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“No Fraternisation?“ – The British Armed Forces in Germany and their encounter with the civilian population

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This work examines the relationship between the British Forces in Germany and the German people. It concentrates especially on the area in and around Bielefeld and Detmold and spans the time from the beginning of the British occupation after the Second World War in 1945 until today.

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Introduction

The occupying forces in Germany after 1945 – everybody instantly thinks of an American GI, who gives chewing gum and chocolate bars to little boys in ragged clothes.

But there were also three other occupying forces in Germany and I wanted to look behind the American picture. This paper tries to define how the British Forces were experienced by the German civilians and vice versa.

Was there really “No Fraternisation” or have the English troops been a part of German lives in the past 60 years? How did the relation change in the years after World War II? Is there some kind of philosophy behind this relationship and how can it be explained?

As these questions cannot really be answered on a general basis, but rather are matters of personal experiences and attitudes, my work is not only classically based on literature, but on interviews with different witnesses of the times, British as well as German, and on several sources from the internet.

I have tried to collect personal experiences and impressions of the situation of the British Forces in Ost-Westfalen and link them with general information on the British Forces in Germany in the attempt to understand the encounter of two cultures within Germany, see their historical roots and development and maybe also take a look at their future.

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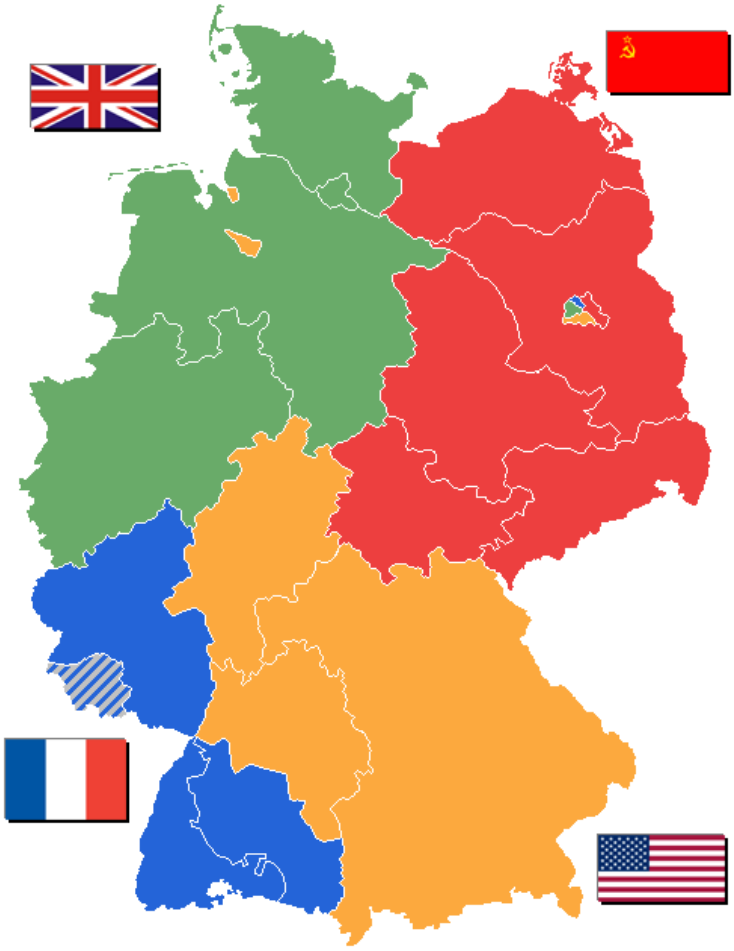
1. The British Occupation Zone in 1945

After the capitulation of the *Wehrmacht* on May 8th, 1945, the allied forces USA, Russia, Great Britain and France realized their plan to divide Germany into four occupation zones as they had agreed on in the conference of Jalta in February 1945. The American troops first controlled large parts of today`s North-Rhine/Westphalia, from Cologne up to Bielefeld, which a few weeks later were handed over to British administration as it had been decided during the Jalta conference. The British zone also included Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony and a part of West-Berlin (compare map). The administration was situated in Hanover (Benz p 409).



