



# APPUNTI & NOTE

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## NOBLE VIOLENCE AND BANDITRY ALONG THE BORDER BETWEEN THE VENETIAN REPUBLIC AND THE AUSTRIAN HABSBURGS\*

**ABSTRACT:** *The article at hand is a contribution to studying the problem of noble violence along the Habsburg-Venetian border, with an emphasis on the 17th century. The border facilitated the general spread of violence, primarily through two Habsburg-Venetian wars (1508-1516/1521 and 1615-1617). During the warfare, the land witnessed an influx of a significant number of mercenaries who often indulged in looting and spreading terror among the local population. One part of the troops remained in the area after the conflicts ended, often in the service of feudal lords at whose behest they committed a series of crimes in relation to feuds between noble families. The reason for the proliferation of violence along the Habsburg-Venetian border should be sought not only in the inefficient judicial system (especially the widely prevalent sentence of banishment, the so-called "bando") and inadequate means of repression, but also in the blood feuds among noble families and factions (e.g. in the infamous Cormons feud).*

**KEYWORDS:** *banditry, feud, nobility, Gorizia, Cormons, Friuli.*

### VIOLENZA NOBILIARE E BANDITISMO LUNGO IL CONFINE TRA LA REPUBBLICA DI VENEZIA E LE TERRE DEGLI ASBURGO

**SOMMARIO:** *L'articolo intende contribuire allo studio della violenza nobiliare lungo il confine tra la Repubblica di Venezia e le terre ereditarie degli Asburgo d'Austria, ponendo in primo piano la situazione nel Seicento. L'area visse in un generale clima di violenza, soprattutto durante le due guerre combattute tra la Repubblica di Venezia e gli Asburgo d'Austria (1508-1516/1521 e 1615-1617). Durante le guerre il territorio e i suoi abitanti risentirono pesantemente della presenza dei soldati mercenari. Dopo la fine dei conflitti, una parte dei soldati restò sul territorio, spesso a servizio della nobiltà feudale, compiendo vari delitti nell'ambito delle faide nobiliari. Le ragioni del proliferarsi della violenza lungo il confine vanno, infatti, individuate non solo nel sistema giudiziario, dimostratosi non abbastanza efficiente (soprattutto con la diffusa prassi del bando), e nell'insufficienza di mezzi di repressione, ma anche nelle faide nobiliari (per es. nella cruenta faida di Cormons).*

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** *banditismo, faida, nobiltà, Gorizia, Cormons, Friuli.*

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\* Abbreviations used in the article: Asgo, Archivio di Stato di Gorizia [State Archives of Gorizia], Italy; Aspgo, Archivio Storico Provinciale di Gorizia [Historical Archives of the Province of Gorizia], Italy; Psac, Parrocchia di Sant'Adalberto di Cormons [Parish Archives of Sant'Adalberto in Cormons], Italy.

Certain parts of early modern Europe were marked by an almost endemic spread of banditry, with different roots and characteristics in different states and regions. Mediterranean banditries were a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The article at hand provides a contribution to examining the problem of noble violence and banditry along the border between the Venetian Republic and the Habsburg hereditary lands, where the idiosyncrasies of the Mediterranean intertwined with those of the continental world, with a special emphasis on the 17th century.

Noble exiles, otherwise legally ousted, often retained their presence in society or on its margins. When they were forced to seek refuge in a foreign territory, they could rely on the support of their relatives or help themselves with possessions that feudal families often had on both sides of the border. When, however, they were left with no income and assistance, banditry was their only way of survival. In such instances, they would also resort to other illegal practices like smuggling, robbery, extortion, etc.

### **General spread of violence in the border area**

When examining the said complex problem, consideration should be given to the specific political, economic, social and geographic situation of the Habsburg-Venetian border area, in which the Austrian Habsburgs and Venetians contended not only for the territory but for the souls, as Laura Casella puts it in her discussion on the extreme mobility of local nobles<sup>2</sup>. The border contributed to a widespread proliferation of violence, primarily through two wars that took place between the Venetian Republic and the ruling House of Habsburg: one between 1508 and 1516/1521 and the other between 1615 and 1617. The warfare caused a major influx of mercenaries who often indulged in looting and spreading terror among the local population. And since one part of the troops remained in the area after the aforementioned wars ended, the border continued to facilitate further spread of violence long afterwards. The unresolved issue of border demarcation also generated disputes between villages on the Habsburg and Venetian side, respectively. The vicinity of the other state's territory facilitated a rapid growth of illegal practices, such as smuggling, banditry, etc., as perpetrators could easily seek refuge on the other side. The migration went in both directions. The Habsburg-Venetian border, which was ulti-

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<sup>1</sup> F. Gaudio, *Lotta al banditismo e responsabilità comunitaria nell'Italia moderna*, «Mediterranea ricerche storiche» n. 5 (2005), pp. 419-422.

<sup>2</sup> L. Casella, *Potere nobiliare e politica veneziana nel Friuli del Seicento. Alcune riflessioni*, in W. Arzaretti, M. Qualizza (ed. by), *Marco d'Aviano Gorizia e Gradisca dai primi studi all'evangelizzazione dell'Europa. Raccolta di studi e documenti dopo il convegno storico-spirituale del 14 ottobre 1995*, Fondazione Società per la conservazione della Basilica di Aquileia, [S. l.], 1998, pp. 430.

mately set in the mid-18th century, was crossed with impunity by well-armed and relatively large bands of a few tens or even hundreds of men who, often led by members of the nobility, pillaged, extorted and spread terror among the population. Namely, many feudal noble families held estates and connections on either side of the border as well as armed retainers for the purposes of pursuing illegal practices, defence and violence associated with feuds between noble families.

