SECTION 1


How serious was the political instability of the period 1459–61?

KEY POINTS

• Henry VI’s weaknesses in the 1450s led to serious divisions within the nobility.
• Richard, Duke of York, who was allied to the Neville family, engaged in a series of battles after 1459 against what he called the king’s ‘evil advisers’.
• Though York was killed in the struggles, Henry VI was overthrown by York’s son, Edward, Earl of March, in 1461. Edward was crowned in London and then defeated Henry VI’s forces at the Battle of Towton. The new king styled himself King Edward IV.

TIMELINE

1453 Henry VI suffers a mental collapse.
1455 First Battle of St Albans – York defeats the Lancastrians.
1459 Battle of Ludlow – York defeated and flees to Ireland.
1461 York’s son declares himself king as Edward IV. Battle of Towton – Edward IV defeated the Lancastrians to secure the throne.

Fate of the Yorkists

In 1476, the same year as William Caxton began operating the first English printing press in Westminster, King Edward IV organised a bizarre and moving ceremony in the church at Fotheringhay in Northamptonshire. Although

Church at Fotheringhay
The collegiate church had been founded by Edmund, Duke of York, and now it was to be the family mausoleum.
Edward IV was a Plantagenet, he was also a Yorkist, since his father was Richard, Duke of York. This duke was the centre of attention at Fotheringhay on this occasion, even though he had been dead for fifteen years. Edward IV had had his father's body exhumed and the corpse carefully prepared for reburial. Also present was another corpse, the body of Edward IV's younger brother, Edmund, Earl of Rutland. Father and son had been killed in battle in Yorkshire late in 1460. They had been fighting against the Lancastrian forces of Henry VI (Henry VI's great grandfather was the Duke of Lancaster) and mistook the main Lancastrian army for a foraging party. They rushed out of the safety of Sandal Castle and were promptly killed. The Duke of York's head was cut off and sent to the city of York, where it was exhibited on a long pole and decorated with a paper crown for the benefit of passers-by.

Violent death was not unusual for the family of York. Henry V had executed York's father, Richard, Earl of Cambridge in 1415, on charges of treason. In the same year, York's uncle, Edward, Duke of York, who was a grandson of King Edward III was killed in the battle of Agincourt. He was already buried in the great collegiate church at Fotheringhay, which he had founded, and now his nephew and successor as Duke of York was to be buried alongside him.

York's surviving sons fared little better than their father. Most would meet their deaths in violent circumstances. While Edmund of Rutland had been killed in battle with his father, another son, George, Duke of Clarence, was to be judicially murdered by his own brother (Edward IV), and the youngest of York's sons, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, born in Fotheringhay Castle, would die at Bosworth in 1485; the last English king to die in battle.

The next generation of Yorkists proved to be similarly doomed. Edward IV's two sons – the 'princes in the Tower' – were murdered there, while their cousin, Edward, Earl of Warwick, was to spend most of his life in prison, only to be put to death by Henry VII in 1499. The one exception to the rule that Yorkists died violent deaths was Edward IV himself, who became king at the age of eighteen. Although briefly overthrown, he went on to rule successfully and died in his bed!

The Wars of the Roses, 1459–61: the limits of political instability
The families of York and Lancaster

Edward III = Philippa of Hainault
1312–1377 d.1369

HOUSE OF LANCASTER

Edward "The Black Prince" d.1376
Lionel, Duke of Clarence d.1368
John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster d.1399
= (1) Blanche d.1369
== (2) Constanza d.1394
(3) Katherine Swynford d.1403

Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke) 1367–1413
Mary de Bohun d.1394
John Beaufort d.1410
John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset d.1444

Edward IV = Elizabeth Woodville 1442–1483 d.1492

Edward V 1470, died 1483?
Richard, Duke of York died 1483?

TUDOR

Henry VII = Elizabeth of York 1457–1509 d.1503

Arthur 1486–1502 = Catherine of Aragon
Margaret 1489–1541 = (1) James IV of Scotland
killed at Flodden 1513 = (2) Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus d.1557
Henry VIII = (1) Catherine 1491–1547 = (2) Anne Boleyn
of Aragon div. 1533 executed 1536

Henry VI 1387–1422 = Katherine Valois = (2) Owen Tudor executed 1461
Jasper, Duke of Bedford d.1495
Edmund, Earl of Richmond d.1456
Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby d.1509

