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# Corinth as a Catalyst Before and During the Peloponnesian War

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Corinth as a Catalyst Before and During the Peloponnesian War

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### Corinth as a Catalyst Before and During the Peloponnesian War

The spring of 432 BCE in Greece was tumultuous: Athens had just quashed a Potidaean<sup>1</sup> revolt, angering many Corinthians whom considered the Potidaeans close. The Corinthians quickly called a meeting of the Peloponnesian League, consisting of Sparta and its neighboring city-states, to ensure that they offered some sort of response for such atrocities. Many city-states expressed grievances over the latest Athenian aggressions. However, the Corinthians were far more hostile towards the chair of the League, Sparta. Firstly, the Corinthians lambasted Spartan lawmakers for their inactivity regarding the Athenian rise to power and prominence—the establishment of its empire. The Corinthian delegation then threatened that it would find another ally if Sparta continued its laissez-faire approach to foreign policy. The accusation coupled with the threat was enough to make Sparta anxious. Corinth had been a faithful ally for Sparta during the Spartan helot revolts, and the Spartans would not like to lose the Gulf of Corinth to Athens (Tritle 26-27). The Athenians denied the Peloponnesian allegations; furthermore, they blatantly accused the Spartans of withdrawing from diplomatic ties: “That empire that we [Athens] acquired not by violence but because you were unwilling to prosecute to its conclusion the war against the barbarian” (Thucydides 1.74). The two Spartan speakers that followed, and were the last to speak at this meeting, were mixed in their opinions: Eurypontid, the Spartan king, cautioned against war whereas Sthenelaidas, a Spartan general, argued that the Athenians must be punished. After Sthenelaidas’ terse statement that Athens was now in the wrong, the Spartans decided to go to war (Tritle 27). They decided to start the war that would ultimately end Greek pre-eminence. The Corinthians catalyzed the Spartan decision to go to war

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<sup>1</sup> Potidaea is a city much to the north of Peloponnese and Attica, south of Olynthos

through their repeated attempts to invoke a Spartan declaration of war, and their rash provocations of Athenian diplomats.

Corinthian actions were instrumental in bringing Sparta into the Peloponnesian War—a war Sparta did not want to start. Thucydides acknowledges that Athens did play a large role in bringing Sparta into war: “The real cause, however, I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable” (Thucydides 1.23.5). Yet it was Corinth’s actions that both amplified the severity of Athenian aggressions and magnified the peril in Sparta proper. Corinthian actions demonstrated the following: that they knew of, and took advantage of, overzealous Athenian actions, that they cunningly maneuvered Sparta into thinking these actions were paramount to a direct threat, that they knew of, and exploited, internal Spartan conflicts, and that they used external pressure to bring Sparta to war. These elements were tantamount to the Corinthian plan for dragging Sparta to war.

Athenian aggression started shortly after the end of the Persian War; this was largely the result of the power vacuum created from the exit of two major powers in Greece. Nevertheless, after the Persian War, the victor was obvious: the Greek city-states had prevailed over the impotent Persian defense. The Athenians had managed to march into Ionia in 479 BCE—this is after losing the city of Athens earlier due to a Persian invasion—and retake many islands in the Aegean Sea. The Persians, one of the two aforementioned powers, were now absent in Greek foreign policy; internal struggles would come to dominate the next eighty years. These struggles were largely the result of the wildly diverging Athenian and Spartan foreign policy paths. The Spartans, and many other city-states along with them, continued to exist in anachronism with a more isolationist stance. The Athenians, however, remained diplomatically active: “With the siege of Sestos, a more decisive divergence began to appear between Athenian and Peloponnesian aspirations; it became more pronounced...with offensive operations.” (Sealey 228). Athens

was right for the most part; the Spartans, the second of the two powers, did sidestep most diplomatic issues until about 432 BCE, when they abruptly declared war. Significant exceptions did exist—the helot revolts, for one—but Sparta remained extraordinarily isolated. Thus, Sparta did leave herself open to the criticisms that Corinth, and Athens, would later direct.

