

The Hess flight: still dangerous for historians – even after 75 years

Rudolf Hess: Treachery and Deception

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How did Hitler's deputy come to be piloting an unarmed fighter-bomber, at high speed in fading light, over Southern Scotland in the middle of a world war? Was he duped by the British into attempting the solo peace mission that landed him in prisons for the rest of his long life? Or was the daring 900-mile flight on Saturday, 10 May 1941,¹ part of a failed *coup d'état* by certain well-known high Tories, attempting a ceasefire with Nazi Germany by removing Churchill as war leader?

The facts about May 10, just six weeks before the German invasion of Russia, remain so uncertain that professional historians have tended to give the affair a wide berth. The disastrous peace mission by Rudolf Hess was, apparently, equally unexpected by both sides. In the decades since, it has come to be seen as an historical elephant trap of the kind that has wrecked the careers of men as respectable as Hugh Trevor Roper and as devious as David Irving. The exposure of the bogus *Sunday Times* Hitler Diaries, and Irving's recent humiliation in a London libel court (as recently retold in the film *Denial*), remind us what happens to a historian when the world learns, beyond all doubt, that the historian has got it wrong.

Neither Stalin, nor Churchill, the two leaders most endangered by the Hess mission, seems to have known what was afoot. Stalin's disastrous misreading of the situation undoubtedly contributed to the deaths of the 23 million Soviet citizens who died in the war that Hitler unleashed on June 22.

Churchill was in a desperate jam. On May 7, 1941, just three days before Hess took off for Scotland from the Bayerische Flugzeugwerke airstrip in Bavaria, Churchill faced a dangerous Commons confidence motion. Six days after the confidence motion, and three days after Hess crash landed in Scotland, when someone asked the prime-minister in the Commons why the Minister of Information was not handling, with 'skill and imagination the news of the flight to this country of this very high and important Nazi leader', all that the most eloquent of British war leaders could say was:

¹ The night of May 10-11 May 1941 marked the peak of the Blitz bombing of London.

'I think this is one of these cases where imagination is somewhat baffled by the facts as they present themselves.'

The post-war Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, political commissar at the Battle of Stalingrad, dared to discuss the Hess mission with Stalin by suggesting:

'The Germans are hiding something. I don't think Hess's flight to England is really an escape from Germany at all. I think he must actually be on a secret mission from Hitler to negotiate with the English about cutting short the war in the West to free Hitler's hands for the push East.

Stalin heard me out and then said, "Yes, that's it. You understand correctly." He didn't develop his thoughts on the subject further. He just agreed. We had long since become accustomed to the practice that if you weren't told something, you didn't ask.'²

Stalin would later taunt Churchill at a 1943 dinner in Moscow, suggesting that the British prime-minister had known about the Hess flight before it happened. Churchill said through his interpreter: 'When I make a statement of facts within my knowledge I expect it to be accepted.' Stalin grinned and said, 'There are lots of things that happen, even here in Russia, which our secret service does not necessarily tell me about.'

Into the archives

In the early days of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, professional historians criss-crossed the old Iron Curtain mounting reciprocal research expeditions into each other's archives. For the British, any evidence in their archives of a conspiracy behind the Hess Flight lay like an unexploded bomb. It was as dangerous as the NKVD material on the mass murder of Polish POWs in the Katyn Forest, or the disappearance of Raoul Wallenberg. For the FBI and CIA it would be like records of conspiracies leading up to the assassination of JFK.

John Costello, backed by a New York budget, was first into the KGB archives, working with former KGB colonel Oleg Tsarev to deliver in 1991 *Ten Days That Saved The West*, a book in which Costello supported Russian suspicions that the British had plotted to lure Hitler into attacking Russia. The book sold well in the USA with the sub-title, *The Secret Story of the Hess Peace Initiative and British Efforts to Strike a Deal With Hitler*. Four years later Costello, 52, was found dead in his airline seat as he flew home to Miami from London. Shellfish poisoning was suggested, but the Dade County toxicology tests were inconclusive.

In the opposite direction came Professor Oleg Rzheshesky,

² *Khrushchev Remembers*, by Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, translated by Strobe Talbott, 1970.

president of the Russian Association of World War II Historians. I remember seeing the professor in a London hotel. He had asked to meet Hugh Thomas, the former British army surgeon whose daring 1979 book *The Murder of Rudolf Hess*³ had ingeniously argued that the last war crimes prisoner of Spandau in Berlin was not in fact Hess, but a double, substituted with the connivance of British intelligence. Rzheshesky seemed surprised that, unlike the KGB files, the British files on Hess were closed for research until 2017 by an act of Parliament.

