

A comment on Simon Matthews' 'The Dungavel Handicap: Scotland, Churchill and Rudolf Hess, 1941'

Scott Newton

Simon Matthews has written a very interesting piece about the Rudolf Hess affair of May 1941 in this issue of *Lobster*,¹ but there are a couple of comments that I would like to add to his account.

First, back in the late 1980s and the mid-1990s I wrote about the topic of Britain's appeasement of Germany before 1939, and the continuation of this strategy after the outbreak of war. The results of this work appeared in a series of articles² and a book, *Profits of Peace* (Oxford University Press, 1996). What became very clear to me as I researched this subject was that support for a deal between Britain and Germany was strong within some of the most powerful sections of the British State and society. Seeking to identify who was behind all this, Matthews very rightly points to a complex of senior armed forces personnel, intelligence officers, Tory MPs and Peers, as well as leading landowners and members of the Royal Household. But the peace party was not limited to these groups. It also included (or in many cases overlapped with) significant fractions of the City of London and large-scale industry. Within the first of these could be found senior figures such as Bank of England Governor Montagu Norman as well as representatives from established banks such as Kleinwort's, Schroder's and Lazard's. In the second were executives from some of the nation's most powerful corporations such as ICI, Shell-Mex, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now known as BP), Cable and Wireless, and AEI (Associated Electrical Industries, then one of Britain's major industrial groups).

This coalition of forces, formed at the junction where the interests of British financial, industrial and landowning capital all met, made up the core of the British Right. It was frightened of war with Germany on two main counts. For a start, City banks feared the disruption of financial links with Germany and Central Europe, many forged during the post-1918 reconstruction period when millions of pounds had flooded into Germany from London to support infrastructure projects and the rebuilding of cities, as well as in the form of

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/23tx3yxa>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster81/lob81-scotland-churchill-hess-1941.pdf>>

² One appeared in *Lobster* 20, November 1990, titled 'The economic background to appeasement and the search for Anglo-German detente before and during World War 2'.

short-term credits for trade.³ At the same time, many large British firms had reached deals on market-sharing and cartels with their German counterparts, agreements seen as essential to corporate stability at a time when international trade was hedged about with tariffs and global demand for goods was low as a result of the Depression. These arrangements would clearly be jeopardised by renewed conflict.⁴

Beyond these very serious short-term concerns there was real, existential fear in the City, industry and among the landowning aristocracy, that conflict with Germany would quickly erupt into a re-run of the 1914-18 experience, when Britain experienced 'war socialism' or 'total war' for the first time. There had been an unprecedented level of State control over the economy, a dramatic escalation of public spending, and a dependence on overseas credit (mostly from the USA) which had proved fatal to the nation's ability to continue after the war as the world's leading creditor. In fact, the UK became a debtor of the USA, which replaced it as the world's number one financial power. There was every reason to suppose another war would complete the erosion of Britain's dominant position in the world which had started in 1914. Its capital would be bundled out of overseas markets by money from Wall Street; American corporations would encroach on territories, especially those in the Empire, hitherto largely monopolised by British producers; full mobilisation of all the nation's military and industrial resources for war would both necessitate economic planning and create a demand for labour which would swing the balance of power on the factory floor in favour of the trade unions. At home, Britain would be transformed into a semi-socialist State. In external affairs its influence would inevitably shrink dramatically. Britain would end another war financially dependent on the USA. It would no longer possess the means to retain its colonies: the need to guarantee public support for the war effort within its imperial territories would in all likelihood force London to make commitments to decolonisation after the end of hostilities. Retreat from Empire would therefore follow renewed conflict, a process in all likelihood to be accelerated by a shortage of funds.

This was the British Right's nightmare scenario. In combination with the more immediate worries about the economic consequences of war shared by the City and industry, it propelled efforts to reach a detente with Germany before and during the war. While Neville Chamberlain had been Prime Minister, there was good reason to hope that war would be averted; or, if it came, that it

³ See Scott Newton, *Profits of Peace: the political economy of Anglo-German appeasement* (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 58-66.

⁴ Scott Newton, 'Appeasement as an Industrial Strategy', *Contemporary Record: The Journal of Contemporary British History*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1995), pp. 485-507.

would be quite quickly concluded with a negotiated settlement in which Germany was left the leading power on the European mainland while Britain remained a great maritime, imperial power with its global strategic and economic influence untouched. Once Chamberlain was replaced by Winston Churchill, known for his determined anti-Nazi views, his belief that no lasting agreement with Germany was feasible, and for his willingness to seek American support for a British armed struggle against Germany, total war – with all that followed from it – became inevitable. Given that no other major industrial state was fighting alongside Britain, and that by May 1941 Nazi Germany was now either dominating or in control of the European continent and all its resources outside the USSR, final victory over Hitler (as opposed to national survival and immunity against invasion) looked most unlikely. To the peace party, it therefore made sense to settle with Berlin sooner rather than later, before the irreversible leftward transformation of British society and the disintegration of the Empire. This was what drove the Right's attempts, well described by Matthews, to reach an agreement with the Nazi regime and oust Churchill: these were two sides of the same coin.

