

The birth pangs of a new order

Calvinism was not defeated everywhere. Calvin himself was welcomed by the burghers of the city state of Geneva. He became the dominant intellectual and political force in the city and imposed a new religious orthodoxy which could be every bit as bigoted as the old. In 1547, a Jacques Gruet was executed for 'blasphemy' and 'atheism'; in 1553, a Spanish refugee, Servetus, was burned alive for 'heresy'. Calvin also imposed his own discipline of hard work through public denunciations, banishments and whippings. Laws banned adultery and blasphemy, and enforced compulsory school attendance. It was a regime many respectable burghers found irksome. But it did provide ideal conditions for money-making.

The example of Geneva inspired others in Europe. Even in a place like Scotland, where the economy was backward and the urban middle class relatively weak, Calvinism could have an intellectual appeal to those who wanted somehow to take society forward. The preacher John Knox was able to draw together a disparate group of aristocrats and a weak burgher class in opposition to the Catholic Queen Mary Stuart. Most significantly, in the Netherlands it provided the banner beneath which the burghers of prosperous towns rose alongside local princes in revolution against Spanish rule.

The Dutch Revolt

The area which today makes up Belgium and Holland had passed into the hands of the Spanish crown in the 15th century. This did not cause any particular antagonism among the local population at first, for this was before the era of modern nationalism. The feudal lords gained from serving a great emperor—until 1555 the Flemish-born Charles V. The urban middle classes also benefited, using Spanish wool in their textile industries and profiting from the export of manufactured goods to

Spain's American empire. Silver and gold flowed in from the colonies, passed through the coffers of the Spanish crown, and ended up in the pockets of Low Country merchants. The Castilian heart of Spain, rich and powerful in the 15th century, entered a centuries-long era of economic stagnation, while the Netherlands became the most economically dynamic part of Europe.

The Spanish crown had used its control of the country's Catholic hierarchy, and especially the Inquisition, to stamp on opposition to its rule since the 1490s. Philip II, ruler from the mid-1550s, took this process a step further, seeing it as his mission to fight heresy and Protestantism right across Europe, to impose everywhere a Catholic ideology which fitted the increasing backwardness of Castile's economy. In Spain this meant attacking the autonomy of Catalonia and suppressing the remaining Moorish minority. In the Low Countries it meant an onslaught on the local aristocracy and the growing Protestant minorities among the urban classes. This was accompanied by increased taxation for the mass of people at a time of economic crisis and growing hardship.

The first wave of revolt came in the late 1560s, just as the religious wars were being waged in France. Calvinism spread from the southern to the northern cities, accompanied by a wave of 'iconoclasm'—the destruction of religious images and the sacking of churches. Spain's Duke of Alba crushed the revolt, marching into Brussels with an army of 10,000 and executing thousands—including the Catholic Count of Egmont who, like the rest of the local aristocracy, would not countenance armed resistance. There was a second revolt a decade later, which proved successful in the north, where it received the backing of certain nobles—the most important of whom was the Prince of Orange—and established an independent state, the United Provinces (later known as the Dutch Republic). Its towns and its trade were to prosper enormously. For more than a century it was the most economically dynamic part of Europe, supplanting Portugal in the East Indies colonies and even threatening Portugal's control of Brazil. By contrast, the southern nobles abandoned the struggle, allowing the Spanish army to reconquer the towns. Places such as Ghent, Bruges and Antwerp, which had been in the forefront of economic development for 300 years, now entered into a long period of stagnation.

The Thirty Years War

The fighting between the Netherlands and Spain came to a halt with a 12 year truce in 1609. But before the truce had expired another great religious war had broken out several hundred miles to the east. It was to rage for 30 years over much of the area between the Rhine and the Baltic, causing devastation and a massive loss of life. Germany's population was around a third lower at the end than it had been at the beginning.

Anyone reading about this war today is bound to be confused by its kaleidoscopic character. Alliances formed and disintegrated. One day the fighting was at one end of Europe, the next several hundred miles away. No sooner did one issue seem resolved than another arose. Whole armies changed sides. Many thousands of combatants saw the war as about religious principles for which they were prepared to die, yet Protestant princes supported a Catholic emperor at one stage, while at another the pope and Catholic France supported the Protestant king of Sweden. The ablest commander of the war was assassinated by his own generals at the behest of his own ruler. The only constant features seem to be the rampaging mercenary armies, the looted villages, the hungry peasants and the burning towns—a world brilliantly portrayed in Bertolt Brecht's epic anti-war play *Mother Courage*. No wonder the war has been the cause of as much controversy among historians as any in history.⁸⁶ Yet it is possible to find a certain pattern through the fog of events.

Spain was still the greatest power in Europe in the 1610s. Its rulers, one branch of the Habsburg family, still looked to a ruthless imposition of Catholic doctrine as a way to cement their power in all the lands of the crown—not just Castile, but also the other Iberian kingdoms of Aragon (especially Catalonia) and Portugal (which they had managed to acquire), the Americas (where they had been thrown briefly on to the defensive by a powerful 'Indian' rebellion in Chile), major parts of Italy (including the duchy of Milan and the kingdom of Naples), and the southern Netherlands. They were also preparing for war to reconquer the northern Netherlands.

Closely allied to the Spanish crown was the other branch of the Habsburg family, the emperors of the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German nation'. They dreamed of turning their empire into a huge, centralised monarchy embracing all Europe from the Atlantic to the

border with the Ottoman Turks. But, for the moment, most of the empire was run by powerful, independent princes. The emperors' only real power lay in their own Austrian lands, and even here it was strongly circumscribed by the 'estates'—representatives of the lords, knights and urban oligarchies. These insisted on their right to decide fundamental questions of policy, and in the biggest part of the Austrian domains—the kingdom of Bohemia—claimed the power to choose a king who might not be a Habsburg. A growing faction within the imperial court came to see a Spanish-style imposition of religious conformity as the way to crush resistance to imperial power.

