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Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry: 1100–1550

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If rivals watched with gimlet eyes, Canaris's political patrons had reason to look the other way. He was soon enmeshed in the government's efforts to circumvent the naval-armament provisions of the Versailles treaty that had ended World War I. With his international networks delivered, Canaris won only muted applause in Berlin.

Grand Admiral Erich Raeder was leery of Canaris, who he feared was compromised politically. Mueller acknowledges the awkwardness between the two officers but emphasizes Raeder's professionalism. Raeder's own memoir supports that judgment. Setting his personal feelings aside, Raeder intervened to elevate Canaris to the head of the Abwehr.

At first Canaris walked the razor's edge between collaboration with the Nazi regime and open resistance. The spring of 1938 was the turning point. The cumulative effect of the Blomberg and Fritsch scandals, destroying the careers of the war minister and the commanding general of the Wehrmacht, respectively, was too much for an old-school naval officer. Still in uniform, Canaris became the heart of the opposition circle in Abwehr headquarters.

Canaris's career-long wrangling with his political and diplomatic counterparts will resonate with military intelligence officers today. His death in the bloodletting unleashed by Claus von Stauffenberg's failed attempt on Hitler's life is startling only for its accidental nature. The real surprise is that he was untouched until the Abwehr was dissolved in mid-1944.

Who was Wilhelm Canaris? A loyal servant of "the other Germany" or a right-wing Nazi sympathizer? What

accounts for Himmler's indulgent, even protective, attitude toward Canaris and his circle? The wily yet principled admiral is an incomplete puzzle. However, Mueller puts new pieces on the table, while nudging others into place.

Readers will appreciate Muller's abundant reference notes, exhaustive bibliography, and index. Sadly, the work is marred by the absence of rigorous copyediting and fact-checking; names in particular suffer. But these are minor quibbles. Mueller's work is an important contribution to the literature, and the Naval Institute deserves a laurel for bringing it to these shores.

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Harari, Yuval Noah. *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry: 1100–1550*. Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell, 2007. 224pp. \$90

Yuval Noah Harari published this book in the midst of the ongoing struggles among the Hezbollah militia from Lebanon, the Palestinian Hamas militias, and the Israeli army. These contemporary events, especially the special operations undertaken by all sides, provide the backdrop to this work. With regard to medieval special operations, not much has been written, and Harari endeavors to fill this void by focusing his work on a general readership rather than a strictly scholarly audience.

The title of this book is eye-catching but immediately raises questions: What does the author mean by "special operations," and what is meant by "the Age of Chivalry"? The author's use of the phrase, which dates back to the high and late Middle Ages, is really nothing

more than a literary choice. It is easy for the reader to get distracted in the discussion regarding the term and the notions of chivalry and chivalric virtues. Harari does not imply that the employment of deception, guile, kidnapping, and assassination as means of political and military operations was contrary to the code of conduct. Rather, he says that they were not the normal methods of operation but were in that sense unconventional and therefore special. He notes specifically that the code of chivalry never stood in the way of success or victory and that medieval special operations almost always necessitated foul play. This brings us to the second and more substantial issue—Harari’s definition of special operations.

The author defines special operations as combat operations that are limited in area, size, and duration and that, relative to the resources expended, have disproportionate strategic and political results. Additionally, he notes, they are by their nature covert and unconventional. While covertness is a given, because a small force cannot hope to accomplish its mission if discovered, the concept of unconventionality causes a problem. Not all medieval battles were fought between two opposing forces lined up three battalions abreast, with a melee following a few volleys of arrows and charges of knights. The large, set-piece battle was in fact relatively rare; the small-unit raid was more the norm. This issue is not whether the operations are “special” but rather whether the examples used actually meet a modern definition of special operations. Modern special operations are similar to Harari’s definition in that they are designed to achieve covertly a

political or strategic end, but both the operation and the effect are planned, and the operations are usually carried out, by specially trained forces, not necessarily by small detachments of conventional soldiers. By his less rigorous definition, nearly all small actions could be regarded as “special.”

Harari’s preface and first chapter, which together account for nearly one-third of the book, define medieval special operations and then list a plethora of examples, such as small-unit raids, political intrigues carried out by military forces, assassinations, hostage takings, kidnappings, and associated rescues. He focuses on inland special operations targeting infrastructure or people or national symbols (either people or strategic places). However, his methodology for selecting examples is unclear. As a result, chapter 1 is long on examples but short on the analysis of their impacts—the one true weakness of the book.

Of the other cases specifically explored, the assassination of King Conrad of Jerusalem by the Nizaris (Assassins) in 1192 and the destruction of the imperial flour mill at Auriol by the French in 1536 are more in line with the contemporary definition of special operations. These examples feature specially trained troops executing plans that had strategic and political goals and involved limited resources. It is in these cases that the true value of this work is evident.

Harari successfully shifts the reader’s attention from the glory of the large, set-piece battle to the implications of the actions of small forces of soldiers, no matter whether their operations were special or not. The author’s

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