Political Reform in England as a Result of the Hundred Years’ War

The Hundred Years’ War was a series of conflicts waged between England and France roughly between 1337 and 1451. Due to the prolonged and costly nature of the conflict, drastic changes in England’s infrastructure, primarily in its economy and government, were inevitable. Focusing specifically on the more significant and overarching of these two dynamics, questions arise as to why, how, and to what extent did the Hundred Years’ War bring about political change in England? The primary consideration in analyzing these questions is the war’s effect on English citizens, both the soldiers and the non-combatants. While the conflict was devastating in many regards for the English population, several historians point to the Hundred Years’ War as the birthplace of English nationalism and unity, and it is during this time that average citizens gained unprecedented levels of individual power and freedom. The vastly expanded influence of the House of Commons, arising as a result of the citizenry’s dissatisfaction with the system of indenture, excessive taxation, routine requisition of goods, and domestic insecurity, established checks on the English monarchs and began a major transition of power to an increasingly representative Parliament.
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Abstract

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Introduction

The “war” aspect of the Hundred Years’ War is well documented and, in many instances, preserved forever in legend. Joan of Arc will forever be heralded as a saint in French lore. The Black Prince is a name English schoolchildren are familiar with from a very young age. The Battle of Agincourt is perhaps the most well known battle in the history of medieval Europe. What people are less familiar with is what went on behind the scenes that prompted, ended, and made the lengthy war possible. The Hundred Years’ War was an example of total war; non-combatants in both France and England were unavoidably involved in the conflict, and while French citizens were subject to far more violence and destruction than English citizens, it was the non-combatants on both sides who funded, supplied, and were, in general, most affected by the war.

Public support became essential for the English crown to sustain the conflict. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers, as well as vast quantities of arms, armor, food, and transportation for those soldiers, were necessary; the English monarchs relied almost exclusively on the people to provide and pay for these supplies, as well as almost all other aspects of the war. A system of indenture, or required service in the military, was relied upon to build the massive armies sent to fight in France, and those armies were primarily supported by English citizens across the country ordered to make the necessary supplies by royal decree. On top of the required production of armaments, substantial taxes were levied on English towns and citizens to finance the many other expenses.

The high cost of the war prompted the crown to reform domestic policies, which in turn, catalyzed several major improvements in England’s infrastructure. Nationalism and a sense of countrywide unity grew during the conflict, as citizens rallied behind an anti-French, pro-English sentiment. Wages paid to soldiers, in addition to the spoils of war, provided some poor English soldiers with small fortunes when they returned home (Allmand 156). A massive demand for weapons and supplies created and expanded new markets and provided jobs for thousands of skilled laborers, opening up the potential for
upward social mobility and more equal income distribution (Fowler 9). But the most important advancement that occurred during the conflict was an increase in domestic involvement and representation in governmental affairs. The political atmosphere of the country changed for good as the non-combatants gained influence; the crown’s financial and substantive reliance on the general population gave the citizenry the ability to demand things from the crown they had never before had the power to do.

In regards to the original question, why, how, and to what extent the Hundred Years’ War brought about political change in England, this paper will address each of the questions in the order that they are posed: firstly, it will explore why the English population was dissatisfied with their government, analyzing problems with the system of indenture, forced production, taxation, and lack of domestic security. Following that, a closer look will be taken at how the crown responded to each of these concerns, namely providing benefits to those involved with the military, building a sense of national identity, and establishing a policy of representative taxation. The final point will be a transition into a discussion of the short and long term political implications of these actions to conclude the paper.

Sources of English Discontent

Forced Service

The Hundred Years’ War was primarily an armed conflict fought between the standing armies of the English and French sides. A war of that scale and duration could not have been possible without some kind of conscription; as C.T. Allmand writes in Society At War, “England’s chief military need was the provision of an effective army to fight extended campaigns of aggression in France and elsewhere. The challenge was met by the development and adaptation of the social system of indenture, or retainer, already in existence before the war began, in order to meet military requirements” (57). The English system of indenture required men from all regions across the nation to join the army, pulling them away from their lives, families, and occupations for usually an unspecified amount of time. Huge standing armies were used in some of England’s major excursions; tens of thousands of men were pulled from the labor force to fight, and many did not return.

