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Machiavelli and the Decline of the Classical Notion of the Lessons of History in the Study of War

by Azar Gat

The idea that war could be studied systematically by historical observation, by the selection of successful organization, and by the imitation of stratagems, emerged in antiquity, and was powerfully revived — with a strong practical tendency — in the Renaissance. It was a counterpart to the tradition of the classical political philosophy, deductive conception of history, and the notion of a universal law of nature. Like them, it stemmed from an historical scope and experience in the framework of which fundamental change was hardly noticeable and the basic features of human reality were perceived as enduring and recurring in numerous manifestations in differing periods and societies. Military theory was then simply a synthesis of the best military models of the known cultural past, be it in Greece or in Rome. For Xenophon, in his Hellenica and Anabasis, the theory of war explicated the combat formation and drill of the phalanx, particularly the Spartan, while for Polybius in his Histories and for Vegetius in De Re Militari, it consisted in the sophisticated organization and deployment of the Roman legion.

Roughly speaking, very little changed from classical Greece to Machiavelli’s time in what can today be called the technological dimension of war, and consequently in the character of war itself. The foot soldier, horse, armour, manual weapons, fortifications, and siege-machinery undeniably underwent considerable developments and transformations, and the importance of each fluctuated in a diversity of military establishments, the most prominent of which included the Persian, Greek, Macedonian, Gaul, Roman, Parthian, chivalrous, and Swiss models. Still, these weapon-systems remained remarkably similar, and the diversity of military models which were based upon them also revealed fundamental recurring characteristics. Historical experience thus offered an extensive testing ground of a relatively limited number of military systems, exposing their strong and weak points in multifarious circumstances.

In the Renaissance, Machiavelli attempted a synthesis of the whole of military experience from Antiquity to the developments of the late Middle Ages. In this he brought the classical conception of the lessons of history to its pinnacle. His basic assumption was that despite historical change, man and society remained, “in essence,” the same at all times and cultures, because human nature was immutable. “The world has always gone on in the same way,” he wrote: “ancient kingdoms . . . differed from one another because of the difference in their customs, but the world remained the same.” History could thus teach us lessons which were valid in every period. This conception which dominated Machiavelli’s political work, also guided his military thought. But it was in the military sphere — rapidly and decisively influenced by technological change — that this outlook on history and theory faced an almost immediate breakdown.

The reason for Machiavelli’s close attention to military affairs is obvious: he regarded the role of the Florentine Republic in the history of the Italian Wars from the beginning of the 16th century to the Peace of Lodi in 1518 as paramount both in domestic and foreign politics. Thus, he discussed military affairs throughout his political works, and later devoted to them a specialized study, The Art of War (1521). Here he sought to distill the lessons of military history and bring them to bear in devising a complete scheme for an army of his days.

The militia, the national army of citizens called to fight for their “patria,” was regarded by Machiavelli as the only proper form of military organization both from the social and the military points of view. This had been positively revealed in Antiquity in the heyday of the Greek city-states and, even more so, of the Roman republic. And in modern times this explained the extraordinary power of the small Swiss republic. The same lesson had been negatively demonstrated in Antiquity by the role played by mercenary armies in the decline of Greece and Rome. And in the modern period it was reaffirmed by the conduct of the disdainful, rapacious, treacherous, impudent, and cowardly “condottieri” who were more dangerous to their employers than to the enemy, and who were responsible for the downfall in the international status of the once proud Italian city-states. During his political career in the Chancellory of the Florentine republic and as the secretary of the Office of Ten, Machiavelli witnessed the crippling effect of Florence’s dependence on the “condottieri,” and was the driving force behind the attempt to reestablish the Florentine militia.

As to the actual organization of the army, Machiavelli maintained that infantry armed with weapons for fighting at close quarters, protected by armour, and deployed in deep formation, would break, under normal circumstances, the most vigorous cavalry charges. This lesson had been demonstrated numerous times by the Greeks and the Romans. With the decline of the Roman state and organized armies, it had been somewhat obscured. But it was strikingly redemonstrated — to the amazement of chivalrous Europe — with the revival of the classical formation of infantry by the Swiss on the battlefields of Burgundy and Italy. According to Machiavelli, infantry was therefore to be the backbone of a properly built army.

