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‘They Hide from Me, Like the Devil from the Cross’: Transalpine Postal Routes as Intelligence Work, 1555–1645

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Abstract
Tracing patterns of letter interception across the Alps provides a new geography of Habsburg communications, espionage, and counter-espionage in seventeenth-century Europe. Using the correspondence of the Tassis family of imperial and Spanish postmasters, this article demonstrates that despite increasingly martial rhetoric, battles in information security took place along different geography than the military campaigns of the Thirty Years War. Instead of the ‘Spanish Road’, the article proposes the consideration of two alternative roads debated by postal administrators: the ‘German Road’ through Augsburg and the ‘Swiss Road’ through Lucerne. Letter interceptions along these roads demonstrate that information security differed from martial security in two key ways: First, Habsburg postal systems relied upon international cooperation rather than territorial control. The desire to avoid information leaks had to be balanced with the financial necessity of contracting postal operations to Alpine towns such as Lindau. Second, postmasters themselves responded to the information security needs of cosmopolitan private patrons and multiple princes, complicating their allegiances as state agents. Cases such as the imperial Postmistress General of Brussels and Spanish postmaster of Milan demonstrate that postmasters served as both ‘honorable spies’ and spy-catchers, proposing new itineraries to circumvent espionage.

I

Postal interference featured prominently in the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus’s manifesto on entering the Thirty Years War (1618–48). The 1630 declaration appeared in five languages and twenty-three editions, seeing the widest known circulation of a pamphlet to that time.[1] The first explanation for Swedish intervention was the interception of Gustavus’ letters to the Prince of Transylvania: ‘after they had been opened, and false glosses put upon them, to load His Majesty with the people’s hatred,

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[1] Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years’ War* (New York, 1988), p. 121.

and render him odious everywhere, they were maliciously published; and the courier who carried them was put in prison, and treated as a criminal by open and public violence contrary to the law of nations'.[2] Several such letter interceptions and publications took place over the course of the conflict, including entire chancelleries abandoned in the aftermath of battle.[3] Yet, Gustavus' manifesto made the rare connection between interception and an overarching code of conduct in international relations, nominally guaranteeing the immunity of mail and its agents. The incident represented the 'thousands of secret and open practices and threats made use of by the Spaniards and their partisans'.[4] The pamphlet set forth the unprecedented claim that such abuse was a *casus belli*. Delegates to the peace negotiations at Münster and Osnabrück would later address guarantees of postal security at length.[5]

Surveillance and mail interception along transalpine routes played a key role in European politics in the decades surrounding the Thirty Years War. A 'black chamber' describes the systematic interception, decryption, and extraction of intelligence from postal systems. The English term is a direct translation from the French *cabinet noir*, associated with the chief ministers of France. This article aims to show that intelligence work, including espionage and counterespionage, was a foundational purpose of state postal systems. This included the Habsburg Spanish and imperial Posts, as run by the Tassis family, later the princes (*Grafen*) of Thurn and Taxis. Intelligence operations were rumoured to exist in key postal hubs such as Augsburg, Milan, and Turin as early as the 1580s. A 'black legend' of letter interference associated with Thurn and Taxis even provides plot points in Thomas Pynchon's postmodern novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*.[6] Nonetheless, the communications 'cold' wars carried out by and against postal agents in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries have rarely been studied outside of France and England.[7]

[2] 'The Swedish manifesto, 1630', in Peter Wilson (ed.), *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* (New York, 2010), p. 123.

[3] Wilhelm Jocher, *Secreta Principis Anhaltini Cancellaria* (1621); Ludwig Camerarius, *Der Röm: Spanischen Cantzley Nachtrab* (1624); Ludwig Camerarius, *Mysterium Iniquitatis, sive Secreta Secretorum Turco-Papistica Secreta* (1625). For an overview of the published intercept genre, see Noel Malcolm, *Reason of State, Propaganda, and the Thirty Years' War* (Oxford, 2007).

[4] 'The Swedish manifesto', in Wilson, The *Thirty Years War*, p. 122.

[5] Johann Gottfried von Meiern, *Acta Pacis Westphalicae publica*, V (Osnabrück, 1969), pp. 442–56.

[6] The novel's conspiracies revolve around a fictional Jacobean play, 'The Courier's Tragedy', and its representation of an ongoing conflict between the Thurn and Taxis and a secret rival postal service. The seventeenth century saw the regular publication of 'mailbag novels', often involving a frame story of a courier being attacked and his letters revealed to a voyeuristic public. See, for example, Ferrante Pallavicino, *Corriero svaligiato* (Nuremberg, 1641).

[7] Pioneering work by Eugène Vaillé continues to inform scholarship on pre-eighteenth-century black chambers. Eugène Vaillé, *Le cabinet noir* (Paris, 1950). For work on less well-known cases, see Siegfried Grillmeyer, 'Briefgeheimnis oder Staatsräson?: die Schwarzen Kabinette der Thurn und Taxis: ein Beitrag zur Adelsgeschichte', *Verhandlungen Des Historischen Vereins Für Oberpfalz und Regensburg*, 147 (2007), pp. 205–20; Karl de Leeuw, 'The Black Chamber in the Dutch Republic during the War of the Spanish Succession and Its Aftermath, 1707–1715', *The Historical Journal*, 42/1 (1999), pp. 133–56; Vito Salierno, 'Il "Gabinetto nero" della Milano del settecento: Censura,

Decoupling intelligence work from military operations reveals the prominence of civilian surveillance via the postal system. The postal routes known as the 'German' and 'Swiss' roads do not map exactly on to the Spanish military corridor, nor does the metaphor of moving munitions adequately represent the complexity of managing communications.[8] Postmasters sought to monopolize (rather than simply obstruct) inimical communications for surveillance purposes. Publication of politically sensitive communications was a bid for popular support for high-level international relations. This article will outline the postal politics of the transalpine routes in the decades immediately prior to, during, and following the Thirty Years War. Cases of postal intelligencing along the transalpine routes reveal common patterns among the Tassis family network of Spanish and imperial post offices, but also a growing public pressure for them to foreswear partisan politics.

II

By the end of the sixteenth century, Tassis family members and their affiliates occupied the positions of Spanish postmaster in Milan, imperial postmaster in Venice, imperial postmaster in Augsburg, and Postmasters General at the imperial and Spanish Habsburg courts in Madrid and Innsbruck, Prague, and Vienna (Figure 1). Bringing the Tassis family archives into dialogue with the state archives of Spain, northern Italy, Germany, and further afield reveals the evolution of a rhetorical strategy: the Tassis portrayed their rivals as either malicious foreign agents or hapless abettors of plots, in contrast to their own faultless loyalty to 'the prince'. By exploiting the growing distrust between rulers and their heterodox populations, postal officials profited at the expense of a growing fault-line in Europe's confessionalising composite monarchies.[9] The threat of 'foreigners' to information security was a constant refrain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Tassis postmasters themselves were often foreigners in their cities of residence, as imperial subjects originating in a Venetian region outside of Spanish Milan. They nonetheless succeeded in primarily associating rival merchant messengers with an international conspiracy to cultivate heretical ideas and foreign allegiances.[10]

In the late sixteenth century, Tassis postal officials argued that information security necessitated the routine interception of

delazioni, spionaggio', *La Martinella di Milano*, 28/5–6 (1974), pp. 174–8; H. Hartmann, 'Über schwarze Kabinette und ihren Zusammenhang mit der Taxisschen Post in Bayern', *Archiv für Postgeschichte*, 1 (1925), pp. 68–78.

[8] Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road* (Cambridge, 2004).

[9] J.H. Elliot, 'A Europe of composite monarchies', *Past and Present*, 137 (1992), pp. 48–71; H.G. Koenigsberger, 'Dominium Regale or Dominium Politicum et Regale: monarchies and parliaments in early modern Europe', in Koenigsberger (ed.), *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History* (London, 1986), pp. 1–25.

[10] The role of Italian merchants as heretical networks in and outside of Italy is treated in depth in Diego Pirillo, *The Refugee-Diplomat: Venice, England and the Reformation* (Ithaca, 2018).

