

THE CONCEPT OF “A GOOD ARMY” IN THE THEORY OF NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI – IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF TOTAL DEFENSE

Zoran R. Nikolić¹
Čedo Spasojević²

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Abstract: The thought of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) in the history of political ideas is regarded as the beginning of modern political theory, which abandons the classical Socratic view of politics condensed in the virtue of citizens as the foundation of the polis (the state), as well as the medieval Christian worldview of Thomas Aquinas, where the state and politics are subordinated to religion and Christian morality. Politics becomes distinguished as public as opposed to private, and into political theory Machiavelli introduces the concepts of power, force, strength, and violence as legitimate political notions—a kind of Copernican turn away from the classical political theory of antiquity, where “trust in mute force, which the ancient Greeks considered a non-political instrument...” (Tadić, 1996: 56), now becomes axiomatic. In political reality, new rules apply—the virtuous citizen is replaced by homo politicus.

Machiavelli, in the reality of politics, analyzes concrete political phenomena from the perspective of realism and the application of the empirical method. Among other things, Machiavelli says that “many have imagined republics and principalities that never actually existed” (Machiavelli, 2012: 65). Machiavelli’s concept of the state and power is founded on the experience of the Florentine friar Savonarola and the famous dictum that unarmed prophets have failed: “It is necessary to know that there are two ways of fighting: by law and by force” (Machiavelli, 2012: 73). In *The Prince*, Machiavelli emphasizes that “there can be no good laws without a good army, and where there is a good army, there must be good laws” (Machiavelli, 2012: 53).

¹ University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, E-mail: nzoran1961@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2028-9872>.

² University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2835-6597>.

In this paper we analyze the concept of a “good army” in Machiavelli as an unclear and disputable term. By applying methods of content and discourse analysis of Machiavelli’s works, we will demonstrate his understanding of a good army within the framework of his theoretical innovation, his new method, through the research question of whether it means a well-armed army, a standing army of monarchical states (France, Spain), the adventurer companies, *compagnie di ventura*, hired by Italian city-states, or an army that, in the spirit of Augustine, wages war in good faith—or something else? Machiavelli criticizes mercenary warfare and introduces the notion of an armed people, a citizen militia, into his teaching. We will explain the concept of the armed people through his republicanism, his view of the people as the pillar of preserving the state, of the political community in freedom, and the category of friendship between ruler and people.

In addition, the paper will address the reach of Machiavelli’s idea of the “good army” in the political thought and practice of contemporary society, namely, how far his idea corresponds with the concept of total defense, which in various forms is practiced in a number of states around the world.

Keywords: *Machiavelli, modern political theory, power, force, “good army”, people, state, total defense*

Introduction

Our research into the teachings of Niccolò Machiavelli, through the conceptual definition of the term “good army,” the reflections of the Renaissance political writer who is centuries removed from us, raises the question of its relevance and applicability from today’s perspective, within the geopolitical situation of the end of the bipolar world order and political instability (Živanović, Radojević, 2024). The link between the apocalyptic context of sixteenth-century Italy (McQueen, 2016)—in a kind of war of all against all among the Italian city-states—and the contemporary challenges of security and sovereignty of the modern state, is contained in Machiavelli’s answer: a good army and good laws. By the term “good army” he means an armed people, citizenry that, under good laws and inspired by patriotism, defend their freedom more successfully than a mercenary, professional army.

An army recruited from citizens under good laws is also the best bulwark against enemies, because, as Machiavelli points out: “He who becomes master of a city accustomed to living in freedom and does not destroy it, must expect to be destroyed by it; for in rebellion it will always recall the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, which neither the passage of time nor benefits bestowed will ever cause it to forget” (Machiavelli, 2012: 26). This thought corresponds with the concept of total defense, which encompasses all social functions and the entire society (Bērziņa, 2020), as well as with the defensive orientation of our own state: “A special place in the preparation

and execution of total defense is occupied by building the resilience of society, the state, and the citizens to external security threats, as the ability to continue functioning under unfavorable conditions. In addition, the development of patriotism and the building of morale among the population, as well as the citizens' own preparedness for defense, contribute to resilience, and thereby to the overall readiness to defend the Republic of Serbia" (White Paper on Defense of the Republic of Serbia, 2023).

Machiavelli's theoretical approach — realism — introduced in his work, with *verità effettuale* as the criterion of truth, and practice serving as the corrective to contemplation and abstraction, rejects classical political theory's demand for virtue and justice as utopian impulses that impose belief and ideological frameworks onto scientific method. This Machiavellian paradigm, focused on the facts of political reality, remains contemporary in its exposure of the ideological premises behind the practices of modern states, where no country in the world will admit to being undemocratic or to pursuing anything other than peacekeeping policies on the international stage, while in reality the true motives are particular interests and strategies.

