**English Civil Wars: An Overview**

Fought between 1642–1651, the **English Civil War** saw King Charles I (1600–1649) battle [Parliament](https://www.thoughtco.com/how-parliamentary-government-works-4160918) for control of the English government. The war began as a result of a conflict over the power of the monarchy and the rights of Parliament. During the early phases of the war, the Parliamentarians expected to retain Charles as [king](https://www.thoughtco.com/women-rulers-of-england-great-britain-3530279), but with expanded powers for Parliament. Though the Royalists won early victories, the Parliamentarians ultimately triumphed.

As the conflict progressed, Charles was executed and a republic formed. Known as the Commonwealth of England, this state later became the Protectorate under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658). Though Charles II (1630–1685) was invited to take the throne in 1660, Parliament's victory established the precedent that the monarch could not rule without the consent of Parliament and placed the nation on the path towards a formal parliamentary monarchy.

**Causes of the English Civil War**

Ascending to the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland in 1625, Charles I believed in the divine right of kings, which stated that his right to rule came from God rather than any earthly authority. This led him to frequently clash with Parliament as their approval was needed for raising funds. Dissolving Parliament on several occasions, he was angered by its attacks on his ministers and reluctance to provide him with money. In 1629, Charles elected to stop calling Parliaments and began funding his rule through outdated taxes such as ship money and various fines.

This approach angered the population and nobles, and the period from 1629–1640 became known as the "personal rule of Charles I" as well as "the Eleven Years' Tyranny." Consistently short of funds, the king found that policy was frequently determined by the state of the nation's finances. 1638, Charles encountered difficulty when he attempted to impose a new Book of Prayer on the Church of Scotland. This action touched off the Bishops' Wars (1639–1640) and led the Scots to document their grievances in the National Covenant.

**The Road to War**

Assembling an ill-trained force of around 20,000 men, Charles marched north in the spring of 1639. Reaching Berwick on the Scottish border, he encamped and soon entered into negotiations with the Scots. The resulting Treaty of Berwick, signed on June 19, 1639, temporarily defused the situation. Chronically short on funds, and concerned that Scotland was intriguing with France, Charles was compelled to call a Parliament in 1640. Known as the Short Parliament, he dissolved it in less than a month after its leaders criticized his policies. Renewing hostilities with Scotland, Charles' forces were defeated by the Scots, who captured Durham and Northumberland. Occupying these lands, they demanded £850 per day to halt their advance.

With the situation in the north critical and still needing money, Charles recalled Parliament that fall. Reconvening in November, Parliament immediately began introducing reforms including a need for regular parliaments and prohibiting the king from dissolving the body without the members' consent. The situation worsened when Parliament had the Earl of Strafford (1593–1641), a close advisor of the king, executed for treason. In January 1642, an angry Charles marched on Parliament with 400 men to arrest five members. Failing, he withdrew to Oxford.

**The First Civil War - Royalist Ascent**

Through the summer of 1642, Charles and Parliament continued to negotiate while all levels of society began to align in support of either side. While rural communities typically favored the king, the Royal Navy and many cities aligned themselves with Parliament. On August 22, Charles raised his banner at Nottingham and commenced building an army. These efforts were matched by Parliament who was assembling a force under the leadership of Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex (1591–1646).

Unable to come to any resolution, the two sides clashed at the Battle of Edgehill in October. The largely indecisive campaign ultimately resulted in Charles withdrawing to his wartime capital at Oxford. The next year saw Royalist forces secure much of Yorkshire as well as win a string of victories in western England.  In September 1643, Parliamentarian forces, led by the Earl of Essex, succeeded in forcing Charles to abandon the siege of Gloucester, and they won a victory at Newbury. As the fighting progressed, both sides found reinforcements: Charles freed troops by making peace in Ireland while Parliament allied with Scotland.

**Parliamentarian Victory**

Dubbed the "Solemn League and Covenant," the alliance between Parliament and Scotland saw a Scottish Covenanter army under the 1st Earl of Leven (1582–1661) enter northern England to reinforce Parliamentarian forces. Though English Parliamentarian general William Waller (1597–1668) was beaten by Charles at Cropredy Bridge in June 1644, Parliamentarian and Covenanter forces won a key victory at the [Battle of Marston Moor](https://www.thoughtco.com/english-civil-war-battle-of-marston-moor-2360797) the following month. A key figure in the triumph was cavalryman Oliver Cromwell.

Having gained the upper hand, the Parliamentarians formed the professional New Model Army in 1645 and passed the "Self-denying Ordinance" which prohibited its military commanders from holding a seat in Parliament.  Led by Thomas Fairfax (1612–1671) and Cromwell, this force routed Charles at the [Battle of Naseby](https://www.thoughtco.com/english-civil-war-battle-of-naseby-2360800) that June and scored another victory at [Langport](https://www.thoughtco.com/english-civil-war-battle-of-naseby-2360800) in July. Though he attempted to rebuild his forces, Charles' situation declined and in April 1646 he was forced to flee from the Siege of Oxford.  Riding north, he surrendered to the Scots at Southwell who later turned him over to Parliament.

**The Second Civil War**

With Charles defeated, the victorious parties sought to establish a new government. In each case, they felt that the king's participation was critical. Playing the various groups against one another, Charles signed an agreement with the Scots, known as the Engagement, by which they would invade England on his behalf in exchange for the establishment of Presbyterianism in that realm. Initially supported by Royalist revolts, the Scots were ultimately defeated at Preston by Cromwell and John Lambert (1619–1684) in August and the rebellions put down through actions such as Fairfax's Siege of Colchester. Angered by Charles' betrayal, the army marched on Parliament and purged those who still favored an association with the king. The remaining members, known as the Rump Parliament, ordered Charles tried for treason.

**The Third Civil War**

Found guilty, Charles was beheaded on January 30, 1649. In the wake of the king's execution, Cromwell sailed for Ireland to eliminate resistance there which had been directed by the Duke of Ormonde (1610–1688). With the assistance of Admiral Robert Blake (1598–1657), Cromwell landed and won bloody victories at Drogheda and Wexford that fall. The following June saw the late king's son, Charles II, arrive in Scotland where he allied with the Covenanters. This forced Cromwell to leave Ireland and he was soon campaigning in Scotland.

Though he triumphed at Dunbar and Inverkeithing, Cromwell allowed Charles II's army to move south into England in 1651.  Pursuing, Cromwell brought the Royalists to battle on September 3 at [Worcester](https://www.thoughtco.com/1600s-and-1700s-military-history-timeline-2361262). Defeated, Charles II escaped to France where he remained in exile.

**Results of the English Civil War**

With the final defeat of Royalist forces in 1651, power passed to the republican government of the Commonwealth of England. This remained in place until 1653, when Cromwell assumed power as Lord Protector. Effectively ruling as a dictator until his death in 1658, he was replaced by his son Richard (1626–1712). Lacking the support of the army, Richard Cromwell's rule was brief and the Commonwealth returned in 1659 with the re-installation of the Rump Parliament.

The following year, with the government in shambles, General George Monck (1608–1670), who had been serving as Governor of Scotland, invited Charles II to return and take power. He accepted and by the Declaration of Breda offered pardons for acts committed during the wars, respect for property rights, and religious toleration. With Parliament's consent, Charles II arrived in May 1660 and was crowned the following year on April 23.