Lucius Cornelius Sulla

Sulla came from a good, though not very wealthy Roman family in 138 BC. Sulla was well educated but spent a lot of his spare time in the company of actors and prostitutes. He joined the army and played a leading role in the Social War when some of Rome’s allied rebelled. Sulla believed that the rich Romans (patricians) should rule Rome instead of the poor people (plebs).

In 88 BC Mithridates, King of Pontus, attacked the Roman province of Asia, where an alleged 80'000 Romans and Italians were massacred, the senate (Rome’s parliament) decided on Sulla to be commander of the army against Mithridates.

But one politician called for the command to be given to another general. The plebs backed this change. But Sulla proved a man not to be messed with. ***Sulla marched on Rome at the head of six legions*** (about 36,000 soldiers) and forced the reversal of this decision.

This type of action was to prove typical of Sulla's methods.

After successfully completing his campaign against Mithridates Sulla returned back to Italy. Other than having command of a battle-hardened army he held no office. Sulla was not to wait for anyone to offer him any political position. ***He simply marched on Rome and took it by force***. The government could not raise an army powerful enough to fend him off. And so Sulla took charge.

He was not to take power as an elected consul (like the Prime Minister), but in the position of dictator, a post specially made in times of military crisis.

He now introduced the '***proscriptions***'. This meant the publication of lists of any people he deemed undesirable. Rewards would be made to those who brought them in, be they dead or alive. It goes without saying that Sulla used this device in order to annihilate any political opposition, rather than to track down any real criminals.

***40 senators and 1600 equestrians supposedly died in this first wave of gruesome proscriptions.*** Sulla undoubtedly had all the hallmarks of a Stalin, Mussolini or Hitler. He even revelled in calling assemblies at which he would hold grand speeches, threatening and intimidating all those he claimed to be his enemies, as well as his own audience.

But dictators like Sulla don't just stop killing because the names on the list are exhausted. Instead he began adding new names of people who had become 'enemies of the state'. There was no place people, once on those lists, were safe. ***Even those who took refuge in temples were killed***. Some might have been hauled before him and thrown at his feet. They were killed nonetheless. Others fell victim to the mob, being literally lynched by a bloodthirsty crowd. Those suspects who only had all their belongings confiscated and were then thrown out of Rome were indeed the lucky ones among those who felt Sulla's wrath. ***Sulla used spies to track down anyone who escaped.***

Sulla also used his position to change Rome’s parliament. He wanted to keep the Senate strong and make sure that no politicians who were sympathetic to the plebs could get into politics.

Unusually for a tyrant, Sulla retired in 79 BC. He spent his last years on his country estate, writing his memoirs. Within a short time he died of old age.

Gaius Julius Caesar

Without a doubt the most significant figure in the history of Rome, Julius Caesar paved the way both for the end of the republic and the rise of the emperors.

Like all young Romans, Caesar joined the army. While serving in Asia Minor in 80 B.C., Caesar earned a high military award for bravery. He traveled to Greece for further training in public speaking. On the way, he was captured by pirates and held for ransom. After his release, he led a force to victory against the pirates and then ***crucified all of the survivors***.

To get ahead in Rome, a politician had to spend money on bribes and lavish entertainments for the Roman plebs. Caesar sponsored the most magnificent set of gladiatorial games Rome had ever seen. Later, he obtained a position as governor in Spain, where he made back all the money he had spent by ***stealing*** it from the Spanish people.

Caesar was soon elected consul (like a Prime Minister), but by then it was clear that only two men in Rome really mattered: Caesar and Pompey (a hugely successful Roman general).

The two became allies in order to control Rome. Pompey even married Caesar's daughter Julia to solidify their bond, but despite their mutual claims of loyalty, the alliance was an uneasy one.

The conflict would be delayed for many years, however, while Caesar went to Gaul (modern France). Anxious to gain military glory, he went looking for a war. Caesar attacked the Gauls, then dealt with the Germans. Next, as a means of preventing the Celts of Britain from aiding their allies on the mainland, he led the first Roman invasions of Britain in 55 B.C. In the course of these campaigns, ***Caesar killed perhaps a million people,*** but eventually placed all of Gaul firmly under Roman control.

