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What News on the Rialto? The Trade of Information and Early Modern Venice's Centralized Intelligence Organization

Intelligence and National Security, vol. 31 no. 3

DOI: 10.1080/02684527.2015.1041712

This version is available: <https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/2b05b609-a326-42e6-91aa-ff4055b80bc8/1/>

Available on RADAR: 11.11.2016

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What News on the Rialto?

The Trade of Information and Early Modern Venice's Centralised Intelligence Organisation

ABSTRACT This article explores one of the earliest centrally organised state intelligence services in world history. Contrary to the orthodoxy that sees systematised intelligence as a modern political phenomenon, this was developed in early modern Venice. The article reveals the complex organisation of Venetian systemised intelligence that distinguished it from other contemporaneous states' espionage networks. It also shows how Venetian authorities commodified intelligence by engaging citizens and subjects in a trade of information for mutual benefits. Ultimately, the article challenges our understanding of early modern political communication and offers a fresh vista of intelligence as a business trait and economic necessity.

*As love and good intelligence bear the security of our possessions, so do rumours and disagreements jeopardise everything.*¹

Introduction

Intelligence gathering and espionage have long fascinated the reader and, in more recent years, the historian. Official and unofficial narratives of clandestine operations, covert agents and intelligence agencies have competed for shelf-space in bookshops and libraries, to complement the ever-appealing genre of spy fiction. Indeed, historians have been scrutinising declassified records in their efforts to produce a robust history of the subject. This, however, spans largely from the eve of The Great War to the twenty first century,² while more distant eras remain unexplored. Scholars have recognised the implications of this dearth and some work has been done on early modern states like England (and later Britain),³ France,⁴ the Dutch Republic,⁵ the Habsburg and Ottoman empires,⁶ Portugal,⁷ Spain,⁸ and the dominant Italian states.⁹

¹ The Council of Ten to the Proveditor of Corfu, Archivio di Stato di Venezia (Hereafter ASV), Consiglio dei Dieci (hereafter CX), *Parti Segrete*, Registro (hereafter Reg.) 11, carta (hereafter c.) 65 recto (hereafter r.) (10 Nov. 1575).

² The bibliography on this topic is vast. For an overview see Philip Knightley, *The Second Oldest Profession: Spies and Spying in the Twentieth Century* (London: Deutsch 1987); For Britain, see Christopher R. Moran, 'The Pursuit of Intelligence History: Methods, Sources, and Trajectories in the United Kingdom', *Studies in Intelligence* 55/2 (2011), pp.33-55.

³ Peter Fraser, *The Intelligence of the Secretaries of State and their Monopoly of Licensed News* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1956); Alan Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994).

⁴ Lucien Bély, *Espions et Ambassadeurs au Temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Fayard 1990).

⁵ Karl De Leeuw, 'The Black Chamber in the Dutch Republic during the War of the Spanish Succession and its Aftermath, 1707–1715', *Historical Journal* 42/1 (1999), pp.133-156.

⁶ Emrah Safa Gürkan, *Espionage in the 16th Century Mediterranean: Secrecy, Diplomacy, Mediterranean Go-betweeners and the Ottoman Habsburg Rivalry*, unpublished PhD thesis (Georgetown University, 2012).

⁷ Fernando Cortés Cortés, *Espionagem e Contra-Espionagem numa Guerra Peninsular 1640–1668* (Lisbon: Livros Horizonte 1990).

⁸ Carlos J. Carnicer Garcia and Javier Marcos Rivas, *Espías de Felipe II: Los Servicios Secretos del Imperio Español* (Madrid: La esfera de los libros 2005); Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1998). For an overview of the literature, see Christopher Storrs, 'Intelligence and the

Despite these notable efforts, our understanding of pre-modern intelligence and espionage remains fairly limited and reliant on a few accounts of individual spies or spymasters,¹⁰ espionage networks and their covert operations,¹¹ and cryptography.¹² These scattered scholarly outputs reveal the unsystematic exploration of the ways in which intelligence emerged and evolved in its trajectory towards the contemporary state-of-the-art intelligence services.¹³ Additionally, historians of intelligence have primarily focused their attention on the political and military nature of espionage. The expansionist and economic drivers that greased the wheels of strategy formulation and policy making, however, have been overwhelmingly neglected, if not ousted from the study of pre-modern intelligence. In other words, the unsystematic historical exploration of intelligence has centred on the latter's political character and implications, while the social and economic aspects of its evolution and systematisation remain uncharted territory. The absence of relevant sources is often held by historians as the reason for this.¹⁴ Yet, it is fascinating to know that already by the end of the fifteenth century governments had started to formalise information management and knowledge control.¹⁵ This took form in the systematic organisation of record keeping and archiving.¹⁶ Archival records, therefore, exist and await exploration in order to unravel the gestation and systematisation of intelligence in the pre-modern era.

While potential monographs on this subject merit consideration, this dearth has led to a misconception that sophisticated diplomacy, bureaucracy and state-organised security are characteristic of the modern state.¹⁷ As this article will contend, this orthodoxy is no longer

Formulation of Policy and Strategy in Early Modern Europe: The Spanish Monarchy in the Reign of Charles II (1665-1700)', *Intelligence and National Security* 21/4 (2006), pp.493-519.

⁹ On Venice, see Paolo Preto, *I Servizi Segreti di Venezia: Spionaggio e Controspionaggio ai Tempi della Serenissima* (Milan: Il Saggiatore 1994); on Venice and Genoa, see Romano Canosa, *Alle Origini delle Polizie Politiche: Gli Inquisitori di Stato a Venezia e a Genova* (Milano: Sugarco 1989); on Savoy, see Christopher Storrs, *War, Diplomacy and the Rise of Savoy, 1690-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999); On Milan, see Francesco Senatore, *"Uno Mondo de Carta": Forme e Strutture della Diplomazia Sforzesca* (Naples: Liguori 1998); on the Italian states in general, see the essays in Daniela Frigo (ed.) *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000).

¹⁰ On England, see James Cooper, *The Queen's Agent: Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I* (London: Faber and Faber 2011); Alan Haynes, *Walsingham: Elizabethan Spymaster and Statesman* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton 2004); On Spain, see Carnicer Garcia and Rivas, *Espias de Felipe II*; on France, see Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 2009).

¹¹ Joseph Dedieu, *Le Rôle Politique des Protestants Français 1685-1715* (Paris, Bloud & Gay 1920); Philip S. Lachs, *The Diplomatic Corps Under Charles II and James II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1965).

¹² David Kahn, *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner's 1996).

¹³ One exception is Diego Navarro Bonilla's analysis of 53 political, military and diplomatic treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Diego Navarro Bonilla, "'Secret Intelligences' in European Military, Political and Diplomatic Theory: An Essential Factor in the Defense of the Modern State (Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries)", *Intelligence and National Security* 27/2 (2012), pp.283-301.

¹⁴ Daniel Szechi, 'Introduction: The "Dangerous Trade" in Early Modern Europe', in idem, *The Dangerous Trade: Spies, Spymasters and the Making of Europe* (Dundee: Dundee University Press 2010), pp.1-21, (pp.16-17).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Voncent Hardi, *Studies in Italian Renaissance Diplomatic History* (London, Aldershot 1995); Senatore, *"Uno Mondo de Carta"*.

