

# Defeat, death and glory

Thermopylae  
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Spartan life offers lessons on contemporary wars, says Tom Palaima

In the ninth and final chapter (excluding three appendices) of this important book, the historian Paul Cartledge reviews how the battle of Thermopylae has been used in Western culture, from Cyriac of Ancona's lamentation in 1447 that all the brave Spartan warriors are dead and gone, to the expected release in 2007 of the Warner Bros feature film of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300*. In Miller's glorified comic book, the Spartan King "Leonidas and his 300 'boys' stand for reason, justice and law in opposition to the 'whim' and whips of the autocratic Persian monarch Xerxes, who also commits the cardinal error of believing he is a god".

Those who wonder how a significant percentage of US citizens and voters can support, on an emotional level that defies facts and reason, the expenditure in Afghanistan and Iraq of \$500 billion (£268 billion) and nearly 3,000 American lives can thank Herodotus for inspiring works such as Miller's cartoons and movie, and Steven Pressfield's bestselling novel *Gates of Fire*. Herodotus tells too good a story. It has been easy to use his Homeric account of the suicide mission of Spartan soldiers as a paradigm to justify the waste of human lives in other times and places.

Cartledge argues that the "frankly martial and celebratory outlook" on the East versus West battle of Thermopylae during our modern East versus West Cold War struggle "lies significantly behind" Western military intervention in Iraq. Readers' reviews of Pressfield's novel on the amazon.com website offer "an illuminating snapshot of the vitality and vibrancy of the Thermopylae myth in its latest, Western incarnations". There we can read contributions from US veterans "endorsing a fairly simplistic 'us against them', 'West versus East', 'goodies against baddies' mentality".

Cartledge's survey made me wish that the prevailing take on the battle at Thermopylae had been similar to Robert Graves's ironic Persian perspective in his poem "The Persian Version". Of the Persian defeat at the battle of Marathon ten years earlier, he wrote: "Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon/ The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon." Dwell on Thermopylae we do. So we need historians as sound as Cartledge to explain the many dimensions of its nearly 2,500-year cultural influence.

Readers who buy *Thermopylae* expecting it to be an informed retelling of the Persian Wars similar to Donald Kagan's *The Peloponnesian War* will be disappointed. But those who want

to understand Ancient Sparta, Greece and the Persian Empire, the nature of Ancient Greek (and Persian) warfare, politics, diplomatics, religion, cultural and ethnic self-conception, and how and why Herodotus wrote his history and what he achieved, will have spent their money wisely. They will also have to be as patient with Cartledge as we all must be with Herodotus. Herodotus's history weaves together ethnography, geography, political and social history, mythology, folklore, oral history, journalism, moral preaching, civil and religious propaganda, and just plain old storytelling. And he provides no footnotes or appendices. Cartledge takes all this on, as well as the myth of Sparta in antiquity and, as we have seen, in modern times.

In talking about the power of blues music, Bob Dylan said in 1985: "For me, this is a deep reality: someone who's telling me where he's been that I haven't, and what it's like there - somebody whose life I can feel." There is that quality in *Thermopylae*, too, because Cartledge understands that his readers will not grasp the significance of Thermopylae unless they understand what it feels like to be a Spartan soldier, a Spartan mother, a Spartan king, and what it was like, on the other side, to be part of the world's most powerful unified empire before the Roman Empire.

There are as many important insights in *Thermopylae* as there are important human lessons in Herodotus. One is that if we look to the Persian Wars as a paradigm for modern East versus West conflicts, we have to reverse roles somewhat.

Cartledge quotes judiciously from the rock-cut Persian imperial propagandistic inscription at Bisitun to give us a sense of the feelings of empowerment the Persian kings must have had, reinforced by their special relationship with the god Ahura Mazda: "By the favour of Ahura Mazda I am king. Ahura Mazda bestowed kingship upon me. By the favour of Ahura Mazda these countries obeyed my law." In surviving official correspondence and proclamations of achievement, the kings Darius and Xerxes address even the powerful satraps, or provincial governors, who are mostly their relatives by birth or marriage, using a term that can be translated as "slave" in Greek. The vast Persian Empire, extending from India, Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq in the east to western Turkey, Bulgaria, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt towards the west, was the king's family business. As Herodotus tells us, the king alone was free.

The East in the early 5th century BC had the overwhelming military and economic power. It had the well-developed network of governmental control that could mobilise that power and bring it to bear in a true coalition against the king's enemies.

The Greeks in 490-479BC were "as little a unity as the Arab world is today". Moreover, they did not have the crucial economic resources that give countries in the Middle East their powerful hold over Western governments. Although the Greeks shared an ethnicity based on variants of a common language, common religious beliefs and practices, constructed myths of common ancestors and common social customs, they were not united politically.

The Greek *poleis*, or city-states, were often at war with one another. In southern Greece, Sparta was in open military conflict with the major city-state of Argos repeatedly during the 6th and 5th centuries BC. In the compact north-central district of Boeotia, the Plataeans had a deep hatred of the Thebans. And the Phocians who went to fight at Thermopylae did so as much out of hatred for their Thessalian neighbours as to protect the freedoms of Greek *poleis* to the south.

Many of the Greek city-states of western Anatolia were under the control of pro-Persian tyrants. Those Greek city-states that had yearned to breathe free had been soundly defeated in the naval battle of Lade in 494BC that ended the five-year Ionian revolt. They subsequently formed part of the huge Persian naval and land force that the Persian King Xerxes led down upon Thermopylae in August 480BC. There was very little incentive for Greek *poleis* from Boeotia northwards not to capitulate to the king.

The Spartans, meanwhile, were preoccupied with controlling their home territory and the district of Messenia, which they had acquired in a series of wars in the late 8th to mid-7th centuries BC. Their polis was in constant internal war, declared yearly, between the Spartiate citizen class of 8,000-9,000 men and the large helot slave class who farmed the land and provided the Spartiates with the means to focus solely on their one state-sanctioned occupation: training for war.

Cartledge tries to get us to understand the positive values of Spartan society. From the time of Pericles's funeral oration (430BC) - contrasting the openness, freedoms and intellectual and material pleasures of Athenians with the closed, authoritarian and culturally impoverished Spartan way of life - the true courage of the Spartan soldiers has been in question. The argument runs that the Athenians rose readily to the occasion and did so of their own free will, while the Spartans, like the Cold War Russians, were brainwashed and forced into action.

Spartan elite soldiers were familiar with death and expected, even preferred, their own early deaths in battle. Spartan mothers and wives rejoiced at the deaths in combat of their sons and husbands. In Cartledge's view, the goal in the West today is to win and live. Hence our mechanised way of war and our focus on minimising casualties, which, unlike Spartan women, our home populations are reluctant to accept.

The Spartans, however, like Japanese kamikazes, had four good reasons for dying: first, an overriding commitment to the good of the state; second, belief that the enemy represented serious evil; third, belief that the spirit of resistance was "as literally vital as the physical damage they inflict on the enemy"; fourth, belief that the dishonour accompanying failure made life unlivable.

Cartledge argues that commitment to the commands of an organised state and exclusive focus on military targets together keep the Spartan suicide mission to Thermopylae from being

comparable with modern terrorist suicide bombers. Even if we accept his proposition, I am glad I am not a Spartan and that the mother of my son is not one either.

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## **Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World**

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