
General's Legions: Marian Reforms and the Collapse of the Roman Republic

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Few peoples have been studied, discussed or disputed as much as the Ancient Romans. These world conquerors established one of the most impressive and expansive empires of antiquity. Their influences are still seen to this day across Europe, America, and the Near East. However, before the Romans spanned their empire from Britain to the Caspian Sea, Rome was a Republic, built to govern the small territory around a growing city. At the beginning of the first century BC, there had already been great tumult in the governance of the state, as the military emerged an increasingly important power in the republic. Wars were becoming commonplace in the Republic as the expansion of its dominion continued past the Italian peninsula and into places such as Africa and eventually into Gaul, or modern day France. One man who profoundly shaped the army and molded it into the legendary fighting force for which it is known today was Gaius Marius, a military man who reformed the Roman army and in no small part set the stage for the fall of the Republic through his professionalization of the military, and his grants of land as payment for military service.¹

Historical scholarship on Marius is scant, since most historians are quick to label him merely a man of the people and a reformer of the armed forces of Rome. These scholars underestimate the implications that came with his reforms. In fact, the reforms served to undermine the Republic through the creation of legions—professional armies that quickly became more loyal to their general than to the state. Likewise, while historians recognize his interest in politics (serving several consulships), few see his public service as contributing to the fall of the republic.

These scholars have overlooked the contributions of Marius and others after him, namely Sulla and Caesar, to ending the Republic as it was known. Classical sources also seem to place less weight upon Marius, for many of the same reasons as modern historians; in general they treat him from a negative or indifferent perspective. It might be that later the military had become such an integral part of society that Velleius Paterculus, a Roman historian from the Augustan period, would see Marius simply as a man who had Roman virtues and a commitment to Roman expansion, rather than a man who set in motion the end of the Republic.

Of course, one cannot strictly pin the entirety of the fall of the Republic on the shoulders of one general and his military reforms, yet Marius set out some of the building blocks that would be used to make it possible. The fall of the Republic hinged on the use of the military as a political tool more than a strictly defensive or offensive weapon. Once armies were beginning to march on Rome itself, much of the damage had already been done. Marius' reforms, while not groundbreaking, definitely set a precedent for those who came later. Civil strife within Rome had become a problem as the senatorial class continued to create factions that would compete, often violently, for control

¹ Marius was a Roman general and six time consul of the Republic. Born in Cereatae, later called Casemare, in 157 BC, he died in 86 BC upon his election to a seventh term as consul. He gained fame in the Jugurthan and Northern Campaigns into Cisalpine Gaul. On his life see Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. E.H. Warmington, trans., Perrin Bernadotte, vol. IX (London: Harvard University Press, 1968).

of Rome. “[Marius] allied himself with Saturninus and Galucia... He also stirred up the soldiery, got them to mingle with the citizens in the assemblies, and thus controlled a faction which could overpower Metellus,” according to Plutarch.² These factions would come into conflict with each other to the point where parts of the city were ruled by glorified gangs. Street riots continued into the time of the First Triumvirate and beyond, having to be crushed by various consuls. Some of these factions hired or aligned themselves with street rioting men, like Saturninus, for political gain, turning on them as soon as the Senate demanded it. During this time, Glaucia and Saturninus held office and sabotaged elections through acts of thuggery.³ Such issues and the direct civil wars between the generals of the Roman army led to the collapse of the Republic.

Beginning with the professionalization of the military, there was quite a change in how the Republic viewed its armed forces. Marius would later become almost universally known for this, despite his other accomplishments and his unprecedented six consecutive consulships. A prime example of these other accomplishments was his triumph in 104 BC when he took King Jugurtha as a prisoner, a man who had been a vigorous adversary to an expanded Republic.⁴ Up until that point, there were no “professional” soldiers: men came from the upper classes to fight in the army because they could pay for their own equipment. Also, they had a tangible interest in seeing the success of the Roman state, something that many believed did not apply to those in the lower classes. The economic class of a man determined if he was eligible for service; even if people from the plebs wanted to serve Rome, class status remained the determinant. This became increasingly problematic with the Republic expanding; during the time of the Punic Wars and Pyrrhic War, it was not as much of a concern as the wars were usually more localized. As Leon Fitts suggests, “what put stress on this system was the continuous warfare in which Republican Rome became engaged. In theory, the army was designed for local wars of short duration.”⁵ This local system and conscription were unstable or unsustainable for large scale and drawn-out conflicts, as the requirement for equestrians and soldiers with means to buy equipment rose. “So it was to the recruiting system that Marius turned his attention, and he began making changes by throwing open the legions to volunteers and abandoning all inquiries into the economic status of recruits.”⁶ As the need for soldiers grew and foreign wars became more heated, the only solution was to allow those in the lower economic statuses to join the military. This, as some historians suggest, was unpopular at first with many—especially the equestrian class who held a lofty position as members of the military and in politics.

