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'The connected world of intrigues: the disgrace of Murad III's favorite David Passi in 1591'

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The connected world of intrigues: the disgrace of Murad III's favourite David Passi in 1591

Elif Özgen

The sixteenth century was 'the age of dissimulation' as courtiers and officials, religious dissidents and Jews, authors and even rulers dissimulated.¹ I will argue that during this period domestic court intrigue, foreign policymaking and international espionage were intertwined. David Passi was a Jewish adviser and favourite of Sultan Murad III (r. 1574-1595) of the Ottoman Empire.² Nevertheless, Passi was spying for Spain, Venice, England and the Ottoman Empire at the same time. European states had a stake in Passi's high-profile disgrace case (1591) because he was advising on the fleet preparations for a joint Anglo-Ottoman naval offensive against Spain. The Grand Vizier Koca Sinan Paşa (in office 1580; 1589-1591, 1593-1595) was an active proponent of this war. He saw the Jewish favourite, who belonged to a rival faction, as a threat to his foreign policy interests. The grand vizier's reports to the sultan that Passi was a spy and that Muslims should not befriend or trust Jews were to no avail. Eventually, Koca Sinan Paşa managed to get David Passi banished from the court by accusing him of co-authoring a libellous letter.

Politics has been considered a game of dissimulation and nonchalance at least since the days of Tacitus. Aristocrats, grand viziers, secretaries of state, ambassadors, courtiers and semi-official court members such as David Passi secretly carried out speculative and treacherous

* Dedicated to Zeynep Çelik, Suraiya Faroqhi and Huricihan İslamoğlu – three teachers who have been a constant source of inspiration and support in the past decade. I am grateful to everyone who generously offered feedback. Maaïke van Berkel, Jeroen Duindam, Liesbeth Geevers, Jos Gommans, Boris James, Antonis Hadjikyriacou, Stuart Parkinson, Peter Rietbergen and Aleksandar Sopov offered great suggestions and constructive criticism. Barend Noordam kindly assisted with German. The editors of *Leidschrift*, especially Brigitte van de Pas, have done brilliant work on the article.

¹ J. Martin, 'Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance', *The American Historical Review* 102 (1997) 1309-1342; P. Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA 1990) 1-14.

² B. Arbel, 'David Passi' in: N. A. Stillman ed., *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* IV (Leiden 2010) 43.

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undertakings. These endeavours concerned diplomacy, warfare, succession problems, peace negotiations, aggrandizement of factions and illegitimate commercial profits. Furthermore, they plotted at court and across courts. For they knew that if their acts and interests became publicly known, they would be disgraced. The repercussions of disgrace could include dismissal, investigation, confiscation, exile and execution.³ Conspiracy was ever-present during the crises of the Reformation and the Wars of Religion. Explanation of conspiracies through human agency instead of divine providence made sure there was public support for the punishments meted out to plotters.⁴ Thus, the art of dissimulation was the most valuable asset the political elites had.

In the last thirty years the scholarship on the factional division of mercantile and diplomatic interests among the grand viziers and their rivals has increased considerably. Grand viziers hid their commercial and political motivations in a thick discourse of religiosity and servitude to the sultan. Their factions profited from trade with different nations. Conclusion of peace treaties was another source of financial gain for grand viziers, who received cash (going up to 10.000 ducats) and other costly gifts.⁵ I will argue that Koca Sinan's attempts to banish David Passi and fight the Spanish, and his rivals' support for peace with Spain, elucidate the divided loyalty and personal engagement of grand viziers.

I will contextualize David Passi's disgrace not just as a domestic libel plot, but also as an exemplary of the precarious position Jewish diplomats had. David Passi belonged to a network of Jewish and New Christian

³ Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 7-14.

⁴ B. Coward and J. Swann, 'Introduction' in: B. Coward and J. Swann ed., *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution* (Aldershot 2004) 1-12.

⁵ İ. M. Kunt, 'Derviş Mehmed Paşa, Vezir and Entrepreneur: A Study in Ottoman Political-Economic theory and Practice', *Turcica* 9 (1977) 197-214; C. Kafadar, 'A Death in Venice: Anatolian Muslim Merchants Trading in the Serenissima', *Journal of Turkish Studies* 10 (1986) 191-218; A. Salzmann, 'An Ancien Regime Revisited: "Privatization" and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire', *Politics and Society* 21 (1993) 393-423; G. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford 2010). For the earlier period Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont's primary source publications shed light on these activities: J. L. Bacqué-Grammont, 'Autour d'une correspondance entre Charles-Quint et İbrâhîm Paşa', *Turcica* 15 (1983) 231-246; Idem, 'Neuf Lettres de Ferhâd Paşa (1515-1521)', *Journal of Ottoman Studies* 10 (1990) 69-97.

(disparagingly referred as *marranos*, literally ‘pigs’)⁶ diplomats, physicians, financiers and spies that connected courts across Europe in the late sixteenth century. Being alien was the core identity of these prominent actors. Identities of aliens, however, were not simple enough to be defined solely in relation to their religious beliefs and practices, national background and the rulers whose services they entered. Identities and loyalties of aliens were fluid, contingent and relational. They do not fulfil modern expectations of consistency and integrity; nor do they fit neatly into our religious, ethnic and national categories.⁷ David Passi’s disgrace shows how things went wrong when the multiple loyalties and identities of aliens crashed.

I will couple Ottoman and European sources, making visible the discrepancy between the domestic discourse and the international interests of the Imperial Council members. Through Koca Sinan Paşa’s précis reports (*telhis*) to Murad III⁸ and the chronicle of Selanikî Mustafa Efendi,⁹ one learns how the grand vizier convinced the sultan that Passi and the Governor-General of Rumelia, Saatçi Hasan Paşa, co-authored a libellous letter. Yet, Ottoman chronicles are silent about the entrepreneurial initiatives, diplomatic and commercial choices of the Imperial Council members. This silence can be explained through the conventions of the genre rather than the ignorance of chroniclers about these issues. Selanikî Mustafa Efendi, a mid-level court bureaucrat, would leave them out not to accuse the dignitaries openly. Instead he used the *topoi* of criticism that were already established such as corruption, bribe taking and aggrandizement.

⁶ Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 13.

⁷ S. Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to be Alien: Travails and encounters in the Early Modern World* (Lebanon, NH 2011), 1-14; E. R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD 2006) 103-105; B. Arbel, *Trading Nations: Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden 1995) 145-168; E. V. Campos, ‘Jews, Spaniards, and Portingales: Ambiguous Identities of Portuguese Marranos in Elizabethan England’, *English Literary History* 69 (2002) 599-616; J. Martin, ‘The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance’, 1321-1335; L. Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London 1996) 97-103.

⁸ H. Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa’nın Telhisleri* [The Précis Reports of Koca Sinan Paşa] (Istanbul 2004).

⁹ Selânîkî Mustafa Efendi, *Tarih-i Selânîkî: 971-1008/1563-1600* [The History of Selaniki]. M. İpşirli ed. (Ankara 1999).

