

# The lessons of Thucydides for the war in Ukraine

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Can a 2,400 year old book teach us lessons on the terrible events currently unfolding in Ukraine? It does seem to be the case of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*<sup>2</sup>, written by Thucydides in the V<sup>th</sup> century BC, which narrates the war between the two military powers of his time, Sparta and Athens.<sup>3</sup> Some passages of the book are disturbing as they seem to have been written yesterday.

The main reason that makes *The History of the Peloponnesian War* a classic directly stems from its author. A former Athenian general sent into exile after facing a defeat, Thucydides decided to write his book to teach future generations the lessons that he had drawn from this conflict, which resulted in the end of Athens' Golden Era. For this reason, and the great thoroughness of his work, Thucydides is widely regarded as the very first historian.

**Three main lessons can be drawn from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. The first one relates to the main causes of the war.** What brings two powerful and prosperous nations, once allied against their common and powerful enemy – Persia –, to fight each other, risking losing everything? Thucydides distinguishes two main reasons. On the one hand, there are deep factors, linked to the rivalry of two nations with very different political systems; on the other hand, there are triggering factors. The two nations certainly did not start the war lightly; Thucydides relates the debates that took place in each camp. According to him, the most fundamental reason for the war was that Sparta feared the rising power of Athens. The outbreak of the war finds its origin in local conflicts between smaller cities linked to Sparta and Athens by a system of alliances. On each side, the fear of appearing weak acted as a powerful motivation to go to war. These local rivalries ultimately led to a general conflict through a domino effect, reminiscent of the trigger of World War I (or more recently the debates on whether to allow more countries to join NATO and on the risk to amplify the war in Ukraine).

**The second lesson relates to a specific passage of the book called the Melian dialogue,** which speaks of the attempt of the small Republic of Melos to stay neutral in the conflict. Melos faced an ultimatum from Athens: join their camp or be annihilated. The dialogue that followed between the Melian authorities and the Athenian delegation has stayed in history as the triumph of the “law of the strongest” [“might is right”]. While the Melians tried to advocate their own rights and moral concerns, the Athenians answered that when forces are unequal “*the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept*” (p. 402). This particular dialogue also tackles a lot of current topics: what would be the impact of Athens' intervention on the other cities (would this push them to take arms against Athens)? How likely would it be that Sparta (or any other city) steps in and

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be interpreted as reflecting those of the institutions he is affiliated with. A previous version of this article was published in French by *Le Grand Continent*, see [link](#).

<sup>2</sup> Unless specified otherwise, the citations of the present article come from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Penguin Classics, translated by Rex Wagner with an introduction and notes by M. I. Finley..

<sup>3</sup> The war started in -431 and ended in -404, but it did not go on continuously between these two dates. Rather, the conflict often took the form of proxy wars between nations allied to Sparta or Athens. It was interrupted by periods of relative inaction, like the Peace of Nicias in -421, which was short-lived. It is actually the second war of this type between the two nations: the first Peloponnesian war took place between -460 and -445; it was concluded by a Treaty stipulating that no ally of Athens or Sparta should change side (therefore splitting the Greek world into two camps).

helps Melos? Can Melos, admittedly smaller, still inflict significant damage on Athens, and shouldn't Athens preserve its forces? These considerations are very relevant in the case of asymmetric warfare, when one country fights a much larger and more powerful enemy.

**The third lesson concerns the reasons for Athens' defeat.** At the start of the conflict, Athens was on paper the most likely to win the war. This was at least the analysis of the much respected general Pericles, who eloquently argued in favor of the war (Athens being a democracy, decisions were publicly and freely debated). Yet, Athens suffered a crushing defeat. Several factors can explain this unexpected outcome. Some of them could possibly not have been anticipated at the time (in particular, Athens was struck by a pandemic, which was especially deadly as the Athenians had locked themselves down behind their fortifications). Other factors arose from what can be interpreted, *ex post*, as an erroneous assessment of the situation: it is worthwhile analyzing them with the benefit of hindsight.

The rest of this article goes over each of these three lessons.

## 1. The causes of the war: geopolitical balance and specific triggers

Thucydides attaches great importance to the causes of the war, which he analyses in the first chapter of the book. He distinguishes deep, long-running geopolitical factors, and specific events that acted as a trigger.

**The main factor causing the war was the fear of Sparta, once the hegemonic power of the Greek world, to see Athens reinforce itself and overtake them.** (*"What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta"*, p. 49)<sup>4</sup>. To explain this, Thucydides goes back to the beginning of the Athenian empire in the first chapter. Athens' empire emerged during the Greco-Persian Wars when the Athenians decided to abandon their city and flee overseas to other Mediterranean cities. This led Athens to form a coalition of cities, over which its hegemony was asserted over time. The prestige of the victory of the Athenians over the Persians during the naval battle of Salamis represented a source of pride for Athens, which arose the jealousy of the Spartans.

