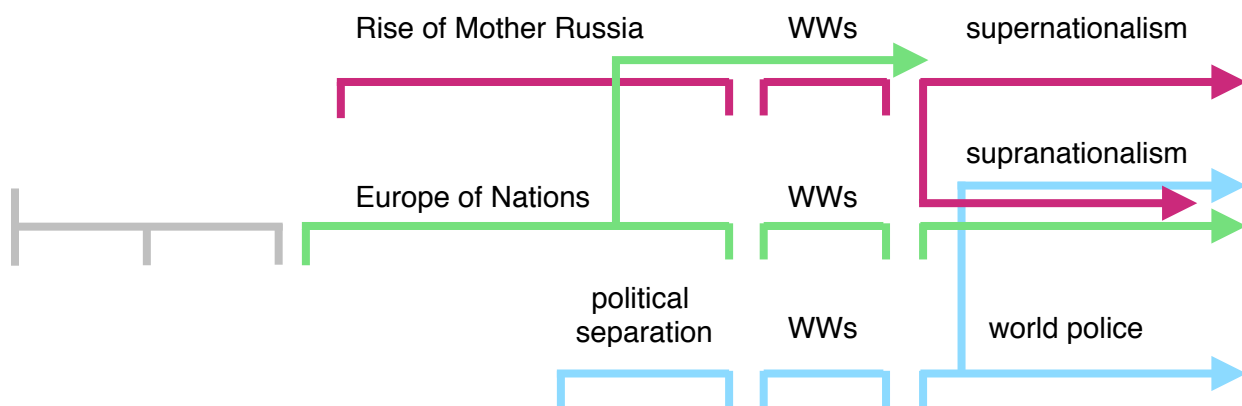


VII. The Greco-Roman Background

A. Completing the Big Picture

1. Everything we have learned about the history of the modern interconnected history of Europe, Russia, and America is rooted in a background story that precedes, without which none of these cultures would have become what it is today.
2. That background story consists of three main components: ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and Christianity.
3. To capture this reality, we will append one more segment to our timeline representation.



4. This final segment represents the separate rise of Greece and Rome around the same time, the addition of Christianity (as a religion that arose in the Roman empire), and then the Fall of Rome, which we are already accustomed to.

B. Athens: Monarchy and Aristocracy

1. Athenian society emerged according to a simple model common to all ancient cultures. It had what is usually called a “monarchy,” i.e. the “rule of one.”
2. At the top was a king, who ruled for life, but he belonged to the most powerful family that had founded the city, which was allied to a large group of other families that referred to themselves as the “aristos” (the best), and without which neither the main family nor the king could maintain themselves in power.
3. This arrangement highlights an important point that holds true through all of history: there really is no such thing as monarchy. All monarchies are, in fact, forms of aristocracy, with a large ruling group surrounding a single figure, who may have a lot of power (depending on how charismatic he is) or may rely almost entirely on those around him (especially in a hereditary, and/or bureaucratic monarchy).

4. In Athens, for instance, the aristocracy are known to have made the monarchy *elective*—meaning that they actually *chose* the king, who would rule sometimes only for ten or fewer years. (At some point, it even seems to have been an *annual* office.)

C. Athens on the Archaic Plateau: The Problem of Debt Slavery

1. Prior to the rise of democracy, Athens remained stuck on the “archaic plateau.”
2. This level of development in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia meant a permanent acceptance of monarchy and a certain way of life based on subsistence agriculture.
3. On this plateau, one basic idea continued to guide people in the making of governments: one group must rule the others. America’s founding fathers called this the problem of “faction.” (As James Madison explains in the famous essay “Federalist No.10,” a “faction” is a group that wants to deny the rights of another. *Without the identification of individual rights, politics is always about “faction.”*)
4. The “aristos” were the accepted rulers in all such societies, but the harsh realities of life sometimes led the commoners to rebel against their rule.
5. In times of drought, Athens's commoners often starved. If they wanted to survive they had to turn to the aristocratic land-owners for help. To obtain loans of food or supplies, the commoners had to agree that if they could not repay their debt they would lose their property and become slaves.
6. When this way of organizing society became intolerable to too many commoners, they rebelled.
7. In one such episode, the aristocracy triumphed in a civil war and appointed an “archon” to prevent civil unrest. His name was Draco, and his especially harsh laws became notorious through the ages. The modern English word “draconian” is derived from his name and is used to denote rules that are very severe.

