

Political Thought from Machiavelli to Stalin

Also by E. A. Rees

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Political Thought from Machiavelli to Stalin

Revolutionary Machiavellism

E. A. Rees

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Introduction

The influence of the ideas of Niccolò Machiavelli in Russia has attracted comparatively little attention amongst scholars. However, there are notable exceptions. The study by the Italian scholar Giuseppe Prezzolini *Machiavelli* contained a valuable section on the reception of Machiavelli's ideas in Russia.¹ A major breakthrough in this field was the work of the Polish scholar Jan Malarczyk. Malarczyk defended his dissertation on the subject of Machiavelli's political thought at Leningrad State University in 1958.² The main findings were published in 1959 and 1960.³ Malarczyk's work, however, concentrates on the scholarly debate on Machiavelli and pays less regard to the political impact of his ideas. His findings were published in Italian and taken up by Italian scholars.⁴

M. A. Yusim's *Machiavelli v Rossii*, published in 1998, provides the best examination of the influence of Machiavelli's views in Russia from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. It provides a very comprehensive bibliography of sources, particularly of early archive sources, and it provides excellent coverage of the works published in Russia since Stalin's death.⁵ Yusim's book, like Malarczyk's work, inclines towards an overly schematic summary of works, which overlooks some of the crucial aspects of the impact of these ideas as they relate to the policies and practices of political movements and regimes.

The influence of Machiavelli's ideas in Russia and the Soviet Union is a big subject. At the outset, it is necessary to dispel some misconceptions. Machiavelli is primarily thought of as the theorist who advances the proposition that the end justifies the means. And, indeed, Machiavelli does just this. But Machiavelli is much more than this. His work is concerned with the problem of political order, of what kinds of political system are viable and effective. He addresses also the question of the nature of political change, the role of the state and the relationship of the state to its subjects. Indeed, his work is extraordinarily rich in this regard. This is where the strength of his appeal lies.

However, vision without power is a chimera. From Marx and Engels they had much to learn about the nature of power. But other sources also contributed to their thinking. And this was true for the Bolshevik leaders in general. What is astonishing is the failure to examine the influence of these other sources of ideas on the thinking of these figures. For political leaders in a newly established state, forged in the upheaval

of revolution and civil war, the question of order and stability was central. For a political leadership who saw itself engaged in the construction of a new order, one which would supersede the capitalist order, and which would endure for generations, the question of appropriate models of political organization were vital.

For such leaders, there were to hand examples of institutions which had survived for centuries and had played a formative role in shaping the history of mankind. One of these was the Roman Republic and Empire, from which Machiavelli sought to derive fundamental lessons about the nature of political order. The second was the Roman Catholic Church, in the preservation of which the order of the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius Loyola, played a major part. The Jesuits played a major role in the intellectual attack on Machiavelli from the sixteenth century onwards. The central basis of this attack was Machiavelli's criticism of the papacy and the priesthood, his scathing criticisms of the corruption of contemporary Christianity, and his apparent atheism. Despite this sustained attack on Machiavelli, commentators from the outset noted the very close affinity between the ideas of Machiavelli and the methods and practices of the Jesuits.⁶

In this study we explore the various strands of Machiavellian thought that influenced the revolutionary movement in nineteenth-century Russia. We also analyse how far Bolshevism had an affinity to the Machiavellian problematic, and how Machiavelli's ideas were used. We also explore, as a subsidiary issue, the surprising interest shown by Russian revolutionaries in the ideas and organizational methods of the Jesuits.

Machiavelli had always been considered a dangerous, subversive thinker. In the sixteenth century his works were placed on the Index of the Catholic Church, he was vilified and denounced. In the eighteenth century his works were widely proscribed. Frederick the Great of Prussia, assisted by Voltaire, wrote his famous *Anti-Machiavel*. In this climate, Machiavelli also came to occupy a place of high regard amongst many intellectuals, for the boldness of his thinking, his uncompromising endeavour to describe the world of politics as it was, for his independence of thought, and his willingness to challenge the pretensions of the Catholic Church. Amongst leading intellectuals, from Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza to Rousseau his contribution to human enlightenment and learning was applauded.

