

To what extent did the NMA change the course of the English Civil Wars?

The New Model Army (NMA) has long been held as the beginning of modern military organisation. Beyond this, traditional historiography has posited that the NMA delivered military victory for Parliament after a period of stalemate; that it was the radicalised Puritans' puppet (exploited by them to further their interests during the spiritual and political upheaval); and that the body of the army was motivated entirely by religious fervour. This assessment, however, is flawed in many key respects.

In fact, though the NMA certainly contributed to victory on the battlefield, historical analysis has underappreciated the Royalist forces' limitations in logistics and resources, which left them unable to sustain an enduring conflict. Furthermore, though the established consensus of a religiously zealous army does stand up to scrutiny, the wide variance of religious belief within the New Model - and religion's intertwining relationship with politics - demonstrates that the true unifying principles were fundamentally political. Indeed, rather than the traditional interpretation of military passivity, the soldiery themselves influenced the course of political action during the English Civil Wars - and beyond.

It is crucial to examine the military, religious, and political factors before during and after the First and Second English Civil Wars to understand how the conflict played out in and between their respective spheres. (Though nominally Royalist - Republican, the Third Civil War is better understood within separate Anglo-Scottish terms, and thus will be excluded.)

The NMA's lasting impact is often considered its breaking the military impasse between the Parliamentarian and Royalist forces - thus changing the course of history. However, though the NMA's tactical and strategic improvements almost certainly contributed to Parliament's victory, it is more likely that the Royalists lost because King Charles's army was fundamentally incapable of sustaining a lengthy conflict, due to endemic flaws in command and logistics.

Before the formalisation of its military as the NMA, Parliament's forces had been organised as regional Associations, commanded by their regional aristocrats. The initial NMA was formed of the Earl of Essex's Army merged with the Eastern Association (commanded by the Earl of Manchester), and the Southern Association (commanded by Sir William Waller).

Though the Committee of Both Kingdoms recommended this NMA on 6th January 1645, its implementation (together with the crucial Self-denying Ordinance, proposed in December 1644), stalled in the House of Lords, only passing on 3rd April 1645. The reason for its delay was also its greatest strength: the Ordinance required Members of Parliament to resign their commissions or their seats; functionally, this targeted the hereditary peers, who could not resign their titles. The result was two-fold: militarily, it made way for experienced commanders (Cromwell's 'russet-coated Captains'¹ as opposed to incompetent Gentlemen), but politically – and crucially - it removed those aristocratic moderates who wanted peace with the Crown and protection of their lands and titles under such peace. As such, they would not strive for victory at all costs, a position exemplified by the Earl of Manchester who said:

*If we beat the King ninety and nine times yet he is king still, and so will his posterity be after him; but if the King beat us once, we shall be all hanged, and our posterity be made slaves.*²

Essentially, 'some... were more determined to fight to the finish and others more fearful of the war's outcome'³. This led to disunity, factional in-fighting, and military failures, especially in autumn 1644.⁴ The Ordinance completely rid the army of the problem.

Initially, the Parliamentarians had pressed the levies of sympathetic noblemen, and conscripted from pro-Parliament localities. But issues soon arose, with Waller commenting (after his troops mutinied

¹ Oliver Cromwell, *Letter to Sir William Spring* (September 1643)

² Robert Bucholz; Newton Key, *Early Modern England, 1485–1714: A Narrative History*. (Chicago, 2004), pp. 243

³ Mark Kishlansky, 'The Case of the Army Truly Stated: The Creation of the NMA', *Past & Present*, No. 81 (Nov., 1978), pp. 57

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 58

against campaigning further afield) that 'An army compounded of these men will never go through with your service, and till you have an army merely your own that you may command, it is in a manner impossible to do anything of importance'⁵. Fundamentally, the yeomanry were not prepared to act as a professional army.

