**Historians have disagreed about the origins of the English Civil War.**

**What is your view about the causes of the Civil War in England in the years 1624-1642?**

The debate surrounding the causes of the English Civil War is one of the oldest and most passionate in history. The lack of a clearly identifiable single cause, and the multiplicity of possible interpretations, suggests that it is a debate that will continue indefinitely. Moreover, the intensity of the argument is often fuelled by the fact that many of the ideas at stake are still of contemporary relevance. The Marxist interpretation of Christopher Hill for example, sees the period before the war as a bourgeois struggle for power, and the war itself a progressive necessity. Equally, John Morrill, a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, sees religion as the all-important element, believing it provided the vehemence behind Parliament’s opposition to the King. By contrast, a historian like Cicely Wedgwood sees the war as a wholly internal English conflict caused by a temporary and potentially avoidable breakdown of political authority. What is clear is that any account of the English Civil War must take into consideration a multiplicity of causes. A successful answer to a causation question does not consist in a dismissal of all factors bar one, but rather a careful ranking of them in terms of importance. For example, what factors led to conflict, but in addition what factors caused that conflict to break out in violence? From a reading of historians like Wedgewood, Russell, Morrill, Carlin, Hill and Trevor-Roper, we can see that whilst some elucidate the former, others help to account for the latter. This essay will therefore argue that issues of class, religion and were highly significant, but that the politics and the personality of Charles I served as a fulcrum – a tipping point – for these rapidly accelerating forces.

Writing as part of the post-war boom in popular narrative history, Cicely Wedgwood’s *The King’s War*[[1]](#footnote-0), concentrates on high politics, personality and events in her account of the causes of English Civil War. From its title it is evident that the war to be one nobly waged and led by the King, as a result of his problematic relation with Parliament. Above all she sees Charles’s failure to catch and arrest his five most significant opponents on the 4th of January 1642 as the turning-point. Charles entered the Commons on the 4th January to arrest John Pym, John Hampden, Arthur Haselrig, Denzil Holles and William Strode, the boldest critics of his regime and who Charles believed were planning a coup. Wedgwood states that Pym had ‘intended to threaten, or appear to threaten, the impeachment of the Queen’, in the face of which ‘Charles would have to attack’. Charles made the controversial move of entering the House of Commons to seize the men, leaving the doors open to show his troops brandishing their weapons. However, the show of force was ineffectual, for in Charles’s own words, his ‘birds’ had ‘flown’ (having caught wind of the King’s intentions beforehand). However, a violent backlash ensued: the King had failed to carry out the arrests, but demonstrated his clear capacity for violence against unarmed parliamentarians. Wedgwood writes indicating its decisive nature: ‘When Charles drove home, the people who not six weeks before had cheered him home by torchlight surged round his coach, menacing and insolent, shouting “Privilege!”’ The next day the Commons issued a proclamation denouncing any who assisted the King in his attempts at arrest as public enemies, and within a week the City was preparing for war. Wedgwood vividly conveys the desperation of Charles and Parliament’s and London’s fearful anger at his actions. The narrative style ensures the reader can appreciate just how quickly events and tensions escalated in this short period before the raising of the Royal Standard.

