

Communicating Conflict: Early Modern Soldiers as Information-Gatherers

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Before setting off to the Low Countries to fight in the Habsburg army in 1584, the twenty-two-year-old Roman nobleman Pietro Caetani received a letter of instruction.¹ The Netherlands were considered an excellent military academy where young Italian aristocrats could learn the latest developments in siege warfare and battle tactics, as well as acquire valuable military leadership skills.² In this didactic treatise, the secretary Giovan Francesco Peranda gives detailed advice to Caetani on how to master the art of warfare and how to gain favor with the army general Alexander Farnese. For this young and aspiring military commander, pen and paper were indispensable tools: Caetani is instructed to write letters regularly, to collect military precepts for the purpose of creating a practical military manual, and to keep track of relevant events in a diary.

Peranda devotes the first pages of the treatise entirely to practical advice on letter writing and how to maintain epistolary relationships while on campaign in the Low Countries. He recommends that Caetani compile a list of all the influential people with whom he will need to correspond on a regular basis. Caetani is reminded to note important things on paper slips so that he will not forget to add them to his letters. He is cautioned not to seal his letters until the courier leaves, so that he can always add the latest news to his missives. Caetani is also advised to befriend the battlefield postmasters: they will “share the news they receive from various places with him.”³ Maintaining a good relationship with the postmaster would allow him to be among the first to hear the latest news and to include this news in his letters to family and patrons in Italy.

This letter of instruction illustrates that soldiers of high-ranking status such as Caetani were expected to include up-to-date information about the political and military situation in the Low Countries in their correspondence. Caetani lived up to these expectations: after his arrival in the Low Countries, he reported frequently about the preparatory maneuvers by Alexander Farnese to besiege the city of Antwerp in letters addressed to influential Roman family members.⁴ The type of information considered worthy of attention was shaped by the instructions and needs of recipients in the Italian states. Members of Italy's ruling and noble families had an almost insatiable hunger for reliable news about the conflict as they had political, economic, and personal reasons for wanting to know and understand developments in the Low Countries. This enormous appetite for information is aptly captured in a letter written by the papal secretary, Pietro Aldobrandini, to Ottavio Mirto Frangipani, the first papal nuncio in Brussels, in 1596: "Here we have a great desire to receive news from the Low Countries, both on matters of state and of war. I remember that I have reminded you before to do so. I continue to remind you we want to receive all the news."⁵ Frangipani is exhorted to gather every bit of news on both military and political matters.

Since the fifteenth century, ambassadors had received instructions repeatedly reminding them to collect and relay as much information as possible about their host country to the home state.⁶ As a result, scholars have predominantly focused on ambassadors as the key agents in the exchange of news in early modern Europe.⁷ Apart from Brendan Dooley's article on Don Giovanni de Medici's activities as an information broker for the Medici family in the Low Countries, the broader phenomenon of letter-writing soldiers and their crucial role as intermediaries in the dissemination of news from the battlefield has hitherto been largely ignored in histories of early modern communication.⁸ Illustrative of this neglect is David Randall's 2008 study specifically devoted to military news, in which he suggests that most foreign and military news in late Elizabethan and early Stuart England came from diplomats rather than "from generals writing home about their victories and (soft-peddling) their defeats."⁹ Randall significantly downplays the importance of military men providing information on the conflicts in which they were actively deployed. His statement is part of a wider trend within cultural history: soldiers' writings have often been overlooked, partly because of concerns about their veracity.¹⁰ In his recent book, Miguel Martínez demonstrates that rank-and-file soldiers in the Spanish Habsburg army were involved in the production, dissemination, and consumption of a variety of literary texts discussing war and criticizing warfare in the Spanish empire; he

argues that this literary activity created a “soldierly republic of letters.”¹¹ His interpretation of this “soldierly republic of letters,” however, is distinctly that of a republic of literature and not a republic of epistles. In reality, letters were the most influential and widespread textual form in the early modern period and the principal medium through which soldiers maintained long-distance communication to and from the battlefield.

This article focuses on the letters sent by Italian soldiers of varying ranks fighting in the Habsburg army during the Dutch Revolt (1566–1648). As will be shown, the young sons of powerful noble families—as well as lower-ranking nobles and even rank-and-file soldiers fighting in the trenches—regularly corresponded with Italy’s governing elite, providing news and information about the latest current events. Specifically, this article draws upon letters received or preserved by Italian ruling houses which are now kept in state archives, such as the Della Rovere and Medici archives in the Archivio di Stato in Florence, the Gonzaga archives in Archivio di Stato in Mantua, and the Este archives in Archivio di Stato di Modena. Letters were sometimes addressed to the duke directly, but the majority were sent to the secretaries of state in charge of foreign correspondence in these respective Italian states. In a few cases, letters were addressed to family members; their presence within state papers suggests that these letters were subsequently given to secretaries to be read.

This article analyzes how military men strategically deployed the sending of news to craft a reputation as trustworthy correspondents and military experts. Within the history of early modern communication, however, this type of correspondence is generally excluded from analysis mainly because of the underlying presumption that these letters reached a restricted elite audience rather than a larger undefined public. A predominant commercial narrative in the history of news still largely fails to acknowledge the inherently public nature of letters as well as their scribal publication during the early modern period.¹² However, these soldiers’ letters were crucial for the dissemination and reception of distant events in Italian states; they were partly or entirely copied, repacked in anonymous handwritten newsletters, and included in news pamphlets. By studying soldiers’ correspondence and analyzing the information they shared, this article aims to illuminate the soldiers’ significance within early modern information networks.

