

THE SPARTACUS WAR

“A swift-moving, accessible chronicle of the insurgency against ancient Rome led by the charismatic slave leader Spartacus...Strauss colorfully illustrates the making of the durable Spartacus myth. Graphic, adrenaline-pumping history.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“No one presents the military history of the ancient world with greater insight and panache than Strauss...[A] brisk, engrossing account.”—*Publishers Weekly*

In the summer of 73 BC, Rome faced a revolt unlike any it had ever known or would experience again: a slave revolt 60,000 men strong, led by a Thracian gladiator and ex-soldier named Spartacus. The legend has lasted two millennia and inspired countless novels and films, but the true story of Spartacus nearly defies belief. In **THE SPARTACUS WAR** (Simon & Schuster; March 17, 2009; \$26.00), historian Barry Strauss tells the captivating story of a charismatic gladiator who built an army from only 74 gladiators that would eventually control all of Southern Italy. Spartacus’s slave army managed to defeat nine different Roman armies and kept the greatest military power at bay for two years before going down in defeat.

The Real Man and Not the Myth

Though that two-year struggle ended in failure—the overwhelming might of Rome ultimately wore down the insurgents—the “Spartacus War” has emblazoned itself on public consciousness ever since. Spartacus’s apparent martyrdom has inflamed the rhetoric of political leaders of every modern-day stripe: Lenin, Stalin and Marx all referenced Spartacus as “the very model of the proletarian revolutionary,” while Ronald Reagan touted the rebel gladiator as “an example of sacrifice and struggle for freedom.” An epic if historically skewed Hollywood film cemented the Spartacus image—he was a noble philosopher-warrior who valued liberty more than life.

Yet until now there has never been a completely objective book that balances the elusive facts of Spartacus’s rebellion against the myths that have taken root in public imagination. Strauss’s **THE SPARTACUS WAR** finally captures the real man and events, and proves that fact, presented in colorful, engrossing context, is far more fascinating than mythology.

In this epic new work, Strauss transports readers to the *real* world of Spartacus and, in the process, corrects misconceptions that have lingered for centuries. In the popular imagination, Spartacus was a revolutionary hero who fought to free the slaves, moved by an inspiring philosophy of liberation. In truth, Spartacus was more like an insurgent, motivated by nationalism, revenge, and religion. Spartacus came from Thrace (modern Bulgaria). His ragtag army was a multi-ethnic coalition including Germans and Celts (probably from both France and the Balkans) as well as other Thracians. Far from serving as the acknowledged leader of a band of slave brothers, Spartacus struggled unsuccessfully to hold rival factions together. His objective was never the subjugation of Rome—Spartacus’s ultimate goal was to lead his quarrelsome force north over the Alps and out of Italy to their far flung homelands.

It was one of history’s first examples of an empire versus an insurgency — but not the last.

Even in the little things, Strauss offers surprising insights: During battles in the arena, a referee enforced rules, and an audience signal of thumbs *up* rather than *down* invited a victorious gladiator to deliver the death blow to his defeated rival.

From the first stirrings of rebellion among incarcerated gladiators in Capua to the bloody climax of their uneven struggle against Rome two years later in the Valley of the Upper Silarus, Strauss deftly combines epic storytelling with clear-eyed research based on new archeological discoveries to present the *real* story of the Spartacus War. Every page offers insight—and excitement.

Genesis

Spartacus, whose name translates as “Famous for His Spear,” was conscripted into the Roman army and captured after (probably) deserting. His punishment was being sold as a gladiator to Vatia, who boarded his slave warriors in the city of Capua not far from Mount Vesuvius. It was essentially a death sentence: few gladiators survived beyond the age of 35, and Spartacus was about 30 at the time.

Soon, abetted by an unnamed seeress-lover who claimed Spartacus was specially blessed by the god Dionysus, god of liberation and freedom, he convinced many of his fellow gladiators to rise up against their owner and escape. His mystic companion prophesied that as Dionysus’ servant, Spartacus would do great things. His timing was propitious—most of the crack Roman legions were away putting down rebellions in far-flung corners of the empire. Spartacus and 74 others fled to Vesuvius, where they camped and began recruiting slaves from the countryside. The rebels easily drove off a small body of soldiers from Capua, and, after winning three additional skirmishes against ragtag forces sent by the Roman Senate, Spartacus and his troops became a magnet for slaves throughout the region. His religious charisma added to Spartacus’s appeal. The rebel forces eventually swelled to as many as 60,000 men, mostly slaves, plus wives, children and other hangers-on. Almost by accident, Spartacus’s escape plan became a full-blown rebellion.

The Spartacus War

Strauss notes that “Spartacus understood the difference between guerrilla and conventional warfare. Guerrillas cannot defeat a conventional army by military means; they can only frustrate it.” But Spartacus was not supreme commander of the rebel force. His fellow Thracians obeyed him, but

German and Celtic slave recruits followed their own leaders. In suggesting that the entire army adopt hit-and-run tactics, Strauss explains, “Spartacus was right but he was outvoted.” The compromise was for the rebels to swing south, recruit more fighters from among tough country slaves, then turn to fight whatever force Rome sent after them next.

