

appendix iii: *Sikorski's Death*

in 1967 the german playwright Rolf Hochhuth produced a drama, *Soldiers*, about air warfare. Churchill's role in the 1943 death of the Polish prime minister Wladyslaw Sikorski was a central element of the play. This resulted in fierce controversy. After our book *Accident* was published,* David Frost devoted three special TV programmes to it. A highly defamatory book appeared, written by one Carlos Thompson: *The Assassination of Winston Churchill*. A number of officers and other witnesses contacted us: we spoke with the widow of the missing second pilot, and an S.O.E. officer based on the Rock told us what he had seen. Early in 1969 we asked the prime minister, Harold Wilson, to reopen the 1943 R.A.F. Court of Inquiry, and Woodrow Wyatt, mp, tabled a parliamentary Question.

The relevant government files were released to the Public Record Office just before this volume went to press. These reveal that in February 1969 the Intelligence Co-ordinator provided a background memorandum for the cabinet secretary Sir Burke Trend to forward to Wilson. This concluded that our book had conveyed as clearly as was possible without risking a libel suit that the Liberator's pilot, Edward Prchal, had 'assisted in the plane's sabotage.' 'He [David Irving] has clearly done a good deal of research among people involved in the Gibraltar arrangements and the Court of Inquiry and among United States and Polish émigré archives.' In advising the prime minister to refute the sabotage allegations most robustly, Sir Burke warned him however to temper his remarks with caution since, not only were High Court writs flying, but 'the report of the contemporary R.A.F. court of inquiry contains some weaknesses which, if it were published, could be embarrassingly exploited.' The 1943 inquiry did not 'exclude the possibility of doubt' on the possibility of sabotage, explained the cabinet secretary:

The shadow of doubt is certainly there; and a skilful counsel could make good use of it. Irving, in his book *Accident*, points to the weaknesses in the report, a copy of which he has certainly seen and may possess; and if challenged he might publish it.

* David Irving: *Accident – The Death of General Sikorski* (London, 1967). Extracts from the file on our website at fpp.co.uk/books/Accident.

Anything that Wilson might say must therefore be consistent with what might need to be admitted if the inquiry's report later came into the public domain. Meanwhile, as Wilson was informed, the Intelligence community was limiting its response to providing 'unattributable' and 'discreet' help and 'encouragement' to those anxious to defend the late Sir Winston Churchill, notably his grandson, Mr Winston Churchill Jr., his wartime 'secret circle,' and the 'rather enigmatic' Argentine author Carlos Thompson (husband of the actress Lilly Palmer) whom Randolph Churchill had commissioned to write a book. It was also hoped to destroy both ourselves and the playwright Hochhuth with legal proceedings (only Hochhuth was eventually sued). 'Irving,' Harold Wilson was advised, 'has called for a re-opening of the R.A.F. Court of Inquiry which he (rightly) claims is permissible under R.A.F. Rules.' The prime minister was warned:

It would be most unwise to agree, not least because of the weaknesses in the proceedings of the [1943] Court of Inquiry.⁵⁵

Harold Wilson concurred in this view. He did however inquire in one minute whether Winston Churchill had in fact ordered the assassination. He was assured that he had not.

Temporary footnote

55 Sir Burke Trend to Harold Wilson; with attached Memo by Intelligence Co-ordinator, **top secret** [Feb 1969]: 'Irving is a young and prolific British historian, with known Fascist leanings. He has published other books on the war which are critical of British leadership and tend to show the Germans in a good light.' And: 'There are various grounds for suspecting, but no real proof, that Hochhuth's and Irving's activities are part of a long-term Soviet "disinformation" operation against the West' (prem. 13/2644).