

Tyranny in Athens

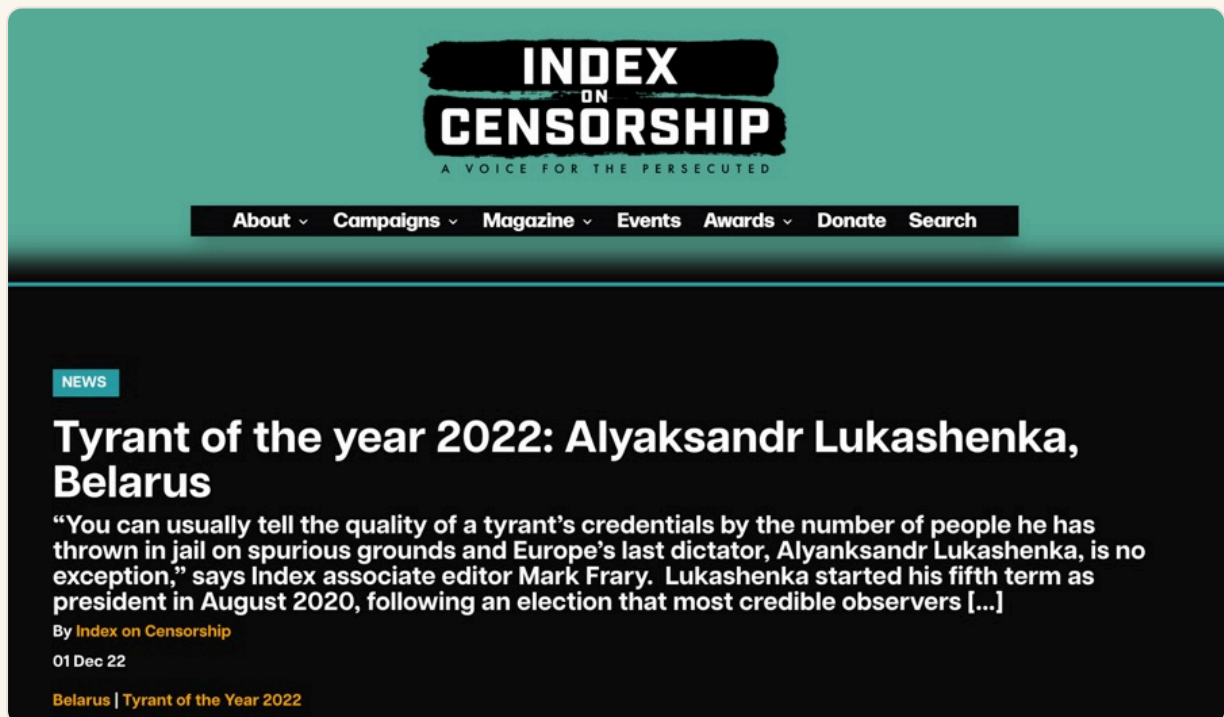
Written in my final year at school for IB Greek HL. The Individual Assessment is a source-based dossier: pick a research question, then translate and analyse a set of primary source passages in the original Greek to answer it. I looked at how tyrants and tyranny in Archaic and Classical Athens were actually received, working through Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Herodotus, Thucydides, and the inscription on a tyrannicide statue.

Originally written: 2024

Context: IB Greek HL Individual Assessment

Sources: Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Herodotus, Thucydides

Starting point



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Index on Censorship website. The header features the organization's logo, "INDEX ON CENSORSHIP", with the tagline "A VOICE FOR THE PERSECUTED" below it. A navigation bar includes links for "About", "Campaigns", "Magazine", "Events", "Awards", "Donate", and "Search". The main content area is titled "NEWS" and features a prominent article: "Tyrant of the year 2022: Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarus". The article text reads: "You can usually tell the quality of a tyrant's credentials by the number of people he has thrown in jail on spurious grounds and Europe's last dictator, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, is no exception," says Index associate editor Mark Frary. Lukashenka started his fifth term as president in August 2020, following an election that most credible observers [...]. The article is attributed to "By Index on Censorship" and dated "01 Dec 22". A tag at the bottom of the article reads "Belarus | Tyrant of the Year 2022".