The occupation zones in Germany in 1945/1946
(www.wikipedia.org)

1.1 First contacts with the British

The fact that there had been American troops before, who were now being replaced by the British soldiers, led to confusion among the civilian population. While the American soldiers where seen by many as those who freed Germany from the National Socialists, the British now had the more formal image of occupation, of administration, restriction and laws. This was also true for Bielefeld, where the Americans, the first foreign soldiers to be seen in April 1945, had stayed only for a few weeks.

"I personally never experienced the British as those who freed us. The Amis, yes, with their Jeeps and everything, but the British were more the occupying force."[1] Wilfried Kehl was 12 when World War II ended and his attitude towards the British soldiers was, influenced by National-Socialist propaganda, as negative as it could be. His wife Marie-Luise Kehl, back then 11 years old, agrees with him: "I had been a *Jungmädel* during the war, I did not even look at them. They were our *Erzfeinde*, that was what we had been taught. My younger sister was different though. She used to climb on the arms of the British soldiers waiting in front of the *Donnerburg* and had herself fed with chocolate."

The parents of Marie-Luise Kehl and her sister Irmtraudt were the owners of the Restaurant *Donnerburg* in Bielefeld. It had been a NSDAP education center during wartimes and was then used as an officers' mess by the British administration for nearly a year.

This was good luck for those who lived there, as it guaranteed a certain amount of food within reach. Marie-Luise's mother worked in the kitchen of the mess and helped to keep her children alive by "organizing" food. She was wearing her apron inside out, and filled the pockets inside with little amounts of the life-saving food with the course of the day. The British officers ignored that the apron was standing wide away from her legs when closing-hour was reached, so her three children as well as father and grandfather could enjoy more than the normal ration of food.

But in other points the British administration acted more strictly. They imposed a curfew and the confiscation of private housing estates was a normal event in the weeks after the arrival of the British troops. The administration stationed the soldiers of lower ranks in the former "*Von Bülow Kaserne*" at Detmolder Straße, where up to

[1] All quotes in the first part translated by Katharina Kehl

today, the soldiers of Gütersloh Garrison live and work. For the officers, they had to organize houses of higher standards, which meant whole families had to pack their belongings and move out to relatives. This was not improving the relationship between the soldiers and the German inhabitants of Bielefeld, whose housing conditions were often poor enough due to air strikes and refugees from the east.

One of these refugees was Hildegard Rieke, who had fled with her mother from East Prussia under Russian occupation to her parents-in-law in Brackwede. She was by then already 25 years old and experienced the British differently. For her, they were not her enemies, but rather a normal appearance. She remembers evenings of dancing with the young “Tommys”, even if this meant 1½ hours of walking. “Everybody was glad when they came to dance with us, because there was nobody else to dance with. The German men were all dead or still prisoners of war somewhere in the East.” In Brackwede and towards the Senne, the soldiers were fewer in numbers than in the city center and they acted very unconspiciously, not interfering with the lives of the civilian population.

But as they were holding the administration and bringing in big amounts of men as well as machinery, logistics and, most important, food, the British were popular to work for. Almost every family had at least one member somewhere in British service. Hildegard Rieke’s father helped in the kitchen of a British barrack, an ideal job to smuggle out food for his family.

1.2 The 1950s – Drawing closer together?

From the beginning of the occupation, the British administration had supported the idea of an independent democratic system in the British zone, which should only be supported in its work by the allied forces. After the post-war denacification-process, the first *Landtag* was elected in 1947 and in 1950 the constitution of the newly-founded North-Rhine/Westphalia was acknowledged in a referendum (Benz p.409). The political leaders quickly came to terms with the British officers, but what about the “normal” people? Were they living the idea of understanding between the countries?

