

Why did Sulla Decide to Fight a Civil War?

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ABSTRACT

Lucius Cornelius Sulla's decision for civil war contributed to the destruction of the Roman Republic. This paper illustrates that Sulla's coup involves subjective factors, including Sulla's character and increasingly intensified contradictions with Gaius Marius. Besides, the corruption of Rome, the disloyalty of the Roman army, the dilemma of citizenship and the conflict between plebs and nobles led to the civil war as objective factors. This work also briefly discusses the end of the Civil War and the Sullan reformation. By revealing Sulla's military coup, readers can better understand how the decline of the Roman Republic embeds in partisan conflicts and deteriorated social environment.

Keywords: *Sullan Civil War, Subjective Factors, Objective Factors, Sullan reformation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 88 BC, Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix was the first Roman general who led his army against Rome and declared Sullan Civil War [1]. By marching his army to Rome, Sulla eliminated his enemies by violence, obtained supreme power and controlled Roman politics. [2] Besides, his unprecedented military operation profoundly influenced Roman politics because his coup was imitated by many descendants such as Lucius Sergius Catilina and Gaius Julius Caesar. [3]

Sulla's military coup provided the impetus for the destruction of the Roman Republic. [4] Therefore, it is necessary to understand why he unprecedentedly chose civil war. This essay argues that certain subjective factors and objective surroundings urged Sulla to march the army against Rome. Precisely, after introducing modern scholars' ideas about Sulla, the following section would enquire about Sulla's character and his conflict with Gaius Marius that drove him to seize Rome. As for the objective factors, we can see that the corruption of Roman politics became an excuse for Sulla marching to Rome; the corruption of the Roman army made Sulla capable of his coup; the conflict between old and new Roman citizens lay behind the civil war; the conflict between plebs and optimates also existed in Sulla's military operation. After that, the essay will demonstrate the consequence of civil war and conclude.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many modern scholarships demonstrate the situation of the Roman army in the late Republic. Specifically, Andrew White finds that the military reformation by Marius contributed to the dictatorship of Sulla and Caesar, as well as the Catiline conspiracy. Before Marius, the Roman soldiers always fought for a few months before finishing the harvest. As the Roman expanded their territory, the soldiers had to garrison for a long time, leaving their farms ruined. As a result, some poor soldiers sold their land and became *poletarii*. During the Jugurthine War and the battle against Germanic and Celtic tribes, Marius formed a professional army by recruiting them, which weakened the authority and influence of the Senate on the Roman army. Meanwhile, Marius created the relationship of dependence between generals and soldiers. Because soldiers could not maintain their lives from the profits of their farm, they expected the general to win the wars and capture booty for them. In return, the general relied on their soldiers' loyalty. [3]

Michael C. Gambino and Michael M. Sage reveal more details about the economic connection between Marius and his army, and they also find that such a situation had lasted to Sulla. Marius won their soldier's loyalty because he could fulfil their demand for land and wealth. [5] By distributing booty as well as land in North Africa and Italy, he enabled the poor soldiers to become middle class. High unemployment and economic inequality paved the way to the prolonged influence of his military reform. Following Marius,

Sulla also raised his legions from the *proletarii*, and he distributed the confiscated property to his soldiers when the civil war was over. [6] Therefore, the economic connection between Sulla and his soldiers was significant. By comparison, Richard Edwin Smith found that Senate could only use the promise of a pension to attract soldiers. Such a weak connection could not stop the soldiers from turning to side with the general. Smith also criticises the collapse of aspiration in the late Roman Republic. [7]

Hannah Szapary illustrates three factors causing Sulla to march to Rome. She shares a similar idea with White, believing that Sulla benefited from Marius' military reform. Then she points out that Sulla's rivalry with Marius for power struggling also played a significant role in the civil war. Further, the revolt of Italian communities was also an essential issue during the civil war. [8] As Szapary draws a basic framework analysing Sulla's coup, the essay will adopt her ideas and reveal more reasons.

