

‘Bravery and Loyalty - Insufficient Securities for the Life and Honour of a
Naval Officer’

How Honour influenced the Court Martial and Execution of Admiral John Byng

by

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Abstract

The execution of Admiral Byng was a turning point in the history of the Royal Navy. For the first time, a senior officer had been executed, in an act that ran counter to the recommendations of the Admiralty, the court martial, and the House of Commons. This thesis examines the case of Admiral Byng and argues that honour was a crucial factor in both his conviction and execution. Honour was a multifaceted concept that varied based on individual interpretation. As a result, honour was interpreted and utilized throughout the trial and its aftermath in a variety of ways, including in the form of national honour, naval honour, and Byng's personal honour. This thesis examines the theme of honour during the prelude of the case, Byng's court martial itself, and the period leading to his execution, exploring the influence of honour and how views of honour shifted throughout the affair.

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Chapter One: Introduction

On the 14th of March 1757, Admiral John Byng of the Royal Navy was executed for breaching the Articles of War, an act that one modern historian refers to as “the worst legalistic crime in the nation’s annals.” This controversial act divided the nation, with politicians, the media, and the Navy at odds over the justice of Byng’s execution. Admiral Byng was charged for his failure to do his “utmost to take or destroy every ship” during the Battle of Minorca, which was a violation of the 12th article of the Articles of War. That being said, the legitimacy of this charge is dubious, with many of Byng’s contemporary and modern defenders arguing that Byng was made a scapegoat to protect the government and Admiralty Board, or alternatively to appease the public infuriated by the naval defeat at Minorca. The subsequent conviction at the court martial examining the Minorca affair only confused the matter further, as, despite accepting that Byng took the correct action by retreating, the presiding officers of the court martial still found him guilty of violating Article 12. Moreover, the presiding officers unanimously recommended Byng be offered clemency, but despite this, the Admiral was executed when King George II refused to follow their recommendation in a violation of precedent. The court martial and execution of Admiral Byng remains a hotly disputed topic to this day and can be considered one of the most controversial courts martial of the Royal Navy to have ever occurred.

Both contemporary figures and modern historians largely focused on the effects of Byng’s court martial as well as the legalities of it, in order to determine whether Byng’s conviction (and subsequent execution) was justified under the law or had a beneficial effect upon the Navy, with N. A. M. Rodger being a strong proponent of the

latter belief. This thesis, in contrast, proposes a fresh perspective by examining Byng's court martial through the theme of honour. In doing so, it proposes that Byng's execution was not done strictly to punish a scapegoat or take action against an Admiral viewed as cowardly, but to assuage the honour of Britain, the King, the people, and the Royal Navy. By examining the honour of key figures and groups within the case, this thesis explores how honour influenced the actions and decisions that guided the court martial to its ultimate conclusion of Byng's death.

Minorca was a disaster for the British, not only due to the strategic implications (although they were certainly unfortunate) but due to the profound affect that the failure of Byng and his naval expedition had on individual, national, and naval honour. The people and the media called for blood, while the government and Admiralty sought to safeguard their honour by punishing Admiral Byng, who they argued held full responsibility for Minorca. In turn, Byng and his supporters argued that he had acted with honour, and that any dishonour rested with the government. Even the court martial itself hotly debated the question of both Byng and the Navy's honour. In the end, the case was concluded by the King's actions to protect royal and national honour through the execution of Byng.

The Royal Navy and the Battle of Minorca

Somewhat surprisingly, the first seeds of Byng's court martial were planted well before Minorca or even the Seven Years War. Up until 1745, during the War of the Austrian Succession, the offence that Byng had been charged with did not mandate a death sentence for senior officers. Unfortunately for Byng, during 1745, the Articles of War were amended to mandate the death sentence for all officers, in response to the

execution of a young lieutenant named Baker Philips.¹ Philips had taken command of his ship, the HMS Anglesea, after the death of Captain Jacob Elton, whose incompetent defence of his ship forced Philips to surrender to his French adversaries. Philips was court martialled due to his surrender under Article 12, the same article that Byng would later be tried under, and eventually executed, generating outrage over the Admiralty blaming and trying a junior officer for surrendering when Elton was ultimately responsible for the situation.² The British Parliament was particularly aghast at Philips' treatment, and forced a revision to Article 12 in response, so that senior officers and junior officers would face the same penalty for violating the Articles.³ Byng would be the first senior officer to be court martialled and found guilty under the new revisions, sentencing him to death from which he previously would have been exempt.

Byng's direct troubles began in 1756, shortly before the outbreak of the Seven Years War. Sensing the arrival of the war and being aware of the dangerous strategic position of Minorca (one of the Balearic Islands, which had been ceded to Britain earlier in the 18th century), the Admiralty ordered Byng to raise a fleet to protect Minorca from a likely French assault.⁴ Despite their orders, they did not give Byng enough time, ships, or supplies to prepare a capable force, and Byng was forced to set off with a severely

¹ William Johnson, "Richard Jack, Minor Mid-18th Century Mathematician: Writings and Background," *International Journal of Impact Engineering* 12, no. 1 (1992): 137.

² William Laird Clowes et al., *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, vol. 1 (London: S. Low, Marston, and Company, 1897), 278-279.

³ Johnson, "Richard Jack, Minor Mid-18th Century Mathematician: Writings and Background," 137.

⁴ Chris Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2009), 63.

understrength and poorly-equipped fleet.⁵ As predicted, France launched a naval invasion and put Minorca under siege, although the British garrison under General William Blakeney continued to hold out in Port Mahon. Byng arrived in Gibraltar, from where he would launch his expedition to relieve Minorca.⁶ His situation would only worsen, as General Thomas Fowke (who commanded Gibraltar) refused to supply Byng with the marines needed to relieve the garrison, despite having been ordered to do so.⁷ At this stage, Byng wrote to the Admiralty to apprise them of the situation and informed them of the state of the fleet and poor chances of the expedition succeeding. Nevertheless, he did his duty as ordered, setting out on 8 May to relieve Minorca and Blakeney.

On 19 May, Byng arrived at Minorca, and attempted to make contact with Blakeney, but was interrupted by the arrival of the French Navy. On 20 May, both forces engaged in battle, with roughly equal force distribution (Byng had a slight numerical advantage, but the French ships were better armed). Both forces formed into single lines and closed the distance, however the British were poorly coordinated and were unable to fully close, in contrast to the French who maintained their formation. Although neither force lost any ships, it was clear by the end of the engagement that the British had taken more damage.⁸ The battle concluded on 20 May when the French retreated following the Royal Navy re-establishing their line of battle, though Byng remained in the vicinity of

⁵ Martin Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy: The Seven Years War* (London: I. B. Taurus and Co., 2015), 33.

⁶ Karl Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," (MA diss., University of Arizona, 1964), 53.

⁷ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 76, 78.

⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 110.

Minorca until 24 May. At this point, Byng and his officers jointly made the decision to retreat to Gibraltar, on the grounds that there was no reasonable hope of relieving Minorca or defeating the French.⁹ Although technically a stalemate, as neither force had decisively defeated the other, the Battle of Minorca ended with the French having forced Byng's retreat and preventing the relief of Minorca. That being said, in the absence of British marines supplied by Fowke, it is difficult to imagine that the relief of Minorca could have been successful due to a lack of manpower.

Arriving back at Gibraltar on 19 June, Byng repaired his fleet and plotted a new offensive, buoyed by fresh reinforcements that would give him a decisive numerical advantage. He also sent a report of the Battle to the Admiralty. Before he could launch a second attempt, however, he received a letter from the Admiralty relieving him of duty and recalling him to Britain.¹⁰ The Admiralty had been informed of the results of Minorca through the French on 2 June (via the Spanish ambassador to Britain) and were displeased. They immediately recalled Byng, despite not having received his report or having any understanding of his side of the story.¹¹ The Admiralty finally received Byng's report on 23 June. Their actions following the receipt of Byng's report were indicative of how the Byng affair would progress: the Admiralty proceeded to edit Byng's report as to make him seem a coward, then leaked it to the *London Gazette*, which published the edited report on 26 June.¹² The Admiralty collaborated with the

⁹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 57.

¹⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 121.

¹¹ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 131.

¹² "Extract of a Letter from Admiral Byng to Mr. Cleveland, Secretary of the Admiralty. Dated on board the Ramillies off Minorca, May 25, 1756," *London Gazette*, no. 9594 (26 June 1756): 1.

government in leaking the report, as Henry Fox, a minister, was responsible for editing the report.¹³ It was clear that the Admiralty intended to ensure Byng would take the blame for Minorca, given their pre-emptive recall of Byng and their editing of the report. As one might expect, the British public reacted furiously to ‘news’ of Byng’s cowardice and failure, and protests broke out across Britain calling for his execution.¹⁴ The press shared a similar loathing for him, although they also directed some of their vitriol towards the Duke of Newcastle, the Prime Minister.¹⁵ Their treatment of Byng stands in sharp contrast to their treatment of Byng’s counterpart Blakeney, hailed by publications such as the *Gentleman’s Magazine* as a heroic soldier let down by Byng’s cowardice and failure to relieve him.¹⁶ Byng’s name was vilified throughout Britain, although he did retain some important supporters, including William Pitt, who was among those who held Newcastle and the Admiralty responsible for the debacle.¹⁷ Upon Byng’s arrival in Britain on 26 July, he was placed under arrest by his brother-in-law, Admiral Henry Osborn, to await his court martial, which would begin on 28 December and conclude on 27 January 1757.¹⁸ As for the British garrison on Minorca, they were forced to surrender on 29 June, having lost any hope of relief with Byng’s defeat.

It is important to understand the general context of Britain’s situation within the Seven Years War, as it goes some way towards understanding the popular discontent and

¹³ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 127.

¹⁴ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 82.

¹⁵ Sarah Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng: Imperial Debates, Military Governance and Popular Politics at the Outbreak of the Seven Years' War," *Journal for Maritime Research* 13, no. 1 (2011): 4.

¹⁶ "Defence of Lord Blakeney," *Gentleman’s Magazine* 27 (Sept 1757): 413.

¹⁷ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 14.

¹⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 138.

outrage directed by the public against Byng and the government. Britain had begun the Seven Years War on a poor footing, with Byng's defeat being one of a several, mostly in North America. Fighting between the British and French had started several years earlier (historians generally agree the French-Indian War, as the North American theatre of the Seven Years War was known, began in 1754).¹⁹ The British faced heavy setbacks in this conflict, with the Braddock Expedition being particularly disastrous, and saw few successes, which took the form of naval officers harassing French shipping.²⁰ On top of their poor showing in the war, Britain was facing food shortages and, as a result, riots and public discontent.²¹ The food riots had begun around the start of the war in Wherrybridge (in the West Midlands), and would only grow over the following two years, to the point that nearly 150 reported riots had occurred by 1757.²² There was similar unrest over the Militia Act (proposed in 1755), a law creating militias to defend against French belligerence, which proved wildly unpopular with the public due to concerns over pay and the food shortages.²³ The unrest led to rioting and attacks on the local gentry, creating an environment hostile to the aristocracy prior to Byng's court martial.²⁴ The unrest against both the food shortages and the Militia Act would create severe discontent against the government and authority in general, which would be

¹⁹ William Fowler Jr, *Empires at War: The French and Indian War and the Struggle for North America, 1754-1763*, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2009), 75.

²⁰ William Harrison Lowdermilk, *History of Cumberland, (Maryland) from the Time of the Indian Town, Caiuctucuc, in 1728, Up to the Present Day: Embracing an Account of Washington's First Campaign, and Battle of Fort Necessity, Together with a History of Braddock's Expedition*, (Washington: J. Anglim, 1878), 174; Fowler Jr, *Empires at War*, 75.

²¹ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 58.

²² Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 58.

²³ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 76.

²⁴ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 79.

turned against both Byng and the Newcastle administration following the loss of Minorca.

The British public were extremely discontented with their government in general, and particularly their handling of the war effort. That being said, Byng's failure was a particularly harsh blow, for a number of reasons. Although fighting in North America had begun well before, Minorca was seen as the first 'official' battle of the war, and it was one the British were perceived to have decisively lost. To make matters far worse, Minorca had been a naval battle. The Royal Navy was Britain's pride, and more importantly, its best line of defence against invasion.²⁵ It was an elite naval force, and one that the public expected to always emerge victorious. As historian Nicholas Kaizer explains, naval honour was crucially linked to national honour, and a naval defeat was a matter that was of great concern to the British public and could lead to serious accusations that Britain's honour had been damaged.²⁶ Had Minorca been a land battle, failure may not have drawn the same level of criticism, but the British public were far more emotionally invested in the outcome of Britain's naval battles. In a very real sense, the Royal Navy was a key point of pride as well as the chief military might of Britain, and thus an early major naval defeat was seen as a particular disgrace. When one considers that Minorca followed other military mishaps and general public discontent, it is unsurprising that the Byng affair caused an explosion of public outcry that would have

²⁵ Timothy Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy 1793-1815* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 66.

²⁶ Nicholas Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour: The Royal Navy's Quest for Vengeance in the Single Ship Actions of the War of 1812* (Warwick, England: Helion & Company, 2020), 77.

massive repercussions for Byng himself, the British government, and future courts martial.

The concept of honour critically influenced the court martial of Admiral Byng, as it did in much of life in 18th century Britain as a whole, and thus merits some explanation. Under the definition of Samuel Johnson, honour did not have a fixed meaning, but was rather a matter of outside perception. For example, those who enjoyed a prestigious position, such as the nobility, were assumed to have more honour, while those who acted in a shameful manner were seen as dishonourable. Honour also had many forms, including, in this case, national honour, representing Britain's honour as a state, and naval honour, representing the honour of the Navy in the eyes of the country. As a result, honour was fluid, as each of these forms were subject to the interpretation of individuals, meaning that while one person might have seen Byng's actions as honourable, another might see his actions as the height of dishonour, depending on their personal priorities. This allowed honour to be employed actively in pursuit of an objective, by utilizing interpretations of honour to influence an outside viewpoint, be it in good or bad faith. Moreover, it was also possible for one to profess a devotion to honour, while in reality, acting out of self-interest and pragmatism. This, as such, was not necessarily incompatible with honourable behaviour, as it was very possible for someone to comport themselves honourably (even genuinely believing in their own righteousness) while simultaneously pursuing a self-serving course. Honour is therefore a highly subjective subject, as it is nearly impossible to differentiate between 'rhetorical' and idealistic notions of honour.

In the case of Byng, this was exemplified by the government and Admiralty deliberately emphasizing and exaggerating Byng's failure to relieve Minorca and subsequent retreat in order to suggest to the public that he was dishonourable and cowardly. This argument was undeniably one that favoured their own interests, but it is important to note that many (such as Henry Fox) genuinely believed that Byng's chosen course violated both honour and the Articles of War.²⁷ Lastly, it is important to understand honour was a 'currency' of sorts. Those who were perceived as honourable almost inevitably enjoyed more respect and prestige among society, with honour being particularly important to ascending both social and naval ranks. Simultaneously, being perceived as dishonourable might lead to being shunned or rejected, as Byng was made an outcast by the public. Honour was therefore highly desirable and valuable, given its influence on both social life and career prospects.

Historiography of the Royal Navy and Britain in the Seven Years War

This thesis pulls from several different fields, notably the scholarship focused specifically on Admiral Byng, the broader field of naval historiography, and British press, politics, and culture during the Georgian period and Seven Years War. Unfortunately, it is difficult to understand the mind of Byng, while also examining broader groups such as the Admiralty, the British public as a whole, the presiding officers of the court martial, and the King and his ministers. Luckily, the subject of Byng was prominent in contemporary writings, and many official records (including, crucially, the court martial records and official letters) and newspaper articles are available for examination. There are also a significant number of naval scholars who have examined

²⁷ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 128.

Byng in detail, although fewer naval historians have focused directly on the influence of honour within the Navy and its effects on British society. In recent years, there has been a growing number of social naval historians who are examining the topic, though the focus continues to be on the administrative aspects and engagements of the Royal Navy.

To begin by examining the naval historiography focusing specifically on Admiral Byng, one key author is Chris Ware. His work, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, published in 2009, is arguably one of the definitive works on the court martial of Admiral Byng, covering Byng's early career all the way up to his eventual execution, as well as the ramifications of it. Ware is among the historians who have attempted to redeem Byng's reputation and argues that while Byng made a number of strategic mistakes, he was not guilty of violating the Articles of War and that his execution was illegal.²⁸ He focuses chiefly on Byng's career and character, as well as the legalities of the court martial. He also touches on the politics and public sentiments that prevailed throughout the case. Ware's work is likely the broadest and most even-handed examination of the Byng affair, as well as of Admiral Byng in general, and is almost universally referred to when examining John Byng.

Another, more recent, naval historian who focuses on Admiral Byng and his court martial is Joseph Krulder. His work, *The Execution of Admiral John Byng as a Microhistory of Eighteenth Century Britain*, published in 2021, fulfills an important role in the literature as well as offering a fresh perspective on the Byng court martial. Unlike Ware, Krulder focuses chiefly on the aspects outside the court martial and how they

²⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 232.

affected Byng, particularly the cultural and political aspects. By examining contemporary print culture, political dealings, and the protests and riots that occurred as a result of the Byng affair, Krulder examines the court martial from the lens of a social microhistory. Krulder largely reaches the same conclusion as Ware, that Byng was a scapegoat, albeit from an examination of the political aspects rather than the court martial and naval-focused examination of Ware.²⁹ Although less well known, Krulder's work is immensely valuable as a more modern and social history examination of the Byng affair.

A third naval historian who is heavily involved with the study of Admiral Byng's execution is Sarah Kinkel. She has written a number of articles on the subject of Byng and focuses chiefly on the question of discipline and the political aspects of the case, as well as the public outcry against Byng's failure. Her book, *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy*, published in 2018, discusses the politics of the case that resulted in the fall of the Newcastle ministry and the scapegoating of Byng. Kinkel is among the definitive authors on the politics of the Byng affair and is particularly helpful in explaining the roles and actions of key opponents and supporters of Byng. Her focus on the Duke of Newcastle and William Pitt is especially intriguing, as their political clash over Byng led to serious social and political upheaval.³⁰ Like Ware and Krulder, Kinkel tends towards the view that Byng was scapegoated, though she expresses more interest in the making of Byng as a scapegoat

²⁹ Joseph Krulder, *The Execution of Admiral John Byng as a Microhistory of Eighteenth-century Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2.

³⁰ Sarah Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 122.

than the legalities behind it. Kinkel's works are very useful for understanding the general discontent directed at Byng and Newcastle in the aftermath of Minorca, as well as the influence of print culture and political factionalization.

To examine broader naval historiography, one can begin only with N. A. M. Rodger, undoubtedly the most influential naval historian currently alive. Rodger's seminal work, *The Wooden World* (1986), is regarded as the definitive historical text on the Royal Navy during the Seven Years War and is invaluable to any historian studying the institution.³¹ *The Wooden World* was revolutionary for naval historians, largely due to his focus on the administration and social history of the Royal Navy, in contrast to the traditionally 'battle-focused' naval histories. Interestingly, Rodger is one of the few modern naval historians who argue that Byng's conviction, and thus sentence, was justified. He also argues the conviction had a positive effect on the Navy by encouraging officers to be more aggressive and proving that the Navy would punish cowardice. Rodger takes the view that Byng was a coward, commenting "his was a clear case of moral cowardice, of preferring the certainties of failure to the risks of success."³²

Moreover, Rodger is the figurehead of the largest school of thought within naval history. His school argues that the Royal Navy was a highly disciplined organization that sought to fairly maintain authority within its ranks through the use of regulated punishments and reasonably fair courts martial, as well as the fear of dishonour. Rodger, and historians with similar beliefs, reject the notion that the Royal Navy was a tyrannical

³¹ Julian Gwyn, review of *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, by N. A. M. Rodger, *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 695.

³² N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World : An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), 247-248.

organization (as was popularly supposed), and endeavour to show it was a fair master to both seamen and officers.³³ This view contradicts an opposing school of thought led by Marcus Rediker, which argues that the Royal Navy was tyrannical, and that the seamen were frequently oppressed and adopted revolutionary beliefs in opposition to the naval hierarchy.³⁴ Rediker and his allies are of less use to this thesis than Rodger's school, as he focuses on the social history of seamen, which is not applicable to the topic of Byng, but his views are relevant to naval historiography, especially as a contrasting outlook to Rodger.

Rodger has a number of allies within his school of naval historiography, including Samantha Cavell and John Byrn. Largely, this is a group that focuses heavily on the institutions and the officer class, however courts martial and honour are also frequent topics. Byrn has written probably the most thorough examinations of courts martial, *Naval Courts Martial, 1793-1815* (2009). In it, he examines a number of court martial records and explains key factors that would influence the decisions of a court martial, including how acting with honour could lead to the court requesting clemency.³⁵ Cavell, meanwhile, examines discipline and punishment among officers, as well as how honour could influence and dictate the actions of the officer class. While she largely studies the post-Byng period of the Royal Navy, her work is still useful for an understanding of discipline within the officer class. Lastly, David Syrett's work on the Seven Years War, particularly his two-volume compilation of letters from Admiral

³³ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 344-345.

³⁴ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 75.

³⁵ John Byrn, ed., *Naval Courts Martial, 1793-1815* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), xxv.

Rodney, provide an understanding of how an influential and renowned officer within the Navy viewed major events, including the Byng affair.

Nicholas Kaizer is another naval historian, whose object of focus is on the honour of the Navy. Kaizer's recent book, *Revenge in the Name of Honour* (2020), examines how naval defeats could lead to public outrage, a crisis of confidence in the Royal Navy, and the effect of naval defeats on the press, which is very applicable to the Byng affair. Kaizer also examines courts martial investigating naval defeats and potential cowardice, and the potential ramifications of those courts martial. Lastly, he examines the effect of notorious naval defeats on the British public and media, explaining their outrage over what they saw as the damaged honour of the Navy and of Britain, which were inexorably linked.³⁶

Moving on from naval historiography, the examination of Georgian politics, culture, and print culture is also valuable for an investigation into the court martial of Admiral Byng. Nicholas Rogers is one of the more important social historians of the Georgian period for this thesis, particularly as some of his work centers on naval courts martial and how the media and public perceived them. His work, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (1998), dedicates a section to the unrest caused by Byng's failure at Minorca, as well as the politics that were involved in encouraging this unrest as well as examining a number of the other factors that had played into public discontent prior to the revelation of Byng's defeat, such as the food rioting and naval impressment. Lastly, Rogers presents a valuable examination of contemporary publications and news

³⁶ Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, 77.

coverage of Byng's court martial, including many of the methods that were used to protest the actions of the unpopular admiral and how he was depicted in the public imagining.³⁷

Similar to Rogers, Kathleen Wilson is a social historian examining Georgian Britain, particularly print culture, public sentiment, and politics. Her work *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (1995), describes the public outcry against Byng, particularly how his actions were seen to have endangered national honour. Wilson's work presents a remarkably interesting discourse on the subject of Byng and honour, framing it in the context of a British culture and national honour that was beginning to shift from its aristocratic roots to a more patriotic form. She argues Byng was seen as a representative of the seemingly decadent aristocratic class, which in turn was identified with cowardice, mismanagement, and weakness, all of which Byng was accused of being guilty of.³⁸ Lastly, Wilson shows how outrage against Byng was associated with anti-government outrage, and how Minorca was the 'final nail in the coffin' of Britain's faith in the Newcastle ministry and their handling of the war.

Sources and Thesis

This thesis will also be using a number of contemporary sources to demonstrate popular and individual opinion within Britain. Among those sources will be examples of contemporary magazines, such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Gazette*,

³⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60-62.

³⁸ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 189.

two publications that reported heavily on Byng's court martial. The *London Gazette* is particularly interesting, as it was the magazine that originally published the edited and leaked version of Byng's report on the events of Minorca, as well as taking a hardline anti-Byng stance.³⁹ Throughout the court martial, the *Gazette* acted as one of the government's chief allies against Byng within the media and were open in their jubilation over Byng's conviction and execution. Meanwhile, the *Gentleman's Magazine* was one of the most prominent publications of the period, and took a neutral stance on Byng, publishing articles written by Byng's allies and enemies alike, as well as a detailed account of the court martial. The French philosopher Voltaire famously defended Byng within the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It also published a letter (passed on by Voltaire) from the Marquis de Richelieu, who had commanded the French forces at Minorca and wrote to defend Byng's actions and defend his honour.⁴⁰ Notably, Samuel Johnson, a famous Tory writer and defender of Byng, was a writer at the *Gentleman's Magazine*. While these are the two most prominent publications this essay will examine, there are also a number of others, including the *Oxford Journal* and *Scot's Magazine*, which are used to provide a broader British perspective.

Another key group of contemporary sources were political cartoons, or satirical prints as they were known at the time. These were quite popular and were among the most effective methods used to attack Byng. Notably, these prints almost always attacked Byng's conduct and defeat, with only a few that seemingly favoured Byng by attacking the government instead. While there are hundreds of such prints, one

³⁹ "Extract of a Letter from Admiral Byng," *London Gazette*, 1.

⁴⁰ "Historical Chronical," *Gentleman's Magazine* 27 (Jan 1757): 44.

particularly interesting satirical print is called *The English Lion Dismembered*. It depicts a wounded British lion and a French rooster attacking a Union Jack, with the British public clamouring for justice in the background.⁴¹ The print explicitly identifies Byng as the one responsible for the dishonour and laments the damage to national honour and Britain's prestige. This was one of a large number of prints that identified Byng with devils, attacked his courage, or lionized Blakeney while comparing him to Byng. Considering the popularity and prevalence of such prints, it is undeniable they provide a valuable perspective when evaluating the Byng affair.