"Tyrant of the year 2022: Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarus." *Index on Censorship*, 1 December 2022.

'Index on Censorship' voted Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the Belarusian leader, as 2022's "Tyrant of the year". The webpage's contents satirise Lukashenka's totalitarian regime, negatively characterising his 'tyranny'. This example led me to investigate the research question below.

Research question

How were the tyrants of Athens in the 6th–4th centuries BC, and tyranny as a way of ruling, received?

Prediction

I predict that tyrants won't have been received as negatively as they are today. I believe that many of our negative associations with tyrants stem from the negative connotations of the word 'tyrant'. As these connotations weren't necessarily associated with the ancient definition of 'tyrant', I predict that tyrants wouldn't have been received as negatively.

Introduction

A tyrant today is an unfair and cruel ruler. This differs from the ancient definition of the word, as someone who gained power unconstitutionally. In this dossier, I shall explore if the attitudes towards tyrants in Athens in the 6th–4th centuries were as negative as the modern connotations of 'tyrant' suggest. I shall first investigate three philosophical texts which give a broad outline of attitudes towards tyrants before shifting my attention to historical accounts which offer a different insight into the Peisistratid tyrants, Peisistratus and his sons Hippias and Hipparchus.

Source 1: Plato, *The Republic*, Book 9, 577e–578c · c. 379 BCE

GREEK

πλουσίαν δὲ ἢ πενομένην ἀνάγκη τὴν τυραννουμένην πόλιν εἶναι;
πενομένην.
καὶ ψυχὴν ἄρα τυραννικὴν πενιχρὰν καὶ ἀπληστον ἀνάγκη ἀεὶ εἶναι.
οὕτως, ἢ δ' ὅς.
τί δέ; φόβου γέμειν ἄρ' οὐκ ἀνάγκη τὴν τε τοιαύτην πόλιν τὸν τε τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα;
πολλή γε.
όδυρμούς τε καὶ στεναγμούς καὶ θρήνους καὶ ἀλγηδόνας οἷε ἓν τινι ἄλλῃ πλείους εὐρήσειν;
οὐδαμῶς.
ἐν ἀνδρὶ δὲ ἡγῆ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐν ἄλλῳ τινὶ πλείω εἶναι ἢ ἐν τῷ μαινομένῳ ὑπὸ ἐπιθυμιῶν τε καὶ
ἐρώτων τοῦτω τῷ τυραννικῷ;
πῶς γὰρ ἄν; ἔφη.
εἰς πάντα δὴ οἶμαι ταῦτά τε καὶ ἄλλα τοιαῦτα ἀποβλέψας τὴν τε πόλιν τῶν πόλεων
ἀθλιωτάτην ἔκρινας—
οὐκοῦν ὀρθῶς; ἔφη.
καὶ μάλα, ἦν δ' ἐγώ. ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτοῦ τυραννικοῦ τί λέγεις εἰς ταῦτά ταῦτα
ἀποβλέπων;
μακρῷ, ἔφη, ἀθλιώτατον εἶναι τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων.

TRANSLATION

“And must the tyrannized city be rich or poor?” “Poor.” “Then the tyrant soul also must of necessity always be needy and suffer from unfulfilled desire.” “So it is,” he said. “And again, must not such a city, as well as such a man, be full of terrors and alarms?” “It must indeed.” “And do you think you will find more lamentations and groans and wailing and anguish in any other city?” “By no means.” “And so of man, do you think these things will more abound in any other than in this tyrant type, that is maddened by its desires and passions?” “How could it be so?” he said. “In view of all these and other like considerations, then, I take it, you judged that this city is the most miserable of cities.” “And was I not right?” he said. “Yes, indeed,” said I. “But of the tyrant man, what have you to say in view of these same things?” “That he is far and away the most miserable of all,” he said.