To be in that international pre-internet group of self-appointed investigators was often exciting. Censored wartime pictures and documents were turning up in newspaper offices. Former fighter pilots were still around, telling stories that didn't fit the shaky official version. Doug McRoberts, for example, official historian of 602 City of Glasgow fighter squadron, reported that a Spitfire scramble by the RAF fighter ace Al Deere recorded in Deere's pilot's log book on May 10 had not been recorded in the squadron operations record book.⁴ In addition to such publicly accessible historical oddities, MPs frequently accused the Foreign Office minister Lynda Chalker of obsessive secrecy in closing the archives.

Between 1973 and 1978 the head of the British Secret Intelligence Service MI6, a man then known usually as 'C', was himself a real historian. Maurice Oldfield had studied history under A. J. P. Taylor at Manchester, earned his fellowship in mediaeval history but was diverted into spying at the onset of the Second World War. The former mediaevalist once admitted being a socialist 'of the Piers Plowman kind'.

'Brewesters and baksters, bochiers and cokes

For thise are men on this molde that moost harm wercheth

To the povere people'

When Major Hugh Thomas, a British army bullet wound surgeon, was serving in Northern Ireland, Oldfield took him as his assistant on secret negotiations south of the Irish border. In return, Sir Maurice removed a most secret Foreign Office file on Hess and passed it to Thomas to 'save it from the weeders for the sake of the historians'. The Dutch film maker Karel Hille, working on a TV documentary entitled *The Appalling Truth*, took the file abroad for safety.

New research

There were many setbacks. The late Roy McHardy of BBC Scotland found a Scottish doctor who had been asked by Churchill to check again for First World War bullet wound scars on the chest of the German pilot. A lorry on

³ Hugh Thomas, *The Murder of Rudolf Hess* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1979).

⁴ Douglas McRoberts, *Lions Rampant: Story of 602 Spitfire Squadron*, (HarperCollins, 1985).

a roundabout killed the old doctor and his wife as they drove into the Glasgow studio to record an interview.

McHardy battled on, gathering new Scottish eyewitnesses until the BBC ordered a London team from *Timewatch* to take over the project. They too had their problems. A freelance producer cracked under political pressure and had to be replaced by the Official Historian of the Security Service (MI5).⁵

Dr Matthias Uhl of the Deutsches Historisches Institut Moskau unveiled in 2011⁶ a chilling document found in the State Archive of the Russian Federation. For 63 years the Russians had been hiding a 28-page notebook said to have been hand-written in captivity by Hess's adjutant Karlheinz Pintsch (the man ordered to break the news of the Hess Flight to Hitler). A pre-war businessman who had lectured in London in the thirties, Pintsch had been arrested at Berchtesgaden; interrogated in Berlin by 'Gestapo' Muller; jailed by the SS; sent to the Russian front in 1944; captured by the Russians and betrayed to the NKVD by a fellow German prisoner. In the Lubyanka Prison in Moscow the NKVD broke all his fingers to make him talk. His words in the 1948 notebook, translated for the attention of Stalin, say 'Hitler calmly listened to my report and dismissed me without comment.'

The notebook says Hess flew 'by prior arrangement with the English' to 'use all means at his disposal to achieve, if not a German military alliance with England against Russia, at least the neutralization of England.' But some phrases in the notebook have an ominous ring of the jargon used by Russian torturers:

'The facts I am reporting confirm that England, by promoting Hitler's aggression against Soviet Russia, acted in accordance with its old principle of using foreign hands to remove the chestnuts from the fire.'

In 1955 James Leasor, Lord Beaverbrook's private secretary and *Daily Express* foreign correspondent, found Pintsch among 600 newly-released POWs at Camp Friedland in West Germany. But during several interviews Pintsch, a man with broken fingers, appears to have said nothing to Leasor about Hitler being involved in the planning of the Hess mission.⁷

The popular historian Peter Padfield stepped into this minefield in 1991 with *Hess: Flight for the Führer* and in 2013 with *Hess, Hitler and Churchill: the real turning point of the Second World War*. Padfield found an unnamed academic who had worked during the war for the BBC in

⁵ 'Hess, "Hess", *Timewatch* et al', in *Lobster* 20 (November 1990).

⁶ <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/historian-uncovers-new-account-document-suggests-hitler-knew-of-hess-british-flight-plans-a-765607.html>>

⁷ James Leasor, *Rudolf Hess: the uninvited envoy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962).

