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Rational Mutiny in the Year of Four Emperors

Robert Connal

Roman writers tended to see the mutinies accompanying the civil wars of AD 69 -70 as evidence of the unreliability and even the downright insanity of the troops involved. Those troops were frequently critical of their leaders, suspicious of their officers, and dangerous to soldiers and civilians alike; but this is not quite the whole story. Much of their supposed insanity is explicable in terms of struggles – admittedly not always wise - over goals on which the men involved were not always able to agree. Though some of their suspicions were wrong-headed and might be disastrous in their consequences, others were well founded and the resulting actions could be restrained and reasonable. Much of the sad tale of repeated mutiny may be traced, in fact, to the attempts of ordinary soldiers to adjust to the circumstances of civil war without giving up what they considered their own legitimate interests.

The art of mutiny

Mutiny, for most of those involved, was not exceptionally dangerous, nor was it particularly rare. The idea that Roman armies were uniformly well disciplined and obedient

has a long history, which W. S. Messer traced to the 1596 *De militia Romana* of Lipsius.¹ The idea remained popular among historians, who liked to emphasise the “supreme emphasis placed upon prompt and implicit obedience.”² However, while “misdemeanours that ... could influence the outcome of a battle were usually dealt with by execution, flogging, or mutilation,”³ it is far from clear that mutiny in other circumstances was so dangerous. Vegetius, writing in the late fourth or early fifth century, but echoing sources dating from the first century and earlier,⁴ thought that only the ringleaders need be severely punished and that the threat of mutiny should be handled by quietly removing the potentially seditious.⁵ In practice, even the ringleaders stood a reasonable chance of surviving their misbehaviour. One modern study found only three cases of mutiny, out of thirty in the last half-century of the Republic, in which generals were able to impose effective punishments.⁶ The record of mutiny and the limited punishments applied suggests that mutiny could be met with a degree

¹ W. S. Messer, *CPh* 15 (1920) 158–75. Messer gives a much later date (1675) for Lipsius’ work, probably because he was referring to a seventeenth century edition of the *Opera Omnia*.

² S. E. Stout, *CJ* 16 (1921) 423–31.

³ P. Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History*, Santa Barbara, CA 2006 32.

⁴ Vegetius probably worked largely from existing epitomes, derived ultimately from writers such as Frontinus and, more distantly, Cato the Elder.

⁵ *Veg. Mil.* 3,4.7-10. See e.g. B. Campbell, *JRS* 77 (1987) 13–29 for the value of Vegetius for the military history of the early Empire.

⁶ S. G. Chrissanthos, *JRS* 91 (2001) 63–75.

of tolerance when it occurred off the field of battle. The principal reason for such tolerance may be that Roman generals were already aware of a factor suggested by Messer: that mutiny could be "the exaggeration of a good quality, the ability of the private soldier to think and act for himself."⁷ It is not a quality likely to occur among troops terrified by the possibly fatal consequences of getting it wrong, or for that matter among troops who have been allowed, in peacetime, to lose the ability to improvise.⁸

Civil war, however, tipped the balance heavily in favour of the mutineer. When Roman armies were marching against their emperors, or fighting to press or uphold the doubtful claims of usurpers, they could not, at the same time, preserve the level of discipline appropriate in peacetime or in wars against external enemies. Military discipline was always "the first virtue to fly" on the approach of civil war,⁹ as Tacitus recognised (*Tac. Hist.* 1,51). Military commanders in the wars of Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian learned to rule lightly or speedily learned their error. Claudius Julianus, commanding the Misenum fleet, simply allowed discipline to grow lax (*Tac. Hist.* 3,57). Minicius Justus, Flavian camp-prefect of VII Galbiana, had to be rescued from his own troops at Padua when he proved too strict a disciplinarian for civil war (*Tac. Hist.* 3,7). In such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising

⁷ Messer (above n. 1) 160.

⁸ For the idea that peacetime armies tend to create order, which in turn makes them ineffective in the disorder of the battlefield, see O. Jacobs, "Introduction to Section 4" in R. Gal and A. D. Mangelsdorff (eds.) *Handbook of Military Psychology*, Chichester 1991, 389–92.

⁹ B. W. Henderson, *Civil War and Rebellion in the Roman Empire, A.D. 69-70: A Companion to the "Histories" of Tacitus*, London 1908, 13.

that mutiny was popular. If it was relatively safe at other times, it was especially safe in the midst of civil war when even loyalty to whatever emperor the Senate had been persuaded to recognize could as easily be a vice as a virtue. The effects of these real problems should not be exaggerated; men mutinied, disobeyed orders, accused their officers of corruption or worse, and even attacked or killed them; but they also marched long distances, built camps, and fought battles.

For all his references to the inadequacies of ordinary soldiers, Tacitus was aware that their leaders suffered from inadequacies of their own.¹⁰ The problem of mutiny was worsened by a general failure in leadership. The legions of Upper Germany were left without effective leadership when Galba withdrew Verginius Rufus, whom they had considered as a possible new emperor (*Tac. Hist.* 1,8). The Vitellian legions, I Italica and XXI Rapax, were driven back on Cremona more by their lack of leadership than by the strength of their opponents (*Tac. Hist.* 3,18). The same lack of leadership contributed to their subsequent defeat in a decisive battle at Bedriacum, when it led to a ragged and broken formation that the Flavians were able to destroy (*Tac. Hist.* 3,25).

