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Europe's First Republic

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The first republic in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire was England - or the Commonwealth of England as it was called. It was created by the controversial figure of Oliver Cromwell and it marked the end of the "Divine Right of Kings" - the idea that kings were appointed by God to rule.

Cromwell belonged to a group called the Independents. They believed in religious freedom and limiting the power of the monarch. In the English civil war Cromwell formed the New Model Army and demonstrated great military prowess in defeating King Charles' 'cavaliers'.

Members of the New Model Army received proper military training and by the time they went into battle in 1644 they were very well-disciplined.

In the past, people became officers because they came from powerful and wealthy families. In the New Model Army men were promoted when they showed themselves to be good soldiers. For the first time it became possible for working-class men to become army officers.

Cromwell thought it was very important that soldiers in the New Model Army believed strongly in what they were fighting for. Where possible he recruited men who, like him, held strong Puritan views and the New Model Army went into battle singing psalms, convinced that God was on their side.

King Charles I was eventually executed as traitor and Cromwell became 'Lord Protector' of the Commonwealth - a chief executive.

In August 1649, Cromwell and 12,000 soldiers arrived in Ireland. During the next ten years of bloodshed it is estimated that about a third of the population was either killed or died of starvation.

The majority of Roman Catholics who owned land had it taken away from them and were removed to the barren province of Connacht. Catholic children were shipped to Barbados and sold to the planters as slaves!

You can imagine what the Irish think about Oliver's army even today.

After Cromwell's death the role of Lord Protector was taken by his incompetent son. Without Oliver Cromwell's strong presence the Commonwealth fell apart and the monarchy, in the person of King Charles II, was restored.

The English Republic lasted from 1649 - 1660 and the English show little willingness to repeat the experiment. But who knows? The next monarch will be King Charles III. The first two lived in interesting times.