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**NOTHING LESS THAN  
VICTORY**

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DECISIVE WARS AND  
THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

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## Introduction

### **Victory and the Moral Will to Fight**



Americans today have been told to expect years of military action overseas. Yet they are also being told that they should not expect victory; that a “definitive end to the conflict” is not possible; and that success will mean a level of violence that “does not define our daily lives.”<sup>1</sup> A new administration is now bringing more troops into Afghanistan—where American troops have been operating for eight years—but without defining the terms of victory. The change in American military doctrine behind these developments occurred with astonishing speed; in 1939 American military planners still chose their objectives on the basis of the following understanding: “Decisive defeat in battle breaks the enemy’s will to war and forces him to sue for peace which is the national aim.”<sup>2</sup> But U.S. military doctrine since World War II has progressively devalued victory as the object of war. “Victory alone as an aim of war cannot be justified, since in itself victory does not always assure the realization of national objectives,” is the claim in a Korean War–era manual.<sup>3</sup> The practical result has followed pitilessly: despite some hundred thousand dead, the United States has not achieved an unambiguous military victory since 1945.

Historically, however, this debasement of victory in military planning is radical. Aristotle knew that “victory is the end of generalship,” and no Roman army fought for anything less.<sup>4</sup> The change in doctrine is not due primarily to the horrific destructiveness of modern war, for American leaders have adopted such aims even for conflicts that do not threaten to “go nuclear.” We inhabit a moral climate in which any attempt by victors to impose cultural values onto others is

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roundly condemned. We have largely accepted that the pursuit of victory would necessarily create new grievances and guarantee an even more destructive conflict in the future. This is a moral issue.

But this idea should be questioned. This book presents six major wars in which a clear-cut victory did not lead to longer and bloodier war, but rather established the foundations of a long-term peace between former enemies. Each of these conflicts began with an act of military aggression. Each stagnated during years of carnage that ended when a powerful counteroffensive and an unambiguous victory reached deeply into the moral purposes behind the war, and forced one side to give up its cause and to renounce the fight. The result, in each case, was not “universal peace,” but an understanding between former enemies that definitively ended the war and brought enormous benefits to thousands or millions of people. How and why these successes were achieved is the subject of this book.

The causes of war and peace run far deeper than the movements of armies and troops (strategy and tactics) into the reasons why armies form and move at all.<sup>5</sup> War is an exclusively human activity: animals eat each other, and clash over mates, dominance, and territory, but absent the capacity to pursue chosen goals and values with an organized commitment, they do not wage war. Contrary to Freud’s conclusion that mankind has a universal “instinct for hatred and destruction,” wars of a continental scale lasting years do not just happen, by chance, circumstance, or instinct.<sup>6</sup> The wellspring of every war is that which makes us human: our capacity to think abstractly, to conceive, and to create. It is our conceptual capacity that allows us to choose a nation’s policy goals; to identify a moral purpose for good or for ill; to select allies and enemies; to make a political decision to fight; to manufacture the weapons, technologies, strategies, and tactics needed to sustain the decision over time; and to motivate whole populations into killing—or dissidents into protest. Both war and peace are the consequences of ideas—especially moral ideas—that can propel whole nations into bloody slaughter on behalf of a *Führer*, a tribe, or a deity, or into peaceful coexistence under governments that defend the rights and liberties of their citizens. The great-

est value of the examples in this book is to show the importance of ideas—especially moral ideas—in matters of war and peace.<sup>7</sup>

Moral ideas as they relate to war must not be conflated with the rules associated with deontological just-war theory—for instance, of proportionality and absolute prohibitions against attacks on civilians.<sup>8</sup> Such rules divorce ends from means, and are often considered by their advocates to be absolute strictures apart from context and consequences. In this moral framework, the goals of each nation are granted no import in evaluating the conduct of the war, and those fighting to maintain a system of slavery become morally equal to those fighting for freedom. That such rules can become weapons in the hands of an enemy who is fighting for conquest, loot, or slavery is said to be irrelevant to the categorical commandment that each side follow those rules regardless of result. But surely we should question moral rules that exempt a belligerent from attack because he hides behind civilians whom he intends to enslave. The moral purpose of a war—the goal for which a population is fighting—sets the basic context for evaluating a conflict and determines the basic moral status of the belligerents. Those who wage war to enslave a continent—or to impose their dictatorship over a neighboring state—are seeking an end that is deeply immoral and must not be judged morally equal to those defending against such attacks. It is vital to evaluate the purposes of a war when evaluating both the means by which that purpose is being pursued, and the social support for those directing the war.

Because warfare is first and foremost a clash of moral purposes, acknowledging the place of moral ideas over physical capacities—expressed in Napoleon's dictum that "the moral is to the physical as three to one"—establishes a hierarchical relationship between the ideas fueling a war and the shifting details of terrain, tactics, and technology.<sup>9</sup> Certainly the tactics of Roman foot soldiers cannot be applied directly to tank divisions today, but the Romans might be able to tell us something about the motivations of a stateless enemy that is subverting a world power. This perspective on war leads to a certain conclusion about war's proper object, which is not the destruction of an enemy's army or industry. The goal of war is the subjugation of the

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hostile will, which echoes Carl von Clausewitz's identification that war is "an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will."<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz also wrote that "war is an act of human intercourse" and that "the essential difference" between war and the arts and sciences is that "war is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts, or at matter which is inanimate but passive and yielding, as is the case of the human mind and emotions in the fine arts. In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts."<sup>11</sup>

Clausewitz wanted to refute the idea, promoted by the Napoleonic officer Baron de Jomini, that military principles could be turned into charts and followed as rules.<sup>12</sup> Some theorists today, trying to understand warfare in scientific terms, are adopting the analytical methods proper to complex physical systems, using principles derived from chaos theory.<sup>13</sup> The idea here is to see every situation as a dynamic, interactive whole, to grasp an enemy's reactions as "feedback," to recognize that the complexity of the system does not allow us to grasp every detail of the action within it, and to understand the whole without being overloaded by its complexity.

But there is a limit to such analysis, for no mathematical methods will ever be able to quantify the primary factor that drives a war: the willingness of the leadership, soldiers, and civilians to butcher thousands in pursuit of an abstract moral purpose. Wars do have a fundamental cause: the moral purpose that motivates the decision and commitment to fight, which is expressed, in one form or another, from the highest levels of leadership down to every grunt with a rifle, a spear, or a club. The complexity deepens given the different ways such ideas are understood in different cultural contexts, the degrees of human ingenuity and technological sophistication available to pursue this purpose, and the commitment to achieve the moral purpose embodied in a nation's policy goals. The possibility of conflict increases to near certainty if a nation comes to accept that glory, loot, or moral sanctity can be achieved by the initiation of horrific force on behalf of a tribe, a ruler, a deity, or a collective.<sup>14</sup>

The will to war is the motivated decision and commitment to use military force to achieve a goal. How, then, can a commander use

physical force to compel an enemy to change his mind and to reverse the decision and commitment to fight? Military planners have been consumed with this enormous question; debates among American strategists in the 1930s about the role of a new air force, for instance, grappled with the question of whether the destruction of an enemy nation's industry could break its will to fight. The selection of targets became the dominant issue in air strategy, and the solution required industrial experts to determine which factories had to be destroyed to break the will and the capacity of the enemy population to support the war.<sup>15</sup> This issue remains contextual—Germany was defeated by “boots on the ground,” whereas Japan surrendered under air assault, just as the Romans had to smash their way through the Goths, while Palmyra surrendered when threatened by a siege—but commanders knew that the defeat of the hostile will was invariably the object of the war. In his 1934 testimony before the Federal Aviation Commission, Lt. Gen. Harold L. George stated that “the object of war is now and always has been, the overcoming of the hostile will to resist. The defeat of the enemy's armed forces is not the object of war; the occupation of his territory is not the object of war. Each of these is merely a means to an end; and the end is overcoming his will to resist. When that will is broken, when that will disintegrates, then capitulation follows.”<sup>16</sup>

