The Greatest Battles in History: The Peloponnesian War

by

Charles River Editors
Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds...Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world—I had almost said of mankind.” – Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War

The Peloponnesian War, as the great historian Thucydides wrote in the introduction to his eponymous book, which has become one of the greatest historical treatises of antiquity, was an event of such calamitous magnitude that Greece had never witnessed its like in all of recorded history. Not the Trojan War, not the Dorian Invasion, not even the recent Persian invasions – which had devastated mainland Greece and seen Athens herself evacuated and put to the flame, the buildings on her Acropolis razed into dust – could compare to the scale of the devastation that engulfed all of Greece for almost three decades, causing the deaths of tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands.

Entire populations were displaced, whole cities destroyed, and mountainous sums of money spent, all in order for Greece's two most famous city-states to establish who had dominion over Greece. Sparta, whose invincible armies had recently led the Greeks to victory against Xerxes's hordes at Plataea was at the head of the Peloponnesian League. Their opponents were led by proud Athens, possessor of a fleet that virtually dominated the entire Mediterranean and decimated the Persian navy at Salamis and Mycale, at the head of the Delian League. Sparta was insular and old-fashioned, while Athens was dynamic and democratic, but both were bent on imperialistic expansion, and the two ancient rivals, at loggerheads for so long, eventually sucked every other major city-state in Greece into the war. The Peloponnesian War would rage on a scale that was unimaginable to the Greeks, ranging from Italy to Asia Minor. By war's end, nothing would be the same and nothing would be sacred. Even the Spartans, the proud vanquishers of the Persian hordes, whose king Leonidas and his Three Hundred had died to the last man at Thermopylae to help preserve Greek freedom, were forced to go cap in hand to the Persian emperors and beg for money to continue the war. The war between Athens and Sparta was a war of nations, and it lasted so long that many who were alive and well at its beginning were dead of disease and old age – quite apart from the hazards of the battlefield – by its finish.

The Greatest Battles in History: The Peloponnesian War comprehensively covers the history behind one of the most famous wars of antiquity, the men who led and fought in the war, and the war's lasting legacy. Along with a bibliography, maps, and pictures of important people and places, you will learn about the Peloponnesian War like you never have before.
The Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.)

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds. The preparations of both the combatants were in every department in the last state of perfection; and he could see the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel; those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation. Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world—I had almost said of mankind. For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that more immediately preceded the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on as great a scale, either in war or in other matters.

— Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War

The names of history's most famous battles still ring in our ears today, their influence immediately understood by all. Marathon lent its name to the world's most famous race, but it also preserved Western civilization during the First Persian War. Saratoga, won by one of the colonists' most renowned war heroes before he became his nation's most vile traitor. Hastings ensured the Normans' success in England and changed the course of British history. Waterloo, which marked the reshaping of the European continent and Napoleon's doom, has now become part of the English lexicon. In Charles River Editors' Greatest Battles in History series, readers can get caught up to speed on history's greatest battles in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

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Athens, possessor of a fleet that virtually dominated the entire Mediterranean and decimated the Persian navy at Salamis and Mycale, at the head of the Delian League. Sparta was insular and old-fashioned, while Athens was dynamic and democratic, but both were bent on imperialistic expansion, and the two ancient rivals, at loggerheads for so long, eventually sucked every other major city-state in Greece into the war. The Peloponnesian War would rage on a scale that was unimaginable to the Greeks, ranging from Italy to Asia Minor. By war's end, nothing would be the same and nothing would be sacred. Even the Spartans, the proud vanquishers of the Persian hordes, whose king Leonidas and his Three Hundred had died to the last man at Thermopylae to help preserve Greek freedom, were forced to go cap in hand to the Persian emperors and beg for money to continue the war. The war between Athens and Sparta was a war of nations, and it lasted so long that many who were alive and well at its beginning were dead of disease and old age—quite apart from the hazards of the battlefield—by its finish. The Peloponnesian War was just as influential as it was deadly. The Spartan victory permanently ended the Golden Age of Athens, but Sparta would hardly have time or reason to celebrate the victory either. The Greatest Battles in History: The Peloponnesian War comprehensively covers the history behind one of the most famous wars of antiquity, the men who led and fought in the war, and the war's lasting legacy. Along with a bibliography, maps, and pictures of important people and places, you will learn about the Peloponnesian War like you never have before, in no time at all. The Greatest Battles in History: The Peloponnesian War

