INTELLIGENCE SOURCES AND THE REVISIONIST REASSESSMENT OF THE CATHOLIC QUESTION IN ANGLO-SPANISH RELATIONS (1570–1600) THROUGH A CASE STUDY OF JESUIT PROPAGANDA

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Abstract. This study reinterprets the 'Catholic question' in Anglo-Spanish relations between 1570 and 1600 through the analytical lens of intelligence history. By examining both English and Continental espionage networks, directed by Francis Walsingham, William Cecil and their Spanish counterparts, such as Bernardino de Mendoza and Robert Persons, this essay challenges the traditional depiction of the period as a binary confessional struggle. Drawing on primary intelligence materials from the State Papers and the Simancas Archive, and engaging in the revisionist historiography of early modern statecraft, it argues that religion served not as a fixed ideological boundary but as a malleable instrument within systems of information exchange and manipulation. Intelligence gathering, surveillance and disinformation became central mechanisms through which both monarchies negotiated legitimacy, managed dissent, and defined enmity. Reconsidering these dynamics reveals Anglo-Spanish relations less as a crusading conflict of faith than as a contest for epistemic authority and informational control: a reconfiguration that demands a broader transnational understanding of early modern power.

Keywords: intelligence history, espionage, revisionism, Anglo-Spanish relations, Elizabethan England, Catholic question, diplomacy, early modern statecraft

Introduction: The Intelligence Turn in Early Modern Historiography

The relationship between England and Spain between 1570 and 1600 has long been interpreted through the lens of confessional hostility. Conventional historiography, shaped by both Protestant triumphalism and post-war national narratives, often casts these thirty years as a defensive saga: Protestant England besieged by a militant Catholic empire. Over the past four decades, however, the historiographic landscape has undergone significant revisions. Scholars have increasingly turned from macropolitical and religious explanations to the infrastructures of information that mediate these conflicts. The rise of intelligence studies as a subfield of early modern history has introduced new methodologies for

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re-evaluating diplomatic relations, propaganda and the construction of ideological enmity. Through this 'intelligence turn', the apparently irreconcilable opposition between Protestant and Catholic powers appears less absolute than strategic, more a function of espionage, perception and statecraft than of immutable theology.

The so-called 'Catholic question' in Elizabethan England, that is to say, the perceived danger posed by English Catholic recusants, papal influence, and Spanish intervention, provides a particularly fruitful case study for this methodological shift. Beginning with the excommunication of Elizabeth I in the *Regnans in Excelsis* (1570), Anglo-Spanish relations entered a new phase of ideological and political instability. The papal bull, which released Elizabeth's subjects from loyalty in the name of obedience to the Pope, who was both a spiritual leader as well as a foreign monarch, was quickly interpreted by English officials as a declaration of religious and political war. Yet, intelligence evidence from both sides reveals a more ambiguous picture. English and Spanish policymakers alike relied on a dense web of informants, intercepted correspondence and covert diplomacy that frequently blurred the line between orthodoxy and pragmatism. It is within these circuits of information - letters, reports and memoranda - that the Catholic question must be reconsidered.

Early accounts of this period, such as Conyers Read's monumental *Mr. Secretary Walsingham and the Policy of Queen Elizabeth* (1925), present espionage largely as a defensive instrument of Protestant survival[1]. Read's Walsingham is a patriot who builds England's secret service to uncover papal plots and foreign conspiracies. While invaluable for its archival diligence, Read's narrative is bound by the Whiggish teleology of Protestant nationhood. Later works, including Geoffrey Parker's *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (1998), extended this confessional framework by portraying Spanish policy as the rational expression of a militant Catholic monarchy seeking to restore England to papal authority and Catholic worship[2]. Despite their differences in emphasis, both interpretations presuppose ideological coherence on each side of the English Channel. On the other hand, Parker's portrayal of Philip II's anti-English foreign policy has been dented by historians working on Philipine intelligence networks, such as Diego Navarro Bonilla's *Los archivos del espionaje* (2004), Carlos Carnier and Javier Marcos' *Espías de Felipe II* (2005), and Gennaro Varriale's *Arrivano li Turchi* (2014), Tobias Graf and Charlotte Backerra's *Case studies in early modern European intelligence* (2022). Collectively, they have shown beyond any doubt that Philip II's espionage system was all geared towards war and counter-terrorism against the Ottoman Empire, and devoted a far minor attention to England, let alone to the cause of a handful or radical English Catholics abroad[3].

Revisionist historians have approached espionage not as an instrument of ideological conflict but as a language of politics itself. John Bossy's *The Embassy Affair* (1991) offers an early model by reconstructing the clandestine negotiations between English and Catholic agents in the 1590s, revealing how espionage could function as an alternative form of diplomacy[4]. Stephen Alford's *The Watchers* (2012) further reframes Walsingham's network as a self-conscious 'republic of intelligence', whose members justified surveillance and subterfuge through moral and providential reasoning[5]. The subsequent works of Nadine Akkerman and Alexandra Gajda have expanded this approach by highlighting the role of intermediaries, such as clerks,

women and exiles, whose information flows defy binary categorisations of loyalty and faith[6]. These studies collectively dismantle the notion that religion operates as an autonomous political force. Instead, they suggest that faith itself became an instrument, a manipulable identity within the transactional world of early modern intelligence.

In this light, the Catholic question must be understood not as an objective threat but as a discursive construct emerging from intelligence culture. Surveillance reports, intercepted letters and coded dispatches from both English and Continental archives reveal that 'Catholic conspiracies' often originated within the machinery of espionage rather than beyond it. The Ridolfi, Throckmorton and Babington plots, for instance, were shaped as much by Walsingham's manipulations and intelligence theatrics as by genuine foreign coordination, as Berta Cano-Echevarría has convincingly shown.[7] Intelligence did not simply record political reality, it produced it. This epistemic function of espionage, by which states constructed their enemies through information practices, marks the essential revisionist insight driving this essay.

The transnational nature of espionage compels historians to transcend Anglocentric narratives. Spanish diplomatic intelligence, directed through Bernardino de Mendoza's embassy in London and the Jesuit networks of Robert Parsons, operated within an ideological and epistemological economy. The Spanish crown's reliance on exiled English Catholics and Jesuit intermediaries led to systematic distortions of English realities. Reports from London, filtered through confessional zeal and self-interest, frequently exaggerated the prospects of a Catholic uprising. Philip II's government, as Geoffrey Parker and Henry Kamen noted, acted upon intelligence that confirmed its own ideological assumptions[8]. The result was a feedback loop of mutual misperception: Walsingham's agents amplified fears of invasion to secure resources and legitimacy, while Spanish operatives inflated English Catholic sympathy to justify intervention. In both cases, intelligence became performative, a theatre of persuasion within which religious identity was weaponised.

