

The Crisis of the Third Century

The Crisis of the Third Century was a period of approximately 50 years in the third century AD, during which the Roman Empire nearly collapsed in the face of civil war, foreign invasion, plague, and economic depression. Sometimes known as “the Anarchy,” it resulted in a collapse of Roman governmental authority. While the Roman Empire survived the Crisis of the Third century and recovered, it emerged from the crisis fundamentally changed. Thus the Crisis of the Third Century was one of the major turning points in Roman history.

Causes of the Crisis

The Crisis of the Third Century began with the assassination of Severus Alexander in 235 AD, but even before his death, the Severan Dynasty had instigated some of the most important policies that would cause the crisis. Every Severan emperor except for Alexander had devalued the currency, usually in an attempt to pay the troops, upon whom Severan power rested. The increased importance of the troops also led to their greater influence in politics, and their willingness to intervene to make or break emperors. Without the strong Severan Dynasty to keep them in check, this became a major problem.

When Severus Alexander was killed the Severan Dynasty came to an end, and the throne was open to whoever was strong enough to claim it. Civil war swallowed up the Roman Empire. In 258 AD, the territories of Gaul, Spain, and Britain broke free of Roman control, nominating their own emperors, and calling their state the Gallic Empire. Two years later, the eastern provinces broke free, becoming the Palmyrene Empire. Among the territories that remained loyal to Rome, a number of generals fought for power. These men are usually called the “barracks emperors” because of their overwhelmingly military background. Most of these emperors were either killed in battle or assassinated, and their reigns averaged less than two years each. During this period, the military made and broke emperors, and any man who wanted to rule had to carefully court the army.

The Severan emperors had already raised new legions and increased the salaries of the soldiers by 200 percent, and in order to pay for this they increased taxes and devalued the currency. During the Crisis of the Third Century the emperors continued these policies, and often had to bribe the soldiers for support in civil war. They decreased the silver content in coins and added less valuable metals like bronze and copper. This, however, caused inflation, as the value of these coins decreased. As the Roman currency was continually devalued, inflation became rampant, and the Roman economy went into freefall. Soon, money became nearly worthless. People stopped using money and began to barter instead. This meant that the Roman government, which relied on tax revenues, faced bankruptcy. It had to collect taxes in kind (that is, in the form of food and goods) instead of as money.

Economic problems hampered Rome’s ability to fight its enemies. Indeed, while the Roman armies fought each other, foreign enemies smashed the Roman border defenses. New and more dangerous German tribes appeared in this period: the

Alamanni and Franks on the Rhine and the Goths on the Danube. We know little about what was happening in the *Barbaricum* (the lands inhabited by “barbarians”), but it seems that in the face of Roman power, in the second century smaller Germanic tribes had begun to band together and form larger, unified groups. These groups could organize large-scale invasions in a manner not previously possible. They invaded the empire and sacked and destroyed many important cities.

Even more dangerous than the Germans were the Persians. Indeed, the rise of Sassanid Persia was perhaps the largest single factor contributing to the Crisis of the Third Century. The successful campaigns of the Severan emperors against the Parthian Empire in the late second century had revealed the weakness of the Parthian Dynasty. As a result, the Parthians were overthrown by the Sassanid Dynasty, a native Persian dynasty intent on restoring the glory of the Persian Empire to what it had been before Alexander the Great. The Sasanians were far more aggressive than the Parthians, and were eager to prove themselves with victories over the Romans. They overran the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire, sacked several important cities, and even captured the Roman emperor Valerian.

Another problem the Roman Empire faced in this period was a major outbreak of plague. Called the Plague of Cyprian, it devastated towns and villages, killing many of the farmers and soldiers the empire relied on. The depopulation caused by plague would be a problem that the Roman Empire continued to struggle with even after the third century.

Recovery and Change

Eventually the Roman Empire began to recover from the Crisis of the Third Century thanks to a series of competent and aggressive military emperors. In 269 AD, Emperor Claudius II defeated the Goths at the Battle of Naissus, driving them out of Roman territory. Claudius died of plague the following year, but he was succeeded by a brilliant commander named Aurelian, who won more victories against the Goths and the Alamanni, then embarked on a campaign of reunifying the Roman Empire. He defeated the Palmyrene Empire and the Gallic Empire, restoring these provinces to Roman control. For this he was given the title *Restitutor Orbis*, “Restorer of the World.”

