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LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM SPARTACUS



"Death comes to us all. Press me again, and you shall find yours" Spartacus

Spartacus was a Thracian gladiator, who led a slave revolt and defeated the Roman forces several times as he marched his army up and down the Italian peninsula until he was killed in battle in April 71 BC. He is a figure from history who has inspired revolutionaries and filmmakers, although scholars do not have significant amounts of information about him. Only accounts from a few ancient writers have survived to this day, and none of these reports were written by Spartacus or his supporters.

Background

According to the main two sources at the time, Appian of Alexandria and Plutarch of Chaeronea, Spartacus was born around 111 BC. in Thrace, whose boundaries today would encapsulate parts of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. This was an area in Southeast Europe that the Roman's were often trying to subjugate in the first century.

Spartacus appears to have served in a Roman auxiliary unit for a time, and he either deserted or became an insurgent against the Romans.

He was therefore captured and forced into enslavement. Due to his strength and stature, he was sold as a slave to Lentulus Batiatis, owner of the gladiatorial school, Ludus in Capua, 110 miles from Rome. Spartacus was considered a heavyweight gladiator called a "murmillo".

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However, Spartacus was a rebel. In 73 BC, Spartacus was among a group of 78 gladiators who plotted an escape from Ludus. Spartacus and his co-leaders, Gaul's Oenomaus and Crixus broke out of the barracks, seized kitchen utensils, and took several wagons of weapons and armour. They defeated legions sent after them, plundered the region surrounding Capua, recruited many other slaves into their rank, and eventually retired to a more defensible position on Mount Vesuvius. This was more than a century before it erupted, and in Spartacus' time, the mountain was covered with vines and had fertile farmland nearby.

Rome's response to this incident was limited as they were distracted fighting both a revolt in Spain and against King Mithridates VI of Pontus in Northern Turkey. The Romans dispatched a force of 3,000 under the command of Gaius Claudius Glaber and isolated the gladiators on a hill-top on Vesuvius. However, Spartacus surprised them as he had made ladders from the branches and ropes from vines and descended from the hill during the night. The Romans, still in camp, never saw them coming. Plutarch wrote "the slaves were able to surround them and to shock the Romans with a surprise attack. When the Romans fled, the slaves seized their camp."

Rome then sent a second force, twice the size of the first, commanded by Publius Varinius. The rebels easily defeated the second expedition. Varinius himself was humiliated; he lost the very horse that he rode on, they killed his lieutenants, seized all their military equipment, and Spartacus paraded their fasces through his camp. With these two successes, they expanded their raiding territory to include the towns of Nola, Nuceria, Thurii and Metapontum. More and more slaves flocked to Spartacus's forces, as did many shepherds and herdsmen from the surrounding regions. By this point, Spartacus had 70,000 people under his command.

In the winter of 73-72 BC, on the coast of Metapontum, Spartacus spent the winter training his recruits. He planned to cross the Apennines Mountains and move to the north, where his people could return to their homelands. At the same time, the Roman Senate, alarmed by the defeat of the praetorian forces, dispatched a pair of consular legions under the commands of Lucius Gellius Publicola, and Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Clodianus to defeat Spartacus. In the spring of 72 BC, a number of the rebels stayed in south Italy with co-leader Crixus, while the remainder advanced towards the Alps under the command of Spartacus.

Gellius' troops caught up Crixus' division and slaughtering Crixus and 30,000 of the rebels near Mount Garganus. Gellius then proceeded to advance on Spartacus from the south while Lentulus drove in from the north. Spartacus was trapped between two armies likely equipped with better arms and armour than he had. However, neither commander anticipated the sizeable cavalry force Spartacus had built up in the preceding months. Lentulus intercepted the main force of Spartacus's army near the Apennines. Plutarch wrote that with his cavalry force Spartacus was able to rush at Lentulus' army and defeat them swiftly. Gellius was then either defeated by Spartacus or forced to retreat.

Spartacus had one last obstacle before reaching the Alps: the army of Gallia Cisalpina, the Roman province which was inhabited by the Gauls along the river, Po, which flowed across northern Italy. At Modena, Governor Gaius Cassius Longinus and his provincial army were defeated. Spartacus's forces were now free to climb the Alps and go to Gaul, Thrace or

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other areas not controlled by Rome. However, for reasons lost to history, Spartacus chose not to do this. Instead, he turned his forces around and went back into Italy. It is likely that Spartacus was vetoed by his men, who had a taste for victory and had “visions of Rome in flames”. It was also speculated that Spartacus received news of Roman advances in Thrace, making him doubt he would ever be able to return safely home.

In the winter of 71 BC, Spartacus arrived at the “toe” of Italy and captured the city, Thurii. According to sources, Spartacus made a bargain with Cilician pirates to then transport him and his men to Sicily, where he intended to gather reinforcements. “Although the Cilicians made an agreement with Spartacus and accepted his gifts, they deceived him and sailed away,” wrote Plutarch. Spartacus forces then retreated toward Bruttium, near Messina.

By the time Spartacus had reached the Messina Straits, a new leader Marcus Licinius Crassus had taken command of the Roman forces. He was a wealthy individual, able to raise a large army and pay them, at least in part, out of his pocket. Among his forces were remnants of legions, belong to Gellius and Lentulus that had been previously defeated by Spartacus. He revived the practice of ‘decimation’ where military units that ran away from the enemy would draw lots and have a random number of soldiers killed by being clubbed or stoned to death. Appian wrote “Crassus selected every tenth man from the consular legions by lot and had him executed,”. This tightened discipline under Crassus.

