Augustan Era Policy on the Rhine Frontier from 34 B.C.E.-16 C.E.

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A B S T R A C T

According to the view of certain historians, military affairs in the Roman Empire were conducted according to an intentional and centrally controlled “Grand Strategy.” Whether or not such an empire-wide strategy existed is highly debatable. As a result of this uncertainty, the question of provincial strategy arises; was there a consistent strategy on the provincial level? This paper addresses that question by means of a case study of the province of Germania during the reign of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. I argue that there was indeed no such coherent “German Policy” during the reign of Augustus, but rather a series of policies, each with different objectives based on changing conditions.

F A C U L T Y M E N T O R

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Kyle’s fascination with military policy and foreign relations under Augustus emerged in his senior history seminar in the fall of 2007. His decision to focus on the defeat of Varus under the emperor Augustus meant that he was addressing one of the most vexed moments in this emperor’s rule. How could the Romans be defeated by the Germans whom they had just conquered? Kyle’s research into the ancient sources and archaeological evidence enabled him to construct a largely negative argument against those who would see a “Grand Strategy” for the Roman empire under Augustus. Kyle’s ability to argue against this line of analysis led him to read closely the ancient sources and made for several searching discussions about the nature of historical narratives and the ways of approaching evidence. It became increasingly evident that Kyle had not only a passion, but real abilities in pursuing problems in ancient history. I am pleased that he will go on to a graduate program in ancient history at UCR where he can pursue these and other issues.

A U T H O R

Kyle McStay
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Kyle McStay is a graduating senior with a double major in History and Classical Studies. His main areas of interest are the later Roman Empire and, more generally, the Roman military system. In particular, Kyle is interested in the Christianization of the empire and its effects on political, military, and social frameworks; Roman military history, especially the way in which major military disasters affected the political history of the empire; and the history of the Eastern Roman Empire after the fall of the West, an area he believes to be frequently underplayed or ignored outright in many history programs. In fall of 2008, Kyle will continue his studies in graduate school here at UCR.
During the last three decades it has been forcefully argued, most notably by Edward Luttwak, that Roman military affairs during the imperial period were conducted according to a “Grand Strategy.” This system envisages an intentionally planned and unified set of strategic principles controlled by the emperor, by which all tactical operations were governed. Whether or not such a system actually existed, or indeed, whether such a system could have functioned at all due to the vast size of the Empire, the dubious state of available geographic knowledge, and the relatively slow speed at which information and troops traveled in antiquity, remains highly suspect. While the existence of an empire-wide strategic policy continues to be hotly debated, even the existence of a unified strategic policy on the provincial level is a question that is still controversial and largely unexplored.

What follows is an attempt to address that question by means of a case study of the province of Germania between 34 B.C.E. and 16 C.E. During that period, no less than seventeen campaigns were conducted in the Rhineland by the legates of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, or members of his family against numerous Gallic and Germanic tribes. To characterize these campaigns as being the result of a preconceived policy designed specifically to expand imperial territory by incorporating Germania into the Empire is inaccurate. Such a view fails to take into account the relationship between Gaul and Germany. Also, such a view demonstrates a fundamental misconception of the nature of the Rhine River itself in Roman strategic thought. Without an understanding of these complex relationships, it is impossible to understand Augustus’ “German Policy,” which was in fact not a single policy at all, but was rather a set of several distinct yet interrelated strategies. Each of these strategies was reactionary in nature; all were based on particular sets of conditions and were designed to produce distinct results.

