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A Failure of Intelligence: Gómez Suárez de Figueroa and the Fieschi Conspiracy, 1547¹

MICHAEL J. LEVIN

At midnight on January 3, 1547, the city of Genoa almost experienced a revolution.² A young, dashing Genoese nobleman named Gian Luigi Fieschi, backed by several hundred soldiers and a small fleet of ships, seized control of the city's main gates and the harbor. Fieschi and his followers shouted "Liberty! Liberty!" and "The People! The People!" in an attempt to rally the Genoese citizens to their cause, of overthrowing the pro-Spanish rule of Andrea Doria. Giannettino Doria, Andrea's cousin and designated heir, came out of the ducal palace to confront these troublemakers; he was shot down and killed. Andrea Doria, old and ill, fled the city in terror.

As it turned out, however, the event more closely resembled a Monty Python skit than the French Revolution. Most of the citizens of Genoa locked themselves in their houses rather than join this would-be revolt. Gian Luigi Fieschi, while walking over a plank between his ship and the quay, fell into the harbor. Unfortunately for him, he was dressed in full armor; he sank to the bottom and drowned. A few days later, once it seemed safe, Andrea Doria returned to the city, and began a vendetta against Fieschi's family and friends. Over the next few weeks, most of them would be arrested and executed. While this event had a rather anti-climactic ending, the political actors involved certainly did not treat it lightly.

In the following centuries, many Italians celebrated Fieschi as a tragic hero, who fell while trying to strike a blow against tyranny and foreign oppression.³ In the eighteenth century, Friedrich Schiller even wrote an opera about him, titled "The Republican Tragedy" (1783). Modern historians are harsher: one refers to the conspiracy as "pathetic," while another dismisses Fieschi as an "idiot" who was being manipulated by both the Pope and the King of France.⁴ What I am interested in, however, is how Charles V, the king of Spain

¹ Research for this essay was made possible by a Faculty Research Grant from the University of Akron, and a grant from the Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain's Ministry of Culture and United States' Universities.

² For details see Arturo Pacini, *La Genova di Andrea Doria nell'Impero di Carlo V* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1999), 593-610, and Paolo Lingua, *Andrea Doria* (Milan: Editoriale Nuova, 1984), 145-177.

³ See for example Emanuele Celesia, *The Conspiracy of Gianluigi Fieschi*, trans. David H. Wheeler (London: S. Low and Marston, 1866).

⁴ Steven A. Epstein, *Genoa and the Genoese 958-1528* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 320; Lingua, 146.

at the time, and his resident ambassador in Genoa, Gómez Suárez de Figueroa, interpreted this event. The casual observer might laugh at Fieschi, and dismiss this whole episode as a mere sideshow of history. But the evidence suggests that the Spanish ambassador and his monarch did not laugh. They believed they had narrowly escaped the loss of a crucial ally, and it scared them badly.

What is even more interesting, however, is that the Spaniards could have easily prevented the whole thing.⁵ As we shall see, the Spanish intelligence network picked up early warnings of the conspiracy a full eighteen months before it happened. In fact, Charles V ordered Figueroa to be on his guard, but the ambassador blithely assured him that there was nothing to worry about. The Fieschi affair thus represents a classic case of intelligence failure: not because the Spaniards failed to discover information, but rather because they had the information and failed to act on it.

One final point of interest about the Fieschi affair is what happened to Figueroa in punishment for committing such a monumental blunder: apparently, nothing. He would continue at his post for another twenty-two years, until his death in 1569. In fact, a mere two months after the attempted coup, Charles accepted Figueroa's advice on the extremely delicate political question of whether to seize power in Genoa. At a time when Charles was considering assuming direct imperial control of numerous northern Italian territories, it is remarkable that the same man whose egregious error in judgment had almost cost the Spaniards a crucial Italian ally should so dissuade the emperor.

To understand why Charles and his ambassador in Genoa were so frightened by the Fieschi conspiracy, we have to remember the geopolitical context. The Republic of Genoa was critically important for Charles V's strategic goals.⁶ In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Genoa had wavered between allying with France or Spain, but in 1528 Andrea Doria, admiral of the Genoese fleet, made a decisive move into the Habsburg camp. From that point on

⁵ Paolo Lingua suggests that Fieschi's intentions were fairly obvious, but Figueroa and Doria dismissed him as an innocuous dreamer. *Andrea Doria*, 161-162. I agree, but I also have found more hard evidence of it.

⁶ See Arturo Pacini, "Genoa and Charles V," in *The World of Emperor Charles V*, eds. Wim Blockmans and Nicolette Mout (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2004), 161-199, and Manuel Herrero Sánchez, "Una república mercantil en la órbita de la monarquía católica (1528-1684). Hegemonía y decadencia del agregado hispano-genovés," in *Sardegna, Spagna, e Stati italiani nell'età di Carlo V*, eds. Bruno Anatra and Francesco Manconi (Rome: Carocci editore, 2001), 183-200. See also the recent collection of articles in *Génoa y la Monarquía Hispánica (1528-1713)*, 2 volumes, eds. Manuel Herrero Sánchez, Yasmina Rocío Yessef Garfía, Carol Bitossi, and Dino Puncuh (Genoa: Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 2011).

