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The Invisible Trade: Commoners and Convicts as Early Modern Venice's Spies

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Abstract

This chapter shines a light on the people who carried out espionage for Venice in the early modern period. As home to one of the earliest centrally organized state intelligence services, Venice was a hotbed of spies, overseen by the feared and powerful Council of Ten, housed at the doge's Palace. It will be argued that intelligence was collected both 'from above' and 'from below'. From above, the Ten relied on semi-professional informants such as ambassadors and governors, who picked up information through elite networks and social circles. From below, the Council employed a secret army of amateur spies, often with disreputable backgrounds and motives, who worked either for profit or to have criminal convictions overturned. The chapter discusses the meaning and function of a spy in the early modern period, raising questions about the lack of professionalization that placed spies in the shadows of warfare.

Keywords

Venice; spies; espionage; intelligence; profession; *popolani*.

In the winter of 1572, in the midst of a thundering confrontation between the Ottoman Empire and Venice, the governor of the Venetian stronghold of Trau (now Trogir, Croatia),

received a letter destined for the Venetian resident ambassador (*bailo*) in Constantinople.¹ The letter had been forwarded to the governor by the Council of Ten, the governmental committee overseeing the domestic and foreign security of the Venetian state.² Detailed instructions contained in the letter charged the governor with soliciting the services of a Turkish spy who had been in his employ for the past few months. The spy was to deliver the letter to the *bailo* who, due to the Ottoman-Venetian war, was under house arrest in the Venetian embassy in Constantinople. The instructions for the Turk were multiple and direct. He was to hide the letter in a waterproof piece of cloth, supplied by the Ten specifically for that purpose. The concealed epistle should then be stitched up as a secret compartment inside his clothes. Upon arrival in the Venetian embassy, he would be able to hand the letter to the *bailo* through a window, under which he would have to wait until the *bailo* appeared, collected the letter, penned a response, and handed it back to the spy, who was then to bring it back to Trau. To ensure that the job would be carried out in its entirety, the governor was ordered to pay only a fraction of the spy's compensation, withholding the remaining sum until the completion of this undertaking, when the spy would bring back the response from the Venetian legate.³ It goes without saying that the spy had to be sworn to strict secrecy in order to carry out his mission. Aside from the instructions on his assignment, nothing else is known about this Turkish spy.

¹ On the Venetian *bailo* in Constantinople, see, amongst others, Bertelè; Preto, 'Le relazioni dei baili'; Coco and Manzonetto; Dursteler, 'The Bailo in Constantinople'; and Hanß. Specifically on *baili* as spymasters, see Gürkan, 'Laying Hands on Arcana Imperii'.

² On the Council of Ten, see Macchi; Finlay.

³ Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Consiglio di Dieci (CX), *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Registro (Reg.) 10, cc. 73v-74r. (14 Nov. 1572).

This episode is emblematic of the obscurity that surrounds the meaning and function of a spy in the early modern era. While there is not a sizeable historiography on early modern espionage, there are some significant works on spies operating in England,⁴ Spain,⁵ France,⁶ the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires,⁷ and the Republic of Venice.⁸ Most of these publications provide systematic narrative accounts of spycraft and the operations of spies as seekers and keepers of secrets. My newly published history of early modern Venice's state intelligence organization, however, has broken from this historiographical tradition by focusing not on the revelatory value of clandestine communication and missions but on the social processes that generated them.⁹ Espousing this approach, this chapter explores the time specific meaning and function of a spy in the early modern period, with a particular focus on the quasi-direct yet active role of the *popolani* in political affairs. Combining archival material with relevant historiographical sources and contemporary concepts and theorizations from sociology, the chapter discusses the invisibility of early modern spies as shadow agents of war, focusing, in particular, on the lack of professionalization of the craft of espionage. The chronological and geographical focus of the chapter is sixteenth-century Venice, an emblematic case of an early modern state that had pioneered a centrally organized state

⁴ Marshall; Martin; Akkerman.

⁵ Carnicer García and Marcos Rivas.

⁶ Bély.

⁷ Gürkan, *Sultanın Casusları*.

⁸ Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*.

⁹ Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*.

intelligence service.¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite this emphasis on the Venetian Republic, the notion of the spy discussed and analysed here was universal across early modern Europe.¹¹

The chapter starts by exploring the meaning and function of early modern spies, emphasizing the negative connotations of espionage as an unchivalrous craft. Focusing on the Republic of Venice, the chapter then delineates the different types of spies and informants in the employ of the Venetian authorities. It proceeds by considering the two main reasons why Venetian spies remained in the shadows of warfare – as well as diplomacy and politics – and, in consequence, on the margins of historical accounts: plausible deniability and expendability. Engaging with contemporary debates on the role of the *popolani* in the ‘political construction of Venetian society’,¹² the chapter concludes with a brief sociological discussion on professionalization, advancing the argument that there was no established, institutionalized profession of a spy in the early modern era. This would gradually emerge at the turn of the twentieth century, as a result of ‘the twin forces of industrialization and ideology’, which accelerated the professionalization of espionage, turning it into the ‘institutionalized activity we began to call intelligence in World War I’.¹³ Until then, espionage remained an obscure, invisible trade.

Spies in the Early Modern Era

¹⁰ Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*.

¹¹ For a general overview of early modern spies in various early modern Italian and European states, see Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 37-53.

¹² Judde de Larivière, 81.

¹³ Warren, 334.

