

# The importance of the new model army during the years 1645-1649



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It is questionable how much of an impact the Army had on the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. However, their importance during the years 1645-1649 is undeniable. Evidence suggests that the Army was the “mainspring of the Revolution and the force that deterred more radical change”. Yet some historians, such as Christopher Hill, question the possibility of the Revolution as being a “Bourgeois Revolution” or a “Puritan Revolution”, moreover, Peter Gaunt along with other historians tampers with the possibility that the Revolution may have been caused by economic transformations.

Though these are all possibilities, the Army has the most impact, in my opinion, and were therefore the “mainspring of the Revolution”: “Battles were won because of the discipline, unity and political consciousness of the masses organised in the New Model Army” (Christopher Hill). It is important, I feel, to look at the causes of the English Civil Wars because they were, after all, what paved the way for the Revolution.

Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, who lived through the war, believed that constitutional issues caused it and issues concerning religion, while James Harrington, who also lived through the war believed that it was a result of social and economic problems. Clarendon’s interpretation is the most probable and the most convincing. Constitutional disagreements were, very much so, apparent between King and Parliament and the growing political influence of the New Model Army.

This later led to a full-scale Revolution, temporarily wiping out the British Monarchy. In 1642 at the beginning of the first Civil War, “the old political

system had broken down and no new system was visualised so the country drifted to Civil War” claims Peter Gaunt. But by 1645 at Naseby, the New Model Army advanced rapidly and successfully to victory over the Royalists, ending the first Civil War. This was the point by which the power of the Army was on increase and the point by which revolution was inevitable.

David. L. Smith describes as “ crucial turning point”. This was recognised by Parliamentary Presbyterians who later attempted to get rid of the New Model army by sending it to Ireland so they personally start compromising with the King, who had by this time, surrendered to the Scottish Army and had been sold back to the English Parliament. In order to stop the Presbyterians within Parliament arranging some sort of an agreement with the King, Cornet Joyce seized Charles.

This was a success and in June 1647, Christopher Hill noticed that “ the Army and Parliament now existed side by side as rival powers in the state” (To make the Army even more politicised, an Army Council was set up, making Presbyterians withdraw from the House of Commons). During the following years of 1646, Charles’ position as King had crumbled further. Royalist groups were rising, for example, in Glamorganshire but they were easily overpowered and put down by the New Model Army. This was bad news for Charles so he soon realised that he was likely to secure better terms from the Scots than from the English Parliament.

He moved away from Oxford in April 1646 and later, on 5th May, he surrendered and, as David. L. Smith states “ concluded to the second Civil War” which highlighted even more that Revolution by this point was

inevitable. Though only a short war, “ the revival of royalism was crushed by the Parliamentarian Army in the second Civil War” (Peter Gaunt). This later led to a military coup in December 1648. The Army occupied London and later on 30th January 1649, executed the King, abolished Monarchy and established a Republic. The New Model Army had ensured the military defeat of the King.

The “ crushing” of the monarchy resulted in the English Revolution. Charles Carlton believes that “ when Charles began the second Civil War, in effect he signed his own death warrant”. The Army were, therefore, the Mainspring of Revolution even though “ the New Model Army was nothing more than a highly polished version of the old one” according to Charles Carlton. Though the New Model Army were to be the “ mainspring of the Revolution”, perhaps it is questionable whether or not the King or Parliament had an impact. Charles and Parliament were both unwilling to compromise a peace settlement.

Even if they did, a compromise probably would have never been reached, as both wanted only what would benefit themselves. The King had become militarily weak and had disregarded of Parliaments rights and liberties yet he still had his legitimacy. Parliament disrespected his legitimacy and did their up most to overthrow the monarchy. The Army could be seen as a mere sector that happened to side with Parliament and then won them the Civil War by breaking stalemate, therefore gaining the label as the “ mainspring of the Revolution”.

The “ mainspring” could be the decline in the relationship between King and Parliament yet without the help of the Army, stalemate would have probably resumed for much longer than it had done, and could not have led to a Revolution. Though the fact that the Army were the “ mainspring of the Revolution” seems somewhat aggressive, it did deter more radical change. Opponents to the King did carry with them very radical ideas. Opponents included Puritans, militant Presbyterians and radical sectaries. Each group had different radical ideas.