A crucial difference between these soldiers and diplomats is that none of the former were sent to the Low Countries on a specific mission to gather detailed intelligence on behalf of their ruler. While some high-ranking members of the nobility such as Caetani were instructed, like diplo-

mats, to send epistolary news, the majority of Italian soldiers, seem to have acted on their own initiative to offer their services as information-gatherers due to the specific context of the multinational Habsburg army in the Netherlands. In their quest for personal promotion and military glory, thousands of Italian soldiers were drawn to the wet and muddy battlefields of the Low Countries.¹³ Take, for example, Giuseppe Roselli, a Tuscan soldier who wrote in a letter to the Medici secretary of state in 1627 that he had come to the Low Countries “to gain honor.”¹⁴ Fighting in the Habsburg army in the Netherlands became an essential part of the Italian nobility’s strategy for gaining various favors and social promotion, either in their home country or within the Spanish Habsburg Empire. Letter writing enabled ambitious soldiers to build an honorable reputation and capitalize on these opportunities.

Enlisting as a mercenary was a very costly enterprise for any family. The Caetani family calculated that Pietro Caetani’s time in the Low Countries had cost them a staggering 60,000 scudi.¹⁵ Soldiers would only receive regular pay for their services from the Habsburg authorities upon receiving a royal patent. Giuseppe Roselli was bitterly frustrated by this; in the aforementioned letter, he explains that to receive a promotion in the Low Countries was more difficult than anywhere else, due to the high number of noblemen in the army who had come to learn how to fight. In this world of intense rivalry and competition for reward, Italian soldiers of all ranks sought to establish or maintain ties with their ruler and potential patrons.

Some soldiers enlisted the services of information professionals in the Low Countries to keep their patrons regularly informed. In a 1607 letter, the soldier Sebastiano del Pio reports on his attempts to recruit an intelligence-gatherer in Brussels for Vincenzo Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua and Monferrato.¹⁶ He tells how he hired one Henrico Glausee to write on a weekly basis to Mantua with all the news from the Low Countries, France, and England. Del Pio was certain that Glausee was an ideal source to recruit for the duke’s service as he worked within the office of Tassis, the head postmaster in Brussels, and thus had access to vast quantities of incoming and outgoing correspondence.

Alessandro Farnetis, one of the Duke of Urbino’s subjects fighting in the Low Countries, introduced and recommended a very different kind of intelligencer. In a letter of January 28, 1601, Farnetis recommends Don Gaston de Spinola’s services: “I was thinking that Don Gaston could be useful to inform your Excellency on the things that occur in these lands with trustworthy news and many things that are not public knowledge.”¹⁷ De Spinola, Count of Bruay, was a military officer originally from Sicily, who had risen

to prominence at the archducal court.¹⁸ He was one of the leading members of the archducal household, privileged with guaranteed access to Archduke Albert. His closeness to the center of political power and familiarity with court politics in Brussels made him a very important peer to correspond with. From 1601 until his death in 1616, de Spinola wrote on a weekly basis to the Duke of Urbino or his secretary.¹⁹ In his dispatches, he would regularly inform the duke on matters such as the health of the archdukes and events at the Brussels court, including hunting parties and balls. In return, he received regular updates on the latest events on the Italian peninsula. This was a high-status relationship and the exchange of news was mutual.

Letter writing was seldom an exchange of information between people of equal standing. Rather, it was an activity of sociocultural exchange deeply embedded within the informal power structures and social hierarchies of rank and privilege prevalent in early modern Italian society. Ambrogio Landriano, from an ancient Lombard family whose members served the Della Rovere family, wrote to Francesco Maria II Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, promising to inform him of “what is currently happening to satisfy the obligation I hold and the will I have to reverence your Excellency by means of my letters.”²⁰ As this example shows, soldiers’ letters were carefully constructed rhetorical texts expressing obedience, loyalty, and duty. Letter writing was influenced by client-patron relations and the main obligation in such a relationship was to keep a patron continuously informed. In Landriano’s first surviving letter, written on June 9, 1579, he apologizes for not having written to the Duke of Urbino for a while as, two months earlier, he had been injured in his arm and right hand during an attack on Maastricht.²¹ Soldiers’ letters are filled with formulaic sentences promising to fulfil the patron’s desire to be apprised of events as correspondence conveying the latest news was an excellent opportunity to showcase loyalty and continuous allegiance to a ruling house. Yet it is important to note that soldiers of all ranks often wrote to more than one member of the political and religious elite. These letters became part of transactional relationships in an attempt to maximize their authors’ chances of successfully gaining future preferment, securing pay, or winning promotion.

The impoverished foot soldier Aurelio Alciati serves as a case in point. Alciati fought in the trenches at the Siege of Ostend (1601–4) and desperately sought a higher and more rewarding position in the army. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to trace biographical information relating to lower-ranking soldiers. It is, however, evident from letters from and about him that Alciati was born in Rome, but came from a Milanese family. He

was related to the famous lawyer and humanist Andrea Alciati. Around 1599, he was placed under a ban by an unknown territory (but presumably Rome).²² It was common for those who had committed a crime and had been banned by an Italian territory to serve in the Habsburg army. After a very brief period of fighting on the Hungarian plains against the Ottomans, Alciati was present at the Siege of Ostend in 1601.