In a treatise initially published in 1585, Tommaso Garzoni (1549-89) described 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 hanged by the neck, these people are essential, as History and practice have shown’.¹⁴ As Garzoni’s description indicates, in the early modern period, the craft of espionage had negative connotations. Spying was deemed to be a ‘necessary evil justified only by the exigencies of wartime’.¹⁵ This is because, while deemed essential, especially during times of war, spying was associated with dishonesty, treachery, and cowardice, conducted by loathsome individuals who ‘did not seek honor in battle against worthy opponents but skulked in the shadows’ to betray and deceive their enemies.¹⁶ This unsavoury view of espionage endured throughout the centuries, prompting the French philosopher Montesquieu to voice the oft-quoted statement: ‘Spying would perhaps be tolerable if it could

¹⁴ ‘Il nome poi di spia particolarmente significa quella sorte di persone, che van secretamente per gli esserciti, dentro alle città, esplorando i fatti de nemici, per referirgli ai suoi, et benche l’ufficio sia infame, et perciò tali persone ritrovate s’impendino per la gola; con tutto ciò son necessarie, come dall’ Historie et dalla praticca si conosce.’ This excerpt is from the 1587 edition of the book: Garzoni, 705.

¹⁵ Warren, 11.

¹⁶ Warren, 15.

be exercised by honest people, but the necessary infamy of the person [i.e. the spy] can make the thing [i.e. espionage] be judged infamous'.¹⁷

For Venetians, in common with vernacular terms for spy used by other early modern Europeans, the word *spia* or *spione* also carried negative connotations. It was most commonly used to indicate an enemy's (secret) informant or a dishonourable individual who reported on the potentially suspicious behaviour or dealings of fellow citizens.¹⁸ In the 1570s, for instance, the Venetian authorities made numerous attempts to poison an 'important and most astute spy' (*spia importante et astutissima*) sent to Venice as a formal legate by the Ottomans.¹⁹ It took them several botched endeavours and about two years to have him executed by a paid assassin.²⁰ As a timely coincidence, the spy was eliminated during a devastating plague that claimed one-quarter to one-third of the city's population in the course of two years.²¹ His death, therefore, was conveniently attributed to the deadly epidemic, in order not to aggravate the Ottoman authorities.²² Similarly, a 1613 anonymous denunciation

¹⁷ 'L'espionnage serait peut-être tolérable s'il pouvait être exercé par d'honnêtes gens; mais l'infamie nécessaire de la personne peut faire juger de l'infamie de la chose.' Montesquieu, 326.

¹⁸ Preto, *I servizi segreti*, 42.

¹⁹ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 11, c. 7r./v. (6 April 1574); c. 9v. (29 April 1574); c. 32v.–33r. (6, 10 Oct. 1574); c. 34r. (19 Oct. 1574); c. 35v. (24 Oct. 1574).

²⁰ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 11, cc. 101v.–102r. (19–20 July 1576); filza 19 (19 July 1576).

²¹ On the 1575 plague and its consequences, see Preto, *Peste e società*. On the plague's devastating impact on Venice's population, see Luzzatto, 257; Beltrami, 57.

²² ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 11, c. 103r./v. (18 Aug. 1576).

accused a certain Fausto Verdelli of being a *spione*, speaking of Venice in a despicable manner and reporting on Venetian affairs to the ambassadors of Savoy, Lorraine, Flanders, and Spain.²³

While other early modern European states seem to have used the term *spy* to denote both one's own and an enemy's secret agent,²⁴ the Venetians distinctively styled spies in their employ *confidenti*, a positive term that replaced the medieval Latin idiom *explorator/esploratore*.²⁵ A *confidente* was a reliable informer tasked with gathering valuable intelligence for the benefit of the state. In 1563, for instance, the Venetian authorities warned their *bailo* in Constantinople not to reveal any vital intelligence to his *confidente*, a Turkish slave in the employ of the Ottoman Grand Vizier – the Sultan's prime minister, after they discovered that he was originally from Genoa. As Genoa was Venice's perennial commercial rival, this caution was instructed in case the *confidente* was acting as a double agent for the Genoese.²⁶ In this context, *confidenti* were expected to perform a variety of intelligence functions, including political and military espionage, and, generally, informing the authorities on any matter of state security, activities that were worthy of praise and acclaim. As the

²³ ASV, *Inquisitori di Stato (IS)*, busta (b.) 608, 10 Oct. 1613.

²⁴ In a letter to the Vatican in 1574, for example, the papal nuncio (envoy) in Venice refers to his own *spie*, whom he sent to Friuli in search of a wanted man. See Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV), *Segreteria di Stato, Venezia*, b. 14, c. 63r. (1 May 1574); b. 16, c. 76r. (1 May 1574).

²⁵ Still, the use of the term 'explorator' continues to be used in the sixteenth century. See, for instance, ASV, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci (CCX), *Lettere Secrete*, filza 8 (26 Jan. 1573). See also William Caferro's contribution to this volume for medieval usage.

²⁶ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 7, c. 115v. (21 April 1563).

Florentine humanist Benedetto Varchi (1503-65) affirmed in his *Storia Fiorentina*, written in the late 1540s and 1550s but not published in Florence until 1721,²⁷ ‘to spy on the secrets of the enemy is one of the most important and laudable things that one can do’.²⁸

This distinct terminology, denoting the diverse perceptions of *spie*, *confidenti*, and even *esploratori*, implies that, while the act of espionage was generally understood across cultures, the actor – that is, the spy – operating in the shadows in an effort to remain unrecognized, was a more obscure concept. For the purpose of this chapter, a spy is defined as an individual actively recruited, authorized, instructed, and compensated to obtain information for intelligence purposes or to cause physical harm and destruction.²⁹ Indeed, in the early modern period, spying entailed ‘both jobs, reporting on events and affecting them by stealth’.³⁰ A spy was a mercenary agent, who was marginally different to an informer (or ‘intelligencer’) – a person who voluntarily engaged in information-gathering initiatives in the hope of a reward and, on occasion, a formal appointment by the government. In other words, an informer would hope to become a spy in the formal employ of a paymaster. An informant, on the other hand, was someone who reported to the authorities information that they were privy to out of a sense of duty.³¹ Resident ambassadors or travelling merchants, as it will become clear further down, fell within this category. The Republic of Venice, which had created a

²⁷ See Brancato.

