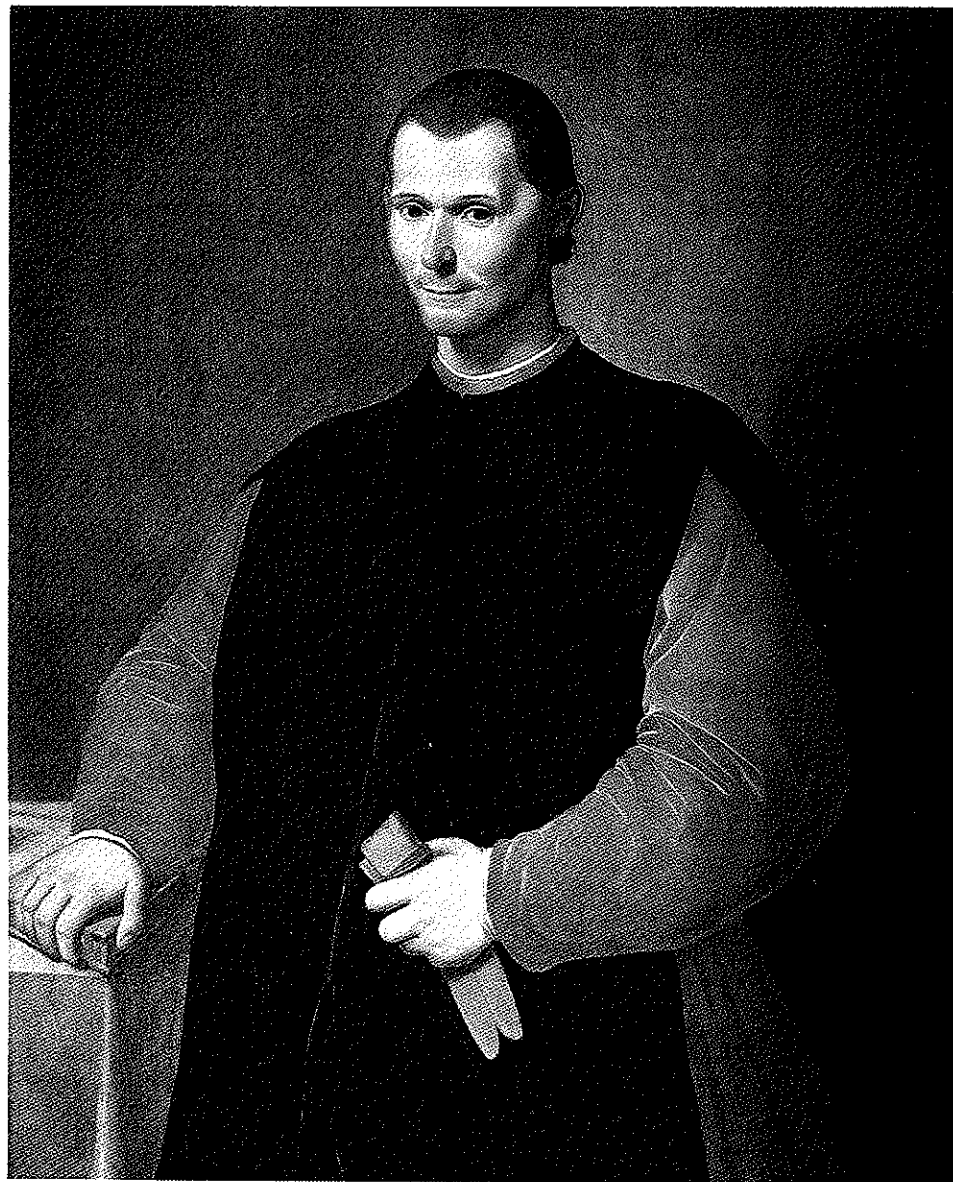


The Historian as Philosopher

(Right) portrait of Machiavelli by San di Tito.

History taught Machiavelli that, as a prince must know how to act as a beast, he should be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves

Irene Coltman Brown



MACHIAVELLI AND THE NEW PHILOSOPHER PRINCE

ISLAM WAS AN ARMED FAITH. Machiavelli taught that the overriding lesson of history is that 'all armed prophets have conquered, and unarmed prophets have come to grief'. The man with the sword will always defeat the unarmed and conquer the followers of Christ, the great unarmed prophet, who begged Peter to put up his sword and whose renunciation of violence Machiavelli thought was the way to political weakness and death. He appealed for a new and strong ruler who would lead his

divided and conquered country of sixteenth-century Italy back to the pagan military greatness of ancient Rome through a ferocious revolutionary process of the creation of new cities and the destruction of the old.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in the year 1469, when Lorenzo de Medici, called Lorenzo the Magnificent, 'the most Florentine of Florentines' inherited the city. The Medici dynasty of bankers-turned-princes had ruled Florence since Cosimo de Medici had seized the govern-

ment in order to protect his wealth from envious rivals, but Florence had a long record of civic turmoil.

