

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" (or "diarchy") 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," can be called "communism." (It is not strictly necessary to have a philosophy like Marxism or Leninism to make it so.)

H. Greece Stands Together Against a Common Enemy

1. There have been many great wars in history. Of course, the *World Wars* (especially *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 by the conflict. One way to put it is to say the war in question was “decisive.”
2. From that perspective one war is by far the most important: the ancient Greco-Persian War (c.500-449 BC) in which the Persian Empire, probably the largest the world had seen up to that point, tried to conquer Greece.
3. This is because the invention of democracy is only the beginning of the Greek imprint on history. In addition, 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. (If Europe were still stuck in its tribal and national Dark Ages, America simply would never have been discovered—and therefore, there would never even have been a United States. (What modern war can match that in terms of importance!?)
5. The war was triggered by the Athenians attacking a Persian city called Sardis, where the son of the tyrannos Peisistratus had fled after the tyranny of his father was overturned. The Athenians sacked the city, and this brought them to the attention of the Persian king for the first time.
6. He first sent a fleet across to Athens specifically, but the Athenians successfully defended their coastline when the Persians disembarked at the Battle of Marathon c.490 BC. The next Persian king, Xerxes, decided to invade by land by first crossing into Europe by the narrow passage near Istanbul today. His army was the largest ever assembled at that point, with ancient sources claiming it contained two million men, and modern historians more inclined to accept a figure of 600,000.
7. 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.
8. Athens had to accept that it could not be defended against this force, and so its people evacuated the city and retreated to the island of Salamis nearby, and the Athenian fleet, assembled precisely to repel another Persian invasion by sea, was able to achieve a decisive victory in the naval Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Xerxes was so demoralized, that he personally retreated to safety in Asia, while tasking his generals to try to accomplish his goal, but they were again defeated, and for the remainder of the war, Greece was on the offensive, and the war concluded once and for all in 449 BC.

I. Divided, Greece Falls Apart

1. In order to continue attacking Persia after the invasion of Greece, Athens formed an alliance called the Delian League. Sparta, however, was not invited to participate and it formed its own competing Peloponnesian League.
2. Trying to overcome their mutual suspicion, they avoided war at first by agreeing to a treaty whereby they promised not to attack each other, but their allies did not hold to the terms, thus entangling the two main city-states in their war indirectly.
3. The conflict between the two alliances sparked the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), in which Sparta defeated Athens, which was a tragedy for Athenian culture, which led, in one famous regard to the condemnation of the philosopher Socrates to death by the leaders of the democracy of which he was so critical.
4. All of Greece had exhausted itself, however, and became more susceptible to conquest from without. Indeed, Sparta was only temporarily able to achieve primacy. Another city-state, Thebes, became temporarily dominant after it, in a shifting configuration of rivalries based on the presence of charismatic leaders. Soon weakened Greece was conquered by neighboring Macedonia, under Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander “the Great.”
5. Although Alexander commanded the Greeks on a fantastic invasion of the Persian Empire, which was briefly successful, he died during his famous exploit of some mysterious cause, and the Greeks were not numerous enough to maintain such an empire. It broke into competing kingdoms, and soon they would collide with an even greater power...