

Notes on Quiz #8: War Between the Greeks

1. Did Sparta win the Peloponnesian War, or did Athens lose it? Explain using examples either of what Spartans did right, or of what Athenians did wrong, that resulted in the Spartan victory.

This is a subjective question, but some of the things that can be mentioned are as follows. For Athens to “lose” this war, would mean that Athens had an advantage that might have led to them winning, but which they squandered. One argument for this would be the overextension of their strength and resources by extending the war to Sicily. This ended up being a huge catastrophe which permanently weakened Athens’s ability to fight off Sparta. An argument could also be made for Athens losing through disaffection caused by Athens’s ruthlessness toward its allies, as exemplified by the siege and massacre at Melos. Athens was also weakened at the start of the war by the great Plague of Athens, which greatly reduced not only manpower but also many ordinary Athenians’ faith in the path they were taking.

For Sparta to “win” would mean overcoming their own disadvantages to defeat Athens through their own agency. Arguments in this line of reasoning would involve the establishment of the base at Decelea in Attica, allowing year-round raising and harassment of Attica’s countryside. Also the deal with Persia in which Persia provided naval help to Sparta, overcoming Sparta’s disadvantage at sea, in exchange for the return of the Ionian Greek states Persia had ruled over before they were taken back by the Delian League. Another, more minor factor is the unexpected ability of a Laconic Spartan general, Brasidas, winning over Athenian allies to Sparta, leveraging their disaffection and overcoming their fear of Athens.

2. How did the Plague affect Athens? What impacts did it have on the war?

The Plague brought about a breakdown in custom and morality in Athens, with burial rites and other sacred customs unobserved, looting of homes and warehouses, and other erosions of the social fabric.

The advent of the Plague strongly affected the Athenian relationship with the gods, already disturbed by the fifth century emphasis on reason and science; some were sure that this plague came from the gods and reflected their hostility to Athens’s might, while others decided the gods had abandoned humanity, leaving the Athenians without divine protection. Either way there is powerful disillusionment with Athens’s drive for dominance being sanctioned by the gods. The Athenians are a lot more ruthless and pragmatic in conducting the war from here on out.

The massive loss of life meant that Athens was much weaker in terms of its agricultural and industrial labor force, so there was a huge impact on its economy. It was also weakened militarily, losing a great deal of manpower both for army and navy. Finally, the Plague removed the one leader most of Athens had faith in, Pericles; though he was under a cloud at the time due to accusations of corruption, his loss was like a blow.

EC1. All of the following are true about Alcibiades EXCEPT:

- (a) Handsome, charming, and pleasure-seeking, he was eagerly courted by men and women alike
- (b) He advocated expanding the empire as a means of defeating Sparta, leading to the Sicilian Expedition
- ✓ (c) He returned to Athens after the war and opened a successful brothel
- (d) Recalled from the war to stand trial for heresy, he slipped off and defected to Sparta

EC2. In your opinion, which city is most to blame for the Peloponnesian War? Explain and give examples.

There are three obvious candidates.

Athens gets the blame for its aggressive expansionism, especially the founding of cleruchies and expanded trading during the Thirty Years’ Peace, and its mistreatment of its allies (e.g., Potidaea).

It’s Corinth, however, who treats every act of trading aggression by Athens as an indefensible provocation, and they call upon their ally, Sparta to turn the commercial rivalry between Athens and Corinth into Hellenic-wide war.

Sparta, for its part, agrees to fight Athens because the Spartans believe that only their community is a true expression of the Greek idea, and that Athens’s version, empowering the demos and fostering widespread creative expression, was so detrimental to Hellenic that it had to be stopped.