

Sikorski—a case of murder?

by Victor Zorza

Did Winston Churchill order the murder of General Sikorski, the Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-exile during the war?

Moral indignation at the apparent monstrosity of this charge does not dispose of the fact of the air crash in which Sikorski was killed just after take-off from Gibraltar. Nor is it possible to dismiss out of hand a view held so firmly by a playwright with the reputation of Rolf Hochhuth, whose play "The Representative" has thrown so powerful a searchlight on the motives and actions of Pope Pius XII.

[The National Theatre has now rejected "The Soldiers," his play which blames Churchill for Sikorski's death.]

What must be rejected, however, is the claim that the information acquired by Herr Hochhuth is so secret that it has had to be deposited in a Swiss bank, with instructions that it must not be revealed for another 50 years. A great many of the relevant facts are available in the archives left behind by the Polish Government-in-exile, and they can be examined here and now. Indeed, this is the material that Herr Hochhuth himself has studied with some interest—as I was told by the custodians of these archives when I visited the Sikorski Institute in London.

The crash occurred on July 4, 1943, when Sikorski was on his way back to London after an inspection trip to the Polish forces in the Middle East. The Air Ministry immediately sent a commission of inquiry to Gibraltar, which took evidence from the pilot, examined 30 witnesses, and made exhaustive technical studies of parts of the aircraft recovered from the sea.

The commission concluded that the crash had been due not to sabotage but to other causes, which, however, it was not in a position to establish. It also added that the pilot was not to blame.

Nothing was published at this stage, but these conclusions were later to cause many misgivings. How, it was asked, was the commission able to say that the cause had not been established, and at the same time claim that it was neither sabotage nor

human error on the part of the pilot?

The Polish Ministry of the Interior sent a representative to Gibraltar, who expressed certain misgivings about the conclusions and noted, in particular, that the "guarding of the aircraft, and the control of the identity and the number of passengers, left much to be desired."

A Polish Air Force commission formed by the Government-in-exile confirmed his misgivings on the score of security, but expressed no clear opinion on other matters.

A year after the death of General Sikorski, Stalin told the Yugoslav Communist leaders that they must beware of the British Intelligence Service, and of English duplicity, especially with regard to Tito's life. "They were the ones who killed General Sikorski in a plane and then neatly shot down the plane—no proof, no witnesses."

Did the Soviet leader believe this, or was he just telling this story to Milovan Djilas (who records it in his "Conversations with Stalin") to cause trouble between Tito and Britain? Whatever Stalin's motive may have been, it was not he who had invented the story. It had been circulating quite widely.

The suspicion that the Russians themselves may have done away with Sikorski was widely held by those Poles who believed that Stalin regarded their Prime Minister as the one major obstacle to the Soviet conquest of Central Europe. The events of recent months had given them more cause for this suspicion than ever before.

When Sikorski refused to make the territorial concessions demanded by the Kremlin, Stalin began to organise in Russia a puppet Polish Government-in-exile. The British and American Governments shared Sikorski's objections to Stalin's moves, but at the same time urged both their allies to reach a compromise.

So far as many Poles were concerned, Sikorski was under great and increasing pressure from Britain to sell out Poland's national interests to the Kremlin. His refusal to give way was later used as an argument to suggest

that Churchill would have been ready to seek the "liquidation" of Sikorski, rather than risk the grave damage to the Allied cause which might have resulted from a break with Russia on the Polish question.

This is why Herr Hochhuth seems to believe (as Lord Chandos, the chairman of the board of the National Theatre, does) that if the death of Sikorski could be proved to be Churchill's work, Churchill would emerge as a more heroic figure than ever.

The conspiracy theory of history, which attributes all unexplained events to dirty work at the crossroads, derives in most cases from the great complexity of political life. Sikorski was at the centre of a large number of cross-currents, each pushing him in a different political direction. He tried to resist them all, and because political passions in the Polish émigré community were rising high, the story of murder found ready acceptance.

The author of "The Gibraltar Crash," published in Poland in 1965, had published some years before a book in which he accused General Anders, who was the commander of the Polish Forces in the Middle East at the time of Sikorski's death, of responsibility for the murder.

It was only in the later book that Mr Klimkowski pointed firmly at Winston Churchill who, he claimed, had "compelled" Sikorski to make the trip which was to lead to his death.

After he had thus "lured Sikorski out of London," Churchill asked him, "for reasons known only to himself," to return immediately, so that Sikorski "found himself in Gibraltar," where the appropriate arrangements for the "accident" had been made. The book is full of "evidence" of this kind.

"I have read the letters exchanged between Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, Attlee, and Truman. I have read the diary of Alanbrooke, and British, Polish, American, and Russian documents. The idea built up in my mind step by step as I read about these events."

But a great many other people have also read all these documents, and the historians among



General Sikorski



Rolf Hochhuth

them would not have let slip any real piece of evidence pointing towards the conclusion at which Herr Hochhuth has arrived. To justify the inclusion of "the idea built up in my mind" about Churchill's guilt in what purports to be a documentary play would require a little more evidence than that.

While Herr Hochhuth may be unable to deal with the evidence within the framework of his play, he has collaborated closely on this matter with a British author who expects that his book, devoted entirely to the "murder" of Sikorski, will be published later this year. It will then be possible to judge the grounds for Herr Hochhuth's belief more fully.

In the meantime, the strongest "evidence" produced so far is the assertion, by the author of another book published in Poland, that just before Sikorski's trip the writer had been warned by a friendly cypher officer at the War Office, not otherwise identified, "Under no circumstances must Sikorski go to the Polish forces in the Middle East."

The author, Mr Strumpf-Wojtkiewicz, claims that his own life was at one time in danger because he persisted in arguing that Sikorski had been murdered. He also trots out the "chain of death" theory, familiar from other exercises in the conspiracy theory of history, purporting to prove that a number of people who were connected with the murder of Sikorski later lost their lives in mysterious circumstances.

This is the only kind of "evidence" available to support

a claim which, for several weeks past, has caused newspapers in Britain and throughout the world to publicise Herr Hochhuth's belief that Winston Churchill had ordered the murder of Sikorski. There is other evidence, too, and if Herr Hochhuth has really studied the matter in detail, he must be aware of it—even if those who have taken up the cudgels on his behalf have never heard of it.

The Gibraltar crash was announced a day later by the chief mouthpiece of the Goebbels big lie factory, the "Volkischer Beobachter," in a front-page story: "Sikorski murdered by London."

The German propaganda effort was successful to the extent that it managed to keep alive the doubts already entertained in Polish political quarters in London about the hand of the Kremlin. The Polish Government-in-exile certainly did not suspect Churchill, but it had its own public opinion to reckon with.

It could not, therefore, accept the conclusions of the Air Ministry's commission of inquiry, which ruled out any possibility of sabotage in the absence of hard evidence for or against. But to say that sabotage cannot be disproved is certainly not the same as to say that sabotage is likely to have occurred.

On the question of sabotage the verdict must be "not proven." As for Churchill's involvement in a supposed murder, the available facts require a verdict of "not guilty."

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