My second comment relates to Matthews's suggestion that it looks as if some good fortune enabled Churchill to survive the Hess affair in May 1941:

' . . . it appears that Churchill was a lucky man in May 1941 . . . The difference between his staying in office and a messy debate aimed at his removal, may have come down to Hess getting disorientated over Scotland, bailing out rather than meeting his accomplices, and falling into army custody.'⁵

Well, maybe; but there is evidence which points to Churchill being prepared for the events of 10 May and therefore in a position to quash any attempted coup. He maintained an extensive surveillance of those suspected of harbouring pro-Nazi, or pro-peace views. The Duke of Buccleugh was closely watched and indeed complained about this in letters to R. A. Butler, while the Prime Minister kept a file on Samuel Hoare, receiving reports on his movements in Spain from an agent with the code-name of Harlequin.⁶ Both SIS and the Foreign Office were aware of Hoare's contacts with the well-connected Liechtensteinian and pro-German go-between Max von Hohenlohe (who was in fact an SS member).⁷ They had even been tipped off by high-level informant General

⁵ Simon Matthews, 'The Dungavel Handicap: Scotland, Churchill and Rudolf Hess, 1941', *Lobster* 81 (2021), p. 30.

⁶ For Buccleugh see TNA (The National Archives) FO 371/26542, C1954/324/18; for reference to the file on Hoare see PRO PREM 4/23/2368, 19 April 1943.

⁷ See Newton, *Profits of Peace* (see note 3) pp. 187-88.

Aranda, Commandant of the Spanish War College, that, at the request of Reichsmarshal Goering, Hohenlohe was flying to London to discuss peace possibilities on 19 April 1941⁸. Finally, Churchill was not only receiving information from SIS and the Foreign Office. He was tipped off about the Hess flight by Minister of Labour Ernest Bevin, who was plugged into a European-wide trade union intelligence network, run by the International Transport Federation (ITF). The ITF had agents in Germany sending vital information back to contacts in London, and it seems that on the evening of 10 May one of these passed him the information that the German Deputy Fuhrer was on his way.⁹ It is, then, all things considered, plausible to suggest that Churchill knew about the Hess mission in advance and was therefore able to scupper the peace party's efforts. He took over management of the 'peace talks' which followed the flight and suppressed all the important information that otherwise might have been put into circulation amongst the plotters. These were left in the dark as the Prime Minister, along with a very small circle of advisers and Cabinet Ministers, considered and rejected the German terms.

The Hess affair marked last serious effort to reach an Anglo-German detente. Six weeks later, the war was dramatically widened by the German invasion of the USSR. Britain was no longer the only major industrial state at war with Germany. Soviet entry into the conflict considerably improved the odds of final victory over Nazism, even if this was a still long-term prospect. The struggle was to continue.

Simon Matthews responds:

My piece, *The Dungavel Handicap: Scotland, Churchill and Rudolf Hess, 1941*, has resulted in correspondence on a number of issues.

One is the possibility that Churchill (or Ernest Bevin) may have known that Hess would arrive prior to 10 May. I would argue that at present we have no evidence to substantiate this. I have seen a letter, dated 16 May (after Hess arrived) said to come from an official in the International Transport Federation (ITF). It is written in German. Translated it reads:

16th May 1941

⁸ TNA FO371/26945, C4235/306/41, report of a conversation with Aranda by Torr (Military Attache), 18 April 1941. Given Hohenlohe's neutral status as a citizen of Liechtenstein, a flight to London was certainly feasible.

⁹ See Andrew Rosthorn, 'What Did They Know And When?', *Tribune*, 27 July 2012; and 'Top Secret at Queens', *Yorkshire Ridings Magazine*, summer 2013, pp. 122-125. Rosthorn's story has also been published as an epilogue on pp. 448-58 of Jan Needle's novel *Death Order* (2015).

Dear friend Ernest Bevin

I would like to give you my opinion on the Hess case.

As a convinced Nazi, Hess is the co-author of the book Mein Kampf. He supports today the principles laid down in it, and would act on them: lying - defamation - breach of word and contract – the claim to rule over people and peoples - suppression of every kind of freedom.