Not only were they required to serve in times of conflict, but also during times of peace (Allmand 57). At all times, the men had to be ready to fight whenever called upon or they faced major punishments: “The importance for the crown to be able to maintain an effective control over its forces, largely by the use of economic sanctions, is reflected in the system of the muster and review of soldiers which came to be a characteristic of military life for the soldier in the royal service” (Allmand 60). The practice of “muster and review” further inhibited their daily lives, as soldiers from across the county would have to gather frequently at a central location and prove their military readiness, even during times of peace.

The system of indenture was far from perfect. There are varying opinions amongst scholars as to how effective and efficient it was, but it is unanimously held that pay was inconsistent, duration of service varied, and while there was the possibility of making money in France through the gathered “spoils of war” after victories, there was always the threat of death or capture by French forces. As Kenneth Fowler writes in The Hundred Years War, even nobles risked losing everything: “... there were by no means few, who spent sometimes agonizing periods of their lives in French prisons, who had to sell up their estates in England to buy back their freedom, or who died in captivity through failure or inability to raise the sums in question. The higher they climbed up the military ladder, the greater the risk of loss as well as the chance of gain...” (11). So even if an individual
avoided dying on the battlefield, from wounds sustained during fighting, from sickness, or by any other reason, they still risked being captured by the French and held for ransom in a prison, potentially for the rest of their lives.

Requisition and Forced Production

The Hundred Years’ War required vast amounts of resources to support. Industries that suffered the most, according to Allmand, were those that required ships for trading; the English military frequently requisitioned merchant ships as a kind of indentured service, transforming them into transports and naval vessels, but the owners of the ships were often never paid back: a petition to Parliament from 1378 reads, “The Commons pray that as in time past the land of England was well provided with a fleet, both of large ships and of small... yet, since the beginning of the war between England and France, the said fleet have suffered very excessive losses and expenses... without obtaining any form of compensation from the king or kingdom, as a result of which many of them have been totally ruined, and the said fleet almost destroyed in all parts of England, to the great loss of the king and kingdom, to the complete ruination of the owners of the ships, and to the great rejoicing of all the enemies of England” (Allmand 161).

England’s economy was reliant on trade, and the naval battles with France severely depleted the number and efficiency of merchant vessels. As Jonathon Sumption writes in *The Hundred Years War: Trial by Battle*, “There were no great industries in England to absorb the impoverished population of the countryside as those of Flanders and northern France to some extent did” (48). Coal and metal production methods were inefficient and technically backwards, not to mention on a very small scale, salt only had modest export trade, fishing supported a large number of harbors along the east and southern coasts, and cloth-making was undercapitalized, dispersed and inefficient; “England’s principal economic asset was wool... Without an excessively large bureaucracy it could be exorbitantly taxed, or compulsorily purchased and exported for the King’s account. For a short period in the 1290s and again after 1337, English foreign policy was to be substantially financed by one and sometimes all of these devices” (41). England was reliant on the wool trade, which was primarily done through Northern France; during wartime, trade was more or less impossible and goods were difficult to export: Allmand includes a missive from the *Archives Historiques du Departement de la Gironde*, written in 1465: “Item, the English leave the goods which they cannot immediately sell with people in Bordeaux, so as to have them sold; and these people make a great profit, for the people from [Spain, Navarre, Aragon, Languedoc, *inter alia*] often come to seek and then buy this merchandise” (Society At War 183). And, as Fowler argues, “No less important, the entire revenues derived from the wine trade, like those secured from the wool trade with Flanders, were sufficiently large and regular to secure credit advances from Italian bankers” (Hundred Years War 4). With no way to supplement the decreased trade revenue, growth in the English economy was stagnant.