¹⁶ For Venice, see Filippo de Vivo, 'Ordering the Archive in Early Modern Venice (1400-1650)', *Archival Science* 10/3 (2010), pp.231-248; Armand Baschet, *Les Archives de Venise* (Paris, Henri Plon 1870). For Italy, in general, see Paul Marcus Dover, 'Deciphering the Diplomatic Archives of Fifteenth-Century Italy', *Archival Science* 7/4 (2007), pp.297-316. For Spain, see José Luis Rodríguez de Diego, *Instrucción Para el Gobierno del Archivo de Simancas (año 1588)* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura 1989).

¹⁷ Bernard Porter, *Plots and Paranoia: A History of Political Espionage in Britain, 1790-1988* (London: Unwin Hyman 1989); William O. Walker III, *National Security and Core Values in American History* (New York:

sustainable. Exploring records from the Archives of Venice, Simancas and London, this article will challenge this view, by revisiting one of the world's earliest centrally organised state intelligence services. This took shape and form in the pre-modern world, in early modern Venice. There, the systematic, corporate-like organisation of bureaucracy, diplomacy and intelligence undergirded the city's commercial and maritime supremacy.

The article will start with a brief discussion of Venice's emerging administrative and bureaucratic structures that saw not only the systematic organisation of information and official record-keeping, but the systemisation of diplomacy and, as a result, the sophistication of secret intelligence processes.¹⁸ It will proceed to discuss the different communication channels the Republic employed for its clandestine missions; the development and refinement of its state intelligence apparatus; and the significance of secrecy in rendering Venice one of the most supreme commercial and maritime empires in the early modern world. The article will particularly focus on the composite complexity, efficiency and corporate-like organisation of Venice's intelligence apparatus that distinguished it from other contemporaneous states' espionage networks. It will also show how the Republic used the commercial mind-set of even politically excluded Venetian commoners to render them dealers in information of political consequence. In doing so, it will reveal a hitherto unknown facet of politically excluded Venetians. Ultimately, the article will advance the value of broadening and deepening the historical study of intelligence beyond the modern era and past the realm of politics.

Intelligence and Information Gathering in Early Modern Venice

In May 1591 the Venetian merchant Antonio Tizzoni visited a Venetian public notary to make a formal declaration. The document in question, drafted and also signed by Tizzoni's naval crew two years earlier in England, declared a severe incident. In 1589 Tizzoni's galley was captured by English corsairs close to the Cape of St. Vincent in the Algarve. From there, it was transported to England, where the corsairs seized a precious trunk containing paintings of the Siege of Malta. The paintings belonged to the Portuguese Don Diego di Sosa, a member of the Order of the Knights of Malta, but the looters destined them for the High Admiral of England as a gift. Notably, the value or the intention of the cargo was not deemed worthy of mention in the official document.¹⁹

A few decades earlier a woman named Laura Troilo was making her living by entertaining eminent men as a courtesan. Courtesantry was a more refined form of prostitution, one of early modern Venice's thriving industries.²⁰ Courtesans were highly educated and sophisticated female companions of men in power. Mannerly and cultured, they were distinct from ordinary prostitutes due to their education and eloquent use of language. They were

Cambridge University Press 2009); Richard C. Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (London: Wiley 1994); Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1994).

¹⁸ On the systemisation of diplomacy, see Isabella Lazzarini, 'Renaissance Diplomacy', in A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012), pp.425-443; on the link between the history of communication and intelligence, see Larry Willmore, 'Government Policies toward Information and Communication Technologies: A Historical Perspective', *Journal of Information Science* 28/2 (2002), pp.89-96.

¹⁹ ASV, *Notarile Atti*, busta (hereafter b.) 11653, p. 229, Notary Marino Renio (14 May 1591).

²⁰ Some of the most notable studies on Venetian courtesans include: Antonio Berzaghi, *Donne o Cortigiane? La Prostituzione a Venezia. Documenti di Costume dal XVI al XVIII Secolo* (Verona: Bertani 1980); Rita Casagrande, *Le cortigiane Veneziane del Cinquecento* (Milan: Longanesi 1968); Doretta Davanzo Poli and Irene Ariano (eds.), *Il Gioco dell'Amore. Le Cortigiane di Venezia dal Trecento a Settecento* (Milan: Benincasa 1990); Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1992).

renowned for both their sexual and intellectual capacities, and it was due to the latter that they were sought by reputable men and feared by the Venetian authorities.²¹ In that capacity – and in perfect fusing of the two oldest professions in the world – Laura Troilo entrapped and denounced a state official for revealing state secrets. Antonio Landi, the official in question, was serving as state secretary for the Senate. With his wife permanently in Padua, Landi frequented the residence of Troilo, where he met another one of her clients, Giovanni Battista Trevisan. Both men frequently engaged in political conversations, but to ensure secrecy, the conversations were held in Latin. Suspicious of this, Troilo informed a friend, Girolamo Amadi, who, hidden behind the bed, overheard the two plotting to communicate state secrets to the Duke of Mantua, a close friend of Trevisan's and a bitter foe of Venice. The denouncers reported the pariahs to the authorities and were handsomely rewarded for doing business with them.²²

Both these reports are representative of ways in which information of political weight was communicated in early modern Venice.²³ Upon reading them, one could contest their relevance to intelligence. After all, what do these have to do with covert operations? This seemingly simple observation encapsulates the fundamental issues associated with the study of pre-modern intelligence, that are, in fact, more complicated than a scholar of modern intelligence might envisage. Defining intelligence as a historical phenomenon is problematic. What constitutes intelligence throughout history? Is it a professional service or a civic duty? Is it a political act or an economic necessity? Actually, intelligence can be all of the above and because of its multi-valency, that is, its different manifestations in different circumstances, it means different things to different people.

In early modern Venice the term 'intelligence' meant 'communication' or 'understanding'. In this article, the term will be used to denote any kind of information of political, economic, social or cultural nature that was worthy of evaluation and meaningful decision of potential action by the government. In Venice this was made possible due to a variety of information gathering and communication channels: the *political* channel of the formally established governmental institutions like the Senate, the *Collegio*, and the Council of Ten; the *commercial* channel, made up of a maze of merchants' letters and reports;²⁴ and the *personal* channel, whereby individuals of all levels of society, eponymously or anonymously, collected and divulged information pertaining to state security. Although rumours and fabrications were unavoidable, the frantic existence of these composite communication channels enabled the systematic evaluation of information through the process of comparison.²⁵

Venice as an Information Centre

To trace the origins of modern intelligence, one must inevitably cross paths with Venice, one of the most significant commercial and maritime empires in the early modern world. Between the fifteenth and mid-sixteenth century, Venice had dominated vast parts of northern Italy,

²¹ Elizabeth Horodowich, *Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), p.177.

²² Giuseppe Tassinari, *Alcune delle più Clamoroze Condanne Capitali Eseguite a Venezia* (Venice: Tipografia di G. Cecchini 1866), pp. 129-130; See also, Marino Sanudo, *I Diarii*, edited by Rinaldo Fulin, Federico Stefani, Nicolò Barozzi, Guglielmo Berchet, Marco Allegri (Venice: F. Visntini 1879-1903), vol. 1., pp.918-919.

²³ On the circulation of political information in Venice, see Filippo De Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007); Horodowich, *Language and Statecraft*.

²⁴ On the difficulties examining this body of documentation, see Richard Mackenney, 'Letters from the Venetian Archive', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 72/3(1999) pp.133-144.

