

Civil Wars and Despotism

Plagued by murderous ambition, Rome's politician-generals turned their armies against each other — and even against Rome herself.

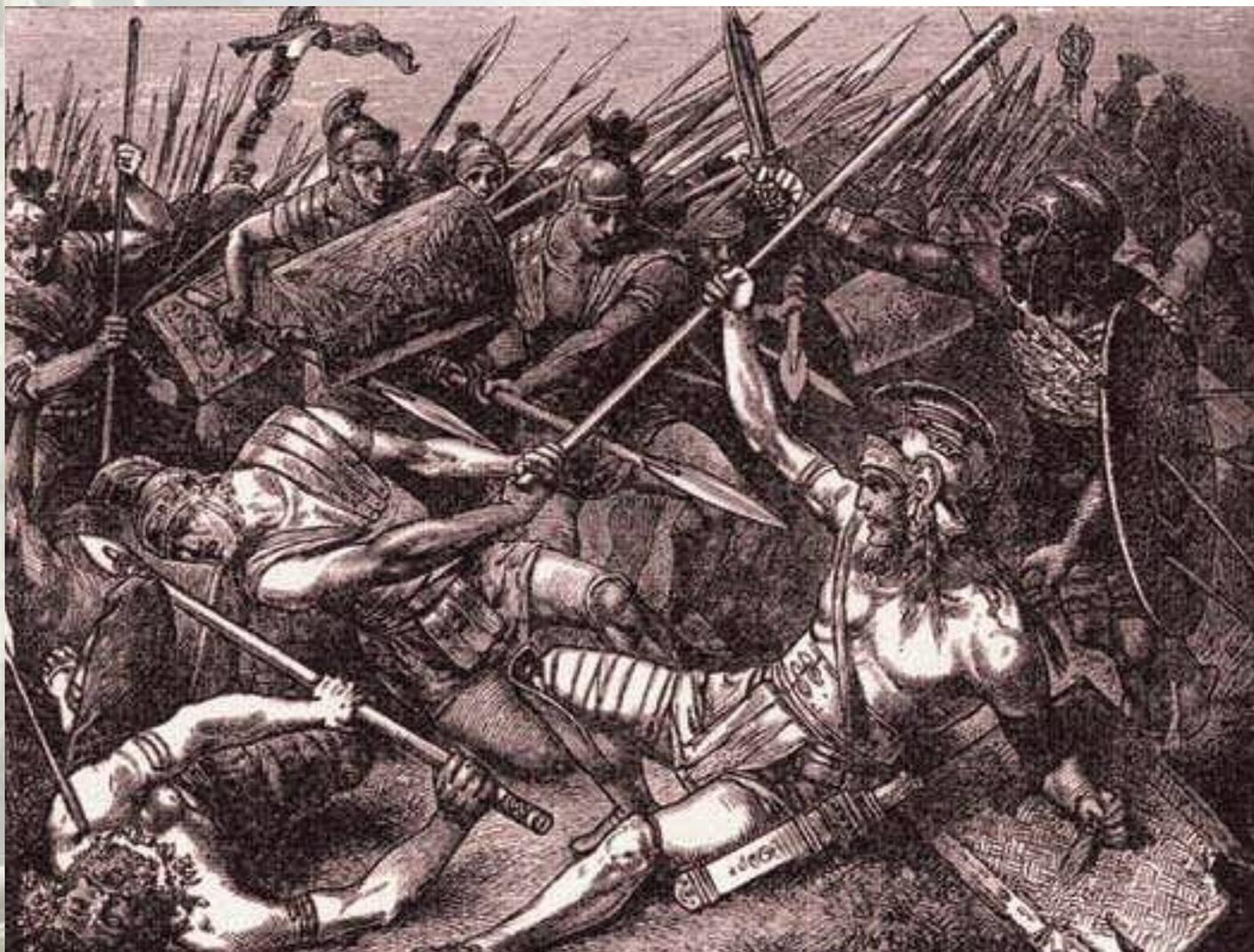
by *Steve Bonta*

This is the fifth installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.

Travelers passing along Rome's Appian Way between Capua and Rome in the spring of 71 B.C. were greeted with a gruesome sight. For

mile after mile along the road, festering bodies hung from crucifixes as kites, jackdaws, and other carrion birds picked at the remains. More than 6,000 men had been brutally put to death along Rome's main thoroughfare. They were not common criminals but captured soldiers of a former gladiator named Spartacus, who had led a damaging revolt against the Roman government.

