

# ***FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC I***

The fall of the Roman Empire is the most famous issue in European history (students have been writing essays on that topic for the last thousand years!), but the forces that tore the Roman Republic apart are more relevant and more intriguing. The disintegration of the Roman Republic is the first example in European history of the collapse of a constitutional system. One school of thought contends that individual generals and would-be dictators like Julius Caesar and Pompey destroyed the traditional political system of Rome through ruthless ambition. According to this view, the Commanders of the Roman army, acting like feuding Mafia dons, turned their armies inward upon the Constitutional system. Contemporary Romans usually tried to explain the political crisis in terms of moral decline: “*Fortune turned against us and brought confusion to all we did. Greed destroyed honor, honesty and every other virtue, and taught men to be arrogant and cruel, to neglect the gods. Ambition made men false. Rome changed: a government which had once surpassed all others in justice and excellence now became cruel and unbearable.*” (Sallust) There is something to this view. However it is necessary to explain why aristocratic generals would act in defiance of constituted authority. It is also necessary to account for the fact that ordinary soldiers would be willing to follow such leaders into the destructive violence of civil war.

The causes of the violence, which ultimately destroyed the Roman Republic, lie deeper than the ambitions of men like Marius, Sulla and Julius Caesar. The origins of this crisis lay in the stunning successes by which Rome conquered the Mediterranean world. The Roman Empire undercut the very republic it was built to protect. The Roman Constitution had been designed to govern a city-state. It was well adapted for Italy, but not to governing an overseas empire. Imagine the strains that might fracture the Utah state legislature if some of its members were commanding armies and administering the economies of Washington state, California, New York and Mexico. As trade increased, a class of merchants and financiers (the equestrian order) grew influential enough to inject their commercial interests into Roman politics. Masses of slaves captured in war undercut the small farmers who had been the backbone of early Roman society and its army. Many of them moved to Rome where they lived by selling their only asset: their vote. The old Roman conscript army gave way to a professional force made up of soldiers who expected to be rewarded for their service with gifts of land or money. Soldiers like these gave their commanders the power to ignore the usual constitutional restraints. In other words, the Roman republic was afflicted with ***fundamental structural*** problems, which resisted any attempts to solve them through reform.

The problems of the Republic should have been solvable by compromise, but the aristocratic solidarity upon which the entire Roman system rested began to break down. The death throes of the republic began in 133 BC. with the tribuneship of Tiberius Gracchus, and lasted for a little over a century. The murder of Tiberius Gracchus by a mob of senators and their clients gave clear notice that the ruling consensus at Rome was shattered.

How could the empire be stabilized? In retrospect the answer was obvious but painful. The Empire required a monarchical system, but the basic values of Roman

society and its elites rejected the very idea of monarchy as simple tyranny. The political, social and economic crisis of the Republic was ultimately solved by extending Roman citizenship to the provincials and by imposing social peace from above by the authority of first a dictator (Julius Caesar), then an Emperor (Caesar Augustus).

But the full realization of such a program meant the end of the political and moral traditions that had given the Roman people their distinctive character--for Roman society to achieve peace and stability, in the name of prosperity for the empire, much that the Roman elites held dear had to vanish. Such a solution required that the Roman *patricians* would have to modify their definition of republican liberty that meant, in practice, the liberty of the Roman senatorial order to compete with one another for the privilege of looting the provinces of the empire. According to Sallust, the nobility used its *dignitas* and the people its *libertas* as mere arbitrary factors--that is to say, as pretexts for pursuing their own arbitrary aims. The Republic itself, caught in the middle, was destroyed. That is a very Roman way of saying that the Republic was destroyed by what Marxists call contradictions. In the end, the Romans, despite the deepest possible reluctance, would resurrect the program of Alexander the Great: the rule of a god-king over a multi-racial, multi-ethnic empire.

### **The Constitutional Crisis: Civil-Military Relations**

In broad terms, many of the problems that brought down the Roman republic can be described in terms of civil-military relations; in other words, the senate lost control of the Roman military. It did so because the senatorial order could no longer deal with social problems at home or the military and administrative problems of the empire. One easy fix that continually tempted the senate was to deal with problems by throwing soldiers at them. The crises that plagued the late republic were very real: for example, in 73 B.C., the senate had to face a problem that haunted all slave-owning societies -- slave revolt. A gladiator named Spartacus escaped from a training school and attracted thousands of other slaves to his banner. There are few figures in history so famous yet misunderstood as Spartacus. Hollywood portrayed him as a martyr of freedom. Karl Marx called him the "*finest fellow that the whole of ancient history has to show, a great general, a noble character and a true representative of the ancient proletariat.*" (Shaw, pp. 14-16) In reality, Spartacus was not so much an opponent of slavery as a robber chief on a grand scale.

