

## ‘Was the abolition of monarchy the inevitable outcome of King Charles I’s trial?’

The death of Charles I marked a watershed moment in British history. The monarch was executed on 30 January 1649, following the first-ever trial of an English king, staged in Westminster Hall.<sup>1</sup> Although it was to be dressed in legal forms and justified by principled arguments, Charles’ fate outlined the motivations of key figures, radical influences, and the context that culminated in a decade of political failure.<sup>2</sup> Thereby, defining the temporary abolition of monarchy as the ‘inevitable’ product of Charles’ trial poses difficulty. This overlooks the intentions of the trial’s orchestrators and broader manoeuvres that established the unprecedented Commonwealth – Vallance argues that the process of putting the king on trial is governed by a much greater range of forces and actors.<sup>3</sup> In examining the contested political complexity of mid-17th century England, the perspective of this essay challenges deterministic interpretations that dictate the likely, not inevitable, result of Cromwell’s “cruel necessity”.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the uncertainty behind England’s dethroning, it is essential to first consider the political background and rise of radical elements. Charles’ irritable demeanour, besides religious and financial pressures, maintained an intolerable relationship with Parliament, denoted by Young as the ‘erosion of trust’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the Personal Rule imposed Ship Money and (attempted) Anglicanism in Scotland which alienated many undergoing absolute rule. However, it was Charles’ ensuing conflict during the First Civil War that provoked Parliamentarians to truly question the nature of governance.<sup>6</sup> Those victorious forces, dominated by Puritans, regarded Charles as a wicked man responsible for the bloodshed of his subjects and deserving of the vengeance of God.<sup>7</sup> Retribution through compromise, however, proved unmanageable. The Newcastle Propositions – peace terms proposed by the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Worthen, *Regicide: The Trials of Henry Marten*, Haus Publishing, London, 2022, p. 22

<sup>2</sup> M. Lynch, *The Interregnum, 1649-1660*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1994, p. 7

<sup>3</sup> The Cromwell Association, ‘Cromwell Day Address (September 2019), Cromwell, blood guilt and the trial and execution of Charles I’, *Cromwelliana 2020*, series III, no. 9, Huntingdon, The Cromwell Association, T. Vallance, 2019, p. 6-7

<sup>4</sup> Quotes of Oliver Cromwell 1599-1658, *The Cromwell Association* [website]

<sup>5</sup> Charles I and the Erosion of Trust, 1625–1628, *Cambridge Core* [website]

<sup>6</sup> Treason against the state: The execution of Charles I, *The National Archives* [website]

<sup>7</sup> Anglo-Australian Lawyers’ Association, ‘The Trial of King Charles I – Defining Moment for our Constitutional Liberties’, London, M. Kirby, 1999, p. 7

Scots and conservative allies in Parliament – collapsed. Even after George Joyce seized the king from Holdenby in June 1647, offering significantly more lenient terms, a settlement remained elusive. To exacerbate matters, the Heads of Proposals deepened divisions within the army, with some rank-and-file representatives deeming the offer as too forgiving. This division affirmed Charles’ strategy of exploiting splits among his opponents, a tactic that initially bore fruit.<sup>8</sup> Charles believed his defeat had not destroyed kingship, but perhaps ‘The Engagement’ and subsequent Second Civil War sowed the seeds for systemic change.<sup>9</sup> Secret negotiations with the Scots were perceived as a betrayal, prompting shifts towards Parliamentary sympathies. Particularly within the army, frustration culminated in Thomas Pride purging the Long Parliament of sympathetic Royalist members. This action isolated the ‘Rump Parliament’ which was more amenable to trying the king. Moreover, the radicalisation of the army paralleled the growing Leveller movement. The Putney Debates of October and November 1647 discussed the ‘Agreement of the People’, aligning the army and Levellers’ demand for egalitarian reforms. During these debates, Thomas Harrison famously labelled Charles as “that man of blood”, invoking the Biblical notion of ‘blood guilt’ that underscored extremism throughout the civil wars.<sup>10</sup> In essence, radical ideas were pivotal in justifying Charles’ trial, yet they permitted a spectrum of divergent possibilities for the future of the monarchy. As tensions peaked, an ordinance established the High Court of Justice to try the king for high treason.