Wedgwood’s history offers a compelling account of events, helpfully illustrated with Charles's speeches and parliamentary petitions. And it's certainly true that she identifies probably the most significant ‘trigger’ to the outbreak of war, Charles’s storming of Parliament. The event is successfully shown to be the climax and culmination of a number of smaller altercations, for it is placed into context by Wedgwood, who first paints a colourful picture of the ‘rioting’ of the Apprentices and the King’s retaliative calling out of the ‘City Trained Bands’ and direction for his courtiers to ‘wear swords’. The religious aspect to the fighting is rightly made clear: ‘All the bishops who had signed the protest [against their exclusion from the Lords] were impeached.’ With this close approach, Wedgwood, in her own words, offers a counterpoise to a historical approach which ‘treats developments as though they were the massive anonymous waves of an inhuman sea’, ostensibly alluding to Whiggish history and its belief in progress. As a result she pays little attention to other 20th Century historians, but is herself subject to an unknowing ideological perspective: a sense of human nature as unchanging, and an inability to see political decisions in the light of their deeper foundations. For example, Cicely Wedgwood reveals a definite tendency to blame Parliament rather than the monarch. England had progressed from royal absolutism, and so her suggestion that Charles had *no* other choice (‘would have to attack’), when confronted with criticism (mere ‘threat’), but to muster soldiers and breach the Commons comes across as rather forced. It is likely that concessions from the monarch would have been enough to placate Parliament; none in the House at this point desired a Republic. Another question one might ask of this work is whether Wedgwood is correct in imagining -- were Charles successful in these arrests -- that the event would have been an ‘object lesson on the might and authority of the Sovereign’ -- surely the extremity of his entrance would have rendered any arrests carried out bathetic, and his unpopularity would have continued. Nevertheless, Wedgwood shows how on the 4th January 1642, in a single afternoon, Charles frightened his people into taking a side. The incident made the King appear dangerously militant, and prompted Parliament and the City to respond in kind. A Civil War between Royalists and Parliamentarians could then ensue.

Conrad Russell[[2]](#footnote-1) also focuses on the role of Charles in creating the circumstances that would lead to Civil War. He carefully considers the slow process of escalation by which the political crisis of 1640 was transformed into the Civil War of 1642. Russell recognizes that the King has often been treated as if he were largely passive in the drift to Civil War, when it was an event in which he was a very active participant. He argues that it was usually Charles who exacerbated matters by introducing threats of force. He mentions the failed arrest of the Five Members as an event in which Charles nearly threw away his fighting advantage by accelerating tensions. He moved before his support had consolidated, and thereby ‘did his opponents the priceless service of reuniting them’. However, he argues against Cicely Wedgwood by insisting that Charles was not compelled to react violently: Charles, he insists, had always ‘raised the stakes’ irresponsibly: ‘If we...ask who first introduced armed force in the British Isles, the answer is Charles'; ‘True, Charles was under pressure to fight, but it was a pressure he showed no great determination to resist’. Despite being similarly focused on the personality of the King, Russell goes further than Wedgwood in that he considers the general situation Charles was faced with during his reign. To some extent this allows him to excuse Charles: it was his ‘misfortune’ to rule when he did. Charles was ‘expected to solve the problem of multiple kingdoms, in a context in which religious differences merged with the various nationalisms’. Moreover, it was a time in which royal power was at its lowest both financially and politically. However, Russell adds to Wedgwood’s account, by his demonstration of Charles’s propensity for violence was not simply the result of provocation but constitutes part of a pattern – as is shown in the Army Plot of April and May 1641, which Russell states was ‘clearly Charles’ plot’. After reading both historians, it is clear that they concur in the view that the next act of violence -- the failed arrest of the five members, a ‘decisive blunder’, in the words of Philip Taylor -- constituted a fatal escalation of tensions. That very night, as Wedgwood states, the King, ‘lost London’ and Civil War was on the horizon.