The Venetian diplomatic dispatches H. F. Brown edited in *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice* shed light on the Imperial Council members' diplomatic leanings and information-gathering methods.¹⁰ For instance, that Koca Sinan Paşa belongs to the 'anti-Spanish party',¹¹ that 'The Grand Vizir [*sic*] is well disposed towards the Republic'¹² or how Koca Sinan gathers information from renegades.¹³ What is silenced or absent in Ottoman chronicles and archival records often is present in diplomatic correspondence.¹⁴ They are invaluable for our understanding of factional politics; we learn which party supported which foreign policy, and how they tried to gain the upper hand with court intrigues.¹⁵ Yet, one should caution for the inclusion of unverified gossip, exaggeration and distortion of events due to what their authors had at stake.

The disgrace of David Passi and his relationships with Murad III and Koca Sinan Paşa have been the subject of two articles.¹⁶ Works on the Mediterranean Jewish history also discuss his case.¹⁷ Suraiya Faruqi

¹⁰ *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 8: 1581-1591*. H. F. Brown ed. (London 1894); *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 9: 1592-1603*. H. F. Brown ed. (London 1897). On H. F. Brown's selection of documents, see E. Armstrong, 'Venetian Despatches on the Armada and Its Results', *English Historical Review* 12 (1897) 659-678: 659.

¹¹ 'Venice: December 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 564-570.

¹² 'Venice: January 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 512-521.

¹³ 'Venice: March 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 526-536; 'Venice: January 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 512-521.

¹⁴ For instance compare Selaniki's account of the dismissal of Siyavuş Paşa and the appointment of Osman Paşa, 'Elizabeth: September 1584, 1-10', *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth*, Volume 19: August 1584-August 1585 (1916), 43-58; Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 144-146.

¹⁵ M. P. Pedani and E. Dursteler use these sources to reconstruct the relationships between Ottoman dignitaries and Venetians. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*; M. P. Pedani, 'Safiye's Household and Venetian Diplomacy', *Turcica* 32 (2000) 9-32.

¹⁶ S. Faruqi, 'Ein Günstling des Osmanischen Sultans Murad III: David Passi', *Der Islam* 47 (1971) 290-297; P. Fodor, 'An anti-Semite Grand Vizier? The crisis in Ottoman-Jewish Relations in 1589-91 and its Consequences' in: Idem ed., *In Quest of the Golden Apple: Imperial Ideology, Politics, and Military Administration in the Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul 2000) 191-206.

¹⁷ B. Arbel, *Trading Nations: Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden 1995) 164-168; S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews XVIII* (New York, NY 1983) 134-141; C. Roth, *The Duke of Naxos of the House of Nasi* (Philadelphia, PA 1948) 204-212; E. Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews and Sephardim:*

showed that David Passi's fall had to do with 'the intermediate realm, in which diplomacy and espionage are often barely distinguishable', using both Ottoman and European sources for the first time. Pal Fodor took a different direction and argued that Koca Sinan opposed David Passi out of anti-Jewish feelings that became common during Murad III's reign. Neither Faroqhi nor Fodor show how a libel plot was ultimately the cause of Passi's disgrace. I will argue that a conflict of domestic and diplomatic interests, specifically the Anglo-Ottoman League, brought David Passi into disgrace, rather than the anti-Jewish sentiments of Koca Sinan. Furthermore, I argue that Passi was not the only one who undertook covert illegitimate activities at court. The grand vizier's libel accusation, analyzed in the second part of the paper, may have been a court intrigue to remove his rival.

The balance of power in the late sixteenth century Mediterranean

Religious and national solidarity seems subordinate to pragmatic considerations in late sixteenth century trade and diplomacy. Neither a Christian-Muslim frontier divided the Mediterranean,¹⁸ nor was Europe split up into Catholic and Protestant parts. Trade between Spain and England continued at the height of their conflict.¹⁹ While the wars of religion were going on, traditional formulations of Christian unity against the Muslims became obsolete. Commercial and diplomatic relations between the Protestant countries and the Ottomans further weakened the 'common corps of Christendom' argument. Yet, politicians continued to reproduce

memories of a past golden age (Lanham, MD 2007) 99-109; I. Burdelez, 'The Role of Ragusan Jews in the History of Mediterranean Countries' in: A. M. Ginio ed., *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Mediterranean World After 1492* (London 1992) 190-197.

¹⁸ Still a division between the Muslims and Christians in the Mediterranean persists, see C. B. Johnson, 'The Algerian Economy and Cervantes' First Work of Narrative Fiction' in: G. Piterberg, T. R. Ruiz and G. Symcox ed., *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World: 1600-1800* (Toronto 2010) 207-228.

¹⁹ P. Croft, 'Trading with the Enemy, 1585-1604', *The Historical Journal* 32 (1989) 281-302; M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado, 'Paz ruidosa, guerra sorda: las relaciones de Felipe II e Inglaterra' [Noisy peace, silent war: the relations of England and Philip II] in: L. Ribot García ed., *La monarquía de Felipe II a debate* [The monarchy of Philip II on debate] (Madrid 2000) 63-119; G. Parker, 'The Place of Tudor England in the Messianic Vision of Philip II of Spain: The Prothero Lecture', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002) 167-221.

conventional religious discourse. For instance, the Secretary of State Sir Francis Walsingham (in office 1573-1590) maintained a discourse of 'Christian unity against the Turk', while he was in practice the mastermind behind the Anglo-Ottoman alliance for which David Passi posed a threat.²⁰

The Anglo-Ottoman rapprochement was based on calculations of the balance of power in Europe. The crusading King of Portugal Dom Sebastiao (r. 1557-1578) died without an heir on August 4, 1578 at the battle of al-Qasr al-Kabir (Portuguese *Alcazarquivir*) in Morocco. Philip II of Spain (r. 1556-1598) annexed Portugal in 1580 because he was the heir presumptive through his mother's line. As a result, the Moroccans began pursuing a policy of neutrality towards Spain.²¹ Furthermore, it was commonly feared that Philip II would soon add France and England to his dominions. Because Elizabeth I of England (r. 1558-1603) did not marry any of her suitors, she was unlikely to produce an heir, while the succession in France turned bloody after the death of Henry III in 1589.

In response to the King of Spain's aggrandizement, the Ottoman sultan, the Queen of England, Henry IV of France (r. 1589-1610) and a pretender to the Portuguese throne, the Prior of Crato, Don Antonio (Dom António in Portuguese), drew closer.²² The Venetians remained neutral while harbouring two fears: firstly, that Philip II had his eye on the

²⁰ F. L. Baumer, 'England, the Turk, and the Common Corps of Christendom', *The American Historical Review* 50 (1944) 26-48: 39-40. The ideal of Christian unity informed many publications in this period. For instance, Hakluyt took out a sentence about the joint attack because it would show the Anglo-Ottoman conspiracy against Spain. See Faroqhi, 'Ein Günstling', 295. This discourse continued to inform publications about the Ottoman Empire in the next century, for instance, see the anonymous *The Intrigues of the French King at Constantinople to embroil Christendom* (London 1689).

²¹ G. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford 2010) 152-153; D. Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century: Problems and Patterns in African Foreign Policy* (Essex 1981) 88-114.

²² B. Givens, 'Sebastianism in Theory and Practice in Early Modern Portugal' in: G. Piterberg, T. R. Ruiz and G. Symcox ed., *Brandel Revisited: The Mediterranean World: 1600-1800* (Toronto 2010) 127-150: 132-134; D. M. Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk: A Pattern of Alliances, 1350-1700* (Liverpool 1954) 146-175; A. N. Kurat, *Türk-İngiliz Münasebetlerinin Başlangıcı ve Gelişmesi (1553-1610)* [The Beginning and Development of Anglo-Turkish Relations] (Ankara 1953) 118-175.

