

Introduction: The Plague in Context: Florence 1349–1350

Stories of the long-term . . . have the powerful effect of banishing myths and overturning false laws. This and not the appreciation of mere antiquities is the reason that universities have history departments and the reason for history's classical mission as *magistra vitae*, the teacher of all aspect of life.

Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto*¹

Out of useless activity there come discoveries that may well prove of infinitely more importance . . . than the accomplishments of useful ends.

Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge"²

I

If, as recent historiography suggests, the Middle Ages was a period of "alterity," difficult to relate to current times, it may also be said that it was a time of contradiction and of conflicting forces operating at once.³ In this it resembles all eras.

Contradiction is the subject of this book, which takes as its title, *Petrarch's War*, as a way of emphasizing that fact. The author of "Italia mia," the famous pacific poem, ending with a threefold call for peace on the peninsula, wrote a letter to Florentine officials in June 1349 demanding that the city wage war even while it was still suffering the immediate effects of the devastating plague of the previous year. Francesco Petrarch's call to arms appears in the same collection of epistles (book VIII of *Rerum familiarum libri*, or *Familiars*) that also contains his famous lament about the pestilence. Petrarch sent his bellicose letter, *Familiars*

¹ Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2104), p. 37.

² Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," *Harper's Magazine* 179 (June 1939), p. 549.

³ Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *American Historical Review* 103 no. 3 (June 1998), pp. 677–704.

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VIII 10, to the Florentine priors. It was transcribed by Giovanni Boccaccio, a long-time admirer of Petrarch, who had recently returned to his native city and was then writing the *Decameron*.⁴ Shortly thereafter Florence sent out its army. The target was the Ubaldini clan of the upper Mugello, who had attacked two of Petrarch's closest friends as they traveled through the mountainous region.⁵

"Petrarch's war" ended on 27 September 1350, the day before Boccaccio returned from his embassy to Dante's sister in Ravenna and a week before Petrarch traveled to Florence, where he first met Boccaccio, on his way to the papal jubilee in Rome (October 1350).⁶ The conflict thus frames the incipient friendship between the two men and casts new light on their relationship, and on the relationship between the poets, the city, and their famous forebear Dante – subjects of keen interest to literary scholars.⁷

The connection may account for the abundant and detailed material that has survived in the Florentine state archives. Indeed, no contemporary conflict is better documented. The material includes two of the earliest extant *balie*, containing the acts of the ad hoc committees that oversaw the day-to-day management of the war; budgets of the *camera del comune*, which handled the city's income and expenditure; diplomatic dispatches (Signori, Missive, I Cancelleria, 10) to ambassadors and city council legislation.⁸ The very first *consulte e pratiche* (1) register, relaying the debates of the executives who ran the city, deals extensively with the war. Indeed, the discussion of Ubaldini misdeeds fills the first twenty pages of the volume, which makes no mention of the plague.⁹ The war is

⁴ Francesco Petrarch, *Rerum familiarum libri, I–VIII*, translated and edited by Aldo S. Bernardo, vol. 1 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975), pp. 429–435. On Boccaccio writing the *Decameron*, see Vittore Branca, *Giovanni Boccaccio. Profilo biografico* (Florence: Sansoni, 1997), p. 80.

⁵ For a preliminary discussion of the war and its economic and literary implications, see William Caferro, "Petrarch's War: Florentine Wages at the Time of the Black Death" *Speculum* 88 no. 1 (January 2013), pp. 144–165, and "Le Tre Corone Fiorentine and War with the Ubaldini," in *Boccaccio 1313–2013*, edited by Francesco Ciabattini, Elsa Filosa and Kristina Olson (Ravenna: Longo editore, 2015), pp. 43–55.

⁶ Giuseppe Pelli, *Memorie per servire alla vita di Dante Alighieri* (Florence: Guglielmo Piatti, 1823), p. 30.

⁷ Todd Boli, "Boccaccio's Trattatello in laude di Dante, Or Dante Resartus," *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988), pp. 395–398; Jason M. Houston, "Boccaccio at Play in Petrarch's Pastoral World," *Modern Language Notes* 127 (2012), pp. 47–53; Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Martin Eisner, *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch, Cavalcanti and the Authority of the Vernacular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁸ The sources in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF) include *balie* 6, 7; *Consulte e pratiche* (CP) 1; *Camera del comune*, *Scrivano di camera uscita* 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10; *Provvisioni*, registri 36, 37, 38; and *Signori, Missive, I Cancelleria* 10.

