

## **Britain's Ionian Consul: Spiridion Foresti and Intelligence Collection (1793-1805).**

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### **Introduction.**

Control of the Mediterranean was of vital importance to the major powers engaged in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars of 1793-1815, an importance which made the Sea a centre of major military and political conflict. The Mediterranean Theatre can be considered as three distinct basins<sup>1</sup>, connected together by narrow straits, each potentially under the operational control of an island or island chain. The Eastern Basin between Sicily and the Levant was the highway to the east, leading in one direction north to the Dardanelles and the Black Sea and in the other south to Egypt and the overland routes to India and the Far East. Access to this great Basin could be controlled by a Fleet based at Malta, with support from Sicily. The second Basin, the Adriatic Basin provided the passage to Venice and Trieste and covered access to the western seaboard of Turkey-in-Europe. Entrance to this Basin could be controlled by possession of the Ionian Island chain, stretching from Corfu in the north through Paxos, Ithaca, St Maura, Cephalonia, and Zante down to Cerigo in the south, off the tip of the Morea.

The key to both these Basins was the third, the Western Mediterranean Basin stretching from Gibraltar to Sicily, its entrance controlled by the island of Gibraltar. For Britain and France, control of this western basin was critical to the control of the whole Mediterranean. The major French Naval Base at Toulon, occupied briefly by Britain early in the War, was blockaded almost continually by Britain. The blockade was an attempt to prevent the French fleet based there joining with those in the Atlantic ports or, after 1804, with fleets from Spain, to mount expeditions either further east in the Mediterranean or in the Atlantic. The importance of the Western Basin was well understood by British Naval Commanders in the Mediterranean. Nelson wrote in response to Ionian Island concerns of a French invasion and the lack of local British Ships of War, *"the only way for a naval force to protect the [Ionian] Republic is by watching the enemy in their own ports"*<sup>2</sup>. Russia relied on passage through the Eastern Basin to bring its Baltic Fleet into the Mediterranean, but had an alternative via the Dardanelles for its Black Sea Fleet.

Of the major powers, Britain, France, Austria and Russia each had complex and shifting interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. These ranged from maintaining or influencing the balance of political and military power, protection of their own trade, blockade of enemy trade and military supply lines, the suppression of piracy, sourcing of military supplies, access to bases for naval forces, and on a larger scale, control of access to the rich resources of India. An overarching factor was the declining power of the Ottoman Empire and the threat of its occupation or fragmentation and the relative advantage that may ensue to one or more of the powers.

For the Mediterranean commander the challenge was huge. Vast distances were involved over which communications were slow at best and subject to the vagaries of

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weather and attack by the enemy or by privateers. Orders from London and St. Petersburg for example, could take months to arrive. An element of independence of command decision was essential. The shifting alliances of the great powers, declarations of war followed by peace treaties and sudden withdrawals of forces from the Mediterranean (Britain in 1796, Russia in 1799, 1801 and 1807) impacted strongly on the ability to exercise command. Intelligence of all sorts was vital, and Commanders such as Nelson paid great attention to intelligence collection despite all the difficulties. At sea, frigates and smaller ships formed the basis of intelligence gathering and these ships were in great demand and most always insufficient in the eyes of the Commander. On land, each nation had a network of representatives at the major trading and political centres and these formed the basis of an important intelligence collection capability (if tasked correctly).

Against this background the purpose of this paper is to examine the role played by one of the longest serving official of any country in the region throughout this period of change and conflict, Mr Spiridion Foresti, a native of the Islands and the British Consul and later Resident Minister to the Ionian Islands. Foresti's broad consular responsibilities will be studied, with an emphasis on intelligence, during the period 1793-1805 mainly through an analysis of his correspondence with the British Government and with the military commanders in the Mediterranean.

### **The Adriatic Basin and the Ionian Islands.**

The Adriatic Basin, as already introduced, was important for its trade and communication access to Venice and Trieste and for trade in currants and oil to the Ionian Islands of Corfu, Zante and Cephalonia. For centuries the Venetian Navy controlled the Sea in conjunction with local governors in each community, each in turn responsible to Venice. Zante was a major calling place as an important link in the trade from northern and western European nations to Smyrna, Alexandria, Constantinople.

However the decline of Venice as both a significant trading and naval power meant that its territories in the Adriatic were vulnerable, including both the Ionian Islands and the associated territories on the Albanian and Greek mainland. In the early years of the War a position of neutrality with respect to the warring powers was adopted by Venice and maintained fairly successfully despite pressure from "national" factions in each of the Ionian Islands.

Napoleon clearly saw their strategic importance and put to the Directory that "*.. the Islands of Corfu, Zante, Cephalonia are more important to us than all of Italy put together*".<sup>3</sup> As a result in 1797, the Islands were occupied by France under the articles of the Treaty of Campo Formio that followed the defeat of Venice. Napoleon saw the Islands not only as a source of trade and military supplies but as a stepping stone to Constantinople and to Egypt. The French maintained a small naval force in Corfu and were active in establishing relations with the various Pachas who were in control of the Turkish mainland, in particular the most powerful and aggressive Ali Pacha of Ioannina.

Subsequently the loss of the Islands to a combined Russian and Turkish Force under Russian Vice Admiral Uschakov in 1799 and the creation of an independent Republic

of the Seven Islands was clearly a severe blow to Napoleon. When the opportunity arose, he ensured their re-occupation by France in 1807 under secret provisions of the Treaty of Tilsit. France then remained in occupation of Corfu until the defeat of Napoleon in 1814. Britain maintained a naval blockade of Corfu during much of this second French occupation and in 1809-1810 successively occupied all the Islands but Corfu which was perceived as too well fortified. The Islands were passed to a British Administration under the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and eventually returned to the new nation of Greece in 1864.

