

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR, 460-404 BCE

Contents of brackets [] suggest analogies to later events.

I. THUCYDIDES: WHAT A GUY!

Many readers across many centuries felt that Thucydides' Peloponnesian War evoked their own times and tragedies.

Yet readers often see different central arguments in this book. Some see an anti-democratic Thucydides warning that publics are folly-prone and popular rule is misrule. Some see a ruthless celebration of the inexorable cruelties of international politics and the use of force. Some see an anti-war book, warning that force often produces unforeseen or unwanted results, and should only be used as a last resort. Who is right?

Does this book identify general laws of motion that govern events across time and circumstance?

II. PHASES OF THE CONFLICT

- A. 480 BCE: Greece vs. Persia War
  - B. 460-445 BCE: Athens vs. Sparta War Round #1
  - C. 431-421 BCE: Athens vs. Sparta War Round #2--the "Archidamean War"
  - D. 421-415 BCE: Truce--the Peace of Nicias
  - E. 415-404 BCE: Athens vs. Sparta War Round #3--the Expedition to Syracuse
- Rounds #2 and #3 are the focus of Thucydides' book.

III. MILITARY POWER: CHARACTER AND DISTRIBUTION

- A. Athens and Sparta were the two strongest powers in Greece. Each led a large alliance/empire.
- B. Athenian power was growing relative to Spartan power.
- C. Athens had a MAD-like military strategy. If Sparta attacked it by land Athens would leave its farmland undefended, instead withdrawing its population within Athens' strong walls while sending its navy to torch Spartan coastal cities.

IV. SPARTAN AND ATHENIAN SOCIETY

- A. **Sparta**: an oligarchic slave state--an oppressive "human volcano." A small Spartan population ruled a large slave population. The Spartans themselves were ruled by a Spartan oligarchy.

- B. **Athens**: a quasi-democracy. All male Athenian citizens could vote. But half of Athens' subjects were disenfranchised slaves, and women could not vote. Public questions were decided by direct democracy at popular assemblies of male voters.

#### V. THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN ANCIENT GREECE

- A. **The Spartan empire** feared that its large slave population would help an invader, hence it feared it could easily be conquered if an enemy force penetrated its territory. [Like Austria 1914 and like Hitler's 1941 view of the USSR.]

- B. **The Athenian empire** depended on its fleet, which required tribute from "allies" (really imperial vassals). So it had to keep its vassals in line and it did so by harsh measures. [Like the world imagined by mercantilists in 1755--empire was a highly cumulative resource.]

Hence both states believed they were vulnerable to conquest and had to maintain empires for their own safety.

#### VI. CHRONOLOGY

- A. The Greco-Persian War: Athens acquired an empire as a side-effect of war. [Like the USSR's conquest of Eastern Europe, 1944-45.]

- B. Round #1: the Sparta-Athens war of 460-445--of which we know little. Thucydides has a sketchy account on pp. 87-103.

- C. Round #2 beginnings:

1. The dispute at Epidamnus, 433 BCE. Epidamnus was a tiny colony of Corcyra, which in turn was a colony of Corinth. Corcyra was now hostile to its progenitor Corinth, and was neutral in the Athens-Sparta conflict. Corinth was a major Spartan ally.

A civil war erupted in Epidamnus. The losers appealed for aid to Corcyra. It refused aid. The losers then appealed to Corinth.

Corinth agreed and sent settlers to seize Epidamnus, which Corinth saw as a lost possession.

Corcyra objected to Corinth taking a Corcyran colony and asked Athens to help defend it against Corinth. Athens agreed because it feared that Corinth, a major naval power, might conquer Corcyra's substantial fleet and thereby tip the naval balance of power against Athens. Hence Athens offered Corcyra a defensive alliance.

However, offensive and defensive behavior proved hard to distinguish at sea. This allowed Corinth to later claim (to Sparta) that Athens had broken the 30-

year truce, which had ended the war of 460-445 BCE, by acting offensively. Thus this local dispute was the first trigger to a vast war. [Sarajevo]

Background causes of the clash over Epidamnus:

- a. Security fears in Athens caused it to care who controlled Corcyra.
  - b. Greeks had no agreed rules to determine ownership of rebel colonies. Hence ownership of rebel Epidamnus was undefined. Did it belong to Corcyra or Corinth? The matter was unsettled.
2. The dispute at Potidaea, 432 BCE. Athens, fearing war with Corinth and Sparta, tightened control over its colony Potidaea by ordering Potidaea to tear down its city walls and hand over hostages. Potidaea rebelled instead. Corinth--fearing the long-term growth of Athenian power and anxious to contain it--sent help to Potidaea. It thereby violated the 30-year truce of 445. [Athens toward Potidaea = G.W. Bush to others: "You are with us or with the terrorists."]

