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**Finn on Platias and Koliopoulos, 'Thucydides on Strategy:  
Athenian and Spartan Grand Strategies in the Peloponesian War  
and Their Relevance Today**

Jennifer Finn

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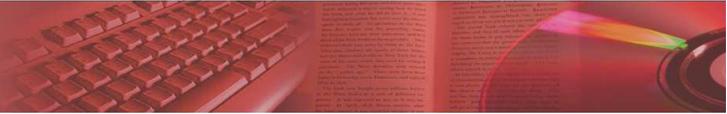


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# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Athanasios G. Platias, Kōnstantinos Koliopoulos.** *Thucydides on Strategy: Athenian and Spartan Grand Strategies in the Peloponnesian War and Their Relevance Today.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xiv + 197 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70133-4.

**Reviewed by** Jennifer Finn (Marquette University)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

The Peloponnesian War, fought between Athens and Sparta from 431 to 404 BC, pitted the two most powerful Greek city-states against one another in a conflict that has much to teach us about ancient warfare and military strategy. In *Thucydides on Strategy: Grand Strategies in the Peloponnesian War and Their Relevance Today*, Athanassios Platias and Constantinos Koliopoulos seek to demonstrate that “although material conditions may change, the logic of conflict between organised entities remains constant throughout the millennia” (p. xi). While not dismissing the historical value of Thucydides’ tome *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, they rank it among the best pieces of strategic military analysis, to be compared to Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* and Clausewitz’s *On War*. The authors adhere to their goal in presenting a tight, focused, and clear analysis of Thucydides’ understanding of grand strategy in the Peloponnesian War; the book will be especially useful to students of military history who already maintain a strong background in the historical circumstances of the war.

The first chapter plays a definitory role, clearly summarizing with historical examples various levels of military strategy (e.g., offensive, defensive, compellent, deterrent) and tactics. The authors give a conceptual typology of grand strategy (which they define as the way in which states “ensure security”) to lay the foundation for their focus on this aspect of Thucydides’ description of the war between Athens and Sparta. Their definition of “grand strategy” is inclusive, drawing together elements of domestic and international legitimacy, diplomacy, and military action. The second chapter is an extremely co-

gent review of the differences between the Athenian and Spartan *poleis*, an introduction that sets the stage for the conflict between the two city-states that formed the basis of Thucydides’ *History*. In chapters 3 and 4, the authors present a clear case for understanding the grand strategies of Athens and Sparta in the initial phases of the war as quite opposite, with Athens (under the leadership of Pericles) favoring a strategy of exhaustion and the Spartans pursuing a strategy of annihilation to counteract what they perceived to be an unfavorable status quo. Platias, who retains sole responsibility (according to the preface) for the content of the third chapter, mounts a defense of the Periclean grand strategy and Athenian naval reliance. The author addresses various critiques of the effectiveness of the Periclean policy, although one often feels that the argument (carried also into the next chapter) reads as an Athenocentric apologia and eschews any counternarrative, with several important pieces on the issue missing from the bibliography.[1]

Platias and Koliopoulos locate the turning point of the war in the Athenian decision to invade Sicily in 415 BC (a classic case of “overextension”) and the intensification of Persian monetary aid to the Spartan cause (p. 78). It was after this disaster that the Spartan army was able to match its means to its intended end and shift the balance of power to her side. The final chapter of the book proposes that the application of the Thucydidean model of grand strategy can serve as predictive of more modern conflicts and appraises the use of the annihilation and exhaustion strategies as a function of recent international relations and technological developments.

The last portion of the chapter highlights the Athenian blunders in Sicily as the result of the underestimation of the enemy, and the authors take the opportunity to compare the disaster with more modern instances of the same phenomenon. Throughout, the authors emphasize the importance of perception (internal and external) to the decision-making apparatuses of ancient and modern warfare.

The authors contend that Thucydides, often studied as the first international relations theorist, has not received as much attention as he deserves for his contribution to our understanding of ancient military strategy. While their work is undoubtedly an important contribution to this field, it rather disturbingly fails to account for several important previous contributions on the subject, such as J. F. Lazenby's *The Peloponnesian War: A Military Study* (2004) and Theodore Tsakiris's "Thucydides and Strategy" (2006). Troubles also arise when one applies anachronistic terms to Thucydides' work; the danger is clear when one browses the appendix on "Strategic Concepts in Thucydides' *History*," where—although it is acknowledged that Thucydides did not employ modern jargon—passages are taken out of context to prove that our historian maintained an interest in grand strategy. Such an exercise, if performed in the same way, may also prove fruitful in a variety of other ancient authors (Herodotus included). One constantly wavers on a tightrope, whereby the application of Thucydidean (non?)terminology to modern categorizations begins to feel uncomfortably forced.

Although the authors contribute to our understand-

ing of Thucydides' sophisticated conceptualization of the Peloponnesian Wars, their work is best when considered in tandem with a study of contemporary (including Thucydidean) commentary on Greek cultural life and mores and their profound differences from our own. Thus, the book should be read in conjunction with a full translation of Thucydides (recommended is Robert Strassler's *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1998) and a modern summary of the work (e.g., Lawrence Tritle, *A New History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2010), as in many cases the authors mention an issue essential to an understanding of the war (e.g., The Melian affair, cited on p. 50) with no further commentary. Ultimately, the work of Platias and Koliopoulos is a helpful addition to our understanding of Thucydides as a military strategist and to the outcome of the great war between Athens and Sparta, although the astute reader will want to compare its conclusions with other contributions on the same topic.

#### Note

[1]. *Inter alia*, Peter Krentz, "The Strategic Culture of Periclean Athens," in *Polis and Polemos: Essays on Politics, War and History in Ancient Greece*, ed. Charles Hamilton and Peter Krentz (Claremont: Regina Books, 1997), 55-72; Iain Spence, "Perikles and the Defense of Attika during the Peloponnesian War," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 110 (1990): 91-107; Thomas Kelly, "Thucydides and Spartan Strategy in the Archidamian War," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 25-54; and D. W. Knight, "Thucydides and the War Strategy of Perikles," *Mnemosyne* 23 (1970): 150-61.

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