THE BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE, fought between King Leonidas of Sparta and the Persian king Xerxes, was little more than a holding action to delay the invasion and subjugation of Greece. It tested the mettle of the Spartans, the great warrior caste of Ancient Greece, a breed comparable to the Prussians of early modern history. Indeed, the epithet ‘Spartan’ has flattered military leaders for more than two millennia and the martial virtues of the ancient Greek kingdom were particularly appealing to Adolf Hitler.

For Xerxes, the invasion of Greece was unfinished business. His father Darius had attempted the same, but had come unstuck at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. A body of Greeks – actually a tiny minority of the city-states – had agreed to bury their differences at Sparta in 481 and at Corinth in the spring of 480. This show of unity was very remarkable in itself, as the Peloponnesian Wars were to prove later. The rest of Greece had either gone over to Persia or hoped to weather the storm.

Sparta had been assigned the leadership of both land and naval forces, but in terms of numbers, the Greeks could only muster a small army to fight the Persians. Sparta had about 40,000 heavily-armed hoplites sheathed in armour and more lightly-armed troops. The name ‘hoplite’ derived from the characteristic round shield or hoplon, which was carried over the left arm, while in his right hand the warrior carried a 2.5-metre (8-ft) long spear.

TAKING A STAND
Aware of the overwhelming numerical superiority of the invader, the Greeks looked for a place to hold him off. The first choice was the Gorge of Tempe in Thessaly, but the Thessalians were deemed untrustworthy. The Greeks therefore decided on a tactical withdrawal, retiring to the south and leaving the Persians to invade northern Greece unopposed.

After some hesitation, the Spartans chose to face the Persians at the narrow coastal pass of Thermopylae on the southern side of the Malian Gulf, an inlet of the Aegean west of Euboea, between Thessaly and Locres. While most of the land around the bay is flat, there is one point where it is hemmed in by the Callicotronos Mountains, also known as the Cliffs of Trachis.

Thermopylae lay just south of the River Asopus. The name, a compound of the words thermo- and pyla (literally ‘warm gate’), alludes to the hot sulphur springs that bubble up in the mountainside there, and to three pinch points on the defile between the cliff and the sea. At those points – the East, Middle and West Gates – the track was so narrow that only a single cart could pass.

The second-century AD traveller and writer Pausanias estimates the total Greek forces at the outset of the battle as 11,200. Around 1,000 of these were Phocians guarding a path through the mountains. It is more likely, however, that the Greek army numbered a mere 5,000 men. The ancient
Greek historian Herodotus, who was born four years before the battle, claimed that the Persians deployed 5 million men, but this is now dismissed as a wild exaggeration. Most estimates today give Xerxes near 200,000, accompanied by an armada of around 1,000 ships. A request for reinforcements by the Greeks had been stymied by the Olympic festival, which had to run its course before men could be released to fight. In the end, most of the army was sent southwards to safety after Leonidas learned that the Persians had been told of a mountain path that would circumvent the Greek force. The chiefly Athenian navy, which was on hand to give the soldiers support, was helped considerably by a storm that wrecked a large proportion of the Persian fleet. Herodotus saw ‘God’ as having had a hand in this.

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

Leonidas, who had just succeeded to the Spartan throne after the suicide of his brother Cleomenes, was left with 300 hand-picked men (in Herodotus’s words ‘all fathers of living sons’) and a force of 700 Thespians, together with some 400 Thebans who were unconvincing of the need to protect Greece from Persia and were brought along more as hostages than as a fighting force. The Spartan king made use of a dilapidated wall at the ‘Middle Gate’ as a barricade behind which he could conceal the body of his men. Before the Persians took up their positions, he had his men build it.

As soon as Xerxes arrived at the pass, he sent a Persian rider to reconnoitre who was able to see some of the Spartans in front of the wall that ran from the cliff to the sea. Others were concealed behind it. ‘Some of them were stripped for exercise, while others were combing their hair.’ They apparently paid scant attention to him while he did his best to assess their strength.

Xerxes was baffled by his scout’s report. He sent for Damaratus, a deposed Spartan king who had been granted asylum by Xerxes’s father Darius. Even so, Damaratus may have retained a soft spot for his former realm, as he tipped the Spartans off about the Persian invasion by sending them a secret message hidden under a coating of wax.

‘Some of them were stripped for exercise, while others were combing their hair.’

