

Legitimising War and Defending Peace: Thucydides in WWI and After¹

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In 1948, Arnold J. Toynbee, historian and transatlantic public intellectual – he had featured on the cover of *Time* magazine the year before, and *A Study of History* was already an American bestseller – gave a lecture to the British School at Athens, reflecting on the roots of his conception of world history.² He began with an account of his visit to Crete in 1912, when he still thought of himself as an ancient historian, but then turned to the way in which his life had taken another direction.

I discovered [the Greeks'] contemporaneity for myself by the aid of a different clue when the outbreak of the First World War caught me teaching Ancient Greek history at Oxford. For the experience of a war in which the spiritual as well as the political destinies of Western Christendom were manifestly at stake brought to life for me the sense and feel of phrases in the work of Thucydides which I had read hitherto with blind eyes because, so far, I had not been in possession of the psychological key to them. I realised in 1914 that had overtaken Thucydides' generation in the course of Hellenic history by the time at which he wrote his book. In other words, the age of Thucydides, so far from lying behind me in my past, had been standing all that time in front of me in my future until now, when I was just beginning to catch Thucydides up through meeting in my own life with Thucydides' experiences.³

This powerful sense of recognition and identification became a significant thread in Toynbee's intellectual development, as will be discussed below. However, he was certainly not the only classically-educated young man to be struck by such parallels. Ernst Jünger's popular and influential war memoir *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storm of Steel*), first published in 1920, is permeated with Thucydidean echoes.⁴ The novelist John Buchan claimed that he had read and re-read

¹ I am enormously grateful to Liz Pender for the opportunity to participate in the Leeds conference, and for her patience as I missed successive deadlines in completing the written version. I have benefitted greatly from the comments and suggestions of colleagues at Berlin, Bristol and Exeter, and I am particularly grateful to Christian Wendt, Liz Sawyer, Ben Earley and Polly Low, all of whom have also shared relevant material.

² The lecture was repeated in London in 1950. On Toynbee's conception of history, see Gargan 1961, Henningsen 1962, McNeill 1989, McIntire & Perry 1989.

³ 1950: 9-10

⁴ Wendt 2017.

Thucydides between 1914 and 1918, “for he also had lived among crumbling institutions”.⁵ The connection was especially hard to ignore for those who served in the eastern Mediterranean. In an article for the *New Statesman* in 1919, one Orlo Williams commented on the importance of books for a soldier as a means of enduring the tedium of waiting for action.⁶

In this spirit I made again the acquaintance of Thucydides, who kept me going many weeks of the Dardanelles campaign, amazed at the modernity of his outlook and the extraordinary political insight reflected in his set speeches. Again and again an exclamation was forced to one’s lips by an expression particularly apt to the conditions of 1915. That wonderful chapter of condensed acumen, for instance, in which he shows that the general political feature of States determined their sympathies in the direction of Athens or Sparta, as the case might be, could have been applied with hardly a word changed to the factors which determined the sympathies of nations in 1915 toward the Allies or the Central Powers. It was impossible not to leave Thucydides with the conviction that he is unsurpassed among political historians, and that, in particular, the funeral oration of Pericles is the supreme tribute to the fallen soldiers of a free State for all time, leaving nothing to be said, no emotion unexplored, and no grace of expression to be added. The peculiar applicability to our own expedition of the account of the Athenian expedition against Syracuse was happily hidden from me till later.⁷

The Scottish writer Compton Mackenzie likewise recalled reading Thucydides, along with Homer and Vergil, during the Gallipoli campaign.⁸ Such was the perceived relevance of Thucydides’ work that Winston Churchill was presented with pocket editions by two different people, one of them David Lloyd George, when he stepped down from the cabinet and went to serve on the Western Front in late 1916 – having been given another copy by an admirer earlier the same year.⁹

The experience of reading Thucydides and becoming convinced of his direct relevance to the present was hardly restricted to the Great War; successive readers have felt that his work spoke directly to their own times.¹⁰ Thucydides invited his readers to recognise their own situation in the events he described, claiming his work would be a “possession for ever” precisely

⁵ Cited by Jenkyns 1980: 335.

⁶ Williams was a House of Commons clerk, *TLS* reviewer and writer.

⁷ 1919: 469

⁸ Vandiver 2010: 62.

⁹ Schelske 2015: 85-6.

¹⁰ See Lee & Morley 2015 *passim*; Morley 2014: 145-6.

because present and future will resemble the past. What matters is the specific nature of these supposed parallels – which episodes speak most powerfully to different cultural contexts, or are read differently in the light of contemporary events? – and how they, and the writer who created them, are understood. Thucydides’ relevance and immediacy could be seen, as Toynbee suggests, as the product of a parallelism between actual events, so his work appears prescient because history is repeating itself; or as the result of his genius and insight, identifying the universal dynamics of politics.