### **Spiridion Foresti, British Consul and Resident, Ionian Islands.**

Spiridion Foresti (1752-1822), was a native of Zante, and was variously the British Consul and then later Resident Minister in the Ionian Islands during the full duration of the Napoleonic Wars. His positions and locations are summarised in the following table.

<b>Period</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Foreign Service Position</b>
1783-1789	Zante	Vice Consul
1789-July 1797	Zante	Consul
July 1797-August 1798	Corfu (as prisoner of France).	Intelligence agent.
August 1798-November 1798	Venice	Consul at large.
November 1798-March 1799	Bocche di Cattaro and at Sea with Russian Fleet off Corfu.	Consul at large
March 1799-September 1799	Zante	Consul
September 1799- August 1807	Corfu	Resident Minister
August 1807- September 1809	Malta	Minister at large
September 1809-March 1810	With British Force capturing the Ionian Islands.	Special Adviser to General Oswald
March 1810-1814	Zante	Resident Minister.

**Table 1.** Roles and locations of Spiridion Foresti, British Consul and Resident at the Ionian Islands, 1783 to 1814.

The role of Consul and Resident Minister required the holder to carry out a range of duties that varied in emphasis depending on the state of conflict and regional alliances. The functions Foresti was required to fulfil can be summarised as follows.

*Diplomatic:* the basic function of representing the interests of the British Government and its causes with the host government, conveyance of official correspondence between governments, presentation of proposals on behalf of British government, negotiation, formal representation. For Foresti this diplomatic role became particularly difficult in the dying days of Venetian power. French influence grew and was supported by the popularity of revolutionary ideas with the local citizens.

*Trade Support:* a primary focus in Foresti's early days at Zante, yet always of importance during the period of hostilities. Actions included appeals to local authorities for fair dealing for British shipping, monitoring of likely threats from

enemy naval elements or from privateers and corsairs, and providing related warning and avoidance advice, advice on the state of crops and commodity prices, petitioning the British Navy for allocation of ships to the Adriatic to suppress threats to trade and conduct convoy duties.

*Political Local and Regional:* exercising influence with local authorities to act in British interests, maintaining relations and influence with regional rulers especially Ali Pacha, paying subsidies to mainland chiefs to frustrate French projects.<sup>4</sup>

*Support to Citizens:* normal consular support to British visitors, traders and sailors visiting the Islands, support with matters of quarantine, support with legal issues. Foresti was noted for his hospitality to visiting dignitaries.<sup>5</sup>

*Support to the Armed Forces:* Foresti provided support in the form of intelligence and local knowledge to elements of British and allied armed forces operating in the Islands eg assistance with recruiting local brigades to supplement British Forces<sup>6</sup>, worked closely with British war ships deployed in the Adriatic for trade protection and other duties, acting as prize agent, defending military actions to the host government such as capture of prizes in disputed circumstances.

*Warfighting:* Foresti was most unusual for a diplomat and administrator in actually taking part in several military actions. He was on board the Russian Command Ship at the breaking of the siege of Corfu in 1799 and he was part of the British force which took possession of the southern Ionian Islands in 1809-1810, and was even wounded in the fight for St. Maura.<sup>7</sup>

*Intelligence:* Throughout the War Foresti was the centre of an active intelligence network in the Adriatic and beyond. He supplied a series of important intelligence updates to the British Government and to the successive Mediterranean Commanders. This aspect of his duties will be dealt with more fully in the next Sections.

### **The Intelligence Process.**

The importance of intelligence has been long understood by political and military leaders. The objective of “know your enemy”<sup>8</sup> has been pursued with increasingly complex and capable systems up to modern times. Intelligence encompasses a broad range of information: political, economic, geographical and environmental, health and military intelligence. Military intelligence includes understanding of the strategic intentions of the enemy; plans for operations; force levels and capabilities eg number of ships, their size and the number and calibre of their guns, training levels of crew; readiness for deployment and level of provisioning; quality and character of military commanders. Tactical or real-time intelligence covers matters such as the current dispositions of forces and directions of movement. In the age of sail real time intelligence collection was very limited, ranges of observation were small and physically the ability to disseminate the intelligence to the intended user was limited. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century modern commanders such as Napoleon, Nelson and Wellington were introducing an increasing focus and specialisation on systematic intelligence production. The existence of an established system of diplomatic positions in major foreign cities and their cooperation with the military was an

important component of this new capability. The intelligence cycle can be viewed as consisting of four stages as shown in Figure 1.

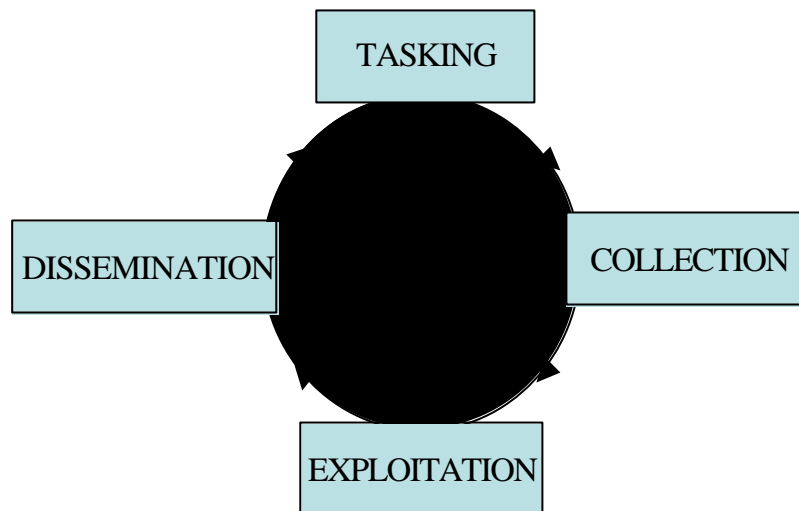


Fig.1. The Stages in the Intelligence Cycle.

