

PRINCE PHILIP, THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

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Usually a lot of our knowledge is dispersed, fragmented. So a key dimension of learning (or re-learning, or learning more) involves bringing it all together, unifying and integrating it. Easier said than done. Time and again, when I pose certain questions in class, or in admissions committees and interviews, I realize that the student or students involved actually have all or most elements of the answer in their possession. Somewhere in the back of their minds. But they are unable to retrieve them — basically because they are unable to synthesize. To link, to connect.

Here is a case in point. On the one hand, the death of a celebrity. And on the other hand, undergraduate coursework. Can you build bridges between the two? Can you apply your academic intake to closer “readings” of public events?

Yesterday Prince Philip passed away. May he rest in peace. RIP. Latin original *In pace requiescat*. Corresponding to Allah rahmet eylesin.

He was 99 (1921-2021). Officially he was Duke of Edinburgh, Royal Consort to his wife Elizabeth. Queen Elizabeth, please. She survives him. She is 95 (1926 –). Officially she is Elizabeth II Queen of the United Kingdom — and fifteen other Commonwealth realms.

I am not interested so much in him, his character, or his personal achievements, as the socio-historical background that he represented. That he (and Elizabeth) came out of. Dead or alive, they are the last relics of a bygone era. An age of European monarchies and nobilities. And their intermarriages.

Consider the following bits and pieces of information from the various obituaries now flooding the internet. His mother and father had met at the funeral of Queen Victoria in 1901. At a time when all but four of Europe’s nations were monarchies, his relatives were scattered through European royalty. Some royal houses were swept away by World War One; but the world into which Philip was born was still one where monarchies were the norm.

His grandfather was the King of Greece. His father was Prince Andrew, a younger son of King George I of the Hellenes. His mother, Princess Alice of Battenberg [a great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria], was the eldest child of Prince Louis of Battenberg and the sister of Earl Mountbatten of Burma. (Please note that ENG mount(ain) and GER berg are the same, so Mountbatten becomes the English translation and equivalent of Battenberg. In effect they are two branches, in two different countries, of the same royal-aristocratic family.)

Prince Philip of Greece was born on 10 June 1921 on the island of Corfu. His birth certificate shows the date as 28 May 1921, as Greece had not then adopted the Gregorian calendar. After a coup d'état in 1922, his father was banished from Greece by a revolutionary court. A British warship sent by his second cousin, King George V, took the family to Italy. Baby Philip spent much of the voyage in a crib made from an orange box. They were deposited in Italy. One of Philip's first international journeys was spent crawling around on the floor of the train from an Italian port city, "the grubby child on the desolate train pulling out of the Brindisi night," as his sister Sophia later described it.

The prince spent his early years wandering, as his place of birth ejected him, his family disintegrated, and he moved from country to country, none of them ever his own. He began his education in France. In Paris, he lived in a house borrowed from a relative; but it was not destined to become a home. At the age of seven, he came to live with his Mountbatten relatives in England, where he attended a prep school in Surrey. In just one year, while he was at boarding school in Britain, the mental health of his mother, Princess Alice, deteriorated and she went into an asylum; his father, Prince Andrew, went off to Monte Carlo to live with his mistress; and his four sisters married and went to live in Germany. In the space of ten years he had gone from a prince of Greece to a wandering, homeless, and virtually penniless boy with no-one to care for him.

In 1933, he was sent to Schule Schloss Salem in southern Germany, which was run by educational pioneer Kurt Hahn. But within months, Hahn, who was Jewish, was forced to flee Nazi persecution. Hahn moved to Scotland where he founded Gordonstoun school, to which the prince transferred after only two terms in Germany.

With war looming, Prince Philip decided on a military career. He wanted to join the Royal Air Force but his mother's family had a seafaring tradition and he became a cadet at the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. While there he was delegated to escort the two young princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret, while King George VI and Queen Elizabeth toured the college. According to witnesses, Prince Philip, then 18, showed off a great deal. And the meeting made a deep impression on the 13-year-old Princess Elizabeth.

