An island too far
(The Athenian expedition to Sicily, 415 B.C.)

Prologue

A bridge too far is the title of a book of the journalist and writer Cornelius Ryan (1920-1974). It reports Allies’ failed attempt to enter Germany through the Netherlands during the WW II. The bridge mentioned in the title is Arnhem bridge, reached but not conquered by the allied paratroopers. This failure compromised the whole operation, coded as Market-Garden.

But in English, A bridge too far has got also a different meaning. According to the Oxford Dictionary, it means “A step or act that is regarded as being too drastic to take” or “Something that is very difficult to achieve”.

And the act taken by the army and the navy of a Great Power many centuries before Market-Garden, in 415 B.C, is very similar to “an act that is regarded as being too drastic to take”. If Cornelius Ryan had lived in 415 B.C., he would have titled his own work, “An island too far”, alluding, from one side, to a real island, and, from the other side, to the gamble connected with the fact of bringing the war thousands kilometres far from the homeland.

Sicily is that real island; Athens and the Athenians are those who made the gamble.

Segesta’s lies.

After the so-called “Peace of Nikias” (421 B.C.) that ends the Peloponnesian War temporarily, Athens, having its hands free, cultivates the idea of expanding westwards, towards Sicily. Some years before(427 B.C), Athens had tried to do it, but its intervention
in favour of the town of Leontini (today Lentini) had failed. Leontini is under protectorate of the powerful city of Syracuse, now; the democratic faction had been expelled from the town and almost every day the exiles ask Athens for help. Also two other Sicilian poleis (towns or cities, in Greek), Segesta and Selinus (present-day Selinunte), are at each others’ throat because of some territorial questions.

In that game, Selinus has Syracuse’s support; the Segestians, instead, have no support: this is the reason why they cannot hope for victory. In short, they risk the same fate of Leontini’s inhabitants. So, they look for help. Both Carthage and Agrigento, consulted by the Segestians, do not want any trouble and reject their request of help.

The Segestians, then, send (416 B.C.) some envoys to Athens—with which they are bound by bonds of friendship. Once arrived, they speak clearly. Pay attention, they say, because if Syracuse is going to control Sicily, you are in trouble. The Syracusans are Dorics like your Spartan enemies. Will they resist, tomorrow, if requested, the temptation to help them? And what should happen if their navy begins to privateer, to annoy you, to disturb your communications at sea? Hear us: help us. If you will help us, your gain will be double: you will deprive Sparta of a potential ally and you will pay no drachma, because we would pay everything.

Money opens doors and doorways. In particular when or if the others, not we, are those who pay. Even more so during a war, because during a war gold is—almost always—more important and decisive than iron. In Athenians’ opinion, the Segestians’ purpose is a very intriguing purpose. Politically (a potential new ally) and economically (no expenses). They discuss the issue, but for the moment, they prefer to remain cautious. (Or pretending to do it). So, collecting information is, for them, the first step. They wish to know how much extended is the conflict between Segesta and Selinus and, in particular, if the Segestian temples contain plenty of wealth so as Segesta’s envoys had claimed. In order to know that de visu (that is to say: “in person”), they send some envoys to Sicily and wait.

The ambassadors come back in the early spring of 415 B.C. along with some officials from Segesta. These last ones have not come empty-handed, but with sixty silver talents. Showing the talents to the shocked Athenians, the Sicilians say: sixty talents, sixty ships. For one month. We will give you the rest—if necessary—during the operation that will follow the first month.

It is a big lie. Segesta cannot pay the military operation for a long time. It has no money. But it has been very shrewd. It has rigged the game, turning the appearance in substance. The Athenian ambassadors have taken the bait. Totally. Once come back to Athens, required about Segesta’s wealth and money, they confirm: “The temples and the houses in Segesta overflow with gold, silver, pottery, coins and jewels. We saw them with our own eyes.” True. But they ignore they have always seen the same wealth in different places or seen borrowed pottery. So, a swindler trick is about to cause more than a trouble to the Athenians. The decision of the Assembly is obvious. What are we waiting for? Let’s arm sixty ships as soon as possible; let’s give full power to our commanders; let’s sail to Sicily! The Segestians are satisfied: it seems to be done.