**What started as purely defensive fortifications was seen as a threat by the Spartans.** Thucydides explains the effect produced by the construction of the Long Walls, a fortification linking Athens to the port of Piraeus, thus allowing Athens to be supplied by sea in the event of a siege. This construction displeased the Spartans because, even if it was a purely defensive military structure, it protected Athens from a siege by Sparta (this is exactly what happened during the first stage of the Peloponnesian War). The construction of the Long Walls placed the Spartans before a *fait accompli*, and even if they did not react officially, this reinforced their distrust of their former allies of the Persian Wars. A recent example of this mechanism would be anti-missile missiles, which can be interpreted as an offensive action as it modifies the balance of powers.

**The triggering factor was the system of alliances of each of the two cities, exacerbated by local rivalries between smaller cities.** Here the notion of a defensive alliance (*epimachia*), as opposed to a classical, offensive and defensive alliance (*symmachia*), takes on decisive importance and is closely reminiscent of current NATO discussions. Thucydides recounts several conflicts, the most emblematic being perhaps that between Corcyra (today's Corfu) and Corinth, two cities in conflict while Corinth was allied with Sparta (Book I, 24). Corcyra approached Athens, recalling that the three largest navies

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<sup>4</sup> This is what Graham T. Allison calls Thucydides Trap. This trap is often cited in the context of the US/China rivalry, see for example a [recent analysis by David Kotok on the subject](#), with a focus on the economic and financial implications of the question.

of the time were precisely made up of Athens, Corinth and Corcyra (in this order): to ensure the victory of Corcyra was therefore to deprive Sparta of any allies at sea and prevent them from acquiring a fleet. Thucydides reports the debates of the Athenians, faced with a dilemma: help Corcyra gain the advantage over Sparta, or avoid provoking war. After long debates, the Athenians opted for a purely defensive alliance.<sup>5</sup> Athens therefore sent warships (triremes), but in small numbers, and asking the captains to act only defensively, so as not to provoke Corinth, an ally of Sparta. However, the battle turned to Corinth's advantage and the Athenians ended up engaging more resolutely in the battle.<sup>6</sup> This aroused the anger of the Corinthians who complained to Sparta, asking them to honor their treaty of alliance after a virulent plea (Book I, 69)<sup>7</sup>. The reproach of cowardice and the risk of seeing Athens strengthen and Sparta's allies leave the Peloponnesian league if it showed irresolution resulted in the decision of the Spartans to go to war.

**On both sides, the same logic pushed each side against the other: the fear of appearing weak, and thus losing allies.** Pericles advocated for entering into war, inciting the Athenians not to yield anything to their adversaries: *"If you give in, you will immediately be confronted with some greater demand, since they will think that you only gave way on this point through fear. But if you take a firm stance you will make it clear to them that they have to treat you properly as equals"* (p. 119).

## **2. The Melian dialogue: on the impossibility to remain neutral and the existential choice between freedom or being destroyed**

The second teaching of Thucydides comes from a specific passage in the book, which is called the "Melian dialogue". It is named after the small city of Melos, which was approached by Athens to join its alliance but refused because it preferred to remain neutral. Athens then sent a military delegation to Melos with an ultimatum urging the city's authorities to submit or face total destruction. During the ensuing dialogue, reported by Thucydides (Book V, 84-116), the Melians tried to put forward several arguments, relying in particular on morality and law. The Athenians responded to these arguments by reminding the Melians of their dangerous position and by calling for realism. This is how they started the negotiations *"If you are going to spend the time in enumerating your suspicions about the future, or if you have met here for any other reason except to look the facts in the face and on the basis of these facts to consider how you can save your city from destruction, there is no point in our going on with this discussion. If, however, you will do as we suggest, then we will speak on."* (p. 401).

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<sup>5</sup> *"they decided on entering into some kind of alliance with Corcyra. This was not to be a total alliance involving the two parties in any war which either of them might have on hand; for the Athenians realized that if Corcyra required them to join in an attack on Corinth, that would constitute a breach of their treaty with the Peloponnese. Instead the alliance was to be of a defensive character and would only operate if Athens or Corcyra or any of their allies were attacked from outside."*, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> *"And now the Athenians, seeing that the Corcyraeans were in difficulties, began to support them more openly. At first they refrained from actually ramming any Corinthian ship; but finally, when there was no doubt about the defeat and the Corinthians were still pressing on, there came a point where everyone joined in and nothing was barred. Thus a situation inevitably came about where Corinthians and Athenians were openly fighting with each other."*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> The Corinthians shower the Spartans with reproaches *"And it is you who are responsible for all this. It was you who in the first place allowed the Athenians to fortify their city and build the Long Walls after the Persian War. Since then and up to the present day you have withheld freedom not only from those who have been enslaved by Athens but even from your own allies. When one is deprived of one's liberty one is right in blaming not so much the man who puts the fetters on as the one who had the power to prevent him, but did not use it"*, p. 74.

