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# Caesar and Genocide: Confronting the Dark Side of Caesar's Gallic Wars

KURT A. RAAFLAUB

**Abstract:** Julius Caesar's military achievements, described in his *Gallic War*, are monumental; so are the atrocities his army committed in slaughtering or enslaving entire nations. He stands accused of genocide. For today's readers, including students and teachers, this poses problems. It raises questions, not least about Caesar's place in the Latin curriculum. Applying modern definitions of "genocide," is he guilty as accused? If so, is it justified to condemn him of a crime that was recognized as such only recently? Without condoning Caesar's actions, this paper seeks fuller understanding by contextual analysis, placing them in the context of Roman—and ancient (if not almost universal)—customs of imperial warfare. It emphasizes the complexity of historical persons and events, juxtaposing Caesar the brutal conqueror to Caesar the clement victor, who established clemency among a ruler's cardinal virtues.

**Key words:** Caesar, *The Gallic War*, conquest of Gaul, war atrocities, genocide, Cicero, Rome's brutal wars, clemency, teaching Caesar.

## 1. The Massacre of the Usipetes and Tencteri: Caesar's Worst War Atrocity in Gaul

To lead the readers *in medias res* and help them gauge the scope and nature of the war atrocities Caesar and his army committed in the course of the Gallic War, I begin by discussing what is probably the worst example.<sup>1</sup> According to Caesar's report, in the winter of 56/55 BCE two German nations, the Usipetes and Tencteri, crossed the lower Rhine into Gaul, escaping the harassment of the dominant Suebi.<sup>2</sup> They spent the winter in villages whose owners they had killed or expelled. By the spring, welcomed by Celtic and German nations living along the Rhine, they moved south. These nations included clients of the Treveri who maintained close contacts with Germans across the Rhine and whose loyalty Caesar had already found questionable. Moreover, his earlier experiences with the German warlord Ariovistus, whom he had defeated in 58, and deeply ingrained Roman fears and prejudices had predisposed him against Germans. Hence, he believed, these German migrants could not be trusted and were likely to cause troubles among the fickle Gauls.<sup>3</sup>

From his first encounter with envoys of the two nations Caesar portrays their leaders, like Ariovistus, as utterly arrogant and treacherous. In negotiations for a peaceful settlement Caesar demanded that the Germans leave Gaul but tried to make this more palatable to them by suggesting a union with the Ubii, his allies across the Rhine, which would enable all of them better to resist the Suebi. Twice they requested more time for their response, which hardened his suspicion that they were not negotiating in good faith. So did an unprovoked attack by their cavalry during a truce. He detained their leaders, who

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<sup>1</sup> More examples will be described in section 4. For definition and discussion of the concept of "genocide," see section 6. Unspecified source references are to the *Bellum Gallicum* (BG). BC = *Bellum civile*. Translations from Caesar's works are taken from the *Landmark Julius Caesar* (Raaflaub 2017).

This paper was offered in earlier versions at the 2017 Summer Institute and the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of New England, at the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians, and in 2018 and 2019 at various universities and colleges in Germany and the USA. I owe thanks for useful feedback and good advice to audiences at these events and particularly to Elizabeth Baer, Deborah Boedeker, Joseph Frechette, Ian Hochberg, Jon E. Lendon, Dominic Machado, Amy Martin-Nelson, Hans-Friedrich Mueller, Aaron Seider, Karin Suzedail, Mark Thatcher, David Yates, and the anonymous referee of the *NECJ*. The paper received its final shape in the summer and fall of 2020 in the USA. This is the perspective underlying allusions to "our time" and "our country." I welcome readers' comments.

<sup>2</sup> "Nation" translates *civitas*; for the advantage of using this term vs. "tribe" or "people," see Pelling 2011: 211.

<sup>3</sup> 4.1.1–2; 4.4–6; Treveri: 2.24.4–5; 3.11.1–2. Ariovistus: 1.30–54. For Roman fears of German invaders, see below at n. 166.

had come to apologize for the incident, and immediately went on the attack, completely surprising and terrifying the Germans.<sup>4</sup>

Their fear was obvious from their screams and chaotic running around. Our soldiers, spurred on by the betrayal of the previous day, burst into the camp where those of the enemy who could quickly seize their weapons resisted for a short time... Meanwhile the masses of other persons—women and children, for the Germans had left home and crossed the Rhine with their entire families—began to flee in every direction. Caesar sent the cavalry to run them down. When the Germans heard shouts rising behind them and saw that their people were being slaughtered, they threw their arms away... and rushed out of the camp. When they reached the place where the Rhine and Meuse run together, they lost any remaining hope of getting away. A great number of them were killed. The rest threw themselves into the river and perished there, overcome by panic, exhaustion, and the power of the current. Every last one of our men survived, and only a few were wounded.<sup>5</sup>

The number given for the enemy (430,000) certainly is far too high—a feature typical of ancient war reports to make the danger and the victor's achievement appear even larger.<sup>6</sup> But the number does not matter here; nor is it important that parts of the two nations survived, because more escaped the massacre than Caesar was told or because they were not present at the scene of the final massacre or had never participated in the migration to Gaul. What matters is the cold-blooded attack on an unsuspecting enemy with the undisguised intention of destroying two entire nations, men, women, and children, and the general's gloating about having achieved this without any loss among his soldiers.

This drastic episode drew the attention of Caesar's enemies in Rome. They convinced the Senate to appoint a committee to investigate Caesar's policies in Gaul, although it is unknown whether this committee was actually sent off.<sup>7</sup> Cato the Younger even demanded that Caesar be extradited to the victims as an atonement for the crime he had committed by arresting envoys and violating a truce—accusations that Caesar's narrative carefully refutes. Cato's proposal was, of course, influenced by partisanship but not unprecedented; presumably he chose this moment for his attack because Caesar's action more than any other seemed to violate even the loose Roman norms on such matters.<sup>8</sup> In view of the magnitude of Caesar's victory, his supporters easily suppressed Cato's demand.<sup>9</sup> Yet the controversy continues to this day: scholars critical of Caesar's methods in his Gallic wars have focused not least on this episode to accuse him even of genocide.

## 2. The Balance Sheet of Caesar's Conquests: Questions and Approaches

The genocide accusation, featuring in recent research on genocide, was picked up by Nico Roymans, a Dutch archaeologist, who found in a dry riverbed in far northern Gaul, in a setting that seems to fit Caesar's description, a large deposit of skeletal evidence, including

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<sup>4</sup> 4.7–13.

<sup>5</sup> 4.14–15.

<sup>6</sup> See Brunt 1971: 694–97; Henige 1998; Stangl 2008; Pelling 2011: 211, 253. On the importance of numbers, see below at nn. 112, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 24.3.

<sup>8</sup> See Powell 1998: 124–32 for Caesar's highly defensive narrative, and below at n. 88 for “norms of war.” Precedents: Pelling 2011: 252.

<sup>9</sup> Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 51.1–5; *Caesar* 22.1–7; Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 24.3; Drogula 2019: 199–200. Gelzer 1968: 132 n.1 suggests that, reacting to these attacks when writing his full report, Caesar may have “strengthened the allusions to the malicious breaches of faith by the Germans.”

women and children.<sup>10</sup> For various reasons, this identification seems questionable.<sup>11</sup> Yet the issue of genocide must be taken seriously and forces us to confront what I call “the dark side” of Caesar’s Gallic wars.

So does the balance sheet of Caesar’s nine-year conquest of Gaul. It is most depressing. According to Plutarch and Appian, one million Celts died, another million were enslaved.<sup>12</sup> Casualties among the noncombatant population probably were higher but cannot be estimated more precisely. In his triumph in 46 Caesar listed the number of soldiers killed in all his battles (thus not only in Gaul) as 1,192,000.<sup>13</sup> Despite the numbers Caesar gives of Gallic military levies and losses, it is impossible to estimate the population of Gaul in Caesar’s time with any precision. Reasonable estimates by modern scholars run up to 8 or even 10 or 12 million. If this is correct, the percentage of casualties mentioned by the sources amounts to between 16 and 25% of the total.<sup>14</sup> This by far surpasses even the figures of the two countries most affected by World War II, Germany (c. 9%) and the Soviet Union (c. 13.7%).<sup>15</sup> To calculate Caesar’s losses is impossible because he rarely gives those figures.<sup>16</sup>

It was not only the Roman sword that inflicted death on the Gallic population. Large parts starved to death because the harvests were confiscated or destroyed and their settlements and farmsteads burned, or they froze to death when the legions drove them out of their settlements in winter and burned down buildings, villages, and towns. Huge forests were systematically felled because Caesar’s army needed firewood and lumber to build fortifications, bridges, and entire fleets, or tried to prevent nations from using them as refuges. Herds of cattle and pigs were driven from the fields and devoured.<sup>17</sup> About an episode in 53 Caesar writes: “Even if for the moment some people succeeded in remaining hidden, it seemed that after the army’s departure they would still necessarily perish from complete lack of supplies.”<sup>18</sup> The Roman army’s march through enemy territories turned these into landscapes of war and terror.<sup>19</sup> Ernst Badian writes: “Requisitions of food and punitive devastations completed a human, economic, and ecological disaster probably unequalled until the conquest of the Americas.”<sup>20</sup> The material and financial exploitation of Gaul also had a disastrous, though often underestimated, impact on the population.<sup>21</sup>

My concern in this paper is how to assess the accumulation of violence that, from our perspective, is highly disturbing and has not received the attention it demands. It poses a serious problem that I formulate here from a teacher’s perspective, although it should affect every reader. How do we come to terms with Caesar’s actions in view of the values we may hold and want to pass on to the next generation? How do we deal with an author

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<sup>10</sup> Roymans and Fernández-Götz 2015; Quesada-Sanz 2015. The final excavation report has not yet been published. Genocide research: n. 67 below.

<sup>11</sup> Raaflaub and Ramsey 2017: 31–33.

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar* 15.5; Appian, *Roman History* 4 (*Celtic Wars*) 1.2.

<sup>13</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 7.92.

<sup>14</sup> For details, including the estimates for the population of Gaul, see Will 1992: 96–98. For comparison, the war dead on both sides of the American civil war numbered at least 620,000 out of a combined population in 1861 of 31 million (that is, 2%).