The four stages in the Cycle are:

*Tasking*: the process by which the user of the intelligence sets out the intelligence requirements and allocates tasks to agents.

*Collection*: the nature of the collection process varies widely depending upon the nature of the intelligence required and the situation of the agent. Intelligent is gathered through direct observation or through a network of contacts.

*Exploitation*: a three step process of (a) assessing the quality of the intelligence ie its reliability and degree of corroboration by independent sources, (b) fusion of information from different sources, and (c) extraction of the meaning of the intelligence and its implications, this step is generally done locally by the agent who uses local expertise and by the end-user who can most likely add value by comparisons with other agent responses.

*Dissemination*: the process of sending the intelligence to the user requiring a record of the intelligence to be made perhaps using encryption and a channel for communication to the user(s). The ability to communicate quickly and securely is at the heart of intelligence, and was the major challenge to intelligence utilisation in the age of sail.

### **Foresti as Intelligence Agent.**

The importance of intelligence in the Mediterranean grew with the spread of the war in the early 1790s, and Foresti therefore found himself in an important geographical and political location. The Ionian Islands were themselves a hotly disputed possession of the great powers. They were ideally located to gather intelligence on both the Eastern and Adriatic Basins and well able to communicate this intelligence to the British Government and to the Mediterranean Commanders and other officials. Intelligence on enemy activity in the Islands themselves, on their political situation,

on activity in the Adriatic and on French occupied Italy and on the Turkey-in-Europe littoral was supplied, together with intelligence on the military and political situations in the eastern Mediterranean basin including Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria.

### ***Tasking.***

Foresti received only limited direction for intelligence collection from the British Foreign Secretary, guidance was provided more in the form of feedback advising approbation for the tasks being currently undertaken. In addition, a pro-active collection role was presumably assumed for all diplomatic positions. Particular directions were given from time to time. When on Corfu in 1799 under French arrest Foresti receives circumspect (due to the danger of interception) instructions from Foreign Secretary Grenville to continue in the provision of valuable intelligence of enemy shipping activity<sup>9</sup>. In Venice after his escape from Corfu, Foresti was instructed by Secretary Grenville to provide assistance and intelligence to Sir Sidney Smith:

*“My letter.... will have apprized you of my wish that you should afford to Sir Sydney Smith, who is appointed to a command in the Mediterranean; all the assistance and Information which your long residence and observation in that part of the world so eminently qualifies you to give. And which the objects that he may have to accomplish may require.”*<sup>10</sup>

During 1802-7 with the Ionian Islands under Russian control, Foresti is charged with working closely with the Russian Plenipotentiary Count Mocenigo and with actively engaging with him in the mainland in gathering intelligence and supporting rebels *“to frustrate the hostile projects of the French”*. Reflecting the value of his work to Britain, he is even authorised to expend up to ten thousand pounds in these endeavours<sup>11</sup>.

Foresti received the clearest directions of intelligence requirements from Nelson during his periods of command in a series of dispatches that will be examined further below.

### ***Collection.***

Foresti's intelligence collection network was built on the network he had established pre-war for trade and diplomatic purposes. He had regular correspondence with officials and personal friends on all of the Ionian Islands; on the mainland at Ioannina, Prevesa, Ragusa, Cattaro, Parga, Arta, and Patras; in Italy at Venice, Trieste, Ancona, Otranto, Naples, Leghorn, Palermo, and to the east at Salonica, Constantinople, Smyrna, Aleppo and Alexandria. He maintained regular correspondence with the officials and commercial agents at Vienna and in London and Bristol. These contacts, together with information obtained from Ship's captains, other officials and private travellers calling at Zante and Corfu, supplied a rich source of intelligence, which Foresti had become particularly skilled at gathering. From his long period as a commercial Consul he had many friends and business colleagues within the group of small traders who plied the Adriatic and he used these contacts for intelligence gathering and the transmission of dispatches. Foresti also effectively uses personal contacts within the occupying powers (even France) to gather intelligence on political issues and military strategies. As a Greek native, he had a long acquaintance with most of the local leaders and public officials as well. He and his father before

him had a strong personal relationship with successive Venetian Admirals in command of the Republic's Navy. So Foresti was able to use these contacts in the early days of the war, both to gather intelligence and to protect British shipping.

### ***Exploitation.***

Foresti is notably cautious in providing intelligence and makes sure the source or sources are clearly stated. He is well aware of the danger of rumours in an era of little solid information, rumours that may have been deliberately started by the enemy for their own purposes. If the intelligence is based on one source only he carefully signals his uncertainty and much prefers to provide intelligence based on at least two sources. Foresti mostly waited until dual source confirmation was available before forwarding his conclusions.

Foresti's local knowledge of people, politics, places, commerce, geography and weather make his exploitation of intelligence observations particularly valuable to London and the Mediterranean commanders. He is additionally an ex-merchant sailor himself so has an excellent working knowledge of ships and maritime matters which enables him to make accurate observations and draw valuable conclusions on shipping related matters.

