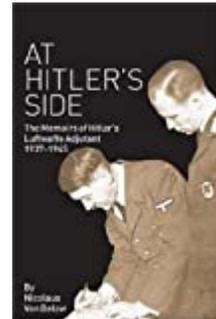




Nicolaus von Below. *At Hitler's Side: The Memoirs of Hitler's Luftwaffe Adjutant 1937-1945.* London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2004. 256 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85367-600-0.



Reviewed by Howard D. Grier (Department of History, Erskine College)

Published on H-German (May, 2005)

Eight Years with Hitler

The memoirs of a young Luftwaffe officer who spent practically every day for eight years in Hitler's presence are naturally of great interest. The work under review is an abridged translation of Nicolaus von Below's *Als Hitlers Adjutant 1937-45*, published in 1980. For reasons never stated, this English version is only about half the length of the original German edition. Most of the material omitted comes from the prewar years, and therefore a discussion of several important topics contained in the German edition (the *Anschlu*, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the Spanish Civil War) is missing. Below states that his diaries were destroyed during the war, and that the manuscript is based upon notes he made in captivity, from 1946 to 1948. Despite this assertion, he quotes from several contemporary letters. His memoirs have an introduction covering the period through 1938, and one chapter per year for 1939 to 1945. The translator provides approximately two dozen explanatory notes, but some people and places mentioned in the text will be unfamiliar to many readers. Despite the work's shortcomings, Below was an important witness and this translation of his memoirs is therefore welcome.

Below's reliability is the main concern. Although much of his account rings true, some sections clearly are fabrication. The most glaring example is his assertion that Hitler hoped to avoid war with Poland. Below maintains that Hitler wanted to meet with Polish diplomats to resolve the crisis, and he refers to the Fhrer's "heartfelt wish to solve the Polish question without bloodshed" (p. 30). According to Below, British treachery was responsible for the war with Poland. To blame the English for unleashing World War II is absurd. Below also dusts off the old argument that Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union to deprive Britain of a continental ally, ignoring Hitler's writings and statements since the 1920s on the need for *Lebensraum* in the East. Further, he provides vastly inflated civilian casualty figures for the Allied bombing of Dresden, although a note provided by the publisher points out this exaggeration.

Below claims to have distanced himself from Hitler in the fall of 1944. He writes that at this time he realized the war was lost, but Hitler insisted upon fighting to the end. Nonetheless, he seems more eager to defend Hitler than to condemn him, and places the blame for Germany's de-

feat on others. For example, Below blames the loss of the air war on Gring, who misled Hitler about the true state of aircraft development. He criticizes Gring for deceiving Hitler about the dates when new models of aircraft, particularly the Messerschmidt 262, would become available. In doing so he ignores Hitler's role in the delay, caused by the Fhrer's insistence that the plane function as a fighter-bomber. One of Below's more dubious assertions is that Franz Halder sabotaged Barbarossa. Finally, according to Below, Hitler's physical collapse following the July 20, 1944 assassination attempt did not result from injuries sustained in the blast or from his generally deteriorating health, but rather from his bitter disappointment over the army's betrayal.

Some odd omissions characterize his recollections. There is surprisingly little on the Battle of Britain, and readers looking for a comprehensive summary of air strategy will be disappointed. Another unusual aspect of Below's memoirs is that except for Hitler, no other individual really comes to life. The reader catches glimpses of Hermann Gring, Erhard Milch, and a few others, but Hitler occupies center stage and others remain in the shadows. With Hitler's permission, Below left the Berlin bunker on April 29, so he is unable to add any details on Hitler's final hours.

As is the case with all members of Hitler's entourage, Below claims to have known nothing about the Holocaust. Nonetheless, he is honest enough to acknowledge that Heinrich Himmler never would have undertaken the extermination of Europe's Jews without Hitler's order. He also states that a young communications officer spoke with him about witnessing what must have been an *Einsatzgruppe* action in which women and children were murdered. Below asked SS liaison officer Karl Wolff to look into the matter, but upon being told that the victims were "saboteurs" he dropped the matter. In an even more shocking passage, he claims to have visited the notorious Dora-Mittelbau complex, the underground factory near Nordhausen where slave laborers worked under appalling conditions to manufacture V-2 rockets. Below, however, remarks that "the prisoners seemed well treated and were in good physical condition so far as I could determine" (p. 227).

Below implies that he retained Hitler's confidence to the end. In addition to his duties as air force adjutant, from May 1944 on Below also acted as Albert Speer's liaison officer with Hitler's headquarters. He frequently mentions the hours spent alone or in a very small group with Hitler, and the invitations his wife received to stay

at the *Berghof*. One of the most surprising aspects of Below's relationship with Hitler is that the Nazi leader never directed his angry outbursts at his Luftwaffe adjutant, surely quite an accomplishment as Allied bombers reduced one German city after another to rubble.

Below's portrait of life in Hitler's entourage is interesting and confirms what other witnesses have written. He agrees that Hitler preferred to go to Obersalzberg to make important decisions, and that he "worried about growing old—that there was nobody with the capability to succeed him in his work" (p. 83). Below states that it was not unpleasant to work for Hitler, remarking that he "was very easy to get on with, being amiable and correct towards his staff" (p. 15). Below claims that he accepted the position of Hitler's adjutant with the understanding that he would serve in this capacity for two years, but Hitler refused his requests to transfer to a front-line unit because Hitler "did not like new faces" (p. 11). Surprisingly, he asserts that Hitler was neither arrogant nor stubborn, and, provided one had clear and reasoned arguments, Hitler could be persuaded to change his mind. This depiction stands in sharp contrast to that of most others who dealt with Hitler, but it is possible. Hitler listened to those whom he trusted. Another revelation is Below's statement that after the failure of the Ardennes Offensive (Battle of the Bulge) in December 1944, upon which Hitler had set great hopes for victory, Hitler admitted that the war was lost. It was the only time Below saw him in such a state of despair.

Below's account provides an accurate description of Hitler's daily routine and gives particularly vivid descriptions of the Reich Chancellery and its furnishings, and of Hitler's military headquarters. It is particularly good at showing Hitler's mistrust of German Army leadership, especially Halder and Walther von Brauchitsch, in 1939 and 1940. He also clearly demonstrates Hitler's desire to attack in the West as soon after the Polish campaign as possible, and his fatal underestimation of the Red Army. He brings out Hitler's fascination with technology, and the Fhrer's belief that he could turn the tide of the war with "miracle weapons" such as jet aircraft and the navy's new models of submarines.

In general, the text flows well, but there are a few minor errors with spelling and translation. There is reference to a pilot having to "bale out" (p. 73), *Grnderzeit* is translated as "the time of the founder" (p. 14), Lake Peipus is referred to as the Peipus Sea (pp. 107, 191), Major Bernd von Freytag-Loringhoven is misnamed Freytag-Loringhausen (p. 237), and in one passage Transylva-

nia is said to be located in Russia rather than in Romania (p. 66). In a particularly awkward sentence, Hitler “saw over” the battleship Bismarck (p. 98). These irregularities are rare, and generally do not distract the reader.

Overall, this translation of Below’s memoirs provides

an interesting description of life in Hitler’s immediate surroundings, and will be welcomed by those who cannot read the original German edition. Although much of this account is useful, some sections are unreliable and require caution.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Howard D. Grier. Review of von Below, Nicolaus, *At Hitler’s Side: The Memoirs of Hitler’s Luftwaffe Adjutant 1937-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10563>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.