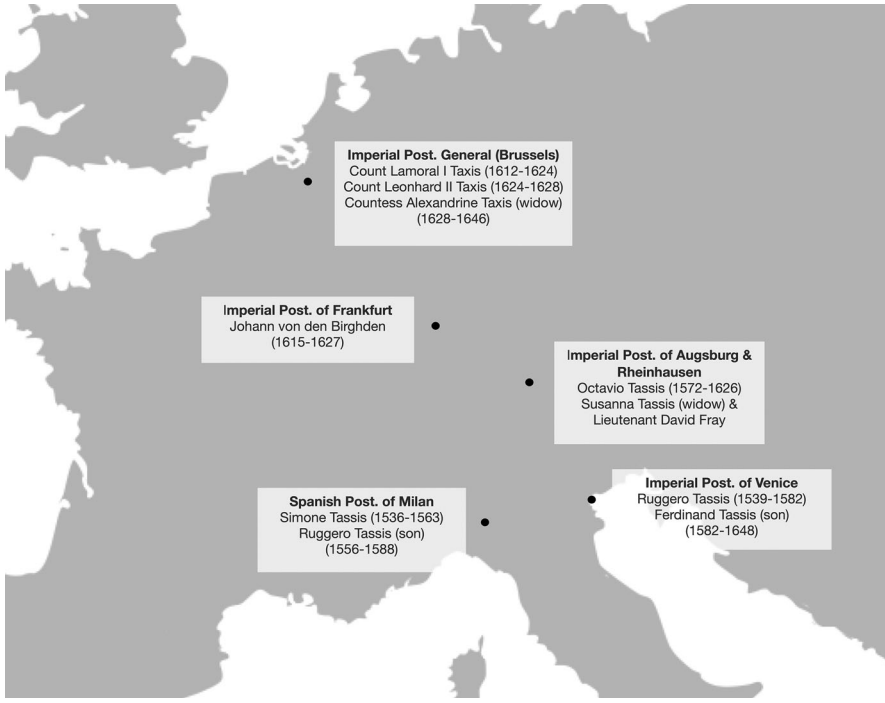

Figure 1 Map demonstrating key locations and dates of officeholding for the imperial and Spanish posts. The imperial Postmasters General also spent significant time in residence at the court in Prague prior to the death of the Emperor Rudolf II (1612).

correspondence, which, in turn, justified their monopolistic privileges on international mail carrying. Much like print licensing systems, official posts harnessed a new communications technology for the benefit of the state. Working in partnership with postal officials, rulers and governors designed postal privileges to intervene in the public sphere, pruning a diverse communications ecosystem and countering the proliferation of newsletters.[11] National and religious loyalty became key litmus tests for postal agents, culminating in the removal of the Lutheran postmaster of Frankfurt and newspaper publisher, Johann von den Birghden (1582–1645), on charges of espionage.

Yet, the seventeenth century brought backlash to perceived Tassis partisanship, including the near expulsion of the imperial postmaster in Venice, Ferdinand Tassis (1582–1648). Birghden's appeals lasted decades, even appearing at the Westphalian peace conferences.[12] Ongoing debates

[11] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, 1991).
[12] 'Bericht vom Post Wesen vom Postmeister Birchden zu Francfurth verfasset', in Meiern, *Acta Pacis*, V, pp. 444–9.

about shifting the central axis of European communications from the 'German' road utilising the Brenner Pass to a new 'Swiss' road via the St. Gotthard pass demonstrate the impact of intelligence work on postal infrastructure and personnel. Balancing speed with security drove conversations and decisions among postal officials.

By the end of the Thirty Years War, postal officials applied an increasingly commercial, rather than political, logic to information security. Intelligence work was not in the interest of a cosmopolitan clientele of businessmen and financiers, and postal officials and statesmen therefore decentred it from the public purpose of state postal systems. The guarantee of extraterritorial protections to international postal routes in the Treaty of Westphalia exhibits a paradigm shift from the divisive rhetoric of counter-Reformation surveillance to new notions of free commerce among nations. The force of public opinion shaped the form of postal intelligence in following centuries, necessitating the secret services of the eighteenth century.

III

A postal system describes a series of waystations at set distances to facilitate couriers riding in relay. Postmasters managed the provisioning of fresh horses and riders as well as receiving and directing mail. Families from the valleys outside of Bergamo in Lombardy, including the Tassis of Camerata Cornello, dominated the early postal systems of northern Italy and beyond. By the 1480s, the Tassis received contracts to build and administer posts for the Holy Roman emperors across the Alps and in the Netherlands, earning the title of Postmaster General (*chief et maistre des postes*).[13] The first Tassis postmasters connected the Habsburg courts to Papal Rome, imperial Milan, and eventually the Neapolitan court.

A 1516 postal contract between Charles V and the Tassis referred to the route from Brussels to Rome as 'The German road' (*chemin d'Allemagne*).[14] The German road, the *Via Claudia Augusta*, or the Roman road (*Roemerstrasse*) historically linked the Tyrol to Italy by way of the Reschen and Brenner passes. At an elevation of 1370 m, the Brenner pass is one of the lowest passes, especially in comparison to Swiss alternatives, all of which top 2000 m. Since the fourteenth century, merchants had developed the road to link commercial hubs on either side of the Alps, namely, Augsburg and Venice.[15] The earliest iteration of an imperial

[13] In a 1508 letter that survives in a later copy, Janetto Tassis described himself as having served as 'magistro de correri e poste con miei fra[t]elli et nepoti anni 20', in Fürst Thurn und Taxis Hofbibliothek und Zentralarchiv [hereafter FTTZA] *Taxis Bergamo Urkunden* 27 n5; privilege of Francesco Tassis (1 March 1501) in *Archives départementales du Nord* (ADN) b. 2.178. See also Martin Dallmeier (ed.), *Quellen Zur Geschichte des Europäischen Postwesens, 1501–1806*, I (Kallmünz, 1977), p. 3 n1.

[14] Postal contract of Charles V (12 November 1516) in Dallmeier, *Quellen*, pp. 4–5 n3.

[15] Bozen merchant Heinrich Kunter sponsored the building of a mule road through the Eisack gorge that made the Brenner passable in 1314, while the Fugger family had contributed to rebuilding

transalpine postal route came along this route in 1495, although Venetian forces periodically blocked the Brenner pass.[16] By 1517, an additional route connected Innsbruck through Füssen (see Figure 2).[17] Once Charles became Holy Roman Emperor (1519) as well as took control of Milan (1535), imperial mail routinely travelled across Europe via northern Italy.

By the end of the sixteenth century, Tassis postmasters in Venice and Milan established several important principles of the postmaster that shaped practice across Europe. First, postmasters depended upon alliances with executive power in northern Italy, specifically the Spanish governor of Milan, who oversaw both the post office in the city and the reimbursement of the imperial postmaster in Venice. Second, postmasters shared and even cultivated the fear of foreign communications going unmonitored by the governor to shore up their own case for monopolistic privileges, often against significant resistance by local carriers and merchants. Third, postmasters were politically active in lobbying on their own behalf, but also in intercepting letters and surveilling correspondents, especially to and from regions associated with religious and military threat.

Imperial postmaster Ruggero Tassis of Venice was especially active in intelligencing, as a 1552 incident demonstrates. The postmaster wrote to Spanish statesman Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (d. 1586) to report a planned interception of the letters of suspected Francophiles, Filippo [W]alter and Auster Reicher:

> I have written to Zapata [likely Juan Zapata, Spanish postmaster at the imperial court] in Innsbruck, where the courier of Augsburg can be waylaid to find many good things. It will be necessary to open all the letters because they write under assumed names, nor do they sign their letters, because they hide from me, *like the devil from the cross*.[18]

The use of ciphers and pseudonyms had gained popularity in recent decades, facilitated by manuals on secret writing.[19] The postmaster offered his services in the interception of the mail, indicating his own

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portions in the sixteenth century. Uwe A. Oster (ed.), *Wege über die Alpen* (Darmstadt, 2006), p. 35. See also Gudrun Schnekenburger (ed.), *Über die Alpen: Menschen, Wege, Waren* (Stuttgart, 2002), pp. 48–9, 83.

[16] The route was an important extension of the earlier Innsbruck-Mechelen course established in 1489; see Lamoral Taxis-Bordogna and Erhard Riedel, *Zur Geschichte der Freiherren und Graffen Taxis-Bordogna-Valnigra und ihrer Obrist-Erbpostämter zu Bozen, Trient und an der Etsch* (Innsbruck, 1955), pp. 29, 38.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Emphasis added. Letter from Ruggero Tassis of Venice to Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (24 October 1552), RB, II/2269, fos. 268r-9r, in Júlia Benavent, and Miriam Bucuré (eds), *Epistolario inedito entre Ruggero de Tassis y el Cardenal Granvelle (1536–1565)* (Prato, 2017), pp. 130–1. Benavent argues for a greater appreciation of Ruggero's political role in this collection and in 'Lettere dei Tasso a Madrid: Biblioteca Nacional de España e Real Biblioteca', in Tarcisio Bottani (ed.), *I Tasso e le poste d'Europa* (Bergamo, 2012), pp. 239–46.

[19] David Kahn, *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing* (New York, 1996). See also Katherine E. Ellison and Susan M. Kim (eds), *A Material History of Medieval and Early Modern Ciphers: Cryptography and the History of Literacy* (New York, 2018).