The trial of Charles was highly contentious. Initiated by the Rump Parliament, it was a profound statement against the alleged tyranny of the monarchy. As a courtroom drama, the key issue was the nature of legitimate political authority, and both sides sought to demonstrate their case emphatically.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of fervent Puritan beliefs, a trial coupled with the adoption of a written constitution for the people’s representative would form the basis of a settlement. It would show who the boss was, tie the hands of the monarch, and make expiation for the blood spilled.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, a sense of ambiguity arose as Ackroyd asserts that neither Charles’ death nor the abolition of the monarchy was necessary.<sup>13</sup> This argument is particularly relevant when considering the army’s stance. The Remonstrance,

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<sup>8</sup> Why was Charles I executed?, *The World Turned Upside Down* [website]

<sup>9</sup> See Lynch, *The Interregnum*, p. 7

<sup>10</sup> Reluctant regicides? The trial of Charles I revisited, *The National Archives* [website]

<sup>11</sup> M. Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire: A New History of the English Civil Wars*, Penguin Books, London, 2009, p. 572

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 558

<sup>13</sup> P. Ackroyd, *Civil War: The History of England Volume III*, Pan Macmillan, London, 2014, p. 305

primarily drafted by Henry Ireton in November 1648, signified the political conclusion of articulating Charles' guilt.<sup>14</sup> Many in the army wanted the king dead, viewing Charles as too popular, slippery, and well-supported. However, Charles might be even more dangerous dead, so some influential officers and MPs opposed regicide.<sup>15</sup> This revealed a troubling instability in the direction of the proceedings. The ordeal was widely regarded as illegal, even sacrilegious: and worse than a crime – a mistake. Thomas Fairfax, the esteemed lord-general of the army, stayed away.<sup>16</sup> Fairfax's lone attendance was probably a deliberate gesture of his disapproval of the affair. A masked lady, thought to be Anne Fairfax, allegedly cried out from the gallery that her husband “had more wit than to be there”.<sup>17</sup> The two leading generals of the New Model Army, Cromwell and Fairfax, developed distinctly opposing political positions during the trial, suggesting that the fate of the monarchy remained contended.<sup>18</sup> There were notable discrepancies among the Parliamentarians, many of whom were not republicans. They advocated for a monarchy with constitutionally restricted powers. In accusing Charles of treason, they charged him with war crimes for waging conflict against the people and overstepping the boundaries of his sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> Despite MP's numerous reservations, these were potentially part of a negotiation strategy to prove that the king faced a genuine threat.<sup>20</sup> There was a compelling motive to seek a settlement. Hence, regicide and the abolition of monarchy presented a huge risk.

The unpredictability of the trial's outcome was additionally reflected in Charles' conduct throughout the hearing. As a King, Charles was disastrous; as a man, he faced death with courage.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to expectation, Charles behaved with dignity and lost the stammer that had habitually handicapped his public speaking.<sup>22</sup> The king was adept at articulating his views with both clarity and coherence. Comparatively, other historians interpret Charles' behaviour as obstinacy, seeing it as a refusal to accept the trial's legitimacy. As Tombs points out, the king engaged in a deadly game of bluff as his stubbornness pushed the judges into equal intransigence.<sup>23</sup> Irrespective of opinion, the king ultimately refused to submit a plea. Charles repeatedly questioned the authority of the court; he mocked its judges and scorned

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<sup>14</sup> The Remonstrance, 1648, *Cambridge Core* [website]

<sup>15</sup> R. Tombs, *The English and Their History*, Penguin Books, 2014, p. 237

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 237-238

<sup>17</sup> The trial of Charles I: an early modern show trial?, *The History of Parliament* [website]

<sup>18</sup> See 'Reluctant regicides?' [website]

<sup>19</sup> The Execution of Charles I, *History Today* [website]

