**Tiberius – The Treason Trials**

**SOURCE 1 - Prescribed Source – Suetonius *Tiberius* 61-63**

A detailed list of Tiberius’ barbarities would take a long time to compile; I shall content myself with sketching out the chief categories. Not a day, however holy, passed without an execution; he even desecrated the beginning of the new year. Many men were accused and condemned with their children – some actually by their children – and the relatives forbidden to go into mourning. Special awards were voted to the informers who had denounced them, and in certain circumstances to the witnesses too. An informer’s word was always believed. Every crime became a capital one, even the utterance of a few careless words. A poet found himself accused of slander – he had written a tragedy which presented Agamemnon in a bad light – and a historian had made the mistake of describing Brutus and Cassius as ‘the last of the Romans’. Both these authors were executed without delay, and their works – though once publicly ready before Augustus and accorded general praise – were called in and destroyed. Tiberius denied those who escaped with a prison sentence not only the solace of reading books, but the privilege of talking to fellow prisoners. Some of the accused, on being warned to appear in court, felt sure that the verdict would be ‘guilty’, and to avoid the humiliation of a trial stayed at home and severed an artery; yet Tiberius’ men bandaged their wounds and hurried them, half-dead, to prison. Others obeyed their summons and then drank poison in full view of the Senate. The bodies of all executed persons were flung on the Gemonian Stairs and dragged to the Tiber with hooks – as many as twenty a day, including women and children. Tradition forbade the strangling of virgins so when little girls had been condemned to die in this way, the executioner began by violating them. Tiberius used to punish with life those who wished to die. He regarded death as a comparatively light affliction, and, on hearing that a man named Carnalus had forestalled his execution by suicide, exclaimed, ‘Carnalus has got away!’ once, during a jail inspection, a prisoner begged to be put out of his misery; Tiberius replied, ‘No; we are not yet friends again.’ A man of consular rank has recorded in his memoirs that he attended a banquet at which Tiberius was suddenly asked by a loud-voiced dwarf, standing among a group of jesters near the table, ‘What of Paconius? Why is he still alive after being charged *maiestas*?’ Tiberius told him to hold his impudent tongue, but a few days later requested the Senate to make a quick decision about Paconius’ execution.

**SOURCE 2 - Prescribed Source, Valleius Paterculus, *History of Rome*, 2.126.1-34**

126.1 Could anyone enumerate in detail all that has been achieved over the last sixteen years, since it is perfectly apparent to the hearts and minds of all of us? Caesar deified his father not so much by imperial decree as by his own display of religious devotion. He did not call him a god; he made him one. 126.2. Respect has been restored to public life, political conspiracy eliminated from it. Scheming for high office has been banished from elections, factional strife from the senate; justice, fairness, and commitment to hard work, qualities long buried and forgotten, have been brought back to the body politic. The magistrates have recovered their authority, the senate it former majesty and the law courts their solemnity, riots in the theatre are a thing of the past. Everyone now is driven by a desire to do what is right and fitting; if not, they are compelled to do so by force. 126.3. Good deeds are admired; evil deeds punished.

**SOURCE 3 - Prescribed Source - Younger Seneca, *On Benefits* 3.26.1–2**

Under Tiberius Caesar treason charges became so commonplace that they amounted to a form of national madness and cost the lives of more Roman citizens than any civil war. Drunken conversations and light-hearted jokes became the targets of informers; nothing was safe; any excuse for brutality was welcome, and no-one waited to discover the fate of an accused – it was always the same.

A certain ex-praetor called Paulus happened to be attending a dinner party wearing a ring with a large central stone engraved with a portrait of Tiberius Caesar. It would be a bit pathetic of me if I tried to put this politely: he was handed a chamber-pot, and this action was spotted simultaneously by Maro, one of the notorious informers of the day, and by one of the slaves of Paulus, the intended victim of this trap, who slipped the ring off the finger of his inebriated master. When Maro called his fellow banqueters to witness the fact that the emperor’s portrait had been in contact with something disgusting, and was already putting together an indictment, the salve demonstrated to the company that the ring was in fact on his own finger. Anyone who could call such a man a slave would presumably have no difficulty in calling Maro a bosom-friend.

**SOURCE 4 - Prescribed Source - Tacitus, *Annals* 3.50**

Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (V) opposed this motion. ‘If, senators,’ he argued, ‘we only consider the outrageous utterances with which Clutorius Priscus has degraded himself and his hearers, prison and the noose – or even the tortures reserved for slaves – are not enough for him. Yet, however deplorable and outrageous the offence, the emperor’s moderation and your own ancient and modern precedents indicate the mitigation of penalties. Besides, folly is distinguished from crime – and words from deeds. For these reasons, it is legitimate to propose a punishment which will cause us to regret neither over-leniency nor harshness. I have often heard our emperor deploring suicides, since they prevent the exercise of his clemency. Clutorius is still alive. His survival will not endanger the State; and his death will convey no lesson. His compositions are senseless, but they are insignificant and ephemeral. A man who betrays his own outrages to impress not men but mere females is no very great danger. I propose, therefore, that we expel him from the city, outlaw him, and confiscate his property, as if he were guilty under the treason law.’

