

Oleksandr Sushko*

Postgraduate Student

Interregional Academy of Personnel Management

03039, 2 Frometivska Str., Kyiv, Ukraine

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2602-6328>

Ivan Servetskiy

Doctor of Law, Professor

Interregional Academy of Personnel Management

03039, 2 Frometivska Str., Kyiv, Ukraine

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5713-8911>

Agent intelligence in the era of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi: Organisational foundations and administrative practices

Abstract. The relevance of this study derives from the importance of agent intelligence during Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's era as an instrument for preserving Cossack statehood amid military confrontation with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and a multilevel system of relations with neighbouring states. The study aimed to examine the organisational foundations and administrative practices of agent intelligence in the administration of the Hetmanate between 1648 and 1657. For this purpose, it used historical-genetic, comparative-historical, and prosopographical methods, along with a critical analysis of the sources and the historiography. The intelligence system of the Hetmanate combined a centralised analytical control carried out by the Hetman and the General Military Chancellery with decentralised operational activity carried out by the regimental and company authorities. The three-tier hierarchy of the foreign agent network stretched from the colonel down through the intelligence residents to the field agents. It was active in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire, the Principality of Moldavia, and the Muscovite Tsardom, although its main area of concentration was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, since this was the principal military opponent. The agents were divided into four categories depending on the type of cover they had and the tasks they carried out: those embedded within the adversary's top administrative bodies, economic agents, agents working under clandestine cover, and agents given military and tactical responsibilities. The methods employed by the administration consisted of the use of cyphers and secret communications, the interception of the enemy's correspondence, the carrying out of disinformation and sabotage operations, as well as the implementation of counterintelligence measures to protect the state leadership. The intelligence gathered was put to use in planning the military campaign of 1649, which concluded with a victory at Zboriv. The findings can be employed in order to reconstruct the institutional origins of Ukraine's intelligence agencies, in courses on the history of public administration and intelligence services, and in comparative studies of the security mechanisms used by early modern states

Keywords: Cossack statehood; administrative hierarchy; sabotage; diplomatic missions; military operations

Introduction

Throughout the history of the development of Ukrainian statehood, intelligence activities have been used to aid political and military decision-making, and the way in which they were organised has shown the level of institutional development that existed at each historical stage. In 20th- and 21st-century academic circles, intelligence is regarded as an activity carried out by state bodies which have been specially set up and which possess legally defined powers, a professional staff, a well-established organisational

structure, and a system of institutional control. However, when this institutional definition is applied to early modern states, there arises a methodological problem since in the mid-seventeenth century within the Ukrainian Hetmanate intelligence activities were not carried out by a separate specialised organisation; rather they were part of the military-administrative system of the Cossack state and depended on the personal authority of the Hetman and his trusted associates. To treat these practices as

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*Corresponding author



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equivalent to intelligence in the later, departmental sense is to impose an anachronistic modern viewpoint on the past. On the other hand, to undervalue them ignores the fact that the administration of the Hetmanate had set up an extensive network of agents with clearly defined levels of command, types of operatives, and means of communication. Therefore, the issue for scholars is to reconstruct the intelligence activities that took place during Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's leadership, something which is especially important since during that period intelligence work was aimed at preserving the statehood itself.

M. Franz (2024) looks at the political situation in which an information advantage became a strategic asset for the Hetmanate government, focusing on the period 1648-1649. At that time, the various factions in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – some advocating peace and others favouring war – made use of the Cossack question in their struggle for power within the Commonwealth; the death of King Władysław IV and the defeats suffered by the Crown's forces led to a crisis. Researchers found that for both the Polish and Lithuanian magnates, the Cossacks continued to be a source of political manipulation, while the Cossacks themselves aimed at becoming an autonomous and, on certain occasions, an independent political actor, taking advantage of the instability in Warsaw. O. Sokyрко (2020) also looked at the military aspect of the problem, using the campaigns of the second half of the seventeenth century to point out the common features in the way both the Crown and the Cossack forces organised and planned their raids on the Ottoman border, especially with regard to reconnaissance. His study showed that the Cossacks had a great deal of experience in steppe warfare and that the range of methods developed in cooperation with the Crown army included collecting information on the enemy. S. Ivlieva's (2024) findings proved that military organisation was deeply embedded in the Cossack community. She showed how events in the 16th and 17th centuries had influenced the development of the military terminology used by Cossack regiments and, from a historical point of view, explained the meanings of the terms "kurin", "kish", "otaman", and "hetman". The results indicated that by the mid-17th century the Cossack army had a well-developed conceptual framework. The use of this terminology allows the hierarchy of command to be reconstructed, including the various levels of authority responsible for intelligence tasks.

A.M. Likhovidov (2022) dealt with the tactical aspect of the question and discovered that the main part of the Cossack army was made up of infantry, there being no clear distinction between infantry and cavalry. The success of both defensive and offensive operations largely relied on the ability to get close to the enemy's positions without being detected before launching a quick attack. In order for such tactics to be used, it was necessary to have prior intelligence regarding the location and state of the enemy forces, thus showing that there had been a well-established tradition of reconnaissance and that this tradition had played a role in supporting combat operations. Yu. Mytsyk (2025) reconstructed the personal dimension of governance in the Cossack state. Drawing on scattered published and archival sources, he reconstructed the biographies of General Quartermaster F. Korobka

and Chyhyryn Colonel H. Kaplonskyi, established when they were born and their education, and clarified their roles in the events of the National Liberation War of 1648-1658. His findings confirmed that key functions in the Hetmanate, including security-related functions, were entrusted to a circle of the Hetman's trusted associates. The author also showed that the political loyalty of these figures determined the stability of the governance system itself. A study by I. Servetsky & O. Sushko (2025b) concentrates specifically on the organisers of intelligence. It concluded that intelligence activities carried out outside their own territories weakened the defensive abilities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while the recruitment of agents and the bringing them together under a single command post led to the creation of a specialised state service. The authors maintained that the heads of the intelligence units played a central role in gaining the military initiative and in diverting enemy forces to secondary areas of war.

