An Indomitable Will: Hannibal Barca & the Start of a World War

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Abstract

For many historians, the “Great Man” theory—emphasizing the centrality of powerful leaders in changing history—has (rightly) fallen out of fashion. Less credit is given to leaders; more attention is paid to the average person. Concurrently, for many international relations theorists, the demands of realpolitik and geopolitics are emphasized while the individual personalities of leaders and the collective personalities of cultures are de-emphasized. Yet, while the “Great Man” theory of history is limiting, certain historical events simply cannot be explained without reference to the passions, motives, and personalities of individual leaders. Relatedly, though the competitive desire for resources can explain some wars, the fiercest conflicts are fought not over tangible goods but over abstract ideals. The Second Punic War proves both points: Almost entirely on his own, for reasons related more to culture and ideals than resources, one remarkable man—Hannibal Barca—triggered the ancient world’s deadliest world war. The next time resentment over an unfair treaty, bitterness, one driven leader, and clashing ideals would trigger such large-scale conflict would not occur until the Second World War.

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An Indomitable Will
Hannibal Barca and the Start of a World War

Michael Elias Shammas*

“*I will either find a way or make one.*”
—Hannibal Barca

The year is 218 BCE, and it is the start of one of the bloodiest periods the world will ever see. Arrayed on the banks of the Ebro River like a gigantic bow, Hannibal Barca’s army stands poised to start antiquity’s greatest war. The force is heterogenous, including Carthaginians, Iberians, Balcaric Islanders, Libyans, Phoenicians, and Numidians. Yet Hannibal’s eighty-thousand soldiers are united by one purpose: defeating Rome.† Ten years earlier, Rome forbade Carthage from crossing the Ebro River on pain of war; now, Hannibal stands poised to do just that.‡ In his quest, he will bring about the deaths of hundreds of thousands of men using tactics so ingenious they remain studied in military academies today.

That Carthage’s merchant elite let events progress to this point is striking. The city-state was still reeling from the First Punic War (264 BCE-241 BCE), which had caused the loss of its navy and three key islands: Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily.§ Its treasury was depleted, its citizens tired, its institutions in dire need of reform. Aware of this reality, in the years before the Second

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§ Ibid.
Punic War, Carthage’s elite was content to consolidate gains in Iberia and—like their trade-savvy forbears in Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon)—to trust in the fattened coffers that a peaceful, trade-conducive Mediterranean would surely bring.⁴

Yet—to a degree rare in history—the Second Punic War was no collective decision. This was Hannibal’s war. A man in his twenties decided how and when to start a world war. Although he eventually received grudging (and scant) aid from Carthage, it was largely because of his unilateral decision to besiege the Spanish city and Roman protectorate of Saguntum that Carthage declared war in the first place.⁵ Hannibal—not Rome—forced Carthage’s hand.

The Second Punic War demonstrates the tremendous role individual initiative can play in sparking conflict. It shows how one man’s thirst for glory, for immortality if only historic immortality, can yield early mortality for millions of others. In doing so, it confounds the realist realpolitik perspective of international relations theory and promotes a constructivist view, one stressing clashing ideals and cultures over clashing desires for raw materials and other resources.⁶ Hannibal crossed the Alps because, given Rome’s naval hegemony, he had no other way to invade Italy.⁷ But more importantly, the general’s epic march across the Pyrenees, through Gaul, and to the steps of Rome was motivated by his moral views and aspirations. His thirst for glory and his family’s ethical qualms about Rome—exemplified by a solemn oath taken as a child—would permit nothing less. “Even the Alps could not defeat his will.”⁸

What Drove Hannibal?

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⁴ Reid, “Problems of the Second Punic War,” 188.
⁵ Briscoe, “The Second Punic War,” 45.
⁶ Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, 1-3.
Scholars have long tried to identify what motivated Hannibal to take on Rome in such a spectacular manner. What lent the man his indomitable will? History suggests two symbiotic factors fueled Hannibal: (1) Love of family and (2) love of country. Together, these factors illuminate Hannibal’s loathing for Rome; for in the First Punic War, Rome had humiliated both father and country.

