

Jakub J. Grygiel. *Return of the Barbarians: Confronting Non-State Actors from Ancient Rome to the Present.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. ix + 222 pp. \$28.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-61124-1.

Reviewed by Megan A. Stewart

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Policymakers and scholars of international relations will undoubtedly find *Return of the Barbarians*, by Jakub Grygiel, to be a rich resource of information on the premodern global order. Throughout the text, Grygiel cogently and forcefully argues for researchers and practitioners to return to premodern history to understand contemporary threats and strategic challenges that the United States currently and increasingly faces.

Grygiel begins *Return of the Barbarians* by outlining the nature of the premodern world. The premodern system, he argues, facilitated the rise and heightened the threat of dangerous “barbarians.” Grygiel cites the Mongols, the Huns, the Goths, and the Vandals, as well as the Comanche Native American tribes as historical examples of barbarians. Grygiel sees three key reasons for the rise of violence. First, many strategic actors made military technology readily available to barbarians, and these barbarians were adept and skillful at innovating upon either the weapons they secured or the use thereof to seize the military upper hand in conflict. Second, “manpower,” meaning a larger army, mattered more than the size of the territory one controlled. Third, the premodern era, according to Grygiel, was beset by “ungoverned spaces,” literally “vast empty spaces” (p. 35) that by geology, logistics, and politics resisted imperial incursions. Beyond these conditions,

conflicts in the premodern era were less about the accumulation of territory or resources and more about religion, politics, and prestige.

The conditions described above facilitated the rise of barbarians, which the author defines as “small,” “mobil[e]” and “decentralized groups” (p. 48) organized around leaders through personal and identity ties rather than through impersonal administrations and bureaucracies. Because these groups were resilient to conventional warfare attacks launched by the state and almost undefeatable in guerrilla warfare, undeterrable, and resistant to diplomacy, they plagued the global order at the time. Furthermore, because of the personalist nature of political organization among barbarians, the author argues that violence was a source of social cohesion; thus violence for violence’s sake often drove conflictual relations between empires and barbarians. The consequence of barbarianism was increased violence and lethality.

Grygiel argues that as nation-states have slowly consolidated since the premodern era, the “past two or three centuries, in particular, have seen a marked decline in the strategic relevance of barbarian groups” (p. 12). But that concord has come to an end. Grygiel notes that the contemporary international system is characterized by both a proliferation of military technology and a concurrent rise in ungoverned spaces, which together

have incubated the growth of contemporary “barbarians.” For Grygiel, contemporary barbarians include al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas. Like their premodern counterparts, contemporary barbarians are lethal, able to organize large groups on the peripheries of the state, and share similar objectives: ideology, religion, and violence motivate contemporary barbarians more so than the pursuit of territorial control. The author further contends that these groups have no interest in becoming the state or forming state-like institutions, as opposed to retaining interpersonal bonds or identity-based connections. As a consequence, modern-day barbarians, like their predecessors, are immune to state efforts to deter violence or find diplomatic solutions.

Grygiel then demonstrates his argument about the strategic importance of barbarians in the premodern context by using three cases that highlight how premodern barbarians pulled on the fraying strength of imperial Rome such that the empire eventually unraveled and collapsed. These cases provide an insider’s view of the fall of the Roman Empire.

The strength of the book lies in its chapters on premodern history, both the theoretical and empirical chapters. Here, readers confront information about the global order that emerged around the Roman Empire and in which the Roman Empire was embedded. The application of contemporary international relations concepts and theory to the empirical cases of imperial Rome is a welcome insight. Careful case studies and a deep consideration of the content and character of the premodern system, particularly with the hope of identifying similarities and patterns between the past and today, is certainly a noble effort.

The largest problem of the work, however, relates to Grygiel’s conceptualization of barbarians and the conditions that precipitated their rise. A clear and well-defined conceptualization of barbarians is essential to Grygiel’s work in two ways: first, the author claims that barbarians have

re arisen from their long-standing historical dormancy, and second, the threat posed to states and empires in the premodern era necessitates our intensified focus on the threat posed by them today. The author’s ability to successfully apply a premodern framework to contemporary international security thus rests largely on the author’s conceptualization of barbarians and his application of this description to particular contemporary examples.