<sup>15</sup> Germany: c. 6.3 million out of a total population of 69.3 million within Germany’s 1937 borders. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_War\\_II\\_casualties#Nazi\\_Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties#Nazi_Germany) (accessed March 19, 2021); Overmans 2004; Overly 2015. Soviet Union: almost 27 million out of a total population of c. 197 million in June 1941. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_War\\_II\\_casualties\\_of\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union#Total\\_population\\_losses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties_of_the_Soviet_Union#Total_population_losses) (accessed March 19, 2021); Ellman and Maksudov 1994; Haynes 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Exceptions: 6.44.1 (two cohorts: c. 600); 7.51.4 (700); *BC* 3.71.1–2 (960); 3.99.1 (200). The ambush of 15 cohorts (more than 5,000 men) by the Eburones in 54 (below at n. 52) was Caesar’s highest loss in all his wars. The narrative implies that Roman casualties at Bibracte (1.26.5) and the Sabis River (2.25) were high. Very low numbers, contrasted with high enemy losses, are presented with pride (4.15.3; *BC* 3.53.1–2; 3.99.1, 4).

<sup>17</sup> Based on Will 1992: 98.

<sup>18</sup> 6.43.3.

<sup>19</sup> Hill and Wileman 2002; Will 1992: 98.

<sup>20</sup> Badian 2012: 758. I thank Michael Meckler for this reference.

<sup>21</sup> See below at n. 24.

who perpetrated these actions and describes them without any reluctance? Although there are good reasons to find Caesar's writings interesting and valuable, this problem compels us to ask: how do we justify teaching Caesar as one of the most important authors in our Latin curriculum? I intend in this paper to suggest some ways to tackle this problem and to make positive use of a very negative reality.<sup>22</sup>

I will first sketch Caesar's situation in 58 and the political necessities under which he operated in Gaul (section 3). I will then establish in more detail the sad record of the atrocities he committed there, summarizing the most relevant events (4) and assessing the overall picture of Caesar the brutal conqueror (5). Looking at the authoritative definitions of "genocide" and "war crimes," I will conclude that they are clearly applicable to several of Caesar's war atrocities, although I will also point out the difficulty of condemning Caesar of crimes that were recognized as such only two millennia later (6). I shall argue that the simplest solution for dealing with this problem, namely to eliminate Caesar from the Latin curriculum, is perhaps not the best (7). I will then explain Caesar's atrocities in their broad historical context (8), and emphasize the complexity of historical persons and events, juxtaposing Caesar the brutal conqueror to Caesar the clement victor (9). In concluding, I will consider Caesar's actions even more broadly in the context of the function of genocide in ancient warfare (10). In a brief appendix I will address the issue of "migrants" that has special significance for readers familiar with some of the most urgent challenges in our own time.

I expect that some readers will criticize me for trying to find excuses for Caesar's actions. I therefore declare now once and for all, with utmost emphasis, so-to-speak in capital letters, that I do not intend to play down, condone, or explain away Caesar's atrocities. Analyzing is not the same as condoning. When dealing with historical events and persons, we *must* be able to look at the full picture from all sides. In this sense, I ask my readers to consider this paper an invitation for a continuing discussion.

### 3. The Background: Caesar in 58 BCE and the Helvetian Campaign

Caesar's situation at the beginning of 58 BCE was dire.<sup>23</sup> True, with the support of his allies, Pompey and Crassus, he had in 59 reached the consulship. He had seen to it, as promised, that their primary political agendas were realized. For himself he had secured five-year governorships over three provinces that in a broad arc covered the entire north of Italy: Transalpine Gaul (roughly modern Provence), Cisalpine Gaul (the Po Valley from the Alps to the Adriatic), and Illyricum (along the north-eastern coast of the Adriatic). But he had paid a steep price for all this: his bills had met stiff resistance in the Senate and been passed in the assembly only through much violence, his reputation among Rome's senators was lower than ever, his leading opponents threatened to drag him through the courts as soon as he was no longer protected by official immunity, and he was in deep financial trouble. When he assumed his governorships, he was desperately looking for an opportunity to fight a major war, mainly for two reasons.

One was his need for money. Caesar lacked substantial family wealth and was notoriously indebted. Urbanization was spreading rapidly in gold- and metal-rich Gaul, and the sack of towns promised great rewards. In addition, Italy was hungry for ever more slaves, and the slave traders and booty merchants following Roman armies offered instant profits.<sup>24</sup> I cannot discuss here the material and financial plundering of Gaul that enriched Caesar, his officers, his army and supporters, Roman officials and senators, and the population at large. Nor shall I talk about the building program in Rome that Caesar financed with the gold, booty, and slaves of Gaul. Caesar himself mentions the slaves and rarely the plunder, Hirtius offers brief insights, and later sources summarize the essentials.<sup>25</sup> Suffice it to quote Wolfgang

<sup>22</sup> See further section 7.

<sup>23</sup> For Caesar's career, see Gelzer 1968; Meier 1995; Goldsworthy 2006; Gruen 2009.

<sup>24</sup> 2.33.6–7; Rowan 2013, 2017; Ralston 2017. Generally: Will 1992: 66–72.

<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar* 15.5, 20.2–3; Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 26.2–3, 54.2; Dio Cassius 42.49; 43.39.4. Slaves: 2.33.7;

Will who writes sarcastically: “We can’t read Caesar’s thoughts but we can read his balances. When the governor left his provinces, both the population of Gaul and the gold price in Italy had fallen by a quarter.”<sup>26</sup>

More important for this paper’s purposes is Caesar’s ambition to emulate Pompey. After conducting far-reaching campaigns in the east and finally defeating Rome’s nemesis, Mithradates VI of Pontus, Pompey had in the late 60s reshaped Rome’s eastern frontier. By annexing vast territories to create new provinces and establishing dependent principalities (client kingdoms), he had created a broad security cordon.<sup>27</sup> He thereby set the bar of public accomplishment at a new level. Whoever in the future wanted to compete for a position of pre-eminence in the senatorial aristocracy had to establish a comparable record of achievement. More than ever, the path to the top led through success on the battlefield.

In 56, only three years into the Gallic wars, debates began in the Senate about the renewal of Caesar’s governorships. In his speech *About the Consular Provinces*, Cicero formulated a striking vision. Its outline, I am certain, was conveyed to him by one of Caesar’s agents. In essence, Cicero argued, through his conquests and new provinces Pompey had created a safe boundary for Rome in the east. Caesar was pursuing the same goal in the north. By expanding the frontier to the ocean, taming the fierce and war-hungry nations in Gaul, and bringing them under Roman control, he was establishing a safe, peaceful, and well-ordered world.<sup>28</sup> Cicero was tapping here into the Roman ideology of what moderns call “defensive imperialism,” that is, the justification of imperial expansion with the need to enhance Roman security. Another aspect of this ideology is summarized by Cicero’s statement, “Our people has now gained power over the whole world by defending its allies.”<sup>29</sup> This was precisely how Caesar justified his intervention in Gaul.<sup>30</sup>

At any rate, Gaul was interesting. It offered opportunities. Wars had been fought with Gallic nations in and near the province of Transalpine Gaul until the late 60s. Further wars were expected, but then the threat subsided. In 60, Cicero wrote about a consul who expected to be appointed governor of one of the Gallic provinces, [He] “is an excellent consul. I have only one criticism: he is not over-happy at the news of peace in Gaul. He wants a triumph, I suppose.”<sup>31</sup> The right to celebrate a triumph, with a magnificent parade of the army through the city and up to the Capitol to render thanks to Jupiter, was the greatest honor the Senate could bestow on a victorious general.<sup>32</sup> Caesar had this ambition too. Forced by the machinations of opponents who wanted to prevent his consulship, Caesar had in 60 chosen this office over a triumph for victories in Spain. He was determined not to miss a second opportunity. Controlling through his provinces the entire northern frontier, he trusted that somewhere troubles would erupt that would justify his intervention. And so they did.

Plans of the Helvetii (a Celtic nation living in today’s Switzerland) to migrate to the west of Gaul had been known before, but when news arrived in Rome in the spring of 58 that they had actually set a firm date to assemble, Caesar pounced. He rushed to Genava (Geneva, on the border between his Transalpine province and Helvetian territory), mobilized troops, and denied the Helvetians’ request to migrate peacefully through the province. After trying in vain to break through Caesar’s barricades, they changed their route and avoided the province altogether, depriving Caesar of a cause for war. But he was not to be denied. He hurried to Cisalpine Gaul, returned with five legions, and crossed into

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3.16.4; 7.89.5. Plunder: 7.11.4–9, 28.4; 8.24.4; Hirtius, 8.4.1, 5.3, 24.4, 27.5, 36.5. See Rambaud 1966: 168–72; Will 1992: 98–104.

<sup>26</sup> Will 1992: 66 (my trans.).

<sup>27</sup> On Pompey’s career, see Greenhalgh 1981; Seager 2002. Mithradates: Mayor 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Cicero, *De provinciis consularibus* 19–20, 30–34.

<sup>29</sup> Cicero, *Republic* 3.34–36, esp. 35 (trans. Harris). On defensive imperialism, see Harris 1979: 163–254.

<sup>30</sup> 1.11.

<sup>31</sup> Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 1.20.5. Trans. Shackleton Bailey 1978a (modified). Here and elsewhere content in square brackets condenses wording that does not need to be quoted in full, or makes the quote better understandable.

<sup>32</sup> See Beard 2007 and discussion below at n. 125.

independent Gaul. There he collected complaints of locals about Helvetian transgressions and was duly asked for help by the Aedui, long-standing Roman allies. Moreover, he claimed, the Helvetians' plan to settle right next to the Roman province would expose it to intolerable danger by a most warlike and aggressive hostile nation.<sup>33</sup> (Probably few of Caesar's readers knew enough about Gallic geography to realize that the Helvetians' intended settlement area, on the Atlantic coast north of the Garonne, was more than 200 miles from the province's border, while in their previous homeland they had been its direct neighbors!)