Xerxes observing the Spartans’ preparations for battle
Damaratus warned Xerxes that the Spartans would be tough nuts to crack, and explained that it was the Spartan custom to groom their hair before battle, particularly if they thought they would not survive.

**BRUTE FORCE VERSUS TACTICS**

Herodotus tells us that Xerxes expected the Spartans to flee when they realized how hopeless their position was and how greatly outnumbered they were. When they failed to do so, he waited four or five days before losing patience and sending in the first wave of troops. These Medes and Cissians had instructions to capture the Spartans and bring them before him. The Medes were badly blooded and were soon withdrawn and replaced with the 'Immortals', the elite Persian force commanded by Hydarnes.

In the confined space, however, Persian numerical superiority brought them no advantage, and the Greeks were able to wreak havoc with their longer spears. Moreover, the Persians could not profit from their famous cavalry or bowmen, as neither could be brought to bear against the Spartans in this narrow strip. The Spartans also employed the tactic of running away from the enemy to give them the impression they were retreating in confusion, then suddenly wheeling round to face them in good order and inflicting innumerable casualties. The dead soon began to foster in the summer sun, further sapping Persian morale. The Persians retreated to find another way of dealing with the Spartans.

A detachment of 1,000 or so Phocians had been detailed to watch the mountain pass lest the Persians discover a means of coming around the back of the Spartans at the wall. Meanwhile, a Macedonian by the name of Ephialtes came to the Persian camp to inform Xerxes of just such a path in the hope of gaining a rich reward.

The track began at the Asopus and ran along the Anopiae ridge before descending behind Black-Bunocks’ Stone to Alpeni, close to the East Gate at the rear of the Spartan warriors. The Persian Immortals marched by night, the Oeta Mountains on their right and the Cliffs of Trachis on their left. By dawn they sighted the Phocian force stationed at the top of the pass. Taken by surprise, the Phocians were unable to organize their defences before coming under fire from the Persian archers, and withdrew to disarray further up the mountain.

**GLORIOUS DEFEAT**

The Spartans defending Thermopylae had their first inkling of their coming defeat when a seer named Megistias read the sacrificial entrails (augury was common practice in ancient times). Messengers arriving during the night confirmed his prophecies. With the exception of the Spartans, the Thebans and the captive Thebans, who elected to fight on, the other Greeks withdrew to defend the Isthmus at Corinth. Leonidas may have deliberately decided to sacrifice himself and his men since he had been told by the Delphic Oracle that a Spartan king would first have to fall if Sparta itself was to be spared destruction.

Knowing their fate, the Spartans and the Thebans fought to the last. They went out into the plain in front of the wall to face Xerxes’ army. Herodotus tells us that: “Many of the barbarians fell; behind them the enemy commanders plied their whips indiscriminately, driving the men on. Many fell into the sea and were drowned, and still more were trampled to death by one another. No one could count the number of the dead. The Greeks, who knew that the enemy were on their way round by the mountain track and that death was inevitable, exerted all their strength and fought with fury and desperation. By this time most of their spears were broken, and they were killing Persians with their swords.”

King Leonidas fell in the battle together with several members of the Persian royal house. The Greeks fought to protect the king’s body and four times they drove the Persians off. It was only when the Persian forces arrived from behind that they had to fall back on the wall in a single compact group and fight with their hands and teeth when they could no longer wield their swords. The Persians won the day with a hail of missiles from their archers. The Spartan Driapes deserves special mention for his cool response on being told that the impending torrent of Persian arrows would blot out the sun: ‘If the Persians hide the sun we will light in the shade.’

After the battle Xerxes ordered his men to find Leonidas’ body, sever his head and fix it on a stake. Only one Spartan survived according to Herodotus’ account, and that was because he was recovering from an eye infection during the battle. Nor did the Thebans manage to convince the Persians immediately that they were mere hostages, and many were killed.

Thermopylae was a defeat with no major military significance: it held up the Persian advance for just three days, barely enough to create a new defensive line. It is also doubtful that the Greeks killed 20,000 Persians – the tally attributed by Herodotus. If the battle has a significance, it is that it taught the Greeks and subsequent generations of the dignity of personal sacrifice and the need to take a stand against tyranny.

‘Go tell the Spartans, passer-by,
That here, obedient to her laws we lie.’

SIMONIDES – EPIPHANY FOR THE SPARTANS WHO Fell AT THERMOPYLAE