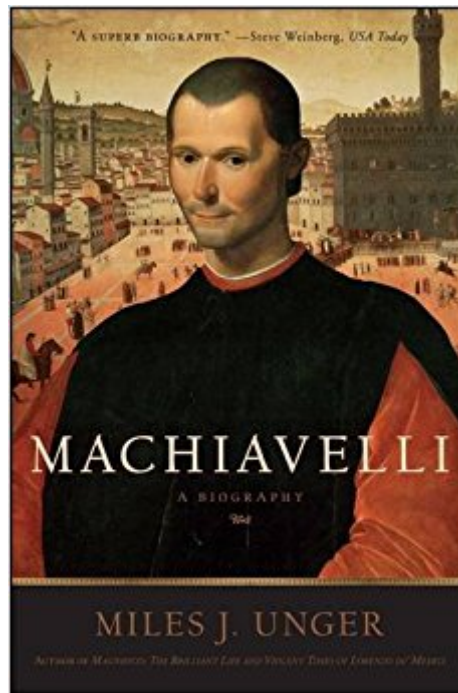




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# Machiavelli: A Biography



## Synopsis

A "captivating biography of Italian philosopher and playwright Niccolò Machiavelli, author of *The Prince* whose writings have outraged and inspired generations of readers. Niccolò Machiavelli is the most influential political writer of all time. His name has become synonymous with cynical scheming and the selfish pursuit of power, but the real Machiavelli, says Miles Unger, was a deeply humane and perceptive writer whose controversial theories were a response to the violence and corruption he saw around him. Machiavelli's philosophy was shaped by the tumultuous age in which he lived, an age of towering geniuses and brutal tyrants. His first political mission was to spy on the fire-and-brimstone preacher Savonarola. He was on intimate terms with Leonardo and Michelangelo. As a diplomat, he matched wits with the corrupt Pope Alexander VI and his son, the infamous Cesare Borgia, whose violent career served as a model for *The Prince*. Analyzing their successes and failures, Machiavelli developed his revolutionary approach to power politics. His famous book is a guide that is based on the world as it is, not as it should be. Miles Unger has relied on original Italian sources as well as his own deep knowledge of Florence in writing this fascinating and authoritative account of a genius whose work remains as relevant today as when he wrote it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A captivating biography of Italian philosopher and playwright Niccolo Machiavelli. . . . Lively, well-researched portrait of a master political strategist." --Kirkus Reviews "Unger skillfully narrates

the details of a life led during one of the greatest periods of artistic, political, and literary activity in Western history. . . . [He] does a wonderful job of bringing Machiavelli to life." --Alan Wolfe, "The New Republic"

"This is a superb biography, of interest to anybody -- not just management consultants -- trying to get along in the contemporary world. . . . Unger is superb at providing context, so readers grasp how Machiavelli's thinking was received during his lifetime, how it has been interpreted/misinterpreted through the centuries, and how it offers meaning in the 21st century." --Steve Weinberg, "USA Today"

"Excellent. . . . wonderfully readable." --Jessica Warner, "National Post"

"A wonderful biography. . . . Unger includes details you didn't hear in World History 101, details that make fascinating reading and should put the book on the list of any history buff." --John Monaghan, "The Providence Journal-Bulletin"

"For most people, 'Machiavellian' means ruthless, the application of power without remorse. Thanks to a fascinating portrait by Miles J. Unger, the real Machiavelli comes across the centuries as something more: a man with whom many of us might like to spend a few hours in rich conversation." --Repps Hudson, "St. Louis Post-Dispatch"

"An excellent analysis of the influential thinker and his renowned writings." --"Booklist"

"A thoughtful and well-informed study of the life of the Florentine diplomat and government bureaucrat. . . . Unger presents a side of the cynical and jaded diplomat rarely known by even those who had read Machiavelli's notorious collection of practical and often amoral advice to the prospective ruler." --Karl Rove

Miles J. Unger, a contributing writer to The New York Times and former managing editor of Art New England, is an art historian and the author of *Magnifico*, a biography of Lorenzo de' Medici. He lives in Massachusetts.

A great bio of a famous but tremendously misunderstood historical figure. Unger truly brings Machiavelli and his age back to life. Most highly recommended.

Like many people fascinated by political science, human movements and what drives them, etc., I had always been interested in Machiavelli, and I chose this book as my "primary source" -- before getting around to reading "The Prince" -- the so-called bible of machiavellian intrigue and political manipulation. I wasn't too far into the book when I found myself laughing out loud, not at Machiavelli or his actions, but at the world he lived in in 16th century Italy, specifically Florence, which was the "bank" of Italy the way New York is the bank of the United States today and all that implies. The backdrop of Italian history alone is a character in itself, including flavor-of-the-month wars and