The Puritans wanted to maintain the Established church and retain a reformed episcopacy. Their aims were to get rid of the “ remnants of popery”. The Presbyterians wanted pretty much the same. They accepted the Established Church but wanted to change the way it was governed from the Episcopalian to the Presbyterian form. The Radical Sectaries despised the idea of the Established Church. They regarded a church as a voluntary association of like-minded people, who could worship together according to their own belief.

This radical formation generated a political group known as the Levellers. The Levellers wanted complete toleration of the Radical Sectaries but also the abolition of monarchy and the House of Lords. They wanted to establish a supremacy of the House of Commons. The Levellers were the most influential radical group. They especially influenced sections of the Rank-and-File within the Army and also lower class society. However, radicals failed to influence the Revolution after 1649, but why? Religious radicals, such as the Puritans were pleased because of the defeat of Presbyterianism.

This is a reason why I feel Peter Gaunt's interpretation of the Revolution, as a "Puritan Revolution" is somewhat incorrect. Though there were many Puritans within Parliament, it is misleading to say that everyone was a puritan as not everyone was. The Leveller Constitutional Programme was rejected because "it gave political rights to the ungodly as well as the godly" according to Peter Gaunt. Another reason why radicalism was deterred from being a success was because of the little support it gained. Small numbers of artisans and traders were those in favour of radical reform.

So, because of the rising Political influence and the power of the New Model Army, radical changes were deterred, especially during the Putney debates of October 1647. Representatives of the Army (officers, agitators and grandees) met at Putney Church to debated Leveller demands. This attempt by the Levellers to control the Army was defeated. Though the Army Council was dispersed of, it was soon reunited at the due to the outbreak of the second Civil War. Military control was again resumed.

In comparison to the argument already put forward that the New Model Army was the "mainspring of the Revolution", according to J. G. A Pocock, the Revolution was "caused by a breakdown of the society... it was the pressures of society which dictated the outbreak of the Revolution and shaped the state which emerged from it". This argument is similar to Peter Gaunt's possibility of a "Bourgeois Revolution". The Bourgeois consisted of middle-class people. These people were usually merchants, trades people, and artisans, and later bankers and entrepreneurs. 1 They wanted complete free trade for small producers, the freedom of big merchant companies, disestablishment of the Church and security of small property owners.  
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All the Bourgeois aims and issues were put forward and expressed by the Leveller movement. As already mentioned, these ideas were put forward at the Putney Debates (1647) but the results were inconclusive. Consequently, the Bourgeois deserted the Levellers. It seems, then, that the interpretation of a “ Bourgeois Revolution” is incorrect. The Bourgeois were merely a class of “ disorganization and instability” (Christopher Hill). Perhaps if the Bourgeois became more organized, they could have had more of an impact on the Revolution.

However, there was a possibility that the Revolution was to be shaped by social influence, due to the Digger movement. The Diggers were radicals, who were members of a communistic movement. Their aims were to gain land, for farming, from the Lords of Manors who had, in their opinion, also been defeated as well as the King. In order to achieve their aims, 40 Diggers, led by Gerrard Winstanley and William Everard, began digging uncultivated lands, making them suitable for farming etc. However, the New Model Army dispersed them and both leaders were later arrested.

Again, the New Model Army and “ deterred more radical change” and maintained the force that was to be the “ mainspring of the Revolution”. In conclusion, the Army was the “ mainspring of the Revolution and the force that deterred more radical change”. However, an ongoing bad relationship between King and Parliament influenced this. If their disagreements and arguments had not reached stalemate, perhaps the Army would not have become such a politicized force. The Army deterred social radicals though. Groups such as the Puritans, Presbyterians, the Levellers and the Diggers all failed to gain complete control even though they did try.

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The Army intervened by using force and stop radical succeeding: “ This was a revolution in that it involved a change of a political system by force” (Christopher Hill). This quote sums up the situation completely. The political system was changed due to the force of the New Model Army. Finally, the English Revolution had took place and though the Monarch was restored in 1660, “ there could be no question of putting it back to where it had stood before the Civil War” (R. C Richardson), due to the actions of the New Model Army sparking off and making a Revolution inevitable.