

## Historical Article

# Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia: Suez and syphilis. Un canard dévoilé

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### Abstract

Frederick III (Crown Prince of Prussia, and Emperor of Germany) died of cancer of the larynx in 1888. In *Drame Imperial* (1888) journalist Jean de Bonnefon asserted that the disease was not cancer but syphilis which the Crown Prince acquired in 1869 in Suez. What de Bonnefon wrote about the prince does not coincide with the prince's itinerary published in the *London Times*. This discrepancy is examined and the reason for de Bonnefon's claim is considered. The report that Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia caught syphilis in Suez is a canard.

**Key words:** History of medicine, C19<sup>th</sup>; Laryngeal neoplasms; Syphilis

### Introduction

Did the laryngeal cancer that killed Emperor Frederick III of Prussia (1831–1888) develop from a specific syphilitic lesion and, if so, when did the primary lesion appear? These vital questions were answered in a manner of speaking by journalist Jean de Bonnefon when he wrote about Frederick's visit to Suez in *Drame Imperial Ce que l'on ne peut pas dire à Berlin*, published within months of Frederick's death (de Bonnefon, 1888). But de Bonnefon's account of the Suez visit was a lie: *Drame Imperial* was not a true profile as it was an act of revenge.

### Frederick's itinerary

The *London Times* (1869 a,b) contains not only accounts of the opening of the Suez canal but also bulletins revealing the whereabouts of the dignitaries who attended this historic event. Crown Prince Frederick, representing Prussia, left Berlin early in October in order to cruise the Mediterranean and to tour the Levant on his way to Port Said where, on the 16th of November, 1869, he was present at the religious ceremony dedicated to the Suez Maritime Canal. Next day he was a prominent figure on board the 'Grille', one of 40 or so ships of shallow draught, entering the canal for the first time southward bound for Suez.

### First lie

In *Drame Imperial* de Bonnefon (1888) gave exact dates for Frederick's visit to Suez. Such as:

'C'est pendant un voyage à Suez, en 1869, que Fritz prit le germe du mal dont il est mort . . . vingt ans après'.

'Le prince était seul; le soir du 18 Octobre, l'ennui, l'orage et je ne sais quel diable aussi le poussent dans les bras d'une belle Espagnole qui répondait au nom de Dolorès Cada'.

But on that date the Crown Prince was in Corfu, which is, as the crow flies, about 1000 miles northwest of Suez (*London Times*, 1869a). He was not alone. He was not bored. It was his 38th birthday. He opened a trunk of lovely gifts. He was delighted that his family had remembered him (Muller-Bohn, 1900).

### Second lie

According to de Bonnefon (1888):

'Le 16 Novembre, à Port Said, la maladie se déclarait chez le Prince Frédéric. Les premiers soins, très incomplets, furent donnés par le médecin du Khédive Ismael'.

In fact, observed by a myriad of onlookers crowding around the ceremony being held on that day, the Crown Prince, evidently in good health though slightly bored, was but one of a coterie of distinguished guests in the presence of the Khedive, and the Empress Eugenie of France (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1869). It is inconceivable that amidst this tumult the Crown Prince of Prussia, conscious of his rank, and aware of rumours that France intended invading Germany (Poschinger, 1898), would have consulted the Khedive's doctor, (Dr Bourguieres, a

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French physician). Besides, the prince's own doctor was with him on this voyage.

### An error of latitude

As he grew up Marie Francois Joseph Jean de Bonnefon (1867–1928) must have heard of his country's triumph i.e. the construction of a canal between Port Said on the Mediterranean and Suez at the head of the Red Sea. Yet, as a trained journalist in 1888, he asserted that the Crown Prince caught syphilis in Suez then became aware of the infection when he reached Port Said. This was impossible. The prince's first port of call in Egypt was not Suez but Port Said (*London Times*, 1869b). Monsieur d'Amat was right when he said of de Bonnefon 'it was necessary to signal his partiality, his unjust attacks, and his feeble documentation' (d'Amat, 1954).

Clearly *Drame Imperial* should have been and should be ignored except that Stevenson (1946) was inclined to believe de Bonnefon's falsehoods and Minnigerode (1986) with evident caution—included them in his article on Frederick's disease. Worst of all, the falsehoods are now treated as facts (Reid, 1987).

### Stevenson's biography of Morell MacKenzie

Requiring evidence that Frederick, attended by Mackenzie in 1887 and 1888, had had syphilis, Stevenson (1946) referred to *Drame Imperial* in his biography of Mackenzie, although he considered the evidence offered by de Bonnefon (1888) to be circumstantial and uncorroborated. This step has had lamentable consequences. Stevenson's biography (1946) was, and still is, regarded as a definitive work. It was reviewed in eight publications in English, and five of the reviewers made some reference to syphilis.

This form of libel could have been avoided. Through the *London Times* index Stevenson (1946) could have discovered that the Crown Prince was in Corfu, not Suez, on that fateful day, 18th of October 1869 (his 38th birthday).

### The political background

There can be no doubt that *Drame Imperial* (de Bonnefon, 1888) was believed throughout France particularly in Alsace-Lorraine where the Franco-Prussian war opened in 1870. This was a war the French declared but the Prussians won with the help of the Bavarian states.

Thereafter Germany, having acquired most of Alsace-Lorraine (Treaty of Frankfurt, 1871), imposed a severe regime on the inhabitants of this ancient territory in order to curb the French influence. Meanwhile Crown Prince Frederick's concern for the vanquished, his efforts to prevent the destruction of property, and his compassion for the wounded on both sides of the conflict were soon forgotten as hatred of Germany grew.

### The expulsion of Jean de Bonnefon

On the 20th of June, 1888, five days after Frederick III died, the German police ordered Jean de Bonnefon, reporter for *Le Galois*, to leave the country by nightfall. According to de Bonnefon there were three reasons: he had calumniated Frederick's successor, Emperor William II; he had had a liaison with Sir Morell Mackenzie; he had published a series of articles about Alsace-Lorraine. The articles were dedicated to Frederick's wife Empress Victoria (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1888).

In addition to de Bonnefon's expulsion we must take into account the disappointment he experienced shortly after Frederick became Emperor on the 9th of March, 1888. Instead of liberating Alsace-Lorraine, which was expected of him, Frederick confirmed its union with the German Empire through a rescript proclaimed in Strasbourg and reported in the press (*London Times*, 1888).

### Revenge

Soon after his return to France de Bonnefon wrote his spurious tale. Full to the brim with malice he made up the story that the late Emperor, known affectionately as 'Unser Fritz', had caught syphilis from a courtesan one sultry night in Suez (de Bonnefon, 1888).

Et qu'est-ce que *Drame Imperial*? Ce n'est pas une histoire. C'est un canard.

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