



2014-011

**Antony Beevor, *The Second World War*. New York: Little, Brown, 2012. Pp. xii, 863. ISBN 978-1-316-02374-0.**

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Prolific, prize-winning author Antony Beevor brings to this new entry in the rich field of World War II histories a deep knowledge of the war and an eye for illuminating vignettes. His narrative features several major recurring themes, including the costs of the war for civilians, the nature and folly of leaders, and the foundations of the Cold War.

The introduction sketches a brief overview of the lead-up to the war; Beevor chooses not to assign a specific start-date to the conflagration, but instead anchors its origins in the quagmire of 1930s geopolitical unrest. Interestingly, as a nod to the global scale of the conflict, he opens with the Japanese-Soviet clashes of 1939. He can be brusque in his judgments, for example, of Anglo-French foreign policy choices in the 1930s, and too often brushes aside more nuanced recent analyses of the complex methods the Nazis used to win over average Germans to, or at least implicate them in, the designs of the regime.

The main body of the work comprises fifty chapters covering key elements of the war. Some focus narrowly on specific phases or campaigns: for example, the Battle of Britain, the struggle for Moscow in late 1941, and life in German occupied Europe. Others offer useful, natural juxtapositions—for instance (in chapter 26) of the simultaneous campaigns in Southern Russia and North Africa. Some chapters step back to offer a wider perspective, as in Beevor's discussion of the consequences of the failure of the German assault on Britain or Japan's onslaught against Pearl Harbor and the Philippines; this approach allows him to encapsulate many critical developments of the war. But some chapters amount to grab bags: those on the Pacific and East Asian theaters, for example, lack the concentration and drama of the chapters on the war in Europe. Some chapters, like 24 (on Stalingrad), meander well beyond their proper time frame. Not surprisingly, the strongest chapters are those on subjects Beevor has covered in his earlier books.

The author tends to work in several registers. He regularly pauses to offer a broad overview of the war, often from the perspective of the leaders of the various belligerent states, but he also zeroes in on specific moments that vividly capture the human element of war: a French soldier loading shells with the bloody stump where his hand had been, American marines and sailors exchanging war souvenirs for chocolates at Guadalcanal, the experiences of Russian women serving in the military, or the horrors of the siege of Leningrad.

Beevor is capable of nicely turned phrases, notably in describing various leaders and generals: Lord (Louis) Mountbatten is a "vertiginously over-promoted destroyer captain" (467); Bernard Montgomery alienates his American allies with his "armour-plated conceit" (633); Maj. Gen. John Lucas, the American commander at Anzio, is "a kindly man, who gave the impression of an elderly uncle with his white moustache and wire-rimmed glasses, but he lacked any killer instinct" (537).

Beevor's perceptive discussions of leaders more broadly give him the chance to explain the complexities of alliance warfare, as in his account of the tense debates between Montgomery and the Americans Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, and Omar Bradley. His exploration of differing leadership styles is best illustrated in Stalin's whipping up the rivalries between his generals in the race to capture Berlin (or giving them misleading information about Anglo-American intentions). Some generals, like Mark Clark and Douglas MacArthur, come off poorly, others, like George Marshall and Chester Nimitz (the decision to invade Peleliu excepted), quite well. Beevor also surprisingly goes off on a tangent about Henry Ford, simultaneously exonerating his production line techniques of inspiring Hitler's death camps while also laying out Ford's well documented anti-Semitism.

The Big Three—Josef Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill—do not escape criticism; indeed, for Beevor, they are the founders of the Cold War order. Stalin comes across as in turn manipulating, flattering, and stonewalling his fellow leaders in his bid to get the USSR its due in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. FDR appears overconfident, subject to blandishment, and a poor judge of Stalin's true character and intentions. As for Churchill, on one side of the ledger, he bears significant blame for Allied troubles in Norway, a lack of strategic coherence in 1940–41, and excessive optimism about operations in the Mediterranean despite the travails of the Italian campaign; on the other side, he was a prophet decrying the coming Soviet empire, but unable to convince his American partner of the gravity of the threat. Indeed, Churchill even commissioned highly secret plans for a campaign *against* the Soviets in Poland (aptly name “Operation Unthinkable”); this proved impossible, but Soviet spies nonetheless learned of it. In these judgments, we sense Beevor's anger and disappointment over the fate of countries like Poland; it is unclear, however, just what alternatives were open to Roosevelt, especially since both he and Truman believed they needed Soviet aid in finishing off Japan.

The horrors of the war as experienced by average civilians forms another persistent theme of the book. Beginning with the Rape of Nanking and the brutal treatment of Poles in the aftermath of the German campaign in 1939, Beevor returns repeatedly to the miseries the war inflicted on civilians. Some instances are dealt with in passing, such as the mass starvation during the German occupation of Greece. Others are covered more extensively: nearly two full chapters concern the Holocaust. Dispersed across several chapters is the terrible suffering of average Soviet citizens both under Germany's plans to create a racist empire and the ruthless disregard for his own people with which Stalin prosecuted the war. Japanese atrocities—starvation, forced labor, and the use of “comfort women”—likewise come under scrutiny. Allied bombing campaigns against civilian targets in Germany and Japan receive attention, although here, as in his treatment of submarine battles in the Atlantic and Pacific, Beevor's coverage tilts heavily toward the action in Europe. (The highly effective American submarine campaign is relegated to one page, the Battle of the Atlantic receives half a chapter.) Beevor also describes the atrocities of the closing phases of the war, including mass rapes by Soviet troops in both Europe and China, the plight of displaced persons, and the sad fate that awaited repatriated Soviet citizens.

One source of frustration with *The Second World War* is its limited citations. While it is perfectly reasonable to curb the size of the endnotes in a work meant for broader audiences, Beevor regrettably provides a list of works consulted only on his webpage,<sup>1</sup> and without tying them to specific issues. He has clearly been influenced by Adam Tooze on the German economy,<sup>2</sup> Mark Mazower on occupied Europe,<sup>3</sup> and, in his concluding remarks, Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*.<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, unfortunate that he did not capitalize on the expansive possibilities of his website to more richly detail his sources, especially given his long dedication to his subject.

Antony Beevor has nonetheless written a worthy example of a grand single-volume narrative of the conflict, one that will appeal most to its target general audience or to some undergraduate readers. For scholars, Gerhard Weinberg's *A World at Arms*<sup>5</sup> remains the standard of the genre.

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1. See [www.AntonyBeevor.com](http://www.AntonyBeevor.com).

2. *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (NY: Viking Penguin, 2006).

3. *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (NY: Penguin, 2008).

4. Subtitle: *Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (NY: Basic Books, 2010).

5. Subtitle: *A Global History of World War II* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1994).