This paper does not claim that Thucydides was especially important for the First World War; he was evoked and quoted as a means of understanding events, but as just one among many ancient authors familiar to the classically-educated young men who fought on all sides of the conflict. Certain features of his account may have made him especially useful for specific purposes, but compared with the cultural significance of the *Iliad* or the reworkings of Latin authors by the English war poets, he played a decidedly minor role.¹¹

However, the Great War was certainly important for Thucydides, or rather for the ways he is read today. Since the Renaissance, he has been seen as an important and authoritative figure – but his importance and authority have been conceived very differently over time. The most striking contrast is between the historian and the political theorist. In the nineteenth century, Thucydides was read as a historian, promoted (predominantly in Europe) as a model for contemporary critical historiography.¹² This reading came under attack early in the twentieth century, not least because of a recognition that his approach diverged radically from modern historiographical norms, and he largely disappeared as a serious model for historians by the 1940s. Thucydides’ reception today is dominated by political theory, international relations and strategic thought; this dates from the Cold War era, and has until recently been a largely American phenomenon.¹³ In other words, between 1900 and 1950 Thucydides changed his identity, from a historian to a theorist of global politics and war, and crossed the Atlantic. This paper argues that the roots of Thucydides’ contemporary identity and importance lie in the reception of his work in the First World War and its aftermath.

Academic Engagements

On 3rd August 1914, Anton Elter, Professor of Classical Philology at Bonn, was due to give an address at a civic reception. On the morning of the 2nd, the day after Germany ordered a general

¹¹ Vandiver 2010.

¹² Morley 2014.

¹³ Keene 2015; Stradis 2015.

mobilisation against Russia, he put his prepared speech to one side and wrote a new, shorter one: 'Thucydides and the name of the Peloponnesian War'.¹⁴ Elter had hitherto shown little interest in Thucydides; he chose him now as the most appropriate author for such an occasion. We are gathered here, he declared, in consciousness of the need to take up arms and defend world peace, and to remain true to the values of research and truth. Why was the Peloponnesian War called that? Because it is customary to name wars after one's adversaries. Thucydides could never have entitled his work *The Attic War*, as that was the Spartan conception – "Not Thucydides the Athenian, who wrote his work with an eternally unsurpassable impartiality, but who despite all the tribulations he suffered remained true to his fatherland with his whole soul". Elter's relative lack of familiarity with Thucydides might be surmised from the fact that he believed the work was actually entitled 'The Peloponnesian War', when that is in fact a much later invention. However, he clearly knew something of the debate around Thucydides' objectivity, for which the Athenian's apparent lack of resentment over his exile was an important piece of evidence, and used this as the basis for depicting him as the perfect historian who was nevertheless a true patriot, the most appropriate subject for a classicist to discuss in these times.¹⁵

Academics on all sides of the conflict felt called upon to do their bit for their country; two famous examples are the *Aufruf an die Kultermwelt* of October 1914, signed by ninety-three German scientists, writers and artists including the great ancient historian Eduard Meyer, and the volume published by members of the Oxford Faculty of Modern History, *Why We Are At War*. Each group sought to persuade their readers – fellow citizens, but still more the court of world opinion, above all in the United States – of the justice of their country's cause. For the most part they concentrated on recent history: the events leading up to the war, with a particular focus on treaty obligations, and, in the case of the Oxford publication, claims about 'The New German Theory of the State' that was seen as the foundation of German aggression.¹⁶ When Meyer offered a book-length contribution to public debate, it was an account of English political development and the way that England's jealous defence of her imperial power and naval dominance had made war unavoidable; when he introduced historical analogies, they were from the Punic Wars, the confrontation of Rome with Carthaginian sea-power – with the exception

¹⁴ Published unchanged the following year; Elter 1915.

¹⁵ One possible source for this reading was Wilhelm Roscher's claim that among the things one could learn from reading Thucydides were 'to value fame and freedom highly, the fatherland higher still, but the truth above all. *If someone's reading of Thucydides has not given new life to these three resolutions, then, however many grammatical rules or historical facts he may have learnt from it, he has read Thucydides in vain.*' (1842: xi).

¹⁶ Barker 1914; discussed by Wright 1978.

that, in the first Punic War, the Romans were the aggressors, whereas Germany has been forced into war against the New Carthage against its will.¹⁷

The idea of relating Thucydides' account to more recent global developments was certainly not unprecedented. In his 1911 account of the political structures of classical Greece, the British classicist Alfred Zimmern developed a series of idealising parallels between Periclean Athens and the British Empire; the title of his book was the deliberately modernising *The Greek Commonwealth*.¹⁸ The second edition appeared just after the outbreak of war, and Zimmern took the opportunity to reiterate his belief in classical Athens as a model for liberal (Western) democracies:

While the book has been passing through the press war has broken out, bringing Great Britain face to face, for the first time since she has become a Democracy, with the full ultimate meaning of the civic responsibilities, both of thought and action, with which in the narrower field of the city-state, the fifth-century Athenians were so familiar. Greek ideas and Greek inspiration can help us today, not only in facing the duties of the moment, but in the work of deepening and extending the range and meaning of Democracy and Citizenship, Liberty and Law, which would seem to be the chief political task before mankind in the new epoch of history on which we have suddenly entered.¹⁹

Perhaps simply because he was out of academia between 1909 and 1919, working first for the Board of Education and then the Foreign Office, Zimmern did not develop these ideas any further.²⁰

In Germany, meanwhile, comparisons between Greek history and contemporary developments could be found at the highest levels of the state. In 1904, the then Chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow, wrote a memorandum to the Kaiser about Germany's naval expansion, concluding that "our situation is similar to that of the Athenians, when they had to build the Long Walls at Piraeus without being hindered from completing these defences by the over-mighty Spartans"; "my dear Bülow how often have I in recent years used this example!!!" the Kaiser responded.²¹ In a more theoretical register, clear traces of Thucydidean ideas are found in the writings of the *bêtes noires* of the Oxford historians, the political theorist Heinrich von Treitschke and retired general Friedrich von Bernhardi. In the lectures published posthumously

¹⁷ Meyer 1915:200-3; responded to by Robertson 1917: 115-17, discussed by Ungern-Sternberg 1990.

