

## **Spartan Military Dominance: Helot Suppression and the Integration of Children into a Militaristic Society**

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Ancient Greece, although connected through trade networks, religion, and alliances, developed into independent city-states with competing governments, lifestyles, and social structures. The independence of each city-state allowed for high cultural diversity across the region; however, certain city-states, such as Sparta, became recognized for their military attraction, strict training regimen, and glorified victories with external enemies. These features, identified through written records and archeological evidence, defined their city-state, allowing historians to understand more clearly the human activities within each Greek city-state. The written records of early historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plutarch, retrospectively, who were not native Spartans, captured the Spartans' warlike tendencies.<sup>1</sup> From these historical accounts, Spartan warriors became prominent figures, symbolizing strength, obedience, and discipline. Spartan children assimilated into this militaristic society without any choice, entering hardships that were unprecedented for other Greek city-states. Spartans brutally trained their children, via the *agôgê*, a mandatory training regimen for boys, to ensure that fierce soldiers were created for the establishment of a strong military society.<sup>2</sup> Spartan soldiers and military strategies did not develop suddenly; instead, the aggressive nature of the Spartans developed over time. The initiation of this military culture began after the early Spartan tribes conquered Messenia and Laconia, displacing the native peoples. The Spartan military suppressed these people, known as helots, to a lower status, depriving them of private property, political rights, and many freedoms enjoyed by the *Spartiates*, or warriors.<sup>3</sup> Because the helots largely outnumbered the Spartans, it became necessary

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<sup>1</sup>Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus* (ca. 415 B.C.E.), *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2707/2707-h/2707-h.htm> (accessed November 2, 2020); Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (ca. 431 B.C.E.), *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm> (accessed March 4, 2021); Xenophon, "The Laws and Customs of the Spartans," in *Classics of Western Thought*, Vol. 1: *The Ancient World*, ed. Donald S. Gochberg, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), 160–172; Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* (ca. 100 C.E.), in *The Parallel Lives by Plutarch*, Loeb Classical Library edition, vol. 1 (1914), [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Lycurgus\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Lycurgus*.html) (accessed November 3, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Xenophon, "The Laws and Customs of the Spartans," 163.

<sup>3</sup> Humphrey Mitchell, *Sparta: to Krypton tēs Politeias tōn lakedeimoniōn* (1952; rep. ed., Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 75.

for Sparta to mandate military training for children to ensure the strength of the society.<sup>4</sup> Spartan children, through the utilization of artificial selection and the *agôgê*, initially served as great warriors not to assert dominance over the region, but instead to suppress the helots, thus rendering Sparta as a heavily militaristic society and promoting conformity.

The quality of training originating in Sparta no doubt resulted in the peak performance of warriors; however, modern scholars analyzed the cause of such a well-trained society. Modern historians have different interpretations to explain the causes of Spartan military ascension. Political economist Humphrey Mitchell argues that Spartans developed their lifestyle partially to suppress the helots, but also to prevent an external invasion. Although Mitchell acknowledges that the helots played an important role in indirectly creating the Spartan military, he also asserts that the reason for a disciplined military originated as a means “to suppress sedition within the State or repel invasion from without.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, University of Edinburgh historian Nic Fields agrees that the *agôgê* and its “code” played a central role in ensuring “their military supremacy over the subordinate population.”<sup>6</sup> Fields emphasizes the importance of military training within the society to prevent potential revolts posed by helots. British historian Michael Whitby has compared the helots to “a potentially active human volcano,” indicating the dangers of suppressing an eventually overwhelmingly large lower class.<sup>7</sup> Although he recognizes the dangers of invasion by foreign enemies, he attributes the origins of the strong Spartan military to “the refusal of the Messenians [i.e., helots] to submit quietly,” forcing the *Spartiates* “to organize themselves as a community of professional soldiers, dedicated not (like many militaristic peoples) to foreign conquest . . . but above all to maintaining strict internal discipline and harmony.”<sup>8</sup> Here Whitby identifies the helots as the primary cause for fear and potential revolts within the Spartan society. While Whitby distinguishes the helots as a catalyst to the development of military training, Gina Salapata suggests an alternative reasoning for heroic actions centered around culture and religion. After deciphering terra-cotta plaques of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Salapata argues that heroes served as “an intermediate” between gods and humans.<sup>9</sup> Salapata neither wholly accepts nor rejects the key points presented by Whitby and Fields, but instead suggests that the cultural and religious aspects of a “hero” possessed greater value for Spartans. Whitby, Fields, and Mitchell all recognize

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Hunt, “Helots at the Battle of Platea,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 46, no. 2 (1997): 129-44 at 129-30.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *Sparta*, 165.

