



Were Internal Factors Responsible for the Fall of the Roman Empire?

YES: Antonio Santosuoso, from *Storming the Heavens: Soldiers, Emperors, and Civilians in the Roman Empire* (Westview Press, 2001)

NO: Peter Heather, from "The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire," *The English Historical Review* (February 1995)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: History professor Antonio Santosuoso states that the Roman Empire's inability to cope with demands involving the defense of the empire was responsible for its demise.

NO: Professor of history Peter Heather claims that the invasion of the Huns forced other barbarians to use tribal unity as a survival technique and to seek safety within the confines of the Roman Empire, thus permitting the invasion of the Huns to bring about the fall of the Roman Empire.

Periodization illuminates the past by delineating significant changes in humanity's progress from one time period to another. The European Renaissance, which marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world, is one such example. The decline and fall of the Roman Empire is another, because it notes the end of the Greco-Roman classical era and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Greek and Roman cultures provided Western civilization with some of its greatest historical and cultural endowments. Thus, the demise of these cultures continues to interest Western historians.

Not until the Italian Renaissance, with its renewed interest in classical antiquity, did the fall of Rome, along with its antecedent causes, earn an official place in the world of scholarship. Humanist scholar Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) (1304–1374) blamed internal problems for the empire's demise. In the next century, however, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), perhaps the first modern political scientist, blamed the constant attacks of neighboring barbarians, which eventually wore down the empire and caused its collapse.

Modern historical scholarship on the fall of Rome began with Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), who injected another variable into the mix. In his mul-

tivolume work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (first published between 1776 and 1782), Gibbon stated that the rise of Christianity may have played a significant role in Rome's collapse. Because he was a product of Europe's Enlightenment era and shared its skepticism regarding the effects of organized religion on a civilization's progress, many modern historians consider his focus on Christianity to be overemphasized. In general, he took a more fatalistic approach to the empire's demise, stating that "the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness."

More recently, countless reasons have been given for Rome's fall: the disintegration of the imperial economy, agricultural problems caused by climatic changes, manpower shortages due to lead poisoning from the empire's water pipes, destruction of the leadership class through imperial executions and civil wars, racial mixing that diluted the old Roman stock, the drain of gold and silver, widespread slavery that made the rich richer and the poor poorer, and a class war waged by peasant soldiers against the ruling class. This list is not complete, but it does testify to the interest historians have taken in the fall of Rome.

While recognizing the probability of multiple causation in most historical events, twenty-first-century historians continue to debate the reasons for Rome's demise by analyzing and evaluating the effects of internal and external forces. By applying the Roman experience to the rise and fall of other civilizations—past and present—contemporary historians continue to revitalize the debate.

Our two historians reflect this internal/external dialogue. Peter Heather stresses the role of the barbarians in the empire's downfall, but offers a different spin. The 4th century C.E. invasion of Europe by the Huns was key to the fall of the Roman Empire, in his view, because it forced Germanic tribes to seek safety within the empire's boundaries where they developed a sense of unity, which ultimately gave them the power to supplant it. Antonio Santosuoso provides a new spin for the internal side of the argument. He states that internal disintegration within the Roman army, caused by a variety of factors, made it impossible for the legions to resist the barbarian pressures. If these weaknesses had not existed, the Empire might have been able to survive this crisis.

Rome Is No More: The End of the Empire

In 410, about eight centuries after it was sacked by the Gauls, Rome fell again to barbarians. This time, Gothic troops broke through the gate, having taken imperial lands about three decades earlier. As Jerome lamented from Palestine, the whole world perished in one city. But this event was not the beginning of the age of troubles. The troubles had begun three decades earlier, but after the sack of Rome the political landscape in western Europe would shift. Fifteen years afterward, Britain was no longer part of the empire. Barbarian kingdoms under the Vandals, Suebians, Visigoths, and Burgundians would be established throughout western Europe and North Africa. Rome was lucky to keep a tenuous hold on the Italian peninsula and the Balkans, but these territories would also fall to the invaders. Forty-five years later a new barbarian army—the Vandals—would sack the city again; twenty-one years after that—in A.D. 476—the Western Roman Empire came to its official end. . . .

