

ATHENS VS. SPARTA: A CLASSROOM WAR GAME

Joyce E. Salisbury
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

When my lower level Ancient Civilizations class was ready to take up the Peloponnesian War, I was wrestling with the question of how best to present it. I wanted to use the classroom period to achieve several goals: 1) to increase understanding of Greek society and culture; 2) to help students understand the nature of Greek warfare; and 3) to help them assimilate the narrative of the Peloponnesian War that they had read in their text. (I must confess I was also looking for a way to wake up my class that meets at 8:00 a.m.) With the invaluable help of my colleague, David Galaty, an historian of science, I designed a game to have the class engage in a Peloponnesian War.¹ The experience was a great success and accomplished all my goals.

The game is primarily a role playing activity during which students find themselves trying to fight a war under many of the same circumstances that existed in each city-state during the fifth century B.C. Thus, the game is really a vehicle to help students better understand ancient Greek society rather than a war game in a more traditional sense. The students had read about the Peloponnesian War before class, so they had a sense of the nature of the conflict, but they certainly did not have to redo the actual war. They were encouraged to be as creative as possible within the constraints of the roles they were playing and it was theoretically possible for Athens to win, although during my class Sparta won resoundingly.

Some of the remarks my students made during the game testified to the increased understanding of Greek society that emerged during the play. An Athenian complained, "We were voting while Sparta moved!" A Spartan observed, "We were united by our fear of the helots who are sitting in the corner conspiring." Perhaps the best result of the game, however, was the carryover into the classes that followed. During our discussion of the Spartan hegemony, the class excitedly discussed the predictability of some of the events (such as the problems with Persia) since the framework was set even in our game. When Thebes liberated the Messenian helots, those in the class who had played helots during the war game stood up and cheered. All in all, the experience was sufficiently beneficial that I would recommend it. Thus, I offer it here.

Materials:

Very few materials are necessary. I made a transparency of a map of ancient Greece and used an overhead projector to project it on a large flip chart. Each move was drawn with markers on the paper, and I could turn the page and have a fresh map for the next move. I distributed a ditto of the rules of the game to everyone and an additional ditto to each person describing the resources and goals of their respective teams (either Athens or Sparta). Additionally, I prepared 3 x 5 cards on which I typed a description of each person's role in the game. My class contains twenty people, but the roles can easily be modified by increasing or decreasing the numbers of allies, helots, or Athenian and Spartan citizens. The following are the dittos and game cards:

Rule Sheet

RULES:

1. You must not change the stated goals.
2. You must act in your character's best interest (even if it conflicts with the goals of your city-state).

TEACHING HISTORY

3. Over 50% of the voting members of your team must vote for a move before you may execute it.
4. Each move must be begun within 10 minutes. Remember you must have the appropriate vote before you may begin to move. Failure to execute a move within the time limit results in a defeat for that move.
5. As in all things Greek, Fate is the ultimate authority on the results of each move. There is no appeal.

How to Move:

Each cycle of a move consists of four steps:

1. Discuss your strategy with the members of your city-state, and conduct diplomacy with allies, helots, or Persia.
2. Vote (you need over 50%).
3. Deploy forces (choose how many and where you will send them).
4. Fate announces outcome and establishes the new conditions for the next move.

REMEMBER THE TIME LIMIT - THE FIRST TWO STEPS MUST
BE COMPLETED WITHIN 10 MINUTES

The War Begins:

The Peace of Nicias fails!

YOUR MOVE!

Athens

Goals:

1. Deliver a knock-out blow that would defeat Sparta.
2. Keep hostile empire together.
3. Extend empire (especially in Sicily).
(Feel free to negotiate with anyone to achieve your goals, including Sparta's allies or helots or Persia.)

Means Employed to Peace of Nicias:

1. Raiding the Peloponnesian coast.
2. Brutally putting down rebellion of allies.
3. Staying inside walls to protect city.

Resources:²Army

28,000 hoplites (of which 16,000 are required to insure defense of long walls and frontier forts)
1,200 cavalry

Navy

140 Triremes complete with hoplites and slaves to engage in sea battles

Funds

6,000 talents in the treasury at the Acropolis

1,000 talents a year from the League

Allies

10,000 hoplites

2,000 cavalry

1,300 lightly armed troops

Sparta

Goals:

1. Deliver a knock-out blow that would defeat Athens.
2. Break up Athenian Empire.
3. Preserve own Peloponnesian League.
4. Stay home to keep helots pacified.
(Feel free to negotiate with anyone to achieve your goals, including Athens' allies and Persia.)