Political pamphlets were something of a middle ground between satirical prints and newspapers. Similar to newspapers, pamphlets were written largely to describe the arguments of Byng's court martial, and there were both supporters and defenders of Byng among the producers of pamphlets. Like the satirical prints, however, they were designed to be more accessible and easily read than newspapers to present arguments to the broader public. Pamphlets were political in nature, generally focused on a single argument that would be expressed in support of either Byng or the government. Both sides had prominent pamphleteers defending their beliefs, such as Samuel Johnson and Horace Walpole, who were also involved in the politics behind the Byng court martial, unlike print artists or newspaper writers.⁴² Overall, pamphlets provide a valuable insight into the arguments with which the pro- and anti-Byng camps sought to persuade the general public.

⁴¹ *The English Lion Dismembered*, 1757, caricature, the British Museum.

⁴² Wilmarth Lewis, "The Accords and Resemblances of Johnson and Walpole," *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 22, no. 2 (1968): 7.

Lastly, although perhaps most importantly, the court martial records and official letters are an indispensable source for this thesis. Their importance to the case is obvious, but they also provide insight into how the presiding officers of the court martial sought to evaluate the case and what they relied on when coming to their conclusion. Furthermore, they provide insight into the minds of the officers who were also at Minorca, as officers like Captain Arthur Gardiner sought to defend Byng throughout the courts martial.⁴³ Finally, they also provide further evidence as to the importance of honour to the trial, as honour and courage were the basis of both Byng's defence and the prosecution's arguments against him, while also being the stated cause for the plea for clemency by the presiding officers.

This thesis is divided into three chapters and seeks to present the Byng affair as something of a three-act play. The first chapter deals with the period between Minorca and the start of Byng's court martial and examines the political and personal factors of the case, the popular and status factors of the case, and the career factors. The first section of the chapter deals largely with the political crisis of the Newcastle Ministry and some of the key actors of the Byng affair, including Byng himself, William Pitt, Newcastle, Samuel Johnson, and some of Byng's allies within the service. The second section examines the riots and protests against Byng upon his return to Britain, the satirical prints and contemporary newspapers, and how the background of Byng played

⁴³ Charles Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng, at a Court-Martial, as Taken by Mr. Charles Ferne, Judge-Advocate of His Majesty's Fleet. Published by Order of the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, at the Desire of the Court-Martial. To Which Is Added, an Account of Admiral Byng's Behaviour in His Last Moments. Also, a Copy of a Paper Delivered by Him to William Brough, Esq; Marshal of the High Court of Admiralty, Immediately before His Death," (court martial record, London, 1757), 117.

into the court martial, particularly his noble status and famous father. It also draws an important comparison between Byng and Earl Ferrers, another British aristocrat from the period who was reviled by the public and executed in a highly publicized trial, albeit for insanity instead of naval affairs. The final section draws on how the damage naval honour impacted Britain and the Navy, as well as examining how Byng's previous career was seen as honourable in contrast to the dishonourable failure of Minorca.

The second chapter focuses on how honour directly affected the court martial itself, focusing on the period between 28 December 1756 and 27 January 1757. It focuses on three pillars: the honour of Byng himself, the honour of the Navy, and the shifting values and honour of the British public. The first section, Byng's honour, examines how his honour and courage became the central point of the case, acting as both Byng's defence and the prosecution's argument. Moreover, it explores how the jury justified pleading for clemency on the basis of Byng's honour, despite the fact that the charge they convicted him on was one that implied dishonour. In the second section, the honour of the Navy is explored by demonstrating how the presiding officers and the Admiralty had to consider the reputation and honour of the service (which Minorca had gravely damaged) when coming to their decision. It also explores other factors such as Byng's perceived lack of masculinity and rising nationalism that was tied to the concept of naval honour. The final section explores how the concept of honour within the lower classes of Britain was shifting from the traditional aristocratic honour, to a new, more populist and patriotic form of honour. This shift led to a drastic change in the values of the contemporary British public, which became more commercial and adopted more rationalist values. The change in values in turn influenced the view of the British public

regarding Byng's court martial, as they became more enraged at the injury done to their patriotic pride while opposing his aristocratic roots.

In the third substantive chapter, the period following Byng's conviction leading up to his execution is explored through the lens of national honour and how all figures sought to defend their own interpretation of national honour. The first section of this chapter deals with the actions of the King and his Cabinet and their efforts to defend national honour by either forcing the execution or pleading for mercy on Byng's behalf, focusing specifically on the major individuals that influenced the course of events, such as George II, William Pitt, Earl Grenville-Temple, Henry Fox, and Newcastle. The second section examines the Royal Navy and their efforts to defend both national and naval honour by obtaining clemency for Byng, by examining figures such as former First Lord of the Admiralty Anson, Augustus Hervey, Augustus Keppel, and Admiral Edward Boscawen. The final section examines the general public's desire to repair the damage done to national honour in contrast to the desire of individuals within the public, such as Horace Walpole and Byng's sister, Sarah Osborne, to save Byng and protect Britain's honour from a miscarriage of justice.

This thesis is intended to contest N. A. M. Rodger's belief that Byng's execution was intended to encourage naval officers to be more aggressive and provide a harshly punished example against cowardice, in addition to Byng's conviction being motivated by his lack of fighting spirit. Instead, this thesis argues that while the aforementioned belief was one factor, the British public, the Navy, the government, and the court martial were more concerned with the damage that would be done to Britain's honour if Byng's failure went unpunished, to the point that the court martial explicitly stated Byng had not

behaved in a cowardly manner. While the majority of the public did accept Byng's cowardice as fact, the root cause of their upset was the belief that national honour had been stained, and that drastic punishment was required to restore it. Moreover, the King, and his supporters in the cabinet, were more concerned about the implications for their own honour, as well as British honour generally, when deciding against offering clemency, particularly as many in the cabinet bore partial responsibility for the debacle at Minorca. In turn, Byng was as focused on proving himself to be an honourable individual as he was in defending himself against charges of cowardice, while his supporters accused the government of dishonouring Britain through their failures.

As a final note before examining the topic in detail, it would be remiss not to explain the many differing types of honour that are mentioned and were involved within the court martial. Personal honour refers to the honour of an individual, such as Byng's own honour, and was largely a matter of status and reputation, as well as how others perceived the relevant individual and their actions. Naval honour, meanwhile, refers to the honour of the Navy and the broader officer class, as well as the Admiralty by extension. This was largely a matter decided by their successes and the conduct of individual officers, which in turn reflected upon the reputation of the service upon Britons. National honour refers to the idealized belief of Britain's honour as a state, which consequently was a matter that affected Britain's citizens. Effectively, national honour was what the British people believed about Britain's status in the world, and would therefore be heavily influenced by the opinions of individuals. For example, George II's view of national honour differed greatly from that of William Pitt, as George II believed his own honour was linked to national honour, while Pitt believed national

honour was more patriotic in nature and tied to Britain's successes or failures throughout the world. Royal honour refers to the honour of George II, who believed that his personal honour was tied into national honour, in an amalgamation called royal honour. Finally, the honour of the people was a concept closely tied to national honour, in the sense that it was how the British public viewed themselves. In the case of Byng, the public felt insulted that a commander who theoretically represented them was perceived to have acted as a coward, believing his cowardice reflected on them by as a result. The public demanded Byng be punished harshly on the grounds that otherwise Britain would effectively be condoning his actions. They further sought to disassociate themselves from Byng by making their outrage clear in a belief that this would repair what they saw as damage he had done to Britain's honour.

Chapter Two: “Failure to do his Utmost:” The Loss of Minorca

Over the course of 1756-1757, Admiral John Byng faced a court martial, beginning a months-long saga that would divide the nation, see the fall of a government, and raise questions about the inevitability of the death penalty for severe breaches of the Articles of War. It was a political controversy that would draw all sides into the fray, even the monarchy and the Admiralty. Byng was eventually executed, but not without significant public disorder and political tension. This chapter explores the factors behind the court martial by examining positive and negative biases that influenced the affair in the period prior to the court martial. It will also explore the central factor of honour, particularly Byng’s personal honour, naval honour, and the honour of the people. This period ranges from the Battle of Minorca all the way to Admiral Byng’s trial, although it also includes elements of Byng’s history, especially his prior military service. The key events will cover a range of topics, notably the resultant unrest that manifested in riots, threats, and public outcry against both the British Government, the Admiralty, and Byng himself. Another key event involved the political upheaval and subsequent government reshuffle that occurred as a result of the Battle of Minorca.

For the purpose of this section, positive bias is defined as the holding of preconceived ideas that were in Byng’s favour, while negative bias is the inverse, holding preconceived ideas or beliefs against Byng.⁴⁴ The first group of factors is political biases and personal connections. Political biases were highly influential in this

⁴⁴ Leendert Koppelaar, Alfred Lange, and Jan-Willem Van De Velde, "The Influence of Positive and Negative Victim Credibility on the Assessment of Rape Victims; An Experimental Study of Expectancy—Confirmation Bias," *International Review of Victimology* 5, no. 1 (1997): 61.

period, as the political situation was fluid. Similarly, personal connections frequently led to a preconceived decision of one's beliefs, as one would almost always side with one's allies. Another group of biases was popular opinion as well as status, such as Byng belonging to the noble class. Status was a key part of contemporary Britain and had been known to offer significant protection for officers of the Navy, or, conversely, should their status be seen as low, see them abandoned to their fate. The popular opinion of Byng also impacted the case, as key figures, particularly political actors, had to be keenly aware of what the public was thinking and adjust their position accordingly. The final group of biases were career factors. His career and naval views played a key part in Byng's attempt to win the support of the Navy and defend himself from the Admiralty. This section will examine such biases and attempt to determine how they affected the course of the trial, and how Byng's conviction and lack of success in pleading for mercy were defined by such factors.

Context

To understand the variables that affected the outcome of the Byng court martial, we must understand the circumstances leading up to the court martial itself. In 1756, the Seven Years' War broke out in Europe, and the Royal Navy committed itself to defending British interests on the continent. Of particular concern was Minorca, which was seen as a strategic threat to France, given its position just off the Mediterranean coast of France. As expected, the French Navy moved to attack Minorca shortly before the outbreak of the war, and, consequently, the Royal Navy sent a poorly equipped fleet

under Admiral John Byng to defend it.⁴⁵ Byng had been a relatively successful, if obscure, officer who had served in the Jacobite rebellions, and the British press was confident that he would emerge victorious. This was proven to be incorrect, however, as the French were victorious in the Battle of Minorca on 20 May 1756, with their ships untouched while several British ships were damaged during the battle.⁴⁶ Byng made the decision to abandon the battle the following day on the grounds there was no reasonable hope for victory and retreated to Gibraltar.⁴⁷ Thereafter, Minorca quickly fell to the French in a quick siege, finally surrendering on 29 June, although it was eventually returned to the British in the Treaty of Paris, which was signed in 1763.

Byng's retreat caused a national uproar in Britain. To the British, naval supremacy was a point of extreme pride, and Byng's retreat had placed that reputation, and naval honour in general, in jeopardy.⁴⁸ Not only had he unquestionably lost the battle, but his retreat had also resulted in the loss of Minorca itself. Under the contemporary naval culture of honour and courage at all costs in the face of the enemy, this was unthinkable.⁴⁹ Upon his return on 26 July, spurred on by public discontent (divided on whether to blame the Admiralty or Admiral Byng personally), the Admiralty accused Byng of breaching Article 12 by failing to do his utmost to defeat the enemy, and immediately arrested him.⁵⁰ These charges were significant, as only a few years

⁴⁵ Stephen Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," (PhD diss., York University of Toronto, 2008), 1-2.

⁴⁶ T. H McGuffie, "Some Fresh Light on The Siege of Minorca, 1756," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 29, no. 119 (1951): 113.

⁴⁷ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 5.

⁴⁸ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 3.

⁴⁹ Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, xvi, 35.

⁵⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 138.

prior, the Articles of War had been amended to demand the death penalty to *any* officer who failed to do his utmost to defeat the enemy, even a senior officer like Byng.⁵¹ Combined with the fact that the political establishment and the Admiralty itself fixated on Byng as a scapegoat for the disastrous battle, contemporary newspapers were perhaps correct to declare the verdict had been determined before the trial.⁵² Nevertheless, Byng was not without allies in the Navy, as officers like Admiral Rodney defended Byng in both public and private, in spite of the Admiralty and First Lord George Anson's best efforts to fan the flames against Byng.

Contemporary figures described Britain as close to revolution during the period between Byng's arrest and his court martial on 28 December, on account of public unrest arising from the defeat and fury over Byng's trial.⁵³ Numerous riots occurred throughout Britain in the period leading to the trial. The civil unrest was unusual in its sheer divisiveness, as it saw both pro- and anti-Byng protestors vehemently attacking their opposition, supported by influential figures, including both politicians and the Admiralty. The vitriol grew to such levels that it was common to see effigies of the Prime Minister or Byng being burned, depending on the sympathies of the particular protest, and mobs attacked both the Prime Minister's coach and Byng's house. The upcoming court martial also drew in the Tories, as they attempted to use the chaos to bolster their own power, while simultaneously several major Tory writers took to the press to defend Byng against his accusers. In summation, the period leading up to Byng's

⁵¹ Markus Eder, *Crime and Punishment in the Royal Navy of the Seven Years' War, 1755-1763* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 4.

⁵² "Further Particulars of Byng's Conduct," *Gentleman's Magazine* 26 (Sept 1756): 412.

⁵³ Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 122.

court martial saw a considerable amount of division within Britain, including in the Navy, the public, and politics. This division most notably manifested itself in the form of massive riots and protests, to a point where the Prime Minister was forced to resign, and a new cabinet was formed to unite the Establishment Whigs and Patriot Whigs.⁵⁴ Thereafter, the conflict would largely be resolved by the time of the court martial, owing to the changed political scene and Byng's consequent loss of support.

Political and Personal Factors

Two of the most important elements that affected the outcome of Byng's court martial were political and personal factors. These factors were not uncommon in court martials, as can be seen in the case of Lieutenant Baker Philips, who had seen a political outcry over his conviction in 1745. It was felt his captain was to blame for the loss of the ship Philips served on; however, owing to the writing of the Articles of War, Philips, as the surviving commanding officer, ended up taking the blame and was accordingly executed. Philips' case saw the Articles of War amended so that execution could also apply to senior officers, which ultimately led to Byng's execution. Admiral Byng's court martial was rife with politics, and saw the nation divided between those who supported Byng and those who favoured the King's and Admiralty's interpretation of the Battle of Minorca. The former were largely Patriot Whigs and Tories, with Secretary of State William Pitt being particularly outspoken in Byng's defence.⁵⁵ However, Byng also found support from fellow officers, on account of both personal connections to those

⁵⁴ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 11.

⁵⁵ Joseph Krulder, "'More Dangerous Enemies': The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1756-1757," (MA diss., California State University, 2010), 127.

officers and the general opposition of high-ranking officers to one of their own being executed.⁵⁶ Despite that, Establishment Whigs and the Admiralty were all largely united in their determination to see Byng punished harshly for his failure at Minorca. As a result of these attitudes, it is impossible to attempt an examination of Byng's court martial without discussing the importance and effects of both political and personal factors, particularly personal honour, given that they were at least as important to the case and its outcome as the actual evidence shown in the court martial.

One cannot discuss political factors without beginning with an examination of the relevant parliamentary parties. In the mid-1700s, the two dominant parties were the Whigs and the Tories. Generally speaking, the Whigs were more broadly liberal and saw more support from the mercantile and educated urban population, whereas the Tories were typically conservative and aristocratic in outlook. The Whigs during this period were also extremely factionalized, which was of critical importance during Byng's court martial. During the Seven Year's War, the Whigs were divided into two major groups, the pro-war Patriot Whigs, and the anti-war Establishment Whigs. The Patriot Whigs, led by William Pitt, strongly backed Byng during his trial, on account of their belief that the Admiralty was not committed to the war, thus hoping to exert further influence over the Admiralty in order to draw them further into the War.⁵⁷ The anti-war Establishment Whigs, led by the Prime Minister Thomas Pelham-Holles, the Duke of Newcastle, were Byng's main opposition. The Establishment Whigs, alongside the Admiralty, feared that a failure to make Byng the scapegoat for Minorca would rebound on them, as they had

⁵⁶ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 101, 279.

⁵⁷ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4, 10.

given the order for Byng to engage with an ill-prepared fleet.⁵⁸ A contemporary document from an Establishment Whig politician suggests that there had been a longstanding plan in place to implicate Byng, as, prior to the Battle, Establishment Whigs had discussed having a scapegoat ready if needed.⁵⁹ Furthermore, as their name suggests, they were tied closely to the establishment of Britain, including the King, who opposed Byng fervently. A third, less important group were the Bedfordite Whigs, named for the Duke of Bedford, who were a group mostly united in their support for a professionalized navy and preference for a more colonial foreign policy (in opposition to Pitt's European ambitions).⁶⁰

Both the Patriot Whigs and the Tories united in support of Byng, both for practical reasons, to embarrass the Newcastle ministry by defending Byng, and for ideological reasons, as Byng was seen by Patriots as a hero who had been sold out by the corrupt establishment.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the Bedfordite Whigs largely applauded Byng's upcoming court martial, as they were not supportive of the War and believed Byng's court martial was an important step to demonstrate the penalties for cowardice in the face of the enemy.⁶² Newcastle and the Establishment Whigs, meanwhile, attempted to foment hatred amongst the public against Byng, and were countered by Pitt and his allies, which will be discussed further in a later section.⁶³ The result, however, was the

⁵⁸ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 91-93.

⁵⁹ George Duddington, *The Diary of the Late George 'Bubb' Dodington, Baron of Melcombe Regis*, ed. Henry Penruddocke Wyndham (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2012), 341.

⁶⁰ Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 127-128.

⁶¹ Paul Langford, "William Pitt and Public Opinion, 1757," *The English Historical Review* 88, no. 346 (1973): 72.

⁶² Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 14.

⁶³ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 61.

fall of the Newcastle government on 11 November, to be replaced with a pro-war coalition between the Establishment (who had been forced by public opinion to support the war) and Patriot Whigs. This coalition saw Newcastle being replaced as Prime Minister by the Duke of Devonshire and Pitt and his allies gaining control of important ministries, including the Admiralty.⁶⁴ It also forced the Patriots to abandon their support of Byng, due to their new ties with the Establishment Whigs (suggesting that their support was pragmatic rather than ideological, at least to some degree), robbing him of his most powerful political supporters, though Pitt continued to plead for mercy after Byng's guilty verdict.⁶⁵ The withdrawal of the Patriots from the case would have massive implications, as it allowed the government and Admiralty to place considerable pressure without serious opposition on the presiding jury of the court martial. Byng's support was damaged by his own Whig supporters pursuing their other political goals, damaging both his chances in the court martial and his public support, given that the most powerful voices asserting his innocence had gone silent.

In contrast, the Tories were largely united in their aims, but found themselves placed in an unusual and uncomfortable situation. They had supported Byng in a bid to damage the government.⁶⁶ Despite this, the Tories were reluctant to push too hard in Byng's defence, for a number of reasons. Traditionally, the Admiralty and the Tories had close ties, and it is certainly true that a number of high-ranking figures within the

⁶⁴ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 108; Richard Middleton, *The Bells of Victory: The Pitt-Newcastle Ministry and Conduct of the Seven Years' War 1757-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

⁶⁵ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 110.

⁶⁶ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 45.

Admiralty were Tory supporters.⁶⁷ As a result, the Tories were likely wary of damaging their relations with the Admiralty, or even the reputation of the Admiralty, over what they saw as an opportunity to embarrass the government.

Complicating matters further was the fact that, unlike the Patriot Whigs, many Tories did not actually want Byng to be proclaimed innocent, preferring that he be instead offered mercy after a guilty verdict.⁶⁸ As a result, most Tories were not particularly committed to his defence, backing away after the Newcastle government fell and they became aware of the magnitude of British popular opinion against Byng. A notable exception was Samuel Johnson, a Tory writer who was indefatigable in Byng's defence, and one of his chief backers.⁶⁹ Overall, the Tories were largely fair-weather friends to Byng. They did play an important role in toppling the Newcastle administration in November and in securing support for him during the initial stages of the Byng affair, but, with the exception of individual members like Johnson, largely backed off on account of their complicated, even contradictory alliances with both Byng and his opponents, as well as the degree of public opposition to Byng.

The Admiralty found itself in an uncomfortable position during and after the court martial of Admiral Byng. On the one hand, they represented the Royal Navy, which was overwhelmingly opposed to Byng's execution, and many of senior Admiralty figures shared their opposition. On the other, the political situation was such that if Byng

⁶⁷ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Admiralty* (T. Dalton, 1979), 52; Henry Stooks Smith, *The Parliaments of England*, 2nd ed., (London: Political Reference Publications, 1973), 48–50.

⁶⁸ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

⁶⁹ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 48–49.

was not blamed, they were likely to take the fall for Minorca themselves, which would be a severe blow to the honour of both the Admiralty and the Navy. As a result, the ideal result of the Admiralty was a guilty verdict for Byng followed by clemency from the King.⁷⁰ In pursuit of this goal, the Admiralty actively attempted to attack Byng's personal honour through political caricatures and by openly funding anti-Byng protests. This funding largely took the form of creating or purchasing effigies of Byng, which would be burnt by protestors or riots.⁷¹ This was a practice prevalent enough that one newspaper reported that every town in the County of Yorkshire had either hanged or burnt an effigy of Byng, only a few days after the official release of Byng's report on Minorca.⁷² There is evidence suggesting that the Admiralty leaked information to negatively impact Byng's honour in the eyes of the public, notably printing a recall of Admiral Byng in a newspaper not long after June 2 (which was a common practice so that family could know where relevant officers and ships were stationed) in deliberately ominous tones to suggest he bore the blame for Minorca.⁷³ Infamously, they also released the letter from Byng reporting the loss of Minorca edited in such a way to suggest cowardice and dishonour, in order to inflame the public.⁷⁴ In these efforts, they acted in concert with particularly anti-Byng Whig ministers, such as Newcastle or Henry Fox, who placed pressure on a number of newspapers to attack Byng.⁷⁵ Both groups had a vested interest in the humiliation of Byng, although this changed upon the fall of the

⁷⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 112-140.

⁷¹ Krulder, *The Execution of Admiral John Byng*, 117.

⁷² Krulder, *The Execution of Admiral John Byng*, 117.

⁷³ "Byng's Letter, on which it was said he would not fight," *Gentleman's Magazine* 26 (Oct 1756): 482.

⁷⁴ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 148.

⁷⁵ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 127-128.

Newcastle Ministry in November, when the new First Lord of the Admiralty, Earl Richard Grenville-Temple, reversed Anson's efforts to attack Byng, and attempted to support Byng during his ordeal. Overall, the Admiralty played a highly important role in both the politics of the period and in generating popular discontent. Their utilization of the media, protests, and even Byng's letters, show a concerted effort to damage Byng's personal honour in the minds of the British populace. They were motivated by a desire to protect their own honour, as well as naval honour more broadly, while also staving off potential public outcry against their own actions.

Although they had no official role in politics, there was a tremendous amount of opposition to Byng's court martial from the officers of the Royal Navy. Many influential officers, such as Admirals George Rodney and Augustus Hervey, spoke out both publicly and privately in his defence.⁷⁶ Officer opposition largely stemmed from the strong belief that Byng's failure, if he had even failed at all, did not deserve the death sentence given the fact he was outnumbered and outgunned at Minorca. The majority of officers, such as Rodney, felt that if there was a failure that dishonoured Britain, it belonged to those who had sent Byng with an inadequate force, rather than Byng himself, who had done the best he could under unfavourable circumstances.⁷⁷ Other officers were likely motivated by the fear of a similar punishment being applied to them, and thus opposed Byng's sentence fearing that it would set an unfortunate precedent, best highlighted by the French writer Voltaire, who famously said "in this country it is

⁷⁶ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 148.

⁷⁷ David Syrett, ed., *The Rodney Papers, Volume I, 1742-1763* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 209.

considered useful now and again to shoot an admiral, to encourage the others,” while defending Byng.⁷⁸ This suspicion seemed to have some merit, as many scholars, led by N. A. M. Rodger, have argued that such a fear contributed to the desperate aversion to failure present among officers of the Navy, a fear which can be traced back to the Byng court martial.⁷⁹ Although this support would have largely manifested indirectly (through utilizing their own networks to support Byng and providing a check on the Admiralty’s opposition to Byng), it also had concrete political effects. Many prominent naval officers held political office during the period, including Byng, who was actively serving as a Member of Parliament, and those stationed in Britain would have been able to use their political sway to defend Byng.⁸⁰ Having said that, the majority of officers were aligned with either the Tories or Patriot Whigs, who already supported Byng, making their support largely inconsequential. In summary, while the support of officers for Byng did play an important role in the period leading to the court martial, such support was largely indirect and overshadowed by the political actors in the government and Admiralty.

Personal connections were highly important in contemporary Britain and played an exceptionally important role in determining the situation and governmental fallout leading up to the court martial. Byng himself benefitted from the staunch defence of his friends in the Royal Navy. Prominent naval officers, including Augustus Keppel, Augustus Hervey, and George Rodney spoke in both public and private in his defence.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Joachim Voth and Guo Xu, “Encouraging Others: Punishment and Performance in the Royal Navy,” (2020): 2.

⁷⁹ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 17; Voth and Xu, “Encouraging Others: Punishment and Performance in the Royal Navy,” 2.

⁸⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 143.

⁸¹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 142-148.

Honour demanded that friends aided each other in times of need, and figures such as Augustus Hervey went to great lengths to save Byng owing to their friendship with him.⁸² These friends, in turn, would pull in their own friendships, leading to a network of allies. Although this defence paled in comparison to the massive anti-Byng propaganda campaign of the government, it did succeed in drawing public outrage towards the government's handling of Minorca, which Byng's supporters likely hoped would direct public anger away from Byng, potentially saving him. Although the strategy eventually failed in Byng's court martial, it proved to be a successful one in similar high-profile courts martial, such as the Keppel-Palliser affair of 1779, demonstrating the importance having friends to defend one.⁸³ Similarly, William Pitt, who vehemently defended Byng and attacked the government's handling of the case, was backed by a number of his associates who held similar views, from his family to prominent merchants (even from places as far afield as Jamaica).⁸⁴ This coalition of allies was decisive in Pitt's anti-government attacks, and even managed to bring down the Newcastle Ministry over their handling of the Byng case on 11 November 1756. Their efforts culminated in the creation of a new Ministry which included Pitt in a leading role. Overall, it is clear that personal connections were influential throughout the Byng Affair.