Hannibal’s father Hamilcar had figured prominently in the First Punic War. Immediately before 241 BCE, Hamilcar had been forced to fight unconventionally in the Sicilian theater, as he was relegated to guerilla-style tactics due to dwindling money and men.\(^9\) Though necessary, such tactics seemed like cowardice to the ancient psyche. The experience scarred Hamilcar.\(^10\) He left Sicily with Carthage’s approval, but his wounded honor never recovered.\(^11\) Although he had defeated the Romans several times and—later—subjugated half of Iberia in a mere eight years, this was not enough. The Barcid family’s martial honor had been smeared. The resentment simmered in his heart and those of his sons. Honor aside, Hamilcar’s patriotism meant he “would [never] have been prepared to accept the outcome of the First Punic War as definitive.”\(^12\)

Alas, Hamilcar drowned in battle before he could finish conquering Iberia, and Hannibal’s brother-in-law Hasdrubal the Fair succeeded him as Carthage’s supreme commander in Iberia. It was he who signed the notorious River Ebro Treaty of 226 BCE with the Romans, whereby the Roman Senate agreed to recognize all Iberia south of the Ebro River as Carthaginian territory in return for Carthage’s promise not to expand north of the Ebro.\(^13\)

\(^9\) *Ibid.*, 34.


\(^12\) Briscoe, “The Second Punic War,” 44.

Unfortunately, while Hasdrubal was seemingly content with the treaty, Hannibal was not; for reasons that will become apparent below, his reluctance likely relates to his close relationship with his father Hamilcar.

So: Familial duty played a key role. So did patriotism. As noted, Carthage suffered immensely after the First Punic War. The harsh treaty imposed on it as part of the First Punic War’s resolution—like the harsh Treaty of Versailles after the First World War—fostered a resentment that would help trigger the Second Punic War. This ancient Treaty of Versailles, the Treaty of Lutatius (signed in 241 BCE and not to be confused with Hasdrubal’s later Ebro River Treaty) was designed mostly by the Romans. As such, it placed the blame for the war exclusively on Carthage. Per its terms, Carthage was to evacuate Sicily, return Rome’s prisoners of war free of charge (while paying a heavy ransom for safe passage of its own troops), transfer the Aeolian and Ustica islands to Rome, and vacate all other islands between Italy and North Africa. In addition, Carthage was to pay Rome 30 tons of silver immediately, to be followed by ten separate payments of 66 tons of silver over ten years.

Incredibly, the Romans seemed to think the two treaties generous. Meeting Hannibal before the final clash, the Battle of Zama, Scipio—soon-to-be Scipio “Africanus”—pronounced the treaties something the Carthaginians had “desired,” calling Hannibal’s invasion “an action of … grossest perfidy.” Needless to say, the Carthaginians disagreed; the second and especially the first treaty were eternal thorns, relentless reminders of Carthage’s loss and geopolitical

\[\textit{in Italy, lvi.}\]


15 \textit{Ibid.}

dissipation and of Rome’s victory and regional consolidation. Where Carthaginians once controlled the entire Mediterranean, these proud descendants of the sea-going Phoenicians now found themselves relegated to the sea’s western corner, its boats doing little more than shipping troops across the Strait of Gibraltar.17

Although Carthage had been leveled—utterly decimated—it would not be held down for long. As E.T. Salmon writes, history “provides numerous examples of great powers thirsting for revenge after defeat.”18 (This seems especially true when the treaty ending the first war causes simmering resentment in the vanquished.) Germany after the humiliation of World War I was one such great power; Carthage after the humiliation of the First Punic War was another. To restate an earlier point, the Treaty of Lutatius was the Carthaginian’s Treaty of Versailles. Like the latter it represented a false peace, an unfair peace, a peace gained through hot-headed war instead of calm-minded negotiation. And, in the same way that the Treaty of Versailles sparked the resentment that led to the Second World War, the Treaty of Lutatius fed a bitterness that ultimately sparked the Second Punic War.