Many of Marius’s reforms, especially that all soldiers must carry their own supplies and gear,⁷ shook the status quo and therefore could be unpopular, even if reforms merely meant to promote more successful tactics. Shifts in the number of men serving in the army also made the power of each commander much greater. A legion was much larger than the select amounts of maniples that other commanders might have possessed, which could be seen in the civil wars later in the decades to come. This was very significant as it put more men under the supervision of one general. Instead of smaller local commands that were led by a consul, there were professional legions commanded by lifetime soldiers. These generals earned the respect and love of their men, who generally held less

² Plutarch, *Marius* 28.5.

³ Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History: From Romulus and the Foundation of Rome to the Reign of the Emperor Tiberius*, trans. J. C. Yardley and Anthony A. Barrett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), 6.

⁴ Peter Zoch, *Ancient Rome: An Introductory History* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 153. Jugurtha was King of Numidia, who led a hit-and-run war against the Romans until being captured in 105 BC and executed after Marius’ triumph in 104 BC.

⁵ R. Leon Fitts, “All for Power,” *Calliope* 13, no. 2 (October 2002): 38.

⁶ P.A Kildahl, *Gaius Marius* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, 1968), 74-74.

⁷ Later his soldiers were called “Marius’ Mules.” By carrying their own equipment, soldiers cut down on supply chains and therefore the weakness of the army, making them far more mobile in the field as they needed to cover a large amount of ground quickly. Kildahl, 77.

love for the Senate perhaps than most upper-class Romans. As the number of legions grew, the threat to the Senate did as well, for there was no guarantee of loyalty from these soldiers or their generals. As the Republic grew larger and transformed into the Principate, many of the reforms endured and were expanded. Some of these reforms would spell the end of the Republic. As the nation grew to become more dependent on their military strength, much of the political power would be tied to whoever possessed the most legions. Also important was how well military leaders wielded their power and authority in the Senate. Many of these leaders who started with Marius, began to take more consulships and positions than were their due based on their prowess at warfare. This would allow authors of the time to label Marius's reforms as "a betrayal of Roman traditions"⁸ and claim that these volunteers lacked the patriotism for Rome necessary to fight for her. Yet, the opening of the military to the have-nots made Marius popular among the plebs, giving him the opportunity to undermine senatorial authority and begin a reign of six consulships. These consulships began a trend that continued until the end of the Republic, and the military reforms and the political sway it gave to military leaders led to the Republic's downfall. The Marian Reforms were just one aspect of how the military ushered in the age of civil wars.

Indeed, the Civil Wars can be seen as coming directly from Marian reforms. With the growing influence of the legions in the political sphere, some generals were emboldened, seeking more power. One of these men, Sulla, rose in direct opposition to Marius. In many ways, Marius made Sulla who he was, and his reforms were the building blocks that eventually led to his own downfall. Sulla was Marius' aide and later his opponent, fighting in a civil war against him and the Roman State. Some suggest that Marius chose Sulla for his help against Jugurtha while others argue that, "[Marius] picked Sulla for the job [of Marius' aide], simply because he was a sufficiently shrewd judge of military ability," according to one historian.⁹ The period of civil warfare began to take the state by storm as the Senate and people had to scramble to pick a side, hoping to not be on the wrong one. Such divisions made it easy for later men like Caesar to come to power, as the people wanted one thing, while the senatorial class wanted another.

Generally, soldiers saw Marius as one of them. Evidence suggests he was a man to whom the soldiers could relate, which raised his popularity, as did the perceived benefits he offered his men. While land concessions were not unheard of previously, Marius used it to his advantage during the Jugurthan War, and it would later be used by many of the generals and leaders of the late Republic. The promise of riches and even land in conquered territory upon discharge proved an attractive incentive that sparked loyalty to Marius, especially among the poor and homeless of Rome, who were now able to volunteer for the army. "For a desperately poor man... the army would look good – especially an army led... by a proven commander," noted scholar Erik Hildinger.¹⁰ Marius bred great loyalties in his men, and it showed in his victories. This pattern became more prevalent among many of the leaders of the late Republic. Military commanders, proven in battle and with enough money and prowess to earn their soldier's loyalties, would begin extending their power and even marching on Rome. Augustus and Antony followed the Marian model, with much greater bloodshed against fellow countrymen, appeasing their legions with promises of land taken from their enemies.

More and more, the men of the legions did not have loyalty to the state. Wondering what the state had ever done for them, the men knew their generals had offered them land, plunder, and gainful employment. During a campaign against the Ambrones, Roman soldiers pilfered all that they could from the slain and some claimed that soldiers voted to give it all to Marius.¹¹ This might speak

⁸ Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 366.

⁹ Arthur Keaveney, *Sulla: The Last Republican*, Classical Lives (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 14.

¹⁰ Erik Hildinger, *Swords against the Senate: The Rise of the Roman Army and the Fall of the Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 98.

