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The New Indies, the Desired Indies: Antonio Possevino and the Jesuits between Diplomacy and Missionarism in Northeastern Europe, 1577–1587

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1 Possevino's Rise: Muscovy and Transylvania

Antonio Possevino (1533–1611) was a Jesuit intellectual and diplomat credited to have contributed to the establishment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (1622), the Holy See's organ that to this day oversees Catholic missionaries across the world.¹ Possevino's most famous writing is probably his *Bibliotheca selecta de ratione studiorum, ad disciplinas & ad salutem omnium gentium procurandam*, a massive bibliography designed to complement the Jesuit curriculum, which saw many editions after its first publication in 1593. The *Bibliotheca selecta* contains texts that Possevino considered best for educating Catholics, while taking into account the environments in which they lived.² The attention he gave to political and cultural details in this and other works was undoubtedly due to his extensive knowledge of local conditions in western and northeastern Europe, which informed his pragmatic and militant brand of Catholic missionarism.

After entering the Society of Jesus in 1559, Possevino preached for 13 years against the Huguenots and Waldensians in Piedmont and France. Between 1573 and 1577, he held the prestigious position of secretary to the general of the Society, but that work left him hungry for more direct action. He requested to be sent to Greece or Transylvania, where he could be closer to the Ottoman empire—the target of all his diplomatic efforts, which galvanized his attention throughout his career.³ Instead, he was sent to Sweden, where he was asked to lead the Jesuit mission that had been secretly established there in 1575, with

1 J. Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino's Plan for World Evangelization," *The Catholic Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (1988), 179–198; J. Santich, "The Role of the Jesuits in the Westernization of Russia, 1596–1656" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley: 1992), 195–196.

2 S. Mostaccio, *Early Modern Jesuits Between Obedience and Conscience During the Generalate of Claudio Acquaviva (1581–1615)* (Burlington: 2014), 44.

3 Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino's Plan," 180, 188.

the hidden purpose of converting the Swedish king, John III Vasa—and then gradually the entire country—to Catholicism. The mission ended in 1580 in complete failure. The Jesuits were expelled from the country and their college in Stockholm burned when Possevino decided to make their mission publicly known, in a daring move that was meant to pressure John III to convert and which proved a grave miscalculation.⁴

Despite the dismal end of his efforts in Sweden, Possevino's enthusiasm for working on the frontier of the Catholic world was immediately employed elsewhere. In 1581, the tsar of Muscovy, Ivan IV ("the Terrible"), who had been embroiled for decades in military conflict with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, requested papal mediation in order to establish peace. The Muscovite side was at a disadvantage after a series of Polish-Lithuanian advances, and Ivan was shrewd enough to use to his own benefit the Polish-Lithuanian king's deference to Rome and the pope's own hopes for an anti-Ottoman league and a union with the Orthodox Church. Despite its clumsiness with western diplomatic protocol, the Muscovite embassy proved successful.⁵ Gregory XIII (1572–1585) decided to send a special envoy as mediator between the two parties, and the choice fell on Antonio Possevino, freshly returned from northern Europe. Possevino successfully negotiated the truce of Jam Zapolski (signed in January 1582), which gave Muscovy and Poland-Lithuania a ten-year respite from military engagement—an outcome welcomed by both sides of the barricade, exhausted as they were by the rising financial and psychological toll of the conflict. Ivan's promises of military assistance against the Ottomans, however, remained vague. As for the union of the churches, the tsar's reaction did not leave any room for doubt. When Possevino suggested recognizing the primacy of the pope, Ivan flew into a rage that made the Jesuit fear for his life.⁶

Possevino's mission to Muscovy led to a long-lasting friendship with Stephen Báthory, king of Poland-Lithuania. The two saw eye to eye when it came to strategies for supporting Catholicism in the region. Báthory was first and foremost a soldier, and his favourite manner of resolving conflicts was by force of arms. However, as far as religion was concerned, he was fundamentally pragmatic

4 O. Garstein, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in Scandinavia, until the Establishment of the S. Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in 1622: Based on Source Material in the Kolsrud Collection, 1583–1622*, Universitetsforlaget, 2 vols (Oxford, 1963); O. Garstein, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in Scandinavia: Jesuit Educational Strategy, 1553–1622* (Leiden: 1992); Santich, "The Role of the Jesuits," 172.

5 P. Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège: études diplomatiques* (Paris: 1897–1906), 2:11, 18.

6 A. Possevino, *The Moscovia of Antonio Possevino, S.J.*, ed. H.F. Graham (Pittsburgh: 1977), 72; Santich, "The Role of the Jesuits," 216.

and would not engage in actions he deemed unrealistic. In Transylvania—Báthory's home country—he had been one of the few Catholics left in the realm, and when he was elected to the Transylvanian throne (1571), he learned to operate within a constitutional system that had been erected to protect religious pluralism. His loyalty to Rome became stronger in time, but he never went outside the legal framework of his role—not for religious purposes, at any rate. After his election to the Polish-Lithuanian throne (1576), he took measures that promoted the Catholic Church in the region, often with the help of the Society of Jesus, but still within the limits of the local constitution, which, like in Transylvania, protected liberty of conscience and banned religious persecution. While working with Protestants as political supporters and advisors, Báthory used Jesuits in the promotion of his own church. Not only did he support their activities in the Commonwealth, but he also sent them to Transylvania (1579–1588) to erect colleges and seminaries, in the hope of enticing the Transylvanian youth back to the fold of the Catholic Church.⁷

