

War Selection in the Ancient World

David Starr Jordan

Table of Contents

<u>War Selection in the Ancient World</u>	1
<u>David Starr Jordan</u>	2

War Selection in the Ancient World

David Starr Jordan

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

The human harvest was bad!" Thus the historian sums up the conditions in Rome in the days of the good emperor, Marcus Aurelius. By this he meant that while population and wealth were increasing, manhood had failed. There were men enough in the streets, men enough in the camps, menial laborers enough and idlers enough, but of good soldiers there were too few. For the business of the state, which in those days was mainly war, its men were inadequate.

In recognition of this condition we touch again the overshadowing fact in the history of Europe, the effect of "military selection" on the human breed.

In rapid survey of the evidence brought from history one must paint the picture, such as it is, with a broad brush, not attempting to treat exceptions and qualifications, for which this article has no space and concerning which records yield no data. Such exceptions, if fully understood, would only prove the rule. The evil effects of military selection and its associated influences have long been recognized in theory by certain students of social evolution. But the ideas derived from the sane application of our knowledge of Darwinism to history are even now just beginning to penetrate the current literature of war and peace. In public affairs most nations have followed the principle of opportunism, "striking while the iron is hot," without regard to future results, whether of financial exhaustion or of race impoverishment.

The recorded history of Rome begins with small and vigorous tribes inhabiting the flanks of the Apennines and the valleys down to the sea, and blending together to form the Roman republic. They were men of courage and men of action, virile, austere, severe and dominant.[1] They were men who "looked on none as their superior and none as their inferior." For this reason, Rome was long a republic. Free-born men control their own destinies. "The fault," says Cassius, "is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings." Thus in freedom, when Rome was small without glory, without riches, without colonies and without slaves, she laid the foundations of greatness.

[1] *Virilis, austerus, severus, dominous, good old words applied by Romans to themselves.*

But little by little the spirit of freedom gave way to that of domination. Conscious of power, men sought to exercise it, not on themselves but on one another. Little by little this meant aggression, suppression, plunder, struggle, glory and all that goes with the pomp and circumstance of war. So the individuality in the mass was lost in the aggrandizement of the few. Independence was swallowed up in ambition and patriotism came to have a new meaning, being transferred from hearth and home to the camp and the army.

In the subsequent history of Rome, we have now to consider only a single factor, the reversal of selection." In Rome's conquests, Vir, the real man, went forth to battle and foreign invasion; Homo, the human being, remained on the farm and in the workshop and begat the new generations. "Vir gave place to Homo," says the Latin author. Men of good stock were replaced by the sons of slaves and camp-followers, the riff-raff of those the army sucked in but could not use.

The Fall of Rome was due not to luxury, effeminacy or corruption, not to Nero's or Caligula's wickedness, nor to the futility of Constantine's descendants. It began at Philippi, where the spirit of domination overcame the spirit of freedom. It was forecast still earlier in the rise of consuls and triumvirs incident to the thinning out of the sturdy and self-sufficient strains who brooked no arbitrary rule. While the best men were falling in war, civil or foreign, or remained behind in faraway colonies, the stock at home went on repeating its weakling parentage. A condition significant in Roman history is marked by the gradual swelling of the mob, with the rise in authority of the Emperor who was the mob's exponent. Increase of arbitrary power went with the growing weakness of the Romans themselves. Always the "Emperor" serves as a sort of historical barometer by which to measure the

War Selection in the Ancient World

abasement of the people. The concentrated power of Julius Caesar, resting on his own tremendous personality, showed that the days of Cincinnatus and of Junius Brutus were past. The strength of Augustus rested likewise in personality. The rising authority of later emperors had its roots in the ineffectiveness of the mob, until it came to pass that "the little finger of Constantine was thicker than the loins of Augustus." This was due not to Constantine's force, but to the continued reversal of selection among the people over whom he ruled. The emperor, no longer the strong man holding in check all lesser men and organizations, became the creature of the mob; and "the mob, intoxicated with its own work, worshipped him as divine." Doubtless the last emperor, Augustulus Romulus, before the Goths threw him into the scrap-heap of history, was regarded by the mob and himself as the most god-like of the whole succession.

