



2010.10.02

Lawrence A. Tritle, *A New History of the Peloponnesian War*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Pp. xxvi, 287. ISBN 978-1-4051-2250-4.

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Why yet another history of the Peloponnesian War? After all, Thucydides' classic original is a landmark in western history, much admired for its modern-feeling scientific approach. And, too, the ancient historian had many advantages over later writers: he was a member of the Athenian elite, whose family came from natural resource-rich Thrace. He had sufficient political prominence to be elected to the board of Athenian generals (*stratego*) during the war he describes. Privy to high-level diplomatic negotiations and strategic planning, he knew firsthand the rough-and-tumble procedures of decision-making at Athens as well as the city-state's strengths and limitations in manpower and finances. He well understood the critical importance of supply routes for the timber and flax needed to build and outfit ships and for the grain to feed a large civilian population during decades of quasi-siege conditions.

Thucydides understood the mentalities of highly influential and factionalized political and military leaders. He could gauge the reliability of Delian League allies (later, subject states of the Athenian empire) at any given moment. He also (to his cost) experienced the vagaries of public opinion in the radical democracy of late fifth-century Athens.

As a *strategos* in 424, Thucydides was charged with safeguarding the key site of Amphipolis on the Strymon River in Thrace, an area important for its timber and precious metals. After failing to relieve the forces at Amphipolis fighting the army led by the Spartan commander Brasidas, he was forced into (a twenty-year) exile that enabled him to follow the progress of the war from a non-Athenian (including Spartan) perspective.

Thucydides realized at its outset that the war, in its scale and importance, would surpass even the Persian Wars of 490 and 480–479 that had been fought by citizen soldiers who were the ancient Greek equivalent of the “greatest generation” of World War II veterans. The Peloponnesian War in fact proved to be a protracted, all-out conflict involving hundreds of Greek city-states and even non-Greek participants like the Persian provincial governors (*satraps*) in present-day western Turkey.

Thucydides was very much a man of his time, deeply influenced by the new learning in medicine, rhetoric, philosophy, drama, and poetry. Unlike his predecessor Herodotus, he eschewed mythological explanations and cast his history as a diagnostic study of individuals and communities under the stress of state-sponsored, large-scale use of force. For him, human thoughts and actions, not Homeric notions of divine envy, anger, and intervention, motivated the decisions of city-states and the often violently competing groups within them. Selecting telling events as test cases of wartime behavior, Thucydides amply illustrates how the best-laid plans and expectations may be confounded. He makes brilliant use of speeches to crystallize “what was appropriate to the particular occasion.” A particular concern is the influence superpowers wield over warring factions within smaller states.¹ With a stark clarity, he reveals the worst that human beings can do and bear at the behest of that harsh teacher—war.

To repeat, given all that Thucydides is, what need is there of a new history? Lawrence Tritle (Loyola Marymount) argues convincingly that Thucydides overwhelms modern historians who “retell Thucydides' story but without probing his text critically or paying attention to the traumas and anxieties people were

1. Leading American Secretary of State George C. Marshall, in a speech delivered at Princeton University (22 Feb 1947), to assert “I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens”—quoted in W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1984) 3.

then facing” (xxi). He sees the Peloponnesian War not as a purely political and military conflict, but in the totality of its social and cultural context.

By a judicious use of literary,² epigraphic,³ and archaeological⁴ materials, Tritle strives to take his readers through the war staying in the now, without recourse to the hindsight that shapes Thucydides’ narrative (xxiii–xxiv). Thus, for example, discussing the (“phony”) Peace of Nicias (421 B.C.E.), he sticks to what an astute observer could say at the time: “Aside from Athens and Sparta, there was little joy over the recent settlement. Thucydides relates that nothing was settled and there was little ‘peace’ to be found: terms prescribing the return of land were ignored, violations of all kinds by all parties occurred (Thuc. 5.26.2)... Corinth and Megara were denied recovery of strategic sites; Thebes saw that peace meant an end to greater power. Frustrated these states refused to sign the agreement” (121).

Most significantly, Tritle pays careful attention to an aspect of the war largely ignored in modern accounts (he cites Donald Kagan, J.F. Lazenby, Victor Hanson, N. Bagnall, and G. Hutchinson), namely “the impact of the war’s violence on society and culture” (xxii). This claim might surprise even readers familiar only with abridged versions of Thucydides.⁵ But such powerfully affecting events as the plague in Athens, the debate over the execution of the male population of Mytilene, the atrocities committed during the Corcyraean civil war, and the collision of *Machtpolitik* with idealistic moral standards in the Melian Dialogue—these episodes and others are presented so clinically by the former Athenian general, inured as he was to war trauma and intra-state violence, as to dampen the reader’s appreciation of the unremitting stress endured by individuals and communities throughout the long war.

Tritle attributes such steady debilitation of the human spirit and decline in decent public behavior to “the corrosive effect of violence and its impact on human society” (xxiii). By contrast, modern commentaries often reinforce the sense of abstraction in even the most vivid particular descriptions in Thucydides’ test-case accounts, concentrating instead on general lessons that will not disturb the peace of mind of civilian readers.