Possevino, in turn, was a quintessential Jesuit in the sense that he believed in the power of education. Both in his correspondence and in his more formal writings, he insisted that missionaries should learn local languages, and he spent much energy advocating the importance of quality translations of fundamental Catholic texts. But education was not the only way of reviving Catholicism, in Possevino's eyes. Like Ignatius of Loyola, he had a martial understanding of mission, best illustrated by his persistent idea of establishing military academies for Catholic youth throughout Europe, in order to prepare them for crusades against the heretics and infidels.⁸ Another illustration is the text he wrote for soldiers fighting against the Ottomans in the Mediterranean and the Huguenots in France (*Il Soldato christiano*, 1569). In this work, he depicted a chain of obedience with the pope at the top, to which the soldiers were required to submit without questioning. However, while teaching obedience to regular Christians, Possevino evidently reserved for himself—as well as a small elite of decision-makers within the church—the privilege and burden of discernment, which allowed for a certain measure of individual agency

7 A. Pontecorvo Martonffy, "The Early Counter-Reformation in Hungary: Jesuits, Papal Nuncios, and the Hungarian Lands, 1550–1606" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago: 1980), 145–79, 229–316.

8 P. Pierling, *Báthory et Possevino: documents inédits sur les rapports du Saint-Siège avec les Slaves* (Paris: 1887), 186; Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino's Plan," 196–197; J.P. Donnelly, "Some Jesuit Counter-Reformation Strategies in East Central Europe, 1550–1585," in: *Politics, Religion, and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of De Lamar Jensen*, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 27 (Kirksville, MO: 1994), 8–12.

and even disobedience, when necessity required it.⁹ Possevino never theorized about it in his writings, but his entire career illustrates that, next to education and military campaigns, he also believed in diplomacy and high-level politics, particularly in the shape of secret dealings, which often required a good measure of discernment. As we will see below, Possevino's discernment eventually terminated his diplomatic career.

After the conclusion of the peace with Muscovy, Stephen Báthory asked Possevino's assistance in another dispute—this time a territorial claim he raised against Rudolf II, king of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor. The claim concerned the territories around Szatmár and Némethi (now Satu Mare), which had belonged to the Báthory family but were occupied in 1561, along with other border areas, by Imperial troops and brought under Habsburg control as part of Royal Hungary. The territories were recovered under Báthory's command while he was still the main military officer in Transylvania, but they were retaken by the Habsburgs in 1565. Báthory was sent to Vienna in 1565 to negotiate the situation on behalf of Transylvania's ruler at the time (John Sigismund Szapolyai, 1540–1570), but a change in his instructions from home led to a rash reaction from Maximilian, who ordered Báthory's imprisonment. The future ruler of Transylvania and king of Poland-Lithuania remained captive in Vienna and Prague for two years. He was only released at the intervention of the Polish king, Sigismund II Augustus, and he never forgot his imprisonment, nor the land his family lost, which fuelled his deep and long-lasting distrust of the Imperial court.¹⁰

In 1582, when Possevino suggested joining forces with the Holy Roman Emperor within the framework of a Holy League—now that there was peace on the eastern front—Báthory mentioned the obstacle that prevented an alliance with Vienna and asked for Possevino's assistance in solving the matter. The pope agreed to Possevino's role as mediator in the Szatmár dispute, and the

9 Possevino and a few other Jesuits were part of a group who defied their generals and involved the papacy in their attempts to reform the Society; see Mostaccio, *Early Modern Jesuits*, 39–42. See also P. Foresta, “De su alteza es mandar y de nosotros obedecir: Riflessioni su obbedienza e disobbedienza nei primi gesuiti,” *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 92, no. 1 (2012), 328–358. On obedience and discernment in the letters of Jesuit missionaries, see T. Peeters, “Trust in the Indipetae from Seventeenth-Century Genoa and Corsica” in G. Imbruglia, P.-A. Fabre, and G. Mongini, eds., *Litterae Indipetae. Una fonte lunga cinque secoli* (forthcoming).

10 I. Lukinich, “La jeunesse d'Etienne Báthory,” in: A. de Divéky ed., *Etienne Báthory: roi de Pologne, prince de Transylvanie* (Cracow: 1935), 18–46; J. Donnelly, “Antonio Possevino, S.J. as Papal Mediator between Emperor Rudolf II and King Stephan Báthory,” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 69 (2000), 3–7.

protracted negotiations lasted between 1582 and 1585, proving to be more difficult than the peace with Muscovy. Rudolf II refused to return the Szatmár and Némethi territories to the Báthory family and offered a different area in return—but only after long delays and much opposition from Báthory, who felt deeply offended by the fact that Rudolf contested his right to the territories in question. Possevino did his best to keep the discussions open, despite several instances when the two parties (and especially Báthory) threatened to shut them down.