Defeated by Crassus, one of Rome's iron generals, thousands of Spartacan rebels had been publicly executed as a salutary lesson to others contemplating rebellion against the Roman state. The bodies were never removed, but hung on their grisly scaffolds for years thereafter, a grim and poignant reminder of the monstrous regime taking shape in the heart of what had once been the world's freest



Routing the rebellion: In 71 B.C., Roman troops led by General Crassus defeated an army of rebel slaves led by the former gladiator, Spartacus. Thousands of the captured rebels were nailed to crosses alongside the Appian Way; their lifeless and rotting bodies were displayed for years thereafter as a warning to other would-be rebels.

civilization. In 71 B.C., the mass executions along the Appian Way were only the latest in a series of horrors that Rome had endured during nearly two decades of civil war and despotic government. No doubt some of the older passersby, who remembered Rome in better days, gazed on the fly-blown victims of the latest convulsion and wondered: how had the republic come to this?

The First Civil War

It began with the so-called Social War, which erupted in 91 B.C. At issue was a long-standing sore spot among the non-Roman Italian peoples living under Roman rule. For centuries, Rome had been absorbing other Italian peoples into the republic, but had never granted them Roman citizenship. When a consul named Drusus, who had been pushing to extend citizenship to non-Roman Italians, was assassinated, the Italian cities formed a league and revolted against Rome. Tens of thousands of Romans and Italians died in three years of brutal war — in which Marius and Sulla, two of Rome's most prominent military leaders, became bitter political enemies. The war ended when Rome negotiated a settlement granting citizenship to non-re-

bellious Italians and to those rebels who laid down their arms.

In the meantime, another threat to Rome had arisen in the east, in the person of the formidable Mithridates VI, the king of Pontus, a powerful state in Asia Minor. Mithridates was a prototypical oriental despot, having come to power by murdering most of his siblings and marrying his own sister. He is said to have spoken 25 languages and to have spent years building immunity to every kind of poison then known. He possessed a huge, well-equipped army and navy. Having territorial ambitions of his own in Asia Minor and the Aegean, Mithridates detested Roman power and the high-handed way in which the Romans presumed to dictate terms to every other nation. In 88 B.C., as the Social War was petering out in Italy, Mithridates decided to make his move against Rome.

In that year, Mithridates' agents instigated a massacre of all Romans living in Asia Minor. The victims, numbering in the tens of thousands, included merchants and

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diplomatic envoys as well as their families. After such a catastrophe, Rome had little choice but to declare war on Mithridates, an enterprise that promised to be Rome's greatest military exploit since the Second Punic War.

Rome's First Despots

With such a prospect for personal glory, the rivalry between Marius and Sulla, which had simmered since the Jugurthine War more than a decade earlier, exploded into the open. Sulla, serving as one of Rome's consuls, was chosen to lead the campaign against Mithridates. Marius, seething with envy but having no legal recourse, allied himself with the newly enfranchised Ital-



Roman Republic during Mithridates VI anti-Roman alliance of 85 B.C.

In the year of Sulla's death, 78 B.C., the purges had subsided, Mithridates had been placated, and tenuous threads of legality still held the Roman Republic together. But forces were already in motion that could not be stopped, and the Spartan revolt still lay ahead.

ian citizens of Rome. He encouraged them to vote for a new law giving him command over the Mithridatic task force.

Furious, Sulla decided to use the troops under his command to unseat Marius before turning his attention to Mithridates. Although many of his officers resigned in protest, his foot soldiers, eager for the spoils of war in the East once Marius was out of the way, followed their leader in a fateful march on Rome. Sulla was met along the way by several deputations, who