Power, Authority, Force – Legitimate Political Concepts

The Renaissance was not only a cultural phenomenon; its distinctiveness also lay in the political reality of Italy, which was formed as something different from the medieval experience of the struggle between spiritual and temporal supremacy, church and ruler. A reconciliation of these forces was anticipated in the work of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, at the dusk of the Middle Ages. Aquinas established the general definition of medieval thought in the maxim "Render unto God what is God's, and unto Caesar what is Caesar's," where the ruler is legislator, executor of the law, and supreme judge—"God has subjected all laws to the power of the ruler" (Aquinas, 1990: 107). As Simeunović notes, "Man is obliged to please God, and not the community" (Simeunović, 2009: 48). Politics was thus taken out of the hands of the people and given to kings and feudal lords, while the ruler treated the state as his personal property. The principle of authoritarian rule, *pater familias*, regarded subjects as dependents, immature children.

The new political reality of the emerging citizenry, with new political formations such as the city-states, and the struggles for survival or domination in a general war and turmoil, contextually influenced Machiavelli's thought— "Politics is above all the political form of authority, relying on the citizenry as the stratum of society which, in Renaissance and republican Florence of Machiavelli's time, emerged as a potential political subject" (Perović, 2004: 68). Burckhardt observed that the conflicts of the popes and the heirs of the Holy Roman Empire, the Hohenstaufen, directly influenced the fragmentation of the political map of Italy compared to the West, where "the feudal system in France, Spain, and England was such that, once it had outlived itself, it had to collapse into the arms of a unified monarchical state" (Burckhardt, 1953: 7).

In accordance with his method to define as the subject of politics the real political realities that exist or have existed in the past, Machiavelli introduces into his theory the interpretation of truth as success, *verità effettuale*, the actual truth, legitimizing the concepts of force, power, violence, and conspiracy as politically relevant, being aware that he is breaking with tradition. He opposes the theories of political utopianism present in the Renaissance in Thomas More and civic humanism, Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, Remigio de Girolami, Marsilio of Padua (Grubiša, 2010), introducing a new method, and in the Discourses, he says: "I have decided to take a path that no one has yet taken" (Machiavelli, 1985: 153). Civic humanism of the Renaissance appears as a theoretical expression of free cities, city statutes, and republican governance in the form of self-government, which opposed the feudal models. Following Aristotle and his understanding of man as a political being, *zoon politikon* (a political animal), who can live only in community, and that outside the polis, the state, there exist only gods and beasts, the humanists of the Renaissance emphasize that by nature a citizen considers his city as a common good, which, as the good of the community, is greater than the individual good.

Machiavelli takes these humanist impulses to the extreme and sets his theory as a discontinuity with tradition. He establishes a new paradigm: political realism, which views politics through the inductive analysis of past and contemporary orders of his time, "attempting to establish a new hierarchy of political values determined by the primacy of civic ethics, the ethics of the civic community over individual ethics" (Grubiša, 2010: 18). In this innovation, Machiavelli's teaching is oriented toward the state. The question arises: why do some states collapse while others endure? "In the end, long and established rule erases the memory of the old and removes reasons for change" (Machiavelli, 2012: 13). But what difficulties lie in new governments?

Machiavelli shifts his theoretical perspective from ethics to the functioning of authority and relations of power, force, and violence, which he reveals as categories of politics: "Power, force, and violence are integral, organic parts of politics, which have their defined place and role in political processes" (Simeunović, 2002: 148). These concepts are intertwined, and even defining them is difficult, as is distinguishing them, so they are often equated. Power, force, and violence are recognized intuitively, visible even to the blind and to children; even if their meanings are not fully understood, experience shows their expression.

The definition of power is found in Weber, where "power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1976: 37), and force represents the foundation of power and its instrument. Machiavelli, in Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*, mentions force and laws as modes of rule, while he sees the cause of instability and corruption in human nature, in a kind of anthropological pessimism. He says: "For of men in general it may be said this: they are ungrateful, fickle, deceitful, cowardly in danger, and greedy for gain; while you serve their interest they are entirely yours, offering you their blood, property, life, and children, as I have said before, when the need is far distant; but when it approaches, they turn against you" (Machiavelli, 2012: 71). By nature, men are evil, but not irredeemably evil, which represents the main danger to democracy in the republic — corruption.

