**FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE**

**Directions:** There was no single cause for the fall of the Roman Empire. Many different internal and external factors came together to contribute to the decline of Rome. **Examine each of the documents provided below and answer the questions in order to identify the factors leading to the fall and the impact that persisted afterward.**

**INTERNAL FACTORS**

**OI: The Mistake of Mercenaries**

Rome had a long history of absorbing people from the empire’s fringes (edges) into Roman society, first by making them allies and then eventually by granting them full citizenship rights. But usually these foreign citizens had developed ties to Rome itself; they learned Latin, they bought into the whole idea of the aristocratic republic. But by the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, though, the empire had been forced to allow the kind of riffraff into their army who didn’t really care about the idea of Rome itself. They were only loyal to their commanders. And as you no doubt remember from the historical examples of Caesar, Pompey, Marius, and others, this is not a recipe for success.

So now Rome is stuck with a bunch of expensive and bloody wars against Germanic peoples who were really good at fighting, and then they had a great idea: Why not just get these guys to fight for us? So they essentially hired them as mercenaries, or soldiers who fight in exchange for money, and soon the Roman Legions were teeming with these Germanic mercenaries who were loyal mostly to gold, secondarily to their commanders, and not at all to Rome.

This was of course a recipe for civil war, and that’s exactly what happened, with general after general after general declaring himself Emperor of Rome. So there was very little stability in the West. For instance, between 235 and 284 CE, 41 different people were either emperor or claimed to be emperor. And many of the generals who were powerful enough to proclaim themselves emperors weren’t even Roman. In fact, a lot of them didn’t speak much Latin.

**Source:** John Green, “The Fall of Rome… in the 15th Century,” Crash Course World History (adapted)

1. **What are mercenaries? What problems arose from filling the Roman legions with Germanic mercenaries?**

**OI: More Money More Problems**

The insecurity of civil wars and invasions affected many aspects of Roman life. Robbery and piracy increased, and travel became hazardous. Merchants feared to ship goods. Military needs required ever-increasing amounts of revenue, and to collect more money, emperors raised taxes. As taxes rose, however, the value of money declined. Since Rome was no longer expanding, conquests no longer brought in new sources of wealth. To maintain the money supply, emperors minted new coins with copper and lead as well as silver. When people realized coins contained less silver, they refused to accept the currency at its face value. The result was growing inflation, or a dramatic rise in prices.

**Source:** Susan Ramirez, et al., “The Fall of Rome,” World History: Human Legacy (adapted)

2. **What is inflation? What factors led to inflation in the Roman Empire?**
OFFICIAL DOCUMENT 2: Collapse of Commerce

... By the middle of the second century Italy [within the Roman Empire] was in a state of decline. By the time of Diocletian, at the opening of the fourth century, decay was apparent throughout the empire. Commerce had largely disappeared owing to (because of) the lack of customers, to piracy on the seas, and to insecurity of the roads on land. Generally speaking, purchasing power at that time was confined to the public officials, to the army officers, and to the great landowners. Trade in the everyday objects of daily use had all but disappeared, but trade in luxuries prospered. The cities in the west, omitting (except for) the places where government centered, were usually in decline; their commercial and industrial classes had disappeared, the old traders having been replaced by the traveling eastern merchant, of whom the Syrian was the most notorious. Foreign trade was sharply curtailed (cut short). At various times the government attempted to prohibit the export of various commodities (trade goods), among them wine, oil, grain, salt, arms, iron, and gold. With this curbing (reducing) of exports there was also an effort made to control certain imports such as is evidenced by the state monopoly in silk. These two movements hampered (reduced, weakened) commercial contracts outside the empire and all but killed what was left of foreign trade....

Source: Louis C. West, “The Economic Collapse of the Roman Empire,” The Classical Journal, November 1932

3. According to Louis C. West, what were two economic problems the Roman Empire faced during its period of decline?

4. Think about the factors that had allowed for peace and stability in Rome during the earlier days of the Empire. In what ways did the conditions in this later period represent an almost opposite version of the Pax Romana?

OI: Diocletian the Divider

Emperor Diocletian took power in 284 CE. To slow the empire’s decline, Diocletian changed the empire into an absolute monarchy. He placed himself far above his subjects and ruled with no accountability to anyone. Instead of calling himself Princeps, or “First Citizen,” he chose the title Dominus, meaning “Lord”. As part of his efforts to improve the efficiency of imperial administration, Diocletian divided the empire in two. Ruling the eastern half himself, he appointed a co-emperor to rule the western provinces. Both emperors named assistants, called Caesars, who were supposed to help run the empire. This system was called the Tetrarchy, or rule by four. Diocletian also forced Roman society into a rigid order. Almost every aspect of life was regulated by the imperial administration. Under Diocletian’s decrees (laws), sons were supposed to follow the trades and social positions of their fathers. Peasants were to be permanently tied to the land they farmed. In addition, Diocletian increased the army and gave the defense of the empire the bulk of his attention.


5. “Yo, Diocletian is trying to improve and strengthen the Empire with his reforms, but he’s just going to make it worse.” What two arguments could you make to support the above perspective based on what you read in the document? (Check out the map on page 4!)
**OI: New Capital for Constantine**

Constantine gained control of the western part of the empire in 312 CE and continued many of the social and economic policies of Diocletian. In 324 CE Constantine also secured control of the East, thus restoring the concept of a single ruler. In 330 CE, Constantine took a step that would have great consequence for the empire. He moved the capital from the city of Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium, in what is now Turkey. The new capital stood on the Bosphorus Strait between the Mediterranean and Black Sea, strategically located for trade and defense purposes on a crossroads between West and East. With Byzantium as its capital, the center of power in the empire shifted from Rome to the east. Soon the new capital stood protected by massive walls and filled with imperial buildings modeled after those in Rome. The city eventually took a new name—Constantinople, or the city of Constantine. After Constantine’s death, the empire would again be divided. The East would survive; the West would fall.