As 'it gradually dawned on the leaders of the Commons that traditional ways of governing were inadequate to bring even order, much less victory, out of such chaos'⁶, the Parliamentarians drew on their best commanders to develop an entirely new military system. Regiments were established, with clear systems of command, organised based on role and skill rather than place of origin, officers promoted on merit rather than patronage, and monthly salaries to be paid. A red-coat uniform was issued, reducing the likelihood of friendly fire; military tactics were devised, with soldiers being trained on them before going into action.

The effect was almost instantaneous. In comparison to the 'disorderly'⁷ conduct of the Roundhead infantry during the 1643 Royalist victory at Aldwalton Moor, the Parliamentary army on the field of Naseby was unrecognisable in its competence.

The NMA optimised their battlefield formations and tactics to their capability. The infantry comprised of Musketeers to Pikemen in a 3.5:1 ratio. Commanders deployed the massed Musketeers, with their shock effect, on the flanks of the Pikemen. These latter were poised either to advance towards, or stand and receive Royalist cavalry, breaking up their ranks and preventing them from pressing their attack home. This then allowed the more experienced Parliamentarian cavalry to counter-attack. Musketeers were easy to train and cheap to equip, giving the NMA devastating firepower at little delay or cost.⁸

⁵ Sir A.W. Ward, *The Cambridge Modern History: Modern History IV: The Thirty Years War*

⁶ Bernard Norling, 'Review of: *The Rise of the NMA* by Mark A. Kishlansky', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Jan., 1981), pp. 140

⁷ Margaret Duchess of Newcastle, *The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle*, (London, 1879), pp. 260

⁸ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (1993, New York), pp.305

The Parliamentary use of Dragoons (effectively, mounted infantry) also proved a key tactic. They were able to protect the flanks of the infantry, scout ahead, and even disrupt the Royalist cavalry in the early stages of battles. For example, during Naseby, they surprised Generals Maurice and Rupert behind a hedge.

Naseby also shows the competence of the Parliamentary infantry. As the two sets of infantry approached each other in the gully, the Musketeers' Swedish Salvo formation broke down due to insufficient reloading time. The two sides closed in hand-to-hand combat, with Cromwell (on the eastern flank) crucially breaking through Langdale's cavalry; then the disciplined Ironsides regrouped and, with Okey's Dragoons, tore through the Royalist infantry. The effective commander and his tight control of these well-disciplined NMA units stands in stark contrast to the 'cavalier attitude' of Prince Rupert's horsemen. These, after breaking Ireton's cavalry and effectively destroying a flank of the Parliamentary army, failed to press their advantage, and instead went chasing baggage trains and loot. They ended up miles away, unable to have any further effect on the battle.

This thesis oversimplifies the issue by concentrating on combat. Indeed, though Parliament had suffered many losses and setbacks until the formation of the NMA, the Royalist cause achieved few decisive victories either. As time wore on, the military capabilities of the Cavaliers seemed to erode, irrespective of the Roundhead's actual strength.

Initially the Roundhead armies had dwindling manpower and issues with desertion. They were unable to supply half of the 14,000 infantry Fairfax required: Waller provided only 600 foot, Essex about 3,000, and Manchester about 3,500.⁹ Given their low numbers, there must have been a reason other than battlefield competence for their military success.

That reason was largely the deficiency of the Royalist forces. Charles's army suffered from systemic failings in terms of recruitment, command and control, and - most pertinently - logistics.

⁹ Report of the Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Portland Preserved at Welbeck Abbey (Volume VI), 'Report on the MSS. Of the Duke of Portland, i., 215)

An early recruitment problem was the Tudor legacy: 'the country had no regular military system', and the process of raising levies had corroded since the days of Wolsey. This left the King reliant on volunteers and the efforts of aristocrats to recruit. It also left Parliament in control of the Navy, allowing them to supply Hull (their main northern stronghold), Plymouth and Lyme Regis. This resupply allowed these towns to withstand sieges by Royalist forces which would have been better used elsewhere.

