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## Ranke's Favorite Source: The Relazioni of the Venetian Ambassadors

Gino Benzoni

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# Ranke's Favorite Source: The *Relazioni* of the Venetian Ambassadors

BY GINO BENZONI

In committing himself to the study of history, Leopold von Ranke most certainly gave thought to the historian's duty not to indulge in fantasy. Indeed, his dismay upon reading Sir Walter Scott brought him to affirm that historical truth is infinitely richer, more interesting, and more beautiful than the most exciting of imaginary events. He maintained that a historian should not view factual knowledge through a screen of preconceived notions, but must examine afresh each new appearance on the world scene. He must take account of specificity against a broad historical context. In that way single events can be perceived in a dynamic relationship of constraint and freedom, and made to emerge vividly both in the characteristics that make them unique and in the reciprocal influences that make them depend one upon the other.

Ranke also warned that individuals, whole generations, and peoples sink out of sight if they are immersed in a predetermined current that absorbs everything into a deceptive, triumphal march. Epochs cannot be dealt with in terms of steps upward in a supposedly unarrestable climb toward progress. Every extraneous insertion on the part of the historian will distort the harmonious development of an idea. Every subordination to a supposed unified, predescribed, pre-designed plan is illegitimate. One can reach a true understanding only by giving facts the opportunity to speak for themselves; and not by sacrificing their originality to an imposed structure. Even though he was no stranger to the contemplation of great historical trends and even though he eventually affirmed that historiography was useful in the last analysis, Ranke was always conscious that universal history is, first and foremost, the knowledge of facts. Facts, he believed, deserve love and respect; they should not be assaulted with value judgments or obscured by generalizing, theoretical discourses. They should be understood in their precise sequence through a diligent



and scrupulous reconstruction. Ranke's conception of history is severe, almost priest-like in its approach. In order to render the facts accurately, he felt, the self (that is, the subjectivity of the narrative historian) should be extinguished—a proposition that gave rise to Georg Simmel's ironic observation that the dissolution of the self would involve the annulment of the subject that should be comprehending the non-self.

But Ranke was too preoccupied with protecting factual truth; too zealous in defending the purity of history from contamination, from philosophical manipulation in general and from historical philosophy in particular; too interested in establishing a clean division between philosophical knowledge (which should deal with the abstract) and historical knowledge (which should restrict itself to the precision of single facts)—too wrapped in all of these pursuits to be disturbed by doubts or perplexities. With unshakable confidence he urged that events, however complex, be considered objectively. Unlike his contemporary Edward Hallett Carr, who believed that Divine Providence imparted broad significance to occurrences, Ranke felt that the historian's essential task was the assessment of facts.

In any case Ranke distrusted the philosophy of history, with its practice of prefiguring developments and its *a priori* constructions. In 1823 he wrote to his brother: "I want to eliminate the *a priori* method. . . . All of my conclusions", he insisted, "are *a posteriori*". Even in the earliest stages of his vast output of work, he proclaimed his conviction that historiography must concern itself with the impartial search for real facts. Already in 1824, in the preface to his *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, Ranke declared his detachment from the notion that the historian's task was

FACING PAGE: Manuscript 33. Relazione dell'Ambasciata di Roma di Pietro Basadona. 1663. A seventeenth-century copy. 71 pp. 22 x 16.5 cm. This version differs substantially from other extant copies in the Venetian archives and the Donà family archives. Used by Ranke in his *Die römischen Päpste*.

