CHAPTER 16

A Disappointed Diplomat (1640–45)

Politics and Protocol

Unappreciated as an irenist, famous among scholars, exiled from his homeland, and sidelined in diplomacy: that is a summary of the final years of Grotius’ life. To understand the context in which the ambassador operated, we now turn to the political situation. The country he served, Sweden, had three objectives in its German policy: payment in wages and grants of land for its officers and soldiers (‘contentement’); compensation for its war costs in money and land (‘satisfactie’); and expansion of its sphere of influence in the north as the basis of Swedish mastery of the Baltic (‘assecuratie’). The first two objectives served the third. They were largely achieved at the peace congress of Münster-Osnabrück in 1648. The position of the Estates of the Empire in international law was recognized, and imperial power was substantially reduced. Sweden also received certain territories in northern Germany as imperial fiefs: West Pomerania, Wismar, Bremen and Verden. The ‘liberty of the Estates of the Empire’, which was tantamount to sovereignty, was confirmed, and Sweden knew how to profit from this.

It is an obvious question, how it could come about that after being reconciled with most of the imperial Estates on the basis of the Peace of Prague in 1635, the imperialists nevertheless were so weakened that the Peace of Westphalia in fact amounted to a defeat for them. The most important reason was undoubtedly the close alliance between Sweden and France. In spite of mutual distrust, the alliance was lasting and effective. Imperial proposals for a separate peace were ignored, and Sweden refused to be tempted by the promise of Pomerania. The allies also shrewdly exploited the centrifugal tendencies in the Empire. They encouraged the particularism of the Estates and their struggle to achieve sovereignty, in order to thwart the Emperor. The allies’ position at the negotiating table was also strengthened by military successes. After the death of Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar, the conqueror of Breisach on the upper Rhine, other generals took up his baton. Johan Gustavsson Banér invaded Brandenburg, defeated the Saxons at Chemnitz (14 April 1639) and reached the outskirts of Prague. France was less successful on the battlefield but captured Arras in August 1640, scored successes in Italy and also pressed forward into Germany (Thuringia). In January 1641 Banér bombarded Regensburg, where the Reichstag was assembled under the chairmanship of the Emperor. Banér
collaborated with Jean-Baptiste de Budes, Marshal Guébriant, who now commanded Bernhard’s armies. Although Banér died suddenly on 20 May 1641, the Franco-Swedish armies defeated the imperialists at Wolfenbüttel on 29 June 1641. Grotius’ youngest son Dirck fought in this battle under Guébriant as commander of a company of infantry.\(^1\) Mutinies then brought the allies to a stand, but once Banér’s successor Lennart Torstensson had restored order, he inflicted two heavy defeats on the imperial forces at Schweidnitz on 30 May 1642 and at Breitenfeld on 2 November 1642. France too had the wind in its sails in the Rhineland, while its other Habsburg enemy, Spain, was hamstrung by revolts in Portugal and Catalonia. Finally, the imperialists were further weakened by the growing yearning for peace in the German states. The war was becoming intolerable and had brought Germany to the brink of collapse, but the imperialists were slow to react. They did not make concessions until it was too late and greater concessions were required; and these too were refused until it was again too late, and so on. The imperial Estates took an increasingly independent line and sought to force the Emperor to make peace. Naturally, they were spurred on by France and Sweden, with the result that the Peace of Prague was no longer accepted as the basis for a peace settlement.

All these developments are discussed at length in the heavily annotated published texts of Grotius’ diplomatic despatches. It is not possible to go into great detail on his activities here. His diplomatic correspondence would justify a separate study, which would need to draw on material from such still incompletely published sources as *Rikskansleren Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter*.\(^2\) Undoubtedly they could also be supplemented by material from the French despatches in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry in Paris. Only such an approach could give a balanced evaluation, but a cautious survey will not be out of place here.

In the first place, it is important that Grotius never expressly disagreed with Sweden’s war policy, either in his despatches or his private letters. He subscribed to Sweden’s demand for guarantees in the form of the annexation of territory in Pomerania.\(^3\) The second important point is that he saw Swedish policy in the context of a justified struggle for political autonomy and freedom of religion for the German Protestants. As their ally, Sweden was fighting a just war on German soil, which was a heavy burden on the home country; it was regrettable that the Protestant magnates of the Empire did not recognize this

\(^1\) *BW* XII, p. xii.

\(^2\) *Rikskansleren Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter och brefveabling*, Afd. 1–11, Stockholm 1888–.

\(^3\) See *BW* VIII, no. 3044 (p. 245), to A. Oxenstierna, 24 April 1637; *BW* IX, no. 3566 (p. 268), to A. Oxenstierna, 7 May 1638; cf. *BW* IX, p. 793, instruction for ambassador Grotius, no. 111, 9.