In between negotiation rounds on the Szatmár affair, Possevino and Báthory conversed about Muscovy (and Báthory's desire to conquer it) and Transylvania (and Báthory's wish to strengthen its Catholicism and fortify it militarily against the Ottomans). In 1583, the king convinced Possevino to visit his native land. The result of that 47-day trip was a work titled *Transilvania*, which Possevino completed in late 1583, during breaks in the negotiations with the Imperial party at Cassovia.¹¹ In this book, Possevino surveyed the religious situation in Transylvania and identified the groups that we would label today as Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Antitrinitarians, and Orthodox Christians, together with their likely response to Catholic missionary efforts.¹² Like other visitors who wrote similar reports about the area, Possevino lamented the scarcity of Catholic clergy and emphasized the despair of abandoned Catholic flocks that would beg, "with tears in their eyes," that their confessions be heard or that at least they receive a blessing whenever a Catholic priest appeared in the area.¹³

Possevino was not one to dwell on lamentations or tears, though. His report was a carefully laid-out plan for "helping Transylvania" (*modi di aiutare la Transilvania*)—and through it, Hungary, Moldavia, and Wallachia as well.¹⁴ Its details are highly illustrative of how entangled religious, political, military, educational, and social aspects could be, and how seamlessly Possevino could play the role of a missionary, a diplomat, and a military strategist at once. Both in the preface and in the final part of the work, the Jesuit requested from Pope Gregory XIII money and manpower that amounted to no more than the value of "two equipped and manned galleys," but which would be greatly effective in bringing religious change in the country. More specifically, he mentioned that he "would desire" 50 priests to be sent to the area. Other than Jesuits,

11 Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino," 25.

12 For the sake of expediency, I will make use of these rather anachronistic labels in the following paragraphs, even though they were not used as such at the time (they only became common-place in the 17th century in Transylvania).

13 A. Possevino, *Transilvania (1584)* (Budapest: Tip. artistica Stephaneum, 1913), 54–56.

14 Possevino, *Transilvania*, 173.

they could be graduates of the German and English colleges in Rome as well as Franciscans, “because the Turks have respect for them.” Besides priests, he requested interpreters (“like it is done in the Indies”), but he also insisted that “that language [Hungarian] is not impossible to learn; many Italian and German merchants and soldiers are already learning it,” and therefore the missionaries could and should do the same. Printed books, “which already exist but should be in greater number,” and the establishment of a local Catholic printing press would greatly help as well.¹⁵

What other ways of helping Transylvania were there? Possevino quickly moved to more pragmatic solutions, many of which were quite political in nature: placing more Catholics in positions of power (counsellors but also military captains); forging political alliances with the Lutheran elite (who was less opposed to the Catholic Church than the Calvinists or Antitrinitarians); converting influential non-Catholic figures such as Transylvania’s chancellor, Wolfgang Kowaczocsy; allowing Calvinists and Antitrinitarians to educate their sons in Jesuit schools without imposing religious obligations on them; encouraging them to study at Catholic universities rather than Leipzig, Wittenberg, or Tubingen (although it should be said that plenty Hungarians studied at Padua); establishing military schools staffed by loyal Catholics; bringing in Italian colonists from the Valtelline area, because of climate similarities; building a new fortress in northern Transylvania with funding from both Báthory and the pope (the latter could request that it be manned by Catholic soldiers only, so that Báthory does not carry the blame for introducing religious discrimination); closing the “Arian” (Antitrinitarian) school in Kolozsvár (although on this point Possevino expressed uncertainty on account of the measure being liable to provoke great unrest in the country); sending a bishop to Transylvania (which had had no Catholic bishop since 1556); and finally, opening more Jesuit residences throughout the country.¹⁶

In all of the above, Possevino insisted on caution and discretion. “The more [we] push, the more threatening [we] seem,” he wrote.¹⁷ What should the Jesuits do instead? Teach by example, but also learn: “[They should] apply great care in [tending to] their own souls, behavior, and sobriety, not only for the salvation of the soul, but also for the health of the body ... and learn the language in order to be able to help others.” Most importantly, they should avoid setting the locals against the Society; for this purpose, they should be mindful of what they write in their letters, lest they be intercepted by the

15 Possevino, *Transilvania*, 3, 196.

16 A summary is provided in Martonffy, “The Early Counter-Reformation,” 211–216.

17 Possevino, *Transilvania*, 176; Martonffy, “The Early Counter-Reformation,” 214.

“heretics.”¹⁸ Ironically, the Jesuit mission in Transylvania—just like the one in Sweden, for that matter—would have benefited from heeding Possevino’s advice for more discretion. In the first half of the 1580s, the Transylvanian mission opened a seminary, lower schools in three cities, and upper classes in two, and it had some success with preaching and conversions in the big cities. Their greatest success was reflected in the approximately 200 students enrolled in the Kolozsvár college within one year of its foundation (1581), 18 of whom were non-Catholics in 1585 (the students were indeed not required to profess Catholicism or to attend Catholic mass). But the locals were not happy with the Jesuit presence in the country, as they feared their religious influence and resented their tax exemptions and wine sale privileges. Rumblings against them were heard at estate assemblies in 1585 and 1586, and in the spring of 1587 the Easter procession in Várad was attacked by local Protestants. At the first opportunity, which presented itself in December 1588, the estates forced the hand of their (Catholic) ruler—Sigismund Báthory, Stephen’s nephew, whose position on the throne had to be confirmed by the diet after his reaching majority that year—and passed a resolution that expelled the Jesuits from Transylvania. At the assembly, the estate representatives accused the Jesuits of idol-worship and blamed them for the 1586 plague. They were given 15 days to vacate their residences and their properties were officially relegated to the princely domain.¹⁹