Roman citizenship is another aspect needed to be explored. Ronald Syme believes that Samnium and Lucania rebelled against Rome in 91 BC was for justice and freedom instead of the Roman franchise. [9] However, Seth Kendall affirms that Syme does not show enough evidence to prove his argument. Compared with Szapary, Kendall shows more evidence about how the conflict of Roman citizenship intensified and how the Sullan Civil War reflected such strife. [4] Gareth C Sampson also reveals the clash of citizenship, and he provides details to illustrate Sulpicius Rufus' unusual policy. [10]

As for historiography, there are three scholars whose chronicle books are helpful for readers. Howard Hayes Scullard's *From the Gracchi to Nero* reveals some motivations for Sulla to conduct the civil war. [11] Richard Billows describes the history of the Sullan Civil War in part of his *Julius Caesar The Colossus of Rome*, and this essay will adopt his historiography to illustrate what happened from Sulla's first control of Rome to his reformation at the end of the civil war. [12] Besides, A.H. Beesley provides comprehensive analysis about the actions of Sulpicius and Sulla in *The Gracchi Marius and Sulla*, providing readers with a new angle to approach ancient sources. [2] His exploration of the relationship between Sulla and his soldiers makes a nonnegligible contribution to the essay.

As for the ancient sources, *The Civil Wars* by Appian and Plutarch's 'The Life of Sulla' displays extensive details about the progress of the civil war, and their historiography has become a vital source for modern scholars' research. Therefore, this essay will mainly adopt their narrative to demonstrate the background and the consequence of the civil war.

3. FINDING

3.1 Subjective Factors

Considering subjective factors when Sulla decided to conduct a civil war is important; specifically, showing Sulla's character and his conflict with Marius before the civil war will help readers understand that conducting the civil war was necessary for Sulla.

Sulla was the one who always thirsted for power. He was born in the Cornelia, a Rome's noble patrician gentes that used to be great but had fallen into poverty in the late third and second centuries. Combining patrician pride and obscure status as a political new man perhaps stimulated his eagerness for power and fame. Sulla was supremely energetic, active and efficient once he put his mind to business, who could not allow anyone or anything blocking his way to the top in Roman politics. [12] Once he expelled Marius from Rome, he made as many efforts as possible to consolidate his rule. Precisely, he attempted to erect consuls who would not go against his will, so the optimates, Cnaeus Octavius, was elected. He also wanted his partisans to elect consuls for the year 87, but people thwarted his plan by electing Lucius Cornelius Cinna, the leader of the *Populares*. Therefore, Sulla remedied such a situation by letting Cinna swear not to go against his will. [2,11] Sulla desired power, so he would take over Rome with his army. Besides, Sulla was selfish and would not sacrifice his interest. People can see his character when he marched his army to Rome with the name of patriotism. [1,2]

The conflict between Sulla and Marius was also essential for Sulla's coup. They had been opposite for a long time before the civil war. The first conflict originated from Jugurthine War when Masius sent Sulla to negotiate with Jugurtha's father-in-law - King Bocchus I. Sulla successfully finished the negotiations and persuaded Bocchus I to hand over Jugurtha to Rome. Therefore, Sulla declared that he had ended the war, which aroused Marius enmity. But Marius still used him for campaigns against barbarians, during which Sulla performed many successful services and evoked Marius' enmity again. Marcus opposed Sulla's advancement; therefore, 'Sulla attached himself to Catulus, a colleague of Marius in the consulship.' [13]

Even without Marius, Sulla still contributed to Catulus's military success and rose to power and fame. As Sulla said, 'Marius was greatly distressed.' [13] Before long, the third conflict was more severe. To gratify Sulla and please the Roman people, Bocchus presented some images with trophies and gilded figures representing Jugurtha being surrendered by Bocchus to Sulla. 'Thereupon, Marius was very angry and tried to have the figures taken down, but others were minded

aiding Sulla...and the city was all but in flames with their dispute.’ [13]