According to M. Yuriy & N. Khristan (2025), the Cossack armed forces belonged neither to a regular army nor to a militia of civilians. Rather, they constituted a corporately organised, hierarchical military formation composed of professional soldiers who entered service voluntarily or were mobilised by order of the Hetmanate authorities. The military command system, in which the regiment, with its variable personnel strength, remained the principal tactical formation, proved highly reliable during military campaigns. This created the organisational conditions for entrusting territorial military authorities with additional functions, including intelligence duties. V. Tyshchuk (2022) addressed the continuity of security institutions on Ukrainian lands. The counterintelligence powers of border authorities were examined through transformations in the relevant units during different historical periods, while knowledge of the history of the development of national special services was considered useful in refining national security strategy. However, the Cossack era was outlined only in broad terms, leaving the early modern stage in the development of counterintelligence activity without detailed consideration.

The state of research outlined above shows that intelligence in the era of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi has been examined from two perspectives: a biographical perspective focused on the figures responsible for organising it, and a military-tactical perspective in which reconnaissance was regarded as an element of the art of war. There has never been a specific study which deals with a thorough reconstruction of agent intelligence as a system including various levels of command, different categories of agents, the means of communication, the motivations of the operatives, and measures for counterintelligence protection. Likewise, the connection between the central direction of intelligence operations and their decentralised implementation, the social background and motivations of the agents, and the relationship between the intelligence collected and particular military and political decisions of the Hetmanate government have also been left outside the realm of research. It was precisely these gaps that determined the aim of the study: to reconstruct the agent intelligence system of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's Hetmanate administration from 1648 to 1657, focusing on both its

organisational structure and the mechanisms employed to manage intelligence activities. In accordance with this, the study identified the historical conditions under which Cossack intelligence work became a state function, reconstructed the organisational structure of the intelligence service, and examined the administrative practices that supported intelligence activity in relation to military and political results.

Materials and Methods

The study was theoretical and historical in design. It covered the period from 1648 to 1657, that is, from the beginning of the National Liberation War to the end of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's tenure as Hetman. Its methodological framework was based on the principles of historicism, objectivity, and a systemic approach. These principles required intelligence practices to be considered within the military and political context of the mid-17th century, without projecting onto them categories characteristic of security institutions in later periods. The historical-genetic method was used to establish the historical preconditions for the emergence of agent intelligence. Sources for this analysis were the Chronicle of Samovidets (1971) and S. Velychko's (1991) Chronicle. These chronicles were examined for evidence concerning the scale of popular participation in the uprising, the social composition of the rebel army, the nature of the confrontation on the steppe frontier, and the course of military campaigns.

In order to describe the organisational structure of the intelligence service, the study carried out a critical source analysis. This approach was applied to the memoir volume of J. Michałowski (1864), a book including correspondence, Sejm materials, and reports from the Polish side during the war. The source was looked at for accounts given by officials and military commanders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth regarding the Hetman's knowledge of what was happening in Warsaw and Vilnius, for details on the exposure of agents within the royal court, and for information about intelligence operatives who had been detained. It also had references to the methods used for transmitting information and to the way in which exposed agents were treated, thus providing material for reconstructing the requirements of clandestine activity. The aim of this analysis was to check the evidence about the operation of the Cossack agent network by comparing it with the testimony of the opposing side in the conflict. This kind of comparison lessened the risk of a one-sided interpretation and allowed the Hetmanate government's information advantage to be confirmed by means of sources of independent provenance.

The prosopographical method was used to identify individuals involved in directing intelligence activities. Its source was the Register of the Zaporizhian Host, 1649 (Shevchenko *et al.*, 1995). The register was examined for records concerning the personnel of regiments and kurins, the offices held and kurin affiliations of individuals mentioned in other sources in connection with intelligence activity. The purpose was to document their service within the Cossack army, establish their formal status and probable family ties, and verify biographical information that is only fragmentarily represented in narrative sources. Disputed issues concerning the organisation of intelligence

were considered through historiographical analysis. Based on M. Hrushevsky's (1997) study of the events of 1654–1657. This analysis examined assessments of the degree of coordination among the organisers of uprisings behind enemy lines and conclusions concerning the absence of a single centre of control over this activity. Its purpose was to compare historiographical views on the centralisation of the intelligence system. This made it possible to assess how a structured agent network and its operatives related to situational coordination. Differences between historiographical works from different periods were taken into account, while conflicting information about particular individuals was identified as disputed and no preference was given to either version in the absence of documentary confirmation. Systematisation was used to classify agents according to their social cover and the nature of the tasks performed, and to organise intelligence activities by foreign-policy direction. The comparative-historical method was used to compare the tasks and outcomes of agent activity in the Polish, Crimean, Ottoman, Moldavian, and Muscovite directions, providing grounds for identifying the Polish direction as the priority. The combination of these methods enabled the cross-verification of evidence from sources of different provenance and the reconstruction of the intelligence activity of the Hetmanate administration as a coherent management system.

Results

Historical preconditions for the formation of agent intelligence in the hetmanate administration. The formation of intelligence and counterintelligence structures during the Khmelnytskyi era drew on the earlier experience of the Cossacks. Throughout the first half of the 17th century, Ukrainian Cossacks accumulated experience in tactical and operational intelligence amid continuous confrontation on the steppe frontier. The defence of the southern frontiers against Tatar raids, the organisation of steppe raids, and maritime campaigns against the Ottoman Empire's Black Sea fortresses required knowledge of the terrain and the enemy's routes of movement, the ability to capture prisoners in order to obtain information, and the organisation of advance reconnaissance patrols (Kravets & Ostapchuk, 2021). By the mid-17th century, this experience remained confined to military practice and was fragmented. It had not yet assumed the form of a systematic state institution operating at the strategic political level, while intelligence measures were carried out within individual military operations without permanent bodies to direct them.

