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Domitian's Reign of Terror: Historical Reality or Theoretical Construct?

“Tyranny is a habit, it grows upon us”
Dostoevsky *The House of the Dead*

“When in the silence of abjection, all one can hear is the slave’s chains and the traitor’s voice, when all tremble before the tyrant and it is as dangerous to incur his favour as to fall from his grace, the historian appears, charged with the vengeance of peoples”
Chateaubriand *Mercure* July 4th 1807

Introduction

In late summer AD 93, three men who were connected to Helvidius Priscus and Thræsea Paetus, including the former’s son, were prosecuted and then executed. Four others, three of whom were women, were sent into exile. At the same time, troops surrounded the Senate house and books deemed to be subversive were confiscated and burnt.

These events left a deep and lasting impression upon Tacitus and Pliny. In his biography of Agricola, Tacitus described his anguish that he had stood back and done nothing¹. Pliny knew the victims of this purge personally. Indeed, in two of his works he described how thunderbolts fell on those around him but nevertheless he managed to emerge unscathed. The events of 93 have had an effect upon modern historiography of Domitian and the nature of his reign. This particular year has been seen as a watershed which began a period of great tyranny which culminated in Domitian’s assassination three years later. In fact, the events of 93 were the logical progression of a trend which had been present throughout his reign. Domitian ruled by terror. Acts of overt violence which took place throughout his rule were the most extreme manifestation of this, representing the continuing implementation of a conscious style of autocracy rather than the sudden introduction of a more tyrannical and oppressive regime.

¹ Tacitus *Agr.* 45.1-3

Plots Against Domitian

On 22nd September 87, the *Fratres Arvales* recorded the detection of a plot against Domitian. Few details survive about this plot and the conspirators themselves elude identification. During the fifteen year period of Domitian's reign, a number of senators were executed. Suetonius records a list of ten consular victims of Domitian². These men were executed under a number of different pretexts and at different points throughout the reign of Domitian.

Two consulars serving in the provinces were executed by Domitian whilst still in post. C. Vettulenus Civica Cerialis was executed whilst he was serving as proconsul in Asia. He was executed around 88 and his death may have been caused by his inactivity during the appearance of a 'false Nero' in the East in the same year³. Sallustius Lucullus was governing Britain when he was executed. According to Suetonius, he incurred the wrath of Domitian after naming a new lance after himself. It has been suggested that his execution may be linked the plot of 87⁴.

L. Aelius Lamia Plautius Aelianus was the former husband of Domitian's wife, Domitia Longina. He was executed on account of a joke he had made regarding Domitian⁵. His execution probably took place during the early years of Domitian's reign. Salvius Cocceianus and Mettius Pompusianus were also executed at some point under Domitian on rather spurious grounds.

T. Flavius Sabinus was the grandson of Vespasian's brother. He was executed because he was saluted as imperator rather than consul at a consular election⁶. M. Arrecinus Clemens and T. Flavius Clemens were both condemned by Domitian⁷. The latter was allegedly executed for following a Jewish lifestyle. A similar charge was levelled against M. Acilius Glabrio who was executed whilst living in exile⁸.

It is interesting to note that, according to Dio, in his later years Domitian became more suspicious of his freedmen and prefects than of the Senate⁹. The freedman Epaphroditus was executed towards the very end of Domitian's reign. He had been Nero's freedman and had helped his master to commit suicide in 68. Domitian executed Epaphroditus *pour encourager les autres*. This was a mistake as it proved to be a catalyst for the plot which resulted in his murder.

² Suetonius *Dom.* 10.3

³ Jones (1992) pg 183

⁴ Birley (2005) pg 99

⁵ Suetonius *Dom.* 10.2

⁶ Suetonius *Dom.* 10.4

⁷ Dio 67.14.1

⁸ Dio 67.14.3

⁹ Dio 67.14.4

The Revolt of Saturninus AD 89

On 1st January 89 L. Antonius Saturninus, the governor of Upper Germany, launched a rebellion against Domitian with the intention of winning supreme power himself. Saturninus had the support of two of his legions, XIV *Gemina* and XXI *Rapax*, and the savings of his troops. Saturninus also had the support of the Chatti, who were only prevented from sending military support by a sudden thaw on the Rhine¹⁰. The revolt was short lived. The governor of Upper Germany, A. Bucius Lappius Maximus, defeated Saturninus and his forces in battle. He was assisted by the procurator of Rhaetia, Norbanus. He would become Praetorian prefect in the last year of Domitian's reign. The future emperor Trajan marched the legion which he was commanding, VII *Gemina*, from Spain to the Rhine to fight Saturninus. Trajan arrived too late to join the fray as Saturninus had already been defeated and killed¹¹. Domitian had marched north with a contingent of the Praetorian Guard to deal with Saturninus. On reaching Moguntiacum, Domitian proceeded to order a series of executions.