In conclusion, personal and political connections were highly important in the context of the court martial of Admiral Byng, to the point that they were likely the largest factor behind his eventual execution. Political divisions and tensions between the

⁸² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 200.

⁸³ Nicholas Rogers, "The Dynamic of News in Britain During the American War: The Case of Admiral Keppel," *Parliamentary History* 25, no. 1 (2006): 57.

⁸⁴ Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 125.

Whigs and Tories certainly contributed, as the Whigs were divided over the proposed fate of Byng while the Tories took the opportunity to attack the government. The Admiralty also engaged in politics to see Byng convicted in order to protect naval honour, as well as their own honour, from the furious public. This was particularly important given the importance of naval honour to Britain's national honour, which will be discussed in a later chapter. The officers of the Navy also separately attempted to intervene through both their personal connections and through politics. Their goal to save Byng, for personal reasons, the need to protect the Navy's honour, and the dangerous precedent that was being set, was ultimately unsuccessful, but clearly demonstrates the political power and involvement in politics of the contemporary Royal Navy. Finally, personal connections with one's friends and allies were key during the affair. Byng's network of allies was supported by that of his political defender, Pitt, as well as a number of serving naval officers and political commentators such as Samuel Johnson, all of whom supported Byng due to a mix of political goals, personal honour compelling them to aid their friend, self interest, and a genuine belief in his innocence. The Prime Minister, on the other hand, found himself alone and abandoned, being forced to resign over the public backlash, and was replaced by the Duke of Devonshire in alliance with Pitt, which forced Pitt's network of Patriot Whigs to abandon or limit their support of Byng due to their new position in the Establishment Whig government⁸⁵. Richard Grenville-Temple was perhaps the best example of this besides Pitt himself, as Grenville-Temple had initially been outspoken in Byng's defence but was forced to limit his support after being promoted to First Lord of the Admiralty. Overall, the influence of

⁸⁵ Middleton, *The Bells of Victory*, 7.

both politics and interpersonal relationships was central to the case of Admiral Byng, as politics was a root cause for both his defence and prosecution, while personal relationships served as the primary method for both sides to pursue their goals.

Popular and Status Factors

Georgian Britain placed a high degree of importance on one's personal status, most famously through the system of nobility that dominated the upper caste of the nation. This, in turn, was tied to honour, as it was believed that honour was linked to one's status, particularly noble status.⁸⁶ Although the Royal Navy was more meritocratic than most organizations of the period, where a commoner could rise to great heights, Byng himself benefitted from a prestigious and 'honourable' background, being both a noble and the son of one of the most successful naval commanders of the Georgian era. This section explores how British attitudes towards matters such as status could affect one's court martial, both positively and negatively. In addition, this section will also explore the factor of popularity. Royal Navy officers were the subject of extreme fascination by the British public, to the point that they were almost celebrity figures. Although Nelson is certainly the best-known example (albeit well after Byng's period), a considerable number of contemporary admirals enjoyed similar status, being popular enough that collecting memorabilia such as dishware emblazoned with a respected admiral's face was not uncommon.⁸⁷ Byng himself enjoyed a certain notoriety both before and after Minorca, which undoubtedly influenced how individuals in the public

⁸⁶ Johnson, "Honour" in *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

⁸⁷ *'Admiral Keppel For Ever' Plate, 1761-1782*, commemorative plate, Royal Museums Greenwich, London.

reacted to his court martial. The Byng affair also saw numerous riots and protests, which will also be examined owing to their effect on popular opinion.

Class was undoubtedly a major element in contemporary Britain, and those of noble heritage enjoyed a significant advantage over those of lesser status. Nevertheless, the Navy was less affected than most other comparable organizations in the period⁸⁸. Byng is an excellent example of this, as though he was a noble (the fourth son of the Viscount of Torrington), his class did not wholly shield him as he was found guilty in his court martial and ultimately executed. It is worth noting that while it was unusual for nobles to be executed during this period, it was not unheard of. A famous case that occurred not long after Byng's execution was that of Laurence Shirley, Earl Ferrers, who was executed for murder in 1760.⁸⁹ Despite this, executing nobles was generally reserved for treason (Ferrers was the last peer to be executed in Britain, and among the only peers to have been executed for a crime other than treason), indicating that the execution of Byng was highly unusual.⁹⁰ Furthermore, it is possible that the unrest and riots of the period led to greater acceptance for the idea of executing nobles, as both the case of Ferrers and Byng were marked by unrest and public outrage.⁹¹

A comparison of Byng to Earl Ferrers is extremely useful, as despite Ferrers not being a naval officer, there are numerous parallels between the two. Both figures were widely reviled by the public at large, due to the fact they were seen as dishonourable and

⁸⁸ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 332.

⁸⁹ Simon Barber, "R V Earl Ferrers (1760): The Trial That Saved England From Revolution?" (LLB diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2017), 2.

⁹⁰ Barber, "R V Earl Ferrers," 2, 5.

⁹¹ Barber, "R V Earl Ferrers," 6, 16; Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

embarrassing to the reputation of Britain, leading their representative bodies (the Admiralty and the House of Lords, respectively) turning on them.⁹² Similarly, there was a considerable degree of disgust among the politicians that played a key role in their conviction, with Byng being made a scapegoat by Newcastle and Ferrers being overwhelmingly found guilty by his peers in the Lords.⁹³ Lastly, modern legal scholars have adopted similar views on their cases. With the striking exception of N. A. M. Rodger, naval and legal scholars have generally concluded that Byng's conviction was an unparalleled miscarriage of justice, accepting that he was made a scapegoat simply on account of his rank making him the commanding officer of the squadron at Minorca.⁹⁴ Similarly, modern scholars such as Simon Barber agree that Ferrers should have been found to be legally insane, with his conviction being motivated out of a personal distaste for Ferrers and his actions, as well as to calm the upset public.⁹⁵ In both cases, scholars find that they were the victims of public and political pressure, largely on the grounds of their tarnished honour, rather than being executed on the strength of the evidence.⁹⁶ Likewise, despite both expecting their noble status to shield them, scholars find that their

⁹² Calum Cunningham, "'A Thorn in Their Side': Trends in British Punishment during the Long Eighteenth Century and the Crime of Jacobitism, 1688-c. 1815," *Spark: Stirling International Journal of Postgraduate Research* 7 (2021): 6.

⁹³ Julius Marke, "The Case of the Mad Peer," *Litigation* vol.4, (1977): 54; Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 9.

⁹⁴ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 247-248; Peter Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," *The Mariner's Mirror* 106, no. 3 (2020): 346; Wilbur Larremore, "Felo De Se," *Canadian Law Times* vol. 33 (1913): 210; Andrew Johnston, "'Arbitrary and cruel punishments': Trends in Royal Navy courts martial, 1860–1869," *International Journal of Maritime History* 33, no. 3 (2021): 529.

⁹⁵ Barber, "R V Earl Ferrers," 21.

⁹⁶ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 9; Barber, "R V Earl Ferrers," 4.

status actually weighed against Byng and Ferrers, suggesting that the protection of nobility only extended to a certain point, which will be discussed in the next chapter.⁹⁷

Byng did benefit from his status in some ways, however. Although the Navy was comparatively meritocratic, the nobility still dominated the upper ranks, and there were numerous high-ranking noble officers who were firm in the belief that the Navy should favour the nobility. Had Byng been of lesser status, his case likely would have generated less outrage among his peers of the Navy. Similarly, it was not unheard of for lower-ranking officers who were of lesser status to be executed, while the execution of a noble Admiral would have been considered impossible to even contemplate the year before.⁹⁸ Byng's noble status would have also been important due to the ties between honour and status. Due to public outrage over the dishonour to Byng, the Navy, and Britain, Byng likely appreciated the implied honour that was conferred by his status, considering how damaged his personal honour was otherwise. Overall, although Byng's status did not offer him total protection, it did shield him to an extent. He received support and public attention he would not have otherwise, and it is possible that some his supporters would have opposed him had he been of a lower class. It also granted an implicit level of honour that was unaffected by the Minorca debacle. Importantly, however, his noble status was proved to be of lesser value than any would have imagined in the period. His case conclusively demonstrated that it was, in fact, possible to execute a high-born Admiral for failing to adequately perform his duty.

⁹⁷ Marke, "The Case of the Mad Peer," 54.

⁹⁸ Marke, "The Case of the Mad Peer," 47.

Although minor compared to other factors, Byng might have expected his parentage to offer him some protection. His father, George Byng, was among the most celebrated admirals of his day, and had, in fact, held the highly prestigious positions of Admiral of the Fleet and First Lord of the Admiralty in his lifetime, in addition to having assisted in the crowning of William III and being well liked (as well as ennobled) by George II's father, George I.⁹⁹ Given Britain's respect for lineage, status, and reliance on personal connections, having such a father was considered a solid point in Byng's favour, one that certainly assisted Byng in climbing the ranks.¹⁰⁰ If Byng had expected his deceased father's reputation to protect him, however, he would have been sorely disappointed. Perhaps the strongest point in Byng's favour regarding his parentage was his father's royal connections, but this eventually proved a major problem for him, which will be discussed in Chapter Four. Nonetheless, it should be stressed the memory of George Byng would have inclined many to mercy, and it was likely a leading factor in the Navy largely favouring Byng over the Admiralty and government.

Byng's personal popularity was one of his most useful shields during the aftermath of the court martial. His career was not particularly illustrious and was damaged by Minorca, but he did retain a measure of personal popularity, which was significantly reinforced by the belief that Byng was the scapegoat for both the Admiralty and the government's failures.¹⁰¹ These two factors combined to ensure that a portion of the public was united behind the cause of mercy for Byng, particularly among the

⁹⁹ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 18.

¹⁰⁰ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 34.

¹⁰¹ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

merchant class.¹⁰² One's honour was also linked to how one was perceived by others, so while Byng's honour was severely damaged by the contempt the general public held him in, the continued support of his friends allowed him to retain a degree of personal honour.¹⁰³ This benefitted him by his allies, including figures such as Samuel Johnson, being obligated to defend Byng's honour and case through various mediums, like pamphlets.¹⁰⁴ Byng was also bolstered by support from prominent figures, whose own popularity and influence strengthened Byng's position. While Voltaire, Johnson, and Pitt have been mentioned previously, Byng also received the support of Richard Grenville-Temple, an ally of Pitt who was one of the richest politicians of the period and who attained the position of First Lord of the Admiralty following the collapse of the Newcastle administration in November 1756. Byng was also backed, surprisingly, by the Duc de Richelieu, who was the French General who had laid siege to Minorca.¹⁰⁵ His public letter to the British public in Byng's defence, published in January 1756, failed to generate significant support to Byng, though did attract the attention of some of the more educated British upper class.¹⁰⁶ Although Byng was certainly disliked by the majority of Britain, he remained notorious enough that news of his impending execution caused severe unrest, which represented his best hope at persuading court martial to show mercy.¹⁰⁷ This unrest was extreme enough that rioters called for the death of Newcastle,

¹⁰² Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 6.

¹⁰³ Johnson, "Honour" in *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, "The Accords and Resemblances of Johnson and Walpole," 7.

¹⁰⁵ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 3; Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 110; "Historical Chronical," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 44.

¹⁰⁶ "Historical Chronical," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 44.

¹⁰⁷ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

the Prime Minister. It eventually culminated in a reorganization of the government to include Pitt and Grenville-Temple's Patriot Whigs, turning replacing Newcastle with the Duke of Devonshire.¹⁰⁸ After that, although remaining dedicated to Byng's defence with the backing of the House of Commons, alongside the support from Byng's other supporters, eventually the weight of popular opinion prevailed, forcing the Patriots to take a more neutral approach to the case.

While the previous paragraph discussed Byng's positive popularity, contemporary sources make it clear Byng was extremely unpopular among the majority of the British, despite his popularity with a minority of the population discontent with the government.¹⁰⁹ Byng's failure at Minorca and upcoming court martial was a widely discussed topic throughout Britain, to the point it is likely the majority of Britain were aware of the affair.¹¹⁰ This widespread knowledge translated to a massive wave of public hatred for Admiral Byng, who was frequently burned in effigy by angry crowds and was the subject of riots even before his return to Britain.¹¹¹ This discontent was fanned by prominent British political actors, such as First Lord of the Admiralty George Anson, who used their wealth and distributions of food to draw people into public demonstrations protesting Byng staining Britain's national honour, as well as the honour of the people.¹¹² This method, while clearly effective at drawing popular support, backfired. The streets of Britain descended into what amounted to mob rule where the

¹⁰⁸ Middleton, *The Bells of Victory*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 195.

¹¹⁰ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

¹¹¹ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60-62.

¹¹² Thomas Wright, *Caricature History of the Georges*, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1876), 190.

financial backers were unable to exert control over those they had supported, and the public concluded that both the government and Byng needed to be punished, owing to the dishonour they had brought to Britain.¹¹³ In a sense, his fame was a double-edged sword that had turned on him. While it had succeeded at generating public controversy and propelled his political allies into power, it also escaped the grip of both his opponents and allies, turning into a danger to both him and his opponents. For Byng himself, he had lost the protection of much of the vocal minority owing to political and social upheaval, and thus the majority of the public voices who cried for mercy, like William Pitt.¹¹⁴ For his opponents, their efforts to fan anger against Byng saw the defeat of the Newcastle administration and near anarchy in the streets. They were successful at ensuring Byng's execution, but at the cost of nearly pushing Britain into a revolution to the point that even aristocratic critics opposed to Byng spoke out against the levels of anger the protests had generated.¹¹⁵

The protests had a massive effect on both popular opinion and the court martial itself. As was mentioned before, both pro and anti-Byng actors had attempted to fan the flames to shift the public mood in their favour. Nevertheless, a considerable number of protests occurred independently, showing the level of discontent that Minorca had generated, as well as the level of blame thrown on Byng personally. Yorkshire, a county with little connection to the navy, saw the vast majority of its towns form anti-Byng riots and burning him in effigy in the immediate aftermath of the government releasing

¹¹³ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 62-66.

¹¹⁴ Langford, "William Pitt and Public Opinion, 1757," 70-71.

¹¹⁵ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 63-64.

Byng's report on the outcome of Minorca.¹¹⁶ Other protests and riots were quick to follow, including a particularly intense riot upon Byng's return to Britain in July near Portsmouth (the base of the Navy), which saw effigies of Byng burned, shot, and hanged.¹¹⁷ They also attempted to harass him in person, burning effigies as he passed by on his way to his trial and rioting outside his house.¹¹⁸ These protests were supported by the government (who had misleadingly altered his report on Minorca to imply cowardice) and the Admiralty (who funded the protests), but also by the media, which was largely against Byng.¹¹⁹ The *Scots Magazine* claimed he was the most detested person in Britain, while numerous other magazines from Worcester to York celebrated the destruction of his effigies in imaginative ways.¹²⁰ The *Salisbury Journal* referred to him as a dishonourable coward (quite a common descriptor of Byng in the media), while *The Gentleman's Magazine* lambasted his craven nature and claimed that an acquittal would see the judges charged with perjury.¹²¹ Other journals, including the *Ipswich Journal*, spread rumors about common sailors objecting so strongly to Byng's 'cowardice' they threatened to mutiny, a charge which was unfounded but dealt a significant blow to Byng's honour.¹²² Despite this, there were some more positive attitudes. The *Gentleman's Magazine* printed a letter defending Byng, while a broadside

¹¹⁶ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 81.

¹¹⁷ "Christopher De Beaumont, &c." *The Scots Magazine*, no. 18 (July 1756): 359.

¹¹⁸ "London," *Oxford Journal*, no. 292 (January 1757): 1.

¹¹⁹ Krulder, *The Execution of Admiral John Byng*, 117; Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 91.

¹²⁰ "Christopher De Beaumont, &c." *The Scots Magazine*, 358; Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62.

¹²¹ *Salisbury Journal*, no. 16 (23 Aug 1756); "Execution of Admiral Byng Justified," *Gentleman's Magazine* 27 (April 1757): 154-155.

¹²² "Wednesday Post," *Ipswich Journal*, no. 913 (31 July 1756).

(accompanied by a singing protest) accused Newcastle of selling out Minorca to the French.¹²³ Overall, however, the tone of the media and riots was broadly negative to Byng. This led to a highly unstable situation in Britain, which contemporary figures commented could only be resolved with Byng's execution, lest the riots spiral out of control.¹²⁴

Equally interesting as the riots were the political cartoons and satirical prints that accompanied them. Unlike the riots, there was a more even divide between pro- and anti-Byng prints. Similar, however, is the focus on either Byng's cowardice and dishonour or the government's incompetency, depending on which side of the debate the artist favoured. One of the more interesting prints, *Merit and Demerit Made Conspicuous* (figure 1), shows Byng being escorted away by an honest sailor, while a devil reaches for him, and a French dog urinates on a British flag.¹²⁵ These themes are repeated throughout the anti-Byng print collection, as British symbols are usually shown as defiled or mutilated, Byng is contrasted to a more courageous figure, and devils are frequently depicted with Byng, all of which show the emphasis on Byng's dishonour and the negative effects on Britain's reputation.¹²⁶ Simpler anti-Byng cartoons often more pointedly refer to his cowardice, depicting him running away in women's clothing, as in *Admiral Byng's Attempt or Miss Mistaken*.¹²⁷ From these themes, we get a sense of the

¹²³ "Historical Chronical," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 44; Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 3-4.

¹²⁴ David Vaisey, ed., *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1754-1765* (Oxford, 1984), 93.

¹²⁵ *Merit and Demerit Made Conspicuous*, 1756, caricature, the British Museum.

¹²⁶ *The Contrast: or Britannia's Distributive Justice*, 1756, caricature, the British Museum; *The English Lion Dismembered; Cowardice Rewarded or the Devil will have his Due*, 1756, caricature, the British Museum.

¹²⁷ *Admiral Byng's Attempt or Miss Mistaken*, 1757, caricature, the British Museum.

feelings of those opposed to Byng. They disliked his perceived cowardice and felt it had disgraced both his own honour and that of Britain, leading to calls for his punishment.¹²⁸ On the other hand, anti-Government pieces largely depicted the government as uncaring or malevolent. One print, *The Eaters*, saw them gorging themselves at the expense of Byng and Pitt, while another common theme depicted in multiple prints was the charge (which has since been proven) that Byng's letter had been altered to imply cowardice.¹²⁹ In summary, the satirical prints clearly show an emphasis on Byng's cowardice and dishonour in the view of the public, while others emphasised the government's efforts to prove him a scapegoat.¹³⁰



¹²⁸ *The Court-Martial's Sentence on Admiral Byng, 1757*, caricature, the British Museum.

¹²⁹ *A Court Conversation, 1756*, caricature, the British Museum; *The Eaters, 1756*, caricature, the British Museum.

¹³⁰ *A Court Conversation.*

Figure 1. An example of contemporary satirical prints condemning Admiral Byng's conduct. (*Merit and Demerit Made Conspicuous*. 1756. Caricature. From the British Museum. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-4030).

In conclusion, the personal background and status of Byng was undoubtedly important to his court martial, but, crucially, it was less important than contemporary figures expected it to be. While factors such as his rank, his honour, the controversy of the affair, and his noble heritage were expected to lead to a favourable outcome for him, the growing prominence of a new interpretation of honour, 'Enlightenment honour,' proved otherwise, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Lastly, although Byng and his allies were successful at harnessing his remaining popularity and utilizing it to stir discontent in his favour against the government (while the establishment adopted the same tactics), this ended up backfiring for Byng's cause. It resulted in the crowds that had been incited calling for the death of both Byng and Prime Minister Newcastle, as they concluded that both the government and Byng were at fault for the catastrophe at Minorca. As a result of Newcastle's defeat and the political upheaval, some of Byng's strongest supporters were brought into government, and thus limited in the help they could offer Byng. This also led to a situation some within the public, including shopkeeper Tom Turner, feared could only be calmed by Byng's conviction, suggesting appeasing the public had become more important than justice.¹³¹ Overall, the main lesson learned from Byng's case was that one's status and class was

¹³¹ Vaisey, *The Diary of Thomas Turner*, 93.

less of a shield than expected in a court martial. Political necessity and the weight of public opinion outweighed Byng's prestigious background.

Career Factors

The Navy was one of the more meritocratic organizations of the period, and one that did not overly discriminate based on status. Those who conducted themselves in an honourable fashion that did the Navy credit could expect to be granted leniency during courts martial, while those who had shamed or embarrassed the Navy would face strong opposition from the hierarchy, no matter how prestigious their careers might have been. Byng found himself in an intriguing middle ground between these extremes. His career was by no means as illustrious as, for example, the future maverick Thomas Cochrane, but neither did Byng have a reputation as a maverick and a troublemaker. This section will explore the importance of Byng's personal reputation within the Navy in the lead up to the court martial, as well as the factors of honour, the Navy's reputation, and discipline.

Personal reputation within the Navy tended to make or break an individual's career. Thomas Cochrane, to take one of the most famous examples, was one of the most skilled, courageous, and brilliant captains of the Royal Navy, respected by Napoleon himself, and with a long list of victories that few could equal. Nevertheless, his personal conduct was extremely problematic. He was viewed as reckless, arrogant, and greedy, and made few friends in the hierarchy.¹³² This eventually led to his discharge from the Navy on matters completely unrelated to nautical matters (financial malfeasance). There

¹³² David Cordingly, *Cochrane the Dauntless: The Life and Adventures of Thomas Cochrane, 1775-1860* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 2.

is an interesting contrast to Byng here, as he was, by all accounts, a personally likable individual, to the point that even Newcastle regretted that he had no choice but to pin all of the blame of Minorca on Byng.¹³³ Byng's personal reputation, in fact, may have been one of his few unequivocally useful assets during his court martial. His connection to his father, as well as his own accomplishments during the Jacobite rebellion, would have meant that he was well liked by his fellow officers, who in turn were inclined to support him, as seen with Admirals Rodney and Keppel.¹³⁴

In addition to this, Byng had never been defeated in battle or engaged in any scandals or dishonourable behaviour, which would have inclined those within the Navy that did not know him in his favour, particularly as they came to know the circumstances of the defeat at Minorca. This would have had a greater effect on the officers of the Navy, who had a better understanding of both Byng's background and the unfortunate disparity of forces he was forced to contend with.¹³⁵ We see evidence from figures such as Keppel and Rodney's letters that there was a concerted campaign in the Navy to spare Byng and they were speaking to their own allies and families in this pursuit.¹³⁶ Notably, Keppel was a prominent Whig while Rodney sat as a Tory, suggesting that respect for Byng and his reputation crossed party lines within the Navy.¹³⁷ As a result, his own

¹³³ Thomas Pelham, Newcastle to Nugent, July 31, 1756.

¹³⁴ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 31; Syrett, *The Rodney Papers*, 209.

¹³⁵ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1756-1757," 20.

¹³⁶ Syrett, *The Rodney Papers*, 209.

¹³⁷ David Syrett, "Admiral Rodney, Patronage, and the Leeward Island Squadron, 1780-2." *The Mariner's Mirror* 85, no. 4 (1999): 417; Rogers, "The Dynamic of News in Britain During the American War: The Case of Admiral Keppel," 51.

personal reputation within the Navy was valuable asset to Byng during and after his court martial.

We know from other cases of courts martial that the presiding officers generally considered the previous conduct and performance of an officer nearly as important as the circumstances surrounding their supposed offence.¹³⁸ Interestingly, this was a factor that likely worked both for and against Byng. Byng's own background would have also positively influenced many people who took an interest in the court martial. Although his career was by no means as lustrous as the later naval heroes like Nelson or Rodney, Byng had always been a solid officer who had served Britain well. His service in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 was particularly respectable, and unlike many of the other factors that have been mentioned, his role within it was undeniably a positive for anyone without Jacobite sympathies.¹³⁹ Even the King himself would have appreciated the role that Byng played in denying supplies to the rebels, as Byng's actions were instrumental to the relatively swift and painless defeat of the Jacobites, which in turn protected the positions of the King and the anti-Catholic Establishment Whigs who later opposed Byng. Amusingly, Byng's Tory supporters were likely the ones most likely to favour a Stuart restoration, while his Establishment Whig detractors were the ones most opposed to the Jacobites. In any event, despite not having a famous or glorious career, Byng had a background that would have evoked respect from even his most hardened opponents, even though his failure at Minorca irrevocably tarnished his career. The popularity and

¹³⁸ Alex Kennedy, "An Analysis of Naval Courts Martial in the British Royal Navy, 1793-1815," (Honours diss., Dalhousie University, 2021), 49.

¹³⁹ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 31.

respect it garnered him would have been one of his chief assets when appealing to public sentiment.

However, as Byng had lost the only major naval battle he ever participated in, which was also *the* worst naval defeat in living memory, this previous ‘respectable but mostly uneventful’ career had been flipped on its head. At the best of times, a naval defeat would be lamented, but a naval defeat so early in the war was viewed as a catastrophe.¹⁴⁰ Simply put, despite playing a genuinely useful and important role by blockading the Jacobites, the British valued success, or in this case failure, in ship-to-ship action more highly than they did what were arguably more important strategic maneuvers, like the blockade.¹⁴¹ Byng had brought a massive amount of dishonour to both the Royal Navy and himself with his defeat. This was especially true as it was the first European engagement of the Seven Years War, and the first naval defeat in a considerable time. In addition, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the honour of the Navy was closely tied to the honour of Britain, which was a major factor behind the public’s fury over his defeat. Overall, although his role in the Jacobite blockade doubtless did present itself to the presiding jury as a point in Byng’s favour, both they and the British public could not overlook the fact that by their standards, his defeat at Minorca were far more dishonourable than the honour he had won in the Rebellion. In addition, the fact that it was the worst naval defeat Britain had suffered for a

¹⁴⁰ Nicholas Kaizer, “Regret, Determination, and Honour: The Impact of Single Ship Losses in North American Waters on the British Royal Navy, 1812-1813,” (MA diss., Dalhousie University, 2018), 81

¹⁴¹ Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, 116.

considerable period was not lost on the jury, who may have felt obligated to treat it as a worse loss than they would have otherwise.