The nature of intelligence activity changed in 1648 with the beginning of the National Liberation War. From the outset of the uprising, Bohdan Khmelnytskyi recognised the imbalance of forces: with a force of approximately 500 Cossacks at the initial stage, he could not expect victory over the regular Polish army without an information advantage. The rebels' actions were intended primarily to delay the advance of Crown forces commanded by M. Potocki, allowing the Hetman time to mobilise the population and conclude a military alliance with the Crimean Khanate. From the beginning of its existence, the Ukrainian Hetmanate found itself at the centre of complex interstate relations and effectively served as a buffer between

neighbouring states, each of which sought to strengthen its influence in the region (Youvan, 2025). Under these conditions, obtaining information about the intentions and actions of neighbouring states became one of the permanent areas of the Hetmanate administration's work, while intelligence changed from an auxiliary tactical element into an instrument for securing the survival of the newly established state. The adoption in 1648 of a military statute known as the Articles on the Organisation of the Zaporizhzhian Host marked a stage in the institutionalisation of the rebel army and its intelligence units (Yermolayev, 2013). This document established the organisational structure of the Cossack army, whose core consisted of infantry equipped with firearms and mobile cavalry. The existence of the statute signalled a transition from guerrilla tactics to coordinated regular military operations, of which systematic intelligence work became a component.

Under the statute, frontier colonels were required to monitor the adversary's activities, including its intelligence activity. Thus, intelligence functions were formally assigned to territorial military authorities at the earliest stage of the war, providing a legal basis for the further development of the intelligence system. During the period under study, the Cossack state's intelligence and counterintelligence activities were defensive in character. The tasks of Hetmanate intelligence were to preserve the statehood already won, detect enemy plans in advance, monitor the mobilisation measures of the Polish king and the movements of Crown forces, and prevent internal political destabilisation resulting from attempts on the state's military and political leadership. Accordingly, from the outset the intelligence service developed as a multi-functional system combining foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, and protection of the leadership. Its tasks were determined by the state's military and political needs at each stage of the war.

The prerequisites for creating an agent network were also linked to the socio-economic and ethno-confessional situation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Social, national, and religious oppression by the nobility led to mass participation in the uprising (Goszczyński, 2023). According to the Chronicle of Samovidets (1971), "every living soul rose to join the Cossacks"; even in a small village, it was difficult to find a man who had not joined the army himself or sent his son or servant to it. A broader picture of the social basis of the uprising emerges from comparing the testimony of the Samovydetes with S. Velychko's (1991) Chronicle. Describing the first campaigns of 1648, S. Velychko records not only the scale of the movement but also its social heterogeneity: peasants, townspeople, military retainers of noble estates, and members of the clergy joined the army. Comparison of the two chronicles shows that, from the outset, the uprising involved different strata of the population throughout the territory affected by hostilities, rather than the Cossack estate alone. This social diversity had direct implications for intelligence activity: it ensured the presence of persons sympathetic to the Cossack cause in a range of social settings, from rural servants to townspeople and clergy, and thus created natural channels through which information could be passed. This situation provided a social base for the expansion of the agent network. Ukrainian inhabitants of towns and villages,

together with servants on noble estates in territories that remained under the control of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, became a base for Cossack intelligence. Information came from peasants, townspeople, Orthodox clergy, and travellers, giving the Hetmanate government an information advantage over the adversary and substantially reducing the cost of maintaining the agent network, since some informants acted voluntarily. At the same time, the Hetmanate administration had to counter enemy agents within its own ranks. The Polish side, drawing on its financial resources, sought to bribe members of the Cossack officer elite in order to split the rebel camp. In particular, A. Kysil, the Voivode of Bratslav, sought to win over I. Charnota, Quartermaster of the Zaporizhzhian Host, to the side of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by offering him "the office of Hetman and royal favour" (Sytniewski, 2022). Such attempts necessitated constant counterintelligence monitoring within the Cossack army and among its officer elite, and they became one factor in the emergence of counterintelligence as a distinct function within the intelligence service. Foreign-policy factors also required intelligence to be organised at a higher level. The conclusion and maintenance of international alliances demanded not only observation but also political analysis and forecasting. Diplomatic missions sent by the Hetmanate government to Istanbul, Moscow, the Principality of Moldavia, Transylvania, and Sweden combined the functions of official embassies with those of centres for collecting political, military, and economic information; diplomats also acquired intelligence during their travels (Kozłowski, 2017). Thus, the historical preconditions for establishing the intelligence network included the need to protect the newly established state in the face of the adversary's superiority, the Cossacks' prior intelligence experience, the statutory establishment of a regular army, and the social and political situation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which created conditions for recruiting agents.

Organisational foundations of the intelligence service and the structure of the agent network. The organisational structure of intelligence and counterintelligence during the period of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi combined centralised analytical direction with decentralised operational work. The system was not established as a separate government body; nevertheless, it had defined hierarchical levels, distinct spheres of responsibility, and specialised areas of activity. At the apex of this hierarchy was the Hetman himself, who assigned intelligence tasks and was the principal recipient of the information obtained: he received intelligence reports, analysed strategic intelligence, issued instructions to agents, and heard their reports. The notes of S. Kushevych, the Lviv syndic who negotiated with the Hetman in 1648 as part of a delegation from the city magistracy, record an incident in which a local priest brought Bohdan Khmelnytskyi a letter from the people of Krekhiv, for which he was rebuked by the Hetman. Immediately afterwards, a young man arrived who had been sent to Warsaw to gather intelligence on Crown affairs but had carelessly spoken about his assignment; he was therefore reprimanded and isolated in a separate place (Stepankov, 2008). These episodes demonstrate the Hetman's direct involvement in directing agent operations and supervising compliance with secrecy requirements.