**SOURCE 5 - Prescribed Source - Tacitus, *Annals* 4.20**

4.20. Silius anticipated imminent condemnation by suicide. But his property was dealt with unmercifully. It is true that the provincial tax-payers received nothing back (and none of them requested a refund). But gifts of Augustus were deducted, and the claims of the emperor’s personal estate enforced item by item. Never before had Tiberius gone to such pains regarding other men’s property. Gaius Asinius Gallus proposed Sosia’s banishment, moving that half of her property should be confiscated and the other half left to her children. Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, however, counter-proposed that a quarter should go to the accusers – as the law required – but that her children should have the rest.

I find that this Marcus Lepidus played a wise and noble part in events. He often palliated the brutalities caused by other people’s sycophancy. And he had a sense of proportion – for he enjoyed unbroken influence and favour with Tiberius. This compels me to doubt whether, like other things, the friendships and enmities of rulers depend on destiny and the luck of a man’s birth. Instead, may not our own decisions play some part, enabling us to steer a way, safe from intrigues and hazards, between perilous insubordination and degrading servility?

However, Lepidus was contradicted by Marcus Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messallinus, who was of equally noble birth but very different character. At his proposal the senate decreed that officials, however free of guilt or knowledge of guilt themselves, should be punished for their wives’ wrongdoing in the provinces as though it were their own.

**SOURCE 6 - Prescribed Source - Tacitus, *Annals* 4.30-31**

4.30. Senators proposed the ancient punishment for the elder Serenus but the emperor, to mollify ill-feeling, vetoed it. He also rejected Gaius Asinius Gallus' counter-proposal of confinement on Gyaros or Donusa, observing that both islands were waterless and if a man were to be granted his life he must be allowed the means to live. So Serenus was returned to Amorgos.

Cornutus having committed suicide, it was proposed that the accusers should forfeit their rewards whenever a man prosecuted for treason killed himself before the trial was finished. This proposal was practically carried when Tiberius, quite sharply and with unaccustomed frankness, backed the accusers, protesting that such a measure would invalidate the laws and endanger the nation. 'Better cancel the laws', he said, 'than remove their guardians!' So that breed created for the country's ruin and never sufficiently penalized, the informers, kept their incentives.

4.31. These tragedies were interrupted by a comparatively agreeable event. Gaius Cominius, a Roman knight convicted of a poem slandering the emperor, was spared by Tiberius as a concession to the pleas of Cominius' brother, a member of the senate. This made it all the more surprising that Tiberius, who was no stranger to better things and understood that mercy was popular, should generally prefer grimmer courses. And his failures were not because he was unobservant: it is not difficult, when emperors' doings are concerned, to tell whether applause is genuine or insincere. Moreover he himself, usually by no means a fluent speaker – his words seemed to struggle for delivery – spoke more readily and easily when he urged mercy.

However, when Publius Suillius Rufus, formerly assistant of Germanicus overseas, was convicted of judicial corruption and banned from Italy, Tiberius proposed his relegation to an island, feeling strongly enough to declare on oath that the national interest so required. This was badly received at the time. But later, when Suillius returned, it was favourably regarded. For the next generation was to know him as exceedingly powerful and corrupt, exploiting long and ably – but never beneficially – the friendship of Claudius. The same penalty was imposed on the junior senator Firmius Catus for falsely accusing his sister of treason. It was he, as I have recorded, who trapped Marcus Scribonius Libo Drusus and produced evidence to destroy him. Recalling this service, but alleging other reasons, Tiberius excused Catus from banishment, not objecting, however, to his expulsion from the senate.

**SOURCE 7 - Prescribed Source - Tacitus, *Annals* 6.18-6.19**

6.18. Earlier fears now revived. Considius Proculus was accused of treason. While unperturbedly celebrating his birthday, he was dragged to the senate-house, and instantly condemned and executed. His sister Sancia was outlawed. Her accuser was Quintus Pomponius, a neurotic who claimed that he undertook these and similar cases in order to gain the emperor's favour and recuse his brother Publius Pomponius Secundus from danger. Another woman, Pompeia Macrina, was exiled. Tiberius had already ruined her husband and father-in-law, argolicus and Laco, leading Greeks. Now her father, a distinguished knight, and her brother a former praetor, saw condemnation ahead and killed themselves. Their offence was that the latter's Mytilenean great-grandfather Theophanes had been a close friend of Pompey and had been deified posthumously by sycophantic Greeks.

6.19. Then Sextus Marius, the richest man in Spain, was thrown from the Tarpeian Rock. The charge was incest with his daughter. But the real cause of his ruin was his wealth. This became clear from Tiberius' personal appropriation of his gold and copper-mines though the State was ostensibly the confiscator.

Frenzied with bloodshed, the emperor now ordered the execution of all those arrested for complicity with Sejanus. It was a massacre. Without discrimination of sex or age, eminence or obscurity, there they lay, strewn about – or in heaps. Relatives and friends were forbidden to stand by or lament them, or even gaze for long. Guards surrounded them, spying in their sorrow, and escorted the rotting bodies until, dragged into the Tiber, they floated away or grounded – with none to cremate or touch them. Terror had paralysed human sympathy. The rising surge or brutality drove compassion away.