

History essays - roman army



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Why did the roman army become so important in the last century BC?

“ Roman success in empire building was founded on the phenomenal achievements of their army.”

The relationship between the military and the chief political machinations of the state has been an ever present feature of history, from the first recorded geo-political actions of the Greek state up to the modern era, meted out in modern times in the democratic fight against authoritarianism and totalitarianism. In his *Histories of the Peloponnesian Wars*, Thucydides, writing from the viewpoint of an Athenian naval commander, notes the organic relationship between the fortunes of the armed forces and the decision making capabilities of the political apparatus. Further on, during the early sixteenth century - at the very cusp of the advent of the modern era - Machiavelli declared that the power of any given state was in relation to the perceived power of its armed forces. Essentially, these thinkers, from ancient history to Dr. Kissinger in the present day, all concur that the threat of the use of force by a supreme military power alters forever the balance of the status quo in favour of the strongest power. It is within the context of this *realist* doctrine of international relations theory that the historian locates the Roman political model in the first century BC - a society in a state of flux, caught in the ambitions of the early Republican founders yet confronted by the realism of the might of the growing Roman Army.

To best answer the question a linear view of Roman history must be taken, analysing chronologically the changes that beset the republican model from the dawn of the century until the Restoration as overseen by Octavian. It will

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be seen how the fragile roots of Roman democracy facilitated the arrival of a militarily strong style of leadership; how the republican was eventually unable to fend off the right wing advances of a group of men with military ambition matched only by their desire for political power in the Senate.

After the debacle of the Roman experiment with monarchy, the ruling, educated classes implemented a political republic with power diverted to the People. This necessitated a split within the people to characterise them as either ' active' or ' passive' citizens; those active citizens with enough power and influence gradually ascended the hierarchical ladder of the Roman Republic to wield influence in a variety of ways. Yet, in contrast to the republican paradigms of the modern era, the Romans never truly disassociated themselves from the ancient Greek ethos of conquest with the inherently heroic element to history that the Homeric tradition left as its enduring legacy. The main links that the historian has to the first century BC, namely Tacitus and Suetonius, were primarily concerned with recreating the glory of ancient warriors. It is a significant point because if the arts and literature of the contemporary period were concerned with romantic ideals of conquest and valour then it comes as little surprise to learn that the prevailing attitude amongst the political elite of Rome in the first century was similarly geared towards imperial examples of force.

Therefore, with the stability of Rome temporarily secured, and the threat of a return of monarchical power made obsolete, the right wing nature of ancient societies made sure that expansion abroad was high on the political agenda.

" It has already become clear that in various ways Rome's small town Republican constitution was - for all the famous ' balance' between the

classes, stressed by the Greek historian Polybius – unfitted for imperial responsibilities. The solution which imposed itself was the autocracy of the dictators Sulla (81-79BC) and Julius Caesar (48-44BC).”

Of these two men the key figure as to why the marriage of convenience between the military and politics took place during the first century BC is without a doubt Caesar. He was the first man to make his name and fortune within the republican and then to transfer that influence to the field of military campaigns, primarily in Western Europe. There can be no denying the fact that he was motivated by a desire to attain personal valour and, as has been highlighted in the writings of Tacitus, to recreate the glories of quasi mythical figures such as Achilles and Alexander the Great. Much in the manner that the crowds in the UK greeted each new Victorian acquisition of territory during the imperialist heyday of the nineteenth century, so Caesar’s exploits were cheered at home – each victory against the uncivilised barbarians of France, Germany and Spain made him appear more and more of a hero in the eyes of ordinary Roman citizens, and indeed non-citizens. It is an important point that was not lost on the fascist leaders of the twentieth century. Patriotism, nationalism and military success combined to make Caesar more popular than the state itself and to become quote literally larger than life. The significance likewise was not lost on the contemporary leaders of the Roman Senate who saw Caesar as the antithesis to their dream of a democratic empire, albeit a democracy that excluded women, children and slaves of that very empire.

Julius Caesar was the first man to transcend military and political boundaries and the first to actively encourage others to follow suit. He was greatly

assisted by the lack of a single, unifying God within Roman society, which enabled him to become an icon on a par with mythical heroes of pre-history. And though this character trait may well have been seen as undesirable in the eyes of many senators, he was equally viewed as a triumph for just as many Romans in the first century BC. “ Caesar crossed the Rubicon simply to save his skin and to defend his *dignitas* , the position which he had gained in public life, not to bring some new political system or panacea to an ailing republic. While many of the Roman aristocracy might disapprove of his methods, most would recognise his goal.”

