

More on Hess

Part 1

Conspiracy, Calamity and Cover-up

John Harris and Richard Wilbourn

Lewes: Uniform, 2023, £35.00, h/b

reviewed by

Andrew Rosthorn

In a *Lobster* review of Richard J. Evans's book *The Hitler Conspiracies: The Third Reich and the Paranoid Imagination*,¹ John Newsinger welcomed a 'well-informed and well-written' account of the dozens of conspiracy theories generated by the Nazi era, everything from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* of 1903, the 'Stab in the Back' armistice allegations of 1918, to 'the question of who burned down the Reichstag, Rudolf Hess's flight to Britain and, lastly, whether Hitler actually died in the bunker or escaped'.

Professor Newsinger did not touch on Sir Richard Evans's description of how the wartime arrival in Scotland of Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, piloting a fast fighter bomber from Augsburg to Glasgow on May 10, 1941, in a peace mission just six weeks before the German invasion of the Soviet Union, encouraged authors and books from 'the world of professional conspiracism'. Evans complained that one particular investigation of the Hess flight, by John Harris and his colleague Richard Wilbourn, had been 'shot through with unsupported speculation, suggestion and innuendo'.

Ever the complete professional, Evans, the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University, 2008–2014, was prepared to accept that two British authors of books on Hess Flight conspiracies might well be described as historians, albeit with qualifying adjectives. John Costello, 1943–1998, author of *Ten Days that Saved the West*,² with expensive access to KGB files in Moscow, was described as a 'freelance military historian'. Peter Padfield, 1932–2022, author of three books on Hess, all surmising that Hitler knew that Hess was planning to fly to Britain, was described by Sir Richard as a 'naval historian'.

¹ Allen Lane, London, 2020, and Penguin Books, London, 2021.

Review in *Lobster* 84 at <<https://tinyurl.com/4y7e37ws>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/84/the-perennial-conspiracy-theory-and-the-hitler-conspiracies/>>

² Bantam Press, London, 1989 (h/b), 1991 (p/b)

But for five books on the Hess Flight written by John Harris, Richard Wilbourn and an earlier collaborator, Meirion Trow, there was no cigar.³ They were not historians of any kind in Sir Richard's eyes.

A key player in the German *Historikerstreit* controversy⁴ and author in 1989 of *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past*,⁵ Sir Richard argued that if Hitler had really possessed advance knowledge of the Hess Flight there would have been no need for Hess to order adjutant Karlheinz Pintsch to take a night train to deliver a letter from Hess to Hitler at Berchtesgaden. In *The Hitler Conspiracies* he writes:

Attempts, for example by John Harris – a chartered accountant who has written five collaborative conspiracy-theory books on Hess, variously with Richard Wilbourn, a farm manager, and Meirion Trow, a schoolteacher and author of detective novels, true-crime stories and historical works – to prove that Hess flew with Hitler's approval, fail to get round this fundamental obstacle.⁶

– and –

At this point, conspiracy theories about Hess's flight pass over into the realms of fantasy; it no longer really matters whether any of them can be proved or have any basis in a verifiable documentary record. What counts is their entertainment value.⁷

Twelve years after their inclusion in Evans's 'world of professional conspiracism', Harris and Wilbourn are back, with a sixth book on the Hess flight opening with an account of their dealings with Sir Richard.

Conspiracy, Calamity and Cover-up arrives 24 years after Harris first published an explanation⁸ of how in 1940 MI5 intercepted a letter from the German diplomat Albrecht Haushofer, sent via neutral Portugal to Air

³ Reviews in *Lobster* 73 at <<https://tinyurl.com/uf69xem6>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/73/the-hess-flight-still-dangerous-for-historians-even-after-75-years/>> and *Lobster* 79 at <https://tinyurl.com/28fyu734> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/79/rudolf-hess-truth-at-last-the-untold-story-of-the-deputy-fuhrers-flight-to-scotland-in-1941-by-john-harris-and-richard-wilbourn/>>.

⁴ See, for example <<https://tinyurl.com/bddfh4r9>> or <<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/german/German/LyndsayJones.pdf>>

⁵ New York: Pantheon Books, 1989

⁶ Evans, p. 132

⁷ Evans, p. 155

⁸ John Harris and M. J. Trow, *Hess: The British Conspiracy* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1999)

Commodore Douglas Douglas-Hamilton, 14th Duke of Hamilton, when he was commanding the Royal Air Force in Central Scotland. Haushofer, who was eventually murdered by the SS in 1945, suggested to the Duke, 'You . . . may find some significance in the fact that I am able to ask you whether you could find time to have a talk to me somewhere on the outskirts of Europe, perhaps in Portugal'.

