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**Why was Charles I executed in 1649?**

**Barry Coward grapples with a question which has become more difficult to answer as a result of recent scholarship. He finds the answer lies in the New Model Army, in religious passion and in Charles himself.**

In his introduction to a collection of essays published in 1982 (*Reactions to the English Civil War*), John Morrill wrote that the question of why Charles I was executed in 1649 'has become easily the most difficult of the range of questions about Tudor and Stuart history with which the undergraduates I teach have to wrestle'. Since then this question has become, if anything, even more difficult to answer, largely because much recent historical writing has successfully demolished key assumptions on which long-accepted explanations for Charles's execution were based. As the first part of this article will show, recent research suggests that much that happened in Britain before 1649 makes the fact that Charles I was executed astonishing. The execution of the king was certainly not the inevitable climax of long-term developments in the previous century. Nor was it brought about by a wave of popular revolutionary opposition to the Stuarts or the institution of monarchy. On the contrary, Charles I was probably more popular at the moment of his execution than at any other time in the 1640s (and maybe even before that). The main part of this article, therefore, suggest that the search for the solution to the puzzle of why Charles was executed must begin by unravelling the motives that in the late-1640s drove a minority of men to take the high-risk and incredibly radical step of putting Charles Stuart on trial on a charge of having 'a wicked design totally to subvert the ancient and fundamental laws and liberties of this realm and, in their place, to introduce an arbitrary and tyrannical government', of finding him guilty, and then of cutting off his head (if necessary, as one of them, Oliver Cromwell, said) with the crown on it.

**Exploded theories**

Twenty years or so ago this question was relatively easy to answer. Few historians questioned the fact that Charles I's execution was the inevitable climax of long-term developments that had begun in the previous century, and of the escalating radicalism of events in Britain during and after the Civil War. In the light of recent writings by historians (often labelled 'revisionism') such views are now suspect. Whatever the validity of recent criticisms made of revisionism, there is no reason to think that they have undermined the contention made in the 1970s and 1980s by G.R. Elton, C. Russell and others that parliaments in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were not full of MPs anxious to 'win the initiative' from the crown in the making of policy. Early Stuart politics were not primarily characterised by conflicts between the crown and parliaments. MPs were fearful of what the crown might do, but these fears did not lead them into a campaign of parliamentary aggression designed to erode the constitutional powers of the crown.

Nor were those powers inevitably threatened during the same period by the development of revolutionary Puritanism. Work by P. Collinson, N. Tyacke and others published since the later 1970s has shown that whatever Puritans were (and they did exist), they were not a revolutionary group intent on destroying the basic structure of the post-Reformation English Church. On the contrary, they were 'a militant tendency' within the Church who wanted to reform but not overthrow it. Of equal importance, they were not hostile to the basic structure of a monarch-centred State.

Even before the appearance of these revisionist views, it had already become difficult to accept that Charles I was executed as the inevitable climax of another long-running development: 'the rise of the gentry'. While accepting that the gentry landed elite as a whole grew and prospered during the century before 1640, it became impossible to relate that to the political crisis of the mid-seventeenth century, since in that crisis the English landed elite split down the middle. Moreover, any connection between 'the rise of the gentry' and the king's execution became even less plausible when it was realised that, as the 1640s wore on, even those members of the gentry who had once opposed the king, became firm supporters of him.

The growing conservatism of the gentry is a neat link to another theme of recent writing which has undermined once-popular explanations of the execution of Charles I: the paradoxical fact that the English Revolution of the 1640s was probably characterised more by conservatism than revolution. One of the most extraordinary features of the 1640s is the way that support for Charles I grew despite frequent illustrations of the king's ineptness and untrustworthiness. Despite his blundering attempt to arrest the leading parliamentarians on 4 January 1642, during the next few months he gained enough support to enable him to take on the parliamentarian armies on the Civil War battlefields. Despite the revelations of his treaty with the Irish rebels in 1643 and his negotiations with foreign powers while negotiating with his domestic opponents, when the war ended support for a settlement with the king on minimal terms grew. Despite numerous revelations of his treachery in conducting post-war negotiations, parliamentary enthusiasm for them rarely subsided. It is true that Charles's Engagement with the Scots in December 1647 prompted the parliamentary decision in January 1648 never again to negotiate with the king (the so-called Vote of No Addresses), but the vast majority who supported that Vote changed their minds within a matter of weeks. On 5 December 1648, even though the House of Commons was surrounded by hostile soldiers, a comfortable majority of MPs (129 to 83) voted to continue negotiations with the king at Newport in the Isle of Wight on terms that would have allowed him back with very few limitations on his power.