²⁸ Varchi quoted in Preto, *I servizi segreti*, 26.

²⁹ On physical harm and destruction caused by spies, see Iordanou, *Venice’s Secret Service*, 201-203.

³⁰ Warren, 13.

³¹ For the semantic challenges posed by the variety of terms, see Marshall, 4–5.

meticulously organized state intelligence service by the sixteenth century, benefitted from the services of all these types of agents.

Spies in the Service of Venice's State Intelligence Organization

The Republic of Venice, which in the sixteenth century encompassed large parts of Northern Italy, the Balkan Peninsula, and several parts of what is now Greece, was one of the first early modern states to have created a centrally-administered state intelligence organization. Headed by the Council of Ten, the exclusive committee responsible for the security of the Venetian state, the Council was made up of seventeen men, including ten ordinary members, six ducal councillors, and the Doge of Venice.³² Within its jurisdiction were secret affairs, public order, domestic and foreign policy.³³ Moreover, as part of their responsibilities, the Ten oversaw the central administration of intelligence gathering and espionage in Renaissance Venice. For this reason, they created and managed a complex network of intelligence gatherers. More specifically, Venetian ambassadors, governors and consuls, who served the Republic across the European continent, Anatolia, and even Northern Africa, played the part of professional informants. A similar role was performed in an amateur capacity by merchants and tradesmen who took it upon themselves to supply the motherland with vital intelligence they came across during their travels.³⁴ Yet, on account of their

³² Cozzi, 308.

³³ Finlay.

³⁴ On professional and amateur informants serving the Council of Ten, see Iordanou, 'What News on the Rialto?'; *Venice's Secret Service*, 164-179.

professional and social standing, those individuals were precluded from active involvement in espionage activities, due to the afore-mentioned negative connotations that spying carried in that period. For this reason, since acting as an outright spy was professionally and diplomatically unacceptable, the Venetian authorities resorted to procuring the services of amateur, mercenary spies who emanated from the social order of the *popolani*, the lowest tier in the Venetian social hierarchy.

The Venetian *popolani* – or commoners – were a social group distinct from the higher orders of Venetian society, namely the patricians and the citizens.³⁵ As a social entity, they comprised the mass of Venetian residents and subjects who enjoyed no legal status and were divided into two categories, the *popolo minuto* and the *popolo grande*. The former group were ‘the city’s workers, whether skilled or unskilled’, who served the numerous industries that flourished in Venice. The ‘skilled’ category included textile workers, glassmakers, shipbuilders, bakers, barbers and tavern owners. Within the semi-skilled or unskilled ranks, there were boatmen, domestic servants and fishermen. The latter group, the *popolo grande*, were ‘the well-to-do commoners’, the more financially secure amongst the greater labour force who owned workshops and property and employed workers.³⁶

Venetian *popolani* were commonly known to be lured by the thrill and potential payoffs of engaging in amateur espionage activities. This engagement spanned the entire spectrum of intelligence gathering, from unsubstantiated chatter and gossip to outright espionage.³⁷ Apothecaries, for instance, whose merchandise was usually quite costly and, as a result, attracted a more refined, prosperous clientele, more often than not became privy to

³⁵ On social classes in Renaissance Venice, see Romano.

³⁶ Romano, 30-37.

³⁷ Iordanou, ‘What News on the Rialto?’, *Venice’s Secret Service*, 179-187.

information that could be of particular interest to the Venetian authorities. Barbers, whose establishments welcomed men of any rank during their daily grooming routine, became hubs of political conversations and were, thus, frequented by several information gatherers seeking the latest gossip or even more valuable information.³⁸ These information gatherers supplemented the work of travellers, soldiers, and immigrants, who were actively encouraged to share news about national politics and international affairs, particularly focusing on news about war.³⁹ The Council of Ten handpicked brash individuals who were willing to risk their life in exchange for a monetary sum or a privilege, including an office offering a steady salary for a fixed period of time, or the revocation of a criminal conviction.

Such recruitment was particularly common during times of impending war. In the early 1570s, for instance, the imminent war with the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing loss of Cyprus compelled the Council of Ten to spend ‘as much as needed’ on the recruitment of spies, who would be shipped to Constantinople and other parts of the Mediterranean in order to gather intelligence on the military preparations of the Ottomans.⁴⁰ The recruits were selected in a variety of ways, the most prominent of which was direct recommendation to the Ten. In December 1570, for example, as the Ottomans were planning their attack on Venetian possessions in Anatolia, an anonymous Venetian citizen recommended the appointment of the Armenian Soltan Sach as a dexterous spy who could travel to Constantinople to spy on the Ottoman military preparations. His assignment also included delivering letters to *bailo*

³⁸ De Vivo, ‘Pharmacies’; *Information and Communication*, 98-106.

³⁹ De Vivo, *Information and Communication*, 91. See, for example ASV, *Notarile Atti*, b. 4854, notary Giovanni Nicolò Doglioni (10 May 1578) for mercenary soldiers reporting on gruesome crimes committed by the Ottomans against Venetian subjects in the Levant.

⁴⁰ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 9, c. 102r. (17 Nov. 1570).