### ***Dissemination.***

Passing collected intelligence to the prospective user was a major challenge in the age of sail. Foresti spent a large portion of his time as Consul on the transmission of dispatches, attempting to ensure their speedy and safe delivery. The routes used and expenses incurred would depend on the importance of the dispatch, the most important justifying the engagement of express boats to provide an individual service. Carriage by naval ships was the preferred option for security and quick passage, but these opportunities were infrequent and usually difficult to anticipate. Foresti also used merchant ships where he had personal knowledge of the reliability of the captain.

At times a King's Messenger was used, usually engaged by Constantinople or London and utilised by Foresti as he passed through Corfu. Surprisingly expresses or other forms of conveyance were shared by the various nations at Corfu, there apparently being little concern about the security of sealed dispatches (Foresti did not have access to cypher despite requests). Land routes were used through Ioannina to the east and through Trieste and Vienna and across Germany to London. All these routes required an initial first sea leg to the coast from Corfu or Zante, this in itself could often suffer long delays because of prevailing winds. At times Foresti employs a small galley to allow urgent dispatches to be delivered in adverse wind conditions. Land routes also had many dangers, Foresti advises of couriers to the east being killed by bandits, drowning in a river crossing and being intercepted by the French in crossing Italy.

The delays in getting intelligence to London were considerable. Foresti's dispatches to the Foreign Office were mostly annotated with the date of arrival (sometimes the hour) and thus they provide a means of estimating the transmission time, some uncertainty remaining because the dispatch may have not always been sent on the

date on which it was written, as is assumed here. The transmission times of his dispatches to London, measured in this way are shown in Figure 2.

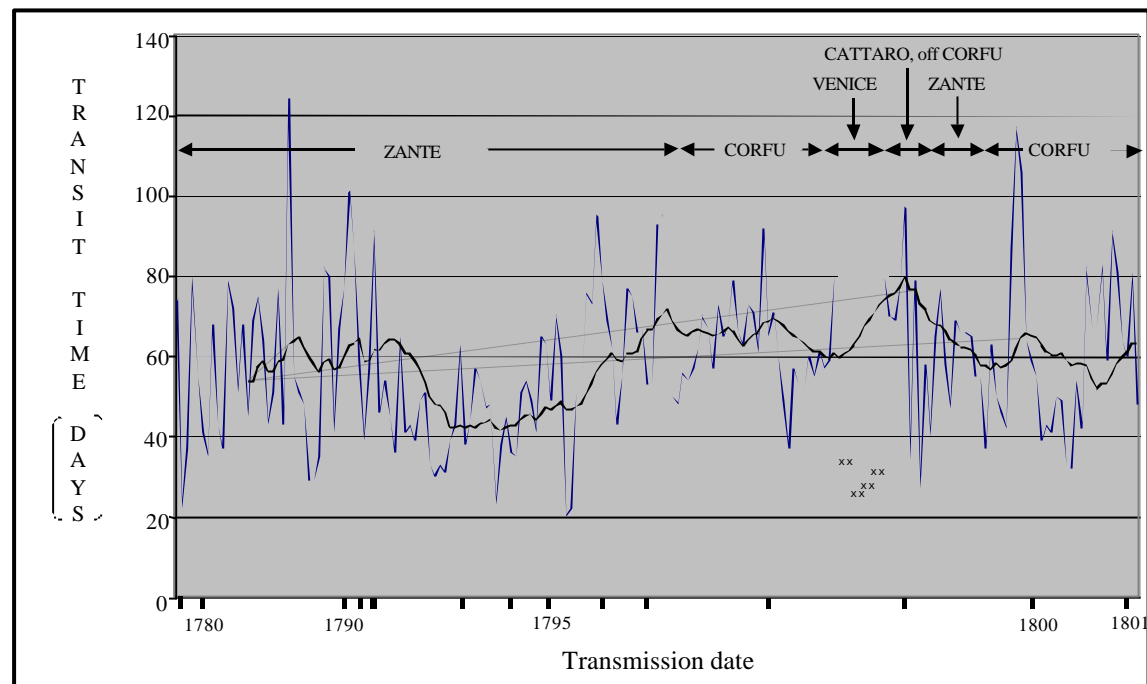


Fig. 2 Transmission times for Consular dispatches from the Ionian Islands to London, 1779-1801.

Long delays are clearly involved in reaching London, usually over 40 days and averaging approximately 60 days for the period 1779-1801. Delays during the period Foresti was in Venice are indicated by crosses in the Figure. These times are significantly lower, averaging about 26 days. They are not included in this average or in the running mean shown in the Figure. During the 1780's the times were widely variable, averaging about 60 days. Foresti became Consul at Zante in 1789 and the declining transmission times to near 40 days until 1793 suggest he worked hard at improving this aspect of his new role. A steady increase then is evident reaching an average of approximately 65 days by 1798, most likely caused by disruptions of the War. Times are then much more variable (26 to 120 days), averaging around 60 days. These figures lump together all paths used by Foresti and thus do not provide a clear differentiation on the causes of the delays above pure travel time at the speed possible for the period. Judging the value of intelligence gathered by the distant consuls to decision makers in London must take these delays into account.

Transit times for Foresti on Corfu and Zante to the Mediterranean Commanders would have been considerably shorter, for the dispatches could pick up normal frigate and other small boat voyages between fleet elements. It is difficult to make estimates of these times, Foresti reports on a transit time from Malta to Zante under the most favourable weather of two days, but this was most unusual.

