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# "We Are from the North": Livonica in the Vatican Archives and the Special Case of Aleksander Kurtna[1]

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**Abstract**. This paper examines the historical development of research concerning medieval and early modern Livonica within the Vatican Archives from the nineteenth century to the present. This survey is inextricably linked to the singular case of Aleksander Kurtna, one of the most brilliant Estonian intellectuals of the twentieth century. While Kurtna spent years conducting high-level research in the Vatican, he was simultaneously one of the most prominent intelligence agents in the Eternal City, blending archival scholarship with clandestine espionage.

**Keywords**: medieval Livonia, medieval history, Vatican Archives, Baltic historiography, espionage

This article focuses on two distinct yet closely intertwined themes that hold considerable significance for the cultural history of the Baltic States. First, it offers an overview of the state of research on medieval and early modern Livonian sources preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Archive (formerly the Vatican Secret Archive). Second, it demonstrates that this enquiry is inseparable from the figure of Aleksander Kurtna,

1 "We are from the North", the coded opening of a message sent by Soviet secret services to their agents in Rome (see below), has already been used as a chapter title in D. Alvarez and R. A. Graham. Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage Against the Vatican, 1939–1945. Frank Cass, London, 1997, 114–139.

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who spent more time working in the Vatican Archive than any other Baltic scholar. Kurtna's case is exceptional: his intricate biographical circumstances deeply shaped his archival endeavours, meaning that his scholarly contribution can only be fully assessed through a reconstruction of his life. Moreover, existing historical and popular literature lacks a sufficiently thorough and rigorous biographical account.

Accordingly, this study adopts a dual methodology, complementing a historiographical review with a biographical analysis. The latter – unfolding as a true Second World War espionage narrative grounded in contemporary historical methodology – allows for multiple interpretations and leaves several questions unresolved. While the article may consequently seem dual-natured or even fragmented, both thematic strands ultimately converge on a single issue: the persona of the historian within the archive who can never disentangle private existence from professional life.

## INTRODUCTION: FROM TURGENEV TO KARTTUNEN

Established in its modern form in 1612 by Pope Paul V and further organised under Urban VIII, the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano houses over 600 archival fonds across 85 kilometres of shelving, containing millions of documents.[2] The Vatican Archives serve as one of the primary repositories for the history of medieval Livonia – encompassing present-day Estonia and Latvia – from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. While a significant body of these documents is already known to Estonian and Latvian scholars, they represent only a fraction of the relevant material preserved in the archives.

Investigating this field is a formidable task, primarily due to the vast scale of the Vatican's holdings. A further challenge stems from the fragmented nature of Estonian and Latvian archival research in the Vatican, which remains marked by significant gaps and methodological shortcomings.[3]

2 See L. E. Boyle, O. P. A Survey of the Vatican Archives and of Its Medieval Holdings. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 1972 (revised edition Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 2001); F. X. Blouin Jr. Vatican Archives: An Inventory and Guide to Historical Documents of the Holy See. Oxford University Press, New York, 1998. These works provide the essential foundational framework for any researcher approaching the central archives of the Holy See.

3 See K. Toomaspoeg. Ühest Brugge kirstust, Riia peapiiskoppidest Avignonis ja arhiiviuuringutest Vatikanis. – Vana Tallinn, 2017, 28 (32), 202–224. This article discusses several of the methodological issues and specific archival challenges addressed in the present study.

Systematic archival research in the Vatican is generally traced back to 1881, when Pope Leo XIII opened the archives – then known as the Archivio Segreto Vaticano – to all qualified researchers.[4] This pivotal event coincided with the establishment of several foreign historical research institutes in Rome, including the Austrian Historical Institute in 1881 and the Prussian Historical Institute in 1888.[5] Prior to this opening, official access was not standard practice, though it remained possible under exceptional circumstances.

Regarding Livonia, two scholars gained access to these collections prior to 1881: Alexander Turgenev in the 1840s for his *Historiae Russiae Monumenta*, a work of remarkable quality for its time[6], and Augustin Theiner for his *Vetera Monumenta Poloniae et Lithuaniae* in the 1860s.[7] Turgenev's research in the Vatican covered the entire territory of the then-Russian Empire, with a particular focus on Livonia. His success was facilitated by his status as a prominent Russian aristocrat with close ties to the Holy See, as well as by his personal reputation for erudition. Theiner, a native of Breslau (Wrocław), conducted his research from a position of authority, having served as Prefect of the Vatican Archives since 1855.

Hermann Hildebrand, the city archivist of Riga, was the first Baltic historian to enter the Vatican Archives following the granting of free access in 1881; he conducted his research there from October 1885 to April 1886. His publications – *Livonica, vornämlich aus dem 13. Jahrhundert, im Vatikanischen Archiv*, as well as volumes 7, 8, and 9 of the *Liv-, Est- und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch* (LEKUB)[8] – contain several sources from the Vatican. Furthermore, he was the first Livonian scholar to consult not only the papal registers but also other fonds, such as the *Dataria* – a collection that remains relatively obscure even today.[9] As Hildebrand noted, despite being warmly welcomed, researchers still faced significant practical hurdles, such as limited opening hours and the absence of archival inventories; consequently, scholars could

4 See, for example, K. J. Walsh. The Opening of the Vatican Archives (1880–1881) and Irish Historical Research. – Archivium Hibernicum, 1981, 35, 34–43.

5 Das Deutsche Historische Institut in Rom. 1888–1988. Bearb. von R. Elze, A. Esch. Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1990.

6 A. Turgenew. Historiae Russiae Monumenta. Eduard Pratz, St. Petersburg, 1841–1848 (reprint Herculaneum Press, West Vancouver, 1973).

7 A. Theiner. Vetera Monumenta Poloniae et Lithuaniae 1–4. Typis Vaticanis, Roma, 1860–1864 (reprint Zeller, Osnabrück, 1969).

8 H. Hildebrand. Livonica, vornämlich aus dem 13. Jahrhundert, im Vatikanischen Archiv. Deubner, Riga, 1887; Liv-, Est- und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch (LEKUB). Bd. 7. 1423 Mai–1429 Mai. Bearb. von H. Hildebrand. Deubner, Riga, Moskau, 1881; LEKUB, Bd. 8, 1429 Mai–1435. Bearb. von H. Hildebrand. Deubner, Riga, Moskau, 1884; LEKUB, Bd. 9, 1436–1443. Bearb. von H. Hildebrand. Deubner, Riga, Moskau, 1889.

9 H. Hildebrand. Livonica, 9, see an example in ibid., 70, no. 53.

only request items they had already identified through references in existing literature.[10] Although his objective was to systematically record and publish a comprehensive collection of available sources, his work remained a selection of documents, proving more exhaustive for the fifteenth century than for earlier periods.

Research on Livonica in the Vatican has frequently been integrated into broader international projects. A notable example is the Finnish initiative conducted between 1907 and 1915 and directed by Henry Biaudet,[11] during which Liisi Karttunen transcribed a series of documents concerning Livonia from the papal registers and *miscellanea* fonds. This work took place within the framework of the so-called Finnish Historical Expedition to Rome, for which Karttunen served as secretary; during this period, she also prepared her doctoral thesis on the sixteenth-century papal diplomat Antonio Possevino.[12] The National Archives of Estonia (RA) in Tartu preserve five dossiers containing Karttunen's transcriptions – primarily from the papal registers – covering documents dated from 1219 to 1571.[13]

This archival series has a curious history: as Karttunen noted in her own hand, the transcriptions were prepared in April 1919 in Rome for the "Estonian Embassy in Italy", and the dossiers themselves consist of paper from the *Cartoleria Ricci* in Rome.[14] However, since an official Estonian Embassy did not yet exist in Rome in 1919, Karttunen's work should be linked to the activities of the Estonian diplomatic delegation, particularly to Kaarel Robert Pusta, who visited Italy several times between 1918 and 1919.[15] Having ceased her own Vatican research after 1915 to serve as a

10 H. Hildebrand. Livonica, 6.

11 E. Garritzen. Lähteiden lumoamat: Henry Biaudet, Liisi Karttunen ja suomalainen historiantutkimus Roomassa 1900-luvun alussa. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki, 2011.

12 L. Karttunen. Antonio Possevino. Un diplomate pontifical au XVIe siècle. Pache-Varidel & Bron, Lausanne, 1908. See K. Salonen. The Vatican Archives and the Nordic Countries. – Friedensnobelpreis und historische Grundlagenforschung: Ludwig Quidde und die Erschließung der kurialen Registerüberlieferung. Bearb. v. M. Matheus. De Gruyter, Berlin, 2012, 552–561, here 554–555; F. Zuliani. L'expédition historique finlandaise à Rome (1909–1915) e la storiografia italiana novecentesca. – Bridges to Scandinavia. Ed. by A. Meregalli, C. Storskog. Ledizioni, Milan, 2016, 157–169.

13 Rahvusarhiiv (National Archives of Estonia, RA), EAA.854.2.560, Urkunden aus dem Vatikanischen Archiv aus Jahren 1219–1389. Bestätigte Kopien und Dubletten. Lateinisch. Bd. I.; RA, EAA.854.2.561, Urkunden aus dem Vatikanischen Archiv aus Jahren 1220–1478. Bestätigte Kopien und Dubletten. Lateinisch. Bd. II.; RA, EAA.854.2.562, Urkunden aus dem Vatikanischen Archiv aus Jahren 1228–1324. Bestätigte Kopien und Dubletten. Lateinisch. Bd. III.; RA, EAA.854.2.563, Urkunden aus dem Vatikanischen Archiv aus Jahren 1404–1533. Bestätigte Kopien und Dubletten. Lateinisch. Bd. IV; RA, EAA.854.2.564, Urkunden aus dem Vatikanischen Archiv aus Jahren 1432–1571. Bestätigte Kopien und Dubletten. Lateinisch. Bd. V. All these materials date from 1919.