During the Social War, Sulla probably might have determined to seize the power of Marius, as he shielded some brave and loyal subordinates transgressed some rules. [13] However, such previous conflicts were not as significant as the conflict of military command. In 88 BC, Sulla was elected as consul for his great contribution during the Social War and granted the province of Asia. However, Marius also hankered for such command for a long time. He even investigated the situation in Asian Minor after his sixth consulship. [11] Therefore, Marius allied with a tribune Sulpicius for the command in the Mithridatic War. To control the situation, they prevented voting by suspending an assembly near the temple of Castor and Pollux and sent military tribunes to Nola to take over Sulla’s military command. [13] Sulla wanted to gain political fame and a lot of booty if he defeated Mithridates, so he could not accept such humiliation for stripping out his military command. [3,12] He naturally had reason to fight with Marius and Sulpicius.

Sulla also suffered further hurt and humiliation when Marius took control of Rome. During the Marian tumult, ‘Marius and his partisans in the city went to slaying the friends of Sulla and plundering their property...The son of Pompeius, who was the son-in-law of Sulla...was killed by the Sulpicians.’ [13] For Sulla, he might suffer an insult from Marius. ‘[Sulla] after having been pursued into the house of Marius, was forced to come forth and rescind the decree for suspension of public business.’ [13] We can imagine how Sulla felt disgrace when he succumbed to Marius in his headquarter. However, Plutarch’s narrative was suspicious. If Sulla resented Marius, he had no reason to escape to his enemy’s house for shelter. Marian tumult must be a bitter experience for Sulla. When he decided to start the civil war, Sulla determined to kill Marius. After capturing Rome, Sulla outlawed and hunted down Marius and Sulpicius. Sulpicius was killed sooner, but Marius fled to Africa. [12]

3.2 Objective Factors

Apart from subjective factors, objective factors were also essential for Sulla’s operation against Rome. Objective factors could influence people’s opinion, and they are the preliminary foundation for a person to put the plan into practice. There were Four factors underlying Sulla’s civil war. The corruption of Rome rendered justice suspicious and the emergence of charismatic leaders who could impose their will upon others via violence. More importantly, the changes of the Roman army made it a threat to the Republic, which was the sequela of Marius military reform. Besides, the problem of citizenship continued to the civil war.

Ultimately, the conflict between plebs and nobles was vital for Sulla marching his army against Rome.

The corruption of Roman aspiration reflected the decline of the Roman Republic. Men’s minds were filled with ideas for outwitting opponents rather than the consideration for Rome’s destiny and responsibility. [7] Such an environment enabled ambitious people to satisfy their desire in an unprecedented and injustice way.

According to Plutarch, Sulpicius, the man who launched the political reform to enfranchise new citizens, was a symbol of Roman corruption:

‘[Sulpicius was] a man second to none in prime villainies ... he sold the Roman citizenship to freedmen and aliens at public sale and counted out the price on a money-table which stood in the forum. Moreover, he maintained three thousand swordsmen who were ready for everything ... Further, though he got a law passed that no senator should incur a debt of more than two thousand drachmas, he himself left behind him after death a debt of three million.’ [13]

The reformation he carried out was probably out of his self-interest because he expected to employ new citizens as ‘loyal servants for all his ends.’ [1] Although the reformation could improve the condition of new citizens, his motivation for the reform was not in the interest of new citizens nor the Roman Republic. As mentioned above, he resorted to political violence to guarantee his plan, which violated the benign regulation of Roman politics. When Sulpicius controlled the Senate, he deposed Pompeius Rufus’ consulship, but such a case of a tribune deposing a consul never happened before. [10]

Sulpicius promised to transfer military command of the Mithridatic War from Sulla to Marius to win his support. This plan was inappropriate, for Marius was nearly 70, and Sulla was competent. Driven by a desire for power, Marius took part in the conspiracy. [11,12] Therefore, Marius also put his interests before the country, which became an excuse for Sulla declaring civil war.