Republic's possessions and secondly, that the Ottomans would attack Crete if they did not attack Spain with their new fleet.²³

While Philip II's preparations for the 'enterprise of England' continued in the mid-1580s, the English had a back-up plan to counter the Spanish Armada. They entered into a league with the Ottomans against Spain, their mutual enemy, in order to attack Spain from both sides: the Ottoman navy in the Mediterranean and the English in the Atlantic.²⁴ The King of Spain was not the only foe the Ottomans and the English shared. The 'Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy' from the 1580s also had the aim of capturing Malta, which was another fervent member of the Catholic League.²⁵ It can be argued that the English wanted an alliance with the Ottomans for reasons other than survival. They were trying to solve many problems at once with a concerted attack from both sides: to establish Don Antonio on the Portuguese throne and the Huguenot King of Navarre on the French. Therefore, arguably, the English wanted to change the balance of power entirely to their liking, while their merchants were enjoying the profits of trade with the Ottomans.²⁶ The Ottomans, however, had their hands tied at war against the Safavids of Iran, from 1578 to 1590. This war made it difficult for the Ottomans to realize an attack in the Mediterranean until the conclusion of peace with the Safavids in 1590.

Power was pragmatically consolidated in dynastic empires, who conspired together; The Spanish and the Safavid empires forged alliances, while England and the Ottoman Empire did the same. When the news of the Ottoman peace negotiations with the Safavids reached Madrid in November 1586,²⁷ Spain dispatched an agent to Istanbul to negotiate a

²³ F. de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford 2007) 40-85; 'Venice: February 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 521-526.

²⁴ E. Pears, 'The Spanish Armada And The Ottoman Porte', *English Historical Review* 8 (1893) 439-466; E. Armstrong, 'Venetian Despatches on the Armada and Its Results', *English Historical Review* 12 (1897) 659-678; F. L. Baumer, 'England, the Turk', 33; A. P. Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy* (Malta 1972) 69-70.

²⁵ Vella, *An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy*, 7-76.

²⁶ For the Spanish anxiety on the benefits of this trade see L. Jardine, 'Gloriana Rules the Waves: Or, the Advantage of Being Excommunicated (And a Woman)', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (2004) 209-222: 211-212; D. Jensen, 'The Ottoman Turks in Sixteenth Century French Diplomacy', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985) 451-470: 467-486.

²⁷ 'Venice: November 1586', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 216-223.

truce, which would prevent a surprise Ottoman attack during the Spanish ‘enterprise against England’. Grand Vizier Siyavuş Paşa accepted 10.000 ducats from the Spanish agent through his adviser Moses Beneviste. However, the peace was not concluded because the Spanish did not concede to the Ottoman Sultan’s demand to include the Queen of England as his ally in the treatise. As a result, Philip II offered the Safavid Shah arms, ‘either one thousand Spanish musketeers or two thousand Portuguese harquebusiers’, so that he would continue the war.²⁸ Meanwhile, the English and the Ottomans were bolstering their alliance by setting the slaves of one another free.²⁹

The early Anglo-Ottoman relations show that conventional ideas about Ottoman diplomacy, such as the pursuit of a unilateral foreign policy until the eighteenth century or that perpetual warfare in *dari’l-harb* (abode of war) had been the *raison d’être* of the Ottoman state, are not valid. The Ottomans and the English were both willing to enter into an alliance as equal partners to counter the Catholic League led by their mutual enemy Philip II. This rapprochement does not conform to the traditional view about Ottoman methods of alliance with the ‘infidels’, in which Ottomans always treated non-Muslims as subordinates.³⁰

²⁸ ‘Venice: July 1587’, *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 290-302; E. Naki, Şah Abbas Döneminde İspanya-İran İlişkileri (1587-1629) [Relations between Iran and Spain during the reign of Shah Abbas, 1587-1629] (MA Thesis, Ankara University, 2009) 95-124; L. Gil, ‘Diplomatik Denge: İspanya, Osmanlı ve Safevî İmparatorlukları’ [Diplomatic Balance: Spanish, Ottoman and Safavid empires] in: P. Martin Asuero ed. *İspanya-Türkiye: 16. yüzyıldan 21. yüzyıla rekabet ve dostluk* [Spain-Turkey: Rivalry and Friendship from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century] (Istanbul 2006) 139-155.

²⁹ ‘Venice: July 1587’, *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 290-302; ‘Venice: August 1588’, *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 372-382. Likewise, Marlowe’s Jew, Barabas, set Turks free. R. Wilson, ‘Another Country: Marlowe and the Go-Between’ in: A. Höfele and W. von Koppenfels ed., *Renaissance Go-Betweens: Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe* (Berlin 2005) 177-199: 190-192.

³⁰ For a critical perspective on Ottoman diplomacy, see A. N. Yurdusev, ‘The Ottoman Attitude toward Diplomacy’ in: A. N. Yurdusev ed., *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?* (Hampshire 2004) 5-35; D. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2004) 1-20.

Jews and New Christians at courts

Jews from Spain and Portugal, such as David Passi, were good candidates for spies because they had mercantile, financial, linguistic and diplomatic aptitude; furthermore they had connections all over Europe. The profusion of double agents in this period had something to do with spymasters such as Secretaries of State Thomas Wilson, Sir Francis Walsingham and Don Juan de Idiáquez. The Elizabethan statesmen found their spies among Catholics who fled the country. Spain employed as spies Protestants and Jews.³¹ Jewish, Protestant and Catholic spies combined sincerity and pretence in the age of dissimulation. They had to leave their countries behind because they could not or chose not to dissimulate about their religious identity any more. Yet, in their adopted homelands, they worked for the very rulers who did not tolerate their presence back home.

Courtly careers were also open to aliens in the sixteenth century. Some New Christians came to prominence at the Elizabethan court, such as the queen's physician Roderigo Lopez. The New Christian network was tightly knit; when Lopez was charged with high treason in 1593, Solomon Abenaish (Alvaro Mendes), another Jewish adviser of Murad III, tried to intervene – albeit without success – through his London agent Judah Serfatim.³² At the Spanish court in the early seventeenth century, New Christian financiers and merchants such as Manuel Cortizos and Juan Nuñez enjoyed the favour of the king and his favourite minister Don Gaspar de Guzmán, Count-Duke of Olivares. Despite being the confidant of Olivares, Nuñez was charged with Jewish heresy in 1613, but he got away with a heavy fine.³³

Although it has been claimed Murad III harboured anti-Jewish sentiments, the sultan relied on Jewish physicians and advisers.³⁴ A

³¹ M. Leimon and G. Parker, 'Treason and Plot in Elizabethan Diplomacy: The "Fame of Sir Edward Stafford" Reconsidered', *The English Historical Review* 111 (1996) 1134-1158: 1138-1139, 1148-1157; Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 1-14, 38-62; Arbel, *Trading Nations*, 77-168; Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, 103-129; Burdelez, 'Ragusan Jews', 190-197.