D. The First Advance: Solon

1. In 594, with another round of civil conflict at its peak, the two sides agreed to submit their dispute to a respected archon named Solon.
2. Solon was given absolute power to create new laws, and the people further agreed to follow his laws for ten years thereafter.
3. Solon attempted to force the Athenians to change their way of thinking to better balance the desperate needs of the commoners and the power and property of the aristocrats.
 - a) First, Solon *emancipated* the debt slaves, and returned their property to them.
 - b) Second, he *abolished* the institution of debt slavery. From that point on, it would be illegal to make any contract that would result in slavery.
 - c) However, Solon refused to *redistribute* property from the aristocrats to the commoners, which would relieve their plight in times of drought.
4. As positive as these measures were, they could not solve the recurring problem of famines under conditions of subsistence agriculture. Further violence was almost certainly inevitable.

E. The Rule of a “Tyrannos”

1. Solon's laws were temporarily accepted by the Athenians. However, the commoners were not satisfied because Solon has not given them more land. This meant they would eventually have to turn to the lords for help again. The commoners did not want to be dependent in this way.
2. For their part, the lords resented the loss of slaves and property.
3. The commoners chose a respected military hero and nobleman named Peisistratus to champion their cause. His willingness to support the commoners earned him both the admiration of the commoners and the hatred of his fellow aristocrats.
4. With the help of the commoners, Peisistratus became the “tyrannos” of Athens after another round of violence. (The difference between a “tyrannos” and an “archon” was simply that an archon was viewed as a legitimate ruler by the aristocracy. A tyrannos is what in modern parlance is called a “populist”—someone who rises to power by appealing to the common people. (It may help you to think of Donald Trump as a modern American tyrannos, rejected by the American aristocracy of New York and California, and elected by the common laborers of the Midwest.)
5. By taking land from the aristocrats and giving it to the commoners, Peisistratus made himself very popular.
6. Predictably, the aristocracy was angry with these developments and recruited outside help, from the aristocrats of another city-state, Sparta, to help overthrow the tyranny.

F. The Second Advance: Cleisthenes and the Birth of Democracy (c.508 BC)

1. Once the aristocracy had regained control of Athens, there was a contest for leadership. If Athens continued to be racked by political violence, it would eventually disintegrate completely and be conquered by some other city-state.
2. **C.508 BC**, an aristocrat named Cleisthenes was thus able to convince the aristocracy to accept a program of reforms to share power with the commoners.
 - a) To break up the power of the aristocratic families, Cleisthenes allowed all commoners to participate in a new, larger assembly that was made responsible for all the laws of Athens.
 - b) To encourage the aristocrats and commoners to work together, Cleisthenes gave the commoners and equal right to participate in the government, by attending the governing assembly of the city-state.
 - c) Also, the aristocrats no longer had any special privileges. All important officials were chosen by elections, and all matters were decided by a majority vote in the assembly.
 - d) Since the aristocrats no longer ruled over the commoners, this new form of government was a step up from the archaic plateau. Now every citizen could participate in the government, and the majority would rule. (This system, the rule of the people, gets its name from the Greek words “demos”—people, and “kratia”—the rule of.)