Julia died in 54 B.C., breaking the bond between Caesar and Pompey. Soon Pompey ordered Caesar back to Rome, and Caesar, knowing he would be killed if he went back alone, brought his army with him.

Pompey moved his forces to Greece in order to regroup, while Caesar defeated Pompey's legions in Spain. At one point, Caesar’s army mutinied so he ***decimated*** the mutinous legion. The two met in battle at Pharsalus in Greece in 48 B.C., and though Caesar's armies won, Pompey managed to escape. He fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated.

In 47 B.C. Caesar returned to Rome, where he assumed the ***powers of a dictator***, and quickly pushed through a series of laws. Most notable among these was his effort to reduce unemployment by requiring that every landowner hire one free man for every two slaves working in his fields.

Caesar gave himself more power than any Roman leader had ever enjoyed; yet he seemed to want more. He placed his ***portrait on coins***, an honor previously reserved only for the gods, and declared that the month of his birth would no longer be called Quintilis but "Julius" or ***July***. Instead of standing before the senate when he spoke to them, as rulers had always done before, he sat—more like a King.

Caesar planned to address the senate on the Ides of March (March 15th) 44 B.C. Unknown to him, however, a group of some 60 influential Romans—led by his supposed friends Brutus and Cassius - had joined forces to assassinate him. ***As he entered the senate chamber, the assassins jumped at him with daggers, stabbing him 23 times.***

Nero

Nero was the fifth Roman emperor. He is remembered as an ineffectual and brutal leader.

Nero was born near Rome on 15 December 37 AD. Through his mother Agrippina he was the only surviving direct male descendant of the emperor Augustus. In 49 AD, Agrippina married her uncle, the emperor Claudius, and began to promote her own son's claim to the succession. She persuaded Claudius to adopt Domitius - who now took the name Nero - as his son, had Claudius poisoned and Nero became emperor.

Agrippina clearly wished to rule through Nero, and her portrait briefly appeared on the coins alongside his. But the new emperor paid more attention to his advisors Burrus and his teacher Seneca, and the result was five years of exemplary government. ***In 59 AD, Nero had his mother put to death.***

In 62 AD, Burrus died and Seneca retired, removing the key controlling influences on Nero. ***He divorced his wife Octavia, who was later executed***, and married his mistress Poppaea. From a young age Nero enjoyed the company of actors, musicians and prostitutes. Two years later, much of Rome was destroyed in a fire, for which Nero was blamed. Nero diverted blame from himself by accusing the ***Christians*** - then a minor religious sect - of starting the fire, leading to a ***campaign of persecution***. Nero reportedly ***burned Christians alive*** during his feasts. Nero set about the necessary rebuilding of the city, including a large area for a ***new palace*** for himself and a ***colossal bronze statue of himself***.

Meanwhile, the Roman Empire was in turmoil. Nero established Armenia as a frontier state against Parthia (Iran), but only after a costly war. There were revolts against Rome - in Britain (60 AD - 61 AD), led by Boudicca, and Judea (66 AD - 70 AD).

To pay for the rebuilding program, Nero undertook a number of acts that would live in infamy. Nero ***robbed Rome’s temples*** and forced rich Romans to change their wills so that he would inherit all their wealth. He then ***forced them to commit suicide***.

In 65 AD, Gaius Calpurnius Piso led a conspiracy against the emperor and in the purge that followed, dozens of prominent Romans were ***executed without trial***, including Seneca. In 65 AD, Nero is believed to have ***kicked his wife Poppaea to death***, whilst pregnant with his child. Nero also had his favourite slave ***castrated*** because he believed him to resemble Poppaea. His next wife was Statilia Messalina, whose first husband Nero had executed.