This interpretive framework, which sees intelligence not merely as the gathering of data but as the production of meaning, represents one of the most significant historiographical developments in recent decades. It aligns early modern studies with broader theoretical movements in cultural and political history, particularly the so-called 'new history of information'. Scholars such as Peter Burke and Ann Blair have emphasised the intellectual consequences of the information revolution in the sixteenth century: the bureaucratisation of knowledge, the emergence of archives and the proliferation of surveillance mechanisms[9]. Espionage, within this schema, appears as both a symptom and a driver of the early modern state's epistemic ambitions. The intelligence archive, as this essay will argue, thus stands at the intersection of confession, diplomacy and state formation.

Finally, this introduction situates this present study within revisionist debates about Elizabethan policy and the nature of confessional politics. Whereas traditional interpretations regard Anglo-Spanish hostility as the inevitable outcome of irreconcilable faiths, this essay contends that religious identity was secondary to the informational imperatives of both regimes. This is not to say that religion did not play an increasingly important role, especially in shaping English national identity; it did. It

is just as important to realise, however, that intelligence operations reveal continuous channels of communication, negotiation and even cooperation that belie the myth of total war. The espionage lens, therefore, allows for a reassessment of the Catholic question as a phenomenon of political communication rather than doctrinal antagonism.

The following sections elaborate on this argument in six parts. Section II reconstructs the organisational and operational structures of English and Spanish intelligence, revealing espionage as a form of political infrastructure. Section III demonstrates how intelligence practices shaped the English state's portrayal of Catholicism as an existential threat. Section IV turns to the Continental networks that misinterpreted English politics, which led to strategic failures, such as the Armada. Section V highlights the pragmatic dimensions of intelligence, exploring how espionage could facilitate détente as well as conflict. Section VI examines the methodological and epistemological challenges posed by intelligence sources. Finally, Section VII will conclude by proposing a revisionist synthesis: that the Catholic question, far from being a doctrinal battlefield, was a contest of information and interpretation. It was a struggle over who could define truth during an age of secrecy and surveillance.

Intelligence Networks as a Political Infrastructure

The institutionalisation of intelligence under Elizabeth I and Philip II represented one of the most profound developments in the political culture of late sixteenth-century Europe. What had once been the informal world of courtly gossip, merchant correspondence and diplomatic rumours became, by the 1570s, a structured system of surveillance and information management. The intelligence networks of England and Spain were not peripheral to statecraft; they were operational foundations. Both monarchies recognised that the control of information, its acquisition, suppression and strategic release. They could substitute for open warfare in the management of empire and faith.

Walsingham and the Architecture of Elizabethan Intelligence

In England, Sir Francis Walsingham (1532-1590) forged the prototype of a bureaucratic secret service. His tenure as principal secretary institutionalised espionage as a permanent arm of government, linking the Privy Council, court and local gentry via a constellation of informants, couriers and cryptographers. As Stephen Alford has argued, Walsingham's genius lies not merely in gathering intelligence but in transforming it into a system of governance. His network extended across Europe, from Constantinople to Paris, from the Hanseatic ports to the Low Countries, binding together Protestant exiles, merchants and scholars in a collective enterprise that he described as a *respublica intelligendi*, a republic of intelligence[10].

The operational core of Walsingham's system rested on four interlocking mechanisms: (1) coded communication and cipherbreaking, (2) courier networks, (3) embedded agents in foreign courts and (4) domestic informers within the recusant community[11]. The employment of Thomas Phelippes, a master cryptanalyst, exemplified the scientific precision of this apparatus. Phelippes' 'decipherment of

Mary, Queen of Scots' correspondence during the Babington Plot (1586) demonstrated that intelligence could serve as a legal and ideological weapon, thereby producing not only security but legitimacy for the Elizabethan regime[12]. George Lasry, Norbert Biermann and Satoshi Tomokiyo's article, "Deciphering Mary Stuart's lost letters from 1578-1584" has settled the matter for good: the Scottish Queen was framed by Walsingham's intelligence network[13].

Beyond its technical sophistication, Walsingham's network exemplified the integration of surveillance and ideology. His correspondence reveals a persistent effort to frame intelligence as providential service, a defence of divine truth against Catholic deception[14]. This religious rhetoric, however, coexisted with pragmatic opportunism. Walsingham's agents often engaged in double-dealing, espionage-for-hire and manipulation of information for personal or political advantage. The elasticity of loyalty within the network underscores intelligence's ambiguous moral economy: espionage was both a Christian duty and a market commodity.

Spanish and Papal Intelligence Systems

Across the English Channel, Philip II's administration constructed a parallel architecture of intelligence, although its character and objectives differed significantly. The Spanish monarchy's global scale necessitated a more fragmented intelligence system dispersed across its European and global territories. The ambassadorial corps, particularly Bernardino de Mendoza in London (1578-1584) and Don Juan de Tassis in Paris, functioned as nodal points in a web linking Madrid, Brussels and Rome[15]. Mendoza's dispatches to Madrid, preserved in the Archivo General de Simancas, form one of the richest documentary records of Elizabethan politics viewed through Spanish eyes[16]. The English College, Rome, owns a wealth of information about the interlinked finances of the same with those of other English Colleges, notably the one in Rheims, as well as the one in Valladolid.The money they received from Rome contrasts sharply with the amount that Philip II was prepared to send the English College in Rheims[17].

Where Walsingham's system was centralised and ideologically cohesive, Spain's intelligence operated through overlapping sovereignties: royal officials, Jesuit missionaries, papal nuncios and mercenary informants each claimed partial allegiance to different masters[18]. Robert Parsons, the English Jesuit exile, exemplifies this fluidity. Operating between Rome, Valladolid and Antwerp, Parsons served simultaneously as missionary, propagandist and intelligence broker. His letters to the papal secretary and to Philip II advised on English Catholic sentiment, invasion prospects, and the moral legitimacy of rebellion[19]. Yet these reports often told their patrons what they wished to hear. The inherent incentives of espionage, such as reward, patronage and ideological validation, created systemic distortion in both Spanish and papal intelligence, as will become clear in the case study below about Jesuit propaganda.