Once in the Low Countries, Alciati started to correspond with multiple prominent families in Italy. From 1601 onwards, he regularly wrote letters containing military analysis and the latest news from the front to the Roman nobleman Virginio II Orsini, the second Duke of Bracciano.²³ In 1606, he wrote directly to Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Monferrato, and between 1607 and 1608 he wrote letters to Maffeo Barberini, the papal nuncio in Paris (and the future Pope Urban VIII).²⁴ Later, Alciati initiated a regular correspondence with the secretary of state of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.²⁵ His letters contain repeated requests and pleas to these powerful men for letters of recommendation to be sent on his behalf to various members of the military corps and government in the Habsburg Netherlands. Sending news and information was the service he offered them in return. Alciati was therefore keen to stress the excellent quality and reliable nature of the information he provided; he claimed “to write only what he knew for certain, leaving aside the lies spread by the common people.”²⁶

Soldiers were expected to gain insight quickly into the situation in the Low Countries, and to offer their correspondents reliable information and digested political accounts. Upon his arrival in the Low Countries, Pietro Caetani was instructed to “seek to understand the state of this war, the things they undertake, and the things they plan to undertake in the service of the king, because in this way in your first letters you will be able to give information on the things that happen in those provinces.”²⁷ In their first letters, soldiers often offered summary descriptions of the political and military situation in the Low Countries. Sometimes they gave brief overviews of the country, its court, government, and ministers as well as its geography and customs—topics which were also covered extensively in the famous Venetian ambassadorial dispatches.²⁸ Arriving in Brussels in the autumn of 1588, the soldier Fulvio della Nave wrote a letter to the priest Julio Cesare Valentino in Mestre.²⁹ Della Nave first provides an overview of the seventeen different provinces in the Low Countries, listing all the towns no longer in the king’s possession. Then he gives a rather lengthy overview of the Habsburg army with its different constituent nations, enumerating the different regiments and their commanders. Last, he offers an assessment

of Alexander Farnese's character. In writing these letters, soldiers showcased their recently acquired knowledge of the region and shaped their readers' understanding of the current military and political situation. Reading such accounts, members of the Italian political and religious elite became familiar with the region and received updates on the most recent military and political developments.

Soldiers paid close attention to ongoing peace negotiations and often included printed documents offering news about political and military events with their correspondence. After the surrender of the city of Antwerp to Habsburg forces in August 1585, Giacomo Magno sent a printed copy of the peace conditions along with his letter to Cardinal d'Este in Rome.³⁰ Sending such official documents allowed the recipients to read the conditions of surrender or details of peace agreements in full before these documents were printed in different Italian cities. Thanks to these personal correspondents, the Italian governing elite had early access to information about fast-moving political events. Between 1607 and 1608, Aurelio Alciati closely monitored the peace negotiations between the Habsburg delegation and the Dutch Republic. The issue of free trade and navigation with the Indies soon halted the talks. In one of his letters to Virginio II Orsini, Alciati includes an Italian translation of an anti-peace pamphlet printed in the Dutch Republic.³¹ This pamphlet argued that the Dutch should not concede the East Indies trade in return for a peace deal with the Habsburg king. Such printed items were considered useful as a means of grasping popular sentiments and political opposition to the ongoing peace negotiations in the Dutch Republic. In sending this pamphlet to his patron, Alciati demonstrated that he had the ability to access rather sensitive material.

Important occasions, especially court entertainments and city festivals, were described in detail by soldiers. In 1587, the Cypriot Livio Podocataro wrote a lengthy description of the carnival festivities held by Alexander Farnese at the court in Brussels. Though he claims to include details about these celebrations only "in order to fill the blank spaces," his letter nevertheless provides insight into the behavior of several important noblemen.³² Such letters provided their readers with information about honor, ceremonial protocol, and matters of precedence—subjects with which members of Italy's governing elites were obsessed. The rivalries and competition which flourished between the different Italian ruling and noble houses were transported to the Low Countries; Italian soldiers therefore paid significant attention to the arrival of Italian nobles and the honors bestowed upon them. In their letters they described conflicts about status, titles, and rank. This was the

case in an extensive dispatch written by Mecenate Ottaviano, a colonel from Arezzo, to the Tuscan secretary of state, Belissario Vinta, describing the triumphal entry of Archdukes Albert and Isabella into Brussels in 1599.³³ Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Monferrato, had played a prominent role in the event. Gonzaga had traveled to the Low Countries, ostensibly for a health treatment in Spa, but many doubted that was his real objective and believed he had ulterior motives. Gonzaga dreamed of military glory and was extremely ambitious; he had already tried to obtain the position of Habsburg army general in the Low Countries.³⁴ Ottaviano ends his letter by describing Gonzaga's favored treatment by the archducal couple and his participation in a tournament held at the court, and elaborates on the status and treatment of Gonzaga at the newly established archducal court in Brussels.

The majority of the letters written by soldiers describe military preparations and actions. The war in the Netherlands was waged primarily by siege warfare rather than open battle.³⁵ This type of warfare was long and protracted with campaigning season often continuing throughout the winter months, providing ample opportunity for soldiers to gather enough news about the progress (or lack thereof) of the siege to share. Their epistolary commitment was exhaustive: military officers and soldiers alike promised to report on every single action. Normally on a weekly basis, they drafted letters providing updates from the military camp. Their letters range from personal accounts of their own involvement in an assault to more general overviews of recent actions undertaken by the besieging army. Accurate reporting and, above all, maintaining an overview of the different actions was quite a difficult task. It was impossible to both take part in all the assaults and report flawlessly on them. To add to the confusion, military camps were rife with rumors, making it difficult to accurately ascertain what was happening or even what had happened. Because of this, soldiers often differentiated between what they had heard from others and what they had seen in person. In order to maintain a trustworthy reputation it was better to indicate what was still unclear at the time of writing. This was the case in April 1585 during the Siege of Antwerp, when the city's defenders sent ships carrying explosives to destroy Farnese's pontoon bridge on the river Scheldt. In describing the attack, Fabritio della Rocca concluded that many people had been either killed or injured. However, he specifically added that he could not give a precise number as he did not want to lie.³⁶ Such difficulties were often overcome a few days after the end of a battle or a siege. At such moments, soldiers wrote or attached carefully crafted retrospective accounts offering an overview of the most noteworthy actions.

