



EDITED BY
MICHAEL KNAPTON, JOHN E. LAW, ALISON A. SMITH

VENICE AND THE VENETO DURING THE RENAISSANCE

THE LEGACY OF BENJAMIN KOHL



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**Venice and the Veneto during the
Renaissance: the Legacy of Benjamin Kohl**

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Politics, War and Diplomacy in late fifteenth-century Italy: Machiavellian thoughts and Venetian examples

by Humfrey Butters

In the course of the last century political, military and diplomatic history gradually lost their age-old supremacy, as other forms of history, social, economic and cultural, came to play an increasingly prominent role. Paradoxically, in the same period, Political Science and International Relations, conceived of as subjects belonging to the social sciences, grew and prospered. In the discipline of International Relations two of the foremost schools, the Realists and the Behaviouralists, were wedded to positivism, the view that the social sciences should adopt the same methodology as the natural sciences¹. There are two reasons why these not particularly novel reflections on twentieth-century intellectual developments are relevant to a historical essay on Italian political life in the late fifteenth century. The first is that one of the fundamental early texts of the Realist school was written not by a social scientist, but by a historian with strong Marxist and positivist leanings. The work was *The Twenty Years Crisis 1919-1939* and its author was E. H. Carr. The second is that Carr took Machiavelli, whose works are full of reflections upon fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Italian history, to be the model exponent, *avant la lettre*, of Realism.

Carr cast Machiavelli in this star role because of three principles that, according to him, underlay the latter's works: that the task of the political or social theorist is to lay bare the sequences of cause and effect of which history is composed; that practice is prior to and produces theory; and that morality is the fruit of power². It is not difficult to see Marxist inspiration in Carr's interpretation of Machiavelli, for Marx certainly shared Machiavelli's contempt for certain sorts of idealistic or utopian thinking, while being, like Machiavelli, quite willing to indulge in his own variety of it. There are, however, several reasons for doubting that Machiavelli deserves a place in the Realist pantheon, and one very good one is that it is impossible to combine Machiavelli's

¹ Hollis and Smith, 28-32.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

conception of the importance of *Fortuna* with a positivist belief in universal causal laws, as Montesquieu, a keen student of Machiavelli's *oeuvre*, was perfectly aware³. Whatever one thinks about Machiavelli's views on Fortune, it is fairly clear that the social sciences have failed so far to produce the causal laws that would enable them to explain and predict the phenomena that constitute their respective subject matters⁴.

Another reason for doubting whether Machiavelli can be accounted an early member of the Realist school is that while Realists tend to make a sharp distinction between domestic politics and the conduct of relations between states, he did not. In *The Prince* he stressed how important it was for a prince both to win a good reputation at home, by keeping his subjects satisfied and by avoiding their hatred or contempt, and to have the formidable military resources and reliable allies that would secure him from foreign threats. A ruler's domestic reputation for strong and effective government would make it less likely that foreign powers would attack him; while a successful foreign policy would help to discourage his domestic opponents from engaging in rebellion or other sorts of disobedience⁵. Machiavelli's perception of the intermeshing of politics, war and diplomacy is also to be seen in his account of Rome's career of conquest in the *Discourses*. Machiavelli is rightly notorious for his insistence upon the role of force in government, but it would be a grave error to suppose that he thought that power and force were identical, or that Rome's enormous territorial acquisitions were to be attributed solely to the use of her formidable military apparatus. He also considered that the perceptions or estimates of Rome's military potential of those facing Roman expansion or, to put it another way, Rome's reputation, were of great significance. Rome, according to him, was fortunate in that its foes did not unite to oppose her, because when one state was attacked others were too scared to come to its assistance. In the case of states geographically distant from Rome, such as Carthage, Machiavelli saw the former as the beneficiary of their miscalculations: the Carthaginians, for example, whenever Rome was engaging one of her opponents, judged that she would be defeated; and when that judgment turned out to be wrong, they supposed that they would be still be able to deal with the threat Rome posed by military or peaceful means. Another crucial factor in Rome's victories was her ability to secure the assistance of allies, or *compagni*; and in some cases these allies were dissident elements *within* the state that Rome was attacking, fifth columns ready to assist her in countries such as Greece, Spain or Gaul⁶. The significance that Machiavelli attached to reputation comes out clearly in *The Prince*, where despite the stress that he lays there upon robust military arrangements, he argues that the rulers of Western Europe could not rule by force alone, for in

³ Butters, 2006, 91.