Basadona's mission to Rome took place during the twenty-year-long Turkish siege of the Venetian fortress at Candia (Crete). As ambassador, Basadona kept up the Venetian effort to put pressure on the Pope to use his influence on other Catholic states to send men and money to support Venice. Basadona also concluded negotiations described as 'bitter' over the legal immunities of churchmen, and the Inquisition within the Venetian dominion.

che si voglia la monarchia glio al marce, ma in  
quò altre forme non è più de' suoi. Tutto suo sogli  
supera i Dacotares del 1.<sup>o</sup> malle, cioè del Carce  
uerant.<sup>o</sup> in Spagna si è unigo moi senore a dispo-  
sico piacim.<sup>o</sup> de suoi Senas. Rquali hauendo il loro  
Pa.<sup>o</sup> con un ombra, hanno mangiato il mondo a bro-  
tento. Ne sono in Spag.<sup>o</sup>; benchè si ti che altroue, ma  
nella Francia, e nell' Asia. Gah. nati sono  
con la medesima mentura. Basto dar D'occha-  
ba da un Richelieu, da un Mazarino. Ma oggi adar-  
mo troppo chiaro.<sup>o</sup> insi che la grandezza, l'arrogan-  
za, perché il paragone di Francia vdi e con l'Asia  
felicità più raparenti gli altri malum. Ma Re  
maschio, che è un Argo politico, un Oratore guerrie-  
ro non meno amato, che temuto da noi; che non cono-  
scia, che non s'ignosca da Ministri, che ad ogni un' ugi-  
la sua ma condit.<sup>o</sup> da ingegno superiore a gli altri  
della sua setta, che in un tempo suo tutto, era tutto  
che di

che da molto da pensare a chi seco confina, ed acci-  
marrebbe per desiderio della propria conseruacione  
dovrà a fronte di quella d'Altra, che rappe emb-  
tendero ne sui illiti, quando sciogliete risoluti-  
men che giuste: Che, che non si dovrebbe tenero di  
quell' onore, e buon Principe; ma la sicurezza di  
gli altri non perciò deve fidarsi sui lo recitudine  
di chi uolendo, potrebbe occuparli, ben si spera le  
forze di chi può difenderceli, e parato con l'armi  
certo approuacione non ha ricuato neppure di  
maggiore importanza per la conseruacione di la-  
sta, glio il tenente da ogni costo il Re Luigi Brta-  
no, e mantenendo solo alcune città possedute, in-  
giare parrebbe amichea con lo Spag.<sup>o</sup>; si dice  
smentacione fiancheggiato aco gli della serenità  
1.<sup>o</sup> tanto gli successi erati di chi che sia. Benente  
spento in uero lo Spag.<sup>o</sup> non caruo uicino con  
dovra forma l'esperienza c'indegno, ed è di molto  
sci

to judge the past and instruct the present for the benefit of the future. Also, he announced his intention of recording everything as it actually happened. Thus, from the very beginning Ranke assumed the celebrated principle demeaned by so many of his students and in turn by their students. It was a principle which would fall out of favor along with the myth of objectivity and be considered in time even banal—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*: recount things as they actually occurred. For Ranke, this alone was the job of the historian.

Ranke's tenet reflected, on the one hand, his personal conviction and constituted, on the other, a challenge to all philosophers of history. Here it would be legitimate to observe that Ranke, if not a philosophical historian, acted as a theological historian when he wrote that every epoch is individually endowed with its own worth, its own consistent self-sufficiency, significance, flavor (and hence fascination), and has a direct relationship to God.

Spurred on, then, by his desire to obtain objective truth, Ranke went to Berlin, anxious to put his theory into practice by searching out and studying all available documents. In his opinion, documents recorded events as they actually happened. During his stay in Berlin, this young and promising scholar began his systematic hunt for documents. In the Royal Library, which he visited assiduously, he made his monumental discovery of a large collection of Venetian ambassadorial *relazioni* and immersed himself in reading them with great energy. His burst of enthusiasm was more than justified. In these reports, composed immediately after the completion of each mission, the ambassador presented a concise and well-thought-out panoramic survey of the environmental, demographic, social, economic, and, in particular, the political and institutional characteristics of the state where he had been stationed. These authentic documents, rich with information concerning great events of the past, became Ranke's principal source. In his anxiety to retain them for his own personal use, he bought up all the copies he could on the antiquarian market. One need only scan the *Catalogue* of Rankean manuscripts prepared by Edward Muir to realize that the major part of his collection consists of the *relazioni* of the Venetian ambassadors, especially those dealing with Rome, France, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, England, and Turkey. All of those subjects, of course, were of great interest to Ranke.