2 Possevino’s Fall: Szatmár and the Polish-Lithuanian Interregnum

Possevino himself would have done well to heed his own advice on discretion. Back in 1584–1585, as the Szatmár negotiations were approaching their

18 Possevino, *Transilvania*, 196, 198.

19 The death of their protector, Stephen Báthory, in 1586, was another important blow to the Transylvanian Jesuits, who were thus deprived of their most important source of moral and material support. After their expulsion from Transylvania, the Jesuits went to Poland-Lithuania, Austria, and Royal Hungary, but a few remained disguised as secular priests on the private estates of the prince and several Catholic nobles. In 1591 there was a partial rescinding of the expulsion order, allowing Sigismund Báthory to have a Jesuit teacher and a confessor at court. The expulsion order was canceled in 1595, at the beginning of the 15-year war between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, which marked a temporary ascendance of Catholic influence in Transylvania, but although the Jesuits could return at the turn of the century, they never regained the visibility they had in the 1580s. In 1607, a law was passed by the Transylvanian estates that requested all Catholic priests working in the principality to be of Hungarian origin—an interesting decision openly directed against outside missionary activities. Martonffy, “The Early Counter-Reformation,” 163–74.

conclusion, Imperial complaints against the Jesuit mediator started piling up on the desks of his superiors, General Claudio Acquaviva (1581–1615) and the pope's secretary of state, Tolemeo Galli (1572–1585). According to Rudolf and his councillors, the Jesuit was far from impartial but favoured the Polish-Lithuanian king, and for this reason they requested his removal from the negotiations. Their suspicions were supported—and to a certain extent fuelled—by the negative sentiments of the papal nuncios to the Empire and the Commonwealth (Germanico Malaspina and Alberto Bolognetti) who, as the pope's official ambassadors in the region, felt slighted by Possevino's prominent diplomatic role at the two courts. Possevino blamed their jealousy—and especially Malaspina's—for the rising mistrust in his role as mediator, but he also attributed it to the interception of several letters written to him by Báthory and his chancellor, Jan Zamoyski, which showed how little well-disposed they were towards the Emperor, and which compromised Possevino along with the entire endeavour. Despite Possevino's attempts to defend himself, General Acquaviva was more concerned with the reputation of the Jesuit order, so he approached Galli and asked that Possevino be removed from the Szatmár negotiations. In February 1585, after obtaining approval from the pope (who, like Acquaviva, was keen to show impartiality in the matter, since Rudolf's suspicions extended all the way to the Holy See), Galli gave Possevino the order to place himself under the authority of the local Jesuit superior and withdraw to Braunsberg college, where he was to occupy himself with purely religious and intellectual pursuits. Thus Possevino was deprived, only days before the Szatmár agreement was signed, of the special diplomatic authority that had been conferred on him by the pope.²⁰ Bitter but powerless, Possevino did as requested. Only two months later, however, Gregory XIII's death in April 1585 reopened the door to his diplomatic ambitions.

Báthory had continued to treat Possevino as a close confidant even after the latter's retirement to Braunsberg. The king's dream to invade Muscovy and bring it under his control had been growing in the previous years, and he had often shared these ambitions with the Jesuit. After the Szatmár affair was finally concluded and matters were settled with Rudolf II, the Polish-Lithuanian king grew restless, and the election of a new pope only stoked the fire. Sixtus V (1585–90) was a Franciscan known for his austerity and crusading spirit, and

20 R. Reichenberger ed., *Nuntiatuurberichte aus Deutschland, 1584–1590*, vol. 2/1 (Paderborn: 1905), 23–24, 62–67, 74; Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 2:272–273; Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino," 52–55; L. Burkiewicz, "Sylwetka Antonio Possevino SJ (1533–1611)," in: D. Quirini-Popławska ed., *Antonio Possevino SJ (1533–1611). Życie i dzieło na tle epoki* (Cracow: 2012), 175–176.

his background encouraged Possevino to take the liberty to write to his secretary of state (Decio Azzolino) about Báthory's plans. Gregory XIII's vision of a broad Holy League was no longer on the table; the king was now requesting direct financial support for swift military action against Muscovy, which would then—Possevino insisted—make possible an attack on the Ottoman empire. Báthory pushed Possevino to go to Rome and discuss these matters in person with the pope, practically treating him as his own envoy. But Possevino could not emerge from his exile without at least asking for permission. In February 1586, he and the king sent letters to Acquaviva and Azzolino, asking the Jesuit general and the papal secretary to authorize Possevino's role in this highly sensitive matter. Acquaviva gave no definite response—which shows how reticent he was to allow Possevino to become involved in politics again. Azzolino, by contrast, invited the Jesuit to Rome—but without pressing him too hard or setting a deadline. As militant as he was, the new pope was still reluctant to support belligerence against a tsar whose father, only four years before, had sought Rome's assistance in bringing peace between Muscovy and Poland-Lithuania.²¹

