The Peloponnesian War

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Introduction

In 431 BC,[1] a conflict erupted in Greece which would become known as the Peloponnesian War. Primarily a war between Athens and Sparta, with various allies on either side, it would throw the Greek world into chaos for the best part of three decades.[2]

In this discussion we will be confining ourselves to the causes of the war and the war itself. First, we will examine the background and events preceeding the war. Second, we will discuss the war itself, including a focus on some of the events which could have tipped the balance in favour of either side. Finally, we will briefly examine the immediate aftermath of the war, and the implications this had on Greece's internal and external relations.

The nature of warfare in this period means that, although the conflict lasted nearly thirty years, there were long periods of inactivity, either due to temporary ceasefires or environmental factors such as the seasons (little campaigning could take place in winter). Similar levels of technology and tactics means that battles do not offer the variety found when Rome was going to war with her enemies. As a result, we will skip over many events, or simply mention them in passing.

Background

Ancient Greece was a collection of *poleis* (singular: *polis*), generally translated as 'city-state' and the root of words such as metropolis.[3] Unlike Rome in Italy, there was no one city-state in Greece which ruled all others. Instead a form of duopoly existed, with Athens and Sparta being the two most powerful city-states and weaker ones siding – in varying degrees of overtness – with one or the other (though a few city-states remained independent and notionally neutral).

The name of the war comes from the fact that many of our sources, particularly Thucydides, are Athenian and therefore would have seen the conflict as a war against the Peloponnese, an area of Greece which included Sparta. Were the majority of our sources Spartan, it is likely we would instead know the conflict as the Athenian War, or possibly the Delian War.

[1] All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Thucydides described it as 'the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes' (Thuc. 1.1) and 'the greatest war of all' (Thuc. 1.21), even more than the Persian War because of its length and the suffering caused (Thuc. 1.23).

[3] Like many ancient terms, translating *polis* is difficult. Depending on context, it can describe citizenship, a body of citizens, a city or a city-state.

Athens

A democratic city-state in the true meaning of the word, Athens was the main naval power in Greece. In many ways she was more democratic than modern states, though the franchise was not extended to women, slaves or foreigners (the latter were referred to as *metics* and paid a special tax). A rich city with plenty of arable land and, through her allies, access to silver mines, Athens spent lavishly on public buildings such as temples, some of which survive to this day. Inscriptions detailing important information such as laws were erected throughout the city, and their survival means we know more about Athens than most other city-states.

Before the war, Athens and its allies formed the Delian League (from the initial location of the treasury at Delos). In theory all members of the League had an equal say and vote, but in practice the view of Athens held sway.

Sparta

As an oligarchy ('rule of the few') presided over by two kings, Sparta was in many ways the opposite of Athens. The most notable aspect of Spartan society was the focus on martial training, which was compulsory for men. This went far beyond modern training, as young men were separated from their families and, in their early years of training, were not allowed to return home, even for visits.

In order to free up the citizen population for martial training, the Spartans relied on slaves, known as *helots*, to take care of most of their day to day tasks. The ratio of helots to citizens is unknown; Herodutus provides a figure of seven helots for every citizen but the accuracy of this figure has been questioned and it refers to a battlefield situation as opposed to everyday life.[4] Regardless of the actual numbers, the ratio was sufficiently large for Sparta to be constantly concerned about a helot revolt, particularly whilst her men were away fighting.[5]

Sparta and her allies formed the Peloponnesian League, which was perhaps more overtly run by Sparta than the Delian League was by Athens.

Other city-states

Although there were no other city-states powerful enough to challenge Athens or Sparta independently, some had sufficient resources or strategic locations which could tip the balance when combined with one of the two major powers. One example was Corcyra (modern day Corfu), which made it clear to Athens that by adding their naval fleets and taking advantage of Corcyra's strategic position they would be able to defeat their common enemies (in this case Corinth).[6] As we shall see, it could be argued that, were it not for the interventions of these other city-states, the Peloponnesian War might never have occurred.

Causes of the war

Pinpointing the exact cause of a war can be difficult. Often an underlying reason causes tensions, and then a particular incident results in war being declared, athough it is possible that if the incident had not occurred then something else would have started the conflict. We will examine the underlying

[4] Herodotus 9.28
[5] Xenophon, *Hellenica* 3.3.6; Thuc. 4.80; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1269a
[6] Thuc. 1.33-36

cause of Athenian imperialism and the tipping point of the Megarian decree as two possible causes for the Peloponnesian War.

