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*“The strong do what they will, and the weak do what they must”:
Spartan Imperialism and Political Transformation (405-395 BCE)
after the Peloponnesian War*

ABSTRACT: *This article explores the effects of empire on Spartan institutions between 405 and 395 BCE (after the success of the Peloponnesian League over Athens and the Delian League). It analyzes the transformation of the Spartan state through the lens of international Realism to explain why Spartans abandoned customs that had been upholding their acclaimed mixed (oligarchic, democratic, and monarchic) government. The author argues that Sparta’s abandoning of Lycurgan traditions and uncharacteristic imperialistic foreign policy fit a pattern of behavior consistent with a realist model of interstate relations.*

KEYWORDS: *antiquity; Greece; Sparta; Peloponnesian War; Lycurgus; Agis; Lysander; empire; international relations; Realism*

Introduction

Why is war inevitable, and why does it appear as quickly as it seems to disappear? One answer might be that the original cause of conflict has not been resolved and that further fighting is necessary to settle the dispute. Another reason might be that there is something inherently belligerent about the nature of men and the systems in which they live. The latter was the case in classical Greece, where war was constant, diplomacy was erratic, and alliances were, at best, temporary. Following the conclusion of the Greco-Persian Wars (499-449 BCE) and the subsequent end of Persian hegemony in the Aegean Sea, the city-state of Athens quickly built up an empire and became the most powerful entity in the Greek world.¹ The Spartans, a former member of the Delian League, feared Athenian hegemony and formed a coalition of Greek city-states as a countermeasure. This coalition included the powerful city-states of Thebes and Corinth, and the recently defeated Persians.² Between 431 and 404 BCE, the two leagues fought against each other in the Peloponnesian War, submerging the entire Greek world in conflict. The subsequent defeat of the Athenians and the destruction of their naval power left the Spartans and their allies with a vacuum of power, which resulted in a power grab. This period of history after the Peloponnesian War is the focus of this article.

¹ Thucydides lays out the reasons for the Peloponnesian War and the growth of the Athenian Empire in the Aegean. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, in *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler and Richard Crawley, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press 2008), 1.1.23-24. Ancient sources are cited in traditional format (book, chapter, line number).

² The first Delian League was a coalition of allied Greek forces during the Persian Wars. After the war had concluded, the Athenians continued to maintain and dominate the Delian League while Spartan and the stronger Greek powers left the league. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.1.17-19.

The ancient sources employed here include Xenophon's *Anabasis* and *Hellenika*, Diodorus Siculus's *Library of History*, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* for the biographies of Lysander and Lysander.³ In addition, Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* is relevant, as some of the relationships and events that shaped the political landscape during the Peloponnesian War impacted the post-war period.⁴ As Xenophon was a participant in the war, his works are contemporary accounts of the events. Xenophon wrote from a pro-oligarchic and arguably Laconophile (or pro-Spartan) perspective, and he had the experience of a soldier. Diodorus composed his *Library of History* after this period, namely during the late Roman Republic (first century BCE). This work is valuable because Diodorus had greater access to different accounts of the war and the events after the war. However, scholars are suspicious of his usefulness because his work occasionally paraphrases and simplifies the work of the anonymous author of the *Hellenika Oxyrhynchia*, whose work survives in fragments.⁵ The works of Aristotle and Plutarch are necessary for our understanding of the constitution, political actors, and institutions in the Spartan *polis*. Aristotle wrote during the fourth century BCE and praised the Spartan state, but he criticized their shortcomings in his peripatetic style. Plutarch, meanwhile, wrote during the first-century CE's *Pax Romana* for both Roman and Greek audiences, and he was probably influenced by the anecdotes and prior histories that he would have read as an educated Greek.⁶

Since I am approaching the subject from a Realist perspective, I am considering scholarship from both the Realist and the Idealist schools of thought. For the Realist camp, I am relying on the works of Kenneth N. Waltz and Arthur M. Eckstein. Waltz has been a leading figure in Realist thought for the better part of the twentieth century and has influenced authors such as Eckstein to apply Realist theory to other fields in history.⁷ Eckstein applies Realist theory to the ancient world, and he primarily looks at the Romans and the qualities that allowed them to dominate the Mediterranean region. Eckstein's work,

