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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A DICTATORSHIP IN FLORENCE IN 1342*

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The Florentine revolution of 1342 offers an excellent illustration of what modern historians, such as Kenneth Setton and Alfred von Marten, call the proto, or first Fascism, of the Renaissance.[1] It was as a result of this insurrection that Walter of Brienne was made Lord of the Republic.[2] The Council of the People bequeathed to him dictatorial perogatives. It was at the new dictator's behest that the Ordinances of Justice were prorogued.[3] The security and liberty of the Republic were no longer to be predicated upon the constitutional tradition of the state, but upon the whim of Lord Walter of Brienne.[4]

Why was the state subverted? Why were the liberties of the Commune surrendered?[5] Why was the authority of the Priors eliminated?[6]

To answer these questions we must go back into the thirteenth century; for it was in that era that Florence began her large-scale commercial relations with England, France, and the Levant.[7] Into these distant lands the enterprizing merchants of the Red Lily exported vast amounts of capital. Great financial risks were taken in the barbarous countries to the north and the luxurious lands to the east. But these great risks were taken at high interest rates. The fate of these ventures was predicated upon political and economic contingencies over which neither the *popolo grasso* (burghers) nor their government had the remotest control. The magnitude of these loans reached such a point that the prosperity of the Republic was tied to the economies of "divergent and distant countries."[8] The safety of these loans was put in jeopardy at the turn of the fourteenth century. With the decline of the closed economic system of feudalism there was a breakdown of the traditional safeguards of internationalistic culture and law.[9] Foreigners were placed outside of the culture and extra-legally outside of the law.[10] Villani was disturbed by the hatred of the Londoners for the Florentine capitalists.[11] This xenophobia was not confined to London, nor to England, but was a frame of mind prevalent throughout all of Europe. Nor was it directed solely against the Florentines, but rather it was a characteristic of the revival of nationalism which Sapori believed transformed Europe into an armed camp in the early fourteenth century.[12] This hatred for the *Auslander* vent itself on different groups in the following centuries: the Italians in the fourteenth, the Papacy in the fifteenth, and the Germans in the sixteenth century.[13] But in each case it was a reaction against exploitation, guised in the monarchical cloak of national indignation.

By the decrees of May 6, 1339, Edward III of England suspended payment on his obligation to the Bardi and Peruzzi, two of the most powerful of the Florentine banking houses.[14] According to Villani, whose experience in Italo-English banking affairs was great, the suspension involved the loss of 1,365,000 golden florins.[15] Estimates vary on the amount of the default. Sapori states that two thirds of this figure is nearer the truth.[16] In either case the loss in monies was at least three times the total annual revenue of the Commune of Florence.[17] Schevill contends that the annual revenue of the Republic was more than the King of Naples could extract from his entire realm in any given year.[18]

The English historians, Russell[19] and Rhodes,[20] concur in the opinion that Edward's treatment of the bankers of the Republic of the Red Lily was shabby. But from the Englishman's point of view it was a rather inexpensive method of keeping a militaristic monarch in gold.

The repudiation of the Italian debt by the English was but one of the several disasters that overtook the Republic on the Arno during this period. The armies and the diplomats of the Commune had been thwarted in their diverse imperialistic schemes, conceived to achieve suzerainty over all of Tuscany. This aspiration was dashed in October of 1341 when the Pisans captured the city of Lucca. The Florentines at this time may well have recalled the invective of Dante, "A curse upon Pisa! May the Arno be dammed at its mouth, and drown all

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Pisa, man and mouse, beneath its raging waters."[21] In pursuit of status in foreign affairs and stability at home, the government had contracted a debt of more than 800,000 golden florins.[22] The *Pistoian Chronicle* relates that "the *popolo minuto* (working class) began to speak harshly of the *popolo grasso*."[23] Machiavelli writes that the people condemned the governing classes even in their conversations in the streets and the market places.[24]

The ruling oligarchy had not only lost a major war, but they had made unwise expenditures, and failing to provide for the immediate needs of the subject population, consequently lost their support. This loss of confidence stemmed from their ineffectual handling of state affairs. Paoli contends that these conditions were a result of inexperience rather than of the malicious intent of the oligarchy.[25] The government was in such dire straits that it had to advise its allies, the Papacy and the Kingdom of Naples, of its inability to advance them certain monies for mutual defense.[26] Nor could it aid the bankers in securing the requisite wool necessary to keep the weavers employed.[27] An increase in the rate of taxation might have salvaged the state, but the English default on its Florentine loans, coupled with the first battles of the Hundred Years war, had curtailed trade with the North. It was on just that trade that the prosperity of the Republic depended.