A more detailed examination of Foresti's role with a focus on intelligence collection will now be presented, looking at two important periods in the War. Firstly the period following the fall of Venice and the occupation of the Ionian Islands by France, and



secondly, the two periods of Command by Nelson in the Mediterranean, one following the Battle of the Nile, and the second leading up to the battle of Trafalgar.

### **The Fall of Venice, Corfu and the Battle of the Nile (1797-98).**

Following the occupation of Venice by France in May 1797 troops were sent under command of General Gentili to occupy Corfu and soon after the other Ionian Islands. Foresti, then British Consul at Zante, was placed under arrest on 9 July 1797 and sent to Corfu where he was kept under open arrest but close observation. Of particular interest to the British command was the state of French forces, naval and military, in the Islands and the disposition of the ex-Venetian Fleet that had now fallen into French hands. A major question was if and when these ships would join the French Fleet assembling in Toulon for an expected major action, either inside or outside the Mediterranean. Admiral St Vincent, in Command of the Mediterranean Fleet was keeping Cadiz blockaded. There were no British naval forces inside the Mediterranean.

By 13 July 1797 Foresti, though under close French surveillance, was reporting the Fleet strengths to London and to the British Minister at Naples (Hamilton). On 31 July he reports a total force of 13 Ships of the Line, 5 Frigates, 1 Cutter and 5 Galleys, potentially a very significant force<sup>12</sup>. Of these, 6 Ships of the Line, and 1 Frigate were French, the balance ex-Venetian. Foresti assesses that these latter ships are in fact in very poor condition and that the French have major manning problems, both officers and mariners. These dispatches reach London in late September and would have been expected to reach Naples in late July or early August. Foresti kept track of the progress of these dispatches through his network of contacts. He also reports the collecting at Corfu and Venice of very large quantities of naval stores, wood, brass ordnance, ammunition and lead from galleys and the sending of these materials to Toulon<sup>13</sup>. During the following months he maintains a stream of intelligence to London and Naples covering the activities of the French Ships, the number in harbour at Corfu or on operations, the numbers of troops at Corfu, the worsening situation regarding availability of mariners for the French, and the capture of British commercial shipping.

At the Foreign Office, extracts of all Foresti's dispatches covering naval intelligence are provided to the Admiralty and would have contributed to the general expectation of some new French operation to be mounted from that Port. Foresti continues to provide advice that his best estimate is that the ships and supplies are bound for Toulon and that they are only awaiting orders from Paris to depart. Foresti re-iterates that the Venetian ships of the line are in very bad state of repair and are hardly seaworthy.

*The French Naval Commanders complain of the very erroneous estimates formed by General Bonaparte, with respect to the assistance to be derived to the French Navy by this junction of that of the Venetians. They clearly see that the Venetian Ships are actually unfit for service<sup>14</sup>.*

In January 1798 he provides intelligence that the French Commander at Corfu, Rear Admiral Brueys, is himself reluctant to return to France for he expected persecution

because of his noble background. An interesting observation concerning the man destined to become Napoleon's naval Commander on the expedition to Egypt.

On 25<sup>th</sup> February Foresti dispatches the very important intelligence that the whole French squadron has finally sailed for Toulon, including the ex-Venetian ships despite their bad state of repair and low manning levels. The ships are laden with the spoils from Venice and the Islands and in his opinion, are very vulnerable to attack<sup>15</sup>. This intelligence is sent to Venice, London and to Naples via Otranto. The dispatches reach London on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1798. There are however no British naval forces in the Mediterranean prior to Nelson's deployment in April 1798 so that the French ships are able to reach Toulon safely on the 2 April. St Vincent established a communication link with Hamilton at Naples and was kept regularly informed of intelligence gathered by Hamilton. Foresti's letters are passed on to Nelson in May by Hamilton since "...*Foresti being always good, I enclose [his letter] for your intelligence.*"<sup>16</sup>

Foresti's advice re the state of the Venetian ships was proved largely correct as only two are able to be repaired sufficiently for them to sail to Egypt with the French Fleet, departing from Toulon on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1798. Malta was taken by Napoleon on the 12<sup>th</sup> June, the news reaching Foresti on Corfu two days later by a French chebeque, whose Captain also indicated to Foresti that further stages of the expedition were planned. Foresti passed this intelligence on to Constantinople and Smyrna and also to Naples and London but it does not arrive there until 7<sup>th</sup> September 1798. Because of French suspicions of these dispatches and their desire to keep Napoleon's plans secret, Foresti is arrested by the French authorities on Corfu, imprisoned, and then exiled to Venice.

Foresti, interviewing ship captains arriving at Venice from Corfu learnt of the arrival there of a French 74 gun Ship of the Line with a British 44 gun Frigate as prize, "*both badly shattered*". He advised London of this on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1798 (received 6<sup>th</sup> October) and then on 28<sup>th</sup> September<sup>17</sup> confirmed their identity as the 'Leander', sent by Nelson with dispatches from Alexandria, and the French 'le Generaux' that had escaped the Battle under command of Admiral Villeneuve. He reported on the condition of the captains and crew. On the 24<sup>th</sup> October he notified London that the two captains, Thompson and Berry, have passed on to Trieste on their way home to London, bringing the earliest first-hand accounts of the victory of the Nile.