Athenian imperialism

Since the end of the Persian War, Athens had emerged as a city-state to which others could look to for leadership, particularly those unhappy about Spartan conduct during the war. This set of alliances became known as the Delian League, and in theory all its members were equal, even if Athens took the lead, particularly when it came to managing the treasury. Sparta became concerned as the League began to grow in size and influence, and some felt it was more an Athenian empire than a coalition of willing allies.

However, whilst Sparta may well have been concerned by the growing power of Athens, this does not in itself explain why the war broke out. The Athenian Empire had been building slowly since the end of the Persian Wars, so why did Sparta choose this particular moment to act? Sparta also had its own collection of alliances, so was hardly blameless in this matter. The tipping point appears to have been a series of actions taken by Athens against other city-states in the run up to the declaration of war, one of which we shall now discuss.

The Megarian decree

In c. 432, Athens barred the Megarians from all ports in the Athenian Empire, which as far as we know was an unprecedented action to take in peacetime. Supposedly the decree came about because the Megarians were cultivating land which was sacred to the Athenians, and they were also accused of harbouring fugitive slaves. Technically economic sanctions such as this did not violate the letter of the treaty,[7] and so it would be unlikely that Sparta could use this action by Athens as a pretext for declaring war.

Sparta called together other city-states with a view to allowing them to air their grievances against Athens.[8] Although not invited, an Athenian representative just happened to be present on unspecified other business.[9] Heated arguments were followed by a vote that stated that Athens had broken the peace, and was therefore also a vote in favour of war.[10]

King Archidamus had attempted to guide the vote in favour of a compromise, through the registration of an official complaint against Athens, whilst also suggesting that preparations should be made for possible war at a future date. Like many political compromises, it appears to have failed to endear itself to either side, but the actions of Archidamus suggest that even at this point Sparta (or at least one of its 'rulers') was keen to avoid a conflict. So concerned was Archidamus that he is reported as saying – somewhat prophetically as it would turn out – that he feared 'that we shall be leaving it [war] to our children after us'.[11] In fact, Sparta continued to negotiate until the outbreak of hostilities, which did not occur until some time after the vote, eventually offering an ultimatum that war could be averted if Athens withdrew the Megarian decree.[12] We can only speculate whether this would have satisfied the other members of the Peloponnesian League, although if Sparta agreed

[7] Whether these actions breached the spirit of the treaty is a matter for discussion which we shall not go into here.

[8] Thuc. 1.67

[9] Thuc. 1.72. One assumes that this was a face-saving measure, since if Athens sent an official delegation they would be admitting that Sparta had the right to judge their conduct (in fact under the terms of the treaty such disputes could be referred to arbitration).

[10] Thuc. 1.87-88

[11] Thuc. 1.81

[12] Thuc. 1.139

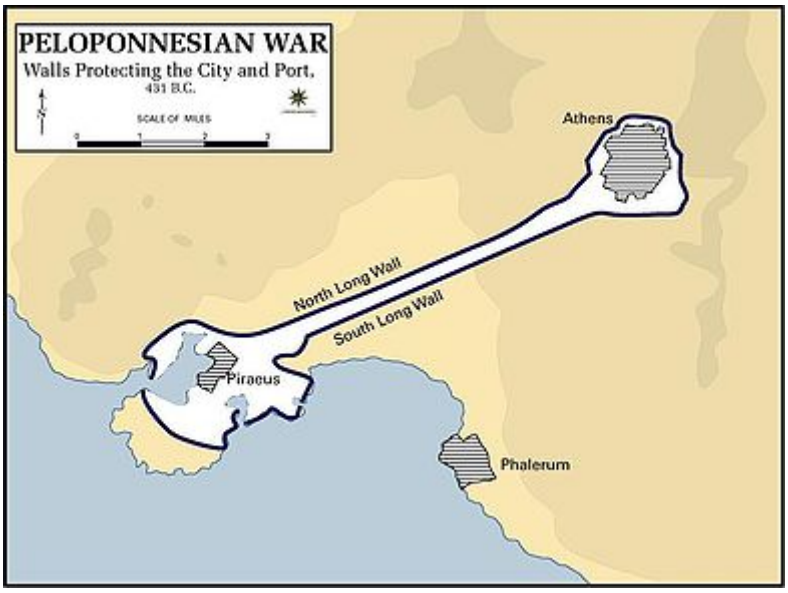

Figure 1: The walls of Athens (Source: Wikipedia)

then its allies may well have fallen into line. In any event the offer was rejected by Athens after a speech by Pericles.

