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THUCYDIDES

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

WITH INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS BY HANSON W. BALDWIN AND MOSES HADAS



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED



THUCYDIDES
THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

Translated by
BENJAMIN JOWETT

With introductory essays by
HANSON BALDWIN and MOSES HADAS



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THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR
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THUCYDIDES

The Athenian general Thucydides, who wrote the history of his city's long war against Sparta, is a monument of philosophical objectivity.

Although Thucydides was a participant in the war, he describes his own military operations with the same cool detachment he accorded those of others. His impartiality is in direct contrast to the passions and prejudices of the other famous Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon.

Partaker of the genius of the Periclean Age, Thucydides, with his great work, established himself as the world's first scientific historian.



THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Warrior, vase painting, fifth century B.C. / TARQUINIA
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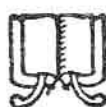
Achilles binding wounds of Patroclus, vase painting,
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Departure of a warrior, vase painting, fifth century
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—Charles Eliot Norton

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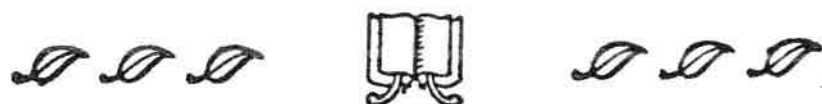
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WARFARE AND CIVILIZATION

by Hanson W. Baldwin



THE greatest of the Greek tragedies was the Peloponnesian War. Neither Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, nor any of the towering Greek poets ever presented a more terrible drama than this stark objective narrative of what John Ruskin called "the suicide of Greece."

To the classicist, Thucydides was the world's first objective historian—and one of the greatest. In the nineteenth century, and in the early part of the twentieth, his name was as familiar to any well-educated gentleman as that of Macaulay or Gibbon. But the rise of *laissez faire* in modern American education and the emphasis upon the physical sciences at the expense of the classics has obscured his fame.

The classicists of my father's time corresponded, for their own amusement, in the ancient Greek; to them the glories of Athens and the fortitude of Sparta were as tangible as the gramophone of Edison, the wireless of Marconi. Nor was this pedantry. For the classical education of yesterday produced men of understanding, balance, and refinement—men who had researched history's lessons and the wisdom of the past to apply to the present.

The modern generation—now seeking restlessly in the age of Toynbee's "Time of Troubles" and of Spenglerian pessimism for precedents and for an understanding of human actions which no study of nuclear physics can ever give—will profit from Thucydides and his times.

For it is all here—tragedy and triumph; statesmanship and demagoguery; bestiality and virtue. It is “a story of fantastic contradictions, of shrewdness and naïveté, courage and cowardice, loyalty and treachery, generosity and cruelty, idealism and cynicism, wisdom and folly . . . an appalling story of a silly war that marked the failure of the most brilliant civilization in history . . . a supremely classical account of wildly romantic excess. . . .” *

The Peloponnesian War was, in other words, essentially a story of today. The weapons have changed; the modern protagonists dwarf the city-states of 430 B.C., but the wondrous ways of Man—arch-villain and arch-angel of History—have altered not at all.

Americans are not noted, as a people, for a long view of history; we are brash and boastful and apt to aggrandize our accomplishments.

Thucydides reminds us that a civilization in many ways greater, more creative, more mature than our own fell, in the short space of three decades, from the glories of the Periclean age to defeat and disaster.

We learn again that there is nothing new under the sun. Twenty-four centuries ago the contest was, as it is today, the “sea beast” (in the phrase of Winston Churchill) versus the “land beast”—Athens against Sparta; now the United States versus Russia. For the concentration camps of World War II, substitute the quarries of Syracuse; for Hiroshima or Hamburg or London, substitute Melos; compare the follies of Hitler with the overweening ambitions of Alcibiades—“the most complete example of genius without principle that history produces”; * “handsome, brilliant, vain and daring. . . . recognizing no principle but self-seeking . . . combining the art of the demagogue with his own personal fascination. . . .” †

Or study the failures and the follies and the falsities in our own democracy and compare them with the license of the Athenian yesterdays. Huey Long was not unique in history; Cleon the Tanner; Hyperbolus, the Lamp-maker, dreamed the same paranoiac dreams.

* *The Uses of the Past*: Herbert J. Muller; Oxford University Press, 1952–1954.

* *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*: Sir Edward S. Creasy, 1943.

† *Hellenic History*: Botsford and Robinson; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956.

The lessons of yesterday that can be applied to today are literally unlimited; the Peloponnesian War provides them prolifically. Its setting—the cockpit of world history, the arena where man has struggled against man for all the recorded centuries—provides a romantic backdrop, a geographic constant against which parade in unending pageantry the heroes and the knaves, the knights and troubadors, the hoplites and the sailors, the kings and their henchmen—ever succeeding generations of Man in endless variety.