14 See RA, EAA.854.2.560, after every document there is the date of transcription: 11 April 1919.

15 T. Mulla, P. Pillak, J. Trei, H. Vilbiks. Eesti välisteenistus. Biograafiline leksikon 1918–1991. Välisministeerium, Tallinn, 2006, 94–95.

diplomat, Karttunen probably compiled these transcriptions from her previous work. These copies were later transferred to the State Archives and inserted – somewhat illogically – among the records of the Estonian Knighthood (*Ritterschaft*), the territorial self-government of the German nobility abolished in 1920. A note in the first dossier indicates a revision dated 29 February 1924. While some of Karttunen's papers had been previously published, most remained unedited; nonetheless, her transcriptions are not critical editions, as they consist of rapid copies of papal letters without diplomatic or palaeographic apparatus.

Shortly before Karttunen, between 1904 and 1905, the Prussian historian Arthur Motzki – while examining sources related to the Teutonic Order during the Avignon Papacy – copied and subsequently published a valuable series of acts concerning Livonia from the registers of papal supplications (*Registra Supplicationum*).[16] These supplications consist primarily of requests for the concession of church benefices; additionally, petitioners sought the confirmation of indulgences, dispensations from marriage impediments, and occasionally absolution from various offences. As such, they possess immense historical value. Although the collection comprises more than 7,300 volumes, Motzki consulted only the first 43, covering the period from 11 October 1342 to 9 May 1366, from which he collected 152 documents.

The young Baltic States successfully combined classical academic tradition with the evolving demands of medieval studies, largely thanks to figures such as Leonid Arbusow Jr. (1882–1951). The first state-organised research project in the Vatican took place in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Arbusow Jr. conducted four expeditions to Rome supported by the Latvian government (specifically from November 1926 to March 1927, the first half of 1928, the summer of 1929, and from November 1930 to February 1931). His third expedition was carried out alongside the historian and nationalist politician Augusts Tentelis. While the results of Arbusow's work were extensively published,[17] many of his unedited notes and transcriptions are preserved in the Latvian State Historical

16 A. Motzki. Livonica aus den Supplikenregistern von Avignon (1342 Okt. 11–1366 Mai 9). – Mitteilungen aus der Livländischen Geschichte, 1921, 21, 2, 101–172.

17 L. Arbusow. Römischer Arbeitsbericht. I. Mit einem Anhang von Papstregesten des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts und von Urkunden. – Latvijas Universitātes Raksti. Acta Universitatis Latviensis, 1928, 17, 285–423; L. Arbusow. II. Römischer Arbeitsbericht. Nebst Papstregesten und -urkunden des 14. Jahrhunderts. – Latvijas Universitātes Raksti. Acta Universitatis Latviensis, 1929, 20, 475–657; L. Arbusow. III. Römischer Arbeitsbericht. – Latvijas Universitātes Raksti. Acta Universitatis Latviensis, Filoloģijas un Filosofijas Fakultātes serija 1929–1931, 1, 3, 65–160; L. Arbusow. IV. Römischer Arbeitsbericht. – Latvijas Universitātes Raksti. Acta Universitatis Latviensis, Filoloģijas un Filosofijas Fakultātes serija, 1931–1933, 1, 4, 279–398.

Archives. Furthermore, his collection of nearly 1,000 photographs of Vatican documents – long believed to have been lost during the Second World War – was recently rediscovered within the same archives.[18]

Arbusow's work remains the most scientifically significant achievement in this field to date, despite the limited time at his disposal and the necessity of focusing on a restricted selection of sources. He provided an overview of the two major series of papal registers – the *Registra Vaticana* and *Registra Avenionensia* – for the period between 1198 and ca. 1378. Additionally, he consulted several archival units from the ancient Archive of Castel Sant'Angelo (*Archivum Arcis*), the original core of the Vatican Archives, along with volumes from the *Collectoriae* of the Apostolic Chamber, the Nunciature to Poland, and the supplication records from 1366 until the reign of Antipope Clement VII (1378–1394). His research focused primarily on the fourteenth century, the least known and researched portion of the Vatican's *Livonica* collections, and he dedicated significant attention to specific sources, such as the inventory of the belongings of the Archbishop of Riga, Friedrich von Pernstein († 1341).[19]

## A JESUIT FROM RÄPINA: ALEKSANDER KURTNA IN THE VATICAN

The Estonian response to the Latvian project was spearheaded by Aleksander Kurtna (birth name Kurson), a flamboyant personality born in 1914 in Räpina, south-eastern Estonia, to an Estonian father and a Russian mother.[20] He hailed from roughly the same region as Georges Simenon's fictional *Peter the Lett* (born in Pskov), a crossroads of languages, cultures, and religions. Initially, Kurtna intended to become an Orthodox priest; however, in 1935, he came into contact with the Catholic Church, which was then pursuing an ambitious project to re-Catholicise Eastern Europe and bring Eastern Christians

18 See K. Neitmann. Das wissenschaftliche Lebenswerk Leonid Arbusows. Themen und Methoden seiner Forschungen zur Geschichte Livlands. – Leonid Arbusow (1882–1951) und die Erforschung des mittelalterlichen Livland. Hrsg. von I. Misāns, K. Neitmann. Böhlau, Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2014, 19–78.

19 L. Arbusow. Römischer Arbeitsbericht. I, 310. See also K. Toomaspoeg. Ühest Brugge kirstust, 206–211.

20 See his short biography and a description of his work in the Vatican based on Estonian sources in J. Kivimäe. Aleksander Kurtna ja Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia. – 50 aastat Eesti Teaduste Akadeemiat. Toim. A. Köörna. (Teaduslugu ja nüüdisaeg, 8.) Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia, Tallinn, 1989, 187–190.

into communion with Rome, primarily through the Jesuit Order and the Vatican Dicastery for the Eastern Churches. After converting to Catholicism and receiving foundational training in Poland, he travelled to Rome in 1936 as a seminarian at the Jesuit *Collegium Russicum*, founded by Pius XI in 1929 near the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.

Our knowledge of Kurtna's life in Rome relies heavily on his own accounts: a fictionalised and often unreliable short autobiography published in Estonian periodicals in 1965 and 1966,[21] and a conference paper from 1966.[22] These may be supplemented by his substantial dossier compiled by the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) in 1944.[23] However, a comprehensive understanding of his personality and activities remains unattainable without access to the closed archives of the Italian and, more importantly, the Russian secret services.

According to Kurtna, his journey to Rome was motivated by a desire to study philosophy, and his entry into the Jesuit Order as a seminarian was merely a pretext. This claim, however, is dubious; Kurtna was, in fact, brought to Rome within a very specific ideological framework. His travel expenses were covered by the Catholic Bishop of Estonia, Eduard Profittlich, himself a Jesuit who had been trained for missionary work in the Soviet Union. Kurtna was one of two Estonian candidates sponsored by the bishop.[24] The *Russicum*, with its community of Russians and other émigrés from the former Russian Empire, served as a primary headquarters for the Vatican's project to re-evangelise the Soviet Union.

According to Kurtna, the primary purpose of his stay in Italy was to pursue studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University (*Università Gregoriana*) at Piazza della Pilotta. Lectures were conducted exclusively in Latin, a requirement that posed no difficulty for Kurtna, who was already fluent in at least five languages (Russian, Estonian, German, Polish, and Italian). Later, in November 1939, he gave an interview to the Estonian newspaper *Päewaleht*, providing a detailed description of the university's academic life.[25] He was not the only Estonian studying

21 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga (Behind the Bronze Gate). – Kultuur ja Elu, 1965, 3–11, and Ühistöö. Rapla rajoonileht, 1966, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, 27, and 29 January; 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19, 22, and 24 February, 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, and 15 March. In the present study, citations are taken from the edition published in Ühistöö, available online.

22 Tallinna Linnaarhiiv (Tallinn City Archives, TLA), TLA.R-27.1.937a.

23 The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657.

24 M. Paas. Peapiiskop Eduard Profittlichi märterlusest. – Akadeemia, 2024, 10, 1779–1801, here 1782–1783, 1795. See also K. Laur. Tunnistaja. Hea Lugu, Tallinn, 2022 – a historical novel centred on Bishop Eduard Profittlich, though occasionally 'imaginative' with respect to Kurtna's figure.

25 Seal kus kõnekeeleks on ladina keel. – Päewaleht, 25 November 1939.

in this prestigious environment; however, the other young man sent to Rome by Bishop Profittlich, Johannes Raidal, abandoned his studies, and no further traces of him have been found.[26] The *Päewaleht* article reveals that by late 1939, Kurtna claimed to speak fifteen languages. It also noted that the Gregorian's student body comprised sixty different nationalities, all of whom benefited from a regime of extraterritoriality, as they were under the direct jurisdiction of the Vatican.

Kurtna was preparing a doctoral thesis in philosophy on the works of Lev Shestov, a Russian existentialist and critic of rationalism and positivism.[27] Shestov (who died in Paris in November 1938) was a Jewish thinker known for contrasting "Athens with Jerusalem" and for his meditations on Jesus' sleepless night in the Garden of Gethsemane.[28] While he was an ideal subject for study in this context, Shestov was also blacklisted by the Soviet authorities; consequently, Kurtna omitted any mention of this PhD topic from his later autobiography.[29] In any case, the thesis was never completed, and no records of it exist in the archives of the Gregorian University.

At this point, a further contradiction emerges between Kurtna's account and other sources. On 19 January 1939, the rector of the *Russicum*, Philippe de Régis, informed Bishop Profittlich that, in his opinion, Kurtna could no longer remain at the *Collegium*, as he was deemed unfit for the priesthood.[30] Consequently, some have supposed that he was expelled and returned to Estonia;[31] however, Kurtna himself claimed to have lived in Rome until November 1939, despite no longer residing at the *Russicum*.[32] In his memoirs, he somewhat glosses over this transition, which was not voluntary but rather the result of his "lack of vocation".