The rational mutineer

The relative safety of mutiny, while it might encourage the mutineers of the civil wars, does little to explain either the reasons for mutiny or the ways in which soldiers understood their actions. Perhaps the greatest difficulty standing in the way of understanding, however, is an attitude towards mob behaviour that links the ancient senatorial historians with modern ideas that have only recently been seriously questioned. In their modern guise, those ideas

¹⁰ See G. G. Mason, *CB* 60 (1984) 30–35 for ways in which Tacitus draws attention to the absence or failure of leadership.

derive from the social troubles of late nineteenth century France; in their ancient guise, with the analyses of Plutarch and Tacitus. In the simplest terms, while Plutarch and Tacitus blamed the instability or insanity of the troops, a theory of crowd behaviour, now more than a century old, hid the nature of mutiny – and other forms of crowd behaviour – under the supposed ruling position of a single crowd mind.

Ancient writers were generally inclined to put the blame for the mutinies of 69 AD firmly on the shoulders of the mutineers, whose mob behaviour was both source and result. For Plutarch, the troubles of the time were due less to the successive emperors and would-be emperors than to the greedy and licentious soldiers who subjected the empire to military forces that he considered both ignorant and irrational (ἄλογος) (Plut. *Galb.* 1,3-4). Plutarch is not alone in the accusation of irrationality. Tacitus records several instances when the soldiers, as he thought, gave way to impulses that had little or no connection with rationality, or even sanity.¹¹ At Divodorum, chief town of the Mediomatrici, Vitellian troops, he claims, were seized by a sudden panic, and began a massacre of innocent civilians. Tacitus rules out plunder as a motive and decides that the reason is a mystery, though it is evident that the soldiers were seized by some form of madness (Tac. *Hist.* 1,63). Flavian troops of VII Galbiana similarly fell into a needless panic on sighting a cavalry force that later turned out to be their own; though they could prove nothing against him, they cried for the execution of the

¹¹ However, see R. Ash, *Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories*, London 1999, 71 for the view that Tacitus, unlike Plutarch, saw a steady deterioration, with the level of irrationality reaching a peak with the Flavians.

unpopular legate of Pannonia, Tampius Flavianus.¹² Other Flavian troops, supposedly infected by a similar madness, shortly afterwards attacked Aponius Saturninus, leader of the Moesian army.¹³

In the late nineteenth century, something not far removed from Plutarch's theory of military mobs ruled by irrational impulse became the standard approach to crowd behaviour. In 1895, Gustav Le Bon introduced the notion of a collective mind that made the members of a crowd feel, think, and behave in ways quite different from the ways in which they would feel, think and behave when alone.¹⁴ For Le Bon, therefore, the "psychological crowd" was an entity whose human parts behaved like cells in a body to create something quite unlike the single cells. For a sociological theory, it has proved uncommonly resilient and still colours perceptions of crowd behaviour.¹⁵ If anything, Le Bon reduced the crowd to something less than the Tacitean mob. It may be that Tacitus "detests all mobs, civil or military,"¹⁶ and the Tacitean mob can often seem like something less than the worst of its parts; but it remains a

¹² Tac. *Hist.* 3,10. Flavianus was accused of having betrayed Otho and of embezzling a donative meant for the troops; but Tacitus evidently does not expect either accusation to be taken seriously. Indeed, accusations of this kind were frequent, and needed little justification.

¹³ Tac. *Hist.* 3,11. This time, the immediate cause was the appearance of letters supposedly written by Saturninus to the sitting emperor, Vitellius.

¹⁴ G. Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, Paris 1895.

¹⁵ For the continuing influence of Le Bon's views, see e.g. J. Drury and S. Reicher, *Journal of Social Issues* 65 (2009) 707–25. Drury and Reicher also emphasise the connection between crowd behaviour and power: the crowd may empower those who are individually powerless.

¹⁶ R. Syme, *Tacitus*, Oxford 1963, 531.

human mob nonetheless, however affected by supposed insanity.¹⁷ Le Bon's approach quite literally gave the mob a mind of its own, albeit not a very bright one, and effectively separated the behaviour of the mob from the ordinary aims and beliefs of its members. As long as that remarkably persistent model of crowd behaviour was accepted, there could be little reason to consider the values, aims, motives, or attitudes of its individual cells.

Recent theories of crowd behaviour, however, tend to restore the decision-making power of the individual and emphasise rational action over irrational submersion.¹⁸ Admittedly, the results of this rational action are not always remarkable, to the outsider, for their appearance of good sense; but with a fire behind and a tunnel in front it is hardly irrational to choose the tunnel, especially if you have first weighed the risk of being trampled to death against the certainty of burning. Seen in this light, apparent demonstrations of extreme and uncontrollable behaviour may turn out to be, if not less extreme, at least less uncontrolled. Even the worst mutinies may have their roots in the rational pursuit of the mutineers' wishes.

Those wishes, admittedly, could be insalubrious; but moral judgement is not in question here. It is unfortunate but evident that murder and pillage can be the work of sane people

¹⁷ Thus, Mason (above n. 10) 34 emphasises Tacitus' ability to see the soldiers composing the military mob as still "human even in their flaws".

¹⁸ Discussion of these theories is beyond the scope of this article; however, a good introduction to the subject may be found in C. McPhail, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd*, New York 1991. For the present purpose, what matters is the general agreement of these theories on the basis of crowd behavior in the interaction of rational people. See also R. Boudon, *Theories of Social Change: A Critical Appraisal*, Berkeley CA 1986, 52 for criticism of the tendency to see massed action as evidence of a lack of individual motivation.

following courses that are entirely rational given the premises on which they operate. In the confused circumstances of civil warfare, the premises were sometimes mistaken. The legitimate shipment of arms might be interpreted as a prelude to treason (Tac. *Hist.* 1,80); the evident greed of a general might lead to suspicions that he was hiding loot that should have been shared with his troops (Tac. *Hist.* 2,29). However, errors in premises – or disagreements over values – need not signify irrationality.¹⁹ The soldiers of 69 and 70 AD acted on the information available to them. The motives for their rational actions, while sometimes laudable, were often selfish or worse, but in the midst of civil war, feelings were bound to run high.