Already in 1810 the importance of these reports had been instinc-

tively recognized by Johannes von Müller, an author who had exerted some degree of influence on Ranke's formation as a scholar. But Ranke had far surpassed Müller. It was one thing to point out the existence of a possible source, and another to use it systematically, to consult it continually, to incorporate information from it into other historical works, and to convince contemporary as well as later scholars of its indispensability. In this light Ranke should be regarded as the authentic discoverer of the *relazioni*, and their supreme sponsor. Thanks to him, all modern historians consult these reports, which were judged to be accurate and systematic by the historian and diplomat Alfred von Reumont, who, it is worth noting, dedicated a sympathetic obituary to Ranke.

But Ranke's affection for these *relazioni* was unique. Besides furnishing him with facts and details, at times they also appear to provide his greatest inspiration, the spark that fired his narrative release. This is not an exaggeration. In the preface to *Die römischen Päpste in den letzten 4 Jahrhunderten*, Ranke himself asserts that it was only because he had been able to see and use the *relazioni* (usually in their original versions) of the diplomats returning from Rome that he had found the inspiration, purpose, and courage to write this great work in an uninterrupted draft. *Die römischen Päpste* is regarded by some (Delio Cantimori, for example) to be his first mature effort, while others (such as Carlo Antoni), in disagreement with the majority opinion, consider *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* to be Ranke's early masterpiece.

Ranke with laudable pride collected forty-eight *relazioni* dating from 1500 to 1783. Of these, nineteen date from the sixteenth century, twenty-one from the seventeenth century, and eight from the eighteenth century. If we consult *Le relazioni a stampa di ambasciatori veneti* (Padua, 1939), so diligently assembled by Francesca Antonibon, we find that a total of sixty-five pertain to Rome. For approximately forty-two of these, Ranke's summaries are cited in the bibliography; and for three, Ranke's are the only references provided. Of the sixty-five in Antonibon's list, twenty-nine belong to the sixteenth century, twenty-four to the seventeenth, ten to the eighteenth, and two to the end of the fifteenth century (for which only the summaries in Marino Sanudo's *Diarii* are given). On the basis of these figures it is clear that Ranke was not able to study all the Venetian *relazioni* concerning the Holy See and the pontifical state. It is equally evi-



## Scritto Prencipe

Qual fausto auspicio alla nostra morte riguardiamo l'onore di presentarsi da questa parte all' Eminentissimo Seno. Conoscendo e per le massime de' Maggiori, e per i princij, coi quali si siamo noi stessi sin qui condotti aver del dover di buon Regidin il vivere, e inchinar le Re<sup>te</sup> Sovrane dispositi, abbandoniamo quel vigore al quale sembrava, che dai sostenuti travicij forza a noi devotato un qualche titolo di aspirare. Nell'assumere pertanto il Regio Caratter, del quale ha usata l'Autorità Pub<sup>lica</sup>, incostrarsi si avvia alla Corte di Londra per noi adempire l'ingiuncto incarico di significare la Re<sup>te</sup> eultrava verso il presente Monarca Giorgio 3.<sup>o</sup> per la felice sua successione al Trono della Gran Bretagna. Si sava da noi eseguito con tutti quei modi, che vagliano a dinotare la vera estimaz<sup>ione</sup> della Reg<sup>ia</sup>, per un tanto Sovrano, a tener coltivata la buona corrispondenza con quella Nazione, ed a rendere ben disposte le inclinaz<sup>ioni</sup> sue verso i publici oggetti, come precisam<sup>ente</sup> richiede la difficolta, et osservabile combinaz<sup>ione</sup> de' tempi presenti, proponendo per conseguire un tal fine qualunq. benchi essenziale riflesso della privata nostra

dent, however, that Ranke gave a vigorous boost to the study of these documents, one that led to the eventual increase of their use and survival, not only of the Roman examples, but of all the *relazioni*.

