

IMPERIAL FLOPS AND ANTI-IMPERIALIST NARRATIVES:
MARATHON– VARUS– VIETNAM

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“The largest of all imperialist powers feels in its own guts the bleeding inflicted by a poor and underdeveloped country; its fabulous economy feels the strain of the war effort.” This writes no lesser man than Ernesto “Che” Guevara, in 1967, shortly before the Vietnam War reached its bloody climax. And he proceeds: “Let us sum up our hopes for victory: total destruction of imperialism by eliminating its firmest bulwark, the oppression exercised by the United States of America. To carry out, as a tactical method, the people’s gradual liberation, one by one or in groups: driving the enemy into a difficult fight away from its own territory, dismantling all its sustenance bases, that is, its dependent territories. This means a long war. And, once more, we repeat it, a cruel war. Let no one fool himself at the outset and let no one hesitate to start out for fear of the consequences it may bring to his people. It is almost our sole hope for victory. We cannot elude the call of this hour. Vietnam is pointing it out with its endless lesson of heroism, its tragic and everyday lesson of struggle and death for the attainment of final victory. There, the imperialist soldiers endure the discomforts of those who, used to enjoying the U.S. standard of living, have to live in a hostile land with the insecurity of being unable to move without being aware of walking on enemy territory — death to those who dare take a step out of their fortified encampment, the permanent hostility of the entire population. [...] How close we could look into a bright future should two, three, or many Vietnams flourish throughout the world with their share of deaths and their immense tragedies, their everyday heroism and their repeated blows against imperialism, impelled to disperse its forces under the sudden attack and the increasing hatred of all peoples of the world!”¹

This is quite an accurate description of asymmetric warfare and the chances it implies for anti-imperial actors; it is, at the same time, a plea for the legitimacy of anti-imperialist fight and a call for unity amongst the Davids who oppose imperial Goliaths – in this case the U.S., one of the

1. Ernesto Guevara, Message sent to the Tricontinental Solidarity Organisation in Havana (1967).

then two superpowers, a dualism which Guevara deliberately omits. Guevara's message to the Tricontinental Solidarity Organisation is a classic example of how description and polemics intertwine, as soon as conflicts between imperial powers and anti-imperial actors are concerned.

This paper will use the Vietnam War, referred to by Guevara, the disaster of the three Roman legions commanded by Quinctilius Varus in the area that Tacitus called the *Teutoburgiensis Saltus*, and the defeat of Datis' expeditionary force at Marathon as case-studies in asymmetric warfare resulting in decisive defeats of imperial great-powers and in subsequent attempts to exploit them for the construction of anti-imperialist narratives. In each of the three cases, a great power – which we may call an empire – clashed with an actor at the outer fringes of its sphere of power, resulting in conflicts of highly centralised global players with a sophisticated engine of war at the state of the art of its period and abundant resources versus relatively isolated units in a politically fragmented periphery, politically, militarily and economically no match for any empire.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it attempts to explain – through a comparative investigation inspired by some theoretical considerations – why, in all three instances, the unexpected happened, i.e. why the imperial powers failed to crush the anti-imperial actors. It explores, second, through the narratives available, the repercussions the events had on the *imaginaire* of the contemporaries of both sides – the narratives and myths that shaped the perception of imperial flops, sometimes till the present day. Before that, however, a few common terminological misunderstandings have to be straightened out.

1. Imperialism and empire

Large, expanding political entities with a hierarchic centre-periphery structure, which existed throughout history, are usually referred to as 'empires'.² Their drive towards expansion is often called imperialism: in the field of ancient history, we read of 'Assyrian imperialism',³ 'Achaemenid imperialism'⁴ and – over and over again – 'Roman imperialism'⁵.

2. Cf. the definition by Doyle 1988², 12: 'Empire, I shall argue is a system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy – the effective sovereignty – of the other, the subordinate periphery.'