Written approximately 130 years after the end of the Peisistratid tyranny, this passage is from Book 9 of Plato's *Republic*, where Plato justifies the tyrannical life as the worst. Plato compares the tyrannised city (τυραννουμένην πόλιν) with the tyrant soul (ψυχὴν ἄρα τυραννικὴν). Both are poor (πενομένην) and maddened by desires and passions (ὑπὸ ἐπιθυμιῶν τε καὶ ἐρώτων). Plato's criticisms stem from the tyrant's inability to satiate his desires and the ensuing poverty that follows. Plato would have written this text in light of the tyrants of the previous centuries, meaning Plato may have based his ideas on their

actions. Importantly, the *Republic* is a philosophical text which prompts the reader to contend the ideas mentioned, meaning that any ideas were Plato's own and not guaranteed fact. Thus, this opinion gives a flavour of Plato's negative attitudes towards tyranny.

Source 2: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8, Ch. 10, §2 · c. 340 BCE

GREEK

τούτων δὲ βελτίστη μὲν ἡ βασιλεία, χειρίστη δ' ἡ τιμοκρατία. παρέκβασις δὲ βασιλείας μὲν τυραννίς: ἄμφοι γὰρ μοναρχίαι, διαφέρουσι δὲ πλείστον: ὁ μὲν γὰρ τύραννος τὸ αὐτῷ συμφέρον σκοπεῖ, ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὸ τῶν ἀρχομένων. οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶ βασιλεὺς ὁ μὴ αὐτάρκης καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ὑπερέχων: ὁ δὲ τοιοῦτος οὐδενὸς προσδεῖται: τὰ ὠφέλιμα οὖν αὐτῷ μὲν οὐκ ἂν σκοποῖ, τοῖς δ' ἀρχομένοις: ὁ γὰρ μὴ τοιοῦτος κληρωτὸς ἂν τις εἴη βασιλεὺς. ἡ δὲ τυραννὶς ἐξ ἐναντίας ταύτης: τὸ γὰρ ἑαυτῷ ἀγαθὸν διώκει. καὶ φανερώτερον ἐπὶ ταύτης ὅτι χειρίστη: κάκιστον δὲ τὸ ἐναντίον τῷ βελτίστῳ.

TRANSLATION

The best of these constitutions is Kingship, and the worst Timocracy. The perversion of Kingship is Tyranny. Both are monarchies, but there is a very wide difference between them: a tyrant studies his own advantage, a king that of his subjects. For a monarch is not a king if he does not possess independent resources, and is not better supplied with goods of every kind than his subjects; but a ruler so situated lacks nothing, and therefore will not study his own interests but those of his subjects. Tyranny is the exact opposite in this respect, for the tyrant pursues his own good. The inferiority of Tyranny among the perversions is more evident than that of Timocracy among the constitutions, for the opposite of the best must be the worst.

Another philosophical work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, was written nearly 200 years after the Peisistratids. Here, Aristotle defines tyranny as the "worst", arguing that tyrants are greedy and only pursue what is in their good. Aristotle's grounds for his negative attitudes towards tyrants are similar to his teacher's in the previous source. Both sources condemn the greedy desires typical to all tyrants, suggesting that this makes them immoral.

Source 3: Xenophon, *Hiero*, Ch. 7, §11–13 · c. 360 BCE

GREEK

ἐπεὶ δὲ ταῦτα πάντα διήκουσεν ὁ Σιμωνίδης, Καὶ πῶς, ἔφη, ὦ Ἱέρων, εἰ οὕτως πονηρόν ἐστι τὸ τυραννεῖν καὶ τοῦτο σὺ ἔγνωκας, οὐκ ἀπαλλάττη οὕτω μεγάλου κακοῦ, ἀλλ' οὔτε σὺ οὔτε ἄλλος μὲν δὴ οὐδεὶς πώποτε ἐκὼν εἶναι τυραννίδος ἀφεῖτο, ὅσπερ ἂν ἅπαξ κτήσαιο; ὅτι, ἔφη, ὦ Σιμωνίδη, καὶ ταύτη ἀθλιώτατόν ἐστιν ἢ τυραννίς; οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀπαλλαγῆναι δυνατόν αὐτῆς ἐστι. πῶς γὰρ ἂν τίς ποτε ἐξαρκέσειε τύραννος ἢ χρήματα ἐκτίνων ὅσους ἀφείλετο ἢ δεσμοὺς ἀντιπάσχων ὅσους δὴ ἐδέσμευσεν, ἢ ὅσους κατέκανε πῶς ἂν ἱκανὰς ψυχὰς ἀντιπαράσχοιτο ἀποθανουμένας; ἀλλ' εἴπερ τῷ ἄλλῳ, ὦ Σιμωνίδη, λυσιτελεῖ ἀπάγξασθαι, ἴσθι, ἔφη, ὅτι τυράννῳ ἔγωγε εὐρίσκω μάλιστα τοῦτο λυσιτελοῦν ποιῆσαι. μόνῳ γὰρ αὐτῷ οὔτε ἔχειν οὔτε καταθέσθαι τὰ κακὰ λυσιτελεῖ.

