The Fate of Secrets in a Public Sphere: the Comte de Broglie and the Demise of the Secret du roi

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In every century, secrecy has been a part of the diplomatic game and the sine qua non of espionage. For Louis XV, however, secrecy became a volatile weapon that did him more harm than good, especially at the end of his reign. Like fire, secrets sometimes took a life of their own and burned those clandestinely serving the king instead of enemies—even Louis XV became a victim of his own espionage. In the end, he himself was burned. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, Louis XV conducted a secret foreign policy with a network of spies, run for much of its existence until the end by the Comte de Broglie. This network was referred to as the secret du roi by its own members and initiates, and sometimes merely as “the secret.” The secret du roi often went counter to his official policy and was conducted behind the backs of his ministers. This on the surface is puzzling. Why have two policies that worked at cross purposes and that prompted government officials to be at odds with one another, keeping secrets from one another and certainly not facilitating an efficient flow of information? It may help to think of secrets as political currency. In royal courts, keeping one’s secrets hidden while learning those of potential enemies was essential to survival. Louis XV had taken the advice of his predecessor, Louis XIV, to heart: that a king should always have several sources of information, preferably unknown to one another.

By the end of the eighteenth century, though, secrecy was losing its power and legitimacy, not unlike the French monarchy. Much valuable work has been done on the importance of public opinion and the calls for greater transparency in pre-revolutionary France,¹ but the history of secrecy—the dark underside and

¹ See James Van Horn Melton, The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Arlette Farge, Dire et mal dire: l’opinion publique au XVIIIème siècle (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der
counterpart to the well-illuminated and illuminating history of transparency and the public sphere—is an area where scholars have only begun to scratch the surface. The story of the *secret du roi*, particularly its downfall, is also the story of the depreciating value of secrets in eighteenth-century France. Secrecy lost its mystique and took on a sinister connotation for many reasons in this period, including the rise of public opinion as mentioned above, the growing importance of political and personal transparency, and a shift in the concept of masculinity away from aristocratic notions of negotiation and duplicity. Far from being an ill-conceived side project of Louis XV’s that simply fell apart, the *secret du roi* suffered from the changing attitudes towards secrecy and were magnified by the new values of transparency and accountability. When the *secret* became public knowledge at the death of Louis XV, the Comte de Broglie, head of the secret organization, did his best to portray himself as an honest and transparent person to whom secrecy was anathema, even going to so far as to accuse his enemies of secrecy and subterfuge since he believed that the aura of secrecy that surrounded him did harm to his reputation. He knew that there were both advantages and pitfalls in the use of secrecy in diplomacy, but the problems of the *secret du roi* became more acute because of a new culture of transparency, and, once dismantled, the changing attitudes towards secrecy made it impossible for the *secret* to be revived.

**The Perils of Secrecy**

In the early years of Louis XV’s reign, the king saw secrecy as a useful and powerful tool, a belief he had inherited from previous generations. Spies and courtiers traded in secrets, and governments had to safeguard their own secrets and try to discover those of rivals for reasons of security. The *secret du roi*, however, had been Louis XV’s particular invention. By all accounts, he was a king who favored secrecy and valued his privacy, but scholars may never know his exact motives for initiating his own network of spies unbeknownst to his ministers. Certainly, kings had always had their own spies who answered only to them, just as many courtiers did, but Louis XV began a kind of bureau, perhaps as early as the 1740s when Cardinal Fleury was serving as his prime minister, with the Prince de Conti as the head, and several spies, couriers and secretaries underneath him. The original goal was to strengthen the alliance with Poland and place the Prince de Conti on the Polish throne. Eventually, the *secret du roi* sought to undermine the power of Austria even while a Franco-Austrian alliance was in the making. The secret network also worked against France’s traditional nemesis, Great Britain, especially after the bitter defeat of the Seven Years’ War in the 1760s. After the death of the Prince de Conti, the Comte de Broglie came to head the organization. He had already been serving as an ambassador when the Prince de Conti, who knew

*Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürglichen Gesellschaft*  
and trusted him, suggested to the king that he be initiated into the secret. After a few years, he gained the king’s trust and proved his capacity for keeping secrets.

Despite its lofty goals, the secret du roi has often been overlooked by scholars. Certainly a source of titillating memoirs and anecdotes, featuring colorful characters, such as the cross-dressing Chevalier d’Eon and the playwright Caron de Beaumarchais, the secret du roi has been the subject of short articles or footnotes that mention it in passing. Considering the fact that it was mostly a failure and kept secret for most of its existence, it may be understandable that it has not received as much scholarly attention as it might. References to the secret network are cryptic in the Bastille archives, though they corroborated with a nineteenth-century collection of them, which is the source used for this article.