³ Xenophon, *Anabasis: Books I-IV*, ed. Maurice W. Mather and Joseph W. Hewitt (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1962); Xenophon, *Hellenika*, in *The Landmark Xenophon's Hellenika*, ed. Robert B. Strassler and John Marincola (London: Quercus, 2011); Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History: Volumes V and VI*, ed. Charles Henry Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950 and 1954); Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Thomas A. Sinclair (London: Penguin Group, 1981); Plutarch, *Lives: Volumes I and IV*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

⁴ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1-7.

⁵ Vivienne J. Gray, "The Value of Diodorus Siculus for the Years 411-386 B.C.," *Hermes* 115 (1987): 72-89.

⁶ Christopher B. R. Pelling, "Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman Lives," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 99 (1979): 74-96.

⁷ For more information on the tenets of Realism see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome (2007), has been the source of inspiration for this article and its analysis of state behavior in classical Greece according to Realist paradigms.⁸ I have also consulted scholars who do not agree with the monocausal Realist thesis of international relations, including Polly Lowe's monograph, *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece* (2009), as well as articles by Jon E. Lendon and Stefan Dolgert.⁹ For the political history of this period, Charles D. Hamilton's *Sparta's Bitter Victories: Politics and Diplomacy in the Corinthian War* (1979) and Jon Buckler's *Aegean Greece in the Fourth Century* (2003) are indispensable.¹⁰ Peter Krentz's dissertation, "The Thirty in Athens" (1979), examines the events in Athens during the short-lived reign of the pro-Spartan Thirty Tyrants (404 BCE).¹¹ Articles by Caroline Falkner and Herbert Parke discuss the changes in Spartan and Persian relations, and Iain A. F. Bruce has studied the internal politics and overall public sentiment among the Athenians after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants.¹²

This article analyzes the political history of Sparta between 405 and 395 BCE from the perspective of international theory. There is a debate between Realist and Idealist political theorists concerning the question of whether classical Greek city-states existed in a state of international anarchy, or whether cultural norms and shared history shaped state behavior. Even though there is strong evidence that the Corinthian War (395-387 BCE) happened primarily because of a security dilemma, this form of analysis is arguably too simplistic when assessing the political institutions and players in Sparta after the Peloponnesian War. Following their great victory, the Spartans became the unquestioned leader of the Hellenic (ancient Greek) world, but the political institutions that had made them successful in war were ill equipped to handle the administration of an empire; this created internal political strife and resulted in inconsistent policy

⁸ Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009; first published 2006).

⁹ Polly Lowe, *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece: Morality and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2007); Jon E. Lendon, "Xenophon and the Alternative to Realist Foreign Policy: *Cryopaedia* 3.1.14-31," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 126 (November 2006): 82-98; Stefan Dolgert, "Thucydides, Amended: Religion, Narrative, and IR Theory in the Peloponnesian Crisis," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 661-682.

¹⁰ Charles D. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories: Politics and Diplomacy in the Corinthian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979); John Buckler, *Aegean Greece in the Fourth Century BC* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹¹ Peter Krentz, "The Thirty at Athens" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1979).

¹² Caroline Falkner, "Sparta and the Elean War, ca. 401/400 BC: Revenge or Imperialism?" *Phoenix* 50, no. 1 (1996): 17-25; Herbert W. Parke, "The Development of the Second Spartan Empire (405-371 B.C.)," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 50 (1930): 37-79; Iain A. F. Bruce, "Athenian Foreign Policy in 396-395 B.C.," *The Classical Journal* 58, no. 7 (1963): 289-295.