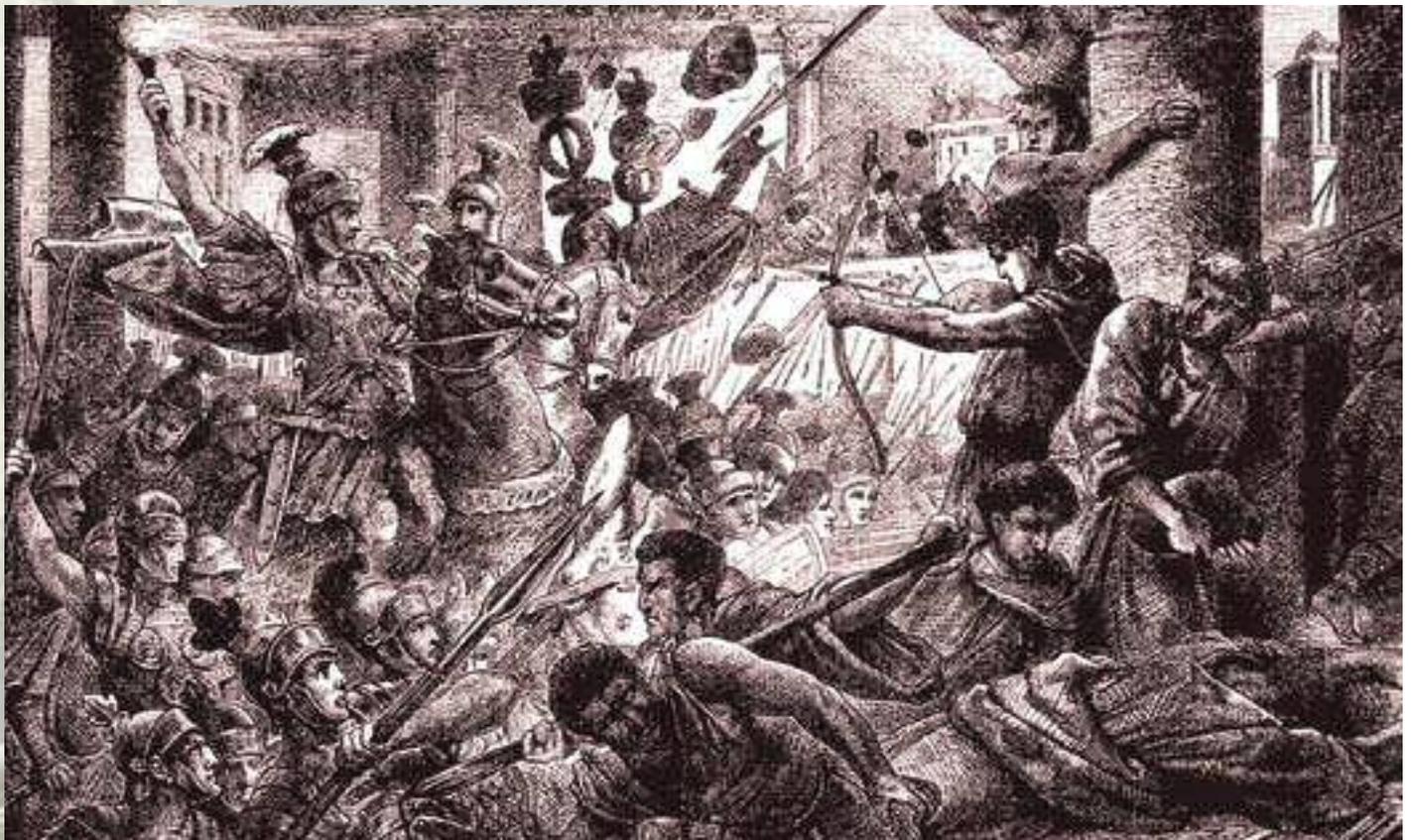
asked him why he was marching against his native land under arms. His reply, shameless and unwavering, was the rationale of usurpers in every age: "To free her from tyrants." As his troops swept into Rome, they encountered only light resistance from the Marians, and large-scale butchery was averted — for the time being. Marius himself slipped out of the city and escaped to Africa,

intending to regroup and return. Sulla meanwhile lost no time in reforming the Roman constitution in his favor, which included installing several hundred new senators and diminishing the power of the tribunes, who since the days of the Gracchi, Rome's first full-blown demagogues, had been exercising unconstitutional, demagogic power.

His reforms, though long overdue, had been instituted by force of arms, setting Rome on a path toward despotism from

which recovery was increasingly unlikely. "This was," noted Appian gloomily, "the first army composed of Roman citizens to attack their own country as though it were a hostile power. From this point onwards their conflicts continued to be settled by military means and there were frequent attacks on Rome, and sieges, and every sort of incident of war, because nothing remained, neither law, nor political institutions, nor patriotism, that could induce any sense of shame in the men of violence."

