

THE IMPERIAL REPUBLIC: GAIUS MARIUS

The constitutional crisis precipitated by Tiberius Gracchus and his brother destabilized the Roman system by injecting the poor into politics and showing how a politician might employ demagogic tactics to undermine the authority of the senate. The old pattern of shifting alliances among the senatorial families continued, but there now appeared something like an ideological division in Roman society. Rome seemed polarized between two groups, two attitudes: the *optimates* (the best people) and the *populares* (those “for the people”). In the short run, the senate seemed victorious. After all, the senate ruled over much of the Mediterranean world. The world was subservient to the judgment of the *patres*, as the senators were called. The senate could invoke a cloak of legality to cover their most repressive actions by passing a decree called the *senatus consultum ultimum* -- which authorized the consuls to take any action, “to see that the republic took no harm.” Such a decree was used to justify the murder of Tiberius Gracchus’ younger brother Gaius Gracchus. Such decrees became a feature of last decades of the republic, illustrating both the Roman taste for violence as well as the Roman taste for legalism.

From the crisis of Gracchi in 133 down to 44 BC when Julius Caesar became dictator for life, it is possible to discern to loose political groupings within Roman society.

OPTIMATES: In general, these were the people who wished to maintain the status quo. They insisted upon the supremacy of the Senate and the social supremacy of the senatorial order. Politically, the *optimates* were opposed to any reforms that even hinted at a drift towards democracy or increasing popular influence.

POPULARES: The *populares* were also led by aristocrats, but they were willing to follow the example of the Gracchi and turn to the Roman plebs for support and money. They often favored the extension of Roman citizenship throughout Italy largely as a way of increasing their network of clients. They were willing to extend grants of food, or grants of land to the plebs in exchange for support. If we look ahead a century, both Julius Caesar and his successor Caesar Augustus would support the popular program and use that ideological position as a justification for a return to a monarchical system. Only a true “father of the country” or Emperor could rise above the petty rivalries of the senate and represent the interests of all Roman citizens.

If these concepts are vague, so too were the agendas of those people who joined these two factions. One person might want reform in one area and be conservative in another; in other words, these factions or groupings might shift according to the issue at hand. It would be inaccurate to see the *optimates* and *populares* as the Roman equivalent of modern conservatives and liberals. It is not even possible to force the *optimates* and *populares* into a social model of senators and the mob, nobles and commoners. These attitudes cut through every social group. There were Roman nobles like the Gracchi and Julius Caesar who were *populares* and noted plebeians like C. Pompey Magnus who took the *optimata* side. It was unknown peasants after all, who

killed Tiberius Gracchus even if they were acting on the instigation of some senatorial patron.

Both sides justified their actions by appeals to constitutional principle, but both sides practiced dirty politics. Both groups used violence to further their ends when possible, although the *populares*, had to be careful initially because of the fate of the Gracchi. The actions of the Gracchi opened up permanent wounds in the social fabric of Rome--less than a century after their brief career, the republic would tear itself apart. In the words of **Appian**:

There was no civil slaughter until Tiberius Gracchus was the first to fall victim to internal commotion. Unseemly violence prevailed almost constantly, together with shameful contempt for law and justice. Whenever either side got possession of the city, the opposing side made war, ostensibly against their adversaries, but actually against their country. (**Appian, p. 2**)

One faction broke the law and persecuted their enemies in the name of the Senate and tradition; the other carried out similar unlawful acts in the name of the people. The inevitable outcome of this persistent crisis was a gradual slide towards open civil war. And as civil war became more and more likely, both the *optimates* and the *populares* turned towards the Roman army. Whichever side that could command the loyalty of the army had the best chance of victory and survival. Control of the army, as in any society in crisis, would be crucial. If Tiberius Gracchus had brought the poor into Roman politics, another *popularis*, Gaius Marius would bring the Roman army into politics with consequences that would last far longer than the Roman republic itself.

Gaius Marius: (157-86 BC)

In the closing years of the second century BC, a series of military setbacks in North Africa triggered another wave of popular anger against the senatorial order and led to the emergence of the popular military hero in Roman politics. Gaius Marius was the first example of a Roman general using his military success and the support of his army to carve out a political career. A Hellenized North African king Jugurtha caused Rome considerable problems by leading a very effective uprising against Rome. To make matters worse, he bribed a number of Roman senators to gain the advantage on his brothers who were rivals for the crown of Numidia (Libya) and generally assure a favorable policy from the senate. Jugurtha made the comment that Rome only lacked a buyer, everything was for sale. This proof of corruption on the part of several **nobiles** was enough to trigger popular anger in Rome against the senate.