Florence faced a seemingly hopeless economic situation. There was no solution within the traditional republican nexus. Bankruptcy forced the Commune to suspend payment on the state debt. The business men recognized that their ruin was imminent on two levels. In order to make restitution, their fortunes would have to be placed at the disposal of their hungry creditors. In addition, the halcyon days of their political power would end with their loss of prestige. To prevent this and to preserve the last vestiges of their influence, they had selected a dictator.

To retain control of the financial policies of the Commune, the magnates agreed to sacrifice sovereignty in foreign affairs to Walter of Brienne.[28] To this end, full power was given to the Count of Brienne in September, 1342. The limit of one year that had been placed on his *Signoria* in July was removed; he was proclaimed Lord of the City of the Red Lily for life.[29] He was supported by all of the orders. The *popolo minuto* favored Walter over the oligarchy since the latter had failed to bring the Pisan War to a successful conclusion. The *grandi* (nobles) supported him because they hoped he would recall their exiled relatives from banishment.[30] Machiavelli epitomizes the situation by saying that since the *popolo grasso* could not meet their financial commitments they were willing to free themselves by enslaving their country.[31]

The citizens themselves were responsible for Walter's elevation to power. It had been achieved not through force of arms, but through popular acclimation, midst wild rejoicings. Alarms were sounded; church bells rang out the "Te Deum"; the mob shouted, "Be our Lord," and "Hail the Duke our Lord." Then *il popolo* hoisted *il signore* on their shoulders and carried him through the Piazza. Down from the tower came the flag of the Republic and up went the ensign of Brienne.[32]

Economic conditions were conducive to such demonstrations of enthusiasm. All classes desired a dictator; the *popolo grasso* hoping for a moratorium on debts;[33] the *grandi*, a return to power;[34] and the *popolo minuto*, an end to unemployment.[35] To this end there was a unanimity of opinion unusual in the annals of the history of the city. The classical *tripartizioni* of society ceased to exist for the time being. The nobles, the business men, and the lower orders had acted in harmony and with great dispatch and thus were able to effect a bloodless revolution.[36]

The dominance of one class in the state was, for diverse political, social, and economic reasons, reprehensible to the other orders. Two centuries of Guelph versus Ghibelline, with its honorific blood-letting, had evaporated as a vain myth by the fourteenth century.[37] Two centuries of contention and *vendetta* between the families, revenge and counter-revenge the theme, had brought nothing but suspicion and death in its wake.[38] Two centuries of civil war between the nobles and the *haute bourgeoisie* had brought Florence alternate waves of prosperity and financial crises. Centuries of the hatred of the *malnate* (base born) for those groomed to the purple had disrupted the judicial process.[39] Recent

disillusionment with imperial policy had dashed the high hopes of the Dantes of the age. The grief of Anagni and the shame of Avignon discouraged intellectuals of Petrarch's ilk.[40] It was in the climate of these failures that Florentine public opinion was formed. It was in the atmosphere of these disasters that a decision was reached to establish a *signoria*. Sapori contends that as sanguine expectation for a solution for these problems faded, so in direct proportion did the traditional morality of the classes.[41] He suggests that the destruction of the feudal economy, law, and culture by the artisans, speculators, and workers made the rejection of the old morality inevitable. The priors were expelled from their palace and the Ordinances of Justice were destroyed by a hysterical, emotional *popolo*. The magnates painted Walter's coat-of-arms on the facades of their houses over the traditional emblems of the Republic.[42]

That the officers, laws, and symbols of government should have been sacrificed with such indecent enthusiasm is indicative of a change in political morality; a change which Villani, an eyewitness, ascribed to divine retribution for the sins of his fellow citizens;[43] a change which, even in the time of Dante, was discernible, and in the life of Petrarch was obvious even to the humanist shut off from the world by folios of Cicero.[44] This gradual disenchantment with the existing order was accompanied by a rising sentiment in favor of a political solution to the pressing economic and social problems. It is at best a sentiment. There is little evidence to indicate that any of the orders of citizens contemplated or desired a profound reintegration of the social or economic system. It was a rearrangement at the executive level that was envisioned. This is a characteristic of Italian thought during the Renaissance. Petrarch, Dante, and even Machiavelli posited solutions which were romantic, superficial, and impractical in terms of the complex needs of Italian society.[45] "All can be arighted if we can but find the 'Just Emperor, the 'Good Pope,' or the 'Ideal Prince '" This "Great Man" will in some magic inexplicable way solve the banking problem, the Pisan problem, the employment problem, and the English problem. In the mind of the Italians this was to be secured through the realization of the Ciceronian ideal of establishing concord between the various social orders. This was a great myth in the last days of the Roman Republic and as such was a source of inspiration to Cicero and his friends. It followed that in the fourteenth century this ideal was viewed by the Italian romantics as a solution to their problems. The myth was not discredited until the sack of Rome in 1527.[46]

