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Abbe Francois Gaultier: secret envoy

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The Abbe Gaultier was an agent or spy for the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Marquis de Torcy. Through much of the War of the Spanish Succession he lived in England and communicated with Torcy in coded letters. He assumed several roles in the settlement of Utrecht. His most prominent role was to provide a channel of communication which allowed the Earl of Oxford and the Duke of Shrewsbury, leaders in the new Tory ministry of 1710, to negotiate secretly with Torcy and to avoid the scrutiny of the Dutch, the Austrians, and members of their own cabinet. During the negotiations at Utrecht he served the French Plenipotentiaries and acted as a courier for Torcy. He corresponded on behalf of Oxford and Viscount Bolingbroke with the Stuart Pretender in France.

François Gaultier came to London in 1698 as chaplain to the Marechal de Tallard, the French Ambassador to London. When Tallard returned to Paris, Gaultier remained in order to collect information for Torcy. For a short period he was in the service of Count Gallas, and then he attached himself to the Earl of Jersey whose wife was a Catholic. When Torcy heard that the Godolphin ministry might fall, he wrote to Gaultier in July 1710 instructing him to contact the new favorites, Shrewsbury and Mrs. Masham, to find their sentiments for a negotiated peace. Only a few weeks passed before the Earl of Jersey asked Gaultier to enquire as to whether he could negotiate for Torcy. While Jersey was not a member of the new ministry, he was in contact with Shrewsbury and Oxford. Between the fall of 1710 and April of 1711 Jersey made known to Gaultier the conditions under which England might agree to a peace between France and the Allies. These secret negotiations have become known as the "Jersey" period on the negotiations of the Peace of Utrecht. Oxford and Shrewsbury stayed in the background, no doubt concerned that any direct contact with Torcy would be construed by the Dutch and Austrians as a betrayal of the alliance. Bolingbroke and the rest of the Tory Cabinet were unaware that negotiations were in process. The conditions set forth by Jersey were in fact a betrayal of the Allies and an attempt to benefit English commerce. Queen Anne and the Tory ministry, however, very much wanted an end to the war and realized that the demands put forth by the Allies in 1709 could never be accepted by France.

As the war in Spain seesawed back and forth during the fall of 1710, the Tories hesitated to make any concrete proposals to Torcy via Gaultier. At one point Torcy offered to send someone of a higher level to negotiate, but the English insisted on mediation through Gaultier. Once it became apparent, however, that Philip would be victorious, Gaultier wrote to Torcy in December 1710 that the English would not insist on restoring the House of Austria to the Spanish throne if English commercial interests could be secured. Jersey had also communicated to Gaultier that the new Tory ministry would welcome a Jacobite restoration. A Jacobite restoration reflected Jersey's personal hopes more than it did the sentiment of the Tories, who were divided between Jacobites and Hanovarians. For Gaultier, however, the possibility of seeing the Pretender on the throne as James III was as important as the peace itself. With James on the English throne, France could look to England as an ally in its future dealings with the continent. Gaultier therefore proposed to Torcy that Jersey be pensioned.

Gaultier came to France in January of 1711 without any written proposals from the Tories, but with verbal instructions to tell Torcy to make an offer to the Dutch for a conference. Should a conference ensue, England was prepared to support Philip's claim to the Spanish throne and work out other difficulties which might prevent a general peace. If the Dutch and Austrians proved obstinate in negotiations, England would be forced to sign a separate peace with France. Torcy sent Gaultier back to London requesting that France treat directly with the Tory ministry rather than with the Dutch. Oxford and Shrewsbury rejected this idea but proposed through Gaultier that the French send conditions for a conference to them, and England would forward them to the Dutch. At this point the Tory ministry was still very concerned to bring along the Dutch in any peace effort.

Torcy's first proposal to Oxford and Shrewsbury was rejected for not being sufficiently specific. It was also rejected for not being as favorable as the French offers made in 1710. At this point Gaultier was once again sent to France. In March 1711 Gaultier arrived at Versailles with a list of terms which Oxford and Shrewsbury wished for Torcy to put in the proposal for a conference. Along with these terms they communicated to Torcy through Gaultier that the English would work to keep Philip on the Spanish throne and to revise the Barrier Treaty of 1709 to reduce the number of towns held by the Dutch. In April 1711 Torcy sent Oxford a proposal of terms for negotiations which were basically the terms communicated by Gaultier in March. Torcy's terms were shown to Bolingbroke and the Tory cabinet on April 26, 1711 and were then forwarded to Heinsius, the Grand Pensionary.

The remainder of the preliminary negotiations were done by Matthew Prior and Nicolas Mesnager. The result was an agreement to hold a Congress in Utrecht to begin in January 1712. At Utrecht Gaultier was appointed to the position of secretary of the French Embassy. The three Plenipotentiaries, the Marechal d'Huxelles, the Abbe Polignac, and Nicolas Mesnager, had requested Gaultier's presence in Utrecht. He would be useful not only for his knowledge of the early negotiations, but he was to be the channel by which the Embassy could deal secretly with the English. When the Congress came to a standstill due to the death of the son and grandson of Louis XIV, Gaultier was used by Torcy as a confidential courier between Paris and Madrid to work out a separation of the two crowns.

A second motif in the negotiations for peace was the desire of certain Tories and Louis XIV to restore James to the English throne after Anne's death. In his conversation with Gaultier in 1710 the Earl of Jersey had no doubt overstated the commitment of the Tory ministry to a Jacobite restoration. The Tories had passed the Act of Settlement in 1701, and there was no majority in either house to restore James unless he embraced the Anglican Church. Be that as it may, Bolingbroke was opposed to the Hanovarian succession and very much hoped for James's conversion. Oxford vacillated over the Jacobite issue. Gaultier was well aware of the political situation in London when he wrote to Torcy on December 14, 1713. He told Torcy that Anne must live or the Stuart cause would be lost and that Oxford wished that James were as lax on his religious views as had been Charles II.

Despite the terms of the Peace of Utrecht which forbade France from supporting the Stuart Pretender, Gaultier at the behest of Oxford and Bolingbroke wrote to James in February 1714. He urged James to seek God's guidance in deciding which communion he should choose, and he assured James that he could never assume the English throne unless he changed to the Anglican Communion. James was appalled that a Catholic Abbe would ask him to dissimulate his religious beliefs and wrote a letter of complaint to Cardinal

Gaulterio about Gaultier's conduct. Torcy even commented that Gaultier deserved to be the Archbishop of Canterbury for his Anglican zeal.

Gaultier proved himself a worthy agent to Torcy as he guided the secret and delicate preliminary negotiations between the English and French. His attempts on behalf of the Stuart succession after Anne's death were doomed to failure by the personality of James himself. For a continued peace in England this was certainly all for the better. Gaultier saw his own actions in the peace in somewhat grander terms than they deserved. He approached the Pope requesting a Cardinal's hat for his contributions. A hat he did not get, but Louis XIV made him the Abbe of Olivet and of Savigny.

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