<sup>6</sup> Nic Fields, *The Spartan Way* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen and Sword Books Ltd, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> G. E. M. De Ste Croix, “The Helot Threat,” In *Sparta*, edited by Whitby Michael, 190-95, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> G. E. M. De Ste Croix, “The Helot Threat,” 190–195 at 192.

<sup>9</sup> Gina Salapata, *Heroic offerings: The Terracotta Plaques from the Spartan Sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 3.

the threat that the helots posed to the Spartan military, but Mitchell alone denies that the helots experienced the poor treatment that other modern historians have suggested, and that protection of their homeland held equal importance to the suppression of revolts.<sup>10</sup> The various insights provided by these modern scholars, although quite different in some senses, revolve around the similar conviction that Sparta required a well-qualified army of highly-trained warriors.

The purpose of highly-sophisticated military tactics primarily stems from the necessity to maintain control over the helots, which indicates a direct correlation between the threat of helot uprisings and the amount of effort dedicated to military superiority. Military supremacy over the helots depended on the quality of soldiers, as the helots drastically outnumbered the Spartan warriors. In fact, Herodotus, in *Histories*, claims that, at the time of the Battle of Plataea, Sparta contained a “ratio of seven helots to each Spartan.”<sup>11</sup> The dramatic difference between the number of helots and Spartan warriors caused the Spartans to live in constant fear of uncontrollable rebellions, motivating them to maintain their physical and military superiority. Sparta understood the importance of genetically favorable traits. The newborn had to possess what “the elders of the tribes” deemed to be “well-built and sturdy”; however, if the infant ultimately exemplified signs that it might be “ill-born and deformed,” then it was considered to have “no advantage either to itself or the state,” and thus murder of the child ensued.<sup>12</sup> To determine the potential strength of the baby, the elders would utilize “wine,” which “was reputed to induce convulsions in weak babies, while tempering the strength of healthy ones.”<sup>13</sup> The complex understanding and, ultimately, the brutal reality that Spartans enforced signifies their dedication and sacrifices to the strength of their society. Sparta decided to exterminate society of these weaker links at an early age to maintain their powerful positioning over the helots. The continuation of this practice promoted stronger individuals as favorable genetic capabilities passed from generation to generation, allowing for much stronger warriors to be bred. Ultimately, the function of artificial selection enabled the Spartans to overpower the much larger helot population.

Spartan warriors did not develop rapidly; instead, it took ample time, training, and discipline to produce high-quality Spartan warriors. The difficulty of education and training for these young Spartans exemplifies the necessity for protection against the overwhelming population of helots. The continuous need for military dominance over this slave class has been demonstrated through the amalgamation of evidence surrounding Spartan military strategy, education, and training into the lifestyle of Spartan children. The military training for boys, by modern standards, was intentionally abusive. Within these training programs, boys were forced to walk barefoot, no matter the time of year, to ensure that their feet would “harden”, so that “they would go up steep

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<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, *Sparta*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Hunt, “Helots at the Battle of Platea,” 129–44 at 129–130.

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, at chap. 16.1.

<sup>13</sup> Fields, *The Spartan Way*.