<sup>20</sup> See Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, p. 575

<sup>21</sup> The execution of Charles I: Killing of a 'treasonous' King, *Historic Royal Palaces* [website]

<sup>22</sup> See Lynch, *The Interregnum*, p. 8

<sup>23</sup> See Tombs, *The English and Their History*, p. 238

the MPs who were presumed to be in control.<sup>24</sup> Given the extraordinary nature of trying a king, this response is unsurprising. Charles' attitude was rooted in a strong conviction of his divine right to rule and accountability only to God. The abolition of monarchy, once an inconceivable idea, was increasingly becoming a reality – much to Charles's chagrin – as evidenced by the dressings of the courtroom. Westminster Hall now displayed a shield with St. George's Cross and the Irish harp, replacing the royal coat of arms.<sup>25</sup> The layout stressed the Commons' dominance over the king, foreshadowing a sign of things to come.

Before republicanism could be seriously entertained, it is clear that even regicide was far from assured. The purged Parliament and its military allies were unsure about carrying out such an act.<sup>26</sup> The primary concern was not execution itself, but whether a personal treaty with Charles would align with the 'salus populi'.<sup>27</sup> At this stage, asserting popular sovereignty did not necessarily entail the end of the monarchy.<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, however, the influence of Parliamentary figures profoundly altered the course of the trial, rendering the abolition of the monarchy highly probable. The disinterment of Cromwell, Bradshaw, and Ireton was certainly a double-edged sword.<sup>29</sup> Ireton passionately believed the monarchy would soon be replaced by a regularly elected Parliament. This coincided with the army's wishes, as its commanders were also politicians.<sup>30</sup> Ireton, along with the radical preacher Hugh Peter, championed the eradication of monarchy, a perspective that resonates with Bradshaw, who had previously compared Charles to Emperor Nero.<sup>31</sup> Bradshaw contended that the court possessed legitimate authority and suggested that the king had failed to exhibit any requisite deference. The jurist declared Charles "a tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy" which echoed John Cook's description. In one sense, few acts are more revolutionary than executing a reigning monarch, so Cromwell drafted the execution order when no one else would.<sup>32</sup> Cromwell and Ireton were obdurate: the king must die. Otherwise, there would be no safety for the new Commonwealth.<sup>33</sup> Cromwell initially wavered on the king's punishment, but Charles' obduracy persuaded him that trial and execution were imperative.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Royal Rewind: the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649, *The Crown Chronicles* [website]

<sup>25</sup> Trial of Charles I – What were the real objectives?, *The World Turned Upside Down* [website]

<sup>26</sup> See Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, p. 580

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 558

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 570

<sup>29</sup> J. Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell's Head*, The National Archives, Surrey, 2008, p. 50

<sup>30</sup> See Worthen, *Regicide*, p. 26

<sup>31</sup> See 'The Execution of Charles I' [website]

<sup>32</sup> See Tombs, *The English and Their History*, p. 238

<sup>33</sup> See Ackroyd, *Civil War*, p. 308

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 306

Therefore, in light of Charles' stubbornness, regicide and the abolition of monarchy became a matter of cold 'necessity'.<sup>35</sup>

Charles was executed outside the Banqueting House in Whitehall. Thereafter, the proclamation of the Commonwealth on 6 February 1649 marked the end of the monarchy. Conceivably, this outcome grew more probable as the potential of alternative candidates emerged, undermining any argument that the abolition of monarchy was inevitable. Supposedly during Charles' trial there were attempts to abdicate the king in favour of the Duke of Gloucester.<sup>36</sup> Gloucester was assumed a symbolic successor to the throne, but this promise never materialised. Alternatively, a more formidable contender surfaced: Cromwell. Cromwell's prolonged deliberation highlights that England's dethroning was not an inexorable fate. Conservative Parliament members insisted that Cromwell should accept the crown, denying any refusal. William Lenthall chastened Cromwell for believing that kingship was merely a title. Despite this, Cromwell's judgement was shaped by scriptural interpretation, providential thinking and army influence.<sup>37</sup> Cromwell valued military insight, seeing their battlefield experiences as evidence of God's providence. William Bradford menacingly warned Cromwell against accepting the crown and betraying his godly allies. Accordingly, like in 1649, Cromwell and the army concurred.<sup>38</sup> The committee of 99 endeavoured to sway Cromwell, but it was God that fortified his resolve. Reasonably, this was Cromwell's desired outcome all along – acquiring the benefits of a Parliamentary constitution without the burden of kingship.<sup>39</sup>