The Illnesses of the Empire

In one of history's surprises, an empire as powerful as Rome raised an army of only a half-million (with mobile armies in support) to guard an enormous frontier and was unable to meet the barbarians' concerted attacks. The truth is that the empire could recruit no more than 600,000–650,000 men. The total recruiting pool was relatively small, the mortality rate was high, and financing and administration were a crushing burden. Any tax increase could not be implemented unless the state taxed the people that tradition, power, and prestige made untouchable. Even maintaining this army on the field disrupted society and stressed the Western Empire so much that it fell to the barbarians.

Although the figures are debatable, there are several factors indicating a demographic decline in the Late Empire. Cultivated lands decreased as much as 50 percent in Africa and perhaps 10–15 percent elsewhere due to lack of manpower, land erosion, deforestation, soil exhaustion, and a logical tendency to abandon areas prone to barbarian attack. The Roman Empire was essentially a primitive subsistence peasant society. The lower classes must have been weakened by chronic malnutrition, which prevented prodigious childbearing. The economic situation was so dire that peasants and the urban poor sold their children. Plagues struck the Roman Empire under Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in the second century and then in repetition in the third century (251, 261, and 271) before subsiding in the fourth century. Farmers abandoned their lands under the tax burden, unable to make a living. The "landlords were perennially short of tenants to cultivate their land," and the government tried to meet the demand by tying agricultural workers to their occupation by law—a policy implemented for most essential activities, including the armed forces. All this limited the labor force and thus the ability to recruit more soldiers. Even worse, the state and the rigid class and religious structure excluded many adults from serving in the army.

Roman technology was low, and the manpower (i.e., the lower classes) had to provide for consumers who paid either no or few taxes. The senatorial

order, which continued even after being spoiled of most political power, was one of the wealthiest groups of the empire; besides gaining enormous wealth and building large estates, this class was able to avoid fiscal obligations by way of privilege. The civil service was another group that was supported by the state and thus sucked resources from the economy with minimal benefits to the rest. The Christian Church created a new group that provided spiritual guidance but no economic gain. The situation became more serious because; the new church accumulated wealth to a degree unknown in pagan religions. The 600,000–650,000 soldiers cost too much but created no new wealth once being placed on the defensive for more than a century. (The last large territorial acquisition had been the brief control of Mesopotamia under Septimius Severus.) Finally, the soldiers (who could barely hold their own against the increasing waves of barbarians) needed a large administrative machine that was inefficient, corrupt, and nonproductive.

A decline in civic spirit spread throughout the social system and touched all classes. The official defenders of the state, the soldiers, became isolated from the civilian population, the butt of ridicule and scorn or the object of fear. As Jean-Michel Carrié points out, the situation had reversed since the first two centuries A.D. The new army was divorced from society because so many soldiers came from behind the frontiers, spoke languages that the rest could not understand, brought alien customs that were reprehensible, and were considered as barbaric as those who pressed at the gates.

Christianity, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "was the vampire of the *imperium Romanum*—in a night it shattered the stupendous achievement of the Romans." But surely he exaggerates. The old pagans and the new Christians were attached to the empire just the same. And both looked in horror at the "savage nations" pressing the empire's defenses. In any case, Christianization of the military was a slow process, and those who subscribed to the Christian God could hardly be viewed as inferior soldiers. Yet it is hard to deny that Christianity emphasized peace, not war, and that several reluctant recruits tried to avoid military service for religious reasons. The old gods were part and parcel of the army and the state; the Christian God praised peace and brotherhood and encouraged many new believers to choose a life removed from the battlefield. The Christian God would provide a martial function in time in the form of the Crusades.

The major problem was the lack of manpower. More than 50 percent of the soldiers became "second-class troops"; the recruits were men of inferior quality organized under the greatest administrative abuses. Even if we downplay this negative interpretation, the *limitanei* seemed undisciplined and undermined in comparison to their fighting peak under Diocletian. The elite was the mobile field army, and the idea behind it was effective. Even the later development, when mobile armies were stationed in the west and the east, was a step forward, for a single mobile army could not hope to cover the length of the frontier. Then regional reserves mushroomed in the Western Empire, Africa, Spain, and Britain, and the huge army in the Eastern Empire remained idle, poised against Persia while providing no relief to the Rhine and the Danube frontiers. The Roman empire was fragmented, stretched, and about to break down.