The Romans of the Republic might perhaps have made a history very different. Had they held aloof from world-conquering schemes Rome might have remained a republic, enduring even down to our day. The seeds of Rome's fall lay not in race nor in form of government, nor in wealth nor in senility, but in the influences by which the best men were cut off from parenthood, leaving its own weaker strains and strains of lower races to be fathers of coming generations.

"The Roman Empire," says Professor Seely, "perished for want of men." Even Julius Caesar notes the dire scarcity of men, while at the same time there were people enough. The population steadily grew; Rome was filling up like an overflowing marsh. Men of a certain type were plenty, but self-reliant farmers, "the hardy dwellers on the flanks of the Apennines," men of the early Roman days, these were fast going, and with the change in type of population came the turn in Roman history.

The mainspring of the Roman army for centuries has been the patient strength and courage, capacity for enduring hardships, instinctive submission to military discipline of the population that lined the Apennines.

"The effect of the wars was that the ranks of the small farmers were decimated, while the number of slaves who did not serve in the army multiplied," says Professor Bury. Thus "Vir gave place to Homo," thus the mob filled Rome and the mob-hero rose to the imperial throne. No wonder that Constantine seemed greater than Augustus. No wonder that "if Tiberius chastised his subjects with whips, Valentinian chastised them with scorpions." [2]

[2] The point of this is that the cruel Tiberius was less severe on the Romans of his day than was the relatively benevolent Valentinian on his decadent people.

With Marcus Aurelius and the Antonines came a "period of sterility and barrenness in human beings." Bounties were offered for marriage. Penalties were devised against race-suicide. "Marriage," says Metellus, "is a duty which, however painful, every citizen ought manfully to discharge." Wars were conducted in the face of a declining birth-rate, and the decline in quality and quantity in the human breed engaged very early the attention of Roman statesmen. Deficiencies of numbers were made up by immigration, willing or enforced. Failure in quality was beyond remedy.

Says Professor Zumpt:

'Government having assumed godhead, took at the same time the appurtenances of it. Officials multiplied. Subjects lost their rights. Abject fear paralyzed the people and those that ruled were intoxicated with insolence and cruelty.... The worst government is that which is most worshipped as divine. . . . The emperor possessed in the army an overwhelming force over which citizens had no influence, which was totally deaf to reason or eloquence, which had no patriotism because it had no country, which had no humanity because it had no domestic ties. . . . There runs through Roman literature a brigand's and barbarian's contempt for honest industry. . . . Roman civilization was not a creative kind, it was military, that is, destructive.'

What was the end of it all? The nation bred Romans no more. To cultivate the Roman fields "whole tribes were borrowed." The man with quick eye and strong arm gave place to the slave, the scullion, the pariah, whose lot is fixed because in him there lies no power to alter it. So at last the Roman world, devoid of power to resist, was overwhelmed by the swarming Ostrogoths.

The barbarian settled and peopled the empire rather than conquered it. It was the weakness of war-worn Rome that gave the Germanic races their first opportunity.

"The nation is like a bee," wisely observes Bernard Shaw, "as it stings it dies."

In his monumental history of the "Downfall of the Ancient World" (Der Untergang der Antikenwelt) Dr. Otto Seeck of the University of Munster in Westphalia, treats in detail the causes of such decline. He first calls attention to the intellectual stagnation which came over the Roman Empire about the beginning of the Christian

War Selection in the Ancient World

Era. This manifested itself in all fields of intellectual activity. No new idea of any importance was advanced in science nor in technical and political studies. In the realm of literature and art also one finds a complete lack of originality and a tendency to imitate older models. All this Seeck asserts, was brought about by the continuous "rooting out (Ausrottung) of the best"[3] through war.

