



Frederick the Great (1712-1786)

by Louis Godbout

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Frederick the Great.
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King of Prussia (1740-1786), general, and writer, Frederick II greatly expanded his kingdom through a series of brutal wars and cynical reversals of alliances in which he showed both military genius and diplomatic acumen. His homosexuality was an open secret during his reign, yet some historians have attempted to deny it or diminish its significance.

In spite of the carnage wrought in the bloody battles of the campaigns he led, Frederick saw himself as the archetype of the Enlightened ruler. He was, indeed, not only a protector of the arts and sciences, bringing to his court some of the best minds of the eighteenth century, but also a flute player, composer, and writer, albeit of modest talent.

Because Frederick's military conquests made Prussia the core around which Germany would coalesce in the nineteenth century, he has often been portrayed as a national hero and as such his homosexuality has frequently been glossed over. Even some recent biographies continue to exclude any allusion to or hint of his homosexuality. German historians especially have considered it impossible for such a virile and stoic man to have been homosexual, and have regarded the king's reputation for homosexuality as a slight by the French.

Yet proof of Frederick's sexual proclivity is overwhelming. It comes not only from the writings of satirists and enemies, but from the observations and correspondence of friends and from the works of Frederick himself.

Traumatic Childhood and Young Manhood

His youth was extremely traumatic. Born in Berlin on January 24, 1712, he was the son of King Frederick William I. His father was a miserly, uncouth, and violent man, who savagely beat his wife (a daughter of George I of England) and children, and whose only passion was for a regiment of giants, men over six feet tall who were recruited at high cost.

Frederick William took his son's enthusiasm for all things French as a sign of effeminacy. (Frederick himself considered the German language as good enough only to speak to his horses and wrote mostly in French). The father imposed on his son a soldierly regimen of the strictest discipline and took sadistic pleasure in humiliating him. He went so far as to mock him publicly, for instance, by saying to his face that he himself would never have endured such a father as he was.

In reaction to the king's despotism and philistinism, Frederick and his older sister Wilhelmina, with whom he was to have a lifelong close friendship, secretly cultivated music and literature, smuggling books with the help of friends of similar inclinations. One of them, the handsome Hans von Katte, Lieutenant in the Royal Guard and son of a general at Königsberg, became particularly close to Frederick and may well have been his first lover.

In 1730, at eighteen, Frederick and Katte, along with a couple of accomplices, planned an escape to his mother's relatives in England. Caught and accused of high treason, Frederick barely escaped with his life and was imprisoned. As for Katte, Frederick William's cruelty reached a pinnacle when he had the young officer executed by sword under the very eyes of Frederick, who fainted with emotion and collapsed for two days.

For another ten years Frederick had to live under the yoke of his tyrannical father and accept his arrangements for a marriage that was probably never consummated. (Upon his father's death in 1740, Frederick immediately separated from his wife, Elizabeth Christine of Brunswick.) He nevertheless gained some measure of independence at Rheinsberg, where he was permitted to set up a little court in which he found peace and happiness.

Interest in Homosexual Culture

It is from there that he started his voluminous correspondence with Voltaire, which would last through his life in spite of a serious falling out between the men in 1753. Voltaire was later to write a book exposing Frederick's homosexuality, but it was published only in 1784, six years after its author's death.

In his correspondence with Voltaire, Frederick early on evinced a great interest in what we would today call gay culture. In an astonishingly open fashion, this interest was encouraged by Voltaire.

Allusions to the great homosexual heroes of antiquity abound. Frederick is portrayed as Caesar or Alexander and his intimate and go-between Count Keyserling as Césarion or Hephaestion.

In a letter to Voltaire dated February 2, 1739, one year before his accession to the throne, Frederick reveals a literary project of his, "so great that I myself am frightened by it . . . a tragedy with a subject taken from the *Aeneid* . . . the tender and constant friendship of Nisus and Euryalus." Though no trace of this homoerotic tragedy has survived, Frederick went on to write a lengthy mock-heroic poem, *Le Palladion* (1750), in imitation of Voltaire's own *La Pucelle* (written in the 1730s) and, like it, rife with allusions to homosexuality: Frederick even portrays Jesus and John the Beloved Disciple as lovers.

