; Wilson, 206-236

him.⁸⁷ These petitions called for redress for issues, such as governmental corruption, the misuse of warrants, and the revocation of colonial legislation including the Townshend Duties. Labeled the Wilkite movement, it illuminated the lack of political consensus among the British public. Throughout the public sphere there were active partisan divisions in how Britain should best govern its empire and itself.

THE AMERICAN COLONISTS AND WILKES

It was clear to some American colonists that there was a connection between their plight and that of John Wilkes. The corrupted politicians that John Wilkes and the Freeholders of Britain were fighting against were the same ones who had placed the colonies into their precarious situation. During the Townshend Duties Crisis, many American colonists took up the rallying cry of “Wilkes and Liberty” alongside using “45” as a symbol in their politics and protests.⁸⁸ When the controversy over the Middlesex Election occurred in 1768 and 1769, American supporters of Wilkes sent petitions and money, “to enable him the better to preserve his patriotism and independency.”⁸⁹ One Bostoner wrote of Wilkes’ potential return to Parliament, “I believe in the spirit of his abilities, that they will prove to the good of our country. In the resurrection of liberty, and the life of universal freedom forever.”⁹⁰ At least to the American colonists John Wilkes and his British supporters seemed to share their same concerns

⁸⁷ While it is hard to know the exact number of people involved in this movement there are a handful of sources that can be used to help create an estimate. It is estimated that the petitions came from around 18 counties and 20 boroughs in England and around 60,000 people signed the various petitions, a sizeable portion of the eligible voting electorate. This number is an estimate from Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain*, 119; see also Cash, 258

⁸⁸ “45” was a reference to Wilkes’ famous issue No. 45 of *The North Briton*; Cash, *John Wilkes*, 231

⁸⁹ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, January 19, 1769

⁹⁰ *Britannia’s Intercession for the Deliverance of John Wilkes, Esq. from Persecution and Banishment*, 6th ed., Boston, 1769, as quoted in Maier, “John Wilkes and American Disillusionment with Britain,” 373

over the taxation of the colonies and may have believed it to be their best chance at seeing the duties revoked.

THE PETITIONING MOVEMENT

It is not surprising that the colonists came to the conclusion that John Wilkes and the Freeholders were on their side considering the petitions being published by the freeholders. In a petition delivered to King George III on July 5, 1769, by the Livery of the City of London, the writers accused the King's ministers and other members of Parliament of a series of treasonable actions. Many of these actions were the main concerns of the petitioning movement. Within their accusations were claims that the ministers had circumvented established laws and engaged in general corruption. However, what is perhaps the most important issue is the claim made by the Liverymen of London that the government had taken unlawful actions in passing the Townshend Duties, "They [the King's ministers] have established numberless unconstitutional regulations and taxations in our colonies. They have caused a revenue to be raised in some of them by prerogative. They have appointed civil law judges to try revenue causes, and to be paid from out of the condemnation money."⁹¹ The petition accuses the government of imposing "unconstitutional regulations," upon the American colonies and overstepping their bounds as Parliament.

Other petitions expressed similar ideas and demands.⁹² In the petition of the freeholders of Bristol to the King, they claimed, among other accusations of corruption, that the British government ministers had, "Alienated the affections of our American brethren - Ruined our

⁹¹ The Humble Petition of the Livery of the City of London, printed by T. Bowen, London, England, July 1769, print, The British Museum, London, UK; also printed in many newspapers including *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, July 13, 1769; *The Belfast News-letter and General Advertiser*, July 14, 1769

⁹² See as an example *The Warwickshire Journal*, September 21, 1769

manufactories, by insidiously imposing and establishing the most impolite and unconstitutional taxation and regulations, in your Majesty's colonies."⁹³ Bristol, more so than many other cities, was central to Atlantic trade with the American colonies, meaning its merchants had much more to be worried about with the worsening tensions than many other cities or villages. However, it was not just port cities that would be negatively impacted by this crisis but also any that were major manufacturing centers. As published in *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, one observer noted, "We hear that Petitions from all the manufacturing Towns in this Kingdom, on the deplorable decay of our Trade and foreign Commerce, are preparing to be laid."⁹⁴ These manufacturing cities would become the centers of the John Wilkes-related petitioning movement and partisan discontent.

