

Rebellion 4  
 How dangerous  
 were the rebellions?

## E Review: The year of the many-headed monster – how dangerous were the rebellions of 1549 for Edward VI's government?

### 161 The extent of the threat

Reasons why the rebellions did not pose a threat to the Government	Reasons why the rebellions were a problem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was virtually no attempt at co-operation or synchronisation between the isolated uprisings. There was some uniting of forces within regions: for example, Devon and Cornwall joined forces and Kett's rebels were joined by small contingents from Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire. However, there was no attempt at cross-regional co-operation, which could have been extremely dangerous for the Government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In some cases, most notably Norfolk and Devon and Cornwall, the local gentry failed to deal with the uprisings and the central Government had to intervene.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The rebellions were not directed at the Government or the monarch. There was no attempt to march on London, as there had been in 1381, 1450 and 1497.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising troops was difficult and expensive. The normal method of raising troops was through the local militia, but the Government was understandably reluctant to ask the rebellious peasantry for support. Russell in the south-west had to raise troops from distant counties, while the Government employed foreign mercenaries.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Government was always in control of its forces and was never in danger.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Against his will, Somerset had to bring troops back from Scotland to assist in the crisis. This marked the end of his policy of garrisoning the northern border.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a noticeable and significant lack of aristocratic and gentry leadership.</li> </ul>	

#### ACTIVITY

- 1 What does Source 16.8 reveal about how the gentry reacted to the rebellion?
- 2 What does Edward's Chronicle entry (Source 16.9) reveal about his views on the danger posed by the rebels in the spring and early summer?
- 3 What does Edward's entry show about how the rebellions were normally suppressed?
- 4 Study Source 16.11. Do the military preparations instigated by Somerset necessarily prove that the rebellions were dangerous?
- 5 What evidence is there to support David Loades' statement in Source 16.11 that 'it looked as though the whole of southern England was on the point of social and economic disintegration'?
- 6 Do the sources support or contradict the idea of rebellion given in the rebels'-eye view (see Chart 16) that rebellion was a basic type of communication between the elites and the common people?

#### SOURCE 16.8 Nicholas Sotherton, *The Commotion in Norfolk, 1549*

*For they cryid out of the Gentlemen as well for that they would not pull downe theyr enclosid groundis, as allsoe understood they by letters fownd emonge theyr sarvants how they sowl by all weyes to suppres them, and whatsoever was sayde they would down with them soe that within a ii or iii wekes they had so pursuyd the Gentlemen from all parts that in noe place durst one Gentleman keepe his house but were faine to spoile themselves of theyr apparrell and lye and keepe in woods and lownde placis where no resorte was: and some fledd owte of the cuntrye and gladd they were in theyr howses for saving of the rest of theyr goods and cattell to provide for them daiely bred mete drinke and all other viands and to carry the same at their charge even home to the rebellis campe, and that for the savinge theyr wyves, and chydrren and sarvants.*

#### SOURCE 16.9 Edward VI's Chronicle on the events in May and June 1549

*The people began to rise in Wiltshire, where Sir William Herbert did put them down, overrun and slay them. Then they rose in Sussex, Hampshire, Kent, Gloucestershire, Suffolk, Warwickshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, a piece of Leicestershire, Worcestershire and Rutlandshire, where by fair persuasions, partly of honest men among themselves and partly by gentle men they were often appeased.*

The bulk of the stirrs tended to embarrass the government by seeking to implement rather than resist its policy. The government at no point fought for its life. No rising in 1549 threatened the government physically in the manner of those of 1381, 1450 and 1497 with a sustained march on London. Nor did the rebels plan to release the king from the grip of evil ministers. If anything, the aim was to aid the government against the aristocracy, or to make it change its religious policy. Also to the government's relief, the 1549 risings stand out for their lack of aristocratic participation and leadership.

