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Abstract

The Spartacus Revolt is commonly known for its titular leader, whose deeds have been romanticized in movies and other media. While Hollywood has led many to believe Spartacus was a revolutionary leader working to end slavery in the Roman Empire, this is not an accurate characterization. However, that does not mean that the Spartacus Revolt was nothing more than a historical footnote, although not for its leader. In fact, the revolt should be seen as a revolt of a middle class of veterans in the Roman Empire who wanted greater social standing than the end of the Social War had afforded them, rather than a revolt merely by slaves.

Keywords

Rome, Spartacus, Revolt, Slaves, Veterans, History

The Spartacus Rebellion: More Than a Slave Revolt

Gavin Maziarz / Gettysburg College '22

The Spartacus Rebellion is one of the most famous episodes of Roman history. As a result, it has been studied often by many, from thinkers and authors like Karl Marx to college students, and even to children learning about Rome. However, one major mistake that many have made when studying the rebellion is the assumption that it was conducted and perpetrated by slaves who had the goal of ending slavery, at least for those revolting. This is not the whole picture. While it was led by Spartacus, whose escape from gladiatorial slavery has made for a compelling narrative, the revolt may have only been as memorable as it was for the Romans because of the threat it posed with free men fighting alongside slaves and freedmen. While the presence of some free men was not unheard of or impossible in a slave revolt, it is important to note that the Romans specifically recorded their presence. This indicated that free men played a major role in the revolt's history and its goals. In essence, many current interpretations of the Spartacus Rebellion may be missing a key component of what made the rebellion enticing for Romans of lower classes to join and threatening to the Roman nobles. To fully understand the Spartacus Rebellion, a re-examination of the revolt

as one of both slave and free men is necessary. The historical accounts of the Spartacus Rebellion show that lower classes joined the revolt, while the nobles reacted in fear of the threat the revolt posed. The combination of which make the Spartacus Rebellion unique in the Roman history of slave revolts.

According to contemporary accounts made by those alive in 71-73 BCE, and from recorded histories from the centuries following, there were at least two major slave revolts prior to the Spartacus Revolt. Yet, these revolts were not characterized as having free men and citizens as a part of the revolting army.¹ Of course, this does not mean it is impossible that free men would have decided to help other revolts for their own gain. A record of such assistance can be found in the history of the Second Sicilian Slave Revolt. Historian Diodorus Siculus stated that the slave army was able to field two thousand skilled cavalry men.² Considering the amount of forces Siculus attributed to the slaves, and their reported skill, it is possible that what Siculus was actually describing was free and

¹ Brent D. Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), pp. 73, 101.

² Diodorus Siculus, "The Second Slave War on the Island of Sicily: Second Version," in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), pp. 109-111.

enslaved people fighting together.³ As slaves were unable to serve in the army, it seems unlikely that two thousand rural agricultural and domestic slaves with the experience necessary to act as skilled cavalymen could be gathered in a single uprising.⁴ Therefore, it is likely that the only way these troops could have been gathered would be through the addition of ex-soldiers to the slave army. At the same time, it would be foolish to simply accept the alleged skill of an army that lost in a “brilliant victory” for Rome in a history written by a man who lived in the Roman empire, so skepticism on the presence of non-slaves in this instance, should be advised.⁵

Regardless of whether non-slaves participated in other revolts, it is clear from ancient records that there were at least some non-slaves involved directly in the Spartacus Revolt. For evidence one can observe what the ancient historians have recorded. One ancient Roman historian, Appian, stated that

³ Siculus, “The Second Slave War,” pp. 109-111; Appian, “The Spartacus Slave War,” in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), p. 133.

⁴ Morris Silver, “Public Slaves in the Roman Army: An Exploratory Study,” *Ancient Society* 46 (2016): p. 204. doi: 10.2143/AS.46.0.3167455; Sandra R. Joshel and Lauren Hacksworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 63.

⁵ Siculus, “The Second Slave War,” p. 112; Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, p. 163; Siculus was born in Sicily and lived in Rome when writing *The Library*. His work may be biased from his own perspective or from outside pressure, but to assume that there was no bias would be a folly, especially when adjectives and battles are involved.

“fugitive slaves and even some free men from the surrounding countryside” joined Spartacus at Mount Vesuvius.⁶ Their presence in the revolting army would explain how the “slave army” was able to battle real legions commanded by Roman generals sent by the senate and win.⁷ Other slave revolts had gone up against conscripted forces and won, but they had not been able to win battles against the legions that would inevitably come after them once the conscripts had been defeated.⁸ Normal country slaves may not have been capable of such feats, because they were not trained soldiers and only a relative few were “employed” in manual labor. Therefore, there must have been some amount of trained soldiery involved, such as the freemen Appian mentioned as joining the ranks and being armed by Spartacus’ army. The question of why these free men would join a small band of slaves and gladiators is important to answer, otherwise the revolt will become more ambiguous. Without any written accounts from participants this is not a simple nor straightforward question to answer.

