

Rochus Misch, *Hitler's Last Witness: The Memoirs of Hitler's Bodyguard*. Translated by Geoffrey Brooks with an introduction by Roger Moorhouse, Scribe, Melbourne, 2014, 243pp. + xxvii, \$32.99.

Reviewed by Associate Professor Peter Monteath

The fascination with Adolf Hitler will not go away. The publishers of this book by Hitler's former bodyguard Rochus Misch are well aware of that and have done their bit to fan the flames. But have they simply sought to capitalise on a ghoulish interest in an already well-documented past, or does the publication of this book genuinely deliver new knowledge and insight?

Rochus Misch had attracted a good deal of interest from historians long before he chose to commit his story to print. The legions of viewers of the movie *Downfall* will be familiar with the figure of Misch as the loyal telephonist who inhabited the bunker with his 'boss' Hitler to the bitter end. And in 'real life' Misch freely recalled to all who would listen his experiences in service of the Führer.

The celebrity status of his later years – Misch died in 2013 – stood at odds with his humble beginnings. Born in Silesia during the First World War and orphaned very young, a career in the armed forces led him into the campaign in Poland in 1939, wounding in battle, and then allocation to an elite SS group dedicated to serving Hitler. Misch did this as a bodyguard, a courier, and ultimately a telephonist, managing over several years to retain Hitler's confidence. Such a curriculum vitae was difficult to conceal at the end of the war, of course, with the result that Misch spent eight years as a guest of the Soviets before being

returned to Germany and confronted with the task of establishing something resembling a normal life.

Misch was not the first to report from the bunker. A similar, slightly earlier case is that of Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge, whose recollections formed some of the basis of *Downfall*, in which she appears briefly in person. Misch's book poses questions similar to Junge's reminiscences. Where some will prefer to deny Hitler his humanity and cast him as a monster, Junge and Misch describe a boss who generally treated them well, who displayed a range of distinctly human traits and could even, at times, provoke sympathy.

Readers unwilling to countenance the possibility of Hitler's humanity should probably not bother with this book in the first place. For others, though, it can offer glimpses into the man, the way he related to fellow human beings, and the infernal conditions into which his life descended in its last months and days. Much of it, of course, is trivial, as Misch recounts the comings and goings of the bunker, the daily routines, Hitler's prodigious feats of memory, the presence of Eva Braun and her two Scotch terriers Negus and Stasi.

On bigger issues of politics and strategy, pickings are slim. Misch insists on his own apolitical nature, and of course he would say that. Junge was much the same, claiming the 'Sergeant Schulz defence' that she knew nothing. But where ultimately – shown at the end of *Downfall* – she comes to express repentance and regret, Misch shows no such contrition. His remains a story largely devoid of politics, which makes it a very incomplete story. This great gap in the book is to an extent also an inevitable outcome of the fact that although Misch had a physical proximity to Hitler, he was never part of an inner, decision-making circle. His protestations that he knew little of the atrocities planned by his boss and select

acolytes are not without plausibility. But this also means that as a fly on the bunker wall Misch had his limitations, and even if he were more inclined to candour, his story could only tell us so much.

If anything the book is historically valuable as much for what it does not say as what it does. The orphan Misch sought a new father figure and found one; his politics were visceral rather than considered; the burdens of moral behaviour tacitly passed on to others. Like Traudl Junge, he speaks for a generation, not all of whom were willing to learn from the disasters in which they participated.