

A True Account of the New Model Army

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Contents

The Set Up	3
The New Model Army	4
What They Believed	5
What They Did	7
Where They Went	9
Conclusion	10

Revolutions have generally required some form of military activity; and military activity, in turn, generally implies an army or something like one. Armies, however, have traditionally been the offspring of the revolution, impinging little on the revolutionary politics that animate them. History provides numerous examples of this, but perhaps the most poignant is the exception that proves the rule. Recall the extreme violence with which rebellious Kronstadt was snuffed out by Bolshevism's Finest, the Red Guards. The lesson in the massacre of the sailors and soldiers is plain, armies that defy the "institutional revolution" can expect nothing but butchery. The above statements, however, are generalizable solely to modernity, that is to say, only to the relatively contemporary era wherein the assumption that armies derive their mandate from the nation-state; and the nation-state in turn derives its mandate from "the people." Prior to the hegemony of such assumptions, however, there is a stark and glaring example of an army that to a great degree *was* the revolution. Specifically an army that pushed the revolution as far as it could, an army that was the forum for the political development of the revolution, an army that sincerely believed that it could realize heaven on earth. Not a revolutionary army by any means, rather an army of revolutionaries, regicides, fanatics and visionaries. The Revolution is English (ca 1645–1653) and the name of this army is the New Model.

The Set Up

The English Revolution began as most early modern revolutions began, with the clash of a restive, self-confident middle class and an incompetent (if not blatantly stupid) monarch. Charles I had, almost from the outset of his reign, done everything wrong. In a country that had seen almost a century of unrest and bloodshed centering around the question of anglicanism versus Catholicism, Charles married a papist. Worse, laws against catholics went unenforced while puritan ministers were being tortured, thrown into prison and publicly reviled. The final religious insult came when Archbishop Laud began to reintroduce ceremony into the anglican faith in direct contradiction to the simple dignity that the puritans demanded from their services. The re-institution of the railed altar in all churches led to scattered rioting that inevitably included the destruction of the hated "romish" rails. It was all too much for the godly and, significantly, such "popish" provocations often drove puritans to the far left of religious heresy, in an effort to break all ties with established religion (Cromwell fits into this category). The religious question, however, was only half of what rankled the gentry.

By 1629, it had become obvious to Charles and the royalists that Parliament, and particularly the House of Commons, was developing into something little better

than an elected rabble. In March of that year, after several stormy sessions and in spite of repeated pleas and threats by Charles, the Commons had refused to grant the traditional tariff guarantees for the monarchy (tunnage and poundage). In retaliation Charles decided to dissolve the body. The radicals realized that years might elapse before a new Parliament would be summoned so they decided to close the final session with a demonstration of their displeasure with the crown. On the day that Parliament received the order of adjournment as the Speaker was preparing to rise and end the session, Benjamin Valentine and Denzil Holies rushed forward and held him forcibly in his seat, effectively keeping Parliament in session. The Commons erupted, a rush was made to set the Speaker free, a counter-rush was made to lock the door. Swords were drawn and oaths exchanged, the radicals gained the upper hand and Holies read out the charges; that anyone seeking to introduce innovations into the Church of England or trying to establish tunnage and poundage or any other tax without the consent of Parliament was to be counted an enemy of the kingdom and a betrayer of its liberties. The chamber resounded to cries of, "Aye! Aye!" The doors were flung open and the members burst out into the midst of an armed force that Charles had assembled to put the "uprising" down. Another Parliament would not be called by Charles for eleven years. And as one might expect, this time it was the Commons' turn.

The Long Parliament assembled in November of 1640, and from the beginning it was obvious that its members had their own agenda; Archbishop Laud was immediately impeached and imprisoned (and later executed), all royal taxes were suspended and political prisoners of the crown were released and compensated. In addition, a scathing indictment of Charles's policy was adopted by the Commons, the so-called Grand Remonstrance. In response to such provocation, Charles brought a body of armed men into the House in an attempt to have five members of the opposition arrested. As it turned out, Charles was no better at a simple arrest than he was at running the country; the five had been warned well beforehand and had taken refuge in the City of London. Resolutions of support poured in from all over the country and Charles was forced to leave for the relative safety of the north of England.

