

## 10: Sparta System Action Patterns—Socialization

### Background

Early Greece wasn't a nation. Each city and its surrounding territory formed a "polis" (city-state) not connected to other *poleis* (plural). In some places, a powerful *polis* would dominate and control its neighboring *poleis*, even forcing its people to become near-slaves. Sparta was one of the most powerful city-states. You'll investigate some of the reasons.



<http://www.civilization.org.uk/greece-2/sparta/sparta-constitution>

<http://resourcesforhistoryteachers.wikispaces.com/7.24>



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## Investigation: Spartan Fame

Thucydides, Athenian general and historian, writing in about 431 BCE, tells about the unusual character of Sparta:<sup>1</sup>

Suppose the city of Sparta to be deserted, and nothing left but the temples and the ground-plan, distant ages would be very unwilling to believe that the power of the Lacedaemonians [*another name for the Spartan people*] was at all equal to their fame. Their city is not built as a unified group of buildings, and has no splendid temples or other edifices; it rather resembles a group of villages, like the ancient towns of Hellas [*rural central Greece*], and would therefore make a poor show.

***The Spartans were famous not for what they built, but for their patterns of action, described in data that follow. Identify these patterns.***

<http://wikireedia.net/wikireedia/index.php?title=File:Hoplite.jpg>



Sparta had three classes of people—*Spartiates* (citizen/nobles), *perioeci* (non-citizen civilians, craftsmen and other free workers) and *helots* (near-slave serfs, agricultural workers). The helots outnumbered the other two classes. Most helots came from Messene, which had been conquered and dominated by the Spartans.

All able-bodied male *Spartiates* (even the kings) trained and became *hoplites* [HO-plee-tay]—foot soldiers equipped as shown above. The large, heavy shield was supported by the left shoulder and controlled by the hoplite's left arm.

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<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (written 431 BCE) 1:10



<http://www.twcenter.net/forums/showthread.php?302865-Extended-Cultures-4-Faction-Previews-The-Greek-City-States>

The standard Spartan war formation: the *phalanx*. Other Greek armies were similar, also having hoplite soldiers and using phalanx formations in war.

In 480 BCE, the forces of the Persians under King Xerxes I were invading Greece. They were opposed by military forces from a confederation of Greek city-states. The most famous battle of this campaign occurred at Thermopylae, on a narrow strip of flat ground between mountain cliffs and the sea. The Persians arrived from the north with a huge army, and needed to move east, then south to gain control of Athens and the surrounding region. The Persian army—probably at least 70,000 troops plus support personnel, perhaps many more—were opposed by about 7,000 Greek troops, including 300 Spartans. The Greek force was led by Sparta’s King Leonidas. **Herodotus tells the story:**<sup>1</sup>

When the Persian army drew near to the entrance of the pass at Thermopylae, the Greek forces were seized with fear; and a council was held to consider a retreat. It was the wish of the Peloponnesians generally that the army should fall back to the Peloponnese, and there guard the Isthmus [*at Corinth*]. But Leonidas, who saw the dismay of the Phocians and Locrians [*soldiers from regions near Thermopylae*], when they heard of this plan, spoke out for remaining where they were, while they sent envoys to the several cities to ask for help, since they were too few to make a stand against an army like that of the Persians.

While this debate was going on, Xerxes sent a mounted spy to observe the Greeks, and note how many they were, and see what they were doing. Before Xerxes left Asia Minor, he had heard that a few men were assembled at this place, and that they were led by certain Lacedaemonians [Spartans], under Leonidas...

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<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, Vol. 7, [http://www.shsu.edu/~his\\_ncp/Herother.html](http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Herother.html) (adapted)

