

THE FALL OF ROME

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Many factors contributed to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire including invasions, economic collapse, and inner turmoil. The economic downturn created other situations which accelerated the decline through secondary effects and all of these finally culminated to bring the Roman Empire to its knees. The cessation of outward expansion and acquisition of new territory and resources triggered the decline and eventual collapse of the Roman Empire.

Before the decline began, Rome often engaged in war to acquire new exploitable resources and to bring in “vast sums as booty”.¹ The continued growth of the Roman Empire allowed continued growth of the Empire's economy. Once the Empire transitioned from expansionist to peacetime maintenance, the economy stagnated or shrank, depending on the area.² With the crippled economy, the Empire experienced a shortage of funds which stretched the reserves to their limits to pay the wages of the military and numerous public officials. Unfortunately, continued expansion would have been neither immediately profitable or possible with the manpower available at the

1 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 20

2 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 20

time.³ Decentralization of the economy due to the increased risks and cost of transportation further destabilized the already weak central economy. These economic burdens were consistently passed on to the public via additional taxation.

Ward-Perkins articulated, “the key internal element in Rome's success or failure was the economic well-being of its taxpayers.”⁴ This was illustrated by numerous the side effects that additional taxation had on the Roman economy and Roman society. With a stagnant or shrinking economy, increased taxation easily forced once prosperous families into near-poverty. Little or no surplus in these families had two consequences with the same result: depopulation. In some cases, families were unable to pay the taxes required of their land, and left it. In other cases, the families managed to keep pace with taxes, but were unable to produce children fast enough to offset the death rate due to the lack of funds for raising children.⁵ The infants that could not be provided for were often sold into slavery. This practice was illegal but “from about 300 onwards the practice was officially tolerated; and in a terrible famine of 450 it became widespread.”⁶ Increasing taxation also created several other problems. It significantly

3 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 80

4 Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 41

5 Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Annenburg School Press, c1976), 100

6 Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Annenburg School Press, c1976), 101

reduced enterprise, since more taxes meant less profit or even no profit for businesses and many simply closed up shop. As taxation increased, the central government slowly tightened its grip on municipalities to ensure that all taxes were collected in full. Failing cities and provinces were often assigned imperial commissioners or administrative experts to reorganize and restructure their finances, but its problems only presented themselves when the practice became regular and long term.⁷ This opened the channels for further control of local affairs and began a speedy degradation of municipal liberty, “a keystone of the structure of Roman civilization.”⁸ The end result of this degradation was a complete loss of self-government on the local scale. The security of the Roman Empire from invasion was entirely dependent on a well supplied and funded military. This added burden also manifested by causing the portion of the population that was subject to taxation to resent the taxation and even military itself. At this point, they became unwilling to “maintain the army and fill its ranks.”⁹ The military was forced to find manpower elsewhere, and turned to barbarian allies and mercenaries to get what it needed. The barbarization of the military caused revenue to leave the Roman Empire entirely, which led to inflation and a worsening economy.

7 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 22

8 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 22

9 Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Annenburg School Press, c1976), 92

Inner turmoil was a constant drain to the economy. The frequent supplantation of old regimes by new ones occasionally caused the loss of a province, typically caused military deaths, civilian deaths, and wasted resources inside the Empire. These resources and manpower might have been better spent defending frontiers from attack and regaining territory that had already been lost to such attacks to promote restoration of, at least, a stagnant economy.¹⁰ The rapid change of regime was usually caused by the death of an emperor without sufficient provision for succession or a forceful removal of the emperor and his replacement with a military leader, usually a general.

Increased external conflict worsened the situation by diverting military resources away from the somewhat static frontier and toward other, more aggressive opponents. This was made worse by the fact that there was no mechanism for borrowing money on credit to bolster the military in times of emergency.¹¹¹² One instance of this was the removal of soldiers from the northern front to reinforce the effort being put forth in the Parthian Wars in the eastern regions of the Roman Empire.¹³ Several barbarian tribes in the north, including the Marcomanni and Quadi, took advantage of this opportunity in

10 Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Annenburg School Press, c1976), 66

11 Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 41

12 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 22

13 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 21

167 and made it as far as northern Italy before they were turned back.¹⁴ The Huns

were a large part of the external challenges faced by the Romans, as illustrated by

Edward Gibbons in *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

The barbarian world was agitated by the rapid impulse of war; and the peace of Gaul or Italy was shaken by the distant revolutions of China. The Huns, who fled before a victorious enemy, directed their march towards the West; and the torrent was swelled by the gradual accession of captives and allies. The flying tribes who yielded to the Huns assumed in their turn the spirit of conquest; the endless column of barbarians pressed on the Roman empire with accumulated weight; and if the foremost were destroyed, the vacant space was instantly replenished by new assailants.¹⁵

The Huns never stopped coming and gathered multitudes of other barbarians at their

side that allowed them to continue their assault long after the Roman military had

exhausted the resources that were immediately available to them. Due to the

weakened economy, those resources were already fragile, but effectively combating the

relentless onslaught of Huns required much more than the Roman Empire could provide

at one time and the loss of provinces to the Huns damaged the economy further.

Another side effect of the external conflict was that farmers often fled their land rather

than be torn asunder when faced with advancing enemy troops, causing further

economic downturn and depopulation for those who remained behind and lost their

14 Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 21

15 Edward Gibbons, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1899.

lives.¹⁶

The economic stagnation and collapse initiated by the halt of expansion into and acquisition of new resources and territory caused the majority of the secondary and tertiary effects that fed back onto themselves to initiate and accelerate the downward spiral of the Roman Empire toward its destruction. These feedback effects include weakened defenses, loss of territory, over taxation, depopulation, and internal turmoil. The culmination of the economic collapse and its effects caused the decentralization of the Roman economy and, finally, halted the existence of the Roman Empire.

¹⁶ Solomon Katz, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Mediaeval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 21

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