There had been a hardening of Catholic doctrine and organisation with the 'Counter-Reformation' of the 1560s. The church's Council of Trent had finally agreed a common doctrine which all Catholic clerics were meant to inculcate. A new religious order, the Jesuits, based itself upon a sense of discipline, a religious zeal and an intellectual rigour very different to the corruption and laxity that had characterised so much of the church in the past. It became the vanguard in fighting Protestantism, especially within the ranks of Europe's upper class, forming networks of aristocratic adherents in every city where it was able to operate.

Counter-Reformation Catholicism suited Spain's rulers admirably. The colonisation of Europe's ruling class by the Jesuits was also a way of supplementing Spanish military power with ideological power. This process, once under way, had a logic of its own. The papal laxity of the early 16th century had been that of a church hierarchy that was on occasions cultivated as well as corrupt, allowing Renaissance thought and art to flourish. The first generation of Jesuits inherited some of the Renaissance tradition, gaining repute for their educational role and their concern for charity.⁸⁷ Yet the Counter-Reformation, and the Jesuits especially, were soon characterised by a clampdown not just on outright 'heresy', but on any critical thought. The papacy banned all the writings of the great religious scholar Erasmus and all translations of the Bible into living languages. Soon even the archbishop of Toledo, who had played a leading part in the Council of Trent, was being persecuted for 'heresy' by the Inquisition.⁸⁸ The Jesuits became notorious for being prepared to justify any policy of their aristocratic followers on the grounds that the 'ends' of bringing people to salvation justified any 'means'. There was 'the triumph within the Society of Jesus of a cult of irrational and monolithic authority, with the subordination of

the personality in the service of a monstrous organism'.⁸⁹

Counter-Reformation Catholicism and the two wings of the Habsburg dynasty shared one great enemy—the liberated, anti-Habsburg, Protestant northern Netherlands. As the Czech historian Polisensky has put it, 'Europe [was] riven within itself...the liberated Netherlands on the one hand, the Spaniards on the other, had become the two focuses for a gathering of forces which affected the whole of the continent'.⁹⁰

Yet the war did not break out on the frontier of the Netherlands, but 400 miles away in Bohemia. The kingdom of Bohemia, embracing the present day Czech Republic and Silesia, was of central importance to the Holy Roman Empire. It was the biggest single state in the empire and the home of the imperial courts for much of the second half of the 16th century. But it was an anomaly in an empire increasingly under the influence of the Counter-Reformation ideology sweeping in from Spain, with its glorification of kingly power and its fear of dissent of any sort. Bohemia was characterised both by the power of the non-kingly estates and by toleration for a multiplicity of different religious groupings that had persisted since the settlement of the Hussite wars 170 years before. As well as Catholics, there were 'ultraquists',⁹¹ Lutherans and Calvinists. This was an affront to the whole ideology of the Counter-Reformation, just as the power of the estates was an affront to the imperial dream of establishing a centralised German monarchy along the lines of that in Spain.

The immediate cause of the war was the attempt to clamp down on religious freedom in the kingdom. The imperial authorities began to pull down Protestant churches, arrest some well known Protestants, censor printed material and ban non-Catholics (90 percent of the population) from civic office. When representatives of the Protestant estates complained, the emperor rejected the protests and declared meetings of the estates illegal. The estates retaliated with fury, with the famous 'Defenestration of Prague' of 1618—when they threw imperial officials out of a window 60 feet up (only a muck heap saved them from serious injury)—and replaced the Habsburg Ferdinand as king of Bohemia with a Protestant prince from Germany, Frederick of the Palatinate.

The Habsburgs saw the clash with the Bohemian estates as the first round in a bigger battle with the northern Netherlands and their allies. But behind this was an even deeper struggle—between two

different ways of responding to the changes all of Europe had been experiencing as the market transformed the old feudalism.

This does not mean that the Bohemian estates stood in some crude way for 'capitalism' or the 'bourgeoisie' against feudalism. The estates represented three layers of society—not only the burghers, but also (and with more influence than them) the two feudal groupings of the great lords and the knights. Even the burghers' representatives were not wholly bourgeois, since they often owned land which they ran along feudal lines. But as Polisensky has shown, changes were taking place which undermined the feudal character of rural life in areas of Bohemia. Many landowners, nobles and burghers were replacing serf labour or rent in kind by fixed money rents, growing industrial crops, and encouraging the growth of small towns and forms of handicraft production on their lands. There was an incentive to improve methods of production in agriculture and industry, and a spread of 'free' wage labour. The unfree labour a peasant had to provide could be as low as one day a year. Feudalism was far from finished across Bohemia as a whole. But there was a compromise between it and new, embryonically capitalist, forms of production. As Polisensky puts it, 'The whole great edifice of feudal obligation, both personal and occupational, was being undermined by a series of pressures which tended in their different ways to liberate production from its fetters'.⁹² The result was that Bohemia was economically dynamic and did not suffer, at least until the 1590s, the economic stagnation and peasant impoverishment of the adjoining German lands.

The estates system of government, with its careful balancing of different interests and religious tolerance, provided a framework within which such economic change could occur slowly and peacefully. Members of all three estates could see reasons to defend a structure which allowed them to coexist peacefully and profitably. Even some of the greatest feudal magnates found themselves resisting forces which aimed to drive all of Europe back to feudalism.

However, that was not the end of the story, as the course of the war showed. Some of the magnates moved to the side of the empire and the Counter-Reformation in the run up to the war, producing converts for the Jesuits. Even those nobles who were steadfast in their allegiance to the Bohemian cause conceived of the war along their own class lines, causing discontent among the burghers which weakened the war effort. Observers at the court of the Protestant king 'were astounded by the

indifference or cruelty shown by Frederick and his entourage towards the “wretched peasants”.⁹³ Only one leading figure, the Austrian Tschernembi, argued that if ‘the serfs are freed and serfdom abolished... Common people will be willing to fight for their country’.⁹⁴ He was overruled.