The Spartacus Revolt occurred only sixteen years after the end of the Social War, which expanded full citizenship and rights to many former allies and Italians. These Italians were now part of

⁶ Appian, “The Spartacus Slave War,” p. 133.

⁷ Plutarch, “Life of Crassus,” in *Plutarch’s Lives*, trans. George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), p. 49.

⁸ Barry Baldwin, “Two Aspects of the Spartacus Slave Revolt,” *The Classical Journal* 62, no. 7 (1967): p. 293, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3295491>.

the Roman system, and able to participate more fully in more Roman life than before. However, they still could not count on enfranchisement in the Roman political system due to their distance from Rome where the major elections took place. Furthermore, those trying to live off the land they gained as citizens, or as veterans of Sulla's army, may have had a hard time competing with the wealthier farmers with connections in Rome.⁹ This concern for social mobility or just survivability in the Roman world may have weighed upon the many veterans of the Social War living in the Roman countryside when a golden opportunity to exert some force on Rome for change (the background info implied that it would be in their favor) appeared in the Spartacus rebellion. This position was supported by Appian who wrote that the Italians "had sided with the gladiator Spartacus against the Romans, even though he was a wholly disreputable person."¹⁰ If this group of ex-soldiers had made up a majority of Spartacus' army, it would explain how they fought so successfully against Roman legions and why they refused to leave Italy.¹¹ Rather than misplaced confidence in their ability to fight, the free men were looking to

⁹ Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), pp. 239-240, 248.

¹⁰ Appian, "King Mithridates of Pontus and Spartacus," in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), p. 137.

¹¹ Plutarch, "Life of Crassus," p. 48.

gain status, political power, and possibly wealth through their uprising, not leave their homes. Given that Spartacus returned with his army, it may be possible that he knew no one would follow him to Thrace and decided to stay where he had power even when he was able to escape.

Despite evidence saying otherwise, ancient sources referred to the Spartacus Revolt as a slave revolt, not a revolt of diverse backgrounds.¹² If these historians knew of free peoples taking part, their method of labelling the revolt would therefore seem to be in error. However, given the negative view of slave revolts in the ancient world, as well as the ability of slave to refer to both enslaved people and ex-slaves, the terminology makes more sense.¹³ Terming the Spartacus Revolt a “slave revolt” may have been both an accurate description of the beginning of the revolt and a way for later authors, who were of noble status, to defame those who fought with the gladiators from Capua. This would certainly fit with some narratives that claimed that calling the slaves “enemy” was shameful, and that the fact that a gladiator “the lowest sort of men” were leading them “only added mockery to the disaster itself.”¹⁴

¹² Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, pp. 73, 101.

¹³ Baldwin, “Two Aspects,” pp. 289-290; Beard, *SPQR*, p. 332.

¹⁴ Florus, “A Detailed Synopsis of the Spartacus War,” in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), pp. 147-148.

To understand why there was resentment from Roman nobles against this revolt in particular, the fear that Spartacus caused in the noble ranks must be examined in comparison to other revolts. One way the revolt inspired fear in the nobles was through its proximity to Rome. Nevertheless, other revolts had occurred even closer than Capua—for example, one revolt occurred in 196 BCE in Etruria—and never had the same effect on Rome as Spartacus’ revolt did.¹⁵ The Spartacus Revolt was different because of its size. Prior to its inception, large scale slave wars or revolts had been outside the view of the city of Rome. The closest contemporary slave wars fought by Rome before Spartacus were in Sicily in 135 BCE and 104 BCE.¹⁶ While these slave revolts were close to the Italian peninsula, they were still far enough away that they could be put down without any real or perceived threat to Rome materializing, even if Rome had to use actual legions. Spartacus’ army was able to defeat these legions, and it took some serious work from multiple commanders, including Crassus and Pompey, to decisively defeat Spartacus’ army after suffering numerous defeats of their own.¹⁷

¹⁵ Livy, “A Slave Rebellion in Etruria Is Suppressed in 196 B.C.E.,” in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), p. 64.

¹⁶ Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, pp. 73, 101.

¹⁷ Plutarch, “Life of Crassus,” pp.48-51.

