

HISTORICAL ARTICLE

The Case of Rudolf Hess

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Many influential Nazi party members are well known historically because of their roles in atrocities spanning the Second World War. One such member of Hitler's inner circle was Rudolf Hess. Hess was Hitler's loyal right hand man for much of the time preceding and during the war and is best known for his surprise flight to Scotland in 1941. This article presents extracts from a lecture given to the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow by Dr. JG Graham, the physician who initially looked after him. Dr. Graham served as a commissioned gunner during the First World War in France. After the war he chose medicine as a career and graduated in 1923. In 1939 he was mobilised as a territorial regiment medical officer but was soon transferred to the general hospital at Buchanan Castle, near Drymen. He spent the remainder of the war as a lieutenant colonel in medical divisions of hospitals in Egypt. With the introduction of the NHS he continued his career as a consultant physician at the Royal Alexandra Infirmary, Paisley. This article reveals much about Hess' character and his misgivings in what was one of the most bizarre and intriguing events of the Second World War. Below describes the background to the events leading up to Hess' flight, followed by extracts from the lecture.

Rudolf Hess was born in 1894 and spent the first dozen years of his life in Alexandria, Egypt, before being sent to school at Godesberg on the Rhine. He fought in the infantry in the First World War, rose to the rank of lieutenant and in 1918 became a pilot in the German Air Force. After the war he studied Economics at the University of Munich. Passionate about his country and how it might rebuild itself following defeat in the war, he became politically active. Hess was inspired by the teachings of Professor General Karl Haushofer, a man who believed that the struggle for a nation's life was little more than a contest for space on the world's surface. Haushofer founded the study of political geography known as Geopolitics, a form of geographical imperialism which provided an air of academic respectability for the acquisition of land which was German speaking or culturally German, known as *Lebensraum*.

This was a popular philosophy amongst Germans including Hess who believed the Treaty of Versailles had unfairly stripped their country of much of its land.

Hess was one of the first members of the Nazi party. He joined immediately after hearing Hitler speak in public in 1920. He took part in the unsuccessful Beerhall Putsch in 1923 in which, when trying to protect Hitler, he took hostage important members of the Bavarian cabinet. When news came to him of the putsch's failure he fled and found shelter with Karl Haushofer. Both Hitler and Hess were imprisoned together during which time Hess acted as Hitler's secretary whilst writing his book *Mein Kampf*. Through visits from Haushofer and indirectly via Hess, Hitler adopted Geopolitics as an academic front to his oppressive foreign policy. When Hitler was made Chancellor in 1933, Hess was appointed his deputy. Hitler understood the importance of

organising German nationals living abroad and it was Hess that established the Volksdeutsche Rat (the council for those of German origin who were living outside the Reich) in 1934. Hess was heavily involved in the 'night of the long knives', which involved the extermination of the important figures of the SA army, who threatened Hitler's political survival and nearly managed to seize control of the country by martial law. Following the execution of over 200 people, only half of whom were SA officers, Hess was chosen to give public justification to the German people. The choice of Hess for this task was clever as he was seen in the public eye to be a man of great conscience and intellect and less bloodthirsty than Himmler or Goering.

However, Hess was not as great an intellect as he would like to have thought. He was a shy, insecure man and displayed a near religious devotion and obedience to Hitler. In the early years of his rise to power Hitler found his work satisfactory and rewarded him for his dogged loyalty. He wielded much power as head of the Nazi party and of the Volksdeutsche Rat.

Hess's influence with Hitler began to fade towards the outbreak of war because of his lack of understanding of the mechanics of power and an inability to act on his own initiative. By 1937 his decline was more noticeable as he was displaced by the rise in stature of other Nazis such as Borman, Goering and Himmler.

Hitler regarded the British as a great Nordic race akin to themselves and wrote in his book *Mein Kampf* 'No sacrifice should have been too great in winning England's friendship'. The British Government swiftly rejected Hitler's peace proposals in October 1939 because there was no associated withdrawal from occupied territories. After the invasion of France, Hitler refrained from attacking British forces in Dunkirk. Bizarrely, Hitler then spoke of admiration for the British and the Empire's importance in maintaining world equilibrium. Hitler remained reluctant to invade Britain, partly through fear of failure in an assault involving the sea but also because of his imminent plans to attack Russia, thus risking war on two fronts. Hess understood this well and believed that peace with Britain was still possible and necessary in order to together oppose Russia. He saw himself as a man of honour and one of the few who could negotiate peace terms with the British and thereby regain his esteem in the mind of the Fuhrer.

