



## *Thermopylae: Great Battles* by Chris Carey.

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Serious readers of military history tend to be more attracted to the underside of “heroes” and the true motives for making war, rather than once glamorous “Great Battles.”<sup>1</sup> But anyone can admire men defending to the death their native soil and right to self-determination. In this context, Herodotus’s account of the battle of Thermopylae<sup>2</sup> (480 BCE) still provides the paradigm for last stands.

Thermopylae is exceptional in other ways: the heroization of the Spartans, especially the warrior-king Leonidas, has informed poems by Lord Byron, Emily Dickinson, Constantine Cavafy, and A.E. Housman, as well as such popular caricatures as, for example, Frank Miller and Lynn Varley’s graphic print version (1998) and director Zack Snyder’s popular 2006 film *300*.<sup>3</sup> (The laconic title for both comic and film erases the other Greeks who died there.) Fictions build on fictions: Stephen Pressman’s *Gates of Fire*<sup>4</sup> still awaits filming, but video games help fill the gap.

Author Chris Carey has now surveyed the Thermopylae of fact, myth, and memory. He connects the Hellenic fight to the last man with the near-mythic last stands at the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and (in Nazi propaganda) Stalingrad. Thirty low-quality photographs (most taken by the author) and six maps<sup>5</sup> help the reader reconstruct details of the distant campaign.

Why did a Greek expeditionary force fight to their death at Thermopylae? Their self-sacrifice barely slowed the progress of the Persian King Xerxes’s army and nearby navy; Athens was soon burned to the ground.<sup>6</sup> Herodotus’s sources, four or five decades after the fact, did not include strategists on either side. He had to reconstruct plans and ad hoc adjustments like Leonidas’s response to the traitor Ephialtes’s revealing to Xerxes the existence of a mountain path around the Greek position.

How do we know anything about the Greek army’s strategic thinking? No Hellenes loyal to the cause survived the battle at Thermopylae. Leonidas dismissed most of his allies before the final stand so that they could fight another day. Theban deserters surrendered themselves to Xerxes, while the Thespians refused to leave the Spartans and died with them to the last man. As Carey reminds us, we must rely on Herodotus’s historical investigation, conditioned as it was by traditional structural and literary expectations. Hence his epic scenes of Homeric heroism and

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1. This is both the subtitle of the book under review and the title of a series of volumes published by Oxford Univ. Press—see webpage.

2. The name means “hot gates” in reference to nearby sulfur springs.

3. Miller served as a consultant during production of the movie, which “was filmed mostly with a super-imposition chroma key technique, to help replicate the imagery of the original comic book”—*Wikipedia*, s.v. “300 (film).” See, further, the review at *MiWSR* 2007.05.04.

4. Subtitle: *An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae* (NY: Doubleday, 1998).

5. The captions for maps 3 and 4 are transposed.

6. See Robert Garland, *Athens Burning: The Persian Invasion of Greece and the Evacuation of Attica* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2017).

interpretive speeches. There were scant archival sources of any kind and his elderly eyewitnesses were fast disappearing. Fifty years after Marathon (490 BCE) and the battles of 480–479, he met with informational distortions owing to source-bias and local patriotic silences as he investigated military and political puzzles.<sup>7</sup> And his questions were different from ours, eight hundred thirty-four generations later.

As Carey observes, we lack Persian sources for the battle and war, despite the thousands of administrative documents found at Persepolis, Darius and his son Xerxes's imperial headquarters, and the relief sculptures and inscriptions at Bisitun. Herodotus (7.209) has exiled King Demaratus explain to Xerxes his fellow Spartans' peculiar pre-battle hair-grooming habits and their supposed refusal ever to surrender (false)—elements of the Spartan mirage.

The Persians' advance westward took over a year. Xerxes, like George W. Bush, was bent on conquering territory his father had failed to subdue (44). He organized feats of engineering—two three-quarter-mile-long ship bridges across the Hellespont and a mile-and-a-quarter-long canal through the Mt. Athos peninsula. Intimidating many communities along his route into capitulation, he arranged logistical supply dumps and coordinated amphibious forces from the provinces. The army and navy did not reach the pinch-point at Thermopylae until late August. Changing weather and logistical problems would soon afflict the invading force.

