
Book Review

Life and times of Mountbatten: an oligarch in the age of the common man

by Laurent Murawiec

Mountbatten, The Official Biography

by Philip Ziegler

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The *principle* of oligarchy needs oligarchs to manifest itself and to perpetuate itself—stating this is not a tautology but a starting point to understand how the caste of aristocrats, high-priests, and usurers arrogates itself extraordinary powers above and against the rest of society, and how it sees itself.

The life of Louis Earl Mountbatten of Burma, great-grandson of Queen Victoria, the last Viceroy of the British Raj in India, Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal Navy, and a principal promoter of the “peace movement,” provides an exemplary glance into the world of oligarchy in the 20th century, which historians, sociologists, and political scientists all present as devoid of any “aristocratic” influence. The authorized biography of Mountbatten recently published in London by retired British diplomat Philip Ziegler, besides offering a flagrant case of incompetent and lying-by-omission historiography, contributes a useful wealth of material to the case at hand.

On May 11, 1979, Mountbatten delivered an address in Strasbourg, France, on the occasion of receiving an award on behalf of an organization he had co-founded, Stockholm’s SIPRI [Peace Research] institute. The speech, which was forthwith blasted world-wide by the media, represented the culmination of two decades of its author’s efforts on behalf of “disarmament and arms control,” and an outright assault on “the arms race.” Several weeks after the speech, Mountbatten lost his life when an alleged IRA cell blew up his boat. And in January 1984, the flamboyant far-right British politician Enoch Powell charged—in a publicized exchange of

letters with a leader of the British peace movement—that it was the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency which had plotted and executed the death of his unlikely bedfellow, peacenik Mountbatten of Burma.

Queen Victoria’s offspring

What led one born immediately under the throne to become an inspiration for the appeasers of all lands, and a martyr for their cause, is the 20th century life of a member of the extended family of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the German noble house which became central to Europe’s reigning, uncrowned royalty and their lower-level feudal colleagues.

Mountbatten’s mother “was a radical in her ideas,” the biographer informs us, “a radical, a Marxist,” a Briton who knew her reports, and from her, Mountbatten “inherited egalitarian instincts, yet also a strong sense of caste.” How the two seeming extremes were to be reconciled we will see later. She was Princess Victoria of Hesse, herself the daughter of the Grand Duke of Hesse and Princess Alice, one of Queen Victoria’s nine children. His father Prince Ludwig (Louis) von Battenberg, from a branch of the grand-ducal family of Hesse, had a sister who married Prince Andrew of Greece, who in turn fathered the present Prince consort Phillip of Edinburgh. The immediate family circle included the royal families of Germany (Hohenzollern), Denmark, Russia (Romanov), Spain, Sweden, Greece, Portugal, Baden, and Hanover as well as of Britain—all intensely interrelated as the prolific descendance of Queen Victoria in one extended family, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

From his mother, young Louis learned that he was descended from William the Conqueror, and before him, from Charlemagne, not to speak of far earlier ancestors who had probably roamed the Central European forests half-naked. Genealogy—the oligarchy’s notarial account of its own legitimacy, or the projection in family form of the history of the oligarchical system—was to become Mountbatten’s enduring passion, the one that provided most of the books he read.

From his father, appointed in 1912 First Sea Lord, he took his interest in the sea, and became a Naval Cadet who nearly saw action at the end of World War I. That was his "technical" specialization in a century where even aristocrats have to learn a thing or two. But while a Cambridge student, he also firmed up family friendships which were later to provide him with swift promotion in the Royal Navy and quick ascent on the ladder of power: The closest friend of Prince Albert, the future King George VI, he was also asked by David, Prince of Wales (the future Edward VIII and Duke of Windsor) to be his aide-de-camp for a world tour.

Upon his return, he married one of the richest heiresses of the realm, the granddaughter of financier Sir Ernst Cassell, banker, financial adviser, confidante to King Edward VII, and a London associate of the New York houses of Harriman, Warburg, and Schiff. He thus entered the powerful circle of the "Edwardians," the King's circle of friends—as well as the radical-chic "jet-set" crowd of his wife Edwina Ashley, who described herself as "a Socialist" and later, "a Communist."