Genoa was a crucial partner in Charles's attempts to establish hegemony in Italy and the Mediterranean. On land, having Genoa as an ally helped cement Habsburg control of northern Italy, and kept communication lines open between Spain and its Italian territories (Naples and Milan). At sea, the Genoese fleet fought in all of Charles's Mediterranean campaigns, especially against the Turks.⁷ Perhaps even more important, Genoese bankers financed Charles's empire, providing critically important loans to the Emperor.⁸ So for political, strategic, and economic reasons, Charles depended on the alliance with Genoa; in Charles's famous political testament of 1548, he told his son Philip that of all the states in Italy, "Genoa is the most important of all to us. Act shrewdly and skillfully in your dealings with it."⁹ Thus any threat to Andrea Doria's friendly regime was taken very seriously indeed.¹⁰

In order to maintain good diplomatic relations with Genoa, and to keep an eye out for trouble, Charles depended on his resident ambassadors in that city. And for much of Charles's reign, that meant depending on a particular ambassador, Gómez Suárez de Figueroa, who filled that post for an extraordinary forty years (1529-1569). Very little has been written about Figueroa; in fact historians sometimes confuse him with a contemporary Spanish noble with the same name.¹¹ We know that the ambassador Gómez Suárez de Figueroa came from a hidalgo family in Guadalajara, Spain. He served in the king's personal bodyguard before being appointed a captain of infantry in Italy. He was one of the knights who escorted King Francis I of France back to Spain after his capture at the battle of Pavia in 1525.¹² So as a young man he had a distinguished military career, and had personal connections with Charles. We also know that he was sent to Genoa as a replacement for the previous ambassador, Lope de Soria, who

⁷ See Thomas Allison Kirk, *Genoa and the Sea: Policy and Power in an Early Modern Maritime Republic, 1559-1684* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 14-28.

⁸ There is a large literature on this topic, beginning with the classic work by Ramon Carande, *Carlos V y sus banqueros*, 2nd edition, 3 volumes (Madrid: Sociedad de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1965-1967).

⁹ Quoted in Karl Brandt, *The Emperor Charles V*, trans. C.V. Wedgwood (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), 583-584.

¹⁰ Genoa would be equally important to Philip II; see Geoffrey Parker, *Grand Strategy of Philip II* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 81-82.

¹¹ Manuel Fernández Álvarez, for example, seems to make this mistake: *Felipe II y su tiempo*, 10th edition (Madrid: Espasa, 2000), 816. See also the entry on Figueroa in German Bleiberg, *Diccionario de historia de España*, Vol. 3 (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1967-1979), 698, which confuses the two men. The other Gómez Suárez de Figueroa (d. 1571) was the first duke of Feria. See Ann E. Wiltout, *A Patron and a Playwright in Renaissance Spain: the House of Feria and Diego Sánchez de Badajoz* (London: Tamesis Books Limited, 1987), 31-32. To add to the confusion, the duke of Feria was also in Italy for a time: he was governor of Milan 1554-1555.

¹² Donald E. Chipman, *Nuno de Guzman and the Province of Panuco in New Spain, 1518-1533* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1967), 114-116.

had fallen into serious disfavor with Andrea Doria.¹³ The fact that Figueroa remained at his post for the next forty years would seem to be a testament to his diplomatic abilities—but the Fieschi conspiracy definitely represents one of the low points of his career.

The Fieschi were one of the oldest and most prestigious noble families in Genoa; in 1243 a member of that family was elected pope (Innocent IV), the first Genoese to receive that honor.¹⁴ In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries they had close ties to the French monarchy, as did many of the older noble houses. It is these very families who would become increasingly marginalized when Andrea Doria decisively switched allegiance to the Habsburgs in 1528.¹⁵ We should note however, that Gian Luigi's father Sinibaldo Fieschi (d. 1532) was friendly with the Spaniards. In a letter to the Empress Isabella in 1531, Figueroa referred to Sinibaldo Fieschi as a “good servant of Your Majesty.”¹⁶ Perhaps this helps to explain why, fourteen years later, Figueroa would be so slow to believe that Sinibaldo's son would plot against the Spaniards. On the other hand, in the period of 1534-1536, Sinibaldo's widow, Maria Grosso Della Rovere (a niece of Pope Sixtus IV), actively pursued alliances with France, as well as with other disenfranchised noble Genoese families hostile toward Doria's regime. Figueroa was well aware of Maria Grosso's anti-Spanish plotting, and remarked on it in his reports.¹⁷ It thus seems particularly odd that Figueroa would cavalierly dismiss warnings of Gian Luigi's conspiracy.

The first mention of the Fieschi affair appeared in a letter from the Spanish ambassador in Paris to Francisco de los Cobos, Charles's closest advisor, dated 7 May 1545. He reported that an unidentified member of the Fieschi family was seeking French support for a coup d'état in Genoa. According to the ambassador, this person “says he has brought the plot to a point, and holds out

¹³ According to the historian Henar Pizarro Llorente, the reason why Andrea Doria did not like Lope de Soria was because he was jealous of Soria's deep knowledge of Genoa, and resentful of Soria's friendship with many of Doria's rivals in the Genoese aristocracy. “Un embajador de Carlos V en Italia: don Lope de Soria (1528-1532)” in *Carlos V y la quiebra del humanismo político en Europa (1530-1555)*, ed. José Martínez Millán (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Commemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 2001), Vol. IV, 119-155.

¹⁴ Epstein, *op. cit.*, 126.

¹⁵ For a full analysis of Genoese politics, see Pacini, *La Genova di Andrea Doria*, and *idem.*, “‘Pignatte di vetro’: Being a Republic in Philip II's Empire,” in *Spain in Italy: Politics, Society and Religion 1500-1700*, eds. Thomas James Dandeleit and John A. Marino (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 197-225.

¹⁶ Figueroa to Isabella, 5 July 1531; Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 1363, #35.

¹⁷ Arturo Pacini, *Genova di Andrea Doria*, 598-601.

hope that the people will favor it, if they see themselves supported [by France].”¹⁸
A week later, Charles V relayed this information to Figueroa. As he wrote,

Our ambassador in France has informed us that a certain Genoese called “Something” de Fieschi, a man of credit and position in Genoa, has been with the King of France recently, pressing him to aid his brother the Governor of the city. He professes to have already won over the populace and says that, as soon as they see a certainty of French support, they will declare themselves. The King of France rejected the overtures.... Though this business seems to be as groundless as the others, yet as sometimes inconvenience is caused by not striking at the root of such rumours, we think best to let you know, so that you may, in the manner you may consider advisable, speak to Prince Doria about it, and discover secretly if there is such a man in Genoa as the person mentioned as having been in France lately... If you find there is anything in it, take such measures as may be necessary to stop it.¹⁹

In this letter Charles does not seem terribly alarmed, but he does make it clear that Figueroa should investigate and if necessary take action. The last thing Charles wanted was a new political upheaval in Italy, just when an end to the interminable Italian Wars with France seemed within reach. Charles had recently won an apparently decisive victory: in September 1544, he forced King Francis I of France to sign the Peace of Crépy, in which Francis formally surrendered his claims on the Kingdom of Naples (as well as Flanders and Artois). In addition, in February 1545 Charles decided to offer the duchy of Milan as the dowry for the political marriage between Francis’s youngest son, Duke Charles of Angoulême, and a daughter of Charles’s brother Ferdinand.²⁰ With the fate of Naples and Milan secured, and French armies out of Italy, Charles could finally focus his attention on the two most critical issues on his agenda, countering the Protestant revolt in Germany, and inducing the pope to convene a general Church Council (which opened at Trent in December 1545).²¹ Any renewal of political intrigues involving the French in Italy would have been most unwelcome.