Clausewitz had seen certain principles behind this issue long before air power made its debut, in the nature of war as a duel akin to two wrestlers, each grappling for balance, albeit founded on a political decision that depends upon a network of political, economic, social, and military support.<sup>17</sup> The result, he concluded, is a certain “center of gravity” for each side, the point of greatest vulnerability, which is not necessarily its army. “If Paris had been taken in 1792, the war against the Revolution” would most certainly have been ended, Clausewitz explained. “In 1814, on the other hand, even the capture of Paris would not have ended matters,” given Napoleon's sizable army.<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz elaborated: “For Alexander, Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, and Frederick the Great, the center of gravity was their army. If the army had been destroyed, they would all have gone down in history as failures. In countries subject to domestic strife, the

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center of gravity is generally the capital. In small countries that rely on large ones, it is usually the army of their protector. Among alliances, it lies in the community of interest, and in popular uprisings it is the personalities of the leaders and public opinion. It is against these that our energies should be directed.”<sup>19</sup>

But Clausewitz’s conclusion needs to be more solidly anchored in the social support for a war, which provides irreplaceable ideological, material, psychological, and moral resources for a nation’s armies and its leaders. The “center” of a nation’s strength, I maintain, is not a “center of gravity” as a point of balance, but rather the essential source of ideological and moral strength, which, if broken, makes it impossible to continue the war. A commander’s most urgent task is to identify this central point for his enemy’s overall war effort and to direct his forces against that center—be it economic, social, or military—with a view to collapsing the opponent’s commitment to continue the war. To break the “will to fight” is to reverse not only the political decision to continue the war by inducing a decision to surrender, but also the commitment of the population to continue (or to restart) the war.

To force this reversal of the decision and commitment to fight, a commander must *know himself, his own people, his enemy, and his enemy’s people—and, he must know his own moral objective as well as that of his enemy*. An effectively aimed, well-planned, and quickly executed counteroffense—or, even better, a credible show of strength that collapsed opposition with little killing, a feature of three of the examples here—was the climax of the six conflicts in this book. But each of these counteroffenses worked not only because of its physical success but because it forced that enemy, including the civilian population, to confront the enormity of what it had done, to recognize its hopeless inability to continue the fight, to lose heart as it lost support, and to give up the pretenses, misunderstandings, and delusions that had fueled the war from its start.

The chapters illustrate these effects on several levels. Strategically, each illustrates a major war, lasting more than a year and costing thousands of lives, which began with an attack against a political state that controlled a distinct territory, and whose survival was on the line.



I do not here deal with usurpations by competing Roman emperors, long-standing struggles for power between medieval families, or wars within a single territory, whether religious, civil, or revolutionary. The American Civil War warrants inclusion because the United States was geographically divided into two distinct territories, with opposing governments motivated by opposing moral ideals, and it is necessary to consider the two territories as distinct in order to grasp the nature of the conflict and the constitutional peace that has followed. In each of the examples, the war became a bloodbath without end until the side under attack launched an energetic offense against its opponent's social, economic, and political center. The military success was accompanied by a forthright claim to victory, so that there were no illusions about who had won the war.

But strategy alone does not explain the result; the tide of war turned when one side tasted defeat and its will to continue, rather than stiffening, collapsed. To understand this, it is vital to consider the cultural background of the opponents. For the Persians of the early fifth century BC, to take one illustration, the destruction of Xerxes' navy was an indirect projection of power against the ideological center of his rule, which was founded upon a culture in which people expected him to assert his magnificence through conquest. The defeat laid bare his fundamental weakness, which potentially undercut his position fatally. To protect his reign (and his neck), he had to abandon the goal of expansion that he had inherited. This became the policy of the king's court beyond his own lifetime. Despite differences in politics, terrain, technology, and tactics, similar results followed for each of these examples; in each case, the military failure reached deeply into the very identity of the regime itself and undercut the moral basis of the regime's actions as it destroyed material support for the war. The result was not only a change in the strategic balance of power, economic resources, or technology but a long-term change in *policy*.

In chapter 1, the Greek city-states faced decades of attacks by the Persian Empire. The Greeks ended the aggression—and discredited the ideology behind it—by ruining the enemy's army and threatening the king's position on his own soil. The Persians never again attacked the Greeks. In chapter 2, Sparta, home to the world's most feared

infantry, mounted years of attacks against an alliance of farming communities headed by the city of Thebes. The conflict should have been no contest—but the Spartan mirage was shattered when those farmers marched into the Spartan heartland and made Sparta's defeat unmistakable. The Spartans never again attacked the Thebans. Chapter 3 pits Carthage against Rome, via a long indirect route leading to Hannibal's attack against Italy in the Second Punic War. After years of indecisive warfare, the Romans won quickly with a direct attack on Carthage's homeland. Carthage accepted its position and never again attacked Rome. In chapter 4, third-century AD Rome was rent by internal usurpations and external attacks that divided the empire into thirds. The emperor Aurelian reunited Rome in an energetic campaign that collapsed the threats posed by its eastern and western enemies. As in the previous cases, a display of overwhelming force exposed the physical and ideological bankruptcy of those advocating war, which led to an immediate collapse in the will to fight.

The ancients are worthy of this much of the text because they reveal the basic issues behind every war in terms that are stripped of their modern nationalistic, technological, and logistical embellishments. Ancient writers placed the human elements first, especially the motivations that fuel a war and that must be reversed if long-term peace is to follow. We are hard-pressed to find such lasting victories, either in our own day or in the ancient world—they are in a certain sense anomalous in history—but there are three modern examples in this book. In chapter 5, a long, deeply rooted war of rebellion within the United States ended quickly when one Union army pinned the southern forces in the North, while another marched through the South and destroyed the economic and social foundations of the rebellion. Once again, military defeat accompanied the psychological and ideological collapse of the will to fight.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider World War II—the worst slaughter in history, which killed millions until the defenders mounted an overwhelming offense against the capitals of Germany and Japan. Chapter 6 takes up a very specific aspect of this conflict: how certain moral ideas conditioned Britain's response to Hitler and became causal fac-

tors in the onset of war. This chapter differs from the others in that it deals little with fighting and not at all with the end of the war—its concern is with the prelude to war and the way in which a clear-cut aggressor was empowered to attack. Warfare studies are not only about strategy and tactics but also about why armies end up on the battlefield when and where they do. Chapter 7 turns to the Pacific war and considers the nature of the victory over the Japanese decision and commitment to fight.

A rich variety of details adorns these events. In each case, the leadership of the defeated side was discredited, emasculated, or demoralized by the visible evidence of defeat; neither Agesilaos of Sparta, Hannibal of Carthage, Zenobia of Palmyra, Jefferson Davis, nor Hirohito could rouse his people to further action. For others, cruel war came directly to their homes; they saw their economies destroyed and their former vassals rise against them—as the Spartans, the Carthaginians, and the Palmyrenes saw their support evaporate, and southerners in America saw former slaves set free by a Union army. In some cases their cities were surrounded and pulverized, as the Goths, the people of Atlanta, and the Japanese saw their towns burned. In others, civilians shook with fear, knowing that an enemy army was on the way; the bloodless campaign of the Theban leader Epaminondas parallels the campaigns of the Roman emperor Aurelian into the East as well as Sherman's march through the South. Reliance on divine providence—through Ahura Mazda in Persia, Baal-Shamim in Carthage, Sol in Rome, and the Chrysanthemum Throne in Japan—played a part in unifying the efforts of some, and in the victory or defeat that followed. In one case, the focus is on the prelude to a war: the defensive posture assumed by British leaders, who failed to challenge the moral claims of the Germans, left them unwilling to oppose Hitler while it was possible to do so. This is a powerful example in reverse of the effects of certain moral ideals on the policies of rational statesmen who genuinely wanted to avoid a new war.