Honour was extremely important within contemporary Britain, and especially so for the Royal Navy. Royal Naval officers were expected to hold themselves to an exceptionally high standard in both their personal and professional behaviour, and honour was among the most important aspects of good behaviour. Admiral Byng had been traditionally successful at maintaining a reputation for honour. He was regarded as a solid officer with no obvious shortcomings, and certainly no major personality defects that we are aware of (beyond being regarded as something of a fop).¹⁴² His behaviour at Minorca in May 1756 bears this reputation out, as despite issuing repeated warnings to the Admiralty that his expedition was in no way equipped or prepared for the orders they had been given, he still did his duty when ordered, despite knowing the poor odds.¹⁴³ Unfortunately, this clear demonstration of honour was overshadowed by his ‘shameful’ defeat. One of the most important facets of honour was personal courage in the face of the enemy, and Byng’s detractors alleged that his retreat had been ordered out of cowardice, marking him a dishonourable traitor.¹⁴⁴

It is also important to note that honour was not a hard, statistically provable quality. Instead, it was based on personal beliefs, and Byng’s opponents had gone to great lengths to ensure his reputation for honour would be permanently scarred in the minds of the public.¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the most egregious example of this actually occurred

¹⁴² Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 28-29.

¹⁴³ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 3.

¹⁴⁴ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60.

¹⁴⁵ Johnson, "Honour" in *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

before the court martial, when the government-run newspaper, the *London Gazette*, published a heavily altered version of Byng's post-battle report designed to make him appear a coward, aiming to protect the government's own honour by providing a scapegoat.¹⁴⁶ This perception of Byng would entrench itself within the public, as despite clear evidence otherwise, the chief public criticism of Byng was the fact he had dishonoured himself and Britain through his cowardly retreat.¹⁴⁷ Importantly, many who led the initiative to portray Byng as dishonourable were doing so for pragmatic reasons rather than out of genuine belief, such as Fox and Newcastle, who felt they would otherwise be held responsible.¹⁴⁸ That being stated, many within the public would come to honestly share this belief, with their opposition to Byng arising from their own sense of honour. Regardless of his honourable conduct or lack thereof during the Battle of Minorca, Byng could not escape the criticism that he had abandoned courageous British defenders to their fate, thus dishonouring himself either through a personally cowardly retreat or tactical mistakes that had dishonoured the Navy and Britain as a whole.¹⁴⁹ Equally as concerning for Byng was the common sentiment in the Navy that tarnished honour would always be tarnished, implying the dishonour of Minorca would haunt him forever, which did turn out to be the truth.¹⁵⁰ Overall, Byng's honour became one of his

¹⁴⁶ Moore, "Losing Minorca: An Event in English Political History," 91; "Byng's Letter, on which it was said he would not fight," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 481-482; "Extract of a Letter from Admiral Byng," *London Gazette*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60.

¹⁴⁸ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 61-62.

¹⁴⁹ McGuffie, "Some Fresh Light on The Siege of Minorca, 1756," 111; Brian Tunstall, *Admiral Byng and the Loss of Minorca* (London: Allen and Company Limited, 1928), 142-148.

¹⁵⁰ S. A. Cavell, *A Social History of Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1771-1831* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012), 232.

greatest liabilities in the court martial and the aftermath. Despite having conducted himself as well as could be expected, the public were given an altered account that depicted Byng as a coward, while Byng was unable to rid himself of the fact his retreat ensured the surrender of honourable British soldiers who had been besieged.

Linked heavily with honour was the idea of protecting or increasing the reputation of the Navy. Nationalism, and the importance of national honour, was increasingly beginning to encroach on the contemporary mindset, and for the British, their Navy was a point of extreme pride. The Royal Navy was seen as an invincible force, and in fairness, there was reason for this belief.¹⁵¹ It was the largest and most prestigious of any contemporary military force and held an impressive number of victories, with very few major losses. Naval officers were all but required to uphold the honour and reputation of the Royal Navy, with a failure to do so likely ruining the career of the individual responsible, as was the case with Admiral Powlett in 1752.¹⁵² Obviously, Byng fell into this category. By failing to defeat the French at Minorca, he had put the reputation of the Royal Navy in jeopardy.¹⁵³ To the outraged crowds calling for his head, it did not matter that he had not been supplied the forces necessary to complete his assigned task. Though many also held the government responsible for the naval defeat, as seen by the outrage directed at Newcastle and the fall of his government, Byng was still the responsible commander who had led British forces into a failed

¹⁵¹ Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, 72-73; Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 196; Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 435-436; Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy 1793-1815*, 76.

¹⁵² Admiral Powlett had faced charges of cowardice, and despite his acquittal, he was blocked from ever serving in an active role in the Navy again.

¹⁵³ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60.

engagement.¹⁵⁴ As Nicholas Kaizer asserts in his book *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, the British expected any officer of the Royal Navy to emerge victorious in an equal, or even slightly disadvantageous, engagement, an expectation that would only grow in the years to come.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, despite the reality that Byng had not been adequately supplied, it was generally perceived by the public that he was responsible for the defeat at Minorca. While Byng had not lost any ships, several of his own had sustained heavy damage, whereas the French fleet had been virtually untouched.¹⁵⁶ His battle lines had been broken and the French had controlled the engagement from the beginning.

Perhaps most importantly, he had retreated from Minorca on 24 May 1756, and in doing so, allowed British territory to surrender to their historic rival, the French, a month later, which was a massive stain on national honour. By any standard, the Battle of Minorca had been a disastrous tactical defeat. To make matters worse, it was the first major naval engagement of the Seven Years' War (though technically occurring before the War formally began), causing the British to fear that the French had gained the initiative in the conflict. None in Britain could deny the Battle of Minorca was a severe blow to the reputation and honour of the Royal Navy, and by extension to Britain itself.¹⁵⁷ The only question for the British public was how responsible Byng was personally for this blow, with them concluding that fault laid in the corrupt Newcastle administration, while also holding Byng responsible for the damage to the reputation of the Royal Navy.¹⁵⁸ While Byng was officially tried for cowardice and a failure to do his

¹⁵⁴ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

¹⁵⁵ Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, 35.

¹⁵⁶ McGuffie, "Some Fresh Light on The Siege of Minorca, 1756," 113.

¹⁵⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60.

¹⁵⁸ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4.

utmost against the enemy, his true crime (in the eyes of the public, if not Britain as a whole) was his failure and the damage it did to the Royal Navy's reputation. The reputation of the Navy had to be protected, so the defeat was blamed on the responsible Admiral (and, indirectly, the administration whose orders had made his victory unlikely).

The Royal Navy could forgive much in the name of success, but discipline was not one of those things. Having a disciplined officer and seamen corps was what set the Navy apart from continental rivals, and they took great pride in it. Even the most famous and successful officers in the Navy were expected to conduct themselves with discipline, as Captain Thomas Cochrane, who was highly successful and popular, found out to his detriment.¹⁵⁹ Cochrane, despite his illustrious career, drew criticism over his efforts to discredit his superior Admiral Gambier on grounds of negligence during the Battle of the Basque Roads, which contributed to his disgrace and dismissal from the Navy.¹⁶⁰ The Navy expected its officers to do their duty regardless of personal beliefs and with professionalism. On the face of it, Byng seemed to be a model of this ideal. His conduct at Minorca saw him engage an enemy he stood no chance at defeating out of a determination to uphold his orders.¹⁶¹ Despite this, there are some key differences. Notably, Byng failed to instil discipline on his officers both before and during the Battle. The HMS *Defiance* and Rear Admiral Temple West, among other ships and officers, had broken off from the main force prior to the battle, which cast Byng's squadron into confusion, delayed the British engaging the enemy, and gave the French force the

¹⁵⁹ Cordingly, *Cochrane the Dauntless*, 250.

¹⁶⁰ Cordingly, *Cochrane the Dauntless*, 250.

¹⁶¹ "Historical Chronical," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 44.

advantage in the fight.¹⁶² This failure was attributed to Byng miscommunicating with his officers and gave rise to suggestions Byng had mismanaged his officers.¹⁶³ The discipline of one's subordinates reflected on their commanding officer, so Byng's inability to keep order among his captains should have been a black mark. This factor saw an inverted result to that of honour. In contrast, the public largely ignored the question of discipline.

To sum up, the individual careers and expected standards of officers within the Royal Navy played a key role within courts martial. The career details and accomplishments of individuals was held to be important, particularly in courts martial defences, which was problematic for Byng, as his failure at Minorca outweighed his one major accomplishment.¹⁶⁴ In addition, the Royal Navy put a great deal of importance on honour, upholding the Navy's reputation, discipline, and personal conduct. Honour was seen as essential for both an officer and a gentleman in the period, and it was partially Byng's perceived dishonour of fleeing the battle and abandoning the besieged soldiers that sealed his fate.¹⁶⁵ This was made worse by the fact the British public had lionized the soldiers defending Minorca, particularly their commander William Blakeney, who was viewed as something of an anti-Byng by the press.¹⁶⁶ Byng's failure to uphold the Navy's reputation of invincibility also had an impact on his reputation, as his defeat was

¹⁶² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 98-100.

¹⁶³ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 101.

¹⁶⁴ "Historical Chronical," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 44.

¹⁶⁵ Cavell, *A Social History of Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1771-1831*, 77.

¹⁶⁶ McGuffie, "Some Fresh Light on The Siege of Minorca, 1756," 113; "Further Particulars of Byng's Conduct," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 412.

viewed as a blow to the national honour of Britain.¹⁶⁷ Discipline was prized highly by the Navy, and Byng did benefit from a record of disciplined behaviour.¹⁶⁸ This won him sympathizers within the ranks of the Navy but was largely ignored by the public. Overall, the factors relating to Byng's career generally were weighed against him. Byng himself was well regarded by his brother officers of the Navy despite this, and had it not been for Minorca, he would have been viewed as an unexciting but commendable officer of the Royal Navy.

Conclusion

It is clear that Byng's trial, as well as the overarching political turmoil, were caused by a number of preconceived biases both positive and negative. The major contemporary political factions, including the Admiralty, the Tories, and the various Whig factions, all had their own goals concerning Byng's court martial and their own perception of the relevant facts. While the Patriot Whigs saw a system of political corruption that had imperiled the War and seen a good man scapegoated for a crime he was forced into by the government, the Admiralty saw a person they personally respected who had failed and created a situation that had the potential to severely damage the reputation and honour of the Navy and the Admiralty.

The Byng affair was rife with politics, and all of the major players had some sort of political ties or connections. There is also evidence that personal networks played a key role in building support and deciding individuals' personal views. Another group of

¹⁶⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 60-62.

¹⁶⁸ Cavell, *A Social History of Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1771-1831*, 74.

factors was the importance of status and the popular opinion of Byng. Byng's noble status, as well as his rank, wealth, and prestigious family, proved to be little protection in the minds of the public or the court martial, though likely did secure him support a commoner would not have received. Popular opinion of Byng was a key factor against him, as most of Britain called for his head owing to the dishonour caused by Minorca. It did, however, turn out to be a double-edged sword, as attempting to turn public opinion against Byng saw the fall of the Establishment Whig government.¹⁶⁹ Lastly, the final group of factors were career factors. These primarily affected and were of particular importance to the Admiralty and navy, especially naval honour and discipline. Overall, there were a number of factors and biases that influenced the Byng court martial, both in positive and negative fashions. These factors largely weighed against Byng (particularly the political factors), however there were a number of factors that worked in his favour and led to some contemporary sympathy for him.

¹⁶⁹ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 66.

Chapter Three: “Once An Honourable Man:” the Influence of Shifting Values

After having faced devastating blows in the realm of public opinion from 26 June to 28 December 1756, Admiral John Byng was faced with the reality of a court martial that was all but certain to convict him. The public demanded his head, and the weight of the Admiralty and Whig government severely hamstrung the supposedly neutral jury. In the words of a pamphlet defending Byng, “he is to be deemed a coward also, and given up to the rage of the multitude; his letters published, and deprived of all that can vindicate him, with additions intended to depreciate his present endeavors.”¹⁷⁰ During his court martial, both Byng and his accusers turned to honour as a justification for their actions. Honour was traditionally a strong defence in courts martial,¹⁷¹ but it was rare for various interpretations of honour to be imposed from so many corners. In coming to their decision, the presiding jury was forced to take into consideration and try to reconcile Byng’s honour, the Navy’s honour, the nation and Crown’s honour, and even the honour of the Admiralty and government.

This chapter examines honour within Byng’s court martial by examining how honour was perceived differently by different groups, as well as how honour was intermixed with other qualities such as masculinity, courage, and success. It explores the three major ways that honour impacted the case: how and why Byng attempted to defend

¹⁷⁰ *An Appeal to the People: Containing, the Genuine and Entire Letter of Admiral Byng* (London, J. Morgan, 1756), 52

¹⁷¹ Kennedy, “An Analysis of Naval Courts Martial in the British Royal Navy, 1793-1815,” 48.

himself through proving his own honour; how the honour of the navy forced the jury to convict Byng, albeit reluctantly; and how the honour of the general public had diverged from traditional aristocratic honour into a new, distinct idea of honour. It shows that despite Byng successfully defending his own honour to the jury, honour simultaneously demanded that Byng be punished for his failure. The chapter covers the period of his court martial, from its beginning on December 28, 1756, to the eventual verdict on January 27, 1757.

Honour is here being defined using the view prevalent in Britain in the 18th century, which differs greatly from the contemporary definition. I will be using the definition laid out in *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson, which, as it was widely considered the definitive dictionary of the period, can be reasonably assumed to define honour in a contemporarily acceptable fashion.¹⁷² Johnson's definition is broad and encompassing; however, it does contain a number of reoccurring themes. He believed honour to be both a mark of status and reputation, and largely sees honour as a matter of outside perception, rather than conduct.¹⁷³ For example, in the case of Byng, honour was lost by the fact he had been seen to have failed in his duty, rather than the failure itself. It was largely immaterial, under Johnson's definition, whether or not Byng was responsible for the failure at Minorca, on account of the fact that the public, his superiors, and the Crown held him accountable for the failure.

¹⁷² Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2.

¹⁷³ Johnson, "Honour" in *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

Context

On 28 December 1756, the court martial of Admiral John Byng began. This followed the defeat of the Newcastle ministry and subsequent decline in pro-Byng public opinion, which forced Byng to begin his defence on a poor footing.¹⁷⁴ Byng was charged with the offence of failing to do his utmost against the enemy, on the grounds that he repeatedly delayed his campaign, neglected to reinforce his men, and mishandled the engagement at Minorca.¹⁷⁵ The public and government also sought to portray Byng as a coward, a charge which he would have to rebut in order to have any hope of acquittal.¹⁷⁶ There is also some evidence that the presiding panel of judges, who would also serve as a jury, were not completely neutral. A few were noted opponents of Byng, such as Admiral Holburne,¹⁷⁷ while others were noted to be “completely terrified,” suggesting that some pressure had placed on them by the Admiralty to convict Byng.¹⁷⁸ Admiral Douglas, another member of the panel, was notorious for his harsh discipline, which considering the charges, almost certainly inclined him against Byng.¹⁷⁹ A number of Byng’s staunchest supporters, such as Admiral Rodney, refused to serve on the court martial on grounds of feeling the proceeding was politically motivated and opposing

¹⁷⁴ Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," 346.

¹⁷⁵ "Answer to Objections in a 4th Letter to the People," *Gentleman's Magazine* 26 (Nov 1756): 531.

¹⁷⁶ Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," 346.

¹⁷⁷ Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of George II*, vol. 3. (London, Henry Colburne, 1847), 40.

¹⁷⁸ Edw. Owen to Edw. Weston, 5 March, 1757, in *Eighth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts* pt. 1 (1881), 313; "Influence of the Principle of Honour, Illustrated in the Trial and Sentence of Admiral Byng," *American Advocate of Peace* 2, no. 9 (1836): 31.

¹⁷⁹ Douglas Hamilton, "Brothers in arms: Crossing imperial boundaries in the eighteenth-century Dutch West Indies," In *The MacKenzie Moment and Imperial History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 5.

making Byng into a scapegoat.¹⁸⁰ There were only a few members, including the president of the court, Admiral Thomas Smith, who were openly sympathetic to Byng.¹⁸¹ As the charges laid against Byng carried the death penalty as a punishment with no possibility for a lighter sentence, the judges were forced into a situation where they would either have to agree Byng's actions deserved death (barring the possibility of the sentence being commuted) or that he deserved no punishment whatsoever.

The court martial itself proceeded in a comparatively standard fashion over the end of December and January. Byng focused his defence largely on attempting to disprove accusations of his cowardice and unwillingness to enter battle. Byng prioritized his honour in his defence, rather than attempt to prove that the engagement was weighted against him through hard facts. This was actually a highly successful and commonly utilized contemporary defence in courts martial and considering the context of the case likely represented Byng's best hope at winning back public favour, and forcing his opponents to withdraw the pressure for a conviction.¹⁸² It was also a strategy likely to find favour with the presiding officers, who largely came from similar backgrounds to Byng and were able to empathize with him. In doing so, Byng actively accused the government and Admiralty of being responsible for the debacle, claiming on January 18th: "I desire not to become an accuser, but if the loss of Minorca must be imputed, either on me, or on those who sent me on the expedition, they who have so falsely fixed the imputation on me, in order to protect themselves, can with little show of justice

¹⁸⁰ Syrett, *The Rodney Papers*, 212

¹⁸¹ Peter Le Fevre and Richard Harding, eds., *Precursors of Nelson: British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century* (London, Chatham Publishing, 2000), 194.

¹⁸² Kennedy, "An Analysis of Naval Courts Martial in the British Royal Navy, 1793-1815," 48.

complain of my retorting a charge so unjustly applied to me.”¹⁸³ This strategy was aimed directly at the judges, who Byng must have hoped would share the general distaste for the trial that most of the upper echelons of the Navy held, as evidenced by Keppel and Rodney.¹⁸⁴ This plan was not as effective as he had hoped, likely due to the loss of his supporters in government and the media who had assisted the previous media outcry against the government.

The trial largely proceeded as expected, with the prosecution arguing that Byng had not made a serious effort to relieve Minorca, his disadvantages notwithstanding, and that he had badly mismanaged his force before precipitously retreating.¹⁸⁵ One damaging charge laid against him was that he had retreated despite never entering into battle himself, suggesting cowardice.¹⁸⁶ Byng was unable to totally remove himself from this accusation, as it was his cautious approach to the battle and miscommunication with his captains that had led to the situation.¹⁸⁷ This had a damaging effect on his chances, given that his defence rested largely on proving his own honour, but he was unable to effectively rebut this accusation. Finally, the prosecution alleged that the lack of men was Byng’s own fault, as the condition of his fleet was deemed his own affair and General Fowke’s refusal to offer men (in violation of his orders) was glossed over.¹⁸⁸ Byng, focused on his honour, largely ignored and failed to address these accusations, damaging his case immensely. His refusal to rebut the attack meant that key factors that

¹⁸³ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 101.

¹⁸⁴ Syrett, *The Rodney Papers*, 212.

¹⁸⁵ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 124-125.

¹⁸⁶ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 37.

¹⁸⁷ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 124-125.

¹⁸⁸ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 10.

may have exonerated him, such as Fowke's refusal and the rushed nature of the expedition, went largely, if not totally, ignored. Overall, Byng proved to be a poor defence attorney, minimally cross-examining witnesses and over-emphasising his own actions rather than those of the fleet, while the prosecution pursued their case unchallenged on key points and effectively roused doubts about Byng's courage and honour.¹⁸⁹

Byng was found guilty on January 27, 1757, albeit with the presiding officers recommending mercy.¹⁹⁰ They unanimously acknowledged the testimony of the witnesses who had served under Byng (which was largely favourable to him), while acknowledging that he was not a coward and that the failure had arisen from a disparity in force and overabundance of caution.¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, they unanimously declared Byng guilty of failing to do his utmost against the enemy despite their otherwise favourable conclusion. This seems to imply that the judges did not want to declare him guilty but felt obligated to on grounds of the undeniable failure. They presented a conclusion as a compromise which would strongly support their recommendation for clemency while still fulfilling the need for a guilty verdict. The panel likely did not feel that the failure of Byng warranted death, but were bound by the reality of public relations, political pressure, and the precedent of potentially forgiving a scandalous failure for the Navy. They took the most acceptable option of declaring him guilty but recommending he be

¹⁸⁹ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 17.

¹⁹⁰ "Influence of the Principle of Honour," *American Advocate of Peace*, 31.

¹⁹¹ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 124-125.

pardoned as a result of their dilemma, expecting that the King would oblige based on precedent.

Byng's Honour

Byng's defence hinged on the crucial point that he was an honourable individual. This meant that Byng attempted to convince the jury that he had behaved courageously by attempting to fulfil his duty as ordered against impossible odds. In doing so, he attempted to rebut both the unfavourable depiction of him being a coward and defend against the accusation he had not 'done his utmost.' This section will show why defending his honour was seen by Byng as his best option and examine how his honour became one of the central elements of the case, which the prosecution sought to attack, Byng's opponents sought to defame, and Byng sought to restore.

There is a strong contemporary precedent for using honour as a defence in courts martial. Throughout the eighteenth century, sailors and officers alike would rebut accusations by pointing to their previous conduct and their reputation as a defence or a plea to receive a lighter sentence.¹⁹² As historian John Byrn points out, courts martial were useful to officers especially as, if they could prove their honour before the court, the presiding officers would normally acquit them. This would bolster their honour and reputation, while also firmly discounting the accusations in question.¹⁹³ This was based on the Royal Navy's high standards for its representatives. According to N. A. M. Rodger and Samantha Cavell, the Navy expected its officers, and to a lesser degree its sailors, to conduct themselves as "good gentlemen," which played an important role in

¹⁹² Byrn, *Naval Courts Martial, 1793-1815*, 607.

¹⁹³ Byrn, *Naval Courts Martial, 1793-1815*, 607.

terms of maintaining both discipline and naval honour.¹⁹⁴ As Rodger shows, officers in particular were expected to be cultured and of good character, and deviations from such standards were punished.¹⁹⁵ Those who successfully defended their character at a courts martial would likely receive a lesser sentence or be completely absolved of wrongdoing, regardless of the facts of the event.¹⁹⁶

Honour was implicitly linked to courage and perception, which was in turn linked directly to “doing one’s utmost against the enemy,” the charge laid against Byng. In order to rebut it, Byng had to prove that he had, in the words of the presiding jury of the court “seemed to give his orders coolly and distinctly, and did not seem wanting in personal courage.”¹⁹⁷ Honour was largely a matter of perception, meaning that the court was forced to accept the generally favourable testimony of Byng’s fellow officers who had served at Minorca. This included the testimony of officers such as Captain Arthur Gardiner, which largely exonerated Byng.¹⁹⁸ Byng’s defence simultaneously aimed at making him an object of sympathy and value to the Navy by proving he was a gentleman of upstanding character (and thus desirable to the service), while also rebutting the charges of cowardice through the testimony of his fellow officers and by actively proving his courage and honour. While Byng was somewhat successful in this strategy,

¹⁹⁴ Cavell, *A Social History of Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1771-1831*, 138; Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 261.

¹⁹⁵ Rodger, “Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815,” 427; Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 262.

¹⁹⁶ Byrn, *Naval Courts Martial, 1793-1815*, xxv.

¹⁹⁷ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 126.

¹⁹⁸ Ferne, “The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng,” 117.

he was unsuccessful at totally vindicating himself in the eyes of the court and only succeeded in obtaining a plea for clemency.

It is also crucial to remember that Byng's honour had become the a focal point of his opponents within the general public and government.¹⁹⁹ As contemporary publications like the *Gentleman's Magazine* show, Byng's perceived lack of honour was at the heart of the controversy in the minds of the public, with one commentator stating that Byng's had to be convicted due to his cowardice and dishonourable retreat.²⁰⁰ While the presiding judges were in theory required only to examine the facts presented, it stretches imagination to think that they were unaware of the sheer weight of public discontent against Byng, or the potential career ramifications for themselves that might occur should they decide to defy the Admiralty by exonerating Byng. Contemporary sea officers showed awareness of the levels of outrage directed towards Byng and how it had impacted his chances of acquittal in early January, with one anonymously commenting in a political pamphlet "since we find bravery and courage are by no means sufficient securities for the life and honour of an officer, when any political interests come into competition with them."²⁰¹ This indicates that if Byng was to have any hope of acquittal, he would need to relieve the public pressure on the trial by disproving accusations of his cowardice. He pursued this by largely focusing on his own conduct during the trial and

¹⁹⁹ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 9.

²⁰⁰ "Trials by Court Martials unnecessarily expensive," *Gentleman's Magazine* 27 (April 1757): 155.

²⁰¹ *A Candid Examination of the Resolutions and Sentence of the Court-Martial on the Trial of Admiral Byng; as Founded on the Principles of Law, Evidence, and Discipline. In a Letter to Gentlemen of the Navy. By an Old Sea Officer* (London, J. Cooke, 1757), 6

focusing his interrogations on the fact that witnesses never saw evidence of his supposed cowardice or attempts to avoid battle.²⁰²

Byng was effectively trying to defend himself in the eyes of both the unofficial trial of public opinion and the official court martial. Unfortunately for Byng, his efforts likely came too late. Most of the public had made up their minds against him during the riots and accepted the arguments of the satirical cartoons and the edited letter. As Sarah Kinkel points out, the majority of his political backers (who had more influence than Byng in the public sphere) had been neutralized by their new positions in government, leaving him vulnerable.²⁰³ Byng was correct to realize the effect that outside pressure had on his court martial, and his strategy of defending his honour in the hopes of alleviating some of the pressure was likely the correct one, but he had waited too long. He was unable to swing public opinion back in his favour despite his best efforts.

