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What Led to the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th Centuries?

Examining the internal and external forces that weakened the Western Empire

Student's Name

Institution

Professor

Course

Date

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Introduction

In the late fourth century, the Western Roman Empire crumbled after nearly 500 years of operation as the world's superpower. The scholars have blamed its fall on myriad factors which range from the military failure to the natural disasters and climate change. Some historians also hold the view that the empire never falls completely in the 476 AD since the Eastern part of the empire continued to expand and rain for over 1000 years after the fall of the Western section which was under the rule of King Honorius (Womersley, 2008). Therefore, the concept of the empire's collapse is an ongoing debate and theories have emerged to explain its decline and disintegration during the period. During the period between 4th and 5th century, the Roman city and its inhabitants fought with their neighbors and expanded their territories to the extent that they covered the modern day Northern Africa, Middle East and Europe (Gibbon, 2013). As the territory grows, the empire did experience numerous invasions, but given that they had a strong army, it was brought to a halt. Due to the fact that the city was known to be powerful and had a lot of resource endowment, its fall was a greater shock to most of the people who lived in the period. A fall in the Western Roman Empire depicts a failure of the emperor to enforce its rule on its vast territories, a situation which have led to the division of the empire by various successors due to intensive politics. It thus forced the emperor to loose strength which could have enabled it to exercise its control over other territories hence making other conquests unprofitable. Therefore, Some of the factors which weakened the empire comprise of the number and effectiveness of the army (over-expansion and military overspending), the strength of the economy, the invasion of other tribes, the rise of the eastern empire, the changes in the religion, the increased pressure from the barbarians living in the outskirt of the empire, the competencies of the emperor, and the efficiency of the civil administration ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). The factors made the empire unmanageable and ungovernable hence its actual collapse. Therefore, in the paper, there is need to discuss at length the reasons which caused the fall of the empire to expound on what happened during the period.

Causes and Fall of the Roman Empire

Just as the building of Rome was not done by single events, its downfall was also very complex. It lasted for over 1000 years and did represent adaptive and sophisticated civilization ("Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire | Western Civilization," n.d.). During the period, the main reasons why the empire did fall can be explained as follows:

Due to the Barbarian Invasion

The fall of the Roman Empire is pegged on the failure of the military to protect it against the eternal forces and invasions. During the period, the Rome had tangled with the Germanic tribes

and cultures for a very long period. However, during the 300s, the barbarians especially the Goths invaded the territories and extended beyond the borders of the empire. However, during the fourth century, the Roman soldiers weathered the Goth's uprising. In the 410 periods, the Visigoth did sack the city of Rome successfully. Therefore, the empire spends several decades when they were still under the threat of the external forces, and the city was raided again in the 455 periods by the Vandals ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). These piled more pressure on the leadership of the empire as well as its operations hence leading to its weakening. Besides, in the year 476, the empire faced a major revolt from the Germanic machinery under the leadership of chieftain Odoacer which disposed of the emperor Augustulus Romanus from leadership. During a short span of time, they first capture Orestes and Ravenna and eventually entire Italy. Thereafter, the Roman Empire could not be able to rule from Italy's posts hence a view that it is in 476 periods which the empire got the greatest blow which brought it to its knees. Therefore, historians had a feeling that without these subsequent invasions from the determined Barbarians, the empire would not have been subjected to lots of pressure, a situation which would have enabled it to stand just as the eastern part of the empire. It is because most of the western provinces were suffering from the waves of Germanic invasions and most of them were politically disconnected from the east hence a decline of the entire western part of the empire.

Overreliance on Slave Labor and Economic Troubles

Even though the empire was suffering from external attacks, there were also some of the internal issues which did affect its operations and management as it was scrambling from within due to the financial crisis and squabbles which arises among the leaders during the beginning of the 4th century. The overspending and constant war which had been experienced in the empire had greatly lightened the imperial coffers. Besides, the high rate of inflation, as well as the imposition of the oppressive taxation, has greatly widened the gap between the poor and the rich. In the hope of avoiding the taxman, most of the wealthy people fled to the countryside and constructed independent chiefdoms. These caused a lot of problems in the collection of revenues which was to be used in the management of the empire's operations hence leading to an incline in the shortage of funds over a given period. Besides, the empire was greatly affected by the labor deficits since it fully depended on the slaves to help in tilling its fields and work as craftsmen (Gibbon, Bury, & Boorstin, 2000). Due to the labor deficit, the empire lacked enough workforce to recruit in the army hence there was minimal to no replacement in the military as some of the soldiers lost their lives in the war. It is a situation which led to the decline in the army officers who could work as a team to defend the empire. The shortage in the slave mainly happened in the 5th century when the Vandals conquered North Africa and started to disrupt the trading system of the empire by marauding the Mediterranean as pirates ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). Due to the decline in the agricultural operations, faltering of the commercial

activities, the empire loses grip in the entire Africa and Europe, a process which led to its downfall.

