

to do something to save the Italian nation from the “barbarians” (Machiavelli’s term) and incidentally to take advantage of the experience and knowledge that Machiavelli himself had acquired during his public career, a career that coincided with the most cataclysmic, brutal, and disastrous period of Italian history since the earlier barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire and before the more technologically advanced and savage barbarism of the 1940s.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence in May 1469, the year Lorenzo the Magnificent took over the Medici party machine that managed the Florentine republic. Machiavelli’s family was of the impoverished Tuscan nobility, which like so many of the impoverished gentry class of Europe had a lengthy tradition of service to the state for which they received very little recompense. Indeed, Machiavelli’s father had to practice law

to feed his family and maintain appearances. The first twenty-one years of Niccolò's life were lived in a period of unusually peaceful co-existence among the states of Italy, largely engineered by Lorenzo de' Medici's political skill. This was also the period of Michelangelo, Leonardo, and the remarkable efflorescence of Renaissance culture. But Machiavelli was twenty-three when Lorenzo died and his son, Piero, assumed his father's position. He was twenty-five when King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy in 1494 to claim the kingdom of Naples, to which he had an obscure dynastic right, and to win some military glory. This invasion marked the end of peace in Italy for over sixty years, beginning a period of continuous foreign intervention into the affairs of the peninsula and turning Italy into the battlefield of Europe.

What was so remarkable to Italians in 1494 was that it was so easy. The French were virtually unopposed, and the march to Naples was more like a parade than a military campaign. In fact, there was no one to stop them. Wars in Italy were fought not by feudal levies or citizen armies, but by mercenaries, usually local rural noblemen who could not make a living from their poor patrimonies and who had bands of armed retainers to form the nucleus of an army. These small mercenary forces were no match for the huge feudal levies of France, led by heavily armed knights, all of whom were professionals as well and supported by great hosts of soldiers armed with diversified weapons and supported by mobile artillery.

As we rehearsed in detail in our discussion of the crisis in Chapter Eleven, Italy simply collapsed before the French. Piero de' Medici

continuously involved in the development of all important Florentine policies. The important diplomatic missions given to Machiavelli began with his embassy to King Louis XII of France in 1500. It was an illuminating experience; for two years Machiavelli had been thinking constantly of Italian affairs and politics, making judgments and writing reports, but when he visited France he realized that the fate of Italy was being determined there, north of the Alps, not in the peninsula itself. Also in France he saw a centralized, nation-state monarchy at work. And he learned another lesson: he wrote back to a friend saying that Florence paid a high price for being a republic. Certainly internal liberties were greater than in a despotism, but foreign relations were made difficult by the lack of a singular policy and by the frequent rotation of executive authority. The Florentine executive committee, the nine priors,

held office for only two months and were then ineligible for the following three years. Whatever continuity there was in Florentine politics was provided by men like Machiavelli, senior civil servants. Because of this, France despised Florence, a supercilious loathing reinforced by the fact that the republic did not even possess an army and had to pay others to fight for it. To a noble French knight such an attitude was disgusting and worthy of total contempt.

As a result, Machiavelli's first visit to France was a great education and a painful experience for such a fervent republican and an even more fervent patriot. To Machiavelli and others of his class and education, Italy was the true heir to Rome and the lodging place of human civilization. The kingdoms north of the Alps were at best bastard daughters, defiled by barbarians to such a degree that they remained still barbarous themselves.

One of Cesare's suggestions to Florence was to take back the Medici, because without a principal family, the republic would remain internally divided and hence vulnerable to outside attack. Machiavelli, as a dedicated republican, disagreed, as did most other Florentines. However, everyone saw the need for some kind of continuing executive. A compromise was reached: the republic established in 1502 a permanent chief executive office (the *gonfaloniere* for life); and the post fell to Machiavelli's political associate and close friend, Piero Soderini. Machiavelli's future seemed secure and promising.

At the beginning of 1503, Machiavelli was sent back to Cesare Borgia. On this occasion his mission was to tell the duke that Florence was friendly, while still trying to protect its territory from Borgia ambitions. This time Machiavelli attended on Cesare for three months and lived

in the closest proximity with him. The dispatches sent back to Florence were brilliant and increasingly reflected the Machiavelli's growing adulation of this man of action. Furthermore, his views on Florence were changing as he saw the image of the city from without. Machiavelli still remained dedicated to Soderini and the republic, but he became increasingly concerned about its ability to survive in the harsh, brutal world represented by Cesare Borgia and the French.