King Charles could not, as Parliament had done, simply reform his army; that ran contrary to the very principles he was fighting to defend. He was fundamentally unable to move to merit-based promotion due to his cause's emphasis on the Divine Right of Kings and obedience to the Body Politic. This also proved detrimental to the Royalists' resource management. While Parliament brought in professional logisticians from outside to support the national campaign, Charles had to continue with the traditional administrators of each region. Thus, Royalist resources were managed to benefit local politics, rather than the national war effort.

Furthermore, those areas loyal to Parliament afforded the Roundheads greater access to key assets. Parliament dominated many agricultural areas, and so were able to require cavalymen to supply their own horses. This also allowed loyal and experienced men to occupy important positions within the army. Parliamentary control of London meant access to a major port, as well as control of industry, and the financial districts – thus Parliament could rely on sources of revenue inaccessible to King Charles.

For the Royalists, this left 'the regiment[s]...being very weakly Armed', compounded by the Cavalier philosophy that 'some especial care [was] taken first to furnish the King's guards before any other regiments'¹⁰. This often-meant Royalist forces were more motivated by capturing Parliamentary

¹⁰ Sir Jacob Astley, Sergeant-Major General of Foote, *1st February 1643*

supplies rather than achieving battlefield victory. In several battles, Rupert's cavalry disobeyed his military orders in order to chase baggage trains (and loot) – most notably at Naseby.

Thus, while the NMA's structural changes did contribute to military victory, it cannot be said to have overturned the Civil War's impasse entirely on its own merits. Instead, the Parliamentarians benefitted from more secure revenue and availability of resources. By contrast, crucially, the Royalists' lack of organisation rendered them incapable of withstanding the attrition of a long conflict, regardless of the limitations of their foe.

It has also been argued that the importance of the NMA was not necessarily solely military, but religious as well (changing the fabric of the church community, in particular, cleansing it of theological Laudianism and High-Anglican liturgical practices) as well as guaranteeing toleration of various burgeoning Non-Conformist Protestant groups. The 'war was one of religion'¹¹, with the NMA acting as the driving force of the Puritan movement, pushing for more radical action. However, the extent to which this radical action was motivated purely by religion, rather than admixed with politics, is dubious.

The religious nature of the NMA is indisputable. While the practise of Psalm reading before battle was familiar to both sides, it was the NMA who were issued *'The Souldiers Pocket Bible'*, with Biblical excerpts printed without commentary, simply under relevant headings for ease of use. (This provision originated with Cromwell prior to the establishment of the NMA.) For instance, under 'A Souldier must be valiant for God's cause' were quotations from 1 Samuel which was used to rally men. This quasi-*sola scriptura* attitude to faith nurtured and was nurtured by Puritan ideology. This close biblical study reaffirmed personal spirituality, but the accompanying Chaplains and a well-read Officer class enabled a flourishing of religious discussions and a faith community. As so often, the moral component was the decisive element in the conflict.

¹¹ Glenn Burgess, 'Was the English Civil War a War of Religion? The Evidence of Political Propaganda', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1998), pp. 173-201 (29 pages), pp.175

Under the influence of preachers like William Dell, the Parliamentary soldiery became more radicalised and spurred to action: the 'Puritans linked pulpit and predestination, and that connection gives us our first glimpse of Puritan sociolatriy. Puritan sermons reminded the elect to be ever vigilant against complacency as well as against popery.'¹² This fundamental change in the course of history and societal ideology was so powerful that later sociologists (such as Weber) identified it as the foundation of the global economic and political changes that led to modern societies and Protestant hegemony.

Indeed, the unusual religious zeal of the NMA sometimes went beyond what officials preached to them. Their deep-seated independent fanaticism has been attributed for in atrocities during the Cromwellian Conquest of Ireland, such as the sack of Wexford (in which about 2,000 soldiers and 1,500 townspeople were slaughtered), despite their commanders having been in negotiations with the town leadership.¹³ It seems unsurprising, then, that historians such as Symmons were 'certain that the rebels who fought their king were inspired by religious zealotry'¹⁴ of a new nature, that changed English history.