It is therefore clear that perceived or actual wrongs against family and country shaped Hannibal’s hatred for Rome. But there was another factor. Long before the war, the young Hannibal—barely nine years old—swore a solemn oath that would bind him for life. According to ancient scholars, on the eve of Hamilcar’s departure to Iberia his son came to him, begging to be allowed to fight. In the story—which scholars generally accept—Hannibal’s father agreed to take the child to Iberia on condition that he swear a vow. Intrigued, the boy followed his father into a temple’s sacrificial chamber. There, clutching Hannibal over an open fire, Hamilcar asked

18 Ibid., 131.
the future general to swear that, for as long as he lived, he would never be a friend of Rome. Ever eager, Hannibal swore even more; he said, “I swear [that] so soon as age will permit ... I will use fire and steel to arrest the destiny of Rome.”19 Silius Italicus puts it more eloquently, recording Hannibal as declaring that he would “enact the doom of Troy” on Rome, despite “the treaty that bars the sword,” “the Alps,” or even “the gods.”20 Very nearly, he did just that.

**Saguntum and a Legal Pretext for War**

Although initially it seemed as if Hasdrubal’s treaty had accomplished the impossible—forged a long-lasting peace in Iberia—this proved a false hope, for like the earlier Treaty of Lutatius the Ebro treaty was utterly flawed. One oversight in particular proved the source of great tension. As John Briscoe writes, “[the treaty’s] terms were flatly inconsistent with the Roman alliance with [the city of] Saguntum, concluded … years before the Ebro treaty.”21 As noted, this oversight gave Hannibal not a pretext but a legitimate reason to launch his long-desired war. It was in this manner that Saguntum—like Serbia during World War I, an internationally unimportant power—had the misfortune to become the crux of history’s first true world war.

The problem with Saguntum was that, though Rome’s ally, it stood *south* of the Ebro River. Therefore, it clearly lay in what the treaty designated as the Carthaginian sphere of influence. While Rome claimed its alliance overrode the Ebro treaty, the Carthaginians—bristling at the Treaty of Lutatius, whose terms were already less than fair—saw things differently. Still, for years it seemed that Saguntum would remain a minor inconsistency; like all agreements, the treaty may not have been watertight, but surely it was not so deficient that the

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20 *Punica*, vv. 113-121.
21 “The Second Punic War,” 44.
whole instrument should be discarded. Certainly, Hasdrubal was more than content with the treaty. This changed dramatically when Hannibal unexpectedly succeeded his brother-in-law as Iberia’s supreme commander in 221 BCE. The Celtic assassin who stabbed Hasdrubal, like the Bosnian Serb who shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, could not have foreseen the cascade of events his decision put into play. Both men killed only one man, yet they arguably caused millions of deaths.

The Saguntines were only too aware of the problems inherent in the Ebro treaty and, fearing just such a change in leadership, had begged Rome for reinforcements in the years before the siege. But the Romans rebuffed their entreaties—until Hasdrubal’s death, when they changed their tune. Whether on a whim or because even then they knew something of Hannibal’s nature, in 220 BCE the Senate sent messengers to Spain. (One imagines, the Saguntines would have preferred troops.) Presciently, they not only asked Hannibal to discard any thoughts of taking Saguntum; they argued that crossing the Ebro would violate the treaty established by his brother-in-law.