How on earth was it, then, that only a few weeks later, on 30 January 1649, Charles I, far from being restored to power, was on the scaffold with his head about to be severed from his neck by the executioner's axe?

**Cromwell and Ireton**

The answer clearly is not because of long-term developments that were corroding the monarchy in Britain or because Charles I lacked support in the country. The main argument of what follows is that the answer is to be found in the minds of the tiny minority in the country, officers and soldiers in the parliamentary New Model Army, together with their civilian supporters at Westminster and in the provinces, who had the political and military power in 1648-9 to override the wishes of the majority. Of these, two men are of crucial importance, Oliver Cromwell and his son-in-law Henry Ireton. Ireton deserves at least to share the historical spotlight with his father-in-law, who spent the greater part of 1648 away from London and the centre of events in the south of England and who only committed himself to bringing the king to trial at the very end of December 1648. It was Ireton who drafted the Army Remonstrance that called for Charles, 'that Man of Blood', to be brought to justice. It was Ireton who was in the eye of the revolutionary storm from September 1648 until the execution of the king in January.

What drove men like Ireton and Cromwell to execute the king? Since Ireton and Cromwell lacked the most obvious characteristic of regicides, an ideological commitment to republicanism, even this is a question that is not without difficulties. Until at least November 1647 both men had been firm supporters of monarchy. At the famous Putney Debates in the Army Council in October-November 1647 they had resisted the demands of radical army agitators and Levellers for a republic, as well as for a more democratic franchise. Until November 1647 they had spent months working assiduously for a settlement with Charles I that would have restored him to power. Only after the king's escape from army custody on 11 November 1647 and his subsequent Engagement with the Scots did Cromwell and Ireton abandon that attempt and press for the Vote of No Addresses (see above) in January 1648. However, unlike many others who supported the Vote, Ireton (and eventually Cromwell also) remained committed to a settlement without the king. What made them change their attitude to the king in the twelve months that followed the collapse of the Putney Debates in November 1647?

**The Motives of the Minority**

There are three broad explanations. The first reason is fairly straightforward. It is what Cromwell himself called 'necessity', by which he meant that political reality dictated that Charles I should be got rid of. Until near the end of 1647 the army leaders, including Cromwell and Ireton, had believed that everything they had fought for in the Civil War could be achieved by a settlement with the king. The terms of this settlement were set out clearly in the army's Heads of the Proposals, which had been drafted by Ireton in July 1647. This remarkable document makes clear that, for its drafters, the Civil War had been fought to safeguard parliament's place in the constitution and also to bring about a loosely organised national Church that would allow a large amount (albeit not unlimited) freedom of conscience for Protestants, so that they could continue the unfinished work of bringing about a national spiritual regeneration. Charles's alliance with the Scots in December 1647 was the final act of royal treachery that convinced them that this cause could not be achieved by a settlement with the king. As in 1639-40 and 1643-44, so now in 1647-48, the interconnections between England and Scotland were crucial in provoking a radical turn of events south of the Border. For Ireton (if not yet for Cromwell) after the king's Engagement with the Scots an agreement with Charles I was out of the question.

