

Book Review - Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Why Did it Collapse? by Donald Kagan Review by Walter S. Zapotoczny

Among the historical questions that men have posed through the ages, none has attracted more attention over a longer period than the one that asks why the Roman Empire in the West collapsed. It has remained a vital question because each age has seen in the story of Rome's fall something significant and relevant to its own situation. In his book, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Why Did it Collapse*, Donald Kagan summarizes writings from ten military historians who wrote about the Roman Empire's decline and fall. The book is organized into three sections: The Problem of Decline and Fall Stated, The Causes, and Lessons for the Future.

In the first section, Michael Rostovtzeff and Frank Walbank attempt to define the problem of decline and fall. Rostovtzeff divides the concept of decline into two major divisions: political, economic, and social decline on the one hand, and intellectual and spiritual on the other. He writes that the Roman Empire's decline meant the barbarization of the political institutions, the simplification and localization of the economic functions, and the decay and disappearance of urban life. In the intellectual and spiritual area, Rostovtzeff writes that the people developed a mentality based exclusively on religion. He believes this was hostile to the intellectual achievements of the higher classes. Walbank offers a clarification to the problem by setting it in its historical perspective and by defining the field of inquiry.

The second section presents a selection of some of the explanations, which have been offered for Rome's decay and collapse. The collection includes writings by John Bury, Edward Gibbon, Frank Walbank, Arthur Boak, William Westermann, Tenney Frank, William Heitland, Michael Rostovtzeff, Norman Baynes, and Andre Piganiol. Bury proposes that the success of the barbarians in penetrating founding states in Rome's western provinces cannot be explained in any general consideration. Bury claims this is accounted for by actual events and would be clearer if more of the story were known. He claims that the gradual collapse of the Roman Empire was the consequence of a series of contingent events and no general cause can be assigned that made it inevitable. In his essay, Gibbon believes the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of excessive greatness. He claims prosperity ripened the principle of decay and the causes of destruction multiplied with extent of conquest. Gibbon believes that Rome was built of artificial supports and the structure yielded to the pressure of its own weight. Walbank offers a different explanation suggesting that the destructive tendencies of the Roman Empire arose from the premises upon which classical civilization arose, namely low technology and to compensate for it, the institution of slavery. Arthur Boak writes that with the declining work force and increasing impoverishment, the Roman Empire in the West was unable to defend itself against disintegration from within and invasion from without. The loss of economic and political freedom, according to Westermann, account for Rome's decline. He believes these losses had disastrous results upon private initiative and undermined the Roman civilization. Tenney Frank offers a different explanation for the decline in his essay suggesting that the people who built Rome had given way to a different race of people. Heitland approaches the question by suggesting that the decline and fall occurred due to an absence in any non-revolutionary means of freedom. He claims that no public opinion could be organized to undertake reforms. The gradual absorption of the educated classes by the masses and the consequent simplification of all of functions of society is the explanation offered by Rostovtzeff for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. He suggests that the loss of political, social, economic, and intellectual life created a "barbarization" of the Rome. Poverty is the reason offered by Baynes for the decline of the Western Empire. Baynes writes about how it crippled Rome in its efforts to maintain a civil and military system. Andre Piganiol writes that barbarians destroyed the Roman Empire. He writes about the unorganized bands of Germans who had succeeded in living on the frontiers of the empire for centuries without being civilized.

The third section of the book gives the views of four authors, Edward Gibbon, William Heitland, Michael Rostovtzeff, and Frank Walbank, on the meaning of the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire for their own and future generations.

Donald Kagan's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Why Did it Collapse* offers a variety and diversity of solutions for the question of why the Roman Empire in the West collapsed. The question of the decline has remained a vital one for centuries. While Kagan's book does not offer a single solution

to the question, it provides the reader with theories that can be analyzed and considered in context of today's generation.

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