The barrier to the collapse of the democratic principle is constituted by laws and the regeneration of the republican fabric through new laws; and since what is old always tends to oppose and endanger innovations, force is also necessary. "In the said case, republics recover from the forgetfulness of their beginnings by returning to their institutions (ordini), to the laws that established order, for precisely through those laws they can often be renewed (rinovazione)" (Milenković, 2013: 131–146). Machiavelli takes as an example Cesare Borgia, who was considered cruel, yet he unified Romagna, freeing it from rebellious mercenary armies, establishing peace and security for citizens by granting cities statutes and communal administration. Machiavelli concludes that the foundations of the state, whether a republic or a monarchy — or, in Machiavelli's theory, a kind of *raison d'état* republicanism — rest upon a good army and good laws. In speaking of strength (*forza*), Machiavelli introduces the concept of power as numbers.

Considering civil rule, where the ruler is elected and appointed by the people, in Chapter IX of *The Prince* Machiavelli emphasizes that the people secure the rule because they are the most numerous, "A prince can never be secure from a discontented people, because they are too many; from the nobles he can be, because they are few" (Machiavelli, 2012: 45). The people also possess another quality — they are nobler than the nobles, since the citizenry does not desire power in order to oppress or exploit, but only not to be oppressed. Machiavelli's republicanism rests on his understanding of freedom as the citizen's freedom "for", and not freedom "from," on the primacy of the community and the institutions that free citizens defend even with their lives (public virtue), as opposed to the private individual who, in ethical individualism, demands the greatest possible freedom for himself. "The republican political ideal is shaped around two fundamental theses: the first states that the basic aim of the political community is to promote the common good; the second, that the fundamental condition for realizing the common good lies in the rootedness of individual actions (participation) of people in their public virtues" (Podunavac, 2012: 28).

Let us return to the definition of power as numbers, to which Hannah Arendt also points when she says that "one of the most obvious distinctions between power and violence is indeed that power always requires numbers..." (Arendt, 2002: 53). But what happens when power as an instrument of rule is lost? How can one be saved from a discontented people, which for Machiavelli represents the greatest danger, greater even than conspiracies, since conspirators are few and driven by the fear of failure and punishment, whereas behind the ruler stand the state, the laws, and the friendly people. In the famous maxim that unarmed prophets have perished in history, Machiavelli, giving the example of Savonarola, provides the answer: armed force — the army. The friar Savonarola, through his sermons and in a kind of ecstatic fervor (Machiavelli, on the order of the Signoria, listened to Savonarola and expressed admiration for him in his reports), stirred the people of Florence to expel the Medici and to oppose Pope Alexander VI, who, according to Machiavelli, was steeped in corruption and an unholy life. However, when the fervor of the people subsided, and Savonarola, in his Christian purism (the burning of books and luxurious possessions of the citizens), went to extremes, that same people burned Savonarola at the stake. Machiavelli reproaches the friar for not having armed himself and for failing to form a citizen militia.

Machiavelli's interest in the army and armed force might lead us to a militant interpretation of his teaching. Despite the fact that several chapters of *The Prince* are devoted to the analysis of the army, as well as the Discourses, and that he wrote a separate work, *The Art of War*, being authorized by the Florentine authorities to form a militia with which he conquered Pisa, although the militia was conceived as a defensive force, for Machiavelli politics stands above the army. Military force is the instrument of politics; just as religion, for that matter, which should serve as a means of strengthening the unity of the community and its presence in the world, and not as a strategy of withdrawal from the world into the silence of monasteries. In this sense, Machiavelli praises the Roman, pagan religion, which the Romans used to consolidate governance but also to wage war — where religion appears as a patriotic call that encourages soldiers and gives them strength in battle: "Since the military commanders, before the dead victims and burning altars, swore never to abandon the fight, they called the soldiers one by one..." (Machiavelli, 1985: 180), and he adds that the citizens feared violating an oath more than violating the laws.

Let us return to the problem of a good army and good laws. For Machiavelli, the laws serve the function of directing self-interested citizens, with their selfish aims as members of the rising third estate, toward adherence to the common good.

At the same time, an army recruited from among the citizens contributes to the defense of the state, thereby ensuring security, freedom, and prosperity, realizing the idea of good governance within the binomial: to live freely (*vivere libero*), to live civilly (*vivere civile*). Simić notes that "for political science, this Machiavellian position (the idea of an armed people, author) is significant because it reestablished the connection between military and political life, that is, it integrated them into a single whole (as in ancient times)" (Simić, 1992: 171).

An Armed People – a Good Army

Theoretically conceptualizes the notion of a good army within his framework of the army and laws as the Renaissance in Italy, through the rediscovery of antiquity, may be said to have, in all fields — art, medicine, law, and politics — rediscovered the human being as the demiurge of the world, marking an extraordinary development of individuality. Rationality, now indispensable to statesmen, is expressed in Machiavelli's thought on the wise ruler who recognizes the spirit of the times and must possess the skill, *virtu*, to confront necessity, fate, and fortune, *fortuna*, carefully choosing the means to achieve his goals in accordance with Aristotelian prudence in human affairs, that is, in politics. Machiavelli writes that "the Romans did what all wise rulers ought to do: they must take into account not only present disorders but also those that may arise in the future, and strive to avert them with all their strength. For if one foresees them in time, they can easily be remedied; but if one waits for them to draw near, the remedy does not arrive in time, for the disease has become incurable" (Machiavelli, 2012: 18).