The presence of a slave army numbering 70,000 men, however poorly armed and equipped was still enough to terrify Roman society. The senate reacted to this threat by creating a "special" command. Pompey (106-48 B.C.) and a wealthy senator Marcus Licinius Crassus were appointed to put down the slave rebellion. The main source of Crassus' clout was wealth but he had a solid reputation as a commander (he had fought with Sulla). He was the richest man in Rome and used that wealth to gain political prominence. The modern word crass meaning the crude display of wealth comes from Crassus. He once observed, "*no one could be called rich who could not support an army out of his income.*" It took Crassus two years and six legions to crush the slave revolt. The fate of the slaves was not pleasant. Spartacus fell in battle but Crassus took several thousand prisoners of war after the final battle. Here is the account of the historian Appian:

The body of Spartacus was never found. When the survivors among Spartacus' men, who were still a large number, fled from the battle, they went up into the mountains, where they were pursued by Crassus' forces. Splitting themselves into four groups, they continued to fight until all of them had perished—all, that is, except six thousand of them, who were taken prisoner and crucified along the whole length of the highway that ran from Capua to Rome. (**Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars*, 1.14. 116-21, Shaw, pp. 143-4**)

The Slave Revolt was only one of many crises that led the Senate to turn to military commanders to control a crisis. The most important of these "special" commanders was Cn. Pompeius Magnus. Since I quoted Karl Marx on Spartacus, I might as well quote Marx on Pompey. He described Pompey as "*a real shit.*" Most historians and William Shakespeare too would have agreed with that evaluation, if not with the coarse language. Pompey extorted a number of "special" commands from the Senate that were free of the constitutional restrictions that usually applied to military commanders. At the age of 28, Pompey was given command to suppress a rebellion in Spain. In 67 B.C. the Senate gave him the task of suppressing piracy in the entire Mediterranean. The appointment carried *imperium* over the entire coastline of the sea and inland for fifty miles. The Senate was fiercely opposed to granting such authority to Pompey; Julius Caesar was the only senator to speak in favor of the law granting Pompey the command. But the Senate was literally shouted down by the populace of Rome. According to Plutarch, the uproar was so great that a raven flying over the Forum was disoriented by the noise and fell to earth. **The problems of empire demanded power for individuals like Pompey to deal with foreign threats, yet the granting of those powers undercut the constitutional order at home.** Pompey was remarkably successful in clearing the sea of pirates. His success in war got him elected Consul for 70 B.C. along with his hated rival Crassus. This opened the way for other ambitious generals and demagogic tribunes to attack the Senate.

## **The Rise of Julius Caesar**

**Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.)** is without a doubt, the most famous of all Roman historical figures. In European history, Julius Caesar has been revered as the founder of the monarchy from the supreme secular power in the West takes its name. (Kaiser, Czar, Caesar). The Renaissance discovered his personality: Caesar embodied the ideal of the *Renaissance man*: conqueror, general, great writer, and lover. History has seen him as the man who organized Rome, saved the Empire and ultimately solved the long and destructive constitutional crisis of the Republic. To many of his contemporaries, he seemed to be a man whose exploits transcended the usual scale of human possibility. In the words of the great German historian of Rome Theodor Mommsen, he ordered "*the present and future destiny of the world. He thus acted more effectively than any mortal before or since.*" (By the way, Mommsen's *History of Rome* is the strongest statement of the Caesar Cult and one of the true masterpieces of historical literature—it won the very first Nobel Prize for Literature!) From Shakespeare to Al Capone, one could cite endless quotations praising the genius and statesmanship of Julius Caesar.

His early career was colorful and scandalous but hardly seemed to promise much in the way of glory. Thanks to bribery, he was elected *Pontifex Maximus* or high priest in 63 B.C. -- an event that caused some amusement in Rome considered his reputation as a rake. (Suetonius described him as every woman's husband and every man's wife.)

Another scandal involved the festival of Bona Dea, a woman-only festival held in the home of the *Pontifex Maximus* and presided over by Caesar's wife Pompeia. P. Clodius, a radical politician, disguised himself as a woman in order to enter the house and have a sexual encounter with Caesar's wife, but was unmasked. Caesar then divorced Pompeia with the famous words, "*Caesar's wife must be above suspicion.*" The next year Caesar served as governor of Further Spain, an office that gave him some military experience and a chance to get out of debt. Julius Caesar's political connections were with the *populare* faction. Caesar gained political prominence by a characteristically bold move.