Marcantonio Barbaro, who, as already noted, was under house arrest in Pera, the Constantinopolitan suburb where the Venetian embassy was located.⁴¹ Soltan's mission was communicated to him in the middle of the night, when he was called into the doge's Palace under the mantle of strict secrecy. His service to the Venetian Republic would be reimbursed with the sum of 100 ducats, of which 20 was handed to him directly in order to cover the expense of his trip, while the remaining sum would be paid upon completion of his mission. To put his reimbursement into perspective, a professional cryptanalyst working for the Venetian government at the same period was offered an annual salary between 48 and 120 ducats, depending on his professional expertise and rank.⁴² Sach accepted his mission instantly but appealed for a higher compensation, arguing that the expense for such a lengthy and perilous journey was greater than the amount paid.⁴³ While his request was denied, Sach completed his mission and was reimbursed in full nearly seven months later.⁴⁴ The Ten were deeply aware of the extreme peril involved in espionage missions to the Ottoman capital at the time, which, more often than not, led to the spy's capture and execution. For this reason, a few days later, they appointed another Armenian named Simon de Iacomo to travel to Constantinople with the same instructions. He was promised 140 ducats in total, of which 100 ducats were paid upon completion of his mission, six months after his appointment.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Arbel, 77.

⁴² ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, filza 15 (23 Nov., 30 Dec. 1571); Reg. 19, c. 18r./v. (14 July 1636).

⁴³ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, c. 108r./v. (3 Dec. 1570).

⁴⁴ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, c. 164r./v. (30 June 1571).

⁴⁵ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, cc. 113v-114r. (22 Dec. 1570); c. 164r. (16 June 1571).

For espionage missions inside the Ottoman Empire, the Ten recruited locals who hailed either from Anatolia or, mainly, from Venetian strongholds in the Balkans and the Mediterranean.⁴⁶ The Ten valued their local knowledge, in combination with their command of native languages and regional dialects. Such individuals proved particularly useful during the War of Cyprus (1570-1573), primarily because they could pass for Turks, which rendered them valuable in the Venetians' attempt to infiltrate Ottoman terrains. Two weeks after he completed his first espionage assignment to Constantinople, for which he received a special commendation for his valour and courage,⁴⁷ Simon de Iacomo was presented with a new mission to the Ottoman capital, as more letters had to be delivered to the captive *bailo*. This time, however, the hazard of such an enterprise had increased exponentially. During his previous mission, de Iacomo had witnessed one of the *bailo*'s messengers – most probably the Franciscan friar Paulo Biscotto⁴⁸ – impaled on a spike, as a result of having been caught trying to smuggle letters to the *bailo*. Fearful that he might be recognized by the Ottoman authorities and have a similarly gruesome ending, the Armenian turned down the offer for 140 ducats as being incommensurate with the extremely high risk involved in his second assignment. The Venetian secretary who acted as the interpreter in the Armenian's dealings with the Ten – as Simon had an excellent command of Turkish but spoke very little Italian – managed to convince him that, upon completion of his mission, he would have earned the right to petition the authorities for a permanent office for him and his descendants, which would provide him with a steady salary for life. This proposition was enough to persuade him

⁴⁶ AAV, *Segreteria di Stato, Venezia*, b. 8, cc. 6r.-7v. (8 July 1570).

⁴⁷ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 9, cc. 113v-114r. (22 Dec. 1570); c. 164r. (16 June 1571).

⁴⁸ Gürkan, 'The Efficacy', 19.

to accept the assignment, which entailed another journey of six months to the Ottoman metropolis.⁴⁹ Sadly, records do not reveal whether his return visit to Constantinople was a success or a mission too far.

What becomes apparent from the above-mentioned instances of spies working for the Venetian Republic is that the most unexceptional men were conscripted for the most exceptional service. Those men, hailing from the social order of the commoners – the *popolani* – were audacious enough to defy any fear of imminent risk or danger.⁵⁰ They were, more often than not, convicts or banished criminals who were willing to exchange their banishment for freedom or a monetary prize. As a consequence, they were quite easy to recruit. One such emblematic case is that of the Cypriot Manoli Soriano and his comrades. In November 1570, on the eve of the war with the Turks, Soriano's mission involved attacking the Ottoman settlements in the Dalmatian town of Skradin and setting the Ottoman fleet stationed there on fire.⁵¹ The Ten rewarded brazen acts in a variety of ways, including the revocation of exiled criminals' sentences.⁵² In fact, in comparison with preceding and succeeding periods of peace, there was an exponential increase in the overturning of banishments in exchange for participation in intelligence operations and espionage missions

⁴⁹ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, cc. 164v.-165r. (1 July 1571). See also Preto, *I servizi segreti*, 251. Preto seems to conflate the two cases of Armenian spies. Diego Guzmán de Silva also related the incident to King Philip II of Spain (1527-98), see Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado*, Legajo 1329 (21 June 1571).

⁵⁰ Preto, *I servizi segreti*, 247. On amateur agents and early modern 'diplomacy from below', see articles in Van Gelder and Krstić.

⁵¹ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, filza 7 (25 Nov. 1570).

⁵² ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, cc. 88r.- 89r. (13 Sep. 1570). See also, Canosa, 53.

during and immediately following the War of Cyprus.⁵³ To carry out his mission, Soriano requested and was offered a squadron of 300 men, most of whom were exiled criminals and convicts. To secure their cooperation, the Ten promised them the revocation of their banishment upon the successful completion of their mission.⁵⁴ Once again, however, the modesty of their origins and social status precluded their survival in archival records. Alas, aside from marginal information about their mission, compensation and, more often than not, a personal identifier, such as a name, nothing else has been recorded. It is evident that, for the Venetian authorities, these men were expendable in direct proportion to the risk of the mission.

A note needs to be made here about the potential existence of female spies serving the Venetian Republic. On the whole, a detailed study on the information gathering activities of women is still missing from Venetian historiography, following an archival tradition that remains silent on female spies and intelligencers in the early modern era. A recent and arresting study on female intelligencers in seventeenth-century Britain is one of the few exceptions to this scholarly lacuna. As Nadine Akkerman has aptly shown, the mere existence of the court offered British women of high social status ample opportunities to engage in espionage activities due to the ‘invisibility’ conferred on them by their gender. Additionally, their elevated social status rendered them more likely to survive in archival memory, compared to their lower-order counterparts.⁵⁵ By contrast, the lack of an established court in Renaissance Venice, which could have allowed patrician women a more active part

⁵³ See, for instance, ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 10, cc. 115r.-116r. (15-25 April 1573).

