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**Spies in the Post Office: Sovereignty, surveillance, and communication in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Denmark.**

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*I. Introduction*

In the following I will present the main theses of my Ph.D.-project, a fellowship sponsored by the Post & Tele Museum in Copenhagen where I have been employed as a curator of exhibitions since 2000.

In most Western European states in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the post offices did not only serve as transmitters of letters or as branches of the revenue. In the words of British historian Kenneth Ellis, they served as “the governments’ mouthpiece, eyes, and ears”, providing channels of propaganda, and strict surveillance of communications.<sup>1</sup> As “store-and-forward systems” (as noted in the introduction to this session on the web), the postal systems were easy to tap for information, and this happened almost everywhere in the century.<sup>2</sup> All that was required was sufficient time between the closing of the post office and the time of departure to survey the incoming letters, forge, break and remake the seals of the selected letters and read and possibly copy or make abstracts of the text. Letters also left traces in protocols much in the same way that all electronic communication does today, which made it easy to keep track individuals’ traffic of letters. The “technology”, if seen in a narrow perspective, was simple, but if the bureaucratic and administrative procedures involved are included in the understanding of technology it becomes much less simple.

The subject of postal espionage has been dealt with in a number of studies, but not recently to any large extent.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore it has yet been concerned almost exclusively with the “black chambers” of the great powers, in particular France, England and Austria.<sup>4</sup> Almost no research has been done on the secret opening of letters in smaller European states.<sup>5</sup> My project examines the forms of state power wielded by and through the Danish postal service, and the ways in which the secret letter opening practices affected the systems of communication it was connected with. It is my hope that my study can contribute to a wider discussion of these aspects in communications history.

*II. Danish post espionage*

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, Kenneth. *The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Administrative History*. Oxford University Press 1958: VIII.

<sup>2</sup> See Kalmus, Ludwig: *Weltgeschichte der Post*, Vienna 1937: 404-30.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Behringer, Wolfgang. *Im Zeichen der Merkur. Reichspost und Kommunikationsrevolution in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Göttingen 2003: 679, who mentions the „censorship complex“ as a „*Forschungsdesiderat*“.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Ellis (op cit); Kalmus, Ludwig: *Weltgeschichte der Post*. Vienna 1937: 404 ff.; Vaillè, Eugene: *Le Cabinet Noir*. Paris 1950; Hubatschke, Harald: *Ferdinand Prantner (Pseudonym Leo Wolfram) 1817-1871: Die Anfänge des politischen Romans sowie die Geschichte der Briefspionage und des geheimen Briefdienstes in Österreich*, Dissertation, Wien 1975: vol. 5-6. The most recent works in the field are (to my knowledge): Bély, Lucien: *Espions et ambassadeurs au Temps de Louis XIV*. Paris 1990: 134-62.

<sup>5</sup> For an important exception, see de Leeuw, Karl: “The Black Chamber in the Dutch Republic during the War of the Spanish Succession and its Aftermath, 1707-1715”. In: *Historical Journal* 42(1) 1999: 136-55.

Danish postal espionage was dominated by the attention attracted by diplomatic correspondences. It was used in domestic intelligence as well, but only on a rather rare *ad hoc* basis, using the existing structures for intercepting foreign correspondence. When this happened, it was most often used in the context of court intrigue rather than as a means of suppression against the broader letter writing part of the population. The Danish absolutism was a strong one, marked by a relative absence of opposition from below. The only serious internal threats, at least until the revolutionary years at the end of the century, seemed to come from within the state apparatus, from courtiers striving for power. Seen in this light, domestic Danish post espionage should perhaps be seen primarily as something which happened as part of internal power struggles within the state. In the following, for the sake of the short time given here, I will deal with the Danish post espionage directed against foreign powers.

Unlike the European great powers, Denmark never developed any formalized organisation for postal intelligence like the French *Cabinet Noir*, the Habsburg *Geheime Kabinetskanzlei* or the British *Secret Office*, neither did it develop nor maintain any standing cryptanalytic capacity. From time to time, single individuals with cryptographic talents would appear, but all in all the cryptanalytic capability of the country was poor. With one exception, that of the Great Northern War 1700-20, post espionage seems to have been organized through shadowy networks of contacts between the first secretary of the *German Chancellerie* (the Danish Foreign Office), servants of the chamber at court and certain strategically placed individuals within the postal service. Rarely were the Postmaster General's directly involved, at times they were probably unaware of the opening of the mails. As a consequence of the organisation's character of being based on personal ties and relationships, Danish postal espionage suffered from a lack of continuity and seemed to have disappeared for periods when its masters fell from grace.

