

Secret Councils

/ Tagungsberichte

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Secret Councils: Comparative Perspectives on Monarchies and Republics, c. 1550–1800

Organisatoren	Debora Heim / Nadir Weber, Universität Bern
Ort	Bern
Land	Schweiz/England
Fand statt	In Präsenz
Vom - Bis	20.06.2024 - 21.06.2024

Von

Amélie Jaggi, Universität Bern

During the 16th and 17th centuries, so-called secret councils – also known as *privy council*, *conseil secret*, *geheime Kammer* or *consiglio segreto* – emerged in the political centres of Europe. Secret councils advised rulers, established networks of secret information and communication, sent orders or received foreign ambassadors. As Christian Wieland has argued, secret councils were established as direct consequence of the increasing centralisation and bureaucratisation of the administrative tasks of states and governments in the late Middle Ages and early modern period.¹ In the 17th century in particular, secret council were at times the most important authorities, although they were not the sovereign either in monarchical or non-monarchical political systems. Despite their important role, these councils have rarely been analysed from a comparative perspective. The aim of the two-day international workshop, which was organised as part of the SNSF Eccellenza project "Republican Secrets: Silence, Memory, and Collective Rule in the Early Modern Period"² at the University of Berne with funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation, was to initiate such a discussion.

In their introduction, the organisers DEBORA HEIM (Bern) and NADIR WEBER (Bern) emphasised the importance of a comparative European perspective on the history of secret councils in the early modern period in both monarchical and republican contexts. The main objectives of this international workshop were to examine different modes of political communication, diverse cultures of decision-making and the functions of governmental secrecy in the early modern period, which Daniel Jütte prominently interpreted as "the Age of Secrecy"³, through the lens of the activities of secret councils and councillors. Furthermore, the workshop aimed to critically assess the role of secret councils in broader historiographical narratives such as the rise of absolute monarchies or the emergence of the political public sphere.

The keynote speaker CÉDRIC MICHON (Rennes) gave an overview of councils and councillors in the monarchies of Renaissance Europe. According to Michon, between 1450 and 1550 there was a decisive momentum for the institutionalisation of councils, for example in the Ottoman Empire, in Spain, in England and Scotland, in France and in the Netherlands. Privy councils linked bureaucratic process with the court and the feudal system, as the examples of Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540) and Thomas Howard (1473–1554) show. Royal favour and personal power strongly influenced the activities of the advisory bodies, whose institutionalisation therefore remained limited. The balance of power between the monarch and his council was often fragile. On the one hand, a council of loyal nobles and skilled lawyers could strengthen the position of the ruling prince; on the other hand, powerful councillors could also be involved in domestic troubles. Nevertheless, privy or secret councils could pave the way for a partial modernisation of the monarchy.

Following this overview of the emergence of privy councils and councillors, eight case studies discussed the role of the secret councils in different early modern monarchies and republics. CATHLEEN SARTI (Oxford) focused on the evolution and function of the Danish secret council from Christian IV (r. 1588–1648) to Christian VII's reign (r. 1766–1808). Sarti analysed the tension between informal power politics and the formalisation of councils in three periods of the political and administrative history of the Oldenburg monarchy. In the first period there was the *gehejmeråd* (secret council) which had been in use since the reign of Christian IV and reflected the strong aristocratic component of the monarchy. From 1660 to 1772, the so-called *gehejmekonseil*, which was oriented towards the absolutist monarch, gained power and influence and at times became the *de facto* ruling body. After 1772, the function of the *gehejmekonseil* changed once again, marking the beginning of the third period.

ADRIANO COMISSOLI (Santa Maria) analysed the activities of the king's councils and Secretaries of State of the Portuguese monarchy from 1777 to 1812 in a transatlantic perspective. The Iberian settlements in South America served as a stage for declared and undeclared conflicts between the Portuguese and the Spanish Empires. In the Spanish cities, relevant information was collected by spies and informants and was thus an essential component of Portuguese information policy. The communication channels followed the governmental hierarchy and strengthened the position of the monarchy. Comissoli argued that even though the Portuguese monarchy did not have a formally established secret council, the three Secretaries of State played a prominent role in governance and decision-making and could therefore be interpreted as a small advisory council to the monarch.

