

Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution



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"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."

Letter from Cromwell to Sir William Spring, September 1643

"...the execution was met with 'such a groan as I have never heard before, and desire I may never hear again'."

Charles I, shortly before his execution

Sources:

- "Geschichte Englands", Kurt Kluxen
- "Die Stuarts – Zwischen Krone und Schafott", Hermann Schreiber
- "Changing Britain", Chris Husbans
- Several Internet sources (please ask for a detailed list when needed)

Oliver Cromwell's life 1599-1642

Oliver Cromwell was born on April 25, 1599 in Huntingdon, a small village near Cambridge. His father Robert was the younger son of Sir Henry Cromwell of Hinchinbrook who was a knight (the "Golden Knight of Hinchbroke") and the grandnephew of Thomas Cromwell, the chief architect of King Henry VIII's political and religious reformation. Being a knight meant that he had very little property – Oliver grew up in poverty. His mother was Elizabeth Steward whose family obtained lands which Henry VIII had taken away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

We don't know very much about Oliver's childhood: he had seven sisters and attended school in Huntingdon. He went to Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge April 23, 1616. In 1617, his father died and Oliver became the legal heir and master of Huntingdon (because he was an only son). It is possible that Oliver studied law for a time at the Inns of Court in London – but it can also be that he went to fight in the "Thirty Years War" (1618-48). On August 22, 1620, he married Elizabeth Bourchier, the daughter of Sir James Bourchier who brought him into contact with the Puritan Party's leading persons. In 1621, his first son, Robert, was born. In the following eighteen years he had eight further children: – four sons and four daughters – together with his first-born Robert, they were nine.

Because of his sagacity, elected by the borough of Huntingdon, he appeared in Parliament the first time – that was in 1628.

In 1630 – because of the failure of his business¹ –, he moved to St. Ives where he worked as a yeoman farmer. In the same year, he experienced a religious conversion to the Puritan cause. When his uncle (his mother's brother) died without heirs in 1637, he inherited a little income and property.

From 1640 on, he represented Cambridge in Parliament; he had quite a lot to say – compared with his first appearance in 1628. He criticized the royal policies and the Anglican Church and claimed more parliamentary power, annual sessions of Parliament and the power to name army generals which was the privilege of the king in this time.

The English Revolution I

In 1628, Parliament passed the Petition of Rights which required Parliament's permission for any taxation the king desired. Charles I adjourned Parliament and ruled without it for about eleven years. When the Scottish rebellion began in 1639, he needed money for an army to crush it. So he called Parliament which wanted him to listen to their complaints before they discussed about money.

Charles was impatient and sent Parliament away. Because Parliament worked for only three weeks it is also called "The Short Parliament".

In 1640, Charles lost the war against the Scots and was forced to pay a lot of money (he didn't have) to the Scottish army. Because he was nearly bankrupt, he called Parliament again ("The Long Parliament" 1640-60) having hope of getting some money – this was in September 1640.

The Long Parliament decided to take measures so that Charles I could never rule again without Parliament. They executed Strafford and arrested Charles's advisers.

When the Rebellion in Ireland started in September 1641, an army was needed to liquidate it. In former times, the king had the power to control the army; but because Parliament didn't trust him any more, they asked him to share his power with them. Charles thought that Parliament wanted to take away all his power – so he tried to arrest five members of Parliament for high treason going into the House of Commons with a couple of soldiers January 4, 1642.

¹ He hardly said anything which some people see as the result of his intimidation because of his high status

Unfortunately for Charles, the MPs were warned and could escape before he arrived. Parliament recognized that they couldn't trust their king any more and so they made up new laws the king didn't agree with. Charles left London looking for support – and came back with an army in August 1642. Parliament also built up an army² – a war was inevitable.

The First Civil War

On August 22, 1642, the Civil war began: Royalists (people who supported the king: the noblemen, the Catholics and the Irish) fought against Parliamentarians (people who supported Parliament: the Puritans, the Scots and the townspeople) in their own country. Cromwell was an officer in the parliamentary army – responsible for a couple of mounted troops. In 1643, he was promoted to colonel and given his own cavalry regiment which he guided through a series of victorious small battles which helped the Parliamentarians to secure East Anglia and the East Midlands against the Royalists. At the end of the same year, he was second in command of the Eastern Association Army (Parliament's largest army) with the rank of Lieutenant-General.

When he won the battle of Marston Moor on July 2, 1644, he helped Parliament to secure the north of the country for them. In 1645, Parliament's largest army was formed newly and given the name "New Model Army" (nicknamed "The Ironsides") – this was done by Cromwell and Sir Thomas Fairfax. Cromwell also became second in command of this army and won the battle of Naseby on June 14, 1645 which played a major role for the victory of Parliament in the Midlands, the South and the South-West.