Means Employed to Peace of Nicias:

1. Raid Attica and burn crops.
2. Return home frequently to check on helots.
3. Incite Athenian allies to revolt.
4. Try to get new allies (like Persia).

Resources:

Army

24,000 hoplites (of which 5,000 are required to insure repression of helots)

15,000 lightly armed troops

Allies

10,000 hoplites

1,000 cavalry

Navy

Allies control the following:

70 Triremes (complete with hoplites and slaves to engage in sea battles)

Funds:

Always a problem . . . you try for contributions from allies and loans from anyone. You do not need money to run your own army, however. This shortage simply makes it difficult to bribe anyone or to buy ships. You have to offer something other than money.

PlayersAthenians:

Leader: You are a strong popular, charismatic leader and you feel you are the only one who can lead Athens to victory. You are primarily motivated by self-interest, however. You want power and prestige and you'll do anything to get it. You may negotiate with anyone independently to get power. You will also sell out your city-state if it serves your best interests. You get one vote.

Leader: You are a highly respected leader from an old family. You feel you are the only one qualified to lead Athens--you have guided her in the past and intend to continue to do so. You disapprove of this war--it is not only immoral, but impractical. Athens doesn't need to fight to be great. You get one vote.

Leader: You have been a highly successful commander of Athenian troops. You are an excellent strategist and you are strongly in favor of this war. You will destroy Sparta once and for all. You believe your city-state needs your strong leadership during this time of crisis, and you want the power. You get one vote.

Wealthy Citizen: You live in Athens and you have made your fortune by owning slaves who manufacture things that are sold throughout the Empire. If the Empire falls apart you lose lots of money. You get one vote.

Average Athenian Citizen--2 People: You are the Athenian "person on the street." You are proud of your city-state and sure it is the best and most virtuous one around. You know your cause is just, but you are at times a little confused about just how to achieve your goals. You get one vote each, and want to use it wisely, but it certainly is difficult to figure out just how to vote at times.

Poor Peasants from Countryside--2 People: You are sick of this war. Every year the Spartans have burned your crops and you are forced to hide inside the long walls. You're broke, you lost a number of family members from the plague, and you want all this ended quickly, but you don't want to be conquered by the Spartans, since after all, they are the ones who burnt your fields. You each get one vote.

Allies--2 People: You represent all the allies (actually subjects of Athenian Imperial tyranny). You want the Empire to fall, but you

don't want to get killed--Athens is ruthless with allies who try to get out. If you can't get out of the Empire altogether, you at least want the best deal you can get. You do, after all, get trading privileges. You get no vote--what do you think this is, a democracy? You are waiting for a chance to revolt, and you may announce a revolt after any Athenian move.

Spartans:

Elders--2 People: You are over 60 years old and are the elected leaders to advise the Spartan assembly. You are very conservative and want to preserve the old Spartan way of life. NO new ideas! (At least not many.) You each have one vote and are expected to take the lead in guiding Spartan city-state.

Army Leader: You are the commander of the Spartan land forces. You are proud of the traditional Spartan way of doing things and convinced of the invincibility of your army. You are very suspicious of the Persians--allying with those people is dangerous not only to the war effort, but to the Spartan way of life. You get only one vote, but you are able to influence other people.

Navy Leader: You are the commander of the small but important (and you hope growing) Spartan fleet. You are convinced that a strong fleet is the only way you will beat the Athenians, and you are at times annoyed at the conservative Spartans. You are in favor of an alliance with Persia because you see that as a way to get your bigger fleet. (Maybe Persia will lend you money, if not ships.) You get one vote, and as a commander you can influence the soldier/citizen.

Citizens--2 People: You are the citizen soldiers of Sparta. You are over 30 years old, so you may participate fully in discussions and you get one vote each. However, as a good Spartan you are obedient to authority since you recognize that authority is what preserves your way of life.

Spartan Allies--2 People: You represent the interests of Sparta's allies. The only thing you have in common with Sparta, however, is that you want to win this war. You are sometimes suspicious of Sparta's motives. You control the allied fleet and the allied forces. Sparta is not an Empire so you participate fully in discussions and get one vote each.

Helots--2 People: You are aware of Spartan policy, you are able to listen to all their plans, although you may neither speak nor vote. You are waiting for an opportunity to lead a slave revolt when the Spartans leave town with their hoplites. You whisper together, but don't let the Spartans know what you are planning. At the end of any Spartan move, you may announce a slave revolt, but you don't want to die, so don't revolt unless you think you'll survive.