Furthermore, Allmand and Fowler discuss the massive requirements of the army and the crown’s less-than-satisfactory method of repayment. Included in Allmand’s *Society At War* are letters sent out from King Edward III in 1346 to fourteen different holdings across England; included in the letters are demands for supplies: “… we now firmly order and command you, under penalty of forfeiting all that is forfeitable to us, that, upon seeing these present letters, you shall immediately cause to be bought and provided for us, out of the issues of your jurisdiction, 200 bows and 400 sheaths of arrows, from whatever places may seem best to you in your counties, both from within and outside franchises” (65) In 1346 alone, King Edward III ordered that a quota of 1830 bows, 500 bow strings, and 5150
sheaths of arrows was met collectively by English townships (65). Also included in Allmand’s records are similar orders from King Henry V in 1415 to various counties, requisitioning huge quantities of assorted foods, baked goods, beer, and hundreds of livestock like oxen, calves, and cows (70).

Not only did the non-combatants have to figure out a way to meet the high demands of the English army, but Hewitt’s chapter in Fowler’s *The Hundred Years War* outlines the broken process of repayment: “The pattern of operations was broadly as follows: estimates of the total requirements were made, and then estimates of the quantities of this and that commodity various counties might reasonably be expected to supply… Agents were sent to the counties to get the quantities of goods laid down. These men, called ‘purveyors’, were armed with two powers – the right to buy in advance of competing buyers or of the market (pre-emption) and the right, in cooperation with the sheriff, to ‘take carriage’ ( wagons, horses, boats) for the conveyance of the goods acquired to a chosen destination” (81). These purveyors sent out by the crown to requisition goods often did not carry sufficient amounts of money to pay for goods they acquired, leading to crippling delays in payment and economic instability for providers. Purveyors were also sometimes dishonest in their collections, and frequently, more goods were demanded from the English counties than were actually needed (82).

**Taxation**

To support such a massive and lengthy conflict, the English monarchs relied heavily on taxes and loans from English citizens and cities. Allmand contends, “Participation in war, as Christine de Pisan noted, could be achieved in other ways than by active fighting. One such vital means was the financial contribution made by the nation through taxation and grants, partly as subsidies voted in assemblies, partly as loans made, more or less willingly, by individuals and communities” (134). The crown had a tendency to ask for “large sums of money,” or as much as the community or individual could pay (136). The loans were theoretically supposed to be paid back, but Maryanne Kowaleski notes in her article “Hundred Years’ War,” included in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology*, that often, “in practice the English kings in particular failed to meet their obligations” (281). Wealthy individuals and sometimes entire cities were left bankrupt by kings failing to repay loans, but the situation was even worse for the commoners.

Individual taxes levied on non-combatants varied throughout the duration of the war, but were more often than not unreasonably high. How much in taxes did the English monarchs demand? Anne Curry highlights in *Arms, Armies, and Fortifications in the Hundred Years’ War*: “Few would now deny that the fourteenth century witnessed an enormous increase in the financial demands of the English state: K.B. McFarlane calculated that the crown raised approximately £8.25 million from the profits of direct and indirect taxation during the conventional chronological limits of the Hundred Years War, and the present author’s researches on the same material have indicated that the true total stood at over £9.5 million” (86). This was an extraordinary amount of money for the time, especially when taken into consideration with other demands of the crown, including military service and the forced production of certain supplies.

Not only were the taxes exceptionally high, but the levying of the taxes was often unresponsive to changes in the populations of towns. Furthermore, the government was unrelenting in their demands of the people, even after the devastation of the Black Plague: “For nearly a century after 1334, the crown continued to charge fixed quotas from village and town communities as their contributions to lay subsidies, largely ignoring the massive changes both in population and in the geographical and social distribution of wealth that
followed the Black Death and the recurrent plagues of the later fourteenth century” (Curry 88). Eventually, the civilian population reached a breaking point and outwardly protested the taxes in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The Revolt, a direct result of three separate poll taxes (levied at the same rate on all adults) in a five-year span, included violent uprisings against local authorities and tax collectors in major cities across the country, including Kent and London (Kowaleski 281). While the uprisings were short-lived, the message was clear; English people could not and would not continue to pay the excessive taxes levied without restraint.