decisions.¹³ While the Spartans' actions and their former allies' responses were predictable within a system of international anarchy, there was a serious debate within Spartan leadership on strategy.¹⁴ There were different political coalitions within the Spartan *polis* that ranged from being idealistic to being imperialistic. This raises the question which international model might best describe the behavior of Sparta after the conflict. There appears to be truth on both sides of the debate: the physiological and rational aspect of the Realist theory appears to explain why naval commander Lysander and King Agis supported policies that were aggressive and imperialistic.¹⁵ The democratically elected *ephors* (overseers) responded to the popularity of these leaders and shifted Spartan foreign and domestic policy toward avarice. Yet, in 402 BCE, they curbed Lysander's influence by sending King Pausanias to relieve him of his command when he had returned to Athens after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants.¹⁶ Later, swayed by King Agesilaus's influence, they sent an army against the Persians on the principle that they owed the Ionian Greek city-states freedom from the oppressive satrap Tissaphernes.¹⁷ In a sense, King Agis and Lysander represented the unbridled aspiration of the state, while King Pausanias became the voice of the conservative order which desired to return Sparta to its isolationist roots.¹⁸ I argue that the Spartans' behavior fits a Realist model. Even though many of their decisions were justified by reasons of community, reciprocity, and shared history, it appears that their new role as *hegemon* (leader) of the Hellenes (Greeks) and their fear of losing that advantage corrupted the institutions that had formerly made peaceful coexistence with the other Greek city-states possible.

I. International Politics

The ancient Greek world was a harsh place where war was commonplace and long-term security fleeting. In a famous quote from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, "The strong do what they will and the weak do what they must," an Athenian emissary describes the tough reality that the Melians were

¹³ Aristotle writes that the Spartan state was designed for fighting wars, but comments that the austere institutions made it hard to prosper during peacetime since they traditionally did not save much in the public treasury. Aristotle, *Politics*, 2.9.

¹⁴ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 41-42.

¹⁵ Spartan foreign policy was dictated by the democratically elected *ephors*. The two kings were in charge of all military decisions while on a campaign. Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.14.

¹⁶ King Pausanias convinced the *ephors* to send him with an army to relieve Lysander of power for he feared that the latter would be able to create an oligarchic coalition in Athens loyal to him. Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 2.4.29.

¹⁷ There are multiple accounts of Spartan leaders deciding to reverse their promise to hand over the Ionian Greeks to the Persians following the defeat of the Athenians. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 108; Lowe, *Interstate Relations*, 41.

¹⁸ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 39-41.

facing: they were under siege by the Athenians and would later be enslaved because they had refused to join the Athenian side in the conflict.¹⁹ The emissary's statement does not just describe the reality for the unfortunate Melians; it also characterizes the harsh reality of ancient international politics: the strong do whatever they want to a weaker power.²⁰ The basic principles of international Realism are that state actors act within a landscape of international anarchy where long-term security is a scarcity and states actors are compelled by necessity to act decisively in order to promote their own short-term security.²¹ Imbalances of power, opaqueness of military capabilities, and territorial ambitions are realities that states face in a landscape of international anarchy.²² At a more basic level, international Realism does not have a set philosophy or ethics; it is a paradigm of behavior that is deterministic and tilts toward immorality. In such an anarchic reality war is inevitable, and state actors are inherently self-interested because human nature is predictably rational. Thus, human psychology and social institutions make war almost certain when there is internal political strife as a result of disagreement within the state; war helps unify the state against a common threat.²³ With these ideas in mind, I will demonstrate that the Spartans did not act in the spirit of a Greek community or shared history, but, rather, for the sake of impressive empire and to resolve internal political conflicts.

The constructivist/Idealist scholar examines shared histories, community, and identity as explanations of state behavior in international relations. To use the "Melian Dialogue" as an example, the Melians made a plea for their autonomy and for justice in order to avoid being crushed.²⁴ While this failed to persuade the Athenians from killing the Melian men and selling the rest of Melos's population into slavery, it shows that the Greeks were aware of higher ideals in interstate action that did not involve coercion. Since our information regarding the events surrounding the Peloponnesian War comes from a mere handful of sources, careful examination is required when searching for the causes of state action. Stefan Dolgert writes that religion has been overlooked as a possible factor in the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War since the Spartans had been banned from the Delphic *amphictyony* (league of neighbors), a religious

¹⁹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 5.89.1.

