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The Deceivers Deceived: How a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Anti-Jesuit Circle Duped a Jesuit Rector

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Abstract

In 1608, Antonio Barisone (1557/8–1623), rector of the Jesuit college at Ferrara, became ensnared in an elaborate deception designed to expose the unscrupulous methods by which Jesuits exploited vulnerable wealthy widows and enlarged the material wealth of their Society. Entering into a correspondence with a Venetian noblewoman who lamented the loss of her Jesuit confessor following the expulsion of the Society of Jesus from Venice (1606), it took several months before Barisone realized that the letters he was receiving actually had their origins in the anti-Jesuit circles linked to Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623). In addition to throwing light on Venice as a hotbed of espionage, political rumors, and conspiratorial activity in the early sixteenth century, this episode foregrounds several themes and leitmotifs that would go on to dominate anti-Jesuit polemic over the subsequent centuries.

Keywords

forgery – anti-Jesuitism – Venice – Interdict – Giovan Francesco Sagredo (1571–1620) – Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623) – espionage – fake news – early modern religious history

1 A Well-Honed Hoax

On March 12, 1608, the rector of the Jesuit college at Ferrara, Antonio Barisone (1557/8–1623), received a letter addressed to Antonio Possevino (1533–1611). The latter was not in the city at the time and in his absence, he decided to

open it himself. The Venetian noblewoman Cecilia Contarini was writing to Possevino to tell him she had lost her confessor, Antonio Giugno (b. c.1548), as a consequence of the Interdict and the expulsion of the Society of Jesus from Venice (1606); she was therefore turning to one of the undisputed leading lights of the print war in which Rome and the Serenissima were then engaged.¹ Contarini painted herself as a woman beset by her own relations whose greed was restricting her contact with the outside world for fear of her alienating their inheritance, and she asked if the Jesuit would therefore take on her spiritual guidance “by letter.”²

We cannot know what Possevino would have made of this communication, but we might guess that such an acute politician and diplomat as that veteran of the pamphlet wars could have scented a trap. But Barisone, who actually opened the letter, was also no cipher: he had run the college at Macerata and the Greek College in Rome, and, in 1606, was stationed in Ferrara, where he received notice of the bull of excommunication that Paul V (r.1605–1621) had issued against Venice, forwarded to him by the Society’s superior general Claudio Acquaviva (in office 1581–1615) with instructions that it be promulgated immediately.³ He was, besides, brother to Girolamo Barisone—a confidant of Acquaviva’s—who had also occupied positions of responsibility within the Society over the same period.⁴ We are dealing, then, with a figure who ought to have been sufficiently on the ball to be wary of such an unusual request, although it is also true that the Jesuits in Venice had so polarized opinion in the city that while there certainly existed a considerable public hostile to the Society, there were equally many who resented the Jesuits’ banishment. Furthermore, the practice of providing spiritual guidance to women of rank

1 See Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 160–99.

2 Cecilia Contarini to Antonio Possevino, Venice, March 12, 1608, in Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Cod. It. X, 188 (=7216): *Lettere promiscue di Rocco Berlinzone sotto il falso nome di Cecilia Contarini e del Gesuita Antonio Barisoni sotto quello di Angiola Colomba dell'anno 1608*, 11^r.

3 Antonio Barisone, scion of a noble Paduan family, entered the Society on March 25, 1576. From 1594 to 1597, we find him in Macerata and from 1599 to 1600, at the Greek College (see ARSI, *Hist. Soc.* 86 (Cat. trienn. 1594–1600), fols. 3^r, 22^r). He was appointed rector of the Ferrara college on February 25, 1606 (see ARSI, *Ven.* 5, fol. 446^v). In 1613, he was in Perugia, as we gather from a March 12 letter regarding Father Joan Bautista (see ARSI, *Hist. Soc.* 177, vol. 2: *Vocationes illustres*, fol. 47^r). From his obituary (ARSI, *Rom.* 185, fol. 130^{r-v}) it appears that in addition to the above-mentioned positions he had also administered the college at Fermo.

4 Girolamo Barisone (1559–1614) was rector of the Naples college (1600), provincial in Milan from 1603 to 1606 and subsequently in Naples from 1609 to 1612.

was beginning to be standard practice in the early years of the seventeenth century. These considerations, then, were enough to persuade Barisone to agree to enter into correspondence with Contarini and to find nothing untoward in her suggestion that they write under assumed names so that any letter falling into the wrong hands could not be traced back to themselves.

The names they fixed on were Rocco Berlinzone⁵ and Anzola Colomba, the two exchanging forty-eight letters in all, and it seems that almost until the last moment the Jesuit failed to realize that the Contarini/ Colomba alias concealed one Giovan Francesco Sagredo (1571–1620), an influential figure in the Venetian world of the time, friend of Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623), correspondent of Galileo Galilei's (1564–1642), and a prominent member of the anti-Jesuit party.⁶ Sagredo was doubtless not acting alone in this scheme: he was one of the so-called *giovani*, a group that included Antonio Querini (1554–1608), Leonardo Donà (1536–1612),⁷ and Niccolò Contarini (1553–1631)—and it may well be that the correspondence, once concluded, remained in the possession of the last named.⁸ Sagredo had planned his hoax to be at the expense of a figure he reckoned to be one of the staunchest upholders of the Roman line (i.e., Possevino), but decided to proceed regardless of the fortuitous change of target. He began drawing in the rector by describing the difficulty of finding

5 The name Rocco Berlinzone resurfaces in the correspondence between Galileo Galilei and Gian Francesco Sagredo to indicate the Jesuits, but Berlinzone is also an appellation that the 1612 *Vocabolario della Crusca* notes as among those used by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) in the *Decameron* to indicate “an empty, made-up name, for fun.” The name “Cecilia Contarini” may have been suggested by the fact that Sagredo had a sister married to a Contarini and a sister-in-law called Cecilia.

