

During the dark ages of Greek history, and perhaps earlier, whole populations of farmers and herdsmen in many parts of Greece had been reduced by superior military force to subjection. The subjected population was called differently in different areas; in Sparta they were known as helots, probably from a Greek word meaning to take captive. Helots were not slaves, but rather like state-owned serfs. They shared a common language and ethnic origin, lived in family groupings (thus replacing their numbers without the need for outside recruitment), worked either as peasants or servants, and had fixed obligations to their Spartan masters. Only the state could free them or put them to death, though it was likely that the individual Spartan whose maintenance was their responsibility would beat them from time to time.

Sparta had two varieties of helots: the helots of Laconia, the Spartan home territory, who were quite docile, and the helots of conquered Messenia to the west, who were at times dangerously rebellious. The helots outnumbered Spartans by a ratio of at least 20 - 1, and, of course, it was the need of keeping this much larger subject population under control which forced the true-blooded Spartans to become the ancient Greek equivalent of samurai. There were, however, other controls over helots than simple military force.

Every year the leaders of the Spartan state, the ephors, declared war on their own helots, a dire form of psychological repression. Certain helots were selected for annual public whipping whether they deserved it or not. Spartans got helots drunk and forced them to perform funny dances and recite silly rhymes just to show young Spartans how not to behave. Helots were said to have been forced to wear dog-skin caps. Yet the most deadly weapon of all was the Krypteia, whereby potential helot leaders were put to death without any process of law by young Spartan toughs striking a preemptive blow for state security. Apparently in 424 B.C., during the long and bitter war with Athens, the Spartans invited all helots who thought they had served the state well to come forward for an appropriate reward. Some 2000 helots came forward. They were garlanded with flowers, led around the temples on parade, then taken off and murdered to a man in Gestapo-like fashion, though no one knew where or when.

The helot's lot in life was not completely black, however, and rebellion among the local helots of Laconia was rare. Those who worked on the state-allocated plots of Spartan warlords knew the joys of family life on small farms, something not possible for true slaves. The farming helot in theory only had to give to his Spartan master a fixed amount of produce every year, and could keep the surplus for himself, though it could be dangerous to grow too prosperous. Serving as a hoplite in war could also earn the helot a freer status, that of Neodamodeis, though again there were dangers in drawing attention to yourself. Nonetheless, some seven hundred of these semi-liberated helots served in Northern Greece with a Spartan general named Brasidas ca. 424 B.C.

Yet in case the reader believes that a suppressed majority hungering for freedom will soon find a way to surmount a blanketing tyranny, it must be pointed out that the fierce, but small Spartan warrior class managed to hold the helots of Messenia in abject bondage for almost 300 years. It took an additional 170 years for a Spartan king with revolutionary tendencies to finally free the local helots of Laconia, whose ancestors had been serfs for over 500 years.