

Was the fall of the roman republic inevitable



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Roman Republic enjoyed reasonable success in its early stages, the conquest of Italy and overseas territories lead to rapid expansion and a surge in population, wealth and culture. However, as this essay will demonstrate this growth of population and increase of wealth was not sustainable; the allies with which Rome went to battle were not fairly rewarded and demanded citizenship, powerful men grasped at the chance to win power in Rome creating political conflict and foreign powers jealous of Rome's success would conspire to her downfall.

In order to assess whether the downfall of the Roman republic by the turn of the century was inevitable, this essay will look at each major personality and decide whether the republic would have fallen in their absence or whether we can discern a clear point of no return in the politics of the republic. In order to do this and despite the lack of sufficient contemporary sources, this essay shall utilise the findings and musings of modern academic debate to answer its question.

Ultimately, we shall conclude that the lion's share of problems in the republic were due to its unprecedented growth, system of government and mass of opportunity for ambitious political figures rendering the decline therefore unavoidable. This paper will start with the detailing the beginning of the end for the republic, which commences with the character of Tiberius Gracchus in 1341 and the efforts of his brother Gaius. Then we shall look at the long consulship of Marius and the 'dictatorship' of Sulla as the turning point which lead to the increasingly despotic rules of Pompey, Caesar and Augustus.

In order to determine whether the failure of the republic was predetermined by the way in which it was structured we must look at its failure from a chronological point of view and note any key events which may have signalled a 'point of no return'. The start date of the 'Crisis of the Republic' is open to interpretation but this essay will take it to be the date of the ascension of Tiberius Gracchus² as Tribune of the plebs, as Gracchus was the first real controversial reformer of the republic.

Gracchus believed that the economy would be better served if land ownership was to be limited and the excess land to be redistributed between poor settlers and thus he proposed a land reform, although some contemporaries would attribute this reform to Gracchus's want for popularity or pressure from his influential backers. As we know, the senate consisted of the wealthiest men in Rome whom this would affect severely, knowing this; Gracchus used the power of the Consilium Plebis to bypass the senate.

Gracchus had broken with tradition and angered the senate who employed tactics to stop him. A political tennis match of vetoes and laws ensued but bloodily ended with the senate accusing Gracchus of aspiring to one man rule or regnum. In fact, as Plutarch muses, his intentions were most probably honourable in that he wanted to legislate against the oligarchy and restore some power to the oppressed people. Gracchus and his followers were brutally murdered in the streets of Rome in an event which even contemporary observers were shocked to see. Ungern-Sternber, 2004, p. 91). This event is important to this essay for two reasons; the first is that this is the first documented major break with the senate and tradition, Gracchus had unwittingly been the first proponent of popular politics, the same style <https://assignbuster.com/was-the-fall-of-the-roman-republic-inevitable/>

which later on will cause more unrest. Secondly, it was also as one contemporary described it ' the beginning of civil bloodshed and of the free reign of swords in the city of Rome. ' (Paterclus, II. 3. 3).

The ultimate order of death from the senate set the tone for the rest of the republic that murder can be the solution for unpopular reform. In some ways this can be seen as the turning point, as it paved the way for the actions of the proceeding hundred years and also showed that through the popular courts a man could gain power. However, at this point no irreversible damage had been done, the tradition of senate rule was still strong and it would take the combined ambition of the next 3 figures to be discussed to overturn that tradition.

Gracchus's brother, Gaius³, was the next Tribune to create tension within the republic; he acted much in the same way as his brother. However in order to avoid the same grim demise as his sibling, Gracchus II based his legislation on more than one issue. Not only did he support his brother's land reform bill but also a regulation of the grain prices which were being deflated due to new overseas markets. Gracchus II also made the justice system more transparent and fair by reducing the proportion of senators who could sit on juries.

All of this legislation, made capable by a two year term, was to create tension between him and the senate, the same tension which is to underpin the entire period. He then further fuelled this tension by selling the taxation rights of the Asian territories to non-senators. These actions and others lead

to the failure of his 121 campaign and the start of a political attack on his reforms, the aftermath of which lead to his death.

Once again through use of violence the senate was able to prevail over the popular sentiment, continuing the aforementioned violent tone set by the previous Gracchus's ' execution', but we still cannot say that the republic is on an unstoppable decline as the senate is still powerful and popular politics was merely a common theme between the brothers not yet a ' coherent movement' (Ungern-Sternber, 2004, p. 94). However, the consulship of Marius was to test this theory and the power of the senate.

Marius was to gain his support and power in an unorthodox method, adding to the feeling that the traditional republic was failing in its duty at keeping a check on power; Marius started with victory over Jugurtha in Africa and then the Teutones and Cimbri who were threatening Northern Italy, to do this he had relaxed the qualifications for service in the army, a move which would have far-reaching implications for the republic (Shotter, 1994, p. 37). The returning soldiers were in need of land to settle in and Marius, influenced by two populist supporters decided to settle them in new colonies in Italy.

The Senate disliked this notion for two reasons; firstly they were extremely wary of having Roman citizens settle in colonies, they were also very much afraid of military commanders and soldiers participating in joint political action as it threatened to lead to popular revolt, another key theme in the fall of the republic. However, one of Marius's key supporters stepped out of line and gave the senate justification to declare a state of emergency leading

to the senate recalling Marius from the field in order to quell a revolt lead by his own supporters.

After this, with very little favour left in Rome, Marius withdrew from political life. Marius served for an extraordinary six consulships during the prime of his political career, he was able to ascend to this position through no traditional (Shotter, 1994) means but through sheer popularity and military success, these values were the antithesis of what the senate wanted and strived for and the length of his term shows how the strength of the senate was waning and that its power was being replaced by single, monolithic powers in the form of political and military personalities.

