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The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire

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writing style is captivating, and the book meets its stated aim of providing a popular history of medieval special operations. Harari, whether intentionally or not, demonstrates the importance of being able to fight hybrid wars.

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Luttwak, Edward N. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2009. 512pp. \$35

In the Western historical imagination, the Eastern Roman Empire, which ruled from Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) from AD 330 until 1453, has received mostly disdain and neglect. The term “Byzantine” carries some negative connotations. One dictionary defines “byzantine” (lower-case *b*) as “characterized by a devious and usually surreptitious manner of operation.” In the often-quoted judgment of a Victorian historian, “Its vices were the vices of men who had ceased to be brave without learning to be virtuous. . . . The history of the Empire is a monotonous story of the intrigues of priests, eunuchs and women, of poisonings, of conspiracies, of uniform ingratitude, of perpetual fratricides.”

The academic study of Byzantine history, the preserve of a rather inbred community, requires mastery of difficult medieval Greek, the intricacies of Orthodox theology, and other esoteric specialties. But in recent years the work of a new generation of talented Byzantinists has given us English translations of many long-inaccessible primary sources, including an extensive body of military texts.

In 1976, military analyst and historian Edward Luttwak published *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century AD to the Third*, advancing a controversial thesis that the empire developed a conscious and consistent strategy of “defense in depth,” based on lines of frontier forts, backed by regional and central mobile armies.

In this new work, on the Eastern Empire’s grand strategy, Luttwak explains that after the collapse of the Western Empire in the fifth century, Eastern emperors no longer enjoyed this luxury. Faced by endless waves of nomadic horse archers from the steppes, plus Sassanid Persia (the persistent traditional enemy to the east), the empire could not afford to fight decisive battles or wars of attrition, which would only deplete the costly, carefully trained imperial army. Trying to annihilate the present enemy would only smooth the way for the next tribe migrating out of Central Asia. The empire’s most natural ally was whatever tribe was stacked up *behind* the horde currently assailing the Danube frontier.

The empire developed an “operational code” that combined shrewd diplomacy, careful intelligence, defensive siege craft, and well-placed bribery, with military force as a last resort. When battle could not be avoided, Byzantine generals practiced “relational maneuver,” a style of fighting based on insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each enemy.

The rise of Islam in the seventh century represented a deadly new threat, based on an aggressive religious ideology. With strongly disaffected religious minorities in its Syrian and North African provinces, the empire was particularly vulnerable. Luttwak explains how a

succession of warrior-emperors managed this threat for almost seven centuries.

A short but sharply argued chapter, "Leo VI and Naval Warfare," reviews the very limited surviving texts on Byzantine sea power and provides a lucid account of "Greek fire," the empire's much-misunderstood "secret weapon."

Luttwak's analysis is particularly sharp on the relation of religion and statecraft. Unlike in the medieval West, where church and state contended bitterly for centuries for dominance, the Orthodox Church was usually an integral part of the imperial order: the patriarch of Constantinople was appointed by the emperor and served at his pleasure. Orthodoxy was a source of "cultural confidence" for Byzantine

soldiers and a practical instrument for taming uncivilized barbarians.

The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire is a work of solid scholarship, creative imagination, and practical military analysis. It should be of more than antiquarian interest to those who believe that the present confrontation between Islam and the West may become a multigenerational conflict. The empire endured so long because it took war very seriously, avoided it whenever possible, and realistically analyzed the cultures that surrounded it.

The book's only weakness is its maps, which are muddy and crudely drawn. The reader will benefit from keeping at hand a good historical atlas, such as the *Penguin Atlas of Medieval History*.

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