



Killing for the Republic: Citizen-Soldiers and the Roman Way of War

by Steele Brand.

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Review by James R. Smither, Grand Valley State University (smitherj@gvsu.edu).

In the second century BCE, the Greek historian Polybius linked the success of the armies of the Roman Republic to the dedication of its citizen-soldiers. In *Killing for the Republic*, historian Steele Brand (King's College–New York City) attempts both to explain why this came to be and to consider the causes and consequences of the replacement of citizen-soldiers by professionals. In the process, he compares the Roman experience with that of the United States. Throughout, he seeks to interpret Roman military history from the perspective of the common soldier, while clarifying the links between the army and the rise and decline of republican institutions and values. Though he often strains the available sources beyond what they will bear, he sheds needed light on the nature of military service and the ties between soldier and state in ancient Rome.

Brand took the unusual career step of enlisting in the army after his dissertation defense (Baylor Univ.). He served as an intelligence analyst in Afghanistan, an experience that informs some of the larger arguments he presents here. He is also fully conversant with the pertinent primary and secondary literature on his topic as well as relevant archaeological evidence.

In his preface, the author traces the idea of the citizen-soldier from the Roman Republic (509–27 BCE) to the American Revolution, noting the consistent erosion of the concept. Proceeding chronologically, he develops various theses about the socioeconomic status of Roman soldiers and their relationship to the structures of the state over time. He discusses five specific battles¹ to show how the Roman military system and the attitudes of its soldiers evolved over time. The book's final sections concern the character of Marcus Tullius Cicero, the Roman politico and orator whom he casts as the last great defender of the Republican ideal.

One unavoidable problem is the paucity of sources, especially for the early Republic (509–264 BCE). And the precious extant sources were written long after the fact, often based on oral tradition and shaped by their authors' agendas. Brand nonetheless tries to characterize the attitudes and beliefs of Roman soldiers by extrapolating from their collective actions and the rare mentions of individuals in the works of later historians. A number of reasonable inferences allow him to show, for instance, that soldiers pressured political leaders to act responsibly, thereby demonstrating their investment in the state as citizens.

In the period of the Punic Wars (264–146 BCE) and beyond, the sources become much richer, enabling Brand to mount more effective arguments, although he still fails to show much of what the soldiers themselves were thinking, and does not always take advantage of what his sources offer him. In discussing the Third Macedonian War (171–168 BCE), a generation after the defeat of Hannibal, he notes a speech given by a centurion (thus a commoner):

1. I.e., Sentinum (295 BCE), New Carthage (209 BCE), Pydna (168 BCE), Mutina (43 BCE), and Philippi (42 BCE).

What is important here is how the expansion of Rome's imperial republic began to affect the nature of Roman civic militarism and the character of the Roman citizen-soldier. When war erupted again with [King] Perseus [of Macedon], the consuls' levy drew some controversy, and a centurion named Spurius Ligustinus was allowed to address the people. The entire speech is eminently fascinating for the details it affords about the career of a centurion. Ligustinus was apparently among the *proletarii*—he states he inherited a paltry one *jugerum* (about two thirds of an acre)—but had been afforded the opportunity to start at the bottom ranks and work his way up over the course of a long and distinguished career. He was made chief centurion four times, rewarded for bravery by commanders thirty-four times, “received six civic crowns,” and served a total of twenty-two years (Livy, 42.34). His military career began in 200, which means he had been hundreds of miles away in Spain, Macedonia, and Anatolia for twenty-two out of twenty-nine years. This kind of service was becoming increasingly common in the second century, and it was one of the new challenges facing Roman citizens as the second century wore on. (179)

While this is a clear-cut case of the professionalization of the Roman military at the time, Brand tells us nothing about what Ligustinus had to say about the new round of conscription, and offers no analysis of his perspective as a soldier. This even though Livy and some other authors occasionally describe individual soldiers who stood out or expressed themselves.

When it comes to gleaning what Romans at a given social level thought about the Republic and its soldiers, Brand capitalizes on the relatively abundant and persuasive source material for Cicero's later career. Cicero's letters and speeches reveal the old orator dragging himself out of retirement to rally politicians, soldiers, and the citizenry to the cause of the Republic after Julius Caesar's assassination (15 Mar. 44 BCE). He helped cobble together a coalition of civilian and military leaders who defeated Mark Antony and Caesar's followers at Mutina (43 BCE), only to lose at Philippi a year later. By then Octavian had changed sides, paving the way for a new triumvirate and finally the principate of Octavian, soon to be styled “Augustus.”

Soldiers who once fought ferociously to protect their homes and farms and later the Republic and the Roman way of life itself now turned on one another at the behest of favored commanders or for the sake of fighting itself. Brand interweaves available evidence of the conduct of Roman soldiers on both sides with Cicero's own views and related evidence to depict the fall of the Republic as an epic tragedy rather than the replacement of a failed system with one better suited to governing a multinational empire.

Steele Brand's appealing style of writing and vivid narrative will appeal to a broad audience. But he also hopes to give scholars in the field food for thought. Even though none of the material he presents will be unfamiliar to specialists, the suggestive parallels he draws between the Roman situation and present-day America are well worth considering. The US military forces deployed around the world in the past two decades have included many more career soldiers than did those sent to Korea or Vietnam. The military can sometimes seem like a closed society detached from the civilian world. But how that relates to the larger political picture and the future of republican institutions is less clear. Even so, this remarkable book deserves the careful reflection of both experts and the general public.