STUDY GUIDE

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

LECTURE 11

JULIUS CAESAR AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic*, translated with introduction and notes by Rex Warner, "Caesar," chapters 1-2, 28-32, and 59-69.

OUTLINE

0:00-5:07 — Caesar in Marius and Sulla's Civil War

- Julius Caesar is one of the most polarizing figures in history, as historians debate whether he is the man who destroyed the Roman Republic or a great statesman who tried to restore liberty to Rome.
- Caesar was born in 100 BC into the gens Julia, a family that traced its ancestry back to Julius, a son of Aeneas.
- Marius was Caesar's uncle by marriage, which linked Caesar to Marius in the civil wars between Marius and Sulla.
    - While Marius was in control of Rome, he made Caesar a member of the priesthood and had Caesar marry the daughter of his ally, Cinna, in 84 BC.
    - When Sulla defeated Marius' forces in 82 BC, he demanded that Caesar divorce Cinna's daughter, but Caesar refused. In response, Sulla confiscated Caesar's inheritance and removed him from the priesthood.
    - To avoid further trouble with Sulla, Caesar joined the army in 80 BC.

5:08-12:53 — Caesar's Early Political Career

- After Sulla's death, Caesar returned to Rome in 78 BC, and tried to pursue a legal career. His first attempt was a failure, which spurred Caesar to study oratory in Rhodes.
- In 75 BC, while on his way to Rhodes, Caesar's ship was captured by pirates.
    - While he was held captive, Caesar conversed and played games with the pirates, all the while telling them that once he was free, he would have them hanged.
    - Once his ransom was paid, Caesar gathered an armed force and sailed back to capture the pirates and put them on trial, after which they were executed.
    - Caesar then continued to Rhodes to pursue his studies in oratory.
- When Caesar returned to Rome, he was elected to the office of military tribune and then climbed through the offices of the *cursus honorum*.
- Caesar gained popularity after being elected aedile in 65 BC by putting on lavish games and entertainments, but he also incurred significant debts.
- In 63 BC, Caesar served as *pontifex maximus*, the high priest of Rome, and was elected praetor. During his praetorship he took on a leading role in opposing the execution of the five Senators involved in the Catilinarian Conspiracy.
- He then served as governor in further Spain in 61 BC, where he expanded the borders of the province and paid off some of his debts.
- In 60 BC, Caesar joined Crassus and Pompey to form the First Triumvirate and was elected consul.
    - He proposed land distributions for Pompey's veterans, support for Crassus' *publicani*, and two agrarian laws that would have provided land allotments for 20,000 of Rome's urban poor.
    - Many of the measures that Caesar pushed through as consul were opposed by the *optimates*. Caesar relied on extreme measures to pass his agenda, including voter suppression and force, which made the legality of his reforms dubious.
    - Caesar avoided prosecution for these actions by leaving for Gaul, which granted him immunity while he was serving as governor.

12:54-18:14 — Caesar in Gaul

- After serving as consul, Caesar was appointed to a five-year term as governor of Cisalpine Gaul, Transalpine Gaul, and Illyricum in 59 BC.
- When the Helvetii tribe migrated near the Roman border of Transalpine Gaul, Caesar seized the opportunity to conquer the remainder of Gaul, which he accomplished in 55 BC.
- In 55 and 54 BC, Caesar made two expeditions into Britain. Caesar planned to return to Britain, but uprisings in northern Gaul under Vercingetorix in 53 BC prevented him from returning.

- Caesar forced Vercingetorix to retreat to the town of Alesia in 52 BC, where Vercingetorix hoped to trap Caesar with a relief force.
- Caesar surprised Vercingetorix with the speed at which he was able to build siege fortifications. Caesar built two walls surrounding the town—an inner wall to trap Vercingetorix and his forces, and an outer wall to protect his troops from the incoming relief force.
- Due to Caesar's military genius, Vercingetorix was forced to surrender, which put an end to the Gallic uprising.

18:15-24:22 — Caesar's Civil War

- Caesar expected to be met with honors for defeating the Gauls, the ancestral enemies of Rome, but instead he faced the threat of criminal charges.
  - The tensions between Caesar and Pompey were aggravated by events that occurred while Caesar was in Gaul.
  - Caesar's daughter and Pompey's wife, Julia, had died in childbirth in 54 BC and Crassus had been killed in his Parthian expeditions in 53 BC.
  - While Caesar was in Gaul, Pompey had been the main actor in Rome and had pursued a legislative agenda that was ambivalent to Caesar. He also supported the efforts from several *optimates* to strip Caesar of his legions.
  - In the *Senatus consultum ultimum*, or the final decree of the Senate, the Roman Senate declared Pompey dictator and Caesar an enemy of the state.
- In January 10, 49 BC, Caesar crossed the Rubicon with his 13th Legion while declaring that he was doing so to liberate Rome from corrupt Senators who were acting unconstitutionally.
  - Caesar faced little opposition as he marched toward Rome. His opposition in the Senate all fled Italy and Pompey fled to Greece to gather troops.
  - Before pursuing Pompey, Caesar went to Spain to defeat some of Pompey's legions who were stationed there.
  - Caesar pursued Pompey in Greece, and won a decisive victory at the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BC.
  - Pompey fled to Alexandria where he was murdered by the advisors of Ptolemy XIII.
- Caesar pursued Pompey to Egypt where he engaged in an affair with Ptolemy's sister, Cleopatra.
- Caesar returned to Rome after an absence of nearly two years, but soon departed for North Africa where he defeated the forces of Cato the Younger at the Battle of Thapsus in 46 BC.
- Caesar then pursued Pompey's sons to Spain, where they had amassed another army, and defeated them at the Battle of Munda in 45 BC to end the civil war.

24:23-33:35 — The Assassination

- After Caesar returned to Rome, he pursued an ambitious legislative agenda.
    - He sought to alleviate the debt problem of Rome.
    - He hoped to rebuild Corinth and Carthage and settle some of his veterans there.
    - He reformed the Roman calendar.
    - He passed sumptuary taxes to reign in the licentiousness of the elites.
    - He encouraged families to have more children through pro-family marriage laws.
- During this time, Caesar held the positions of dictator and praetor while alternating between the office of consul and proconsul. He also assumed the powers of the tribune of the plebs and the censor.
- Caesar's growing power concerned his enemies who believed that he was attempting to make himself king. When he declared himself dictator for life in 44 BC some 60 Senators began to plan an attempt on his life.
- One of the leading figures of the assassination was a republican idealist named Marcus Junius Brutus.
    - The conspiring senators needed Brutus—who had a reputation for honesty—in order to lend credibility to their plot.
    - He was convinced to join the plot by senators who reminded him that he was descended from Lucius Junius Brutus, the man who had overthrown the Roman monarchy.
    - Brutus was also someone whom Caesar trusted and who could convince Caesar to join the Senate meeting.
- On the Ides of March, the conspirators lured Caesar to a special meeting of the Senate, which deprived Caesar of his bodyguards. The conspirators then stabbed Caesar 23 times. One of the blows struck his heart and killed him.
- After killing Caesar, the conspirators announced to the city that they had killed the tyrant, but were met by silence. Nearly all of the conspirators eventually fled Rome to escape the vengeance of the people.
- The civil war that followed ultimately destroyed what was left of the Roman Republic.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How did Caesar display his military genius during the Gallic War?

What was the character of Caesar's political reforms in Rome after his victory in the civil war?

Was Caesar responsible for the collapse of the Republic? How might the Republic have been saved?

NOTES