

ON CAESAR'S POLITICS
(A STUDY. IN DE BELLO CIVILI)

By

MOSTAFA EL-ABBADI

Ten days before the long impending civil war between Caesar and Pompey actually broke out, the senate on the 1st of January 49B.C. held one of the most critical meetings in its history. The matter before it was the last attempt to avert the break out of hostilities. The chance was offered by Caesar, "when he sent a message to the senate that all should give up arms. This was rejected."⁽¹⁾

We are fortunate to possess a rather cursive but very vivid report, in the words of Caesar himself, about how the senate reacted to Caesar's challenge for peace.⁽²⁾ His style is as usual straightforward, simple, and restrained; his sense of humour is never failing, sometimes amounting to sarcasm and irony.

From Caesar's report we understand that there was much wrangling and altercation about the matter. On receiving Caesar's missive the consuls at first did not wish to have it read in the senate, but when the tribuni plebis acting on Caesar's behalf insisted, they allowed it to be read. Yet when the tribuni plebis asked for a motion on Caesar's offer for peace, this was flatly rejected. Then the consul L. Lentulus began an appeal for solidarity of the

(1) Caesar, de Bello Civili, I. 9.3 : "Cum litteras ad senatum miserit, ut omnes ab exercitibus discederent, ne id quidem impetravisse."

(2) B.C. (= Caes. de bello civ.) I. 1—5.

senate against Caesar and to stop their policy of appeasement. Next spoke Scipio more definitely : "Pompey does not intend to desert the *res publica*, if the senate follows him. But if it delays and acts remissly, it will in vain seek his help, if it should wish to do so in the future (3). Obviously Scipio was speaking on behalf of Pompey; and Caesar does not miss the opportunity of saying this in his own sarcastic manner: "This speech of Scipio appeared to come from the mouth of Pompey himself, since the senate was meeting in the city and Pompey (with his soldiers) was close at hand."(4)

Any attempts at a middle course were promptly suppressed by the consul and Pompey's friends. Thus the senators, sufficiently intimidated, were compelled to adopt the proposal of Scipio, "That Caesar should disband his army before a fixed date, and that-if he failed to do so-he should be considered to be meditating treason against the *res publica*."(5) Against such a drastic measure, the *tribuni plebis* resorted to the use of their right of intervention. This was again denied in an angry and threatening manner;(6) and the senate finally on the 7th of January 44 B.C. declared martial law for the protection of the state(7).

(3) B.C. I.1.4: "Pompeio esse in animo rei publicae non desse, si senatus sequatur; si cunctetur atque agat lenius, nequiquam eius auxilium, si postea velit, senatum imploraturum."

(4) B.C. I. 2.1 : "Haec Scipionis Oratio, quod senatus in urbe habebatur Pompeiusque aderat, ex ipsius ore Pompei mitti videbatur."

(5) B.C., I. 2.6 : "Sic vocibus consulis, terrore praesentis exercitus, minis amicorum Pompei plerique compulsi inviti et coacti Scipionis sententiam sequuntur: uti ante certam diem Caesar exercitum dimittat; si non faciat, eum adversus rem publicam facturum videri."

(6) B.C. I. 2.7; Dio cassius 41. 2, shows that the rejection of the tribunes' intervention took place on the following day, i.e. 2nd Jan. 49. B.C.

(7) B.C. I. 5. 3—4.

The tribuni plebis found themselves helpless; "being unable to protest against the peril that threatened them, ... they at once fled from the city and betook themselves to Caesar."(8)

This abstract from Caesar's report may be excused in view of its significance for the point I wish to stress. Caesar as an historian enjoys an unusually high reputation of being truthful. Undoubtedly he tries, and often succeeds, to justify his political and military actions in the eyes of his contemporaries. But his narrative, when checked against those of other ancient authors like Cicero, Suetonius, Plutarch and Dio Cassius proves to be, in the main, trustworthy.

If, therefore, we accept that the account quoted above is historically correct, we may at once notice that certain elements in the situation seem either contradictory to one another or that we need to know more about the situation in order to understand its apparent ambiguity. For example, at the beginning of the war we are told that Pompey was both politically and in armed forces far more powerful than Caesar, yet he deliberately avoided meeting Caesar in Italy either at a conference table or in the field of battle.