The inconstant Greek coalition considered making a stand farther north at Tempe before settling on Thermopylae. A “patchy turnout” of some seven thousand Hellenes (58) took up positions in the pass, but Herodotus focuses on the Spartans. What was their intent? Carey suggests possibilities: a suicide stand, holding action, or an advance guard of a much larger army to stop the Persian advance indefinitely (72). Events, however, overtook strategy.

The battle itself lasted three days. Herodotus downplays the effect of long-distance Persian bowmen on the first day. On day two, Xerxes's special forces unit, the ten thousand “Immortals,” could not maneuver in such close quarters, and the Greek hoplites mauled brave Persians who lacked, for instance, helmets and carried lighter shields. Carey surmises that the Greek forces fought in relays (96). On the third day, Hydarnes led the Immortals along the path around the pass into the rear of the Greeks. Having been forewarned, Leonidas released 5,600 of his troops; besides the Spartan 300, only 700 Thespians and 400 Thebans remained. Carey wisely quotes Herodotus's account of Leonidas's endgame in extenso (7.223–25). Nothing afterward blocked Xerxes from central Greece.

Excavations at the battle-site confirm Herodotus's account, though 20–30 meters of accreted material and a large alluvial plain obscure the lay of the land in 480 BCE (21). If Herodotus is correct, Xerxes's mistakes were the result of his youth, failure to heed the advice of more strategic heads, and over-confidence in his superior numbers.

Thermopylae was the prelude to the Persian naval defeat at Salamis. In both locations, Xerxes should have held off until the Greeks' interminable internal *polis* disputes destroyed their fragile alliance. He should never have allowed himself to be drawn into battles in confined spaces on both land and sea that neutralized his advantage in numbers.

Herodotus's concentration on the 300 Spartiates obscures the contributions of their helot attendants and loyal allies. But the losers immediately weaponized the heroic catastrophe at Thermopylae. The “wound” (τρωμα=trauma, 8.27) they suffered there, while traumatic for Sparta, boosted Greek morale even in the face of daunting odds.

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7. See, further, my *Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto: Univ. Pr, 1989) 55–75.

After the final battles of the war at Plataea and Mycale in 479 BCE, every Hellene wished to be accounted a “white hat” patriot. But no such unanimity had existed in 480, when only thirty-one of the hundreds of Greek city-states were willing to face the amphibious expedition of the world’s most powerful autocrat. Herodotus’s exposé of Thebans and other Medizing collaborators stirred the resentment of their descendants. Plutarch or some other Boeotian excoriated him as a “barbarian-lover” in *The Malice of Herodotus* for his silence about their parlous and exposed situation on the Persians’ invasion route.

Other Greeks fought at Thermopylae in later times, as did the Roman legions who defeated less maneuverable phalanxes there in 191 BCE. The commemoration of Spartan carnage influenced post-Renaissance Europeans who plundered, conquered, and exploited every ethnicity Xerxes had inherited or subdued. “Defeat ... took on the aura of success” because “we see Thermopylae through their eyes”—that is, after Herodotus’s lionizing narrative (4–5).

Carey devotes fully a third of his study to the reception history of the first battle of Xerxes’s crusade.<sup>8</sup> A chapter on “The Myth in the Modern Era” starts with Michel de Montaigne’s sixteenth-century allusion to the battle and discusses Jacques-Louis David’s controversial painting of “Leonidas at Thermopylae” (1814).<sup>9</sup> He identifies ironic parallels between the Greeks at Thermopylae and the Texans at the Alamo, both of whom exploited members of a different race serving involuntarily (viz., Spartan helots and Texan slaves; 174).