According to Kurtna, he received a small grant from the Estonian government in April 1939 to conduct research in the Vatican Archives.[33] On other occasions, however, he cited 16 May and 1 June 1939 as the start date of this funding.[34] He claimed the grant came as a complete surprise, resulting from the intervention of his father, Viktor Kurtna. Although

26 Raidal is presumed to have fallen in the war: J. Kivimäe. Minevik karussellil. – Keel ja Kirjandus, 2023, 66, 3, 341–344, here 342.
27 Päewaleht, 25 November 1939.
28 See, for example, A. Oppo. Lev Shestov: The Philosophy and Works of a Tragic Thinker. Academic Studies Press, Brookline (MA), 2020; M. Beaumont. Lev Shestov: Philosopher of the Sleepless Night. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2021.
29 He did, however, refer to his thesis in a conversation with Jüri Kivimäe, see J. Kivimäe. Aleksander Kurtna, 187.
30 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Collegium Russicum, 1001: Ex Officio (1938–1939), quoted in M. Paas. Peapiiskop Eduard Profittlichi märterlusest, 1795.
31 M. Paas, *loc. cit*.
32 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 3 February 1966.
33 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 27 January 1966.
34 J. Kivimäe. Aleksander Kurtna, 187; Päewaleht, 22 November 1939.

a gardener by trade, Viktor was no ordinary labourer; he served as the superintendent of the park at Keila-Joa Manor, a summer retreat for many high-ranking government officials.[35] It is believed that Viktor spoke with his superior, Peeter Päts, the head of the State Parks Administration (*Riigiparkide Valitsus*) and brother of President Konstantin Päts.[36]

This account is intriguing, and although Kurtna reports it in his autobiography, it has been largely overlooked by historians. On the one hand, when he submitted a request in autumn for a more substantial and regular grant to study the Vatican Archives, he demonstrated a knowledge of the subject and provided detailed information on the materials to be examined; this suggests he must already have been working in the archives for some time. As he states, he obtained authorisation to enter the archives thanks to a recommendation from the papal nuncio in Estonia, Antonio Arata, who was an acquaintance of his.[37] On the other hand, if the initiative to research the Vatican Archives did not originate with Kurtna himself, how did it arise? It is also probable that after his expulsion from the *Russicum* – though he continued to associate with his fellow students and attend the Gregorian University as an unenrolled student (*fuori corso*) – Kurtna had already begun working as a library collaborator and language teacher, activities that later augmented his primary means of support.

As he himself noted, it was during this period that Kurtna became acquainted with Friedrich Bock, a staunch National Socialist who headed the German Historical Institute in Rome (*Deutsches Historisches Institut in Rom*). Bock was then managing the institute on behalf of its director, Edmund Ernst Stengel, who remained in Germany overseeing several research bodies for the Nazi government.[38] Another scholar Kurtna met in the Vatican was Gottfried Lang, who would later play a significant role in safeguarding Italian archives during the Second World War.[39]

35 P. Erelt. Ministrite suveidüll Keila-Joal. – Eesti Ekspress, 18 June 2011. Erelt appears to have consulted the records of the *Riigiparkide Valitsus* at the Estonian State Archives (RA, ERA.983). The State Parks Administration was created in April 1935 to administrate the parks of Kadriorg, Keila-Joa and Oru. Viktor Kurtna is likewise a figure of considerable interest, although less thoroughly documented in the sources. According to his military service record (RA, ERA.495.7.2302), he graduated from the Uspensk Agricultural School in 1907 and served as an officer in the First World War and in the Estonian War of Independence. According to the same source, he worked initially as a gardener, but in 1928 entered the state administration in Petseri. During his interrogation in 1944, Kurtna stated that his father was then an officer serving as an interpreter in the Soviet Army: The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657, interrogation report, 3.

36 Kurtna himself stated as much: Pronksvärava taga, 27 January 1966.

37 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 29 January 1966.

38 A. Hoffend. Zwischen Kultur-Achse und Kulturkampf. Die Beziehungen zwischen 'Drittem Reich' und faschistischem Italien in den Bereichen Medien, Kunst, Wissenschaft und Rassenfragen. Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 270–274.

39 J. Klöckler. Verhinderter Archivalienraub in Italien. Theodor Mayer und die Abteilung

In his accounts of his archival work – though not elsewhere – Kurtna mentioned two other scholars who were undoubtedly relevant to his research: namely, the aforementioned Liisi Karttunen, now a member of the Finnish diplomatic corps, and the Jesuit Jean Chrétien Joseph Kleijntjens.[40]

Kurtna enrolled in the Vatican School of Palaeography, Diplomatics and Archive Administration, where he met its director, Giulio Battelli.[41] The school's curriculum was even more rigorous then than it is today; Kurtna supplemented these studies with unspecified courses at the German Historical Institute and later at the University of Rome (now *La Sapienza*), where he attended lectures by the Fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile on the philosophy and methodology of history.[42]

As noted above, using his studies at the School and his growing familiarity with archival repertoires and indexes – where he encountered many of the same practical difficulties as Hermann Hildebrand before him – Kurtna submitted an official grant request. However, at this juncture, his autobiography begins to feature the series of contradictions, omissions, and exaggerations typical of his later persona as a spy. He claimed to have sent proposals not only to the Estonian government but also to the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union in Moscow.[43] Specifically, he allegedly offered to research documents concerning Peter the Great, building upon the earlier work of Yevgeny Shmurlo.[44] According to Kurtna's version of events, he even received a promise from Moscow that the Academy would begin financing his research in the second half of 1940. This version of events is highly implausible, as the Soviet coup d'état in Estonia in June 1940 was not a predictable event outside of Stalin's inner circle. In my view, the initial contact between Kurtna and the Soviet authorities must have occurred later; as will be discussed, he spent a significant period in Moscow between July and October 1940.

In any case, following a week of negotiations in Tallinn in November 1939, the Estonian state – already subject to increasing Soviet pressure, yet

"Archivschutz" bei der Militärverwaltung in Verona 1943–1945. – Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken, 2006, 86, 491–537, here 513–518.

40 J. Kivimäe. Aleksander Kurtna, 188.

41 Battelli is considered a foundational figure in Italian palaeography and archival science; see, for example, G. Battelli. Lezioni di paleografia. Pontificia Scuola Vaticana di Paleografia e Diplomatica, Città del Vaticano, 1936.

42 On Gentile, the preeminent intellectual of Italian Fascism, see D. D. Roberts. Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007.

43 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 1 February 1966.

44 Е.Ф. Шмурло. *Петр Великий в оценке современников и потомства*. Сенат. тип., Санкт-Петербург, 1912.

still in existence – granted Kurtna a yearly stipend to research documents concerning Estonia in the Vatican Archives. Specifically issued by the Chancellery of the President of the Republic, this was a significant decision with scientific, cultural, and political weight, as reflected in contemporary press coverage.[45] The grant consisted of a substantial monthly sum of 1,500 – later increased to 2,000 – Italian lire (roughly equivalent to the same amount in euros today). Kurtna returned to Italy almost immediately, on 13 December 1939;[46] given the increasingly grim situation in Estonia, the move was probably strategic. From this point on, Kurtna's autobiography is filled with accounts of the *bella vita* in Rome, characterised by visits to restaurants, bars, and concerts. The months between late 1940 and June 1941 appear to have been the happiest period of his life. Despite his newfound financial security, the inexhaustible Kurtna continued to take on side work as a language teacher. It was through these lessons that he met Alma Hablitz, a young and talented soprano who had also received an Estonian government grant to study in Italy.[47] The couple began living together and were eventually married on 18 June 1942, at the Campidoglio in Rome.

Despite the distractions of his social life, Kurtna did indeed embark on an intensive period of research in the Vatican. By March 1940, he claimed to have recorded 600 documents; subsequently, in an unpublished 1966 conference paper, he asserted that during his tenure in Rome – which lasted until September 1944 – he had compiled a catalogue of approximately 7,000 sources.[48] The preliminary results of this research are preserved in the National Archives of Estonia in Tartu, which holds two reports from Kurtna and a folder containing the research project he proposed in March 1940 to the Chancellery of the President and the Estonian Academy of Sciences.[49] This documentation is highly relevant to our analysis and is complemented by the aforementioned 1966 conference paper, which provides a comprehensive overview of the Vatican Archives and their collections. In 1940, Kurtna highlighted several specific series which he had examined, chief among them the supplication

45 Päewaleht, 22 November 1939.
46 RA, EAA.661.1.489, 3.
47 E. Schütz. Alma Kurtna: unustamatu lauluõpetaja. Ilmamaa, Tartu, 2018; Eesti muusika biograafiline leksikon, I. Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, Tallinn, 2007, 339. An intriguing report in Avvenire d'Italia, 14 February 1939, mistakenly states that the President of Latvia (!) had provided the grant for Alma Hablitz to perfect her art in Italy. Hablitz is likewise a figure of considerable interest; during the Second World War, she worked for the EIAR, Mussolini's broadcasting service.
48 T. Männik. Estica Vatikani arhiivis. Kokkuvõte A. Kurtna ettekandest. TLA.R-27.1.937a. This four-page summary is part of the Presentations in Archive Researchers' Conferences collection, dated 18 November 1966.
49 RA, EAA.661.1.489. See J. Kivimäe. Aleksander Kurtna.

registers, a collection then largely unknown in Baltic historiography (with the notable exceptions of the studies by Motzki and Arbusow Jr.). Following a detailed analysis and description of these registers, Kurtna drew attention to the *Ospizio dei Convertendi*. This remains a little-known archival collection containing records of individuals (primarily Protestants) who converted to Catholicism, including numerous cases of people from Livonia.[50]

In this manner, Kurtna chose to launch his research by focusing on two specific cases: a collection that had been only partially explored by Baltic historians – even adding corrections to Motzki's work – and an entirely unknown series. His long-term plan was eventually to expand his scope to the papal registers and the collections of the Apostolic Chamber (*Camera Apostolica*). An analysis of Kurtna's perspective on the archives, particularly through his 1966 conference paper, reveals that his approach was largely shaped by his own research interests, with significant attention devoted to medieval and early modern fonds. He gave particular prominence to the *Armaria* – which, according to Kurtna, consisted of eighty cabinets containing a vast number of documents accumulated haphazardly rather than through systematic selection – and to what he called the *Archivio Diplomatico*. In reality, the latter does not exist as an autonomous archival series; it probably refers to the collections now known as the *Archivum Arcis* and *Instrumenta Miscellanea,* which contain original documents on both parchment and paper.