⁴ The best account of this failure and of the reasons for it is to be found in Macintyre, 84-102.

⁵ Machiavelli, 75-76 (*Il Principe*, chap. 19).

⁶ Butters, 2000, 131.

their dominions the people were stronger than the army. It was for that reason that a canny ruler was well advised, according to Machiavelli, to take seriously both what his subjects wanted him to do and their estimates of how likely it was that he would be able to provide it⁷.

In the forty years leading up to the French invasion of 1494 the relations between the principal Italian powers provide numerous examples to support Machiavelli's view that political life on the one hand, war and diplomacy on the other were hopelessly embrangled. It is true that a powerful historiographical tradition, deriving ultimately from Burckhardt's vision of the Renaissance State, has argued that in this period Venice, Milan, the Papacy, the kingdom of Naples and Florence, whose governments exercised tight control over the territories subject to them, were engaged in a rather orderly competition in which no one power dominated the rest, so that it is legitimate to speak of the operation of a balance of power⁸. The principal problem with this opinion is that while it is perfectly true that in the late Middle Ages Italian political geography was simplified by the emergence of the five powers in question, which almost without exception acquired resources that they had not had before, such as standing armies⁹ and resident ambassadors¹⁰, it is not clear that their internal organization corresponded very closely to that depicted by Burckhardt or his later followers. The cities that became subject to Florence and Venice, for example, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, retained many of their previous statutes, institutions and leading families. Feudal jurisdiction, moreover, can be found almost everywhere, in the kingdom of Naples, the duchy of Milan, the Papal State and the Venetian Terraferma state¹¹. This is why one of the principal tasks of Italian governments in this period was to manage their aristocracies, using patronage, force, or the threat of force, as occasion demanded, and by no means all of them showed themselves capable of this. One of the reasons why success could prove elusive was that the resources upon which the domestic opponents of a government could draw were not confined within the frontiers of the territories subject to it. In Genoa governments were often overthrown or threatened by an alliance between a hostile faction and a foreign power such as France or Milan; while in Naples the Aragonese monarchy faced two serious baronial rebellions, between 1458 and 1462 and from 1485 to 1486, the former backed by the house of Anjou, the latter by the Papacy¹². Governments, therefore, did not

⁷ *Ibid.*, 133. For an excellent analysis of the relationship between power and force, see Luttwak, 195-200.

⁸ Mattingly, 90.

⁹ Mallett, 1974, 107-45.

¹⁰ Mattingly, 66-76.

¹¹ The most powerful assault ever mounted upon the conception of the Renaissance State is to be found in Jones, 71-96. See also Law, 397-413. For a historiographical account, see Butters, 2005, 121-50.

¹² Butters, 1988, 16.

necessarily have a monopoly of foreign policy; but they could certainly seek to forestall such crises, or overcome them when they arose, with the aid of their own external allies, and the classic case of this is the relationship with Milan that for several decades buttressed the Medici regime in Florence.

This is not the only respect, moreover, in which domestic politics and foreign affairs could be difficult to disentangle: the Barons' War of 1485-1486 provides two further ones. Firstly, its status was ambiguous, since although it could be regarded as a war between two of the major powers of Italy, and so as an episode in Neapolitan or Papal foreign policy, the Papacy had a long-standing claim to be the feudal overlord of the king of Naples and, therefore, to have the right to intervene in the conflict between Ferrante and the rebel barons. Secondly, some of the leading actors in the drama had lands both in the Papal State and in the *Regno*, such as the Orsini and the Colonna families¹³.