Thus armed with plenty of justifications that to any Roman must have sounded compelling enough, Caesar embarked on the Helvetian war. Act One consisted of the unprovoked massacre of the Tigurini, one of the Helvetian tribes, who had played a part in defeats inflicted by the Cimbri and Teutoni upon Roman armies some fifty years before. Caesar presents this as an act of revenge for a long-ago defeat in which a consul and an ancestor of Caesar's wife had been killed—Rome's and Caesar's personal honor were now restored.<sup>34</sup> In Act Two Caesar was met by a Helvetian leader to explore conditions of a settlement. Caesar offered peace if the Helvetii submitted hostages, offered compensation for the damage they had done during their march, and returned to their country. The proud (or, in Caesar's view, arrogant) Helvetian declined. Act Three consisted of a fierce battle, provoked by the Helvetii and finally won by the Romans (though with heavy losses), in which the greater part of the Helvetian migrants perished. In Act Four the survivors surrendered, exhausted after three days of flight with no supplies, and were sent back to their country.<sup>35</sup>

Caesar reports that in the Helvetian camp tablets were found with the names of all the migrants. Their total, he says, was 368,000, out of whom 92,000 bore arms. 110,000 returned home—around a third!<sup>36</sup> That there were tablets can hardly be doubted—many witnesses must have seen them. Their explanation is debated. The numbers look artificial and are certainly vastly exaggerated. Modern scholars think of a total of perhaps 80,000 migrants, 20,000 of whom were combatants.<sup>37</sup> What draws attention more than numbers is Caesar's way of proceeding. He found or created a cause for war, even if the enemy tried to avoid it, and then pursued victory with single-minded determination. Peace was possible, but only on Caesar's terms!<sup>38</sup>

This is the Caesar driven by fierce ambition and held back by few scruples. We will find this pattern in several cases of conquest atrocities discussed below. As Suetonius formulates it, "He lost no opportunity of picking quarrels—however flimsy the pretext—with allies as well as hostile and barbarous tribes, and marching against them."<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. An Overview of Caesar's Worst War Atrocities

The massacre of the Tigurini eliminated a substantial part of the Helvetian force.<sup>40</sup> Otherwise, Caesar fought the Helvetii to prevent their migration, not to annihilate them. To form a fuller assessment, we now need to survey his other war atrocities in more detail.

<sup>33</sup> 1.2–11; "right next": 1.10.2.

<sup>34</sup> 1.12.

<sup>35</sup> 1.12–28.

<sup>36</sup> 1.29. The number of survivors sent home should be augmented by those of the 32,000 Boii who had joined the Helvetii and were allowed to settle among the Aedui (1.28.5, 29.2).

<sup>37</sup> 92,000 is exactly one quarter of 368,000. Pennacini 1993: 984, at 1.29 n.2, lists numbers given by other ancient sources and some scholarship on this issue; see also the discussion in Walser 1998: 72–74; Pelling 2011: 222–24. Some scholars (whose arguments are summarized by Walser, and Walser himself in Walser 1998: 37–88, 150–81, 182–90) have radically challenged the entire campaign report. Despite many important observations, they go too far in trying to demonstrate wholesale fiction and massive distortion on the part of Caesar: there were too many witnesses (see at n. 61 below).

<sup>38</sup> See, however, below at n. 124.

<sup>39</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 24.3.

<sup>40</sup> See at n. 34 above.



With a view on genocide, I focus here on the most outrageous cases. Space limitations do not allow me to give a full survey of all episodes in which Caesar displayed cruelty in some form or other.<sup>41</sup> Throughout we stay aware that we mostly depend on Caesar as our only source, that his characterization of his various enemies (peoples and leaders) is partisan and, with few exceptions, probably too negative, and that the narrative, though probably never grossly distorted, is tainted and bent throughout to serve Caesar's interests.<sup>42</sup>

Episode 1: Still in 58, having defeated the Helvetians, Caesar was asked by Gallic leaders for help against the German warlord Ariovistus who had crossed the Rhine by invitation of Gallic nations but had turned against them and established a personal fiefdom in southeastern Gaul, tyrannizing the nations in his orbit. Caesar describes him as untrustworthy, deceitful, and arrogant, an obvious threat to Rome's Gallic allies and the safety of the Transalpine province. After much diplomatic and military maneuvering, Ariovistus' army was defeated. "Soon all the enemy turned in rout and did not stop running until they reached the Rhine River... There, a very small number... managed to save themselves... But our cavalry ran down all the others and killed them."<sup>43</sup> The total death toll supposedly was 80,000, including the German women and children.<sup>44</sup>

Episode 2: The second year (57) began with a "conspiracy" of the Belgae, a large group of nations located in the north of Gaul. Alarmed by Caesar's invasion and his army's wintering in Gaul, they prepared to expel the intruder. According to Caesar's allies, close to 300,000 select troops had been pledged, a large part of whom were marching south.<sup>45</sup> Caesar thus claimed to react to aggression. Fickle, lacking discipline, and neglecting elementary logistics, the Belgae were defeated in a brave attempt to ford a river and then massacred in their chaotic withdrawal: "with no danger to themselves, our forces killed as many of them as they could in the course of the day."<sup>46</sup>

Episode 3: Caesar then advanced rapidly and forced several Belgic nations to surrender without fighting, doing them no harm. The Nervii, fiercest of all, were defeated in a major battle, despite heroic resistance that brought Caesar's men to the brink of disaster.<sup>47</sup> The Atuatuca, their allies who had missed the battle and retreated, had concentrated their people and possessions in a heavily fortified town. They initially resisted but, frightened by the unfamiliar Roman siege machinery, surrendered, agreeing to offer hostages and hand over their weapons. Caesar spared them and protected them from abuse by his soldiers. But they had hidden many weapons; at night they tried a massive sortie but failed. Now Caesar considered them traitors and oath-breakers. The town was sacked, the booty, including 53,000 persons, sold to the traders.<sup>48</sup>

Episode 4: At the end of 57, one of Caesar's legates (sub-commanders) had accepted the submission of nations living along the Atlantic and English Channel coast and, as usual, taken hostages. A few months later the Veneti and their allies detained Roman requisitioning officers, expecting to exchange them for the hostages. Caesar took their supposed violation of the sacred protection of envoys as a cause for war and, after their defeat, the justification for an exceptionally severe punishment of the Veneti. As a deterrent, "he executed all councilors and sold the rest of the people as slaves."<sup>49</sup> This justification is far-fetched—requisitioning officers are not ambassadors—and there are other reasons to question Caesar's narrative. Strabo maintains that the "revolt" of the Veneti was primarily a

<sup>41</sup> Some examples will be discussed below at n. 75. On the way Caesar presents massacres, see Powell 1998.

<sup>42</sup> On Caesar's tendentiousness, see Collins 1972; Raaflaub 2017: web essays HH and JJ, available at [www.landmarkcaesar.com](http://www.landmarkcaesar.com) (accessed June 25, 2020). See also below at n. 61.

<sup>43</sup> 1.53. The entire campaign: 1.30–53.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar* 19.12; Appian, *Roman History* 4 (*Celtic Wars*) 1.3. See further below at n. 160.

<sup>45</sup> Number: 2.4.

<sup>46</sup> 2.11.6.

<sup>47</sup> 2.16–28.

<sup>48</sup> 2.33.6–7. The entire campaign: 2.29–33.

<sup>49</sup> 3.16.4. The entire campaign: 3.7–16. For an in-depth criticism of Caesar's narrative, see Stevens 1952: 8–14, on which see Levick 1998.



war motivated by their determination to prevent Caesar from possibly invading Britain and interrupting their profitable trade with the Britons.<sup>50</sup>

Episode 5 concerns the annihilation of the Usipetes and Tencteri, described at the beginning of this paper and further discussed below.<sup>51</sup>

Episode 6: In the fall of 54 Caesar stationed 15 cohorts (one and a half legions, more than 5,000 men) in a winter camp among the Eburones. Their leader, Ambiorix, repelled in a surprise attack on this camp, pretended that the Gauls had conceived of a common plan to attack all Roman camps on the same day so that no mutual support was possible. Still, because of Caesar's favors, he promised the Romans safe conduct to the boundaries of his territory. After an intense debate in their war council the Romans evacuated their camp. Their force was ambushed and destroyed almost to the last man.<sup>52</sup>

Caesar leaves no doubt about Sabinus' grievous mistakes. But his anger and hatred turned against Ambiorix whom, we sense, he had considered his friend and whose betrayal he took very personally. In the summer of 53 he organized a systematic hunt for Ambiorix who narrowly escaped. The army burned the Eburones' villages and buildings, destroyed the harvests, drove off the herds, and killed whomever they could find. Those who survived would die of starvation.<sup>53</sup> In 51 Caesar returned. Since he no longer hoped to capture Ambiorix, he writes, "the next best thing Caesar could do for his honor and reputation was to devastate his territory to such a degree, destroying its inhabitants, buildings, and herds, that if chance left any of Ambiorix' people alive," they would never allow him to return to his nation.<sup>54</sup> The goal of all these actions was "that the nation and its very name would be eradicated for the terrible crime they had committed."<sup>55</sup>

Episode 7: In the winter of 53/52, the Carnutes, hosts of the central sanctuary of the Druids, launched a pan-Gallic war against Caesar (soon to be Vercingetorix' war) by massacring the Roman traders who had settled in Cenabum, their main town.<sup>56</sup> A year later, after the Gallic disaster at Alesia and upon complaints of the Carnutes' neighbors, Caesar led two legions against them in the coldest winter.

[The Carnutes] scattered in flight and abandoned their villages and towns ... [Caesar sent light troops and cavalry] everywhere the enemy were reported to have been heading ... The Carnutes were overwhelmed by the hardships of the winter and their dread of the dangers surrounding them; driven from their homes, they did not dare stay anywhere for long, and during the harshest weather of the year they could not find any shelter in the woods. Scattered as they were, they lost a large part of their population, and the rest were dispersed among the nearby nations.<sup>57</sup>

## 5. Caesar the Brutal Conqueror

This is Caesar the brutal conqueror. Considering that for nine years he was the sole decision-maker on monumental issues that affected life and death of his army and entire nations, all for the sake of his own (and Rome's) honor, prestige, and power, we may find it less puzzling that, at the end of his Gallic command, both forced by his enemies and in "an act of monumental egotism," he consciously and explicitly set his honor and political survival

<sup>50</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 4.4.1, barely hinted at in *BG* 3.8.1. The Veneti, like many other opponents of Rome, probably had no concrete understanding of the full Roman meaning of "surrender" (*deditio*) to which they had agreed (on which, see Livy 1.38.1–2; Polybius 20.9.10–11; Lintott 1993: 16–18).

<sup>51</sup> At n. 163.