¹⁸ Zimmern 1914, discussed by Millett 2007 and Morefield 2014: 31-68.

¹⁹ Zimmern 1914: no page number.

²⁰ Millett 2007: 168-9.

²¹ Lepsius, Bartholdy & Thimme 1927: 373, cited in Woodward 1935: 85.

as *Politik*, Treitschke's dismissal of historians who merely narrate rather than identify laws of political behaviour closely resembles similar critiques put forward in contemporary German readings of Thucydides (especially that of Roscher)²², and his judgement on Greek historiography was clear:

The second great historian of the Greeks, whose relation to Herodotus is that of the mature man to a naïve child, is purely political; he includes no cultural history at all... In historical representation, cultural history can be left out; politics never.²³

Thucydidean references and echoes appear in discussion of themes like the role of war in creating a *Volk*, great leaders and the tendency for them to be suspected (Pericles), techniques of demagoguery (Kleon) and the danger of decay in political life.²⁴ Bernhardt, meanwhile, evoked Thucydides' *Archaeology* in claims about the struggle of all against all and war as the basis for development, while remarks he made in newspaper interviews sound more like direct allusions: "Law is for weaklings; force is for strong men and strong nations"; "War is a fiery crucible and terrible training school through which the whole world has grown better".²⁵ This was the so-called 'New German Theory of the State', the tendency to see might as right which the Oxford historians had denounced in 1914 – but attributed to the influence of Machiavelli alone.²⁶ Perhaps because the main target audience for these wartime debates was the American public and opinion-makers, for whom Thucydides was not a familiar name, these interpretations were not explored further.

Lessons from Thucydides

Where some knowledge of Thucydides could be assumed – or an audience compelled to engage with him regardless of their preferences – classicists seized their opportunity: in the schoolroom. This can be traced through the series of articles that appeared through the war years in the *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte und deutsche Literatur, und für Pädagogik*, which had many Gymnasium teachers among its readership and regularly included articles on classical pedagogy. In 1915, it published Elter's lecture on 'Thucydides and the Name of the Peloponnesian War' and a lengthy article by Benno von Hagen on 'Death for the Fatherland', analysing Pericles' Funeral Oration for guidance on how the war dead should be honoured, as a

²² Treitschke 1922, Vol. I: 4.

²³ Ibid., 64.

²⁴ Ibid., 113-14, 207; Vol. II, 260, 291, 520.

²⁵ Bernhardt 1912: 57, 61; press quotes from Sprigg 1915: 18, 128.

²⁶ Barker 1914: 108, 113.

means of creating a “consciously political” community. 1916 brought a general comparison of the characters of the Germans and the Greeks, to educate young people in the idea of the fatherland - “whoever wants to depict the character of his own people should first always read the speech of Pericles”; a survey of new approaches to history teaching that insisted on the importance of Thucydides for understanding war, as he distinguished between real and alleged causes; and another reference to the Funeral Oration, in an account of Gymnasium education, as a means of encouraging citizens and awakening their better selves.²⁷ In 1917, parallels between Thucydides’ account and current events (particularly emphasising the role of the Dardanelles in both wars) were the focus of Erich Bethe’s article on ‘Athens and the Peloponnesian War in the mirror of the World War’, a theme developed the following year in Carl Reuter’s ‘Teaching the origins of the Peloponnesian War: of the contemporary value of ancient history’, and Werner Jaeger’s reflections on ‘History and Life’, exploring how we now see the past through different eyes, while at the same time history gives us a true understanding of events, just as Thucydides had promised.²⁸ “The political depth of his work was first opened up to us through our own experiences in the World War”.²⁹

These discussions offered two different perspectives on Thucydides. The first read him as a wholly reliable source of information about the past, taking for granted his well-established status as a critical historian. Von Hagen noted the question of whether Thucydides recorded exactly what Pericles said, but concluded that he identified “the essential philosophical content” of the speech; none of the other authors (including those who also focused on the Funeral Oration) raised even minimal doubts about Thucydides’ reliability.³⁰ In such readings, what mattered were the parallels between the Peloponnesian War and current events, as Bethe argued: “The Peloponnesian War was for the microcosm of the Greek world what the present war is for Europe”.³¹ This offered a means of characterising and disparaging the English, using passages like the Corinthians’ speech to the Spartans as well as the Mytilene Debate: “Athens was then, what England is in the modern era... England has in Athens a no less reckless predecessor; for them, any means are legitimate to fetter (in the strongest sense of the word) their ‘allies’”.³² This

²⁷ Maass 1916; Cauer 1916; Seeliger 1916.

²⁸ Reuter 1918; Jaeger 1918.

²⁹ Jaeger 1918: 169-70.