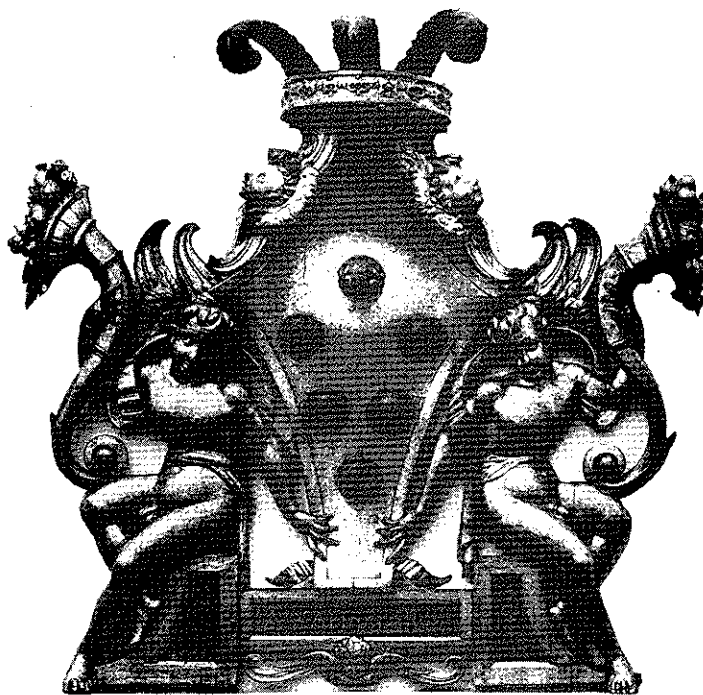
Machiavelli loved his birthplace, but the history of violence that he retold in his *History of Florence* was to him symptomatic of the natural history of the human race. Cast in the Italian republican genre of rhetorical history, weighted with speeches conveying political advice, it was a history of endemic social conflict. According to Machiavelli the political order of the City continually broke down

because of the natural class war between the people of Florence and the ruling nobility. The hatred of the poor for the rich was, and must always be, a threat to the stability of Florence and to all political régimes, but it was also the source of the energy of its civic republicanism.

In 1378 there had been a famous outburst of rioting in Florence, and Machiavelli imagined how the excited workers met at night and one of the most daring and experienced of these poor men spoke, hoping to incite the crowd to a new surge of rebellion. 'I certainly think,' he argued in the words Machiavelli gave to him, 'that if nothing else could teach us, necessity might.' Having dared to go so far, the workers must now protect themselves from government repression and act decisively to secure a better life. Only the total overthrow of the nobility could accomplish both these purposes. A popular revolution would remove the possibility of punitive counter-measures by the nobility, while 'their riches, when they have become ours, will support us'. This revolutionary leader denied that the aristocracy had any right to rule and protested against social inequalities that had no sanction in the life of nature. 'Strip us naked, and we shall all be found alike. Dress us in their clothing and they in ours, we shall appear noble, they ignoble, for poverty and riches make all the difference.'

The people who bear away the spoils of war, however they acquire them, are eventually accepted as the most deserving, and the poor especially have no business to worry about the sin of violent rebellion 'for when, like us, men have to fear hunger, and imprisonment, or death, the fear of hell neither can nor ought to have any influence upon them'. Those who observe the pattern of human affairs will notice, he went on, that all who attain great power and riches make use of either force or fraud. 'Those who either from imprudence or want of sagacity avoid doing so, are always overwhelmed with servitude and poverty; for faithful servants are always servants, and honest men are always poor; nor do any ever escape from servitude but the bold and faithless, or from poverty, but the rapacious and fraudulent.' The rich get rich because they cheat the poor out of their possessions. The poor who have not even begun to think aggressively like the nobility try to make their way by long hours of arduous toil. By these habits they will be poor for ever, while the aristocracy, who know that wealth is stolen, will continue living on their plunder. If the people are ever to emerge from slavery they must imitate the methods of their masters. All the human race is fighting for bread. Happiness is the reward of those who snatch it from

Lorenzo de Medici, 'the most Florentine of Florentines' who, with his brother, inherited Florence in 1469, the year of Machiavelli's birth.