³² Campos, 'Jews, Spaniards, and Portingales', 599-600, 603-607; Wilson, 'Another Country', 191-192; C. Roth, *The Duke of Naxos of the House of Nasi* (Philadelphia 1948) 211; Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 140-142.

³³ Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 54.

³⁴ Fodor, 'Anti-Semite grand vizier?', 191-206; Roth, *Duke of Naxos*, 189.

combination of intellectual capital of medicine, fluency in European languages and an intimate knowledge of contemporary European politics secured Jews entry into the orbit of politics at the Ottoman court.³⁵ Most of these figures were of Portuguese or Spanish origin: newcomers into the Ottoman Jewry that expanded due to the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian peninsula during the sixteenth century. They brought capital they had accumulated elsewhere, made through banking in Europe, as in the case of Don Joseph Nasi or through mining privileges in India, as in the case of Solomon Abenaish. They used their capital to bid on lucrative tax farms in the Ottoman Empire.³⁶

David Passi, a Jew of either Portuguese or Spanish origin, became the favourite agent, adviser and confidant of Sultan Murad III. Passi used to live in Ragusa (present day Dubrovnik), moving to the Venetian ghetto in 1572, where the Jewish merchants lived with their families. During this period, he was working as a double agent for Venice and Spain. In 1573, Guzmán de Silva, the Spanish ambassador in Venice, wrote that Passi 'spoke Spanish and considered himself to be a native of Spain, yet he was dressed in a Greek manner.' The ambassador added that Passi was very rich.³⁷ His wife lived in Ferrara, his father in Thessaloniki, his uncle in Istanbul. He is said to be the nephew of a physician of Murad III, either Moses Hamon or his successor Joseph de Segura.³⁸ His brother lived at the Polish court.³⁹ On 17

³⁵ Among the prominent Jewish figures at the court of Murad III, one can enumerate Kira Esther, the agent of the queen mother Nurbanu Sultan; Kira Esperanza, the agent of Murad III's wife Safiye Sultan; the physician Solomon Nathan Ashkenazi, also called Alamanoglu [son of the German]; physician Moses Beneviste known as 'Hoca Musahibi' (the boon companion of the [Imperial] Tutor); Alvaro Mendes known as Solomon Abenaish; imperial physicians Moses Hamon and Joseph de Segura; and David Passi.

³⁶ Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 84-147; Roth, *Duke of Naxos*, 195-216; Wilson, 'Another Country', 179-180; L. Jardine, 'Alien Intelligence', 97-103; U. Heyd, 'Moses Hamon, Chief Jewish Physician to Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent', *Oriens* 16 (1963) 152-170; Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, 103-129. Their entry into Istanbul Jewry was not uncontested. See D. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, 87-89, 180-182.

³⁷ Di Stato, Venice, Consiglio dei Dieci, Parti secrete, R. 9cc. 89-90, fol 101v and Archivo General de Simancas, Papeles de Estado, Legajo 1334. Cited in Burdelez, 'Ragusan Jews', 193.

³⁸ Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, 111.

August 1585, a Venetian letter mentioned him for the first time as the confidant of Murad III. There was the possibility of ‘the wealthy Jew, David Passi’ becoming the Duke of Naxos and the Archipelago, vacant since the death of Joseph Nasi in 1579.⁴⁰ At the time, he was collaborating with the English about the Polish succession in addition to reporting to the sultan on the current state of Europe.

The grand viziers’ visions for diplomacy and trade

Koca Sinan Paşa and David Passi belonged to rival factions. When Koca Sinan was appointed grand vizier for the second time in 1589, David Passi had been the only favourite of Murad III who survived the Beylerbeyi Incident (1589). This incident, a cavalry uprising that took place at a time Passi had been advising the sultan on finance, was set off by the debasement of the coinage with which the soldiers were paid. During the bloody revolt, Passi was beaten so badly that he was believed to be dead. In 1590, the grand vizier abolished the new wine tax against the wishes of Jewish tax-farmers Passi supported.⁴¹ Although he made infamous anti-Jewish statements, Koca Sinan was not anti-Jewish, as he had a Jewish physician and adviser himself.⁴²

In 1590, when the preparations for the fleet to attack Spain began, Koca Sinan Paşa asked the sultan not to include Passi in any discussions fearing that he may inform Spain. However, the sultan ordered him

to consult with Passi, to listen to him, to favour him. The Grand Vizir refused, whereupon the Sultan said that slaves like the Vizir he hart [sic] in abundance, but never a one [sic] like David, probably alluding to all the information about Christendom with which Passi furnishes the Sultan.

³⁹ Fodor, ‘Anti-Semite Grand Vizier’, 197; Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa’nın Telhisleri*, 16.

⁴⁰ Roth, *Duke of Naxos*, 204-206. David Passi is an inspiration for Marlowe’s famous Duke of Malta, see Wilson, ‘Another Country: Marlowe and the Go-Between’, 177-199; Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 134-135; Jardine, ‘Alien Intelligence’, 95-110.

⁴¹ Fodor, ‘Anti-Semite Grand Vizier?’, 197.

⁴² Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 145. Fodor, ‘Anti-Semite Grand Vizier’, 206.

The grand vizier obeyed the sultan and discussed the fleet preparations with Passi. They contended over whether the new fleet would attack Spain as Koca Sinan wished or Crete as Passi favoured. Passi's involvement with the Polish affair also displeased Koca Sinan Paşa.⁴³

If the Spanish were the ultimate enemy for the Ottomans, Koca Sinan Paşa was the ideal warmongering grand vizier to avenge the embarrassing Ottoman defeat at the battle of Lepanto (1571). Unlike his rival Siyavuş Paşa, who would rather negotiate peace with Spain, Koca Sinan Paşa had both Sokollu Mehmed Paşa's (in office 1565-1579) mercantile ambitions and thirst for fighting. However, both of them had strong Jewish adversaries: Sokollu Mehmed supported Michael Cantacuzenus, also known as Şeytanoğlu (the Devil's son), against the interest of the Don Joseph Nasi,⁴⁴ whereas Koca Sinan opposed David Passi and pursued pro-Venetian and anti-Spanish policies.

Sokollu Mehmed Paşa initiated the rapprochement between England and the Ottoman Empire. When the English merchant William Harborne travelled to Istanbul in 1578 to obtain trading privileges, Sokollu Mehmed Paşa considered it a great opportunity and convinced the sultan to write a letter to Elizabeth I. The Habsburg ambassador reflected on Sokollu Mehmed's cunning designs for taking advantage of the religious disunity in Europe. He also noted that it was unprecedented for an Ottoman sultan to initiate diplomatic correspondence with a European ruler.⁴⁵ Post-Reformation religious disunity in Europe indeed paved the way for the Anglo-Ottoman cooperation. Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth I in 1570, which freed English merchants from the papal levies against trading with 'the infidel'.⁴⁶

Koca Sinan and Sokollu Mehmed had other common interests. During his first term as grand vizier in the early 1580s, Koca Sinan tried to

⁴³ Faroqi, 'Ein Günstling', 291-292. 'Venice: January 1591', *Calendar of State Papers*, Vol. 8, 512-521. Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 135-136.

⁴⁴ Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 87.

