



Western Roman Empire: Overwhelmed by Immigrants

The late afternoon of August 9, 378 A.D. was brutally hot in the fields around Adrianople in southeastern Europe. Today a prosperous Turkish city (Edirne) near the Greek and Bulgarian borders, Adrianople on that day almost 1,700 years ago was the site of one of the greatest and most decisive battles in all of human history, a conflict that ran its course quickly in the hot, parched countryside, and left tens of thousands of men — most of them the flower of the Eastern Roman imperial military, including the Roman emperor himself — dead on the field, while the comparatively small army of Goths and Alans rode triumphantly over the terrain, giving no quarter to the wounded and dying, slaying officer and foot soldier alike. By late day, the field belonged to the carrion fowl and blowflies, already commencing their grim work among the heaps of corpses.



On that occasion, known to history as the Battle of Adrianople, which is usually considered to be the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire, tens of thousands of Romans and their allies were hewn down, crippling the once-invincible Roman military and guaranteeing the supremacy of the Goths in the eastern portions of the empire ever after. Within a generation, the Goths, emboldened and battle-hardened, would arrive at the gates of the Eternal City itself, and become the first foreign power in eight centuries to sack Rome.

And all of it began because of an immigration crisis.

Charitable Notions

By the middle of the fourth century A.D., German tribes were settled all along the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire, from the Rhine to the Danube. Over the centuries, the Germans had proven Rome's most resolute rivals. The Cimbrian War during the late second century B.C. was enormously costly for Rome, although they eventually repulsed the Germanic and Celtic hosts that threatened to overrun Italy. Julius Caesar himself, after subduing Gaul, contented himself with crossing the Rhine into German territories and launching a few military attacks, before retreating back into Gaul. In 9 A.D., the first great military disaster to befall imperial Rome took place at Teutoburg Forest, where a German chieftain with Roman military training named Arminius led a rout of Roman forces that resulted in the annihilation of three legions under Varus. In the centuries that followed, Rome never ceased to press on the Germans in Western and Central Europe, sometimes pushing forward the frontiers of the empire, sometimes withdrawing. The Germans showed little inclination to adopt Roman ways, preferring the virtues of rustic simplicity combined with a knack for ferocity in combat that kept the disciplined Roman



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legions from imposing their will.

To the east, in what is now the Ukraine and western Russia, lived another German people, the Goths. We do not know the exact limits of their dominion, nor whether, in remoter antiquity, they had come from further east, perhaps from the steppes and deserts of central Asia. But by the mid-fourth century A.D., they were settled on the fringes of the Eastern Roman Empire, enjoying a more or less settled existence. Unlike other barbarian tribes settled on the Roman frontier, many if not most of them had converted to Christianity, although of the Arian, not the Catholic, strain.

Unfortunately for the Romans, events thousands of miles beyond the limits of their dominion many years before had set in motion forces that would upset the more-or-less peaceful status quo in the east. From somewhere out of the fastnesses of the far eastern steppes — probably in what is now northwestern China or west-central Asia — a people had issued forth who came to be known to the Romans as the Huns. These were possibly related to the Hsiung-Nu, a confederation of eastern nomads who, as late as the first century A.D., controlled a vast swath of territory to the north of China and the Himalayas, extending perhaps as far west as the Transoxiana region of central Asia. Whether the Huns and Hsiung-Nu were synonymous is still hotly debated by scholars, but in one of those periodic accidents of which the history of the Central Asian steppe peoples is replete, something happened to stir up the Huns and prompt them to begin migrating west.

As with the Scythians before them and the Mongols after, the Huns were a people hardened by the demands of nomadic life in the empty Asian wilderness. They lived on horseback and had no permanent settlements, using their wagons as mobile communities. They enjoyed battle and plunder, and as with other equestrian nomads in the era before firearms, enjoyed a distinct advantage over the armies of mostly infantry that tried to stand against them. Accordingly, their westward advance met little resistance. Rumors of their cruelty and military strength went before them, and before long, after overrunning the territory of the Alans to the east, the Huns crossed the Don to the north of the Sea of Azov on the northeastern arm of the Black Sea, and entered the territory of the Goths.

A group of Goths known as Thuringians, after being overwhelmed by the Huns in several military engagements, took advantage of a lull in the Huns' advance to flee west to the border of the Danube River, beyond which lay the Roman province of Thrace. Their leader, Alavivus, petitioned the Eastern Roman emperor, Valens, for permission to cross the river and settle in Thrace, promising to be faithful subjects. For the moment, they were safe from the Huns' depredations, since the invaders were too busy looting the Goths' former settlements eastward to bother pursuing the Gothic host, but there was little doubt they would eventually reach the Danube themselves and fall upon the tens of thousands of Goths encamped there.

Valens, who was worried at rumors of the approaching Huns, allowed the Thuringian Goths to cross the broad Danube and settle on Roman territory in hopes of enlisting them in defense of the empire. This act of emergency amnesty was disruptive enough, but as soon as the Thuringians had crossed the river, they began ranging far and wide over Thracian territory, foraging for food and sometimes plundering local settlements. Moreover, word of Roman amnesty soon spread, and a second Gothic host, the Gruthungians, soon appeared on the far shore of the Danube demanding the same right to immigrate. This time Valens, already aware that he had made a mistake in allowing the Thuringian host into Roman territory, turned down their petition. But the Gruthungians, not to be denied, constructed a floating bridge in secret and crossed the Danube anyway.