To the military analyst and historian a study of the Peloponnesian War is particularly fruitful; it forces re-examination of many of our current concepts and produces thoughtful parallels in strategy and tactics, generalship and politics.

Perhaps one of the most important contemporary lessons to be drawn from Thucydides is the use and misuse of sea power.

When the Peloponnesian War started, Athens was the greatest sea power of her time; her culture, her power, her wealth was founded upon maritime commerce and maritime empire. Sparta was a great land power; her armies were known and feared throughout the Greek world.

The Periclean strategy against Sparta was, in a smaller dimension, the same type of maritime strategy used by Britain against the Napoleonic empire. It represented, too, the "eccentric" strategy Churchill sponsored in World War II—command of the sea to insure Athens' food supplies and to disrupt the commerce of the enemy, amphibious raids against the Peloponnesian coast (the "soft underbelly") and seizure of key island bases—a slow and gradual war of attrition, frugal in Athenian lives. The wealth of the Athenian treasury—6,000 talents stored in the Acropolis—could better stand the strain of long drawn-out war than could Athens' poorer opponents.

It was a strategy, however, which was never adequately prosecuted or boldly pushed. It left the Athenian fields, orchards, and vineyards open to devastation by the strong armies of Sparta and her allies, and it "subjected Athenian nature to excessive strain." *

The same impatience to close with the enemy on land—

* *Hellenic History, ibid.*

to launch a blow directly at his heart, to fight, if need be, an Armageddon and be done with it—that characterized American strategy in World War II influenced the conduct of the Peloponnesian War.

Public opinion, therefore, as in every war fought by a democracy modified somewhat the initial Periclean strategy, which, after the death of Pericles in the great plague that swept away a third of the city's population, was twisted and changed beyond recognition.

Athens did not utilize its tremendous power on the sea to its fullest advantage. Blockade was employed intermittently but not with full or continuing effect. And, in some phases of the war—notably the ill-fated expedition against Sicily—the Athenians allowed the tail to wag the dog.

The life and fortunes of their city-state depended upon predominance at sea; land expeditions should have been merely an extension of sea power—a means of strengthening Athenian control of the sea. The proper objective of every Athenian fleet was the destruction or neutralization of the enemy fleet. Yet, in the siege of Syracuse, the Athenian fleet—the sole lifeline between home base and the expeditionary army—became a mere appendage to the Athenian army. Instead of seeking out and destroying the enemy fleets at sea, with plenty of maneuver room, the Athenians allowed their fleet to be bottled up in a narrow harbor, with no room for maneuver and assailable on all sides by the enemy land forces. When the harbor entrance was blocked, it was the point-of-no-return, not only for the Athenian triremes but for Athens itself.

Ironically, however, the delayed end came years later when the last fleet of the great city-state of Athens was caught by surprise by Lysander at the Hellespont, with its crews ashore, its triremes drawn up on the beach. It was a sad ending—at sea's edge but not in the true kingdom of bluewater—for what had been the greatest sea power of its day.

By one of the quirks of history, another great sea power—the kingdom of Britain—started twenty-four centuries later what has now come to be recognized as the beginning of its decline at a spot not far from where Lysander won the Trafalgar of his time. At Gallipoli in World War I, the unheard-of happened. The British abandoned—in the face of the enemy, in full view of the Turkish shore batteries—two disabled but still floating battleships, the *Ocean* and the *Irresistible*, an

episode that was a melancholy epitaph to the glories that were Greece and the grandeur that had been Britain's.

The Peloponnesian War ended when the final Athenian fleet was destroyed; like Jellicoe at Jutland, the Athenian admiral was the only man who could lose the war in an afternoon.

Two great lessons emerge from this study of ancient times, as valid to our space-shrunken world today as they were to the small dominions of ancient Greece.

The final victory came only when Sparta controlled the sea, and—by sea as well as by land—the greatest city-state of all time was beleaguered and lost, and the Long Wall to the Piraeus was torn down to the wail of flutes. Sparta became by necessity a naval power during the thirty years of fighting; she and her allies built and created fleets. Despite the prowess of the Spartan armies and of the Boeotian league—far stronger in numbers than the Athenian land forces—victory was not confirmed, or even insured, until Sparta and her allies under Lysander destroyed Athenian sea power.

Athens contributed to her own downfall by her frequent misuse—most noticeable in the Syracuse campaign—of sea power.

"When naval power is dominated by land warfare considerations, naval power fails to develop its full potential."