<sup>52</sup> 5.26–37. This episode stands out not least because in both the war council and the ensuing disastrous battle Caesar's report emphasizes an exemplary contrast between good and bad leadership (represented by the junior commander Cotta and the senior commander Sabinus, respectively).

<sup>53</sup> 6.29.4–34.9; 6.43.

<sup>54</sup> 8.24.4–25.1.

<sup>55</sup> 6.34.8. Some Eburones still survived: Heinrichs 2008.

<sup>56</sup> 7.1–3.

<sup>57</sup> 8.4–5.

above the well-being of his nation by plunging it into the misery of civil war.<sup>58</sup>

Yet he wrote the *Gallic War* while he expected to return to Rome at the end of his command. Its purpose was to prepare the Roman Senate and public for his resumption of an honored career there. In all the cases discussed above he carefully explains his reasons and decisions. Most of these explanations focus on his obligation to defend Roman allies and Roman honor and ensure the safety of the Roman province and, as the war progressed, the stability of Roman control over Gaul. We may wonder why justification was so important to him, especially when, as we shall see, his methods of seeking and ensuring victory, including his atrocities, fit long-standing Roman practices to which the public was thoroughly accustomed. The answer probably is not that he felt guilty and sought to present excuses but that the war he fought in Gaul was exceptionally public. Normally, what governors and army commanders did in their wars reached notoriety only if it was particularly outrageous and raised an unusual level of criticism and protest that was conveyed to Rome and prompted a Senate investigation. Caesar, however, had achieved a high level of notoriety and provoked powerful opposition in Rome long before he assumed his Gallic command. His enemies watched his every step and were even in touch with Ariovistus who claimed, Caesar says, that “if he killed Caesar, he would be doing a favor to many noblemen and leaders of the Roman people—which he knew from these people themselves, through their own messengers.”<sup>59</sup>

We know that communications between Caesar’s camps and people in Rome and Italy (senators, officials, families, friends) were intense and not controlled (or controllable) by Caesar.<sup>60</sup> He acted virtually under the eyes of Rome. Incidentally, this is one of the strongest arguments supporting the essential veracity of his account. There were too many witnesses to allow him to get away with large-scale falsification. For the same reason, because he knew that his actions were constantly scrutinized, Caesar took great pains to avoid anything that could be misinterpreted as a breach of negotiations or a truce, and to justify his actions with arguments that would sound compelling to any Roman who was not his inveterate enemy.<sup>61</sup>

To be sure, since antiquity Caesar has been admired for his achievements. He was a superb general. In some fifty battles, fought in Gaul and all over the Roman empire, he was defeated only three times (twice on the same day). His military successes would not have been possible without his extraordinary qualities as a leader of men. He knew his soldiers, understood their needs, potential, and limits, and was able to combine strict discipline with a high level of tolerance. All this permitted him to expect and receive from them performance on the highest level, year after year.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Caesar was a remarkable literary talent. Cicero appreciated him as a brilliant orator and, based on his *De analogia*, as an expert in language style and the purity of the Latin language.<sup>63</sup> His published war reports (the *Gallic War*) received high praise for their unadorned elegance and precision of expression.<sup>64</sup> His achievements and qualities as a politician are debatable. His uncompromising anti-conservative stance, lack of patience, quick anger, and readiness to do things alone if he ran into resistance made many enemies and prevented his lasting success. But he was one of very few senators in his time who were able to recognize the profound and urgent problems the Roman state was facing, and to propose solutions. Politically, he was in several ways a visionary.<sup>65</sup>

Against all this stands his record of atrocities committed in Gaul. For centuries

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<sup>58</sup> *BC* 1.7–9; Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 30; Plutarch, *Caesar* 32.7–8; Eckstein 2004 (quote: 279); for a fuller treatment, see Raaflaub 1974: 1–225.

<sup>59</sup> 1.44.12.

<sup>60</sup> Cicero’s correspondence with his brother Quintus, a legate in Caesar’s army, and many other items in Cicero’s letter corpus offer plenty of examples. See Shackleton Bailey 1972 and, overall, Osgood 2009.

<sup>61</sup> See 1.46.3.

<sup>62</sup> On Caesar as a general, see Goldsworthy 1998; Le Bohec 2001; Rosenstein 2009; Potter 2010; de Blois 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Cicero, *Brutus* 252–61. *De analogia*: Garcea 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Hirtius, *BG* 8 *praef.* 4–5; Cicero, *Brutus* 262. For discussions of all of Caesar’s works, see Grillo and Krebs 2018.

<sup>65</sup> See the biographies cited in n.23; in addition, Raaflaub 2010.

these acts were ignored or minimized, perhaps because many of Caesar's readers considered the brutality of war an unchangeable fact or took imperialism and its devastation of native populations for granted.<sup>66</sup> Today we are more sensitive in considering these problems. As said earlier, some scholars even accuse him of genocide.

## 6. "Genocide" and "War Crimes"

Before we accept this accusation we have to ask whether the label "genocide" is justified in this case. The term is modern, created by the historian Raphael Lemkin in reaction to Nazi crimes in German-occupied Europe, more specifically those we categorize as "holocaust crimes."<sup>67</sup> The term is also applied to the case of the Armenians earlier in the twentieth century, increasingly to that of native nations in America's conquest of the west and Spain's conquest of the New World and, more recently, to cases in Uganda, former Yugoslavia, Myanmar, and China.<sup>68</sup>

The crime of genocide is defined by the *UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (adopted in 1948 and entered into force in 1951):

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) killing members of the group;
- (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>69</sup>

The intention to destroy is thus crucial, while it matters less whether the intention was fully or partly realized. Importantly, of the four categories mentioned in the UN Convention, only "national group" fits Caesar's case, in the sense that his opponents and victims were Gallic and German nations. Despite the prejudices invoked by the term "barbarian" and despite Caesar's efforts to "otherize" Gauls and especially Germans through stereotypical negative character traits (the fickle Gauls, the arrogant, treacherous Germans), Caesar did not fight or annihilate Gauls or Germans because of their ethnic, racial, or religious difference from Romans.<sup>70</sup> Recognizing the lack of precision in the extant texts and the difficulty of applying to ancient events a modern definition that is based on legal concepts, some scholars propose modifications, such as "genocidal massacre."<sup>71</sup>

The case of the Eburones (section 4 episode 6) certainly meets the UN criteria, and here Caesar himself expresses the intended annihilation: "that the nation and its very name would be eradicated for the terrible crime they had committed."<sup>72</sup> In the case of the Carnutes (episode 7) his choice of time (the coldest winter) and method of proceeding leave no doubt about his intention. Although different, the cases of Ariovistus (episode 1) and the Usipetes and Tencteri (described at the beginning) qualify as well. Caesar did not tolerate these Germans in Gaul. Since they refused his proposals and did not leave voluntarily, he destroyed them through military defeat and wholesale massacre.

<sup>66</sup> See James 2013 for corresponding tendencies among archaeologists.

<sup>67</sup> His texts are collected in Lemkin 2012. On genocide: Kiernan 2007, 2014; Bloxham and Moses 2010; Jones 2011; Rubinstein 2014; Carmichael and Maguire 2015; Konstan 2021; Taylor 2021. Genocide in antiquity: van Wees 2010, 2016. More generally, on Roman atrocities: Westington 1938; on Caesar's massacres: Powell 1998.

<sup>68</sup> See relevant chapters in Bloxham and Moses 2010.

<sup>69</sup> <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/untfs/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2020).

<sup>70</sup> On Caesar and barbarians, see Burns 2003: 88–139; on Roman depictions of barbarians, Ferris 2000.

<sup>71</sup> Quesada-Sanz 2015.

<sup>72</sup> 6.34.8.

“Virtual killing” could be achieved by eliminating a group socially through collective enslavement: Orlando Patterson calls slavery “social death.”<sup>73</sup> If we include this in the definition of “genocide,” the Atuatuaci and Veneti, who broke their oaths of surrender, chose war, were defeated and sold collectively into slavery, are also victims of genocide.<sup>74</sup>

Other cases do not fit the definition. The disastrous losses of the Helvetii, Belgae, and Nervii occurred in battles in two of which Caesar’s army suffered heavy casualties as well.<sup>75</sup> The massacre of the population of Avaricum (modern Bourges), including the aged, women, and children, and of thousands of additional defenders was caused, Caesar claims, by the soldiers who ran amok because of exhaustion and anger and in revenge for their compatriots massacred by the Carnutes at Cenabum.<sup>76</sup> Caesar had not ordered this—whatever he thought (and we might think) about it. As the UN definition shows, genocidal intention is crucial, and such intention requires a superior design or order.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Caesar besieged Avaricum not to annihilate its population but to gain a major victory in an ongoing war, and Avaricum was only one of many towns of the Bituriges.<sup>78</sup>

Nor does the case of the defenders of Uxellodunum in 51 fit the definition. There, the townspeople, relying on their town’s impregnable location, had taken in a band of some 2,000 Gauls whom Roman troops had deterred from raiding the Roman province. Caesar cut off the town’s water supply and forced it to surrender. Believing that, in order to be able to fully pacify the country, he needed to set a severe example to discourage imitators, he had the hands of all arms-bearing men cut off but allowed them to live.<sup>79</sup> The intention was punishment, not extinction.

The case of the Mandubii in late 52 is again different. Alesia, their town, was occupied by Vercingetorix and his army and besieged by Caesar. Running out of supplies, the defenders ejected all those who were useless as fighters, including the families of the Mandubii. Caesar refused to let them pass through his fortification and feed them. He was trying to starve Vercingetorix into submission and was unwilling to relieve his supply problems by allowing part of the population to escape. The Mandubii supposedly perished in the no man’s land between the town and Caesar’s fortifications.<sup>80</sup> As so often in history, innocent people here became the victims of a brutal war.

Still, in all these episodes Caesar’s willingness to tolerate or encourage brutality is abundantly clear. And, as we saw, without the slightest doubt Caesar can rightfully be accused of multiple cases of genocide. Needless to say, his actions in Gaul also violated much that is barred in modern conventions limiting abuses in warfare (the so-called Geneva Conventions adopted in 1929 and 1949), and represent “war crimes” as they are defined in Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in The Hague in 2002:

- (i) Willful killing;
- (ii) Torture or inhuman treatment...;
- (iii) Willfully causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or health;
- (iv) Extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly; ...
- (vii) Unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement;
- (viii) Taking of hostages.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Patterson 1982. For further discussion, see Bodet and Scheidel 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Atuatuaci: 2.30–33; Veneti: 3.7–16. Collective enslavement as genocide: van Wees 2016: 20.

