

The causes of the english civil war history essay



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The crown was placed upon his head and with that he became King Charles I of England, on June 2, 1626. Over 25 years later, his head would also symbolize the end of his reign through execution. He would become the first English monarch to be tried and sentenced to death since the monarchy's establishment, largely due to his causing of the English Civil War. The war stemmed from a long-standing weakness of the monarch and Charles I's attempt to strengthen the figure head of a nation. However, the Civil War proved to be crucial to the political system of Great Britain and the United Kingdom. The English Civil War permanently and directly shaped the balance of power between the monarch and the parliament of England.

The underlying problems facing Charles I during his reign began in the 16th century. In 1550, the price of food in England had doubled from that of 1500. The cost then doubled again by 1590 and in 1640 the price was six times that of 1500. A great contributor to this was the importing of silver from Central and South America by Spain during this time period. Such a great increase in currency production inflated prices across Europe, including England. Another factor was a population increase, which led to increased demand and in turn inflation. The lower classes were not the only people affected by this time of difficulty. Queen Elizabeth I was forced during her rule to sell approximately £900, 000 of property in order to pay off personal debt. This act left the monarchy very vulnerable to public scrutiny. It also left many doubting the power, prestige, and divine right of the monarch (Russell 98-99). With the death of King James in 1625, his son Charles took the throne. With regard to political experience, Charles had none. All he did have was royal blood and a claim to divine right. The king was deeply religious

and favored the ceremonious Church of England, partially because as King he was the head of the church. This worried many members of parliament, which was dominantly Puritan. They feared that Charles' taking to ceremonies could possibly lead to his conversion to Roman Catholicism. They also feared that he would then desire to enforce Catholicism as the national religion (Lace 22). This fear was justified by the actions of Charles in Scotland in the mid-1630s. In an attempt to further unite the nations which he ruled, he substituted Anglican worship for the Presbyterian worship which was most commonly prevalent in Scotland. This angered the large Presbyterian population and resulted in a large revolt in 1638 (Gentles 276). Two wars were fought as a result of this conflict. Both were failures and English soldiers retreated in great numbers in 1640. The essential reason for this was the drying up of funds to support the fighting.

In a desperate attempt to increase the current taxes enforced on the public, Charles called together the Parliament which he had vowed never to call again after dissolving it three times prior (Gentles 277). By this point, the majority of the Parliament opposed the taxation put in place by the King. He had recently implemented an additional tax called ship money. This was a tax used specifically to aid the building and maintenance of the Royal Navy. The Parliament, in an attempt to restrict the power of the monarch, passed laws through legislation that called for the beheading of one of Charles' advisors, the earl of Stratford. They also passed bills that abolished all taxes without the consent of the parliament. In addition, Royal courts were abolished that the parliament viewed as supporting the King's abuse of power. King Charles I, to prevent immediate rebellion, signed all of these bills

into law (Lace 36). By doing so, he greatly limited his own power in an attempt for appeasement. Charles ruled peacefully for the following year until October of 1641. It was during this month that rumors spread throughout the nation of England that Irish citizens had begun a rebellion against English rule.

The specifics of the rumors varied. Some claimed that over one hundred thousand English women and children had been killed by Irish mobs. In actuality approximately four thousand English citizens were killed, and very few were women or children. Nonetheless, it was clear that action had to be taken by King Charles I. While these goings on occurred, a member of parliament who opposed the King took it upon himself to present a bill to the parliament. It proposed an even further restriction on the power of the monarch, including the nominating of all the King's advisors by the parliament. Parliament voted and the bill was passed by a very small margin. Charles responded by arresting five members of the parliament, including the composer of the bill. King Charles I personally traveled to the next parliament meeting, only to find that the five persons to be arrested had been notified of their arrest beforehand and had fled. The conflict between the King and the parliament had reached its breaking point. Civil war was eminent (Russell 252-257).

The two sides, those supporting the King and those supporting the parliament, built up their armed forces and raised money in anticipation of the upcoming war. On August 22, 1642 Charles I officially declared war in a public announcement and requested his supporters, the Royalists, take action to assist him in his effort against the parliamentarians as they would

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be known. As in many wars, the two sides created mocking nicknames for each other. The Royalists were called Cavaliers, a reference to the Spanish word caballeros meaning mounted knight which emphasized the quasi-Catholic customs of the King. The parliamentarians were known as the Roundheads. The Roundheads were in actuality an organization of apprentices in London who cut their hair very short (Lace 43).