⁵⁴ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, filza 7 (25 Nov. 1570).

⁵⁵ Akkerman.

into the diplomatic and political circles of the period, is one of the reasons why archival records remain mute with regard to the espionage and information gathering activities of Venetian women. The most important reason for this lacuna, however, is that the women who have allegedly engaged in information gathering and espionage activities in that period are the type of lower-class females who either do not feature in the surviving historical record or were never documented in the first place. Indeed, in his detailed study of the Venice's intelligence services in the early modern era, Preto mentions a handful of instances of prostitutes acting as amateur spies in the eighteenth century but makes no reference to female espionage activities in the 1500s and 1600s, primarily due to lack of surviving evidence.⁵⁶

As mentioned above, Venetian and, when necessary, non-Venetian commoners, especially banished convicts and criminals seeking cash or favours, were recruited as a result of personal recommendations to the Ten. Another way they expressed their wish to act as spies was by means of a *raccordo*. A *raccordo* was a formal proposal, made directly to the Council of Ten, for an invention, a service, or a revelation of a secret that could benefit the state, in exchange for a favour. An exemplary case of a banished convict who offered his services as a spy to the Ten through a *raccordo* is that of Giovanni Antonio Barata. Barata is one of the few individuals employed by the Venetian authorities as an agent for whom we have enough information to sketch his biography as a spy. Barata was originally from the town of Savigliano in Piedmont but, at the time of his recruitment, he lived in Milan.⁵⁷ In late 1569, Barata requested an audience with the Ten to inform them of some rumours he had heard the year before, when he was in Constantinople. The rumours involved the trial of explosives in the residence of Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmet Pasha (1506-79), with the

⁵⁶ Preto, *I servizi segreti*, 479-481.

⁵⁷ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 9, c. 48r. (2 Jan 1570); c. 64r./v (31 March 1570).

intention of setting the Venetian Arsenal – Venice’s renowned shipbuilding factory – on fire. Barata related to the Ten how in June of that year he communicated these rumours, in person, to the Venetian legate in Milan, who dismissed them as unsubstantiated fabrications. When the Arsenal was, indeed, set ablaze in September of that year, Barata reached out to the envoy again, only to be brushed off once more.⁵⁸ The advent of the War of Cyprus, however, in the early 1570s, provided the impetus for Barata’s enlistment.⁵⁹

Barata’s formal recruitment took place in January 1571, with a compensation of cash and the revocation of his exile upon successful completion of his mission. The extensive description of his job includes a ‘self-made’ codebook – in order to communicate secretly in commercial jargon with the authorities – and instructions on the use of invisible ink, both of which tools he could use to communicate with the Ten during his sojourn in Constantinople.⁶⁰ It goes without saying that he was expected to carry out his mission under strict secrecy. For this reason, according to the Ten’s instructions, Barata was supposed to pass for a textile merchant, called Gioan Pessaro, who was, allegedly, on a business trip to the boisterous Ottoman capital. Any letters from Barata to the Ten were to be addressed to Pessaro’s brother and business partner, Ottavio Pessaro in Paris. It is highly probable that Ottavio was a real textile merchant living and trading in Paris, who, for whatever reason, was known to the Council of Ten. Thus, unbeknownst to him, they used his name to render Barata’s fake professional assignment plausible, in order to disguise his identity and, by extension, the real reason why he was in the Ottoman capital. The Ten knew that any letters

⁵⁸ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, c. 48r./v. (2 Jan 1570).

⁵⁹ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, c. 64r./v. (31 March 1570); c. 65r. (7 April 1570).

⁶⁰ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, filza 7 (17 Feb. 1571); ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, cc.126v.-127r. (26 Jan. 1571).

from Constantinople to Paris would have to be sent via the Venetian embassy in Constantinople, and, by extension, Venice, meaning that the Ten would have the opportunity to open and read them.⁶¹ During his perilous mission, the Venetian authorities relocated Barata's wife and young children from Milan to the Venetian city of Bergamo and furnished them with a monthly stipend, which turned into a permanent yearly pension for Barata's widow when, nearly one year later, Barata was captured and decapitated in Constantinople.⁶² A few years after his death, his wife successfully petitioned for a pension increase and eventually secured for her fatherless children a lifetime income stemming from a small office.⁶³

The main reason why more substantial personal information on Barata has survived is because he took the effort to provide it in his numerous written *raccordi* to the Ten. Still, just like all the other anonymous or barely known spies enlisted by the Venetian authorities, he was another one of those unremarkable men thrown into the most remarkable of circumstances by the Council of Ten, with no formal training or risk assessment for the hazardous missions they were expected to undertake. It was the commonly accepted knowledge of the immense risk and danger of such missions that induced the Council of Ten to include clauses for posthumous provisions for the recruit's spouse and dependants in the verbal or written agreement between the Ten and an aspiring spy. For instance, when during the Siege of Corfu (by the Ottomans) in 1537, a Venetian subject from Crete offered to lead a team of men to the island, in order to help restore Venetian rule over Corfu, he was offered a

⁶¹ ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, filza 7 (17 Feb. 1571).

⁶² ASV, CCX, *Miscellanea*, b. 6 (13 Feb. 1571); ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 9, c.198r. (15 Dec.1571).