⁹ The discussions go from 18 April 1349 to 22 June 1350. ASF, CP 1 fols. 1r–19r.

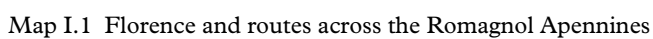
recounted in detail by the chronicler Matteo Villani and by his younger contemporary Marchionne di Coppo Stefani. It is also discussed by the famous diarist Donato Velluti, who, as we shall see, took a leading role in executive councils and served as an ambassador during the conflict.

The war, in short, mattered. As far as military engagements go, it was nevertheless unremarkable. Florence fought frequently with the Ubaldini clan, a prominent and obstinate Ghibelline family, whose patrimony lay along important trade routes to Bologna, a key outlet of Florentine goods to and from the north (Maps I.1 and I.2). The most famous instance of violence between the two occurred just after Dante's exile in 1302. The poet, along with other "white Guelfs," allied with the Ubaldini against the city. They were quickly defeated, but battles between Florence and the clan continued throughout the fourteenth century.

From a purely political perspective, the conflict in 1349–1350 may be viewed as an instance of what Paolo Pirillo has called the "successiva fiorentinizzazione" of border regions that accompanied the city's expansion into a territorial state. More immediately, it served as a prelude to the bitter interstate war with Milan (1351–1353) – the first of several contests between the two from which scholars have seen the roots of a civic humanism that formed part of Florence's self-definition during the Renaissance.¹⁰ The relation between magnate families and the ruling *popolo* is part of a venerable debate, recently reinterpreted by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, who stresses the complex and ambiguous role of the clans in Florentine affairs.¹¹ The area of conflict, the upper Mugello, is associated in modern times with the *linea gotica* (Gothic line) set up by the Nazis in the late stages of World War II to stop the Allied advance through Italy. Every year battle reenactors assemble at Giogo, the mountain pass

¹⁰ Paolo Pirillo, "Signorie dell'Appennino tra Toscana ed Emilia-Romagna alla fine del Medioevo," in *Poteri signorili e feudali nelle campagne dell'Italia settentrionale fra Tre e Quattrocento: fondamenti di legittimità e forme di esercizio*, edited by Federica Cengarle, Giorgio Chittolini, and Gian Maria Varanini (Florence: Florence University Press, 2005), pp. 211–220. For the larger trajectory of the Florentine territorial state, see William Connell and Andrea Zorzi, eds., *Florentine Tuscany: Structure and Practices of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Giorgio Chittolini, "City-States and Regional States in North-Central Italy," *Theory and Society* 18 no. 5 (1989), pp. 689–706; Samuel K. Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State: Peasants and Rebellion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For civic humanism at the end of the century, see Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹¹ On the magnates and their relation to the *popolani*, see Gaetano Salvemini, *Magnati e popolani in Firenze dal 1280 al 1295* (Florence: G. Carnesecchi, 1899); Nicola Ottokar, *Il comune di Firenze alla fine del Duecento* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1926) and John Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280–1400* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). See now Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Ritorno alla politica: I magnati fiorentini, 1340–1440* (Rome: Viella, 2007).





Map I.2 Tuscany

that separates Scarperia and Firenzuola, to refight the decisive encounter (September 1944) between the Nazis and Allies. The region lies in the heart of what was previously Ubaldini territory.

The application of the term “war” to the conflict in 1349–1350 is done with caution. The definition was not so clear then as it is today. The sources alternately refer to the engagement as a *cavalcata*, implying more of a police action, and as a *guerra*, a more formal war. The distinction may derive from the fact that the conflict involved two campaigns, the second on a larger scale than the first. But the

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language of the documents is imprecise, with frequent alternation of terms. For the purposes here, the distinction is irrelevant since both required the mobilization of a substantial military force, economic resources, and the appointment of special committees to oversee activities.