Dio praises Norbanus and Lappius Maximus for burning Saturninus' papers which would have incriminated other senators¹². This scenario is extremely unlikely given Domitian's suspicious nature. It is likely instead that Saturninus never had senatorial support for his revolt. The Senate was not informed of the details of the purge instigated by Domitian in Upper Germany. The only notification they received were the severed heads of those killed on his orders¹³. Domitian was carrying out a purge of the army officers within the province in order to remove those he suspected of being disloyal. A military tribune named Julius Calvaster was pardoned on the grounds that his liaisons with Saturninus had been of an amorous rather than a conspiratorial nature. There is no evidence that Saturninus had any senatorial support and Domitian did not continue his purge in Rome. Nevertheless, the way Domitian maintained his communication with the Senate during this period by sending severed heads for public display indicates that he wished to demonstrate the ruthlessness he would use in destroying those who threatened him.

The Intimidation of the Senate

The use of severed heads was, no doubt, an effective way to spread terror amongst the Senate, especially when no explanation was given for their appearance. In fact, Domitian seems to have had an aversion to subtlety when it came to intimidating the Senate. Dio records an extraordinary meal

¹⁰ Suetonius *Dom.* 6

¹¹ Pliny *Pan.* 14.3

¹² Dio 67.11.2

¹³ Dio 67.11.3

held by Domitian to which he invited numerous senators¹⁴. When the guests arrived, they were ushered into a room which was completely black. Their attendants were sent away on Domitian's orders. The guests were seated on black couches and a personalised gravestone was placed next to them along with a funeral lamp. Funeral sacrifices were held and they were waited on by boys painted to look like black ghosts. According to Dio¹⁵, each of the guests

'...feared and trembled and was kept in constant expectation of having his throat cut the next moment, the more so as on the part of everybody but Domitian there was dead silence, as if they were already in the realms of the dead'

Domitian spoke to the guests about morbid topics relating to death. At the end of the evening, the guests were dismissed in the company of Domitian's slaves who accompanied them home. Shortly after the guests reached their homes, a messenger arrived from Domitian. The guests understandably assumed that they were about to be executed. On the contrary, the messenger brought gifts from Domitian.

This bizarre event demands explanation. Waters has defended this incident as an example of Domitian's quirky sense of humour¹⁶. This event is much more than a practical joke. The particular focus on death and the removal of the guest's attendants were intended to remove them from their comfort zones. The intense psychological pressure to which the guests were subjected was the intended product of the careful preparations which had been made on Domitian's orders. The whole event may have been a test. Any of the guests who had guilty consciences may have cracked under the psychological pressure and confessed in order to escape their presumed executions. The fact that none of the guests appear to have confessed to any wrongdoing may explain the delivery of gifts at the end of the evening. The guests had passed the test and had been found to be loyal to Domitian. At the same time, the entire procedure was designed to terrorise the guests and those who heard of the events of the evening by word of mouth.

AD 93: A Turning Point?

The group purged by Domitian in 93 were all connected to Helvidius Priscus and Thrasea Paetus. The younger Helvidius Priscus had been consul in 87. He was executed for composing a farce about Domitian's marital relations with his wife¹⁷. Herennius Senecio was executed for writing a biography of the elder Helvidius Priscus. Arulenus Rusticus was condemned for praising Thrasea Paetus in a literary work¹⁸. He shared the fate of his friends. As well

¹⁴ Dio 67.9

¹⁵ Dio 67.9.3

¹⁶ Waters (1964) pg 75-6

¹⁷ Suetonius *Dom.* 10.4

¹⁸ Tacitus *Agr.* 2.1

as those executed, other members of the group were sent into exile¹⁹. Junius Mauricus, the brother of Arulenus Rusticus, was banished. He was accompanied by his brother's wife, Verulana Gratilla. Arria, the wife of Thrasea Paetus and her daughter, Fannia, who was also the wife of Helvidius Priscus were also sent into exile. Books by these individuals which were judged to be subversive were burnt on a bonfire in the Forum itself²⁰.