Edward, Prince of Wales killed at Tewkesbury 1471
Margaret of Anjou d.1482

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The families of York and Lancaster
Reburial in Fotheringhay, 1476
The bodies of Richard, Duke of York and Edmund, Earl of Rutland had been buried for fifteen years in Pontefract. The corpses (or what was left of them) were dug up and transported over a five-day period from Yorkshire to the Yorkist stronghold of Fotheringhay in Northamptonshire, with its large castle and magnificent church. Clothed in cloth of gold, the two bodies reached their final destination and, amid much pomp and circumstance, were duly buried in the collegiate church, with its glorious late Gothic architecture. Meanwhile, all the nobility of the realm, together with all the bishops and archbishops, acted as onlookers as the bodies were lowered into their final resting places. The proceedings were watched over by the Duke of York’s widow and his three surviving sons, including the king of England himself. It was a massive ceremony – perhaps 5000 people attended, crowding into the church and the castle. There was feasting for the powerful men assembled there, while alms were given to the poor and needy.

It was an extraordinary ceremony by any stretch of the imagination, but what did it mean? What was Edward IV trying to prove beyond devotion to his fallen father? Why had he not done it before now – after all, he had been king for some fourteen years already? For Edward IV, the ceremony did two things, which were meant to strengthen his control of the country.

- First, it forcibly reminded the assembled notables of the disadvantages of civil war. Both the victims had fallen during a period of intense civil war, known since (but not at the time) as the Wars of the Roses. The red rose symbolised the family of Lancaster, while the white rose represented the family of York.
- Second, the ceremony was designed to promote the idea that the family of York had arrived on the throne and

**KEY PEOPLE**

Princes in the Tower The two sons of Edward IV. On his death in 1483, the elder (aged twelve) was proclaimed king as Edward V but was never crowned. His uncle, Richard of Gloucester, claimed the throne andEdward V and his brother Richard (aged ten) were probably murdered in the Tower of London, possibly on Richard’s orders.

Edward, Earl of Warwick (1471–99) The only son of the Duke of Clarence and Warwick’s eldest daughter, Isobel. He was imprisoned for most of his short life: first by Richard III and then by Henry VII. Since he had a better claim to the throne than either of these monarchs, he was an unwitting threat to their regimes. Aged only 28, he was finally executed by Henry VII in 1499, probably under pressure from Spain, who did not want Catherine of Aragon to come to England to marry Arthur Tudor while other claimants to the throne were still alive. Some claimed that his prospects were blighted not only by his imprisonment but also by the fact that he was mentally disabled and that his father had been attainted and executed by Edward IV.

Duke of York’s widow
The Duke of York had been married to Cecily Neville. Their marriage brought about a long-standing political alliance between the families and was central to York’s ability to wage war against those who advised Henry VI.
that they intended to stay. The duke was the founding father of a royal dynasty keen to establish permanence on the English throne.

By 1476, Edward had done all the things necessary to assure success. He had seen off his rivals for the throne, had led an expedition to France and would soon invade Scotland. This ceremony was designed to show the assembled notables, peers and clergy, that the conflicts which had brought the Yorkists to power were well and truly over. In this hope, Edward IV was proved right: though his father and grandfather had met violent deaths, Edward IV would not.

OVERVIEW
Looking back from the perspective of the reburial service in 1476, it would be easy to think that the conflict that preceded it had been very serious indeed. The period 1459–71 is often seen as the high point of the so-called Wars of the Roses: a series of battles, murders, betrayals and executions engaged in by the Lancastrians and Yorkists, which engulfed England in the middle of the fifteenth century. There was an outbreak of serious battles in the period 1459–61 and a further round of fighting in 1470 and 1471. In the ensuing carnage and confusion, kings came and went. Henry VI was deposed twice and his rival, Edward IV, once. The Earl of Warwick became known as the Kingmaker because he helped both men to the throne! Many leading noblemen were killed on both sides in scenes of carnage more concentrated and intense than any seen before in England, at least not since the troubled reign of King Stephen (1135–54).

On the other hand, the scale of the conflict should not be exaggerated. Despite the battles, English society did not descend into anarchy and confusion. Edward IV ruled without too much difficulty between 1461 and 1469 and the fighting was very much concentrated in two distinct periods before and after. Whatever the changing fortunes of the two monarchs, the institution of monarchy remained strong and respected. With the deaths of Henry VI and his only son, Prince Edward, in 1471, Edward IV ruled unopposed and England quickly resumed its accustomed stability.
Causes and course of the fighting

Weaknesses of Henry VI
The origins of the conflicts between the families of Lancaster and York, which are often referred to as the Wars of the Roses, went back many years and revolved around the weaknesses of King Henry VI and the ambitions of Richard, Duke of York.