In either case, infra-state contests such as that of 1349–1350 have been consigned to scholarly obscurity in the Anglophone academy.¹² The status quo reflects a general lack of interest in warfare as a field of academic inquiry. It is a messy and disconcerting subject, which, as Jay M. Winter asserts, poses “intractable problems” for researchers, owing to uneven evidence, ideological bias, and, paraphrasing Fernand Braudel, the tendency of each generation to construct its own understanding of war.¹³ This is particularly true of medieval Italy, where scholars, following the famous example of Niccolò Machiavelli, have too often treated war in moral terms, stressing the lack of “native martial” spirit and reliance by Italian states on greedy, “useless,” “unreliable,” and “disloyal” mercenaries.¹⁴ Machiavelli's depiction has encouraged scholars to separate Italian warfare from its societal milieu.¹⁵ This is particularly true for the middle years of the *trecento*, the era of the “companies of adventure,” bands of mercenary soldiers, which included foreigners from outside the peninsula, who arrayed themselves into

¹² C. C. Bayley, among others, does not mention these in his oft-cited account of Florentine warfare in the *trecento*. He mentions only the interstate war and the conflict with the Visconti. C. C. Bayley, *War and Society in Renaissance Florence: The De Militia of Leonardo Bruni* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 18.

¹³ Jay M. Winter, ed., *War and Economic Development: Essays in Memory of David Joslin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 2. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, translated by Sian Reynolds (New York, NY: Harper Books, 1966), p. 891.

¹⁴ Machiavelli famously condemned mercenaries as “useless,” “unreliable,” “dangerous,” “disloyal,” and “undisciplined,” in addition judging them “cowards.” See *The Prince* (books 12 and 13), *The Art of War* (book 1), and *The Discourses* (book 2, discourse 20). Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated and edited by David Wootton (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 38–45; *The Discourses*, translated by Leslie J. Walker and edited by Bernard Crick (New York, NY: Penguin, 1970), pp. 339–341; *The Art of War*, translated by Christopher Lynch (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 13–32. Machiavelli's views shaped nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian scholarship and remain influential. Ercole Ricotti, *Storia delle compagnie di ventura in Italia*, 4 vols. (Turin: Pombo, 1844–1845); Giuseppe Canestrini, “Documenti per servire alla storia della milizia italiana dal XIII secolo al XVI,” *Archivio storico italiano* 15 (1851), pp. 347–446; Piero Pieri, “Alcune quistioni sopra fanterie in Italia nel periodo comunale,” *Rivista storica italiana* (1933), pp. 561–614 and *Il Rinascimento e la crisi militare italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1952).

¹⁵ See William Caferro, “Warfare and Economy of Renaissance Italy, 1350–1450,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39 (2008), pp. 167–209 and more recently “Individualism and the Separation of Fields of Study: Jacob Burckhardt and Ercole Ricotti,” in *The Routledge History of the Renaissance*, edited by William Caferro (Abingdon: Routledge Press, 2017), pp. 62–74.

marauding armies during times of ostensible peace.¹⁶ For all the literature devoted to the development of the Florentine territorial state at this time, warfare has not been properly integrated into the discussion.

The scholarly inattention to Petrarch's war in 1349–1350 owes most of all, however, to the Black Death that occurred immediately prior to it. The cataclysmic nature of the event and its role as an historical turning point has crowded out consideration of other contemporaneous phenomena. In F. A. Gasquet's famous formulation, the pestilence brought nothing less than the "close of the medieval period and the beginning of the Modern Ages." G. G. Coulton described the plague as a "gateway" to the Renaissance and Reformation.¹⁷ More recent literature has avoided simplistic pronouncements, but the notion of the plague as a turning point and all the baggage that goes with it remains. The subtitle of David Herlihy's book on the Black Death is "The Transformation of the West."¹⁸ Bruce Campbell calls his recent integrated study of the contagion the "Great Transition."¹⁹ A. B. Falsini's detailed investigation of Florence, still an important starting point for examination of events in the city, argues that the Black Death brought an entirely "new economic and social reality."²⁰ Bruno Dini asserts in his study of the Florentine wool cloth industry (*arte della lana*) that the plague of 1348 not only changed that business, but the "general economic organization" of Florence.²¹ The art historian Millard Meiss notes a basic shift in Florentine artistic

¹⁶ Maria Nadia Covini, "Political and Military Bonds in the Italian State System, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Century," in *War and Competition between States*, edited by Philippe Contamine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 14; Brucker's list of Florence's wars in the *trecento* are intercity ones, notably with Pisa and Milan. Gene Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343–1378* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 84–130. Brucker does not mention the conflict with the Ubaldini, although he mentions the papacy's request for troops in 1350, which Florence denied on account of the war with the Ubaldini. Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society*, p. 141; William Caferro, *Mercenary Companies and the Decline of Siena* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ F. A. Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence* (London: G. Bell, 1893), p. xvi; G. G. Coulton, *Black Death* (London: Ernest Benn, 1929); Thompson compared the Black Death to World War I, the real transformative event of his own day. James Westfall Thompson, "The Aftermath of the Black Death and the Aftermath of the Great War," *American Journal of Sociology* xxvi (1921), pp. 565–572.