[3] *"Die Ausrottung der Besten, die jenen schwächeren Völkern die Vernichtung brachte, hat die starken Germanen erst befähigt, auf den Trummern der antiken Welt neue dauerende Gemeinschaften zu errichten."* Seeck.

Such extermination which took place in Greece as well as in Rome, was due to persistent internal conflicts, the constant murderous struggle going on between political parties, in which, in rapid succession, first one and then the other was victorious. The custom of the victors being to kill and banish the leaders and all prominent men in the defeated party, often destroying their children as well, it is evident that in time every strain distinguished for moral courage, initiative or intellectual strength was exterminated. By such a systematic killing off of men of initiative and brains, the intellectual level of a nation must necessarily be lowered more and more. In Rome as in Greece observes Seeck:

'A wealth of force of spirit went down in the suicidal wars. . . . In Rome, Marius and Cinna slew the aristocrats by hundreds and thousands. Sulla destroyed the democrats, and not less thoroughly. Whatever of strong blood survived, fell as an offering to the proscription of the Triumvirate. . . . The Romans had less of spontaneous force to lose than the Greeks. Thus desolation came sooner to them. Whoever was bold enough to rise politically in Rome was almost without exception thrown to the ground. ONLY COWARDS REMAINED, AND FROM THEIR BLOOD CAME FORWARD THE NEW GENERATIONS.[4] Cowardice showed itself in lack of originality and in slavish following of masters and traditions.'

[4] *Author's italics.*

Certain authors, following Varro, have maintained that Rome died a "natural death," the normal result of old age. It is mere fancy to suppose that nations have their birth, their maturity and their decline under an inexorable law like that which determines the life history of the individual. A nation is a body of living men. It may be broken up if wrongly led or attacked by a superior force. When its proportion of men of initiative or character is reduced, its future will necessarily be a resultant of the forces that are left.

Dr. Seeck speaks with especial scorn of the idea that Rome died of "old age." He also repudiates the theory that her fall was due to the corruption of luxury, neglect of military tactics or over-diffusion of culture.

'It is inconceivable that the mass of Romans suffered from over-culture.[5] In condemning the sinful luxury of wealthy Romans we forget that the trade-lords of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were scarcely inferior in this regard to Lucullus and Apicius, their waste and luxury not constituting the slightest check to the advance of the nations to which these men belonged. The people who lived in luxury in Rome were scattered more thinly than in any modern state of Europe. The masses lived at all times more poorly and frugally because they could do nothing else. Can we conceive that a war force of untold millions of people is rendered effeminate by the luxury of a few hundreds? . . . Too long have historians looked on the rich and noble as marking the fate of the world. Half the Roman Empire was made up of rough barbarians untouched by Greek or Roman culture.

Whatever the remote and ultimate cause may have been, the immediate cause to which the fall of the empire can be traced is a physical, not a moral decay. In valor, discipline and science the Roman armies remained what they had always been, and the peasant emperors of Illyricum were worthy successors of Cincinnatus and Calus Marius. But the problem was, how to replenish those armies. Men were wanting. The empire perished for want of men.'

[5] *"Damitsprechend hat man das Wort 'Ueberkultur' überhaupt erfunden, als wenn ein zu grosses Maass von Kultur überhaupt denkbar wäre."*

In a volume entitled "Race or Mongrel" published as I write these pages, Dr. Alfred P. Schultz of New York, author of "The End of Darwinism," takes essentially the same series of facts as to the fall of Rome and draws from them a somewhat different conclusion. In his judgment the cause was due to "bastardy," to the mixing of Roman blood with that of neighboring and subjective races. To my mind, bastardy was the result and not the cause of Rome's decline, inferior and subject races having been sucked into Rome to fill the vacuum left as the Romans themselves perished in war. The continuous killing of the best left room for the "post-Roman herd," who once sold the imperial throne at auction to the highest bidder. As the Romans vanished through warfare at home and

War Selection in the Ancient World

abroad, came an inrush of foreign blood from all regions roundabout. As Schultz graphically states:

'The degeneration and depravity of the mongrels was so great that they deified the emperors. And many of the emperors were of a character so vile that their deification proves that the post-Roman soul must have been more depraved than that of the Egyptian mongrel, who deified nothing lower than dogs, cats, crocodiles, bugs and vegetables.'