⁴⁵ M. Epstein, *The Early History of the Levant Company* (London 1908) 1-66; A. C. Wood, *A History of the Levant Company* (Oxford 1935) 1-41; Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk*, 167. Kurat, *Türk-İngiliz Münasebetleri*, 1-63; S. Skilliter, *William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey, 1578-1582* (London 1977) 49-85; L. Jardine, 'Gloriana Rules the Waves', 209-214. The Habsburg ambassador's report is translated in Skilliter, *Trade with Turkey*, 60-63.

⁴⁶ Jardine, 'Gloriana Rules the Waves', 209-214.

continue Sokollu Mehmed's expansionist policies by taking over the leadership of the Indian Ocean faction. The grand vizier promoted production of knowledge, trade, diplomacy and naval offensives. He took up Sokollu Mehmed's unrealized Suez Canal project, which would arguably make the Ottoman power unsurpassable in the Indian Ocean. However, at the end of 1582, Koca Sinan's ambitions were cut short when factionalism at court and military problems on the Safavid front led to his dismissal.⁴⁷

Koca Sinan seems to have continued Sokollu Mehmed Paşa's pro-English policies as well. In 1584, the English agent got involved in the disgrace of Siyavuş Paşa with the design of reinstating Koca Sinan to the grand vizierate. However, his middle-man Özdemiroğlu Osman Paşa, who showed the sultan the letters Siyavuş wrote to the rebellious Khan of the Crimean Tatars Mehmed Giray, was appointed grand vizier instead of Koca Sinan. This shows that Koca Sinan's pursuit of the Anglo-Ottoman alliance preceded his second term in the grand vizierate (1589-1591).⁴⁸

The New Fleet

Koca Sinan Paşa began the preparation for fitting the Ottoman navy with new galleys in January 1590, in order to finally realize an Anglo-Ottoman offensive against Spain. Venetian reports from January, February and March 1591 state that David Passi was present at the daily meetings where Koca Sinan, the grand admiral, the Chief of the Janissaries Saatçi Hasan (promoted to the governor-generalship of Rumelia in January-February 1591) discussed and oversaw the naval preparations.⁴⁹ The Ottoman fleet intended to help the Huguenot King of Navarre in France and Don Antonio onto the throne of Portugal. The English promised the Ottomans

⁴⁷ Casale, *Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 154-163; E. Fetvacı, *Viziers to Eunuchs: Transitions in Ottoman Manuscript Patronage, 1566-1617* (Ph.D. dissertation 2005) 140-201, 330-334.

⁴⁸ 'Elizabeth: September 1584, 1-10', *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth*, Volume 19: August 1584-August 1585 (1916), 43-58.

⁴⁹ 'Venice: January 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 512-521; 'Venice: February 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 521-526; 'Venice: March 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 526-536. For Saatçi Hasan Paşa's promotion, see Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 231.

Villefranche, Toulon or Marseille.⁵⁰ However, others did not share Koca Sinan's eagerness to attack Spain. David Passi, the Grand Admirals Uluç Hasan Paşa (in office April 1588-July 1591) and Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Paşa (in office July 1591-July 1595) and the Chief of the Janissaries Saatçi Hasan made up the pro-Spain or anti-Venetian party. Their aim was to attack Crete, at the time a Venetian possession, instead of Spain. Thus they saw their interest in another war.⁵¹

Since the Ottoman budget had a deficit in the 1580s and 1590s, the Ottomans needed an innovative scheme to raise the funds necessary for the preparation of a fleet of 300 vessels.⁵² In this, the members of the Ottoman ruling classes were to finance the fleet. The sultan would pay for fifty galleys, the grand vizier for ten, each vizier (there were five or six viziers) for six galleys, the chancellor for three vessels and the provincial governors would pay together for 146 vessels. In addition to this scheme, the tax arrears from the provinces accumulated in the past twenty years were to be channelled into the new fleet. Thus, the burden of the vessels on the Imperial Treasury would be nominal. To collect the tax arrears, a tax-farm was created and auctioned, but nobody wanted to bid on such a risky venture. Then it was decided that provincial administrators would collect the tax arrears and send them to Istanbul in two instalments. Collecting the tax arrears with this method was not a standard Ottoman taxation practice. The Venetian ambassador attributed this novel idea to David Passi, while the grand vizier claimed it as his own in his précis reports to the sultan.⁵³

Orders for the materials necessary for building the ships were sent to various parts of the empire. Koca Sinan came up with a new canal project

⁵⁰ 'Venice: January 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 512-521.

⁵¹ 'Venice: February 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 521-526. S. Faqohi mentions the Chief of Janissaries Mehmed Ağa as the associate of Passi. See Faqohi, 'Ein Günstling', 292. Saatçi Hasan Ağa may have been confused with Mehmed Ağa, who was first appointed chief of janissaries, then governor-general of Rumelia in 1592. See Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 264-265.

⁵² C. Kafadar, 'Les troubles monétaires de la fin du XVI^e siècle et la prise de conscience ottomane du déclin', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 46 (1991) 381-400; B. Tezcan, 'The Ottoman Monetary Crisis of 1585 Revisited', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 52 (2009) 460-504.

⁵³ Faqohi, 'Ein Günstling', 292; P. Fodor, 'Between two Continental Wars: the Ottoman Naval Preparations in 1590-1592' in: I. Baldauf and S. Faqohi ed., *Armağan: Festschrift Für Andreas Tietze* (Prague 1994) 89-111: 92-103; Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 234.

that would connect the Lake of Nicaea, the river of Sakarya and the Black Sea to bring construction materials and wood to Istanbul with more ease.⁵⁴ In January 1591, the sultan wrote to the Queen of England and the King of France that he had appointed Koca Sinan Paşa the commander of the fleet that was to be sent against Spain in 1592.⁵⁵ The only piece Selaniki wrote about the offensive was the appointment of Koca Sinan as the commander of the fleet against the ‘miserable infidels’, meaning Spain. He must have seen an order that made the Ottoman campaign against Spain official.⁵⁶

David Passi’s disgrace

Alvaro Mendes represented the Portuguese pretender Don Antonio at European courts for a long time before his move to Istanbul. Don Antonio was related to Elizabeth I’s physician Rodrigo Lopez and to Alvaro Mendes through his New Christian mother and sister. When Alvaro Mendes’ relations with Don Antonio became tense, his rival David Passi took up the cause of the Portuguese pretender at the Ottoman court. There was also friction among the English about what to do with David Passi. The English ambassador Edward Barton suggested to Don Antonio that he should sue Alvaro Mendes in front of the sultan, claiming that his wealth was illegitimately acquired in Portugal and actually belonged to him. However, Elizabeth’s Lord High Treasurer William Cecil wrote to Mendes to guarantee him English support if such a lawsuit was ever brought before the sultan. The queen reprimanded Barton for relying too much on David Passi’s advice. Is it possible that the English found out about Passi’s double-dealing later than the Venetian ambassador?⁵⁷

In March 1591, the grand vizier wrote to Don Antonio that the sultan decided to protect and help him onto the throne of Portugal in alliance with the English. He did demand from Don Antonio that his son be sent as a hostage to Istanbul, as the Ottomans had the custom of holding the sons of rulers that entered into an alliance with them as subordinates.

⁵⁴ Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 232-233, 238.

⁵⁵ For copies of these letters, see ‘Venice: January 1591’, *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 512-521.

⁵⁶ Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 234.