The establishment of a dictatorship failed to solve the fundamental problems of the Florentine state. Dictators before, and dictators after Walter's brief tenure, were impotent in the face of the complexities of the Italian capitalism. Walter's policy was typical of the Renaissance despot: favor the middle class, kill off any dissenters. Make peace or war in the interests of domestic security, and grant the *popolo minuto* and the *grandi* bread and circuses respectively. An examination of all the documents of the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze* connected with Walter's despotate, from May 14, 1342[47] to August 6, 1343,[48] shows this to be his policy.

The *virtu* of the *nuovi principi* would in some mystical way prove beneficial to all the social classes. Economic and social stability would be obtained, not by changing fundamental relationships, but by establishing that which Alfred von Martin designated as the welfare state of the *haute bourgeoisie*.[49] This solution postulates a return to a static hierarchical society, in which all orders are fixed to that social and economic position at which maximum concord between the classes is achieved. Just where this mythical point was located the despot of the early Renaissance could not say. It remained for the Medici to approximate its location at a later date.

The revolution of 1342 was a rearrangement rather than a reorganization of the state. It substituted the authority of one man for the authority of the *arti maggiori* (greater guilds). Ottokar states that the Priorate was the exclusive property of the *popolani grassi* (wealthy merchants) as early as 1282.[50] The despot was brought in at their behest and he was expected to act in terms of their interests.[51] That Walter failed to do this is indicated by his subsequent overthrow by *la classe plutocratica*. According to Schevill, his ouster resulted from his inability to master the ever deepening financial crisis.[52] It might be well to extend this thesis. It was his attempt to solve this problem that

frightened the middle class. They were desirous of a solution, but not on his terms. Walter's concessions to the *popolo minuto*, (whom he fondly called *le bon popule*), of which there are at least six recorded in the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze*, were attempts to alleviate the situation.[54] Overthrowing the prevailing wage policy, taking the part of the employees against the *arti maggiori*, was more than a just rearrangement of the apex of authority. It was a threat to the security of the church, nobility, and burghers.[55] The dictator was despot within the limits of the security of those orders. Once he violated the limits he was faced with revolution. This was the frame of reference in which the Medici later ruled. This traditional attitude remained constant until the sack of Rome. Guicciardini was the first historian with any real insight into the situation.[56]

Michelet characterizes the spirit of the protoFascism of this age in the words:

> Never was there an age less favorable to...high tendencies...[it was symbolized by] the living materialism of the tyrants and the band of mercenaries, the bourgeois platitude of the man of finance and money. A religion began in the banks of Florence having in gold its real presence and in letters of exchange its eucharist.[57]

[1]Cf. K. M. Setton, "Some Recent Views of the Italian Renaissance," *Report of the Canadian Historical Association* (1947), pp. 10-11; *idem, Catalan Domination of Athens 1311-1388* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1948), p. 44; Alfred von Martin, *Sociology of the Renaissance*, trans, by W. L. Luetkens (London, 1944)

[2]C. Paoli, "Della Signoria di Gualtieri VI Duca d'Atene in Firenze," *Giornale Storico degli Archivi Toscani* (1862), VI, doc. 10, 192.

[3]G. Villani, *Istorie Fiorentine* (Milan, 1802), XII, 2.

[4]Marchionne di Cappo Stefani, "Cronaca Fiorentine," *Rerum italicarum scriptores: Recoolta degli storici italiani*...ordinata da L. A. Muratoria (Citta di Castello, 1903), XXXI, 193, R. 552; Machiavelli, Istorie Fiorentine (Florence, 1927), II, 33; Silvano Razzi, *Vite de cinque huomini illustri* (Florence, 1602), p. 40; "Storie Pistoresi," *Rerum italicarum scriptores: Raccolta degli storici italiani*...ordinata da L. A. Muratori (Città di Castello, 1907), p. 175, c. 104; "Cronache Senesi," *Rerum italicarum scriptores*: Raccolta degli storici italiani... ordinata da L. A. Muratori (Bologna, 1939), p. 532, l. 31-40.