Discerning motives

Among the consequences of accepting a rational model for the behaviour of mutineers is the recognition that they can no longer be treated necessarily as a single, undifferentiated group. Mutineers acting under the influence of Le Bon's single crowd mind could be treated as a single unit. Once the persisting rationality of individual soldiers is recognised, their part in the crowd behaviour that forms a mutiny becomes not only voluntary but also directed by individual and possibly quite different concerns.

Some of the ordinary motives thought to govern the actions and attitudes of troops appear in a passage where Josephus describes arguments used to persuade them to support Vespasian's bid for power.²⁰ There are dangers involved in the use of speeches as evidence.

¹⁹ See e.g. D. Davidson, *Problems of Rationality*, Oxford 2004, 189.

²⁰ Joseph. *BJ* 4,592-600. For Ash (above n. 11) 56 this passage is designed to demonstrate, for the soldiers, "a sense of integrity and an ability to make moral judgments." It is unlikely

However, the speech Josephus reports need not be pure fiction. It suits the period and the circumstances, and, while the content is unlikely to be literally accurate, Josephus might have been present when speeches of this kind were made and could have been familiar with the arguments used. In the absence of better evidence, therefore, the speech recorded by Josephus may be taken as an indication of what was said, if not on this specific occasion, then more broadly at various times before Vespasian finally made his bid for power.²¹ It may be doubted whether much persuasion was required, but the troops were being asked to revolt against an emperor, however murky his claim to legitimacy might be.

The first item is simple jealousy of the soldiers in Rome and the easy life they lead in Italy while others grow old in war. They are condemned for making emperors in hope of gain, but it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the hope of gain, while being condemned in others, is simultaneously offered as an inducement. It would have been senseless not to mention the possibility. Safety is also a concern, relieved by pointing out the size of the forces available to Vespasian as well as the useful fact that Vespasian already has members of his own family in Rome. Possession of Rome, in spite of the creation of emperors elsewhere, still counted for something. Thus far, self interest; but Josephus also includes arguments that affect Rome as a whole. That Vespasian was a better choice than Vitellius was not difficult to argue; and his possession of an adult son, Titus, an effective commander capable of earning the support and affection of his troops (Tac. *Hist.* 2,5; 5,1), was an additional benefit likely to be important in

that they were all so virtuous; but concern for the fate of Rome is surely realistic, even if it is only a minority interest.

²¹ Josephus should have had little reason to distort these pro-Flavian arguments; it must be admitted, however, that his account of the troops persuading Vespasian to take the throne (*BJ* 4,601-4) surely reflects either naivety or distortion on his part.

Roman eyes. The final point suggests a gap in the troops' understanding of realities: they are told that if they do not act, the Senate may impose another emperor, though the Senate, in practice, had long been more imposed upon than imposing.²² Later, according to Tacitus, Vespasian's supporter, Gaius Licinius Mucianus, claimed that Vitellius intended to move the Syrian legions to Germany (Tac. *Hist.* 2,80), an effective threat since XII Fulminata and VI Ferrata had been in Syria for decades and hoped to remain there.²³ It hardly mattered whether there was any truth in the assertion. If the soldiers, and the local people with whom they had formed close ties over the years, could be made to believe it, they would have a personal interest in the war against Vitellius.

The motives suggested by Josephus and Tacitus cover a wide range, from the simple promise of loot, through references to safety and comfort, to pleas on behalf of Rome and its need for good government. They thus suggest a range of motivation and a diversity of wishes and opinions among ordinary soldiers, to which the speeches were supposed to appeal. Some were expected to be moved only by thoughts of looting, others by promises that this would be a relatively safe war, in which they would face only limited opposition from a weak enemy. Others would be most interested in the promise that they would be allowed, after the fatigue of the campaign, to return to the familiar and comfortable quarters to which they had become

²² P. A. Brunt, *CQ* 34 (1984) 423–44.

²³ See G. E. F. Chilver, *JRS* 47 (1957) 29–35 for the close relations between the Syrian legions and local peoples, as well as doubts about the existence of similar relations elsewhere. For some possible effects of local sympathy, however, see Ash (above n. 11) 49 on the possibility that familiarity with the region and with native officers would make it easier for Roman legions to accept the Gallic Empire.

used. Others still, though perhaps only a minority, were expected to react well to the promise that they would serve Rome well by giving it, in Vespasian, the best emperor available.

Diversity of opinion is implied also by the manner in which officers often survived attacks that ought to have been murderous in consequence as well as intent. Minicius Justus, camp prefect of the seventh legion, had to be rescued from his own troops when his standard of discipline exceeded what was feasible in the midst of a civil war (Tac. *Hist.* 3,7). If Tacitus really means that all the troops in the legion were intent on murder, one is forced to ask how any rescue was possible. However incensed the troops may have been, the attack on Minicius Justus was surely the work of a small minority, easily dissuaded, and perhaps not dreadfully murderous to begin with. Again, when the Vitellian general, Valens, was attacked, the troops first stoned him and then chased him as he fled from them (Tac. *Hist.* 2,29). A man who was seriously stoned by even a fraction of the troops under Valens' command should have died,²⁴ and yet Valens apparently escaped from all of his pursuers, and, when things calmed down, emerged unhurt from his hiding place. It is difficult to believe that a determined attack by a large body of professional soldiers could lead to such feeble results. It might be more accurate to say that a few soldiers drove Valens off with stones, perhaps without even intending serious harm. If nothing else, such incidents suggest that statements apparently referring to large bodies of troops cannot always be taken at face value.