6 Giovan Francesco Sagredo (1571–1620) is chiefly known for being one of the three characters in Galileo's *Dialogo sui massimi sistemi*, which takes place in the Sagredo palace on the Grand Canal. He also served as an intermediary with Markus Welser (1558–1614) for Galileo's letters on sunspots and circulated them in Venice. See, on him, Antonio Favaro, *Amici e corrispondenti di Galileo Galilei*, VIII, *Giovan Francesco Sagredo* (Venice: n.p., 1903): 1–132; Gaetano Cozzi, *Paolo Sarpi tra Venezia e l'Europa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979): 135–234 (“Galileo Galilei, Paolo Sarpi e la società veneziana”); and the recent biography by Nick Wilding, *Galileo's Idol. Gianfrancesco Sagredo and the Politics of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

7 Leonardo Donà was elected doge of the Republic in 1606 and found himself having to manage the Republic's stand-off with the Holy See during the Interdict. See his entry—by Gaetano Cozzi—in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 40 (1991) <[8 The manuscript is marked as being bound for the nobleman Girolamo Contarini, 1843. On the Venetian context for the letters' production see Wilding, *Galileo's Idol*, 61–62.](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/leonardo-dona_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>, as well as, with reference to the Interdict, Giovanni Florio, “Un contributo involontario alla ‘guerra delle scritture’: Nicolò Manzueli e la sua orazione al doge Leonardo Donà (1606),” <i>Acta bulllearum</i> 3 (2017): 225–36.</p>
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a good confessor in Venice as all those remaining in the city were linked to the Republic's cause. Anzola Colomba described to her Jesuit correspondent the real threat of heresy represented by the available Venetian options: having to make her confession to such priests made her feel, she wrote, like "a Lutheran Jew" ("zudia luterana"), uniting in this phrase two bogeymen, namely the Protestant Reformation and the ever malign influence of the Jewish community. She had sought, she claimed, absolution from her Venetian confessor for having disobeyed the Interdict, but he had refused to absolve her from what he did not believe to be a sin. Barisone agreed that it would be better in that case not to confess at all; and the two of them returned on several occasions to the Interdict theme.⁹

But the final aim, it seems clear, was another: to demonstrate that the Jesuits were only interested in getting their hands on the worldly possessions of the female faithful. Contarini/ Colomba succeeded, in fact, in shifting their conversation in this direction, saying that she was keen to leave part of her estate to "pious places" and insisting that Barisone help her draw up a draft will ("schizeto di testamento").¹⁰ The Jesuit initially replied cautiously that she should herself choose what "places" should receive her legacies, but in subsequent letters allowed himself to be drawn into making suggestions. In the first instance Barisone, with a certain canniness, made no mention of Jesuits (listing the Theatines, the Capuchins, the odd hospice),¹¹ but as their exchanges proceeded—and encouraged by the noble lady who wanted to leave something specifically to her Jesuit confessor—he eventually confirmed Sagredo's dark suspicions by allowing that some part of her landholdings might be conceded to the usufruct of the Society and indeed named her former Venetian confessor, Father Antonio Giugno (whom he had failed to consult with a view to verifying the information supplied by the noblewoman), as an appropriate beneficiary of her largesse.¹² That Barisone was aware the operation could stoke accusations of impropriety against the Society is clear from his enjoining Cecilia Contarini to proceed with utter secrecy and *before* Giugno was able to return to Venice, since

if you were to do it after his return, all the world and your children in particular would think that you had been influenced by him, and therefore

9 Antonio Barisone to Cecilia Contarini, Ferrara, April 16, 1608, in *Lettere promiscue di Rocco Berlinzone*, 13^r.

10 Cecilia Contarini to Antonio Barisone, Venice, April 26, 1608, *Lettere promiscue*, 14^v–15^r.

11 Antonio Barisone to Cecilia Contarini, Ferrara, May 2 [?], 1608, *Lettere promiscue*, 23^v.

12 Cecilia Contarini to Antonio Barisone, Venice, May 25, 1608, *Lettere promiscue*, 26^r.

it would be best that you draw up your will before his arrival so that he could not be accused of having had you do so under his guidance.¹³

The hoax was therefore moving in the direction Sagredo hoped, and confirming the Jesuits' avarice. But then a month later "Cecilia Contarini" received a letter from a certain Maddalena Boschi informing her of the sudden departure of Barisone for Naples and forwarding a request from the father to have back the sheet outlining the legacy in favor of Antonio Giugno. The motive given was a scruple regarding the beneficiary who had not been informed of the ongoing discussion, and "if God wills it that Master Antonio should receive this, then He will find a way to make it so; and if He does not wish it, we should not go against His will."¹⁴ Barisone had at last smelt a rat.¹⁵ To be sure, the good father had not behaved with scrupulous rectitude, contravening all the guidelines issued over the years by the superior general to Jesuits in every part of the globe that they should not enter into worldly transactions with women to whom they were giving spiritual guidance.¹⁶ There was even a direct Venetian precedent from a decade or so earlier when Father Giulio Viscandi (dates unknown) had been reprimanded by Acquaviva himself for having accepted cash donations from certain widows.¹⁷

The Jesuit sources pertinent to our inquiry are unfortunately exiguous, but Nick Wilding has succeeded in tracking down a draft letter from the superior general to Barisone dated July 5, 1608, from which we gather that the Ferrara rector had solicited the help of a cardinal to intervene with the Venetian authorities, but that the more circumspect Acquaviva turned away the suggestion, no doubt aware of Barisone's error of judgment and of the necessity of not drawing attention to a correspondence potentially embarrassing to the Society.¹⁸ Evidence of the culprit's own embarrassment is the fact that in one of his last letters Barisone enjoined "Cecilia Contarini" to burn the draft will he had drawn up together with "all my letters to you [...] so that they not be

13 Antonio Barisone to Cecilia Contarini, Ferrara, June 4, 1608, *Lettere promiscue*, 47^r.

14 Maddalena Boschi to Cecilia Contarini, Ferrara, July 1, 1608, *Lettere promiscue*, 64^v.

15 A letter from Antonio Barisone to a certain Bernardo, in the Venice parish of San Giovanni in Oleo, dated July 5, 1608, seems to confirm that he had uncovered the plot, without however identifying Sagredo as the concocter of the "diabolical fabrication" (see Wilding, *Galileo's Idol*, 63–64).