The relationship between Domitian and the group of individuals linked to Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, who were crushed in 93, was ambiguous. Attempts at reconciliation can be observed in the suffect consulships awarded to members of this group in 92 and 93. For some reason, this attempt at reconciliation failed and Domitian carried out a purge of this group. The surviving literary sources do not illuminate the causes of the final conflagration which engulfed this group. Pliny was connected too closely to these individuals to ever give an unbiased account of what exactly happened. Using the chronology of the reign laid down by Tacitus, it is tempting to see the years after the death of Agricola as period of brutal terror and systematic purges carried out by an increasingly paranoid Domitian. The pattern of the executions and banishments imposed by Domitian gives a different picture. Not all of those attacked in 93 were executed; the women were exiled to return under Nerva along with Junius Mauricus. Contemporary analysis of the later events of Domitian's reign is clouded by the emphasis of Pliny and Tacitus on this group. These were not the first or last executions ordered by Domitian and it is only the horror of Tacitus and Pliny which force contemporary scholars to place such emphasis on them. This was not the turning point in the character of Domitian's reign. On the contrary, the executions in 93 were part of a gradual escalation of terror promoted by threats, real or perceived, against the emperor. This escalation encompassed not only acts of violence but also acts of intimidation such as the banquet described in lavish detail by Dio.

Conclusion: A State of Terror?

It was Lenin who argued that the purpose of terrorism is to terrorise, and who better to pass judgement on such a subject than that architect of such misery, death and suffering. When dealing with Domitian, historians tend to classify him as a tyrant whilst in some cases mitigating this judgement on account of his upbringing and background²¹. I would argue that Domitian was not only a tyrant but also a terrorist. Syme described the young Octavian as a "chill and mature terrorist" and in doing so showed that such a label applied to some of those who wielded supreme power in antiquity as much as the disaffected individuals described with such relish in today's tabloids²². The executions and sentences of exile ordered by Domitian can be seen as acts of terror with the intention of intimidating those closest to him into submission and loyalty.

¹⁹ Pliny *Ep.* 3.11.3

²⁰ Tacitus *Agr.* 2.1

²¹ Southern (1997) pg 119-25

²² Syme (1939) pg 191

Domitian may have expected never to take supreme power at all. His elder brother had won military glory in Judaea and had clearly been groomed as his father's successor. The premature and unexpected death of Titus left a relatively inexperienced Domitian in command. Compared to Vespasian and Titus, Domitian had no military experience to speak of. It is fair to say that Domitian did try to remedy his lack of acquaintance with military matters. He was the first ruler since Julius Caesar to increase the pay of a legionary. Shortly before the revolt of Saturninus, he formalised the legal status of veteran soldiers and their families including exemption from certain taxes²³. Domitian acquired military experience during his campaigns in Dacia and the presence of the *princeps* in the combat zone would have won him respect from the troops. Despite this, Domitian was still insecure. His judgement in appointing Saturninus, Sallustius Lucullus and Civica Cerialis to provincial commands had been completely misplaced. Domitian suffered a serious problem in maintaining the loyalty of those whom he selected for provincial appointments. I would suggest that the executions and sentences of exile imposed by Domitian were an attempt to maintain the loyalty of the senatorial elite and those closest to him by terror. These were not the impulsive acts of a tyrant but rather the calculated acts of a terrorist using violence for political ends, namely to ensure the loyalty or at least the submission of the Senate. His violence was aimed not only at senators but also at his freedmen, as in the execution of Epaphroditus. The bizarre dinner party described by Dio cannot seriously be seen as only an example of Domitian's quirky sense of humour. It was a situation orchestrated to terrify his guests whom it would be safe to assume were senators. By dangling the prospect of their mortality before them, Domitian was demonstrating both his own power and their likely fate if the dinner guests ever turned against him.

The idea that a turning point during the rule of Domitian initiated a reign of terror is not sustainable under close scrutiny. The dictum that a week is a long time in politics must be applied to the fifteen year length of Domitian's reign. It was the longest period of rule of any Flavian emperor. During this time, Domitian adapted and responded to face the changing threats and circumstances of the period. The sheer length of his reign increased the volume of those executed to maintain Domitian's power. He was unlucky in that Tacitus and Pliny wrote works which damned him for posterity. It would be wrong to absolve Domitian from guilt. His methods of maintaining power were brutal and ruthless. He aimed by killing a few prominent individuals to terrorise the rest. To some extent his methods were successful. There is no conclusive evidence of the involvement of senators in his assassination. Whilst the Senate could be terrorised into submission, he gravely underestimated the character of his own freedmen. Terrorism has a major flaw in that not everyone can be terrorised.

²³ ILS 9059

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