Fragmented Italy, divided into city-states and republics — Venice, Florence — but also plagued by illegitimate local tyrants, "finally saw the Oddi forced to abandon Perugia, and the city turned into a besieged fortress under the complete tyranny of the

Baglioni, to whom even the cathedral had to serve as a barracks" (conflict between rival noble factions in Perugia, author's note) (Burckhardt, 1953, p. 22). Alongside the advancing monarchical states — France, Spain, and the German Holy Roman Empire — as well as the Papal State acting as an active political participant, this environment of what may be described as a Hobbesian state of war of all against all provided the contextual background that profoundly influenced Machiavelli.

Following Machiavelli's view that the desire to acquire something is entirely natural and ordinary, we will examine his reflections on war, state security, and the military, which are modern in relation to the medieval experience. Machiavelli bases his propositions on both Roman tradition and contemporary events of the Florentine Republic. He introduces, as a general principle derived from his theoretical notion of the autonomy of politics, the superiority and instrumentalization of the military in service of political power and authority. For Machiavelli, laws and the army constitute the foundations of order and the survival of the state. The question then arises regarding the character of military force. Machiavelli introduces a classification of armies into four types: own forces, mercenary, auxiliary, and mixed. He considers mercenary and auxiliary forces both useless and dangerous. Some authors note that in Italy mercenary armies were deemed necessary for the city-states due to their small populations, limited finances, and the rulers' — particularly local tyrants' — fear of an armed populace.

Burckhardt notes that mercenaries introduced innovations in military strategy and tactics compared to the Middle Ages, where "various material and temporal constraints of military obligations, as well as the vanity of the nobility — who, for example, in the presence of the enemy, concealed their internal quarrels over precedence and, through their fierceness, ruined the most important battles, such as those at Crecy and Maupertuis" (Burckhardt, 1953, p. 59). Grubiša emphasizes that "monarchical armies — Spanish, French, as well as that of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire — were professional, better armed and equipped, better trained, and in front of them, armed citizens, lacking a militaristic eros, were generally powerless" (Grubiša, 2010, p. 117). Machiavelli, as in his entire theoretical corpus, did not follow mainstream trends or opinions. Similarly, in his analysis of military force, he maintained realism and an inductive method grounded in experience, drawing examples from both antiquity and the contemporary Renaissance period. From his cyclical view of history (Polybius: states rise and fall), he opposed the theological concept of a linear progression of history toward a goal, the end of earthly empire, and the establishment of God's kingdom.

Such a conception of history in terms of the movement, growth, and decline of states is summarized in the logic of Machiavelli's scientific concept: "Although, due to men's natural envy, it has always been dangerous to discover new behaviors and orders, just as it is when exploring unknown waters and lands, yet, since men are more inclined to censure than to praise the actions of others, and having always been motivated by the natural desire to act without regard for what I consider to be for the common good, I have decided to follow a path on which no one has yet ventured (emphasis in the original), and which may perhaps cause me inconvenience and difficulty, but which could also bring me the recognition of those who, humanly speaking, consider the aim of my endeavor" (Machiavelli, 1985, p. 153).

How does Machiavelli evaluate military force? By introducing the principle of force as a means, he analyzes the use of means in relation to effectiveness, a praxeological concept; the contribution is weighed in relation to political and state-building goals. In this regard, an auxiliary army, which is not truly an army but rather an alliance, is deemed useless and, as Machiavelli emphasizes, the most detrimental for a state that has called it onto its territory either for defense or to form an alliance against a third state. Machiavelli states that “after victory such soldiers most often plunder both the one who called them and the one against whom they were called, doing so either because their ruler is wicked or by their own desire” (Machiavelli, 1985, p. 266). In *The Prince*, this recurring narrative highlights the error of the Italian city-states, which in their mutual conflicts invited foreign powers (France, Spain), an action that Machiavelli identifies as one of the causes of the failure to unify Italy. Mercenary armies are not only unreliable and useless but also the most dangerous to the state itself and its sovereignty. The experience of Italy in the sixteenth century supports Machiavelli’s claims. Mercenaries and their commanders, the condottieri, initially came from abroad, such as John Hawkwood in Florence, and later also appeared domestically, like Francesco Sforza, often assuming power in the cities that employed them; Sforza proclaimed himself Duke of Milan following success in the defense of Milan, while others proved incapable and lost battles.