16 See Claudio Acquaviva, *Monita generalia quae ad religiosam nostrorum directionem spectant, et ab omnibus observanda sunt*, cap. 3, in *Institutum Societatis Iesu*, 3 vols. (Florence: Typographia a Ss. Conceptione, 1892), 3:267–68.

17 See Claudio Acquaviva *al p. preposito di Venezia*, July 8, 1595, ARSI, *Ital.* 71, fols. 30^v–31^r.

18 The letter is in ARSI, *Ven.* 6, fol. 68^v, cited in Wilding, *Galileo's Idol*, 64 and n. 53.

discovered.”¹⁹ The Society’s strategy was evidently to keep knowledge of the correspondence within its own walls, not least because, the ongoing Interdict notwithstanding, the Jesuits were currently negotiating to be allowed back into Venice, and any circulation of the letters between Rocco Berlinzone and Anzola Colomba would hardly have been helpful to their efforts.

Of the opposite inclination to the Roman party, needless to say, was the Venetian side, which was only too happy to make the hoax at Barisone’s expense known, first and foremost to Sarpi,²⁰ a key figure in Venetian anti-Jesuitism, and, beyond Venice, to Galileo himself.²¹ The now openly burlesque nature of the correspondence was apparent in the final letter to the Jesuit, recounting the death and the testamentary provisions of Cecilia Contarini:

This is to inform Your Reverence of the passing of that most devout Countess Signora Cecilia who has left to Your Reverence’s Society the sum of five thousand ducats to be counted in good currency, immediately on receiving the news of her safe arrival in heaven in accordance with the contract she stipulated while alive with Master Rocco Berlinzone, your appointed agent. Be assured that as soon as Your Reverence be satisfied by the first messenger arriving from on high with the aforementioned confirmation in authenticated form, and can see that it arrives here, he will receive due satisfaction, and I meanwhile kiss his hands trusting in his holy prayers.²²

The farcical tone of this communication represented, however, only one level of the exchange: that the aim was something more than mere leg-pulling emerges in fact from a note that Sagredo appended to the correspondence. The Venetian, addressing Barisone directly in a sort of summarizing indictment, rehearsed the whole history of the hoax and strongly condemned the Jesuit’s behavior in the course of it: “How wretched and unfortunate are those that put their trust in you, those who stumble into the coils of the deceptions you

19 *Antonio Barisone to Cecilia Contarini*, Ferrara, May 2 [?], 1608, ARSI, *Ven.*, 22^v. Barisone returns to the importance of secrecy regarding the will in a letter of June 11, 1608 (ARSI, *Ven.*, 53^v) and again on June 25 (ARSI, *Ven.*, 58^v).

20 Paolo Sarpi, *Lettere ai protestanti*, ed. Manlio Duilio Busnelli, 2 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1931), 2:130 (*Colloquio con Christoph von Dohna*, August 23, 1608).

21 See Galileo Galilei, *Opere*, 12:458.

22 *Al Barisone per dare avviso alla morte di Cecilia Contarini*, Venice, July 12, 1608, *Lettere promiscue*, 66^r.

live by and end up the unhappy prey of your greed and rapacity.”²³ And what is more, the rector had not, in Sagredo’s opinion acted as a loose cannon: his behavior was entirely consistent with that of the Society generally:

Everyone knows that you seek what is convenient to yourselves without regard to others [...], your plans always aimed at other, no doubt higher ends. [...] If the Jesuits are ready with such miserable means and with letters without scruple and addressed to persons they do not know, what will they get up to in the confessionals where they keep devoted ladies for whole days on end!²⁴

The second and more important level of Sagredo’s concern was, then, to demonstrate, once and for all, that the anti-Jesuit sentiment widespread in the Venetian Republic was profoundly justified, and the devices employed by the Society of Jesus to conspire against the state were legion. Its strategy did not necessarily involve violent political action as in the Gunpowder Plot against James I (r.1603–25) recently foiled in England (1605), or the assassination of Henri III of France (r.1574–89) perpetrated by the Catholic fanatic Jacques Clément (c.1567–1589) in 1589, who, it was suspected, may have been incited and even armed by the Jesuits.²⁵ A more subtle game plan was to subvert the womenfolk, who represented a weak link in the social chain but a key point of entry into powerful families. Thus, the Jesuits were alleged to deploy confession as a full-blown political tool, not only in the case of confessors to kings, but as a weapon for working on consciences more broadly.²⁶

23 *Lettere promiscue*, 71^r. And further on: “he [Barisone], does not hold back, indeed he runs, rushes in to suborn one he believes to be an important gentlewoman, advises her [...], tutors her, and more: induces her, provokes her, entreats her to divert her possessions from her own grandchildren” (71^v).

24 *Lettere promiscue*, 77^v–78^r. The title Sagredo gives to his manuscript is also of interest and leaves his stance in no doubt “a collection of several letters written to Father Antonio Barisone of the Society of Jesus under an assumed name by the illustrious Countess Lady Cecilia Contessa, together with his replies [...] so that every man of judgement can deduce from his endeavours what can be expected from the return of the Society of Jesus to the city of Venice.”

25 Sagredo speaks of the “villainies” (*Lettere promiscue*, 83^r) committed by the Jesuits in France and England. See Andrew McKenzie-McHarg’s article in this issue on the emergence of the defamatory link between the Jesuits and regicide.

26 For the use of confession in the French Wars of Religion, cf. Paolo Sarpi, *Del confutar scritture malediche*, in Sarpi, *Opere*, ed. Gaetano and Luisa Cozzi (Milan: Ricciardi, n.d.), 1170–71.

