The Greek Civil War

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Curt Baker is a senior from Vancouver, Washington. He is a member of Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society, the Honors College, and the Student Association. A lover of words and languages, Curt hopes to use his Spanish major and History minor as avenues to develop truly rich communities in a world desperate for sincere relationships. Homeschooled until college, Curt attributes his love of learning to his mother, the best teacher he has ever had.
Victor Davis Hanson adds to his substantial collection of well-respected historical accounts with his 2006 work *A War Like No Other*, which explains the Peloponnesian War in a manner that both reveals the lasting cultural significance of the conflict and also serves as a reminder of the similarity of war across the boundaries of time and geography. Hanson writes in understandable language and organizes the book topically, weaving together strands of Greek life with the details of the war to transport readers into classical Greece during a period of significant change within that society as a result of the clash between Sparta, Athens, and their respective allies. Indeed, the author’s statement in the prologue effectively sums his position on the matter: “A better name for our subject, perhaps, would be something like ‘the Great Ancient Greek Civil War.’”\(^1\) Hanson’s portrayal of the Peloponnesian War reflects his consideration of the conflict as not only military in nature but cultural as well, ushering in the decline of Greek society.

In pursuit of explaining the personal nature of the Peloponnesian War that took place in the fifth century B.C., Hanson arranges his book according to subject rather than chronology, highlighting in ten chapters the significance of the war on various elements of Classical Greek identity that decayed throughout the conflict. Firmly grounded in primary sources, *A War Like No Other* also contains frequent references to other wars and Hanson’s personal experience as he strives to minimize the intellectual difference between modern readers and the men, women, and children affected by the Peloponnesian War.

This effort begins with a discussion of the Spartan strategy: to “marshal the Peloponnesian League, invade Attica, destroy farmland, and hope that the Athenians came out to fight.”\(^2\) A key element in this strategy was the destruction of crops, not an easy task for Sparta as they

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\(^1\) Hanson, Victor Davis, *A War Like No Other* (United States: Random House, 2006) xv.

\(^2\) Hanson, *A War Like No Other*, 35.
invaded an area that contained “more individual olive trees and grapevines than classical Greece did inhabitants.” Hanson confirms the difficulty of this from his personal experience attempting to cut down walnut trees inhabiting his farm. However, Hanson also notes that the destruction of crops, although difficult, “was an affront to the spiritual and religious life of the polis, besides a potential threat to its economic livelihood.” Here, Hanson provides the first indicator that this war was more than territorial and, as a result, would have impacts beyond the political boundaries of each polis. Sparta, by cutting down sacred olive trees and other precious crops, attacked one of the central elements of classical Greek life.

The Athenian strategy in response to the Spartan attacks also included non-traditional battle tactics. Athenian general Pericles utilized a strategy of attrition, allowing the Spartans to pillage the countryside around Athens unhindered, refusing to meet the fantastic Spartan infantry in its familiar context. Rather, Athenian retaliation took the form of vicious naval raids, where the Athenian forces “plundered…attacked…killed.” Hanson draws from primary sources including Thucydides to establish the “barbarity of these raids.” This description of Athenian battle tactics as barbaric by a contemporary Greek historian is significant when one considers that a cultural pillar of classical Greece was the ethnocentric consideration of themselves as civilized. This ideological separation from every other culture characterized Greek identity.

Again, Hanson supports his thesis that this war was much more than a battle between two city-states; it was truly the onset of decay within Greek society.

