



SECRETS OF THE GOTH



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FILE UNDER: **SOURCE REPORTS**

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I KEPT RUNNING INTO this book when I browsed the bibliographies of *other* books. I ignored it the first few times – the title sounds pretty gossipy, right? But my curiosity got the better of me. Running short of reading material during the COVID-19 outbreak, I found a cheap used copy online and ordered it. And you know what? I’m really glad I did. Even though you need to take everything here with a grain of salt, this is a fast, fun overview of the royal families of Europe, told in a brisk, matter-of-fact style without all the boring parts.

I’ll give you a complete run-down of what’s good and bad about this book, then I’ll give you a huge list of the most interesting tidbits I learned.

Just want the good stuff?

[Click here to go straight to the interesting tidbits!](#)

BOOK DATA

THE BASICS

TITLE: *Secrets of the Gotha*

AUTHOR: Ghislain de Diesbach

PUBLISHER: Barnes & Noble Books

YEAR: 1993 (orig. 1964)

LANGUAGE: English; originally in French

TRANSLATOR: Translated from the French by
Margaret Crosland

FINDING IT

WHERE I GOT IT: [Amazon Marketplace](#) (\$3.99+)

FIND YOUR LOCAL COPY: [Worldcat results](#)

OTHER EDITIONS

- Originally published in 1964: *Les Secrets du Gotha*
- First English edition, 1967

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

THE OSTENSIBLE PURPOSE OF this book is to explain what the *Almanach de Gotha* is and how it works...and then, presumably, to give us all their dirty secrets. If you're like me, you already know the *Gotha* is the "Who's Who" of European royal houses. And truthfully, you probably don't need to know much more about how it works. But if you want that information, it's in the first chapter of this book. I skimmed it the first time, and went back and re-read it after I'd finished the book. It was way more interesting the second time, when I wasn't dying to get onto the juicy gossip.

So, with that in mind, what is the *Gotha* and what can it

tell us? For starters, it was published from 1763 until 1944. It began as a true almanac, with a yearly calendar and a mail delivery timetable, which totaled a whopping 20 pages. The next year, it grew to include the genealogy of the house of Saxony and a list of the Holy Roman Emperors.



**FRIEDRICH AUGUST OF SAXONY,
KING THE YEAR THE GOTHA
FIRST INCLUDED GENEALOGICAL INFO.
PAINTING AFTER ANTON GRAFF,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

In 1765, it expanded again to include stories and anecdotes about the court of Gotha. It expanded yet again to include more royal genealogy and the marriages, births, and deaths of the ruling houses of Europe. It

ignored the sweeping changes brought about by the Napoleonic Wars – even deposed monarchs were still royal, after all. Later, after the Congress of Vienna, the *Gotha* would continue to list the mediatized princes and counts of Germany, but not in the same section as ruling houses.

In 1874, the *Gotha* expanded again to include more than just ruling families – this time, they included some ducal and princely families from Russia, Italy, France, and Great Britain.

From 1890 onward, the *Gotha* had three sections:

- Genealogy, births, deaths, and marriages of ruling houses
- List of diplomats and high-ranking officers and ministers in countries around the world
- List of sovereigns by age and by accession, with a calendar of their birthdays

Not surprisingly, twentieth century editions would be over 1,000 pages long.

After the first chapter (about the history of the *Gotha*),

we get a European tour of royal houses, with a quick-and-dirty summary of the most interesting people and events in the past few hundred years.

CHAPTERS

- **Austria:** House of Habsburg-Lorraine (24 pages)
- **Bavaria:** House of Wittelsbach (14 pages)
- **Belgium:** House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (13 pages)
- **Bulgaria:** House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (3 pages)
- **Denmark:** House of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg (4 pages)
- **France:** House of Bourbon-Orléans (24 pages)
- **France:** House of Bonaparte (19 pages)
- **German Courts:** Brunswick/Hanover, Coburg, Baden, Mecklenburg, Hesse, Württemberg (47 pages)
- **Great Britain:** House of Windsor (34 pages)
- **Greece:** House of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg (9 pages)

- **Italy:** House of Savoy (12 pages)
- **Luxembourg:** House of Nassau (2 pages)
- **Naples/Two Sicilies:** House of Bourbon (15 pages)
- **Netherlands:** Former House of Orange-Nassau (4 pages)
- **Norway:** House of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg (3 pages)
- **Parma:** House of Bourbon (3 pages)
- **Portugal:** House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha-Braganza (9 pages)
- **Prussia:** House of Hohenzollern (19 pages)
- **Romania:** House of Hohenzollern (8 pages)
- **Russia:** House of Romanov-Holstein-Gottorp (26 pages)
- **Serbia, Yugoslavia:** House of Obrenović, House of Karađorđević (6 pages)
- **Spain:** House of Bourbon (15 pages)
- **Sweden:** House of Bernadotte (9 pages)

WHAT WAS HELPFUL?

