

Choosing Sides in the English Civil War

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Introduction

Between 1642 and 1646 England was torn apart by a bloody civil war. On the one hand stood the supporters of King Charles I: the Royalists. On the other stood the supporters of the rights and privileges of Parliament: the Parliamentarians. Shortly before the war broke out, partisans of both sides began to apply an insulting nickname to their opponents, little dreaming that the two scornful labels which they had chosen for each other would ring down through the succeeding centuries.

To the Parliamentarians, the Royalists were 'Cavaliers'—a term derived from the Spanish word 'Caballeros', meaning armed troopers or horsemen. To the Royalists, the Parliamentarians were 'Roundheads'—a reference to the shaved heads of the London apprentices who had been so active in demonstrating their support for Parliament during the months before the fighting began. Both terms reveal a lot about what the two sides thought of each other. In Parliamentarian eyes, the typical Royalist was a dissolute gentleman, possessed of a suspiciously foreign air and prone to acts of sudden violence. As far as the Royalists were concerned, the typical Parliamentarian was a 'base mechanic': a low-born, lumpen townsman, inexperienced in judgment and inelegant in appearance. There was more than a grain of truth in these stereotypes, but it would be wrong to conclude from them that the Civil War was primarily a class war, a punch up between 'toffs' and 'toughs'. The considerations which prompted men and women to choose the sides they did between 1642 and 1646 were infinitely more varied and subtle than the two-party labels suggest.

The personality of Charles I

At the heart of the conflict lay the policies and personality of the King himself. Charles I was a reserved, slightly diffident figure whose abilities as a monarch left a good deal to be desired. During the 1630s, his apparent determination to rule England without the assistance of Parliament, his introduction of all sorts of controversial financial measures and his support for 'high-church' religious practices aroused considerable alarm among his subjects. Many people, particularly the more zealous protestants, or 'puritans', came to fear that Charles was pursuing a hidden agenda: that he planned to remove his people's rights, or 'liberties', and to restore England to the Catholic fold.

When, in 1637, Charles attempted to introduce a new form of prayer book in his northern kingdom of Scotland, a major rebellion erupted. The King did not have enough money to raise an army against the Scots and was therefore forced to summon a Parliament. Yet the men who assembled at Westminster were unwilling to give the King the money he needed until their own grievances had been dealt with. The angry, disaffected members of Parliament seized political control and set about dismantling the hated instruments of the Personal Rule. During 1640-41, Charles I's prerogative courts were abolished, his ministers arrested or forced to flee, and his unpopular financial expedients declared illegal. To many

contemporaries, it seemed that the kingdom's political problems were solved. In fact, they were only just beginning.

The road to war

late 1640 Charles I had faced a political élite which was almost wholly united against him. In late 1641 this was no longer the case. By this time a split had emerged in Parliament—and, still more dangerously, in the country at large—between those who wished for further reform, and those who felt that the recent changes had gone quite far enough. Friction was particularly apparent between religious conservatives, men and women who were happy with the Church of England as it had been established at the time of the Reformation, and more 'Godly' protestants', those who considered the Church to be 'but half reformed' and were determined to rid it of the 'rags and patches of Rome'. As time went by, religious traditionalists became increasingly alienated from the more radical spirits and turned to the King for support. Charles thus found himself with a swelling political constituency and, emboldened by this change in his fortunes, he made a bold attempt to seize back the political initiative. In January 1642 Charles strode into the Parliament house with a body of soldiers and demanded the persons of five MPs whom he had declared to be traitors. The King's plan went badly wrong. Not only did the men he sought manage to escape, but public opinion was outraged by his action. London was soon in an uproar, and the King, fearing for his life, was forced to flee. War was now inevitable and over the next few months rival sides began to emerge across the country.

Class divisions

Among the peerage and the greater gentry, a majority favoured the King: partly, perhaps, because they felt bound to him by ties of personal loyalty, mainly because they saw him as the chief guarantor of the established social order. Similar considerations influenced the lesser gentry. Among this group, too, it seems probable that supporters of the Crown outnumbered supporters of the Parliament, though by a considerably narrower margin. Beneath the level of the gentry it is harder to make definite connections between social status and political allegiance. Many historians believe that the 'middling sort' of people were more inclined to favour Parliament than the King because Parliament's party was less rigidly hierarchical—and this may well have been so. Yet, for the vast majority of ordinary men and women, it was factors other than those of 'class' or 'rank' which determined the eventual choice of sides.

