



31 December 406

A Confederacy of German Tribes Crosses the Rhine

The Slow Death of Rome's Western Empire

'...the bright light of all the world was quenched...the Roman empire had lost its head and...the whole universe had perished in one city...'

St Jerome (c.340-420) describes the sack of Rome (410)

The river Rhine, at a spot near Coblenz, had frozen over towards the end of December 406 and the natural eastern boundary of the Roman province of Gaul could therefore be crossed. It was to here that the Germanic tribe of the Vandals had been led by their king, Gunderic. They were not alone. Other German tribes had combined to form a great confederation. Unlike the genuinely nomadic Huns, who were pressing in behind them from the east, these migrating Germans wanted to settle and enjoy a safer life than the one they had escaped from. As agricultural peoples they had also discovered that repeated cultivation of the same territorial soil was more fruitful than just tilling and then moving on. Heavily burdened with carts and livestock, their progress was slow and an average of a mile or so an hour was probably their maximum speed. The Alans who had crossed the Dnieper in c. 375 would only reach their final home in the Tagus valley near Lisbon in the 420s after travelling on average about five miles a year.

The December 406 crossing of the Rhine was part of a wider and older pattern of tribal movement. The Vandals belonged to the east German group of tribes which had moved from Scandinavia into the region east of the Elbe. Other members of this group included the Burgundians, Visigoths and Ostrogoths. The Goths had left their settlements in the second century AD and then drifted to the south-east so that by c. 400 AD the Visigoths or 'Western' Goths were on the Black Sea coast and the Ostrogoths or 'Eastern' Goths found themselves further east (and therefore very exposed to the Huns) in the Crimea and on the Dnieper steppes.

The success of the tribal push on an increasingly porous border reflected the progressive disintegration of Roman imperial authority since the second half of the third century. Internally, the empire was suffering from a low birth rate and choking bureaucracy as well as high tax and inflation because of the expensive, long-term, business of paying for an army to protect the boundaries. After they crossed the Rhine the tribes spread out over Gaul. The Vandals crossed the Pyrenees in 409, left the Suevi to establish themselves in Galicia (north-west Spain) and then travelled across Iberia to Africa which had also been the destination of Alaric, king of the Visigoths until his death shortly after he sacked Rome. By 429 the Vandals were at the Straits of Gibraltar and in 439 they arrived in Carthage. For over a century the Vandal kingdom of north Africa, an important naval power with bases in Sardinia and the Balearic islands, would be a major military threat in the western Mediterranean.

The southward and western migrations of the Germanic tribes were spread over half a millennium. Their movements included long periods of settlement until patterns of climate and of food supplies, along with internal conflicts among the tribes themselves, forced them on. By the fourth century many German tribes had become settled along the imperial boundaries, and were being paid, by the Roman themselves, as *foederati* pledged to protect the frontiers. The one great constant was the external impact on them, and on Rome itself, of the Huns who, with their great herds of cattle, had been moving towards the west from their homelands on the steppes of central Asia ever since the Chinese had defeated a Hunnic empire in c. 36 BC. Armed with bows and arrows, and using the stirrup (which they had invented) to ride their Mongolian ponies, the Huns could achieve long distance raids across thousands of miles in the summer months before returning to their bases. Between

the second and fourth centuries those bases had shifted from north of the Caspian Sea towards the area of modern Ukraine – that crucial geographic point of contact between the steppe and Europe. Other differences separated them from the barbarian: the clans of the Germanic tribes were bound together by shared kinship but it was a community of interest which bound together the Hunnish tribes into various 'hordes' such as protection from natural forces and from outsiders. Mentally formed by the wide horizons of the steppes, their aim was the establishment of a world empire.

The German migrations were therefore the result of a chain of events stretching from central Asia to the Atlantic coast. The pattern of European nations today is also the result of interaction between late Roman antiquity and barbarian ambition. Mentally, the Romans drew a sharp dividing line between themselves and the barbarians. Rome stood for written law, administrative records, the settled existence of urban centres and great estates. The Germanic tribes, by contrast, were wholly agrarian, bound by the customs of an oral unwritten law and governed by a general assembly. The kinship loyalties of tribal groups contrasted with two defining Roman notions: loyalty to the emperor and the honourable obligations of citizenship. Religion was another divide. Instead of the Graeco-Roman pantheon of gods worshipped in temples, the barbarians gathered in sacred groves for cult festivals which worshipped their own pantheon such as Wotan, Thor who protected farmers, and fertility goddesses like Freyja. But, though so different, the barbarian tribes could see the advantages of Roman order even in an age of civilized breakdown and their fury was often the result of disappointment when the Romans refused to extend those advantages to include them. Alaric turned towards an anti-Roman offensive when his Visigoths were denied the right to settle in Noricum, now modern-day Austria. Thinly spread Roman forces gave the tribes their chance. Alaric's threat to Constantinople, for example, led to the withdrawal of the Roman legions in Gaul and so by c. 400 AD the Burgundians could move into the territory now named after them.