Young naval officer Mountbatten was the mentor of the Prince of Wales, the future short-lived, "populist" King who was to pay private visits to Hitler after his abdication in 1936. The Prince's policy was perfectly in tune with the radical-Fabian views of British Union of Fascists leader Sir Oswald Mosley, a friend of Keynes and the trendy set of the "Bloomsbury Group," and when the great crisis of 1936 which eventually ended in Edward VIII's departure from the throne erupted, Mountbatten used his radical-leftist contacts to try to start a campaign on the latter's behalf: He asked Cambridge Apostle and Communist leader John Strachey to make overtures to the editor of Communist newspaper *The Week*, one Claud Cockburn, so that the Communists influence public opinion in favor of the King.

Mountbatten was then already a politically active aristocrat, who did a lot of "liaising" with the Left. The same year, "Dickie" Mountbatten and wife made the pilgrimage to Moscow, at the height of the mock-trials. But when the new King George VI stood despondently in the first night of his reign, moaning, "Dickie, this is absolutely terrible. I never wanted this to happen. I am unprepared for it," it was he that gave the pep-talk to the newly crowned monarch.

A nobleman at war

As to Mountbatten's seafaring career, curiously for a future First Sea Lord, it proved an unmitigated disaster, with most of the ships under his command damaged or sunk by accident, recklessness, or callous and uninspired command. What he displayed was flamboyant irresponsibility, the stuff of chivalric "heroes," and an unusual ability to manipulate individuals under his command, using glamor on the one hand, and playing the role of the benign Lord, the nobleman who does not hesitate to talk to his inferiors. The age of

"democracy" required such histrionics. "Thoroughly badly commanded," the British commander in charge commented when Mountbatten's flotilla was mopped up off the coast of Crete during World War II—but that did not stop the irresistible ascent of the royal offspring, who got in succession the command of the first British aircraft-carrier HMS *Illustrious*, the command of the newly-created Combined Operations, which gave him—to the utter disgust and wrath of the British Chiefs of Staff—a seat in their meetings, and promotion to acting vice-Admiral, Lieutenant-General and Air Marshal.

As head of Combined Operations, Mountbatten built a staff that included his lifelong friend, homosexual leftist writer Peter Murphy, South African anatomist (and future star of the Club of Rome milieu) Solly Zuckerman, David Astor, of the American opium-traders who had bought themselves a British lordship and had been the center of the prewar appeasement policy of the "Cliveden Set" (named after the Astor's estate), Communist scientist J.D. Bernal, among others. With such an input, it is barely astonishing that the "output" should have been the bloody, aborted Allied landing at Dieppe, the "Operation Sledgehammer" which uselessly sacrificed thousands of (especially) Canadian crack troops to demonstrate to the American command and President Roosevelt that the invasion of Europe was impossible—and thus prolonged the war by up to two years.

India: the bloody retreat from Empire

The influence of Leo Amery, then Secretary of State for India, who was "the political heir of [Lord Alfred] Milner, head of the British Round Table, the secret society that shaped in-depth British strategies from the 1890s through the 1940s, had been at work to give Mountbatten a leg up to Chief of Combined Operations. The process was repeated for his appointment as Supreme Allied Commander for the newly-created South-East Asia theater—which formally placed him on an equal footing with General Eisenhower or General Douglas McArthur! Franklin Roosevelt's comment to his son Elliott was curt: "You know why Winston [Churchill] has Mountbatten here with him? . . . Burma. The British want to recapture Burma. It is the first time they've shown any real interest in the Pacific. And why? For their colonial empire." To boot, Mountbatten used his war-time tenure (the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Commander "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell and less glamorous British officers did the real job while Mountbatten was posing for photographers) as the stepping stone for his next major assignment, the last British Viceroy of India, an appointment that was also suggested by Leo Amery. Off went Mountbatten to India, after the Labour government of Clement Attlee had rubber-stamped the proposal thus coming from on-high.

"It had fallen to me to be the outward and visible symbol of the British Empire's intention to return to the attack in

Asia." Stilwell's scathing remark on the symbol makes the assessment more realistic: "pisspot, childish Louis, publicity-crazy."

What did the Symbol do? Until then, he had acquired his seat in the gallery of destructive commanders who sacrifice their men for no purpose but their own self-aggrandizement. He was now to give a repeat performance at the level of a subcontinent, both for self-aggrandizement and to ensure the partition and resulting relative impotence and mutual hatred of the partitioned parts of the Indian Raj, at the cost of one, perhaps two millions lives, and several million homeless refugees uprooted in the brutal months of the partition on communal-religious lines. Mountbatten implemented to a dot the Round-Table's pre-formulated strategy for the Raj, one that appeared in 1916 under the byline of Lionel Curtis, the founder of the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House), which called for a "rejuvenated" Empire in the form of what was to become the Commonwealth—a loose confederation of war-torn, minority-riddled, unviable states whose international credit would remain firmly centered in the City. As Mountbatten was telling young, upcoming Third World leaders gathering around him in London, "your strategic metropolis will shift to Washington, but your political capital will remain in London."