In Denmark, postal espionage and the practices involved were developed during the frequent Danish-Swedish wars of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Due to a lack in capacity for deciphering the letters, the regular surveillance stopped around 1760. This is evident in the series of intercepted correspondence where from 1758 the clerks copying the letters started to note e.g.: "*One page in cipher*" instead of copying the numbers. The systematic censorship of mails used during the Napoleonic War was feeble and did not seem to bring much intelligence to the Danish government.

### *III. The diplomatic information society*

Most historians of diplomatic services note the huge importance of diplomatic communications. M.S. Anderson describes the acquisition and circulation of information as the main purpose and activity of the permanent diplomatic representations that appeared in Southern Europe in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and in Scandinavia almost two centuries later.<sup>6</sup> E.J.B. Allen suggests a close relationship between the development of early, pre-public post routes and the demands of the diplomatic courier services for reliable and frequent means of transmission.<sup>7</sup> The demands for political information were further increased with the political state system that followed the Westphalian Peace, based on the idea of the fine balance of power in the context of which any event anywhere in Europe was seen as potentially important to know about for any ruler. The demands were probably also fuelled by the new ideas of "self-consciously instructed decision-making" in government that arose out of the so-called Scientific Revolution, according to British historian

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson, M.S.: *The Rise of European Diplomacy 1450-1919*, London and New York 1993: 20 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, E.J.B.: *Post and Courier Services in Early Modern Europe*, Hague 1972.

Jeremy Black. Black uses the term “the diplomatic information society” to describe the ensuing international network of circulating political information. All diplomats were expected to maintain a steady correspondence with their own court. At the same time, they were required to create their own local networks of correspondents and informers. They also actively “bought and sold” information with other diplomats at the court where they resided, thus disseminating information while acquiring it. And finally they were expected to keep up a regular correspondence between themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Naturally the security of the correspondence was of prime political importance. For this purpose all diplomatic services operated with ciphers, cover addresses, and a great concern of the post routes by which their correspondences travelled. Couriers were still in use throughout the period (indeed are still in use to this day), and they were used to carry the most important messages, but they were too expensive to be used very often, and they had the drawback of attracting attention. Finally, trusted private travellers were frequently used as couriers. Still, at least throughout the first half of the century, most diplomatic information was transmitted via the postal networks.

It is then clear that communications to a large extent affected diplomatic practice. Speed, control and security are the factors most often mentioned by historians, as does for example David Nickles in his recent study of “how the telegraph changed diplomacy”.<sup>9</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, however, these are all aspects of the security problem, the potential or actual post espionage. Control over the resident diplomats by the need for reliable communication. This could work both ways: Kenneth Ellis describes how the control aspect had a profound influence on mid-eighteenth century British diplomacy, where the Secretaries of State often decided to make the most important negotiations abroad, a seeming paradox that Ellis explains by the problems of controlling secret or intercepted information at home in a political climate marked by parliamentary inquisitiveness and conflicts.<sup>10</sup> Speed was affected by the choice of safe routes and postal alliances, which often meant not going the fastest way to the target.<sup>11</sup>

#### *IV. Spying and letter opening*

The following example illuminates the practice of diplomatic correspondence as seen through the reports of a “classic” spy. In 1743-45 the Danish officer Christian Møller Friis sent almost daily spy reports to the King describing life at the Russian embassy of *envoyé extraordinaire* Baron Johan Albrecht von Korff.<sup>12</sup> Friis was clearly trusted by the Russian, a position he had got into via the marriage of his sister to the baron’s secretary. This meant that he could come and go at the diplomat’s house without attracting any suspicion. The reports thus give us an unusually close look into life at the embassy, telling at length about conversations held during strolls in the King’s Garden with other foreign diplomats or at the Russian’s dinner table.

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<sup>8</sup> Black, Jeremy: *British Diplomats and Diplomacy 1688-1800*, Exeter 2001: 118-46.