But the cases Grygiel evokes do not meet his definition of barbarians. In some cases, these examples actively contradict the author’s claims. In terms of the premodern or historical cases, none of the barbarians mentioned were solely composed of apolitical, mobile cells of fighters that failed to administer some form of governance to a people. Though the Mongols, Huns, Goths, Vandals, and Comanches might have formed smaller bands of soldiers that engaged in troublesome guerrilla warfare tactics with the Roman Empire or the United States, these fighters emerged from and represented a political and social body of persons that included both warriors and nonwarriors alike. The mobile bands of guerrilla fighters were part of a broader social and political fabric, even if their form of political organization and sovereignty was not territorially defined. Furthermore, it is unclear if the decentralization that characterized premodern barbarians, which the author himself admits is the most challenging dimension of his theoretical framework, is any different from the relationships one might have observed between monarchs and their fiefdoms. In other words, the key point of difference between the Roman Empire and the barbarians is their primary *modus operandi* on the battlefield (conventional warfare as opposed to guerrilla warfare), and perhaps how sovereignty was organized in these societies.

In terms of contemporary examples of “barbarians,” it is unclear whether any of the cases fully meet the inclusion criteria outlined by the

author. One of the contemporary barbarian cases that the author focuses on considerably is Hezbollah. Hezbollah, Grygiel argues, is a contemporary barbarian because Hezbollah does not want to be a state and is willing to sacrifice people and territory in pursuit of its goals. Although the author cites Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as stating that Hezbollah does not want to take over the state, Nasrallah may have said this because at that time, Hezbollah already held seats in the Lebanese national parliament. The group was then, and still remains, part of the Lebanese state. And though Hezbollah's leader says that the organization no longer wants to overthrow the Lebanese state, this was most certainly not the case at its inception.[1] Furthermore, while Hezbollah was willing to absorb casualties in its 2006 fight with Israel, its extensive and highly organized administrative apparatus compensates victims and ensures that homes and businesses are rebuilt in lieu of Israeli military retribution, one aspect of Hezbollah's governance apparatus, which is about as bureaucratic and state-like as the Lebanese state itself.[2] Finally, Hezbollah and Israel have developed clear and routinized "rules of the game" to limit violence, much like states develop repertoires of contention between them.[3]

Hezbollah is not unique: virtually all the cases the author designates as contemporary "barbarians" control and administer territory in which civilians reside, have a clear bureaucratic structure, and aim to create some form of state-like political organization, though not necessarily based on territorial sovereignty.[4] Perhaps the best example for the author is al-Qaeda, but even then, only some branches of al-Qaeda meet the author's definitional standards of "barbarianism," whereas other al-Qaeda affiliates have achieved a highly organized, territorially bounded, state-like administrative apparatuses, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.[5]

As a result, the author's own paragon examples contradict the definition of barbarianism put

forth. If barbarianism has little to do with constructing state-like institutions, the size of the organization, and the links between the organization and the population, then what is barbarianism? Although the author is cautious to not say as much (p. 114), the sole criterion consistent across all groups is that barbarians are political actors that are not recognized as states, that engage in guerilla warfare. Some of these groups might also either endeavor to create political organizational forms outside of the traditional nation-state, if they have not already achieved such social and political structures.

But therein lies the problem: nonstate groups that rely on guerrilla warfare have always persisted, as have many of the conditions that lead to their rise. One need hardly turn to premodern history. Indeed, why Grygiel did not compare contemporary Islamist insurgencies to just-a-few-decades-earlier communist insurgencies is surprising,[6] especially as the two sets of actors literally draw from the same strategic model,[7] frequently engage in guerrilla warfare,[8] and share transnational ambitions to rid the world of an "imperialist" (in fact, the same) foe.

In terms of the conditions that precipitate the rise of "barbarians," the prevalence of ungoverned spaces also characterized the immediate post-World War II period (if not earlier) as recently independent states struggled to consolidate control and authority throughout their borders, sometimes under threat of insurgencies capturing and controlling territory on the peripheries at states' end.[9] Indeed, many of these "ungoverned spaces" were actually well governed by rebel groups (frequently communist or anticolonial in the post-World War II era) that created many of the same bureaucratic and governance structures that Hezbollah currently maintains in Lebanon. [10] Correspondingly, the author contends that over the past several centuries, conflicts largely revolved around territorial disputes and resource issues. This claim is surprising as the two largest

global “conflicts” before the 1990s included the Cold War and its related “proxy” wars, as well as World War II. Both conflicts were motivated by ideological commitments rather than conquest. As opposed to diving hundreds of years back in time to premodern Rome, we could simply look back a few decades for an even more appropriate analog to the current security environment.

And though the author claims that barbarianism refers to a descriptive, analytical category and is not intended to be used as a normatively laden term, the examples he selects suggests that normative or ideological components might have unconsciously infused his analytic choices. First, almost all the contemporary examples of “barbarians” that the author uses refer to relatively successful Muslim rebel groups or armed political parties, but many of these examples fall short of the definition of barbarians outlined by Grygiel.