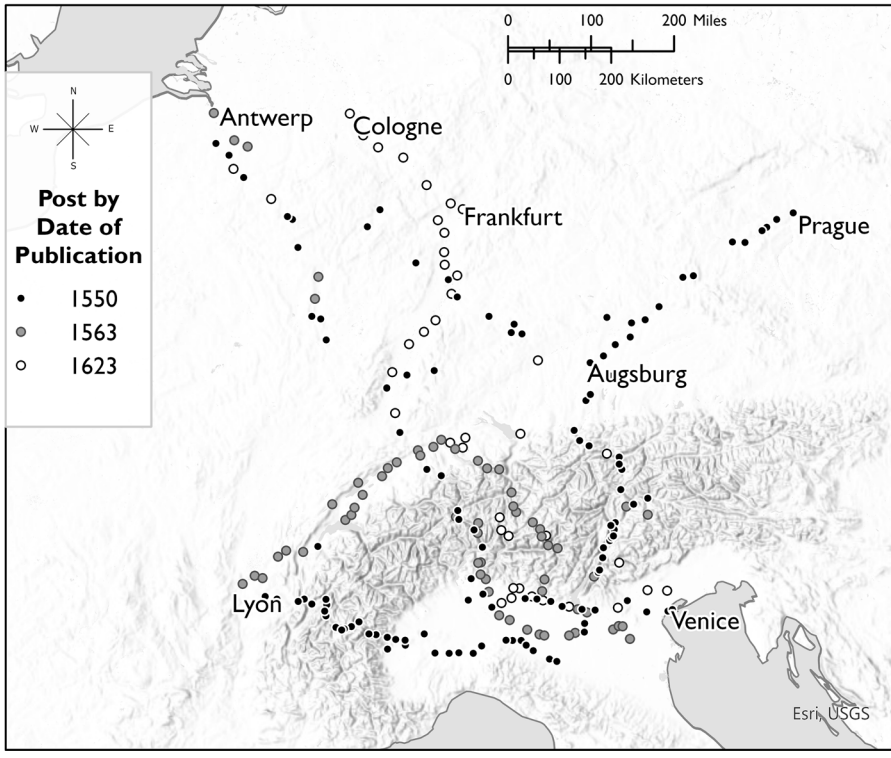


Figure 2 Map of transalpine routes across time. Each point represents the location of a waystation, as they were first documented by printed postal itinerary books. Routes shown include portions of 'the posts from Rome to Brussels in Flanders' in an anonymous Milanese itinerary book (1550); 'the trip from Milan to Antwerp through Switzerland' and 'the path from Bologna to Lyon by way of the German road (*via di Alemagna*), which is to say the Swiss road (*camino svizzeri*)' from Cherubino Stella and Giovanni dell'Herba's *Itinerario* (1563); and later versions from Ottavio Codogno, *Compendio delle poste* (1623). Not shown here are routes to France utilizing coastal passes in the southwest. Over time, routes continued to rely on the St. Gotthard, Bernina, and Brenner passes, but avoided several Protestant cities, such as Zürich. The extension of the Swiss road through Strasbourg, Frankfurt and Cologne provided an important alternative for reaching northern Europe to the traditional route connecting Augsburg to Speyer.

detectival skill in identifying masked authors. In referring to the 'courier of Augsburg', Ruggero likely meant the municipal or merchant carriers who rivalled his own postal couriers.[20] Economic protectionism provided both a cover and an alternative benefit for political aims.

[20] In 1577, Emperor Rudolf forbade these carriers from handling foreign mail, tasking the Tassis with building a new route from Augsburg to Cologne; see edicts (14 October 1578) and (30 April 1579) in Dallmeier, *Quellen*, p. 25 nn. 49, 50.

Ruggero frequently traded favours with counter-Reformation allies, as evidenced in a letter preserved in the British State Papers. English diplomat Sir Edward Carne wrote from Rome in 1557, summarized as the following:

> On the 9th the Abbot of St. Salutis, lately in Cardinal Pole's [Reginald Pole, d. 1558] service in England, came to visit him, and amongst other things mentioned that a friend of his in Venice, Gaspar Petigliano, a Piedmontese, informed him that Roger de Tassis, the King's post-master in Venice, assured him that there came to his hands divers letters sent from England to the Pope by a great Bishop of England against Cardinal Pole, and that therefore De Tassis stayed the said letters. These, he said, he would have enclosed in others to the Cardinal, had he not been afraid that it would come to the Pope's knowledge that he had intercepted them.[21]

Ruggero's knowledge and handling of the mail went beyond that of a simple facilitator. Many suspected the Archbishop of Canterbury of Protestant sympathies, but he was officially supported by the Marian regime. The letters would have been an embarrassing show of disunity on an international stage. In the year after the split between the Spanish and imperial crowns, Ruggero's actions were well outside the sphere of the imperial postmaster's explicit responsibilities. While nominally beneficial to King Phillip II, husband to Mary, it seems more likely that Tassis was continuing a common pattern of gathering intelligence and foreign politicking. Licit or illicit access to correspondence could have life or death consequences during Europe's wars of religion.

'Two postmasters for a city are as incompatible as two princes': so began a petition from another Ruggero Tassis, the Spanish postmaster of Milan.[22] He continued, 'all of the foreign couriers direct themselves in their own houses, and secretly and publicly collect letters and dispatches, and distribute them in contempt of your Majesty and the Illustrious Governor, from which derives much gossip and scandal'.[23] Key to the postmaster's authority was the requirement that all international mail in and out of the city pass through his office. Much like the customs office, this measure curbed smuggling and tax evasion; however, we see Ruggero of Milan equating physical oversight of the mailbag with control of the public sphere. In fact, the postmaster primarily faced threats from local merchants. By characterizing the carriers as 'foreigners', he echoed Spanish rhetoric which frequently approached the Milanese as French or Venetian partisans in disguise. Characterizing merchants as a 'fifth column' proved a powerful allegation. By the 1580s, such accusations were

[21] Letter from Sir Edward Carne to Queen Mary (11 December 1557), SP 69/11 fo.119. Summary taken from William B. Turnbull (ed.) *Calendar of State Papers Foreign: Mary 1553-1558* (London, 1861), pp. 346–354, as made available by British History Online.

[22] The letter is undated, but likely originates from the struggles with the merchants faced by Ruggero Tassis of Milan between 1566–82, in Archivio di Stato di Milano [ASMi], *Atti di Governo*, *Miscellanea Storica*, 43.

[23] Ibid.

often explicit, as appears in a petition presented by Governor Don Sancho de Padilla on behalf of the Spanish postmaster against his merchant rivals, and in defence of a proposed Milan-Venice ordinary postal courier:

> In Your Majesty's states at every time, not just in war, when letters and newsletters are in frequent use, messengers are not free to travel wherever, nor is it often suitable to send them, lest secret actions be discovered; but also in times of peace, when [the enemy] conspires war, not to mention the danger posed to our religion. Your lords and ministers close the roads to these miserable, insidious sects, who seek to oppose us by every means. Their false doctrines are scattered and sown in souls by way of letters and newsletters. They make the wonderful invention of writing and letters, so necessary to human society, something pernicious and loathsome.[24]

While the letter drew a distinction between a state of war and contemporary circumstances, it nonetheless endorsed martial control considering the ongoing *spiritual* war. The omnipresence of conspiracy demanded pre-emptive counterespionage, specifically targeting the dangerous newsletters (*avvisi*).[25] The governor cited recent rebellions in 'Genoa, Florence, Venice and Rome' caused by perceived conspiracies of merchants. He likened Milan to the rebellious Low Countries, where the Tassis postmasters notably held monopolistic privileges. The governor acted on behalf of Ruggero Tassis of Milan (who may very well have provided these foreign examples) to bypass the Milanese senate and outlaw merchant carriers. He had also been inspired by his own recent experience, recounted in detail:

> I wrote in past days to your Majesty about people sent from England and other places to disseminate heresy in Italy, and to do other things in disservice to God, and your Majesty. It is my charge to use every possible diligence to discover their correspondences, and to have in hand the letters that they write, for which purpose I am sent the names and signatures (*contrasegni*). I communicate with a few ministers because they aid me, but they have nothing satisfactory to report to your majesty, nor myself: the postmaster says that such exchange is disguised by the merchants (*sotto coperta de' mercanti*), which he cannot discover: but if the letters pass through a single hand, as is suitable, it will be easy to tell this and other things, from which I may be warned of important things that he discovers.[26]

The letter outlined the mutual benefits to the Spanish state and the Tassis postmasters: postal privileges in exchange for unparalleled surveillance. A postscript added in the governor's hand reiterated the importance of such information received from the postmaster, and the possibility of thereby accomplishing surveillance without arousing suspicion. The letter nominally sought the king's approval, but the governor had already

[24] Ibid.
[25] On the newsletter in Italy, see Mario Infelise, *Prima dei giornali: Alle origini della pubblica informazione, secoli XVI e XVII* (Rome, 2002).
[26] Ibid.

acted, attaching a print edict to the letter. Merchants posed a danger because of their connections abroad, a notion that was well in line with the reactionary preaching of the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Borromeo (1538–84).[27]

On the surface, the battle to control transit between Venice and Milan was straightforwardly economic. Merchant and municipal carriers predated the state posts, but globalizing financial markets increased the scale of demand for timely service.[28] While postmasters often held their monopolistic privileges in exchange for free franking of 'public' mail (*lettere pubbliche)*, 'private' mail (*lettere particolari*) could reimburse the initial outlay for postal infrastructure and even provide a profit. The Tassis's relationship with business interests complicated their relationship with the state. Despite the injunction not to carry private parcels or goods that might attract highwaymen, the Tassis had long ferried money for wealthy patrons, such as the Fuggers and Welsers.[29] By the turn of the seventeenth century, post offices were overwhelmed by the quantity of goods being sent by the official posts, particularly across the Alps. Writing in 1609, imperial postmaster Ferdinand Tassis in Venice passed on the complaints of the messengers of Cologne and Frankfurt that those offices were sending 'too many money purses, which are heavy, and cause the postilions to complain of being overloaded, and what's worse, if bandits assault a single ordinary, every poor postilion will face the danger of being murdered'.[30] Less than a year later, he reported an attack on a courier outside of Bassano, 'and they took several heavy packages for which Signor Carlo [Charles Tassis] blames me as the merchants said that there were 400 gold *ungari* coins in one, 420 gold *zecchini* coins in the other, and in another, jewels worth 700 *scudi*—in total, around two thousand *scudi* in damages'.[31] Transalpine routes were regularly handling large quantities of valuable goods in addition to letters.

