
Critical Analysis Of 'Berlin: The Downfall 1945' By Antony Beevor

Non-fiction book 'Berlin: the Downfall 1945' is a narrative history written by Antony Beevor, which was originally published in 2002. The book is set in the final five months of World War Two in Europe, with a major focus on the Battle for Berlin. It achieved both critical and commercial success largely due to Beevor's ground-breaking access to the previously undisclosed Russian communist-era archives, that gave him a unique insight into the conflict, as he was able to gain a Russian perspective, which had not been seen in previous works on this period. The endearing nature of Beevor's book is the stories that he found in his research, and the little anecdotes inserted throughout, that give the work its more distinctively personal and human touch. He provides the reader with stories of civilians and the hardships they faced and the terrible atrocities committed against them. It is through this that Beevor shows not only the political and military ramifications of war, but also how war impacts the lives of everyday people. In particular, it is his uncovering of the mass rape of German women by the Red Army, which really leaves a lasting impact, and is what separates this work from all others on this period. A good historian is one that does not deny truth. This is part of what makes this a great historical work. Beevor was not afraid to write about such a sensitive topic despite the potential controversy that could follow. He made sure that he would be objective to the issues discussed which is vital for a great work of history as Leopold Von Ranke stated, "he [the historian] will have no preconceived ideas as does the philosopher." In recent years, popular history books are those that have a great focus on the impact of war on everyday people – social history. For a historian writing in this generation, selling is key. Beevor knew that he had to add something fresh to a topic area that had been covered many times before this work. This, he surely did.

The work is considered to be a form of narrative military history but also acts as a social history. Within Beevor's narrative, one of his major storylines is the downfall of the Nazi regime – hence the title. He opens the work in the preface with a quote from Albert Speer that "history always emphasizes terminal events...he hated the idea that the early achievements of Hitler's regime would be obscured by its final collapse." As this is the first point Beevor chooses to raise in his work makes us assume that it is going to be one of his key arguments. This being that nothing reveals "...more about political leaders and their systems than the manner of their downfall." Beevor eventually ends his work with a follow up to Speer that, "The senseless slaughter which resulted from Hitler's outrageous vanity utterly belies Speer's regret that history should emphasize 'terminal events'. The incompetence, the frenzied refusal to accept reality and the inhumanity of the Nazi regime were revealed all too clearly in its passing." Based on Hayden White's four different approaches to the historical narrative, Berlin would fall into the category of

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a 'mechanistic' historical narrative. This approach according to White is that which "presents events in order to seeks for reasons, causes and effects, both of themselves and, more widely, about life in general – the 'lessons of history' idea." Narratives and stories often have some sort of lesson behind them, Beevor's work, as a historical narrative, is no different. In the preface of the work, Beevor engages with this 'lessons of history' idea that is presented in the mechanistic approach. He writes, "this moment of fate for millions of people still has much to teach us. One important lesson is that one should be extremely wary of any generalization concerning the conduct of individuals." Extremes of human suffering and degradation can bring out the best and the worst in human nature. Beevor commented in an article he wrote that this period of World War Two revealed, "how thin the veneer of civilization can be when there is little fear of retribution." Great acts of kindness were shown on both sides, but the terrible atrocities that were committed in this period, are largely remembered. Despite the grueling detail Beevor goes into on military and political activities, his form and writing style is quite effective and entertaining. This can be largely attributed to the little anecdotes and stories added throughout which not only influence his storyline but provide an insight into how the war affected the life of a specific individual. One memorable anecdote that influences his storyline was a quote from a British soldier, who wrote in his diary, "I'll forgive the Russians absolutely anything they do to this country when they arrive. Absolutely anything." It is clearly a deliberate choice here by Beevor to have this quote to show the mindset of the soldiers at this point in the war and to put the terrible atrocities committed into context.

