

HISTORY IN AN HOUR

History for busy people

Rudolph Hess and his flight to Scotland – a summary

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On this day, May 10, seventy years ago in 1941, occurred one of the most bizarre incidences of the Second World War – the appearance in Scotland of top-ranking Nazi, Rudolph Hess.

Hitler and Rudolph Hess

Hess was one of the original members of the Nazi Party, joining in 1920. Three years later he was involved in the failed [Munich Putsch](#) and, for his part, was imprisoned alongside his leader, Adolf Hitler. Devoted to Hitler, Hess acted as scribe as Hitler dictated his biographical [Mein Kampf](#). Upon their release, Hess became Hitler's private secretary and in 1933 was promoted to deputy leader of the Nazi Party. In 1939 Hess was appointed second-in-line to Hitler as Head of State, second only to Herman Goering.

Hess' Flight to Scotland

Although a fervent and ideological Nazi, Hess felt that, as fellow Anglo-Saxons, Britain and Germany should not be at war with one another. Thus, on May 10, 1941, he took it upon himself to fly single-handedly from Augsburg in Germany to Scotland with the express purpose of negotiating a peace between the two nations. Around 11 pm, after a five-hour flight, Hess jettisoned his plane and parachuted out, landing awkwardly and breaking his ankle. He had landed on Floors Farm, near the village of Eaglesham in Renfrewshire, eight miles south of Glasgow.

A 45-year-old ploughman, named David McLean, who had heard the crashing of the plane, rushed out, armed with a pitchfork, to find Hess who initially identified himself as Captain Albert Horn. Prodding the German with his pitchfork, McLean escorted the hobbling Hess back to his cottage where McLean's mother offered Hess a cup of tea (Hess refused, asking only for water). Here, in this slightly muffled TV interview, Mr McLean, with his mother, describes his strange encounter with the Nazi apparition from the skies. "He was a gentleman," she says, and "after all he was somebody's son.":

The Duke of Hamilton

Upon being officially arrested, Hess demanded to see the Duke of Hamilton, whom he misguidedly believed had some influence within the British government, but was adamant he did not want to see Churchill, whom he held responsible for waging war on Germany. Churchill, on his part, had no intention of seeing Hess and ordered his internment, rather melodramatically, in the Tower of London (the Tower's last political prisoner). Then, until the end of the war, Hess was kept in various military prisons and hospitals, whilst observed, interrogated and analysed.

Hitler, on hearing of Hess' treachery, stripped his old comrade of all positions and responsibility, and ordered him shot should he ever step foot back in Germany. To the German public, the Nazi Party explained away Hess' defection as being a result of his 'mental illness'.

British Intelligence, backed up by medical opinion, had come to much the same conclusion – that Hess was mentally ill. The German was deeply depressed, had attempted suicide and was convinced he was about to be murdered.

Hess Stands Trial at Nuremberg

In 1946, Hess was sent back to Germany to stand trial at Nuremberg, irritating his co-defendants by continually fidgeting, rocking and laughing inappropriately. He was found guilty of various lesser charges, including conspiring against the peace, but crucially not of war crimes, which carried the death penalty. Instead, Hess was sentenced to life imprisonment within Spandau prison in Berlin. (Although in West Berlin, Spandau was jointly-managed by all four allied powers – Britain, the US, France and the Soviet Union).

Hess in Spandau

From 1966, following the release of other Nuremberg-sentenced Nazis, including, most famously, Albert Speer, Hess became Spandau's sole inmate. His mental health had deteriorated still further and

the three Western powers petitioned his release on humanitarian grounds. The Soviets however were determined that Hess should remain behind bars to the end of his life.

Finally, in 1987, during [Mikhail Gorbachev](#)'s tenure as Soviet leader, the Soviet Union relented and agreed to Hess' release. But on August 17, 1987, Hess, aged 93, was found dead. He'd hung himself in the prison summer house with an electric cord. Spandau prison was then destroyed to prevent it becoming a shrine to Neo-Nazis.

The Alternative Theories of Hess

The story of Rudolph Hess' flight to Scotland and his subsequent imprisonment does not end there. Conspiracy theories abound to this day. One such theory argues that Hitler approved of Hess' mission; wanting to make peace with Britain to allow him a free hand in the coming [invasion of the Soviet Union](#) (launched a month later in June 1941). Another theory postulates that Hess' plane was shot down and Hess killed (or shot soon after) and that it was a double that appeared in the Nuremberg dock and spent 41 years in Spandau.

Even his death raises questions – aged 93, Hess needed constant care and help – he was reportedly unable to tie his own shoelaces or lift his arms – let alone hang himself, and that, on the eve of his release, he was murdered on the orders of British Intelligence to prevent embarrassing revelations coming to light.

Will we ever know the full truth? The chances are that yes, possibly we will. But not until 2017 when, 30 years after his death, the official files on Rudolph Hess are opened.

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