Although the Bohemian armies twice advanced on the imperial capital of Vienna, they were forced to retreat each time, as enemy armies found little obstacle to their own advance through Bohemian lands. Finally, after the Bohemian army suffered a major defeat in 1620 at the Battle of the White Mountain, the Protestant king and the noble generals fled the country rather than fall back on Prague to mount further resistance. The war was lost, not because the Bohemian estates lacked the means to defeat the empire, but because the class interests of their leaders prevented them utilising those means.

Bohemia’s leaders had relied on Protestant rulers elsewhere in Europe leaping to their defence. They were sorely disappointed. The Protestant Union of German princes withdrew from the war before the Battle of the White Mountain. The Dutch and the English governments (the Bohemian King Frederick was married to a daughter of James I of England) refused to begin wider hostilities against Spain. As increasingly successful commercial powers, they put their battles for trade above their supposed religious commitments. Yet keeping out of the Bohemian war did not stop either the German Protestant princes or the Dutch suffering its consequences. The Spanish crown, exultant at its victory, went on to conquer the Palatinate territories which lay between some of its territories and its next goal, the Netherlands. This forced the Dutch and the English to take action of their own—supplying finance and troops to fight in the Palatinate. It also threatened to alter the balance of power of Europe to the detriment of both the German princes and the monarchies of France and Sweden. Hence by the late 1630s Catholic France and Lutheran Sweden were the allies of Calvinist Holland, and they were backed by the pope, who feared growing Spanish influence in Italy as a threat to his own papal territories.

At one point the empire seemed on the verge of victory, with its armies commanded by a Bohemian magnate, Wallenstein, who had converted to Catholicism. But Wallenstein was not just hated by the Bohemian Protestants he had betrayed. He also terrified the Catholic princes of Germany, as he seemed about to establish an empire that

would nullify their independent power, and he antagonised the protagonists of complete Catholicisation of the empire, since he resisted their demands to return to the social conditions of 200 years before. His experience in managing the huge estates he had amassed in Bohemia and elsewhere—partly with the help of a Protestant banker of Dutch nationality, De Witte⁹⁵—impressed on him the importance of newer forms of economic organisation and, with them, a certain degree of religious toleration.⁹⁶ He put up resistance, albeit half-hearted, to the demands of the ultras, was twice dismissed as head of the army and was finally murdered by assassins acting for the emperor.⁹⁷ As Polisensky has noted, 'In the last analysis it was more than personal hatreds... that lay behind Wallenstein's downfall: the fundamental issue was his economic system versus the extreme advocates of feudal absolutism'.⁹⁸

But the methods of the ultras could not lead to victory in the war. It dragged on for another 14 years after the death of Wallenstein, with ever-shifting permutations of alliances increasingly centred around the rival absolute monarchies of Spain and France. By the end of the war few of the active participants could remember its beginning, and even these could hardly recognise any remnant of the original issues. All that was visible was the devastation of Germany and the economic cost elsewhere. Peace was finally agreed through the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, against a background of social and political unrest in virtually all the combatants—a revolt of Catalonia and Portugal within the Spanish Empire, a clash between the Orange prince and the merchants of the northern Netherlands, the beginning of the political revolts in France known as the 'Fronde'.

The war had damaged both of the initial combatants. Bohemia was subjugated to a devastating and deadening feudal absolutism. The land was now in the hands of lords who cared only for grabbing as much of the produce as possible, regardless of productivity. The interest in new techniques which had characterised the 16th century died as the peasants were compelled to devote up to half their working time to unpaid labour.⁹⁹ The towns, depopulated by the wars, stagnated under the impact of debt and physical destruction. What had been one of the centres of European culture became a provincial backwater. A symbol of the change was that the Czech language was forced into obscurity for 200 years, hanging on only in the countryside while German came to predominate in the

towns.¹⁰⁰ The clash between the new ways of making a livelihood and old sets of social relations had been resolved in Bohemia by the forcible and extremely bloody destruction of the new by the old. A terrible price was paid for the failure of revolutionary initiative in the first years of the war.

The Spanish crown also lost much. Even before the war there had been signs of economic deterioration in Castile. But military power seemed to paper these over. By 1648 this was no longer the case. The crown had lost Portugal. It could hold down Catalonia and its empire in Latin America, the Philippines, parts of Italy and the southern Netherlands. But increasingly the benefits of empire flowed elsewhere, while the Iberian Peninsula became one of the backward parts of Europe.

The German princes were among the victors of the war, in that they were able to exercise independent power even more at its end than at its beginning. But the mass of German people paid a price for this. The patchwork of fragmented realms, cut off from each other by customs posts and continually engaged in dynastic plots against one another, provided no basis for overcoming the extreme economic and social dislocation caused by the war. Southern Germany had been one of the most urbanised and economically advanced areas in Europe in the early 16th century—it certainly was not in the late 17th.¹⁰¹

France emerged from the Thirty Years War as it had emerged from the religious wars of the previous century—with its monarchy strengthened (despite the short term turmoil of the Fronde), with a very slow growth of economic centralisation and a snail's pace adoption of the forms of economic organisation that broke with the old feudal ways. Its rulers gained a little from the war, the mass of its people nothing.

The only real 'gain' from the war was that the independent Dutch republic survived and its new ruling class, based upon capitalist methods, thrived. Through all the smoke of a century and quarter of Reformation and the devastation of religious wars and civil wars, one small part of Europe had seen the establishment of a state based upon a new way of organising economic life. As the Peace of Westphalia was signed, a similar transformation was being pushed to completion by violent methods but at far less cost just across the North Sea.

