

Like monarchs, oligarchs usually lived luxurious lives and enforced their rule with military support. Citizens in an oligarchy enjoyed certain protections. But they lacked full political rights, such as voting. Therefore, most citizens of an oligarchy had very little say in how the city-state was run.

Over time, oligarchies began to disappear in Greece for various reasons. In Corinth, for example, the people lived well, but the oligarchy ruled harshly and the citizens eventually overthrew it. In Athens, dissatisfaction with the oligarchy arose as the peasant population increased and food shortages became common. The power of oligarchies was also weakened when powerful and wealthy individuals assembled armies of hired, or mercenary, warriors, called *hoplites*, and used them to intimidate political leaders. By the 400s B.C.E., a stable oligarchy ruled only one city-state, Sparta.

Tyranny

A **tyranny** is a form of government in which the ruling power is in the hands of an individual who has seized control, often by illegal means. The word “tyranny” comes from the Greek word *tyrannos*, which means “usurper with supreme power.” Over time, a person who ruled by tyranny, or a tyrant, became known for holding onto power by cruel and abusive means.

Tyrannies in Greece first arose during the mid-600s B.C.E. In many city-states, a growing wealthy middle class of merchants and manufacturers became angry with their rulers. This middle class demanded political and social privileges to accompany their newfound wealth, but the ruling oligarchies refused to grant them a say in the government. Various individuals—mostly former military leaders—responded to the demands of the middle class and promised to make the changes they wanted. Supported by the middle class, these individuals seized power from the ruling groups. Once in power, these leaders—or tyrants—often reformed the laws, helped the poor, canceled debts, and gave citizens other than nobles a say in the government. As a reward, citizens often gave gifts to tyrants, who in turn became quite wealthy.

Many tyrants ruled for short periods of time. In some city-states, tyrants became harsh and greedy, and were simply overthrown by the people. The last important tyrant to rule mainland Greece was Hippias of the city-state of Athens. In 510 B.C.E. a combination of Spartan invaders and Athenians, who were opposed to his harsh rule, forced Hippias to resign and leave Greece. A new form of government—one in which all citizens shared in the decision making—eventually replaced him.