The blazon of the Medici family. Did the Medici deserve to inherit rule? It was said Lorenzo preferred the gift of a pair of coursing dogs which was presented at the same time as Machiavelli's *Prince*, the book that called on him to liberate Italy.

the rest. 'God and nature,' said Machiavelli's 'Jacobin', 'have thrown all human fortunes into the midst of mankind, and they are thus attainable rather by rapine than by industry, by wicked actions rather than by good.'

Karl Marx later praised Machiavelli's *History of Florence* as a masterpiece, and through his evocation of this char-

acteristic episode Machiavelli suggested that the struggle between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' still goes on and that human happiness will always lie on the other side of what men call crime.

While Machiavelli was a child the Medicis terrorised the exquisite court they had brought into being, but in 1494 the King of France, Charles VIII, led an

army into Italy to lay claim to the throne of Naples. At the approach of the French army with its frightening cannon Piero de Medici lost heart and handed over the keys of the city. This abject surrender to French demands weakened the Medici mystique and the great square of the Piazza della Signoria was suddenly full of armed Florentines crying 'The people and liberty!'

Such a débâcle was a day of judgement that prepared the way for Savonarola, the inspired Florentine monk who called the citizens to repentance. 'Will you have Jesus for your king?' Savonarola asked his vast congregations, and 'Yes, Yes!' they would reply as his anti-aristocratic theocracy grew more and more emotional. The cathedral was filled with weeping sinners. The city's street gangs became moral vigilantes encouraged to take paintings and jewellery from the homes of well-off citizens and to burn them on a public pyre of penitence. The extravagance of the hysteria and social upheaval Savonarola had induced disturbed the Church. He was excommunicated and, as some of the people of Florence began to turn away from him, Savonarola offered to prove that his mission was authentic by passing unharmed through a fire. His reluctance actually to do this before the crowds who gathered hopefully to watch ensured his fall.

'All who have prophesied have suffered,' Savonarola cried in premonition of his fate when he was dragged from his monastery. He was tortured, tried and hanged, and his body burned before the crowd. A more secular popular government was set up and Machiavelli, at the age of twenty-nine, was entrusted with the external affairs of a republican régime which had his deep devotion, though Florence had recently been trounced by the citizen militia of its rival city-state of

The Borgia Pope Alexander VI, father of the bastard Cesare Borgia.



Pisa. Her mercenaries had deserted and, as a Florentine, Machiavelli represented a weak and defeated régime. When he was sent on a diplomatic mission to France he was impressed by this strong nation, united by a warrior king that could humiliate with impunity the insignificant representative from divided Italy, rendered powerless by its many feuding city-states whose divisions, Machiavelli believed, were encouraged and exploited by the Papacy.

In 1502 Machiavelli was sent to Cesare Borgia, the bastard son of the Borgia Pope Alexander VI who made his son a cardinal. Cesare's ruthlessness and treachery, and his military campaign to overthrow the feudal rulers of the Italian Romagna and to found there a new and united state that would dominate papal Rome, were things 'I should always imitate if I were a new prince'. His political power would have subjugated the citadel of Christianity as Savonarola had imposed Christ upon the city, but Cesare Borgia failed through a malicious act of fortune when his protective father died too soon. Fortune proved more Machiavellian than this Machiavellian new prince. In Machiavelli's *The Prince* he says Fortune is a woman 'and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her. Always, being a woman,' he continued, 'she prefers young men because they are more ardent and less cautious and command her with greater audacity', but she is also like Machiavelli's perpetual innovator who never reveals his intentions.

Nonetheless Cesare's goal had been the right one when he marched on 'weak noblemen, quicker to despoil their subjects than to govern them well'.

In 1504 Machiavelli ended a poem on the first ten years of Florence without the Medicis with a deeply felt *envoie*. Salvation still eluded the Florentines, 'but the road would be short and easy if you would reopen the temple of Mars', he wrote, but nonetheless in 1512, when the Medici were forcibly restored by foreign powers, Florence was still too weak to offer any armed resistance and, when the popular government fell, Machiavelli was dismissed.