Background causes of the clash over Potidea:

- a. Security fears in Athens caused it to care who controlled Potidea, hence to take harsh measures to enforce Athenian control of Potidea.
  - b. These harsh measures provoked Potidea to rebel, not comply. The spiral model in action?
  - c. Security fears in Corinth then caused Corinth to break the truce with Athens by supporting Potidea's rebellion.
- D. Sparta's decision for war, 431 BCE.
1. Sparta saw the rise of Athenian power and feared that a stronger Athens could destroy Sparta. [Germany feared rising Russia, 1914]
  2. Corinth lied to Sparta--"Athens is breaking the 30 years truce! They are starting a war!"--and Athens failed to reply to these lies. [Dinwiddie, Shirley and Duquesne, 1754]
  3. Sparta offered pretexts for war--priests, goddesses, curses. Every reason for war was trotted out except the real one: Sparta's fear of Athens' rising power. [Vietnam, Gulf of Tonkin 1964]
- E. The moderate Pericles died and the violent Cleon and Alcibiades rose to power in Athens. The moderate Archidamus died and Brasidas rose to power in Sparta. [The rise of the Ludendorff/Hindenburg ultra-hawkish "silent dictatorship" in Germany, 1914-1918.]
- F. The growth and later contraction of Athenian war aims.
1. Athens won a big victory at Sphacteria. It then refused to settle on its original peace terms. [US in

Korea 1950, Sebastopol 1855]. Was war causing war?  
Athens was then sobered up by ...

2. Athenian defeats at Delium and Amphipolis. These defeats finally convinced Athens to make a truce--the Peace of Nicias, 421-415 BCE.
- G. Mytilene, an Athenian colony, saw Athens' harsh treatment of other colonies and decided to revolt before the same fate befell it. But Athens believed the revolt had "no reason" and was unprovoked. Hence Athens saw need to further scare its colonies with even harsher treatment. Athens considered killing all Mytilenians (Cleon pushed for this) but relented.
- H. Round #3 beginnings: the truce broke down.
- I. Athens destroyed Melos, a rebellious Athenian colony. Athens killed all military-age Melian men and sent the Melian women and children into slavery.

Compare the Mytilene Debate and the Melian Dialogue: the latter was nastier. Ethical concerns disappeared from the discussion. Regarding justice, the Athenians simply declared that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." (Thucydides, p. 402)

Did Thucydides' think ethics mattered? Yes. "Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation." (Thucydides, p. 80.)

- J. The Athenian expedition to Syracuse [Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare campaign, 1917]
1. Athenians did little research before launching the expedition. They were ignorant of basic facts such as Sicily's size and population.
  2. Athens' aims were vast; Syracuse's aims soon became vast [Britain and France in 1755, US in 1941, US and China in 1950.]
  3. Athens expected easy victory, believing the expedition was "an absolutely safe thing." This grew from:
    - a. Athenian ignorance of Syracuse's power.
    - b. False expectation that others--Sparta and the Sicilian states--would bandwagon with Athens, wouldn't balance against it. [Hitler and the Axis Alliance.]
    - c. False expectations of help from Egesta (see below).
  4. Athens expected a fun, cheap war. Alcibiades told Athenians that the Syracusan Expedition was an opportunity for "gaining new experience" and to avert the "ruin" that comes with being "idle." [1914.]

5. Athenians wrongly thought their decision for war was reversible. Alcibiades told Athenians that if things went poorly the Athenian forces could simply "come back again."
  6. Athenian strategy was disintegrated. Athenians said Syracuse was so strong it was a serious threat, and so weak it could be easily conquered.
  7. Eggestaeen blue smoke and mirrors--Egesta manipulated Athenian perceptions. Egesta told Athens:
    - a. "Beware the transnational Dorian conspiracy against Athens! Syracuse, being Dorian, is part of it!"
    - b. "If you fight Syracuse others in Sicily will join your side!"
    - c. "We Eggesteans have huge financial resources and can help a lot!"
  8. When the Expedition later faced disaster Nicias (the commander) feared making a necessary and prudent peace because he feared being pilloried for it by Athens' hawkish public. So he fought on to ruin.
- K. Catastrophe for Athens. The Syracusan expedition was destroyed in 413 BCE. But Athens survived anyway for nine more years (413-404 BCE)! [Germany 1914-1918.]

