Should the English Civil War properly be seen as <u>just</u> one of the wars of the three kingdoms of the mid-seventeenth century, all stemming from the so-called "<u>British Problem</u>"?

The English Civil War has taken centre stage in the history of Britain's warring period of 1637-51. The Bishops' Wars and Eleven Years' War have been portrayed more as background events in the story of the English Civil War, while England and its internal divisions have enjoyed a spotlight in explaining its causes[1]; rather than investigating the unifying causes of all three wars. Each kingdom was member of a multiple monarchy ruled under Charles during this period. Thus, the consequences of the English state trying to rule in three kingdoms with different religious and political makeup, with a particular policy of unifying these three kingdoms, is an avenue worth exploring in explaining why each of these wars occurred. This we define as the "British problem". As such, we will consider the ways in which the "British Problem", as defined, contributed to the Bishops' Wars, the Eleven Years' War and the English Civil War, subsequently considering whether the English Civil War deserves the significance it has been attributed.

Let us consider the three kingdoms in the order armed resistance against King Charles I arose, starting off with the Bishops' Wars in Scotland, 1637. These wars were fundamentally a result of England's failed policy of securing cultural hegemony over Scotland. Charles wanted to align the Scottish Church with the English Church by promoting Laudian policies. For example, he arbitrarily introduced a new set of Canons and a new Prayer Book in Scotland which was in line with English practice. Firstly, they ardently opposed these adaptations as they were seen as too synonymous with Catholicism. Moreover, Charles' policy promoted the role of the bishops in the Church[2]. Whereas, in the view of the Scots, the church should have been governed by ministers and elders. It was these qualms which they fought for in the Bishops' Wars, made apparent by the 1638 National Covenant which pledged to oppose such "innovations"[3]. Thus, we see that the chaos that broke out in Scotland was due to the British problem as Charles had been too insistent on enforcing English religious domination over a kingdom loyal to the structures and practices of Presbyterianism.

Similarly, War broke out in Ireland in 1641 due to Charles' desire to secure conformity within Britain. Firstly, Charles (through the Earl of Strafford) pushed to enforce Laudian practices. He also promised the Catholics that The Graces would be pushed through: a suspension of disabilities of the Catholics and the security of tenure for 'old English' landowners. This alarmed the 'New English' as they saw these Arminian policies as crypto-catholic in pairing with the Graces, as well as being alarmed at the thought of losing their land. Thus, a wedge was driven between the administration and the recent Protestant planters. Charles lost further support from the Old English and Gaelic Irish when the promised Graces never ended up getting past the Protestant administration. Simultaneously, the plantation scheme continued[4] in pursuit of political allegiance between the two kingdoms, the Gaelic Irish were grated further. Although it was not the uniformity Charles had hoped for, these actions amounted to the temporary unification of these previously divided groups in their shared hatred for the policy being pursued, resulting in the Irish Rebellion of 1641. As such, we see that once again, due to the religious differences between

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[1] See Lawrence Stone's *The Causes of the English Revolution*

[2] This is a policy that dates back to the Acts of Revocation in 1627 when he increased the wealth of the bishops by revoking land grants made to noblemen, symbolising how long this clash had been going on for, with it being labelled 'the groundstone of the mischief that followed' by Sir James Balfour.

[3] Burrell, S. A. "The Covenant Idea as a Revolutionary Symbol: Scotland, 1596-1637." *Church History* 27, no. 4 (1958): 338-50. Accessed July 13, 2021. doi:10.2307/3161138.

[4] The term 'Plantation' describes the process in which the land of Gaelic Irish was confiscated from rebellious landowners and was given to loyal settlers who promised to use English laws, language and customs.

England and her subject kingdom (in this case Ireland) paired with the policy of the monarch that one must secure religious and political conformity across his kingdoms, war broke out.

We must also examine the connectivity of the events in Ireland and Scotland as part of the British problem. First, it is possible to suggest that the outbreak of war in Scotland was a consequence of Charles being distracted by issues in Ireland. In Ireland there was a degree of compromise in which Archbishop Ussher and Bishop Bramhall were left to battle about the contents of the canons amongst themselves because of the political infighting that broke out between Ussher and Wentworth; whereas, the Scottish canons appeared almost without warning, drawn up by a committee of bishops mostly appointed by Laud, an Arminian. The difference in treatment we observe likely occurred because of Charles being pre-occupied with dealing with the said resistance that had arisen in Ireland. The combination of the lack of compromise and the comparison to the better treatment the Irish received may have become a source of Scottish bitterness towards Charles and subsequently increased their motivation to rebel. Moreover, the problem with two kingdoms with similar motivations meant that one could watch the other closely and decide their actions having seen the reaction of the English. This is best illustrated in the Irish rebellion being viewed as a copy of the Bishops' Wars: when one leader was captured and asked what he was attempting to do, he replied, "to imitate Scotland, who got a privilege by that course". Thus, we see that the burden of dealing with two opposing kingdoms simultaneously would worsen the conditions in both, and the British problem proves potent in causing outbreak of war.

Moving to the final act: The English Civil War, 1642. Had it not been for the conflicts in Ireland and Scotland, the Civil War in England would have never occurred. First, it was the Bishops wars that forced parliament congregate after 'The Eleven Years' Tyranny'[5], since the victorious Scottish refused to accept a treaty not confirmed by an English parliament. This meant that their long list of grievances finally had the audience of the king. This summoning would turn into the Long Parliament, elevating tensions in England as Charles battled with his parliament over their demands. Successively, the Irish Rebellion of 1641 directly caused the outbreak of war in August 1642 when parliament refused to grant Charles the permission to raise an army but did so anyway. Thus, we see the British problem frontstage and centre causing the English Civil war.