Lord Grenville praised Foresti's role in the collection, evaluation and dissemination of intelligence in letters in October 1797<sup>18</sup> and again in October 1798<sup>19</sup>. His early advice of the assembling of the naval forces at Corfu and of their likely destination as Toulon would have contributed to the growing awareness in London and with the British Commander St Vincent of an intended operation from that Port by France. His intelligence on the assemblage and dispatch of large quantities of naval stores and cannon collected from the Adriatic would have reinforced this view. His estimates of the bad state of the large Venetian Fleet would have enabled St Vincent and the Admiralty to better estimate the number of ships likely to be available to Admiral Brueys in any expedition to the east. And this awareness led to the re-call of Nelson to active duty on 16 March 1798 and for the orders generated for him to join St Vincent and to re-enter the Mediterranean with the mission of the destruction of the French Force assembling at Toulon.

## Foresti and Nelson.

The relationship between Admiral Lord Nelson as a Commander in the Mediterranean and Spiridion Foresti was quite a remarkable one given their widely different stations in life and the fact that they never met. The respect Foresti earned from Nelson was quite clearly based on the professionalism and energy that Foresti applied to his role as intelligence agent for Nelson. Nelson attested that Foresti was one of only two Consuls:

*"...I have found who really and truly do their duty, and merit every encouragement and protection".<sup>20</sup>*

Nelson encouraged Foresti in 1799, recovering from his time as a prisoner of the French:

*"Give me leave to say, that throughout my command in the Levant seas, you have done yourself the highest honour, and rendered, as far as was possible, the greatest service to your Country. This public testimony, from a stranger to everything except your good conduct, will, I trust, be not unacceptable".<sup>21</sup>*

Nelson recommended Foresti's service to Lord Elgin at Constantinople<sup>22</sup>, to Foreign Secretary Hawkesbury<sup>23</sup> and to Admiral Lord Keith.<sup>24</sup>

Their direct correspondence begins in 1798 soon after Nelson returns to Naples from the Battle of the Nile and continues until Nelson leaves the Mediterranean in 1800. Correspondence resumes again in 1803 when Nelson is appointed commander in Chief in the Mediterranean and continues until his death at Trafalgar. Approximately 31 dispatches have been found in various archives from Nelson to Foresti and approximately 52 from Foresti to Nelson. A number of further Foresti dispatches have been lost due to missing Consular letter-books and the loss of records during his period of captivity on Corfu, July 1797 to August 1798. Foresti's major correspondence throughout the war period was that to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to whom he wrote regularly, on average about fortnightly. Many of these letters were copied to Nelson or were sent to London through Nelson using a flying seal which allowed Nelson to peruse them before forwarding. Hence the intelligence provided to the Mediterranean Commanders by Foresti can be tracked indirectly.

### *Aftermath of the Nile: 1798-1800.*

The major focus for Nelson during this period was the defence of the Neapolitan Kingdom, to ensure the security of Sicily for Britain and to complete the siege of Malta. In addition, activity in the Italian Peninsula and the Adriatic was considered desirable as it provided encouragement to Austria to resume hostilities. Nelson also had to consider the French Expedition still at Alexandria where Napoleon remained until August 1799.

Nelson indicated he wished to take an interest in freeing the Ionian Islands<sup>25</sup> but in 1798 a combined Russian and Turkish Fleet under Admiral Uschakov freed the minor Islands and in March 1799 Corfu was freed after a significant siege. Nelson now saw the Russian presence as a bulwark against further French aggression in Turkey and Greece and he attempted to also get their support either in Egypt or in Naples.

During this period Foresti on Zante and Corfu performed a number of roles in support of Nelson. Throughout this period he provided a series of intelligence updates on:

- the strength of the Russian naval and military forces in the Adriatic and their disposition;
- Russian strategic thinking and an interpretations of likely outcomes;
- personality profiles of the Russian military and political leaders in the Adriatic;
- the situation in the Ionian Islands and of the Russian plans for a new constitution and of the Islander's views;
- tensions between the Russian and Turkish commanders on Corfu;
- the progress of Sir Sidney Smith in Egypt and Syria;
- ship movements, naval and commercial;
- the situation on the Albanian mainland, particularly with Ali Pacha;
- more general events around the eastern Mediterranean.

Foresti had a major role in ensuring the transmission of important dispatches between Nelson and the British Minister at Constantinople. Attendance to this task was an ongoing demand though the amount of effort and expense varied with the importance of the dispatches. In a case of an important secret dispatch from Constantinople to Nelson (March 1800) brought by special courier, Foresti hires a boat to take the courier to Otranto, provides an experienced pilot, provides passports and letters to the Health Office at Otranto in an attempt to minimise quarantine delays, provides letters of introduction to various officials and instructions on actions to follow at Naples in attempting to locate Nelson<sup>26</sup>. He also instructs the courier on steps to maintain security during processes in the postal system if letters have to be quarantined: letters must only be slit (not opened) for fumigation and must never leave the couriers direct sight.

Foresti had been given special responsibility to support Sir Sidney Smith during his operations in the Mediterranean and he provided Nelson with intelligence on Smith's progress with operations in the Levant. Foresti had also been given the task of assisting the British General Villette who was posted to Corfu for the purpose of raising two regiments of Albanians to serve with the British forces in Sicily. Foresti used his network on contacts on the mainland and with the local Pachas to support the project. This proved to be a long and difficult task and it lost its popularity with the British command and was finally abandoned. Foresti kept Nelson informed of progress on this project.

