

In the Bunker with Hitler

The Last Witness Speaks by Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven, with François d'Alañon.
Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006.

The inside rear fly leaf shows a photo of the author, an extremely old but well dressed man sitting in an armchair. His little book is a memoir of the man, a former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Bundeswehr, or German Army. But the front cover of the book has a photo of a much less benign figure, Adolf Hitler, and this book is a memoir of one part of the author's life, his military service in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War, and the last few days of it, spent in the Führerbunker in Berlin as the Allies tore into the ruins of Nazi Germany.

Von Loringhoven was born into a landed German family whose ancestors settled in the Baltic in the 15th century. He became a soldier in the early 1930s, having studied law at university, and served with some distinction in Poland, and at Stalingrad, from which he escaped. His reputation, as well as his family connections with other senior officers, smoothed his career path, and he ended up as the ADC to the last two chiefs of staff of the German forces, Heinz Guderian and Hans Krebs.

He joined Hitler's close staff just after the 1944 bomb plot and stayed the course until April 29th 1945, when he left the bunker with Hitler's blessing. He was captured, held as a PoW, and released by the British Army in 1948.

What makes this little book such compelling reading is that Von Loringhoven is the last witness to events that retain an abiding fascination, the collapse of one the vilest regimes in human history and its leaders. Loringhoven writes as something of a snob about many of the senior Nazis, whom he clearly despised, and who he differentiated from the 'real' soldiers devoted to their country. The book contains the expected protestations of ignorance about, and then horror at the Holocaust, which it would be easy, glibly, to dismiss. Von Loringhoven's later career, however, and the high regard in which he was held by some senior British officers, mitigates somewhat in his favour in this regard.

This is a most valuable memoir.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh