

The Inevitability of the Civil War: The Popularis and the Optimates

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ABSTRACT

The Civil War in 49 BCE was the most direct catalyst to Rome's transformation from republic to empire because it perpetually ended the struggle between the popularis and the optimates and established a dictatorship. Through assaying two major precedents in Roman history: the reforms of the Gracchi brothers and Sulla's march on Rome, then examining the political and military relationships between Pompey, Caesar, and the Senate in the 50s and 60s, this paper details the reasons that made Pompey and Caesar's Civil War inevitable. I argue the direct cause of this Civil War was long years of build up between the popularis and optimates political factions and the Senate's unwillingness to compromise. The tragic trajectory of Rome explicates for the modern world how extreme wealth gaps, a divided constitution, and seditious reform leaders can be catastrophic for even the greatest empires.

Keywords: *Civil War, popularis, optimates, Caesar, Pompey.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the destruction of Carthage, the Senate ran Rome and managed its affairs with moderation and forbearance [1]. The people elected and entrusted power into the hands of this exclusive class for protection while the Senate kept Rome in order. However, Rome's rapid expansion presented lucrative opportunities of land, slaves, and spoils for the senatorial elites, whereas the Roman middle-class farmers returned from their military service to barren lands, destroyed from inactivity [2]. This created an inequality of wealth that disrupted the reciprocity; and the Senate's diminished focus on the needs of the people led to divisions in Rome's political system. The popularis faction had the support of the multitude with representative leaders like Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, and later, Caesar. Conversely, the optimates faction consisted of long lineages of noble families who held most of the power in the Senate. Tensions between the two political factions degenerated as huge influxes of wealth, slaves, land, and citizens entered Rome. Rome embarked into a period of political and military reforms which equipped Caesar and Pompey with the strengths and ambition to enter a civil war. This paper focuses on the events leading up to the war and how this civil war became inevitable. There are various research works on the topic of events leading up to the Civil War, yet there has not been one that focuses

specifically on the Senate's role in the civil war. I believe that the direct confrontation of power between Pompey and Caesar and the Senate's radical desire to remove the popularis movement pushed the two most powerful men in Rome into a Civil War.

2. PRECEDENTS IN ROMAN HISTORY

The optimates used violence to suppress radical reforms made by the popularis, exacerbating the political divisions within Rome. As Rome expanded, years of war and the continuous demand for soldiers strained the once affluent middle class, reducing the abundant majority into an ever-growing poor proletarian class. From 133 to 123 BCE, the Gracchi brothers, Tiberius and Gaius, advocated for a land allotment law that redistributed lands seized by the wealthy to the proletarians. Their reform signified the rise of a flourishing political movement and triggered more ruthless politicians to challenge the Senate. However, both reforms failed as the goal of the popularis inherently encroached upon the optimates' interests. The Gracchi brothers and their followers were brutally massacred by opposing leaders under *Senatus Consultum Ultimum*, an emergency decree passed by the Senate that gave all powers to the consuls. From then on, "the city was divided between sorrow and joy" as it was evident to the popularis that these optimates were willing to supplant the commonwealth with force

on any threat that infringed on their political control of Rome [3]. Furthermore, the final decree institutionalized the use of violence in politics and became a martial law that would later be manipulated by the Senate to suppress all reforms. Gracchi brothers' tragedy is representative of the turmoil in Rome's political landscape, to which Cicero, a loyal conservative, commented: "this habit of disregarding legality begins to spread and transforms our empire from the rule of law to the rule of force" [4]. Cicero knew the usage of abominable violence aggravated the feud between the two factions and would ultimately transform Rome into a military autocracy.

After the land reforms, Rome entered long years of wars against two enemies, Jugurtha in the South and the Germanic tribes in the North, through which a warlord — Sulla— rose to power with the aid of a loyal army. In 82 BCE, Sulla set a precedent by marching on Rome and naming himself dictator. The soldiers shifted allegiance to Sulla because he was the one rewarding them the most benefits. The Senate could do little to curtail his power. Sulla prosecuted popularis leaders using proscriptions and demoted their descendants from the noble class. Despite this blatant politicide, Sulla ruled in peace as no populist had an army capable enough to overthrow him. His ruthless reign left the legacy of extreme political standpoints between the popularis and optimates. His unprecedented seizure became an example to many ambitious warlords who wished to impose his will on the Republic: Pompey, Caesar, or any general with a seasoned army.

