

“That which you have by force, I count as nothing.” Was the English Revolution anything more than a military coup d’état?

The English Revolution was the Army’s revolution. It was only the Army’s radicalisation that proved the trigger for the literal and metaphorical decapitation of the British political structure in 1649. This essay concedes that England’s Revolution was a coup: the military took power by force or threat of, and thereafter Army officers held power which was based on Army loyalty. However, England’s Revolution should not be judged as “simply” a coup in the traditional mould, like recent ones in Sudan or Zimbabwe. The Revolution enjoyed propulsion from the lower ranks, which meant this coup was not limited to a self-interested *junta* as in many others but had widespread ideological support. More importantly, it did not stem from cynical motivations; Army radicals felt they were safeguarding the public against Charles, who by his own royal policies had threatened the English people. A lofty aim by any standard – not one typical of our traditional *coup d’état*. Furthermore, a coup was not the preferred option. Rather, it was *intended* as a means to an end. That end was the spiritual and therefore political progress of England and its people– admittedly, towards a future dictated by Army officers.

The men that drove the English Revolution were what one parliamentarian called ‘that violent and rash part of the army’¹. They were a radical minority as compared to the >90% of soldiers who never took up arms for political ends.² Their impatience grew at Parliament’s reticence over decisive action against the King, who Army radicals felt was personally responsible for the resumed bloodshed of 1648. By 1647, this faction was prepared to act alone to achieve their aims; in June, it did. Troopers led by a Cornet Joyce seized Charles from Parliamentary custody to gain for them a bargaining chip in the game being played for England’s future. Army radicals found success when they resorted to arms or threat of their use: in January 1648, they pressured Commons into denying further negotiation with the King. Furthermore, by November, the Council of Officers passed a death sentence upon Charles, a verdict then pressed on England’s civilian leadership. Officers were prominent in drafting the *Agreement of the People*, whose “popularity” one colonel worried was falsely advertised: ‘I should be very unwilling we should force the people to an agreement.’³ Thus even high-ranking officers were willing to admit publicly that the Army’s influence was disproportionate its popularity among the “political nation”. Army activity was responsible for the most “revolutionary” act of the Revolution: the Regicide. In December 1648, contradicting its January resolution, Parliament voted to continue negotiations with the King. The Army reacted, and Colonel Pride’s regiment initiated a “purge” of the Commons against men opposed to their outlook. Staffed solely by Army sympathisers, in January 1649 Commons charged the King with treason (for which the sentence was execution). Army men effectively took control of policy. He was beheaded soon after in what was arguably the civil war’s only “revolutionary” moment. The Army declared it had supported regicide to rid the

¹ Sir Gilbert Pickering; *Thurloe State Papers* (1742), vol. V, p. 674

² Gentles, pp. 345-6

³ *Ibid*, p. 288

country of the King's "warmongering influence". Similarly, it had purged Parliament to protect liberty "threatened" by a Presbyterian faction which in May 1648 had passed blasphemy and heresy laws effectively forbidding dissent. However, it can seem that the Army, by use of arms and political purges, was often guilty of the crimes it charged its opponents with.

Once the Army assumed control, as with most coups, it directed grand policy through itself or proxies (sympathetic MPs). The Rump Parliament reflected this, a veritable echo chamber. With the Lords and Privy Council abolished, the Army-dominated Commons and the Council of State held an unprecedented legislative monopoly. The role of the military in British politics became, as Professor Smith judges, inextricable almost to the point of symbiosis.⁴ Furthermore, an Army general, Oliver Cromwell, became England's political hegemon. His tenure is reminiscent of myriad military dictatorships, directed towards the interests of a minority thrust into power by coup. He dissolved the Rump in April 1653, evidently discarding the "free" way⁵ he had so apparently favoured in war. Though he resurrected Parliament afterwards, this was likely to avoid accusations of dictatorship, whilst consolidating power for himself (like Caesar refusing the title *rex*), as MPs were "nominated" by Army officers. Parliament was subjected to Cromwell and the Army. In December 1653, Cromwell shattered any illusions by declaring himself Lord Protector, having the document ratifying this drafted by an Army Major-General. His power base now rested on support from Puritan radicals and his troops, a franchise comprising *at most* 0.4% of the English population.⁶ Army men gained greater influence under the monarchic Protectorate: for example, between 1655-7, the infamous "Rule of the Major-Generals" enforced by military authorities (directly answerable to Cromwell) iconoclastic regulations upon a reluctant English populace. By threat and intelligent application of violence, the Army came to dominate the public landscape of England. However, we cannot assume these results were those *intended* by the creators of the Revolution—when has a plan ever survived first contact with the enemy?

