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David Alvarez, *The Pope's Soldiers: A Military History of the Modern Vatican*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2011. Pp. xiii, 429. ISBN 978-0-7006-1770-8.

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David Alvarez (St. Mary's College of California) has written the first general history of the papal armed forces from 1796 to the present time. In so doing, he sheds welcome light on two hundred years of the Vatican's diplomatic history as well. The work relies on material not previously mined, such as the Archivio Segreto Vaticano holdings of military records and the archives of the Pontifical Swiss Guard. Alvarez, who has written previously on the Vatican State,¹ here concentrates on the roles of major papal military units: recruited armies, the Vatican Gendarmeria (police), the Noble Guards and Palatine Guards (largely household guards with ceremonial functions), and the Swiss Guards, the present military and security force of the Holy Father.

The work is, however, more than just a chronicle of campaigns and battles. It relates much detail about tactics of engagement during the long time span when the Papal States controlled much of the Italian peninsula and the Vatican had to defend its holdings during invasions after the French Revolution, attempts to throw off papal control during the struggles for unification of Italy in the nineteenth century, and the vicissitudes of two world wars. Alvarez pays meticulous attention to the weaponry and equipment employed during this period, when papal forces moved from being the worst army in Europe, as he describes it under Pius VI in 1796, through centuries of neglect after the stunning role of the Pope's naval and military forces at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, to become the up-to-date security force it is today.

In telling the story of the papal forces, Alvarez highlights the men who commanded it: their formation and training in European military skills, their recurring problems in serving a papal state increasingly averse to violence, and the intrigues endemic to military units competing for resources, attention, and finally survival. The whole fascinating story of genius, blunder, and perseverance is set against the backdrop of modern Italy's birth pangs.

Stark ideological differences between the papacy and revolutionary France eventuated in Napoleon Bonaparte's appointment to command the French republic's Army of Italy in 1796. The neutralizing of Austrian and Sardinian armies opened the way to the northern reaches of the Papal States and the seizure of Bologna and Ferrara. The next goal was to liberate Rome itself from, as the French saw it, long servitude to the pope. Since the papal army was useless, Pius VI had to accept ruinous terms, such as sending to Paris a hundred works of art, five hundred valuable manuscripts from the Vatican Library, and huge monetary payments. French occupation of Rome, the killing of a French general in a street demonstration, and the house arrest, deportation, and eventual death in France of the eighty-one-year-old Pius VI did nothing to stimulate his successor, Pius VII, to put military preparedness on a better footing: lack of money, as always, won out and Napoleon was crowned in Paris in 1804 by this pope, who was eventually kidnapped back to France and allowed to return to Rome only in 1814, after the Congress of Vienna restored the Papal States. Even after all this, little consideration was given to military planning or enhancement, as modest reorganization of the Papal States (in eastern and central Italy from Bologna to well south of Rome) went forward. Successful insurgencies beginning in 1831 clearly revealed that the popes had men in uniform but no soldiers—equipment, training, discipline, spirit, confidence, and purpose were sorely lacking.

The author devotes some 250 pages to the long reign of Pope Pius IX (1846-78). His predecessor, Gregory XVI, had sought to control the Papal States by inviting Austrian troops to invade rebelling territories, but once these were pacified and the Austrians had departed, local civic guards refused in various ways to

1. See *Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2002) and (with Robert A. Graham) *Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage against the Vatican, 1933-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

acknowledge papal authority. In this period, papal forces numbered only about two thousand, spread over a large swath of Italy. Disgust with papal administration grew rampant, revolt was at hand, and Austria, tired of propping up popes at the cost of fueling revolution, began pressure for amelioration of popular discontent and grievance. A big part of this effort was the complete reorganization and reform of the pontifical military to produce a professional armed force able to keep order without relying on foreign intervention. Little of this bore immediate fruit except for the gaining of permission from the Swiss Confederation to recruit troops from Switzerland.

The history of Pope Pius IX is the history of the final collapse of the temporal realm of the papacy, that is, the Papal States, and the unification of Italy. It is a long, varied, and dramatic story of good planning, human failure, and slow progress toward efficient military units serving the papacy. It unfolded in the context of revolutions, uprisings, and conflicts between Austria, France, nascent Italian republican forces, and royal troops of the incipient Kingdom of Italy Piedmontese. Pius IX evolved from a progressive leader eager for reform to an intransigent conservative who lost control over everything temporal except for what is now the Vatican City State, the status of which was not finalized by Italy until Mussolini in 1922. Alvarez presents this sweep of events clearly and in welcome detail, with a focus on the fitful progress toward a papal military with something like modern competency. The untenable position of a church conducting military operations to retain temporal power runs through this story; the pope was very often loath actually to use even that military force he was struggling to consolidate.