Possevino went to Rome without waiting for Acquaviva's permission. His trip went on the heels of Báthory's nephew and official envoy to the pope, Cardinal András Báthory, who made a general presentation to the pope in March 1586. While preparing for his own departure, Possevino told Azzolino to delay all decisions on the matter until his arrival, as he was in the possession of "secrets" that he could only transmit orally on behalf of Báthory. At this point, he was virtually an independent agent, acting outside his usual chains of command—the papacy and the Society of Jesus. At best, he was Báthory's representative, although he was not completely compliant to the king's ideas either—he often tried to steer Báthory back to the idea of an anti-Ottoman crusade each time the king seemed to forget the supposed ultimate goal of his plans. In Rome, throughout the late summer and autumn of 1586, Possevino managed to convince Sixtus V to support Báthory's plans. In November, the pope wrote the king an encouraging letter. More importantly, he also sent him an installment of 24,000 *scudi*, which were entrusted to the new papal nuncio to the Commonwealth, Annibale de Capua, who started towards Poland-Lithuania together with Possevino in late 1586. In a misguided attempt to leave the door open to a more pacifist approach, Sixtus also wrote to the Muscovite tsar, Feodor I (1584–1598), letting him know about Báthory's ambitions and advising him to reach an agreement with the Polish-Lithuanian king rather than resort to

21 Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 2:288–295, 304–306.

war. He requested that Possevino take the letter to Muscovy in person, but the Jesuit used every reason he could fathom to shake free of this unwanted mission: it was inappropriate for a member of the Society of Jesus to become so involved in such matters; it would give the wrong idea to the Commonwealth about the pope's intentions; and last but not least, his health was not so good. Not heeding his protestations, Sixtus also gave Possevino the authority to deal with the details of whatever agreement might be reached between Feodor and Báthory, and—strangely enough—to act as mediator between Báthory and his own parliament (the Polish-Lithuanian Sejm), which was expected to oppose the king's request to finance his planned campaign against Muscovy.²²

In the end, none of these preparations amounted to anything. On 12 December 1586, soon after Possevino started his trip towards Poland-Lithuania, Stephen Báthory died unexpectedly after a short illness. When the pope learned the sad news, he forcefully expressed his regret at having to abandon the king's plans, to which Sixtus had evidently become more attached than he had previously let on. Possevino found out about Báthory's death while passing through the Holy Roman Empire, and the news was disheartening in more ways than one. Not only was the Jesuit devastated by the loss of his favourite monarch, but he had the unfortunate chance to witness first-hand how bitter the race for the Polish-Lithuanian throne was going to be—and how dangerous for his own position in the region. Poland-Lithuania was an elective monarchy, and Báthory's death opened an interregnum characterized by unusually intense factionalism, thanks in no small part to the Habsburgs' previous attempts to win the Polish-Lithuanian crown. While still in Prague, in January 1587, Possevino had a conversation with Archduke Maximilian, the Emperor's brother and one of the strongest Habsburg candidates in this election (several of Rudolf's brothers entered the race, but in time it became apparent that Archduke Ernest and especially Archduke Maximilian had the highest chances to win). Maximilian conveyed to the Jesuit how intent he was on winning the election and asked for his support. Possevino, who in an earlier letter to the pope had suggested in a veiled manner that the Swedish candidacy was probably more viable, could only respond with vague promises of impartiality and hopes for providential help, and advised Maximilian to reach an agreement with the other archdukes who were poised to enter the race. The meeting must have been particularly uncomfortable, because almost immediately afterwards, on 22 January, Possevino wrote to Rome asking permission to retire somewhere quiet until the electoral storm would pass. He was not mistaken: complaints

22 Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 2:304–312.

about him started pouring from Rudolf II soon enough. The Emperor wrote to the Imperial crown-cardinal Ludovico Madruzzo that Possevino had designs against his brothers' candidacy to the Polish-Lithuanian throne, and he asked for his removal from the region. In early April, Madruzzo wrote back to let Rudolf know that both Acquaviva and the pope had been mobilized in solving this problem. Possevino immediately wrote to Archduke Maximilian to deny the rumours that he favoured the Swedish candidacy (which was incidentally supported by Báthory's former councillors and allies, and with whom Possevino undoubtedly sympathized, despite his efforts at impartiality). He even ventured to give Maximilian advice about how to best rule Poland-Lithuania in the event that he was elected. "Despite all this, these sirs [the Habsburgs] remain unsatisfied," wrote the papal nuncio to Vienna, Antonio Puteo, in a letter to Cardinal Montalto, the pope's nephew and secretary of state. On 6 April 1587, Montalto wrote to Possevino ordering him, in the name of the pope, to leave Poland-Lithuania and go either to Italy or to a Jesuit college in Germany, and once there to await further orders from the pope. Acquaviva supported the decision: he wrote to request that the Holy See leave all members of the Society out of politics. Possevino did not wait to be asked again: he left the Commonwealth almost immediately and by the end of June was already in Padua.²³

Before he left the region, in early May, Possevino wrote one last memo on the subject of the Polish-Lithuanian election. The text had been requested by Stanisław Gomoliński, a Polish prelate connected to Chancellor Zamoyski, who at that time was by far the most powerful dignitary in the realm and who might have been behind the request, although we have no evidence on this matter. Gomoliński's objective was to learn Possevino's thoughts about the Swedish and Muscovite candidacies (Feodor I had also joined the race, and he had a rather significant following among the Lithuanian and Polish nobilities). Possevino's answer was extremely cautious. He refused to express any preference whatsoever for any of the Catholic candidates, be it the Swedish prince or one of the Austrian archdukes (whom Gomoliński had not even mentioned). Instead, he focused most of his answer, which went on for five pages, on the undesirability of putting the Orthodox Feodor on the Commonwealth's throne. Possevino's words against the Muscovite tsar had a forcefulness that contradicted his earlier optimism about the union of churches or the possibility of