He organized a meeting with Pompey and Crassus. The result was an informal association known as the **First Triumvirate** that brought Pompey, Crassus and Caesar control of the Roman republic. Other politicians had made deals before, the combined wealth and power of these three men was enormous, enabling them to dominate the political scene and thoroughly intimidate the senate. Caesar was named Consul with the aid of his friends and he saw to it that his associates each got what they needed. Pompey obtained land for his veterans and Crassus got a tax break for himself and his supporters. Caesar was very much the junior partner but he got the chance he wanted when the Senate, once again intimidated, gave him a special command for five years over Cisalpine Gaul and Narbonese Gaul on the other side of the Alps. Between 58 and 54 B.C., he conquered all of modern France and raided both Germany and Britain. These famous conquests gained Caesar a great military reputation and more importantly, the services of a large and loyal army. He kept his name in the public mind by publishing installments of his famous *Commentaries*; they were written in a simple, readable Latin that ordinary Romans could understand. To this day, *Caesar's Commentaries* are a remarkable literary masterpiece that read like an adventure novel.

Consider the following passage describing Caesar's invasion of Britain:

Caesar himself arrived in Britain with the first ships about nine in the morning and observed that the enemy were waiting on the surrounding hills. He sailed on about seven miles and then grounded his ships on a level, suitable beach. Several factors made the Roman attack very difficult: The great size of the ships prevented them from running ashore except in deep waters, and the Roman soldiers, with their hands full and their bodies burdened by their heavy weapons, had to jump down from the ships, get a foothold in the waves and fight an enemy who had their hands free. Our soldiers were frightened and showed none of the usual enthusiasm. But then, while our soldiers were still reluctant to move because the water was so deep, the standard-bearer of the Tenth Legion, after praying to the gods for a successful operation, cried to our men: "Jump down, unless you want to betray our eagle to the enemy." As he said these words, he jumped from the ship and, with the eagle in his hands, advanced against the enemy. As soon as our soldiers had reached dry land and all of their comrades had joined them they attacked the Britons and routed them, although they were unable to pursue them because the cavalry had failed to keep their course and

reach the island. This was the one incident of the war, which was not crowned with the success that normally accompanied Caesar's deeds. (**Caesar, *Gallic Wars*, 4.20-38**)

### The Triumvirate Breaks Apart

The *Triumvirate* began to show signs of strain in 54 B.C. when Caesar's daughter Julia died. She had been married to Pompey and her death severed the personal tie between the two men. To make matters worse, Crassus, intent on military glory too, was killed in 53 B.C. in a harebrained attempt to conquer Parthia (modern Iraq). Crassus' death reduced a stable "gang of three" into an uneasy partnership of two rival generals. Caesar's enemies in Rome saw an opportunity to drive a wedge in the partnership of Pompey and Caesar. Pompey allowed himself to be forced into the position of serving as the senate's champion against Julius Caesar.

### The Civil War

Civil war between Caesar and Pompey became inevitable when the senate ordered Caesar to hand over command of his army and return to Rome as a private citizen. Caesar could not do so, because such a move would have made him completely vulnerable to his enemies. In this way, Julius Caesar justified his decision to cross the Rubicon river and march on Rome with his Gallic veterans. *"My position has always been of prime importance to me,"* he told a senatorial deputation, *It pained me to see the privilege conferred on me by the Roman people being insultingly wrested from me by my enemies.* Later he commented *"Despite all my achievements, I should have been condemned if I had not appealed to my army for help."* (**Meier, p. 5**) Julius Caesar always claimed that the civil war was not his doing. One of Caesar's friends, the historian Asinius Pollio, recounted that the night before Caesar ordered his troops across the Rubicon river, thus committing treason and opening what certainly would be a bloody conflict, Caesar summed up the situation by saying, *"To refrain from crossing will bring me misfortune; but to cross will bring misfortune to all men."* (**Meier, p. 3**) Although Caesar's propaganda machine churned out numerous justifications for his actions; ultimately, Caesar stood for no cause but himself. Cicero wrote, *"This cause lacks nothing but a cause."* (**Meier, p. 5**)

To the shock of Pompey, all of Italy went over to Caesar in two weeks. Cicero, stunned, commented, *"The wariness and speed of that monster are terrifying."* The main battle in the civil war occurred at Pharsalus in 48 B.C., where Caesar's veterans carried the day against Pompey's. As soon as the battle was won, Caesar issued the order **"Parce Civibus"** -- Spare the Citizens. Pompey fled to Egypt where he was murdered. Caesar found himself the undisputed master of the Roman world. At this point, many among the Roman elite feared that Caesar would purge the Senate and simply have his enemies murdered and seize their property. Instead, he declared that he had no intention of persecuting his political enemies. He did not forgive his enemies; he simply disdained to punish them. He declared a new policy of **Clementia**, proposing *"a new style of conquest, to make mercy and justice our shield."* Caesar stated his policy in a memorable letter to the senator Cicero:

You rightly surmise of me that of all things I abhor cruelty. I am not disturbed by the fact that those whom I have released are said to have left the country in order to make war against me once more. Nothing pleases me better than that I should be true to my nature and they to theirs. **(Meier, p. 374)**

