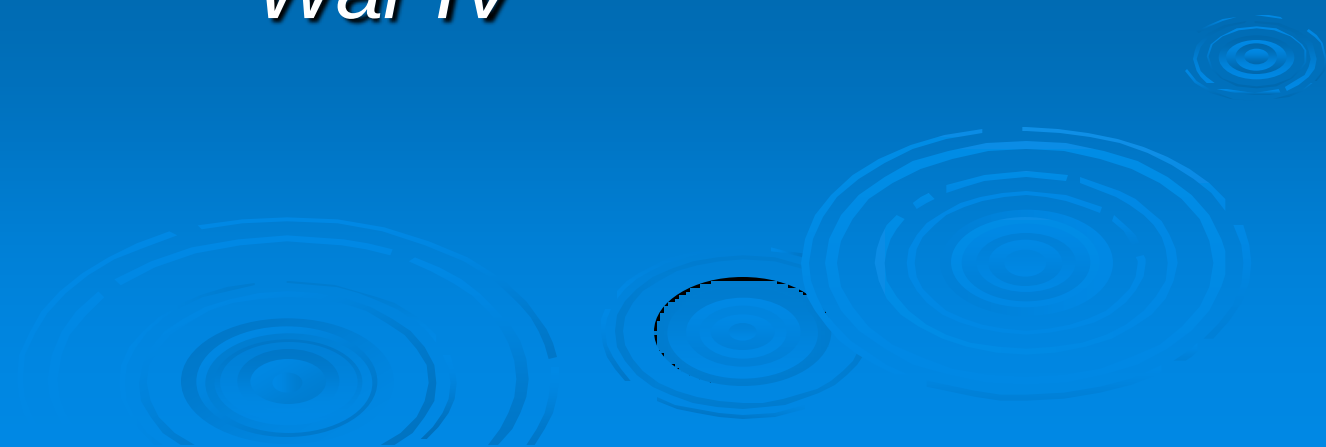


CLAH4005 Defenders Conquerors, Vanquished

Lecture 11: *The Peloponnesian
War IV*



The dark Face of imperialism

- 'For ourselves, we shall not trouble you with specious pretences--either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us--and make a long speech which would not be believed; and in return we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Lacedaemonians, although their colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, holding in view the real sentiments of us both; since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.' Thucydides 5.89

The Sicilian Expedition

- From 416 BCE, the Athenians started the debate and preparation for the Great Sicilian Expedition.
- The expedition was aimed at the conquest of Sicily and Magna Graecia.
- Thucydides presents the decision to open another front in the war and try to take up as big a city as Syracuse as an act of collective madness on the part of the Athenians.

Athenians in Sicily before 415

- Athens had ambitions towards the west as early as the middle of the 5th century and possibly even earlier.
- In 444/3 Athens founded a colony at Thourioi in Italy in an important geostrategic position.



The first Sicilian Expedition

- In the 420s, during the Archidamian War, Athens had sent forces to Sicily with orders to set up a base and increase Athenian influence in the area.
- The fleet came back empty handed and the Athenian intervention then failed.
- SO, what happened in 416/5 was not collective madness but the continuation of an existing policy.

Why Attack Sicily?

- We sailed to Sicily first to conquer, if possible, the Siceliots, and after them the Italiots also, and finally to assail the empire and city of Carthage. [3] In the event of all or most of these schemes succeeding, we were then to attack Peloponnese, bringing with us the entire force of the Hellenes lately acquired in those parts, and taking a number of barbarians into our pay, such as the Iberians and others in those countries, confessedly the most warlike known, and building numerous galleys in addition to those which we had already, timber being plentiful in Italy; and with this fleet blockading Peloponnese from the sea and assailing it with our armies by land, taking some of the cities by storm, drawing works of circumvallation round others, we hoped without difficulty to effect its reduction, and after this to rule the whole of the Hellenic name. [4] Money and corn meanwhile for the better execution of these plans were to be supplied in sufficient quantities by the newly acquired places in those countries, independently of our revenues here at home. Thucydides 6.90

Alkibiades and Nikias

- The strongest proponent of the Athenian attack on Sicily was Alkibiades.
- The strongest opponent was Nikias.
- Nikias did not manage to convince the Athenians that attacking Sicily was not a good idea but he was elected general in the expedition.
- So was Alkibiades.