The English Revolution

In January 1649 an executioner's axe cut off the head of the king of England and Scotland, Charles I. The event shocked the whole of Europe.¹⁰² Rulers throughout the continent—Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist—severed diplomatic relations with the English government.¹⁰³ It had committed sacrilege against a principle they shared—the right of some to rule over others because of an accident of birth.

The men who ordered the execution were far from being extreme republicans. Only 20 months before, their leader Oliver Cromwell had defended the principle of monarchy, saying that 'no man could enjoy their lives and estates quietly without the king had his rights'.¹⁰⁴ Now he famously declared, 'We will cut off his head with his crown on it.' He was, despite himself, opening the door to a new era, which would question the assumption that some human beings were divinely ordained to superiority over others.

There are fashionable accounts of the English Revolution which see it as a result of mere jockeying for position between rivals within a homogenous 'gentry' elite. Such accounts chart the patronage and family connections which tie one upper class figure to another and explain the battles and beheadings as flowing from a process of plotting and counter-plotting which got out of hand.

Such interpretations fail to see that 1649 was not some historical quirk. It was a product of the clash between the same social forces which had been tearing much of Europe apart for a century and a half—forces unleashed as market relations arose out of and transformed the old feudal order. It involved not just rival upper class courtiers and politicians, but merchant interests similar to those prominent in the Dutch revolt; it involved artisans and small traders like those who had carried the Reformation through south Germany or been burned at the stake in France; and it involved peasant protests, much smaller in scale but not different in kind to the German Peasant War of 1525. Binding together the parties in the English Civil War were the rival religious notions thrown up by the European Reformation.

Peaceful prelude

The Reformation in England had, like the 'princely reformations' in parts of Germany, been carried through by royal decree. Henry VIII

had broken with the Roman Catholic church for diplomatic reasons and bound the majority of the English ruling class to his policy by selling former monastery lands at knock-down prices.

But there was more to the Reformation in England than just princely self interest and upper class greed. It sank roots among all those open to a new worldview which seemed to make sense of the changing society, especially among the trader and artisan classes but also among some of the landed gentry.

The gap which separated the Reformation from above and the Reformation from below in England was blurred through the latter half of the 16th century. The bitter experience of an attempt to reimpose the old Catholicism by force under Mary Tudor (married to Philip II of Spain) caused lordly recipients of church lands to stand shoulder to shoulder with Puritan burghers in support of her successor, the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I.

This was encouraged by slow but continuous economic change, although England was still one of the more economically backward countries of Europe. The population more than doubled between 1500 and 1650.¹⁰⁵ By the end of this period more than one person in 12 lived in towns. The output of handicraft industries—especially textiles—soared, as did mining and iron-making. Many thousands of people came to be employed in rural industries, as well as in the towns, until 60 percent of households in the Forest of Arden were involved in cloth production and there were 100,000 country people engaged in knitting stockings.¹⁰⁶ The proportion of land in the hands of the better off farmers, the ‘yeomen’ who supplemented family labour by employing waged labour, grew substantially. And a minority of the gentry began to discover there were better and more secure long term incomes to be gained by granting long leases to yeomen—who would employ waged labour and improve the land—rather than driving small peasants below the subsistence level.

Society still displayed numerous feudal features. Many of the gentry and aristocrats squeezed the peasants dry. Although serfdom had disappeared at the time of the Black Death, they could still extract numerous feudal payments. The bulk of the land was still tilled by small and medium peasants, not by capitalist farmers using waged labour. Artisans, rather than wage labourers, still dominated in most industries. The gentry were still as likely to look to supplement their incomes through handouts from the royal court—which in turn came

from taxes—as by improving their landholdings. And the most powerful merchants relied upon monopolies granted by the monarch, which raised prices for everyone else and discouraged other industries. Yet from the mid-1550s to the mid-1610s the arrangements, like those in Bohemia before the Thirty Years War, allowed slow economic advance and, with it, the slow germination of the new capitalist methods.

There were religious rows with political overtones during this period. The last part of Elizabeth's reign saw the persecution and emigration of some 'Puritan' Calvinists, and the advent of James VI of Scotland to the English throne as James I witnessed an aborted conspiracy (the 'Gunpowder Plot') involving some of the rump of large Catholic landowners. But by and large the period was marked by a high degree of consensus between the monarchy, the large landowners, the gentry, the hierarchy of the national church and the merchants. This was expressed by a constitutional setup in which the king appointed ministers to decide policies, but depended for their implementation and financing upon the support of the two 'houses' of parliament—the House of Lords, made up of the great aristocrats and the bishops, and the House of Commons, made up of representatives of the landowning 'gentry' of each county and the burghers of the urban boroughs.

The state machine was much weaker than in France or Castile. There was no standing army, no national police structure, and only a rudimentary civil service. Real power in each locality lay with the gentry, who administered much of the law, imposed punishments on the labouring classes, ensured most taxes were collected and raised troops when the occasion demanded. The monarchy's power depended on its ability to persuade or to cajole the gentry to do what it wanted. But this was easily done so long as there was broad agreement on policies to be pursued.

The road to war

Things began to fall apart in the later 1610s under James I and, more seriously, in the late 1620s under his son Charles I. A gap opened up between the demands of the monarchy for money and the willingness of the parliamentary gentry and merchant classes to provide it through

taxes. The monarchy further embittered parliament by seeking sources of revenue outside its control—new taxes and customs duties, and the selling of lordly titles and monopolies over certain sorts of trade. Parliament threatened to deny any regular funding until it was granted control over such measures, and the crown tried governing without it, using special courts such as the 'Star Chamber' to punish those who resisted. This in turn increased the distrust of the monarchy—or, at least, of 'advisers' like Buckingham in the 1610s and 1620s and Strafford in the 1630s.

