

BOOK REVIEW

Death to Tyrants! Ancient Greek Democracy and the Struggle against Tyranny. By DAVIDA. TEEGARDEN. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 261. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-691-15690-3.

In our times, the unrestrained use of assassination, especially by UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, the so-called “drones”) threatens to undermine the bases of democracy. It is therefore strange to be reading a book that puts legalized assassination at the center of the defense of democracy. But Teegarden makes an imposing argument that “the promulgation of tyrant-killing law contributed significantly to the persistence of democracy in the ancient Greek world” (215). He reviews six different sets of laws from five different Greek cities over the two and a half centuries: the Athenian Decree of Demophantos (510 BCE), the Eretrian Tyrant-Killing Law (341 BCE), the Athenian Law of Eukrates (336 BCE), a collection of inscriptions recording legal dealings between the democracy and deposed tyrants at Eresos from 333 to 305 BCE, the Philites Stele from Erythrai (after 332 BCE), and the detailed Ilian Tyrant Killing Law (circa 280, cf. 199-203). The contribution of the book is less in bringing these laws forward and relating them than in its methods, conclusions, and the intensity of its focus on a single issue, namely the effectiveness of anti-tyrant legislation in protecting democracies.

Teegarden bases much of his analysis on the work of the sociologist Timur Kuran, who explained the psychological thresholds individuals must overcome in order to rebel against tyrants. He argues, for instance, that Kuran’s work helps us to understand the sequence of events that led to the overthrow of the 400 at Athens in 410 BCE (cf. 28-30), in which the conspicuous assassination of Phrynichus led to a gathering popular uprising and the restoration of the Democracy after four months of oligarchical rule.

For Teegarden, Kuran helps us to understand the events in 410 through his analysis of what sociologists call the “revolutionary co-ordination” problem (21 and *passim*). This is the problem caused by the fact that once tyrants have misinformed and separated citizens in order to take over and maintain power, it is very hard for citizens to feel confident that they can safely rebel, since they do not know

how much support they will get from the society at large, or even from their own neighbors. However, only confidence in success and survival will allow most people to rebel against a tyrant. Most people will therefore not dare to rebel against a tyrant unless “they know that everyone knows that everyone knows” (38, *et al.*) that the rebellion has substantial popular support. In the ancient Greek poleis, public assassination of a tyrant or someone close to him signaled to the majority that others were ready to risk their lives, and could therefore “initiate a revolutionary bandwagon” (30) of shared knowledge and rebellion.

This is what happened in 410 BCE, argues Teegarden. Moreover, rather than leave this sign, and therefore the defense of the democracy, to chance, public support for this type of assassination (which resembled the famous founding deed of Harmodius and Aristogeiton) was institutionalized in the Decree of Demophantos (30-32). The decree stipulated (among other things) that anyone who overthrew the Democracy might be killed with impunity, and it required Athenians to swear loyalty to the Democracy. It thus solved the problem of advertising public support for tyrant killing, and by offering specific rewards also encouraged braver individuals to take the first steps in any future rebellion.

As it turned out, a rebellion was right around the corner, and Teegarden argues that the Oath of Demophantos “was in fact largely responsible for the successful mobilization” (44) against the so-called “thirty tyrants” installed in Athens by the Spartans after Athens lost the Peloponnesian War in 403. This overthrow was followed by another mass oath (the famous Amnesty Oath) that in its turn *suppressed* violent action against the defeated oligarchs, and Teegarden offers a useful discussion of the relation of the two oaths, of their complementarity in terms of achieving the political aim of stable democracy, and of the future of the Oath of Demophantos in the similar Law of Eukrates, which was promulgated in 336 and is discussed in a subsequent chapter. Altogether, his argument is a thought provoking addition to our understanding of these events and this period.

Athenian anti-tyrant legislation was subsequently imitated elsewhere; in particular, when Alexander the Great declared the Greek cities of Asia Minor democracies, these cities used anti-tyrant legislation to defend popular rule against resurgent oligarchs (126-129, and frequently thereafter). Teegarden goes through each piece of evidence in detail, as far as possible explaining each law, its historical situation, and the known outcomes of the law. His explanations are very clear, his grasp of the big picture is strong, and although some of his argument must be based on speculation, the speculations are principled, and may therefore be assessed. This is a good thing, because he sometimes gets too enthusiastic. For instance, on page

127, he unnecessarily offers a speculative reconstruction of a speech held at Eresos. His reconstruction accords entirely with his idea of how events ought to proceed, and he draws conclusions about the probable social effects of the reconstructed speech. This was too much generalization from theory for the present reviewer.

Such moments are fairly rare, however, and Teegarden's original and thorough interpretation of the difficult evidence, if seen in the context of other political events and influences, has much to recommend it. Moreover, in every formal way this book is exemplary: the argument is very clearly laid out, original sources are provided in Greek and English, the scholarship is extensively referenced; the volume is furnished with an appendix, based on Mogens Herman Hansen and Thomas Heine Nielsen's *Inventory of Greek Poleis*, of cities and their regime types throughout the period he examines, and also with a detailed index. Finally, it is very well edited, with few typographical errors appearing anywhere.

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