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With One's Own Arms: Condottieri, Machiavelli, and the Rise of the Florentine Militia

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of mercenary warfare on the Italian peninsula during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It later focuses on the unique political and economic environment in Florence that led to Niccolò Machiavelli orchestrating the creation of the Florentine militia.

Keywords

Florence, Condottieri, Machiavelli, Militia, Renaissance

Disciplines

European History | History | Medieval History | Medieval Studies | Military and Veterans Studies | Military History

Comments

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With One's Own Arms: *Condottieri*, Machiavelli, and the Rise of the
Florentine Militia

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FYS 197: Florence: Art, Money, and Power in the Renaissance City

Professor Else

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“Mercenaries and auxiliaries are useless and dangerous,” writes Florentine politician Niccolo Machiavelli in his magnum opus *The Prince*. “[A]nyone who relies upon mercenaries to defend his territory will never have a stable or secure rule.”¹ These views, expressed by Machiavelli in 1513, would have seemed laughable to many of his predecessors. From the late medieval period to the early 16th century, mercenary warfare was the dominant military strategy on the Italian peninsula. Italy was cluttered with competing regional powers locked in almost perpetual territorial disputes and political intrigue. The driving forces of the day were economic wealth and military strength. Nowhere did this interplay of money and power converge more neatly than in the case of the *condottieri*. These companies, roving bands of soldiers for hire, were more than happy to fight a city-state’s wars provided the price was right. Increased dependence on the *condottieri* during the Renaissance led to the deterioration of military tradition and service in Florence, instead promoting the concentration of state spending on mercenary armies.² By the early 1500s the inherent problems of relying on the *condottieri* were beginning to become evident. Larger Italian powers such as Milan and Naples slowly integrated the *condottieri* into the own armies.³ In Republican Florence, however, the volatile and feuding political environment necessitated a different course of action. Machiavelli championed the establishment of the Florentine militia, one of the first of its kind on the peninsula. This force, raised from Florentine households and armed with Florentine weaponry, was intended to restore the virtues of civic pride and military service once so essential to the city’s existence. Florence’s atypical military development during the early 16th century was a result of its fractured republican government’s inability to effectively manage its national defense.

¹ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1988, 43

² Caferro, William P. 2008. "Warfare and Economy in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1450." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2008. 167. *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 19, 2014).169

³ Caferro, Warfare 176

One can hardly blame Florence and the Italian city-states for their heavy reliance on mercenaries. Standing armies were almost unheard of during the medieval and Renaissance periods, even in comparatively centralized kingdoms of France and Spain. Peacetime armies consisted mainly of retinues, small units of professional soldiers who served the king and were used to keep order. When it came time for war, a ruler would call upon his civilian levies. These men were serfs bound by feudal law to serve their liege in times of war under a system of forced conscription. Naturally the discipline and quality of these hastily assembled troops were questionable, as most were farmers and laborers more accustomed to holding farm tools than spears. Levies were inexpensive, plentiful, and quick to raise, the perfect solution for a feudal lord with an excess of serfs and a tight budget. The small city states of the Italian peninsula were faced with a very different scenario. Each possessed a substantial amount of wealth and trade connections for states of such modest stature. However, they could not compete with the larger European powers in terms of raw population and military manpower. France, for example, invaded the Italian peninsula in 1494 with over 30,000 soldiers, more than half of the total population of Florence and its environs.⁴ For all of their talk of civic virtue and an emphasis on service to their city, most Florentines were woefully unprepared for the life of a soldier. A large portion of Florence's population was comprised of urban workers, unfamiliar with even the most rudimentary concepts of combat. The more affluent among them, merchants and noble families, would have much preferred to play the glamorous role of the cavalryman than the downtrodden foot soldier. In order to supplement the meager retinues and the armed peasantry, companies of professional soldiers for hire were sought out by warring states.⁵ This scenario worked very well for the Italian powers, Florence included. The *condottieri* provided the perfect solution for the

⁴ King, Ross. *Machiavelli: Philosopher of Power*. 15. New York: Atlas /HarperCollins, 2007. Print.

⁵ King 17

Florentine problem: an army of disciplined and professional soldiers to complement their lackluster manpower and overflowing coffers.

The life of a *condottiere* was certainly a comfortable one. Incomes for the commanders ranged in the thousands, often exceeding the salaries of wealthy patricians and bankers. The wealthiest among them were often lords in their own right. In 1499 Florence's estimated total income was around 130,000 ducats. Out of this, 25,000 were used to pay the salary of Jacopo d'Appiano, a veteran *condottiere* legendary for his service for several Italian powers.⁶ Many captains owned land given to them in exchange for their service and conquests, while some simply turned to looting and brigandage in times of peace. The city of Siena experienced a harsh example of this looting, suffering thirty seven attacks from rogue mercenary companies in the period from 1342-1399. The city finally capitulated, paying a bribe amounting to over four times their annual income to deter any further attacks.⁷ Often city-states would enlist the service of a mercenary company simply to prevent their defection to a rival during a war.