Hannah Arendt, in *On Revolution*, ascribes a central place to Machiavelli as a thinker on revolution ('the spiritual father of revolution'), and on the more complex task of establishing a lasting new authority, which emerges from this upheaval, with the opening of opportunities

to newcomers, to 'Cicero's *homines novi*, to Machiavelli's *condottiere*'. Machiavelli was especially significant in separating politics from ethics, in his enthusiasm for reviving the spirit and institutions of Roman antiquity, and his recognition of the role of violence in politics. He exercised considerable influence in this regard in the eighteenth century and on the French revolution.⁷ Machiavelli has been widely viewed as a revolutionary in terms of his thinking on politics.⁸

Machiavelli's influence during the Enlightenment and the French revolution remains unclear and a matter of controversy. Not surprisingly, when we turn to the October Revolution of 1917, the influence of Machiavelli seems even more remote. The question might be posed as to what contribution a sixteenth-century Florentine might have made to the ideas which guided the first proletarian socialist revolution.

Historians of Soviet Russia, with a few notable exceptions, simply ignore it. We shall approach the question by examining the way in which Machiavelli's ideas were received, presented and used in Russia. In exploring this theme we shall be concerned with examining various kinds of relations between ideas and practices. First, we shall examine the evidence of the direct influence of Machiavelli's thought on political actors, the evidence that they had read his work and derived lessons from it, which they applied in practice. The direct influences are the most difficult to substantiate and the easiest to conceal. Second, we shall examine the evidence of indirect influence, the way in which political actors were influenced at second-hand by the thoughts and ideas of individuals and movements that had been directly influenced by Machiavelli's thought. Third, we shall be looking at affinities between both the thoughts and actions of political actors and the advice offered by Machiavelli. Strong affinities may exist quite independently of direct or indirect influences from the thoughts of Machiavelli, and may be simply part of the everyday currency of 'Machiavellism' in politics. But strong affinities, which we shall argue exist in the cases of V. I. Lenin and I. V. Stalin, require us to be open to the idea that there may also be strong direct and indirect influences which as yet have remained undetected.

The question of influence, direct and indirect, cannot be posed in a unilinear way. The political ideas of Machiavelli have to be addressed in their complexity, taking the tensions and ambiguities in his thinking into account; the defender of dictatorship and the sworn enemy of tyranny; the democrat who despairs of democratic means; the humanist who advocates inhumane methods. Thus, a fourth aspect of our approach is to determine how far the political discourse of particular movements and parties reflect these tensions, and how far their inter-

nal debates revolve around the ambiguities and tensions that were integral to the thinking of Machiavelli himself.

A wide diversity of different intellectual influences went into the shaping of the Stalinist system, some of which were directly connected to Marxism, others with a more remote connection which were gradually fused with it. Isaac Deutscher described the growing influence of the Asiatic elements in Russian culture in the Stalin era. Here, it will be argued that Stalinism drew on a wide range of intellectual European influences, particularly the darker, more authoritarian strands in European thought from classical antiquity, through the Renaissance to the twentieth century. In this, the history of Stalinism cannot be understood in isolation from the wider history of Europe in the twentieth century, and the rise of the other authoritarian trends of Nazism and fascism. The study revolves around the question of the influence of Machiavelli's thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the rise of Machiavellism in modern politics.

An important aspect of this study revolves around the relationship between politics and ethics. Machiavelli was and remains an extremely controversial figure. Leo Strauss unambiguously describes *The Prince* as a revolutionary work and his teaching as 'evil' and 'diabolical'.⁹ Carl J. Friedrich analysed the exaggerated Machiavellism in politics as an aspect of political pathology.¹⁰ Here we explore the relationship between Marxism and ethics, and the problem of revolutionary movements, revolution as a political act, and the problem of revolutionary governments.

One school of thought presents Machiavelli as one who develops a 'scientific' approach to the question of political power, and one who offered this advice to leaders who pursued worthy and laudable aims (the rescuing of the state and society from decadence through a rediscovery of *virtù*, who sought to cleanse the state of the corrupt accretions of feudal and clerical power, who sought the unification of Italy and the expulsion of the invading powers). At the outset, it should be stated that Machiavelli's approach to politics was not 'scientific' in the sense of a dispassionate, disinterested quest for truth, but rather that it stemmed from very powerful convictions about the nature of political power, based on his understanding and admiration of the ancient Romans.

In approaching this study, it is important to distinguish between the influence of Machiavelli, and what might be termed 'Machiavellianism' or 'Machiavellism', which may or may not be related to Machiavelli's thought. 'Machiavellism', in so far as it involves a detached and even cynical approach to the exercise of political power, it might be said is a

universal phenomenon, not bound by time or by culture. It might be said that there are situations, war, civil war, insurgency, revolution, where politics by its nature is 'Machiavellian'. It might also be said that many statesmen and politicians approach politics instinctively in a 'Machiavellian' manner. Given the great diversity of situations, and the great differences in statesmen and politicians this raises the question of whether it is possible to identify a common approach to politics which might be termed 'Machiavellism', be it intellectual, situational or personal.

