

## **The Gallic Wars**

(58-50 BCE)

### The German Threat

Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres...

With these words, Caesar begins the *Bellum Gallicum*, his own account of the Gallic Wars. The books of this unique work, which were written at the end of each year, were sent to the Senate in Rome, probably as supplements to an eventual application for a Triumph. The excuse for the war was the supposed crossing of the Helvetii into Roman sphere of influence and the invasion of Gaul by the German tribe of the Suebii. The reality was that Caesar needed to build up an army and a reputation to match Pompeius's, which would secure him another Consulship upon his return to Rome.

There can be no doubt that Caesar was an extremely competent General, probably one of the best ever. He understood strategy and tactics, and he could handle the brutish and greedy legionaries of his time. He was almost always aware of the movements of his enemies and usually secured both communications and supply lines in a masterly fashion. His natural energy was turned into the feared *celeritas* of Caesar, a swiftness of action that stunned his contemporaries. Almost paradoxically, he could combine this swiftness with extraordinary patience, and as a result was almost always able to choose the time and place for his battles, or regain the initiative even in the most difficult situations.

In 58 BC, he moved across the borders into Gaul, defeating the westward migration of the Helvetii and then crushing the Sueban mercenaries under Ariovistus. With his victory against the Germans, Caesar firmly cemented his position as Marius' heir. In the following year he subdued the Belgic tribes in the north, while his lieutenant Publius Licinius Crassus pacified present day Normandy and Brittany.

### The Meeting at Lucca

Meanwhile, the relations between the triumvirs had become strained. Pompeius was becoming increasingly jealous of Caesar's successes while Crassus returned to his former enmity against Pompeius. During Caesar's tenure as Consul, Cicero had been sacrificed to his enemy Publius Clodius (of the Clodius scandal) and forced to go into exile. A year later, however, Pompeius secured Cicero's return, a decision that antagonized Clodius.

Cicero first initiative was to procure the *cura annonae* (grain distribution rights) for Pompeius for a period of five years, an important concession which is unlikely to have pleased Caesar. The situation grew more tense when the Optimates, supported first by Clodius and later by Cicero, attacked the *lex Julia Agraria* (land bills) of 59. To bring the matters to a head, one of the potential consuls for 55 threatened to take away Caesar's command.

In May 56, Caesar invited Pompeius and Crassus to a meeting at Lucca

just inside the borders of Cisalpine Gaul, where he succeeded in patching up the alliance. Almost 200 senators participated in this meeting, including governors from Sardinia and Spain -- one would be forgiven for thinking the Senate had moved to the provinces. It was arranged that Pompeius and Crassus be Consuls for 55, and Caesar's command in Gaul was prolonged for a further five years. Pompeius received a five-year term in Spain and Crassus a similar tenure in Syria. In addition, it was agreed that Caesar would be allowed a second term as Consul upon the termination of his Gallic command.

Despite bitter resistance from Cato and the Optimates, the elections of Crassus and Pompeius were secured and Caesar's command prolonged, after which Crassus travelled to the east leaving Pompeius to take on the duties of Consul alone. But by the end of the year Pompeius had difficulties controlling the Consular elections for 54. However skilled Pompeius might be on the battlefield, his skills did not extend to the political arena.

#### Further Operations - The Channel Crossings

In 56 BC, the operations in Brittany continued. The Veneti had revolted, supported by the Morini and Menapii from the Lower Rhine region. Caesar destroyed the Veneti and the next year conquered the Morini and Menapii and virtually exterminated two German tribes, the Usipetes and Tencteri, who had crossed the Rhine to help the rebels. He then bridged the Rhine and raided Germany before crossing the Channel to Britain. The Roman people, duly impressed by these feats, voted him twenty days of public thanksgiving.

The reality was that things were beginning to get out of hand. His expeditions to Germany and Britain had both been brief and Gaul was still far from pacified. It must have been dawning on him that something more than his previous (almost terrorist-like) lightning strikes would be required, if he were to subdue the Celts. Nevertheless, he prepared to launch a new expedition on Britain the next year.

800 ships and 5 Legions were invested in the second Channel crossing, a record which would stand until the Normandy landings of the Second World War. But as Plutarch laconically tells:

He passed thither twice from that part of Gaul which lies over against it, and in several battles which he fought did more hurt to the enemy than service to himself, for the islanders were so miserably poor that they had nothing worth being plundered of. When he found himself unable to put such an end to the war as he wished, he was content to take hostages from the king, and to impose a tribute, and then quitted the island. (Plutarch)

Caesar's return to Gaul marks a turning point in his life, and a period of personal crisis. In the letters waiting upon his return are news of the deaths of two of the most important people in his life - his daughter Julia, and his mother Aurelia. The short-term effects of his personal loss are visible in the careless dispositions of his armies for winter quarters. This uncharacteristic lapse forces him into a very circumstantial and untrustworthy, but meticulous explanation for the disposition of his troops in the winter of 54. But the facts are unavoidable, his sloppiness cost the lives of 15 cohorts, or at least 10000 men. He drowned his sorrow in the blood of the Gauls, waging a

war of extermination against the rebellious Eburones and bridging the Rhine for a second raid.

Politically, the death of Julia meant that the bonds between Pompeius and Caesar were weakened. Pompeius refused further offers of marriage with women within Caesar's family, choosing instead to marry Cornelia, daughter of the Optimate Metellus Scipio. Pompeius lingered in his villa on the outskirts, making no effort to stop the growing anarchy. Street violence made elections impossible, and as early as 54, there was talk of making him Dictator. The next year, Crassus died at the battle of Carrhae, effectively dissolving the triumvirate.

However, neither Pompeius nor Caesar felt ready for the break that the Optimates were hoping for, and Pompeius readily complied with Caesar's request to raise 3 Legions for his campaigns against the Gauls in 53. In January 52, Clodius was murdered by the armed followers of the Optimate Titius Annius Milo and in the riots that followed, the Senate house burnt down. Finally, Pompeius intervened and forced the Optimates to choose between himself and Milo. He was elected sole Consul, with responsibility for re-establishing law and order.

#### The Gallic Revolt

In the meantime, Caesar was forced to devote his full attention to the Gallic tribes. At last, the people of central Gaul had found a leader who could unite them - the Arvernian Vercingetorix. Although Caesar's career is on the line, he re-enters the Gallic scene seemingly untouched by a year and a half of personal crisis.

Vercingetorix favored a "scorched earth" policy, but was unable to persuade his countrymen to adopt it wholeheartedly. Instead, the Bituriges insisted on standing siege in their town of Avaricum, which was taken by Caesar within a month. The Romans followed this by besieging Vercingetorix in Gergovia, but their attempt to storm Gergovia was repulsed with heavy losses -- the first outright defeat that Caesar had suffered in Gaul. After repelling an attack while his army was on the march, he then laid siege to Vercingetorix in Alesia. Like Gergovia, Alesia was a position of great natural strength, but the relieving force was repulsed and dispersed by Caesar and Vercingetorix was forced to capitulate.

This rebellion occurred at a time which was most fortunate for Caesar, so much that one may be tempted to allege that Vercingetorix was a Caesarean agent. In any case, the suppression of this revolt and others in 51 BC was so efficient that the province of Gaul remained pacified, even during the following decades of civil war.

Caesar's approach in these years was a mixture of reconciliation and terror. When he captured the natural fortress of Uxellodunum he had the survivors' hands cut off. Whatever one may feel of his methods, the policy was effective and gave him the peace needed to concentrate on events in Rome.