Regarding mercenary armies, Machiavelli states that they “are fragmented, envious, undisciplined, and unfaithful; brave toward friends, weak toward enemies, they do not fear God, nor are they loyal to men; they exist only until they are attacked; in times of peace they plunder you, and in war they plunder your enemies. This arises from the fact that they have no other love or cause keeping them in your service except a small wage, which is insufficient to make mercenaries willing to die for you” (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 53). The mercenary army is naturally predisposed toward tyranny, and in this respect, it is incompatible with Machiavelli’s concept of civic authority, drawing him close to Aristotle’s view that “the king’s bodyguards are citizens, whereas the tyrants are mercenaries” (Aristotle, 2003, p. 153).

We now pose the question of how Machiavelli foundation of the state and sound governance. This is a national army, and as a model he cites Charles VII, who, after defeating the English in war, introduced a standing army in the French kingdom. An army recruited from citizens, well-trained and disciplined, possesses, according to Machiavelli, one additional attribute, the *differentia specifica*, in contrast to mercenary forces: courage. By this, he refers to patriotism, the willingness to defend the community, even at the cost of one’s life, as well as freedom and political sovereignty, expressed in the monarch or the people, following Aristotle, in a mixed constitution. Aristotle, in *Politics*, advocates a system that harmoniously realizes all three principles: the monarch, the oligarch, and the demos, corresponding to three types of governance — monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy (Aristotle, 2003). Similarly, Machiavelli reflects on the class character of the state and the conflicts of interest arising in the Renaissance era, marked by the rising bourgeoisie, embodied in layers of wealthy citizens and poor laborers in manufactories, as well as petty artisans, in tension with the declining feudal nobility. He thus promotes a democratic conception, which in Chapter IX of *The Prince* he terms civic rule, a system where “...some citizen becomes the rul-

er of his homeland not through crime or other unbearable violence, but by the consent of the rest of his fellow citizens..." (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 44).

Such an army, recruited from citizens—the concept of an armed populace—is, according to Machiavelli, a good army: "I conclude, therefore, that when one does not have one's own army, rule is not secured, since everything depends on fortune, as there is no courage to defend it in adversity" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 62). Returning to the previous point, it is emphasized that Machiavelli understands the army under the primacy of politics, introducing the principle of unified command, whereby the supreme commander is the one who decides on war and peace, the monarch in a monarchy, or an elected citizen in a republic. Machiavelli also practically implemented his ideas of an armed populace during the period of the Florentine Republic. Authorized by the Signoria as secretary to the new magistrate, the War Nine, Machiavelli formed a militia composed of Florentine citizens. Although initially successful (the conquest of Pisa), these units suffered a catastrophic defeat at Prato at the hands of the Spanish army in 1512, which accelerated the end of republican Florence and the return of the Medici: "but from good merchants, artisans, and farmers, unaccustomed to warfare and discipline, it is not possible to create an effective and disciplined army overnight" (Grubiša, 1985, p. 25). Perhaps a more serious reason lies in the size of the militia. Being a citizen of Florence was an elitist category. Records indicate that only a small portion of the population had civic rights: during elections to republican institutions in the period of the second republic (1498–1512), out of 90,000 inhabitants, only 3,200 citizens had the right to be elected (Grubiša, 2010). Machiavelli thus observes that by arming subjects, they become the ruler's weapon, adding that "since all subjects cannot be armed, when you have secured those whom you arm, you can be more confident than with the rest" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 87).

We observe that fear of conspiracies, then a prevalent mode of political struggle (Machiavelli himself was accused and convicted for alleged participation in a plot against the Medici, and was subjected to torture during his trial), limited the number of suitable candidates for service in the popular militia. In his writings on the organization of the army, particularly in *The Art of War*, Machiavelli addresses in detail tactics, strategies, weaponry, and new military technologies (cannons, fortresses), which is not the focus of our research. However, we will analyze his privileging of the infantry, which we interpret through his republican and democratic discourse. Compared to cavalymen, feudal knights with their expensive equipment, heraldry, retinues, and pages, the infantryman in formation, where all are equally equipped, standing side by side in battle lines, embodies the people of the republic and the principle of equality. This can be explained by Machiavelli's reference to ancient political experience, in which the emergence of the polis marked the end of the heroic Homeric age, transferring virtue from the heroic individual to citizens who now competed in rhetoric and politics in the public square. Sophists, through the democratization of knowledge, educated Athenian citizens in political matters, establishing a principle of equality in society. These changes also affected military practice. The cavalryman of aristocratic, lineage-based society was replaced by the soldier, the infantryman (hoplite), who stood in battle lines alongside other citizens regardless of origin. Vernan emphasizes that philosophy

among the Greeks arose from politics: “the first sophia of the Greek sages was of a moral and political nature” (Vernan, 1990, p. 57).