Role of the Instructor:

My role in the game was two-fold. First, I was Persia so that if either team wanted to negotiate a deal with Persia, it had to come to me, although it would certainly be possible in a large class to delegate this role to a small group. Persia has 100 appropriately manned triremes available to it to help either Athens or Sparta if it so chooses. Persia's overriding goal in any negotiations is to prevent any Greek city-state from emerging from the conflict in a powerful position. In my game, as Persia I committed 100 triremes to Sparta until Athens offered me a better deal. I then betrayed the Spartans. Such is diplomacy.

My second and of course most crucial role was to determine the outcome of each move. After the allotted ten minutes of discussion, negotiating and voting, I called for the move. Given the time constraints within the classroom, I did not restrict the distance either team could traverse at a given move. I did, however, take into consideration the relative distances the teams were moving adhering to the following principle: The team moving the shortest distance arrives first and therefore may fight from a fixed fortified position. For the most part, my class depended on negotiation rather than traversing large distances, so the moves were fairly comparable. A move was executed by the spokesperson of each team marking on the projected map the numbers of troops committed to a particular position. My role then was to assess the move.

First, I had to decide if the move was a clear knock-out blow and I had established a set of criteria (known only to me) that would constitute a decisive victory for one side. The following are a list of criteria that would permit decisive victories, none of which are achievable without successful negotiation with various allies, helots, or Persians.

1. Victory for Athens:
 - a. Successful invasion of the Peloponnesus through an undefended Isthmus with a force of 1.5 Athenians to one Spartan with a concurrent revolt of helots.
2. Victory for Sparta:
 - a. Attack on the walls with a force of 2.5 Spartans to 1 Athenian defending the walls. Victory will only be assured if the helots do not revolt or if they are secured at home with a force of 5,000 Spartans.
 - b. Complete destruction of Athenian fleet by one of two means: (1) A naval engagement with a Spartan advantage of 1.5 triremes to one that takes place on the open sea or (2) an even naval engagement within a narrow strait, such as near Salamis.

In my class, Sparta delivered a decisive blow. Sparta negotiated with Athens' allies to the north and mounted a large invasion against Athens' walls at the same time that Athens had decided to pull its hoplites off the walls to make a concerted drive to the Peloponnesus. Sparta's helots refused to help the Athenians and Athens fell.

In most cases, however, it is unlikely that either side will achieve a decisive victory quickly. The class will find out how difficult it would have been to achieve such a victory and will thus understand why the actual war dragged on for almost thirty years. Most of the engagements will be indecisive, and my role was to assess the skill of each move and declare a winner of that battle. The winner of each engagement would receive one point. My rough criteria for a battle victory were as follows:

1. If a team had not gotten the necessary 50% vote within the time period, it automatically lost the engagement. One point was given to the winning team, but no troop losses were assessed.
2. The Isthmus can be safely held against odds of 2 to 1.
3. If equal numbers fought on land, the Spartans had the advantage.
4. Troops fighting from a fixed fortified position had an advantage and would lose fewer troops in an engagement.
5. If equal numbers fought at sea, the Athenians had the advantage.
6. Cavalry would win against one and a half as many hoplites, and hoplites would win in an engagement against twice as many lightly armed troops. If the troops were more outnumbered than these figures, they would lose.

After awarding a victory point in a battle, I assessed the manpower costs of the engagement. I tended to make each battle expensive, so I would eliminate one to two thousand hoplites from the losing team and two to three hundred from the winning team depending upon which team was fighting from a fortified position. The teams would then retreat to their groups to have ten minutes to plan their next strategy. It actually took a very short time for me to assess each move so the game moved rapidly back to the role playing situation which was really the core of the experience.

These criteria are purposefully broad and should remain flexible so that the instructor may have the widest latitude to alter criteria and loss assessments to keep the game moving and interesting. The instructor acts as fate, the final authority in any Greek enterprise, and not only decides the outcome, but should feel free to decide whether any of the players in Athens will be struck down by the plague that hit the city during the war, or if any ships will be lost in any of the storms. The overriding consideration in these moves should be to keep the role playing aspect of the game proceeding smoothly.

Conclusion:

At the end of the class period the team that has the greatest number of points wins. I suggest that at the beginning of the next class period, some time be allotted for the class to discuss the experience and analyze what they had learned about Greek society. The roles have been set up to encourage discussion on many aspects of Greek life, politics and society as well as warfare, and if the game works as well for you as it did for me, you will find it an enriching and rewarding educational experience.

NOTES

¹I initially named my game the Peloponnesian War game until I discovered a board game on the market by that name. Thus, the name change to "Athens vs. Sparta."

²Most of these figures are taken from William G. Sinnigen and Charles Alexander Robinson, Jr., Ancient History from Prehistoric Times to the Death of Justinian (New York, 1981), 187-88, and 195-196. The only figures I invented were those giving Sparta control of some ships.