Kurtna's research project outlined a systematic three-stage plan: the creation of a register or catalogue of sources, followed by their scholarly edition, and, ultimately, historical research on specific topics. The Estonian Academy of Sciences forwarded his proposal to the Director of the Estonian State Archives, Otto Liiv, for evaluation. Liiv, however, was a specialist in the Swedish period of Estonian history rather than the Middle Ages or the Vatican Archives. Nevertheless, his assessment of Kurtna's project – expressed in a letter dated 26 April 1940 – was entirely and even incomprehensibly negative.[51] In essence, Liiv deemed Kurtna unfit for the task, citing a perceived lack of knowledge regarding Estonian history. Despite having met Kurtna and exchanged correspondence with him since June 1939, Liiv remained unconvinced of his professional capacities. This dismissal may be interpreted as the

50 A. Raunio. L'Ospizio dei Convertendi, storie di conversioni miracolose e l'assistenza romana caratterizzata dallo spirito post-tridentino. – Proceedings of a Conference on Early Modern Rome, 1341–1667 *held on May 13–15, 2010 in Rome under the auspices of AACUPI*. Ed. by P. Prebys. Edisai, Ferrara, 2011, 510–517.

51 RA, EAA.661.1.489, 35–38.

reluctance of a bureaucrat to endorse an operative beyond his direct control, but political motives may have also played a role; Liiv later displayed certain sympathies for the Soviet authorities, whereas Kurtna – a former seminarian collaborating with clergy and Western scholars – was far from being a 'leftist' figure.[52]

## KURTNA FINDS NEW SPONSORS

The Soviet coup d'état in Estonia on 21 June 1940 – which effectively ended the de facto existence of the Republic of Estonia – precipitated a major shift in Kurtna's life and research. This followed another pivotal moment: Italy's entry into the Second World War, on 10 June 1940, which led to restricted access to the Vatican Archives. However, Kurtna had secured a special arrangement with the young (42-year-old) Substitute for General Affairs at the Vatican Secretariat of State, Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Paul VI), already a key figure within the Holy See.[53] Kurtna's relationship with Montini would play an essential role throughout the war years; in his later life, Kurtna often boasted of this friendship. The Russian linguist Julia Dobrovolskaya recounts a meeting with him in Moscow during the 1970s, where Kurtna wore a necktie that he claimed was a birthday gift from Paul VI.[54]

Montini allegedly granted Kurtna continued access to archival fonds even after the outbreak of war.[55] In my view – as can be deduced from his autobiography – Kurtna worked in close contact with the Second Section of the Secretariat of State, and it is likely that his career as an intelligence asset began here. A compelling argument in support of this theory is that when Kurtna was later arrested on suspicion of being a German or Soviet spy, he was promptly readmitted to the Vatican upon his release. According to his memoirs, every significant move he made was preceded by consultations with his contacts within the Holy See. In other words, while he was often suspected of spying *on* the Vatican, he was primarily a spy *for* the Vatican. In any case, Kurtna's activities as an intelligence officer began in earnest in June 1940. While some authors – without citing any evidence – claim that Kurtna was a "born" Soviet spy

52 On the political leanings of Liiv, which caused him difficulties during the German occupation, see P. Pillak. Otto Liiv 100. – Tuna, 2005, 5, 4, 152–154, here 154.
53 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 12 February 1966.
54 J. Dobrovolskaja. Post Scriptum. Memorie. O quasi? Cafoscarina, Venezia, 2006, 45.
55 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 12 February 1966.

sent to the *Russicum* specifically for that purpose,[56] there is absolutely no historical data to support such a theory.

At the end of July 1940, Kurtna travelled to Moscow, where his research in the Vatican Archives allegedly "aroused the interest of the comrades". Discrepancies exist between his autobiography and his later interrogation by British intelligence, during which he claimed the journey took place in September 1940. This trip was made possible by the unique geopolitical alignment of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact; at the time, the Soviet Union was an ally of Germany and maintained a similar, though unofficial, status with Italy.

Kurtna claimed that during this visit he dined with Andrey Vyshinsky as part of an exclusive group of eight people. However, this detail invites scepticism, as Vyshinsky was only appointed First Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs on 6 September 1940. At this juncture, a degree of caution is necessary: spies who survive long enough to write their memoirs are often prone to narcissism, tend to 'sugar-coat' their pasts, and frequently aggrandise their roles. A parallel can be found in Branko Bokun, another wartime operative in Rome and the Vatican. Although a figure of minor significance, Bokun published extensive – and often unreliable – accounts of his activities, including the highly improbable claim of having met the exiled Mussolini on the island of Ponza in late 1943.[57]

There is a striking detail regarding Bishop Eduard Profittlich: following his arrest by Soviet occupation authorities in June 1941, he was interrogated by NKVD agents. On 2 October, Profittlich was questioned specifically about Kurtna's departure from Soviet Estonia. The bishop was accused of facilitating (or, more precisely, failing to report) Kurtna's 'escape' abroad via Finland, a charge that contributed to his death sentence in November 1941.[58] This raises a logical contradiction: why would Kurtna need to 'escape' if the Moscow authorities had already authorised and financed his work? Kurtna himself claimed to have travelled from Moscow to Tallinn in late October 1940, where Profittlich allegedly assisted him through a "German Baltic commission" – probably the German diplomatic mission – to renew his visa. He then departed Estonia, entering Germany at Tilsit.[59] As suggested by Kurtna's 1944 interrogation report, this elaborate itinerary was a ploy designed to conceal his time in Moscow. While some authors suggest that Kurtna

56 V. Sibilio. Misteri vaticani. Independent edition, 2023.
57 B. Bokun. Spy in the Vatican. Praeger, New York, 1973, 135–143.
58 M. Paas. Peapiiskop Eduard Profittlichi märterlusest, 1794–1795.
59 The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657, 30.

may have provided incriminating information about Profittlich, a more straightforward explanation exists: the NKVD agents who arrested the bishop were simply unaware that Kurtna was an asset of the GRU (then known as the Fourth Bureau).

While Kurtna returned to Rome in the autumn of 1940, his autobiography is notably silent regarding the period leading up to June 1941; this narrative hiatus leaves his actions during the months preceding the German invasion of the USSR entirely undocumented. It is certain, however, that by this time Kurtna had received specific instructions for his work with the GRU. The primary obstacle in tracing his activities as a Soviet agent remains the limited access to relevant archives. Nevertheless, Owen Matthews, author of the most recent biography of Richard Sorge,[60] has successfully consulted the archives of Soviet military intelligence in Podolsk (TsAMO RF, Central Archives of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation). It is highly desirable that contemporary historians follow this precedent to further investigate Kurtna's clandestine role.

At this juncture, a crucial question arises: what, precisely, were Kurtna's directives? During his 1944 interrogation by British intelligence, he outlined several of his tasks. Primarily, his role involved gathering rumours and intelligence regarding shifts in Vatican policy, a mission that would become exceedingly demanding during the German occupation of Rome. Interestingly, the Soviets also assigned him minor, almost 'apprentice-level' tasks, such as transcribing historical documents the Vatican refused to release to the USSR. One such request concerned a "Greek monk called Skilitsa Kouropalatos", none other than John Skylitzes, the eleventh-century Byzantine historian.[61] Moscow's interest in Skylitzes was purportedly linked to a planned film on the Christianisation of Russia; according to Kurtna, the Vatican had withheld the sources because they contained "scandalous" details about the monk's private life. A far more significant objective, however, was lobbying the Holy See to establish formal diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, as the interrogation report clarifies, the Soviets intended to utilise Kurtna not only within the Vatican but also as an observer of German institutions across Rome.

Like any self-respecting spy, Kurtna maintained strategic female acquaintances. By chance, in 1940, he met two secretaries working for Otto von Bismarck, the head of the Political Office at the German

60 O. Matthews. An Impeccable Spy. Richard Sorge, Stalin's Master Agent. Bloomsbury, London, 2019.

61 J. Wortley. John Skylitzès: A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

Embassy in Rome (at that time located at Villa Wolkonsky):[62] Fräulein Laubert and Fräulein Jäger. They provided him with information regarding their work, while he, in turn, fed them "false news" to mislead his German contacts.[63] His primary contact at the Soviet Embassy was an intelligence officer known to him as "Gorshkov", whom he had previously met in Moscow. This was indeed a real and significant figure: Nikolai Mikhailovich Gorshkov, who would later become a renowned Soviet operative active in Algeria during the Cold War. In 1941, Gorshkov would have been approximately twenty-nine years old.[64]

In this manner, Kurtna's research grant was extended in 1940 by the Soviet authorities; however, on 22 June 1941, he lost his new benefactor. When the personnel of the Soviet Embassy departed Rome following the invasion of the USSR, Kurtna was expected to operate independently, though he was left entirely without financial resources. According to his autobiography, he sought counsel from Montini and Cardinal Eugène Tisserant, the powerful Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and a pivotal figure in the Holy See's Eastern European policy.