To leave or not to leave.

It seems, but it is not so. Nikias, one of the Athenian commanders (the others are Lamacus and the superstar Alcibiades), if he could, would forgo that adventure. Too many risks, almost no advantage. Risk to compromise the peace, achieved with big strain and always on the brink to be broken; risk to bite off more than one can chew; risk to have another potential enemy in addition to the Spartans and their allies; risk to lose everything in case of defeat; risk to pay at high cost the ambition, the inexperience and the impulsivity of the Athenian young people, eager to fight.
Doubts and dangers about that expedition are exposed by him to the Assembly. But Alcibiades takes part in the debate, criticizes Nikias’ opinions and says he is favourable to expedition to Sicily. Applauses, screams, standing ovation. The political climate becomes overexcited; the veterans of the previous campaigns feel themselves invincible as never before; the young people wish to know a new world and participate to an exciting enterprise (as if war, every war, were exciting).

“Well” Nikias claims at this point “Do you want war? You got it. But pay attention. It won’t be an easy enterprise. Syracuse is powerful, it has got ships, allies, money. And, above all, a very effective cavalry, while ours is weak. Too weak. So, in order to win, we need more hoplites, more slingers, more cargo ships, more triremes, more money. How much? If I had to guess, I would say no less than one hundred war ships, five thousands hoplites, units of slingers, archers and light infantry. Who pays money for that?”

Nikia’s requests are stratospheric requests. He knows that. His behaviour has been intentional. He has made that deliberately, hoping his requests are rejected by the Assembly. This is his reasoning: if the operation is not authorized because it is considered too expensive, that’s good news. For peace, for Athens, for me. If the operation is authorized, despite the financial effort required, I will command a very strong force and, perhaps, I could win a victory.

He would prefer the first solution. But Alcibiades has sowed very well, scattering optimism, inspiring enthusiasm among the young people. So the Assembly chooses Alcibiades’ position: we will go, cost what it may. Some of the older and experienced men do not like that decision, but they remain silent, fearing to be accused of treason. In that excited and almost doped climate, common sense and moderation look like mortal sins.

Somebody goes beyond, much beyond. Sicily? It is only the first step: Carthage will be the next goal.

Envoys are sent to the allied cities, soldiers are recruited, money is collected, ships are launched. Despite the soothsayers are preaching disasters (but some of them are divining triumphs); despite many intellectuals (among them Socrates, too) have serious doubts about the success of that enterprise, one is working hard and quickly. The appalling plague that had hit Athens some years before, now is a memory only. The population has grown in numbers; money does not lack. In short, soothsayers apart, everything seems it is going in the best possible way.

But something goes wrong.

Suspecting Alcibiades

One morning, while the preparations of the enterprise are still in progress, Athens’ inhabitants wake up, go down in the streets of the city and are amazed: the Herms, the votive statues put, with good-luck functions, on the crossroads or in front of the houses, have been desecrated. Overnight, someone has scarred them or has cut their penis. The indignation is huge; for many people, the democracy itself is in danger. There is, in fact, who sees in this act a conspiracy to break down democracy. The authorities intervene and order: those who know something about the desecration of the Herms must speak. We are going to hear everyone, included slaves and strangers.

Somebody begins to confess, the name of Alcibiades begins to emerge in these confessions. Has he desecrated the Herms? asks the enquirers. Yes, no, perhaps. However, if a conclusive proof lacks, rumours say he previously participated to similar stunts, performing a parody of the Sacred Mysteries in a private house and, in addition, at the presence of some slaves.

It’s a fake news, is Alcibiades’ answer. And he presses: put me immediately on trial. I am ready. Also to accept to be convicted, if you will find me guilty.
Putting him on trial immediately? He is too much popular among the soldiers, too much well-liked, too much influential, too much dangerous. Invoking a supplementary investigation is better. Let him leave Athens. When he will come back, we examine the whole issue.

We go, then. Next stop Corcyra (present-day Corfu), meeting place of that mini-Overlord of the ancient times.