Foresti was able to establish good relations with some of the Russian and Turkish commanders and their staffs and used these contacts to provide Nelson with insider views on decision making in the combined command. For example he is able to provide the explanation of why the Turkish Ships suddenly left Palermo in September 1799 and returned to Corfu and then on to Constantinople. There had apparently been a major difference of opinion between the Turkish Commander and his Second-in-Command and a revolt by the sailors against any further deployments. At Corfu thousands of these sailors, apparently with the permission of the commanders, left the service and proceeded to the mainland and Ali Pacha,<sup>27</sup> thus weakening substantially the support to Nelson's operations in Sicily.

### *Prelude to Trafalgar: 1803-1805.*

Nelson was made the Commander in Chief in the Mediterranean in May 1803 and being acutely aware of his need for intelligence, he soon set about establishing a network of agents and communication links. One of his many concerns was to ensure British interests were maintained at the Porte and that a strengthening French influence was countered. He set up a communication channel with the British Minister at Constantinople

*"I think we can establish a mode of communication through Mr Spiridion Foresti, it would be the quickest way, unless any event of great importance would call for a ship being sent direct to Constantinople. The time an express by land will take from Corfu to Constantinople will be desirable for me to know"*<sup>28</sup>.

Foresti used two major over-land routes to send dispatches to Constantinople, one through Ioannina which typically took about 12 days, and one through Patrass, which was more secure but slower. Again Foresti made a significant contribution through the processing of these dispatches, also those through Trieste and Vienna.

Nelson provides clear tasking of what he expects from Foresti in terms of intelligence collection

*"...and you will, of course, let me know the situation of that infant Republic, whether you think that it will be able to maintain its independence, and whether the generality of the people are attached to it; and whether, in your opinion, they wish for a change or dissolution of the present Government; and whether the whole, or any party, would wish to give themselves up to France; and that if that they wish to remain where they are, would they take up arms to defend themselves against the French? Your accurate knowledge of those Islands, and the character of every individual on them, will enable you to give me such answers as will assist me to regulate my conduct"*<sup>29</sup>.

In response Foresti provides Nelson with detailed reports on the situation in the Ionian Islands, now in the process of becoming the 'independent' Septinsular Republic, and of the growing dominance of the Russians<sup>30</sup>. In his view the Islanders will always depend on a foreign power and will be unable to provide a suitable governance structure on their own. The people have been too long abandoned to cruel anarchy, and suffer from strong and bitter divisions based on political differences and class divisions. It is only the strong presence of Russian troops that is holding society together, besides the Islanders have insufficient revenues to allow the development of a defensive force of their own. The current position is that of entire dependence on Russia.

Foresti provided regular updates on the strength of the Russian Forces in the new Republic. In August 1805 for example, he advised that there are two 74 and two 64 gun Ships of War, 5 Frigates of 44 guns and a number of smaller ships. It is interesting to note the listed nationality of the Captains of the 9 larger ships, 4 are Russian, 3 are English (including the senior officer) and 2 are Greek.

Trade had always been fundamental to Foresti's thinking and during this period he was required to be very active as British shipping was frequently threatened by privateers and corsairs operating under a variety of flags, often sponsored by the French. Foresti kept Nelson informed of these activities and made a strong case for the deployment of British naval assets in the Adriatic and for the provision of a

convoy system. Nelson responded early and sends a small force to the Adriatic under Captain Cracraft<sup>31</sup>. Foresti worked closely with this Commander providing local knowledge and intelligence of threats and other support. Convoys were organised to protect local trade and more importantly trade between Zante and Smyrna and Trieste. The operation was very successful with a number of prizes taken and British trade able to proceed safely. In the early part of 1804 there was great concern in the British Government at the possibility of a French landing in the Adriatic, either at Corfu or on the mainland. Foresti and Cracraft worked together on keeping a watch on the likely ports of embarkation and advising Nelson of their findings.

Naval stores were always in short supply and in September 1803 the British government ordered Nelson to examine the possibility of sourcing stores and in particular timber from the Albanian and Greek mainland. The possibility of “..opening to His Majesty’s Ships the Port of Panormo in the Adriatic, and facilitating the purchase of Naval Stores..”<sup>32</sup> had been raised by Ali Pacha in conversation with Hamilton, the Private Secretary to Lord Elgin, Minister at Constantinople. Foresti was tasked by Nelson to investigate what Ali Pacha might have to offer in terms of trade privileges, timber for shipbuilding and growing of hemp<sup>33</sup>. Cracraft is also tasked with exploring the potential for port facilities and for his observations on resource availability. The matter was most sensitive both in regard to the Russian and the Ottoman Governments and Nelson wrote to Ali Pacha through Foresti in cypher on the matter. The reports of Foresti and Cracraft are sent under cover to Lord Hobart at the War Office by Nelson<sup>34</sup> in March 1804. Foresti’s report is much more positive than Cracraft’s and identifies a series of potential ports providing good anchorages and access to timber.<sup>35</sup> This intelligence was not immediately acted upon but laid the basis for an alternative source of naval stores in the Adriatic in the following years of the War.<sup>36</sup>

Foresti’s close working and personal relationship with Nelson continues intermittently up to the time of Trafalgar. The last letter to Nelson in the Consular Letterbook is dated the 24 November 1805, a month after Nelson’s death at Trafalgar, a sad indication of the delays in the transmission of news across the Mediterranean.