In time the problem would become insurmountable. Enemies roamed about at will. Stopping one threat was not enough, for another would emerge; if that new threat was pushed back, another popped up elsewhere. This was an epidemic of violence, yet contenders to the throne fought one another as much as they fought the enemy. Invasions often took advantage of civil war in the empire. As with the German tribes during the first two centuries A.D., the empire had fractured into factions that were impossible to unite in common cause. The Western Empire was a "nursery" of pretenders to the throne, and the armies of Britain and Gaul were the real threat to the security of the emperors. This meant that Roman generals sometimes had to rely more on barbarian soldiers. They were cheaper and more trustworthy than Roman citizens, who were quick to back a different pretender to the throne. The emperor and the pretenders alike did not hesitate to employ recruits from across the northern frontier to attack their rivals.

Still, the Eastern Empire—the "Romans of Constantinople"—continued for another thousand years. Why did they remain so strong? The western frontiers were too long, the resources too few, the coffers empty, the population smaller, civil wars more common, the enemy more intrusive and persistent. But the Roman army created the stresses, throwing society and the economy off balance. It required huge taxation, which in turn caused a decline in agriculture and population. It also required the establishment of a large civil service to gather and administer the tax revenues. But the real key was the decision of the Eastern Empire not to support the Western Empire. When the emperors of Constantinople like Justinian had a mind to, they successfully defeated the barbarians in the west. By that time, however, it was too late. Rome lay in pieces.

Epilogue

Melancholy pervaded the last years of the Roman Empire and it never disappeared. The Empire gave future generations their sense of destiny. It survived for another thousand years in the East, it was ever-present in most of the barbarian kingdoms. New people emerged, the borders were different.

Rome shaped the past and the future of western Europeans and through them most of the world. After a dramatic entrance following the Second Punic War, Rome would teeter on the edge of collapse but always reemerged. The first century B.C. would set Rome down another path. Marius's reform of 107 B.C. made sense, for the ranks of the army were difficult to replenish as long as the old eligibility requirements were maintained. Marius opened the army to everyone as long as they held Roman citizenship. But over time this would upset the republic's stability. For the next seven decades or so, until Augustus's victory at Actium in 31 B.C. against the fleet of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra, the glorious armies of the past became hosts of pillagers.

With the military ranks opened to all, the new army no longer served as the depository of values for upper-class and propertied families; potentially it could become the representative of the poor. In reality, however, the leadership core was unchanged. And the new soldiers—the rank and file—

simply wanted to improve their lot, to gain immediate wealth, material goods and improve their condition. Overthrowing the privileged classes was not on their mind, and the "war managers" of the past—the aristocrats—remained in command. If one can identify any innovation, it was probably in the appearance of the new leader, the obvious case being Marius. But even he did not come from the dregs of society; he was an equestrian who had married into a distinguished family. The most radical change was seen in the soldiers' behavior. The troops became the enemy within; pillage and slaughter of fellow citizens was indiscriminate; loyalty was pledged not to the republic but to their leaders—as long as they provided the booty.

All this played out amid external and internal disorder. New invaders, the Cimbri and the Teutones, had to be thwarted; then the *socii* (non-Roman Italian allies) united and requested citizenship; finally Spartacus and the slaves threatened the very idea of Roman domination. It is remarkable that the slave rebellion never mushroomed into class warfare, with the lower classes making common cause with Spartacus and his men. Even the *socii* episode was not a class conflict for, with few exceptions, all social orders shared similar goals—to have the same rights, not just the duties of Roman citizens. In spite of the immense bloodshed that it caused, the integration of all peninsular Italians south of the Rubicon, that is, central and southern Italy (not the islands, however), made Rome stronger and laid the basis for extending its power even farther. Yet for decades afterward Romans slaughtered Romans, and troops felt little loyalty to society. The situation changed during the last stages of the Roman Civil Wars, and certain events made the reestablishment of social harmony mandatory: In part it was the work of a remarkable individual—Julius Caesar; in part it was the realization among the generals and their followers that killing friends and enemies alike led nowhere; and in part it was the massacre of members of the highest aristocratic order—the senators.

The new army, forged under Caesar and refined by his successor, Augustus, reacquired the traditional sense of destiny. It was Rome's duty to conquer all and to bring civilization to all corners of the earth. But it was also a matter of material gain and the fulfillment of a sense of violence and lust for power that had distinguished the men of Rome from the very beginning. Caesar and Augustus were pivotal in shaping the Roman Empire that followed. By Augustus's time the borders had reached almost their farthest expansion; the army finally was brought under control.