⁶³ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 11, c. 78v. (26 Jan. 1577).

monthly salary of ten ducats for life, which, in the event of his death while on duty, would increase to twelve ducats for his dependants. His men were also promised a lifetime compensation of four ducats per month, which their children would inherit, if the conscripts lost their life while serving the Republic.⁶⁴ On the whole, as extant documents reveal, looking after the family of a deceased ‘serviceman’ was an obligation that the Ten took seriously.⁶⁵

In a similar way to employing mercenary spies, the Ten offered benefits and favours to those who volunteered to support their state surveillance operations by means of exposing potential firebrands. More specifically, from the fourteenth century ordinary Venetians were encouraged to inform the Council of Ten on any potential threats to the security of the Venetian state, with a particular focus on breaches to official state secrecy. One of the ways in which the Republic urged them to do so was through leaving anonymous or eponymous denunciations in public places, including churches, entrances to state buildings, and even the doorsteps of government officials. By the mid-sixteenth century this practice had become so popular that the Venetian authorities started to install wooden post-boxes in prominent locations about the city and the wider Veneto area, which were gradually replaced with well-crafted stone-carvings in the shape of masked faces or, more commonly, lions’ mouths, from which they were styled *bocche di leone*.⁶⁶ This invitation to Venetian commoners to denounce anyone threatening the domestic or foreign security of the Venetian state revealed a long established ‘open door’ stance upheld by the Council of Ten towards anyone wishing to

⁶⁴ ASV, CX, *Deliberazioni Segrete*, Reg. 4, cc. 79v.-80r. (15 Sep. 1537).

⁶⁵ On several instances of petitions or supplications for recompense made by individuals who served the Republic during the Italian Wars (including those acting as spies), see Bowd, 109, 175.

⁶⁶ Preto, *Persona per ora secreta*.

contribute to Venice's socio-political and, by extension, economic, stability. According to one such denunciation, the Ten were informed that 'my ill-born brother, whose name will shortly be revealed to you, is a traitor of our motherland. He reveals the most important secrets of the negotiations of our councils to Zuane Pecchi, who lives in *calle* Sporca in the neighbourhood of San Luca, on the bank of the Grand Canal, and then he [Pecchi] communicates them to his compatriot, who is the servant of the Holy Roman Emperor's ambassador. [The ambassador] uses the servant in order to be accurately informed of what is discussed in the Senate. Unless your excellencies want rumours to spread in the Republic, you should act upon this notice'.⁶⁷

Additionally, the Council of Ten recruited self-proclaimed amateur spies to eliminate potential criminals who conspired against the Venetian state. In 1525, for instance, in the years between the Second (1499-1503) and Third (1537-40) Ottoman-Venetian Wars, the Ten decided to exterminate a man who had been proven to act maliciously against the Venetian Republic. For that reason, they offered a sizeable army of three hundred men, freedom from banishment, and, even more generously, a pension for life to any banished criminal who would volunteer to assassinate the culprit.⁶⁸ In essence, the Council of Ten presented aspects

⁶⁷ '... il mio malnato fratello è traditore della Patria, il nome di cui tra poco le sarà paleso; egli confferisce i segreti più importanti delle negoziazioni de Consigli a Zuan Pecchi, sta in calle Sporca a San Luca su la fundamenta al canale Grande, e questo poi li comunica al suo patriotto, che è il maggiordomo del inbassador del Imperador, quale se ne serve di questo mezo per sapere puntualmente quello si fa in Pregai. L'Eccellenze Vostre provegano a questo, se non desiderano novità nella Republica, e se ne servano dell'aviso...' ASV, *IS*, b. 643 (undated anonymous denunciation).

⁶⁸ ASV, *CX*, *Deliberazioni Secrete*, Reg. 1, c. 23v. (9 Oct. 1525).

of state security missions as business propositions to their recruits with mutual benefits for both parties. This entrepreneurial acumen is not difficult to comprehend, considering the idiosyncrasy of the Venetian ruling class who, both as merchants and statesmen, were seasoned in business negotiations and transactions. In this respect, the Council of Ten normalized such extraordinary measures either by reinforcing their necessity for state security and, by extension, the greater good of the community, or by presenting them as opportunities to extract further benefits. Accordingly, in early modern Venice espionage activities and intelligence operations were not only a rigid, top-down process of authority and control but also a concoction of flexible undertakings of multiple frontline and supplementary operations that depended upon the ‘bottom-up’ contributions of lay individuals.

Spying in Early Modern Venice: An invisible trade

The instances of amateur spies discussed in this essay are only a fraction of the multiplicity and variety of secret agents and covert operatives that were deployed by the Council of Ten to enable Renaissance Venice’s intelligence gathering and espionage pursuits.⁶⁹ While offering an essential service to their paymasters, the nature of their work, involving the use of unsavoury sources and methods, compelled them to operate in the shadows, in order to maintain the secrecy of their operations. On account of their capacity for betrayal and deception, they were stigmatized by society as unchivalrous actors lurking in the shadows of warfare. As a result, they were engulfed in a pervasive aura of negativity. Importantly, since they were as disposable as any mercenary operative was to the authorities, these spies were

⁶⁹ See Iordanou, *Venice’s Secret Service*, esp. Chapter 5.

obscure actors oscillating between visibility and invisibility. They were, thus, the quintessential shadow agents of war.

The deployment of undistinguished, even invisible, commoners to carry out some of the most elaborate espionage activities on behalf of the Venetian state is redolent of what Scott Lucas termed ‘state-private networks’.⁷⁰ In a broad sense, the concept of the state-private network describes the cooperative partnership between the state and independent civilians in pursuit of intelligence gathering, consensus-building, and even propaganda. Much as this term applies to contemporary politics, deriving primarily from Lucas’s work on the CIA and various cultural groups during the Cold War,⁷¹ it is hard to overlook the similarity with the Venetian state, where nominally private citizens or subjects acted as intelligence gatherers and spies at the behest of the state, in order to ‘obscure the source of government activity’.⁷² Under the mantle of their amateur status, social and political invisibility, however, they stood a better chance of securing plausible deniability for the Venetian authorities. This was a worthy cause for lurking in the shadows.