- Henry VI had succeeded his father, Henry V (who had defeated the French at Agincourt in 1415), in 1422. As a small child, he was crowned king of both England and France. His minority proceeded surprisingly smoothly and showed the innate strength of English medieval monarchy. One of his uncles, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, took charge of England, while another uncle, John, Duke of Bedford, had charge of England’s French possessions.
- Problems arose, however, after Henry came of age. He was a rather shadowy figure, a meek and pious individual, with apparently none of the military or political skills needed by a good king. Unlike his famous father, who was a warrior king and the embodiment of strong medieval kingship, Henry VI seemed to possess little will of his own, little appreciation of politics and had no apparent interest in fighting!
- Henry VI was easily dominated by favourites at his court, which annoyed powerful men excluded from favour. At the same time, his government was on the losing end of conflict in France, so that by 1453 the English had been expelled from France, except for the port of Calais. This was a terrible disaster for Henry’s regime.

York’s power
The man who felt most excluded from power, and a man not associated with the disasters in France, was the most powerful man in the land after the king himself. Richard, Duke of York held extensive estates in the north, south Wales and Ireland. He was linked by marriage to the powerful Neville family and together these families had the ability to raise whole armies if need be. At the same time,
until the birth of Henry VI’s son in 1453, the Duke of York was also heir presumptive, since he was Henry VI’s closest male relative. At first it seemed unlikely that the tension between the king and York would result in warfare and it was even more unlikely that York would dare to challenge for the throne itself.

Problems of 1453–5
In 1453, however, a series of events seriously undermined Henry VI’s government.

- Quite unexpectedly, Henry VI suffered a mental collapse – now thought to be catatonic schizophrenia – which rendered him helpless and apparently speechless for at least fifteen months and possibly longer. This meant that some kind of protector or regent would have to be appointed to rule in the king’s name. This was York’s opportunity to gain power. As the king’s closest adult male relative, English traditions suggested that York should be protector, in the same way as if the king were still a child. Indeed, in 1454, Parliament petitioned that York should assume this position and offered him the same limited powers as those given to the king’s uncles during his minority. It was agreed that York should be protector until Henry recovered. York duly became protector and the previous favourite, Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, was arrested and imprisoned.

- However, York’s power was uncertain and was undermined by two other developments. First, in October 1453, Henry VI’s French wife, Margaret of Anjou, gave birth to a son, Prince Edward. If the child were indeed Henry’s – and there were soon stories that he

**KEY TERMS**

**Heir presumptive** The person who is the king’s successor or heir but has not been officially named as such. Henry VI at this date had no children, so York, as his closest male relative, thought he would be the king’s successor.

**Catatonic schizophrenia** Refers to a medical condition marked by near or total unresponsiveness to the environment or other people.

**KEY PEOPLE**

**Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset (1439–71)** Fourth Duke of Somerset since 1464 and son of the second Duke of Somerset, also called Edmund, who was killed at St Albans in 1455. This Edmund Beaufort was only sixteen when his father was killed and 25 when his elder brother (Henry, the third Duke) was killed by the Yorkists at Hexham. The fourth Duke was thus a die-hard Lancastrian and led their forces at Tewkesbury in 1471. He was captured during the battle, tried and beheaded by Edward IV soon afterwards. His younger brother was also killed in the battle.

**Margaret of Anjou (1429–82)** The daughter of the Count of Anjou, Margaret was married to Henry VI in 1445. Her only son was born eight years later and some claimed that the king was not his father. Politically, Margaret was very important, as it was she who allied with Somerset and other lords against York and his allies. After the king’s illness, Margaret took control of affairs.
was not – then York was no longer heir to the throne.

- Queen Margaret then appealed to French traditions to claim that she, not York, should be protector while her husband was ill. Around Christmas time, 1453, she claimed that King Henry had recovered his sanity. Immediately, the Duke of Somerset was released, York was ousted from the Council and several of his enemies among the nobility were welcomed back to court.

- Stung by this sudden reversal in his fortunes, York resorted to force. Together with his ally, Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury, he raised troops and marched menacingly on London. The king’s advisers were taken by surprise and the royal forces were defeated at St Albans in May 1455. The battle was little more than a skirmish but the Duke of Somerset and the Earl of Northumberland were killed, leaving their heirs to plot revenge against York and his allies.