Harris and Wilbourn have cheekily dedicated their new book to Sir Richard Evans. They refer to a £1.5 million grant that Sir Richard secured from the Leverhulme Trust for a five-year research project under the auspices of CRASSH – the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at Cambridge University. The now completed project, *Conspiracy and Democracy*,⁹ led by professors Evans, Naughton and Runciman, culminated in the publication of *The Hitler Conspiracies* in 2020 (discussed below), after which 'John Harris had an untypically unpleasant exchange of correspondence with Sir Richard J. Evans.'¹⁰ Harris and Wilbourn point out that:

Almost uniquely, Sir Richard appears to believe the Hitler communiqué to the German nation of 13 May 1941, which of course described Hess flying unaided and under a delusion.¹¹

Harris and Wilbourn take their definition of *conspiracy theory* from the *Oxford Compact English Dictionary*:

An explanation for an event that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups, often political in motivation, when other explanations are more probable.

On the one side we have the professional historians at CRASSH and, on the other, a pair of gentlemen farmers. The latter have been entertaining us for 25 years with the triumphs and disasters of their self-funded expeditions to the ends of the earth – and the gulf between the two sides seems to be wider than ever. The amateurs intend to continue their tireless search for vestiges of wartime conspiracies:

Consequently, we would now dedicate this book to Sir Richard and his team, in the hope (forlorn, probably) that they take the time to learn the facts of the Hess case *before* coming to judge others who have at

⁹ <<https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/research/projects-centres/conspiracy-democracy/>>

¹⁰ Dedication to *Conspiracy, Calamity and Cover-up*, Harris and Wilbourn (Lewes [Sussex]: Uniform, 2023).

¹¹ See note 10.

least attempted to do so to the best of their abilities (and budgets). Lastly, we should state clearly that we have self-funded both our own research over many years and many accompanying beers. The beer tabs alone would probably amount to £1.5 million.¹²

The fairest analogy to describe the state of play would be to compare Harris and Wilbourn to a pair of honest police detectives. They are occasionally out of their depth, sometimes grasping at straws, but reliably turning up at remote scenes of crime with a pair of open minds, gathering evidence of conspiracies which may well prove too sketchy for the procedural mind of a civil service solicitor at the Crown Prosecution Service.

Richard J. Evans has himself explained the problem.

Historians bring a whole variety of ideas, theories, even preconceptions to the evidence to help them frame the questions they want to ask of it and guide their selection of what they want to consult. But once they get to work on the documents, they have a duty to read the evidence as fully and fairly as they can. If it contradicts some of the assumptions they have brought to it, they have to jettison those assumptions [. . .] What a professional historian does is to take the whole of the source in question into account, and check it against other relevant sources to reach a reasoned conclusion that will withstand critical scrutiny by other historians who look at the same material.¹³

But where are the documents? The Hess Flight was a conspiracy that certainly involved more than one man, and more than one spook. It was planned and executed in wartime during the era of the telephone. No written Royal Air Force technical report on the successful incursion into British airspace – of what was at the time the world’s fastest operational twin-engined fighter bomber – has ever been uncovered. No photograph of the cockpit area has ever been found, though one must have been taken. I say this because David Mitchell, who was a young RAF instrument maker in the Carluke railway sidings handling the wreck of the Bf 110E in 1941, told me at his home in Lancashire that he was ordered to remove a ‘blind flying panel’ from the cockpit, to make a box for it and to send it for evaluation to the secret Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough.

Harris and Wilbourn suspected that this ‘blind flying panel’ might have

¹² See note 10.

¹³ *Richard J. Evans, Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust and the David Irving Trial*, (London: Basic Books, 2001)

been a Luftwaffe standard issue FuG10 EL radio set which, with a stopwatch and a map or conversion table, could be used to navigate with precision using the latest version of the German Elektra blind landing system known as Sonne.



Author John Harris's 1943 model of the Lorenz FuG10 EL [long wave] radio transceiver, designed as a blind landing aid for the German air force.

Harris and Wilburn relate how some 'flight notes' - with coded marks on them - were stolen from the pilot by the ploughman who first encountered him in Scotland; there are also some cryptic notes obtained from the son of the late Peter Padfield, originating from the Central Navigation School at RAF Shawbury in Shropshire. Using those two sources, the authors have proven to my satisfaction that these notes allowed the pilot to use the Sonne guidance beams without revealing a Luftwaffe secret. The fact that the marks indicate a landing in North Germany to take on vital engine lubricating oil at an air base and an intended final landing on a hard and illuminated runway at RAF Dundonald - in Ayrshire, rather than the grass airstrip near the Duke's residence of Dungavel House - fits a well-known first-hand account of the crash landing.

