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Revision

The 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace

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Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How serious a threat to Henry VIII and his government was the Pilgrimage of Grace?

Student answer with commentary

The Pilgrimage of Grace that broke out in the autumn and early winter of 1536 is often seen as the greatest challenge to the power of Henry VIII and his government. The serious nature of the threat was largely the result of the scale of the rising, but issues such as cross-class support and its control of much of the north of England, as well as the concessions the rebels gained, all suggest that it was a serious threat. However, the actual aims and motives of the rebels and the tactics of the king and his government ultimately reduced the threat, which was further weakened by the actions in 1537 of Francis Bigod, which gave Henry the opportunity to go back on his promises and crush any remaining challenge. This undermines the claim that it was a serious threat.

Essays are sometimes set on a narrow but significant topic area, and the Pilgrimage of Grace fits this as the largest Tudor rebellion. The opening of this answer outlines the arguments for and against the view that the rising was a threat and concludes by suggesting that it was not a serious threat. It is focused on the question and raises several issues that the student can discuss in the main body of the essay.

The scale of the rising in the north appears to be the greatest threat to Henry and his government. The rebel forces were more than 40,000 men, outnumbering the royal force by 5:1. The rebel force was also no peasant army, but contained men who had experience from fighting against the Scots. It would therefore have provided a serious challenge to the king's force under the Duke of Norfolk, which numbered only about 8,000. The rebels had also seized the capital of the north, York, and Pontefract Castle, seen as the gateway to the south. However, their unwillingness to move south and potentially increase their numbers and threaten the capital never materialised. The tactics of Henry and Norfolk further reduced the threat the rebels posed. Robert Aske was persuaded to negotiate, a truce was arranged, and a pardon offered by Norfolk. Aske went to London, where the king offered various concessions that satisfied Aske and other rebel commanders, destroying any threat posed.

There is a balanced consideration as to the threat posed. There is detailed factual knowledge of the actual events, and this is used to sustain a balanced argument which reaches a judgement at the end of the paragraph.

It appeared as if the rebels had triumphed, as Henry promised that their demands would be considered in a parliament to be held in the north, suggesting that they had threatened his rule. However, Henry was able to go back on his word, as Bigod's rising in 1537 provided the excuse he needed to renounce his agreement with Aske and use military force to crush the remnants of the unrest. The ease with which Bigod's rising was suppressed adds further weight to the argument that the Pilgrimage was not a threat, but without its occurrence it could be argued that Henry would have been forced into honouring his commitments and reversing some of the religious changes, challenging the view that the rising was not a threat.

As with the previous paragraph, this response provides a balanced discussion, using Bigod's rebellion to argue that its crushing destroyed the potential threat, but raises an important point as to what might have happened if Bigod's rising had not occurred. The student could have made more of this without drifting into speculation. However, the response does suggest that without the rising, the Pilgrimage could have seriously threatened Henry.

It was not just the scale of support that made the rising a threat, but the cross-class nature of the support. Aske was able to rally not only many peasants, but men such as himself from higher ranks in society, as well as several nobles, such as Darcy, Hussey, Lumley and Latimer, which gave the rising a sense of legitimacy. Despite this, the leadership provided by the nobility and 'better-off' members of society may have lessened the threat of the rising, as they were able to control the rank and file and perhaps prevent any attempt at using force. Furthermore, the leadership was able to prevent the rebel armies moving south and thus confined the rising to the north, further lessening the threat to both Henry and his government.

There is a balanced discussion as to the impact of cross-class support, which is well-supported and there is a judgement, although it would benefit from further development.

The aims and objectives of the rising also lessened the threat. The rising did not aim to remove Henry from power, although it did want to restore Mary to the line of succession and was a threat to several of Henry's ministers – particularly Cromwell, who was viewed as the architect of many of the religious reforms to which the rebels objected. This was reflected in the Pilgrims' ballad, which attacked Cromwell, Cranmer and Rich. Although it was not a direct threat to any of the ministers, it might have weakened Cromwell's position and led ultimately to his fall in 1540. Not only did the rising not have major political goals, but its original name, 'a pilgrimage of grace for the commonwealth', along with the rebels' belief in the society of orders, adds to the view that it was not a serious threat. The aim was to protect the commons from unfair and heavy taxation, agrarian threats and the onslaught against the wealth of local churches. Most of the demands were religious, providing further evidence that the rising was not a direct challenge to Henry and his government, although it did appear to threaten his policies, particularly when many monasteries in Lancashire were restored. Once the rising was crushed, Henry was able to speed up the dissolution and close the larger monasteries over the following years, undermining any challenge to the government's religious policies.

The discussion on the aims and objectives is well developed and balanced, with relevant supporting knowledge, leading to a simple judgement that would again benefit from development.

Although it might be argued that Henry made some concessions to the rebels over entry fines, the 1534 Subsidy Act and the abandonment of the Statute of Uses, none of these threatened his power. He was able to agree to these as he was secure, and the abandonment of taxation caused by unrest was not a new approach. Henry had done the same in 1525 with the Amicable Grant and Henry VII

had acted in a similar fashion in dealing with the Cornish and Yorkshire tax revolts. The willingness to make concessions further suggests that he did not feel threatened, and this was reinforced by his changes to the Council of the North and his visit to York, which served only to reinforce his power.

The discussion and linking of material in this paragraph to the actual question is less clear, although the response does suggest that it shows the rising was less threatening. There is wider knowledge from other parts of the period, which examiners can credit, but the argument needs to be clearer.

The Pilgrimage appears at first sight to be a serious threat because of the scale of the rising, the largest any Tudor monarch faced. However, the aims, motives and actions of the rebels greatly reduced the threat. Although pardons and concessions were offered, Henry played for time. He was undoubtedly aware that the rising could not be sustained for a long period and therefore by delaying and appearing to offer concessions he was able to reduce the potential threat, aided by the unwillingness of the rebels to force the king into battle. As a result, the potential threat was greater than the actual challenge.

The conclusion follows from the line of argument pursued in the essay and considers the issues raised in the opening paragraph. There is a sense of judgement and this, along with the consistent argument, ensures the response would be placed in the higher levels.

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