The dispute increasingly took on a religious coloration. The gentry and merchants tended to identify with the Protestant forces in the Thirty Years War, out of a mixture of deep-felt religious convictions and crude economic calculations. The merchants reckoned that any weakening of Spanish influence would translate into easier access to American and East Indian markets. James and Charles were pulled in the other direction, towards alliances with the great Catholic monarchies—with Charles marrying the daughter of the French king, who was attacking Protestants in the town of La Rochelle. Charles's Archbishop of Canterbury, Laud, purged Calvinist ministers, used the church courts against religious dissenters and ordered the clergy to proclaim non-payment of the king's taxes was irreligious. In effect, the church hierarchy began to act as if it was part of the civil service, a 'moral' police force acting on the behalf of the king.

Sections of the gentry and merchants began to fear they would suffer the fate of many European Protestants and drown in the wave of Royalist Counter-Reformation sweeping the continent. The fear grew after a clash between the Commons and the king in the late 1620s, when he imprisoned five knights for refusing to pay taxes and dispensed with parliament. A powerful Catholic group centred on the king's French wife and her Jesuit adviser emerged at court, and the king's favourite, Strafford, established a permanent Irish army made up of Catholics.

The king's hardline approach seemed to be working. Then in 1637 he overstepped the mark. He attempted to impose a new non-Calvinist prayer book in Scotland—which he ruled was a separate country with its own political institutions, legal structure and church. A Scottish 'convention' of nobles, lawyers, Calvinist ministers and burghers raised an army of revolt. The king confidently set out to crush it, only to discover he could not raise the necessary finance.

As Scottish forces moved into northern England he was forced to summon his first parliament for 11 years.

The gentry, the borough representatives and even many of the lords who gathered at Westminster were in no mood simply to grant the king's requests without obtaining a great deal in return. In the main, they were conservative in their political attitudes. But for them, conservatism meant maintaining their own position as the rulers of the localities, and that position had been under threat from the king for 11 years. The majority took their lead from figures like John Pym—secretary of a company whose ambition was to break the Spanish stranglehold on trade with Latin America and the Caribbean. They demanded redress for their grievances: abolition of the new taxes and a pardon for non-payers; dissolution of the special courts; an end to the king's power to dissolve parliament without its consent; the trial and execution of the chief royal adviser Strafford; the removal of the bishops from the House of Lords; and an amicable peace with the Scottish Calvinists.

The king made some concessions—for instance, the trial of Strafford. But he could not accept the platform as a whole. It would have meant the monarchy giving up most of the powers it had acquired over hundreds of years. Without them, the king would be little more than a figurehead at a time when across Europe his fellow monarchs were increasing, not diminishing, their powers.

As time passed, the king found his position improving. Many in the Commons and the majority in the Lords were reluctant to take a radical stance against him, lest it encourage others to challenge their power. A 'king's party' grew among a section of the gentry and the aristocracy, especially in areas of the north and west, where remoteness from the influence of the London market had left many feudal customs intact. Even in more economically advanced areas the king had the backing of those of the gentry who gained financially from royal favours, from those great merchants benefiting from the royal monopolies (for instance, the East India Company) and from people of all social classes inculcated with the habits of deference established over many generations.

By January 1642 the king felt powerful enough to try to seize total power in a coup. He descended on parliament with 400 armed supporters, intent on arresting five of the most prominent MPs. But they had already fled a mile away to the security provided by the merchants, tradesmen and apprentices of the City of London.

When the king entered the City in pursuit the next day, an eyewitness told, "The king had the worst day in London that he ever had, the people crying, "Privilege of Parliament" by thousands...shutting up all their shops and standing at their doors with swords and halberds'.¹⁰⁷ Rumours that the king was going to return to the City with his armed 'cavaliers' brought huge crowds into the streets with whatever arms they could lay hands on: women provided hot water to throw on the invaders; stools, forms and empty tubs were hurled into the streets to "intercept the horse".¹⁰⁸

The events were portentous. The king had failed to establish his absolute power by a simple police action. Within a week he had left London, intent on raising an army to retake it. The political argument had reached the point of civil war.

The first civil war

The king gathered around him the sons and retainers of the northern lords and the court gentry, military adventurers, unemployed mercenaries, the gilded youth of the royalist aristocracy, and a 'Cavalier' core of flamboyant bullies who were to earn a reputation for the arrogant despoilation of every area of the country through which they rode. Along with these came all those who believed the absolute monarchies of Spain and France were the model of how society should be run, including a significant minority of the Catholic apostles of Counter-Reformation. The parliamentary section of the ruling class could now only protect themselves and their property by raising armies of their own. But events had also drawn into the conflict masses of people who were outside the ruling class.

Merchants opposed to the royal monopoly holders had been able to gain control of the City of London by encouraging a wave of demonstrations by ordinary tradesmen and apprentices. But they could not simply switch the popular movement on and off, especially when Cavalier officers attacked the participants. Apprentices demonstrated in their hundreds and even thousands. 'Mechanic preachers' were blamed for encouraging people 'to neglect their callings and trades two or three days a week'.¹⁰⁹ This happened as economic hardship was causing more or less spontaneous riots in many parts of the country over enclosures and fen drainage (which deprived the peasants of part of their livelihood in East Anglia).

The eruption of popular anger was a double-edged weapon for the parliamentary wing of the ruling class. It enabled them to preserve their lives in the face of the attempted royal coup. But it also threatened them with a movement which, if it got out of hand, could damage their own class rule. Hardly had the urban agitation broken the hold of the king's supporters on the City government than the parliamentarians were trying to bring it to an end. Many became convinced that only a new form of religious discipline, applied by themselves, could stifle revolt among the lower classes and maintain control. They wanted to force the king to accept their demands, but were keen to end hostilities as quickly as possible.

This group soon formed a moderate parliamentary faction. They were called 'Presbyterians' because they were associated with the notion that there had to be a uniform system of religious doctrine, which church elders ('presbyters') from their own class would impose on everyone else.