The tension between the roles of temporal and spiritual leadership that would afflict Pius throughout the crises of 1848 [when the first war for Italian independence began] was especially apparent in his attitude toward the pontifical armed forces. The several efforts at reorganization and reform since the restoration of 1815 may have marginally improved the capabilities of the army (although they had done little for the navy²) but fundamentally it remained a third-rate force orientated primarily toward ceremonial service, fortress duties, and internal security and policing. In 1847 the regular army included four battalions of Swiss mercenary infantry, six battalions of “indigenous” infantry (i.e., battalions raised in the Papal States), sixteen pieces of field artillery,... five squadrons of cavalry (indigenous), and two companies of engineers (indigenous)... Excluding support and auxiliary units, the regular pontifical army of 1847 could theoretically put into the field a combat force of approximately 7,000 infantry, 800 cavalry, and 16 cannons. In practice, however, the army was under-strength. (44)

There never was a rush for military transformation. Until the late 1850s, the line infantry weapon was a percussion version of a musket from 1822; it was gradually replaced by the Belgian 1857 rifle and the locally manufactured Mazzochi 1857 carbine.

This was the level of force maintained during the Risorgimento, a period of especial confusion and rapid change in the history of the Italian peninsula; once again, a pope, Pius IX, was forced to flee Rome, this time for Gaeta near Naples (November 1848).

Alvarez’s vivid narration traces a number of topics, often day-by-day: Pius IX as popular leader initially; public opposition to his refusal to go to war with the occupying Austrians in northeast Italy; his seeking protection from French troops; the establishment of a Roman republic; the successes of the House of Savoy and the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia together with the operations of Garibaldi and his Red Shirts in the south; and final unification in 1861. Provision of a timeline of these events would have been a help to readers without a good grasp of the period.

Papal military and naval forces often consisted largely of non-Italians and were shaped by a series of foreign military experts. Some names stand out: the double-dealing of Napoleon and the failure of diplomatic initiatives to maintain the territorial integrity of the Papal States recommended to Pius IX the abilities and projects of the French monsignor Frédéric François Xavier de Mérode. In 1859, Pius appointed him commander-in-chief of a newly created Ministry of Arms, where he directed the renewal of the papal military. An ambitious program of modernization was incomplete by the outbreak of war in 1860, and papal

2. The papal navy had been the last to use galleys rowed by convicts, introducing sailing ships only in 1755.

forces collapsed after nineteen days, another political disaster as well for the papacy. The pope now controlled only Rome and its environs, one-third the extent of the pre-war Papal States, and his army was in tatters. De Mérode, struggling with financial constraints, saw military expenditure decline in 1864 to half what it was in 1859. Once again, those in the papal government who believed its temporal power could not be secured militarily were in the ascendancy and the able and imaginative de Mérode was dismissed. Opponents of military competency, led by Cardinal Secretary of State Giacomo Antonelli, could not foresee how effectively Pius IX's next minister of arms, the German general Hermann Kanzler, would implement a new army program.

Kanzler envisioned 10,787 men in combat units with proper material support, including more and better resources—weapons, munitions, uniforms, boots, horses, wagons, rations, medical facilities, and ambulances. Training was the highest priority. Thanks to these innovations, papal forces suppressed the brigands who plagued what was left of the Papal States in a war from 1864 to 1868.

Alvarez provides a cogent re-evaluation of the competency and success of General Kanzler's newly invigorated pontifical army in the face of Garibaldi's calls for an attack on the Papal States. Historians had long maintained that the campaign of autumn 1867 began when Garibaldi himself entered papal territory. But it is now recognized that Red Shirt bands had invaded three weeks earlier. Nor did the papal army retreat to Rome to await rescue by the French. Alvarez shows that it was not the French who defeated the Red Shirts at the crucial battle of Mentana, north of Rome. In fact, the papal army fought and won the 1867 campaign, suppressed an insurrection in Rome, engaged in more than a dozen small-unit combat operations, and defended provincial towns from Garibaldi's Red Shirts, inflicting hundreds of casualties—all before the French even entered the fray.