Augustus’ first two strategies in the Rhineland were motivated by the need to ensure internal stability in Gaul. Germanic tribes from both sides of the Rhine frequently invaded Gaul; however, the Germanic tribes often came not to raid, but to assist Gallic tribes rebelling from Roman control. As such, Gallic security was linked to controlling these Germanic tribes. This Germanic assistance in Gallic uprisings was the primary motivating factor for many of the campaigns across the Rhine during this period. Between 31 and 28 B.C.E. three Gallic tribes, the Morini, Treviri, and the Aquitani revolted, each with assistance from Germanic tribes from across the Rhine. This forced Marcus Agrippa, who had been commissioned to put down the revolts, to campaign on both sides of the river. Agrippa was again posted to Gaul in 20-19 B.C.E., as according to Cassius Dio, one of our best sources for these events, “…the inhabitants were not only quarrelling among themselves, but were being harassed by the Germans.” This was a familiar situation; Augustus placed great importance on the region, as is evidenced by the fact that he assigned Agrippa, his most able and trusted lieutenant, to subdue both Gallic uprisings.

Up to this date, Augustus’ policy of retaliating against specific tribes that had committed specific offenses had not proved to be a deterrent against invading Gallic territory. In 17-16 B.C.E. three Germanic tribes, the Sugambri, Usipetes, and the Tencteri crossed the Rhine and inflicted a defeat upon Marcus Lollius, which was severe enough, according to the Roman historian Velleius Paterculus, to cause Legio V Alaudae to lose its eagle standard, though it was subsequently returned. After this defeat, Augustus himself hurried to the Rhine to take command, but by the time he arrived the Germans had retreated back across the river, and had decided to make peace. Augustus’ personal intervention shows how serious he considered this event to be.

The Emperor did not return to Rome until 13 B.C.E. The defeat of Lollius clearly advertised the failure of his policy of limited retaliation, and his reaction to this failure was a significant alteration of his previous strategy. His new policy would be aggressive, and would consist of yearly, preemptive invasions across the Rhine. Just as the previous strategy was aimed at securing Gallic stability by punishing those Germanic tribes that had either participated in Gallic rebellions or had invaded and plundered Roman controlled territory, the new strategy was aimed at ensuring Gallic stability by intimidating and subduing the Germanic tribes across the Rhine, thereby eliminating them as possible threats to Roman control of Gaul; though the goal was the same, the methods employed to achieve it were radically different.

Augustus used the three years he spent in Gaul preparing the Rhineland for the launch of his new aggressive strategy. It is very likely that it was during this period that the legionary bases along the Rhine were established, as the large scale offensive operations Augustus was planning...
would have needed large supply bases, and the five or six legions stationed along the Rhine by 13 B.C.E. would have needed extensive bases to winter in and to operate from. Three of these bases, Vechten (Fectio), Xanten (Vetra), and Mainz (Mogontiacum), stood at the heads of the three main invasion routes into Germania, and all of the Rhineland bases were built on the west bank of the Rhine.

Bases were also established along the Lippe River, the invasion route opposite Xanten mentioned above, but these were most likely established by Augustus’ stepson Drusus between 12 and 9 B.C.E. or later. The most important site along the Lippe is the legionary fortress at Haltern (Aliso), which may have included a naval station and large stores complex. It is important to note that all of these fortresses, both those on the Rhine and those on the Lippe, were wood and turf structures, which is a strong indication that they were not yet intended to be permanent installations. The construction of these fortresses does not imply a shift towards a defensive strategy, and Augustus had no plans of establishing a border along the Rhine, Elbe, or anywhere else; he was still employing offensive strategies with the intent to secure Gaul from invasion. According to Erich Gruen, this is because:

> [t]he Rhine was an artificial and largely ineffectual barrier…It represented at best a frontier zone rather than a demarcated border. And harassment of Roman Gaul by trans-Rhenane intruders was a continual menace.

The years between 16 and 13 B.C.E. clearly marked a departure from previous policy. Major military installations were established to support regular, large-scale offensive operations into an area that had previously been invaded only sporadically. Five or six legions, along with comparable numbers of auxiliary infantry and cavalry had been transferred from the interior of Gaul, Spain, and other locations to the Rhineland fortresses in order to carry out those invasions. Augustus was clearly no longer considering local retaliatory incursions, but this does not imply an intention to annex Germania; indeed, the sources make no mention of any such intention at that time.

