

# Death of Hess, Hitler's most obedient servant

Rudolf Hess, who was sentenced to life imprisonment at the Nuremberg war-crimes trials in 1945, has died in Berlin aged 93. Hans Werner Kettenbach looks at the Hess years for *Köln Stadt-Anzeiger*.

The late Rudolf Hess' greatest claim to fame was his 2,000-kilometre flight from wartime Germany to Britain on 10 May 1941 when he outmanoeuvred both air-defence systems.

Hess, 47, was Reich Minister and the Führer's deputy. His aim was to talk with the Duke of Hamilton, an influential RAF officer, and submit a peace plan.

"He was successful, but no one can say with certainty if the mission was Hesse's own idea or whether it was on Hitler's orders.

Hitler issued an official statement saying his deputy was mentally deranged ("The entire manner of his behaviour confirms the fact that he had been suffering from delusions").

Yet a peace treaty with Britain would have suited Hitler's strategic purpose fine. Ten days earlier he had decided to invade the Soviet Union on 22 June.

That meant waging a risky war on two fronts for as long as there was no outcome in the West.

There have been doubts expressed both about the motive and the identity of the man who made the parachute jump over Dungeness, the Duke of Hamilton's country estate.

Hugh Thomas, a British military doctor who examined "Prisoner No. 7" at Spandau in 1973, found no traces of the bullet that penetrated Hess's lung in 1917.

Thomas put further facts together in support of a fantastic theory. His idea was that Himmler, the SS leader, planned to oust Hitler.

He had thus eliminated Hess and sent a double of the Führer's deputy to Scotland to cover up the fact. But there is too much evidence against this theory.

The British government failed to take the deserter, with his arrogant demands, seriously.

During interrogation, Hess said: "The Führer can, understandably, not be expected to negotiate with Mr Churchill. You would have to elect another Prime Minister who is acceptable to the Führer."

Hess was imprisoned, given psychiatric treatment and tried by the Allies at the first Nuremberg tribunal in 1945.

He was the only one of 22 Nazi leaders tried at Nuremberg to be found innocent of charges of war crimes or crimes against humanity.

But he was sentenced to life imprisonment for conspiracy and crimes against peace.

Was his sentence unfair? Was he an idealist who meant well but fell foul of the victors' revenge?

Or was a sick man sentenced, a man who was neither legally nor morally to blame for the offences of which he was accused?

Hess's life story would seem to indicate that an entirely different conclusion is warranted. He was a typical, by no means unusual representative of the clique that triggered the worst war ever waged and had millions of deaths on its conscience.

Hess was born on 25 April 1894 in

Alexandria, Egypt, where his father was a self-employed businessman.

His father was a typical German of his day: strict, hard-working and had a strong sense of honour. At home, his son later said, he struck terror into his family's hearts.

In 1908 Rudolf was sent to a Protestant boarding school in Bad Godesberg. He was not allowed to study mathematics and science, as his teachers advised; his father insisted on him learning a commercial trade. He returned to Alexandria and went into his father's business.

When war broke out in 1914 he rebelled against his father for the first time, telling him it was no longer for businessmen to issue orders; now was the time for soldiers.

He volunteered for service with the 7th Bavarian Field Artillery Regiment. He was wounded three times, once at Verdun. Near the end of the war, he was commissioned and trained as a pilot.

After the war, he went to Munich where in 1919, he enrolled as a student of economics at Munich University and studied under Karl Haushofer, a former general who taught geopolitics.

But his main activity was procuring arms and ammunition for nationalist terror groups. He led sabotage groups and joined the Epp Freikorps.

In May 1920 he met Hitler at a meeting of similarly confused characters in the back room of a Munich bar. Hess became the staunchest henchman of the emerging Führer.

Lieutenant Hess agreed with Private Hitler that Germany's defeat and the emergence of the Weimar Republic were national disgraces that must be avenged. Hess asked: "I fought for the honour of the German flag. Is it all to be in vain?"

As commander of a student corps he took part in Hitler's November 1923 putsch, storming the Bürgerbräukeller and the Rathaus and taking hostages.

When the putsch failed he fled to Austria but returned on learning that Hitler had been sentenced to prison. He was tried, sentenced and served his prison sentence alongside Hitler in Landsberg jail.

## Demolition plan to stop Spandau becoming neo-Nazi shrine

Spandau War Criminals' prison has outlived its usefulness. With the death of Rudolf Hess, Hitler's former deputy, the red brick building which was once a Prussian military prison, is empty.