²⁰ The "Melian Dialogue" provides two interpretations of international politics: the Athenians gave an account of political Realism, while the Melians made a plea for justice and freedom as their rationale why they should not be compelled by the Athenians to be slaves. W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "How International Relations Theorists Can Benefit by Reading Thucydides," *The Monist* 89, no. 2 (2006): 232-244.

²¹ Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 21.

²² Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 38-39.

²³ For a discussion on the relation between internal politics and the international community, see Lowe, *Interstate Relations*, 24-25; Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 80.

²⁴ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 5.98.1.

assembly of city-states that decided the rites performed at Delphi.²⁵ There was perhaps a strong sense of community among the Greeks, but there were no mechanisms to enforce international law; instead, there were customs and practices that were considered in decision-making.²⁶ In addition, *hybris* (pride/shame) and honor played an important role in relations between states, and reciprocity or goodwill was conventional during the classical Greek period.²⁷ Plato and Aristotle recognized that enslaving other Greeks was so abhorrent that it should never be practiced.²⁸ Soft norms were prevalent in Greek thought, even though they were not always practiced. Yet, there is a paradox between Realist and Idealist theories and international relations more generally, and that is moral relativism.²⁹ Moral relativism challenges observers to understand the true motivation of the state, yet one cannot only explain state actions on the basis of moral reasoning, but also through rationalism. Two things can be true at the same time: firstly, that the lack of international law prevents an orderly and moral character of states, and secondly, that there can be order within states because there are laws with weight behind them. Classical Greek thinkers were pessimistic about the prospect of preventing war. In Plato's *Laws*, a Cretan lawgiver claims, "What most people call 'peace' is nothing but a word, and in fact, every city-state is at all times, by nature, in a condition of undeclared war with every other city-state."³⁰ Morality within a state can rationalize the actions of state actors who are operating in a proverbial state of nature. In order to apply a theoretical approach to classical Spartan international relations, we must look at the institutional change of the Spartan *polis* after the Athenian defeat at Aegospotami (405 BCE).

The Spartan government was ill-equipped to restrain the ambitions of the military and to manage a naval empire. In earlier times, Lycurgan tradition had kept the state in friendly relations with its neighbors and resisted intervention in politics overseas, but the influx of wealth and responsibilities overseas challenged the balanced Spartan political system. Both Aristotle and Plutarch praised the Spartan government for having oligarchic, democratic, and monarchic divisions of government. Five democratically elected *ephors* were

²⁵ Dolgert, "Thucydides, Amended," 661-682.

²⁶ The concept of *koine eirene* (common peace) was known during the fifth century BCE, but it was never implemented. Hamilton argues that the Corinthian War happened because of Sparta's "abandonment of self-restriction" or an abandonment of the austere Lycurgan constitution. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 17-18.

²⁷ For a discussion of *hybris* and reciprocity in classical Greek foreign policy, see Lendon, "Xenophon and the Alternative to Realist Foreign Policy," 97; Lowe, *Interstate Relations*, chap. 2.

²⁸ For a discussion of Greek thought on slavery see Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.4; Plato, *The Republic*, trans. George M. A. Grube, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 469b.

²⁹ Lowe, *Interstate Relations*, 29.

³⁰ Plato, *Laws*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987; first published 1980), 626a.

responsible for diplomatic and foreign policy decisions, two hereditary kings conducted the military campaigns, and there was an advisory council of twenty-eight elders.³¹ Even though the *ephors* made decisions pertaining to affairs abroad, the kings and military commanders wielded considerable power since they led the military campaign. Before the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, the land of the Spartan polity had been divided equitably among the populace in order to curb avarice, and the currency had been switched from gold and silver bullion to worthless steel pieces in order to reduce the influence of foreign powers.³² However, following the Gylippus affair, which had involved Athenian bribes, the Spartan state abandoned its policy of only using steel pieces as currency, and used the silver and gold collected from the war for public funds.³³ These funds were necessary to fund a navy for the empire that Sparta had inherited. The traditional Spartan values of non-interventionism and modest wealth were challenged by newfound wealth, power, and ambitious military leaders. Admiral Lysander directed most of the Spartan policy after the defeat of Athens, setting up *harmosts* (military governors) in the colonies that had previously been allied with Athens.³⁴ Thus, Sparta's policy began to be impacted by the aspiration of its military leaders.