A note he wrote speaks of living on after all was lost. The republic that had been led for a decade by a great man, the virtuous and freedom-loving Soderini, had collapsed and, as a known republican, Machiavelli was bonded to good behaviour in a large sum and forbidden to enter the Piazza della Signoria where its popular politics took place. Piero Soderini had fallen, Machiavelli believed, because he had left the defeated Medicis, and their supporters in the city, alive. He had not seized power for himself and thereby turned the republic into a de-

fensive popular tyranny, and Sheldon Wolin writes: 'He was a gentle well intentioned man faced by the imperatives of politics to choose between the objective necessity of destroying his enemies or of observing legal niceties which would allow his enemies to destroy him. Being a good man, he chose the latter, thereby inflicting great harm on his country and himself.'

In 1513 the authorities claimed to have in their possession a letter that had been accidentally dropped which contained names of probable sympathisers with a



The preacher and reformer, Girolamo Savonarola who was born at Ferrara in 1452.

plot against the Medicis, with Machiavelli's among them. He was arrested and interrogated on the rack before being chained in a foul-smelling cell that crawled with lice, he said, as big as butterflies. Only the coronation of a Medici as Pope caused an amnesty in Florence which let Machiavelli out of prison and back to his father's farm seven miles from Florence where he wrote *The Prince* and perhaps began the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, which was probably composed mainly between 1514 and 1519.

During the day he led the aimless life of a political exile; chatting with the farm workers, inspecting his bird traps, reading his favourite poets and drifting to the tavern for a game of tric-trac and the gossip of the village. But at night he 'put on the robes of court and palace' to commune with the historians and philosophers of the ancient world 'the food that alone is mine and for which I was born'.

Savonarola had dreamed of Florentine deliverance as much as Machiavelli, but Machiavellianism was a counter-revelation, restating the prophecy of the Florentine mission on pagan foundations and trusting to a restoration of the ancient Roman virtues to purify the city from corruption. The sins of Florence were



Execution of Savanarola, 1498, by an unknown sixteenth-century artist. Savanarola, a Catholic reformer, was a critic of Italian corruption and decadence. He was excommunicated and sentenced to be hanged and burned after his supporters lost their faith in him.

military sins, like taking prisoners instead of slaughtering their enemies.

They needed political and military virtues alien to the Christian faith, and Machiavelli also wrote *The Art of War* in 1521, because it was the art he wished most to teach his fellow citizens. Rome was sacked by the German army in May, 1527, and the defeat of the Medici Pope caused the Medici puppet government in Florence to fall. There was a new popular régime, but Machiavelli did not get a post and, disappointed, he fell ill. Before he died he told his friends that he had had a dream of Heaven and Hell. In Heaven he had seen the poor who were as always thin and ragged and in Hell the well dressed philosophers like Plato, Plutarch and Tacitus. He said he hoped he would go to Hell to discuss politics

with noble minds and not go to Paradise with the beggars.

Some philosophers have also made use of other men's works of history. While Europe was transfixed by Columbus's voyage, Machiavelli used Livy's history of the Roman republic as a compass with which to explore a territory more unknown than America. 'I have resolved to open a new route which has not yet been followed by anyone', he wrote, and it led to the modern vision of a revolutionary republic kept in being by a Jacobin dictator sustained, like Robespierre, by Virtue and the Terror. Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* is immediately subversive in a way that *The Prince* is not. Unlike *The Prince*, dedicated to 'Your Magnificence' Lorenzo de Medici, grandson of Lorenzo il

Magnifico, Machiavelli admits that for its recipients 'I have chosen not those who are princes, but those who, on account of their innumerable good qualities, deserve to be'. Despite the dynastic ambitions of Italian princes, and the continuing strength of the hereditary principle in Renaissance statescraft, Machiavelli's *Discourses* are filled with contempt for hereditary princes and are profoundly anti-aristocracy, and Roman history proved, he thought, that Rome was governed best by rulers who did not inherit their throne.

The hero of the *Discourses* is, like Livy's, the republic, and nobles he claims, wish to tyrannise and are inherently anti-republican. The Romagna, before Cesare defeated the lords who ruled it, was an example of the gangster politics of aristocrats.

crats indulging in killing and wholesale robbery. Their pillaging 'impoverished the people without amending them' and they were an example to Machiavelli of the decadence of his contemporaries who engaged in politics and violence for private reasons instead of for reasons of state. 'It was the wickedness of the princes that gave rise to this', he insisted when assessing Cesare Borgia, and those states whose political life survives uncorrupted do not permit any of their citizens to live like those lords,' claimed Machiavelli, explaining that he was using the word lord or Gentiluomo for any man who lived in idleness on the abundant revenues of his estates without having anything to do either with their cultivation or any other form of labour. 'Such men are a pest in any republic and in any province,' and Machiavelli believed it necessary to set up a non-hereditary monarchical power with an overwhelming presence strong enough to restrain their ambitions and to repress the corruption that powerful private citizens inevitably cause in the body politic. That this would need a massive and violent political intervention, even their extermination, was made crystal clear by Machiavelli who argued that 'where the gentry are numerous, no one who purposes to set up a republic can succeed unless he first gets rid of the lot'.