THIS BOOK HAD SOME OF THE MOST CONCISE & EASY-TO- UNDERSTAND INTRODUCTIONS TO PARTICULAR COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES. Ever been confused by a description of the Holy Roman Empire? Ever wondered how the hell the Brunswick and Hanover families got so intertwined? Confused about Mecklenburg-Schwerin versus Mecklenburg-Strelitz? Read the first bits of their chapters. Diesbach actually makes it easy to understand complicated multi-hundred-year histories in a few sentences or, in the case of the Holy Roman Empire, paragraphs. Major kudos.

For example, I'd always seen references to the "queen of Etruria" and how Napoleon's brother Lucien refused to marry her. But what the hell is Etruria? As Diesbach so helpfully states, it's Parma. Problem solved.



MARIA LOUISA OF SPAIN, QUEEN OF ETRURIA
BY FRANÇOIS-XAVIER FABRE, PUBLIC DOMAIN
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

As another example, I never quite understood the whole Naples/Sicily/Two Sicilies thing. Diesbach clears it up: King Ferdinand I of Sicily assumed the title “Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies,” uniting the two crowns of Naples and Sicily in 1816. Okay, rad. Now I know!

WHAT WAS NOT HELPFUL?

- **LACK OF FAMILY TREES.** In the first edition, the book came with 22 pull-out genealogy charts. My cheap-ass Barnes & Noble reprint did not. It would have been nice to have these while reading the chapters on France, Spain, Two Sicilies, and Portugal, which intermarry so often with such similarly named folks that even I go “_(ツ)_/”.
- **LACK OF DESCRIPTION ABOUT WHAT THE AUTHOR FERRETED OUT FROM THE GOTHA AS OPPOSED TO COMMON KNOWLEDGE INFO.** In the first chapter, there’s a great quote about why such a dry, tedious genealogical tome is valuable: “Between the lines, beneath the dry catalogue of names, titles and dates, are hints of endless tales of mystery, tragedy and scandal, which throw new light on the Olympus where these demi-gods reigned, and prove that they were far less conventional than the court painters let us think” (18). But nowhere in the book does he say which scandals we can see between those lines. I would have liked to see an example of this in action – comparing birth and marriage dates to see who got it on before marriage or who was a

really early preemie, or something like that. But there's no mention of how Gotha entries actually inform the stories he gives us. Seems like a missed opportunity.

WHAT YOU WON'T FIND

- **THERE WAS NO MENTION AT ALL OF HEMOPHILIA IN THE SPANISH ROYAL FAMILY.** Diesbach does tell us that Alfonso XIII's second son was "deaf and dumb," but we get no mention of the hemophilia that affected both his eldest son and his youngest son. Was this not public knowledge in the early 1960s, when this book was written and published?



IMAGE OF ALFONSO, PRINCE OF ASTURIAS
BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER (1922).
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

- **THERE IS ALMOST NO MENTION OF ANY SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS OR PREFERENCES.** Diesbach brings it up two times: once in connection with Isabella II of Spain's husband – and indirectly at that. He gives us her quote about her wedding night – I'm

paraphrasing here: “What did you think would happen with a guy who wore more lace than I did?” The second time he brings it up is in connection with King Gustav V of Sweden, who “seemed miraculously preserved from the ravages of time, but gossip maintained that he rejuvenated himself from time to time in the arms of young officers who were given the honourable task of warming the blood which had begun to cool with age” (360).



**KING GUSTAV V OF SWEDEN IN THE 1940S.
IMAGE BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

I can't help but wonder why he included these two anecdotes, but didn't mention any of the other royal men known to be gay or bisexual. It's not that I want details that are none of my business. It's just that so many of these stories aren't complete without the layers of emotional complexity added when you know their preference. Tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria was bisexual – and it was a well-known fact among other sovereigns at the time. Grand Duke Ernest of Hesse was believed to be gay, which is often given as the reason why his marriage to Princess Victoria Melita of Edinburgh failed. King Charles of Württemberg was gay, which was also a known fact among royal families of the time. But none of those men's stories in this book mention their sexual preference.