Upon closer examination, however, these religious ideals appear to be as much political grievances – albeit raised within the religious context – as they were religious dogma. Despite changing conceptions of faith (with which the political grievances inextricably intertwined), it is important to recognise that the religious expression of political grievances was no cynical weaponisation of biblical dogma for political ends. Rather, that within the culture of 17th Century England, there was simply no understanding of the political sphere without a framework steeped in Christianity.

¹² John F. Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism during The English Civil Wars, 1640— 1648* (Princeton, 1969), pp. 56-57, 168-89

¹³ John Kenyon, Jane Ohlmeyer, *The Civil Wars* (1998, London), p. 100.

¹⁴ Burgess, 'Was the English Civil War a War of Religion? The Evidence of Political Propaganda', pp.174

Historians have long acknowledged how the Early Stuart period was remarkable for its lack of wide spread rebellions¹⁵, and have attributed this to the maintenance of the 'pure religion of Elizabeth and James'¹⁶. However, this conventional position is undermined by a closer examination. James I/VI supported High Anglicanism – the 'beauty of holiness' for which his son Charles I would receive such ire – and was dismissive, even repressive, of English Puritans.¹⁷ What differentiates James's reign from Charles' was less the religiosity and more the use of religious dogma to justify temporal burdens. Thus Charles I, having built up the religious ideology of Royal Prerogative to unprecedented heights, used this to levy a ship-tax and to justify his corrupt sale of monopolies (such as on soap.) It was this temporal aspect to which the Members of Parliament objected.

Charles also affected ordinary people's lives and livelihoods directly. The royal forests were restored to their ancient limits, leaving those dependent on the land liable to fines for encroachment. Lands which commoners had used freely were sold for private pasture, or (as happened in the Forest of Dean) for iron industries. Disafforestation and enclosure had long caused grievances, but this high-handed approach, anchored in High Anglicanism, exacerbated by heavy taxes on local economies generated unprecedented popular anger towards the king, leading to rebellions such as the Western Rising.¹⁸ Legislation encouraging expensive High Anglican practises within every parish in England simply added religious insult to pre-existing economic injury. Thus, as Johnson notes there was no deliberate development of 'Puritan Holy war theory'¹⁹ against the High Anglican King; rather the cause was socio-economic. As the contemporary writer Jeramiah Burroughs opined 'we acknowledge we must not resist for Religion'²⁰.

¹⁵ John Morrill, 'The Religious Context of the English Civil War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 34 (1984), pp. 155-178 (24 pages), pp.159

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp.165

¹⁷ Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King: A Life of James VI & I*, (2003, London), pp.197

¹⁸ Buchanan, Sharp (1980), *In Contempt of All Authority*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.82

¹⁹ Burgess, 'Was the English Civil War a War of Religion? The Evidence of Political Propaganda', pp.176

²⁰ Jeramiah Burroughes, 'A Briefe Answer to Doctor Fernes Booke,' , *The Glorious Name of God, the Lord of Hosts* (London, 1643)

These otherwise unorganised frustrations found a powerful political outlet in the NMA: 'By 1647, the New Model would undergo a fundamental transformation ... a process of radicalisation. Its military chain of command would be supplemented by a new and dynamic political organisation initiated from the bottom upwards ... this military body would become a political participant'.²¹ The psychological effect of grouping and organising these men was powerful: they were now uniformed, not dressed in local costume or commander; they had a strong sense of group identity; and began discussing their common anger. This socio-economic basis – together with their Low Church commitment - lead to a powerful and enduring ideological driver. Long after the Civil War was over, these men defended their 'Good Old Cause'.

The effect was potent: 'after the first few months little is heard of their desertion'²²; even conscripted men became dedicated members of this political movement. Notably, this momentum came entirely from the soldiery, influenced by contemporary movements like the Diggers, Levellers and Quakers whose petitions were increasingly supported. By contrast, 'few of the chaplains supported Leveller political equality when they preached'²³, often refusing to apply their theology to real world material questions of policy and government. It was this grass-roots movement within the NMA that changed the very course of English history: 'this development eventually produced a crisis that turned a civil war into a revolution.'