²⁵ Gürkan, 'Espionage', pp.39-40.

the Balkan Peninsula and the islands of the Levant.²⁶ Simultaneously, she had become the master of the most strategic Mediterranean and European trade routes, controlling the commerce of luxury items like silk and spices from India and Egypt. In Europe, she provided the main trade link between Germany and the Mediterranean.²⁷ As a result, for early modern Venice commercial and territorial supremacy were blurringly intertwined. This commercial and territorial supremacy, combined with its strategic geographical position midway between the Ottoman and the Spanish empires, placed Venice at the forefront of diplomacy's advancement and sophistication.²⁸ It is due to this position that Venice became the central terrain of encounters between foreign representatives seeking information on behalf of several foreign powers.²⁹

This was not accidental. Alongside its commercial and maritime pre-eminence, St. Mark's protégée gradually became the most significant agency of news in the nascent modern world.³⁰ The fifteenth century saw the revolution of printing and publishing. Very quickly, early modern Europe became obsessed with news that arrived from all corners of the globe and made headlines on various vital affairs, like the menacing advancement of the Ottomans towards European lands; the naval expeditions to the New World; the developments of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation; and, most importantly for Venice, the prices of spices and all the other advancements of a rapidly evolving economy.³¹ So, when Salanio opened the third Scene of *The Merchant of Venice* with the line 'What News on the Rialto?' his contemporary Venetians were well aware of the economic and political weight of this question.

While news was becoming a commodity and a craze in Europe, for Venice it was more or less business as usual, a kind of 'vernacular commerce', as Richard Mackenney pertinently termed it.³² Already from medieval times, the Venetian government's overall orientation towards the protection of trade had led to the development of a deeply-rooted international business network of merchants, brokers and agents.³³ Recognising the vitality of the systematic diffusion of information for commercial advancement and prosperity, the Venetians pioneered one of the world's earliest postal systems, the *Compagnia dei Corrieri*.³⁴ Merchants, as seasoned travellers and correspondents, turned into skilled reporters. Their letters home produced a kind of pre-modern 'data bank'.³⁵ So important was their reportage

²⁶ Frederic C. Lane, *Venice, a Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1973).

²⁷ On the economy of sixteenth-century Venice, see Gino Luzzatto, *Storia Economica di Venezia dall'XI al XVI Secolo* (Venice: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume 1961); Lane, *Venice*; Paola Lanaro (ed.), *At the Centre of the Old World: Trade and Manufacturing in Venice and on the Venetian Mainland (1400-1800)* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies 2006).

²⁸ On the development of diplomacy in medieval and early modern Italy, see Lazzarini, 'Renaissance Diplomacy'; for smaller Italian states see, Frigo, "'Small States' and Diplomacy: Mantua and Modena", in idem (ed.), *Politics and Diplomacy*.

²⁹ De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, pp.70-71.

³⁰ On news in Venice, see Pierre Sardella, *Nouvelles et Spéculations à Venise au Début du XVIe Siècle* (Paris: Colin 1947). On Venice as a centre of news, see Peter Burke, 'Early Modern Venice as a Center of Information and Communication', in J. Martin and D. Romano (eds.), *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2002), pp.389-419; Mario Infelise, 'Professione Reportista: Copisti e Gazzettieri nella Venezia del Seicento', in S. Gasparri, G. Levi, and P. Moro (eds.), *Venezia: Itinerari per la Storia della Città* (Bologna: Il Mulino 1997), pp.193-219.

³¹ See Sardella, *Nouvelles*, pp.19-43; Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2014).

³² Mackenney, 'Letters', p.143.

³³ Pettegree, *The Invention of News*, pp.51-54.

³⁴ On the history of the postal system, see Bruno Caizzi, *Dalla Posta dei Rei alla Posta dei Tutti* (Milan, Franco Angeli 1993).

³⁵ Burke, 'Early Modern Venice', p.391. On merchants and the circulation of information, see Giorgio Doria, 'Conoscenza del Mercato e Sistema Informativo: Il know-how dei Mercanti Finanziari Genovesi nei Secoli XVI

that in a letter to Charles the V, the Imperial ambassador in Venice reiterated that no news on the Turks had arrived from Venetian merchants in Constantinople,³⁶ the city that housed an established colony of Venetian traders with a permanent formal representative, the *bailo*. The systematic correspondence between the Venetian authorities and the *bailo* was overflowing with information of political and economic weight.³⁷ Incessantly reporting on the crucial Ottoman-Venetian relations,³⁸ this communication never went unnoticed or unsuspected by the Turks, and rightly so. In 1491 for instance, the *bailo* was expelled from Constantinople, accused of spying.³⁹ Indeed, he was.

The fast-growing significance of information on the politics and economy of the Venetian empire rendered intelligence of any nature a determining factor in the city's commercial and territorial pre-eminence. As a result, from 1563 the Venetian Republic started to officially inform its citizens on issues that were of particular interest to merchants, Venice's lifeblood. These centred primarily on the on-going rivalry with the Ottomans. This kind of dissemination of information took the form of the world's first newspaper, the *gazeta de la novità*. This namesake of the subsequent eponymous journalistic term was a small monthly news publication named after the *gazeta*, the small copper coin disbursed to purchase it. It was literally a 'halfpennyworth of news' that could be purchased from the Rialto market.⁴⁰

The Rialto market was the economic and commercial hub of Venice. Somewhat like an early modern Wall Street, it was the financial centre of the early modern world, a vast emporium of commodities, money and news. There, the impact of harvests, wars, epidemics and shipwrecks affected the price of victuals which, in turn, determined the price of insurance premiums, public debt investment and foreign currency.⁴¹ The news of the Portuguese's new spice route to India through the Cape of Good Hope in 1501, for instance, sky-rocketed the price of pepper in Venice within four days.⁴² Reports of the seizure of Venetian galleys by the Turkish corsair Kamali in the same year shot maritime insurance rates up from 1.5 to 10 per cent.⁴³ So, for Venetians of all ranks who were either producing or trading commodities, news meant profit or loss. Actually, Venetians could not see a clear-cut distinction between politics and commerce, as political affairs could affect one's business and livelihood, and commercial pursuits could have diplomatic implications.⁴⁴ It is not a coincidence therefore, that their commercial and diplomatic correspondence travelled in the same saddle-bags until, in 1627, the Venetian *corrieri* formally petitioned for two separate sacks.⁴⁵

e XVII', in A. De Maddalena and H. Kellenbenz, (eds.), *La Repubblica Internazionale del Denaro tra XV e XVII secolo* (Bologna: Il Mulino 1986), pp.57-115.

³⁶ Archivio General de Simancas, legajo 1308, c.186 (5 May 1531). Full text in Emilio Sola, "Rodrigo Niño, embajador imperial en Venecia, a la caza de avisos", Archivio de la Frontera, <http://www.archivodelafrontera.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/A-MED08-rodrigo.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2015).

³⁷ See, for instance, ASV, *Inquisitori di Stato* (hereafter *IS*), b. 148 and b. 433 for letters directed to the *bailo*; and *Ibid.*, b. 416-428 for letters sent by the *bailo*. See also the archival series *Secreta*, *Archivio Proprio Costantinopoli*; Senato, *Deliberazioni Costantinopoli*, and *Dispacci Ambasciatori, Costantinopoli*; and Capi del Consiglio dei Dieci (hereafter *CCX*), *Lettere di Ambasciatori, Costantinopoli*.

³⁸ On Venetians gathering information on the Ottomans, see Hans J. Kissling, 'Venezia come centro di informazione sui Turchi', in H. G. Beck, M. I. Manoussakas, and A. Pertusi, (eds.), *Venezia Centro di Mediazione fra Oriente e Occidente (sec. XV-XVI): Aspetti e Problemi* (Florence: L. S. Olschki 1977), vol. 1, pp.97-109.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101

⁴⁰ Julia Cresswell (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), p.186.

⁴¹ Sardella, *Nouvelles*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.90.

