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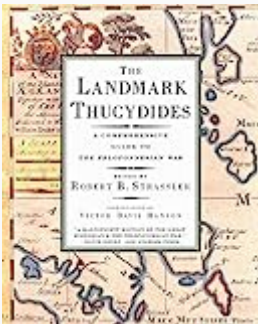
From ancient grudge

by Arthur Waldron

A review of *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides

On The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War edited by Robert B. Strassler.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Thucydides

The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War

Free Press, 752 pages,

Thucydides' story of the conflict between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century b.c., I tell my students at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, will introduce them to virtually every type of person and situation that they will encounter in their modern military careers. But to get that much, it is almost essential to read his *Peloponnesian War* with a group that contains some experts able to initiate the newcomers. That is what I have found at the college, where the book was made a foundation stone of the curriculum in the early Seventies by the school's reforming president, Admiral Stansfield Turner. Turner had been a Rhodes Scholar and was undoubtedly impressed by the Oxbridge stress on the classics. But in the 1970s there was another strong reason for U.S. military officers to look at ancient Athens. Our involvement in the Vietnam War was too explosive a matter to be argued directly at the War College. But the wisdom of the Sicilian Expedition for Athens, a brilliant or crazy scheme, depending on how you assessed stakes and

interests, provided an analogy two millennia old, which worked very well.

As the Vietnam War has receded, the stress on the Sicilian Expedition has diminished. When the students meet in small groups for their three-hour seminars on the book, attention today is often on how a maritime power engages a land power and vice versa, or Thucydides' view of democracy, or the strengths and weaknesses of the Periclean strategy.

One complaint, however, has united students and faculty for as long as this ancient war has been taught at Newport, a complaint about the teaching materials. We have used the Penguin Classics edition of Thucydides, translated by Rex Warner, which is a fluent and smooth English version and (I assume) accurate as well. But no one, whether student or general reader, can really understand it without recourse to all sorts of supplementary materials: maps above all, but also chronology, annotation, and explanation.

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Now the appearance of Robert B. Strassler's *Landmark Thucydides* has transformed this unsatisfactory situation. The book is just about everything that could be asked for. At the top of each page running heads give date, place, book number, and summary in a phrase. Small- and medium-sized maps, specific to the moment in the narration, appear on many pages, inserted into the text precisely at the points needed, with the places or features in question highlighted. Summaries of the action with dates accompany each numbered passage at the margins. Footnotes provide brief explanations, as well as cross references both to text and to maps. At the front, a businesslike Introduction by Victor Davis Hanson, a professor of Greek at California State University, Fresno, sets the stage and formulates issues with great clarity. At the end of the text, a twenty-page chronology traces the course of the war in the four primary theaters and other regions, with exact textual references for every event listed. This indispensable tool is followed by eleven appendices, on important topics of government, empire, institutions, methods of warfare, religion, money, and so forth— each written by a leading authority. Finally come a glossary, bibliographies of ancient and then modern sources, and reference maps. The index is a model of the genre: comprehensive and listing ideas as well as names and places. The book is big and comfortable to hold: even the smallest type in the notes is readable.

Indeed, only one real criticism can be leveled against the book, and that concerns the translation, by Richard Crawley, first published in 1874. In an edition clearly aimed at general readers,

narration such as the following can only be an obstacle:

Phormio, meanwhile, being himself not without fears for the courage of his men, and noticing that they were forming in groups among themselves and were alarmed at the odds against them, desired to call them together and give them confidence and counsel in the present emergency.

In his editor's note Strassler praises the accuracy and the quality of Crawley's language, while admitting that he has seen fit to break up some sentences and modernize the Victorian diction here and there. Certainly Crawley's version is fine English prose of a certain type, but as a teacher I wish that it had been possible to use Warner's, which is simply easier for today's students to read. Perhaps copyright made that impossible.

Even with Strassler's magnificent volume, however, most readers of Thucydides will need additional background really to grasp the power of the text and the reason it has survived. The problem will be apparent if one asks what people today know or remember about World War ii — which classically educated Europeans regularly saw as the final stage of their own Peloponnesian War. The sense from hindsight, I suspect, would be that Allied victory was inevitable, indeed overdetermined. How could Germany and Italy and Japan ever expect to prevail over Britain plus the United States plus the Soviet Union? Certainly little sense of danger survives anymore when we consider that conflict. If anything, the concern is that too much force was used in securing the victory — e.g., through area bombing and the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The conflict has been transformed from a test of will and strength whose outcome was unknown into little more than a clearing mechanism for greater social forces. Indeed, this approach is so thoroughly accepted by most intellectuals that wars are scarcely studied anymore in our universities.

Few mainstream American academics these days give war a second thought (Britain is different). They rarely ask the sort of question that I heard about through the academic grapevine during the Gulf War, when events forced it. One eminent historian buttonholed another, one of our rare experts on war: "What is war anyway?" the first asked, with real puzzlement. "Doesn't it boil down to sociology plus technology?"

The questioner was one of the many thinkers since ancient times who have felt intuitively that war ought to be reducible to a subset of something else; who have sought an algorithm that will convert its horror and passion and chaos into something a little more law-abiding and intellectually respectable.