Moreover, the very existence of other kingdoms to turn to for support meant Charles was less inclined to resolve the dispute in his own. This can be seen in May 1641, when after the failure of the Army Plot, Secretary Vane thought that Charles would settle with his English Parliament, stating 'there being in truth no other (course) left'. Instead, he was able to create a Scottish party via keeping relations with Montrose, which (in Charles' perspective) would elevate his chances against parliament. Therefore, we may conclude that the English Civil war was triggered by the British problem both through the uprisings in Scotland and Ireland precipitating its outbreak and the fact that the presence of two other kingdoms disincentivised Charles making peace efforts in England.

However, the British problem does not account for why parliament did not support their king by the time the Bishops' Wars arrived. First, not summoning parliament for Eleven Years' meant the trust they had in their king had disappeared such that when he promised to address their grievances after dealing with the war in Scotland, they did not believe him. Yet, by insisting that he address their grievances immediately, they weakened England's chance of reacting with a united front and quashing the uprising in Scotland immediately. Yet, why did parliament have so many grievances? In short, the answer lies in Charles' handling of two key areas: religion and finance. Charles' new religious policy to strive for conformity within his own kingdom led to the promotion of Arminian

[5] See S.R. Gardiner's *History of the Great Civil War, 1642 – 1649*

practices, which was perceived as synonymous with welcoming Catholicism in the eyes of the Calvinists and Puritans in parliament[6]. Second, because of Charles' crippling financial situation[7] he had to take measures such as the Forced Loan in 1627 and further calling for Ship Money to be collected from inland inhabitants in 1634[8]. While the financial situation had been ameliorated [9]; he had passed both levies without parliamentary consent, which was seen as an exploitation of his prerogative power and was taken as an existential threat to parliamentary liberties – a belief which became the core of the parliamentary fight in the Civil War.

Thus, while the British problem may have triggered the outbreak of this civil war, it only heightened divisions which had already existed. Without the turbulent relationship between parliament and crown stemming from financial problems and religious divisions within England, the English civil war was unlikely to have occurred.

The other similarity of all three kingdoms who broke out into war was that they were all ruled by Charles. Thus, we must question how much Charles is to blame for the outbreak of war. First, we may consider his choice in approach when aiming to achieve religious conformity, which emerges as a dominant theme in the British problem. It was common consensus that "religion is… the strongest band to tie the subjects to their prince in true loyalty"[10], and thus we cannot criticise his decision to push for conformity. Nonetheless, his characteristically rapid approach may be evaluated. His father, King James I, managed to deal with the divide in religion by pursuing it slowly[11], never allowing the moves to be extreme enough to give dissenters an appropriate time to uprise. Moreover, while James attempted to shift them all closer to each other incrementally; Charles pursued unity by making Scotland and Ireland more like England,[12]. Thus, we might infer that the British problem is not impossible to work around but becomes potent when English dominance is asserted upon the two other kingdoms in small timeframes.

Moreover, Charles mistakenly did not hold firm against the various demands of his three kingdoms. We turn to the Petition of Right which he first refused to sign, but then caved in 1628 when under pressure from parliament; or, the execution of Strafford which followed the same pattern. This lack of capability to hold firm encouraged his subjects in all kingdoms (who looked on at each interaction he had) to believe that if they pressured him for long enough, he would retreat once more. For the accusations against him of arbitrary government, he did not manage to even do this properly. Perhaps if Charles had been a more consistently firm ruler, the Civil War would not have broken out as his opponents would not have thought he would accept their concessions. Thus, we might say the problem itself did not cause the wars; the failure of Charles to handle it correctly did.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that in order to truly understand why this warring period occurred we must not just view it through an Anglocentric lens but emphasise the interconnectedness of the wars and problems in each of the three kingdoms. In doing so, we have revealed that the wars of the three kingdoms do all in fact all stem from the British problem, to a

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[6] For example, laymen William Prynne, John Bastwick and Henry Burton who illegally published tracts criticising Arminianism.

[7] It is predicted that the dept reached £2 million by 1629.

[8] This was unprecedented as Ship Money had always.

[9] For example, Ship money raised nearly £800,000.

[10] Russell, Conrad. "The British Problem and the English Civil War." *History* 72, no. 236 (1987): 395-415. Accessed July 10, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24415746.

[11] For example, by re-establishing bishops in Scotland in 1613 and later introducing the Five Articles of Perth in 1618.

greater extent in Ireland and Scotland than in England, while also considering the fact that the presence of this problem did not mean an inevitable explosion into a warring period from 1637-51. Rather, in combination with Charles' weaknesses as a ruler and the internal divisions at Westminster, the British problem was given the perfect conditions to flourish and set off and ensure the continuation of the wars in each of the three kingdoms. In light of these discoveries, we consider whether the English Civil War deserves the significance it has been attributed. While one could argue that it was unique to the conflicts in Ireland and Scotland as England had internal divisions separable from the British problem; we have proven that these would have never become so important had it not been for England's rulership over Ireland and Scotland. Thus, this seemingly unique factor of internal division becomes just as significant as the British problem itself. Therefore, we have also revealed that the glory given to English Civil War in British historiography is largely undeserved and focusing on 'The Wars of the Three Kingdoms' or 'The British Civil Wars' are more enlightening subjects of study.

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