<sup>75</sup> Helvetii: 1.26.5, 29.3. Belgae: section 4 episode 2. Nervii: 2.28.1–2.

<sup>76</sup> 7.28.4–5. Supposedly, only 800 of 40,000 survived. Cenabum: above at n. 56.

<sup>77</sup> See van Wees 2010: 243.

<sup>78</sup> 7.15.1–2.

<sup>79</sup> 8.30–44.

<sup>80</sup> 7.78; Dio Cassius 40.40.2–4.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/documents/rs-eng.pdf> (accessed May 28, 2020).

All this is undeniable. It is very important to fully realize it. We have every right to condemn Caesar for his appalling record of brutality in Gaul, even if, as we shall see, it is perhaps too simple to label him “a very bad man.”<sup>82</sup> Seeing in 2020 statues defaced and falling that are tied to an abominable past of slavery and a civil war unleashed to preserve it, we might find it just that in a Belgian town a statue of Caesar suffered the same fate.<sup>83</sup> A call, presumably tongue-in-cheek, to rename the months July and August that, the author emphasizes, honor two of the most murderous despots in world history, appeared in July 2020 in a letter to a newspaper.<sup>84</sup>

Yet we should also be aware that such modern judgements are based on ideas and agreements that emerged in history only after two millennia of further brutal warfare and some especially outrageous abuses.<sup>85</sup> After all, it took the horrendous suffering witnessed by Henry Dunant in 1859 in the aftermath of the battle of Solferino in northern Italy, one of the largest battles in history, to stimulate the foundation of the International Red Cross, and the mass-murdering world wars to create the League of Nations and the United Nations.<sup>86</sup> Nothing like this existed in the ancient world, even if in fourth-century BCE Greece various (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts were made to secure peace through large-scale international “common peace” agreements.<sup>87</sup> Greeks and Romans were also aware of “norms or laws of war” that were concerned with basic issues (such as the protection of heralds and ambassadors or the need to fight just wars) but, as Adriaan Lanni emphasizes, “did not encompass humanitarian ideals” and “were indifferent to considerations of mercy and the protection of noncombatants.”<sup>88</sup> Nor did they try to prevent the mass killing of defeated enemies which was in fact quite common.<sup>89</sup> And they did not apply to wars against “barbarians.”

## 7. Why Not Simply Eliminate Caesar from the Latin Curriculum?

The unsettling aspects of Caesar’s warmaking raise the stark problems that I sketched early in this paper and every reader of his works must confront. In particular, in the USA, together with Vergil, Caesar provides the Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum of high school Latin. For teachers the question of how to deal with this bloodthirsty author must be a challenge. Students on all levels, who, I hope, today are more critical of the material that is presented to them than they were in my own student years, will and should ask penetrating questions. And we, their teachers, should be able to answer them.

Of course, a simple solution that seems to be mentioned not infrequently would be to eliminate Caesar from the Latin curriculum. I fully understand those who advocate this solution. Right now, of course, high school teachers have no choice, but this must not keep us from thinking both about alternatives and about why it might still be worth reading Caesar. I

<sup>82</sup> Thus Kulikowski 2020, reviewing O’Donnell 2019 who writes about the *Gallic War*: Undeniably, “this is a great work of literature, one of the greatest, and at the same time, ... it is a bad man’s book about his own bad deeds. I think it is the best bad man’s book ever written” (viii). See further sections 8–9 below.

<sup>83</sup> I thank Elizabeth Baer and Jennifer Yates for alerting me to this case: [https://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20200614\\_01483015/une-statue-de-jules-cesar-vandalisee-a-zottegem?fbclid=IwAR2j4vAxblVNU29726Ci7kbNKESE7JZSdpXJb1IjaSvREj4mDdGg-b9-So](https://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20200614_01483015/une-statue-de-jules-cesar-vandalisee-a-zottegem?fbclid=IwAR2j4vAxblVNU29726Ci7kbNKESE7JZSdpXJb1IjaSvREj4mDdGg-b9-So) (accessed July 20, 2020).

<sup>84</sup> [https://www.stltoday.com/opinion/mailbag/letter-if-you-want-to-be-politically-correct-rename-calendar/article\\_f6206dc5-6385-58ec-b31e-76fdd2b4ce39.html?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=email&utm\\_campaign=user-share](https://www.stltoday.com/opinion/mailbag/letter-if-you-want-to-be-politically-correct-rename-calendar/article_f6206dc5-6385-58ec-b31e-76fdd2b4ce39.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=user-share) (accessed July 26, 2020). I thank Francis Oates for this information.

<sup>85</sup> Kiernan 1999 examines the suitability of the concept of genocide for pre-modern events.

<sup>86</sup> See, e.g., Boissier 1985; Northedge 1986; Peters 2015, respectively.

<sup>87</sup> Common peace (*koinē eirēnē*): Ryder 1965; Jehne 1994; chapters by J. Wilker and P. Low in Wilker 2012: 92–117, 118–34.

<sup>88</sup> Lanni 2008: 470; see also Ober 1996; Bederman 2001: 242–63. On just war and the role of the priesthood of the *fetiales* in Rome, see Wiedemann 1986; Rich 2011. Rüpke 1990: 97–124, followed by Ando 2011, argues vigorously for a late republican invention of the fetial ritual and law and its subsequent retrojection into early Roman history.

<sup>89</sup> See van Wees 2011.

am concerned here with the latter and suggest that, by ignoring Caesar and thus choosing an “easy” way out, we miss an opportunity and avoid an important challenge.

For Caesar’s *Gallic War* is about much more than war and atrocities. Apart from the ethnographies that figure prominently in the AP selections, this work presents to us elements of a cultural portrait of Rome at the end of the Republic: it shows us an eminent Roman’s concept of what a general and statesman should be and what a Roman citizen ideally was, what his qualities were, and how he behaved—in sharp contrast to what “barbarians” (and, in the *Civil War*, Romans acting like barbarians) were.<sup>90</sup> Anticipating Anchises’ famous words in *Aeneid* 6 (quoted below), Caesar also lets us perceive his view of Rome’s cultural mission in the world: to conquer a chaotic and threatening barbarian world, to impose civilization (*mores*) on the defeated, and thus to create a well-ordered, peaceful world.<sup>91</sup>

These aspects may primarily be of historical interest, but they are significant in offering an inside perspective on the society that produced masterworks in literature (of all genres) and art (which influenced cultural achievements into our own time) and an empire that eventually provided the foundations for hugely consequential developments in religion, law, and other areas of civilization. In addition, these aspects invite critical analysis. I give but one example. One of the most fascinating ways in which the “program” of Rome’s cultural mission is highlighted in the *Gallic War* is the Gauls’ fight to preserve their ancestral liberty. Rather than suppressing this noble motive, Caesar lets Gallic leaders emphasize it frequently, culminating in the pan-Gallic war against Caesar in 52. At Alesia Critognatus, a respected leader but notorious for proposing cannibalism to ward off starvation, argues:

What do [the Romans] want, except to settle in the fields and cities of the Gauls and bind the people in slavery forever? ... They have never waged war for any other reasons than these ... Look at our neighbor ‘Gaul’ which has been reduced to a province, had its rights and laws transformed, been made subject to their government, and is oppressed by perpetual slavery.<sup>92</sup>

Vercingetorix, offering after his defeat to be extradited to Caesar, insists that he has undertaken this war only “to serve the cause of the common freedom.”<sup>93</sup>

Since freedom was a Roman value too, this aspect of Caesar’s narrative might well have raised sympathy for the Gauls.<sup>94</sup> Caesar surely was aware of this, and he does not miss opportunities to undercut such proclamations.<sup>95</sup> His main point, however, seems to be that the Gauls’ subjection for the sake of realizing a safe, peaceful, and orderly world required the suppression of their ancestral liberty: here a great value needed to be sacrificed for the sake of an even higher one.<sup>96</sup> Again we think of Anchises’ words in the *Aeneid*:

You, Roman, remember to rule the people with your command (*imperium*)—these will be your skills—to impose civilization (*morem*) on peace, to spare the subjected and to fight down the arrogant.<sup>97</sup>

This resonates with us as we contemplate tensions between ideology and reality: in particular, we might think of the contradictions between our own country’s longstanding advocacy

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<sup>90</sup> See Raaflaub 2018: 22–27. Romans acting like barbarians: Raaflaub 1974: 293–307. Ethnographies: Shadee 2017.

<sup>91</sup> See at n. 96 below.

<sup>92</sup> 7.77.14–16. “Our neighbor ‘Gaul’” refers to the Transalpine province.

<sup>93</sup> 7.89.1–2; see also, e.g., 5.7.8; 5.27.6; 7.1.5, and Hirtius in 8.1.3; Seager 2003: 22–26.

<sup>94</sup> On Roman concepts of freedom, see Wirszubski 1950; Bleicken 1972.

<sup>95</sup> Barlow 1998. Critognatus’ “barbaric” proposal of cannibalism (7.77.12–13) offers an example.

<sup>96</sup> Raaflaub 2018: 22–23.

<sup>97</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.851–53 (my trans.). See also Cicero’s arguments in *On the Consular Provinces* (at n. 28 above).



of liberty, democracy, and human rights abroad and some imperial aspects of its foreign policies as well as the troubled history of failures to realize these ideals in attitudes and politics at home.

Caesar's text thus challenges us to think about ourselves while reading his text. The categorization of the enemy or "other" as "barbarians" involves a plethora of prejudices and notions of superiority vs. inferiority that, however they are expressed, we can trace in recent history and the present as well, of the world and our own country.<sup>98</sup> A thorough reading of Caesar's text in its context allows us to recognize and dissect the techniques of subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) propaganda and to become alert to its use in our media.