In his closing remarks, Sagredo returned to the issue of the Interdict, introducing a new theme: the pope—as a human being—could err in human fashion like another, and it was just such an error that had induced him to impose an excommunication on Venice. It is worth noting in passing that the same line of argument would *mutatis mutandis* be often redeployed in late eighteenth-century *pro*-Jesuit propaganda: it was surely a human error that had induced Clement XIV (r.1769–74) to suppress the Society of Jesus in 1773, and for that reason, the papal brief *Dominus ac redemptor* (1773) was a pronouncement that could be considered null and void.²⁷

We cannot know for sure whether Sagredo intended to publish the Rocco Berlinzone–Anzola Colomba correspondence. The addition to the exchange of a letter from Barisone to Sagredo, solicited by the latter on a trivial pretext apparently to prove that the Jesuit's handwriting was indeed that of the letters sent to the “Contarini,” would tend to support such a conjecture. Nor can we know what motives, if this was indeed his intention, caused the Venetian nobleman to hold back. The manuscript survival of the text, which exists in a single copy first spotted by Gaetano Cozzi in Venice's Marciana Library,²⁸ strongly suggests that if such a plan had existed it was never realized since no trace of it is to be found in the great mass of Venetian anti-Jesuit publications. The choice of an epistolary format nonetheless corresponds to a well-worn tradition typical of literary anti-Jesuitism, which would enjoy considerable success over the following centuries. The most famous example is, of course, Blaise Pascal's (1623–62) *Lettres provinciales*, but there are many other occasions when the epistolary genre was preferred on account of its attractiveness to a wider public. It is also the case that many of the polemical pamphlets

27 See Sabina Pavone, “Il paradosso dei gesuiti: Contro il papa per fedeltà al papa,” in Philippe Koeppl, ed., *Papes et Papauté au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), 219–38; Antonio Trampus, “La ritrattazione del breve di soppressione della Compagnia di Gesù: Comunicazione politica e strategia del falso,” in *Congiure e complotti*, ed. Marina Caffiero and Maria Antonietta Visceglia, a monographic issue of *Roma moderna e contemporanea* 11, no. 1–2 (January–August 2003): 253–80; Marina Caffiero, “La rhétorique symétrique, discours et stratégies d'autolégitimation des jésuites,” in *Les Antijésuites: Discours, figures et lieux de l'antijésuitisme à l'époque moderne*, ed. Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Catherine Maire (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 197–220.

28 Gaetano Cozzi, *Galileo Galilei, Paolo Sarpi e la società veneziana* (Florence: Barbera, 1965), reprinted in Cozzi, *Paolo Sarpi tra Venezia e l'Europa* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 135–234; see also Cozzi, “Fortuna, e sfortuna della Compagnia di Gesù a Venezia,” in *I Gesuiti e Venezia: Momenti e problemi di storia veneziana della Compagnia di Gesù: Atti del convegno di studi, Venezia, 2–5 ottobre 1990*, ed. Mario Zanardi (Padua: Giunta Regionale del Veneto-Gregoriana Libreria 1994), 59–88, in particular 80–82.

issued around the Venetian Interdict were arranged in letter form.²⁹ But it is clear that, even in the manuscript, the correspondence must have circulated widely enough in Venice and is indeed mentioned in Sarpi's letters. Sarpi, as already indicated, was a key figure in the construction of the myth of the power-hungry Jesuit set on manipulating every aspect of social relations, be it religious, economic or political.

2 The Venetian Background

We should at this point take a step backwards and have a look at the context in which the sting at the expense of the Jesuit father Barisone was perpetrated. And Venice does in fact represent an interesting case study of how the stereotype of a Society of Jesus maneuvering deviously within a society and plotting to seize power could be constructed. In the years preceding the hoax, the Venetian Republic had become an important crossroads for European politics and, thanks in part to its position as a leading port for trade with the Levant, it was considered by contemporaries as a hotbed of espionage, political rumors, and conspiratorial activity. Another contributor to this reputation was the fact that the republic had tried to play a mediating role in the ascent of the Protestant Henri IV (r.1589–1610) to the French throne and had thereby acquired the credit in Reformation circles of being an “open city,” which the presence of long-term English residents might seem to confirm.³⁰ The lagoon

29 On the pamphlet war, see Prosperi, *Altro coltello*; Vittorio Frajese, *Sarpi scettico: Stato e Chiesa a Venezia tra Cinque e Seicento* (Bologna: Mulino, 1994); Ivone Cacciavillani, *Paolo Sarpi: La guerra delle scritture del 1606 e la nascita della nuova Europa* (Venice: Corbo e Fiore, 2005); Marie Viallon, ed., *Paolo Sarpi: Politique et religion en Europe* (Paris: Garnier, 2010). This is not the place to provide a detailed listing of the pamphlets held in the *Rari veneti* section of the Marciana Library in Venice, but to give an idea of the breadth of the holding it is worth mentioning that Possevino's short *Lettera del p. Antonio Possevino giesuita Al padre maestro Marc'Antonio Capello minor conuentuale, con la risposta di detto padre: Et il suo parere delle controuersie trà il sommo pontefice Paolo quinto, et la serenissima Republica di Venetia* (Venice: Cavalcaluppo, 1606), is present in no less than five copies.

30 On the Protestant presence in Venice during the years of the Interdict, see Micaela Valente, “Le campane della propaganda: Rapporti di reciprocità e conflitto giurisdizionale a Venezia tra Cinque e Seicento,” *Laboratoire italien* 3 (2002), <<http://journals.openedition.org/laboratoireitalien/369>> (accessed February 28, 2022). See also W. B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1997]); Stefano Villani, “Uno scisma mancato: Paolo Sarpi, William Bedell e la prima traduzione in italiano del *Book of Common Prayer*,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 53 (2017): 63–112.

city was also busy with spies and informers in the pay of one or more Italian or European powers who stoked a flourishing market in fake news.³¹ Among such spies were inevitably numbered the Jesuits who were reputed to keep black books of information on every sort of person, be they friend or foe.³² The true, the false, and the plausible intertwined inextricably, fueling a publishing boom that was particularly vigorous in the years we are dealing with. These elements sometimes made it hard even for governments to distinguish reliable from specious information. And then, as Marc Bloch put it in a famous essay: “error propagates itself, grows, and ultimately survives only on one condition—that it finds a favorable cultural broth in the society where it is spreading. Through it, people unconsciously express all their prejudices, hatreds, fears, all their strong emotions.”³³ There can be no doubt, besides, that an anti-Jesuit mindset had become quite firmly rooted in Venice, feeding off the anti-Roman and anti-Spanish prejudices already flourishing in the city.