TRANSLATION

When Simonides had listened to all this he asked: “Pray, how comes it, Hiero, if despotism is a thing so vile, and this is your verdict, that you do not rid yourself of so great an evil, and that none other, for that matter, who has once acquired it, ever yet surrendered despotic power?” “Simonides,” said he, “this is the crowning misery of despotic power, that it cannot even be got rid of. For how could any despot ever find means to repay in full all whom he has robbed, or himself serve all the terms of imprisonment that he has inflicted? Or how could he forfeit a life for every man whom he has put to death? Ah, Simonides,” he cried, “if it profits any man to hang himself, know what my finding is: a despot has most to gain by it, since he alone can neither keep nor lay down his troubles with profit.”

From Xenophon's *Hiero*, his philosophical dialogue on tyrants, in this extract, the poet Simonides describes tyranny as “vile”, with Hiero arguing that tyrants would benefit from killing themselves since they cannot otherwise repay their crimes of robbing and imprisoning others. Like the previous two sources, this source shows the injustices of tyranny. The tyrant is so unjust that his best action would be to kill himself. Xenophon develops on Aristotle and Plato, pointing out that tyrants benefit only by wronging others, thus arguing that tyrants bring no benefit. These first three sources provide a broadly negative outlook on tyranny, suggesting that it is an inferior way of ruling and that the tyrant is an unhappy and greedy character.

Source 4: Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 16, §7 · c. 350 BCE

GREEK

οὐδὲν δὲ τὸ πλῆθος οὐδ' ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις παρώχλει κατὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ παρεσκεύαζεν εἰρήνην καὶ ἐτήρει τὴν ἡσυχίαν: διὸ καὶ πολλάκις ἐθρύλλουν ὡς ἡ Πεισιστράτου τυραννὶς ὁ ἐπὶ Κρόνου βίος εἴη: συνέβη γὰρ ὕστερον διαδεξαμένων τῶν υἱέων πολλῶ γενέσθαι τραχυτέραν τὴν ἀρχήν.

TRANSLATION

And in all other matters too he gave the multitude no trouble during his rule, but always worked for peace and safeguarded tranquillity; so that men were often to be heard saying that the tyranny of Peisistratus was the Golden Age of Cronos; for it came about later when his sons had succeeded him that the government became much harsher.

This passage from the *Athenian Constitution* discusses the Athenian citizens' attitudes towards tyrant Peisistratus' second period of power. Whether Aristotle wrote the *Athenian Constitution* is unclear, meaning it's unclear if these were his views. However, it still represents an attitude towards tyrants in Athens.

Peisistratus' reign is described as a "Golden Age of Cronos". This might be because of his benevolence in "not disturbing the people in any matters" or because the reign of his sons was "much harsher". Either way, the optimistic view towards Peisistratus contrasts Aristotle's previous negative outlook on tyrants in Source 2. This contradiction may be due to the source's unreliability, but it may suggest that Aristotle found Peisistratus' goodwill to be an exception to his broad conception that tyranny was the worst of all regimes.