Hector MacLean was a Battle of Britain Spitfire pilot who had lost a leg when shot down in 1940. On 10 May 1941, he was the fighter commander on duty in the Ops Room at RAF Ayr. At 22:34 he scrambled a Defiant night fighter, crewed by Canadian pilot William Cuddie and air gunner Hodge. MacLean gave them specific orders to climb to two thousand feet, on a

bearing of nine degrees, and 'Dive and Buster'. When Harris and Wilbourn plotted MacLean's orders, they matched the destination indicated by the decoded Hess flight notes.

This would have put the night fighter attacking whatever might be at the end of Dundonald's airstrip. A truly telling order, especially as he had no idea as to where the Hess plane was headed, as at 22:34 pm the Bf110 was still in the middle of Lowland Scotland.¹⁴

The research reveals that Hess lied about his flight for the rest of his long life, both to conceal his route and to conceal the advanced navigational techniques supplied to him by the Messerschmitt company and the Luftwaffe. He did however tell his wife what went wrong, in a letter from Spandau Prison in 1950. The radio system failed him when daylight was fading over the Cheviot Hills, between Northumberland and the Scottish Borders. This was the beginning of the 'calamity' in the title of Harris and Wilbourn's investigation: Hess lost daylight.

Just when the radio system was critical to his mission, the system failed (or, more likely, he failed to interpret the dots and dashes being transmitted into his headset). Whilst he had a stopwatch, without the Elektra system being operational he would not know precisely when to turn or bank left.

Being an experienced pilot, he did not panic, but turned back to simply retrace his steps. He knew this was critical. An entry too low would put him over Newcastle, RAF Ouston and RAF Acklington; an entry too high would place him on top of the fighter stations protecting Edinburgh and Rosyth . . .

[. . .]RAF Home Chain [radar] had already spotted the plane and had sent up a Spitfire from Acklington. As the RAF pilot, Pocock, climbed, Hess had dived and was at sea level, trying to locate his 'entry point', the Cheviot. Having done so, by flying up the coast he then turned inland. The Cheviot was exactly due east of the newly opened bases at Prestwick, Ayr and their satellite base at RAF Dundonald.¹⁵

Some conclusions are offered:

Hess was not targeting Dungavel airfield. He may well have hoped to have eventually ended up at Dungavel House, but only after a safe

¹⁴ Harris and Wilbourn (see note 10) p. 306

¹⁵ Harris and Wilbourn (see note 10) p. 305

landing at Dundonald. This straightaway alters the character of the flight from one previously described as a solo flight.

Hess landed in Germany to de-risk the flight and to prevent him having to install an auxiliary hand-cranked oil pump. This too, alters the character of the flight, as it infers connivance with the Luftwaffe and was and was therefore not a 'solo mission'.

Hess lied about the route to disguise the fact that he landed [at Giessen in Germany] and the fact that he had on board the Elektra system, the then state of art German navigational system.

Hess got lost and in doubling back to find his turning point lost 40 minutes. This loss prevented him landing in light . . .

Was Hess helped in? We suspect not, simply because he was not expected as late as 20:23pm at Chatton [Northumberland]. When the RAF realised what was happening they appear to have tried to shoot the plane down, as evidenced by the very precise command given to Cuddie by Hector MacLean. The question is also unanswered as to how MacLean knew to vector Dundonald. This we believe very significant and was essentially a panic measure.

The eventual outcome, an alive Hess, wandering around the Renfrewshire farming community prior to being interrogated for two hours in German by the part-time Polish Consul in Glasgow, was actually a disaster in security terms. The worst possible outcome. Certainly, a calamity.¹⁶

It would be very unfair to describe as 'unsupported speculation' the authors' recent discoveries in the small Bavarian alpine settlement of Bad Hindelang, pop. 4,915, in the Oberallgäu. Harris and Wilbourn have chased down a well-known but rarely researched suggestion that Hess was lured into his flight by British agents. This dates to the 1956 publication of the memoirs of Walter Schellenberg [1910-1952] chief of the *Sicherheitsdienst* political intelligence for the SS. His memoirs were written after his conviction by a US military court at Nuremberg for conspiracy to murder Soviet prisoners of war. Schellenberg had investigated the Hess flight for the SS. In *The Labyrinth*¹⁷ he wrote:

[O]ur secret information showed that for some years Hess had been influenced by agents of the British Secret Service, and their German

¹⁶ Harris and Wilbourn (see note 10) p. 302

¹⁷ *The Labyrinth: Memoirs of Walter Schellenberg, Hitler's Chief of Counterintelligence* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956)

collaborators, and that they had played a large part in his decision to fly to Scotland. This was true, more particularly of a Prof. G - - -, a gland specialist in Upper Bavaria.