The same is true for Caesar's war atrocities. Again without condoning them, we should be aware that, in committing them, he was but a link in a long chain that stretched from the ancient Near East to Greece and Rome, and far beyond.<sup>99</sup> In fact, it reaches well into our own time. War is always brutal. Despite modern conventions and the efforts of world organizations, it still does not spare the innocent or refrain from wholesale massacres, even if their scale may stay below those reported by Caesar. So, rather than cutting Caesar from the Latin curriculum, we might use Caesar's text to help our students learn from negative examples, as they may already be used to doing in other cases, and raise their critical awareness of the immorality and inhumanity of war and of the fundamental injustice of extolling military might and its facile use as a political tool—as world leaders, including our own, have been prone to do. History cannot be a *magistra vitae* (life's teacher) if we look only at its edifying aspects but fail to confront its ugly faces.<sup>100</sup>

Finally, to invoke only one analogy, if we banish Caesar from our curricula should we not also desist from reading the *Iliad* with our students because the thoughts and actions of both sides in that epic war focus on annihilating the other?<sup>101</sup> Would it not be better to help our students enhance their critical thinking through insights gained from discussing this seminal and deeply humane work not least, but emphatically, against the inhumane aspects of its content?

## 8. Understanding Caesar's Atrocities by Contextualizing Them

When dealing with Caesar's war atrocities we need to gain a fuller understanding by placing them in their broad historical and cultural context. In doing so, I emphasize again that understanding does not mean condoning or justifying. We may disapprove of an ancient leader's actions, even most vigorously, while still trying to explain them from the perspective of their time and culture.

To begin with, the German holocaust policy was based on an ideology that was independent of war, although its realization was greatly facilitated by war. The Armenian genocide too had a long prehistory of persecution and oppression; it was not centrally linked to war, but exacerbated and facilitated by it.<sup>102</sup> Unlike these and some other cases of modern genocide but comparable to those committed during Spain's conquests in the New World, all of Caesar's "genocidal actions" took place in the context of war.<sup>103</sup> Of course, this does not mean that war justifies genocide, but this context is relevant. Ancient wars, especially against foreign peoples, knew few moral constraints, and these concerned diplomacy rather than fighting and killing. Cato based his proposal to extradite Caesar to his victims not (or much less) on the massacre of the Usipetes and Tencteri as such than on the belief that he committed it and held envoys captive during a truce.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Caesar claims to have

<sup>98</sup> See above at n. 70.

<sup>99</sup> See below at n. 117.

<sup>100</sup> *Historia magistra vitae*: Cicero, *De oratore* 2.9.36.

<sup>101</sup> See below at n. 118.

<sup>102</sup> See, e.g., Longerich 2010; Hovannisian 1992, respectively.

<sup>103</sup> Genocide in Spain's New World conquests: Kiernan 2007: 72–100.

<sup>104</sup> See above at n. 7; esp. Plutarch, *Cato minor* 51.1–5, discussed by Powell 1998: 124–28, and Pelling 2011: 251 on Plutarch, *Caesar* 22.2–3.



reacted with extreme violence only when forced by enemy aggression, treason, the violation of oaths, or extreme challenges to his honor code. All his genocidal actions fit this pattern. Those of Ariovistus, the Atuatuca, Veneti, Eburones, and Carnutes are obvious.<sup>105</sup> For example, it was not the initial resistance of the Atuatuca but their violation of the conditions and oath of surrender that in Caesar's view deprived them of any further claim to mercy and justified their "virtual annihilation" by collective enslavement.<sup>106</sup>

Only the case of the Usipetes and Tencteri (discussed in section 1) offers cause to hesitate. Caesar is adamant that here too the other side was guilty, not least of an unprovoked attack during a truce. Moreover, he had offered the two nations a way out of the confrontation that would have strengthened them in their defense against the Suebi. Still, Caesar's justification seems more specious, his presentation of some of the events evasive, and his prejudicial intention to destroy the enemy difficult to overlook.<sup>107</sup>

Another aspect to consider is that Caesar was a typical Roman and lived in a society whose values and sensitivities differed greatly from those in our own time—even if, given the current deep and pervasive polarizations in many countries and especially in our own, it seems difficult to make general statements about values that are typical of our society and time. At any rate, the events that gave rise to the new term "genocide" and to the conventions discussed above (section 6) happened only in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>108</sup> Recent political and military actions, including some of our own country, reflect regrettably little respect for the ethical principles we might believe in. Undoubtedly and fortunately, modern sensitivities are more highly developed than ever, but if war crimes in Vietnam and Iraq have come under intense scrutiny it is probably the presence of journalists and social media in the war zones as much as moral revulsion in the military and among politicians that made investigations unavoidable. By contrast, although news from Gaul reached Rome by other channels as well, it was Caesar himself who reported the events to the Senate and large audiences in Rome and Italy in all their gruesome details.<sup>109</sup>

The attitude of most senators toward such matters is illustrated well by Cicero who in 56 invoked the impact of Pompey's victories in the east as a model for Caesar's intentions in Gaul: "There is no people that has not been weakened to such an extent that it hardly exists anymore, or tamed so much that it holds its peace, or pacified so completely that it is happy about our victory and rule."<sup>110</sup> We should note also that at the end of 55, the year that featured the crossing into German territory and Britain but also the extinction of the two German nations, the Senate decreed a record number of thanksgiving days in honor of Caesar's achievement.<sup>111</sup> As multiple literary texts and inscriptions from the Republic and early Empire show, "the Romans thought that conquest was a good and glorious thing." They "had a penchant for collecting and publicizing lists of the names of peoples or places" they had subjected or destroyed. Caesar's long lists of nations arrayed against him and eventually defeated emphasize the same point. His actions and justifications were perfectly attuned to Roman ideology.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, Caesar operated in a country that was mostly unknown and hostile. He was often confronted by superior forces. Under these circumstances, I suspect, generals far beyond antiquity would have considered it vital to include in their arsenal distrust, preventive brutality, and exemplary punishment as a deterrent.<sup>113</sup> Caesar knew how to use both the carrot and the stick.

<sup>105</sup> Section 4 above, episodes 1, 3, 4, 6, 7.

<sup>106</sup> 2.32–33.

<sup>107</sup> See n. 7 and n. 163 below.

<sup>108</sup> See at n. 85 above.

<sup>109</sup> See at n. 60 above for correspondence; on Caesar's readers and audience, see Wiseman 1998.

<sup>110</sup> *On the Consular Provinces* 12.31 (my trans.). On Cicero's attitude toward imperialism, see Stevenson 2013: 183–87.

<sup>111</sup> 4.38.5.

<sup>112</sup> E.g., 2.4.4–10; 7.75.2–5. See Mattern 1999: 162–94 (quote: 164).

<sup>113</sup> So too Powell 1998: 136 n.51.

Arthur Eckstein describes the Mediterranean world of the last centuries BCE as an anarchic jungle where might was right and the strongest prevailed. Rome had risen to rule in the Mediterranean through constant warfare. War had molded Roman society, social relations, and values. Uncounted numbers of victims of Roman conquests had been killed (in battles and massacres) or enslaved; in Italy these slaves served as an indispensable motor for the economy from which especially the elite profited enormously. Carthage and Corinth stand as examples of large, thriving cities that the Romans brutally destroyed in war.<sup>114</sup>

The following example is extreme but not untypical. The Senate had granted the army of Aemilius Paullus, the victor over the Macedonian king Perseus at Pydna in 168 BCE, the booty from the cities of Epirus that had supported the king. In a carefully coordinated surprise action, based on deception, 70 towns were sacked. Out of the enormous booty every soldier and cavalryman received a reward amounting to almost double their annual pay. 150,000 persons were enslaved.<sup>115</sup> Against this background, Caesar's actions do not seem so unusual. In fact, without having the space to demonstrate this here, I feel confident in stating that not one of Caesar's war atrocities does not have antecedents in the history of Roman imperialism before his time.<sup>116</sup>

Moreover, texts and images from the ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and the Greek world illustrate the same pattern. The biblical "ban law" ordered the Hebrews to destroy completely (persons, animals, and property) some of the enemies they conquered.<sup>117</sup> In the *Iliad*, Menelaus is about to take a Trojan captive for ransom, when Agamemnon intervenes:

Not one of them  
Escapes sheer death at our hands, not even  
The boy who is still in his mother's womb.  
Every Trojan dies, unmourned and unmarked.<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, the complete extermination of Troy by killing the men, enslaving the women and children, and destroying the town is the goal of the Achaean heroes and, conversely, the complete destruction of the Achaean army and fleet that of the Trojans in this seminal work that is widely admired as foundational for European literature, with a cultural impact that reaches into our own time.<sup>119</sup> In the unquestioned understanding of Greeks and Romans, the victors had the right to deal with the defeated and their property as they wished.<sup>120</sup>

## 9. The Other Side of the Coin: Caesar the Clement Victor

There is yet another answer to the question I posed—one I consider particularly important because it sets a positive image against the negative one. This requires us, however, to be able to look, so-to-speak, at two sides of the same coin simultaneously and to acknowledge that history is never entirely one-dimensional: historical personalities no less than modern ones are complex, neither all good nor all bad, even if some verge close to one or the other extreme. Caesar was not only a typical but also a very untypical Roman. What made him exceptional among his fellow Roman conquerors, though, is not so much that he offered an enemy the

<sup>114</sup> Eckstein 2008. War and Roman Society; Harris 1979: chs. 1–2; Raaflaub 1996. War captives; Harris 1979: 80–85. Carthage: e.g., Appian, *Roman History* 8 (*Punic Wars*) 74–136; Goldsworthy 2000. Corinth: Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 7.16.7–10; Dio Cassius 21 (Zonaras 9.31).

<sup>115</sup> Livy 45.33–34; on Pydna and its aftermath, see Lendon 2005: 193–211.

<sup>116</sup> See Westington 1938. No recent study is known to me.

<sup>117</sup> As an example from the Ancient Near East, see Ussishkin 1982 (reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, depicting the siege of Lachish during the king's campaign against Judah in 701 BCE; also accessible at google.com under "Lachish reliefs"). On the ban law in the Hebrew Bible see Niditch 1993: chs. 1–2; Greenberg 2007. Overall, see van Wees 2010, 2011, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> *Iliad* 6.57–60; cf. 22.62–68 (trans. S. Lombardo).

<sup>119</sup> On the "ideal of annihilation" in the *Iliad*, see van Wees 1992: 183–90; also Gottschall 2008.

