

The Gallic Wars

The Gallic Wars were a series of wars fought between the Roman Republic under General Gaius Julius Caesar and the various tribes of Gaul (consisting of modern-day France, Belgium, parts of Germany and the United Kingdom).

Fought between 58 and 50 BC, the Gaelic, Germanic and British tribes fought long and hard to defend their homelands in the face of an aggressive Roman invasion. Ultimately the Gallic tribes were defeated in the battle of Alesia in 52 BC, which led to a complete takeover of Gaul by the Romans.

The conquest of Gaul helped secured the Roman Republic's borders with the hostile barbarian tribes along the river Rhine. Both Gallic and Germanic tribes had used Gaul as a staging ground for their attacks on Rome itself.

However, on the domestic front, Julius Caesar's success in Gaul made more enemies than friends politically. The added wealth and prestige of Julius Caesar's made the Roman senate believe that the former was planning to overthrow the republic and make himself a dictator. A group of them would assassinate Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.

His death would begin a series of civil wars that would lead to the demise of the Roman Republic and give birth to the Roman Empire.

This article will give further information about the Gallic Wars and the events after. This will be useful in the world history segment of the UPSC Exams.

Why did the Gallic Wars happen?

Julius Caesar had covered himself in glory and fame for his military campaigns, but he had also racked quite a debt for himself by the end of his first term as Consul. He used his influence in the First Triumvirate (An informal political alliance among three prominent politicians in the late Roman Republic: Gaius Julius Caesar, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus and Marcus Licinius Crassus.) to secure himself a governorship in the Cisalpine Gaul and Illyricum for five years.

When the governor of Transalpine Gaul passed away suddenly, Caesar was made governor of this province as well. Historians believe getting the governorship was part of Caesar's plans to conquer territory in order to get himself out of debt. To this end, he was planning on invading the kingdom of Dacia in the Balkans, which was known for its rich gold deposits.

However certain events may have changed his plans. A mass migration of Gaelic tribes would occur in 58 BC, which would give Caesar the *Cassus Belli* (cause for war) that he was looking for. The tribes were the Helvetii, a tribal confederation on the Swiss Plateau. They were under pressure from the

Germanic tribes from the North and East and hence planned a mass migration towards Transalpine Gaul and ultimately to the territory of the Aedui, a tribe allied to Rome.

Caesar, as well as his fellow Romans, feared that the lands left by the Helvetii would be occupied by the Germanic tribes. These were dangerous neighbours to have as compared to Gaelic tribes. Also, the mass migrations would also destabilise the borders between Rome and Gaul.

Thus, Caesar denied the Helvetii request and they turned north, completely bypassing Roman territory. The crisis seemed to be resolved but that was not the case. The Helvetii migration was the *Cassus Belli* Caesar was looking to invade Gaul and it was too tempting to pass it. He, therefore, made plans to attack the Helvetii citing that they may in the future return and threaten Roman provinces. The Roman Senate approved his military campaign.

Beginning of the Gallic Wars

With 24,000 to 30,000 troops under his command, Caesar set off in pursuit of the Helvetians, who were crossing the Saone river up until that point. The Romans fell upon the ones who had not crossed and destroyed them, but at least three-fourths of them had made it across the river.

The Romans then made a pontoon bridge to cross the river. Soon they were upon the rest of the Helvetians, who began a series of negotiations. It came to an end when Caesar imposed harsh terms that were promptly rejected by the Helvetii. When Caesar's own supply began to run out he attacked the Helvetii directly. The Romans were almost surrounded in the final battle, but they emerged victorious. The Helvetii were ordered back to their lands and they became a buffer between the Romans and fearsome Germanic Tribes.

For his actions, the Gallic tribes congratulated Caesar, including the Aedui, long-time allies of Rome. They now requested to attack the Suebi, a Germanic tribe that several years before migrated into the territory of the Gallic Sequani tribe. The Sequani for their part offered land in return for military assistance against the Aedui.

There was speculation that as more Germans would migrate, they would take over Sequani territory and eventually all of Gaul. But there was a catch, the Suebi king, Ariovistus was declared a "king and Friend of the Roman people" So Caesar could not just attack a tribe who were seen as virtual allies of Rome. But he was not the one to give up.

Caesar presented Ariovistus with a list of demands that were too harsh to be fulfilled as far as the Suebi were concerned. The demands were

- Return of all hostages taken by the Suebi
- Protect all other Gallic tribes considered friends of Rome - even those hostile to the Suebi like the Aedui.

- The Suebi were to cut short their migration and return to the east of the Rhine, never to cross into Gaul again.

Arivistus ignored the demands as he was fully aware that Caesar had no authority to make them. Hence, the Suebians kept attacking the Adeui and more Germans crossed into Gaul. A new war was coming.

The Romans fell upon the Suebians who were on their way to take Vesontio, the largest Sequani city. Although both Caesar and Arivistus made a great show in attempting to negotiate an agreement but violated the terms of the meeting and incited each other to war. Finally, Arivistus attacked Caesar's camp but was repulsed. The next morning both armies were ready for battle. The Romans emerged victorious and the Suebians were forced to flee across the Rhine.

Caesar ended his campaign in 58 BC and returned to his governorship in the Cisalpine Gaul, but by this point, it is possible that he had made it his ambition to conquer all of Gaul.