Given the range of motives demonstrated by mutinous troops, it would be unwise to assume that all mutineers, in a given situation, were necessarily acting in consort. The most

²⁴ See Plut. *Sull.* 9 for the stoning to death of some military tribunes. A modern stoning (still legal in some parts of the world) can attract a large crowd, but a handful of active participants suffices to carry out the sentence even when the condemned person is not first buried up to the neck.

rational of people can disagree with each other, even violently, when motives they consider evidently correct are resisted. Such a disagreement probably lies behind the mutinous outbreak that followed Otho's suicide. The motive supplied by Tacitus is simply emotional: the troops were stricken by grief and could not make up their minds about their demands. At one moment they wanted to make an emperor of Verginius Rufus; the next moment they wanted him to negotiate for them with the Vitellian generals Valens and Caecina (Tac. *Hist.* 2,51). It sounds like extreme indecisiveness or even panic, in impossible circumstances. However, Dio adds the curious detail that many soldiers were killed when they took to fighting with each other (Dio 64,15,2b). If Tacitus' estimate of the troops' motives is accepted, this can only be an extreme reaction to grief and panic. However, rather than see a single mass of indecisive soldiers unable to decide between surrender and the acclamation of a new emperor, it might be better to think in terms of two opposing groups whose differing views led first to verbal argument and then to violence. In the end, Verginius Rufus ended the hopes of those who wished to follow a new emperor by leaving (Tac. *Hist.* 2,51). His departure left his supporters with no realistic candidate and agreement on surrender followed.

For better or worse, the incident demonstrates the level of enthusiasm that might arise among the soldiers of the civil wars. Military enthusiasm sometimes led troops to demand action in the face of their commanders' less aggressive approach. Otho's praetorians grew restive at Placentia in March 69, and threatened to kill their general, Vestricius Spurinna because they thought they were wasting time that would be better spent in battle.²⁵ In a similar outbreak, Vitellian troops under Caecina mutinied because many of them remained

²⁵ Tac. *Hist.* 2,18-19. In spite of their elite status, the guard cohorts had little acquaintance with warfare and the mutiny was easily quelled by introducing them to some practical soldiering: a long march followed by the unfamiliar work of constructing a camp.

unused in the indecisive battle of Ad Castores (Tac. *Hist.* 2,26). In both cases, the actions taken by the soldiers suggest that they acted out of enthusiasm, albeit an enthusiasm little affected by appreciation of the military situation.²⁶ It was strongly affected, however, by the soldiers' inability fully to trust their leaders.

Distrust and suspicion

In addition to the seemingly diverse views entertained by individual soldiers and groups of soldiers, another element must be considered: the inability of those involved always to trust each other. Sometimes suspicion was justified, sometimes not; in the circumstances of civil war, it was likely to be particularly difficult to know. Justified or otherwise, suspicion and distrust were likely to provide some of the premises on which the rational conclusions of the soldiery were based and, in the midst of civil war, with its inevitable doubts about loyalty, it should not cause surprise that some distrust existed between the troops and their leaders. That problem was common among the forces directly involved in the struggles between the emperors and would-be emperors, though it was Otho's praetorians who displayed it most convincingly, by murdering a tribune and offering to complete their work by murdering senators. The praetorian tribune Varius Crispinus unfortunately decided to move some weapons at night from the praetorian barracks, seeing which some vigilant (or drunk) Praetorians decided that he was arming men for an attack on Otho and proceeded to kill him,

²⁶ See G. Morgan, *69 A.D. The Year of Four Emperors*, Oxford 2006, 121. Morgan excuses Caecina because he was attempting to withdraw from battle rather than to continue it. Enthusiastic soldiers, watching what must have seemed a worryingly slow movement of reinforcements, evidently understood the situation differently.

together with two centurions who supported him.²⁷ From the very beginning of Otho's reign, the soldiers who helped him to seize power had been anxious to keep him away from his officers.²⁸ Distrust of officers and other sources of authority provided the premises for the conclusions and actions that followed. Convinced now that treason was afoot, they attacked the palace, where they threatened officers and senators alternately and finally demanded a free hand to deal with all of them (Tac. *Hist.* 1,82). The distrust felt by the Praetorians had become a significant danger, from which only Otho's personal intervention could rescue the intended victims. The following morning, Otho confirmed the banishment of discipline by thanking the soldiers for their loyalty; only two men were punished. The distrust underlying the outbreak remained.

Rational action does not cease to be rational because it is based upon false premises, which the period abundantly offered. The selection of senators as victims reflected an understandable, though mistaken, belief that the Senate represented a real source of authority and a genuine threat to the emperor. Senators were similarly threatened after Otho's defeat at Bedriacum, when they were again in danger from soldiers who suspected them of hostility to Otho and wanted only an excuse to massacre them (Tac. *Hist.* 2,52). In reality, they could neither support nor oppose and were too frightened either to change sides openly or to seem unduly loyal. It was only when they were assured of Otho's preparations for suicide that they felt ready to declare their unanimous support for Vitellius (Tac. *Hist.* 2,53). Given that they

²⁷ Plut. *Otho* 3,3-4. That the soldiers were drunk is suggested by Tacitus, who thought that the prospect of looting also appealed to the worst among them (*Hist.* 1,80).

²⁸ Tac. *Hist.* 1,36. The soldiers may have valid reasons for acting so; Sempronius Densus, who died trying to protect the outgoing emperor, Galba, from his killers, was one of their centurions.

saw cause to suspect the senators, the troops were not being irrational; they were, however, led astray by a false premise about the power of their intended victims. The Senate suffered from a split between reality and perceptions. In reality, it was powerless, in the face of military events, to do much more than joyously proclaim each new emperor that the warring armies thrust upon it. Its reputation, however, had not sunk, in all quarters, to the level of its true influence. At a suitable distance, it could still look "grander to outward view" than it really was²⁹. Ordinary soldiers could be excused for believing in senatorial power when their most senior officers came from the senatorial class and when the letters SPQR on their standards continued to proclaim the empire of the Senate and People of Rome even as they fought for the empire of Otho, Vitellius, or Vespasian.