The First Civil War ended on May 5, 1646 when Charles I surrendered to the Scots.

The Second Civil War and Charles's execution

In June 1647, the Scots turned Charles over to Parliament. He was able to escape and made an alliance with the Scots: if they let him return to the throne, he would make Presbyterianism the official religion of both kingdoms.

When war flamed up again in 1648, Cromwell crushed the rebellion of the Royalists in South Wales and then won the battle of Preston against the Scottish-Royalist Army on August 18, 1648 commanding the New Model Army which had better payment and fought with discipline and enthusiasm – not like the Royalist soldiers who couldn't be paid because Charles hadn't got the money.

When the Parliamentarians finally won the war, Charles I was beheaded after his trial on January 30, 1649. After the king's execution, Parliament executed many prominent members of the Royal Party.

Cromwell wanted to take control over Ireland (1649-50) and Scotland (1650-51) which were (after the battle of Dunbar, September 3, 1650 and the battle of Worcester, September 3, 1651) also part of the new "Commonwealth". In summer 1650, before the battle of Dunbar, Cromwell was appointed Lord General of all parliamentary forces.

Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell

Parliament abolished monarchy in 1649 and promised to make changes in law and landowning. When nothing happened (p.e. taxes were high because the war against the Dutch which was very expensive) and Parliament got unpopular, Cromwell tried to rule with an one-house Parliament and called himself "Lord Protector" of England. On April 22, 1653 he dissolved the Long Parliament after a consultation with a council of officers.

² It was Oliver Cromwell who raised the troops

After the dissolution of the Long Parliament, the "Barebones Parliament" was created – they wanted an abolition of all church positions (including that everyone can become a priest), a radical reform of the educational system and the abolition of lawyers and the law system. On 12 December 1653, a conservative part of the "Barebones Parliament", made up of its minority, dissolved the whole Parliament.

On December 16, 1653, Cromwell accepted the Instrument of Government, a written constitution which granted him to call himself "Lord Protector" and to rule with a one-house Parliament.

The Protectorate

In September 1654, the First Protectorate Parliament met. The Protectorate unified England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland under a single, new, elected British Parliament where every component nation had seats. It was the first government operating under the terms of a detailed written constitution: religious liberty for most Protestant faiths, a council and limited legislative and executive power.

The constitution fixed a single head of state – at this time Oliver Cromwell – who had to coordinate the work of Parliament and Council, but had very few rights and limited powers. He was called "Lord Protector" (not king) and ruled for his whole lifetime. The Protectorate was not hereditary and was the longest stable form of regime in the commonwealth period (1649-1660). In July 1656, Oliver called a new Parliament hoping that the major generals could arrange an assembly of Parliament which was good for him. In September 1656, the Second Protectorate Parliament met.

In 1655, Cromwell divided England into ten districts; each district had got one "Mayor-General" to "uphold the order" with an internal army. This system was called the "Mayor-Generals" system. The money for this system came from former Royalists; Anglicans were persecuted and their prayer book was forbidden.

In March 1657, Parliament offered the crown to Oliver Cromwell. He refused and remained Lord Protector until his death on September 3, 1658 in Whitehall (where he had also the seat of his government). He was buried at Westminster Abbey.

Shortly before his death, he had sent Parliament away saying "I will dissolve this Parliament, and let God judge between you and me" in a public speech³ – England had been a monarchy without a monarch.

England after Cromwell

Cromwell died without solving the financial problems of England. The state had high debts and nobody seemed to be able to control Parliament and the army after his death. His oldest surviving son Richard tried to rule for eight months as Lord Protector until he lost the throne after an army coup in spring 1659 – with his ejection the period of the Protectorate was over.

The Rump Parliament was restored and in November 1659, the Presbyterian MPs which had been retired by Pride's Purge in 1649 were allowed in Parliament again. After that, the Long Parliament arranged elections⁴ and dissolved itself shortly after them. In 1660, a group of generals asked Charles's son to return to England (he fled to France after his father's execution) and to become king. He agreed and restored the Stuart monarchy in spring 1660. Oliver Cromwell was exhumed and posthumously executed⁵ on January 30, 1661.

³ His opponents answered "Amen" when he had ended his speech

⁴ The people could now elect the MPs themselves in public elections

⁵ His head was cut off and put on public display outside Westminster Hall for nearly 20 (!) years

Charles I

A year and a half after Cromwell's birth in 1599, Jacob I's Danish wife gave birth to her second son Charles in November 1600. When he was born, his older brother Henry (Prince of Wales) should have become Jacob's successor. In 1617, Henry died and Charles became Jacob's successor and Prince of Wales.

At the age of 25, Charles ascended the throne. Two months before that, he married the 15 year-old daughter of France's King Henry IV, Henrietta Maria. He had four sons and five daughters with her (he had two sons named Charles, the first one died as a teenager, the second one became his successor → England after Cromwell).