Certainly, the organization had had its crises. The projects that Louis XV and his secret agents undertook from the 1750s to the 1770s sometimes ended in horrible failure. One spectacular example is the mishap with the Chevalier d’Eon, the king’s spy who had been sent to England behind the back of the foreign minister, the Duc de Praslin, and who threatened to defect when he believed he was not being paid enough. Threatened and cornered, the king considered having d’Eon kidnapped and brought back to France, but in the end he conceded and paid the spy what he wanted in order to silence and placate him. Furthermore, the Austrian court discovered and decoded the correspondences of Louis XV’s spies, and soon the entire public knew of their existence. The entire system then collapsed

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just before the king’s death, revealing the secret diplomacy, which had rarely been effective and that had even been counter-productive to the interests of France.

But the king appeared to have been too fond of secrets all his life. The Abbé Georgel, who had once served as an ambassador, wrote in his memoirs at the beginning of the nineteenth century of how the king enjoyed keeping secrets and believed in having multiple sources of information. The abbé wrote, “Louis XV’s secret correspondence was completely unknown to his council, and especially to his ministers of foreign affairs… This secret network was not even revealed to all of our ambassadors. Sometimes it was the secretary of an ambassador, or another Frenchman traveling privately who acted as the king’s spy. The king, who enjoyed this secrecy immensely, wished in this manner to judge the conduct of his ministers in foreign courts and compare those secret reports to the official ones.”

While Louis XV valued his secret operation, it could also make his appear weak. In 1767, the king wrote secretly to the Comte de Broglie, whom he had then placed in charge of the secret du roi, that the Duc de Choiseul, one of his ministers, might have found out about the secret correspondence. He expressed his fears to Broglie, saying that the duc “might know too much… I believe that we must remain as we are and not say anything more to him. Make him believe that these are nothing more than suspicions on his part.” A year later, the king wrote to Broglie, “M. le Duc de Choiseul might have notions and he seeks certitude, but he has said nothing to me at all about your correspondence with me.” Clearly, Louis XV worried that his ministers had pried into his secrets, or worse, had discovered them completely but kept their knowledge hidden from the king. Worse still, he worried that his ministers might be conspiring with his mistress to uncover his secrets. The king wrote to Broglie about his mistress, Mme. du Barry, saying, “Mme. du Barry saw your letter. It was not a secret. With regards to the large packet, she found it on the table; she wanted to see what it was. I did not wish to show her. The next day she was at it again. I told her that it regarded affairs in Poland, that as you were ambassador there, you still had reports to send me… That is all I told her. I am sure that she will divulge nothing to M. de Choiseul.” Whether or not the king’s mistress was sharing his secrets with the Duc de Choiseul, the king was worried that this was a possibility, or had already happened, and shared this fear in many letters with the Comte de Broglie.

There were problems outside of his court as well, and the organization’s plans were sometimes reduced to a frightful mess, even threatening to become a

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5 Ibid., 404.
6 Ibid., 145.
catastrophe for the king at one point. In 1764, the Chevalier d’Eon who was then the king’s spy in England and official secretary to the ambassador, claimed he had been insulted by the ambassador and later accused the ambassador of trying to poison him. Believing that he had been abandoned by the king, he threatened to reveal all the secrets he knew if the king did not protect him and award him an enormous pension. The king wrote to one of his confidants, saying, “I doubt that we would have war with England if he revealed everything, but we must nip this scandal in the bud.” He added that the foreign minister wanted d’Eon arrested immediately and that d’Eon deserved it, but that “what is most important is to placate him and have my papers returned. In the future, let us be more prudent in our choices of confidants: he is, however, the only one until now who has threatened treason to such a high degree. Can you imagine what they would do to him in the tribunals?”

