

# Why do wars begin?

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Why do wars begin? The simple answer is they never end. Peace is an illusion conjured up by a version of the old Roman magic trick: 'Where they make a desolation, they call it peace.' The full implications of Tacitus's oft-quoted observation can be translated like this: 'Use your advanced military technology and overwhelming superiority in human and natural resources to create a wasteland. Call it peace. The people back home will believe you. They want to believe in their own benignity.'

Do you doubt this? Then notice that peace always comes with qualifiers. Take A. J. P. Taylor's explanation of the widespread romantic innocence that the 'war to end all wars' shattered: '(T)here had been no war between the Great Powers since 1871. No man in the prime of life knew what war was like.' In August 1914, the nearly 22,000 British soldiers who died in South Africa between 1899 and 1902 were not around to tell stories. Those among the 425,000 Boer War veterans who were still alive were past their prime. And South Africa was not a great power – nor were the Zulus, Ashanti, Afghanis or other peoples butchered in colonial wars throughout this period of European peace.

War is endless. As Paul Fussell remarks in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975): 'The idea of endless war as an inevitable condition of modern life would seem to have become seriously available to the imagination around 1916.' He catalogues the wars that have made the imagined real: the Spanish civil war, the Second World War, the Greek civil war, the Korean War,

the Arab-Israeli war and the Vietnam War. Orwell published the canonical modern myth of eternal war in 1948. Events have proved him prescient and timeless. Ancient Greek history had already proved him right.

Among recent students of war, Philip Bobbitt, in *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (2002), comes closest to seeing war for what it is. He thinks and writes from the perspective of modern nation states and international diplomacy, but his title alludes to Homer's *Iliad*, and he begins by considering Thucydides' reassessment of the stops and starts in what the Athenian general-in-exile eventually identified as a continuous war that ravaged the entire known world. We now call it the Peloponnesian War and place it at 431–404 BC, thereby creating the comforting illusion that the founders of our Western cultural tradition unwisely let war out of its cage for a nearly disastrously long time, but eventually forced it back inside. However, endless war was an inevitable condition of ancient Greek life.

Thucydides, like other Greeks, distinguished between periods of formally declared war and periods of official peace. But he also knew the primary texts of Hesiod and Homer and enough about contemporary diplomatic and strategic affairs, and human nature, to grasp that *eris*, 'strife, contention, political discord', was a constant force within and among the ancient Greek *poleis*, or city states, and that competing elements within most *poleis* or the controlling powers within individual *poleis* would find, with terrible regularity, true causes (*aitiai*) or pretexts (*prophaseis*) for open civil or interstate warfare. Thucydides took for granted that they would do so single-mindedly in their own interests.

Bobbitt similarly argues that the major armed conflicts of the twentieth century make up a single epochal war, the 'long war of the nation state' and that between 1914 and 1990, 'despite often lengthy periods in which there [was] no armed conflict, the various

engagements of the war never decisively settle[d] the issues that manage[d] to reassert themselves through conflict'. If they were alive today, Thucydides and Herodotus would agree with Bobbitt that the periods of so-called peace were intervals when the competing nation states were inevitably preparing for the next phase of open war, even if citizens and leaders of these nation states believed peace had really come.

For the 'long war' view, read Herodotus' prose *Iliad* about the fifth-century war that defined his times. Herodotus wrote about the millennium-long aggressive dance between Greeks and non-Greeks that culminated in the two Persian wars between 490 and 479 BC. Everything in his sprawling nine-book amalgamation of geography, ethnography, anthropology, journalism, history and field recordings of folk tradition relates to the growth of power, the intricate thread of causation and the fundamental differences in defining cultural attitudes that brought allied Greek and Persian forces into confrontation at Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea.

Herodotus would recognise the continuation of his long war between East and West in the current conflicts and tensions involving Israelis and Palestinians, the US and terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, the Greeks and Turks on Cyprus, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman was being Herodotean in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (1995) when he observed that Arabs, Jews and Christians in Lebanon and Israel were 'caught in a struggle between the new ideas, the new relationships, the new nations they were trying to build for the future, and the ancient memories, the ancient passions and ancient feuds that kept dragging them back into the past'. And the past means war.

