

English Constitutionalism Secondary Sources

SOURCE 1:¹

The Causes of the English Civil War
From Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War*, 1990, pp. 213-217

The civil war in England, which broke out in the middle of the seventeenth century, is even more controversial among historians than the Thirty Years' War. At the heart of the controversy are two related issues: first, what the balance of religious, political, economic, and social forces was in causing the civil war; second, what groups or classes can be said to have supported each side.

CONSIDER: *What were the causes of the English civil war according to Russell; how Russell's causes worked together; the distinction between long-term and short-term causes*

[The English Civil War] was the result of three long-term causes of instability, all of them well established before Charles came to the throne, and all of them ones which can be observed to have troubled European, as well as British, monarchies. There is nothing peculiarly British (still less English) about any of them: they were not even exceptionally acute in England. What is peculiar to the two cases of England and the Netherlands is that all of them came to a head at the same time. These three long-term causes were the problem of multiple kingdoms, the problem of religious division, and the breakdown of a financial and political system in the face of inflation and the rising cost of war.

The problem of multiple kingdoms was always a likely cause of instability from 1603 onwards.² The temptation to press for greater harmonization was always there, and was always likely to produce serious troubles. In 1603 England encountered ... the shock of subjection to a supranational authority.... [T]he English ... wished to treat both James and Charles as if they were only kings of a single nation-state called England. Since this was patently not the case, and the kings could not help knowing it, the English were always likely to misread royal actions, and in particular to press their kings to do things which, in British terms, they could not do. When, as in 1637, a British king fell victim to a similar misapprehension, and attempted to govern all Britain as king of England, he found this was something he could not do....

England's basic error in 1603 was the failure to absorb that what had taken place was the union of two sovereign, and therefore legally equal, states. Not even James could really turn Scotland into 'North Britain.' It was a state with institutions, law, and culture of its own, and one determined to insist that any resulting relationship must be a legally equal partnership....

[T]he problem of religious division ... derived its explosive force from the belief that religion ought to be enforced. It was a problem of a society which had carried on the assumptions appropriate to a society with a single church into one which had many churches....

But August 1640, when the Scottish army, by entering England, merged the religious problem with the British problem, was too early for it to have cooled enough. One might say of the English Calvinists what Machiavelli said of the Pope in Italy: they were too weak to unite the country, but too strong to allow anyone else to do so. When the Scots entered England, they were able to join forces with a large group of people who preferred Scottish religion to what was coming to be taken for their own.

The strains caused for monarchies by the combination of inflation with the massive increases in the cost of war known collectively as 'the military revolution' is also a European theme. The financial difficulties faced, after the conclusion of the long wars of the 1590s, by James VI and I, Philip III of Spain, and Henri IV of France have too much in common to be entirely coincidental. The changes following the regular use of gunpowder, especially the trend to larger-scale fortifications and to larger armies, much increased the economic drain of war. The resulting financial pressures put strain on the principle of consent to taxation everywhere in Europe, and perhaps only the Netherlands, with the advantage of a visible enemy at the gate, were able to combine consent with the levying of taxes on the scale needed. England, because the principle of consent to taxation was so particularly well entrenched, was perhaps put under more constitutional strain by this process than some other powers....

No one, or even two, of these forces was in the event enough: it took the conjunction of all three to drive England into civil war.... Both the religious and the financial problem had been plainly visible by the 1550s, and they had not created civil war in ninety years since then. England in 1637 was, no doubt, a country with plenty of discontents, some of them potentially serious, but it was also a still very stable and peaceful one, and one which does not show many visible signs of being on the edge of a major upheaval.... The attempt which Charles made in 1637 to enforce English religion on Scotland was thus by far the likeliest reason

¹ From Dennis Sherman, *Western Civilization: Sources, Images and Interpretations*, 4th edition / From the Renaissance to the Present, 2004, pp. 28-29, 66.

² In 1603 James VI of Scotland (King James I of England) gained also the throne of England (which included Ireland as well), uniting the crowns.

for a merging of these three long-term causes of instability. It is difficult to see what action a king could have taken which would have been better designed to precipitate an English civil war.

SOURCE 2:¹

The English Revolution, 1688-1689
From George Macaulay Trevelyan, *The English Revolution, 1688-1689*, 1938, p. 164-166

In England two blows to monarchical authority proved to be turning points. The first was the civil war and the execution of Charles I in the 1640s. But although this was a victory for Parliament, the Cromwellian period that followed and the return from exile of Charles II in 1660 cast doubt on the permanence of Parliament's victory. The second was the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, which removed James II from power without the turmoil of the first revolution. In the following selection Cambridge historian George Macaulay Trevelyan compares the two revolutions and analyzes the significance of the second one. Following the Whig tradition, Trevelyan views these trends in British history as constructive and progressive (see Source 3 on the Whig tradition). More than most historians, he sees this revolution as an admirable triumph for Parliament.