The king called d’Eon a “madman capable of anything” but he eventually silenced him with a hefty pension and protection from the foreign minister. Early in the following year, though, while the king desperately tried to avoid disaster in England, he struggled to contain the damage on his own shores. The foreign minister at the time, the Duc de Praslin, caught d’Eon’s valet at Calais on his way to England carrying suspicious letters. The king knew that the valet would be sent to the Bastille and that his secret correspondence might be compromised in his own court, but he could do nothing to help the valet without revealing too much to the Duc de Praslin. The king then secretly maneuvered to keep the papers found on the valet from the Duc de Praslin even while the valet, a man named Hugonet, underwent interrogations. De Praslin was eager to glean as much information as he could from Hugonet, and he ordered the chief of police, Sartine, to learn the location of d’Eon from the valet, and to send him all of Hugonet’s personal papers (though the king later diverted some of these). Sartine wrote back to the Duc de Praslin, saying of Hugonet, “He said he has absolutely no knowledge of [d’Eon’s] whereabouts, and no matter the questions we asked him, even after threats, we could pull nothing from him…” But acting under de Praslin’s orders, the police did their best to intimidate Hugonet and extract as much information as they could. They had time on their side and several techniques for frightening the valet into talking. The inspector who first interrogated him wrote, “I found him to be an even-tempered man, affecting calm and confidence, but I was not his dupe. Nevertheless, I failed to pry any satisfying information from him. He always persisted in saying that it had been more than two months since he had seen M. d’Eon and that he knew nothing of his whereabouts… I employed all the most

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7 Ibid., 122.
8 Ibid., 123.
9 Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal MS 12245 Dossier de prisonniers 1765.
efficacious methods I knew to gain his confidence during the journey [from Calais to Paris]. I made little progress during the day, but in the evening at the inn where we had stopped, I saw him deep in reflection and looking far less self-assured than I had seen him the previous day. I took the opportunity to paint a bleak picture of the situation in which he found himself. He heaved a great sigh... He began to cry. I continued to press my argument, and his tears fell in torrents. Finally, he told me, 'I cannot tell you, monsieur, where M. d'Eon can be found because I do not know.'

Hugonet would remain at the Bastille long after he had been arrested while the king and the Comte de Broglie endeavored to keep as much hidden as they could from the Duc de Praslin.

In January of that year, 1765, the king wrote that the letter found on Hugonet had no signature, but the handwriting was clearly that of the Comte de Broglie's secretary. "I could not find a copy of this letter nor remember its content," wrote the king anxiously. He added, "M. de Praslin is to examine these papers at the Bastille this evening, but I hope that M. de Sartine [the lieutenant general of police] has put aside what I asked him to. I will tell you when I know more... It is not yet possible for you to go to the Bastille and examine these papers with M. le lieutenant de police. That would reveal everything." The king expressed hope that he could soon send someone he trusted to the Bastille without the foreign minister's knowledge. He wrote several more frantic letters, trying desperately to learn what the valet had revealed and to outmaneuver his foreign minister, not daring to release those who served him because it might reveal too much to others at court. It was as if the king were maneuvering and struggling to have one of his spies released from a foreign country.

Transparency and a New Masculinity

Dodging mistresses and ministers, placating his own unruly spies, and failing to protect those in his secret network because of the fear of exposure, Louis XV seemed to be a man more burdened with secrets than enriched and empowered by them. In contrast, his mistresses who were often portrayed as usurpers of power at the royal court, were believed to be exercising their power through backchannels and underhanded means, employing secrecy to their supreme advantage instead of being out in the open and honest in their dealings.

At the same time, "transparency" became the new desired quality, first in individuals and then in regimes. In the language of the day, one word approaching the idea of transparency was publicité, though this word also referred to the related but not identical concept of public opinion and the public's growing power. But publicité was not the only word available to those who were trying to articulate their fears and suspicions of secrecy, and the existence of another word no doubt led to the further cementing of the concept. In his novels, Rousseau had used the

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10 Ibid.
The Fate of Secrets in a Public Sphere

word *transparence* in descriptions of heroes, heroines and other sympathetic characters. Transparency meant the lack of artifice and hidden motives; a transparent individual was honest, genuine and pure. If transparency had such a positive connotation, its opposite, keeping things hidden—or secrecy—could take on a negative connotation.

This preference for transparency applied to politics and government, too. Even if he did not use the word “transparency,” the Comte de Mirabeau, in a treatise that railed against the use of *lettres de cachet* (secret orders for immediate arrest and indefinite imprisonment), echoed the concerns of many of his contemporaries when he advocated government transparency. For several pages, Mirabeau warned against the dangers of government secrecy, saying that state secrets often covered up atrocities, and that the idea of “reasons of state,” invoked famously by Cardinal Richelieu, had always been an affront to liberties. He believed that every “mysterious” administration was ignorant and corrupt, and that there should be no secrets in cabinets that were kept from the eyes of the people. Furthermore, he made a point of emphasizing the enormity of problems that arose from different branches in government whose limits were not clearly delineated and who did not communicate with one another. To Mirabeau, a “veil between sovereign and people” led to distrust between them, particularly on the side of the people. Mirabeau’s sentiments were certainly symptomatic of the rise of the idea of government accountability, and countless others, from moderate anonymous pamphleteers to vociferous radicals like Marat, pushed the same message, hoping to press the idea into their readers’ heads like the printing press imprinted the inked blocks onto the waiting paper.