2.1. POMPEY, CAESAR, AND THE SENATE

Pompey gained unrestricted military power of the entire Mediterranean through the pirate raids, slave rebellions, and the Mithridatic Wars in the 60s. As a young military genius, Pompey refused to give up the command of his inherited private army upon the request of the Senate. Not long after, the Senate pleaded for his army to suppress the war against Sertorius in Spain when all other generals sent by the Senate failed [5]. Pompey was then voted by the people to crush Spartacus' slave rebellion. Although two other Roman leaders, Crassus and Lucullus, had already brought the revolt under control, Pompey claimed the honor upon himself. Without a doubt, the people believed in him. "It was agreeable to the Romans to hear this said and to repeat it, so kindly did they feel towards him" [6]. Pompey's talent, prestige, and expertise in the military were unstoppable at this point in his career. In 67 BCE, tribune Gabinius proposed that Pompey should be given *imperium infinitum* by sea throughout the Mediterranean and settle the pirates whose raids had long been affecting the corn supply of Rome. This "out-and-out monarchy and irresponsible power over all men" was feared by the elites, whereas "the people received them with excessive pleasure" [7]. The optimates opposed *Lex Gabina*,

fearing Pompey's growing power, but the common people voted for him. In three months, Pompey brought the pirates under control, exposing the corruption and incapability of the Senate, who have neglected this matter for years. Additionally, another law named *Lex Manilia* was passed in 66 BCE, transferring the command over the Mithridatic War to Pompey. The *Lex Gabina* and *Lex Manilia* essentially gave Pompey open-ended power over all Rome. It is worthy to note that even Cicero, the renowned conservative, supported Manilius' resolution. He commented that the command was necessary in times of unusual circumstances [8]. However, Cicero also recognized that "all these instances, numerous, important and novel as they are, have all occurred in the case of the same man" [9]. Cicero cautioned the Senators against giving one single man supreme command, especially when they had no control over Pompey's military. However, it was all too late. With this unlimited power, Pompey continued to conquer Judea and ended the Seleucid empire in Greece: overseeing the provinces, client kingdoms, and appointing rulers for each, all without the Senate's consent.

The Senate's irresponsibility not only led to the Catilinarian Conspiracy but also increased the legitimacy and the need for populist politicians. The pirate raids, Spartacus' revolt, the lack of tax inflow, and the Senate's incapability or even unwillingness to solve these problems placed Rome in a severe economic crisis, out of which the Catilinarian Conspiracy emerged. This conspiracy was led by Catiline to overthrow the Senate and free the lower class from debt. The conspirators were mainly from two groups: the Italian rural farming class, most of which were Sulla's veterans who settled on land allotments, and the urban equestrians and nobles. The poor farmers were forced off their lands by their lenders when interest rates skyrocketed amidst the turmoil in the 60s. On the other hand, the urban nobles were enticed by the huge influx of material possessions from war that they began to borrow money imprudently, accumulating astronomical amounts of debt [10]. Catiline was one of those heavily indebted equestrians because of his extravagant lifestyle and unsuccessful political campaigns. Thus, when his creditors began to hound him for repayment, he conspired a march on Rome with C. Manlius, a veteran farmer suffering from chronic indebtedness [11]. The army was joined by other Roman farmers who were bitter towards the established system of taxes, credits, and the Senate's continuous negligence of the people. Although the conspiracy was a fiasco, it nonetheless revealed the heightened tensions in Rome and the discontent of the people. This atmosphere allowed popularis leaders like Caesar to gain massive followings through a unique political approach that appealed to the people's goodwill [12]. Caesar openly attached himself to the political and spiritual legacy of former popularis leaders, helped restore the right to hold office to the sons of those proscribed, and advocated the

right to citizenship for Italian allies [13]. “His support for measures to relieve debt, distribute land, limit the Senate’s more extreme powers, and increase honesty and efficiency in governance” made it clear to the Roman citizens and the Italian allies that he was on their side. Consequently, Caesar became the leader of the popularis movement: beloved by the people, hated by the optimates [14].