Since the fifteenth-century Venice had shown a distinct assertiveness towards the papacy, to the point where in 1411 it took a series of measures to exclude from office those nobles with relations in the curia or shared interests with Rome. In 1551, disturbed by their increasing influence among the patriciate, the Council of Ten actually banished the Barnabites (Clerics Regular of St. Paul) from the Republic, already identifying the confessional as a potential tool for extracting state secrets.³⁴ At that point, the Jesuits had not yet fallen under suspicion, perhaps because they were only then beginning to penetrate Serenissima territory, but the rapid expansion of the Society’s colleges by 1591

31 See Peter Burke, “Early Modern Venice as a Center of Information and Communication,” in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State*, ed. John Jeffries Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 389–419; Paolo Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia: Spionaggio e controspionaggio ai tempi della Serenissima* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2010); Stefano Dall’Aglio, “Cosimo’s Self Made Spy,” *Renaissance Studies* (2022): 1–19.

32 This too is an enduring *topos*. We find it again in Philippe Canaye, *Lettres et ambassade de Messire P. Canaye, sieur de Fresne*, 3 vols. (Paris: Robert Regnault, 1635–36), 3:85–86, where he reproduces a report for Henri IV on the motives for Venice’s expulsion of the Jesuits, among which is the discovery of such dossiers in the Bergamo and Padua colleges; and, looking ahead, again in Guillaume Libri, “Lettres sur le clergé français,” *Revue des Deux Monde*, 2^o s., 2 (1843): 329–56, 968–81. In the literary sphere, we should also mention Eugène Sue, *Le Juif errant* (Paris: Paulin, 1845), on which see Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 25–62.

33 Marc Bloch, “Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre,” *Revue de synthèse historique* 33 (1921): 13–35.

34 See Preto, *Servizi segreti*, 114. The Barnabite episode has been reconstructed by Elena Bonora, *I conflitti della Controriforma: Santità e obbedienza nell’esperienza dei primi barnabiti* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1998), 475–503.

did then provoke a clash with the University of Padua, initially sparked by the philosopher Cesare Cremonini (1550–1631), who objected to the local Jesuit college awarding academic qualifications. Cremonini accused the Jesuits—if only on the academic level—of electing themselves as “monarchs of knowledge” in Padua.³⁵ The Paduan squabble was the forerunner of further quarrels between universities and Jesuit colleges, which would embroil other centers of learning such as the Sorbonne in Paris³⁶ or Prague University,³⁷ and feed into another leitmotif of anti-Jesuit propaganda—using the schools as a recruiting ground for the order. It was a theme that would be revisited by nineteenth-century (particularly French) propaganda, contributing to the conspiracy theories of those who feared—more than the Jesuits themselves—the so-called *jésuites de robe courte*, fellow travelers who assumed positions of power in society without actually taking the cloth, acting as the Society’s fifth columnists, and tailoring the policies of states to suit the order’s interests.³⁸

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- 35 *Oratione dell'Ecc.ts. S. Dottore Cesare Cremonino da Cento recitata nell'Ecc.mo Collegio di Venezia a favore delle università dello Studio di Padova contra li Rev. Padri Gesuiti, l'anno 1591, l'Antivigilia di Natale.* I quote from the copy preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Coll. Dupuy 728, fol. 160^v. I have also glossed this episode in my own *Le astuzie dei gesuiti*, 226–30. See also Maurizio Sangalli, *Cultura, politica e religione nella repubblica di Venezia tra Cinque e Seicento* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti, 1999), 187–276 and more recently Silvia Ferretto, “Il dibattito sulle ‘scole’ dei gesuiti a Padova nel XVI secolo,” *Studi storici* 4 (2016): 879–900, which she bases largely on her research on the *Fondo Studio Patavino* in the Archivio di Stato at Padua.
- 36 See on this point another pillar of anti-Jesuitism, Étienne Pasquier, *Le catéchisme des Jésuites* (Paris, 1602) (ed. Claude Sutto [Scheerbrooke: Centre d’Études de la Renaissance de l’Université de Sherbrooke, 1982], particularly ch. 3. (eng. trans.: Étienne Pasquier, *The Jesuits’ Catechism or Their Doctrine Examined* (1602), ed. Robert A. Maryks and Jotham Parsons (Leiden: Brill, 2021).
- 37 See Alessandro Catalano, “Un’altra guerra durata Trent’anni: La Compagnia di Gesù e l’Università di Praga (1622–1654),” in José Martínez Millan, Henar Pizarro Llorente, and Esther Jiménez Pablo, eds., *Los jesuitas: Religión, política y educación (siglos XVI–XVIII)*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Comillas, 2012), 1:231–54.
- 38 See Geoffrey Cubitt, “Jesuits in Plain Clothes,” ch. 7 in *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 216–34. Cubitt argues that at least three elements must be present to speak of a “conspiracy theory”: intention (attribution of events to conscious human action), dualism (a clear divide between human forces for good and for evil), and an occult input (the presumed existence of a layer of reality profoundly other than social and political appearances). All three elements are frequently found in conspiracy myths associated with the Society of Jesus. See also Christine Vogel, “Des stéréotypes religieux à la pensée conspirationniste: L’exemple des jésuites,” in *O poder e a persistência dos estereótipos*, ed. Antony David Barker (Aveiro: Universidade de Aveiro, Dep. de Línguas e Culturas, 2004), 51–69; Ignazio

