# And a Lurking League of Letter Openers: the Austrian Black Chamber.

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#### Some context

Adolf Fischof said in the 1850s that Austria depended on four armies: "A standing army of soldiers, a sitting army of bureaucrats, a kneeling army of priests and a sneaking army of snitches."

# Actual quote is a bit different

- Bach hatte wohl zur Erhaltung des Einheitsstaates mchtige Schutzmittel aufgeboten: ein stehendes Heer von Soldaten, ein sitzendes Heer von Beamten, ein knieedes Heer von Priestern, und ein schleichendes Heer von Denuncianten; aber vergeblich!
- Bach created a powerful force for the protection of state power: a standing army of soldiers, a sitting army of bureaucrats, a kneeling army of priests, and a sneaking army of snitches: all in vain!

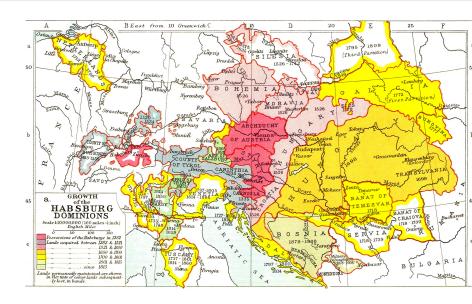
# Another quote

- Uralt und doch ewig neu ist die geheime amtliche Forschung offiziller und privater Briefschaften.-Josef Karl Mayr
- Ancient and yet eternally new is the secret examination of official and private correspondence.

# Some background

- Speaking mainly of era from 1714 to 1918.
- Ziffernkanzlei = Austrian letter opening and cryptanalysis office
- Ziffernkanzlei built on earlier foundations
- Some predecessor/ancestor in Holy Roman Empire
- Predecessor had to do with Thurn und Taxis post: details murky.

# What I mean by Austria



#### Some research difficulties

- Postal interception and cryptography are always closely held historically
- When capitol falls or is threatened, closely held documents get destroyed
- Vienna threatened in 1529, 1683, Seven Years' War
- Vienna captured in 1805, 1809, 1938, 1945
- US bombing of Vienna destroyed documents in 1945
- Had to use secondary sources

#### Sources

- Major source of info: memoirs of Alois Cobelli
- Worked in Ziffernkanzlei from 1822 until closure in 1848.
- Memoirs destroyed in 1945 bombing
- But..source for Mayr and Fournier books
- Harald Hubatschke found enough for dissertation

# Origins I

- Initially Thurn und Taxis monopoly did this for Holy Roman Empire (HRE)
- Records of that limited, murky
- 1714, Charles VI established separate group
- Timing: Pragmatic Sanction

# Origins II

- Thurn und Taxis still handed over copied mail from HRE
- Initially concerned with diplomatic mail
- Started small: three employees
- By 1726, was concerned with foreign and domestic mail

# Origins III

- Set up new post-lodges at request: Prince Eugene, 1735
- Central office in Vienna handled cryptanalysis and analysis
- At one point, located in Stallburg palace

# Stallburg Palace



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#### Who worked there

- Highly educated people
- Typical employee knew several languages
- Stenographers (Schnellschreiberen)

# A note on Stenography

- Lots of letters to copy: volume increased over time
- Shorthand made this much easier
- Stenographers at various sites, forwarded copies to Vienna
- Uncertain whether custom shorthand used

#### Methods

- Ziffernkanzlei worked hard to avoid postal delays
- Copying done in teams: sometimes 4 to a letter.
- Letters for copying came in four batches a day
- Work was done 24x7
- Interceptions based on lists of people and places to be watched

#### **Problems**

- Hard to recruit people
- Volume of work led to breakdowns
- Budget cuts hit salaries: man in cloak?
- Private couriers in Austria: Rothschild
- Metternich aimed to make government mail better than private

#### Kaunitz I

- Chancellor 1753-1793
- Expanded number of post-lodges
- Had post-lodges at every border crossing, places in HRE

#### Kaunitz II

- Allegedly ordered every letter opened
- International mail went through HRE, esp to and from Russia
- Some Russia to Russia mail went through HRE
- Used French Revolution to justify increased perlustration

# A passage from one of Kaunitz' letters I

Nos lettres passent, comme vous savez, par quelques bureaux de la domination Palatine; il ne seroit pas mauvais, ce me semble, de savoir sans bruit, par le canal de M' de Lilien, si les tenantposte ont assez de tems pour pouvoir les paquets? Et s'il donnoit les ordres necessairs, pour que sure cetter route on eut une attention particuli'ere sur les Stunden Zedel.

### A passage from one of Kaunitz' letters II

As you know, our letters pass by Palitinate authority; it would not be bad to check, via Madame de Lilien, if they have enough time to open parcels? And it would be good if the necessary orders were given to pay special attention on this route to the Studen Zedel.

#### Metternich

- Metternich greatly relied on postal interception
- Congress of Vienna was big event for Ziffernkanzlei
- As Chancellor, Metternich made for large increases in interception lists.

- Late 1847: postal interception scandal starts
- Becomes issue in the early months of 1848
- Postal interception one of the complaints
- Metternich resigns on March 13, 1848
- Ziffernkanzlei closure on April 4, 1848

#### The Ziffernkanzlei comes Bach

- Rebellions crushed in Austria, Hungary, other lands under Hapsburg rule.
- Baron von Bach becomes Minister of Interior
- Resumes postal interception
- However, not on scale of Metternich
- Bach fell from power in 1859, but his methods stayed

- 1861 Constitution meant new restrictions
- 1867 Dual Monarchy means other changes
- Appears postal interception more common and less restrained in Hungary
- Continued as regular practice until the fall of the Hapsburgs in 1918.
- Massive increase in communications caused other issues.

# Questions?

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