Each of these examples has been studied in great depth, and there is a mountain of scholarship for each. No chapter-length essay should aspire to provide the details that specialists will crave, or to even attempt to exhaust the studies made of these events. Some readers may

criticize the omission of many wars that could not be included. But all authors must be ruthlessly selective. B. H. Liddell Hart, in his important book *Strategy*, surveys history in order to present his thesis of indirect strategies. Yet he reduces the medieval period to eight pages (given “the drab stupidity of its military course”). Similarly John Lynn, in his important book *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, claims to take a global view of warfare in order to refute claims to historical continuity from the Greeks. Yet Lynn ends his discussion of Western antiquity with Greece circa 400 BC, skips past the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and pauses on ancient China before jumping ahead seventeen hundred years to the Hundred Years War, which he equates with the medieval period. No Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Justinian, et al. beyond scattered mentions—and neither were these necessary. Each of these authors illustrates his own thesis and invites readers to look further at the areas he chooses not to cover. I do the same.<sup>20</sup>

There is no single strategic pattern, no universal “theory of war,” and no moral “rules” divorced from context or purpose to emerge from this book. The major point is to *take moral ideas seriously*. The lessons of history relate not to tactical or strategic rules but to the ideas that motivate people to fight and their consequences in action. An aggressive nation can be empowered far beyond its physical strength by a conclusion that its opponent does not have the will to fight—surely a factor in Xerxes’ invasion of Greece and Japan’s commitment to the “Asian War”—and then be demoralized and beaten by an offense that exposes the physical and moral bankruptcy of its position. Conversely, a powerful nation may give up if its people come to think that a war is unjust, their nation’s position is morally untenable, or its goal unclear or simply not worth it. In either case, our recognition that war is the product of human ideas, ambitions, intelligence, and morality allows us to put the primary focus of warfare studies where it belongs: on human beings, who are the locus of the decision and commitment to fight, and the only agents capable of creating freedom and peace for themselves.

## Chapter 1

### **“To Look without Flinching”**

The Greco-Persian Wars, 547–446 BC

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#### The Hostile Will

It was the summer of 480 BC, and the Great King Xerxes, ruler of the mighty Persian Empire, son of Darius and heir to the Achaemenid throne, King of Kings and beloved of the deity Ahura Mazda, stood at the head of his army, looking down on the object of his revenge: the Greeks. He had every reason to be pleased, and to anticipate swift victory over a ragtag enemy. For months, the largest military force ever seen had marched and rowed to his command, drinking the rivers dry as city after city sent tokens of tribute and submission. The last of his Greek enemies would soon be ground under his feet. Yet within weeks everything had changed: the king was in full retreat, his dream in ruins, his navy scattered, and his army facing annihilation. It was as if all the energy of empire, once pushing forward in an unstoppable juggernaut, had stopped and turned inward on itself. Greece would never submit to this king's will, and no Persian king would ever again invade Greece. Why this sudden turnaround? And, most important to the future of the Western world, why was it permanent?

The basic story is well known. A Persian naval attack ten years earlier had ended on the beach at Marathon, when ten thousand Athenians defeated some thirty thousand Persians. The honor in this victory was so high that the playwright Aeschylus is said to have inscribed on his gravestone, “I fought at Marathon.”<sup>1</sup> The Persian commander retreated, but King Darius swore vengeance. His son Xerxes

inherited the call to revenge, and in 480 he marched a gigantic force into Greece, rolling over the Greek defenders and sacking Athens twice. Every lover of history knows about the battle of Thermopylae, where three hundred Spartans—with several thousand allies—held off hundreds of thousands of Persians for three days, while the Persian navy was stymied at Artemisium. The king lay waste to Athens, but the sea battle at Salamis broke the back of his forces, and his navy disintegrated before his eyes. He left his general on Greek soil—to be destroyed the next year at Plataea, along with thousands of subjects—and ran for home. He never returned.

This is where most accounts of the Greco-Persian wars have ended—with the military defeat of the Persians in a few battles on the Greek mainland and their withdrawal.<sup>2</sup> But the meaning of the Great King's disaster reached far deeper than a battlefield defeat and a strategic retreat. There was a change in policy in the Persian court—seventy years of aggressive doctrine was reversed when westward expansion of the empire was permanently abandoned. What are the reasons behind this astonishing reversal of policy? Why was a pattern of attacks four generations old, fueled by a mandate for revenge that Xerxes had inherited from his father, and supported by all the resources of the Great King's court, so quickly broken? The answers are rooted in certain ideas and practices that reached back to the emergence of the Persian Empire from its Near Eastern background, and stretched into military action on the king's own soil that lasted a generation.

In the early 550s BC the Persians under Cyrus the Great—one of the most successful commanders in history—revolted against the Median Empire. He swept out of the Iranian highlands, conquering the Medes and the Babylonians, and in two decades cobbled together an empire that reached from the borders of modern India into Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Cyrus ascended over a mosaic of competing rulers, cities, and empires with roots more than twenty-five-hundred years old, and he lay claim to a complex history in which one basic political-religious leitmotif had been omnipresent: assertions by grandiose rulers of personal magnificence and domination over prostrate subjects. Akkadians, Babylonians, Hittites, Assyrians, Mittani, Medes, Lydians—and myriad

others—all took as a given that a ruler close to the gods, a good shepherd and father to his people, would assert his power and demand abject submission from those below. The image of the king was vital here—this was how he appeared to the vast majority of his subjects.

A stele of the neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (ca. 680–669) towering over two captives, bound and kneeling before him, illustrates the submission demanded by the awesome image of a great king. The Assyrian *Chronicle* says that Baal, the lord of the land of Tyre, “kissed my feet,” “bowed down and implored” Esarhaddon as “lord,” and paid tribute.<sup>4</sup> In the next century the cuneiform cylinder seal inscription of Cyrus made the terms of rule explicit: “I am Cyrus, king of the world . . . whose rule Bel and Nebo love . . . all the kings of the entire world . . . those who are seated in throne rooms . . . all the kings of the west living in tents, brought their heavy tributes and kissed my feet in Babylon.”<sup>5</sup> Cyrus faced a world that understood what he was after and thought it perfectly natural.

Even Hammurabi of Akkad—a ruler traditionally credited with a comprehensive law code, some twelve hundred years earlier—began his laws with a proclamation of his own elevated status as a man of justice and power, called to rule for the good of his people.<sup>6</sup> Such kings demanded personal acknowledgment of their superior status—along with gifts of riches—from local rulers, who in turn claimed superiority over those below them. Before the Persians, the Assyrians did the most to institutionalize this suzerainty; they created a complex administrative organization with provincial governors, which passed, in varying forms, to the Babylonians and Medes.<sup>7</sup> But Cyrus refashioned this inheritance into an empire of uniquely comprehensive scope and organization. The realm of this so-called Achaemenid Dynasty—reaching ultimately from Egypt to the Indus River—was divided into some twenty satrapies (provinces), each controlled by a satrap (regional governor) who was respectful of local customs but was also bound to the king. This was the Persian Empire, in the eyes of the king the realm of just rule, deservedly magnificent, sanctioned by the gods, and bent on ruthless expansion.

Although the evidence is far from conclusive, Cyrus and the more educated subjects in his court may have dichotomized the entire world

between his kingdom—the realm of light and of truth—and the realm of darkness and lies, where he does not yet rule. This worldview may reflect the direct or indirect influence of Persian Zoroastrianism, from the mystic Zoroaster (ca. 628–551 BC), which was in some way associated with the god Ahura Mazda. This dichotomous worldview, syncretized with earlier warrior practices and the desire for submission, would have offered a powerful justification for violent expansion, whether or not Zoroaster himself ever held such intentions.

Texts associated with Zoroastrianism and Persian traditions uphold a certain “right order” of society, founded on a complex hierarchy of castes, to be defended by a good king. A middle-Persian text, the *Book of Arda Viraf*, relates the late fourth-century BC invasions of Iran by Alexander the Great in terms of an evil god; its verses also tell of a Zoroastrian journey through heaven and hell, call for ruthless suppression of domestic insurrection on pain of agony in the next world, and uphold the legitimacy of the Persian ruler against foreign attacks. The *Letter of Tosar*, a third-century AD work that has undergone several translations and editions, demands recognition, by the Turks and Greeks, of the eminence of the Persian “King of Kings.”<sup>8</sup> The ideology behind Cyrus had a long history, in many manifestations, both before and after him.