We know that the Civil Wars developed from a terrible party strife at Rome between the senate and the populares. Caesar always championed the cause of the populares; whereas Pompey, a great soldier but an irresolute politician, after vacillating between alignment with Caesar and the pursuit of personal glory, finally accepted

(8) B.C. I.5.5.

the leadership of the senate. This final unification of the forces of both Pompey and the senate utterly upset the political situation at Rome. Caesar seems to have lost all means of controlling matters to suit his wish, whereas Pompey became the dominant personality and in full control of the city. The above quoted report of Caesar shows such a situation plainly : the rebuff of Caesar's offer for universal disarmament, the prevention of the tribunes to exercise their right of intervention, the outrageous treatment of the tribunes and their flight from the city; all this is an adequate proof of the helplessness of Caesar's political position in Rome.

Also the military situation was decisively in favour of Pompey. We are told, on the authority of Caesar himself, that on the eve of the war, he had with him at Ravenna one legion only, namely the thirteenth legion. (9) He further assures us that he crossed the Rubicon at the head of that one legion only. (10) Pompey, on the other hand, had then ten legions (11) and all the ships in Italy. (12)

(9) B.C. 1.7.8 : "conclamant legionis XIII, quae aderat, milites — hanc enim initio tumultus evocaverat, reliquae nondum convenerant — ...".

(10) B.C. 1.8.1. : "Cognita militum voluntate Ariminum cum ea legione profiscitur." In Picenum, before Asculum, Caesar received a second legion (I. 15.3 : "Interea legio XII Caesarem consequitur"); his third reinforcement, before Corfinium, was one more legion, 22 cohorts from Gaul and 300 horse (I. 18.5); his total force at Brundisium was six legions (I. 25. 1)"

(11) Pompey had taken two legions from Caesar under the pretence of a Parthian war but were kept in Italy (I. 3.2; I.9.4). He also held levies throughout Italy (I. 6.8; I.9.4) his total force was ten legions (I. 6.1 : "legiones habere sese paratos X). With the exception of Mommsen, History of Rome, vol. IV. p. 349 (Trans. by W.P. Dickson), this fact has often been overlooked. R. Syme, Roman Revolution, p. 49, states "Pompeius might stamp with his foot in the land of Italy,... No armed legions rose at his call. But Syme's rhetoric seems to ignore the simple statement of Caesar.

(12) B.C. 1.29, "quod omnibus coactis navibus Pompeius praesentem facultatem insequendi sui admirat".

It would seem therefore, that from a political and military point of view the position of Pompey was more powerful than that of Caesar. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that Caesar always tried to seek a peaceful agreement(13) while Pompey urged a settlement by war.(14) Yet, paradoxically enough, one notices that Pompey never gives the assurance that Caesar displays. Pompey tended to be pompous and nervous, whereas Caesar, reasonable and confident. What was the reason behind the confidence of Caesar and the anxiety of Pompey? It is perhaps difficult to give a conclusive answer, and it is not my intention to do so. I only wish to stress one element in the situation which-to my mind-has not been adequately appreciated. A reading of the "de bello civili" gave me the impression that Caesar realised, at an early stage, that the decisive element in the situation was not Rome and the Romans, as much as Italy and the Italians. Of course he is careful to show every respect for the traditional institutions of Rome; for example, when Pompey apologetically wrote to him, "thet what he had done was for the sake of the respublica; that he had always held the interests of the res publica above personal relation"(15) Caesar answered in a similar language : "To him the dignity of the res publica was supreme and above lifehe was prepared to resort to anything, to submit to anything for the sake of the res publica. Let Pompey go to his provinces, let them (both) disband their armies, let everyone in Italy lay down his arms, let fear be banished from the

(13) Caesar repeatedly made offers for peace, e.g. B.C. I.5.5; I. 9.3, 6; III. 10. 3—II; III. 57. 2—5.

(14) B.C. I.4.5 : "(Pompeius) rem ad arma deduci studcbat".

(15) B.C. I.8.3 : "ne ea, quae rei publicae causa egerit in suam contumeliam vertat. Semper se rei publicae commoda privatis necessitudinibus habuisse potiore".

state, let free elections and the whole control of the res publica be handed over to the senate and the Roman people.”(16).

This is not much more than lip service; and perhaps dictated by his genuine desire to stop the fighting and make peace with Pompey. Ever since the formation of the triumvirate in 60 B.C. it was felt at Rome that the coalition was-to say the least-detrimental to the Roman constitution. In the summer of 59 B.C., during the first consulship of Caesar, a moderate conservative like Cicero had this to say to his friend Atticus, “The whole country has gone to ruin, and affairs are in one respect worse than when you left. Then it looked that the state was oppressed with a tyranny which was popular with the masses, and though annoying to the upper class, still comparatively harmless; but now it has become suddenly hateful to all alike, that I tremble for the issue.”(17).