Regarding the battle formation of the infantry itself, Machiavelli argued that, armed with sword and shield, and deployed in several flexible, maneuverable and mutually supporting squares, it would throw into disintegration and slay at close quarters enemy infantry armed with the pike and deployed in fewer, larger, and less maneuverable squares. This had been demonstrated time and again in the great encounters of the Roman legion with the Macedonian and Seleucid chasse people — in Cynoscephalae, Magnesia and Pydna — and had been analysed in depth by Polybius in a celebrated treatise in the Histories (XVIII, 28-32). The same lesson was corroborated — though perhaps less decisively — by the engagements between the Spanish infantry armed with the sword and buckler, and the deep hedgehogs of the highly renowned Swiss infantry armed with the pike. Infantry, Machiavelli maintained, was therefore to be built by adopting the example of the Roman legion, though some of the features of the Macedonian and Swiss formations were also to be incorporated.

As was the case in his political writings, Machiavelli freely adapted historical evidence to fit his argument. His hostility towards the “condottieri” made his account of their military conduct particularly tendentious. This has been exposed by modern research. However, as pointed out by commentators,
Machiavelli’s aim was predominantly theoretical rather than historical. Despite inaccuracies, he put forth a penetrating analysis of the principal military models of the past and a remarkable synthesis of the legacy of classical military theory. Yet it took little time before his military views were struck by the full weight of an unprecedented historical change.

In the very days in which Machiavelli wrote and published his *Art of War*, the old forms of warfare were being revolutionized, predominantly because of the introduction of firearms. The Swiss formation could be regarded as a new Macedonian phalanx, while the Spaniards might have resembled in many respects the Roman infantry. But the new arquebuses and guns could not be moulded into the old framework. The attempts to dismiss them as insignificant, or to adapt them into the paradigm of the classical battlefield as a “new form” of archers and slingers, were thwarted — the former in immediate failure, and the latter in decreasing achievements during a longer period of time — as their revolutionary effect on the battlefield grew ever stronger. In the fictitious battle described in the *Art of War*, Machiavelli allowed the artillery to shoot only once and ineffectively before the armies closed. If commanders “do rely on infantry and on the method aforesaid,” he wrote in *The Discourses*, “Artillery becomes wholly useless.” Yet, while he was composing *The Discourses* and six years prior to the writing of *The Art of War*, the guns of Francis I broke the dreadful Swiss infantry on the battlefield of Marignano (1515). And only a year after Machiavelli dismissed the significance of the new arquebuses — sarcastically remarking that they were useful mainly for terrorizing peasants — the Spanish arquebusiers inflicted on the Swiss infantry its second great defeat at the Battle of Bicocca (1522).9

There have been some attempts to explain away and minimize Machiavelli’s dismissal of firearms precisely when they were beginning to play an increasingly decisive role in the Italian Wars of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Felix Gilbert, for example, pointed out that Machiavelli’s attitude to artillery in *The Discourses* (II, 17) was deliberately one-sided, having a polemic aim to restress the dominant role of valor. Machiavelli’s emphasis on moral forces is indeed undisputed. But his attitude to firearms cannot be mainly understood as polemic tactics. This is certainly not the case with *The Art of War*, to which Gilbert does not refer in this context. *The Art of War* is Machiavelli’s positive and complete scheme for the building of armies, and reflects the full scope of his military outlook. His ideal army is totally of Roman and Macedonian-Swiss form, and though artillery is introduced, its significance and role in battle could not be more belittled.10 Most commentators, however, have been critical of Machiavelli’s military ideas. Machiavelli, wrote Oman, though very perceptive, was mistaken in all his major predictions of future military developments, particularly regarding firearms.11 How, then, did the Florentine thinker — famous for his penetrating and sobering insights into the complexity of human relations, politics and society — fail to recognize one of the most important milestones of military history? Clausewitz, otherwise an admirer of Machiavelli, pointed to the obvious reason. In a letter to Fichte he wrote:

So far as Machiavelli’s book on the art of war itself is concerned, I recall missing the free, independent judgment that so strongly distinguishes his political writings. The art of war of the ancients attracted him too much, not only its spirit, but also in all of its forms.12

This line of explanation — independently arrived at by later commentators13 — is undoubtedly true, but should be expanded. As mentioned, the reasons for Machiavelli’s great misjudgment go deeper. It can only be understood in the context of his conceptions of history and theory. His way of thinking in attempting to overcome the challenge of artillery is most revealing. He sought an analogy in Antiquity:

In approaching the enemy, infantry can with greater ease escape the discharge of artillery than in Antiquity they could escape the rush of elephants or of scythed chariots and of other strange weapons that the Roman infantry had to oppose. Against these they always found a remedy. And so much the more easily they would have found one against artillery.14

Machiavelli could not accept firearms as a significant military and political innovation because this would have undermined not only his model for military organization and virtues — the Roman army — but also the foundations of his historical and theoretical outlook. Such acceptance would have implied an historically unprecedented, fundamental change in the well-known, recurring patterns of past warfare, invalidating the lessons offered by the historical perspective of two thousand years.