**Domestic Insecurity**

The Hundred Years’ War was predominantly fought in France, but the English coastline was decimated several different times throughout the duration of the conflict. This obviously had a major impact on the population of Southern England, which had a relatively higher population density than the rest of the country. Gilbert writes, “The French forces inflicted considerable physical and psychological damage upon the inhabitants of Portsmouth, Guernsey, and Southampton in 1338... Exactly how the civilians reacted to such disasters is not known, though it is clear that following the attacks they undertook the multitude of tasks necessary for the rebuilding of their burned and looted communities” (341). French troops took advantage of the poorly defended communities, and fueled by revenge for the English troops regularly attacking French villages, burned entire towns to the ground. As Allmand writes, “Thus the French and their allies ravaged the coastal areas of southern England during certain periods of the fourteenth century, thereby causing much resentment against the English government which failed to defend its subjects adequately;” (131). As Allmand contends, the non-combatant population was left weakened, demoralized, and angry at the crown’s inability to defend its homeland.

Often overlooked, it was left up to the women to assume control over their communities when the men had to leave for service. James Gilbert writes in his book *A Medieval “Rosie the Riveter”*, “Not only were these women required to provide the crown services of their advisors, but they were also called upon to arm their servants and tenants as a means of beating back an attack” (356). Women had to assume command over the defense of their towns, consequentially becoming targets for foreign troops. The threat of a French invasion was always present, although attacks were far from consistent; what were more frequent were raids from Scotland and Northern England that further disrupted unprotected English communities and put non-combatants in harm’s way. Allmand writes, “In many cases men joined together to form armed bands of marauders who caused havoc among the poorly defended civilian populations during the 14th and 15th centuries” (78). Raids from marauders in the North, the constant threat of a French invasion, attacks along the Southern coast, and the targeting of women and other non-combatants were constant issues the crown struggled to address; there was no way to guarantee protection as long as the war continued, so the kings had to find other ways to keep the public in support of the war.

**The Monarchy’s Response**

Within a few decades of fighting, the high cost of the war and growing domestic discontent and war weariness placed English kings into a difficult situation; they could not shamefully end the campaign or surrender to the French, but on the other hand, it was becoming nearly impossible to fund the extended period of conflict. It was a lose-lose situation for the kings as long as the stalemate in France continued, and so they were tasked
with finding creative and sometimes unprecedented methods of sustaining revenue while simultaneously maintaining domestic stability. The Peasant’s Revolt of 1381 effectively eliminated the possibility of unrestrained taxation to finance the war, and it became evident that the only way in which the war could be continued was to gain the approval and support of the civilian population. These methods, including providing benefits to those involved with the military, issuing propaganda that gave rise to English nationalism, and establishing a system of representative taxation, helped ensure that the people would remain in support of the war.

**Benefits of Involvement**

For many soldiers, especially those in the lower class, the war was very profitable. There is a lot of debate among scholars as to how successful indenture actually was, but as Hewitt writes in his chapter “Organization of War”, included in Fowler’s *Society At War*, voluntary service was common: “The indenture system proved effective. Under the terms of the contract the king provided ships for the transport of both men and horses, guaranteed compensation for loss of horses lost in his service, and often arranged that he should have a share in the ransoms received for prisoners captured during the forthcoming campaign... Obligatory service was superseded by voluntary service” (80). Even when the indenture system failed and soldiers were not paid what they were owed, they often still made money after victories through the spoils of war; Allmand writes, “These spoils of war were an enticement: the manner of drawing up indentures seems strongly to suggest that they were seen as supplementing wages, but few would have denied that these ‘advantages’ were, in effect, a substitute for pay which, for a variety of reasons, was all-too-frequently not forthcoming. Spoils, whether legalized or not, were an integral part of the wage structure of the late medieval soldier” (77).

When the indenture system started becoming more reliable early in the 15th century, payment from service, coupled with the spoils of war, gave some soldiers more money than they ever would have made at home. Some higher-ranking military personnel and merchant donors in England were even given major property holdings in France after victories. Allmand includes a royal missive from 1425 which states, “We make it known to all, both living and to come, that out of consideration for the good and valuable services which our beloved secretary, master Ralph Parker, has done for us, we ... have given, granted, ceded and handed over ... a house with all its appurtenances whatever, and with the furnishings and equipment within it, all of which formerly belonged to Jean le Blanc, the house being situated in Paris at the Porte Barbette...” (156). It is evident that for some, the war was profitable, while for others, it was the opposite; conflicting accounts by scholars make an evaluation of the overall quality of the indenture system difficult, but there is no doubt that, for many, the war was seen as an opportunity as evidenced by the rise in voluntary service—this in and of itself shows that the perceived benefits outweighed the costs at the time, perhaps indicating that the war created a better life for soldiers after they were done with service.