Another reason for doubting the idea that there was a balance of power in operation in this period is provided by the outcome of the Ferrara war (1482-1484), in the latter stages of which Venice confronted the other four major powers and still contrived to come out with a significant gain, the Polesine of Rovigo¹⁴. What is certainly true is that, thanks to Venice's extraordinary territorial expansion in the first half of the fifteenth century, the Peace of Lodi (1454) and the alliance between Milan and Florence were both motivated in large part by the desire to limit Venetian ambitions¹⁵. It is not surprising that it became a commonplace in the second half of the century to accuse Venice of seeking the *imperio d'Italia*¹⁶; and although it is not certain how many of those who levelled this charge actually believed it, Venetians themselves were quite happy to compare themselves to the Romans¹⁷.

Machiavelli did not share this latter view, but he did have a sufficiently high opinion of Venice's importance to think that it was worthwhile to compare Venice *with* Rome, even though his purpose in making such a comparison was to draw attention to the differences between them. His principal reason for having a lower opinion of Venice than of Rome was that he found Venetian military institutions decidedly inferior to Roman ones, thanks to Venice's reliance upon *condottieri*, whose deployment Machiavelli took to be an infallible sign of corruption. He attributed Venetian territorial expansion to cunning and cash rather than military prowess¹⁸, taking his distaste for Venetian military arrangements to the point of maintaining that Venice was stronger before she acquired her mainland territories¹⁹. The disintegration of Venice's Terraferma state after the battle of Agnadello in 1509 was obviously

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ Cozzi and Knapton, 70.

¹⁵ Chambers, 59.

¹⁶ Rubinstein, 197.

¹⁷ Chambers, 12.

¹⁸ Cozzi and Knapton, 302.

¹⁹ Machiavelli, 336 (*Discorsi*, II, chap. 19).

in his mind, and the fact that she was able in the following years to recover most of what she had lost did not alter his judgment²⁰. What he did concede was that Venice had survived for a longer period as a republic than Rome had, and for that reason he argued that a republic that wanted to expand should follow the Roman model, but a republic that was content merely to survive would be better advised to follow the Venetian one²¹. He failed to grasp the significance of the development of standing armies in Italy, so that the fact that Venice had one failed to impress him²².

Venice had other profoundly significant resources. The wealth that she derived from her crucial role in the spice trade gave her a great advantage, and so did her fleet and her geographical location. In the late fifteenth century the annual income of the Venetian government in normal years (admittedly a rather artificial notion) of 1,150,000 ducats was almost certainly superior to that of her main Italian rivals²³; though it is worth pointing out that Machiavelli would not have been impressed by this latter fact, because he was very keen to deny that money was essential to the successful waging of war²⁴. The subject of the relationship of resources to foreign policy is, however, not a simple one. The choices governments made were obviously dependent on the resources available to them; but these did not constitute a fixed and predictable quantity, for the human and material resources available for one political or military undertaking would not necessarily be available for another. This was particularly true of those represented by a government's foreign friends and allies, of whose great value Machiavelli was quite aware²⁵.

Nor was there a simple relationship between a government's domestic resources, military and financial, and the outcome of the conflicts in which it engaged. The war of Ferrara (1482-1484) presents a particularly good example of this. Although it is true that the income of the Venetian state was probably superior to that of any one of the five powers that it confronted in the closing stages of the war, Ferrara, Milan, Naples, Florence and the Papacy, it was certainly not superior to their combined incomes, though naturally much depended in times of war on the sources of credit on which each could draw. The number of troops at its disposal, however, around 20,000, was probably not even superior to that which Milan alone could deploy, and it was, without a shadow of a doubt, inferior to that of the armed forces of the five put together. But as we have seen, the result of the war was not what these considerations might have led one to expect, for Venice emerged from the war with a substantial gain²⁶. Timing, tactics and strategy, the quality of the troops and of

²⁰ The best treatment of Machiavelli's views about Venice is to be found in Cervelli.

²¹ Machiavelli, 138-41 (*Discorsi*, I, chap. 5).

²² Vide supra, 105.

²³ Cozzi and Knapton, 302.