## **Conclusion.**

In this paper the role of Spiridion Foresti, the British Consul at the Ionian Islands has been examined with a particular focus on his role in the provision of intelligence to the British Government and to the Mediterranean Commanders during the period 1793-1805. The unique position of the Ionian Islands at the entrance to the Adriatic basin and as a key node for shipping movement between Western Europe and the Levant has been highlighted as leading to its important position in intelligence collection for Britain. Spiridion Foresti was unusual, if not unique, in being a native of the country to which he was the British Consul. This situation gave him particular strengths in intelligence exploitation that were highly valued. His contribution to Britain in intelligence provision in a critical period for both Britain and for the Ionian islands has been outlined. Foresti’s contributions highlighted for Britain the value of possession of Corfu not only as a fortress and a naval base but also as “an observatory over the whole of European Turkey.”<sup>37</sup> These arguments were used in support of the invasion of the Islands by British Forces in 1809 and which led indirectly to the British Mandate following the Congress of Vienna.

The value of intelligence supplied by Foresti to Britain is further attested to by the fact that his claims for compensation with the British Government for substantial financial losses resulting from enemy actions were supported by written testimony from four previous Naval Commanders, Jervis, Keith, Nelson and Collingwood.

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BL = British Library; NA = National Archives, London; CRO = Cornwall Records Office; *Dispatches* = Nicolas *"Dispatches and Letters of Lord Nelson"*, Chatham, London, 1998.

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- <sup>2</sup> Nelson to Foresti, 14 June, 1804, BL, Add MSS 34956, .
- <sup>3</sup> Bonaparte to the Directory, 16 August, 1797, quoted in *"Nelson and the Eastern Mediterranean"*, J. Knight, *The Mariner's Mirror*, 91 (2), May 2005, 195-215.
- <sup>4</sup> Hawkesbury to Foresti, 1 February 1804, NA, FO 42 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Taylor, J., *"Travels from England to India"*, Low, London, 1799, pp 110-115.
- <sup>6</sup> Grenville to Foresti, 26 April, 1799, NA FO 42 3, pp .
- <sup>7</sup> Wrigley W. D., *"The Diplomatic Significance of Ionian Neutrality, 1821-31"*, Lang New York 1988.
- <sup>8</sup> Sun Tzu, *"The Art of War"*, 6C BC.
- <sup>9</sup> Grenville to Foresti, 17 October, 1797, NA FO 42 2, p. 260.
- <sup>10</sup> Grenville to Foresti, 29 October, 1798, FO 42 3 pp. 101-2..
- <sup>11</sup> Hawkesbury to Foresti, 1 February 1804, NA FO 42 5, p.128.
- <sup>12</sup> Foresti to Grenville, 31 July, 1797, NA FO 42 2, pp. 221-4.
- <sup>13</sup> Foresti to Grenville, 5 August, 1797, NA FO 42 2, pp. 225-35.
- <sup>14</sup> Foresti to Grenville, 5 August, 1797, NA FO 42 2, pp. 225-35.
- <sup>15</sup> Foresti to Grenville, 25 February, 1798, NA FO 42 3, pp 21-22.
- <sup>16</sup> Footnote by Hamilton to Nelson, on Foresti to Henry Smith (Naples), 28 May, 1798, BL Add MSS 37077, p. 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Foresti to Grenville, 28 September, 1797, NA FO 42 2, pp. 89-90.
- <sup>18</sup> Grenville to Foresti, 17 October, 1797, NA FO 42 2 p. 260.
- <sup>19</sup> Grenville to Foresti, 3 October, 1798, NA FO 42 3, pp. 91-95.
- <sup>20</sup> Nelson to Nepean (Admiralty), 28 November, 1799, *"Dispatches"*, Vol. 4, p.114-5.
- <sup>21</sup> Nelson to Foresti, 26 March 1799, *"Dispatches"*, Vol. 5, 1998, p.308-9.
- <sup>22</sup> Nelson to Elgin, 29 October, 1799, *"Dispatches"*, Vol. 4, p.75-6.
- <sup>23</sup> Nelson to Foresti, 16 June, 1803, CRO J3/35/36.
- <sup>24</sup> Nelson to Foresti, 28 March 1800, CRO J3/35/36.
- <sup>25</sup> Nelson to Spencer, 9 October, 1798, *"Dispatches"*, Vol 3, pp.146-7.
- <sup>26</sup> Foresti to Nelson, 23 March, 1800, NA FO 348 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Foresti to Nelson, 2 October, 1799. NA FO 348 2.
- <sup>28</sup> Nelson to Drummond, About 11 June, 1803, *"Dispatches"* Vol 5, pp. 86-7.
- <sup>29</sup> Nelson to Foresti, 16 June, 1803, *"Dispatches"*, Vol 5, pp88-9.
- <sup>30</sup> Foresti to Nelson, 2 July, 1803, NA FO 42 5, pp 44-8.
- <sup>31</sup> Nelson to Cracraft, 16 June, 1803, *"Dispatches"*, Vol 5, p 89.
- <sup>32</sup> British Government to Nelson, 23 September, 1803, NA CO 173 1.
- <sup>33</sup> Nelson to Foresti, 25 November, 1803, *"Dispatches"*, Vol 5, p 296.
- <sup>34</sup> Nelson to Hobart, 17 March, 1804, NA ADM 1 407, pp 136-137.
- <sup>35</sup> Foresti to Nelson, 31 January, 1804, NA ADM 1 407, pp 142-146.
- <sup>36</sup> Knight, J., *"Nelson and the Eastern Mediterranean"*, *The Mariner's Mirror*, 91 (2), May 2005, 210.
- <sup>37</sup> Myer to Canning, 12 December, 1807, NA FO 42 9 p.257.