

THE DECLINE OF THE VENETIAN
NOBILITY AS A RULING CLASS

By

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CHAPTER I

SIXTEENTH CENTURY BACKGROUND:

THE VENETIAN NOBILITY AS A RULING CLASS

The caste-like nature of the Venetian nobility always looms large in the writings of Renaissance observers of the Republic's constitution.¹ It was natural that they, and later writers too, should find this quality impressive because from the last years of Marco Polo's life until the terrible war with the Turks in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Venetian nobility was remarkable for its policy of exclusiveness. The patricians were organized as a distinct social class with jealously guarded privileges. In order to avoid contamination by inferiors and to keep power in their own hands, they refused to accept new members; they adopted strict rules regarding marriages; and they kept careful birth and marriage records in the famous Golden Books.

But the ruling class had not always had this exclusive character. Most historians now agree that for the first eight centuries after the barbarian invasions and the consequent migrations into the lagoons there was no organized, permanent, and clearly distinguishable "nobility" in the Venetian islands.² If the rem-

¹ See Gasparo Contarini, *La repubblica e i magistrati di Vinegia* (Venice: Sabini, 1551), trans. from his *De magistratibus & republica Venetorum*; Donato Giannotti, *Libro de la repubblica de Vinitiani* (Rome: Blado, 1542); Francesco Guicciardini, *Del reggimento di Firenze*, in *Opere inedite di . . .*; illustrate da Giuseppe Ganestrini e pubblicate per cura dei conti Pieri e Luigi Guicciardini (10 vols. published as 5; Florence: Cellini, 1857-67).

² It would be pointless to list here the many historians who have written on the origins of the Venetian nobility, and their points of view. My summary of this question and the so-called *serrata* of the Great Council is drawn largely from Roberto Cessi's *Le origini del ducato veneziano*, *Collana Storica IV* (Naples: Morano, 1951), Chap. XI; and his essay on the Great Council in *Deliberazioni del maggior consiglio di Venezia*, in *Atti delle assemblee costituzionali italiane dal medio evo al 1831* (3 vols.; Rome: Accademia nazionale dei lincei, Commissione per gli atti delle assemblee costituzionali italiane), Vol. I, Series 3, Sec. 1.

nants of the Roman nobility of north Italian cities did flee to the islands along with the other refugees, they did not continue to hold special privileges which set them apart from the others. The *tribuni*, who ruled the Venetian islands before the doge emerged as the principal authority, constituted a kind of *de facto* nobility, but they later disappeared and all that remained of them was a hereditary but purely honorific title attached to the names of some of the families which had once provided tribunes. Of course, there were always groups of men who dominated public affairs, but until the end of the thirteenth century, the doges and other officials who ruled Venice had no exclusive right to rule and belonged to no clearly marked governing class. Their qualifications for office were nothing more nor less than their wealth, ability, and interest in government. While they held office they were known as nobles, but the title derived from the fact of holding office and was temporary. The leading families seem to have dominated the popular assembly, and decrees and pacts were signed by principal citizens.

At the end of the thirteenth century a nobility with definite membership and specific political privileges did finally emerge. The new development is closely related to the history of the Great Council. This body had developed out of a *Consilium sapientium* which was created in 1142 to deal with a temporary situation about which little is known. It remained in existence and gradually became the principal legislative body; it was known as the *Maius Consilium* (the *Maggior Consiglio* or Great Council).³ The Great Council contained first thirty-five, and later one hundred, elected "ordinary" members, in addition to a much larger number of members who were entitled to take part in it by virtue of being in other offices or councils.

At the end of the thirteenth century the members of the Great Council passed a major constitutional law regarding the membership of this body. It granted membership to all who had belonged to the Great Council at any time in the preceding four years⁴ and established a three-man electoral commission which

³ *Maggior* actually means "greater" and implied a comparison with the *Minor Consiglio* which consisted of six ducal councilors and the doge. Historians writing in English usually simplify matters by referring to the *Maggior Consiglio* not as the Greater but as the Great Council.

