

Peloponnesian War



Peloponnesian War, (431–404 BCE), was a war fought between the two leading city-states in ancient Greece, Athens and Sparta. Each stood at the head of alliances that, between them, included nearly every Greek city-state. The fighting engulfed virtually the entire Greek world, and was recorded in the book, The History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides. (A great Greek Historian)

The Athenian alliance was, in fact, an empire that included most of the island and coastal states around the northern and eastern shores of the Aegean Sea. Sparta was leader of an alliance of independent states that included most of the major land powers of the Peloponnese and central Greece, as well as the sea power Corinth. Thus, the Athenians had the stronger navy and the Spartans the stronger army. Further, the Athenians were better prepared financially than their enemies, due to the large war chest (\$ to fight wars) they had amassed from the regular tribute they received from their empire. Athens and Sparta had fought each other before the outbreak of the Great Peloponnesian War (in what is sometimes called the First Peloponnesian War) but had agreed to a truce, called the Thirty Years' Treaty, in 445. In the following years their respective blocs observed an uneasy peace. The events that led to renewed hostilities began in 433, when Athens allied itself with Corcyra (modern Corfu), a strategically important colony of Corinth. Fighting ensued, and the Athenians then took steps that went against the Thirty Years' Treaty. Sparta and its allies accused Athens of aggression and threatened war.

On the advice of Pericles, its most influential leader, Athens refused to back down. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute failed. Finally, in the spring of 431, a Spartan ally, Thebes, attacked an Athenian ally, Plataea, and the war began.

The years of fighting that followed can be divided into two periods, separated by a truce of six years. The first period



lasted 10 years and began with the Spartans, under Archidamus II, leading an army into Attica, the region around Athens. Pericles declined to engage the superior allied forces and instead urged the Athenians to keep to their city and make full use of their naval superiority by harassing their enemies' coasts and shipping. Within a few months, however, Pericles fell victim to a terrible plague (a contagious disease) that quickly spread through the crowded city, killing a large part of its army as well as many civilians. Thucydides survived the plague and left a vivid account of its negative impact on the Athenian morale. In the meantime (430–429), the Spartans attacked Athenian bases in western Greece but were turned away. The Spartans also suffered losses at sea. In 428 they tried to aid the island state of Lesbos, an island under Athens control that was planning to revolt. But, the revolt was headed off by the Athenians, who won control of the chief city, Mytilene. Urged on by the political leader, Cleon, the Athenians voted to massacre the men of Mytilene and enslave everyone else, but they changed their minds the next day and killed only the leaders of the revolt. All of Sparta's attacks during the plague years were all unsuccessful except for the capture of the strategic city Plataea in 427.

In the next few years, the Athenians took the offensive. They attacked the Sicilian city Syracuse, in western Greece, and the Peloponnese itself. In 425 the picture was bleak for Sparta, which began to try to negotiate for peace. Led by Brasidas, the hero of the Battle of Delium, the Spartan force won several key battles and encouraged revolts against Athens: For Example, in Chalcidice in 424, Sparta encouraged Athenian subject states (areas controlled by Athens) to revolt. In a decisive battle at Amphipolis in 422, both Brasidas and the Athenian leader Cleon were killed. This set the stage for Cleon's rival Nicias to persuade the Athenians to accept the Spartans' offer of peace.

The so-called Peace of Nicias began in 421 and lasted six years. It was a period in which gradually gave way to small-scale military operations as each city tried to win smaller states over to its side. The uncertain peace was finally shattered when, in 415, the Athenians launched a massive assault against Sicily. The next 11 years made up the war's second period of fighting. The decisive event was the catastrophe suffered by the Athenians in Sicily. Aided by a force of Spartans, Syracuse (Sicily) was able to break an Athenian naval blockade. Even after gaining reinforcements in 413, the Athenian army was defeated again. Soon afterward the navy was also beaten, and the Athenians were utterly destroyed as they tried to retreat.

By 411 Athens itself was in political turmoil. Athenian Democracy was overthrown by an Oligarchy (Rule by a few), which was in turn replaced by the

more moderate government of the Five Thousand. At the end of 411 the rebuilt Athenian navy, fresh from several victories, acted to restore democratic rule. However, the democratic leaders refused Spartan peace offerings, and the war continued at sea with the Spartan and Athenian fleets trading costly victories. The end came in 405 when the Athenian navy was destroyed at Aegospotami by the Spartan fleet under Lysander, who had received much aid from the Persians. The next year, starved by an impenetrable blockade, Athens was forced to surrender – but doing so brought about the end of Greece as world leader. For the next 66 years, Sparta, Thebes, and Athens struggled to be the leader of the Greek World- but all this petty fighting allowed a more powerful people to come in and take over Greece – MACEDONIA!