The prosecution also sought to exploit the perception of Byng as a coward and focused a number of their questions on Byng's conduct in battle.²⁰⁴ This effort was two-pronged. On one hand, it attacked Byng on what has been shown to be his weakest point: the perception that he had sabotaged the efforts at Minorca due to his lack of courage, which had been popularized by the press, particularly the *London Gazette*.²⁰⁵ This subtle

²⁰² Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 46.

²⁰³ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 110; Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 122-123.

²⁰⁴ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 32.

²⁰⁵ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62; Christopher Obringer, "The Global Impact of British Naval Leadership, 1757-1805," (PhD diss., San Houston State University, 2018), 33.

²⁰⁵ "Trials by Court Martials unnecessarily expensive," 155; "Extract of a Letter from Admiral Byng," *London Gazette*, 1.

attack forced Byng to focus all his efforts on defending his honour while reinforcing the public narrative that had already been accepted. It also allowed the prosecution to dilute the testimony of the officers who had served under Byng, by repeatedly questioning them on delays, missed opportunities, and Byng's own conduct.²⁰⁶ The prosecution created the impression that the campaign had been mismanaged (due to cowardice or incompetency) despite the testimony generally being favourable to Byng.

The other major goal of the prosecution's case was to direct attention onto Byng, and away from the alternative: that the government and Admiralty had mishandled the case.²⁰⁷ Kinkel argues that this had been the traditional argument of Byng and his supporters, especially prior to 11 November 1756, when the Newcastle ministry fell and William Pitt (one of Byng's strongest supporters) joined the cabinet, and arguably represented Byng's best defence in the court martial, especially considering that it was chaired by naval officers.²⁰⁸ Byng had plenty of evidence that the campaign had been ill-conceived and that neither the government nor his fellow military officers had provided the support necessary for a serious campaign. By attacking Byng's honour, the prosecution in turn forced Byng to defend himself, and thus directed attention away from such evidence. For example, General Fowke had refused orders to supply Byng with the men necessary for the campaign.²⁰⁹ Despite this, Fowke's disobedience was all but ignored during the trial (only appearing in several letters submitted as evidence), and Byng never questioned witnesses on the matter which allowed the prosecution to ignore

²⁰⁶ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 32.

²⁰⁷ Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 131.

²⁰⁸ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 4, 10.

²⁰⁹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 53-54.

it.²¹⁰ Fowke's defiance, and similar failures, thus were neatly sidestepped due to the prosecution's decision to focus the case on Byng, and Byng to dedicate his efforts solely towards defending his honour from their attacks. Just as Byng believed he would benefit from focusing on defending his honour, the prosecution actively sought to turn his honour into a central aspect of the case in order to strengthen their own case.

This leads to the question of the charge, "failure to do one's utmost against the enemy." It is important to note that this charge is largely subjective and had a history of being used to create a scapegoat.²¹¹ Modern historians hotly contest Byng being convicted under this charge, while Julian Corbett and N. A. M. Rodger argue that Byng's conviction under this charge was just and necessary for the smooth operations of the Navy. In contrast, Ware argues that Byng was not guilty of violating the Articles of War and that the court martial recognized this but felt compelled to convict him anyway, with multiple other officers having made identical mistakes but not being charged with the same offense.²¹² The perception among the public was that it was Byng's own cowardice and mishandling of the campaign that had led to the failure and subsequent charges, with the *Gentleman's Magazine* furiously commenting "But why do I mention either bravery or his country in the same sheet with his ever ignominious name? Common men were never in the world in higher spirits, or more furious to engage."²¹³ Byng's honour

²¹⁰ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 6-12.

²¹¹ J. K. Laughton, "The Study of Naval History," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 40, no. 2 (1896): 262-263.

²¹² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 230-232; Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 344-345; Julian Corbett, *England in the Seven Years War: A Study in Combined Strategy*, vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 104.

²¹³ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62; "Further Particulars of Byng's Conduct," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 412.

became a central focus of Byng himself, the prosecution, and the outraged public. This is unsurprising, as traditionally a failure to do one's utmost against the enemy had been a matter of courage and honour, as Lieutenant Baker Philips' court martial demonstrated in 1745. Philips had been court martialled for surrendering his ship to the enemy, in spite of the fact he had only been a junior officer who had been left with no choice but to surrender after the death of his unprepared and incompetent captain. It was not the lack of preparedness of the officers in question that the trial focused on (despite being the undeniable cause of the defeat), but instead the dishonour that Philips' surrender had brought.²¹⁴ It is ironic that Philips' case was so similar to Byng's own, considering its ramifications for Byng.

The verdict of the case, delivered on 27 January 1757, shows the judges had a different interpretation of the charges despite the precedent and the focus placed on honour by the relevant parties. They chose to absolve Byng of cowardice and accepted that he actively engaged the opponents with appropriate haste but declared him guilty regardless.²¹⁵ This was likely because they sought to punish him while preventing the extreme sentence of his execution through requesting clemency, but also because they placed less importance on Byng's honour than might have been expected. They instead focused their conclusion on the argument that Byng had been overly cautious and avoided making a full commitment of his fleet to the Battle of Minorca.²¹⁶ This is intriguing on multiple levels, as it implies shifting views, which will be discussed later in the chapter. It shows that the court martial was less concerned specifically with Byng's

²¹⁴ Laughton, "The Study of Naval History," 262-263.

²¹⁵ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 122-125.

²¹⁶ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 122-125.

honour and conduct, and more with the outcome of the battle. They critiqued a number of his decisions, including the perceived waste of shot involved in attempting to engage from a distance and the fact that Byng had not seriously attempted to engage the French fleet with his full force regardless of the numerical disadvantage.

N. A. M. Rodger and others argue that the Royal Navy sought to make Byng an example to ensure extreme bravery, in order to boost the performance of their fleet.²¹⁷ This is supported by the remarkable results of the Navy in the aftermath of the Byng affair.²¹⁸ Historians Joachim Voth and Guo Xu have demonstrated that the performance of naval officers, particularly those connected to Byng, increased dramatically following his execution, demonstrating the effect that Byng's example had on the service and the discrediting of the myth of officer invulnerability to courts martial.²¹⁹ It is also supported by a few contemporary figures, who anonymously claimed in an open letter to Robert Bertie (a general who defended Byng at his court martial) that a failure to punish Byng would weaken the Navy by tacitly accepting cowardice.²²⁰ It seems that the court either did not accept the implicit argument that Byng's force did not realistically have the ability to defeat the enemy and sought to create a precedent as suggested above, or that the court martial felt Byng had not adequately shown he had 'done his utmost,' perhaps due to his decision to emphasize his honour instead. This decision perhaps indicates a

²¹⁷ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 17.

²¹⁸ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 17.

²¹⁹ Joachim Voth and Guo Xu, "Encouraging Others: Punishment and Performance in the Royal Navy," (2020): 10-12, 17-29.

²²⁰ *A Letter to Lord Robert Bertie: Relating to His Conduct in the Mediterranean, and His Defence of Admiral Byng* (R. Griffiths, 1757), 20.

new kind of honour was prevalent within the service regardless of their specific reasons, which will be discussed in the next section.

In conclusion, it was inevitable that Byng's honour would play a role in the case. Both the prosecution and Byng sought to utilize it to strengthen their own arguments, and outside forces made it inevitable it would become a major factor of the case. Byng also followed the normal precedent in attempting to prove his character and honour in the hopes of securing leniency or an acquittal. It is curious that the presiding officers placed little importance on honour when coming to their sentence, but it is possible that they sought to appease the public and government while also preventing Byng's execution by using Byng's honour in their recommendation for mercy while focusing on his defeat in their verdict. Overall, Byng's honour was a central feature of the case and played a major role in determining both the process of the case and the outcome.

Honour of the Navy

While Byng's honour was the clear and obvious focus of the case, the honour of the Navy also played a role. In the words of historian Timothy Jenks, "naval figures could claim to be – with what contemporaries describe as legitimacy – representative of the nation at large."²²¹ The honour of the Navy was almost inseparable from the honour of the nation at large, and a blemish on the honour of the Navy would have a similar effect on national honour.²²² The loss of Minorca fell under this category and it is clear from contemporary satirical prints that the populace felt the blow bitterly. The presiding

²²¹ Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy 1793-1815*, 66.

²²² *A Letter to Lord Robert Bertie*, 27.

officers had to determine how Byng's actions could be addressed while also restoring the honour of the Navy. Naval honour had several factors to consider, including ideas of masculinity, how failure impacted honour, the professional nature of the navy, and of course, nationalism. This section examines these factors in the context of Byng's court martial and show how Byng's verdict was largely motivated by the need to protect naval honour.

The professional nature of the Navy was surprisingly intertwined with naval honour, as historian Chris Durbin discusses.²²³ The Navy had traditionally drawn its higher-ranking personnel from the upper classes, particularly the nobility. Over time, they shifted from favouring the upper classes to a stronger focus on the concept of a 'good gentlemen' officer class.²²⁴ Social status was less important than behaviour, and skill was becoming increasingly prized.²²⁵ Officers were expected to be ambitious and strive for success, but also be honourable and were held accountable for their action. All of these factors heavily disadvantaged Byng. He was seen as part of an obsolete generation and believed to have built his career on his father's legacy, having failed to seek success with the drive expected of an officer on top of failing outright at Minorca.²²⁶ This led to him being seen as something of an obvious liability by the rest of the service. If the presiding officers had acquitted him, it would have been seen as a

²²³ Chris Durbin, "The Sad Fate of Admiral Byng," *Naval History Magazine* 33, no. 4 (2019).

²²⁴ Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 426-427.

²²⁵ Pablo Ortega-del-Cerro and Juan Hernández-Franco, "Towards a Definition of Naval Elites: Reconsidering Social Change in Britain, France and Spain, c.1670-1810," *European Review of History* 25, no. 6 (2018): 986.

²²⁶ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 63.

rejection of the professionalization reforms while convicting him was seen as an endorsement of the new expectations.

On top of that, the Navy was beginning to enforce a degree of equality in terms of social status. Prince William (the future William IV) was held to most of the same standards as his fellow midshipman despite his royal status, and the Navy increasingly sought to promote a limited form of social mobility amongst their officer class.²²⁷ Had the court martial acquitted Byng, it would have been seen as favouritism and elitism, given the public outrage against Byng, damaging the Navy's own attempts at reform.²²⁸ Durbin further points out that Byng's case was the first where a senior officer had been tried under the amended Article 12.²²⁹ As a result, the professionalization of the Navy placed an implicit expectation on the court martial that they would punish Byng, lest they dishonour the Navy by failing to uphold the standards that they were expected to apply. Overall, the ongoing professionalization of the Navy played a small but important part by limiting the Navy's ability to offer Byng much in the way of leniency. The ongoing reforms required that Byng be found guilty of his failure to maintain the Navy's reputation and honour, considering his failure to demonstrate the skill or courage expected of an officer and the public perception of the court martial.

Nationalism was one of the major focuses of both the court martial and naval honour as a whole. N. A. M. Rodger points out that officers of the Royal Navy swore their oaths directly to the King, which meant their actions reflected directly on him and

²²⁷ Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 430; Ortega-del-Cerro and Hernández-Franco, "Towards a Definition of Naval Elites," 984.

²²⁸ "Execution of Admiral Byng Justified," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 154-155.

²²⁹ Durbin, "The Sad Fate of Admiral Byng."

the nation. It is unsurprising that they were more sensitive to their honour than they would have been otherwise, as a result of this connection.²³⁰ As a result of Byng's oath, his failure directly impacted the honour of the Navy, the King, and the nation itself.²³¹ The newer ideas of honour were beginning to come into vogue and prized highly both nationalism and patriotism. While not a factor of major concern to the court martial, it was of considerable importance to the Admiralty and the government, who needed to maintain public confidence.²³² Minorca had been a major embarrassment to both parties, as the dismissal of the Newcastle ministry and press coverage from the *Gentleman's Magazine* in November showed.²³³ It was a matter of vital importance to the Admiralty and government that they regain their honour through the conviction of Byng, which would theoretically absolve them of wrongdoing. This had ramifications for the Navy as well, because conviction would lead to the blame falling on one man, rather than on the service as a whole. Considering the critiques from major publishers such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* on the handling of the war effort before the beginning of the court martial, a boost in public confidence and a restoration of the honour of the Navy, Admiralty, and nation would have been welcome.²³⁴

²³⁰ Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 435.

²³¹ Ortega-del-Cerro and Hernández-Franco, "Towards a Definition of Naval Elites," 989.

²³² Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 78.

²³³ "Objections to the Ministry respecting Minorca," *Gentleman's Magazine* 26 (Nov 1756), 532.

²³⁴ "Objections to the Ministry respecting Minorca," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 532.

²³⁴ Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," 346.

In addition, one must also consider the role of nationalism in heroism. The high-ranking officers of the Royal Navy were heroes to the British populace.²³⁵ Naval officers were expected to emerge victorious against seemingly impossible odds and embodied the greatness of Britain for all the world to see. Byng's failure, as a result, flew in the face of all that most ordinary citizens believed. As Kathleen Wilson put it, "In this climate, Byng became the inglorious anti-hero of patriotic virtue, spectacularly failing to live up to its injunctions of service and leadership – opprobrium that also rebounded in the public mind against the ministry."²³⁶ It was not only Byng's failure that shamed patriots, but also the fact that someone who was expected to be a hero had let Britain down. The people of Britain demonized Byng in response. He was seen as a traitor, a coward, and incompetent.²³⁷ It is very possible that Byng's conviction was thus aimed at two goals tied closely to nationalism: to, as Voltaire put it "encourager les autres,"²³⁸ and to restore confidence in the 'heroism' of the Navy. In the first case, the Navy desired to ensure that its officers appreciated the necessity of 'honour' in its engagements. As N. A. M. Rodger argues, they sought to ensure that no British commander would ever flee from a fight, which would make the Navy into a terrifying force to engage.²³⁹ This would further ensure no 'heroes' would ever fail Britain in the manner of Byng, thus preventing future shame. In the latter case, the Navy must have sought to appease the populace and reassure them that they were still committed to the war by sacrificing the admiral.

²³⁵ Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy 1793-1815*, 25, 300; John McAleer and Christer Petley, eds., *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c. 1750-1820* (London: Springer, 2016), 188.

²³⁶ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 184

²³⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62.

²³⁸ Voltaire, *Candide, or, Optimism* (London: Folio Society, 2011), 98.

²³⁹ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 17.

Nicholas Rogers argued that it was part of a broader effort to pacify the population through regenerative patriotism, part of which was achieved by sacrificing a pariah to regain the honour of Britain and the confidence of the populace.²⁴⁰ Nationalism played a key role in the court martial, as the Navy was required to take steps to restore the confidence of the upset public in order to maintain their role and honour as the representatives of the King and nation.

Masculinity was heavily tied into contemporary ideals of honour, especially in military matters. Honourable naval officers were expected to be courageous and decisive, engaging the enemy being seen as the height of honour.²⁴¹ Unfortunately for Byng, masculinity was one area he was at a disadvantage at well before his trial, which increased his difficulties. Byng had always been regarded as an effeminate fop, and as historian Kathleen Wilson put it “Byng (was) identified with aristocratic, frenchified counsels,” a grievous charge when France was an enemy.²⁴² Effeminacy was significant to 18th century gender ideology, particularly regarding military service, as the expectation was that males would exemplify a masculine ethos and behaviour.²⁴³ ‘Womanly’ behaviour, such as cowardice or overly vain conduct, were seen as signs of weakness and effeminacy, and thus condemned among the officer class.²⁴⁴ Byng himself was perceived to be overdressed (he was believed to be overly interested in fashionable

²⁴⁰ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 64.

²⁴¹ Julia Banister, *Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture, 1689–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 73.

²⁴² Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241; Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

²⁴³ Rodger, “Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815,” 443.

²⁴⁴ Rodger, “Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815,” 442.

attire by his colleagues) and ‘soft,’ more inclined to a leisurely existence than a life at sea, leading him to be termed a effete fop by some of his critics.²⁴⁵ This portrayal of Byng was pragmatic in nature, as it is unlikely that most of Byng’s chief critics were overly concerned about his dress, but it did appeal to the ideals of the 18th century British public, and was useful at turning the public against Byng. This image did not improve when the Battle of Minorca occurred, and critics seized the chance to use Byng’s supposed lack of masculinity against him.²⁴⁶ Satirical images of him dressed in woman’s clothing appeared during the course of Byng’s court martial, such as the mocking print *Admiral Byng’s Attempt or Miss Mistaken* (figure 2) which portrayed him fleeing in women’s clothing.²⁴⁷ Byng was also portrayed as a woman in the print *Female Court Martial*, which mocked Byng by implying that he was being tried for adultery, implying he had been unfaithful to Britain.²⁴⁸ Curiously, a similar print called *The Way the Cat Jumps, or the Boy frightens his Nurse* also depicts similar themes to *Admiral Byng’s Attempt or Miss Mistaken*, but instead of Byng running away in women’s clothing, it is Newcastle in a nurse’s costume fleeing the uncomfortable truths (depicted as a cat) Byng is releasing.²⁴⁹ This suggests that both Byng’s supporters and accusers sought to link cowardice to effeminacy, though it was more common as a weapon against Byng.

²⁴⁵ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62; Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 144.

²⁴⁶ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

²⁴⁷ *Admiral Byng’s Attempt or Miss Mistaken*.

²⁴⁸ *Female Court Martial*, 1757, caricature, the British Museum.

²⁴⁹ *The Way the Cat Jumps, or the Boy frightens his Nurse*, 1756, caricature, the British Museum.



Figure 2. Admiral Byng depicted in woman’s clothing to demonstrate cowardice.

(*Admiral Byng’s Attempt or Miss Mistaken*. 1757. Caricature. From the British Museum.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-4033).

Portraying Byng as a woman directly linked his perceived effeminacy to weakness, cowardice, and disloyalty, by implying that a more masculine officer would have defeated the French at Minorca.²⁵⁰ Although Byng’s effeminacy did not directly affect the court martial, his perceived cowardice certainly did. His over-caution and refusal to risk his force in a decisive engagement after the initial battle on 20 May were major factors in the verdict against him. The prosecution also sought to exploit the fact that his flagship had never entered into the battle to imply a unmasculine lack of courage. Byng was a victim of the fact that he had never entirely fit into the idealized, glorified masculine image of the time, and his failure at Minorca was simply seen as evidence of

²⁵⁰ Banister, *Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 85.

his weakness. As historian Julia Bannister astutely points out, “Byng’s sentence punished one who had failed to ‘be’ who he ought to have been.”²⁵¹ His lack of obvious masculine qualities turned the public against him because of their dislike for his supposedly more effeminate qualities, which would be used by the presiding officers to justify his verdict. Byng’s rival, Admiral Edward Boscawen, as well as others, were particularly critical of his perceived foppish manner and effete dress.²⁵² It is clear that Byng’s failure to fall within the naval image as an honourable and masculine commander played a role in the court’s martial decision to find him guilty of failing to do his utmost and dishonouring the Navy.

In the 1750s, views of honour were shifting in Britain at large. Honour had previously been a matter of status combined with good behaviour. Ideas of British honour descended from the aristocratic conception of honour, which was heavily influenced by the French interpretation of honour.²⁵³ For many, particularly in the commercial classes, new ideas of honour were beginning to gain greater sway and would eventually come to dominate the navy. This new honour prized success above all else, along with patriotism and duty.²⁵⁴ The Navy would increasingly adopt this new form of honour, particularly as officers became less aristocratic over time. Byng was undeniably a remnant of the old ideas of honour. He was an aristocrat by birth and was, as Kathleen Wilson points out, definitely considered to be a part of the aristocratic factions of both

²⁵¹ Banister, *Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 87.

²⁵² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 15.

²⁵³ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

²⁵⁴ Roy Porter, “The Vulgar” in *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (Penguin UK, 2001).

the Navy and society, a fact which the public was aware of.²⁵⁵ This made him unpopular with the proponents for a results-based honour system.²⁵⁶ His failure at Minorca made matters worse, as he was now seen as a direct affront to the new ideals of honour. After all, he had been seen to lose in a battle that resulted in the surrender of British troops because he did not fully commit his fleet to battle. This was a problem that would become increasingly common in the Navy in the coming years, with Nicholas Kaizer discussing how naval defeats in the War of 1812 led to comparable public outrage regardless of the tactical realities of the defeat.²⁵⁷ Consequently, his actions could not have flown in the face of the results-based system more. Both Minorca and his court martial occurred during a period when Britain was losing the war and the British people took them as an affront to both the honour of their nation and their Navy, unfortunately for the Admiral.²⁵⁸ Even many high-ranking officers who were sympathetic towards Byng, like Rodney, bemoaned his failure and results, recognizing that he would have a difficult time defending himself in light of his failure.²⁵⁹ This appears to indicate that a shift in ideas of honour had occurred in Britain, one which the Navy had to be aware of in order to defend their own honour.²⁶⁰ Considering the new “principle which makes crime to turn upon results,”²⁶¹ it is likely that the British people would have judged the honour of the Navy based on the results of their court martial. In other words, anything

²⁵⁵ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

²⁵⁶ Stephen Moore, ““A Nation of Harlequins”? Politics and Masculinity in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England.” *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 515.

²⁵⁷ Kaizer, *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, 78-79.

²⁵⁸ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62-64.

²⁵⁹ Syrett, *The Rodney Papers, Volume I*, 219.

²⁶⁰ Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy 1793-1815*, 49, 206.

²⁶¹ “Influence of the Principle of Honour,” *American Advocate of Peace*, 34.

other than a punishment for Byng's actions would have been unacceptable to the public and damage the honour of the British Navy by refusing to penalize the failure of its officer to abide by the new standards of success and patriotism. The new results-oriented honour system and its growing importance in Britain demanded Byng be found guilty, and the Navy would have been seen as dishonourable should they have come to any other conclusion.

Naval honour drastically limited the options of the presiding jury. They could not afford to lose their own honour or the confidence of the public, and thus were forced into a position where punishing Byng was the only valid option. The tides of change were such that Byng himself was seen as a liability to naval honour. He had become the symbol of aristocratic decadence, and an acquittal would have been an active repudiation of the ongoing naval reforms and emerging ideas of honour.²⁶² They could not acquit him without seriously damaging their credibility on their commitment to a less aristocratic navy or drive for success. Byng's inability to fit into the traditional masculine mold also seriously damaged him, as it was a key portion of naval honour.²⁶³ Rising nationalism meant that it was vital for the Navy and Admiralty to rid themselves of the stain of Minorca through the sacrifice of Byng, while also regaining the confidence of the patriotic public. The realities of naval honour meant that a conviction and plea for mercy was the most pragmatic and least objectionable outcome for the Navy. In theory, it would pacify both critics and supporters of Byng. Things turned out differently in practice, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁶² Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 63.

²⁶³ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

Shifting Values in Britain

Byng was partly a victim of Britain's changing values and beliefs. A new form of honour and rising nationalism, in addition to the shift away from the traditional aristocratic values, had all played a role in his conviction. The Navy's need to punish him in order to exonerate their own honour also played a part. In this section, those topics will be discussed in more detail, particularly the shift from aristocratic ideals to the new, commercialized form of honour. This section will discuss the new 'Enlightenment' honour system, the blurring of the traditional commoner and noble roles, and the shift away from continental honour in order to explain why national honour benefitted from the disgrace of Admiral Byng.

Honour, as demonstrated in the previous sections, differed based on the beliefs and ideology of the individual in question. National honour was particularly difficult to define, largely because it arose from one's own class interests. The ideals of the Enlightenment could be seen to be inspiring a new form of honour among most of the middle and commercial class of Britain. Unlike the old aristocratic honour, 'Enlightenment honour' was fundamentally based in logic rather than moralism.²⁶⁴ It particularly prized success and rejected traditional elements like the aristocratic code of *noblesse oblige* or dueling as superstitious and irrational.²⁶⁵ It was inspired by early capitalism, which particularly prized the drive for success and individualism.²⁶⁶ That

²⁶⁴ Porter, "The Vulgar" in *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*.

²⁶⁵ Porter, "The Vulgar" in *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*.

²⁶⁶ Porter, "The Vulgar" in *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*.

said, moral and honorable conduct was still deeply prized in certain contexts, as historian Christian Kuhner points out, "The model of heroism advocated by *Chambers's Journal* was instead one which admonished readers to be heroes of everyday life and precisely not to seek fame and glory, but to take pride in moral – one might also say: honourable – conduct in their daily lives."²⁶⁷ Byng's court martial arrived at an unfortunate time, as the commercial classes were already discontent due to food riots and opposition to the militia act.²⁶⁸ The failure at Minorca in 1756 was the 'icing on the cake.' Byng's defeat was seen by proponents of this new honour as a bitter failure. He had not only failed, but seemingly put little effort into attempting to succeed and was symbolic of the old aristocratic model that the commercial class opposed.²⁶⁹ It is perhaps unsurprising that they lashed out against Byng as the scapegoat of everything wrong with the system, particularly as riots only intensified with the defeat at Minorca. Many historians, such as Nicholas Rogers, have suggested that Byng's conviction was at least in part to pacify the discontent populace, and indeed contemporary commenters called on the government to do just that. While proponents of 'Enlightenment honour' could normally be overlooked by the government and Admiralty, the poor state of the war and unrest within Britain demanded that concessions be offered to the angry populace in order to quell public outrage. Byng had become the face of that discontent, making him the easiest and least damaging scapegoat for a myriad of issues.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Christian Kühner, "Eternal Fame? Honour and Prestige in Historical Perspective," *E-Journal on Cultures of the Heroic*, no. 2 (2016): 13.

²⁶⁸ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 64.

²⁶⁹ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 122-125; Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

²⁷⁰ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 64.