Mountbatten's craft was to make use of ties developed during the war with India's nationalist leaders, such as Krishna Menon and Nehru, which he did with the help of his wife (whose whorish way of life was so outrageous that no biographer could afford to keep silent about it. As he was to notice, in a display of what "upper class morality" is, "Edwina and I spent all our married lives getting into other people's beds.")

To fulfill his assignment, Mountbatten upon his vice-regal arrival, gave an ultimatum to the Indian leaders: They have 15 months, not a day more, to become independent—whether problems were solved or not, whether the extraordinarily delicate problems posed by transition from colonial rule to independence were settled or not. With the crass indifference of the Master Race for the Untermenschen, Mountbatten commented blithely: "A measure of transfer of population will come about in a natural way," which came about in the form of savage, protracted, bloody rioting which sent millions on the roads, Muslims and Hindus shifting locations and dying in droves on the way. But such minor events in the ant-hill are of little import to the true royalty, aren't they? Mountbatten, soon the first British Governor-General of independent India, also worked overtime to achieve his other policy aim—keep the United States out of India. The United States, he said in a 1947 interview, wanted "to sell the American industrialization to the Indians at the earliest possible moment. . . . Unless the British offer was received by the Indians before the American offer there would be a good chance that it would be too late altogether." The Noble Savage was more amenable to Empire than the indus-

trial Third World. The American ambassador was sending cables home that Mountbatten was "warning the Indians against dollar imperialism," the same dollar that was rebuilding Britain at the same moment, courtesy of the Marshall Plan.

A measure of Mountbatten's success, however, was that Jawaharlal Nehru was to dub him "a very noble specimen of British Imperialism." Churchill did not take it so kindly. Mountbatten noted in his own diary, as quoted by Ziegler, that during a 1951 dinner they had had together, he had "questioned the wisdom of linking Britain irrevocably to American foreign policy, especially if it seemed that the course followed by the Americans was likely to lead to war," in good English, a proposal that Britain should remain neutral in any U.S.-Soviet confrontation! Churchill, according to Mountbatten's diary entry:

turned to me and said: "I think you should be careful about your anti-American attitude." I repeated that . . . taken as a corporate mass, the Americans were immature, and if they were *allowed* their own way, they would probably take a course which would not only destroy their own country but would ultimately end in the destruction of their own system. He then said: "I am very sad to hear you express such left-wing views."

One seems to hear Edmund Burke commenting on the American Revolution. At the same time, however, Viscount Mountbatten, Knight of the Garter, was being charged by U.S. intelligence sources with being "deeply involved with the Communist Party," which was a naive way of expressing that his dealings with the treacherous crowd that was involved in the back-channels with Moscow made him a most suspicious character. True enough, many of Mountbatten's circle of friends were on MI5's list of Soviet agents, including the homosexual Labour MP Tom Driberg, later the protector of one Mick Jagger.

As First Sea Lord, a job he obtained a few years later, Mountbatten halved the Royal Navy's reserve fleet, discharged 30,000 seamen, and, in accordance with the doctrine promulgated by Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, the usher of arms control, disarmament, and détente, the transformation of the Navy into the tool required to fight "minor neo-colonial wars," the strike force for "cold and limited wars." In 1959, Macmillan picked him up for the job of Chief of the Defense Staff (CDS), to reorganize the British military on the principle that war was not to be fought, unless it was against the "wogs." War against Russia was "impossible" since "deterrence" had "abolished global war." Whatever scraps of traditional "Clausewitzian" wisdom remained in the British command were expressed in relentless hostility on the part of the Services to Mountbatten's sweeping reforms. And at personal level, their insight into his character was expressed with scientific rigor by Field Mar-

shal Sir Gerald Temple during a staff meeting: "Dickie, you're so crooked that if you swallowed a nail, you'd shit a corkscrew." Not without justification, Chief of Air Staff Boyle told Mountbatten: "I consider your appointment as CDS the greatest disaster that has befallen the British Defense Services within memory."

