

The History Guide

Lectures on Early Modern European History

Lecture 7: The English Civil War

What an inequitable thing it is for one man to have thousands, and another want bread, and that the pleasure of God is, that all men should have enough, and not that one man should abound in this worlds good, spending it upon his lusts, and another man of far better deserts, not be worth two pence, and that it is no such difficulty as men make it to be, to alter the course of the world in this thing, and that a few diligent and valiant spirits may turn the world upside down, if they observe their seasons, and shall with life and courage ingage accordingly.

--- attributed to William Walwyn

The [English Civil War](#) was as much the response to the effects of the Reformation as it was a response to the needs of the rising middle classes, the landed gentry. The war itself involved the king, Parliament, the aristocracy, the middle classes, the commoners, and the army. The War tested the prerogative of the king and challenged the theory of divine right. War raged between Parliamentarians, Royalists, Cavaliers and Roundheads and every religious sect in England.

The years before 1640 in England were years of national disillusionment. The gap between the court and Protestant elements widened, the golden age of drama and literature was over, the religion of the court and at Oxford and Cambridge seemed diffused, and scientific ideas, though popular in London and at Oxford and Cambridge, as yet had received no official recognition. In the meantime, censorship grew more severe, and lawyers became the patrons and consumers of art. For the most part, energies which had been devoted to literature in the mid-to-late 16th century were now channeled into political and theological concerns. The Civil War was both religious and political, as well as social and economic. But it was also a legal battle between the king and his subjects.

The transition from [QUEEN ELIZABETH I](#) (1533-1603, r.1558-1603) of the Tudor House to that of [James I](#) (1566-1625, r.1603-1625) and the Stuarts was quite dramatic. Elizabeth had been an astute manager of men as well as of England. She chose her advisers well and introduced a modicum of civility into court society and encouraged the patronage of the arts. However, Elizabeth refused to marry and so the successor to the throne remained a thorny problem. A crisis was avoided when her chief minister, [Robert Cecil](#) (1563-1612), arranged for the king of Scotland, James Stuart, or James VI, to succeed the throne upon Elizabeth's death in 1603.

Elizabeth also refused to act decisively against those Catholics remaining in England. There were those who hoped that upon Elizabeth's death, that [Mary, Queen of Scots](#) (1542-1587), a Catholic, would succeed the throne. Mary had already been removed from Scotland by Calvinist nobles and was now a prisoner in England. A Catholic plot to drive out Elizabeth remained until Elizabeth agreed to [execute](#) Mary on February 8, 1587.

There were other dangers that confronted the English government under Elizabeth. Throughout the late 16th century economic forces had transformed English society. The nobility no longer had a vital military role to play in England. They were also losing their authority in government while



the House of Commons was becoming the near equal of the House of Lords in Parliament. Finally, the nobility seemed to be losing out in terms of England's increasing prosperity, as new elements, such as the gentry, entered the scene. The gentry was a broad group of people that had done quite well since the early 16th century when they purchased the land the English crown had confiscated when the monasteries were closed. The gentry also found themselves more thoroughly involved in the commerce of the nation which found them at odds with the nobility who were traditionally aloof from business matters. Integral to the administration of the local parishes, the gentry now wanted a voice in Parliament. Their argument was simply that since they had helped increase the wealth of the nation they too ought to share in the governing of the nation. The existence of the gentry in the early 17th century was not enough to stimulate a civil war. What helped create the foundation for the Civil War was the fact that many of the gentry were sympathetic to the Puritans, who argued that the Anglican Church established by

Elizabeth was far too close to Roman Catholicism, and so they sought to reduce the influence of ritual and hierarchy within the Church. Elizabeth refused to do so.