The General Military Chancellery, headed by General Scribe I. Vyhovskiy, became the coordinating centre for collecting, systematising, and processing information of state importance. Under his leadership, ad hoc intelligence assignments undertaken at the beginning of the war by individual colonels, including Stasenko, referred to as Tarasenko in some sources, gave way to a permanent institutional foundation for agent intelligence. During this period, there was a move from temporary assignments to the establishment of permanent residencies, in which agents worked within organisational units directed by residents vested with appropriate authority. The Chancellery received reports from territory controlled by the Hetmanate government and from neighbouring states, synthesised them, developed instructions for agents, and prepared detailed reports for the Hetman. These documents concerned not only the military situation but also contained information on sessions of the Polish Sejm, agreements among magnates, and decisions of the secret royal council of John II Casimir. In addition, the Chancellery oversaw the work of diplomats who performed intelligence tasks during foreign missions. L. Kapusta was responsible for counterintelligence support, the security of the state's senior leadership, the detection of enemy agents, and the neutralisation of internal conspirators (Stepankov, 2008). Biographical information about him in the sources is limited. His active period spanned 1648-1657. In the Register of the Zaporizhian Host, 1649 (Shevchenko *et al.*, 1995), he is listed in the Osavul kurin of the Chyhyryn Regiment, where Vasko and Parkhom Kapustenko, probably his sons, are also mentioned.

Kapusta commanded Cossack detachments during the Battles of Zhovti Vody, Korsun, and Pyliavtsi, and led raids against Horodok and Przemyśl in the autumn of 1648. In February 1649, Bohdan Khmelnytskyi appointed Colonel Kapusta town otaman of Chyhyryn and of Subotiv. His appointment as town otaman of Subotiv, the Hetman's ancestral estate, demonstrated personal trust: Kapusta effectively served as head of the Hetman's security service, protecting his life, family, and residence. Under Kapusta's leadership, an agent network operated in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, gathering information and disseminating disinformation by transmitting distorted accounts of the Cossack command's intended operations. Kapusta also monitored the Muscovite intelligence network operating in the Hetmanate, countered Polish agent activity, and worked to improve the operation of the Cossack state's foreign agent network. A separate strand of his work was diplomacy: he led embassies to Moscow in 1653 and to Istanbul in 1656 and 1657. The lower territorial levels of the intelligence organisation comprised regimental and company authorities, whose official duties included organising intelligence within their respective territories.

Operational direction of the foreign agent network followed a three-tier structure: Colonel Stasenko headed the network; mid-level residents reported to him and, in turn, directed field agents. The degree of centralisation of the Hetmanate administration's intelligence network remains a matter of debate in historiography. Whereas V. Stepankov's (2008) reconstruction presents the Hetmanate administration's intelligence and counterintelligence as a structured system with defined levels of command, M.S. Hrushovsky (1997), in analysing the organisers of uprisings behind enemy lines, concluded that they did not act together under a unified leadership and lacked a centralised system for controlling that activity. A similar assessment was offered by I. Servetsky & O. Sushko (2025a), who noted that intelligence work encompassed not only the collection of information but also the organisation of uprisings, the recruitment of commanders of enemy units, and sabotage behind enemy lines. However, this activity lacked a single coordinating centre. A comparison of these positions supports the conclusion that the centralisation of the intelligence system was not absolute: alongside a structured agent network subordinate to designated intelligence residents, there were operatives whose activities were coordinated on a situational basis.

The geographical reach of agent activity extended to every state bordering the Hetmanate. The Hetman had agents in the Muscovite Tsardom, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire, and the Principalities of Transylvania and Moldavia. His agents also maintained contact with intelligence operatives from other countries in Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, Austria, Moravia, and Silesia (Stepankov, 2008). This territorial breadth of the network reflected the foreign-policy interests of the Hetmanate government and ensured a flow of information from every direction in which the state faced potential threats. To attain broad information coverage, Cossack intelligence developed a multi-tier agent network drawn from diverse social strata, enabling it to collect information both in urban settings and in the highest echelons of the adversary's military and political leadership. Intelligence activity involved noblemen, Orthodox and Catholic clergy, townspeople, officials, military personnel, peasants, the urban poor, and diplomats. Agents included men and women of different ages, including adolescents. S. Kushevych's letters of 4 October 1648 mention a woman detained near Lviv, who had posed as a Cossack's wife and had been sent by M. Kryvonis to the vicinity of Kraków to perform intelligence tasks. The ethnic composition of the agent network was diverse: Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Germans, Poles, Lemkos, and Roma worked for Cossack intelligence. According to social status, the nature of their cover, and the tasks performed, agents were divided into several categories, as systematised in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of agent intelligence in the hetmanate administration and recorded outcomes of their activity

Category of intelligence	Representatives	Cover and operational methods	Recorded outcomes
Agents in the adversary's senior administrative structures	V. Vereshchaka, the King's chamberlain; the Sechevych brothers; Yarmolovych; Lieutenant Volosovets	Noble birth; court and officer posts; participation in closed deliberations	Transmission to Chyhyryn of information on sessions of the Sejm and the secret royal council of John II Casimir
Economic and customs intelligence	O. Astamatii (Ostamatenko), administrator of <i>inducta</i> collection	Management of the customs service; collection of <i>inducta</i> ; possible contacts with merchants	Establishment of customs houses on the Moldavian and Muscovite frontiers; probable use of a frontier position for gathering information

Table 1. Continued

Category of intelligence	Representatives	Cover and operational methods	Recorded outcomes
Agents operating under cover	V. Hzhbyovskiy; the Ostrovskiy brothers; Cossack Vorozhbylovych	Assumed identities from itinerant and unprivileged groups: the poor, persons unable to work, travelling performers, clerics, and pilgrims	Travel through enemy cities; collection of information on garrisons and the condition of the army
Military-tactical and sabotage intelligence	I. Bohun; Y. Hlukh, Colonel of Uman; Colonel Stasenکو; Cossack Dorosh	Field commanders; raids; capture of prisoners	Depriving the adversary of intelligence; organisation of uprisings behind enemy lines