⁴⁵ Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, Nuova Serie, b. 46, fascicolo '184' (8 Jan. 1627).

The Systemisation of Diplomacy, Bureaucracy and Intelligence

The evolution of international politics and business was deeply influenced by the advancement of news. The latter was a by-product of the Printing Revolution that ran parallel to the Military Revolution.⁴⁶ A combination of the two led to the consolidation of theories of warfare, politics and diplomacy and their circulation in printed form. As a result, the technical 'how to' literature on efficient ruling, military and ambassadorial practice increased in volume and, gradually, significance.⁴⁷ Treatises on effective diplomatic practice started to emerge everywhere in Europe and with them came an 'increasing documentary consciousness.'⁴⁸

With diplomacy on the path of sophistication, rulers, diplomats and political thinkers steadily worked towards the systematic organisation of information management processes.⁴⁹ Bureaucracy was taking shape and form and Venice was behind the wheel of this process. To ensure the efficiency of its diplomatic service, already from 1402 the Venetian authorities had established the official archive of the Republic's state secrets. This was formally named *Cancellaria Secreta*, the Secret Chancellery, and affectionately termed *cor status nostri*, the heart of our state.⁵⁰ For security purposes, the *Secreta* was situated in the Ducal Palace, Venice's political nucleus. Security was so stringent that even the Doge could not enter unaccompanied. Ambassadors' dispatches and any other classified reports were stored therein and governmental scribes, sworn to unyielding secrecy, meticulously copied and archived them day in day out.⁵¹ It should not come as a surprise then, that only illiterate candidates stood a chance of appointment as the archive's guards.⁵² And it is not accidental that, as part of these bureaucratic processes, the Venetian government invested on the systematic development of cryptography, cryptanalysis and steganography.⁵³

The earliest collection of dispatches in the *Secreta* dates from 1477. It took some time for the authorities to grasp the significance of preserving these documents. Once in the sixteenth century they did, however, they systematised this procedure.⁵⁴ By the late sixteenth century, the gates of the *Secreta* were opened to officials who were tasked with penning the history of Venice. Although there was no formal equivalent of an Official Secrets Act, official historians were not allowed to consult documents of the last decade, as their relevance to current affairs rendered them classified.⁵⁵ Unquestionably, any publication of material was subject to approval by the authorities⁵⁶ and any unauthorised or uncensored publication was confiscated and destroyed.⁵⁷ In consequence, the collection, management and dissemination of information assumed strategic significance for Venice.

⁴⁶ See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996).

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Betty Behrens, 'Treatises on the Ambassador Written in Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries', *English Historical Review* LI/CCIV (1936), pp.616-627.

⁴⁸ Lazzarini, 'Renaissance Diplomacy', p.433.

⁴⁹ For an overview, see Bonilla, 'Secret Intelligences'.

⁵⁰ See De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, pp.48-49.

⁵¹ ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Reg. 19, c.59r./verso (hereafter v.) (5 Apr. 1639).

⁵² Baschet, *Les Archives de Venise*, pp.175-176.

⁵³ See, for instance, ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Filza (hereafter f.) 15, (23 Nov.; 30 Dec. 1571). Ibid., Reg. 19, cc.18r./v. (14 July 1636).

⁵⁴ Burke, 'Early Modern Venice', p.393.

⁵⁵ ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Reg. 11, c.130 (17 May 1577).

⁵⁶ The review committee were the *Riformatori dello Studio di Padova*. See ASV, CX, *Parti Comuni*, f. 36, c.154r. (7 Feb. 1544 *more veneto* – hereafter m.v. Nb. The Venetian calendar started on March 1st. All dates in this article follow this pattern).

⁵⁷ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, f. 8 (28 Feb. 1572 m.v.)

This significance was not solely influential in the political landscape, where most intelligence scholars have cast their focus.⁵⁸ This is because in Venice intelligence did not only serve purposes of political nature. Economic espionage that pertained to commerce and industry was as important for a capitalistic metropolis like Venice as its military equivalent.⁵⁹ This type of espionage was not new to the early modern world. The fascination with secrets of alchemy, science and nature harks back in medieval times and history is filled with instances of unauthorised seizures of technical secrets for competitive advantage.⁶⁰ The Chinese were the first victims of this form of competitive intelligence. Their secrets of silk and porcelain production were stolen by the Byzantines in the sixth century and the Jesuits in the eighteenth century, respectively.⁶¹ The history of Venetian industry and trade abounds with cases of craftsmen and merchant spies sent abroad in order to extract information for their business affairs and the Venetian commercial community as a whole. Such state-initiated clandestine missions involved reporting on new techniques for textile, cannon, mirror and porcelain production, with the intention of stealing a march on competitors.⁶²

Economic and industrial counter-intelligence was even more formalised in Venice. The prospect of the flight of artisans and, in consequence, the diffusion of trade secrets was an issue that haunted the Venetian authorities for centuries. As a result, in the name of Venetian monopoly, laws were created that forbade specialist craftsmen of strategic Venetian industries like ship, glass and silk production to emigrate. Disobedience was subject to civil and criminal sanctions, including death.⁶³ Such state regulations were mandated by the Venetian guilds, which undergirded the export of Venetian products and restricted the diffusion of technical knowledge.⁶⁴ The guild of the glassmakers, for instance, guarded specialist secrets with incredible zeal.⁶⁵ As early as 1271, any glassmaker who set up workshop outside the city was liable to a fine. By 1295 those who dared defy this regulation risked expulsion from the guild.⁶⁶ Similarly for the silk-weavers, by the 1370s their emigration was forbidden by law under the threat of one year's imprisonment and a fine.⁶⁷

This type of counter-intelligence was part of Venetian diplomats and spies' professional repertoire. In 1572 the *bailo* wrote of the presence in the Ottoman Arsenal of the renegade shipbuilder Nicolò Frassidono who produced replicas of the renowned *quinqueremis* designed by the Venetian humanist and naval architect Vettor Fausto.⁶⁸ It seems that the Ottomans wished to boost their Navy with Venetian-like vessels, in an effort to forestall

⁵⁸ On this issue, see Brendan Dooley and Sabrina A. Baron (eds.), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge 2001).

⁵⁹ See Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*, pp.381-402.

⁶⁰ See William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Book of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994).

⁶¹ Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*, p.381.

⁶² See, for instance, ASV, *IS*, b. 459 (19 June, 28 Aug. 1668).

⁶³ Maximilian Frumkin, 'The Origins of Patents', *Journal of the Patent Office Society* 27/3 (1945), pp.143-49, p.144.

⁶⁴ On the Venetian guilds, see Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders: The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, c. 1250 – c. 1650* (London: Croom Helm 1987); Idem, 'Guilds and Guildsmen in Sixteenth Century Venice', *Bulletin of the Society for Renaissance Studies* 2 (1984), pp.7-18; Francesca Trivellato, 'Guilds, Technology, and Economic Change in Early Modern Venice', in S. R. Epstein and M. Prak (eds.), *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), pp.199-231.

⁶⁵ See Eduardo Juárez Valero, *Venecia y el Secreto del Vidrio: Cuatrocientos Años de Monopolio* (Madrid, Catarata 2013).

⁶⁶ Giovanni Monticcolo and Enrico Besta (eds), *I Capitolari delle Arti Veneziane Sottoposte alla Giustizia e poi alla Giustizia Vecchia dalle Origini al 1330* (Rome: Forzani & C. 1896-1914), 3 vols. See, specifically, vol. 2.

⁶⁷ Luca Molà, *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2000), pp.43-44.