It is easy to see how such a successful revolt could be frightening to nobles accustomed to hearing reports of the revolts rather than seeing them for themselves. This was the same conclusion that Plutarch reached as he stated that the Senate was “moved by fear and the danger” of the revolt enough to send both consuls, Gellius Publicola and Lentulus Clodianus, to deal with the revolt in 72 BCE and Crassus with multiple legions of his own after the consuls’ defeat.¹⁸ Crassus even believed he might need help and asked the Senate to send for Pompey and Lucullus, from their respective posts in Iberia and Thrace, so that they might help him against Spartacus.¹⁹ Such actions were not that of a confident people ready to put down a simple slave revolt like many times before. Orosius later drew upon the lost works of Livy to claim that Spartacus and the death of Gaius Cassius had caused terror to “spread through the city of Rome, just as it had when Hannibal had threatened its gates.”²⁰ He later stated that this fear was “universal” as not only were “individual consuls... frequently defeated badly,”

¹⁸ Plutarch, “Life of Crassus,” pp. 48-49.

¹⁹ Plutarch, “Life of Crassus,” p. 51.

²⁰ Orosius, “An Account of the Opening and Closing Phases of the War,” in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), p. 145.

along with their combined forces, but the war “was the cause of terrible horrors.”²¹

However, Rome had faced terrible wars with many casualties before even exceeding the most radical estimates of over one hundred thousand casualties of slaves, not counting the dead Roman soldiers.²² While it is hard to ascertain how many casualties resulted from the war with Spartacus it would be irresponsible to believe this was more catastrophic than other contemporary wars, such as the Social War. Therefore, there must be another reason besides proximity and size that the Romans spent the next decade after the death of Spartacus hunting down the remnants of his army.²³ In fact, when the general Gaius Octavius was tasked with rooting out the final remnants of Spartacus’ forces finally did so in 62 BCE, he found they had joined up with the remnants of Cataline’s army in the Thurii countryside.²⁴ The reason these groups joined together may have been nothing more than necessity of survival for shrinking groups of bandits. But that attributes no

²¹ Orosius, “An Account,” p. 146.

²² Orosius, “An Account,” p. 146.

²³ Suetonius, “Operations against Remnant Rebel Slaves of the Spartacus War in Southern Italy in the late 60s B.C.E.,” in *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), p. 160.

²⁴ Aldo Schiavone, *Spartacus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 144-145. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gettysburg/detail.action?docID=3301224>.

goals for either group than subsistence. Cataline's forces wanted to make change in Rome, and the Italian free men of Spartacus' army had their own goals when taking up arms. Mithridates believed he could incite the freemen of Italy to arms with promises of change, it is possible Cataline, and the Roman nobles, thought he could do the same.²⁵

It was this revolutionary character that made Spartacus' uprising a revolution and not merely a revolt. Not because Spartacus himself had high ideals of changing Rome, he just wanted to go home to Thrace, but because his followers had their own agenda. The agenda of the Italian soldiers to gain power and influence would even explain why nobles believed Spartacus would march on Rome, despite his lack of ability to do so.²⁶ The nobles were afraid of the change this army could enact, so much that they believed it could happen, even a decade after Spartacus was defeated.

As a result, the Spartacus Rebellion has been hard to classify. It was not a Marxist style revolution of lower classes; it would be wrong to say the veteran landowners were proletarii or proletariat in a Marxist sense. It would also be wrong to call it merely a slave revolt, as the army must have at least been

²⁵ Appian, "King Mithridates of Pontus and Spartacus," p. 137.

²⁶ Plutarch, "Life of Crassus," p. 51; Appian, "The Spartacus Slave War," p. 134.

populated by many free men to give it the necessary skill in battle to survive. Perhaps this is why the revolt has remained murky for such a long period of time; Marxists have read into Spartacus the high ideals they wish he had, while other historians, more skeptical of a deeper cause or background for the revolt (or perhaps just fans of pattern recognition), have preferred to see the revolt as just another slave revolt. What seems to be the case is that the Spartacus Revolt started to escape slavery for the gladiators in Capua, and somehow gained the support of opportunistic veterans who had hoped for a chance to gain more political influence in Rome. In that way, the Spartacus Rebellion is closer to a second Social War than anything else, although much more limited in scope. Regardless, it is quite the unique event when compared to other slave revolts, and even compared to other wars. No other contemporary event, other than the Social War, had caused more division in Rome, fear in the nobles, and inspired more free men to take up arms prior to the Civil War between Pompey and Caesar. However, even those wars did not have such a “cinematic” or modern hero, as the gladiator turned rebel leader, Spartacus.

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