The commander he chose to carry out his new policy was his stepson Drusus. The result was five consecutive yearly campaigns across the Rhine, the first of which was launched in 12 B.C.E. According to Dio, the Gauls were again “discontented at their subjugation,” and the Germanic Sugambri crossed the Rhine to aid them. Drusus quickly quelled the Gauls and then drove the Sugambri back across the river. His next moves illustrate clearly that a new policy was in place; he crossed the river and proceeded to attack tribes all over northern Germania, none of which, other than the Sugambri, are mentioned as having participated in the Gallic uprising. He passed through the territory of the Usipetes, though Dio makes no mention of any fighting against them. Drusus then laid waste the territory of the Sugambri, following which his army sailed up the Rhine to the ocean and gained the alliance of the Frisians along the coast. The army then went inland and attacked the Bructeri along the Ems River and the Chauci between the Ems and Weser Rivers. At the end of this campaign, Drusus and his army returned to their bases along the Rhine for the winter. That Drusus returned to the Rhine following each campaign strongly indicates that annexation was not then under consideration.

No mention is made of any overt hostile actions that could have provoked the four campaigns that followed. This is further evidence that Augustus was pursuing a new and more aggressive preemptive strategy. In 11 B.C.E., Drusus crossed the Rhine and subdued the Usipetes, marching all the way to the Weser River, after which he was attacked by the Cherusci and the Sugambri. Though the return to the Rhine was difficult and fraught with hardships, Drusus did manage to build and garrison the fortress at Haltern, before he reached his main bases.

Augustus accompanied Drusus and his other stepson, the future emperor Tiberius, to Gaul during the winter of 11-10 B.C.E. The occasion was the inspection of the Altar of Roma and Augustus which had been set up at Lyons (Lugdunum), signifying the allegiance of the Gallic tribes to both Augustus and the Roman state. Dio states that the purpose of this visit was also to keep watch on the Germanic tribes more closely; once again, the pacification of Germania and the internal stability of Gaul are intimately linked. At the beginning of spring, 10 B.C.E., Drusus set out across the Rhine and attacked the Sugambri and the Chatti tribes, which had formed an alliance. Once again, Drusus returned to the Rhine at the onset of winter.

The most far-reaching successes came during the fourth campaign. Beginning in the spring of 9 B.C.E., Drusus...
set out from Mainz and again attacked the Chatti. After fierce fighting along the upper Main River, he defeated the Marcomanni, who afterwards migrated eastward. The army then turned north, crossed the Weser, and reached the Elbe River. Drusus became the first Roman commander to achieve this. For unknown reasons, Drusus did not cross the Elbe, but turned back toward the Rhine. At some point he suffered a broken leg, and died before his army reached the river.22

Tiberius took over command after the death of Drusus, and launched a new campaign in 8 B.C.E. during which, according to Velleius Paterculus, he traversed every part of Germany with no loss to his own army.23 But what had Drusus and Tiberius actually accomplished? It seems clear that these five campaigns had been invasions, not conquests. The same tribes were attacked year after year, indicating that those tribes remained unconquered at the end of each campaign. For the time being however, the Germanic tribes east of the Rhine were unwilling to continue to fight the Romans, so it is probable that Drusus and Tiberius had at least succeeded in weakening the tribes and intimidating them into accepting peace; Augustus’ strategy appeared to have worked.

By this time, Augustus’ thoughts seem to have been turning away from simply securing Roman control of Gaul and towards incorporating Germania into the Empire. The willingness of the Germanic tribes to make peace and to remain peaceful, at least for the time being, appear to have convinced Augustus of the safety of Gaul and that Germany could be made into a province as well. Evidence to support the claim that Augustus was now turning towards the peaceful incorporation of Germania into the Empire is provided by the erection of an Altar of Roma and Augustus at Cologne (Oppidum Ubiorum) around 8 B.C.E., similar to the altar that had been erected at Lyons during the winter of 11-10 B.C.E. The altar signified allegiance to Augustus, and as Tacitus tells us, the priest of the cult was a member of the Cherusci tribe,24 another indication of the believed loyalty of the Germanic tribes.