James I, however, was handicapped. He was brought up in Scottish court society, a society patterned on the French court. He was greedy and squandered his wealth. His tutors, however, were Scottish Calvinists who taught him that tyrannical kings may be deposed by the people. His reaction to this was strong since he was a vigorous believer in the divine right of kings. And so in his defense he wrote the *A Trew Law of Free Monarchies: Or the Reciproock and Mutual Duetie Betwixt a Free King, and his Naturall Subjects* (c.1597). Monarchy was a divinely ordained institution -- the king was accountable to God only and was above the law. This manner of thinking brought James into frequent conflict with Parliament in 1604. Did the Commons have the right to determine the disputed elections of its own members? James was also faced with Puritans who wanted to reform the Anglican Church through legislation as well as the gentry, who wanted to extend their influence in politics. And in 1609, James delivered a series of [SPEECHES](#) to Parliament in which he laid down his claim to rule by divine right. Finally, by 1611, James had had enough of Parliament and ruled by himself until 1621.



The rights of the "freeborn Englishman," unable to find a voice in Parliament, turned to the courts of common law. The opposition to the divine right theory of James was led by the constitutional lawyer, Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634), who viewed law not as the instrument but as the boundary of royal prerogative. The King was under the law and not above it. This implied equality before the law and made judges the final arbiters and not the King. Unfortunately for the opposition, Coke was dismissed from his post as Lord Chief Justice in 1616. The fact that the House of Commons favored Puritanism only made matters worse with James, whose hatred of the Puritans ran deep. Parliamentary opposition simply added fuel to the fire. From the Puritan point of view, James hated their religion and their political ideas. The Puritans also reacted against the systematic abuse of granting royal patents and monopolies to the worthless favorites of James. In turn, James threatened to drive the Puritans out of the country and so in 1620, the Puritans established the "Holy Commonwealth" in the New World.

James died in 1625 and was succeeded by his son, [Charles I](#) (1600-1649, r.1625-1649). Unlike his father, Charles was personable and dignified, temperate and level headed. He patronized the artistic work of Flemish painters like Van Dyke and Rubens. He also won his popularity by his anti-Spanish policies and by sponsoring a government which was both benevolent and efficient. For the most part, Charles stood on the side of the common people and tried to protect them. However, like his father, Charles believed in the divine right theory of kingship. This court convinced him of the righteousness of his actions. But Charles was even more pro-Catholic and anti-Puritan than his father. He also had a French wife, Henrietta Maria.

The first major explosion with Parliament came when Charles entrusted affairs to George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham (1592-1628), who was a poor administrator of men and things. Parliament tried to impeach him because he refused to vote supplies for the Thirty Years' War. Charles dissolved Parliament and resorted to an illegal "forced loan." Because of shortages of money Charles was forced to call Parliament into session. Parliament voted the king supplies in 1628, but also made him accept the [PETITION OF RIGHT](#). This was a landmark legal decision. The king would now observe the rights of his subjects which, among other things, demanded an end to the billeting of troops in private homes and trials by martial law. The *Petition* also declared arbitrary taxation and imprisonment as illegal.



A second session of Parliament in 1629 showed Charles' duplicity. Parliament passed two resolutions. First, whoever brought innovations in religion into the country was an enemy of the kingdom. This resolution was directed against Charles and his support of Catholicism. Second, whoever levied customs duties without consent of Parliament was an enemy of the kingdom. In short, because Charles lacked the proper statesmanship, the Puritan Revolt began. Charles dissolved Parliament and justified this act by a long [DEFENSE](#). Parliament was not called again for eleven years.

The Puritans made their appeal to the defense of the constitution and the rights of all English subjects, specifically to protect religious toleration. But the basic issue was the divine right theory of kingship. According to the Puritan argument, divine right destroyed any and all appeals to the law. It eroded property rights and threatened personal rights as well. Most Englishmen

simply wanted to limit the king's prerogative to rule. Even in 1640, both Houses wanted to preserve the King's prerogative, restore Parliament's privileges and restore liberty to all English subjects.