3 The Interdict, Sarpi, and the Jesuits

1606 was the crucial year in the Society's clash of wills with the Republic. In the face of the senate's refusal to allow two priests accused of serious crimes to be dealt with by a church tribunal, Paul V, already angered by a series of measures aimed at restricting ecclesiastical privileges within the Republic, placed Venice under an Interdict, and pressured the Jesuits to do their utmost to obtain the city's obedience.³⁹ In the ensuing "pamphlet war" the already mentioned Possevino, the undisputed leading player, active under a number of pseudonyms, was joined by such figures as the Jesuit cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) who, despite his role as recognized papal champion, adopted a less intransigent stance than, say, Father Paolo Comitoli (c.1545–1626), whose fulminations against Venice were thought even by his confrères over-violent and liable to imperil his order's survival in the city.⁴⁰ The Society was certainly not the only religious order opposed to Venetian policy, but it suffered from already existing prejudices nurtured in particular by the circles around Sarpi, whose members were convinced that vanquishing the Jesuits would mean a round defeat of the Holy See. It was hoped that such a defeat might in turn trigger a new reform movement in the Catholic Church.⁴¹ This is not the place to examine the supposed Protestant leanings of Sarpi, on which much ink has already

Veca, "L'ombra dei reverendi padri," ch. 5 in *La congrua immaginata: Opinione pubblica e accuse di complotto nella Roma dell'Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2019), 133–62. On the belief in conspiracies in the early modern age and on its influence on the public opinion, see Barry Coward, Julian Swann, eds., *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

39 A 1603 law forbade the construction of churches, monasteries, and other sacred buildings without permission from the senate while a further measure two years later disallowed the transfer of property to ecclesiastics.

40 [Roberte Bellarmine], *Risposta del card. Bellarmino al Trattato dei sette Theologi di Venezia sopra l'interdetto della Santità del nostro Signore Papa Paolo v e all'opposizioni di F. Paolo servita, contra la prima scrittura dell'istesso cardinale* (Rome: G. Facciotti, 1606); Paolo Comitoli, *Trattato apologetico del monitorio della Santità di N. Sig. Papa Paolo Quinto, et delle censure in quello contenute, & pubblicate in Roma alli 17. d'Aprile 1606 contra il Doge, et Senato Veneto* (Bologna: Appresso Gio. Battista Bellagamba, 1606).

41 Sarpi wrote: "The Spanish and Roman monarchies rest on nothing more than religious superstition and Jesuit operations" or again: "There is no more worthy endeavour than discrediting the Jesuits; with them beaten, Rome is lost, and religion will reform itself" (Sarpi, *Lettere ai protestanti*, 2:129; 1:182–83).

been spilled.⁴² To be sure, however, the Servite had seen in the maneuvers of the Jesuits in contemporary society a confirmation of accusations leveled at them of conspiring against states. One immediate example was the appearance in 1606 in Poland of an imposter who had got himself recognized by the order and by the pope himself as a son of Ivan the Terrible (1530–84). This false Dmitrij (d.1606) had converted to Catholicism and managed to reach Russia and have himself crowned tsar. His rise (and fall) had been meteoric but none other than Possevino had talked up his cause to Paul V, writing “if it pleases God to preserve Dmitrij for us, many doors might open for a right and proper propagation of the Catholic faith.”⁴³ The episode did not pass unobserved in Venice, home to counterfeiters, where the production of forged letters was a daily amusement, and which now saw the publication of *Condoglianza di Stanislao Przovski Lublinense Studente in Padova col Padre Antonio Possevino Giesuita*. This was a letter supposedly written by a Polish student in Padua, not by accident addressed to none other than Possevino, in which the Jesuits were not only framed as the principal architects of the False Dmitrij imposture but also accused of having spurred Sebastian I of Portugal (r.1557–78) to the disastrous Moroccan crusade in which he lost his life and of having plotted against Elizabeth I (r.1558–1603) in England.⁴⁴

On May 10, 1605, the Society of Jesus was forced to quit Venice and transfer to the Republic’s neighboring territories. It would not be allowed back until 1656, but as we have said a minority pro-Jesuit party persisted in the city of the doges

42 Federico Chabod, *La politica di Paolo Sarpi* (1952), in Chabod, *Scritti sul Rinascimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981 [1967]), denies his conversion, while Gaetano Cozzi, in “Fra Paolo Sarpi e l’anglicanesimo,” *Rivista storica italiana* 68 (1956): 593 opines that it was “no longer possible to doubt his substantial acceptance of Calvinism.” Cf. Frajese, *Sarpi scettico*.

43 Antonio Possevino, *Per aiutare la Moscovia*, quoted in Paul Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint Siège*, 5 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1901–12), 3:447 (Appendix 2).

44 *Condoglianza di Stanislao Przovski Lublinense Studente in Padova col Padre Antonio Possevino Giesuita* (n.d., n.p.). Cf. Sabina Pavone, *The Wily Jesuits and the Monita secreta* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2005), 204 [ed. orig.: *Le astuzie dei gesuiti* (Rome: Salerno, 2000)]. See also Luigi Lazzerini, “Falsificazioni: Sarpi, la Polonia e i gesuiti,” in *Atti dell’Accademia Polacca delle Scienze*, 8 vols. (Rome: Accademia Polacca delle Scienze, 2017), 5:64–84, who argues less than convincingly that the *Monita privata Societatis Iesu* were also from Sarpi’s production line (cf. Luigi Lazzerini, “Officina sarpiana: Scritture del Sarpi in materia di Gesuiti,” *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* 58 [2004]: 29–80). Despite his interest in “collective elaborations,” Nick Wilding seems in agreement on the implausibility of Lazzerini’s Sarpian attributions: see his *Galileo’s Idol*, 65n55, where he writes that “despite the methodological looseness in some of these attributions, we would do well to start thinking about collective authorship for some early modern texts.”

so that it was not implausible that the pseudo-Cecilia Contarini might wish to continue with a Jesuit spiritual director.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the hostile party was certainly the busier, as the abundant anti-Jesuit documentation amassed by the Republic and now preserved in the Venice State Archive testifies.⁴⁶ One of the more enthusiastic collectors of material against the Society was Paolo Sarpi himself, whose name keeps recurring in these pages, and who was at the center of another episode that lent substance to the Jesuit conspiracy myth.

