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Szapary, Hannah

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Playing Offense: A Deeper Look into the Motivations and Significance of Sulla's March on Rome

Hannah Szapary
Brown University
Classics and Applied Math – Biology
Class of 2019

Abstract: *In 88 BCE, Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla marched on his own city for the first time in the Roman Republic's history to procure for himself political control that had been awarded to Gaius Marius. This paper examines not only the impact of this decision, but also some of the most important motivations behind it that help to shape the march's significance. Specifically, narratives of Appian, Plutarch, and Velleius Paterculus, that describe this event, in conjunction with commentary from modern historian Allen M. Ward, are presented to illustrate that Sulla's march on Rome was politically significant in that it set a precedent of violence against the state as a means to attain military command. However, it was not necessarily novel on its own: in fact, it was shaped by the Marian military reforms, Sulla's personal struggle for power in a rivalry with Marius, and the ongoing popular revolt against Roman authority during the Italian War.*

In 88 BCE, Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla marched on his own city for the first time in the Roman Republic's history to procure for himself political control that had been awarded to Gaius Marius. Many claim that this was also the first instance in which an army was more loyal to a commander than to the Roman state, and that this set a dangerous practice of violence that would lead to the eventual breakdown of the Republic. While this event is compelling on its own, it is also intriguing to examine how it formed within the greater context of Republic history. Illustrated through ancient writers Appian, Plutarch, and Velleius Paterculus, as well as modern historian Allen M. Ward, Sulla's march on Rome was politically significant in that it set a precedent of violence against the state as a means to attain military command. However, the event was not necessarily novel on its own: in fact, it was shaped by the Marian military reforms, his personal struggle for power in a rivalry with Marius, and the ongoing popular revolt against Roman authority during the Italian War.

When Sulla decided to march his army against Rome, he departed the city for Campania, where his troops were camped, and appealed to them to join him. Appian wrote a description of this interaction in his *Civil Wars*, and contended that

Sulla spoke of the indignity put upon him by Sulpicius and Marius, and while he did not openly allude to anything else (for he did not dare as yet to mention this sort of war), he urged them to be ready to obey his orders. They understood what he meant, and as they feared lest they should miss 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

It is interesting to note that in this translation, the soldiers “uttered” their agreement to charge Rome, rather than declare or otherwise more forcefully assert their intentions. This choice of

¹ Appian, *Civil Wars*, trans. Horace White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 1.57
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil_Wars/1*.html (accessed October 29, 2016).

words signifies hesitation to proceed, reflecting a measure of ambivalence that needed to be overcome. Appian also indicated that the army needed convincing to march towards Rome because they did not want to miss the campaign against Mithridates. As Appian later stated, the war against Mithridates promised riches for the soldiers, but Sulla presented the ongoing injustice from his rivals as moral justification for the march, as well as the promise of a war in Greece that would be even more lucrative for the reluctant soldiers, both of which swayed many in his direction. If they chose not to follow their commander, the relationship with their patron would have been broken, something many soldiers could not afford. Therefore, it seems clear that no one knew how to appropriately respond to Sulla at first, because there was no reference in history on which they could rely. This underscores the significance of Sulla's actions, because this was the first time that a Roman general had proposed violence against the state as a means to attain political and military control.

Eventually the delicate allegiances that had been created fell apart, as Appian continued that "Sulla was overjoyed and led six legions thither forthwith; but all his superior officers, except one quaestor, left him and fled to the city, because they would not submit to the idea of leading an army against their country."² The desertion of many officers was unsurprising: many were aristocrats who would most likely side with the state in order to protect the status quo rather than jeopardize their status with a plan they believed to be barbaric and ill-conceived. But, the answer to the question of why the soldiers allied with their commander lies in the Marian reforms made in 107 and 104 BCE. In his *Life of Marius*, Plutarch outlined the first military reform victorious Gaius Marius enacted as a newly elected consul after the war against Jugurtha:

He was triumphantly elected, and at once began to levy troops. Contrary to law and custom he enlisted many a poor and insignificant man, although former commanders had not accepted such persons, but bestowed arms, just as they would any other honour, only on those whose property assessment made them worthy to receive these, each soldier being supposed to put his substance in pledge to the state.³

The goal of reform was to gain more manpower for Rome, as there had been a constant struggle to maintain a sizeable army since the Third Punic War due to large casualties during the years of imperialism and too few men meeting the property qualifications to enlist. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus had attempted to rectify this in 133 and 123 BCE with the redistribution of public land, but Marius' reform had serious consequences. By abolishing the property qualification completely and creating a volunteer army, any landless "poor and insignificant man" could find a permanent paying job in the military, with the hope of rising through social ranks just as *novus homo* Marius had proved during his lifetime. The commander acted as a patron, keeping his soldiers in secure employment, giving them food and clothing, and disbursing property between them. In effect, the client army was formed, and troops felt a contractual loyalty to their commander, because he presented the only opportunity for wealth, property and glory available to them. Thus, it is understandable why Sulla's troops had greater allegiance towards him than the state: because of personal connection between commander and soldiers that reflected the Marian reforms, he secured the manpower necessary to overtake Rome. With this tactic, his

² Ibid.

³ Plutarch, *Life of Marius*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), 9.
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/plutarch/lives/marius*.html (accessed October 29, 2016).

march had large political impact in the way it illustrated the extreme to which individuals with authority could increase their own power in Rome by appealing to poor men.