Hannibal’s reply was characteristic. The twenty-six-year-old declared that—per the Ebro treaty’s terms—the Romans were, quite simply, wrong. Saguntum was south of the Ebro River and it was therefore properly within the Carthaginian sphere of influence. It followed that Carthage had a right to take the city, by force if necessary, and even violence would have the sanction of law. Conversely, he added, Rome had no legal right whatsoever to interfere in an internal Saguntine affair. The Roman response is unknown. Yet if any believed they had

22 Livius, Livy: Books XXI and XXII; Hannibal’s First Campaign in Italy, lvi.
23 Briscoe, “The Second Punic War,” 44.
24 Ibid., 45.
persuaded Hannibal, they were mistaken. In the spring of 219 BCE, acting alone, Hannibal—reiterating Carthage’s right to Saguntum—besieged the beleaguered city, which must have felt abandoned by its Roman “allies.” The siege took only eight months. Saguntum’s fall foreshadowed the horrific nature of the developing conflict; its women were raped, its men murdered, its children sold into slavery. From the outset it was clear that, like the Second World War, the Second Punic War would be an existential conflict, what political scientists have rightly termed “total war.”

One cannot say for certain whether Hannibal and his Carthaginian confidants thought this attack would be isolated or if even then they planned for greater conflict. But though Carthage’s government may not have foreseen an escalation, it seems naïve to assume that Hannibal himself did not. As Briscoe writes, “Hannibal was looking for a reason to reopen the conflict with Rome.” Saguntum provided an opening. What’s more, his own father—and effective mentor in the art of war—had been convinced by Rome’s annexation of Sardinia that Carthage “would never know peace as long as Roman power remained unchecked.” Hannibal likely shared this assumption. Further evidence of Hannibal’s eagerness is betrayed by the swiftness with which he acted. Put simply, Saguntum gave Hannibal a path through which he could fulfill his childhood vow to Hamilcar. It therefore provided a public rationale for a private (familial) motive.

**Saguntum’s Lessons**

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Saguntum’s fate contains important lessons on how conflicts begin. First, treaties can have unforeseen consequences, especially when they disproportionately advantage one side at another’s expense. Like the Treaty of Versailles, the Treaty of Lutatius was inequitable. It punished Carthage, exaggerating Punic aggression as a rationale, while excusing any Roman wrongdoing.\(^{30}\) Thus, as with World War I, the First Punic War’s concluding treaty yielded a deep resentment that helped trigger another, even more devastating war. And in the same way the Treaty of Versailles angered Germans, granting Hitler support for aggression, the Treaty of Lutatius caused Carthaginians to more readily accept Hannibal’s arguable disrespect for the more recent Ebro treaty. His aggression seemed justified, if not by “the law in the books” then by “the law in the sky.” Here is a clear lesson for war-time politicians: Do not sacrifice long-term peace for short-term gain. An effective treaty is a fair treaty.

Second, Saguntum demonstrates that one small incident can trigger a series of cascading crises that escalate into all-out war. Again, in providing this lesson, the Second Punic War is not alone. The escalating series of events before World War I bolsters the contention that—due to pride or hatred—nation-states, like individuals, are often unwilling to back down after a crisis has emerged. In the case of the Second Punic War, the Romans could have acquiesced, letting Carthage absorb Saguntum. But they did not. In fact, the delegation they sent to Carthage afterwards made demands that were unlikely to result in anything but war, such as even more “restitution” and the hand-over of Hannibal and other generals.\(^{31}\)

Third, Saguntum implies that war is not always or even usually a collective decision. One leader can seize the initiative and shape things in such a way that conflict becomes inevitable.

\(^{30}\) Lazenby, *The First Punic War: A Military History*, 158

Sufficiently driven, one man can decide the fate of the world. He can drag his countrymen into war. When Hannibal attacked Saguntum, he acted without the explicit approval of the Carthaginian legislature, effectively committing the entirety of Carthage to war by himself.\(^{32}\) This had dire implications for Hannibal’s future Italian campaign, as the unilateral manner in which he acted made existing political enemies even more resentful and even less willing to help later on, after a series of decisive victories by Hannibal, when even a little aid could have spelled Rome’s doom. This bitterness is best illustrated by the fact that even when Hannibal was five miles from Rome, Carthaginian politicians like Hanno the Great refused to grant material support.\(^{33}\)