Tritle is well equipped for the mission he sets himself. As an officer in the Vietnam War, he witnessed the causes of the psychological trauma analyzed by Jonathan Shay in his now-classic *Achilles in Vietnam*.⁶ He has written insightful articles on the realities of ancient warfare, most notably, on Xenophon’s portrait of the Spartan veteran and mercenary Clearchus as a previously unrecognized case of post-traumatic stress disorder⁷ and on ancient and modern cases of mutilation of corpses by soldiers.⁸ His book *From Melos to My Lai*⁹ drew on the human implications of Shay’s comparative psychiatric studies to enrich ancient and modern military history in a provocative way that left plenty of room for debate and discussion.¹⁰ He has for years taught regular seminars entitled “Achilles in Vietnam” and has sponsored conferences at his university on war and violence and the ongoing military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹¹

2. Including Plato, the master rhetorician Gorgias (for a haunting picture in words of ancient Greek veterans clearly suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD), and Plutarch, most notably his biographies of Pericles, Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lysander.

3. See Tritle’s “A Note on Sources” (243–47).

4. Tritle analyzes the social significance, mid-war, of the temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae, Polyclitus’s *Hera* statue at the rebuilt Argive Heraeum, the *Nike* of Paeonius at Olympia, and the *Dying Niobid* statue vis-à-vis Euripides’ *Hecuba*.

5. E.g., Paul Woodruff’s *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

6. Subtitle *Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (NY: Scribner, 1994); see also Shay’s *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (NY: Scribner, 2004). Tritle embraced and supported many of Shay’s findings early on. His *New History* has separate bibliographies for “Classical Studies” (263–73) and “Modern History (including Psychology and Trauma Studies)” (273–74).

7. “Xenophon’s Portrait of Clearchus: A Study in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” in C. Tuplin, ed., *Xenophon and His World* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2004) 325–39.

8. “Hector’s Body: Mutilation of the Dead in Ancient Greece and Vietnam,” *Ancient History Bulletin* 11 (1997) 123–36.

9. Subtitle *War and Survival* (NY: Routledge, 2000).

10. In my review, “Apocalypse Now and Atrocity Then,” *Times Higher Educ Suppl* (16 Feb 2001) <www.miwr.com/rd/1027.htm>, I question the comparison between the rogue action tacitly encouraged by senior officers in Vietnam and the slaughter at ancient Melos mandated by a vote of the Athenian assembly.

11. E.g., the Bellarmine Forum (7–13 Nov 2004) on different aspects of social violence and the symposium “Mission Failed? The US War in Iraq: What Now?” (10 Apr 2006).

Here are a few of the (many) gems readers will find in this new version of the Peloponnesian War. Tritle finally puts to rest the dubious yet widely held idea that hoplite warfare was so ritualized that battles like the first major land engagement of the war at Delium in 424 lasted only minutes.¹² His detailed reconstruction (98–104) shows that a disaster of the scale of Delium—the Athenians lost 1,000 men, the Boeotian League 500—would have taken much longer.

The Athenian strategy required the coordination of forces coming from different directions, tight security over military intelligence, and on-the-spot reactions by the commander in the field, Hippocrates. In all three cases, this overly ambitious plan went badly awry. In particular, an intelligence failure prevented the arrival of a contingent of troops under Demosthenes, Athens' most successful field officer at the time. Hippocrates should have aborted the mission. However, perhaps fearing the displeasure of the Athenian assembly, he stuck to his orders, dawdled in the field, and unwisely positioned the bulk of his forces too far from himself, where they could not see the 18,000-strong Boeotian army making for the high ground they had vacated.

The sights and sounds of this fight—like any battle ancient or modern—are beyond the comprehension of the inexperienced. The battleground itself would have become, as Thucydides suggests, littered with bodies of the wounded, dying and dead making it difficult to walk and fight at the same time. Blood and lots of it would have made the ground slippery and the air foul. The noise and confusion would have been bewildering and disorienting all at once....

Killing with spears and swords is not easy—many more men would have been wounded than killed—and with thousands of men fighting, and pushing their way forward to replace the fallen, the duration of the hoplite battle would have been an affair that lasted hours rather than minutes (101–3).

Perhaps worst of all, the Thebans rightly claimed that the Athenians had violated sacred territory and so justified their stripping the Athenian dead of their armor and leaving the one thousand bodies “exposed to the ravages of animals and the elements” for seventeen days.

Tritle also discloses treasonous activities of self-aggrandizing Greek political leaders as they made and unmade arrangements with like-minded figures in other communities, with no regard for the best interests of their own city-states. For example, during the Melian affair, the Athenian statesman Alcibiades exerted influence through one of the two generals, Tisias, a close friend, who was sent out in summer 416 with 3,000 soldiers from Athens, Chios, and Lesbos. It is no surprise then to learn that Chios and Lesbos, undoubtedly influenced by Alcibiades' conservative “friends,” assisted him in his unprecedented entry of *seven* chariot teams at the Olympics that same summer: Chios provided animals for sacrifice and fodder for the horses, Lesbos wine and other provisions for Alcibiades' entourage (137). Later, during the Ionian phase of the war, Sparta, on the earlier advice of Alcibiades (while outlawed from Athens), established a permanent base at Decelea in Attica near the Boeotian border. Tritle astutely notes that a delegation from Lesbos visited the Spartan king Agis II at Decelea, while Alcibiades with the Spartan Chalcideus and a small squadron arrived in Chios for talks with the oligarchs there.