Charles was weak in financial and administrative affairs. He could raise money only through Parliament, which in the early 16th century was restrained by the landed gentry. Administrative power came from the local gentry or Justices of the Peace and sheriffs, who resented the attempt by the central government to remove their authority. In terms of religion, Charles had a powerful entity to control, the Church of England.

The Anglican Church was produced by the Reformation. The major question was simply this -- after the break with Rome how should the Church be reformed? The Puritans arose in late 16th century and basically wanted more change than Elizabeth would allow and so they concentrated on changing the method of governing the Church. There were many sorts of Puritans. All were Calvinist, all believed in predestination, and all believed it necessary to purify the Church from Catholic popery. The Presbyterians, for instance, wanted a system of Church government based on a hierarchy of Elders. The Independents or Congregationalists, wanted each congregation to be

legally independent of every other one. The individual Church was the highest authority. And finally, the Separatists wanted to separate from the established Church altogether. Eventually, the Puritan challenge split into two groups -- those who stressed reform of Church structure, and those who stressed liberty of conscience and religious toleration.

On November 3, 1640, Charles I called the famous Long Parliament in order to finance his war in Scotland. The Long Parliament tried to impeach some of Charles' favorites and went on to abolish the high courts of the Star Chamber and the High Commission. Charles accepted these developments but meanwhile built an army to counteract Parliament. In 1641, a [Triennial Act](#) was passed which provided that Parliament be called into session at least once every three years. Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford (1593-1641) was impeached and ultimately executed for treason while the Archbishop of Canterbury, [William Laud](#) (1573-1645), was impeached and imprisoned.

In October 1641, a rebellion against English rule in Ireland broke out. Although the king raised an army to defeat the rebellion, there were those in Parliament who feared Charles would use the army against them. Under the leadership of [John Pym](#) (c.1583-1643), Parliament adopted the [GRAND REMONSTRANCE](#), which outlined the evils of Charles's rule. The Remonstrance also demanded church reform and parliamentary control of the army and over royal appointments. Such arguments split the parliamentary party and as a result, many moderates went over to Charles. In January 1642, Charles made the bold step of attempting to arrest John Pym and four other opposition leaders. By this time, civil war was inevitable.

Charles raised his standard at Nottingham on August 22, 1642. At first, Parliamentary forces were routed until 1644, at Marston Moor, where the Kings forces were checked. In 1645, the "New Model Army" defeated the forces of Charles at Naseby and Langport. The New Model Army was based on a soldier's ability rather than on his position within society. Merit not birth or wealth became the only criteria for membership -- social class meant nothing. Although the idea of the New Model Army was first suggested by Sir William Waller in 1644, Cromwell's speech in the House of Commons led to the [Self-Denying Ordinance](#), which canceled the military high command. The New Model Army Ordinance was passed in February 1645.

The inspiring force of the New Model Army was [OLIVER CROMWELL](#) (1599-1658). Cromwell was a solid member of the gentry and lived the life of a country gentleman. He spent a year at Cambridge where he studied mathematics and law. He was brought up a Puritan and experienced his spiritual conversion at the age of twenty-eight. He belonged by birth to the English ruling class and came from a family that did not really have a great amount of wealth but certainly wielded much power. In actual fact, he was from a Reformation family and his wealth was relatively new. His family intermarried with other such families when Cromwell sat in the Long Parliament of 1640 (at the time, twenty of his kinsmen sat as well). He married into a wealthy manufacturing family and his eldest daughter was married to [General Henry Ireton](#) (1611-1651), Cromwell's right hand man in the New Model Army.



Cromwell's background helps to explain why he was opposed to the "leveling" movements within the Puritan Revolution itself. He worked to support authority and property and believed that class distinctions were the cornerstone of society. But what did Cromwell object to in Charles I? On the one hand, Cromwell abhorred the arbitrary taxation of subjects which meant that property was not safe. On the other hand, and perhaps of greater importance, as a confirmed Independent, Cromwell believed in religious freedom and toleration. Contemporaries and later critics saw Cromwell as a hypocrite. However, he sincerely believed

that God had chosen him to lead His people and he attributed his military victories to God rather than to his own strategy and tactic.

