

FALL OF ROME

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THE SOURCE OF THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the Roman government's inadequacy and corruption was the main reason behind Rome's collapse. Political inadequacy is the inability of a ruling body to produce an effective government, which may lead to revolt and the malfunction of society as a whole. As such, this paper analyzes specific incidents such as the economic crisis and the spread of disunity that led to the collapse of Rome and relates them to the imperial rule. I also consider alternative claims about the fall of Rome such as barbarian invasions, Christianity, and environmental factors causing its collapse. This paper is important because it helps us identify and understand the main cause of Rome's collapse, namely, its government. I conclude my paper by highlighting the importance of learning from the mistakes made by the Roman government in order to enhance the political systems we have in place in today's world.

Keywords: Roman Empire, Imperial rule, Byzantine Empire, political inadequacy, corruption, electoral bribery

The Source of The Fall of The Roman Empire

Many people know of the proverb “Rome was not built in a day”. While this proverb is regarded as common knowledge, the statement “Rome was destroyed in a day” by barbarians, is also suggested by some. This, however, is far from the truth. Contrary to popular belief, Rome was gradually destroyed from within its own walls by its governing power.

In this paper, I argue that political inadequacy and corruption are the main reasons behind the downfall of the Roman Empire. I define political inadequacy as the inability of a ruling body to produce an effective government, which may lead to revolt and the malfunction of society as a whole. Since Rome fell on multiple occasions throughout history, it is important to specify the specific year discussed in this paper. This specific year will be 476 A.D., when the barbarian Germanic soldier, Odoacer, took control of Rome by defeating the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus (“Roman Empire”, 2023). There is an extensive debate surrounding the source of the collapse of the Roman Empire. These sources range from barbarian invasions to the economic crisis; thus, I will demonstrate how they link to the flaws in the imperial rule at the time.

I support my position on political inadequacy and corruption ultimately determining the downfall of the Roman Empire with the following three arguments. First, I argue that poor decision-making and the mismanagement of resources led to economic instability. For example, Goldsworthy (2009) posits that Roman soldiers were compensated with items such as grain because of the instability of the currency at the time. Second, I argue that the Eastern Roman Empire survived longer than the Western Roman Empire because of the aptitude of its governing body. As Saunders (1963) and Haldon et al. (2022) argue, the Eastern Empire was wealthier, more developed, and better governed than its Western counterpart. Finally, I argue that the unpopularity of the government because of sheer corruption and instability

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elicited hostility and unrest in the nation. As Stam (2009) points out, the most impactful cause behind the destruction of Rome was the internal conflict within its walls.

I also consider three alternative views to my position. First, Kulikowski (2006), Piganiol (1950), and many others, cite the multitude of military defeats the Roman Empire suffered against barbarian tribes as the main reason behind the fall of Rome. Second, as Jones (1955) discusses, some argue that Christianity diverted power away from the emperor and created a power struggle and a sense of vulnerability that led to the demise of the empire (Chadwick et al., 2023; “The Fall of The Roman Empire,” n.d.). Third, researchers such as Harper (2016) evaluate the claim that natural forces brought about the collapse of Rome. I show that the above claims have merit; however, the overarching corrupt government and its inability to rule had a role to play in all these arguments. For example, as Saunders (1963) and Andrews (2023) explain, the government’s poor decision to trust the barbarians and draft them into their military allowed the barbarians to conquer Rome, which many people believe is the main cause of Rome’s demise.

This paper is important because it addresses various questions that aid our understanding of the cause of Rome’s collapse. These questions include “How did political inadequacy and corruption lead to the demise of the Roman Empire,” “What are some specific examples of political inadequacy and corruption in the Roman Empire,” and “How could the Roman Empire’s demise have been avoided.” Through addressing these questions, the objective of this paper is to shed light on the government’s prominent role in the fall of the Roman Empire and put other speculations to rest. By doing so, we can learn from the political mistakes made by the Romans and implement this knowledge into enhancing today’s political systems.

How the Flawed Imperial Rule Caused Rome to Fall

Although it is heavily debated, the main cause of the fall of Rome is directly related to the mistakes, inability, and cruelty of the Roman government. The governing power committed many ill-advised decisions that led to the economic demise of Rome. This power

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was also to blame for decreasing the morale of Roman citizens through their oppression. In addition, the Eastern Roman Empire was ruled in a much better fashion than the Western Roman Empire and therefore thrived for a much longer period.

