

**William Caferro. *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. pp. xviii + 459.**

This is an excellent and well-written book. Relying on thorough archival research, Caferro sheds important new light not only on one of the most important military leaders of late fourteenth-century Europe, but also on the history of mercenary armies, and on warfare, politics, and finance in Italy at the time. Moreover, the book raises interesting questions concerning the privatization of war and the relations between war and business, which are fast becoming as relevant to the twenty-first century as they were to the fourteenth.

John Hawkwood was one of the leading mercenary captains of late fourteenth-century Europe. He was born in England, underwent his military apprenticeship in the royal English army during the Hundred Years' War, joined the notorious "free companies" that ravaged southern France in 1360, and moved to Italy along with many of his compatriots and comrades in 1361. Since Italy suffered from endemic conflict between dozens of independent city-states, while simultaneously developing the most sophisticated financial infrastructure in Europe, its mercenary market was the biggest and most lucrative of the era. Professional soldiers from throughout Europe flocked to the rich but turbulent peninsula, contributing to the formation of an extremely complex fiscal-military system.

Hawkwood gradually proved himself to be amongst the most skilful and ruthless players in this intricate game. He was all of a gifted military leader, a shrewd diplomat, an adroit businessman—and a merciless thug who ravaged large areas of the Italian peninsula, terrorized its civilian population, and was responsible for some of the worst atrocities of late fourteenth-century warfare. Through meticulous research in archives in both England and Italy, and a careful reading of primary and secondary sources, Caferro demolishes the fictional and romantic image of John Hawkwood, uncovering in its

stead a different, more complex, and arguably far more intriguing, historical figure.

Hawkwood's career and Caferro's study raise important questions about the exact relations between war, politics, and finance in late fourteenth-century Italy. Particularly intriguing are the relations between the rationalization of business in this period and the conduct of Italian wars. Was the rise of the mercenary market part and parcel of the rationalization of business, representing an ideal, cost-effective solution to the problems of waging war? Or was the growing dependency of the city-states on increasingly rapacious and untrustworthy mercenaries the price of adopting a rationalistic business mentality? When reading Caferro's account of the way the merchants and bankers of Florence, Siena, and Pisa found themselves blackmailed and manipulated by their own military employees, one begins to wonder whether even those with keen business minds might be woefully inadequate when it comes to managing war.

Perhaps the main drawback of Caferro's book is that it does not explore these issues at great length, and that it gives more attention to the factual course of events than to the mentality and worldview working behind the scenes. It would have been particularly interesting to learn how a barely literate Essex lad understood the world of Italian finance, adapted to its ways, and managed to make the system work for him.

The intersection between war and business which dominates the book should make it interesting reading material, not only for specialists in fourteenth-century Italian history or late medieval warfare, but to readers and scholars interested in the relation between war, politics, and finance in general. Until a few years ago, mercenaries were considered an extinct and obsolete military resource, and the history of mercenaries was accordingly an obscure sub-field of military history. In politics and the political sciences alike, common wisdom—which can be traced back to the propaganda of the French Revolution and even to Machiavelli's writings—held that mercenary forces are inherently inferior, irrelevant to the post-1789 world.

Yet mercenaries are now making a comeback. Along with schools, prisons, and hospitals, states are privatizing their armies. Countries as diverse as Sierra Leone and the United States rely increasingly on mercenaries to fight their wars for them, and with the much-talked-about demise of the nation-state, the twenty-first century may well belong, militarily, to the mercenary. Estimates of the number of mercenaries currently working for the United States in Iraq run into the tens of thousands, and the private security industry is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world today. Buying private security stocks in the 1990s proved to be a better investment than buying high-tech stocks.<sup>1</sup>

The world and career of John Hawkwood may therefore be of surprising relevance to students of twenty-first-century warfare and politics—perhaps more relevant than studying the career of a Rommel or a Patton with their mass-recruitment national armies. Caferro's book is highly recommended as a well-researched and thought-provoking entry into this field.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).