Source 5: Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 1, Ch. 59, §4–6 · c. 425 BCE

GREEK

τρωματίσας ἑωυτόν τε καὶ ἡμιόνους ἤλασε ἐς τὴν ἀγορὴν τὸ ζευγὸς ὡς ἐκπεφευγὸς τοὺς ἐχθρούς, οἳ μιν ἐλαύνοντα ἐς ἀγρὸν ἠθέλησαν ἀπολέσαι δῆθεν, ἐδέετό τε τοῦ δήμου φυλακῆς τινος πρὸς αὐτοῦ κυρῆσαι, πρότερον εὐδοκιμήσας ἐν τῇ πρὸς Μεγαρέας γενομένη στρατηγίῃ, Νίσαιάν τε ἐλὼν καὶ ἄλλα ἀποδεξάμενος μεγάλα ἔργα. ὁ δὲ δῆμος ὁ τῶν Ἀθηναίων ἐξαπατηθεὶς ἔδωκε οἱ τῶν ἀστῶν καταλέξας ἄνδρας τούτους οἱ δορυφόροι μὲν οὐκ ἐγένοντο Πεισιστράτου, κορυνηφόροι δέ: ξύλων γὰρ κορύνας ἔχοντες εἶποντό οἱ ὀπισθε. συνεπαναστάντες δὲ οὗτοι ἅμα Πεισιστράτῳ ἔσχον τὴν ἀκρόπολιν. ἔνθα δὴ ὁ Πεισίστρατος ἤρχε Ἀθηναίων, οὔτε τιμὰς τὰς ἐούσας συνταράξας οὔτε θέσμια μεταλλάξας, ἐπὶ τε τοῖσι κατεστεῶσι ἔνεμε τὴν πόλιν κοσμέων καλῶς τε καὶ εὖ.

TRANSLATION

Wounding himself and his mules, he drove his wagon into the marketplace, with a story that he had escaped from his enemies, who would have killed him (so he said) as he was driving into the country. So he implored the people to give him a guard: and indeed he had won a reputation in his command of the army against the Megarians, when he had taken Nisaea and performed other great exploits. Taken in, the Athenian people gave him a guard of chosen citizens, whom Pisistratus made clubmen instead of spearmen: for the retinue that followed him carried wooden clubs. These rose with Pisistratus and took the Acropolis; and Pisistratus ruled the Athenians, disturbing in no way the order of offices nor changing the laws, but governing the city according to its established constitution and arranging all things fairly and well.

From Herodotus' *Histories*, this source describes Peisistratus' attempts at gaining power a second time. Peisistratus' persuasive powers helped him secure power and rule "fairly and well". However, Herodotus wrote nearly 150 years after Peisistratus, meaning any specific information may have been distorted. This doesn't necessarily diminish this source's value, as it shows that the broad consensus that Peisistratus was a popular tyrant with persuasive skills and a fair regime still existed 150 years after his rule, when democracy was at its height.

Source 6: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book 6, Ch. 54, §5 · c. 420 BCE

GREEK

οὐδὲ γὰρ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρχὴν ἐπαχθὴς ἦν ἐς τοὺς πολλοὺς, ἀλλ' ἀνεπιφθόνως κατεστήσατο: καὶ ἐπετήδευσαν ἐπὶ πλεῖστον δὴ τύραννοι οὗτοι ἀρετὴν καὶ ξύνεσιν, καὶ Ἀθηναίους εἰκοστὴν μόνον πρᾶσσόμενοι τῶν γιγνομένων τὴν τε πόλιν αὐτῶν καλῶς διεκόσμησαν καὶ τοὺς πολέμους διέφερον καὶ ἐς τὰ ἱερὰ ἔθυσον.

TRANSLATION

Indeed, generally their government was not grievous to the multitude, or in any way odious in practice; and these tyrants cultivated wisdom and virtue as much as any, and without exacting from the Athenians more than a twentieth of their income, splendidly adorned their city, and carried on their wars, and provided sacrifices for the temples.

This source recounts the tyranny of Peisistratus' sons. Thucydides positively depicts their reign's (527–510 BCE) beginning, claiming it wasn't "grievous" to the masses as it cultivated both "wisdom and virtue". This source shows the

positive similarities between the tyrannies of Peisistratus and his sons, both seeming popular with the masses. However, despite Thucydides' intentions of portraying events as they truly happened, this source may be unreliable since it was written nearly 100 years after the Peisistratids.