It must not be overlooked, however, that the Roman race was never a pure race. It was a union of strong elements of frontier democratic peoples, Sabines, Umbrians, Sicilians, Etruscans, Greeks, being blended in republican Rome. Whatever the origins, the worst outlived the best, mingling at last with the odds and ends of Imperial slavery, the "Sewage of Races" ("cloaca gentium") left at the Fall.

Gibbon says:

'This diminutive stature of mankind was daily sinking below the old standard and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies when the fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed. They restored the manly spirit of freedom and after the revolutions of ten centuries, freedom became the parent of taste and science.'

But again, the redeemed Italian was of no purer blood than the post-Roman-Ostrogoth ancestry from which he sprang. The "puny Roman" of the days of Theodoric owed his inheritance to the cross of Roman weaklings with Roman slaves. He was not weak because he was "mongrel" but because he sprang from bad stock on both sides. The Ostrogoth and the Lombard who tyrannized over him brought in a great strain of sterner stuff, followed by crosses with captive and slave such as always accompany conquest. To understand the fall of Rome one must consider the disastrous effects of crossings of this sort. Neither can one overlook the waste of war which made them inevitable through the wholesale influx of inferior tribes. Neither can one speak of the Roman, the Italian, the Spaniard, the French, the Roumanian, nor of any of the so-called "Latin" peoples as representing a simple pure stock, or as being, except in language, direct descendants of those ancient Latins who constituted the Roman Republic. The failure of Rome arose not from hybridization, but from the wretched quality on both sides of its mongrel stock, descendants of Romans unfit for war and of base immigrants that had filled the vacancies.

Greece.—Once Greece led the world in intellectual pursuits, in art, in poetry, in philosophy. A large and vital part of European culture is rooted directly in the language and thought of Athens. The most beautiful edifice in the world was the Peace Palace of the Parthenon, erected by Pericles, to celebrate the end of Greece's suicidal wars. This endured 2,187 years, to be wrecked at last (1687) in Turkish hands by the Christian bombs of the Venetian Republic.

But the glory of Greece had passed away long before the fall of the Parthenon. Its cause was the one cause of all such downfalls—the extinction of strong men by war. At the best, the civilization of Greece was built on slavery, one freeman to ten slaves. And when the freemen were destroyed, the slaves, an original Mediterranean stock, overspread the territory of Hellas along with the Bulgarians, Albanians and Vlachs, barbarians crowding down from the north.

The Grecian language still lives, the tongue of a spirited and rising modern people. But the Greeks of the classic period—the Hellenes of literature, art and philosophy—will never be known again. Says Mr. W. H. Ireland:

'Most of the old Greek race has been swept away, and the country is now inhabited by persons of Slavonic descent. Indeed, there is a strong ground for the statement that there was more of the old heroic blood of Hellas in the Turkish army of Edhem Pasha than in the soldiers of King George.'

The modern Greek has been called a "Byzantinized Slav." King George himself and Constantine his son are only aliens placed on the Grecian throne to suit the convenience of outer powers, being in fact descendants of tribes which to the ancient Greeks were merely barbarians.

It is maintained that the modern Greeks are in the main the descendants of the population that inhabited Greece in the earlier centuries of Byzantine rule. Owing to the operation of various causes, historical, social and economic, that population was composed of many heterogeneous elements and represented in very limited degree the race which repulsed the Persians and built the Parthenon. The internecine conflicts of the Greek communities, wars with foreign powers, and the deadly struggles of factions in the various cities had to a large extent obliterated the old race of free citizens by the beginning of Roman period. The extermination of the Plataeans by the Spartans and of the Melians by the Athenians during the Peloponnesian war, the proscription of the Athenian

War Selection in the Ancient World

citizens after the war, the massacre of the Coreyrean oligarchs by the democratic party, the slaughter of the Thebans by Alexander and of the Corinthians by Mummius are among the more familiar instances of the catastrophes which overtook the civic element in the Greek cities. The void can only have been filled from the ranks of the metics or resident aliens and of the descendants of the far more numerous slave population. In the classic period four fifths of the population of Attica were slaves; of the remainder, half were metics. In A.D. 100 only three thousand free arm-bearing men were in Greece. (James D. Bouchier.)