After having a number of prominent Marians killed, Sulla, anxious to leave the seething capital, took his army and departed for Asia Minor. There, in what became known as the First Mithridatic War, he eventually forced Mithridates to capitulate. In less than three years, Sulla's forces killed more than 160,000 of the enemy and recovered Greek and Asian territories annexed by Mithridates. The monarch of Pontus himself, however, was allowed to live on and to rule over his original domains because Sulla had run



Sulla's fateful march: Decades before Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, General Sulla invaded Rome. "This was the first army composed of Roman citizens to attack their own country as though it were a hostile power," recorded the historian Appian. Sulla's march inaugurated a tragic era of civil war and despotism.

out of time. During his absence, Marius had returned to Rome and had instigated a reign of terror.

Proscriptions and Pogroms

Sulla had left as his consular successor in Rome a man named Cinna, who soon allied himself with the Marians and with the voting bloc of new Italian citizens. In a showdown with the other consul, Octavius, who represented the Senate and the interests of the old citizenry, Cinna was defeated, divested of his consular office, and chased from the capital city, whereupon he began inciting neighboring cities to rebellion. He soon raised an army and returned to encamp outside of Rome. The Roman consuls summoned an army of their own and encamped nearby, while the city waited fearfully for what was sure to be a dreadful outcome. The fugitive Marius seized this opportunity to return from Africa, and using his past military exploits as a sales pitch, quickly raised yet another army and marched to Rome to join forces with Cinna.

The Marian forces cut off Rome's food supplies. The Senate, seeing that conditions were hopeless, negotiated the surrender of Rome on condition that Marius would not perpetrate a massacre. As the terms of surrender were accepted, records a somber Appian, "Marius, standing beside the consular stool, said not a word but made it plain by the savagery of his expression what murder he would unleash."

No sooner were Cinna and Marius ushered into Rome by the cowed citizens than an orgy of bloodletting was unleashed the likes of which Rome had never witnessed nor could have imagined. All political enemies of Marius were cruelly put to the sword, and the heads of slain senators, consuls, and praetors were put on public exhibit in the forum. "No one," says Appian, "was permitted to give any of the dead burial, and birds and dogs tore apart the bodies of such distinguished men. There were many further unauthorized and uninvestigated murders carried out by the rival parties.... All [Sulla's] friends were put to death, his house was razed to the ground, his property was declared forfeit, and he was proclaimed an enemy of the state."

Marius died before he could be re-elected consul, but Cinna remained in power

with another longtime confederate, Carbo. Cinna was then assassinated by a mob of unruly soldiers, leaving Carbo in sole command of Rome.

In the midst of this bloody tumult, Sulla returned from the East, bent on retaliation for the Marian outrages. He quickly attracted many allies, including the able general Metellus, who had been busy stamping out the last remnants of the Social War, and a young general named Gnaeus Pompeius, or Pompey, who raised three legions in support of Sulla. With these forces, Sulla for the second time marched toward Rome.

This time, the consular forces, led by Carbo and Marius, the son of the late despot, engaged Sulla's forces in a num-

ber of battles across Italy and overseas. The conflict escalated into an epic civil war that claimed many tens of thousands of Roman lives in Italy, Africa, and even Spain. Sulla's generals won a string of victories against the Marians and committed widescale atrocities in many conquered cities. When Praeneste fell, thousands of her citizens were put to the sword. When Narbo was overwhelmed, her city, along with most of its inhabitants, was burned to the ground.

Sulla finally entered Rome and launched a fearful bloodbath there as well, massacring dozens of senators and thousands of noblemen. "He was so terrible and quick to anger in everything," wrote Appian, "that he killed Quintus

For the Serious Student

Our sources for the late Roman Republic are fairly detailed. Most of the best Roman historians lived in the early Empire, and for them, the age of the Gracchi and the civil wars was fairly recent history. It was also the time of Rome's greatest pathos, of heroes and villains, of epic battles and world-convulsing political turmoil.

