

15 March 44 BC

The Assassination of Julius Caesar

The Death of a Dictator and the End of the Roman Republic

A certain star during those days appeared in the north towards evening . . . the majority ascribed it to Caesar, interpreting it to mean that he had become immortal.

Dio Cassius (c. 155–235)

On 15 March, 44 BC, a day known as the Ides of March in the Roman calendar that he had himself recently reformed, the general and politician Gaius Julius Caesar was assassinated in the Senate at Rome as a result of a conspiracy of republican noblemen. On the morning of that day he had stood at the apex of his power as the conqueror of Gaul, the undisputed winner in the civil wars which had consumed the old Roman Republic and then as dictator for life – an office which had survived from earlier Roman history and was now revived. Although warned by one of the numerous street soothsayers to beware that day, Caesar had shown his usual toughness of mind and decided to attend the Senate.

As Caesar entered, the Senate rose as a mark of respect and, after he sat down, the conspirators closed around him. Tillius

Cimber approached first under the pretext of a petition on behalf of his brother who had been exiled by Caesar. His colleagues joined in with their own prayers, kissing Caesar's head and feet. The surrounded leader tried to get up but couldn't. His assailants' daggers were now unsheathed. Servilius Casca aimed for Caesar's left shoulder just above the collar bone but missed. Casca's brother then drove his sword into the ribs. Cassius slashed his face and Decimus Brutus pierced him on the side. Some of the conspirators ended up hitting each other in the mêlée. Having been wounded some thirty-five times Caesar's body came to rest at the foot of Pompey's statue.

Caesar had already reformed the Senate by increasing its size and making it more representative of the citizens of Rome. He had also pursued a generous policy of granting Roman citizenship to non-Romans such as the entire population of Cisalpine Gaul north of the River Po. And he had also recreated the two great cities of Carthage and Corinth, destroyed by his predecessors in the course of Rome's implacable rise from city-state republic to world power status. In the previous year he had passed a law which established the way in which the *municipia*, the local units of Roman self-government, should be run. All of these measures were taken in order to try to solve the great problem of how to deal with the soldiers of the Roman legions, whether discharged and hungry for land or currently serving but detached from any loyalty to the central Roman institutions. Rather than serving the republic, they chose instead to serve the political ambitions of their own generals and this had caused the decline of that republic's institutions. But it was the evidence of Caesar's ability and ambition which caused his death. Among the conspirators were two former governors of

Gaul, Marcus Junius Brutus (widely believed to be his illegitimate son) and Decimus Junius Brutus – members of a family long since associated with the cause of republicanism. Indeed, one of their ancestors was supposed to have helped to expel the Tarquin kings in 509 BC, the event which led to the republic's establishment. Caesar, the dictator, seemed bent on subverting half a millennium of republican institutions and beliefs. The argument for killing Caesar was that it would revive the old Roman way of life – *mos maiorum* or the customs of the ancestors.

War, law and politics had always dominated the Roman state. Roman citizens elected the republic's two senior officials, the consuls who were charged with military affairs. Lesser officials then decided legal disputes, organized the public works and presided over religious festivals and other duties of state. Although all Roman citizens could vote for the candidates, they were divided into three groupings determined by status and wealth. The patricians were a small elite group of families who alone had the right to be elected to certain positions. The equites were non-patricians with enough money and leisure to pay taxes and perform the unpaid duties of state. The remainder were the plebeians. This system, suitable for a medium-sized central Italian city-state, came under pressure as a result of Rome's expansion. By c. 290 BC Rome had unified the rest of Italy under her rule and the epic struggle which followed in the next century and a half led to the eventual defeat of the North African city of Carthage – Rome's rival for dominance of the western Mediterranean.

The Rome of the mid-second century was also a world power in the east after the defeat of most of Greece, and in the

west, southern Gaul (France) had also been conquered. But the imperial economy would tear the republican system apart. Small peasant land holdings were celebrated in Roman literature as nurseries which taught the virtues of hard work and ancestral piety towards the gods; however, they were no longer viable. Imports of cheap food, especially from the granaries of North Africa, as well as the growth of large estates run by slave labour, now dominated the markets and created mass rural unemployment. Migration into Rome also resulted in a huge urban proletariat which was hungry, often unemployed, and therefore ready to sell their votes to those who promised them food, money and lavish spectacles. Successful generals, when seeking office, could also use their own troops to bully their way into power. Money and muscle were therefore the resources needed in order to be elected to the offices of praetor and consul, whose traditional perks included the governance of a province. And the clients of a successful Roman noble family, those who gave their patrons political support, could therefore include provincial kings and entire national regions.