¹⁸ *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers, relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain*, ed. Martin A.S. Hume (Nendeld: Kraus Reprint, 1969), Vol. VIII, 100.

¹⁹ Charles to Figueroa, 13 May 1545; *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, 112.

²⁰ There was a famous debate amongst Charles and his advisors about whether to offer Milan or the Low Countries as dowry; in other words, which territory could the Spanish Habsburg empire more afford to lose? See Federico Chabod, “Milán o los Países Bajos? Las discusiones en España acerca de la ‘alternativa’ de 1544,” in *Carlos V y su impero* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 211-251.

²¹ Duke Charles died unexpectedly in September 1545, which once again brought the fate of Milan into political play. See the overview of Charles’s political and military career by Geoffrey Parker,

Unfortunately we do not have Figueroa's immediate response to Charles, but we do have a letter from Figueroa to Prince Philip, dated 30 June 1545, that was originally sent in code. He wrote:

Concerning the report sent by His Majesty's ambassador in France, that a gentleman of the House of Fieschi has arrived there, offering to the King that he would start a popular revolt and throw Prince Doria out of the city, His Majesty ordered that I be informed, concerning which I have done due diligence to learn who this person could be... Having communicated with the Prince and examined well this business, we have determined that this person is a bastard son of the Count of Fieschi who was in Marseilles to study... and that he learned that the French are featherbrains who will believe anything [*sean ligeros a creer qualquier cosa*]... If the Count was involved in this matter there would be something to worry about, but I cannot believe that he proceeds in this way because it is doubtful that he would risk losing everything he has. So to both the Prince [Doria] and myself it seems there is nothing to this story, especially considering the state of things, with no army in the field and no fleet at sea. If I learn anything else I will let Your Highness know.²²

This was a crucial moment, when Figueroa received what turned out to be accurate information, but dismissed it.²³ We should note, of course, that Andrea Doria seems equally culpable. They both refused to believe that Fieschi could be foolhardy enough to risk his fortune and his life. They underestimated his idealism, or perhaps overestimated his intelligence. Figueroa's sneering contempt for the French is also telling. Rumors out of France, he suggested, should be discounted, simply because of the credulity of the French. Figueroa's casual bigotry nearly cost him dearly. His attitude is also striking given that when the Fieschi conspiracy actually occurred, Figueroa immediately assumed (incorrectly) that the French were directly involved.

Over the next year and a half Figueroa referred to Fieschi several times in his official correspondence, so evidently he was watching him. There were

"The Political World of Charles V," in *Charles V 1500-1558 and his Time*, ed. Hugo Soly (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1999), 113-225.

²² Figueroa to Philip, 30 June 1545; AGSE 1377, #19-20. Arturo Pacini also discusses this document (*La Genova di Andrea Doria*, 602-603), but does not stress its importance from the point of view of intelligence failure.

²³ An important historian of Spanish diplomacy, Miguel Ángel Ochoa Brun, claims that Figueroa should be given credit for detecting and defeating the Fieschi conspiracy, but he does not seem to be aware of the documents above. *Historia de la diplomacia española*, Vol. V, "La diplomacia de Carlos V" (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 1999), 491-492.

additional warning signs. For example, Figueroa wrote several letters concerning Fieschi's efforts to purchase warships (the very ones he would use during the attempted coup). These efforts involved complex negotiations with Pope Paul III, and the pope's bastard son, Pier Luigi Farnese, the duke of Castro, Parma and Piacenza. Charles and his ministers were highly suspicious of both the pope and his son, who clearly had ambitions for expanding their power in northern Italy, at Spanish-imperial expense. Indeed, as we shall see, one of the direct consequences of the Fieschi conspiracy would be the assassination of Pier Luigi in September 1547, with at least tacit approval from the emperor.²⁴

Figueroa mentioned this matter of Fieschi's acquisition of ships as early as January 1546. In a few brief lines, the ambassador reported that Fieschi was negotiating the purchase of ships from Pope Paul, although the pope was unwilling; apparently he had originally promised the ships to his son Pier Luigi.²⁵ Figueroa did not seem to be alarmed. This was a routine report on the movement of men and munitions in Italy, the sort of thing he commented on constantly. Three months later, however, Figueroa's reports take a strange turn. On April 9, 1546 the ambassador wrote that Fieschi had left Genoa in order to meet with Pier Luigi Farnese. Furthermore, he reported that Fieschi was upset with Charles [*muestra algun descontento*], because he had written a letter to the Emperor concerning the purchase of ships, and Charles had not responded. As Figueroa wrote, "Your Majesty knows that in this city [Fieschi's] house has much authority and influence, and the Count is young and jealous of his honor, and so I believe it would be a very great favor if Your Majesty ordered a response to be sent to him, as a vassal and servant."²⁶ So here we have the ambassador warning the emperor that he had offended Fieschi, his good and loyal subject!

Three weeks later Figueroa wrote again on this issue, saying that the Count of Fieschi often complained to him about how Charles never responded to his letter. Also, Fieschi assured Figueroa that if the Emperor was angry because he had bought the ships without the Emperor's permission, he only intended to give the ships to his brother. Figueroa wrote, "I have told [Fieschi] that according to what Your Majesty has written to me, you believe that you are better served with the ships in [Fieschi's] power than in someone else's, as you hold him to be a good servant of his."²⁷ This all seems very strange. After Charles warned Figueroa to keep an eye on Fieschi, Figueroa says that Charles trusts Fieschi and believes him to be a loyal vassal. So evidently neither the Emperor nor his

²⁴ See María José Bertomeu Masiá, *La Guerra secreta de Carlos V contro el Papa* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2009).