The troops' exaggerated opinion of senatorial power could be useful as well as dangerous. When the German legions mutinied against Galba, they exchanged their oath to the emperor for one to the Senate and People. It was a short-lived solution, and no doubt intended as such, at least by those officers who supported the mutiny (Tac. *Hist.* 1,55), but that need not imply that the troops did not see it as a serious commitment. Galba had declared himself the General of the Senate and People of Rome;³⁰ and Verginius Rufus, after defeating the Gallic rebel, Vindex, had also made use of the rights of the Senate when his troops tried, against his will, to push him into the competition for imperial power (Plut. *Galb.* 10,2). With such encouragement, it was perhaps natural that the ordinary soldier should treat the Senate as a powerful body, to be taken seriously both as ally and as potential enemy.

²⁹ Brunt (above n. 22) 424.

³⁰ Plut. *Galb.* 5,2. Appeals to the Senate and People of Rome were fairly frequent; in difficult times, it could be useful to fall back on "the interim government of the senate and people" (D. C. A. Shotter, *CQ* 17 (1967) 370–81, 372, n. 8.).

Once the struggle for Nero's legacy had begun, the soldiery were bound to become the objects of persuasion on all sides, while the divided loyalties inevitable in civil war repeatedly gave them reason - justified or otherwise - to doubt the loyalty and trustworthiness of supposed friends. Though it was evident among the Vitellians prior to their defeat by Vespasian, distrust ran particularly deep among the Othonians in the approach to their own earlier defeat. This may have been due at least in part to the circumstance that Otho owed his position to a handful of well-bribed ordinary soldiers rather than to the ambitious commanders who were the usual culprits behind the elevation of a new emperor. Tacitus is indulging in exaggeration when he claims that the transfer of power was handled by a pair of ordinary soldiers (Tac. *Hist.* 1,25), but the exaggeration is not excessive. The conspirators could have achieved little by force alone. That they succeeded was due in part to Otho's careful gifts to soldiers, deserving or otherwise;³¹ but Galba himself had helped the cause with his stinginess and severity.³²

However, one effect of this revolution from below was to make Othonian officers suspect in the eyes of the ordinary soldiers, who found it difficult to believe in their loyalty to an emperor who owed so much to the rank and file. It was for this reason that they anxiously kept Otho separated from the tribunes and centurions while he threw kisses at the growing mass of his supporters (Tac. *Hist.* 1,36). It was not a promising start to a reign that would

³¹ Plut. *Galb.* 20,4; Tac. *Hist.* 1,23; 1,24; Suet. *Otho* 4,2. Morgan (above n. 26) 58 doubts whether Otho's generosity began as part of a plan to replace Galba, believing that it might have been merely preparation for his expected succession to the older man's position. In the event, however, deliberately or otherwise, the gifts proved to be valuable investments in advance of Otho's seizure of power.

³² Tac. *Hist.* 1,31;1,87; Dio 64,3.1-2; Plut. *Galb.* 15,3-4; Suet. *Galb.* 16.

shortly descend into civil war, especially when Otho agreed with the troops' estimate of their generals and thus undermined their authority and that of their officers (Tac. *Hist.* 2,33). The generals repaid his distrust with generalship so poor that Suetonius Paulinus and Licinius Proculus could later claim before Vitellius that they had deliberately wrecked the Othonian campaign (Tac. *Hist.* 2,60), incidentally validating the doubts of so many Othonian soldiers. On the Vitellian side, only Valens among the senior officers continued to serve his emperor when sense and self-interest would have suggested a change of allegiance, and he paid for his stubborn loyalty with his life (Tac. *Hist.* 3,62). His erstwhile partner and rival, Caecina, was more fortunate and survived until his taste for conspiracy led to his being killed on Titus' orders in AD 79.³³

Though the troops might sometimes be mistaken, as they were in the case of Crispinus, their suspicions were not always unfounded; nor were their subsequent actions always thoughtless or inappropriate. At times, their actions, while technically mutinous, could also be rational and justifiable – even admirable. This aspect of civil war mutiny was evident, for instance, in October 69, when the Vitellian general Aulus Caecina conspired to hand over his soldiers to the Flavians. The Vitellian troops initially agreed to desert, but soon changed their minds. They attacked Caecina and, having been persuaded by the tribunes that they should not kill him, arrested him instead.³⁴ Tacitus does not mention the interference of the tribunes, but the subsequent actions that he describes suggest that officers accepted the justice of the

³³ Suet. *Tit.* 6,2; Dio 66,16.3-4.

³⁴ Joseph. *BJ.* 4,639-641. Josephus thought the motive for their change of heart was the suspicion that Vitellius might win the civil war after all. The Flavian supporter Josephus, though, had no reason to think well of men who had first deserted to Vespasian and then reverted to Vitellius.

mutiny and may even have been directly involved. Having mutinied against their general, the troops proceeded to select Fabius Fabullus, legate of the fifth legion, and the camp prefect Cassius Longus, as their leaders (Tac. *Hist.* 3,14). This was not the action of an irresponsible rabble, nor even a general mutiny of soldiers against their officers. In fact, the troops immediately began a long march to Cremona, covering, according to Wellesley's calculation, some thirty miles on the last day.³⁵ Tacitus believed that the soldiers' main motive was pride: they were not prepared to suffer the shame of giving up the emperor without a fight (Tac. *Hist.* 3,13). Tacitus was no habitual admirer of the common soldier and this acceptance of a laudable motive for their actions is not to be lightly dismissed.