RELIABILITY

MODERATE. I did find a few mistakes, natural in a book with as much scope as this one. And I did find a few stories that I'd seen disputed elsewhere. Enjoy this book because it's entertaining – but before you tell these stories at a dinner party, google the main characters involved, just to be sure.

- He calls Archduchess Isabella of Austria “Archduchess Frederika.” Similarly, he calls her mother-in-law, Elisabeth Franziska “Isabella.” The info about them is right, it’s just the names that are wrong. [I wrote about Isabella and her daughter, Maria Anna, in this post.](#)



ARCHDUCHESS ISABELLA OF AUSTRIA-TESCHEN
BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. PUBLIC DOMAIN
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

- Diesbach says Grand Duchess Victoria Melita of Hesse left her husband, Ernst, after the death of their eldest son. They didn’t really have an eldest

son – they had one daughter, Elisabeth, and one stillborn son.

- He said Dom Pedro II of Brazil was the son of Amelie of Leuchtenberg – but that's not right. Amelie was his stepmother; his mother was Archduchess Leopoldina of Austria.
- The chapter on Greece is a little rough, with several mistakes I spotted in a casual read. One might be a typo, but here are a couple other pitfalls. Diesbach writes that Princess Maria of Greece and Denmark married Grand Duke Michael; nope – she married Grand Duke George. He writes that Nancy Leeds (who married Prince Christopher) was born Anastasia Stewart; nope – she was born Nancy Stewart and took the baptismal name of Anastasia when she married Christopher and converted to Orthodoxy. And Diesbach also says King George II of Greece was the son of Prince Alexander; nope – Alexander was his brother. His parents were King Constantine and Queen Sophie.



GEORGE II IMAGE BY UNITED STATES OFFICE OF
WAR INFORMATION, OVERSEAS PICTURE DIVISION,
WASHINGTON DIVISION, PUBLIC DOMAIN
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

- There's a strange mention of Grand Duchess Elizaveta Feodorovna of Russia (better known as Ella, born a princess of Hesse and by Rhine) being imprisoned in Serbia during the Russian Revolution. This never happened. Ella was imprisoned at Ekaterinburg and then Alapayevsk

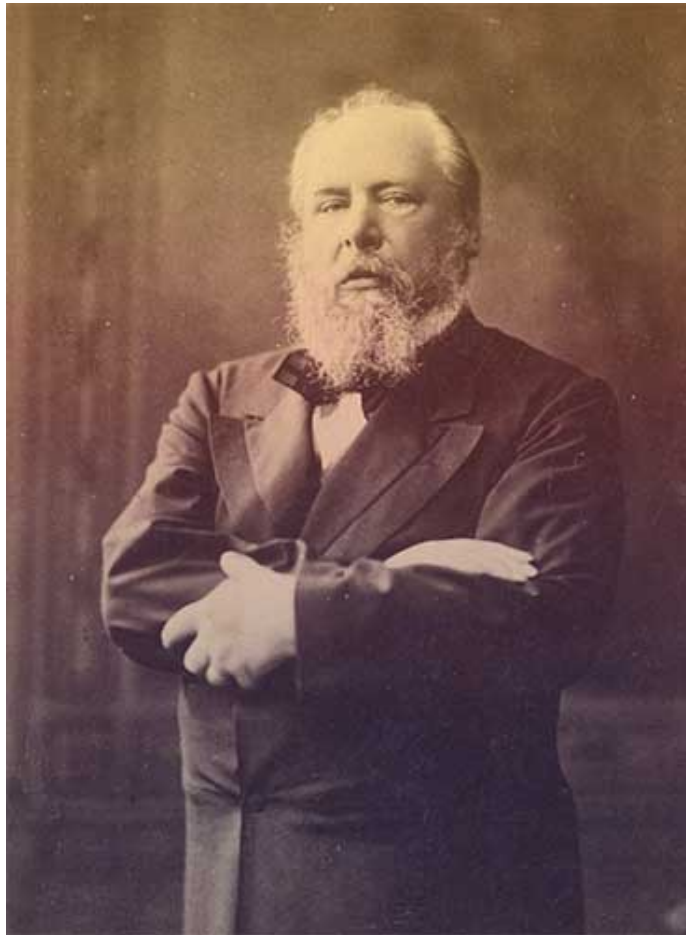
with, among others, Prince Ioann Constantinovich, whose wife was Princess Elena of Serbia. Elena had followed Ioann to Ekaterinburg, where she pestered the British consul and the Bolshevik authorities for news of her husband the tsar's family. They eventually arrested her and sent her back to Petersburg. Ioann, Ella, and a few other family members were murdered in July of 1918 in Alapayevsk. Because you're a Patreon subscriber, you have access to a short story I wrote about Ella's murder. [Click here to grab it, if you haven't yet.](#)

QUOTES I LIKED

Just to give you a little flavor of what the book is like...