Harris and Wilbourn opened a correspondence with Andreas Gerl, the grandson of Professor Franz Gerl, a close friend and neighbour of Rudolf Hess. Andreas Gerl has uncovered the names of the influential and wealthy British patients who came, usually for thyroid gland treatment, to stay at the Gerl clinic close to the Austrian border, where Hess owned a holiday retreat (that Ilse Hess lived with their son Wolf-Rüdiger in the years when her husband was in captivity).

The list includes two sons of Roger Chance, press attaché at the British embassy in Berlin in 1938; Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare, Liberal MP and Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty 1937-1940; Pamela Baldwin, daughter of the British prime minister; Stewart Blacker, organiser, navigator and photographer on the 1933 Houston-Mount Everest flight (in which the future Duke of Hamilton piloted the first aircraft to fly over Everest); and Lady Elizabeth Percy [1916-2008], daughter of the Duke of Northumberland, maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth at the 1937 coronation of King George VI and wife of Douglas Douglas-Hamilton, 14th Duke of Hamilton.

This is bringing the Hess affair very close to home indeed. In 1941, Hamilton was prepared to go to court to refute the allegations that he knew Hess. What now appears to be the case is that Harry Pollitt, the defendant in the action (and secretary to the British Communist Party) had picked the wrong family member. When accusing the Duke of knowing Rudolf Hess before the war, he should have chosen perhaps the Duchess of Hamilton or, alternatively, Stewart Blacker, Hamilton's leader and fellow flyer some eight years previously in Nepal. ¹⁸

Harris and Wilbourn have been building on eighty years of worldwide research into perhaps the most inexplicable event of the Second World War. I'm pleased that both my name and the Anglo-Czech name of my colleague, 'Spike' Hodbod, appear at the top of the list of acknowledgements. The first air crash researcher to go knocking on doors in southern Scotland was the late Kevin Mount;¹⁹ his actions elicited a visit to Kevin's home in Preston from Wolf-Rüdiger Hess – the previously mentioned son of Rudolf and Ilse Hess. 37 years ago we heard that two spooks had been seen on the platform

¹⁸ Harris and Wilbourn (see note 10) p. 119

¹⁹ Kevin Mount's sketches appear in *Conspiracy, Calamity and Cover-up*.

at Preston station when Hess Jnr was catching the train home. That makes for nigh on four decades of conspiracy, calamity and cover-up.

Harris and Wilbourn have uncovered many rocks of certainty that justify all six of their entertaining investigations and outweigh all allegations of 'unsupported speculation, suggestion and innuendo'.

In any case, readers of *Lobster* might well argue that those three vices, forbidden to professional historians, must surely remain the divine right of honest, entertaining and self-funded investigators.

Part 2

*The Hitler Conspiracies –
The Third Reich and the Paranoid Imagination*
Richard J. Evans
London: OUP, 2020; Allen Lane, 2021

comment by
John Harris

I write this as one of Professor Sir Richard Evans's targets. Chapter 4, dealing with the Hess flight, is essentially a hatchet job on anyone who fails to believe that Hess flew to Scotland in 'a stolen aircraft and under a delusion' – the explanation put out by a Nazi Party communiqué of 12 May 1941, the day after the Hess flight.

My colleague Richard Wilbourn and myself have spent the past 35 years trying to understand exactly what was going on in May 1941; our latest book, *Conspiracy, Calamity and Cover-Up*, is reviewed by Andrew Rosthorn above. Whatever else Hess was doing, he was certainly not flying in a stolen aircraft, and neither was he under a delusion. Somewhat unbelievably, Sir Richard still apparently believes this to be the case and fails to understand that the explanation/lie was an attempt to keep Josef Stalin and the German-Russian trade agreement onside.

Sir Richard may believe this to be the case because he didn't actually do the necessary research for the book. In 2013, Sir Richard was awarded a Leverhulme Programme grant for £1,584,611. The grant was for a five-year programme based around 'Conspiracy and Democracy'. Consequently, Sir Richard employed researchers and they are duly acknowledged on p. 217. Was this book the culmination of his paid researchers' input, duly 'topped and tailed' by the Professor?