23 Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 2:315–320; Joseph Schweizer, "Antonio Possevino S.J. und die polnische Sukzessionsfrage im Jahre 1587," *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte* 23 (1909), 179–190; J. Schweizer, ed., *Nuntiaturberichte aus Deutschland: nebst ergänzenden Actenstücken: 1585 (1584)–1590. Abt. II: Die Nuntiatur am Kaiserhofe. 2. hälfte: Antonio Puteo in Prag: 1587–1589* (Paderborn: 1912), 28.

an alliance with Muscovy. According to the Jesuit, Feodor would never convert to Catholicism nor would he ever fight for the Church, and what is worse, he would also subject the Commonwealth to religious and political persecution.²⁴

Considering that the Zamoyski party was staunchly anti-Habsburg, Possevino's response may be seen as a subtle green light for the only remaining option, namely the Swedish candidacy—although this is arguably reading too much into it. At face value, all Possevino did was discredit the Muscovite candidate, which in no way went against papal instructions or Imperial interests. Other members of the papal diplomatic machine were in fact much more explicit about the advantages of electing the Swedish prince. In early 1587, Horatio Spannochi, secretary to the late nuncio Alberto Bolognetti, wrote a report on the Polish-Lithuanian interregnum that clearly showed the likelihood and potential benefits of a Swedish success.²⁵ Granted, Spannochi's report was a memo addressed to the pope, not to the Polish-Lithuanian voters, and its author's relatively low position in the papal hierarchy must have protected his candor. Still, this example goes to show that whatever partiality Possevino might have had for Sigismund Vasa was not an isolated preference based on personal fondness, but fit in a wider trend that made the Swedish candidate quite popular in Poland-Lithuania.

Indeed, on 19 August 1587, Sigismund Vasa—soon to become Sigismund III (1588–1632)—was elected king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Zamoyski's faction and the larger part of the nobility. But that was not the end of the electoral race. The pro-Habsburg faction was not willing to accept defeat, and a rival assembly, dominated by Zamoyski's archenemies, the Zborowski family, elected Archduke Maximilian on 22 August. The situation was tense, but it was not the first time a double election occurred in the Commonwealth. In December 1575, Stephen Báthory's election by the greater part of the Polish nobility was a protest against the election of the Emperor Maximilian II by the Commonwealth's most important senators, which had occurred only days before. What solved the conundrum 11 years before had been the swiftness with which Báthory arrived in the country and took the crown, while his rival hesitated over the electoral contract that all Polish-Lithuanian kings were required to sign. Maximilian's son did not make the same mistake. In fact, he went one step too far. The archduke gathered an army and tried to

24 The memo was published in full in O. Halecki, "Possevino's Last Statement on Polish-Russian Relations," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953), 261–302.

25 H. Spannochi, "Discours de l'interregne de Pologne l'annee 1587," in: *Trésor politique divisé en trois livres contenant les relations, instructions, traitez, et divers discours appartenans à la parfaite intelligence de la raison d'Estat* (Paris: 1608), 341–373.

take Cracow—Poland-Lithuania’s coronation capital and the headquarters of anti-Habsburg resistance—by force. His daring, however, was not matched by his military skills. The siege ended in defeat on 24 November, and after a two-month retreat, Maximilian was captured by Zamoyski’s army. He remained their prisoner for more than one year.²⁶

For the third time in seven years, the pope had to send a mediator to help solve a dispute involving Poland-Lithuania. Although Possevino knew north-eastern European affairs better than anybody else in Rome, his involvement was no longer welcome. Ippolito Aldobrandini (the future Clement VIII, 1592–1605) was appointed in his stead to help broker an agreement that could pacify the region. The new mediator felt daunted by the task and requested Acquaviva’s permission to take Possevino along, but the Jesuit general was so adamantly opposed to the idea that Aldobrandini had to embark on his mission armed only with Possevino’s written advice. The memos written for Aldobrandini focused on reconciling the Imperial and Polish-Lithuanian courts after Archduke Maximilian’s renunciation, which Possevino saw as inevitable. The best reconciliation that Possevino could fathom was intermarriage between the Habsburg and the Vasa houses, which had already been discussed before the Polish-Lithuanian election, as a way to bring Sweden closer to Catholic interests. After months of assiduous efforts on Aldobrandini’s part, an agreement was finally reached on 9 March 1589. Archduke Maximilian abandoned his claim to the Polish-Lithuanian throne and recognized Sigismund Vasa—who had already been crowned in Cracow more than one year before—as the rightful king of the Commonwealth. They pledged mutual friendship and, three years later, despite strong opposition from Zamoyski and the anti-Habsburg nobility, Sigismund married one of Maximilian’s cousins.²⁷ Thus ended the rivalry between the Imperial and Polish-Lithuanian courts, which cost Possevino his diplomatic career.

3 Possevino’s Identities

Possevino was a Jesuit at heart, but he performed most of his diplomatic work as a representative of the Holy See, not the Society of Jesus. Perhaps because of

26 The two interregna are discussed in detail in: F. Roşu, *Elective Monarchy in Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania, 1569–1587* (Oxford: 2017); A. Pieńkowska, *Zjazdy i sejmy z okresu bezkrólewia po śmierci Stefana Batorego* (Pułtusk: 2010); E. Dubas-Urwanowicz, *Koronne zjazdy szlacheckie: w dwóch pierwszych bezkrólewach po śmierci Zygmunta Augusta* (Białystok: 1998).

