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Almost an imperator

by *Bruce S. Thornton*

A review of *The Spartacus War* by Barry Strauss

Books in this article

Barry Strauss

The Spartacus War

Simon & Schuster, 288 pages, \$26.00

Even in these days of “small Latin, and less Greek,” Spartacus is a name from Roman history as recognizable as Caesar or Nero. The Thracian gladiator who ignited a slave rebellion in 73 B.C., defeated nine Roman armies, and plundered Italy from the Straits of Messina to the Alps, has for centuries been an icon of righteous violence against an unjust social order. Communists appropriated Spartacus as a historic exemplar of proletarian revolt; revolutionary nationalists like Toussaint L’Ouverture and Giuseppe Garibaldi admired him; Voltaire deemed the gladiator’s rebellion the only

just war in history; American leftists glorified Spartacus in novels and films; and even Ronald Reagan evoked Spartacus as a champion of freedom. So much for the myth, but what about the man?

In *The Spartacus War*, Barry Strauss, professor of history and classics at Cornell University, seeks to answer this question for a popular audience. In recent years Strauss has established himself as one of our premier writers of ancient history cast for what used to be called, without condescension, the “common reader.” In books like *The Trojan War: A New History* and *The Battle of Salamis* he unites a novelist’s storytelling skills with the expert’s command of ancient sources to retell for classically challenged moderns some of the most important and exciting stories from ancient history. *The Spartacus War* is a worthy successor to those earlier achievements, weaving together evidence from ancient literary sources, archaeology, epigraphy, and personal autopsy of the Italian regions where Spartacus marched and fought to give us a fast-paced, gripping story that tells us everything we can reliably know about Spartacus the man and the revolt he inspired.

Strauss’s tale begins in the gladiatorial school owned by Cnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Vatia near Capua, in the beautiful, fertile region about fifteen miles north of modern-day Naples. There Spartacus—the name meant “famous for his spear”—was trained to fight as a *murmillo*, a gladiator who wielded a short, broad sword and an oblong shield. The *murmillo* was usually paired against a *thraex*, who carried a smaller shield and curved sword, a contest that matched the quickness of the *thraex* against the power of the *murmillo*. Strauss’s recreation of such a fight—“a combination of elegance and brutality”—accurately and dramatically recovers the truth of ancient gladiatorial combat obscured for us moderns by Hollywood’s lurid fantasies.

The fighting skills learned in the gladiatorial school and the arena obviously prepared Spartacus for the revolt he eventually led. But before he became a slave and a gladiator, back in his homeland Thrace, Spartacus had served with the Roman army in an allied unit, perhaps as a cavalryman. Most likely, he was forced into service after the Thracians—a fierce, tattooed Balkan people fond of fighting and ecstatic religion—were conquered by the Romans. The details are obscure, but at some point Spartacus deserted and took to banditry, although the Latin word *latro* is also used for guerrilla fighters and insurgents. No doubt, Spartacus and others like him combined principle with expediency and practiced both robbery and resistance against the Romans. In any event, he was captured, enslaved, and trained as a gladiator.

As Strauss points out, Spartacus combined the very qualities and skills necessary for leading a slave uprising. To his natural bravery and charisma were added first-hand experience of the discipline and tactics of the Roman army, and the skills of personal combat learned in the Darwinian arena of the games. And Rome was ripe for a slave uprising—the era was “the heyday of exploitation in the ancient world, the zenith of misery and the nadir of freedom,” according to Strauss. The 1.5 million slaves, about 4 percent of the population, were mostly agricultural laborers working in chain gangs, and, as such, concentrated in regions lacking police forces and close to mountainous terrain perfect for escape and concealment. And many of the slaves comprised some of the fiercest, bravest fighters in the ancient world—Thracians like Spartacus, but also Germans and Celts, the latter “absolutely mad about war,” as the Roman writer Strabo wrote. This tinderbox of rebellion had ignited a dozen times in the century before Spartacus, two massive uprisings occurring in Sicily. More recently, in Capua itself, two slave revolts had broken out, one led by a disaffected Roman noble named Titus Minucius Vettius, who

organized an army of 3,500 slaves. Forty years later, Spartacus followed Vettius' example, turning a motley band of bandits into a tough fighting force.

First, Spartacus had to convince 200 of his fellow gladiators, armed with meat cleavers and skewers, to escape from Vatia's "school" in Capua. Given that the average gladiator seldom lived past thirty, many of them would have been easily persuaded. In the event, only seventy-four made it out. They immediately headed for the wooded slopes of 4,000-foot high Mt. Vesuvius, the volcano that destroyed Pompeii a century and a half later. Along the way the renegade gladiators picked up agricultural slaves, many of whom were needed to work the huge farms near Vesuvius, as well as free men — agricultural laborers, tenant farmers, and bandits, many perhaps veterans themselves. Eventually the slave army grew to 60,000 strong, a force Spartacus had to try to train, arm, and discipline if it was to stand up to the killing machines of the Roman legions.

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Rome underestimated the scale of the revolt at first; the Senate sent the obscure praetor Caius Claudius Glaber with 3,000 ill-trained recruits to crush the rebels. By now, Spartacus' army numbered several thousand and had made sallies from their camp in the volcano's crater to plunder and terrify the estates and farms around Vesuvius. Glaber camped at the foot of the volcano, intending to bottle up the rebels and starve them out. But in this first conflict, Spartacus combined "Thracian speed and stealth with Roman organization and discipline." His men slithered down a steep cliff using as handrails ropes made from wild grapevines, surprising the Romans in their camp. The tall, long-haired, tattooed Celts and Thracians and Germans—all screaming their own terrifying war-cries, and perhaps fired up with wine and prayers to Dionysus, the "loosening" god of freedom—sent the frightened Romans running.

