

Ethnogenesis Throughout the Twentieth Century

The collapse of Rome has compelled historians to study the reasons why it might have fallen and how the ethnogenesis of Germanic barbarians affected the fall. Ethnogenesis is the formation of ethnic groups¹, and in the case of the barbarians this would include groups such as the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, etc. The theories of these barbarians effects on fall of Rome have changed throughout the twentieth-century. In the beginning of the twentieth century, from the 1900s to the late 1930s, historians believed in a racialist view of the the barbarians. The historians truly believed that the Germanic tribes were an inferior race and their occupation of Roman territory and their infiltration into the Roman army caused the downfall of the Roman Empire. These early twentieth-century views saw the barbarians as culturally degrading. Then World War II happened and the scholars who had previously seen the Germanic tribes as a homogenous group, which contributed to the Nazi's Aryan race theory, now were considering other theories of the barbarians. Now historians did not argue that the Germanic barbarians were an inferior race, although one does argue that the barbarians weakened Rome, that bashed their way into the Roman empire. Instead, most believe they were welcomed and accepted into Roman society for their cheap labour.

When covering the fall of Rome in the early twentieth century, the effect of barbarians in the Roman empire was a common topic. View's of the Germanic barbarian's effect on the fall of Rome are adequately covered by three famous historians: Paul Vinogradoff, J.B. Bury, and H. St. L. B. Moss. Paul Vinogradoff was a Russian historian born in 1854, and after his liberal ideas got him into trouble at the University of Moscow, where at the time he was a professor, he emigrated to England.² He

¹ ethnogenesis: definition of ethnogenesis in Oxford dictionary

² Paul Vinogradoff, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Vinogradoff/ (accessed November 24, 2013).

published numerous books and articles on economics in early England.³ There is an extensive list of articles and chapters that Vindograff has contributed to journals and encyclopedias, including chapter 19 “Social and Economic Conditions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century” in volume 1 of *The Cambridge Medieval History*.⁴ In “Social and Economic Conditions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century” Vindograff argues that the barbarian's entering Rome caused a rapid degeneration of Rome's civilized culture.⁵ The chapter states that the degeneration of culture extended to all aspects of culture from creating dialects of Latin, to their perpetual “decay of art and aesthetic taste” claiming that the “figures are distorted, [and] the faces are deformed.”⁶ Vinogradoff's descriptive language makes his opinion toward the barbarian tribes evident. He saw the Germanic people as those of an inferior race who are decaying the Roman culture and world from the inside out. Throughout the chapter Vinogradoff only used about fifteen primary sources, all that were translated within fifteen years prior to his publication, and the rest of his sources were books that were no older than twenty years.⁷ These “current sources” all shared his racialist view of the Roman empire thus strengthening his argument. The exception to his “contemporary” sources was Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, although the version used was a recently edited by J.B. Bury.⁸

J.B. Bury was a prominent historian of the later Roman empire during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He was an Irish professor who worked at Cambridge from 1902 until his death in 1927.⁹ Bury was a follower of Ranke's belief that history should be a science and historians should only

3 Examples of Vinogradoff's popular works on early England are *Villainage in England*, *The Growth of the Manor*, and *English Society in the Eleventh Century*.

4 *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Sir Paul Gavrilovitch Vinogradoff (British legal scholar),” <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.umw.edu/EBchecked/topic/629517/Sir-Paul-Gavrilovitch-Vinogradoff> (accessed December 3, 2013).

5 Paul Vinogradoff, “Social and Economic Conditions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century” 544, in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 1: also available online at www.archive.org/details/SocialAndEconomicConditionsOfTheRomanEmpireInTheFourthCentury (accessed November 20, 2013).

6 Paul Vinogradoff, “Social and Economic Conditions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century” 545-47.

7 Paul Vinogradoff, “Social and Economic Conditions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century” 688-90.

8 Paul Vinogradoff, “Social and Economic Conditions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century” 688.

9 *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*, s.v. “J.B. Bury (British scholar),” <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.umw.edu/EBchecked/topic/85988/JB-Bury/> (accessed December 3, 2013).

present the facts and not embellished narratives.¹⁰ Bury's writings were so influential and popular that even after his death colleagues edited and published his writings including his 1927 lectures at Cambridge. These lectures were edited in 1928 by fellow colleague F.J.C. Hearnshaw, but the lectures titled *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* were not published until 1967. Bury's lectures state that the reason for the collapse of the Roman empire was not because of the mass number of Germans, in fact they only accounted for five percent of the total population, but it was because of their significant influence that they had over the army.¹¹ Bury's focus of the barbarian's influence is on their military status while Vindograft's focus was purely on the barbarian's affect on culture. Although Bury and Vindograft focused on two different aspects of the Roman collapse both would agree that the Empire was affected by a “disintegration from within.”¹² This popular view of the inferior barbaric tribes was accepted in the early twentieth century and shared by another historian H. St. L. B. Moss.