### Noble violence in the Venetian Friuli

From the 1570s onwards, violence and banditry spread throughout the entire Venetian “Terraferma”. Claudio Povolo assumes that banditry associated with noble exiles reached its peak in the 1580s, while the 17th century was marked by a growing incidence of crime among the peasantry. The main reasons for this were the increasing poverty of peasants and artisans who, united in armed bands, attacked and robbed travellers. These plundering raids are deemed to have taken place with the tacit consent or at least in the absence of opposition from the most bloodthirsty nobles unfavourable to the Venetian rule. The raids were associated with feuds that involved a considerable number of noble families from the Venetian “Terraferma”<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, banditry was often closely associated with feuds and the general proliferation of violence along the Habsburg-Venetian border. The rebellion that shook Friuli in 1511 also had the characteristics of a feud and left a lasting impact on the Friulian society. The following decades witnessed a series of attacks, murders and ambushes. After the rebellion, the system of revenge, which had previously played part in the contentions between the Strumieri and the Zamberlani, erupted into uncontrollable violence and retaliatory attacks for the wrongs suffered<sup>4</sup>. In the context under discussion, feuds, rebellions and revenge were inextricably interwoven. Edward Muir emphasises that the present differentiation between revenge as a limited conflict between individuals and a feud as a long-running argument between different groups conceals the then meaning of vengeance, which included individuals and groups and caused eruptions of violence as well as centuries-long

<sup>3</sup> C. Povolo, *L'Intrigo dell'Onore. Poteri e istituzioni nella Repubblica di Venezia tra Cinque e Seicento*, Cierre, Verona, 1997, pp. 103-190; C. Povolo, *Nella spirale della violenza. Cronologia, intensità e diffusione del banditismo nella Terraferma veneta (1550-1610)*, in G. Ortalli (ed. by), *Bande armate, banditi, banditismo e repressione di giustizia negli stati europei di antico regime*, Jouvance, Roma, 1986, pp. 21-51.

<sup>4</sup> L. Casella, *I Savorgnan: la famiglia e le opportunità del potere*, Bulzoni, Roma, 2003, pp. 110-113. For more on the rebellion and its consequences, see: E. Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring. Vendetta and Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1993; F. Bianco, *1511. La crudel zobia grassa. Rivolte contadine e faide nobiliari in Friuli tra '400 e '500*, La Biblioteca del Messaggero Veneto, [S.l.], 2004.

antagonisms. Revenge formed part of feuds; it represented a legitimate manner of settling disputes and was regulated by city statutes. Noble banditry also targeted members of its own social stratum and was often associated with noble feuds that were not a form of revolting against the authorities but a way of addressing and ending disputes. Feuds, whose integral part was also the system of revenge, served the function of establishing order among different groups. A major change in the mental realm occurred after the rebellion and by roughly the mid-16th century. The Renaissance courts spurred the process of internalising anger, as well as adopting codes of self-control and polite behaviour. With waning collective honour came the rise in the importance of duels. It seems safe to assume that the said process reached the area under discussion with a certain delay, although it also began to manifest itself in the conduct and activities of some nobles. In the Venetian Friuli, a formal reconciliation between the contesting Zamberlani and Strumieri factions took place in 1568, but the resentment and hatred would not entirely disappear, and by the end of the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th century, they again sparked a series of gory disputes<sup>5</sup>.

An important role in these disputes was played by retainers whom sources often refer to as “bravi”, “bravacci”, etc. According to Nicholas S. Davidson, armed retainers that were present in western Friuli during the 1560s and 1570s were recruited from the rosters of former mercenary armies and among all sorts of criminals, murderers, brigands, etc. coming from smaller or larger urban areas within or outside the Venetian Republic<sup>6</sup>. Similar developments took place in areas lying more to the east and for the following century. Part of mercenary troops that fought along the Habsburg-Venetian border between 1615 and 1617 remained in the area and in the service of influential noblemen also after the conflict. Their retinues also often included exiles from the Venetian territory who had sought refuge in Gorizia.

A special role in recruiting the aforementioned retainers was played by the characteristic practice of the Venetian authorities, namely, sentencing criminal offenders to banishment. The most severe penalty was a “bando capitale”, which meant that anyone had the right to kill an exile with impunity. The Venetian Republic resorted to banishment due to inadequate means of repression – a problem faced by many other early modern states. In the centuries preceding the 19th century, only rare

<sup>5</sup> More in: F. Bianco, *Mihi vendictam: aristocratic clans and rural communities in a feud in Friuli in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries*, in T. Dean, K. J. P. Lowe (ed. by), *Crime, society and law in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 249-273; A. Zorzi, «Ius erat in armis». *Faide e conflitti tra pratiche sociali e pratiche di governo*, in G. Chittolini et al. (ed. by), *Origini dello Stato. Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1994, pp. 609-629.

<sup>6</sup> N. A. Davidson, *An armed band and the local community on the Venetian terraferma in the sixteenth century*, in G. Ortalli (ed. by), *Bande armate cit.*, pp. 401-422.