⁴ They had to be approved by the *Quadrantia*, a legislative body.

could propose for membership other men who had not belonged to the Council during this time. According to Roberto Cessi, one main purpose of this constitutional change was to end the imbalance between ordinary and ex-officio members of the Great Council. Now membership was no longer dependent either on election as one of the one hundred ordinary members or on holding an office which conferred ex-officio membership. All members of the body enjoyed the same status. Another aim of the law was to guarantee membership in the Great Council to all influential Venetians who had established a kind of right to belong to it. During the thirteenth century the Great Council and the various offices of the government were usually filled by men from the same group of families. Many of these men had served so often that they had acquired what was now recognized as almost a right to membership in the Great Council. When, for complicated but purely technical reasons, fewer men were annually elected to the legislative body toward the end of the thirteenth century, a number of influential Venetians found themselves excluded from it. The law of 1296-97 took away any limits on the size of the body and confirmed the right of all men who had previously been active in the government to take part in the Great Council.

This law and those that followed in the next two and a half decades have traditionally been considered a "closing" of the Great Council by a group of men determined to become an exclusive political caste. This was certainly not the original intention. The immediate effect of admitting those who had been temporarily excluded and of providing for election to the Great Council of men who had never taken part in it and had no hereditary claim was not to diminish, but to greatly enlarge, the legislative body. In the following decades, however, the Great Council was indeed "closed." The original willingness to accept new men who were proposed by the electoral commission gradually disappeared, and laws were passed which made the requirements for approval of the proposed men increasingly rigorous.⁵ Soon the only new nobles who were accepted were foreign princes

⁵ There is a useful account of this legislation in Chapter IX of Francis C. Hodgson, *Venice in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* . . . (London: Allen, 1910).

and nephews of popes, who received what amounted to honorary grants of nobility. (As we shall see, however, one major exception was made in 1381.) The dropping of the practice of co-opting new members meant that the Great Council soon became a very exclusive body. At about the same time there was another, almost equally important development. The principle was established that all important government offices must be filled by members of the Great Council.⁶ From this time forward, the status of Venetian nobility, membership in the Great Council, and the right to take part in directing the government were synonymous.

Although the laws passed in 1297 and the following years changed the constitution in such a way as to exclude new members, the Great Council made an exception in 1381 and ennobled thirty men who had fought well or contributed money to the cause of the Republic during the War of Chioggia against Genoa.⁷ During the wars of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a few individuals from the mainland of northern Italy who had commanded Venetian mercenary troops were rewarded with membership in the nobility,⁸ but they and their families did not play an important part in subsequent Venetian history. The ennoblements of 1381 were the last important exception to the policy of exclusiveness until the middle of the seventeenth century. For 265 years it was virtually impossible for even the wealthiest and most able nonnoble Venetian citizen to enter the ruling class.

From fifteenth-century records it is clear that exclusion of new blood from the nobility was a deliberate policy. In 1403 two of the three presidents of the chief judicial body proposed in the

⁶ The Venetians never passed a general law reserving important offices for nobles. The constitutional historian Vettore Sandi cites a law of 1478 which reserves certain offices for nobles, but this seems merely to have confirmed a long established practice. *Principi di storia civile della repubblica di Venezia dalla sua fondazione sino all'anno di N. S. 1700* (6 vols.; Venice: Coleti, 1755-56), pt. II, II, pp. 700-701.

⁷ Samuele Romanin, *Storia documentata di Venezia* (10 vols.; Venice: Fuga, 1912-21), III, 300-301.

⁸ According to a seventeenth-century manuscript in the Marciana library entitled *Distinzioni Segrete che corrono fra le Casate Nobili di Venezia*, there were eight such families. (Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana), It. VII, 2226 (9205). Hereafter all citations beginning with Marc. will refer to manuscripts in the Marciana library.