¹⁸ Herlihy called the contagion "Europe's greatest known ecological disaster." David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 17.

¹⁹ Bruce Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁰ A. B. Falsini, "Firenze dopo il 1348: Le conseguenze della pesta nera," *Archivio Storico Italiano* (1971), pp. 437–482.

²¹ Bruno Dini, "I lavoratori dell'Arte della Lana a Firenze nel XIV e XV secolo" in *Artigiani e salariati. Il mondo del lavoro nell'Italia dei secoli XII–XV, Pistoia, 9–13 ottobre 1981* (Bologna: Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte, 1984), p. 33.

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styles in 1350: from a realistic/optimistic emphasis on humanity to a brooding/religious conservatism.²² Louis Green, examining the Florentine chronicle tradition, sees a “radical re-dimension” in the pre-plague writing of Giovanni Villani (who died of the plague) and the post-plague writing of his brother and successor as chronicler Matteo – a shift from religious devotion and general optimism to pessimism and greater acceptance of the natural world,²³ and Katharine Park has outlined the decline of the medical profession after 1348.²⁴

The present study seeks to add war to the plague narrative on the basis of the extant sources. Indeed, it follows precisely the lead of Petrarch himself, whose account of the Black Death (*Familiare* VIII 7) is not only in the same book of letters as his advocacy of the war, but was, in its original version (which has survived), part of the *same* letter that describes the attack by the Ubaldini on his friends.²⁵ Petrarch did not distinguish between the violent death of a friend at the hands of robbers and the death caused by the epidemic (which took his beloved Laura). Both brought “insufferable loss.” The war thus casts light on the Black Death; the Black Death casts light on the war.

The coincidence of plague and violence is itself noteworthy. Common sense, or perhaps common decency, suggests that the plague, as some scholars have argued, caused a “cessation of all activities” in its immediate aftermath. Doubtless this was true of *some* activities, but it was not true of violence. Indeed, Florence saw a quickening of the pace of both internal and external unrest. The problems with the Ubaldini coincided with more general difficulties with magnate families in the countryside.²⁶ And armed conflict was not restricted to the Florentine state. There was unrest in the papal lands in the nearby Romagna and Marche. An anonymous chronicler from Rimini wrote that although the Black Death killed “two of every three people,” it did not do away with “contentious tyrants and great

²² Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

²³ Louis Green, *Chronicle in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 86–87.

²⁴ Katharine Park, *Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 42–45.

²⁵ Aldo S. Bernardo, “Letter-Splitting in Petrarch’s *Familiare*,” *Speculum* 33 no. 2 (April 1958), pp. 236–241.

²⁶ ASF, Provvisioni, registri 36 fols. 63v–64r; Provvisioni, registri 37 fol. 7v; *Capitoli del Comune di Firenze, inventario e regesto*, edited by C. Guasti, A. Gherardi, vol. 2 (Florence: Cellini, 1893), p. 61 note 7; 257–266, 311–314. Matteo Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, vol. 1, edited by Giuseppe Porta (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 1995), pp. 48–49; Demetrio Marzi, *La Cancelleria della Repubblica Fiorentina*, Rocca San Casciano: Cappelli 1909), pp. 667–669, Samuel K. Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 140.

lords” of the region.²⁷ In May 1350, Francesco degli Ordelaffi, lord of Forlì, attacked nearby Bertinoro, a town that was part of the papal state.²⁸ The Malatesta of Rimini moved on the Marche in 1349–1350.²⁹ Hungarian and French branches of the Angevin family fought in Naples in 1349.³⁰ The two commercial republics, Genoa and Venice, battled on the Black Sea in August 1350. The Visconti of Milan and the Church were at odds.³¹ Siena and Orvieto quarreled over rights to castles in bordering territories.³² And Matteo Villani spoke of war also in Tunis in northern Africa and the ongoing “Hundred Years War” between England and France.