The Spanish system's reliance on confessional solidarity also limits its adaptability. Information flowed along channels of trust rather than verification, producing what Geoffrey Parker described as a 'culture of confirmation'[20]. Reports that aligned with ideological expectations, that English Catholics were poised for

insurrection or that Elizabeth's ministers were divided, were accepted uncritically. Consequently, intelligence failures proliferated. The 1588 Armada's strategic assumptions, especially that English Catholic subjects would support the invaders, originated from years of overly optimistic reports by expatriate agents[21]. The reality on the ground was that most English Catholics acted patriotically, chosing to fight for England against Spain. English Catholics in England did not behave at all in the way that Parson had wished them to. It had all been just wishful thinking by a man who had come to believe his own propaganda myths.

Networks as Instruments of Governance

Intelligence served as a tool for foreign policy and as a mechanism for domestic governance. In England, the extension of Walsingham's network into local communities through informers and justices of the peace blurred the boundary between espionage and administration. As Alford and Haynes have noted, the Elizabethan state's capacity to monitor dissent depended less on centralised coercion than on the voluntary complicity of subjects who internalised surveillance as loyalty[22]. The 'recusant informant' thus became a paradoxical figure: both suspect and servant of the crown.

In Spain, too, intelligence played a domestic role, particularly in the surveillance of conversos, Moriscos and political dissenters[23]. The Inquisition's information-gathering apparatus intersected with state intelligence, producing a hybrid system of religious and political control. Philip II, for example, obtained from Pope Pius V a bull for the creation of the Inquisition of the Sea, on 27 June 1571, with jurisdiction over the souls of Spanish-flag ships worldwide, though particularly in the Turk-infested Mediterranean. The result, as Henry Kamen argues, was a regime obsessed with the management of knowledge, one that sought to preserve orthodoxy not merely through punishment but through information dominance[24]. In both countries, intelligence reshaped the relationship between subject and sovereign. It fostered a new mode of governance grounded in secrecy and suspicion, where loyalty was measured not by open allegiance but by one's informational reliability. This phenomenon anticipates what political theorists would later describe as the 'information state': a polity organised around the collection and interpretation of data[25].

Espionage and the Economy of Patronage

The operation of intelligence networks also intersected with the structures of patronage and finance. Espionage was expensive. Walsingham often lamented his personal financial ruin in the service of intelligence work[26]. Payments to agents, the maintenance of cipher clerks, and the costs of bribes placed constant strain on his resources. However, these expenditures also created an informal economy of loyalty. Service to the crown in secret capacities could yield pensions, offices and social advancement[27]. Thus, intelligence functioned as a currency of favour, like an invisible commerce sustaining the visible hierarchy of Elizabethan government.

The same applied to the Continental side. Spanish and papal agents competed for royal and ecclesiastical patronage by promising privileged information about England[28]. Such competition incentivised exaggeration and invention. Intelligence reports became literary performances designed to secure rewards. The rhetoric of danger, imminent uprisings, conspiracies, divine providence pervaded these documents, creating a discourse of fear that shaped policy.

Intelligence as Infrastructure, and the construction of the Catholic threat

By 1600, intelligence had become a permanent infrastructure of early modern diplomacy. The exchange of information through coded letters, couriers and intermediaries sustained international relations, even when formal diplomacy collapsed. The period between 1570 and 1600 witnessed repeated ruptures, it suffice to think of papal excommunication, war in the Netherlands, the Armada. Yet, correspondence between agents never ceased. The persistence of espionage during war and peace suggests that intelligence constituted a continuum of communication.

As Gajda has noted, this infrastructure was not merely functional, rather, it was eminently cultural[29]. It created a shared vocabulary of secrecy, trust, and dissimulation that transcended confessional boundaries. The same cryptographic techniques, rhetorical codes and ethical ambiguities operated in both Protestant and Catholic networks. Intelligence, in short, was Europe's common language of power. From a revisionist perspective, therefore, intelligence networks must be recognised as political infrastructure. They were systems that sustained governance, shaped ideology and mediated diplomacy. They reveal that the Catholic question was not simply a matter of religious confrontation but of informational asymmetry: a contest over who possessed credible knowledge and how that knowledge could be used.

The Elizabethan intelligence system did not simply observe Catholicism; rather, it produced the 'Catholic threat' as a political narrative. Between 1570 and 1600, English surveillance and propaganda mechanisms transformed sporadic Catholic dissent into a coherent image of conspiracy. Espionage, rather than exposing pre-existing dangers, actively constructed the ideological justification for repression and war. In this process, intelligence became a form of storytelling: a way to define enemies, mobilise resources and legitimise state violence. In the same way as the Elizabethan intelligence produced an inflated version of the Catholic threat so the radical fringe of English Catholics abroad, which was led by violent English Jesuits, produced an inflated version of Catholic support for a Spanish-led regime-change operation. In this section we are now going to consider the fundamental contribution of Jesuit intelligence to the construction of the Catholic threat.

The excommunication of Elizabeth I in 1570 (*Regnans in Excelsis*) is often regarded as the starting point for England's aggressive anti-Catholic policy. The papal bull's spiritual claim, that Elizabeth's authority was null, acquired political force only through the interpretive labour of Walsingham's and Cecil's intelligence offices. Reports from Italy and Flanders were filtered through a rhetoric of treason and subversion[30]. This transformation exemplifies the performative role of intelligence; it translated faith into threat.

The process accelerated with the exposure of successive conspiracies, such as the Ridolfi Plot (1571), the Throckmorton Plot (1583) and the Babington Plot (1586). Each episode involved genuine discontent among Catholic exiles but was amplified by Walsingham's operations into an existential crisis[31]. The Ridolfi Plot, for instance, relied heavily on intercepted letters between Roberto Ridolfi, the Duke of Norfolk and the Spanish ambassador. Yet Walsingham's presentation of the evidence to the Privy Council framed the conspiracy as part of a coordinated Spanish–papal invasion scheme[32]. The intelligence was selective: fragments of correspondence and confessions were woven into a coherent narrative of Catholic sedition. The plot, in modern terms, was an artefact of the state's interpretive apparatus.

The Babington Plot represents the apotheosis of intelligence as political theatre. Anthony Babington's correspondence with Mary, Queen of Scots, which was intercepted and deciphered by Thomas Phelippes, has traditionally been hailed as Walsingham's crowning achievement. Yet revisionist readings, particularly those by Stephen Alford and John Guy, have shown that Walsingham engineered much of the affair[33]. Babington's letters were not only intercepted but facilitated: Walsingham allowed them to pass under surveillance to entrap Mary. In doing so, he transformed intelligence into entrapment and surveillance into dramaturgy.