²⁵ Figueroa to Charles, 29 January 1546; AGSE 1378, #44.

²⁶ Figueroa to Charles, 9 April 1546; AGSE 1378, #40.

²⁷ Figueroa to Charles, 29 April 1546; AGSE 1378, #37.

ambassador took seriously the idea that Fieschi might really be plotting a coup. In this same letter, Figueroa noted confidently, “Concerning this Republic I take it for certain that if they do not totally lose their heads, during the life and death of the Prince [Andrea Doria] they will persevere in Your Majesty’s service, and in devotion to you, because there is no one better for them.” [*Quanto a lo de esta Republica yo tengo por cierto que sino pierden el seso del todo que en vida y muerte del principe perseveraran en el servicio de V[uestro] M[ajestad] y su devocion pues a ellos les va mas que a otro ninguno.*] The arrogant and complacent tone of this statement betrays much about Figueroa’s assumptions, and the entire Spanish mindset. Figueroa could not conceive that Fieschi or any Genoese could possibly want to break from Charles.²⁸ In January 1547 he would be in for a rude shock.

At the time of the Fieschi conspiracy, Andrea Doria was 80 years old and often ill. Much depended on this one man. Back in 1528, Doria had signed a personal contract of allegiance to Charles, giving the Admiral wide independent powers in return for Genoa’s nominal loyalty to the Emperor.²⁹ Charles’s relations with Genoa were thus based on a personal relationship with the city’s leader, which was typical of the structure of Charles’s empire.³⁰ Figueroa and the other Spanish ministers in Italy constantly expressed concerns about Doria’s health, and what would happen when he died. (They could not know he wouldn’t die until 1560, at the age of 93.) For example, Ferrante Gonzaga, the Governor-General of Milan and Charles’s military commander in northern Italy, wrote to Charles just the day before the Fieschi affair that it was not wise to depend too much on a man who seemed to be on the point of death.³¹ Gonzaga warned that Charles needed to have a plan in place, and military force at hand, for the day when Doria died, because of the “diversity of humors and passions” amongst the Genoese citizens, which could lead to “notable disorder and disservice for Your Majesty.” In other words, Gonzaga did not feel certain that Genoa would remain loyal to Charles in the event of Doria’s death. Gonzaga was obviously less confident than Figueroa about Genoese loyalty. Gonzaga also had a personal agenda; as the historian M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado has recently pointed out, Gonzaga plotted to increase his territorial power base in Milan, and Genoa was

²⁸ Other Spanish ambassadors in Italy displayed the same arrogance; see Michael J. Levin, *Agents of Empire: Spanish Ambassadors in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²⁹ See Kirk, *op. cit.*, 19-21, and Vicente de Cadenas y Vicent, *El Protectorado de Carlos V en Génova: la “condotta” de Andrea Doria* (Madrid: CSIC, 1977).

³⁰ Wim Blockmans, *Emperor Charles V 1500-1558* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2002), 136.

³¹ Gonzaga to Charles, 2 January 1547; published in *Atti della società Ligure di storia patria*, Vol. VIII (1868), 11-12.

one of the nearby states he contemplated annexing.³² In any case, in the wake of the Fieschi affair, both Gonzaga and Figueroa repeatedly urged Charles to take action.

Let us return to the events of January 3, 1547, as seen through the eyes of the Spanish ambassador. His first report, written at 2:00 that morning, was rather short and breathless. He knew little for sure. Fieschi and an unknown number of soldiers had apparently taken control of key points in the city. Crowds of people in the streets shouted “Liberty and the People!” while rumors flew that both Andrea Doria and his heir were already dead. Figueroa himself took refuge in the Ducal palace, which for the moment was still under the control of the government and strongly defended. Figueroa noted that he had requested aid from Gonzaga, and would send Charles constant updates. “Matters will be remedied as best they can for Your Majesty’s service,” he wrote, none too reassuringly.³³ Clearly he had been taken by surprise, and was greatly alarmed, not to say panicked.

Twenty hours later, Figueroa wrote a much calmer letter, indicating that the crisis was already over.³⁴ “Matters have been resolved on good terms,” he declared. “From what I can tell, and not without much work and danger, affairs have been pacified, at the pleasure of Our Lord.” Fieschi was dead, drowned in the harbor, and the government was back in control. To Figueroa’s knowledge the aborted revolt had not done any real damage, with the major exception of the murder of Giannettino Doria. Andrea Doria was not dead, although he had bolted from the city, and was holed up in a secure location fifteen miles away. (Presumably Figueroa was worried about the loss of face for Doria.) Figueroa also noted that much of the Genoese fleet had been disarmed, and the rowing slaves disbanded, a serious inconvenience for the imperial military service. While the tone of this letter is calmer than in the previous one, Figueroa still warned that Gonzaga should send Spanish infantry to the city, to reinforce the Emperor’s “reputation” as well as to secure the situation.

Ferrante Gonzaga, at around the same time, wrote a similar set of letters that if anything were even more alarmed and alarming. Upon hearing the initial news of the revolt, Gonzaga had immediately put all of the imperial forces in Italy on high alert.³⁵ He ordered the Spanish fleet in Sicily to prepare to sail to Genoa, and sent a request for additional soldiers to Cosimo de’Medici, Duke of

³² M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado, “Ferrante Gonzaga: the Champion of Innocence,” in *Ferrante Gonzaga: Il Mediterraneo, l’Impero (1507-1557)*, ed. Gianvittorio Signorotto (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2009), 139-196.

³³ Figueroa to Charles, 3 January 1547; *Atti*, 13-14.

³⁴ Figueroa to Charles, 3 January 1547; *ibid.*, 14-15.

³⁵ Gonzaga to Charles, 3 January 1547; *ibid.*, 16-17.