Hence, Athens had free reign to assert diplomatic supremacy. After the apparent Spartan withdrawal from most diplomatic issues in the spring of 479 BCE, Athens started forming the Delian League (Sealey 227). The Delian League, for the most part, consisted of Athens and the city-states—soon-to-be protectorates—around Athens, including the newly-reclaimed islands. The Ionians were not altogether content under their new Athenian leadership, but they felt the need to willingly comply with Athens before they were compelled into submission. However, Athens soon took many actions, such as the movement of the League's treasury from Delos to Athens, that made it clear the alliance was no longer a "League" so much as an "Empire." Contributions from the other city-states were not payments to the Delian League; rather, they were tribute to the Athenian Empire (Chambers 61). Once the other city-states began to realize their newfound subordinate position in the Athenian Empire, a few began to revolt. The two most prominent riots, in Naxos and Thassos, were quickly quelled by Athenian authorities. The city-states of the Delian League were now firmly in Athenian hands. Athenian empire-building was just as Thucydides observed.

Corinth, meanwhile, neither withdrew from foreign policy altogether nor asserted its authority to the extent that Athens did. When Athens did start to form its sphere of influence around Attica, Corinth tried to shield itself from Athens' outward influence by placing some "buffer" states between Athens and Corinth—namely, Megara. The city-state of Megara was on Attica proper, but it had significant influence on the Gulf of Corinth with its expansive trade. The timing of the Corinthians' campaign to conquer Megara was impeccable. Both major city-states were distracted by other affairs, the Spartan helot revolt and the Athenian Empire revolts, and Corinth thought she could act without interference. Furthermore, the Spartans

had little interest or clout to rein the Corinthians in at this point. Regardless, the Megarans appealed to the Athenians whom then immediately agreed to defend the Megaran city-state. They built the “long walls” to connect Megara to the port of Nisaea in Athens. With this decisive action, the Corinthians were dissuaded from building their own sphere of influence; however, this action had also created bitter animosity between the two polities.

In 435 BCE, twenty-five years after their failed bid to take Megara, the Corinthians had to deal with insubordination within their own empire. Their colony of Epidamnus<sup>2</sup> had an ongoing civil war in which the democrats were winning with the support of Corinth. The former ruling oligarchs had been exiled, yet they had the support of Corcyra, another protectorate of Corinth. The Corcyrans also had a significant navy that was considered the third strongest in all of Greece behind Corinth and Athens; nevertheless, the Corinthians could overpower them handily. After the Corcyrans expressed their support of Epidamnus’ oligarchs, the Corinthians sent warships to neutralize the rowdy Corcyrans; in a drastic turn of events, the Corinthians lost. The Corcyrans, rightly fearing a larger Corinthian force afterwards, appealed to Athens for help.

Both of the city-states sent delegations to Athens to argue their case. The Corcyrans largely played on the Athenian fear of Corinth’s potent navy while the Corinthians reminded the Athenians that Corinth has respected her prior internal struggles<sup>3</sup> and that the Athenians should stay out of this conflict due to such previous obligations. However, the Athenians side with Corcyra, but not without limitations, as pointed out by Will Chittick and Annette Freyberg-Inan:

Athens here proves to be partly constrained in her actions by the honour motive, as represented by her treaty obligations and the arguments of Corinth. Instead of being able

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<sup>2</sup> Epidamnus is located along the Adriatic Sea to the north of both Corcyra (on Corfu) and Corinth

<sup>3</sup> The Naxos and Thassos revolts

to take full advantage of the prospect of a complete alliance, they agree only to a defensive alliance with Corcyra...The Athenians feel that they cannot afford to watch Corcyra lose its navy without risking too much of their own power position. (78)

Corinth now must withdraw or risk losing most of its navy; this greatly enraged the Corinthians and bred bitter animosity between them and the Athenians. Nevertheless, the Athenians continued subverting other colonies, such as Potidaea. With the ruthless hostilities Athens was pursuing, Corinth hastily called a meeting of the Peloponnesian League in 432 BCE.