Portland Place. This man remembered being asked to assess some documents found in a Scottish field after Hess crashed the plane near Glasgow. The academic told Padfield there had been a draft peace treaty, typed on *Reichskanzlerei* paper with numbered clauses and with an attached English translation:

'This was not a renegade plot. Hitler had sent Hess and he brought over a fully developed peace treaty for Germany to evacuate all the occupied countries in the West.'

But Roger Moorhouse, author of *Killing Hitler*, concluded rather sadly in *History Today*:⁸

'Padfield argues that this approach was ruthlessly covered up, largely for fear of undermining Britain's moral case and scuppering Churchill's efforts to bring the US in to the European theatre.

This is broadly plausible. However, in building his case, Padfield is forced to rely almost exclusively on circumstantial evidence. Understandably, perhaps, he has the barest scraps of archival sources, but the evidence that he presents is largely a melange of lost letters, missing documents, anonymous informants and unreliable witnesses.'

Padfield also examined fresh evidence gathered by Tony Marczan in post-Communist Prague, where air historian Jirí Rajlich⁹ discovered from log books and interviews that two Czechoslovak RAF Hurricane pilots, Sgts Leopold Šrom and Václav Bauman (left and centre below), reported



⁸ <<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2013/12/real-turning-point-second-world-war>>

⁹ Rajlich discusses this in his book 'Stíhací pilot' (which translates as 'Fighter Pilot' from Czechoslovakian), first published 1991.

See also <<http://www.tribunemagazine.org/2014/07/evidence-of-a-british-wartime-deception-with-unparalleled-and-horrifying-consequences/>>.

receiving radio orders from RAF Aldergrove in Northern Ireland to break off their attack on Hess's Bf110 on May 10, 1941¹⁰.

Enter Harris and Wilbourn

Two yeoman historians have been at work in these boggy research fields for at least twenty years. During absences from careers in accountancy and farming, John Harris and Richard Wilbourn have defied the unexploded ordnance and conducted worldwide research, on a scale that would have bankrupted a professional popular historian. Their fourth investigation, *Rudolf Hess: Treachery and Deception*,¹¹ tracks the wartime activity of a cunning art historian called Carl Tancred Borenus and is said to have 'proved that no single spymaster knew the whole story'.



I remembered Tancred Borenus from the spine of a heavy 1938 book that stood unopened for decades in one of my father's bookcases. John Harris told me:

'Tancred Borenus was certainly not James Bond. He was not even British. He was a Finn, born in Vyborg on the Karelian isthmus in 1885 and a friend of Queen Mary. He was hired by a ruthless MI6 spymaster for a dangerous wartime mission to Switzerland and silenced after the war in a mental hospital.'

The Borenus mission to Geneva came to light in the diaries of Ulrich von Hassell, the anti-Nazi German diplomat executed in 1944 after the plot to kill Hitler. Most of his diaries were buried in the garden of his house in Ebenhausen, near Munich. Some were hidden in Switzerland. Von Hassell wrote in January 1941 that Carl Burckhardt of the Swiss Red Cross had 'looked me up in Geneva'.

Von Hassell noted in the diary that 'very recently' Tancred Borenus

¹⁰ 'RAF colluded in Hess flight' in *Lobster* 37 (Summer 1999).

¹¹ John Harris and Richard Wilbourn, *Rudolf Hess: Treachery and Deception* (Northampton: Jema Publications, 2016)

had come to Geneva to explain,

'apparently at the behest of English officials, that a reasonable peace could still be concluded.'

Burckhardt was an old friend of the German geographer and diplomat Albrecht Haushofer, a protégé of Rudolf Hess. At Hess's request Haushofer had been corresponding, in wartime, with another old friend in Scotland. Haushofer's old friend 'Douglo' was the Duke of Hamilton, a serving squadron leader at RAF Turnhouse, the very man charged with the interception of enemy aircraft in Southern Scotland. Haushofer, the professional diplomat, told his family that he thought it unlikely that Hess would ever land alive in Scotland and even if the perilous flight succeeded, the chances of peace were remote. Hess certainly believed he would be meeting Hamilton in Scotland. And he did.