Later that year the pope died, and with him went his son's prospects for uniting all of central Italy between Venice and Rome into a single powerful state able to control invasions from the north or, given the Aragonese foothold in Naples, from the south. Machiavelli was sent to Rome to observe—and probably try to influence—the papal election; and at the end of the year he went



back to France to witness the Treaty of Lyons between France and Spain.

Those three years were important for Machiavelli as an author and politician. During his diplomatic missions he had written dispatches and short treatises on the situations in which he found himself. All were remarkable for both their shrewd observation and brilliant language and style. However, during the years 1504–06, he also began a work of leisure, a literary work, a verse chronicle called the *First Decade* devoted to the years since 1494. The theme of this book is critically important to any understanding of Machiavelli, for it suggests that it was the internal problems of Italy itself that had led to the intervention of the barbarians and that the peninsulas will remain in ruins as long as these dissensions persist and Italy lacks at least one ruler strong enough to galvanize his fellows into a concerted

action and marshal the Italian people into a national army to drive out the northerners. Machiavelli acknowledges his book tells a sad tale; but he says it is an important one to write, because by demonstrating how the states of the peninsula have fallen from great heights of wealth and culture Italians should be encouraged to reclaim their dignity and greatness.

These years also provided Machiavelli with a second elemental experience—the chance to establish a militia to be used in place of mercenaries. In 1507 Machiavelli's friend Soderini gave him the position of secretary to the new war office, which was concerned with the formation of the militia. He loved it with the intense pleasure of an idealist finally allowed to practice his ideals, and on it he lavished all his time and much of the republic's money. Ironically, however, the barbarians made his plans to use his militia against

Pisa useless. The war of the League of Cambrai, in which Louis XII, Emperor Maximilian, and the King of Spain (Ferdinand of Aragon), exhorted by Pope Julius II, dismembered Venice, perhaps the most powerful and viable Italian state, led to the capture of Pisa by Florence. Utterly alone, starving, and demoralized, the Pisans capitulated. Machiavelli marked the events of 1509 by writing the *Second Decade*, a continuation of his verse chronicle.

After another embassy to France, Machiavelli returned to Florentine affairs, which had become disastrous. As we saw previously, the total defeat and near annihilation of Venice in 1509 had resulted in enormous barbarian armies wandering unchecked about northern Italy. The allies had already fallen out among themselves. The pope and Ferdinand of Aragon (and Naples) declared war on France under the absurd and

ironic pretext of their battle-cry, "Out with the barbarians!" Florence was desperate. The city had always had close ties with France, and Soderini thought that a continuation of the alliance would help preserve the balance of power. It didn't. The Holy League army, composed of Spanish veterans, attacked Tuscany at Prato. Machiavelli marshaled his cherished, beloved militia, armed at public expense and trained for three years. Prato was very well defended by walls, and the Florentines outnumbered the Spaniards. However, it was a complete rout. The militia fled after a single hole was made in the walls by the enemy artillery. The Spanish advanced, Soderini resigned and fled into exile, and the Medici were returned as rulers. Machiavelli, as a leader of the republic and a close associate of Soderini, was out of a job. Indeed, he was considered dangerous. He was implicated—falsely—in a conspiracy and was tortured and

imprisoned. Then, despite conciliatory attempts on his part, he was turned out with no money or honor. In 1513, unable to afford Florence, he moved out of the city to live on his tiny farm nearby at San Casciano.

After having devoted all the energies of his adult life to politics and the service of the republic, Machiavelli found the republic gone and his career shattered. He was too closely associated with the regime of Soderini to switch his allegiance to the Medici easily, although he did offer. Also, he was poor and forced to live away from Florence, far from his political friends. He did, however, continue to correspond with them. In particular he maintained his close association with Francesco Vettori, another former republican, but one who had managed to ingratiate himself with the new regime. Vettori kept Machiavelli informed about politics, both Florentine



and international. In April 1513, Vettori wrote to his friend about the dangers posed by the truce between Spain, France, and Venice, a truce obviously negotiated by King Louis to renew his claims in Italy. Consequently, another invasion was expected. Remembering the quality of Machiavelli's diplomatic dispatches, shrewd judgments, and observations from happier days, Vettori despaired at not having his friend's counsel in such times. These letters between Vettori and Machiavelli continued throughout the summer of 1513, following the events of the latest series of French defeats and the increasing danger from the Spaniards.