Progress of the Gallic Wars

In the next four years since the battle with the Suebies, Julius Caesar systematically fought and defeated several Gallic tribes and gained nominal control over the region

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- In 56 BC he defeated the Veneti in a naval engagement and took over northwest Gaul
- In 55 BC he crossed over to the Rhine and fought the Germans
- The same year, in a bid to boost his own image, he undertook a military campaign never before undertaken by any Roman general - the invasion of Britain
- Julius Caesar invaded Britain twice. The invasion achieved little in terms of territory or long-term military goals, but he still received accolades from the Roman senate and people.

Julius Caesar had to cut short his campaigns as he got word that the Gauls were planning a revolt in his absence. Back home the rivalry between Pompey and Julius Caesar caused political upheavals that threatened the Triumvirate itself and by extension the domestic politics of Rome.

Perhaps seeking to take advantage of the situation, a general revolt broke out in central Gaul when the Carnutes tribe wiped out all the Romans in their territory. This was the most pivotal moment of the Gallic wars as never in their history have the Gauls united under a common cause. Soon the leadership of the revolt fell to Vercingetorix - a chieftain of the Arverni tribe - who managed to rally many of the Gallic tribes under his banner.

Knowing fully well that he cannot take on the full might of the Roman army, Vercingetorix resorted to a scorched earth policy by burning villages, and towns, evacuating their inhabitants to forts and destroying farmlands in order to starve the Romans into retreating.

Not the ones to give up the Romans under Caesar prepared for the final phase of the Gallic wars.

Final Phase of the Gallic Wars

Hearing of the revolt, Julius Caesar arrived with an army in 52 BC. He laid siege to the important city of Avaricum. The city was spared from Vercingetorix's scorched earth campaign as its inhabitants had refused to evacuate. He carried out a guerilla campaign on the besieging Roman army. But it was not enough.

Undergoing heavy labour and food shortage, the Romans laboured with their siege engines to break into the city. After 25 days, they broke into the city and put about 40,000 of the inhabitants to the sword. The loss of Avaricum did little to deter the Gauls from giving up the revolt. More joined Vercingetorix every day and this, in turn, led to a supply problem for the Romans as allied tribes of the Romans such as the Aedui had thrown in their lot with the Romans.

Vercingetorix withdrew to his own capital of Gergovia. The Romans promptly besieged Gergovia but were repulsed with heavy losses. Unable to maintain it, Caesar withdrew from Gergovia. He was pursued by Vercingetorix.

In a cavalry engagement between the Gauls and the Romans, the Gauls were beaten badly and they withdrew to the city of Alesia. Knowing a direct confrontation with the Gauls was not a good idea, Caesar opted to lay siege to Alesia in September of 52 BC. Vercingetorix was expecting such a move and with it, he hoped to trap the Romans in a pincer movement by attacking from the fort and through a relief army coming to his aid.

The Arverni chief had managed to get messages across the Gaulish tribes to come to his aid at Alesia. Now an army of 80,000- 250,000 was on its way to Alesia. Hearing of this Caesar in one of the most super displays of military strategy built two sets of siege walls - one to keep Vercingetorix in Alesia, and the other to prevent the Gaulish army from breaking into Alesia.

Despite the Gauls outnumbering the Romans by a huge margin, a combination of Roman's fighting discipline and lack of coordination led to a catastrophic defeat for the Gaulish coalition. The relief force was defeated and Vercingetorix surrendered. He would be executed in Caesar's triumph (a victory procession) in Rome in 46 BC. The fall of Alesia led to the eventual subjugation of Gaul. Mop-up operations would continue till 50 BC but nothing of the scale of the Vercingetorix's revolt would take place.

The Gauls had not been entirely subjugated and were not yet a formal part of the empire. But that task was not Caesar's, and he left that to his successors. Gaul would not formally be made into Roman provinces until the reign of Augustus (the Nephew of Julius Caesar) in 27 BC.

Legacy and Outcome of the Gallic Wars

The Gallic Wars lack a clear end date. Legions continued to be active in Gaul through 50 BC when Aulus Hirtius took over the writing of Caesar's reports on the war. The campaigns might have continued into Germanic lands, if not for the impending Roman civil war. The legions in Gaul were eventually pulled out in 50 BC as the civil war drew near, for Caesar would need them to defeat his enemies in Rome.

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The conquest of Gaul marked the beginning of almost five centuries of Roman rule, which would have profound cultural and historical impacts. Roman rule brought with it Latin, the language of the Romans.

This would evolve into Old French, giving the modern French language its Latin roots. Conquering Gaul enabled further expansion of the Empire into Northwestern Europe. Augustus would push into Germania and reach the Elbe, though settled on the Rhine as the imperial border following the disastrous Battle of the Teutoburg Forest.

In addition to facilitating the conquest of parts of Germania, the Roman conquest of Britain led in 43 AD by Claudius also built on Caesar's invasions. The Roman hegemony would last, with only one interruption, until the Crossing of the Rhine in 406 AD.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Gallic Wars

What was the reason for Gallic Wars?

The Gallic Wars were triggered by the Helvetii, a Gallic tribe that lived in modern Switzerland. They were coming under increasing pressure from the Germans in the north and east and felt trapped with their backs to the Alps.

Did Caesar actually write the Gallic Wars?

Caesar's commentaries on the Gallic Wars contain some of the most complete descriptions of Gaul and the people that lived there. But they aren't necessarily exact histories: they were written as memoirs, and Caesar was fighting the wars, in part, to boost his own political career.

What is the importance of the Gallic Wars?

Caesar's Gallic Wars were one of the most important conflicts in the ancient world. It brought a vast, wealthy region under Roman control and helped elevate the political and military power of Julius Caesar. Caesar's Gallic Wars were well documented in antiquity.