H. St. L. B. Moss discussed the effects of the barbarians on the Roman empire in his 1935 book *The Birth of the Middle Ages*. Moss' argument is similar to Bury's argument and both agree that the decay of Rome was mainly caused from the German influence on the Roman army.¹³ Moss placed the blame of German tribes gaining control of the army on the landowners who, only by requirement, were sending useless men to serve mandatorily in the army.¹⁴ The lackluster men who were now serving in the army were easily outshone by the Germanic barbarians whose cheap but vicious labor was necessary for defending the empire.¹⁵ He did outright state that the barbarians were inferior and incapable of learning the complex Roman military strategies, which led to the simplification or “Germanization” of the Roman army.¹⁶ Moss even said that we should not even try to study or understand the barbarian tribes from a civilized point of view because we will never be able to

10 *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*, s.v. “J.B. Bury (British scholar).”

11 J.B. Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, ed. F.J.C. Hearnshaw, (New York: Norton 1967), 43, also available online at www.archive.org/details/TheInvasionOfEuropeByTheBarbarians (accessed November 21, 2013).

12 J.B. Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, ed. F.J.C. Hearnshaw, (New York: Norton 1967), 61.

13 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 20.

14 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, 21.

15 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, 21.

16 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, 20-21.

understand the “simpler races.”¹⁷ Racist attitudes, such as the belief in “simpler races,” in England, much like in America, were rampant in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was an accepted idea that some races were inferior as other races were superior. Since the idea of a racial hierarchy was accepted in everyday culture it was inevitable that these ideas would frame how historians of the early twentieth century viewed race. This school of thought was not challenged until after a tragic and racial motivated genocide occurred. This genocide was the Holocaust during World War II.

The Nazi party’s ideas of ethnic cleansing and creating a homogenous aryan race was strengthened by the early twentieth-century historians. The descriptive terms of the Germanic barbarian children as “tall, fair-haired children,”¹⁸ and referring to the Germanic barbarians as “arian” by historians such as Moss created a perfect description of Hitler’s aryan race.¹⁹ This idea creates a philosophical jump to the idea that if the homogenous German barbarians of the fourth and fifth century were able to take down the largest empire in the world, then if modern Germans were able to return to this homogenous state no one would be able to stop them. This ideology led to the mass genocide of the Jewish people and other minorities. After early twentieth century historians’ work clearly supported the Nazi’s cataclysmic ideas, historians began to consciously or subconsciously change their views on ethnogenesis and the fall of Rome.

After the Nazi’s reign of terror in Europe many historians began either to focus on other aspects of Roman civilization as possible causes for the decline in the Roman empire or study Rome as a transformation and not “falling.” The historians were focusing more on how the Roman empire continued and survived rather than the destruction. Three historians post World War II that studied the transformation of the Roman empire are Richard Mansfield Haywood, A.H.M. Jones, and Herwig Wolfram. Richard Mansfield Haywood (insert biographical information). Haywood argues in his 1958 book *The Myth of Rome’s Fall* that the barbarians were integrated too quickly into Roman society and

17 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, 40.

18 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, 42.

19 H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages: 395-814*, 61.

that was the source of the power transfer.²⁰ He argues that this power transfer was not caused by barbarians ruining Roman society and simplifying it, but from Romans becoming spoiled and indifferent to invaders.²¹ Since Haywood's book was written and published shortly after World War II some of his views are strikingly similar to those written prior to the war. His views on the Germans impact on the military are updated ideas that have removed the racist views. As the century progressed forward the common views, such as A.H.M. Jones' and Herwig Wolfram's, became increasingly different from those of the early twentieth century.