CONSIDER: *Why the second revolution was a more clear-cut victory for Parliament than the first; factors that contributed to the victory of Parliament.*

The fundamental question at issue in 1688 had been this—Is the law above the King, or is the King above the law? The interest of Parliament was identified with that of the law, because, undoubtedly, Parliament could alter the law. It followed that, if law stood above the King's will, yet remained alterable by Parliament, Parliament would be the supreme power in the State.

James II attempted to make the law alterable wholesale by the King. This, if it had been permitted, must have made the King supreme over Parliament, and, in fact, a despot. The events of the winter of 1688-9 gave the victory to the opposite idea, which Chief Justice Coke and Selden enunciated early in the century, that the King was the chief servant of the law, but not its master; the executant of the law, not its source; the laws should only be alterable by Parliament—Kings, Lords and Commons together. It is this that makes the Revolution the decisive event in the history of the English Constitution. It was decisive because it was never undone, as most of the work of the Cromwellian Revolution had been undone.

It is true that the first Civil War had been fought partly on this same issue:--the Common Law in league with Parliament had, on the field of Naseby, triumphed over the King in the struggle for the

supreme place in the Constitution. But the victory of Law and Parliament had, on that occasion, been won only because Puritanism, the strongest religious passion of the hour, had supplied the fighting force. And religious passion very soon confused the Constitutional issue. Puritanism burst the legal bounds and, coupled with militarism, overthrew law and Parliament as well as King. Hence the necessity of the restoration in 1660 of King, law and Parliament together, without any clear definition of their ultimate mutual relations.

Now, in this second crisis of 1688, law and Parliament had on their side no only the Puritan passion, which had greatly declined, but the whole force of Protestant-Anglicanism, which was then at its height, and the rising influence of Latitudinarian skepticism—all arrayed against the weak Roman Catholic interest to which James had attached the political fortunes of the royal cause. The ultimate victor of the seventeenth-century struggle was not Pym or Cromwell, with their Puritan ideals, but Coke and Selden with their secular idea of the supremacy of law. In 1689 the Puritans had to be content with a bare toleration. But law triumphed, and therefore the law-making Parliament triumphed finally over the King.

SOURCE 3:

Historiography & the Whig Tradition

Historiography is the history of history. Rather than subjecting actual events – say, Hitler's annexation of Austria – to historical analysis, the subject of historiography is the history of the *history* of the event: the way it has been written, the sometimes conflicting objectives pursued by those writing on it over time, and the way in which such factors shape our understanding of the actual event at stake, and of the nature of history itself.³

How a historian approaches historical events is one of the most important decisions within historiography. It is commonly recognized by historians that, in themselves, individual historical facts dealing with names, dates and places are not particularly meaningful. Such facts will only become useful when assembled with other historical evidence, and the process of assembling this evidence is understood as a particular historiographical approach. Some examples of

³ From "Historiography," *Writing on History*, Queens College, NY, 2007, accessed 10 Aug. 2014
<<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/critical/historiography.html>>.

historiographical approaches are: cultural history, economic history, diplomatic history, women's history, Marxist history (aka historical materialism), and the Whig tradition.⁴

The Whig tradition is an important school of British historiography. It derives its name from one of the two main political parties in Parliament in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the other party were known as Tories. Whigs tended to stress the importance of parliament, as a counterbalance to the Crown and the Church of England; Tories were much more deeply attached to the power and authority of Crown and Church.

The Whig view of history grew out of the unprecedented strength and prosperity of mid-nineteenth century Britain, which led the world in scientific and technological development and ruled an empire that stretched from Canada to South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean. The Victorians saw themselves as the heirs to the Romans, but with one important difference: instead of an autocratic emperor, the British had a limited, parliamentary monarchy which, they believed, placed Britain on a higher moral plane; as a result the Victorians tended to revere institutions such as parliament, the Church of England, the legal system, the universities and the monarchy, as components of a perfectly balanced constitution, a model for other countries to follow. When the Victorians asked themselves how they had come to live in such an apparently perfect society, they looked for an explanation to the history of England.

In the Whig view, English history was the story of a struggle for the recovery of political and religious liberty which, they held, had been lost at the time of the Norman Conquest. Central to the Whig interpretation of history was the long conflict between Crown and Parliament that dominated the seventeenth century. While they regretted the bloodshed of the Civil War and the execution of King Charles I, the Whigs saw the defeat of the Crown and its subjugation to Parliament as

essential to the establishment of a free society.⁵

⁴ From "Historiography" on *Wikipedia*, accessed 10 Aug. 2014.

⁵ From "The Whig Tradition," *Faculty of History*, University of Cambridge, 2014, accessed 10 Aug. 2014 <<http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/prospective-undergrads/virtual-classroom/secondary-source-exercises/sources-whig>>.