2.2. THE FIRST TRIUMVIRATE

Roman constitution’s numerous checks and balances enabled politicians to paralyze the government by vetoing any legislation that they disagreed with. These stalemates, which only a dictatorship or martial could break, led to the creation of the First Triumvirate. In 62 BCE, Pompey finished the reorganization of the empire in the east and returned to Rome with three demands: a ritual procession of highest honor, also called a triumph, for his victories over the pirates and Mithridates, land allotments for his veterans, and the Senate to officially ratify his reorganization of the east [15]. Cato, the leader of the conservatives, vetoed Pompey’s proposals to restrict his growing powers. Pompey, unfamiliar with the political manipulations in Rome, struggled to fulfill his promises to his veterans. Similarly, Caesar was rejected by the Senate when he tried to run for the consulship *in absentia*, a common privilege to run for office without being in Rome. The aristocratic Senate saw him as a great threat to the oligarchical government. Unsurprisingly, their attempts to restrict Caesar were futile since his great popularity overrode the Senate’s decision. By gaining each title, Caesar’s relationship with the Senate grew worse. Urgently, these elites passed a law assigning the most trivial governance to the upcoming consuls of 59 BCE in hopes of preventing Caesar from making further military advancements [16]. Frustrated, Caesar appealed to Crassus and Pompey with his clout, his position as *Pontifex Maximus*, and his promise to override the political difficulties that Pompey encountered, in exchange for Pompey’s army and Crassus’ money and relationships. Both Pompey and Crassus were persuaded by Caesar. By 60 BCE, the First Triumvirate had complete control over the Republic and its legislative processes [17]. The intransigence of the optimates united the three most powerful men in Rome together. However, Caesar soon recognized that he, having neither military nor money, was the weakest of the three. To secure his position, Caesar overturned his original assignment of woods and pastures into a governorship of Cisalpine Gaul, Transalpine Gaul, Illyria, along with four legions for the extent of five years. Through his blatant disrespect of the law, Cicero felt that he had lost his freedom of speech, *auctoritas*, and *dignitas*; “We are bound hard and fast on every side, and are no longer making any difficulty as to being slaves” [18]. Cicero portrayed the larger sentiments of the optimates party, who claimed that they had lost their voice due to The First Triumvirate freely imposing

their will on every facet of politics. No one had the power to stop them.

2.3. THE FINAL BREAKDOWN

The Triumvirate broke down when Pompey and Caesar supported opposite political parties; however, they sought conciliations because neither was ready nor willing to commit to war. While Caesar was still fighting in Gaul, Julia, the wife of Pompey and daughter of Caesar, died of childbirth in 54 BCE, severing the personal connection between the two triumvirs. Pompey declined another marriage bond proposed by Caesar, showing the first signs of fracture between the First Triumvirate [19]. In 53 BCE, Crassus embarked on a disastrous Parthian campaign, subsequently dying at the Battle of Carrhae. A year later, Clodius, a consul who used gang violence on the streets to control Rome, was killed by his political rival, Milo, who was supported by Pompey and the Senate. The death of these three, especially Crassus, led to the dissolution of the Triumvirate and a direct confrontation of power between Pompey and Caesar. Furthermore, Clodius’ gangs rioted and burned down the Senate house, throwing Rome into a state of chaos. In despair, the Senate sought an alliance with Pompey, who refused to intervene until he was named sole consul and given extraordinary powers to suppress the riots [20]. When Pompey accepted this position, the Triumvirate officially ended. Pompey had always been “a political maverick rather than Sullan or optimate, pursuing his interests rather than any ‘party line’” [21]. His alliance with the Senate is simply to make himself more appealing to the best people in Rome so that he can gain popularity among the nobility as well as the supporters of the Triumvirate [22]. Cassius Dio argued that: “as they considered the greatness of the danger and foresaw the obscurity and uncertainty of the issue... they exchanged propositions looking toward friendship” [23]. Although Pompey sided with the Senate, it was clear through his actions in the 50s that he did not intend to engage in a civil war with Caesar. Pompey displayed these acts of friendship when he agreed to supply Caesar with troops when the latter was in desperate need of reinforcements [24]. Pompey also strove to help Caesar secure the privilege to run for consul *in absentia*, and he suppressed consul Marcellus’ plan to limit Caesar’s tenure [25]. Both Pompey and Caesar foresaw the potential conflicts in the future as their powers grew stronger and stronger, but up until 51 BCE, they were still helping each other on both political and military aspects to avoid a war.