II. Spartan Aggression

Lysander's involvement in post-war Athenian politics and reconstruction illustrates how the natural ambition of human nature corrupted the Lycurgan tradition of non-interventionism. In 404 BCE, the Peloponnesian fleet surrounded Athens, and leading Athenian politicians were unwilling to discuss peace terms. However, after Lysander sent the Athenian prisoners and exiles from Byzantium to fill the Athenian port city of Piraeus with hungry prisoners of war, Athenian leaders became more willing to talk.³⁵ As the political situation in Athens continued to deteriorate, oligarchic factions seized control over the city's affairs,

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 2.9, 1270b6-28; Plutarch, *Lives [Lycurgus]*, 5.

³² Lycurgus thought that he could control the moral character of the populace by artificially controlling the currency in Sparta, so that Spartans would not be tempted by treasonous offers of money. Plutarch, *Lives [Lycurgus]*, 8-9.

³³ Gylippus was a Spartan general who had embezzled bullion sent from Lysander to the Spartan government. However, Lysander left receipts on the sums of gold and silver sent to Sparta. There was a debate on how to handle the newfound wealth without corrupting the whole *polis*. Lysander convinced the *ephors* to allocate the newfound treasure to public funds only. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 13.106.7; Plutarch, *Lives [Lysander]*, 16-17; Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 55.

³⁴ It had been Spartan policy to set up military governors in territories previously controlled by Athens, however, the difference now was that Lysander was arguably setting up these *harmosts* with leaders personally loyal to him. The sources disagree on his true motivations, but Parke believes that this aligned with his personal ambitions. Parke, "Development of the Second Spartan Empire," 51-52.

³⁵ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 2.2.1-4.

blaming its democratic leaders for the current situation. They resolved to negotiate with the Spartans to obtain terms of surrender. The Spartan fleet and army found themselves in an ideal position in which they could simply starve the city, plunder it, and share the spoils with their allies. However, Lysander's personal ambitions influenced the decision to sway the *ephors* in another direction, namely by choosing the more moderate route of being lenient with Athens and making it a protectorate. Xenophon claims that these terms were reached because Sparta and Athens had a shared history of fighting against the Persians during the Greco-Persian Wars:

The Spartans, however, said they would not enslave a Greek city that had accomplished so much for Greece during the time of its greatest dangers; they preferred, rather to offer peace with Athens upon the following conditions: that the Athenians take down their Long Walls and fortifications of the Peiraeus; that they hand over all their ships except twelve; that they allow their exiles to return to Athens; that they have the same friends and enemies as the Spartans; and that they be willing to follow the Spartans as their leaders on land or sea, on whatever campaign the Spartans should order them.³⁶

Xenophon claims that the Athenians had supported the Spartans during the greatest time of danger for the Hellenes, namely the war against the Persian invasion. It is difficult to accept this as the reason for benevolence, since Lysander had been rather ruthless after the battle of Aegospotami and executed all three thousand Athenian prisoners. On the one hand, Xenophon's statement could be interpreted to say that there was an international norm of respecting legacy or *hybris*. Lysander's popularity played a role in the *ephors* offering such lenient terms, showing how fragile and insular the Spartan constitution was in handling new conquests.³⁷ One of the difficulties of using a modern approach to international relations is that it might appear anachronistic when dealing with ancient Greek city-states.³⁸ The division of power in the Spartan government was undoubtedly complex, which led to many executive decisions by kings and generals without direct approval from the *ephors*. This is understandable, though, because kings and military leaders needed to act decisively in crucial military situations. According to Aristotle, one of the flaws of the Spartan kingship was that it was hereditary and permanent, thus allowing kings more long-term influence on the state.³⁹ The institutions of the Spartan *polis* were designed to wage war successfully, but after a war was won, the opinions of the triumphant commander must have played a significant factor in policy decisions. In this case,

³⁶ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 2.2.21-23.