Such letters or reports generally contained the following information: the geographical importance of a location, the number of combatants on both sides, the number of soldiers killed, and the number taken prisoner. Soldiers explained why their readers needed to know everything about a recent success or defeat. In the case of the successful Siege of Maastricht in 1579, Ambrogio Landriano wrote that the Duke of Urbino needed to know every detail of this siege, “being the most attacked and defended place taken in Flanders.” He added: “Never before have we seen people so united in defending themselves and so resolute in dying.”³⁷ Defenders of a besieged city were frequently described as obstinate and stubborn during the early modern period. Landriano’s allusions to a determined resistance underline the enormous achievement of the Habsburg army in conquering this strategically important city. Yet stubbornness and obstinacy were also negative characteristics specifically associated with the inhabitants of the Low Countries. Due to their perceived rebellious nature and heretical beliefs, those terms became familiar tropes. Landriano’s letter and many others penned by soldiers expressed both admiration for their enemy’s courageous resolution and despair at their obstinate resistance. In an anonymous letter from the besieging camp at Ostend in 1602, these sentiments are clearly at play in the description of the city’s defenders: “they fight valiantly afflicted by so many devils.”³⁸ Deploying stereotypes and comparing the enemy to devils, the letter-writing soldiers shaped the narratives about and perceptions of their adversaries at the Italian courts.

Soldiers did more than simply inform their readers about the specifics of a particular battle or siege; by describing the intricacies of siege warfare and battle tactics, soldiers could present themselves as military connoisseurs. Military practices and techniques were undergoing significant and crucial changes during this period, and the Low Countries were seen as the best battlefield from which to observe and learn about the newest developments in martial action. Having considerable practical expertise in the art of warfare was a skill highly valued at the Italian courts. In their letters, Italian soldiers emphasized that they had come to the Low Countries specifically to obtain such practical experience. In crafting a reputation as military experts, many soldiers were actively trying to advance their own careers.

Military strategies and tactics used during trench warfare also received ample attention; for instance, Landriano elaborates on the use of mines and countermines during the Siege of Maastricht in 1579. Urban siege warfare was a slow process but also consisted of very spectacular episodes. The long and protracted Sieges of Antwerp (1584–85) and Ostend

(1601–4) captured the imagination of contemporaries. During the Siege of Antwerp both sides showed a remarkable military inventiveness. Della Rocca describes the successful completion of an 800-meter pontoon bridge across the river Scheldt by Alexander Farnese as a miracle.³⁹ The subsequent (failed) attacks by the city's defenders with specially designed bomb ships to destroy the fortified bridge are described at length in letters by several writers. The Habsburg army captured the *Finis Bellis*, a large floating platform which was meant to crash against the bridge but was so heavy it ran ashore before causing any damage. Nevertheless, in many letters the ship's weaponry (gun powder, nails, artillery) and a specific mechanism to destroy the bridge are described in detail.⁴⁰ During the Siege of Ostend, various soldiers reported on the ineffective new siege weapons invented by the Venetian engineer Pompeo Targone, such as his mobile drawbridge.⁴¹

Letters were not the only way to provide updates on blockading operations and battle tactics. Military architects often sent drawings of specific fortresses and sieges with their correspondence. Fortification plans and city maps had news value and were enclosed with letters in order to advertise the successful conquest of a city. In 1595, the military engineer Guidobaldo Pacciotti made a drawing of the Siege of Cambrai to accompany an extensive report describing its successful capture.⁴² Drawings of the fortifications of a specific city helped to contextualize the written reports. They also provided valuable information about the latest technological developments in siege warfare.⁴³ By sending illustrations, military engineers hoped to please their recipients and obtain future assignments. Italian dukes were very keen to study these maps, and collected this material for that purpose. To be knowledgeable in the art of fortification was a crucial part of their cultural education. In 1602, the Tuscan engineer Gabriele Ughi sent a drawing of the Siege of Ostend to Vincenzo Gonzaga "as a humble token."⁴⁴ Sending maps of sieges was not the sole preserve of military architects and engineers; impoverished lower ranking soldiers also included this type of material. Frederigo Livi from Urbino served twenty-seven years in the Low Countries, often going a whole year without receiving pay. He sent maps of the Siege of Bergen-Op-Zoom in 1622, and Breda in 1624, to the Duke of Urbino.⁴⁵ He was rewarded in 1629, when the unfortunate and long-serving Livi was finally promoted to colonel in the Republic of Lucca.

Soldiers provided shrewd and critical analysis of the wars in their letters. They reported and reflected upon their defeats as well as describing their victories. One of the most illustrative examples is the Battle of Nieuwpoort on July 2, 1600. During the battle, the Habsburg troops had the upper

hand during the first part of the confrontation with the Dutch army in the dunes. Francesco Grillenzoni describes the lengthy one-on-one fighting during this battle to an unknown family member: after a new attack was undertaken by a small group of Dutch cavalry, the Habsburg army started to retreat in disorderly fashion and eventually lost the battle. Grillenzoni recounts how he was able to save himself only by hiding in the nearby woodland. He concludes that “in the end due to bad governance, our sins, and pride, we fled in such a way that it was impossible to stand up to anyone.”⁴⁶ Both sides suffered huge losses and a lot of their experienced military commanders perished: 6,000 men in total died. Landriano was not present at the Battle of Nieuwpoort due to his deteriorating health, but he describes this defeat in a lengthy dispatch to the Duke of Urbino. He concludes, “[T]he greatest loss, is reputation.”⁴⁷ Archduke Albert, who was wounded during the battle and removed to safety, would instantly try to limit the reputational damage. Just a few days after the battle, it became clear that the Dutch army general Mauritis of Nassau was unable to capitalize on his victory, making it far easier for the Habsburg party to claim the battle was a pyrrhic victory rather than a defeat. Like Grillenzoni and Landriano, most soldiers provided Italian princely dynasties and family members with a totally different picture from the official accounts. Their letters contain vivid depictions of the battle, describing how soldiers engaged in the fight for hours, and the subsequent chaos as soldiers fled and went into hiding to save their own lives and the lives of their compatriots. It became impossible to deny the reality of this defeat and the enormous loss of life as more and more epistolary reports of dead family members arrived in Italian cities.

