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Military Impressment and the Popular Politics of Coerced Service in Gloucestershire, 1640-1641

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In two months of research on early modern English military impressment supported by the History Project, I worked in the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the Cheshire Archives, the Gloucestershire Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives, the National Archives at Kew, and the Parliamentary Archives. The sources I sampled included lieutenants' letters, muster rolls and indentures, and quarter sessions records. I came to focus on a petition to the House of Lords and subsequent parliamentary investigation into alleged abuses in impressment and the collection of coat and conduct money in Gloucestershire, 1640-41.

This archival work has led me to re-frame the project as a microhistory. The 334 depositions collected by the Gloucestershire investigation will serve as the core of a piece on the local, national, and Atlantic context of this furor. The project currently has two goals. First, the strategies used to extract potential soldiers from wary villages and towns must be incorporated into the history of how the English gathered and moved laborers across borders and ultimately oceans. Second, the ways in which men and women interacted with the lieutenancy and later participated in the petition process show that local negotiations with the central government were never simply a struggle over access to resources, whether coin or human capital. The Gloucestershire case demonstrates that ordinary people also understood and manipulated the religious and political meaning of paying military levies and sending men to fight in the Second Bishops' War.

Previous scholarship has examined military impressment in institutional histories of the lieutenancy. This work often uses the raising of armies as a measure of the effectiveness of Charles I's antebellum government. It views impressment as a more-or-less functional extractive endeavor, in which the crown dipped its fingers into the localities' pool of laborers. Historians have also gathered anecdotal manuscript evidence to build an impressionistic sense of how impressment worked; their findings are borne out here. Constables preferred to press the pariahs of their community and men without young families; richer men paid for substitutes to go in their place; officers tricked men into accepting press money ('the King's shilling'); the pressed soldiers marched off to rendezvous points, but often deserted at the first opportunity. This scholarship suggests that impressment was negotiated on two levels: between lords lieutenant and their deputies, and then between deputies, constables, and the better-off commoners who led their communities.

My research instead shows that the negotiations of the press occurred right through Gloucestershire society, between commoners of every social status. All adult male commoners were vulnerable to the press, but not to the same degree. Families and neighbors cooperated to buy discharges for those that they thought of as their own, at the cost of men with less money, credit, or social connections. Impressment therefore fostered a special social dynamic of protection and exposure (or betrayal). The petition and subsequent depositions against the deputies alleged that the deputies had inappropriately pressed men without regard to their status, and had demanded too much money. The traces and silences in the documents imply that people of lower status were not passive victims, nor were they always desperate evaders of the press. They, too, tried to activate their social networks and to emphasize their protections from impressment.

With additional research, I will test my hypothesis that the petition and subsequent investigation only had traction because the deputy lieutenants came to represent something larger: the violation of local privileges and the repression of godly reform during the Personal Rule. This argument is supported by a few pieces of correspondence and the existing political historiography. I plan to pursue this point further with prosopography and mapping.

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