Charles had inherited the financial problems of his father which he tried to solve sending Parliament away (three times between 1625-29) and finally ruling without it for about eleven years⁶. He financed his reign by extracting ship money⁷ and selling commercial monopolies to corporations⁸.

Charles's wife (she was deeply Catholic) angered the nobility which became more and more Puritan by inviting several Catholic friends to the royal court. Because of his wife, Charles tended strongly to Catholicism and forbade anti-catholic laws which were wanted by the Puritan part of the nobility. He used ministers who died "officially" as Catholics.

The Conflict in Scotland

When Charles tried to introduce the "Book of Common Prayer" in Scotland to "unify" the worship of God in summer 1637, the Presbyterian clergy protested and formed the "National Covenant" – together with the nobility and the middleclass – to refuse all religious changes to keep the purity of the Gospel.

Under Alexander Leslie, a huge army of religiously motivated men assembled to fight against the 40000 men Charles sent to Scotland to force the use of the new prayer book. "The First Bishops' War" which started in 1639 was decided before it was really started. So Charles had to admit that the bishops can decide about the new prayer book – this was called the "Treaty of Berwick". Charles didn't like this idea very much because he wanted to control Scotland as a whole. So he called for Sir Thomas Wentworth who was in Ireland during The First Bishop's War. Together with Archbishop Laud, he convinced the king to resume the war in Scotland.

Because Charles had no money due to the first war, he had to recall Parliament after eleven years of his reign without it. Wentworth, who advised the king to do so, became the First Earl of Strafford. Strafford was loyal to the king and thus executed in 1640 (→ The English Revolution I). After three weeks, Charles sent Parliament away because he didn't want to agree to their demands.

When the City of London and the East India Company refused to give money to Charles, he sent Strafford to Ireland where he could get the Parliament of Dublin and one year later the Irish army on his side. In 1640, the "Second Bishops' War" started, this time with Ireland on the king's side. The Scots won again and occupied Northumberland and Durham on the king's costs until Charles would have paid a compensation for their army (£ 850 per day!).

Because there was no money left, Charles had to call the Long Parliament which wanted to share the power over the army with him. Charles thought, they wanted to take away all his power and tried to arrest five MPs (→ The English Revolution I).

⁶ This time of his reign was also called "the Eleven Years' Tyranny"

⁷ Every town which builds naval warships has to pay this fee when there is a war. Charles took the money although there was no real threat for these cities,

⁸ It wasn't allowed to sell monopolies to individuals – so he sold them to corporations to don't do something which was unlawful

The English Revolution II

In August 1641, the Irish Rebellion forced the king and Parliament to do something. Because Scottish people were "planted" onto the land which was taken from the Irish and the pro-presbyterian and the protestant course of England, the catholic Irish rose to rebel.

Parliament agreed to send an army, but there was one big problem: the law said that this army had to be controlled by the king. Because the majority of the MPs didn't trust the king, they decided to make up a new law which only gave control to the troops to trustworthy men. This was done by a complaint to the king in November 1641 called "Grand Remonstrance" which also listed all the political errors of the royal government and claimed the control of the executive for Parliament and parliamentary influence on the church.

When the law was put through, the MPs decided to print and publish it – this was all done on December 15, 1641. When Charles thought that Parliament wanted to take away all his power, he tried to arrest five MPs (compare → The English Revolution I). Charles had to flee to Windsor where he was looking for support. He came back with an army and started the First Civil War in August 1642.

When the First Civil War ended in May 1646, Charles surrendered to the Scots. During his stay in the Scottish Army, he made secret negotiations with them favouring the Presbyterian Constitution of the English Church. He went to Wight Island where he contacted Parliament. Meanwhile, the Scots marched southwards – thinking this was the king's interest.

When Cromwell started to fight the Scottish Army, Charles made up the "Treaty of Newport" in 1648. In this treaty, the king admitted that Parliament had fought the First Civil War in legal defence; the control of Parliament over the army was also included.

Due to the wish of the puritan denomination, the army didn't want Parliament to agree with the treaty, but they did. The Army also blamed the king for the Second Civil War which arose because of the wrong promises Charles made to the Scots (compare → The Second Civil War and Charles's execution).

When the Second Civil War ended, the army arrested Charles at Newport. For them, he was "the man of blood" who "invited" the Scots and allied himself to Parliament. Then they turned against Parliament and sent Colonel Pride who arrested 45 MPs with a couple of soldiers. On December 6, 1648, "Pride's Purge" forced 100 MPs who were Presbyterians to retire from Parliament.

The Army wanted to abolish the monarchy – and so only the "Rump Parliament" consisting of a majority of MPs who supported the army rested. Cromwell pleaded for Charles's life and proposed to give him a chance if he agreed with the army's conditions. Charles didn't agree and said that he would sooner lose his life than the crown.