No single set of customs, and no single religion, was made exclusive in the kingdom; Persian kings wanted submission, not homogeneity. They routinely left non-Persians in charge of local affairs, once they had submitted; the attack on Marathon was commanded by a Mede. But Ahura Mazda was the divine symbol of the king’s legitimacy, and fire, the use of libations in lieu of animal sacrifices, and depictions of Ahura Mazda to the exclusion of all other gods up to the reign of Xerxes support the conclusion that Darius and Xerxes “may have been good Zoroastrians.”<sup>9</sup> The Behistun inscription, a proclamation of power carved into a cliff by King Darius (r. 522–486), lists those kings who hearkened to him, contrasts the Great King’s truth with the kings who lied, and connects his rule to Ahura Mazda through his claims to royal ancestry.<sup>10</sup> The chaotic, disunited Greeks—constantly squabbling and quarreling, fighting each other with none becoming



dominant—would have been the perfect foil, in the king’s eyes, to the order established in his own kingdom.

The conclusion follows that the Persian King of Kings was driven by an ideology—a system of ideas, used for political purposes, and passed on to him by the legacy of his father—that conjoined claims to divine protection with displays of magnificence, demands for submission, and continuous expansion of his rule across the entire world.<sup>11</sup> This was a dynastic ideal with moral force that had guided kings for four generations. Cyrus conquered the Medes in Asia Minor by 550 BC, the Lydians on the coast by 547, and the Babylonians in Mesopotamia by 539. Cambyses (r. 530–522 BC) expanded his rule into Egypt and accepted the submission of the Libyans to the west.<sup>12</sup> Darius claimed the throne in 522 or 521, after ending a revolt by the Medes; he then attacked the Scythians of the Black Sea area in 516, the Thracians in 512, the Greek cities in Asia Minor in 499, including Miletus in 494, and the Greek mainland in 490. When Darius died in 486, he passed the desire for conquest on to his son Xerxes, who suppressed revolts in Egypt and Babylonia before marching against the Greeks in 480. The pattern is clear, even if the precise dates are not.

For these kings, each act of expansion was an expression of legitimacy that strengthened his connections to his ancestors, bolstered the support of the nobility beneath him, affirmed his personal magnificence, and gave his subjects a goal as well as a means to promotion by gaining favor in the king’s eyes. All of this suggests that the decision to attack the Greeks was motivated not primarily by strategic concerns—calculations of relative power, for instance, or the need for material resources or taxes—but rather by the ideology of magnificent dominance, and that this ideology, not strategy, would dictate the size, organization, and use of military forces. Such motivations would only be strengthened, should a desire for revenge enter the king’s mind. To use purely strategic criteria to understand these events is fundamentally flawed.<sup>13</sup>

Cyrus’s conquest of the Lydian kingdom on the coast of Turkey—and the fateful end of the plutomaniac Croesus, in 547 BC—brought

the Persians into contact with the Ionian Greek city-states on the Aegean islands and the coast of Asia Minor. Cyrus's claim to rule Yaunâ [Ionia], preserved on the cylinder seal, shows that his conquest of the Ionian Greeks was as important to him as his other conquests.<sup>14</sup> Cyrus placed the area under the control of a loyal officer and turned to further campaigns in Mesopotamia. This officer brought the area to heel and allowed the Greek cities a large degree of autonomy as long as they submitted to the Great King. When Cyrus's son Darius invaded Scythia some thirty years later, the Ionian Greeks fought well for the king and protected his line of retreat over the Hellespont. The king must have been pleased to know that the Greeks were loyal warriors; he would need their sailing expertise and their ships in future wars of expansion. But there was dissension in the Greek ranks; some Greek leaders drew the conclusion that the Persians were weak and that a revolt might work.<sup>15</sup> The Persians convinced Greek leaders not to revolt, for the moment, by supporting them as rulers over the Greek cities.<sup>16</sup> Over the next decade, such leaders faced mounting pressures as they tried to maintain their positions.

Whether either side knew it or not, the worldview of the Greeks—and their political systems—differed fundamentally from that of the Persians. The central development was the rise of the independent Greek city-states, or *poleis*, and each *polis* became a self-governing community without allegiance to greater empires.<sup>17</sup> The central idea was not “liberty” in the modern, Lockean sense but rather political autonomy, or self-government, for every Greek in his own *polis*. The Greeks were growing hostile to anyone who tried to rule by nonlawful means—outside of customary and participatory norms—whether an internal tyrant or an outside power. The discourse of the Greeks—itsself a product of their autonomy and self-rule—led them to unprecedented examinations of their political life and to direct action against those whose personal power might threaten it. Of course, this discourse became an excuse to attack one's political enemies while lending itself to rhetorical manipulation, but it also limited the power of tyrants and was generally nonviolent within each *polis*. One example may suffice: Miltiades, the later hero of Marathon, had ruled

the Hellespont as a tyrant and later faced prosecution in Athens for his actions.<sup>18</sup> Such people were not inclined to become subjects of the Great King.

In short, the deeply rooted Persian ideology of expanding royal supremacy was on a collision course with these budding Greek ideals of self-governance, autonomy, and intellectual inquiry.

### The Ionian Revolt and the Onset of War

The so-called Ionian Revolt of the Greek cities on the eastern Aegean and Asia Minor against Persian rule in 499 was born of complex local intrigues, including the collaboration with the Persians by many Greeks. When certain Greek cities in Asia Minor appealed to the Athenians and the Spartans for help in the revolt, the Spartans refused to fight so far from home. But the Athenians sent about twenty ships—not the last time they would get into trouble over a half-hearted commitment. This was enough for Darius to associate them with the revolt but not enough to allow it to succeed; the burning of Sardis—the Persian capital in Asia Minor—gave him a pretext for revenge and a target for his next expedition. The revenge motive was central to the explanation for the war offered by the Greek historian Herodotus; the twenty ships were “the beginning of evils” for both sides.<sup>19</sup> Yet this explanation—a thoroughly Greek view of vengeance as a historical cause—must be held in context with the claim by every Persian king to rule the Ionian Greeks as subjects. Greek revenge did not start the conflict, for Cyrus’s expansion into Asia Minor and his demands for submission had occurred far earlier.

Darius’s suppression of the Ionian Greek revolt led to the sack of Miletus, a Greek city on the coast of Asia Minor in 494, followed by brutal mopping-up operations across the northern Aegean Sea into the Hellespont, including Lesbos, Byzantium, and Chalcedon. As Herodotus put it, “Once the towns were in their hands, the best looking boys were chosen for castration and made into eunuchs; the most beautiful girls were dragged from their homes and sent into Darius’ court, and the towns themselves, temples and all, were burnt to the

ground. In this way the Ionians were reduced for the third time to slavery—first by the Lydians, and then, twice, by the Persians.”<sup>20</sup>

Peter Green drew out the major consequence of this Persian action: “The Ionian Revolt was over, and the invasion of mainland Greece had, by that fact alone, become inevitable.”<sup>21</sup> The success of the king’s campaign did not satisfy him—it became the impetus for further action. Success strengthened his support, affirmed his magnificence, and motivated him to further revenge. Yet, as refugees fled, the campaign deeply affected Greek attitudes toward the Persians. Some submitted, either symbolically or in fact (to “Medize,” as the Greeks put it) in order to avoid the same treatment, and others hardened into intransigent opposition. Herodotus’s account of the drama by the playwright Phrynichus, *The Capture of Miletus*, based on the Persian sack of the city, captures the depth of emotions that the Persian campaigns evoked in the Athenians.<sup>22</sup> If this story is right, the Athenians were moved to tears and banned the play forever.

In 492 BC Darius ordered his first invasion of the Greek mainland, a land and sea expedition that followed the northern shore of the Aegean Sea. Whether he intended to reach the Greeks or merely to secure the northern tribes, his navy was wrecked off the coast of Mount Athos, and his army was forced to retreat by the attacks of native tribes.<sup>23</sup> To this point, the king had engaged in at least seven straight years of war against the Greek cities, following his predecessor’s initial contact nearly fifty years earlier, and he now reached into Europe. He had faced setbacks, but no overall failure. His will to continue was unabated. The Greeks, he decided, would submit to the king of truth and light.