The published history of the *relazioni* began at the end of the sixteenth century with a badly done anthology called the *Tesoro politico . . .* and continued in the seventeenth century with the *Tesori della corte romana . . .*, compiled by the writer-adventurer Gregorio Leti. Not much was done with these materials during the eighteenth century for two reasons: the intellectual atmosphere in the Age of Reason was not conducive to studies of 'reason of state'; also, Venice's loss of reputation diminished the general interest in the opinions and outlook of its patriciate. In the nineteenth century, however, partly as a result of Ranke's teaching, the *relazioni* began to speak brilliantly for themselves. The Piedmontese historian Luigi Cibrario published three of them, staggered over time, concerning the Duchy of Savoy; Louis Prosper Gachard brought to light those dealing with Charles V and Philip II; and Niccolò Tommaseo, those relating to sixteenth-century France; Joseph Fiedler and Alfred Arneth, those of the Venetian aristocrats on their return from Vienna and Prague; Eugenio Alberi, all the sixteenth-century examples; and Niccolò Barozzi and Guglielmo Berchet, all those of the seventeenth century. This fervor of publication continued into the twentieth century with the editions prepared by Petrus Johannes Blok, Arnaldo Segarizzi,

FACING PAGE: Manuscript 70, opening page of the dispacci. Commissioni, dispacci, relazione, e ducali spettanti all' ambasciata veneta straordinaria al re della Gran Bretagna Giorgio III. eseguita dalli N.N.U.U. m[esse]r Tommaso Querini, e m[esse]r Francesco Morosini 2[second]o K[avalie]ri, e Proc[urato]ri di S. Marco. MDCCLXII. MDCCLXIII. An eighteenth-century copy from the library of Lorenzo da Ponte, and carrying his bookplate. 396 pp. 30.5 x 22 cm. Presentation binding in full red goatskin, elaborately tooled, all edges gilded.

Tommaso Querini and Francesco Morosini were sent to London as extraordinary ambassadors to congratulate King George III on his accession to the throne. England had been victorious in the Seven Years War, which formally ended in February 1763 and which guaranteed English domination over the French in North America. King George had already established himself as a different sort of king from his father, who had allowed his ministers to control affairs. Because of England's dominant maritime power and King George's personal style of rule, the mission was critical to Venice's own interests. Querini and Morosini were two of the most powerful men in the Venetian republic.

Carlo Morandi, Ruggero Moscati, Giovanni Comisso, Franco Gaeta (in French translation), James C. Davis (in English)—and, most recently, with a partial re-edition of Segarizzi's collection edited by Angelo Ventura and rendered especially valuable by its vigorous introduction and by Ventura's philological scrupulousness in restoring the original reading to the text. Finally, a monumental photo-offset edition by Luigi Firpo, which is nearing completion, will enable scholars to consult the *Relazioni di ambasciatori veneti al senato, tratte dalle migliori edizioni disponibili e ordinate cronologicamente*.

The publication of these *relazioni* not only has enlarged their reading public, but has also generated an intensified use of them in modern historical studies. Some books are based almost entirely on them, sometimes citing them extensively, sometimes summarizing them. Such is the case in *La vita economica degli stati italiani nei secoli xvi, xvii, xviii (secondo le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti)* (Catania, 1938) by Alfredo Pino-Branca, and in *El siglo xvi a la luz de los embajadores venecianos* by Orestes Ferrara (Madrid, 1952; French edition, Paris, 1954; and Italian edition, Milan, 1960). Occasionally, the *relazioni* themselves constitute subjects for study and contemplation. Friedrich Meinecke finds the idea of 'reason of state' easily traceable in them, and Federico Chabod notes that they contain political ideas. From Armand Baschet to Willy Andreas, from Basilio Cialdea to Myron P. Gilmore, from Garrett Mattingly to Constantin Antoniadis, the study of these documents has become focalized and more probing. The *relazioni* are now recognized as the essence of the diplomatic wisdom of the Venetian Republic; they provided the source for Donald E. Queller's definitive account of their medieval genesis and Renaissance development.

