

Peloponnesian War



The Peloponnesian War began in 431 BC between the Athenian Empire (or The Delian League) and the Peloponnesian League, which included Sparta and Corinth. The war was documented by Thucydides, an Athenian general and historian, in his work *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Most of the extant comedies of Aristophanes were written during this war, and poke fun at the generals and events. The war lasted 27 years, with a 6-year truce in the middle, and ended with Athens' surrender in 404 BC.

Causes of the war

According to Thucydides, the cause of the war was the "fear of the growth of the power of Athens" throughout the middle of the 5th century BC. After a coalition of Greek states thwarted an attempted invasion of the Greek mainland by the Persian empire, several of those states formed the Delian league in 478 BC in order to create and fund a standing navy which could be used against the Persians in areas under their control. Athens, the largest member of the league and the major Greek naval power, took the leadership of the

league and appointed financial officers to oversee its treasury, which was located on the island of Delos, the League headquarters.

Over the following decades Athens, through its great influence in the League, was able to convert it into an Athenian empire. Though some members of the League embraced Athenian conversion, just as many were bitterly opposed to the governments imposed upon them. Gradually League funds went more directly into Athenian projects, rather than into defending the Aegean and Greece from Persia. Pericles had the League treasury relocated from its home on Delos to Athens, from whence most of the funds were used in vast building projects such as the Parthenon. As the member states of the League gradually lost their independence, it transformed into the Athenian Empire, whose growth Sparta watched with concern.

The League, based around the Ionian and Aegean Sea, was by its very nature reliant on ships for trade and to fend off pirates and Persian fleets. As the League developed into the Athenian Empire, member states gradually lost control of their own ships, which they gave to Athens annually as tribute. Consequently, Athens began to accumulate a huge navy. This increase in Athenian military power allowed it to challenge the Lacedaemonians (commonly known as the Spartans), who, as leaders of the Peloponnesian League, had long been the sole major military power in Greece.

The immediate cause of the war comprised several specific Athenian actions that affected Sparta's allies, notably Corinth. The Athenian navy intervened in a dispute between Corinth and Corcyra, preventing Corinth from invading Corcyra at the Battle of Sybota, and placed Potidaea, a Corinthian colony, under siege. The Athenian Empire also levied economic sanctions against Megara, an ally of Sparta. These sanctions, known as the Megarian decree, were largely ignored by Thucydides, but modern economic historians have noted that forbidding Megara to trade with the prosperous Athenian empire would have been disastrous for the Megarans. The decree was likely a greater catalyst for the war than Thucydides and other ancient authors admitted, more so than simple fear of Athenian power.

The "Archidamian War"

Sparta and its allies, with the exception of Corinth, were almost exclusively land-based powers, able to summon large land armies, which were very nearly unbeatable (thanks to the legendary Spartan forces). The Athenian Empire, although based in the peninsula of Attica, spread out across the islands of the Aegean Sea; Athens drew its immense wealth from tribute paid from these islands. Thus, the two powers were relatively unable to fight decisive battles.

The Spartan strategy during the first war, known as the Archidamian War after its king Archidamus II, who invaded Attica, the land surrounding Athens. While this invasion deprived Athens of the productive land around their city, Athens itself was able to maintain access to the sea, and did not suffer much. Many of the citizens of Attica abandoned their farms and moved inside the Long Walls, which connected Athens to its

port of Piraeus. The Spartans also occupied Attica for only a few weeks at a time; in the tradition of earlier hoplite warfare the soldiers expected to go home to participate in the harvest. Moreover, Spartan slaves, known as helots, needed to be kept under control, and could not be left unsupervised for long periods of time. The longest Spartan invasion, in 430 BC, lasted just forty days.

The Athenian strategy was initially guided by the strategos, or general, Pericles, who advised the Athenians to avoid open battle with the far more numerous and better trained Spartan hoplites, relying instead on the fleet. The Athenian fleet, which heavily outnumbered the Spartan, went on the offensive, winning victories off Naupactus (now known as "Návpaktos"). In 430, however, an outbreak of a plague (thought by some to be anthrax tramped up from the soil by the thousands of refugees from Attica hiding out in Athens during a siege by the invading Peloponnesians, although no authoritative consensus exists among modern medical authorities as to the correct diagnosis).

The plague ravaged the densely packed city, and in the long run, was a significant cause in the final defeat of Athens. The plague wiped out over 30,000 citizens, sailors and soldiers and even Pericles and his sons, roughly one quarter of the Athenian population. The plague was a disaster, which they could never hope to recover from, as Athenian manpower was drastically reduced, and even foreign mercenaries refused to hire themselves out to a city riddled with plague. The fear of plague was so widespread that the Spartan invasion of Attica was abandoned, as their troops were unwilling to be near the diseased enemy.

After the death of Pericles, the Athenians turned somewhat against Pericles's conservative, defensive strategy and to a more aggressive strategy of bringing the war to Sparta and its allies. Rising to particular importance in Athenian democracy at this time was Cleon, a leader of the hawkish elements of the Athenian democracy. Led militarily by a clever new general Demosthenes (not to be confused with the later Athenian orator Demosthenes), the Athenians managed some successes as they continued their naval raids on the Peloponnese, stretched their military activities into Boeotia and Aetolia, and began fortifying posts around the Peloponnese.