As Kurtna recounts, the Vatican authorities advised him to seek assistance from Father Robert Leiber, a professor at the Gregorian University and the Pope's private confessor. Leiber reportedly suggested that he consult Friedrich Bock at the German Historical Institute.[65] At this juncture, the narratives diverge: in his autobiography, Kurtna claims he only established contact with the Nazi authorities – specifically Herbert Kappler – in June 1942, upon Leiber's recommendation.[66] However, during his 1944 interrogation by British Secret Services, he admitted to having met Kappler as early as March 1942 through Friedrich Bock.[67]

Kurtna, who described Bock as a "hideous Nazi" in his Soviet-era memoirs, had on other occasions only praise for the historian. In reality, Bock – an avowed and proud Nazi – had actively supported Kurtna's Vatican research and eventually hired him at the library of the German Historical Institute in July 1941, with a good monthly salary of 2,000 lire.

62 On the German Embassy, its diplomats, and the intelligence services in Rome, see (with due caution), E. Dollmann. With Hitler and Mussolini: Memoirs of a Nazi Interpreter. Skyhorse, New York, 2017.
63 The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657, 31.
64 B. Hautecloque. L'affaire Georges Pâques (1963–64). Un haut-fonctionnaire français au service des Soviétiques pendant toute la Guerre froide. – Nuova Antologia Militare, 2024, 5, 20, 515–542, here 520. Gorshkov's service in Italy is also corroborated by Russian biographical sources.
65 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 12 February 1966; 15 February 1966.
66 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 22 February 1966.
67 The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657, 26.

Under this arrangement, Kurtna was officially tasked with researching the Great Schism in the Baltic region within the Vatican Archives. However, in February 1942, he lost this position due to a new directive: German historical institutes abroad were henceforth permitted to employ only German nationals. Kurtna still held his Estonian passport, to which he had promptly added Soviet citizenship in the summer of 1940, a detail he wisely chose to conceal at the time.

It was Bock – a "close friend" of Kappler – who introduced him to Kurtna, undoubtedly much earlier than March 1942.[68] Herbert Kappler would become a defining figure in Kurtna's career as a spy. At thirty-four, this SS *Obersturmbannführer* served as the head of the SD (the *Sicherheitsdienst*) and represented Heydrich's RSHA (Reich Security Main Office) in Rome. It was a position that remained largely in the shadows until the German occupation of the city in September 1943, an event that thrust Kappler into a direct operational role and established him, alongside his subordinate *Hauptsturmführer* Erich Priebke, as one of the major German war criminals in Italy. In his memoirs, Kurtna provides a vivid description of his encounter with Kappler: a "polite, blond, slightly overweight middle-aged man with a scar on his left cheek".

In summary, when the Soviet personnel evacuated their embassy in Rome, they failed to provide Kurtna with the necessary resources to sustain his activities. Consequently, he was drawn into the web of German intelligence, not through Admiral Canaris's Abwehr, but via the SD. Officially, his role was to provide the German Embassy with monthly reports on the diplomatic relations between the Third Reich and the Vatican, for which he received a salary of 2,000 lire.

The question that later preoccupied both British intelligence and the Soviet secret services was whether Kurtna continued to operate as a Soviet mole collecting data from both the Germans and the Vatican while disseminating disinformation. Kurtna lacked radio transmitters or other technical equipment, and with the Soviet Embassy in Rome closed, he had no direct channel to Moscow. Curiously, the Germans were fully aware of his previous associations with the Soviets, yet they appear to have had complete confidence in him. It was only later, in 1944, that Kurtna claimed to have re-established contact with Gorshkov via correspondence.

68 Kappler's correspondence with his superiors in Berlin indicates that he was already working with Kurtna as early as February; see D. Alvarez, R. A. Graham. Nothing Sacred, 137.

## KURTNA'S JOURNEY TO ESTONIA AND HIS IMPRISONMENT

Between 23 June and 30 July 1942, Aleksander Kurtna travelled to Estonia. This journey remains perhaps the most enigmatic episode in his history, with strikingly different accounts appearing in his autobiography and the 1944 interrogation report. The stated motivations for the trip vary significantly between the two versions. In his memoirs, Kurtna claims he travelled at the invitation of the Slovak Ambassador to the Vatican, Karol Sidor, ostensibly to investigate the situation of Jews in Slovakia.[69] He also asserted that the Vatican Secretariat of State and Cardinal Tisserant had tasked him with meeting Jesuits in Prague and uncovering the fate of a Catholic priest missing in Estonia. To these official reasons, he added a personal motive: concern for two of his brothers, who had been arrested by the Germans.

In the 1944 version, his journey was motivated by a single, pragmatic reason: an attempt to renew his research grant in Tallinn by submitting a request to the *Eesti Omavalitsus* (Estonian Self-Government), the puppet administration under German control. His travel application would have been supported by both Bock's German Historical Institute and the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome. The 1966 version is demonstrably false, beginning with the departure date: Kurtna claimed to have left on 18 June, whereas the 1944 records confirm he departed on 23 June. In his later memoirs, he backdated his departure to accommodate a lengthy, fabricated account of a visit to Prague, a trip that, in reality, never took place. He introduced this fiction to reinvent himself as a witness concerned with the fate of Central European Jews, even claiming to have received early reports regarding the Auschwitz concentration camp.

It is highly probable that the British version of this journey is also partially inaccurate: Kurtna declared to MI6 officers that he had travelled directly to Estonia via Tilsit in East Prussia, Lithuania, and Latvia. However, in his memoirs, he inserts a visit to Berlin following the (fabricated) trip to Prague. According to this account, his journey was facilitated by Kappler in Rome – whom Kurtna introduces for the first time in his autobiography at this juncture – who supposedly referred him to the Gestapo in Berlin for further travel clearances.

69 Karol Sidor was a controversial figure. Though a staunch antisemite, he was not an active participant in the Holocaust; his concerns regarding the fate of Jews in Slovakia may have been known to Kurtna through other channels. See, for example (with some caution), K. Sidor. Denníky 1930–1939. Ústav pamäti národa, Bratislava, 2010.

In Berlin, at the RSHA headquarters on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, Kurtna allegedly held a lengthy meeting with SS *Standartenführer* Friedrich Panzinger. The 39-year-old Panzinger was a pivotal and controversial figure in wartime espionage and counter-espionage, later serving West German intelligence and the CIA. At the time, he headed Division A of the Fourth Section (*Amtsgruppe IV A*) of the RSHA, the heart of the Gestapo.[70] Since Berlin was directly on his route, Kurtna visited both the Gestapo and Panzinger again during his return trip. It is difficult to believe that Kurtna would have been granted an audience with such a high-ranking officer merely to discuss a travel visa. Furthermore, the timeline of his journey is telling: reaching Tallinn from Rome in just three days (by 25 June), including a stopover in Berlin under 1942 conditions, strongly suggests he utilised military transport or possessed high-priority travel credentials.

Upon his arrival in Estonia, according to the interrogation report, Kurtna learned for the first time that one of his brothers was imprisoned and another had been executed by the Germans. In this version – though notably not in his autobiography – he identifies the officer who ordered the execution as SS *Obersturmbannführer* Georg Elling. This revelation opens a new and significant investigative path: Elling, a former friar who served in the SS in Lorraine and later the SD as a specialist in religious affairs, was ultimately sent as a secret agent to Rome and the Vatican, where he disappeared in 1944. My research confirms that he was an active member of Einsatzgruppe A in the Baltic states in 1941, a fact not widely documented.[71] This detail is particularly striking given that Kurtna would later work alongside Elling. Are these accusations accurate, and if so, why did Kurtna omit them from his memoirs? This silence raises the question of whether his later collaboration with Elling was a calculated act of insincerity or whether, in 1944, he was attempting to distance himself from a man whose crimes he knew all too well.

According to the British report, Kurtna was informed of these tragic circumstances by a schoolmate named Otto Tamm. While his autobiography mentions an encounter with Tamm, it provides a completely different version of the event. Crucially, Kurtna omitted a vital detail

70 I. Wirth. Friedrich Panzinger: Am Ende stand der Suizid. – Täter Helfer Trittbrettfahrer, XVI, NS-Belastete aus München. Hrsg. von W. Proske. Kugelberg Verlag, Gerstetten, 2023, 325–336.

71 Exhaustive data regarding Elling's career were located in a file prepared in 1965 for the prosecutor of the *Kammergericht* in Berlin, intended for a murder prosecution. Since it was discovered that Elling had died in 1952 in Kempten, the case was closed; the dossier contains general information and service records but lacks specific details on the crimes of which he was accused. See Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 057-01, Nr. 959.

from his interrogation: after meeting Kappler in Rome and Panzinger in Berlin, he entered the grey building at Tõnismäe 16 in Tallinn, the headquarters of the SiPo (*Sicherheitspolizei*) and SD in Estonia, the local branch of the RSHA. There, he was received personally by the chief, the thirty-year-old SS *Sturmbannführer* Martin Sandberger, a notorious war criminal. Sandberger subsequently referred him to an officer whom Kurtna identified as "Untersturmbannführer Zefeldt". This individual was, in reality, SS *Untersturmführer* (Second Lieutenant) Gustav von Seefeld, who was in charge of two sections of the *Politische Polizei*: "Foreign Countries" and *Abwehr*. While Kurtna claimed the purpose of this visit was to seek news of his brothers – and that Seefeld informed him of Nikolai's execution – the fact remains that Seefeld was an intelligence officer, not a functionary responsible for such enquiries.

The British version of the return journey offers further contradictions: Kurtna claimed to have met Professor Juhan Vasar, a scholar of the modern period and deputy to the Director of Education for the Estonian Self-Government.[72] Although his request for a new grant was denied, he received 8,000 lire (a sum he notably converted into Italian currency) specifically to produce photographic reproductions of archival documents.