Letter-writing soldiers articulated astute military criticism. As early as 1583, Gian Battista Montacini offered a dramatic assessment of the war and the huge death toll to his brother Alberto, a commander in Ferrara: “This war should more appropriately be called a slaughterhouse of honest men. If things do not change it will be impossible to find honorable men who want and can resist the difficulties, which are almost unbelievable if one has not experienced them first-hand.”⁴⁸ Such judgments of this all-devouring war were voiced frequently in letters as the situation deteriorated even further.⁴⁹ In the 1590s, the Habsburg monarchy was near financial collapse, and military companies mutinied as many had not received their pay for years.⁵⁰ Many letters written by soldiers during this period were rather critical of Habsburg policy and recent developments in the Low Countries. Common and recurring complaints were the general lack of money, late pay, insufficient provisions, and internal struggles within army high command. The

opening sentence of Andrea Trivigo's letter of 1595 offers a good example: "If I have to write to you on the state of the affairs in Flanders, as you have asked me to do, five sheets of paper folded in two will not suffice." He proceeds to offer a blunt assessment of the terrible conditions of the Habsburg army and the devastation of the land. In order to avoid overly lengthy descriptions of all the problems, soldiers often couched their criticism by referring to contemporary military and political theory. In the same letter, Trivigo alludes to the theories of the famous Florentine writer Niccolò Machiavelli on how to win a war (reiterating the trope of obstinacy as explanation for the war dragging on), writing: "The king does not send people or money, whilst money is greatly needed. Following Machiavelli's thinking, we cannot be in a position with such well-fortified places and people of such obstinacy that a whole army can perish trying to take one or two fortresses."⁵¹

One of the most astute observers was Alciati, who claimed to write only the truth without embellishment.⁵² Describing the loss of the city of Sluis in August 1604 in a letter to Virginio II Orsini, Alciati predicted further ruin due to inexperienced military commanders and bad governance. To this analysis he adds, "[C]ertainly, I would never have believed what I have seen and see every day in this country even if I had read it in Tacitus or if it had been told to me by the most truthful man."⁵³ By referring to the Roman author Tacitus, Alciati demonstrates his knowledge of contemporary political theory. Tacitus revealed the secrets of state and the workings of high politics driven by ambitious individuals. The ancient Roman author was very popular at the end of the sixteenth century as contemporaries saw many parallels between his histories and the civil and religious wars devastating parts of Europe.⁵⁴

The writing of letters containing information from the battlefield was sometimes explicitly prohibited by army generals. For example, after January 7, 1602, Archduke Albert forbade the communication of details of a failed Habsburg assault on Ostend, in which 2,500 of his men had lost their lives.⁵⁵ Soldiers were well aware of the value of discretion; not every matter could be entrusted to paper. Letters were frequently intercepted, opened, and copied by enemy troops. For instance, in July 1604, Dutch soldiers intercepted letters written by Don Giovanni de Medici to the secretary of state in Florence describing the Siege of Ostend.⁵⁶ These were subsequently translated from Italian into Dutch as they were going to be read in the meeting of States General. In order to avoid falling into the wrong hands, letters touching upon sensitive matters contained promises that more information would be provided in person.⁵⁷

Letters from the battlefield reached a wider audience than their senders anticipated. As well as being used as a source of information by government officials and newsletter writers, several soldiers' letters were copied in their entirety in manuscript and found their way into print. Letters sent by members of army high command were often partially copied and circulated as separate news-sheets. This was the case with the letters sent by the military engineer Gabrio Serbelloni from Antwerp between 1567 and 1569.⁵⁸ Such separate news-sheets were part of a widespread culture of copying and re-packaging information into short snippets addressed mostly to other state officials, a distinct element of governmental practice in early modern Italy. In the majority of cases, soldiers' letters were anonymized and copied by news hawks in Italian cities. They formed the basis of handwritten newsletters with headlines such as: "from Antwerp with letters from a soldier."⁵⁹ While the precise identity of the author of these letters was removed, references to soldiers as authors and to besieging camps as the source of information were retained in order to render the content more reliable and trustworthy because it suggested that the news was written by eyewitnesses.

Letters were also copied in their entirety without anonymizing them; standard epistolary conventions including signatures were retained and reproduced. Grillenzoni's letter to a family member in which he described his personal experience of the Battle of Nieuwpoort in 1600 was copied in full and intended for wider circulation. Scribal dissemination beyond the originally intended recipients of such letters was important: as eyewitness accounts of a defeat of the Habsburg army, letters like Grillenzoni's offered a reliable counter-narrative to that of official Habsburg accounts minimizing the defeat. Letters were scribally copied, circulated, and eventually, in cases of victory, also printed. In 1579, Hercole Magno, soldier and member of Alexander Farnese's entourage, regularly wrote letters about the progress of the Siege of Maastricht to Alexander's father Ottavio Farnese, Duke of Parma and Piacenza. His last letters on the siege were copied and sent to the Medici family in Florence.⁶⁰ These letters present an official account of the first siege undertaken by Farnese as army general. Magno significantly downplays the violence involved in the conquest by Farnese's soldiers, claiming the three-day sack of the city happened without any bloodshed. Magno's letters were meant to celebrate and promote Habsburg and Catholic victories undertaken by an Italian general.⁶¹ To further promote this victory, these letters were first printed by Alessandro Benacci in Bologna then reprinted by Lorenzo Pasquato in Padua.⁶² Presented as a chronological compilation of

