

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC I: L. CORNELIUS SULLA

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 in some ways more relevant and more intriguing. The relevance lies in the fact that 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, Pompey or L. Cornelius Sulla 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 men false. . .Rome changed: a government which had once surpassed all others in justice and excellence now became cruel and unbearable.”* The historian Sallust, author of these words also tried to explain why he found it impossible to behave in a moral fashion: *“Instead of decency, self-discipline and competence, there was insolence, corruption and rapacity. Although I despised these things, being quite untouched by baseness, my insecure youth was nevertheless corrupted, in the presence of such great vices, by the desire for honors and gain and [I] became their prisoner.”* (Meier, p. 23) In other words, the political crisis that destroyed the Roman republic was the result of individual bad behavior—generals who put their personal career ahead of the public good. 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.

However, 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 Republic was caught up in what Christian Meier has called *“a crisis without alternative.”* 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—after all, the Romans practically invented the idea—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. This final crisis was, in the words of Christian Meier, “*very curious, combining grave and bloody unrest with great stability, and frequent failure of the political order with a universal conviction that it was the only true one.*” (Meier, p. 26) 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.

L. Cornelius Sulla (138-78 BC)

We can see the forces at work undermining the Republic in the career of L. Cornelius Sulla (138-78 BC.). Sulla was, along with Julius Caesar and Pompey, one of the three most important figures of the late republic but is the least known of them today. Sulla came from a lesser branch of the Cornelian clan which produced 188 known magistrates. His early years were not impressive. He earned a reputation for preferring the company of actors and prostitutes to that of soldiers. In Roman terms, this indicated both lack of moral character and lack of ambition. In 108 BC. he stood for the office of *quaestor* and won, presumably because of his family connections.

His character and appearance were striking, to say the least. Plutarch described him in these words:

As for his personal appearance, one can get a good general idea of it from the statues. But the terribly sharp and dominating glare of his blue eyes was made still more dreadful by the complexion of his face in which the pale skin was covered

with angry blotches of red. It was because of this, they say, that he got the name 'Sulla,' and one of the street jokers at Athens made a verse on the subject: 'Sulla's face is a mulberry with oatmeal scattered on it.' When he was still young and unknown he used to spend his time with ballet dancers and comedians and shared their dissolute way of life; and when he had won supreme power he was always organizing parties of the most impudently outspoken characters from the stage with who he used to drink and exchange witticisms, with the result that people though he was acting in a manner very ill-suited to his age; and he not only cheapened the reputation of his high office but actually neglected much business which required attention. (**Plutarch, p. 67**)

In other words, his character was the rather typical Roman combination of diligence and sensuality. "*Once Sulla had sat down to dinner,*" wrote Plutarch, "*he found it quite impossible to take anything seriously. At other times he was a hard worker and used to wear a particularly forbidding expression.*" (**Plutarch, p. 67**) Nevertheless, Sulla soon proved himself very adept at diplomacy and war. He was beloved by the ordinary legionaries because of his wit, courtesy and willingness to share their burdens. This knack for winning the hearts of soldiers never deserted Sulla—and that fact would have terrible consequences for Rome.

Sulla emerged as an important player in Roman politics during a conflict between Rome and her Italian allies known as the Social War (from the Latin *Socii* meaning allies). He captured numerous enemy towns during the war and earned a reputation as a formidable military commander. Sulla stood for the Consulship in 88 BC. along with his political ally Q. Pompeius Rufus and was elected almost unanimously. At this point, a number of foreign and domestic events brought about a full-blown civil war. First, King Mithridates VI of Pontus, invaded and conquered the Roman province of Asia. Mithridates' invasion was a serious blow to Roman prestige. It was made all the worse since most of the people of Asia, angered by Roman exploitation went over to Mithridates and a great massacre of Roman citizens in Asia took place. In this so-called "Asiatic Vespers," as many as 80,000 Roman citizens perished. The Romans expected to be able to defeat Mithridates fairly easily. The only question was who should command the expedition. The chief contenders were Marius (now almost 70 years old and a little dotty) and Sulla. This was a serious question since the booty, glory, and political clout that would come the commander's way were immense and would certainly make him the dominant figure in Rome upon his return.