Another, related, tribal movement was well established by the early fifth century. Tall, red-haired and ferocious, the Celts had attacked Rome in 390 BC and mainland Greece in 279 BC. Established in northern Italy and in the lands to the north and west of the Alps they resisted the Roman advance in the first and second centuries BC. Overwhelmed in Gaul and with some of them travelling further west, they became progressively Romanized and then constituted the native population of Spain, Gaul and Britain. The further impact of the invading Angles and Saxons, especially after the withdrawal of the Roman legions from Britain in 410 AD, pushed into the north and west those Celtic tribes previously settled in the south. They survived in western Scotland, Wales and Ireland and also in Cornwall whose émigrés headed for Brittany and made it Celtic. The Scots, a Celtic people native to Ireland, migrated to Caledonia, subjugated the native Picts and established a Gaelic Scotland.

The Huns had started to move into eastern Europe by c. 360 AD and their king Attila (404-53) unleashed them as a terrifyingly destructive force capable of extracting ever higher tribute money. On the death of the emperor Theodosius I in 395 the Roman empire split definitively into its eastern and western halves. Attila attacked the east and west in two campaigns and the west in another onslaught. His defeat in the battle of the Catalaunian plain in north-east France was the result of a joint Roman-

barbarian effort which then pushed him out of Italy before his death in 453 after which the Huns faded as a military threat. The Ostrogoths, under Theoderic, now became the dominant power in Italy. At the same time, Clovis, king of the Salian Franks, went on to create a huge Merovingian kingdom in Gaul.

The barbarian migrations established the contours of the European nations. The Visigoths ruled Spain and absorbed the Suevi. The Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy would be conquered by the east German Langobardi or Lombards and the peninsula was contested between them in the north, Byzantines in the south, and the expansionist Franks who also ensured the collapse of the Avars in the Danube basin. That collapse was the Slav opportunity. Western Slavs crossed the Danube in 551 and colonized areas east of the Elbe vacated by the German tribes: Czechs were established in Bohemia, Slovaks in the southern Carpathians, and, further north, Poland became a distinctive territory. The eastern Slavs, including the Russians, moved north and east into the upper Volga. In doing so they established the divide between Slavic Poles and Slavic Russians. The western Slavs of the north were also now separated from the southern Slavs of the Balkans: Slovenes, Serbs and Croats (settled on the Dalmatian coast) became the agents for the Slavicization of Illyria, Bulgaria and Greece. The Slavic kingdoms could never establish an imperial unity but along with a Persia revived by the Sassanians, they threatened the eastern Roman empire. The Bulgar empire of the eighth and ninth centuries was a major anti-Byzantine power.

Europe had become a mosaic of peoples conquered, absorbed or pushed west. Romanized Celto-Iberians in Spain, Gallo-Romans in Gaul, the Latinized peoples of Italy – all had been subsumed under a Germanic layer. Britain assumed its present shape with a Germanic culture in the east, south and centre, a Celtic one in the west and a mixture of Celtic highlanders with Germanic lowlanders in Scotland. Linguistic vernacular variety reflected the ethnic diversity: the Slavs produced three main groups of Slavonic languages and Latin dissolved into the Romance languages. The western provinces of the empire drifted away into their own self-contained worlds. The reign of the emperor Justinian saw an attempt at restoring Roman authority in the west when his general Belisarius destroyed the Vandal kingdom in north Africa. But his reconquest of Italy from the Ostrogoths exhausted the peninsula's resources and made the north vulnerable to the last of the German invaders – the Lombards. Further non-Germanic migrations from sea-raiding Vikings, from nomadic Magyars who moved into the Hungarian plain by c.900 AD, and from the Mongols, as well as the Moors and Turks, lay ahead.

Europe's nations had evolved out of the maelstrom of ethnic diversity, cultural mingling, and military-political conflict – which would also shape their future.