On October 5, 1607, the Servite was returning to his monastery late in the evening when he was set upon in the Campo Santa Fosca by

five assassins, [...] the innocent Father being wounded by three dagger thrusts, two in the neck and a third in his face, which entered by the right ear and emerged in the slight depression between his nose and right cheek, the assassin not managing to extract his weapon which had passed through the bone where it remained much twisted and lodged fast.⁴⁷

Head of the band sent to kill the Republic's theologian was a certain Rodolfo Poma (dates unknown). Having initially fled with his companions to the papal nuncio's house, the would-be assassin succeeded in reaching Rome, which in itself confirmed, had there been any doubt in Sarpi's mind, that the Roman Curia was behind the botched attempt on his life. From an Inquisition condemnation of his *Trattato sull'Interdetto* (1606) the curia had progressed to excommunicating him (January 5, 1607) and now—it appeared—attempting to murder him.⁴⁸ For Sarpi, in any case, the true instigators of the papal tactics could only be the Jesuits, well-known theorists of regicide and, as we

45 Throughout the period of its absence however, the Society continued to test the mood of the Venetians: see, for example, *L'inchiesta sugli umori del patriziato veneziano (1619–1620)*, in ARSI, *Ven.* 109.

46 See Archivio di Stato, Venice, *Consultori in iure* 451, 453, 454. Volume 454 (*Scritture et avisi havuti da diverse persone concernenti le insidiose machinazioni et male actioni de Padri Gesuiti verso questa Serenissima Republica*) is published in its entirety in Giuseppe Cappelletti, *I Gesuiti e la Repubblica di Venezia* (Venice: Grimaldo, 1873), 287–357.

47 Fulgenzio Micanzio, *Vita del padre Paolo dell'Ordine de' Servi e Theologo della Serenissima Republica di Venetia (1646)*; modern printing in Paolo Sarpi, *Istoria del Concilio tridentino*, ed. Corrado Vivanti, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 2:1345.

48 The Holy Office's condemnation dates to September 1606; the work is described as “reckless, calumnious, scandalous, seditious, schismatic, erroneous, and heretical,” not to mince words. For a contextual overview of the attempt on Sarpi, see Sabina Pavone, “Venezia, 5 ottobre 1607: Assassinare il letterato,” in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, ed. Gabriele Pedullà and Sergio Luzzatto (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), 323–30.

have already noted, widely believed to have been behind important assassinations.⁴⁹ “A Jesuit is ever ready to compose a work that will show that it is permissible, even meritorious, to kill someone by any means possible who has been excommunicated by the pope,” wrote Sarpi to Monsieur Jérôme Groslet de l’Isle (d.1622), and the reference to the attack on himself was hardly a veiled one.⁵⁰

The hoax perpetrated by Sagredo at Barisone’s expense fits snugly, then, in a context that seemed more than ready to approve the launch of true or speculative accusations against the Society of Jesus. And that Venice was a keen collector of similar matter from further afield is shown by the fact that a few years down the line a libelous little tract out of Poland—the *Monita privata Societatis Jesu*—that purported to be the true, and secret, Jesuit playbook, sparked considerable interest throughout Europe.⁵¹ Sarpi himself was intrigued, determined as he was to lay his hands on the actual *Constitutions* of the Society. The sixth “Instruction” was entitled *How our Society should keep widows to their widowhood and gain control of their income*.⁵² Thus, a common thematic thread clearly linked this very successful libel and the exchange of letters between Contarini and Barisone.

4 Conclusions

Research into anti-Jesuitism and presumed conspiracies fomented by Jesuits has enjoyed a strong revival, particularly in the early years of the twenty-first

49 See particularly the works by Manuel Sá, *Aphorismi confessoriorum ex doctorum sententiis collecti* (Venice: n.p., 1595) and Juan de Mariana, *De rege et regis institutione: Libri III ad Philippum III* (Toledo, P. Rodericum, 1599). The latter was condemned by the Paris parliament in 1610.

50 Paolo Sarpi to Monsieur Groslet de l’Isle, April 1, 1608, in Sarpi, *Lettere ai protestanti*, 1:7.

51 On the anti-Jesuit literature circulating in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the years leading up to the appearance of the *Monita privata Societatis Jesu*, see Robert Maryks’s contribution to this special issue.

52 1617 also saw the appearance of *L’istruzione ai prencipi della maniera con la quale si governano li Padri Giesuiti, fatta da persona religiosa e totalmente spassionata* (Poschiavo: Peter Landolfo et Bonatto Minghino) attributed to Fulgenzio Micanzio (1570–1654), Venetian Servite and biographer of Paolo Sarpi, which incidentally includes the *Monita* as an appendix and numbers among the Jesuits *de robe courte* “those women popularly known as ‘Chietine,’ whom the Jesuits have persuaded to despise the things of this world while relieving them of their pearls, their fine clothes and furnishings, and eventually their excellent incomes” (8). On the attribution, see Pavone, *Astuzie dei gesuiti*, 168n57.

century. If for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many studies on these themes were marred by prejudice, especially in an anticlerical direction, over the last twenty years inquiries have largely freed themselves of ideological preconceptions, thanks in good part to a revision of the conspiracy paradigm in response to the proliferation of “fake news” propaganda in our own day. The present has cast its shadow back onto the past, encouraging a plethora of research into plots, conspiracies, and the manufacture of forgeries.⁵³ The analysis of a few classic *topoi* of anti-Semitism has allowed us, for example, to identify elements in common with the anti-Jesuitism of the early modern age, finding similarities between that notorious conspiratorial imposture—*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*⁵⁴—and the best known of the anti-Jesuit fakes, the *Monita privata* [secreta] *Societatis Jesu*: both texts that played on the fears and prejudices of the societies that produced them.