This hostility to Charles I was particularly intense among those in the New Model Army. As in many armies that have fought long wars elsewhere and at other times, an esprits de corps had been forged in the ranks of the New Model Army by a common sense of suffering and achievement. Many soldiers felt (as did some in a later twentieth-century army) that they should not disband until there was created a land fit for heroes to live in. This feeling of comradeship had the effect of distancing soldiers from those who had not fought. It stiffened their determination during the course of 1648 not to abandon the cause for which they had fought by trying to reach a settlement with the king. They did not take the path followed by many of the army's erstwhile civilian allies, like Lords Saye and Sele and Oliver St. John, who peeled away from supporting the army in order to support the treaty negotiations with the king at Newport. This 'army explanation' of why a few turned away from Charles in 1648 is illustrated well in Cromwell's letters during the Second Civil War in 1648. As he fought a rebellion in Wales and then opposed a Scottish invasion in Lancashire, he wrote letters that express the utter horror he shared with many of his comrades-in-arms at the reckless way Charles had plunged the country into another bout of bloodshed. As a result he came to believe that those who opposed the army in the Second Civil War were guilty of worst crimes than those he had fought during the First Civil War. The war of 1648, he wrote on one occasion, was 'a more prodigious treason than any that had been perpetrated before, because the former Quarrel [i.e. the first Civil War] was that Englishmen might rule over one another; this war [i.e. the second Civil War] is to vassalise us to a foreign nation'.

During the course of 1648 the hatred and contempt that men like Ireton and Cromwell felt for Charles I grew. What transformed that loathing into a determination to end his life, however, was religious passion. It was this that fired them to do what had hitherto been unthinkable, to kill the king. A good starting point for understanding this vital point is the importance of the belief in God's Providence felt by many godly Protestants at this time. The belief that every action on earth was governed by God's will was a very pervasive one. It was therefore not unusual or extraordinary that many who had served in the New Model Army came to believe that the victory in the first Civil War had been achieved with God's help and was a sign of God's blessing. This is the context in which one should read Cromwell's famous battle reports during the first Civil War: 'Truly England and the Church of God hath had a great favour from the Lord', he wrote after the battle of Marston Moor in July 1644. After the battle of Naseby in June 1645 he wrote in a similar manner, elated at what he saw as God's Providence: 'This is none other than the hand of God and to Him belongs the glory'. These claims are not those of a fanatical religious eccentric; they were widely shared within the ranks of the New Model Army and among their supporters.

The unquestioned assumption that the New Model Army's victory in the first Civil War was in fact God's victory dramatically shaped the attitudes of many in the army to their opponents in 1648. Those who fought against them came to be seen not just as war criminals who had plunged the country into renewed war and bloodshed; they also came to be seen as guilty of a far greater crime, that of defying the judgment of God. For that there was only one possible penalty: death.

The first significant sign of this feeling in the ranks of the New Model Army can be seen at the end of April 1648 when there took place a quite extraordinary meeting of the General Council of the army at Windsor. Faced by the grave news of an impending Scottish invasion and reports of outbreaks of rebellions in south Wales and elsewhere, the officers of the New Model Army spent three days in prayer, trying desperately to discover the causes of the crisis. The conclusion they came to reflects their belief in providence: they must, they said, 'go solemnly to search out … our Iniquities, which we were persuaded had provoked the Lord against us'. Out of the subsequent bouts of introspective prayer came the first suggestion in public that perhaps God's anger was caused by the army's negotiations with the king after the end of the first Civil War. If this was the case, it was suggested, 'it was our Duty, if ever the Lord brought us back to Peace, to call Charles Stuart, that Man of Blood to account, for that the blood he had shed and mischief he had done to the utmost, against the Lord's cause and people in these poor nations'.