The Senate heard that and sent convoys to enquire why Sulla’s army was marching to Rome. Sulla replied, ‘to deliver her from tyrants.’ [1] Sulla continued to justify his action after he took over Rome:

‘At daybreak they [Sulla and his adherents] summoned the people to an assembly and lamented the condition of the Republic ... and said that they had done what they had done as a matter of necessity.’ [1]

Although Marius and Sulpicius’ injustice could pave the way for Sulla to fight a civil war, Sulla’s claim could not whitewash his evil. The conflict between Sulla and Marius reflected the decline of the Roman political order. As Appian said, ‘now the first army of

her own citizens had invaded Rome as a hostile country.' [1] Perhaps for that reason, Sulla did not dare to tell the army that he wanted to start a civil war at first.

Sulla was a charismatic leader who used his rhetoric to realise his private interest with the disguise of patriotism. However, he could not start a civil war on his own. His soldiers were willing to see the civil war happen as they feared missing the campaign. 'They uttered boldly what Sulla had in mind, and told him to be of good courage, and to lead them to Rome.' [1]

Exploring the situation of the army is necessary, especially their loyalty. During the Jugurthine War, Marius recruited soldiers 'not according to the classes in the manner of our forefathers, but allowing anyone to volunteer, for the most part the proletariat.' [14] After Marian military reform, soldiers became loyal to a specific general rather than the Republic because they wanted money and land from him. Sulla's soldiers were keen on a war against Mithridates VI Eupator because they could win the spoils in Asia. Another possible reason was that his soldiers were willing to slaughter those citizens in Italy who seized their lands. These soldiers were afraid that another general would replace Sulla. [3,6] Besides, Sulla's soldiers had gone against the law during the Social War. 'The lieutenant of L. Sulla, Postumius Albinus...at that time so aroused the hatred of all the soldiers against him by his insufferable arrogance that they stoned him to death...' [15]

Sulla realised that the army was willing to fight for him, so he determined to achieve his political end. It was Sulla who made the Roman army a political weapon against his enemies. In this sense, Sulla and his soldiers were highly interdependent. Indeed, soldiers' benefits as plebs were not always aligned with Sulla's that closely linked to the nobility. There could be some soldiers reluctant to obey Sulla. However, they could not afford their patron broken if they refused Sulla. On the other hand, Sulla had to rely on his army for the sake of his success. He was a powerless man without soldiers. Therefore, he did not have enough time to win his friends and conciliate enemies when he captured Rome because he could not violate his soldiers' desire to fight the First Mithridatic War. [2,3]

Sulla led the army against the Senate and the state. His soldiers slew two tribunes who wanted to take military power away from Sulla and went forward to Rome. When the Senate knew Sulla was marching against the city with six legions, they sent two praetors to stop him. Sulla's soldiers insulted them in many ways and sent them back to the city. [2,13] The Senate was in despair and made a final attempt to send envoys forbidding Sulla to come within forty stades (five miles) of Rome. Sulla heard that the Senate had promised to secure his rights, but he knew it was a stalling tactic because Marius wanted time to organise his partisan.

Therefore, Sulla cheated the deputation, saying he agreed to encamp his army. But once the envoys withdrew, he followed them and captured the city gate and the walls. After a short skirmish, Sulla took over Rome. At that moment, violence became the order of Rome; the general became the master of Rome; the law subdued to force. Who acquired forces, who got power, who controlled Rome. [1,2]

The problem of citizenship lasted for a long time. Italians wanted to be Roman citizens, partly because they were in favour of Roman culture. Since the second century BC, Italians were more living as Romans because they received Roman military training, studied Latin, employed Roman weights and measures, and dressed like Romans. More importantly, they wanted profits and protection corresponding to Roman citizenship. In the military aspect, Italian Allies were only to be commanded by Roman generals, and they were always sent into the most perilous places. The Allies received heavier punishment compared with Roman soldiers and always got fewer booty. In the economic aspect, Italians could not compete for profitable occupations like contractors. Since the second century BC, they had faced more economic maltreatment from Roman magistrates. The unequal taxation after 167 BC also incurred resentment because of the Romans' tax exemption. [4]

