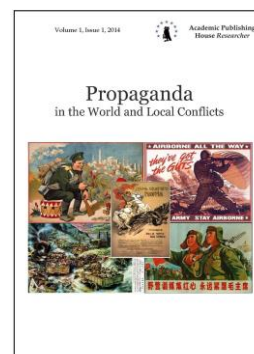


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Articles and Statements

Provoking a War: Polish Fake Documents in Warsaw's 17th century Eastern Policy

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Abstract

This paper addresses the use of fake documents in Rzeczpospolita's 17th-century political discourse. The author discusses a variety of fake documents used at the time, including the following: the Sultan's letters to the King of Rzeczpospolita, fake correspondence between the monarchs, the Sultan's letters to the Polish gentry, and a set of false agreements related to the creation of a European Christian anti-Turkish coalition. Whomever they may have been addressed to, these documents must have had an impact on political life in the Polish-Lithuanian state and must have served to push Warsaw into war with the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: fake document, correspondence, political publicistic writing, political discourse.

1. Introduction

A key characteristic of the state system in Rzeczpospolita was the active participation of the Polish and Lithuanian gentry in the state's political life. For centuries, the gentry fought for its estates rights, and it achieved great success in this. Essentially, in the Polish-Lithuanian state it was the gentry that had a major say in both foreign and domestic policy making, wielding decision-making power over matters like establishing the size of taxes, affirming important decisions by the King, ratifying international agreements, etc.

The gentry enjoying this exclusive status in the state system made political propaganda and publicistic writing a necessary element in political life and a key factor in state decision-making. With that said, Rzeczpospolita was no paragon of democracy (unlike what the gentry believed it to be) – there were oligarchic groups (especially, in Ukrainian provinces), there was clientelism, and there were dynastic conflicts. So extensive use was made of literature's propaganda potential. Every crucial political decision was grounded in sustained work on popularizing a certain viewpoint and discussions with the opponents. "Political parties" worked with all types of writers. Sometimes they acted on their own initiative, aiming for a cash award from magnates whose stance they represented. But more often they were hired by others. Their "literary arsenal" included just about anything – from decent analytical essays to occasional verses of a propagandist nature, many of dubious artistic quality. One was not squeamish, either, to employ fakes, which were produced for the purpose of galvanizing public thought in the run-up to another Sejm meeting and helping, on the back of an emotional surge, "push" a certain proposal through the Sejm.

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The tradition to use fakes in political discourse is a fairly long one. Some of the classical examples of the use of fakes in Europe include the letters of Prester John or the Donation of Constantine, which was proven a forgery by renowned Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla.

2. Materials and methods

This paper's primary focus is on the use of historical fakes in the political struggle in Rzeczpospolita. One thing to note straightaway, however, is that it is hardly possible to describe and analyze all fakes which were produced in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian state. On the one hand, there is no publication cataloguing these fakes, and, on the other hand, this is way beyond the scope of this work.

In the context of the subject under investigation, the study's source base has a number of distinct characteristics of its own. I have no interest in forged financial documents or land acts, or documents related to conferring nobility (which abound), but do only in those which have to do with Rzeczpospolita's Eastern (Turkish) policy specifically. Thus, the study's source base is grounded in a set of forgeries produced in Rzeczpospolita in the 17th century.

3. Discussion and results

In terms of its Turkish policy, Warsaw tried to balance between pragmatic interests, a categorical unwillingness to start a costly and very dangerous war with the Porte, and a willingness to retain in international relations its image as an *Antemurale Christianitatis*, i.e. the Bulwark of Christianity in Europe, a defender of the entire Christian world from the Moslem threat. Zygmunt III and his son and successor Władysław IV continually sought to enlist the support of the gentry to advance their plans regarding the anti-Turkish war – but to no avail. One of these attempts has to do with the first fake we are going to examine below.

