Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War

Thucydides’ purpose: “My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever.” (p. 48/I:22)

Social and intellectual background: “Thucydides the Athenian wrote the history of the war between Athens and Sparta . . .” (p. 35/I:1)
  - military officer
  - student of sophism
  - historian

Historical method and principles:
Systematic inquiry: “And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war, I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible.” (p. 48/I:22)
  - avoidance of the supernatural
  - context
  - skepticism
  - interpretation
  - accuracy
  - understanding “from all sides”

Arguments:
  - Historiographical: “better evidence than that of the poets.” (p. 47/I:21)
  - Historical: “more worth writing about than any of those which had taken place in the past,” (p. 35/I:1); “never such loss of life—in the actual warfare and in internal revolutions.” (p. 48/I:23)
  - Interpretive: “Hellenic navies . . . were the foundation of empire.” (p. 44/I:5)
    “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” (p. 49/I:24)
  - Human nature: “being what it is”

“It will be enough for me if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.” (p. 48/I:22)

Elements of the conflict:

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Themes: ambition, justice, virtue, character, insight, understanding from all sides:

Character: “. . . there was a general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world. The simple way of looking at things, which is so much the mark of a noble nature, was regarded as a ridiculous quality and soon ceased to exist.” (p. 244/III:83)
  - First phase (431-421): Pericles/statesman and Cleon/demagogue

Mytilene:
Cleon: “For if [the Mytilenians] were justified in revolting, you [Athenians] must be wrong in holding power.” (p. 217/III:40)
Pericles: “Your [Athenian] empire is like a tyranny; it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go.” (p. 161/II:63)

Coryra:
“to fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings . . . a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage . . . the ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action” (p. 242/III:82)

“private ambition and private profit led to policies which were bad for both the Athenians themselves and for their allies . . .” (p. 163/II:65)

• Second phase (421-414): Peace of Nicias
  Melos: “The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.” (p. 402/V:89)

• Third phase (414-404): Alcibiades
  Syracuse: “They had come to enslave others, and now they were going away frightened of being enslaved themselves; and instead of the prayers and paeans with which they had sailed out, the words to be heard now were directly contrary and boded evil . . . .” (p. 528/VII:75)

Standards “to last for ever”: Thucydides and Athens

Cited Quotations

Thucydides’ purpose
“My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever.” (p. 48/I:22)

Social and intellectual background
“Thucydides the Athenian wrote the history of the war between Athens and Sparta . . .” (p. 35/I:1)

“What I would prefer is that you should fix your eyes every day on the greatness of Athens as she really is, and should fall in love with her. When you realize her greatness, then reflect that what made her great was men who were ashamed to fall below a certain standard” (p. 149/II:43).

“We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect. We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break” (p. 145/II:37).

“In other respects also Athens owed to the plague the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness . . . As for what is called honour, no one showed himself willing to abide by its laws, so doubtful was it whether we would survive to enjoy the name of it. It was generally agreed that what was both honourable and valuable was the pleasure of the moment and everything that might conceivably contribute to that pleasure. No fear of God or law of man had a restraining influence” (p. 155/II:53).
Historical method and principles:

“The rest of the Hellenes, too, make many incorrect assumptions not only about the dimly remembered past, but also about contemporary history. . . . Most people, in fact, will not take trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear” (p. 47/I:20).

“I have found it impossible because of its remoteness in time, to acquire a really precise knowledge of the distant past or even of the history preceding our own period. . . .” (p. 35/I:1).

“And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war, I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible” (p. 48/I:22).

“I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speeches say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation” (p. 47/I:22).

Arguments:

“better evidence than that of the poets (like Homer), who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or of the prose chroniclers (like Herodotus), who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked. . . .” (p. 47/I:21).

“more worth writing about than any of those which had taken place in the past” (p. 35/I:1).

“Never before had so many cities been captured and then devastated, whether by foreign armies or by the Hellenic powers themselves . . . never had there been so many exiles; never such loss of life—both in the actual warfare and in internal revolutions” (p. 48/I:23).

“Wide areas, for instance, were affected by violent earthquakes . . . eclipses . . . drought . . . famine . . . . plague. . . . All these calamities fell together upon the Hellenes after the outbreak of the great war” (p. 48/I:23).

“Hellenic navies . . . were the foundation of [its] empire” (p. 44/I:15).

“What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta” (p. 49/I:24).

“It will be enough for me if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future” (p. 48/I:22).

Elements of the conflict:

“An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick at carrying it out. You [Spartans], on the other hand, are good at keeping things as they are; you never originate an idea, and your action tends to stop short of its aim. Then again, Athenian daring will outrun its own resources; they will take risks against their better judgment, and still, in the midst of danger remain confident. But your [Spartan] nature is always to do less than you could have done, to mistrust your judgment, however sound it may be, and to assume that dangers will last forever” (pp. 75-76; I:70).

Themes:

“because of his (Pericles’) position, intelligence, and his known integrity, [Pericles] could respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check. . . . So, in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen” (p. 164/II:65).
“the violence of his (Cleon’s) character” (p. 212/III:36).

“a general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world” (p. 244/III:83)

Cleon: “Punish them as they deserve, and make an example of them to your other allies, plainly showing that revolt will be punished by death” (p. 217/III:40).

Pericles: “Your [Athenian] empire is like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go” (p. 161/II:63).

Cleon: “. . . if [the Mytilenians] were justified in revolting, [then] you [Athenians] must be wrong in holding power” (p. 217/III:40).

“. . . fathers . . . killed their sons; men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very altars; some were actually walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there” (p. 241/III:81).

“to fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one’s unmanly character; [the] ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action . . . ” (p. 242/III:82).

“. . . methods of demagogy, which resulted in their losing control over the actual conduct of affairs.” (p. 164/II:65)

“private ambition and private profit led to policies which were bad both for the Athenians themselves and for their allies. Such policies, when successful, only brought credit and advantage to individuals, and when they failed, the whole potential of the state was impaired.” (p. 163/II:65)

“of all the Hellenes of my time, [Nicias] least deserved to come to so miserable an end, since the whole of his life had been devoted to the study and the practice of virtue.” (p. 536/VII:86)

“the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (p. 402/V:89)

“No Hellenic army had ever suffered such a reverse. They had come to enslave others, and now they were going away frightened of being enslaved themselves.” (p. 528/VII:75)