The Lancastrians seek revenge

Although York made himself protector again in November 1455, opposition from many of the nobility and from Margaret of Anjou caused him to resign his office just three months later. After that, the court party, led by the queen and the Dukes of Somerset and Buckingham, seemed determined to destroy York and his allies. The queen built up a power base in the Midlands, in the area where her young son held lands. In 1459, royal forces were again mustered to take on Yorkist troops being raised in the Ludlow area. At Ludford Bridge, Yorkist forces fled from the field when soldiers from the Calais garrison decided to abandon the duke and went over to the king’s side. At the subsequent Parliament held in Coventry (the Yorkists nicknamed it the Parliament of Devils), York and his allies were denounced as traitors. This meant that they lived under sentence of death and all their lands were confiscated and handed over to royal stewards.

The Yorkists strike back, 1460

Faced with this desperate situation, the Yorkists had no choice but to resort to armed force. Luckily, they possessed large estates and could raise troops quite easily. In addition, they had refuges, where royal forces could not reach them.

KEY PERSON

Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury, (1400–60)
York’s brother-in-law and political ally, since York married his youngest sister, Cecily Neville. He was killed with York at the Battle of Wakefield in 1460. Salisbury was father of the famous Warwick the Kingmaker, who made Edward IV king and then overthrew him in favour of Henry VI.

KEY PLACE

Calais garrison This was the army that defended Calais from French attack. At a time when the king had armed guards but no permanent army, control of the Calais garrison would prove important in the fighting. Luckily for the Yorkists, the Captain of Calais at this time was their ally, Warwick, the Kingmaker.
• After the disaster at Ludlow, York had retreated to his estates in Ireland, where government by the English Crown existed in name only. His ally, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, slunk away to Calais, across the water, where he was Captain of the garrison.

• In June 1460, Warwick, together with his father, the Earl of Salisbury, and York’s eldest son, Edward, Earl of March, sailed from Calais and landed in Kent. They brought troops and a papal legate called Coppini with them. As the Pope’s ambassador, he gave spiritual significance to the Yorkist cause and thoughtfully excommunicated most of the Lancastrian nobles from the Roman Catholic Church.

• As the royal court was in the Midlands at the time, the rebels took charge of London, where the merchants supported the Yorkists, as they tended to back whoever controlled the port of Calais.

Marching north-west, the Yorkists met with unexpected success. In July 1460, they defeated a large Lancastrian force at Northampton, killing the Duke of Buckingham and the Earl of Shrewsbury in a battle that lasted barely an hour. The real bonus for the Yorkists was that they also captured the enfeebled Henry VI, who was apparently watching the battle in a state of incomprehension. With the king on their side, the Yorkists could hope to rule in his name and get rid of their enemies. They would argue that they were merely getting rid of evil men who had misled the hapless King Henry. However, York, who had played no part in the battle, took a different view.

In September, he arrived from Ireland and marched on London. When he arrived at the Parliament being held there, he strode into the House of Lords and placed his hand on the empty throne, meaning to claim it for himself. Instead of the shouts of approval and acclamation he had hoped for, he was greeted by a deafening silence. Even his closest allies had no idea that he intended to claim the throne for himself and they clearly disapproved of such a move. To rule in the name of a childlike king was one thing, but to depose an anointed sovereign was unthinkable, even if that king was mad. Such was the residual power of English kingship that everyone backed away from such a sacrilegious act.

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York claimed the throne on the basis that Henry VI’s grandfather, Henry IV (who ruled 1399–1413), had illegally taken the throne from Richard II in 1399. However, the English nobility refused to allow usurpation of the throne by York and instead would agree only to an unworkable compromise. Trying to placate both sides, the Act of Accord of 1460 declared that Henry VI would remain king for his own lifetime but on his death the Crown would pass to Richard of York or, if York had died in the meantime, to York’s heir, Edward, Earl of March.

Death of the Duke of York, 1460
The Act of Accord was a recipe for more fighting. Henry’s son, Edward, Prince of Wales, was hardly likely to accept being disinherited without a fight, while the Yorkists realised that they would have to continue fighting if they wished to achieve any degree of security.