By contrast to the merchant carriers of Milan, whose primary protectors were the Milanese senate, the Tassis had firmly allied themselves with the executive power represented by the Spanish governor. To his rivals, the Milanese postmaster's cooperation with the Venetian couriers was tantamount to alliance with a foreign state. The Venetian Company of Couriers even joined the fray themselves, writing to the Spanish Governor in Ruggero's defence, and accusing Milanese merchants of 'usurpations' and tricking the senate into favouring them

[27] Rachel Midura, "Policing in Print: Social Control in Spanish and Borromean Milan (1535-1584)," in Helmer Helmers, Nina Lamal, et al. (eds), *Print and Power in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800)* (Leiden, 2021), pp. 21–46.

[28] On the contemporary development of bills of exchange, see Francesca Trivellato, *The Promise and Peril of Credit: What a Forgotten Legend about Jews and Finance Tells Us about the Making of European Commercial Society* (Princeton, 2019).

[29] Wolfgang Behringer, 'Fugger und Taxis: Der Anteil Augsburger Kaufleute an der Entstehung des europäischen Kommunikationssystems', in Johannes Burkhardt (ed.), *Augsburger Handelshäuser im Wandel des historischen Urteils* (Berlin, 1996), pp. 241–8.

[30] Letter from Ferdinand Tassis (13 September 1609) in FTTZA, *HFS*, 117.

[31] Letter from Ferdinand Tassis (19 February 1610) in FTTZA, *HFS*, 118.

using a mud-slinging campaign.[32] The merchants launched a counterclaim in the same vein, pleading to the Milanese senate that they were mistreated by the favouritism shown to Tassis by the Governor of Milan. Milanese and Venetian authorities had been turned against them, 'instigated, perhaps, by Tassis'.[33] Rivalry between state postmasters and merchant or municipal competitors most often appears in historiography as the growing pains of a fuller nineteenth-century realization of state postal services, yet mutual allegations were always coloured by implications of political and religious disloyalty.[34]

The early intelligencing activities of the postmasters of Milan and Venice reveal key aspects of family practices in Tassis postmastership. The techniques of intercepting and monitoring mail were notably employed prior to the outbreak of armed conflict to surveill a 'fifth column' of foreign supporters located within northern Italy and corresponding with the Protestant north. As the postal systems increasingly came to rely on private (non-state) mail to fund their operation, with state mail often carried *gratis* as a condition of postal privileges, intelligence gathering offered postmasters political capital and conveniently justified monopolizing even private mail service. The xenophobic rhetoric of foreign, Protestant threat – with merchants posing the primary 'threat within' – would be carried on by generations of Tassis postmasters on either side of the Alps, to their dual economic and political benefit.

IV

In 1618, the imperial postmaster of Venice came under suspicion of participating in a conspiracy known as the 'Bedmar', or 'Spanish' Conspiracy. In 1628, the imperial postmaster of Frankfurt left office in disgrace on charges of passing secrets to the Protestant Union. The two incidents have never been considered in tandem, divided as they are by a modern national and linguistic boundary. Yet, both were located along key nodes of the German road during the outbreak of the pan-European conflagration known as the Thirty Years War. Separated by less than a decade, the two scandals involved many of the same Tassis family members and affiliates. Both incidents speak to ongoing patterns of postal intelligence work, but also an increasing awareness and resistance to letter interference in a court of public opinion.

The imperial postmaster in Venice, Ferdinand Tassis, occupied a distinctly uncomfortable role as a prominent and elite Habsburg

[32] This included spreading the false rumour that the Florentine couriers would be banned by the new monopolistic privileges along the Milan-Venice route: 'Supplica della Compagnia dei Corrieri al Serenissimo Senato' (1582) in Archivio di Stato di Venezia [ASVe], *Compagnia dei Corrieri*, 35.

[33] 'Memoriale della Università dei Mercanti di Milano contro il Tasso Corriero Maggiore' (5 Dec 1580) in ASMi, *Atti di Governo, Finanze*, 933.

[34] For foundational works on the history of the international postal systems, see Wolfgang Behringer, *Im Zeichen des Merkur: Reichsport und Kommunikationsrevolution in der Frühe Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2003) and Bruno Caizzi, *Dalla posta dei re alla posta di tutti: territorio e comunicazioni in Italia dal XVI secolo all'Unità* (Milan, 1993).

representative. It was only natural that he be subject to scrutiny. Informers reported on him to the Venetian 'secret service', the *Inquisitori di Stato*, mentioning an injurious fall from a ladder as early as 1603.[35] Given the activities of prior generations of Tassis postmasters, additional allegations of espionage seem plausible. Ferdinand regularly provided his cousins with news items as a form of internal intelligencing, as surviving bulletins in the Thurn and Taxis family archives indicate.[36] In 1617, a Venetian bookseller – likely under investigation for his own shop – provided a list of suspected foreign conspirators, with Ferdinand, 'the *Bergamasco* of the Post of Augsburg', topping the list.[37]

After indirectly sparring in conflicts from the succession crisis of Mantua-Monferrato (1612–17) to the 'War of the Uzkoks' (1615–18), there was bad blood between Habsburg rulers and the Venetian government. The Spanish ambassador to Venice, the Marquis of Bedmar (1574–1655), was openly belligerent. Despite attempts to oust him in 1612, when Bedmar notably admitted to ordering several assaults on Venetian couriers by masked assailants, tensions did not reach a boiling point until the spring of 1618, when Venetians accused Bedmar of attempting to organise a Spanish invasion of the city.[38] In the aftermath of the Bedmar conspiracy, Ferdinand stood accused of being 'one of the bitterest enemies of the Republic'. One informant reported that 'after the tumult in Bohemia [referring to the Defenestration of Prague]', Ferdinand had 'caused the Augsburg ordinary to be delayed till Saturday (that had always left on Fridays) in order to report to the Spanish ambassador, especially many things regarding military affairs of the Republic'.[39] While the archive offers little definitive proof, the accusation of strategic delays and espionage fit into the pattern established by Ferdinand's father, Ruggero.

In 1623, Ferdinand received a blistering dressing-down from Venetian authorities 'since the letters from Holland are opened every week, including those of the Dutch ambassador. I must write to every imperial postmaster to remedy these errors, or else they'll seize my office'.[40] Venetian sources reveal the suspicion that 'the Tassis ministers, who are patrons of the post', were routinely opening and copying the post in

[35] The letter writer notably describes him as the 'postmaster of the Netherlands and Augsburg', indicating the importance of these two connections for most Venetians, in ASVe, *Inquisitori di Stato* (IS), 610. On the Venetian state inquisitors generally, see Ioanna Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service: Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019).

[36] Letters from Ferdinand and David Tassis in Venice can be found in FTTZA, *Postakten* (PA), 653 and 1214.

[37] Deposition of Tomaso Baglioni (September 1617) in ASVe, *IS*, 638.

[38] Richard Mackenney, "'A Plot Discover'd?": myth, legend, and the "Spanish" conspiracy against Venice in 1618', in John Jeffries Martin and Dennis Romano (eds), *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797* (Baltimore, 2000), pp. 185–216.

[39] 'Memoriale di Alessandro Granzini' (5 Feb 1619) in ASVe, *IS*, 610. Writing in 1623, Ferdinand declared 'ma è cosa molto fastidiosa, esser servitor fidele della Casa d'Austria' (28 July 1623) in FTTZA, *PA*, 5403.

[40] Letter from Ferdinand Tassis (14 Jul 1623) in FTTZA, *PA*, 5403. See also ASVe, *Corrieri*, 1, III.