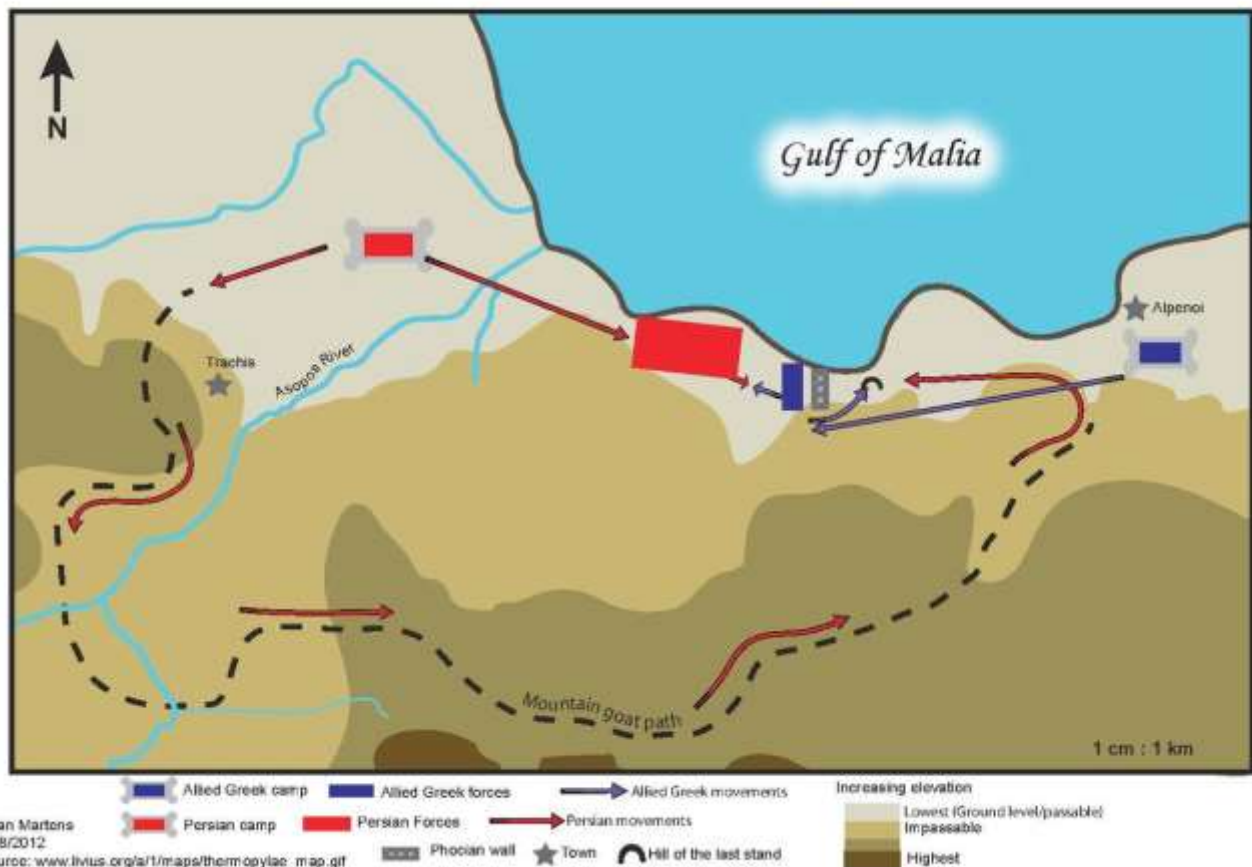
[Note: The wall mentioned below was an earlier fortification built by locals—Phocians—across the narrowest part of the strip of land between the mountain and the sea.]

The horseman rode up to the camp, and looked about him, but did not see the whole army; for many were on the far side of the wall (which had been rebuilt and was now carefully guarded); but he observed those on the outside, who were camped in front of the wall.

The Spartans held the outer guard at this time, and were seen by the spy, some of them engaged in gymnastic exercises, others combing their long hair. At this the spy greatly marveled, but he counted their number, and when he had taken accurate note of everything, he rode back quietly. No one pursued after him, nor paid any heed to his visit. So he returned, and told Xerxes all that he had seen.

<https://prezi.com/hk7gajywe6b3/battle-of-thermopylae/>

### The Battle of Thermopylae, 480 B.C.



Xerxes thought this way of acting of the Greek forces was strange and laughable, but one of his aides—an old man with previous experience of Spartan forces—told him that the Spartans were prepared to fight. Xerxes didn't believe him.

Four whole days Xerxes waited, expecting the Greeks to run away. On the fifth day, when the Greeks were not gone, he figured their staying was just taunting and recklessness. He grew angry, and sent against them the Mede and Cissian soldiers, with orders to take them alive and bring them into his presence. Then the Medes rushed forward and charged the Greeks, but fell in vast numbers. Others took the places of the slain, and would not be beaten off, though they suffered terrible losses. It became clear to all, and especially to the king, that though he had plenty of combatants, he had very few warriors. The struggle, however, continued the whole day.