The senatorial commanders sent out to Africa to fight Jugurtha failed to win the war quickly. Jugurtha used his cavalry to fight a guerrilla war. The Roman commander Metellus adopted the standard strategy to fight guerrillas, he tried to deny Jugurtha access to the population by rounding up the civilian population into **castella** (fortified camps). In the Boer War, the British called them concentration camps; in Vietnam, the American army called them strategic hamlets. Marius was serving as **questor** in Metellus' and he decided to make political capital out of the failure to win a quick victory. He returned to

Rome, and ran for Consul on a “Win the War” slogan. He also accused Metellus of bribery and cited his failure to force a decisive battle on Jugurtha as evidence. Marius was elected Consul for 107 BC and the Popular Assembly voted to give Marius command of the North African army, a clear encroachment on the senate's right to conduct wars.

Marius' problem was that he should have been a natural *optimatus* but he was forced into the role of *popularis* by necessity. To the senatorial order, he was merely a rich social climber, and his campaign to replace Metellus in Africa seemed a betrayal of the *fides* a client owed his patron. His senatorial enemies took to calling him “The Ploughboy”—a reference to his supposedly humble origins. The senate ordered Marius to recruit a new army in the hopes of making him unpopular with the people, but the plan misfired because Marius came up with a truly revolutionary idea thereby made the worst nightmare of the senatorial order real. He recruited landless men for his new professional army on the promise that they would receive a parcel of land after the war. In other words, Marius invoked the old land reform program of Tiberius Gracchus in a new guise. Marius promised his soldiers a grant of land to farm in return for their military service. This idea certainly made him popular with the people and it did open military service and economic opportunity to the poor. On the other hand, in the view of the senate, Marius instantly became the most dangerous social revolutionary since the days of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus. In the words of **Plutarch**:

He proceeded to levy soldiers contrary to both law and custom, enlisting slaves and poor people; whereas, former commanders bestowed arms, like other favors, as a matter of distinction, on persons who had property qualifications, a man's property being thus a sort of security for his good behavior. But Marius made enemies in other ways than this; particularly in the violent speeches, full of contempt and arrogance, by which he offended the aristocracy. (**Plutarch, pp. 20-21**)

The conscription of landless men into the army was one of the most important policy changes in all of Roman history. Among other things, it allowed the creation of armies more loyal to their commander than to Rome or the Roman senate, and such armies in the hands of men like Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar would be the most important factor in the collapse of the Roman republic. On the other hand, it made the Roman military potentially the most powerful, professional army in all of history before the French Revolution. It also opened up a path for social mobility to the poor that would have been inconceivable under the old Republican system. The positive aspects of this fundamental change would only become apparent under the Imperial system established by Caesar Augustus. In the short run, it was the potential to destabilize Roman politics and even Senatorial rule that caught the attention of the Roman elite.

Marius required his men to swear an oath (**sacramentum**) to himself, not to the republic. These soldiers saw their military service as a profession; they would fight for pay during the war, booty from the campaigns, and land as a bonus after the war. Know full well that they could expect little reward from the senate except fine words of gratitude, they turned to their commander, Marius himself, for their expectations of personal economic security. From the time of Marius to the end of the Roman Empire centuries later, the Roman state would be plagued by a persistent case of militarism—the tendency of the army to intervene over and over again in politics.

He was a tough, but charismatic commander who won the hearts of the common troops. Plutarch wrote:

That fierce manner of his in command and his inflexibility in imposing punishments seemed to them, once they had got the habit of discipline and obedience, not only right and proper but a positive advantage. His angry temper, rough voice, and that forbidding expression with which they gradually grew familiar, seemed more terrible to the enemy than to themselves. **(Plutarch, p. 26)**

Marius also did a lot to transform the Roman army from a militia into a highly-trained, professional force. He gave the legions their symbol: the silver eagle standard, badges of rank, and decorations for bravery. He also did a lot to establish the esprit de corps and legend of the army. He assigned each legion a name like *venetrix*—the sons of Venus, or **rapax**—the rapacious ones. He ordered his men to sing on the march and trained them thoroughly in sword tactics making use of gladiators as instructors. Marius also reorganized each legion into a self-contained force combining engineers, cavalry, artillery ranging from the small **onager** catapult up to huge **ballistae** capable of throwing stones a mile. He dropped the old practice of baggage trains and insisted that each man carry all necessities on their backs: rations, tents, weapons, and engineer tools. His legionaries began calling themselves “Marius' Mules.” He demanded much from the men, but was popular because of his common touch: *“It is the most obliging sight in the world to the Roman soldier,”* wrote Plutarch, *“to see a commander eat the same food as himself, or lie upon an ordinary bed, or assist the work in digging a trench and raising a wall.”* **(Plutarch, p. 19)** It was Marius who fashioned the Roman legion into its classic form. He even designed the thrusting and throwing spear—the *Pilum*—that the legionaries carried for centuries. It was a wooden shaft connected to a long steel shaft by a wooden rivet; if thrown, the weapon was designed to break in half on impact, so opponents could not throw it back. In the hands of a trained soldier, the *Pilum* was a lethal weapon; when thrown in a high arc, it could, we are told, go through a man and a horse in full armor.