Augsburg: if true, this black chamber would rival, or even precede the earliest identified French establishment.[41] Ferdinand had a dark outlook, writing that 'these German merchants seek my ruin' and 'this will be the ruin of the post'.[42] He likely referred to the carriers of Augsburg, who ran a route from the city across the Brenner pass to Venice, working out of the German *fondaco*. In later petitions to his Postmaster General cousin, Ferdinand described how his mother had aided in efforts to 'sustain this office against the Germans of Augsburg' even selling her own jewellery and clothes.[43] Yet, as was now common in his letters, Ferdinand blended the threats posed by the Germans and the Venetian Company of Couriers, who were also 'ever vigilant in their aims to take over all the posts in Venice'.[44]

Ferdinand also actively thwarted Venetian espionage. Plague hospitals (*lazzaretti*) where couriers were routinely stopped on the Venetian mainland, nominally for quarantining and sanitization, were especially contentious settings. Postmasters complained of mail being opened and excessively delayed.[45] Ferdinand travelled to meet the mail in person, with 'confidential' letters separated under his watchful eye. A Venetian report notably indicated that an agent had therefore been unable to intercept the letters 'despite my best efforts', leading him to recommend the appointment of an 'expert person' to the lazzaretto.[46] In fact, countering Venetian espionage was a major responsibility of Tassis postmasters. In 1620, a Venetian agent described posing as the recipient of letters to intercept them from the courier.[47] Meanwhile, in Augsburg, imperial postmaster Octavio Tassis believed that the imperial courier was routinely assailed by the Venetians 'in order to read ministers' letters'.[48]

The Venetians seemed to employ a strategy from the Tassis playbook: accusing the postmaster of foreign conspiracy as a means of asserting postal sovereignty.[49] By 1630, the Venetian Company of Couriers debuted their own postal ordinary to Augsburg. Venetian accusations always made a special note of Tassis family origins in Bergamo as proof of a predisposition to treachery. Bergamo was, after all, a 'very suspicious (*gelosa*) city due to its proximity to Milan'.[50] Such lobbying spoke to

[41] The French *cabinet noir* was active by 1633, but certainly in operation earlier. Interestingly, the Venetian secretary in Milan appeared to be seeking how to turn this information network to his own advantage for the Venetians, requesting additional funds for spies: 'Risponde all'ordine circa la lettera dell'Ambasciatore in Inghilterra Valaresso intercetta in Augusta' (4 January 1622) in ASVe, *IS*, 450.
[42] Letter from Ferdinand Tassis (29 January 1622) and (30 June 1623) in FTTZA, *HFS*, 117.
[43] Letter (27 September 1624) in ibid.
[44] Letter (21 April 1629) in ibid.
[45] Mail was often dipped in vinegar among other Venetian innovations to control contagion. Paolo Peruzza (ed.), *Venezia e La Peste* (Venezia, 1979); Karl Meyer, *Disinfected Mail* (Holton, 1962).
[46] Anonymous report (15 June 1620) in ASVe, *IS*, 610. A list of correspondents found in the mailbags and kept by a prior of the lazzaretto survives in ASVe, IS, 1214.
[47] Anonymous report (31 August 1620) in ibid, 638.
[48] Letter from Octavio Tassis (12 April 1623) in FTTZA, *PA*, 1214.
[49] Entry (29 February 1623) in ASVe, *Corrieri*, 12.
[50] ASVe, *IS*, 610.

the shared perception of national and religious identity as impacting the postmaster's value, or threat, to information security.

It was Venetian interference that prompted discussion of shifting operations from the German road among Octavio, Ferdinand, and other Tassis family members. The German road was increasingly referred to as the 'old route' while a new 'Swiss' route posed a promising possibility for improving information security. The move would involve a significant shift of infrastructure, negotiations with the Swiss political entity known as the Grey Leagues (or the *Grisons*), the local carriers of the Swiss town of Lindau, and increasing the capacity of imperials offices in Ulm and Nuremberg. It was a pricey undertaking, but as Octavio noted, 'I can only point to a single reason: that all Catholic princes are loath to see their letters traveling by the Venetian road… if one sends mail by the Venetian road, it all comes into their hands'.[51] Octavio implied that the Venetians were dubious allies in matters of religion as well as politics. The proposed Swiss routes made a notable appearance in a postal itinerary published by the Spanish postmaster lieutenant in Milan in 1623 (see Figure 3).[52]

V

While Octavio and Ferdinand Tassis warded off interference along the German road, trouble brewed further north. The Frankfurt office was relatively new and recently leased to Aachen-born Lutheran, Johann von den Birghden, in 1615.[53] Despite service in the Spanish military and apprenticeship at the office at Rheinhausen and Frankfurt, Birghden's appointment was a point of tension between the Postmaster General, Count Lamoral Tassis I (1557–1624), and his son, Leonhard II (1594–1628).[54] Birghden nonetheless maintained the appointment throughout the following decade, building new post courses that connected Leipzig and Hamburg to the German road (see Figure 3).[55]

During his tenure, Birghden produced a postal newsletter, one of the first of its kind. As early as 1615, Johann Schweikhard von Kronberg, the Elector of Mainz, paid Birghden 100 *gulden* a year for carrying his mail, and another forty for the regular provision of 'weekly newsletter', almost certainly a manuscript *avviso*.[56] Around that time however Birghden did

[51] Letter from Octavio de Tassis (6 March 1624) in ibid.

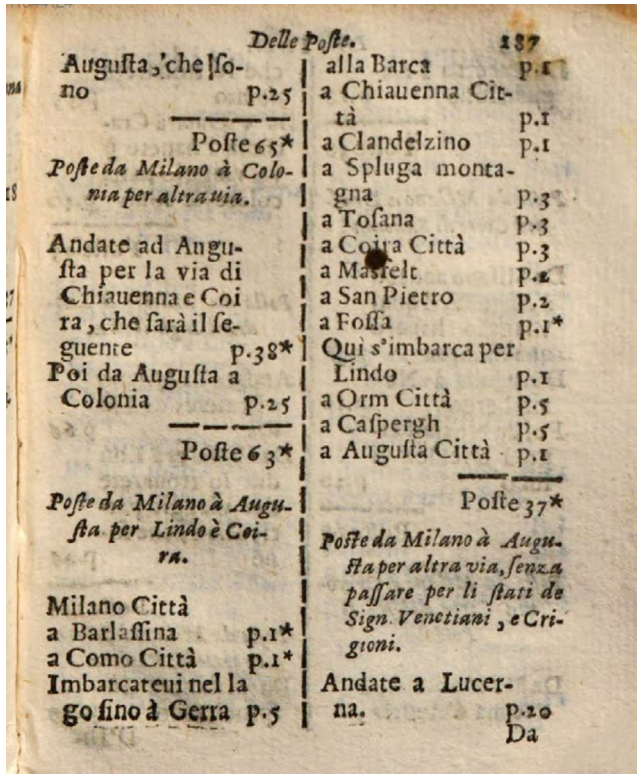
[52] Ottavio Codogno, *Compendio delle poste* (Milan, 1623).

[53] Birghden and the Frankfurt post office are treated in great detail in Karl Heinz Kremer, *Johann von den Birghden, 1582–1645: Kaiserlicher und königlich-schwedischer Postmeister zu Frankfurt am Main* (Bremen, 2005). See also Bernhard Faulhaber, *Geschichte des Postwesens Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt, 1883).

[54] The reason for the resentment is not clear, although Kremer suggests that the younger Leonhard may have resented Birghden's seniority and favoured place as lieutenant, in addition to religious intolerance: Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 287.

[55] Werner Münzberg, *Thurn und Taxis 1490–1867: 500 Jahre Post* (Regensburg, 1982), pp. 9–12.

[56] The newspaper, now commonly referred to as the Frankfurter Postzeitung, did not regularly carry a title until 1628. For a table of possible production numbers and surviving editions, see Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 538.



Delle Poſte. 187

Auguſta, che ſono p.25

Poſte 65*

Poſte da Milano à Colonia per altra uia.

Andate ad Auguſta per la via di Chiauenna e Coira, che ſarà il ſeguente p.38*

Poi da Auguſta a Colonia p.25

Poſte 63*

Poſte da Milano à Auguſta per Lindo è Coira.

Milano Città
a Barlaſſina p.1*
a Como Città p.1*
Imbarcateui nel lago fino à Gerra p.5
alla Barca p.1
a Chiauenna Città p.1
a Clandelzino p.1
a Spluga montagna p.3
a Toſana p.3
a Coira Città p.3
a Maſelt p.2
a San Pietro p.2
a Foſſa p.1*
Quì s'imbarca per Lindo p.1
a Orm Città p.5
a Caſpergh p.5
a Auguſta Città p.1

Poſte 37*

Poſte da Milano à Auguſta per altra via, ſenza paſſare per li ſtati de Sign. Venetiani, e Grigioni.