But let us return to Ranke and attempt to understand why he staked his scholarly reputation on the choice of the *relazioni* as his pre-eminent source. Almost certainly it resulted from his admitted passion for Venice, for he spent a feverish period of study in that city from late 1827 until 1831, returning twice (in 1858 and 1863) to continue his archival and bibliographical pursuits and to follow the more relaxing ones of a tourist. Another important factor was Ranke's desire to write for the German cultural elite a comprehensive history of the Republic, a desire only partly fulfilled by the three essays on Venetian topics: the conspiracy of 1618, the Venetian presence in the Peloponnesus, and sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-

century Venice—all of which were included in a volume of his *Opera Omnia*. Although not a large state, Venice, in Ranke's opinion, was a remarkable one.

Among the many outstanding aspects of Venice, according to Ranke, were these *relazioni*, which inspired him as a collector and sharpened his desire for *verstehen*. Forming a continuous sequence from the 1400s to the 1700s, they can be read both vertically, that is, to follow in chronological succession the events of a single political entity, and horizontally, to study simultaneously Europe and the Mediterranean. Many of Ranke's ideas were suggested to him through his reading of the *relazioni*: for example, the cause and effect of religion on politics. Here we are reminded of Ranke's belief that the often antagonistic relationship of Church and State is a constant element in modern history. Other themes inspired by the *relazioni* are: the internal reinforcement of royal power (derived from the sixteenth-century *relazioni*); the Spanish withdrawal (from seventeenth-century examples); the majesty of French monarchic grandeur; the surprising ascent of Holland; the robust vitality of England. Ranke would later elaborate these embryonic ideas in his large-scale narratives.

There are two advantages to reading the *relazioni* as sources: they bear witness to an event, and they stimulate historical *verstehen*. Ranke regarded the *relazioni* as primary evidence, superior in status to the spurious documentation constituted by the mass of so-called narrative sources, that is, the entire body of historiographical versions contemporary or slightly posterior to the facts in question.

Ranke states this opinion clearly in *Französische Geschichte* in his judgment of Enrico Davila, the author of the *Storia delle guerre civili di Francia* (Venice, 1630) and himself an eyewitness of the last phase of that war. While Ranke esteems Davila's work and considers it to be much more valuable than Jacques Auguste de Thou's *Historiae*, he warns against accepting its veracity. Ranke believes that Davila's fundamental approach (evident even in the work's title, in which religious wars become 'civil' wars) distorts his interpretation of single incidents and induces him to downgrade religion to a 'pretext', a 'color', in a ruthless struggle for power. All narrative and literary sources, Ranke believed, were artificial precisely because their elaborateness introduces yet one more modification to obfuscate their documentary value.



Ranke was intent upon penetrating the thoughts of the protagonists of historical events, anxious to enter into the complexity of their ideas and emotions in order to understand them thoroughly. He was not delighted by the fact that he was often preceded in this respect by narrative sources, especially sixteenth-century versions which, following in the wake of Francesco Guicciardini, tend towards psychological description. As a historical narrator, Ranke is conscious of the weaknesses found in previous accounts, but nevertheless regards them as rivals to his own, even in those cases where the narrative version of the event dominates the occurrence itself, an area for which he cites Davila as a transgressor. We see a particularly eloquent example of the dominating narrative in Paolo Sarpi's *Istoria del Concilio tridentino*, which, though it was written after the fact, contains much information derived from interviews with participants in the council. If, as Sarpi suggests, the Council of Trent produced the same epic reverberations as the sacking of Troy, then Sarpi himself can be looked upon as its reproving Homer; for the event as described is unthinkable without the author. Thus, from Sforza Pallavicino to Hubert Jedin, every successive historian of the Council has taken upon himself to demolish or at least correct Sarpi's version, as if to separate surgically one from the other—the Council itself, that is, from its historical misrepresentation.