Mercenaries and conscripts

Some had no particular preference for either party, but joined up with the first army which happened to come along, in the hope of pay and plunder. Captain Carlo Fantom, one of the hundreds of foreign mercenaries who flocked to England during the Civil War, frankly admitted that 'I care not for your Cause, I... fight for your halfe-crowne[s], and your handsome woemen'. Others found themselves forced to fight when they would much rather have stayed at home: tenants called out by their landlords, for example, and village rogues conscripted by parish constables who were anxious to see them gone. Some were even compelled to fight at gunpoint. In Lancashire, the Royalists press-ganged crowds of local men

and marched them away to attack the Parliamentary garrison at Bolton, 'the reare being brought up with troopers that had commission to shoot such as lagged behind, so as the poor countrymen ... [were] in a dilemma of death, either by the troopers if they went not on, or by the... shot of the towne if they did'.

Ideological and ethnic divisions

Yet for every man who enlisted under compulsion, or for purely mercenary reasons, there was another who did so because he sincerely believed in what he was doing. One of the best definitions of the ideological division which lay at the heart of the Civil War was given by the Worcestershire clergyman, Richard Baxter. 'The generality of the people... who were then called puritans, precisians, religious persons', Baxter wrote, those 'that used to talk of God, and heaven, and scripture, and holiness... adhered to the Parliament. And on the other side... [those] that were not so precise and strict against an oath, or gaming, or plays, or drinking nor troubled themselves so much about the matters of God and the world to come [adhered to the King]'. Baxter's view was biased, of course. Royalist sympathizers would have countered that it was not that they were irreligious, but that they remained true to a purer, more traditional form of Protestantism: one which was untainted by puritan 'zeal'. Nevertheless, Baxter's words convey an essential truth. Across the country as a whole, it was religion which ultimately divided the two parties. Puritans everywhere supported the Parliament, more conservative protestants—together with the few Catholics—supported the King.

Beneath the all important religious divisions lurked anxieties about nationhood and ethnicity. Parliament set out, from the very first, to portray itself as the party of 'Englishness', and although this image played well throughout most of the kingdom, it provoked a counter-reaction in 'Celtic' Cornwall and Wales. Here, the overwhelming majority of the population came out for the King in 1642, and throughout the rest of the war these two regions remained Charles I's most important 'magazines of men'. Cornish and Welsh troops were vital to the Royalist war effort, but the King's reliance upon them reinforced his opponents' claims that the royalist party was fundamentally 'un-English'. So did Charles' use of soldiers brought over from Ireland, many of whom, the Parliamentarians maintained, were Catholics. During the first half of the war, Parliament's close links with the Scots tended to undermine the claim that Parliament's cause was the cause of England itself—and anti-Scottish feeling undoubtedly helped to bring many English men and women into the King's camp. Once the relationship between Parliament and the Scots started to deteriorate in 1645, however, and the King began to court the Scots in his turn, this situation changed.

The final choice: subjugation or liberation

As Charles I's attempts to secure 'foreign' soldiers in any way he could became more widely known, the choice facing the English people seemed increasingly to be one between national subjugation under the King and national liberation under the Parliament. It was a choice to which there could only be one response. Those who had initially rallied to the King's banner now deserted him in droves—and the defeat of the Royalist party in arms was the inevitable result.

In June 1646 the King's wartime capital, Oxford, was surrendered to the Parliamentary New Model Army. Charles fled in disguise and put himself under the protection of the Scots—but they soon handed him back to Parliament. Two years later the King was led out to the executioner's block, his attempts to recover his position by fomenting a new war—this time between the Scots and Parliament—having finally hardened his captors' hearts against him. On 30 January 1649 the King was beheaded in front of a huge crowd at Whitehall. 'The man Charles Stuart' was gone—but, thanks to the subsequent efforts of royalist propagandists, the memory of 'the martyr king' would live on in the English popular imagination for centuries to come.