The next attack, in 490, moved by sea directly across the southern Aegean, under the command of a Mede, Datis (see Figure 1.1). The fate of the expedition was decided at the battle of Marathon and by the Mede’s failure to penetrate the Greek mainland. The Persians went home unrequited, and after honoring their fallen heroes, the Greeks largely turned back to their own affairs. There was no general mobilization by the Greeks to prepare for another Persian invasion.

The decade after Marathon, between 490 and 480 BC, saw the Persians tied down with the death of Darius and the rise of Xerxes,

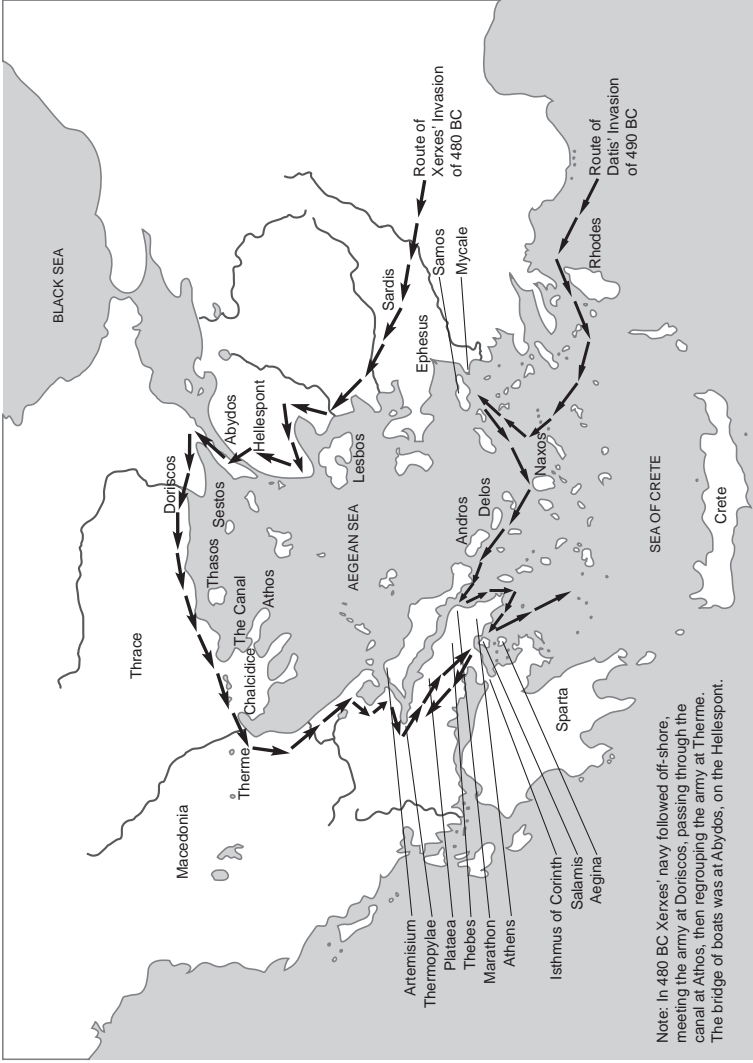


Figure. 1.1. The Greco-Persian Wars: Main Routes of Invasion

who had to suppress revolts in Egypt and Babylonia. Meanwhile, the Athenians focused on ostracizing potential tyrants at home and controlling the sea near Athens by warring against the island of Aegina. When the Athenians discovered new veins of silver in their mines in southern Attica, the politician Themistokles persuaded them to build a great navy—a fleet of triremes, state-of-the-art three-banked rowing ships—instead of distributing the silver by a public dole.<sup>24</sup> The original impetus to build the navy was probably the war with Aegina—not fear of the Persians—although the navy was destined to become the city’s bulwark against the Persians and the main military arm of the democracy.

Whether or not any Greeks anticipated the Persian threat, Xerxes took up the legacy of his father’s throne, and in 480 BC he marched across southern Europe and into Greece, accompanied offshore by a huge navy. The attentions of the mainland Greeks, under the uneasy leadership of Athens and Sparta, were now firmly fixed on the Persians, and on the reports of their massive army. The Greeks held the king at Thermopylae for three days, forced him to retreat in the sea battle of Salamis in the fall of 480, and finished off the land army at Plataea in the next year.

This much of the story is familiar, and ancient and modern commentators alike generally treat this as the end of the war, but what follows deserves greater emphasis.<sup>25</sup> This time the Greeks—in particular, the Athenians—did not stop at their own shores. Armed with their navy, a powerful offensive weapon, and emboldened by their victory at Salamis, they moved energetically into the Aegean Sea. The Athenians refused a separate peace with the Persians, which would have destroyed the alliance—a strong reason for the Spartans to support the Athenians—and they took an oath with the Spartans against the Persians and their supporters.<sup>26</sup> While the Athenians and Spartans took vengeance against those Greeks on the mainland who had collaborated with the Persians—especially the Thebans—they also confronted Aegean cities that had fallen under the Persians.<sup>27</sup> Herodotus claimed that they first sailed no further east than Delos, but the historian Diodorus of Sicily says that they responded forthwith when the island of Samos off Asia Minor asked for aid.<sup>28</sup> The first

Greek victory on Persian-controlled territory was a rout at Mycale, a promontory on the coast of Asia Minor, opposite the island of Samos, on or about August 27, 479 BC—about the same time as the battle of Plataea.

The Athenians and the Spartans then turned together into the northeastern Aegean, an area that had borne the brunt of Persian attacks in the original revolt, and set out to take control from the Persians. The Spartans soon abandoned their plans to become a sea power, and they retreated to affairs in the Peloponnesus. It was the Athenians who set their sights on total command of the Aegean. They allied with the island polities where they could, coerced them if necessary, and spent a generation driving the Persians off of Andros, Naxos, Samos, Lesbos, Rhodes, and elsewhere; they reached as far east as Cyprus, and to Phaselis on southern Asia Minor. Greek cities revolted. Persian garrisons were attacked, local Persian leaders captured or killed, and a sense of fear rose up in Persia’s supporters. Herodotus tells us that the Greek commander Xanthippus, father of the democratic leader Pericles, nailed the Persian governor to a board at Sestos, a city on the Hellespont.<sup>29</sup>

This offensive drive made it impossible for the Persians to return to Greece. The Greeks did not have a singular, thought-out strategy of taking over the Aegean Sea; there was much that was ad hoc in their actions, and much that depended upon the ambitions of particular men, acting from motives that might not align with the decisions of the *poleis*. The Spartan Pausanias and the Athenian Cimon, for instance, fell in and out of favor with their own cities as they vied for control of the sea. The Greeks were deeply enmeshed in political infighting, both within their own cities and between cities. Nor were their actions everywhere a success—the Athenian expedition to Egypt in 455 failed, and it took more than one attempt to succeed on Cyprus. But the end result of this forward projection of power was that the Athenians created a military alliance to defend the Aegean Sea and ended the king’s attempts to expand his empire to the west.<sup>30</sup>

Marathon was where Greek freedom was asserted, Thermopylae was where it was defended, and Salamis was where it was saved, but Mycale is where the Greeks were first made truly safe, for the Persians

could no longer reach Greece. The final end to the Persian threat can be found not in the Persian defeats in Greece, but at battles in areas controlled by Persia, such as the Eurymedon River on Asia Minor some fifteen years later.<sup>31</sup> Long-term peace between the Greeks and the Persians was likely not achieved until after a second battle at Cyprus, probably after 450 BC, nearly thirty years after the second Persian invasion. If Diodorus is right, the peace followed directly upon Greek successes at Cyprus and Asia Minor: “Artaxerxes the king, when he learned of the reverses suffered by his forces in the area of Cyprus . . . decided that it was to his advantage to make peace with the Greeks.”<sup>32</sup> The so-called Peace of Callias is disputed among scholars—the historian Thucydides omits it—but whether or not there was ever a formal treaty, hostilities ended after a sustained projection of power by the Greeks into the Aegean Sea and onto Asia Minor. The zeal for westward expansion never again returned to the dynasty of Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes.