³⁰ Hagen 1915: 467.

³¹ 1917: 73.

³² *Ibid.*: 79, 87.

also implied a positive outcome to the war for Germany: Athens had in the end failed to keep control of its allies, and was defeated.

Other authors were similarly interested in parallels between ancient and modern events, but focused more on 'Thucydides' own analysis. Cauer saw his main contribution in the distinction between real and alleged causes for the outbreak of war, rather than accepting the claims of different sides at face value.³³ Jaeger understood it as a work of political depth, drawing out the inner connections of events: what we thank Thucydides for is not facts but understanding, whereas so much modern history teaching is purely mechanical.³⁴ Reuter developed these ideas furthest: 'Thucydides' work was a piece of political history "as could be fully useful for the education of a modern citizen", especially effective because of the quality of the historian.³⁵

It would already be an enormous benefit, if the pupil by the hand of a teacher like Thucydides learnt nothing beyond the struggle to attain a factually grounded judgement, the striving after the objective valuation of things with cool cheeks despite a fiery heart, nothing beyond the attempt at a just appraisal of the enemy as well as of one's own people, an achievement, before which in the case of Thucydides we stand today with ever more wonder, the less we can lay claim to it ourselves in a similar situation.³⁶

Thucydides' insights, Reuter argued, are numerous: the characters of different kinds of states and how this affects their behaviour, the processes by which people reach important decisions, and above all the power of rhetoric. Germany had gone to war to defend itself, but that motive had not impressed neutrals; by the time its representatives began shyly to talk of the freedom of the seas, world opinion had already turned against them because of the slogans adopted by the English, 'Against militarism!' and 'Freedom for small states!' Drawing explicitly on the speech of the Corinthians, but clearly influenced by passages like the Corcyrean *stasis*, Reuter remarked caustically that "England has never 'annexed' anyone, but only 'liberated peoples', and thereby successfully set the mood as Corinth does here. And we're not supposed to be able to learn anything from this?"³⁷

The usefulness of 'Thucydides' work was constantly emphasised – reinforced by the fact that he had made such a claim himself, as Jaeger noted: "As for the teachability of his insight, he

³³ 1916: 128.

³⁴ 1918: 169.

³⁵ 1918: 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*: 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 32.

as a true son of the period of the Enlightenment and rationalism had no doubts”.³⁸ It offered a deeper understanding of past events, and hence of similar events in the present; of the character of the Germans (through comparison with the Greeks), and of general and universal principles of human and state behaviour. But it could be equally powerful as a means of inspiring readers and inculcating the right attitudes. Reading the Funeral Oration would “encourage the citizens and awaken their better selves”, according to Seeliger, while von Hagen presented it as a timeless injunction: preserve the memory of heroic deaths in times of peace, keep the spirit of patriotism alive in young and old, and (in his very loose version of 2.43), “Don’t look fearfully at the dangers of war – fear is contemptible – but believe courage to be true happiness and true freedom! Learn the courage to sacrifice and to lose!”³⁹

Deploying the *Funeral Oration*

It is likely that similar discussions of contemporary parallels and messages in Thucydides also took place in British schools, but direct evidence for this has not yet been identified. What does survive are examples of the deployment of one specific passage for a wider audience. Detailed discussions of Thucydides’ interpretation of the causes of wars and political rhetoric might be limited to classrooms and learned articles for readers who already had some knowledge, but the power of the Funeral Oration, and the usefulness of the sentiments it promoted, were too good to waste.

This happened in both Britain and Germany. In the first months of the war, a social-democratic newspaper in Saxony printed the complete Oration for its working-class readers; an editor with a Gymnasium education clearly felt that this struck the correct note of patriotism and the call of duty.⁴⁰ Similar sentiments inspired the publication of a series of pamphlets called the *Feldpostbücherei* – the Active Service Library – by a publishing house in Jena; priced at 60 Pfennig each, roughly equivalent to a day’s allowance for an ordinary soldier and so clearly intended in the first instance for the officer class, these were (like their parent journal) intended to set out the cultural and intellectual foundations of a new German idealism and humanism. Volume 10, from 1915, was entitled *Mannhaftigkeit und Bürgersinn* (Fig. 1), ‘Manfulness and Civic Spirit’, a collection of ‘Voices of the Ancients’ selected and introduced by Otto Crusius, Professor of Classical Philology at Munich, with a foreword based on his lecture on the legacy of Greek thought for Europe: “Germany is, as a result of its geographical position as much as of its spiritual past,

³⁸ 1918: 169.

³⁹ Seeliger 1916: 222; Hagen 1915: 471, 476, 473.

⁴⁰ *Volksstimme* 93, 21st November 1914; mentioned by Hagen 1915 467n.

called to become the crystallisation point of the new Europe”.⁴¹ After selections from Homer, Hesiod and various archaic poets, ‘The Age of Pericles’ offers an image of Athens as the instrument of true culture, in which “the best men were conscious of participating in a new and higher ideal for humanity and the state”, as set out in the Funeral Oration – reproduced in full.⁴²

Crusius claimed that his translation avoided “cheap modernisation” and sought to capture the “to us alien character of the style” – not, it should be noted, of the sentiments expressed. This required some negotiation of political terminology – “The name of the constitution, because it rests not on a minority but on the majority, is *Rule of the People* (democracy)” [“...*Volksberrschaft* (Demokratie)”] – perhaps because democracy was too closely associated with the British.⁴³ However, the wish to capture Thucydides’ style did not hinder him from presenting the most important sentiments as clearly as possible: “Set happiness in freedom and freedom in a courageous disposition, and do not look fearfully at the dangers of war”.⁴⁴



⁴¹ Crusius 1915: 3.