This episode demonstrates how espionage can manufacture guilt. The deciphered letter, bearing Mary's consent to Elizabeth's assassination, became both evidence and narrative climax. Phelippes's infamous addition of a postscript symbol (a gallows sketch) reveals the theatrical awareness of the intelligence operation[34]. Thus, intelligence functioned as propaganda-by-document. Its authenticity was rooted in its secrecy, its authority derived from its control of a narrative sequence. The Babington case also illuminates the recursive relationship between intelligence and law. Walsingham's discovery provided the juridical foundation for Mary's execution, symbolising the triumph of Protestant justice over Catholic treachery. Yet, this 'discovery' was itself an act of textual construction, shaped by decisions about what to reveal and what to withhold. As Bossy remarks, 'intelligence was the script by which the state staged its virtue'[35].

Catholicism as an Informational Category

The notion of 'the Catholic threat' also emerged from the bureaucratic practices of information management. Surveillance reports, recusancy rolls, and informers' depositions redefined Catholicism as an administrative identity[36]. Catholics were no longer merely religious dissenters; they were potential data points in a network of suspicions. Local justices, acting as nodes in Walsingham's intelligence web, filed reports that fused confessional and political categories: 'Papist,' 'disloyal' and 'traitor' became interchangeable[37].

This conflation had profound implications. It converted theological differences into actionable intelligence. The State Papers Domestic reveal thousands of such reports - lists of recusants, intercepted letters, and examinations of suspected priests - each a microcosm of the state's epistemic ambition[38]. These documents did not passively reflect Catholic activity; they organised it into a coherent narrative of subversion. The result was a feedback loop: surveillance produced data that justified

further surveillance. In revisionist terms, the 'Catholic question' was, therefore, less an empirical problem than an epistemological one. The state's effort to know Catholicism, to map its adherents, decode its symbols and anticipate its moves, constituted the very process by which Catholicism became politically dangerous. Information created its own object of fear.

Propaganda and the Public Sphere

Espionage's influence extended beyond the secret service into the realm of public discourse. Intelligence findings were routinely leaked, edited or dramatised for propaganda. The Acts of the Privy Council and proclamations against seminary priests frequently drew upon intelligence language, portraying Catholicism as a contagion[39]. Pamphlets such as *A Discoverie of the Dangerous Rock of Romish Treason* (1581) repackaged secret reports into moral parables. The hidden became a public spectacle; secrecy itself conferred legitimacy.

Nadine Akkerman's work on 'invisible agents' emphasises how this circulation of intelligence narratives depended on gendered and social intermediaries, such as secretaries, scribes and rumour-mongers, who bridged elite and popular spheres[40]. Through them, espionage became a cultural phenomenon. Information about plots, spies and papal conspiracies infused sermons, plays and popular ballads, embedding intelligence logic into the national imagination. Shakespeare's Hamlet, with its motifs of surveillance and feigned madness, reflects this cultural saturation of espionage anxiety[41].

The Spanish and papal sources mirror this dynamic from the opposite side. Mendoza's dispatches from London reveal how English propaganda influenced Spanish perceptions. Recounting the Throckmorton affair, he reports a widespread English panic over 'Jesuit plots', interpreting it as evidence of Protestant fear and divine punishment[42]. Thus, English intelligence not only shaped domestic policy but also manipulated foreign responses, thereby constituting a sophisticated exercise in information warfare avant la lettre.

Espionage, Fear and Political Theology

At a deeper level, the construction of the Catholic threat was theological. Elizabethan propagandists, including the polemicists associated with Walsingham's circle, framed espionage as a form of divine vigilance. The state watched over its subjects as God watched over creation; knowledge itself became sanctified[43]. This spiritualisation of intelligence reinforced the moral hierarchy of Protestant governance. Catholic secrecy, with its confessions, coded liturgy and its transubstantiation dogma, was recast as the antithesis of divine transparency. Surveillance, thus, acquired a soteriological dimension: to know was to save.

This ideological linkage between knowledge and virtue persisted in the visual and textual cultures of the period. The 1588 Armada victory, for instance, was commemorated not only as divine deliverance but as the triumph of foreknowledge, an intelligence success. The mythic 'Protestant wind' obscured the more prosaic but crucial role of espionage in anticipating the Armada's movements[44]. The event's

representation fused providence and intelligence, reinforcing the state's claim to divine sanction via information mastery.

Revisionist Implications

From a revisionist standpoint, the 'Catholic threat' appears less as a historical constant than as an adaptive discourse. Each intelligence cycle, each intercepted letter, decoded cipher, or forced confession, reinscribed Catholicism as treacherous. Yet, as Gajda has suggested, these same intelligence operations reveal deep ambivalence within the Elizabethan polity[45]. The crown's reliance on former Catholics as informers, and its intermittent negotiations with Catholic powers, contradicts the simplicity of confessional absolutism. Espionage exposed the permeability of identities that official ideology sought to harden. In sum, intelligence did not merely illuminate hidden Catholic plots; it created the interpretive conditions under which Catholicism could be imagined as a coherent, omnipresent threat. The Catholic question, as refracted through the prism of espionage, was thus a state-produced narrative of control; it was a story the government told itself and its subjects to render the world legible.

Continental Intelligence and Anglo-Spanish Misperceptions

If English intelligence constructed the Catholic threat, Continental intelligence simultaneously constructed an equally distorted vision of Protestant heresy and Elizabethan vulnerability. Between 1570 and 1600, the Catholic monarchies of Spain and the Habsburg Netherlands relied on intelligence channels that blended diplomacy, confession and espionage. These networks, though extensive and often well funded, operated within a culture of ideological confirmation and institutional rivalry that produced systematic misperception. The result was a cycle of mutual misunderstanding: each side believed it possessed secret insight into the other's weakness, yet both were misled by their own information systems.

Spanish Intelligence: Bureaucracy and Belief

The Spanish monarchy of Philip II maintained one of the most complex bureaucratic apparatuses in early modern Europe. Yet, its intelligence system, dispersed across ambassadorial, military and ecclesiastical circuits, was more a federation of competing interests than a unified service[46]. The king's methodical style, his obsession with written reports, marginal annotations, and chains of correspondence, created an illusion of omniscience. In practice, the sheer volume of reports from the *Consejo de Estado* overwhelmed the analytical capacity. Anyone who is familiar with Philip II's manuscripts, both in Simancas and in Madrid, knows that he was always frantically annotating every single piece of paper. That level of paranoiac control over his empire papers could only lead to catastrophic mistakes.