The constant little struggles of the Greeks among themselves made no great showing as to numbers compared to other wars, but they wiped out the most valuable people, the best blood, the most promising heredity on earth. This cost the world more than the killing of millions of barbarians. In two centuries there were born under the shadow of the Parthenon more men of genius than the Roman Empire had in its whole existence. Yet this empire included all the civilized world, even Greece herself. (La Poughe.)

The downfall of Greece,[6] like that of Rome, has been ascribed by Schultz to the crossing of the Greeks with the barbaric races which flocked into Hellas from every side. These resident aliens, or metics, steadily increased in number as the free Greeks disappeared. Selected slaves or helots were then made free in order to furnish fighting men, and again as these fell their places were taken by immigrants.

[6] Certain recent writers who find in environment the causes of the rise and fall of nations, ascribe the failure of Greece to the introduction in Athens and Sparta of the malaria-bearing mosquito. As to the facts in question, we have little evidence. But while the prevalence of malaria may have affected the general activity of the people, it could in no way have obliterated the mental leadership which made the strength of classic Hellas, nor could it have injected its poison into the stream of Greek heredity.

It is doubtless true at this day that "no race inhabits Greece," and the main difference between Greeks and other Balkan peoples is that, inhabiting the mountains and valleys of Hellas, they speak in dialects of the ancient tongue. Environment, except through selection and segregation, can not alter race inheritance and the modern "Greeks" have not been changed by it. Schultz observes:

'We are told that the Hellenes owed their greatness largely to the country it was their fortune to dwell in. To that same country, with the same wonderful coast line and harbors, mountains and brooks, and the same sun of Homer, the modern Greeks owe their nothingness.'

In other words, it is quite true that the Greece of Pericles owed its strength to Greek blood, not to Hellenic scenery. When all the good Greek blood was spent in suicidal wars, only slaves and foreign-born were left. " 'Tis Greece, but living Greece no more." [7]

[7] In contrasting a new race with the old—as the modern Greeks with the incomparable Hellenes—we must not be unjust to the men of to-day whose limitations are evident, contrasted with a race we know mainly by its finest examples. In spite of poverty, touchiness and vanity characteristic of the modern Greek, there is good stuff in him. He is frank, hopeful, enthusiastic. The mountain Greek, at least, knows the value of freedom, and has more than once put up a brave fight for it. The valleys breed subserviency, and the Greeks of Thessaly are said to be less independent than the mountain-born.

Furthermore, we do not know that even the first Hellenes of Mycenae were an unmixed race, or that any unmixed races ever rose to such prominence as to command the world's attention. We do know that when war depletes a nation slaves and foreigners come in to fill the vacuum, and that the decline of a great race in history has always been accompanied by a debasing of its blood.

Yet out of this decadence natural selection may in time bring forward better strains, and with normal conditions of security and peace nature may begin again her work of recuperation.

In the fall of Greece we have another count against war, scarcely realized until the facts of Louvain and Malines, of Rheims and Ypres, have brought it again so vividly before us. War respects nothing, while the human soul increasingly demands veneration for its own noble and beautiful achievements. As I write this, there rise before me the paintings in the "Neue Pinakothek" at Munich, representing the twenty-one Cities of Ancient Greece, from Sparta to Salamis, from Eleusis to Corinth, not as they were, "in the glory which was Greece," not as they are now, largely fishing hamlets by the blue Aegean Sea, but as ruined arches and broken columns half hid in the ashes of war, wars which blotted out Greece from world history.

***Mr. Jordan is Chancellor of Leland Stanford Junior University*