⁴² Ibid., 62. The Oration is 63-71, followed by some quotes from Pericles’ second speech, and lines from Sophocles.

⁴³ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁴ “Setzet das Glück in die Freiheit und die Freiheit in mutige Gesinnung, und schauet nicht ängstlich auf die Kriegsgefahren”: 70.

Figure 1: *Mannhaftigkeit und Bürgersinn*, edited by Otto Crusius, and *The Ideal of Citizenship*: affordable reprints of Pericles' Funeral Oration and other classical texts. Author's collection.

A similar British pamphlet – priced at a shilling, again about a day's pay for a private – was *The Ideal of Citizenship* (Fig. 1), published as part of a series entitled *Memorabilia* that included Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' and Wordsworth's 'The Happy Warrior' – both of which could be seen to have some relevance to the war – as well as collections of English and French carols. *The Ideal of Citizenship* reprinted the version of Pericles' Funeral Oration from Zimmern's *Greek Commonwealth*, with an Introductory Note by an unnamed author that largely reproduced sections of Zimmern's account of Athens – but with additional remarks to emphasise its contemporary relevance:

Read in isolation, the words of the speech are self-sufficient, requiring little or no context to render them comprehensible. If this is true in general, it has become the more true to-day – in general, and for us English in particular.⁴⁵

This alleged connection was developed through a brief, and somewhat tendentious, account of the rise of Athens in the fifth century, echoing some of Zimmern's ideas and phrases but making their message explicit:

Between 480-432 B.C., when the Peloponnesian war broke out, Athens had become the foremost power in Greece, and so in the civilized world. She was fully conscious of the responsibility, and confident that reason and fair dealing were her guides in council and in policy. Her world was content to accept her as the model state; her influence passed beyond the Aegean, and even the confines of her Empire. The Persian war was ended in 448, but the alliance which, under Athens, had led to this triumph, subsisted. Athens the imperial stood to her part, as we in these days are resolved to stand to ours. Be the truth what it may, Athens held, and England holds, that the continuance of liberty and right lay and lie therein.⁴⁶

Pericles' words encapsulated the spirit of Athens and its Empire – with no hint of the darker side of Athenian power, which Thucydides had explored and Zimmern had partially conceded.⁴⁷ On

⁴⁵ *Memorabilia* 1915: 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 5-6.

⁴⁷ Albeit by claiming that Thucydides became embittered with age until he rediscovered his love for the *polis* at the end of his life: Morefield 2014: 54-6.

the contrary, suggested this writer, while modern readers might be sceptical of such claims, they would be wrong:

If we, to-day, smile at such high estimate of Athenian work, shall not the generations to come be tempted to a like fine laughter at our assurance that ‘England entered the war, not on calculations of self-interest but in defence of the inviolable principles of Freedom and the sanctity of Treaties’”.⁴⁸

Reviewers of the pamphlet needed little persuasion of this. *The Connoisseur: an illustrated magazine for collectors* (vol.15: 1916) claimed that: “This noble eulogy, one of the most poignant ever written, is singularly appropriate to the present time, for, with the substitution of a few words, the speech would apply equally to the England of today as the Greece of Pericles.” *The Burlington Magazine* (vol. 29: 1916) echoed this: “The speech of Pericles is especially opportune at the present time”.

This view was shared by the civic authorities. In late May 1915, the *Llanelly Star* (and doubtless many other newspapers) included the following at the bottom of its ‘News in a Nutshell’ column:

The following quotation from Pericles on the Athenians is published in London as a recruiting appeal: “We have more at stake than men who have no such inheritance. If we sing the glories of our country, it was the warriors and their like who have set hand to array her... For you now it remains to rival what they have done and, knowing the secret of happiness to be freedom, and the secret of freedom a brave heart, not idly to stand aside from the enemy’s onset”.⁴⁹

The second sentence is word for word Zimmern; the first substitutes “it was the warriors” for his accurate but non-specific “it was these men”, to emphasise who was being celebrated – and should be imitated by the reader. The most famous part of this campaign were the advertisements on public transport in the capital, using the same quotation as the newspaper article; the surviving posters come from the Underground Railway (Fig. 2), but the reference in a 1921 book to those on the windows of London omnibuses has been most widely cited.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 7.

⁴⁹ 22/5/15. Archive of the National Library of Wales: <http://cymru1914.org/en/view/newspaper/4123011/2>

⁵⁰ Wallas 1921: 166, cited by Turner 1981: 167; cited by Azoulay 2014: 214-15 and many others. Azoulay reproduces a poster from the London Transport Museum (1983/4/8159), which attributes the quotation to “Pericles on the Athenians”; the Imperial War Museum copy (Q.63766) is from a different printer, and has the more accurate “Pericles to the Athenians”, suggesting it is a later corrected version.

motives behind this campaign were clear. By mid-1915, the authorities were concerned about a falling-off in volunteers; an appeal to the essential role of soldiers in defending everything Britain stood for was either a final attempt at encouraging the hesitant or the first step in the process, taken forward by the National Registration Act in July, of the introduction of conscription.