Women had exercised power at the French court for centuries—and been subjected to suspicion and contempt for it—but a new understanding of masculinity and the public sphere was emerging in the eighteenth century that threatened elite women’s hold on power. An older, more traditional concept of masculinity was slowly giving way to something quite different, another kind of masculinity tinged by the new ideas of patriotism, the apotheosis of reason and the suspicion of all things secret and hidden. It was at the same time unsurprising that

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13 Marat believed that “plots against the nation [were] always concocted in darkness,” and that “princes [called] no witnesses” to their evil deeds, and so it was up to a sentinel of the people to open “the entrails of deceit.” See Jean-Paul Marat, *Les chaines de l’Esclavage* Ed. Michel Vovelle (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1988), 144.
secrecy came to be cast as a sign of weakness and femininity as well as sinister dealings. Mistresses and other women who had achieved some form of influence in society were seen as conniving and negatively influencing government, and as figures whose power was ultimately illegitimate. The Comte de Broglie often complained about the king’s mistresses interfering in politics, especially the powerful and to him, meddlesome Pompadour, “though no one,” he claimed “was brazen to the same degree as Mme. du Barry.” The Chevalier d’Eon also complained to his friend, Broglie, of Pompadour, portraying her as a demanding harpy whose “hysterical vapors” too frequently influenced the king. While they were demanding and emotional, women were also devious; they tried to gain influence through secretive methods while prying into the secrets and affairs that did not concern them.

Pompadour knew how others saw her. She wrote to the Duc de Choiseul in 1756, “They accuse me of being devious, sly, crafty and even false. But I am only a poor woman who has sought happiness these past ten years and who believes to have finally found it.” It was true that she used her influence over the police to keep an eye on her enemies and slanderers. (The lieutenant general of police, Berryer, had been a friend of hers and owed his position as head of the Paris police from 1747 to 1757 to her.) When she allowed those who slandered her or those she perceived to be a threat to be sent to the Bastille, she believed that it was for the good and stability of the crown, just as the police tracked down underground printing presses and booksellers of forbidden tracts to serve what they believed as the public good and the interests of the monarchy. The famous Chevalier de Latude, a prisoner in the Bastille who became a celebrity during the Revolution for having escaped from the prison multiple times, had originally been imprisoned for devising a false plot to assassinate Pompadour and then pretending to uncover it to gain her favor. It is also probable that the police opened and read letters for her, as the revolutionaries later accused her of doing, but it certainly was not a practice that she had invented. The king (who in fact had the postmaster open letters as well), the police, and, of course, the king’s ministers were not exempt from these suspicions. Pompadour saw both surveillance and secrecy as necessities on the part of the government not only because these were traditional tools of those in power, but also because she was keenly aware of the force of public opinion and wanted to control it as best she could.

15 *Correspondance secrète*, 413.
16 *Correspondance secrète*, 435-6.

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For Pompadour, the volatility as well as the potential extremes of public opinion was reason enough to practice discretion and keep secrets. In a letter to the Maréchal de Richelieu she asked him to secretly send a list of officers meriting rewards for commendable service, adding “the fewer the names you choose, the better it will be for the finances of the king.”\textsuperscript{18} It seemed particularly important to her to influence public opinion on the matter of finances. She hoped to show that the court was not as extravagant as the public believed, and understood that regardless of the truth of the situation, the winds that swayed public opinion were what mattered. In 1751 she wrote to her friend, the Comtesse de Lutzelbourg, “The king wishes to diminish his expenses in every respect, and though that in and of itself is not very considerable, the public believing that it is, I hope to influence [\textit{ménager}] opinion and show a good example. I also hope that others are of the same mind.”\textsuperscript{19} When her friend asked for a lucrative position for her son, Pompadour refused for reasons of finance and the negative publicity such a favor would garner the royal favorite. She told her friend that if she gave the position to her son it might earn him an extra two thousands \textit{livres}, which would not mean much to the son of the comtesse, but which would mean a great deal to a low-ranking officer.\textsuperscript{20} She also knew that despite all her efforts, she could not alter her reputation as a vile temptress who used her feminine wiles to hold sway over the king and usurp royal power. She did come to exercise a great deal of influence, and at the height of her power, (incidentally the same period when she had ceased to be the king’s mistress), she was the gateway at Versailles to royal favors, positions and largesse. When she heard of attacks against her, she declared that “the king knows the truth,” and she added that she “had long since decided to console [herself] for these injustices with the certainty of the purity of [her] intentions.”\textsuperscript{21} She believed that she was devoted servant of the crown, and that everything she did was meant to further the king’s interests and strengthen his position, though she was continuously portrayed as manipulative, self-serving, secretive and above all, illegitimate. The public sphere was becoming the domain of men, and men were expected to be out in the open, not advancing themselves through intrigue and cunning but through strength and honesty.