One of these posts was near Pylos on a tiny island called Sphacteria, where the course of the first war turned in Athens's favor. The post off Pylos struck Sparta where it was weakest: its dependence on the helots. Sparta was dependent on a class of slaves, known as helots, to tend the fields while its citizens trained to become such fine soldiers.

The helots made the Spartan system possible, but now the post off Pylos began attracting helot runaways. To lose these slaves was bad enough, but the fear of a general revolt of helots emboldened by the nearby Athenian presence drove the Spartans to action. Demosthenes, however, outmaneuvered the Spartans and trapped a group of Spartan soldiers on Sphacteria as he waited for them to surrender.

Weeks later, though, Demosthenes proved unable to finish off these irrepressible Spartans. After boasting that he could put an end to the affair in the Assembly, to most

Athenians' surprise (and perhaps to his as well), the inexperienced Cleon won a great victory at the Battle of Pylos and the related Battle of Sphacteria in 425 BC. The Athenians captured between 300 and 400 Spartan hoplites. The hostages gave the Athenians a valuable bargaining chip.

The Battle of Sphacteria was more a humiliating surrender than a devastating one, however. After the battle, Brasidas, a Spartan general, raised an army of allies and helots and went for one of the sources of Athenian power, capturing the Athenian colony of Amphipolis, which happened to control several nearby silver mines which the Athenians were using to finance the war. In subsequent battles, both Brasidas and Cleon were killed (see Battle of Amphipolis). The Spartans and Athenians agreed to exchange the hostages for the towns captured by Brasidas, and signed a truce.

The Peace of Nicias

The Peace of Nicias lasted for some six years, but was a time of constant skirmishing in and around the Peloponnese. While the Spartans refrained from action themselves, some of their allies began to talk of revolt. They were supported in this by Argos, a powerful state within the Peloponnese that had remained independent of Lacedaemon. The Argives, allies of the Athenians, succeeded in forming a grand alliance against Sparta.

The Battle of Mantinea was the largest land battle fought within Greece during the Peloponnesian War. The Lacedaemonians, with their neighbors the Tegeans, faced the combined armies of Argos, Athens, Mantinea, and Arcadia. The Spartans, "utterly worsted with respect to skill but superior in point of courage", routed the alliance against them. While the battle was indecisive with respect to the Athenian-Peloponnesian conflict, Sparta succeeded in defeating Argos, thus ensuring their supremacy over the people of Peloponnese.

The Sicilian Expedition

In the 17th year of the war, word came to Athens that one of their distant allies in Sicily was under attack from Syracuse. The people of Syracuse were ethnically Dorian, while the Athenians, and their ally in Sicily, were Ionian. The Athenians felt obliged to assist their ally.

The Athenians people did not act solely from altruism: they held visions of conquering all of Sicily. Syracuse, the principal city of Sicily, was not much smaller than Athens, and conquering all of Sicily would have brought Athens an immense amount of resources. In the final stages of the preparations for departure the hermai (religious statues) were mutilated by unknown persons, and Alcibiades, the Athenian general in charge of the expedition, was charged with religious crimes. Fearing that he would be unjustly condemned, Alcibiades defected to Sparta and Nicias was placed in charge of the mission. After his defection, Alcibiades informed the Spartans that the Athenian planned to use Sicily as a springboard for the conquest of all of Italy, and to use the resources and soldiers from these new conquests to conquer all of the Peloponnese.

The Athenian force consisted of over 100 ships and some 5000 infantry. Upon landing in Sicily, several cities immediately joined the Athenian cause. Instead of attacking at once, Nicias procrastinated and the campaigning season of 415 BC ended with Syracuse scarcely damaged. With winter approaching, the Athenians were then forced to withdraw into their quarters, and they spent the winter gathering allies and preparing to destroy Syracuse. The delay allowed the Syracusans to send for help from Sparta, who sent their general Gylippus to Sicily with reinforcements. Upon arriving, he raised up a force from several Sicilian cities, and went to the relief of Syracuse. He took command of the Syracusan troops, and in a series of battles defeated the Athenian forces, and prevented them from investing the city.

The Second War

The Lacedaemonians were not content with simply sending aid to Sicily; they also resolved to take the war to the Athenians. On the advice of Alcibiades, they fortified Decelea, near Athens, and prevented the Athenians from making use of their land year round. The fortification of Decelea also prevented the shipment of supplies overland to Athens, and forced all supplies to be brought in by sea at increased expense.

The Corinthians, the Spartans, and others in the Peloponnesian League sent more reinforcements to Syracuse, in the hopes of driving off the Athenians; but instead of withdrawing, the Athenians sent another hundred ships and another 5000 troops to Sicily. Under Gylippus, the Syracusans and their allies were able to decisively beat the Athenians on land; and Gylippus encouraged the Syracusans to build a navy, which was able to defeat the Athenian fleet when they attempted to withdraw. The Athenian army, attempting to withdraw overland to other, more friendly Sicilian cities, was divided and defeated; the entire Athenian fleet was destroyed, and virtually the entire Athenian army was sold off into slavery.