A.H.M. Jones was a British historian who was an ancient history professor at University College London and Cambridge University.²² Jones is criticized for only using literary primary sources to prove his arguments, but archaeological evidence for late antiquity was extremely limited in the early 1960's.²³ In A.H.M. Jones' most influential historical work *The Later Roman Empire* he explicitly states that there was no “fall of Rome,” and instead the barbarians were the “successors to the Roman empire.”²⁴ Jones argues that the barbarians were not uncontrollable beasts that caused the Roman empire to implode, instead the barbarians actually preserved quite much of the Roman civil administration.²⁵ He also stated that the barbarians tried to give the Romans whom they ruled over a “fair deal” and protect them from violence, but would give preference to themselves or other barbarians was to be expected.²⁶ This book is the beginning of the dramatic swing away from blaming the barbarians for the fall of Rome. Jones' work is still being cited in contemporary sources on barbarians and the fall of Rome.

Herwig Wolfram is an Austrian historian who is currently a professor at the University of

20 Richard Mansfield Haywood, *The Myth of Rome's Fall*, (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 1958), 119.

21 Richard Mansfield Hayworth, *The Myth of Rome's Fall*, 118-119.

22 Deceased Fellows - British Academy, <http://www.britac.ac.uk/fellowship/directory/dec.cfm?member=3595> (accessed December 3, 2013).

23 Deceased Fellows - British Academy, <http://www.britac.ac.uk/fellowship/directory/dec.cfm?member=3595>.

24 A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 1: v

25 A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, 248.

26 A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, 264.

Vienna in Austria.²⁷ He has published a few popular books about barbarians in the third and fourth centuries, and contributed an article about the topic, “The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom,” in the first edition of the *Viator*. In this article Wolfram states that the major pitfall for the Roman empire was allowing these barbarian people's to create their own governments as *federates*.²⁸ He also affirms that it was not the size or force of the barbarians that allowed them to keep control of parts in the Roman empire, but it was the apathy of the Roman citizens in the occupied territories.²⁹ Instead of arguing for a fall of Rome theory, Wolfram argues that the kingdoms that thrived in medieval Europe were actually old barbarian kingdoms that adopted practices and were inside of the Roman empire.³⁰ In the mid twentieth century the formal idea of ethnogenesis had just emerged. The historians of the time period were experimenting with different theories and ideas that led to the common contemporary view of barbarians and ethnogenesis.

Modern historians, from 1990-2013, are separated into two distinct arguments. The most common argument is a transformation of Rome, and the less common argument, that is growing in popularity, is similar to the early 20th century idea that the barbarians did weaken the Roman Empire, and they were the main reason for the fall of Rome. The modern version of the 20th century theory does not include the racialist aspect that was popular pre-WWII.

The three proponents of the transformation theory, influenced by Peter Brown³¹, are Michael Richter, James Joseph O'Donnell, and Walter Goffart. Michael Richter was an Irish historian who recently passed away in 2011 at the age of 68.³² Richter was professor at the University College Dublin for fifteen years before leaving to lecture at University of Konstanz in Germany where he lectured until

27 Institut Für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, translated by Karen Swain, http://www.univie.ac.at/Geschichtsforschung/personen/herwig_wolfram (accessed November 24, 2013).

28 Herwig Wolfram, “The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom,” *Viator* 1, no. 1 (1971): 11, www.metapress.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/content/r021841515151355/fulltext.pdf (accessed on November 10, 2013).

29 Herwig Wolfram, “The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom,” 15.

30 Herwig Wolfram, “The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom,” 18.

31 Peter Brown's book *The World of Late Antiquity* which was published in 1971 introduced the idea of a peaceful transformation instead of a “fall” of Rome.

32 Medieval History Professor Wrote Groundbreaking Book on Ireland, www.medievalnews.blogspot.com/2011/08/medieval-history-professor-wrote.html (accessed on November 24, 2013)

he died.³³ In 1994 Richter wrote a book on the formation of medieval Europe called *The Formation of the Medieval West* which covered how the ethnogenesis of the Germanic barbarians affected the fall of Rome. James Joseph O'Donnell, a former professor at Georgetown University, is a classical scholar specializing in late antiquity.³⁴ O'Donnell is also the former president of the American Philological Association for whom's research publication he appeared in with a work titled "Late Antiquity: Before and After."³⁵ In his article O'Donnell uses a historiographical point of view to argue his angle on barbarians and the fall of Rome. Finally, Walter Goffart is a historian specializing in the barbarians of the later Roman empire and the early Medieval Ages.³⁶ Goffart was born in 1934 in Berlin Germany and received his bachelor and doctoral degree's from Harvard.³⁷ He spent almost forty years at the University of Toronto before retiring and becoming a senior research scholar at Yale University.³⁸ In Goffart's 2006 book, *Barbarian Tides*, he argues that there are not "Germanic People" because anthropologically you cannot have a "people" with continuity in language and culture between the "Germanic Tribes."³⁹