Broken Borders and Battles



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These events took place in 376 A.D., and marked the first time that the Roman Empire had effectively lost control of her borders; from that time on, the eastern frontier was ineffectually guarded, allowing a stream of violent, undesirable invaders to enter the empire unimpeded from the east.

In the meantime, the Gothic host in Thrace was making more and more of a nuisance of itself. For one thing, Roman authorities proved unable or unwilling to feed them properly, and rumors that they were being provisioned with dog meat kindled resentment among the Goths.

The first major conflict occurred at the city of Marcianopolis, where the Roman general Lupicinus, trying to reestablish order, invited the two Gothic leaders, Alavivus and Fritigern, to a banquet to parlay. However, the locals, resentful of the Goths encamped near their city, soon started a conflict that led to the killing of a number of Roman soldiers and pillaging by the Goths. Lupicinus, in a show of good faith, allowed both Alavivus and Fritigern to leave, but, in the words of historian Ammianus, who may have witnessed many of these events, the seeds of war had been irrevocably sown:

The whole nation of the Thuringians became suddenly inflamed with a desire for war; and among many preparations which seemed to betoken danger, the standards of war were raised according to custom, and the trumpets poured forth sounds of evil omen; while the predatory bands collected in troops, plundering and burning villages, and throwing everything that came in their way into alarm by their fearful devastations.

For the next two years, the war between the Goths and Romans raged unabated, with thousands slain and no clear victor. By early 378, however, the Eastern emperor, Valens, dissatisfied with the failure of his commanders to bring the unruly Gothic immigrants under control, decided to take over management of the war in person. According to Ammianus, he was motivated in part by a desire to match the successes of his counterpart Gratian, the Western Roman Emperor, who had recently defeated the Alemanni, a Germanic tribe in Western Europe who had invaded Pannonia in central Europe. Although the Roman Empire had been formally partitioned for almost 100 years, the Eastern and Western emperors still had a strong alliance. Valens petitioned Gratian to come to his aid in suppressing the Goths, and departed Antioch for Constantinople, the Eastern capital. As soon as he reached Constantinople in May, he authorized one of his top generals, Sebastianus, to re-order and gather existing Roman forces in Thrace. In the course of this buildup, Sebastianus managed to defeat several small detachments of Goths, giving Valens confidence that Roman victory was at hand. In early August, Sebastianus' force met up with Valens' army at the city of Adrianople, and fortified themselves in readiness for battle.

At this juncture, Gratian's eastward march was halted by a battle with a fierce army of Alans, who forced him to withdraw westward to Pannonia. As a result, Valens was now faced with a fateful choice: wait for Gratian's arrival, or hazard a battle himself with the Gothic host, led by Fritigern, now encamped nearby.

According to Ammianus' account, Valens — ignoring the counsel of his generals — chose the latter course, emboldened by reports that his own forces greatly outnumbered the Goths, who were said to field a mere 10,000 men. He was probably also hoping to upstage Gratian. Whatever the reasons, the impatience of Valens was to cost the Roman Empire dearly.

On August 8, Fritigern sent an emissary to Valens proposing terms for peace, which included the cession of Roman territory to the Goths. Not surprisingly, Valens rejected this bold proposal from a man who only two years earlier had relied on the goodwill of the Roman sovereign to save him and his



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people from the marauding Huns. Besides, Valens, who apparently had at least 20,000 men at his command, was confident of an easy victory over a disorganized and fickle foe.

On the morning of August 9, he marched forth with his army from Adrianople to confront the Gothic forces encamped about eight miles north of the city. Unbeknownst to Valens, a large Gothic cavalry at least several thousand strong was off raiding, and Fritigern expected them back as reinforcements.

The weather was very hot, and by the time they had completed their seven-hour march under the pitiless sun, the Romans were wilting. The Goths, in the meantime, had been biding their time, content to let the heat wear down their enemies. To add difficulty to the Romans' advance, the Goths fired all the fields between them and the city, depriving the Romans of food and forcing them to march across fields of charred stubble. When the exhausted and dehydrated Roman forces arrived to confront the Goths, they found that the latter had encamped on a hill, circling their wagons to protect their families and provisions.

The Gothic cavalry had still not arrived, so the wily Fritigern began frivolous negotiations to gain more time. His first embassy was rejected by Valens, who demanded he send men of higher rank. His generals, aware of the toll that heat and exhaustion had taken, encouraged negotiations, while Fritigern, aware of the Roman reputation for disciplined valor, was reluctant to unleash his forces until the cavalry arrived.

As it turned out, the Battle of Adrianople began at a time of neither side's choosing, when a group of Roman soldiers escorting one of Valens' top generals, Ricimer — who was attempting to parlay with the Goths — launched an impetuous attack on Gothic lines.