Thucydides tracks how a new strain of war virus, Athenian imperial aggression, develops and spreads in a 'long war' between superpower-dominated city-state coalitions that, like Bobbitt's twentieth-century war,

lasts nearly eighty years. Thucydides' 'long war' begins with a fifty-year cold war between an established superpower necessarily conservative in foreign policy (Sparta) and an emerging superpower addicted to its own superabundant interventionist energies (Athens). The Athenian virus eventually drives Athens and Sparta and their allies into a twenty-seven-year world war.

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* does not so much analyse why war begins as study how and why war, as an assumed near-constant, reaches new levels of violence, what forms it takes and why human beings aid war.

The best way to see what Thucydides has to say about why wars start is to read Paul Woodruff's annotated 1993 translation with commentary, *On Justice, Power and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War*. By far the most important of these subjects is 'power'.

Thucydides compresses Herodotus' nine books into a twenty-five-paragraph analysis of the growth of power in Greek prehistory and history. He demonstrates that human communities are organised for Darwinian competitive purposes, to acquire and then exploit and defend the limited natural resources available to them. The more successful will convert the energies they have mobilised to ensure their survival into aggressive acquisition of resources, and subjugation of rival communities, to improve the security and material well-being of their own citizens. Dominant states will develop high cultures and use high-minded concepts and ideals to disguise their aggressions.

Like fifth-century BC Athenians, modern Europeans and Americans can afford to be concerned about abstract concepts such as justice. Because of our successful use of force in the past and present, we control and consume an imperial share of the world's resources and believe in the illusion of peace. Thucydides concentrates on resources, power and state self-

sufficiency (*autarkeia*). He juxtaposes his analyses of Pericles' funeral oration, the plague in Athens and Pericles' last speech to tell us all we need to know about imperial self-conceptions promulgated as self-justifying political spin, the fragile nature of codes of civilised human behaviour, and the need for unflinching use of military power to gain and secure empire.

If war is a stern teacher, the Greeks were very sternly taught. Lincoln MacVeagh, US ambassador to Greece, observed in a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt on Christmas Day 1940, 'The history of Greece is at least 50 per cent discord.' A.G. Woodhead, author of the standard guide to Greek historical inscriptions, quotes MacVeagh to correct him: 'Ninety-five per cent, on the record as we have it, would be nearer the mark.' War was reality in ancient Greece. I doubt whether many families during any of the four generations of fifth-century Athens were without the experience of a father, husband, brother, son or close male relative risking or losing his life in battle. The city itself was under virtual siege conditions for much of the final three decades of its one truly great century. In a single six-year operation in Egypt mid-century, the Athenians lost an estimated 8,000 men, roughly 18 to 25 per cent of their adult male population. And, according to conservative estimates, the Athenians would have had their own 'lost generation' during the Peloponnesian War, in which at least 30,000 adult male citizens died.

The Greeks would have had no illusions about war and peace of the sort that prompted Freud at the outset of the First World War to write his essay 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death: I. The Disillusionment of the War'. Freud attributes the trauma caused by the Great War to the enormous chasm between the artificial morality of modern civilised society and human behaviour in times of war. No such chasm existed in the fifth century BC. Young men learned about war from the *Iliad*. Homer's epic showed

them the true costs of war and it portrayed the many contradictions in human behaviour within an army on active campaign and within a city state under siege.

No Greek would ever have forgotten that his community was constantly under threat from rival communities. The plays of Aristophanes convey an appreciation of the benefits for common citizens of a cessation of armed conflict. But an Athenian farmer would never have mistaken the absence of active campaigning for what we call peace, and he would be perplexed that we have to ask why wars begin.

### Further reading

Philip Bobbitt: *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002)

S. Freud: 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death: I. The Disillusionment of the War', in E. Jones (ed.), *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers* (Basic Books, 1959), vol. 4, pp. 288–304.

Paul Fussell: *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975)

J. Rich and G. Shipley (eds): *War and Society in the Greek World* (Routledge, 1993)

R.B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides* (Simon & Schuster, 1996)

L. Tritle: *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival* (Routledge, 2000)

P. Woodruff (ed. and trans.): *On Justice, Power and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War* (Hackett, 1993).