The safety of the Gallic Empire

The final stage and immediate aftermath of civil strife demonstrated how rational soldiers, regardless of other peoples' perceptions of their conduct, could find it reasonable to give up their existing allegiance to Rome and adapt themselves instead to the service of Rome's enemies. In part, this action stemmed from the difficulty, at such a time, of identifying friends and enemies with any certainty. While civil conflict moved towards Flavian victory in Italy, Julius Civilis, a Batavian with royal blood in his veins and long experience as a commander of Roman auxiliary forces, began an uprising, which he claimed was intended to hold down Vitellian troops and thus help the Flavian cause.³⁶ By the end of the year, Vitellius was dead, and Civilis dropped all pretence of supporting Vespasian (Tac. *Hist.* 4,54). The Batavians

³⁵ K. Wellesley, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, London 2000, 141.

³⁶ The Flavian general, Antonius Primus, went along with Civilis so far as to send him a letter encouraging his work, and encouragement came also from Hordeonius Flaccus, legate of Upper Germany (Tac. *Hist.* 4,13).

were joined in revolt by Gallic forces led by Julius Classicus, Julius Tutor and Julius Sabinus, Romanized Gauls who wished to create a Gallic empire on what appeared to be the ruins of Roman power. By the time the forces of Quintus Petillius Cerialis arrived, a Roman garrison had been destroyed, two Roman generals had been murdered, and Roman legions had allowed mutiny to slide into treason by swearing to serve the Gallic Empire.

Since the soldiers of the Rhine army were Vitellians, their principle enemies, for the time, were the Flavians, serving what they could only see as a false emperor in Vespasian. It was unfortunate that senior officers chose, rather too early, to demonstrate their shift of allegiance to the forthcoming winner of the struggle. Soldiers whose allegiance had not changed could rationally identify those officers as enemies. One result of this was that some of his own troops hauled Flaccus from his bed and murdered him (*Tac. Hist.* 4,36). Hordeonius Flaccus had early seen the advantage of switching his support from Vitellius to Vespasian, but when he and his officers had their troops swear loyalty to Vespasian, the event was less impressive than intended. A few men no doubt, spoke the name clearly enough, but their voices were drowned under the mumbles of the majority (*Tac. Hist.* 4,31). Discontent was allowed to slumber for a while, but then the men heard that Vitellius had sent money for a donative, which they demanded. A commander with more understanding of his troops might have given them the money without further comment; but Hordeonius Flaccus insisted on following his changed allegiance by handing it over in the name of Vespasian (*Tac. Hist.* 4,36). Since Vitellius was still living, the troops were not being entirely unreasonable if they saw this as treason. The tribunes had saved Caecina from a similar fate when he tried to deliver his forces to Vespasian (*Joseph. BJ* 4,639-641), but Caecina could be an effective and sometimes even a popular general. Flaccus was neither, and in this case, the tribunes were probably wise to be quiet. The memory of that reluctant oath to Vespasian was fresh enough to be troublesome and discretion would recommend the safer course.

There was less excuse for the murder of Vocula; by the time of his murder, Vitellius was dead and there could be no treason in his serving Vespasian. But he stood in the way of what could easily seem the rational way out for men who had lost the object of their loyalty and needed a viable replacement. According to Tacitus, the troops hated Vespasian so much that they would rather serve outsiders (*Tac. Hist.* 4,54). The removal of Vocula would make that easier, though he might have survived had he not made himself unpopular by his severity.³⁷ Despite their dislike for him, Vocula's soldiers took no direct part in his murder (*Tac. Hist.* 4,59), but even the least disaffected were apparently willing to look the wrong way when the murderer appeared. With the deed done, Classicus could enter the camp, in the garb of a Roman general, and receive the oath of allegiance to the Gallic Empire.

For men who wished to survive, for whom loyalty to Vitellius was no longer realistic, and for whom the prospect of serving Vespasian was still distasteful, Classicus offered a rational and acceptable way out of their problems. Roman commanders were supposed to prefer death to dishonour, and Dilius Vocula had both refused to escape before he was murdered and been prevented from suicide only by the entreaties of his freedmen and slaves (*Tac. Hist.* 4,59). But the commanders of Roman legions were men with family reputations to think of. The ordinary soldier had less need to fear the disgrace of survival. Indeed, the Roman camp, rebuilt, if necessary, day after day in the course of a campaign, openly offered troops "a place to run away to, when the order was given that running away had suddenly become the Roman

³⁷ *Tac. Hist.* 4,27. Vocula first put to death a soldier whom Flaccus had merely imprisoned; after which the troops still wanted Vocula to lead them - though the desire may have been less universal than Tacitus claims (*Tac. Hist.* 4,25). Later, however, Vocula executed several more men in what by then was a hopeless effort to restore discipline (*Tac. Hist.* 4,27).

thing to do."³⁸ In normal circumstances, peer pressure might have operated to keep the less enthusiastic soldiers in place, but circumstances were far from normal. The large-scale movement of troops from the Rhine into Italy had left those who remained vulnerable to attack from enemies who found, in the burning of the temple of Jupiter Best and Greatest during a struggle between Vitellians and Flavians, the final vindication for their belief in the imminent collapse of Rome (Tac. *Hist.* 4,54). There was little hope of aid from the South; Vespasian was too unpopular to inspire loyalty; and mutiny soon progressed to murder. The enthusiasts now were those who wanted to join the Gallic Empire.