According to Ranke it is deceptive to learn about a fact only from narrative or literary versions, which he considers to be secondhand knowledge. Instead, Ranke insists, historical knowledge should be based on firsthand information. Once the screen of literary and narrative sources has been removed, we should be led to a direct understanding of how things really occurred. Pure knowledge, based only

FACING PAGE: Manuscript 87. *Relatione del nob[ile] homo s. Pietro Gradenigo fu di S. Badio, nel ritorno suo di podestà di Brescia Anno 1664.* A seventeenth-century manuscript, with a bookplate bearing the coat of arms of the Gradenigo family. 24 pp. 27.5 x 19.5 cm. Semi-limp vellum, gold tooled. Report of an embassy to Brescia.

Brescia—like Bergamo, Verona, Vicenza, Padua, Treviso, and Udine—was a large mainland town within the Venetian dominion. As podestà, Gradenigo acted as both the chief police officer and head judge in the community, which at this time suffered from an influx of poor starving peasants from the countryside and recurrent raids by bandits. This copy of his report written after he returned to Venice is about the general conditions in Brescia and was prepared for his own family's private library.



on documents and uncluttered by ideologies, is essential to Ranke's goal of scientific historiography.

Admittedly, this is an idealistic goal, especially on Ranke's part. Is not his tenet "Everything is an individual and universal life" a form of ideology? Is it not ideological to claim that historical knowledge is the province of scholars and scholarly institutions, of specialized periodicals that are at once official and officious? While historical knowledge certainly is increasing, it is also confined to the realm of academics, regimented and subordinated to the state, and made to conform to the directives issued by 'Herr Professor'. The fact that Ranke was a Prussian functionary was undeniably an influential factor in the formation of his ideas. When he discussed historical trends of long duration, even though he did not present his ideas as concepts, he ideologized more than he thought he did. It is amusing to note that François Furet, in his recent defense of his own analysis of deep-seated trends, introduces as an analogy Ranke's attempts to identify such trends. Furet, however, does not participate in Ranke's cult of documents.

Ranke was not comfortable with all kinds of documents. He felt the need to know the person who was pronouncing the words of the past. He did not like dry, minute documents such as accounts and inventories, customs records of payments and expenditures, contracts, lists of deceased persons, or similar types of records—these he considered of little importance. In Ranke's works, preference is given to the writings of great diplomats—and in the present case, Venetian diplomats—for they are more consistent with his natural inclination to perceive history through the study of interstate relationships in which force plays a central role. Diplomats serve as sentinels posted to discern elements of strength and weakness. A reading of all their reports (scarce for the Middle Ages and abundant for the modern age, for which reason Ranke preferred modern to medieval history) reveals who is the strongest and why. Ranke resorted systematically to the most continuous, compact, and homogeneous corpus of diplomatic reports, the Venetian *relazioni*, for which no equivalents exist. But is it wholly legitimate to consider that corpus as a faithful record of how things actually occurred? Is this group of documents entirely immune from all the biases evident in contemporary historiographic works? Ranke was so overwhelmed by his own enthusiasm for these documents, congenial as they were to his own vision of

history, that he took from them the inspiration for his own prolific writings. From the very beginnings of his scholarly career, Ranke seems to have placed his trust in these documents in direct proportion to the doubt that he accorded other forms of history. In sum, he attributed to the *relazioni* the same value merited by more immediate and spontaneous testimonies.