Source 7: Roman copy of the lost tyrannicides statue, with its inscription





Roman marble copy of the tyrannicides group of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. Surviving Roman copies are generally associated with the bronze group by Kritios and Nesiotes of 477/476 BCE, itself a replacement for the earlier group by Antenor; which original any given copy derives from is not settled.

GREEK

ἢ μέγ' Ἀθηναίοισι φόως γένεθ' ἡνίκ' Ἀριστογείτων Ἱππαρχον κτεῖνε καὶ Ἀρμόδιος.

TRANSLATION

A marvellous great light shone upon Athens when Aristogeiton and Harmodius slew Hipparchus.

This is a copy of a statue, originally in the Athenian agora, celebrating Harmodius and Aristogeiton slaying Hipparchus (514 BCE), one of Peisistratus' sons. The original was stolen, but copies survived. The statue celebrates Harmodius and Aristogeiton as tyrannicides, expressing their powerful stances and raised arms. Importantly, Harmodius and Aristogeiton didn't kill Hipparchus because he was a tyrant but because he was involved in a messy love affair. However, the statue's position in the agora is noteworthy, as it was a public display everyone saw daily. This suggests that Harmodius and Aristogeiton's actions were so celebrated that they became part of everyday life. This is also evident in Simonides' inscription: "a great light shone upon Athens". Ultimately, the statue reflects the attitudes of 4th-century Athenians who wished to celebrate these tyrannicides' victory over tyranny in their agora.

Source 8: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book 6, Ch. 59, §2 · c. 420 BCE

GREEK

τοῖς δ' Ἀθηναίοις χαλεπωτέρα μετὰ τοῦτο ἡ τυραννὶς κατέστη, καὶ ὁ Ἱππίας διὰ φόβου ἤδη μᾶλλον ὢν τῶν τε πολιτῶν πολλοὺς ἔκτεινε καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἔξω ἅμα διεσκοπεῖτο, εἴ ποθεν ἀσφάλειάν τινα ὁρῶη μεταβολῆς γενομένης ὑπάρχουσάν οἱ.

TRANSLATION

After this the tyranny pressed harder on the Athenians, and Hippias, now grown more fearful, put to death many of the citizens, and at the same time began to turn his eyes abroad for a refuge in case of revolution.

Also from Thucydides, this source helps contrast the beginning and end of Peisistratus' sons' tyranny. Hipparchus had been murdered, with Hippias now the sole ruler. Thucydides describes Hippias' cruel response to his brother's murder and his having put citizens to death, which is at odds with the benevolent behaviours we see in Source 6. This source shows the contrasting effects that Hippias' tyrannical regime had. While Hippias' rule didn't initially seem adverse to the people, we can see the eventual cruelty he inflicted upon his subjects. This source, alongside Source 6, suggests that tyrannies weren't inherently good or bad. Instead, various factors may have led to particular tyrants behaving in multiple ways, independently of any negative attitudes surrounding tyrannies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are varying views about tyrannies. Philosophers such as Xenophon and Plato give an unfavourable account of tyrants, arguing that they are greedy and wrong others. However, in particular instances, such as with Peisistratus, the good actions of tyrants mean that they transcend the negative baseline the philosophers offer. Historians writing during Athens' period of democracy, Thucydides and Herodotus, still had positive things to say about Peisistratus. This suggests that although tyrannies may have been viewed negatively, Peisistratus, in particular, wasn't. However, Source 7 shows the negative outlook on tyrannies that 4th-century Athenians may have had, as they chose to celebrate two tyrannicides. Generally, while the first three sources offer a broad dismissal of tyrants, the others suggest that there was no singular view on tyrants and that the individual actions of tyrants would have moulded any perspective.

Assessment of prediction

My prediction failed to account for the fact that there was still a broadly negative conception of tyranny, as seen by the first three sources. Source 7 also disproves my theory, although Sources 4, 5 and 6 show that particular tyrants (rather than the broad idea of tyranny) were received more positively, which is at odds with the starting source that negatively characterised tyrants.

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