For the moment there was no avoiding war. Even the moderate Presbyterian gentry feared the consequences of unlimited royal power and had to mount resistance. But for the first two years of the war that resistance was held back, like that of the Bohemian estates to the Habsburgs in 1619, by disdain for genuinely revolutionary measures.

There was not one single parliamentary army, capable of following a coherent national strategy, but a collection of local armies, each with a lord as general and the local gentry as officers. The rank and file were conscripts, often forced to fight against their will, not revolutionary enthusiasts. The unwillingness of the gentry to provide for the upkeep of the armies led the parliamentary troops, like the royalist Cavaliers, to live by pillaging the land, so alienating the peasants of the countryside and the artisans of the town.

The parliamentarians enjoyed a couple of successes. The London bands of tradesmen and artisans stopped the royal army from marching on the capital at Turnham Green late in 1642, and the joint armies of parliament and Scotland defeated a royalist force at Marston Moor in the summer of 1644. But most of the battles of 1642-44 were inconclusive. Worse, by the beginning of 1645 the situation looked potentially catastrophic. The king was still entrenched only 50 miles from London at Oxford. The parliamentary armies were tired, unpaid, demoralised and often mutinous. There were desertions on a massive scale, and a danger of the Scottish army doing a separate deal with

the king. Unless something was done quickly everything would be lost in an English repeat of the Battle of the White Mountain.

There was a single bright spot in the picture. The cavalry of one of the parliamentary armies, the 'Ironsides' of the 'Eastern Association', had been decisive in the defeat of the royalists at Marston Moor. The cavalry had been raised in a different way from the rest of the army. Its leader, the Cambridgeshire landowner and MP Oliver Cromwell, had consciously chosen not to officer it with aristocrats or man it with unwilling, impoverished conscripts. Instead, he relied on volunteers from 'the middling classes': mostly these were from the 'yeoman' layer of better off working farmers, who were wealthy enough to own horses but poor enough to have a commitment—often a Puritan, religious commitment—to hard work. They were, one observer later wrote, 'most of them freeholders and freeholders' sons, who upon a matter of conscience engaged in this quarrel'.¹¹⁰ Such troops, Cromwell saw, could be as skilled as the 'gentlemen's sons' and mercenaries who rode for the king, but were more disciplined in battle since they were less likely to disperse in pursuit of booty at the first success. He said, 'I had rather have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for and loves what he knows than that which you call a "gentleman" and is nothing else'.¹¹¹

Cromwell also saw that he could not attract and hold such people unless he allowed them to give expression to values and views very different to those of the gentry. He would not allow Presbyterian parliamentarians to purge from his force followers of the various religious sects who carried a militant message of salvation for the lower middle classes. Preachers with a radical message travelled with the troops—the best known, Hugh Peter, would speak of a 'just social order characterised by decent care for the sick and the poor and an improved legal system...imprisonment for debt abolished'.¹¹² Cromwell even defended the non-religious radical John Lilburne against his commanding officer, the Earl of Manchester. The earl repeated gossip that Cromwell hoped to 'live to see never a nobleman in England', and loved some people the better 'because they did not love lords'.¹¹³ Cromwell may or may not have held such views at the time. But he had built support for himself in Cambridgeshire in the past by speaking up for farmers opposing the draining of the fens, and was certainly prepared to play on the class feelings of the middling classes if this was necessary to defeat the king. This meant he was prepared to

show a determination which had been lacking among so many Protestant leaders in the struggle across continental Europe.

The New Model Army

In the spring of 1645 Cromwell was the pivotal figure in a group of MPs and officers who saw only one way to avoid defeat—to rebuild the entire army as a centralised force, no longer commanded by aristocrats who held back from all out war, or officered by gentry amateurs. They only got their way in the face of strong resistance in the House of Commons and opposition from the House of Lords by relying on an increasingly radicalised layer of artisans and anti-monopolist merchants in the City of London. The instrument of revolutionary victory, the ‘New Model Army’, was formed at the moment of greatest crisis.

Many of its footsoldiers were recruited in the old way, from unwilling conscripts who had hitherto showed no concern for the issues at stake in the war. But the cavalry was built, as Cromwell’s Ironsides had been, of volunteers motivated by political and religious enthusiasm. And even among the footsoldiers there were a minority of enthusiasts who could motivate the rest at key moments of battle. There was, in effect, a revolutionary spine to the army, and its efforts were reinforced by inspired preaching from the likes of Hugh Peter, the circulation of pamphlets and news-sheets, informal Bible readings and numerous religious and political discussions.

The impact of the revolutionary approach was shown dramatically at the Battle of Naseby in June 1645. The parliamentary army was able to hold together after an initially successful royalist cavalry charge and then sweep forward and rout the enemy. Within days the king’s headquarters at Oxford was in parliamentary hands and the king had fled to surrender to the Scottish army at Newark.

This was the decisive battle of the civil war. However, it was not the end of the revolution.

With fear of the king removed, fear of the masses became the dominant emotion among the great majority of the gentry. They pressed immediately for the disbanding of the New Model Army, the curtailment of religious liberty, and the crushing of dissident religious groups and secular revolutionaries.

But there was another force emerging which the parliamentary gentry did not find it so easy to deal with. The rank and file of the army

were not at all happy with the prospect of being disbanded without pay or, worse, being sent to fight a dismal war in Ireland. The 'middling men' of the cavalry, who had fought for their principles, were outraged and driven to adopt a more radical approach than hitherto. The conscripts were distressed at facing a future without prospects and, although they could occasionally give voice to monarchist sentiments, they were soon attracted to the talk of the minority of committed enthusiasts among them.