Strength, honesty and transparency were thus becoming the markers of a new masculinity. The more traditional, more aristocratic brand of masculinity—sensitive to matters of honor, never countenancing any affront physical or otherwise, but also knowing how to be a good courtier: clever and graceful in speech as well as in dissimulation—had been pushed aside for a newer, more modern and perhaps more democratizing form of masculinity. Certain thinkers

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Lettres de Madame de Pompadour}, 326.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 256.
and writers even denounced the aristocratic version of honor and looked down on the ritual of the duel, preferring virtue to honor, or putting the honor of the nation above personal honor. According to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, author of the *Tableaux de Paris*, duels were no longer common in his day, thanks to philosophy and reason. He considered the practice of dueling “stupid and barbaric.” Robespierre called aristocratic honor a “gothic prejudice,” and he was once challenged to a duel but refused to fight, claiming that even an insult did not merit the loss of a life. In his famous Virtue and Terror speech, he declared that “we want in our country to substitute morality for egoism, probity for honor… merit for intrigue, genius for fine wit, truth for brilliance… in short all the virtues and miracles of the Republic for all the vices and absurdities of monarchy.” Whether virtue was to replace honor, or a new understanding of honor would privilege virtue above all else, the emerging masculinity coupled with the power of public opinion favored a culture of transparency where taking a strong stance meant having nothing to hide and where intrigue and secret plots were punished.

**Rejecting Secrecy and the Secret du roi**

Given his opinions of Pompadour and du Barry, and the growing importance of transparency, the Comte de Broglie distanced himself from the sinister aura of secrecy when his role in the *secret du roi* came to light, though he had been the head of a shadowy network for decades. He submitted to disgrace and exile so that the king could make a show of punishing him rather than admit that Broglie was acting under his orders when another minister, the Duc d’Aiguillon, suspected the existence of the *secret du roi* and targeted de Broglie. After the death of Louis XV, the Comte de Broglie, who was still in exile, wrote to the new king to ask to return to court. He wished to restore his honor, though in the process, he put that of Louis XV into question. He painted himself as a faithful diplomat whom the king had cowardly abandoned to protect his own honor. The Comte de Broglie exposed all of these secret dealings and claimed that he had wished to bring everything to light years ago, advised Louis against such duplicity from the beginning.

After the death of Louis XV, these fears and suspicions were all but confirmed by those who survived him. When Louis XVI was newly crowned, Broglie wrote to him, explaining everything about the *secret du roi* as he saw it, since it had already come to the public’s attention, and he mentioned his

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predecessor, the king’s “desire to hide a secret which his minister, aided by Mme. du Barry... wanted to pry from him...” Broglie saw the king’s mistress as meddling in affairs that did not concern her, but he also understood that the king, rather than yielding to her curiosity and being swayed by her, continuously tried to keep his secrets from her and his ministers.

Other diplomats and spies who secretly served Louis XV in these missions also perceived Louis XV as a weak monarch who kept things hidden from those in his court because he could not command them. Their sentiments seemed to echo the general opinion. In 1774, after the king’s death, d’Eon wrote to Broglie, mourning the loss of “our lawyer at Versailles” (Louis XV’s code name), and added that “in the midst of his own court he had less power than a lawyer at the Châtelet, who through an incredible weakness of his, always let his unfaithful servants triumph over his faithful, secret ones, and always did more good to his enemies than to his true friends...It is time that you tell all to the new king who loves the truth and who, I am told, has as much firmness as his illustrious predecessor had little...”25 Louis XV’s reputation, and that of the Crown, had been tarnished by the end of his reign, and his supposed weakness was to blame in eyes of many for the setbacks the nation had suffered such as the loss of the Seven Years’ War.

