

¶He had no use for right and wrong.

MACHIAVELLI—THE DADDY OF ALL DICTATORS

THE ideas which the dictators of to-day have put into practice have been a long time agrowing. Mussolini and Hitler, the authoritarians, can trace their spiritual ancestry back to the fifteenth century and, no doubt, publicly would do so if they did not feel that to admit they were not original would lower their prestige in the eyes of their followers.

The man from whose literary labors in a fifteenth-century Florentine villa the dictators were born was Nicholas Machiavelli. He has had to wait a long time for recognition, and he, or his writings, have passed through many vicissitudes before they were tacitly endorsed over a large part of the present-day world.

The man himself was put to the rack and thumbscrew during his life; his books were of the first to be placed on the Roman Catholic "Index"; and so cordially was he hated at one time that, in the opinions of many past writers, his Christian name it was that gave rise to that term for the Devil, "Old Nick."

Machiavelli was born in 1469; the doctrine he evolved

was truly the result of experience, for he had spent forty-five active years before he wrote a word. For fifteen he was secretary of one of the departments in the government of Florence, and knew intimately most of the great people of his time. He was a familiar of Caesar Borgia, and was one of the first men in history to be provided with a passport, which he used to carry him on his diplomatic missions.

Strangely, in the long struggle between freedom and tyranny in his native Florence, which was an independent sovereign state in his time, Machiavelli belonged to the popular party.

In 1512 his party fell, and the Medicis threw Machiavelli out of his job and into prison. He was put on the rack in order to extort a confession of his conspiracies, and languished in a dungeon for a few months until, when a new Pope came to the Vatican, he was released with many others under an amnesty. He withdrew to his farm outside Florence and, enjoying a moderate income, gave himself up to dilettante days and nights of meditation.

One of his letters still exists; it was written a short time after he had been released from prison. It reads:—

“I am at my farm; and since my last misfortunes, have not been in Florence twenty days. I rise with the sun and go into a wood of mine that is being cut, where I remain two hours inspecting the work . . . and conversing with the woodcutters.

“When I leave the wood . . . I proceed to the place which I use for snaring birds, with a book under my arm—Dante or Petrarch or one of the minor poets . . .

“When evening falls I go home and enter my writing room. On the threshold I put off my country habit, filthy with mud and mire, and array myself in royal courtly garments; thus worthily attired I make my entrance into the ancient courts of the men of old, where they receive me with love . . . And since Dante says that ‘there is no science unless we retain what we have learned,’ I have set down what I have gained from their discourse, and composed a treatise, *De Principatibus* . . . To a prince, and especially to a new prince, it ought to prove acceptable.”

It should, indeed, have proved acceptable to a new prince, a new prince who had usurped a throne, for *De Principatibus*

was a cold, scientific justification of just such strong-arm methods as the new Florentine prince had utilized. It was a handbook for tough guys, but every method which Machiavelli recommended he supported by reasoning on a general plane so that it was possible to evolve a whole philosophy of statecraft and government from his book.

In a sense, his philosophy was not new, for the germ of every possible idea exists in the world at any moment, and has always so existed. Machiavelli’s hairy ancestors had an inkling, aeons before his time, of the doctrine he enunciated. But ideas in most people lie dormant and unrealized; the men who really influence the world are those who put their ideas into a form which other people can appreciate and judge. In this sense Machiavelli originated the tactics and gave face to the valuations of the dictators.

What was his doctrine? It was the philosophy of taking the world as we find it, extended to its *nth* degree.

What interested Machiavelli was not whether a thing was reasonable or moral or beautiful, but whether it *was*. Men, he said, have much villainy in them. Certainly they should not have and it will be very nice if, one day, they get rid of it. But you must treat them

as what they are and ignore what they should be.

This doctrine, obviously, demolishes every basis of right and wrong of which we are aware. Machiavelli realized this, and realized that some touchstone of what was good or bad must exist or the whole world would fall into anarchy.

So he set up the State as the supreme entity in man's life. The State could do anything it wished in its own interest and, indeed, would be acting immorally if it allowed any moral scruples to hold it back on the path to power.

As for the individuals who composed the State, their supreme allegiance was to the latter; no crime they might be guilty of was more odious than that which hurt the State; to them the State must be God. This, manifestly, is just what Mussolini says, and just what Hitler and his lieutenants declaim every year at Nuremberg. It is also what they say in Soviet Russia.

"War is the only fit study for princes," he said. Where, in his works, he appears to be taking a moral standpoint, he is really dealing only with expediency. Sometimes he admits it, as where, for instance, he advises a prince to stimulate religion because most of his subjects will inevitably be religious,

and will admire the faith of their ruler.

In his favour, one should remember that the world of his time sorted the weak from the strong, with a heavy hand. The Dark Ages, about to end, held Europe in a black pall; the whole of the known world was full of rape, murder, war and corruption. In Machiavelli's personal knowledge for years was Caesar Borgia, who thought no more of having an enemy stabbed or poisoned than he did of having an erring cook thrown into the moat. Machiavelli learned his lessons in a hard school. His greatest fault was that he ignored the streak of goodness in human beings. He was right in saying that men have much villainy in them; but it was equally true that, far more potent than the mass of villainy is the leaven, tiny though it may be, of goodness.

If you dispute this fact, explain (as Machiavelli did not trouble to do) how it is that the big gross devils who inhabit us have not, through the process of history, brought us into a pit of chaos. Actually, on the contrary, the tiny angels who fight with the devils have grown very slightly stronger over the ages. But they were far too weak to bear any weight with "Old Nick." — *Sidney Duncan, condensed from Evening Despatch, Birmingham.*