While Cromwell's inauguration as Lord Protector had all the trappings of a royal coronation, it conspicuously lacked a crown.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, public sentiment after Charles' death continued to contemplate a lingering uncertainty concerning the abolition of monarchy. Under Charles' reign, social and economic strife, compounded by the Civil Wars, bolstered national support for republicanism. A fervour for stability was exemplified by London radicals, who opposed any hasty peace with the king.<sup>41</sup> The Rump Parliament had unlimited authority, yet it was hardly representative of the people.<sup>42</sup> The execution of the anointed

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<sup>35</sup> D. Scott, *Politics and War in the Three Stuart Kingdoms, 1637-49*, vol. 25 of British History in Perspective, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004

<sup>36</sup> See Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, p. 564

<sup>37</sup> See Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell's Head*, p. 129

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 132

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>41</sup> See Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, p. 559

<sup>42</sup> See Ackroyd, *Civil War*, p. 311

monarch, as a profound affront to tradition, appalled the masses.<sup>43</sup> Many were reluctant to condone Charles' judicial murder, and the fatal blow was greeted with a groan.<sup>44</sup> Eikon Basilike was by far the greatest propaganda success following the regicide.<sup>45</sup> Charles' account of his trials and martyrdom convinced his supporters who had witnessed his grim end.<sup>46</sup> Even John Lilburne, who previously incited agitation in the army, scrutinised the new administration in 'England's New Chains Discovered', challenging Cromwell's hypocrisy. Unlike the French or Russian Revolutions, there was no widespread enthusiasm as Charles was ironically more popular at his death than in the 1640s. The English Revolution was perceived across all three kingdoms as the work of a minority.<sup>47</sup> The Civil War was not over; Charles II was proclaimed King in Edinburgh and Dublin.<sup>48</sup> Although Cromwell's forces decisively defeated a Scottish army at Dunbar, the enduring royalist movements revealed that deep-seated monarchism persisted.

In conclusion, it is overly simplistic to view the abolition of the monarchy as the inevitable outcome of Charles' trial. The concept of inevitability neglects the deep divisions among the political factions and the unparalleled nature of the trial. England's dethroning was a contingent result, moulded by intricate manoeuvring and the actions of pivotal individuals. Cromwell and Ireton were driven to regicide by functional and ideological pressures – this is what Cromwell meant by 'necessity'.<sup>49</sup> The characterisation of Cromwell as a 'reluctant regicide' conveys the ambivalence and complexity circulating Charles' 'road to the scaffold'. Consistent indecision throughout illustrates the unprecedented notion of dismantling the monarchy. Considering the deeply entrenched belief in divine right, prosecuting a monarch in 1649 was inconceivable, making the abolition of monarchy seem almost unattainable. Thus, Cromwell achieved regicide through a combination of providential conviction and Puritan zeal. Furthermore, the hypothetical picture of 'King Cromwell' implies that the prospect of kingship remained a viable option. This emphasises that the monarchy's collapse was not preordained but rather a product of the volatile and unpredictable political landscape.

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<sup>43</sup> See Lynch, *The Interregnum*, p. 9

<sup>44</sup> See Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, p. 577

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 580-581

<sup>46</sup> Charles I and the Eikon Basilike, *Cambridge University Library Special Collections* [website]

<sup>47</sup> B. Coward, *Stuart England, 1603-1714: The Formation of the British State*, Longman, 1997, p. 155

<sup>48</sup> See Tombs, *The English and Their History*, p. 240

<sup>49</sup> See Coward, *Stuart England*, p. 155

Word count: 1999

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