The Profanation of the Mysteries

- In the midst of these preparations all the stone Hermae in the city of Athens, that is to say the customary square figures so common in the doorways of private houses and temples, had in one night most of them their faces mutilated. [2] No one knew who had done it, but large public rewards were offered to find the authors; and it was further voted that any one who knew of any other act of impiety having been committed should come and give information without fear of consequences, whether he were citizen, alien, or slave. [3] The matter was taken up the more seriously, as it was thought to be ominous for the expedition, and part of a conspiracy to bring about a revolution and to upset the democracy.

Thucydides 6.27

Alkibiades and the Mysteries

- Alkibiades was implicated in the profanation of the Mysteries but was allowed to go to Sicily.
- When the fleet reached there, he was recalled to face trial at Athens.
- He did not return to Athens but fled to Sparta instead.
- Thus, not only had Athens lost a very good general but Sparta gained a valuable ally.

The Sicilian Disaster

- The Athenians spent the better part of two years in Sicily.
- In the beginning, they seemed to have the upper hand but with some Spartan help Syracuse fought back successfully.
- In 413 BCE, after a great naval battle in the harbour of Syracuse, the Athenians were defeated soundly.

A disaster like no other

- The prisoners in the quarries were at first hardly treated by the Syracusans. Crowded in a narrow hole, without any roof to cover them, the heat of the sun and the stifling closeness of the air tormented them during the day, and then the nights which came on autumnal and chilly, made them ill by the violence of the change; [2] besides, as they had to do everything in the same place for want of room, and the bodies of those who died of their wounds or from the variation in the temperature, or from similar causes, were left heaped together one upon another, intolerable stench arose; while hunger and thirst never ceased to afflict them, each man during eight months having only half a pint of water and a pint of corn given him daily. In short, no single suffering to be apprehended by men thrust into such a place was spared them. [3] For some seventy days they thus lived all together, after which all, except the Athenians and any Siceliots or Italiots who had joined in the expedition, were sold. [4] The total number of prisoners taken it would be difficult to state exactly, but it could not have been less than seven thousand. [5] This was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in my opinion, in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. [6] They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army--everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home. Such were the events in Sicily. Thucydides 7.87

Fear in Athens

- Such were the events in Sicily. When the news was brought to Athens, for a long while they disbelieved even the most respectable of the soldiers who had themselves escaped from the scene of action and clearly reported the matter, a destruction so complete not being thought credible. When the conviction was forced upon them, they were angry with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition, just as if they had not themselves voted it, and were enraged also with the reciters of oracles and soothsayers, and all other omenmongers of the time who had encouraged them to hope that they should conquer Sicily. [2] Already distressed at all points and in all quarters, after what had now happened, they were seized by a fear and consternation quite without example. It was grievous enough for the state and for every man in his proper person to lose so many heavy infantry, cavalry, and able-bodied troops, and to see none left to replace them; but when they saw, also, that they had not sufficient ships in their docks, or money in the treasury, or crews for the ships, they began to despair of salvation. They thought that their enemies in Sicily would immediately sail with their fleet against Piraeus, inflamed by so signal a victory; while their adversaries at home, redoubling all their preparations, would vigorously attack them by sea and land at once, aided by their own revolted confederates. [3] Nevertheless, with such means as they had, it was determined to resist to the last, and to provide timber and money, and to equip a fleet as they best could, to take steps to secure their confederates and above all Euboea, to reform things in the city upon a more economical footing, and to elect a board of elders to advise upon the state of affairs as occasion should arise. [4] In short, as is the way of a democracy, in the panic of the moment they were ready to be as prudent as possible. Thucydides 8.1

Alkibiades at Sparta

- Meanwhile you must carry on the war here more openly, that the Syracusans seeing that you do not forget them, may put heart into their resistance, and that the Athenians may be less able to reinforce their armament. [6] You must fortify Decelea in Attica, the blow of which the Athenians are always most afraid and the only one that they think they have not experienced in the present war; the surest method of harming an enemy being to find out what he most fears, and to choose this means of attacking him, since every one naturally knows best his own weak points and fears accordingly. [7] The fortification in question, while it benefits you, will create difficulties for your adversaries, of which I shall pass over many, and shall only mention the chief. Whatever property there is in the country will most of it become yours, either by capture or surrender; and the Athenians will at once be deprived of their revenues from the silver mines at Laurium, of their present gains from their land and from the law courts, and above all of the revenue from their allies, which will be paid less regularly, as they lose their awe of Athens, and see you addressing yourselves with vigour to the war. Thucydides 6.91