3. Van de Mierop 2007², 217.

4. Dusinberre 2003, 196.

5. E.g. and only pars pro toto Harris 1979; Ferrary 1988; Clemente 1990; Gabba 1990; Woolf 1992; Webster/Cooper 1996; Mattingly/Alcock 1997; Schwartz 2001; Scott/

However, imperialism is a chameleon-like term. As far as I can see, it has at least three different meanings:

1. Imperialism means ‘the expansion of a nation’s authority by territorial conquest establishing economic and political powers in other territories or nations’⁶ – this is the classical definition first introduced by Karl Kautsky.⁷
2. Imperialism also means ‘the imperialistic attitude of superiority, subordination and dominion over foreign people – a chauvinism and comportment relegating foreign people to a lesser social and or political status’⁸: this is the way the term is used by orthodox Marxist critics of capitalist economies (who define ‘imperialism’ as a specific phase through which capitalism has to go) or, more generally, by any David polemicising against imperial Goliaths.
3. Finally, imperialism refers to the ‘Age of Imperialism’ in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with the European great powers ‘scrambling’ for spheres of colonial domination in India and Africa: this is how Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define imperialism: as territorial expansionism, as opposed to Empire, which for them is detached from territorial boundaries and barriers.⁹

Despite its semantic ambiguity, applying the term ‘imperialism’ to ancient, pre-modern polities has a long-established tradition in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, starting at least in the early 20th century.¹⁰ A great many scholars seem to not really bother as to the precise meaning of the term ‘imperialism’, they just use it. One who does bother, however, Craige B. Champion, the editor of a recent reader titled *Roman Imperialism*,¹¹ borrows Joseph A. Schumpeter’s definition which, in German, reads: ‘Imperialismus ist die objektlose Disposition eines Staates zu gewaltsamer Expansion ohne Grenze.’ (the objectless disposition on the part of a state to unlimited forcible expansion).¹² For Schumpeter, imperialism was the result of an elite’s irrational strive for power (‘Atavismus der sozialen Struktur

Webster 2003.

6. Imperialism. (2008, August 28). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 14:52, September 3, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Imperialism&oldid=234696923>.

7. Kautsky 1909.

8. Ibid.

9. Hardt/Negri 2000, XII.

10. The first such study deals with Greek ‘imperialism’: Ferguson 1913.

11. Champion 2008⁶. See the introduction, p. 2, on concepts of imperialism.

12. Schumpeter 1953, 74

und [...] Atavismus individualpsychologischer Gefühlsgewohnheit'),¹³ at the expense of others – something which could happen any time, and Schumpeter himself considered Rome an excellent example for such an attitude.

The applicability of Schumpeter's ideal type seems indeed straightforward, but this impression is misleading. In fact, it combines a descriptive thread (the correct observation that polities tend towards territorial expansion by means of force) with a normative one (the notion that such an expansive turn is both, irrational and unjust). Schumpeter's concept of *Imperialismus* blends the experience of the 19th and 20th century with the truism that states are expansive. This makes its value questionable: if we take, for a example, the period of 'Mediterranean anarchy' in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, indeed all major actors on the stage, without a single exception, shared the 'disposition to unlimited forcible expansion'.¹⁴ As a consequence, imperialism as a heuristic tool for the study of pre-modern interstate war is (a) overcharged with modernist, anachronistic assumptions and (b) applicable to virtually every major political unit, at least before the creation of international law and organisations; imperialism is a commonplace, not an analytical category.

This brings into play e second ideal type: empire. I shall define an empire as a political entity which

1. comes into being and expands by means of force;
2. is centralised, with a hierarchic centre-periphery-structure, ideally aligned in concentric circles, with power and socio-economic development decreasing from the centre towards the periphery;
3. usually combines different patterns of power and rule: direct (in the centre and inner periphery) and indirect (in the outer periphery);
4. has therefore – unlike the nation-state – no geographically clearly defined borders, but frontier zones usually merging into power vacuums;
5. is by definition multicultural, polyethnic, multilingual and in most cases multireligious;
6. has a set of values and beliefs which emanate from the centre towards the periphery and form a major source of legitimacy for imperial rule (usually this encompasses to some degree the belief that the empire is equivalent to civilisation as such);

13. Ibid., 119.

14. Eckstein 2006; Eckstein 2008.

7. has as enemies few competing empires and/or a multitude of fragmented entities.

In contrast to other definitions, my ideal type implies neither any specific type of government (monarchic), nor particular ways of how power is exerted (mostly directly). Instead, my definition of empire can be applied to various polities, cross-culturally and at any given time in history. The Persian Empire, Rome and the post Second World War western hemisphere dominated by the United States all fall under the same category.

