

## Niccolò Machiavelli and *The Prince*

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in the city of Florence, Italy, on May 3, 1469. His father, Bernardo Machiavelli, was a lawyer, although not a very prosperous one, with much of his income derived from family property rather than his law practice. However, he retained his membership in the lawyers' guild, which was influential in Florentine politics. As a lawyer and a man with a love of literature and writing, Bernardo probably had contacts among the powerful in Florence's political circles, which later provided Niccolò with the opportunity to enter public service. Niccolò would grow up to share his father's literary ambitions.

Very little is known about Machiavelli's early life, but it appears that he received a typical education for a boy of the middle class, learning Latin and reading the classical Roman and Greek authors, particularly the histories. Although Florence was supposed to be a republic, ruled by its leading citizens rather than by lords or princes, during Machiavelli's youth, Florence was effectively controlled by the powerful Medici family, with Lorenzo de Medici, called "the Magnificent," at its head. The Florence of Machiavelli's time was a rich, vibrant city—a center of the arts—of which Lorenzo was a great patron, and a hub of intellectual activity. Florence had an excellent university, where Machiavelli may have listened to lectures, and it is possible he had some contact with Lorenzo's son, Giuliano. Lorenzo's truly magnificent public displays and artistic ventures drained the Medici fortune, and his successor, Piero, proved unpopular. The Medici fell from power in 1494, replaced by Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar who led a charismatic religious government.

No official records of Machiavelli's life appear until 1498, immediately after the fall of Savonarola's government, when he would have been 29. The Florentine republic had been reinstated, and Machiavelli was appointed as secretary of the Second Chancery, a position in which he coordinated relations with Florence's territorial possessions. How he acquired this position is not clear. Participation in the government was expected of all of Florence's leading citizens, but Machiavelli's intelligence and energy must have attracted particular attention among Florence's politicians. Within a month, he also became secretary to the Council of Ten of War, Florence's foreign policy body, in which he functioned as an envoy, traveling extensively around Italy and Europe to negotiate with potential allies, gather information, and do whatever the Ten needed done. Though not officially an ambassador, a position reserved for members of aristocratic families, he was nonetheless a professional diplomat. In 1501, he married Marietta Corsini, with whom he had seven children. Little is known about their relationship beyond the few domestic details that appear in Machiavelli's many letters. Machiavelli appears to have kept more than one mistress during his extensive travels, a practice that would not have been unusual in his time.

Machiavelli would spend 14 years as the "Florentine secretary." During this period, he had opportunities to meet and observe many of the major political figures of the period. Observing and negotiating for the Florentine republic, over the course of the next 15 years he visited the courts of Caterina Sforza, King Louis XII of France, Cesare Borgia, Pope Julius II,

and Emperor Maximilian II. These visits and his experience in foreign policy would later form the basis of many of the principles he expresses in *The Prince*, and the great personages that he met form the examples from which he draws his lessons. He also became a friend of Piero Soderini, who in 1502 was named *gonfaloniere* (head of the Florentine government) for life. Dismayed by the performance of mercenaries hired by the Florentine government, he persuaded Soderini to back a plan to create a native Florentine militia, very much against the wishes of the Florentine aristocracy. Machiavelli personally supervised the project, overseeing everything from the selection of uniforms to training and maneuvers. He was vindicated in 1509 when the Florentine militia were finally able to take the neighboring city of Pisa after conflicts that had dragged on for 15 years. This marked the high point of Machiavelli's career. However, Florence was a staunch ally of the French, and Pope Julius II was working to drive the French out of Italy. This put Florence into conflict with the pope and his Spanish allies, who sent armies to Florence to remove the Soderini government. Soderini was a man of responsibility and integrity, but Machiavelli would later have harsh words for Soderini's complete inability to control his opponents in Florence or to cut his losses with the French. In 1512, Machiavelli's Florentine militia was cut down by more experienced Spanish troops at the nearby town of Prato, and Soderini was forced to resign in the aftermath. The Medici family returned to Florence, and the people soon demanded that they be put back in power. Soderini was exiled. As a supporter of the Soderini government, Machiavelli was removed from his office by the new regime, fined, and forbidden to travel outside Florentine territory.

A few months later, two young malcontents were arrested and found with a list of supposed conspirators against the Medici. Machiavelli's name was on the list. Although there is no indication he was actually involved, Machiavelli was imprisoned and tortured to extract information. From prison, he wrote two sonnets to Giuliano de Medici, asking him to intercede. He was sentenced to remain in prison pending payment of a fine. However, when Giuliano's uncle, Giovanni, was elected Pope Leo X in March 1513, a general amnesty was declared in celebration, and Machiavelli was released. He retired to the relative safety of his home in the country outside Florence to rest and consider his future. During this time, he wrote many letters to his friend and fellow Florentine diplomat Francesco Vettori, who had been appointed ambassador to Rome, looking for news of the outside world and hoping Vettori could recommend him to the Medici family. In this self-imposed exile, he wrote *The Prince (Il Principe)*, which distilled his observations about human behavior, leadership, and foreign policy. He dedicated the work to the Medici family in an effort to demonstrate his support, but without success. It was clear by 1515 that the Medici would have nothing to do with him and that his diplomatic career was over.

Over the next ten years, deprived of the political activities that were his life's work, Machiavelli turned his attention to writing. During this period, he produced a treatise on the art of war, one that draws on his experience as organizer of the militia, and a commentary on the writings of the classical Roman historian Livy. Examining Livy's account of the Roman republic, Machiavelli discussed at length the concept of republican government. In contrast with *The Prince*, which supports monarchy or even tyranny, the *Discourses on Livy* are often cited as

evidence of Machiavelli's republican sympathies. He also wrote many poems and three comedic plays.

His writing attracted the attention of Cardinal Giulio de Medici, who had for several years been in control of Florence and who commissioned him to write a history of Florence. He worked on his *Florentine History* from 1520 to 1524. Giulio was elected Pope Clement VII in 1523, and Machiavelli presented the finished *History* to him in 1525. Reconciliation with the Medici brought about Machiavelli's brief return to public service. He was put in charge of military arrangements for Clement in Florence. However, Clement foolishly fell for a ploy by his Roman enemies that resulted in his humiliation and the sacking of the papal palace and church of St. Peter. Soon after, Rome fell, and the great Catholic city was terrorized and looted by mostly German Protestant armies. This debacle, and the threat posed to Florence by the advancing forces of Clement's enemies, led the Florentines to depose the Medici family in 1527. Machiavelli, a staunch supporter and lifelong defender of the Florentine republic, was on the losing side once again, now suspected by the republicans for having been in league with the Medici. However, he did not have long to dwell on the irony of his position. He died after an illness in June 1527.

Machiavelli's most famous work was not formally published during his lifetime, although it probably circulated in manuscript copies. *The Prince* was first published in 1532, with the permission of Clement VII. As evidence of its popularity, it went through seven Italian editions in the next twenty years. In 1559, all of Machiavelli's works were put on the "Index of Prohibited Books," a list of books banned by the Catholic church for heresy or immorality. This did nothing to dampen his popularity, and *The Prince* was soon translated into all the major European languages. Today, Machiavelli continues to be recognized as one of the first modern political thinkers and as a shrewd commentator on the psychology of leadership.