Whereas the author points to these Muslim examples as meeting the definition of barbarianism, two more applicable but undiscussed examples include the militiamen of the American Revolutionary War and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) of the post-Civil War and late Reconstruction period, organizations that neither controlled territory nor formed any new governing bodies and are best characterized as bands of fighters emerging from and receding into the population from whence they commenced. Indeed, given that white supremacist terrorism has long been overlooked by local police and federal investigators, and that white supremacist terrorism has increased recently, to underscore the rising threat of “barbarians,” the author could have more closely focused on the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century KKK and other associated white supremacist terrorist organizations that actually succeeded in dismantling democratically elected governments and instituting exclusionary local dictatorships premised upon racial terror.[11] The argument about the impending return of the “barbarians” would have been made all the more compelling

with these examples that match the author’s definition of barbarianism and that have clear ramifications for the domestic security environment today.

Second, there appears to be an implicit assumption of the moral superiority of the state and empire. For instance, Grygiel distances barbarians from the state by their characteristic use of violence as an end in and of itself. The author argues that the “barbarians” seek out violent confrontations to strengthen social cohesion (pp. 46-47, 116). But even if we accept the assumption that barbarians are prone to violence for socially cohesive purposes, it is unclear whether this logic is unique to “barbarians.” While barbarians may reap strategic and cohesive benefits from violence, so too do states. Indeed, Charles Tilly once described statemaking as a protection racket, a form of organized crime. Tilly writes that states provoked violence against them as a way to further consolidate authority and expand the state apparatus, thereby deepening the social contract between the state and society.[12] This logic—that states wield violence to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the population—is shared by barbarians. For barbarians, if the social contract is premised upon bonds of loyalty and personal connections, and violence strengthens these bonds, then the use of violence also strengthens their position vis-à-vis the population. For both states and barbarians, violence is a tool to deepen the authority of leaders and strengthen their ties to the population, even if the bonds that connect the central authority to society are distinct across territorially organized and nonterritorially organized political actors.

Furthermore, moral superiority with which the author seems to imbue states vis-à-vis barbarians is again surprising because according to James C. Scott, it is frequently the actions of *states* that have caused the greatest and most profound depths of human suffering and loss of life.[13] Scott’s claims echo within Grygiel’s text: while

Grygiel likens the Comanche tribes to barbarians, at the same time these tribes were allegedly engaged in barbarian activities, the United States government enforced a policy of settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing, such that violence by Comanches had a strong defensive element to it as Comanche tribes were forced to defend themselves. What might help readers adjudicate the authors claims is contemporary scholarship on Native American history or Native American perspectives on the period. Instead, parroted by the author in defense of his arguments are two sources from the 1930s (albeit written by a well-known historian) that describe "Plains Indians" as having "no concept of the white man's generosity to a vanquished foe" (p. 82) and suggest that they could not be "tamed" by the church because they preferred the "warwhoop" (p. 47).

As a whole, the book succeeds in outlining the premodern conflict and competition between territorially based and nonterritorially based forms of political organization and raises interesting questions about the nature of violence and warfare between nonterritorial sovereign forms and territorially sovereign forms in the contemporary era. It clearly demonstrates how these nonterritorial challengers eroded the power and capacity of the Roman Empire, hastening its eventual demise. But the book lacks the analytic precision to bring these premodern patterns into dialogue with contemporary trends in political violence and organizing, and overlooks more relevant and recent historical examples that better compare to the cases and challenges facing the United States today.

Notes

[1]. Joseph Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

[2]. Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 50-51.

[3]. Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 83-84.

[4]. Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Mara Redlich Revkin, "What Explains Taxation by Resource-Rich Rebels? Evidence from the Islamic State in Syria," August 25, 2017, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3023317>; and Katherine Zimmerman, "AQAP: A Resurgent Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 9 (2015): 19-24.

[5]. Zimmerman, "AQAP: A Resurgent Threat."

[6]. See, for instance, similar comparisons by Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," *Dædalus* 147, no. 1 (2018); and Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): 743-76.

[7]. Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 83-89.

[8]. Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 415-29.

[9]. See, for example, Mahmood Mamdani, "Making Sense of Political Violence in Postcolonial Africa," in *War And Peace in the 20th Century and Beyond*, ed. Geir Lundestad and Olav Njølstad (River Edge, NJ: World Scientific, 2003), 71-99; and William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[10]. There are numerous works on this topic, but see Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism* regarding Hezbollah; and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Reyko Huang, *Wartime Origins of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Ana Arjona,

Rebelocracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) for a broader overview of rebel governance behavior.

[11]. Jonathan Greenblatt, “The Resurgent Threat of White-Supremacist Violence,” *The Atlantic*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/the-resurgent-threat-of-white-supremacist-violence/550634/>; Janet Reitman, “U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don’t Know How to Stop It,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html>.

[12]. Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169-91.

[13]. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 3-5.

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