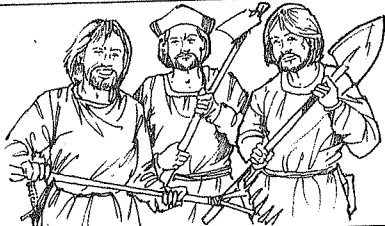








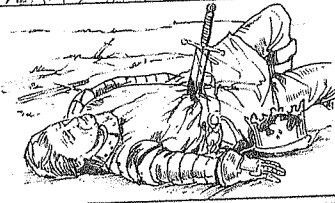
SOURCE 16.11 D. Loades, *The Mid-Tudor Crisis, 1545–1565*, 1992, p. 114

In 1548 the situation had been contained without too much difficulty, which may have induced a sense of false security, but as the summer of 1549 advanced, it looked as though the whole of southern England was on the point of social and economic disintegration. By July the foreign mercenaries, recruited for the war in Scotland, were being deployed against English rebels; and London was garrisoned and protected with artillery.

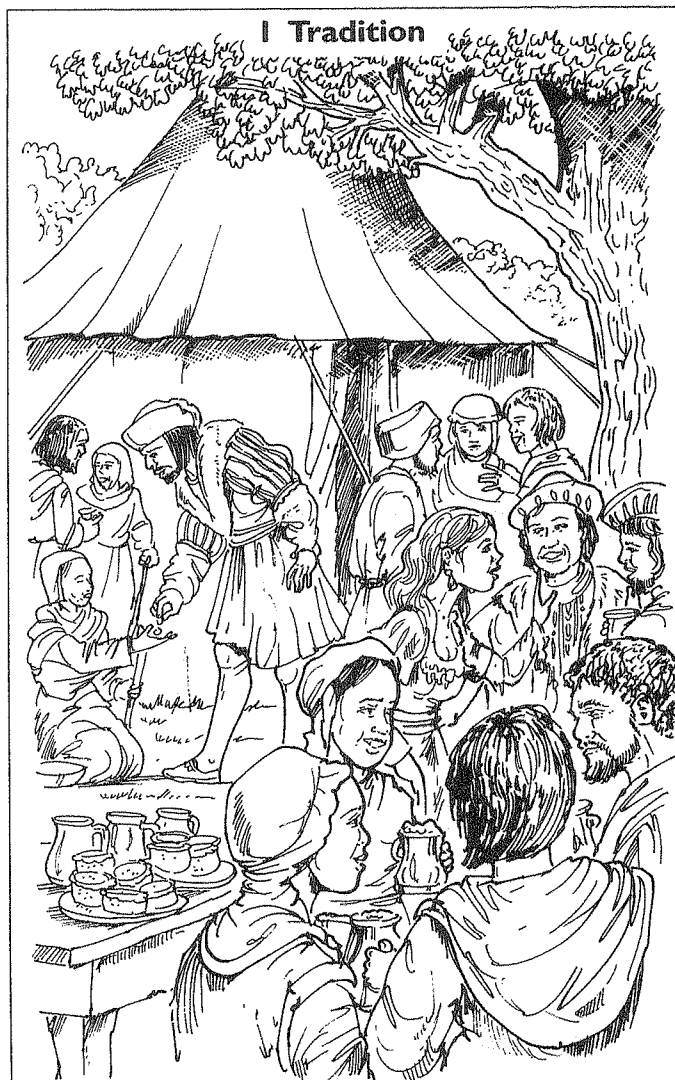
**ACTIVITY**

Sort the Western rebellion and Kett's rebellion into types A and B and decide where to place them on the Richter scale of unrest according to how dangerous they were.

- Type A: Attempts by political leaders to seize the throne.
- Type B: Mass demonstrations to draw attention to grievances and to force changes.