But Harris and Wilbourn claim they have new evidence to suggest that Haushofer was risking his own life in the perilous mission, by acting as a double agent for the British. According to their earlier book *Rudolf Hess: A New Technical Analysis of the Hess Flight, May 1941*¹² the three most senior RAF officers in Scotland on May 10 all had German and royal connections:

'...we can say for certain in respect of the RAF command in Scotland that evening is that the commanding officer of No 13 Group was a German expert, the Duke of Hamilton in the Turnhouse sector had some significant links with Germany, and that the base commander at RAF Prestwick/Ayr was an extremely close friend of the Duke of Hamilton and the Duke of Kent, the brother of King George VI.'

Dr Albrecht Haushofer had suspected that British intelligence would intercept his letters in neutral Portugal. And they did.

At Hitler's alpine headquarters on the morning of May 12, 1941, when neither Hitler nor Haushofer yet knew whether Hess had survived the flight, Haushofer was ordered by Hitler to write down a very long list of *English Connections and the Possibility of Using Them*.

Although Haushofer was murdered by the SS a few days before the fall of Berlin, his memorandum has survived. It names dozens of British aristocrats who might have been inclined to strike an understanding with Nazi Germany.'

'A leading group of younger Conservatives [many of them Scots]. Among them are the Duke of Hamilton. . . the parliamentary private secretary of Neville Chamberlain, Lord Dunglass. . .

¹² Spellmount, Stroud, 2014

See also <<http://www.tribunemagazine.org/2014/07/evidence-of-a-british-wartime-deception-with-unparalleled-and-horrifying-consequences/>>

Balfour. . . Lindsay. . . Wedderburn. . . Derby. . . Stanley. . . Astor. . . Samuel Hoare, at present English ambassador in Madrid.'

Close ties link this circle with the Court. The younger brother of the Duke of Hamilton is closely related to the present Queen through his wife; the mother-in-law of the Duke of Hamilton, the Duchess of Northumberland, is the Mistress of the Robes; her brother-in-law, Lord Eustace Percy, was several times a member of the Cabinet and is still today an influential member of the Conservative Party [especially close to former Minister Baldwin. . . .]

There was hardly one of those named who was not at least occasionally in favour of a German-English understanding. . . .

I wrote a letter to the Duke of Hamilton at the end of September 1940 and its dispatch to Lisbon was arranged by the Deputy Führer. . . .

Then in April 1941 I received greetings from Switzerland from Carl Burckhardt, the former League of Nations Commissioner in Danzig and now Vice-President of the International Red Cross, whom I had also known well for years. He sent the message that he had greetings to pass on to me from someone in my old circle. I should please visit him some time in Geneva.

Reich Minister Hess decided that I should go to Geneva.'

The von Hassell diaries were first published in 1948, as early evidence of the German wartime resistance to Hitler. Harris and Wilbourn were intrigued to find that the 2011¹³ unexpurgated edition of the famous diaries revealed more about Borenium:

'He has very intimate connections with the Royal House [principally with the Queen].'

Harris and Wilbourn admit failing at first to perceive that von Hassell and Burckhardt were not talking about the wartime Queen of England, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, but about Queen Mary, the widow of George V, who was an active art collector (an interest she shared with Borenium) and the grandmother of the present Queen Elizabeth II.

And then they got lucky. Borenium had died of a cerebral embolism and valvular heart disease in 1948 at Laverstock House, near Salisbury. Harris took a look in the Salisbury phone book in 1998 and found a Borenium. It was Tancred's son Lars Ulrich (often known as 'Peter') Borenium, a retired lawyer.

'... his father's wartime trip had caused some later amusement in the Borenium household on two accounts: firstly because he had been asked to deliver a "book" to Burckhardt; and secondly, he had been given a poison pill the size of a golf ball. The family thought that

¹³ *The Von Hassell Diaries*, (London: Frontline, 2011).

Borenium would choke on the pill long before the supposed poison would take effect . . . He also said that he had been given the book by Claude Dansey, prior to his departure. Claude Dansey was the deputy head of MI6'¹⁴

After twenty years on the case, Harris and Wilbourn have opened new paths into the epicenter of the minefield. The description of secret meetings in neutral Switzerland is gripping, almost cinematic.

The involvement of Ilse von Hassell, elder daughter of Grand-Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, staying with her 'sick' son at an alpine hotel in Arosa is particularly intriguing. Ilse tipped off Carl Burckhardt that Dr Haushofer would be coming to see him in Geneva with a 'double face'.

The 'book' that Borenium carried to Switzerland was clearly one of the MI6 'one-time pads' that the late Keith Jeffery, official historian of MI6, reported as being in 'very short supply' in Switzerland in 1941.