places with far greater ease.” Shoes, although essential today, to these Spartan warriors, implied weakness to those who trained. Another brutal reality was that older boys, deemed “whip-carriers,” would “inflict whatever chastisement was necessary,” not only signifying the brutality of these training programs, but also demonstrating the strict military culture throughout the Spartan society.<sup>14</sup> The culmination of the aggressive and violent actions of the Spartan training camps resonated in the treatment of the helots, as Spartan warriors beat, and many times, killed this lower class. Just after the graduation from the *agôgê*, young men, around eighteen years of age, “set out at the dead of night with the minimum of clothing and supplies to ruthlessly hunt down and eliminate helots, particularly the few individuals, we can suppose, who were judged capable of becoming nuclei of discontent.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the *Spartiates* justified their position within the society and, at the same time, attempted to prevent potential helot revolts. The *agôgês* combined teaching and violence and encouraged stealing. Spartans believed that young soldiers stealing from helots forced the creation of stealthier adolescents, ultimately making “the boys craftier.”<sup>16</sup> Not only did the boys become educated on stealth, but they “also cultivated their warlike instincts,” while attempting to avoid capture.<sup>17</sup> These hostile impulses, engrained in young Spartans’ minds, signify the dedication to the development and prosperity of their militaristic society. The encouragement of stealing taught the trainees about problem-solving in intense scenarios, as well as developing individualized military strategies. The clever military tactics and the ability to go unseen became significant in their attacks against the helots at a later age. By developing this system of educational training, the young men demonstrated great strength and thus could move on to the next stage in their lives: becoming a Spartan soldier.

The accumulation of evidence, through the perspective of the development of boys and young men, indicates the importance of the military within Spartan culture; however, the reasoning for this military may not be as apparent. Although some may argue that the military dominance of the region established the necessity for a militaristic society, the more prominent justification for the increased military state was due to the need to suppress the helots. The helots outnumbered the Spartans seven to one, thus suggesting that the development of a strong military to suppress this slave class became warranted. The helots feigned great loyalty to the Spartans warriors, perhaps in fear of the repercussions of disobeying their masters; however, uprisings performed by the helots still occurred. Helot graves at the site of the Battle of Plataea (479 B.C.E.), reveal that at least some

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<sup>14</sup> Xenophon, “The Laws and Customs of the Spartans,” 163.

<sup>15</sup> Fields, *The Spartan Way*.

<sup>16</sup> Xenophon, *The Polity of the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians* (ca. 400 B.C.E), *Project Gutenberg*, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1178/1178-h/1178-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0002](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1178/1178-h/1178-h.htm#link2H_4_0002) (accessed October 28, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Xenophon, *The Polity of the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians*.

helots fought alongside and were willing to die for their masters.<sup>18</sup> The level of loyalty exhibited by the helots suggests, however, that it was instigated by fear. Plutarch describes the relationship between Spartans and helots as “harsh and cruel,” indicating that “ephors, as soon as they came into office, made a formal declaration of war upon the helots.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the establishment of dominance over the helots as a means for training and military power implies that the Spartans developed a fear of the sheer number of slaves that they controlled. The Spartan warriors exerted their power over the slaves frequently, killing the strongest of the workers, thus forcing the helots into submission. The conformity of the helots within the Spartan kingdom, primarily out of fear, allowed the Spartans to remain in power, ultimately promoting a stable society and allowing for expansion. The conquests of Sciritis and Tegea served more as an alliance, as the Spartans knew that “they had too many helots on their hands,” and it would be “easier to turn the conquered Tegeans into allies than into slaves.”<sup>20</sup> By recognizing the threat that the helots posed, the expansion efforts transformed from pure dominance to hegemony.

Through artificial selection and intense training programs, Sparta society developed great warriors to suppress the helots, thus enabling a strong militaristic society to be built. Sparta developed into a militaristic society through its efficient system of creating warriors from young men. This gave rise to the training programs and military capacity of Sparta. The strong military system enabled Sparta to reign dominant around the region; however, the development of a strong military initially served to repress the helots. Ultimately, the dedication to military forces exhibited by Spartan civilians, regardless of the enemy, surrounding territories, or helots, should be recognized as one of the greatest throughout the course of history. In a quote written by Plutarch, the renowned dedication of the Spartan warriors to their homeland can be exemplified, as Spartan women told their husbands and sons going into war, “come back with your shield – or on it.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Hunt, “Helots at the Battle of Platea,” 129–44 at 129–130.

<sup>19</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, at chap. 28.4.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, *Sparta*, 29.

<sup>21</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* (ca. 100 C.E.), *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, [https://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/background/8c\\_p1.html#:~:text=Asked%20what%20was%20the%20greatest,of%20mothers%20to%20their%20sons](https://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/background/8c_p1.html#:~:text=Asked%20what%20was%20the%20greatest,of%20mothers%20to%20their%20sons) (accessed November 6, 2020).

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