Popular, semi-underground newspapers of the time like the Memoires secrets were quick to report the king’s conduct once his secret correspondence had been discovered. In 1776, the Memoires secrets reported the former king’s hidden attempts to help his spy, d’Eon, in England while his own foreign minister wanted to have him arrested. According to the newspaper, “the king, who could be devious and sly, warned his spy of the minister’s actions while pretending to prosecute him. We add that...the king continued a secret correspondence with him, and had him spy not only on the English but also on his own ambassadors and other Frenchmen in London.”26 The newspaper found this “incredible” but decidedly true. While this was shocking, it also painted a portrait of a king who was both wily and weak, spying on his own people and secretly defying his ministers since he was afraid to do so overtly.

It was his inability to protect those who were members of the secret du roi that angered and embittered many after Louis XV’s death. (Hugonet, for example, ended up spending over two years in the Bastille, and he was finally released in May, 1767. He had been arrested in January, 1765.) Because of the king’s unwillingness to reveal his secret network to his own ministers, the Comte de Broglie had suffered damage to his reputation so that the king could blame him and not expose his own secret maneuvers when his foreign minister discovered a spy carrying suspicious papers. In a mémoire from Broglie to Louis XVI, asking to

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25 Ibid., 435-6.
return from exile, Broglie's lawyer wrote, “The Comte de Broglie cannot therefore attribute any other motives to His Majesty when he had him exiled apart from the desire to preserve his secret.” Though Broglie emphasized the depth of the sacrifice he had made to keep the former king's secrets, he considered it vital to reveal everything in order to salvage his reputation.

Broglie also believed that it was important to the future of the nation to bring everything to light, and that such policies of secrecy would no longer serve in the future as well as they had the previous generation. When Louis XVI first thought it would be wise to burn all the papers related to the secret du roi, Broglie demurred. “Far from regarding it as advantageous to burn all the papers of the secret correspondence,” he wrote to Louis XVI, it would not do to destroy all the evidence, since Broglie needed “irreproachable proof of [his] past conduct.” Because he was at the head of a shadowy and secretive network, Broglie acknowledged that that naturally made him suspect in the eyes of many. It was essential that this correspondence no longer be kept secret. He feared that “in the eyes of all Europe” he would be regarded as a “vile intriguer” when in fact he had only obeyed and participated in the secret du roi out of “an excess of love and obedience” for the former king. Broglie maintained that he had only submitted to disgrace and exile to protect the secret, initially believing it would be but a brief inconvenience. He wrote that this submission on his part would have been “beyond [his] strengths without the certitude that the king [Louis XV] only held [him] higher in his regards.”

Broglie wrote to Louis XVI that he hoped the king would deign to remove the “odious patina” with which he might be tarnished through a prolonged exile. He hoped that the king would repair his reputation and honor which he dared to believe would not simply be ignored and destroyed by the new ruler. He repeated in his letters that he was the purest and most zealous of the king’s subjects, using florid language and proclamations of loyalty. The profusion and length of his letters communicate Broglie's urgent desire to repair his reputation.

Broglie went so far as to label his detractors as secretive and manipulative while he portrayed himself as ever transparent and loathe to use secrets. He laid most of the blame of his disgrace and exile at the feet of the foreign minister at the time, the Duc d'Aiguillon. Broglie and his lawyer spared no effort to paint of picture of d'Aiguillon as an intriguer and often referred to his “shadowy” plots and machinations. According to Broglie, d'Aiguillon pulled the strings in the shadows with the help of the then royal mistress, Mme. du Barry, to discredit Broglie and destroy his influence and position at court. In a memoire written to Louis XVI in May, 1774 de Broglie claimed that Mme. du Barry and d'Aiguillon had been in league against him because they were jealous of the royal favor he enjoyed. Broglie added that he even proposed introducing d'Aiguillon into the secret network but that Louis XV had refused. Despite this affirmation of openness, de Broglie's

27 Correspondance, 410-12.
attitude towards d’Aiguillon had been far from conciliatory before his exile. There had been an incident where Broglie had written a rather insulting note to the foreign minister because he had denied de Broglie access to his extended family in the Piedmont while on a diplomatic voyage. De Broglie believed that the king had used this disrespectful letter as a pretext for his exile. He asserted that the king was “not desirous of admitting to the existence of the network that he wished to keep secret” and that he looked upon de Broglie’s insulting letter as a suitable pretext to protect his secret.\(^{28}\) In de Broglie’s eyes, his offer to include others in the secret network had pushed the king to momentarily move him out of the way and perhaps punish him for trying to put an end to the project. Including the foreign minister in the secret would defeat the purpose of the secret du roi, which was to have a channel of information separate from the office of foreign affairs. In addition to enduring disgrace, de Broglie appeared to have lost to one of his enemies at court, d’Aiguillon. All of this had occurred to preserve a secret that he did not believe was worth keeping.