John Morrill[[3]](#footnote-2) writes as a Revisionist historian of the English Civil War, one that argues against it being the inescapable outcomes of long-running historical forces. As he states ‘The English civil war certainly did not grow out of a gradual and inexorable collapse in the state's ability to compel obedience.’ For Morrill, England in 1600 was a peaceful, settled country, with no necessary inclination towards revolution or rebellion. His focus therefore falls upon the immediate religious context of the English Civil War, which he believes is the root of the fervent parliamentary debates and the opposition to Charles and his policies. Morrill states that in 1640 there was ‘an ideological crisis as well as a functional one’. He offers the statistic that the Commons sent more than twenty complaints against Churchmen to committees by the end of November 1640. He argues that religion was the only aspect of the conflict that could provide the passion required for the violence to erupt. Key to his interpretation is a dimension that modern, secular historians all-too-easily ignore, that is that Christianity was for many an intrinsic part of identity. Moreover the intertwining of Church and state that had followed on from Henry VIII Act of Supremacy, made politics, nationhood, and religion, inextricably bound together. Morrill writes how many people were convinced England was being subjected to the forces of Antichrist. The belief in an international Catholic conspiracy was strong, and Charles seemed -- however hard he tried -- only to increase these fears. The Irish Rebellion, itself a result of religious opposition, served to portray him as the foister of Catholicism on his Kingdoms. In addition, the issue of power of the episcopacy – the fact that Bishops had a seats in the House of Lords – became an issue of popular as well as theological strife. It was the subject of one of the most violent events preceding the outbreak of Civil War: the 1639-40 Bishops’ Wars. The Scottish victory over the King in these, as Morrill states, led to a unity of purpose among members of 1640 Long Parliament.

Morrill’s own faith most probably has influenced his historial outlook (in perhaps the same way that an agnostic historian may underplay the role of religion). What Morrill does provide is a sense of the centrality and urgency of religious debate in fomenting civil strife. For Wedgwood, cries of ‘No Bishops’ were characteristic of the ‘rabble’, a background noise against which high political events took centre stage. For Morrill these sentiments saturated all the political objection to the King. they found in Charles I ‘a negligent king who was oblivious to the threat of popery at home, abroad, and within the church of which he was supreme governor.’ However, this does not mean, though, that he is not able to consider other factors: his work takes into account a wide variety of interpretations. And yet there are unresolved issues in his work. The issue of how religious tension becomes then transformed into violence is a key one. And here one might say that Morrill underplays the importance of events like ‘The Five Members Coup’. He appears to recognise its significance, stating that there was no thought of violence until 1642, the year of its occurrence, but fails to connect it to his own interpretive schema. Morrill concedes that Charles I had a significant role in inciting opposition, pointing out that in all the political debates down to and beyond the Grand Remonstrance, nothing was presented as a grievance that predated Charles I’s reign. He remarks that Parliament’s complaints were ‘very specifically about the misgovernment of a single man’, but here also he fails to persuasively demonstrate the primacy of religion in these complaints. The Commons were outraged at the King’s actions as a breach of parliamentary privilege – something apart from theological dispute. Therefore John Morrill (perhaps unwittingly) demonstrates how the Civil War was of monarchical origin, religion and other issues stemming from the sovereign. However, there is little doubt that such perceived outrages could only serve to exacerbate the religious tensions already simmering in the country.

Norah Carlin[[4]](#footnote-3) agrees with John Morrill’s religious interpretation of the Civil War in that she states: those who fought the English Civil War, ‘fought over how the state should implement Protestantism’. She explains how almost all of the participants in the war regarded enforcement of the ‘true’ religion as an essential part of law and order. Carlin identifies the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, as a prime mover in the decisive years of the 1640s. Under Laud, Arminianism, which recognized the role of free will, became the dominant theological position within the Church of England. It rejected predestination, the traditional rallying cry of radical English Protestantism. As Carlin states, Laud’s ascent intensified dissension among Protestants. Puritan reformers desired a fundamental reorganisation of the Church, both politically and theologically: the destruction of episcopacy ‘root and branch’, (the subject of a 1640 petition). However, Carlin takes the issue much further back than Morrill, to the reign of Elizabeth. Many Protestants even then thought that the Anglican settlement was ‘imperfectly reformed in ceremonies and discipline’. This narrative approach taken can be likened to that of Cicely Wedgwood, but it can instead be observed as fairly unfruitful in this case since it looks too far backwards to assess events that were potential triggers. The question first and foremost is what led to Civil War in 1642, and therefore how had the religious conflict -- if it is so significant -- not resulted in war before this time. Carlin only begins an answer in her claim that ‘by 1640 many “reformers from within” had been driven to the point of leaving the church’. What drove them to leave, we might suggest however, was not simply their own theological purity, but more concretely the actions of the King: his unerring ability to alienate negative opposing elements in society. The King is hardly mentioned throughout the rest of the chapter, Carlin links politics and religion by asserting that ‘Church government was a question of state power’, but does not delve into this any deeper. Like Morrill, she fails to adequately reconcile her religious interpretation with political events on the ground. The violence with which Charles responded to political developments was crucial in escalating tensions, and his reaction (we can assume) was to threats to his role as King rather than head of the Church.

