

Clear look at the past with eyes unclouded

Thucydides
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Thucydides: An Introduction for the Common Reader offers an engrossing intellectual appreciation of the most important and most difficult historian in the western cultural tradition. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides created modern notions of history, using what Nietzsche called "a strong, severe, hard factuality" to lay bare how human beings and human communities respond to the extremities of "world war".

Perez Zagorin is a senior scholar of early modern Britain and Europe. He brings formidable personal intelligence to major questions in Thucydidean scholarship, and his book goes well beyond the typical synthetic handbook.

The book will be useful in courses on historiography, Greek history, political science, ancient culture, the history of warfare and the history of ideas. There is nothing else like it. Zagorin will also help those reading Thucydides on their own to get their bearings on his genius.

Zagorin aims at explaining why Thucydides has been held in high esteem by historians, philosophers, statesmen and generals, and why the history of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) is still important. Four main chapters analyse Thucydides's thought and methods by going through the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, from beginning to end.

The narrative is self-contained. Readers who know nothing about ancient Greek history will come away with a clear understanding of the events, and horrors, of the war. A brief fifth chapter takes the Peloponnesian War to its conclusion from the point where Thucydides's account breaks off (411-404 BC). In three surrounding chapters, Zagorin emphasises how innovative a thinker Thucydides was, even in the context of the tremendous intellectual revolutions that took place in imperial Athens (477-404 BC).

The author addresses the most difficult aspects of Thucydides's history, each of which has generated volumes of specialised modern scholarship: his idiosyncratic use of speeches, his use of logical antithesis, his distinction between true causes and proffered causes, his understanding of concepts such as justice and force and chance, his use of reported speech and narrated action to reveal human character, his insight that states are in constant competition for power and resources and are guided by self interest, and his uncanny ability to extract general truths about the human condition from austere diagnoses of particular events.

Readers of Zagorin might consider one alternative way of looking at Thucydides's subject matter. Athenian *demokratia* is a system in which a large, but still limited, body of citizens wields power. It is, in effect, an expanded oligarchy, an option to, or different form of, tyranny.

Athenian-style democracy came about for pragmatic reasons. Its founder, Cleisthenes, needed a support base against aristocratic political rivals.

If Athenian democracy is viewed from this perspective, there is no paradox in democratic Athens exerting brutal forms of power over an empire of subjugated former allies. Thucydides, seeing "both present and past with the same unclouded eye", understood this.

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