Andate a Lucerna. p.20

Da

Figure 3 A page from Milanese postal lieutenant Ottavio Codogno's *Compendio delle poste* (1623), publishing a new Swiss road as an alternative to the historic reliance on the Brenner Pass. Note that the following route, which passes through Lucerne, is designated 'the posts from Milan to Augsburg by another route, without passing through Venetian territories or the Grisons'. Courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek Passau, Catalogue Item S nv/Mh (b) 33. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

begin to publish a printed version. The support of the elector, one of the most powerful Catholic patrons in the Holy Roman Empire, proved crucial when Birghden came under fire, first by a rival bookseller, and later by the merchant carriers of Frankfurt. Among their accusations, they claimed Birghden had referred to them as 'instigating rebellions, naming them rebels', which suggests that Birghden kept that Tassis strategy alive and well.[57] Privately, Birghden indicated his own distrust, noting that 'while it's true that dog doesn't bite dog… I have always been averse to Calvinism, and our religion [Lutheranism] cannot be compared with that

[57] The letter of complaint dates to 6 February 1624, in Institute für Stadtgeschichte, Frankfurt am Main (ISG) *Burgermeisterbücher 1623*, p. 135; in Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 222.

of the Calvinists'.[58] While Birghden regularly called for tolerance and unity in his newspaper, prejudices shaped postal practice and lobbying in a similar manner across the Alps.

Following the outbreak of armed conflict between the Catholic League and Protestant Union, postal ley lines became open battlegrounds. The year 1622 saw several sieges and battles in the Lower Palatinate, where couriers routinely faced harassment by enemy forces. In April, Ferdinand Tassis wrote to the Postmaster General to say that the Dutch ordinary had been compromised somewhere in the Palatinate. Several letters between high-ranking officials were missing, and as he noted 'it seems strange that the other letters would arrive and only theirs would be missing', although the clear answer was interference on the part of 'the Protestants'.[59] Birghden advised Brussels of similar interference with the messenger in 1624, although he did not assign blame.[60] Birghden also notably publicised such delays and interferences in his newspaper, such as in July of that year, when he informed readers that 'this week the mail awaited from Germany and Italy was attacked by the Hollanders near Namur at the Emptin post'.[61]

Postmaster Octavio Tassis in Augsburg routinely butted heads with Birghden over the best route for the post. He accused Birghden of capriciousness, 'doing one thing one day and undoing it the next', but bitterly commented that his opinion never seemed to matter since Birghden was among 'the favourites'. With the death of Postmaster General Lamoral in 1624, however, Octavio made his true feelings known:

> I have never shared it, but I know it well from rebel correspondence in the Palatinate, and I have it from Rheinhausen that [the rebels] have complained about not being able to control that road [The Swiss road, for which Octavio had long lobbied] due to the number of routes on which people arrive. But then I saw Birghden's reply that having considered the current circumstances, it would be difficult to alter the route, not knowing where the storm is about to go.[62]

Yet, Octavio also openly described himself as jealous of Birghden's station. The success of the Frankfurt office had come at Augsburg's expense. Frankfurt steadily overshadowed the city as the crux of not just a north-south route, but an east-west axis connecting Prague to Cologne.[63]

[58] FTTZA, PA, 24631, in Kremer, *Birghden*, pp. 224–5. The idiom 'kein wolf den andern beist', likely derives from 'es beist kein Wolff den andern bald/Es sey dann Hungers Roth im Wald'. The phrase appears as a translation of the Latin *canis caninam non est* in Andreas Sutor, *Latinum Cahos De, Ex, & Pro Oni Seu Compenduolum Pro Uso Quotidiano* (Augsburg, 1716), p. 406.

[59] Letter from Ferdinand Tassis (3 April 1622) in FTTZA, *HFS*, 118.

[60] Letter from Birghden to Brussels (31 March 1624) in Joseph Rübsam, 'Postavisi und Postkonto aus den Jahren 1599 bis 1624', *Deutsche Geschichtsblätter*, 7 (1906), pp. 8–19.

[61] 'Diese wochen ist die auss Teutschland und Italien anhero erwartende post von den Hollandern bey Naumur auff die Post Emptin uberfallen': Birghden, *Wochentlich Zeitungen* (13 July 1624) in Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 152.

[62] Octavio de Tassis in Augsburg (16 Jan 1625) in FTTZA, *PA*, 1234.

[63] Martin Dallmeier, *500 Jahre Post*, p. 3. See also related documents in FTTZA, *PA*, 1234.

In fact, the storm was about to turn on the Protestant postmaster of Frankfurt himself, although Octavio did not live to see it. The first warnings came from the Postmaster General Lamoral, who shortly before his own death reported his son, Leonhard's, intrigues at court.[64] Despite receiving an imperial commendation and coat of arms as recently as October 1625, by March of 1627, Emperor Ferdinand himself called for Birghden's resignation:

> due to continuing his suspicious and dangerous correspondence with the supporters of the Count Palatine in Strasbourg, Basel, Durlach, and Holland in his weekly prints. These newspapers, some of which were spotted in France, have interfered with many matters.[65]

The edict went further to establish that the office should be 'filled with a Catholic subject'. The use of the Latin *subjecto*, replacing a more standard reference to a citizen-resident (*bürger*), emphasised the necessity of imperial allegiance above other ties. The accusations went even further, implying Birghden had a network of imperial supporters who helped distribute his intelligences. He had received payment from the Protestant Union and a medal from the Count Palatinate himself.[66] Gerard Vrints, a long-time (and importantly, Catholic) lieutenant of the Postmaster General, would be appointed postmaster in Birghden's place. Once again, the Tassis post office was positioned in direct opposition to pernicious 'newsletters' and the information security compromise they represented. Yet, Vrints picked up the postal newspaper where Birghden left off, turning its focus towards imperial propaganda, and reporting an increased distribution volume, despite no longer including France.[67]

Ousted by the Tassis, Birghden did not give up the fight. In following years, he continued to handle mail for the city of Frankfurt and the elector of Mainz. In 1628, he regularly complained of Vrints withholding his mail, exchanging insults with him, and going as far as to bring a notary witness with him to the office.[68] In 1629, the Swedish Lutheran King Gustavus Adolphus decisively placed a finger on the scale to benefit the Protestant Union. As noted at the outset of this article, interception and alleged interference in the Swedish king's correspondence played a prominent role in his 1630 manifesto. Swedish forces occupied Hamburg, Frankfurt, Augsburg, and Nuremberg by 1629. Vrints fled the Frankfurt office, allegedly leaving it in a state of complete disrepair. By 1632, Adolphus designated Frankfurt the centre of the Swedish Posts of the

[64] Letter from Lamoral Tassis to Birghden (9 July 1623) in Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 210.
[65] The recipients of Birghden's newspaper via their chancellors and secretaries appear in Dallmeier, *Quellen*, p. 96 n. 208. See also FTTZA, *Posturkunden* (PU) 98.
[66] Ibid.
[67] In October of 1627, Birghden indicated that he had produced 450 copies of the newspaper, while in 1628, Vrints distributed 778. Kremer doubts the validity of these numbers, presuming that Birghden may have deliberately under-reported in the context of his charges. Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 155.
[68] Kremer, *Birghden*, pp. 304–13.

Holy Roman Empire, and Birghden their postmaster, establishing a system following the Tassis model.[69]

Meanwhile, the imperial Postmaster General died in Prague at the young age of 34, leaving his wife, Countess Alexandrine von Taxis und Rye, to serve as Postmistress General throughout the minority of their young son. A 1632 letter from her postal lieutenant David Fray in Augsburg divided Europe in terms of faithful agents and 'Birghden's faction'. Fray petitioned the postmistress once again to shift portions of the German road westward, this time adding new posts near Cologne. By securing and speeding the posts, he hoped to move business away from Nuremberg and Frankfurt, thereby 'playing a lovely trick (*una bella burla*) on the heretic messengers who traffic through Nuremberg'.[70] 'It really is a shame', he noted about Birghden, 'that there be a person so perfidious and inimical to Your Honour [in Frankfurt], because if this was not the case, we could send everything that way, especially the merchants' letters'.[71] While the Tassis continued to work with Birghden when necessary, it was clear that security was compromised.

Having lobbied for control of private as well as public mail along the alpine routes, the Tassis were now diligently at work to assure the speed and security of correspondence. Driven by necessity, Fray negotiated with the carriers of Protestant Lindau to establish the Swiss postal road and dealt with such recurrent annoyances as snow soaking the courier's well-worn bags of mail.[72] By 1628, the new postal course was a reality, running north from Milan through Lindau and Memmingen (see Figure 2). Vrints, Birghden's replacement, was far more amenable to the changes, but it would take until the cessation of conflict for the new route to come fully into effect, notably serving the peace conferences at Münster and Osnabruck.

Birghden's removal from office, much like the threatened expulsion of Ferdinand Tassis, was not the politicization, so much as the recognition of the espionage and counter-espionage roles of the postmaster. The association of postmasters with active intelligence work made political and religious loyalty essential. In prior decades, the Tassis had effectively made the case for the potential of the post office for surveillance: fairly or unfairly, Birghden came to represent how that potential could easily be turned against the state.