- “If the majority of courtiers have no difficulty in eulogizing the virtue, the handsome appearance, and the magnificent dwellings of their masters, those who performed this delicate task at the ducal court of Coburg in the early part of the last century must have had trouble in performing it without hypocrisy.” (151)

- “Holland, a country without geographical colour if not without history, has been governed for two centuries by sovereigns who lacked both colour and history.” (260) *Ouch*.



**KING WILLEM III OF THE NETHERLANDS.
IMAGE BY MARIA HILLE, PUBLIC DOMAIN
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

- “Before the 1914 war Serbia was one of those explosive little kingdoms which seemed to have been created on purpose to annoy the great powers,

outwit diplomats and divert, with theatrical *coups d'etat*, the other nations which, through centuries of experience, had learnt a little wisdom or resignation.” (332)

- “Of all the bad ideas that occurred to Louis XIV during his reign one of the worst was certainly wanting to place his grandson, the duke of Anjou, on the throne of Spain.” (338)

MY FAVORITE TIDBITS

- **AUSTRIA:** Emperor Joseph II’s first wife, Isabella of Parma, fell in love with a Spanish gentleman at the court of Parma. They were going to run away together, but the plot was discovered and he was murdered on the night they were supposed to make their getaway. As he lay dying, she heard him whisper, “In three...you...” She thought it meant she’d be dead in three hours. But when three hours, then three days, then three weeks, then three months passed and she wasn’t dead, she agreed to a proposed marriage with Archduke Joseph (Maria Theresa’s son, Marie

Antoinette's brother). Three years later, she died, just as she'd warned Joseph she would when they married.



PAINTING BY JEAN-MARC NATTIER,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

- **FRANCE:** I loved the story of the assassination of the last of the Condés, the father of the duc d'Enghien. In a nutshell, this guy was stupid-rich. The future King Louis-Philippe asked Condé to be

godfather to his son, the duke of Aumale, born in 1822. Condé agreed and grew attached to the boy, regarding him as his heir. But the revolution of 1830 changed Condé's mind – he thought Louis-Philippe usurped the crown from the rightful owner, Charles X and his heirs. He said he was going to change his will and disinherit Aumale before he fled to England to join the Bourbons in exile. The night before his departure, he was found dead, hanging from a window in his chateau. The problem? He wasn't tall enough to hang himself in that location, and no one knows what really happened. Louis-Philippe had the chateau razed. Did Condé's lover, who had facilitated the rapprochement with the Orléans, murder him? Aumale kept the fortune for his lifetime, then gave it to the Institut de France. Did he feel too guilty to pass it on to his heirs?

- **FRANCE:** When Bulgaria gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire, not everyone in Europe was happy about it. Later, when Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was picked to succeed the dethroned Sandro Battenberg as

prince of Bulgaria, some countries initially refused to give diplomatic status to Ferdinand and his ministers. Later, when Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria passed through Paris, he met his uncle – the duke of Aumale, from the tidbit above (his mom’s brother). The duke apologized for not acknowledging Ferdinand right away: “I am like the Great Powers, I didn’t recognize you!” (91). I was CRACKING UP when I read this. No one understood why I was laughing so hard.

- **NORWAY:** Norway was a new monarchy, established after the split from Sweden in 1905. The capital, Christiania, had no social life and no royal balls. So when Queen Maud wanted to dance, someone had to call into town and request a young man be brought into the palace. Maud would dance with him for an hour or two while a servant wound the gramophone. Does that sound awkward or what? It also sounds vaguely untrue – this is a charming story, but one I’d definitely fact-check before using.