Following a failed attempt to drag Warsaw into another Holy League, sought to be organized by the Austrian Habsburgs in the late 16th century, Zygmunt III had to make a pause before undertaking a new move. In the early 1600s, he resumed his attempts to enlist the support of the Sejm. It is these attempts that might have had to do with the emergence of a forged letter from Persian Shah Abbas to the Polish King. A copy of the letter is stored at the Raczyński Library within a *silva rerum*, a collection of handwritten documents maintained by the Polish gentry for their own needs. The front-page contains the date November 22, 1605, with Zygmunt III listed as the recipient. The very date listed on the document is testimony to the author planning to distribute the text on the eve of the 1606 general sejm. This required hurrying up to get it done before the convening of a pre-sejm meeting of the regional councils in 1605. Based on the letter's text, Persian Shah Abbas proposes that the Polish King, along with the other Christian rulers, start a war on several fronts against the Ottoman Empire. This kind of proposal was not new in Polish political publicistic writing. Back in the late 16th century, there had started to emerge in literature calls to taking a closer look at Persia as a potential ally in a possible war with Turkey. The two states had had diplomatic contacts. In 1605, Rzeczpospolita was visited by envoys from Shah Abbas who approached the King with a partnership proposal. At the same time, prior to the 1605 sejm the King himself claimed that the Persians were distracting the Sultan and confusing him, precluding him thereby from attacking Poland (Strzelecki, 1921: 45). Curiously, the year 1608 saw the publication of a verse by Wawrzyniec Chlebowski entitled 'Trąba Pobudki Ziemie Perskiej do Wszystkich Narodów Chrześcijańskich, Przeciwko Machometanow' (Chlebowski, 1608), which called on all the European monarchs to join hands and start a war against Istanbul.

Why do I think the letter is a forgery? There are several arguments in favor of doing so. Firstly, the letter's structure is out of alignment with the diplomatic protocol. It, of course, may be assumed that the person who created the record in the *silva rerum* must have left out of the letter all the redundant parts. At the same time, the letter contains several phrases which neither the Persian Shah or any of his courtiers, nor any of his envoys to the Polish King could have possibly produced. For instance, in proposing peace and amity to Zygmunt III, Abbas expresses a hope that the "**as two Christian rulers, we** will enjoy a relationship of love and friendship similar to the one between the Italian states and all the Christian rulers". The letter further says that to fight Istanbul "we have already sent **our Christian troops (in the name of Jesus)** to seize their land and subdue them" (Copia lista krola, 1605: k.125-125v.).

Thus, Abbas's letter to Zygmunt III may be regarded as a fake which was written specifically on the eve of a Sejm session for the purpose of promoting amongst the gentry the idea of offensive war against the Ottoman Empire. The plan failed, and the following year Rzeczpospolita witnessed the Zebrzydowski Rebellion, while Warsaw got involved in the False Dmitry ventures. But the fact that the letter got in a *silva rerum* is testimony to the eventual dissemination of its contents amongst the gentry. Unfortunately, it is not possible to find out at this time where, who, and when placed the letter's text in the *silva rerum*.

Another fake that might have pushed the gentry into war with the Turks has been identified by Polish researcher Dariusz Kołodziejczyk. A letter dated July 26, 1618, written in the name of the Sultan, contains accusations against Zygmunt III of attempts to sever the friendly ties with the Porte and provoke a war. In response to these attempts by the King, the Sultan promises death to Zygmunt III himself, the destruction of Christianity, and repressions against the clergy: "Are you not scared of death with such a small number of men at your side? If war is what is on your mind, so be it – you will soon see how powerful our state is. Wait with your plans until the next summer, and you will soon know our real power. I will seize your capital, Kraków, and show no mercy. I will leave you my bloody sword so that you remember me forever. I will walk all over your land, trample down your crucified God, and root out your faith for good... So I conclude here, and I want you to think about it and be ready". I totally agree with the assessment of the text provided by Professor Kołodziejczyk. I just want to add that it is not impossible that the text was employed by the author, who is certain to have had the Royal Court behind him, not to push the gentry into war (as this was extremely hard to achieve) but, rather, wangle additional funds for defense purposes, for in the letter they were giving Zygmunt III some time to prepare – until the following summer.