A counter-narrative proposing the universal security of the post, and the impartiality of the postmaster was well underway. Birghden himself had regularly used the newspaper as a platform to call for tolerance, frequently underlining the impeccability of his news sources, fresh from the courier, and the 'objective' and 'unpartisan' nature of his

[69] Both the Swedish king and 'Winter King', Frederick V of Palatinate, were present in Frankfurt in December of that year, with Frederick residing in the post house: Faulhaber, *Geschichte*, p. 54.
[70] Letter from David Fray (7 January 1632) in FTTZA, *PA*, 1214.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Letter from David Fray (20 February 1627) in FTTZA, *PA*, 1214

reporting.[73] It is not too far of a stretch to think that Birghden may have influenced the association drawn in the Swedish manifesto between interference in the mail and the great number of ways in which the Habsburgs had interrupted 'free commerce'.[74] Biographies of Birghden largely portray the episode as Tassis machinations against a prodigy administrator.[75] After a World War II bomb destroyed much of the original documentation, Birghden's printed set of defences, including letters of advocacy from a number of elite figures, remain the definitive collection of sources.[76] The *Deductio Birghdiana*, addressed to the 'impartial reader', lay the entire affair at the feet of the 'great hatred' born by the Tassis Postmaster General. The defence routinely contrasted the 'dispassionate' approbation and commendations in support of Birghden against the dissimulating Tassis, accused of Machiavellian entrapment. The defence notably made no explicit mention of either religious matters or the accusations of espionage, but like Birghden's newspapers, lauded its conquest of 'passions'.

Guilty or innocent, the postmasters of Venice, Augsburg, and Frankfurt stood accused of espionage and partisanship shaped by their national and religious identity. Postmasters sat at the crux of politics and a broadened news network, kept informed by both manuscript and print. The involvement of postmasters in espionage and counterespionage was foundational to the establishment of a state postal monopoly over international mail. Yet, the question of whether political surveillance benefited economic privileges, or vice versa, remained complex. As succeeding years demonstrated, the private–public balance of the post shifted, and cultivating good public relations further limited attempts at utilizing the post to constrain the transalpine public sphere.

[73] A representative passage appears in the first issue of the new year in 1621. In addition to calling for a cross-confessional celebration of Christ's birth, Birghden wrote 'Und ob wol mit dieser Relation biss anhero der methodus gehalten worden/dass man sich aller eingensinnigen Passionen enteussert/und den beglaubten uberschriebenden Avisen beflissen/so habe sich doch viel Kluglin gefunden…. Dass diesseits man sich der schuldigkeit erkennet/der Obrigkeit gebuhrenden schuldige Respect zu erweisen/allen Uffruh/Rebellion-und uffwicklungen/so viel immer mensch-und moglich/zu verwehren… die konnen sich bey den Zeitungsschreibern/Sangern/oder ander Pasquillanten angeben/bey welchen sie ohne zweiffel/dergleichen Materi genugsamb finden werden/sich damit zu erlustigen'. In Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 137.

[74] On a shift towards free commerce, and the denigration of 'jealousy of trade' in diplomacy, see Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2010).

[75] See, for example, the description of Birghden having 'fallen victim to the increased confessional tensions' in Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know about Itself* (New Haven, 2014), p. 216.

[76] A printed copy survives in the Bavarian State Libraries, where it has been dated to 1636: *Deductio Birghdiana, Das Ist, Etlicher Hochst-Und Hochansehenlicher Chur-Fursten Und Herren, Intercessiones, Commendations, von Attestastions* (1636) Augsburg, Staats- und Stadtbibliothek – 2 S 44. Digitised version available at http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11201796-0. On the destruction of the original sources at the Frankfurt archives, see Kremer, *Birghden*, p. 3.

VI

By the middle of the seventeenth century, Tassis postmasters increasingly identified themselves with a cosmopolitan, commercial elite, adopting their distaste for the 'partisan' activities of espionage and counterespionage, at least publicly. Modern and early modern writers alike tend to draw a line between public (state) and private (non-state) mail-carrying. In practice, postal officials distinguished further between merchants (referred to as *mercanti*) and businessmen (*negotianti*, or *particolari*). In the sixteenth century, administrators along the German road deliberately associated foreign merchants with disruption, rebellion, and heresy. Yet, the late sixteenth century through early seventeenth century was an age of ascendancy for the *negotianti*.[77] Businessmen, such as the bankers of Genoa, whose loans financed much of the Spanish military, were generally above such imputations.[78]

By 1630, a new generation oversaw many of the posts of the German road, including many women (see Figure 1). The Postmistress General in Brussels, the postmistress in Augsburg, and postal lease-holders in Milan relied more heavily on Lindau than ever before, even linking it to Augsburg by way of Memmingen rather than utilizing the old Brenner route (compare to Figure 2).[79] The threat of foreign espionage along the German road drove the development of the Swiss road, but the necessities of speed, security, and navigating the alpine crossing required compromise. While the Tassis worked out a route to avoid Zürich, Geneva, and Bern – preferring Lucerne, a 'city and canton of Catholics' – they nonetheless employed Protestant Lindau as a crucial component of the Swiss road.[80] Postmaster Octavio Tassis of Augsburg resentfully dubbed the Lindau carriers 'tyrants' even as he encouraged working with them, seemingly resenting their hard bargaining more than their religion.[81] Despite perennial efforts to establish an entirely internal system, the Tassis continued to sign agreements with the messengers of Lindau well into the

[77] Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 2013); Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization & Capitalism 15th-18th Century—Volume 2*, trans. Sian Reynolds (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982).

[78] On the dependence of the Spanish crown on northern Italian financiers, especially for continued conflict in the Netherlands, see Parker, *The Army of Flanders*.

[79] The route from Augsburg through Memmingen was built over the course of 1628–35, see Münzberg, *Thurn und Taxis*, pp. 120–2. Relevant letters from Giovanni Battista Serra (8 November 1634) and Alexandrine Rye und Taxis (22 July 1628) are in FTTZA, *PA*, 1242.

[80] The phrase comes from a letter of Juan de Taxis, the Count of Villamediana and Spanish Postmaster General. Letter to Count Fuentes and Count Oñate (5 April 1609) in AGS, *Estado*, 1899, 180.

[81] Several letters detail the resentment of the Lindau messengers by the Milanese postmistress Lucina Catanea Tassis and her postmaster lieutenant; see, for example, a letter that called their continued existence 'an embarrassment' to the office: letter from Ottavio Codogno (26 June 1607) in ASMi, *Carteggio delle cancellerie dello Stato*, 392. Letter from Ottavio Tassis of Augsburg (12 April 1623) in FTTZA, *PA*, 1214.

eighteenth century.[82] The reality of contracting and incorporation belied the rhetoric of foreign threat: different agents competed for advantage in the communications sphere, but ultimately relied upon one another as specialists and middlemen, especially when it came to challenging terrain.[83]

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, leaseholders of the post office of Milan opposed the desires of 'businessmen of the Grisons' for the establishment of their own post office.[84] A key characteristic of postal surveillance was the necessity of all messengers in and out of the city reporting to the central office. Postal leaseholders pointed out that the carriers of the Grisons were 'especially suspect', almost certainly referring to the free religion of the region.[85] Evidently, the ability to subject the Lindau messengers to continuous oversight, a more difficult topic with diplomatic pouches, earned a small measure of trust. The Lindau carriers had also simply proved faster than the German road alternatives, as noted by the new postal leaseholders in Milan, who were themselves Genoese businessmen.[86] The imperial route between Mantua and Trent had fallen into disrepair in the mid-seventeenth century.[87] Speed was of the essence as businessmen competed with one another for advanced knowledge of news with both commercial and political bearing.

Continued intelligence work met resistance from unexpected quarters. Many of the same agents involved in the work of prior decades now expressed distaste for letter interference, revealing an overall shift towards a political neutrality for the post, at least in its public face. In 1643, the same Ferdinand Tassis who had nearly been expelled from Venice in the 1620s for his perceived partisanship, wrote:

> This week the Dutch and German merchants called me before the Duke to complain that they are hurt by the packages arriving opened from Augsburg and even more so those that come from Cologne, and that they send letters for Amsterdam by a different road which takes an additional eight days, by which they have experience some business losses. They seek another fall-back because the opening of packages of another is a barbarous thing and not to be practiced in any part of the world. I have responded that these failures did not occur in my office… I beg your Honour to tell me how this has come to pass and what I might do, as I have a bad feeling about this matter, for my part.[88]

[82] Bruno Caizzi, 'Il servizio postale dei mercanti tra Lindau e Milan', *Società e storia*, 42 (1988), pp. 855–66; Erwin Neurold, 'The Milano courier and the mail conditions in Graubunden', *Postal History Journal* 71, (1985), pp. 18–23.

[83] The Count of Villamediana noted that the route was 'very dangerous and difficult with mountains and rivers': letter to the Count de Fuentes and Count de Oñate, (5 April 1609) in AGS, *Estado*, 1899, 180.

[84] Letter from Ottavio Codogno (26 June 1607) in ASMi, *Carteggio*, 392.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Letter from Gio. Batta Serra (8 November 1634) in FTTZA, *PA*, 1221.

[87] See many references in FTTZA, *PA*, 1221.

[88] Note from Ferdinand Tassis (May 1643) in FTTZA, *PA*, 5090.