The inclusion of war alters the current portrait of post-plague Florence delineated by scholars, and raises important questions that are not easily answered. It affords an opportunity to cross subfields and even disciplinary boundaries and to reevaluate literary and historical trends that are usually treated separately.

The sources cast new light on the friendship between Petrarch and Boccaccio, their political activities, their connection to the establishment of the new university in Florence, and their attitude toward, and appropriation of, Dante, who, as Simon Gilson and others have argued, served as literary intermediary in the developing amity between the men.³³ At the same time, the documents reveal a Florentine army that, contra Machiavelli and the scholarly consensus, was not “ad hoc,” “backward,” or lacking a native component, but built around a small cadre of “faithful” mercenaries and professionalized local infantrymen, some of whom worked over the long run for the city, even invested in the public debt and lent money to the city for the war! Florentine officials appropriated revenue from pious bequests of plague victims to the confraternity of Orsanmichele, Florence’s main charitable institution, to help pay for

²⁷ *Cronaca malatestiana*, edited by Aldo Massera, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, vol. 15 (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1922–1924), p. 17.

²⁸ Albano Sorbelli, *La Signoria di Giovanni Visconti a Bologna e le sue relazioni con la Toscana* (Bologna: Forni, 1902), pp. 2–4.

²⁹ P. J. Jones, *The Malatesta Lords of Rimini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 65; ASF, Missive I Cancelleria, fol. 2v; Capitoli, registri 27 fol. 40r; Demetrio Marzi, *La Cancelleria della Repubblica Fiorentina*, pp. 653–657.

³⁰ ASF, Capitoli 27 registri, fols. 40r–54r; Demetrio Marzi, *La Cancelleria della Repubblica Fiorentina*, pp. 653–654.

³¹ Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 175–176; Mario Brunetti, “La battaglia di Castro (1350),” *Rivista marittima*, 43 (January–March 1910), pp. 269–282.

³² Demetrio Marzi, *La Cancelleria della Repubblica Fiorentina*, p. 663.

³³ Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski, “Petrarch and His Friends” in *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 16–34; Simon Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

the war, using one form of misery to fund another. Infantrymen recruited from the mountainous regions of the state recycled war money back to their rural communities.

The documents provide an especially close look at Florence's public labor force – and, above all, its army, a large part of that labor force – whose wages have never been studied, but behave differently from current plague models. Demographic contraction enabled workers to do more than one job – evidence that, along with careful consideration of their terms of employment, calls into question scholarly attempts to posit modern notions of occupation into the distant past. Meanwhile, the shortage of labor had profound and unexpected institutional and diplomatic consequences. Florence employed men of low rank, members of the so-called family (*famiglia*) of the priors – bell ringers, servants (*donzelli*), and cooks (whom Petrarch notes were traditionally considered the “most vile” of men) – on long-term embassies to the most important diplomatic destinations, including the papal court in Avignon, the Holy Roman Empire, and Hungary.³⁴ Thus, while the city projected itself, in Nicolai Rubinstein's famous formulation, as a “bastion of republicanism” in these years, it appears to have conducted vital foreign policy matters by means of personal retainers of the executives of the city in a manner similar to the tyrannies it condemned. Florentine bureaucratic structures were porous and personal, and, like medieval notions of occupation, difficult to apprehend in modern terms.

The war with the Ubaldini even affected the physical landscape of the city. Master builders (*capomaestri*) hired in 1349 to build the church of Sant'Anna in honor of plague victims were sent to the town of Scarperia in the Mugello in 1350 to oversee the building of trebuchets – machines of war – and the destruction of Ubaldini castles. The church project was halted on account of this, and indeed was never completed.³⁵

II

Contemplation of the periphery, in short, alters our apprehension of the center, and close consideration of an all too pedestrian war connects literary and historical trends. This volume follows Teodolinda Barolini's eloquent plea to better “historicize” great literary figures, whose lives and material circumstances remain insufficiently

³⁴ Gene Brucker, “Bureaucracy and Social Welfare in the Renaissance,” *Journal of Modern History* 55 (March 1983), p. 4; Petrarch, *Familiars* VIII, 4, vol. 1.

³⁵ Saverio La Sorsa, *La Compagnia d'or San Michele, ovvero una pagina della beneficenza in Toscana nel secolo XIV* (Trani: V. Vecchi, 1902), pp. 110–111, 240–250.