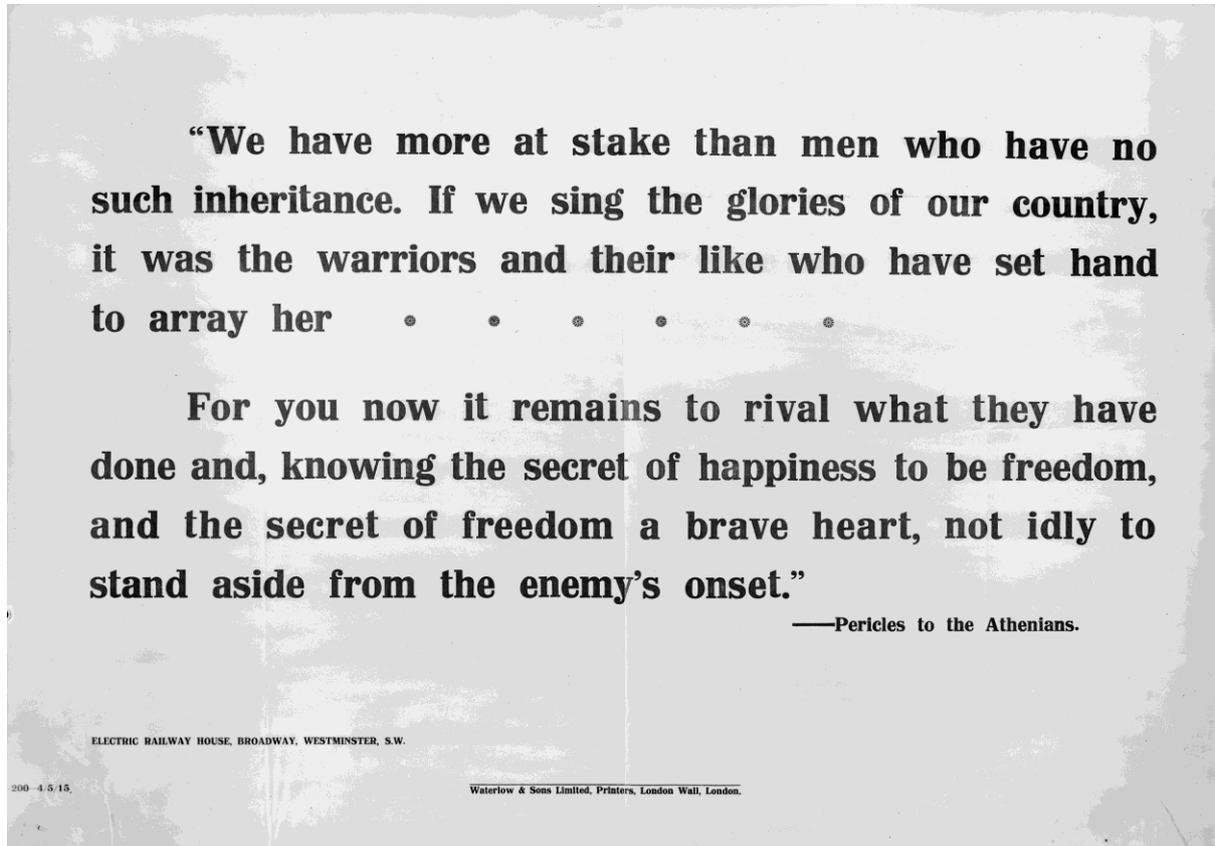


Figure 2: The words of Pericles on a poster from the London Underground, 1915. © Imperial War Museums (Q 63766)

In terms of intention – to commemorate and justify the sacrifice made by the dead, to arouse patriotic fervour in the living – there is a strong resemblance between this campaign and the most prominent public role of Thucydides in the post-war period, the use of the Funeral Oration on war memorials.⁵¹ Apart from Greece, where Pericles' words appear both on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Syntagma Square, Athens, and on the Greek monument at the Inter-Allied Memorial at Liège, this was largely if not entirely an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. Pericles' words feature on the war memorial at Southport (completed 1923), on the Soldiers' Tower at the University of Toronto (1924), at the centre of the memorial to the 21st Royal Scots Fusiliers at the Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle (1927), and on the

⁵¹ Key works on war memorials: Koselleck & Jeisman 1994, Winter 1995, Ashplant *et al.* 2000, Low, Shipley & Rhodes 2012.