Towards Sicily

As in Berlin many centuries afterwards, also in Syracuse there is someone who is expecting the invasion. Hermocrates, for example, a smart guy, able with weapons and with words, is expecting it. They are arriving, he tells his own countrymen. And they are not arriving with friendly intentions. Let’s move as soon as possible, or it will be too much late. Let’s send envoys all around; let’s form alliances here in Sicily and in Italy. If necessary, with Carthage, too. Let’s move against them with our navy; let’s scare them a little bit, and maybe we could have some advantage. Who is in command, in fact, does not look enthusiastic about this adventure.

How and where will he have known Nikia’s doubts and hesitation?

His exhortation, however, is underrated. A lot of people do not believe in him (The Athenians at the gates? Impossible!); others think he is acting in this way in order to achieve a greater personal power. Moving first with the navy in order to scare them? Why? Forget it.

Arrived in Reggio (present-day Reggio Calabria), the allied commanders want to see the cards and find the bluff: Segesta cannot pay. What to do?

Nikias: let’s sail towards Selinus, let’s settle the things, let’s show our power and then let’s go back home.

Lamacus: Syracuse is our true and real goal. Syracuse’s inhabitants are not ready for war: let’s attack them now and close the game. The more we wait, the more they become strong. Alcibiades: coming back empty-handed? Never! Let’s find a base of operations; let’s look for alliances and, once verified who is with us and who is against us, let’s attack Syracuse. Maybe Nikias is shy, hesitating and cautious, but, seen the situation, his proposal seems guided by common sense. But it is not approved, it cannot be approved. Lamacus, whose proposal is, perhaps, from a strictly military point of view, the better at all, changes his mind and approves Alcibiades’ one. Katane (present-day Catania), “persuaded” to choose the Athenians, is turned into a military operational base. The die is cast, the damage is done.

The bankrupt

In the meanwhile, in Athens, all sort of things are happening. The inquiry about Hermes’ profanation has not stopped and it is not stopping. Someone does not cease to evoke a
political plot; others are afraid for the survival of the democracy. There is a witch-hunt climate; a lot of innocent people is jailed. And many others would be jailed. But, at a certain point, with the promise of immunity, an alleged witness gives his version of the facts. Doubting is legitimate, Thucydides comments.

Amidst other names, also the name of Alcibiades is mentioned. He must be trailed, the crowd screamed. But Alcibiades is in Sicily with the navy, he has got command responsibility, he is involved in a complex and sensitive political and military operation. What to do? Do we have to convene a trial, as the crowds, the “people”, want and ask for, or do we wait for Alcibiades’ return, after the end of the military enterprise in Sicily? Proving that the Gods drive mad those whom they want destroy, Athens calls back Alcibiades. The state ship “Salamis” reaches Katane- Catania with the task to bring back to homeland him and the other soldiers charged of impiety. They will never arrive to Athens. Maybe exploiting a sudden storm, the ship on which they are, mocks the Salamis and disappears. Alcibiades reaches at first Turi (Athenian colony in Italy) and then Sparta, where he is received with open arms by the Ephors (and, according to the gossipers, by the King Agis’ wife, too). He abounds in caresses (to the Queen) and in advices (to the Ephors), cheating on the King and causing a lot of troubles to his ex-colleagues engaged in Sicily.

A river in winter.

Without Alcibiades, Nikias and Lamacus are disoriented and almost ineffective. They meet more than one trouble to find allies, since the Greek towns in Sicily seem to take time, keeping themselves cautious and suspicious of the newcomers. The Syracusans, on the contrary, resume heart and morale. The so feared invaders look as they were confused: they are alone, without allies; have been defeated at Ibla and don’t seem able to hit hard nowhere. So, why don’t we take the initiative, march to Katane and teach a lesson to them?

