English Civil War: Crash Course European History

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

And as we saw last week, Absolutism was in the air during the seventeenth century, but not just in France. Across the English Channel, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England after the death of the childless Elizabeth in 1603, and he found himself thinking, "You know, I might not agree with everything those French Catholics believe, but they are onto something when it comes to the Divine Right of kings to have absolute power." The inhabitants of the British Isles, however, weren't so sure.

In fact, Protestant reformers were imagining a different idea of government. That's right, my friends. The constitutions are coming. [Intro] So, when he inherited the British throne, James aspired to unite his holdings in Wales, England, Scotland, and Ireland into a more cohesive whole, but of course those regions, despite their geographic proximity, contain quite a lot of religious, ethnic, and economic diversity.

Religiously, Calvinists (called Presbyterians in Scotland), Catholics, and Anglicans had big disagreements. Also, if you've ever been to a Scottish bar and accidentally said how much you're enjoying your visit to England, you will know that Scottish people are not English. True story by the way.

The entire bar went quiet all at once. It was really uncomfortable. And then I tried to fill that silence by saying, "well, you have the same money." Which also didn't go over great.

James thought he could solve these problems by taking the title of King of Great Britain--one place, one king. He also had his officials institute English laws across all his kingdoms and promote adherence to Anglicanism. And he sought to keep the peace among Europe's great families by marrying his son, Charles to Henrietta Maria, the Catholic sister of France's Louis XIII, but that only ended up furthering divisions, because Henrietta Maria refused to convert and became a target for opponents from various factions.

Henrietta Maria's husband, James's son Charles came to the throne in 1625, and he too firmly believed in the divine right of kings. Because, you know, of course he did. He was backed by the nobility and about half of the gentry, or wealthy landowners, below the nobility.

But other members of the gentry opposed the idea of absolutist monarchical power, including the other half of the gentry, many less powerful farmers, and much of the merchant classes, who tended to live in cities. These groups had no titles or ancient claims to land, but they were driving much of Britain's economy, and they felt the elected English Parliament should have more power. Because of course, that would mean that they had more power.

In 1628, Charles bowed to that parliamentary strength by agreeing to the Petition of Right, which said that the King couldn't raise taxes without parliament's permission. But then he was, like, I think I might have found a loophole, and he basically ghosted them. He simply stopped calling parliament back into session, which of course infuriated Parliament and also felt like a rather blatant absolutist move from a King who'd just agreed to a check on his power.

Meanwhile, Puritans, who objected to the pomp of Anglicanism with its statues and stained glass and incense, resisted the archbishop of Canterbury, named William Laud, who was attempting to bring the Puritans back to Anglican orthodoxy. Puritan critics were tortured, put into the stocks, whipped, and had their faces mutilated, as were members of the upper classes who disapproved of the king and his administration. Then Laud stirred up defiance among the Presbyterians in Scotland, whom he aimed to restore to Anglicanism.

He pushed them to adopt a new version of the Prayer Book of the Anglican Church; and resistance to that was literally riotous. Young women hurled the new prayer books during religious services and provoked the congregation to join them. In fact, the Presbyterian Scots were eventually so enraged that they invaded England.

In reaction, after more than a decade of refusing to summon Parliament, Charles was like, "oh uh, Parliament, can you come back, please. I need your support in declaring war." Like many a ruler, Charles I thought that warfare, which he undertook on numerous occasions, would make Parliament rally around him and allow him to raise taxes. But that was a big mistake.

Instead, the representatives instead responded by removing Laud from power, decreeing that Parliament must meet at least every three years, and putting additional roadblocks in Charles' way. When Charles called on soldiers to arrest the members of Parliament who had thwarted his demands, outright civil war erupted. Between 1642 and 1646 those loyal to the king, called Cavaliers, faced off against those loyal to Parliament, called Roundheads (because of their short haircuts).

Parliamentary forces raised the New Model Army, led by Oliver Cromwell. And this new army saw opposing religious sects let go of their differences, which allowed them ultimately to capture Charles I, and then execute him in 1649. We also have to remember that during these years, the little ice age was taking its toll.

Many people died from famine; furthermore, between 1625 and 1636 the bubonic plague killed some 45,000 people in London alone. Amid successive bad weather, entire villages disappeared as their inhabitants either died of illness or starvation, or else abandoned their communities in search of food. And all of this enhanced the resistance and criticism of those who found it impossible to pay more taxes so that Charles could realize his absolutist dreams and fight his wars.

A higher percentage of Britain's population died in this period than during both World War I and II combined. But with the war ended, and Charles defeated, England was now a republic, although not quite like contemporary Republics, since it was ruled by the increasingly dictatorial Oliver Cromwell. Although come to think of it, that does make it like some contemporary republics.

Cromwell was still the head of the New Model Army. But without a shared enemy in the King, all those varying sects and religious factions went back to squabbling with each other until Cromwell wiped out those in the New Model Army who objected to the policies of his Puritan regime. Cromwell's army crushed the Catholics in Ireland, whom it was suspected favored a restored monarchy, but even so, Cromwell could not keep his army or government unified, despite building a very impressive network of spies.

In 1658, after less than a decade in power, Cromwell died, and as Civil War once more seemed inevitable, in 1660, Parliament summoned Charles II to the throne. Did the center of the World just open? Is there a wig in there?

Am I going to have to put that on, Stan? So this was the time in English history that the wigs that I, at least, associate with English history, and fancy British people started to be a thing. What purpose did they serve?

Well, then as now, they were a way of concealing hair loss, but also people liked to cut their hair short to minimize the risk of lice. So

now I'm worried that this wig Stan gave me has lice, and we're gonna move on with the video. So Charles II was summoned to be the English King.