⁶⁸ The Ten's permission for the production of Fausto's vessel is in ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Reg. 1, c.31r. (23 Sep. 1525). On Fausto, see Ennio Concina, *Navis. L'Umanesimo Sul Mare* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi 1990).

another disaster like their ignominious defeat at Lepanto the year before.⁶⁹ Writing from Genoa a century later, the governmental agent Antonio Bortoluzzi reported the relocation of five Muranese glassmakers in the city that was the perennial thorn in Venice's side. They headed thither, he stated, to 'plant a new Murano'. In a bid to higher compensation, Bortoluzzi volunteered to personally repatriate and reinstate them to the service of the Republic.⁷⁰ Evidently, already from the pre-modern era piracy had multiple meanings and manifestations. It is not a coincidence therefore, that Venice was the first European state that, as early as 1474, granted patents that permitted not only monopolistic exploitation for a period of time, but licences of service.⁷¹

It becomes apparent that intelligence in early modern Venice was not simply the collection of information of political or military nature; it encompassed a wide spectrum of spheres, including those of economy and society. In fact, early modern Venetian intelligence emerged in the continuum between politics, economy and society and became the key determinant of the Republic's commercial and, by extension, political supremacy.⁷² It is due to this continuum that the notion of intelligence, as we perceive it today, becomes blurred. A discussion of the variety of professional and amateur intelligencers that the Republic employed for its clandestine missions will help clear the murky landscape of pre-modern intelligence.

Channels and Agents of Information in Early Modern Venice

It has already become evident that for a quintessential commercial metropolis like Venice, intelligence was a major player in the city's commercial and territorial supremacy. It has also been contended that in Venice there were three main channels of information and intelligence gathering and reportage: the *political*, the *commercial* and the *personal*. So, who were the spies and informants of the Republic that made part of these channels? They were actually recruited from a wide spectrum of social ranks depending on their distinctive set of skills and the variety of tasks they were asked to perform.

The gradual systemisation of covert communication throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be attributed to the key role embassies played on the organised flow of information through their networks. Ambassadors were instrumental in this process.⁷³ Venetian ambassadors were not an exception. These were noblemen who were officially sent on diplomatic missions in foreign courts and were responsible for representation, negotiation and information.⁷⁴ In a way, they professionalised the act of information gathering through their systematic collection and dispatch of detailed intelligence reports. To ensure secrecy, these were more often than not drafted in cipher. Venetian ambassadors acted as quasi-official spies for the Republic, tasked with spying on the plans and the secrets of other princes.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ ASV, Secreta, *Archivio Proprio Costantinopoli*, f. 6 (15 Sep. 1572).

⁷⁰ ASV, IS, b. 554 (29 Jul. 1673).

⁷¹ Edward Wydham Hulme, 'History of the Patent System under the Prerogative of the Common Law', *Law Quarterly Review* 12 (1896), pp.141-154; On questioning intellectual property as the subject of this regulation, see Ted Sichelman and Sean O'Connor, 'Patents as Promoters of Competition: The Guild Origin of Patent Law in the Venetian Republic', *San Diego Law Review* (2012), 49/129, pp.1267-1282.

⁷² See De Vivo, *Information and Communication*.

⁷³ Béatrice Perez (ed.), *Ambassadeurs, Apprentis Espions et Maîtres Comploteurs: Les Systèmes de Renseignement en Espagne à l'époque Moderne* (Paris: PU Paris-Sorbonne 2010).

⁷⁴ Lazzarini, 'Renaissance Diplomacy', p.430. On Venetian ambassadors, see Donald E. Queller, *Early Venetian Legislation on Ambassadors* (Geneva: Librairie Dross 1966).

⁷⁵ Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*, p.197-198.

The Venetian *political* channel of information was not solely restricted to formal ambassadors, as was the case for other Italian states.⁷⁶ Venice's sophisticated diplomatic network extended to officially appointed representatives in Venetian cities in the *Terraferma* (the Venetian mainland) – the *rettori*; in Venetian dominated regions of the *Stato da Mar* (the Venetian overseas possessions) – the *Proveditori*; and in other areas of the Mediterranean where there was notable Venetian merchant presence – the *consoli*. Intelligence gathering was part of those envoys' duties and they all appointed and oversaw their individual informants in order to fulfil their responsibilities. The Venetian authorities did not micromanage this process. They received the information, channelled it back to all relevant authorities, commanded and expected execution, trusting that their delegates would see to the job. In July 1574, for instance, the rectors of Verona received orders to arrest and question three Veronese men on the grounds of a severe accusation. A French alchemist resident in the city wrote directly to the French King, warning him that the three had prepared a lethal poison for him. Undeniably, a potential assassination of the *most Christian* of Kings by Venetian subjects could cause a major diplomatic incident. The rectors, therefore, were instructed to have the residences of the potential culprits searched for suspicious documents, chemicals and anything that could indicate criminal action. Within two days they responded to the authorities that there was no reason to suspect those 'men of good nature' but would not free them without direct orders from Venice. Eventually, the French alchemist's letter was considered a hoax, the authorities requested no further action and the incident was buried.⁷⁷ This is just one instance of the corporate-like distribution of duties within the Venetian intelligence apparatus that set it apart from other states' intelligence operations. The latter primarily relied on the communication between the ruler and the ambassador.⁷⁸

Merchants and businessmen comprised the *commercial* channel of intelligence gathering and reportage. This is because secrecy and efficient intelligence had been widely regarded as key constituents of successful business affairs. Frederic Lane's famous merchant of Venice, Andrea Barbarigo, already from the 1430s had created his own cipher for confidential communication with his business agent in the Levant.⁷⁹ It should not come as a surprise then that Venetian merchants, as seasoned travellers and dealers in both merchandise and news, made perfect undercover agents for the Venetian authorities. In 1496, for instance, during the ongoing rivalry between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, the young merchant and future doge of Venice Andrea Gritti was a resident merchant in Constantinople. Aside from his commercial duties, he was charged with sending intelligence of political and military nature to his motherland. To prevent suspicion, Gritti coded his intelligence in commercial lingo and presented it as business communication instead. He once reported, for instance, that he was in prison for debt but he would be released in June, meaning that the Turkish fleet was planning to set sail in that month.⁸⁰ Commercial coding proved quite a popular clandestine practice for Venetian spies. During the Fourth Ottoman-Venetian war, the Venetian authorities appointed the Jewish merchant Caim Saruch as their spy in the Sublime Porte. A skilled intelligencer, Saruch even produced – and had approved by the authorities – his own cipher, coding the Ottomans as 'drugs', their army as a 'caravan', and artillery as 'mirrors'.⁸¹ Overall, even when not always on official covert missions, merchants were instructed to signal any

⁷⁶ Senatore, "Uno Mundo de Carta"; Frigo, 'Small States'.

⁷⁷ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Secrete*, f. 9 (27 July 1574).

⁷⁸ Senatore, "Uno Mundo de Carta"; Frigo, 'Small States'.

⁷⁹ The cipher is in ASV, *Archivio Grimani-Barbarigo*, b. 41, Reg. 1, c.158r. On Barbarigo, see Frederic C. Lane, *Andrea Barbarigo Merchant of Venice 1418-1449* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1944).

⁸⁰ James C. Davis, 'Shipping and Spying in the Early Career of a Venetian Doge, 1496-1502', *Studi Veneziani* XVI (1974), pp.97-108, (p.102).