As the new prince should not be lulled

into false security by the apparent friendship of his supporters, a new nation must not believe it can turn to peace because the world is not at war. It should rather use the peace assiduously to prepare for battle. The man who possesses power and riches is the natural target of those without it. There is no time for peace just as there is no time when the prince can be completely virtuous. No state had grown to greatness except at the cost of its neighbouring peoples. Livy, whom Machiavelli had chosen as his master, was obliged to demonstrate that Rome had been built on the bones of dead men. The future cannot come to life without the murder of the past. It marches on broken traditions and abandoned customs. The very survival of humanity rests on its continual war with every other species. If they were to live, mankind would die.

The obstinate, who reject this idea of omnipresent evil, refuse to face the unpalatable truth of the conditions of their existence, and Machiavelli paused at this point in *The Prince* to stress that he had thought it right 'to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined'. Rejecting the vision of Plato's *Republic* or the promise of the Kingdom of God, Machiavelli argued that 'many have dreamed up republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist [but] a man who

neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation. The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule, he must learn how not to be virtuous and to make use of this or not according to need'. The good man is not a good citizen. Private virtues are political vices and private vices may be political virtues.

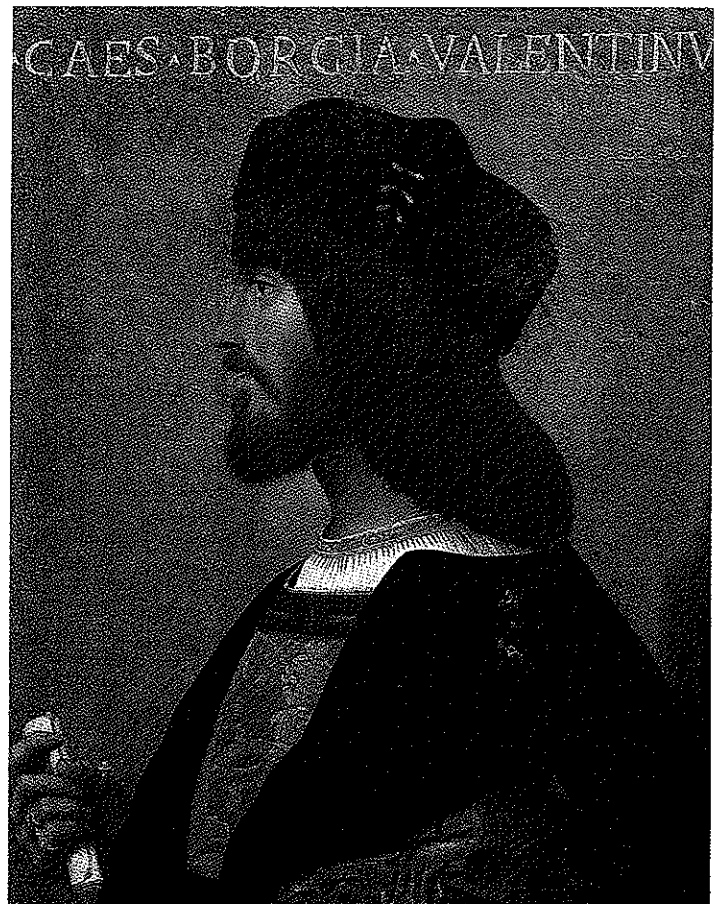
Soderini believed, Machiavelli wrote in the *Discourses*, that his goodness and beneficence towards all would in time overcome their envy without violence. 'What he failed to realise was that time waits for no man, that goodness alone does not suffice . . . and that malice is not to be placated by gifts.' Machiavelli therefore advised a new prince seeking to rule as securely as the old line to kill his friends as well as his enemies. The patriot leader who, in his bid for power, received enthusiastic support from ardent citizens who hoped for better things from a new régime 'is always compelled to injure those who have made the new ruler. Because of the eternal scarcity of human resources the rewards he can distribute are always limited so that his fellow revolutionaries, disappointed, will soon intrigue against him.