“Thermopylization,” however, tends to denote specifically a doomed force fighting a battle to the last man against an alien enemy and overwhelming odds (175). George Armstrong Custer’s intended massacre of native Americans in 1876 was aborted at “Greasy Grass” (a.k.a. Little Bighorn); by a twisted logic, Custer and the men of the 7th Cavalry regiment acquired an aura of heroism despite their unjustifiable mission. “Manifest destiny” and the Wild West shows of William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody quickly transformed the US Cavalry’s defeat into a famous east-coast entertainment, where genuine native American “savages” mock-slaughtered the US army, and urban crowds<sup>10</sup> celebrated their martyrs for civilization.

In a last stand at Isandlwana in KwaZulu-Natal in 1879 (187), multiracial British troops were surrounded by “backward heathens.”<sup>11</sup> (The author projects the prejudices of civilized Christian Brits). The Britons’ African cause was as discreditable as their Opium Wars in Asia. As Carey acutely clarifies, when your side loses any battle against superior numbers, comparing it to Thermopylae makes the best of a bad situation. The two World Wars changed perceptions somewhat, as seen in H.W. Garrod’s terse and ambiguous 1919 epigram: “Tell them at home there’s nothing here to hide/ We took our orders, asked no questions, died.”

The Thermopylae archetype found a place in National Socialist ideology as well. Aryan-worshipping Nazis found some justification for their peculiar laws of eugenics (infant exposure) and execution of members of “inferior races” (177) in Sparta’s murderous customs. Indeed, the Spartan system, founded on invasion and maintained by state terror, had more in common with

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8. See, further, Emma Bridges et al., eds., *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2007), esp. sect. V, “Leonidas Goes to Hollywood.” The book’s dust cover is borrowed from the Miller-Varley graphic novel.

9. See *Wikipedia*, s.v., *Leonidas at Thermopylae*.

10. Including my Viennese grandfather in New York.

11. Cf. the films *Zulu* (1964) dir. Cy Endfield and *Zulu Dawn* (1979) dir. Douglas Hickox.

Nazi ideology than liberal Anglophones would care to admit.<sup>12</sup> Celebration of the Spartans dominates Herodotus's Thermopylae narrative, and their uniquely repressive regime escapes mention.

Reich Marshal Hermann Göring cast the ill-fated brutal German siege of Stalingrad (1942–43) as a Thermopylae-like demonstration of German tenacity, courage, and discipline against crushing odds (183–86). Diehard elements in the Luftwaffe formed a Leonidas-Squadron as the going got tougher (186). A US Undersecretary of State considered the Vietnamese siege of the imperialist French at Dien Bien Phu to be a modern Thermopylae. Even those who won victories at great cost, like the Poles at Monte Cassino, have adduced Thermopylaean massacre and self-sacrifice (192).

What then does “Thermopylae” mean today? Cavafy's dispirited eponymous poem (1901/1903) stripped the glamor from the engagement and turned the battle into every person's daily dread of some Ephialtes betraying noble causes (198). But today tee-shirts hawked on Amazon and elsewhere and decals on pick-up trucks' rear windows exalt Leonidas, Spartan helmets, and the tough-talk words, ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ<sup>13</sup> (“come and get it”)—“it” being the displayer's weapon—spear, cannon, or AR-15.

Thermopylae has migrated (201) from moral exhortation to entertainment, decoration, and threat. The Athenians' unprecedented stand (and attack on the run) at Marathon (490 BCE) would be a better symbol, an actual victory, though, like the loss at Thermopylae, of little strategic significance. But Marathon's morale purposes have been coopted by long-distance, commemorative races and a brand of gasoline touted as “better in the long run.”

In his succinct study, Chris Carey has both described what happened in an obscure elbow of northern Greece to an alarmed and divided people in late summer 480 and shown how later generations have exploited their self-sacrificing defense. The legacy of the battle far outweighs its immediate military significance. Herodotus's gripping “you are there,” tear-inducing account determined the battle's heroes and their actions' meanings, ancient and modern. *Thermopylae* is a discerning examination of a still resonant battle and the problems it poses for ancient historians. Its author writes intelligently for nonspecialist students of military history, without footnoting controversies. He has walked Xerxes's route.

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12. See, further, Anton Powell, *Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 B.C.* (London: Routledge, 1988) 262n313.

13. Plutarch, “Sayings of the Spartans,” *Moralia* 225d.