To be sure, the more daring the mission of infiltrating foreign courts and other loci of strategic significance, the higher was the need for obscurity and anonymity. Still, the mass of these mercenary spies – most of whom defied the grisly risks of espionage for financial rewards, other material privileges, or simply the evasion of political convictions – remained in the shadows not simply because the Venetian authorities had grasped the significance of invisibility, and, in consequence, plausible deniability. In reality, these individuals’ invisibility – both in the eyes of the authorities and, by extension, in the archival records –

⁷⁰ See Lucas, *Freedom’s War*, esp. chap. 7.

⁷¹ Lucas, ‘Mobilizing Culture’.

⁷² Pullin, 554.

emanated from their expendability. In other words, the intrepid nature that enabled them to take on the hazards of their daring missions mattered more than their actual identity and life story. In fact, the more daring the enterprise, the greater the need for a random mercenary spy rather than a professional state representative, such as an ambassador or other type of envoy, who acted as a professional informant to the authorities.

By and large then, it is evident that in early modern Venice there was spying rather than professional spies. This is because unlike other established professions such as those of the chancery secretary or the cryptologist,⁷³ or other ‘professionals of oral and written communication’ who were involved in public administration,⁷⁴ there was no established and institutionalized profession of a spy. This is surprising, granted both the systematization of diplomacy and intelligence, and the gradual proliferation of stand-alone professions in sixteenth-century Italy.⁷⁵ Despite these developments, the practice of spying did not meet any of the established criteria of a profession set by sociologists and historians. These criteria include several professional attributes such as reliance on theoretical knowledge and practical skills; systematic training for skills development; a professional ethic; a sense of commitment; an appeal to expertise; and a perceived *esprit de corps*.⁷⁶ In other words, while

⁷³ On professions and professionalization in the early modern period generally, see O’Day, 18–43. Specifically on ‘conventional’ professions in Renaissance Italy, see Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors*. On Venetian state secretaries, see Trebbi; Neff; Zannini; Galtarossa. On professional chancery secretaries and cryptologists, see Iordanou, *Venice’s’ Secret Service*, 139–157.

⁷⁴ Lazzarini, 115, 202.

⁷⁵ Biow, *On the Importance*, 39.

⁷⁶ O’Day, 4. See also Larson.

systematizing the organization of intelligence operations and despite professionalizing the art of cryptology,⁷⁷ Renaissance Venice failed to establish a profession of espionage based upon ‘cognitive specialization’, that is, some kind of formal training which transcended the boundaries of apprenticeship, a quality that has been deemed inherent to the process of professionalization.⁷⁸ Indeed, while, in the realm of systematized intelligence and espionage, the Council of Ten went to great lengths to provide rigorous training and development opportunities to professional cryptologists and other chancery secretaries (including continuing professional development activities and frequent examinations for the purpose of updating their technical knowledge and expertise),⁷⁹ formally appointed spies were offered no such developmental opportunities and were not subjected to the same robust organisational structures as others serving in the Venetian secret service were.⁸⁰ The fact that their only benefit was a salary or other perk which they would receive upon completion of their mission reinforces the argument of their expendability in the eyes of the Venetian authorities. And indeed, a brief but thorough survey of espionage in other early modern European states shows that spies were treated with the same condescension in all parts of the early modern world.⁸¹ It is not accidental, therefore, that many of these mercenaries acted as double spies, bestowing their allegiance to any master who would offer them a hefty

⁷⁷ Iordanou, ‘The Professionalization of Cryptology’.

⁷⁸ Larson, 3-4.

⁷⁹ Iordanou, *Venice’s Secret Service*, 110-111, 142; ‘The Professionalization of Cryptology’.

⁸⁰ On the organizational structure of Venetian state intelligence, see Iordanou, *Venice’s Secret Service*.

⁸¹ Iordanou, *Venice’s Secret Service*, 37-54.

compensation.⁸² This, then, is the second and most prevalent reason, aside from the insignificance of their social status, that detailed documented narratives of those amateur intelligencers are lacking.

Despite the lack of such documented narratives, what is evident from the above is that the Venetian government – here, the Council of Ten – were keen to involve ordinary commoners who, in theory, were categorically excluded from political participation,⁸³ with actions that were directly related to the implementation of political decisions and public policy.⁸⁴ This quasi-direct participation of ordinary Venetians in political statecraft was not fortuitous. It was a deliberate act of ‘conflict regulation and political tension between the patricians and the *popolani*’.⁸⁵ Offering ordinary individuals this type of supervised political agency enabled the authorities to manage and control public behaviour and keep the populace on their side.⁸⁶ The result was a calculated attenuation of socio-political tensions,⁸⁷ which was so fervently – yet not always successfully – pursued by the Venetian ruling class.⁸⁸

On the whole, the obscurity of their work, partly due to the invisibility of their existence that served the purpose of plausible deniability on the part of the authorities, and

⁸² Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 186.

⁸³ On the sociopolitical standing of the popular classes in Renaissance Venice, see Romano. The literature on revisionist perspectives on the role of the popular classes in early modern Venice is gradually growing. For apt examples, see Iordanou, ‘Pestilence’; Judde de Larivière and Salzberg; and several of the essays in Van Gelder and Judde de Larivière (eds).

⁸⁴ Judde de Larivière.

⁸⁵ Judde de Larivière, 82.

⁸⁶ Horodowich, 25.

⁸⁷ Judde de Larivière.