The principal architect of Spanish intelligence in northern Europe was Bernardino de Mendoza, ambassador in London from 1578 to 1584 and later in Paris. Mendoza's dispatches to Madrid, preserved in the Archivo General de Simancas, reveal both the diligence and the delusion of Spanish espionage[47]. His agents included English Catholics, Jesuits, merchants and courtiers. These were figures whose access

to power was often exaggerated. Many of their reports, promising imminent Catholic uprisings or English naval weakness, played to Mendoza's expectations and the ideological narrative of divine favour. Geoffrey Parker aptly called this phenomenon the 'culture of self-deception'. Yet, in an intelligence report from the Low Countries, the Duke of Alba explained Philip II as early as on 23 February 1570 that: "even though Catholics in England are asking for help, I have understood that they do not wish to get it if its price were subjection to a foreign ruler"[48]. The Spanish crown's intelligence failures, most spectacularly in the 1588 Armada, were not due to ignorance but to selective belief. The flood of confirmatory intelligence reinforced preconceptions: that English Catholics would revolt, that Elizabeth's navy was unprepared and that providence guaranteed success. When contradictory reports arrived, for example from Don Bernardino de Ayala or other cautious informants, they were dismissed as defeatism.

Spanish intelligence was not served well by the 'help' it received from the Society of Jesus. In the last section we shall consider some of the ways in which English Jesuits contributed through their intelligence channels to misrepresent the reality of English Catholicism.

Intelligence and the Fabric of Faith

In the closing decades of the sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus mastered a paradox: the production of truth via instruments of secrecy. Nowhere was this paradox more vivid than in the Jesuit management of intelligence concerning England. Between 1570 and 1600, Anglo-Spanish relations were defined by diplomatic hostility and a deep epistemological contest over the meaning of loyalty, conscience and truth. The Jesuits' task, namely, to sustain the embattled English Catholic community from exile, required them to operate simultaneously as theologians, propagandists and intelligence officers. Through networks that linked Valladolid, Seville, Rome and Madrid, Jesuit superiors transformed fragmentary reports into coherent narratives of persecution, sanctity and divine favour. These narratives, circulated as 'annual letters' and martyrs' accounts, performed an informational and ideological function: they supplied the monarchy with knowledge and the faithful with belief.

The Jesuit archives of the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI) preserve numerous examples of this convergence between spiritual records and intelligence reports. The 1595 "Copia de una relación de las cosas que han sucedido en el Colegio de los Ingleses de Valladolid" (FG 650B, MS 651) epitomises the genre. Ostensibly a pious account of seminary life, the letter operates as a coded document of surveillance, recruitment and propaganda. Its author, identified only as 'el Rector', writes to his superior in Rome with a precision that betrays bureaucratic discipline: 'para guardar la costumbre q ay de escriuir annuar… haré aquí una breue súma y recapitulacion'[49]. The 'annual' is presented as a devotional obligation, but its content is intelligence: names, numbers, escape routes and political hazards. Each anecdote of English students' perilous journeys is a microcosm of Jesuit strategy: an act of collecting and transforming information into edification.

This case study examines how Jesuit intelligence functioned not simply as espionage but as an epistemology: a system for producing truth under persecution. Drawing on ARSI FG 650B-651 and MS Angliae 30, it argues that the Jesuit administration's handling of English affairs reveals a coherent method of propaganda rooted in the bureaucratic management of faith. The annual letter from Valladolid, the Italian 'ultime parole del Sig. Luigi giustiziato a Hereford' and the pseudo-Latin 'translation' of Everard Ducket's execution narrative in Angliae 30 are not isolated texts but linked experiments in constructing verisimilitude. They demonstrate how the Jesuit system, through its assistants, secretaries and regional correspondence, transmuted fragments of intelligence into narratives of martyrdom designed for both internal and external audiences.

The Valladolid Network: Information and the Making of English Catholicism

The 1595 Relación from Valladolid opens with a bureaucratic formula that conceals its extraordinary ideological labour. The Rector assures his superior that he writes in obedience to 'la costumbre q ay de escriuir annuar', signalling that this text participates in the Jesuit *litterae annuae* tradition, a hybrid genre combining chronicle, report and edifying fiction[50]. The litterae served as both administrative communications and tools of internal propaganda, establishing a transcontinental rhythm of information flow. By the late sixteenth century, English colleges in Spain had become key nodes in this network. The Jesuits in Valladolid, constrained by the political sensitivity of Anglo-Spanish relations, could not openly present themselves as agents of the Spanish Crown; instead, they fashioned their mission as a spiritual counter-intelligence enterprise, reclaiming the souls that Protestant England had 'stolen'.

The Rector's tone oscillates between devotion and surveillance. He enumerates the arrivals with the same precision as an intelligence officer cataloguing assets: 'han sido admittidos en el, por todo este año que son 16…'[51]. Each English youth is described not only in spiritual terms but through a narrative of evasion, imprisonment and endurance. 'Thomas Polus de la Proua, Elboracense… fue presso y detenido dos años en la carcel,' he writes before detailing Polus's passage through Ireland and eventual arrival in Spain[52]. Such stories transform mere logistical data into a political allegory of Catholic resilience. Thus, the seminary becomes a symbolic border crossing: a space where human movement is spiritualised and surveillance becomes sanctity. This narrative technique transforms danger into evidence of divine election. Consider the tale of Guillermo Robinsón, the nineteen-year-old who escapes from an English prison after his three companions are condemned. The Rector narrates that Robinsón, once in Ireland, converts 'a otro moço… page de un Conde… que era hereje,' and together they come to Valladolid, 'donde uiuen como dos Angeles'[53]. The phrase is striking: it conflates intelligence success with moral purity. In Jesuit epistemology, information gained through perilous adventure validates itself as truth because it has been purchased by suffering. The letter's insistence on 'peligros,' 'prisiones,' and 'constancia' replicates the syntax of martyrology, thereby fusing espionage with sanctity.

This conflation reflects a deeper structural feature of the Jesuit administration. From the perspective of Rome, the English mission belonged to the Assistancy of Germany, a classification that reveals how the Society organised its operations not by geography but by lines of information. The list of secretaries, from Hieronimus Natalis in 1558 to Georgius Duras in 1597, maps an evolving bureaucracy of communication. The Rector's letter, dispatched from Valladolid, participates in this chain of obedience and control, where each report becomes both spiritual testimony and bureaucratic data. The insistence that twelve priests have been 'émbiados deste Colgo… ala miss.on de Ingalat.a,' reads simultaneously as a missionary boast and as a logistical update to superiors monitoring the movement of agents across enemy territory[54].

What emerges from this administrative devotion is a distinct Jesuit epistemology of verification. In a world where physical access to England was restricted, truth could only be known through letters, that is to say, through the circulation of testimony authenticated by hierarchy. The Valladolid Relación, thus, performs a double operation: it produces faith among readers and secures credibility within the chain of command. The Rector's repeated assertion that divine providence guides each voyage: 'Dios aloultimo los trajo en saluo a este Colgo…'[55]. This functions not merely as pious rhetoric but as a signature of authority. To claim divine authorship is to render the report self-validating. In this sense, Jesuit intelligence was not simply about gathering facts but about producing a theology of facthood.