Auckland War Memorial Museum (1929).⁵² The Australian War Memorial at Canberra (1941) did not in the end feature it, but the identification of Australian soldiers with those of classical Athens, rather than with the Trojan War, was constantly reiterated by C.E.W. Bean, classically-educated war correspondent, Official Historian and leading figure in the project; extracts from the Funeral Oration were included in the programme for the memorial's inauguration on Anzac Day in 1929, and the letterhead of the AWM for many years featured Pericles' words.⁵³

There was no direct connection between these monuments and the 1915 recruitment campaign. This is clear both from the choice of quotations – the majority of memorials feature the line from earlier in the speech about the whole earth being the tomb of famous men – and from the differing translations. The renditions of Thucydides 2.43.3 in Edinburgh and Auckland read as if they took Zimmern's version as a crib but made adjustments for clarity and, in the former case, to emphasise the distance between home and battlefield: "They are commemorated not only by columns and inscriptions in their own country. But in foreign lands also by memorials graven not on stone, but on the hearts of men".⁵⁴ The Southport memorial features a more or less literal rendition of the Greek: "To famous men all earth is sepulchre". The Australian War Memorial letterhead proudly used Bean's own translation of 2.43.2, checked and polished by a retired professor of Classics at Melbourne – even if Bean eventually concluded that these words were "too trite" to be included on the memorial itself: "They gave their lives. For that public gift they received a praise which never ages and a tomb most glorious — not so much the tomb in which they lie, but that in which their fame survives, to be remembered for ever when occasion comes for word or deed".⁵⁵

The Soldiers' Tower in Toronto did use the same line as the 1915 campaign, but in a completely different rendition, taken from a translation by the Victorian classicist and retired schoolteacher Arthur S. Way and published in his local newspaper on the Isle of Wight in 1918:

Take these men for your ensamples. Like them, remember that prosperity can only be for the free, and that freedom is the sure possession of those alone that have courage to defend it. Scorn to be haunted by thoughts of the horrors of war.

⁵² On British memorials, Moriarty 1997 and King 1998; on Toronto, Shipley 1987: 72.

⁵³ Inglis 1985; Londey 2007. Until recently, the Anzac Day website included suitable readings for the occasion, including Funeral Oration quotes. On analogies between Gallipoli and Troy, Midford 2011.

⁵⁴ Zimmern has "their story is not graven only on stone over their native earth, but lives on far away, without visible symbol, woven into the stuff of other men's lives". The Scottish inscription substitutes "over their clay" for "over their native earth".

⁵⁵ Londey 2007: 354.

Way's version travelled beyond his local community via publications like *United Empire*, the journal of the Royal Colonial Institute, which reprinted it.⁵⁶ It caught the eye of a Toronto lawyer, J. Murray Clark, who was involved with the Soldiers' Tower project and clearly pushed for this line to be chosen as its epigraph. The distinctive wording of Way's version (especially 'ensamples') makes it easy to trace its subsequent dissemination not only across the British Empire but also into the United States, not least through the influence of the Armistice Ceremonial Committee, a Canada-based organisation that promoted Armistice Day observance. As a New Zealand newspaper remarked, having reproduced the extract popularised by Murray Clark, "during and immediately after the war, nothing was oftener quoted than one or two of these sentences", and attributed this directly to the International Armistice Day Ceremonial Committee.⁵⁷

The Funeral Oration was thus a pervasive influence on public commemorations of the Great War throughout the 1920s. Those responsible for the design of memorials seem often to have preferred their own versions rather than existing translations; but together they established Thucydides as a dominant figure in the tradition of commemorating and celebrating self-sacrifice for one's country, drawing a direct line between happiness, freedom, courage and military service, that persists to this day.⁵⁸

Thucydides and Global Politics

The message of a Funeral Oration quote on a war memorial was not so much 'Never Again' as 'This Is Why We Do It', which may explain why it is more often associated with military or national monuments than local community memorials. Thucydides became public property, but with strongly military (if not militaristic) associations. In the same period, however, he also became associated with efforts to ensure a lasting peace. Conceivably, his ideas may have influenced discussions at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919; this was suggested by the international relations theorist David Mitrany, emphasising the role of one of the American plenipotentiaries, General Tasker Bliss – who devoted himself in retirement to giving college

⁵⁶ The following account is based on Sawyer 2013.

⁵⁷ *The Akaroa Mail and Banks Peninsula Advertiser*, 8/1/26.

⁵⁸ Quotations from the Oration have been used more recently, for example the Bomber Command memorial in London (2012) and a 2011 memorial in West Wymess in Fife. They feature in Veterans' Day materials in the United States, as well as being widely repeated on the internet (Morley 2013).

lectures in support of international peace, always carrying his Thucydides with him.⁵⁹ The role of Gilbert Murray in the establishment of the League of Nations, and his numerous books and articles drawing on parallels between Greek history and modern events (including the catastrophe of the Great War) as arguments for peace and international cooperation, also ensured that Thucydides, with other classical authors, remained part of the discourse of inter-war global politics.⁶⁰

More significant in the longer term was the establishment of a new discipline of international politics, conceived by many of its founders as a means of preventing future wars, in which Thucydides was enshrined as authority, model and inspiration.⁶¹ This was perhaps a matter of pure coincidence, as leading figures in this development happened to be classically trained and already familiar with his work. However, it was driven by a specific conception of Thucydides that had been reinforced if not forged in the Great War, and a firm belief in the importance of using history to understand the world; not as a source of analogies – von Bülow and Kaiser Wilhelm were following in a long tradition of exemplary history in drawing a comparison between German foreign policy and classical Greece – but as a body of data from which general principles and laws, applicable to a wide range of different periods and societies, can be derived and evaluated. A focus on general principles rather than just description fitted with Thucydides' claims for the usefulness of his work, predicting regularities based on “the human thing”; the invention of a new discipline offered a new way of characterising him, rather than the label ‘historian’ that obscured his interest in understanding the underlying structures and dynamics of events.⁶² Reading Thucydides in this manner made him available for appropriation as a founding figure of the new approach, lending classical authority to a very modern discipline.