Florence.³⁶ Furthermore, Gonzaga promised he would mobilize as many as 4,000 troops, because, he said, “This rebellion could not have happened without the knowledge and intelligence of the King of France, and undoubtedly the French have abetted this tumult in every possible way, knowing as they do how much harm to Your Majesty could result.” It is telling that Gonzaga immediately assumed that the Fieschi conspiracy had a French connection. The Emperor Charles and King Francis I of France had been fighting over Italy for decades, so this was a natural assumption to make. Interestingly, other European powers also came to the same conclusion. On January 15, William Paget, a member of Henry VIII’s privy council and his secretary of state, received an intelligence report that “the commons of Genoa have risen against the nobility, disarmed the Emperor’s galleys and released the slaves. If this be true, the French King is here thought the doer.”³⁷ In fact, however, everyone was wrong: King Francis had no direct involvement. He most likely encouraged Fieschi, but gave no material support. By January 1547 Francis was nearly bankrupt, and almost exclusively focused on recovering French territory he had lost in his wars against England.³⁸ The fact that no one realized this is perhaps another sign of the limits of political intelligence in this period. Throughout this crisis Gonzaga and Figueroa repeatedly warned Charles that France was behind Fieschi, although they had no hard evidence. The possibility of losing Genoa back to France seemed all too real.

On the day after the Fieschi affair, Figueroa wrote to Gonzaga that things seemed to be under control, and that Gonzaga no longer needed to send troops.³⁹ “With God’s help,” he wrote, “the city is persevering and returning to its usual pristine state, and when the Prince [Andrea Doria] returns everything will be peaceful.” But Figueroa himself was not placid; he was furious, and frightened. He wanted vengeance, and to make an example of the conspirators. As he wrote to Gonzaga, “It is fitting that His Majesty should punish such great disobedience... and to restrain the insolence of those with evil inclinations, for if it is not done there could be another major disturbance, and it will not be in my power to impede or remedy it.” Figueroa was clearly rattled by the bad night he had had the day before, and felt unprepared to handle another similar crisis. Over the next few weeks, he would demand help.

³⁶ Although Charles did not rule Florence directly, Cosimo de’Medici was a fairly reliable imperial ally. Cosimo was related by marriage to Pedro de Toledo, the Spanish viceroy of Naples. See Carlos José Hernando Sánchez, “Naples and Florence in Charles V’s Italy: Family, Court, and Government in the Toledo-Medici Alliance,” in *Spain in Italy*, 135-180.

³⁷ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of King Henry VIII*, eds. James Gairdner and R. H. Brodie (Vaduz: Kraus Reprints, 1965), Vol. XXI, 369.

³⁸ R. J. Knecht, *Francis I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 376. Furthermore, toward the end of January Francis fell ill with fever, and would be dead by the end of March.

³⁹ Figueroa to Gonzaga, 4 January 1547; *Àtti*, pp. 20-21.

That same day, Figueroa wrote a long letter to Charles, which described the events of the Fieschi affair in more detail than in his previous reports.⁴⁰ But before recapping the events of that day, he vented his feelings. “At the moment matters remain in the state which Your Majesty will understand [from reports]. There has been great insult, and great treason, and little respect for Your Majesty’s service; and if it had not been for the many people [here] who are good servants of Your Majesty, all would have been lost.” (My emphasis.) This is a remarkable declaration, one designed to grab the king’s attention. Here and elsewhere Figueroa makes it clear that he believes that the Spaniards have dodged a bullet, and not by much. Later in the letter, while recounting the events of the day before, Figueroa stresses the confusion in the streets and in the ducal palace. At first, no one knew what was happening or what to do. Thank God, Figueroa says, that many of the Genoese citizens were in fact loyal to Charles, and refused to join in Fieschi’s revolt. But even this positive note is undermined. In an addendum to the letter, Figueroa claims that things were even worse than he thought. If Fieschi had not providentially died, the conspiracy may well have been successful. Furthermore, Fieschi’s younger brothers, who had been co-conspirators, were still very much alive, and Charles had better do something about them. Figueroa ends the letter thus:

One may consider that matters are not as secure as they should be, and there needs to be a remedy in order to avoid another major disturbance when the Prince [Andrea Doria] dies... there ought to be some guard residing here... for I would have no confidence in being able to remedy or resist the fury of a people like this, who are so fond of novelties [*novedades*], and who have such passions, the more so now that this new enmity has been introduced, which could lead to another major fire being lit.

This reference to *novedades* is particularly interesting to me. In my previous work, I have described how often the Spanish ambassadors in Rome and Venice used this word in their correspondence.⁴¹ Time and again, the ambassadors complained that as a nation, Italians were by their nature addicted to seeking *novedades*, changes or challenges to the political status quo. The Spanish resident ambassadors in Rome and Venice perceived this Italian character defect as a direct threat to their attempts to establish Spanish hegemony in Italy. Now

⁴⁰ Figueroa to Charles, 4 January 1547; *Atti*, pp. 25-28.

⁴¹ See Levin, *op. cit.*, 200-208.

we see the Spanish ambassador in Genoa saying the same thing.⁴² In any case, at this moment Figueroa obviously did not feel in control of the situation.

Figueroa was also not very patient about getting a response. On January 8, he wrote again to Charles.⁴³ He did have some good news to report: Andrea Doria had returned to the city, along with one of his top lieutenants, Agostino Spinola. The Spinola family was closely aligned with the imperial cause, and Figueroa clearly felt better with Spinola back in the city. In fact Figueroa had a specific suggestion for Charles: there should be a Spanish garrison permanently based in Genoa, and Agostino Spinola should be named captain general. That way, if anything happened in the future, the Emperor would have force at hand, under the control of a trustworthy commander. Figueroa again emphasized that Andrea Doria was old and could die any day, and that things could fall apart very quickly; as Figueroa pointed out, during the Fieschi revolt it had only taken an hour for the Doria regime to lose control of both the city and the fleet. The next day, Ferrante Gonzaga wrote a letter to Charles proposing the very same plan: he had obviously agreed with Figueroa to present a united front.⁴⁴ In addition, Gonzaga suggested that Charles should construct a new castle in or near Genoa, as additional protection and safeguard against losing the city.⁴⁵ It seems that Gonzaga had been just as spooked by the Fieschi affair as Figueroa.