The eight cavalry regiments each elected two representatives—known as 'agitators'—to express their views. The soldiers of the other regiments followed suit. The agitators began to make demands, in the name of the army rank and file, that challenged not only the power of the king but also the power of the gentry. A petition denounced the gentry in the House of Commons, stating, 'some that had tasted of sovereignty had turned into tyrants'.¹¹⁴ Regimental meetings took on an almost insurrectionary character, with attacks on the way the Commons were elected (by a tiny franchise), demands for annual parliaments, calls for vengeance against Presbyterian ministers, and attacks on the arcane language of the law courts.¹¹⁵ The meetings of agitators began to turn into a system of self organisation for the rank and file of the army to press their demands—they set up a team of writers to prepare pamphlets, they insisted the officers obtain a printing press for them, they sent delegates to stir up the non New Model Army regiments, and they began to make contact with 'well affected friends' (other radical elements) throughout the country.

Levellers and revolutionaries

A radical democratic grouping, the Levellers, led by people like Richard Overton, John Wildman, William Walwyn and John Lilburne, enjoyed growing influence. In October 1647 support for the Levellers reached such a peak that Cromwell and other army leaders were compelled to chair a debate in Putney with soldiers influenced by them. It was here that Rainborowe, the most radical of the officers, put forward a view which challenged the whole basis of rule by the gentry and merchant classes: 'I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he...the poorest man in England is not all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not a voice

to put himself under'.¹¹⁶ In reply Cromwell's close ally Ireton spelt out the class view which still motivated the Independents: 'No one has a right to...a share...in determining of the affairs of the kingdom...that has not a permanent fixed interest in the kingdom...that is, the person in whom all land lies, and those in the corporations in whom all trading lies'.¹¹⁷

The Levellers' position, as has often been pointed out, was not for universal male suffrage. When pushed, they were prepared to accept that 'servants'—those in the employ of others—should be excluded from their scheme for increasing those allowed to vote. In part this was because they feared that the royalist lords and gentry would dragoon their servants, labourers and retainers to vote for them. In part it was because the core of the radical influence in the army did not lie with the conscripted poor but with the volunteer small property owners who saw themselves as a cut above the labourers or journeymen working for them.

The leading Leveller, Lilburne, spelt out that the call for political rights for small property owners did not involve an attack on the system of private property. They were, he wrote, 'the truest and constantest assertors of liberty and propriety [ie property]', and there was nothing in their writings or declarations:

...that doth in the least tend to the destruction of liberty or propriety or to the setting up of levelling by universal community or anything really and truly like it... This conceit of levelling of property and magistracy is so ridiculous and foolish an opinion that no man of brains, reason or ingenuity can be imagined such a sort as to maintain such a principle.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, the election of the agitators and the call for small property owners to have the same rights as large was enough to terrify the already frightened 'moderates' of the Presbyterian party. The power of the representative body of the gentry and merchant classes was being challenged by a new representative body of those members of the middling and lower classes enrolled in the army. And these people constituted by far the most powerful organisation of armed force in the country. A clash between a section of the ruling class and the king risked turning into a revolutionary conflict.

The parliamentary moderates summoned three of the agitators to

appear before them and blustered about punishing them. The Presbyterian leader Denzil Holles later said that they should have had the courage to hang one as a warning to the others. But they let them go. They could not do more until they had reliable armed forces of their own. They now tried to assemble these, arranging for the City of London oligarchy to purge radicals from its militia, establishing a 'committee of safety' to organise forces under the control of the gentry in each county, attempting to ensure the military arsenals were in their hands and negotiating with their fellow Presbyterians who controlled the Scottish army to bring it into England. They came to believe they should unite with the royalist gentry to restore a slightly reformed version of the old monarchy.

The Independents around Cromwell were very weak in parliamentary terms. But they saw they could use the agitator movement to defend themselves, ensuring it did not get out of hand. They set up a 'council of the army', made up half of rank and file representatives and half of officers. Many of the rank and file troops still deferred to their 'betters', and the officers were able to direct much of the soldiers' bitterness into channels favourable to themselves.

At first, the aim of the Independents was to force the king to negotiate with them. To this end they allowed a contingent of forces to seize the king from the hands of the Presbyterian party. Cromwell and those around him intended to make it clear that they had won the civil war and that the king had to accept the terms they dictated, which included many of the reforms he had resisted. But their terms still provided for a monarchy, for the continuation of the unelected House of Lords and for the restriction of the parliamentary franchise to the upper class.

The second civil war and the great execution

However, Charles had no intention of conceding to demands he regarded as against the very principles of kingship. He determined on a new resort to civil war, escaping from captivity in November 1647. Cromwell now recognised his attempts to negotiate with the king had been mistaken and used New Model Army troops to pressurise parliament into voting for the war party's measures. What is usually called 'the second civil war' followed in the summer of 1648. Former supporters of parliament fought alongside the cavaliers, there were

royalist risings in south Wales, Kent and Essex, and an invasion from Scotland.

This time the victory of the anti-royalist army was not followed by a policy of leniency or negotiation with the king. Cromwell declared, 'They that are inflexible and will not leave troubling the land may be speedily destroyed,' and the officers of the New Model Army called for the death sentence on Charles and his chief advisers. Knowing the Presbyterian majority among MPs would never vote for this, the army occupied London. A detachment of troops under Colonel Pride barred the leading Presbyterians from the House of Commons, and other troops removed the leading oligarchs from their control of the City of London. At the end of January the executioner held the severed head of the king before a crowd in Whitehall.