For John Morrill, the ‘The English civil war was not the first European revolution: it was the last of the Wars of Religion.’ The Marxist historian Christopher Hill[[5]](#footnote-4) argues quite the opposite. For Hill the ‘English Revolution’ of 1640 was a ‘struggle for political, economic and religious power’. The question Hill asks is why did the support that the political classes offered to a series of Tudor rulers enjoy suddenly seemingly begin to evaporate during Stuart rule. The answer Hill gives is that they had ‘done very well’ out of the previous regime, but that this prosperity began to be eroded. Their opponents were the vested interested that the Stuart monarchy stood for. In Hill’s words: ‘a Court clique of aristocratic commercial racketeers and their hangers-on, sucking the life-blood from the whole people by methods of economic exploitation’. According to Hill, Charles and this clique tried to regulate trade and industry with the ‘contradictory’ intention of both ‘slowing the capitalist development and sharing in its profits’. In foreign policy, he wished for the alliance of the most reactionary powers, and refused therefore ‘the forward national policy demanded by the bourgeoisie’. Certainly the King favoured Spain, after making peace with it and France, which was more traditional in its absolutist monarchy. Hill states that the bourgeoisie rejected Charles’ government because he represented an obsolete feudal system that opposed the conditions that could allow freer capitalist development. The number of archaic and, for the most part, obsolete, financial policies the King reintroduced would support this -- Ship Money, previously collected only in coastal areas in times of war, was expected of the whole country from 1628 through to 1640. Moreover, these commercial vested interests were manifested in theological debate. For Hill each class ‘sought to impose the religious outlook best suited to its own needs and interests.’

For the most part convincing evidence is provided by Hill to persuade the reader of even the most bold assertions, such as that England’s objection to Charles’s taxes was ‘not so much the taxes themselves’ but rather the method of taxation -- as shown by their later acceptance of greater taxation. However, perhaps Hill is unwise in assigning the royal failure in Scotland to the lack of ‘quality in his structure’ of taxation, for this discounts the importance of Charles’s aim of uniting the kingdoms and policy of ‘Thorough’ -- both of which lacked any sensitivity to regional differences. An example of this is his imposition of the Anglican Prayer Book on Scotland when it was Presbyterian, more so than simply Puritan England. Furthermore, the determinist aspect of Hill’s Marxist history -- he writes that ‘men saw the essential preliminary condition of social and intellectual advance’ -- can very much be disputed. The rather Whiggish assumption of progression had even begun to decline by Hill’s time[[6]](#footnote-5), and since then has been more trenchantly refuted. Moreover, Hill’s account of economic history often seems to be squeezed into an overly confident ideological framework. For example Hill states that less than twenty years saw a reversal of the fortunes of the the bourgeoisie: ‘As the Stuart monarchy became progressively less useful to the bourgeoisie, so it became more indispensable to the aristocracy and courtiers, their only guarantee of economic survival. That is why they were to fight for it so desperately in the Civil war.’ Such a change in fortunes – in less than a generation – seems unfeasibly rapid. Again questions of timing sit uneasily with Hill’s account: James I was notorious for his expenditure and extravagance and so it remains unclear why Civil War should arise from Charles’s methods of raising revenue, however controversial. Religion, for Hill, is an aspect of the socio-economic background to the Civil War: ‘the fight to control the Church was of fundamental importance; whoever controlled its doctrine and organisation was in a position to determine the nature of society’. Unlike Morrill, Hill does not, however, provide a more personal motivation than social ambition in his argument, and one wonders if such bourgeoise aspirations could have inspired the other classes in the way as Morrill sees religion as doing. In contrast to Wedgwood neither Hill nor Morrill really explain why violence erupted when it did. in Perhaps the chief flaw in Hill’s argument is that he maintains that men became involved in rebellion because they saw the opportunity to socially ‘advance’ without showing how this desire was linked to the the indisputable unpopularity – and potential weakness – of King Charles I.

