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| **Charles I: After 1637 - not a bad king after all?** *(From an article by Graham Seel in History Review)* | | |
|  | **He was an ineffectual king who quarrelled with his subjects, provoked a civil war, refused to accept defeat and was silenced only by beheading. Yet he was able to persuade an army to fight for him. Some historians now argue that he showed effective powers of leadership and nearly succeeded in keeping his throne.** No sustained attempt has been made to revise the generally accepted picture of Charles I as a catastrophic king during the years 1637-1649. Yet it can be argued that Charles was not without qualities of effective leadership and astute political judgement during the latter period of his reign.  **Events in Scotland, 1637-1640**  In 1637, having collaborated with only a handful of Scottish bishops, Charles introduced in Scotland a revised version of the English Prayer Book. It was met with organised riots and resistance which subsequently crystallised into the National Covenant of 1638 - a pledge to resist innovation in Church and State. But his alleged 'insensitivity to Scottish sensibilities' (Macinnes) may be doubted. There was by 1637 a compelling case for a British King to construct a uniform British Church, in which bishops could act as crown agents throughout his realms - instead of two different Churches under the rule of one monarch.  Charles has been criticised for the way in which he responded to events in Scotland from 1637 - allegedly withdrawing the Prayer Book too late. Yet to have offered concessions at an earlier stage would almost certainly have appeared as royal weakness. His decision to wage war against the Covenanters in 1639 has also been attacked. Yet mobilising the resources of two of his kingdoms in order to quell rebellion in the third was an impressive strategy, which failed largely because of logistical difficulties that were beyond his control. A long period of peace had left the realm unprepared for such action.  A number of contemporaries believed that the consequent decision to sign the Pacification of Berwick in 1639 was a crucial mistake. Yet the truce did at least buy Charles time, a valuable asset since Strafford (Lord Deputy of Ireland) had not yet fully mobilised his army. The subsequent failure of the royal war effort in the Second Bishops' War was arguably because the fighting spirit of the English soldiers was sapped by Scottish claims that they had common interests with the English. Even more damaging was collusion between the Covenanters and English elites, each of whose interests was served by the royal will being thwarted in battle. In such circumstances any monarch would have suffered the humiliation that was heaped upon Charles I in 1640.  **The Long Parliament 1640-1642**  Charles adapted quickly and impressively to changed political circumstances after the meeting of the Long Parliament. During the course of 1641 he assented to bills obliging him to call Parliament at least once every three years, preventing him from dissolving Parliament unless MPs agreed and abolishing the prerogative courts (High Commission and Star Chamber) which had sustained his Personal Rule during the 1630s. Charles also took positive action, appointing seven leading opposition lords to the Privy Council and demonstrating his attachment to Protestantism by marrying his daughter to William of Orange. These and other measures won the King support. At least two-fifths of the House of Commons and the vast majority of the House of Lords chose in 1642 to side with Charles and not Parliament.  Yet despite his conciliatory stance, no political settlement was achieved. Traditional historiography holds that, at least in part, this was because Charles had been slow to offer concessions and that they were made in bad faith (hence his involvement in the First Army Plot). However, it would be an inept politician indeed who made apparent to his opponents the extent of his weakness by immediately offering apologies or concessions. Moreover, since the Scots army was being employed by the Parliamentary opposition to intimidate MPs, Charles' implication in the First Army Plot was not especially shocking. Even his attempt to arrest the Five Members in 1642 can be justified, since they had conspired with the Scots.  The absence of a political settlement from 1640 to 1642 can be attributed to the peculiar circumstances of that period. First, there was no machinery of arbitration and no individual whom both sides could trust. Second, the presence of the Scottish army in England did much to prevent a settlement. It was in their interests to prevent a political settlement between Charles and his English Parliament, in order to stop him using the resources of his larger southern kingdom to dismantle the Covenanting revolution in his northern. Third, Pym drove the Long Parliament into 'a war that nobody wanted' (Fletcher). For his own purposes he fanned suspicions of royal involvement in a Popish Plot. This inflamed opinion (especially after the Irish rebellion of October 1641) and reduced prospects of settlement.  **The First Civil War, 1642-1646**  Historians tend to explain Charles' defeat in the First Civil War by stressing his errors of judgement - like his failure to appoint Montrose as lieutenant general in Scotland until 1644.  Nevertheless, within months of raising his standard at Nottingham in 1642, Charles possessed a sizeable field army numbering perhaps as many as 24,000 by the battle of Edgehill in October. This was an extraordinary achievement and demonstrates his flexibility and nerve. There is also evidence to suggest that the war transformed Charles from an ineffective speaker to a powerful orator, able to motivate and rouse his men. As commander-in-chief, Charles compares well with Essex, the Lord General of Parliament's forces until 1645. He exhibited an impressive personal bravery and tactical agility - assets fundamental to the royalist success at, for example, the battles of Cropredy Bridge and Lostwithiel.  Charles' defeat in 1645-1646 was therefore ultimately less a result of his own inadequacies and more a consequence of Parliamentarian advantages - in particular the latter's possession of a newly modelled army from 1645 and, above all, the fact that London, with its huge resources of men and materials, remained a Parliamentarian stronghold. For this reason alone, once the war had become a war of attrition (as is the nature of civil wars) Charles was always likely to suffer defeat.  **The failure to establish a settlement, 1646-1648**  As is usual in such circumstances, the defeat of a common enemy encouraged the emergence of differences between each of the elements of the victorious coalition – the army, Parliament and the Scots. The continued absence of a settlement also fomented differences within each of these elements: in the army between the Grandees and Agitators; in Parliament between the Independents and the Presbyterians; and in Scotland between the Covenanters and the Engagers. In such a situation the most appropriate policy for Charles was, as he recognised, to seek 'a perfect delaying answer' to the various terms that were put to him.  Of course, the greatest difficulty of such a policy was in deciding at what point it should be pursued no further. After all, if Charles had accepted a version of the Newcastle Propositions in 1646 then he would not have benefited from the politicisation of the army in 1647. Making yet more difficult Charles' decision as to when, how, or even if, to proceed to settlement was the fact that monarchy and divine right authority continued to compel respect. This suggests that the King's error was not that he pursued the wrong policy after 1645 but that he did not prevaricate sufficiently.  Historians have criticised Charles for forming a military alliance (the Engagement) in 1647 with the moderate Covenanting faction of the Scots, because it united his opponents and fatally transformed the army's attitude towards him, the soldiers henceforth declaring their King 'a man of blood'. Yet at the time the scheme had much to recommend it.  The combined effect of riots in London, Norwich and Canterbury on Christmas Day and of a general and widespread revulsion in the English provinces against Par1iament's tyranny suggested that Charles' action was astute and perfectly timed. He could not realistically have anticipated that the Engagers would enter England with a force of only 14,000-15,000 - a mere 40 per cent of the potential force that he could have expected. And Hamilton, the leading Engager who led the descent on England, displayed an unexpected lack of martial qualities.  **Conclusion** Most historians agree that Charles I's astonishing poise and measured speech immediately prior to his death on 30 January 1649 did more for the cause of monarchy than anything he had done during his life. Yet during the difficult years following 1637 he demonstrated effective qualities of leadership, political and military. Above all, Charles' strategy of evasion and delay nearly brought him success - a fact obscured by the high price of his failure. |