Whatever the case, by acting alone, Hannibal finally had the war he had yearned for as a child, the war he had promised his father he would bring about. His siege of Saguntum marked the effective beginning of the Second Punic War.\(^{34}\) It was a war that would ultimately yield Carthage’s total destruction while simultaneously engraining Hannibal’s name in the history books forever. It seems likely that Hannibal had planned the war for years—that Saguntum was the means to an end, a pretext paving the way for his idealistic clash with a rising empire he saw as decrepit and immoral.\(^{35}\) Although Hannibal could have taken other actions—diplomacy, for example, or bribing Saguntum’s leadership—he chose war. That Hannibal besieged Saguntum at all surprised the Carthaginian and Roman leadership; what he did next made his siege of Saguntum pale in comparison.

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32 Reid, “Problems of the Second Punic War,” 176.

33 Polybius, *The Histories*, 150.

34 Livius, *Livy: Books XXI and XXII; Hannibal’s First Campaign in Italy*, lvi.

35 Reid, “Problems of the Second Punic War,” 183.
Choosing a Land Invasion

After the Carthaginian government grudgingly came out in support of Hannibal—again, Roman demands left little choice—Rome planned to fight the Carthaginians on Iberian soil. It expected a conflict resembling the First Punic War, one fought over territory that safely outside either empire’s homefront. They were utterly unprepared for a war in Italy. Although E.T. Salmon maintains that the Romans “must have realized long before the war began that the Carthaginian attack, when it came, would take the form of an invasion by land across the Western Alps,” little evidence supports this view.\(^36\) The worst-case scenario the Romans envisioned seems to have been that Carthage might scrape up enough ships to land an army in Sicily or Sardinia. They simply could not imagine that Hannibal would be so determined—so \textit{mad}—as to march thousands of men across the Pyrenees, through hostile territory (before joining his army, Gallic tribes harassed Hannibal’s forces endlessly), and over the foreboding wall of ice and snow that was the Alps. “The Senate clearly did not envisage Hannibal moving outside of Spain.”\(^37\)

Roman war strategy further undermines Salmon’s argument. For the Senate’s plans suggest that, even after Saguntum’s surrender, Rome remained oblivious to Hannibal’s plans for a land invasion. Indeed, the Senate initially decided to send two armies \textit{outside} Italy—one, led by the famous Scipio Africanus’s father, would go to Iberia, and the other to Carthage’s vicinity in North Africa.\(^38\) No preparations were made to defend the Alpine passes.\(^39\) Just as the Romans were fine-tuning this plan, Hannibal forced a change in strategy by crossing the Ebro, making it evident that he did indeed plan on attempting the impossible.

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\(^{39}\) Salmon, “The Strategy of the Second Punic War,” 139.
One question must be asked—why? In other words, even if motivated by love of family and country to fight Rome, why did he choose to do so in this audacious manner? Why did he transform a conflict for Iberian supremacy into one that must, by its very nature, result in the effective destruction of one or both empires? Why did he turn a regional conflict over Spain into an existential one over the fate of the two most powerful empires in the Mediterranean basin? Mere patriotism, family loyalty, or even his oath to his father cannot explain his decision.

Although Briscoe maintains that scholars “can do no more than speculate on the plans that Hannibal had when he began his march,” it seems clear that Hannibal chose the land invasion for sound—if daunting—strategic reasons. Although he was confident in his tactical mastery and in his ability to smash any legion, this would serve little purpose unless Rome capitulated. There were two ways to accomplish this. Hannibal immediately discounted the first strategy—which would have entailed besieging Rome. Transporting siege equipment hundreds of miles over rivers and mountains—necessary to level Rome’s formidable walls—simply was not “physically feasible.” As such, Hannibal opted for the second option. This strategy entailed slowly working his way through Italy, defeating Rome’s legions in the field, and eventually encircling the capital, cutting it off from any Italian city-states inclined to provide aid. After a time, Hannibal hoped he would make enough Italian allies of his own to force Roman capitulation.