The barracks in the *Detmolder Straße* had been enlarged and there were now housing estates for married soldiers coming to Germany with their families. The British community in Bielefeld grew and schools, sports clubs and other facilities especially for the members of the British Forces were established. In the eyes of

Wilfried Kehl, this was a major factor why the relationship between him and the troops stayed rather formal: “We had few points of contact with them. They stayed in their “ghettos” and any interaction between us and the English youngsters was prevented, most of all by the different schools we were going to.” He remembers one day when he was not allowed into an YMCA-office (Young Men’s Christian Association), even though he was a member of the German branch CVJM. For him at the age of 15 - 20 it always seemed as if the English did not really want to mix with the Germans, but he also admits that he did not show a big interest either.
Once again, Hildegard Rieke tells a different story. In 1951 she was the owner of a small shop and in her neighbourhood the typical example of an “intercultural love story” took place. The 17-year-old daughter of a neighbour fell in love with a British soldier who worked in the Army-depot close by and the whole street profited from their developing relationship. Billy, as the young man was called, soon was accepted by the girl`s parents and the other neighbours and supplied the Germans with cigarettes, chocolate and other things from his job in the depot. Hildegard Rieke: “He was well liked, certainly by some only for organizing cigarettes, but he also was a really nice boy.” As his “organizing” went too far, he was one evening searched by the British military police and could flee the country just in time, after a German policeman, a close friend of the girl’s family, had warned him. His young German wife, with one small child and pregnant with a second, followed him to Great Britain, where the two of them still live today. When his mother-in-law got seriously ill years later, Billy came to Bielefeld illegally to see her, always under the threat of being caught by the authorities.

These two views on the Anglo-German relationship in the years after the war, as different as they sound, have one aspect in common: Wilfried and Marie-Luise Kehl as well as Hildegard Rieke stressed the rather reserved attitude of the British soldiers and the fact that they did not interfere with German life. Often, their presence was not noticed at all as long as civilians did not have to interact with the administration or actively searched contact with the troops themselves. The British Army was experienced as an occupying force in the background, who lived their lives separated from the German population.

3. Posted to Germany in the 1970s – A British point of view

John Hale was born in Graz 53 years ago as the son of a British soldier and grew up in South-East England. He joined the Army and served as an Aircraft Engineer in Canada, HongKong and also in Detmold, where he first arrived in 1978.

He describes the British community as a separate, self-contained society within Germany. Everything the soldiers need they can find in their direct environment, shopping, sports or leisure facilities. In his eyes, it is not so much the cultural difference that prevents contact, but the attempt of the Army to keep their (mostly young) soldiers within the camp to restrain them from misbehaving and causing tensions within the local communities – a "self-built-in protection system".

Another problem is the language: "There is a fear of the German language. It's not a fear that you can explain, the British have the same fear with every foreign language."[2] Due to the fact that English is spoken all over the world, native speakers have no motivation to learn foreign languages. Clearly this makes communication difficult and lets the soldiers stay in the camp with their people.

But John Hale also sees the historical background of the Anglo-German relationship. For him, the British position after WW II was clearly that of a superior occupying force and he explains the reluctant manner of the "Tommys" with another argument, unmentioned so far: "The Americans had the financial power, so their soldiers could go out and spend money. Our soldiers didn't have money." Obviously it was not only the slightly reserved British attitude, but very pratical reasons that made the British troops stay in the background.

Even though he states that it has been difficult for single soldiers to make friends with Germans as they hardly need to leave their garrisons, he also tells stories of how friendships were built up. His parents, stationed in Hanover in the 1950s, still meet with German friends of theirs and John Hale himself can also serve as an example . He has got two daughters with his German wife, whom he met in the mess of his camp, and today lives in Donop, where he sells and develops high-class flight simulators. The last sentence of my interview with him very much sums up how the British Army handled the encounter between soldiers and the civilian population: "There wasn't a drive to make friends, but there wasn't a drive to stop people making friends either."

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[2] All quotes by John Hale, see **Material** for full interview

3. “British Forces Germany” - What is left of the occupation

The British troops still remaining in Germany unite under the name “British Forces Germany”, which includes troops of the British Army, the Royal Air Force, civilian personnel and all family members living in Germany. The vast majority is stationed in North-Rhine/Westphalia and Lower Saxony.

These British Forces are in Germany for reasons of national and NATO security and their work takes place with the agreement and support of the German government. They have for a long time now not been occupying forces but partners of Germany and their presence brings security and support to all European NATO allies. Most of their units are logistic, supply or transport regiments, who have to provide transport and supplies as well as trained forces in case of international operations. All of them bring along a great number of so-called “dependants”, family members and civilian staff. Alltogether, the British community in Germany has approximately 56, 000 members, 23,000 of whom are military personnel. This is also of enormous economic importance for Germany, as much of the 800 million pound budget of the two command bases is spent directly into the local economy.