The New Model Army

The next four years are characterized by desultory attempts at negotiation between Charles and the Commons, and of course, Civil War. While the situation in the countryside proved to be fluid, generally Charles held the north and southwest of the country, while support for Parliament was strongest in the midlands, the Home Counties and London. The battles and lines of support raged back and forth

across the country, Charles never really having enough support to win any major engagements and Parliament never having the will to press home its advantage. For all intents and purposes, a stalemate punctuated by occasional bloodletting.

In the fall of 1644, things were looking particularly grim for the supporters of Parliament. The Earl of Essex and his entire army had been cut off and forced to surrender in Lostwithiel in September. The indecisive Battle of Newbury (25 October) had strengthened the arguments of those calling for the elimination of half-hearted officers and a more unified command. Oliver Cromwell, a silent backbencher prior to the conflict, and by 1644 one of the preeminent military commanders, was particularly hot on this topic. He argued forcefully for some kind of new army to meet and defeat the royalists once and for all. He stated in Parliament that the gloomy argument used by Henry Montague to avoid battle at Donnington, “If we fight a hundred times and beat him ninety-nine, he will be king still... But if he beats us but once, or the last time, we shall be hanged,” was a sure indication that without an army dedicated to victory, the war would be lost. What was needed was something different, an army of fanatics, razors; men with a religious zeal to win. Cromwell, in a speech to Parliament on 9 December, makes the case plainly, “till the whole army were new modelled...they must not expect any notable success in anything they were about.” Much to Cromwell’s later chagrin, he got exactly what he asked for, in the New Model Army.

The formation of the New Model Army is inextricably linked with the Self-Denying Ordinance, which prohibited peers and members of Parliament their previous military commissions. The act of self-denial signaled an attempt to break cleanly with the past and to form a wholly revolutionary institution. It is also interesting to note that this split between Parliament and the Army effectively created two sources of power in the country (not counting Charles). This was not lost on many members of Parliament and soon the Commons had split into two factions, “Presbyterians” and “Independents,” read conservatives and radicals. It is also important to remember that the one thing that fueled this split and the subsequent clashes across the benches was the simple existence of this entity.

What They Believed

It is difficult to describe the level of fanaticism and zeal associated with Parliamentary forces at this time. Cromwell was one of the first military commanders to actively recruit and train religious non-conformists. His Eastern Association, prior to the formation of the New Model, was considered by its soldiers to be a union of the “godly” and Independents of all stripe joined in large numbers. Cromwell; once questioned about promoting an Anabaptist to a captaincy, replied, “The state

in choosing men to serve them takes no notice of their opinions. If they be willing faithfully to serve...that satisfies." Such sentiments, however, were considered dangerous to the point of sedition by the stolid presbyterian property holders in London and elsewhere, who regarded Anabaptists as holding religious and social views that could potentially damn the souls of innocent bystanders.

Perhaps the best indicator of the intensity of the feeling of these men is by examining their views of battle. Cromwell is probably a poor barometer for this kind of measurement; the man was almost always exhilarated to the point of frenzy by battle. Yet after leading his Eastern Association into the Battle of Marston Moor (July 1644) he came away convinced that this army was the instrument of God on earth. He was also convinced that it had been established to defeat the Anti-Christ (Charles). Another example, in a mopping-up operation fought during July of 1645 near Langport in Somerset, a group of outnumbered royalists had taken up a commanding position on a hill which could only be approached by a lane wide enough for four horses abreast. The Royalists were swept from the hill and to the "godly" officers of the New Model there could be but a single explanation for such a victory. As he watched the royalists break, Colonel Thomas Harrison, an Independent, "with a loud voice [broke] forth into the praises of God with fluent expressions, as if he had been in a rapture." Cromwell, not to be out done by a colonel, concluded upon witnessing the same site, "To see this, is it not to see the face of God?" Clearly, a very different Army than the coterie of professional soldiers and peers that had fought prior to the formation of the New Model.