This theme is maintained throughout the book as Hanson turns to descriptions of specific elements of classical Greek civilization, effectively summed in his discussion of armor and classicism within the military. According to Hanson:

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3 Hanson, A War Like No Other, 35.
4 Ibid., 36.
5 Ibid., 37.
6 Ibid., 43.
7 Ibid., 97
8 Ibid., 97.
One of the peculiarities about Greek warfare at the dawn of the Peloponnesian War was the archaic idea of class, not military efficacy, determining the role of the soldiers. In theory, the landless rowed and threw missiles. The propertied served as hoplites. Only the very wealthy rode horses or outfitted and commanded triremes...This cherished idea was also a casualty of the Peloponnesian War.9

For decades, this elite group of warrior citizens served as the backbone of Greek military. Hanson, in order to provide a modern parallel to the importance of hoplites within Greek society, compares the elect infantry to the “majestic dreadnoughts of the First World War, formidable capital assets that likewise ‘feared nothing.’”10 Military prowess, however, was only one element of the significance of hoplites — the position also reflected a specific social rank. The rank of hoplite was one reserved for citizens wealthy enough to supply their own armor, openly placing them in a select social category. Thus, military service operated as a staple of Greek society by establishing an avenue of duty to the polis and civil positions. Military rank clearly delineated social class, a precedent abandoned through the course of the war and lamented by Plato.

The brutal Athenian naval raids characterized this deviation from traditional, hoplite-based warfare. Hanson quotes a disgusted Plato, who rejects the utilization of low-class “naval infantrymen.”11 As already discussed, Athenian battle strategy capitalized on naval superiority, ransacking Spartan territory. However, the warriors carrying out these raids were not exclusively hoplites but also included the lower classes. Simply outfitting the existing navy contributed significantly to Athens’ bankruptcy at the end of the war; outfitting each ship with solely hoplite warriors would have cost a staggering amount of money.12 Plato renounced this divergence from hoplite-based warfare, a position understandable when one considers the social gravity of the hoplite rank. The transition away

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9 Hanson, A War Like No Other, 143.
10 Ibid., 146.
11 Ibid., 99.
12 Ibid., 17.
from hoplite warfare signaled a larger move away from the established standard of classical Greek society.

In addition to firmly establishing the idea that the Peloponnesian war ushered in changes in Greek lifestyle, Hanson also subtly reinforces in readers the timeless horrors of war by consistently comparing elements of the conflict between Athens and Sparta to modern conflicts and facts. Indeed, the first paragraph of the first chapter compares the size of various Greek poleis to American states, immediately drawing a comparison in the reader’s mind to his or her own, modern context. Similar references in the first chapter are made to the Hundred Years War, the Thirty Years War, Hitler’s Germany, Vietnam, the Cold War, and the World Trade Center attacks. Hanson continues this trend in each of the following chapters. For example, he compares the total-war tactics used by Sparta to Ulysses Grant’s implementation of the same strategy centuries later and the plague of Athens to the Bubonic Plague in Medieval Europe. Hanson considers the absence of laws regarding warfare comparable to the Beirut crisis in Lebanon, hoplites to dreadnoughts of World War One, and the unfortunate polis of Platea to Poland in the twentieth century. Hanson even draws tactical comparisons, approximating the communication difficulty between Greek forces to Napoleon’s failed attempt to take Moscow, Athenian naval tactics to the famous “crossing the T” maneuver, the creation of a Spartan navy to the Japanese imperial fleet near the beginning of the twentieth century, and the military innovations of the Peloponnesian War to advancements made during World War Two. Such intentional and repeated effort to draw comparisons between the Peloponnesian War and recent conflicts is no accident — Hanson deliberately reinforces the consistency of war throughout all time, rejecting the intellectual divide that can result from reading “history.”

A War Like No Other undoubtedly confirms Hanson’s thesis: the Peloponnesian War was much more than a conflict between various poleis in classical Greece. Indeed, it served as a conduit of change for Greek society as the standards and traditions of that day began to crumble. The topical rather than chronological organization of the book allows Hanson

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13 Hanson, A War Like No Other, 3.
14 Ibid., 4, 5.
to draw connections and show how the war affected different areas of Greek life. Hanson also adds his modern perspective on war into the book by consistently reminding readers of the timeless horrors of battle, a powerfully subtle element of the narrative. An engaging read, *A War Like No Other* presents the information of the Peloponnesian War in a way that makes the conflict understandable and personally relatable, a work appropriate for both casual readers and dedicated students of history.