It was not only through literature that Frederick extolled homosexuality. He collected ancient artwork, notably ancient carved gemstones picturing nude athletes and the *Adoring Youth*, a Hellenistic bronze that had previously belonged to another famous homosexual general, Prince Eugene of Savoy, which he placed in view of his library window. He commissioned frescoes of Ganymede for his palaces; and, in 1768, inspired by Voltaire's poem bearing that title, had a *Temple of Friendship* built in his garden at Potsdam, inscribed with the names of lovers and friends of antiquity, such as Orestes and Pylades and his cherished Nisus and Euryalus.

Life at Sans Souci

Voltaire was eventually drawn to reside at Sans Souci, a newly built palace where Frederick surrounded himself with freethinking men--no women were allowed--many of whom, such as Count Algarotti or the philosopher La Mettrie, were homosexual. He describes the utter freedom of their suppers there (for instance, discussing Plato's theory of the Androgynes) and the exact way in which Frederick would pick handsome soldiers for his sexual "schoolboy games."

Although some have insinuated that Voltaire invented these stories of life at Sans Souci to avenge the humiliation he suffered after his quarrel with Frederick, such is unlikely, for their sodomitical banter picked up as soon as their correspondence started again. One only need read Voltaire's famous letter of May 2, 1759, complimenting Frederick's victory at Rosbach, which deals in a campy way with the "beautiful asses" of the fleeing French soldiers, to understand to what degree the king was open to his close entourage.

Frederick's Lovers

Apart from Katte, a few of Frederick's great loves are known: Fredersdorf, the handsome guard assigned to him after his escape, who eventually became his Majordomo; Count Algarotti, the seductive Italian writer; and the abbé Bastiani, a Venetian who was made Canon of Breslaw (Wroclaw) Cathedral and who did not hesitate to show his compatriot Casanova the love letters he had received from the king.

Close to him also, but showing the same tastes in a more outrageous manner, was his brother Prince Henry. Voltaire called him a Potsdamite (that is, a Sodomite), and he was reputed to recruit only homosexuals in his regiments.

The Homosexual Subculture and Reaction

With such examples from above, it is no wonder that a homosexual subculture developed in Berlin. In 1782, *Briefe über die Galanterien von Berlin* (Letters on the Gallantries of Berlin), a book exposing the city's sexual underworld, attributed to one Johann Friedel, described public meeting places and even a boy-brothel that testify to the loose morals of the "warm brothers" as homosexuals called themselves.

If Frederick's friends and some of his subjects took inspiration from his homosexuality, his enemies did not hesitate to attack him on that front. Several pamphlets were published containing insinuations of homosexuality, such as *Idée de la personne, de la manière de vivre, et de la cour du roi de Prusse, juin 1752* and *Les Matinées du roi de Prusse* (1766, translated as *Royal Mornings*, 1798).

The philosopher Diderot, well informed and not prone to exaggeration, wrote in March 1760 a note on Frederick in which he says: "The only one thing that this admirable flute player was missing was a mouthpiece that should have been a little cleaner." He also penned a poem entitled *Parallèle* between Caesar and Frederick (undated) that includes the statement: "Caesar was generous, Frederick is miserly. When I compare them I see but one point in common, namely that they were both buggers. But there wasn't a Roman lady who was worthwhile with whom Caesar did not sleep, whereas His Prussian Majesty never touched a woman, not even his own wife."

During the Seven Years War, Frederick was almost "outed" by the Duc de Choiseul, the French prime minister. Frederick had written an offensive poem about the love of Louis XV for his mistress Madame de Pompadour; in response, Choiseul had had a poem written that ended thus: "How can you condemn tenderness, you who have known ecstasy only in the arms of your regimental drummers."

Conclusion

In his last years, Frederick, having established Prussia as a major European power, doubled its size, and set the stage for a unified Germany, grew misanthropic and reclusive. After a lengthy illness, he died August 17, 1786, at age 74, attended by a young Italian count.

It is a testimony to the strength of homophobia and heterosexism that such a mass of evidence of the king's homosexuality, of which only the surface is presented here, was obscured or deemed unconvincing for more than two hundred years after Frederick's death.

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About the Author

Louis Godbout is a collector and amateur historian. He is a longtime member of the Archives gaies du Québec and has participated in the preparation of several exhibits in Montreal. He has also produced three multi-media lectures that reflect his varied interests: *Beaux enfans de Sodome*, on eighteenth-century sodomitical imagery; *Ébauches et débauches*, on gay French literature from 1859 to 1939; and *Le rideau rose*, on French gay and lesbian theater before 1969.