It should come as no surprise then that men who held such different religious views should be forced to tolerate each other's idiosyncracies. This necessity for toleration crept slowly into other aspects of the men's lives as well, particularly when it came to their political beliefs. As shown above, the Army, almost from its inception, had been a hothouse for radical religious ideas and even more radical men. These radicals were often made chaplains and their preaching extended beyond Army listeners to include civilian worshipers. As the military campaign gathered steam, the linkage between religious and political radicalism became even more pronounced. The Bible, once the font of an individual's personal religious learning and comfort, became a signpost on the road to a new world. This new world differs vastly from the ravings of current religious fanatics, it is a world where there are no more peers, a world of social equality and religious tolerance. While some of the chaplains merely expressed the need for limitations on personal holdings, there were others expressing infinitely more dangerous sentiments, including programs to "level" society, incipient republicanism and even regicide. As the New Model tramped back and forth across the country rooting out Royalists, sermons on such topics were preached to both soldier and citizen alike.

What They Did

The New Model fought a single significant engagement during this period, the Battle of Naseby (14 June, 1645) at which Royalist forces were decisively routed. After a year of cleaning the countryside of latent or active royalists the job of the Army appeared to have been pretty much accomplished. So just when the New Model should have been exiting the stage of history, things started to heat up.

As the military prowess of the Army and the incipient radicalism of its soldiers became known to presbyterian members of Parliament they began laying plans to eliminate it. In the spring of 1647 Parliament tried to disband a part of the Army and to send the rest off to Ireland. This deal also left a great part of the soldiers unpaid for services rendered. The final insult came when Parliament refused to pass an act of indemnity to protect soldiers from legal consequences for acts committed during the war. That was as far as the Army was willing to be pushed. Reunited by a long list of grievances and fueled by almost two years of increasingly radical influences, the New Model would rise and set things straight.

The Army elected Agitators, two per company, starting with the cavalry. Plans were drawn up for a march on London and ultimately Parliament itself. All troops wore a red ribbon on their shirt sleeves symbolizing solidarity, even to death. The Generals, Cromwell and Thomas Fairfax, were at a loss as to how to deal with these malcontents. Lilburne, a leading Agitator, derisively wrote later that “all or most of the officers sat like so many drones and snakes.” After a fair amount of dithering, however, most of the officers were drawn into the plot. The Agitators called upon Cromwell and Fairfax to arrange a general rendezvous, otherwise, “we – shall be necessitated...to do such things ourselves.”

On 3 June, 1647, just one day before the general rendezvous, Cornet Joyce was sent, in an action initiated by the Agitators and approved by Cromwell, to seize the king from Parliament and place him fully under Army control. Joyce and a company of 500 cavalrymen visited the king twice at Holmby House; the second time he was persuaded to come away with them. When the king demanded to know under what authority he was being taken away, Joyce gestured around to the soldiers and said, “All commanded.”

With Charles as its prisoner, and the Agitators in complete control of the situation, the Engagement of 5 June 1647 established an Army Council, “to consist of those general officers of the Army who have concurred with the Army...with two commission officers and two soldiers to be chosen from each regiment.” In one document the Agitators had replaced hierarchy with equality and martial discipline with mutual trust. The sequel to this rendezvous shows how deeply feeling in the Army had run against some of the officers. The troops, “hooted divers officers out of the field, unhorsed some and rent their clothes and beat them...Officers at that

time being only admitted by mutual consent, they could have no power but what was entrusted to them by the soldiers.” After this display, the Army vowed to a man, “not to willingly disband nor divide” until all their grievances had been answered. The New Model then set off for London, where in the Levellers they had allies, and in Parliament they had a score to settle.

The Army occupied London on 4 August and the eleven presbyterian members of Parliament, whom the Army had proposed impeachment for, fled and did not return. Divisions between the Army, Cromwell and some of the other Independents, however, began to arise at this time. Cromwell and some of the Generals had entered into negotiations with the king. These negotiations had produced a document, The Heads of Proposals, which, among other things, contemplated a limited monarchy. In response, the Agitators, in collusion with some of the London Levellers drew up the Agreement of the People, a document wholly founded on democratic principles. The two factions, Generals and Agitators met to thrash out their differences at St. Mary’s Church, Putney, on the outskirts of London. These debates are perhaps one of the most remarkable collisions of two separate and competing views of political franchise and power in the English language, Cromwell and his brother-in-law Ireton arguing the conservative case and Colonels Rainsborough and Sexby arguing the radical. Cromwell dwells on the need for property (“a fixed interest in the kingdom”) in order to be guaranteed the vote while Rainsborough insists that the “poorest he that lives” must be given a say in political affairs. The debates ended inconclusively and in turn laid tfig groundwork for the king’s escape from Hampton Court on 11 November to the Isle of Wight. The New Model soon found itself back in the field and the importance of the debates was lost in the need to defeat the king’s supporters once again.

