

Aspects of Britain and Germany

As a great admirer of Queen Elizabeth II and her late consort, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, and with vivid memories of the prince's funeral just a few weeks ago and aware that the Queen has just celebrated her 95th birthday, I thought it right and proper to devote a few lines to Anglo-German ties over the last century, especially any that involve the Duke of Edinburgh himself. Bear in mind, of course, that the Queen and the Duke were closely related, both being great-great-grandchildren of Queen Victoria, Elizabeth by descent from Victoria's eldest son, King Edward VII, and Philip by descent from Victoria's second daughter, Princess Alice of the United Kingdom.



the Duke of Edinburgh, 1992

But where to begin? Clearly with a little (very European) family history. Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark, the late consort of Queen Elizabeth II, was on his father's side a member of the House of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, but just prior to the official announcement of his engagement to Princess Elizabeth in 1947, he became a naturalised British subject and adopted the surname "Mountbatten" from his mother's side of the family.

In a previous "Aspects" article, I pointed out the enormous hostility in Britain to anything and everything German in the first part of the 20th century. The British royal family adopted "Windsor" as the title of its royal house (previously known as the House of Sachse-Coburg and Gotha). And even the German Shepherd breed of dog was renamed the "Alsatian"; the English Kennel Club only re-authorized the use of 'German Shepherd' as an official name in 1977. So, as you might have guessed, the name "Mountbatten" is yet another example of re-naming, and like "Windsor" it dates back to 1917. The British dynasty originated as a cadet (junior) branch of the German princely Battenberg family,

the name coming from the small town of Battenberg in the German state of Hesse.

I suspect that for most British people the name Mountbatten is associated with the 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma, an uncle of the Duke of Edinburgh and second cousin once removed of the Queen. During the Second World War, he was Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command and served as the last Viceroy of India and the first Governor-General of independent India in 1947. He was assassinated in 1979 by a bomb planted aboard his fishing boat in Mullaghmore, County Sligo, Ireland, by members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, a murder which only a few days ago the leader of Ireland's nationalist Sinn Fein party apologised for. Up until then previous nationalist leaders had maintained that Lord Louis Mountbatten had been a legitimate target. His death was seen at the time as a direct attack on the royal family, especially so as he had long served as a father figure and mentor to Prince Philip, and because of his close relationship with Prince Charles, his "Honorary Grandson", as he called him.



Lord Louis Mountbatten with Prince Charles



Admiral of the Fleet Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten, 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma

However, to return to Prince Philip and the many British-German links: Philip was born, apparently, on the dining room table in Mon Repos, the family villa on the Greek island of Corfu, the only son and fifth and final child of Prince Andrew of Greece and Denmark and Princess Alice of Battenberg. The said table now resides in a boardroom in the City of London after it was purchased by a firm of shipbrokers! Just a year after his birth, Philip was smuggled out of Greece in an orange crate, aged 18 months, during the Greco-Turkish War. The family was banished to Paris for several years, and Philip's sisters went on to marry German men, three of whom are believed to have supported Nazi causes. His mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and placed in an asylum. In 1930 Philip was sent to live in Kensington Palace with his maternal grandmother, the Dowager Marchioness of Milford Haven, and granddaughter of Queen Victoria. In 1933 he attended the famous Salem Castle School in Germany, whose Jewish founder, Kurt Hahn, had to flee Nazi persecution and was offered asylum in Britain. Greatly respected as an educationalist, he was given the opportunity to found Gordonstoun School in the Scottish Highlands in 1934, to which Philip moved after two terms at Salem, Germany. A central theme of Hahn's educational thinking was developing students to become community leaders with a deep love of comradeship and the outdoors. This was to inspire, of course, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme for young people, first announced in 1956.

To conclude, let us recall the funeral at Windsor Castle on April 17th, 2021, attended by three of Philip's German relatives. They were Bernhard, hereditary prince of Baden, Prince Philipp of Hohenlohe-Langenburg, and Prince Donatus, landgrave of Hesse. Bernhard and Philipp are descendants of Prince Philip's sisters, whose marriages to German aristocracy caused awkwardness after World War II due to some of them having been members of the Nazi party. Prince Donatus's grandfather, Philip's cousin, was also a Nazi party member.

While Philip's sisters became intimately tied to the Nazis, his mother, Princess Alice of Greece, after her recovery from schizophrenia, saved a Jewish family by hiding them during World War II, earning her the honor of "Righteous Among the Nations" from Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust museum.

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