His return route is described differently in the two sources. In his statement to British intelligence, he admitted to stopping in Berlin but was suspiciously eager to specify that he remained there for only ten hours and met no one. Conversely, in the 1966 version, he portrays his journey as a harrowing escape, fraught with fear and potential danger, claiming that during this stopover, Panzinger and the Gestapo treated him with cold suspicion. Kurtna's journey to Estonia can be interpreted in several ways. While it probably served as a form of reward from the Germans, his meetings with intelligence officers – such as Panzinger, Sandberger, and Seefeld (and potentially others omitted from his autobiography) – were clearly professional in nature. These encounters undoubtedly facilitated a high-level exchange of information, solidifying his role as a trusted asset within the Nazi intelligence hierarchy.

Aleksander Kurtna returned to Rome on 30 July 1942, only to be immediately arrested at the Termini railway station. He was taken to Regina Coeli, Rome's primary pre-trial detention centre, a prison whose structure and history bear a striking resemblance to Patarei prison in Tallinn. Much like his Estonian journey, Kurtna's arrest remains a deeply

72 Eesti teaduse biograafiline leksikon. Toim. J. Aaviksoo, K. Siilivask. Kd. IV, Sar–Y. Lisa. Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, Tallinn, 2013, 136–137.

controversial episode. According to his autobiography, he and his wife, Alma, were detained because his address was discovered on a captured member of the Resistance.[73] Kurtna identifies this man as a Slovenian, and from this point in his memoirs, he introduces the theme of the Yugoslav resistance, claiming to have fought alongside them. However, the British report paints a far more complex picture: the Italian Military Secret Service (SIM), while investigating a Swiss espionage ring, had arrested two Soviet agents on 13 June 1942: the Finn Holgar Tarvonen (alias Ernest Harn) and Fritz Schneider (alias Hermann Leo Marley, or "Paolo"). This led to the discovery of an extensive network of Italian accomplices.[74] Unlike Kurtna, Tarvonen and Schneider possessed a radio transmitter; the SIM intercepted and decrypted a message directed to them that began with the phrase "We are from the North", which contained specific instructions or information intended for Kurtna.

Colonel Manfredi Talamo, head of the SIM counter-espionage squad, and his team found themselves in a precarious and confounding situation regarding Kurtna.[75] From the outset, Kurtna did not hesitate to reveal his work for the German services, confessing to being a spy, but for Berlin, not Moscow. This admission did little to aid his case. The Italian secret services harboured a deep-seated loathing for their German counterparts, and the revelation only added to the prevailing confusion. According to Kurtna's own testimony, the Italians interrogated him approximately twenty times. In his memoirs, he even recounts a "mock execution" staged by Colonel Talamo in a desperate attempt to force a confession. It is essential to note the discrepancy in his narratives: in his autobiography, Kurtna omits any mention of his intelligence activities, instead portraying himself as arrested without cause. This stands in stark contrast to his 1944 interrogation, where he provided the British with detailed information regarding his operations for the Soviet Union.

Kurtna offers a detailed account of his time in prison, enriched by several compelling anecdotes. Most notably, he claims to have met the renowned writer Curzio Malaparte in Regina Coeli. Malaparte was indeed arrested in 1943, shortly after the fall of Mussolini's regime on 25 July, and spent a month in detention. According to Kurtna, the writer would read chapters of his work-in-progress, the novel *Kaputt*, to his

73 A. Kurtna. Pronksvärava taga, 3 March 1966.

74 A. Mantica, V. Fragalà. La dimensione sovranazionale del fenomeno eversivo in Italia. Studio sui collegamenti fra le organizzazioni terroristiche internazionali. – XIII Legislatura – Disegni di legge e relazioni – documenti. Senato della Repubblica, Camera dei Deputati, Roma, 2001, 1–246, here 59–60: a very curious document that does not mention Kurtna.

75 R. A. Graham. L'occhio del Sim sulla Città del Vaticano. – Gnosis. Rivista italiana di intelligence, 2022, 28, 2, 134–149, here 146–148.

fellow inmates. Decades later, in 1976, Kurtna achieved a remarkable editorial feat by managing to publish an extract from *Kaputt* in the prestigious *Loomingu Raamatukogu* series in Tallinn.[76] This was no small accomplishment: Malaparte was featured on the Soviet blacklist of Western writers, primarily due to his provocative 1932 novel, *Lenin, the Good Fellow* (*Le bonhomme Lénine*), which was viewed with extreme hostility by Moscow.[77]

From this point forward, Kurtna's autobiography veers into pure fantasy. He claims that on 10 September 1943 – as German forces occupied Rome following the Italian armistice and the flight of King Vittorio Emanuele III to Brindisi – a prisoner revolt at Regina Coeli led to his liberation. This account is entirely inaccurate. According to his British interrogation records, Kurtna was actually released on 30 September 1943. His liberation was orchestrated by Herbert Kappler, who had also moved to arrest Colonel Manfredi Talamo. This was more than mere retaliation for Kurtna's imprisonment; it was a strike against the Italian SIM, which had long hindered German intelligence operations in the capital. Talamo's fate was tragic: he was later executed by Kappler's SS during the Fosse Ardeatine massacre on 24 March 1944.[78]

Upon their release, Kurtna and his wife, Alma, received a substantial sum of money from Friedrich Bock and settled into a luxurious new apartment at Via Cola di Rienzo 28, in the elegant Prati neighbourhood. Curiously, in his autobiography, Kurtna claims to have lived in a much more modest location on Viale Regina Margherita. While his memoirs depict him as a "freedom fighter" actively participating in the defence of Rome against the German occupation, several intriguing figures from the Nazi hierarchy emerge in his narrative. Kurtna mentions encounters with two pivotal personalities in occupied Rome: the aforementioned Georg Elling and Eugen Dollmann, an honorary SS *Obersturmbannführer*. According to Kurtna, these men facilitated Alma's release, though the British interrogation report attributes the liberation to Bock and Kappler. Dollmann remains an enigmatic figure; while some authors have mistakenly labelled him the head of German intelligence in Rome,

76 C. Malaparte. Kriket Poolas. (Loomingu Raamatukogu, 38/39). Perioodika, Tallinn, 1976.
77 C. Malaparte. Le bonhomme Lénine. Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1932.
78 The Fosse Ardeatine massacre (24 March 1944) stands as the most heinous German war crime committed in Rome, alongside the deportation of the Roman Jewish community. The massacre was a reprisal for the partisan attack in Via Rasella the previous day, which killed 33 soldiers of the SS *Polizeiregiment Bozen*. Following Hitler's order to execute ten Italians for every German victim, the SS collected 335 prisoners from various Roman jails – including the Gestapo headquarters at Via Tasso – and murdered them in the Ardeatine caves. See A. Portelli. The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003.

that role belonged strictly to Kappler. Dollmann's rank was largely ceremonial, yet he wielded immense influence as the primary liaison between the German command and Roman high society, bolstered by his personal connection to Heinrich Himmler.[79]

## THE GERMAN OCCUPATION AND THE END OF THE WAR IN ROME

The German occupation of Rome lasted only nine months, yet for a historian, it remains an exceptionally dense and eventful period.[80] Vatican City had become a sanctuary for a vast number of diplomats, Allied officers, and opponents of the Third Reich, and the city was swarming with operatives from every intelligence service. For Kurtna, this was a season of intense activity, but also one of calculated repositioning. As it became increasingly clear that the Germans were losing the war – with the Allied arrival expected at any moment – he realised he needed to provide tangible services to Soviet intelligence to secure his future. At this juncture, Fräulein Laubert reappears, alongside a new contact: Fräulein Schwarzer, a secretary at the German Embassy. Kurtna first persuaded them to purge incriminating data from his SIM dossiers, which had fallen into German hands following the occupation. Subsequently, he began transmitting intelligence to the Soviets through the Siamese Legation (the current Thai Embassy at Villa Thai on Via Nomentana) and other clandestine channels. This strategic pivot probably saved his life when the war finally concluded.

Kurtna's most significant operational achievement was persuading Fräulein Schwarzer to defect to the Soviet cause. Her cooperation was partially rooted in her family's communist sympathies, but it was primarily secured through a calculated promise: with Soviet troops advancing towards her parents' home in Silesia, Kurtna guaranteed their protection. He later followed through on this by providing their names

79 E. Dollmann. With Hitler and Mussolini. On Dollmann's actual influence and his complex relationship with the SS hierarchy, see K. von Lingen. Allen Dulles, the OSS, and Nazi War Criminals. The Dynamics of Selective Prosecution. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013.

80 For the definitive accounts of this period, see R. Trevelyan. Rome '44. The Battle for the Eternal City. Secker & Warburg, London, 1981; R. Katz. The Battle for Rome. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004; L. Klinkhammer. Zwischen Bündnis und Besatzung. Das nationalsozialistische Italien und die Republik von Salò, 1943–1945. (Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom, 75). Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1993. For a topographical and visual history, see A. Majanlahti, A. Osti-Guerrazzi. Roma occupata 1943–1944. Itinerari, storia, immagini. Il Saggiatore, Milan, 2010.

to Soviet authorities to ensure their safety. Schwarzer's position granted Kurtna access to the German Embassy's most sensitive files, including copies of Tarvonen's confession, which contained a comprehensive list of active Soviet operatives. Simultaneously, Moscow utilised Kurtna to feed the Germans sophisticated disinformation, such as falsified reports on the outcomes of the Tehran Conference. However, Soviet directives were often inconsistent, forcing Kurtna to rely on his own ingenuity and imagination to execute his missions and maintain his cover.