2. Asymmetric warfare and the power of the weak

The strength of empires lies in their social and economic complexity, in the vast territories they control and the tremendous resources they command. The same factors of power tend to be their weak spots: large territories mean enormous distances, resulting often in a mismatch between military/strategic challenges and resources – imperial overstretch (to which continental empires tend to be more susceptible than seaborne ones) is the common formula since Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*¹⁵, but the disease as such was diagnosed centuries ago by Edward Gibbon¹⁶ and Carl von Clausewitz.¹⁷ Their complexity forms a threat to the coherence of imperial societies, and the ability to mobilise massive resources implies the risk of addiction. That makes empires vulnerable and may give anti-imperial actors who are politically highly motivated and prepared to sacrifice even their lives an upper edge over their enemies: they target the empire's most crucial resources, material and non-material ones.¹⁸ Undermining the imperial population's morale may be as efficient as the destruction of supplies and infrastructure. Hence,

15. Kennedy 1988.

16. Gibbon 1994, vol. 2, 509-10: 'The rise of a city, which swelled into an empire, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. [...] The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long.'

17. Clausewitz 1963, 96-97, on 'Die Ökonomie der Kräfte' and 192-93 on 'Der Kulminationspunkt des Angriffs'.

18. Once again, anti-imperial strategies have been anticipated by Clausewitz 1963, 140: 'Ist die Verteidigung eine stärkere Form des Kriegführens, die aber einen negativen Zweck hat, so folgt von selbst, daß man sich ihrer nur so lange bedienen muß, als man sie der Schwäche wegen bedarf, uns sie verlassen muß, sobald man stark genug ist, sich den positiven Zweck vorzusetzen.' Cf. now Aron 1962, 48-49; Münkler 2005, 174-75; Münkler 2006, 246.

anti-imperial actors will try to ‘asymmetricise’ the conflict: they will attempt to dictate their own timetable, they will try to protract the war and avoid direct confrontation, they will seed terror by hitting soft targets (involving often the civilian population) and they will challenge the imperial doctrine that the empire ensures peace and security.¹⁹ The first theoretical manifesto of such a ‘protracted war’ is a series of lectures given by Mao Zedong on the ‘people’s war’ in China, against the Japanese. He states that resistance movements against the great powers invariably failed when they fought with their inferior weapons on the enemy’s terms. For Mao, crucial for a ‘final victory’ of the Chinese resistance was the consequent exploitation of the few own advantages: by protracting the war with a combination of mobile and guerrilla warfare; by drawing the enemy deep into the country; by avoiding positional warfare and by carefully choosing battles that can be won on battlefields that can be controlled; and finally by maintaining the own population’s support and winning that of the enemy’s population by means of political propaganda.²⁰

In Vietnam, the anti-imperial actors followed Mao’s instructions like a handbook for asymmetric warfare: they basically traded space and resources for time; they kept the conflict simmering, knowing that time was working against their enemies. When, in late 1967, General William Westmoreland, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, proclaimed that the war had reached a point ‘where the end comes into view’,²¹ he was soon to be belied by the Tet Offensive, launched in January 1968, in which North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces attacked some 100 South Vietnamese towns, cities and military sites, including the headquarters of the US and South Vietnamese armed forces; they were fought back, but resumed attack in two more waves in May and August. Although the allied troops got the upper hand in the remaining months of 1968 and the blood toll paid especially by the Vietcong guerrilla was immense (with a body count of probably some 50,000 men), the political damage the Tet Offensive created to the Johnson administration was irreparable: Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defence, stepped back in February, and in March Lyndon

19. On protraction and the rhythms of symmetry and asymmetry Münkler 2006, 178-88. Cf. also Luttwak 2003, 125. The problems of a conventional power at war with a guerrilla are summarised in a nutshell by a famous phrase coined by Henry Kissinger (quoted in Münkler 2006, 184): ‘The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.’

20. Series of lectures delivered by Mao Zedong at the Yanan Association for the Study of the War of Resistance Against Japan, from May 26 to June 3 1938.

21. Westmoreland 1991, 116.

B. Johnson announced that he would not stand for re-election as President in the same year's election.

No less devastating than the political impact of the attacks was the psychological effect the continuous strain had on the allied soldiers. Countless eyewitness reports collected in oral history databases reveal the horrors of the war without fronts: 'So, during the Tet Offensive, they had the Vietcong dressed up as the police. They wore white shirts and we called them the "white mice." They looked like white mice. Anyhow, the Vietcong dressed up like that, and they directed these busses down a side street where they were waiting with machine guns, and stuff, and they mowed those guys down so, I mean, that was bad. It could happen anywhere. It was just all around you. You never knew who the Vietcong were. I can remember being in downtown Saigon one day. We were buying something from a vendor woman, or whatever, and she looked up, and she said, "You go now, VC come, you go." I looked, and I see these three guys coming down the street, and they looked like tough guys, you know, but you don't have to tell me twice. So they knew who they were, the locals knew who was VC and who wasn't.'²² A scenario in which it was virtually impossible to distinguish between civilians and Vietcong guerrilla hiding among civilians, overreaction and outbursts of uncontrolled violence on behalf of US soldiers became recurrent features of protracted warfare, most notoriously in the massacre which took place on 16 March 1968 in the hamlet of My Lai, where up to 500 civilians were killed by members of a US task force. As the architects of protracted warfare had planned, the continuous terror, bundled with the flawed strategy of the American leadership and their boundless belief in technical superiority and body counts, set off a momentum that turned 18-year-old 'grunts' into beasts. In the long run, this strategy paid off: in the eyes of the American people the price of victory became unacceptable, the last American soldiers left Vietnam eight years after the turn of the tide marked by Tet.²³

