

Three Great Reformers of the Roman Army

Zihao Zhang (John)

355 Duck Pond Road, Locust Valley, NY 11560

Abstract: Rome was famous because of its strong military force and it dominated the Mediterranean Sea. However, it was facing severe shortage of soldiers for a long time during 150 BCE. This problem had enormous effect on the Roman society and political life such as the appearance of slavery in Rome and the use of violence in Rome. The reasons why Rome had shortage of soldiers were related to its own military system and political system. The three great reformers, Tiberius Gracchus, Caius Gracchus and Caius Marius tried their best to solve the problem. Gracchus brothers failed but Marius succeeded. Experiences we can learn from these reforms will also be mentioned.

Keywords: Roman army, shortage of soldiers, reform and reformer, Senate, Gracchus brothers, Marius, experiences

Published Date: January 2018

Published Online: 31st January 2018

Introduction

When we talk about ancient world history, Rome is an unavoidable country which would be mentioned. On one hand, Rome's rise in Mediterranean area is so impressive; On the other hand, the fall of Rome especially the army provides significant historical experiences. Let's take a look at how Rome rose: before 350 BCE, Rome was just a small city-state but it gradually controlled Italy through wars (eventually controlled Italy in 270 BCE even though there were still wars in Northern Italy) and it finally turned into a republic which controlled the whole Mediterranean. "In the course of the preceding four hundred years Rome had developed from a small city-state on the banks of the Tiber into the dominant power throughout the Mediterranean" (H.H. Scullard, 1959 Page 2). In addition, Rome is the first empire which occupied both lands not only in Europe, but also in Asia and Africa. Therefore, here comes the question:

why Romans were able to dominate Italy in such a short period of time? This question can be explained by a couple of reasons, the first one is the way Romans treated their citizens. Romans would give citizenships to the enemies they had conquered; hence, their enemies became Romans. This policy had a great advantage for Rome because it offered stable man power for the country which means that Romans were extremely difficult to be defeated in wars by other countries. The best example is the Second Punic War, "the historian Polybius tells us that Rome possessed the largest and finest army of the Mediterranean. Six legions were made up of 32'000 men and 1600 cavalry, together with 30'000 allied infantry and 2'000 allied cavalry, which was merely the standing army. If Rome called on all its Italian allies it had a total number of 340'000 infantry and 37'000 cavalry potentially" (F. Cavazzi, 2012). The second reason why Roman armies could unify Italy so fast is the way they traditionally recruit their army. All Roman soldiers came from middle class and it was their duty and honor to fight for the country. The middle class had to equip themselves and leave their motherland to join the war. They could come back home every winter because the war would not happen during that time. In conclusion, the shrinking of middle class would not happen as long as the battlefields took place in Italy (including Sicily because it is still really close with Italy) because they were able to come back home taking care of their land. In addition to the way they treated the countries they had conquered and the way they recruited their army, their tactics for the war also helped them on occupying Italy. F. Cavazzi described that how Roman army was formed in his article *The Roman Army*: "There were now three lines of soldiers in a legion, the *hastati* in the front, the

principes forming the second row, and the *triarii*, *rorarii* and *accensi* in the rear." *Hastati* were young fighters and carried body armor attached with *leves* which were far more lightly armed, carrying a spear and several javelins. There were a total number of 900 for *hastati* and 300 for *leves*. *Principes* were the best equipped soldiers and they were experienced. The total number for *Principes* 900. *Triarii* were veteran soldiers, *rorarii* were unexperienced soldiers and *accensi* were the least defendable fighters. The total number for *triarii*, *rorarii* and *accensi* were 2700 men. Thus, one legion contained 4800(without horsemen).

1 The problem with the Roman army and the cause of the problem

However, strong armies with reasonable tactics like this were facing serious problems that Roman people could not find enough soldiers after 200 BCE and the whole system could not even work after 150 BCE. How could Rome which had plenty of man power develop a shortage of soldiers? Is the reason that too many Romans were sacrificed in war caused this problem? The answer is no because the Romans would give Roman citizenship to the city they had conquered. The real reason which led to the shortage of soldiers is the way they traditionally recruited their army and the slavery also played an important role. First, let me talk about what was wrong with the way Romans traditionally recruit soldiers. As I mentioned before, middle class equipped themselves and served in the army as soldiers which means that the population of soldiers fully depended on the size of the middle class. Roman soldiers were able to come back once a year during the winter because they were fighting in Italy. Nevertheless, when Roman Republic's territory expanded from Italy to North Africa and Spain, it is impractical that soldiers were able to go back to take care their land once a year since the transportation was so underdeveloped and they had to continuously stay in Spain for six years. Therefore, some soldiers abandoned their lands because there were no one else taking care the land for them and they became proletarians which means they did not