Kurtna also played a role in assisting escaped Soviet prisoners of war and forced labourers, many of whom were hidden within the Siamese Legation. However, this effort was not a direct instrument of Soviet policy; rather, it was spearheaded by a local branch of the Mladorossy (Young Russians). While this movement was ideologically hostile to Communism, its members – led in Rome by Vassili Nikolaevich Dyukin – collaborated with the Soviet Union during the war out of nationalistic necessity. Paradoxically, Kurtna was actually reprimanded by his Soviet handlers for this involvement, as Moscow viewed such independent initiatives with deep suspicion.[81]

Even as he pivoted toward Moscow, Kurtna continued to serve German interests by assisting Georg Elling. Their meeting took place at the Albergo Maestoso, where Elling revealed that despite his long tenure in Berlin as the RSHA's Vatican specialist, he lacked practical field experience and could not even speak Italian. During this encounter, Kurtna received a payment of 6,000 lire. As the German occupation of Rome drew to a close, Kurtna became central to Elling's project of establishing a 'stay-behind' intelligence network intended to operate under Allied occupation. As the Germans evacuated, Kurtna agreed to remain in the city as an undercover agent, accepting a staggering sum of 100,000 lire to fund his future activities. Simultaneously, however, he obtained from Fräulein Schwarzer the complete list of agents that Elling was leaving behind in Rome, effectively compromising the entire German operation before it even began.

In his autobiography, Kurtna paints a radically different picture: he depicts himself as a dedicated Resistance member, sheltering Soviet officers in safe houses and enthusiastically welcoming the American liberators. However, 5 June 1944, the day after the Allies entered Rome, proved to be far from celebratory for him. Early that morning, Kurtna went to the Vatican to deliver a cache of documents obtained from

81 The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657, 22.

Fräulein Schwarzer. He left them with one of Montini's secretaries, intended for ultimate delivery to the Soviets. Afterwards, he and his wife headed to Villa Thai to gauge the situation in the city. On their return journey, near Villa Nemorense, they were intercepted by the very same SIM agents who had arrested Kurtna in 1942: Tranfo and Di Bello.

Kurtna was returned to Regina Coeli, where he was interrogated by various U.S. and British intelligence officers. Finally, he was visited by Nikolai Gorshkov, who initially feigned ignorance of Kurtna's identity before engaging him in a private conversation. Gorshkov instructed him to withhold all information from the British and Americans. Seeking to protect himself, Kurtna requested and obtained a formal guarantee from the British Secret Service that his depositions would remain strictly confidential. On 21 September 1944, Kurtna and his wife were handed over to Soviet military authorities and transported to Moscow. There, he faced trial for treason and was sentenced to the Norilsk labour camp. Some years later, in 1948, his former fellow seminarian Walter Ciszek encountered him in Norilsk. To Ciszek's surprise, he found Kurtna well-fed and dressed in a white coat, working in the camp's medical service, a "warm and quiet place" far removed from the brutal labour of the other inmates.[82]

Existing studies on espionage in Rome and the Vatican rank Kurtna among the most eminent intelligence operatives of the era.[83] Conversely, Branko Bokun – a fellow spy in the Vatican who knew him well – offered a more biting assessment, describing him as "one of the most obscure double agents" and a "small, insignificant, and compliant mouse of a man who travelled paths laid out for him by others". For Bokun, Kurtna was a triple agent, working simultaneously for the Vatican, the Germans, and the Soviets.[84] Notably, Bokun is one of the few to highlight the connection with the Holy See, which, as this study suggests, is crucial to deciphering Kurtna's true role. The web of suspicion around him was broader still: in 1942, the Italian SIM even suspected him of collaborating with the French Deuxième Bureau.[85] Despite his historical importance, Kurtna's figure remains shrouded in mystification, some of it self-authored, and some the result of superficial

82 D. Alvarez. Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2002, 316–318.

83 See, for example, D. Alvarez, R. A. Graham. Nothing Sacred, 120, 121, 126, 127; O. Chadwick. Britain and the Vatican During the Second World War. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, 176.

84 B. Bokun. Memoirs of A Nomadic Humorist. Irony, Pathos and Farce. Vita Books, London, 2007, 19–21.

85 R. A. Graham. L'occhio del Sim sulla Città del Vaticano, 148.

historical accounts. In Italian literature one encounters the recurring, inaccurate trope of the "Lithuanian priest" who spied for both Berlin and Moscow.[86]

A definitive judgement on Kurtna's activities as an intelligence officer remains elusive without access to the Soviet sources held in the Podolsk archives. Nevertheless, several key considerations can be made. Some authors have alleged that Kurtna was responsible for the arrest and subsequent death of numerous Jesuits and others involved in the Vatican's "re-evangelisation" project in Eastern Europe, as well as clergy opposed to the Nazi regime.[87] These claims, however, appear to lack a factual basis. Had Kurtna surrendered all the data in his possession to either the Soviets or the Nazis, it would probably have triggered hundreds of arrests. Yet, there is no documented evidence of anyone being detained specifically due to his denunciations. As the evidence suggests, both Moscow and Berlin were primarily interested in high-level political intelligence within the Vatican; they did not utilise Kurtna as a tool for dismantling missionary projects or for the systematic persecution of individual religious opponents.

Another complex issue lies in determining exactly for whom Kurtna worked. The evidence suggests he served all three powers – the Germans, the Soviets, and the Vatican – simultaneously and with equal dedication. While his German handlers initially held sway, by 1943–1944 it became clear that the Reich was losing the war, and his primary allegiance shifted decisively toward the Soviets. It is also noteworthy that Kurtna provided a vast amount of data to British intelligence – directly defying Gorshkov's orders – in an effort to demonstrate his willingness to collaborate with the Allies. It was for this reason that his 1944 interrogation report was eventually reviewed in London by Kim Philby, who sought to examine the extent of the Soviet intelligence network in Italy.

Ultimately, the Soviets appear to have accepted Kurtna's version of events. Had there been even a modicum of suspicion regarding his ultimate loyalty, he would probably have been executed immediately. Instead, he was sentenced to ten years in the Gulag – a remarkably lenient term given the political climate of the era. Another telling detail involves his wife, Alma. She was never arrested and, in February 1945,

86 G. Pillon. Spie per l'Italia. I Libri del No, Roma, 1968; C. De Risio. Generali, Servizi Segreti e Fascismo: la guerra nella guerra 1940–1943. Mondadori, Milano, 1978.

87 E. Caretto. Le spie in Vaticano. – Corriere della Sera, 13 August 2003. Caretto's assertions represent a trend in popular journalism that often prioritises sensationalism over archival verification.

gave birth to their daughter in Moscow. This implies she must have been pregnant since May 1944, during the final weeks of the German occupation of Rome. Curiously, Kurtna makes no mention of this in his autobiography, which concludes abruptly with his "happy" return to the Soviet homeland.

Throughout his years in Rome – with the exception of his imprisonment from July 1942 to September 1943 – Kurtna worked in the Vatican Archives. In his 1966 account, he claimed to have copied or catalogued approximately 7,000 sources. According to Kurtna, this extensive catalogue was confiscated by American forces upon his arrest on 5 June 1944.[88] In reality, however, he was apprehended by the Italian Military Intelligence Service (SIM).[89] As no trace of this catalogue has been found in the archives of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) or British intelligence, its ultimate fate remains a mystery. The records of the SIM are currently held by the Italian intelligence agencies (AISE) and remain strictly inaccessible to researchers; consequently, it is impossible to determine whether Kurtna's documents are still preserved within those files.

## CONCLUSIONS: ARCHIVAL RESEARCH FROM HELK TO THUMSER AND A FINAL JUDGEMENT ON KURTNA

Kurtna's scholarly interests extended far beyond the Vatican Secret Archives – where he focused on the registers of supplications and papal letters – to the central archives of the Society of Jesus (ARSI). These Jesuit archives house a wealth of primary material concerning Livonia from the sixteenth century onward. Following the Second World War, these same sources were systematically examined by Vello Helk, the only Estonian historian to conduct extensive research in Roman ecclesiastical archives during that period. Helk's seminal studies on the Jesuit Order in Livonia drew upon the very foundations that Kurtna had once navigated, though under vastly different circumstances.[90]

88 TLA.R-27.1.937a, 2 (14).

89 The National Archives (Kew), KV 2/657, interrogation summary, 28 August 1944, 12.

90 See V. Helk. Die Jesuiten in Dorpat 1583–1625. Ein Vorposten der Gegenreformation in Nordosteuropa. Odense University Press, Odense, 1977; see also the unpublished annotations and copies in RA, EAA.5383. See also J. Undusk. How to Become a Perfect Danish-Estonian Historian: Homage to Vello Helk. – East and Central European History Writing in Exile 1939–1989. Ed. by M. Zadencka, A. Plakans, A. Lawaty. Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2015, 236–248.

Following Vello Helk's contributions, no systematic research on Livonica within the Vatican was undertaken until the recent editorial project led by Matthias Thumser and his colleagues. This major initiative focused on volumes 13 to 16 of the first series of the *Liv-, Est- und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch* (LEKUB). The project aims to incorporate Vatican documents covering the period from 1472 to 1494; volumes 13 and 14 have already been published; the very sources that Kurtna had once catalogued.[91]

In summarising the current state of research, the initial impression is one of significant complexity and fragmentation. The earlier volumes of the LEKUB were compiled before the formal opening of the Vatican Archives in 1881; it was only starting with Volume 7, edited by Hildebrand – covering the period from 1423 – that Vatican sources began to be utilised. However, these early volumes were edited according to outdated historiographical criteria, often failing to cite specific sources or provide diplomatic and palaeographic descriptions. Consequently, they offer limited assistance regarding Vatican materials. Even the editors of the most recent volumes (from Volume 13 onward) were able to consult only a limited selection of available papal records. As the editors themselves acknowledge, practical constraints meant that the *Vaticana* could only be partially incorporated. While materials from the German Historical Institute in Rome were used, they were incomplete at the time, meaning that many registers – beyond the intentional exclusion of minor judicial and gratial matters – appear only sporadically in the current editions.[92]

Any study of the medieval and early modern history of Livonia based solely on the LEKUB must be considered scientifically incomplete, given the substantial quantity of unpublished and uncatalogued sources yet to be integrated into these volumes. Before assessing the potential source material available in the Vatican, it is necessary to survey the documents already accessible within the Baltic region. Existing editions by Motzki, Arbusow, and others must be carefully considered, alongside a significant volume of unpublished transcriptions and registers. Of

91 LEKUB, Bd. 13, 1472–1479. Bearb. von M. Mahling, K. Neitmann, M. Thumser. Böhlau, Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2018; LEKUB, Bd. 14, 1480–1483. Bearb. von C. Gahlbeck, M. Mahling, K. Neitmann, M. Thumser. Böhlau, Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2020; volumes 15 and 16 are in preparation.

