

MILITARY AUTOCRACY

The Roman emperors exercised an extraordinarily effective form of military autocracy through which their subjects were held in subjection to their rule for centuries. This is not to assert that the sources reveal a society in which the agents of the state were all-pervasive, or the movement and thoughts of individuals closely controlled. On the contrary, emperors had little interest in imposing ideology – social, political or religious – and had no means to impose surveillance on the whereabouts of all the inhabitants of the empire. But in their concern to ensure their own safety, comfort, power and prestige, emperors employed a huge military force whose main but unstated purpose was the suppression of dissent.¹

POWER OF THE ARMY

The creation of a large standing army by Augustus was the secret weapon of the empire. It was a novel notion in the Roman state. Throughout the expansion of Roman power during the Republic, armies had been raised each year for warfare and disbanded at the end of the campaigning season. As late as the 90s BC the Roman state had in most years raised only six legions for all purposes; in one year in that decade, three legions had sufficed. In the following years, extended wars in distant places led to many legions being left *in situ* for more than the usual one year, even in some cases up to eight years, as in Gaul under the command of Julius Caesar in the 50s BC. Where wars were endemic because of fractious provincials, a military force of some kind came to be more or less permanently stationed, particularly in Spain and in Syria, but the assumption still remained that on the completion of their military task soldiers would return to farm peasant plots; since the settlement of Marius' veterans in 100 BC, if a soldier did not possess such a plot it would generally be provided by the state.²

Thus when in 30 BC Octavian celebrated his victory over Egypt, it would normally have been expected that he would disband all of the 60 legions under his command. These legions represented an extraordinary accumulation of troops acquired haphazardly from those who had signed on over the

preceding 14 years with one or the other leader in the civil wars. That troops were no longer needed was emphasized in 29 BC by the symbolic closing of the doors of the temple of Janus by which Octavian indicated that Rome was entirely at peace. And Octavian did indeed dismiss over half of the legions at tremendous expense, as he proudly recorded in his *Res Gestae* 3.3. But in 25 BC there were still 28 legions and a huge number of auxiliary troops under arms. What were they for?

To some extent an answer may be found in Octavian's need for military victories to bolster his prestige with the Roman people.³ It is indeed striking that the next 40 years witnessed a flurry of campaigns in Spain, the Balkans and on the Rhine. But none of these wars required more than 10 legions at any one time, and even then such a large force was unusual, as Velleius Paterculus noted in AD 7 of the campaign to put down the revolt of Pannonia and Dalmatia:

There were now gathered together in one camp ten legions, more than seventy cohorts, fourteen troops of cavalry and more than ten thousand veterans, and in addition a large number of volunteers and the numerous cavalry of the [Thracian] king – in a word, a greater army than had ever been assembled in one place since the civil wars.

(*History of Rome* 2.113.1–2)

For most of Augustus' rule, two-thirds of the legions were idle, and it was never necessary for more than half to take action at any one time. Thus up to 100,000 legionaries, fully equipped and well paid, were kept in permanent readiness for combat without ever fighting. Added to them was a number of auxiliary units, supplying perhaps 150,000 fighting men (as estimated by Tacitus of AD 23, *Annals* 4.5). The auxiliaries acted as cavalry and light infantry, and their equipment in this period was slightly less expensive and more varied than that of the legionaries. Like the legions, auxiliary units became permanent fixtures under Augustus. Altogether, before the changes made in the Flavian period, about 250,000 men were employed as troops of one kind or another by the imperial state. Most of them had nothing to do. In any case, emperors could quite easily announce victories to the Roman public without necessarily having to fight; hence, for example, Augustus' 'victories' over Parthia and Armenia in 20 BC, and the claim of *Res Gestae* 26.2 that Germany had been pacified along with France and Spain.

The decision to keep these troops on, rather than disband them, cannot have been taken lightly. To some extent frenetic campaigning can be seen as a *product* of the retention of troops. Augustus needed to prevent his huge command looking otiose, lest people ask too many questions. At the same time, the expense of the military machine was horrendous. A vast income was needed, perhaps half of the total spending of the state, constituting by far the largest single item in the state's budget, and culled by taxation of the provincials. The first ever provincial census was held in Gaul in 27 BC, and it is not accidental that during Augustus' rule the rigour of the census and tax

collection sparked off revolts in Gaul, Pannonia and Judaea (see Chapter 16). Thus, ironically, the collection of taxes to pay them gave the soldiers something to do, in suppressing rebellion caused by that very taxation.

It is improbable that the reason for retaining such a force was primarily the protection of the empire from outside attack. Not only had a much smaller force proved adequate, albeit admittedly for a smaller empire, in the 90s BC, but since Roman defensive techniques relied essentially on eventual aggressive or even rapid response, the permanent possession of troops was unnecessary. So long as enemies of Rome could expect eventual retaliation, they would be effectively deterred from attack. In practice the state's use of the military machine in the Early Empire seems to have reflected *ad hoc* decisions rather than any overall strategy, partly for this very reason, that there was not in general any need to worry about attacks on the borders by enemies.