In Syracuse, tempers run high. Some armed horsemen reach the Athenian camp, mock of the defenders by reminding them the recent defeat at Ibla. They taunt the enemies. “What are you doing here?” they provoke. “Have you come to bring again the inhabitants of Leontini here or have you come to live in these places as our neighbours?” It’s time to stop this situation and to take action, Nikias and Lamacus think. They have got a plan. Let’s lure the enemies here, to Katane. Then, while they are leaving Syracuse, we reach, at night, the town by sea, we land, choose the place where we’ll fight and wait for their return. Some Syracusans exiles suggest: let’s wait for them nearby Zeus Olympic’s shrine. The ground is rough there: it might have been made for causing trouble to their uncatchable cavalry.

It is a good plan. But how can the trap be triggered? And at this point, Nikias – or somebody in his behalf- has got a stroke of genius. He sends a spy of his to Syracuse. The
man - who is known in Syracuse- says he is coming on behalf of Katane’s pro-Syracusans; provides information( name, descent, family) about some of them, and nobody suspects he is playing both sides. He continues: the Athenians do not spend the night inside their camp, but in town. Do you want to swipe them out? Here it’s how to do. We must choose a date. On that day, you will arrive in front of the walls with your army. As soon as we will see you, we will close the doors. In this way, the Athenians won’t go out from the town. More: we will set on fire their ships. At this point, conquering the enemy camp will be very easy for you.

A tale like this would need some caution. But the Syracusan commanders are excited. Too much, indeed. They want to teach a lesson to the pompous Athenians -who are, in their opinion, coward, too. So they believe in the spy , accept his proposal and dismiss him. On the day specified, the Syracusan vanguards reach Katane, find it empty and see no ship in the harbour. The Athenians are just near Zeus’ shrine, very close to Syracuse. They are occupying a terrain where there are many trees, a lot of small walls, a swamp and a ravine. In short, they are occupying the terrain that is less favourable to the cavalry. In addition, they have erected palisades to protect their ships, built a fortified position and cut off the bridge over the river Anapus( in ancient Greek, “invisible”).

And there, in the vicinity of the “invisible” Anapus, in the midst of lightning and thunders, the battle between the two armies is fought. The Syracusans, come back from Katane, fight with bravery and courage, but , eventually, they must give up in front of the superior tactical ability of the Athenians.

The latter, however, do not exploit their victory( in retrospect, a huge mistake). Instead of hitting hard in order to defeat their enemy definitively, they stop fighting, collect they fallen( almost fifty, according to Thucydides), allow the defeated to collect theirs( two hundred sixty), erect a trophy and, being winter arrived by now, they return to Katane.

Winter “dead season”? Not exactly, in this case. The Athenians, for example, attack Messene( today Messina). They are firmly convinced to conquer it in a short time, but, on the contrary, they are defeated. Why? Because, before deserting, Alcibiades had revealed Nikias’ and Lamacus’ plan to the Messenians. He had said: The Athenians count on a fifth column in Messene: find it, destroy it and they, when will arrive, will be able ineffective at all. And the things go exactly in this way.

Nikias and Lamacus remain fifteen days long in front of Messene, waiting for someone who open the doors of the town. In vain. But also the Syracusans do not stay idle: they attack in force Katane, while the Athenians are wintering near Naxos( today Giardini -Naxos), ravage the country and then they return to Syracuse. In short, despite the bad season, fighting does not stop.

The conflict is dangerously becoming wider and wider. And not only on the military level. Day after day, it is taking on the appearance of a fight between imperialism and autonomy, between oppression and desire of freedom. Nikas is aware of it, and, perhaps, now he is regretting his own mild opposition to this madness when in Athens the expedition was decided. But at this point, he cannot give up. So, he ask for reinforcements( cavalry, in particular) and money; he plans to make alliances against Syracuse; he cultivates the idea to start secret negotiations of peace; he orders to store food.

For his part, Hermocrates , during his speech before the Assembly, is self- critical. Why were we defeated at Anapus River? Because of lack of bravery? No, I do not think so. We were defeated because we lack of experience and military training, because we have too many commanders, and this fact causes confusion. We need to redesign the command chain, we need to use the winter in order to train ourselves, we need make alliances.