The Comte de Broglie managed to escape imprisonment, but many of those who worked form, such as his personal secretary, were not so lucky. Members of court suspected de Broglie of misdeeds, even treason. This enraged de Broglie and alarmed those under him who had so far escaped imprisonment. Interrogations of those imprisoned, most of whom were connected to the secret du roi, soon took place at the Bastille which de Broglie called “a shadowy procedure” designed by d’Aiguillon to implicate de Broglie and to make it look as if he maintained his own “criminal correspondence with secret emissaries in all the foreign courts to discredit the efforts of the king’s ministers and to ignite everywhere the torch of war.” De Broglie added that “His Majesty knew the falsehood of all these imputations.”\(^ {29}\) Rather than de Broglie being the secretive intriguer who hid terrible things from others and plotted in the shadows, it was his curious enemy, jealous of being kept out of the king’s pet projects, who used intrigue to overthrow de Broglie and his supporters. The other guilty party, though de Broglie never dared to mention it explicitly, was the king. Broglie claimed again and again that the king knew of everything, knew of his innocence and of the foreign minister’s machinations, but still sent de Broglie into exile and his subordinates to the Bastille.

If Louis XVI was reluctant to bring everything to light, even if it meant exonerating Broglie, it was most likely because Broglie’s revelations cast Louis XV, and therefore the monarchy, in such a negative light. Louis XV had already closed his reign as a monarch of dubious repute after the scandals of his mistresses and the humiliating defeat of the Seven Years’ War. If it was revealed that Louis XV had failed to protect those in his service in order to maintain a secret project that had done little to further the interests of the nation, it would further prick the

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 390-2.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.
already deflating balloon of the monarchy. Like the families that requested *lettres de cachet* to hide a black sheep and preserve their honor, Louis XVI clearly preferred to hide his grandfather’s secrets to protect the monarchy’s reputation.

De Broglie, of course, saw things differently, but attempting to discredit d’Aiguillon in order to redeem himself once again placed Louis XV in a bad light. Broglie told Louis XVI that he hoped that the king “would deign to delve into sources separate from those of this minister [d’Aguillon]… in order to determine the true reasons for my exile. If I am not mistaken, bringing together several letters of the former king will prove that there was no other reason [for my exile] apart from His Majesty’s desire to hide a secret…” To de Broglie, the sole motivation of his slanderers and enemies was malice brought on by envy since he protested that he had done nothing wrong. “They suspected me, all of them, of having been honored with the secret confidence of the master [i.e. the king]…” he told Louis XVI in another of his letters. But if envy and malice motivated de Broglie’s enemies, what motivated his patron, the king, to act as he did apart from weakness—weakness vis-a-vis the members of his court, and moral weakness—and fear? In contrast, de Broglie portrayed himself as intrepid and steadfast, willing to make sacrifices out of service and loyalty (though he would not accept his victimization for long), and as a man of honor because he was afraid of nothing that might surface in an investigation. He proudly declared, “I fear no one in the examination of my life in its entirety.” De Broglie was relentless in his assertions and his requests for a return from exile, becoming passionate, even forceful in his letters, clearly hoping that his zeal would persuade the king of his loyalty and innocence. He told the king that “if the proof that I have the honor of sending Your Majesty of my fidelity, of my innocence…does not appear sufficient, I will dare to propose that Your Majesty send me from [my estate] to the Bastille where I will remain until you have found the most extensive evidence of my conduct.”

In his memoire, de Broglie’s lawyer made sure to underscore the point that de Broglie had never sought the post of secret head of the correspondence. He discussed his reluctance to participate and the fact that de Broglie had to be ordered twice to take charge, saying that “[de Broglie] even tried to quit the political arena for that of the military.” He wanted to join the 1747 campaign, but the king refused to grant his permission, and de Broglie was ordered to return to Poland as ambassador. Broglie knew only a “blind obedience to the will of the king,” and his loyalty was only further bolstered by his gratitude in receiving the “cordon bleu which [the king] had just given him despite the desires of Mme. de Pompadour.” Receiving the cordon bleu meant being inducted into the knightly Order of the

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30 Ibid., 399.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 413.
Holy Spirit, the most prestigious and highest honor in the land, granted only to royalty, princes of the blood and the highest nobility whom the king chose to grace with the honor of membership. De Broglie had not been a protégé of Mme. de Pompadour, and he claimed that it was because she was jealous and suspected (rightly) that he was involved in some sort of secret mission that the king kept from her.