[5]This was not the first relinquishment of Florentine freedom. Cf. G. Degli Azzi, "La Dimora Di Carlo Duca Di Calabria A Firenze," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Series 5, Vol. XLII, 1908, pp. 45-83; 259-304.

[6]F. Sassenay, *Les Brienne de Lece et D'Athènes* (Paris, 1869), p. 206.

[7]O. Metzing, "Das Bankhaus der Medici u. seine Vorlaufer," *Volkswirtschaftliche u. Wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Abhandlungen*, neue Folges, 6 Heft, Jena, p. 76.

[8]H. Pirenne, *A History of Europe* (New York, 1939), p. 386.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 99.

[10]A. Sapori, *La Crisi Delle Compagnie Mercantile Dei Bardi E. Dei Peruzzi* (Florence, 1926), p. xv.

[11]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. x, 8.

[12]A. Sapori, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. x.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 58

[15]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xi, 88; Ernest Mehl, *Die Weltauschauung des Giovanni Villani* (Leipzig, 1927) p. 2.

[16]A. Sapori, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

[17]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, p. x.

[18]F. Schevill, *History of Florence* (New York, 1936), p. 212; Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Practica della Mercatura*, ed. Allan Evans (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1936), p. xv. The value of the golden florin, as of 1932, was $2.35.

[19]E. Russel, "The societies of the Bardi and Peruzzi," ed. G. Unwin, *Finance and Trade under Edward III* (Manchester, 1918), p. 227.

[20]W. Rhodes, "The Italian Bankers in England and their Loans to Edward I and Edward II," *Historical Essays by members of the Owens College Manchester* (London, 1902), p. 138.

[21]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xi, 135; *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (Temple Classics), Canto XXXIII, 80-84.

[22]C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, p. 87. He gives the amount as 4000,000 golden florins exclusive of the Pisan war.

[23]"Storie Pistoresi," *Rerum italicarum scriptores: Raccolta degli storici italiani...* ordinata da L. A. Muratori (Citta di Castello, 1907), p. 174, ch. 100.

[24]Machiavelli, *op. cit.*, II, 33.

[25]C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[26]A. Sapori, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 27.

[28]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, 3; Schevill, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

[29]Marchionne di Cappo Stefani, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-6, R. 555.

[30]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, 3.

[31]Machiavelli, *op. cit.*, II, 3.

[32]*Loc. cit.*

[33]C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, doc. 82, pp. 209-10.

[34]*Ibid.*, doc. 57, p. 204.

[35]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xiii, 8; Marchionne di Cappo Stefani, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, 8.

[36]A. Sapori, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

[37]H. D. Sedgwick, Italy in the Thirteenth Century (Boston, 1933), I, 429.

[38]*The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (Temple Classics), Canto III, 106-8.

[39]Machiavelli, *op. cit.*, II, 33; Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, 2.

[40]*The Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, Canto XXVII, 55-60; *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, Canto III, 58-60; *The Sonnets, Triumphs and other Poems of Petrarch London*: Bohn Library, 1897). p. 136.

[41]A. Sapori, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

[42]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, 3; S. Razzi, *op. cit.*, p. 45; Marchionne di Cappo Stefani, *op. cit.*, p. 196, R. 555; "Storie Pistoresi," *op. cit.*, p. 177; Andre du Chesne, *Histoire de la Maison de Chastillon sur Marne* (Paris, 1621), p. 313.

[43]G. Villani, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, 2.

[44]*The Purgatory of Dante Alighieri*, Canto VI, 76-93; G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1923), I, 305.

[45]H. Baron, "Das Erwachen des historischen Denkens im Humanismus des Quattrocento," *Historische Zeitschrift*, CXLVII (1932), 5-20.

[46]H. Baron, "Cicero and the Roman Civic Spirit in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XXII (1938), 72-97.

[47]C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, doc. 1, pp. 189-90.

[48]*Ibid.*, doc. 322, p. 264.

[49]A. von Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

[50]N. Ottokar, *Il Commune di Firenze alla Fine del Dugento* (Florence, 1926) p. 25.

[51]F. Sassenay, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

[52]F. Schevill, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-1.

[53]Marchionne di Cappo Stefani, *op. cit.*, p. 119, R 566.

[54]C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-8.

[55]*Ibid.*, doc. 84, pp. 211-2.

[56]P. Villari, *Niccolo Machiavelli and his Times*, Trans. Linda Villari (London, 1892), II, 436.

[57]J. Michelet, *Histoire de France* (Paris, 1898), VII, 62.