Said, done. In accordance with Assembly’s decisions, the Syracusan military commanders are reduced ( three, instead of thirteen), Sparta and Corinth are alerted, the places of possible landings are defended by strong palisades, the territory around the town is fortified, the Army is reorganized.
But the difference is due to “A” factor. Where “A” means “Alcibiades”. Reached Sparta, before the Spartan assembly he , at first, justify himself: the reason why he is here, the reason why he has fought Sparta in the past, and so on. He elaborates and explains a personal definition of “Patriot” and “Homeland”, he always scrambles. But when he speaks of policy, he is very clear. Exaggerating a little bit, he claims: “Pay attention! You are in a very big danger. Athens wants – and I know it surely- to conquer the whole Sicily, to set foot in Italy, to make weaker Carthage, and, finally, to besiege, by land and by sea, the whole Peloponnese. Syracuse must be supported: if it falls, the whole island falls. And if the whole island falls, the Mediterranean Sea will become, day after day, more and more, an Athenian sea. And if it becomes an Athenian sea, you are lost.

What to do? If I were you, I would send a contingent to Sicily, would give it an experienced commander and would fortify the village of Decelea, in Attica. Decelea is not far from Athens, it controls a vital way of communication. Send a permanent garrison there, ravage the surrounding countryside, block the access to the mount Laurion Mines and you will have the Athenians in your pocket”.

Did the things go in these way, actually? Thucydides swears that this is the truth. But, perhaps, the Spartans had reached these conclusions on their own. Anyway, following Alcibiades’ indication or acting on their own, the Spartans prepare an invasion force to send to Sicily. This force is commanded by general Gylippus. A very sharp bastard. In every sense.

And the invaders will learn soon to know him.

The siege

While in Sparta the question – to intervene or not to intervene- is discussed, in Sicily plans of battle are prepared. Nikias, the Cautious, finally decides to siege Syracuse. His goal is to isolate the city, closing it by a grip by land and by sea, preventing reinforcements and supplies in order to compel it to capitulate. He should have done this move a year before; it could be too late, now. He has received money and some reinforcement from Athens, but his health is bad: his chronic nephritis has become worse, causing a lot of problems for him.

How does it end? Everybody knows how it ends. The Athenians underrate Gylippus and his four ships, unable, in their opinion, to become a really threat; they do not block, immediately, the Big Port allowing some Corinthian ships to enter the harbour; they occupy the Epipolae, the rocky terrace overlying Syracuse, but they do not guard, culpably, its entrance door( Eurylaeus Pass); they suffer the raids of Gylippus and of his troops recruited on the spot( Gylippus uses Eurylaeus Pass to launch his raids); they are unable to build a double wall around Syracuse in order to isolate and cut off the town; they are dislodged from Labdalus, an important position immediately exploited by Gylippus; they lose in combat Lamacus; they store food and materiel at Plemmirio( the main port of Syracuse), and they remain without resources when the port falls in enemy’s hands.

They receives reinforcements under a top commander, the undefeated general Demosthenes, but they are unable to change the situation. Mistakes are followed by other mistakes. Nikias delays for one month the withdrawal and the new army repositioning because of an eclipse interpreted by the Greeks as a bad omen( and Plutarch, centuries afterwards, will accuse him of superstition); the Athenian ships are trapped inside the Grand Port, where, because of the narrow spaces, they cannot exploit their own best velocity; they, once besiegers, now become besieged. Finally, attacked by higher forces near River Assinarius, they are defeated and wiped out.

Few of them are able to escape and to reach Katane; Nikias and Demosthenes are executed( according to Plutarch, they committed suicide); the most part of the Athenian prisoners died of starvation and thirst inside the Latomie; other were enslaved. Some of
them were released after some years, thanks to unusual merits: they will teach the verse of Euripides’ tragedies to their lords and masters, receiving freedom in reward. Word of Plutarch.

**Epilogue**

A stranger enter a barber's shop in Athens. The barber and the client begin talking as is custom, today and yesterday, in the barbers' shops. The new arrived, as if he was telling about an event know by everyone, mentions the Athenian disaster in Sicily. Using a lot of details.