In the autumn of the same year, Cicero writes to his brother Quintus, “And now let me tell you what you most desire to know, the constitution is completely lost to us.”(18) Four years later, in 55 B.C., during Caesar’s absence in Gaul, Cicero admits in despair : “We must either utterly

(16) B.C. I.9.2,5: “Sibi semper primam rei publicae fuisse dignitatem vitaque potiore[m] Sed tamen ad omnia se descender[e] paratum atque omnia pati rei publicae causa. Proficisatur Pompeius in suas provincias, ipsi exercitus dimittant, discedant in Italia omnes ab armis, metus e civitate tollatur, libera comitia atque omnis res publica senatui populoque Romano permittatur.” Also at a later stage of the war, when he renewed his offer for peaceful settlement, III. 10. 8 : “Conditiones pacis, quoniam antea convenire non potuissent, Romae ab senatu et a populo peti debere.”

(17) Cicero, Epist. ad Atticum, II. 21. 1: “Tota perit atque hoc est miserior, quam reliquisi, quod tum videbatur eius modi dominatio civitatem oppressisse, quae iucunda esset multitudini, bonis autem ita molesta, ut tamen sine pernicie, nunc repent tanto in odio est omnibus, ut, quorsus eruptura sit, horreamus.

(18) Cicero, Epist. ad Quintum Fratrem, I. 2.15 : “Nunc ea cognosce quae maxime exoptas. Rempublicam Funditus amisimus.”

humiliate ourselves by agreeing with a minority (the triumvirs), or disagree with them to no purpose the senate, the lawcourts, and the whole state have undergone a complete change.”(19)

These sentiments do not seem to be peculiar to Cicero, nor dictated merely by his differences with Caesar or by his attachment to Pompey. Caesar is sufficiently reported by Suetonius to have had much contempt for the ancestral tradition of Rome. “According to Titus Ampius, Caesar said that the *res publica* was nothing, merely a name without substance or form. (20)..”

These declarations show how little faith Caesar had in Rome and its traditional institutions. I would even venture to say that his claim to fight for the protection of the *tribuni plebis*(21) was no more than a useful legal argument to his advantage. One might even doubt if he fully believed in the office itself as is shown by his attitude towards the two great *tribuni plebis*, the Gracchi, who had tried to effect a revolution through the popular party and the *comitia tributa*. He publicly dissociated himself from them and their political philosophy. In the important speech which he delivered to his soldiers, a day before crossing the Rubicon, Caesar described the measures of the Gracchi as “pernicious laws” (in *perniciosis legibus*). (22).

(19) Cicero, *Epist. ad Familiares*, I. 8. 3—4 : „Nam aut assentiendum est nulla cum gravitate paucis, aut frustra dissentiendum commutata tota ratio est senatus, iudiciorum, rei totius publicae.”

(20) Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 77 : „ut Titus Amp. (r) ius scribit nihil esse rem publicam, appellationem modo sine corpore ac specie.” then he adds the famous sentence : „Sullam nescisse litteras, qui dictaturam deposuerit.”

(21) e.g. B.C. I. 5.4; I. 7.2,8, I.22.5.

Notice that Caesar here shows the same hostility as the Senate towards the Gracchi, which is voiced by Cicero, In *Cat*, I, 3, 4; IV, 4.

(22) B.C. I. 7.5.

All this seems to indicate that the political philosophy of Caesar did not envisage the populares or the common people of Rome to be the proper media of the revolution. I suggest that this role was reserved for the Italians. There are a number of incidents which indicate that Caesar had this in mind and that he tried to convince the Italians that he was fighting also in their name. The earliest indication of the interrelations between the political behaviour of Caesar and the Italians is found in a letter of Cicero to Atticus during the first consulship of Caesar in 59 B.C. Cicero expresses his fear that the triumvirs "have been roused to energy by the hisses of the crowd, the talk of the loyalists and the murmurs of Italy." (23)

Immediately after the break out of the civil war, Caesar makes a new offer for a negotiated peace with Pompey. On this occasion he urges the messengers, who had come from Pompey, to carry back his own message, "in the hope that with little trouble they might be able to put an end to serious disputes and free the whole of Italy from alarm Let everyone in Italy lay down his arms." (24)

Among the reasons that prevented Caesar from following Pompey at once to the Balkans was, as he says, "lest Gaul and Italy should be tampered with in his absence." (25)

But most appropriate to our purpose is Caesar's message to the Massilians who had closed their gates

(23) Ad Atticum, II. 21. 1 : "nunc vero sibiis vulgi, sermonibus honestorum, fremitu Italiae vereor ne exarscrint."