⁸⁸ See, for instance, Van Gelder and De Vivo.

partly due to the lack of professionalization, which rendered them expendable, led to a complete absence of documented narratives of Venetian mercenary spies. This is deeply regrettable, as this gap deprives us of a glimpse into a spy's perception of the work they performed for the Council of Ten, casting a shadow on our understanding of any sense of professional identity they might have constructed. Nevertheless, even despite any documented testimony of an emerging professional identity, surviving narratives of early modern spies suffice to support the claim that, as a service, espionage in the early modern period had not been subjected to formal organization of work, just like other established professions.⁸⁹ Viewed from this light, early modern espionage resembled early modern diplomacy in its multiple and, as such, flexible manifestations.⁹⁰

The above-mentioned ruminations raise a notable question: why did a territorial state like Venice that was pioneering in its creation of a systematic, centrally organized state intelligence service fail to cater for the professional development of specialist spies? Were not these individuals, who sacrificed their lives for the Venetian Republic's intelligence gathering pursuits, worthy of such an opportunity? The answer to this question may lie in the political context of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. More specifically, the four devastating Ottoman-Venetian wars between 1463 and 1573, in combination with Venice's shattering defeat by the League of Cambrai at Agnadello in 1509,⁹¹ led to an aggressive

⁸⁹ Burke, 393; Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 188.

⁹⁰ On a revisionist study of early modern diplomacy as a flexible activity, see Lazzarini.

⁹¹ The League of Cambrai was an alliance between Pope Julius II (1443-1513), Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519), King Louis XII of France (1462-1515), and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452-1516). As a result of her defeat by the League at Agnadello, Venice was forced to forfeit a significant portion of its Italian mainland territories.

‘realpolitik policy of neutrality, a balancing act between the French, the Habsburgs, and most importantly, the Ottomans’.⁹² The progressive loss of its maritime possessions as a result of these events, in combination with its stance of neutrality led Venice to resort to military action only when absolutely necessary,⁹³ investing, primarily, in a robust network of fortifications to protect its prized possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁹⁴ As a result, Venice’s foreign policy centred on ‘disarming’ enemies by keeping up appearances, while maintaining secrecy and, eventually, even manipulating information. Within this political context, while spying remained a vital political and diplomatic activity, professionalizing it in any way could have had grave implications for the Republic’s foreign policy and, by extension, domestic security. In this respect, keeping spies in the shadows as obscure, inconspicuous agents, advanced Venice’s strategic stance of neutrality. In this context, then, espionage became an invisible trade.

Conclusion

Early modern Venice’s secret agents were drawn from all strata of Venetian society. Representing the patriciate, Venetian ambassadors and governors acted as semi-professional informants with restricted intelligence gathering activities, strictly demarcated by the socially acceptable norms of diplomatic decorum. Venetian merchants also offered their services as amateur intelligencers, reporting to the authorities any information of potential value that

⁹² Dursteler, ‘Power and Information’, 616.

⁹³ Arbel, 142.

⁹⁴ Mallet and Hale, 429-460.

their professional activity enabled them to obtain during their journeys across Anatolia, the Adriatic, and beyond. For the most outright and daring espionage missions, however, when the spy had to remain unrecognised in order to infiltrate foreign lands, the Council of Ten handpicked run-of-the-mill mercenary spies who were willing to risk their lives for a cash prize, an official privilege or a political favour. And while their hazardous assignments necessitated a variety of specialist skills, the Ten did not see the need to offer any specialist training or professional development to these individuals, most probably in order to maintain a much-needed stance of political neutrality. On the contrary, the Ten's strategy was to deploy as many such men as needed, in the hope that some of them would carry out their mission successfully. The only skills required were knowledge of local languages (or dialects), culture, and lands. Undeniably, to the authorities, these agents were as expendable as their actions. This is the second reason, besides the need for plausible deniability, why these spies nearly always remained in the shadows, somewhere in the zone between visibility and invisibility, resulting in a lack of information on their identity and personal circumstances, except for, occasionally, a name and, more rarely, their place of origin.

One significant aspect of these actors' recruitment was their compensation. Indeed, in order to secure their cooperation, the Ten turned to the quintessential Venetian trait, business dealing. Intelligence gathering and espionage, therefore, turned into a business transaction between the government and those governed by them, in the sense that the former offered some kind of benefit or compensation for services offered by the latter. Compensating for services rendered by means of gifts has been deemed a remnant of the patronage system that proliferated in the Renaissance period.⁹⁵ Yet, ordinary Venetians' and non-Venetians' active involvement in espionage missions transcended the realm of patronage to assume political

⁹⁵ Kettering, 192-206.

overtones. More specifically, through this transactional nature of espionage, mere commoners, who were categorically excluded from participation in politics, assumed a political purpose within the state. This political purpose, however, was camouflaged in the form of a business deal, seeking some kind of benefit for espionage assignments.⁹⁶

The obscurity of the prototypical early modern spy, as depicted in this essay, demonstrates the flexible and multifarious nature of early modern espionage which, while not properly professionalized, materialized in a variety of systematic and unsystematic ways. Importantly, the very lack of visibility of early modern spies emphasizes the significance of their contributions as shadow agents of war. While acting in the shadows, these lay individuals' 'bottom-up' contributions to the state they served are redolent of espionage 'from below', which is fundamental for our understanding of early modern intelligence gathering and espionage pursuits. To be more specific, exploring these actors' missions and assignments, as well as the methodological challenges inherent in such scholarly endeavours, offers rich historical insights into the profound entanglement of state and society in the early modern period. Accordingly, despite its methodological restrictions, the study of early modern spies as shadow agents of war is significant because it allows us to focus on the political and social interactions between the government and those invisible agents. This, in turn, might enable us to realize that the study of early modern intelligence and espionage is as much a people's history as it is a history of the elites.

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⁹⁶ Iordanou, 'What News on the Rialto'? On the subtle, yet vital political role played by commoners in the diffusion of information, see De Vivo, *Information and Communication*.

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