Due to the Rise of the Eastern Empire

Most of the mistakes of the city of Rome was committed and concealed in the late 3rd century when Emperor Diocletian divided the empire into two halves. The western Empire seated in the Milan city and the Eastern Empire in Byzantium which was later known as Constantinople ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). When the division was made, the governance was possible in the short term. After a period, the west and east had failed to work together to fight the external forces which were affecting them especially the west. The two sections of the empire were constantly struggling over the available resources and other military aids, a process which brought various conflicts between the two halves of the empire. Therefore, when these happened, the external forces took advantage and conquered the west part of the empire. As the gulf widens, the Latin-speaking eastern empire grew in wealth while the west languished in an economic crisis. These thus divert the attention of the Barbarians to the western parts of the empire hence leading to an incline in the number of invasions over a given period (History & Policy, n.d.). Emperor Constantine who was the emperor of the East ensured that the East was fortified and well-guarded that the Barbarians could not be able to conquer hence the final fall of the West. The East endured the forces after 1000 years and they later fell after the invasion of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s.

Over-Expansion and Military Overspending

After a series of conquests to the neighboring empires and kingdoms, the stretch of the empire from the Atlantic Ocean, river Euphrates to the Middle East became one of the factors which could have caused the downfall of the empire ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). Due to a very big territory to govern, the empire did face a logistical and administrative problem which was not easy to counter. Even though they have good road networks, they could not be able to enhance faster communication from one place of the empire to the next hence could not be in a position to enhance the management of the holdings. Besides, they struggled to marshal sufficient troops and the resources to help in defending the territory from the outside attacks and other local rebellions which were experienced in the empire (Putnam, 2004). These constant struggles, as well as the divisions experienced in the Empire, is what sped the collapse of its western part.

The Political Instability and the Government Corruption

The political fall of the Roman Empire has been considered to be one of the vital events in the history of the world. In the 4th century, the empire was still in many superficial ways strong. However, due to the growth in size, there grew an inconsistent and inefficient leadership which

served only to magnify the problems of the emperor. Due to the fact that being the emperor was not an easy task, the administration process was thus a nightmare. However, it came to be more dangerous in the second and the third century since it became like a death sentence. The civil war did cause chaos, and in the span of 75 years, 20 men had taken the throne especially after the murder of their predecessors. These subsequent assassinations and the political rot had led to the instability experienced in Rome hence led to a high level of instability. Besides, due to a wide range of corrupt practices in the land, the weakening of the economy occurred, a condition which forced the empire to strain the available resources hence their depletion. It is because they couldn't be able to sustain the activities like the construction of the wall and the military support, a condition which gave the external forces an opportunity to invade the western part of the land or empire. These thus contributed to its major downfall during the period of 4th and 5th century respectively.

The Arrival of the Huns and Migration of the Barbarian Tribes

The invasion of the Barbarian to the western Rome was mainly caused by the migration which was championed by Huns invasion of the Europe in the late 4th century. The Eurasian warriors invaded Northern Europe and did drive numerous Germanic tribes to the borders of the Roman Empire. The Romans did allow the Visigoth members to cross to the south of the Danube and the safety of the Roman territory ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). However, they received and treated them with a lot of cruelty. Besides, the Roman officials even forced the starving Goths to trade their children into slavery for the exchange of dog meat (Womersley, 2008). Through this brutality and mistreatment, the enmity was created between the Goths and the Roman Empire who live along their borders. When they could not contain the oppression they were undergoing through any longer, the Goths rose to a revolt, a process which routed the Roman Army and they eventually killed the Eastern Emperor Valens during the Adrianople battle in 378 AD. The Romans were shocked and started to negotiate with the Barbarians for a portion of their empire. These continued to the 410 periods when the Barbarian king went to the west of the empire and sacked the emperor. As the empire weakens over, other tribes from German did take advantage of the situation and made their invasions. These comprise of the Vandals and Saxons surged and settled in Spain, North Africa, and Britain. These eventually led to the fall of the entire empire since it is the Goths who were in control of everything and they had destabilized the Roman leadership.