⁸¹ ASV, CX, *Parti Secrete*, f. 15 (23 Nov.; 30 Dec. 1571).

suspicious manoeuvre of the enemies' ships, especially from various areas of the Middle East where they were stationed.⁸²

In a business-savvy state like Venice the secret services devised several tactics to utilise the *personal* intelligence gathering pursuits of all members of the Venetian society.⁸³ Clergy and Jews, the former due to social respect, the latter due to lack of it, enjoyed a relative immunity that rendered them effective covert operatives. In February 1500, for instance, a strange mission was assigned to the Jewish doctor Leon Abravanel who lived in Naples. Aside from his medical practice, Abravanel was known as a skilled astrologer. In that capacity, he was sent to Constantinople to extract information from the Sultan's astrologer.⁸⁴ Other respectable professionals like lawyers and notaries, with direct access to their clients' private affairs, acted as frequent informants to the government. Depending on the value of the communication they traded, they did not hesitate to leak information to the Spanish and French ambassadors when the opportunity arose to pad their pockets.⁸⁵

More strikingly, commoners, in their various trades and professions, were also engaged in intelligence gathering and, at times, espionage. Apothecaries, due to their pricy merchandise and, as a result, distinguished clientele, had access to information that was potentially of interest to the authorities.⁸⁶ Barber shops, where men of any rank mingled and chattered during their daily grooming routine, became hubs of political conversations and, as a result, the locals of many information dealers.⁸⁷ Travellers, soldiers and refugees were charged with sharing news about war, national politics and international affairs.⁸⁸ Residents in Venetian subject territories became local agents for the Republic on account of their linguistic abilities. Even banished criminals were frequently tasked with covert missions due to their audacious personalities.⁸⁹ One striking example of a banished felon turned secret agent is that of Giovanni Antonio Barata. In February 1571, at the break of the war with the Turks, the Republic was desperate for reconnaissance in the Ottoman capital. In need of cash, Barata did not think twice. Furnished with an extensive job description, a 'handmade' cipher for producing 'merchant-style' letters, and instructions on using invisible ink, he was sent to Constantinople to spy on the enemy.⁹⁰ Conscious of his hazardous mission, the Venetian authorities took his wife and young children under their wing while he was on duty. For this purpose, they relocated them to the Venetian city of Bergamo and provided them with a monthly stipend which turned into a permanent yearly pension for Barata's widow when, nearly one year later, he was decapitated in Constantinople.⁹¹

So, it is fair to say that in early modern Venice there was spying, rather than spies. This is not surprising since intelligence, as a professional service, had not yet been subjected to formal division of labour between professional activities.⁹² In this respect, it is difficult to construct a clear definition of a spy in that period. The Venetian author Tommaso Garzoni, however, anticipated this challenge. In a 1587 treatise, he defined spies as 'the sort of people that, in secret, follow armies and enter cities, exploring the affairs of enemies, and reporting them back to their own people. And even if the profession is infamous and, if found, they are

⁸² Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*, pp.248-250.

⁸³ Kissling, 'Venezia come centro'.

⁸⁴ ASV, CCX, *Lettere di Ambasciatori*, b. 18 (15 Feb. 1500).

⁸⁵ De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, p.78.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.91.

⁸⁹ Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*, p.247.

⁹⁰ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Secrete*, f. 7 (17 Feb. 1570 m.v.); ASV, CX, *Parti Secrete*, Reg. 9, cc.126v.-127r. (26 Jan. 1570 m.v.).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, c.198r. (15 Dec.1571).

⁹² Peter Burke, 'Early Modern Venice', p.393.

hung by the neck, these people are essential, as History and practice have shown.’⁹³ His contemporary Bartolomeo Pellicciari from Modena described spies on similar terms in his treatise on the instrumentality of good intelligence in military affairs.⁹⁴

Already by the beginning of the seventeenth century the word ‘spy’ had assumed negative connotations for Venetians. It was most commonly used to indicate an enemy’s informant or the one that reported on the suspicious behaviour of fellow citizens.⁹⁵ In this context a spy was called *spia* or *spione*. A 1613 anonymous denunciation for instance, accused a certain Fausto Verdelli of being a *spione*, speaking of Venice in a despicable manner and reporting on Venetian affairs to Savoy, Lorraine, Flanders, and the Spanish ambassador.⁹⁶ For linguistic distinction, one’s own spies were called *confidenti*,⁹⁷ a term that replaced the Medieval Latin idiom *explorator*.⁹⁸ The remit of a *confidente* was by no means restricted to political or military espionage. As their innumerable surviving reports testify, they informed on any matter of state security.

One did not have to be on the government’s permanent payroll to be a spy. Casually contracted informants were in high demand, as long as they were *a persona fidata* and *prudente* or a *soggetto confidente* (a trustworthy subject).⁹⁹ At the start of the Third Ottoman-Venetian war for instance, when communication between Venice and the Baylo or Venetian merchants in Constantinople had been broken, the authorities ordered for a *persona fidel et pratica* to be sent to the Sublime Porte for reconnaissance purposes.¹⁰⁰ All these linguistic variations indicate the different manifestations of professional and amateur intelligence gathering and espionage in the early modern era. In this respect, the term ‘spy’ is as loosely defined as the spectrum of early modern intelligence.

Venice’s State Intelligence Service

As we have already seen, Venice’s state intelligence apparatus, operating on three distinct yet composite levels, the *political*, the *commercial* and the *personal*, had a corporate-like character that distinguished it from the espionage networks of other Italian and European states. There, the organisation, distribution and delegation of duties was orchestrated within the headquarters of the Ducal Palace by one of the most powerful executive committees, the Council of Ten. Established in 1310, the Council of Ten was the administrative body responsible for secret affairs, public order and state security. It was actually made up of seventeen men, including the ten ordinary members, six ducal councillors and the Doge at its head. It was initially tasked with protecting the government from overthrow or corruption. By the mid-fifteenth century its powers had extended so much, that it was administering Venice’s diplomatic and intelligence operations, military affairs, legal matters and law enforcement.¹⁰¹ This was not an easy job, yet, demonstrating an extraordinary political (and corporate) maturity, the Ten managed to oversee the internal and external security of the Venetian dominion through the meticulous organisation and management of their political,

⁹³ Tommaso Garzoni, *La Piazza Universal di Tutte le Professioni del Mondo* (Venice: Gio. Battista Somasco 1587), discorso XCVII, p.705.

⁹⁴ Bartolomeo Pellicciari, *Avertimenti Militari del Colonnello Bartholomeo Pellicciari da Modona: Utili & Necessarii a Tutti gli Officii che Possono Essere Essercitati in un Formato Essercito, Principiando dal Soldato Privato, et Ascendendo per Ordine fino al Carico del Capitano Generale* (Modena: Gio. Maria Verde 1600).

⁹⁵ Preto, *I Servizi Secreti*, p.42.

⁹⁶ ASV, IS, b. 608, fascicolo. 4, 10 Oct. 1613.

⁹⁷ See for instance, ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Reg. 11, c.125r. (27 March 1576).

⁹⁸ Still, the use of the term ‘explorator’ continues in the sixteenth century. See, for instance, ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, f. 8 (26 Jan. 1572, m.v.).

⁹⁹ ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Reg. 5, cc.14v.-15r. (30 July 1539); *Ibid.*, Reg. 19, c.143r. (29 Nov. 1646).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Reg. 4, cc.82v.-83r. (7 Nov. 1537).

¹⁰¹ On the Council of Ten, see Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (London: Ernst Benn 1980).

commercial and private agents' intelligence operations. It is this unique complexity, efficiency and corporate-like organisation of Venice's intelligence apparatus that renders it eligible for the title of the world's earliest centrally organised state intelligence service.