Focussing on the Swiss republics from the 16th to the 18th centuries, DEBORA HEIM (Bern) examined the connections between the institutional establishment of secret councils (*geheime Räte* or *geheime Kammern*) and the emerging republican self-understanding in the Swiss republics in general and in the Protestant city states Bern and Zurich in particular. Heim argued that the Swiss republics had performatively staged their possession of state secrets through the active role of the secret councils in diplomacy and foreign politics from the 17th century onwards. The importance of secret councils in diplomacy and foreign politics could further be attributed to the growing republican self-understanding and the need to claim sovereignty towards the subjects as well as the outside.

ANDRES WÜRGLER (Geneva) analysed the early modern Swiss Federal Diet (*Tagsatzung*) in the context of secrecy. The negotiations, the instructions, the results, and the recesses (*Abschiede*) were generally kept secret. Oral communication, oaths of secrecy, common dissimulation techniques, and secret meetings in unusual places were some of the various measures used to maintain secrecy. Würgler presented the thesis that it was an open secret to foreign envoys and informants that confidential information about cooperations, alliances, and foreign relations circulated at the Diet. This made the Federal Diet an ideal platform for the trade of news between the various Swiss and European secret bearers.

A third paper on secret councils in early modern European republics was given by BORO BRONZA (Banja Luka). Based on the diplomatic relations between the Republic of Ragusa – known today as Dubrovnik – and the Habsburg Empire throughout the 18th century, Bronza showed that secrecy played a crucial role in official and unofficial communication between the maritime republic and the court of Vienna due to the strong position of the Ottoman Empire in the Adriatic region. In institutional terms, the Senate, with its 45 members, was the most powerful and influential council in the Ragusan Republic.

DOROTTYA PRIOSKA B. SZÉKELY (Budapest) analysed the information network of the Hungarian politician and cleric György Szelepcsényi (1604–1685) who mediated for roughly two decades between the Habsburg Emperor and the Hungarian political elite. Furthermore, Székely focused on the institutional development of the Viennese secret council. During the 17th century in general, and during the reign of Leopold I (r. 1658–1705) in particular, the prestigious role of secret councillors led to a massive increase in the number of members of the secret council. Consequently, a new advisory board – the so-called secret conference – was established during the 1660s which gained power and influence in the 1670s and 1680s.

SVEN DITTMAR (Mainz) focused on the function and importance of secret councils in clerical states using the example of the Electorate of Mainz. Based on the assumption that secret councils played an important role in both domestic and foreign politics, Dittmar argued that the secret council of the Electorate of Mainz also provides important insights into the history of the Holy Roman Empire. In contrast to earlier research, Dittmar was able to prove that the functioning of the secret council developed towards a cabinet or ministerial conference during the reign of archbishop Lothar Franz von Schönborn (r. 1693–1729). In this period, the few most important ministers had to answer correspondences on behalf of the archbishop and were additionally responsible for exchanging information at the Imperial Diet.

HANNES ZIEGLER (München) suggested that the "paradox of council" – the tension between the necessity of princely counsel, and the fact that obligatory counsel could undermine princely authority – was intensely debated in the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. He argued that there was a strong confessional element to the political debates as well as the practical settings of princely councils in the Holy Roman Empire. While the Lutheran/Reformed courts favoured a collegial style of princely councils, the Catholic courts emphasised their preference for a single moral advisor. In practical administrative settings, the strong normative ideas were softened because both confessions tended towards the one-man solution.

In his concluding remarks, ANDRÉ HOLENSTEIN (Bern) stated that secrecy was a fundamental principle and instrument of all government action in the early modern period. In both monarchical and republican contexts, the principle of secrecy seems to have strengthened the position of the ruler or the authorities. Secret councils could act as mediators between government and local authorities, as collection points for information and as advisory councils in the decision-making process. Yet councils in general and secret councils in particular could also create conflicts between the advisory bodies and the sovereign. Moreover, early modern politics and diplomacy were characterised by a tension between formality and informality. Finally, Holenstein pointed out that the dysfunctionality of secrets and the leaks in secrecy revealed the limits and gaps in arcane politics, which was being challenged by popular protests, opposition movements, demands for more publicity and the extension of the public sphere into the political.