The threat of each other’s armies and the Senate’s infringement upon Caesar’s *dignitas* eliminated the possibility of a compromise between Pompey and Caesar. After his legendary victories in Gaul, Caesar not only gained great popularity but also military power to contend with Pompey’s. The Senate feared that Caesar would follow Sulla’s example and march on Rome with

his army [26]. In response, Cato allied with Pompey and employed his military as an instrument to check Caesar's power. To the Senate, Caesar represented a movement that aimed to change the traditional Roman government, threatening their authority and power; therefore, they ordered Caesar to step down immediately and authorized Pompey to start amassing legions to defend Rome [27]. Because of Pompey's alliance with the Senate, the competition between him and Caesar escalated. It was perhaps at this point that Pompey saw more advantages in supporting the Senate than Caesar because his legitimate power resided within the Roman Republic. The Republican system and the Senate validated his title as sole consul, not Caesar nor the people of Rome. However, the problem Pompey and the Senate faced was that Caesar was simply too powerful; his army was too large to be confronted head-on, and his popularity guaranteed him victory in any election. Therefore, the Senate insisted that the only way they would accept Caesar's return was for him to resign the command of his army and come back to Rome as a private citizen. Caesar refused because he knew that as soon as he lost the legal immunity provided by his governorship, he would be put on trial by Cato for instigating wars in Gaul and Britain not authorized by the Senate. Moreover, he was indignant that the Senate sought to deny the advantages promised to him through the *ratio absentia*. He also did not want to lose the *dignitas* he earned through the years of conquest in Gaul. The idea of dignity was of the utmost importance in Roman politics; it derived from the nobility of one's birth, the glory of one's deeds, and political influence. It was this sense of status, honor, and respect that was manifested to an individual through his peer's recognition of their distinction and eminence [28]. Caesar commented in his own written account of the Civil Wars regarding *dignitas*. "'As for myself,' he said, 'I have always reckoned the dignity of the republic of first importance and preferable to life'" [29]. This idea was crucial to understanding Caesar's motives behind the Civil War; he made it clear that his *dignitas* was something he would fight for even if he had to stake his own life [30]. In December of 50 BCE, Caesar marched his army down to Ravenna, close to the border of Rome, insisting that if Pompey put down his command first, then so would he. Both Caesar and Pompey were afraid of each other's military powers, and the negotiations fell into an impasse when neither was willing to resign and be left undefended first.

The Senate's desire for the destruction of the popularis and their intransigence left Caesar no other choice but to cross the Rubicon River. Approaching 49 BCE, Caesar compromised again and offered to resign his governorship of Cisalpine Gaul, Transalpine Gaul, and the majority of his legions, requesting to keep the governorship of Illyria and two legions until 49 BCE and that he would be allowed to run for Consul for 48 BCE. This would extend his legal immunity so that he would

not have to fear prosecution. Cicero acted as a mediator for this deal and negotiated Caesar down to just one legion and two provinces. This would achieve the Senate's goal of severely limiting Caesar's power and influence. Pompey was, in fact, willing to accept. However, the stern old-fashioned senators, particularly Cato, refused the deal and persuaded Pompey to "fight to death rather than allow the Republic to accept a single dictate from a mere citizen" [31]. The Senate hated the notion that they had to yield to Caesar [32]. However, in a collective collaborative system like the Republic of Rome, compromises and toleration are key to stable politics. And from the Gracchi brothers, the optimates had shown that they refused the existence of another faction [33]. Hence on the 7th of January, the Senate voted again to immediately strip Caesar of all his power. Once again, the law was vetoed by Caesar's tribunes in the Senate. Nevertheless, the Senate had prepared for this and instead passed the *Senatus Consultum Ultimum*, declaring Caesar the enemy of Rome and handing all powers to Pompey. A week later, Caesar gathered his troops and crossed the Rubicon River, the Civil War had begun.

3. CONCLUSION

The Senate feared that the legacies of Sulla and the vehement political tension between the popularis and optimates started by the Gracchi brothers would motivate Caesar to march on Rome. Although Pompey and Caesar were initially aligned together, their divergent ambitions separated them. Pompey sought to protect the system on which his power was based, and Caesar sought to protect his life, *dignitas*, and the popularis movement. In pursuit of their authority and interests, the optimates wished for the death of Caesar and the destruction of the popularis faction. This political divide penetrated Roman ideologies and it continues to influence historians today: prejudices and biases were ubiquitous in all sources, especially when it came down to Caesar, Pompey, and the Senate's motives in the Civil War. In the end, Caesar won the war and established himself as dictator for life because the Senate rejected every offer of compromise made by Caesar. The defeat of Pompey signified the demise of the optimates and the downfall of the Republic. The Civil War between Pompey and Caesar marked the transformation of the Roman Republic into an empire, which completely changed the trajectory of the Roman Empire until its collapse. Ancient Rome's pitfalls and tragedies, namely the imbalance of power and an adamant Senate, is a piece of history that modern day republics can all learn from.

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