The question of the influence of Machiavelli's ideas in Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involves an analysis of the way these ideas were received and interpreted; the way these ideas were put to very different purposes, as a means of defending autocratic rule, but also as a means of exposing the nature of autocratic rule and as a critique of tyranny. The interest in Machiavelli and 'Machiavellism' thus can be used to shed light on the nature of the problem of governance as refracted through the study of ideas on dictatorship, from Machiavelli, through Jacobinism, to the Proletarian Dictatorship.¹¹ Within the Marxist tradition, there is a strong affinity with Machiavelli's thought, reflected in the works of Antonio Gramsci, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Louis Althusser.¹²

In considering Machiavellism in politics, we are concerned with examining a particular problematic, a way of perceiving politics, which relates to certain circumstances. These circumstances change over time and vary from place to place. In some period and some countries, the problematic appears wholly irrelevant. In others it appears central and intrinsic to all political preoccupations. In examining the Russian case, we are seeking to understand this problematic and to relate it to the specific conditions of Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to set this in comparison with the experience of other countries.

The question of the relationship between Machiavelli's thought, Machiavellism and the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century was already broached in the early 1940s in a famous exchange between two leading French intellectuals Jacques Maritain and Raymond Aron.¹³ We shall briefly review this debate. Maritain took the position that within Machiavelli's thought there was a strong element of Machiavellianism, whereby politics was separated from all ethical consideration, and based purely on calculations of expediency. His position is summarized by Aron as follows: 'From Machiavelli's Machiavellianism, to vulgar Machiavellianism, and then from the latter to total Machiavellianism, there is an irresistible movement.'¹⁴ As an ardent Christian, Maritain argued

the necessity for politics to be subordinated to moral values. He argued that, notwithstanding the initial successes of Machiavellianism, it served in the end to corrupt both leaders and subject, and brought with it misery to all mankind.

Aron acknowledged the force of the argument regarding the self-destructive potential of unrestrained Machiavellianism. At the same time, he argued that Maritain's desire to base politics on firm moral principles was untenable. The power of Machiavelli's thought was that it related to the reality of politics and the nature of states, societies and individuals. In a sense, Machiavelli addresses an eternal problem about the nature of politics and one which has ultimately no solution:

Maritain attempts to mark the way of a politics simultaneously moral and realistic, somewhere between an abstract hypermoralism which, by proposing an unrealizable ideal, inclines men to cynicism and a Machiavellianism which resolutely occupies wickedness and evil. I fear, however, that he has not given sufficient recognition to the imperfection, the inertia, and the materiality of human and social nature. Or at least I fear that without denying it, he leaves in the shadows the part that art and technique play in politics. And conflicts arise when the techniques of the seizure, conservation, and organization of power require the use of force and fraud, and especially, more generally, an amoral management of men. Maritain, moreover, it seems to me, simplifies somewhat the antinomies of existence while laying down the formulation 'Machiavellianism does not succeed' and placing on the level of immediate successes all the victories of violence which spring up during the course of history and which so many times have engendered lasting works.¹⁵

The only attempt which Aron offers to the dilemma was the counsel of prudence; that statesmen in international and domestic affairs cannot be constrained by the same moral imperatives as lone individuals, and should not be judged by the same criteria. At the same time, the protection of the common good, of the interests of the state and of the citizen, require the exercise of prudence and discretion, to avoid the danger of resorting to the use of medicines that are more deadly than the disease they seek to cure.

Aron intended to write his own study of the relationship between Machiavelli, Machiavellism and the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, whose ideologies he depicted as new 'secular religions'.¹⁶ But Aron did not attempt to explore how far this Machiavellism might

be traced back to Machiavelli himself. This work attempts to explore some of these themes anew.

To undertake such a study of the development of ideas and influences over such a long period of time runs counter to the strong trend in the study of political thought to contextualize and to relate ideas to immediate concerns and the accepted assumptions of the time. Such a study must, of necessity, be more conjectural. The dangers of such an approach in constructing lineages of thought, which in reality might not exist, are obvious. But without such studies we have political ideas that lack a dynamic dimension that cannot address the way in which similar dilemmas are a recurrent feature of political life through the ages.

E. A. REES