In a similar manner, the renegade Roman officer Arminius won his war against Rome culminating in the disastrous *clades Variana* in AD 9, which took, partly at least, place at Kalkriese near Osnabruck. Rome had penetrated the Germanic barbaricum for some time: since Drusus' campaigns (12-9 BC) it had established a military and to some degree also a

22. Interview with First Lieutenant James J. Riley, Rutgers Oral History Archives.

23. See now the superb study by Greiner 2007.

civilian infrastructure to the east of the Rhine.²⁴ The complete annexation of the free Germania seemed only a question of time when Varus' three legions were annihilated by the ambush engineered by the defected auxiliary leader Arminius. Cassius Dio, who gives the soundest account of the battle, highlights the 'asymmetric' elements of the conflict: he outlines the secret preparations for the conspiracy, describes the carelessness of the Roman commander on his way back to the Rhine frontier and how the Cherusci stage a rebellion in another part of Germany as a red herring. The description of the fight itself has all the ingredients of a stereotype battle scene. The tactical involvement of the Romans is hampered by trees and swamps, whereas the insurgents ingeniously exploit the confusing terrain: 'For since [the Roman soldiers] had to form their lines in a narrow space, in order that the cavalry and infantry together might run down the enemy, they collided frequently with one another and with the trees.' The Germans protract the battle over no less than four days, over which the Roman force is gradually depleted and finally obliterated.²⁵

But the *clades Variana* was merely the climax in a long war, protracted like that in Vietnam, with the Germans carefully avoiding direct confrontation and the Romans pushing forward into a seemingly deserted country. Downright paradigmatic is Germanicus' punitive expedition against the tribes between the Rhine and the Weser (14-17), with the battle at the *pontes longi* between Germanicus' sub-commander Aulus Caecina and Arminius in late summer of AD 15 as the classical example of ambush warfare. The account we owe to Tacitus²⁶ is clearly formed as a *déjà vu* of the

24. Many of the legionary camps have been known for a long time. For a summary on the Lippe camps Wells 1998; Kühlborn 2007b; Kühlborn 2007a; Sommer 2009, 140-150. On the camp of Oberaden, discovered in 1906, cfr. Albrecht 1938; Kühlborn 1995; Schwemin 1998; on the large camp of Haltern cfr. Schnurbein 1974; Kühlborn 2007b, 80-86; on the camp of Anreppen Kühlborn 2007a, 208. Far more spectacular than the traces of Roman military presence was the discovery of a civilian settlement, a true *civitas* in statu nascendi, at Waldgirmes on the river Lahn. Cfr. Becker et al. 1999; Becker 2007; Becker/Rasbach 2007; Rasbach 2007.

25. Cassius Dio LVI. 21, 2. The description of an adverse natural setting in combination with the enemy applying classical guerrilla tactics is a stereotype in Roman historiography on warfare with (Germanic and non-Germanic) tribal groups: e.g. Caes. *Gall.* V. 26-37 (the Eburoni annihilate a Roman legion under the command of Cotta and Sabinus), Tac. *Hist.* V. 14-15 (the Batavi dam the Rhine and close in on three Roman legions in the morass); Herodian VII. 2, 5-6 (Alamanni fight the emperor Maximinus Thrax in forests and marshes).

26. *Ann.* I. 65. On the episode Wiegels 1999, 650; Dreyer 2007, 384; Dreyer 2009, 172-177; Sommer 2009, 71-72.