<sup>120</sup> E.g., Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.5.73.

opportunity to avoid war and calamity or that he sometimes treated defeated enemies with moderation. Others had done this too. Scipio Africanus the Elder (the victor over Hannibal) and the Younger (the brutal destroyer of Carthage), Pompey, and others were credited with having applied moderation in memorable cases or to memorable effect.<sup>121</sup> Livy (of course writing after Caesar) even lets the Carthaginians enhance their peace appeal to Rome by emphasizing that it had enlarged its empire almost more by sparing the defeated than by the victories themselves.<sup>122</sup>

The crucial difference is that these earlier generals had used clemency occasionally. Caesar elevated it to a principle or preferred *modus operandi*—although, if informative sources had survived to let us know more about his predecessors, Caesar might appear somewhat less exceptional than he does now. Several extant sources, however, recognize the singular merit of Caesar's focus on clemency. Cicero's use of clemency in connection with Caesar increases in his correspondence after the spring of 49 and in his "Caesarian" speeches of 46–45. Pliny the Elder criticizes Caesar for his bloody victories and for boasting about the numbers of enemies killed, and overall rates Pompey's achievement higher, but he praises Caesar's "peculiar distinction of the clemency in which (even to the point of subsequent regret) he surpassed all men; also he afforded an example of magnanimity that no other can parallel."<sup>123</sup>

Yes, peace was possible only if Caesar offered it and on Caesar's terms and, yes, his interference in Gaul was, despite all his justifications, motivated by only one cause, and that was Rome's imperialist drive, compounded by Caesar's ambition and need for victories.<sup>124</sup> But all this corresponded to the harsh reality of war and imperialism throughout the ancient world and far beyond. Roman triumphs were awarded for great victories, based on numbers (enemies killed and towns destroyed). In the dedicatory inscription on the shrine of Minerva that Pompey built with the spoils of his eastern wars, he boasted of having in those wars "routed, scattered, slain, or received the surrender of 12,183,000 people, sunk or taken 846 ships, [and] received the capitulation of 1,538 towns and forts."<sup>125</sup> The "objective" criterion of 5,000 enemies killed, long considered decisive but now debated, cannot be totally off the mark.<sup>126</sup> Mary Beard begins her exploration of the Roman triumph with a quote from Seneca that offers an analogy: "Petty sacrilege is punished; sacrilege on a grand scale is the stuff of triumphs."<sup>127</sup> Caesar's care in informing his readers of the masses of enemies defeated and killed, both throughout his war narrative and in his triumphal display in 46, shows that he was much aware of the significance of statistics of names and numbers.<sup>128</sup>

Hence it is all the more remarkable that in his quest for victory and conquest Caesar sought the destruction of his opponents only in specific and, in his view, clearly justifiable cases, when the nature of the enemy's actions left him no choice. Clemency, one might say, was Caesar's default action. He speaks remarkably often of it, even as his habit and character trait. Already in 57 he lets the Atuatuaci appeal to his clemency as a widely known fact: "if Caesar, in his merciful kindness (*clementia et mansuetudo*), about which they had heard from others, decided to spare them." In his response, Caesar describes his decision to do so as

<sup>121</sup> Scipio the Elder: Polybius 15.17.3–7; Livy 33.12.7. Scipio the Younger: Polybius 10.17.6–16; Pompey: Cicero, *Verrine* 2.5.153; Plutarch, *Pompey* 20.8.

<sup>122</sup> Livy 30.42.17; cf. Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.853 (at n. 97 above). On clemency in Roman foreign policy before Caesar, see Weinstock 1971: 234–37.

<sup>123</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 7.92–93 (trans H. Rackham); cf. Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 75.

<sup>124</sup> As explained in section 3 above. For Caesar's role in the history of Roman imperialism, see Stevenson 2013: 187–92. For the language of imperialism, Lavan 2013.

<sup>125</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 7.97; cf. Plutarch, *Pompey* 45.2–4.

<sup>126</sup> Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 2.8.1; for discussion, Beard 2007: 209–11.

<sup>127</sup> Seneca, *Letter* 87.23; Beard 2007: 1. See Beard 199–214 on the criteria for a triumph.

<sup>128</sup> Triumph: Pliny, *Natural History* 7.92 (above at n. 13). Size of enemy armies and numbers of enemies killed: e.g., 1.29.2; 2.4.5–10; 2.28.2; 4.15.3; 7.75; also 8.29.4. See, on this kind of statistics, Wiseman 1985: 1–10; Williams 2001: 38–40; Pelling 2011: 211.

his habit (*consuetudo*).<sup>129</sup> In 51 at Uxellodunum, Hirtius writes, Caesar “was aware that his merciful disposition (*lenitas*) was known to everyone, and he did not need to be afraid that, if he acted more harshly than usual, it would be ascribed to his cruel character (*crudelitas naturae*).”<sup>130</sup> The vocabulary Caesar uses for this attitude is varied: *clementia* twice in Book 2, otherwise “mildness” (*lenitas*, *mansuetudo*), “commiseration” (*miser cordia*), even *humanitas*, and several other terms.<sup>131</sup> Whatever the words, this attitude was expressed in deeds. Two examples must suffice here.

After their capitulation in 58, he sent the Helvetii back to their country and ordered them to rebuild their towns. Because they had no supplies left to survive the winter, he instructed the nearest nation in his province to assist them. After the surrender of the Nervii who had suffered horrendous losses in the battle at the Sambre in 57, “Caesar wished to make it known that he was merciful in dealing with miserable people and suppliants. He thus took great care for their safety,” ordering their neighbors to refrain from exploiting their weakness.<sup>132</sup>

Of course, in all these cases Caesar’s clemency was also driven by ulterior motives. Resettlement of the Helvetii in their own country would prevent German invaders from taking it over.<sup>133</sup> To help the Nervii recover from their disastrous defeat might entice others to avoid risking a war and battle, while the punishment of the Atuatucae and the men of Uxellodunum clearly was meant to deter imitation by others. And, of course, clemency, however termed, is to be understood within its Roman parameters. In war, it inevitably implied a massive power difference between giver and recipient. Although the definition Seneca offers in *On Clemency* is far too restrictive to be applied universally in the mid-first century BCE, for the conditions under which Caesar operated the essentials are valid: whenever a person who has power over another person, group, or nation to punish, take vengeance, oppress, or kill does not use this power, he demonstrates clemency.<sup>134</sup> Hence, in Roman perception, Caesar’s decision to accept the Atuatucae’s first capitulation without doing them any harm—after they had demonstrated their support for the Nervii and actively resisted his siege operations at their town—counted as clemency.<sup>135</sup> To use modern parallels, the allied victors’ treatment of Germany in the Versailles Treaty of 1919 was the opposite, the American help to rebuild Germany after World War II a shining example of Roman-style clemency—whatever the ulterior motives behind these policies.<sup>136</sup>

Caesar’s principle of applying clemency whenever possible was even more visible during the civil war against Pompey. Many feared that both leaders would imitate the cruelty Sulla had exhibited in the civil war of the 80s. Of Caesar Cicero wrote: “You may well be afraid of a massacre, although nothing would be less in Caesar’s interest if he wants his victory and personal power to last.”<sup>137</sup> But Caesar surprised everybody and turned public opinion in his favor, when, at the first opportunity he had, he dismissed unharmed all senators and equestrians who had been fighting against him.<sup>138</sup> Cicero commented: “The truth is that any evil this Pisistratus has not done is earning him as much popularity as if he were to have stopped someone else doing it ... They are delighted with his deceitful clemency (*insidiosa clementia*) and fear the other’s wrath.”<sup>139</sup> Caesar himself wrote to two of his supporters:

<sup>129</sup> 2.31.4, 32.1.

<sup>130</sup> 8.44.1 (see above at n. 79).

<sup>131</sup> *Clementia*: 2.14.5; 2.31.4. Variety of terms typical of this period: Konstan 2005: 341–42.

<sup>132</sup> Helvetii: 1.28.3; Nervii: 2.28.3.

<sup>133</sup> 1.28.4.

<sup>134</sup> See Seneca, *De clementia* 2.3.1. For discussion, see Konstan 2005.

<sup>135</sup> On Caesar’s clemency, see, e.g., Dahlmann 1967; Weinstock 1971: 233–43; Alföldi 1985: ch.5; Campi 1997, and especially Konstan 2005.

<sup>136</sup> See, e.g., Boemeker et al. 1998; Sharp 2011, and Hogan 1987; Schain 2001, respectively.

<sup>137</sup> Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 7.22.1. Trans. here and below Shackleton Bailey 1978a, modified.

<sup>138</sup> *BC* 1.22–23; other spectacular acts of clemency: 1.72; 3.98.

<sup>139</sup> Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 8.16.2. “This Pisistratus” refers to the famous Athenian tyrant and characterizes Caesar as a tyrant; “the other” is Pompey.

I had already decided on a policy to demonstrate as much leniency as possible ... Let's try whether in this way we can regain the goodwill of all people and achieve lasting victory, because others have not been able by cruelty to escape hatred and to hold on to victory for any length of time—except only for Sulla whom I am not going to imitate. Let this be our new way of conquering: to protect ourselves by mercy and generosity (*misericordia et liberalitate*).<sup>140</sup>

To Cicero he wrote: “You rightly surmise of me... that of all things I abhor cruelty... I am not disturbed by the fact that those whom I have released are said to have left the country in order to make war against me once more. Nothing pleases me better than that I should be true to my nature and they to theirs.”<sup>141</sup> By 46, Cicero's initial skepticism had subsided: he too now spoke of Caesar's “mild and merciful disposition” (*mitis clemensque natura*).<sup>142</sup>

Caesar was well aware that the civil war, in which he was fighting against Roman citizens, created conditions that differed massively from those of his Gallic campaigns.<sup>143</sup> Hence his frequent application of clemency in the Gallic wars, as his default action, as a principle, and as his character trait, seem all the more remarkable. His attitude is consistent throughout his wars.

Augustus followed his adoptive father—although only after the brutal phase of his life in the civil wars and proscriptions was over. In his *Res Gestae* (*Record of His Achievements*) he wrote: “As victor I spared the lives of all citizens who asked for mercy.”<sup>144</sup> The Senate honored him for this in 27 by the gift of the *clipeus virtutis*, a golden shield with the inscription “the shield of virtue, clemency, justice, and piety toward the gods and the fatherland”—the first formulation of the four cardinal virtues.<sup>145</sup> Henceforth, *clementia* was firmly established among the canonical virtues of the emperors.<sup>146</sup>

Caesar has a good claim to have integrated *clementia* among the cardinal virtues, and probably of having consolidated these virtues in their soon-to-be canonical set.<sup>147</sup> This, then, would be the imaginary coin I mentioned at the beginning of this section. On the obverse it would display the head of *Clementia* or, as on a posthumous issue, the temple of *Clementia Caesaris* (Caesar's Clemency) vowed by the Senate but never built because of the honoree's assassination.<sup>148</sup> The reverse would feature the brutal conqueror, with a captive Gallic warrior and a mourning woman representing Gaul below a trophy (a victory monument).<sup>149</sup> Both images are linked: they represent two aspects of Caesar's complex war record.