states had the capacity to effectively control their own borders and even fewer states had their borders clearly set<sup>7</sup>. Control over crime in the cities of the Venetian “Terraferma” was in the hands of the “familia” of every lieutenant (“luogotenente”) of Udine, i.e. the supreme representative of the Venetian authority in Friuli. These were joined by local inhabitants and a small number of so-called “birri” or “sbirri” in the service of local authorities – rectors (“rettori”). Control over the countryside, especially the borders and smuggling, however, was in the domain of the so-called “stradiotti” or “cappelletti” (horsemen recruited by the Venetian Republic in Albania and Dalmatia), and the “capitani del devedo”, whose task was to prevent the export of grains. Nevertheless, the above did not suffice for the establishment of effective control over the territory. In 1549, the council of ten decided to recruit two “capitani di campagna” from the “stradioti” who would lead seventy men in the fight against banditry and related criminality in the Venetian “Terraferma”. But just as many other measures, this one too proved unsuccessful. Besides, many statutes required the population to capture offenders and hand them over, and in the 16th century the Venetian authorities began to introduce rewards for the said obligation in the form of money and revocation of banishment for bandits who killed other bandits. Soon enough, these rewards became subject to trade. A unique institution of Venetian judiciary was established, the so-called “voci di liberar bandito”, pursuant to which anyone who killed or captured a person condemned to banishment had the right to set free another person subject to banishment. But this right was not only reserved for murderers. At the beginning of the 17th century, the council of ten and the Venetian senate addressed the said problem with a series of laws and measures (private violence and the feud – considered until that time legitimate – became criminal violence), but the Venetian judiciary remained fairly ineffective as well as lenient in its judgement of violent noblemen, which was in complete conformity with the general crisis of Venetian judicial system. The latter started in the 16th century and came to a head in the following century. The Venetian judicial system never enjoyed much trust among the population to begin with, although there was no shortage of cases where the authorities imposed severe penalties on some nobles who were found guilty of horrible crimes<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *I banditi. Il banditismo sociale nell'età moderna*, G. Einaudi, Torino, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> C. Gioia, *Aristocratic Bandits and Outlaws: Stories of Violence and Blood Vendetta on the Border of the Venetian Republic (16th-17th Century)*, in F. Petrucci, E. Lollini (ed. by), *Imagining Frontiers, Contesting Identities*, Edizioni Plus Pisa University Press, Pisa, 2007, pp. 93-107; E. Basaglia, *Il controllo della criminalità nella Repubblica di Venezia. Il secolo XVI: un momento di passaggio*, in *Venezia e la terraferma attraverso le relazioni dei rettori*, A. Giuffrè, Milano, 1981, pp. 65-78; A. Ventura, *Nobiltà e popolo nella società veneta del Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, Unicopli editore, Milano, 1997, pp. 440-454.

The lieutenant of Udine was not furnished with an adequate number of armed men to exert effective control over the territory, but rather with ill-paid troops and occasionally with soldiers from Corsica or Croatian cavalry. After the founding of the star fort of Palmanova (1593), which represented an outstanding achievement of the Venetian military architecture, the lieutenant could at most critical times rely on the intervention of the soldiers from the said fortification. In this connection, Venetian representatives in Udine often pointed to the problem of private jurisdictions, to feudal lords who supported bandits, as well as to the inadequate means of repression. Lieutenant Girolamo Mocenigo, for instance, stated in 1574 that the inhabitants had no respect for the court system and that Friuli was still rife with armed bandits crossing the Habsburg-Venetian border and residing in areas from which they had been banished<sup>9</sup>. The following year, Lieutenant Lorenzo Bragadin wrote about the pointlessness of maintaining the marshal's horsemen, because they were locals and had connections with the local notables<sup>10</sup>. There were also warnings regarding poor payment and the insufficient number of men, some of whom were even unable to maintain their horses. Lieutenant Vincenzo Capella wrote in his report of 1615 that the bandits had taken shelter in various places along the border, indulging in all kinds of excesses and vengeful attacks against individuals. He also stressed the importance of individual leaders of armed bands, adding that the deaths of certain leaders had a pacifying effect on the others. Nevertheless, the land continued to live in constant fear<sup>11</sup>. In 1626, Lieutenant Girolamo Civran deplored the failure to implement the laws prohibiting the use of weapons and mercenaries due to insufficient funds<sup>12</sup>. Owing to other political and military priorities as well as concerns that any interference might place further strain on the already fragile balance in the relations between the Venetian authorities and the Friulian elite, the Venetian Republic was reluctant to interfere with the developments in Friuli, where the authority and control over the territory were dispersed among numerous jurisdictions. In the desire to contain the spread of, the central authorities charged the Lieutenant of Udine to carry out a trial in accordance with a strict procedure used by the council of ten, intensified legislation on banishment and – also in the case of horrible crimes – endeavoured for reconciliation between nobles engaged in vendetta. Arbitration between the parties in dispute was of crucial importance, since due to insufficient means of repression, every con-

<sup>9</sup> *Relazioni dei rettori veneti in Terraferma*, I, *Patria del Friuli (Luogotenenza di Udine)*, Giuffrè editore, Milano, 1973, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> *Relazioni cit.*, I, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> *Relazioni cit.*, I, p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> *Relazioni cit.*, I, pp. 176-177.



demnation of a noble unavoidably led to an increase in the number of bandits. Banishment was often a powerful instrument in political wrangle. Many Friulian feudal lords offered sanctuary to bandits in their jurisdictions, also after such privilege was abolished in 1581<sup>13</sup>.

Similar reports poured to Venice from other rectors in Venetian Friuli, conveying illustrative details about the atmosphere, fraught with violence. Particularly pressing was the problem of maintaining order in Cividale del Friuli, where, according to the historian Faustino Moissesso, «gentil'huomini, et molto inclinati all'armi, et alle risse ciuili» (the nobles had a particular disposition for picking up arms and fighting)<sup>14</sup>. The city was marked not only by a pro-Habsburg sentiment and tenacious unwillingness to comply with the orders issued by the central Venetian authorities, especially in the field of tax policies, but also by violence fuelled by arguments between noble factions. In 1609, the Venetian rector in Cividale del Friuli, Lorenzo Longo, began his report, which he sent to Venice on completing his term, by expressing his profound sympathy for the broad strata of the population and urged the highest Venetian authorities to put an end to the violence: perpetual state of unrest, violence, lootings and injustices perpetrated by more or less powerful lords, as well as keeping the poor and exploited peasantry in «tyrannical slavery» was in dire need of God's and Venice's help. Longo stressed that these were not merely disagreements but genuine wars that ensnared not only the city of Cividale del Friuli, split into two factions – one led by the Galla family and the other by Manzano – but the entire Friuli<sup>15</sup>. Nonetheless, the situation remained unchanged. In March 1615, the Venetian administrator in Cividale del Friuli, Girolamo Soranzo, dedicated a considerable part of his report to the Venetian senate to the all-consuming animosities between the aforementioned families. A few days before, the said strife turned into the torture and murder of a servant Paulo Emilio Galla and the murder of a servant Marc'Antonio di Manzano. Soranzo was particularly dumbfounded by the manner in which the members of the two families conducted themselves during the interrogation in connection with the murders. In his presence, the disputed parties tried to conceal their hostilities and even deceive him by acting courteously towards each other. Much to his astonishment, Soranzo realised that such behaviour lasted only for the duration of his presence and that deadly hatred was