Then the Medes, having met a rough reception, withdrew from the fight; and their place was taken by the band of Persians commanded by Hydarnes, whom the king called his "Immortals." They, it was assumed, would soon finish the business. But when they joined battle with the Greeks, they had no better success than the Medes. Things went much as before. The two armies were fighting in a narrow space, and the barbarians [*Persians*] were using shorter spears than the Greeks, so their greater numbers gave them no advantage.

The Lacedaemonians...proved to be far more skillful in fighting than their enemies, often turning their backs, pretending they were all running away. The barbarians would rush after them with much noise and shouting. The Spartans, when they came near, would wheel round and face their pursuers, in this way destroying vast numbers of the enemy. Some Spartans fell in these encounters, but only a very few. At last the Persians found that all their efforts to advance through the pass didn't work, and that, whether they attacked by divisions or in any other way, they were unsuccessful. They withdrew to their own camp.

During these assaults, it is said that Xerxes, who was watching the battle, jumped up three times from the chair on which he sat, in terror for his army. Next day the combat began again, but with no better success for the barbarians. The Greeks were so few that the barbarians hoped to find them disabled by their wounds, so they would stop resisting the new attack. But the Greeks were in formation, each city's warriors together, and withstood the assault in turns, (all except the Phocians, who had been stationed on the mountain to guard the pathway). So, when the Persians found no difference between that day and the preceding, they went back to their camp again.

At this point Xerxes called off the main fight. However, the story doesn't end well for the Greeks. Xerxes learned about an alternate path over the mountain around to the other side of Thermopylae, and sent a strong force of troops along this path, marching in the light of the full moon. The Phocians, who were supposed to defend the mountain path, fled in fear. King Leonidas, soon aware that he was outflanked, sent away many of the Greek soldiers to safety. The Spartans and about 1,200 other soldiers under his command stayed behind as a rear guard.

The Persians attacked, killed the remainder of the 300 Spartans, including King Leonidas, and most of the other remaining Greek troops.



The Greeks lost the battle, but not the war. Later naval battles won by Greeks changed the course of the war in their favor.

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***You've identified some Spartan patterns of action in the account of the battle. What shared ideas might explain these action patterns?***

“Attributes” are basic elements of human personality, closely related to a person’s deeply-embedded ideas and values. Examples of attributes: “talkative,” “flirtatious,” “complaining,” “humble,” “determined to be physically fit,” “easily angered.”

***List the attributes that Spartans are likely to consider desirable in a hoplite, such as “brave.” Make your list as complete as possible.***



<http://www.battle-of-thermopylae.eu/gallery.html>

Present-day photograph of the area of the battle. At the time of the battle, the edge of the sea was much closer to the mountain. In more recent time, the land was filled in. The original shoreline was about where the road on the right is now.

## Investigation: Socialization in Sparta

Every society—Persian, Chinese, Indian, American—expects its members to think and act in certain ways and possess certain **attributes**. The young learn these from their elders and from training. The process of teaching and learning is called “socialization” by social scientists.

Xenophon (431-354 BCE) was a soldier and historian from Athens, but an admirer of Sparta, essentially an “honorary Spartan citizen” who had his own sons raised there. Writing about 400 BCE, He described Sparta’s socialization system, called “*agoge*.”<sup>1</sup>

**Analyze the data that follow, and identify possible relationships between Sparta’s socialization patterns and the hoplite attributes you identified previously.**

**Note:** “Lycurgus” was the possibly-mythical person in the distant past who Spartans considered the founder of their laws and way of life.

Sparta, despite having one of the smallest populations, had nonetheless clearly become the most powerful and most famous state in Greece... They have become successful by obeying the laws laid down for them by Lycurgus.

Lycurgus required females to take physical exercise just as much as males. He arranged for women also, just like men, to have contests of speed and strength with one another, in the belief that when both parents are strong their children too are born sturdier.

[*At age seven, every son of a citizen is removed from his family to begin agoge schooling*] Lycurgus...ruled that a man should take charge of them as Trainer-in-Chief. Lycurgus gave this man authority both to assemble the boys and to punish them severely. He also gave him a squad of young adults equipped with whips to administer punishment when necessary. The result has been that respect and obedience in combination are found to a high degree at Sparta.