The culture of violence to handle unrest also aids in the decline of the republic as reason and justice give way to aggression and murder. This is not yet the point by which the revolution is inevitable, but Marius made great strides in showing that personal political power was not impossible. After the premiership of Marius and failed attempts by a tribune, Marcus Drusus, to extend franchise, the Italian allies realised that political manoeuvres were amounting to nothing at that something more drastic needed to be done in order to attain political rights.

The ' Social War' that followed was to be a key point in the decline of the republic as it showed the senate losing its power over popular sentiment. The war that followed was essentially a civil war between the city of Rome and her disillusioned allies; from what scarce records are available we can state that this was no easy war for Rome; both sides were trained in a similar

way for example. The battles took place across Italy, with many colonies being permanently razed.

The economic consequences were similar and can be compared to the Hannibalic war. (Brunt, 1971). In addition to this, while Rome was busy quelling her allies, Mirthidates of Pontus took the opportunity to overrun the Asian territories and massacre a large number of Italians. In answer to this a successful commander, Lucius Sulla was sent to deal with Mirthidates. However, while he was absent from Rome, an opportunistic tribune once again tried to take sole power which had to be resolved by Sulla returning and dispatching him.

Once again showing a descent into violent conflict, it is clear from this point that the republic was starting to fail, constant attempts to gain power by ambitious individuals were becoming commonplace and Sulla, had shown that a popular general could easily mobilise his popularity to gain political power. (Brunt, 1971). It was also apparent that the will of the people could no longer be ignored and reform was imminent, marking this time as a crucial change in the direction of the republic, which is exemplified in the prime of ' Sulla the Dictator' (Gruen, 1974). Upon returning to Rome, Sulla was greeted with chaos.

Cinna and Marius had been in almost dictatorial charge of Rome from 86 and did very little in the way of constructive action to solve the unrest plaguing Italy. Sulla mobilised his small force and gained support from the lengths of the country to overthrow them. The ensuing battles ' left Sulla as sole master of the state' (Brunt, 1971). While in power, Sulla concentrated on moving

power back to the senate and legislating against future populares by reducing the power of the tribune, all the while hoarding wealth for himself in the same vein as previous kings and tyrants.

On closer examination however, Sulla's motives may have been honourable, considering the unrest that preceded him, he did very well to calm it through high handed political action. However, the mark that Sulla left on Rome was not his policy but his rise to power and methods, he essentially ruled as king, heralding the end of the republic only half a century later. (Gruen, 1974). No matter what Sulla's intentions for Rome, the structure that he left was weak, and once his reforms were sidestepped, the Republic's ' headlong slide to self destruction went unchecked' (Gruen, 1974).

After Sulla's death there ensued a conflict between his supporters and the populares, as well as foreign threats. Each threat was put to a young general, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus⁴ who dispatched them accordingly, despite gaining his power through extraordinary and anti-Sullan methods. His consulship, partnered with Crassus, led to the empowerment of the tribune once more. After his consulship Pompey was granted control of all coastal regions and access to large amount of resources in order to deal with piracy. This is important as we see the command of large parts of the empire fall under one man once more, a foreshadowing of the days to come.

Pompey's military successes followed and moved east, however Rome was ready for his return in the sense that it did not want a repeated of Sulla's tyranny. Pompey was not given the chance for further gain until the offer of the first Triumvirate. Pompey's prime showed that the Sullan structure of

rule was not viable and could be abused, further showing that the republican structure was inevitably going to fail. This essay states that this is in fact the point of no return previously alluded to, the point at which the fall of the republic was no longer doubted.

This is backed up by the fact that until now there had been a hope for senatorial strength and The milestone which marks the final years of the republic is the formation of the ' First Triumvirate' an informal agreement of cooperation between the popular Pompey and Crassus and the rising political star, Julius Caesar. This was the first time that ' three men had conceived of the notion that their private arrangements should regulate what would happen in Rome. ' (Ungern-Sternber, 2004). This has important consequences as we see the power of institution being overrun for the final time by popular personalities.

This tri force was used to increase the length of time each man held power for, as well as dealing with Clodius in the 50's, and was successful until Crassus's death in 53. After this, Pompey seized the chance to be elected once more to consulship and break with Caesar who was busy gaining territory in Gaul. Once again, a singular man held power in Rome. However this power was short lived. Through a series of confusing laws, Pompey was able to lose Caesar's trust. Caesar then brought his veteran army back from Gaul to engage in a civil war he was to ultimately win.

Once in power, Caesar was to extend his term to ten years and then for life effectively sealing the end of the republic through the instigation of a dictatorship which circumvented all of the checks that the senate

represented. However short this perpetual dictatorship lived, it was to create the opportunity for Augustus to seal the military rule that marked the final resting place of the Roman republic. The triumvirate was not the point of no return that this essay years to find, it was merely a consequence of half a century of political domination by men abusing popularity and wealth to achieve their own political goals.

When asked the question as to the inevitability of the republic's failure, we must answer that yes, the failure was predetermined by the culture created in Rome, by the vast wealth and power available to opportunistic and ambitious men and also the vested interest within the senate to keep power to themselves. The lives of the mentioned men all contributed to the downfall of the political system and it is important that we conclude the analysis that the reasons for their actions were sometimes noble and sometimes selfish but the general sentiment was that of greed.

The senate at many opportunities chose the wrong course of action in dealing with opposing legislation from the tribune. Instead of opposing it with aggression and stubbornness they could have avoided the descent into chaos and eventual despotism by acquiescing certain demands to the people and using the judicial system, not lynch mobs, to exact justice, but the culture created in Rome was that power came before stability and this is the reason the republic fell - it was destroyed by the same energy and power hungry attitude that made it successful in the first place.