(24) B.C. I.9.1.1,5 : si parvo labore mangas controversias tollere atque omnem Italiam metu liberare possint ... discedant in Italia omnes ab armis."

(25) B.C. I.29. 3 : „...Galliam Italiamque temptari se absente nolebat.

against him and sided with Pompey. He at first warns them against taking the first step towards fighting, and adds that "they ought to follow the authority of all Italy rather than to submit to the will of one man (i.e. Pompey)." (26)

Caesar continued to uphold the Italian cause and the idea that he was acting in the name of Italy and not only of Rome. This attitude is clearly reflected in the opposition of the people of Apollonia to take up arms against Caesar. It is reported that "they refused to shut their gates against the consul (i.e. Caesar), or to decide anything for themselves that should be contrary to the decision of all Italy and of the Roman people." (27)

Finally, in the last stage of the war, Caesar made overtures to Scipio, trying to win him over to his side in a final endeavour to stop the war. In his letter Caesar said, "If he (Scipio) should do this, everyone would credit him with achieving the tranquility of Italy, the peace of the provinces, the safety of the empire." (28)

This is new language in Roman politics, wherein the name of Rome is remarkably missing, and the name of Italy is most prominent. Caesar, as it were, wishes to make it clear that the civil war was in no sense a party struggle among the Romans. This seems to be a fundamental difference between the attitudes of the senate and Caesar. These two different attitudes come out most clearly in the

(26) B.C. I.35. 1 : „debere eos Italiae totius auctoritatem sequi potius quam unius hominis voluntati obtemperare”.

(27) B.C. III. 12. 2 : “Illi vero daturos se negare neque portas consuli praeclusuros neque sibi iudicium sumpturos contra atque omnis Italiae populusque Romanus iudicavisset.”

(28) B.C. III. 57. 4 : “Quod si fecisset, quietem Italiae, pacem provinciarum, salutem imperu uni omnines acceptam relatos.”.

messages exchanged between Caesar and the Massilians; Caesar, as just mentioned, calls them to follow the authority of all Italy. The Massilians, who had Pompey's men among them, gave in reply "the authoritative argument of the senate" (ex senatus auctoritate) as follows: "We understand that the Roman people is divided into two parties. It is not within our discretion or our power to determine which side has the juster cause." (29)

We can see from these examples that Caesar waged his propaganda campaign on the basis that he primarily fought the civil war for the sake of all Italy. His policy appealed to the Italian municipalities, and their response was most favourable. No sooner did Caesar's standards appear near a city in Italy than the inhabitants hastened to declare their loyalty. (30). In spite of Pompey's superiority in number of legions, his position in Italy was precarious. Although he never encountered Caesar with his force on Italian soil, his losses were enormous (31). It is even conjectured by Caesar that he might have originally intended to quit Italy. (32) This state of affairs in Italy was perhaps one

(29) B.C. I. 35. The word "senatus" is supplied by Menge and adopted in the Oxford text: "legati..... atque ex senatus auctoritate haec Caesari renuntiant; intellegere se divisum esse populum Romanum in partis duas. Neque sui iudici neque suarum esse virium discernere, ultra pars iustiore[m] habeat causam."

(30) E.g.: B.C. I. 11 (at Pisaurum, Fanum, and Ancona); I. 12 (Iguvium); I. 12 (Auximum); I. 15 (in the territory of Picenum: "Cunctate earum regionum praefecturae libentissimis animis cum (i.e. Caesar) recipiunt exercitumque eius omnibus rebus iuvant."); I. 18 (Sulmo); I. 20 (Corfinium); I. 28 (Brundisium).

(31) B.C.III.10.5: "illum Italiam expulsum amissa Sicilia et Sardinia duabusque Hispaniis et cohortibus in Italia atque Hispania civium Romanorum centum atque XXX."

(32) B.C. I. 27. 2 "Pompeius, sive operibus Caesaris permotus sive etiam quod ab iniuio Italia excedere constituerat."