As we have seen, the debate that ensued made the Corinthian motives quite clear. Corinth needed to make Athenian actions seem unforgivable, and hence bring Sparta to war so that Corinth could regain its sphere of influence. Although Corinth did not view Athens as a direct threat, Corinth had both great animosity toward them as well as significant motives to prevent the Athenians from procuring more influence: "even the Corinthians had not viewed the very existence of the Athenian empire as tantamount to a direct threat to their survival. To be sure, they were worried by the power of Athens..." (Chittick 86). The Corinthians had lost much of their lands and influence to the encroaching Athenian sphere-of-influence; this severely hurt their oligarchic merchant class that relied on an extensive trade network—and hence an extensive Corinthian sphere—to generate income and prosperity. These oligarchs did nearly everything in their power to persuade Sparta to go to war. They argued that Athens was aggressive, that Sparta was passive, that Sparta was going to be overrun, and that Athens was a severe military threat. The Corinthians blatantly pushed for war.

To reach this end, the Corinthians used an ample amount of fear—that Athens was potent militarily. Coupled with the Corinthian threat to leave the alliance, the oligarchs dragged the Spartans out of their isolationism. They used the one clear motive that could incite the steely Spartan generals to action:

"Experience had shown that the only thing that could move Sparta to war was *fear* and it was on this emotion that the Corinthians had played at the beginning of the war." (Kagan 302). Fear dominated the Corinthian argument to persuade the Spartans to war; even so, the Spartans were still noticeably reluctant to go. They made marginal attempts at arbitration,<sup>4</sup> though these efforts were in vain. The Spartans made additional attempts to neutralize the impending conflict: they sent three embassies to the Athenians, but Pericles, the primary Athenian ruler, rejected every embassy. The first embassy proposed that Athens remove its curse—Pericles—but the Athens replied with an equally witty request. The second embassy requested that Athens withdraw from Potidaea. The final embassy asked Athens to repeal the Megarian Decree<sup>5</sup>. None of these embassies came to fruition; the Spartans were left with few options other than to declare war (Thucydides).

These actions demonstrated that Sparta was desperately trying to avoid war: Sparta "hoped that the Athenians would give them a way out of an impasse created by Athenian aggressions and Corinthian hostilities" (Tritle 33). However, Sparta could not circumvent Corinth's blind hatred of Athens. Corinth relentlessly pulled Sparta into a war that they did not want to enter; Athenian intervention in Northwestern Greece interrupted an ongoing struggle with Corcyra that had been occurring since the fifth century (Tannenbaum 569). The peace party in Sparta, which had been in control since the end of the Persian War, would not support a Corinthian bid for war without compelling evidence, and the Corinthian words coupled with Corinthian propaganda overexaggerated the Athenian threat to the point where the pressure became insurmountable. Sparta needed to declare war or risk losing everything because of Corinth's diplomatic gambit.

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<sup>4</sup> Arbitration was the primary means by which disputes between Greek city-states were resolved (other than war). These involved one city-state mediating the argument between the two parties, and objectively ending the argument by deciding in favor of one side. However, in this case, there was no non-aligned, unbiased city-state large enough to handle an arbitration between Sparta and Athens.

<sup>5</sup> The Megarian Decree limited Megara from utilizing the Athenian port, greatly constraining their trade practices.



After the First Peloponnesian War, the positions before the war were simply exacerbated. Athens was more powerful, Sparta was more isolated, and Corinth was more distraught. Donald Kagan observes the following about Corinth's decrepit condition:

In 421 the Archidamian War had been in progress for ten years, with disastrous results for Corinth. Not only had she failed to check Athenian advances and to recover her fading prestige, but she had also suffered severe additional losses. The Athenian occupation of Aegina and Potidea cut off her trade with the east, small as it was. Athenian victories in the west and north, Phormio's naval triumph off Naupactus and the democratic success in Corcyra, completely destroyed Corinthian trade with the west. The city which leaned heavily on commerce for its power and prosperity was shut off from all her areas of trade. The conclusion of the Peace of Nicias between Sparta and Athens left Corinth with none of her war aims accomplished and, indeed, far worse off than before. (Kagan 292)