The support for both sides displayed social variety. The lords of the various territories of England were practically evenly split between the Parliamentarians and Royalists. However, the more influential lords mainly sided with the King. These lords were also vastly skilled as riding horses and trained in fighting on horseback. This presented the Royalists with the advantage during the beginning years of the war in which large expanses of land had to be crossed during battles. In one of the first battles, the Battle of Edge Hill, the sides found it very difficult to control their vast armies. At one point, a large portion of the Royalist cavalymen halted while the rest continued to ransack the belongings of the Parliamentarians who had been forced into retreat. This caused mass confusion on both sides fighting. It resulted in the Parliamentarians returning to the battlefield to continue fighting. The war ended at dusk with both sides agreeing to continue in the morning. This never came to be and the battle was ended with the Parliamentarians taking heavier loses than the Royalists. In this way, the Royalists started the war off on a high note. The battles for the next two years resulted in much the same way, with both sides claiming victory. However, a trend began to form in 1643. The Royalists began using military tactics from the mind of the Parliamentarian Lieutenant General, Oliver

Cromwell. His strategy to send the cavalry into battle in waves proved revolutionary in these conflicts (Lace 47). He led the army into battles in which victory seemed ineffable, including many where the Royalist army outnumbered the Parliamentarian cavalry 2 to 1 and surprise attacks on the Parliamentarian bases. The soldiers under his control fought heroically and in many cases were able to successfully drive the Royalists back to their own camps. After these battles it became clear that the war would continue on for an inconceivable amount of time. However, neither side surrendered but rather continued to recruit soldiers and raise money and supplies to fight on.

In 1644 the tide of the war shifted to the side of the Parliamentarians. In the battle of Marston Moor Royalist forces were outnumbered and suffered a great defeat. Likewise, in the battle of Naseby the Royalists were defeated in a mere three hours. Nearly all of their foot soldiers were killed and a large portion of their cavalry was taken out by the well strategized effort of the Parliamentarians on behalf of Oliver Cromwell (Ashley 119-120, 128-129). This battle ended the first portion of the English Civil War. The fighting would continue for another five years. The battles would conclude with much the same results and in 1648 the Royalists surrendered (Ashley 163). A remonstrance was quickly drafted by a member of the Parliament, Ireton. It called for many constitutional reforms and also the immediate placement of the King on trial. The King was placed on trial, by the decision of the Parliament, and was sentenced to death by execution. King Charles I was beheaded on January 30, 1649 (Gentles 282).

The beheading of the monarch meant an opportunity for the Parliament to restructure the government. They did just that by forming the

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Commonwealth of England. Immediately, the Commonwealth faced foreign invasion. Thousands of Irish citizens revolted yet again and threatened to invade the island of England. However, before the army could be raised to suppress them a rebellion from within their ranks rose up (Lace 78-80). This mutiny was defeated soon after it began and the focus shifted to Ireland. After defeating this rebellion in the battle of Worcester, Cromwell, the Lord-General of the Commonwealth, settled into an entirely political life. He was soon disappointed by the actions of the Parliament under the new government. Instead of focusing on the political and social reforms that fueled the creation of the Commonwealth, many member of the Parliament became determined with the maintenance and expansion of their individual property (Lace 91). Soon Cromwell had had enough. In 1653 Cromwell, much to the dismay of the people of England, disbanded the Parliament indefinitely and became sole ruler of England (Lace 92). This granted him the power he need to pass whatever reforms he pleased, on the other hand it also directly contradicted the policy of a representative form of government that gained him power in the first place. He announced on April 30 his appointment of 140 men to become a representative entity in the English government.

This body, headed by Cromwell as Lord Protector, successfully passed many reforms in its peaceful rule. For the first time in over nine years England experienced no conflict, politically or militaristically, in its government. One of Cromwell's greatest reforms was that of the court system. He abolished the death penalty for insignificant crimes and the court system's efficiency was greatly improved (Lace 98). In 1657 Cromwell was presented with an offer that would require much contemplation, that he accept the crown and

become England's next monarch. After great consideration he declined the offer presented by members of the representative branch of government. He continued to rule as Lord Protector until September 3, 1658 when he died of an apparent infection caused by a kidney stone (Lace 108).

The death of the Commonwealth of England shortly followed that of Cromwell. Despite the reintroduction of the monarch of England, the power of the Parliament had been greatly shifted forever. Never again would a monarch be able to disregard the Parliament as King Charles I had, nor would they ever hold as much power as they had previously. Eventually and to this day, the Parliament would come to control the monarch and not vice-versa. Due to the fighting of the English Civil War the balance of power between the monarch and the Parliament of England was shifted forever.