Decelea

- In the first days of the spring following, at an earlier period than usual, the Lacedaemonians and their allies invaded Attica, under the command of Agis, son of Archidamus, king of the Lacedaemonians. They began by devastating the parts bordering upon the plain, and next proceeded to fortify Decelea, dividing the work among the different cities. [2] Decelea is about thirteen or fourteen miles from the city of Athens, and the same distance or not much further from Boeotia; and the fort was meant to annoy the plain and the richest parts of the country, being in sight of Athens. Thucydides 7.19

Athens in a vice

- Summer was now over. The winter ensuing saw all Hellas stirring under the impression of the great Athenian disaster in Sicily. Neutrals now felt that even if uninvited they ought no longer to stand aloof from the war, but should volunteer to march against the Athenians, who, as they severally reflected, would probably have come against them if the Sicilian campaign had succeeded. Besides, they considered that the war would now be short, and that it would be creditable for them to take part in it. Meanwhile the allies of the Lacedaemonians felt all more anxious than ever to see a speedy end to their heavy labours. [2] But above all, the subjects of the Athenians showed a readiness to revolt even beyond their ability, judging the circumstances with passion, and refusing even to hear of the Athenians being able to last out the coming summer. [3] Beyond all this, Lacedaemon was encouraged by the near prospect of being joined in great force in the spring by her allies in Sicily, lately forced by events to acquire their navy. [4] With these reasons for confidence in every quarter, the Lacedaemonians now resolved to throw themselves without reserve into the war considering that, once it was happily terminated, they would be finally delivered from such dangers as that which would have threatened them from Athens, if she had become mistress of Sicily, and that the overthrow of the Athenians would leave them in quiet enjoyment of the supremacy over all Hellas. Thucydides 8.2

The 400 at Athens

- One of the consequences of the Sicilian Disaster was a surge in anti-democratic feeling in Athens.
- The first stirring of anti-democratic feeling in Athens came as early as 413 BCE.
- By 411, the climate was ripe for an oligarchic revolution.
- More importantly, the vast majority of the fighting lower classes, the thetes, were not in Athens at the time but with the remainder of the Athenian fleet in Samos.

The Revolution

- But this was a mere catchword for the multitude, as the authors of the revolution were really to govern. However, the Assembly and the Council of the Bean still met notwithstanding, although they discussed nothing that was not approved of by the conspirators, who both supplied the speakers, and reviewed in advance what they were to say. [2] Fear, and the sight of the numbers of the conspirators, closed the mouths of the rest; or if any ventured to rise in opposition, he was presently put to death in some convenient way, and there was neither search for the murderers nor justice to be had against them if suspected; but the people remained motionless, being so thoroughly cowed that men thought themselves lucky to escape violence, even when they held their tongues. [3] An exaggerated belief in the numbers of the conspirators also demoralised the people, rendered helpless by the magnitude of the city, and by their want of intelligence with each other, and being without means of finding out what those numbers really were. [4] For the same reason it was impossible for any one to open his grief to a neighbour and to concert measures to defend himself, as he would have had to speak either to one whom he did not know, or whom he knew but did not trust. [5] Indeed all the popular party approached each other with suspicion, each thinking his neighbour concerned in what was going on, the conspirators having in their ranks persons whom no one could ever have believed capable of joining an oligarchy; and these it was who made the many so suspicious, and so helped to procure impunity for the few, by confirming the commons in their mistrust of one another. Thucydides 8.66

The Failure of the 400

- The oligarchic revolution failed quickly.
- One reason was that the oligarchic factions started undermining one another.
- The other was that they started making overtures to Sparta for Athens' surrender.



From Thucydides to Xenophon

- Thucydides lived to see the end of the Peloponnesian War.
- But he did not manage to finish his History before his death.
- His account ends with the revolution of the 400.
- After 410 BCE, the main source is Xenophon's *Hellenika*

Follow-up Reading

- B. Jordan, “**The Sicilian Expedition Was a Potemkin Fleet**” *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2000), pp. 63-79. JSTOR:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1558935>