- Margaret of Anjou, now in the north of England, set about recruiting troops to win back her son’s inheritance. Supported by many of the great northern magnates, who disliked York and the Nevilles, they raised a great army.
- York, who may have had plans to force Henry VI to abdicate, marched north to meet them. Just after Christmas, 1460, he mistook the Lancastrian army for a foraging party, rushed out of the safety of Sandal Castle and was promptly killed by the Lancastrians, along with his second son, Edmund, Earl of Rutland.
- York’s brother-in-law, Salisbury, was executed by his enemies after the battle and York’s head was hacked off and sent to the city of York. There it was put on a long pike by the main bridge over the River Ouse and apparently decorated with a paper crown. Thus all those who passed along the way might mock the pretensions of a man who wished to take the Crown from the rightful king. At the same time, this grisly sight reminded everyone of the penalties for unbridled ambition.

The triumph of York’s son, 1461
For York’s heir, Edward, Earl of March, who was only eighteen years old, the future looked bleak indeed. The Lancastrians, under Margaret, were now free to march south and retake possession of the capital.
Edward, Earl of March was recruiting in the Welsh Marches and hoping to come to London when he heard that Jasper Tudor, a keen Lancastrian, had landed in south Wales with a force of French mercenaries. Edward promptly marched his forces into Hereford and defeated Tudor’s army at Mortimer’s Cross. It was the biggest battle of the wars so far and it underlined young Edward’s abilities as a military commander.

Meanwhile, however, Edward’s main ally in this time of crisis, his cousin, Warwick, was showing his failings as military commander. His army was now the only force that could protect the city of London from Margaret’s increasingly undisciplined army. Yet Warwick’s failure to track the progress of that army meant that he was taken by surprise at St Albans. Believing that the enemy was still nine miles away, he was changing the placement of his troops when they were attacked and routed.

Warwick fled from the scene and the Lancastrian triumph seemed complete, since Margaret had now also regained the person of Henry VI. Her enfeebled husband was discovered at the rear of the Yorkist forces and reunited with his wife and supporters. The Lancastrian forces need only retake the capital and Henry VI’s regime would be fully re-established, while the Yorkist faction would be doomed to exile or destruction.

However, at this point, Margaret, realising that her northern army would take great delight in sacking London and much of the rest of southern England, gave the order to march north again. In truth, the Lancastrians had neglected the city of London for many years and now they paid the price. Margaret had been keen to establish a power base in the Midlands centred on the lands of her son, the Prince of Wales. At the same time, the great London merchant companies, who dominated the city’s government, tended to side with whoever controlled the port of Calais. Since 1455, of course, the Captain of Calais had been Warwick.

Queen Margaret’s decision to march north gave Edward, Earl of March, a much needed breathing space. With his army fresh from victory in the west and his supporters already streaming into London, he marched on the capital...
and gained admittance on the basis that he was the only man likely to protect the capital from being sacked. Once there, the dangers of the situation forced Edward to take a desperate gamble and claim the throne for himself.

- In a series of stage-managed ceremonies, Edward was apparently forced to take the throne on the basis that he had a better descent from Edward III than his rival Henry VI, who was grandson of the usurper Henry IV.
- Unfortunately for Edward, this Yorkist claim to the throne via inheritance had been specifically rejected by the judges and Parliament in 1460. Furthermore there was, of course, no Parliament meeting in London at this time and so there was no important institution to recognise Edward’s assumption of power.
- Edward’s claim to the throne was extremely tenuous as it broke the Act of Accord of the previous year, which had proclaimed that Henry VI would be king for the rest of his natural life. In reality, a small faction of nobles and merchants had proclaimed Edward king.

**The Battle of Towton**

Waiting just long enough to gather further troops, Edward set off from London to meet Henry in battle. So, on 29 March 1461 – Palm Sunday of that year – two great armies faced each other in Yorkshire, north of the town of Pontefract. The ensuing Battle of Towton was certainly the greatest battle of the Wars of the Roses and probably the largest pitched battle ever on English soil. At first, the Lancastrian forces seemed to have the advantage, but the timely arrival of Yorkist reinforcements turned the long drawn out battle in their favour. After many hours of fighting, the Lancastrian forces scattered and fled, many being killed as they tried to escape. It was a decisive battle and a decisive victory for Edward, Earl of March. Three months earlier, his father, Richard, Duke of York, had been killed at the Battle of Wakefield and Edward’s fortunes seemed to be at their lowest ebb. Spurred on by his father’s death, Edward, still only eighteen years old, had proclaimed himself King Edward IV in London and had now secured his kingship with victory in battle. He had defeated and scattered the forces of his opponent, King Henry VI. Edward, the usurper, had made a reality of his power and would rule rather more effectively than his
predecessor for the next nine years. When he was briefly overthrown in 1470, it was not his enemies but his friends who were responsible.

The geography of the conflict, 1455–87