In 68 AD, the Gallic and Spanish legions rose against Nero. Nero declared to the Romans that he intended to confront the rebels and ***sing to them*** with an army of Amazon princesses. In order to get an army of Amazonians, Nero had every prostitute in Rome assembled and had their heads shaved. When the Praetorian Guards (Nero’s bodyguards) rose against Nero, he fled Rome.

The senate declared him a public enemy and he committed suicide on 9 June 68 AD. Disputes over his succession led to civil war in Rome.

Caligula

'Caligula' was the third Roman emperor after the emperor Tiberius. He has gone down in history as Rome's most tyrannical emperor.

Caligula was actually named Gaius. He was the son of the popular general, Germanicus and the great-grandson of Augustus – the first emperor. From age two to four he lived on the Rhine with his father's legions, and the soldiers gave him the affectionate nickname 'Caligula', or 'Little Boots'.

After the death of his brother in 33 AD he was next in succession, and lived with the emperor Tiberius on Capri (an island near Naples). When Tiberius died in 37 AD, the bodyguard Macro ensured that Caligula became emperor. It was also rumoured that Caligula and Macro had hurried the death of Tiberius by ***smothering him with a pillow***. Macro was put to death at the beginning of the new reign.

The 24-year-old emperor was initially hugely popular - he was the son of Germanicus, had the blood of Augustus in his veins, and was a welcome change from the dour, absent Tiberius.

Tiberius was extremely tight with his money but Caligula ***provided lavish games*** for the Romans to enjoy, and abolished the sales tax. But seven months into his reign he fell ill, and he emerged from this as a megalomaniac - he may have lost his sanity.

He went out of his way to ***humiliate the senate*** (he ***named his horse as Consul*** – Prime Minister), and encouraged ***treason trials*** for his own financial benefit. He also ***insisted on being treated as a god***. Caligula did not like the fact that he was starting to become bald. As a result, he forbid anyone to look at him from above.

Caligula had three sisters, with whom he was alleged to have ***committed incest***, and they were given unprecedented public honours, being included in the soldiers' oath of allegiance. But Drusilla died in 38 AD, and the next year Agrippina and Livilla were exiled for involvement in a conspiracy.

In 39-40 AD, Caligula campaigned in Germany, as his father had done. More mysterious was his planned expedition against Britain in 40 AD. He got no further than the Channel, where he ***ordered the troops to gather seashells***.

His actions suggest that he needed military glory such as Augustus and Tiberius had enjoyed, but did not want the bother (or the expense) of a war. His triumph on his return in 40 AD was thought to have featured bogus Germans (slaves in disguise). He also particularly offended the Jews, intending to place a statue of himself in the Temple at Jerusalem.

In 41 AD, the Praetorian Guard assassinated Caligula, together with his wife Caesonia and his daughter. He was 29. Only the common people, who benefited from his extravagant spending, lamented his death.

Boudicca

Boudicca was queen of the Iceni people of Eastern England and led a major uprising against occupying Roman forces.

Boudicca was married to Prasutagus, ruler of the Iceni people of East Anglia. When the Romans conquered southern England in AD 43, they allowed Prasutagus to continue to rule. However, when Prasutagus died the Romans decided to rule the Iceni directly and confiscated the property of the leading tribesmen. ***They are also said to have stripped and flogged Boudicca and raped her daughters***. These actions increased widespread hatred at Roman rule.

In 61 AD, while the Roman governor Gaius Suetonius Paullinus was leading a campaign in North Wales, the Iceni rebelled. Members of other tribes joined them.

Boudicca's warriors successfully defeated the Roman Ninth Legion and destroyed the capital of Roman Britain, then at Colchester. This act was particularly savage as the town was undefended - military had retreated to London. Boudicca’s troops burnt the Temple of Claudius whilst the town’s ***civilian population were trapped inside.***

The Rebels went on to destroy London and Verulamium (St Albans). ***Thousands were killed.***

Finally, Boudicca was defeated by a Roman army led by Paulinus. Many Britons were killed and Boudicca is thought to have poisoned herself to avoid capture. The site of the battle, and of Boudicca's death, are unknown.