Successful commanders garnered the admiration and commemoration of the states that they served. Mercenary commander John Hawkwood, an Englishman, played a pivotal role in Florence's defense against Milanese aggression in the late 14th century. To commemorate his service, Florence awarded him honorary citizenship and a large estate in the city. When he died in 1394 he was given a state funeral with full honors.⁸ In 1436, the famed artist Paolo Uccello designed a magnificent funerary monument honoring Hawkwood in the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore. The monument depicts Hawkwood astride a pale horse with a marshal's baton in his hand, a pose normally reserved for distinguished military commanders or civic heroes. Andrea

⁶ King 18

⁷ Caferro, Warfare 176

⁸ Caferro, William. *John Hawkwood an English Mercenary in Fourteenth-century Italy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 311-315.

Del Castagno produced a similar work portraying the triumphant *condottieri* Niccolo da Tolentino, the hero of the Battle of San Romano. Tolentino's monument contains an even more direct connection between mercenary service and the ideals of the city. Nude youths flank the mounted Tolentino, bearing the heraldry of both the Florentine Republic and Niccolo's personal crest.⁹ The symbolic presentation of a mercenary's coat of arms alongside the Florentine fleur-de-lis further cements the message that the service of loyal mercenaries was invaluable to the preservation of the republic. This idealized portrayal of mercenary captains was a form of propaganda, demonstrating the Florentine government's desire to portray their hired swords as loyal and obedient individuals, always carrying with them the ideals and values of the republic.¹⁰ Hawkwood's commitments before his time in Florence included service with nearly every state on the peninsula, from Milan to the Papal States. Florence's decision to overlook Hawkwood's prior service indicates the often cutthroat nature of the mercenary business. When it came time to pick sides, previous loyalties mattered little to both the *condottieri* and their employers. Money and the reliability of payment were the primary motivating factors.

As the 16th century approached, the changing Italian political environment brought about the decline of the *condottieri*. Invasions by France and Spain brought instability to the region. Pisa took this opportunity to declare independence from Florence, ending the long occupation of the city. After a protracted siege, the Florentine mercenary army, led by *condottiere* Paolo Vitelli, was on the brink of overwhelming the city's defenders. However, Vitelli called off the attack after the Florentine government refused to allow his company to loot the city after it fell. The mercenary lifted the siege and fled to the countryside, abandoning his siege equipment and

⁹ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 7th ed., Prentice Hall, 2011. 278.

¹⁰ Caferro, Hawkwood 320-321.

allowing the embattled defenders time to rearm and resupply.¹¹ Vitelli was eventually captured and executed by the Florentines, but the humiliating failure of the siege could not be erased so simply. This disastrous Pisan campaign was one of the primary factors that led to the fall of the *condottieri* in Florence. It became clear to the republic that mercenaries were wholly unreliable in combat. These hired swords charged without orders, looted the dead, and had no vested interest in the well-being of the states they served. They were also fond of theatrics, often making grand entrances and displays of power and heraldry before battle. In one engagement, the battle of Zagonara, two mercenary companies representing Florence and Milan fought for several hours without a single casualty on either side. The only death of the day occurred when a captain fell from his horse and drowned after being pinned in the mud.¹² This extravagant farce must have come as a shock to the Florentines, who surely expected loyalty from their mercenaries, especially considering the astronomical costs that were involved in procuring them. Florence's previous two-year scuffle with the Duchy of Milan cost the republic over two million florins in mercenary salaries, roughly three times the income of the city during that period.¹³ Each mercenary was only an asset to the state if their salaries were paid, and companies would often desert the losing side in a war in order to seek out the safer pay.

Many Italian powers began to phase out the *condottieri* in the 16th century. Larger states, such as Naples and Milan, first began to extend the length of their mercenary contracts. Average lengths of service increased from a few months to as long as several years.¹⁴ This increased contract time encouraged the development of loyalty between the mercenary and their employer, ensuring that a company would not simply desert and turn to looting after a conflict ended. These

¹¹ King 23-24

¹² Paret, Peter. *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986. 21

¹³ Caferro, Warfare 174

¹⁴ Caferro Warfare 176

powerful and centralized powers, although not competitive with the large armies of France and Spain, were still able to develop their administration for the purpose of building and equipping a respectable mercenary force.¹⁵ Florence's republican strife made it very hard for the city to follow suit. The decentralized government had very little control over military affairs, and the economically minded civilian population tended to scrimp on defense spending during peacetime. Because of these factors Florence became infamous for its unreliable payment of mercenaries, and resultantly the city tended to win only the contracts of companies that had received no other bids.¹⁶