1		Mild, isolated protests from peasants.	6		Rebels are advancing or have remained in place for at least four weeks. Meeting with regional nobility required. Government begins to prepare measures for suppression.
2		More vocal and sustained protests from various social groups in the lower orders. JPs order them to disperse.	7		Troops raised. Suppression by regional nobleman attempted.
3		Unrest begins to spread. Rebel leadership established. Meeting with local gentry and JPs.	8		Rebellion requires full-scale military suppression.
4		Rebels produce a list of demands. Rebel camp is established. Numbers swelling. Suppression by local gentry attempted.	9		Monarch's position severely threatened by the rebellion.
5		Rebel camp numbers thousands. Government intervention required. Pardon offered in return for rebels dispersing.	10		Rebellion succeeds in overthrowing the established dynasty.

## 16J What can we learn about how dangerous Kett's rebellion was by examining it from the rebels' perspective?



The word 'rebellion' conjures up images of violence, destruction and uncontrollable anger. The rebels of 1549 were certainly angry and determined, but to understand the rebellion from the ordinary rebels' point of view you need to understand the importance of order and tradition, as well as violence. Traditional beliefs, practices and customs affected every aspect of Kett's rebellion. The rebellion began on a traditional festival day – a feast to celebrate Saint Thomas Becket's relics. It was often the case that unrest began on special days because they were times when crowds naturally assembled. There was, however, no element of pre-planning and no prior intention to attack Flowerdew's enclosures. Although there are no records of the rebels' thoughts on that first day, it can be imagined that their discussions and anger at the festival, enhanced by the drink and the feeling of strength that comes from being in a crowd, turned their minds to resolving the problems that so embittered them.

Tradition also dictated the articles that the rebels compiled and the places where the camps were set up throughout East Anglia. The sites were normally market centres or assize areas (courts) because they acted as focal points and helped the spread of news. Mousehold Heath, the site of the main rebellion under Kett, was traditionally used as an assembly point in disturbances. In their demands they appealed for the re-establishment of relations and conditions as they had been under Henry VII. They seemed to be looking to recreate a lost golden past when rents were reasonable, grassland was cheap and local officials were honest and effective. By pulling down the hedges and fences around enclosures, they saw themselves to be restoring the old structure of the landed economy and re-establishing rights of way and common grazing rights. They viewed the enclosers and not themselves as the culprits and they were supported in this by government proclamations. These government statements, which blamed enclosure for the country's economic ills, and the enclosure inquiry under John Hales in the Midlands only helped to legitimise and encourage the rebels.



The rebels' actions during the uprising were almost always disciplined. There is little evidence of wanton violence being meted out and even John Flowerdew seems to have remained unmolested. The rebels seem to have been guided by a desire to maintain order and to demonstrate the legitimacy of their position. The Mousehold Heath camp was effectively organised and run by Kett. A pseudo-county council was created – two representatives were elected from each of the 22 hundreds (administrative areas) in Norfolk and one from Suffolk – and proper legal procedures were always followed. They had their own open-air court under a tree that they called the Oak of Reformation with the assembled people acting as the jury. The court was established so that the rebels could 'be admonished to beware of their robbings and spoiling and other their evil demeanours and that account they had to make'. Even those searching for food went armed with a commission in the King's name. Diarmaid MacCulloch has concluded that 'The 1549 camps were probably more like a rough and ready garden fête or assize meeting than the savage centres of misrule which the government later tried to picture'. (Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*).