<sup>13</sup> G. Trebbi, *Il Friuli dal 1420 al 1797. La storia politica e sociale*, Casamassima Libri, Udine, Tricesimo, 1998, pp. 193-223; F. Bianco, *Le terre del Friuli. La formazione dei paesaggi agrari in Friuli tra il XV e il XIX secolo*, Astrea, Mantova, Cierre edizioni, Verona, 1994, pp. 21-23; Povoletto, *L'intrigo dell'Onore* cit., pp. 118-123.

<sup>14</sup> F. Moissesso, *Historia della ultima guerra nel Friuli*, Venetia: Barezzo Barezzi, 1623, vol. I, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Relazioni dei rettori veneti in Terraferma*, V, *Provveditorato di Cividale del Friuli. Provveditorato di Marano*, A. Giuffrè, Milano, 1976, pp. 72-73.

lurking underneath the surface. His report described not only the disputes but the deeply rooted contempt for the Venetian authorities and their efforts to maintain law and order. The nobles would even go to the lengths of working in cahoots with their enemies to protect the status quo, which would enable them to settle their scores as they pleased. Soranzo, however, was concerned not only about the said event, even though the incident of arquebus shooting occurred in the middle of the city and in broad daylight, but also about the imminent danger that such hostilities posed for Cividale del Friuli in general<sup>16</sup>. Blood feuds such as the one mentioned above were probably not uncommon in the city and its surroundings.

Inadequate means of repression and resorting to punishment by banishment only added more fuel to the proliferation of banditry and violence along the Habsburg-Venetian border<sup>17</sup>. Banishment was a sign of the state's lacking resolve and inability to effectively contain the spread of crime. Nonetheless, the state's weakness was far from the only contributing factor to the growing incidence of illegal practices. It may be safe to assume that during the centuries proceeding the 18th century the high level of banditry and brutality in the Habsburg-Venetian border area was, first and foremost, closely linked to blood feuds that generated bandits through the struggles between noble families and factions for influence and property.

### **Banditry and violence in the Habsburg county of Gorizia**

The atmosphere of violence and retaliation also spread to Gorizia through kinship ties and alliances. A valuable description of the situation in the county during the 17th century was provided by the most important historian from Gorizia, Carlo Morelli (1730-1792). He had great admiration for what he perceived as the quintessential nature of Gorizia's inhabitants, that is, their sincerity and spiritedness, although he noted that in the 17th century the latter often deteriorated into audacity and rage. Every day the number of hot-blooded Gorizians grew in the presence of Venetian villains who sought shelter in the Habsburg territory without restriction and fear. Their excesses apparently became so great that they ultimately left hardly any impression on people. Nobles surrounded themselves with a large body of armed retainers who at their behest committed a series of violent acts. The use of

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<sup>16</sup> *Relazioni cit.*, V, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> Marco Cattini and Marzio Romani, for instance, make similar assumptions with regard to the spread of brigandry in the mountainous areas under the jurisdiction of the d'Este family in the 17th century (M. Cattini, M. A. Romani, *Tra faida familiare e rivolta politica: banditi e banditismo nella montagna estense (sec. XVII)*, in G. Ortalli (ed. by), *Bande armate cit.*, pp. 53-65).



weapons was widespread. Although arquebuses were ordinarily left at the church door, not even churches were considered safe<sup>18</sup>.

In the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Gorizia, violence wreaked havoc within all social strata, especially among the nobility. Most noble crimes were committed in pursuance of disputes between different factions, from which no family of distinction could escape<sup>19</sup>. The presence of exiles only further heightened the tensions that plagued the Gorizian society of the 17th century, when the old Gorizian elite felt especially threatened by wealthy nobles that moved there from the Venetian territory and at first had no difficulty winning a seat in the Gorizian provincial diet<sup>20</sup>.

Noblemen received and offered protection to all sorts of exiles who sought refuge in the Habsburg territory. In the face of the widespread violence, they were even more willing to surround themselves by armed men, whose number also contributed to the maintenance of their families' reputation<sup>21</sup>. In this connection, mention should be made of an agreement concluded in Cormons, on 18 August 1634, between Giovanni del Mestri and his nephew Giovanni Battista del Mestri, on maintaining a certain number of armed retainers. The relatives wrote down that the protection of honour and property was assured by the unity within the family and agreed that Giovanni would cover the expenses for three armed retainers and Giovanni Battista for five<sup>22</sup>. The agreement was reached during a very tumultuous period in the history of Cormons, the mid-17th century, which was marked by the eruption of violent conflicts between the local noble families.