On January 1, 1649, Charles I was charged as a "tyrant, traitor and murderer; and a public and implacable enemy to the Commonwealth of England." Of the 135 judges who were supposed to hear evidence, only half that number showed up. The only people Cromwell allowed into Parliament were those who supported the trial -- this was the [Rump Parliament](#). Cromwell at first opposed bringing the king to justice but then took a leading role at his trial. Charles, of course, never accepted the judgment that he had broken the social contract with his people -- "Princes are not bound to give an account of their actions but to God alone." Charles charged that his accusers had been unjust and tyrannical. No one was really safe, not even the king. A [charge](#) of guilt was reached on January 20. Seven days later, Charles I was [sentenced](#):

For all which treasons and crimes this Court doth adjudge that he, the said Charles Stuart, as a tyrant, traitor, murderer, and public enemy to the good people of this nation, shall be put to death by the severing of his head from his body.

On the 29th, the [death warrant](#) was issued and was signed by John Bradshaw, Thomas Grey and Oliver Cromwell. On the following morning, Charles I was executed in front of Banquet Hall, Whitehall.

With the death of Charles, the monarchy was also abolished and a republic declared. The Long Parliament was [dissolved](#) and in 1653, Cromwell adopted the [Instrument of Government](#) and became "Lord Protector of the Commonwealth." Upon Cromwell's death in 1658, his son Richard took control, but he lacked the force and the will of his father. By 1660, nearly everyone in England and had enough of the Puritan experiment in government. [Charles II](#) (1630-1685, r.1660-1685) returned from the Spanish Netherlands without bloodshed. Thus ended the Civil War and began the era of the Restoration.

The significance of the Puritan Revolt stretches outside the years 1640 to 1660. The Puritan attempts to establish a Holy Commonwealth in the New World in 1620 was one response. The English Civil War at home was another. The effect of the Puritan Revolt in America is clear. But the effect on the continent was small since the Puritans did not universalize their message. Nevertheless, the Puritan Revolution was a bold movement in European history. The major weapon was the New Model Army, the first mass, democratic army. To fight Charles I, Parliament needed its own army and so the New Model Army marked a break in tradition linking the English crown with the army.

The New Model Army was motivated by a new spirit -- these were men who fought not for money but for service and belief: "We were not a mercenary Army, hired to serve any Arbitrary power of a state, but called forth and conjured by the several Declarations of Parliament, to the defense of our own land and the people's just rights and liberties." However, the New Model Army was divided on the question of what form of government England should have. On one side, stood Cromwell, Ireton and the officers, and on the other, the common soldiers. In August 1647, Ireton drew up the "[Heads of Proposals](#)," a document that retained a government by kings and the two Houses of Parliament. The militia would be controlled by the Lower House. The soldiers responded with "[The Agreement of the People](#)," which specified manhood suffrage, equal electoral divisions, biennial Parliaments, and freedom of religion and equality before the law.

The [Putney Debates](#) which followed have a modern feel to them since what we are witnessing is democracy in the making. Colonel Rainborough, who represented the commoners, argued that every man who contracts with a civil government ought to have a voice in that government. Ireton argued that giving men without private property a political voice would endanger liberty and property. For Cromwell, the government should be for the people but not by the people. A compromise was reached in 1649 when an [Act](#) was passed establishing the English Republic

which would be governed as a Commonwealth. However, England was not a free state, nor was the House of Commons voted by the people. From 1649 to 1653, the Rump Parliament ruled and from 1653 to 1658, Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector. Cromwell's rule was based on force not the will of the people. As such, it was a dictatorship which eventually was opposed by the majority of the nation.