### 3 Communication



Rebellion itself was seen as a drastic but acceptable form of communication with superiors. The ordinary people had few other ways of expressing their dissent or complaints. It can perhaps be best compared to a game of medieval football, with the rebels on one side and the authorities on the other. The rules were loose and poorly understood, but by invading the other side's space you forced them to take notice and *always* provoked a response. Violence and physical destruction were highly likely, but the intention at the outset was *not* to cause maximum harm. Tactics in the rebellion were naïve and underdeveloped. The rebels were, above all, rebelling to make the authorities aware of their grievances. The aim was to force a response from them, not to overturn them. This is why the rebels *camped* rather than *marched* – they were waiting until they were given satisfaction and they realised that only their continued presence could pressurise their superiors into conceding their demands. If the rebels had been the mindless and uncontrollably destructive monster of sixteenth-century propaganda, the violence would have been more widespread and indiscriminate, the list of demands would not have been as considered and detailed, and the rebellion would have been more aggressive. In fact, the only gentlemen and noblemen who were killed died in active combat and gentry were normally humiliated rather than attacked. Only two instances of personal molestation were recorded in Norfolk. One was against Mr Wharton, who was forced to run the gauntlet from the camp to the city gate while being stabbed with spears and knives. Derision was one of the principal tools of the rebels: they approached Norwich 'bear arssyde' and 'most shamefully turned up their bare tayles agenst those which did shoote, whych soe dysmayed the archers that it tooke theyr hart from them'.

### 4 The response of the authorities



Both sides recognised the need to bridge the gulf and reach an understanding. There is a set pattern to how the authorities dealt with unrest. Their first action was always to seek meetings at a local level. In these they would attempt to begin a dialogue with the rebels and try to establish understanding and trust. If this failed and suppression by local gentry was not possible, the next step would be a meeting with the principal regional nobleman. Again the magnate would try to *negotiate* and reach a compromise. At this stage, if not before, the Government would intervene and would take the rebels and their demands seriously. Failing this and the offer of a royal pardon, troops were raised. But even when the army arrived, they would initially offer a pardon to all but the ringleaders. Most of the 1549 risings were ended by the return of senior court figures to their localities to talk to the rebels and, if need be, offer money and pardons. In Suffolk, for example, Sir Anthony Wingfield was able to quell the unrest with pardons and promises of improvements. In Sussex, the Earl of Arundel invited the leading rebels to his house for dinner. The rebels, perhaps cowed by the sheer weight of his status and authority, reached agreement. The rebellions in Norfolk and the south-west were perhaps not suppressed because there was no one to do the job. The senior noble families in the south-west (the Courtenays) and in East Anglia (the Howards) had been removed in Henry VIII's reign.

### What were the consequences of the rebellions of 1549?

- Most historians agree that the coup which removed Protector Somerset was made directly possible by the rebellions and by Somerset's handling of them. Somerset's support of the anti-enclosure measures had disastrously earned him the widespread reputation of being a friend of the commons. His failure to quickly crush the rebellions sealed his fate (see page 199).
- Northumberland's successful military suppression of Kett's rebellion added to his own political credibility and status. He was able to use this to gain extra support when he made his bid to become ruler in January 1550 (see page 199).

# How dangerous were the rebellions of 1549?

Edward VI's Chronicle on the events in May and June 1549

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M. L. Bush, *The Government Policy of Protector Somerset*, 1975, p. 85

The bulk of the stirs tended to embarrass the government by seeking to implement rather than resist its policy. The government at no point fought for its life. No rising in 1549 threatened the government physically in the manner of those of 1381, 1450 and 1497 with a sustained march on London. Nor did the rebels plan to release the king from the grip of the evil ministers. If anything, the aim was to aid the government against the aristocracy, or to make it change its religious policy. Also to the government's relief, the 1549 risings stand out for their lack of aristocratic participation and leadership.

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In 1548 the situation had been contained without too much difficulty, which may have induced a sense of false security, but as the summer of 1549 advanced, it looked as though the whole of southern England was on the point of social and economic disintegration. By July the foreign mercenaries, recruited for the war in Scotland, were being deployed against English rebels; and London was garrisoned and protected with artillery.

## Questions

### Re-read Rebellion 2 and Rebellion 3

#### AIMS

1. Compare the aims of the two rebellions. How are they the same and how are they different?

#### SERIOUSNESS OF THE THREAT

2. Based on these sources, and your own knowledge, to what extent did the rebellions of 1549 target the government directly? How much of a threat were these rebellions of 1549? Which was the greater threat? Why?