The obvious reason for such massive expenditure on soldiers was to keep Octavian and his successors in power; that is, the troops under arms were intended to suppress internal dissent more than external threats. Needless to say, neither the emperors nor their subjects could often admit this fact openly. One exception will suffice. Like many deep truths it was expressed at the time as a joke, which is itself preserved within the bizarre imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*:

Favonius [the orator from France] once had an expression he used criticized by Hadrian and conceded the point. When his friends found fault with him for wrongly conceding the point to Hadrian about a word in common use with reputable writers, he raised a hearty laugh by saying, 'You are giving me bad advice, my friends, when you don't allow me to regard a man with thirty legions as more learned than anyone else.'

(*Hadrian* 15.12–13)

Usually, it did no good to the rulers or to the ruled for either of them to admit that the empire was controlled by terror. None the less, the effect of a massive army loyal to the emperor, to whom they swore an oath, and whose image was placed with their standards, was clear enough.

But why so many troops? The answer may lie in Octavian's awareness of his own career. His own path to power had begun with the enlisting of a private army of two legions. What he could do, others might attempt. But there was a limit to the size of an army any private individual could expect to bribe. So long, therefore, as the emperor always had more troops available and uncommitted to campaigns against external enemies than any possible opponent, he could relax. Octavian made sure that that should be the case. He ensured, also, that his own soldiers remained loyal to him, granting them honoured status, to the extent of instituting special seats for soldiers in the theatre. In fact all emperors gave frequent donations to their soldiers, who were also rewarded by the development of a complicated system of military

decorations (*donna militaria*), always given in the name of the emperor.⁴ Julius Caesar and Augustus both enhanced their military grip on the state by the settlement of veterans in Italy, often at important road junctions, but the unpopularity with civilians of land confiscations in Italy led to the abandoning of this procedure by later emperors, who preferred to give the soldiers cash.

Apart from the cessation of veteran colonies in Italy, no later emperor saw fit to change the method by which they retained their power. The soldiers did not in normal circumstances need to do anything. The number of soldiers changed only slightly during the first two centuries of the Empire.⁵ When three legions were lost under Varus in AD 9, no attempt was made to replace them, and the 25 legions left on Augustus' death in AD 14 became a standard number. At that point they were stationed as follows: one in Africa, three in Spain, four in Lower Germany, four in Upper Germany, three in Pannonia, two in Dalmatia, two in Moesia, four in Syria and two in Egypt. However, during the first century the equipment and training of the auxiliary units came more and more to resemble those of legionaries and their units were regularized by Claudius with grants of *diplomata* (records of the privileges allowed on discharge), so that the number of heavily armed infantry in the field gradually rose.⁶

The army was complemented by a permanent navy, manned, like the auxiliaries, by non-citizen provincials. Naval forces had proved decisive in the civil wars to 31 BC, but they faced no obvious external enemy in the imperial period apart from the threat of piracy, since the Roman state controlled the whole Mediterranean coastline. By AD 23, according to Tacitus' survey of the troops available to Tiberius (*Annals* 4.5.4), there were roughly as many auxiliary troops (including the navy) as legionaries.

The pretence that the soldiers were aimed at external enemies led to the deployment of most of them at a distance from Rome, but this did not indicate constant trouble in the places where the armies were stationed. On the contrary, three legions stayed in Spain until AD 43, some seventy years after pacification, and the two Egyptian legions had almost nothing to do from 25–24 BC (the campaigns against Arabia) until a revolt broke out in the province in AD 172–73.⁷

THE PRAETORIAN GUARD

In the city of Rome itself the stationing of regular troops was a major innovation by Augustus.⁸ The nine praetorian cohorts (of 500 men each) in theory acted as the emperor's headquarters' guard, assigned to him by virtue of his role as an army commander. But the use of such a guard was not standard in the Late Republic – although it became a common practice for generals in the triumphal period – and when they had held their army commands, neither Pompeius nor Julius Caesar had stationed troops permanently near the capital while living in Rome. The praetorians were chosen after Actium from among

the most experienced veterans and favoured with extra pay; three cohorts were billeted in small groups around Rome, the rest in neighbouring towns. At first, Augustus kept the guard under his personal command, but in 2 BC two praetorian prefects (to hold the command jointly) were appointed for the first time, and in AD 23 Sejanus, unusually sole commander from AD 15 to 31, moved them into a strongly fortified camp on the Viminal, to the north-east of the city. By this time the praetorians were directly recruited as an élite force. Epigraphic evidence reveals that their numbers were increased to 12 cohorts in Tiberius' reign, shortly after AD 23.⁹ From Domitian's reign onwards, 10 became the standard number.

Not that the praetorians were alone in enforcing the imperial will in the city. The urban prefects, appointed by the princeps, could rely on three urban cohorts to preserve the peace (unlike all magistrates in the Republic, who had emperor had a private bodyguard of non-citizen Germans (Barbarians), to protect him as he went about the city.