Yet, the *relazioni* are highly filtered, deeply pondered texts, and they are not spontaneous in the least. There are many explanations for this: they were composed after the fact, elaborated and rewritten with caution and attention, carefully gauged to conform to obvious stylistic conventions and to serve the manifest literary ambitions of their authors. The *relazioni* are not simple writings, but premeditated essays. "Sind Werke eines Geistes . . . Kunstwerke einer politischen Kultur" (They are the product of a mind, masterpieces of a political culture), Willy Andreas observed in 1908.

Not only do the *relazioni* lack freshness and candor, they are overburdened with sophistication, with the specious addition of artifice. One need only scan the biographies of the authors of these *relazioni* to ascertain their sense of commitment to the composition of their reports. Conceived as an occasion for demonstrating the intellectual acuteness and writing skill of its author, the *relazione* as a literary form became in time an arduous test of compositional dexterity in which factual knowledge was taken for granted. It provided an opportunity for the aristocrat to distill the essence of his own diplomatic experience by adopting a method of interpretive synthesis in order to submit his reflections on the public authority of the state to which he was assigned. In it, he might include as much as was deemed 'worthy' of the Serenissima's 'cognition'.

Since Venice was only a medium-sized state (and not a great power), it required—to maintain its autonomy—a sophisticated diplomacy that would enable a rapid evaluation of the strengths of other states. Following this principle, Venetian foreign diplomacy in the sixteenth century acquired a special aura of success and wisdom, while in the seventeenth century it appeared to be very much modified, and in the eighteenth it could no longer conceal its impotence. The *relazioni* illustrate that this essentially neutral diplomatic policy was pursued almost uniformly, with the exception of alliances formed during the struggle against Turkey.

But the *relazioni* do not only refer to the importance and specific



natures of the states that deal with Venice. Often the author apparently needs to emphasize the excellence of his own deeds, as well as to justify them, especially when his actions have not been free from criticism. If in his *relazione* he praises a particular procedure practised abroad, this constitutes a veiled criticism of the absence of that procedure in Venice and an implicit suggestion for its adoption. In more than one *relazione*, it can be observed that to understand the affairs of other states (“intender li fatti di altri”) means to understand Venetian affairs. This conflation of foreign and internal political policies accentuates the manipulative aspect of the *relazioni*. The Venetian ambassadors do not describe current events in their *relazioni*, but rather in their incessant (and sometimes daily) correspondence.

If any immediacy exists in any diplomatic records, it is found in letters and dispatches. Whereas the *relazioni* are by necessity selective, the correspondence recounts facts minutely in a continual stream of fresh details about what really took place. There was literally no time to revise these missives. For example, if we compare the subsequently printed *relazione*, which Paolo Paruta submitted at the end of 1595 after his return from Rome, with his dispatches sent during his mission and also subsequently printed, the results of the differing approaches are evident. In the dispatches, Paruta describes in detail all that happens to him, what he hears, sees, or experiences; in the *relazione* Paruta measures, composes, judges, self-justifies, reprimands indirectly, criticizes implicitly, and above all, synthesizes and interprets the same information.

Since interpretation and synthesis are the prevailing methods in the *relazioni*, details are drastically reduced towards that end. Marco Foscarini, the author of the *Storia della letteratura veneziana* (Padua, 1752), correctly assessed them as ‘historical essays’; if read both synchronically and diachronically, the *relazioni* constitute an enormous and overwhelming history of Europe and of the Mediterranean in the modern age. While nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians, Ranke *in primo*, use the individual *relazioni* as isolated documents, the entire corpus does also give the overall impression of a continuous militant view of history on the part of an entire ruling class. There are hundreds of *relazioni* written in different times, by different hands, concerning different countries. And yet they are all similar to one another to the extent that they seem almost to be the work of a single author. One reason for this is that they all follow the

same general format: first the site and the quality of the territory is discussed, then the inhabitants, including their customs and activities, and lastly the court or government. A further unifying factor that transforms the separate *relazioni* into so many chapters of a single collective history is their insistently Venetian-centered perspective. The external world may be varied, different, and contradictory, but the telescope through which it is viewed remains fixed on the lagoon. Venice is the observatory from which the *relazioni* are external projections.