These failures led Niccolo Machiavelli, a prominent statesman of the time, to argue for a revolutionary system. During the medieval period, Florence and its rivals maintained militias that were lauded throughout Europe for their discipline and organization. These groups fell into disuse during the Renaissance, while an increased amount of the state's income flowed into trade investments. During his time at the court of Cesare Borgia, the Duke of Romagna, Machiavelli was impressed by the discipline and uniformity of his civilian militia. Borgia claimed to be able to raise one man from every house, mustering a force of 6,000 infantrymen from among his holdings within two days.¹⁷ Even more impressive to Machiavelli was the astounding order and discipline of Cesare's troops. Each soldier wore an identical crimson-and-yellow vestment, uniform down to the word "Cesare" emblazoned on the breastplate.¹⁸ The humiliating failure of the Pisan campaign and the tendency of the mercenaries to flock to the highest bidder led Machiavelli to a conclusion that would challenge the very essence of what it meant for a state to be "powerful". Machiavelli argued that the true power of a city was its ability to defend itself

¹⁵ Capponi, Niccolo. *An Unlikely Prince: the Life and Times of Machiavelli*. New York: Da Capo, 2010.119

¹⁶ Capponi 119

¹⁷ Capponi 87

¹⁸ King 49

“with its own arms.”¹⁹ The reliance on foreign troops and their unreliable commanders served only to perpetuate the problems of the city-states. What was needed, he argued, were internally raised and trained soldiers that would defend the city. As he advised the people of Florence in his first *Decennale*: “Your path would be easier and shorter/ if you reopened the temple of Mars”²⁰. Here Machiavelli alludes to the Roman god of war and the legendary discipline of the Roman military. This connection to classical civilization was particularly appealing to the citizens of Florence. Earlier humanists such as Leonardo Bruni had pleaded against the usage of mercenaries, claiming that a reliance on foreign troops and the elimination of compulsory military service undermined the values of the republic.²¹ The Florentines considered themselves the successor state of the Roman Republic: champions of equality, civic virtue, and service to the state.²² Machiavelli’s work sharply criticized the ineptitude and unreliability of the mercenaries and the necessity of a return to the classical virtues of civil service and the stalwart defense of the city. Machiavelli’s vision was finally realized in 1506, when the discovery of a legal loophole allowed Piero Soderini, the elected *gonfaloniere* of the city, to begin the training and arming of Florentine’s first batch of militia recruits. On February 15th the new soldiers paraded through the streets in their red-and-white uniforms, a display surely planned by Machiavelli to emulate Cesare Borgia’s impressive show of power.²³ The city’s hopes rested on the shoulders of this new corps of citizen-soldiers, men ready to fight and die in the noble defense of the Republic.

Although the foundation for a successful Florentine military had been laid, several major obstacles stood in the way of the new militia being an effective fighting force. Concerns were

¹⁹ Erwin, Sean. 2010. "A War of One's Own: Mercenaries and the Theme of *Arma Aliena* in Machiavelli's *Il Principe*." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18, no. 4: 541-574. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 19, 2014).

²⁰ Capponi 113

²¹ Erwin 545

²² Kohl, Benjamin. *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978, 150-151

²³ Capponi 120

raised regarding who should lead the new army and command its forces during wartime. In order to prevent sectarian violence and quiet concerns of corruption, the Republic decreed that the militia would be led by a hired foreign officer.²⁴ The equipment and training the militiamen received was slightly dated, the army was modeled on the storied Swiss pike men of the Burgundian wars of the 1470's. Firearms were few and far between, and the large pike walls of the militia were often outmaneuvered and defeated by Spanish musketeers and quick-moving light infantry²⁵. The obsolete equipment and training of the militia was not its only problem, it also fell victim to the fractured and bloated political institutions of Florence. The government was terrified of a tyrant using the militia to depose the republic, and therefore kept its officers and local commanders on a steady rotation. An effort to keep the force divided resulted in the militia never drilling as a complete unit, with even the largest muster including only several companies of soldiers.²⁶ Once again, the feuding political bodies of the Republic prevented an adequate military force from being assembled.

While the militia system was not a completely effective solution to Florence's military problems, it was the best an embattled and fractured republic suffering from sectarian strife could manage. The Republic's position in the power dynamic on the Italian peninsula was a unique one. It had neither the centralized hereditary structures of Naples and Milan, nor the vast wealth of Venice. The continuation of the *condottieri* system was not a viable option for the city. While the other city-states adapted, Florence was forced to adopt an entirely new system tailored for its unique needs and weaknesses. Machiavelli would later go on to advocate the superiority of a strong and efficient central government, a view that was further justified when oligarchic Medici family once again gained control of the city. Although it was still decentralized and

²⁴ Capponi 127

²⁵ Capponi 127

²⁶ Capponi 128

lacking in military power, the Florentine Republic was, for a time, able to defend itself “with its own arms”.

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