Rather than openly battle Spartacus in southern Italy he built a system of fortifications across Bruttium, from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Ionian Sea. It was a sixty kilometres long wall, cutting Spartacus’s troops off from their supplies. Spartacus responded to the situation by offering Crassus a peace treaty. Crassus rejected this and Spartacus detected that his troops were wavering, Spartacus stiffened their resolve by crucifying a Roman soldier where all could see. It served as a “visual demonstration to his men of what would happen to them if they did not win,” wrote Appian.

Although Spartacus was able to eventually breakthrough Crassus’s trap, splits emerged in the rebel camp. A group of dissidents led by Castus and Gannicus broke away from Spartacus and set off on their own. Also, another force, led by Marcus Terentius Varro Lucullus, was about to land in Brundisium, and a third force, led by Pompey, was on its way from Spain. In the spring of 71 BC, Castus and Gannicus were defeated by Crassus at the Battle of Cantenna. Once Lucullus’s troops landed at Brundisium, Spartacus’s men could no longer get out of Italy using that port. It was time for Spartacus’s final battle.

According to Plutarch, Spartacus called for his horse and in front of his entire army killed it, stating, “If we win I will have no need of this horse because we will have thousands of roman horses and if we lose I would have no use of a horse”. He was able to defeat two of Crassus' lieutenants, Quintus Marcius Rufus and Gnaeus Tremellius Scrofa. The final battle was fought in April 71 B.C in the Upper Silarus Valley. The remaining 35,000 rebels were defeated with most them being killed on the battlefield. Six thousand survivors of the revolt captured by the legions of Crassus were crucified, lining the Appian Way from Rome to Capua. However, the body of Spartacus was never found.

Despite Spartacus’s astonishing achievements his struggles were barely revered or even remembered as the centuries passed. Not a single written word survives from Spartacus or any of his men, and only four thousand words of historical record survived about his feats.

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Roman historians and scholars chose not to record or comment too much on this dark chapter in their history. It wasn't until the 1760s that his memory was resurrected in France, with political freedom movements sweeping across the country and the rest of Europe. Karl Marx cited him as one of his heroes and the ultimate icon of the class struggle. He inspired German Spartacus League, a forerunner of the Communist Party of Germany. Also, several sports clubs in Europe were named after Spartacus. In eastern Europe, there are several football clubs have Spartak in their title. His appeal was not just limited to left-wing politicians and countries. He was also mentioned by Ronald Reagan as a symbol of the fight for freedom.

What can we learn from Spartacus's life and achievements?

1. Persuasiveness

At the gladiatorial school in Capua, Spartacus would have been surrounded by captives from all over Europe. There would have been an assimilation of different languages and a wariness of one another, as their fate would be battle to the death in the arena. Organising an escape with others in these conditions would have been extremely difficult. Spartacus would have to have been a very persuasive individual to convince 70 of his potential gladiatorial opponents that they should work together to escape from Capua.

2. Generosity

Spartacus insisted on equally dividing the spoils amongst his men. This was one of the primary reasons why an abundance of slaves from all over rural Italy were so keen to join him and showed some much loyalty to him.

3. Psychological Warfare

Spartacus knew the importance of getting under the skin of not only his opponents but of his men. After defeating Gellius' and Lentulus' armies, Spartacus took 400 Roman prisoners and forced them to fight gladiatorial games. Spartacus knew reports of these games would get back to Rome making a mockery of the empire. When he thought his men were wavering Spartacus stiffened their resolve by crucifying a Roman soldier where all could see. He showed his men what would happen to them if they did not stay to fight. In what was to be his last battle, Spartacus called for his horse and in front of his entire army killed it stating, "If we win I will have no need of this horse because we will have thousands of roman horses and if we lose I would have no use of a horse". Even when he knew what his fate would be, he was still trying to inspire his men, in the hope of an unlikely victory.

4. Importance of Timing

The initial Roman troops sent to quell the uprising at Mount Vesuvius would have been overconfident as they assumed that they were taking on a small handful of gladiators. The Roman's had all the weapons and equipment needed to overwhelm Spartacus and his men. However, from his position on Vesuvius he could judge his enemies moves, and when they least expected it in the middle of the night, he struck, abseiling his men down Vesuvius to encircle the enemy.

5. Vision

Spartacus knew that he would not be able to survive against the might of Rome without an army of skilled soldiers. In the winter of 73-72 BC, on the coast of Metapontum, he turned his group of rebels into a fighting force. He also recognised it did not matter how skilled his soldiers were if they did not have the right equipment. Traders attempted to complete deals with Spartacus's armies, to trade the bounty they had looted, but Spartacus had forbidden his soldiers to sell bounty for gold or silver. He said "All I want is brass or iron to be turned into weapons" effectively setting up an arms industry smelting iron as fast as possible to make sure every man had a weapon. Spartacus's men became known throughout the ancient world for their skill with the Roman Gladius Sword. Spartacus also recognised the importance of his armies use of their horses in battle. Thracians were known to be good horseman, and it was a skill Spartacus taught to the rest of his troops.

6. The Importance of a Figure Head

Spartacus's camp on Mount Vesuvius had become a beacon attracting all those who had a grievance against Rome. Spartacus accumulated a mixed group; he had a core of gladiators and runaway slaves under his control. The number of followers swelled during their time at Vesuvius. It was estimated that there were 70,000 and reached up to 120,000 at the peak of his rebellion campaign. In Spartacus, they had found a figurehead for their hatred of the empire.

There are few names as recognisable from ancient history as Spartacus. His achievements were remarkable. Spartacus and his followers, the vast majority of them who had never fought as soldiers, won at least nine major victories over Roman armies, the dominant world power at the time. This unique feat makes Spartacus' slave uprising the largest and most successful of its kind in ancient history. His conquests mean that today Spartacus is the symbol of a small man's fight against brutal oppression.

BACKGROUND

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