three letters written by Magno, the printed letters allowed the reader to follow the final assaults before the city surrendered. In his version, the Bolognese publisher Benacci retained the format of personal letters and printed the epistolary apparatus, such as titles of address and signatures, because this conveyed credibility.⁶³ Benacci added to his account that Magno had been sent to the Italian courts to deliver oral accounts of the siege. This insertion further strengthened the veracity of the account. Moreover, it demonstrates the importance of the soldier's role as purveyor of news within Italian information culture.

The Florentine diplomat Lorenzo Magalotti wrote in the 1680s: "I think you know how difficult it is to discover the truth about a solitary battle that is no more than four leagues away from the court in which one writes."⁶⁴ It is precisely here that military commanders and common soldiers played a crucial role: as eyewitnesses and active participants, these men provided firsthand information from the battlefield—information that those further afield simply did not possess. What has become increasingly clear is that these military men not only played a crucial role in writing about military confrontations, but they also covered a wide range of topics. Soldiers did not soft-pedal defeats; rather, they offered crucial analytical assessments of the situation and did not shy away from criticizing their superiors. Such critical insights into the situation on the ground were uniquely valuable and soldiers were acutely aware that the news they were sending to their rulers, patrons, and potential patrons had to be as reliable as possible. Providing trustworthy epistolary news was a way to gain access to powerful lords and princes. These correspondence networks transcended social divisions; common soldiers could reinvent themselves as trustworthy informers and military experts. Soldiers created narratives that shaped the reception of events happening in the Low Countries in Italian cities and courts.⁶⁵ Such military men need to be considered as crucial actors in their own right, crafting and disseminating news in early modern Europe. Their epistolary news shaped larger networks of news exchange as their letters were frequently copied and circulated. These soldiers and their letters, therefore, should be incorporated into our accounts of early modern communication.

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Notes

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- 1 The letter of instruction appeared in print in a collection of contemporary political treatises known as *Thesoro Politico*, which appeared in many different editions. I refer to the “Instruptione all’ Illustriss: Signor Pietro Gaetano quando andò in Fiandra,” included in *La seconda parte del thesoro politico* (Vicenza, 1602), 385–408. Translations throughout of primary sources are my own unless stated otherwise. See also Giampiero Brunelli, “‘Con Insonnij Diversi, et visioni stravaganti di guerre’: L’esordio di Pietro Caetani nelle Fiandre,” in *Militari Italiani dell’esercito di Alessandro Farnese*, ed. Giuseppe Bertini (Guastalla, It.: Mattioli, 2013), 75–106.
- 2 Giampiero Brunelli, “Soldati della scuola vecchia di Fiandra: Nobiltà ed esercizio delle armi nello stato della Chiesa fra cinque e seicento,” in *I Farnese: Corti, guerra e nobiltà in antico regime; atti del Convegno di studi, Piacenza, 24–26 novembre 1994*, ed. Antonella Bilotto, Cesare Mozzarelli, and Piero Del Negro (Roma: Bulzoni, 1997), 421–44; and Davide Maffi, “Cacciatore di Gloria: La presenza degli italiani nell’esercito di Fiandre (1621–1700),” in *Italiani al servizio straniero in età moderna*, ed. Paolo Bianchi, Davide Maffi, and Enrico Stumpo (Milano: Angeli, 2008) 73–103.
- 3 “Instruptione all’ Illustriss: Signor Pietro Gaetano quando andò in Fiandra,” 387: “participaranno con lei gli avvisi, che si ricevono da molte parti.”
- 4 Brunelli, “Con Insonnij Diversi, et visioni stravaganti di guerre,” 86.
- 5 Aldobrandini to Frangipani, Rome, Nov. 30, 1596, quoted in Léon van der Essen, ed., *Correspondance d’Ottavio Mirto Frangipani, premier nonce de Flandre, 1596–1696*, vol. 1, *Lettres, 1596–1598* (Paris: Institut Historique Belge, 1924), 25: “Qua si desidera grandemente havere avvisi di coteste parti, et di cose di stato et di quelle di guerra, però oltre quel che mi ricordo haverle scritto con altre mie in questo proposito, le replico con questa che procuri di sapere et intendere più che potrà delle cose che passano, et avvisi il tutto pienamente.”
- 6 Isabella Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350–1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 76–77.
- 7 Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham, “News Networks in Early Modern Europe,” in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–16, at 8–9.
- 8 Brendan Dooley, “Sources and Methods in Information History: The Case of Medici Florence, the Armada, and the Siege of Ostend,” in *News and Politics in Early Modern Europe (1600–1800)*, ed. Joop Koopmans (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 29–45.
- 9 David Randall, *Credibility in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Military News* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 34.
- 10 Literary historians and historians have begun to study soldiers’ literary texts and other writings; see, among others, Matthew Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard: Pen, Sword, and Ego* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Paul Scannel, *Conflict and Soldiers’ Literature in Early Modern Europe: The Reality of War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 11 Miguel Martínez, *Front Lines: Soldiers’ Writing in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 23.