Hannibal miscalculated. In the same way that the Romans underestimated him, he underestimated the Romans. For he misunderstood how the Italian style of warfare differed from

40 “The Second Punic War,” 46.


42 Ibid., 138.
the Hellenistic and Punic styles of warfare. He misjudged Rome’s determination to fight, while also woefully underestimating the loyalty of key Italian city-states to Rome. The miscalculation is understandable given the Hellenistic view; to Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and others, conflicts were fought until one side or the other won a series of battles. This meant that Hannibal expected the Romans to negotiate a surrender after he had attained a certain number of victories, as in Grecian warfare. In the face of the resounding defeats he dealt the Romans at Trebbia, Lake Trasimene, and Cannae—in which “three consuls and a master of horse were” defeated and “tens of thousands of Romans … slain”—the Romans’ intransigence astounded him. Hannibal simply did not foresee such an unwillingness to admit defeat and submit to a treaty, as the Carthaginians themselves had done to conclude the First Punic War.

Even more surprising was Rome’s adoption of the Fabian strategy after its first devastating defeats, named for Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrocosus, the appointed dictator for much of the war. Hannibal’s strategy depended on decisive victories, but after realizing Hannibal was superior to any Roman general, Rome decided to avoid confronting him on the field and—given Carthage’s abandonment of Hannibal—to let attrition take its course. Hannibal’s father had been relegated to guerilla warfare because of insufficient money and men; the Romans possessed both much more money and many more men than Hannibal—who, as the war progressed, increasingly depended on Gallic troops—yet they avoided direct confrontation simply because they knew that they could not match Hannibal’s tactical genius.

Therefore, as noted earlier, Hannibal’s single-minded decision to go to war came back to bite Hannibal when politicians—seething over what they saw as a rash decision to plunge


Carthage into war—withdraw support at the most critical moment, after the famed Battle of Cannae. In fact, his greatest political enemy and the peace party’s leader Hanno convinced Carthage to abandon Hannibal for ten long years, sending neither military aid nor money. This must have frustrated Hannibal beyond measure. His long-sought victory—so close, if only Carthage would ship siege weapons to the parts of Italy Hannibal controlled (after securing Italy’s coast, such was viable)—slipped away because of bickering old men.45

Thus, though siege weapons would have given Hannibal the chance to attack Rome itself, political gridlock defeated him. For all intents and purposes, Hannibal’s army during the latter part of the Second Punic War could do little more than roam the Italian countryside. And as time dragged on, resilient, persistent Rome trained the legions that—led by Scipio Africanus—would defeat Hannibal on his own home-turf, on the plains of Zama. In a sense, Carthage’s defeat was not due to Rome but to Carthage; when Hannibal needed its aid most in the face of a determined enemy, the Carthaginians—as undetermined as the Romans were determined—dithered. The Carthaginian elite wanted what most men want—comfort, luxury, gold; Hannibal, recognizing higher motives than the profit motive, was driven by forces less tangible and yet altogether more precious: desires for glory, revenge, immortality.

Finding the Reasons for Conflict: Constructivism versus Realism

To some degree, the realist view of international relations theory explains why Rome and Carthage fought the Second Punic War. Realism purports that states are inherently competitive. As such, competition drives international relations.46 This was certainly true in the third century BCE, as Rome and Carthage—two giants in a bipolar system of international (Mediterranean)

45 Miles, Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization, 239-251.

46 Donnelly, Realism & International Relations, 62.
relations as Greece declined in relevance—competed over everything from minerals to timber. The competitive aspect seems especially salient when one examines the earlier struggles over Mediterranean islands. After all, the First Punic War was largely fought over the control of several key islands in the Mediterranean. Both actors probably viewed the struggle over islands as a zero-sum game; there were a limited number of islands, and the more islands one actor controlled, the less the other possessed. (A modern analogue is increasing tensions between China and Japan over islands in the South China Sea.)