One thing distancing the English Revolution from our traditional coup was the driving force given to it by men of lower social status. Not limited to a cabal of senior officers, it comprised both ordinary soldiers and junior officers: many active revolutionaries had not previously been part of the "political nation", and had few, if any, vested interests in the system they were proposing to implement—save ideological ones. Army radicals who participated in the mutinies of 1647 and Putney Debates that shook Army leaders into action contained a substantial proportion of men of a "lower social class". Cornet Joyce, who seized the King in 1647, held the Army's lowest commissioned rank. Among the colonels, Ewer had been a manservant, Harrison was a butcher's son, Jones born to £8-10 annually. Colonel Pride, whose actions paved the way for Regicide and thus the Commonwealth, was previously a brewer's employee.⁷ We can compare it to Japanese Nationalist coups of the

⁴ Smith, p. 171

⁵ T. Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London* (1667), p. 73

⁶ (1650) Statistics from Gentles, p. 10 and Wrigley & Schofield, 'The Population History of England, 1541–1871. A reconstruction.', Harvard University Press (Ann Arbor, 1981), pp. 208-9, table 7.8

⁷ Hill, *GE*, p. 65

1930s: these were often initiated by junior officers down to the rank of Lieutenant angered by the inertia of their superiors, a phenomenon called *gekokuujō* in Japanese. We can see that the English Revolution differed from most coups in that it enjoyed a relatively diverse social base. Crucially, it consisted of men who did not have vested interests in the system Revolutionaries were supposing to implement as a replacement. It is important to differentiate this from many other coups because the men who played the main role in this were ideologically, rather than materially, invested. Their contribution meant that, as one royalist remembers, Cromwell often ‘carried his friends with him into that way which the Army did choose’⁸.

The Army revolutionaries believed that *salus populi suprema lex*— public safety is the highest law. We can distance the Army revolutionaries from the likes of Spanish Nationalists, for example, who moved against the Republican government out of personal disdain for its politics. Though this was by no means absent among radicals, they were acting in what they deemed was the public interest, i.e. the correction of ecclesiastical and political alterations made under Charles. Addressing questions of worship and thus pursuit of Heaven was the chief concern of revolutionaries, their politics was somewhat directed towards achieving eternal life with God (the means of achieving this were subjective). They saw Reformation as the means, and Catholicism as a threat to their aim. The Reformation would bring Heaven closer to Earth, and though they felt Charles and his Archbishop Laud stood in the way of this, Army radicals did not initially see Regicide as the answer. Revolution was also a defence against worldly tyranny. One foretaste of this was Laud’s intrusive and insensitive church reforms, interestingly labelled by one peer ‘an English, though not a Roman, popery.’⁹ As well as protecting English godliness, radicals saw themselves as defending earthly wellbeing against arbitrary rule. This was a rule which had used Catholic troops to suppress good Protestants in Scotland (1639-40), as well as enforcing unpopular doctrine upon the Scottish Kirk (e.g. usage of the Book of Common Prayer) and levying taxes such as Ship Money (1628-40) to finance such affairs. In order to achieve such heavenly aims, political changes needed to be made on the ground reflecting them. The very act of pursuing these goals was evidence of the radicals’ own predetermined “godliness”, which Calvinist theology ordained would convey them into Heaven. The intention here was not cynical subjection of the English people to the Army, but to *subdue the King to them* for the spiritual and therefore political good of England. In this, the radicals deserve our empathy, if not our sympathy.