The Relevance of Machiavelli’s Theory in Contemporary Political Theory and Practice

Machiavelli’s teachings have withstood the test of time, and his theoretical discourse can be classified as a “grand theory (Ritzer, 2012)”, as it represents a set of interconnected ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge about society, the explanation of that society, the prediction of its future, and its transcendence of its own era, remaining relevant in later periods. Machiavelli remains contemporary even today. We will demonstrate the influence of his ideas and works three centuries after their emergence by examining the theorist of war, the Prussian major-general Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz. In his unfinished work *On War*, Clausewitz, like Machiavelli, approaches the subject from positions of realism and experience. Denda notes that “by contrasting the imagined model of ‘absolute war’ with the model of ‘real war,’ which arises from existing experience, Clausewitz concludes that due to the multilayered reality and the associated unpredictability, the imagined model is neither real nor attainable, and we can only ideally approach it” (Denda, 2022, p. 67), bringing him close to Machiavelli’s postulate of dealing with the actual rather than the imagined. Through this methodological approach, Clausewitz opposed the widely accepted abstract theories of war of his time, stating that “it may not be impossible to write a systematic theory of war, full of spirit and content; but everything written thus far is far from it. Aside from their unscientific spirit—in striving for connectedness and completeness, all these theories abound with overlaps, banalities, and nonsense” (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 33). What is war for Clausewitz? It is “the continuation of state policy by other means” (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 35), demonstrating the instrumentalization of force and the military by the political authority, the state. Similarly, Machiavelli asserts that “the role of war is not only to maintain those born as rulers but often to elevate ordinary individuals to that position” (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 62), adding that rulers lost their states when they “thought more of pleasure than of arms” (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 62). Politics determines both the initiation and the conclusion of war, as well as its objectives, since war endangers politics: the state can be lost in war or through the adventurism of military leaders. “Thus, we see that war is not only a political act but a genuine political instrument, an extension of political relations, their continuation by other means” (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 53). What is the nature of war for Clausewitz, its ontological category distinguishing it from other social activities? He compares war to two wrestlers attempting to bring the opponent down, using force to render them incapable of resistance: “an act of force to compel the enemy to submit to our will” (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 41).

The application of force is unrestricted. The Christian conception of war, by distinguishing between just and unjust wars, sacralizes politics with religious terms, framing war as serving God’s kingdom on earth: “the iniquity (evil) of the opposing party drives the wise man to wage just wars” (Augustine, 2004, p. 812). Both Machiavelli and

Clausewitz transcend this interpretation, abandoning abstract normative approaches in favor of the concrete and political. Clausewitz does not operationalize war in the conceptual coordinates of Augustine's feudal notions of a just war, which involve "1. the right to go to war (*jus ad bellum*), 2. just conduct in war (*jus in bello*)" (Mršić, Felbar, & Tolvajčić, 2017, p. 50); rather, he sees war as combat, a clash of living forces, denying it the ethical constraints applicable in peacetime. He observes that "benevolent minds might easily imagine that there is a way to artificially disarm or defeat an enemy without inflicting excessive harm, and that this is the true sense of the art of war" (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 42). Machiavelli's realism legitimizes war as an act of violence, which in a given economy of force he advises should be brief and non-repetitive (rule of terror), while also adding that the conqueror "must first destroy the line of their former ruler" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 15). Both Clausewitz and Machiavelli view war and military force in a praxeological sense, as a domain of uncertainty and unpredictability where knowledge gives way to skill: "...three-quarters of all that war activity is based on is hidden in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty" (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 68).

Machiavelli discusses the polarity of *virtù* and *fortuna*, emphasizing that half of our actions are determined by luck or fate, while the other half remains subject to our intelligence, skill, and preparation. Fate "shows its power where there is no courage to resist it, directing its attacks where it knows that no barriers or defenses have been constructed to stop it" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 102). Clausewitz speaks of the war genius of the commander, noting that "every task, if it is to be performed with a certain virtuosity, requires particular spiritual and mental abilities" (Clausewitz, 1951, p. 66). Both Machiavelli and Clausewitz mediate war and military force to society and the political community. A good army is one recruited from the people, with patriotism serving as the cement of identity and state security, so that "everything that can be of help, that is, all moral and physical forces of a state, must serve as means to achieve the set objective, according to Clausewitz" (Denda, 2022, p. 66).