Introduction

Chapter 1: Ancient Rivalry

The Ancient Greeks have long been viewed nostalgically as the forerunners of Western civilization. While they certainly contributed advances in everything from mathematics and technology to philosophy, it is often overlooked that Ancient Greece was a remarkably fractured entity. As far back as the historical record goes, it is virtually impossible to find a period of more than a decade that was not riven with internal strife and violence. When the Greeks did band together, it was at a time when they were facing an existential threat and realized it.

The unique nature of Hellas, divided as it was into independent city-states that were continuously at odds with one another, meant that for one reason or another the great (and small) poleis of Greece were regularly at each others' throats. It was a history that dated back to the rise of Athens and Sparta themselves. Sometime between 600 and 550 B.C., Sparta was still led by two kings Agasicles and Leon, but by this point the Ephorate, a council of five elders, one from each deme of Sparta and with a large share of the executive power, had also been introduced. It was also around this time that Sparta waged a vicious war against the neighbouring city of Tegea, another Arcadian polis. Tegea resisted with unprecedented tenacity, even inflicting a serious defeat upon the Spartans at what became known as the Battle of the Fetters, and eventually Sparta was forced—in a sea-change of policy—desist from its attempts to subjugate the Tegeans and reduce them to helot status. Sparta instead accepted a grudging agreement from the Tegeans to accept Sparta as their hegemon.
This stubborn resistance led the Tegeans to acquire a significant amount of fame as warriors, their valour and skill at arms being characterised by ancient Greek historians as being second only to that of the Spartans themselves. The upshot of the war was that Sparta now gained a valuable ally in ensuring the continued pacification of the restless Messenian territory, and also a buffer between its own dominions and those of the closest rival superpower, the mighty city of Argos. The following decades of Spartan policy were to be shaped by their desire to gain ascendancy over Argos, and in 546 B.C., following the Battle of Champions, Sparta inflicted another serious reversal on the Argives by taking control of the troubled no-man's-land of Cynuria. Cynuria had been a contested territory which stood between Argolis, the Argive sphere of influence, and Laconia, the fledgling Spartan Peloponnesian domain (hence the modern word “laconic”, as the Spartans were notorious for being men of few words).

Approximately half a century after the Battle of Champions, in 494 B.C. Sparta launched a mighty expedition under King Cleomenes with the intention of destroying Argos once and for all. The Argives fought back, but their forces were annihilated by the Spartan heavy infantry at the Battle of Sepeia, causing such devastation to the Argive war effort that they effectively became a second-rate power. The Argives were forced to acquiesce to humiliating peace terms. It is said that when Cleomenes was asked why he had spared Argos when it lay prostrated and defenceless before him, he remarked mildly that Sparta needed the Argives – they gave young Spartans something to practice on. The defeat of Argos established Sparta once and for all as the dominant land power throughout all of Hellas, its armies invincible and its might unquestioned. Other powers, chiefly Athens, might be more dominant at sea, but wherever battle was joined on land, the Spartans were without peer. As Sparta suddenly vaulted into ascendancy, envoys poured in from as far afield as Scythia and Lydia asking for Spartan aid against the Persian Emperor Darius, whose ruthless expansionist policy was poised to threaten half the known world, including Greece herself, for whom Sparta had taken upon itself the self-appointed role of champion.