The rebels made their chaotic way south. Far from conducting themselves chivalrously, many defied Spartacus and raped women, burned houses, and looted wherever they could lay their hands on booty. All Spartacus could do was strongly suggest better behavior: “His men had just thrown away their chains; they did not want new ones.” By spring in 72 B.C., the rebels had split into two armies—one led by Spartacus, and the other by Celtic gladiator Crixus. Though the force led by Crixus was soon destroyed, Spartacus defeated the Romans on several occasions and marched close to the Alps. But, inconceivably, at the last moment he turned away from the northern route that might have led to freedom. Strauss believes that Spartacus’s men vetoed his escape plan: “Success might have gone to their heads and aroused visions of Rome in flames.” Spartacus was able to inspire the revolt, but he could not control it.

End Game

In the autumn of 72 B.C., the Roman Senate reluctantly turned to Marcus Licinius Crassus, an ambitious general who realized the destruction of Spartacus would propel him to the apex of Rome’s leadership. He immediately instilled a sense of discipline in his new troops by “decimation”—executing the one in ten who fled from battle or otherwise shirked their duties. From there, Crassus planned to harass the rebel army until they had no choice but to stand and fight at a place of Rome’s choosing rather than engage in the hit-and-run tactics Spartacus and his men had carried out so well. Strauss writes, “Crassus had to herd him into a place where the Roman could cut him off from support and supplies. Then Crassus could kill him.”

Only Spartacus’s canny field generalship prevented Crassus from crushing the rebels immediately. But when pirates betrayed Spartacus after promising to ferry him and his men across the Strait of Messina into Sicily, the slave army was gradually maneuvered into one untenable position after another until Crassus finally brought his foe to bay: “It was Crassus’s dream and Spartacus’s nightmare: a pitched battle against the Roman army.” Before the final battle, Spartacus symbolically killed his own horse, telling his troops that if they won he’d have many to ride, and if they lost he would no longer need one. During the fight, Spartacus charged Crassus, was cut down, and the rebels were almost completely defeated.

The revolt ended in a mass crucifixion. Six thousand of the survivors were hanged on crosses and left to die on the road between Capua and Rome, about one every 40 yards. Spartacus, however, was not one of them. He was killed on the battlefield and his body was never found. The famous “I am Spartacus!” scene in Kubrick’s movie, which shows Spartacus on a cross, is a myth.

“Spartacus suffered the common fate of prudent revolutionaries,” Strauss concludes. “He lit a fire that he could not put out...Spartacus was a failure against Rome but a success as a mythmaker. No doubt he would have preferred the opposite, but history has its way with us all. No firebrand nor idealist, the real Spartacus wanted to mix hope and prudence. But history taught him a hard lesson: unlike games in the arena, revolutions spin out of control.”

About the Author

Barry Strauss is professor history and classics at Cornell University. He has written or edited nine books, most recently *The Trojan War* and *The Battle of Salamis*. He speaks several modern languages in addition to reading ancient Greek and Latin. He has been interviewed on many televised historical programs and has lectured widely.

About the Book

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By Barry Strauss

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More Praise for THE SPARTACUS WAR

“The great slave revolt of the gladiator Spartacus shook the Roman world of the first-century BC as much as it fascinates us still two millennia later. The classicist and stylist Barry Strauss explains why all that is so in a narrative that is as engaging to read as it is thoroughly researched.”

—**Victor Davis Hanson**, Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow, Classics/Military History, the Hoover Institution

“The long track of history—especially ancient history—is marred by potholes and chasms of the unknown and unknowable. No contemporary historian bridges these gaps better than Barry Strauss. He does not leap across them so much as build elegant spans of logic, of the likely and the possible. His raw materials are an immense knowledge base, wit and humor, and a welcome sense for brevity. Spartacus comes alive.” —**David L. Robbins**, author of *War of the Rats* and *The Assassins Gallery*

“With his trademarks of extensive knowledge, insights and great story-telling ability, Barry Strauss brings us as close as we can get to the enigmatic Spartacus, the slave who defied the Roman Republic.” —**Adrian Goldsworthy**, author of *Caesar: Life of a Colossus*

Praise for THE TROJAN WAR

“Barry Strauss boldly treats the Trojan War not as mythology or poetry but as history. To the epics of Homer and other Greek sources he adds a broad knowledge of the Bronze Age, of its physical remains and of written evidence from the Hittite and Egyptian archives. The result is an exciting tale written in a lively style that brings Homer’s heroes and the world in which they lived to vibrant and colorful life.” —**Donald Kagan**, Sterling Professor of Classics and History, Yale University

“Classics professor Strauss has demonstrated talent for popular history writing (*The Battle of Salamis*, 2004) that continues with this rendition of the granddaddy of Western literature... Combining caution with a stretch of historical imagination, Strauss' depiction of the Trojan War yields a conflict shorn of the Iliads heroizing but restored with historically plausible causes, chronologies, and conclusions.” —*Booklist*

Praise for THE BATTLE OF SALAMIS

“Salamis was no easy victory, and this account of it by a history professor who is an expert on naval warfare with a gift for vivid narrative brings it, in all its suspense, its complications, its surprises and its cast of extraordinary characters, to fervent and turbulent life.” —*Washington Post Book World*

“What captures the reader’s imagination is how vividly Strauss brings forward the events of 2,500 years ago, breathing life into the men—and one warrior queen—involved in them.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“In the hands of Cornell University historian Barry Strauss, the story of the battle is a military epic of the first order.” —*The Boston Globe*