Source: compiled by the authors based on V. Stepankov (2008), I. Servetsky & O. Sushko (2025a)

Agents in the adversary's senior administrative structures included individuals who had access to information about decision-making within the leadership of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. One such agent was V. Vereshchaka, chamberlain to the Polish King John II Casimir. By virtue of his duties, he was involved in drafting documents arising from Sejm sessions and consultations, and he was present at discussions of matters concerning the Zaporizhzhian Host; he transmitted the information obtained to Chyhyryn (Servetsky & Sushko, 2025b). Specific routes and a circle of trusted contacts were designated for transmitting letters, while outsiders' access to the agent's residence was restricted. Following the defeat of the Cossack army at Berestechko in 1651, a journal of the 1649 Sejm, setting out the content of speeches, was found among the captured papers. Testimony from a captured representative of the Tatar side indicated that information had been supplied from the King's entourage, which resulted in the Sejm's consideration of the "Vereshchaka case" in December 1650. After the Cossack defeat at Berestechko, the Polish side captured the journal of the 1649 Sejm, which contained a named list of speakers and the contents of their speeches, while the testimony of the Tatar aristocrat Nitshokh-murza pointed to an information leak from the King's entourage. Through a bribed servant, the Polish side obtained evidence of Vereshchaka's activity. A subsequent search uncovered further materials, after which the agent was arrested and imprisoned in Malbork Fortress.

Information reached the Hetman through several channels, extending from the circles around individual senior officials of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the decision-making centres in Warsaw and Vilnius themselves. Reports from the camp of A. Kysil, Voivode of Bratslav, dated 30 August 1648, stated that one of the Voivode's confidants regularly passed the Hetman information about promises made by the Voivode to the Cossacks and about decisions concerning the Zaporizhzhian Host taken in Warsaw. The well-informed nature of the Hetmanate government was also acknowledged by representatives of the Polish side. At the end of May 1649, the Lithuanian Chancellor A. Radziwiłł wrote from Vilnius that the enemy had its own agents and was aware of everything taking place there. Piasecki, a nobleman employed in the chancellery of General Scribe I. Vyhovskiy, told envoys of Crown Vice-Chancellor H. Radziejowski that the Hetman was aware of everything that was happening in Warsaw and had people who kept him informed of even the smallest matters (Stepankov, 2008).

Among such individuals were the royal chamberlain, nobleman V. Vereshchaka, the Sechevych brothers, and Yarmolovych, all of whom were among King John II

Casimir's trusted associates. The Hetmanate government's information advantage can be verified against documents from the opposing side of the conflict, collected in the memoir volume of J. Michałowski (1864). The correspondence, Sejm materials, and reports of officials and military commanders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth contained in this volume show that the Polish side was aware of information leaks. The documents record that the Hetman was informed about affairs in Warsaw and Vilnius and that decisions concerning the Zaporizhzhian Host became known to him. Analysis of these materials is of twofold importance for reconstructing intelligence activities. First, information about the Cossack agent network is confirmed by a source independent in provenance, reducing the risk of one-sided interpretation. Secondly, the complaints of Polish officials about the Hetman's awareness are indirect evidence of the effectiveness of Cossack intelligence, because the adversary observed the results of its work without identifying the channels through which information was leaking.

Economic intelligence was a separate area, overseen by O. Astamatii. Born into a Greek family from Podillia, he was instructed by the Hetman in 1654 to collect *inducta*, a customs duty, and headed the Hetmanate government's customs service (Bakalets, 2004). His post afforded access to information about the movement of goods and commercial connections at the Hetmanate's borders, which was used to gather economic and political information. The recruitment of agents from poorer strata of the population to operate under social cover was common. In the 17th century, beggars, people with disabilities, and monks did not attract attention in urban environments, and this was exploited for intelligence purposes. An example is the activity of agent V. Hzhbyovskiy, who presented himself as a person who had escaped from Turkish captivity and travelled through towns of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, collecting alms ostensibly to ransom his comrades. To support this cover story, he displayed an injured hand and used forged letters bearing the seals of the Crown Hetmans. The Ostrovskiy brothers travelled with two trained monkeys, which distracted those around them and enabled them to record artillery positions and collect information about the condition of enemy forces. According to the testimony of agent Vorozhbylovych, 150 intelligence operatives were dispatched to Poland in the spring of 1651 disguised as beggars. Travelling *lirnyks* and *kobzars*, traditional itinerant musicians, also conveyed information orally, making interception by the adversary more difficult. During an operation lasting from the autumn of 1650 to the summer of 1651, around 2,000 intelligence operatives were deployed in Galicia and Poland. Assuming the guise of pilgrims, travelling performers, monks, priests,

and other religious wayfarers, they carried out intelligence tasks in support of a possible campaign by Prince Rákóczi II of Transylvania against Kraków (Stepankov, 2008).

Agents' cooperation with Cossack intelligence was motivated by two main considerations. Primarily, they worked in return for money or privileges: when Colonel Y. Hlukh sent two agents behind enemy lines, he gave each of them a gold coin and promised several head of cattle upon their return; Resident Hzybovskyi promised potential agents a reward for completing intelligence tasks. At the same time, some operatives were motivated by ideological or religious considerations. This category included individuals who undertook tasks with a high likelihood of death. The combination of material incentives and ideological motivation ensured the resilience of the agent network and enabled the selection of operatives for assignments carrying different levels of risk.