The Senate conferred the command upon Sulla, but Marius' influence was enough to persuade the Roman assembly to give him the command. When Marius sent two officers to relieve Sulla of command, his soldiers killed them. Marius himself had brought the army into Roman politics and now, his rival used the same tactic. Sulla was the first Roman general to march his army on Rome but not the last. He forced the followers of Marius out of the city. Thus entrenched in his command, Sulla left Italy for Greece and Asia. Marius soon returned, was elected Consul and died in 86 BC. Even with Marius dead, the stage was set for a civil war since the old *optimates* versus *populares* feud had yet to be resolved. In this situation, Sulla claimed to represent the Senatorial order, and Marius' successor Cinna claimed to represent the people. Cinna's followers managed to intimidate the Senate and seized control of the popular assembly and declared Sulla an

outlaw. In Greece, Sulla declared himself the legitimate head of the Roman government. The stage was set for a violent resolution of the crisis.

But that would have to await the end of the war in Asia. Sulla proved himself an effective and merciful general. When he laid siege to Athens, the Athenians sent out a deputation to persuade Sulla to leniency. When the Athenians started speaking of the glorious Greek victories in the Persian Wars, Sulla interrupted them saying: *“My friends, you can pack up your speeches and be off. Rome did not send me to Athens to study ancient history. My task is to subdue rebels.”* (Plutarch, p. 83) In fact he did drive the forces of Mithridates out of Greece rapidly and he signed a lenient peace treaty. In 83 BC. Sulla landed in Italy and marched on Rome again. With his legions approaching Rome, more and more senators suddenly began to see the virtues of Sulla. Sulla defeated the troops sent to oppose him at the Colline gate of Rome and entered the city. Sulla ordered the Senate brought to see him at the Temple of Mars. As he arose to speak to the frightened senators, the screams of 6,000 prisoners of war—in this case, Roman soldiers—he had ordered massacred at the Circus Maximus interrupted his speech:

The noise of their shrieks—so many men being massacred in so small a space—was, as might be expected, easily audible and the senators were dumbfounded. Sulla, however, continued to speak with the same calm and unmoved expression. He told the senators to listen to what he had to say and not to bother their heads with what was going on outside. *“Some of the criminals are receiving correction. It is being done by my orders.”* (Plutarch, p. 103)

In the next few days he went to force the terrified Senate to grant him dictatorial powers for *“writing laws and ordering the state.”* More surprising and horrifying, was his sudden blood-thirsty demand for vengeance on his enemies. Most people had probably expected a few dozen executions of his most public opponents, but Sulla, in the words of the historian Livy, *“now dirtied a most splendid victory by a cruelty greater than any man had ever displayed.”* His first step was to simply attempt to wipe out the opposition. He posted lists of names of men who were "proscribed" as enemies of the state. Proscribed men could be killed on sight, and those who did so were rewarded by the state. Their property was seized and Sulla used it reward his soldiers. As many as 10,000 slaves received their freedom from Sulla for murdering their masters. When the killing showed no sign of ending, the Senate appealed to him. It did not wish to plead for mercy for those whom he intended to kill, but could he at least let everyone know who he saw fit to spare. Sulla took this suggestion literally and began posting lists of those proscribed. Forty senators, one thousand six hundred Roman Knights and many of their followers were proscribed. Donald Kagan has estimated that as many 100,000 Roman citizens fell victim to Sulla's purge.

The origins of Sulla's purge, like that of Josef Stalin in the twentieth century, are somewhat mysterious. His contemporaries found his behavior terrifying because it was so completely unpredictable. As Plutarch noted: *“In his punishments and his reactions to injury the same inconsistency is to be observed. He would have a man beaten to death for some inconsiderable offence; yet on other occasions he would meekly put up with really serious misdeeds.”* (Plutarch, p. 73) However, there were certain groups in Roman society that received the dictator's wrath in special measure. Sulla's hatred was directed at the rich moneybags (*saccularii*) who had succeeded in acquiring wealth and

status to which they were not entitled. Sulla wished ultimately to restore the authority of the *patricians* and the senate even if that meant the murder of many senators. Sulla also struck at the leaders of the *populares*. Young Julius Caesar belonged to the circle of Sulla's victims. As Marius' nephew and Cinna's son-in-law, Julius Caesar was a man of some importance even though he was only 18 years old. Caesar was forced into hiding for several weeks. Finally, he was brought before Sulla. A number of influential Romans pleaded with Sulla for Caesar's life. The dictator gave in, albeit not without a famous prophecy. *“Very well then. You win! Take him! But never forget that the man whom you want me to spare will one day prove the ruin of the party which you and I have so long defended. There are many Mariuses in this fellow Caesar.”* (Meier, p. 93)