3.1 The Gütersloh Garrison – A British community in Germany

The local area in and around Bielefeld hosts units of Headquarters (HQ) Gütersloh Garrrison as well as regiments of the 102 Logistics Brigade.

The 102 Logistics Brigade consists of two transport regiments, one supply regiment, one Field Hospital and one military police regiment and has its mission in organising the transport of troops and material into battle areas. They have operational experience in the Balkans and transport anything from Challenger tanks to foodstuff.

HQ Gütersloh Garrison states its mission as follows:

“To provide the support required to operational commanders and other administratively dependent elements within the Gütersloh Garrison area, in order to enable commanders to focus on training and preparing for operations”
(http://www.army.mod.uk/gutersloh/background.htm)

This makes its Headquarter the major address for all those somehow connected to “British Forces Germany”, whether it is on matters of housing, education, sports and recration or Anglo - German events. Its three stations are located in Gütersloh (Princess Royal/Mansergh Barracks), Bielefeld (Rochdale/Catterick Bks) and Herford (Hammersmith/Wentworth/HarewoodBks). The HQ provide everything the serving soldiers, civilian staff and their families need.

While single soldiers stay in the barracks, those coming to Germany with their families live in housing estates or flats. The British community has NAAFI stores, where British food, retail products or DVD and Video-hire services are provided. The NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) is a non-profit organisation, which means its profits are returned to the Royal Army for welfare purposes.
There are schools for the children of those serving in Gütersloh Garrison, a bigger number of primary schools (four in total) and King's school in Gütersloh, a secondary school with about 740 pupils, of whom 125 board. At these schools British personnel teach after the British curriculum, so their students get the same education as pupils in their homecountry. But the schools are also an important factor in the intercultural contact, as they join German schools for sporting competitions, student exchange programmes or cultural events.
The Garrison has its own libraries, health and dental services as well as sports clubs and leisure activities. There are weekly church services held in English and a lot of events going on in the single regiments.

But even though this is a community in itself, the British soldiers and their German neighbours never lose contact with each other. For official contact with German authorities the Army has its British Forces Liaison Organisation (BFLO), whose Liaison Officers interact with the local authorities as well as those on federal or state level. For the more informal contact between soldiers and civilian population, Open Days are held regularly and often they just "find" each other in Anglo – German clubs and organisations, such as the "Sennelager Army Golf Club" or the "Anglo-German Scottish Country Dance Club" in Bielefeld. And in the end there are also those more private international relationships as already stated in the chapters before, who do their bit to link Germany and Great Britain.

3.2 A question of "cultural awareness" – How the Army prepares soldiers for their time in Germany

As they have been stationing soldiers in Germany for more than 60 years now, those responsible know where the similarities, but also possible problems between the two cultures lie and try to prepare their soldiers for the challenge of a foreign service in the best way possible. While there are German language courses held in every Garrison, the HQ of Gütersloh Garrison also provide a brochure entitled "Posted to

Germany?", which is supposed to help the soldiers find their way through the routine of everyday life in Germany. Already in the introduction this brochures states an important point:

"The German people are well known for their orderly life styles and for their tolerance of the rights of others. Everyday rules of living are taken for granted in the United Kingdom and sometimes ignored, but in Germany they are regarded as important and they are strictly observed." (Posted to Germany?)

Some Germans might agree to this, but the flood of laws and orders following on the next 36 pages is probably not only a problem for a foreigner. The introduction also stresses the point of the British being guests in this country, which makes clear once again that the time of the occupation is really over. Many of the points in the brochure are just official things everybody has to remember when moving from one country to another, such as tips on passports and other documents, pays, allowances and currency exchange or insurance and motoring.

But there are also those points any British would normally state as "typically German". A whole paragraph lists rules for pedestrians, including the order to wait at a red traffic light, accompanied by humorous drawings.

Another important matter are the various laws and customs concerning house and garden. They include the exact times when it is forbidden to hang out your washing, clean your car or use a lawn mower, the responsibility for houseowners to clear the pavement in front of their home from snow and ice and the different breeds of dogs which have been banned or restricted since 2004.