Following the defeat of the Athenians in Sicily, it was widely believed that the end of the Athenian Empire was at hand. Her treasury was nearly empty, her docks were depleted, and the flower of her youth was dead or imprisoned in a foreign land. They underestimated the strength of the Athenian Empire, but the beginning of the end was indeed at hand.

Athens Recovers

Following the destruction of the Sicilian Expedition, Lacedaemon encouraged the revolt of Athens's tributary allies, and indeed, much of Ionia rose in revolt against Athens. The Syracusans sent their fleet to the Peloponnesians, and the Persians decided to support the Spartans with money and ships. Revolt and faction threatened in Athens itself.

The Athenians managed to survive for several reasons. First, their foes were severely lacking in vigor. Corinth and Syracuse were slow to bring their fleets into the Aegean, and Sparta's other allies were also slow to furnish troops or ships. The Ionian states that rebelled expected protection, and frequently rejoined the Athenian side. The Persians

were slow to furnish promised funds and ships, frustrating battle plans. Perhaps most importantly, Spartan officers were not trained to be diplomats, and were somewhat politically insensitive.

At the start of the war, the Athenians had prudently put aside some money and 100 ships that were to be used only as a last resort.

These ships were now released, and served as the core of the Athenians' fleet throughout the rest of the war. An oligarchical revolution occurred in Athens, in which a group of 400 seized power. A peace with Sparta might have been possible, but the Athenian fleet, now based on the island of Samos, refused to accept the change. In 411 BC this fleet engaged the Spartans at the Battle of Syme. The fleet appointed Alcibiades their leader, and continued the war in Athens's name. Their opposition led to the reinstitution of a democratic government in Athens within two years.

Alcibiades, while condemned as a traitor, was a very strong personality. He prevented the Athenian fleet from attacking Athens; instead, he helped restore democracy by more subtle pressure. He also persuaded the Athenian fleet to attack the Spartans at the battle of Cyzicus in 410. In the battle, the Athenians obliterated the Spartan fleet, and succeeded in reestablishing the financial basis of the Athenian empire.

Between 410 and 406, Athens won victory after victory, and had recovered large portions of its empire. All of this was due, in no small part, to Alcibiades.

Lysander triumphs

Faction triumphed in Athens: following a minor Spartan victory by Lysander at the naval battle of Notium, Alcibiades was not reelected general. He retired, leaving Athens to the mercy of a new and cunning opponent. Lysander was a rare Spartan, comfortable at controlling ships, trustworthy abroad, and with good personal relationships with the Persians.

Opportunity cooperated with him. After a naval battle at Arginusae, in which the Athenians lost 12 ships, the Athenians were unable to rescue the crews due to bad weather. Blaming instead the generals, the Athenians executed all of their top naval commanders, and destroyed the morale of their navy. Lysander, seizing the opportunity, sailed at once to the Hellespont, the source of Athens's grain. Threatened with starvation, the Athenian fleet had no choice but to follow. By means of a ruse, Lysander tricked the Athenians into a total defeat at the battle of Aegospotami, destroying 168 ships; only 12 Athenian ships escaped, and several of these sailed to Cyprus, including the strategos Conon, who was not anxious to face the judgment of the Assembly.

Facing starvation and disease from the prolonged siege, Athens surrendered in 404 BC, and her allies soon surrendered as well. The democrats at Samos, loyal to the bitter last, held on slightly longer, and were allowed to flee with their lives. The surrender stripped Athens of her walls, her fleet, and all of her overseas possessions.

Effects

For a short period of time, Athens was ruled by the 'thirty oligarchs'. According to a footnote in *The Trial and Death of Socrates* translated by GMA Grube pg 35, the thirty oligarchs was "the harsh oligarchy that was set up after the final defeat of Athens by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC, and that ruled Athens for some nine months in 404-403 before the democracy was restored."

Although the power of Athens was broken, she made something of a recovery as a result of the Corinthian War and continued to play an active role in Greek politics. Sparta was in turn humbled by Thebes at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC, but it was all brought to an end a few years later by Philip II of Macedon.

The Corinthian War was an ancient conflict fought between 395 BC and 387 BC. In the course of it a number of Greek city-states challenged the hegemony that Sparta had established following its victory in the Peloponnesian War. This war saw Sparta, already at war with Persia, facing an alliance between its traditional enemies Athens and Argos, and its former allies Thebes and Corinth. The war was largely a stalemate, focusing on the Spartan king Agesilaus's siege of Corinth, which lasted until 390 BC, when the city was relieved by the Athenian general Iphicrates. This victory gave the Persians, who had been bankrolling the allies, pause, leading to the Peace of Antalcidas of 387 BC, in which the Greek states recognized Persian hegemony over Greece, which in effect played out as Spartan domination.

The war continues to fascinate later generations, both because of the way it engulfed the Greek world, and because the insight Thucydides provides into the motivations of its participants is deeper than what is known about any other war in ancient times.