At the same time that the secret correspondence damaged de Broglie’s honor and reputation, he believed that it also did harm to that of the state, certainly more harm than good. He told Louis XVI that years ago when the mantle of the secret du roi was passed from the Prince de Conti to himself he wanted to put a stop to it then and there and end the “useless internal difficulties” that the correspondence occasioned, but that the king was so attached to it that it continued. He made sure to show that the secret du roi had not been a correspondence of intrigue, though secret, and that he had always argued that it would have been more useful to include the ministers of foreign affairs from the beginning, though Louis XV had always refused. Now, de Broglie advised, it was important “that all persons who were under his orders learn in the future that they should only correspond with the minister of foreign affairs.”

If de Broglie was not exonerated, he argued, “the public might be led to suspect that there were actual abuses” going on as a result of the secret correspondence since failure to reveal everything would make the public wonder what the government had to hide. But even if that were true, it did not bolster the previous king’s already tarnished reputation by revealing that the king had been too weak to protect those who served him loyalty, preferring to protect a secret (that in the end seemed to do little in advancing the nation’s interests since it was unsuccessful and had been discovered by the Austrian court) rather than share his plans with his ministers and end their persecutions of de Broglie and others.

Interestingly, while de Broglie advocated doing away with secrecy within the court, he also voiced his suspicions about what was known as the cabinet noir, a secret branch of the post office that opened private letters if they considered suspicious or dangerous to the government. Broglie believed that the government’s violation of individual privacy might be justified for reasons of security. He wrote that “this institution’s goal was to keep the king and the government informed of any issues which might affect the State in order to be able to prevent occurrences that might be harmful to the prince and to the public.” But he disapproved of the postmaster, d’Ogny, since he believed that d’Ogny had long since been in the pay of one of the king’s ministers, or even Mme. de Pompadour, serving his or her personal ends rather than the good of the state and the people. Broglie explained, “There has been for a long while at the headquarters of the post a secret bureau. M.

34 Ibid.
d’Ogny is its head today, and he has a dozen or so of workers under him who open all the letters or at least those they find suspicious, and then they promptly write copies or excerpts.” Though de Broglie was revealing the existence of the cabinet noir to the king and not to the public, he clearly had his doubts about its validity and effectiveness. Out of this “good principle” of serving the good of the state, there resulted nevertheless “as often happens, disquietude and great inconvenience for private individuals and consequently for the [king]. His ministers had decided it was essential to place someone in this office who were loyal to them alone in order to take advantage of the access to these letters and present selected excerpts to the king in order to advance their own passions, vendettas or friendships. There are even cases, it is rumored, where ministers have fabricated excerpts to implicate those who were innocent.” In a position where one “can dispose of the secrets of all citizens,” de Broglie believed it was vital to place someone that the king could trust, who would not be swayed or bribed into the service of this or that minister or royal mistress. For the man in the position of postmaster was “to render no accounts of letters to anyone, even to ministers except by the [king’s] orders. Moreover, he should apply himself to his task with delicacy and the most impeccable scruples.”

Eventually, Louis XVI publicly exonerated the Comte de Broglie and allowed him to return to court, but he never served again in foreign affairs. He sought the title of Duc de Broglie to further compensate him for years of service and the disgrace had suffered, but the king refused, wishing to close the matter as quickly as possible.

By the reign of Louis XVI, the public had learned of the secret du roi. It became clear that it was often counter-productive and sometimes teetered on the brink of disaster in its various projects. When the entire project was revealed, the Comte de Broglie, who himself had been at the head of the secret, called for it to be dismantled and for a new era of transparency and communication to begin. This was because for de Broglie revealing everything would save his reputation since it would show that he only acted under the orders of the king. For the state, it would safeguard the monarchy’s reputation since keeping secrets had come to mean a mark of inefficiency and distrust. Over the course of the eighteenth century, secrecy had come to be seen as something suspect while transparency was emerging as a positive trait not only in the individual but also in a government. While secrecy may have been a traditional and unquestioned aspect of the monarchical regime in the past, its value and even its capacity for efficiency was being questioned. To add to that, a new kind of masculinity had emerged where revealing oneself and being honest and open had become the new mark of an honorable man. Secrecy had become a source of dishonor and a sign of weakness in an era when more and more, transparency meant strength and legitimacy. The Comte de Broglie, by emphasizing the problems of the secret du roi as he did,

36 Ibid.
looking at them at a particular angle and exposing it to the glare of public opinion, held a magnifying glass under the sun. Focused with the right intensity, it could start a blaze.