Italians' economic profits were indirectly related to their political rights. Voting was important for Italians. Lower and middle classes could vote to forbid strenuous military service, secure distributed booty, and end trouble caused by Roman magistrates. Upper middle classes sought to compete for public contracts, to frame economic policy by voting. The upper class saw voting as a good chance for more political power, armies' leadership, and reputation. [4]

Since the second century BC, Italians have been more willing to obtain enfranchisement. However, the competition for office might cause the situation that Rome stopped granting citizenship in 188 BC. [4,12] Such policy influenced the situation in Italy for about 100 years. In 125 BC, a town named Fregellae fought against Roman for citizenship, and the Republic brutally destroyed the town. Later, Gaius Gracchus attempted to reform citizenship, but opponents killed him. Marius successfully granted citizenship to some of his Italian soldiers, which agitated their desire for enfranchisement. Unfortunately, their hopes were destroyed by Romans again when Marcus Livius Drusus was murdered. Italians were fed up with Roman oppression and started the Social War. [6,10]

During the Social War, Rome made some concessions to the Italians. According to Lex Plautia Papiria,

‘Anyone who belonged to an allied people could obtain Roman citizenship, if only he was living in Italy at the time that the law was passed, and if he made an application to the praetor within sixty days...’ [16]

Lex Julia also granted a passive form of citizenship to the Italians, which meant they could enjoy legal protections. However, how to distribute new citizens was still a question. [4] New citizens were willing to be enrolled in 35 tribes, but old citizens did not want to make a concession and put forward such arrangement: to create ten new tribes for new citizens or restrict them to eight of the existing 35 tribes. [12] Consequently, old citizens could outvote the newly enfranchised citizens because the Roman voting system was one vote per tribe. The distribution of political enfranchisement was a dilemma: either new or old citizens would be angry about the distribution because their interests are diametrically opposed. [10] The new citizens were dissatisfied with their valueless votes and protested vehemently to realise their political appeal. Indeed, they would not stop fighting for rights unless they were granted full rights or completely broken. [4,12]

Sulpicius proposed to secure a fair play for the newly enfranchised Italians, distributing them over 35 tribes. [11] The new citizens welcomed his plan. However,

‘The old citizens saw this and opposed the new ones with all their might. They fought each other with sticks and stones ... The consuls postponed the voting to control the situation. Sulpicius rioted against the Senate ... [He] ordered his faction to come to the forum with concealed daggers and to do whatever the exigency might require, sparing not even the consuls if need be ... A tumult arose, and those who had been armed drew their daggers and threatened to kill the consuls, who refused to obey.’ [1]

Sulpicius offended the old citizens, so they would support Sulla in restoring their privilege. For Sulla, his dissatisfaction with Sulpicius’ plan became the reason for civil war, and he could utilise old citizens’ resentment to fight against Sulpicius. After capturing Rome for the first time, Sulla abolished Sulpicius’ reformation to meet old citizens’ interests. [11]

Finally, the conflict between plebs and noble could also become the reason for Sulla’s coup. As mentioned above, Sulla came from a noble family, which meant he had a natural inclination to put himself in the aristocrat’s shoes. Conversely, Marius had a close link to *populares*. [6] After breaking with Marius, Sulla naturally cooperated with the optimates and became a member of them via marriage to the Metellus clan. Therefore, Sulla would fight a civil war to defend the interest of the noble. When Sulpicius dominated Rome and pushed *populares*’ policy to an extreme, Sulla had plenty of motives to establish nobles’ domination.

[7,12] After capturing Rome, Sulla rearranged the citizenship and consolidated the rule of aristocracy:

‘They proposed that no question should ever again be brought before the people which had not been previously considered by the Senate ... also that the voting should not be by tribes, but by centuries ... They proposed many other measures for curtailing the power of the tribunes...and enrolled 300 of the best citizens at once in the list of the senators.’ [1]

3.3 Epilogue

Before long, Sulla confronted Mithridates, leaving Italy an unstable political situation, which caused the second civil war.

