

Peter Raina



A Daring Venture

Rudolf Hess and the Ill-Fated
Peace Mission of 1941

Peter Lang

Preface

On 26 April 2014 it will be 120 years since the birth of Rudolf Hess, who rose to become Hitler's Deputy in National Socialist Germany, and whose daring solo flight to Scotland in 1941 was one of the most sensational and puzzling events of the Second World War. Hess said that he came to Britain on a peace mission. The British were in no mood for peace and the whole idea proved ill-fated. But perhaps this anniversary is a fit occasion to reflect on what Hess really intended.

The year 1941 was the high point of the war. In May, after much agonizing, Hess persuaded himself to fly to Scotland to put a suggestion of peace to the British: he wanted, he said, to save Britain from the horrors of full-scale bombing and sea blockade. Hess was not carrying any official document proposing peace; he simply brought himself and his ideas. But these ideas were, he claimed, implanted in his mind by his Führer, Adolf Hitler.¹ Often, he said, the Führer had told him how he desired to live in peace with Britain. Although the Führer had never specifically asked Hess to initiate or arrange a rapprochement between Germany and Britain, Hess felt that, on his own, he should try to harmonize Anglo-German relations. He could, he said, tell what Hitler's designs were.

What made this man, the Deputy to the Führer, think as he did? When asked this question, Hess consistently replied that he had seen enough bloodshed in both countries and he now meant to stop further destruction of the peoples of Germany and Britain. These two 'white races' (as he called them) should not destroy each other; and an end to the warfare between them could be arranged if 'England' (his term) promised to meet certain conditions advanced by the Führer.

1 Adolf Hitler (by title, 'Der Führer'), 1889–1945; German Chancellor, 1933–45; committed suicide on 30 April 1945.

What were these conditions? Hess put forward certain proposals. They were not really terms of peace to be considered by the British, but were an ultimatum they should unilaterally accept. Hess believed firmly that Hitler would eventually win the war, but before the final victory came, Hitler would condescend to sign a peace treaty with Britain on condition that that country should fully and permanently recognize the Continent of Europe (including European Russia) as Germany's 'sphere of influence'. Britain was never in future to interfere in Continental affairs, which would remain entirely the domain of Germany. In return Germany would be prepared to guarantee her non-interference in the British Empire. If the British were to refuse these conditions, Hess contended, they faced total destruction by Hitler.

Now any sensible politician should have realized that such conditions would be unacceptable to *any* British Government. Hess, however, was not a politically astute man: he was naive. This naivety may be why he clung to his mistaken belief that he might be able to persuade a counterpart in Britain to share his scheme for peace. Here again, this was a great error in judgement. Yet misunderstanding of a situation does not necessarily imply that an idea about it is devoid of sincerity. Hess pinned his faith upon the rightness of his proposals, and he seemed to have an implicit faith that the British should accept them. Now you may challenge his faith, but it is difficult to deny his belief. Hugh Trevor-Roper once called Hess the 'incorrigible intruder' and described his arrival in Scotland as 'the most bizarre single episode of the Second World War'. Both descriptions are justified. Yet Hess's eccentricity seems to us free from pretence. It is this aspect of the 'bizarre episode' we propose to look at in our volume.

Hess's reason for flying to Britain has been the subject of various scholarly works.² Why then our present volume? We thought it essential to

- 2 See under 'Sources' at the end of this volume and works referred to in full in the footnotes. We must nevertheless refer to some of the more important studies, which have appeared after the British Public Records were released. Among these are David Irving's *Hess. The Missing Years, 1941-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1987). Irving is, of course, a controversial and now discredited figure; but, in his research on Hess, he used the sources made available by the Public Record Office, London and other archives with skill, giving a full picture of the fate of his subject. All these sources

produce complete texts of Hess's 'peace' proposals, and show how Hess wanted to present them. This has not been done before. We have also appended to our text copies of the original handwritten documents Hess made in captivity (including his letters to Hitler and his peace terms). These are here made available to the public for the first time. We hope thereby to put the views of this enigmatic figure in a proper historical perspective.

— Peter Raina
Senior Research Associate
Graduate Centre, Balliol College, Oxford

Michaelmas Term, Oxford 2013

are open for verification. Another study worth singling out for its thoroughness is Peter Padfield, *Hess: The Führer's Disciple* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991; Macmillan, 1995). A work of unusual importance is James Douglas-Hamilton, *The Truth About Rudolf Hess* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream, 1993). Douglas-Hamilton's other major work, *Motive for a Mission: The Story Behind Rudolf Hess's Flight to Britain* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1979) is also important: it contains a chapter, written with immense sympathy, on Hess's friend, Albrecht Haushofer, who was murdered by the Gestapo only days before the end of the war. Perhaps the best study ever written on Hess is that by Rainer F. Schmidt, *Rudolf Hess: 'Botengang eines Toren'. Der Flug nach Grossbritannien vom 10 Mai 1941* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1997). Professor Schmidt has thoroughly analysed all the available source material and come to conclusions that are highly convincing. His book is a classic. Our knowledge of why and how Hess flew to Scotland has been greatly enlarged by David Stafford (ed.), *Flight from Reality: Rudolf Hess and his Mission to Scotland, 1941* (London: Pimlico, 2002). This includes several interesting articles: Lothar Kettenacker, 'Mishandling a Spectacular Event: The Rudolf Hess Affair'; John Erickson, 'Rudolf Hess: A Post-Soviet Postscript'; Warren F. Kimball, 'The Hess Distraction: A Footnote from America'; James Douglas-Hamilton, 'Hess and the Haushofers'; Roy Conyers Nesbit, 'Hess and Public Records'; and Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'Rudolf Hess: The Incurable Intruder'. The titles of the next two books are self-explanatory: Martin Allen: *The Hitler/Hess Deception: British Intelligence's Best-kept Secret of the Second World War* (London: Harper Collins, 2003) offers an extensive exposition of how Hess was duped by British Intelligence to come to Britain. Roy Conyers Nesbit and Georges van Acker, *The Flight of Rudolf Hess: Myths and Reality* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2007) gives us a detailed technical description of the flight.