

More Hess

Take me to your leader (or can I see the King please?)

Simon Matthews

On 9 May 1941, the day before he made his flight to the UK, Rudolf Hess ' . . . called a legal officer on Martin Borman's staff to ask the position of the King of England [. . . .] probably he now wanted to know the extent of the King's power to remove Churchill.'¹ The legal officer concerned was Dr Gerhard Klopfer, who had been on Hess's staff for some years after 1935 before working for Borman. Part of his remit there was to advise on the application of the law in occupied and foreign states.²

Hess's subsequent conduct was entirely consistent with him wanting to privately meet with King George VI, in the hope of getting Churchill dislodged as UK Prime Minister. He raised the question of his access to the King on 11 and 14 May (with the Duke of Hamilton), 20 May (with Dr Colonel Gibson Graham RAMC), 28 May (with Lt Malone) 30 May (with Major Foley) and 9 June (with Lord Simon, Lord Chancellor who was masquerading as a Foreign Office negotiator). After the invasion of the USSR further requests were made on 1 and 7 August (both to Lt Murrough Loftus).

Conventional narratives, insofar as they dwell on the Hess case at all, present this constant badgering for a private, in-person meeting with the King as delusional, and proof that Hess was most likely an eccentric acting without wider authorization. In fact, by seeking a direct meeting with the King, Hess was following established Nazi practice, as can be seen by looking at other instances where this approach was used:

DENMARK – April 1940. Germany invaded Denmark at 4am on 9 April 1940. As part of this operation, a token force of about a thousand infantry landed in

¹ See Padfield *Hess, Hitler and Churchill* (London: Icon Books, 2013) p. 159

² See statement of Gustav Bechtold, 30 April 1946, US National Archives. An SS-Oberführer, Klopfer's specific role was to advise on how to package policies and demands in such a way that they could be presented by Germany as legal (and with clear precedents) within the traditions that existed in occupied and allied territories. In *Who's Who in Nazi Germany* (1944) he is described as a 'specialist in problems of State Law'. In this capacity Klopfer attended the Wannsee conference (20 January 1942) at which estimates of the Jewish population of every country in Europe, including the UK, were circulated.

Copenhagen. Here, the Danish army fought back, their commander General Prior, believing the Germans could be expelled from the area around the capital, and later from the surrounding territory. However the King of Denmark, Christian X, insisted on a cease fire and agreed to meet General Himer, the German commander's *aide-de-camp*. Acting on orders from Berlin, Himer was tasked with establishing the intentions of the King, telling him that further resistance was futile and, if necessary, taking steps to prevent his leaving the country. Denmark surrendered and began demobilising its armed forces later the same day. Christian X and his government remained *in situ* under German military occupation.

NORWAY – APRIL 1940. Germany invaded in force on 9 April. The Norwegians resisted and the King, Haakon VII, left the capital with his government. The following day, with a state of war not yet having been declared by either side, the German ambassador, Curt Brauer, received orders from Berlin to seek a personal meeting with the King. In this he was to remind him of the actions taken by Christian X in Denmark and convince him to do likewise. Haakon VII declined Brauer's request, stating such matters were for his government to determine. The following day the Norwegian government refused the German demands and vowed to resist the German invasion as long as possible.

BELGIUM – May 1940. After the German invasion of Belgium on 10 May 1940, Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot and King Leopold III disagreed over whether the King should act independently in his role as Head of State and Commander of the Belgium Army. After the Belgian army had been forced back to Bruges and a strip of territory along the Channel coast, Leopold first attempted to form a pro-German administration under Henri de Man and, when this failed, decided – against the advice of his ministers – to surrender the country and its armed forces to Germany. On 27 May he sent Major General Derousseaux, the army's deputy chief of staff, to negotiate on his behalf with the German commander, General von Reichenau, who, on instructions from Hitler, demanded unconditional surrender. Leopold III acceded to this the same day and, unlike the monarchies of the Netherlands or Luxembourg (and Norway a month later), declined to go into exile, remaining instead in Belgium. The events were summarised by Churchill in the House of Commons on 4 June 1940, thus:

Suddenly, without prior consultation, with the least possible notice, without the advice of his Ministers and upon his own personal act, he sent a plenipotentiary to the German Command, surrendered his Army

and exposed our whole flank and means of retreat.³

YUGOSLAVIA – March 1941. Governed by a Regency since 1934, the position of Yugoslavia as a neutral state in central Europe was precarious after the fall of France in 1940. Because of this, it found itself courted as a potential ally by both the UK and Germany. The key figure in the Regency, Prince Paul, met with Henry Channon MP, a significant pro-appeasement figure in the UK, in January 1941, and later with Hitler, in Bavaria, on 4 March 1941. On 25 March 1941, Prince Paul decided that Yugoslavia should join the Axis Tripartite Pact (Germany, Italy and Japan), something that was widely opposed by significant elements within the Yugoslav army. With British approval and support, these staged a coup in Belgrade two days later, establishing a firmly pro-Allied government. Prince Paul was removed from power and Peter II, 17 years of age, declared King and Head of State.⁴