Nonetheless, viewing the conflict between Rome and Carthage from an exclusively realist perspective is mistaken. Indeed, many realists would not have predicted Hannibal’s actions, for though realism implies a desire for competition and a zero-sum struggle for resources, it also implies that any state’s first priority is survival. Put another way, risks are not taken lightly. “Success is the ultimate test of policy, and success is defined as preserving and strengthening the state.” Therefore, according to realists like Waltz, states will not “risk much to push for hegemony.” There is little point in gaining land if in doing so one loses an equivalent or greater amount of equally valuable land.

Thus, though Rome’s fall would have strengthened Carthage, the risks Hannibal took seem counterintuitive if viewed through an exclusively realist lens. Invading Italy represented a huge gamble. To do it, he had to take valuable manpower and resources out of Iberia, even before knowing whether he could rely on Carthage to provide active support in the Italian theatre. A substantial number of soldiers remained in Iberia, but these troops were less trained,

47 Reid, “Problems of the Second Punic War,” 178.
49 Donnelly, Realism & International Relations, 7 (emphasis added).
50 Ibid., 114.
less patriotic, and less armed than those who marched to Italy. Indeed, many of the soldiers Hannibal left behind were Iberian mercenaries; their loyalty did not clearly belong to Carthage.⁵¹ As a result, Carthage predictably lost much of the land that Hamilcar and Hasdrubal had gained; for to prevent reinforcements from being sent to Hannibal, the Romans undertook a successful Iberian campaign that drove “the Carthaginians right out of” the peninsula.⁵² Hannibal’s willingness to invade Italy regardless of the risk to fertile, resource-rich Iberia suggests the need for another explanation.

This explanation can be found in constructivism. Rather than emphasizing competition, state survival, or material power, the constructivist approach of international relations explains war by emphasizing clashing social or moral ideals. As Alexander Wendt writes, two basic tenants underlie this approach. First, the “structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces”; second, “the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature.”⁵³ This viewpoint seems especially relevant to the Second Punic War because—to its most towering personalities, from Hannibal Barca to Scipio Africanus—much more was at stake than tangible goods and the acquisition of land. Yes, Rome was fighting for its survival. Yes, Hannibal was partly motivated to attack because of material gain. But the clash of ideals was tremendous, and different worldviews played a huge role in both starting the conflict and, as the Hellenistic versus Roman worldview on how to conduct war suggests, determining its course. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the so-called Rape of Sardinia, and to continue the analogy to twentieth

⁵³ Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, 1.
century Europe, Carthaginians everywhere, like so many Germans, “lived for *der Tag.*”\(^5^4\) For many Carthaginians, it was not a matter of *if* Carthage would fight Rome, but *when.* Thus, clashing ideas overshadowed the interplay between power and materials, and it was this clash—highlighted by bitterness and resentment—that instilled so much passion and tragedy into the conflict. This was a war between two futures: A Roman future or a Hellenistic (and Punic) one. Indeed, the Gauls who joined Hannibal had no allegiance to Carthage; they simply despised Rome and the way of life it was continually striving to impose on them. The same can be said for Syracuse and Macedon, both of which allied with Hannibal after his devastating series of victories over the legions.

Numerous social and moral conceptions aside from a Carthaginian desire for revenge, it is important to point out, were clashing before and during the Second Punic War. Though both located in the Mediterranean, Rome and Carthage represented vastly different cultures.\(^5^5\) Largely, Romans were more cohesive and patriotic than Carthaginians; though Roman society was fragmented, Carthage’s was even more divided. There were effectively two spheres in Carthage—the rich and the poor—and there was very little middle ground. Also, Carthaginian territory was much more heterogeneous than Roman lands. As such, its army was made up of “soldiers from many peoples and cultures.”\(^5^6\) This was in stark contrast to the Romans, whose army—with few exceptions—was homogenous. Finally, Carthage and their Phoenician forebears were, in many ways, more Hellenized than the Romans.


\(^5^5\) *Ibid.*, 132-134.

