

The Crossbow and the Longbow's effects on Warfare and Society

Important actions often have far-reaching consequences and when English kings adapted the longbow as an infantry weapon, they could not have foreseen the end results. The adaption of the longbow over the crossbow initiated military and social revolutions, changing the way wars were fought and increasing the power of the common man. Before these effects are explained, there must first be a description of the crossbow and the longbow and an overview of the event that sparked these revolutions, The Hundred Years War.

Crossbows have existed since the late Roman Empire, but did not become widely used until around the tenth century. The tenth century *Historia* by Richer details the defense of the city of Senlis in 947 with crossbowmen as an important part of its defense. The Crusades brought Saracen composite bows to Europe, allowing crossbows to fire more powerful bolts¹. This increase in crossbow power, combined with the ability to learn how to use a crossbow with little training led to the first attempt at arms control in 1139, when the Second Ecumenical Lateran Council outlawed its use among Christians². It would not bring about any social change though as it was an elite weapon. It was costly to equip a crossbowman and the slow rate of fire made it better suited for sieges than for battles. By the time of Edward I, the English army only had about 250 crossbowmen as the army had converted to using the superior longbow.³

¹ David Edge and John Miles Paddock, *Arms and Armor of the Medieval Knight* (New York: Random House, 1996), 35.

² David Nicolle, *Companion to Medieval Arms and Armor: The English Experience* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), 123.

³ Michael Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 131.

The longbow has its origins in twelfth century Wales, where Gerald de Barri used a powerful self bow with a rapid rate of fire. Arrowheads were more refined⁴, and by the fourteenth century, English kings had adopted this Welsh longbow⁵. Englishmen were trained to use the longbow starting from childhood, and practice in adulthood was made compulsory by the Statute of Winchester in 1285⁶. By the Hundred Years War, the free peasantry (yeoman class) was a highly trained militia that kings could utilize.⁷ The longbow had a draw weight of anywhere from 100 to 175lbs, giving the arrows shot from it the power to penetrate plate mail. An experienced archer could shoot ten to twenty arrows a minute. This power and high rate of fire came at a cost, one had to train for many years to gain strength, steadiness, and the degrees of elevation required to hit particular distances.⁸

The Hundred Years War originated in land disputes between the kings of England and France. William of Normandy conquered England in 1066, and became both king of England and duke of Normandy, meaning he was both a king and a vassal of the French king. By the late twelfth century, the English crown administered more French land than the French did, but the French crown tired of English control, and started to fight back. Still, the English crown

⁴ Edge and Paddock, *Arms and Armor*, 49.

⁵ Ibid, 65.

⁶ Joseph Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 187. The Statute of Winchester said that any landowner with property worth forty shillings had to equip himself with a longbow and arrows

⁷ Ibid, 187.

⁸ Prestwich, *The English Experience*, 131.

controlled a large portion of southwestern France, and disputes over English control in France lead to the Hundred Years War.⁹

At the onset of the Hundred Years War, England was small and weak compared to France, and had not yet gained control of the entire British Isles. England's population was at most three and a half million, a third of France's. Agriculture was rather undeveloped, and the only competitive trade industry was that of wool. English wool was famed as the finest in all of Europe, and it formed the backbone of much of the cloth industry, such as the one in the Low Countries. ¹⁰This is why English control of Gascony was so important, as Gascony was one of the major traders with England. England provided Gascony with corn, cloth, hides, leather, tin, fish, and wool. Gascony provided its main export, wine, as well as woad and dyes that came in from French controlled areas. If England lost control of Gascony, this vital trade would be heavily disrupted if not cut off entirely. As England was an island and relied (and still does) heavily on trade, this loss of a major market would be devastating to the economy.¹¹

France on the other hand was bigger and more powerful. Like England, the central government did not control all of modern day France. French influence extended far beyond its direct control though, reaching into the Low Countries and various other territories. France's

⁹ Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles*, 169-172.

¹⁰ Edouard Perroy, *The Hundred Years War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951), 50-52.

¹¹ M. G. A. Vale, *English Gascony: 1399-1453, A Study of War, Government, and Politics during the later stages of the Hundred Years' War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11-14.

population was at a minimum of ten to twelve million. The cultivation of marsh and forest into farmable land had reached an all time high. Prosperity in the towns, especially Paris, matched that of the country. Looms within the towns were beginning to compete with the Low Countries in quality. Also, the period of peace and prosperity before the Hundred Years War allowed a centralization of authority in the areas controlled by the crown. The feudal organization of the past meant that armies were still made up of summoned vassals who equipped themselves at their own costs, as well as untrained masses of infantry from the towns. The English army was quite different, it was composed of well-trained longbowmen taken from the lower classes.¹²

At the battle of Crecy (1346), the French army had not changed, and its main strength was its mounted nobility and heavily armored knights. It had a small infantry component as well, composed of conscripted pikemen and Genoese crossbowmen. The English army had changed significantly as a result of lessons learned from combat with the Welsh and Scots. The Welsh had defeated Edward I's army with longbows and he adapted the longbow into the English army. The longbow was devastating, because it would not directly kill many, but it would cause many injuries to both man and horse, leaving the horsemen a disorganized mess. The English cavalry would then charge, and pikemen would kill any incapacitated Frenchmen. At the Battle of Crecy, and later at the battle of Poitiers and Agincourt, these tactics led to total English victories.¹³

¹² Perroy, *The Hundred Years War*, 34-44.

¹³ Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles*, 187-196.