The family of the Caesars belonged to the *gens* (or clan) called Julius – one of the ancient patrician nobility. But despite the Julii Caesares' claim to trace their family back to the goddess Venus, they were neither rich nor powerful. The latest of their line would have to make his own way.

From the beginning Caesar's ambition was to reform both the old Roman state and the wider Graeco-Roman world. He showed his radical colours by marrying Cornelia, daughter of Lucius Cornelius Cinna who had supported the revolutionary political campaigns of the general, Gaius Marius. The brief dictatorship of Sulla (82–78) was an early attempt at getting

rid of republican rule in the name of a reactionary aristocracy – and Caesar disappeared from Italy to do his military service in the province of Asia and in Cilicia. On his return to Rome he was elected to be one of the military tribunes and, with his new ally Pompey, helped to dismantle the Sullan constitution. By c. 68 he had been elected quaestor – the first major step in a political career – and served in the province of Further Spain. He borrowed heavily to provide some spectacular public shows while he was one of the *curule aediles*. In 63 he was elected *Pontifex Maximus* or High Priest and became praetor in 62. As governor of Further Spain in 61–60 he was able to loot in the traditional manner while on a campaign, which enabled him to settle his debts. On his return to Rome in 60, and against Senatorial opposition, he stood successfully for the consulship of the year 59.

In the 'first triumvirate' Caesar created a powerful force by uniting himself with Pompey and Crassus. He pushed through legislation which would give Pompey's soldiers allotments on Italian public land. He then conquered the remaining, non-Roman, parts of Gaul and it was the prestige he gained from this which gave him the authority to attempt the reordering of Rome herself. The triumvirate had by now foundered due to internal rivalries and in 49 BC Caesar moved on Rome. He crossed the Rubicon, the river that marked the divide between Gaul and Roman soil, without giving up his army. By doing so he broke the law and defied the Roman senate. He defeated Pompey, who was now supporting the senate, at the battle of Pharsalus in southern Thessaly, which made Caesar the effective – though disputed – ruler of Rome. After expeditions in Egypt and Asia Minor he returned to Rome, where he quelled

a mutiny in the Campania, subjugated the rebellious legions in North Africa and then defeated Pompey's sons. Caesar had won – but his victories were so conclusive that he had made permanent enemies of those who believed in, and sentimentalized, the old Roman system.

Caesar was not the tyrant who destroyed the Roman Republic because that system had already self-destructed. The effective authority of the Roman nobility had disappeared because it was a mere oligarchy. Caesar adopted his nephew Octavian as his son and, after Caesar's death, Octavian formed a second triumvirate of like-minded power-hungry politicians with Mark Antony and Marcus Lepidus. This group pursued the assassins of Caesar to their deaths and in 42 BC they deified Caesar and forced the Roman magistrates to uphold Caesar's constitutional changes. Octavian was heir to Caesar's military genius but infinitely more subtle in his political tactics. He dissolved the second triumvirate and established himself as Augustus after the resumption of the Roman civil war. At the battle of Actium in 31 BC he gained a great naval victory over Mark Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. As a result, Egypt became his personal property and the fabulous wealth he now acquired enabled him to distribute power and property in Rome. In 27 BC he was given the title of Augustus Caesar by the Senate. Realizing that it was the naked display of power which had destroyed his uncle he decided to declare that he was simply restoring the old democratic Roman constitution yet his money meant that it was only his own supporters who had a chance of getting the votes for elected office. Beneath a residual democratic façade Rome had become an empire. Behind this achievement stood Julius Caesar's life's work. By

getting rid of the Roman oligarchs who had masqueraded as republicans, Caesar in fact gave Rome a new lease of life.

Strengthened as an autocracy Rome could now stand for another 400 years – at a time when barbarian invaders increasingly threatened from both the north and the west. And Gaul, having been Romanized at a deep level during these centuries, was therefore able to draw on those roots and recover to civilized life after the barbarian tribes had come and gone. Recognition of this common European debt explains the survival of Caesar's family name in the title of Tsar to signify a supreme ruler. But the appeal of republicanism as a political ideal also survived. It would first reappear in the Italian city-states of the middle ages. The works of Machiavelli, followed by those of Shakespeare, especially in his play *Julius Caesar*, endowed republicanism with an idealism which was hardly evident in the selfish motives of those who hacked the first and greatest of Caesars to death on that day in Rome.