However, it was already in the 16th century that the Habsburg authorities expressed concern over the surge of bandits from the Venetian Republic, seeking refuge in Gorizia. In 1560, the authorities set up a commission that submitted an alarming, although not entirely accurate report on the problem of Venetian bandits in the county<sup>23</sup>. In an

<sup>18</sup> C. Morelli di Schönfeld, *Istoria della Contea di Gorizia in quattro Volumi compresi un' Appendice di note illustrative*, Edizioni della Laguna, Mariano del Friuli, 2003, vol. I, pp. 189-191, vol. II, pp. 101-194, vol. III, pp. 138-141.

<sup>19</sup> S. Cavazza, *Una società nobiliare: trasformazioni, resistenze, conflitti*, in S. Cavazza (ed. by), *Gorizia barocca. Una città italiana nell'Impero degli Asburgo*, Edizioni della Laguna, Mariano del Friuli, 1999, pp. 221-222.

<sup>20</sup> D. Porcedda, *Tra Asburgo e Venezia: Stati provinciali e ceti dirigenti nella Contea di Gorizia (secoli XVI XVII)*, in G. Coppola, P. Schiera (ed. by), *Lo spazio alpino: area di civiltà, regione cerniera*, Luguri editore, [S.l.], 1991, pp. 165-175.

<sup>21</sup> C. Morelli, *Istoria cit.*, vol. II, pp. 190-194.

<sup>22</sup> The agreement is referred to by: G. Blasutic, *Il fisco di Cormons. Memorando fatto storico del secolo XVII*, in *Almanacco del popolo per l'anno bisestile 1912*, Le federazione editrice, Gorizia, 1912, p. 80, according to one of the two originals he consulted in the then archive of the del Mestri family.

<sup>23</sup> A. Panjek, *Goriške duše 1566: prostorska, demografska in socialna struktura prebivalstva v ekonomski konjunkturi*, «Acta Histriae» n. 3 (2012), p. 470; S. Cavazza, *Il capitano di Francesco della Torre*, in S. Cavazza (ed. by), *Divus Maximilianus: una contea per i goriziani, 1500-1619*, Edizioni della Laguna, Mariano del Friuli, 2001, pp. 173-174; R. M. Cossar, *Il pittore Giorgio Liberal patrizio goriziano*, «Archivio Veneto» n. 29 (1941), pp. 62-77 (with the published list of suspicious Venetian subjects in Gorizia).

attempt to address the massive inflow of bandits, Archduke Karl von Habsburg, among others, devised a plan to settle them in Aquileia, an all but completely unpopulated area with vast stretches of swampy ground, combined with the threat of malaria. In 1573, he was advised against imposing such a senseless measure by an influential noble from Gorizia and ambassador to Venice, Vito di Dornberg (1529-1591)<sup>24</sup>. On 7 February 1583, the archduke issued an edict by which anyone who shot at another person was to be executed within twenty-four hours, regardless of the insult suffered. Moreover, stipulating that bandits should be arrested and imposed with due punishment, the edict was also deemed an appropriate step to solve the problem of banditry.

But the situation would not improve. Gorizia witnessed the comings and goings of governors, who viewed their title merely as an honour and left the land in the hands of administrators. Gorizia faced a surge in the pursuit of narrow interests and it was only the governor Giovanni Sforza di Porcia (1610-1624) who finally made the first earnest efforts to improve the political and administrative conditions. His goal was to organise a regular armed force under the Gorizian governor and to banish bandits from the county. But his endeavours proved futile and the situation continued to deteriorate. In cases of emergency, the authorities deployed troops from outside the county to deal with the emergency situation and then leave the area, only for the violence to flare up again<sup>25</sup>. Apart from the inadequate means of repression, Gorizia also felt victim to the ineffective judicial system, which was rife with inept judges, incompetent representatives, lenient nobility, etc. This subsequently led to the growing importance in extra-judicial settlement of disputes, e.g. through the mediation of Gorizian Jesuits<sup>26</sup>. Archduke Ferdinand von Habsburg too endeavoured to contain the spread of banditry, but the punishments, no matter how strict, did little to improve the situation, which was only further complicated by a series of private jurisdictions in the County of Gorizia<sup>27</sup>. In autumn 1620, an unknown author wrote to the Archduke Ferdinand (already the Holy Roman Emperor) about the deplorable state of security in Gorizia. He pointed, among others, to murders that went unpunished, bandits marauding freely in Gorizia and the blunt disregard for the ban on carrying weapons. The author summarised the situation with the following words: «In somma ogn'uno fa ciò che vuole» (Everyone does what they want)<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Vito di Dornberg to Archduke Karl von Habsburg: a letter of 18 January 1573, published in: S. Cavazza, «Così buono et savio cavalliere»: Vito di Dornberg, patrizio goriziano del Cinquecento, «Annali di storia isontina» n. 3 (1990), pp. 34-35.

<sup>25</sup> C. Morelli, *Istoria cit.*, vol. II, pp. 97-191.

<sup>26</sup> C. Ferlan, *Dentro e fuori le aule: la Compagnia di Gesù a Gorizia e nell'Austria interna (secoli XVI-XVII)*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2012, pp. 343; S. Cavazza, *Una società nobiliare cit.*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>27</sup> C. Morelli, *Istoria cit.*, vol. II, pp. 128-132.

<sup>28</sup> D. Porcedda, «Un paese sì di piccola dimensione, come è la nostra Contea, più dal caso che da una Provvidenza diretto», «Annali di storia isontina» n. 2 (1989), p. 9.

Gory clashes in the markets and ferocious murders became so frequent that in 1653 the governor of Gorizia, Francesco Lanthieri, was ordered to report on these cases every month. State functionaries too often found themselves in the cross-fire of retaliation and revenge. Thus, the forest warden Francesco Fornasari was murdered in 1656 and the secretary of the County of Gorizia in 1680<sup>29</sup>.