Hugh Trevor-Roper[[7]](#footnote-6) thoroughly rejects Marxist interpretations like Hill’s. He asserts, that ‘the new men, of whom Marxist historians made so much’ were mostly agents, buying back their lands for the old families. Trevor-Roper’s denies that the English Civil War was a war at all, let alone a revolution. According to him, the English Civil War was a regional protest, by victims of a temporary general depression, against a privileged bureaucracy – revolt by the country against the city. He describes it as ‘the blind revolt of the gentry against the Court, of the provinces against the capital’, a reaction to economic centralisation. He argues that the gentry were declining, offering testimonies of their increasing emigration to North America -- which was a consequence of the parsimonious rule of Charles I reducing opportunities at court. In classing the Civil War as merely as a ‘rebellion’, Trevor-Roper, portrays Charles I as to some degree successful in his stand against his enemies, despite his execution, and therefore simultaneously attributes to him strength and irrelevance: the King’s death was neither insignificant, nor did it have lasting consequences. However Trevor-Roper’s beliefs coincide more with Hill and other Marxists perhaps more than he would perhaps like to think. He writes that what the ‘Independents’ wanted (which he sees as a Commonwealth’) was so ‘vaguely envisaged’ that they could not think of any constitutional formula to achieve it, and Hill stated something similar, that the people’s fight was for ‘the whole nature and future development of English society’ – a vast and undefined vision at the best of times. Trevor-Roper explains away their lack of a clear plan or forethought by attributing their animation to ‘passion’, ‘more than anything else’. How exactly this passion arose and escalated is not fully explained, and neither is its manifestation. By contrast Wedgwood shows how political events themselves, the failed arrest of the five members in particular, had the power to inspire a fervour for agitation and revolt. Trevor-Roper’s main weakness lies in failing to consider the monarch’s mistakes. He highlights the 1630s as the period in which incidental political factors increased the economic depression of the gentry, but fails to take account of the fact that this was the period in which Charles I conducted a near-absolutist ‘Personal Rule’ *sans parlement*.

The question of the causes of the English Civil War continues to fascinate but also elude historians. Perhaps this is because it offers the promise of an insight into the very nature of English society, and the English themselves -- are they a people motivated by advancement and self interest, religion and faith, or rather the continuing interplay of monarchical versus constitutional ideas? Historians themselves are no less immune to influence and prejudice. For C.V. Wedgwood, the individual remains at the centre of history, the  ‘infinitesimal dust and the cause of all things’; history is moralised, the King’s violent reaction to Parliamentary opposition his misguided but only possible option.In the eyes of John Morrill, religious dispute in Charles’s reign escalated to such an extent that it motivated men to war, being not only a source of faith but also one of passionate, violent sectarian strife. Christopher Hill sees the stimulus as primarily social and economic. He sees a frustrated early English bourgeoisie at the heart of the parliamentary opposition to the King. Reading different historical interpretations prompts the realisation that no factor can really be considered in isolation: socio-economic issues were a result of political developments at Court; religion was in this period under the direction of the King. The common theme in this case can therefore be seen to be the actions of Charles I: he ensured that the chief topic of debate was religion, and that its resulting conflict escalated into full-scale violence following his visibly aggressive failed arrest of the ‘Five Members’. This certainly was his most decisive blunder.

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