Administrative practices in intelligence activity and its military and political outcomes. Agent intelligence was supported by a set of administrative practices: the organisation of secret communications and the use of cyphers; the creation of false information to mislead the adversary; counterintelligence protection of the state leadership; sabotage operations and the organisation of uprisings behind enemy lines; and the use of intelligence obtained in military campaigns and foreign policy activity. Communication between agents behind enemy lines and the General Military Chancellery in Chyhyryn required secrecy and the use of cyphers. During a search of the residence of V. Vereshchaka, mentioned above, representatives of the royal administration found letters from the Hetman and drafts written in cypher containing information about the situation in the state (Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, 2020).

Intelligence gathered by the agent network was processed and used directly in military planning. In 1649, V. Vereshchaka transmitted to the Hetman's headquarters data on the mustering of the royal army, its strength, and its directions of movement. On the basis of this information, the Hetman mobilised forces, blockaded part of the enemy army at Zbarazh, and attacked and defeated the King's main forces near Zboriv (Stepankov, 2008). The intelligence advantage of Cossack forces is also evident in accounts of the siege of Lviv in the autumn of 1648 (Błoński, 2025). The collection of information about the city and its defences was facilitated by local inhabitants sympathetic to the Cossack side. For example, during the siege of Lviv High Castle, an artisan from the Kraków Suburb revealed to the Cossack command the location of the main municipal water conduit; cutting it off deprived the besieged of access to drinking water. Another townsman disclosed a secret passage to one of the fortified monasteries. The support of local residents also facilitated the capture of High Castle, whose defence was led by Burgrave J. Bratkowski. Thus, at Lviv, the Cossack army's information advantage was secured through the support of local inhabitants, who supplied information about urban infrastructure and concealed approaches to the fortifications. The systematic interception of enemy correspondence was an administrative practice that enabled the Hetmanate government to take pre-emptive action. This was combined with prompt operational responses to identified threats.

In June 1653, after correspondence concerning an assassination plot against the Hetman had been intercepted, a reconnaissance-sabotage detachment of several hundred Cossacks was dispatched to capture King John II Casimir during his journey to the camp. The operation could not be completed because the King had left the intended site of attack before the detachment arrived. Intelligence-supported attempts on senior enemy officials were also undertaken by the Cossack side. At the same time, Bohdan Khmelnytskyi remained the target of assassination attempts. The Polish side offered monetary rewards for his assassination, which necessitated preventive counterintelligence measures under L. Kapusta's leadership.

One area of intelligence activity was the establishment of resistance cells behind enemy lines and the conduct of sabotage operations. At the outset of the war, the Hetman dispatched Colonel Stasenko and agent Dorosh, with a detachment of approximately 300 men, on a raid into Belarus, western Ukraine, and Poland. Near the town of Dobczyce in the Kraków area, agent Dorosh used agitation to organise an uprising involving around 2,500 local residents. These forces tied down Polish contingents and later moved to join the Cossack army (Servetsky & Sushko, 2025a). Uprisings also occurred in Belarusian towns where Lithuanian garrisons were stationed. Sabotage operations were closely integrated with military planning. On the eve of the Battle of Zhovti Vody, agents acting on the Hetman's orders destroyed ferry crossings across the Dnipro, thereby preventing the forces of J. Vyshnevetskyi from intervening in the battle. Before the same battle, reconnaissance patrols sent by S. Potocki were intercepted. As a result, the Polish command was denied information about the strength and disposition of the combined Ukrainian-Crimean army and had to make decisions without reliable information. At the strategic level, agents supplied the Polish command with distorted reports about the strength of the Cossack army and the Hetman's plans. At the end of 1650, Polish diplomats negotiating with the Hetman informed their superiors that B. Khmelnytskyi was aware of their actions and that they could not distinguish reliable information from deliberately planted misleading reports. Intelligence support also extended to foreign-policy directions beyond the Polish sphere.

Intelligence support for foreign-policy directions beyond Poland. Intelligence in the Crimean direction was supported through the mission of Tymofii (Tymish) Khmelnytskyi, who was sent to Bakhchysarai in 1648 following correspondence between Bohdan Khmelnytskyi and Khan Islam Giray III concerning the conclusion of an alliance (Gündüz, 2025). This mission preceded the formalisation of a military alliance between the Hetmanate government and the Crimean Khanate against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Şen, 2023). A practical outcome of the alliance was the arrival of Crimean contingents under the command of Or-mirza Tugay Bey at the Zaporizhzhian Sich in May 1648. From there, they marched with the Cossack army into Polish lands, and the Polish army was defeated at the Battle of Korsun (Gündüz, 2025). Alongside embassies headed by Y. Klysha and K. Burliai, the presence of Cossack representatives at the Khan's court was used to coordinate joint military action and monitor the foreign-policy intentions of the neighbouring state. An agent

network also operated in Bakhchysarai (Mashevskaya, 2018), reporting to the Hetman on the plans of the Crimean Khan and his vassals (Milchev, 2025). Through this network, negotiations between Warsaw and Bakhchysarai concerning an alliance against the Hetmanate were uncovered.

According to one version, the Hetman may have maintained contact with Bektash-aga, commander of the Janissaries and a participant in the uprising of 1648 that brought the underage Sultan Mehmed IV to power. These contacts have been associated with the Cossacks' acquisition of rights to free navigation on the Black Sea, passage through the straits, duty-free trade in Ottoman territory, and the maintenance of their own resident in Istanbul, although Warsaw merely suspected the Hetman's involvement in the uprising (Gündüz, 2025). Under Sultan Mehmed IV, the agreement did not remain in force for long, and responsibility for handling matters in the northern direction was transferred to the Crimean Khanate (Öztürk, 2017). Overall, the exchange of embassies between

the Hetmanate government and the Porte from 1648 to 1653 provided a continuous channel of communication. It was also used to monitor the Porte's foreign-policy intentions concerning the Cossack-Polish and Crimean questions (Ostapchuk, 2013). As O.A. Bakalets (2004) notes, acting on the Hetman's instructions, Ostafii Astamatii established customs houses on the Moldavian and Muscovite frontiers and set rates for the customs duties known as *inducta* and *evecta*. The frontier position of these customs posts suggests that Astamatii may also have been involved in intelligence work in the Moldavian direction, as control of cross-border movement created conditions for gathering information. The Muscovite direction encompassed monitoring the Muscovite intelligence network in the Hetmanate and collecting information through diplomatic missions, including L. Kapusta's embassy to Moscow in 1653 (Zhang, 2025). The allocation of tasks and recorded outcomes of intelligence activity by foreign-policy direction is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Directions of agent activity in the Hetmanate administration by foreign-policy vector

