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THE NEW MODEL ARMY IN THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION. THE IMPORTANCE AND ROLE OF MILITARY STRUCTURES IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF NEW ENGLAND

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The English Revolution (1642-1660), with Oliver Cromwell as its animator, sanctioned the powers and functions of Parliament and was characterised by the presence of the Army as a decisive and politically autonomous body.

The Revolution essentially began in 1642 with the clash between Charles I Stuart, absolute monarch by divine right, and the 'Long Parliament', called by the king after 11 years of absolute rule because of the need to raise money for the war against the Scots. The granting of funds was a matter for Parliament.

Through various military and political developments, the Revolution saw the defeat and later the execution of the monarch himself, the first case in history of a monarch executed in the name of the people at the end of a trial, however questionable. The phase we are studying ended in 1660 with the restoration of Charles II Stuart, son of the beheaded king, in a new political context of a constitutional and no longer absolute monarchy.

A turning point in the political-military events that pitted the monarchical forces against the parliamentary ones was the Battle of Naseby (14 June 1645), which marked the decisive victory of the parliamentary forces led by Oliver Cromwell in the first phase of the Civil War. This victory was made possible in large part by Cromwell's creation

of a new type of Army: essentially, an innovative idea of military force that, as we shall see, was to influence English national politics for a good ten years.

It seems that after the uncertain outcome of one of the first battles – that of Edgehill in October 1642 – Cromwell, a country gentleman and staunch supporter of Puritanism, told his cousin Hampden, also a proud Puritan and both influential members of the Parliamentary Army that *“It is natural that your Army, composed of old servants, brewers' boys and the like, should be defeated by the Royalists, who are the sons of gentlemen, cadets and persons of rank. To overcome them you must find men of spirit who are willing to go as far as a gentleman can go, otherwise I am sure you will be irreparably defeated”*.

In the preceding months, Cromwell had been the soul and leader of the “Eastern Association”, a military organisation of the eastern counties of England whose mission was to prevent the union of the royalist forces of north and south. Cromwell had also raised a squadron of cavalry at his own expense, with which he fought at Edgehill, but was unable to influence the outcome of the battle. Of a different character was the cavalry regiment he raised in March 1643, a few months after Edgehill, of the men later known as “Ironsides”, which he commanded with the rank of colonel and which was the first nucleus of the extraordinary instrument of warfare and ideological elaboration that was to become the so-called “New Model Army”. Cromwell's conviction was that victory would come to the Army whose members drew from the depths of their consciences the reasons and justifications for war. The Ironsides were not a plebe of servants and brewery boys. On the contrary, they were mostly 'yeomen', free and active farmers with their children, who fought in this conflict, as one chronicler of the time wrote, as a matter of conscience. In general, Cromwell's choice of officers showed a marked preference for civilians of humble origin at the expense of professional soldiers. It seemed not to please the latter, one of whom, in a letter written in 1645, said: *“Colonel Cromwell does not choose his officers from among the true soldiers and men of commerce, but from among the common people, poor and of low origin. He regards them only as useful and deserving men”*.

The officer spoke the truth. But there was more. What Cromwell demanded of his men was above all a spirit of total sacrifice. Linking the cause of political liberty to that of religious freedom, he asked them to be prepared to lay down their lives for the triumph of one or the other. Since this spirit of sacrifice went as far as fanaticism, he was sure to find it in the obscure independent sects (especially the Puritans), who had always been cruelly persecuted and reduced to a wandering and clandestine life, and he welcomed them into his Army with open arms. He succeeded in recruiting, he said in one of his speeches, *“men who had the fear of God before their eyes and consciences in what they did, and from that day until now they have never been beaten, but always winning”*.

The new model brought with it major organisational and financial problems, as it was set up on a national basis rather than on a county basis as in the early days of the war. This contributed to the disempowerment of the traditional local authorities and

sharpened the contrast between the moderates of the gentry and the Army, which became a political and organisational entity in its own right.

The actual birth of the new model began later, in the winter of 1644, and was completed in the first months of the same year (1645). In January, Baron Sir Thomas Fairfax took command with the title of Lord General, while Cromwell was given command of the cavalry with the rank of Lieutenant General.