When discussing the contemporary relevance of Machiavelli's concept of a "good army," one may ask whether it corresponds to any models present in modern society. Machiavelli's notion of a "good army," associated with attributes such as a "citizen-recruited army" and the "concept of an armed populace," supports the consideration of its potential connection with the concept of total defense. This model is applied as a framework for preparing a state's forces to respond to potential future conflicts, in order to protect the lives, health, and property of its citizens. Machiavelli's theoretical framework of an "armed populace" is directly linked to the principle of recruitment, which forms the basis of total defense. He states: "It has never been the case that a new ruler disarmed his subjects; on the contrary, when he found them disarmed, he always armed them, for when they are armed, that weapon becomes yours, those who became suspicious of you become loyal, and those who were loyal remain so, thus turning subjects into supporters" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 87). Machiavelli's contemporaneity is also reflected in his emphasis on the people as the bulwark of the state's defense, which resonates with the principle of resilience in the total defense concept: "Therefore, the best fortress that exists is not to be hated by the people, because even if you have fortresses, and the people hate you, they cannot save you" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 91).

The concept of total defense is not a new term in the scholarly community or in social practice, and some authors equate it with the term comprehensive defense (Đukić & Vuletić, 2023, p. 623). The concept of total defense is often associated with the early Cold War period. Vider notes that total defense is essentially a Cold War concept, materialized in Europe and in countries outside NATO (Vider, 2020, pp. 61–81). In the academic discourse, there are numerous definitions of total defense. Some authors define it as a comprehensive strategic framework that integrates military, civilian, and societal capacities to enhance national resilience and readiness (Golubović, Žnidaršič, & Stojković, 2025, p. 97). Total defense is also defined as a societal approach to national security that involves coordinated action among the military, police forces, civilian branches of government, the private sector, and the general population, thereby improving conventional defense and deterrence measures (Milosavljević & Štrbac, 2024, p. 46).

According to Grigalashvili, the modern concept of total or comprehensive defense is based on two fundamental principles: resilience and durability (Grigalashvili, 2023, p. 241). He considers resilience as the will and readiness to defend the country in the face of military threats, while durability is understood as civilian preparedness to maintain societal functioning during crises, including military attacks. Berzina defines total or comprehensive defense as a collective defense concept that emphasizes civilian contributions to national security and civil resilience within the state (Berzina, 2020, p. 12). Some authors argue that the development of the strategic concept of comprehensive defense is based on changes both in the value system of states and in the threats, they face (Vračar & Milkovski, 2020, p. 257). Despite the nuances in defining total defense, its essence involves mobilizing all state capacities to defend vital protected values.

A question arises regarding the extent to which the concept of total or comprehensive defense exists in current social practice, given the present state of international relations and global security. Certain forms of total defense exist in a number of countries, primarily those considered “small states” in political theory, which cannot contend with great powers on equal terms; their military weakness renders them diplomatically vulnerable, limiting their role in global politics (Vandenbosch, 1964, p. 294). Accordingly, total defense models exist in Switzerland, Austria, the Nordic and Baltic countries, Israel, Georgia, Singapore, New Zealand, and others. The Republic of Serbia, in line with its strategic commitment to military neutrality, has adopted a document entitled Concept of Total Defense (2024), thereby joining this group of countries.

No single common denominator explains why certain countries have opted for the total defense concept. Perhaps the choice is motivated by the assessment that, in the current geopolitical context, so-called “small states” cannot fully rely on the protection of great powers or their allies. Consequently, total defense exists in various forms in NATO member states, such as the Baltic countries—Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania—as well as in new NATO members, including Sweden and Finland. One may even observe that the concept of total defense is becoming increasingly accepted, particularly after the sharp polarization in international relations following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. Some European countries

are reconsidering the reintroduction of military conscription, including Germany, Serbia, and Croatia, which is one of the attributes of the total defense concept.

Given these considerations, one can ask whether there are points of intersection between Machiavelli's "good army" and the concept of total defense. Machiavelli's "good army" consists of its own citizens rather than professionals, or what he refers to as mercenaries in his time. Mercenaries are not loyal to the ruler; they are unreliable, motivated by money, and can turn against their employer. In contrast, citizens are prepared to defend their ruler, protecting their own lives and the lives of their families. In the total defense concept, the forces defending the state are not only professional personnel permanently employed in state institutions but also all military and civilian capacities that are inherently loyal to the state and invested in defending their personal values, families, and homeland. The entire citizenry, with all its capacities, is placed in the service of defending the country from potential aggressors.

Machiavelli's "good army" requires constant training, appropriate organization, and leadership. Mercenary armies are poorly trained, composed of adventurers whose common goal is profit. There is no structured organization in terms of strict hierarchy and division of roles and responsibilities, nor is there leadership in its full sense. The concept of total defense cannot exist without an established hierarchy, clear organization, and precisely defined roles for each individual within the system. It requires timely peacetime preparations for potential wartime engagement, including training and logistical capacities. Leadership, embodied in centralized command and subordination, is an essential condition for implementing the concept of total defense.