Following its initial victory, Spartacus' army made its way south, raping, kidnapping, and ransacking the estates and cities they happened upon. As the rebels picked up more recruits, they forged weapons from the slaves' chains. Though they twice defeated another Roman army, Strauss surmises that Spartacus, as a Roman veteran, knew that, eventually, the Senate would send a tougher, better-led army to destroy the revolt and avenge the humiliation of Roman standards being captured by barbarian slaves. Spartacus knew what Hannibal had learned 150 years earlier: no matter how often defeated, Rome never ran out of legions or ambitious leaders for whom military victory was the road to power and prestige. Spartacus' subsequent movements perhaps reflect the realization that the slave-army had to get out of Italy, especially after a splinter army led by the Celt Crixus was destroyed by the Romans. Spartacus marched north first, defeating the Romans five more times and celebrating funeral games for Crixus in which he forced captive Romans to

fight to the death like gladiators. But dismayed by the forbidding Alps, or perhaps drunk on fantasies of destroying Rome itself, Spartacus' army turned back to the south.

By the time Spartacus made it back to southern Italy, Rome had found the general it needed: Marcus Licinius Crassus. Stanley Kubrick's film *Spartacus*, in which Laurence Olivier portrays Crassus as an effeminate epicure trying to seduce Tony Curtis with mollusk metaphors, does this tough, frugal, ambitious Roman a disservice. Crassus was no hedonistic dandy: he had watched his father battling insurgents in Portugal and later seen his father's head nailed up in the Forum when the generalissimo Marius took Rome. Crassus fled Rome and lived in a cave for a while, then raised his own army and joined Marius' rival Sulla in Greece. He also fought in the climactic battle at Rome's Colline Gate in 82 B.C., commanding Sulla's right wing, which crushed the enemy's left and won the battle. He became even richer by buying up the estates of the 500 supporters of Marius proscribed by Sulla. Years after the defeat of Spartacus, Crassus led an army against the Parthians on Rome's eastern border. Following the destruction of his army, Crassus had molten gold poured down his throat before his head was cut off and sent to the Parthian king, where, legend has it, it was used as a prop by a Greek actor performing a scene from Euripides' *Bacchae*.

In 72 B.C., however, Crassus' cruelty, experience, and ambition made him the perfect man to end the Spartacus war. His first task was to instill discipline in his army, which he did by "decimating" the troops who had fled from battle: the first 500 runaways were divided into fifty groups, and one man from each group was executed. Their minds now concentrated wonderfully, the Romans were ready to take the offensive against the rebels,

first defeating a 10,000-man detachment and then besting Spartacus' main force. Faced with an adversary like Crassus, who dogged his steps and maneuvered the slave army into fighting on ground favorable to the legions, Spartacus marched to the straits of Messina in an attempt to pass over to Sicily. But he was betrayed by the pirates he had hired to ferry the rebels across the strait: Spartacus had to turn back to the mountains of southern Italy and there await what he knew would be the end.

Somewhere near Venusia, the poet Horace's hometown, in the valley of the Silarus River, the final battle was fought in April of 71 B.C. Before the battle, Spartacus slaughtered his horse, for, if the slaves won, they would have enough horses. If they did not, they wouldn't need any. Then the battle began, "a clash of military science and heroic ideals," as Strauss describes it. As often in Western history, the passionate courage of the insurgents was no match for the superiority in tactics, training, and weaponry of the Romans. Like a Homeric hero, Spartacus charged at Crassus and was cut down, probably by an anonymous legionnaire. The Thracian's body was never identified. The Romans themselves were impressed by the manner of his dying: the later historian Florus would write that Spartacus "died almost an *imperator*," the title of a Roman commander, shouted out by his men after a victory.

Crassus, however, was more intent on impressing future rebels with the futility of resistance. The 6,000 captured rebels were crucified *en masse*, the busy road from Capua to Rome lined with their crosses. (Contrary to Hollywood, Spartacus was not among them, nor did Kubrick's stirring scene of collectivist solidarity—all the rebels shouting, "I am Spartacus" to protect their leader—ever happen.) For weeks, the crucified hung rotting and dying

while the red poppies and the yellow broom bloomed. Crassus returned to Rome and enjoyed an *ovatio*, what Strauss calls the “stripped-down version of a triumph.” After all, no matter how tough the enemy or singular Crassus’ achievement, Spartacus and his army were mere slaves.

The Spartacus War exemplifies popular history at its finest: command of the ancient sources is seamlessly integrated with a fast-paced narrative, all in the service of recovering fact from the accretions of myth, and all free from academic theoretical fads or specious political sermonizing. Spartacus and men indeed fought for their own freedom, but certainly not for the *ideal* of freedom for all mankind, the mythic role subsequent generations have bestowed on him. In fact, Spartacus and his men had no intention of abolishing slavery; rather, Strauss shows, they were motivated by “nationalism, religion, revenge, and riches.” The story of Spartacus, and of Rome’s response, remains an object lesson in the “timeless patterns of insurgencies and uprisings,” as Strauss writes. Thankfully, Professor Strauss leaves it to his reader to draw the specific conclusions for our own current struggles against another insurgency fired by “nationalism, religion, revenge, and riches.”

Bruce S. Thornton is Professor of Classics and Humanities at California State University, Fresno.

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