

**The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire.** By Edward N. Luttwak. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. 498 pages. \$35.00. **Reviewed by Dr. J. Boone Bartholomees Jr.**, Professor of Military History, US Army War College.

In 1976, historian and theorist Edward Luttwak published *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*. It was original and provocative and caused a stir in the historical community. Debate ranged from whether the Romans really had a grand strategy to whether Luttwak's characterization of it was accurate. Luttwak has now released the companion piece to complete his study of Roman strategy. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* attempts to explain why the eastern empire lasted a thousand years longer than its western counterpart. Not surprisingly, Luttwak finds the reason in the grand strategy the Byzantines pursued.

Luttwak defines grand strategy as “. . . simply the level at which knowledge and persuasion, or in modern terms intelligence and diplomacy, interact with military strength to determine outcomes in a world of other states, with their own ‘grand strategies.’” All states have grand strategies even though they may not be written or acknowledged. Luttwak recognizes that the Byzantines did not understand or practice strategy as we do today, but he contends they consistently behaved in line with a recognizable strategy that developed over time. It included some traditionally Roman practices—such as paying bribes measured in tons of gold to powerful enemies rather than suffering the devastation and expense of fighting them—it also introduced peculiarly Byzantine elements based on specific circumstances. One inheritance from the western empire that made paying bribes possible was an efficient tax system that could consistently generate significant state wealth as long as the empire retained the critical revenue and manpower producing region of Anatolia. It also permitted the Byzantines to field and support another traditional Roman institution: the trained professional army that became the soul of the Byzantine military policy.

According to Luttwak, the Byzantines fundamentally altered the relationship among the three elements he believes comprise grand strategy. Instead of intelligence and diplomacy supporting military power as was the Roman model, the Byzantines emphasized diplomacy and supported it with intelligence and military power (although military power was always the indispensable element). Thus, the Byzantines were likely to try to dissuade, deter, deflect, or convert enemies, recruit allies, or encourage enemies to fight one another rather than to fight them. He argues that by using this scheme the Byzantines were consistently able to generate disproportionate advantage through a judicious mix of the traditional elements of power. That was a good thing, since the Byzantine strategic environment presented significant challenges. The eastern empire never possessed the strategic depth of its western counterpart. Because they had extensive European holdings, the Byzantines had to deal with most of the major enemies the West had faced—Goths, Huns, Alans, etc.—but they also faced Russian and Central Asian groups that arrived after the demise of the western empire—people like the Rus, Alars, Pecheneges, Bulgars, and Magyars. Because the Byzantines inherited the Anatolian, Middle Eastern, and Egyptian territories of the original Roman Empire, they also inherited a different set of implacable enemies—Persians, Muslim-Arabs, and Turks. The mounted horse archers that increasingly became the primary threat both

from the steppes and from the Persians and later Muslim-Arabs required very special military counter-capabilities.

The Byzantines tended to follow what Luttwak calls an “operational code” embodying the grand strategic tendencies of the empire. The code began by assuming war should be avoided if at all possible, but one should always act as if it were imminent. The code required excellent intelligence as the basis of planning. It was founded on the understanding that total victory was either impossible or undesirable. If one happened to eliminate an enemy there was always another right behind him waiting to take his place, and today’s enemy might be tomorrow’s ally based on the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Thus, it was better to manage some strategic problems than expend huge resources trying to resolve them. At the operational and tactical levels, that approach translated into a doctrine that avoided major battle unless there was a near certainty of victory.

*The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* has some problems. Technically, it is grossly under-indexed and not as well proofed as one would expect from a major press. The system of transliteration is unclear; we get multiple possible forms of some words and none of others. Luttwak seems to favor the Greek forms of most names, but that is not universal. The organization is topical covering diplomacy and then military subjects, which makes sustaining the historical story line difficult; the reader can become disoriented, particularly when trying to understand the vast expanse of history entailing the Byzantine Empire. The military analysis is largely based on Byzantine texts. There are more than 150 pages of summary of Byzantine military writing; it is a good synopsis, but adds little if one has read George T. Dennis’s translations of *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* or his *Maurice’s Strategikon*, John Haldon’s translation of *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, or Eric McGeer’s *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*.

What is missing is as puzzling as what is in the book. There is almost no discussion of the organization of the empire or the theme system, certainly an important aspect of grand strategy. Except for an occasional mention of the Fourth Crusade, which resulted in the sack of Constantinople and is thus impossible to ignore in Byzantine history, there is little mention of the Crusades as either a strategic problem or an opportunity. Similarly, Luttwak makes a point that taxation was a key component of Byzantine success, yet there is little discussion of how it worked. Finally, Luttwak does not really take up the issue of why the Byzantine grand strategy ultimately failed.

Where this book does not have issues is in the fundamentals of scholarship. Luttwak has been meticulous and thorough in his research. He presents exceptionally clear descriptions of arcane and complex subjects despite wandering off on tangents—such as the page on the siege of Syracuse in the Second Punic War. While he has a tendency to insert too many often cynical side comments, Luttwak is a good storyteller. The strategist would benefit from reading the first section (“The Invention of Byzantine Strategy”) and the conclusion (“Grand Strategy and the Byzantine ‘Operational Code’”). Those interested in Byzantine history will like the entire book, but this is not a work a novice should undertake in an attempt to understand Byzantium.