To safeguard the secrecy of state affairs, in 1539 the Council of Ten formed the body of the Inquisitors of the State.¹⁰² Initially entitled 'Inquisitors against the Disclosures of Secrets', the Inquisitors of the State were a special magistracy made up of three men. Their activity encompassed all aspects of state security, including conspiracies, betrayals, public order and espionage. Most importantly, they were tasked with counter-intelligence and the supervision and protection of state secrets. The State Inquisitors played the role of a modern day 'Big Brother'; nothing and nobody escaped the ears and eyes of their spies.¹⁰³ Their *confidenti* were ubiquitous and, as we have seen, multifaceted. They reported on anything and anyone that could pose threats: foreign ambassadors, immigrants, gamblers, potential impostors and trouble makers, and foreign armies.¹⁰⁴ In fact, in a city that was an un-walled island with no court to confine secrecy, gossip thrived and the ingenuous State Inquisitors found a way to avail of this weakness for their recruitment purposes.

The Venetians were by nature seasoned businessman and skilled tattlers. With open minds and loose tongues, they had mastered the arts of business and gossip alike. This is the aspect to which the Venetian government turned in order to safeguard the cooperation of its subjects in the collection, management and dissemination of information. It did so through the medium of the *supplica*. The *supplica* was an official request for a favour: a job, citizenship, a patent and a salary increase, amongst others. In exchange, Venetians offered their services to the Republic by means of a *raccordo*, that is, a suggestion for an invention or a revelation of a secret that could benefit the state. The *raccordi* were made directly to the Ten, who were always eager to purchase weighty information. Some of the suggestions in the *raccordi* were so ingenuous, that in 1579 the state decided to catalogue and archive them.¹⁰⁵ In essence, Venetians could propose an invention or the revelation of significant information in exchange for a favour. As a result, information gathering and reportage assumed a transactional character between the government and the governed.

One characteristic example of this transactional system can be offered by the infamous Venetian womaniser Giacomo Casanova. In 1763, banished from his beloved Venice and longing to return, Casanova began to serve the Inquisitors on a voluntary basis. Writing from London, he offered the Venetian ambassador the trial of a product that dyed cotton fabric red, an innovation at the time. This innovation, according to Casanova, would boost the production of Venetian cotton cloth and lead French and English merchants to the Venetian market. His attempt was unsuccessful, as were numerous others that followed. When nearly a decade later, however, he voluntarily exposed and halted the illegal operation of an Armenian printing house in Trieste that was competing with its Venetian counterpart, the Inquisitors granted him the longed-for revocation of his banishment.¹⁰⁶ Notably, Casanova's revelations had commercial, rather than political significance, demonstrating, once again, the correlation between politics and commerce for the Venetian Republic. Overall, for the city that rose from a small community of fishermen to a maritime empire built on commodities, intelligence took the form of a commercial transaction between the government and the governed, a trade as

¹⁰² On the Inquisitors of the State, see Samuele Romanin, *Gli Inquisitori di Stato di Venezia* (Venice: Pietro Naratovich 1858); Canosa, *Alle Origini*.

¹⁰³ Paolo Preto, 'Giacomo Casanova and the Venetian Inquisitors: A Domestic Espionage System in Eighteenth-century Europe', in Szechi, *The Dangerous Trade*, pp. 139-156, (p.142).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp.144-145.

¹⁰⁵ Preto, *I servizi segreti*, pp.155-157.

¹⁰⁶ Idem, 'Giacomo Casanova', p.149.

thriving, as that of spice, silk and news. It seems that Venice did not just systematise intelligence, it commodified it.

The Sanctity and Illusion of Secrecy

Unlike most early modern European states, Venice was a water-locked metropolis, confined and protected by a lagoon. It was also one of the largest cities in Europe, with a population of around 150,000 inhabitants by the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁰⁷ With no physical confines to safeguard sensitive information and a population that had one of the highest literacy rates in Europe, information was bound to slip in a maze of directions within and beyond the city's canals and circuitous streets. The lack of established degrees of exclusion, like a court, meant that information could escape the Ducal Palace and snake through the echoing *calli* with the same remarkable speed that it could reach it. In fact, leakage of sensitive information had many outlets. At any time that the Senate convened, 250 senators and nearly 200 nobles of the Great Council had access to these affairs. Aside from extended family networks, most of these men had an entourage of servants and gondoliers accompanying them to the Palace on a daily basis. Thirsty for gossip and its rewards, their eyes and ears were constantly wide open.¹⁰⁸ Information, therefore, could be overheard or directly communicated by innumerable people. The illegitimate offspring of these noblemen were particularly prone to disclosures, provided they spawned privileges that made up for their political marginalisation in Venice due to their impurity.¹⁰⁹

Venetian ambassadors constituted another vehicle through which confidential information circulated within and beyond the watery confines of the city. Before their departure for their diplomatic mission, they were granted access to the official archive of state secrets, the *Secreta*. There, they read their predecessors' dispatches and any other relevant records that would assist them in their diplomatic service. They were also allowed to make copies that invariably leaked in various directions. Upon completion of their diplomatic missions and repatriation, ambassadors had to deliver their *relazione*, their end-of-mission-report, and deposit it in the *Secreta*.¹¹⁰ The *relazioni* contained classified information on enemies and allies and were highly sought after by foreign ambassadors and local patricians alike.¹¹¹ In a service like the *Secreta*, that employed 80-100 secretaries, disclosures were inevitable and, more often than not, profitable. Ultimately, the authors of the *relazioni* were willing to leak them primarily for publicity purposes.¹¹² The Venetian government's concerns with secrecy were, therefore, not dissimilar to seminal disclosure issues faced by contemporary governments.

Another avenue for the breach of political secrecy was the institution of the *broglio*, the patricians' public networking gathering.¹¹³ The *broglio* took place daily in a square just outside the gates of the Ducal Palace. There, patricians exchanged news, arranged strategic alliances, and negotiated political deals. Unlike other such gatherings in courtly settings, the *broglio* was a public, informal and rather unstructured institution.¹¹⁴ As a result, it was the

¹⁰⁷ Andrea Zannini, 'Un censimento del primo seicento e la crisi demografica ed economica di Venezia', *Studi Veneziani* 26 (1993), pp.87-116.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Walker, Filippo de Vivo, and James Shaw, 'A Dialogue on Spying in 17th Century Venice', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 10/33 (2006), pp. 323-344, (p.325).

¹⁰⁹ De Vivo, *Information and communication*, p.46.

¹¹⁰ On the *relazioni*, see Donald E. Queller, 'The Development of Ambassadorial Relazioni', in J.R. Hale, *Renaissance Venice* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield 1973), pp.174-196.

¹¹¹ De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, p.62.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹¹³ On the *broglio*, see Finlay, *Politics*, pp.27-28.

¹¹⁴ Walker et al., p.324.

target of close surveillance, especially because foreign ambassadors took the opportunity to mingle with nobles in their thirst for valuable intelligence.¹¹⁵ Incidentally, Venetians serving in high-ranking offices like the Senate, the *Collegio*, and the Secret Councils were forbidden by law to speak to foreign ambassadors in private. Any breach of this law would incur a penalty of 1000 ducats.¹¹⁶ In 1612, the English ambassador in Venice reported back to England that foreign ambassadors in the city were restricted by the same impositions.¹¹⁷ To minimise contact with foreign emissaries and their entourage and to ascertain that all diplomatic communication took place only through formally approved channels, embassies in Venice were located in the periphery of the city, away from the centre.¹¹⁸ Secrecy, therefore, was both an obsession and an illusion in the floating city.