Aurelian was murdered by the Praetorian Guard in 275 AD, and civil war resumed. However, the Crisis of the Third Century was decisively brought to an end by Emperor Diocletian, who seized power in 284 and restored efficient government to the empire. Diocletian built on the reforms of Aurelian and other previous emperors in order to stabilize the empire. Aurelian had increased the symbolic authority of the Roman emperor, calling himself *dominus et deus* (Lord and God), and Diocletian adopted this title and established elaborate court ceremonies inspired by Eastern monarchies designed to bestow upon him a sense of being godlike and otherworldly. This ended the days when the emperor was supposed to pretend he was merely the “first citizen,” and transformed him into a completely autocratic figure whose authority could not be challenged. Diocletian apparently hoped this would discourage rebellion and insubordination.

Diocletian also built on Aurelian's economic reforms. Aurelian had begun to issue coins with more silver content in order to help reverse the devaluation of the currency. He also passed laws fixing the prices of important goods. Diocletian followed Aurelian by introducing new, purer coins, such as the gold *solidus*, which after his reign became the standard currency in the Roman Empire. He tried to put an end to inflation by creating an Edict of Prices, a list of how much could be charged for almost every imaginable good or service (though this plan does not seem to have seriously curbed inflation). He also established a land tax and a capita (or head) tax. Instead of taxing whatever crops a town produced (which varied year by year), they levied taxes based on the number of people in the town and the amount of land involved. Since this could be calculated with censuses, the Roman government could plan ahead in a way they never had before.

Another area that needed reform was the military, which had failed to effectively deal with the empire's enemies, while becoming a threat in itself. Under Emperor Gallienus (r. 253-268), senators were prohibited from serving in the army. The emperor had instated this policy out of fear of powerful senator's using their troops against him, but it had the additional effect of ending the old aristocratic hierarchy in the military. Officers were now no longer likely to have gained their rank through wealth and status, but from working their way up in the army. The result was a more experienced officer corps. Gradually, the composition of the army also changed to deal with the effects of the Crisis. In order to achieve his victories over the Gallic and Palmyrene secessionists, Aurelian had relied on a fast moving, cavalry-based army, different from the infantry-based legions of the past. Diocletian increased the amount of cavalry in the army and formed fast-moving armies meant to respond to trouble wherever it arose. Instead of stationing all the soldiers on the borders, he organized the troops in defensive layers and mobile field armies to respond quickly to threats when a sector of the frontier was breached. Diocletian also continued a growing trend of reigning from regions other than Rome, which was far from the often-troubled borders. Instead, he ruled from cities in the East. He formed the Tetrarchy, a system of four simultaneously reigning emperors, who each ruled from a region close to the borders.

By the end of Diocletian's reign, the Roman Empire had emerged from the Crisis of the Third Century, and had achieved a level of stability that it had not enjoyed for two generations. Nonetheless, many of the problems of the crisis—civil war, barbarian invasions, plague, and economic troubles—would continue to afflict the empire for centuries to come, and lead to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. Nonetheless, thanks to the efforts of several emperors, especially Aurelian and Diocletian, the Roman Empire gained a new lease on life and went on to enjoy another two hundred years of unrivaled supremacy over the Mediterranean world.

Summary:

- The Crisis of the Third Century, sometimes known as “the Anarchy,” was a result of trends that had already begun, especially during the Severan Dynasty, but which accelerated after the death of Severus Alexander, which officially marks the start of the crisis.

- Several factors contributed to the Crisis of the Third Century: increased participation of the military in politics, which led to soldier-emperors in constant civil war with one another; high inflation and economic depression, partially caused by the devaluation of the Roman currency; foreign invasions, especially from the Alamanni and Franks over the Rhine, the Goths over the Danube, and the Persians over the eastern frontier; and finally, a very deadly plague that broke out in the third century.
- The empire recovered from the Crisis of the Third Century thanks to a series of competent and aggressive military emperors, especially Aurelian, who reunified the Roman Empire and defeated its external enemies.
- Diocletian, who built on the actions of Aurelian and other predecessors, finally ended the crisis of the Third Century. He introduced a new, more stable currency, reorganized the empire's defenses using a system of *defense in depth* with mobile field armies, and strengthened the imperial cult to make him more respected and feared.
- The Roman Empire emerged from the Crisis of the Third Century fundamentally changed, with a new political, military, and economic culture.