have the right to join the army even though they wanted to. Some soldiers would sell their land with very low price to upper class. This situation became even worse along with the time as there were more and more soldiers sell their land with low price and became proletarians which in another word, the size of middle class shrank rapidly. What is more, those proletarians did not have chance to become middle class again because of the slavery. The slaves were most likely prisoners of war from the countries conquered by Rome. Other sources for slavery included criminals, debtors, and those captured by pirates to be sold at the slave market. The upper class like nobles or equites only had to maintain the life of slaves so the slaves cost very little. Compared with upper class, the middle class depended everything on their own and sometimes they had to spend money to hire helpers in the land. Therefore, the middle class gradually lost the ability to compete with upper class such as nobles and equites because the price of product which produced by upper class would be always lower than the middle class. It is obvious that people would prefer cheaper products. In addition, the Senate and consuls in Rome refused to control the using of slavery because they could earn large amount of benefits from slavery. As a result, the upper class became richer and richer without Senate or consuls interference and the population of middle class declined with faster speed. Many middle class refused to fight for their country because they knew that they would become proletarians after they served in the army and this made the problem even worse. Therefore, the problem in Rome is that there were thousands and thousands of people who were able to fight for Rome but the system would not allow them to join the army rather than the shortage of man power. During 130 BCE, there were 300,000 adult men in Rome but most of them were proletarians which means they were not allowed to fight for their own country.

The shortage of soldiers became so obvious after 150 BCE that even Senate could not ignore it. However, the Senate was still very corrupt and refused to make any reform(as I mentioned before, many of the senators interfered in the land and no one wanted to

give up their property without getting anything). Therefore, Rome really needed capable reformers to solve the problem.

2 General comparison between three reformers

The three reformers are Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, Caius Sempronius Gracchus and Caius Marius. Among these three reformers, Gracchus brothers had same proposal for the army that the people who controlled more than 500 iugera(300 acres) of public land(H.H.Scullard, 1959) should submit the surplus to the government. The government would redistribute these lands to proletarians and help them recovering to middle class; therefore, it can enlarge the size of the middle class. Marius's reformation is totally different from Gracchus brothers, he suggested that every citizen in Rome was allowed to join the army and the government would pay them. These are two completely different proposals, one is that Gracchus brothers wanted the Senate to give the land to these proletarians first and they had the ability to prove themselves. Conversely, Marius preferred to give them a chance to fight for Rome first and they would get what they deserved.

In my opinion, I think both these two reforms have justice purpose which can solve the difficulty finding enough soldiers but Marius's reform is more thorough because he changed the traditional method to recruit soldiers. Although Gracchus brothers have reasonable purpose and clear goals for the reform, they still failed because their reformation was not thorough enough and they had difficulties when they were struggling with conservatives(the Senate). Therefore, in my mind, I think the only sense their reforms made was teaching Marius, Sulla, Pompeius and Caesar the importance of army in political struggle because the ends of Gracchus brothers are same: they were both massacred by the people with an army who authorized by the Senate without the ability to fight back even though they had numerous supporters.

3 Tiberius Gracchus

First, let me briefly summarize the failure of Tiberius

Gracchus. He came from one of the top family in Rome in which many of their ancestors were consuls, praetors or tribunes. Tiberius began his political career in 138 BCE as a quaestor and he was elected as a tribune of plebs in 133 BCE. He would want to make the reform because he had seen the problem in Roman army and a large population of slaves in the countryside of Rome. As a tribune of plebs, he had the right to propose legislation; therefore, he proposed his law of land to the Senate but rejected by the majority of the Senate. He chose to ignore the Senate and directly propose it to the assembly without any army. Although he earned many supporters, the Senate still tried to stop him from applying the law to Roman citizens by refusing to provide any finance. Tiberius also knew that his law would be abolished by the Senate after his tribunate ends. He decided to participate in the reelection but one senator armed his own clients and massacred Tiberius Gracchus and his 300 supporters. In Plutarch's *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* (Page 191), he described that Tiberius and his supporters were all massacred by a senator and his men and Tiberius did not have any force to fight back.