Further offensive operations were deemed unnecessary, and Augustus was content with the planting of garrisons and the construction of additional fortifications along the Rhine and also along the Lippe. The cessation of preemptive invasions is further evidence that Augustus was now concerned with making Germania into a proper province, not with securing Roman control of Gaul. Germania seemed to be pacified, and indeed, Dio states that the area was slowly Romanizing with the presence of Roman garrisons, the growth of cities, the establishment of markets, and the introduction of peaceful assemblies.25 The culmination of Augustus’ new policy of integration came in 6 C.E., with the appointment of Publius Quinctilius Varus to the governorship of Germania.

Varus’ career before being appointed governor of Germany was largely one of administration;26 that he had not had extensive military experience is itself a strong indication that Augustus believed Germania to be ready to be fully integrated into the Empire. No other reason presents itself which can adequately explain why he would have appointed a man such as Varus to a governorship that had, until 6 C.E., been held exclusively by viri militares (military men).27 It would appear that Varus had been appointed to do what he was accustomed to, which was to introduce peacetime administration.28

Correspondingly, Varus set out to speed up the process of Romanization. According to Dio and Velleius Paterculus, Varus began levying taxes and exercising judicial powers to which the Germanic tribes were not accustomed, nor were they disposed to accept this new imposition of authority.29 The Germanic tribes began to lull Varus into a false sense of security by appearing to submit to his judicial authority, so that, as Velleius Paterculus states, “he came to look upon himself as a city praetor administering justice in the forum, and not a general in command of an army in the heart of Germany.”30 In September of 9 C.E., word was brought to Varus that a revolt had broken out far from the Rhine. This was done to lure Varus deep into enemy territory, while simultaneously allowing him to believe that he was traveling through friendly territory, so that he might become lax on the march, which is apparently what occurred.31 Accordingly, Varus set out with all three legions of his army, six cohorts of auxiliary infantry, and three alae of auxiliary cavalry, a force totaling about 21,000 infantry and 1,500 cavalry.32

This force was taken by surprise somewhere in the Teutoburg Forest, terrain that made it almost impossible for the Romans to deploy, thus negating all of their tactical strengths. According to Dio and Velleius Paterculus, the battle was a four day nightmare of ambushes and vicious close quarters fighting during which the Romans constantly tried to regroup and escape back to their bases along the
Lippe and the Rhine. However, by the fourth day the ranks of the rebels had swelled to insurmountable numbers, and the Roman column was hemmed in on all sides; Varus and his officers committed suicide. Over the four days of the battle, Varus’ force was annihilated almost to a man.

In the aftermath of this defeat, one of the worst in Roman history, all of the fortresses on the Lippe were captured almost immediately except for Haltern, which endured a horrendous siege until the garrison was able to escape back to the Rhine. According to Dio and Velleius Paterculus, it was only the quick action of Lucius Asprenas who moved his forces into the fortresses on the lower Rhine that prevented the rebellion from spreading across the river. This defeat completely destroyed Augustus’ hopes of making Germania into a province and effectively marked the end of his third policy. The defeat of Varus was so complete that it took Tiberius, who rushed to the Rhine as soon as news of the disaster reached Rome, almost three years to stabilize the situation.

Augustus reacted by initiating his fourth policy, which was one of retribution. In 13 C.E. Drusus’ son Germanicus was appointed to supreme command of the Rhineland armies. He was to vigorously engage in offensive operations against the Germanic tribes, but as Tacitus tells us, the motivation behind these campaigns was to wipe the stain of Varus’ defeat from Rome’s military reputation, not to extend the Empire. Further evidence that the goal of these campaigns was not re-conquest is that Germanicus made no effort what-so-ever to establish new fortresses anywhere between the Rhine and Elbe, nor did he attempt to reoccupy any of the previously established posts, except possibly at Haltern. It seems clear that all hope of conquering Germania had been abandoned, and re-establishing Rome’s reputation for military dominance was now the main concern.

