



Lethbridge
Undergraduate
Research Journal

ISSN 1718-8482

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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

The Portrayal of the 1718 'Sicily Crisis' by Period English Newspapers

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Citation:

Owen Pikkert: The Portrayal of the 1718 'Sicily Crisis' by Period English Newspapers. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2009. Volume 4 Number 1.

Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of the 1718 'Sicily Crisis' by several period English newspapers, including the *Daily Courant*, the *Evening Post*, and the *London Gazette*. The 'Sicily Crisis' was provoked by the voyage of a Spanish fleet from Spain to Sicily, which the Spanish reclaimed after having lost it through the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht. Much of the voyage was shrouded in mystery, prompting speculation and fear as to its precise destination. After having analyzed the reportage of the 'Sicily Crisis' in each of the aforementioned newspapers, several common prejudices emerged. The English newspapers strongly supported the 'Tranquility of Europe', and they portrayed Britain as eager to negotiate and Spain as needlessly aggressive. Moreover, the restrictions of their own medium helped to contribute towards a sense of crisis.

The British reading public of the early eighteenth century largely interpreted foreign events through the biases of their newspapers. As the primary method of international news communication, newspapers communicated both explicit factual content and implicit agendas of action. This paper focuses on the common portrayal of the 1718 'Sicily Crisis' by three major English period newspapers, including the *Daily Courant*, the *Evening Post*, and the *London Gazette*, referred to collectively as "the newspapers." In particular, this paper argues that the newspapers supported the maintenance of the 'Tranquility of Europe', depicted the Spanish as overly aggressive and the British as eager to negotiate, and heightened the sense of crisis by the restrictions of its own medium. The newspapers thereby betrayed a conservative, reactionary stance, in large part because they could not quickly communicate information. This in turn contributed to increased speculation and fear. Consequently, the information conveyed to the British reading public was as much a promotion of supposed British stability as factual data. All primary references are taken from the newspapers, so as to present the perspective offered to the British reading public.

It is first necessary to understand the main flow of the events themselves, before discussing the newspapers' perspective. The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 had resulted in the international recognition of Philip V as the King of Spain. Part of the Treaty's agreement was that Spain ceded Sicily to Savoy, and Sardinia to Austria. Due to its losses, Spain was deliberately excluded from Italy by the Utrecht settlement.¹ The Spanish subsequently tried to regain these islands and to place them once again under their authority, and not simply for commercial interests, for Sicily had ceased to be a chief partner for Spanish traders.² By the end of May 1718, five Spanish men of war sailed towards Barcelona. Approximately two weeks later, the King of Sicily sent a letter to George I, King of Great Britain. In the letter he claimed that the Spanish fleet had sailed from Barcelona to Palermo in Sicily, where they had landed their troops and reclaimed Spanish sovereignty.³ An Italian Senate maintained that it was fully appropriate for Britain to protect Italy's neutrality by apprehending the Spanish fleet.⁴ By late July the British Admiral Sir George Byng and his fleet had arrived in Port Mahon, Minorca, from where they were to sail towards Naples to intercept the Spanish.⁵ The *Evening Post* argued that it was Philip V's aggression towards Sicily which remained the principal reason for the ensuing war, and that it was "absolutely necessary" for Britain to intervene.⁶ Although the Spanish believed that they could reclaim Sicily with their new naval power, the British won a decisive victory at Cape Passaro on the 11th of August 1718, and by the middle of October the first of Byng's naval squadron sailed homeward.⁷ What was later called the 'Sicily Crisis' dissolved back into the 'status quo', a state of affairs which most European powers tried to maintain.

From a contemporaneous viewpoint, the concept of the 'status quo' was closely related to the 'Tranquility of Europe'. The idea of progress in the eighteenth century was interwoven with virtually every field of thought, and contributed towards

a general period of optimism.⁸ There was a strong British desire for peace at home as well as abroad. Despite being published in Britain, a declaration by Philip V on his disdain of British aggression was suppressed as sedition, and everyone in Britain had to return their copy so as not to disturb the public peace.⁹ In international affairs, the conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession in 1714 fostered a common desire to maintain the new peace. The newspapers' discourse of the Quadruple Alliance formed between Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Austria against Spain also reveals a desire to return to normalcy. For example, the request for the Dutch to join the alliance between Britain and France was called the "Measures proposed for preserving the Quiet of Europe", which the French had joined "for preserving the Peace of Europe", while even the Spanish claimed to support the "publick Tranquility."¹⁰ The members of the Quadruple Alliance claimed that their common desire for peace within their dominions could only be accomplished if the other European states were not at war.¹¹ While the concept of the common good was decreasingly monolithic with the expansion of the British Empire,¹² there was a general consensus that peace in Europe was foundational to its development. When the *Evening Post* published the British Secretary Cragg's warning that the Spanish kindling of war flames would spread over all Europe, the need for decisive, punitive measures against the Spanish would have appeared obvious.¹³