The best comprehensive source for the period extending from the Gracchi to the death of Sulla is undoubtedly Appian. For the events between 133 and 70 B.C., his is the only surviving continuous source. Like many of Rome's best historians, Appian was Greek. He was a native of Alexandria, born in the late 1st century A.D., and probably composed his history between 145 and 165 A.D., at the zenith of the Roman Empire under the Antonines. Living during a comparatively peaceful interlude, Appian, more than any other Roman historian, wrote with passion and dismay of the horrors of civil war and despotism. He deplored the destruction of the republic and traced many significant details — the conspiracies, the political rivalries, the assassinations, and the brutal personages — with unforgiving attention to detail that make his history the best all-around work for those wishing to understand the fall of the republic from an original source. Besides chronicling Rome's civil wars, Appian also wrote volumes on Rome's many wars of conquest. His accounts of the Iberian, African, and Mithridatic wars are noteworthy for the author's sympathy with subjugated peoples and his unstinting criticism of Roman brutality. Appian's history of the civil wars is available in a fine Penguin paperback translation. The balance of his Roman history is available only in Loeb Classic hardcover editions, unlikely to be on the shelf at most local bookstores, but well worth the time and expense to order from the publisher.

Plutarch has given us fine biographies of several of the personalities that figure in this article, including Sulla, Marius, and the Gracchi. Plutarch's character portraits, as always, seek to give balanced accounts, highlighting wherever possible the heroism as well as the villainy of his subjects.

A very readable source on the Jugurthine War is Sallust, a Roman politician who was a contemporary and friend of Julius Caesar. Many of Sallust's writings have been lost, but his two surviving complete works — a description of the Jugurthine War and an account of the Catilinarian conspiracy — are gems of conciseness, if not altogether historically accurate and sometimes encumbered by the author's undisguised biases. Both of Sallust's works are available in a single Penguin paperback translation. ■

— STEVE BONTA

In the space of a few decades, the Roman Republic had descended into despotism and civil war. The decades that lay ahead were to be a season of tragic heroism, as the final defenders of the old republic made a magnificent last stand on behalf of Roman civilization and liberty.

Lucretius Ofella [a former friend] in the open forum.... After this, Sulla called the people to an assembly and said: ‘Understand this, my friends, and hear it from my own lips: I killed Lucretius because he would not obey me.’ And he told them a story: ‘A farmer who was plowing was being bitten by lice. Twice,’ he said, ‘he let go of the plough and shook out his tunic; but when he was bitten again, he burnt the tunic so as not to keep wasting time. So I advise people who have been defeated twice not to ask for incineration the third time.’ With these words, then, Sulla reinforced their terror, and ruled them as he pleased.” Even Plutarch, so often the eulogist, had little good to say about Sulla’s character:

In general he would seem to have been of a very irregular character, full of inconsistencies with himself; much given to rapine, to prodigality yet more; in promoting or disgracing whom he pleased, alike unaccountable; cringing to those he stood in need of, and domineering over others who stood in need of him, so that it was hard to tell whether his own nature had more in it of pride or of servility.

He was also, Plutarch tells us, shamelessly immoral, consorting with dissolute entertainers night and day. His riotous lifestyle brought about physical as well as moral deterioration. He was afflicted by a “creeping sickness” that saw his flesh corrupted by an unknown cause and his entire body literally eaten alive by lice.

Before meeting such a horrible end, Sulla had abdicated his dictatorial power — the only Roman despot ever to do so. A deceptive calm settled over Italy, although the civil war persisted for several more years in distant Spain before the last remnants of the Marian forces were finally

annihilated. In the year of Sulla’s death, 78 B.C., the purges had subsided, Mithridates had been placated, tenuous threads of legality still held the Roman Republic together, and the Spartacan revolt still lay ahead.

But forces were already in motion that could not be stopped. Mithridates would soon rise again, providing political opportunity for the ambitious young general, Pompey. The Spartacan revolt would do the same for Crassus. Yet another military prodigy, Julius Caesar, who had already distinguished himself in various Asian campaigns, was in Rhodes studying the art of rhetoric and persuasion, preparing for a political career.

In the space of only a few decades, the Roman Republic had descended swiftly from irresponsible demagoguery to full-blown despotism, and from militarism overseas to civil war at home. The decades and wars that yet lay ahead were to produce horrors beside which even the atrocities of Marius and Sulla would pale. But they were also to be a season of tragic heroism, as the final defenders of the old republic — Cato, Cicero, and Brutus — made a magnificent last stand on behalf of Roman civilization and liberty. ■

