

Count Bonde and the search for a compromise peace 1939-1941

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In his 1991 biography of Lord Halifax, *The Holy Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax*, Andrew Roberts states (p. 248) that Halifax met a Swiss gentleman on 13 December 1939 and that this 'Mr Bondi . . . had "a scheme for Göring to bump off Hitler and form a Government!"". This is mentioned as one of a series of on-going diplomatic contacts, conducted via intermediaries, between the UK and Germany during the 'phoney war' period, that were designed to extricate the UK from the conflict and devise some sort of compromise peace. Roberts treats them all as a sideshow, some more serious than others, with the 'Bondi' episode being particularly jocular.

A somewhat more serious approach is taken by Peter Padfield in *Hess, Hitler and Churchill* (2013) which accurately records (p. 63) that Bonde (the correct spelling) 'a diplomat serving in the Swedish Legation, in the Swiss capital Berne', approached the UK in December 1939, on the basis that Hitler would be replaced by Hermann Goering, if the UK and Germany could agree terms.

A precise account of Bonde's activities was given at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, where Goering stated:

After the Polish conquest, I had several talks with the Swedish author, Knut Bonde, and, at my request, he saw the British Foreign Secretary (Lord Halifax) in December, 1939, and asked for Britain's peace terms with Germany.

Lord Halifax told Bonde, "I'm glad you came. If there's anyone in the Reich who might win Hitler over to a reasonable peace it is Goering." Lord Halifax submitted two main peace proposals – the re-establishment of an independent Polish state, and more liberty for the Czechoslovakians pending a solution of the Czecho-Slovak problem.

I transmitted these proposals to the Fuhrer. To the first proposal he replied, "Perhaps." To the second, he gave a categorical "No."

This was the first opportunity Hitler missed to end the war.¹

Roberts appears to have been unaware of this when researching his book, and it provides an insight into what the UK wanted in order to bring its involvement in the war to an end.

It is odd that Goering describes Bonde as an author rather than a diplomat. But this was not inaccurate. A search of the internet shows that Knut Bonde published an autobiography, *True and Interesting*, in 1934.² This includes an account of his estate in Scotland. Further research shows him to be an extremely well-connected figure.

Count Knut Bonde was born in Sweden on 31 July 1884. He was a member of the House of Bonde, Swedish nobility with a lineage that stretched back to the fourteenth century. (An ancestor had been King Charles VIII of Sweden who ruled between 1448 and 1470.) Knut's father, Carl Bonde, was a prominent politician, and he had cousins in the military. He pursued a career in the Swedish diplomatic service and in 1911 married Grizzle Anstruther Thomson of Charleton, Fife, in London. She was the daughter of Charles Anstruther, Commander of the 2nd Life Guards and a career soldier much honoured by Queen Victoria.³

After their marriage Bonde and his wife returned to Sweden, and remained there until Grizel inherited Charleton House, and its estate, on the death of her father in 1925.⁴ At this point they took up residence there, and remained in Fife for ten years, when they relocated to Sweden, only visiting Charleton House for part of each year. As well as being a significant figure in the Swedish political and administrative class, via his marriage Count Bonde also had links to UK royalty. Of his four children a daughter, Beata, married Georges Carlier, a

¹ See *The Daily Mirror* 17 September 1946, available via <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/272807864/30623065>.

² He also wrote *Jewellers and Jewellery* (1949), an illustrated study of the jewellery worn by noble and royal women in the early twentieth century, based, it would seem, on finery he had seen at Buckingham Palace.

³ Which included membership of the Royal Company of Archers, the monarch's personal bodyguard in Scotland, the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, founded by Queen Victoria in 1888, and the Royal Victorian Order, a chivalric order founded by Queen Victoria in 1896, that 'recognises distinguished personal service to the monarch'. Unusually, he was also a Knight Commander, Order of the Sword of Sweden, an honour reserved for military personnel who have made personal endeavours for Swedish interests.

⁴ Charleton House is in the East Neuk of Fife, about a mile west of Colinsburgh, and 3 miles east of Lower Largo.

Belgium diplomat, whilst his son and heir, John, served in the Swedish army in WW2 and was involved thereafter in settling Polish refugees.⁵

There is a reference in Padfield's book (p. 63) to Bonde being 'close to Count Eric Rosen, brother of Göring's first wife'. Further details on this are lacking, but Count Eric von Rosen – to give him his correct title – became Göring's brother-in-law in 1923, and led the National Socialist bloc in Sweden. It seems obvious that Bonde was selected by Göring as an interlocutor with the UK government because of his social, political and diplomatic connections. He was chosen because Halifax, to re-assure the French government, declined to continue to receive visits from fellow Swede Birger Dahlerus, whom he had met on various occasions between August and October 1939. Bonde was thus an acceptable replacement, who enabled peace negotiations to continue.