The alleged Spanish disruption of the 'Tranquility of Europe' meant that a peaceable equilibrium had to be restored. Once again, the British newspapers' discourse envisioned the Spanish as a destabilizing force in an already fragile international order. In the Hague, the Spanish ambassador tried to dissuade the Dutch from signing what was published in the *London Gazette* as a "Treaty of Alliance for the Preservation of the general Peace and Tranquility of Europe."¹⁴ A letter from the city of Turin assumed that the British reading public had already heard of the "Baseness of the Spanish in full Peace."¹⁵ In light of these allegations of socio-political disruption, the Treaty of the Quadruple Alliance was seen as an attempt to reinstate the 'Tranquility of Europe.' Philip V was even told that his assurance of peace would be an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his love for international stability.¹⁶ With the successive publications of the official French motives for war, the Treaty of the Quadruple Alliance, and the correspondence between the Secretary Cragg and his Spanish counterpart the Marquis de Monteleone, the British reading public was aware of the official rationales behind military action against the Spanish. George I's desire to establish an unalterable European peace¹⁷ echoed a common European sentiment. The Spanish were framed as destabilizing a feeble tranquility, for which they would be punished.

Furthermore, the British newspapers depicted the Spanish as pugnacious and aggressive, which they contrasted with their portrayal of the British as embodying a spirit of reconciliation. Their description of the Spanish plan to retake Sicily betrays a sense of suspicion, which was subsequently enlarged to a strong disapproval of the entire Spanish stratagem. By early July 1718, the *Daily Courant* claimed that George I was preparing a defense against the "designs" of the Spanish, even though the Spanish venture was not yet fully understood.¹⁸ The newspapers phrased the Spanish presence near Sicily as an "invasion", a word which Secretary Cragg later used officially.¹⁹ As will be seen, the Spanish actually saw their own presence in Sicily as a welcomed return, far from an invasion or conquest. Nevertheless, the newspapers portrayed the Spanish as having broken the feeble trust produced by the Treaty of Utrecht. Some British ministers saw it as the "Spanish Breach of Faith", along with the minister of the Duke of Savoy, who called it a Spanish "perfidy."²⁰ From the Spanish perspective, the Ministry of Great Britain had purposefully cultivated an aversion to Spain within the English nation,²¹ which was at least true for the British newspapers. The Spanish hoped that English merchants, whom they described as "men so wise, so prudent, and so intelligent", would not be deceived by the private interests of the British Ministry.²² Although the newspapers were slanted against the Spanish, the fact that such accusations were published in the very medium which they undermined suggests that the newspapers were at least willing to accommodate accusations. Yet the Earl Stanhope was still sent to Madrid to deter the Spanish from their plans, the English fleet still sailed to ensure safety from "the Attempts of the Spaniards", and the stage was still set to smear the Spanish as "opportunistic conspirators."²³

In contrast to supposed Spanish recalcitrance, the newspapers portrayed Britain as eager to negotiate. Such a portrayal was partly accurate. Both Britain and most continental powers were interested in maintaining peace in Europe, which the Spanish had tried to undermine with their obstinacy at the formation of the Quadruple Alliance. However, only the British were depicted as propagating a desire for reasonable negotiation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the newspapers' portrayal of George I as an arbitrator. The 'Tranquility of Europe' were George I's watchwords, and the *Evening Post's* paraphrase of an Anglo-French communication expressed his desire to appear as a mediator.²⁴ Secretary Cragg expressed the King's wish "that no Coldness on either Side may abate the Friendship which the King so passionately desires to cultivate with his Catholick Majesty."²⁵ Even the official French view of George I was that he maintained a spirit of reconciliation and of peace.²⁶ The whole English nation allegedly preferred peace over any other option, and was therefore willing to negotiate with the Spanish.²⁷

The British newspapers were most prejudiced in the level of illegitimacy which they attributed to the Spanish retaking of Sicily. While Philip V had found the loss of Sicily "a blot on his *gloire*",²⁸ his claim to a Spanish presence on the island was arguably stronger than that of Savoy, in spite of the Treaty of Utrecht. It had only been five years since the Spanish had lost their control of Sicily. There was a general Sicilian animosity towards the strictures of the Duke of Savoy.²⁹ In keeping with its pro-Spanish sentiment, Sicily had apparently also given Spain special access to its harbours, where the Spanish were even allowed to erect magazines.³⁰ A wave of British opinion swelled into a belief that the Spanish had actually been united with the Sicilians all along. This belief supposedly dried up by the time it was published in the *Evening Post*, though it was revived only a week later.³¹ Despite framing the Spanish presence in Sicily as an invasion, the British newspapers were faithful to communicate the general rejoicing of both Spain and Sicily. In Madrid, *Te Deum* was sung in thanksgiving for the reacquisition of Palermo, and in one Sicilian town the citizens put up a picture of Philip V upon the news of the Spanish arrival.³²