\(^5^6\) Fournie, “Over the Alps to Rome’s Gates,” 34.
Indeed, unlike realism, constructivism points out a fundamental difference in the worldviews of the Romans and Carthaginians that helped decide the conflict’s outcome. To Scipio and his Roman counterparts, the reasons for war were simple. Carthage threatened Rome with an existential crisis. As such, Rome had no option but to resist. It had to resist not only because it needed to survive, but also because it was a civilization force in a world of barbarism. The Romans saw Hannibal’s “Hellenistic” view of warfare as flawed, the “Hellenes” as “soft and corrupt,” and as such they decided to fight to the end.\(^{57}\) Needless to say, Hannibal saw things differently. He did not understand that the Romans did not see negotiation as an option. And, as Richard Gabriel points out, his failure to understand his enemy’s ideals was why he lost the war despite winning battle after battle.\(^{58}\) These two men’s different worldviews are perhaps best exemplified by Polybius’s account of the parley held before Hannibal’s defeat at Zama. Entreating Scipio not to fight, Hannibal stressed that he had already achieved victory by any sane (i.e., Hellenistic) measure. “I am that Annibal, who after the battle of Cannae was master of almost the whole of Italy,” he said.\(^ {59}\) Like his counterparts, however, Scipio rejected the Hellenistic conception of victory and replied that Hannibal had made a mistake: he did not seize victory when he had the chance.\(^ {60}\) He did not march on Rome.

Thus, constructivism points out that ideas played a huge role in motivating Hannibal throughout the war. To Hannibal, this conflict was one that would benefit not only Carthage, but the entire world. Rome—an emerging superpower—represented a corrupt force of subjugation

\(^{57}\) Gabriel, “Hannibal’s Big Mistake,” 70.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{59}\) Polybius, The General History, 304.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 305-307.
and militaristic excess. It was a culture of conquest, a culture that would stop at nothing to impose its worldview on others. Indeed, Hannibal believed so strongly that others shared his view of Romans that he assumed the Gauls would join him—an intuition that ultimately proved correct. On the other hand, his view of the Romans as inherently oppressive may also explain why he misjudged the willingness of Italian city-states to help him. In another win for constructivism, these city-states mostly remained with the Romans because their culture was closer to that of the Romans than to the North African, Gallic, and Macedonian “barbarians.”

Put another way, despite the power struggles that had throughout history been fought between these states and Rome, the Italian city-states opted to stick with the power that more closely resembled their way of life. They were unwilling to “believe that [Hannibal] was the man to redress their grievances” simply because he was so different from them.

Conclusion

Few conflicts are as fascinating or prescient as the Second Punic War. The war provides countless episodes that entertain while also teaching timeless lessons about human conflict, at both the personal and geopolitical level. It stresses that great wars can be pushed by a single vibrant personality instead of an entire state, that the personal histories of leaders shape how they conduct war, that hatred and passion dictate strategy as much as—perhaps more than—reason, and that conflicts often feature a heavy idealistic component. Moreover, it shows that when abstract cultural ideals rather than tangible raw materials clash, conflict intensifies. Wars become existential, and therefore they become meaningful on both tangible and symbolic levels.

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Hannibal’s indomitable will started the Second Punic War. This will was sustained by deeply personal reasons: devotion to his Carthaginian country and love for his Barcid family. It was sustained, in other words, by ideals—just like the Romans’ indomitable will was sustained by ideals around patriotism and warfare. The conflict proved so bloody precisely because—like the Second World War—much more than mere material was at stake. The Second World War represented a clash between liberal democracy, fascism, and communism; the Second Punic War represented a clash between the ancient Hellenistic and Punic cultures and the newer culture Rome represented. The Second Punic War clearly conforms more to the constructivist view than the realist one. Hannibal’s personal ideals and his forceful personality meant he could do nothing but take the fight to Italy. Carthage’s material interests played little to no role. The next time resentment over an unfair treaty, bitterness, one driven leader, and clashing ideals would cause such large-scale conflict would not occur until World War II.
Bibliography