Writing from Cologne, postal lieutenant David Fray responded that the Postmistress General 'commands, despite the complaints from Venice, that the letters from Holland continue to be separated, which can't happen without opening the packages from Venice and Italy… may it please God that we find some remedy for the nuisance (*fastidio*) that it causes'.[89] Ferdinand was not content, replying in the next postscript that 'this seems badly conceived, and I have made a complaint to His Majesty and await a response from the Countess, because the breaking of merchant's seals and those of others goes against every conscience and duty (*contra la conscienza e contra ogni dovere*)'.[90] The surviving letter of complaint employed similarly strong language, calling the breaking of seals 'a barbarous and strange thing'.[91] Seals had been in use to indicate the authority of state or notarised documents and authenticity of shipped goods since antiquity, but the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw increasing use to indicate the privacy of correspondence. The seal served as material evidence of new cultural expectation, as did the occasional additional expense of utilizing a blank sheet of paper to provide an envelope.[92]

The Tassis internal correspondence should always be read in light of intrafirm jostling for honours. The middle-aged Ferdinand may very well have resented being overseen by the young postmistress, since she was Tassis by marriage. Yet, in his decades of serving powerful businessmen since his own brush with conspiracy, Ferdinand had risen within Venetian society, and it is worth considering that Ferdinand had cultivated relationships with his German and Dutch clients and felt personally embarrassed by perceived impropriety. Letter interception earned him no favours among his religiously and nationally diverse clientele. Faced with new competitors and enjoying new titles, the Tassis paid new attention to the impact of interference in the mail on public opinion.[93] The postmistress was at this same time defending against renewed appeals by Birghden for recompense, who smartly continued to direct popular pressure by way of published pamphlets.[94]

The Postmistress General and her lieutenant justified the opened mail as an accounting practice, as the sender, recipient, route, and content impacted the correct postage. Yet, the letters of English ambassador Sir

[89] Note from David Fray (14 May 1643) in ibid.
[90] Note from Ferdinand Tassis (May 1643) in ibid.
[91] '…questa cosa di aprir i pieghi d'altri era cosa barbara e siano non mai usata in alcun luogo del mondo', in ibid.
[92] Projects such as *Signed, Sealed, Undelivered* (Brienne.org) at the Brienne Museum are adding significantly to our understanding of seals and letterlocking. See also *Imprint: A Forensic and Historical Investigation of Fingerprints on Medieval Seals* (imprintseals.org); James Daybell (ed.), *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia, 2016); Elison and Kim, *A Material History*.
[93] The Postmistress General notably commissioned a history of the family: Jules Chifflet, *Les marques d'honneur de la maison de Tassis* (Antwerp, 1645).
[94] Birghden, *Bericht des Postmeisters* (1644). See also Johann von den Birghden, *Allerunterthanigst Verwantwortlund Ablehnung auff der Fraw Gravin von Taxis* (1640).

Balthazar Gerbier (1592–1663) indicate his conviction that the operation was not above board. He even wrote a treatise for his successor on how to circumvent the intelligence operation he believed the postmistress to be running.[95] Gerbier echoed and amplified the complaints of the Tassis postmasters in describing the opening of mail as a type of sexual violation.[96] Once again, postal subterfuge served both an espionage and a counter-espionage purpose, as the postmistress helped to carry the Queen of Bohemia, Elizabeth Stuart's correspondence in and out of England, avoiding surveillance by her brother, Charles I. In doing so, she behaved little differently than Ruggero Tassis of Venice a century earlier, staying letters on behalf of the English Queen Mary.

A recent article credits Postmistress General Alexandrine von Taxis with making the post an 'international business enterprise that did not just cater to Catholic but also to Protestant Europe'.[97] In fact, the Tassis along the German and Swiss roads had long carried Protestant mail, although perhaps not always to its intended destination. Whereas the pre-war years of Counter-Reformation had delineated trustworthiness along the lines of national and religious identity, by the mid-seventeenth century, the entire framework had shifted. With the cessation of open conflict, and an increasing intellectual movement towards freedom of commerce, the Tassis pivoted once again. The Postmistress General employed many of the techniques honed by the family firm, but postmasters along the German and Swiss roads shied away from the appearance of impropriety. Impartiality, speed, and security had come to characterise the ideal postmaster, who served the state by serving its cosmopolitan businessmen.

VII

The seventeenth century often appears glancingly in the history of intelligence, remembered for failures in military or political intelligence as much as successes.[98] There has been little room to date for the chimerical Tassis-run postal systems among studies of state secretaries and secret services.[99] Letter interceptions appear to be opportunistic and scattershot, rarely fitting into a clear political program beyond a general

[95] Nadine Akkerman, 'The postmistress, the diplomat, and a black chamber?: Alexandrine of Taxis, Sir Balthazar Gerbier and the power of postal control', in Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox (eds), *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture* (New York, 2011), pp. 172–8.

[96] 'rapt & violement de la virginite de nos pacquets sacrez', in ibid, p. 176.

[97] Ibid.

[98] The bulk of work has focused on later periods, especially relating to England and France: see Nadine Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*: *Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2018); Rachel Weil, *A Plague of Informers: Conspiracy and Political Trust in William III's England*, (New Haven, 2014); Alan Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660–1685* (Cambridge, 2003); Lucien Bély, *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1990). Scholarship on Venice and the Mediterranean are a rare exception, see Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*; Paolo Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia*, (Milan, 1994).

[99] Christopher Andrew, *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* (London, 2018); Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York, 2012); Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor, 2011).

fear of the religious and national 'other'. Tassis monopolistic postal privileges nonetheless grew from the common desire among state officials to control and surveill a rising tide of newsletters and correspondence. The professional administration of a postal system was intelligence work as much as it was a political appointment or a family trade.

Recent studies in diplomacy and journalism make the case that even high-level state officials were deeply embedded in a lively public sphere.[100] Much like diplomats and journalists, postmasters often pursued a parallel set of goals to the state, with an eye to their public reception. Rallying against the rebellious and heretical 'other' served to advance the economic and political fortunes of the Tassis in the late sixteenth century. Yet, letter interception along the transalpine postal routes led to a very public debate among postal officials, state administrators, and a wider international audience over the nature of intelligence and its handling in international relations. As the Tassis increasingly catered to Europe's postwar class of cosmopolitan businessmen, state surveillance came to be a black mark against the speed and security of the postal systems. Combatting new competitors, especially among Protestant nations, the Tassis distanced themselves from accusations of routine letter interference.

Putting international state archives in dialogue with the Tassis family correspondence fills in deliberate silences. Postal intelligence included the 'barbarous practice' of breaking seals, but postal officials also provided state officials with lists of correspondents, piercing ciphers, and codes. Letters could be strategically delayed, forwarded or even potentially altered (as the Swedish king accused), leaving only the slightest archival trace. This transnational approach also reveals that the practices of the postmasters of Milan, Venice, Augsburg, Frankfurt, and Brussels were shared among a family network, as sons apprenticed to fathers, nephews to uncles, and wives to husbands.

Like communications technology today, the public benefit from postal systems came with its own risks and drawbacks. Feelings of violation preceded the fleshing out of a full theory of privacy of communications, and the treatment of correspondence as a form of 'free commerce'. With the cessation of the Thirty Years War, postmasters adopted a rhetoric of impartiality and open exchange, despite their own reliance on monopolistic privileges gained in the past century.

Intellectual movement was joined by geographic movement: the Swiss road began with a distinctly different ideology than it ended. Tassis postal officials had initially embraced the Swiss alternative to the German road as a solution to the intelligence threat posed by Protestant influencers and rival nations. By the time of the road's full realization, the violation of state secrets and proliferation of newsletters were the new status quo. In the mid-seventeenth century, intercepted letters were a literary as well as

[100] Noah Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2017); Jason Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013); Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice* (Oxford, 2007).

journalistic staple, with postal newspapers thriving well into the twentieth century – one only needs to look to *The Washington Post* or the *Daily Mail*. Interception became associated with delay and poor public opinion that was detrimental to the Tassis competition with new Protestant state systems. The Swiss road's security now served primarily to guarantee its speed, and the safe delivery of the parcel post.

The postmaster surveillants and spies of the seventeenth century receded into rumour, fiction, or occasional public scandal. Even today, state interference in postal service is characterized as a 'barbarous' departure rather than a constituting professional purpose of its Postmaster General.[101] Black chambers may have been open secrets in capitals like Vienna and Paris by the nineteenth centuries, but their earlier history remains primarily associated with military intelligence and the increasing power of secretaries of state. An earlier history of postal service as intelligence work nonetheless remains just beneath the surface of Europe's state archives and the correspondence of its powerful families.

[101] Examples include the 1840s 'Mazzini Affair' as well as more recent media coverage of the United States Postal Service. Erik Larson, 'DeJoy's 10-Year Postal Plan Threatens Mail-In Ballots, States Say', *Bloomberg News*, 8 Oct 2021, at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-08/dejoy-s-10-year-postal-plan-will-slow-ballots-again-states-say. See also James Purdon, 'Secret agents, official secrets: Joseph Conrad and the security of the mail', *The Review of English Studies* 65/269 (April 2014), pp. 302–20.