A big part of the brochure is occupied by a chapter on anti-pollution policy and especially "Sorting out your household waste", a thing not too easy in the country where "care of the environment is [...] very important" and whose people "go to endless lengths to protect it". (Posted to Germany?)

Altogether, the British authorities try very hard to make their soldiers aware of the German culture and teach them respectful behaviour towards its traditions and rules, even though to them, some might seem strange, unneccessary or overcorrect. On the other hand, the German people should feel obliged to meet the troops and their family members in a friendly way to keep up the good relations between the two countries.

Conclusion

“No Fraternisation?“ – It seems as if the title of this work was well chosen. This phrase definitely describes one part of the Anglo-German relationship. From different sources I have learned that the British were a very reserved occupying force, staying in the background and only acting on their matters. They tried not to interfere with the life of the civilian population too much and benefited in this attempt from more than one point:

- the structure of the Army system, which provided everything within their garrisons and created a parallel community, to keep the contact between Germans and British as free of tension as possible
- the British fear of foreign languages, which might have prevented further contacts in many cases
- the German attitude after the war, still influenced by Nazi-propaganda
- the general (human) attitude of rather keeping to your own people and culture than facing new and unknown challenges

Altogether, these (and some other) factors for decades have caused the development of two societies next to each other instead of with each other. While politically Germany benefited from the restraint of the British administration, gains in cultural fields could have been much bigger if both sides had put more effort into it right from the beginning

But there is also the other side of the medal. Each of my interview partners could tell at least one story of cultural exchange, going from joined leisure activities up to Anglo-German relationships and friendships existing up to the very day. While on a more general basis contacts were kept low for quite a long time, personal cases tell a different story. People who actively took part in joined activities, who left their camps or interacted with the troops in private matters enjoyed the benefits of cultural interaction, of making new experiences and new friends. To quote once more John Hale: “I think there wasn’t a drive to make friends, but there wasn’t a drive to stop people making friends either.”

It very much depends on one’s personal attitude. And at this point the phrase “No Fraternisation” does no longer work, because its meaning is the active restriction of

close contact, which only happened in the first few months after the war. It was more like “No Fraternisation – until you want to!”

The latest development is going into a different direction. Only two major garrisons are left in Germany and long ago the thought of ‘occupation’ has been abandoned, the British are here as guests now, on a joined NATO-mission with Germany. The last chapter showed how today the Army tries to make their soldiers aware of the German culture and events like Open Days have been held regularly since the late 1980s to finally bring Germans and British soldiers closer together. Everybody speaks English now and facing worldwide interaction, English soldiers in the neighbourhood might be an ideal partner to train your ‘soft skills’. The English communities still exist and along with them do their institutions, their shopping facilities and their sports clubs. But in the last years the readiness to open up to other cultures (which do not differ much from your own anyway) has grown on both sides and it has also been supported actively by the authorities. So today, “No Fraternisation” is no more than a historical phrase.

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Material

Interview with Mr. John Hale

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak with you, Mr. Hale. Let's start with some general information about you.

My name's John Hale, I'm 53 years old and I was born in Gratz, in Austria. I grew up mainly in the South-East of England, a lot of the time in the area around London.

What was your rank, your unit in the British Army?

In the Army? I served as an Avionics Technician, that's working on the electronics on helicopters. Later I went on to become an Aircraft Engineer and I eventually got to the rank of a Sergeant Major.

And you were stationed in Detmold?

I spent a lot of time in Detmold, but I also served in Canada, Hongkong...

And when did you first come to Detmold?

To Detmold? That was around 1978...

Do you have a clue how big the British community in Germany was back then?

I knew the British community was large, at that time there were a lot of British Garrisons in Germany. [...] Today only two major Garrisons are left.

During your time in Detmold, were did you live, close to the barracks?

I lived in Herberhausen, what is now called Hakedahl. There were lots of flats up there, very nice place to live at that time, there weren't any problems.

Was there any preparation by the Army before you first came here – Were there any langugage courses for example?

No, no.The way it's looked at it is, we come and live here in our own community, we have all the facilities we need to be self-existant. We have our own sports facilities, shopping facilities. Everything we need we have, even cinemas in the camps.

