

BOOK REVIEW

Killing for the Republic. Citizen Soldiers and the Roman Way of War. By STEELE BRAND. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019, Pp. xix + 370. Hardback, \$34.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-2986-1.

K*illing for the Republic* is designed to show how citizen armies came into being on the Italian peninsula. Brand shows how the Roman Republic transformed average farmers into ambitious killers that were able to conquer the Mediterranean world. He believes Rome somehow instilled something violent and vicious in its soldiers that made them more effective than say the Assyrian, Persian or even Macedonian soldiers of previous empires. In order to prove his case, Brand reconstructs five separate battles that he believes represent particular moments in Rome's constitutional and cultural evolution and show how the Roman citizen-soldier triumphed over the best warriors of the day. These battles are Sentinum, New Carthage, Pydna, Mutina and Philippi.

Part One describes the ancient republican citizen, his life and his priorities. Part Two describes his Republic. Parts Three and Four give an abbreviated account of Rome's Republican wars and Rome's citizen-soldier ethos. Part Three, in particular, describes the triumph of Roman armies as they conquered the Mediterranean world with an emphasis on Sentinum as "Rome's breakout years" (xviii). Part Four covers the last chaotic years of the Republic and explains how the Republic's ideal citizen soldiers perished shortly after its greatest exponent, Cicero, died. He argues that civic virtue could have been recovered and that the culture of warlordism and selfish ambition of the Late Republic could have been overcome. In this, he may stand alone.

The book tries to engage with recent debates on the nature of Roman militarism, republicanism and federalism. His description of the Roman Republic as manifesting three overreaching themes conducive to citizen armies: liberty, divided sovereignty and participatory citizenship, will be nothing new to students of Polybius. More controversial is his claim that modern republics misidentify their troops as citizen soldiers. He does not consider what National Guard soldiers today do, i.e. sign up for short terms then go back to their civilian lives, as being the equivalent of a Roman soldier signing up to fight the Veian War and then

returning to his farm. He obviously does not think VMI, the Citadel or Norwich University turn out what they advertise. Brand believes he must explain the heritage of the citizen-soldier for a culture that has “forgotten who he is and why he fights” (xv). Graduates of the above-mentioned institutions might take umbrage. So might Greek scholars when he refers to Athenian democracy and hoplite citizen-soldiers as “Hellenic novelties.” He seems to share the ancient aristocratic prejudice that Athens was “too democratic.” Social historians will note that every reference to the “Roman citizen” in the book is male. There are no women in this story; apparently Roman soldiers all gave birth to themselves and their sons.

Brand’s glorification of the citizen soldier, the American family farm, and the greatness of old military leaders is nothing new to anyone who has read Victor David Hanson’s *Western Way of War*. It is a politically reactionary and ultimately unattainable ideal. The original Arcadian state will not return in an age of technological urbanism. Utopianism is emotionally satisfying, but its inherent political contradictions come dangerously close to being irrational. This neo-conservative rural utopianism is a fantasy not unfamiliar to those who have seen the movie *Gladiator*. Americans become wistful about the times when it was generally believed that an individual could achieve the American dream through hard work and commitment to family, God and country. What we have here is the same utopian pseudo-populism where American family values interject themselves into the ancient Roman zeitgeist.

The problem with this vision is that writers who use idealized visions of the past often have little regard for the level of accuracy that preoccupies professional practitioners of Clío’s craft. There is no weighing of the sources, no analysis of their reliability, simply an appropriate Loeb quote where necessary and then references to modern works, some of which Brand does not assess carefully. There is no bibliography. Brand argues that Rome won because its soldiers were more vicious and dedicated to civic virtue, citing Arthur Eckstein’s work; yet it was Eckstein who argued correctly that Rome won out international competition not because of its sheer aggression, but because of its exceptional ability to mobilize its internal resources and to manage alliances and assimilate outsiders. Most ironic is that Brand quotes Wilfred Owen who identifies “the old lie” that it is sweet and right to die for one’s country (citing Horace, *Ode 2.7*), yet Brand buys into that lie completely.

Where one stands on Brand’s arguments depends on where one stands on the subject of imperialism. Was Rome in a “struggle to survive” or was it a vicious imperialist taking over other people’s territory? Brand criticizes the

Postmodernists for decrying colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy of ancient Rome (x). Their arguments can all be ignored because Rome was “the finest ancient Republic.” He claims “the singular Roman republican spirit earned it *the right to dominate* the Mediterranean in the last centuries before Christ” (x-xi).

He believes Rome’s “civic code of the warrior” was lost during the Empire. Soldiers no longer killed or died for the state or their local communities as much as they killed or died for “their code, their commander, their emperor, and their pay” (320) – as if Republican soldiers did not. The problem with this ideal of everyone fighting for civic militarism is that it is another utopian fantasy. Then, as now, there are many other reasons why men enlist: Boredom, to see the world, to impress their girlfriends, to join up with their friends, to get out of their small town, on a dare, to kill legally, to escape their families or to forget a lost love. So is the idea that civic militarism prepares anyone for the rigors or horrors of war. Nothing does.

The most controversial part of the book is the “lesson” that this matters for today and we not only need citizen soldiers again, but we must recover the “killing instinct among modern republics (321).” The book is littered with words of extreme violence: slaughter, brutal, enslaved, destruction, terminated, humiliation, plunder, deadliest, vicious; and that is only on page ix in the Prologue. Brand truly believes that war does not just bring out the “dark,” but it can also show the “light.” Quite the opposite opinion from people who believe that winning a war is like winning an earthquake or a forest fire. To Brand, war makes men, and civic virtue enlightens them. One might ask: where is the virtue in robbing your enemy’s food supplies, hacking up people and slicing their dogs in half in the streets, pillaging people’s houses and obliterating their towns? There is nothing idealized about using terror as a weapon, nor are his descriptions even new. Such behavior was covered thoroughly in M. M. Westington’s *Atrocities in Roman Warfare* (Chicago, 1938).

Brand believes that the Roman preference for agrarian republicanism and citizen-soldiering should make it the most “revered and emulated” example of how to organize one’s defense and that knowledge of Rome’s Republican warfare is a “modern necessity” (xvii). Whether we should revert to its model or whether this is even possible will have to be judged by the individual reader.

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