<sup>9</sup> Nickles, David P.: *Under the Wire. How the Telegraph Changed Diplomacy*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, Kenneth: “British Communications and Diplomacy in the Eighteenth Century”, in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 31: 159-67.

<sup>11</sup> See for example de Leeuw 1999: 139 ff. In the Danish Foreign Office, correspondences between the First Secretary and the Danish Post Inspectors in Hamburg who were responsible of diplomatic mail show the concerns. (RA, TKUA, Hamburg 1731-45. Also: Realia litra P., Correspondence with G. Waitz 1756-60). The shifting alliances of the European “Postpolitik” is perhaps still best described by Kalmus 1937 who names security as the main theme.

<sup>12</sup> RA, TKUA, Alm. del., Papers from the Political Intelligence Service, 1742-63.

The importance of the Russian's correspondences to life at the embassy is immediately clear from the reports. All activity is structured around the arrival of mail and couriers. The Russian exchanges information with other foreign diplomats about news they have had via despatches from home or abroad. He keeps up a steady dialogue with other Russian diplomats and with his Home Office. When a courier arrives, everybody at the embassy must work until four in the morning to get the letters ready and ciphered for his return. When a rare letter in Russian arrives the whole embassy is in panic because someone had lost the long forgotten cipher key for Russian words. Most letters were put partly into cipher and deciphered by the secretary. Friis often describes how he is present when the secretary does this, and more than once he is able to look over his brother in law's shoulder. His reports show how getting the cipher keys were seen as one of his most important tasks, and during more than half a year in 1743 he tries without success to get at them.

The series of copied intercepted letters in the *German Chancery* show why. Since 1742 the Danish post office in Copenhagen had broken the seals and copied the Russian correspondence. It is clear from the intercepted Russian letters that futile attempts at breaking the cipher had been made since 1742. The baron seemed to know all about this: "*At the table the Baron Korff said that today he had had four letters over Sweden, which had all been broken here [in Copenhagen]. He was amused about this, because the part of the content which was not in cipher would be like pepper in the nose of those who read it, and the part in cipher they would leave alone since nobody here [in Copenhagen] understood the art of deciphering. He even knew of courier packets that had been taken and copied by royal servants, but he didn't ask into this because he knew nobody could decipher them*".<sup>13</sup> The quote probably sums up the attitude of many European diplomats and gives a hint at the mentality of the diplomatic information society. The Baron is neither surprised nor really annoyed by the fact that his letters and, in theory, the sovereignty of his ruler had been impeached upon. The awareness of the letter opening can be found in many other diplomatic correspondences.<sup>14</sup> It is both expected and accepted that letters are read. By 1740, post espionage had become an everyday event, a part of the order of things in European diplomacy, no longer a reason for protest as it still was in the beginning of the century.<sup>15</sup> In fact the passage about the "*pepper in the nose*" indicates how letters were often deliberately written with a "*third reader*" in mind and cannot be read naively or literally.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the awareness of the post spies not only affected the diplomatic transport routes (and thus its speed) and the work of diplomatic cipher clerks, it shaped the very language of the diplomatic information society, giving it a nebulous quality. It remains to be fully realised just how big a challenge this is for historians of foreign policy, I think.

## V. Diplomatic negligence

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<sup>13</sup> RA, TKUA, Papers..., Friis to Lawson 19/20.11.1743. Ironically the spy had succeeded in providing his government with the code just fourteen days earlier, presumably after having bribed his brother in law to let him copy the keys to the Russian cipher.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Behre, Göran: "Postspionaget under 1700-tallet", in *Scandia* 1963: 292-319 who demonstrates the awareness among Swedish diplomats around 1750 of having their letters read. A very simple example (aside from the one cited) I have found comes from a collection of intercepted code and cipher keys from the great northern war, a code indicating how the way you write the date (eg. sept., 9<sup>th</sup>, september etc.) can bear hidden meanings. (See RA, TKUA, Intercepted letters from the Great Northern War, 2F, nos. 12 ff.).

<sup>15</sup> Probably the highest level of fuzz was raised when in 1694-6 a lot of German *Länder* raised protests at the *Reichstag* about the widespread and too-obvious post espionage of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. (See Kalmus 1937: 369 ff.) I found (perhaps not too surprisingly) Denmark's official complaint in the British National Archives, among the intercepts, NA, SP 105/85, Urbich to the Emperor 12/22.1.1694. The matter ended in nothing or rather in a demonstration of the futility in attempting to hinder post espionage via traditional political channels.