¹¹ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, Mar.21.2-4.

to the loyalty and perception of the soldiers that greater rewards were around the corner should they remain loyal. The promise for land clearances were harder to make when fighting a defensive war, but it would be possible. Land confiscations would not become uncommon for these generals, and later Octavian and Antony made quite the art form of pressuring people from their homes. As the army grew around the general, soldiers would find little good in the Republic they were told to serve. “These men were professional soldiers with loyalty perhaps tilting from the state and towards the army – an institution that had looked after them more completely than the republic,” concluded one scholar.¹² Marius set these ideals as a precedent that extended far beyond him, and this precedent would become critical during the Civil Wars, leading almost directly to the end of the Republic. The Senate had failed these soldiers, having passed laws for its own empowerment rather than for that of the state at large. Many soldiers became disillusioned with a state and Senate that had never done anything for them. Scholars and contemporaries blamed the Senate for the period of civil wars, as the “Senate was in a poor position, though this was largely of its own making.”¹³ A few argue that the generals inspired loyalty through bribery alone. Yet Sulla, Marius, and Caesar also had powerful personalities that commanded respect and loyalty. Marius’ reforms would lead to men with great personal armies at their disposal, some of which were used to march on Rome during the last century of the Republic.

As the routine bequeathing of lands to soldiers continued, a curious issue began to arise, one that had been debated since the time of the Gracchi in the late first century: How would new land be divided and what new land would the state hand over. At first there was little debate. Later, however, a large overarching problem began to arise near the end of the republic: how the generals were going to pay their troops. “[Marius] abolished qualifications and sought volunteers from below the fifth class. He also promised land and money to those who survived the war.”¹⁴ This required generals to continue to campaign, continue to conquer, in order to pay their bills to their soldiers. Even if they were loyal, troop loyalty would only stretch so far without concrete rewards. Sulla found himself at a roadblock due to these previous promises and policies. Because conquest was slim, there was no land to give, and he resorted to taking land from his political enemies. Previously compensation was given for the lands taken, but, later Sulla began a policy in which no money was paid for confiscated land.¹⁵ There was always going to be a need for more land as these commanders continued to press their soldiers into increasing amounts of conflict. This policy was something that was in the consciousness of citizens of the new Principate, shown by Augustus’ attempt to establish a new military compensation policy not predicated by land claims.

During the time of Marius, soldiers began to be attached to generals, who became patrons, providing equipment and training in service to Rome. Some of these patrons, increasingly men with military experience rather than senators with little to no experience, went as far as spending time and lending money to their men. “Sulla not only lent money to the troops but spoke fair words and made jests with them. Caesar, too, was remarkable... even went so far as to call his soldiers ‘comrades.’”¹⁶ Such practices had not begun with Marius, yet, many generals looked to him as the example of how to conduct themselves. These soldiers, who viewed their commanders as both competent and on their side, forged staunch loyalties with their leaders and followed them to almost any end. Marius flexed his power in this fashion. Yet these loyalties would have profound effects on those who came later, such as Sulla or Caesar who both marched on Rome with their legions, despite very little support outside of their own legions. This made the military a powerful instrument

¹² Hildinger, 22.

¹³ Ibid, 115.

¹⁴ Fitts, 38.

¹⁵ Keaveney, 61.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.

when placed into the hands of a man with great ambitions. It would eventually lead the Italian peninsula into a long stretch of civil wars and conflicts over the status of Rome. This was only the beginning of a string of bad precedents started by Marius that would lead the Roman Republic into ruin. The consulship of Rome was a position for two men annually appointed by the Senate to rule over Rome. The rule of co-consuls aimed to eliminate the potential for despotic rulership or the formation of Rome as a kingdom once again. It provided the sort of checks and balances that can still be seen in modern democratic societies.

Marius, a man of 'simple' origin, was destined to strain this system and set precedents that can be seen as the beginning of the end for the co-consulship of the Roman Republic. People at the time believed that he was, according to historians, "the only man who could save Rome and Italy."¹⁷ His ability as a commander and conqueror of the enemies of Rome had given him the status to bring peace to Rome, yet, as others have suggested, he brought its ruin. This began with him being elected to the consulship for seven terms, an otherwise unheard of number in those times, and it would become something that other leaders sought to emulate, especially in the case of Julius Caesar, who took it a step further when the Senate declared him dictator for life. The escalation and pushing of the envelope by Marius and Sulla allowed many men to rise to power and take things that did not belong to them. Marius' election was because of his support from the lower classes, who saw him as an outsider to the aristocracy and a man of the people, while the equestrians supported him for his military prowess and ability to end wars, which was good for their businesses. The seven consulships enjoyed by Marius would fundamentally change the balance of power in Rome; increasingly the system could be bypassed by ambitious military leaders with the support of former troops. Later landed men and the non-senatorial classes pursued the same course to power. This course would be followed later by men such as Julius Caesar who used the Tribune of the Plebs to his advantage in getting motions passed of which the Senate would not have approved. This became an issue as the army began to have more and more power in the governance of everyday life.

Rome was one of the greatest territorial empires in the Ancient World. With military might, it secured dominance over most of Europe and the Near East. Gaius Marius was a Roman general who helped shape the late Republic and became an essential architect of its downfall. Attaching Roman legions to generals inspired loyalty to military leaders rather than the state. This empowered generals. While not the sole cause, Marius set in motion developments that would be taken up by others and lead to the end of the Republic as it was known.

¹⁷ D. C. A. Shotter, *The Fall of the Roman Republic* (London; Routledge, 1994), 32.