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**Perez Zagorin: Thucydides**

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## Introduction

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OF ALL THE HISTORIANS of war past or present, the ancient Greek Thucydides, author of the *History of The Peloponnesian War*, is the most celebrated and admired. His book, written in the fifth century BCE, is one of the supreme classic works of Greek and Western civilization that continues to speak to us from across the vast gulf of the past. Over the centuries a universal judgment has come to esteem it as one of the greatest of all histories. The famous nineteenth-century English historian Lord Macaulay, whose *History of England* itself became a classic, declared, “I have no hesitation in pronouncing Thucydides the greatest historian who ever lived.”<sup>1</sup> The account Thucydides wrote of the twenty-seven-year war of 431–404 between Athens and Sparta is taken up with the details and actions of warfare on land and sea, but also with much, much more. It is equally a story of diplomacy and relations among the Greek city-states, of political values, ideas, and argument, of the success and failure of military plans and strategy, of renowned and striking personalities, and most fundamentally, of the human and communal experience of war and its effects. Its time is the later fifth century, an era in which Sparta, one of the two great powers of Greece, was a formidable militaristic society organized for war, and Athens an intensely vital democracy that ruled over a large empire of subject city-states and stood at the height of its unequalled achievements as a creative center of culture, intellect, literature, and art.

In many ways Thucydides is one of our contemporaries. Despite the twenty-five hundred years that separate him from the present, and notwithstanding the vast differences in the beliefs, values, and general conditions of life between his society and ours in the twenty-first century, numerous aspects of his thinking and of the world he depicts in his book will seem recognizable and familiar to us today. Those who possess any knowledge or memory of the blood-soaked history of the twentieth century—its terrible international conflicts and the huge slaughter of human life caused by its two world wars, the revolutions that brought communism and fascism to power and the horrors of persecution and terror

that followed, and the violence and catastrophic collapse of moral standards manifest in the bombing and destruction of cities and killing of civilian populations by all the combatants in their conduct of war—will see resemblances in some of the scenes Thucydides describes. And they will likewise see nothing strange in the historian's observations on the aspirations of men and states to power and domination as permanent and recurrent elements of human nature in politics and international relations.

Because of the Peloponnesian War's wide extent and the large number of states involved, which included not only the Greek city-states but also the mighty Persian empire, Thucydides considered it to be a world war and the greatest conflict that had so far taken place in history. It is not surprising that in later times scholars and others have often looked at the Peloponnesian War as a paradigm of later wars and to Thucydides' work for its lessons and parallels. In 1918, at the conclusion of the First World War, the Briton Gilbert Murray, one of the most famous Hellenists in Europe and renowned as a translator of some of the masterworks of Greek literature, published a lecture, *Our Great War and the Great War of the Ancient Greeks*, which was based on Thucydides. Crediting the Greek historian with the faculty of seeing "both present and past . . . with the same unclouded eye," it noted a number of similarities between the war of 1914–1918 and the Peloponnesian War. It closed with the fervent hope that after the vast suffering and destruction of the war just ended, mankind would take the opportunity of building out of the ruins a better, more cooperative life between nations.<sup>2</sup> This hope, of course, was destined to be unfulfilled, as Thucydides himself would have guessed, and two decades later the Second World War began.

Likewise in 1947, following this second great war, General George C. Marshall, U.S. Secretary of State and author of the Marshall Plan, which led to the reconstruction and revival of a severely war-damaged Western Europe, spoke of the Peloponnesian War's importance for understanding the contemporary world. Addressing an audience at Princeton University, he suggested that no one could think with full wisdom and conviction about some of the basic international issues of the present "who has not reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens." This theme was echoed during the Cold War by an American foreign policy expert who wrote in 1952 that "since

World War II Thucydides has come still closer to us so that he now speaks to our ear.”<sup>3</sup> A volume of essays in the 1990s by ancient historians and political scientists dealing with international power politics centers on Thucydides and the light his work casts on current problems of foreign and military policy.<sup>4</sup> Many students and theorists of international relations agree in regarding Thucydides as one of the founders and greatest thinkers in their discipline.

I cite these examples not in order to stress the contemporary relevance of Thucydides’ *History*, which is of course an arguable question, but to indicate how widely his work has been seen as a major source of political insight.

In the introduction to his course of lectures at the University of Basle on Greek cultural history, later published posthumously as his distinguished book *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, Jacob Burckhardt, a leading European historian of the nineteenth century, said of himself, “the lecturer is and will remain a learner and fellow student, and it must also be pointed out that he is not a classical scholar.”<sup>5</sup> It is in the same spirit that I have written this short book on Thucydides and his *History*. As a historian, my professional field of study is not ancient Greece, and my research and books deal chiefly with the thought, politics, religion, and culture of early modern Britain and Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a student, however, I took classes in Greek and Latin and developed a lifelong interest in the history of Greece and Rome. I first read Thucydides when I was in my twenties. During the years since, I have often returned to him as one of the towering and most compelling figures of Western historiography. A recent rereading, in particular, has been for me an intense experience that I should like to share.