But Augustus went much further than did Julius Caesar (his great-uncle). The army finally received fair rewards for its services, but he also ensured that the emperor was the one who held the purse strings. This made the army reluctant to listen to anyone other than the commander in chief, it spoiled the troops from any political ascendancy that they may have acquired in the last stages of the civil wars. Augustus monopolized military power by controlling most of the far-flung provinces where the army was stationed, leaving the Senate to control few soldiers. Moreover, he made certain that generals kept military control only for short periods to prevent the emergence of rivals to the throne. The imperial forces were his army, his soldiers, his fleet.

The reorganization of the state went hand in glove with a reformulation of the "Roman man" and its symbols. As the republic neared its final days and the army's rank and file transformed, Roman intellectuals, foremost Cicero, felt it necessary to restate the traditional virtues first articulated following the Second Punic War. The highest orders—senators and equestrians—were depicted as separate from the lower classes and provincials just as they were making their impact on society felt. This attitude was reflected in the emergence of the Principate: The emperor became the highest symbol of the state through Roman literature, art, and architecture, and the capital became his city. Soon this became the deliberate policy of the emperor, his family, and his troops and was mirrored in places throughout the frontier.

Augustus also added a new dimension to the commander in chief. Like his great-uncle Caesar, he would become worshipped as a god. Scipio Africanus was the first to undertake a process toward divine status, but Augustus perfected it. The idea that the supreme commander was a deity in death if not in life became a fixture of imperial power. Beginning with Diocletian, the association with the gods became stronger. Before him, the emperor's selection was based on merit and reflected the will of the people through the Senate. It was not a hereditary right (even though succession was often kept in the family). As we move toward the end of the third century A.D., however, it was understood that imperial authority rested in the will of the gods, a policy repeated under Constantine a few decades later (although the pagan gods of the past had given way to the Christian God).

Like all emperors, Augustus realized that his power rested on the support of his soldiers, for the emperor had become the exclusive manager of war. Yet he kept them at a distance from the center of power, a policy that worked for about two centuries (excepting a brief period in the aftermath of Nero's death). In the waning years of the second century A.D. things changed, ironically in the aftermath of the death of the ideal emperor, Marcus Aurelius, under his son Commodus. The praetorians, the emperor's guard formed by Augustus and stationed in and near Rome, became, sometimes with soldiers stationed at the frontier, the makers of emperors.

The third century A.D. was a most turbulent period. Barbarian tribes—more numerous, better organized, and more proficient in the art of war than in the past—pierced the empire's border (although this was a problem that Marcus had to face already in the second half of the second century A.D.). Emperor Septimius Severus, who finally brought some order to the anarchy following Commodus's death, was compelled to deal with this threat. And where Marcus and Septimius succeeded, others did not, and the remainder of the third century saw a series of barbarian strikes and Roman defeats.

Septimius was the greatest reformer since Augustus. He increased the number of legions and opened their ranks to more and more non-Romans. By then the armed forces had changed their nature. Senators were apparently discouraged from serving—a policy that became permanent about half a century later under Gallienus; Italian-born men, except in moments of great emergency, practically disappeared from the rank and file (although they still held higher command); the old praetorian guard, the exclusive reserve of Italians,

was disbanded and then refashioned using the best legionnaires from the frontier. This weakened the central tenet of the imperial army: Rome's dominance. Yet the soldier-citizen ideal would be renewed in 312 A.D. when the next emperor, Caracalla (Septimius's son), extended citizenship to all free men within the Roman Empire. By extending such privileges to practically all imperial subjects, this policy diluted the Roman military ideal.

Disorder followed. After Septimius, every ruler and pretender (except for three emperors) fell victim to the sword until Diocletian in 284 A.D. returned stability to the center; no emperor was murdered during the next seventy years.

Augustus made certain that legions were never located within Italy. Nearly all of them would be stationed in the most dangerous frontier hot spots—the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates. Despite Augustus's last instructions, neither he nor his successors intended to switch over to a defensive policy, for the Roman mind believed in aggression. All territories, even those beyond the Roman posts, were considered to be part of the Roman dominion. If Roman lands were threatened, then the enemy had to be met before it pierced the frontier; it was then harshly punished inside its own territory. Supremacy extended to any place where Rome could in theory extend its military force.