Let us now return to Charles. For much of the previous year, the emperor had been fully occupied by the war against the Schmalkaldic League of German Protestants. He had boldly decided to fight through the winter months of 1546, and enjoyed remarkable success, but at great personal cost. By early January he was ill and exhausted, and hoped to turn over command of the German war to his brother Ferdinand.⁴⁶ Then Figueroa's dispatches arrived. Charles received Figueroa's first report concerning the Fieschi conspiracy on January 10, and wrote back immediately.⁴⁷ He kept his cool, at least on paper: he noted the news "has displeased us, as is right," and wished to know more about what was happening. He approved Gonzaga's request to raise money for troops, and to ask Cosimo de' Medici for more. He also agreed with Gonzaga's assumption that the French

⁴² Nor was this the first time Figueroa used the word. On 25 June 1531, when Figueroa had only been at his post for two years, he wrote to Charles: "I have no doubt, as I have written to Your Majesty before, that there are people here who bear us ill will, not because they have cause, but rather because they are fond of *novedades* and for their own particular ends." Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, leg. 1363, #32.

⁴³ Figueroa to Charles, 8 January 1547; *Àtti*, 33-36.

⁴⁴ Gonzaga to Charles, 9 January 1547; *ibid.*, 40-44.

⁴⁵ Andrea Doria would resist this plan for a Spanish fortress in his city, and it never happened. Lingua, *op. cit.*, 177-178.

⁴⁶ Brandi, *op. cit.*, 562-563.

⁴⁷ Charles to Figueroa, 10 January 1547; *Àtti*, 47-48.

must be involved all of this. He had no specific instructions for his ambassador, other than to investigate, and get the full story behind “this *novedad*.”

Four days later Charles wrote again, to inform his ambassador that he was sending a special envoy to Genoa, Don Rodrigo de Mendoza, a gentleman of the royal household, to consult with the Genoese government about what steps needed to be taken to avoid further *novedades*.⁴⁸ Charles wrote, “Considering everything that touches on this *novedad* that occurred in that city, and that every day something similar could happen, it is more than necessary that whatever provision, order, or law that is needed for the affairs of the city should be effected... so that no similar disturbances may occur, and that no one may provoke *novedades* or seditions....” So Charles, too, expressed fear of *novedades*, and wanted his ambassadors to push the Genoese government to take whatever steps were necessary to prevent more of them.

But the really interesting thing is that Charles did not trust the Genoese government to do all that was necessary. In a secret, coded letter to Figueroa, Charles suggested that perhaps more drastic action was called for, especially given “the desire of the French to take power in that [city], and the diverse inclinations which always exist in that people [of Genoa], who are so fond of changes, alterations, and *novedades*.”⁴⁹ As a remedy, what if Charles assumed control of Genoa? (The term he used was *impatronirse*, to bring the city under direct imperial rule.) As he says in this letter, if he took this action, he would then “be the master of the armed forces, and I would always hold the city securely, free of the aforementioned inconveniences.” Charles was not proposing unilateral action; in fact, he suggested that Figueroa should sound out Andrea Doria, the Spinolas, and other Genoese loyal to Charles, to see if they would approve of this idea. Charles also stated that he had no intention of removing Genoa’s current republican form of government. Nonetheless it is important to note that Charles was worried enough about losing Genoa that he seriously considered taking it over. Better that, he wrote, than to have the French win back the city, “which would mean the loss of so much effort and money... and the inconveniences which you could well imagine for the peace of Italy, and for our other kingdoms and states.” In fact, during the period 1546-1547 Charles and his ministers considered the merits of incorporating a number of northern Italian territories under direct imperial rule, including Lucca, Parma, and Siena, in addition to Genoa.⁵⁰ For Charles, the crisis in Genoa represented part of a much larger strategic debate.

⁴⁸ Charles to Figueroa, 14 January 1547; *ibid.*, 49-50.

⁴⁹ Charles to Figueroa, 14 January 1547; *ibid.*, 55-57.

⁵⁰ José Martínez Millán and Manuel Rivero Rodríguez, “Hacia la formación de la Monarquía Hispánica: la hegemonía hispánica en Italia (1547-1556),” in *La corte de Carlos V*, ed. José Martínez

Meanwhile, Figueroa and Gonzaga, with Andrea Doria's keen assistance, were aggressively pursuing and prosecuting Fieschi's family and friends. All of the Fieschi lands and castles were seized, in a series of campaigns.⁵¹ But the Spanish ministers did not relax their vigil. For one thing, they still feared a French invasion (although it never did materialize). And to make matters worse, it became increasingly clear that there had been yet another hand pulling Fieschi's strings: Pope Paul III. At this historical moment, tensions between the pope and the emperor were already high, primarily due to profound disagreements about the Council of Trent. Even at this late date, Charles still held out hope that his German Protestant subjects could be reconciled with the Church, but Paul refused to include any Protestants in the Council's deliberations. On 11 January 1547, for example, over Charles's strenuous objection the Council delivered its final pronouncement on the crucial doctrine of justification by faith; the Council condemned Protestant theological positions without ever hearing from actual Protestants.⁵² Furthermore, despite the best efforts of Spanish ambassadors, bishops, and other pro-imperial participants to prevent it, in March 1547 the Council voted first to move to Bologna (outside of imperial territory) and then to dissolve the current session. Ostensibly the Council took these actions because of an outbreak of the plague in the city of Trent, but Charles and his ministers suspected more political – and explicitly anti-imperial-- motives.⁵³

Pope Paul, who had been aiding Charles's military campaigns in Germany, decided at the end of January 1547 to break the alliance and withdraw his troops, supposedly because Charles had not done enough to restore Catholic worship in those lands.⁵⁴ In reality, the French faction in Rome had convinced the pope that it was not in his interest for Charles to become too powerful.⁵⁵ Moreover, Paul had long been harboring grudges against both Charles and Andrea Doria, because they opposed the pope's attempts to install his son Pier Luigi Farnese as the lord of various territories in northern Italy.⁵⁶ All of these factors formed the background for papal involvement with the Fieschi affair. Charles and

Millán, Part One, Vol. II (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la conmemoración de los centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 2000), 196-197.