As France became enmeshed in Franco-Prussian hostilities, King Victor Emanuel of the House of Savoy realized that France would not or could not object to settling the "Roman Question," making Rome the capital of a unified Italy and ending papal power there. Austria, eager to gain favor with the Italians as further support against Prussian aggression, did not oppose Victor Emanuel. The papal army made its last stand during the assault on Rome in 1870. Once again, Alvarez corrects the standard account of the fall of Rome as the triumph of right-thinking people resisted only by reactionary religious obscurantists out of touch with national sentiments for a unified Italy. Rather, as we now see, the papal army under Kanzler was not engaged in mere token efforts but fought a ten-day campaign culminating in the inevitable surrender of Rome. Alvarez describes the level of discipline, professionalism, and courage of well-motivated, well-led, and well-trained professional troops, not mercenaries but mostly Italians loyal to the Holy Father. The myth of universal Italian nationalism has obscured this story until now. Kanzler had created the best papal army in centuries, but the tide had turned against the ancient tradition of fighting for the pope as a spiritual and temporal ruler. The international community withheld its support and the papal army, now stateless, went downhill.

In 1878, the new pope, Leo XIII, inherited as protection against perceived threats and hostility on all fronts a dispirited motley crew of superannuated veterans, fancy dress guards, and police with little to do. The papal corvette *Immacolata Concezione* was sold that year, ending the navy. Only the Pontifical Gendarmeria survived, a paramilitary unit policing and securing the shrunken papal property, Vatican City. The Palatine and Noble Guards, resplendent, played bit parts until Pope Paul VI abolished them in 1970. The Swiss Guard became largely ceremonial and decorative, but in its way remained a semi-professional unit after 1870, despite declining numbers and standards. It mutinied in 1878 over working conditions, not a good sign in a professional military. It took until the appointment of Jules Repond, a former Swiss army officer, in 1910 to begin the re-professionalizing of the Swiss Guards, by training them in military maneuvers and manners and providing modern weapons. Repond retired in 1921, after the First World War had necessitated extra security guard posts and patrols, but left the Guards a thoroughly professional corps, though largely unappreciated, and even encountering hostility within the Vatican administration. Doubts grew about how well the Swiss Guard needed to be armed: a request for six machine guns was denied. When danger came again to the Vatican in the Second World War, Repond's legacy was more highly valued.

“Armed neutrality” best characterizes the twentieth-century Vatican, beginning with Mussolini’s 1922 march on Rome and seizure of power from the weak King Victor Emanuel III. The wartime pontificate of Pius XII, beginning in 1939, was beleaguered from time to time by Fascist intimidation even at the gates of the Vatican itself, when the Swiss Guard loaded their Mauser rifles for the first time in memory. During World War II, Allied bombs fell perilously close to St. Peter’s, and increased patrols of the Vatican City State had to be mounted, with round-the-clock surveillance of all entrances and some other Vatican State properties in Rome. Espionage, secret diplomatic contacts, and relief efforts for Jews and other victims of the conflict went forward. The Gendarmeria for a while served the interests of Italian intelligence by reporting on activities of residents and visitors. In September 1943, German troops entered Rome, the gates of the Vatican were shut, and St. Peter’s doors closed for the first time ever in daylight. Frantic preparations for attack were mounted, happily in the end unnecessary, though there were tense confrontations with Germans entering the basilica’s piazza and crossing the line of demarcation between Italy and the Vatican. Though the outcome of any armed engagement between the German army and the Vatican Swiss Guards, not to mention other units, would have been a foregone conclusion, Alvarez gives high marks to the resolve, preparedness, and planning of the pope’s soldiers at this critical moment.

Peace in 1945 brought an end to such special measures for the pope’s safety and that of his tiny realm, but economic recovery meant fewer recruits for the Swiss Guards. There was periodic reinvigoration of training and the venerable Mausers were replaced with six-round, bolt-action K31 carbines on the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Guards. Elsewhere in Europe, of course, semi-automatic and automatic rifles were standard.

Protecting the pope, at home and increasingly on foreign travel, remains paramount: assassination attempts have been few but scary. The Papal Gendarmeria now has an anti-terrorism unit. The unexpected happens: routine was shattered when, in May 1998, a Swiss Guard murdered the Commandant and his wife in their quarters and killed himself. I myself witnessed the ensuing uproar and utter confusion while passing the barracks on my way to the Vatican Library that morning. Professionalism on the part of the Swiss Guards and Gendarmeria prevailed: the Library did not close. The need in the twenty-first century for protection of the Vatican and the Holy Father is greater than ever: for no institution or person seems exempt from outrage and violence in our present world.