The Roman Army

In theory, the Roman army was simply the Roman citizen body (and allies) in arms. Roman citizens defended the city in wartime and returned to their farms in peacetime. Marius changed all that and Rome would never be the same. The new professional Roman army, like the old conscripted force, consisted of Legions. Each Legion numbered about 6,000 men organized into thirty smaller units called *maniples* numbering about 130 men. Each maniple was trained to fight independently or join together with the rest of the unit to fight in a checkerboard pattern formation. Unlike the Greek phalanx, the legion could deploy, maneuver, or fight on broken or hilly ground without losing its cohesion. This formation allowed the Romans to withstand the shock of wild onrushes by Celts or disciplined attacks by the Greeks as each maniple could fall back into the gaps in the checkerboard and form a solid line.

The Romans were not supermen and in fact they had some obvious military weaknesses. Roman cavalry was poor and they generally had to rely on their allies for effective fighters on horseback. Nor did they distinguish themselves in missile warfare; once again, the Roman depended upon allied contingents of archers and slingers. Their strength lay in masses of organized, well-trained infantry drawn upon that large Italian population base. Rome produced a few genuine military geniuses (Julius Caesar and Scipio Africanus to cite two) but for the most part, the typical Roman commander was a patrician of the Senatorial order with some military experience. Most Roman victories were the product of superior organization and training. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus described Roman training in the First Century A.D. in these words:

If you study the organization of the Roman army, you will realize that they possess their great empire as a reward for valor, not as a gift of fortune. They do not wait for war to come to begin before handling their arms, nor do they sit idle in peacetime and take action only when the emergency comes—but as if born for the sole purpose of wielding arms, they never take a break from training, never wait for a situation requiring arms. Their practice sessions are no less strenuous than real battles. It would not be wrong to call their practice sessions bloodless battles and battles bloody practice sessions. **(Josephus, pp. 194-95)**

As the Roman Republic expanded, its armies became more professional and more permanent and the legions were no longer raised each spring and dismissed each fall for the plowing season. The individual soldier might serve as long as 20 years before his official discharge. The famous Roman discipline was enforced by the death penalty if necessary and by corporal punishments for lesser breaches of military law. The Roman Centurions, the non-coms of the legions were described by the Greek historian Polybius as *“not so much bold and adventurous as men with a faculty for command, steady, and rather of a deep-rooted spirit, not prone prematurely to attack or start battle, but men, who, in the face of overwhelming pressure, would endure and die in defense of their post.”* **(Polybius, p. 322)** One such centurion showed Julius Caesar his shield after a battle; it had 120 javelin holes in it, but he had stood his ground. **(Starr, p. 111)**

The German Crisis

It was well that Rome had such an army and such a commander as Marius, because a serious threat to national security suddenly appeared over the Alps. A coalition of German tribes migrated into southern Gaul and defeated two Roman armies sent to contain them--it was the greatest defeat for Roman arms since Cannae. Accounts of these German invaders shocked the Romans. According to Plutarch, *“At first what was reported about the numbers and strength of the invading armies seemed incredible; later it appeared that rumor fell short of the truth. Three hundred thousand armed warriors were on the march, and hordes of women and children in much greater numbers were said to be marching with them.”* **(Plutarch, p. 23)**