²⁴ Machiavelli, 302-05 (*Discorsi*, II, chap. 10)

²⁵ Vide supra, 104.

²⁶ Vide supra, 106.

their commanders all played a crucial role, but so did that elusive factor, *reputazione*, to which Machiavelli paid so much attention. His discussion of it in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, was notably original, but the perception that statesmen needed to take account of it was hardly a new one: king Ferrante of Naples, for example, a cunning but hardly a very deep thinker, told the Florentine and Milanese ambassadors on one occasion that the survival of regimes was as much a matter of their reputation as of their military resources²⁷.

It would not be particularly daring to conclude that this was a view common to all the leading players in the game of Italian politics in the late fifteenth century; and if it was, it amounted to an admission by them that their task, to defend the interests of the states that they governed, was an extremely complex one. One quality it required was the ability to predict who was likely to emerge as a winner in a particular contest, however winning was defined at each stage of the unceasing military and diplomatic struggle that constituted Italian political life; and the part played by *reputazione* in that struggle made the business of prediction very difficult, so difficult indeed that there is a certain analogy, not to be pressed too far, between the rivalries of Italy's states and Keynes's famous description of the economy, which he compared to a contest to forecast the result of a beauty competition, in which each contestant has to choose not the most beautiful candidate, but the one most likely to win the votes of the other contestants. As Keynes puts it: "It is not a case of choosing those which, to the best of one's judgement, really are the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects average opinion to be"²⁸. This does not mean, of course, that Italian political life was so opaque that one calculation was just as good as any other. Only a very stupid Italian statesman would have spent much time trying to work out whether Poggibonsi's resources were superior or inferior to those of Venice; but, equally, only a very stupid one would have illuded himself that he *knew exactly* what, at any given moment, Venice's resources actually were, for, in a world in which duplicity and the management of impressions played such a leading role, and in which unpredictable events were commonplace, this was a form of knowledge that not even Venetian statesmen possessed. These features of political and diplomatic life are not, of course, confined to late fifteenth-century Italy. When Harold Macmillan was asked what preoccupied him most when he was Prime Minister, he replied: "Events, dear boy, events." Both Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini would have had considerable sympathy for this point of view.

One key element in Venice's military arrangements illustrates particularly well the point that resources were dependent upon policies: the city's heavy reliance on the services of *condottieri*. It is true that her experience of the use of mercenaries

²⁷ Butters, 2000, 133.

²⁸ Hollis, 102.

was far happier than Florence's²⁹, and in most respects bore little relationship to Machiavelli's atrabilious verdicts upon it. This was because Venice made every effort to induce her *condottieri* to identify their interests with hers, with grants of estates, pensions and even honorary citizenship³⁰. But frequently one of the city's *condottieri* showed that he had political and military aims that diverged quite markedly from those of his employer, and in those circumstances Machiavelli's critique of the *condottieri* system had more purchase. A good example of this phenomenon was Roberto di Sanseverino, Venice's principal *condottiere* for most of the 1480's. During the Ferrara war he was involved in clandestine dealings with the Ghibelline faction in Milan, and while this could be seen as an entirely reasonable discharge of his duties by a sedulous servant of a major power, since a standard tactic in the Italian wars of the age – one already deployed by the Romans, as Machiavelli pointed out³¹ – was the subversion of one's enemies from within by the establishment of fifth columns, it is not clear that in this case Sanseverino's political activities were solely concerned to benefit his employer. He had for long been involved in Milanese political life, indeed, he had been born into it, because his mother Elisa was the sister of Francesco Sforza, duke of Milan³².