As the army fought during the second Civil War, this idea took root and spread. Cromwell was not alone in believing that those who opposed them were guilty of heinous crimes against God, but his letters during the summer of 1648 dramatically reflect this view. 'Their fault', he wrote on one occasion, 'who have appeared in this summer's business [the second Civil War] is certain double to theirs who were in the first [Civil War], because it is the repetition of the same offence against all the witnesses that God has borne, by making and abetting to a second war'. It is an attitude that accounts for the harsher treatment of prisoners of war by the New Model Army in 1648 than in the first Civil War. Cromwell's letters again illustrate this feeling well. Their 'iniquity', he wrote about the leaders of the anti-army rebellion in south Wales, 'was double, because they had sinned against so much light and against so many evidences of Divine Presence, going along with and prospering a righteous cause'. It was this that probably accounts, for example, for Fairfax's order after the defeat of the siege of Colchester in August 1648 that two of the ringleaders of the rebellion be summarily executed against the walls of Colchester Castle after a brief court martial. It also explains why in October and November 1648 in army regiments up and down the country, in the north east and well as the south of England, demands appeared for ending the Newport Treaty negotiations with the king. These were included in the Army Remonstrance which was accepted by the Army Council on 18 November and which called for capital punishment to be meted out to the army's enemies, including that war criminal, that 'Man of Blood', Charles Stuart.

**Godly Puritanism**

Certainly by this stage Ireton had come to the conclusion that the king's death was required by God in order to regain His blessing; otherwise the cause for which they had fought, the intertwined cause of parliamentary and religious liberties and further reformation, would be doomed. Exactly when Cromwell came to the same conclusion is not clear, but there is little doubt that by the last week of December 1648 he had made the awesome decision. Significantly, at about that time, on 27 December, when the trial of the king was being discussed in parliament, a minister, Thomas Brook, delivered a sermon in parliament which captures the (literally) awful religious logic that lay behind these grave events. He spoke on a spine-chilling text from the Old Testament Book of Numbers, chapter 35, verse 33: 'You shall not pollute the land wherein you are; for blood it defileth the land, and the land cannot be cleansed of that blood that is shed therein but by the blood of him that shed it'. That reflects well the 'eye for an eye' logic that was a powerful element in the religious zeal that stiffened the determination of a few men to carry out the king's execution.

Godly Puritanism has a key role in explaining what happened on 30 January 1649. The assumption should not be made, however, that the existence of godly Puritanism made the king's execution inevitable. Godly zeal could quite easily have been a buttress of strong monarchy (as it was in the reigns of Elizabeth I and James VI and I). Godly Puritan zeal was not inherently anti-monarchical. As has been seen, godly zealots like Cromwell and Ireton had been keen to conclude a monarchical settlement until the end of 1647. That godly zeal and godly zealots were turned against the king was due almost entirely to what Charles I did. His behaviour, and especially his refusal to negotiate seriously, drove men who were social and political conservatives to embark on an act of extreme political revolution. Charles I's actions turned godly zealots against the monarch. Therefore, to the list of reasons that make up the complete answer to why Charles I was executed in 1649, should be added one final one: the utter political stupidity of Charles I himself.

**Why was Charles I executed?**

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| **TRADITIONAL VIEWS** | **Revisionist views** |
| Easy to explain | Difficult to explain |
| Inevitable | Contingent |
| Climax of long-term trends | Result of short-term factors |
| Caused by popular pressure | Occurred in spite of popular feeling |
| Importance of broad social developments | Importance of key individuals |

**Further Reading:**

* On revisionism and its critics, see R. Cust and A. Hughes's introductions to their *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religions and Politics 1603-42* (Longman, 1989) and *The English Civil War: a Reader* (Arnold, 1997)
* The best book on the events leading up to Charles's execution is still D. Underdown, *Pride's Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (Clarendon Press, 1971), chapters 4-7
* See also C.V. Wedgwood, *The Trial of Charles I* (Penguin, 1983) and biographies of Charles by P. Gregg (Dent, 1981) and C. Carlton (Routledge, 1983, 1995)

**About the Author:**

Dr. Barry Coward is Reader in History at Birkbeck College, University of London. Among his publications are *Oliver Cromwell* (Longman, 1991) and *The Stuart Age: England 1603-1714* (2nd ed. Longman, 1994). His latest books are *Stuart England: The Formation of the British State* (Longman, 1997) and (with C. Durston)*The English Revolution: a Sourcebook* (John Murray, 1997).