Thucydides might have written this; it is fully applicable to the Peloponnesian War. Actually it was penned about our own times by Colonel J. C. Murray, U. S. Marine Corps, in a review of General Maxwell D. Taylor's book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, in the February 1960 issue of *The Marine Corps Gazette*.

There is nothing new under the sun; the principles of war are immutable.

The student of military history, or even the neophyte in the study of man's long inhumanity to man, must be struck, too, in reading Thucydides by the strategic similarity of the abortive expedition against Syracuse and Sicily to Hitler's attack upon Russia in World War II. Someone, indeed, has written that Syracuse was the Athenian Moscow. Both campaigns nearly succeeded, or appeared to be on the verge of great victory, but in both the reach exceeded the grasp. The effort was beyond the capacity of Athens, just as a two-front war taxed Nazi Germany to the breaking point. Both cam-

paigns postulated an unachievable political goal—a goal of unlimited ends—though both powers possessed strictly limited military means.

This, indeed, was the greatest lesson of the Peloponnesian War—a lesson (as World War II showed) that the world has not yet learned: that the goal of any war must be politically and carefully defined; that it must be finite, not infinite; and that the means (the strength available) must be capable of attaining the ends desired. Without such limitations, without such clear-cut goals, war represents senseless slaughter. This was, perhaps, the greatest tragedy of the internecine warfare of the ancient Greeks; the Peloponnesian War had no clearly defined objectives for either side. It was, in a sense, the first world war, since it embraced most of the ancient world, but it was a war with no sharply focused purpose.

The tactical lessons of a war of twenty-four centuries ago have, of course, historical, rather than technical, interest today. For tactics must conform to weapons, and there is little in common between the battleship of ancient times—the trireme, a 140-foot wooden-hulled vessel with three banks of oars—and the nuclear-powered cruiser *Long Beach* with its missiles and electronic “eyes.” The hoplite, with his shield and sword and spear, would be confounded by today’s fighting man, with his semiautomatic rifle, his grenades and helmet radio (but still wearing body armor). The tactical ingenuity and individual initiative of the ancient Greeks are dwarfed today in an age in which the frontiers of space have been violated; the whole globe is the battlefield, destructiveness is measured in megatons and missiles hurdle oceans.

But Thucydides supplies another lesson pertinent to our times. The factionalism and jealousy of the Greeks—particularly of the Athenian democracy—knew no bounds. The general who failed, or made a slight misstep, or who ran afoul of the emotions of the mob often had short shrift. Like Thucydides, he might be exiled; at the very least removed and dishonored, at the worst executed—his property confiscated by the state. Lynn Montross quite correctly observes that “generalship continued to lag behind tactical improvement, since audacity along intellectual lines was not encouraged by a system which punished honest failure.

“Success, on the other horn of the dilemma, was only too likely to be taken as proof of dangerous personal ambitions.

There remained every incentive for a commander to plod a prudent middle course.” *

These pertinent observations emphasize the real tragedy of the Athenians—the failures and follies of the first of the great democracies. From a government of, for, and by the people, Athens became a tyranny, its defeat celebrated throughout Greece as a rebirth of freedom. The factionalism and the volatility of the Athenians—and of the Greeks; the prevalence of turncoats and tyrants; the willingness of selfish men to sell their cities for personal gain; the rise of demagoguery—these things not only led to the defeat of Athens, but to the decline of all Hellenic civilization. There was dry rot in the nation; the structure failed under the stress and strain of trial.

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, scholar and theologian, has written that “if the democratic nations fail, their failure must be partly attributed to the faulty strategy of idealists who have too many illusions when they face realists who have too little conscience.”

This remark, though particularly applicable to our own democracy and to contemporary times, is also pertinent to the days of struggle twenty-four centuries ago.

But one can even more validly make the point that when the Athenians lost their conscience and adopted the doctrine they applied to Melos—that might makes right—Athenian democracy lost its soul and its reason-for-being, and a “dog-eat-dog” philosophy inevitably triumphed. The small concerns of petty men—hitherto held in check, or idealized by brilliant leaders—were advanced at the expense of the common welfare. The long strain and heavy casualties of unending war, war without purpose—as witnessed in Aristophanes’ bitter comedy, *Lysistrata*—added cynicism and despair to selfishness, and democracy failed.

Is the United States, too, to have so brief a glory? Must our democracy, already far, far different from the Jeffersonian concept, be doomed to the attrition—if not of war—of ease, of sloth, of rich and opulent living?

No human can plumb the heart of man or probe the soul of the future, but the lessons of the Athenian past—a past to which our culture owes so much—are still useful today. Man

* *War Through the Ages*: Lynn Montross; Harper and Bros., 1944.