It has been suggested that the Puritan Revolution was not primarily a social revolution. However, there were faint hints of ideologies in the making during the events of 1640 to 1660. These ideologies are associated with the [Levellers](#) who eventually drafted "The Agreement of the People." There were two kinds of Levellers -- on the one hand, there was that group represented by [John Lilburne](#) (1615-1657), Richard Overton and William Walwyn. Opposite them stood the [Diggers](#). The starting point for both groups was religious in that an inner spiritual war would then lead to outward expression. In the words of William Haller (1955):

Spiritual warfare in this version of the story became directed against the evil in human institutions rather than in the heart of the center himself. The and sought was not personal conversion of the general good. The struggle of Christ's regained one's became a struggle for the redemption of the state. The holy community, the New Jerusalem, came to be conceived rather as a growing community of free citizens than a withdrawn the visible congregation of the elect.

In other words, what I think we are witnessing is the tendency to move from religion to politics while still using the language of religion. It was this secular, worldly Jerusalem for which the Levellers pressed their agitation. Their demands were purely political in that they opposed both Royal and parliamentary government. They wanted direct rule by the people and finally, they believed that Cromwell had substituted one form of tyranny for another.

The Levellers and Diggers and other groups such as the [Fifth Monarchy Men](#) were peripheral concerns and none of them were really decisive during the Civil War. Their ideals were actually more important in the early nineteenth century since they animated socialist doctrine concerning private property. But they did express the democratic aspirations of Puritanism and kept alive the idea of religious toleration.

One of the major accomplishments of the English Civil War occurred in the area of religion but with political consequences. But actually, this accomplishment was the idea of a free Church, which was the result of work by the Independents, who were against the Presbyterians and their belief in a solemn union between Church and State. The idea of a free church involved the belief in religious toleration. This the Presbyterians denied. Under Cromwell there was limited toleration with the exception of Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism. However, it was really only partial tolerance and lapsed in 1660 only to be revived in 1689 with the First Toleration Act by which nonconformists were allowed to exist and worshipped publicly. But members of free churches did not win the rights of full citizenship until 1828, when the Test (1673) and Corporation (1661) Acts were repealed.

The free church was unlike the State Church in at least one important respect -- it was entirely voluntary and represented the free association of individuals. These voluntary societies expanded to escape the pressure of the State. For example, during the English colonization of the New World, the Massachusetts and Virginia colonies were formed by private companies as well as by adventurers like [Sir Walter Raleigh](#) (1552-1618). The idea of freely associated groups served also as a model for future political organization, eventually leading to the formation of political associations during the last half of the 18th century.

Despite the incompetence of the Puritan Revolt, the Revolt was rejected by almost all English people in 1660. After forty years of parliamentary and military strife, Charles II returned to England. He was not a popular king. He was absorbed into the opulent life at court, had numerous

mistresses and was probably a Roman Catholic. This all begs an important question: why did the English people accept the Restoration of a Stuart King? Why did England revert to a state of affairs that existed before 1640? The answer to these questions lies in the combined constitutional and religious nature of the 1640 revolt. At this time, the majority of Englishmen opposed the king's arbitrary rule over Parliament. The people were united in their desire and insistence on their political liberties and it was on this basis that the Puritan Revolt began. However, events led to the seizure of power by Cromwell's New Model Army, which placed religious liberty above political freedom. For Cromwell and his followers, the liberty of the people of God, that is, the chosen or elect, were more important than the civil liberties of the nation. In other words, this limitation on the potential sovereignty of the people in the interests of a minority was not acceptable to those forces who opposed Charles. So, in 1660, Levellers and Presbyterians combined with the Royalists, attempted to secure the peaceful restoration of Charles II. However, as a reaction to Puritan tyranny under Cromwell, the English restored too much autocratic power to the king. The result was that political and religious liberties had to be rescued by the [Glorious Revolution of 1688](#).

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