The Economic Collapse

The inefficient allocation of resources by imperial rule led to a downturn in the economic performance of the empire. Goldsworthy (2009) explains that during the end of the Roman Empire's era, the economy was struggling with high levels of inflation and a weak currency. The author goes on to ascribe these struggles to the greed of the emperors at the time, showing that these emperors were led toward the path of inefficiency in their pursuit of power. This inefficiency would eventually lead to a decline in the resources and financial capabilities of the government. Goldsworthy stresses that this faulty political structure based on staying in power was inevitably going to fall because of the government's lack of focus on efficiency and governing effectively. Similarly, Stam (2009) adds to this argument by emphasizing that the mismanagement of available resources by the imperial rule was an impactful factor in Rome's economic decay.

The inadequacy of the government led them to make a multitude of erroneous decisions that caused a deterioration of the Roman economy. West (1932) and Andrews (2023) discuss Rome's irrational spending on extravagances such as ornaments and furniture that exhausted the nation's gold and silver. More specifically, estimates from West's study suggest that the supply of gold and silver decreased from \$1.7B in 14 A.D. to \$165M in 800 A.D. This waste coupled with the already low standards of living delivered a heavy blow to Rome's economy. Additionally, Jones (1955) and Dayan (2017) make clear that Rome's taxation policy was severely detrimental to its economy. The authors highlight that taxation started by being fair to the citizen but only became heavier and more brutal as time went on. Seeing how the government would then use this tax revenue in a wasteful manner, we can see why Rome's economy dwindled over time. Furthermore, Andrews and Piganiol (1950) suggests that with the high demand for workers and the limited number of slaves in the labor

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sector at the time, Rome's overreliance on them would stunt its economic growth, while also driving demand away from the lower class ("The Fall of Rome," n.d.).

While the Roman Empire made economic blunders, government rule in the Roman Republic (510–27 BC) also displayed a similar recurring theme of overexpansion and poor judgment that aligned with that of the Roman Empire. The Roman Republic developed a sense of carelessness and greed in unison with the pursuit of luxury, which left them vulnerable (Levick, 1982; Jarus, 2021). When discussing the Roman Republic's collapse, Jankowski (2021) investigates the imperial rule's commitment to expanding their nation into an empire and how it ultimately elicited a feeling of complacency among both the government and the citizens. The author further considers that the wealth accumulated from conquests led to the revolt that brought down the Roman Republic by strengthening the armies of military leaders that executed this revolution. Jankowski suggests that if the government had not been blindsided by expansion, the Senate could have limited the monetary budget of these military revolutionists. Although we see many similar characteristics between the two governing bodies, the Empire's leaders were more absorbed by the desire to stay in power. In both cases, we see governmental flaws that led to the untimely collapse of the two superpowers. Therefore, the same love of power that led to the collapse of the Roman Republic is associated with the Roman Empire's collapse.

The Spread of Hostility and Unrest Across the Nation

In addition to the damage they did to the economic infrastructure of Rome, the government was also responsible for the rise of internal conflict. Stam (2009) argues that the Romans' internal conflicts were the main source of their downfall. As explained by Piganiol (1950), the Roman civilians had little to no say in how their nation was run, while also being faced with a significant financial gap between the upper and lower social classes ("The Fall of Rome," n.d.). As a result, a lack of nationalism developed among the lower class, which saw other barbarian tribes rise in confidence. Piganiol goes on to explore the idea that the poor called upon the barbarians to deliver justice for them against the upper class. We may

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speculate that if the barbarians were kept in check by a united and nationalistic Rome, they would not have caused the uprising that brought an end to the Roman Empire.

Along with these internal conflicts, the cruelty of Roman emperors also had an impactful role to play in the spread of discord among the citizens. Deretić (2022) examines the power that was associated with being an emperor at the time and compares it to that of a lord recognized through fear. For example, prisoners under the Roman Empire were brought into a “theatre of torture and death” in a secluded city in Palestine (Moore, 2004, p. 349). Additionally, barbarians living in Rome were subjected to extreme cruelty. According to Andrews (2023), government officials would only provide the malnourished barbarians with dog meat in exchange for their children. This lack of regard for humanity earned the government a feared and hated reputation amongst Roman citizens.