In this crisis, the senate could not afford to dispense with the services of Marius, however much they might have wished to do so. He insisted on his terms: extended consulships and grants of land for his soldiers. He ridiculed the senators before the assembly and asked the people if they would not prefer a leader, *“who gloried in the*

wounds he received for them, rather than the effeminate senators who made much of statues of long-dead ancestors.” (Plutarch, p. 21) Marius' military reforms did create a powerful, professional force capable of meeting the Germans. The Romans encountered the Teutones and Cimbri at Aquae Sextiae in southern Gaul. Marius did not offer battle at once, but built a fortified camp. The Germans, “it was said marched in a steady stream past the fortifications of Marius for six days on end. They marched . . . by the camp asking the Romans. . . whether they had any messages for their wives, 'for', they said, 'we shall soon be with them.’” (Plutarch, p. 31) Despite this provocation, Marius did not offer battle until he had selected his ground carefully. The German mass was encamped on both sides of a river and Marius saw a chance to defeat the enemy in detail. In a grueling two-day battle, Marius' smaller professional force destroyed the Teutones. The next year he destroyed the Cimbri at Vercellae in Southern Gaul. Marius' brilliant generalship against the Teutones and the Cimbri saved the Roman world from utter disaster. According to Plutarch, Marius saved his new, secret weapon (the *pilum*) for the Germans:

They say it was in preparation for this coming battle that Marius first altered the construction of the javelin. Before this time the shaft was fastened into the iron head by two nails of iron; now Marius, leaving one of these nails as it was, removed the other and put in its place a weak wooden pin, the idea being that on impact with the enemy's shield the wooden pin would break and, instead of the javelin sticking straight out, the shaft would twist sideways and trail down, though still firmly fixed to the iron head. (Plutarch, p. 37)

His victories over the Germans earned him enormous gratitude from the Romans who never fully lost their terror of the barbarians. Marius returned to Rome and celebrated a great triumph:

Dressed in triumphal garb and wearing bracelets on his arms and a crown on his head, he summoned the people together. Then he praised the soldiers who had served under him, both collectively and individually, and made them gifts of money and honored them also with military decorations, presenting arm bracelets to some and spears to other, crowns, some gold, some silver--each crown bearing the name of the honored individual and a representation of his brave deed. If he was first over a wall, his crown bore the likeness of a wall. A man who won a sea battle received a crown adorned with ships. But a soldier who had saved the life of a fellow citizen received a crown of oak leaves, which was considered a much greater honor than all the other crowns.

The Roman people, according to Plutarch, “when they celebrated the occasion with their wives and children, they would make their offerings and libations in honor ‘of the gods and Marius.’” (Plutarch, p. 40)

He was elected Consul an unprecedented seven times, he received triumphs for victories in Africa and against the Germans and he expected to become the elder statesman of the senate, censor and *princeps senatus*, the first man in Rome. Even Cicero, the senatorial orator, who despised Marius and condemned him as a political traitor to the Roman constitution, conceded: “Everlasting honor attends the name of Marius, who

twice freed Italy from siege and the dread of slavery.” (Cicero, *Selected Political Speeches*, p. 143) Unfortunately his political skills (not to mention his obvious disregard for matter of constitutional legality) lagged far behind his military accomplishments. After his triumph, he insulted senators by walking into the senate house still wearing his triumphal garb. In fact, the political maneuvering of his last years need not concern us here in any detail. Eventually, suffice it say, he managed to alienate both the senate and the people. At that point, Outmaneuvered by the senate, his popularity in steep decline, Marius was forced to resign from public life in disgrace. The *optimates* remained in control.

To the *optimates*, Marius seemed to be a dangerous combination of demagogue and military hero, an utterly irresponsible man who would do anything for popularity. As Plutarch put it:

In war his great reputation and supreme power came to him because he was needed; in civilian life his supremacy was restricted and so he resorted to attempts to win the goodwill of the mob, not minding so much whether he was the best man so long as he could be the greatest. He thus became very odious to the nobility. (Plutarch, p. 41)

A generation later, the senator and philosopher Cicero invoked the name of Marius in a curious discussion about the nature of the gods:

Daylight would overtake me if I sought to recount the catalogue of good men overtaken by misfortune, and equally if were to recall the evil men who prospered. For example, why did Marius enjoy seven consulships and die as an old man in his bed? So, as Diogenes claimed, the success and prosperity of the wicked wholly refute the notion of the gods’ force and power. (Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, p. 140-43)

For our purposes, the importance of Marius lies in his military reforms and particularly in his opening of military service to the landless. His demand that his soldiers swear an oath (**sacramentum**) to himself set a disastrous precedent. It amounted to a declaration of independence for the Roman army. It would become more and more difficult for the senate to control the army in the future. Why did Marius do this? He was primarily interested in furthering his political career and seeing to the retirement of his veterans. There was no system of state pensions for soldiers and every Roman commander, following his example, during the late republic felt constrained to take extraordinary steps to look to the welfare of his men. The Roman senate was notoriously reluctant to face social problems like poverty. As the Roman army became more professional, they were also becoming more isolated from their fellow citizens and from civilian control. *Legio nostra patria* -- the legion is our fatherland—became a characteristic attitude for many soldiers.