Teutoburg Forest battle, and again it has all the ingredients of asymmetric fighting: endless marshes preventing the Romans from evolving their battle lines properly, Germans attacking from everywhere and fighting in a 'barbarian manner', but at the same time engineering the flooding of the plain by opening the dams. This time, the Romans got away, but only barely. Arminius tried to repeat his successful ambush tactics twice (in the Battle of the Weser and in the Battle at the Angrivarian Wall, both in 16), but failed: according to Tacitus, Germanicus inflicted heavy losses on the Germanic troops each time, though the Roman successes may be doubtful – after all, they marked the definite end of Roman expansion in the north west of Germany.²⁷ In the long run, the strategy of protracted warfare had paid off also in this case: Tiberius ordered retreat, and the Romans never came again. Even if Tacitus' battle accounts are hopelessly stereotypical (and they probably are), the very fact that by the early 2nd century AD, when Tacitus wrote his *Annals*, there was a stereotype at hand how Germans used to fight is highly revealing: the fact that protracted warfare played a major role in Arminius' strategy is hardly disputable.

Like Arminius' Cherusci, the Greek poleis were rank outsiders in their wars with the Persian Empire. And like any rank outsider in a major conflict, they tried to protract the war and to apply strategies of turning their disadvantages into advantages: Kamikaze commandos like the battle of Thermopylai, evasive manoeuvres like the evacuation of Athens and Themistocles' shifting the decision from land to sea at Salamis eventually won the war for the Greeks. They roughly follow the doctrine outlined in Mao's lectures on the People's War: fight only battles you can win or at least the enemy will suffer heavier losses in; compensate the aggressor's numerical and technical superiority with your fanaticism and your intimate knowledge of the land; fight a mobile war and avoid fighting for positions.

The Battle of Marathon, as analysed in this volume, seems to stand out from this pattern: alone, without the support of other poleis, the Athenians faced an enemy who was not only numerically superior (even though perhaps not as superior as most modern estimates suggest),²⁸ but also far better equipped and more diverse in arms (with archers and a substantial cavalry). Under such circumstances, it seems, it was not only an act of admirable bravery to suggest – like Miltiades did – that the

27. For an assessment of the historical importance of the battle and its aftermath Wolters 2008, 125-49; Dreyer 2009, 183-211; Sommer 2009, 168-169.

28. On numbers Doenges 1998, 4-6.

Athenians should charge the Persian phalanx in an open battle, but also of incredible foolishness – were it not for an element of brilliant tactical innovation which, in Marathon, brought into play a powerful momentum of asymmetry, and hence yielded the victory to the Athenians: charging the Persian phalanx that had begun to move against Athens was an unprecedented move. Marathon may not be as important as the Battle of Hastings even for English history, but it is a cornerstone in the history of warfare in that an anti-imperial actor succeeded against an empire in open battle.

3. The David syndrome: transforming anti-imperial victories into anti-imperialist narratives

The victories of anti-imperial actors such as Arminius' Cherusci, Miltiades' Athenians and the communists in Vietnam can be described as the result of successful attempts to assymetricise the conflicts. There are numerous examples for anti-imperial actors running literally against the brick wall and failing: the Mahdists in Sudan, storming into the fire of British Maxim machine guns at Omdurman in 1898, the Jews of the First Jewish Revolt attempting to sustain Roman siege warfare in Galilee, the 'Boxers' in China whose rebellion was put down in 1901 and many others. However, as a rule, weak, but sufficiently determined opponents of empires, who succeed in imposing their own timetable on the enemy, have a realistic chance to defeat an all-powerful imperial actor. Frequently, such victories become turning points and gain momentum: seemingly insignificant defeats in their peripheries often mark the beginning of the end of empires.

A major role is usually played by the actual event's repercussions on the *imaginaire* of the actors. In the case of Vietnam, the main battlefield was public opinion in the United States. The various military drawbacks and events such as the massacre of My Lai had disastrous effects on the home front and the administration's freedom to act. An anti-war movement interlaced with the internal social strains already present. Within a relatively short period of time, the political cost of continuing the war became unacceptably high. Simultaneously, anti-imperialism became fashionable in the entire western world, and guerrilla movements from Namibia to El Salvador became inspired by Vietnam.

