



# 67 JULIUS CAESAR

100 B.C.- 44 B.C.

Gaius Julius Caesar, the famous Roman military and political leader, was born in Rome in 100 B.C., during a period of extraordinary political turmoil.

In the second century B.C., following their victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War, the Romans had created a large empire. This conquest had made many Romans very rich. However, the wars had badly disrupted the social and economic fabric of Rome, and many of the peasantry had been dispossessed. The Roman Senate, in origin a sort of board of aldermen for a small city, proved unable to fairly and efficiently govern a large empire. Political corruption was rampant, and the entire Mediterranean world was suffering from misgovernment by Rome. In Rome itself, starting in about 133 B.C., there had been

a protracted period of disorder. Politicians, generals, and demagogues struggled for power, and partisan armies (such as that of Marius in 87 B.C. and that of Sulla in 82 B.C.) marched through Rome itself. Though the fact of misgovernment was obvious to all, most Roman citizens wanted to retain republican government. Julius Caesar was probably the first important political leader to clearly see that democratic government in Rome was no longer worth saving, and indeed was already past saving.

Caesar himself was descended from an old patrician family. He had received a good education, and as a young man, entered political life. The details of the various offices which he held, his sundry alliances, and his political rise are very involved, and no attempt will be made to recount them here. However, in 58 B.C., when he was forty-two years old, Julius was appointed the governor of three foreign provinces ruled by Rome: Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy); Illyricum (the coastal regions of present-day Yugoslavia); and Narbonese Gaul (the southern coast of France). Under his command at that time were four Roman legions, totaling about twenty thousand men.

During the years 58-51 B.C., Caesar used those forces to invade and conquer all the rest of Gaul—a region comprising, roughly, present-day France and Belgium, together with parts of Switzerland, Germany, and Holland. Although his forces were badly outnumbered, he succeeded in completely defeating the Gallic tribes and in adding all the territory up to the Rhine River to the Roman dominions. He also sent two expeditions to Britain, but achieved no permanent conquests there.

The conquest of Gaul made Caesar, who was already a leading political figure, a popular hero back in Rome; in the opinion of his political opponents, far too popular and powerful. When his military command ran out, he was ordered by the Roman Senate to return to Rome as a private citizen—that is, without his army. Caesar feared, probably correctly, that if he returned to Rome without his troops, his political opponents would use the opportunity to destroy him. Therefore, on the

night of January 10-11, 49 B.C., in open defiance of the Roman Senate, Caesar led his troops across the Rubicon River in northern Italy and marched on Rome. This plainly illegal act started a civil war between Caesar's legions on the one hand and forces loyal to the Senate on the other hand. The war lasted four years and ended in a complete victory for Caesar, the final battle being fought at Munda, in Spain, on March 7, 45 B.C.

Caesar had already concluded that the efficient, enlightened despotism which Rome required could best be supplied by himself. He returned to Rome in October of 45 B.C., and was soon made dictator for life. In February of 44 B.C., he was offered a crown but turned it down. However, since he was already a military dictator, this did not greatly reassure his republican opponents. On March 15, 44 B.C., (the famous Ides of March) Caesar was assassinated at a Senate meeting by a group of conspirators.

During the last years of his life, Caesar had embarked on a vigorous program of reform. He had instituted a plan to resettle army veterans and the urban poor of Rome in new communities throughout the empire. He had extended Roman citizenship to several additional groups of persons. He planned to institute a uniform system of municipal government for Italian cities. He also planned a vast building program, and a codification of Roman law. He instituted various other reforms as well. But he did not succeed in setting up a satisfactory constitutional system of government for Rome, and this was perhaps the principal cause of his downfall.

Since it was only a year between Caesar's victory at Munda and his assassination in Rome, many of his plans were never implemented, and it is hard to be sure just how enlightened or efficient his administration would have been had he lived. Of all his reforms, the one which had the most lasting effect was the adoption of a new calendar. The calendar he introduced has, with only minor modifications, remained in use ever since.

Julius Caesar was one of the most charismatic political figures in history, and possessed a wide variety of talents. He was

a successful politician, a brilliant general, and an excellent orator and writer. The book he wrote (*De bello Gallico*) describing the conquest of Gaul has long been considered a literary classic: in the opinion of many students, the most readable and interesting of all the Latin classics. Caesar was bold, vigorous, and handsome. He was a notorious Don Juan, and even by the permissive standards of his day was considered promiscuous. (His most famous affair, of course, was his celebrated romance with Cleopatra.)

Caesar's character has often been criticized. He was ambitious for power, and he certainly used his political offices to become rich. However, unlike most ambitious politicians, he was in general neither devious nor deceitful. Caesar was ruthless and

*The Ides of March: the assassination of Julius Caesar.*



brutal when fighting the Gauls. On the other hand, he was remarkably magnanimous to his defeated Roman opponents.

It is an indication of the prestige attached to his name that both the German imperial title, *Kaiser*, and the Russian imperial title, *Czar*, are derived from the word "Caesar." He has always been far more famous than his grandnephew Augustus Caesar, the true founder of the Roman Empire. However, Julius Caesar's actual influence upon history is not equal to his enormous fame. It is true that he played a significant role in the downfall of the Roman Republic. But his importance in that respect should not be exaggerated, since republican government in Rome was already tottering.

Caesar's most important accomplishment was his conquest of Gaul. The territories he conquered there were to remain under Roman rule for approximately five centuries. During that interval, they became thoroughly Romanized. Roman laws, customs, and language were adopted, and later, Roman Christianity as well. Present-day French is derived to a substantial extent from the colloquial Latin of those times.

Caesar's conquest of Gaul was also an important influence on Rome itself, providing Italy for several centuries with security against attacks from the north. Indeed, the conquest of Gaul was a factor in the security of the whole Roman Empire.

Would the Romans sooner or later have conquered Gaul, even without Caesar? They had no technological or numerical advantage over the Gallic tribes. On the other hand, Rome was rapidly expanding in the period before Caesar's conquest of Gaul, and for sometime afterward. Given the high military effectiveness of the Roman armies of that time, the proximity of Gaul to Rome, and the disunity of the Gallic tribes, it appears that Gaul had little chance of remaining independent. In any event, it is indisputable that Caesar was the general who actually defeated the large Celtic armies and conquered Gaul, and he is in this book chiefly for that accomplishment.