<sup>16</sup> See Arup, Erik: "Kritiske Studier i nyere dansk Historie. Bernstorff og Holstein", in *Historisk Tidsskrift* 9,1, 1918: 131 ff. for a discussion and a concrete example of the composition of a "third reader" correspondence.

In the almost universally known manual for diplomats of the century, Francois de Callières' from 1716, clear directions in these matters were given. According to Callières, the renowned code breakers of Europe owed their fame solely to the neglect of diplomats and the treasury of their employees. If used correctly, any cipher would be safe; it was all about practice not theory, a perspective, even if somewhat overstated, which is ignored by many historians of cryptography who tend to see the history of cryptography rather as a heroic battle between code makers and code breakers.<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Ellis has in a short article on "*British Communications and Diplomacy in the Eighteenth Century*" demonstrated how even a relatively well organised diplomatic service as the British was extremely negligent when it came to security and handling of ciphers and correspondences, and he concludes that "*with no adequate supervision of diplomatic staff; no legal definition of state secrets; and no clear distinction between state and private papers, security naturally suffered*".<sup>18</sup>

My example has shown that the same can be said about the Russian diplomat. He lets his secretary do the cipher work, he does not lock up his cipher keys (he even loses them), and he does not care too much about the Danish government reading his mail – all in complete contrast to de Callière's lines of advice and in complete accord with the French author's remark on the successful code breaking. I would have liked to give a lot more examples, but this one will suffice to demonstrate how and why even for a small state like Denmark, without the capacity to maintain an expensive cryptographic "black chamber", could find ways of getting intelligence from foreign diplomat correspondences through more traditional forms of espionage. This is also one of two reasons why I use the term "postal espionage" instead of "postal censorship". Whereas the latter indicates a more "clinical" practice, something that happens solely at the post office, the former underlines how the opening of letters most often – at least for a small state like Denmark – happened as part of larger intelligence networks. Other examples from my material show post masters employing regular spies on their own.

The second reason has to do with the forms of power employed when letters were "secretly opened" by postal espionage, in contrast to the form of power employed in what I term postal censorship – the apparent opening of letters, with censorship stamps etc. The latter was employed in Denmark during the Napoleonic Wars, according to my definition. It aimed primarily on suppressing unwanted information, secondarily on intelligence, and it adhered more to the legality of the secrecy of the post by making things clear. The former, instead, let the flow on information pass while tapping it. It was built on a very different view of the ruler, that went back to medieval visions of the king as being vested with "angelic intelligence", an invisible gaze penetrating all of society, and a myth exploited with great efficiency by some rulers from the times of Elisabeth I.<sup>19</sup> We have a seeming paradox here: The secret power has to reveal its existence in order to operate on individual's minds and behaviour. Letter opening was secret, still a certain knowledge of the possibility of surveillance was allowed to escape – or did escape inevitably. A telling example can be found in the parliamentary report of the English House of Commons concerning the letter opening scandal in 1844, in which the committee remarks how "*it may appear to some, that to*

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Kahn, David: *Codebreakers. The Story of Secret Writing*, London 1966; Singh, Simon: *The Codebook*, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, Kenneth: "British Communications and Diplomacy in the Eighteenth Century", in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 31: 159-67.

<sup>19</sup> See Archer, John Michael. *Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance*, Stanford University Press 1993.

*leave it a mystery whether or not his power is ever exercised, is the way best calculated to deter the evil-minded from applying the post to improper use”.*<sup>20</sup>

Postal espionage thus ultimately became an instrument of discipline in the sense used by Michel Foucault, a “gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer”.<sup>21</sup> Though the perspective is rarely found among historians of the postal services, it is a common motive among historians of intelligence services (perhaps professionally given to conspiracy theory) to see the very creation of postal services in this light, as a means of taming the growing epistolary cultures by monopolising the transport of letters.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Report from the Secret Committee on the Post-Office*, 5.8.1844: 18 (British Postal Museum and Archive, London).

<sup>21</sup> Archer 1993: 17-40.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Marshall, Alan: *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660-1685*, London and New York 1994: 78 f.