

# On Strategy in Byzans

by John Hart

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TITEL:

The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire

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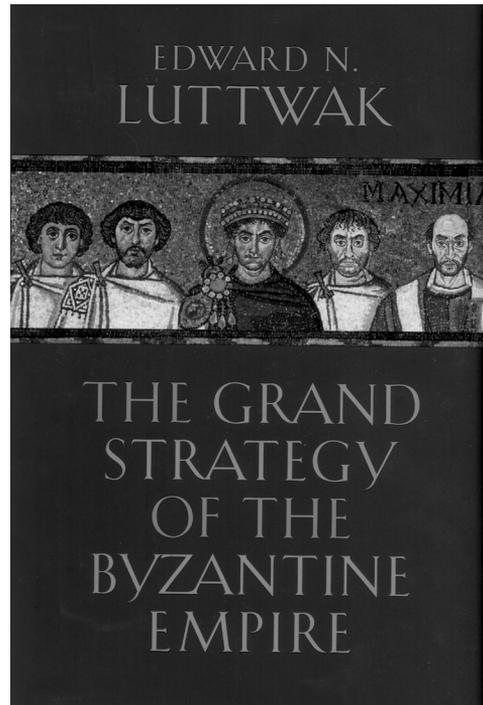
Edward N. Luttwak

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THE PUBLISHER DESCRIBES Dr Edward N. Luttwak's study of the grand strategy of the Byzantine Empire as a history of the empire's diplomacy, intelligence and strategy over a period of 800 years that will appeal to classicists, scholars, and military personnel and history enthusiasts. The book, which is the product of some 25 years of research, follows naturally from Luttwak's doctoral dissertation, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century AD to the Third* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Luttwak, who is a consultant on military strategy and non-resident Senior Associate at the Washington, DC think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), first attracted wide international attention for his book *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*, which he characterized at the time as providing politically neutral techniques for seizing control of a state without regard for subsequent policies.<sup>1</sup> It was partly an attempt to place the contemporary post-colonial independence movements (that not in-



frequently led to coups and counter-coups) into a broader context. It presents well-structured, fairly straightforward political and military factors relevant to the consideration of when a coup can be expected to succeed. Luttwak is also the author of *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Harvard University Press, revised, 2002) and the unclassified 1982 study, *Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union*, which he prepared for the Office of Net Assessment at

the US Department of Defense. He has also published articles and given interviews on counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 293 AD the Roman Emperor Diocletian introduced a tetrarchy ('rule of four'), an administrative system that involved dividing the empire into four administrative units each headed by a co-emperor. However, this arrangement soon collapsed and, in 330 AD, Constantine I founded a new capital of the eastern half of the empire situated at the Bosphorus Straits and named for its founder: Constantinople. The empire fell in 1453 when the city was captured by Mehmet II, The Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

Scholars dispute the continuity of the 'Byzantine' identity, including its nature and how long it lasted. Luttwak argues that the empire retained its identity and imperial status until 1204 when the capital was sacked by the forces of the Fourth Crusade. Although a Byzantine line of emperors (the Palaiologans) returned to govern the city in 1261, Luttwak argues that what remained until the city's capture by Mehmet II, was a largely Greek city state. According to Luttwak, the identity of the Byzantine Empire was, for the 800 years following its birth, based on the moral reassurance of Christianity, Hellenic culture and Roman pride (p. 410) and that this is reflected in the political and military strategies described by the various works (chronicles, commentaries, military manuals and the like) which its leaders consistently referred to and developed -- some of which have only recently been made readily accessible. Although the enmity that developed between the Catholic (Western) and the Byzantine (Orthodox) churches and economic competition as evidenced by the increasingly tense relations with Venice and Genoa during the various

crusades -- eventually facilitated the sacking of the capital, the spread of Orthodox christianity among the Slavs nevertheless contributed to the preservation of the Empire.