Although the government’s inability played a role in giving rise to civil unrest, its corruption played an even bigger one. As detailed by Deretić (2022), government members elicited terror among the citizens because of their reputations for bribery and abuse of power. Accordingly, Deretić highlights that the emperor would set laws that were solely for his benefit. In his work discussing the Roman Republic, Lintott (1990) posits many instances where political leaders used electoral bribery to force their way into power. For instance, the author examines the Roman general Gaius Marius's bribery of people to gain their support in the Senate in the year 115 BC. Furthermore, Lintott investigates acts of violence that saw leaders such as Crassus and Pompey come into power through intimidation. Therefore, we can see the parallel between the corruption of the Republic and that of the Empire. Overall, the governmental corruption, and the low standards of living the citizens were put through compounded the damaging effect on the government’s reputation.

The Comparative Political Success of the Eastern Roman Empire

While the Western Roman Empire struggled with civil unrest, the splitting of Rome saw the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire outlast them by almost 1000 years. The Roman Empire was officially divided into East and West in the year 395 AD to improve the

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government's management efficiency and solve issues of instability (Spaulding, 2022). The West would then collapse because of the inadequacy of its government while the East would thrive into a worldwide trade hub with an impenetrable economic infrastructure (Cartwright, 2018). As detailed by Haldon et al. (2022), the endurance of the Byzantine Empire came from the amelioration of its government's system and its ability to maximize the available natural resources. Thus, we can see how one side of the divide was able to prosper because of its imperial rule while the other side ceased to exist because of theirs.

The Western Roman Empire collapsed because of its political and economic inadequacy in comparison to the Eastern half. As emphasized by Haldon et al. (2022) and Saunders (1963), the East developed a close-knit imperial hierarchy that allowed them to maintain resource efficiency and stronger command of its land. By contrast, as seen above, the West grew complacent, spent profligately, and set an inefficient taxation system. This faulty economic infrastructure was bound to collapse at some point. Furthermore, both Haldon et al. and Saunders argue that the solid political structure in the East shifted the balance of power in its direction, allowing it to bolster its military. This strengthened military was able to fend off a multitude of attacks, which the West was not capable of doing ("Byzantine Empire," 2022).

Other Sources That Caused the Fall of Rome

Many people believe that the government was not the main source behind the fall of Rome. For instance, they argue that barbarian conflicts were the main source, as they overwhelmed the Romans. In addition, some of them argue that Christianity diminished the power of Rome. Others argue that environmental factors such as climate change and disease debilitated the Roman forces. However, the Eastern Roman Empire went through the same environmental challenges as the West and was able to survive.

Barbarian Invasions Killed the Roman Empire

Many believe that relentless barbarian invasions ultimately ended the Roman Empire. In his depiction of the barbarian's invasion of Rome, Saunders (1963) discusses how the

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Goths, a Germanic barbarian tribe, were allowed sanctuary in Rome after being forced out of Eastern Europe by the Huns. The author explains that upon the Goths' arrival they started many conflicts, eventually killing the Roman emperor, Valens. Saunders goes on to explain how the Goths were eventually drafted into the army by Theodosius I to dispatch other barbarians that were threatening Rome at the time. Ultimately, after cooperating with the Romans for many years, the Goths decided to assume complete control of the empire in 476 A.D. where they overthrew the Romans ("Goths and Visigoths," 2019). The conflicts that directly led to the fall of Rome came with the decision to allow the Goths to enter Rome. In fact, this situation could have been avoided had Rome not mistakenly trusted the Goths and drafted them into its military. In addition, had they not allowed the Goths into Rome, the conflict between the Huns and the Goths could have continued, which would have weakened both enemies of Rome.

Others suggest that the Huns, another barbarian tribe, were responsible for the fall of Rome. According to Kulikowski (2006), the source of the fall of the Roman Empire was when the Huns had forced multiple barbarian tribes, including the Goths in 376 A.D. and the Vandals in 405 A.D., into Roman territory by pressurizing them away from the East. The internal conflicts and economic collapse the Romans were experiencing at the time because of governmental blunders, left them vulnerable to these attacks. Consequently, the empire had an extremely limited amount of capital to spend on military reinforcement along with an already-conquered mindset adopted by Roman citizens. As such, the government's inability to control the internal economic and social issues that Rome was experiencing allowed the barbarians to defeat them in battle.