- **Morality and law.** The Melians considered themselves as asserting their rights since they were victims of an external unjustified aggression (the small city of Melos would have been incapable of threatening Athens even if it had wanted to). The Athenians did not seek to refute this argument; instead they used the law of the strongest: between unequal forces, morality cannot be taken into account, the strong do what they want and the weak what they must. The Melians argued that the aggression of Athens would cause the other Greek city-states to rebel against this expansionist attitude. The Athenians believed, on the contrary, that this aggression would only show the strength of Athens and would dissuade the other cities which would be tempted to rebel:

  - Melians : *“So you would not agree to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?”*.
  - Athenians : *“No, because it is not so much your hostility that injures us; it is rather the case that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power”*.
- **Honor.** Throughout *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, honor is considered vitally important: to yield is to expose oneself to shame and to appear weak. The Athenians were well aware of this issue and aimed to reassure the Melians:

  - Melians : *“Then surely, if such hazards are taken by you to keep your empire and by your subjects to escape from it, we who are still free would show ourselves great cowards and weaklings if we failed to face everything that comes rather than submit to slavery”*.
  - Athenians : *“No, not if you are sensible. This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you”*.
- **Uncertainty about the outcome of the fighting and the possible losses for Athens.** The Melians were aware of their numerical inferiority; nevertheless, they proclaimed that war is always uncertain and that Athens could suffer losses, which would weaken it in its conflict against Sparta. The Athenians responded that the stakes were not the same for the two cities: if Athens risked losses, Melos risked losing everything.

  - Melians : *“Yet we know that in war fortune sometimes makes the odds more level than could be expected from the difference in numbers of the two sides. And if we surrender, then all our hope is lost at once, whereas, so long as we remain in action, there is still a hope that we may yet stand upright”*.
  - Athenians : *“Hope, that comforter in danger! If one already has solid advantages to fall back upon, one can indulge in hope. It may do harm, but will not destroy one. But hope is by nature an expensive commodity, and those who are risking their all on one cast find out what it means only when they are already ruined; it never fails them in the period when such a knowledge would enable them to take precautions. Do not let this happen to you, you who are weak and whose fate depends on a single movement of the scale. And do not be like those people who, as so commonly happens, miss the chance of saving themselves in a human and practical way, and, when every clear and distinct hope has left them in their adversity, turn to what is blind and vague”*.
- **The possible intervention of Sparta and other cities.** The Melians tried to intimidate the Athenians by warning them against a possible intervention by Sparta. Athens rejected this proposal, not without sarcasm:

  - Athenians : *“with regard to your views about Sparta and your confidence that she, out of a sense of honour, will come to your aid, we must say that we congratulate you on your simplicity but do not envy you your folly. In matters that concern themselves or their own constitution the Spartans are quite remarkably good; as for their relations with others, that is a long story, but it can be expressed shortly and clearly by saying that of all people we*

*know the Spartans are most conspicuous for believing that what they like doing is honourable and what suits their interests is just. And this kind of attitude is not going to be of much help to you in your absurd quest for safety at the moment”.*

At the end of the dialogue Melos was inflexible on its position. The Athenians seemed infuriated by the resistance of Melos:

- Athenians: *“Well, at any rate, judging from this decision of yours, you seem to us quite unique in your ability to consider the future as something more certain than what is before your eyes, and to see uncertainties as realities, simply because you would like them to be so. As you have staked most on and trusted most in Spartans, luck, and hopes, so in all these you will find yourselves most completely deluded”.*

Thucydides briefly recounts the next sequence of events: Athens sent an army to attack Melos; the siege starved the Melians, who ended up surrendering; the Athenians then massacred all the men and sold the women and children as slaves. A posteriori, one can wonder about this dialogue: who was right and who was wrong? Athenian realism ended up prevailing over Melian moral position and hopes, it is indeed the reason of the strongest that prevailed. However, Athenian expansionism is also at the origin of the tilting of alliances against Athens.