The Loss of Traditional Values and Christianity

The decline in the Roman operation and dominance can be linked with the spread of Christianity. When Christianity was legalized by Edict of Milan in 313, and later declared to be the religion of the state in the year 380, the values of the Roman religion did receive a drastic change in attention (Gibbon & Womersley, 2005). The decree did end the occasional

persecution and had eroded the initial Roman values and systems. It did replace the polytheistic Roman religion which did give the emperor power and divine status. It tends to shift the focus to the glory of the sole deity as opposed to the glory of the state. In the situation, the pope and other religious leaders played a major role in politics which later complicated the Roman Empire governance (Gibbon, 2013). These thus crippled the operations of the empire over a given period hence the genesis of their downfalls.

Weakening of the Roman Legions

In the ancient world, the military of Rome was envied by many states. However, during the decline, the mark up of the once mighty legions began to change. They were unable to recruit sufficient soldiers from the citizenry of the Romans, and they began to hire the foreign machinery to build up their armies ("What Factors Caused the Fall of the Roman Empire?," 2017). The Barbarians and the Germanic Goths grew in number, and the legion eventually swells with these groups of soldiers to the extent that the name of the soldiers changed to Barbarus. The Germanic soldiers were fierce and had no to little loyalty to the empire leadership. Besides, they were power hungry and quite often turn against the Roman employers. It is said that the Barbarians who brought the western part of the Roman Empire down had learned their military tactics and skills as they were serving in the Roman legion ("8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," n.d.). Therefore, it is through the weakening of the legion which eventually led to the collapse of the entire Western Roman Empire.

Theories Explaining the Fall of the West Roman Empire

In the past, the archeologists and historians developed and classified various theories and explanations which clarify the fall of the Roman Empire. They comprise of the decay owing to the general malaise, catastrophic collapse, transformation and monocausal decay. The general malaise can be traced back to Edward Gibbon who postulated that the edifice of the Roman Empire had been constructed on a weak foundation since its beginning (Guizot, 1911). He argued that the fall of the empire was inevitable since the initial stages of its constructions. He did peg the major portion of the decay of the empire to the invasion and influence of the Christianity. He said that it is the Christianity which has resulted in the monocausal explanation. On the other hand, the concept of the catastrophic collapse tends to hold that the empire had been on the pre-determinable event and there was a need for it not to be taken for granted. However, the collapse was due to various processes which occurred in Romans during the 3rd, 4th and 5th periods. Most of them did start during the time of the great migration and consecutive and intense stress which affected the management and leadership of the emperors ("Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire | Western Civilization," n.d.). These greatly influenced the efficiency hence its fall. The last and final theory is the transformation theories which tend

to give a challenge to the fall of the Roman Empire. It seeks for the clarification of the fall into disuse of a certain political dispensation which is unworkable towards its end as well as the fate of the Roman Civilization which guide the empire. The transformation theory draws its premise from the Pirenne thesis which states that the Roman Empire would go random transformation which changed in a medieval world. The scholars of the transformation theory prefer to put a lot of emphasis on the late Antiquity as opposed to the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Therefore, one can thus conclude that the sole cause of the Roman Empire was the actions and selfish interests of its leaders and those who were ascending to power through assassinations and military force.

Conclusion

Roman Empire was a strong empire which ruled a vast area of jurisdiction in the 300s and 400s period. However, due to various internal and external forces, the empire did start to scramble for itself hence leading to its disintegration as well as downfall. However, it is said that the fall in the Western Roman Empire depicts a failure of the emperor to enforce its rule on its vast territories, a situation which have led to the division of the empire by various successors due to intensive politics. However; there are other factors which could be attributed to the downfall of the entire empire. These comprise of the invasion of the Barbarian worries that disintegrate the leadership and took over the control of the empire and overreliance on the slave labor and other economic troubles. They also suffered from the effects of the rise of the Eastern Empire which failed to support the west but rather scramble for the resources so as to attain superiority. These affected the west hence leading to its weakening. As these continue, the Germanic Goths did take advantage and made various invasions. Other factors comprise of the over-expansions and military overspending, the political instability and corruption which was experienced among the government officials, the arrival of the Huns and the migration of the Barbarian tribes, the loss of traditional values and Christianity and weakening of the Roman Legions. The factors in one way or another did cause a lot of problems to the leadership and the administration hence its downfall.

There are various theories which also explain the downfall of the empire. These comprise of the decay owing to the general malaise, catastrophic collapse, transformation and monocausal decay. These gave different views to the downfall of the empire hence having covering a wider scope. Therefore, is believed that when the above mentioned factors would have been addressed by the emperors, the Roman would have remained to be world's superpower. However, due to the selfish interests of different groups, the empire had to completely fall.

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