



Anti-Roman Insurgency and the Significance of Popular Support during
the Mithridatic Wars, 88-63 BCE

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By 120 BCE, the Roman Republic was quickly becoming the most dominant state of the Western world since Alexander the Great's empire. Since the Punic wars, Rome had added Mediterranean islands, most of Spain and territory in Northern Africa. Rome also had conquered provinces and protectorates in Gaul, Greece, and Macedonia. The Republic held some territory and had minor interests in Asia Minor and the Middle East as well, but Roman attention and commitment to these regions would only take true form through the Mithridatic Wars. Mithridates VI Eupator Dionysus (134-63 BCE), whom the wars are named for, was an ardent opponent of the Republic for nearly his entire life. Mithridates was able to put up a formidable opposition to Rome, but ultimately lost because he failed to keep the allegiance and support of both those he ruled directly and the populations allied to him. Brian McGing, who has researched Mithridates extensively and written multiple works on the subject, acknowledges the shortcomings of Mithridates in dealing with his people, but would ultimately attribute his loss to the superiority of Roman military. In studying the foreign policies and actions of Mithridates as ruler, liberator, protector and general, it is clear his fate was determined by the gain and loss of his greatest asset: the support of the population.

Roman domination of the Near East has had a profound effect on Western culture and history. As the catalyst for the Mithridatic Wars, Mithridates holds substantial historical significance. Mithridates was the last fully autonomous Hellenic king of the East. This was mainly because of his staunch resistance that Rome truly came to dominate and administer Asia Minor and the Middle East. For the most part, Mithridates feigned philhellenism to resist Rome. He claimed that he cared more about his kingdom and sovereignty than promoting Greek culture and protecting the various Greek populations. The actions and might of Mithridates made Rome

decide it needed to dominate the Near East to prevent another ruler like Mithridates from

king of Pontus between 119 and 63 BCE. Mithridates' situation, however, was different.

Unlike kings before him who aligned themselves with Rome to expand, Mithridates' expansion forced him into conflict with the Republic.

Mithridates Eupator portrayed himself as both Persian and Greek to win support over all people in his kingdoms and beyond. He shares his surname Dionysus with a Greek god. He told his troops that his father was a descendant of Cyrus and Darius, the founders of the great Persian Empire and that his mother was descended from Alexander the Great and Seleucus of Greece.

Mithridates also claimed relation to Perseus, who was also

of integration between the East and ² This was precisely how Mithridates wanted to represent himself. Mithridates issued royal coins with both Greek and Persian representations depicting Perseus and other Greek

Early in his reign, Mithridates was invited by the Bosporan Kingdom to lead it against the Scythians, who had sacked the key city of Chersonesus.⁵ The ever-ambitious king took the chance and proclaimed himself protector of Greek culture against non- barbarians .⁶ The Scythians had been able to pressure the Greek cities of the northern Black Sea into paying tribute and giving them stores of food. The small Greek cities had to rely on each other for what little protection they could provide against the ever present threat. The presence and fear of the barbarians created a unique opportunity for Mithridates to expand his kingdom and prestige.

Mithridates , son of Mithares, successfully defeated over fifty thousand Scythians with only his six thousand well trained troops. Afterward, he defeated the barbarian Tauri and a number of other tribes that were threatening Greek cities. The sources we have do not document the chronology of these events very well. We do know, however, that through these campaigns, Mithridates annexed nearly the entire northern shore of the Black Sea and soon

about, Mithridates's conquests on the northern Black Sea, for it was much too concerned with its campaigns in North Africa and defending against Germanic tribes to its north. However, the Senate would not tolerate Mithridates and Nicomedes in Paphlagonia, and it ordered both kings to evacuate Cappadocia.⁹ After doing so, the powerful Roman consul, Gaius Marius, told him in 96 BCE either Romans or¹⁰ The following year, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, the praetor of Rome, put Ariobarzanes on the Mithridates's indirect control negated.¹¹ Rome was beginning to see that Mithridates could possibly become a very powerful adversary to the east. Thus, they sought to adopt a policy that would either prevent further expansion or crush Pontus in a seemingly inevitable conflict. Mithridates also recognized that war with Rome was only a matter of time. He began preparing his army and navy for an impending conflict and attempted to align himself with any nations he could to help Pontus against Rome.