Direction	Main tasks of agent activity	Recorded outcomes
Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth	Collecting information about Sejm sessions, decisions of the royal council, and the movements of Crown forces; disinforming the command; organising uprisings	Information used in the 1649 campaign at Zbarazh and Zboriv; discovery of enemy plans; uprisings behind enemy lines
Crimean Khanate	Monitoring the plans of the Khan and his vassals through the network in Bakhchysarai	Uncovering negotiations between Warsaw and Bakhchysarai concerning an alliance against the Hetmanate
Ottoman Empire	Maintaining contacts with the Sultan's entourage; dispatching monk-agents to Christian territories in 1654	Rights to navigate the Black Sea, trade dutyfree, and maintain a resident in Istanbul
Principality of Moldavia	Obtaining information from an agent at the court of Hospodar V. Lupu	Information about V. Lupu's correspondence with the Sultan, viziers, and the Polish King
Muscovite Tsardom	Monitoring the Muscovite intelligence network in the Hetmanate; collecting information through diplomatic missions	Ensuring that the Hetmanate government was informed during preparations for the embassy of 1653

Source: compiled by the authors based on O.A. Bakalets (2004), V. Ostapchuk (2013), H. Gündüz (2025), J. Zhang (2025)

Table 2 shows that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth remained the principal focus of agent activity as the main military adversary, whereas intelligence in the other directions primarily served the diplomatic needs of the Hetmanate government and monitored the intentions of neighbouring states. Overall, the analysis supports the conclusion that both the organisational foundations of the intelligence service, which combined centralised leadership with an extensive network of operatives, and the administrative practices used to maintain communications, provide counterintelligence protection, conduct sabotage, and disseminate disinformation were directly linked to the recorded outcomes of intelligence activity in military and foreign-policy spheres. The intelligence and counterintelligence service functioned until the end of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's tenure as Hetman in 1657, providing the Hetmanate government with the information required for military and political decision-making.

Discussion

The study reconstructed the agent intelligence of the Hetmanate administration as a system combining centralised analytical leadership with decentralised execution of tasks. This result should be compared with evidence concerning intelligence organisations in other early modern states. It is appropriate to begin with the Venetian secret service. I. Iordanou (2022) described this service as a centrally

organised state intelligence institution of the 16th century. It had a clearly defined hierarchy and distinct communication networks, and it was subordinate to the Council of Ten. The findings partially accord with this model: both systems had a single command centre, differentiated levels of responsibility, and communication channels linking residents to the centre. The difference concerns their institutional status. Whereas the Venetian service was constituted as a separate state body with defined collegiate leadership, intelligence in the Hetmanate did not acquire an autonomous institutional form. It remained embedded in the military-administrative system, with leadership functions divided among the Hetman, the General Military Chancellery, and trusted associates. At the same time, the three-tier management structure of the foreign agent network identified in this study supports I. Iordanou's central argument that systematised intelligence activity is not exclusive to the modern state and extends back to the early modern period.

Further correspondences emerge when the present findings are compared with those of E.S. Gürkan (2024). The author examined the 16th-century Ottoman intelligence system, reconstructed from evidence concerning the conflict with the Spanish Habsburgs. The Ottoman authorities used networks of merchants, corsairs, soldiers, and other travellers to move through enemy territory. E.S. Gürkan's findings also show that these networks were

used to collect political, military, and economic information. The Porte employed disinformation, bribery, and sabotage as instruments of influence and invested in the development of cryptography. Each of these elements has a counterpart in the present findings: O. Astamatii's work at the customs frontier created conditions for collecting economic information; L. Kapusta directed disinformation operations; cyphers were used in correspondence with agents in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; and the intelligence potential of travellers was employed in the operation that deployed intelligence operatives under the guise of pilgrims and beggars. The author's conclusion that porous borders and the possibility of changing identities created favourable conditions for espionage in the Mediterranean also finds a parallel in the Ukrainian-Polish borderlands, where the ethno-confessional proximity of the populations on both sides facilitated agents' concealment. This comparison indicates a typological similarity between the intelligence practices of states engaged in war with a more resource-rich adversary.

The technical repertoire of Cossack intelligence can be assessed in light of N. Akkerman & P. Langman (2024). Drawing on archival materials, the authors showed that English espionage from the reign of Elizabeth I to the Restoration used a variety of techniques of disguise. These included invisible ink, cyphers, forged documents, and poisons. The authors further note that technological innovations developed by criminals, secretaries, and other operatives in improving ciphering techniques, which had previously received little scholarly attention, affected the events surrounding the Babington Plot and the Gunpowder Plot. The comparison indicates that Cossack intelligence had access to some of this repertoire. In the Vereshchaka case, ciphered drafts were recorded; V. Hzyhovskyi used forged letters bearing the seals of the Crown Hetmans; and agents working undercover disguised themselves as members of the urban poor. A distinguishing feature was the broader use of oral channels for conveying information through travelling *lirnyks* and *kobzars*, which reduced the vulnerability of communications to the interception of documents. In English practice, by contrast, written means of protecting information predominated. The authors' proposition that inconspicuous operatives could influence the fate of prominent figures is also borne out by Cossack evidence: Chamberlain V. Vereshchaka's reports affected the outcome of the 1649 campaign.