### **3. The reasons for the defeat of Athens: had Pericles misjudged the situation?**

The Athenian defeat represents a major turning point in the history of humanity, but also a paradox. At the beginning of the conflict, the city had substantial assets and seemed, in theory, to be the most likely to win. In the internal debates on whether to go to war against Sparta, Pericles also relied on these assets to advocate for going to war. Pericles analyzed the strengths of Athens very well, while evoking the potential risks:

- **Athens is safe from a siege.** Thanks to its walls, which run to the port of Piraeus, the city can be supplied by sea in the event of a siege. The Spartans are not versed in poliorcetics (siegecraft) and therefore unable to take the city. A siege would only prolong the duration of the war, which would be to Athens' advantage.
- **Athens has complete mastery of the sea.** This protects it from a maritime attack by Sparta and, on the contrary, allows it to counterattack by landing troops on Sparta's rear. Pericles believes that Sparta will not be able to develop a navy quickly enough: *“as for seamanship, they will find that a difficult lesson to learn”* (p. 121).
- **Athens has vastly superior financial resources.** Spartans and Athenians are perfectly aware that money is the sinews of war. *“The Peloponnesians cultivate their own land themselves; they have no financial resources either as individuals or as states; then they have no experience of fighting overseas, nor of any fighting that lasts a long time, since the wars they fight against each other are, because of their poverty, short affairs.”* (p. 120), and further *“this is the main point: they will be handicapped by lack of money and delayed by the time they will have to take in procuring it. But in war opportunity waits for no man”* (p. 120).
- **A risk factor: the temptation to disperse one's forces.** Pericles warns the Athenians against a potential danger, that of dispersing their forces by engaging in too many conflicts simultaneously. *“I could give you many other reasons why you should feel confident in ultimate victory, if only you will make up your minds not to add to the empire while the war is in progress,*

*and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils. What I fear is not the enemy's strategy, but our own mistakes"* (p. 179). This is however precisely what the Athenians did during the Sicily expedition in -415, which precipitated the defeat of Athens.

The reasons for the Athenian defeat come both from unforeseen factors, from the materialization of the risks set out by Pericles, and from what appears, ex post, as errors of analysis:

- **Unforeseen factors: pandemic.** Pandemics are a risk that is difficult to predict and likely to bring down the most powerful armies. We cannot therefore blame Pericles for not having anticipated the plague epidemic<sup>8</sup> that hit the city. Athens was all the more severely affected as its population, taking refuge in the fortifications, was denser; it lost almost a third of its inhabitants, including Pericles, who died in -429 – a major loss for the city.
- **The materialization of risks: the disastrous invasion of Sicily.** Pericles had warned the Athenians of the risk of engaging in too many battles simultaneously. Yet this is what the Athenians did by launching in -415 an expedition against Sicily, which turned out to be a bitter failure, and a major strategic defeat, for Athens.
- **Errors of assessment ?**
  - **The rise of Spartan sea forces.** The superiority of the Athenian navy plays a central role in Pericles' argument. What he did not foresee was Sparta's ability to obtain a navy by sealing an alliance with other maritime powers (including the Persians), as the Corinthians had suggested to the Spartans in their plea for going to war.
  - **The risks of a defensive strategy.** Pericles based most of the strategy on defense: the aim was to exhaust Sparta by a long war, which was to turn to the advantage of Athens, whose means, in particular financial, were superior. The start of the war went as Pericles had predicted, and the Spartans failed to take Athens. However, the psychological impact of the Spartan advance on their territory shook the morale of the Athenians and cast doubt among the allies of Athens.
  - **The prolongation of the war worked in favor of Sparta, the defections multiplied in the Athenian camp.** In the debates preceding the start of the war, the two main speakers (King Archidamos II for Sparta and Pericles for Athens) addressed an important variable, the duration of the war. Pericles was betting that Sparta could not sustain a long war. However, Sparta managed to find the resources, in particular financial resources, to support the conflict over time. The prolongation of the war and the Athenian defeats also led the allies of Athens to change their alliance. This constituted a virtuous circle for Sparta, which gradually gained more allies and the resources that it lacked at the start.

## Conclusion.

According to Italo Calvino "A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say". In this sense *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is indeed a classic of history, and its rereading strikes us by the proximity of the events described with the current situation. While Thucydides does not give us

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<sup>8</sup> Thucydides speaks of plague but the exact nature of the disease is still debated today. Not knowing how to identify the disease, he meticulously describes its symptoms in the hope that this description may be useful in the future (*"As to the question of how it could first have come about or what causes can be found adequate to explain its powerful effect on nature, I must leave that to be considered by other writers, with or without medical experience. I myself shall merely describe what it was like, and set down the symptoms, knowledge of which will enable it to be recognized, if it should ever break out again."* p. 152.

strategic advice per se, as Sun Tzu or Machiavelli may have done, he has perfectly identified the dilemmas facing warring nations. Should we follow our principles or sacrifice them on the altar of realism? Should we commit to our allies, at the risk of escalating the conflict, or not, at the risk of losing them? Should we defend ourselves or attack? The protagonists of *The History of the Peloponnesian War* entered the war knowing every risk, but they obeyed an implacable logic: in a world dominated by the law of the strongest, to retreat is to appear weak. At the very beginning of his book Thucydides explains his approach, all in rigor, and formulates a wish: *“it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever.”* (pp. 48). More than 2,400 years later, it seems that General Thucydides has fulfilled his mission.