Since his father Leonetto was the illegitimate son of Bertrando di Sanseverino, count of Caiazzo³³, Roberto also belonged to one of the leading families of the *Regno*, and thus furnishes a further example of how complicated the political interests of Italian nobles could be. In 1477 duchess Bona made him one of the members of a new formed section of the *Consiglio segreto* that had a permanent residence in the *Castello*³⁴; but this did not prevent him from harbouring his own considerable ambitions, which according to one report extended to the conquest of Parma, Piacenza, Pavia and even Milan itself³⁵. In May 1477 he was found guilty of conspiring against the Duchess's regime, together with several members of the Sforza family, including Ludovico, and declared a rebel³⁶. His estates in the duchy were confiscated. Two years later the support that he and Ludovico enjoyed within the Milanese state brought about their return to favour³⁷ and the eventual removal from power of the Duchess. His alliance with Ludovico was not, however, destined to enjoy a long life. By January 1482 he had become convinced that Ludovico was aiming to exclude him from his role in government, and he feared, moreover, that if he set foot in Milan, he would be arrested³⁸. Sanseverino's solution to his predicament was to

²⁹ Mallett, 1979, 149-64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

³¹ *Vide supra*, 104.

³² Lorenzo de' Medici, 1977a, 45n1.

³³ Lorenzo de' Medici, 1977b, 281.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 330n5: Zaccaria Saggi to Ludovico Gonzaga, 1 June 1477.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 359, 367.

³⁷ Lorenzo de' Medici, 1981, 189n1.

³⁸ Lorenzo de' Medici, 1990, 209n3.

seek employment with Venice, where on 29 March 1482 more than four hundred nobles turned out to welcome him³⁹.

After the end of the Ferrara war in the summer of 1484 Ludovico sought to re-establish good relations with Sanseverino, partly in order to draw closer to Venice, but this made the Ghibelline faction in Milan very nervous, for some of them had engaged in clandestine dealings with the *condottiere* during the war. Led by Filippo degli Eustachii, the castellan of Milan, they made Ludovico abandon his attempt to court Sanseverino, who was declared a rebel once again in July 1485 for conspiring against him⁴⁰. In the Barons' War Venice maintained a neutral posture, but it did allow Sanseverino to join his troops to those of the Pope and the rebel barons. His justification for taking this step was that his sole source of income at that point was his *condotta* with Venice, which was inadequate to his needs. He claimed that he had taken legal advice before signing his *condotta* with the Pope. The Venetian government informed Milan that it had protested at the *condottiere's* decision, but seeing that it would be impossible to make him change his mind, it had decided to let him go⁴¹.

What was Venice doing in granting Sanseverino the permission that he sought? Bernardo Rucellai, Florentine ambassador in Milan, considered that the Venetian government *wanted* the *condottiere* to join the Pope, even if it had not been able to convince the Senate to give him leave to do so. On the other hand it is not obvious that the Venetian government could have stopped him. On 22 December 1485 Giovanni Lanfredini, Florentine ambassador in Naples, in a summary of the forces deployed on both sides of the conflict, calculated that Sanseverino had six hundred men-at-arms with him⁴². The Venetian government would have run the risk of a more serious loss of face if it had persisted in its refusal to give him permission to go and he had simply ignored this.

In the decade between the end of the Ferrara war and the French invasion of 1494 there is a striking, indeed an ironic contrast between Venetian foreign policy and the views of those Italian rivals of hers who saw, or claimed to see, the city as bent on the domination of Italy, or of those Venetians given to remarking upon the similarities between Venice and ancient Rome. The only conflict in which she was involved was the short-lived war of Rovereto of 1487 with the count of Tyrol, in which a key issue was the extensive acquisition and exploitation by Venetian patricians of mines located in areas adjoining Venice's frontiers with the bishoprics of Bressanone and Trento and the lands of the Count⁴³. The defence of her Terraferma dominions and of those that constituted the *Stato da mar* was just as important to Venice as it had always

³⁹ Ibid., 309n4.

⁴⁰ Butters, 1988, 15-16.

⁴¹ Lorenzo de' Medici, 2002, 5.

⁴² Lanfredini, 2002, 452.