## 10. Conclusion

In ancient Greek sources genocide was regarded as an ultimate punishment that could be legitimately inflicted when a community had committed a serious collective offense that called for such measures. In antiquity, Hans van Wees suggests, this view was most widely accepted during periods when states tried to preserve their long-established hegemony or expanded rapidly. Once they had established their control, very few further acts of genocide are attested. Yet, van Wees continues, genocide was always also, and sometimes mainly, “an act of ‘conspicuous destruction’ that served to display the power of the perpetrators

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 9.7C.1.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 9.16.2.

<sup>142</sup> Cicero, *Letters to Friends* 6.6.8. Trans. Shackleton Bailey 1978b.

<sup>143</sup> See *BC* 1.72; Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 75. For a brief summary of Caesar's political strategy in the civil war (explored fully in Raafaub 1974), see Raafaub 2003: 59–61.

<sup>144</sup> Augustus, *Res gestae* 3.1. For the text with explanations, see Brunt and Moore 1967; Cooley 2009.

<sup>145</sup> Augustus, *Res gestae* 34. On these virtues, see Weinstock 1971: 228–59; Galinsky 1996: 80–90.

<sup>146</sup> See, e.g., Fears 1981; Classen 1991.

<sup>147</sup> Weinstock 1971: 228–30, 237–41.

<sup>148</sup> Cassius Dio 44.6.4; Weinstock 1971: 241–43; see, e.g., <https://100falcons.wordpress.com/2009/04/20/caesars-clemency/> (accessed July 12, 2020).

<sup>149</sup> Coin: <https://feminaeromanae.org/caesarcoins.html> (accessed July 14, 2020).

and to restore or enhance their ‘honor’.” Power and prestige were intimately linked. “Those who aimed for the highest possible status in the world order were least able to tolerate any challenge to their honor.”<sup>150</sup> Those who know Thucydides will think of the “Melian Dialogue,” the mega-power Athens’ confrontation with the tiny island of Melos that ended with the Melians’ annihilation.<sup>151</sup>

All this applies to Caesar too, whose name in the *Gallic War* always stands for the Roman people, the Roman state, and Roman honor. His “genocidal actions” in Gaul are typical of his expanding state and his society to which honor and prestige (*dignitas* that determined status and was primarily acquired in war) were among the highest values.<sup>152</sup> Given this background, Caesar’s ability both to embrace and transcend this generally accepted pattern seems remarkable. He was at the same time a brutal conqueror and a lenient victor. His ability to make clemency one of his guiding principles and propagate it as such, even claim it as his character trait, has few, if any, parallels before his time.

When I talk of Caesar’s clemency I often encounter the objection that all this was nothing but propaganda. Undoubtedly, Caesar’s writings served his positive self-presentation and propaganda, and clemency had high propaganda value. But was what Caesar did *only* propaganda? Effective propaganda builds on a solid foundation of fact. What must be decisive is that Caesar’s words and actions fit together. He propagated his clemency but he also practiced it to an unprecedented extent.<sup>153</sup>

The historian needs to understand and explain history, to judge it without prejudice. Caesar’s clemency offers us, in a brutal world of warfare and abuses, a positive example that we can use to get our students to think about the complexity of history and historical personalities and the difficulty of reconciling contradictory aspects of their lives and actions. We can both be disgusted with Caesar’s brutality and impressed by his clemency. We can acknowledge this tension and use it to convey valuable life lessons.

### Appendix: Caesar vs. Migrants

Two of Caesar’s war atrocities concern German invaders (Ariovistus and the Usipetes and Tencteri). His first victory in Gaul decimated another migrating nation (the Helvetii). They all were on the move to find a better place to live. Inevitably, we are reminded of experiences in our own time, in both Europe and the US, with large-scale migrations of refugees and seekers of asylum and a better life. But the analogy is superficial and misleading.

In Caesar’s time the Rhine was not a firm demarcation line between Gauls and Germans. As Maureen Carroll observes, “the idea of a Gallic and a German nation is a Roman political and ideological construct.”<sup>154</sup> The differences were less clear-cut than Caesar makes them to be. While Gaul was predominantly Celtic, a few German nations had settled west of the Rhine.<sup>155</sup> It was natural for others to try to follow them. In much of Gaul the process of stable settlement and urbanization had progressed quite far.<sup>156</sup> This was not the case east of the Rhine. Gaul thus was attractive. West-Rhenanian Germans and their Gallic neighbors maintained close relations across the Rhine. In particular, the Gallic Treveri frequently appealed to Germans for help or hired them as mercenaries in their fight against Caesar.<sup>157</sup> Realizing that he could not possibly control large territories east of the Rhine, Caesar settled on a policy of deterrence and separation of Gauls and Germans along the

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<sup>150</sup> Van Wees 2016: 34–35.

<sup>151</sup> Thucydides 5.84–116.

<sup>152</sup> Rosenstein 2006.

<sup>153</sup> See also Weinstock 1971: 239.

<sup>154</sup> Carroll 2017 (quote: 48).

<sup>155</sup> 2.3.4; 6.32.1; 8.7.5; 8.10.4 (although the latter could also refer to transrhenanian Germans). For discussion, see Carroll 2017.

<sup>156</sup> See Büchschütz 2017; Ralston 2017.

<sup>157</sup> 5.27.8; 5.55.1–2; 6.7.1–9.2; 8.45.1.



natural, though very porous, Rhine border.<sup>158</sup> This artificial separation helped support his claim of having pacified “all of Gaul.”<sup>159</sup>

Ariovistus was a “condottiere” or warlord. Leader of the Triboci, he attracted followers from various nations, molded them into his own private army, hired out his services to Gallic leaders in their wars for supremacy, and then turned the tables on them, creating his own expanding fiefdom (centered in modern Alsace), where he was planning to settle the rapidly increasing number of his followers with their families. Allied with the Sequani, he gained a victory over their rivals, the Aedui, and exploited his power to appropriate large portions of Sequanian territory, while keeping the Aedui in check.<sup>160</sup> He ended up being as unwelcome in Gaul as Caesar was.

It seems strange that just a year before his confrontation with Caesar, when Ariovistus had long established his oppressive rule in southeastern Gaul, the Senate had recognized him as king and “friend of the Roman people”—upon the recommendation of the consul Caesar himself. Although being unresponsive to an Aeduan request for help in 61, the Senate in 59 may have hoped that this prestigious status would deter Ariovistus from continuing to attack another Roman “friend,” the Aedui.<sup>161</sup> Now, in 58, however, Caesar had developed his own Gallic ambitions and saw an advantage in containing and, when negotiations failed, expelling the German rival, thereby fortifying his position of power and patronage in Gaul.<sup>162</sup>

By contrast, according to Caesar, the Usipetes and Tencteri were entire nations that migrated under pressure.<sup>163</sup> Their intention too was to settle in Gaul, and some Gallic nations welcomed them—presumably hoping not least to use them as a potential reinforcement against Caesar.<sup>164</sup> Cassius Dio claims that an invitation by these Gauls had encouraged the Germans to cross the Rhine in the first place.<sup>165</sup> One would expect Caesar to mention this because it would have strengthened his case. If, as Cassius Dio also says, they had already entered the territory of the unreliable Treveri, Caesar had good reason to consider these Germans a danger to his efforts to consolidate his control over Gaul. At any rate, overall their role was similar to that of Ariovistus in that it was political: two large nations in one case, a coherent entity under a strong leader in the other, sought to settle on land taken in Gaul.

Moreover, the Romans’ traumatic fear of German invaders, rooted in disastrous defeats suffered on the part of migrating Cimbri and Teutoni in 113–105 and invoked by Caesar several times, must have increased the army’s willingness to show no mercy towards Germans and provided Caesar with an additional excuse to do the same.<sup>166</sup> Roman soldiers had also experienced the fierce warrior spirit of German women in two victorious battles against these Germans in 102 and 101.<sup>167</sup> We can thus understand Caesar’s motives and the willingness of his soldiers to engage in wholesale massacre, but understanding does not require us to condone it.

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<sup>158</sup> Porous border: see previous note and 6.35–41.

<sup>159</sup> A claim first raised in 57 (2.35.1) and 56 (3.7.1; 3.28.1); also 8.1.1.

<sup>160</sup> 1.31–32. The victory over the Aedui at Magetobriga (1.31.12) dates to 61, at the latest. Ariovistus probably entered Gaul in 72–71.

<sup>161</sup> The Aeduan leader Diviciacus had visited Rome in 61: 1.31.9; 6.12.5; Cicero, *On Divination* 1.90. Declaration as “friend”: 1.35.2. The issue came up in a parley between Caesar and Ariovistus: 1.43.4–5, 44.5. On “friendship” in Roman international relations, see Burton 2011.

<sup>162</sup> The complaints of Gallic leaders (1.31–32) and the speeches at the parley between Caesar and Ariovistus (1.43–45) are overdrawn but their essence is probably correct; the latter were heard by several witnesses. *Contra* (though extreme): Walser 1956: 8–20. Containment: 1.35.3–4, 43.9.

<sup>163</sup> See the beginning of this paper.

<sup>164</sup> 4.6.3–4.

<sup>165</sup> Cassius Dio 39.47.1.

<sup>166</sup> 1.14.1–2; 1.33.4; 1.40.5; 2.4.2; 7.77.12–14.

<sup>167</sup> Plutarch, *Marius* 19.9; 27.2–3.



Both Ariovistus and the Usipetes and Tencteri are best described as harbingers of the much larger German migrations that threatened Roman frontiers from the mid-second century CE onward.<sup>168</sup> Neither episode thus fits the pattern of migrations of large numbers of individuals (persons or families) without central organization or leadership and with entirely personal motives that haunt our own time. But the comparison is useful in making us think and define the underlying problems more sharply.

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