

GREEK & ROMAN CIVILAZTION





LEARNING JOURNAL UNIT 3

HIST 1421-01 GREEK & ROMAN CIVILIZATION - AY2024-T3



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Question:

As stated in your reading assignment titled 'Boundless World History', "Democracy in Athens was overthrown in 411 BCE as a result of its poor handling of the Peloponnesian War." Based on this statement, answer the following questions.

- Athens could not effectively handle the Peloponnesian War, do you agree? Why/why not? Support your answer with sources and evidence by providing details and examples.
- Is it correct to say that democracy in Athens was overthrown after the war?

Please explain your answer and justify your answers with relevant examples.

INTRODUCTION

The Peloponnesian War, spanning over a quarter century from 431-404 BCE, pitted the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta against one another in a protracted conflict that tested the mettle of both powers. This nearly thirty-year clash engulfed the entire Greek world of the time and ultimately ended Athens' supremacy in the region. However, Athens' defeats externally did not fundamentally undermine its vibrant democratic foundations and institutions. As we analyze key events during this period, the flexibility and durability of Athens' democracy comes into focus, despite the tremendous pressures imposed by this lengthy war. Even with setbacks, Athenian democratic culture displayed resilience and an ability to restore governance "by the people" after temporary oligarchic takeovers. So, while the war ultimately ended Athens' regional hegemony, examination of evidence from the period reveals the robustness of Athenian democracy against all odds.

ATHENS' HANDLING OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

I do not fully agree that Athens could not effectively handle the Peloponnesian War. As outlined in our reading, Athenian democracy promoted cultural achievements, economic growth via trade, and progress in philosophy and science. However, the strains of prolonged warfare did contribute to some governmental instability.

INITIAL MOBILIZATION OF RESOURCES

Initially, Athens' democracy helped mobilize resources for the war effort. Historians note "the Athenian democracy was better able to mobilize resources through taxation schemes, to crew its large fleet, and tolerate losses that might have discouraged nondemocratic states" (Kagan, 2003). Athens' navy and protective walls were largely funded by wealthy citizens through a process called liturgies (Pomeroy et al., 2021). This system allowed Athens to amass over 300 ships to counter Sparta's forces.

CONTINUED WAR EFFORTS

Athens' navy allowed them to continue waging war against Sparta for nearly 30 years. Athens had some devastating losses, such as the infamous defeat in Sicily in 413 BCE where they lost over 40,000 soldiers (Pomeroy et al., 2017). Yet Athens endured and refused calls for surrender, continuing to replace ships and men lost in battles. For example, shortly after the loss in Sicily, Athens quickly rebuilt a fleet of 110 triremes (Kagan, 2003). This demonstrated Athens' ongoing commitment to the lengthy war effort.

POLITICAL TURMOIL

Over the course of the nearly 30-year Peloponnesian War, Athens experienced some political turmoil and unrest. After the crushing defeat in Sicily in 413 BCE, extremist oligarchic factions

were briefly able to overthrow the democracy and establish an oligarchy of 400 rulers in Athens (Pomeroy et al., 2017). Yet this government lasted only 4 months before the broader Athenian population was able to band together and restore the traditional democratic rule.

RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The strains of prolonged warfare inevitably took a toll politically. However, even with setbacks, Athenian democratic governmental institutions ultimately proved quite durable and resilient. Athens did finally lose the Peloponnesian War which ended in 404 BCE, and yet its democracy itself endured this defeat. In fact, the 4th century BCE period immediately after the war is considered a “Golden Age” of Athenian culture and flourishing democracy.

CONCLUSION

While the nearly 30-year war put tremendous pressure on Athenian democracy, I do not fully agree that Athens’ democracy was definitively “overthrown” due to poor handling of the conflict. The brief oligarchic revolt of 411 BCE demonstrates the extreme tensions that resulted from this lengthy war. And yet, examining the full arc of Athenian history shows the enduring resilience and strength of its democratic foundations. This institutional durability speaks highly to classical Athens’ democratic vigour and populace.

Wordcount: 578

REFERENCES

Boundless World History : Lumen Learning : free download, borrow, and streaming : Internet Archive. (2017). Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/boundless-world-history/boundless-world-history/page/n631/mode/2up>

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Pomeroy, S. B., Burstein, S. M., Donlan, W., Roberts, J. T., & Tandy, D. W. (2017). *Ancient Greece: A political, social, and cultural history* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.