Although the Venetians traveled, came to know diverse peoples, and ventured into distant lands, they inevitably compared everything to their own city and made all judgments according to domestic standards. For example, Angelo Legrenzi, physician and author of *Il pellegrino in Asia* (Venice, 1705), having arrived at Shiraz in Persia, admired the 'whiteness' of the local glass. He compared it to the same quality found in Venetian glass and at the same time advanced the suspicion that such high quality must be due to Armenian industrial espionage. Ambassador Leonard Donà, who later presided as doge at the time of the interdict of 1577, admitted with obvious disappointment that the bell tower of the Viennese cathedral was "just as tall as our campanile of San Marco". With respect to the Venetians away from Venice, the words of the twentieth-century poet Giorgio Caproni are particularly apt: "In my travels I have always stayed at home".

Whatever his destination—Madrid, London, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Milan, Turin, Rome, or Constantinople—the ambassador kept Venice engraved in his memory as he carried out the instructions of the Senate, the body which continued to direct him during his entire tour of duty. Although he had kept the Senate informed daily by letter, upon his final return to Venice the ambassador presented the Senate with a concise report. The *relazione*, then, provided an account of a foreign state, but one nevertheless seen from a Venetian point of view, always leading back to the concerns of Venice, and evaluated according to Venetian criteria. When, for example, Alvisé Contarini, the future mediator at Münster, depicted Holland in 1626, he noted with pleasure that Amsterdam, furrowed with waterways in which the houses were reflected, bore some similarity to Venice. Yet, at the same time he was astonished at the intensity of navigation, of the trading at the docks. But his amazement was soon surpassed by

his desire to understand the intricate working of such an active commerce in order "to derive very profitable inspirations thereof" that might lead to reviving "the bloodless commerce of this city".

Thus the *relazioni* so dear to Ranke constitute a singular type of source. Saturated with the Venetian outlook, overly subjective in their reflected opinions of the Venetian aristocracy, they represent more an elaboration of the viewpoint of the Republic than exact documents serving the interests of pure history. They constitute a series of chapters of a history written by the ruling class, one that can be viewed as consistent with Ranke's dual conception of history: first, as a science which promotes the collection and the intellectual penetration of precise facts; and second, as an art in that the historiographer, in his attempt to represent, both molds and re-creates.

The ambassador in his *relazione* produced a synthetic elaboration of the same information amassed in the dispatches, though on an intentionally higher stylistic level. Thus, the *relazione* served not only as a government statement, but in a certain sense, as a literary form or (as defined by Marco Foscarini) a historical composition as well. While the *relazioni* show the Venetian patrician's understanding of his position as a member of the ruling class, their limitations are equally evident. They are less perceptive than the works of other Venetian historians like Davila, as demonstrated by his observation that "the qualities of the monarchy are more appropriate and suitable to those who aspire to territorial expansion and to great conquests". In one breath he both alludes to the potential expansion of France's boundaries and implicitly reveals the reasons for the absence of this policy in Venice.

In the final analysis, the *relazioni* say only what the Senate permits to be said. As the writings of the ruling class, they reveal the symptoms of self-indulgence. When the doge Niccolò Contarini employs a ruthless form of self-criticism in his *Istorie veneziane*, he displays a greater comprehension of the Turkish world than is found in all the reports of the ambassadors returned from Constantinople. It is superfluous, however, to acclaim the greatness of Contarini's work. Ranke, in his own time, was well aware of it and had acquired a copy in manuscript—the same copy that is preserved here at Syracuse University.