When discussing violence in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Gorizia, one cannot overlook the so-called Cormons feud that raged on between the Neuhaus, del Mestri and Manzano families and in which the Governor of Gorizia, Carlo della Torre, also came to play his part. The persistent disputes between the Cormons families dated back at least into the 16th century, and the desire for retaliation was not only deeply rooted in the members of families and factions involved, but was passed from one generation to another. It was already on 16 May 1612 that Archduke Ferdinand von Habsburg wrote to the Archdeacon of Gorizia and parish priest of Cormons, Luca del Mestri, the brother of the aforementioned Giovanni del Mestri, about the failure to comply with the laws and religious codes in Cormons, which was under the jurisdiction of Raimondo della Torre. The sovereign was concerned about the strong presence of bandits and the general disregard for the ban on carrying weapons. Especially alarming was the fact that over twenty murders had occurred over the previous two years and no perpetrator met with an appropriate punishment<sup>30</sup>. In the following decade, the situation only continued to drift from bad to worse. On 29 August 1619, Raimondo della Torre even attended a meeting of the provincial board of Gorizia in the company of his armed retinue<sup>31</sup>. On 20 May 1620, the noblemen of Cormons complained to Gorizia over his violent behaviour, stating that on the previous day Raimondo had come to Gorizia with an escort of twenty-five armed "Corsi", troops from Corsica, who after the second Habsburg-Venetian war remained in the service of the local nobility. The latter reportedly attempted to murder Raimondo's adversary Leonardo del Mestri. The strife reached beyond the provincial boundaries. The sovereign's resolution of 3 November 1620 allowed Raimondo to surround himself with armed guards, but only on condition that he ridded himself of the audacious Corsicans and replaced them with others who would help him maintain order in Cormons. The fact that the crisis came to a boil is made all the more evident by the order to destroy all towers and other similar, newly erected buildings in Cormons, including those furnished with crossbows<sup>32</sup>. The aforementioned events

<sup>29</sup> C. Morelli, *Istoria* cit., vol. I, pp. 189-191, vol. II, pp. 101-194, vol. III, pp. 138-141.

<sup>30</sup> G. Blasutic, *Il fisco* cit., p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> D. Porcedda, *Tra Asburgo* cit., p. 170; Porcedda, "Un paese" cit., pp. 11-13.

<sup>32</sup> Reports on the said developments in 1620 are contained in the documents transcribed by the priest Giovanni Blasutic (1844-1912) about 1891 on the basis of the original documents and copies kept in the archive of the del Mestri family in Cormons (now

contributed to the unstable political situation in the 17th century that stemmed from disputes between different factions trying to manipulate provincial institutions to their own personal benefits.

The strife between the families came to a head during the time of Carlo della Torre (1667-1671), who often crossed the Habsburg-Venetian border with his retainers under the pretence of visiting his estates that stretched on both sides of the border. As was customary in his days, he surrounded himself with a band of armed men and became entangled in a series of disputes. For instance, around noon on 5 May 1650, he entered Gorizia, accompanied by twenty-eight horsemen; soon afterwards arrived several other noblemen and a large crowd of citizens, hurling insults at one another, all willing to spill blood<sup>33</sup>. This was merely one of tense stand-offs that punctuated the daily life of Gorizia in the 17th century, when nobles entered the city in the company of armed horsemen or other accomplices. Sometimes such stand-offs escalated into violent confrontations, often with deadly results<sup>34</sup>. Carlo got himself into a wrangle with the noblemen Giovanni Rabatta and Odorico Petazzi, whom he and his retinue murdered at the Scharzenegg Castle (in the County of Gorizia) in 1651, and then withdrew into the nearby Muggia (in Venetian Istria). It was only in 1655 that he was permanently banished, but obtained the sovereign's amnesty only three years later. He joined the Habsburg Army, where he forged himself a shining career in the Swedish-Polish War (1654-1660). Upon his return to Gorizia, he obtained the titles Marshal of the County of Gorizia (1664), Governor of Trieste and Provincial Governor of Gorizia (1667)<sup>35</sup>.

Before long, Carlo also found himself entangled in the Cormons feud. On 20 November 1666, a fierce confrontation took place in Cormons between the members of certain noble families and their sizable armed retainers. Four men of Leonardo di Manzano set an ambush in the house of Baron Orazio del Mestri for the Neuhaus brothers, Francesco Maria and Nicolo, who arrived with a large armed retinue. After the shoot-out, the Neuhaus' retainers attacked the house and caught all four of Manzano's men. The captives were supposedly held

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dispersed) and are presently part of his manuscript collection of documents *Memoriali cormonesi*, in Psac, Archivio storico. Raccolta Giovanni Blasutic, pp. 202-208. For more on these developments, see also: D. Porcedda, "Un paese" cit., pp. 9-29; S. Cavazza, D. Porcedda, *Le contee di Gorizia e Gradisca al tempo di Marco d'Aviano*, in W. Arzaretti, M. Qualizza (ed. by), *Marco d'Aviano Gorizia e Gradisca* cit., p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> Asgo, Archivio Coronini, Atti e documenti, fasc. 368.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, in 1664: Asgo, Archivio Coronini, Atti e documenti, fasc. 368; in 1665: Aspgo, Atti degli Stati provinciali, sezione II, fasc. 437/II; in 1673: Aspgo, Atti degli Stati provinciali, sezione II, fasc. 437/III; [s.d.]; Asgo, Archivio Coronini, Atti e documenti, fasc. 368.