The classical legacy continued to form the intellectual background and source of historical reference for military thinking — among other spheres of European culture — until the end of the eighteenth century. The works of the classical historians, Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, Plutarch, and particularly those who emphasized the military aspects, such as Xenophon, Polybius, and Caesar, and the authors of military treatises, such as Arrian, Vegetius, Frontinus, Aelian, Polyaenus, Vitruvius, and the Byzantine emperors Maurice and Leo, were all widely studied and considered the best material for military instruction. They were published in numerous editions and continually drew vivid attention and extensive commentary between the late fifteenth and late eighteenth centuries.15 Initially, the classical military models, when synthesized with modern firearms, were still of great relevance and influence. Machiavelli, and later the celebrated classical scholar and Humanist philosopher, Justus Lipsius, in his *Politicon libri six* (1589) and *De militia Romana* (1596), propagated the organization, discipline, and flexible internal division of the Roman legion. These inspired the military reforms associated with Maurice of Orange and his Nassau cousins during the Dutch wars of independence, and the organization of the Swedish army under Eric and Gustavus Adolphus.16 However, the old weapons and formations were gradually being abandoned. The pike, the last notable remnant of ancient and medieval warfare, went out of use by the end of the seventeenth century when replaced by the bayonet fixed to the muzzle of the musket. This, together with the growing effectiveness of the musket and field-gun, led to a decrease in the depth of battle formation throughout the eighteenth century. The line won the day.17 No longer did the classical military legacy represent a homogeneous historical experience, and provide direct analogies and lessons for the present, as Machiavelli had assumed in the *The Art of War*.

Yet, the emergence of a strong opposition to the linear formation in the eighteenth century went hand in hand with a powerful revival in the reference to, and interest in, ancient warfare and military works. Folard advocated the restoration of the shock effect of the pike and the column in his *Histoire de Polybe* (1724-30), and in the 1770s, his disciple, Mensil-Durand sparked the great doctrinal controversy between the “ordre profond” and the “ordre mince.” This led to a compromise and to the introduction of the famous column of the Wars of the Revolution and Napoleon as a formation for manoeuvre and fighting.18 As we shall see, de Saxe, Puyssegur, Guichard, Turpin, and Mairzey relied on the ancient models and authorities almost as heavily as Machiavelli. There was almost no military thinker in the Enlightenment who did not refer to Antiquity to some extent. Even the characteristic debate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries — whether the Ancients or the Moderns

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Note: The text above is a continuation of the previous one, discussing the impact of firearms on the military strategies of the time and the comparison with classical military models.
were culturally superior — was not missing in the military sphere.

The notion of a fundamental historical change began to emerge with the Enlightenment, but a new attitude to the past, including military history, took shape only at the close of the eighteenth century. Firstly, after the French Revolution, Tempelhoff, Bälow, and Clausewitz observed a new, "modern" experience. In a direct reaction against the military thinkers of the French Enlightenment, Tempelhoff wrote that theory had to be based on contemporary experience rather than on the history of the Greeks and Romans. Still more important was the emergence of historicism with its supreme sensitivity to the diversity of historical experience and the uniqueness of every period. Clausewitz, who introduced the historicist outlook into military thought, wrote:

Wars that bear a considerable resemblance to those of the present day, especially with respect to armament, are primarily campaigns beginning with the War of the Austrian Succession. Even though major and minor circumstances have changed considerably, these are close enough to modern warfare to be instructive. . . . The further back you go, the less useful military history becomes. . . . The history of Antiquity is without doubt the most useless. . . . We are in no position . . . to apply [it] to the wholly different means we use today.20

The relative uniformity of historical experience as the basis for the theory of war was therefore gradually breaking down in the early modern period. Yet, this development was more than matched by the growth of a powerful, new theoretical ideal to subject all spheres of reality — including war — to the rule of reason. This ideal, which was greatly stimulated by the vision and achievements of the natural sciences, was one of the principal driving forces of the Enlightenment also influencing military thought.

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