While requisitions and faulty methods of repayment were definitely major problems for many in English society, the high demand for goods and services greatly increased employment opportunities for non-combatants. Fowler contends that government-contracted armies, archers, blacksmiths, fletchers, and other non-combatants opened “prospects of advancement and new horizons,” moving lower-class citizens up the social ladder and catalyzing the redistribution of wealth (9). And there was never a shortage of demand, as the requirements for some of England’s grander armies were huge: In Edward III’s army moving from Calais into French territory in the autumn of 1359, 6000 carts, 6000
men in plate armor and well over 6000 archers needed supplies, and in those cards, handmills, stoves for cooking, clothing, and other necessities were needed (Fowler 63). 500 ‘varlets’ (pioneer corps) with spades and axes were contracted to clear paths for carts, and thousands of other citizens took a relatively low-risk option and became traveling merchants for the armies; as Allmand points out, “Private citizens—more often than not those living on a frontier, or merchants engaged in trade—could seek a form of legalized retribution, known as letters of marque, permitting them to obtain redress from an enemy for wrongs or material losses inflicted upon them” (159).

Another blessing in disguise of the war came for England’s merchants; although their ships were often requisitioned, they gained political and economic power as the war progressed. English merchants used their power over Duke of Burgundy, who was in control of Flemish towns reliant on English trade, to keep the threat from Burgundy at bay. The English government was obviously very happy with the situation, and as Allmand argues in his chapter of Fowler’s Society At War, “Powerful economic groups might seek to further their own interests within the context of the war... represents an attempt to influence English policy-makers to turn the conflict in the direction which might bring maximum advantage to the English merchant community” (164). One can assume that the political influence the merchant community gained during the war helped pave the way for its dominance in international trade later on.

Nationalism and Propaganda

The Hundred Years’ War is seen by many to be the most important unifying event in medieval England. Fowler discusses the nationalism that grew as a result of the extended period of conflict; the French language, once commonly spoken, was all but extinguished in place of English as the unanimously accepted national language (164). Community-wide proclamations issued by the English monarchs, announced locally by town sheriffs and leaders of the clergy, included ordered public readings from the pulpit of success overseas and specially written prayers for English troops (164). It is not known for certain just how many people were exposed to these public readings or how effective they actually were, but there were many other subtler, more powerful pieces of propaganda constructed by the crown working to influence the people.

Different monarchs had different strategies; as Kowaleski explains, King Edward III worked deliberately to “project himself as the new King Arthur,” a legendary king in English mythology that is still a staple of English culture today (98). His efforts to establish the image of the king and his court as the symbol of chivalry, righteousness, and cultural unity effectively worked to unify the people behind their just, knightly ruler. Henry V, on the other hand, “appears to have placed almost as much emphasis on his role as the scourge of heretics and the founder of saintly religious communities as on the triumph of Agincourt in public representations of his kingship, and both the quasi-official and unofficial accounts of his deeds consistently stressed his personal devotion to the heavenly hierarchy” (99). While Edward III established his court as the symbol of chivalry, Henry V established himself as a crusader for Christianity and divinely favored hero of the Church, both appealing images to the English public.