I see. So no needs to meet the Germans really?

No. I dont know if it's a cast-off from earlier times after the war. It's just a seperate society within Germany

So how did you get to know your wife then?

I got to know my wife because she worked in the mess, the mess I actually lived in. And that's how we got to know each other.

The British community in Germany - do you think the Germans tried to separate from them as well or is it just because you have this separate communities?Is it on purpose that the Germans don't meet the British?

No, I don't think so. Its because of language, but it's also a self-built-in protection system. The majority of the British soldiers coming to Germany are young and they are single. And in their free time they like to go out and drink. It's a social thing that they do. What they do unfortunately is that they go and drink too much sometimes and that then causes friction within the local community. The Army system itself tries to keep them within their own camps as much as possible, so that there is no friction

There is also a fear of the German language. It's not a fear that you can explain, the British have the same fear with every foreign language. We have the theory that everywhere we go, people speak English and if someone doesn't understand you, you just speak louder – and eventually they will understand.

Yes, that's very much what I learned in England as well.

In the internet I found a broschure, which says "You're posted to Germany?" and then there is a lot of information given, on social life in Germany, on laws, on things like sorting your housewaste out or anything. Was there something similiar at your time?

Yes, there are things that we don't understand. For example that you're not allowed to cut the grass on a Sunday. Because in England, Sunday is the day when cut your grass,Sunday's the day when you wash your car, it's the day when you do that sort of job at home.

Another thing is cleaning the snow on the pathway in front of your house. In England that doesn't happen. Because your don't take the responsibility for people walking in front of your house, they take that.

So there are some things which are unusual. It's not difficult but because we live in that communities of our own, it tends to get ignored, the German laws for that sort of thing.

[...due to technical problems, parts of the interview are missing...]

The British came here as an occupying force. They weren't really interested in being friends with the Germans. They were here to be the masters. And as things changed and the Cold War came along and the Germans after the war got their own

government, started to rebuild Germany, they weren't looke at as the captured population anymore and they attempted to integrate.

But because the British are the way they are and they're living in camps and in garrisons, it didn't work very well. It's like Hakedahl now, where the Russians are lving together or in parts of Germany like Cologne, where your have all the Turks, living together. People get together in their own coumminities.

Back in the 1950s the British really came here as the occupying force?

Because I often had the feeling that they were holding back and saying: Oh, the Germans will build their democracy and we will just stay here and watch and if they make mistakes, we will help them. But it was really more the feeling of the British being the masters, directly after the war?

Yes, because we were. But you mustn't also forget that there were four allied forces, there were the French, the Americans, the Russians and the British. All four of these allied forces had to agree what was going to happen with Germany after the war. And also it was a case of the Americans and the British wanting to keep a presence in Germany because of the Russians, because we didn't trust the Russians. And it was better to do it here, by keeping forces in Germany, than having them in England.

My grandparents said that in the American zone, the Americans were all present, your could see GIs everywhere and the British were just more "holding back". In my grandfather's eyes it could have had something to do with the British ethics, more this "gentleman-like" way of life, to first let everyone do their thing, while the Americans are more pushing people into their way of life. And that's probably the biggest difference I found out so far about the two occupying forces, the British and the Americans.

The other thing that would have had an effect at that time would have been the financial power. You mustn't forget, at the end of the 2nd World War, Britain was in a very bad financial state as well, because the war had cost a lot of money, the British as well as Germany. The Americans had the financial power, so their soldiers could go out and spent the money. Our soldiers didn't have money.

That definitely is a point I never thought of so far, because I had a few problems to somehow explain their behaviour. And we couldn't get hold of an old friend of my grandparents, who was a British soldier back then.

My father was actually a soldier as well, he was stationed in Hannover around 1952, just before I was born. Now I know that my mother and father have very good friends

in Hanover, still. My mother still comes across and visits them. I think friendships were built up, probably married people had more chances of building up friendships than the single soldiers, because the single soldiers were just kept in the camps all the time.

Yes, friendships were built up, but there were no intentions by the British Government to say: Our soldiers go and make friends with the Germans.

No, I think there wasn't a drive to make friends, but there wasn't a drive to stop people making friends either.

That was basically it, thank you very much!