POLITICAL DIVISIONS

The discontent in the American colonies was also a potential risk to England whose relationship with their "first colony" Ireland continued to be volatile. Newspapers in Ireland published letters that called for an end to the tensions present across the Atlantic, specifically, the use of Irish troops as "peacekeepers" in the American colonies. One letter from a gentleman in Ireland noted, "Faith we are not in a less rebellious state here than the people in America... You drain us of our troops to send them to America, to quell the tumults there; but I wish you may not have occasion to recall them for a similar purpose here, before your intentions are effected on the American colonies."⁹⁵ The author of this letter warned of the potential risk that continued conflict with the American colonies would have on Ireland's relationship with England. In a

⁹³ To the King's Most Excellent Majesty, The humble Petition of the Citizens of Bristol in Guildhall, assembled, 25th July, 1769 in *The Political Register and Impartial Review for MDCCLXX*, Vol. 6, printed for Henry Beever, London, 1770; also printed in *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, November 23, 1769; *The London Chronicle*, November 25, 1769

⁹⁴ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, June 24, 1769

⁹⁵ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, September 22, 1768

letter sent from Ireland to Boston, one gentleman wrote, “We are apprehensive that we shall be saddled with a part of the Crown debts next session of parliament... *Behold the difference between free-born Americans and conquered Irishmen! the one cannot be saddled with taxes without their Parliament is managed, while the other are loaded with duties without asking their parliament one question about it.*”⁹⁶ This letter references the proposed plan to tax Ireland just as the American colonies had been taxed. A plan that was heavily criticized in *The North Briton*, “the principal points that this writer labours to prove... the national debt cannot be discharged... but by imposing taxes upon America and Ireland... But the arguments he advances in support of all or of most of those assertions are, to the last degree, ridiculous.”⁹⁷ The author goes on to claim that these taxes are, “a political engine for extracting money out of the pockets of the people, and transferring it into the pockets of our ministers and placemen.”⁹⁸ These criticisms in *The North Briton* were a part of the larger debate about the future of the British empire which included Ireland and the American colonies. This debate concerned issues of the supremacy of Parliament, how colonies should be governed, and whether the English colonies should be used to economically support Britain instead of extracting more taxes from within England.

Politicians who expressed their disdain for the Townshend Duties and other colonial legislation used the issue of “constitutionality” as a justification to question the current ministry’s approach to the English empire. As one newspaper reported in 1768, “Lord Chatham intends to make a motion for the abolition of the new-established board of American affairs, as being unconstitutional... he intends once more to use his utmost influence for the repeal of the

⁹⁶ Italicization comes from original text; *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, October 19, 1767

⁹⁷ *The North Briton*, November 5, 1769

⁹⁸ *The North Briton*, November 5, 1769

late act obliging the Americans to pay a duty on commodities sent from Great Britain”⁹⁹

Additionally in a letter to, “the Electors of Great-Britain in general, and to the Freeholders of the County of Middlesex in particular,” the author claimed that, “the unhappy divisions between Great Britain and her Colonies have been fomented by the arbitrary conduct of the same Administration.”¹⁰⁰ Partisan conflict and debates over ideology were integral in the conflict over the Townshend Duties. Parliament and the British public had not come to a consensus on how England should govern its colonies and resolve the Townshend Duties crisis. The central issue for this debate was the economic fallout of the government’s conflict with its colonies and its connection to internal English political divides.