- 12 Mark Greengrass, Thierry Rentet, and Stéphane Gal, “The Hinterland of the Newsletter: Handling Information in Space and Time,” in Raymond and Moxham, *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, 616–40, at 618; James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, eds., *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
- 13 Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567–1659* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 237–38; Gregory Hanlon, *The Twilight of a Military Tradition: Italian Aristocrats and European Conflicts, 1560–1800* (London: UCL Press, 1998); Angelantonio Spagnoletti, *Le dinastie italiane nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003); and Giuseppe Bertini, ed., *Militari Italiani dell’esercito di Alessandro Farnese* (Guastalla, It.: Mattioli, 2013).
- 14 Roselli to Cioli, Brussels, Apr. 17, 1627, Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter cited as ASF), Mediceo del Principato (MdP), file 4295, vol. 5, fol. 350r: “Non per altro che per acquistare honor.”
- 15 Brunelli, “Con Insonnij Diversi, et visioni stravaganti di guerre,” 94.
- 16 Del Pio to unidentified recipient, Brussels, May 27, 1607, Archivio di Stato di Mantova (ASMa), Archivio Gonzaga (AG), Fiandra, file 575, fols. 802r–v; letters written by Glussee, fols. 810r–36v.
- 17 Farnetis to Duke of Urbino, Brussels, Jan. 28, 1601, ASF, Ducato Urbino (DU), Series I, file 198, fol. 932r: “Pensai in me stesso che Don Gaston sarà bon per avisare e dar conto a VA delle cose che passano in questi paesi et avisi sicuri e molte cose che non son publiche.”
- 18 Dries Raeymaekers, *One Foot in the Palace: The Habsburg Court of Brussels and the Politics of Access in the Reign of Albert and Isabella, 1598–1621* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 211–12.
- 19 ASF, DU, Series I, file 199, fols. 1r–528v.
- 20 Landriano to Duke of Urbino, Maastricht, Sept. 12, 1579, ASF, DU, Series I, file 198, fol. 236r: “mi sono risoluto d’avisarla di quello ch’al presente occorre per satifare al obbligo che tengo et alla volunta ch’ho di fare spesso riverenza a V.Ecc. con il mezzo delle mie lettere.”
- 21 Landriano to Duke of Urbino, Maastricht, 9 June 1579, ASF, DU, Series I, file 198, fol. 232r–33v.
- 22 This short biographical sketch is based on the scarce information given in the surviving letters from Alciati and about Alciati.
- 23 Giampiero Brunelli, “Canali di informazione politica degli Orsini di Bracciano fra Cinque e Seicento,” in *L’informazione politica in Italia (secoli XVI–XVIII)*, ed. Elena Fasano Guarini and M. Rosa (Pisa: Scuola Superiore Normale, 2001), 281–301. His letters are kept in Archivio Storico Capitolino di Roma Capitale (ASCRC), Archivio Orsini, Series I, files 109, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 118, 119, 120, and 124.
- 24 ASMa, AG, Fiandra, files 575 and 576. Alciati’s letters addressed to Barberini are in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), MS Barb. Lat. 6797, fols. 1r–11v.
- 25 ASF, MdP, files 965, 1367, and 1817.
- 26 Alciati to Barberini, Brussels, Sept. 17, 1607, BAV, Barb. Lat 6797, fol. 6r: “Quanti alle cose di questi paesi, scriverò a V.S. Ill. quello che si sa da certo, lasciando da parte le ciancie del vulgo.”

- 27 “Instruttione all’ Illustriss: Signor Pietro Gaetano quando andò in Fiandra,” 385: “doverà cercare di sapere lo stato di questa Guerra, & quello che si fa, & che si pensa di fare per servitio del Rè, perche in questa modo potrà con le prime sue lettere, dar qualche aviso delle cose che passano in quella Provincia.”
- 28 Filippo de Vivo, “How to Read Venetian Relazioni,” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 34, no. 1–2 (2011): 25–59, at 32–35.
- 29 Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana (BV), N22 Memorie Istoriche, fols. 157r–58v.
- 30 Magno to Cardianl d’Este, Antwerp, Aug. 31, 1585, Archivio di Stato di Modena (ASMo), Ambasciatore Germania (AmGer), file 45, unfoliated.
- 31 Alciati to Orsini, Brussels, Apr. 19, 1608, ASCRC, Archivio Orsini, Series I, file 118, fol. 513r–v.
- 32 Podocataro to the Duke of Ferrara, Brussels, Mar. 12, 1587, ASMo, AmGer, file 44, unfoliated: “per impire il foglio le dirò qualche particolare di questa corte e del’alegro Carnavale.”
- 33 Ottaviano to Vinta, Brussels, Sept. 14, 1599, ASF, MdP, file 4255, fol. 348r–49v.
- 34 To this end Vincenzo Gonzaga had already sent Fabio Gonzaga with a letter of instruction to Brussels; see ASMa, AG, file 574, unfoliated.
- 35 For more information, see Christopher Duffy, *Siege Warfare: The Fortress in the Early Modern World, 1494–1660* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 36 Della Rocca to Seguidi, Beveren, Apr. 13, 1585, ASF, MdP, file 1193, insert 18.
- 37 Landriano to Duke of Urbino, Maastricht, June 23, 1579, ASF, DU, Series I, file 198, fol. 235v: “Alla quelle do conto d’ogni minttia per esse questo una impresa che merita che V. Ecc. sappia ogni successo essendo la terra piu combattuta et meglio diffesa di quanto sono statte pigliatte in fiandra, et dove piu cose si sono viste ne mai si sonno visti gente piu unite in diffendersi, ne più resolutta nella morte.”
- 38 ASF, MdP, file 4256, fol. 97r: “che combattono valorosamente et travagliano come tanti diavoli.”
- 39 Della Rocca to Seguidi, Beveren, Apr. 13, 1585, ASF, MdP, file 1193, insert 18.
- 40 Copy of a letter from unknown author to unidentified recipient, Beveren, May 27, 1585, ASF, MdP, file 4255, fols. 44r–46v.
- 41 Alciati to Orsini, Ostend, Dec. 3, 1603, ASCR, Archivio Orsini, Series I, file 124, fol. 61r–v. See also Dooley, “Sources and Methods in Information History,” 41–42.
- 42 Landriano to Duke of Urbino, Brussels, Dec. 25, 1595, ASF, DU, Series I, file 198, fol. 265r–66v.
- 43 Charles van den Heuvel, “*Papiere Bolwercken*”: *De introductie van de Italiaanse stede-en vestingbouw in de Nederlanden (1540–1609) en het gebruik van tekeningen* (Alphen aan den Rijn, Neth.: Canaletto, 1991).
- 44 Quoted in Van den Heuvel, “*Papiere Bolwercken*,” 67. See Peter Barber, ““Procure as many as you can and send them over”: Cartographic Espionage and Cartographic Gifts in International Relations, 1460–1760,” in *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13–29.
- 45 Levi’s letters from 1607 to 1629 are kept in ASF, DU, Series I, file 199, fols. 689r–799v.
- 46 Grillenzoni to unknown recipient, Bruges, July 9, 1600, BV, N22, fol. 92v: “Tanto