It might have been otherwise. Very different, and even opposite behaviours, could result from equally rational considerations, and this was demonstrated by other Vitellian soldiers still stationed on the Rhine. In the north, Vetera still held out, but only just. A camp originally designed to hold two legions was now occupied only by those remnants of V Alaudae and XV Primigenia that had not followed Vitellius to Italy. Civilis had suggested that the garrison might join him and his Batavians in swearing an oath to support Vespasian, but was met with the answer that they already had an emperor in Vitellius, whom they intended to serve to the death (Tac. *Hist.* 4,21). They may also have found the Batavian Civilis a more difficult ally to accept than the Gallic leaders. Besieged, relieved, and besieged again, the troops at Vetera held out for several months, surviving in the end on roots, shrubs, and grass, before they finally surrendered. Promised safety, they left the fort, but were allowed to march only a few miles before they were attacked and slaughtered. At this point Tacitus complains that they had finally ruined their reputations by agreeing to give their allegiance to the Gallic Empire (Tac. *Hist.* 4,60). It seems a harsh judgement on men who had held on for so long, in such circumstances; but it was intended, perhaps, to suggest a comparison with other Roman

³⁸ W. J. Tatum, *Always I Am Caesar*, Malden MA and Oxford 2008, 49.

soldiers, watching events from outside the walls of Vetera: representatives of the legions that had already sworn allegiance to the Gallic Empire in easier circumstances. In practice, the men at Vetera, who had rationally chosen to support their officers in resistance as long as resistance was feasible, now chose, on equally rational grounds, to support the decision to surrender, even on what Tacitus and others might consider disgraceful terms. That their surrender led to the wrong result was due to perfidy on the part of their enemies, rather than any lack of rationality on the part of the garrison at Vetera.

Attitudes of the mutineers

Rationality alone leads nowhere. Hume claimed that reason "is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."³⁹ In a period of civil war, it was natural that the passions should sometimes run hot, but occasional bouts of seemingly uncontrolled behaviour could mask the purpose as well as the application of rationality. The troops who mutinied through and beyond the Year of Four Emperors were acting out of wishes and attitudes that, while not always admirable, were nonetheless usually understandable and not exceptionally marked by foolishness.

Most troops apparently thought it right and proper that a general should enrich himself, but not at the expense of his troops, whose loyalty would quickly vanish if they thought he was keeping too much to himself.⁴⁰ It was suspicion of this kind of unfairness that sent soldiers prodding the ground in search of hidden gold after driving off the notoriously greedy Valens (Tac. *Hist.* 2,29). The failure of the search, by demonstrating his innocence, no doubt helped to make his safe return welcome.

³⁹ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol. 2, London 1739-40, 248.

⁴⁰ J. Elmore, *CJ* 20 (1925) 430–32.

Though the acquisition of plunder was ubiquitous and readily accepted, civil war in Italy raised, at least in theory, the question of whether Roman cities could be plundered. However, perhaps relatively few soldiers believed strongly that they could not; the rest acted in accordance with a natural desire to improve their financial position. According to Dio, its defeated Vitellian defenders joined the victorious Flavians in burning and plundering Cremona (Dio 65,15). Despite the convention that Romans could not be enslaved, soldiers at Cremona took prisoners all the same and, when ordered to release them, butchered a few instead, which encouraged the families of the survivors to find ransom money (Tac. *Hist.* 3,34). The rational, though hardly admirable, application of force achieved its desired end. When the Flavians reached Rome, Antonius Primus tried to delay entry into the city because he feared that his troops, after recent fighting, would not trouble to show respect to civilians or senators and might even attack shrines and temples.⁴¹ He was right. After the spoils of Cremona, they would not refuse the spoils of Rome.

Most soldiers seem to have believed firmly in loyalty and considered it a sound basis for their actions. Throughout the civil wars, soldiers tended to be more reliably loyal than their officers were,⁴² and reacted strongly when they suspected those officers of disloyalty or treason. Loyalty to Otho went to extremes when soldiers chose to join him in suicide (Tac. *Hist.* 2,49), but even Vitellius, in spite of his faults, managed to achieve a similarly devoted following. This was no doubt helped by memories of his friendly and generous behaviour during his short period as legate of Lower Germany (Suet. *Vit.* 7-8), which absence preserved

⁴¹ Tac. *Hist.* 3,82. Tacitus claims that the troops' anger was due to a suspicion that postponing the entry into Rome delayed their victory, but their idea of victory could easily include the kind of behaviour that Antonius Primus feared.

⁴² See e.g. Morgan (above n. 26) 6.

undimmed; but loyalty to Vitellius evidently persisted in soldiers whose personal knowledge of the emperor was slight at best. Indeed, the persistent devotion of Vitellian troops in the face of the defeat and death of "their" emperor suggests loyalty to an image or idea, little affected by the reality of plentiful human failings.

The fate of Galba, however, suggests that loyalty was at least partly based upon the expectation of reciprocity. Galba had done everything possible to ensure the failure of his side of the bargain. On approaching Rome, he butchered a gathering of sailors who wished to be confirmed in the legionary status that Nero had promised them; then he increased the butchery by decimating the survivors.⁴³ He followed this pointless massacre by refusing to pay the donative promised on his behalf by the murdered praetorian prefect Nymphidius Sabinus, stating bluntly that it was his habit to levy soldiers rather than buy them.⁴⁴ Galba could hardly be accused of determined loyalty to his soldiers, and few could have felt that they owed much loyalty in return. His own legion, VII Galbiana, might have supported him, but it had been sent to Pannonia. Sempronius Densus, who died to protect him, did more for his own posthumous reputation than for the doomed emperor. There were exceptions to his failure, but Galba had only a limited ability to inspire loyalty; and since they could not feel loyal to him, his troops had reason on their side when they chose to abandon him.

Closely allied to the question of loyalty was that of oaths and their supposedly binding nature. Soldiers took oaths seriously; otherwise, they need not have muttered the name of Vespasian, as they had earlier muttered that of Galba (Tac. *Hist.* 1,55). They could have spoken the detested name aloud and then quietly forgotten that they had promised anything.