The year 565 AD marked the first period of expansion of the empire. This was largely due to Belisarius, Emperor Justin I's most successful general, who conquered the Vandal Kingdom in North Africa in 534 AD and then commanded a largely successful campaign to wrest control of Italy from the Ostrogoths. In 559 Belisarius was recalled from retirement to defend Constantinople against an army of Bulgars and Slavs. His campaigns are described by his secretary, Prokopius, and are the subject of an historical novel by the British classics scholar Robert Graves. The empire's second great expansion culminated in 1025 under Basil II and Constantine VIII. Perhaps the empire's most vulnerable period was under the reign of Herakleios (dates of rule 610-641) when the capital was besieged simultaneously by Avars and Slavs arriving from the Balkans and Persian forces from Anatolia. The emperor launched a counter offensive against the Persians in 624 and sacked Nineveh (present day Mosul) in 627. This deep strike into enemy territory by a well-trained and mobile, yet numerically inferior, army had the strategic effect of destabilizing the Sasanian Persian empire whose leader was deposed. The campaign operation allowed the Byzantines to recover lost territories in present-day Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

Luttwak defines grand strategy as 'the level at which knowledge and persuasion, or in modern terms intelligence and diplomacy, interact with military strength to determine outcomes in a world with other states' (p. 409). A Byzantine source, *Peri Strategikos* (also called *De Re Strategica*

and translated by George T. Dennis as *The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy*), defines 'strategy' as 'the means by which a commander may defend his own lands and defeat his enemies. The general is the one who practices strategy' (p. 259). According to Luttwak a conflict unfolds at separate levels: the grand strategic, theatre-strategic, operational and tactical (p. 414).

The Byzantines usually possessed highly trained armies and navies which their commanders were generally unwilling to risk committing to full-scale battles or wars of attrition. Unlike the original, united Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire relied less on military strength and more on the full spectrum of all forms of persuasion in order to secure allies, deter opponents and provoke potential enemies to fight each other. Luttwak observes that the Byzantine Empire was less inclined to destroy enemies, than to contain them and possibly to transform them into allies. The Byzantines were also well aware of their own lack of strategic depth and access to resources to fight wars. The attitude of caution was partly informed by a sense that they were the continuation of the Roman Empire and their reading of classical, including Roman history, gave them a longer-term historical perspective in which to place the vagaries of contemporary developments.

Byzantine soldiers, unlike most of their adversaries, were trained to be proficient in the use of multiple weapons, such as the composite bow, lances, and various types of maces. They were also consistently subjected to field drills. Most armies were limited in their choice of weapons or tactics. For example, the Goths favored the use of lances, while the Huns favored bows (p. 11). And most of those facing the Byzantines did not have military doctrine based on the development and transmission of a

body of literature. Many lacked discipline or training for maneuvering and were not supported by effective systems of taxation necessary in order to maintain the state's military institutions.

The Byzantine Empire developed heavy cavalry units skilled in the use of composite bows to contain fast moving raiders such as the Huns. The Huns enjoyed tactical advantages that could be transformed into strategic advantages. Their fast moving horse mounted archers often overcame the strategic and material advantages of the old unified, but decaying, Roman Empire including the capture of cities or inducing their capitulation through terror. Despite his fearsome reputation, Attila the Hun, observed the principle of not harming diplomatic envoys and probably preferred to have tribute brought to him rather than dissipate valuables among his followers through campaigning.

A view quite prevalent among Enlightenment Age scholars, including Edward Gibbon, and partly informed by cultural differences arising from religious disputes with the Orthodox church, was that the empire was decadent and prone to scheming. The perception that the Byzantines were autocratic, deceptive, decadent, and cruel (e.g. through the use of castration for some categories of servants or the blinding of unsuccessful claimants to the throne), recalls Edward Said's criticism of 'orientalism' and Western writings such as Aeschylus's *The Persians*.<sup>2</sup> Luttwak points out, however, that the practice of blinding unsuccessful power seekers reflects a religious view that only God should deprive a person of life. He also places the Byzantine Empire within the Western cultural legacy partly because it sought to perpetuate the Roman Empire.