The reason that Tiberius failed is very simple that he did not have any army to defend himself and he truly needed army because the Senate were full of conservatives and corrupt senators and they would never allow this law to be applied. One senator could arm his clients and took him out because these senators were the people who really controlled the political life in Rome. His clients would always listen to their patronus rather than only a small tribune. He did not predict that one senator could use violence by arming his own clients to kill him and his supporters in front of the assembly. The importance to have an army was undervalued in his heart because he thought the supporters were enough to help him beat the Senate and he never thought that the Senate would use violence in order to kill innocent citizens because that never happened before. That he ignored the Senate is not a sensible idea because he was the first person who directly propose to the assembly and decided to reelect tribune for the second year. The Senate was afraid that he would break Roman political system because

the convention was that all these positions (consuls, praetors, tribunes and quaestors) were only allowed to elect for one time. If he broke this tradition, there would be another person who may break it again in the future. In addition, his proposal was not a long-term plan because after these soldiers became the middle class again, many of them would come back to the battlefield in Spain which cannot come back to Rome for another 6 years. When that happened again, what he could do is that expecting another person would repeat his proposal once again because he had to give up the position of tribune after one year. My conclusion for Tiberius Gracchus is: His basic plan is to recover the middle class in order to provide enough soldiers for Rome but this proposal has some lethal problems. The first one is that it is only a short-term solution for Roman army. The second problem is that Tiberius has no armed force to defend himself and that is why he was killed by a senator when he announced that he would take part in the election as tribune for 132 B.C.E. In general, his failure is unavoidable under the mature development of the slavery because upper class would never give up the land and slavery for the reason that giving up slavery and land would make them lose the advantage against the middle class.

4 Caius Gracchus

The next reformer is Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus's younger brother Caius Sempronius Gracchus. Caius was also elected tribune in 123 B.C.E which means that he was able to continue the reform which was not finished by his elder brother. Unfortunately, his failure is very similar to his brother except that he succeed to reelect tribunes for another year but failed to repeat it for the third time because the senate declared emergency and massacred him and his thousands of supporters just like they did to his elder brother 10 years ago. Caius proposed several important laws including the law of grain which lowered the price of food in order to provide enough food for people and the law of land continued from his elder brother. According to Plutarch (*Life of Caius Gracchus*, 1921 Page 209), he also advised that "clothing should be furnished to the soldiers at the

public cost" and "citizens under 17 would not be enrolled in the army". Last but not least, he wanted to render their Italian allies Roman citizenship in order to motivate them to fight for Rome because Rome stopped spreading Roman citizenship to Italy without any announcement and kept putting pressure on Italy in order to recruit soldiers (that made Italian allies extremely unwilling to fight for Romans). The proposal to spread Roman citizenship to Italian allies actually ruined Caius Gracchus. It made him lost the reelection for the tribune for the third time because many people in Rome preferred to maintain the privilege for themselves and they did not want to see that those Italian allies were equal with them.

My idea for Caius Gracchus is that although he improved the reform based on his elder brother and the improvement of the law of grain brought him more supporters than his elder brother, it is not enough to be applied because he still did not get the point that violence is the only way to beat violence in Rome. He believed that he was able to persuade the Senate but he did not know that the Senate was extremely conservative and refused to make any change. He never realized that the Senate was dare to murder him in public. Their failure also had some effects on Roman political life. First, when the Senate used violence to kill Tiberius and Caius, it became a convention that the Senate had the right to authorize one person to use violence when the emergency happened. It gave Marius an obvious hint that the Senate had the power to get rid of anyone they did not like through violence unless he also maintained violence. Gracchus brothers also told Marius that the method to make upper class give up their land and redistribute them to proletarians would not work. I think Marius must learn something from Gracchus brothers and decided to do the other way around.