The social composition of the agent network identified in this study has parallels in the edited volume by S. Bowd *et al.* (2023), devoted to the shadow agents of Renaissance warfare. According to this volume, military efforts in Italy and beyond were supported by the preparatory and auxiliary work of men, women, and children who occupied a space between visibility and invisibility and moved between civilian and military environments. Such social heterogeneity also characterised the Cossack agent network, which included women, adolescents, members of the urban poor, clergy, and people of various nationalities. The unobtrusiveness of such individuals in everyday settings facilitated their clandestine work. The difference lies in how operatives were recruited: in military conflicts of the Renaissance, the employment of shadow agents was coercive. By contrast, cooperation with Cossack

intelligence rested on a combination of material reward and voluntary participation motivated by ideological and religious considerations, since the population perceived the war primarily as a religious conflict and as resistance to social oppression. The results also provide further support for the relationship between war and state-building. The agent network expanded in parallel with the formation of Cossack state institutions, while counterintelligence protection of the leadership helped to secure the stability of the new political authority. This provides grounds for treating intelligence activity as a component of the state-building process.

Among the issues considered by D. Shaw & M. Woodcock (2023) in their overview of scholarship on early modern espionage from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth century are motives, rewards, and the professional identity of intelligence operatives. The findings on the combination of cash payments, promises, and privileges with ideological motives add material that has not previously been included in broader European syntheses. They also indicate that, in the Cossack network, agents selected for high-risk tasks were drawn specifically from ideologically motivated individuals. The same overview notes the coexistence of two scholarly approaches: the study of individual spies and the analysis of the systems and secretariats in which they operated. The present study combines both perspectives. For example, the activities of I. Vyhovskiy, L. Kapusta, Colonel Stasenko, V. Vereshchaka, and O. Astamatii were analysed as elements of a management hierarchy extending from the Hetman and the General Military Chancellery to field agents.

The infrastructural dimension of intelligence activity becomes apparent when compared with M. Tieleman's (2021) findings. Intelligence networks in the eighteenth-century Republic of the United Provinces relied on the postal service, the printed press, and a commercial economy, while American revolutionaries conducted information and propaganda activities using the channels of the Dutch press. The Hetmanate administration lacked comparable infrastructure. Consequently, functionally analogous tasks of information influence were carried out through agents, for example, Dorosh's agitation, which led to an uprising near Kraków, and the dispatch of monk-agents with mandates to Christian territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire. This comparison suggests that the content of information-influence operations in the early modern era was similar across states, whereas the means through which they were conducted depended on the communication infrastructure available. This pattern accords with M. Pohlig's (2022) conclusion, based on the activities of the British government during the War of the Spanish Succession, that the value of intelligence depended not on its mere acquisition but on the government's ability to process and use it. In the case of the Hetmanate administration, this capacity was provided by the General Military Chancellery, which consolidated reports and prepared them for decision-making.

The comparison permits two generalisations. In terms of its organisational features, operational repertoire, and social base, the intelligence activity of the Hetmanate administration fits within the wider European context of early modern intelligence. This justifies viewing it as a

system of administrative practices. At the same time, Cossack intelligence had features shaped by the conditions of its formation: a defensive orientation, subordination to the task of preserving the newly established state, a social base that rested on voluntary participation, and a reliance on agent networks and oral channels to compensate for the absence of communication infrastructure.

Conclusions

The study permits several conclusions regarding the organisational foundations and administrative practices of agent intelligence in Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's Hetmanate administration. The prerequisites for its formation were complex. The Cossacks' practical military intelligence experience, accumulated in confrontations on the steppe frontier, was reinterpreted after 1648 in response to the imbalance of forces with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was formalised in a military statute that assigned intelligence duties to frontier colonels and reinforced by a social environment in which people in enemy-controlled territories voluntarily supplied information to the Cossack side. Intelligence and counterintelligence activity was defensive in orientation from the outset and combined foreign intelligence, countering enemy agents, and protection of the military and political leadership. Its tasks were adjusted to the state's military and political needs at each stage of the war. Consequently, between 1648 and 1657 intelligence evolved from a supporting element of individual military operations into a permanent means of ensuring the survival of the newly established state.

The organisational structure of the intelligence system combined centralised analytical direction in the hands of the Hetman and the General Military Chancellery with decentralised task execution by regimental and company authorities. The foreign network was managed through a threetier structure, from the colonel through residents to field agents. Such an arrangement allowed an early modern state without a separate specialised body to perform functions that, in states with more developed institutions, were entrusted to specialised government services. Quantitative indicators demonstrate the scale of the system: a single operation in 1650-1651 involved the deployment of approximately 2,000 intelligence

operatives in Galicia and Poland, while the geographical reach of activity covered five foreign-policy directions, with the Polish direction given priority. Agents were differentiated into four categories according to their cover and tasks, and the resilience of the network rested on the combination of material rewards and the ideological motivation of operatives. Centralisation was not absolute, however: alongside the structured network, operatives acted whose coordination was situational.

Administrative practices included the use of cyphers and oral communication channels, interception of enemy correspondence, disinformation, sabotage operations, the organisation of uprisings behind enemy lines, and counterintelligence protection of the leadership. Counterintelligence protection was carried out irrespective of the official position or family ties of those under suspicion. The relationship between these practices and military-political outcomes was traced in the campaign of 1649, whose preparation drew on reports from agents in the royal entourage. It was also evident in foreign-policy agreements with the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire, for which diplomatic missions received intelligence support. Together, these findings confirm the value of viewing Cossack intelligence as a system of administrative practices firmly situated within the wider European context of early modern espionage.

The limitations of the study stem from its source base: some evidence derives from the Polish side of the conflict, the biographical data for certain intelligence organisers are inconsistent, and documentation of the agent network has survived only indirectly. Further research should compare the reconstructed system with intelligence practices under later Hetmans and examine more closely the mid-level figures in the agent network, about whom available information remains fragmentary.

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