The ambition of Mithridates more than caught the attention of Rome. The king and Rome were engaged in political intrigue within Asia Minor, a key outpost of the eastern part of the empire. Rome ruled through a series of puppet kings throughout the region. However, the ever-ambitious Mithridates attempted to maneuver his allies into leadership positions in several strategically important kingdoms.

IX, in Cappadocia within the heart of Asia Minor. In both cases, however, Rome had other ideas: Nicomedes III Euergetes, son of Nicomedes II, was established in Bithynia and Ariobarzanes was restored in Cappadocia by Manius Aquilius around 90 BCE.¹² Although ultimately outmaneuvered by Rome, Mithridates successfully caused political instability in the region.

In 89 BCE, Aquilius, consular legate in Asia Minor, persuaded Nicomedes III Euergetes to raid Pontus. This presented Mithridates with a legitimate cause to make war with Bithynia. He appealed to Rome asking them to either do something about the aggression or to let him react. Aquilius, acting on his own, persuaded Nicomedes III Euergetes to raid Pontus. For many in Asia Minor, Mithridates had adhered to Roman terms and was the aggrieved party. This allowed the peoples of Asia Minor to view the Roman Empire as the aggressor and tiny Pontus as the victim. He could now proclaim himself as liberator from Roman oppression and greed in Asia.

Still, Mithridates moved cautiously in Asia Minor overall because he wanted to take Rome (Aquilius, in particular) by surprise. Rome had been engulfed in a war with its allies in Italy, known as the Social War. The last thing the Senate wanted was a full scale confrontation in Asia. Acting mostly on his own, however, Aquilius instigated Mithridates. Nicomedes invaded Pontus while Aquilius and his forces held defensive positions. Pontic generals Neoptolemus and Archelaus forced the Bithynians and Romans into flight. Mithridates occupied Bithynia in 89 BCE. He treated the conquered people with great compassion and endeared them with his kindness.¹³ Many cities submitted willingly and the inadequate Roman forces fled again. Other cities like Rhodes and Magnesia resisted and were besieged. The inhabitants of Mytilene, a city of the isle Lesbos, handed over Aquilius willingly and invited Mithridates in.

¹² Lendering.

¹³ McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates*, 108-109.

Mithridates had Aquilius killed by pouring molten gold down his throat, symbolizing the greed of the Roman oppressors.

Mithridates quickly annexed Cappadocia and Bithynia and easily defeated Roman opposition in Asia Minor in 89 BCE, as his fleet of three hundred ships took control of the Aegean.¹⁴ Mithridates assumed control of all but a couple of cities in Asia Minor, as most of the inhabitants saw him as a liberator from oppressive Roman rule and welcomed him. In 88 BCE, he had at least 80,000 Romans and Italians living in Asia Minor massacred by the populations of his newly acquired cities. The Asiatic Vespers, as it is known, proved

for Rome and allegiance to their new king. Mithridates believed that these cities were now forever viewed as enemies of Rome.¹⁵ Furthermore, it eliminated a large Italian presence in Asia and provided vast amounts of property for Mithridates to usurp. So great was the gains that Mithridates allowed participating cities a five year tax exemption.¹⁶ This was a much welcomed change from Roman tax laws. Mithridates had support in the Greek world due to the work of his ancestors. In 115 BCE, Dionysus, (not to be

brother on Delos. In Athens, Rhodes and Delos there were herons, coins and statues dedicated to Eupator.¹⁷ Mithridates filled his court with Greek philosophers, 1 19n(tors, po)3(te/,aQBT24 3480055>3<00510

were created. This one in particular is a clear exoss,(S)-2(e)4ofis 7(nti())JTJETBT1 0 0 368.2324 709.2 Tm-()]