- alla fine per il mal governo, per i peccati nostri, superbi per il guadagno, si siamo messi in fuga di tal maniera, che non è stato possibile far testa a nessuno.”
- 47 Landriano to Duke of Urbino, Brussels, July 8, 1600, ASF, DU I, 198, fol. 494r: “Pero la maggior perdita, è, la riputatione.”
 - 48 Gian Battista Montecatini to Alberto Montecatini, Namur, Jan. 22, 1583, ASMo, AmGer, file 44, unfoliated: “Che questa guerra con nome più proprio si possa chiamare macello d’huomini da bene. Se no si mutano le cose non trovo huomo d’honori che voglia o passo volendo resistere alle difficoltà che si passano incredibili veramente se non si provano.”
 - 49 For another example, see the letter sent by Aurelio Alciati to Orsini from Ostend on Aug. 16, 1604, in ASCRC, Orsini, Series I, file 144, fol. 45r.
 - 50 Parker, *Army of Flanders*, 157–76.
 - 51 Trivigo to Bariscotto, Brussels, Apr. 27, 1595, ASMa, AG, file 574, unfoliated: “S’io havessi Mons. a scrivervi dello stato de gl’affati di Fiandra come desiderate certo non basterebbe un quinterno di carta”; “se non mandà il Re gente, et danari, massime danari che la ragione del Macchiavelli non può haver loco in questi tempi ove si trovano tanti et cosi ben munite fortezze, gente d’ostinatione che farà perdere un esser-cito sotto una o due fortezze.”
 - 52 Alciati to Orsini, Ostend, Aug. 14, 1603, ASCR, Archivio Orsini, Series I, file 113, fol. 39r–v.
 - 53 Alciati to Orsini, Ostend, Sept. 5, 1604, ASCR, Archivio Orsini, Series I, file 114, fol. 59r: “certo io non harei mai creduta quello, che ho visto et vedo ogni giorno in questi paesi, ancorche l’havessi letto in Tacito, o mi fosse state detto dal piu verace huomo, ch’hoggi viva sopra che parendomi a bastanza haver scritto non posso più oltre.”
 - 54 See Alexandra Gajda, “Tacitus and Political Thought in Early Modern Europe, c. 1530–c. 1640,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, ed. A. J. Woodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 253–68.
 - 55 Giovan Battista Spaccini, *Cronaca di Modena, anni 1588–1602*, ed. A. Bioni, R. Bussi, and C. Giovannini (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1993), 535.
 - 56 Carletti to Grand Duke of Tuscany, The Hague, July 14, 1604, ASF, MdP, file 924, fol. 157r.
 - 57 Podocataro to Duke of Ferrara, Gent, Jan. 30, 1588, ASMo, AmGer, file 44, unfoliated.
 - 58 ASMo, Cancelleria Ducale, Avvisi, file 6, fols. 668r–69v: “Avvisi d’Anversa de 28 xbre 1567 del S. Gabrio Zerbelloni”; fol. 748r: “Avisi d’Anversa di 30 magio 1568 dal S. Gabrio Serbellone”; fol. 1100r: “Per lettere d’Anversa di 25 settembre 1568 de Gabrio Serbelloni”; and fols. 1210r–11v and 1224r.
 - 59 ASF, MdP, file 4254, fol. 534r–v: “D’Anversa con lettere d’un soldato de 14 di agosto 1576.”
 - 60 A handwritten copy of this letter was sent to the Medici: ASF, MdP, file 4254, fol. 661r–v.
 - 61 See Nina Lamal, “Promoting the Catholic Cause on the Italian Peninsula: Printed *avvisi* on the Dutch Revolt and the French Wars of Religion (1562–1600),” in Raymond and Moxham, *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, 675–94.

- 62 *Copia de gli ultimi avisi venuti di Fiandra all'Illustrissimo & Eccentissimo Signore Duca di Parma & Piasenza &c. dove s'intende minutamente tutti gli assalti, sacaramucie, che sono occorse, sotto la fortezza di Mastrich. Con la presa, & il vero disegno della fortezza* (Bologna, 1579). It was reprinted with the same title in 1579 in Padua.
- 63 Randall, *Credibility*, 95–120.
- 64 Quoted by Brendan Dooley, *A Social History of Scepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 140.
- 65 For more information, see Nina Lamal, *News from Antwerp: Italian Communication on the Dutch Revolt* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).