It would be wrong to state that the NMA achieved all their demands: for instance, 'the Levellers wanted to do away with all existing forms of government and to build a new system on abstract principles.'²⁴ Clearly, in this more specific respect, they were unsuccessful. However, 'regardless of attempts to pacify the soldiers, the Grandees were unable to stifle the forceful program of the

²¹ The Case of the Army Truly Stated: The Creation of the New Model Army, Mark Kishlansky, *Past & Present*, No. 81 (Nov., 1978), pp. 51-74 (24 pages), pp.57

²² Charles H. Firth, *Cromwell's Army: A History of the English Soldier During the Civil Wars, the Commonwealth and the Protectorate* (1902, Oxford), pp.36

²³ G. Elaine Johnson, *The Influence of the Levellers on the New Model Army: From 1647 to 1649*, (1964, University of Richmond), pp. 43

²⁴ Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate*, III (1897-1903, London), pp.380

movement'²⁵. It was the NMA actively lobbying Parliamentarians that resulted in success on an unprecedented scale. When NMA found the Agitators appointed by Parliament to represent their interests to be 'unfaithful and too passive in representing the soldiers, five regiments of horse elected "New Agents"'²⁶ instead. As a determined, politically coherent group, the NMA were powerful enough to dictate terms: their representative John Wildman presented to Fairfax demands to remedy 'grievances or grant desires of the Army as Soldiers' in the form of *The Case of the Armie Truly Stated*. This was the basis of *The Agreement of the People*. As Johnson describes:

*In addition to restating the same economic and political oppressions that had existed since the beginning of the Parliament versus Army struggle, the Case brought in more fundamental principles of government. Not unwilling to consider the restoration of the King, they demanded beforehand the security of the people's rights. With this aim always in mind, they desired the immediate purging of Parliament, dissolution within a year, a biennial meeting and election, a new system of constituencies, and representatives chosen by manhood suffrage.*²⁷

The *Case of the Armie* led to the Putney debates on the 28th of October 1647, where the Army Council gathered to debate and pass judgement on the *Agreement*, a modified version of which was passed.

This *Agreement* was not some romanticised revolution; but nor was it a defeat for the NMA, although probably for radicals killed later at the Corkbush Field mutiny. Indeed, the authority of Parliamentarians such as Cromwell, or military leaders such as Ireton, was never in serious danger. But the representatives of the NMA had discussed principles radical for the time: extension of the franchise, toleration of religious non-conformity, dismantling of the Lords and protection of the vulnerable in society.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Firth, *Cromwell's Army*, pp. 357.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Influence of the Levellers on the New Model Army*, pp.27

Though the radical Agitators and Agents were stifled after the Debates, they had voiced the beginnings of modern concepts of universal liberties and rights, and had planted the seeds of democracy in the audience, both those in positions of political power and those without. The fusion of Parliamentary pragmatism with the grass-roots appeal of the Agitators – a compromise and coagulation of these two factions - led to the NMA's participation in Pride's Purge, the establishment of the Rump Parliament. This was the stepping stone to regicide, and rule without a king²⁸ - something previously unimaginable. Though the NMA's influence lead to one of the most shocking and infamous scenes of English history, their real contribution was to lay the framework of democratic values, throughout the English Civil War, and enduring to today.

Within the military, religious and political parameters discussed here, the NMA's importance has been shown to be paramount as a political entity. Although the professionalism of the NMA undoubtedly played a decisive part on the battle-fields of the Civil War, it was as much the socio-political evolution within the NMA – and the resulting fighting spirit that it engendered – that had a decisive effect on the course of the English Civil War. For the first time, soldiers were fighting for a cause they had debated and believed in- that fused both religious convictions with political belief - rather than following their liege lords into battle. Long before Napoleon's aphorism, Parliamentary soldiers showed 'In war, the moral is to the physical as three is to one.'

²⁸ Norling, 'Review of: *The Rise of the NMA* by Mark A. Kishlansky', pp.141

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