The narrative's closing description of academic triumph at Valladolid, with students excelling in theology and philosophy, impressing the local university, extends this logic. The Rector recounts that the theological *actus generalis* was 'defendido con tanta satisfacion y admiracion de toda esta Universidad…,' with the theses dedicated to the Spanish monarch[56]. The act becomes a performative assertion of legitimacy: an intelligence report disguised as a scholastic ceremony. Through the litterae annuae, the Jesuits transform their intellectual success into political information, assuring Madrid and Rome that English Catholicism survives not as nostalgia but as disciplined knowledge. In this way, the Valladolid letter functions as both a repository and a laboratory of Jesuit intelligence. It demonstrates how obedience to administrative rituals—the annual report—generated a self-sustaining network of propaganda. By transmuting travel, imprisonment and study into an edifying narrative, the Jesuits produced a form of information that was simultaneously empirical and transcendent. The act of writing itself became an operation of faith.

Angliae 30 and the Counterfeit of Testimony

If the Relación from Valladolid sanctified information through obedience, the manuscripts of MS Angliae 30 demonstrate how Jesuit intelligence manipulated information through invention. Composed largely of late sixteenth-century copies of English materials, the Angliae 30 volumes, which are likewise preserved in the ARSI in Rome, reveal a sophisticated system of textual control. Their contents, including the correspondence of Juan de Idiaquez concerning the 'Impresa d'Inghilterra' and the alleged Latin 'translation' of the execution of Everard Ducket, illustrate how the Jesuit network absorbed, distorted and redeployed Protestant narratives for internal

consumption. The manuscripts do not merely record intelligence; they manufacture it, transforming printed English polemics into evidence of divine favour and Jesuit heroism. The Angliae 30 material is exceptional because it sits precisely at the juncture of espionage and devotion. The documents were not produced for publication but for controlled circulation within Jesuit administrative channels. Their value lies not in authenticity but in function; they demonstrate how intelligence, in the Jesuit sense, was an act of discernment—the power to translate hostile information into proof of Catholic truth. The pseudo-Latin text titled *Vera narratio judicii et justitiae nuper habitae de Papistico proditore Everardo Ducheto* epitomises this operation. It claims to be a faithful translation of Anthony Munday's *The Araignement, and Execution, of a Wilfull and Obstinate Traitor, Named Everalde Ducket* (London, 1581), yet it is, in fact, an elaborate falsification[57]. The Latin version diverges entirely from Munday's pamphlet in terms of language, structure and intent. Whereas the original English account, written by Protestant propagandist Munday, frames Ducket as 'a wilfull and obstinate traitor' whose death proves the justice of Elizabethan law, the Latin adaptation converts him into a Jesuit saint: "aulicus", "nobilis", and suffering for conscience's sake.

The pseudotranslation opens with a preamble that pretends to be the voice of an English official but soon collapses into hagiography: 'Personium, Campionem, Briantum, Wakemammu, Fictum, Setiral, et plures alios vestros esse ut aulicos nobiles…'[58]. The catalogue of Jesuit martyrs - Campion, Briant and others - places Ducket within a familiar pantheon of English saints, erasing his individuality and recasting him as another exemplar of Jesuit constancy. Crucially, the text adopts the formalities of judicial record, the "judicium" and "justitia" of its title, although it subverts them by assigning true authority to the condemned. Ducket's speeches, expanded and moralised, now proclaim his innocence and the sanctity of the Roman faith. The fabricated Latin is less a mistranslation than an inversion; it performs the very epistemological coup that defines Jesuit propaganda, namely, the conversion of hostile discourse into proof of divine truth.

From an intelligence perspective, this pseudotranslation constitutes a kind of reverse espionage. The Jesuits here intercept Protestant communication, decode its rhetorical structure and repurpose it as a secret instrument of edification. The Angliae 30 copyists, working in a context where direct contact with England was perilous, thus reproduce not an English text but an image of Englishness domesticated to Jesuit needs. The two texts are so different from each other that the Jesuits one sounds terribly propagandistic. The distortion is deliberate and systematic: an internal fiction designed to convince Roman superiors and Spanish patrons that the English mission flourished in heroic resistance.

The same pattern of fabrication underlies the Italian Ultime parole del Sig. Luigi giustiziato, a Hereford preserved in FG 651. The two folios purport to record the 'last words' of a condemned priest, but the tone and composition reveal a crafted oration rather than an eyewitness transcript: 'Io credo che voi vi siete qui radunati non solo per vedere un vostro Compatriota morire, ma ancora per udirlo parlare,' the speaker begins, in what is clearly an impossibly theatrical opening for a scaffold speech[59]. The text follows the conventions of Jesuit *oratoria sacra*: structured rhetoric, balanced clauses, and the conversion of personal testimony into collective confession.

The speaker's profession of faith mirrors the printed martyr narratives circulating in continental Catholic presses: 'La mia Religione è la Romana cattolica; in questa io son cresciuto intorno à 40 anni; in questa io ora muoio'[60]. Yet, the document's language and provenance identify it as an internal composition rather than a translation of any English original.

This Italian martyr speech demonstrates how the Jesuits used intelligence materials not only to gather information but also to stage truth. The oration's claim that the priest was condemned 'solamente per dire la messa, confessione, amministrare i Sagramenti' reproduces the standard formula of Jesuit propaganda: that English persecution was not political but purely religious[61]. The subsequent denial of involvement in 'la congiura' and the declaration 'io muoio per la coscienza, e per la Religione' complete the transformation of political rebellion into sanctified martyrdom[62]. In the Jesuit information economy, such textual productions served dual purposes: they reassured internal readers of divine favour and provided evidence to the Spanish monarchy that the Catholic cause in England retained moral legitimacy.

What unites the pseudo-Latin Ducket and the Italian Luigi texts is not mere forgery but a disciplined theory of representation. The Jesuits, bound by their ratio scribendi, understood that truth was not the opposite of fiction but its perfected form. To fabricate faithfully, to invent in the service of belief, was to participate in divine creation. This epistemological flexibility made Jesuit intelligence uniquely powerful. It allowed the Society to transform unreliable reports, rumours and imaginative reconstructions into 'credible' documents fit for transmission to Rome or Madrid. The very act of copying in Angliae 30, with its 'diverse hands' and layered corrections, testifies to a collective authorship aimed not at accuracy but at continuity: ensuring that the idea of English Catholic steadfastness survived the loss of direct evidence.