Corinth could not acquiesce to a lesser position after the war; it would be humiliating and destroy any honor the city-state had left. Hence, it was necessary for the merchants—not the land-owning aristocrats whose farms had mostly been saved from the fighting—to restore their trade patterns and to re-assert Corinthian influence over the Gulf. The first obstacle that came to the oligarchs' ambitions was that of the aristocrats. They had lost practically nothing during the Peloponnesian War and would much rather remain in a cozy relationship with Sparta than try something rash. Unfortunately for the oligarchs, much of the population agreed with the aristocrats.

The only foreseeable means that could've persuade the aristocrats to go to war would be if the Spartans wanted to go to war—the aristocratic support of Sparta was unequivocal. Hence, Corinth needed to create an external force to push Sparta into war; these external military operations, added to intermittent internal pressures, were the primary means to get Sparta to re-open war. The oligarchs attempted to

maneuver the Spartans into war by creating a “third force” that would go to war against Athens. Seeing the force already facing Athens, the Corinthians assumed that Sparta would immediately join the third force and rally against Athens. This “third force” was going to be the Boetians, the Megarians, and the Corinthians, all headed by the Argives. The Corinthians sent a delegation to the Spartan soils to complete their plan: “From the beginning, she intended to force Sparta to reopen hostilities; the creation of a third force was only a gambit to achieve her ends” (Kagan 298). Once at Sparta, the Corinthians argued that going to war with Athens would not break the Peace of Nicias, which mandated the peace of signatories, including Sparta. Their rationale was somewhat dubious, arguing that divine intention mandated a second war (Thucydides V.30.2). The Spartans rebuked this conjecture and maintained the peace. This led the Corinthians to support directly the war party in Sparta, and the oligarchs then attempted to create an imminent threat to bring the Spartans back to war—an Argos-Athens alliance. Through a series of convoluted actions<sup>6</sup>, Argos’ democratic government eventually aligned with Athens thereby fulfilling Corinth’s wishes. The Spartans were now ready to go back to war; all it would take would be the right spark which, in this case, happened to be Athens’ expedition to Sicily.

The Corinthians masterfully maneuvered the Spartans into a position where they would have to go to war, yet again. After the failure to garner any traction after the first war, the Corinthians set themselves to have another go by bringing Sparta back into the war. They first tried to persuade Sparta with new allies—Argos, Boetia, and Megara—but later turned to what worked previously: *fear*. That emotion was repeatedly proven the Corinthian’s weapon of choice when it came to persuading Sparta. Regardless, it was the Corinthians who orchestrated the Spartan entrance and re-entrance into the Peloponnesian War; they took advantage of the Athenian aggressions and twisted these aggressive actions into inexcusable offenses that

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<sup>6</sup> The Spartans marched on Argos given its teetering internal politics. A coup d’état replaced the democratic government with an oligarchic government and peace resumed with Sparta. The oligarchs were afterwards overthrown by the democrats who resumed forming an alliance with Athens.

warranted war. The Corinthians both took advantage of domestic Spartan politics and external military operations to create an environment through which Sparta would declare war.

The Corinthian foreign policy was largely conniving. It's reminiscent of the United States-Israeli diplomatic relations in that the smaller, less powerful country is manipulating the larger country to its advantage. Israel has managed to coax the United States into providing nearly indefinite aid and support despite the objective questionability of this support. Furthermore, many of the actual events that transpired during the Peloponnesian War are eerily akin to the actions preceding both World Wars; Tannenbaum points out that the smaller, less influential country—Austria-Hungary—managed to maneuver the larger country into a slightly undesirable war through a series of pacts and obligations that irrevocably tied the larger country to the smaller one (533). These types of small manipulative states must have their power mitigated. They can force larger states in more precarious or powerful positions into situations that have large repercussions for the rest of the surrounding area. Corinth accomplished this feat with Sparta.

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