To understand the reasons behind the Hess flight it is important to understand the role played by another man, Albrecht Haushofer, son of Professor General Karl Haushofer, who worked for Hess as a political adviser in the Nazi foreign affairs bureau. Albrecht's mother was half Jewish and he resultantly came under Hess' protection when the Nuremberg race laws came into effect in 1935 stripping Jews of their German citizenship. Hess issued letters protecting the Haushofer family from Nazi persecution and stating that they were 'honourary

Aryans'. Albrecht was always opposed to conflict as a means of his country attaining its former glory and strongly believed that aggression in Europe would only lead to loss of life and no measurable gain for his country. One of his tasks in particular was to advise Hess as to Germany's relations with Britain and the USA.

Albrecht met with many British dignitaries including the then Marquis of Clydesdale and soon to be Duke of Hamilton, who was a young M.P, a pilot and commanding officer of 602 City of Glasgow (Bomber) squadron. Along with others, he was the first to fly over Mount Everest in 1933 for which he gained international acclaim. Clydesdale met Haushofer at a dinner in Berlin in 1936. The two became friends and Clydesdale visited the Haushofer's home near Munich in early 1937. Four days after his departure Hess visited the Haushofers and was told all about Clydesdale's visit, which interested him greatly.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, the British public demanded a statement of war aims. No explicit statement came from Chamberlain's government but several important figures broadcast their views in the British press. A letter written by Clydesdale to *The Times* was quoted, no doubt out of context, on German news in October 1939. It is very likely that Hess came to hear of this broadcast. What would have appealed to Hess in particular would have been the line 'We shall, I trust, live to see the day when such a healing peace is negotiated between honourable men'.

Hess turned to the Haushofers to establish if and how the British would receive a peace offer. Several approaches were considered but Hess preferred the possibility of meeting the Duke of Hamilton, about whom he had heard so much previously and who, the Haushofer's assured him, had the ear of many important figures in London - even access to the King. Initially the plan was to arrange a meeting in a neutral country. Albrecht wrote a letter to the Duke of Hamilton in September 1940 suggesting a meeting in Lisbon. It was intercepted by British intelligence and the Duke only came to learn of its existence five months later. After discussion with high-ranking air ministry officials and MI5 it was decided that no meeting should take place.

Having received no reply from Hamilton, Hess decided to embark upon a personal and secret mission without Hitler's knowledge. Goering once made a suggestion to Hitler that he fly across and reason with the British just after they declared war against Germany. Hitler was not altogether against this idea but was dubious of its chances of success. This undoubtedly stuck in Hess' mind, and the possibility of outshining Goering must have appealed to him.

On the 10th of May 1941, Hess, dressed in the uniform of an Oberleutenant in the Luftwaffe, made his flight across the North Sea in a Messerschmitt 110, which was modified to carry extra fuel tanks for the journey of around 1260 miles. He arrived at the English coast at dusk, close to the Scottish border over an area with relatively poor coastal defences. He was aiming for Dungavel House, the residence of the Duke of Hamilton in Lanarkshire. He was picked up by radar whilst out at sea and two spitfires were scrambled from Northumberland to intercept. However, he was not intercepted. The Royal Observer Core tracked the position of his Messerschmitt accurately however the R.A.F did not believe that it could be a Messerschmitt, which are long range fighters, but rather a Dornier bomber, which travel more slowly, and so they took measures to intercept such

an aircraft. Hess flew very close to Dungavel house and to check his position continued to the Ayrshire coast before turning around. A Defiant Nightfighter was scrambled from Prestwick and came very close to intercepting him, but low lying mist came to his aid and he parachuted out minutes before it was able to attack.



Part of Rudolf Hess's Messerschmitt, which crashed approximately a mile from Mearnskirk Hospital.
(Image courtesy of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow)

Dr. Graham's lecture picks up events from this point:

Around the 12th May 1941 I was asked to see a German who had flown over to Scotland from Germany and landed near Dungavel. He had been taken to a unit in Maryhill and transferred to the military hospital, Drymen, on account of injuries received from his parachute decent from his plane. These turned out to be of no significance; hair-line fractures of the left fibula and third lumbar spinous process. Physical examination was negative otherwise.