Britain stood out in Europe for its social mobility during this period. Unlike France or Spain, for example, during this time period Britain had fostered a unique blurring of the common classes and the nobility, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the most obvious factor was the democratic system of Britain. Although Britain was not very democratic by modern standards, the parliamentary system allowed for a degree of public participation within politics, far more than was offered by its continental counterparts. Equally important was the economic impact of trade, which was reliant on the commercial establishment, largely comprised of the middle class.²⁷¹ Beginning in 1750, a number of new peerages were created which moved noble power away from the landowners and into the hands of those experienced in governmental affairs or the military.²⁷² As a result, commoners, especially from the commercial class, had a level of influence on the direction of Britain that was more or less unmatched in the largely absolutist, aristocratic Europe.²⁷³ This led to them having a similar degree of influence over the Navy, given their status as representatives of Britain abroad.²⁷⁴ As Rodger points out, the Navy could not afford to ignore the commoners, as they made up a significant portion of the officer ranks (particularly when compared to other European nations) and also had a significant degree of control over national affairs as a whole.²⁷⁵ The professionalization of the Navy only furthered this trend, as part of it involved making the Navy more socially mobile by prizing merit over background. Commoners

²⁷¹ Ortega-del-Cerro and Hernández-Franco, "Towards a Definition of Naval Elites," 981.

²⁷² Michael McCahill, "Peerage Creations and the Changing Character of the British Nobility, 1750-1830," *The English Historical Review* 96, no. 379 (1981): 259.

²⁷³ Kühner, "Eternal Fame? Honour and Prestige in Historical Perspective," 13.

²⁷⁴ Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 437.

²⁷⁵ Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 428-430.

were very aware of their status within Britain and the Navy and sought to strengthen it by weakening the aristocratic hold over the nation.

This had a massive impact on the Byng case, as it was partially the commercial and lower classes protesting against Byng that forced the Navy into convicting him.²⁷⁶ Byng was also depicted as being heavily associated with the aristocrats in a bid to simultaneously weaken Byng by linking him with the unpopular noble class (importantly, he was linked particularly with the unpopular elements of the aristocratic lifestyle, such as the French influence on elitist culture) while also weakening the nobles by linking them with a pariah who was despised by most of Britain.²⁷⁷ The *Newcastle Courant* openly linked Byng's failure with his social status and the perceived cowardice of the aristocracy.²⁷⁸ Similarly, *The Monitor* claimed "Had Byng been equal to Leake, he would not have deserted Minorca," drawing a comparison to another naval officers with a lower-class background in order to demonstrate aristocratic cowardice, before going on to state "A virtuous administration would have been ashamed of promoting an officer to the flag, that had nothing but his family connections to recommend him."²⁷⁹ In contrast, publications that catered to the upper classes, such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*, never discussed the issue of Byng's aristocratic roots, indicating that it was largely a concern for the lower classes. Kathleen Wilson commented on the unrest directed against Byng that "anti-Byng protestors in the localities were not reticent in identifying the Minorca disaster with ineffectual aristocratic counsels; the fact that Byng was himself the son of a

²⁷⁶ Wilson, *A New Imperial History*, 241.

²⁷⁷ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

²⁷⁸ *Newcastle Courant*, no. 4172 (11 Sept 1756): 1-2.

²⁷⁹ "To the Monitor," *The Monitor*, no. 132 (11 October 1758): 700.

peer added further credibility to the connection.”²⁸⁰ This implies that the middle and lower classes were just as interested in damaging the aristocratic system as they were in extracting justice for the failure at Minorca. For many, the Byng affair was just as much about ensuring that the traditionally immune aristocrats pay for a crime that they believed had occurred. Unlike the political manipulations of Byng’s honour in the eyes of the public, this effort was largely motivated by ideological idealism rather than by a pragmatic desire to slander one’s opponents (although the latter aspect cannot be overlooked, as Byng’s being portrayed as an entirely unredeemable, stereotypical noble who was only successful through nepotism shows). In fact, Nicholas Rogers suggests that most protestors did not ever expect Byng to be convicted, which was part of the reason for the public outrage against him.²⁸¹ They were angered at the notion that his status and rank might shield him from justice and sought to demonstrate opposition to Byng to protest the eventuality such an occurrence. In this, they were successful. It is ironic that his noble status, which was traditionally one of the most powerful shields against criminal charges, had become one of Byng’s greatest liabilities, one which he likely was never aware of.²⁸²

The relationship between the aristocratic upper classes and the commercial lower classes would have massive repercussions for Byng. The commercial classes were able to exercise their power together with publications like the *Newcastle Courant* in a firm attack on traditional aristocratic privileges by using their unofficial influence over the nation to make Byng’s acquittal politically impossible. Their motivation was largely an

²⁸⁰ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 188.

²⁸¹ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 63.

²⁸² Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 189.

awareness of the class divide and the desire to take a firm stand against the prospect of aristocratic immunity in courts martial. This culminated in Byng's noble status being used as ammunition against him, in a striking reversal from historical precedent.

One of the chief criticisms of the aristocracy, and Byng in particular, was their cultural closeness to France. They were seen as dandified, more concerned with appearance and comfort than Britain or duty, which was part of the reason for the *Newcastle Courant's* attack on Byng.²⁸³ Many of the effigies of Byng that were burnt were deliberately dressed in aristocratic costumes rather than naval dress, on account of the perceived deficiencies of the noble upper class.²⁸⁴ Byng was particularly targeted for "being more familiar with perfume than gunpowder," as Wilson explains.²⁸⁵ Obviously, this was an unfavourable comparison, particularly as Britain was at war with France, and the average Briton had very little sympathy for the behaviour of enemy noblemen. That being said, British culture had already largely diverged from continental norms, both through new ideals of honour and a growing support for patriotism among Britons. The Seven Years War simply brought it to the forefront, through societies such as the Anti-Gallican Society (who cooperated with the press) who sought to expunge French influence from British shores.²⁸⁶ The aristocratic class was in particular a victim of this focus, and their behaviour was seen as something of a stain on national honour,

²⁸³ Wilson, *A New Imperial History*, 241; *Newcastle Courant*, 1-2.

²⁸⁴ Charles Ludington, "'Claret Is the Liquor for Boys; Port for Men': How Port Became the 'Englishman's Wine,' 1750s to 1800," *The Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 382.

²⁸⁵ Wilson, *A New Imperial History*, 241.

²⁸⁶ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 191; Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, "Admirals as Heroes: Patriotism and Liberty in Hanoverian England," *Journal of British Studies* 28, no. 3 (1989): 223.

particularly when compared to common-born heroes like Admiral Vernon.²⁸⁷

Masculinity was also of growing importance to honour and British ideals of nationalism, and both the French and aristocrats alike behaved in a manner at odds with contemporary idealized masculinity. The hunt for so-called “cultural treason” was aimed largely at expunging weakness, but also at furthering the British self-identity and removing it further from France.

Byng’s behaviour made him a natural target for the patriotic cultural movement. His foppish behaviour, his taste for luxuries, and perception as a craven all played into the stereotypes, and the patriots leapt on the chance to make him an example of the behaviour they sought to stamp out, with the assistance of publications like the *Newcastle Courant*.²⁸⁸ The *Courant* claimed that the aristocracy were effeminate and weak, and believed that the aristocratic Byng exemplified this. Their movement became increasingly focused on the military as a result (Lord George Sackville was made a similar target for his behaviour in 1760), which only played further into the expectations of national honour.²⁸⁹ By the end of Byng’s court martial, it was clear Britain had embraced the anti-aristocratic and masculine ethos as a clear part of their new, distinctly British culture. Overall, the cultural shift away from France and efforts to create a distinctly British culture had a large impact on the course and outcome of Byng’s court martial. He was clearly tied to the aristocratic society, and his behaviour made him a natural target for the cultural nationalists. His failure at Minorca compounded with his

²⁸⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62; Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 188-189.

²⁸⁸ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 62-64.

²⁸⁹ Wilson, *A New Imperial History*, 241.

ties to make him into the focal point of the elitist culture that was increasingly opposed by the patriotic British public. This would have an impact on his chances of acquittal, perceptions of his damage to national honour, the aristocratic system as a whole, and even military expectations of behaviour. The case of Byng seemingly validated everything that the cultural nationalists sought to prove, and they took full advantage of public discontent against him to further their own movement.

Changing values and beliefs played a key role in the court martial of Admiral Byng. The new idea of an 'Enlightenment honour' severely limited the Navy's ability to offer leniency to Byng without dishonouring itself, due to the general public discontent demanding that concessions be made to restore the honour of Britain and wash away the failure of Minorca. The relationship of the nobility and commercial class also played a role, in that the commercial class was able to exert their influence to see the aristocrats damaged through Byng. As a result, Byng was convicted of failing to do his utmost against the enemy partly to spite general aristocratic immunity. In doing so, the public asserted their own position while linking the hated aristocrats to a pariah. On a similar note, the efforts to separate British culture from their European counterparts (particularly France) led to a severe blow in terms of aristocratic prestige. This led to masculinity becoming a focal point of a new, British culture (particularly in regards to the military) and turned Byng into a target for the nascent nationalists and patriots, who identified him with the culturally French aristocrats and turned him into a symbol of anti-British culture. The changing values and beliefs of the British populace undeniably influenced the verdict of the court martial, through the commercial class pressing their developing ideas and ideology on Britain in the context of Byng's trial.

Conclusion

Honour became a key component of the court martial of Admiral Byng, where numerous parties sought to impose their own interests and interpretation of honour onto the proceedings. This included personal honour, the honour of an institution like the Navy, or the honour of a nation. Various parties sought to push their own beliefs into the trial, which quickly became a focal point for new ideologies and creeds. Byng's personal honour was one of the focal points of all groups concerned with the trial, as his enemies sought to attack it while Byng sought to defend it. The trial's proceedings centered on Byng's efforts to defend his reputation, though it was ultimately for naught as the presiding officers drew their conclusion from hard facts unrelated to his honour. The honour of the Navy was also a major consideration, as the presiding officers needed to balance the need to restore the honour and confidence in the Navy following Minorca with the reality that Byng's court martial was unpopular with many officers. The changing beliefs and values of contemporary Britain also played a role, particularly in how class interests clashed while nationalism and new forms of honour were pressed onto Britain to the detriment of Byng and the aristocratic landowners at large.

Byng's court martial took these myriad factors, all of which played a role in determining the verdict and examined them in order to find the most appropriate resolution. In the end, the presiding officers opted for the least controversial solution they could find: to soothe public discontent and restore the honour of the Navy (as well as create a firm precedent and demonstrate their commitment to the professionalization reforms) by declaring Byng guilty, while also appeasing Byng's supporters and recognizing his largely successful defence of his honour by requesting clemency for

Byng. Such a stratagem would allow everyone to get part of what they wanted: the Admiralty and the government would be implicitly absolved of wrongdoing, the Navy would have restore its honour while avoiding alienating its pro-Byng officers, Byng would keep his honour and life, the commercial class would have been seen to deal a major blow to aristocratic prestige and the precedent that nobles were *de facto* immune to prosecution, and patriots would be reassured that national honour had been protected. All that was left was for the King to issue a pardon, which precedent indicated he was all but certain to do. Unfortunately for Admiral Byng, that expectation turned out to be flawed, as the next chapter will discuss.

Chapter Four: National Honour and the King: The Last Days of Admiral Byng

On the 27th of January 1757, Byng was found guilty of the charge of failing to do his utmost against the enemy, which carried with it an automatic death sentence. Hope had not been entirely lost as the court had recommended the King offer him clemency, which would leave a stain on Byng's honour but allow him to keep his life. Unfortunately for Byng, King George II was opposed to the idea and vehemently refused any suggestion of mercy.²⁹⁰ In this, he was supported by a majority of the populace, but opposed by his own government as well as by the Admiralty, whose disaccord with Byng did not extend to the point of wishing his death. George II maintained that the honour of Britain and the Navy demanded justice in the form of Byng's death, while Byng's defenders claimed that the seemingly impugned national honour had been satisfied and that honour now demanded that the King respect the recommendation of the court martial to offer clemency to Byng. Up until the very end, honour remained a central feature of the court martial that guided and influenced the actions of all major figures associated with the trial.

This section will discuss how honour guided the aftermath of Byng's court martial, up until the day of his execution. In particular, it will focus on how three major groups of interest sought to protect national honour through deciding on Byng's fate, namely: the King and his government, the Admiralty and Navy, and the public. In addition, while honour is the main focus of this chapter, it will largely revolve around

²⁹⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

four sub-themes of honour: national honour, naval honour, personal honour, and royal honour. The latter was a unique blend of personal and national honour that was linked to George II. Unlike during the court martial, where Byng's personal honour was the focus of all, national honour took now precedence when deciding his exact fate. This section will strive to show that the need to defend the honour of the nation was utilized as a pretext for all parties to pursue their aims, from cementing Byng as a scapegoat to convicting him, and, in one case, pursuing a personal vendetta against him.

National honour, in the context of this section, will refer to the idea that the nation has a reputation that affects the citizens' individual reputation such that they were obliged to mount a defence of it. Essentially, it was the same concept of honour as defined in the previous section, but instead of applying to an individual, it was applied to the collective citizenry of the nation, past, present, and future.²⁹¹ In this context, Byng's defeat was interpreted by the populace, as well as the governing body, as a stain on the nation's reputation and prestige. His failure to save the beleaguered defenders of Minorca shamed Britain for the world to see and would potentially affect British standing in the world (especially as Britain had taken a naval defeat, despite the Navy being its point of pride).²⁹² That being said, national honour and individual honour had one major difference. While individual honour was largely a matter of outside perception, national honour was generally a matter of personal interpretation. In other words, almost every citizen had a different idea of what national honour constituted, which affected how they sought to defend it. King George II, for example, believed that

²⁹¹ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2.

²⁹² Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 2.

personal honour was inexorably intertwined with national honour, as the figurehead of the nation, as a uniquely 'royal' honour.²⁹³ Conversely, the Admiralty and Navy largely believed naval honour was a key component of national honour, as the Navy was a point of pride of the nation and represented Britain abroad.²⁹⁴ As a result, the definition of national honour differed from person to person, largely being determined by their personal priorities and interests.

Context

In the immediate aftermath following Byng's verdict on 27 January 1757, most major figures in Britain were reasonably confident of Byng being offered clemency by the King.²⁹⁵ There was a general view that justice would be done simply by finding Byng responsible for Minorca, and that precedent demanded that the King follow the recommendation of the court martial. Nevertheless, there were opponents on both sides. John Forbes, the Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty, signalled his support for clemency and refused on 16 February to sign the warrant for Byng's execution on the grounds he believed it to be illegal.²⁹⁶ Meanwhile, among the general public, many continued to call for Byng's punishment to be carried out regardless of the recommendation.

Unfortunately for Byng, the general expectation that George II would offer clemency to him would be swiftly dashed, with him signalling his support for the

²⁹³ Henry Hallam, *The Constitutional History of England: from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II*, vol. 3, (London: John Murray, 1869), 184.

²⁹⁴ McAleer and Petley, *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c. 1750–1820*, 148.

²⁹⁵ Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," 347.

²⁹⁶ Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," 347.

execution on 16 February.²⁹⁷ In a meeting with the First Lord of the Admiralty, Richard Grenville-Temple, the King furiously refused to consider the notion.²⁹⁸ He demanded Byng be executed, and none of his advisors could move him from this. This was a flagrant violation of precedent, as traditionally the King accepted the recommendation of the court martial and his own government. In some senses, George II ignoring precedent in the case of Byng would prove to be the exception that proves the rule, as he was unable to successfully defy the rule of Parliament again during his reign. No other court martial in British history would be as defined by the will of the Crown as that of Byng's. Similarly, in what would be one of the final cases of the Crown openly violating the wishes of Parliament, George II refused the request of his Secretary of State, William Pitt, who informed the King on 24 February that the House of Commons favoured mercy. The King coolly replied to Pitt "You have taught me to look for the sense of my people elsewhere than the House of Commons."²⁹⁹ Pitt was an opponent of the King, and it is very possible that his attempt to help Byng backfired by further hardening George II's attitude towards Byng.³⁰⁰ The King was determined to take independent action on this matter, heedless of the strongly worded advice of his parliament.³⁰¹ Although power had been consistently shifting into the hands of Parliament over the past centuries, the Crown still retained full discretionary powers over the right to offer clemency, even though they had traditionally accepted the advice of their ministers and juries in wielding

²⁹⁷ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 204.

²⁹⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

²⁹⁹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 147.

³⁰⁰ Daniel O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium, 1770-1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 202.

³⁰¹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 147.

it. Despite Grenville-Temple and Pitt's best efforts, the King had his way, and clemency was denied to Byng. It is worth noting the King had a number of personal reasons to oppose clemency in this case, which will be discussed later.

In addition to the government's shift towards offering Byng mercy, the Admiralty also shied away from their previous stance. They had opposed Byng as they needed a scapegoat for Minorca. By obtaining a conviction for Byng, they had acquired their scapegoat as well as appeasing disgruntled officers who were dissatisfied with Byng's conviction through requesting clemency.³⁰² Upon realizing that their careful balancing of their own and the Navy's interests had been placed into jeopardy by the King's refusal to offer clemency, they were horrified and immediately took measures attempting to save Byng. Four of the officers on the court martial requested for their oath of secrecy to be revoked by Parliament on February 25th, apparently intending to speak out in Byng's favour.³⁰³ Although the House of Commons overwhelmingly favoured lifting their oaths, the House of Lords (traditional allies of the King) rejected the proposal on March 4th, forcing the dissatisfied officers to remain silent (although they continued to express discontent in private).³⁰⁴ It is likely that those officers intended to declare that the verdict had been handed down with the understanding Byng would be shown clemency, and that they believed his actions did not merit the death sentence. This view is supported by the letter written by John Forbes, who stated that his refusal to sign Byng's warrant was partially motivated by his belief that Byng's failure was completely undeserving of the

³⁰² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 198-199.

³⁰³ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 210.

³⁰⁴ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 158.

death sentence.³⁰⁵ The Admiralty's shift was largely motivated by the increasing discontent of the Navy, who had never been particularly favourable to the prospect of Byng's conviction, let alone execution. A number of other high-profile officers, including Augustus Keppel and Augustus Hervey, publicly spoke out against the King's decision, with Hervey provocatively declaring George II "such a hardened brute that he was determined Mr Byng should not escape."³⁰⁶ Moreover, even officers who had been apathetic or opposed to Byng opposed his sentence, fearing the precedent it would set for future courts martial.

Byng's execution was scheduled for the 14 March 1757, aboard the HMS *Monarch*, a highly ironic name under the circumstances.³⁰⁷ Notably, in the days leading up to his execution, public opinion saw a moderate shift in favour of Byng. Generally, while the public agreed that punishment was needed, most felt the death sentence was excessive, and the view that Byng had been set up as a scapegoat returned to prominence. This increased tide of public sympathy was by no means universal, as contemporary newspapers reveal, but it did appear that public opinion within Britain had returned to a more balanced view regarding Byng.³⁰⁸ The execution itself was relatively standard, in the context of naval executions. Byng is reported to have resigned himself to his fate and faced his execution by firing squad (carried out by Royal Marines) with

³⁰⁵ John Forbes to the Admiralty Board, "Admiral Forbes's reasons for not signing Admiral Byng's Death Warrant," 16 February 1757.

³⁰⁶ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

³⁰⁷ Benjamin Olex, "'The Painful Task of Thinking Belongs To Me:' Rethinking Royal Navy Signal Reform during the American War of Independence," (PhD diss., Virginia Tech, 2021), 39.

³⁰⁸ "Execution of Admiral Byng Justified," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 154-155.

dignity.³⁰⁹ He was buried in his family's mausoleum, with the epitaph "*To the perpetual Disgrace of PUBLICK JUSTICE, The Honble. JOHN BYNG Esqr. Admiral of the Blue, Fell a MARTYR to POLITICAL PERSECUTION, March 14th in the year 1757, when BRAVERY and LOYALTY were Insufficient Securities For the Life and Honour of a NAVAL OFFICER.*"³¹⁰ Even to the modern day, his fate continues to be a matter of significant debate in the legal, historical, and naval communities, with his family having requested a posthumous pardon in 2007.³¹¹ Many believe his sentence to have been unjust or illegal, with one scholar referring to it as the "worst legalistic crime in the nation's annals," but others believe it to have been a tactically sound decision to cement British naval courage and aggression, securing their place as the dominant naval power for over a century.³¹²

The King and his Ministers

While the King was largely uninvolved in the previous aspects of the trial, his refusal to accept the court's recommendation made him the chief actor of the final stage of the affair. His determination to preserve the 'national honour' through the sacrifice of Byng was a key factor, but also likely concealed a personal vendetta against Byng and his own distaste for cowardice. Moreover, Byng had been once again caught up in a political struggle, this time with the King on one side and the government on the other. This section will discuss the use of national honour by the King and his government, as

³⁰⁹ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 225.

³¹⁰ John Byng, *To the Perpetual Disgrace of Public Justice*, 1757, gravestone in Southill, Bedfordshire.

³¹¹ Stephen Bates and Richard Norton-Taylor, "No Pardon For Admiral Byng," *The Guardian*, 15 March 2007.

³¹² Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 17; Warren Tute, *The True Glory, The Story of the Royal Navy Over a Thousand Years* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1983), 81-83.

well what the government considered to be tied to honour, and other types of honour that influenced the decisions of George II.

George II was a rather traditionalist King, more inclined towards royal absolutism and less willing to accept the will of parliament than the other Georgian monarchs. His contemporary, Horace Walpole, argues that he favoured a more interventionist style of rule (in comparison with the other Georgian monarchs) that was unpopular with the British public and was notorious for pursuing the advancement of his favourites and the repression of his opponents.³¹³ This led him to embracing a slightly more antique version of national honour than most of his contemporaries, further complicated by the fact that he also had to balance the national honour of Hanover (a separate kingdom he ruled in personal union) with the national honour of Britain.³¹⁴ Above all was his staunch belief in the intertwined nature of kings and nations: that the two were one and the same, inseparable. An affront to national honour was an affront to royal honour, his own personal honour. It is therefore unsurprising that he reacted poorly to Byng's failure at Minorca. George II's refusal to offer Byng mercy was in direct response to his belief that Byng was responsible for marring national honour, and thus royal honour, and was consistent with two major contemporary ideas on honour.

The first was the idea, demonstrated by the constitutional historian Walter Bagehot, that the King was 'the fountain of honour,' essentially meaning that the King

³¹³ Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of George II*, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburne, 1846), 91-92; Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 33.

³¹⁴ Henry Siebeneck, "William Pitt and John Forbes," *Western Pennsylvania History: 1918-2018* (1941): 79.

was ultimately responsible for the granting and removal of individual honour in response to one's actions.³¹⁵ This idea was heavily rooted in aristocratic tradition and stemmed from the basic idea that an individual would be rewarded or punished as a consequence of their actions, with the King being the ultimate arbiter of rewards and punishment.³¹⁶ Moreover, it dealt with the aristocratic linking of honour with station and reputation, essentially equating an increase or decrease of honour with a subsequent change in one's socio-economic position, an idea that was also referenced in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*.³¹⁷ The idea of the King as the root of honour meant that, to the King, it was he who held ultimate responsibility for responding to Byng's failure, not the court martial. Under this interpretation, George II was morally obligated to punish Byng because Byng had been found guilty, and the only method he had of doing so was withholding the royal prerogative of clemency. From George's perspective, clemency was a reward to be exercised only in cases where an individual's honour was such to excuse their crime. As the previous chapter showed, Byng's court martial had seen Byng's honour be subject to severe questioning, which was a major factor in the jury's conviction, even as they called for clemency.³¹⁸ Therefore, following the idea that the King was the 'fount of honour,' George II could not reasonably reward Byng with clemency in response to charges arising from his dishonour.

While the previous idea implied the King was a figure above individual honour (after all, how could the arbiter of honour judge his own, personal honour), the second

³¹⁵ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (Collins, 1963), 66.

³¹⁶ McCahill, "Peerage Creations and the Changing Character of the British Nobility, 1750-1830," 259.

³¹⁷ Johnson, "Honour" in *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

³¹⁸ Ferne, "The Trial of the Honourable Admiral John Byng," 32.

idea focuses on George II's personal honour, and how contemporary Britain expected personal honour to be defended. In essence, George II believed his honour and national honour were linked as a unified 'royal' honour, and contemporary society expected one to defend one's own honour by attacking anyone who disrespected it. It is from this expectation that honour duels arose.³¹⁹ Acting on this expectation, it is reasonable to believe that George II believed royal honour, which had been placed into question by Byng damaging national honour through his defeat, demanded retribution in the form of Byng being publicly acknowledged to be the guilty party.³²⁰ While Byng's conviction did represent such an acknowledgement, it is probable the King felt obliged to intervene personally in an attempt to 'gain satisfaction,' as was the contemporary norm. It was expected that an individual would defend his own honour personally, through direct actions such as duelling or appealing for a court martial to defend one's own honour.³²¹ While George II could obviously not challenge Byng to a duel, he could have felt that denying the request for clemency was necessary to satisfy his own demands to avenge his impugned honour. To make matters worse for Byng, the King had a number of reasons to feel that the unfortunate Admiral had blemished his personal honour in addition to the damage done to national honour, which would have only furthered the King's desire to personally avenge himself.

George II had both a negative personal history with Byng and a personal aversion to any lack of courage in his armed forces. He interpreted both factors as affronts to his

³¹⁹ Mark Barton, "Duelling in the Royal Navy," *The Mariner's Mirror* 100, no. 3 (2014), 284.

³²⁰ M. J. Cardwell, *Arts and Arms: Literature, Politics and Patriotism during the Seven Years War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 134.

³²¹ Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660-1815," 435-436.

own honour, and thus pursued Byng with a greater vengeance than he likely would have for another individual. While George II had no real direct connection with Byng, he did with Byng's father, the Viscount Torrington. Torrington had been a political ally of George I's, the current King's father, and had greatly benefitted from this association, attaining both his title and high positions in the government and cabinet.³²² There is no question that John Byng benefitted from his connections to his father when advancing through the ranks.³²³ Unfortunately for John Byng, George II and George I had a very poor relationship, and George II likely bore a grudge against the Byng family, consistent with his history of pursuing vendettas against his father's allies, as many historians and contemporary figures, such as Horace Walpole, affirm (notably, Walpole's father, the Prime Minister Robert Walpole, was a victim of this tendency).³²⁴ This practice was heavily linked to patronage, as historian Michael McCahill argues, as kings (and leaders in general) were supposed to promote their allies, friends, and favourites while bitterly opposing their enemies as a matter of honour.³²⁵ This was again linked to the aristocratic idea equating honour with socio-economic position, as advancing one's friends brought them, and oneself by extension, honour, while the opposite also held true. George II likely felt that he was bound by honour to oppose his perceived enemy (or, rather, his enemy's son) and thus refused any suggestion of clemency. At the very least, his father's

³²² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 34.