<sup>35</sup> S. Cavazza, *Politica e violenza nobiliare: il caso di Carlo Della Torre*, in F. Šerberlj (ed. by), *Barok na Goriškem. Il barocco nel Goriziano. Il barocco nel Goriziano*, Goriški muzej, Nova Gorica, Narodna galerija, Ljubljana, 2006, pp. 59-67.

for ten days and then handed over to the authorities. Their masters, however, fled to the Venetian territory, where Orazio del Mestri was later reported to have murdered one person in Palmanova. The captives confessed their crimes but their patrons appealed to the Gorizian governor, Carlo della Torre, who had kinship ties with Orazio del Mestri and Leonardo di Manzano. The aforementioned men and Orazio del Mestri were imprisoned in the Gorizia Castle, from which they escaped. Francesco Neuhaus expressed his conviction in the treatise *Escolpe di me Francesco Maria di Neuhaus* that the escape had been master-minded by the governor of Gorizia himself, with the aid of his armed retainer Carlo Moretti and a group of men he had gathered in Ziracco (near Remanzacco on the Friuli plain), which was part of the della Torre family's estate<sup>36</sup>. However, rather than settling the matter, this only led to new complications. On the night of 6 June 1667, the brothers Francesco and Nicolò Neuhaus fell into an ambush at Noax, set up by their opponents. Francesco was wounded and Nicolò died<sup>37</sup>. On 24 May 1668, Francesco exacted his vengeance against the governor by staging an ambush near Capriva del Friuli with a retinue of ten armed men. Carlo survived, but the operation claimed the lives of the carriage driver and a Cristofò Bonomo from Trieste. Francesco was put on trial for high treason and attempted murder of the sovereign's representative. On 3 September 1668, Emperor Leopold I von Habsburg sentenced him to permanent banishment from all Habsburg hereditary lands or to death should he be caught, and confiscated all his estates<sup>38</sup>. Such punishment, however, did not stop Francesco – or many other exiles – from crossing the border, and e.g. on 9 December 1681, he was in Cormons concluding some contract of sale<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> The authoress of this contribution has failed to locate the two sources which could provide an accurate description of these events, *Escolpe di me Francesco Maria di Neuhaus* and *Risposta alle Escolpe di me Francesco Maria di Neuhaus*. The said sources were already described as unavailable by Giovanni Blasutic in 1912, although he still consulted them at private owners towards the end of the 19th century, as well as summarised and quoted them in: Blasutic, *Il fisco*, pp. 77-93.

<sup>37</sup> Asgo, Archivio Coronini, Atti e documenti, fasc. 252; Aspgo, Atti degli Stati provinciali, sezione II, fasc. 436/I.

<sup>38</sup> Blasutic, *Memoriali cormonesi* cit., pp. 215-218; Blasutic cit., *Il fisco*, pp. 77-93; Aspgo, Atti degli Stati provinciali, sezione II, fasc. 436/II. On the said attack, see also the contemporary author Giovanni Maria Marusig (1641-1712), whose treatise *Le morti violente e sbitane, successe in Goritia o svo distretto* provides a versified report in Friulian language on 202 mostly unnatural deaths that took place in Gorizia between 1641 and 1704; G. M. Marusig, *Le morti violente e sbitane, successe in Goritia o svo distretto*, L. Ciceri (ed.), Società Filologica Friulana, Udine, 1970, p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> G. B. Falzari, *Giustizia, violenze e bravi nel sec. XVII. Il fisco di Cormons*, «Studi Goriziani» n. 26 (1959), pp. 74-78. Also in other border areas of the Venetian Republic (e.g. in Bergamo) most bandits of aristocratic extraction preferred to remain somewhere near the forbidden border (e.g. in the Duchy of Milan) to maintain contacts and support (C. Gioia, *Noble violence* cit., pp. 93-107).

Carlo della Torre thus gained an advantage over his old foes, but not for long. In 1671, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy. After seeing his adversary meet a misfortunate end, Francesco Neuhaus now hoped that luck was on his side. On several occasions (e.g. in 1671<sup>40</sup>, [in the 1670s]<sup>41</sup>, and in 1683<sup>42</sup>), he tried to win the sovereign's pardon. Each following petition reflects the bandit's growing despair and anguish. In the second petition, he wrote that «vado, remingo, già sono otto anni paesi stranieri» (he had been wandering foreign lands aimlessly for eight years). With his property confiscated, he had lost all income, his houses were demolished and his entire family was all but annihilated. («No ho susidio alcuno, per che sono stati confiscati li beni, sgiantate le case è quasi annihilita la mia famiglia»)<sup>43</sup>. In a petition of 1683, he described himself as an exile deprived of his estates and his very existence («bandito, confiscato e privo del proprio esser»). He entreated for mercy and wrote that he had insulted the sovereign's representative out of sheer necessity. He also complained about the punishments imposed on his family, as all estates were confiscated, regardless of whether or not they belonged to his sisters or younger relatives. His defence reflects the mentality of a nobleman who saw blood feud as a moral right and duty by emphasising: who can hold back that rash natural impulse that drives every offended man to seek vengeance? («chi può raffrenar quel precipitoso impeto naturale, che spinge ogni oltraggiato Vivente a vendicarsi?»)<sup>44</sup>. This time he succeeded, most probably because he resorted to more acceptable arguments. He was granted the imperial pardon on 2 April 1683 as well as reclaimed all his estates and the noble title<sup>45</sup>.

Bandits met with very different destinies. For some noblemen, crimes and banishments did not diminish their opportunities for advancement. This is eloquently illustrated by the aforementioned example of Carlo della Torre, as well as his equally restless son Gerolamo della Torre. In November 1699, Gerolamo and his accomplices, Giovanni Paulo Radiuich, Marino Carrara (both from Gorizia), Alessi Miloso and Paolo Bobano from Ronchi de Faelis (Gerolamo's "brauo ordinario", i.e. regular armed retainer) murdered his brother Sigismund in the Villalta Castle. Fratricides were a fairly common practice aimed at concentrating the family wealth in the hands of one brother to ensure the future well-being of the family. Inheritance was the prime motive for Gerolamo's crime as well. Before

<sup>40</sup> Aspgo, *Atti degli Stati provinciali*, sezione II, fasc. 437/II.