³⁷ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 39; Buckler, *Aegean Greece*, 1-2.

³⁸ International Relations as a field of study began shortly after WWI when actors in foreign relations were nation states. The ancient Greek *polis* varied greatly in institutions and mechanics. Sparta, in particular, had a unique separation of powers, namely the elders, the kings, and the *ephors*, which makes it difficult to analyze it as a cohesive political unit. Lowe, *Interstate Relations*, 9-10.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.14, 1285a3-16.

Lysander appears to have had considerable influence because Theramenes, the leader of the moderate oligarchs in Athens, approached him first before deciding to persuade the other members of his political faction to send delegates to the Spartan *ephors*.⁴⁰ Understanding the motivations of the military leaders in Sparta is crucial for our understanding of state decisions in this period because these military leaders were at the forefront of the new empire and drove the political discussion in Sparta. Thus, the Spartans offered lenient terms to the Athenians not out of altruism or *hybris*, but for personal gain and empire in light of a new political frontier.

Following the capitulation of Athens, Sparta's political leaders were split on how to proceed as *hegemon* of the Greek city-states. There were arguably three distinct factions within the Spartan *polis*. One group was led by King Agis who advocated for a robust foreign policy that involved Spartan intervention not only in mainland Greece but also in the former *poleis* of the fallen Athenian empire. King Pausanias, meanwhile, supported a non-interventionist policy, and Lysander proposed establishing more *harmosts* in the Aegean without direct involvement in the local affairs of these allies.⁴¹ Lysander arguably had the most influence right after the Peloponnesian War, since he had enormous personal popularity and was involved in establishing an oligarchy in Athens and many of the latter's allied city-states.⁴² Lysander's ambitions were transparent when he attempted to change the Spartan tradition of hereditary kingship to secure constitutional power.⁴³ But after Lysander had been relieved of his command in 402 BCE, Agis gained more influence on the political stage.

III. Persian Opportunism

The Spartans now directed their imperialist aims at the settlement of Elis (northwestern Peloponnesus) at the behest of King Agis who sought to assert Spartan power in the region after Sparta had lost its control over Athens in 402 BCE. Xenophon claims that this intervention occurred for religious and historical reasons:

Then, in a later incident, when King Agis had been sent to sacrifice to Zeus in accordance with an oracle, the Elisians prohibited him from praying for a victory in war, saying that it had long been established that Greeks should not consult oracles about a war with other Greeks. He was forced to depart without having made his sacrifice.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Theramenes was a moderate oligarch who had been instrumental in curtailing the earlier oligarchic revolution in 411 BCE. It is likely that Theramenes sought Lysander out first because he had a record of establishing *harmosts* that were pro-oligarchic. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 47.

⁴¹ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 88.

⁴² Plutarch, *Lives [Lysander]*, 19; Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 2.3.6-10, 2.4.29-31.

⁴³ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 89.

⁴⁴ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.2.21.

Shortly after Elesians had repelled King Agis, the Spartan *ephors* declared that they themselves should have autonomy over their region. In addition, the Spartans cited the fact that Elis had joined an alliance with Athens, Argos, and Mantinea when Sparta had been banned from participating in the Olympic games after the Peace of Nicias in the summer of 420 BCE.⁴⁵ While the Spartans were certainly irritated that the Elesians had not respected Spartan power and reputation, it seems more probable that King Agis, an advocate of an aggressive Spartan foreign policy, cited these reasons as a pretext to convince the *ephors* to intervene in areas that were strategically important to Sparta's northern border. The Spartans were successful in compelling Elesian loyalty after raiding the latter's territory. Caroline Falkner has argued that this attack on Elis was indicative of imperialism in the wake of the victory over Athens, but I believe that the Spartans were flexing their muscles to show that they had not lost their determination even though they had lost influence in Athens which had briefly acted as a buffer against the Thebans.⁴⁶ Yet, sentiment in Athens continued to be pro-Spartan among the elites even after democracy had been restored.⁴⁷