Another strength of Tritle's analysis is his contextualizing of Greek comedies and tragedies. Performed at major public festivals in a period of limited literacy and no public educational system or mass media coverage of events, these plays offered an avenue for adult male citizens of Athens to come to terms with their own contemporary history. Tritle offers a stimulating examination (138–41) of Euripides' famous play *The Trojan Women*, which Peter Green¹³ characterizes as “a grimly pessimistic survey of a society's religious and ethical bankruptcy, the tawdriness of its myths, the jungle mentality governing its conduct.” Tritle asks whether the *Trojan Women* was in fact an anti-war play, given contemporary moral standards. He answers “yes,” Green “no,” though he concurs with Green that the tragedy is not a direct response to the actions at Melos: the “[c]omposition of a tragic drama was a complex affair and for Euripides to have written and staged the play in spring 415 demands that it was already in the works when the Athenians sailed into Melos

12. Victor D. Hanson, in *Ripples of Battle* (NY: Anchor, 2004) 171, says “the entire sordid business” at Delium ended “in about an hour.”

13. “War and Morality in Fifth-Century Athens: The Case of Euripides' *Trojan Women*,” *Ancient History Bulletin*, 13 (1999) 97–110.

and demanded its surrender.” He also thinks other, earlier wartime atrocities at Scione, Torone, and Mycalessos provided sufficient inspiration.

Three points need to be made. First, it is odd that the second vote of the Athenian assembly in 427—to kill “only” a thousand of the chief fomenters of the revolt at Mytilene against Athens—should be left off such lists of atrocities. Athenian soldiers executed only half that number at Melos, a much smaller city-state. The same reduced scale of evil likely applies to the small *poleis* of Torone and Scione.

Second, the same arguments were used in regard to Mytilene as at Melos: (1) that even the harshest measures will not deter desperate men from hoping a revolt might succeed, and (2) that inflicting such a punishment would engender a powerful incentive for vengeance against the perpetrating *polis*, were its power to give out.

Third, the precedent of Mytilene over ten years earlier and no doubt ongoing discussions of what to do about Melos even before the denouement of the siege would have given Euripides ample grounds to think a play on such a topic would be popular, whether or not we classify it as specifically “anti-war.”

The volume does have some minor deficiencies: there are problems with its maps¹⁴ and bibliography;¹⁵ the proofreading is imperfect;¹⁶ and there is an occasional slip in chronology.¹⁷ None of these lessens Tritle’s primary achievement. He has produced a major new account of the Peloponnesian War that will allow readers of Thucydides to feel what it was actually like to be at war and to understand the breakdown of legal, moral, and political principles that caused prolonged human suffering on such a colossal scale. We are in his debt.

14. The few maps provided are sometimes poor in quality and the text often lacks references to maps placed elsewhere in the book. E.g., the account of Delium (98–104) should refer to the map of Attica and Boeotia on page 24. Clazomenae and Iasus, city-states mentioned on pages 168–69, are omitted from the map of Ionia (166). Readers of Tritle’s book should have at hand Robert B. Strassler’s profusely illustrated and annotated *Landmark Thucydides* (NY: Free Press, 1996).

15. Which omits works like Otto Dix’s *War Cripples* and Erich Maria Remarque’s *The Road Back*, both used to good effect in Tritle’s discussion of war trauma.

16. On xxiii read “effect” for “affect”; on 69 “that” for “that that”; on 74 “impediment to stand in the way” for “impediment in stand in the way”; on 82, n. 23 “128–31” for “12831”; on 89 “Epitadas” for “Epitadus”; on 122 “agreed to settle the matter” for “agreed to terms settle the matter”; on 148 “Alcibiades” for “Alcibrades”; on 157 “scarce” for “scare”; on 173 “such reforms were” for “such reforms was”; on 184 “the *demos* ceded” for the “the *demos* ceding.”

17. Tritle maintains that “As the disaster in Sicily occurred sometime in September 413 (after the Panathenaea of that year), it would not have been until next year’s festival, that of summer 412, that news would have arrived. Given the circumstances and the distances involved, this seems about right” (163, n. 31). Eight or nine *months* for such news to reach Athens is utterly implausible. Nicolle Hirschfeld, *per ep. elec.* (10 Sep 2010), estimates that an ancient ship with a following wind could sail from Tarentum to Corinth (c. 500 nautical miles) in about five days. Lionel Casson reckons a *round trip* from Athens to Sicily involved about two weeks at sea—*The Ancient Mariners: Seafarers and Sea Fighters of the Mediterranean in Ancient Times*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1991) 103. And the Spartans and their Peloponnesian and Sicilian allies had strong motives to spread the word of the Athenian disaster in Sicily fast!