So, let's look at his Chapter 4 in detail. This is the only chapter I am remotely qualified to comment upon, simply by my experience. It is a theme

of the book as a whole that, unless an author comes from a strictly academic background, nothing of note can follow. Richard Wilbourn and I obviously disagree with this notion and would perhaps immodestly claim that without our work (and that of others, such as Andrew Rosthorn, Spike Hodbod and Peter Padfield) over the past 35 years (completely self-funded and without a penny of grant), the official Nazi communiqué would have remained untested. Presumably Sir Richard has not been one of our adherents or regular readers and still believes what the German nation was told the day after their Deputy Fuehrer had flown to Scotland.

The errors are surprising.

Firstly, Evans takes issue with my complaints of missing documentation, inferring that I am guilty of wishful thinking. The problem with that complaint is that there is indeed missing documentation and we list them in Appendix 7 to our book – 25 files or documents that have existed, but are now either in protected archives or have been destroyed. That is not our fault and we should not be ridiculed simply because we have pointed the fact out.

Secondly, silly errors. Page 151, 'the Duke of Kent, who was killed in an air training crash'. No, he wasn't, his Sunderland crashed into a Scottish hillside whilst on a 'special mission,' as described on the official memorial in Caithness.

And thirdly, if in doubt, just be rude. We are attacked for writing a book entitled *Rudolf Hess, the final truth*, when in fact our 2019 book was entitled *Rudolf Hess, Truth at Last*. A different emphasis. He also states that the introductions to the book 'are clearly fiction' when in fact they are all based on authenticated accounts of the affair: – viz Adolf Galland's account in his autobiography; the blitz of 10 May 1941; the fact that the FA Cup final was held the afternoon before Hess flew; and the account of a 10 year old schoolgirl who saw the plane pass low over her house in Eaglesham. None are fictional. References can be supplied if needed and we were merely trying to bring the affair down to a human level, by quoting the first-hand accounts. This was clearly lost on the Professor, who by this time was truly into attack mode.

So: notwithstanding the book's silly errors, my main disappointment is, if we are so wrong and so amateur that we are an affront to democracy, why not instead tell us all precisely why?

Over the years we have based our research on issues pertinent to the flight, but not subject to the restrictions of the Freedom of Information Act, or the usual paranoid secrecy of the British state. (Perhaps that would have

been a better research subject for the Leverhulme Trust to have financed?) Consequently, we have discovered that Albrecht Haushofer, Hess's English expert, had been writing to Violet Mary Roberts (1864-1958), who at the time was living with the treasurer of SOE. We have discovered and explored the role of Tancred Borenius, the Finnish Art expert in the affair, and have detailed his extraordinary trip to Geneva in January 1941. We have unearthed the history of Dr. Franz Gerl, doctor to Ilse Hess and many of the British great and good. We have analysed the flight in detail and have concluded that, rather than the act of a delusional man, it was actually meticulously planned and engineered, only failing when the ELEKTRA radio navigation system did not function correctly at 'the decisive moment'.

We have discovered that most of the Royal family were in Scotland on 10 May 1941, and the precise whereabouts of the King and Queen have yet to be satisfactorily determined. We have researched Carl Burckhardt's role in the affair and his subsequent actions to try and distance himself from it. In short, we believe there are only two possible explanations; either a very clever intelligence ruse was being played out so as to buy time, thus staving off an invasion, or there was a genuine coup under way. A coup designed simply to unseat Churchill. That is why Hess flew to Scotland. Had he wished to have made a peace with Churchill, there were a host of convenient airfields in and around the capital. The truth is that Hess was flying to meet those who thought he could achieve his goal. Certainly not Churchill.

So, again, I repeat my plea. If the above is mumbo jumbo, please tell us why and please let us debate the issues. We know the above and much else to be factually correct and we actually think the Leverhulme Trust should ask for their money back. Simply being rude to people who do not have a similar budget does not aid democracy in anyway whatsoever. Why not instead tell us why we are wrong. We would enjoy the debate. We know what we know and, in particular, the role of Tancred Borenius requires and deserves careful consideration and research. He is, we suspect, the crux of the Hess affair.

In conclusion we are very, very disappointed as yet again Hess and his mission have been let off the hook. At Nuremberg, Hess avoided having to explain his flight by pretending to be amnesiac. Sir Richard Evans, by just being rude to anyone who has challenged the convenient status quo, has done exactly the same thing, 75 years later. Of course, there has been much nonsense written about the Nazis and Hess in particular, but perhaps Sir Richard should wonder why that is. We believe it is simply because the truth (and its supporting documents and footnotes) *have* been withheld and so, of course, people will speculate. We do not think we have speculated at all. The

Hess affair is still the biggest secret of World War Two – and quite probably an unpalatable secret. Of that we are sure, despite Sir Richard’s assertions to the contrary. We are not that daft, despite only being farmers . . .