Yet Sulla was more than just a butcher. Asked why he marched on the city of Rome with his army, he replied, *“To free it from tyrants.”* (Meier, p. 80) He believed that Rome's greatest problems were the weakening of senatorial authority, the inordinate power wielded by the Tribunes of the Plebs, and rebellious military commanders. He used his position as 'Dictator for the reconstituting of the Republic' to try and turn back the clock to the fifth century. The Senate's legislative veto was restored. The office of Tribune of the People was gutted: their veto power removed, limited by law to one year in office and forbidden to ever hold any office beyond tribune. His objective to reaffirm the political privileges of the Senate and curtail the power of the Tribunes, which the Gracchi had used to attack traditional senatorial rule was clear. Using all the legal and illegal means available to him, Sulla did everything possible to restore a consistent senatorial regime that could work and govern efficiently. He doubled the size of the senate 300 to 600 members, thus broadening the ruling class. Of course, the new members were carefully selected men from the equestrian order who could be relied upon to support the dictator. If his goal was to strengthen Senatorial authority, the means he selected to accomplish those goals, military coups, proscriptions—that is legalized murder—and dictatorial reforms enforced at sword point could hardly achieve the goal.

Above all, Sulla could not cancel the effect of his march on Rome. As Plutarch wrote:

[Commanders like Sulla] were men who had risen to the top by violence rather than merit; they needed armies to fight against one another rather than against the public enemy; and so they were forced to combine the arts of the politician with the authority of the general. They spent money on making life easy for their soldiers and then, after purchasing their labour in this way, failed to observe that they had made their whole country a thing for sale and had put themselves in a position where they had to be slaves of the worst sort of people in order to become the masters of the better. (Plutarch, pp. 81-82)

He had seized absolute power in the name of the *patricians* but hardly with their help. His armies had decided the issue, and the nobles had looked on helplessly. Despite his constitutional reforms and the quasi-legal basis of his dictatorship, the reality was that his power rested upon the hundred and twenty thousand veteran soldiers--his old soldiers and those who had defected to him--whom he now began to settle at various key points in Italy. It was an entirely cynical effort. Rome could not forget four hundred years of political development and Sulla must have known that. Sulla could have made himself the permanent ruler of Rome, but he saw himself as the republic's savior, not its enemy. But

he had ordered things for the rest of his lifetime. In 79 BC. he declared his work complete and retired from public affairs and returned to the life of pleasure. A year after his retirement, he died. Julius Caesar later commented that Sulla had failed to master the rudiments of politics and went on to say that he had been a fool to give up the dictatorship. The epitaph that Sulla selected for himself tells us much about his political ideology: ***“No one ever did more good to his friends, nor more harm to his enemies.”***

Sulla's bloody purge had the effect giving the republic a quick-fix solution to problems that could not really be solved. His reforms attempted to put Roman politics into a strait-jacket, but he could not undo the effect of his own example--a general using the army of the republic to march on Rome and overthrow the government in the name of reform. Within a few years of his death, other generals would follow his example. Even more troubling, was the example Sulla had set with his bloody proscriptions of his enemies. His actions had elevated civil strife to civil war. His actions have puzzled ancient writers and modern scholars alike, for he was a mass of contradictions: rapacious yet generous, a tyrant who murdered in the name of the old senatorial order. The most perplexed was Julius Caesar. Caesar was an autocrat dedicated to imposing his own one-man rule on the Roman world, whereas Sulla ultimately saw himself as a defender of an aristocratic class. His reforms can be seen as an attempt to halt the drift towards tyranny by showing the Romans just how terrifying a tyrant can be. Sulla's most significant and enduring contribution to Roman history was a negative one: he demonstrated how a commander could turn his army into a body of loyal clients and use them to gain supreme power. Everyone who used military force to seize power in Rome thereafter was in this sense a disciple of Sulla.