

STURZA, MICHAEL. *The London Revolution 1640–1643. Class Struggles in Seventeenth-Century England*. Mad Duck Coalition, New York 2022. xvii, 224 pp. \$25.00. (Paper: \$20.00; E-book: \$15.00.)

One of the tributes printed on the flyleaf of this book hails it as a “refreshingly polemical call to arms for Marxist historiography”. That certainly captures the spirit of the work. Its title might suggest a closely focused analysis of politics in the capital over these few years, and Sturza does indeed provide that. But this is, in effect, two books in one. Its wider aim is to depict the upheavals of the civil war era as an unambiguously bourgeois revolution. Eight early chapters provide a broad-brush Marxist outline of the economic, social, political, and religious changes over the preceding century to underpin that interpretation.

The book’s value lies in the detailed narrative and close analysis of London politics in 1640–1643. Sturza depicts an urban revolution in which radical groups outside the traditional ruling elite seized power, ousting royalists and moderates, and established new bodies, notably the Committee of Public Safety, which took the lead in providing resistance to the king at crucial moments of crisis. In the vanguard were the free-trading Atlantic merchants, mostly puritans, who were not tied to the crown by monopolistic privileges, unlike the city’s traditional rulers. The city radicals and their supporters played a key role in shaping the course of national as well as urban politics in these years, making tactical alliances with radical Members of Parliament, raising funds, and mobilizing the citizens to foil the king’s attempts to stage a coup d’état. Later, they provided the financial and human resources to erect defences to protect the city, and to fund the war until Parliament devised new methods of general taxation. It was popular pressure, mobilized by the Atlantic merchants and their allies, which protected the House of Commons and drove the king out of his capital, ensuring that London was to be firmly in the parliamentary camp when civil war broke out in 1642. Every historian probably shares Sturza’s belief that without London, there would have been no victory and no revolution. Much of his material comes from Valerie Pearl’s work on London politics, published in 1961, and Robert Brenner’s ground-breaking study of the Atlantic merchant community, *Merchants and Revolution* (1993), while much of the broader approach is drawn from the Marxist historians Christopher Hill and Brian Manning. What Sturza adds is a close and sustained focus, detailed narrative, and perceptive analysis of the urban radicals and their shifting tactical alliances with other groups in the city and in Parliament, each with its own interests and objectives. The vital importance of new bodies like the Committee of Public Safety has never been spelled out so fully or forcefully.

The early chapters on the wider national context are much less satisfactory. Sturza is determined to fit a multifaceted history into his rigid Marxist framework. Each chapter begins with a lengthy epigraph, not from perceptive seventeenth-century observers but most often from Marx, Engels, Trotsky, and the Communist Manifesto. Sturza brands everything in the traditional order “feudal”, even the Church’s parochial structure, and dismisses the gentry as “idle socialites” while

simultaneously depicting them as ruthless proponents of a new world of capitalist agriculture. He sees the “masses” (an unhelpful and anachronistic term) as eagerly pressing for revolution to throw off their “feudal” chains. He is aware, of course, of the political, religious, and cultural tensions of the early seventeenth century, outlined in the early chapters, but they bear little weight in his explanation of the origins of the civil war or of patterns of allegiance during it. Economic self-interest is all-important in this analysis. A reader new to the period will find little here on the extent to which many, probably most, parliamentarians saw themselves not as social revolutionaries but as fighting an essentially defensive war to avert the twin threats of popery and royal tyranny. News of popish massacres in Ireland late in 1641 came as a chilling reminder that England might well be next. Richard Baxter, one of the sharpest contemporary analysts, believed that it was the bloody news from Ireland and the alarming rumours that Charles I was somehow complicit that pushed many confused provincials into the parliamentary camp. Sturza thinks that Charles had no genuine supporters except courtiers, bishops, and monopolists, and that the influence of feudal landowners over their cowed and “blackmailed” tenants is sufficient to explain how the king was able to wage a war lasting four years. Yet, as Ann Hughes and others have demonstrated, nobles and gentlemen (on both sides) often found their orders ignored by their tenants and other ordinary people. He is correct to say that most of the landed class favoured the king’s cause, as the party of order best able to safeguard their lands, but they were also concerned to save their Church from what they saw as the iconoclastic fury of religious zealots. If Laudian bishops had few friends, “Prayer-book Protestantism” was another matter. Puritanism had always been deeply divisive, and many people saw “fanatical” separatists as a threat to moral and social order, and, equally important, to traditional customs. The prospect of a revolution determined to suppress sports, dancing, plays, and alehouse conviviality was never likely to appeal to all English people, whatever their social class. England was divided at every level of society.

Sturza ends his main story in 1643, with the radicals losing their hold over the city’s governing institutions, the bench of Aldermen and the Common Council. A national revolution was to come a few years later, in 1648–1649, with the execution of the king and the abolition of monarchy and House of Lords. But this was a revolution forced through by the New Model Army, not by Londoners. The army’s occupation of the capital was not welcomed by most of the citizenry, and the regicide saw no joyful celebrations. While the London citizen radicals did indeed play a crucial role in 1640–1643, Sturza’s main argument, he exaggerates their numbers, militancy, and longevity. He regrets their failure to galvanize the “revolutionary masses”, or to launch a Jacobin Terror to crush or liquidate their class enemies. But it is doubtful that they ever had the means or desire to do either. A few years later, the Levellers were indeed able to bring thousands of Londoners onto the streets, but their movement exposed the limits as well as the appeal of revolutionary radicalism.

The book has a third strand: a highly polemical historiographical exercise, which dominates the preface and conclusion. Sturza’s main targets are “revisionist” historians, who argued that the English Revolution had no long-term causes and denied the existence of any serious disagreements over constitutional or other principles before 1640. Sturza launches a fierce and effective assault on this interpretation,

though the revisionist tide has, in any case, long since ebbed. Much of his assault, indeed, consists of lengthy extracts from other historians' critical reviews of the revisionists' books. Whether readers will find the polemical style "refreshing" will be a matter of taste. Academic historians who have ventured to advance any other non-Marxist interpretations are summarily dismissed as slippery, maverick, "absurd frauds", "outlandish and frivolous", and worse. The author is clearly not lacking in self-assurance. Even Christopher Hill is chided for having been "a poor polemicist", "too polite", and making peace with bourgeois "capitalist" historians. This bar-room abuse becomes tiresome and counter-productive.

Sturza explains that he is not an academic historian (he is a lifelong "labor activist"), and his book is presumably aimed at readers politically engaged but unfamiliar with English history. He provides a table supplying basic information on the dates of English monarchs, for example. Its polemical tone will enthuse fellow-Marxist veterans without doing much to convince the uncommitted. His odd assertion that we have been living in "a decaying era" since the collapse of the Soviet Union suggests a mindset not widely shared in the West, least of all among the liberated peoples of Eastern Europe and the Baltics. The book's abusive rhetoric and the heavy reliance on secondary sources will probably lead to it being largely ignored by historians. That would be a pity. For all its strident tone and intellectual rigidity, Sturza's skilful analysis of the turbulent currents in London's political world, and his stress on the vital importance of its radical citizens, makes a valuable contribution.

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