## VII. WHAT CAUSED THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR? WHY DID IT ESCALATE AND CONTINUE? POSSIBLE CAUSES

- A. Windows:
  1. Preventive war by Sparta, 431 BCE: a window of vulnerability.
  2. Preventive escalation by Sparta, 414 BCE: a window of opportunity.
- B. Offense and Defense:
  1. Security was a major goal on all sides:
    - a. Athens' goal: to maintain the political division of maritime Greece, since a unity of non-Athenian maritime Greece could threaten Athens.
    - b. Sparta's goal: to ease its vulnerability to invaders that arose from its oppressive social structure.
    - c. Sparta's and Corinth's goal: to avert the threat posed by rising Athenian power.
  2. "Chain gang" dynamics in the Spartan and Athenian alliances:
    - a. Corinth could drag Sparta to war because Sparta feared that otherwise Corinth might defect; causing Megara to defect; causing Sparta's downfall.
    - b. Athens was dragged into war by Corcyra for similar

- reasons. [Serbia and Austria dragged Europe to war in 1914]
3. Offensive and defensive conduct proved to be indistinguishable. [1914]
  4. Offense was believed easy militarily. Campaign after campaign--by Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and Athens--was launched amid assurances that "it's a sure thing."
  5. Bandwagon beliefs prevailed on both sides.
- C. Conflict spirals:
1. Athens vs. Potidaea: Potidaea revolted in response to Athens' efforts to tighten control. These efforts triggered more rebellion, not less.
  2. Athens vs. Mytilene: Athens provoked the Mytilene revolt but failed to see this, instead thinking the revolt was unprovoked. Hence it inferred that even harsher policies toward its colonies were called for.
  3. Athens vs. Syracuse: Athens exaggerated Syracusan hostility by imagining that Syracuse was part of a false Dorian hostile conspiracy; then it made Syracuse hostile by attacking it. Athens also expected that Sparta and the Sicilian states would bandwagon with Athens if Athens sent an imposing expedition with Syracuse; in fact they balanced against it. (Thuc VI J 3b.)
  4. Sparta opted for war in 431 partly because (Thucydides implies) it falsely thought Athens had broken the 30 year truce. A case of "exaggerate the hostility of others' conduct."
- D. Lack of clear strategy ---> Forgetting of original aims and purposes in Athens. For example, Athens continued the Syracusan expedition even after the important premises that underlay it (e.g., that Sparta wouldn't enter the fray on Syracuse's side) were disproven.
- E. Poor evaluation of policy ideas, especially in wartime. Thucydides is dismayed by the quality of public discourse. See, for example, above on Athenian mis-estimates of Syracuse's power and below on evaluators being shouted down in wartime and on the destructive actions that Nicias took because he feared the Athenian mob.
- F. Pericles' hubris: "I can handle everything--I needn't train successors." [Like Bismarck?]
- G. Other war causes from this course found in the Peloponnesian war:
1. False optimism about war outcomes.
  2. Cheap war, fun war expectations. (Alcibiades: the Syracusan Expedition was an opportunity for "gaining new experience" and to avert the "ruin" that comes

- with being "idle.")
3. Chauvinist mythmaking. Athenians indulged in this.
  4. Both sides fought to control resources believed cumulative, and to maintain credibility.
  5. Manipulation by Allies: Corinth manipulated Sparta; Egesta manipulated Athens.
- H. War ----> War
1. Reciprocal growth of war aims.
  2. Rise of superhawks in wartime.
  3. The tyranny of sunk costs. Alcibiades: "After having sailed out in such forces [the Athenians] ought not to disgrace themselves by going home with nothing to show for it." (Thuc. p. 440.)
  4. Fear that negotiation will be taken as a sign of weakness. Pericles warned: "Do not send embassies to Sparta: do not give the impression that you are bowed down under your present sufferings!" (Thuc. pp. 162-163.)
  5. McCarthyism: evaluators were shouted down or worse. See Thucydides, pp. 242-243. During the war Greeks came to believe that "anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became suspect." And "fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man." And "to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action." Not a climate conducive to calm evaluation of options.
  6. Growing barbarism on both sides as the war proceeds.

#### VIII. MORAL OF THE STORY: NEVER USE FORCE?

Thucydides warns of the over-use of force. Does this warning apply universally? Does history also offer instances when force brought good results? Does it offer instances of the *under-uses* of force?

Consider history's many successful uses of force: the Spanish/French/British/U.S. "Indian Wars" against native Americans--a cruel but successful land grab; the U.S. war against Mexico, 1846-1848--a profitable escapade; the U.S. wars on Germany and Japan in World War II; Bismarck's wars of German unification; the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama; and the British war to recover the Falklands from Argentina, 1982. Some might also list the U.S. Persian Gulf war, 1991; Israel's 1948 and 1967 wars against the Arabs; the Arabs' 1973 war against Israel; and the Greeks' defensive war against Persia before 480 BCE. In these cases war aims were

achieved without falling into a quagmire. How can quagmires be distinguished from instances when force will succeed?

Consider also under-uses of force. Should the Wampanoag and Narragansett nations have wiped out the New England English settlers when they could, in 1620-21? Should Britain and France have attacked Germany in 1936?

Were contemporary U.S. wars with Afghanistan (2001-) and Iraq (2003-2011) a good or a bad use of force?



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