Niccolò Machiavelli
(1469-1527)

Biography

Niccolò Machiavelli is a Florentine historian, politician, and philosopher. He was born in Florence, on the 3rd of May in 1469 in the family of the attorney Bernardo di Niccolò Machiavelli and his wife Bartolomea di Stefano Nelli. The Machiavelli family are believed to be descended from the old marquesses of Tuscany. Machiavelli was not a full citizen of Florence. He was born in an era of wars against Italian city-states. Along with the pope and the major cities like Venice and Florence, foreign powers such as France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and Switzerland battled for regional influence and control. Political-military alliances continually changed, featuring condottieri (mercenary leaders). In 1494, Florence restored the republic. The Medici, the reigning dynasty in Florence for 60 years were expelled. Savonarola, a Florentine preacher and friar who viewed religion as the main power in policy, was executed in 1498. Machiavelli, at the age of 29, was elected as head of the second Chancery and the secretary of the Diplomatic Affairs Council. He was responsible for negotiation and military affairs. He was the Secretary to the Chancery (a ministry of Home Affairs and law) and the Diplomatic Affairs Council from 1494 to 1512. Between 1499 and 1512 he carried out several diplomatic missions: to the court of Louis XII in France; to the court of Ferdinand II of Aragón, in Spain. The Florentine city-state and the Republic were dissolved. Machiavelli was deprived of office in 1512 by the Medici and Pope Julius II and no longer held a position of responsibility in Florence. In 1513 he was accused of conspiracy, arrested, and imprisoned. In 1520 he was released and got a position of a historiographer in Florence. In 1525 he went to his country house in San Casciano Val di Pesa and died in 1527. He was buried in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence.

Creative works

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote scientific and literary works, analyzed historical political experience, and presented republic as effective form of governing. Machiavelli realized his ideas in Florence. The process of realization is shown in the analysis of his works. 

The Prince (1513). The main idea of the work is that the head of the government is the one who makes difficult decisions, and as a result the ends justify the means. A unitary model of a democratic government without church institutions should be established. In Machiavelli's point of view, the state institution of church destroys citizens' active position. The head of the central government (the Prince) should determine the policy of the subordinates and rely on the citizens' opinion and rule according to the Constitution: any solutions connected with economy, tax policy and law establishment should be made after consulting citizens. The ideas of this paper were being realized when Macciavelli was the head of the Chancery. At that period the role of the church became less important. He was an
assistant of the Gondolier of Justice, *Pierro Soderini*, and controlled the execution of laws. The political and financial stability of the government was guaranteed because of Macciacvelli’s policy and its coordination with Pierro Soderini.

*The History of Florence* (1520-1525). The work is based on the analysis of historical and political experience, ideas of creation of a republic and defining potential governing classes. The philosopher expresses a negative attitude to Thodorich’s and Odacr’s (the German conquerors of the Roman Empirein V-VI centuries) and the Medichi’s policy of absolutism. Machiavelli writes that freedom restriction is not effective. He presents a republic based on the cooperation of the head and the citizens as an alternative model that guarantees prosperity and liberty. In his point of view, citizens (il popolo) should be the main governing power as they have more possibilities and, consequently, determination to enrich their educational and political experience. The working class is presented as a stratum lacking potential knowledge of governing and challenged in taking part in governing. In the times of Machiavelli’s political activity the class of *seniors* (the citizens) was claimed to be the basis of law execution. The members participated in State Council sessions, in elections and law establishment and enforcement.

*The discourse of Tit Livii* (1516). The book contains Machiavelli’s interpretation of the Roman historian Tit Livii’s ideas. His main ideas were reflected in the theory of plebiscite (legal equality of all social strata). Machiavelli followed the principle of equality for the head of the government, the Gondoliers of Justice and the members of the Army.

*The Art of War* (1520). The main issues of the work are the principles of a military government establishment, the army organization and war strategy. The head of the government is presented as the head of the military forces. The army should be formed from the citizens on the voluntary principle. The head of the government and the army should be united by reciprocal trust. These relations guarantee citizens’ awareness of the political motives of a war, operative cooperation and victory. Machiavelli also states that the tactics of war should be based upon natural conditions and international situation (“the landscape of the particular place, the power or the weakness of the rivals in the battle” [Machiavelli, N. The Seven Books on the art of War]).

The book written under the influence of participating in wars as a diplomatist and a commander-in-chief of the troops presents the results of analyzing successes and failures in the war. Machiavelli was in a diplomatic council responsible for negotiation and military affairs. The result of his missions was the establishment of the temporal agreements between the countries.

Machiavelli’s theory was realised in the process of the Florentine republic formation. In 1506 the Military reform was held and the Florentine militia (a voluntary army) was established. Machiavelli became its chief. He distrusted the mercenary (he explained the distrust in his official reports and later in his theoretical works), preferring the politically involved citizen. When Florence got involved in the war of the League of Cambrai, Machiavelli’s theory was realised. Florentine citizen-soldiers under his command defeated invading French troops in 1512. The experience of the war of the League of Cambrai was included in the book. The philosopher proves that successful military events were based upon the cooperation of the head of the government and the army.

Niccolò Machiavelli’s ideas were based upon the interrelation between the power of the head of the government and principles of democracy. According to his ideas, the head of the government should rely on citizens’ opinion.

*Florentine influence*

The ideas of Machiavelli’s works were influenced by the process of the republic formation in *Florence* and his work in the *Diplomatic Affairs* and *Military Ministries*. His democratic ideas were based on his personal experience. From 1502 to 1503 Machiavelli witnessed dictatorial state-building methods of *Cesare Borgia* from the Italian state Romania and his father *Pope Alexander VI* who were going to achieve control over Florence. Machiavelli
described the alternative democratic way of governing based on the cooperation of the head of the state and citizens. On the contrary, Cesare Borgia famous for the dictatorial course in his policy was inclined to believe in the absolute power of the head of the state. In the work “History of Florence” Machiavelli stated that he was against the course of dictatorship in policy. In 1498 the ideological opposition of Girolamo Savonarola and Machiavelli was established. Savonarola was going to establish a Christian government based on tolerance to debts in economy, censorship in art and following the postulates of the Bible. Machiavelli contraposed atheism to these views. Machiavelli understood that “religion is not a guiding force to shape a nations leadership, but a disguise for leaders to wear as they do whatever will give them the most control over their people” [Rusty Shackleford. Role of Religion in Politics]. This became one of the principal theses for his work “The Prince”. According to Machiavelli, it is necessary for a Prince “to act contrary to faith, friendship, humanity, and religion” [Machiavelli, N. The Prince].

Machiavelli’s works and ideas were based upon the political principles of the time from 1494 to 1512. They are: the Constitution is the main law; rules are executed and controlled by Gondoliers of Justice; the cooperation of the government and mercenaries is officially prohibited. However, this policy was declined after the existence of the Republic of Florence had been terminated.

Learn more

(= Макиавелли, Н. Государь. - М: Современный литератор, 1999. – 703 с.).