This penchant for direct approaches to a monarch – or in the case of Prince Paul, a regent – clearly produced results in Denmark and Belgian, and initially in Yugoslavia. As far as Hitler was concerned, monarchs were easier and quicker to deal with. They provided a route that allowed trusted interlocutors to side-step belligerent generals and committed political adversaries, without any of the complications of democracy. Monarchs also tended to share Hitler’s virulently anti-communist views.⁵

In the Hess case, we should note that after his second conversation with the Duke of Hamilton, the Duke came to London (15 May) and asked to see the King. He was diverted instead to the Prime Minister, finally getting to have lunch with George VI the following day. Here it was carefully suggested that a statement be drafted, clearing Hamilton’s name. Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, made such a statement to the House of Commons on

³ Part of the extended Saxe-Coburg-Gotha family, Leopold had initially declared Belgium neutral in 1936. A clause in his surrender agreement with Germany stated ‘The Château of Lacken shall be placed at the disposal of His Majesty the King in order that he may reside there with his family, his military attendants and his servants’.

⁴ Channon’s visit to Prince Paul lasted eight days, and is presented as a personal holiday in his diaries. Surely, though, he was sounding out Yugoslavia’s intentions with a view to judging how effective (or disastrous) Churchill’s policy of intervening in the Balkans would be? In which case, he was primarily acting for those who wanted no such policy undertaken and/or Churchill removed from power.

⁵ This list of countries could be increased to six: Germany also dealt closely and successfully with King Carol II of Romania and Admiral Horthy, Regent of Hungary.

22 May.⁶ In the meantime, Churchill and Anthony Eden decided (19 May) that Hess should be blocked from further contact with Hamilton, ostensibly to avoid Hamilton being 'embarrassed'.

Finally, the last two requests by Hess to meet the King are of particular interest. His interlocutor at this point, Lt Murrough Loftus, had been commissioned in the Scots Guards on 21 December 1940 and was the son of Pierse Loftus, Conservative MP for Lowestoft. It seems to be assumed in various accounts, including Padfield,⁷ that Lt. Loftus was sent to guard Hess to obtain from him details of German proposals for a compromise peace, and information about German intentions (particularly with regard to the Soviet Union). But by whom, and why, was this required? And why choose Loftus? Couldn't Major Foley or Lt. Malone, both of whom were MI6 officers, have done just as much?

A clue as to Pierse Loftus's political alignment can be found in Hansard. He showed significant interest in the cases of those arrested and detained because of their membership of, or association with, the British Union of Fascists.⁸ After he lost his parliamentary seat in 1945, he became chairman of the Rural Reconstruction Association, which employed Jorian Jenks as press secretary and editor of their journal *Rural Economy*. Jenks, a significant supporter of Oswald Mosley in the 1930s, built up a network of ex-BUF and English Mystery (sic) members in his new position. Which suggests Pierse Loftus was clearly on the right-wing of the Conservative party. The choice of his son is therefore of interest, and suggests that he was not a neutral interlocutor. After Lt. Loftus's second meeting with Hess, he was given a 45-page document which Hess wanted Loftus to forward to the Duke of Hamilton – presumably so that Hamilton could make it available to King George VI. Loftus passed it on to the government.⁹ But he also briefed Kenneth de Courcy on its contents, which raises the possibility that Loftus was inserted into those guarding Hess by pro-

⁶ See Hansard, 22 May 1941 at <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1941/may/22/rudolf-hess>>.

Given that by May 1941 approximately 1500 German aircrew had been captured after bailing out over the UK, this fails to address (1) why Hamilton would have agreed to see a German POW he claimed he didn't know, and (2) the content of the discussions between Hess and Hamilton.

⁷ See footnote 1.

⁸ See Hansard 4 March 1941, 12 June and 23 July 1941 at <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/people/mr-pierse-loftus/1941>>.

⁹ It can be found in Lord Beaverbrook's papers, held in the House of Lords Record Office, and also in the Foreign Office file TNA/FO 1093/12 held at the PRO Kew.

appeasement MPs who wanted to find out what Germany was offering. The timing here is crucial: August 1941. They expected an imminent defeat of the Soviet Union and wanted to know what terms might be available to the UK, if that occurred. Had the Soviet Union collapsed, they would presumably have tried to instigate peace talks with Germany on that basis.¹⁰

¹⁰ De Courcy maintained that the peace proposals brought by Hess in May 1941 involved removing all European Jews to Palestine. The terms most likely available after a Soviet collapse would have been harsher than this, as can be seen by the chronology of events involving the Wannsee Conference, and the 'final solution' that flowed from it. Had the UK surrendered in such circumstances it would have been required – like other occupied/defeated nations – to agree the deportation of its Jewish population.