Cromwell himself, who had two crucial ordinances passed by Parliament, achieved this through some very skilful diplomacy: the first was the 'Self-Denying' Ordinance of 3 April 1645, by which all those who were members of Parliament, such as Lord Manchester and Lord Essex, were removed from command of the Army. Command was given to Sir Thomas Fairfax, at least until the day when Cromwell himself, now that the Self-Denying Ordinance had been forgotten, could take command of the Army again. Now that he had got rid of the aristocratic and Presbyterian generals (a kind of Protestant moderate who also tended to favour an agreement with the King), he could go ahead as he wished. The second ordinance was the New Model Ordinance of 19 February 1645, with which he persuaded Parliament to disband the Army and create a new one. It will be a 'model' Army, and this chosen militia will be called by that name, a kind of Praetorian Guard, politically and religiously homogeneous (strictly puritanical), and which will become a state within a state, recognising only Cromwell as its sole leader. Moreover, this ordinance does nothing more than apply to the entire Army the doctrine and methods used by Cromwell within the units he commanded.

This Army, dressed in red, a colour that would remain with the English Army for centuries to come, saw action for the first time in May. Cromwell was present: he had obtained a dispensation and a 40-day extension of the almost expired term left to him by the "Self-Denying" to give up his command as a member of Parliament. This new model won its first decisive victory at Naseby, ending the first phase of the Civil War with a clear victory for Parliament.

The Army became a key political player in English political life and began a close confrontation with Parliament itself for political supremacy over the country. At the end of June, Cromwell was demobilised and not confirmed as commander of the Army. The Commons wanted to disband the famous Model Army, which was no longer needed and about which there were religious doubts, since it was made up of Puritans and anti-Presbyterians. It was also felt that this Army was expensive and a luxury that could be dispensed with. Cromwell fell ill in the winter of 1646-47, and Parliament took advantage of his absence to find a way to dispose of the Army by sending it to fight in Ireland under the command of Presbyterian generals. A resolution was also passed which appeared to exclude Cromwell from any military command. The Commons sent a delegation to Saffron Walden in Essex to persuade the Army to agree to the expedition to Ireland. They were not warmly received and relations between Parliament and the

Army rapidly deteriorated to the point of mutiny. Eight regiments went to the polls and appointed delegates to defend their interests, called 'agitators'. Very soon, in just two or three weeks, each regiment had two agitators. Together with the officers, they form the Army General Council, which meets in a clearing near Newmarket. They unanimously issued a solemn declaration that the Army was to become a truly independent political entity: *"The English Army is not composed of mercenaries, but of freemen of the English people. They have united and intend to remain at arms with the firm intention of defending the liberty and fundamental rights of the people"*.

The continuation of the events of the Civil War is a continuous succession of crises between Parliament and the Army, which is now a key political entity in English history. Charles I, handed over to the English by the treachery of the Scots with whom he had sought refuge, became a coveted prize for the Army, which, on Cromwell's orders and against the will of Parliament, held him prisoner. The Army occupying London and purging Parliament of its more moderate members resolves the ensuing crisis.

A profound political dialogue also developed within the Army, as a fully constituted political entity. More extremist factions of the Army grouped around the agitators, inspired by the writings of a strange colonel, adventurer and tireless propagandist, John Lilburne (a form of *"ante litteram"* communism with varying degrees of ideological extremism).

At the end of October 1647, also at the instigation of Cromwell, who wanted to control the more extremist factions in the Army that were opposed to any dialogue with the King, the Army Council met in Putney to discuss a new constitution that would amount to the abolition of the monarchy in England and the proclamation of a republic. This draft, which also provided for universal suffrage, bore the stamp of the Levellers' doctrine, but who were they? They were perhaps the first communists in modern history, mainly among the peasants and small artisans, and were already present in significant numbers in the New Model Army. Then there is a whole range of visionaries, humanists and intellectuals who are much more extreme than the Puritan ideas of Cromwell and his followers, especially on the religious level (in this era, political dialogue is a natural consequence of religious dialogue). The most extreme of them are also vehemently opposed to property rights. Colonel Overton, for example, denies the immortality of the soul, and Walwin opposes egalitarian love to dogma. Above all, however, John Lilburne stood out for his ferocious pamphlets attacking the very foundations of English society, for which he was imprisoned on more than one occasion. The Levellers were frightening: at the time of the Fronde, Mazarin feared that they might spread to France.

For 15 days, the two movements faced each other in sterile debates. Nothing positive came out of them. At one meeting, in Cromwell's absence, Rainsborough, one of the Levellers, succeeded in getting a motion passed to appeal to the whole Army in general assembly.