⁴³ Cozzi and Knapton, 71.

been, but no threats to these significant enough to elicit from Venice a massive and sustained response emerged in these years; nor was the government tempted to engage in any aggressive ventures in order to increase the amount of territory under its control. There were sound financial reasons for such a stance. The Ferrara war was reputed to have cost more than two million ducats⁴⁴, and in order to be able to engage in it the government had been forced to transform existing public credit arrangements by the establishment of the *Monte Nuovo* in 1482. The *Monte Vecchio*, it was thought, would not have been able to confront the challenge, since already by the 1470's its payments of interest were twenty years in arrears⁴⁵.

The Ferrara war was the most extensive military enterprise undertaken by Venice on the Italian mainland between 1454 and 1494, and the one that provides the best evidence for those observers, contemporaries or modern historians, who ascribed to the city the goal of dominating Italy. But while it is plausible to suppose that the Venetians hoped to overwhelm Ferrara's defences before the forces of Ercole d'Este's allies could arrive on the scene, it is far from clear that Venice intended to absorb the city and all its territories into her Terraferma state, even though the Papacy had made this formally possible by bestowing the vicariate of Ferrara on her in April 1482. There is much to be said for Mallett's verdict that Venetian war aims were probably far more modest: the full observance by the Ferrarese of the *patti* that had for long regulated commercial relations between the two cities, greatly to the advantage of Venice, and the recovery of the Polesine of Rovigo⁴⁶. It is significant, moreover, that many leading Venetian statesmen were for long reluctant to contemplate war with Ferrara. As late as November 1481 the Doge and a majority of the Collegio were still insisting that the construction of three forts intended to prevent incursions across the frontier should be delayed, in order to allow further negotiations to take place; and towards the end of that month seventy senators voted against a proposal to send Ercole d'Este an ultimatum⁴⁷. It could be argued that Venice's ability to emerge from this major conflict having achieved most of its war aims, even though it had had to confront four of the major powers in Italy and one of medium rank, showed that the Roman dreams dreamt by some Venetians were not mere flights of fantasy; but while Venice's success was undoubtedly due in part to its ability to deploy formidable military and financial resources, the outcome of the war owed much to the divisions among her opponents and to the fact that their other commitments prevented them from dedicating themselves single-mindedly to the defeat of Venice⁴⁸. If, moreover, the favourable result Venice

⁴⁴ Ibid., 302.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 324.

⁴⁶ Mallett, 1993, 63.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 71-72.

obtained had emboldened some Venetians to entertain further expansionist ambitions, there is little sign of it in the decade that followed the end of the war.

One reason why Venetian foreign policy in Italy tended to be more cautious in the second half of the century than it had been in the first, was that the city's governors were more preoccupied than before with the Ottoman menace, as a consequence of the capture of Constantinople in 1453 and the conquest of the Morea, completed in 1460. In 1463, after a vigorous debate in the Senate, which showed that even in these circumstances there was a strong peace party in Venice, she went to war with the Ottomans, a conflict that lasted until 1479, and resulted in the loss of Negroponte, a disaster which, according to the chronicler Domenico Malipiero, terrified the Venetian ruling élite⁴⁹. When in the middle of this undertaking Venice provided assistance to her *condottiere* Bartolomeo Colleoni in his failed attempt to topple the Medici regime in Florence (1466-1468), she was forced to face the fact that it was very difficult for her to conduct a successful war on two fronts⁵⁰.

Even if Venice's foreign policy in the decade before the start of the Italian wars was relatively lacking in bold initiatives, the importance attributed to the city by the other major powers continued to be considerable. In the early part of 1486, for example, Pope Innocent VIII made a serious effort to convince the Venetian government to ally with the rebel barons against the king of Naples, but although the government made him an offer, it was one that it must have known he would have to refuse: the Pope would receive thirty *squadre* and 2-3,000 foot, and in return he would concede to Venice a string of Romagna towns including Cesena and Savignano. Unsurprisingly Innocent declined the offer, declaring that he had no intention of diminishing the Papal States⁵¹. This disappointment did not, however, discourage the Pope, in the year following the end of the Barons' War, from contracting an alliance with Venice⁵².