Secrecy and the Myth of Venice

So, what was the obsession of Venetian authorities with secrecy? The answer can be traced in the infamous Myth of Venice. According to the sixteenth-century eulogist Francesco Sansovino, Venice was a city unique in its grandeur, power and politics.¹¹⁹ The pillar of this distinctiveness was the Myth of Venice, the view that public laws and private acts were placed at the service of the common good. At least that was the belief that the government strove to implant in Venetians' minds. As a result, Venetians enjoyed an allegedly strong sense of community and relative social harmony that brought them together in unison and concord.¹²⁰ Although the debate over the reality of the Myth of Venice is beyond the scope of this article, in effect, it was a Venetian mask portraying public good and unity triumphing over private interests and disagreements. Appearances were vital in Venice. Indeed, both internally and externally, St. Mark's *protégée* projected an image of a Republic where absence of civil discord went hand in hand with a sense of social serenity so deep that the city was nominated *La Serenissima*, the most serene of cities.

The practical manifestation of this self-perceived Myth of Venice took form in the encouragement of every Venetian citizen and subject to contribute to public good and security by gathering and divulging information pertaining to the Republic's political, economic and social stability. As a result, written denunciations were left in churches, on the stairs of public buildings and at the doorsteps of state officials, until the infamous *Bocche di Leone* appeared in late sixteenth century.¹²¹ These were pre-modern post-boxes for anonymous denunciations. Literally sculpted as a lion's mouth, they served as the eyes and ears of the city. In their orifice, citizens could anonymously denounce fellow citizens on crucial issues of public order and security.¹²² In compensation for their cooperation, Venetians received state protection and a dose of pride in their civic loyalty. By encouraging people of all ranks, including ordinary commoners who were excluded from political participation, to partake so indirectly in political statecraft, the Venetian authorities managed

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.325.

¹¹⁶ ASV, CX, *Parti Secrete*, Reg. 11, cc.91r./v. (30 March 1576).

¹¹⁷ The National Archives, *State Papers* 9/244A/11, cc.109r./v., Dudley Carleton (1612-1613).

¹¹⁸ De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, p.75.

¹¹⁹ Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia, Città Nobilissima et Singolare*, 1st edn 1581 (Bergamo: Leadning Edizioni 2002).

¹²⁰ On the Myth of Venice, see James S. Grubb, 'When Myths Love Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography', *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986), pp.43-94; Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan, 'Towards an Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice,' in Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*, pp.39-64.

¹²¹ See, for instance, ASV, CX, *Parti Secrete*, Reg. 19, c.115v. (30 March 1644); Paolo Preto, *Persona Per Ora Secreta: Accusa e Relazione nella Repubblica di Venezia* (Milan, Il Saggiatore 2003).

¹²² By 1542, in order to be taken into consideration, the denunciation had to be signed by three witnesses. ASV, CX, *Parti Comuni*, Reg. 15, c.54v. (30 Aug. 1542).

to control public behaviour, place the public on their side and ensure the smooth functioning of the state.¹²³

As the smooth functioning of the state was top priority, public protection and control had to be achieved by any means. Within this context, secrecy became an emblem of harmony and civil concord. Any sign of conflict or debate was deemed dangerous and had to be concealed at any cost. This was most certainly the case for the governmental assemblies, where members were forbidden by law to reveal any possible debates that took place therein.¹²⁴ When secrecy failed, the consequences could be catastrophic. In 1542, for instance, a great diplomatic scandal broke when Venetian officials leaked state secrets to the French ambassador. When a governmental delegation demanded that the ambassador hand over the culprits, his men violently assaulted them. News travelled faster than the wind within the city's streets and the incident became a *cause célèbre* within hours. The public took to the streets shouting and menacingly marching towards the French embassy. As a result, the authorities were forced to encircle the area with armed guards for two days. Letters were sent to the Venetian envoys in France and Constantinople requesting that the turncoats be found and punished. The Venetian ambassador in France was asked to petition the King for a new ambassador, one that was 'more dexterous in negotiation'. Importantly, the government took these prompt and drastic steps to 'appease the mayhem of the public'.¹²⁵ Doing so and showing that Venetians were an indispensable part of a state apparatus that operated for their welfare and benefit was the authorities' primary concern.

It seems plausible to hypothesise, therefore, that through the perceived triumph of the common good over personal interests, Venetian authorities managed to instil in Venetian subjects a certain degree of institutional loyalty, contrary to scholarly claims that institutional loyalty had not yet developed in the early modern period.¹²⁶ Jacob Burckhardt appositely remarked that 'no State, indeed, has ever exercised a greater moral influence over its subjects, whether abroad or at home'.¹²⁷ Could this be a proto-modern form of patriotism?

Conclusion

By the sixteenth century most Western European states had started to weave webs of diplomatic representations across and beyond the continent.¹²⁸ Venice was at the forefront of this process, having organised an efficient network of formal and informal covert operatives abroad and at home. These were charged with reporting on enemies, supporting military action, safeguarding commercial activity, and ensuring the internal stability of the state.¹²⁹ While for most Italian states such systematic communication was reserved for the ruler and his ambassadors, and for other European monarchies such processes were initiatives of individuals for personal advancement, Venice was emblematic in its centrally organised state intelligence service. In an exemplar of systematic complexity, efficiency and corporate-like organisation, the Council of Ten and State Inquisitors oversaw the clandestine activities of a great variety of informants and spies. In fact, the Ten and the Inquisitors offer one of the first instances of a formal state intelligence service with a – premature, to be sure – sophisticated organisation somewhat analogous to that of modern-day intelligence agencies. The notion,

¹²³ Elizabeth Horodowich, 'The Gossiping Tongue: Oral Networks, Public Life and Political Culture in Early Modern Venice', *Renaissance Studies* 19/1 (2005), pp.22-45 (p.25).

¹²⁴ De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, p.43.

¹²⁵ "Per sedar il tumulto del popolo." ASV, CX, *Parti Secrete*, Reg. 5., cc.73r.-76r. (22, 25 Aug. 1542).

¹²⁶ Szechi, 'Introduction', p.13.

¹²⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Phaidon 1995), p.89.

¹²⁸ See Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London, Jonathan Cape 1955).

¹²⁹ Preto, 'Giacomo Casanova', p.140.

therefore, that centrally organised intelligence services only emerged in the modern era does no longer stand on firm ground.

Scholars have long dwelled on the study of intelligence in the era after The Great War, with a particular focus on the nature and impact of intelligence services and their operations on domestic and foreign affairs. Yet, the diffusion of information as a human behaviour is a historical phenomenon that spans from the messengers of ancient Athens to the patrons of the Enlightenment coffeehouse and beyond. It also serves purposes beyond politics and diplomacy, primarily of economic security, if not dominance. Contemporary hacking and whistleblowing practices, a topical issue for intelligence practitioners and scholars nowadays, are built on similar incentives and premises; people's need for knowledge, security and prominence. The exploration of the precursors of the highly organised modern-day state intelligence institutions, so alien to our contemporary world yet so astonishingly familiar, can yield great lessons about the need for and significance of intelligence. The challenge for the contemporary scholar is to recognise the familiar in the alien and the alien in the familiar. And it is only by doing so that we will be able to understand the fascinating ways in which intelligence developed through the centuries and the manifold purposes it served.

Acknowledgements

This article was first presented at the 'Intelligence in World History, c. 1500-1918' conference (German Historical Institute, London, February 2014). I wish to thank Professor Christopher Andrew for inviting me to contribute to the conference and the other speakers for their stimulating questions, especially Professor Sir Christopher Bayly for his invaluable input on the economic aspect of my research. Special thanks are due to the anonymous referees of this journal and to Dr Christopher Moran for their constructive criticism of this piece.

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