6. **What made Constantinople a great location for a capital?** *(Check out the map on page 4!)*

7. **How did moving the capital to Constantinople contribute to the collapse of the Western half of the Empire?**

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**External Factors**

**OI: Hunnic Invasions and Germanic Refugees**

For centuries, Rome had faced attacks from the Germanic peoples who lived east of the Rhine and north of the Danube rivers. When Rome was powerful, the legions (Roman military) on the frontiers (border lands) were successful in holding back the invaders. In fact, some of the Germanic peoples who lived along the borders learned Roman ways and became allies of the Romans. However, as early as 200 CE, wars in East Asia set off a chain of events that would eventually overwhelm Rome, thousands of miles to the west. Those wars sent a nomadic people, the Huns, migrating from central Asia toward eastern Europe, which they reached by 370 CE. These skilled riders fought fierce battles to dislodge (remove) the Germanic peoples in their path. The Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and other Germanic peoples who were expelled from their lands crossed into Roman territory seeking safety. With the empire in decline, Roman legions were hard pressed to halt the invaders. Under pressure from attacks, the Roman empire surrendered first Britain, then France and Spain. It was only a matter of time before foreign invaders marched into Italy and took over Rome itself.

Source: Elizabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Elser, “The Long Decline,” World History (adapted)

8. **Do you think the Romans would have viewed the Germanic peoples crossing over their borders as refugees (people fleeing violence seeking safety) or as invaders? How do you think they should be viewed?**

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**OI: Romans Face a Refugee Crisis**

376 CE alarming reports reached the Roman emperor Valens that over 100,000 Goths had massed on the far bank of the River Danube. It soon became clear, however, that this was no barbarian invasion. For this horde was made up of women and children as well as men; their leaders sought permission to settle in the Roman empire as allies. Their own kingdoms had been overrun by the fearsome Huns. For the Romans, this looked like a win-win situation: free manpower to address the chronic shortage in the imperial Roman army. What followed, however, was a total catastrophe. Nervous about the flood of people preparing to enter Roman land, officials tried to limit the numbers crossing the border. Soon, any remaining goodwill quickly evaporated as the Goths suffered for month after month in squalid refugee camps where hunger and disease were the norm.
In such desperate circumstances, it was hardly surprising that refugees began raiding the surrounding countryside for food. Emperor Valens decided to march his imperial army against the Goths, and the result was one of the greatest military disasters that Rome would ever suffer. At the Battle of Adrianople in 378 CE, Valens was killed and the vast majority of his army butchered. It is not difficult to see why many historians have judged Adrianople to have marked the beginning of the end for the Roman Empire in the west.

**Source:** Richard Miles, “What the Romans Can Teach Us About Refugees,” *The Guardian* (adapted)

9. *What mistakes did the Romans make in handling the refugee crisis? What could they have done differently?*

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**OFFICIAL DOCUMENT 1: Waves of Invasions**

![Map of European Invasions](image)

*Source: The Nyström Atlas of World History, Herff Jones Education Division (adapted)*

10. *Based on the information shown on this map, in what way did the invasion of the Huns create a “domino effect” of invasion into Rome?*
11. The map shows the division of the Empire into two halves, first begun by Emperor Diocletian. How might this division have made the Romans more vulnerable to invaders?

**OI: The Power of Attila**

Meanwhile, the Huns, who were indirectly responsible for the Germanic assault on the empire, became a direct threat. In 444 CE, they united for the first time under a powerful chieftain named Attila. With his 100,000 soldiers, Attila terrorized both halves of the empire. In the East, his armies attacked and plundered 70 cities. The Huns then swept into the West. In 452 CE, Attila’s forces advanced against Rome, but bouts of famine and disease kept them from conquering the city. Although the Huns were no longer a threat to the empire after Attila’s death in 453 CE, the Germanic invasions continued.

*Source: Roger Beck, et al., “The Fall of the Roman Empire,” World History: Patterns of Interaction (adapted)*

“They filled the whole earth with slaughter and panic as they flitted here and there on their swift horses... They were at hand everywhere before they were expected: by their speed they outstripped rumour, and they took pity on neither religion nor rank nor age nor wailing childhood.”

*Source: St Jerome, Letters, c. 400 CE*

12. Do you think the Huns should be viewed as a loose bunch of barbarian invaders or as an Empire like Rome?

**OI: Barbarians at the Gates**

Let me introduce you to the traditional view [of the Fall of Rome]: Barbarians at the Gates. If you want to be really technical about it, the city of Rome was conquered by bar-bar-barbarbarbarians in 476 CE. There was a last Roman Emperor Romulus Augustus, who ruled the empire for less than a year before being deposed and sent into exile by Odoacer, who was some kind of barbarian- we don’t know for sure. Ostrogoth, Hun, Visigoth, Vandals; they all looked the same to the Romans. Of course, Rome had been sacked by barbarians before, most notably by Alaric the Visigoth in 410. But after 476, there was never again a “Roman” emperor in Rome.

*Source: John Green, “The Fall of Rome... in the 15th Century,” Crash Course World History (adapted)*

13. What event marked the final defeat of the Roman Empire?