In all, Caesar only spent 17 months in Rome during the years 49-44. Whatever long-range plans he may have had, he had little time to carry them out. There is a fierce debate among modern scholars as to what he really planned to do. Even so, two major points stand out. In the first place, Caesar was master of the Roman world and he planned to exercise his mastery openly. Plutarch was probably right in asserting that Caesar wanted to be king. William Shakespeare argues the same in *Julius Caesar*, which is largely a poetic version of Plutarch. Secondly, Caesar clearly took his position as leader of the progressive faction seriously. He expanded Roman citizenship; to most Italians and included many Greeks. He protected his Jewish subjects from persecution and generally reduced the exploitation of all Roman subjects. Neither of these policies pleased the old Senatorial aristocracy and ultimately led to his assassination. **(Starr, p. 84)**

### **Caesar's Dictatorship and Assassination**

Caesar made few changes in the government of Rome. In theory, the Senate remained supreme. But Caesar increased its size from 600 to 900 members and the new members were not just Caesar loyalist, but also solid businessmen and Italian municipal politicians. When senators protested that the new members seemed to lack the proper family bloodlines, Caesar commented "*even if bandits and cut-throats had helped to defend my position in the state, I would have rewarded them with the gratitude they deserved.*" **(Grant, p. 43)** Caesar knew the former governing class did not love him but he hardly seemed to care. In 46 B.C. he was appointed dictator for 10 years and in the next year, dictator for life. His enemies concluded that he was aiming at monarchy. In the past the dictatorship had always been circumscribed by a time limit or had been granted for a specific purpose such as Sulla's writ for reorganizing the constitution. By accepting an emergency office for life, Caesar made it clear that his goal was nothing less than domination of the Roman state.

It is hard to imagine that Caesar did not understand the depth of his enemy's hatred. "*What made Caesar most openly and mortally hated,*" wrote Plutarch, "*was his passion to be king.*" **(Grant, p. 48)** Suetonius states he was overheard describing the Republic as mere form without substance and that Sulla was a fool for resigning his office. He also hinted that people ought to be more careful in how they approached him. One of the biggest controversies in history is the question of just what Julius Caesar intended for Rome: did he wish to create a monarchy? The question has been argued for centuries and it will never be resolved. In a sense, it is not really important. Caesar was killed for what he was, as Sir Ronald Syme put it, not for what he might become. The factionalism, corruption, and constitutional gridlock of the late Republic was simply the product of a city-state government being stretched to cover a Mediterranean-wide empire--an empire extended to Britain and the Rhine river by Julius Caesar himself. Ultimately, Caesar's solution was to govern by **Clementia**, or failing that, to direct

Roman tensions and violence outwards once again. When he fell to his assassins' daggers, he was planning another expedition against Parthia to avenge the bumbling Crassus.

Caesar was killed by friends, not by his enemies. The plotters were a rather simplistic group, who thought that if only Caesar were dead, the Republic would return to the good old days. In all, about 60 senators joined the conspiracy. Their motives were very Roman. Marcus Brutus spoke for all of them when he said: *“I hold slavery and the sufferance of indignities in deeper loathing than all other misfortunes.”* Brutus was simply restating an old Roman value that citizenship and liberty were indivisible and that they could not exist under a monarchy. Caesar dismissed his bodyguards on March 1st, doubting that anyone would be stupid enough to kill him since his death would mean civil war. He was right about the latter, but wrong about the former. And those stupid enough to kill him did so on the Ides of March, 44 B.C. Perhaps the greatest summary of his career came from his old enemy Cicero:

His character was an amalgamation of genius, method, memory, culture, thoroughness, intellect, and industry. After working for many years to become king and autocrat, he surmounted tremendous efforts and perils and achieved his purpose. By entertainments, public works, food distributions, and banquets, he seduced the ignorant populace; his friends he bound to his allegiance by rewarding them, his enemies by what looked like mercy. By a mixture of intimidation and indulgence, he inculcated in a free community the habit of servitude. **(Cicero, *Philippics*, 11, 16, Quoted in Grant, p. 33)**

Julius Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March, 44 BC., left the fundamental political crisis facing Rome untouched. As one of his supporters put it in a letter to Cicero: *“If Caesar, with all of his genius, could not find a way out, who [among us] is likely to do so?”* It would take seventeen years and two more rounds of civil war to answer that question. The bloody events that followed upon the death of Caesar were the final stages of the Civil Wars and we should remember that all the individuals and armies involved were Caesarians. Junior members of his own faction had killed Caesar; his heir and the senior members would avenge him. They, in turn, fell out among themselves. Ultimately, it was family politics that mattered and Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son, Octavius (later called Caesar Augustus), who won the struggle. Fortunately for Rome, Augustus was a political genius who would preside over a political “restoration of the Republic” (his words) that amounted to a Roman Revolution.