Why? What ended four generations of motivated attempts by the Persians to expand?

### **The End of the Ideology of Expansion**

The reason why Persian attacks against the Greek mainland ended so abruptly is not to be found in the destruction of the Persian king’s wealth or his capacity to wage war. The Persian Empire was astronomically richer than the lands of the Greeks, who held only a fraction of its area and its resources. After the Greeks’ victory at Plataea, their commander Pausanias looked over the rich tables of the Persians, in contrast to the simple meals of the Spartans, and spoke of “the folly of the Persians, who, living in this style, came to Greece to rob us of our poverty.”<sup>33</sup> The Greeks could never have destroyed the king’s resources to the point of physically preventing his return, had he wanted to do so. Nor does the bloodshed on the Greek mainland explain this about-face. Some 200,000 Persians may have died between Thermopylae and the aftermath of Plataea—up to 40,000 drowned at Salamis alone—and few made it home from the army he



left behind.<sup>34</sup> But the king’s supplies of wealth and men were limitless; he had the resources to raise another army and a tremendous excuse for revenge. But he did not. Why?

A strategic explanation may be found in a severe overstretch by the Persians; they took their massive army further than they could support it, and the loss of their navy left them isolated on hostile soil. The king had to retreat to protect himself and his army’s path of escape. But this begs the question as to why the Persians built the army they did, why they overextended it so drastically, why the Greeks held together long enough to confront the Persian threat, and why the Persians never again seriously tried to gain control of the Aegean Sea or the Greek mainland by force.<sup>35</sup>

A more fundamental explanation turns on the nature of the despot’s rule, his motivations to form such an expedition, and the contrasting culture of the Greeks. The Persian Empire was the largest, richest, most populous empire ever seen in the West before Rome, but it was not a homogeneous entity. It was a complex arrangement of local and regional leaders, who paid tribute and swore loyalty to the Great King. Its administrative sophistication and relative stability depended on a certain willingness of the people to submit to the king. He ruled a motley combination of Cilicians, Medes, Persians, Lydians, and other tribes, many of whom were there by coercion, others because of ambition, and the rest out of a sense of subordination that began with their local rulers. Slavery was deeply engrained in these subjects; in basic outlook and in practical fact, everyone was a *bandaka* (slave) or *ardu* (chattel or property) of the king.

The idea was translated into the Greek *doulos* (slave) in a letter purportedly from Darius “to Gadaitis my slave,” one of his satraps.<sup>36</sup> Herodotus leaves us examples of the king’s method of dealing with dissent. One Pythius of Lydia, for instance, who had donated his fortune to the king, asked that one of his five sons be released from service, to remain home with the farm. The king screamed “*you* my slave, whose duty it was to come with me!” and had the son cut in half and nailed to two trees; the army marched between him.<sup>37</sup> These are Greek views of the Persians, of course, and whether they are literally accurate or not, they reflect the essence of the king’s rule as it

would have motivated the Greeks to oppose him. The basic conclusion is sound: the king's empire was held together by a sense of awe and fear in the king's subjects—awe of his great power, and fear of the consequences of disobedience. The possibility of a usurper was real—Xerxes was assassinated in 465—but the king ruled subjects who expected to look up with awestruck fear at someone above them and would have expected him to expand his rule perforce. For his part, Xerxes had to demonstrate his power and to expand it—the ideology, and the success of his rule, demanded it.

An ideology of violent expansion conditioned Xerxes' entire approach to the campaign.<sup>38</sup> His invasion of 480 BC followed a series of violent events after he took power in 486. Egypt revolted (possibly a few months before the death of Darius), and Xerxes put it down by 484. Then, in 483 or 482, the Babylonians revolted; sources mention two rebels, although it is unclear whether there was one revolt or two. Xerxes was a busy man in his first five years, holding his father's kingdom together; it is quite implausible that he spent those years obsessed with preparing to fight the Greeks.<sup>39</sup> But once he established order and asserted his power, an external war of conquest would serve a wider purpose, beyond revenge: it would defuse revolts, by giving the king's subjects—especially the nobles in his court and the regional leaders—an enemy to focus on and a means to attain prominence in his eyes. Aristotle would point out that “the tyrant is a stirrer-up of war, with the deliberate purpose of keeping the people busy and of making them constantly in need of a leader.”<sup>40</sup> The Persian expedition against Greece in 480 was the king's version of an Egyptian Great Pyramid or a Mesopotamian ziggurat: a grandiose project to absorb the energy of the empire, proclaim the king's greatness, and concretize the ideology behind the king's rule. A pyramid is an apt analogy for another reason: power emanated down from the top, bearing down on the masses buried in the foundations, who were too busy marching and working the soil to revolt.

The king's ideology also shaped the views he held of his foes. When he set off in 480 BC, Xerxes treated the Greeks as if they were Near Eastern subjects—how else could he have seen them? He demanded their submission, a policy that had brought order throughout the rest

of the kingdom. His expectations of victory and belief in his own power were so strong that his grand advance was noisy and full of braggadocio; he waged psychological warfare through a concentrated propaganda campaign. To prepare the Greeks for their inevitable surrender, he released Greek spies to return home with word of his grandeur: "Go! Tell them what you have seen here!" This was dramatized in the movie *The Three Hundred Spartans*, in which a Greek spy reports that for seven days and seven nights the army moved past him; "I ran out of numbers and still more of them came." The king released Greek grain ships captured en route, gloating that he would eat the grain later. He whipped a river that refused to obey him and built a bridge and a canal that showed off his power; when the Great King commands, water becomes as land, and land as water.<sup>41</sup> His cultivated aura of invincibility was a calculated attempt to demoralize the Greeks with the same kind of propaganda he and his predecessors had always used throughout the empire.

This propaganda campaign is the source of Herodotus's claim that the Athenians at Marathon in 490 BC were the first of the Greeks "to charge at a run, and the first who dared to look without flinching at Persian dress and the men who wore it; for until that day, no Greek could even hear the word Persian without terror."<sup>42</sup> The claim by historians that the Athenians were in fear of the Persians before 490 BC is a product of the propaganda nine years later, which Herodotus wrote into his *Histories* and became accepted as fact. Herodotus's inflated counts of the Persian forces reflect what the Greeks of the next generation thought, but the exaggeration began with what the Persian king wanted their fathers to think before the invasion.

The propaganda was broadcast in two directions, outward and inward—to the Greeks but also into the king's realm. The word went out: the king had commanded an army to gather. It had to be of outrageous size, to demonstrate the magnificence of the king's rule, to focus his subjects onto a great task and away from the temptations of internal revolts, and to foster defeat in his enemy. But the projection of magnificence was a two-edged sword. It led the king to act in ways based not on a good strategic understanding of the situation but rather toward further display of his self-created sense of magnificence.

The massive army was a physical liability, aggrandized past a point that he could control and desperately dependent upon supplies. The very size of his forces suggests that his purposes were not strategic—to end Athenian sea power in the Aegean, for instance—but rather ideological and deeply embedded in his view of his own position as King of Kings.<sup>43</sup> The expedition was also an instrument of internal policy, and, given its scale, the success or failure of Xerxes' rule became dependent upon its success. The stakes were raised; failure of the missions would be his failure and would put his position on the throne in serious jeopardy. Fail it did—and this demanded that he turn his energy toward reestablishing internal order rather than out toward external conquest. When his Phoenician and Egyptian subjects cut for home from Salamis, the possibility of political disintegration became real. The king abandoned conquest of the Greeks, and he strived to reestablish his rule in terms that did not require a new invasion of Greece.

