
PRINCE WILLIAM BEGINS CELEBRATIONS OF NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA UNDER BREXIT CLOUD

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Prince William has visited North Rhine-Westphalia to mark the state's 70th birthday. DW's Kate Brady reports from Düsseldorf where the looming Brexit is still a worry for many German Anglophiles.

They called it "Operation Marriage." On August 23, 1946, the British military founded the western German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) - an unlikely coupling of two regions, the Rhineland and Westphalia that came with a history of rivalry.

Just as unlikely was the friendship that blossomed between NRW and the UK. After almost half a century of damaged relations, tarnished by two world wars, Britain and Germany rekindled in the post-war years a relationship that continues to grow today.

On the 70th anniversary of the founding of the "hyphenated state," Germany's connection to the UK is stronger there than in any other German state, with some 27,000 Brits currently living in NRW, which is also Germany's most populous state.

To mark the occasion on Tuesday, Prince William the Duke of Cambridge traveled to Düsseldorf, the capital of NRW, as the state's premier, Hannelore Kraft, awarded Britain's 20th Armored Infantry Brigade with the NRW Fahnenband - the highest German honor that can be awarded to a military organization.

"Vielen Dank," Kraft said, as she thanked the UK and the British military for their help in ensuring peace in Europe, particularly in the Cold War era.

The 20th Armored Infantry Brigade, which has been stationed in Germany since 1951, has brought thousands of military personal and their families to NRW over the past five decades.

Among them are several members of the British Women's Club, who attended the ceremony in full force on Tuesday - brandishing their Union Jacks and miniature cut outs of Prince William.

"It's important to celebrate this friendship," 71-year-old Lynda told DW. Like many of her British friends, she moved to NRW "for love" in 1967.

With the British military due to leave Germany by 2020, however, the historic military connection between Britain and NRW will be largely severed.

"We will miss them when they're no longer here" Kraft said.

But the departure of the British military from Germany wasn't the only exit on everyone's mind on Tuesday, however. For many Germans who turned out to see Prince William, the looming Brexit overshadowed the pomp and ceremony of the occasion.

For 17-year-old Feliziz, the possibility of the UK leaving the EU came as a shock. "I'm still grieving," she told DW. The Düsseldorf resident had planned to do a gap year in the UK but now fears that her opportunities to work and travel there might be hindered if the Brexit goes ahead.

"I love the British," she told DW. "The culture, the people. They're so ... different from us."

Claudia, 28, traveled from the nearby city of Aachen in the hope of catching a glimpse of the Duke of Cambridge.

"I'm a big fan of the royal family," the dentistry student told DW. "It would be a shame if we lost that connection if the Brexit goes through, as it's something that Germany doesn't have."

"Plus, Prince Harry's still single," she joked.

Seventy-one-year-old Claus who leads the Rhine area pipes and drums group doubted, however, that the Brexit would affect German-British relations.

"The connection is too deep now," he said. "We'll most likely see political and economic changes, but not cultural."

"Today we have to celebrate what has been achieved in NRW since the Second World War," he said.

Brit Avril, a retiree who moved to NRW from Dundee, Scotland, in 1983, said that despite living in Germany for 33 years, she still feels very much British.

She too was concerned, however, about the pending Brexit and its potential effects on the region.

"It's up to us to keep the connections and the traditions going," she said, "Regardless of what happens."

But as the Duke of Cambridge headed to crowd of spectators on Tuesday, there was no talk of the looming Brexit. "Thank you for coming," said one well-wisher between the tangle of limbs, all desperately trying to catch a photo of the prince.

"Lovely weather for it," he replied. "Well organized!"

First rule of the British handbook: In times of trouble, talk about the weather.