

The Triumph of English Nationalism

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The Hundred Years War of 1337-1453 chronicles England's passage from feudalism into nationalism. When Edward III decided to pursue actively his claim to the French throne, the English political structure - its Parliament - was willing and able to support his ambition. The English people likewise supported the campaign, as they were beginning to feel ties to the central government, over and above those to their local lord.

The English victories at Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt were in many ways due to differences in French and English social structure. The English King was very much a part of the common man's life. He lived in the King's shire, was governed by the King's judges, sheriffs and coroners, sitting in the King's courts. The development of the House of Commons and the middle class served as an important link between the upper and the lower classes, ensuring that the foreign wars of the former received the support of the latter, who were starting to understand how their lives would be affected by the activity on the top of the heap.

The French had no such central structure. Their feudal system divided the land into provinces and baronies ruled by territorial lords. Their army was a mass of untrained, undisciplined commoners whose only major tactical plan was an initial heavy cavalry charge by the nobles, which had been effective for centuries. After that, it was each man for himself.

In England, the Plantagenet Kings had revolutionized the army by organizing all freemen into compulsory military training, recognizing the value of the common man's service. Townspeople were required to keep certain weapons in their homes, with the longbow becoming more and more the prescribed weapon. Edward III forbid any sport but archery in the towns. By royal proclamation, "Handball, football, or hockey...coursing and cockfighting, or other such idle games" were prohibited under pain of imprisonment.

Under a militia structure, men regularly trained in the use of their weapons. From this large group of armed freemen, Edward selected those who would go to war in France. The noble English chivalry did not mind being asked to dismount, fighting on foot shoulder to shoulder with the common archers, acting together as a unit -- a concept totally foreign to feudalism, which would never have put men of rank on equal footing with peasants.

Midway through the war, one French military leader, DuGuesclin, figured out how the English tactics were put together and how he could best counter them. He hired some professional companies of soldiers, as the English were doing. He avoided battle, unless he could enjoy the element of surprise. He used cannons to besiege English controlled castles. Unfortunately, his work was for naught. The French did not let go of feudalism and leaders after DuGuesclin went back to their old ways. These were the leaders who brought their men to grief at Agincourt.

Only after the death of Henry V did the French seem to remember how well the non-feudal tactics of Du Guesclin had worked. Their new military leader, Dunois, drew up battle plans along the same lines as his predecessor's. He also got an unexpected boost from the Maid of Orleans, Jean d'Arc, whose haunting martyrdom finally stirred in the French the national sense and sentiment they needed to rally together against the English. Just over 20 years after her death, France finally succeeded in wearing away the English power.

Bibliography

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