Philip served as a Royal Navy officer in World War II. Throughout this period, he and the young Princess Elizabeth had been exchanging letters, and he was invited to stay with the Royal Family on a number of occasions. It was after one of these visits, over Christmas 1943, that Elizabeth placed a photograph of Philip, in naval uniform, on her dressing table. Their relationship developed in peacetime, although there was opposition to it from some courtiers – one of whom described Prince Philip as "rough and ill-mannered".

But the young princess was very much in love and, in the summer of 1946, her suitor asked the King for his daughter's hand in marriage. However, before an engagement could be announced, the prince needed a new nationality and a family name. He renounced his Greek title, became a British citizen and took his mother's anglicised name, Mountbatten. The day before the marriage ceremony, King George VI bestowed the title of His Royal Highness on Philip and on the morning of the wedding day he was created Duke of Edinburgh, Earl of Merioneth and Baron Greenwich.

The wedding took place in Westminster Abbey on 20 November 1947. It was, as Winston Churchill put it, a "flash of colour" in a grey post-war Britain. His four older sisters had all married Germans, as already indicated. While Philip fought for Britain in the Royal Navy, three of his sisters actively supported the Nazi cause; none would be invited to his wedding.

In some ways, a story of determination, overcoming hardship, and then romance. But also of crisscrossing origins and relationships. Now it so happens that I did touch upon at least some of this in two different courses over the past year. Last Spring, when I was still teaching HIST 102, I devoted my Lecture 8a, on Tuesday, 17th March 2021, to the question of naming 1919-1922. I tried to explain why, on the Turkish side, I saw Millî Mücadele or İstiklâl Harbi as relatively correct, while Kurtuluş Savaşı or Millî/Ulusal Kurtuluş Savaşı involves a major historical mistake. But in a multi-perspectivity exercise, I also passed from that to the Greek side, and spoke of the consequences of the Mikrasiatikî Katastrofi (the Asia Minor Disaster) for Greek politics: the military coup (led by Plastiras and Gonatas), the colonels looking for scapegoats, show trials over a "treason" that had never happened, the six top politicians and officers that were executed, the king abdicating and leaving the country. Things that generations of Turkish students learn next to nothing about, because our educational system is to this day much too steeped in 19th century style "national history." And in the process I mentioned an infant of 2 who managed to escape with his life:

The ex-king's brother, Prince Andrew, also a senior commanding officer in the failed campaign, had been indicted as well but was in Corfu at the time. He was arrested, transported to Athens, tried by the same tribunal a few days later, and found guilty of the same crimes, but was recognised as being "completely lacking in military command experience," an ironic mitigation. He was sentenced to death first and then banishment from Greece for life. The prince and his family (which included his infant son, Prince Philip, later the Duke of Edinburgh) were evacuated on a British warship on December 4, leaving Corfu island for Brindisi.

See, under "Recommended Readings," my entry 0008.1.[Originally 1001.08a.] What's in a name—the National Struggle, 1919-1922 — an abridged version of my 17.4.2020 lecture PowerPoint. It fits what is now being written about that little boy who lived on for another 97 years, doesn't it?

This is my direct connection to what happened yesterday. But there is also an indirect connection, for in a later course, I went into a further generalization. In Fall 2020, I was teaching HIST 325 Formations and Constructions of Europe. I started with geography, the peopling of Europe, the languages of Europe, the religions of Europe. Eventually, I made my way into the politics of Europe. By which I meant not a detailed chronological account, but an attempt to present the overall "shape" of European politics in different periods.

Again under “Recommended Readings,” in 0008.2.[Originally H325.class ppt 13 (30.12.2020)] you can find another abridged PowerPoint — reduced to the few slides where, as you can see, I was trying to emphasize a historical peculiarity starting from the Early Middle Ages:

fief-based states → privatization and hereditization → the rise of hereditary landowning nobilities → inheritance, marriage, alliances (within the nobility) → in an overall context of “small and many” → great families (Houses), heirs and heiresses, main branches and cadet branches → dynastic marriages and relations between nobilities and royal houses → a conflictual kinship web covering virtually all Europe

So this is why Prince Philip is (or was) the tip of an entire iceberg which, now, is only a shade of the past — an ever-receding nebulousness which, yes, is deliberately and artificially given a further life in British pageantry, but no longer exercises the kind of influence over European politics that it did only a hundred years ago.

