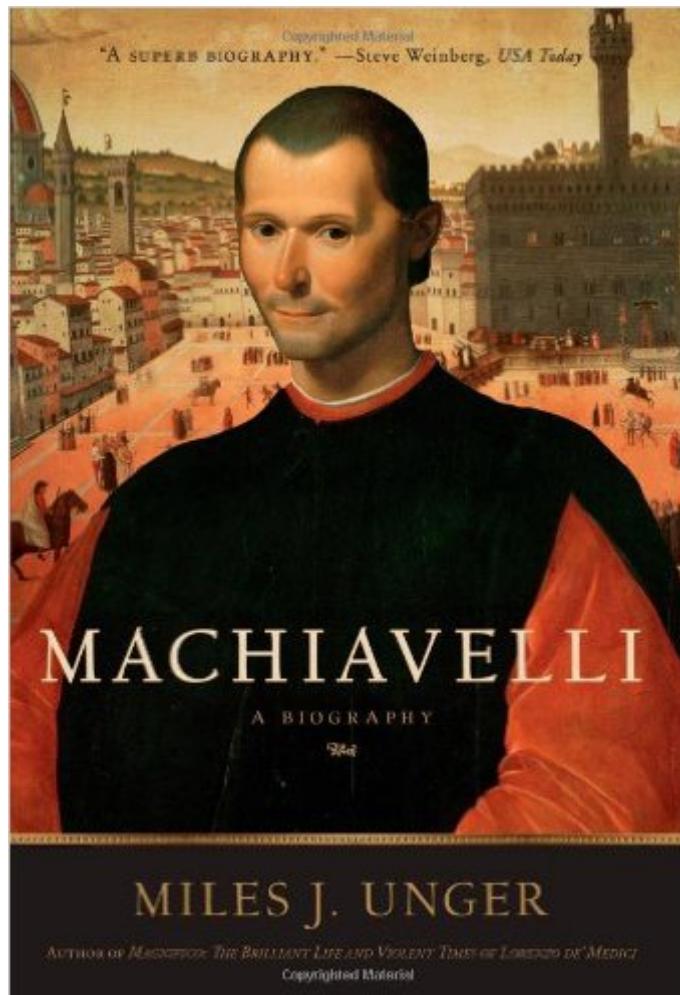


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Machiavelli: A Biography



Synopsis

A compelling 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.

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Customer Reviews

With most biographies of literary artists, there are three major categories in which the author can succeed or fail: 1) in giving context to the life and times of the author in terms of how they shaped his perceptions; 2) in dealing with the ideas that the author himself discusses in his works; and 3) in examining the author's works and legacy in the train of other great works of similar or equal merit. I

feel quite strongly that this biography succeeds greatly in the first, but has significant limitations with the other two, aspects of this approach. The context which Unger gives on Machiavelli's life, on the convoluted geopolitics of Italy and Western Europe at the time, on the social and religious worlds he lived in, and on the Florentine political system are all magnificent. For clarifying many aspects of Florentine Histories alone, I give Unger a ton of credit. But when he gets into the realm of political theory, Machiavelli's strongest field, Unger falters. Repeatedly he conflates the terms democracy and republic, and he fails to distinguish between different kinds of representative systems. To a careless reader this may not mean much, but to a sophisticated and engaged readers of Machiavelli's works--especially his great Discourses on Livy--this means a great deal. Is Machiavelli closer to Rousseau, or to Locke? To Jefferson, or to Madison? If he has no fixed moral "principles"--and certainly it is clear he does not, just as all four of those do not--then which route does he take? (He also did not mention Milton and the English Civil War at all, thereby avoiding mentioning the first consistent attempted application of Machiavelli's ideas on a nation-state level in Europe.

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