

# THE KING BEHIND THE LEGEND

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Christian X often rode unaccompanied through the streets of Copenhagen.



## UHP Staff

When the horse threw its rider during the early morning, a cleaning woman from the Esplanade Restaurant was the first at the scene. She cradled the rider's head in her hands, wiped the blood from his face, and waited for the ambulance that arrived shortly afterwards. The rider, the 72 year old king of Denmark, politely thanked the ambulance driver, noting simply that "it was nice of you to come so quickly" and the ambulance then rushed the king to the nearest hospital.

Hearing of the accident, crowds swarmed the streets of Copenhagen, anxious for news of the king. For Danes living under

Nazi occupation, the king's fall during his solitary morning ride sparked concerns over not only the king's health but the health and future of Denmark.

When Crown Prince Frederick informed the crowds outside the hospital that his father would recover, the sigh of relief was audible.

One of the best known twentieth-century kings, Christian X was, and remains, the stuff of legend.

Upon being informed that Danish Jews must wear the star, the king supposedly responded by saying that if any Dane wore the star, he would be the first to do so. The

story is a myth---the Nazis, reluctant to antagonize the Danish population, never mandated that Jewish Danes wear the star. But while the story is not true, its fabrication and constant repetition reflect the intense admiration that surrounded Christian during and after World War II.

Although related to most of the royal families of Europe, early twentieth-century Danish kings lived lives that lacked the pomp of many of their royal cousins. The death of King Frederick on a quiet street in Hamburg in 1912--where he dropped dead of a heart-attack while taking a solitary evening stroll -- underscored that Danish kings lived lives that were

little different from those of their subjects.

However, when he ascended his father's throne in 1912, Frederick's son Christian was not yet convinced that kings should be relegated to a purely symbolic role. In 1920, eight years after his ascension, in what became known as the Easter Crisis (*Påskekrisen*), Christian demanded the dismissal of the liberal Parliament. He then replaced it with a conservative government.

Angry Danes called for a general strike and Christian was forced to call a new election. When voters, once again, elected a left-leaning government, Christian refrained from interference in that election or any subsequent elections. Denmark was now a constitutional monarchy although the constitution which clarified the king's status was not ratified until 1953.

While Denmark shared high unemployment and the volatility of its neighbors during the 1920s and 1930s, Christian's position as a constitutional monarch became more secure during this period.

By the 1930s, as the Nazi threat loomed over Europe, Christian had aged, mellowing into the role of a much beloved father figure who shared, or at least publicly expressed, the progressive political views of his countrymen and women.

In 1933, for example, a week after the Nazis initiated a boycott of Jewish stores in Germany, Christian attended the 100th



## Christian X of Denmark

Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs

anniversary of the Copenhagen Synagogue in a gesture Danes overwhelmingly interpreted as a critique of German anti-Semitism.

When Danes woke on April 9, 1940 to discover that the Germans had invaded and occupied their small country overnight, it was the King who asked that Danes remain "completely correct and dignified," accepting German rule. Because the Germans viewed the Danes as model Nordic types, the Germans imposed a "model protectorate" over Denmark, allowing it to retain the appearance of its own government.

Christian X, unlike the Norwegian and Dutch monarchs, did not flee his country and he continued to take his daily solitary horseback rides throughout the streets of Copenhagen. Most heartening of all, a new heir was born a week after the invasion; Princess Margarethe, the first child of

Christian's oldest son, Crown Prince Frederick.

During the early years of German occupation, the Danes simply ignored the Germans when possible, adopting a "cold shoulder" toward the Nazis. Christian himself gave Hitler the "cold shoulder" treatment in September, 1942 when Hitler sent an effusive telegram to the king congratulating him on his birthday. Christian replied with only a terse "thank you," so enraging Hitler that he was still fulminating about it six months later.

Throughout the spring of 1943, as Hitler raged against Christian's unacceptable rudeness, Danish antagonism toward the Germans intensified. That March, the Nazis, hoping to regain Danish cooperation, allowed the Danes a free election; of 149 members elected to the *Rigsdag* (Parliament), only three were

members of the Danish Nazi Party. Heartened by this response and spurred by the BBC, the Danes now embarked on a sabotage campaign, attacking and destroying Danish institutions and transportation networks which aided the German war effort.

By July, the unrest had become severe. Strikes spread and in late August, street fighting erupted in Copenhagen. Streetcars were overturned and the Danes constructed barricades. The bewildered Germans, stunned by the hostility of their “Nordic” brethren, initiated a harsh crackdown. Two Danes were now to be shot for every German killed. The hatred Danes felt for the Germans became, one German official noted, “boundless.”

In late August, at a time when Danes were forbidden to meet in groups larger than five people, Christian drove out through the suburbs of Copenhagen accompanied by Queen Alexandrine and a German military escort. Stopping in Lyngby, the king spoke to the crowds which had gathered in defiance of the Nazi’s ban on gatherings of five or more. In a strange nonsequitur, the king told the crowd, “I am happy that the Danish language is still spoken in my old fatherland. Continue!”

For the Danes, the message was clear: the king wanted the uprising to continue.

In response, Hitler now demanded that the gloves come off. Danish Jews, who had been spared any discrimination, were now to be subjected to the

same laws as their co-religionists elsewhere in Europe.

Denmark was to become “*judenrein*” and all of Denmark’s 8,000 Jews were to be sent to concentration camps in October of 1943.

However, word of the impending arrests was leaked by a sympathetic German and the Danes rose up, in what has become known as the Danish miracle, in an all-out effort to rescue Denmark’s Jews. With the help of their fellow Danes, the overwhelming majority of Denmark’s Jews escaped to neutral Sweden where they remained for the duration of the war.

A small minority---just over 400 Jews---were captured by the Nazis and sent to Thieresenstadt. But even here, the Danes and King Christian X ensured that their fate differed from that of other inmates. The Danes sent care packages and Christian himself sent personal greetings to those in the camps, a morale booster which these Danes remembered and spoke of decades later. By the end of the war, some 120 Jewish Danes, many of them elderly, had died in the camps or while escaping to Sweden, a sharp contrast to the fate of most of Europe’s Jews.

Christian X, widely viewed as the symbol of a resistance movement which British Field Marshall Montgomery called “second to none,” had now

**King Christian X and Queen Alexandrine, Courtesy of the Library of Congress**



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become a very different monarch from the one he had been when he ascended the throne in 1912. His position as a symbol of the Danish people secure, Christian died in 1947, leaving the throne to his son, Crown Prince Frederick (King Frederick IX).

Buried in Roskilde Cathedral, the burial site of Danish kings for 500 years, Christian X was mourned not only by his countrymen and women but by a large contingent of admirers from across the world.



**Left:**  
Christian X's sons, Prince Frederick and Prince Knud, Library of Congress

**Below:**  
Christian speaks to his subjects, Library of Congress