While the military reforms materially set up Sulla's army for a successful march, it was his political rivalry with Marius that fueled his ambition. When circumstance necessitated a leader to command the military campaign against Mithridates, Sulla, having established himself as a frontrunner in the Social War, sought the position aggressively. However, he found competition with Marius, as Plutarch wrote in his *Life of Sulla*:

But here he found a rival in Marius, who was possessed by ambition and a mad desire for fame, those never ageing passions. He was now unwieldy in body, and in the recent campaigns had given up service on account of his age, and yet set his heart upon foreign wars beyond the seas.⁴

While Sulla initially secured the position, Tribune P. Sulpicius Rufus, motivated by potential monetary compensation to side with Marius, seemed to have other plans, as he passed a bill that removed Sulla from his command and replaced him with his "rival" Marius. This prompted Sulla to flee to Campania and rally his troops against Rome, "having surrendered to his anger the command over his actions, since he thought only of his enemies, and without any regard or even pity for friends and kindred and relations."⁵ While the decision to avenge his dismissal with violent retribution was made suddenly, the seeds were sewn over a 20-year rivalry for authority that increased as each competitor was given more power.

Plutarch offered a detailed account of the early progression of their relationship, which began when Sulla as a quaestor accompanied consul Marius in the war against Jugurtha in 112 BCE:

He was put in charge of the camp...making a friend of Bocchus, the king of Numidia...[who] finally decided upon his original betrayal, and handed Jugurtha over to Sulla. It is true that the one who celebrated a triumph for this was Marius, but those who envied him attributed the glory of the success to Sulla, and this secretly annoyed Marius.⁶

Conflict was already developing between the two men more than 24 years before Sulla would march, but that it was hidden at first. An early hatred between them was initially fueled by Marius' envy, as he was not content with having any military glory attributed to Sulla, even though the triumph was recognized as solely belonging to Marius officially. It is important to also note that the victory should have been a celebratory occasion in Rome, as the army had just defeated a major enemy, but these powerful men were distracted by individual desires for recognition that overshadowed any focus on the accomplishments of the state.

With the decision made to attack Rome and the manpower necessary to accomplish the task acquired, a successful campaign was dependent on careful timing. As Sulla decided to flee to Campania, the Italian War had just concluded in 88 BCE, which had shaken the Republic with the sudden uprising by Italian tribes. As Velleius Paterculus described,

They demanded the citizenship for the state whose empire they protected with their arms.

⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 7.
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/plutarch/lives/sulla*.html (accessed October 29, 2016).

⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁶ Ibid, 3.

Every year and in every war they provided twice as many infantry and cavalry as the Romans, but they were not received into the citizenship of the state which they had raised to such honor that it could despise men of the same blood and race as foreigners and aliens. The war destroyed more than 300,000 of the fighting men of Italy... So bitter was this Italian war...the armies of the Roman people were routed in many places, and the Romans were compelled to resort to military garb and to remain long in that garb.⁷

It is significant that he mentioned the circumstances leading up to their revolt: the Italians and Romans are described as two peoples who previously had aligned with one another when necessary against common enemies although did not share equal status. Even with the Romans' "many attempts to admitting to citizenship those who had not taken up arms"⁸ with the *Lex Julia* in 90 BCE, the Italian tribes continued to fight. Together, these illustrate that this was not a fight solely for citizenship but for true political and socioeconomic equality, that had not been achieved despite passage of the bill. This narrative depicts the Italian War as having similarities to a civil war, which would have set the precedent of a violent domestic conflict that Sulla could follow when he eventually marched on Rome.

Modern historian Ward supported this theory, observing that "[The Italian War] had practically been a civil war. It pitted against each other communities that in some cases had been fighting side by side for 200 years. Its bitter fighting...trained a generation of leaders willing to resort to it in pursuit of personal political goals."⁹ Though the war officially ended in 88 BCE, its aftermath left the city of Rome in chaos, as Ward further explained that "The human and property losses must have been almost as great as those inflicted by Hannibal. Food was scarce."¹⁰ At this point in time Rome was left weak, exhausted, and in pieces. Sulla's command had been stripped from him and handed to Marius, a mere citizen who held no office, illustrating the ease with which one could take back power. Additionally, the Italians had successfully demonstrated that injustice in Rome was just provocation for armed revolt against the state, which was a legitimate means to achieve political goals. Understanding this, it is clear that the context of Sulla's consulship could have easily prompted and enabled his march. His decision had lasting importance, as Sulla continued to follow the precedent he had set of using violence as a form of expressing dominance: in 82 BCE, he ordered the execution of thousands of Samnites, a population who had fought on the same side as Marius, after Sulla had defeated his rival at the Battle of the Colline Gate.

An analysis of ancient texts by authors Appian, Plutarch, and Velleius Paterculus, together with a review of Allen M. Ward's modern commentary, reveals the conceptual, material and contextual influences that impacted Sulla's march on Rome in 88 BCE, as well as its long lasting political impact. As a rule, it is necessary to recognize and consider the collective impact when studying this moment in Roman Republic history, to gain a full appreciation of both its origins and influence. When an event is viewed on its own, the perspective is limited and the incident can take on inflated significance in terms of its lasting impacts on society. Sulla's march on Rome can fall victim to this outlook, if it is evaluated in a vacuum, judged solely as the first

⁷ C. Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History*, trans. Frederick W. Shipley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 15. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Velleius_Paterculus/2A*.html (accessed October 29, 2016).

⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁹ Allen Ward, Fritz M. Heichelheim and Cedric A. Yeo, *A History of the Roman People* (Boston: Pearson Inc., 2014), 175.

¹⁰ Ibid.

act of civil warfare on the Republic. However, once outside influences are more closely considered, it becomes apparent that far greater personal and political significance existed that extended beyond the battlefield: for instance, rather than a novel uprising, the march likely was facilitated by the Italian War. While this type of analysis might seem too broad to capture details, it is not meant to undervalue the importance of any single event. In fact, it makes events more remarkable, because they become pieces of the larger interconnected puzzle of the Roman Republic that help historians better understand the rise and downfall of the nation.

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