There are no longer any Nazis under Allied lock and key as reminders of the crimes of the Third Reich.

There are already plans being discussed to demolish the building to make way for a supermarket. The aim is to prevent Spandau from becoming a shrine for neo Nazis.

Demolition is the only way of preventing it from becoming a monument. There are still people who refuse to learn the lessons of history.

The first reactions by hard-line Nazis after Hess's death emphasise the importance of such places for neo Nazis.

Hitler dictated his "Mein Kampf" to Hess while they were in jail. Hess was more than a secretary; he also contributed ideas of his own.

The idea of "Lebensraum," or living space, needed by the German people in the East, where they would have to conquer the inferior races who now lived there, is closely related to the geopolitics taught by Hess's university teacher Haushofer.

Otto Strasser, one of Hitler's earliest associates, had this to say about the Landsberg duo:

"Hess is entirely devoted to him. Hitler need have no fear of Hess objecting to any of the historical inaccuracies of which he is guilty, let alone the least criticism of the exaggerated monologues to which Hitler is prone."

Joseph Goebbels, later Reich Propaganda Minister, wrote in 1926 about Hitler and his closest associates:

"Hess: the most decent, quiet, friendly, shrewd, his private secretary."

In December 1933 Hess was rewarded, being appointed to the government. The "Law to Ensure the Unity of Party and State" declared the Führer's Deputy (and the SA's chief of staff, Ernst Röhm) to be members of the Reich government.

Röhm, whose paramilitary forces threatened to get out of the Führer's control (and whose homosexuality was greatly resented), did not survive for long.

The Führer in person led the raid that ended with Röhm's execution and was described by Alfred Rosenberg, the chief ideologist of the Nazi Party, as follows:

"Come on in," Röhm said to the orderly (or so he imagined), "the door is open." But Hitler smashed the door open, lunged at Röhm, who was lying in bed, grabbed him by the throat and yelled: "You are under arrest, you swine!"

Unlike Röhm, Hess never for a moment gave the least ground for suspicion that his views on National Socialism might differ one iota from those of the Führer.

In the late 1920s he said: "I want to be the Party's Hagen."

Yet despite his senior position he never emerged as a commanding figure. "Decent, but sick and indecisive" was Rosenberg's 1939 judgement.

The Führer nonetheless knew Hess's worth. On 25 June 1934 Hess had this to say in a radio speech:

"One person is invariably exempt from criticism of whatever kind, and he



The Führer was always right... Rudolf Hess. (Photo: dpa)

is the Führer. That is because everyone feels and knows he was always right and always will be right."

That same year Hess told political leaders and commanders of the Hitler Youth and the Reichsarbeitsdienst:

"The more you obey orders right down to the smallest detail, turning right or left as the Führer commands, the more automatically you march in step, the more readily the Führer can lay the groundwork for putting the National Socialist programme into practice."

On 1 September 1939 Hitler told the Reichstag that German troops were now returning Polish fire:

"I have now redonned the uniform that was always my most prized and sacrosanct possession. I shall not take it off again until we win — or I shall die before we do so."

If anything were to happen to him he appointed Reich Marshal Göring his successor, to be followed by his former private secretary, Rudolf Hess.

Was Hess a fool, an insignificant, minor figure and an unfairly punished, sick man? Prisoner No. 7 in his day wholeheartedly endorsed the ideology of crime and if he suffered from madness, then it was the madness from which the Nazis as a whole suffered.

He believed in the supremacy of a preordained nation, in despising other people, other political ideas, in brutally pursuing a policy of might is right, in the fixed idea that a war could be just and that violence could lead to a new and better world.

This kind of madness he retained until his dying day. His biographer Wulf Schwarzwälder quotes a guard at Spandau as saying Hess had told him he still stood by his final submission at Nuremberg:

"I am proud to have served under the greatest son Germany has sired in its 1,000-year history. I regret nothing. If I were to be back at the beginning I would do just the same."

A group headed by his son campaigned in vain for his release. Were they right in demanding his release? Over 40 years in jail must surely at some stage no longer make sense.

It can no longer serve the purpose of justice; it is bound to become sheer brutality. The wartime Allies, who now threaten each other with war, would have done well to let Hess die in freedom at 93.

But those who complain of the rigour of his punishment must not seek to set aside his guilt or the ruthless way in which the Nazis persecuted people by the million.

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