The war

Unlike conflicts in the modern age, the Peloponnesian War was not a continuous period of fighting, and was more akin to the central European 'Thirty Years War' (1618-1648 AD), which was a series of related episodes that can be divided into several phases. The fact that little campaigning could take place during winter, partly due to the lack of food (and the fact that there is no point occupying enemy territory in order to deprive them of crops when none are growing) and also the limited options for moving armies in poor conditions. As such, we shall focus on some key episodes of the war, and skip over the quieter periods.

Archidamian war

The first part of the Peloponnesian War is named after the Spartan king at the time, who as we have seen had made several attempts to negotiate with Athens and avoid a conflict. The initial Spartan strategy was to invade Attica (the lands around and including Athens) and ravage the countryside, depriving the Athenians of resources. However, the formidable Athenian navy allowed Athens to continue to be supplied and trade by sea, and the lack of sufficient ships on the other side meant that Sparta and her allies were powerless to prevent this. The citizens of Attica pulled back behind the walls surrounding the city and its main port, and in the absence of siege equipment there was little Sparta could do to persuade Athens to surrender, or even negotiate.[13]

[13]See figure 1 for a rough map of the walls around Athens.

Plague at Athens

In 430 there was a severe outbreak of the plague at Athens, which may have spread quicker than usual due to the densely-packed population. Pericles was blamed by many Athenians because his defensive strategy of withdrawing behind the walls, as opposed to engaging Sparta in the field, meant that the majority of the population was in the confined space of Athens instead of being spread across Attica.[14] However, this dissatisfaction mattered little in the end, as Pericles died from the plague, along with several members of his family and a large percentage of Athenian citizens.

The loss of manpower caused by the plague, compounded by the understandable unwillingness of foreign traders to enter Athens or her ports, is sometimes referred to as a tipping of the balance of power away from Athens and a contributory factor in her eventual defeat.[15] However, the plague had an unexpected benefit for Athens, in as much that fear of the plague caused the Spartans to withdraw from Attica to avoid being infected by their enemies.

Athens on the offensive

The death of Pericles from the plague led to a marked change in Athenian strategy. A new general, Demosthenes,[16] took Athens on the offensive, engaging in naval raids against the Peloponnese which played to the strength of Athens as a sea power. As part of this offensive, the Athenian forces won the Battle of Sphacteria, capturing several hundred Spartan hoplites in the process, including some important Spartan nobles.

After their defeat, Sparta counter-attacked with the support of her allies, focusing their efforts on the Athenian colony of Amphipolis in Thrace. Amphipolis was a particularly important strategic target, as it contained several silver mines which were being used to fund the Athenian war effort. Thucydides led a force to protect Amphipolis, but arrived too late as the Spartan general Brasidas had already captured the colony. Thucydides was exiled for his failure,[17] though Athenian efforts to retake Amphipolis continued, and Brasidas was killed in one of the ensuing battles.

Peace of Nicias

The death of hawkish pro-war generals Cleon and Brasidas, combined with the fact that Athens and Sparta each held something the other desired (hostages and Amphipolis respectively), brought an end to the fighting. The Spartan hostages were to be exchanged for the captured Athenian territory, and a truce was signed, ushering in a period known as the Peace of Nicias.[18]

Despite the truce, skirmishes continued throughout the Peloponnese. Several allies of Sparta began to talk of revolt, and were supported by the powerful independent state of Argos. Eventually these city-states formed a coalition and declared war on Sparta and her allies, initially with implicit support from Athens and later with explicit military support led by Alcibiades.[19]

[14] We do not know if Pericles considered the impact of a possible outbreak of plague and calculated that the benefits of a defensive strategy outweighed the risks.

[15] Although the war would last for another twenty six years, it could potentially take several generations to recover from a population loss on the scale suffered by Athens.

[16] Not to be confused with the famous Athenian orator, c. 384-322.

[17] Historically, the exile of Thucydides was a useful event, as it resulted in him communicating with both sides on the war and thus gaining insights which may otherwise have been missed had he remained in Athens.

[18] Again the Athenian bias is present in our sources, as the peace was named after the Athenian general Nicias.

[19] See Thuc. 5.13-24 for more details on the Peace of Nicias.