5 Caius Marius

After Gracchus brothers' tragic failure in the reform against the Senate, there was another great reformer named Caius Marius which is one of the most famous people in Roman Republic's history. He

was impossible to be a consul theoretically because he came from a normal family. He became a tribune because of his braveness in Spain and his grand political career began from this tribune. In 107 BCE, he finally became a consul and he planned to conquer Jugurtha. In fact, the war against Jugurtha had started many years before Marius became the consul of Rome but Roman soldiers were beaten by Jugurthine soldiers over and over again because Roman army is an unqualified army and many soldiers did not want to fight for their country. "But, in the present state of manners, who is there, on the contrary, that does not rather emulate his forefathers in riches and extravagance, than in virtue and labor? Even men of humble birth, who formerly used to surpass the nobility in merit, pursue power and honor rather by intrigue and dishonesty, than by honorable qualifications; as if the praetorship, consulate, and all other offices of the kind, were noble and dignified in themselves, and not to be estimated according to the worth of those who fill them." This is what the famous Roman historian Gaius Sallustius Crispus (Sallust) described what had happened in Rome during that time in his book *The Jugurthine War* (Chapter 4) and it is very easy to explain why Rome could not beat Jugurtha. The traditional army system could not work anymore so Marius decided to overthrow the whole system in order to make the reform successfully. His proposal is totally different from the Gracchus brothers. He suggested that every Roman citizen should be able to join the army and the government would pay them with food and land. His plan was widely welcomed not only by the assembly but also by the army. Although the Senate hated him just like they hated Gracchus brothers but they could not do anything to Marius because Marius had an army to support him and no one could compete with him. In addition, Marius is also an excellent military commander. He began to train his army and planned the war against Jugurthine and eventually beat Jugurtha. He also saved Rome from the Germans because they started to attack Italy in 105 BCE and Marius once again beat them. Marius had 7 consulships in his life (he died in his seventh consulship) because he had the army's support.

Although Sulla controlled the politic in Rome as a dictator and turned all the system back, Marius's plan worked very well and saved Rome for several times.

6 The Experiences from Three Reformers

In my opinion, I think the most important reason why Marius can succeed is that he had an strong army with professional training because he promised to give them money from the treasury if they fought for Rome. Therefore, the problem with finding enough soldiers was solved and all soldiers liked Marius because Marius helped them to get away from the group of proletarians. Therefore, Marius maintained the strongest force in Rome and no one were able to use violence to solve the problem. As a result, Marius this time combined the support from assembly (nonviolent) with the army (violent) together. If the Senate rejected Marius's proposal, Marius could bring them directly to the assembly and earned supporters from the army at the same time. When the senators considered to use violence to get rid of him, they would suddenly realize that they would get killed. Marius also had an answer to the Senate if they say these proletarians did not deserve land. His answer was that they had fought for Rome and they deserved the reward. He also realized that the land in Italy could not be distributed so his land allotment law was applied outside Italy. Although his reform was successful and saved Rome from Jugurtha and Germanic tribes, it still has some negative affect on Roman society because he really made his soldiers like him and only be loyal to him rather than the country. As a result, there were many warlords appeared in Ancient Roman history such as Sulla, Pompeius and Caesar. These warlords were responsible for the chaos in late Roman Republic period because they all fought with each other for a long time and killed thousands of innocent lives in Rome. It also gave these warlords a hint that the army is always the symbol of power. Sulla controlled Rome, Pompeius used army to force the Senate to give him the special command and Caesar became the dictator of Rome under the support of his own army all proved this theory.

7 Conclusion

To conclude, I think Gracchus brothers' reform made sense because it provided many experience for Marius that how to apply the land allotment law and the importance of army for a reform. Marius's reform helped Rome beat Jugurtha and German tribes and expanded the territory and Latin language. He improved the power of Roman army and solved the problem once and for all. He gave many citizens in Rome a better life. There was also negative effect such as the creation of warlords and they played an important part in the chaos in the last 100 years in Roman Republic.

References

- [1] "Sallust, The Jugurthine War John Selby Watson, Rev. John Selby Watson, M.A., Ed." Sallust, The Jugurthine War, chapter 25. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Aug. 2017.
- [2] "Plutarch's Lives." Plutarch • Parallel Lives. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Aug. 2017.
- [3] "p465 The Life of Marius." Plutarch • Life of Marius. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Aug. 2017.
- [4] "p145 The Life of Tiberius Gracchus." Plutarch • Life of Tiberius Gracchus. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Aug. 2017.
- [5] "p197 The Life of Caius Gracchus." Plutarch • Life of Caius Gracchus. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Aug. 2017.
- [6] Cavazzi, F. "The Roman Army." The Roman Army. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Aug. 2017.
- [7] Scullard, Howard Hayes. From the Gracchi to Nero: a history of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68. London: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- [8] Billows, Richard A. Julius Caesar: the Colossus of Rome. London: Routledge, 2011. Print.