Pien Collegio, or Cabinet, that the Great Council should accept into the nobility a family from the Venetian middle class (the *cittadini originali*) for every noble family that died out. Presumably their intention was simply to keep the nobility always at full strength and to encourage the virtues of hard work and loyalty in the *cittadini*. But the plan was opposed, ostensibly on a procedural ground, by others in the *Pien Collegio*, and never came under consideration in the Great Council.⁹ The same proposal was made again from time to time in the fifteenth century, but always in vain.¹⁰ It is startling to think that if this plan had been adopted the nature of the Venetian nobility would have been different, and the difficult situation which arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the ruling class declined in size might have been avoided.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the nobility gradually perfected the rules designed to preserve the body from contamination. Regulations were established governing marriages with commoners, providing for careful examination of claims to nobility by men who came to Venice from Venetian possessions in the Mediterranean, and ensuring the exclusion of illegitimate sons from noble rights.¹¹ In 1506 the government began to keep records of the births of noble male citizens and twenty years later it began to record the marriages of all noblemen. These records are in the well-known Golden Books.

Was the exclusiveness of the Venetian nobility unique in early modern Europe? Generally, entrance into the various nobilities and gentries of other states was not easy, but rarely was it impossible. A man of wealth and ability could usually buy the land or the office, or render the service which paved the way to some kind of noble status, if not for himself, then for his descendants. (With the aristocratic reaction of the later seventeenth and eight-

⁹ Archivio di Stato di Venezia, *Pien Collegio*, Notatorio (1397-1406), fol. 110v., no. 399, Oct. 24, 1403. Hereafter all citations beginning with the initials A.S.V. will refer to manuscripts in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia.

¹⁰ According to Antonio Battistella, *La Repubblica di Venezia ne' suoi undici secoli di storia* (Venice: Ferrari, 1921), p. 561, similar proposals were made in 1467, 1468 and "più oltre." I could not find records of them in the Notatorio of the *Pien Collegio*.

¹¹ Sandi, *Principi di storia civile . . . all'anno di N.S. 1700*, pt. II, I, pp. 273-74; pt. II, II, pp. 699-701; pt. III, I, pp. 11-19.

eenth centuries, many of the aristocracies would become more exclusive.)¹² As another ruling group of a large Italian city-state, the patriciate of Milan provides a meaningful comparison with the Venetian nobility. From the fourteenth to the late seventeenth century it increased from about 200 to nearly 300 families.¹³ In politically turbulent Genoa, new families were admitted or forced their way into the nobility until the sixteenth century; subsequently, however, Genoa had a closed aristocracy like that of Venice.¹⁴ What is unique about the exclusiveness of the Venetian nobility is the combination of two things. The nobility became a closed caste at a time (1381) when most other noble groups were to some extent "flexible" and it continued to be a closed group for a very long period of time. Other groups such as the merchant oligarchies of Florence were "closed" at times in the middle ages, but only for brief periods. The Genoese were a virtually closed group for a longer time than was the Venetian nobility, but they began this phase 150 years later.¹⁵ In the sixteenth century there was no other aristocratic group in Europe like the nobility of Venice.

By the sixteenth century, the government which the Venetian ruling class directed had become a very complicated structure. Its complexity was partly the result of a strong Venetian attachment to tradition. Government bodies were rarely abolished, but tended to change their nature as centuries passed. As a result of this process, lines of authority between them were often hazy

¹² For discussions of admission to the nobilities of the major European countries see A. Goodwin, ed., *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Studies of the Nobilities of the Major European States in the pre-Reform Era* (London: Black, 1953), pp. 15-17, 25-27, 34-35, 43-44, 64-67, 100-101, 110-11, 123-37, 140-46, 158, 172-76. On the tendency of governing bodies to become more exclusive see Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: a Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, vol. I, *The Challenge* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), Chap. II.

¹³ J. M. Roberts, "Lombardy" (Goodwin, *European Nobility*, pp. 60-82), pp. 64-65. Under both Spain and Austria, the patricians of Milan were active in the governing of Lombardy.

¹⁴ "Genova," in *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*, 1929-37.

¹⁵ Of the various Italian nobilities, Visconti says, "The nobility had been open to personal valor and talent, but after 1560 it closes, becomes exclusive and proud, and requires difficult proofs for admission to the councils and chivalric orders." (Alessandro Visconti, *L'Italia nell'epoca della controriforma dal 1516 al 1713*, Vol. IV in *Storia d'Italia* [Milan: Mondadori, 1958], p. 62.)