Alfred Zimmern, who had pioneered such a historical-political approach in *The Greek Commonwealth*, returned to academia in 1919 as the first holder of a newly-endowed Chair in International Politics at Aberystwyth, as well as co-founding the Royal Institute of International Affairs (known as Chatham House), dedicated to understanding international affairs; his subsequent career took him to Cornell and Oxford, as well as involvement in numerous bodies

⁵⁹ Mitrany, letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, 14/3/25; Macmillan 2003: 5-6 notes that Bliss was famous for lying in bed with a hipflask reading Thucydides, and suggests that Woodrow Wilson spoke to him only five times during the entire conference. On his post-war lectures, Palmer 1954:3.

⁶⁰ Wilson 2011.

⁶¹ Armitage 2013: 23-8.

⁶² Cf. Morley 2016.

for international cooperation.⁶³ His publications now focused on current affairs, but references recur to ancient history in general and Thucydides in particular, especially in his public lectures. Those whose duty it is to observe the basic tendencies of our age with the eye of science, he argued to an audience in Berlin, can become “historians internally bound up with our time, as Thucydides once was”.⁶⁴ Reflecting on the relevance of ancient Greece for modern America after the Second World War, he remarked: “I remember what Thucydides said of war, that war is a teacher who educates by means of violence”.⁶⁵

Arnold Toynbee went still further in promoting a new conception of historical study. He had initially resumed his academic career in Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies in London, but resigned in the face of fierce controversy over critical comments he made about the conduct of the Greek army during invasion of Asia Minor, 1921-2, where – already the engaged historian – he had served as special correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*.⁶⁶ He too shifted to the study of international politics, with a research chair at the London School of Economics and the role of Director of Research at Chatham House, and embarked on the prolific output of books, articles and lectures that made him a world figure, at least until the 1960s. Throughout his career, Toynbee criticised conventional historiography as too narrow and even authoritarian – as well as criticising the social sciences for their lack of historical and moral sense – and insisted on the importance of historical parallels, moral judgements and engagement with the world through a “comprehensive study of human affairs”.⁶⁷ In his 1950 lecture, Toynbee had attributed the origins of his conception of history to his new understanding of Thucydides in the light of the outbreak of war. A still stronger sense of this impact can be found in his account of Thucydides in the monumental *A Study of History*, presented as the paradigm of a ‘broken life’, a man who had endured the shattering both of his own life, banished from the field of action, and of his entire world – and had transmuted this into “a great work of art, into an ageless and deathless human experience”.⁶⁸

The dross of egotism and animus has all been refined away... We are conscious that the author’s personal misfortune is genuinely of no account in the author’s own eyes by comparison with the public catastrophe which has overtaken Athens and Hellas; and even

⁶³ Morefield 2005.

⁶⁴ 1933: 15. Reflections on Thucydides and history in e.g. 1928 and 1938.

⁶⁵ 1947: 11.

⁶⁶ Clogg 1985.

⁶⁷ Toynbee 1955: 1; 1931, 1948, 1953. Discussed by Raubitschek 1950.

⁶⁸ 1935: 292.

the deep emotion which the consciousness of this catastrophe awakens in Thucydides' soul is so rigorously held in control that we are only made aware of its intensity now and again by the quivering tension which reveals itself, here and there, through the texture of the historian's calm and measured words.⁶⁹

The autobiographical element is unmistakable – albeit complex, as, unlike Thucydides, Toynbee had evaded military service through a series of doctors' letters before finding refuge in the Foreign Office.⁷⁰ The end result was the same: a turn to history as a means of regaining control in the face of the catastrophe of war, with the aim of making it useful for the present and future.

In terms of the intellectual development of International Relations since WWII, the liberal internationalists like Zimmern and Toynbee lost. Their 'idealistic' ideas were seen to have been discredited by the events of the 1930s and defeated by Realists like E.H. Carr, who offered quite different conceptions of the nature of global politics and the relevance of history; their contribution to the establishment of the discipline is now largely ignored.⁷¹ However, they left at least one enduring legacy. The modern prominence of Thucydides as a taken-for-granted authority in modern IR theory, where he is often identified as the first Realist theorist and understood as a political thinker rather than a historian, has sometimes occasioned puzzlement, given that founding figures like Carr and Hans Morgenthau made little or no reference to him in their writings.⁷² The explanation is the mediating role of Zimmern and Toynbee as central figures in transatlantic debates into the 1950s, establishing and popularising a new conception of Thucydides as a central figure for the study of international politics – albeit that many of their readers interpreted him as a historically-informed theorist rather than, as they saw him, an engaged historian. The Thucydides of contemporary International Relations theory, like the Thucydides of American veterans and their supporters, is a conception forged in the Great War.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 296.

⁷⁰ See Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian* 14/2/14: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/14/family-first-world-war-experiences-these-are-mine>

⁷¹ Cf. Boucher 1998: 7-8; Dunne 1998: 1-30.

⁷² Keane 2015.

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