

And Now It's the Spartans



by Armando Simón

A recent [article](#) “Is This Sparta? Revisionists Get The Legendary Warriors All Wrong” on Sparta published in *The Federalist* was a counter to an [article](#) in *Foreign Affairs* on the same subject. The latter article “Spartans Were Losers,” was written by Bret Devereaux, a historian at the University of Northern Carolina, the same university that was found to have a longstanding history of racism in its admission process, which was recently struck down by the Supreme Court, much to the lamentation of liberals everywhere.

Alternating between historical facts and snarky comments, Devereaux takes umbrage that Sparta has become popularized in the United States (“Spartaganda”), from fitness equipment and programs to games to films. He is particularly worried about groups within the military. Considering Sparta’s reputation as superb warriors and athletes, that appeal to many is understandable.

Devereaux maintains that Sparta's military excellence was non-existent (something I myself argued decades ago and have since jettisoned as inaccurate). He erects straw men and then knocks them down with snarky comments.

First, he states that Spartan tactics remained static for over a century. That is true, but stagnation of tactics is not exclusively centered in Sparta. The phalanx formation was a solid wall of spears and bronze shields and helmets and remained the preferred tactic of all Greek city-states, and the reason it remained static was because it was extremely effective, particularly against foreign armies. Think of a bronze porcupine.

Armies of men standing in lines prior to and while fighting each other was the order of battle for many centuries, including when rifles and cannons were used during Napoleonic times. This tactic was finally abandoned in WW I with the advent of the machinegun, because of the horrendous casualties in the beginning of the war.

This reluctance to abandon tried and true tactics is common among military leaders, as common as the desire to refight the last war. For example, when Napoleon invaded Egypt the opposing Janissaries complained to him that the French were not using the same honorable tactics that the Janissaries used to (which is why they were crushed).

At any rate, the Spartans were considered by the Greeks to be the best warriors and since they were their contemporaries, we should take their word for it instead of being dismissive two thousand years later. For one thing, in a mixed Hellenistic phalanx, the Spartans always stood in the place of honor, on the right.

It must also be remembered that being a soldier preparing for battle was the sole reason for existence. When Leonidas marched off to Thermopylae with a handful of soldiers, the

remaining Spartans must have been green with envy; after all, this was what they had always trained for. The movie *300* makes this point when Leonidas asks some of the other Hellenes what is their occupation—cobbler, farmer, etc.—while Spartans answer being warriors (however, the movie is absurd on many levels, including Spartans breaking formation to fight individually, away from the phalanx).

The Spartans did occasionally suffer defeat. The Theban general Epaminondas, defeated them at Leuctra and Mantinea by changing tactics, using an oblique order, wherein the left wing of the Thebans facing the Spartans was overweighted. This tactic was used to good use by Frederick the Great, many centuries later.

Another battle that they lost was at Lechaeum, where the opposing force under Iphicrates was composed mostly of peltasts. Peltasts were almost always auxiliary mercenaries from Phrygia who did not fight in close quarters but rather hurled missiles at their foes. If their foes attacked, they would easily retreat since they were not burdened by heavy armor, then resume attack if the line of phalanx broke up.

Spartan cavalry was not as effective as others'. They did not have much of a navy, preferring to fight on land, so that Athenians ruled the seas and Spartans ruled the land. And also, they were ineffective at siege warfare, for which they relied on their Athenian allies at Plataea.

To properly understand Sparta, one must understand the basis for the creation of Spartan society. Worldwide, humans have had slaves. When Sparta originally conquered its neighbors, they became their serfs producing their food. It was a fear that these helots, who lived apart from them and outnumbered their oppressors, would rise up and kill them that led [Lycurgus](#) to [transform](#) the original Spartans into a militaristic society, ever ready to suppress revolts and repel invaders. It became a monomania. Children were taken away from

parents to get them used to brutalization. The food was so bad for Spartans that it was legendary. All other endeavors, particularly artistic and commercial, were outlawed (which is why everything that we know of Sparta comes from other contemporaries). In order to maintain stability, they imposed total equality among its citizens, since income inequality along with envy had torn apart other city-states.

This is also why they were always reluctant to send their armies far away (the Spartan rulers actually had the nerve to tell the Athenians that they would not be able to help them against the Persians because of a [religious](#) holiday—twice; they decided to join the attack on the Persians when the Athenians pointed out that if they lost the Persians would control the Athenians' magnificent fleet and would land troops anywhere in Spartan territory). They cared little for the welfare of other Greek city-states and only became involved in international wars if Sparta would be ultimately threatened, or, if one Greek city-state became so powerful that it could invade their territory. This accounts for the “failure” to maintain their armies far from their city-state, as Devereaux puts it. Later, however, they adopted a radically new strategy in that they tried controlling the other city-states so they would pose no threats, which resulted in a coalition against Sparta.

Considering the fact, that their main preoccupation was in keeping the helots in their place under their boot and foreigners away from their soil, the Spartans were, indeed, successful. And they were not above throwing other city-states to the Persians if it suited them; they never claimed to be “the defender of Greek independence.”

The key to understanding Devereaux's stance is in his use of the word “fascist” to describe Spartan society, the word “fascist” being a dog whistle to leftists. Contrary to what he seems to think, no one is thinking about emulating Spartan society, just Spartan's physical fitness and tenacity in

battle. Considering the present-day movement to homosexualize the American military by leftists, this pro-Spartan attitude is both understandable and commendable.

Sparta was the first totalitarian country for which we have detailed records. As usual, the emphasis was on militarism and equality among its members; to call it "fascist" because of its militarism is a modern-day prejudice since Marxist societies are also well known for their militarism, their dogma of equality, their brutality, and their rigidity, from the Soviet Union to Red China to Castro Cuba, etc. Spartan, Marxist, Fascist and National Socialist are twins.

Armando Simón has degrees in history and psychology and is the author of *The U* and *The Only Red Star I Liked Was a Starfish*.