### The Deeper Clash of Ideas

The king's purposes, and the motivations of his subjects to follow him, contrasted utterly with the purposes and motivations of the Greeks. Ignorance describes the Greek view of the Persians better than fear, for evidence suggests that neither the Greeks nor the Persians really knew much about the other. Herodotus says that only the Greek geographer Hecataeus knew the size of Persia. The motivations of each were also mysterious to the other. The Greeks interpreted the world from the perspective of an autonomous *polis* contesting with its neighbors; this might explain the curious passage related by both Herodotus and Diodorus, in which the Spartans of a past generation are said to have done a quintessentially Greek thing: they sent a single ship to warn Cyrus not to harm other Greek cities.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the Great King approached the Greeks from his own ideological framework, as if they were Near Easterners willing to be subject to a greater power; he wanted to know who these Spartans were, so he could force their submission to him.

The differences in motivations reached the average soldier. The best of the Persians hoped to achieve favor in the eyes of the Great King; the majority could hope only to avoid the pain of his wrath. Because all rewards and punishments emanated from his person, his subjects had to base their actions on pleasing him. In theoretical terms, he acted as an *efficient* cause upon them, pushing them to gain his favor under pain of punishment. But for the Greeks the motivation was less a pain to be avoided than a positive goal to be achieved; as a *final* cause each could claim pride of place in his city. Each had to be persuaded to fight under his leaders, and Greek leaders were continually adjusting their arguments to persuade their fellows. The Persians and their allies had to adjust their thoughts to the whims of the Great King; they were understandably reluctant to speak truthfully in his presence, which left the Great King in woeful ignorance of his true condition. In contrast, Greek political assemblies—whether of citizens inside a city or of leaders among many cities—were raucous, disheveled, and chaotic. They were gatherings of free men, each with an equal right to speak against his fellows, each concerned to gain something for himself and his city. There was nonsense there too, and the basest political motives—deceptions, manipulations, and self-promotion—but such chicanery was open to repudiation by others, and the most powerful among them could one day face his accusers in a jury.<sup>45</sup> The Great King, who ruled by whim, could never understand the strength in such chaos.

As Herodotus put it, the history of the men of Athens was such that “when the Athenians lived under a tyranny [Pisistratus and his sons, who controlled Athens from ca. 560 to 510 BC] they were no better at war than any of their neighbors, but after they got rid of the tyrants they were the first by far. This proves that when they were oppressed they fought badly on purpose as if they were slaving away for a master, but after they were liberated they were each eager to get the job done for his own sake.”<sup>46</sup>

The language of final causation is prominent here; a century earlier they fought badly “on purpose” (*ethelokakeon*, “played the coward deliberately”) because the “for which” they were fighting was a “for a master” (*despotēi*). Aristotle’s later dictum that the free man acts for

his own ends, and the slave for the ends of the master, includes his observation that even a slave will work better if given a certain term of service and a goal to be achieved. Herodotus continues: once the Athenians deposed the tyrants, “each man himself [*autos hekastos*] was motivated [*proethumeeto*]” to do the job “for his own sake [*heōutōi*],” as the slave of no one. It was that goal to be attained by his own autonomous action—rather than punishment to be avoided—that distinguished the Greek citizen from the Persian subject. It also distinguished their respective leaders: the Persian king operated by *diktat* and fear; the Greek political actor by public persuasion and claims to personal merit. Every Greek leader had once stood in a battle line or pulled an oar, and each could face a vote of ostracism. Xerxes knew no such things.

Herodotus reveals this crucial difference in two speeches, as the Persians attempted to control the Ionian revolt after 499.<sup>47</sup> The Persian commanders knew they had to regain power over Miletus lest they “be punished by Darius for their failure.” So, the Persians summoned certain former Greek leaders (Herodotus calls them “tyrants”) who had been pushed out from their cities during the revolt. The Persian commanders said, “Men of Ionia, now it is time to show yourselves true servants of the king. Each of you must do his best to detach his own countrymen from the Ionian alliance.” The rewards for loyalty would be entirely negative; the Persians promise that their cities will not be burned and they will not be sold as slaves. In contrast, when the Ionian Greeks assembled to plan their response to the Persian force that had just arrived at Miletus, a Greek commander said, “Fellow Ionians, our fate balances on a razor’s edge between being free men or slaves.” The Greek alliance did not hold, and the Persians did retake Miletus, along with Caria, Chios, Lesbos, and other city-states.<sup>48</sup> But Herodotus has made the essential terms of the issue explicit.

According to Herodotus, the misunderstanding continued into Xerxes’ invasion. As the king prepared to march in 480, two Spartans met up with a Persian commander on the coast of Asia. The commander wondered why the Greeks did not seek the king’s friendship and become the masters of all the Greeks under him—a perfect state-

ment of a Persian satrap’s position over subjects of the king. The Spartans famously offered an answer that was completely beyond the ability of the Persian to understand: “The advice you give does not spring from a full knowledge of the situation. You know one half of what is involved, but not the other half. You understand well enough what slavery is, but freedom you have never experienced, so you do not know if it tastes bitter or sweet. If you ever did come to experience it, you would advise us to fight for it not with spears only, but with axes too.”<sup>49</sup>

They are so few, the king might have thought while approaching Thermopylae in 480; how can they oppose me, with the greatest army in the world? They have no single king, how can they act in common? This Greek view of the king’s thoughts is probably right in essence; given his Near Eastern outlook, the king could not fathom free men, living under laws and without fear of a king, willing to defend their homes against all odds, each for his own sake. Given such misunderstandings—which amount to profound disagreement about the moral nature of man as an autonomous being—he could never develop a strategy to overcome their intransigence.

The contrast between King Xerxes and Themistokles, the Athenian commander at Salamis in 480, exemplifies the differences between the Persian and the Greek views. One might picture Xerxes, sitting on his great throne, looking down upon subjects making entreaties in prostration, versus Themistokles, hands calloused from his past efforts, walking among the Greeks, hearing their abuses and holding them to their agreements. Xerxes had never had to plead for the agreement of his highest general, let alone stand with farmers in an assembly. He was the most powerful by dint of something other than merit; there was no process by which the best could rise among the Persians, and no checks against his malfeasance except the last resort of assassination. In contrast, Themistokles, a Greek politician, orator, commander, and perhaps the first military strategist in a truly political context, had stood in the ranks at Marathon and earned his position through competence. He had to weave the disparate parts of a fractious physical and political landscape—a crowd of bickering voices from autonomous cities with conflicting aims, animosities, and

whims—into a whole cloth capable of unity long enough to repel the enemy. And he had to do it under threat of prosecution or a vote of exile, while his city, family, and property were under attack.

The chasm between Themistokles and the king implies deep—even metaphysical—differences in their views of reality. For the king, reality bent to his whim: at his command land becomes as water in the form of a canal, and water becomes as land when a bridge appears. When his bridge was wrecked, the king whipped the river, which must obey like every other subject. The king, sitting on his throne overlooking the naval carnage at Salamis, threw a handful of stones into the water, commanding a land bridge to an island. For the king's subjects, his commands might have come from a more-than-human figure that melded in their minds with the deity, and whose commands can order reality in some incomprehensible way. For the Greeks, any such pretensions by Themistokles would have constituted *hubris*, an impious crime. The Persian king was expected to revel in his wealth; it was a demonstration of his power, which gathered at his whim. But Themistokles had to avoid even the appearance of impropriety; the story of his walking along the shore and disdaining to pick up a piece of gold over concern for a bribery charge captures the essence of his position.<sup>50</sup> The Greek world was not commanded by the voice of any man. Even the Delphic Oracle, an alleged portal to the divine, came to be seen as a mouthpiece for special interests, including Persian propaganda (“fly you fools!” said the Pythian priestess), and it declined in influence after the Persian defeat.