PART III: CONCLUSION

Unlike the Stamp Act Crisis, which came to a relatively quick resolution with the Declaratory Act within a year of the Stamp Act’s passing, it was several years before the Townshend Duties Crisis was resolved. Many of these laws were eventually repealed, although not all the taxes were removed as the tax on tea remained. This remaining tax would eventually become known as the Tea Act. The relationship between Britain and its American colonies was heavily damaged by this Townshend Duties Crisis, even with the repeal of the laws. In the span of five years, the colonists had coordinated to boycott British goods twice and had focused more attention on building their own manufacturing to rid themselves of dependence on Britain. As one issue of the *North Briton* prophesied, “If they [the colonies] do not submit to them [the

⁹⁹ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, October 6, 1768

¹⁰⁰ *The Bath and Bristol Chronicle*, May 18, 1769

Townshend Duties], they will either raise a civil war, the greatest of evils; or they will oblige the p---t to repeal an act.”¹⁰¹

By examining newspaper articles and letters on the state of commerce between Britain and their colonies several questions emerged. The first one concerns trans-Atlantic communication during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It has been explored in some form before by Ian Steele in his book *English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community*. Steele lays out the circumstances of trans-Atlantic communication during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to understand how the passage of news affected events such as the Revolution of 1688 in the American colonies.¹⁰² However, his study ends prior to the crises of the later eighteenth century. The complicated timeline of the passing of the New York Restraining Act and the long communication times during the building up of the boycott movement suggests there are further issues to be explored. Building off of Ian Steele’s understandings of trans-Atlantic communication there is research to be done to establish, “How communication between Britain and the American colonies contributed to the events that led up to the American Revolution?” A proper discussion of this question, however, would likely require different sources that are outside of the goal and scope of this paper.

While the previous question arose more out of reading the secondary literature, the second question is one that emerged from the primary sources: why did a similar merchant uprising, as seemingly occurred in response to the Stamp Act crisis, not occur in response to the Townshend Duty crisis? Unlike its previous crisis, which was resolved fairly quickly, the

¹⁰¹ *The North Briton*, August 6, 1768

¹⁰² Steele, 94-110

Townshend Duties did lead to a longer boycott of British goods and, as demonstrated throughout this paper, pushed the colonies towards internal manufacturing rather than relying on British trade. Yet, outside of political pamphlets, some debate in newspapers, and a handful of lines within the petitions of the freeholder's movement, as far as my research has discovered, there was no similar mass movement. One of the turning points in the Stamp Act Crisis was the campaign by London merchants to call for its repeal, a campaign supported by the Marquess of Rockingham, the prime minister at the time, and Edmund Burke. The merchants, aware of the risks of the breakdown of trade or boycotts, believed by repealing the Stamp Act and appeasing the colonists, that they would not suffer continued economic consequences.¹⁰³ However, this same united merchant action did not appear throughout the late 1760s begging the question: Why did no significant collective uprising of British mercantile opposition manifest throughout the Townshend Duties crisis?

The goal of this thesis was to understand the reasons behind public opposition among British individuals in response to the Townshend Duties. Through the examination of newspapers and petitions from the late 1760s it sought to identify the justifications for opposition as expressed through publically published letters and complaints. While previous historians have focused on the political and partisan justifications for opposition, this thesis found that individuals in Britain were growing increasingly concerned about the potential for the colonial crises to escalate already existing economic tensions across the Atlantic. With a heavily in-debt kingdom, alongside a growing problem with international trade and instances of shortage across Britain, many British citizens saw the discontent in the colonies as financially risky and detrimental to the continued prosperity of the kingdom. Concerns over the economic difficulties

¹⁰³ *The North Briton*, November 5, 1768; *The Public Advertiser*, August 4, 1767

with the American colonies and the potential for continued future loss of trade led merchants and other British individuals to speak out in the press or engage in petitioning movements that called for the end of the Townshend Duties and other colonial legislation. This thesis has identified extensive public engagement and ideological divisions among the British public, instead of political consensus, as argued by historians such as Linda Colley and Eliga Gould. The crisis over the Townshend Duties was a part of a larger trend of partisan conflict within Britain that disagreed over the management and governance of England's empire. These factors all contributed toward a public sphere where the public could and did call for an end to the Townshend Duties in open opposition to their own government's policies.

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