And you might be wondering why someone who'd seen his father executed for being King Charles I would want to become King Charles II, but humans are moths that fly toward the light of power, my friends, and Charles II thought he could be a better king. In some ways he was; his reign began the so-called "Restoration"--a time of creativity and discovery, and also further tragedy. In 1665, another outbreak of plague quickly killed some thirty thousand people; the next year, fire broke out in London destroying more than 10,000 buildings, including many churches and businesses.

The Monument to the Great Fire of London encapsulates just how thoroughly religious disagreements shaped every facet of human life. Even when memorializing the dead, the monument's inscribers couldn't help but make it sectarian, writing, "Here by permission of heaven, hell broke loose upon this Protestant city… The most dreadful Burning of this City, begun and carried on by treachery and malic of the Popish faction." Now of course that wasn't true. The fire started in a bakery run by an Anglican.

Charles II, meanwhile, had a Catholic mother in Henrietta Maria, and was seen to be gravitating toward what that monument called "The Pope-ish faction." He loosened restrictions on Catholics and other dissenters, a move Parliament responded to with the Test Act of 1673, which excluded all those who weren't loyal to the Anglican Church from government positions. So just for a quick recap: James I tried to unite all of Great Britain and Ireland under own absolutist crown before dying in 1625; his son Charles I ended being up on the losing side of the English Civil War and was separated from his head in 1649, at which point Britain technically became a republic that more closely resembled a military dictatorship, which eventually failed leading in 1660 to Charles II becoming king. Charles II had at least twelve children, but none with his wife, so his rightful heir was his brother James, a Catholic, who would eventually become king, but only for a few years.

But before we get there, let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1. Across these decades people saw the social order "turned upside down" 2. as some male reformers proposed free love and women took up arms, 3. even carrying them openly during the 1640s and 1650s. 4. One pro-parliament woman recalled seeing the leader of the Irish rebels approaching, 5. writing that she "sent him a shot in the head that made him bid the world goodnight."[1] 6.

Other women began publishing and preaching, 7. with Quaker women emphasizing the divine light shining from all humans, 8. both male and female. 9. And with the political scene fluctuating so rapidly and alliances changing, 10. women served many roles, including as spies, 11. even going to other countries to gather intelligence 12. on those plotting to restore the monarchy 13. or, when it was restored, 14. those plotting to overthrow it again. 15. Among these was Aphra Behn, 16. daughter of a butcher and midwife. 17.

She was pro-Stuart 18. —the family name of James and Charles— 19. and traveled incognito to the Netherlands in the 1660s 20. to gather intelligence on Stuart enemies. 21. However, Behn picked up another career, 22. soon becoming a popular playwright, at a time when 23. —as part of the world turning upside down— 24. women began going to the theater and serving as actresses 25. (before that men had taken women's roles in plays). 26. In 1688, the year before she died, 27.

Behn published Oroonoko, 28. the story of a wrongly enslaved African prince 29. and his love for a high-born slave woman. 30. In this regard, Behn was part of a thriving Restoration literary scene, 31. which rejected puritan austerity in favor of wit, sexual desire and playfulness. Thanks Thought Bubble.

So, despite the efforts of Aphra Behn and her ilk, the Stuart drive for absolutism halted for good in between 1688 and 1689, when the Catholic ways of James II became too much for the pro-Parliament advocates and when, to compound the danger, James' second wife gave birth to a son and heir. James' older daughter Mary and her spouse William III were summoned as monarchs to replace James II, but only after they had agreed to rule by a Bill of Rights. This document stated in its first article that no monarch would reject or publish a decree without the consent of Parliament.

It also guaranteed some of the rights that were later found in the U. S. Bill of Rights, including, for instance, the right to bear arms--at least as long as you were Protestant.

And it's important to note that political theory underpinned this political transformation, which came to be called the "Glorious Revolution." and this is the part in European history where we usually talk about Thomas Hobbes and John Lock. Thomas Hobbes took a very pessimistic view of human nature and argued for an absolutist form of political organization in his book Leviathan. It argued that a lack of political regulation created lives that were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In Hobbes' worldview with absolute rule, one surrendered any claim to personal liberty but received in exchange a measure of personal well-being and protection from that absolutist government.

But there was another famous English theorist of government and human society, John Locke, who presented a rosier view in his Two Treatises of Government. Locke argued that in a natural world, individuals were born free and equal, but that they rationally banded together to create a government that would uphold laws and protect their rights. So Locke is seen as articulating a theory of government similar to the one put forth by the Glorious Revolution--and also similar to the one outlined in the preamble to the U.

S. Constitution. And in many ways, Locke's political thought has been seen as the foundation of traditional or classical liberalism—that is, the belief in rights and freedom as intrinsic to the human self.

And we see this theory amplified from Locke's time down to the present day. Like, today, many of us take it for granted that humans have certain natural rights--including the rights to life, liberty, and property, language taken directly from Two Treatises. But human rights are an invented concept--albeit a very useful one.

King Henry VIII, for instance did not agree with the notion that those who claim to own land actually owned it, as evidenced by his extensive reclamation of Catholic land for himself. The creation of concepts of human rights reminds us again that how we imagine the world--and indeed how we imagine ourselves and each other--deeply impacts the world in which we end up living. Whether we believe in human rights--and how we act on that belief--has profound consequences today, just as it did in The Glorious Revolution.

Next week we're gonna cross back to the continent to see the Dutch variant on constitutional government, including all its twists and turns AND CANNIBALISM. Thanks for watching, Ill see you then.

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[1] Quoted in Susan K. Kent, Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990, (New York: Routledge, 1999) 22.