G. Sparta: Ancient Communism

1. Sparta is the second most important city-state in Greek history for two reasons. First, its famous warriors saved Greece (and thus Western civilization) in the Greco-Persian Wars. Second, Sparta's government was an intriguing model to the Founding Fathers. There were aspects they did not like, but others they admired, including certain "checks and balances" that we will see in how the power of rulers was limited.
2. Sparta was located on the Peloponnese (the peninsula that sticks out from mainland Greece).
3. Early in their history, the conquering aristocracy had belonged to two ruling tribes who chose to cooperate and have one king from each tribe at the same time.
4. The main responsibility of the king was to lead Sparta in times of war. (One king stayed at home, while the other went to war.) However, even here their power was limited, because both kings had to agree before Sparta would officially go to war.
5. This could be called a "duarchy," but like most kinds of kingship, it was really an aristocracy.
6. The two Spartan kings were monitored by five officials known as "ephors. The kings swore an oath to the ephors to uphold the laws of Sparta, and in exchange the ephors swore to uphold the authority of the kings. If a king broke his oath, the ephors could arrest him, and put him on trial.
7. The "separation of powers" (or "checks and balances" as Americans call them) between officials in Sparta was similar to the aristocracy of Athens, but the reason why America's founding fathers did not like the Spartan mode was that *even the aristocracy did not have the "right to life" in Sparta!*
8. Every Spartan belonged to the government.
 - a) At age seven, they were taken from their families and enrolled in a public school system where they would live and be educated along with others their age until they were twenty.
 - b) Their training became gradually more intense, until the final two years, when the young men were taught the art of war and they prepared to join the army.
 - c) At age 20, a Spartan male "graduated." He then joined a *platoon* of Spartan soldiers, with whom he would spend most of his life with for the next ten years.\
 - d) Only when a Spartan soldier had served in the military for ten years, he earned the right to join the government, and participate in the making of laws for Sparta.
 - e) If he survived the next thirty years with distinction, he might be elected to serve as an ephor or a member of the highest aristocratic council serving the kings and ephors.
 - f) Spartan girls were also educated by the government, however they did not train to become soldiers. Spartan women had one role only: to manage the land of their families. The choice of a husband was made by a woman's father, or, if the father was dead, by the government. They too lived in service to the whole community.
9. Any system of government in which the individual must live for the state, which controls his life in the name of the "common good," is known as "communism." (It is not necessary to have a philosophy like Marxism or Leninism to make it so.)

H. Greece Stands Together

1. There have been many great wars in history. Of course, the *World Wars War II* come to mind as the most destructive conflicts in human history. Various civil wars in China have also resulted in tens of millions of deaths. But body counts are not the best measure to use to decide the importance of a war. What matters is how much history was affected—which means: how much *the present* was shaped.
2. From that perspective one war is by far the most important: the ancient Greco-Persian War.
3. This is because the invention of democracy is only the beginning of the Greek imprint on history. In addition, however, we will see that the Greeks (mostly the Athenians) invented physical science, philosophy, history, and beautiful realistic art—among other things.
4. Without the *birth* of these humanistic pursuits in Greece, there would never have been a *rebirth* of them (i.e. the “Renaissance”), including the rebirth of geography, which led to the European discovery of America.
5. So if classical Greece was never born, there would not have been a Renaissance, Europe would probably still be living in the Dark Ages, *America would never have been discovered—and there would never even have been a United States.* (What modern war can match *that* in terms of importance!?)
3. In order to win this war, the Greeks had to work together. The most famous episode of this cooperation was the sacrifice of king Leonidas and his famous 300 Spartans warriors who delayed the Persian invasion at a mountain pass called Thermopylae. This allowed the rest of the Greeks to better prepare to coordinate their resistance to the Persian onslaught, and positioned Athens to lead the Greeks in a largely naval victory at the later Battle of Salamis.

I. Greece Falls Apart

1. In order to continue attacking Persia after the invasion, Athens formed an alliance called the Delian League. Sparta, however, was not invited to participate and it formed its own competing Peloponnesian League.
2. The rivalry between the two city-states sparked the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), in which Sparta defeated Athens, but all of Greece exhausted itself and became more susceptible to conquest from without.
3. Sparta itself was only temporarily in charge. Another city-state, Thebes, became temporarily dominant after it, in a shifting configuration of rivalries, and soon Greece was conquered by neighboring Macedonia, under Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander “the Great.”
4. Although Alexander commanded the Greeks on a fantastic invasion of the Persian Empire, which was briefly successful, he soon died, and the Greeks were not numerous enough to maintain such an empire. Soon they would collide with an even greater power...