Whether the *clades Variana* brought about similar anti-imperialist narratives among the Germans, we do not know – simply for lack of evidence. To be sure, it had a major impact on the capital, where it was,

at least for some time, topic talk of the day.²⁹ What we have, is Tacitus' account of a meeting between two brothers, taking place on the river Visurgis in AD 15 (Weser): the first one Arminius, the second one his brother Flavus who served with the Roman army under Germanicus. Besides insults, the two of them exchange some arguments about Roman rule across the river: Flavus praises Rome's greatness, its *clementia* and the power of the Caesars; Arminius calls him a traitor, invokes ancestral freedom and ridicules the brother, who, in exchange for his wounds received in battle, got nothing but vain honours.³⁰ These are hardly reflections of an authentic anti-imperial narrative circulating among Germans of the period, but it is certain that Arminius' movement – which may have been driven by his own ambition to become a leader of the calibre of a man like his contemporary Maroboduus, the king of the Marcomanni – gained considerable momentum from the Battle in the Teutoburg Forest. In a tribal system in which charismatic leadership was the most important pattern of political integration, victory was a major source of authority, and Arminius' authority was greatly enhanced by his triumph over Varus. Although the anti-imperial (or even: anti-imperialist) motivation of Arminius and his followers is, of course, the invention of 19th century German intentional history, Arminius was de facto an anti-imperial actor of prime importance: his victory over Varus was one of the reasons why hardly any emperor from Tiberius onwards considered Germany to the east of the Rhine a worthy target of expansion.

In the case of Marathon we are lucky enough to have the accounts of the victorious anti-imperial actors. In the eyes of the Athenians, Marathon legitimised them to take their own imperial run-up. Although the Persian campaign was hardly any more than revenge for Athenian participation in the Ionian Revolt – how faint ever it may have been – let alone an attempt to conquer the entire Greek mainland, the battle was depicted as the one decisive victory of Greek *eleutheria* over Barbarian slavery. In Athens itself, the event began to be transformed into a myth some 30 years after the battle, when Kimon was in power. Here it suffices to say that the anti-imperialist narrative to which the Battle of Marathon was condensed, immediately became the imperial charter myth of Athens. David was to become soon a Goliath – one of the many ironies of asymmetric warfare.

29. Cf. Ov. *Trist.* III. 12, 47; IV. 2, 1; Manil. I. 899-900.

30. Tac. *Ann.* II. 9-10.

ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΉΤΤΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΝΤΙΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΔΙΗΓΗΣΕΙΣ
ΜΑΡΑΘΩΝ-ΒΑΡΟΥΣ-BIETNAM*Michael Sommer*

Τρεις αυτοκρατορίες, τρεις πόλεμοι, τρεις αξιομνημόνευτες ήττες: η Περσική Αυτοκρατορία των Αχαιμενιδών, η Ρώμη του Αυγούστου και οι Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, η μεταπολεμική ηγεμονική δύναμη του Β' Παγκοσμίου πολέμου. Η καθεμία από αυτές τις αυτοκρατορίες υπέστη ουσιαστικές απώλειες, που ενδεχομένως προκάλεσαν αποσταθεροποίηση στις παρυφές της αυτοκρατορικής τους επικράτειας, έναντι τεχνολογικά, αριθμητικά και σε επίπεδο οργάνωσης υποδεέστερων, και στις περισσότερες περιπτώσεις διασπασμένων «βαρβάρων» αντιπάλων.

Η παρούσα συμβολή αποσκοπεί σε μία συγκριτική μελέτη των τριών «αυτοκρατορικών αποτυχιών» θέτοντας μία σειρά από ερωτήματα: γιατί είναι «βάρβαροι» «αντι-ηγεμονικοί δρώντες» (Herfried Münkler), που δεν μπορούν να παραβληθούν με τις μεγάλες δυνάμεις, ικανοί όμως να νικήσουν τα υπερέχοντα αυτοκρατορικά στρατεύματα; Τι επίπτωση έχει η καταστροφική ήττα στο σχεδιασμό της πολιτικής στα αυτοκρατορικά κέντρα; Η ήττα επιφέρει άμεσα την αυτοκρατορική παρακμή ή η αυτοκρατορία έχει αποθέματα δυνάμεων που επιφέρουν την αναγέννηση; Με ποιους τρόπους η νομιμότητα της αυτοκρατορικής αρχής πλήττεται από την ήττα; Κατάφεραν οι «βάρβαροι» να κατασκευάσουν αντι-αυτοκρατορικές διηγήσεις και ως εκ τούτου να αμφισβητήσουν το μονοπώλιο της αυτοκρατορίας στο να αντικατοπτρίζει και να διατυπώνει «παγκόσμιες τάξεις πραγμάτων»; Και τέλος: Πώς ερμηνεύτηκε η ήττα των αυτοκρατοριών από τους μετά-αυτοκρατορικούς δρώντες και αποδέκτες; Με ποιους τρόπους οι αυτοκρατορικές ήττες εισήχθησαν στις εθνικές διηγήσεις και ιστοριογραφίες;