<sup>41</sup> Aspgo, *Atti degli Stati Provinciali*, sezione II, fasc. 438.

<sup>42</sup> Blasutic, *Memoriali cormonesi* cit., pp. 218-222; Blasutic, *Il fisco* cit., pp. 88-91.

<sup>43</sup> Aspgo, *Atti degli Stati Provinciali*, sezione II, fasc. 438.

<sup>44</sup> Aspgo, *Atti degli Stati Provinciali*, sezione II, fasc. 438.

<sup>45</sup> Blasutic, *Memoriali cormonesi*, pp. 222-[222b].



that the Venetian senate banished him for having committed grave and detestable crimes («gravi, detestabili delinquenze»). On pronouncing the penalty of permanent banishment from the Venetian Republic on 28 May 1700, the senate emphasised that Gerolamo had violated the first banishment by regularly crossing the Habsburg-Venetian border and visiting Ziriacco, Villalta and other places under Venetian jurisdiction. But the fratricide was too great a crime to overlook. Gerolamo was to be killed if he fell into the hands of the authorities, and his entire property was confiscated<sup>46</sup>. Like many other individuals facing the same predicament, Gerolamo sought refuge in the Habsburg territory and successfully secured himself an important position in Gorizia's political and economic sphere<sup>47</sup>. Gerolamo's transformation from a bandit to a Gorizian man of distinction was, of course, also made possible by the fact that the Austrian Habsburgs provided the local nobility with access to the highest administrative functions, whereas in the Venetian "Stato da Mar" and "Terraferma" these were reserved exclusively for the patriciate of Venice.

The Habsburg-Venetian border represented a merging point of two completely different states, whose disagreements bandits and brigands skilfully turned to their own advantage. Both sides were aware of the border problem and the need to establish mutual cooperation. With regard to the southern border of its "Terraferma", for instance, it was already in 1520 or shortly before that Venice suggested to Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, that he should reach an agreement on mutual extradition of bandits. Perceiving such transfer of custody as a diminution of his sovereign power, the duke refused to do so<sup>48</sup>, while the Habsburgs acceded to the said agreement in 1637, much to the credit of the Gorizian noble Antonio Rabatta (died 1650), later imperial envoy to Venice. Although the sovereign continued to grant pardons, the governors of Gorizia and Gradisca retained limited means of repression and Gorizian nobles still recruited mercenaries and murderers among the exiles from the Venetian territory, the agreement brought about certain progress in the persecution of banditry<sup>49</sup>. In 1638, for instance, an agreement was reached to tear down a number of residential buildings in Gradiscutta, a Habsburg enclave in the Venetian territory, lying east of Tagliamento. Made hardly accessible by a stretch of wetlands

<sup>46</sup> Asgo, Archivio Coronini, Atti e documenti, fasc. 367.

<sup>47</sup> On Gerolamo (Girolamo) as the Marshal of the County of Gorizia between 1707 and 1710, see: A. Panjek, *Il miserabil paese. Lotte di potere, conflitti economici e tensioni sociali nella contea di Gorizia agli inizi del Settecento*, «Metodi e ricerche» n. 2 (1996), pp. 39-76.

<sup>48</sup> E. Basaglia, *Il banditismo nei rapporti di Venezia con gli stato confinanti*, in G. Ortalli (ed. by), *Bande armate* cit., pp. 423-424.

<sup>49</sup> G. Trebbi, *Il Friuli dal 1420 al 1797* cit., pp. 285-287; G. Trebbi, *Tra Venezia e gli Asburgo: nobiltà goriziana nobiltà friulana*, in S. Cavazza (ed. by), *Gorizia barocca* cit., pp. 37-57.

along the Varmo River, Venetian bandits had used the place as their safe haven since the 16th century onwards<sup>50</sup>.

The security situation finally began to improve towards the end of the 17th century (1675), by stationing a garrison of fifty men in the Gorizia castle and deploying thirty-six city security officers<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, during the course of one century, the Gorizian Jesuit collegium, founded in 1618, contributed its part to the rise in the education level of the population and to the adoption of good behaviour. However, the beginning of the century marked by Enlightenment also witnessed a general promulgation of courtly manners and a decline in criminality. Similarly as in many other parts of Europe, where new forms of expressing social superiority were being developed with an emphasis on elegant and refined mores, as well as education<sup>52</sup>, the Habsburg-Venetian border area, once rife with violence, was now gradually becoming more civilised and increasingly less tolerant of violent nobles who in the 17th century were able to attain high positions in the Gorizian society, despite their crimes and despite having been banished from the county. The Gorizian historian Carlo Morelli was one of the authors who underlined that the habits changed in the 18th century. The new lifestyle, marked by an inherent propensity towards vanity and frivolity, was deemed to mitigate the coarse and rustic ways, and brought about the introduction of refined manners and decorum. Morelli looked upon these changes with sympathy as well as some bitterness, especially because they took away much of their natural and open sincerity that once radiated from everyone's face. Also, the genuine warmth and candidness slowly gave way to the spreading pretence and keeping up one's appearances<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> G. F. Palladio degli Olivi, *Historie della Provincia del Friuli*, Forni editore, Bologna, 1966-1972, pp. 303-304; *Relazioni cit.*, I, p. 225 (a report of Alvise Foscarini from 1637), p. 236 (a report of Girolamo Foscarini).

<sup>51</sup> C. Morelli, *Istoria*, vol. II, p. 159.

<sup>52</sup> J. Dewald, *La nobiltà europea in età moderna*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 2001, pp. 71-83, 155-169.

<sup>53</sup> C. Morelli, *Istoria*, vol. III, pp. 138-141.