Turning to Göring/Goering's statement about the 1939 approach, what does it tell us? Allowing that he was on trial for his life, and expected to be executed, he may have seen this as his final chance to ensure that posterity recorded his version of events (which ought to be treated with caution, even if not dismissed out of hand). However the following points are clear:

1. Goering sent Bonde to see Halifax.
2. Halifax welcomed this, saying that Goering was seen as someone who would win Hitler over to 'a reasonable peace'.
3. Bonde's task was to ask for the UK's terms for ending the conflict.
4. The UK's terms were (a) re-creating 'an independent Polish state' and (b) 'more liberty for the Czechoslovakians'.
5. Hitler was open to the former, but dismissed the latter out of hand.

There is no talk here about Goering being installed after Hitler had been assassinated. Did Bonde say this or did Halifax embellish his notes to downplay the approach? As for the UK terms, the comments on Czechoslovakia could mean anything, but clearly don't insist on a full restoration of it as an independent state. Perhaps some relaxation, and a bit of internal autonomy? On the other hand, 'an independent Polish state' implies a self-governing Poland, with new borders and an agreement on its future political alignment.

This possibility was raised in successive talks between 1939 and May 1941. As early as 23 September 1939 Halifax had asked Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to London, about a 'Polish buffer state' and both Hitler (the Poland

⁵ See *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 2009 obituary of John Bonde <<https://shorturl.at/Ousfy>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/books-obituaries/5238424/Baron-John-Bonde.html>>.

of Versailles 'will never rise again') and Mussolini (who recommended 'the creation of a modest, disarmed Poland') indicated they were open to the idea, subject to territorial adjustments. One estimate of rump-Poland's size is that it would have comprised 40% of the land of the previous state, with a population of about 12 million.⁶

It might have been difficult for Chamberlain's government to suggest that the creation of such a truncated entity was an honourable way out of the war for the UK. Unspoken here, though, is the interest of the Royal Family in installing the Duke of Kent as King of Poland, something that seems to have been considered, by rightist elements in Poland, and pro-German figures in the UK political and administrative class, from about 1937. A Poland headed by a British monarch, who guaranteed its neutrality and co-operated economically with Germany, may well have been seen as an acceptable outcome. It is interesting that Goering makes no mention of this, nor of Bonde's clear Royal connections.

That things never went that far came down to several factors. The Chamberlain government was unanimous in its refusal to negotiate with Hitler, rightly regarding the Fuhrer as untrustworthy. The only way through, from the UK government's view, would be if Germany either pursued all its future negotiations via exclusively diplomatic means – i.e. renouncing the use of force – or had Hitler replaced by a new leader (e.g. Goering).

The failure of the December 1939 approach did not end Bonde's involvement, however. According to Padfield (pp. 125-126) he received a telegram exactly a year later from, 'one of his closest British friends, Lady Barlow', asking if he could set up a meeting with Goering. Bonde and Goering spoke on 14 January 1941, after which he replied to Lady Barlow proposing that he visit London to try and persuade Lloyd George to help shift government opinion on a compromise peace with Germany. His letter reached Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office who briefed Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. Eden raised its contents with Churchill who advised on 20 January: 'Your predecessor was entirely misled in December 1939. Our attitude toward all such enquiries and suggestions should be absolute silence.'⁷

The Lady Barlow referred to here – there was more than one – is Anna Barlow, widow of Sir John Barlow, a Liberal MP 1896-1918, and senior partner in Thomas Barlow and Brothers, of Manchester, London, Calcutta, Shanghai,

⁶ See John Lukacs, *The Last European War* (1976) pp. 59 and 66.

⁷ Peter Padfield, *Hess, Hitler and Churchill* (2013) pp. 125-6

Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Quakers, pacifists, and regarded as being on the left of the Liberal Party, they were strong supporters of women's suffrage, temperance, and free trade. Throughout the 20s and 30s Lady Barlow conducted extensive correspondence with political figures across Europe, pursuing these interests. She was a friend of Lord Beveridge, and her brother, Richard Denman, sat in Parliament as a Liberal, Labour and National Labour MP between 1910 and 1945.⁸

The question arises, did she make this approach to Bonde as an individual, or was she asked to do so by others? The attempt here to bring Lloyd George into play – regarded by many as the UK's likeliest Pétain – is interesting. It foundered because of Churchill's control of government machinery, and Eden's loyalty. Bonde disappears from the scene as an interlocutor at this point. He died on 7 March 1952. His son, Baron John Bonde, returned to the UK and settled permanently at Charleton in 1955. The family still live there.

There were many personalities who tried to bring the UK's involvement in the Second World War to an end before the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Their motives varied. Some were naïve, some were actively pro-German, most were indifferent to the fate of Europe. Count Knut Bonde was unique. He was based in Sweden, operated at a very high level in the Swedish diplomatic service, was acquainted with figures in the German leadership and owned an estate in Scotland whilst having connections with UK royalty and throughout the wider political class. It would be interesting to know a bit more about him.

Simon Matthews is writing a study of Winston Churchill's period as First Lord of the Admiralty 1939-1940, for publication in 2026.

⁸ Her son, Sir John Barlow, continued the political tradition sitting as a National Liberal and Conservative MP between 1945 and 1966.