After these aggressive acts, the Thebans, Corinthians, and other Greek allies conspired against Spartan hegemony. Power transition theory explains that weaker states will act aggressively in the face of a rising and powerful state, thus increasing the likelihood of war.⁴⁸ After the Spartans had established a pro-Spartan regime in Athens, the Thebans and Corinthians conspired against them. According to Diodorus, the aforementioned Greek polities opposed the Spartan decree to return the Athenian democrats who had fled Athens during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants:

Though this was an outrageous decree, the other cities, terrified by the soldier power of the Spartans, complied with it. The sole exception was Argos, whose citizens were the first to offer these fugitives compassionate asylum—moved by hatred of Lacedaemonian cruelty as well as by pity for the fate of the unfortunate. The Thebans, too, voted that anyone who witnessed an exile being arrested and did not offer him all possible assistance should incur a fine.⁴⁹

The other Greek city-states became resentful when the Spartans involved themselves in Athenian internal politics. According to Xenophon, "[t]hose thus evicted fled to the Piraeus, but the Thirty evicted many from there too, and so both nearby Megara and Thebes were full of refugees."⁵⁰ Xenophon agrees with Diodorus that this welcoming of refugees went on during the reign of the Thirty in Athens. The Athenian democrats, backed by former Spartan rivals, defeated

⁴⁵ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 110; Buckler, *Aegean Greece*, 13.

⁴⁶ Falkner, "Sparta and the Elean War," 24-25.

⁴⁷ Bruce, "Athenian Foreign Policy," 289-295.

⁴⁸ Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 24.

⁴⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 14.5.5-6.

⁵⁰ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 2.4.1.

the army of the Thirty and reestablished a democracy.⁵¹ Further, Thebes refused to join King Agis in his raids against Elis, as well as the Spartan expedition to Persia led by King Agesilaus in the spring of 396 BCE.⁵² The Spartans' former allies took bold action to weaken the security of the Spartan border by forming a coalition. According to Diodorus, the "Boeotians and the Athenians, and the Corinthians and the Argives besides, made a collective alliance. Since the Lacedaemonians were detested because of their oppressive domination, it would, they thought, be easy to break their rule if there was a general agreement between the principal cities."⁵³ By 395 BCE, the former Peloponnesian League had disbanded. Sparta's aggression in the region had been met with an aggressive realignment of power by its former allies and adversaries.

Spartan intervention in Asia Minor and Persia demonstrates how dominant imperialist factions during the early post-Peloponnesian War period and Persian political leader used the division of the Greek city-states to further their interests in Ionia.⁵⁴ After his appointment as admiral, Lysander established a friendship with the Persian prince Cyrus (the Younger) who had considerable influence in the region of Ionia. It was agreed that Cyrus would have control over the Greek city-states in Ionia in exchange for bankrolling the Spartan fleet during the Peloponnesian War.⁵⁵ Cyrus had wanted a Spartan pledge of friendship so that he could call upon the Spartans to support him in his battle for the throne after the death of King Darius II.⁵⁶ In fact, Cyrus planned to use Spartan hoplites in order to wrestle control back from his brother, King Artaxerxes II.

Lastly, as regards his Greek force, he proceeded to collect it with the utmost secrecy, so that he might take the King as completely unprepared as possible. It was in the following way, then, that he gathered this force: In the first place, he sent orders to the commanders of all the garrisons he had in the cities to enlist as many Peloponnesian soldiers of the best sort as they severally could, on the plea that Tissaphernes had designs upon their cities.⁵⁷

The Persians used the conflict in mainland Greece to further their own interests in Anatolia. Prince Cyrus of Persia had provided crucial naval support for the Peloponnesian League at the battle of Aegospotami, which had led to the final defeat of the Athenian navy. Yet, Cyrus's plan failed, and he was killed by the army of King Artaxerxes at the battle of Cunaxa in 401 BCE. As a result, Tissaphernes, a loyal satrap, took revenge against the Greek *poleis* that had sided

⁵¹ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 2.4.43.

⁵² Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 152-153.

⁵³ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 14.82.12.