³²³ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 38.

³²⁴ Walpole, *Memoirs of George II*, vol. 3 175; Le Fevre and Harding, *Precursors of Nelson: British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century*, 97-98.

³²⁵ McCahill, "Peerage Creations and the Changing Character of the British Nobility, 1750-1830," 283; Le Fevre and Harding, *Precursors of Nelson*, 97-98.

history with the royal family certainly did Byng no favours when it came to dealing with George II, and very likely made matters far worse.

In addition to his family connections, George II likely objected to Byng's perceived lack of courage. This was based on the King's personal experiences, where he had served in the Army, and been commended for his personal bravery.³²⁶ George was particularly sensitive to accusations of courage ever since his hated political opponent William Pitt had accused him of cowardice in 1743 over continental affairs (a memory that must have weighed heavy on the King's mind, considering Pitt's defence of Byng).³²⁷ This fixation on courage had long affected his judgement on courts martial: the King had blocked Admiral Powlett from ever serving in an active position in the Navy again after his acquittal in a court martial during 1752 (Powlett had been facing charges of cowardice).³²⁸ As Chris Ware points out, George II was far from objective on the question of Byng's courage, to the point that several contemporaries were open about their outrage towards the King's actions.³²⁹ Considering his efforts against an admiral who had been acquitted, it is unsurprising that he refused any suggestions of mercy towards an officer who was found guilty. This may have also played into the King's concept of national honour: as the Navy was the face of the nation, and thus deeply linked to the national honour of Britain, any suggestion of cowardice within their ranks could not be tolerated in order to protect that honour. With the linkage of national honour

³²⁶ Julia Banister, "The Court Martial of Admiral Byng: Politeness and the Military Man in the mid-Eighteenth Century," in *Masculinity and the Other: Historical Perspectives*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 236.

³²⁷ Siebeneck, "William Pitt and John Forbes," 80.

³²⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

³²⁹ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

to the King's honour and his own aversion to accusations of cowardice toward him, it is unsurprising he acted heavy-handedly towards 'cowards' within his military, fearing that their own cowardice reflected on him.³³⁰ In summation, George II's interpretation of national honour, his personal honour, and the uniquely 'royal' honour necessitated him refusing clemency to Byng. He viewed Byng as a very personal affront to his own honour, leading to him having cause to pursue a vendetta, and was both personally disinclined towards mercy and obligated by his role as the King who 'granted' honour to refuse to offer clemency to a man who was seen as dishonourable. George II's actions simultaneously cynically used honour as an excuse to pursue a personal grudge while being motivated by idealistic notions of the King's association with honour.

In addition to George II's interpretation of national honour and his perception of the demands of his personal honour, we also need to consider his relationship with his ministers who defended Byng, and how he came to view their defence of Byng as an affront to his own honour during the period leading up to Byng's execution. It was the First Lord of the Admiralty, Richard Grenville-Temple, who played the largest role in bolstering the King's decision to execute Byng. Grenville-Temple was both a staunch defender of Byng and a close ally of Pitt, whose appointment to the office of First Lord must have been met with great acclaim from Byng's supporters.³³¹ He was one of the first and the loudest to demand clemency for Byng, a stance that caused great tension with the King.³³² More problematic was his manner in doing so: Ware writes that on

³³⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

³³¹ Thurman Lee Smith, "An Evolution of a Ministerial Crisis, 1754-1757: a Study in the Politics of the Reign of George II," (MA diss., Southern Illinois University, 1969), 52; Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 14.

³³² Siebeneck, "William Pitt and John Forbes," 85.

February 24th Grenville-Temple “got into the King’s face when he argued for clemency on Byng’s behalf. He was shouting at the King and as such breached every protocol that informed contact with the King and wrecked any hope for a pardon via that route.”³³³

One can only imagine how infuriated George II, never a particularly forgiving man, must have been at such treatment from a minister of his government. These interactions likely did more than any other single factor to reinforce the King’s steadfast refusal to offer clemency. This was especially true as his position as the ‘fount of honour’ meant that under no circumstances could George reward such churlish behaviour by acquiescing to Grenville-Temple’s demands.

George’s honour had also been stung on many occasions by the barbs of William Pitt, whose defence of Byng must have greatly prejudiced the King against the admiral.³³⁴ George II particularly resented Pitt’s hostility to his Hanoverian possessions and European policy, remembering with distaste Pitt’s comment in the 1740s about Hanover being “a despicable electorate.”³³⁵ This led to another instance of seeking to avenge his personal honour, in this case by attacking one Pitt sought to defend. Pitt saw Byng as a scapegoat, with the Lords of the Admiralty being the true culprit of Minorca, but due to his position in Cabinet (and his understanding that due to his relationship with the King, his position was fragile indeed), he was mostly powerless in his efforts to secure clemency for Byng.³³⁶ The futility of his goal, and the lack of esteem the King held him in, were made clear when Pitt informed the King of the House of Commons

³³³ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208.

³³⁴ Siebeneck, "William Pitt and John Forbes," 85.

³³⁵ Siebeneck, "William Pitt and John Forbes," 79.

³³⁶ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 104.

desire to see Byng offered clemency, and the King in turn informed Pitt that he had learned not to trust Pitt's judgement.³³⁷ For both Grenville-Temple and Pitt, their protests served only to irritate the King and harden his resolve, with Grenville-Temple actively making the situation worse by insulting the King's honour.

Other ministers, such as George Grenville and Newcastle, were more appreciative of the King's goal of protecting national honour through the execution of Byng. Grenville actively sought to keep dissenting members of the jury quiet on February 23rd in order to prevent them from criticizing the decision, aiming to keep blame focused on Byng, and in doing so, alleviate the stain on Britain's honour through his execution.³³⁸ Newcastle continued his old opposition to Byng, although it is very likely that his goal was less motivated by true honour and more likely calculated protect his own honour rather than that of the nation.³³⁹ Newcastle's attempt at scapegoating Byng to protect both his own and the government's honour had not been forgotten by Byng's supporters, as Augustus Hervey's condemnation of Newcastle in the first week of March showed, forcing Newcastle to continue his efforts lest he be held accountable for the damage done to the national honour.³⁴⁰ Newcastle's actions are an excellent example of how it was beneficial to utilize honour as a façade to conceal one's true motivations. Henry Fox, an enemy of both Newcastle and Pitt, chose to back the King and government in order to protect his reputation (Fox might have fallen with Newcastle, having been part of his government at the time of Minorca – ironically having called for

³³⁷ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 27.

³³⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 210.

³³⁹ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 18.

³⁴⁰ Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 131.

Byng to have received greater forces at the time, which might have averted the debacle entirely) and due to his own belief in the verdict, pointing out that the majority of the jury did not desire to speak out publicly.³⁴¹ Fox was an unusual case, having both been a supporter and opponent of Byng, having tried to act from the beginning to preserve both Fox's own honour and position, a task which quickly became impossible and led to him aligning with Newcastle in an effort to preserve his own reputation by making Byng the scapegoat of Minorca (having feared he himself would be blamed by Newcastle otherwise, in spite of his prescient warning).³⁴² His was a perfect example of blending 'rhetorical' and idealistic notions of honour, as his actions were both self-serving while also acting in concordance with his personal notions of honour. Overall, while all of George's ministers attempted to act in order to preserve what they saw as national honour, they also had to take their own honour into consideration, and in many cases prioritized the protection of their individual honour over that of Byng's life.

The King and his ministers prized national honour and sought to protect it through either demanding Byng receive clemency or taking steps to prevent Byng getting clemency. Complicating matters was the fact that national honour was a matter of personal interpretation. For the King, it was heavily linked to his own personal honour, which he felt was stained by Minorca. His personal honour also demanded satisfaction against both Byng personally and the likes of Grenville-Temple and Pitt, which he

³⁴¹ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 213; Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 170.

³⁴² Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 61-62; Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 170.

accomplished by refusing clemency, while his position as the ‘fount of honour’ demanded he refuse to reward a dishonoured man with clemency. In other words, George II’s royal honour led him to simultaneously pursue a personal vendetta while acting to protect national honour, owing to his interpretation of Britain’s honour being linked to his personal honour. In many ways, this was the end of an era for the Georgian period. George II would never again successfully defy the will of Parliament, dying only three years after Byng, and his successor, George III, was far more constitutionally-minded and eager to cooperate with Pitt. George II’s refusal to offer Byng clemency would be the last time that ‘royal’ honour would dictate the affairs of the nation to such a great decree.

For Grenville-Temple and Pitt, the case was far clearer. To them, Byng was a scapegoat and attempting to punish him only furthered the damage to the national honour, while protecting him was equated with protecting the national honour. Their actions ironically damaged Byng’s chances further, by inflaming George II causing him to further entrench his position against clemency.³⁴³ Lastly, Newcastle and Fox, as well as other ministers, sought to protect the national honour but had to balance their own honour against their wishes. For Newcastle, this was simple, as he essentially sought to finish what he had started: preventing the dishonouring of the government by ensuring the scapegoating of Byng came to its final conclusion. Fox faced a difficult struggle between his own honour, what he believed the national honour to demand, and his own position. Eventually, he sided against Byng, both for self-preservation and to support his

³⁴³ Kinkel, "Saving Admiral Byng," 14.

complicated, contradictory demands of national and individual honour.³⁴⁴ While national honour was highly important to George II and his cabinet, it was also deeply intertwined with personal honour, with the two arguably being interdependent in practice if not theory.

The Royal Navy and National Honour

The Royal Navy and the Lords of the Admiralty, as the protectors of Britain's national honour abroad, were particularly stung by the King's refusal to offer clemency to Byng. To them, as N. A. M. Rodger argues, Byng was either guilty of damaging the national honour, a fault which he had already been punished for by the verdict of the court martial, or, as Ware argues, a scapegoat deflecting attention from the real culprits.³⁴⁵ As a result, both organizations (including individuals who had called for and supported Byng's conviction) went to great lengths in order to protect Byng and the national honour from an unnecessarily harsh punishment. As with the King and his ministers, the Navy was deeply afraid of the implications of a damaged national honour.³⁴⁶ The officers feared the precedent of executing an officer for failing in what amounted to an impossible situation, while the Admiralty feared the repercussions on morale and trust within the service. This section will consider what the Admiralty and Navy did to attempt to defend Byng, and how they sought to tie his life and sentence to national honour.

³⁴⁴ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 61-62.

³⁴⁵ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 247-248; Krulder, *The Execution of Admiral John Byng*, 2.

³⁴⁶ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649-1815* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 266-267.

Following Byng's conviction, the Admiralty underwent a quick shift from having been one of Byng's most dogmatic enemies who were sponsoring the creation of effigies of him to be burnt, to being a fervent defender of his life.³⁴⁷ In many ways, the Admiralty had played a game of chicken with Byng's life, gambling that George II would accede to their wishes in offering clemency to Byng. That would have been their ideal outcome, to the point that even Rodger, an entrenched critic of Byng, accepts that few people actually wanted Byng executed, just convicted.³⁴⁸ Unfortunately for them, George II proved unwilling to follow precedent, on account of his royal honour demanding Byng be punished for his perceived cowardice and the dishonour to Britain, in addition to the King's personal enmity towards allies of his father. Part of this reversal in policy can be also attributed to Grenville-Temple, who was one of Byng's original allies in the Patriot Whigs, but we can also see efforts from others to defend their interpretation of national honour following the refusal of the King to consider clemency. Famously, John Forbes refused to sign Byng's death warrant on February 16th on grounds of his own honour and conscience, while pointing to the fact that due to the court's "opinion, and Consciences of the Judges, he was not deserving of Death," executing Byng would do further damage to national honour by ignoring both the wishes of the court and his own interpretation of the law.³⁴⁹ Forbes admitted that it was possible that Byng would be executed anyways but chose to defend both his honour and national honour by discharging his duties in the only way that could satisfy his conscience. He pointed to the contradictory decision of the court, which simultaneously absolved Byng of the crime he was accused while

³⁴⁷ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 63.

³⁴⁸ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 267.

³⁴⁹ Forbes, "Admiral Forbes's reasons for not signing Admiral Byng's Death Warrant," February 16, 1757.

convicting him, as his rationale for the fact that both his personal honour, naval honour, and national honour forbade him from signing the order.³⁵⁰ He subsequently resigned his position in protest, showing his commitment to his conscience, although most historians, such as Peter Cowell, agree that this had little effect on the process despite his impeccable record.³⁵¹

Notably, Forbes was not alone in refusing to sign the warrant, although he was the most prominent. Admiral Temple West, who had served as Byng's second at Minorca, also refused to sign and resigned his position on the Admiralty Board on February 16th, believing that the sentence was dishonourable due to essentially convicting Byng on a charge he had not committed and sentencing him to an unnecessarily harsh punishment (West argued Byng was, in practice, found guilty of misconduct, which was not a capital crime).³⁵² Other members of the Board also met with Grenville-Temple on the 23rd to discuss pleading with the King for clemency, showing that while many agreed the guilty verdict of Byng was warranted, they believed the proposed sentence was dishonourable and unnecessary.³⁵³ It is likely that such members were equally as concerned by the King violating precedent by refusing to follow the recommendations of the court martial, as it created a new, volatile situation where the safety of their officers was not assured when requesting clemency, limiting their options in cases such as Byng's to accepting their innocence or accepting the

³⁵⁰ Forbes, "Admiral Forbes's reasons for not signing Admiral Byng's Death Warrant," February 16, 1757.

³⁵¹ Cowell, "Admiral Byng: Justice thwarted," 346-347.

³⁵² Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 201-202.

³⁵³ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 203.

potential execution of an officer.³⁵⁴ While many of the Admiralty acted to protect both Byng's honour and their own honour (with national honour as an extension, considering their role as the 'face of Britain'), they also were undoubtedly concerned over the precedent and morale implications of Byng's execution.³⁵⁵ In contrast, members like West and Forbes clearly placed honour and their consciences over any other consideration, refusing to sign Byng's death warrant and resigning over tacitly associating themselves with what they saw as a dishonourable decision that impaired the honour of the Navy and Nation, and potentially their own honour should they have acceded to the decision.

Ware argues that the majority of officers on the jury agreed that Byng deserved punishment, but that his actions did not merit the ultimate penalty his sentence ascribed.³⁵⁶ The verdict therefore called for clemency, to reflect the dual impulses of the jury to punish without executing Byng. After the King made it clear that clemency would not be forthcoming, a considerable percentage of the jury felt that a miscarriage of justice was taking place and elected to try and stop it by speaking out in Byng's defence. With the support of Pitt, the House of Commons lifted their oaths of secrecy on February 27th; however, the House of Lords remained reluctant to allow them to speak.³⁵⁷ Admiral Norris, one of the highest-ranking officers on the jury, led the effort, supported by Keppel and Captain Moore, with the tacit support of Captain Geary and the highest-

³⁵⁴ Johnston, "'Arbitrary and Cruel Punishments': Trends in Royal Navy Courts Martial, 1860–1869," 534.

³⁵⁵ McAleer and Petley, *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c. 1750–1820*, 148.

³⁵⁶ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 231-232.

³⁵⁷ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 213.

ranking officer of the court martial, Admiral Smith. The reality was not as clear cut, as Geary was reluctant to speak (fearing the damage to his career), while Smith equivocated when he was called to speak before the Lords, earning the distaste of many of Byng's supporters.³⁵⁸ This movement, based in the officers' desire to protect both their own and national honour, had a significant impact on the case regardless. It forced a stay of the execution until the matter had been debated and concluded, while also bringing their discontent with the decision into light and providing Byng's supporters with ammunition against the King and government, who attempted to quash the effort.³⁵⁹ Historians, such as Ware and Karl Von den Steinen, wonder what the impact might have been if Keppel or Norris had been allowed to speak freely to the press (Keppel would in later years strongly protest Byng's decision, but abided by the oath at the time), although it is generally accepted the effort was doomed as they had little beyond their personal opinion with which to persuade George II towards clemency.³⁶⁰ Nonetheless, this was an important and highly unusual effort for a (supposedly) apolitical body to attempt to intervene in politics. Keppel and others clearly felt that the circumvention of their desired verdict also circumvented the purpose of the trial: to clear Britain's honour. In other words, by not offering Byng clemency, George II was failing (at least in the mind of Keppel and his fellows) to protect national honour by punishing Byng unnecessarily harshly. These officers were supported enthusiastically by Pitt and Grenville-Temple,

³⁵⁸ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 209-213.

³⁵⁹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 149.

³⁶⁰ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 216-217; Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 157.

and to a lesser degree by the Admiralty.³⁶¹ The support of the latter can mostly be seen by the fact none of the discontented officers faced any consequences for their attempt (Keppel even rose to become head of the service despite his open disagreement with Byng's execution), as they remained largely silent during the affair, offering support by inaction instead of aiding the government as they had traditionally done throughout the court martial.

Despite failing, the doomed effort was significant to the trial by demonstrating how the officers of the jury interpreted national honour. The problem was not Byng's conviction, it was him being punished over-harshly and the King electing to ignore their advice in order to pursue what amounted to a private vendetta (in their eyes). Despite their failure, their forcing a temporary stay of execution by attempting to speak was actually a far more successful method of resistance than those of Pitt or Grenville-Temple, who accomplished nothing save to further the determination of the King. The jury members also made their views indirectly known to the public, who were aware of officers who had served on the jury attempting to speak out about Byng's execution (which could only be to protest the execution – they would hardly have attempted to break their oaths to endorse it, which was evident to the public).

Opposition to Byng's execution among the officer class also existed outside of the jury and Admiralty. Augustus Hervey, who was a close friend of Byng and an officer who would become the First Sea Lord, led the effort to demand clemency for Byng, and

³⁶¹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 148-149.

played a crucial role in convincing the likes of Keppel to testify.³⁶² In Hervey's case, while concerned about the damage to national honour that would occur by executing an innocent man, he was more concerned about his personal honour, as it compelled him to aid his close friend to the best of his abilities.³⁶³ This concern did not just extend to criticizing the King and gathering allies amongst the court-martial jury, as records confirm Hervey plotted to assist Byng (who was apparently aware of the plan) to escape from custody in March.³⁶⁴ This plan was thwarted by the extensive security but does show the lengths to which Hervey felt honour bound to go as Byng's friend. Hervey, more realistically, also engaged in lobbying and a media campaign to free Byng, both of which met with limited success, mostly involving changing the minds of influential individuals like the writer Horace Walpole.³⁶⁵ A few of the other officers who opposed Byng's execution included Admirals George Rodney, Temple West, and Henry Osborn. While Rodney (like Admiral Smith and the majority of the sympathetic officer class), confined themselves to utilizing their personal networks to defend Byng, as shown by David Syrett,³⁶⁶ West outright resigned his position on February 16th, and spent the remainder of his life bitterly attacking what he saw as the impossible standards the Navy had held Byng to, showing his sincere devotion to both naval honour and national honour (in West's mind, it was dishonourable of Britain and the Navy to condemn Byng for doing his best).³⁶⁷ Another major figure who supported Byng was Admiral Edward

³⁶² Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 148.

³⁶³ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 267.

³⁶⁴ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 220.

³⁶⁵ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 200.

³⁶⁶ Syrett, *The Rodney Papers, Volume I, 1742-1763*, 209.

³⁶⁷ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 140.

Vernon, who was allied to the Patriot Whigs and a hero of the lower classes, on account of his solid leadership and common background.³⁶⁸

It was Osborn who was most passive, ironic considering both his role in the case (he served as Byng's jailor) and his family ties to Byng. Byng's sister had married into Osborn's family, which would normally imply an honour commitment to defend Byng, but Osborn seems to have limited his protest to recusing himself from his role as Byng's jailor by taking leave on January 28th (though he did make his discontent known, he seems to have avoided actual action beyond avenging Byng's defeat and the national honour with a naval victory at Cartagena).³⁶⁹ Clearly, he either felt that national honour demanded Byng's execution despite his personal objection to it or that his recusal was protest enough, suggesting he prioritized his personal honour. The officers of the Navy generally favoured Byng receiving clemency in order to protect the national honour or naval honour, though their methods of protest varied. Some, such as Hervey, went to wild and unrealistic lengths, and West resigned on grounds of his conscience, but most confined themselves to lobbying through their acquaintances.

Although this section has covered much of the Navy, one important name is missing: First Lord of the Admiralty George Anson. Curiously, despite his fervent attacks on Byng during the lead up to the court martial, Anson appears to have been silent on the matter following his replacement as First Lord by Grenville-Temple. Nevertheless, he played a highly important role in the case meriting investigation, and

³⁶⁸ Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 134; Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 188-189.

³⁶⁹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 114.

his shadowy hand was evident behind some key actors. Anson had ensured Byng would be tried by a presiding officer friendly to his plight – Admiral Smith.³⁷⁰ Furthermore, with one very notable exception, many of those who defended Byng in the aftermath of the court martial were protégées or friends of Anson. Keppel was both, having been supported in his career by Anson from the very beginning, and Norris was another friend who many suspected to be acting on Anson’s orders from the very beginning.³⁷¹ Hervey accused Anson, with some justification, of having packed the court to deliberately convict Byng.³⁷² If so, Anson clearly balked at the notion of seeing Byng executed, as his friends and network united in a bid to convince the King to offer clemency. This suggested Anson acted with the goal of convicting Byng, but was opposed anything beyond that, in the hopes of protecting national honour (wounded in the wake of Minorca) and his personal honour (having been accused by Byng’s supporters of being responsible of the debacle), by finding Byng guilty. Admiral Edward Boscawen, a long-time friend and ally of Anson, did not join the majority of Anson’s network in defending Byng. In fact, he was Byng’s bitterest detractor from the start, in addition to attempting to humiliate Byng by planning to execute him as a common seaman.³⁷³ It is unknown if Boscawen was acting on his own initiative or if he sought to go above and beyond in defending Anson’s honour. It should be noted however, as pointed out by Ware, Boscawen was a professional rival of Byng, who had a history of opposing him at every

³⁷⁰ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 152.

³⁷¹ Le Fevre and Harding, *Precursors of Nelson*, 197.

³⁷² Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 121.

³⁷³ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 223.

turn.³⁷⁴ Regardless of his personal feelings, he publicly portrayed himself as a man deeply offended over Byng's failure and who sought to restore confidence in Britain's honour heedless of the cost to Byng. Overall, Anson's personal views are somewhat mysterious, but he clearly appears to be acting to defend both his personal and Britain's honour, attacking or defending Byng as needed. He also appears to have mobilized most of his supporters in order to protest Byng's execution, which ultimately was a doomed endeavour.

The Navy and Admiralty seem to have largely moved in lockstep in the final episode of the affair, attempting to persuade the King towards clemency in order to protect their personal honour in addition to Britain's honour. The Admiralty had miscalculated in assuming that Byng would be automatically spared the death penalty following his conviction and sought to create pressure on the King in a bid to push George II towards reversing his decision. Generally, sympathy within their organizations were with Byng, although there were committed detractors such as Boscawen.³⁷⁵ The Navy and Admiralty pursued a variety of methods in order to achieve their aims, including calling on their personal networks of allies, attempting to see the jury released from their oaths in order to protest Byng's execution, and openly resigning. Their actions were largely in line with what their honour demanded, as we see from examples such as Rodney, who had very little stake in the case and thus confined himself to utilizing his network to call for clemency,³⁷⁶ in contrast to Forbes, who refused to sign Byng's death warrant before resigning on account of his conscience, and Hervey, who went to absurd

³⁷⁴ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 133.

³⁷⁵ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649-1815*, 266.

³⁷⁶ Syrett, *The Rodney Papers*, 209.

lengths in order to attempt to protect his friend. Honour, especially national honour, defined the actions of the Admiralty and Navy, and was a direct cause of their efforts to save Byng through the granting of clemency.

The Public and Byng

While the government was divided and the Navy generally favoured clemency, the general public remained firmly opposed to Byng. However, nuances in public opinion that had previously not existed began to appear after Byng was found guilty. Many who supported Byng's conviction doubted that his actions merited the death sentence, while others continued their visceral hatred of him. This divide largely arose based on differing beliefs on what was needed to restore national honour, especially as there had been no subsequent major naval victories that might have allowed the public to write off Minorca as a coincidence or the failing of an individual.³⁷⁷ Figures who had previously been quiet also began loudly speaking out in favour of clemency, particularly Byng's sister, Sarah Osborn, and the writer Horace Walpole. This section will discuss those topics, all the while examining how national honour guided and galvanized the public's discontent, both for and against Byng.

The public had a history of rioting and loudly protesting Byng's failure at Minorca, and continued to do so in the days leading up to his execution.³⁷⁸ In fact, in some ways the protests were even more energized, as Byng's detractors now felt vindicated. They had championed the idea that Byng was responsible for Minorca from

³⁷⁷ Jonathan Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Years' War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 84-85.

³⁷⁸ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 5.

the beginning and now they had a verdict from the court martial to confirm their belief, along with the implied agreement of the King, who had refused the idea of clemency.³⁷⁹ Even as clemency gained more traction amongst the public, Byng himself remained broadly unpopular, with effigies continuing to be burnt and mocking prints continuing to be drawn. While satirical cartoons were largely directed against him personally, there were a considerable number that demonstrated awareness of the fact that his actions had brought shame to Britain.³⁸⁰ One particularly pointed satirical print showed a lion with a severed paw (Minorca was written on the paw), captioned *The English Lion Dismembered* (figure 3), demonstrating the outraged reaction over the shame Byng was believed to have brought.³⁸¹ The print claimed to speak directly for the public and called for vengeance, while a Union Jack was shown torn on the ground. In the print *Merit and Demerit Made Conspicuous*, a dog representing France is depicting urinating on the flag, again demonstrating that while the public was undeniably angry at Byng personally, it was the damage done to national honour they objected to.³⁸²

³⁷⁹ *An Essay on Political Lying*, 2nd ed. (London: 1757), 25-26.

