PHOKIAN DESPERATION:
PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IN THE OUTBREAK
OF THE 3RD SACRED WAR

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In 343 BC the Athenian orator Demosthenes described travelling though Phokis in central Greece, on his way to Delphi. It was a harrowing scene:

houses razed to the ground, walls stripped away [from cities]; a country emptied of young men; the pitiable inhabitants just a few women and young children, and old men. (D. 19.65)

Demosthenes, of course, had reason to exaggerate the Phokian plight, for which he held his enemy Aischines responsible. Yet the scene is plausible enough. The 3rd Sacred War had ended three years before, in 346. The war had begun in 356, when the Phokians seized the sanctuary at Delphi and proceeded, with the help of mercenaries paid for with looted Delphic treasures, to hold off their enemies—primarily Thebans, Thessalians, and Lokrians—for ten years. With the ridge of Mt Helikon providing a high road into Boiotia,1 the Phokians proved more or less unassailable until the eventual entry of Philip of Makedon tipped the scales decisively against them. Philip settled the war in 346, and thus successfully and permanently inserted himself into the affairs of southern Greece. The fate of Phokis was left to the members of the Delphic Amphiktyony, the religious league of Greek states which controlled the sanctuary at Delphi. Aischines claimed that only his intervention as Athenian envoy had saved the Phokians from an Oitaian proposal that all the adult male population should be thrown off the cliffs at Delphi (Aeschin. 2.142). Whether or not such brutal punishment was seriously entertained, the Amphiktyonic judgement was still harsh. Diodoros tells us that the Amphiktyony decreed that the 20-odd cities of Phokis should be broken up into villages of not more than 50 houses, at least a stadion apart; that the Phokians should not be allowed to possess either horses or arms; and that as reparations to Apollo they should pay an indemnity of 60 talents a year (D.S. 16.60.2). From inscriptions we know that payment

1 Burn 1949 320–321.
of the reparations began in autumn 343, a little after Demosthenes’ visit, with half-yearly payments of 30 talents. The amount was in a few years reduced, but payments continued into Alexander’s reign (CID 2, 37–42). Sixty talents will have been an enormous burden on the ruined Phokians: double the 5th century tribute to Athens paid by Aigina, four times that paid by Byzantion—but they were great trading states, with busy ports to tax. For the Phokians, years of poverty beckoned.

The outline of the story is clear enough, but the question remains: Why did the Phokians seize the sanctuary in 356? The orthodox view is summed up thus in a recent (and fine) general textbook:

Behind the outbreak of the war was Thebes’ attempt to consolidate its hegemony in central Greece. Exploiting a favourable majority on the Amphiktyonic council of Delphi, Thebes arranged to have Phocis severely fined in 357 for cultivating land sacred to Apollo. Phocis’ response was unexpected.

... the Phocians made a desperate effort to regain their independence. Instead of submitting to Theban blackmail, they seized control of Delphi and used the treasures of Apollo to recruit a powerful mercenary army.2

This outwardly reasonable set of statements is, I would argue, wrong in almost every respect. It falls into a common error in our thinking about international politics: the assumption that, where there are great powers involved, they are necessarily pulling the strings. In recent history, there is an excessive tendency to explain every event from the late 1940s to the late 1980s in terms of the Cold War. The same error is common in discussing antiquity, as much in ancient sources as in modern criticism. I have argued previously that although Philip was the ultimate beneficiary of the outbreak of the 4th Sacred War of 340/39, he actually had nothing whatsoever to do with the original conflict from which it sprang. That was a purely local conflict, mainly between groups of people in Delphoi and the Western Lokrian town of Amphissa.3 In this chapter I shall argue that the 3rd Sacred War, similarly, may have sprung from local rather than great power conflicts.

John Buckler, in Philip II and the Sacred War, and most recently (with Hans Beck) in Central Greece and the politics of power, begins his account of the outbreak of the Sacred War with events of 363 BC at Delphi.4 In that year, as we know from an Athenian inscription, the Amphiktyony

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2 Pomeroy 2007 415.
3 Londy 1990.