92 LEKUB, Bd. 13, 17: "Aus praktischen Gründen konnten die Vaticana nur teilweise berücksichtigt werden. Parallel zur Bearbeitung des 13. Bandes des LUB wurde das "Repertorium Germanicum" für Sixtus IV. erstellt. Zwar wurden von seiten des herausgebenden Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom Materialien zur Verfügung gestellt, doch waren diese seinerzeit noch nicht vollständig, sodass die vatikanischen Registerserien über den prinzipiellen Verzicht auf minder wichtige Justiz- und Gratialsachen hinaus nur punktuell in den vorliegenden Band eingeflossen sind."

primary importance are the papers of Liisi Karttunen, left in Estonia in 1919 and now preserved in Tartu, and those of Vello Helk, also held there. Any future research project in the Vatican should commence with the systematic cataloguing of these edited and unpublished sources. Ideally, a centralised database should be established to collate information from the LEKUB, the works of Motzki and Arbusow, and the foundational papers of Karttunen, Helk, and Kurtna.

Returning to Kurtna, he remains the scholar who devoted more time than any other to the study of Livonica within the Vatican Archives. The sheer brilliance of this man is well documented: he was a polyglot fluent in dozens of languages and, following his release from the Gulag, a prolific translator who introduced a vast corpus of world literature to the Estonian public. He was undoubtedly a controversial figure, often polarising those who knew him; in his later years, he probably served the Estonian KGB, though evidence suggests he did so without causing harm to others.[93] In my personal estimation, Kurtna's entry into the world of espionage in 1940–1941 was a pragmatic decision to finance his Vatican studies. His archival research was never a mere cover for his intelligence work; rather, it was his true vocation, for which espionage provided a dangerous but necessary source of funding.

## „ME OLEME PÕHJAST": *LIVONICA* VATIKANI ARHIIVIS JA ALEKSANDER KURTNA ERIJUHTUM

*Kristjan Toomaspoeg*

Vatikani Apostellik Arhiiv on oma 85 riiulikilomeetri ja miljonite dokumentidega üks peamiseid keskaja Liivimaa (tänapäeva Eesti ja Läti) ajaloo allikate hoidlaid. Kuigi suur osa neist materjalidest on Baltimaade uurijatele tuntud, moodustavad need vaid murdosa sellest, mis on veel tundmata. Süstemaatiline teadustöö algas 1881. aastal, mil paavst Leo XIII avas arhiivi uksed uurijatele. Enne seda olid arhiivile erandkorras ligi pääsenud vaid üksikud õpetlased, nagu Aleksandr Turgenev 1840. aastatel ja arhiivi prefekt Augustin Theiner 1860. aastatel. Esimene balti ajaloolane, kes aastatel 1885–1886 Vatikani allikaid uuris, täiendades monumentaalset allikakollektsiooni „Liv-, Est- und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch"

93 Some Estonian intellectuals found reports from a certain "Agent Calvino" in their dossiers after the opening of the KGB archives and attributed them to Kurtna.

(LEKUB), oli Riia linnaarhivaar Hermann Hildebrand. Hiljem integreeriti Vatikani-uuringud rahvusvahelistesse projektidesse. Aastatel 1907–1915 kopeeris paavsti registreid soomlanna Liisi Karttunen, tema ümberkirjutused (aastatest 1219–1571) anti 1919. aastal üle Eesti diplomaatilisele delegatsioonile ja asuvad praegu Tartus Rahvusarhiivis. Vahetult enne teda kopeeris ja avaldas Preisimaa ajaloolane Arthur Motzki väärtusliku seeria Liivimaad puudutavaid palvekirju (*Registra Supplicationum*) aastatest 1342–1366. Läti valitsuse toel tegi silmapaistvaimad uuringud Leonid Arbusow noorem, kes aastatel 1926–1931 uuris põhjalikult paavsti 14. sajandi registreid ja kelle ulatuslik fotokogu leiti hiljuti taas üles Läti Riiklikust Ajalooarhiivist.

Eesti vastus Läti uurimisprojektidele kehastus Aleksander Kurtnas (snd 1914 Räpinas). Kurtna, kes valdas vabalt mitmeid keeli, pöördus 1935. aastal katoliiklusse – ajal, mil Vatikan püüdis jesuiitide ordu kaudu tugevdada katoliikluse mõju Ida-Euroopas. 1936. aastal saadeti Kurtna Rooma jesuiitide seminari *Collegium Russicum* õppima. Kuigi ta pidi 1939. aastal preestriametiks sobimatuse tõttu seminarist lahkuma, jäi ta Rooma, teenis elatist keeleõpetajana ja sai seejärel stipendiumi Vatikani arhiivide uurimiseks. Kurtna tegi Roomas intensiivset teadustööd, keskendudes palvekirjade registritele ja seni vähetuntud *Ospizio dei Convertendi* fondile, mis sisaldas katoliiklusse pöördunud liivimaalaste andmeid.

1940. aasta suvel toimunud Nõukogude riigipööre Eestis ja Itaalia astumine Teise maailmasõtta muutsid täielikult Kurtna elu. Ta sai Vatikani riigisekretäri asendajalt Giovanni Battista Montinilt (tulevaselt paavst Paulus VI-lt) eriloa arhiivitöö jätkamiseks. Samal perioodil algas tema spioonikarjäär. Autori hinnangul oli Kurtna eelkõige Vatikani spioon, kuid 1940. aasta sügisel sattus ta Moskvas tõenäoliselt Nõukogude sõjaväeluure (GRU) teenistusse. Tema ülesandeks oli koguda kuuldusi Vatikani poliitika kohta ja edastada luureinfo oma Rooma kontaktile Nikolai Gorškovile. Kui Nõukogude saatkond 1941. aasta suvel Roomast evakueeriti, jäi Kurtna rahata. Vatikani vaimulike soovitusel pöördus ta Saksa Ajalooinstituudi juhi Friedrich Bocki poole, kes andis talle tööd ja tutvustas teda Herbert Kapplerile – Roomas asuva natsliku julgeolekuteenistuse (SD) ja RSHA juhile. Nii tõmmati Kurtna Saksa luurevõrgustikku ja ta hakkas natsidele koostama igakuiseid raporteid Kolmanda Riigi ja Vatikani suhete kohta. Sakslased teadsid tema Nõukogude minevikust, kuid usaldasid teda täielikult. 1942. aasta suvel reisis Kurtna natside ja Vatikani toel korraks okupeeritud Eestisse, kohtudes teel Berliinis Gestapo ohvitseri Friedrich Panzingeriga ning

Tallinnas Martin Sandbergeriga – see kinnitab tema rolli usaldusväärse Saksa agendina. Eestis sai ta teada, et sakslased olid hukanud ühe tema vendadest. Naasnud juulis 1942 Rooma, arreteeris Itaalia sõjaväeluure (SIM) Kurtna, sest nad olid dešifreerinud Nõukogude spioonidele saadetud raadiosõnumi koodfraasiga „Me oleme Põhjast", mis sisaldas Kurtnale mõeldud juhiseid. Kurtna veetis aasta Regina Coeli vanglas, kus ta väidetavalt olevat kohtunud kirjanik Curzio Malapartega. 1943. aasta septembris, kui Roomas algas Saksa okupatsioon, vabastas Herbert Kappler Kurtna vanglast ja neutraliseeris Itaalia SIM-i. Sõja lõpukuudel Roomas viibides ja mõistes, et Saksamaa kaotab, asus Kurtna intensiivselt edastama infot Nõukogude luurele. Tema suurimaks saavutuseks oli värvata Saksa saatkonna sekretär Schwarzer, kelle kaudu sai ta juurdepääsu natside kõige salajasematele dokumentidele ja natside poolt Rooma jäetud salaagentide nimekirjale, mille ta kohe Nõukogude poolele reetis. 4. juunil 1944, päev pärast liitlasvägede saabumist Rooma, arreteerisid SIM-i agendid Kurtna uuesti. Pärast ülekuulamisi USA ja Briti luure poolt anti Kurtna ja tema naine Alma sama aasta septembris üle Nõukogude võimudele ja viidi Moskvasse. Kurtnale mõisteti riigireetmise eest kümme aastat Norilski vangilaagris – stalinistliku ajastu kohta üllatavalt leebe karistus, mis viitab sellele, et Moskva aktsepteeris tema versiooni sündmustest. Pärast vabanemist naasis Kurtna Eestisse, kus temast sai väljapaistev ja produktiivne tõlkija, kes vahendas eesti lugejatele suure hulga maailmakirjandust. Teaduslikust vaatenurgast on Aleksander Kurtna mees, kes on veetnud Vatikani arhiivides Liivimaa allikaid uurides rohkem aega kui ükski teine eesti õpetlane. Arhiivitöö oli tema tõeline kutsumus, mitte lihtsalt kate spionaažile, mis oli talle vaid viis oma Vatikani-uuringuid finantseerida.

Tulevaste Vatikani-projektide arendamiseks on hädavajalik esmalt süstemaatiliselt kataloogida ja digiteerida juba Baltikumis (Tartus ja Tallinnas) leiduvad avaldamata transkriptsioonid, eriti Liisi Karttuneni, Vello Helki ja Aleksander Kurtna isiklikud paberid. Ideaalis tuleks luua tsentraliseeritud andmebaas, mis koondaks LEKUB-i, Motzki, Arbusowi, Karttuneni, Helki ja Kurtna materjalid, et võimaldada tulevastele põlvedele täielik ülevaade Liivimaa ajaloost.