It is worth noting here how, from the first years of the current century until now, studies of anti-Jesuitism and the conspiracies attributed to the Society have also felt the effect of novel historiographical departures that have concentrated on new issues, from the importance of iconography, to the long persistence of certain prejudices (this obviously connected to the increased attention scholars have recently devoted to the revived, post-1814 Society), and the global aspects of anti-Jesuitism, in which we find traces once again of the tireless Giovan Francesco Sagredo.⁵⁵ The latter, arriving in Aleppo in

53 See Yves-Marie Bercé and Elena Fasano Guarini, eds., *Complots et conjurations dans l'Europe moderne* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1996); Caffiero and Visceglia, eds., *Congiure e complotti*.

54 See Léon Poliakov, *La causalité diabolique: Essai sur l'origine des persecutions* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1980); *Les 'Protocoles des Sages de Sion': Faux et usages d'un faux; Études et documents*, ed. Pierre-André Taguieff (Paris: Berg International, 1992); James Bernauer and Robert Aleksander Maryks, eds., “The Tragic Couple”: *Encounters between Jews and Jesuits* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Julien Giry, “Conspiracism: Archaeology and Morphology of a Political Myth,” *Diogenes* 62 (2015): 30–37.

55 For iconography, see Pierre Wachenheim, “De la physiognomonie à la téréatologie: Les jésuites portaiturées ou les visages de l'antijésuitisme,” in *Antijésuites*, 13–54. Cf. also Michael Niemetz, *Antijésuitische Bildpublizistik in der Frühen Neuzeit: Geschichte, Ikonographie und Ikonologie* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2008); Michela Catto, “Images of ‘Jesuitical’ China in the Enlightenment: Irreligion, Anticlericalism and Anti-Jesuitism,” in *New Perspectives in the Studies on Matteo Ricci*, ed. Filippo Mignini (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 215–32. For the global dimension, see my own studies: Sabina Pavone, “Antijesuitism in a Global Perspective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Jesuits*, ed. Ines G. Županov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 833–54; Pavone, “The History of Anti-Jesuitism: National and Global Dimensions,” in *Jesuits and Globalization: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Tom Banchoff and José Casanova (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 111–30. For the long haul and the Latin American context, cf. Susana Monreal, Sabina Pavone,

1609, tried to involve the Jesuit missionaries in India in another counterfeit correspondence, once again with a view to demonstrating the avarice of the Society's members, "Since I hope," he wrote to Sarpi, "that the trust they have in me will reveal more of what we witnessed between Berlinzone and Colomba."⁵⁶ Two elements strike us in the letters to Sarpi in which Sagredo spoke of his new project: the first is that according to unconfirmed testimonies the governors of Portuguese India had conceded to the Jesuits alone the right to communicate in cipher, and this had once again favored their secret machinations. (The theme of writing in code was one that would resurface in much anti-Jesuit propaganda.) A second had to do with the belief that the Jesuits were second only to the king in the share of European riches they held in the *Estado de India*. He goes on at some length about Jesuit assets without adducing any solid evidence, but he is emphasizing an aspect that would be among the determining factors in the Society's eventual expulsion from the Bourbon monarchies around the middle of the eighteenth century. In closing, Sagredo, dwelling on the quarrels between the various religious orders active in the foreign missions and the authoritarianism over the Jesuits in relation to their converts, hints at another strand of anti-Jesuitism, that was fomented by rival orders, which would have a considerable influence on the Malabar and Chinese rites controversies beginning in the mid-seventeenth century.⁵⁷

The proliferation of scenarios through which it is possible to examine the phenomenon of supposed global conspiracies promoted by the Jesuits need not surprise us: the desire for a universal monarchy may well have appeared an obvious fit with a religious order which had put Christian universalism at the heart of its evangelization strategy.⁵⁸ In such a variegated landscape to

and Guillermo Zermeño, eds., *Antijesuitismo y filiojesuitismo: Dos identidades ante la restauración* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2014).

56 Quoted in Cozzi, *Paolo Sarpi tra Venezia e l'Europa*, 177. Two of the three letters from Sagredo to Sarpi, both dated April 30, 1609, are published in their entirety in Wilding, *Galileo's Idol*, 72–77.

57 From a now extremely ample bibliography I will limit myself to recommending only Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Ines Županov's survey, *The Rites Controversy in the Early Modern World* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). On the Malabar rites in particular, see Sabina Pavone, "Jesuits and Oriental Rites in the Documents of the Roman Inquisition," in *Rites Controversy in the Early Modern World*, 165–88.

58 See Girolamo Imbruglia, "A Peculiar Idea of Empire: Missions and Missionaries of the Society of Jesus in Early Modern History," in *Jesuit Accounts of the Colonial Americas: Intercultural Transfers Intellectual Disputes, and Textualities*, ed. Marc André Bernier, Clorinda Donato, and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 21–49.

focus on the Venetian situation might seem to limit ourselves to a “traditional” anti-Jesuitism. Yet alongside some of the classic stereotypes of anti-Jesuit propaganda, the correspondence between Barisone and Sagredo/ Contarini does, I believe, highlight certain elements that would play an important role in the centuries to come, down to our own day, chief among them the construction of a targetable system of disinformation that flourished in the fertile terrain of early seventeenth-century Venice, where such strategies and the interweaving of truth, falsity, and something in-between were, as we have seen, the city’s daily bread. The diffusion of “fake news” was abetted not only by an unusually lively intellectual climate but by a deliberate program pursued by the Venetian Republic, which was the first to test a jurisdictional confrontation with the Holy See, deploying tactics that would become much more widespread in late eighteenth-century Europe and would indeed result in the suppression of the Society of Jesus, fueled by a range of expedients that had first been trialed and tested in early seventeenth-century Venice.