Caesar’s name remains synonymous with autocratic military leadership today over two thousand years after his zenith. Yet however brilliant a tactician he undoubtedly was and regardless of his proven oratorical and leadership skills, if the Roman political model of the first century BC was made of more durable materials then the opportunity for his seizure of power would never have presented itself. The single most crippling ailment associated with the Republic during this time was political corruption. By dividing Roman society into a virtual caste system, with rigid barriers between the classes, the republic invited disharmony and dishonour to visit itself on the Senate in the shape of greedy, unscrupulous politicians.

Clearly, corruption and individual negligence were characteristics not unique to Roman political life. Contrary to popular belief, much of the famed Greek political tradition was based upon autocratic ideals more than democracy, and corruption between elected officials was similarly rife in Athens as in Rome. Rather, the significance of the strategic impotence of the Senate during the first century BC was that it made sure that Caesar and his

followers in the army were greeted with a fractured front upon their return from the field. Although it is true that the conspiracy which ultimately ended the life of Caesar took part with the agreement of numerous parties, the manner in which he was killed was, arguably, a greater nail in the coffin of republicanism than was Caesar's aggressive militarism in the first place. "The Senate was no more in command of the situation at home than it was abroad. Overseas, for reasons which changed between the 70s and the 60s and the 50s, it exercised only a rather tenuous control over the empire of which it was in theory governing body. Equally, it was unable to ensure the orderly conduct of the political process at Rome and in Italy."

This is a key point. Although the republic, and the ideals which encapsulated its defining driving force, was a cherished institution during the second and first centuries BC, the fact remains that it was a political *theory* that was being defended (after Caesar crossed the Rubicon) as opposed to a military *reality*; and in the ancient world, much more so than in the modern, the physical show of force was always more likely to prevail than a liberal political ideology. Moreover, it has been shown, time and again throughout history, that a state whose politicians are perceived to be weak is extremely vulnerable to right wing, military coups. Mussolini would, in the twentieth century, invoke the spirit of Caesar by using the notion of the Empire and the army to neuter the political set-up of Italy once more.

It can be seen how Rome was gradually transformed, first through Sulla and then through Caesar, into a type of military state. Expansion and acquisition was the key to the success of these men. "This expansion not only increased the power of the state and the wealth of individuals, but also by its

success ensured that the link between elected office and military responsibility remained an unquestioned part of the Roman system. There was no separation of military and civil career, because the army was the state in military guise." The legacy of Caesar and the civil war that followed was a sense of the blurring of the lines between military and politics. Without a doubt the army was the most significant actor in the various Roman dramas that would take place over the coming years.

The limbo mentality of the post-Caesar years was gradually stabilised with the accession of Octavian. This period is often referred to as The Restoration. " History sees Augustus Caesar as the first emperor of Rome, who brought the city and the empire from the chaos of civil war to a system of ordered government. Of this overall achievement there is no doubt, for Augustus provided a firm and stable basis from which sprang the expansion and prosperity of the next two centuries, and which enabled Rome and the Empire to withstand the waywardness of many of the emperors who came after Augustus."

Yet underneath the façade of stability there could be no denying the fact that Rome had been distorted from a peaceful Republic into an aggressive international power, larger and more militarily structured than any society which had gone before it. This is the ultimate legacy of Caesar and the cumulative struggles of the first century BC: a fusion between the high culture of Roman life and the vigorous exposition of power which was frequently displayed by successive emperors both at home and broad. Furthermore, the accord reached after the compromise of Augustus in 30BC was dependent on a strong central figure to bind the two disparate forces of

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politics and the army. " In effect, Octavian obtained the command of so much of the armed strength of the Empire that the military destinies of the state were in his hands. The justification for this was that the Senate during the preceding century had repeatedly shown itself incapable of controlling the soldiers." Yet while Augustus was strong, subsequent leaders of the Roman Empire were not gifted with such military and diplomatic skills; as such the state was eventually weakened to a point of ineffectuality.

Conclusion

It is easy for historians today to see the essential frailty of the Roman Republican model as the chief determining factor in the increasing role of the military during the first century BC. Yet the truth is that the ancient world was established in such a way as to make heroes of instigators of military aggression and right wing jingoistic formulae. " That it should have required a hundred years to accomplish the destruction of the republic is a tribute to the roughness of the fibre of its early institutions and the ideals of the constitutional government which they embodied." More tellingly, the final destruction in the Empire was directly connected to the aggression of these years, revisited upon Rome in the form of increasingly successful barbarian raids after the fourth century AD.

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