The events leading to the execution were paralleled by ferment within the New Model Army and among its civilian supporters. Cromwell and the Independents would not have been able to take control of London and beat back both the Presbyterians and the king without the revolutionary movement within the army. Faced with the threat of counter-revolution, Cromwell had been prepared for a time to defend the Levellers against Presbyterian repression. He even went so far as to visit the imprisoned Lilburne in the Tower of London in an attempt to reach an agreement. But he also resorted to force as the second civil war approached. He isolated the radicals by using the war as a pretext to reorganise their regiments, put down an attempted mutiny—executing one of the alleged leaders, Richard Arnold—and imprison the London Levellers. At the same time he continued to rely upon the Leveller-influenced army rank and file in the period up to and immediately after the execution of the king. Only then did he feel confident enough to smash those who articulated class feelings. Cromwell berated his fellows on the Council of State: 'I tell you, sir, you have no other way to deal with these men but to break them or they will break you'.¹¹⁹ In the spring of 1649 the Leveller leaders in London were confined to the Tower and, in May, a mutiny of 1,000 troops was broken and four of its leaders were executed in the churchyard at Burford in Oxfordshire.

The bulk of the New Model Army was no longer needed to defeat the king and the Presbyterians in England. It was dispatched, minus its agitators, to Ireland, while a Leveller pamphlet asked the soldiers:

Will you go on still to kill, slay and murder men, to make [your officers] absolute lords and masters over Ireland, as you have made them over England? Or is it your ambition to reduce the Irish to the happiness of tithes...to excise, customs and monopolies in trades? Or to fill their prisons with poor disabled prisoners, to fill their land with swarms of beggars?¹²⁰

This was a prophetic warning of what the English ruling class was to do to Ireland. But it could hardly stop impoverished men accepting military discipline and the only livelihood open to them once their leaders had been shot.

The Levellers were not a movement based on the impoverished mass of society, but on the 'middling sort'—the artisans, the lesser traders, the better-off farmers and the soldiers who were recruited from these groups. They were the most radical and courageous party to emerge from these groups and pushed a programme which, had it been successful, would have brought about a much greater revolutionary change than actually occurred. They did so from the point of view of social groups which hoped to prosper from the growth of capitalist forms of production—the groups which were to crystallise over the next century into an increasingly self-conscious 'middle class'. But in doing so they began to challenge the tradition that a section of society was divinely entitled to rule over the rest. Like Müntzer and his followers in the German Peasant War, they helped to establish a rival tradition of resistance to class rule.

The defeat of the Levellers did not mean nothing had been achieved by the agitation and fighting of the previous years. The group around Cromwell had only been able to win by taking revolutionary measures, even if limited in scope. From 1649 the government of England—and soon of Scotland as well—was run by army officers, many of whom came from the 'middling sort'.

Christopher Hill has noted that after the second civil war:

The men who were taking control of events now, though not Levellers, were...of a significantly lower social class [than before]... Colonel Ewer, a former serving man, Colonel Thomas Harrison...the son of a grazier or butcher...Pride...had been a drayman or brewer's employee...Colonel Okey a tallow chandler, Hewson a shoe maker, Goffe a salter, Barkstead a goldsmith or thimble maker, Berry a clerk to an iron works,

Kelesy a button maker... The men who came to power in December 1648 and who were responsible for the execution of Charles I were men well below the rank of the traditional rulers of England.¹²¹

Such men pushed through a series of measures which broke the hold of those who would have turned English society back in a feudal direction once and for all. In this way the English Revolution cleared the ground for the development of a society based on market relations and capitalist forms of exploitation.

Cromwell himself did not come from a new 'bourgeois' exploiting class, although he had family connections with some of the merchants. But he could not have succeeded without relying on those out of whom such a class was forming. His genius lay in his ability to grasp the fact that the crisis of English society could not be resolved without turning to new methods and new men. This alone could stop the English Revolution suffering the same fate as the French Calvinists or the Bohemian estates. A member of a gentry family had to carry through a revolution which ensured society would be run on essentially bourgeois lines.

He ruled England virtually as a dictator for a decade. His regime was based on military force. But it could not survive indefinitely without wider social backing. Cromwell recognised this and attempted to establish parliaments which would back him, only to discover that the dissensions which had turned Presbyterians against Independents in the mid-1640s continually re-emerged. The gentry in each locality wanted an end to the uncertainty associated with revolutionary upheaval and balked at further reform. Sections of the 'middling sort' wanted more radical reform, and were well represented among the army officers. But they were not prepared to push such reform through if it meant further social unrest and as the decade passed they increasingly allied themselves with the very sections of the gentry they had fought during the civil war—people who still saw a monarchy as the precondition for maintaining social order. The culmination of this process came in 1660 after Cromwell's death. A section of the army agreed with the remnants of parliament to invite the son of the executed king back as monarch.

Although the revolution was over, many of the changes survived. The monarchy's existence now depended on the will of the propertied classes expressed through parliament—as was shown in 1688

when they threw James II out in a 'bloodless' revolution. The wealth of the propertied classes depended as never before on their success in coping with market forces. The large landowners increasingly embraced capitalist methods of agriculture. The growing portion of the population who lived in towns increasingly either employed others or worked for others. Guilds were no longer able to prevent innovation in productive techniques—by 1689 three quarters of English towns contained no guilds at all.¹²² Government policies were dictated by the desire to expand trade, not by the dynastic intrigues of the monarch.

Together these changes represented something radically new in world history. The means by which people earned a living was now carried out in units which depended for survival upon the ability of those who ran them to keep costs below those of other units. The big farmer, the medium sized iron master, even the individual handloom weaver, could only guarantee they earned a living if they could stay in business, and that meant keeping up with new methods of production which cut costs.

Competition for the sake of competition, rather than the immediate consumption needs of the rich or poor, increasingly became the driving force of economic activity. The growth which followed was often chaotic, marked by sudden ups and downs. It was also of little benefit to a growing section of the population whose survival increasingly depended on their ability to sell their labour power to others. But it transformed the situation of the English economy and those who dominated it. What had been one of the poorer parts of Europe rapidly became the most advanced, providing its rulers with the means to build a world empire—and, in the process, helped the new capitalist form of production to begin to displace all previous forms.