

BOOK REVIEW: 'BERLIN-THE DOWNFALL, 1945'

This book describes the capture of Berlin by the Russians, an event that signalled the demise of Nazi Germany and the end of the Second World War in Europe. The author was a regular officer in the British Army, as well as being a distinguished military historian, so he brings a combination of talents and skills to the task.

Many histories have already been written about this historical period, but since they were written in the era of the Cold War, the historians had little or no access to Russian archive material. Beevor has had this access, and thus he is able to contribute new material hitherto unknown to our knowledge of this great event. He can give us a much clearer and more comprehensive picture than previous historians were able to.

The book covers the period December 1944 until May 1945. The end of the war was already in sight. The Russians were before the gates of Warsaw and the Western allies were about to invade German soil. The Nazis faced enemies on two fronts with dwindling military resources. The insanity of Hitler is clear during this period. When told of the massive build-up of Soviet troops in the east, he dismisses it all as "complete rubbish", even though it is a detailed assessment by intelligence specialists.

His decision to appoint Himmler as supreme commander of the east is laughable. The Gestapo chief had virtually no military experience and was hopeless at his job. Hitler believed that his rockets would bring the allied powers to their knees, when it was clear that they would do only limited damage. And finally he believed that large German armies were going to relieve Berlin and save him. These forces, by and large, did not exist and they were intent on surrender rather than fighting on. The Fuhrer's mind was full of illusions and this is clear from his statements.

The seeds of the Cold War, based upon the suspicions entertained by the Russians and the Western allies about each other's intentions are already visible. Stalin wanted a communist Poland, dominated by Polish communists resident in Moscow, while the allies wanted a Polish government composed of Polish politicians exiled in London. History shows that Stalin got his way. The British wanted to capture Berlin before the Soviets, because they believed that whoever held Berlin would dominate post-war Europe. The Russians were determined that this would not happen, so they surrounded the German capital with their forces, before attempting to take the city. This manoeuvre was aimed at blocking any allied

attempt to capture Berlin. Stalin was constantly worried that the Nazis would make a separate peace with the Western allies and then only have the Russians to fight.

Stalin was especially interested in capturing Dahlem, near Berlin, as this was the centre of German atom bomb research. He was well aware that the Americans were well advanced in the development of the atomic bomb (–later to be used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and he wished to capture the German scientists who could then aid the Russians to make their own bomb.

Beevor describes in graphic detail, the brutality of the fighting on the eastern front. The Germans saw the Russians, and indeed all Slavs, as ‘Untermenschen’ or ‘subhumans’ and treated both captured soldiers with extreme brutality. The Russians, once they arrived on German soil, behaved in much the same way. German women were a particular target and were frequently raped. German citizens were routinely murdered. Beevor says that in many cases, the Russians were just taking revenge for German atrocities committed in Russia. There was little or no morality or chivalry shown by either side. Hospital ships, though clearly marked, were sunk without mercy. The war on the western front did not have this racial dimension, and thus was less brutal.

The lunatic atmosphere in the Fuhrer bunker is well described as defeat and catastrophe approached. The death of Roosevelt in April 1945 was taken by Hitler,

Goebbels and others as a sign from heaven that events were turning in the favour of the Nazis. Several Nazi leaders, including Bormann and Himmler were under the illusion that they could negotiate with the Western allies and figure in a post-war Nazi government, totally misunderstanding the allied determination to utterly destroy Nazi Germany and its regime. Himmler’s treachery was the last straw for Hitler, prompting him to take the decision to commit suicide. The facts regarding Hitler’s suicide are well known, but Beevor has unearthed data regarding what was done with his corpse. The cranium and jawbone were taken to Moscow to check dental records and establish positive identification. The corpse was secretly buried, later exhumed and finally reburied and the ashes flushed into the sewage system of the city of Magdeburg. Stalin was determined that there would be no permanent shrine for the Fuhrer.

Stalin was also determined that General Zhukov, the defender of Stalingrad and Moscow and the man who masterminded the capture of Berlin should not gain prestige for winning the war. He was relegated to a minor role in the victory celebrations and exiled to a minor command after the war. Stalin wanted the lion’s share of the credit for the victory for himself. Also, Soviet prisoners who were liberated by the Red Army were regarded as traitors to Russia, for having surrendered. Many were driven into exile into camps in

Siberia, from which many never returned. For this injustice, Stalin was primarily responsible.

Beevor's technique of describing both the conduct of the major players in the drama, and interspersing it with anecdotes detailing the fates of ordinary people is extremely effective in giving us a comprehensive picture of the

conflict. His approach is exhaustive-he has interviewed hundreds of people personally, both celebrities and ordinary people and has produced a book that will, doubtless, become a standard work on this tremendous historical event.



Reference

Beevor, A. (2009). *Berlin-the downfall, 1945*. (3 rd ed.). Penguin Books.