In the course of these letters the two friends proposed suggestions for bringing peace to Italy and driving out the barbarians who had disrupted Italian affairs since 1494. It was from Machiavelli's side of this correspondence that *The Prince*

arose. Indeed, most of the central elements of *The Prince* were raised during that summer's correspondence: the disunity of the Italian states; the lack of national armies and the continual reliance on mercenaries; the apparent success of brutality and insolence; and the failure of ambition not supported by sufficient force, in Machiavelli's opinion a cause of much of Italy's present trouble. By early December, Machiavelli informed Vettori that he had produced a short treatise, *De principibus* (Latin for *On Principalities*), the result of their musings on the Italian crisis. This letter to Vettori is probably the single most famous piece of private correspondence in the Italian language. It not only announces the birth of *The Prince*, but also gives us a rather melancholy, poignant, indeed pathetic, insight into the life of a great man who believed that the world had forgotten

him, just when he had so much to give. It merits a lengthy paraphrase:

In the morning I get up with the sun and walk to a woodlot I am harvesting where I spend a few hours reviewing yesterday's work and pass the time with the woodcutters who are always ready to complain about their own or their neighbours' misfortunes.

I go from the woodlot to a spring and from there to my bird snare, always traveling with a book—Dante, Petrarca or a minor poet like Tibullus, Ovid or another. As I read of their loves and passions, I am reminded of my own, and this reverie gives me some brief pleasure. I continue walking along the road to the inn, where I talk with the travelers who pass through, asking for news from where they came. In this way I find out what is happening and observe the many and varied interests and tastes of men.

By then it is time for dinner. Together with my family I eat whatever food my small property provides. After lunch, it is back to the inn where I find the innkeeper, often the butcher, miller, and a one or two kiln owners; and with these companions I slip into rusticity for the

rest of the day, playing cricca or backgammon. Our games trigger a thousand arguments and endless name calling, even though we only argue over pennies. Still, they can hear us shouting as far as San Casciano. Stuck with such vermin I keep my mind active and let the ignominy of my fate take its course, content to be driven down this road if only to see if Fortune blushes with shame.

In the evening I return home and go into my study. Before entering I strip off my clothes, dirty and dusty from the day's work, and change into my courtier's robes. Then, appropriately attired, I enter the courts of the ancients, and they receive me as a friend. I dine on the food that is for me alone and for which I was born. I am not afraid to ask them what motivated their actions, and they graciously answer me. For the next four hours I know no boredom, forget my troubles, no longer fear poverty or even death. I am completely immersed in their company.

Dante says that we forget what we have heard if we do not write it down, so I have transcribed everything useful from my conversations with the ancients, composing a little book, *De principatibus*, in which I delve into my

thoughts on the subject, investigating what a principal-ity is, the forms they take, and how they are won, kept and lost. And, if you have enjoyed any of my trifles, you should like this one; and it should be well received by a prince, especially a new one. Thus, I have dedicated it to his Magnificence Giuliano (de' Medici).¹

In his book, Machiavelli returns to his own real loves: external relations and the militia. During his tenure of office in Florence, Machiavelli never showed the slightest interest in internal, constitutional, or even factional politics—hence his failure to continue in power. He was interested only in diplomacy, in how states relate to one another, and in how they can best defend themselves, since the whole lesson of his experience had been that states exist to make war and expand at the expense of their neighbors. To survive, a state must be able to protect itself and must think only of its security. His experience in Florence

from 1494 to 1502 especially—but also under Soderini's regime—had taught him that republics are not resolute and defense requires resolution. Therefore, the only hope is for a prince to assume authority and dedicate himself and his state to the greatest ambition an Italian could have—the expulsion of the barbarians.

Such was the genesis of *The Prince*. Although we have no concrete evidence of how closely the Latin treatise resembles the finished, polished version of *The Prince*, there is little doubt that they were essentially the same: Machiavelli was coherent in his thought. Even in its advocacy of despotism, brutality, and faithlessness, *The Prince* can be seen as consonant with Machiavelli's fervent republicanism, as illustrated by his own career and his later, more thoughtful abstract discussion of politics, *The Discourses on Livy*, which portrays a profound devotion to repub-

lican ideals. The apparent contradiction is only one of the paradoxes of *The Prince*. Equally, there is Machiavelli's choice of genre, the medieval *Speculum principis*, or Prince's handbook, which attempted to counsel rulers on how to govern according to the absolute moral laws of God and the contingent laws of tradition. For Machiavelli, the genre becomes a vehicle for absolute power. Finally, there is the paradox of the citizen army. By suggesting that the prince arm his people, Machiavelli is advocating that the ruler effectively abdicate his authority. Machiavelli himself repeatedly stresses in *The Prince* that brute force is the foundation of authority; therefore, in Machiavelli's principality it is the people who rule, not the prince, since they have the arms. It is in these paradoxes that the real character of Machiavelli's thought emerges. He remains a republican in every way; his retreat into despotism (a term, like

tions. Morality he will leave to sermon literature or utopians; his concern is with reality, the way men are and the way things are.