⁴³ Dio 64,3,1-2. Tacitus (*Hist.* 1,6) claims that the initial massacre shocked even those who carried it out.

⁴⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 1,5; Suet. *Galba* 16,1.

Admittedly, oaths did not always last. When discontent with Galba passed into mutiny, the legions in Germany swore allegiance to the Senate and People of Rome, but that oath was soon replaced with one to Vitellius. For Tacitus, the speedy adoption of an oath to Vitellius meant that the initial oath was meaningless,⁴⁵ but that need not necessarily follow. The oath to Senate and People allowed the troops to feel that they were loyal to something, even if it was not the current emperor. That temporary oath, even if not entirely realistic, was nonetheless rational; it served a useful purpose for those who gave it, even if it had little value for those to whom it was given.

The later oath to serve the Gallic Empire was also replaced, this time with a fresh oath to Rome, as soon as the affected legions were united with the forces of Petilius Cerialis. It was clearly expedient, at times, to combine belief in the validity of oaths with a sensible, rational acceptance of their possible impermanence. The oath to the Gallic Empire may not have been immensely popular, but survival demanded it and some of the troops involved might even have agreed with their Gallic masters that the burning of the temple of Jupiter Best and Greatest signalled the end of Roman dominion.⁴⁶ Living to fight for a possibly viable Gallic Empire could seem a reasonable alternative to dying for a Roman Empire approaching its ruin. The final test - fighting for the Gallic Empire against Roman enemies who had after all survived their promised destruction - never came about, and perhaps few ever believed that it

⁴⁵ Tac. *Hist.* 1,57. It may have meant little to many or most of the officers, but that would not necessarily prevent ordinary soldiers from taking it seriously. Also, an oath given to an emperor might be seen as extending rather than replacing an oath to Senate and People.

⁴⁶ Tacitus writes of Gallic claims that Roman power was coming to an end as a result of superstitious Druidism (Tac. *Hist.* 4,54) but superstition was hardly alien to Roman soldiers (e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 1,28 on the effects of a lunar eclipse).

would. It was significant that, in spite of their oaths to the Gallic Empire, they were sent south to Augusta Trevirorum, where they remained, unused, until the army of Petilius Cerialis arrived, when it was time for another, less reluctant oath to Vespasian.

Most soldiers took pride in their professional skills and expected those skills to be used effectively; it was the impression that they were not being used to good effect that caused the mutiny against Caecina at Ad Castores. Until decisively defeated in battle or forced to surrender, as the defenders of Vetera were, by impossible circumstances, ordinary soldiers in the civil wars tended to favour action over inaction and battle over submission (Tac. *Hist.* 2,18; 2,26). Sometimes those preferences were troublesome to their officers, as when the praetorians of Vestricius Spurinna insisted on action rather than remaining at Placentia (Tac. *Hist.* 2,18-19), or when some of Otho's supporters refused to give in even after his death (Tac. *Hist.* 2,51). Nonetheless, enthusiasm was more likely to be a virtue than a defect, and occasional mutiny was perhaps not an impossible price for its value in better circumstances. Professional pride and enthusiasm need not imply a blind love of battle; eagerness to put their skills to use could exist alongside a distaste for the horrors of civil war and the inglorious business of slaughtering fellow Romans (Tac. *Hist.* 3,25). Ordinary soldiers were perhaps less troubled than their officers by thoughts of military glory. Even Cicero, at his most bellicose hardly a thoughtless warmonger, recommended that young men should try to win glory through military service (Cic. *Off.* 2,45), but these were men who could expect to convert military glory into status and influence. For the ordinary soldier, military glory was perhaps a minority interest, a fine thing for those with ambitions to carry a centurion's vine-rod but less attractive than survival to those whose ambitions were centred on their retirement prospects.

Conclusions

The soldiers of the Year of Four Emperors were not always remarkable for the strength of their moral principles, but even their worst behaviour, for all its seeming senselessness, could derive from the rational pursuit of their aims and rational insistence on matters that they considered important. They did not always agree among themselves, but some common sources of action may be discerned, not wholly foolish in spite of their sometimes unfortunate results.

In long years devoted to military service, soldiers developed strong views about how that service should be handled. Some of their attitudes they may have learned from their officers; but it was not the officers who taught them to insist on loyalty to a doomed emperor long after the officers themselves had seen the sense of changing sides. Nor is it likely that officers taught them to distinguish between oaths that must be kept and oaths that could be discarded or modified. That choice was not intended for the ordinary soldier, who insisted on making it nonetheless, usually in pursuit of his own aims.

Mutiny gave the ordinary soldier the means of pressing other claims, reflecting attitudes and motives that he considered important. He accepted the ordinary risks of his profession, but he preferred not to have his life or his skills wasted by a thoughtless or inconsiderate commander; nor would he accept the diminution of his rewards by a greedy one. If he was expected to demonstrate loyalty, then so should his commanders and officers; and mutiny was the common means of demonstrating the soldier's disgust with a commander, like Caecina, who failed to live up to the proper standards.

Mutiny, however, was also the means by which soldiers argued and fought out their own disagreements. There were no doubt as many shades of opinion in any group of mutinous soldiers as among striking workers of modern times, and those disagreements, at their worst, could lead to ferocious acts of violence. Even when soldiers appear to act in consort it is advisable to question their apparent agreement, often a product of the ancient - and modern -

tendency to diminish individual and group differences or reduce them to simple dichotomies: better and worse; loyal and disloyal, wise and witless. Any fair-sized gathering of mutineers, each rationally, if not always wisely, following his personal interests, could be all those things at once, and more besides.