Mountbatten's credo, as he expressed in a memo circulated to his staff in the early 1960s, emphasized that neither Christianity nor democracy were to be presented as national aims, but rather, welfare, world government, and disarmament. Far from making him an outcast, these and similar views were integral to the role and influence exerted by Mountbatten in Britain and the Commonwealth. It was he who had introduced his nephew Philip of Greece to Queen-to-be Elizabeth, after having raised the orphaned princeling; it was he who shaped the rearing of Prince Charles, and remained a trusted adviser to the Queen.

Similarly, Mountbatten became something of an Elder Statesman or, as his biographer puts it, "shop-steward of the [European] Royalty," working at pulling together the scattered threads of the continent's rulers, badly mauled by the 20th century, trying to regroup them for a future regaining of thrones and powers. For one, Mountbatten was one of the acknowledged experts in genealogy of the extended family, the craft where the families of the oligarchy read their own perpetuation. And he played mentor to numerous old and young royalty, from the old King of Sweden whom he tried to push from the throne, to the beneficiary, the present King Carl-Gustav; he played a role in the royal succession of Spain and as a ranking dignitary in one of the oligarchy's major international Orders, the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, was further present in the councils of the world's titled nobility.

In the course of his multiple activities, spanning a more than 50-year career, Mountbatten wove several networks of loyalty that converged upon his person (and policies), in the military, in the Commonwealth circles, in the United States, in the intelligence services and in the high-technology areas of science and industry; this did not constitute a "Court" in the ancient manner, but concentric circles of power and influence which superseded the institutions which the members of the Mountbatten circles supposedly served. There in particular lay his "power," one unconcerned with and unconnected to such formal (and impotent) seats of power as the House of Commons. Quasi-feudal networks of loyalties replaced and overcame loyalty to institutions as such. This mode of operation, typical of the oligarchy in the 20th century, ensured a superior form of power, one not described by parliamentary politics.

One who knew him defines him as "having held the view, inherited from his mother in particular, that he and his family were entitled by birth to great wealth, prestige, influence, and power. He also thought that Socialism, Communism, were the wave of the future. So this meant that one had to

accommodate Russia, to make a deal with them, provided of course that his family would retain the wealth, the power, etc." By birth and by function, Mountbatten had access to the highest councils of the Western world. The world of undisputed royal despotism had admittedly disappeared in the course of the 20th century, but not the ability of the same oligarchy, even if divested from royal trappings, to influence the course of events.

In fact, the hypothesis may be floated that Mountbatten devoted the last years of his life to paving the way for a regroupment of the old European oligarchy, in anticipation of the Great Agreement with Moscow which was otherwise much more than implicit in Mountbatten's sponsoring of the Peace Movement. His 1979 speech cited at the outset "against the nuclear arms race" was the international kickoff for the Peace Movement, the call to arms which was heeded by every asset of the Soviet Union in the West. It is no accident either that most of the senior members of Mountbatten's "kindergarten" during his tenure as Chief of Defense Staff, later turned up, like Field Marshal Lord Carver, among the "generals for-no-first-use" of nuclear weapons, just as his most intimate collaborator Lord Solly Zuckerman has been spearheading the pro-Soviet motion against the Strategic Defense Initiative in the West. Mountbatten's grandfather Alexander of Hesse had been the godson of the Russian Czar; his sister had married the next Czar. Connections of the family of the Grand-Dukes of Hesse with the Romanovs were multiple. It was no accident that the "Prinz von Battenberg," as Mountbatten liked to call himself, was invited to Moscow by the Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin—"I then told him of my various ancestral relations who had married Emperors of Russia." It was to be Kosygin's son-in-law, Dzherman Gvishiani, who co-founded the key East-West policy-shaping institute, the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, with Mountbatten's protégé Solly Zuckerman!

Philip Ziegler's biography itself is a useful compilation of facts—carefully screened, however, for the purpose of avoiding "interpretation," i.e., history. Some of the most relevant *facts* of the subject's life have been omitted pure and simple, such as his pre-war collaboration with the "Intrepid" networks of William Stephenson, or his role as the founder of SIPRI, one of the early cornerstones of the disarmament-peace movement. This sanitized version of events also relies of the basic clichés of 20th-century political "science," in particular in the way in which it carefully edits out of history anything that would contradict the "idée reçue" that the oligarchy has disappeared from the ruling of world history. Mountbatten embodied this very oligarchy's species self-conception of itself as the "natural rulers," which Ziegler calls "a strong sense of caste," in the middle of a century too strongly influenced by "Americanism," by science, technology and progress, for oligarchs to be able to exert their power without mediation, or without controlling the very institutions they wished to destroy.