All three historians argue that there was a peaceful transformation of power from the Romans to the barbarians, and that these barbarians were ethnically heterogenous, and they were only united under a common leader for militaristic purposes. These historians had only a few minute differences in their argument. For example Richter argues that there were large waves of barbarians that came flooding into the Roman empire which forced the transfer of power.⁴⁰ While other historians like Walter Goffart argue that the barbarians were not applying intense pressure to the Roman empire and forcing their way in, but instead the barbarians wanted to join Roman society and the Romans wanted the barbarians to

³³ Medieval History Professor Wrote Groundbreaking Book on Ireland, www.medievalnews.blogspot.com/2011/08/medieval-history-professor-wrote.html (accessed on November 24, 2013)

³⁴ James J. O'Donnell, <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/> (accessed November 24, 2013)

³⁵ James J. O'Donnell, <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/> (accessed November 24, 2013)

³⁶ Walter Goffart / Medieval Studies, <http://medieval.yale.edu/people/walter-goffart> (accessed on December 3, 2013).

³⁷ Walter Goffart / Medieval Studies, <http://medieval.yale.edu/people/walter-goffart> (accessed on December 3, 2013).

³⁸ Walter Goffart / Medieval Studies, <http://medieval.yale.edu/people/walter-goffart> (accessed on December 3, 2013).

³⁹ Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 7.

⁴⁰ Michael Richter, *The Formation of the Medieval West*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 4.

solve their physical labour crisis.⁴¹ Although there are small differences in these historians' transformation arguments, they can all be grouped together in contrast to other historians, like Peter Heather, whose arguments are radically different.

Peter Heather is a British medieval historian who completed his undergraduate and doctoral degrees from New College Oxford.⁴² Heather taught at University College London, Yale and Worcester College before settling down at King's College London in 2008.⁴³ In his most recent work regarding Rome and barbarians is *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* that was published in 2009. In his book, Heather aims to show the importance of barbarian migrations into Rome without reverting to the racialist way of thinking.⁴⁴ He is one of the few modern historians who argues that the barbarian forces weakened the power of the Roman empire causing its collapse.⁴⁵ Heather relies heavily on archaeological evidence to support his version of the barbarian migrations and prove the barbarians were actually where he claims they were. Heather argues that the Germanic tribes were forced to enter into the Roman Empire by the Huns.⁴⁶ Heather takes the stance that there was no "Volkerwanderung." but the Germanic tribes traveled in deliberate small bands.⁴⁷ The growing popularity with British historians of blaming barbarians as the sole cause of Rome's collapse is due to the parallels that are drawn between the Roman Empire and the United Kingdom.

Parallels have been drawn between the Roman Empire and the United Kingdom because of their similar size and the strength of their militaries. Since the rapid decrease of the United Kingdom after WWII, theories have begun to emerge that the UK is declining similarly to the Roman Empire.

⁴¹ Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 24-25.

⁴² King's College London - Professor Peter Heather, www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/history/people/staff/academic/heather/index.aspx (accessed November 24, 2013).

⁴³ King's College London - Professor Peter Heather, www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/history/people/staff/academic/heather/index.aspx (accessed November 24, 2013).

⁴⁴ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xvi-xvii.

⁴⁵ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, 153.

⁴⁶ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, 229.

⁴⁷ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, 152-53.

This causes the mass migration of eastern Europeans into the UK⁴⁸ to be compared to the migration of the Germanic barbarians into the Roman Empire. The migration of eastern Europeans into the United Kingdom is striking fear into citizens of the UK that the immigrants will overrun the hospital and school systems.⁴⁹ This fear of immigrants weakening the United Kingdom is causing the reemergence of a theory, similar to the popular theory in the early 20th century, that the Roman Empire's collapse was caused by the barbarians.

Throughout the twentieth century the idea of race and racial relations has gone through a transformation. How historians viewed the ethnogenesis of the Roman Empire followed the same path as racial views. In the first half of the century historians believed in inferior races and that the barbarians were one of these races. After the racially motivated genocide by the Nazi's in World War II, Historians revised their arguments and often downplayed the effects that barbarians had on ancient Rome. Currently, Historians are still downplaying the effects of the Germanic barbarians on the Fall of Rome, but a new theory is gaining popularity which stresses the importance of barbarian migrations.

⁴⁸ BBC News - Immigration fears spook British Government, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25087153>.

⁴⁹ BBC News - Immigration fears spook British Government, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25087153>.

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