



Louis XVIII.

Louis XVIII (1755-1824)

by Michael D. Sibalis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Louis XVIII, who reigned as King of France from 1814 to 1824, is often listed among famous gay people in history, but the evidence is unclear. His case illustrates the difficulty of attributing a homosexual orientation to people in the past.

Born at Versailles on November 17, 1755, Louis XVIII began life as Louis-Stanislas-Xavier, Count de Provence. He was one of the three surviving grandsons of Louis XV (reigned 1715-1774). The court considered him smarter and even more lovable than his dull, plodding older brother, Louis-Auguste, Duke de Berry (born 1754), but the rules of succession dictated that the latter ascend to the throne as Louis XVI in 1774.

The Count de Provence resented his older brother's good fortune and his own lack of a significant political role. Cynical and self-indulgent, he therefore intrigued against Louis XVI and the royal advisers.

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, the Count de Provence initially posed as a supporter of the new political system. In 1791, however, he fled abroad for what turned out to be twenty-three years of exile spent wandering across Europe (he eventually settled in England) and plotting against the Revolution and, then, Napoleon Bonaparte. After the execution of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793 and the death (in June 1795) of that king's ten-year-old son, who was being held prisoner in Paris, the Count de Provence proclaimed himself King of France as Louis XVIII.

The chances of Louis ever coming to power seemed slim indeed, but after Napoleon's defeat and abdication in April 1814, the French Senate, with no other practicable alternative, summoned him to the throne.

Louis granted a liberal constitution, known as "The Charter," but spoiled the effect by dating it "in the nineteenth year of our reign," as if he had been France's legal sovereign ever since 1795.

Louis reigned for only eleven months before he had to flee Paris once more when Napoleon escaped from exile on the island of Elba in March 1815 and marched on the capital. Napoleon went down to defeat at Waterloo on June 18, the Allies sent him into permanent exile on St. Helena, and Louis returned to reign until his death on September 16, 1824. His younger brother, the Count d'Artois, succeeded him as Charles X (reigned 1824-1830).

Louis XVIII's sexuality is somewhat of a mystery. An attractive child (Louis XV described him as "pretty enough to eat"), he grew into an overweight adolescent and an obese and gouty adult. He probably suffered from diabetes. He was impotent in later life, a condition that may have begun when he was still a young man.

His marriage in 1771 to the ugly, dirty, and foul-smelling Marie-Joséphine of Savoy (1753-1810) was unhappy. The young prince claimed that he had sexual relations with his wife, but this could well have been idle boasting. Marie-Joséphine herself had lesbian tendencies and formed a long-lasting attachment to one of her ladies-in-waiting, Madame de Gourbillon, that contemporaries judged to be "unnatural."

The Count de Provence took the beautiful Countess de Balbi as his official mistress in the 1780s and 1790s, but was undoubtedly attracted more by her wit and intelligence than by her physical charms. Many historians believe that they never had sexual relations.

Louis XVIII also had a series of male favorites. The intensity of these relationships suggests some degree of homoerotic feeling on his part, although Louis may not have been consciously aware of it.

The most important of his favorites was the handsome Élie Decazes (1780-1860), who between 1815 and 1820 served the King successively as Prefect of Police, Minister of Police, Minister of the Interior, and finally Prime Minister. Louis spent hours every day meeting with Decazes and writing him passionate letters addressed to "my dear child" and "my son."

The king carefully promoted Decazes's career and watched over his wife and children with an affection that seems more than just paternal. In the words of Évelyne Lever: "Never had Louis XVIII loved with such abandon. This passion [for Decazes] henceforth filled his entire existence."

The king was heartbroken when political pressure compelled him to dismiss Decazes because of the statesman's liberal policies and to send him abroad as ambassador to London. And yet the king's next and last favorite was not another man, but a beautiful woman: the Countess du Cayla (1785-1852).

Although gay dictionaries often include Louis XVIII, the king was certainly not "gay" nor even "homosexual" or "bisexual" in any conventional sense of these words. It is possible that he never had sex with anyone in his life.

Beyond the question of what men or women he may or may not have slept with, however, the history of Louis's various emotional relationships illustrates the difficulty of fitting a complex psychological make-up into the simple binary categories of homosexual and heterosexual.

Bibliography

Dupêchez, Charles F. *La Reine velue: Marie-Joséphoïne-Louise de Savoie, 1753-1810, dernière reine de France*. Paris: Grasset, 1993.

Godard, Didier. "Louis XVIII." *Dictionnaire des chefs d'État homosexuels ou bisexuels*. Béziers: H&O, 2004. 171-75.

_____. "Louis XVIII." *Who's Who in Gay & Lesbian History*. Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds. London: Routledge, 2001. 277-78.

Lever, Évelyne. *Louis XVIII*. Paris: Fayard, 1988.

Mansel, Philip. *Lous XVIII*. London: Blond and Biggs, 1981.

About the Author

Michael D. Sibalis is Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the history of modern France and has published articles and essays on the Napoleonic police state (1799-1815), the nineteenth-century French labor movement, and French homosexuality. He has co-edited, with Jeffrey Merrick, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (2002) and is currently writing a history of the gay male community of Paris since 1700.