In 16 C.E., after two years of hard fighting, Tiberius, by then having acceded to the Principate upon the death of Augustus in 14 C.E., recalled Germanicus from Germania. With Rome’s reputation apparently restored, Tiberius initiated the fifth and final policy, which was one of defense and consolidation. Offensive operations across the Rhine were halted, but all eight legions in the Rhineland remained stationed along the river. It seems obvious that by this point, Tiberius, “who knew Germany if any Roman did … saw the impossibility of recovering the territory lost after the Varian disaster.” Tiberius must have been aware that the Germanic tribes from beyond the Elbe were migrating westward, many along the same invasion routes the Romans had used to go east. Pacifying Germany now meant, unlike during the time of Drusus, not only pacifying the current population but also denying the migrating tribes access to the lands west of the Elbe. According to Collin Wells,

After a youth spent augmenting the Empire and a middle-age in defending it, he [Tiberius] set his face against further expansion. His concern was for consolidating what Rome already possessed.

Though Dio states that Augustus’ will contained instructions that Tiberius not expand the Empire further, it seems likely for the reasons stated above that he would not have tried to do so in Germania even without such advice from Augustus.

To conclude, though the policies of Augustus changed over time, some consistencies run throughout his rule. Swift and public retaliation for any defeat or perceived weakness; the personal intervention of Augustus or his stepsons in every crisis situation; and the promotion of the imperial cult were common factors throughout his reign. However, these common factors do not imply a unity of purpose among his policies in Germania, all of which were essentially reactionary. His decision to implement yearly invasions across the Rhine was a reaction to the defeat of Lollius in 17 B.C.E.; his decision to attempt incorporation of Germania was a reaction to the apparent success of his policy of preemptive aggression; the initiation of the punitive campaign of Germanicus was a reaction to the annihilation of Varus in 9 C.E.; and Tiberius’ decision to implement a defensive policy was a reaction to Germanicus’ success. These policies were never the result of a unified set of strategic goals, and as such, no “Grand Strategy” for Germany existed under Augustus.
References

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Endnotes


3 Gruen, pp.169-171, 178-188

4 The area known to the Romans as “Gaul” roughly encompassed the territory of modern-day France and Belgium.

5 Dio LI.21.5-6

6 Dio XLVIII.49.3

7 Dio LIV.11.2

8 Dio XLVIII.49.3, LI.21.5-6

9 Velleius Paterculus II.97.1

10 Dio LIV.20.4

11 Wells, pp. 93-148

12 Wells, pp. 149-154

13 Haltern is likely, but not certain, the fortress referred to as “Aliso” by Cassius Dio, Velleius Paterculus, and Tacitus (see Wells, pp. 152-153, pp.192-198, for discussion of available evidence).

14 Wells, pp. 99-100

15 Gruen, p. 179

16 Wells, pp. 94-95

17 Dio LIV.32.1

18 Dio LIV.32.1-3

19 Dio LIV.33.1-5; Gruen p. 181

20 Gruen, p. 181; Dio LIV.36.4

21 Dio LI. 36.4

22 Dio LV.1.2-5; Velleius Paterculus II.97.2-3

23 Velleius Paterculus II.97.4

24 Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.57.2

25 Dio LVI.18.2

26 Wells, pp. 238-239

27 Wells, p. 239

28 Wells, p. 239

29 Dio LVI.18.3; Velleius Paterculus II.118.1

30 Velleius Paterculus II.118.1

31 Dio LVI.18.5

32 Ruger, p. 527

33 Dio LVI.20.1-3; Velleius Paterculus II.119

34 Dio LVI.19.4-20.5; Velleius Paterculus II.119

35 Velleius Paterculus II.120.4

36 Velleius Paterculus II.120.3; Dio LVI.22.2

37 Tacitus, *Annals* 1.3.6

38 Wells, pp. 198-206 for detailed discussion of available evidence.

39 Wells, p. 244-245

40 Wells, p. 243-244

41 Dio LVI.33.5