Rather than letting boys’ feet grow soft in shoes, he passed a strict rule to make them strong by going barefoot, in the belief that this would make it easier for them to walk uphill, become better jumpers, and run faster than if they wore shoes. And instead of their clothes allowing them to become delicate, he required them to become used to the same kind of garment all year round. The idea behind this is that they would be better prepared for cold and heat. As for food, he instructed the *eiren* [*young adult warriors*] to furnish for the common meal just the right amount for them never to become sluggish through being too full, while also giving them a taste of what it is not to have enough. His view was that boys under this kind of rule would be better able, when required, to work hard without eating, as well as to make the same rations last longer; they would be satisfied with a plain diet, would adapt better to accepting any type of food, and would be healthier. He also considered that a diet which produced slim bodies would also make them grow tall.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://stacitiesbaad.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/xenophon-spartan-society.doc>

On the other hand, while he did not allow them to take what they required with no effort, to prevent them suffering from hunger he did permit them to steal in order to ward off starvation. Clearly a prospective thief must keep awake at night, and by day must practice deception and lie in wait, as well as have spies ready if he is going to seize anything. So clearly it was Lycurgus' wish that by training the boys in all these ways he would make them more resourceful at feeding themselves and better fighters.

Someone might ask then, if he considered theft a good thing, why on earth did he inflict many lashes on a boy who was caught stealing? My answer is, because people punish anyone who does not perform satisfactorily.

To make sure that someone should be in control of the boys even when no adult happened to be on the spot, he assigned the smartest of the *eiren* to take command of each squadron. As a result the boys of Sparta are never without someone in charge of them.

When boys reach their teens, they become self-willed and are particularly liable to cockiness. This was the age at which Lycurgus loaded them with the greatest amount of work and made sure they should be kept occupied most of the time. In his wish to see a sense of respect strongly implanted in them, he gave orders that even in the streets they should keep both hands inside their cloaks, should proceed in silence, and should not let their gaze wander in any direction, but fix their eyes on the ground in front of them. Certainly, you would sooner hear a cry from a stone statue or succeed in catching the eye of a bronze one than a Spartan boy. And whenever they attended the mess [for meals], they were only allowed to respond to questions the men put to them. Such, then, was the attention he devoted to youths.

However, he displayed the greatest concern by far for the young adults, since he believed that they had the most influence for the good of the state if they were of the right character.

From among the young adults, the *ephors* [ruling council of five men] select three of those in their prime. Each of these picks 100 men as followers, explaining clearly why he approves some and rejects others. As a result, those who do not achieve the honor are at war with both the ones who have dismissed them and those chosen instead of them.

Even those not chosen must keep themselves physically fit, since their rivalry brings on fights whenever they meet. However, all passers-by have the right to separate the combatants. Anyone who defies the man attempting to separate them is brought before the *ephors*; they levy a stiff fine in their desire to establish the principle that anger must never prevail over respect for the law.

***List your conclusions in a two-column table, with “hoplite attributes” on the left, and the “socialization processes” associated with each attribute on the right.***

(There may be more than one process associated with an attribute, and more than one attribute associated with each process. You may wish to expand or change your list of attributes to describe Sparta's socialization system more precisely.)

Next page: additional data



The fame of Sparta continued long after it ceased to be a power. Plutarch, writing five centuries after Sparta was a dominant force in Greece, obviously read Xenophon's account but also had other sources (no longer available to us) for his descriptions of Spartan society. He filled in some of the gaps in describing the socialization of Spartan youth:<sup>1</sup>

As soon as male children were seven years old, Lycurgus ordered them all to be taken by the state and enrolled in companies, where they were put under the same discipline and nurture, and so became accustomed to share one another's sports and studies. The boy who excelled in judgement and was most courageous in fighting, was made captain of his company. The rest watched him, obeyed his orders, and submitted to his punishments, so their boyish training was a practice of obedience. Besides, the elderly men used to watch their sports, and by egging them on to mimic battles and disputes, learned accurately how each one of them was naturally disposed when it was a question of boldness and aggressiveness in their struggles.

Of reading and writing, they learned only enough to do their duty; all the rest of their training was calculated to make them obey commands well, endure hardships, and conquer in battle. Therefore, as they grew in age, their bodily exercise was increased; their heads were close-clipped, and they were accustomed to going barefoot, and to playing for the most part without clothes. When they were twelve years old, they no longer had tunics to wear, received one cloak a year, had hard, dry flesh, and rarely had baths and ointments. They slept in barracks, grouped in troops and companies, on pallet-beds which they collected for themselves, breaking off with their hands — no knives allowed — the tops of the rushes which grew along the Eurotas River.