To rid England of these threats, it gradually became necessary to push Charles aside. However, the Army originally intended to remove the King’s executive powers rather than his head. This is different from other coups, such as Sulla’s (82 BC): his end goal was power, and any compromise was sacrificed. However, Manning maintains that even after Pride’s Purge, Charles’s execution was not a foregone conclusion.¹⁰ Even Oliver Cromwell, the Army man who was to become leader of the English Republic, wrote that regicide was ‘not only a most wicked’, but ‘impossible design’¹¹. The Council of Officers, months before

⁸ Sir John Berkeley in Hill, *GE*, p. 69; a statement tinged by natural Royalist hostility to Cromwell

⁹ Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, *Speech Made to the House of Commons concerning episcopacy* (1641), p. 4

¹⁰ Manning, p. 26

¹¹ Cromwell in letter to a royal adviser (July 1647) in Hill, *GE*, pp. 70-1

clamouring for regicide, voiced their desire that ‘the hearts of the king and people may be knit together’¹²– though this could be interpreted as a public relations manoeuvre designed to portray its authors as peacemakers. However, the fact that the Army failed to act in a “revolutionary” way not during the First Civil War, but months into the Second is evidence in itself. We can see that state control was not the endgame, and only became necessary when Army radicals felt it was clear that national progress could not be assured with the King alive. Cromwell and the radicals came to believe, possibly correctly, while Charles lived, England lay in a ‘bleeding, nay, almost dying condition.’¹³ This is where the English Revolution differs from other coups. The King’s enlistment of the Scots in 1648 to his cause resumed civil war, which the Army knew would bring a new bout of bloodshed. Frustration at this birthed sentiments that facilitated the Revolution and Regicide. Before this, however, the Army *wanted* an accommodation to be possible. Charles’ actions, it appears, convinced radicals that the wellbeing of England could not be achieved without the elimination of Charles. Professor Kishlansky puts it best: ‘the war created radicalism; radicalism did not create the war.’¹⁴

To conclude, the English Revolution was essentially a coup. Military intervention initiated first political purge and then Regicide. England was ruled by puppet parliaments subject to military dictatorship. One radical speaker was not entirely wrong when he declared “King, Monarchy and Parliament fell into the hands, and upon the swords of the Army”¹⁵. However, we must understand the Revolution as a coup made up of conscientious, rather than power-hungry or bloodthirsty, radicals. The Revolution included an unusual contribution from men of lower social status, evidence of no small degree of popularity. It was spawned by long-term conscientious objections to royal behaviour shared by many across England. The Army, rather than acting (primarily) in cynical self-interest, was greatly concerned with the *salus populi*. Though at its inception the Revolution was created to bring salvation, both religious and political, to the English people, it ultimately failed to achieve the aims that underpinned it (covered paragraph 2)– like Bolshevik ones centuries later, the radicals’ ideas proved incompatible with reality. Though we may display empathy towards Army radicals and their ambitions, that does require sympathy with their movement, which was still a coup. The English Revolution demonstrates the near-impossibility of translating radical ideas (however lofty) into the positive, meaningful change they pursue. By 1660, English revolutionaries had failed in their calling to ‘remove mountains, [and do] such things as were never yet done by men on earth.’¹⁶

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¹² *The Representation and Consultations of the Generall Council of the Armie at St. Albans*, 14 Nov 1648, Thomason Tracts, BL E472/3, p. 3

¹³ Cromwell to Parliament (December 1644) in Hill, *GE*, p. 54

¹⁴ Kishlansky, p. 161

¹⁵ Joseph Salmon, ‘A Rout, A Rout’ (1649) in N. Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the Seventeenth Century*. Junction Books (London, 1983) p. 190

¹⁶ Cornet Joyce during the Whitehall debates (January 1648) in Gentles, p. 290

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