Even in this present age of computers, almost instant communication, and continually advancing technology, when the past seems to recede from us more swiftly than ever before, ancient Greek literature, culture, and philosophy continue to be recognized and studied as a great legacy to all subsequent generations and a unique formative element in the creation and evolution of our Western civilization. Because of Thucydides’ high stature as a historian and thinker, present-day humanists and teachers of the humanities generally agree that his *History* is just as essential a part of a true liberal education as are Homer’s *Iliad*, Sophocles’

*Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, and some of the *Dialogues* of Plato and writings of Aristotle. College students are sometimes lucky enough to encounter Thucydides in survey courses in the humanities or the history of Western civilization in which they may learn a little about him from a textbook or be required to read a few selections from his *History*. This kind of exposure, however, is usually too limited to give them much of a conception of his work and achievement. My purpose in writing this book, therefore, is to promote a wider interest in Thucydides and especially to assist common readers, whether students or intellectually curious people who have heard of the Greek historian and wish to know more, to understand and appreciate his work. It is not, needless to say, a substitute for reading him, but rather an introduction and invitation that I hope will encourage them and whet their desire to read and experience him themselves.

In his lectures on Greek history, Burckhardt also told his listeners that “it is perfectly in order to make use of excellent translations.”<sup>6</sup> The literary, philosophical, historical, and other writings that have come down to us from classical antiquity continue to live today not only because of the indispensable labors of generations of scholars, but because they exist and can be read and taught in modern translations. To understand and appreciate Thucydides’ *History*, it is not necessary to know Greek. I hope this statement will not be misunderstood. Something is always lost in translation, and only proficient readers of the original text can perceive the nature, peculiarities, and flavor of Thucydides’ style and the nuances of meaning in his use of language. Those who do not read Greek, however, should have no difficulty in following the course of events and extraordinary speeches the *History* records or in comprehending its author’s remarkable thoughts. I have always read Thucydides in translation and have made continual use of translations in writing this book, although I have also sometimes compared passages I have discussed with the Greek original.

There are at present a number of good English translations in various editions which can be recommended to the reader. Those by Richard Crawley (1874) and Benjamin Jowett (1881) were done in the Victorian era and have been often reprinted. Crawley’s translation is now available in a new revised edition, *The Landmark Thucydides* (1996), edited by Robert L. Strassler, which

contains an introduction by Victor Davis Hanson, a well-known specialist on Greek military history, and includes many notes and maps as well as informative appendices by a number of scholars. An abridged edition of Jowett's translation, published in the Great Historians series by the Washington Square Press in 1963, is preceded by an excellent introduction by a leading ancient historian, P. A. Brunt, which has been reprinted in Brunt's *Studies in Greek History and Thought* (1993). Charles Foster Smith's translation (1923) is presented in parallel pages with the Greek text of Thucydides in the Loeb Classical Library edition published by the Harvard University Press. The most widely read translation today is the one by Rex Warner, British poet, novelist, and classical scholar, which was first published in 1954 in the Penguin Classics series and has gone through many later editions. It includes an introduction by M. I. Finley, another distinguished historian of the ancient world.

Since this book is an introduction to Thucydides, not to the Peloponnesian War, I should also tell the reader that the fullest modern account of the war from its origins to its end is Donald Kagan's outstanding four-volume work (1969–87) a clearly written, deeply informed scholarly narrative that serves as an indispensable supplement to Thucydides' *History*. In 2003, Kagan also published a new, one-volume account, *The Peloponnesian War*, based on his earlier study.

I have intended this book to be brief in keeping with its purpose. Its plan is as follows. The first four chapters discuss some of the background to Thucydides' *History*; its subject, method, and structure; its explanation of the causes of the Peloponnesian War; and the historian's view of the Athenian leader Pericles. The next three chapters present an overview or survey of Thucydides' account of the war to the point in 411 where he ceased writing, and also continue the story to the end of the war in 404. The main focus in these chapters is on a number of revealing and significant events as related by Thucydides, such as the revolution in Corcyra, the Melian Dialogue, and the Sicilian expedition. The eighth and concluding chapter deals with Thucydides as a thinker and philosophic historian. My emphasis throughout has been on the mind of Thucydides and his treatment of the subject and for this reason I have quoted him liberally. I have included a number of notes in every chapter in order to document certain points and to

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suggest further references to the reader. To assist the reader, I have also added a short list of some recommended works at the end of the volume.

Thucydides' *History* enjoys a lasting fame and is in no need of further tributes. Its masterly narrative and analysis of the conflict between Athens and Sparta in a high age of Greek civilization has much to teach us. I shall be very satisfied if this book helps to increase the number of his readers and to provide them with some insight into his work.