Conclusion

We have shown that Machiavelli's understanding of the "good army" is based on a theory of realism, which has appeared in the history of political thought since antiquity (Aristotle), yet through his original solutions, Machiavelli emerges as a foundational figure of modern political theory. By separating politics as a public domain from the private, the political is established as a sphere governed by specific political rules, distinct from the customary morality of private individuals, the real from the ideal, and the factual from the abstract.

The interests of the state and the community take precedence over those of the individual. Politics is considered in terms of power, authority, and force, yet sovereignty is founded on the people simply because they constitute the most numerous class—Machiavelli's definition of power as numerical strength. The "good army" is an armed populace, a citizenry that constitutes the best defense of life in freedom, in contrast to a tyrant surrounded by a mercenary army. Regarding Agathocles, who seized power through crime, Machiavelli states in a humanist manner that "it cannot, however, be called virtuous to kill your fellow citizens, betray friends, break promises, and lack compassion and faith" (Machiavelli, 2012, p. 40).

This view aligns with Aristotle, who even considers tyranny as non-political: "It is entirely logical to place the tyrannical regime last, because of all forms of government, tyranny is the least political, and the subject of our investigation is precisely

the political regime" (Aristotle, 2003, p. 107). Machiavelli's theoretical positions remain relevant in political theory today. From the perspective of our topic, we can cite John Mearsheimer, who argues that realism is the best theory for understanding world politics, stating that "in the realist narrative, the key actors are states that coexist in a world without a supreme authority capable of protecting them from one another" (Mearsheimer, 2025, p. 5).

Machiavelli can be said to reveal the arcane dialectic of politics, which Paul Ricoeur conceptualizes as a political paradox: the state, as an expression of the greatest rationality, is simultaneously a field of irrationality, the greatest evil, which is necessary as a force to be established: "because power/authority is something very great, it is an instrument of the historical rationality of the state" (Ricoeur, 2012, p. 193).

We can conclude that there are several clear connections between Machiavelli's good army and the concept of total defense. This is especially true regarding the concept of an army composed of its own citizens, whose shared goal is the protection of the community's vital values. Machiavelli's concept of a good army remains relevant and is partially embodied in the concept of total defense, while taking into account the understanding of the state in Machiavelli's time versus the modern notion of the nation-state in contemporary political theory and practice. For instance, Machiavelli's notion of citizens' loyalty to the ruler in modern society should be understood as citizens' loyalty to the homeland, i.e., patriotism. Machiavelli concludes his most significant work, *The Prince*, with a call for "Italy to awaken and free itself from foreigners" (Machiavelli, 2012), which directly corresponds to the principle of total defense by involving the entire society in national defense (Berzinska, 2020).

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Summary

Our research question, "What is a 'good army' in Niccolò Machiavelli's political thought?" led us to methodologically situate his theory within the history of political ideas as realism, truth as action, factual truth – *verità effettuale*, and praxis as the criterion of theory. With Machiavelli, a turning point opens in political theory, defining him as the founder of modern political thought. The classical conception of politics as a teaching about civic virtue, as well as the medieval worldview epitomized by Thomas Aquinas, where politics and the state were subordinated to religion and Christian morality, is abandoned. Machiavelli separates politics from other social spheres and publicly distinguishes it from the private. Within the political, concepts such as power, force, strength, and violence are legitimized.

This new approach in Machiavelli arises from his method, realism, and orientation toward empirical observation. Utopian constructivism of ancient political writers, as well as contemporaries such as Thomas More, is rejected. Machiavelli's analysis of politics based on political experience leads him to assert that the state, the community of citizens, rests on laws and force: good laws and a good army.

The concept of a "good army," according to Machiavelli, refers to an armed populace, a recruited citizenry, as the foundation of the state's survival and power in a constant state of war among states, as reflected in his famous dictum that unarmed prophets perish. The army formed from citizens stems from his republican orientation, where the people, under good laws and inspired by patriotism, are contrasted with mercenary, professional armies. The very existence of a mercenary army, for Machiavelli, is a symptom of tyranny, indicating hostility between the ruler and the people.

Machiavelli's theory of realism influenced later authors, such as Clausewitz, who, following Machiavelli's principle of the primacy of politics, formulated the concept of warfare as the continuation of policy by other means.

There are evident similarities between Machiavelli's notion of a "good army" and the concept of total defense in contemporary political theory and social practice, which confirms the relevance of Machiavelli's thoughts and teachings today.

Keywords: *Machiavelli, modern political theory, power; force, "good army", people, state, total defense.*

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