⁵⁷ Roth, *Duke of Naxos*, 206; Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews and Sephardim*, 100; Faruqi, ‘Ein Günstling’, 293-294; Wilson, ‘Another Country’, 192, 199.

Koca Sinan assured Don Antonio that David Passi would further inform him of everything in greater detail.⁵⁸

In spite of the confidence of the sultan, David Passi worked as a double agent, if not from the time of his arrival in Istanbul, then at least from November 1589 onwards. The Venetian ambassador reported that the Spanish agent Giovanni Steffano Ferrari conferred a regular salary on David Passi.⁵⁹ In January 1591 the Venetian ambassador reported home that he, too, had to take David Passi into his confidence because of his increasing importance, in all likelihood without any trust on his part.⁶⁰ In February 1591, the Venetian dispatch stated that David Passi was on the point of secretly dispatching Guglielmo di Savoy to Philip II to give him a warning on the fleet preparations.⁶¹

Within a month, on March 16, 1591, David Passi fell into disgrace with Koca Sinan, the ostensible reason for which was a letter he sent to the Grand Chancellor of Poland. The letter stated that the grand vizier 'wrote the letter of accord and reconciliation on his own authority only, without binding the Sultan, and this with a view to deceiving... and drawing money.'⁶² In his précis reports Koca Sinan repeatedly explained how David Passi thwarted the negotiation of the Polish-Ottoman peace and the arrival of the tribute. His reports about the Polish affair suggest that the grand vizier was indeed in consultation with the sultan.⁶³

Koca Sinan Paşa was furious when he found out about the letter because he thought it implied treason. Passi's letter to the Polish chancellor must have been the last drop that made Koca Sinan determined to get rid of him by all means. He ordered Passi's immediate imprisonment at midnight, but Passi was not at home. When he found out about the order for his arrest, David Passi went into hiding at the residence of Saatçi Hasan Paşa, the recently appointed Governor-General of Rumelia. The Venetian ambassador was uncertain whether Koca Sinan would be able to get David Passi banished from the court. The ambassador argued that Passi's friends

⁵⁸ 'Venice: March 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 526-536.

⁵⁹ 'Venice: November 1589', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 472-476.

⁶⁰ 'Venice: January 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 512-521.

⁶¹ 'Venice: February 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 521-526; Faroqhi, 'Ein Günstling', 293.

⁶² 'Venice: March 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 526-536; Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın telbisleri*, 13-14.

⁶³ Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın telbisleri*, 82-83, 205, 232, 258-259.

and protectors were telling the sultan that Passi was ‘the only truthful and well-informed spy against Christian powers’. This group clearly included the grand admiral (Uluç Hasan Paşa and his successor Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Paşa) and the Governor-General of Rumelia, Saatçi Hasan Paşa.⁶⁴

Koca Sinan Paşa’s first extant report to the sultan about Passi’s disgrace included his dialogue with Saatçi Hasan. The governor-general told the grand vizier that it would have been better if he had made friends with Passi, because he was very rich and he enriched many people. He added ‘even the sultan listened to his counsel’. Koca Sinan reported that he got very angry and rebuked him. He maintained that the sultan would never believe the words of a wretched Jew, and quoted Quran 5:51.⁶⁵ The grand vizier summarized the meaning of the passage for the sultan tersely: ‘If you make them friends, you become one of them.’ Saatçi Hasan accused the grand vizier: ‘It is said that you want to have Passi killed, he cannot go out because of his fear.’ Koca Sinan explained that Passi was a *dhimmi* (protected subject) and he would not move a single hair without consulting the sultan, let alone murder Passi.⁶⁶

The grand vizier then argued that it was against Islam to make David Passi privy to the secrets of the state and that those who befriended Passi or expected loyalty (*sadakat*) from him could not be true Muslims. He included in this group Saatçi Hasan and the chancellor, Abdülmuhiyî Çelebi. Koca Sinan asserted that Passi’s loyalty probably lay with the Spanish and the Venetians. Koca Sinan explained to the sultan how David Passi’s involvement with ‘the Polish affair’ prevented the arrival of the tribute that was necessary for the payment of the soldiers. Nevertheless, none of these arguments could initially convince Murad III to dismiss or exile David Passi. Lastly, Koca Sinan stated in his report that he was afraid that the

⁶⁴ Venice: March 1591’, *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 526-536; Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa’nın telhisleri*, 13-14.

⁶⁵ Quran 5:51 reads ‘O you who believe! do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people.’ The Holy Qur’an, translated by M. H. Shakir (New York, NY 1983) <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/koran/koran-idx?type=DIV0&byte=158021>.

⁶⁶ Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa’nın Telhisleri*, 12-15; P. Fodor, ‘Anti-Semite Grand Vizier’, 197-204.

governor-general would slander him in writing. He was foretelling the future, a future he may have helped shape more actively than he admitted.⁶⁷

On May 18, 1591, events took a turn for the better for David Passi, as he obtained in the sultan's handwriting an order for his immediate release. Upon his release, Koca Sinan had the Jewish spy brought to his presence and reportedly cried out that he would have him drowned as Passi entered the room. However when the grand vizier saw the sultan's order, he was pacified and let him go.⁶⁸ Nevertheless Koca Sinan Paşa was able to turn things around once again. On July 15, 1591, he had David Passi publicly chained and exiled. A rumour went that Passi was destined for Tunis. The Venetian ambassador claimed that he would be thrown into the sea the moment the galleys left the harbour.⁶⁹

Disgrace was a widespread problem because if court officials, high office holders and courtiers carried out illegitimate activities that would get them charged with treason. There are numerous examples where we see noblemen at European courts or servants of the sultan in Istanbul who fell from grace. Dissimulation ties all these stories. While pretending to act in total submission and loyalty to their rulers, David Passi and Sir Edward Stafford furnished the enemy with sensitive information, Sir Francis Walsingham intervened in matters of succession, while the queen's physician Roderigo Lopez got involved in the poison plot of 1593 and was executed for high treason.⁷⁰

However, not every treacherous act became public. This was not just because these acts remained secret. Rulers, their secretaries and grand viziers feigned ignorance of the treason of officials and servants until changes in the wider political conjuncture necessitated them to let go of their favourites. Koca Sinan could have disgraced David Passi before he found out about his letter to the Polish. Likewise, Sir Francis Walsingham let Sir Edward Stafford get away with spying for Spain. Elizabeth I could have known more about the Earl of Leicester's activities and marital status than is generally admitted, while there have been studies on Philip II's use of the art of dissimulation for various political ends. In order to preserve

⁶⁷ P. Fodor, 'Anti-Semite Grand Vizier', 197-204.

⁶⁸ 'Venice: May 1591', *Calendar of State Papers*, Vol. 8, 544-547.

⁶⁹ 'Venice: July 1591', *Calendar of State Papers*, Vol. 8, 549-551.