Along with Ley and Himmler, he is responsible for the smashing of the German labour movement in general and the unions in particular; for the robbery of their property in the amount of 2,134 million marks; for the torture of hundreds of thousands of trade unionists in the SA and Gestapo cellars and in the concentration camps; for the murder of numerous leaders and officials of the labour movement.

He is a fanatical proponent of racial theory and partly responsible for the pogrom against the Jews.

As the main instigator of the war instigator, he invented the phrase "guns before butter".

He was aware of the decisions of the war cabinet and is therefore jointly responsible for the bombing of undefended cities and the deaths of countless people, women and children.

He knows about the invention of secret gasses, the terrible effect of which was seen in Mussolini's war in Abyssinia. The friendship between Hitler and Mussolini, based on mass murder, crime, blood and tears, dates from this time.

As the Deputy Fuhrer, Hess has equal liability as a key partner in the regime built on blood and tears, word and breach of contract.

No power in the world can release him from this liability. In the eyes of mankind, which longs for peace and freedom, Hess remains a Nazi and thus a criminal. He should be assessed and treated as such

With a friendly greeting

Kramer

It's hard to tell what to make of this. We do not know the date the enquiry to 'Kramer' was made. It seems possible that Bevin, or people acting for him, made contact around 12-13 May (just after the arrival of Hess) asking what kind of person Hess was. If so, whatever could be gleaned about Hess from this contact could be used against anyone trying to negotiate with him: i.e. Bevin thought elements in the Conservative party were trying to reach a deal with the Nazi regime, and wanted material that would discredit them. Another

explanation might be that the enquiry to Kramer reflected a debate about whether to put Hess on trial, once he was captured. We don't know. There is also no address on the letter – we don't know where it was sent from, or where it was sent to. This correspondence does not prove that Bevin had prior knowledge of Hess's arrival.

I have also seen a newspaper cutting (from 1969) concerning Albert Heal, Yorkshire organizer of the TGWU, and referencing a coded message he says he had sight of in Leeds on 9 May 1941. The coded message itself is not reproduced by Heal. Heal says he was also present during a telephone call between Bevin and Churchill with Bevin stating (the day before Hess arrived) that Hess would arrive and try to contact the Duke of Hamilton. According to Heal, Churchill thought this was a joke.

Heal had formerly been involved with the No More War Movement, which attracted a mixture of pacifists, anti-capitalist leftists and German sympathizers. He might, then, have been in favour of a negotiated peace for all we know. He states in the 1969 newspaper piece that the code used in the message he saw was the same code he had devised to communicate with people he had 'helped get out of the country (18 to Ireland, 17 to the US)'. Which people? Anti-Nazi's? Anti-Churchill types? It isn't clear. Nor is it clear why you'd need a code to speak with them in Ireland or the US . . . unless they were people the authorities regarded as highly suspect. As with the Kramer letter of 16 May, it's hard to know what to make of this. We need to see more of the material Heal says he saw before reaching a conclusion.

We need to remember that wartime, with censorship in operation, and people being aware that life and death situations involving themselves and their family are possible at any time, is a fruitful breeding ground for both disinformation and fantastic rumours. There was a considerable amount of talk about UK-German contacts in Portugal (and Spain) in 1940-1941, including meetings with, among others, the Duke of Hamilton, Albrecht Haushofer, Prince Hohenlove and even Rudolf Hess. None of these happened as far as we can tell. Which is why I leave them out of my narrative. I do wonder if some of the gossip about these – and some of it may have been deliberate attempts at setting hares running, as would always be the case in espionage – wasn't conflated later with a supposed detailed foreknowledge of Hess's flight. It could, for instance, have been the case that the message about Hess trying to meet Hamilton supposedly seen by Heal on 9 May was linked to this, rather than fresh information about what Hess was actually about to do. It isn't clear, and I suspect it never will be.

Finally, it has been commented that there is no evidence that the Hess aircraft was specially modified with fuel tanks or was equipped with radar.

I would observe that the standard range of an early mark Me 110 without additional fuel tanks was 565 miles. The distance from where Hess took off to Dungavel was about 840 miles. Conclusion: the Hess plane was a long range version, with additional fuel tanks. (NB The Me 110D, introduced in April 1940 had a range of over 800 miles.) In the diary kept by Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador, he notes in his entry for 3 June 1941, following his lunch with Beaverbrook 'an additional fuel tank was attached to Hess's plane, and he flew from Germany to Scotland assisted by a Pelengator'. (A Pelengator is a radio direction finder.)

I concede the difference between radar and radio direction. On all the other matters – many of which I take as a given – I leave it up to the reader to reach their own conclusions.