⁵¹ Figueroa to Charles, 17 January 1547; *Atti*, pp. 63-64.

⁵² For details see Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, trans. Dom Ernest Graf (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1961), Vol. II, 166-316.

⁵³ Modern historians confirm Spanish suspicions: according to Stefania Pastore, for example, Pope Paul transferred the Council to Bologna specifically to reduce Charles's influence over it. "Una Spagna anti-papale: Gli anni italiani di Diego Hurtado de Mendoza," in *Diplomazia e politica della Spagna a Roma: Figure di ambasciatori*, ed. Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Rome: CROMA Università degli studi Roma Tre, 2008), 63-94.

⁵⁴ Parker, "Political World of Charles V," 193, and Brandi, *op. cit.*, 565-566.

⁵⁵ Jedin, *op. cit.*, 412.

⁵⁶ Lingua, *op. cit.*, 153-154.

his ministers in Italy received a number of intelligence reports about meetings between Fieschi, certain pro-French cardinals in Rome, and the pope himself, in the months preceding Fieschi's attempted coup.⁵⁷ On February 2, Charles met with a papal nuncio in the German city of Ulm, and directly accused the pope of complicity in the Fieschi affair, a charge the nuncio vehemently denied.⁵⁸ But the evidence kept piling up. On February 8, for example, Juan de Vega, Charles's resident ambassador in Rome, informed the emperor about a coded letter that one of Fieschi's henchmen had accidentally dropped in that city. The letter had been deciphered, and clearly implicated the pope in the conspiracy.⁵⁹ Both Charles and his ministers in Italy must have felt great anger and frustration.

On top of that, there continued to be disturbing signs of unrest in the city of Genoa itself. This perception was not limited to the Spaniards: Febo Capella, the Venetian resident ambassador in Milan, warned his government that Andrea Doria was "ambiguous and irresolute" and that the situation in Genoa was "out of control."⁶⁰ On January 29, Figueroa sent two similarly uneasy letters to Charles. One briefly reported that the various factions in the city were all screaming at each other about whether the French or Charles was the greatest threat. Figueroa stated that the best way to calm the citizens down would be to have 600 or 700 Spanish infantry stationed there.⁶¹ (Note that this was a rather Spanish-centered view about how to bring peace to the city!) In the other, somewhat longer letter, Figueroa added a revealing detail.⁶² He requested that perhaps 25 or 30 soldiers should be quartered in his personal residence, "for my guard and security." He pointed out that on the night of the Fieschi affair, only his personal servants had been at home, where he also kept his money. He hastened to add that he wanted this personal bodyguard only for security reasons, not for reasons of pomp. But this request reveals much about how badly the Fieschi conspiracy had shaken Figueroa personally.

Given how anxious Figueroa seems to have been, one would think that he would have welcomed Charles's proposal to take over the city. But his actual response was rather negative.⁶³ In fact, he very carefully and diplomatically told

⁵⁷ For example, Juan de Vega to Charles, 13 January 1547 (*Àtti*, 48-49), and an *avviso* from Rome, ? January 1547 (*ibid.* pp. 95-96).

⁵⁸ Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Francis Kerr (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1891-1953), Vol. XII, 330-332.

⁵⁹ *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers, relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain*, Vol. IX, 17.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Riccardo De Rosa, "La congiura di Gianluigi Fieschi nell'opinione della Repubblica di Venezia e del Ducato di Parma e Piacenza," *Malacoda* Vol. 14, Issue 78 (1998): 7.

⁶¹ Figueroa to Charles, 29 January 1547; *Àtti*, 97-98.

⁶² Figueroa to Charles, 29 January 1547; *ibid.*, 98-100.

⁶³ Figueroa to Charles, 30 January 1547; *ibid.*, 101-103.

the Emperor that he thought it was a bad idea. He absolutely agreed that keeping Genoa loyal, and out of the hands of the French, was critically important; but he argued against the “impatronirse” suggestion. For one thing, it would cost too much. (This argument surely resonated for the chronically cash-strapped emperor.) For another thing, it would not change the basic political character of the city. The city was hopelessly divided into factions, and always would be, no matter who was in charge. Taking over the city, Figueroa argued, would only permanently alienate one faction or another, which would then guarantee future seditions. The answer, he argued once again, was martial, not political: build a fortress, and man it with a permanent garrison, and then conduct business as usual.⁶⁴

It is remarkable that the Spanish ambassador would thus argue against enlarging the Spanish Habsburg empire in Italy. His attitude is even more striking in that it seemed to run counter to Charles’s Italian policies. The duchy of Milan, for example, had been incorporated into the empire in 1535, in just the manner Charles had proposed for Genoa.⁶⁵ Furthermore, in 1545 Charles issued instructions, called the *Órdenes de Worms*, to Ferrante Gonzaga, governor of Milan, which emphasized the necessity of bringing that territory (as well as all of the other strategically significant imperial territories) under the strict and personal control of the emperor.⁶⁶ Presumably Figueroa was aware of these instructions, but he believed that the circumstances were different in Genoa. A key to understanding Figueroa’s thinking comes towards the end of the letter of 30 January. According to the ambassador, certain Genoese citizens loyal to Charles approached him, and after pointing out that the present government could not last long (that is, Andrea Doria was about to die), they said “it would be best if Your Majesty took the city, and governed it” [*“que es menester que V. M. tome esta ciudad enssi, y la gobierne”*]. A perfect moment to present Charles’s proposal! But Figueroa denied that Charles had any desire to take such action, and furthermore:

I have said in the Signory [the Genoese government body], and to all those who have spoken with me, that Your Majesty wishes nothing more than that this city should be devoted to him, and it should not fall into the hands of those who would subject it and destroy its fundamentals, and that [His Majesty] wants to preserve its liberty and to aid it, and to always assist

⁶⁴ Charles favored this idea for a while, but Andrea Doria talked him out of it. See Pacini, *La Genova di Andrea Doria*, 610-636.