When a new prince has come to power

Pietro Soderini, the republican ruler of Florence who allowed his political enemies to survive to destroy the Florentine republic.



Cesare Borgia; Machiavelli wrote, 'I know no better precepts to give a new Prince than ones derived from Cesare's actions'.



purely by his own abilities he will need to follow in the footsteps of the great new rulers of the past like Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus. All these men founded new states and they were all prepared to go armed lest persuasion fail. Christ was shown the kingdoms of the world and rejected them. Machiavelli whose name lingers on as Old Nick, the Devil himself, repeats the devil's temptation and urges the prince – the prince in the palace or the prince wearing the palatial robes of philosophy in the shabby olive farm – to take up his sword for the sake of the good that men in power can do. In Machiavelli's comedies he laughs at people easily persuaded to serve the persuader. The poor and the wicked did not need Machiavelli to persuade them to shed blood for the sake of revolution. It was the idealist and the Christian man of honour whom he had to persuade that he who draws the sword must throw away the scabbard.

The sovereign law of political necessity particularly demands the prince to be inhuman when he comes to power over

a corrupt population, for Machiavelli, like other revolutionaries, justified political violence because of the poor quality of the human resources at his disposal.

Aristotle had warned that the one who lives without law must be either god or beast. Machiavelli thought men were such wretched creatures that they should be governed by a man prepared to combine the cunning of the fox and the ferocity of the lion to stay in power by force and fraud long enough to carry out a moral purge and to arm his people. Machiavelli's long-term plan of campaign was to change the corrupt and unarmed Christian people of Italy into an armed and un-Christian people with a proper understanding of political virtue. They would then be able to defend themselves and their cities against the other wild beasts that are called men. It was not a saintly ideal but Machiavelli insisted that it is all that is possible. The saints and moral philosophers have wasted their time, and Machiavelli would have understood why the Christian politics of Thomas More's *Utopia*, written in the same year as Machiavelli wrote the dedi-

cation to *The Prince*, have become a symbol of humanist illusions.

As *The Prince* advises a new leader how to seize and keep power, so Machiavelli's *Discourses* advises a new kind of revolutionary régime how to stay in existence through the absolute rule of a revolutionary philosopher prince defended by the natural populism of the poor.

A patriot prince should arm the people to protect him in his dangerous passage from feudal kingship to absolute rule. Machiavelli deduced from history that Rome conquered the world because its anti-monarchical republic mobilised its people in a citizen army, and that the people would fight for an anti-aristocratic republic because they naturally hate the rich, as Florentine history showed. This hatred was a historical substitute for religious prophecy and the vain moral exhortation of unarmed philosophers. The plebeian tribunes of the Roman republican constitution institutionalised the murder of a king at the republic's founding and checked the power of the patricians that replaced the monarchy. Thus Machiavelli argued that human conflict could become a source of political strength. It invigorated the body politic, and could also be turned upon an external enemy. Rome's republican constitution arose out of violence between its citizens and, in his vision of the armed city, Machiavelli united the republican traditions of Florence who had fought to defend her freedom against encroaching tyrannies with the expansiveness and force of the political tyrants. To encourage the people to make war was the precondition of national power, the path to glory, and in a divided world a republic cannot allow other republics to survive. Machiavelli was aware that he, like Pericles, loved a city-state destined to be a tyrant city or to die.

The revolution, argued Machiavelli, the 'Jacobin', is always in a state of siege. The new order cannot defend its revolution if it is weakened by a Christian culture, and Machiavelli was the prophet of ruthless revolutionary nationalism. The citizen, he argued, had to choose between private and political redemption and in the free-thinking tradition of his native city Machiavelli repeated the local saying that he preferred to save Florence than to save his soul.

NOTES ON FURTHER READING

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The continuing message: the new Philosopher Prince

Antonio Gramsci from notes on Machiavelli written in prison during his twenty-year sentence in Mussolini's Fascist Italy '... the protagonist of the new Prince in modern times cannot be an individual hero, but the political party [which aims] to found a new type of State. ... Machiavelli's limits and narrowness consist only in his having been a "private person", a writer, and not the head of a State or any army, who is still a single person but who has at his disposal the forces of the State and an army and not only armies of words'.

(Right) Gramsci sketched by Mucchi.
(Below) Lenin addressing the people.



'We set out upon a voyage the like of which not even Columbus ever dreamt.'
Nikolai Bukharin in 1923 on the twentieth anniversary of the creation of the Bolshevik party.