At age 30, those successful in passing through all the required training became full citizens. They—or their wives if they had gone off to war—had control of a section of farmland, along with *helots* to do the work of farming. They continued to live in barracks and eat at a common mess with other men, even if they were married; they continued training and working out to stay in top condition. They were expected to contribute a significant portion of the crops their land produced to their mess group.

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***In your opinion, should Sparta have been used all of these socialization methods? If not, identify one or more of them you think was wrong, and give your reasons.***

***What were the primary goals of Spartan society? In your opinion, were they appropriate for any society? Give reasons for your answers.***

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *The Life of Lycurgus*, Ch. 16:  
[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Lycurgus\\*.html#12.5](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Lycurgus*.html#12.5)

A final word from Xenophon about Sparta:

Now it is plain that these laws are extremely ancient... But despite their age, even today other peoples find them new and strange. And the most extraordinary thing of all is that despite the universal praise for such a code of behavior, not a single city is willing to copy it.

## Follow-Up: Socialization Here and Now

Becoming a member of almost any organization, team, or group requires some kind of socialization or “initiation,” even for adults.

The first day on a job, a young plumber’s helper may be sent back to the shop for a “pipe stretcher” or a “left-handed monkey wrench.” There are, of course, no such tools. The experienced plumbers are playing a joke on the inexperienced helper.

They are also socializing the helper, giving the person important information he or she will need to be part of the plumbing crew. The practical joke is a way of telling the helper:

- We are a group of friends. You’re new.
- Your job is to do what you’re told.
- We know a lot about plumbing that you don’t know.
- You have lower status than anyone else.

If the new plumber’s helper “learns” this information, he or she will soon be part of the plumbing crew. But if the new worker refuses to accept any one of these four messages, he or she will probably soon be out of a job.

***Choose a club, team or other group, either one to which you belong or one available for investigation. Identify the processes used to socialize new members, and the rules or other information that new members are taught (including informal rules and messages not put in writing).***

***Identify the primary goal or goals of the group, and explain how they relate to socialization processes. Note that the main goal of many groups may not be written down or even talked about by members, (e.g. “having a good time with people like me”) but they will all understand it.***

***Prepare a report (illustrated, if possible) that shows your results.***

### **For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:**

Major patterns of action within a society create well-known subsystems—economic, political, social class, religious, etc. The socialization subsystem is usually the most important of all.

In the study of social systems, new concepts are best introduced in unfamiliar contexts that contrast with the learner’s society. To introduce the concept “socialization,” there’s probably no better choice than the Greek *polis* of Sparta.

**This unit introduces the concepts of “socialization” and “attributes,” and further enhances learner cognitive skills, particularly those involved in inferring causal relationships.**

Spartan culture is startlingly different from any with which learners are likely to be familiar. To keep the length of the unit under control, much interesting information has been omitted, some of it related to socialization. Within the materials for learners, we left out additional information about the culture, such as the ways egalitarian status within the citizenry was enforced.

Xenophon:<sup>1</sup>

“...Lycurgus, in his wish to arrange that citizens might enjoy a mutual benefit without injury to anyone, caused each man to be master of other people’s children just as much as his own. Should any boy ever tell his father that he was beaten by another, then it is a disgrace if the father does not give his son another beating. To such a degree do Spartans trust each other not to discipline children carelessly or dishonor good order. He even authorized them to use other people’s household servants too if anybody needed them. He also authorized the sharing of hunting dogs. They have the same arrangement with horses, so that if someone needs to go somewhere fast and happens to spot a horse anywhere, he just takes it, and then duly returns it after use. He also arranged to have food caches stocked throughout Sparta so that those in need could break the seals and take what they needed. By sharing with each other in this way, even those who possess little can benefit from everything in the polis whenever they are in need.

“There are also the following practices instituted by Lycurgus which are quite the opposite from those elsewhere in Greece. In the other poleis everyone naturally makes as much money as possible; some are farmers, others ship owners or traders, while crafts support others. But at Sparta, Lycurgus banned all free men from the pursuit of wealth and prescribed that their sole concern should be with things that make cities free. Lycurgus demanded that provisions should be contributed on an equal basis and the way of life be uniform, thus doing away with self-indulgent passion for wealth. There is no point in making money even for the sake of clothes, since it is physical vitality which gives men a distinctive appearance not lavish dress. There is no point in amassing money to spend on fellow members of the mess either, since Lycurgus instilled the idea that the

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<sup>1</sup><https://stacitiesbaad.files.wordpress.com/.../xenophon-spartan-society.doc>

person who helps his companions by undertaking physical labor is more reputable than the one who spends money, since the service comes from the heart, whereas the latter is a function of being rich.