STATE TERROR

So long as the soldiers remained secure and loyal in their barracks, potential enemies within the political élite would remain quiescent. That, indeed, was usually the case, for the exception proves the rule. In AD 68 senators did not dare join in the revolt of Vindex against Nero because any one provincial governor always knew he would be powerless against all the rest of the legions under arms if he attempted to strike out alone. If Nero had not committed suicide it is unlikely that Galba, with his one legion from Spain, would have got far against the seven German legions under Verginius Rufus and Aulus Vitellius, who could easily have blocked his path to Rome.

Similar methods controlled the inhabitants of the empire of lower social status. State terror is only really effective if it is ruthless. In this respect the emperors simply continued a well-established trait of Roman policy.¹⁰ Rome's expansion over the eastern Mediterranean had been partly achieved by the Romans' refusal to accept gentlemanly Greek notions of diplomacy. Those cities which opposed Rome ran the risk of annihilation. Such tactics had worked exceptionally well: for instance, the destruction of Corinth in 146 BC became legendary. It was helpful that the emperor's subjects realized that he too could act similarly. When the Pannonians and Dalmatians rebelled in 13–12 BC, many of the defeated were sold into slavery. There was no need for a constant police force to prevent anti-Roman behaviour if people knew that such action was genuinely likely.

The success of autocracy is greatest when it rarely needs to show its hand in order to produce terror. It did not need to be an everyday occurrence for the emperor's subjects to know that he could sometimes murder his enemies or arbitrarily confiscate property in Italy or the provinces. All his subjects were

THE OPERATION OF THE STATE IN ROME

IMPERIAL BUREAUCRACY

In the final analysis, power in the Roman Empire always rested with the emperor, and influence was wielded primarily through proximity to or friendship with him, as the case of Sejanus illustrated in the reign of Tiberius. The operation of the imperial household thus in time came to resemble that of a state bureaucracy, with offices, secretaries and memoranda, and bribery, patronage and corruption.¹

This imperial bureaucracy was slow to take on a public image. The emperors at first preferred to portray themselves as, in some sense, simple senators pre-eminent in the state only by virtue of their *autoritas* (influence). As such, it did not do to emphasize in public the power of their wives, children, slaves and freedmen. At the same time, there was nothing unconstitutional or unusual in the influence of such people over a senator's affairs, so that it did not need to be hidden, just not advertised. The clues to the operation of such influence under Augustus and Tiberius therefore survive, if only fragmentarily reported. For the reigns of Claudius and Nero in particular, there are clear accounts of the wielding of such informal power.

The Roman Republic had conquered huge territories without ever evolving a state bureaucracy.² Magistrates relied on their own private resources to run state business. Their own slaves acted as secretaries when they dictated letters, and trotted up the accounts when public monies were involved. If extra staff were needed, friends could be asked – it was a good opportunity for young men to gain experience of public life. If a major problem arose, a family conference could be called to discuss it. Wives, mothers, neighbours, political allies, patrons, anyone might be called in to advise. The final decision and action were naturally always carried out in the name of the magistrate alone, but success might well lie with the efficacy of this informal staff of helpers. The emperor's household was no different, except that his magistracy and his wealth were of a size and importance not previously conceived, and the problems that arose were not occasional but perennial.³ Already by the end of the Julio-Claudian period it was quite normal for the emperor's entourage to

only too well aware that the army might at any time requisition supplies and conscripts, and that no appeal would succeed.¹¹ Everyone knew that banishment and exile could take place without trial; that those of the political élite who ran foul of the emperor could be compelled to commit suicide; that the emperor could ban the publication of books of which he disapproved; that imperial estates could increase through confiscation of the lands of those who opposed the autocrat; that for adult males conscription into the army, followed by long and indefinite service far from home, was a constant threat.¹² The fact that all such behaviour is attested in the extant sources at least once (and in most cases much more often) is enough to show that the arbitrary power of the autocrat was known, and could be feared. If only a few complained openly, that should hardly surprise. In practice, most subjects of the empire elected to co-operate in the functioning of the state. Since they had no choice, furthermore, they might as well make the best of their position and dignify their loyalty as an expression of honour.

Thus senators who co-operated naturally insisted, for their self-esteem, that their co-operation was voluntary, and that the emperor through whose patronage they held their status was no more than a rather powerful and much-loved *amicus* (friend); it was in the interest of emperors to encourage such self-esteem among the political élite, for emperors needed energetic and motivated men around them, not least to command on their behalf the legions on which their power was based. In the same way, provincial aristocrats co-operated in the collection of taxes for the Roman state, not least because the alternative was terror. At the same time, since Rome offered the opportunity for such provincials to hold some office within the state, they too could portray their actions as respectable careers in a Roman context. Similarly auxiliary troops, soldiers from Gaul, Spain, the Rhine, the Alps and many other regions of the empire, could justify to themselves their support for the repressive regime, which they bolstered often by serving in their own home regions, by asserting to themselves the truth that Roman rule brought benefits of peace and prosperity. The history of empires is not lacking in other examples of such native co-operation with oppression.¹³

It has to be said that most of the surviving evidence (but not all) was produced by those who co-operated with imperial rule.¹⁴ But this should not disguise the basis of that rule in military autocracy. Modern understanding of the Roman world depends on appreciation not just of what was said but of what was left unstated from fear or from calculation.