From the viewpoint of early modern information theory, Angliae 30 represents a crucial stage in the bureaucratisation of belief. Its compilers operated within an administrative hierarchy that rewarded orthodoxy over originality. The regional secretaries (Polanco, Mercurianus, Manaraeus, Hoffaeus and others) functioned as filters, converting heterogeneous data into uniform testimony. The result was an infrastructural faith: a system where the credibility of a document depended less on its veracity than on its conformity to Jesuit rhetorical norms. The pseudotranslations of Angliae 30 were, in this sense, bureaucratic acts of devotion. By reproducing the external form of English printed texts, they demonstrated submission to the administrative demand for documentation, while their content reaffirmed the triumph of the Catholic conscience.

In both the Latin Ducket and the Italian Luigi, we encounter the Jesuits' most radical epistemological gesture: the conversion of the enemy's voice into the language of sanctity. Munday's Protestant tract, designed to reinforce English state authority, becomes a private catechism of endurance in the Jesuit version. The scaffold oration, likely written by a Roman copyist, transforms judicial punishment into a theatrical sacrament. Such transformations were not accidental; they were the essence of Jesuit intelligence. As the Society's later *Ratio Studiorum* applied to rhetoric: *discretio spirituum*. The Angliae 30 manuscripts thus embody the intelligence function of the Society in its purest form: the ability to produce reality by rewriting it. This manipulation of

testimony also has political implications. By demonstrating to Philip II and his advisers, through intermediaries like Juan de Idiaquez, that English Catholics remained loyal and heroic, Jesuit propagandists reinforced the moral case for Spanish intervention. Jesuit intelligence, in its effort to maintain coherence, created a mirror-world in which faith and fact were indistinguishable. The Society's mastery of secrecy thus culminated not in revelation but in self-persuasion, an empire of documents that believed itself.

Bureaucratic Devotion: Secretaries, Scripts and the Jesuit Epistemology of Control

The Jesuit Administrative Machine as an Intelligence Apparatus

By the final quarter of the sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus had developed one of the most sophisticated administrative bureaucracies in early modern Europe. The lists of provincial secretaries you cite from the ARSI reveal a hierarchical, methodical system for processing information across Germania, Hispania and Italiae. Each provincial 'secretary' functioned simultaneously as a spiritual monitor and an intelligence node. The sequence - 'Hieron. Natalis 1558; Ioannes Polanco 1564; Everardus Mercurianus 1565; Oliverius Manaraeus 1573; Paulus Hoffaeus 1581; Edmundus Hayus 1591' - illustrates continuity through personnel turnover and a centralised commitment to textual recordkeeping[63].

This Jesuit bureaucracy did not merely transmit administrative data; it produced knowledge as a form of devotion. Letters, 'annual relations,' and manuscript reports were constructed as instruments of obedience and channels of grace. As the *Constitutiones* prescribed, scribere est obedire—to write—was itself a religious act[64]. Yet, in the English and Spanish missions, this bureaucratic devotion overlapped with espionage. Reports on the movement of students, the logistics of smuggling priests and the circulation of English Catholic propaganda were all drafted in the same devotional idiom. Thus, the machinery of sanctity became indistinguishable from the machinery of intelligence.

Hierarchies of Secrecy: The Chain of Knowledge

The administrative lists from Hispania- map a different geography of secrecy: 'S. Franc. Borgia 1564; Antonius Araoz 1565; Hieron. Natalis 1568; Aegidius Gonzalez 1573; Garcias Alarcon 1581; Anton. de Mendoza 1594; Barthol. Perez 1596'[65]. These were not simply local bureaucrats; they were gatekeepers of information about politically sensitive missions, including those to England and Ireland. Each report ascending through these secretaries' hands underwent rhetorical reconfiguration, ensuring that the narrative reaching Rome was not merely accurate but edifying. This is where Jesuit intelligence diverged from state espionage. In the secular chancelleries of Madrid and London, intelligence was valued for its factual precision. In the Jesuit system, information was valued for its capacity to reinforce orthodox affect. A report of an English boy escaping from Protestant persecution could be reshaped into a miracle story, a failed mission reframed as martyrdom-in-waiting. The bureaucratic circulation of these documents ensured the orthopraxy of

representation; nothing left the secretariat that could not edify the reader or glorify divine providence[66].

Polyglot Infrastructure of Control

The Jesuit intelligence documents in ARSI show the striking linguistic multiplicity of the Order's network: Spanish administrative prose, Latin translation, Italian devotional narrative and English source material. The Jesuit bureaucracy thus constructed an epistemology of translation, not the faithful rendering of a text but the conversion of information into a spiritual idiom. For instance, the pseudo-Latin translation of Everard Ducket's pamphlet in MS Angliae 30 is the product of this bureaucratic infrastructure. It likely passed through multiple secretarial hands before reaching the Roman archives: 'plures alii vestri esse ut aulicos nobiles…'. The translation fabricated its own authority through the very medium of Latin, the language of universal truth. Yet, this Latin version bears little resemblance to the original English tract: where Munday's 1581 pamphlet ('*The Araignement and Execution of a Wilfull and Obstinate Traito*r') depicts Ducket as a stubborn rebel, the Jesuit version turns him into an edifying confessor[67]. The act of mistranslation becomes, paradoxically, a demonstration of control trhrough which the Jesuit secretaries turn political disobedience into spiritual triumph.

The same mechanism operates in the Italian *Ultime parole del Sig. Luigi giustiziato a Hereford*. Written as if it were an eyewitness transcription, it is, in fact, an exercise in intelligence theatre. The address 'Qui è una numerosa adunanza…' stages an imagined English crowd, allowing an Italian Jesuit audience to experience martyrdom as if firsthand. The likely route of transmission, from English missionary correspondence to Spanish seminarian reports to Italian redactors, demonstrates how the bureaucratic chain produced, not reproduced, the event[68].

Bureaucracy and Belief: The Jesuit Theory of Knowledge

The Jesuit order's administrative genius lies in its fusion of rational recordkeeping and spiritual discipline. Each entry in the list of secretaries represents both a bureaucratic office and a theological position. Figures such as Polanco and Mercurianus theorised that written correspondence could mediate grace. The annual relation from Valladolid (1595) exemplifies this: the Rector's statement, 'haré aquí una breve súma y recapitulacion… siendo la obra tan insigne y de tanto servicio de N.S.,' mirrors the concise reporting style demanded by the *Regulae Societatis*[69]. What begins as administration thus becomes a devotional performance. In this system, 'intelligence' is not merely information but moral cognition, the capacity to discern the divine logic behind political contingencies. Jesuit administrators saw no contradiction between espionage and edification; both served the greater good of truth. The lists of secretaries thus functioned as both personnel registers and cartographies of grace, mapping the divine chain of command from the English mission up to the General in Rome.