Harris and Wilbourn no longer accept Jeffery's assurance that there were no signs in the archives of MI6 involvement in the Hess Flight. Harris now says:

'We know that the Borenium mission was organised by MI6 under Dansey. Consequently, one can conclude that either MI6 destroyed the evidence, or Dansey operated outside his authority, or the Hess flight was an unforeseen consequence of the Borenium mission, rather than a direct result of the Borenium mission.' (correspondence with the author)

Ulrich von Hassell's diary entry shows that Borenium delivered much more than a code book. He carried detailed terms under which a peace might still be possible in 1941, crucially with the restoration of some kind of Polish government in a divided Europe that would leave the British Empire untouched.

Borenium returned to London in March 1941 and lunched at the Dorchester with Colonel Victor Cazalet, MP for Chippenham and liaison officer to the exiled Polish Army in Britain, and with the Polish army's commander-in-chief General Wladyslaw Sikorski, prime-minister of the Polish government in exile.

Secret peace talks between the British and Germans, in the absence of a Polish government, would have unnerved the thousands of exiled Poles in Britain. Many of the 40,000 Polish soldiers, airmen and sailors in Britain were stationed in Scotland.

Sikorski and Cazalet sailed for the USA soon after their meeting with Borenium. But on May 10, 1941, Sikorski decided to take a serious risk by flying in haste back to Britain from New York, via Gander in Newfoundland. The general huddled aboard one of the very first

¹⁴ Harris and Wilbourn p. 134

operational B-24 Liberator bombers, tricky planes that went on to acquire a bad reputation for crashes.¹⁵ Sikorski's new B-24 left Gander just thirty minutes after Hess took off in the modified Bf110 fighter bomber. Both were bound for Scotland. But by the time Sikorski landed at RAF Prestwick at 11:30 on May 11, Hess had already been captured and interviewed in custody by the Duke of Hamilton.

No-one has yet explained why the first man to act as an interpreter for the as-yet unnamed German pilot just happened to be Polish. The recently-appointed Polish consul in Glasgow, Roman Battaglia, turned up at the boy scouts hall in Giffnock, barely an hour after Hess had fallen into the hands of the Glasgow Home Guard.

For Borenien the mission to Geneva was dangerous but probably lucrative. Neutral Switzerland, the best gathering ground for intelligence out of Nazi Germany, was becoming increasingly isolated. MI6 historian Keith Jeffery saw from MI6 records that the money paid to couriers prepared to cross Vichy France to reach Switzerland from neutral Portugal and Spain, travelling on neutral or forged passports, was so generous that it was said to be 'two journeys and retire for life'.

Borenien, who carried a Finnish passport but was never interned by the British, acted as guardian to Dolly Wilde, the 'beautiful but frail' niece of Oscar Wilde. Dolly's biographer, Joan Schenkar, described Borenien to Harris and Wilbourn: he was 'as adroit as a seal and just as slippery.'

Harris and Wilbourn see Borenien as

'... a brilliant man whose story has remained uniquely hidden for over seventy years. It is not overstating his role to say that without it, a 1941 invasion of Britain would have been certainly more likely.' (correspondence with the author)

They have a shot at the vexed question of whether the British were using the slippery Finnish art historian to deceive Hitler, or whether Borenien was himself being used in a very dark British coup against Churchill, aborted only when Hess crashed the Bf110 in the wrong part of Scotland. They argue convincingly that

'There is now absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Hess was being actively "pulled" to fly to Britain. The British, desperate to buy time so as to prevent invasion, had sent Borenien to Burckhardt in January 1941, under the pretext/cover of a Finnish diplomatic mission.' (correspondence with the author)

John Harris has found some evidence of a Tory coup against Churchill and notes the cruel fate that awaited Borenien in post-war England. In 1945 he lost the editorship of the *Burlington Magazine*. The mission to Geneva

¹⁵ In July 1943 Sikorski and Cazalet were killed in a Liberator that crashed into the sea 46 seconds after take-off from Gibraltar.

could never be acknowledged or honoured, and the Russians had permanently occupied his native Karelia. In the hard winter of 1946-7 a doctor, sectioning him under the 1890 Lunacy Act commented:

'Depressed, gloomy, pessimistic and apprehensive... suspicious of all those around him. I hereby certify that he is still of unsound mind and is a proper person to be detained under care and treatment.'

Reporter Andrew Rosthorn's previous Lobster contributions have included: 'RAF colluded in Hess flight' (Lobster 37, Summer 1999) and 'Hess, "Hess", Timewatch et al' (Lobster 20 November 1990).