



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### English Civil War

### BEFORE

**1639** English and Scottish forces clash in the first “Bishops’ War.”

**1642** The Civil War begins at Edgehill, Warwickshire.

**1645** Oliver Cromwell’s “New Model Army” scores victories at Naseby and Langport.

**1646** Charles is forced to surrender to his opponents.

### AFTER

**1649** The Commonwealth of England (a republic) is formed.

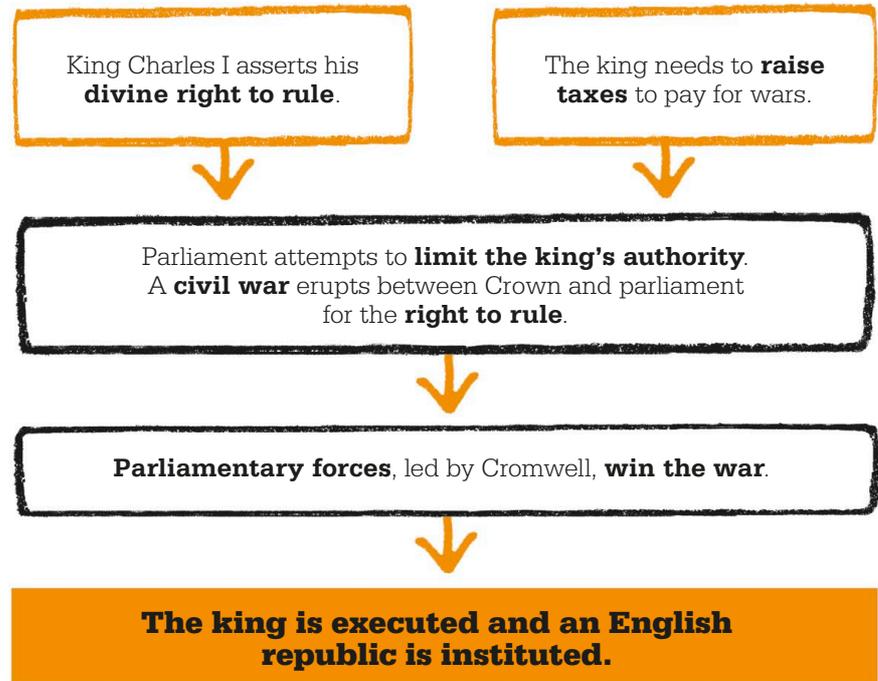
**1653** Cromwell takes the title Lord Protector for Life, giving him the power to call or dissolve parliaments.

**1658** Cromwell dies and is succeeded as Protector by his son, Richard.

**1660** The monarchy is restored: Charles II becomes King of England.

# WE WILL CUT OFF HIS HEAD WITH THE CROWN UPON IT

## THE EXECUTION OF CHARLES I (1649)



**D**uring the 1640s, England was plunged into a series of wars, fought to decide the future of the country and known collectively as the English Civil War. On one side were the Royalists—predominantly landed gentry and aristocrats who supported King Charles I and his right to rule independently of

parliament. On the other were the Parliamentarians—mainly smaller landowners and tradesmen, many of whom held Puritan beliefs and disliked Charles’s autocratic stance. By 1648, the Parliamentarians had beaten Charles on the battlefield and Oliver Cromwell, their leader, ejected from parliament all those who were prepared to negotiate

**See also:** The signing of the Magna Carta 100–01 ■ Martin Luther’s 95 theses 160–63 ■ The Defenestration of Prague 164–69 ■ The opening of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange 180–83

with the king, leaving the remainder (known as the Rump Parliament) to vote to end the monarchy. Charles was tried for treason against England and was beheaded in 1649, after which England began an 11-year period as a republic.

**The causes of war**

King Charles I and parliament were natural opponents. Charles was sympathetic to Catholics while parliament was Protestant, and he believed in the divine right of kings—the idea that the monarch’s appointment is approved by God and so he or she has absolute power.

The clash first came to a head over the king’s repeated attempts to raise money for a war in France. Parliament tried to curb his power to do so by introducing a Petition of Right in 1628, making it a necessity for its members to approve taxation. However, Charles got around this by levying taxes using antiquated medieval laws, selling trading monopolies to raise cash, and ruling without parliament. In 1640, the king was forced to call parliament

for the first time in 11 years to raise money to quell a Scottish revolt. Once called, parliament tried to bring in further measures to limit his power, such as making it illegal for the king to dissolve parliament, but he responded by trying to arrest five MPs. The dispute escalated into the First Civil War in 1642.

**The war and its effects**

Initially, the Royalists gained the upper hand but in 1644 the Parliamentarians reorganized their troops under Oliver Cromwell. With their disciplined, professional approach, this “New Model Army” forced Charles to surrender in 1646. However, the king restarted the war two years later, and this Second Civil War—which ended in a Royalist defeat at the Battle of Preston in 1648—began the chain of events that led to his execution in 1649 and the formation of a republic under Cromwell called the Commonwealth of England.

Like Charles, Cromwell found relations with parliament difficult, but he tried to bring in reforms.

He ruled with stern Puritan authority, imposing it ruthlessly on the Scots and the Irish. Soon after he died, the country—perhaps tired of Puritan austerity—welcomed Charles I’s exiled son home to reign. Charles II agreed to limitations on royal power and to uphold the Protestant faith, but his heir—his Catholic brother James II—clashed with Anglican bishops and offended Protestants by offering prominent positions to Catholics.

Fears of having another Catholic king mounted until, in 1688, in what became known as the Glorious Revolution, James was deposed. The king was sent into exile and replaced by his Protestant daughter Mary, who ruled with her Dutch husband William of Orange. In 1689, William and Mary accepted a Bill of Rights, which ensured their subjects had basic civil liberties, such as trial by jury, and making the monarchy subject to the law of the land. Britain has remained a constitutional monarchy, in which no king or queen could defy Parliament as Charles I did, ever since. ■

**King Charles I of England**



The son of Stuart King James I of England (King James VI of Scotland) and Anne of Denmark, Charles was born in 1600 and became king in 1625. From the start, he alienated both subjects and parliament with his demands for taxation (mostly to fund wars in France) and his assertion of his divine right to rule. He also clashed with the church because of his sympathies with Catholicism (he was married to the French Catholic princess, Henrietta Maria). In addition, he was unpopular in Scotland, where he tried to replace the prevailing

presbyterian system of church governance (without bishops) with the more hierarchical episcopal system (with bishops, following the Anglican model), which led to political and military conflict in 1639 and 1640 (known as the Bishops’ War). During the English Civil War, he took an active part in leading the Royalist armies until he was captured; initially, he was put under house arrest, then he was imprisoned before his execution in 1649. He continued to assert his divine right to rule during his trial.