The policy worked well until the end of the second century A.D. Dangers were met as they arose, with commanders moving troops from one frontier to the next as attacks progressed. It did not work in the third century, however, as enemy strikes became more common and were carried out simultaneously at times. The solution was to create a mobile field army (later several mobile armies were created). In varying forms, this strategy appeared first under Gallienus, then Diocletian, and finally Constantine (although one can argue that the troops Septimius Severus stationed in Italy were the nucleus of the Roman field army). The strength of the new army was its mobility. Thus the foot soldier, once the pride of the Roman military, gave way to cavalry. This also meant that the border troops were relegated to second-class status. Service in the mobile field army meant prestige, rewards, and promotion.

This emphasis on mobility led to important changes in frontier policy. Diocletian had strengthened the frontier borders with fortifications, adopting an elastic defense to hold the enemy in check at the frontier. Constantine abandoned the idea of stout border defense and instead sought to slow invaders by constructing a series of obstacles within the imperial territories. This strategy of defense in depth placed frontier troops and populations in great danger and eroded the principle that peace reigned throughout the Roman Empire.

By then, however, Roman power was clearly on the wane. And although the Roman armies were still powerful, their outright superiority slowly disappeared after Constantine. Under Augustus and his successors, the armed forces combined superior strategic skill with effective tactics. But this was not necessarily the case thereafter. The suppression of Boudicca's Rebellion, the capture of Masada, and the sea-saw struggle against the German tribes are good examples. By the second half of the fourth century A.D. things would be

different. The Romans could still hold their own and often defeated their opponents, as at Strasburg in 357. But as the quality of the troops declined, the onslaught from outside and the struggles within became in the long run impossible to restrain. Roman armies, especially the infantry, became the victims of disaster (e.g., Adrianople) and attrition (e.g., Ad Salices). And the traditional core elements of the Roman army practically disappeared. Friends and enemies greeted Rome from the same corners of the world.

The end of the Roman Empire coincided with population decline, polarization of society (many individuals took from but did not give back to the community), corruption at the highest levels, disappearance of the civic sense, and perhaps even the appearance of Christianity, which emphasized peace over military glory. As in the past, the key was the army: It was too small to patrol the border; was too expensive to maintain (even with heavy taxes); and was badly led by incompetent emperors. The final blow was the bifurcation into the Western Empire and Eastern empire, begun under Diocletian and completed after Theodosius. Practically abandoned by their eastern brethren, the westerners were overrun by the German tribes. The Romans in the east would last for another millennium.

POSTSCRIPT

Were Internal Factors Responsible for the Fall of the Roman Empire?

Most historians studying the fall of Rome agree that neither internal nor external forces can be ignored, yet many continue to produce works that emphasize one side of the debate. E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, reprint) has been a standard source on the external forces side for decades. Arthur Ferrill's *The Fall of Rome: The Military Explanation* (Thames & Hudson, 1986) is a more recent account of the role played by the barbarians in Rome's collapse. Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, A.D. 350-425* (Oxford University Press, 1998) brings the subject up-to-date. In *Warfare in the Classical World* (Salamander Press, 1998), John Warry surveys the role of wars and their effects on Greco-Roman civilization, titling a concluding chapter, "The Coming of the Barbarians." Derek Williams, in *Romans and Barbarians: Four Views From the Empire's Edge, First Century, A.D.* (St. Martin's Press, 1998), and Thomas S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C.-A.D. 400* (John Hopkins University Press, 2003) offer two more contemporary updates.

A. H. M. Jones's *The Decline of the Ancient World* (Oxford University Press, 1964) and Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (Thames & Hudson, 1971) are classics on the internal factors side of the debate. Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire: A.D. 284-430* (Harvard University Press, 1993) surveys the centuries before the empire's fall. Geza Alföldy's *The Social History of Rome* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) is a short but well-packed volume on Rome's social history that sets the stage for the fall of Rome. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (Harper & Row, 1987) gives a religious spin to the question.

Despite its age, one should not ignore Gibbon's classic, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, republished recently in many new editions. Its lasting value is more evident today when scholars and politicians are currently debating the pros and cons of the "New American Empire."

There has been renewed interest in the role of the barbarians in the process. Many historians are now willing to credit them with helping to establish the Middle Ages, viewing that era as emerging from Greco-Roman, Christian, and barbarian influences. Perhaps it's time to put the term "barbarians" to rest. For more information on the barbarians and their contributions, see Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1999), and, Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