The barber can hardly believe his own ears. He runs to the Archons and tells them what he has heard. In those times, orphan of Twitter and Facebook, news moves and travels very slowly, sometimes for months. The Archons and Athenian people do not know what happened in Sicily. Not yet. And so, in their opinion, the words of that stranger are a concentrate of falsity. With the Spartans camped at less than twenty kilometres from Athens at Decelea, it is natural for the Athenians to imagine some trickery. Which trickery? Spreading false information, in order to destroy people's morale, for example. An Athenian defeat in Sicily would have been a perfect fake news.

The stranger is arrested, tortured and released only when other people, arrive to Athens in the meantime, confirm his tale.

For Athens the Sicilian disaster was a dire blow; many towns abandoned the League; Ionia fell in the Persian orbit again; Athens' reputation ruined. During that war, it lost men, ships, money. It was compelled to give up every ambition of an expansion in the Mediterranean Sea, leaving the way open for Carthage. After the Sicilian enterprise, Athens would have withstood for nine years. But its hopes of victory had for ever gone down on the shores of that “too far island”. Athens would have not recovered any more.

Sure: Would have remained a past full of glory and, for the most part of the population, the regret for an unique and extraordinary era. But could have been a past of glory useful? Could have it stopped Sparta? Could have it stopped, centuries later, the Roman legions? When, in 87 BC, to the Athenians who, in order to avoid losing their city, were invoking their glorious past, Lucius Cornelius Sulla replied: I have come here, in Greece, in the name of the Roman people and my task is not to listen history lessons.

And Sicily? Did it gain anything? Doubting it is reasonable. Just few months after that resounding victory, among the Sicilian cities the usual contrasts came back; Carthage became aggressive more than usual; in Syracuse a "strong man", not democracy took the power.

Was it worth it?

**Books to read**

Victor Davis Hanson, *A war like no other. How the Athenians and Spartans fought the Peloponnesian war*, New York, Random House, 2005


Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*,

1 The Herms were small statues depicting, for the most part, the God Hermes (Mercury for the Romans). Hermes was considered protector of the travellers. That desecration act was interpreted by many people in Athens as an attempt of boycotting the Sicilian expedition (the voyage, that voyage would not have had Hermes' protection and for this reason it should not have been done).

2 As many others Greek cities in Sicily, also Katane is suspicious of the new arrived. This is the reason why, it, prudently, declares its neutrality. But Athenians want it at their side. Why? Because Katane is not far from Syracuse, because it has got a very good harbour, because it has got the qualities in order to become a perfect base of operations. In order to get their task, they use deception. The Athenians commanders (in Greek
strategoi, ask of entering alone into the city in order to explain their reasons before the Assembly. While Alcibiades is speaking, a unit of Athenian hoplites, exploiting the poor vigilance, break into the city forcing a door. The pro-Syracusians escape and the Assembly declares the alliance of Katane with Athens.

3 Gylippus was the son of a noble Spartan, Kleandridas, who was expelled from Sparta because of having accepted some Athenian money. His mother was, probably, an Helot. This was the reason why Gylippus was a mothax (μόθαξ). Mothax, in ancient Greek, means, more or less, stepbrother. The motaches (μοθακες) were sons of a noble and of an Helot, or sons of a noble family become poor( and, for this reason, unable to bear the expenses for the full military training or the participation to syssitions (συσσίτιον) - communal dinners- of its own son). They were not part of the Homoioi, the Equals. In other words, they were not part of the aristocracy which had the power, even if someone of them was being co-opted due to his achievements. Formally, they were considered free men and they served in the Army. According to some ancient sources, even Lysander, the victor at Egospotamois (404 BC), was a mothax.

Gylippus was the architect of the Spartan victory in Sicily. Brave, clever, unscrupulous, he carried out winning tactics and strategies. He tried to spare the life to Nikias and Demosthenes not for generosity of spirit, but because he wanted to bring them to Sparta in order to make bigger his own triumph. When, some years later, a huge sum of money was committed by the Lacedemonian authorities to him, he, in spite of the proverbial Spartans’ contempt for money, took possession of it. Discovered, he was sentenced to death in absentia. After the death sentence, he never came back to Sparta.