Cinna wanted to restore Sulpicius’ reform and enrol the new citizens into 35 tribes. Octavius opposed and sent Cinna into exile. Then Cinna called Marius back to Rome. Cinna successfully recruited an army and marched to Rome from the south, while Marius approached Rome from the north with his troops enrolled from veterans and slaves. The two armies only encountered small resistance before taking over Rome. The reign of terror happened; many Marian enemies were killed, including Marius’ formal allies, who took a neutral stance before. Later, Cinna successfully carried out the citizenship reformation. But Marius soon died in his seventh consulship. [12]

Sulla heard what happened in Rome and decided to take vengeance. He made a deal with Mithridates, defeated Cinna’s friendly forces and returned to Brundisium from Greece in 83 BC. Cinna wanted to negotiate with Sulla but failed, then the second civil war was inevitable. After Cinna was killed in a military riot, the son of Marius took charge of the remained army, but he was defeated by Sulla and died at Sacriportus after a lengthy siege. [12] Before long, another Marian commander, Gnaeus Papirius Carbo, was killed by Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, and only Quintus Sertorius was fighting against Sulla in Spain. [1] Sulla controlled Italy, and the civil war was almost over.

With the end of the civil war, Sulla ruthlessly eliminated the opposition to the optimates, confiscating opponents’ property and stripping their descendants’ most active rights of citizenship. To please his soldiers, Sulla distributed confiscated land to 80,000 of them. [5,12] Such action proved the relationship of mutual benefit between Sulla and his soldiers.

Then Sulla reformed to weaken *populares*. The Senate expanded from 300 to 600, many of whom were juries. Only senators were allowed to be members of permanent law courts. Seven law courts were established with specific roles. The number of annual quaestors was raised to 20, whose admission was held by the Senate, while the number of praetors was

increased to eight. The power of provincial governors was curtailed under a modified treason law. Besides, Sulla regulated *cursus honorum*, regulating age limits and the order of offices to prevent the repetition of office holding. He restricted the power of tribune, limiting its veto and banning its right to legislate. Sulla also took measures to stabilise the economic situation and reform priestly colleges. [12] By expanding the Senate, Sulla rewarded some of his loyal veterans. [6,7] As for citizenship, Sulla had to adopt Cinna and Sulpicius' plan to enrol Italian new citizens in 35 tribes. But in practice, no censors were elected in 81 BC and 80 BC to register the new citizens. Moreover, his efforts to weaken The Tribal Assembly also restricted new citizens' political participation. [4,12]

Sulla's conservative reformation aimed at avoiding the civil war, but his efforts were in vain. In 49 BC, Caesar fought a civil war with Pompeius. After that, another civil war between Gaius Octavius Thurinus and Mark Antony ended the Roman Republic. [12]

4. CONCLUSION

The Sullan Civil War was the first time that a Roman general fought against his motherland, indicating that the violence in the Republic reached a new extreme. It was also the first time that a power holder resorted to military means to solve political issues and personal enmity. Although Sulla was a victim of Sulpicius' and Marius' political intrigue, his selfish resolution brought the Republic into civil war and exceeded the decline of Roman politics. Once the Senate could not maintain the loyalty of the army and generals, it became defenceless to stop powerful men from controlling the government with his army. [3] After his death, Sullan reformation faded away, but his coup was imitated by other politicians, which led to the destruction of the Republic.

Overall, the essay constructs an analytical framework to understand Sulla's decision on civil war, affirming that Sulla started the civil war for subjective and objective factors. For subjective factors, Sulla's character and his conflict with Marius had driven him to fight with Marius. Meanwhile, Sulla's decision connected to four objective factors: the corruption of the Republic, the loyalty of his army, the issue of citizenship and the conflict between plebs and optimates.

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