



Antony Beevor. *The Fall of Berlin 1945.* New York and London: Penguin Books, 2002. 490 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-14-200280-3.

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Countdown to *Stunde Null*

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The final hours of the Nazi Regime that unleashed the Second World War have been the subject of many scholarly accounts such as Cornelius Ryan's *The Last Battle* and John Toland's *The Last 100 Days* as well as countless novels.[1] Antony Beevor's book is an extremely engrossing mixture of both approaches. Besides numerous interviews with survivors, the author has conducted extensive research in German and other West European archives, and also mined newly accessible record collections in Russia. Artfully blending fact and anecdote, Beevor transports the reader back and forth between the *Stavka* (the Soviet supreme headquarters) and the *Fuehrerbunker*, the *Wehrmacht* and Red Army headquarters, the two sides of the frontlines, and finally to the streets, neighborhoods, and even the homes of the people living in the war zone.

The remarkably unbiased descriptions of the relentless advance of the Red Army on the one hand, and the desperate defense and ultimate retreat of the *Wehrmacht* from the Vistula all the way to Berlin on the other, provide the background for the multi-layered story of *The Fall of Berlin 1945*. The author has taken great care to construct the chapters as a series of changing scenes. Assessments of the atmospheres at *Stavka* or in the *Fuehrerbunker* follow campaign descriptions. Biographic sketches of commanding generals on both sides give way to anecdotes about the life of a simple *frontovik* (Red Army soldier with front experience) or a *Landser* (the German equivalent).

Among the military history portions of the book, the treatment of the break out of the German Ninth *Armee* and the withdrawal of the German Twelfth and Ninth *Armee* to the Elbe are the strongest. All in all, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* does not so much convince as a contribution to the field of military history but instead to sociology. With great attention to detail, Beevor lets the reader see, feel, almost smell what life was like in the ruins of Berlin, the confines of the *Fuehrerbunker*, or the cold, and wet frontlines. Characteristic for his love of minutiae is that he is not content to describe the general circumstances of Adolf Hitler's wedding to long time mistress Eva Braun. He tells the reader that *Fraeulein* Braun "wore a long black silk taffeta dress," which the *Fuehrer* had "often complimented her upon" (p. 342).

In his desire to enliven the book's narrative with tales of human suffering, ambition, and failings, however, Beevor occasionally crosses the line between scholarly historical narrative and historical novel. The author's tendency to speculate is the book's greatest weakness. When describing the establishment of the *Wehrmachthelferinnenkorps* (female military auxiliary corps) he explains the words "be true and obedient" in the oath of allegiance these young women had to swear with Hitler's possible craving for an *Ersatz* fantasy (p. 181). This attempt at a psychological analysis of the wording of Nazi oaths is dilettantish at best because any *Wehrmacht* soldier had to swear "unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler." [2] In another place Beevor's considerable literary talent moved him to describe the *Fuehrerbunker* rather melodramatically as a "concrete submarine of the Reich

Chancellery underworld providing an Existentialist theatre set for hell” (p. 344). Yet another example is the way he describes one woman doctor’s cunning use of a sign with the word “Typhoid” in Cyrillic letters on it to keep Russian soldiers away from a venereal disease clinic she had set up in an air raid shelter (p. 412). There are two problems with this story. Firstly, Beevor neglected to reference this story to an anonymous diarist, and secondly, the doctor pretended to run a clinic for typhoid patients but really provided a safe hiding place for the young girls of the neighborhood in order to protect them from Red Army soldiers turned rapists.[3] These kinds of inconsistencies led me to wonder about the veracity of other stories lacking substantive reference.

Beevor’s style of referencing leaves a lot to be desired for professionally trained historians. Any researcher looking for the sources for a particular passage, for example, has to go through a laborious process, i.e. to find the page number on one of the thirty pages of “Source Notes” at the end of the book and once that is accomplished, he must remember the beginning of the sentence of the passage in which he is interested. If the sentence happens to be a direct quote he might find a reference, but more often than not this reviewer looked in vain. The “Author’s Cuts” pages on Beevor’s website at antonybeevor.com/berlin offer a treasure trove of additional information and some sources, but do not make up for the lack of documentation in the book. This is all the more surprising given the number of archives Beevor visited. The only way I can explain this phenomenon is that Beevor’s editors presented him with a “choice” between words on a page or endnotes. Beevor chose words.

Still, these shortcomings do not take away from the book’s many strengths. It is written in a very readable prose that endears it to the reader from the first page. The fact that it lacks footnotes in the text may even contribute to its flow because nothing “distracts” from the narrative. The author’s descriptions of military actions do not require previous knowledge of military terminology or history on part of the reader, which makes his book accessible to the widest possible audience. His skillful combination of varying themes within the same chapter prevents boredom and makes this book a page turner.

Notes:

[1]. Cornelius Ryan, *The Last Battle* (Munich and Zurich: Droemer/Knauer, 1966); and John Toland, *The Last 100 Days: The Tumultuous and Controversial Story of the Final Days of World War II in Europe* (London: Barker, 1966).

[2]. Quoted in translation in Robert Sterling Rush, *Hell in Huertgen Forest. The Ordeal and Triumph of an American Infantry Regiment* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), p. 101.

[3]. Anonyma, *Eine Frau in Berlin. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen vom 20. April bis 22. Juni 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 2003), p. 108.

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