

*Rudolf Hess: Truth at last*  
*The untold story of the Deputy Fuhrer's flight to Scotland in 1941*

John Harris and Richard Wilbourn.

Axminster (Devon): Uniformbooks, 2019, £12.875 (p/b)

**Michael Hindley**

**A**s a long standing student of things German, I was pleased to read this book by Harris and Wilbourn, an updated version of the pair's dogged research into one of World War II's deepest mysteries: the extraordinary flight of Rudolf Hess to Scotland in May 1941. Hess' desperate and bizarre initiative, and his subsequent life incarceration in Spandau prison, have given rise to a host of conspiracy theories. The authors deserve credit for their stamina in going through both older and newer material with the proverbial fine-toothed comb. My only quibble is that the resulting publication has more the feeling of a 'notebook' rather than a 'book'.

The story which I and many grew up with, and I reckon still prevails widely, is that Hess was slightly unbalanced and his flight was a quixotic adventure to regain favour with Hitler as well as to bring an unlikely peace offer to Britain. As others have done, the authors quickly demolish this argument – which was the propaganda that the Nazis released at the time.

Firstly, the authors prove the flight was well planned and rational. The question is, and remains, just how much of the episode was founded on a real conspiracy by potential appeasers – either in Britain or in the Nazi regime. It is quite plausible that the flight offered a long odds attempt to reach conciliation with anti-Churchill elements and allow a month for German forces on the Western front to be relocated and participate in the coming planned assault on the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

The question which occurs to an amateur historian like myself is: why did Hess fly to Scotland to bring his offer? If it was an offer to the Churchill government, why not try a more direct route? Hess's offer could only be to the appeasement lobby, who were, by this time, officially out of favour. The authors provide a credible list of potential conspirators in

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<sup>1</sup> This was Operation Barbarossa, which was launched on 22 June 1941.

Southern Scotland, all well-connected and holding influential political positions.

Even after the war had broken out, a larger section of the British establishment than it has been comfortable to subsequently admit were still in favour of making peace with Hitler. Their hope being that the Nazis would turn their full fire on the greater political threat (as they saw it) of the Soviet Union.

New, at least to me, was the inclusion of the Polish factor in the equation. The head of the Polish government, Sikorski, made strenuous efforts to be in Scotland at the time of the Hess flight; ostensibly having a good reason, as the majority of exiled Polish forces were based there. The authors raise the intriguing theory that the intention was to use these Polish forces as possible trouble-makers to stir opposition to Churchill's dogged pursuit of all-out war on Germany.

However, once Hess had crashed-landed and been arrested without making the rendezvous he had planned, the game was up.

For me the whole Hess saga has the air of a risk, sanctioned at the highest Nazi level. If it succeeded, well and good; it might then have been possible to reduce the pressure of fighting on two fronts – for Hitler had always been set on invading Russia. If the plot failed, it could be denied and passed off as an act of madness by Hess. Such a scenario also suited the British government – then and since – for the 'truth of the Hess' flight could point to some very uncomfortable revelations about parts of British establishment. Perhaps it was and remains better to pass the episode off as an act of madness, to lock Hess up and throw away the key and bury the truth in the deepest vaults.

Harris and Willbourn end their book with a plea to release the relevant papers and documents. Perhaps 2021, the eightieth anniversary of Hess' flight, might prove a suitable occasion to tell the 'truth'.

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