The German told me he was Hauptman Alfred Horn of the Luftwaffe. He obviously regarded himself as an important person. A tall, sallow man of good physique, he spoke good English. We only learned the next day that he was Rudolph Hess, Reich Minister and Deputy Fuhrer of Hitler. He was transferred from a ward to a private room and I was put in medical charge. Hess now spoke freely to me. He had been a Hauptman in the German Airforce in the latter part of the 1914-1918 war after service in the Infantry during which he received a bullet wound in the chest, making an excellent recovery.

While at Drymen he was most impatient and put out at the non-appearance of members of our government. He became increasingly nervous and introspective about his health. He told me he suffered from Colitis, gall bladder trouble, renal complaints, and had consulted many doctors during his life, and his list included all types of qualified and unqualified practitioners and many homeopaths.

He had flown to Britain with his pockets crammed with tablets which included various vitamins and medicines, mainly homeopathic remedies with which he could treat outbreaks of colitis, renal and gallbladder troubles. He set great store on a liquid extract which had been given to him by a famous Swedish explorer- Sven Hedin- who had obtained it from a Tibetan Llamasary and assured him it was a potent cure for cholecystitis.

In addition to all this he had a case containing glucose, various sedatives, barbiturates and an opium mixture to control pain following a flying accident. Finally he produced several photographs of his son. His wife appeared only once, a subsidiary figure holding out a book to their son. Hess was obviously a neurotic individual, intensely preoccupied with his health, especially his gastro-intestinal tract.

The presence of the Reichminister of Germany caused a considerable stir. Two senior military officers arrived at the hospital, followed by three companies of primary training recruits, to guard the place, since it was considered that the importance of this patient might encourage a German Air Commando raid to rescue him.

After the second day at Drymen he began to talk freely to me. He told me how sad he felt after Germany's defeat and his determination to devote his life to the rehabilitation of his beloved fatherland. He was in Munich at this time and one day when walking in the town he was attracted by a small crowd listening to a speaker. He approached out of curiosity and became hypnotised by the orator who was talking on the future path of the Reich. He said 'It suddenly dawned on me that I was looking at the man who would rescue Germany and rebuild her greatness'.

He listened spellbound and at once made enquiries and was told that the orator was a man called 'Adolf Hitler' who had newly founded 'The Nazi Party'. Hess immediately joined the party. His voice became triumphant as he added, 'And who would have thought that now the Nazi Party is Germany and will exist for a thousand years'.

On the third day we were informed that he would be removed from Drymen and join the Glasgow-London night train en route for the Tower of London. On arrival at Euston Station when Hess was being transferred to an ambulance he was immediately recognised by passengers in the station and was loudly hissed. This did not seem to disturb him and he smiled happily. Hess was housed in the Becham Tower where important political prisoners were kept. It was noted that Hess seemed elated during his stay and thought that his plans were maturing.

Hess was moved from the Tower to a commodious house in Wychett Place adjacent to Farnborough and Aldershot. There I was introduced to two high up civil servants whose identity I never learned. One had held an appointment in the Berlin Embassy and the other in the Vienna Legation. They spoke fluent German and met with Hess frequently. Their task was to

get as much information out of Hess as possible, especially the high command's thoughts on running the war; their present links with Russia and a possible invasion of Britain.

Hess talked freely to me and trusted me because I was a medical man. He was certain that Germany would win the war. He told me that Hitler regarded Britain as a great Nordic race for which he had much admiration, and had no desire to destroy us in a long and bloody war. We would be allowed to keep our colonies, but must hand back Germany's colonies which had been taken from her after the First World War. He also added that territorial adjustments would be made in Eastern Europe, which did not augur well for their present allies. As he talked of the Fuhrer's war aims he became filled with grandiose ideas and went on to talk of the invincible military might of Germany with ample divisions to fulfil these projects.