Sicilian expedition

Although the Peace of Nicias held for several years, albeit with occasional skimishes, it did little to address the underlying causes which led to war in the first place, and therefore operated more as a temporary ceasefire than a lasting peace. This fatal flaw meant that warfare eventually resumed in earnest, with the Sicilian expedition one of the major engagements that followed.

The island of Sicily, which was to become the central focus of this particular section of the war, contained one powerful city, Syracuse, and a handful of smaller cities. Syracuse shared common elements with the Peloponnese, whereas the smaller cities were more closely aligned with Athens.[20] Syracuse was also seen as a threat by the smaller cities, who felt that she might dominate the island, and to Athens, as Syracuse might decide to send food and soldiers to assist the Peloponnesians.

Before the Sicilian expedition, and during the course of the Archidamian war, the Athenians had twice sent ships to Sicily in response to appeals from the small cities – once in 427 and then reinforced by further ships in 425. Both occasions failed to achieve any meaningful results due to various circumstances (e.g. the reinforcements became tied up in another engagement whilst en-route), and eventually the smaller cities came to an agreement with Syracuse, with the Athenian fleet returning home.

In 416 another opportunity arose for Athens to intervene, when the city of Segesta requested assistance. The Athenian assembly approved the sending of a small expedition, consisting of sixty ships but no hoplites, with Nicias, Alcibiades and Lamachus as generals. Nicias was apparently appointed somewhat against his will, and at another assembly five days later he attempted to overturn the decision to send an expedition. On failing at his initial attempt, he switched tactics and instead suggested that the expedition should consist of a much larger force, including hoplites, in the hope that the enormous cost of such an undertaking would discourage many citizens. Unfortunately his plan backfired, and the assembly enthusiastically passed a motion to send a much larger expedition. As we shall see shortly, this decision was to have catastrophic consequences.

The expedition was flawed from the beginning by having three generals, each with their own strong and differing views on how to proceed. Eventually they agreed on a plan of action, but when the fleet stopped at Catania, Alcibiades was arrested and forced to return to Athens to stand trial. However, he escaped at a stop-off point during the journey and sought refuge in Sparta, where he provided the Peloponnesian League with information on Athenian plans.

Continuing with two generals, the expedition was at first fairly uneventful, with Athens and her allies clashing with Syracuse before halting for winter. A series of walls and counter-walls were erected by both sides, with the intention of blocking access to key resources such as sea routes. At this point both sides seemed reasonably balanced, with neither gaining the upper hand.

Soon after the construction of the walls, the tide began to turn in favour of the Peloponnesians, with reinforcements arriving from Sparta and Corinth. Nicias requested that the expedition be recalled or reinforcements sent, hoping for the former but once again the assembly did not follow his advice. After the reinforcements, led by Demosthenes, arrived, the Athenians dithered between staying to fight and returning to Athens.[21] The Spartans took advantage of this, destroying Athenian ships in harbour and then blocking the entrance to the port. A final naval battle led to the destruction of most of the Athenian fleet, with the survivors forced to flee over land.

As the Athenian forces retreated, they were either killed in fighting or captured. Demosthenes and Nicias were executed, many others were sold into slavery, and the remaining prisoners mostly died

[20] One such commonality was that the majority of citizens from Syracuse and Sparta were Dorians, one of the four distinctive ethnic groups in Classical Greece. Athens, on the other hand, consisted primarily of Ionians, as did many of its allies.

[21] Supposedly a lunar eclipse and advice from priests caused a decision to be postponed for a month.

of disease and starvation, with just a few escaping and returning to Athens.

Defeat of Athens

News of the result of the Sicilian expedition spread throughout Greece, changing the allegiances of a number of city-states. Some which had previously been neutral moved to align themselves with Sparta, whereas several members of the Delian League revolted. Athens attempted to rebuild her fleet as quickly as possible, but the huge losses sustained in Sicily meant there was a lack of trained oarsmen. Athens held on for several more years and won a few battles, but the Sicilian expedition marked the beginning of the end.

The final surrender of Athens occured in 404, after the Spartan general Lysander inflicted a number of defeats and cut off the grain supply. Some cities, including Cornith and Thebes, demanded that Athens be destroyed, but Sparta refused, pointing out that Athens had done great things for Greece. The eventual terms were that the walls of Athens would be pulled down and the city would follow Sparta's lead in all future expeditions.[22]

Conclusions

The underlying cause of the war seems to have been the imperial ambitions of Athens, with the tipping point being their attitude and actions towards Samos, Corinth and Megara – though those cities were not wholly blameless and Corinth in particular is guilty of some degree of provocation. Sparta had little to gain and much to lose from war with Athens, but rational thought rarely comes into play in such situations, and thus Sparta was pushed into a conflict she would rather avoid by her allies and some of her more hawkish citizens.