Cromwell responded by disbanding the agitators' organisation, a decision interpreted by some soldiers as the beginning of repression. Cromwell himself allowed a meeting, although controlled by him, on the issue, at which some regiments, whose presence had not been planned, turned up wearing hats with green ribbons, symbolising the Levellers, and bearing the inscription 'For the Freedom of England and the Rights of the Soldier'. The rebel regiments' resistance to Cromwell's orders was crushed by court martial and, notably, the execution of 23-year-old Private Richard Arnold. This demonstrates the nature of the all-encompassing political entity that the Army had assumed in England at that time. The internal crisis within the Army was only postponed because Charles I, in an attempt to regain power, rejected all agreements and unleashed a second phase of civil war that saw him defeated and subsequently beheaded in Whitehall, thus reuniting the forces of the Army and Parliament against the monarchy.

In this context, the Army turned against Parliament, which was negotiating with the King for a moderate regime, and carried out the so-called 'Pride Purge'. By the end of this operation, led by Colonel Thomas Pride, only 53 of the original 340 MPs were left. Parliament will be reduced to ridiculous proportions and the Army will have seized power. It is this reduced Parliament, effectively controlled by the Army, which decrees the King's death.

With the monarchy overthrown, England is constituted as a Commonwealth by the Army, which establishes the Council of State as an executive body of 41 members, senior magistrates, lawyers of repute and, above all, grand chiefs of the Army, who are the holders of real power. This 'authoritarian' drift led to the aforementioned clash within the Army between various factions, and the Levellers in particular rose up, accusing the Army chiefs and Cromwell himself of authoritarian drift and of trampling on the liberties of the English people.

The conflict ended, after several attempts at suppression, with the defeat of the Levellers at the Battle of Burford in May 1649. The defeat was due to the poor concentration of the Levellers' forces, the lack of strategic leadership and Cromwell's military capacity.

The subsequent phases of the English Revolution were characterised by an ever-increasing assertion of Cromwell's personal power. It was based essentially on the Army he had created, and by a constant clash between Cromwell and the Army itself, on the one hand, and the various assemblies/parliaments which, according to the existing constitutional structure, never questioned by Cromwell himself, had the power to legislate and regulate taxation.

After Burford, the agreement between Cromwell and the Army was at its height. A pamphlet written by a colonel praises Cromwell and calls him an instrument of God.

Cromwell dissolved one Parliament after another, as they had assumed autonomous attitudes with respect to his personal power:

- the "Rump Parliament", augmented by elections, in April 1653, with the accusation of being a Parliament of inept and corrupt people;
- the so-called "Parliament of Saints", made up of men inspired by great religiosity and nominated by himself;
- and once appointed by the Council of State Lord Protector of England, of Scotland and Ireland;
- the first Protectorate Parliament convened and dissolved in January 1655;
- and the second Parliament, dissolved, always relying on the strength of the Army, on 4 February 1658, a few months before his death due to illness.

Cromwell will refuse the title of King, offered to him by Parliament, but the position of Lord Protector will become hereditary, passing to his son Richard.

The Army, however, did not want to hear of Richard Cromwell and demanded an autonomous Constitution. Richard summoned Parliament and the elections brought a majority hostile to Cromwell's memory and his work. Richard dissolved Parliament, but abdicated a month later.

General Monk, who ideally represents the culmination of the experience of the political activity of the Army inaugurated by the New Model Army, in its English particularity, will initiate negotiations with Charles II Stuart and will facilitate his return with the restoration of the monarchy although in a decidedly changed socio-cultural context.

The New Model Army had become a place of political discussion, a kind of "forum" in which the political future of England was being mapped out. Opposing the Independents, whom property rights and censorious demands for electoral rules bound, were so-called extremist factions such as the Levellers, led by John Lilburne, and the Diggers, as well as other smaller groups. Charles II of England, on his accession to the throne, disbanded the Military Corps of Parliament, but used it as a model for some reforms of the Army and the Crown. The New Model Army, though short-lived, radically changed the way war was fought and understood around London. A lesson that would make the British military the most efficient in the world. The era of great parliamentary influence, backed by the great bourgeoisie, was about to begin, from which would emerge the British Empire that would dominate the world for almost two centuries.

Author's short CV

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