⁵⁴ The Persian empire was the largest and richest in the ancient world but was incredibly fragmented and politically divided. Local wars were common between the satraps or governors and were actually encouraged by the kings at times. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 100-101.

⁵⁵ Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 106-107.

⁵⁶ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.1.1-2.

⁵⁷ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.1.6.

with Cyrus and demanded that the Greek city-states submit to him. In response, the Greek Ionians called for Spartan help:

The cities, however, would not receive him, because they wished to be free and because they feared Tissaphernes's wrath since, when Cyrus was alive, they had preferred him to Tissaphernes. They, therefore, sent ambassadors to Sparta, asking the Spartans, since they were now the leaders of all Greece, to protect them, the Greeks in Asia, so that their land would not be ravaged and they themselves would be free men.⁵⁸

The newly crowned Spartan king Agesilaus decided to respond to the plea of the Greek city-states, despite the fact that they had rescinded their original pledge. This decision to lead an expedition to Ionia has confused scholars because it was impractical logistically and could be interpreted as coming from an idealistic reason, namely to save fellow Greeks from barbarians, but the expedition itself was a result of Lysander's influence over the young king.⁵⁹ This presents the relativist problem when studying state action since, on the one hand, the Spartans appear to have led an expedition to save the Greeks in Ionia, but on the other hand, Lysander seems to have been manipulating military leaders to fulfill his own ambitions of empire.⁶⁰ Lysander must have realized the hopelessness of war against the Persians. Ironically King Agesilaus betrayed Lysander and deprived him of power over the expedition. What remains to be explained is why the Spartan *ephors* were convinced that such a policy against the Persians would be beneficial, since victory was only a distant possibility.

Conclusion

The emergence of conflict after the Peloponnesian War and the outbreak of the Corinthian War shows that the harsh nature of international diplomacy was the main reason why peace could not be achieved for a long period of time. Sparta's political traditions and institutions were ill equipped for self-restraint when Sparta was in a position of power during times of peace. The Realist tenet of human behavior, being self-interested and naturally immoral, seems to best describe the attitudes of Sparta's political and military leaders. Arguably, Lysander's unique position as a supreme naval leader in the Aegean after the battle of Aegospotami allowed him to establish an empire for Sparta, which created such factionalism at home that it dramatically changed Spartan foreign policy during this period. On the other hand, the fact that Sparta had practiced self-restraint in its earlier history shows that a case can be made for Idealist principles of international relations. The personal popularity of Sparta's military

⁵⁸ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.1.4.

⁵⁹ The Spartans did not have the navy, the treasury, or the manpower to take on the Persian empire which was the largest and richest in the region. Buckler contends that the Spartans were able to maintain an army of 13,400 hoplites, which might have been enough to enforce their dominance in Greece, but not to take on the Persians. Buckler, *Aegean Greece*, 42; Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories*, 130.

⁶⁰ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.4.2.

leaders effectively gave them political influence over the democratically elected *ephors*, which shaped major policy decisions until the Corinthian War. Advocates of imperialist policies were favored over the conservative faction of Pausanias. Victory and opportunity impaired the integrity of Sparta's government, alienated it from its traditional allies, and stretched its social fabric to a point from which it would never recover. These leaders reversed years of Lycurgan conservatism and isolationist policy that had allowed Sparta to co-exist with its allies.

Future research might explore how culture and religion affected the decisions of state actors during this period. While I am convinced that the security concerns of states were the driving force behind major policy decisions in classical Greece, imagination and concepts of community would be worthwhile areas of study for classical Greek international relations. In addition, it would be beneficial to the field of international relations to investigate the respective diplomatic ties between mother city-states and their colonies.

The Peloponnesian War resulted in a power vacuum which Spartan military leaders took the initiative to fill. These leaders, despite living in a society that carefully instilled values of honor, restraint, and discipline, advocated for a policy that was ambitious and against Spartan tradition. The moral decay within the Spartan state is indicative of how human nature, when left to its own devices, is inclined toward rational self-interest. To answer the question of why war is inevitable, men fight wars because they are concerned for their security and survival, because they possess human ambitions, and perhaps because their nature is inherently belligerent.

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