The final discussion focussed on the benefits and difficulties of comparing different case studies from monarchical and non-monarchical political systems. From the perspective of political theory, republics and monarchies were fundamentally different, while in their institutional practices they could have much in common. Another important discussion point was the number of councillors. While the number of decision-makers and secrets-keepers was reduced in republics, the number of secret councillors often tended to increase in monarchies, indicating the symbolic capital of this title and its function as a means of political integration. However, this meant that the councils could become dysfunctional and be replaced by smaller bodies. In addition to the number of councillors, time was also a key factor in the information and decision-making process. Furthermore, the discussion led to the question of whether the public control through secret councils differed in republics and monarchies. In the republics, the records of the secret councils can also be understood as an instrument of control. In monarchies, where the prince was the sovereign, personal trust seemed to be more important.

In conclusion, the workshop enabled a European perspective on the history of secret councils in the early modern period in both monarchical and republican contexts. The workshop showed the potential that lies in such a comparative view of institutions and governmental practices, but also the importance of clear criteria for comparison. Apart from the political structure, there were also differences between different regions, religious confessions and time periods. Moreover, further research is required to reveal the exact meaning of terms such as privy or secret in connection with the naming of council bodies or offices. Thus, it seems that the terms did not necessarily refer to secrecy but could also indicate a special relationship of trust with the sovereign or an honorary function. The fact that important political advisors and ministers are still referred to as secretaries of state may indicate the longer-term consequences of these institutional innovations in the early modern period.

Conference overview:

Debora Heim (Bern) / Nadir Weber (Bern): Introduction

Keynote

Cédric Michon (Rennes): Councils and councillors in Renaissance Europe

Section 1: Secret councils in monarchies

Chair: Sarah Rindlisbacher Thomi (Bern)

Cathleen Sarti (Oxford): From the aristocratic gehejmeråd to the absolutist gehejmekonseil: The secret council in early modern Denmark

Adriano Comissoli (Santa Maria): Information policy and communication circuits in the Portuguese Monarchy, 1777 to 1812

Section 2: Political secrecy in the Swiss Republics

Chair: Nadir Weber (Bern)

Debora Heim (Bern): Secret councils in the early modern Swiss Confederacy (16th to 18th century)

Andreas Würgler (Geneva): Open secrets? The Swiss diet and republican politics in the early modern Confederacy

Section 3: Secret councils in diplomatic relations

Chair: Andreas Berger (Bern)

Boro Bronza (Banja Luka): Secrecy in relations between the Republic of Ragusa and Austria throughout the 18th century

Dorothy Prioska B. Székely (Budapest): An archbishop and his Viennese information network: Hungarian cases in the privy council and conference at the end of the 17th century

Section 4: Secret councils, clerical states, and confession

Chair: Debora Heim (Bern)

Sven Dittmar (Mainz): Secret councils in clerical states: The case of the Electorate of Mainz

Hannes Ziegler (München): Confessional councils: The impact of religious divisions on the politics of secret councils in the Holy Roman Empire, ca. 1540–1620

André Holenstein (Bern): Closing comment and final discussion

Notes:

¹ Christian Wieland, *Geheimer Rat*, in: Friedrich Jaeger (Hrsg.), *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit* Online, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1163/2352-0248_edn_COM_269456 (09.07.2024).

² <https://www.republican-secrets.ch/> (28.08.2024).

³ Daniel Jütte, *The Age of Secrecy. Jews, Christians, and the Economy of Secrets, 1400–1800*, New Haven; London 2015.

Zitation

Amélie Jaggi, Tagungsbericht: *Secret Councils*, in: H-Soz-Kult, 04.09.2024, www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/ld/fdkn-146095.

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