Also, his intention is good; he has a mission. Italy has been laid waste by the barbarians because the Italians have not learned to play the game of power politics. Cesare Borgia came close, but fortune overturned him. Fortune to Machiavelli is more than bad luck; it is the whole web of events surrounding history. A prudent man, one of *virtù*, can at least mitigate the effects of fortune by shrewdness or resolution. And to Machiavelli the ultimate bad fortune was Charles VIII's invasion of Italy in 1494 and everything that it precipitated. This event was the real occasion, the first cause, of *The Prince* because it exemplified all of the evils inherent in Italian politics. These evils were the result of human weakness, and human weakness can be cured only by harsh medicine.

Machiavelli, in fact, says exactly this later, in his *Discourses on Livy*, and thereby shows how this high-minded republican came to write *The Prince*. He observes that although Florentines were best suited to a republic, the people had grown too weak to sustain the demands of self-government, as was the case in the ancient Roman Republic. The only recourse was to accept a prince who would instill a military discipline in the population in order to restore their dignity; but, once that was accomplished, he should resign as his duty required. Machiavelli's prince, then, is a drill-sergeant, or a cold shower designed to put fortitude back into an enervated people whose weakness has led to their inability to govern themselves. Equally, the harsh rule of the prince is almost a punishment for Italy's failure to stop the French in 1494, a sin that is still with the country.



If all of these justifications for Machiavelli's little book are still insufficient, there remains the testimony of Chapter 26, "The Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians." The conclusion states the purpose of *The Prince* and the rationalization for the prince's rule. Italy, the only legitimate heir of Rome, must be freed from the barbarians. The Italians appear still unable to throw out the invaders, given their present character; hence, a strong man must discipline them to do so. Thus *The Prince* is a desperate cry for both national renewal and national freedom, which expresses a deep belief in the value and the uniqueness of the culture of Renaissance Italy. Modern critics who either refuse to discuss the last chapter of *The Prince*—after all it does end with the poem of Petrarch—or suggest that it is a later addition or a rhetorical flourish have not understood the book. Chapter 26 is its *raison d'être*.

Finally, what immediate effect did Machiavelli's *The Prince* have? Precisely none. Machiavelli offered it to Lorenzo de' Medici, duke of Urbino, after the death of its original dedicatee, Giuliano. Lorenzo probably never read it, although there is a later story reporting that Lorenzo asked whether this Machiavelli was incapable of writing in the grand style. Machiavelli presented *The Prince* at the same audience to which another would-be official gave Lorenzo a pair of hunting hounds; the prince preferred the dogs. Indeed, Machiavelli never saw his book in print, nor did he ever recapture his old office. The Medici did use him in minor posts until another republican revolution in 1527 very briefly restored the old constitution. Ironically, because he had had any dealings with the Medici at all, Machiavelli was refused a position in the new republic, even though it was staffed by his former friends. He never recovered.

Machiavelli died just weeks after this disappointment, in June 1527, one month after the barbarians had committed the worst atrocity yet to Italy, the sack of Rome.

It is ironic that Machiavelli is most remembered for *The Prince*, which, in the course of a fertile literary and political career, was a minor work. Besides his poetry, diplomatic dispatches, and personal letters, which fill two volumes of marvelous reading, Machiavelli wrote a great number of major prose works that show him to be one of the best, if not *the* best, Italian prose stylists of the sixteenth century. His play *Mandragola* is still performed and is still hilarious. His *Discourses on Livy*, a long, rambling commentary on Roman history, is really a study of contemporary Florentine affairs; his *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, lord of Lucca, is a brilliant portrait of a Machiavelian prince in action; and his *History of Florence*,

commissioned by the Medici, is one of the great landmarks of historiography. In addition, there were short stories, another play, much poetry, and numerous political works, ranging from the famous *Art of War*—the only of his books to be printed in his lifetime—to his bureaucratic report on Florentine fortifications.

THE DISCOURSES ON LIVY

The *Discourses* are divided into three books, each following a different theme and illustrated by whatever sections of the Roman historian's work suited Machiavelli's purposes. As with *The Prince*, this superficial adherence to an accepted, conventional genre—the learned, humanist commentary on an ancient author—made the novelty of Machiavelli's opinions all the more effective. Of