Later he told me that his coming to England was entirely his own idea for he knew that the Government in England was most unpopular with the majority of the people who had no desire to be at war with Germany- and further that the population was held down by Churchill and his clique. He knew that if he could get in touch with these people there would be an uprising against the Churchill Government, and a Government put in power which would negotiate with Germany. He seemed to think that the Duke of Hamilton would assist him. We were all exceedingly surprised at such gross ignorance of the mood in Britain in the mind of one of Germany's high ranking politicians, and also if these views were generally held by the Nazi Government. Those in charge of Hess at Wychett were doubtful; they told me Hess was never second in command to Hitler, always third where his blind devotion to his chief was important.

Two days after this conversation and no replies from his letters demanding visits from important people, he became very restless and would eat very little. He asked the reason for wire fences round the garden, grills on his windows and the presence of troops. He again wrote a letter to the Duke of Hamilton. At times when taking exercise in the garden he would suddenly hold himself very erect and walk with a military goose step, stamping his feet loudly on the ground.

A day later his condition was obviously deteriorating; he became very agitated and told me that he was surrounded by secret service agents who were going to kill him by driving him to take his own life, or by making his death appear to be suicide. He told me that he might have been misinformed about Britain's desire for peace with his own Government.

His depression increased but alternated with flashes of a domineering mood. At such times he would brush aside any doubts as to Germany's ability to cope with the growing strength of the allies. The might of the USA was brushed aside as he talked of the wealth defeated France had brought to Germany.

On the 28th of May one of our security men tested Hess by telling him of the sinking of the Bismark - one of Germany's crack dreadnoughts - by our fleet in the Atlantic Ocean. Hess suddenly looked ill and very upset. He asked for a glass of water and went to bed complaining of severe backache. Two hours later he got up saying he felt better. At dinner he carefully selected his food from the opposite side of the dishes handed to him. On going to bed he asked for a sedative and a glass of whisky (he was usually teetotal). Later on he was telling me that a clique was trying to make him commit suicide by arranging noises- his guards kept running up and down just outside his

window. Aeroplanes were being flown over the house at all hours. They were trying to drive him insane. This behaviour of Hess combined with his accounts of his early days in the Nazi party, his hopes for peace without any real evidence, the plans he made for his journey to Britain on a mixture of grandiose background and flimsy woolly substance convinced me that Hess should be examined by a psychiatrist.

Brigadier J R Rees, Chief Psychiatrist to the army was consulted and he interviewed Hess. He agreed with me that we were dealing with a man of unstable mentality who had almost certainly been like that since adolescence. Rees described him as a psychopathic personality of the schizophrenic type, i.e. a tendency to the splitting of his personality. Hess showed marked hypochondriacal tendencies, persecution paranoid delusions, and simple incidents were misinterpreted.

My connection with Hess now ended and I returned to my post in the military hospital, Drymen. My place was taken by Dr. Dicks, a psychiatrist. I met Dicks several weeks later and he told me that Hess showed no change in his behaviour. At times he became violent and on one occasion had jumped over the banisters outside his quarters, falling heavily and fracturing his pelvis.

In June 1943 Hess was removed to Abergavenny in South Wales where he stayed for the rest of the war. He was flown back to Nuremberg on 10th October 1945. The trial of Hess and 19 other Nazi leaders opened on November 10th 1945 and lasted 27 days. Hess at his trial was examined and certified by Lord Moran and Dr. Rees. They mentioned he had a marked hysterical tendency which had led him to a loss of memory,

while not insane at the moment, in the strict sense, this disability would interfere with his ability to make his defence and understand details of the charges against him.

Lord Justice Lawrence found Hess not guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity but guilty of crimes against peace. He was an active supporter and key in war preparations and so on. Hess was sentenced to life imprisonment in Spandau Gaol in the British zone of influence in Berlin.

Sir Winston Churchill in his memoirs wrote, 'Whatever may be the moral guilt of a German who stood near Hitler, Hess has in my view, atoned for this by his completely devoted, and fantastic deed of lunatic benevolence. He came to us of his own free will, and though without authority, had something of the quality of an envoy. He was a medical and not a criminal case and should be so regarded'.

(Author's note: Hess died in 1987 at the age of 92, the last Nazi prisoner in Spandau Gaol. Officially the cause of death was suicide by asphyxiation, but his family believe the circumstances around his death to be suspicious).

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