skirmishes between Italy, France and Spain, and (internally) Venice and the Vatican. The author constructs the history in such a way that the reader can follow who-does-what-to-who all through the story. The only difficulty I perceived was keeping the Medicis, Borgias, and Popes straight, but, so did the people who lived through those times. As far as Machiavelli himself; no, he does not cut a particular "dashing" figure in any particular social or political sense -- nor does he aspire to such pretensions. The author makes clear, respectfully yet honestly, that Machiavelli was, after all, only a bureaucrat who happened to be associated with rather prestigious society in the course of his work, yet did not himself have either social position or political power to be of particular influence, though he was trusted to give honest and carefully critical advice to his employers. After having read Mr. Unger's book, and then reading "The Prince" in full, my diagnosis regarding the mystique behind the "Father of Political Science" is that what Machiavelli did -as far as historical impact- was to write what was essentially a resume (he really was out of a job) and to curry favor with the flavor-of-the-week regime to prove he had no prejudices (including moral); an excellent memory, and the benefit of having been beside numerous regime leaders. In short, he basically offered a thesis of genuine experience, perception, and rational deduction to offer to future leaders. Undoubtedly there were moments while Machiavelli was writing "The Prince" that he laughed up his sleeve at the irony and duplicity of future rulers; and he probably ridiculed himself for hoping that that his efforts in transcribing and analyzing his political and military experiences would actually be taken seriously or lead to any concrete result (such as employment). Ultimately, my feeling after reading Mr. Unger's work is that Machiavelli was a likable fellow with the same weaknesses as any other "middle-class" person during that period in history. It seems to me that his "gift" for the ages was to write the first dissertation (since Roman times) regarding social, political and military structure in useful, literate, and accessible terms. It seems some people have historically considered Machiavelli an engineer of machiavellian concepts, but in fact it seems his works have been misused to excuse the abuses of others who pretend to be students of political science. I've read many biographies, and I have found the best ones tend to be when it is clear that the author clearly either likes or respects his subject. The humor, warmth, intelligence and practical insight within this book make it clear the author really did like and respect Machiavelli. If you're interested enough to know who Machiavelli really was, this book will serve you well.

Miles under succeeded in capturing a brilliant but misunderstood historical figure and created a dense but thoroughly entertaining work of history. He is to be commended for his elegant prose, consistent thematic messages and well researched notes.

Fantastic look at Machiavelli. Perhaps he's not the duplicitous jerk everyone stereotypically think of him as. This book required me to look up practically a word per paragraph in parts. Countless words that were new to me. The author's vocabulary must be remarkable.

To learn of the history of not-yet Italy; he could have written a biography of (KRUPP) or the other fellow who will finish BUYING the 3rd leg of the government.

I liked Unger's biography of Lorenzo de' Medici, so I tried his Machiavelli, and I was not disappointed. I've tried other biographies of Machiavelli, and have always gotten bogged down in the details of the diplomacy in which he engaged on behalf of Florence until the Medicis regained power and fired (and tortured) him, causing him to become a writer. Unger made the diplomacy as interesting as one could expect it to be, and his chapter on *The Prince* is excellent. He discusses Machiavelli's other writings more cursorily. Although Unger criticizes Machiavelli when appropriate, he admires him. He writes that Machiavelli established the premise, accepted by political theorists as diverse as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, James Madison, and Karl Marx, that politics involves the study of human character, and is open to scientific inquiry. In other words, Machiavelli "free[d] the analysis of power from the metaphysical shackles that had constrained such investigations in the past." (p. 348) Machiavelli "was neither an ideological democrat nor an apostle of tyranny, but rather a pragmatist who was willing to pursue whatever path seemed to offer the best chance of success at a given moment." (p. 339) Success at what? Maintaining order, but not for the sake of the prince but for the sake of the people. Although reading only *The Prince* might lead one to conclude that Machiavelli favored totalitarianism, *The Discourses* makes clear that he did so only when necessary in a crisis. *The Prince* offers practical advice for dictators; *The Discourses* for republics. *The Prince* is the more popular book, and, as a result, Machiavelli gained a reputation as a totalitarian. Unger writes well, in a popular style, and has just a few clunkers. For example, Unger writes, "the Cardinal was preparing to install two Medici bastards - Ippolito, illegitimate son of Guiliamo, and Alessandro, love child of Lorenzo - at the head of the government [of Florence]." (p. 307) "Love child" is a cliché fit only for a Hollywood gossip rag. I presume that Unger used it to avoid repeating "illegitimate son," although there would be nothing wrong with repeating the phrase, and his using a synonym might cause one to wonder whether he intended to suggest a difference between an illegitimate son and a love child. But Unger didn't need to use either word, because he'd already used "bastards." He could have written, "the Cardinal was preparing to install two Medici bastards -

Ippolito, Giuliano's son, and Alessandro, Lorenzo's - at the head of the government."A few pages later, Unger mentions King Charles of Spain three times in one paragraph, but only the third time does he call him "Charles V," leaving us to wonder whether Charles V is the same person as the other two. (p. 312)I'll close with a compliment and a complaint. The compliment is that, in addition to having references in endnotes, the book has substantive (and worthwhile) footnotes. Most publishers apparently find footnotes too expensive to bother with. But the footnotes are indicated by asterisks that are so tiny that I did not notice them as I read. Therefore, when I reached the bottom of a page and saw a footnote, I had to go back to search for the asterisk to see what the footnote was commenting on. This is a trivial matter, but it was irritating.

I very much enjoyed this biography. The writing is excellent. Mr. Unger gives the life of Machiavelli along with an interesting analysis of his works.

This book gives expert witness to how this one man permanently affected politics as we know it today. It combines how the lives of the Borgias and the kings of Spain and France as well as contemporaries like Michelangelo intertwined with his life. I highly value this tome for its historical insight.

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