

Thucydides, Yesterday and Today

Summary translation of the Interview

with Jacqueline de Romilly

Conducted in French by Jean Catsiapis*

Renowned Hellenist, Professor at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, the second woman to become a member of the Académie française, Jacqueline de Romilly is also an international authority on Thucydides. The following interview, including passages from her work, sheds light on her view of Thucydides. A future issue of Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies will include Romilly's comments on ancient and modern Greece as well as her opinions on the importance of teaching ancient Greek and on the influence of Greek philosophy.

Thucydides' importance is not limited to learning about ancient Greece. Romilly situates Thucydides from two perspectives. First, he created the historical genre. Herodotus may be called the father of history, but it was Thucydides who developed a demanding level of objectivity, a political history which relied on reflexion and on what he could know and actually see. There are no legends, anecdotes or divine interventions; instead, there is something wildly new in terms of historical objectivity and rationality.

Second, he created a historical political philosophy and a theory of international relations which, unlike history as we understand it today, analyzes the historical events and searches for the essential. Thucydides analyzes and reflects not only on battles, but also on the causes of the war, democracy, demagoguery and the role of ambition on political problems. He said himself that he wanted his history to be useful for those wishing to understand those events and, because of the human element, to understand their own.

Romilly sees people across the ages recognizing their present and trying to understand it through Thucydides. She cites Thibaudet who recognized WWI in Thucydides' writings. The parallel, similarity and extensive nature of WWI and the

Peloponnesian War are detailed and analysed therein. In the Peloponnesian War, the most directly touched was not Peloponnesus but the entire Greek world; the same can be said about WWII which became a global war.

Romilly refers to her works *Thucydide et l'impérialisme athénien* and *Alcibiade* in which she had discussed these similarities between the two wars and the desire for conquest as well as the subsequent disaster (*Alcibiade*, pp. 244-245). She also compares the international relations and foreign policies among the ancient Greek City-States with those, today, among world powers and states. As the Greek states, in the 4th c. BC, asked to unite against the non-Greek world by forming federations and confederations (cf. the voices of Gorgias, Lysias, Isocrates), Romilly mentions the European Union today. The lesson she draws from the case of Alcibiades is that we must become conscious of our actions, consciousness which is needed today more than ever in the international scene. Yet what she considers more important is the crisis of democracy and, on this point, the parallels are even more surprising since the existence of rivalries among men end up by paralysing the State (*Alcibiade*, pp.246-247).

According to Romilly, for every recent event one may find an explanation or a commentary in the work of Thucydides. As she says, at the time of Hitler and WWII, she wrote *Thucydide et l'impérialisme athénien*; later she wrote *Alcibiade*. She insists that what is important, in the work of Thucydides, is (a) that we find the analysis of rival theories and aspirations and of the problems of democracy; (b) that this philosophical lesson and this capacity to find the theoretical schemas of analysis help us understand subsequent events. The study of Thucydides, she concludes, is not so much in order to learn about Greece as to know ourselves.