Christianity Weakened Rome Beyond Repair

Some people suggest that the spread of Christianity caused the spread of disunity. Jones (1955) argues that Christianity led to the collapse of Rome by spreading pessimism across the nation and in turn weakening the nation's military, manpower, and patriotism ("The Fall of The Roman Empire," n.d.). Jones further adds that because this lack of fight

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was instilled in the citizens, they were easily defeated by the barbarians. In reality, as argued by Andrews (2023), this pessimism came from the harsh living conditions and the cruelty the citizens experienced at the hands of the ruling body and not from Christianity. Indeed, the causal relationship between the rise of Christianity and the spread of disunity is unsubstantiated. As highlighted by Piganiol (1950), a religion that had the potential to unite the Empire in the future could not have led to its collapse.

Others also argue that as Christianity grew, political power was diverted away from the emperor. The Christian religion's monotheistic view, the belief that there is only one God, directly opposed traditional Roman views and weakened the emperor's reputation ("The Fall of The Roman Empire," n.d.). However, the emperor's reputation had already been weakened by self-induced political mistakes and fraud. Therefore, the rise of Christianity's effects on Rome were minimalistic in comparison to the inability and corruption of its leadership.

The Environmental Fall of the Roman Empire

The opposition credit the fall of the Roman Empire to natural causes beyond the government's control. According to Harper (2016), climate change and disease were extremely detrimental to the Romans and played a role in their downfall. Harper highlights that these natural factors also aggravated the barbarians and instigated their conflict with the Romans. However, it was the invasion of the Huns into Europe that forced barbarian tribes onto Roman soil and Rome's government allowed them in ("Goths and Visigoths," 2019). Additionally, as argued by Haldon et al. (2022), the same natural factors that affected the West had also affected the East; however, the sound political and economic structure of the East allowed them to overcome this challenge. As such, these environmental effects were completely insignificant compared to the government's inability and its impact on the fall of Rome.

In addition to climate change, the fall of the Roman Empire is sometimes ascribed to the spread of plague and other natural diseases. The Antonine Plague and Plague of Cyprian, which hit Rome in the years 165 A.D. and 251 A.D. respectively, killed around a quarter of

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the Roman population at the time (Goodier, n.d.). These two events occurred long before the fall of Rome in 476 A.D., highlighting their lack of significance in impacting the fall of Rome. Ultimately, the accumulation of mistakes made at the political level years later caused the empire's collapse.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that Rome's defective political system is to blame for its downfall. Roman government leaders were involved in high levels of profligacy and resource maladministration, which meant that an economic depression was inevitable. Among the many faults of this ruling body, are its cruelty and corruption, which blemished its reputation and led to social turmoil. In addition, the government's impact on the Western Roman Empire can be seen when examining the history of the Eastern Roman Empire. Under similar conditions, the East was able to grow into a superpower at around the same time the West collapsed because of their successful political body.

Although the government's involvement in Rome's collapse is clear, critics continue to cite other reasons as primary sources of Rome's demise. Opponents argue that Rome would not have survived attacks from the barbarians regardless of their government. However, evidence emphasizes that the government's decision to allow barbarians within its borders in the first place gave the barbarians easy access to destroy Rome. Additionally, critics suggest that Christianity's alienating effect on Roman society caused Rome's collapse. By contrast, research highlights that the spread of Christianity merely coincided with the spread of disunity that was caused by other political and economic factors. In addition, people argue that climate change and disease diminished the Romans beyond restoration. However, studies show that the notable detrimental natural events of the time occurred centuries before Rome's fall, emphasizing Rome's ability to recover.

Researchers have debated the core reason behind the fall of Rome for many years. The reasons that have been put forth are either of little significance or are intertwined with the actions of the government. Therefore, the government had the biggest impact on the fall

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of the Roman Empire. Moreover, the Roman government avoided scrutiny for far too long and its mistakes and ineffectiveness should be learned from in order to improve political systems around the world. As Warren Buffet once said, “It’s good to learn from your mistakes. It’s better to learn from other people’s mistakes.” By implementing this philosophy, countries may avoid the same fate as the Romans.

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