QUEEN MAUD AND FURRY FRIEND.
PHOTO BY GUNNAR THEODOR SJØWALL,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

- **PRUSSIA:** The Crown Prince of Prussia's second son was named Louis Ferdinand. In the 1920s, Louis Ferdinand was madly in love with a French actress named Lili Damita. In 1928, Lili was invited to Hollywood, where she later entertained Prince George of Great Britain when he took an unscheduled stop in Hollywood during his travels. So Louis Ferdinand went to Hollywood, too – but

the relationship with Lili didn't work out. She married Errol Flynn instead, and he moved to Detroit, where he worked for Henry Ford from 1929 to 1934. He later married Grand Duchess Kira Kirillovna of Russia. Their grandson is the head of the house of Hohenzollern today. I'd never even heard of Lili Damita until researching Prince George's Hollywood trip. Then I stumbled on her name in this book, too – she must have been quite the woman to have two princes desperate for her company!



**LILI DAMITA IN PHOTOPLAY MAGAZINE,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

- **SPAIN:** King Charles IV ruled Spain at the time of the French Revolution. Apparently, he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. His wife had a lover, the Prince de la Paix, who was probably the father of her children. But Charles had no idea the prince and his wife were lovers, so he never questioned the fact that when they were apart, she wrote letters to him non-stop. " 'I am stopping,' wrote the queen one day to the prince de la Paix, 'because the king, who is holding the candle for me, is dropping with sleep and I'm afraid he might set fire to the bed curtains...' " I'm cracking up just thinking of the king holding a candle so his wife can write long letters to her lover every night they're apart. (339)
- **SPAIN:** I'd never heard the story of Infanta Josepha's marriage before – she was a niece of King Ferdinand VII. According to Diesbach, there was a Cuban poet named José Güell y Renté. He was in love with a Cuban woman, but her family rejected him because they thought she could do better. So Güell y Renté was like, screw y'all, I'll show you how important I really am – I'm so important that I'm going to marry a princess. So he

went to Spain because there were no princesses in Cuba. Once settled, he began publishing poems and dedicating them to Infanta Josepha. His paper courtship somehow worked, and they eventually eloped. He really did marry a princess! My gut tells me this story really needs to be fact-checked...it's almost too good to be true. But I'm telling it to you because, well, isn't it a cute story?



**INFANTA JOSEPHA BY AN UNKNOWN PAINTER,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

THINGS I DIDN'T KNOW BEFORE

- **CIVIL WAR VETERANS:** Two of King Louis-Philippe's grandsons, who fled France in 1848, later fought for the Union army in the Civil War: Robert, the Duke of Chartres (1840-1910) and his brother, Philippe, Count of Paris (1838-1894). That's all this book tells you, and now I'm dying to know more. Turns out, they were on Major George McClellan's staff and fought during the Peninsular Campaign. Both brothers resigned from the army on July 15, 1862.
- **A ROYAL MYSTERY:** A 19th century Frenchwoman known as the Countess de la Pommere let it be known she was the daughter of Napoleon's only son, the King of Rome. "In spite of certain rather disturbing coincidences, she could never show any proof of her august affiliation and her death, in 1920, gave no clue to this enigma" (130). What are these rather disturbing coincidences? Diesbach doesn't provide any more detail, but now I hella want to know.

- **ROYAL KIDS' NAMES:** I'd never seen the names of the two kids Prince Alexander (Sandro) of Battenberg had with his wife, opera singer Johanna Loisinger. According to this book, they were named Assen and Zvetana, Bulgarian names. After his admirable but disastrous tenure in Bulgaria, I'm kind of surprised he wanted a reminder of it every day of his life. For more on Sandro, [check out the source report on Downfall of Three Dynasties](#).



**SANDRO, JOHANNA, AND ONE OF THEIR KIDS
– I'M GUESSING ASSEN. PUBLIC DOMAIN
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

- **A FUNNY QUOTE:** Baron Stockmar, an advisor to the future King Leopold of Belgium, was there when Leopold (as Prince of Saxe-Coburg) married the heir to the British throne, Princess Charlotte. Leopold and Charlotte truly loved each other. Here's how Stockmar put it: "...his wife's love for him is so immense that it can be compared only to England's national debt" (158). HA.
- **A ROYAL NICKNAME EXPLAINED:** Queen Marie of Romania's daughter, Princess Marie, was nicknamed Mignon. An adorable nickname, but I never knew why. Apparently, it was because she was born during a performance of Ambroise Thomas's comic opera of the same name.

As always, I'm going to be double-checking on some of these stories. But I wanted to give you a good feeling for what's in this book and whether it's worth your time. I hope you enjoyed all these fun little tidbits!

The End

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