

By GILBERT MURRAY

## LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Thucydides excuses the possible dullness of his history on the ground that he means it not for a passing entertainment but for a 'permanent possession' which may be of practical use in future times when some similar situation occurs again. We tend to smile at the idea. We all know that history never repeats itself. But surely we know also that though exactly the same situation or problem never recurs, yet elements are constantly recurring which, in different contexts, with all sorts of different accompaniments, are essentially the same; and though, obviously, the old parallel never provides an answer to the new problem, it may well help to its understanding. The differences between any problem of ours and those of Thucydides are of course enormous. Our civilisation, immense in scale, dazzling in its scientific inventions and its power over matter, is extremely different from the small-scale city state of fifth-century Athens with no electricity, no gas, no steam, no buttons, no drainage even, and a standard of food and comfort which would produce instantaneous strikes in any Western community. Yet the essential situation which Thucydides had to face was the overthrow of a very high and peculiar

### *Lessons from History*

civilisation by a long and all-absorbing war, a war to which men could find no end, from which they could never keep aloof, and under whose influence they found themselves sinking to standards of barbarism which filled them with horror. We in modern Europe share the experience of that sort of war; and we share perhaps more fully than any age between that time and our own the special quality of that civilisation. How can we find words to describe it? It was a free civilisation, proud of its freedom of life and thought, its advance in knowledge, art, literature; with flourishing commerce, with wide command of the sea, with an acknowledged superiority over 'barbaric' or non-Greek communities and over some that were Greek; and open, evidently, to the kind of criticism that is always provoked by a combination of commercial wealth and high culture, of democracy and empire. Thucydides has left us a wonderful picture of Athens, not of course exactly as she was but as she conceived herself to be or as she was in the eyes of those who loved her. It is not quite as we now see her; to us, living two thousand years afterwards, Athens is chiefly remarkable for its ever-living achievements in art, philosophy, and poetry; but Thucydides hardly mentions such things, though in one famous half-sentence, 'We seek beauty without luxury', he doubtless implies them. He writes not as a critic of art or poetry; and his philosophy is only the philosophy of a statesman.

It was a democratic society, but not depressively *égalitaire*. 'We are called a democracy', he says, 'because the administration is in the hands of the many, not of the few.' But they did not treat all men as equal. 'The law secures equal justice to all men; but we give special honour and admiration to the man who has special qualities or does special public service to the community.' Then it was a tolerant society; 'we are not suspicious or cold to a neighbour because he has tastes different from ours.' But we must not suppose they had loose or disorderly standards. 'In our public duties we have a spirit of reverence; we revere and obey the Laws, especially those which are meant for the protection of the oppressed, and most of all those which are nowhere written but which it is dishonour to break.' They had no iron curtain. 'Our city is thrown open to the world, and we never expel a foreigner to prevent him seeing or learning whatever he wants.'

They lived simply, though, as we noticed before, no one could say they did not care for beauty. 'Poverty is no bar to a man and no disgrace; the true disgrace lies in not working hard so as to avoid it.' They looked on political life as a public duty. 'We take an interest in public

affairs, and blame any man who does not think and care about his City's welfare.' In foreign policy their principles were of the sort one heard from President Wilson or the advanced Liberals of the nineteenth century. 'We seek to help our neighbours and so earn their good will; not from a calculation of interest but in the frank and fearless spirit that freedom produces.' In summing up he says that Athens is a school of civilisation to all Hellas. 'Think what she has the power to be', he says, 'and become her lovers. And remember that the secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom is courage.'

I do not pretend that this account was objectively true, or that it does not leave out some dark patches. We must remember it was written by a 'lover', and written when the beloved object lay cast down in the dust. Remember also that this love is specially conjured up by the thought not so much of the actual state of Athens but of her *dynamis*, of what she might be and had the power to be. But except for this emotional intensity, it is very much the language that we should use about our own liberal civilisation—that free, humane, progressive, highly cultured civilisation in which Europe—or at least Western Europe—has for some centuries led the world. It is not unlike the language we actually used when fighting to save our civilisation against forces which denied freedom, denied culture, and put force in the place of justice. It is not stronger, I think, than the language we should use, those of us who were left, if at the end of a third world war we tried to describe to our children a Europe which was by then only a half-remembered dream of forgotten greatness.

What I would specially emphasise about Thucydides' picture is not his general patriotic admiration for his country but the sort of thing for which he admires it. It is not at all like the picture that is drawn by the Augustan poets of contemporary Rome, or by Bossuet of a truly Catholic Europe, free from all heresy, or by the Marxists of their classless communist millennium. It is essentially the picture of a liberal civilisation such as perhaps after the fall of Athens never came into existence again until the nineteenth century after Christ. The special values that Thucydides dwells upon are freedom, toleration, democracy, equality before the law, and simplicity of life combined, of course, with certain quite different qualities without which no civilisation can be really high, a ready admiration for all special excellence, a spirit of reverence for the laws, and particularly those whose only sanction is man's sense of honour. We might add a pursuit of beauty and 'Sophia' through all the diverse avenues of approach. It is a liberal civilisation which he describes as being destroyed

by war; not indeed by war in itself; for probably Thucydides thought of war as one of the normal vicissitudes of public duty, but by a war which lasted too long, which could not be stopped, which spread from state to state through the whole Hellenic world, and, above all, which became in almost every community a savage civil war of mob against oligarchs. There were, of course, reasonable groups or parties. Thucydides gives two or three speeches to show their point of view: Archidamus in Sparta, Diodotus in Athens; but people were not in the mood for moderation and, as Thucydides puts it, the 'more understanding' were not listened to. There was a constant pressure for peace. It was singularly bold and outspoken; Aristophanes was not by any means alone, but how was it possible to have peace except by giving way to the enemy? And that would never do. There was a brief peace treaty in 423, after the first nine years; a comprehensive fifty years' peace treaty negotiated in 421; but the embers kept smouldering and breaking out again, till again it was war in full blast between the two great combatants, and civil strife or the fear of it everywhere.