The Goths counterattacked and drove Ricimer's force back. At that moment, the long-awaited Gothic cavalry, led by Gothic generals Saphrax and Alatheus, returned, and fell upon the Roman forces.

The Romans, already in disarray after the repulse of their first impetuous assault, found themselves crowded tightly together at the base of the hill, surrounded by Gothic cavalry and under attack from Gothic infantry above them. In the heat and confusion, the battle quickly turned into a rout. The Romans, encumbered by heavy and suffocatingly hot armor, soon abandoned the field en masse, fleeing for their lives with the victorious Goths in hot pursuit. Roman foot soldiers and officers alike were hewn down by the thousands, and the emperor Valens himself got separated from his personal guard in the chaos.

The slaughter lasted for hours. By nightfall, barely one-third of the Roman army had escaped with their lives. Amid the fallen were 35 tribunes, countless captains, and many other illustrious military leaders, including Sebastianus. Somewhere among the heaps of corpses, anonymous and despoiled, the Emperor Valens lay, stripped of all imperial dignity and probably unrecognized by the victorious Goths. Although various stories circulated about how he met his end, his body was never recovered nor given a state burial.

Not since the Battle of Cannae, when Hannibal had wiped out the flower of the republican Roman army, had Rome suffered such a catastrophic military defeat. Some military setbacks over the centuries — Teutoburg Forest, Arausio, and Carrhae, for example — may have been more costly in terms of lives lost, but none had so decimated Roman military leadership.

Although the Battle of Adrianople did not yet guarantee the supremacy of the Goths nor the final collapse of Rome, it ensured that Rome would never again be the mistress of the known world. The Goths would yet commit many depredations, culminating in the sack of Rome under the leadership of



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Alaric in 410 A.D. — before becoming allies with the Romans against a common and far more terrible foe, the Huns, whom they had first invaded the empire to escape. At the truly apocalyptic Battle of Chalons in 451 A.D., Goths and Romans fought side by side in a last-ditch effort to save the West from Attila's host. But even with the Gothic alliance, the best a prostrate Rome could manage was a standoff costing hundreds of thousands of lives. The end of the Western Empire came swiftly after that; within 15 years of the end of the Western Roman Empire, a Gothic monarch, Theoderic the Great, ruled the entire Italian peninsula and much of central Europe (the so-called Ostrogothic Kingdom). Further west, much of the Iberian Peninsula — formerly Roman Hispania and Lusitania — was ruled by the Visigoths or western Goths. In a single century, the descendants of a ragtag immigrant host had become the masters of much of Rome's former territory in Western Europe.

Similarities and Differences

At such a distance in time, it is easy to judge the shortsightedness of Valens and the Roman authorities. Probably the Huns would have wreaked havoc on Rome no matter what happened to the Goths, but there is little question that the Gothic wars crippled Rome's ability to defend herself when the Huns — a far worse threat — made their inevitable appearance on Rome's borders and proceeded to lay waste to much of the remaining civilized portions of the empire. It is also curious that, notwithstanding the fact that most of the existential threats faced by late Rome came from the east, it was the Western Empire that ultimately succumbed. The Eastern Empire, centered on impregnable Constantinople, morphed into the Greek-speaking Byzantine state that lasted another thousand years, claiming for her own the mantle of imperial Rome until her demise at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in the mid-1400s.

In many respects, the original wave of Gothic immigration, both legal and illegal, differs from modern immigration crises faced by the United States and the European Union. For one thing, the Goths were fleeing a clear and present danger that threatened not only them but their Roman hosts as well. For another, the Goths entered Thrace already organized militarily, not as helpless supplicants.

In spite of the tendency of historians to ascribe blame for the Gothic War on Roman incompetence, the fact remains that the Goths showed callous disrespect for their Roman hosts, commencing their pillaging almost immediately. They displayed no inclination to honor their promises to be subject to Roman laws nor to submit to Roman military authority. They showed no gratitude to Roman authorities for taking them in in their hour of need. Instead of allying themselves with the Romans against a common enemy, they took advantage of the weakness of their hosts to seize land and property. A significant number of them entered Roman territory without permission.

While it is extremely doubtful that the millions of illegal immigrants in the United States and Europe pose anything like the existential threat posed by the Goths to the Romans, there are parallels. Some modern immigrant populations — especially those made up of refugees displaced by war or social upheaval, like the current wave of immigrants overwhelming the EU — arrive in foreign lands more bent on survival than on submitting to orderly, legal assimilation. Under such circumstances, governments typically struggle to provide adequate food and shelter, leading to resentment and unrest. These in turn often harden the attitudes of the local populace and their governments toward the newcomers. In the heat of such crises, it can be extraordinarily difficult for governments — and citizenries — to act with prudence and restraint. Because of property rights and scarcity of resources, the noble notion of the brotherhood of man does not translate unconditionally to a right of absolutely unfettered movement; but it should enjoin Christian charity, constrained by enlightened self-interest, toward hard-pressed refugee populations.



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Seldom is the occasion when, as with Valens and the Romans, there are no good choices for solving an immigration crisis.

Graphic at top: Migrating Goths cross a river en route to safety within Roman borders

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