It remains to be considered how the British newspapers reported the Spanish reaction to being portrayed as aggressors. In his published reply to Secretary Cragg, the Marquis de Monteleone claimed that the English fleet was only supposed to act defensively, and not to assault the Spanish.³³ The Spanish therefore viewed the naval battle at Cape Passaro as an unprovoked attack, where Spain had not been the aggressor, for they were still technically at war with Austria.³⁴ Additionally, the Marquis de Monteleone claimed that the Spanish government had been surprised at the high level of British animosity and abuse.³⁵ By reversing the accusation, Spain viewed the British as having acted aggressively. The Spanish later claimed that Philip V's only goal was "the Liberty of Europe" by preventing Austria from swallowing up Italy.³⁶ Both the Quadruple Alliance and Spain were represented as desiring a balance of power, but as supporting

different views as to how it would be accomplished. Just as *Te Deum* was sung in Spain over the reacquisition of Palermo, it was also sung in Britain over the victory at Cape Passaro.³⁷ The newspapers were faithful to publish Spanish accusations of aggression against Britain. However, they consistently depicted the Spanish as overly aggressive, and the British as overly affable.

As with most forms of media, early eighteenth century British newspapers framed the facts as much as they conveyed them. While they were concerned with legitimating British intervention through presenting factual reports, the medium of the newspaper itself helped to heighten the sense of crisis. The newspapers were faithful to print reports, official letters and other supposedly reliable content. Yet they were usually about a week or two behind the events which they reported. This was particularly evident during the first few weeks of the Sicily Crisis, when the need for current information was paramount. On the 21st of June 1718 the Genoese realized that the Spanish had not intended to stop at Sardinia, which insinuated that the Spanish fleet had a farther, probably unwarranted destination. The news of this realization was communicated to the British reading public exactly one week later, by which time it was too late for the British to stop the Spanish from reaching their intended destination.³⁸ Despite their attempt to communicate the news faithfully, the newspaper medium fostered a sense of powerlessness regarding international crises. Sometimes the reports which the newspapers received were both out of date and very vague, which in one case prompted the Neapolitans to commission a boat "to endeavour to gain some certain Intelligence."³⁹ By the time the British heard of the belief that the Spanish were actually sailing for Sicily,⁴⁰ the Spanish fleet could have been in any number of places. The trickle of outdated information to the British press did not allow for immediate, effective responses, and thereby contributed towards a sense of crisis.

Moreover, the speculative tone of many reports further exacerbated a sense of crisis. At times the British, and presumably most of Britain's allies, were completely ignorant as to the location or purpose of the Spanish fleet.⁴¹ The reports often had to travel long distances to get to London, and might change hands frequently. One report, which claimed that the Spanish would attack in a fortnight, was based on some other reports from Italy, which had in turn come via Switzerland.⁴² In general, the Spanish venture into the Mediterranean remained an enigma for some time, as it was previously assumed that the Spanish had simply wanted to bolster their Sardinian troops.⁴³ The speculation was based just as much on the way in which newspapers received news as on the secrecy of the Spanish venture itself. The initial mystery surrounding the Spanish expedition, the inability to pinpoint the location of the fleet, the length of time required for reports to reach London, and the indirect routes by which they came all contributed to a feeling of heightened urgency in the newspapers, especially given their distance from the rapid unfolding of events.

In conclusion, the newspapers encouraged public British adversity towards the Spanish during the 'Sicily Crisis'. Although the Spanish did breach the Treaty of Utrecht, the newspapers' discourse helped to frame the circumstances with little room for Spanish justification. In particular, they strongly supported the 'Tranquility of Europe', they foiled supposedly rash Spanish aggression against the British desire for reasonable negotiation, and they contributed towards a sense of emergency by the restrictions of their own medium. The British newspapers not only helped to communicate a crisis; they helped to create it.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Professor James Alsop of McMaster University for providing the opportunity to research eighteenth century British newspapers, as well as Kate Walker for her constructive criticism of the paper.

About the Author

The author is entering his third year of a Combined Honours Program in History and Philosophy at McMaster University. He has won several scholarships in History, as well as maintaining a President's Award.

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5. *Ibid.*, 4 August 1718.
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