Beevor's unprecedented access into the Russian archives from the communist era seems to have shaped the purpose of his work. After three years of research and analysis his stated purpose was to present newly uncovered information and to shed great light on a shocking, hidden truth. According to British historian Richard J. Evans, "few authors have contributed more to this process of rethinking than the British military historian Antony Beevor." This 'rethinking' he is referring to, is changing the way the Second World War is viewed. It has been viewed as the 'good war' but in recent years this has come into question. The reason for this perception was due to the seemingly 'clearer' moral divide between the two sides, than there was supposedly in World War One. With the uncovering of previously hidden information of atrocities being committed, it can be no longer known as such. Evans claims that Beevor has been one of the frontrunners in changing the perception of WW2 and his books such as Berlin and Stalingrad have certainly shown that atrocities were committed on both sides and that there is a great hypocrisy in the writings of the victors. Beevor's purpose is to produce a work that changes people's perspectives on this particular historical event and to inform them of the real truth that he uncovered. Arguably, he could be considered a revisionist historian, particularly in this work and in Stalingrad. Through his meticulous research he was able to uncover many shocking facts but Beevor does not condemn either side, as he believes that it is "intellectually dishonest." Beevor offers evidence and reason for why the atrocities occurred but does not attempt to justify. Beevor adds that the drunkenness of the disorderly Red Army was part of the

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reason for what occurred, “But vengeance can be only part of the explanation...once the soldiers had alcohol inside them, the nationality of their prey made little difference.” As he himself stated, “the duty of the historian is to understand and convey that understanding, rather than to make moral judgments.” He managed to accomplish this within a narrative that deals with some very heavy and disturbing content.

A historian's purpose has changed throughout history and in this generation, part of a historian's purpose, is to sell. If a modern historian chooses to re-hash a previously written topic, they need to add something new and fresh that previous historians have not done. It is for this reason that Beevor's book was so successful. The topic area of his work is one that has been covered before but he managed to write a book that sheds a totally new light on this period. Nicolas Kinloch noted that Beevor's use of Russian sources countered the “undue reliance on German sources that marred earlier accounts of the fall of Berlin.” A part of his strength is his access to Russian sources, which he gained through the communist-era Russian archives.

In generations gone by the history of women in society was rarely written about as the values of the time dictated that was a part of history that could be neglected. This is no longer the case and it is a matter of, as feminist writer Linda Gordan puts it, “repainting the earlier pictures,” so that the audience of today understands the real history of our society. Beevor's work certainly follows this ‘repainting’ of history idea. The text uncovers the terrible atrocities that were committed against innocent women of all ages in this period. This is potentially another reason for its success due to the rise of feminism within the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century.

Revisionist histories and first-hand accounts of what really happened in war have shaped the perspective of people's views on war. People are more interested now in histories that focus largely on everyday people and how individuals are affected by war. Beevor himself claimed that “war has always been written about in impersonal, collective terms; ‘the country,’ the division,’ ‘the army...’ and what this has always made people forget in the past was the width of the effect and also the length of time that this effect goes on. There's no family in the Soviet Union or Poland certainly or Germany, where they did not lose at least one close relative [in the war].” American military historian David M. Glantz wrote, “Beevor's work excels as social rather than operational history.” In the time of popular history, social history seems to be what sells and Beevor's work is as much social history as it is military and operational. Today, many people purchase historical books to engage with history by reading accounts of narratives and personal stories. Whilst there is significant, often-laborious military detail present, for example the specific movements of the 8th Guards army for example, Beevor's work have a large enough human and individual touch that keeps people reading.

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What truly separates Antony Beevor from other historians is not necessarily his historical skills, but his ability as a meticulous researcher. Beevor spent three years compiling the material for this book and then one year writing it, with much of this time spent analysing and then extrapolating as much information as he could, from the communist era Russian archives. He was able to gain the accounts of Red Army soldiers themselves and states that “time and time again [Red Army soldiers]...openly admitting not only that the Russian troops were raping German women but they were even raping their own.” He found also the writings of Soviet war correspondent and historian, Vassily Grossman and Beevor writes that, “Grossman did not hide unpalatable truths from himself...even if he could never publish them.” The fact that he was writing against the Red Army, makes him a valuable source. Grossman’s contentious works were published after he died, and the KGB ensured that it was not made available to the public. Beevor does note however that the evidence for this mass rape “...is certainly not restricted just to the unpublished notebooks of Vassily Grossman.” Grossman is obviously an important and valuable source for Beevor, but in saying that he is not the only Russian commenting on the rape, adds credibility to the claim of mass rape by the Red Army. He cites the playwright Zakhar Agranenko who wrote in his diary while serving as an officer in the marine infantry in East Prussia, that they “...rape them on a collective basis.” Beevor interviewed Red Army veterans themselves and recalls that they were open about what they did. An account from the leader of a tank company stated, “they all lifted their skirts for us and lay on the bed... ‘Two million of our children were born’ in Germany.” These men seemingly showed no remorse for their actions. It seems likely that the Russians justified by actions with the argument of ‘revenge’ for German actions against Russian civilians.