⁷⁰ Faroghi, 'Ein Günstling', 290; E. V. Campos, 'Jews, Spaniards, and Portugales', 599-600, 603-607; Wilson, 'Another Country', 191-192; Leimon and Parker, 'Treason and Plot in Elizabethan Diplomacy', 1142-1158.

the harmony at court, rulers feigned ignorance of illegitimate activities of court members.⁷¹

Heavy punishments were meted out to those charged with treason. In England, Edward III's Treason Act of 1352 had been used throughout the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.⁷² Ottoman sultans could order the punishment *siyaseten* (capital punishment by the will of the ruler) on those they found guilty of treason, for the public order or the *raison d'état*. The authority to inflict capital punishment in this manner was held by the sultan and his grand vizier. Often there was no trial or investigation when a high-ranking member of the political elite committed treason. In cases without trial or evidence, the grand vizier and the sultan legitimized capital punishment according to *shariat*. They asked for a legal opinion (*fatwa*) from the chief juristconsult (*şeyhülislam*) who would charge the accused within the *shariat* category of *sā'ī bi'l-jesād* (forming corruption).⁷³

The absence of trial and evidence point to the informal nature of these disgrace cases, wherein the basis for the decision could well be unsubstantiated allegations of a rival. This is typical of disgrace cases of members of the military-administrative elite, who were legally considered the slaves of the sultan. Exile and confiscation could be milder punishments for the treacherous. Non-Muslim advisers and financiers of the sultan were also treated like his slaves. In 1576, Murad III ordered the execution of Michael Cantacuzenus, who was supported by the Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa, without trial. The sultan confiscated Cantacuzenus' property, which saved him from paying him back the loans.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Leimon and Parker, 'Treason and Plot in Elizabethan Diplomacy', 1142-1158.. Most recently on Philip II's dissimulation, C. Y. Hsu, 'Writing on Behalf of a Christian Empire: Gifts, Dissimulation, and Politics in the Letters of Philip II of Spain to Wanli of China', *Hispanic Review* 78 (2010) 323-344.

⁷² D. A. Orr, *Treason and the State: Law, Politics, and Ideology in the English Civil War* (Cambridge 2002) 11-29.

⁷³ U. Heyd, *Studies in Old Ottoman Criminal Law* (Oxford 1973) 192-204; A. Mumcu, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Siyaseten Katl* [Capital Punishment in the Ottoman Empire] (Istanbul 2007) 74-114.

⁷⁴ Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 87.

The libel plot

Sometime in May 1591, a libellous letter signed by an unnamed janissary had been planted in the third courtyard of the palace. The sultan sent the libellous letter to the grand vizier for inspection. Koca Sinan did not include the text of the libel in his report collection, however, we can surmise that the author of the libel not only slandered the grand vizier, but also insulted the person of the sultan. Koca Sinan wrote that he cried when he read the letter and argued that a Muslim could not have written such words. Moreover the author of the letter claimed that a janissary uprising was on the horizon.⁷⁵

The sultan was furious and fearful. Koca Sinan promised the sultan to find the author(s) of the libel. Conveniently for the grand vizier, the authors he identified were none other than David Passi and the Governor-General of Rumelia, Saatçi Hasan Paşa. The libellous letter must have been planted before the banishment of Saatçi Hasan to Çorlu in April-May 1591. We know from Selaniki Mustafa Efendi's chronicle that Saatçi Hasan was dismissed because 'he wrote with malice a [libellous] paper containing some true some false things' about the grand vizier. The chronicler did not explain the contents, or how Saatçi Hasan was identified as the author, or Passi's role.⁷⁶

Koca Sinan established the guilt of Saatçi Hasan and David Passi by correspondence to Murad III. The grand vizier reported that the steward of the governor-general wrote a note to one of his own servants from prison, saying that he wanted to give a statement. However before getting his testimony, Koca Sinan used the steward's handwriting as evidence. He surmised that the libellous letter and the note of the steward were written by the same hand. The grand vizier sent both documents to the sultan for examination before he went to get the steward's statement. The sultan approved with a pithy response.⁷⁷

In his next report, Koca Sinan stated that the steward was questioned without torture.⁷⁸ During the interrogation, the steward claimed

⁷⁵ Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın Telhisleri*, 54-55.

⁷⁶ Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 236; Sahillioğlu, *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın Telhisleri*, 54-57, 182-184.

⁷⁷ Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın Telhisleri*, 24; Faroqi, 'Ein Günstling', 293.

⁷⁸ 'asla cefâ olunmayub su'âl olundukda' [when he was interrogated without being tortured]. See: Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın Telhisleri*, 182.

that the governor-general and David Passi often came together at night and had papers written in an enclosed room where they brought scribes. He added that he did not know what they had written. However, the steward explained that some people in janissary and cavalry uniforms would wait downstairs and take the letters, which implied that Passi and Saatçi Hasan had the libellous letter planted in the palace courtyard. The steward asserted that he knew Passi's scribe and that he should be questioned. When Koca Sinan interrogated Passi's scribe, he too claimed to know nothing, and asserted that 'the Jew is there, you should question him.' Then, the grand vizier questioned Passi without the slightest torment. Koca Sinan Paşa did not report to the sultan what Passi said during the interrogation but his ruling: 'in conclusion it was understood to be established that most of the [libellous] papers were written through their means'.⁷⁹ How he reached this conclusion remains a mystery.

When Koca Sinan reported to Murad III the exchange between Saatçi Hasan and himself, he did not demand the imprisonment or exile of Passi. He just asked the sultan not to trust or employ him.⁸⁰ In his next report, the grand vizier noted that Passi was imprisoned in Yeni Hisar in accordance with the sultanic decree. Yet, imprisonment alone did not satisfy Koca Sinan. He demonstrated how Passi meddled with the Polish affair and argued that Passi should be executed. The sultan ordered him again to imprison Passi and not to let him talk to anyone, saying that the time for his execution had not come.⁸¹ It seems that Passi's involvement in the Polish affair had been more important for the sultan than his espionage for Phillip II. Koca Sinan protested to the delay of Passi's execution and then he asked the sultan to order his exile to Rhodes, claiming half the population of Istanbul could be brought as witnesses against him and that Imperial Tutor Hoca Sadüddin approved it.⁸² In another report after Koca Sinan Paşa 'proved' Passi's guilt in the libel affair, the grand vizier repeated his arguments for the importance of executing Passi, and asked the sultan again to exile him. The sultan finally ordered Passi's exile to Rhodes, adding that

⁷⁹ 'muhasalı ekser yazılan kağıdlar bunların marifetiyle olmak mukarrer fehmolundu'. See: Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın Telhisleri*, 183.

⁸⁰ Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa'nın Telhisleri*, 12-15.

⁸¹ Ibidem, 90-91.

⁸² Ibidem, 181-182.

spilling the dirty blood of the infidel was not necessary.⁸³ Thus Koca Sinan Paşa managed to adorn Passi with an iron necklace and exile him to Rhodes.

Factional politics relied on allegations and gossip transmitted to the sultan anonymously at the late sixteenth century Ottoman court. Voluntary informers wrote and sent libelous letters (called *kağıd* or *rika*) to the sultan through doorkeepers and other palace officials, or simply by throwing them into the inner courtyard of the palace. The ostensible intention of their authors was to inform the sultan about the corruption, embezzlement, treason, or oppression of political elites. However, they were often written to denigrate foes, or blackmail the sultan by outlining the preparations for rebellion among the soldiers anonymously. Gossip and slander also served this purpose, though only libel was a vehicle of communicating things one would not dare to say to the sultan. Libel was also used in European courts, where underground presses made them available for masses.⁸⁴ In the Ottoman Empire, libel texts were transmitted in private, and even the names *kağıd* (paper) and *rika* (a shorthand) point to the ongoing manuscript era.⁸⁵

Conspiracy or Conspiracy Theory

The distinction between conspiracy and conspiracy theory is useful for thinking about what might have happened. Conspiracies do not always benefit those who plan them; sometimes another person can exploit an existing conspiracy with a convincing conspiracy theory. The willingness of the steward to give testimony and the lack of detail about the interrogations suggest the possibility of what the historian Carlo Ginzburg calls ‘false conspiracy’. Ginzburg argues that ‘conspiracies exist, and false conspiracies always conceal real ones.’ Here, the false conspiracy would be Koca Sinan’s claim that David Passi and Saatçi Hasan wrote the libel. The real conspiracy

⁸³ Sahillioğlu ed., *Koca Sinan Paşa’nın Telhisleri*, 16.

