

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-2d The Crisis of the Late Republic

Book Title: World Civilizations

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## 10-2d The Crisis of the Late Republic

All through this imperial expansion, Rome's government had remained technically that of an ethnically homogeneous city-state, with traditional powers allocated between the senatorial upper class and the masses. By the end of the second century, the real Rome had deviated far from this ideal, and the strains were beginning to show.

Many poverty-stricken former farmers flocked into the city, seeking any kind of work and ready to listen to anyone promising them a better existence. Many of them had served in the army for years and were then discharged, only to find that their lands had been seized to pay debts or confiscated through the maneuvers of wealthy speculators. The new landowners created great estates that were worked by the vast numbers of slaves that the Roman overseas conquests were bringing into Italy.

The members of this new urban *proletariat* (proh-leh-TAY-ree-uht)—people without sources of income except the daily sale of their labor—were citizens with votes, and they were ready to sell those votes to the highest bidder. They were also ready to follow any general who promised them a decent living in his army of long-serving veterans. Men would serve out their time and then be given a good mustering-out pension or a bit of land to support them in old age. That land could be taken easily enough from the victims of new Roman-incited wars around the Mediterranean Sea and in what is now Western Europe. But in Italy itself, this “land problem”—the forcing of the peasant-soldiers off their ancestral land—proved insoluble.

Starting about 150 B.C.E., Roman public life thus became a complex struggle between those upper-class individuals who saw the growing need for social and political reform and those who rejected reform under the banner of sacred tradition. Among the former was a certain Gaius Marius. This former consul saw his chance for fame in a war against African rebels and had himself reelected consul for six terms—a first that was to become commonplace within a couple more decades. Marius also abolished the property qualification for his soldiers, thereby opening the way for an army comprising men who had nothing to lose by enlisting and would follow any leaders who made sure they got plunder and pensions. More and more, the Roman military was becoming a force for instability and the essential base for all who had political ambitions.

In 83 B.C.E. the harsh soldier-consul Sulla made himself dictator and packed the Senate with new men who would obey him. Sulla instituted several beneficial political reforms as well, but they were abolished as soon as he died in 78, and the government reverted immediately to open or covert warfare of wealthy senatorial groups against each other.

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