

Information on Spartacus

Biographical Briefing

Spartacus (pronounced SPAR-tah-kuss) was born in Thrace, a region north of the Aegean Sea and east of Italy. When the Romans conquered his native land, they captured him and made him a slave. As they did with many slaves, they sent Spartacus to a school for trained fighters, or *gladiators*, located in Capua (pronounced KAH-poo-ah), a city south of Rome. (Gladiators battled each other—often to the death—at festivals for the entertainment of the Roman people.) Conditions at such schools were often very harsh. In 73 B.C.E. Spartacus led 70 other gladiators in a revolt. They turned their weapons on their masters and escaped from the school. The rebels barricaded themselves on Mount Vesuvius and fought off all attempts to capture them. Soon, many runaway slaves who were eager for freedom joined the rebelling gladiators. Their numbers grew tremendously, and by the end of the year, Spartacus was leading a band of nearly 70,000 slaves.

In such great numbers and under Spartacus's dynamic leadership, the rebelling slaves defeated several legions of the Roman army. As a result, they quickly gained control of all of southern Italy. Spartacus then led his forces north, where he hoped to fight his way across the Alps to freedom. They got as far as Gaul—nearly 400 miles north of Rome—but then many of the followers refused to leave Italy. Thus, Spartacus led his forces south again, where they eventually faced the Roman army led by a brilliant commander named Marcus Crassus (pronounced MAR-kuss KRAH-suss). Finally, Crassus's troops cornered Spartacus during a battle and killed him. Without their leader, Spartacus's followers became disorganized and fearful. The Roman army captured 6,000 of them, and then crucified them along the road from the city of Capua to Rome. The rebellion had lasted two years, during which time Spartacus and his followers defeated nine separate Roman armies.



- How did Spartacus become the leader of a slave revolt in 73 B.C.E.?
- What success did Spartacus and his followers have against the Roman army during their revolt?
- What did Marcus Crassus do with Spartacus and his followers after he captured them?

Position: Spartacus believed that expansion hurt Rome because it brought an increase in slavery.

Main Points on Roman Expansion

After Rome conquered a region or a country, the Romans often enslaved the people living there. Their numerous military conquests brought about a great increase in the number of slaves. By 73 B.C.E. there were nearly five million slaves in Italy, about 20 percent of the population.

The huge number of slaves caused several problems. It caused the forced movement, or *displacement*, of small farmers. These farmers could not compete with the large landowners, who used slave labor to produce crops cheaply. In addition, the increase in slavery contributed to unemployment in the cities. The large number of slaves replaced free men in the few crafts industries where jobs were available.

The large number of slaves also resulted in more cruelty within the institution of slavery itself. Before military expansion, the number of slaves in Rome was limited, so they were costly and treated relatively well. In rural areas slaves often worked alongside small farmers and were sometimes even considered part of the family. However, as the number of slaves increased, they became cheap and were mistreated. Men called *overseers* supervised slaves who worked on large estates. These overseers were often cruel, withholding food and clothing from the slaves to increase their own wealth. Rural slaves had their skin branded, lived in underground dungeons, and were chained together day and night. If they became ill, they were sold or turned out to starve.

Finally, the increase in slavery disturbed the peace of the country. Driven by desperate conditions, slaves took part in many serious revolts. One of the worst of these took place in Sicily in 134 B.C.E., when more than 20,000 slaves revolted and set up their own kingdom. It took a large Roman army two years to defeat them.



- **Why did the increase in the number of slaves hurt Rome's small farmers?**
- **Why did conditions for slaves worsen as Rome expanded?**
- **Why were slave revolts a serious problem for Rome in the first century B.C.E.?**