27 Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 2:322–325. One of Possevino’s memos to Aldobrandini (written in Padua on 4 June 1588) was published in full in Schweizer, “Antonio Possevino,” 190–198.

Acquaviva's dislike of political involvement, and his own attraction to it, Possevino preferred the high-flying world of papal politics, where kings and popes concocted secret alliances and planned to take over the world in the name of the Church. Possevino was a learned man, but he was even more a man of action. He saw politics and war as useful and sometimes more efficient ways to implement religious change than missionary efforts alone. Except for his time in Sweden, when he acted in the name of the Jesuit order, his other missions in northeastern Europe were carried out on behalf of and in close consultation with the pope—not the Jesuit general. He had Acquaviva's acquiescence, but between 1581 and 1587 he was practically on loan to the Holy See.

There were times, however, when his Jesuit identity came to the fore—sometimes as a limitation, but more often as a useful asset. Possevino resorted to it in order to deny or refuse political involvement whenever affairs took dangerous turns, such as when Sixtus V wanted to send him to Muscovy in 1586, or when Archduke Maximilian pressured him for support in 1587. At times, he rather embodied the persona of a missionary, such as when he went to Transylvania and helped to organize the college and seminary in Kolozsvár, or when he entreated Ivan IV to recognize the primacy of the Catholic Church. In fact, his two identities—just like politics and religion—were so entangled that trying to separate them might be missing the point. It was only when diplomatic mishaps forced him to withdraw from public life that his Jesuit identity truly took precedence, as illustrated by his placement under the authority of the local superior in February 1585. His return to the Society's fold in 1587 was meant as a demotion, but it also provided him with refuge and a safety net. After all, Possevino did not end his life in poverty and disgrace, but rather as a respected intellectual made famous by the books he wrote in his retirement at the Jesuit colleges of Padua and Ferrara.

Like most diplomats of his time, and indeed like most missionaries who had to operate far from their headquarters, Possevino enjoyed a remarkable amount of autonomy on the ground, which in turn required him to make liberal use of his powers of discernment. He often had to make decisions without consultation with his superiors, and he was as much an advisor as a representative of the pope. The close council he kept with Báthory turned him into a strong supporter of the Polish-Lithuanian king, although it should be said that his efforts at impartiality, visible in his correspondence, were more significant than his Habsburg detractors were willing to admit. After the death of Gregory XIII, however, Possevino went beyond the usual autonomy of discernment that all Jesuits were meant to possess. He actively disregarded Acquaviva's order of retirement and departed for Rome, on the basis of only a vague invitation from the new pope, in order to advocate Báthory's military plans against

Muscovy. At that point, he no longer was an obedient Jesuit or a papal legate; instead, he effectively became Báthory's representative before the Holy See. This paradoxical change did not occur at once. It was a gradual process already under way in 1584, when the king praised in a letter to the pope "the singular trustworthiness of Father Possevino":

I have often thoroughly discussed these matters with him, which I feel pertinent to the public good of the Christian name, so I reiterate my request that Your Holiness have complete trust in him about these matters.²⁸

Such words are often found in ambassadors' letters of accreditation, but less frequently in letters addressed to those who accredited them in the first place.

It is important to note that Possevino's violation of his order of retirement and his diplomatic metamorphosis into Báthory's envoy were not the cause of his final downfall. The new pope—and even Acquaviva, tacitly—went along with it. What ruined Possevino's political career was the dislike that the Habsburg court had taken to him, and their impression that the Jesuit worked against their interests. In the interregnum that followed Báthory's death, Possevino had received formal instructions from Sixtus v to remain neutral and only show partiality on the side of the Catholic faith. Informally, however, the letters he received from Rome indicated that the pope favoured the Habsburg candidacy and especially that of Archduke Ernest (another one of Rudolf II's brothers), whose success Sixtus was prepared to support behind the scenes, including financially. Possevino, however, seemed to have missed the point—or perhaps he willfully ignored it—when, in his audience with Archduke Maximilian, he refused to take sides, to the archduke's frustration.²⁹ Ironically, Possevino's diplomatic career ended because of excessive impartiality.

4 Epilogue: the Jesuits and the Delayed Invasion of Muscovy

After his departure from Poland-Lithuania in the summer of 1587, Antonio Possevino spent the rest of his life in virtual exile from the world of high diplomacy, writing and preaching in Padua and Ferrara. But even from a distance, he continued to take an interest in the affairs of northeastern Europe. In 1604, the Polish-Lithuanian army invaded Muscovy and installed on the

²⁸ Báthory to Gregory XIII, 27 August 1584, in Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino," 8.

