

Background to the Peloponnesian War

The Persians invaded Greece twice in the early 5th century B.C., once in 490 B.C. and again in 480 B.C. Both invasions were defeated, but the Persian threat continued. Greek cities in and near the Persian Empire still needed to be freed and others defended. Furthermore, the Greeks sought revenge and reparations for the widespread devastation of the second Persian invasion. The Greeks subsequently sent a force under Spartan leadership against Persia, but the Spartans treated their fellow Greek soldiers very badly. This caused many Greeks to turn away from the Spartans and toward the Athenians for leadership. With their leadership being questioned and their priorities shifting back again to the Peloponnesus (the big peninsula where Sparta is located), the Spartans decided to play no further role outside their region. The remaining Greek allies then met on the island of Delos to forge a new agreement, called the Delian League. Membership in the league was supposed to be permanent, with Athens as the avowed leader. Athens was even given the power to determine each city's contribution and to control the funds.

In the early years, Athens ran the Delian League in a fair and impartial manner. But by mid-century the Persian threat had receded, and many league members wished to quit the league and stop making their yearly payments. Athens objected and transformed the voluntary Delian League into the involuntary Athenian empire. Under the influence of Pericles (c. 495-429 B.C.), Athens insisted on maintaining the league and used its navy to force rebellious members to keep paying their dues. The majority of Athenians agreed with Pericles and did not want to lose the funding and the empire that protected their security and maintained their great democratic society. The resulting hatred of Athens, however, as well as Sparta's fear of Athens' growing power, led directly to the Peloponnesian War. The Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) pitted the two leading cities of Sparta and Athens but involved essentially all of Greece. In the end, 27 years later, Sparta won, thanks to Persian financial support, which had enabled Sparta to build a powerful navy.

The most reliable source of information on the Peloponnesian War is the historian Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.). In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides endeavored to write a full account of the war, explaining what happened and why. Although an Athenian himself and a general in the early stages of the war, he could be highly critical of the attitudes and actions of his fellow citizens. In his day, the writing of history had barely begun, but he held a commitment to accuracy that was unmatched by other ancient historians. Instead of looking for documents, which is typically how historians work today, he sought the verbal reports of multiple eyewitnesses, whom he interviewed himself. Since he was writing contemporary history, he was actually present for some of the events he describes in his book.

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides declared that, "My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever." Thucydides was dedicated to the pursuit of truth, an essential quality for any historian. By examining the following excerpts from his book, which is already two-and-a-half thousand years old, you may decide for yourself whether his considerable efforts to seek the truth and describe the truth do in fact deserve to "last forever."