Disillusion and disappointment ran deep, both among the Agitators and Levellers. One Leveller pamphlet published in 1648 spelled out in no uncertain terms the radical view of what had happened, “The ground of the late war between the King and you [Parliament] was a contest whether he or you should exercise the supreme power over us.” And in a similar, more bitter vein, a pamphlet from 1649 simply asked, “Is not all the controversy, whose slaves the poor shall be?”

The summer and fall of 1647 had taught Cromwell and Fairfax a number of lessons, not the least of which was the need to keep the Army radical but not radicalized. They henceforth took responsibility for most of the Army’s initiatives, never again allowing it to move ahead of them as had happened in the spring of 1647. The New Model, during the remainder of the revolution, was used as a pawn in the political realm. Although it did accomplish some of its more radical goals, like purging Parliament for good of the presbyterians (Pride’s Purge, 6 September 1648) and realizing the execution of the king (30 January, 1649).

Where They Went

The Army, however, would be the training ground for a new kind of agitator; out of the New Model, after its successes and ultimate defeat, came a wave of millenarian, Utopian preachers. These included a whole host of Ranters, Quakers (prior to the sects renunciation of war), Diggers, Fifth Monarchy Men and others. Many of these radicals had either been in the New Model or had been associated as civilians with it. In a sense these itinerants learned much of their confrontational style from the New Model. Their dialogue is crowded with argument brought into relief by scriptural counterpoint, their combative style is vintage New Model. An excellent example of these new preachers is Abiezer Coppe, who had served in the New Model and then drifted into Ranterism. Coppe describes himself as “charging so many coaches, so many hundreds of men and women of the greater rank, in the open streets, with my hand stretched out, my hat cocked up...gnashing my teeth at some of them and day and night with a loud voice proclaiming the day of Lord throughout London and Southwark. [This was, he admitted], strange carriage...” It also makes one wonder about Coppe’s days in the New Model – try to imagine this guy with a sword...

One question remains, what of the radicals from the New Model after 1660, after defeat. Some clearly made accommodations with the new political climate. Cornet Joyce, the king’s kidnapper, became a colonel in his son’s army and a land speculator to boot. Sexby, the former Agitator involved in the debate at Putney, became a conspirator in touch with royalist circles. But these do not tell the full story. Many of the radicals fled to the New World. There are verified historical reports of Ranter meetings on Long Island as late as 1690. It appears, and the scholarship in this field is just beginning to be done, that many old soldiers found their way to Jamaica and the Caribbean. In this arena many of these men turned again to political radicalism and some found their way to privateering and piracy. In 1660 there was a mutiny in Jamaica led by an ex-officer in the New Model. At this time most of Jamaica’s wealth came from privateering, which “old standers and officers of Cromwell’s army” participated in and profited from. Many piratical codes of conduct also seem to derive from New Model forms; the election of the captain, the absolute equality of shares and risk, and finally the consensus required prior to pursuing a prize. In only one instance do we find a direct link, however, between the pirates and the New Model. Henry Morgan’s brutal raid on Panama in 1671 was said to have been carried out by “troops [dressed] in the faded red coats of the New Model Army.”

Conclusion

I find the New Model Army a fascinating piece of insurrectionary history. Not just because of the relative antiquity of the English Revolution and the concomitant progressive nature of the debates that the Army engaged in. Nor is it the extreme tolerance practiced by the men for each other's very personal beliefs concerning religion and politics. I think it is more centered around the final Utopian goals of the soldiers, and their drawing of the political and military battlefield in shades of pure black and white, of absolute good and total evil. The New Model was an army self-assured, confident and certain of its final goal. The fact that it eventually became a pawn for the Generals speaks more for the subterfuge of the powerful than it does to the corruptibility of the men.

I leave the New Model where I found it, red uniforms flashing in the rising sun, the clank of steel being unsheathed and the whinny of a nervous mount carrying through the calm morning air. In the distance one can hear the final benediction before battle, 'Lord give us thy strength to crush yet another regiment of thy enemies, may they fall before thy soldiers swords like wheat..."

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