“He also prevented moneymaking by illegal means. First he instituted currency of such a type that neither master nor servant could ever be unaware of money coming into the house; indeed this would require a great deal of space and a wagon for transport. Searches are made for gold and silver, and should any be found anywhere its possessor is fined. So what would be the point of being eager to make money when more trouble comes from having it than pleasure from spending it?”

Plutarch explained that the currency in Sparta was made of iron, apparently cast iron quenched in vinegar to make it brittle and unusable for other purposes. Each piece was large and heavy, even though it had little value.

### **Notes on the Investigations:**

#### *Investigation: Spartan Fame*

On-line video depictions of the battle are available, including an extensive one from the History Channel ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhgMn9rvn\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhgMn9rvn_Y)), which somehow makes the mistake of placing the battle within a narrow mountain pass, instead of the narrow strait between mountain and sea. Except for this major flaw in setting, and some other minor errors, the video is fairly well done.

Some students may have read the graphic novel “300” or seen the movie based on the novel. (Barnes and Noble says the graphic novel is “not appropriate for children.”) These accounts of the battle of Thermopylae are extensively fictionalized (not to mention violent), and are not recommended as supplementary sources.

What isn’t distorted in these accounts is the reputation of Spartans as superb warriors—the main point illustrated by the account of the battle. The personality attributes of a Spartan hoplite are fairly easy to infer, we believe—bravery to the point of death, superb conditioning, physical skill, instant obedience, knowledge of fighting tactics, willingness to stand pain, hunger and other adverse conditions—and so forth. Developing these attributes to the extreme level promoted by Sparta was the primary goal of the *polis*.

Many Greek city-states, most notably Athens, were located near the sea, and became maritime powers. Sparta’s inland position, in a river valley away from the sea, probably accounts for their military orientation featuring troops of infantry. Once again, setting influences culture in significant fashion. The lack of emphasis on buildings and temples in Sparta shows the converse influence of culture on setting.

As usual, analysis will be more effective if done cooperatively in work groups.

## *Investigation: Socialization in Sparta*

The core of Spartan society—their extraordinary socialization of future warriors—is described sympathetically by Xenophon. He even had his own sons raised in Sparta, under the *agoge* system of—well—*spartan* discipline and training.

Sparta was part of a bellicose world, where war was more common than peace, and offense was almost always considered the best form of defense. What Sparta was doing was being done (though not to Spartan extremes) by surrounding city-states. Spartans converted surrounding peoples on the Peloponnesian peninsula to something approaching slaves, with the ever-present danger of revolt by these *helots*. From this standpoint, the glorification of warriors by Sparta may be reasonable, even necessary for survival.

We'd expect some learners to react negatively to the harsh punishment of the *agoge* system of Sparta, to the tacit approval of thievery (but don't get caught!), and the rigidity that didn't permit individual pursuits in directions other than those that supported war. If they don't react negatively, you might ask questions such as "What if a Spartan boy has the potential to be an artist, an engineer, a mathematician, a historian? What happens to this talent?"

We didn't include in the learner data the Spartan practice of infanticide if a child is born with a weakness or handicap. If appropriate for a particular group of learners, you might add this information.

Relating particular warrior attributes with particular socialization practices is likely to be an iterative process for work groups. For example, the "desirable" attributes in a warrior that grow out of successful thievery wouldn't likely be inferred from the description of the battle at Thermopylae, but could be added to their two-column analysis as learners analyze the socialization descriptions.

Previous units dealt with shared ideas related to the relative importance of individuals versus the groups to which they belonged. Some discussion of Sparta's views on this subject may be worthwhile. Of course, success in battle requires subjugation of the individual warrior to the requirements of the group and its leader. However, during training, a young person with outstanding capabilities (within the narrow framework of their system) is likely to achieve status as a leader.

The polity of the Spartans was mixed—two hereditary kings at the top—but an elected five-member ruling council with considerable power below them, judges selected from elders who had passed the age of 60, and some limited decision-making power by citizenry. So, some elements of democracy were present. But, of course, citizens were a distinct minority among the population, so from the standpoint of most residents, the state was ruled by a mixed monarchy-oligarchy.

(HLB) July 2015