Closer to home, the cities of the Ionian seaboard (Middle-Eastern in terms of geographic location, but Greek in ethnic background and culture) begged for help in their uprising against Darius, while the Greek cities of Megara and Plataea, and later Corinth, declared their loyalty to Sparta, establishing the beginnings of what later became known as the Peloponnesian League. The League, which would eventually become one of the great political forces in ancient Greece, did not get off to the most successful of starts. The first joint effort by the Peloponnesian League, and the first time Sparta had attempted to assert its political supremacy north of the Isthmus of Corinth, came when the two Spartan kings Cleomenes and Demaratos led an expedition into Attica, Athens's heartland. The Spartans had helped overthrow the Athenian ruler Hippias shortly before, in 510 B.C., and with two political parties, headed by Cleisthenes and Isagoras respectively, vying for supremacy, the situation seemed ripe for political exploitation. The Spartans attempted to back the conservative Isagoras, but the expedition was a complete fiasco: the allies, apprised of the Spartans' intentions, decamped en masse, and then the Spartan army itself was riven in two when Demaratos quarreled with...
Cleomenes and decided to up the stakes and return home as well. As a result, Spartan credibility was somewhat damaged; rather than being uncontested leaders of the Peloponnesian League, they were now expected to defer to their allies when it came to decision-making, leaving them as a first among equals rather than the overlords they would have likely preferred to be. (As an interesting aside, Demaratos would later be exiled and wound up watching the Battle of Thermopylae from Xerxes’s tent. The league itself stood firm, but its goal seems to have shifted. Rather than ensuring Spartan supremacy, it was now geared towards resisting outside intervention. Cleomenes, it appears, had scented a change in the wind. For hundreds of years, Greece had been riven with factionalism and internal strife, but the time was swiftly approaching when all such differences must be set aside. The might of the Persian empire, the greatest the world had ever seen, was being massed against them by the Emperor Darius. The Persian empire used its unimaginable wealth to equip an army whose numbers were so large they defied understanding. In fact, it’s estimated that each province of Persia was capable of raising more men than all the Greek poleis combined.)
Frank Donnelly, “A Useful And Illuminating Written Summary, The Audiobook, (Three Star), Is Rushed And Incomplete. The Kindle, written version, of the summary of The Peloponnesian War is a good summary produced by Charles River Editors. I am attempting to study Thucydides in a much larger book "History of Political Philosophy”. In studying that work, I became confused and needed a concise overview of this period. This product proved satisfactory for that purpose. I was less satisfied with the audiobook, but as long as I could read the Kindle, all was well.I found this summary of the Peloponnesian War to be an adequate and instructional overview that met the needs of this reviewer. I am referring specifically to the Kindle written edition. It was offered for free to the public. I downloaded it and purchased the audiobook for a small additional fee. I found the narration of the audiobook to be rapid paced to the point of being rushed. I was able to correct this by changing the speed on my device. However it affected my opinion of the quality of the audiobook. Also at the end of the Kindle is information on The Funeral Oration of Pericles. This is NOT in the audiobook at all. If I had it to do over again, I would have downloaded the Kindle for free and not purchased the audiobook. Thank You...”

JLTRAVA, “Peloponnesian War. Very interesting summary of the Peloponnesian War. It's incredible how this magnificent civilization destroyed itself little by little. Should be a lesson for all human kind to learn.”

Robert G. Buice, “Excellent. The item downloaded easily. There were no issues. There is not much more you can say about a digital download.”

outdoor lover, “I liked The personal accounts of some of the players in .... I liked The personal accounts of some of the players in the story. Woven into the story of the Peloponnesian conflict was documented quite well with an orderly progression and analysis of motivations of the players involved.”

Montie Taylor, “Informative. I'm still reading this book and don't have a lot to say about it just yet. So far It's excellent”

SD1981, “Nice overview to Peloponnesian War. This little ebook presents nicely roots, course and final outcome of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 b.c.) when Athens and Sparta and their respective allies fought for supremacy in old Greece and the Aegean Sea. Some pictures and maps lighten the short but compact textes and make the book to a very informative overview to that long past classical conflict. Therefore all five stars to this ebook.”
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Chapter 4: Athens' Darkest Hour  
Chapter 5: The Last Gasp  
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Bibliography