The defeat of Athens was most likely down to the combination of losses from the plague and the Sicilian expedition. Had the plague not swept through Attica, or if the Athenians had heeded the advice of Nicias and only sent a small fleet to Sicily, the outcome could have been different.

The end result of the war was a resounding defeat for Athens and an end to her imperial ambitions, with Sparta becoming the dominant power. Despite this, Greece continued to be a divided country, and this lack of unity would assist the Macedonians[23] in conquering the Greeks, and later the Romans who would absorb Greece into their empire.

Chronology

Some dates are estimates, and due to there being no fixed Greek calendar some dates are given as two year periods (e.g. 451/0).

484 Birth of Herodotus (according to Aulus Gellius).

478/7 Formation of Delian League.

460 Birth of Thucydides (generally accepted date).

454/3 Delian League treasury moved from Delos to Athens.

[22] Xenophon, *Helenica*, 2.19-20

[23] Phillip II of Macedon managed to create a federation of Greek states – with the notable exception of Sparta – known as the League of Corinth in 338/337.

432 Members of the Peloponnesian League summoned to Spata to discuss grievances with Athens.

431 Beginning of the Peloponnesian War.

430 Outbreak of plague in Athens.

425 Death of Herodotus.

424 Thucydides exiled from Athens.

404 End of the Peloponnesian War.

400 Death of Thucydides.

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented, and many of the primary sources are still available to us. There is also a wide range of further reading, from popular histories to academic works.

Primary sources

Our primary sources are entirely Greek. This period of history is well served by English translations, particularly of the most important works. Some sources include speeches given by politicians, kings and generals, such as Pericles. These are rarely a verbatim transcript of what was said – often the author of the report was not even present when the speech was delivered – and need to be treated with caution.[24]

Thucydides Athenian who wrote the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, our primary source for the period, though it ends abruptly in 411. Generally well-regarded, though being closely associated with one of the main powers means we must be wary of bias. Popular translation readily available in Penguin and others, with detailed commentaries available in volumes aimed at an academic audience.

Xenophon Athenian with an admiration for Sparta, which eventually led to his exile. His *Hellenica* is available in Penguin as *A History of My Times* and covers the end of the Peloponnesian War as well as the events following it. Sometimes viewed as an unreliable source and treated with caution, but also the main post-war contemporary source to survive intact, and therefore of great interest.

Herodotus The 'father of history' covers the Persian Wars and has no detail on the Peloponnesian War, but provides a useful background to Greek history.[25] One of the most widely translated and easily obtainable sources.

Plutarch Writing several centuries later but a useful source for biographical information on individuals, especially as Plutarch may have used sources which are now lost to us. Of particular interest for this time period are the Lives of Pericles, Nicias, Alcibiades and Lysander, all contained in the Penguin volume *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*. *On Sparta* (Penguin) also contains some interesting background on the Spartans. However, Plutarch must be read

[24]Thucydides is open enough to draw attention to this issue: 'I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches' ... 'so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speeches say what, *in my opinion*, was called for by each situation.' (Thuc. 1.22, emphasis mine).

[25]See the later books, especially 9.114-122, for the beginnings of the Athenian Empire.

with caution as his primary aim was to write entertaining biographies as opposed to balanced histories.

Aristotle His *Politics* and *Athenian Constitution* (the authorship of the latter is subject to debate) contain no information about the Peloponnesian War, but do discuss the internal workings of Athens and Sparta, and therefore provide useful background to the two major powers in the conflict.

Further reading

For those who wish to delve into this time period in more detail, some specific works are listed below.

The Peloponnesian War, Donald Kagan. Popular work aimed at a broad audience. Provides a good overview of the War and the period surrounding it, but lacks the detailed notes and bibliography useful to those who wish to examine the subject in depth. The author has also produced a four volume series for academic audiences.

The Greek World: 479-323 BC, Simon Hornblower. Covers the end of the Persian Wars to the death of Alexander the Great, with chapters on the run-up to the Peloponnesian War, the war itself, and the consequences.

Democracy and Classical Greece, J. K. Davies. Short introduction to the period, covering the end of the Persian Wars to c. 380. Part of the Fontana History of the Ancient World series.