In any work so rich in detail, readers will

inevitably dispute some of the author's definitions and phrasing, such as those touching on national histories and religion. For example, Luttwak states that Bulgaria was 'in large degree a Byzantine creation' (p. 172). He also states that 'Jihad, the holy struggle against unbelievers, is not an essential "pillar" (arkan) of Islam' (p. 198). This characterization, however, does not, for example, distinguish 'external' from 'internal' jihad. The author is probably on firmer ground when he argues that two reasons for the relative ease with which muslims were able to conquer the present-day Middle East, including Egypt, was that they imposed an overall lighter tax burden. Also Christian schismatics (largely Monophysites) and Jews often suffered great violence, including mass killing, by those wishing to impose Byzantine orthodoxy. This was in spite of the fact that the initially majority, non-muslim populations in recently conquered territories were compelled to pay a special tax and enjoyed diminished social and legal rights as compared to muslims. This also assumes that such people, initially Christians and Jews, were 'of the book' from the muslim perspective (pp. 201-211).

A little over half of the book largely consists of a review of the military aspects of the history of the Byzantine Empire interspersed with contemporary references. Luttwak then chronologically presents and comments on various Byzantine military-related texts. For example, the *Strategikon* of Maurikios recommends that a Byzantine commander on campaign refrain from burning or plundering the estates of selected prominent officials from the opposing side in order to raise questions about their loyalty. The manual also suggests ways for dealing with the fighting methods of various peoples' bordering the Em-

pire. It should also be noted that the Byzantine conception of geography differed from those of today since they did not possess accurate, timely or complete information. Furthermore, the extent to which they thought 'cartographically' continues to be debated.

In conclusion Luttwak offers a seven point summary of Byzantine operational code:

1. Avoid war by every possible means in all possible circumstances, but always act as if it might start at any time;
2. Gather intelligence on the enemy and his mentality, and monitor his movements continuously;
3. Campaign vigorously, both offensively and defensively, but attack mostly with small units; emphasize patrolling, raiding, and skirmishing rather than all-out attack;
4. Replace the battle of attrition with the 'non-battle' of maneuver;
5. Strive to end wars successfully by recruiting allies to change the overall balance of power;
6. Subversion is the best path to victory; and
7. When diplomacy and subversion are not enough and there must be fighting, it should [be] done with 'relational' operational methods and tactics that circumvent the most pronounced enemy strengths and exploit enemy weaknesses (pp. 416-417).

The book will appeal to those interested in details on logistics, siege techniques, the names and capabilities of military equipment, Byzantine military literature, frontier defence and campaign planning, and grand

strategy. It also contains a useful bibliography and a glossary of military terminology. The uninitiated reader may have difficulty disentangling the various nationalities and campaigns. Such a reader may be disinterested in some categories of detail, such as the information that Byzantine archers alternated between the Roman (thumb and forefinger) and Persian (three fingers) string pulls to alleviate digit fatigue. It is unfortunate that the book does not include illustrations of some of the war machinery described in detail, but not necessarily simple to imagine.

Luttwak's study offers historical context to the perennial question of whether a state should seek to destroy an opponent or seek

to contain him and, perhaps eventually, conciliate him in order to make common cause against future threats. The possibilities for applying 'historical lessons' to contemporary situations are nevertheless limited and one should be wary of over developing systems for the understanding of strategy. To understand human behaviour and that of states requires achieving a balance between, on the one hand, understanding general processes and principles (suspected or actual) and, on the other hand, specific detail. Nonetheless, this volume should become standard reading in the field.

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## Notes

1. Luttwak, Edward: *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1968, p. 15.
2. For an analysis critical of Said in this respect, see Irwin, Robert: *For Lust of Knowing: the Orientalists and their Enemies*, Penguin Books, London 2007, pp. 11-12, and 281-86.