The bureaucratic texture of the Society's intelligence network reveals an epistemology grounded in obedience rather than empiricism. As Polanco insisted, the Jesuit writer 'should record events not as they occurred but as they ought to

instruct'[70]. In this sense, the Angliae 30 manuscripts and the ARSI FG 650B–651 letters are not sources of data but exercises in normative narration. They transmute contingent realities - failed missions, intercepted priests, or executed converts - into the immutable rhetoric of sanctity. The Society's clerical bureaucracy thus achieved what secular states could not: a system in which propaganda required no central censorship because its producers were already spiritually conditioned to tell the story correctly. Jesuit intelligence and propaganda are not distinct genres but mutually constitutive acts of faith and governance.

The Jesuit Invention of Intelligence as Propaganda

The evidence drawn from the ARSI Fondo Gesuitico and MS Angliae 30 manuscripts illuminates a striking transformation in the function of intelligence within the late sixteenth-century Catholic world. By the 1590s, the Society of Jesus had redefined intelligentia from a secular instrument of surveillance into a spiritual vocation, as a way of seeing the world through obedience and purpose. The Jesuit network that linked England, Spain and Rome demonstrates how administrative systems, devotional writing and strategic misinformation became mutually reinforcing components of a single epistemic project.

Where the English state sought to identify and punish 'papistical traitors', the Jesuit intelligence apparatus reframed those same lives as proofs of grace. The narrative shift from the punitive to the providential required not only theological imagination but bureaucratic discipline. As seen in the 1595 Valladolid Relation, with its careful catalogue of 'Thomas Polus… Guillermo Robinso moço de 19 años… otros dos moços de 19 años hijos de caballeros principales', the function of enumeration itself becomes an act of redemption[71]. The Jesuit habit of listing names, places and outcomes mirrored the state's own logic of control but with an inverse purpose: to demonstrate divine rather than royal order.

At the same time, the distortions of MS Angliae 30, where an English pamphlet becomes a Latin passion and an Italian 'eyewitness' account stages an English martyrdom, reveal that the Jesuits' mastery of information was inseparable from their mastery of representation. The intelligence they gathered was seldom purely factual; it was truthful in a higher, allegorical sense. This conflation of information and inspiration allowed the Jesuits to occupy a unique moral position; they were both agents of the Counter-Reformation and authors of its reality.

The lists of secretaries embody this dual function. Each name stands at the intersection of spiritual governance and administrative precision. Through their pens, divine providence took bureaucratic form. In their correspondences, the Jesuits forged what might be called 'intelligence theology': a belief that information, properly disciplined, could reveal the structure of God's plan in history[72]. This theology depended on the same techniques that defined espionage, secrecy, surveillance and selective disclosure, but purified them through the moral rhetoric of mission.

In this light, the Jesuit order emerges as a proto-modern intelligence community, one that anticipated the mechanisms of later state propaganda but justified them in the language of salvation. Their secretaries functioned much like analysts, synthesising field reports, interrogations and rumours into coherent

narratives that would confirm the righteousness of Catholic perseverance. Yet the ultimate goal was not political victory; it was narrative mastery. To control the story of persecution was to control the meaning of the Reformation itself.

The broader implication of these findings is historiographical. Much of the traditional scholarship on the 'Catholic question' in Anglo-Spanish relations has treated Jesuit sources as repositories of partisan misinformation. A revisionist reading, however, revealed that these documents were not failed histories but intentional reconstructions of the past designed to contest the epistemological monopoly of the Protestant state. When the Latin pseudotranslation of Everard Ducket's trial reframes an execution as martyrdom, it is performing precisely what English government propaganda performed in reverse: the sanctification of authority through narrative control[73].

This dynamic complicates the conventional dichotomy between truth and propaganda. For the Jesuits, the fabrication of events was not a moral violation but an extension of divine creativity. Their concept of truth was incarnational; it resided not in the empirical record but in the moral resonance of the story. Thus, Jesuit intelligence work must be understood as a hybrid genre, half administration, half liturgy. The same pen that recorded the dispatch of a priest to Ireland also recorded his imagined death for the faith, collapsing the boundary between report and revelation.

By 1600, the Society's archival footprint across Germany, Spain, and the Italian states had produced a continental archive of controlled meaning. Each dossier, 'annual relation' and pseudotranslation served as a devotional exercise and a weapon of persuasion. The effect was cumulative: an infrastructure of sanctified information that prefigured the modern state's propaganda apparatus while remaining grounded in spiritual obedience. Ultimately, the Jesuit invention of intelligence as propaganda lies not in deception but in hermeneutic discipline, namely, in the power to interpret reality through the lens of mission. The English Catholic crisis of the late sixteenth century provided the testing ground for this epistemology. Between the scaffold of Hereford and the desks of Valladolid, intelligence ceased to be a merely political enterprise and became a theology of information.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has shown that intelligence sources can help historians go beyond the rhetoric and propaganda of official records, which has been sedimenting into historiography, and that it is now high time we challenged in order to move forward. In particular, I have tackled the Catholic question in Elizabethan England through a case study of Jesuit intelligence sources that aimed to circulate propaganda about the strength of English Catholicism at a time when, in fact, it was waning off. This kind of work is the necessary prerequisite for further deconstructing the Jesuit narrative about the evil Protestant origin of the myth of the English Catholic threat. Moreover, on a wider plan, this work breaks new ground in the critical reassessment of the Jesuit role in the construction of the confessionalisation historiographical conundrum. Were Elizabethan England and Philipine Spain confessional States? They were if we believe Jesuit propaganda; less so if we use

intelligence sources to get to grips with their much more nuanced intellectual worlds. More generally, this essay has drawn attention to the usefulness of intelligence sources for historians. It is conceived as a springboard, as a working paper, almost, to start a conversation and foster new research leading to new insights and analyses. For this reason I have refrained from arguing for and against specific points in the works of the foremost historians of the English Catholic question, such as Alexandra Walsham, Diarmaid McCulloch, Lisa McClain, David Loades, Thomas Thorpe, Debora Shuger, and many more. This article is more programmatic and analytical in a broader sense than my usual historiographical work. After spending so much time among spy reports in unusual archives I have felt the need to begin publishing about some of the unstudied sources I have access to in Rome and in Spain, and see what other colleagues will come up with. The wealth of unexplored manuscripts regarding the Catholic question which are buried in Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese archives, is such that only a collaborative, collective effort will enable us to reframe it more empirically and less dogmatically.

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