The second historian's reply is not recorded, but he would have done well to suggest a reading of Thucydides, as well as of Clausewitz, who provides the best answer I know. War, said Clausewitz, is a paradoxical interplay of passion, reason, and chance — three utterly incommensurable and

incompatible elements. Their compound is therefore volatile and difficult to predict and liable to explode in one's hands.

Two ingredients here, passion and chance, are particularly difficult to capture in retrospect, whether in historical writing or in fiction, although they are two-thirds of war, and they are what are missing from the conventional wisdom about the Second World War (as well, as will be seen, from the Peloponnesian War as generally understood today).

World War ii was no inevitable Allied victory. Quite the opposite. Hitler had *won* the Second World War by the spring of 1940: won in the sense that it was well-nigh impossible to conceive of a plausible scenario by which he would be defeated. Churchill might bluster heroically from his island, but on the ground Nazi Germany had conquered almost the entire European continent. The United States was out of the picture; the USSR was Hitler's ally. Had Hitler not made the fatal mistake of turning against Stalin, he most likely would have eventually secured a government in Britain willing to settle.

European unity would have arrived early, in a more sinister form than currently contemplated; the Final Solution would have proceeded unknown and unimpeded; nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles would have been perfected first in the Third Reich. The world we know and take for granted today would not only never have been, it would seem inconceivable.

But how often today does anyone ponder the full significance of 1940 when he thinks about World War ii? As narrative, the year is not very interesting, except for the dramatic collapse of France, over which historians still puzzle. Certainly 1940 pales compared to what followed—Pearl Harbor, Midway, Kursk, Normandy, etc.

Yet it is the uncertainty of 1940, the choice between two world futures, choices decided not by greater social forces, but ultimately by the folly of one man, that makes World War ii important. As Clausewitz understood, war is more like art than engineering (or economics, then not yet invented, which has become a common intellectual framework for dealing with war today).

Thucydides certainly understood the role of chance or contingency in war, although not all his readers grasp this. He had himself contributed to the ultimate disaster of Athens by being too late in 424 b.c. with the seven triremes he commanded to save Amphipolis, a crucial city. His account of why Athens lost is, moreover, highly personal. Pericles had the right strategy from the start, and had the great man lived, it would probably have worked as planned. But he died, and successors such as Cleon and Alcibiades seduced the mob to support ill-judged and catastrophic adventures. In the abstract, Thucydides seems to blame democracy, which substitutes the passions of the crowd for the reasoned judgment of the elite.

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What most readers and students take away from Thucydides, however, is something that smacks much more of social science: namely,

his invention or discovery of the deeper causes of war. To say that the Trojan War was caused by the abduction of Helen may once have been satisfactory, but the modern sensibility is much happier with Thucydides' formula for the Peloponnesian conflict, that it was determined by the growth of Athenian power and the fear it inspired in the Spartans. In his Introduction, Hanson notes that Thucydides understood the ultimate confrontation "would be both inevitable and terrible."

That sort of objective-seeming analysis gives to war a dignity that appeals not only to the social-science mind but also to the moral needs of the present. Who wants to take *blame*? Whether speaking of the suicide of Europe in this century, or the catastrophe of Athens, it is easier to accept that it was determined or overdetermined, and certainly not caused by sins of omission and commission by villains like Hitler as well as by good men such as Pericles or Chamberlain.

Understanding of the tragic truth that we are in fact responsible for wars haunts many of those who have actually participated in making or fighting them, but tends to elude many intelligent academic students of the topic. The best way to bring this to life is to point out that no leader refuses negotiations or enters into a war asking "What will happen?" Rather he asks "what shall we do?"

To bring this out in teaching means asking not "what happened?" so much as "what would you have done?" and in particular, "how could the war have been avoided" and "how, plausibly, could the losers have won?" Some scientific historians frown on that sort of counterfactual approach, but it alone lays bare the causal sinews, the possibilities, and the fatal choices.

Athens certainly had choices. Sparta sued repeatedly for peace; indeed, peace parties existed in both cities, which were in touch with each other. True, the Spartans, when they marched on Athens, misjudged their own power, but Pericles also totally misjudged the nature of the war, overestimating the efficacy of his own defensive strategy, and failing to anticipate what the Spartans might do and how that would lead to escalation. (Donald Kagan's four-volume history of the war, which belongs on the shelf next to Strassler, brings these and other points out with great clarity).

Constructing hypothetical operations and negotiations that could have terminated the Peloponnesian conflict short of disaster is not difficult. The mystery both in this and other examples, such as World War I, is why such paths were not taken, but instead entire civilizations were sacrificed. To understand war properly means understanding that it is not a natural phenomenon like an avalanche or a typhoon, even if it often seems that way. Nor is war completely determined by social forces, although they certainly can make it more possible, and even likely. Because they are human products, and not acts of nature or of God, wars pose the

question “why?” in a way that human beings ought to be able to answer. To feel the force of the question, however, requires real understanding of the alternatives, and the choices, whether ancient or modern.

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