The failure of the Persians to grasp the self-motivated nature of the Greeks, and their equation of Greek disunity with political weakness, left them open to deceptions. According to Herodotus, following the Greek debate about the upcoming sea battle at Salamis, Themistokles deceived the Persians—and put the Greeks into a position of advantage that neither side could escape—by sending a fraudulent spy to play on the king's expectation of a traitor.<sup>51</sup> There was history for this, too; ten years earlier, a former Athenian leader (Hippias) had guided the Persian expedition to Marathon; during the present expedition, a traitor (Ephialtes) had betrayed the Spartans at Thermopylae, and an



exiled Spartan king (Demaratus) was with Xerxes' own entourage.<sup>52</sup> The Persians expected a traitor and were disarmed against the deception. They sailed into the trap, and the sea battle became a rout.<sup>53</sup>

The next year, the Persian commander Mardonius sent an offer of a separate peace to the Athenians, to divide them from the Spartans. The Athenians responded: “We know as well as you do that the Persian strength is many times greater than our own; that, at least, is a fact which you need not have troubled to rub in. Nevertheless, such is our love of freedom, that we will defend ourselves in whatever way we can. As for making terms with Persia, it is useless to try and persuade us; for we shall never consent. . . . Never come to us again with a proposal like this.”<sup>54</sup>

After the Greeks had driven across the Aegean Sea, and charged the Persian positions at Mycale, their commander Leotychides yelled out, trying to cut through the dust, smoke, and mayhem to get his words to his men: “Men of Ionia, listen, if you can hear me, to what I say. The Persians in any case won't understand a word of it. When the battle begins, let each man of you first remember *Freedom*, and secondly our password, *Hera*. Anyone who can't hear me should be told what I say by those who can.”<sup>55</sup>

More is at stake here than a password and the fog of war; for Persian subjects had no capacity to grasp the freedom of Greek citizens or to match their energy. Decades later, after the Athenians and their allies had brought the war to the mainland of Asia Minor, at the Eurymedon River and elsewhere, the Athenian commander Cimon devised a stratagem to deceive and to panic the Persian land army. After taking the cities of Eion and Scyros, and others at Caria and Lycia, and after a victory in a sea battle off Cyprus, he disguised his own troops in Persian headdress and moved in toward his confused enemy: “In a word, such consternation as well as bewilderment prevailed among the Persians that most of them did not even know who was attacking them. For they had no idea that the Greeks had come against them in force, being persuaded that they had no land army at all . . . thinking that the attack of the enemy was coming from the mainland, they fled to their ships, thinking that they were in friendly

hands. And since it was a dark night without a moon, their bewilderment was increased all the more and not a man was able to discern the true state of affairs.”<sup>56</sup>

The bewilderment of the Persian forces about who was attacking them went far deeper than the mysteries of a moonless night, an outlandish disguise, and a spear thrown out of the dark. The tactics of Leotychides and Cimon were sound; neither the despot nor his officers could fathom the motivations held by the Greeks. Nor could they counter the sophistication and flexibility of the Greeks—in the unorthodox battle line at Marathon, the stand at Thermopylae, the deception at Salamis, and the disguises at the Eurymedon River—which flowed from independent thought and a sense of self-motivated action. As the Greeks projected their energy into the Aegean Sea, the Persians were pushed on the defensive, and the support of their allies in the area collapsed. The Greeks surged outward and filled the vacuum; the Persian king’s coastal forces were compelled to defend their positions. The issue was either-or: either the Greek passion for freedom had to be subordinated to the rule of the Great King, or the Great King’s desire for dominance had to be put in its proper place.

Xerxes began with the inherited passion for conquest that had motivated three generations of predecessors. But when his army and navy were mutilated by the Greeks and he saw his men sink beneath the waves, he confronted serious personal defeat for the first time. As his Great Pyramid collapsed, the effect on the king was immediate; he set off posthaste to secure his own retreat. His defeat was open and public, and despite his likely attempts to make it appear a victory, he knew that this could be fatal to the dynasty. His position had demanded that he demonstrate his splendor—but at the moment of defeat he reached the point of greatest danger. His task now was to reestablish his position inside his own territory—and this required a permanent change in policy. The legitimacy of his throne had to be disengaged from the conquest of the Greeks.

It may be no coincidence that Xerxes now first mentions the god Arta along with Ahura Mazda, a return to polytheism of a pre-Zoroastrian variety.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps he scrambled to legitimate his position on a new divine basis, with a series of far-reaching decisions about the

future of his rule. Such changes would have been consistent with structural changes to the dynasty’s foreign policy; we hear no more of military expeditions by Xerxes (perhaps he “retired to his harem” after the defeat), and after his murder in 465 BC, the new king Artaxerxes had no stomach to confront the Greeks. Facing a siege near Cyprus, Artaxerxes sued for peace. Whether this indicates a “decline” in the Persian court may be debated, but the fire behind four generations of Persian expansion against the West was gone, never to return.<sup>58</sup> The Persians became one player among many in the Aegean Sea, an area they could not control with impunity.

It is impossible to be too specific about the nature of the changes at the center of the Persian court, but we may infer a direct relationship between the Great King’s motivations, his support among the nobility, his ability to command the population into great ventures, and the fact of his defeat. As long as hope smoldered, the king kept alive his vision of universal rule, and he focused the energy of his subjects onto an outrageously huge expedition. But the totality of his failure—visible for all to see—neutralized the desire for revenge in his mind by making it impossible. He and his officers had to know that another attempt would fail, and that he could not survive it as king. The demonstration of Greek superiority on the battlefield had reached deeply into the center of the king’s power. The ideology of expansion collapsed in the wake of concrete failure, and the Achaemenid Dynasty was forced to reestablish itself in terms that recognized the independent existence of the Greeks. With no more promises of great expeditions in the West, there could be no more danger from the defeat those expeditions were certain to bring, to any king foolish enough to try.

**Chronology: The Greco-Persian Wars: 547–446 BC**

- 612 BC Sack of Nineveh by Babylonians and Medes ends the Assyrian Empire
  - Babylonians control Mesopotamia (middle and southern Iraq)
  - Medes control northern Iraq and Anatolia (Turkey)
  - Minor kingdom of Lydia controls Western Anatolia
- 559–530 Rise of Cyrus I “The Great” and the Persians
  - 550 Cyrus defeats the Medes
  - 547 Cyrus defeats Croesus of Lydia. Persians in contact with Greeks
- 546–545 Revolt of the Lydians put down by Cyrus’s commander
  - 539 Cyrus captures Babylon
- 530–522 Cambyses rules Persia
  - 525 Cambyses conquers Egypt
  - 522 Revolt of the Medes
- 521–486 Darius I rules Persia
  - 520 Persian invasion of the Scythians (Black Sea area)
  - 518 Ionian Greeks subjugated
  - 512 Invasion of Thrace (northern Aegean Sea area)
  - 499 Revolt of the Ionian Greeks
  - 494 Miletus subjugated; sea battle of Lade (Ionian Greeks defeated)
  - 492 Land and sea invasion of northern Aegean, wrecked in a storm
  - 491 Darius demands the submission of the Greeks
  - 490 First Persian invasion of Greece: Battle of Marathon
- 486–465 Xerxes rules Persia
- 488–486 Ostracisms in Athens
- 486–484 Egyptian revolt against Persia
  - 483 Babylonian revolt against Persia
- 483/2 Athens builds navy
  - 481 Xerxes prepares invasion; demands Greek submission; Greek League formed
- 480 Second Persian Invasion: Battles of Thermopylae, Artemisium
  - Battle of Himera (Sicily)
  - September: First sack of Athens
  - Naval battle of Salamis
- 479 Athens refuses separate peace
  - June: Second sack of Athens
  - Battle of Plataea destroys Persian army in Greece
  - Battle of Mycale; Persians retreat to Sardis
  - Athenian siege of Sestos; Andros, Carystos, Paros taken by Athens

- 478/7 Athens fortified under Themistokles; builds walls, harbor  
Spartans send Pausanias to liberate Greek cities. First battle at  
Cyprus
- 476–463 Cimon commands Athenians in Aegean Sea
- 474 Themistokles ostracized
- 470 Athens sends Cimon to liberate Asian coastal cities  
Eion, Scyros; cities in Caria and Lycia taken
- 465–425 Artaxerxes I rules Persia
- 462 Failed Athenian expedition to Egypt
- 450 Cimon battles in Cyprus; takes Citium and Marium by siege
- c. 446 Peace of Callias: Artaxerxes sues for peace