

feudal lords in conflict with progressive capitalist mining corporations and recognized individual agency. Economists and economic historians might forgive the lack of synchronic specificity and undefined abstractions like “feudalism” and “capitalism” as tolerable omissions in a pioneering work, but it makes the book more teleological than transtemporal and therefore less helpful to graduate students and non-specialist historians. This slip into Marc Bloch’s “idol of origins” is regrettable, as historians should take Graulau’s assertion of a medieval capitalist silver mining seriously. At the very least, the first four chapters ought to serve as a preliminary survey for other scholars to mine and refine.

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Venice’s Secret Service: Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance. *By Ioanna Iordanou.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xiv + 263 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$41.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-879131-7.

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Reviewed by Thomas Kuehn

Venice’s place as an innovative diplomatic force is beyond doubt and has been explored widely by historians such as Garrett Mattingly, Donald Queller, and Gaetano Cozzi. Venice’s ambassadors, wherever they were, were expected to submit frequent reports on events and information of all sorts—political but also military, commercial, and even meteorological. Many of these reports survive in Venice’s incomparable archives and have served to flesh out the history of diplomacy. Ioanna Iordanou now deftly and insightfully examines the related developments of secrecy surrounding such information, including enciphering, espionage, and dirty tricks.

Iordanou’s position is that Venice’s intelligence services, provided by its own citizens or others, came to be centrally organized and directed by the true center of power in Venice: the Council of Ten, which consisted of Venice’s most powerful and influential patricians, who saw to internal and foreign affairs. The very existence of the extensive archives of the Ten is testimony to that centralization and to the importance of intelligence of all sorts to the governors of the Serenissima. As a formidable

naval power, but still a small entity faced with the ever-threatening Ottomans to the east and Spain and France and other Italian states to the south and west, Venice arguably needed intelligence to level the field and compensate for its relative weakness. Beginning especially around 1525, as Venice's fate became increasingly bound up in the machinations of monarchs to control portions of Italy, and notably so from the 1570s, when the Ottoman Empire threatened Venice's Mediterranean colonies, the Ten directed an active and secret organization, keeping track of enemies and friends alike.

It is the character of that organization that is of interest to Iordanou, whose background is in management and organization studies. Secrecy drove Venice's rulers to devise a protomodern organization, as entity and as process, which Iordanou is at pains to unearth with the concepts of organizational studies and the archival tools of the historian. She seeks a "balanced and situated analysis of pre-industrial organizational life that moves beyond the conventional, overly empiricist narrative approaches to (business) history, while discarding the overly technicist and abstract discussions of organizational theories that favour methodological rigour at the expense of historical reconstruction" (p. 24). In her eyes, Venice fits the model of a coherent organization, which she establishes in part by comparison to Rome, Spain, France, England, and the Ottomans. There are those who may quarrel with her organizational analysis, but there are few who will contest her immersion in Venice's archival riches and their dense linguistic patterns (compounded by the techniques of early modern secrecy) and her analysis of the Ten as an intelligence directorate.

There was a pervasive trading in secrets in the early modern world, and the instrumentality of that trade led the Ten to set up regulations to protect secrecy, especially of documents, including the creation of the *Cancellaria Secreta* for the handling of the most sensitive materials, even as the Ten also effectively invited just about anyone to contribute what they knew, no matter whose secrets they were, to the Ten. Those excluded from civic politics thus gained a role in affairs, and the authorities controlled them by dedication to a common good. The extensive archive of correspondence accumulated by the Ten not only served to protect secrets but "became the fulcrum of committing past and present events and actions to collective memory" (p. 115). What historians have long termed the myth of Venice, possessed of a tranquil and civic-minded citizenry, thus becomes a dense web of secrets and the sharing of them in certain contexts. The illusion of secrecy maintained was more important than its not-so-effective reality. Secrecy was hard to maintain because its chief tool was correspondence, which could be

opened and copied with some ease, depending on circumstances of transmission. One consequence was the never-ending search for indecipherable codes, or for ways to break them. Cryptology became something of a craft, transmitted even across generations of a family, whose members could hope to become figures of significant stature in Venice. Manuals and even classes took form and spread from Venice at least via printing.

So many of Venice's ambassadors and agents were merchants that it was difficult to distinguish public from private information and political from economic goals. Political and diplomatic activities could also serve commercial purposes; information was a traded commodity. So also, as Iordanou says, Venice engaged people to spy but it did not employ professional spies. Espionage was "flexible and multifarious" but also hit-or-miss as a result (p. 188). But then the Ten itself, though consisting of wealthy and influential patricians, was a body subject to electoral turnover and thus an operation that cannot be called professional and at times had difficulties holding to any set policy. Their recruitment of amateurs to glean information or furnish denunciations was unavoidable. Even convicts might be enticed to undertake dangerous activities with the lure of a pardon. The tales of some of these men and women are fascinating, as are those recounted in chapter 6 concerning acts of assassination, mainly by means of poison (calling it chemical warfare is going a bit too far).

Iordanou concludes by asserting four takeaways from her study: (1) that "organized intelligence existed long before conventional wisdom dictates"; (2) that Venice created a public service organization well before industrialization; (3) that it was heavily reliant on intelligence from below; and (4) that there are useful comparisons to modern organizations (p. 223). These are slanted more toward the theoretical issues of organizational studies than they are at the issues of state building and the early modern territorial state, a coherent explanation of the Ten's policies and goals and their change over time, or even at the questions of decline of Venice. But historians will certainly appreciate the research that has gone into this study and Iordanou's candid presentation of the gaps and problems in Venetian secrecy.

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