BCE, Mithridates assumed control of the island Euboea and sent his

sent an army of their own, under Lucius Valerius Flaccus to combat

Mithridates began rebuilding his army and recruiting soldiers soon after the peace. Sulla left his legate and general, Lucius Lucinius Murena, in charge of the Roman province Asia. Murena raided Mithridates's territory, then moved his army into Pontus under the claims that Mithridates was preparing for war and posed a direct threat to Asia. The king, however, fully committed his military to put down uprisings in Colchis and the Bosporan Kingdom.³⁰ After appealing to the Senate with no success, he was forced to act. Mithridates won a decisive victory and forced Murena out of Pontus. Sulla ordered that peace be made. The only

opposition to Roman naval forces and greatly helped the king. They were also a means by which Mithridates could keep in touch with his subjects.

worth the risk to march through the dangerous and unfamiliar land. He sent his prefect Servilius, admiral of the Euxine Fleet, to blockade Mithridates. Mithridates marched south to bring Syria and the other nations of the area under control. Along the way, Mithridates eventually surrendered to Pompey.⁴⁰

Pompey stated that Mithridates was easier to deal with in battle than in flight. He knew Mithridates was forming another army but did not care.⁴¹ The beleaguered king had to lay down huge taxes on the Bosporan people. He planned for lofty and farfetched goals, such as a land that would be ruled by an energetic king who embodied the ideals of the people, but they no longer identified with the tyrant who seemed bent on destruction. Dio states that, Mithridates

⁴² He no longer

cared for his philhellenism, which he showcased earlier in his reign and cared not for the well being of his subjects. He was bent on victory over Rome or glory in defeat. He would allow his Greek and Persian kingdom to perish along with him rather than submit to Roman oppressors.

The public was incensed with rage at Mithridates' failure to finance his new army. Phanagoreia and other neighboring cities revolted. Along with the public, many of his armed forces did not share the zeal and passion to fight Rome. Nearly none believed that the king would lead an invasion of the Italian peninsula. In 63 BCE, Pharnaces, son of Eupator and apparent heir, recognized the dire situation the remains of the kingdom was in. He knew total defeat at Roman hands was ultimately inevitable. He conspired with some of the officers against his father in the city of Phanagoreia, just across the Bosphorus from the

⁴⁰ Peter Greenhalgh, *Pompey: The Roman Alexander*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 114-115, 126, and 131.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴² Dio, 119.

new capital at Panticapaeum. The king learned of this and sent some of his bodyguards to seize Pharnaces. Pharnaces easily persuaded these men to his cause, and together, they marched on Panticapaeum and his father. Mithridates was locked up in his citadel with his wives and other children. First, he administered poison to them and then drank all that remained.

Mithridates survived due to immunity he built up and remained alive in a weakened state. He attempted again to commit suicide by stabbing himself with his sword, but could not finish himself off.

⁴³ Appian and

Plutarch hold that his compassionate guard, Bituitus,

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Either way, it does not matter. For the purpose of the argument, the subjects of Mithridates were dissatisfied and wanted him dead.

After the death of Eupator, Pompey established firm Roman control in Asia Minor as far east as Armenia and south along the coast into Palestine.⁴⁵ He combined Bithynia and Pontus to make one new Roman province, established Syria and set up tribute collections.⁴⁶ Also, he made many kingdoms, such as Judea and Armenia dependant allies, to act as buffers on the Roman frontier. Pompey believed that strong Roman presence in places like the east would prevent another enemy like Mithridates from emerging. Pharnaces was allowed to rule the Bosporan

Mithridates Eupator was an adept politician, a good general and a great inspirer. He used all resources and means available to him to combat his arch enemy Rome and enlisted the support of people from widespread territories. Mithridates used his ripe opportunity in time to get this great support. He aligned himself with anyone who may have helped him, even Sertorius who was himself Roman.

to reverse Roman oppression and keep the support of the people ultimately was the deciding factor in his defeat.

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