

Prince Philip: An embittered defender of hereditary privilege

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Prince Philip spent the whole of his long life trying to keep the dying embers of monarchy alight. It was a calculated, cynical effort to defend and maintain aristocratic class privilege by a self-described “discredited Balkan prince of no particular merit or distinction.”

The British press have fallen over themselves at Philip’s death. The torrent of fawning media coverage is relentless and sickening, and yet has offered no insight into the man or his role. Moreover, the barrage of propaganda had the opposite effect sought by its authors, confirming that the mass of the working population did not share the forced expressions of loss at the passing of the man the disgraced Prince Andrew ludicrously referred to as the “grandfather of the nation.”

The BBC rescheduled all its television programmes, even suspending one channel altogether. All but one of its national radio stations were also rescheduled to rolling news. Its archive radio station was reprogrammed for a whole weekend. Commercial broadcaster ITV also rescheduled television programming to focus on seemingly endless “tributes” and commentary. The response was a collapse in viewing figures. BBC1, the BBC’s main news channel, saw an audience fall of 6 percent. Elsewhere, audiences just turned off. BBC2 and ITV saw viewing figures drop by 60-65 percent.

Philip’s self-appraisal accurately conveys his personal unimportance. More significant, however, is the rotten political role he played throughout his life. His defence of the monarchy and aristocratic privilege, courtesy of the bourgeois order on which it now rests, was driven by a highly attuned sense of a precarious existence, and a well-founded fear of the masses who could end it.

His life was shaped by reaction against revolutionary tumult. The most consequential episode shaping Philip and his world view was the 1917 Russian Revolution, which overthrew Tsarism and established the world’s first workers’ state under the Bolsheviks. Europe’s monarchies and the bourgeois order on which they rested trembled in response, fearing a similar fate. Philip never forgot this fear, or the reason for it.

Thanks to his relationship to the Russian Tsars, his DNA was even used to identify the corpses of the Romanovs. Asked later in life whether he would like to visit Russia, he said he would while adding the caveat, “although the bastards murdered half my family.”

He had personal experience of how tenuous an incestuous European royalty’s grip on power was. Philip was born on the

Greek island of Corfu, becoming Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark as the only son among five children. His grandfather, Prince William of Denmark, married a granddaughter of Tsar Nicholas I. Prince William had accepted the Greek government’s 1863 invitation to become George I, King of the Hellenes. He was assassinated in 1913.

He was succeeded by his eldest son, Constantine I of Greece.

Philip’s father was William/George’s younger son, Prince Andrew of Greece and Denmark. His mother was a daughter of the German Prince Louis of Battenberg and a great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria.

Constantine I was deposed in 1917 over Greek neutrality in World War I, and reinstated in 1920. In 1922, he was overthrown again following an army revolt. Prince Andrew was arrested and court-martialled for “disobeying an order” during the Battle of the Sakarya, which lost territory at the end of the Greco-Turkish conflict. Stripped of Greek nationality, Andrew faced treason charges. Britain’s George V, fearing his execution, sent a naval cruiser to remove the family to Italy, including the one-year-old Philip.

The other factor shaping Philip’s fate was Stalinism’s betrayal of the revolutionary struggles of the working class, which allowed for the survival of European and world capitalism and facilitated the growth of political reaction throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The survival of the monarchy in Greece, for example, depended on the protection of the Metaxas dictatorship, which drew inspiration from Mussolini’s fascists, but was allied to British imperialism. Ultimately the Greek monarchy was abolished by the military junta in 1973.

Philip’s orientation to British imperialism was dictated by similar geopolitical facts and attendant political considerations. His exiled family lived outside Paris until his mother’s institutionalisation after a breakdown. His father headed for Monte Carlo’s casinos, staying in Vichy France until his death in 1944.

Philip’s sisters all married German princes. Three of his brothers-in-law joined the Nazi Party and fought for them. His sister Sophie’s first husband was in the SS. In 1937, one sister, Cecilie, who had recently joined the Nazi Party, was killed in an air crash. Philip followed her coffin through crowds giving fascist salutes in Darmstadt. He later demonstrated the cynicism of his aristocratic judgement, saying of that period, “It’s simply what happened. The family broke up... I just had to get on with it. You do. One does.”

In 1933, Philip had attended Kurt Hahn’s prestigious Schule

Schloss Salem in Germany. But the Jewish Hahn had to leave Germany two terms later for criticising Nazism. Philip followed him to Scotland, and his newly established Gordonstoun school. Philip's personal loyalty to British imperialism was assured.