Ludovico Sforza was another ruler extremely anxious to be on good terms with Venice after the Ferrara war, in part because he had experienced her ability to exploit divisions within the political élite of the Milanese state. One of Venice's strengths in its dealings with other Italian states was that it was less vulnerable to this sort of exploitation, since although it was hardly free of factional conflicts, these were not so grave as to produce the sorts of violent upheavals that were a regular feature of political life in Genoa and the Papal States, and an occasional one in the *Regno*, Florence or the duchy of Milan. In August 1486, however, a major clash over the dogeship broke out between the *Longhi* and *Curti* families, becoming so serious that elections to the Senate and the Council of Ten became a battleground between the two parties⁵³. Marin Sanudo commented that the whole city was divided by the conflict, which came

⁴⁹ Cozzi and Knapton, 58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵¹ Butters, 1988, 22.

⁵² Lorenzo de' Medici, 2003, 87n12.

⁵³ Finlay, 145-47.

to the ears of Ludovico Sforza. He took the matter so seriously that he delivered the following warning to the Venetian ambassador, Marcantonio Morosini: “Hora vedo ben quel Stado in desolation et im partialità esser venuto, fareti far novi pensieri d’ i fati vostri a i Signori de Italia.” Morosini’s dispatch, in which he reported Sforza’s words, was read in the Council of Ten, and it was decided that the Doge should deliver a speech to the Great Council, exhorting them to abandon their dissensions for the sake of civic concord⁵⁴. Ludovico must have taken some pleasure in being able to lecture the Venetians about the loss of reputation that a state infected with serious domestic dissensions was likely to incur, but the danger to which he adverted was real enough.

Ludovico’s determination to cultivate the Venetians after the Ferrara war put a considerable strain on his relationship with a longstanding ally of Milan’s, Florence. In a letter to his master of 20 November 1486 the Ferrarese ambassador wrote that Lorenzo de’ Medici had complained bitterly about Milan’s behaviour, commenting, according to the ambassador: “Et che hora mai il non sapea più che dire se non che ’l cognosea la maiore difficoltà essere in governarse cum li amici che diffenderse da li inimici”⁵⁵. But Lorenzo himself was perfectly aware of the advantages, temporary or otherwise, of appearing to be associated with Venice. It was for this reason that in 1487 he had constantly encouraged the Pope, with whom he was seeking to build a solid relationship, to reinforce his alliance with that city⁵⁶. He also used his political influence in the same year to secure the dispatch of a Florentine ambassador to Venice, an initiative intended to punish Ludovico Sforza for his failure to back Florence in its struggle with Genoa over Sarzana⁵⁷, and for his excessively deferential attitude towards Venice⁵⁸. These examples provide telling illustrations of the fact that in the second half of the fifteenth century Venice did not need to embark upon dramatic or aggressive adventures on the Italian mainland in order to persuade the other major states of the peninsula that she was a power to be feared and, when necessary, cultivated.

⁵⁴ Sanudo, 536.

⁵⁵ Lorenzo de’ Medici, 2003, 25-26n14: Aldobrandino Guidoni to Ercole d’Este, 20 November 1486.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 359n10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 257n1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 383n10.

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Abstract

The essay discusses theoretical and practical aspects of politics, war and diplomacy in late fifteenth-century Italy, using Machiavelli's works as an example of theory, Venetian foreign policy as an example of practice. The attempt to present Machiavelli as a founding father of the Realist school of International Relations is considered and dismissed. Major features of Machiavelli's thought are treated: his vision of the intimate connections between foreign affairs, war and political life; his distinguishing power from force; and his grasp of the importance of reputation. The value of these as a guide to the politics of Italy between 1454 and 1494 is assessed, with particular reference to Venice, and to the merits and defects of Machiavelli's famous comparison between ancient Rome and Venice. The career of Roberto di Sanseverino is examined to show that one premise upon which that comparison was based, that condottieri were unreliable, was sometimes well founded.

Keywords

Middle Ages; 15th century; Venice; politics; war; diplomacy; Nicolò Machiavelli

Humfrey Butters

Warwick University, United Kingdom, Emeritus

H.C.Butters@warwick.ac.uk