²⁹ Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 2:320.

throne a recently converted Catholic pretender who claimed to be the son of Ivan IV, known as Dmitry Ivanovich or False Dmitry (1605–1606). Dmitry's claim won the support of the Polish-Lithuanian king as well as that of the Polish Jesuits, who in turn persuaded the papal nuncio to the Commonwealth and eventually the pope that a Jesuit mission to Muscovy was in order. Enthused by Dmitry's conversion to Catholicism, and encouraged by Possevino's writings about Muscovy, which claimed that the tsar's power was so vast that his subjects could be forced to do anything he pleased, the Jesuits assumed that mass conversion or at least the union of the churches would naturally follow the enthronement of a Catholic tsar. "Oh my Father, we have the new Indies, the desired Indies, and we hold [them] already in [our] hands," wrote in June 1605 Andrzej Lawicki, one of the Jesuits who accompanied Dmitry to Muscovy.³⁰ In the following year, Lawicki went to Rome to report on Dmitry's readiness to start an anti-Ottoman campaign, in an almost perfect mirroring of the 1580s, even though the Jesuits had been warned to avoid any political or military involvement at the beginning of the Dmitry affair.³¹

Unsurprisingly, Possevino was kept in the loop. This was his field of expertise, after all. He maintained a regular correspondence with the Jesuits who accompanied the Polish-Lithuanian army to Muscovy in 1604–1606, and in 1606 he dedicated a special issue of one of his books to Dmitry.³² In the previous year, Possevino had also published a booklet under the pseudonym Barez-zo Barezzi, defending Dmitry's claim to the Muscovite throne. After he was installed in Muscovy in 1605, Dmitry contacted Possevino directly. At the new tsar's request, the Jesuit sent him a collection of religious books in Slavonic, with the purpose of supporting him in his declared intention to spread Catholicism throughout Muscovy. However, neither Dmitry's reign nor the Jesuit mission to Muscovy had any lasting effect. As a matter of fact, both proved highly unpopular and the Jesuits did not have a chance to make their mission public, for fear of violent reactions. The Muscovites were evidently more set in their ways and less docile than expected. In 1606, Dmitry was assassinated and the two Jesuits accompanying his court were thrown into prison, where they languished for two years. When the Polish-Lithuanian army invaded again in 1609–1619, the only noticeable success was the annexation of certain areas to the territory of the Commonwealth. The Jesuits who joined the army

30 A. Lawicki quoted in Santich, "The Role of the Jesuits," 246, 261.

31 Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, 3:143.

32 L. Balsamo, "How to Doctor a Bibliography: Antonio Possevino's Practice," in: G. Fragnito ed., *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: 2001), 76–77.

during these two invasions were publicly referred to as army chaplains—not missionaries—and their work was entirely confined to the spiritual needs of the Polish-Lithuanian soldiers, even though their activities in Rome were recorded under the pompous name *Missio Moscovitica*. After these and a few other failed attempts, the Jesuits were only able to establish a more stable presence in Muscovy under Peter and Catherine the Great, but they never had much success among the Orthodox population. The desired Indies were never attained.³³

5 Conclusions

Possevino's story is a perfect illustration of the complexity of early modern Catholic diplomacy. The study of papal mediation on the frontier of the Catholic world reveals not only the multilayered identities and conflicting loyalties of the temporary ambassadors employed in these mediations, but also the contradictory nature of the Catholic institutions they were supposed to represent. While the papacy was expected to be a unifying force in Christendom, best symbolized by the claims of impartiality professed at these mediations, and therefore not a traditional state actor, it also behaved like any other government constrained by the exigencies of its allies, as shown in the pope's deference to the Habsburg court. While the Jesuits were supposed to support the unity of Christianity and avoid becoming involved in politics, as Acquaviva repeatedly insisted, they were nevertheless found at the court of every Catholic monarch in Europe and beyond, counselling rulers and concocting political and military plans with them. There is certainly nothing new in this vision of a duplicitous Catholic Church—traditional diplomatic history has been looking at the papacy as a regular state actor ever since Ranke. However, this overly political image may simplify the story too much. Neither the papacy nor the Jesuits were animated by solely political goals. In fact, not even the monarchs with whom they dealt only cared about the accumulation of power. Religious ideals of unity and peace were inextricably connected with secular interests in all areas of early modern life, including diplomacy. This study therefore answers to the call of the “new diplomatic history,” which has been resounding in the past two decades, to abandon the teleological study of the medieval and early modern periods as developmental stages of increasingly secularized practices

33 On the False Dmitry story and the Polish-Lithuanian invasions of Muscovy, see: Santich, “The Role of the Jesuits,” 222–323; Pierling, *La Russie et le Saint-Siège*, vol. 3, passim; P.P. Szpaczyński, *Mocarstwowe dążenia Zygmunta III w latach 1587–1618* (Cracow: 2013).

that culminated in the establishment of permanent embassies as the epitome of modern diplomacy.³⁴

The examination of diplomatic dealings at the highest level does not have to be discarded in the pursuit of a new diplomatic history.³⁵ However, we can approach these dealings from a broader perspective. It is instructive to explore not just what was accomplished, but also what was not—for instance Báthory's invasion of Muscovy, or the union of churches—in order to better understand the mental universe of the actors involved. It is relevant to study not just official embassies, but also unofficial and temporary ones, and even mediation efforts on matters that may seem mundane, such as the territorial dispute between Rudolf II and Stephen Báthory, because at closer inspection they reveal hidden motivations for later, more momentous actions. Moreover, it is crucial to look at diplomats not just as docile instruments in the hands of the governments that employed them, but as three-dimensional beings with a life outside their diplomatic activities, and, most importantly, with an enormous amount of autonomy on the ground—at least compared to the modern period. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, it is essential to integrate the 'peripheries'—such as eastern Europe and more generally the non-western world—into our vision of western diplomacy, because only then can we properly understand the centrality of frontier zones in the world of early modern decision-making.³⁶ A deeper analysis of the world of missionaries and papal legates from all these standpoints can bring a fresh perspective on the history of diplomacy.

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