Hahn, a surrogate father-figure, was to help shape Philip for a role in the upper levels of British society. The prince, he wrote, "will make his mark in any profession where he will have to prove himself in a trial of strength." Hahn also inspired the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, which combines individualism with civic responsibility as a "do-it-yourself kit in the art of civilised living" for young people. Although carrying the prince's name, Philip said "It would never have started but for Hahn."

Before the war Philip was sent to naval college, where he first met a Princess Elizabeth as a child. Graduating top of his class in 1940, he joined the navy, seeing military action and gaining promotion. Even here his reputation was for intolerance. "One of his crew," commented a biographer, "said he would rather die than serve under him again."

When he first set out to court Elizabeth, the British monarchy regarded him as beneath them, with his mixed heritage, rough character and lack of titles. Royal reactions to his request to marry Elizabeth show that social layer's backwardness. The Queen Mother called him "the Hun." Her brother dismissed him as "a German." Nevertheless, the marriage was agreed. Renouncing his Greek title, he took British nationality and adopted the anglicised name Mountbatten. On his wedding day in 1947 he was made Duke of Edinburgh. Philip took leave from the navy in 1951 to support Elizabeth, who was taking over duties from her ailing father. In 1952 George died, and Elizabeth became queen.

It is from this point on that most obituaries of Philip focus—his role as the queen's husband for nearly seven decades, the longest serving royal consort in British history. And the narrative goes that this was a role that he played loyally and, for the most part, with aplomb.

His readiness to support the queen, not to say provide the necessary heir/s to the throne, was a vital gift to Britain's ruling elite. It is one acknowledged in innumerable tributes to his readiness to sacrifice masculine dominance and walk the necessary distance behind his spouse. The most ludicrous of these comes courtesy of Gaby Hinsliff in the *Guardian*, who describes Philip as someone "in an era still uncomfortable with the idea of a man bowing to female authority" who came "to define a different kind of masculine ideal; one rooted in devotion, support and the kind of strength that does not need to show itself by muscling endlessly into the limelight." His "real function in public life was having the grace to fade into the background of it and allow his spouse the spotlight..."

Hinsliff does, however, make one useful observation, stating, "It was perhaps the crown, as much as the woman wearing it, to which this scion of the exiled Greek royal family deferred; the crown to which he famously pledged allegiance by kneeling before his wife at her coronation."

Philip was indeed prepared to subject himself to what he clearly saw as a personal humiliation to preserve the authority of the crown as an institution. His life was dedicated to making the monarchy palatable to the population and to defending it against

an eruption of plebeian hostility. Indeed because of his insistence that the monarchy must adapt to survive, he became known as its "moderniser." Notwithstanding his real autocratic feelings, he chaired the Way Ahead Group of leading royals and their advisers, to analyse and avert criticism of the monarchy. His role, he said, was simply "to ensure the Queen can reign."

The same can be said of his "charitable works", and commitment to honouring his numerous public engagements—because this was the price to be paid for a private life of extraordinary privilege, of cricket, polo, yachting, cruising, dining, partying and the rest.

Yet he still bridled at his "sacrifice", and was noticeably bitter, not just privately but in public. He regretted not being able to continue his naval career and complained that his children bore the name Windsor rather than Mountbatten, declaring, "I am the only man in the country not allowed to give his name to his children. I'm nothing but a bloody amoeba."

His numerous ignorant and sometimes nakedly racist pronouncements while on official duties are infamous expressions of his concealed dissatisfaction and suppressed persona. But perhaps the most revealing was when he told Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, "It's a pleasant change to be in a country that isn't ruled by its people."

The prince's concern for the monarchy also rested on broader thinking about the general stability of capitalism. In 1977 he compared the British economy to dry rot in a house, saying, "You don't know when it starts, you don't know when the crisis is, but gradually the place becomes uninhabitable."

It should be added that Philip's much-vaunted environmentalism was likewise based on a misanthropic class privilege. His advocacy for nature conservation accompanied the right to hunt big game for sport. He coupled defence of species against extinction with a naked hostility to the mass of humanity, writing, "I am tempted to ask for reincarnation as a particularly deadly virus, but that is perhaps going too far."

These political and class realities find expression in the eulogies from Britain's political leaders. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, one of the most transparently self-serving representatives of the venal British bourgeoisie, praised Philip's "ethic of service." Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer declared that Britain had "lost an extraordinary public servant."

In the not-too-distant future people will look back in disbelief that this ridiculous and parasitic institution and its representatives was still being discussed in 2021. The death of Prince Philip has exposed again the pressing need for royalty to be confined to the history books, once and for all.



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