MACHIAVELLI

Niccolò Machiavelli was born on May 3, 1469, in Florence, Italy, and passed his childhood peacefully, receiving the humanistic education customary for young men of the Renaissance middle class. He also spent two years studying business mathematics, then worked for the next seven years in Rome for a Florentine banker. After returning to Florence in 1494, he witnessed the expulsion of the Medici family, oligarchic tyrants who had ruled Florence for decades. The Medici family was replaced by Girolamo Savanorola, a religious leader who took control of the region shortly thereafter.

Italy at that time became the scene of intense political conflict. The city-states of Florence, Milan, Venice, and Naples fought for control of Italy, as did the Pope, France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. Each of these powers attempted to pursue a strategy of playing the other powers off of one other, but they also engaged in less honorable practices such as blackmail and violence. The year that Machiavelli returned to Florence, Italy was invaded by Charles VIII of France—the first of several French invasions that would occur during Machiavelli’s lifetime. These events influenced Machiavelli’s attitudes toward government, forming the backdrop for his later impassioned pleas for Italians to unite.

Savanorola criticized the leadership of the Church so Pope Alexander VI threw him out of the church in 1497 ending his rule over Florence. In 1498, Machiavelli joined the Florentine government and was sent to France on a diplomatic mission in 1500. He met regularly with Pope Alexander and the recently crowned new king of France, Louis XII.

Louis XII helped the Pope establish his son, Cesare Borgia, as the duke of Romagna. The Pope’s son ruled Romagna, a region of Italy. These three men would influence Machiavelli’s political thought, but it was Cesare Borgia who would do the most to shape Machiavelli’s opinions about leadership. Borgia was a cunning, cruel, and vicious politician, and many people despised him. Nevertheless, Machiavelli believed Borgia had the traits necessary for any leader who would seek to unify Italy.

In 1500, Machiavelli married. Three years later, the Pope, Alexander VI, became sick with malaria and died. Alexander VI’s successor died after less than a month in office, and Julius II, an enemy of Borgia’s, was elected as the new Pope. Julius II later banished Borgia to Spain

Machiavelli served as a diplomat to Pope Julius, whose conduct as the “warrior pope” he observed firsthand. In 1512, the Medici family regained control of Florence, and Machiavelli was dismissed from office. A year later he was wrongly accused of participating in a conspiracy to overthrow the Medici family. He was held in jail for three weeks, and tortured on the rack. He left Florence for the quiet town of Sant’Andrea and decided to pursue a career in writing.

Machiavelli desperately wanted to return to politics. One of his goals in writing The Prince was to win the favor of the Medici family, by dedicating his book to the Medici governor of Florence. Machiavelli hoped to land an advisory position within the Florentine government. But Medici received the book indifferently, and Machiavelli did not receive an invitation to serve as an official. The public’s reaction to The Prince was also indifferent at first. But slowly, as word spread, the book began to be criticized as immoral, evil, and wicked.

In 1527, the Florentines expelled their Medici ruler, (with foreign help) and Machiavelli tried to retake the office he had left. But his reputation got in the way of his ambitions. He was now too closely associated with the Medicis, so he was rejected by the people of Florence. Soon, Machiavelli’s health began to fail him, and he died several months later, on June 21, 1527.

Please answer the following questions after you do the reading:

1. Who ruled Florence after the fall of the Medici family?

2. What 4 city-states dominated Italian politics at this time?

3. What were some of the tactics these city-states used when dealing with each other?

4. Who was Caesar Borgia?

5. What traits did Borgia have that Machiavelli thought had made him a strong leader?

6. What circumstances led to Borgia losing his job?

7. When the Medici family regains control of Florence, what happened to Machiavelli?

8. Machiavelli wrote The Prince as a means of gaining favor with whom?

9. How did the public react to his book?

10. Once the Medici were expelled again from Florence, Machiavelli tried once again to get back into politics. Why didn't he succeed?