The Extent of Political Reform

One response in particular by the monarchy held major short and long-term political ramifications—representative and responsive taxation. During the Hundred Years’ War, English commoners gained a level of political power unparalleled in the history of the
country. The monarch’s reliance on taxation became a springboard for the ascent of the Commons house of Parliament, the branch dedicated to taxation and the representation of the people. As Sumption writes, “General taxation could not be levied at will in England any more than it could in France. It was an emergency measure for which it was necessary to obtain the consent of the community of the realm. ... However, what was necessary was a matter on which opinions could and did differ. Taxation was refused for more than twenty years in the reign of Henry III until the King’s government was bankrupt” (48). The people now understood that, if the opinion was widely held amongst the townsfolk, they had the power to refuse to pay taxes. The consequences were devastating for the monarchs reliant on that revenue if the wishes of the public were not met, and so the Commons, speaking on behalf of the people, rose into Parliamentary prominence during the conflict: "By the beginning of the 14th century it had become recognized constitutional principle that no general subsidy could be imposed without [Commons] consent, which might be dependent on the King’s willingness to grant their petitions... which included not only local gripes and pleas for special interests, but complaints about royal officials, about the general condition of the realm and occasionally about the King’s misgovernment of it” (49). This general policy was finally implemented during the war and became the standard for future levies; the support of the Commons therefore became vital to the success of the monarch, and the people finally had a direct say in the workings of the monarch.

Taxation during the conflict proved to be yet another blessing in disguise; while the massive financial burden fell harshly on the general public for decades, the crown’s reliance on revenue from taxation forced it to become attentive to the people in several important regards. It had to now provide evidence that the people’s tax revenue was being used effectively: “Subjects would help pay for the war and would follow their leaders; but they expected something in return – success” (Fowler 164). The king was now being held accountable for his subjects’ tax money and how it was being used to execute his foreign policy. Evidence of progress and, after a certain length of time, success, became essential for continued funding. This essentially put an end to the unchecked power of the monarch in foreign affairs, and the people’s voice in the form of tax payments became the final say in English foreign policy.

Finally, the monarchs’ actions during Hundred Years’ War seem indicate a subtle shift in ideology from the people serving the government to the other way around, perhaps providing the foundation for the country’s eventual transition to a representative constitutional monarchy. While the Magna Carta had been around for over 100 years by the war’s end, one could argue that it is during these years that the concept of a servant leader was first exemplified. Kings shaped their image to appeal to the culture and traditions of the people in an effort to win over their affection. After the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, the king listened to the petition of the Commons and eliminated the poll taxes instead of keeping them in place, which he easily could have and might have done in the past. Concerted efforts were made to provide all English soldiers with the necessary arms, armor, and supplies, and service were rewarded through monetary and proprietary payment and permission to keep spoils of war. While this concept is more abstract than something like an increase in a branch’s power or the establishment of a check on foreign policy, there is no doubt that the guiding principles of England’s domestic policy during the Hundred Years’ War, the principles of representation and a government for the people, are mirrored in its policies today.
Bibliography


Cyberbullies can hide behind a mask of anonymity online, and do not need direct physical access to do imaginable harm. Anna Maria Chavez, CEO, Girl Scouts of America. Pre-Reading A. Warm-Up Questions. Finally decided to switch from paper bullet journal to a digital life wiki, and I'm feeling so good about my home page! Write, plan, collaborate, and get organized. Notion is all you need in one tool. Reddit is also anonymous so you can be yourself, with your Reddit profile and persona disconnected from your real-world identity. Psychology Memes. Things To Do Today. Awesome notion spreads to help prep for the final year of my undergraduate degree. Let's get that first, friends. Bullet Journal With Calendar. Self Organization.

Kimberlyn Boddie Final Project: Student Profile Axia College Years ago, children with autism such as Ryan were educated in segregated institutions or schools where there were limited interaction with children without disabilities. However, in today's society, children with autism have more opportunities to learn and interact with children who do not have autism, and they benefit greatly from daily exposure to age-appropriate social models. The great thing about interaction of children with autism in the classroom is that children without disabilities also benefit from their experiences with st... Student surveys on teaching and learning. Final report. Resource document. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council, Sydney. http://www.altc.edu.au/system/files/App%2011%20Student_Surveys_on_Teaching_and_Learning-Final_Report_for%20PDF_0.pdf. Accessed 10 July 2013. Paper presented at the 36th HERDSA annual international conference, research and development in higher education: The place of learning and teaching, 1-4 July, Auckland, New Zealand. Tucker, B., Jones, S., & Straker, L. (2008). Cite this article. Tucker, B. Student evaluation surveys: anonymous comments that offend or are unprofessional. High Educ 68, 347-358 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9716-2. Download citation.