Thucydides, as Cornford has explained, had no technical terms to his hand, either in philosophy or politics. He has to invent his language as he goes. War itself, he explains, takes away that margin of ease and safety which enables men to indulge their highest ideals and nobler motives. War is a 'violent teacher'. It leaves a man no choice. Kill or be killed. Outwit or be outwitted. Inevitably men try to outdo one another in the '*atopia*', 'unguessableness', of their plans and, when once the passion of revenge is aroused, in 'the atrocity of their revenges'. Revenge becomes dearer than self-preservation. Then comes a curious point, which reminds us of the special terminology with which the Marxists bewilder the catechumen. Language, he notices, becomes changed. A word has quite a different meaning when used in the war psychology. All these normal effects of war are of course intensified when it lasts too long, when it is too widespread. Then the passions of war become habits which you cannot shake off. But all is far worse when the open war is complicated by an internal war between political gangs and social classes inside each city. New motives come into play. Resentment for past oppression; passion for a rich neighbour's goods; jealousy between equals, and, above all, the dread of the disguised enemy in the same street; hence hatred between neighbours, eternal suspicion, eagerness to detect, to betray. There is no trust anywhere. The enemy is always disguised, always seeking to deceive. 'There is no seal of good faith except partnership in crime;

for your fellow criminal dare not betray you. The qualities that in normal societies are most valued, the simplicity and straightforwardness which form so large an element in a noble nature, are laughed to scorn and disappear.'

A thought that comes repeatedly in this terrible analysis is the surprise of man at his own possibilities. We men, we civilised Greeks, did not know we could do these things. Words like '*atopia*', 'unguessableness', tend to recur. That again is a symptom that seems to apply exactly to our own experience in the present age. We did not guess that this state of affairs was likely. We in England, and I think one may say 'we in the civilised world', were shocked by the war itself. We did really think we had outgrown such a thing as war between civilised Christian nations. We felt, with Sir Edward Grey, that 'the lamps had gone out, and would not be lighted again in our lifetime'. When the extreme severities of the German army in Belgium became known, Western opinion was incredulous of such 'atrocities'. In the second war standards had changed; the word 'atrocious' was reserved for things that were utterly unknown in the first. The 'violent teacher' with his 'compulsions' forced nations in self-preservation to use methods no one would have thought admissible or even possible before 1914; not to speak of the cruelties of Nazis and Stalinists, one need only think of the British policy of bombing whole centres of industry or the American use of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki.

In Greece, Thucydides says, the war led to 'every kind of wickedness'. Of course there was heroism too, but otherwise might he not be speaking about Europe?

When great mass cruelties are mentioned we generally think of the religious wars and attribute the crimes to fanaticism. But Thucydides never speaks of that. Perhaps he is nearer the truth when he says that 'the cause of all the evils was simply *Arché*, *imperium*, a word hard to translate. Thucydides does not trouble to explain it. Isocrates calls it 'that wicked harlot who makes city after city in love with her, to betray them to their ruin' (De Pace, 103). 'Empire', love of power, ambition; the determination to be master; obviously one of the deepest and most vital instincts in every living organism, but one which in excess leads to destruction. It has animated all the great conquerors and destroyers of mankind. It was not really faith in Christ or in Mahomet or pity for the poor or devotion to justice that made men in their thousands act like mad dogs. It was just '*Arché*', the ordinary ambition that makes a blameless football team eager to win a match, carried into the infinite and surrounded with plausible excuses.

## *Lessons from History*

Of course as soon as the contest starts, plenty of good reasons are provided for carrying it further. In many parts of Europe there has been actual civil war; in all the occupied countries there has been an approach to it. That is a malady from which a nation does not easily recover. In such countries the only way to safety is through obedience, obedience to whichever tyranny is in power.

Thucydides hoped that his book might be of some positive use to statesmen if ever a situation like that of Athens in the Peloponnesian War should recur. It was a very exceptional situation. Many empires have been overthrown, many societies have been ruined or paralysed by war. But it would be hard to find any other instance of a society with ideals and standards like those described in the speech of Pericles which was overthrown and poisoned by a war like the Peloponnesian, international and at the same time civil, until we come to the present century. The comparison is interesting, but can it be in any way useful? Possibly there is a warning conveyed in the Melian Dialogue. It must have seemed almost incredible that the Athens described in the Funeral Speech could have become in the course of one generation the Athens depicted in the controversy with Melos, with all the old ideals and virtues which made men her 'lovers' obliterated in the overpowering passion of *Archê*. It is a warning of what might conceivably happen to our own Western or 'Christian' civilisation if it failed either in strength or faith.