Regardless of the potential controversy and outburst that Beevor likely knew he would face in Russia (the archives were closed very soon after his work was published), he did not push aside or brush over the truth, as it could not be ignored. In the chapter, ‘Fire Sword and Noble Fury,’ Beevor writes “Beria and Stalin...knew perfectly well what was going on...” and that Stalin stated the men should keep a ‘campaign wife.’ After the terrible losses at Stalingrad, and the horrific acts committed against their own people at the hands of the Germans, then perhaps it is an example of rape being used as a weapon of war, which is certainly not uncommon throughout history. Rape has been used in various wars in an attempt to totally demoralize, humiliate and annihilate an enemy. Jonathan Gottschall who wrote an article titled ‘Explaining Wartime Rape’ argues that, “Wherever men have gone to war, many of them have reasoned like old Nestor in the Iliad... to war-weary Greek troops... ‘so don’t anyone hurry to return homeward until after he has lain down alongside a wife of some Trojan.’”

This seems eerily familiar to words allegedly spoken by Ilya Ehrenberg who Beevor uncovers in his work, encouraging Red Army soldiers to take German women as their ‘lawful booty.’ Beevor throughout the book does in no way try and justify the actions of the Red Army. He found also that not only German women were raped, but Russian women as well. This makes it

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difficult to argue for it as a weapon of war. This likely took Beevor aback as the rape of Soviet women and girls "...completely undermines any attempts at justifying Red Army behavior on the grounds of revenge..." He merely gives reasons for why the atrocities were committed, which is his role as a historian – to be as objective as possible and attempt to explain through the information in his sources, why certain things occurred.

Nicky Bird states that Beevor "adds little new to the politics and strategy..." of this period of World War Two. This may be a valid criticism but despite much being written previously, Beevor offers new perspectives through his access to the previously undisclosed Russian archives. Aside from the politics and strategy, the real substance of Beevor's work comes from his extensive discussion and detail into the mass rape committed by the Red Army in these final months of the war and the stories of individual people (soldiers and civilians alike), of how the war impacted their own lives. Bird does compliment Beevor on this, as she writes it has never been written in this way before. Hence it seems unfair for Bird to claim that he adds little to the politics and strategy, particularly from a Russian point of view. In terms of the German and Allied storylines, her criticism seems well founded. In relation to the politics and strategy of the Russian Army with the uncovering of the terrible atrocities committed by the Red Army, which the high command was aware of, opens up new and previously unwritten avenues of discussion.

Despite Berlin being a bestseller, it created great controversy in Russia as it exposed the shocking truth that Red Army soldiers had raped close to two million German women in the final five months of the war. Following the book's publication, Beevor was condemned by the Russian ambassador for, "lies, slander and blasphemy towards the Red Army." Beevor is liable for up to 5 years imprisonment in Russia as there was a law passed in recent years under Vladimir Putin, that any criticism of the Red Army in World War Two, is the equivalent of Holocaust denial. British historian Richard Overy defended Beevor and accused the Russians of refusing to acknowledge Soviet war crimes, "...because they felt that much of it was justified vengeance against an enemy who committed much worse [in their eyes], and partly it was because they were writing the victors' history." The idea of a nation's 'historical conscience' comes into play here in a similar vein to the Japanese refusal to acknowledge the atrocities they committed in World War Two. Beevor writes that, "once again we are faced with a government trying to impose its own version of history. I am opposed to all such attempts to dictate a truth." Beevor believes that denying historical facts is wrong, and this is important in being a true and exemplary historian.

Beevor's work uncovers a terrible truth about the revered 'good guys' that were the allied victors. But in uncovering that atrocities were committed on both sides, and not only to one's enemy, but even to one's own people, makes Berlin not only a historical piece on the period, but a testament to the horrific brutality that mankind is capable of. It is a period that "[defies]

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human accounting.” By taking pains to find stories of acts of kindness by Red Army soldiers, Beevor attempts to add humanity, to a period of history where this on the surface, seems impossible. Relating back to the words of Von Ranke, it is Beevor’s duty, despite its difficulty, to consciously avoid being anachronistic and to view the period based on his sources not from his own personal moral views. In Berlin, Beevor seems to accomplish this.

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