Known for its long history of use, the above type of fake was re-launched nearly 30 years later, during preparations for the Turkish War – now by Władysław IV. But this time contemporaries clearly understood who and why did it (Kołodziejczyk, 2012: 91).

Another fake letter from the Sultan to Warsaw emerged in 1672. Although long known about among researchers, the "letter", however, continues, as noted by D. Kołodziejczyk, to be regarded by some historians as original (Kołodziejczyk, 2009: 13). However, unlike many of the other fakes, its purpose is not to provoke a war but mobilize the resources for defense purposes. This is attested by the circumstances under which the text might have emerged. In 1672, Rzeczpospolita lost Western Podolia along with one of the state's more powerful fortresses – Kamieniec Podolski. The fortress was viewed as a gate to Rzeczpospolita, the state's bulwark. Therefore, the letter contained no threats of war, as the war had already begun. The fake's author was using a different tactic. He was poking right at the sore spot, something which the gentry valued the most and which they fought for with so much zeal – it was about a threat of loss of freedom.

The gentry's attitude toward freedom has been discussed widely¹. Freedom was the biggest value for the gentry. It was something that set it apart from other social categories and peoples. The threat of loss of freedom sounded especially humiliating coming from the lips of the Sultan. The Polish gentry viewed the Sultan as a symbol of tyranny and absolute power and viewed the actual Ottoman Empire as a state where there was no freedom (Pylypenko, 2014).

Fakes were launched into public circulation not only in the form of manuscripts but in printed form as well. This, certainly, would help get more readers, and, plus, add to the veracity thereof. I am going to illustrate this via the following two examples. In 1620, they published in Kraków a short verse by Marcin Paszkowski entitled 'Posiłek Bellony Słowińskiej na Odpor Nieprzyjaciółom Krzyża Ś. Na Seym Warśawski Terazniejszy w Roku 1620 Wydany'. As evidenced by the title, the text contains a call on all Christian states to join hands to fight the Turks. The author himself was not a very famous poet, and wrote occasional poetry. Among the key themes in Paszkowski's oeuvre was the Turkish and Tatar threat, with continual calls made to fighting the Ottomans (Kuran, 2012: 663). While this particular verse is no different from any of Paszkowski's previous verses in substance, it does end somewhat differently. It contains the text of an alleged agreement entitled 'Umowa Niemiecka z Różnymi Nacjami Chrześcijańskimi na Turka i

¹ For more literature see the following: Grześkowiak-Krwawicz Anna. *Regina libertas: Wolność w polskiej myśli politycznej XVIII wieku.* – Gdańsk. – 2006 and the collection of articles *Wartości polityczne Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów: Struktury aksjologiczne i granice cywilizacyjne / redakcja naukowa Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz.* Warszawa, 2017. 318 p.

Tatary', claimed to have been signed by the European monarchs. The coalition comprised the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the Pope, the German states (both Protestant and Catholic), the Spanish King, Czechia, Moravia, Silesia, 72 free cities, Hungary, and Poland ([Paszkowski, 1620: A4-A4V](#)). Each of the allies was providing troops of their own for the war effort. The united army was to be headed by the Emperor himself. This way of talking about yet another alliance of Christian rulers hardly stands up to much scrutiny. Suffice it to say that Paszkowski brings together in a single army the Catholics and the Protestants. And that is when Europe was being torn by the Thirty Years' War. However, from a perspective of political propaganda and the gentry's influence on public opinion, of importance was information regarding the engaging of other states in the struggle against the Turks. It is also worth noting that the verse was addressed to participants in the general sejm held in Warsaw November 3 through December 11, 1620. The emergence of the verse was aligned with the "spirit of the time", as Rzeczpospolita's army had been destroyed by the Turks in the Battle of Cecora, Hetman Żółkiewski had died in the battle, and Rzeczpospolita had been left without an army. The Sejm had several vitally important issues to address: come up, as soon as possible, with the funds for a new army, find allies, and appoint a new hetman.

