The United Kingdom today has one of the best-known and most recognizable royal families in the world. The British monarchy survived the world wars and reforms of the twentieth century, the revolutions of the nineteenth century, and the rebellions and succession crises of the eighteenth century. Compared with France or Germany, the British monarchy seems remarkably stable and long-lived. Yet for much of its history England, the heart of the United Kingdom, was a dangerous and frequently deadly place to be king. No French king was killed by his subjects before the sixteenth century, and the kings of Spain and princes of Germany were equally secure in their persons. By contrast, five of the twenty-five English monarchs who reigned between 1066 and 1649 were killed by their subjects, and a sixth, Charles I, was publicly executed.

Why was regicide so relatively common in medieval and early modern England, and how did it affect the development of England as a political state? This is the question I have been researching this summer in preparation for the Honors thesis I will be writing during the academic year. What I have found is that though English kings were killed with surprising frequency their actual deaths were extremely secretive, carried out in dungeons and isolated towers, the perpetrators anxious to hide their involvement. Charles I’s beheading in 1649 was not radical because the king was killed, but rather because the king was killed so openly.

Clearly there has been a large historical discrepancy between the public sanctity of anointed kingship and the private security of the king’s physical body. My research thus far suggests that the regicides in the early development of the political state perpetuated this discrepancy through secret killings that were given no public justification. In the years following the Norman Conquest, when England was a newly formed nation with a newly minted monarchy, the institution of an anointed, hereditary monarchy resolved the issue of political legitimacy and the peaceful transfer of power. A country only recently liberated from marauding barbarian tribes with Roman era infrastructure needed a strong central authority for protection and order. The English didn’t have a problem with the idea of divine kingship, they just didn’t like some of the men on whom the mantle fell. Between heroes like Richard the Lionheart and Henry V there were fops like Edward II who put the vanity of his few favorites before the needs of the many, or Richard II who preferred comfort to justice, or Henry VI who was so catatonic he did not know his own name. Contemporaries of the regicides like John of Salisbury, William of Ockham, and John Fortescue wrote that it was justifiable to remove or even kill a tyrant, though they remained ambiguous about the conditions and means necessary to do so. Nevertheless, there was no accepted mechanism for dispatching of a king, and certainly not one that could be employed without greatly reducing the majesty of the monarchy as an institution.

Things changed in the seventeenth century with the English Civil War. In earlier generations a king was usurped and killed by his own kinsmen who sought the crown for themselves, and who thus had no interest in attacking or reducing the power of the monarchy. During the Civil War it was not a select group of nobles, but the legislative institution of Parliament that fought the king. Parliament had every reason to seek the diminishment of royal authority, for in a zero-sum game power not held by the king could be grabbed by the representatives of his subjects. Thus it is in the mid-seventeenth century that we see a new language used to describe the king and his powers; he is no longer a divine authority, the physical embodiment of the nation, but rather a magistrate and a servant of state, a man who like any other can commit treason against the state. Ironically, by crippling the monarchy Parliament saved it from future violence after Charles I’s execution. The state no longer relied on the authority of a king to function, and the monarch became a symbol rather than a holder of power. In this way the violent history of regicide has been surprisingly influential to the development of the modern constitutional monarchy.

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