³⁸⁰ Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 8-9.

³⁸¹ *The English Lion Dismembered*.

³⁸² *Merit and Demerit Made Conspicuous*.



Figure 3. An example of a political print condemning the loss of Minorca. (*The English Lion Dismembered*. 1757. Caricature. From the British Museum).

This is supported by an article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* defending the execution (written roughly around the time of Byng's execution, but published in April after the fact), where the author states, "What justice then can there be in the suggestion of the enemy's superiority, or doubt, that if Mr. Byng had done his duty, we must not have obtained a victory."³⁸³ This indicates that the populace was more outraged by Byng being inadvertently responsible for revealing British weakness than for his strategic loss. Within the media, the loss of Minorca was most often lamented due to the contrast between Byng, who had shamed Britain, and Blakeney, whose gallant defence had done the country honour, as could be seen in the article published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* "Defence of Lord Blakeney."³⁸⁴ Had Byng lost at Minorca but put up a good showing and actually engaged the French on equal terms, as the media argued Blakeney

³⁸³ "Execution of Admiral Byng Justified," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 154-155.

³⁸⁴ "Defence of Lord Blakeney," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 413.

did, Byng might have escaped becoming a pariah, as he now found himself. It is clear that public outrage against Byng continued up to his death (and beyond), largely motivated both by personal repulsion to what was perceived to have been his actions, and by genuine outrage over Byng having failed the nation. Satirists particularly attacked this point to generate fury against him (even to the point of depicting the defilement of national symbols), while columnists and protestors continued to lament the damage done to Britain's honour.

The media storm against Byng had largely cooled by the time of his execution, and most publications had ceased to write about his case after the conviction. As Rodger argues, "Nobody expected actually him to be executed," and thus there was a general feeling that the case had been closed with Byng's conviction and his subsequent plea for clemency.³⁸⁵ The *Gentleman's Magazine* confined their coverage of him following conviction to a brief mention of his receiving the order for his execution, while the *London Gazette* contented themselves with a report on his conviction and, later, his execution.³⁸⁶ This is surprising, as the *London Gazette* had strongly backed the government from the first publishing of the edited report of Admiral Byng, while the *Gentleman's Magazine* had previously had at least one article per monthly edition, along with letters sent in and even poems castigating Byng prior to his conviction.³⁸⁷ Although the storm might have faded, the public discontent had not, as one article in the

³⁸⁵ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 267.

³⁸⁶ "Historical Chronicle," *Gentleman's Magazine* 27 (February 1757): 91; *London Gazette*, no. 9674 (29 March 1757): 4; "Trial of the Hon. Admiral John Byng," *London Gazette*, no. 9669 (12 March 1757): 2.

³⁸⁷ "Poetical Essays," *Gentleman's Magazine* 26 (August 1756): 400.

Gentleman's Magazine published after Byng's execution reveals.³⁸⁸ The media also seems to have resumed their interest following the execution of Byng, as the *Gentleman's Magazine* published a summary of both his execution and the Bill to release the members of the court martial from their oaths in the following months. It seems probable that while the media largely shifted away from their coverage of Byng after his conviction, it was not due to any newfound affection for him amongst the public, but rather due to a belief that the case was shut, first by the conviction and plea for clemency, and later by George II's refusal to consider said plea. This is supported by the few magazines that covered George II's refusal, such as the *Sussex Advertiser*, which was jubilant about the decision and supported the King wholeheartedly.³⁸⁹

While the portrayal of Byng in the press was largely negative to the very end, there was one incident where his conduct was admired by his opponents in the press and public. That was, ironically, his own execution. Byng was largely portrayed as courageous and calm about the affair and was noted to have faced death with dignity. His conduct was such that a reporter attending from the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported it brought men to tears and caused an onlooker to declare "There lies the bravest and best officer of the Navy."³⁹⁰ The *Magazine* even followed by printing an elegy celebrating Byng's dignity at his execution and admitting that even Byng's harshest foe had to admire his "calm composure."³⁹¹ This was a sharp reversal, considering that only a month prior the publication had been critiquing Byng. Even as anti-Byng publications

³⁸⁸ "Execution of Admiral Byng Justified," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 154-155.

³⁸⁹ "Thursday's Post," *Sussex Advertiser* (7 March 1757): 2.

³⁹⁰ "Elegy on Adm. Byng – Description of an Antique Tower," *Gentleman's Magazine* 27 (April 1757): 176.

³⁹¹ "Elegy on the Death of Admiral Byng," *Gentleman's Magazine* 27 (April 1757): 176.

like *The Test* were celebrating Byng's execution, other media outlets as well as random bystanders could not help but quietly admire Byng's dignity in a grim situation and mourn for a man who had faced death with honour, whatever his other sins.³⁹² While many bystanders served in the Navy, there were a crowd of civilians ashore observing who were similarly affected by his death, and it seems unlikely to assume all of them were allies of Byng.³⁹³ This seems to have played a role in softening the general opinion of Byng, as publications which opposed him, like *The Monitor*, were increasingly willing to concede in next months that his crime had been exaggerated for the benefit of figures like Newcastle, although they still felt his conduct merited execution.³⁹⁴ More neutral publications like the *Gentleman's Magazine* seemed to wonder, in the aftermath of his death, whether Byng had been guilty at all.³⁹⁵ Byng may have been vilified in life, but he had won back some of his lost respect in death.

Despite the generally negative portrayal of Byng within the media, there were a few holdouts who remained committed to Byng, and ensured that his side of the story was shared with the broader public. One particularly influential figure was the author and politician, Horace Walpole, who was persuaded to Byng's defence by the eccentric Augustus Hervey.³⁹⁶ Walpole had initially been a detractor in the wake of Minorca, referring to Byng as "haughty and disgusting," but would change his mind in light of the

³⁹² O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium*, 6; *A Letter to a Gentleman in the Countryside from His Friend in London* (London: J. Lacy, 1757), 45.

³⁹³ *A Letter to a Gentleman in the Countryside from His Friend in London*, 45

³⁹⁴ "To the Monitor," *The Monitor*, 799.

³⁹⁵ "Elegy on the Death of Admiral Byng," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 176

³⁹⁶ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 200.

political interference rife throughout the affair.³⁹⁷ He was mostly active in politics rather than through the media (most of his writings on Byng were devoted to his recollection of the affair and came well after Byng's execution). Nonetheless, his contacts in the writing community (including with Samuel Johnson, another noted Byng ally) would have been useful, and his political expertise was critical during the attempt in late February and March to persuade Parliament into lifting the oaths of the presiding officers.³⁹⁸ Walpole's views largely centered around the context of national honour: he firmly denounced what he saw as unfair and 'spiteful' treatment by the governing class. He objected strongly to what he saw as Newcastle's attempt to scapegoat Byng and believed it unjust and dishonourable to the point of falling out with his friend Henry Fox, over Fox's treatment of Byng.³⁹⁹

Samuel Johnson, in contrast, focused his efforts on the media. Both the pro- and anti-Byng camps placed a heavy emphasis on producing political pamphlets to support their views, and Johnson took center stage in this contest. Not only did he apparently write pamphlets for Byng (as the writers were anonymous, this is a subject of debate, however some historians have argued he wrote at least one pamphlet on Byng's behalf), but he also played a key role in promoting them through *The Literary Magazine* and other friendly publications, such as the *Citizen*.⁴⁰⁰ His defence of Byng and promotion of

³⁹⁷ Joseph Binford, "The Politics of Horace Walpole," (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 1966), 102-103; Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 111.

³⁹⁸ Binford, "The Politics of Horace Walpole," 103; Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 211; Lewis, "The Accords and Resemblances of Johnson and Walpole," 7.

³⁹⁹ Binford, "The Politics of Horace Walpole," 103.

⁴⁰⁰ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 95; Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 49.

pro-Byng material was instrumental in gathering support from the educated middle class, while also promoting an anti-government narrative that saw the blame of Minorca placed on the shoulders of Newcastle.⁴⁰¹ Johnson's motives were almost identical to Walpole, albeit where Walpole focused primarily on the interference during the trial and the days before Byng's execution, Johnson focused largely on the government seemingly setting Byng up for failure.⁴⁰² Lastly, an obscure writer defending Byng was Paul Whitehead, a political satirist. Historians generally agree that Whitehead wrote or planned the majority of pamphlets defending Byng, meaning that he played perhaps the largest role in shaping the narrative of the Byng camp.⁴⁰³ While his exact views are less well known than his allies, it is reasonable to assume based on his writing he was offended and concerned by the dishonour caused to Britain by the persecution of Byng, and by the government's failure to properly pursue the war effort, leading to the failure of Minorca. It seems clear that despite the generally negative view of Byng, there were a few influencers who remained committed to Byng, who largely acted in defence of Britain's honour, which they believed the government to have tainted.

Although the main actors in the days leading up to Byng's execution were generally writers, naval officers, or politicians, there were a few exceptions who did not fit into this category, but who nevertheless attempted to intervene in order to pursue their idealized national honour. The most prominent case, as suggested by Ware, is likely that of Sarah Osborn, Byng's sister, who proved a prolific letter writer and staunch defender

⁴⁰¹ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 95.

⁴⁰² Krulder, "The Role of Nationalism in the Execution of Admiral John Byng," 49.

⁴⁰³ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 95.

of her brother.⁴⁰⁴ Although her efforts were futile, they spanned from politicians to the Admiralty Board, notably including correspondence with the former First Lord, the Duke of Bedford (who was noncommittal to her appeals) in early February.⁴⁰⁵ Osborn attempted to appeal to her readers' sense of national honour and justice by pointing to the jury's recommendation for clemency, Forbes' refusal to sign the death warrant, and how the sentence was "ignominiously suspended, most ignominiously aspersed, and inhumanely traduced throughout the world."⁴⁰⁶ Similarly, Byng's nephew Viscount Torrington attempted to appeal directly to the King on the 9th but was predictably rebuffed.⁴⁰⁷ Curiously, despite the stance of her husband, Lady Caroline Fox also favoured Byng, albeit advocating for rather unorthodox ideas to protect him.⁴⁰⁸ Her plan was to allow Byng to escape by faking his death, although the details of such a plan are unclear. This plan would allow Britain and the government to keep its honour by 'executing' Byng, while also accepting that it was dishonourable to actually execute him. It is significant that Lady Fox was willing to deny the wishes (and ignore the potential ramifications to his honour) of her husband, especially considering his contradictory stance on Byng.

One major detractor of Byng was Arthur Murphy, a writer and playwright.⁴⁰⁹ Intriguingly, historian Daniel O'Quinn suggests Murphy's career in propaganda and writing was launched by the Byng affair (having previously been an actor), leading to

⁴⁰⁴ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 202-203.

⁴⁰⁵ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 202-203.

⁴⁰⁶ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 207.

⁴⁰⁷ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 203.

⁴⁰⁸ Von den Steinen, "Political Aspects of the Loss of Minorca and the Subsequent Public Disgrace, Trial, and Execution of Admiral John Byng, 1755-1757," 142.

⁴⁰⁹ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium*, 6-7.

him being quickly employed by Henry Fox to lead the efforts to mobilize the public and fan the flames of hatred against Byng through his publication, *The Test*.⁴¹⁰ In this, he proved remarkably successful and he was among the writers who popularized the idea that Byng had caused national dishonour by his cowardice.⁴¹¹ Murphy attacked Byng up until his execution, which he happily celebrated in *The Test*.⁴¹² While it is highly probable that Murphy's interests in Byng were career driven, at the very least he endeavoured to make the dishonouring of Britain into the center of the outrage against Byng, proving that it was influential to his audience and possibly himself. Overall, although many influential civilian figures who involved themselves in the case had their own motives (ranging from career reasons to family honour), it does seem as though national honour played a role in motivating a considerable number. At a minimum, they sought to utilize Britain's honour as a tool to either defend or attack Byng to a wider audience, even if they did not personally care for national honour themselves.

It is clear that among the commercial and lower classes, national honour was one of the more important factors in influencing their view on Byng. For the majority, Byng's failure at Minorca and the shame it brought to Britain when compared the 'heroic' General Blakeney, were the main reasons for calling for him to be harshly punished (as well as their protesting against him and burning his effigy).⁴¹³ In contrast, for those who defended Byng, it was the dishonour brought about by the government's desperate attempts to fixate on Byng as a scapegoat, as well as avoid their rightful

⁴¹⁰ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium*, 6.

⁴¹¹ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium*, 7.

⁴¹² O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium*, 6.

⁴¹³ "Defence of Lord Blakeney," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 413; Olex, "The Painful Task of Thinking Belongs To Me," 37.

punishment from having avoided prosecuting the war properly from the beginning, that influenced them in speaking out against the administration.⁴¹⁴ This trend did not only apply to the general public, but also specific groups of influencers, including those who managed contemporary political commentary and the pamphlets, such as Johnson and Walpole, but also individuals who simply felt strongly about the affair, and consequently involved themselves, such as Sarah Osborn or Arthur Murphy.⁴¹⁵ While it is important to remember that other factors influenced their stance (it is doubtful whether Osborn would have gone to such lengths for a stranger), both their emphasis of and use of national honour were highly significant, especially as doing so was common among nearly all groups involved in the trial of Admiral Byng. Overall, the commercial and lower classes adopted a similar rationale to other influential groups, despite being less involved in the case than the government or Navy.

Conclusion

National honour played an important role in the Byng court martial, particularly during the period between Byng's verdict and execution, as Byng's personal honour became less of a factor. Nearly all competing influences associated with the case were strongly motivated by the need to protect the honour of Britain, while simultaneously using it as a tool to justify their stance on the issue. For the government, national honour was particularly important in the context of the King, who equated his own honour and interests with honour of Britain as a whole on account of his position. George II took this complex view and weighed it against his position as the 'fountain of honour' and what

⁴¹⁴ Binford, "The Politics of Horace Walpole," 103.

⁴¹⁵ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium*, 6.

his personal honour demanded of him when coming to his decision, deciding that his honour and Britain's were both best served by refusing clemency. This view was no doubt assisted by some of his ministers, particularly Pitt and Grenville-Temple, whose defence of Byng had the inverse effect, while others like Fox and Newcastle worked to damage Byng in order to protect both their honour and national honour from further shame. Among the Navy, while concerns about the precedent caused by the King ignoring their request for clemency and morale were evident, it is also true that there was a genuine belief that executing Byng would fix nothing and further damage Britain's honour. The Admiralty, and possibly Anson, who had been bitter opponents of Byng from the beginning, worked to protect him, having miscalculated in assuming that he would be offered clemency accordingly after the recommendation of the presiding officers. Figures like Hervey and the general officer class all put effort into defending Britain's honour by attempting to defend him through a variety of methods. Perhaps the greatest attempt at resistance was done by Keppel, Norris, and the other officers who had served on the jury of the court martial, as they managed a delay of the execution and came close to being allowed to speak out freely, if not for the House of Lords.

Among the lower and commercial interests, Britain's honour remained the driving force for much of anger among the populace, both against Byng and the government. This was an anger deliberately fanned by propogandists like Murray and Johnson, who sought to win the support of the people through publishing works that promoted their own viewpoint, either for or against Byng. While such figures were likely motivated by careerist reasons, the emphasis of national honour is universal throughout, suggesting it was likely a matter of genuine outrage for them. Even individuals who

sought to influence the case largely did so at least nominally in the name of Britain's honour, although in cases such as Sarah Osborn, reasons like family honour played a major role as well.

In the days leading up to Byng's execution, all parties would double down on this narrative, as Byng's personal honour had been conclusively judged by the court martial, while the case was rapidly approaching a point of no return. Byng's adversaries sought to continue the pressure to see Byng punished (and equally as importantly, not escape punishment through a slap on the wrist), while his supporters were horrified at the notion Byng would be executed for a crime that the court martial admitted had never taken place.⁴¹⁶ The former group eventually won the debate, as the King had absolute control over the granting of clemency and was bound by both his personal honour and what he believed to be Britain's honour to refuse any such suggestion. This was not an obstacle that even the best propagandists or the most fervent naval officer could overcome, especially after the government only furthered the King's resolve (ironically, the ones most responsible for this being Byng's supporters, who managed their relationship with the King poorly).⁴¹⁷ Nonetheless, national honour became for all parties both a motive and a weapon to use against their opponents, a justification of one's position and the chief talking point in the narrative discussing Byng. The influence of national honour in the last days of Byng cannot be overstated, as it guided the main actors in all their actions relating to the case.

⁴¹⁶ Smith, "An Evolution of a Ministerial Crisis, 1754-1757, 52; "Execution of Admiral Byng Justified," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 154-155.

⁴¹⁷ Ware, *Admiral Byng: His Rise and Execution*, 208, 216-217.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The execution of Admiral Byng and its questionable honour is a matter that continues to haunt Britain today. Many believe that Byng was an unfortunate scapegoat, while others continue to see Byng as a coward whose execution was just and fair. That ongoing debate is a fitting outcome for a case that revolved so heavily around the subjective and occasionally nebulous concept of honour, with all groups concerned attempting to protect both their personal honour, national honour, and the honour of the Royal Navy. King George II, Newcastle, and Henry Fox, among others, were successful in their goal to convict and execute Byng, as well as protecting their personal honour and their perception of Britain's national honour. Even so, one can only imagine that the former two were displeased by the controversy generated by the court martial and Byng's execution (especially as Newcastle faced a political crisis over it). In contrast, Murphy and other anti-Byng publishers were likely very satisfied by the results. Not only had they protected the honour of their nation and the British people, but they had also successfully defended the changing values and new patriotism of Britain. In the case of Murphy, the personal reputation and career prospects gained from the court martial must have also been welcome. Similarly, the broader British public had achieved their goals of protecting the honour of the people and nation, while also forcing political change on an unpopular government.

The Admiralty and Royal Navy, meanwhile, emerged from the aftermath of the execution in a state of concern. While Byng's execution did much to repair the reputation of the Navy in the eyes of the public, they had lost a senior officer who had been supported by a number of influential officers like Hervey and Rodney. The King had also

demonstrated a willingness to ignore the request of the presiding officers and Admiralty for clemency, which was unprecedented among courts martial of senior officers. Anson and the Admiralty achieved their goal of making Byng a scapegoat for their own errors but failed to prevent an execution they had never intended to happen. The Navy had maintained its honour, but at the cost of Byng's life and service and had to face a disturbing new precedent for executing senior officers (even when clemency was requested). Despite N. A. M. Rodger's argument that Byng's execution benefitted the Navy by inspiring its officers to greater heights, which does seem to have occurred, the Admiralty and Navy could not have been pleased by the outcome of the court martial. This is particularly true, as they had presumably expected that a similar effect would have been created by the dismissal or simple conviction of Byng, without the need for his execution.

As for the supporters of Byng, the court martial was an undisputed loss. William Pitt and Earl Grenville-Temple might have gained new prominence in the government but were unable to exercise their new powers to achieve their goal of saving Byng due to being blocked by their colleagues and King George II. Byng's supporters had failed in their goal of protecting Britain's honour through the prevention of his execution and had not even succeeded in forcing those they held responsible for Minorca completely out of power, despite weakening the Establishment Whigs. For his friends in the service such as Hervey, the honour of the Navy had been damaged despite the regained faith of the public. Byng conducted himself honourably and courageously right up to the moment of his death, but his personal honour was forever stained, and he continues to be controversial to this day.

In the immediate aftermath of Minorca, and the first ‘act’ of the Byng affair, it is apparent that the population was outraged and lashed out at both the government and Byng over the naval defeat. In this period, it is clear that the most decisive forms of honour were personal honour and the honour of the people, with naval honour being of secondary importance. Personal honour was prevalent in both the governmental aspects of the case, with Newcastle and his allies seeking a scapegoat in order to escape responsibility. It was also relevant in terms of Byng himself, as his honour was badly tarnished by his retreat. In both cases, the figures concerned turned to the press to defend themselves and attack their opponents, which led to widespread protests and even riots against both Byng and Newcastle. William Pitt was an exception to this rule, as he and the Patriotic Whigs sought to protect national honour by defending Byng over the government. They were eventually forced to silence after joining the government, which left Byng bereft of one his most powerful protectors. In contrast, the honour of the people was largely a populist movement of the broader public, instead of individuals. They expressed their views through a variety of media, including satirical prints, the burning of effigies, and protests. Although funded by elements of the anti-Byng lobby, it was largely a grassroots movement designed to disassociate the public from the cowardice and mismanagement of the Minorca campaign, necessary due to the public’s close interest and implicit ties to the Navy as the representatives of Britain.

During the court martial itself, naval honour became increasingly important, unsurprising considering it was an explicitly naval inquiry into the events. National honour also moved into the forefront during this stage, as Byng was increasingly identified with the disliked aristocratic class by the popular press and public. They

sought to impose new ideals of patriotism, masculinity, and rationalism on the nation. The court martial saw both Byng and his opponents defend or attack his personal honour, respectively, by linking Byng's honour to the honour of the Royal Navy. The presiding officers were also conscious of a need to maintain the honour of the Navy through convicting Byng, encouraged by the Admiralty. Byng was also, in some ways, a victim of the movement to professionalize the Navy. The movement implicitly demanded Byng be punished as to reassure both the Navy and the public that officers were required to display courage and skill, as opposed to relying on simple nepotism to obtain their rank. The presiding officers did make some concession to Byng's personal honour, noting that he had gone about his duties with honour and courage and requesting clemency for him as a result. As this was ongoing, the press sought to defend national honour by supporting new, patriotic ideals. The public and the press portrayed Byng as the representative of the decadent and corrupt aristocratic class, who were seen as anathema to this new form of patriotic honour, on account of being overly 'Frenchified.'

In the closing act of the Byng affair, following the conviction of the admiral, national honour became the most crucial form of honour influencing matters. Even so, it was inexorably linked to other forms of honour such as personal honour and the honour of the people. The decision of George II to refuse clemency to Byng was made in the interests of what he interpreted national honour to be, which was crucially inseparable from his personal honour. George II had many reasons to oppose Byng: being opposed to Pitt, disliking Byng's father, and personally abhorring cases where he suspected cowardice, leading him to seal Byng's fate by refusing clemency. Ironically, this act of royal defiance would prove to be an end of an era for the Hanoverian kings, as future

monarchs sought to avoid opposing Parliament in the future. William Pitt, Richard Grenville-Temple, and Horace Walpole all sought to defend national honour by pleading for clemency and attempting to allow officers such as Keppel to break their oaths of silence in order to prevent Byng from being executed, as they saw him as innocent. Despite their good intentions, Pitt and Grenville-Temple did far more harm than good due to their relationship with the King. The press and public, meanwhile, were jubilant, seeing the decision to execute Byng as repairing the damage to Britain's honour and as a vindication of the people's honour which wiped away the dishonour brought about by Minorca. Naval honour continued to be relevant, as the Admiralty sharply reversed their original policy of attacking Byng on account of them fearing the damage to morale and the precedent set by Byng's execution. They argued that Byng's execution was an overly harsh punishment that would do further harm to national honour, rather than repairing it. There were also a number of officers concerned over the damage to naval honour that would result from the execution of a man who acted with honour, particularly figures such as George Rodney and Augustus Hervey. This opinion was not universal, as officers like Edward Boscawen firmly supported Byng's execution as a step to remove the stain of dishonour upon the navy brought about by Minorca.

It seems clear that, contrary to the supposition of N. A. M. Rodger, Byng was not convicted for cowardice and the goal of the Admiralty was not solely to encourage officers to avoid retreat at all costs. Instead, nearly all aspects of the court martial concerned honour, specifically personal honour, royal honour, naval honour, the honour of the people, and national honour. While the Admiralty did benefit from encouraging their officers to take more aggressive actions, they were ultimately more concerned with

not being held responsible for the dishonour brought by Minorca and thus collaborated with the government to see Byng made into a scapegoat.⁴¹⁸ When they realized Byng was likely to be executed, the Admiralty actively reversed this policy to attempt to appeal to the King and obtain clemency. They also supported the efforts of Parliament to lift the oaths of secrecy binding the presiding officers of the court martial, in the hopes of persuading the public and King towards clemency. Although some officers and the majority of the public did subscribe to the view that Byng was a coward, the court martial explicitly acquitted Byng from charges of cowardice and reaffirmed that he acted with honour throughout the engagement. This served as the presiding officers' justification for calling for clemency. Boscawen was one of the few officers who held firmly to the view that Byng was a coward. Overall, the majority of the Navy and Admiralty opposed executing Byng, which goes against the view that it was a deliberately planned move to influence the future actions of officers. Instead, the push to execute Byng seems to have largely originated from public demand and the refusal of George II to consider clemency, owing to the demands of his royal honour and his interpretation of national honour.

In conclusion, while many factors influenced the Byng affair, conceptions of honour were central to how the case unfolded. Honour influenced key figures and groups in their decision making from the beginning, when Newcastle's ministry decided to act in order to protect their personal honour up until Byng's execution. While other factors played a role, including Rodger's point that the Admiralty sought to encourage their

⁴¹⁸ John Haymond, "The Scapegoating of an Admiral," *The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 33, no. 1 (2020): 30–32.

officers to be more aggressive, it is clear that honour was among the most influential factors that guided the affair to its ultimate conclusion. In addition, Rodger's belief about Byng's cowardice is flawed, considering the government and Admiralty's concerted effort to make Byng into a scapegoat and the court martial accepting that Byng acted with honour throughout the engagement. In the end, all sides acted in the interests of honour, but clemency ultimately rested with George II, who believed royal and national honour demanded Byng's death. As Byng's epitaph puts it, ultimately "Bravery and Loyalty were Insufficient Securities for the Life and Honour of a Naval Officer."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁹ Byng, *To the Perpetual Disgrace of Public Justice*.

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