⁶⁵ In the case of Milan, the act was precipitated by the death of its ruler duke Francesco Sforza without an heir. For an overview of Spanish Milan, see Antonio Álvarez-Ossorio Alvariño, “The State of Milan and the Spanish Monarchy,” in *Spain in Italy*, 99-132.

⁶⁶ Rogelio Pérez Bustamante, *El gobierno del imperio español: los Austrias (1517-1700)* (Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, 2000), 274. My thanks to James Boyden for this reference.

those who govern it, because if anything else were to be said to [the Genoese] it would scandalize them even more than they have been up to now, and leave us in great confusion.

So according to the Spanish resident ambassador in Genoa, the best policy was to reassure the Genoese that the emperor would not seize power, but would instead defend the city's republican government and traditions.⁶⁷ Anything else would lead to worse conditions for the Spanish cause.

Perhaps even more interesting than Figueroa giving this advice, Charles evidently accepted it. At this point, in late March 1547, Charles was once again on the march with his armies in Germany—in fact, getting into position for his famous victory over the Schmalkaldic League at Mühlberg.⁶⁸ From the road, on 29 March 1547, he wrote to Figueroa,

We have seen what you wrote concerning becoming the lord of the city [of Genoa], and the inconveniences you suggest would result from implementing it. After considering well, we concede that you are probably right, and have thought about it with the prudence and experience you are accustomed to display in matters of this sort, and thus we will put aside this matter for now, leaving it for a better occasion. And you have done very well in dissimulating with those who have spoken about and support this end, and in giving the understanding both in general and in particular terms that we have no intention other than to conserve this city in our devotion, and not to let it fall into anyone's else's hands, nor to allow anyone to destroy its liberty.⁶⁹

So Charles agreed, at least for the moment, to maintain the status quo in Genoa. Ironically, two days after Charles wrote this letter, King Francis I of France died, throwing into question the delicate balance of Habsburg-Valois relations once again. Charles no doubt feared a resurgence of French machinations in Italy, but as it turned out, the new king, Henry II, did not immediately re-start the Italian Wars—although, by the early 1550s, he would.⁷⁰ Charles also did not know that Italian affairs would continue to vex him throughout the year. In May 1547 the Kingdom of Naples would erupt in a popular revolt as a result of an attempt to

⁶⁷ Arturo Pacini points out that republican traditions of protest literature remained strong in Genoa throughout the sixteenth century; see “Pignatti di vetro...”

⁶⁸ Brandi, *op. cit.*, 567.

⁶⁹ Charles to Figueroa, 29 March 1547; *Atti*, p. 138.

⁷⁰ R. J. Knecht, *French Renaissance Monarchy: Francis I and Henry II*, Second edition (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 43-45.

introduce the Spanish Inquisition.⁷¹ Then in September 1547 a revolt broke out in the duchies of Parma and Piacenza, and Ferrante Gonzaga seized the opportunity to murder Pier Luigi Farnese.⁷² In addition, Figueroa continued to send alarming notes from Genoa. On 30 August 1547, for example, Figueroa warned that some of Gian Luigi Fieschi's brothers were plotting with the French and Pier Luigi Farnese to try again to overthrow Andrea Doria's government.⁷³ (This is one of the reasons why Charles tacitly approved Farnese's assassination.) Yet Figueroa maintained that Charles should not take over Genoa, and Charles acquiesced.

There is no way to know the extent to which Figueroa's advice influenced Charles's decision not to annex Genoa; surely there were other factors, such as money and the emperor's preoccupation with the German war.⁷⁴ Andrea Doria, not surprisingly, also objected to the idea.⁷⁵ But Charles himself suggested that his ambassador's opinion carried significant weight-- which in itself is remarkable. Figueroa, by ignoring the intelligence that Charles had sent him, had nearly caused a strategic disaster. The emperor would have been justified in dismissing Figueroa from his post for gross incompetence. But he did not; instead he praised Figueroa's "prudence" and accepted his advice on a very sensitive political and strategic issue (and maintained Figueroa as his resident ambassador in Genoa throughout his reign). Perhaps Charles was impressed with Figueroa's willingness to argue against him, to "speak truth to power." Or perhaps Charles really did value Figueroa's "experience": he had lived in Genoa for almost twenty years, and knew its citizens intimately. This after all was one of the fundamental purposes of a resident ambassador: to provide analysis of his host state, and to guide policy through his first-hand knowledge. Apparently, the only unforgivable sin for resident ambassadors was to alienate pro-Spanish regimes, such as Figueroa's predecessor Lope de Soria had done.⁷⁶ Figueroa still had a good working relationship with Andrea Doria. In the end, despite Figueroa's spectacular error of judgment, Charles decided to trust his man in Genoa.

⁷¹ See Carlos José Hernando Sánchez, *Castilla y Nápoles en el siglo XVI: el virrey Pedro de Toledo* (Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y León, 1994), 304-339.

⁷² Parker, "Political World of Charles V," 204, and Bertomeu Masá, *op. cit.*, passim.

⁷³ Figueroa to Charles, 30 August 1547; *Átti*, 178-179.

⁷⁴ For a detailed analysis of the connection between war and finance in Charles V's empire, see James D. Tracy, *Emperor Charles V, Impresario of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷⁵ Pacini, *La Genova di Andrea Doria*, 626. Interestingly, in 1559 Andrea Doria secretly offered to turn over control of Genoa to Charles's son Philip II, but Figueroa argued against it, saying that control of Genoa's fleet was all that really mattered. See Kirk, *op. cit.*, 59-60.

⁷⁶ A number of Spanish ambassadors in Italy were replaced for just this reason; the Spanish ambassadors in Rome had an especially difficult time staying in the good graces of the popes. See Levin, *op. cit.*, 113-123. Lope de Soria, incidentally, was not kicked out of the Spanish diplomatic service; he continued to serve in Italy after leaving Genoa, including a stint as ambassador in Siena, 1530-1531. Pizarro Llorente, *op. cit.*, 143-152.