⁸⁴ Leimon and Parker, ‘Treason and Plot in Elizabethan Diplomacy’, 1142-1143.

⁸⁵ Sokollu Mehmed Paşa’s enemies resorted to libel; a libel written to denigrate Sokollu Mehmed Paşa, probably around 1579 survives. See ‘Hırzû’l-Mülûk’ in: *Osmanlı Devlet Teşkilatına Dair Kaynaklar: Kitâb-ı Müstetâb, Kitâb-ı Mesâlibi’l-Müslimîn ve Menâfî’l-Mü’minîn, Hırzû’l-Mülûk* [Sources about the Structure of the Ottoman State: The Book of the Excellent, The Book of the Affairs of Muslims and Benefits of Believers, The Castle of Kings], Yaşar Yücel ed. (Ankara 1988) 143-207.

could be that an unrelated third person or someone who was following Koca Sinan's orders wrote the libellous letter that the grand vizier successfully attributed to David Passi and Saatçi Hasan.⁸⁶

On August 2, 1591, Koca Sinan himself was dismissed and replaced with his rival Ferhad Paşa. Ferhad Paşa became the leader of the pro-Spanish party, against virtually everyone else. At one point, the sultan asked him not to broach the subject of peace again. Meanwhile, the new grand admiral Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Paşa was going to the arsenal everyday. Under the influence of the imperial tutor he, too, became enthusiastic about a campaign against Spain. They intrigued for reinstating Koca Sinan with the support of Murad III's consort, Safiye Sultan.⁸⁷ After nine months, Murad III dismissed Ferhad Paşa because of another libel (this time signed by the Chief of the Janissaries Mehmed Ağa).⁸⁸ The sultan wanted to reappoint Koca Sinan and get on with the Spanish campaign. However, he was away from the capital, so he appointed Siyavuş Paşa instead, who restarted the truce negotiations with Spain once more.⁸⁹

It must be immediately after Koca Sinan's dismissal that a Jew called Arslan wrote a petition to the sultan for the release of his 'father Frank David who had been innocently exiled to Rhodes due to ill will'.⁹⁰ Within a week, on August 9, 1591, the sultan ordered the Governor of Rhodes to set David Passi free and send him back to Istanbul.⁹¹ The Venetian ambassador reported on September 21 that David Passi had returned from Rhodes with terror on his face. The ambassador thought that he would better leave the affairs of the state alone, 'if he had any brains at all'.⁹²

The last appearance of David Passi in Istanbul was in 1593; Judah Serfatim (the London agent of Alvaro Mendes) wrote a letter to Rodrigo

⁸⁶ C. Ginzburg, 'Learning from the Enemy: On the French Prehistory of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion' (paper presented at Aptullah Kuran Lectures, Boğaziçi University, April 1, 2005).

⁸⁷ 'Venice: March 1592', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 9*, 14-21.

⁸⁸ Selaniki, *Tarih-i Selaniki*, 264-265.

⁸⁹ 'Venice: April 1592', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 9*, 21-26.

⁹⁰ 'babam Rodos'a sürgün olan Frenk David ki günahı olmayub garazan sürgün olmuştur' in TC Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı [Republic of Turkey, Prime Ministry's State Archives Directorate, Ottoman Archives Administration], Mühimme Defterleri 67, p 151, no. 396.

⁹¹ Cited in Fodor, 'Anti-Semite Grand Vizier?', 205.

⁹² 'Venice: September 1591', *Calendar of State Papers, Vol. 8*, 554-558.

Lopez, which stated that Passi was in prison.⁹³ Koca Sinan, who had been appointed grand vizier for the third time on January 28, 1593, must have found a way to eliminate Passi once and for all. However, border skirmishes in Hungary became a serious problem, which led Koca Sinan Paşa to lead the pro-war party against the Habsburgs of Vienna, which resulted in the Long War (1593-1606).

Conclusion

The domestic and foreign interests Koca Sinan Paşa harboured boiled down to a single libel plot. Maybe he just came up with a convincing theory, maybe he conspired against Saatçi Hasan and David Passi. It seems plausible that the grand vizier resorted to intrigue. After all, his anti-Jewish denunciation or foreign policy arguments did not suffice to remove Passi and his ally Saatçi Hasan from the court.

Defeating Spain would have been the Ottoman comeback in the Mediterranean. Were the times ripe for this? The Ottoman Empire had monetary and fiscal problems, partly due to prolonged warfare in Iran. Furthermore, Murad III could not trust any one grand vizier for long. It is said that his extreme superstition led him to depend on the imperial astrologer, Takiyüddin, and his sheik, Şücaeddin, more than his temporal advisers or his absolute deputy, the grand vizier. In spite of having powerful backers at the Ottoman court such as Koca Sinan Paşa and the Imperial Tutor Sadeddin Efendi, the Anglo-Ottoman offensive against Spain could not be realized. At the height of the fleet preparations in 1591, Murad III dismissed Koca Sinan. Like the Ottoman expansion in the Indian Ocean in the 1580s, the Anglo-Ottoman offensive against Spain was thwarted by the instability of the office of the grand vizier. However, trade and diplomacy between the two countries prospered.

The greatest statesmen pursued their own interests and glory in those of their king, queen, sultan or shah. This was clearly the discourse Koca Sinan Paşa employed in his reports. However, we also know about his commercial endeavours that led him to be extremely wealthy. Koca Sinan showed that he was good at conjecturing when the conjuncture was suitable for success, laying out the strategy for coordinating enormous projects. Maybe Koca Sinan's weakness was that he blew up these plans to grandiose

⁹³ Faroqhi, 'Ein Günstling', 296.

proportions, each time including a costly canal project, which his rivals used to bring about the grand vizier's dismissal.

Double agents like David Passi had the courage to set out on uncertain paths across the separating lines of religion, language, nation and ruler, but not always without a cost. Back in 1573 when Passi became a double agent of Venice and Spain, he knew very well that he could face treason charges. However those who took the risk of disgrace were not limited to double agents. Members of the political elite all dissimulated about their personal interests in foreign policy and mercantile issues.

People leave behind documents: traces of events, transactions, friendships, enmities, negotiations, itineraries and plans. Although different documents give us different clues about what might have happened, they are not portals that transport us to an already inaccessible past reality. Whether or not David Passi and Saatçi Hasan conspired, or Koca Sinan created a convincing theory to discredit them, will never be known. The most plausible approximation is that Koca Sinan was able to manipulate the situation with a greater degree of finesse and candour than the multi-sided agent and his associate.