On December 23, 1648, Charles was put on trial by the army. The accusation was the following: Charles had planned to turn "the ancient and fundamental laws" of the nation to put up a tyrannical regiment.

Charles didn't have any respect of the court because in his eyes no hereditary king could be put on trial by his own people. When the judge said "Charles Stuart is a tyrant", he laughed and refused to say anything for his defence. Only when the judgement was spoken out, he wanted to say something; but the judge forbade him to do so.

It was not easy to get the 58 signatures of all judges for the king's death sentence. It is told that Cromwell was the only one who was really sure of what he did. It is also told that he guided an undecided judge's hand signing the death sentence.

Charles was executed in the early morning of January 30, 1649. Before his execution he said that he had never wanted to cut England's freedoms. He had wanted to "keep liberty and freedom under a government which never would have touched them"⁹.

Many people were shocked when their king was beheaded, but the army cheered. Charles's son fled to France and returned to England in 1660 to restore the monarchy.

⁹ Them = these freedoms

Living in Britain in the 17th century¹⁰

Population grew rapidly since the beginning of the 16th century; and so did the number of poor people (because there wasn't more work only because there were more people). When Henry VIII closed down all the monasteries¹¹ where monks and nuns had looked after poor and sick people, there was no place they could go. Many laws forbade them to beg – those who started begging were punished (persistent beggars p.e. were put in the pillory¹²).

It's not true that people got married very young at this time – that's what a historian named Peter Laslett found out. The commonest age for men to get married was 24, for women 22. Only two out of a thousand marriages were marriages between "younger" couples (between 14 and 18). A vicar who had married a 14 year old girl to a 17 year old man wrote down "a couple of young fools". It's also not true that people had a lot of children at this time.

Everyone believed in God, Heaven and Hell. They thought that God would judge people sending the evil ones to Hell and the good ones to Heaven. Many people believed that the world would end and that this could happen – probably – in their lifetime. All countries of Western Europe were part of the Roman Catholic Church with the Pope as its head. He could appoint archbishops and bishops all over Europe; the Bible and all church services were in Latin. Praying was very important for the people – for the rich in the same way as for the poor.

Because of the people's belief in the Devil, there was also a belief in witchcraft. A witch was a person who was possessed by the Devil (that's what people thought at this time). Parliament passed laws against witchcraft, the first one in 1563. Two years later, the first woman who was accused of being a witch was hanged. Matthew Hopkins who called himself "Witch Finder General" claimed he had found 36 witches (the famous "Essex witches") which were arrested and tortured (18 of them were executed) – this was in the 1640s when "witch hunting" was at its height in England. The reason why people started to hunt witches was simple: if something went wrong¹³ they needed somebody to be blamed for – and that was the Devil and (because they didn't trust each other) the witches (who were possessed by the Devil → beginning of the paragraph).

After 1550, travelling actors started to leave their temporary stages to play in purpose-built theatres. Walter Hodges, author of the book "Shakespeare's Theatre" wrote the following about theatres at this time: "*The theatre was a wooden building forming a circular enclosure around an open courtyard. In this courtyard stood the stage. Around the yard were three galleries, one above the other, with seats for the spectators. In the yard the audience had to stand. There was no roof..*". People enjoyed going to the theatre – rich and poor, young and old. Going to the theatre didn't only mean to see a play, but also to have drink, food and side-shows in the open air.

Until the end of the 17th century, people explained something mysterious saying God or the Devil had caused it. After this time, thinkers were interested in mathematics, physics and astronomy and explored many things which helped them to understand our world. But also during the 17th century there were some important inventions: between 1580 and 1620 instruments like the microscope and the telescope were invented, in the 1620s Galileo proved Copernicus's ideas (the sun is the middle of the universe and all the planets are moving around her) so his works were banned by the Catholic Church and the printing press was introduced in Britain. Newton discovered gravity and found out that light is a mixture of light of different colours. He wrote two books about these two discoveries with all his theories in them and is so still important for modern science.

¹⁰ The facts about "all countries" (third paragraph) refer to the middle of the 16th century (before Henry VIII broke with Rome); the theatre includes the end of the 16th century

¹¹ The Crown always needed money – so Henry closed down the monasteries which were very rich to pay his luxurious court and his debts

¹² Pranger

¹³ Many things went wrong – especially during the First Civil War

The English Revolution (also called the English Civil War) was a period of armed conflict and political turmoil between 1642 and 1660 which pitted supporters of Parliament against the king. The ultimate outcome of the Revolution was the discrediting of the idea of the divine right of kings, the belief that parliament was supreme in political matters, and that the English monarch had to rule in a manner which was limited by a constitutional agreement (i.e. the idea of a constitutional monarchy).