

B O O K S R E V I E W S

Guillaume Alonge, *AMBASCIATORI. DIPLOMAZIA E POLITICA NELLA VENEZIA DEL RINASCIMENTO*, pref. Sergio Luzzatto (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2019), pp. 276; ISBN: 978-8868438852*

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Guillaume Alonge's book completes the profound historiographical renewal of the history of diplomacy over the past twenty years. It responds to Isabella Lazzarini's recent calls for a social and cultural history of diplomacy, beyond the ambassador's perspective. Moreover, *Ambasciatori* responds to Elena Bonora's work, which confronts an 'Italy of the Emperor' with an 'Italy of the Pope' along the 1530s and 1540s. Alonge theorises a third way: an 'Italy of the Most Christian King' (i.e. the king of France), apt to fill the interstitial spaces among the two instances presented by Bonora. Thinking of French diplomacy in Italy, we are normally keen on considering the case of Piedmont, ruled by a French governor, and Ferrara, influenced by Duchess Renée. On the contrary, Alonge starts from Venice, considering it as 'a gateway to the Italian world and the ideal place for the construction of an Italy of the Most Christian' (pp. 8–14). In his book, Alonge decides to focus on the French diplomacy and the men who were responsible for it at the time of Francis I.

The six chapters are built upon a crossed chronological and thematical structure. The author frames Venice in its spatial position as an interface between Europe, Italy and the Mediterranean. Venice is also seen as a gateway to Swiss and Germanic territories, that is, consequently, to the Reformation in Italy. This proto-reformist Venice allows the author to start from a critical evidence: every single French ambassador in Venice between 1520s and 1540s comes from evangelical networks (p. 6). The choice was deliberate. Francis I actively sought the conditions for an alliance with Protestant princes and the Ottoman Sultan. To do so, he needed men in agreement with this heterodox diplomatic line, as these evangelical bishops were. Venice became the laboratory for this policy, primarily because it was one of the last territories upon which neither the Emperor nor the Pope had a serious

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hold. Those ingredients allowed French agents to think of Venice an innovative diplomatic space.

This case study reveals the backstage of diplomatic life, the world of ambassadors, their daily living places, the identifiable members of their famiglia as well as the informants and spies they bribed to obtain information. These invisible spaces and actors remain a largely unexplored part of the history of diplomacy. The embassy became a French refuge in Venice as well as a stopover for agents on their way to Constantinople and Italian exiles waiting for their transit to the French court. Those invisible actors, identified through a very detailed study of diplomatic correspondences, held a much more permanent position on Venetian territory than ambassadors. This was the case for Pierre Brunel, Lazare de Baïf's secretary (1529–34), who remained in charge on explicit demand of Baïf's successor. Giovanni Gioachino da Passano established himself in the Veneto after several diplomatic missions on behalf on Francis I, notably in England. Thanks to the king's liberality, he bought a house in Padua, which became the cornerstone of the French diplomatic system in Venice and served as a relay for the French representatives all across Italy.

Thanks to a chronological structure, in which each ambassador takes a leading role within a chapter, the author shows that these networks of agents held long term value. Each ambassador inherited his predecessor's networks and enhanced them with new contacts. United around the same political cause and personal interests, these networks constituted the foundations of French Italy, a base that included ambassadors and their political staff, but also a set of local contacts, both Venice and exiles all over Europe.

In Venice, Francis I also found the conditions for cultural diplomacy. Almost all his French ambassadors in Venice were scholars and humanists. One of the tasks of the agents in Venice was to send original manuscripts and copies of ancient works, in order to complete the royal library and make the French court an essential place for humanist studies. Here, the blurring of boundaries between private and public spheres is demonstrated through the personal involvement and interests of agents. The careers of the ambassadors after their time in Venice show that they had used their legation to collect document and prepare further publications. This Baïf, on his return to Paris, published *De Re Navali*, a collection of ancient texts about navigation. This knowledge of ancient texts also served him during his embassy to stand out to the king: he did not hesitate to punctuate his letters with references to Greek theatre, winking at the interests of the prince.

Without any further comparisons, Venice remains a diplomatic exception in early modern times. It would be partly due to its republican context and the multiplicity of actors involved (pp. 113–14), but also to the existence of an information marked and the regular monitoring of it by Venetian authorities

(pp. 129–30). The central diplomatic place of Venice naturally makes this work indispensable to anyone wishing to work on sixteenth-century diplomatic issues with an innovative socio-cultural perspective. However, Alonge's model still ought to be confronted to other case-studies.

Coming from religious history, Guillaume Alonge offers an alternative look at the history of diplomacy. He reflects on the constitution of agent networks, the political and individual interests that governed their organisation and the administrative logics that ruled their maintenance over decades. Finally, he demonstrates that Francis I's reign corresponds to a particular diplomatic moment. These evangelical bishops could not keep the political space they had granted themselves under Henry II and a more rigid confessional policy: as if the time for compromise and experimentation had ceased with Francis I's death.