In my view, the greatest propaganda effect came from information indicating that the other states were providing funding for the war effort. Nearly every project related to the reform of the Polish army shattered against the need to come up with the funds for the purpose. The gentry were categorically unwilling to introduce new taxes to pay for the army for fears that it would strengthen the King's power.

It is hard to tell whether or not Paszkowski's verse had an effect on Sejm decision-making, as no coalition was formed. It is likely there was no direct effect, albeit the very fact of the use in political discourse of various ways of influencing public thought is testimony to the vast extent of discussion on the Turkish subject.

Perhaps, the most famous forgery in Ukrainian history, a fake with a long and vibrant history, is the apocryphal letter of Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Turkish Sultan. The text has undergone numerous translations and rewritings. The most famous are its translations into French and German, which helped make it accessible to the European reader. The letter's text was written by Koshovyi Otaman of the Zaporozhian Host Ivan Sirko in response to a letter to the Cossacks from the Sultan. Due to the known popularity of the Cossacks' letter to the Sultan, I will not go into its actual contents in this paper. However, it may be worth noting the popularity in political publicistic writing in various countries of apocryphal correspondence between sultans and various rulers in Europe. To exemplify this, I will mention a set of printed letters allegedly written by the Sultan to Zygmunt III and the replies to them. They were published by Grzegorz Czaradzki in 1621 in a little brochure entitled 'Pobudka na Wojnę Turecką Rycerskim Ludziom Polskim ku Pocięże, z Listy Tureckimi y Constitucyami Tegorocznymi o Rządzie Woennym Przydaninymi'. The letter, addressed to the Polish King in the name of the Sultan, contains an allegation that the King is deliberately breaking peace between Rzeczpospolita and the Ottoman Empire without any cogent reasons for doing so. The Sultan threatens: "And let me assure you that I desire to vanquish you and stampede you day and night, and I will finally establish my authority over the entire globe... And you will know my ruthlessness... I have resolved to raze a few castles and towns of yours to the ground right in front of your eyes. Do not expect any more of our amity and stop trusting your defensive walls. I want to ruin Kraków so as to make certain your kingdom remembers my bloody sword forevermore" ([Czaradzki, 1621: A4](#)). One cannot but notice a similarity between this text and those mentioned above. The author goes on to present the reader with Zygmunt III's reply to the Sultan. The King allegedly speaks of how strong the Christian faith is and that Jesus is there to protect all faithful Christians, and tries to assure the Sultan that castles and fortresses in Rzeczpospolita are safe and that artillery will suffice to defend it from any adversary ([Czaradzki, 1621: B1V-B2V](#)).

Historians have identified instances of apocryphal correspondence between monarchs and sultans in other states as well. For example, 17th-century lists contain the legendary correspondence of Ivan the Terrible and the Turkish Sultan. Some researchers are of the view that it originated in the Ambassadorial Prikaz and was based on merging Turkish and Tatar diplomatic correspondence with Moscow book tradition ([Kagan, 1957: 272](#)). The priority in our study is not what exactly is in the correspondence (so I am ignoring the actual text herein) but the very fact of its existence altogether.

4. Conclusion

Political discourse in Rzeczpospolita was often infiltrated by fake documents and letters. It is impossible to tell the exact percentage of fake documents in circulation at the time, but the informed guess is that there were quite many. Documents of this kind were produced by representatives of various political groups, including those of both the pro-Royal and gentry opposition. Depending on the political force, fake documents were to perform various functions in propaganda, like smearing the name of an opponent, “pushing” a certain proposal through the Sejm, or mobilizing public thought.

In the context of Warsaw’s Turkish policy, quite frequent were forged letters from the Sultan to the King containing threats of war, destruction of the Catholic Church, and enslavement of the gentry. In my opinion, letters of this kind might have been used as part of the political struggle for a variety of objectives, including both as an argument for introducing additional taxes to pay for defense and for criticizing the Royal Court’s international policy.

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