As a result of the long years of fighting and attempts at occupying Wales and Scots, the English had developed a more defensive mentality and applied this mentality to warfare. The traditional “rules” of warfare involved hand-to-hand fighting between knights out in an open field. As the army the English had would have been destroyed if they blindly obeyed these rules, they had to improvise, and they based these new rules on their earlier experiences. First of all, instead of fighting on a level plain, the English selected an easily defensible position, something like a river or hilly forested area. Then, instead of having all of the soldiers displayed in the open, infantry were concealed behind fences, hedges, or other concealing parts of the environment. Combat was initiated by longbow fire that, like mentioned above, greatly weakened the incoming knights for the infantry to destroy. The English had adapted to the changing rules of warfare, but it took the French most of the Hundred Years War to do the same. It was believed after Crecy that the English had just had a stroke of luck and that the environment and lack of discipline from the knights led to English victory, not the use of the longbow. By the time the French were defeated at Agincourt, the world had concluded that the change in tactics had led to the astounding victories.¹⁴

The battle of Crecy not only influenced change in warfare, but increased the prestige of England. It was England’s first victory as a nation, especially against France, which was thought of as a superior force. The states on the Continent could not idly dismiss England as a powerless backwater. As well, the victory strengthened England’s resolve to keep Gascony as a sovereign

¹⁴ Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles*, 192-194.

province and its desire to conquer more French territory. At the beginning of the war, and if the English had not won such spectacular victories, the English might have been content to hold Gascony in fief if French officials had left them to their own business. The victory at Crecy, as well as the ones at Poitiers and Agincourt, ensured though that the Hundred Years War would continue on for nearly as long.¹⁵

While the use of the longbow during the Hundred Years War resulted in a military revolution, it also resulted in a social revolution. The armies that England used to devastate France were drawn mainly from the common people, as they were paid less and a much broader section of the population. Therefore, the victories the English won were not won by the nobility, but by the common man. The common man in England gained power because of the government's need for financial support and the common man's military service. The Great Revolt of 1381 had been a success as rebels were equipped with longbows and their leader had participated in the Hundred Years War. The French abandoned implementing longbow practices when the king realized that the peasants might become stronger than the nobility.

The Commons started meeting separately from the Lords in Parliament and only agreed on new taxes in return for political concessions. The first time the Commons met separately was in 1341, which was shortly after English victories against the Scots that were due to the use of the longbow. In 1351, five years after Crecy, Parliament added control over indirect taxation, like wool subsidies, to its powers of direct taxation. The minimum property level to vote in

¹⁵ Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles*, 195-196.

Parliamentary elections was set to an income of 40 shillings a year, the same income level that mandated ownership and training with the longbow. By the time of Edward III, the importance of the Commons in Parliament rivaled that of the Lords, which coincided with the rise of importance of the longbow. The infantry style of fighting led to impersonal attempts at slaughter with little chance of surrender. The previous style was highly personal and often ended in capture. As the common man dominated the battlefield, capturing for ransom was fairly useless as commoners did not garner enough ransom to make the practice worthwhile. Class tensions between the nobility and the commoners also encouraged the fighting to kill mentality.¹⁶

While France had started the Hundred Years War in a period of prosperity, it came out in a greatly weakened state. As the entire war had gone on within France, the land and the population suffered heavy damages from the fighting and raiding and epidemics. Many areas of the countryside were deserted and were barely able to sustain the surrounding towns. To counteract this countryside devastation, vigorous methods were set into place to restore the countryside and bring people back by regrouping lands, reducing rents, and paying for some labor services. There was a massive increase in the amount of new construction as well; to counteract all that had been destroyed. Towns suffered less, as trade still served to bring profit to the people. Finally, by the end of the war the government had transformed from a feudal

¹⁶ Clifford J. Rogers, "The Military Revolutions of the Hundred Years War." *The Journal of Military History*

57, no. 2 (1993): 248-257.

monarchy to a more centralized state with a more efficient administration, as the nobility was greatly weakened from not adapting to English longbow tactics.¹⁷

England did lose the Hundred Years War in the sense that it failed to hold Gascony, and ended the war with only Calais. England did gain a lot though. It gained respect in the eyes of Christian Europe, and gained self-confidence as a nation. As a result of the Hundred Years War the English were now aware of their strength. Linguistic unity was established, by the 1450s the vast majority of all official documents were drafted in English. While England also incurred a heavy cost from the war, it was much less than that of France's. The land itself was left intact, and the people hastened the end of the war by refusing to pay excess taxes. With the war ended, the economic burdens from it started to lift, bringing in economic growth. As the export of wool had become unreliable, a cloth making industry was created in some of the towns and wool-growing areas, which eventually put the looms of the Low Countries out of business. This created a new foreign trade market for England which helped make up for the loss of Gascony.¹⁸

The use of the longbow, especially during the Hundred Years War, brought about both a military and social revolution. The military revolution ended up vastly increasing the potential size of armies, and made warfare much bloodier. The social revolution increased the power of

¹⁷ Perroy, *The Hundred Years War*, 323-329.

¹⁸ Perroy, *The Hundred Years War*, 333-335.

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the common man within the government. The military revolution that happened during the 14th century was just one of a series of changes in warfare that allowed more revolutions to happen beyond the 14th century. The social revolution decreased the power of the nobility, as they were either dead or no longer able to be the main provider of important troops. This allowed the king to start centralizing control, leading to the absolute monarchies of Europe beginning in the 17th century.

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