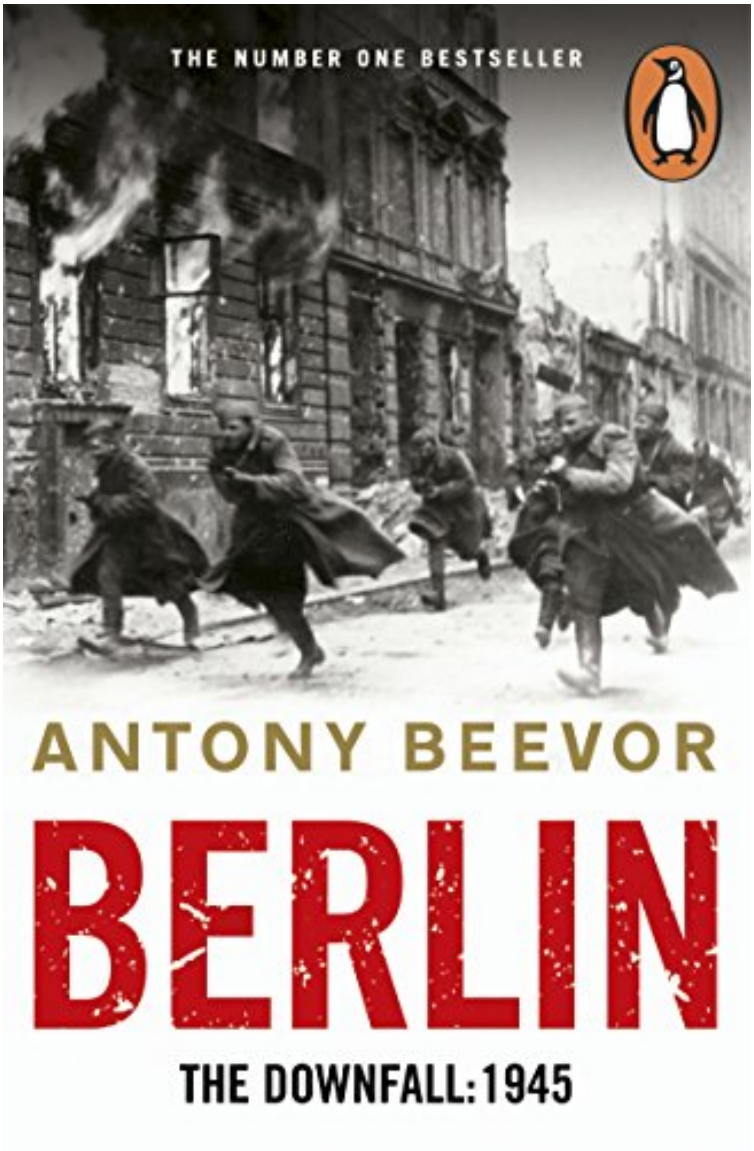
Berlin: The Downfall: 1945



Par Antony Beevor
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Par Antony Beevor : Berlin: The Downfall: 1945 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Berlin: The Downfall: 1945:

Description : Description du produitThe Red Army's invasion of Berlin in January 1945 was one of the most terrifying examples of fire and sword in history. Frenzied by terrible memories of Wehrmacht and SS brutality, the Russians wreaked havoc, leaving hundreds of thousands of civilians dead and millions more fleeing westward. Drawing upon newly available material from former Soviet files, as well as from German, American, British, French, and Swedish archives, bestselling author Antony Beevor vividly recounts the experiences of the millions of civilians and soldiers caught up in the nightmare of the Third Reich's final collapse. The Fall of Berlin 1945 is a heartrending story of pride, stupidity, fanaticism, revenge, and savagery, yet it is also one of astonishing human endurance, self-sacrifice, and survival against all odds.

Prsentation de l'diteurBerlin: The Downfall 19145 is Antony Beevor's brilliant account of the fall of the

Third Reich.The Red Army had much to avenge when it finally reached the frontiers of the Reich in January 1945. Political instructors rammed home the message of Wehrmacht and SS brutality. The result was the most terrifying example of fire and sword ever known, with tanks crushing refugee columns under their tracks, mass rape, pillage and destruction. Hundreds of thousands of women and children froze to death or were massacred because Nazi Party chiefs, refusing to face defeat, had forbidden the evacuation of civilians. Over seven million fled westwards from the terror of the Red Army.Antony Beevor reconstructs the experiences of those millions caught up in the nightmare of the Third Reich's final collapse, telling a terrible story of pride, stupidity, fanatacism, revenge and savagery, but also one of astonishing endurance, self-sacrifice and survival against all odds..comBy December 1944, many of the 3 million citizens of Berlin had stopped giving the Nazi salute, and jokes circulated that the most practical Christmas gift of the season was a coffin. And for good reason, military historian Antony Beevor writes in this richly detailed reconstruction of events in the final days of Adolf Hitler's Berlin. Following savage years of campaigns in Russia, the Nazi regime had not only failed to crush Bolshevism, it had brought the Soviet army to the very gates of the capital. That army, ill-fed and hungry for vengeance, unloosed its fury on Berlin just a month later in a long siege that would cost hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. But as Beevor recounts, the siege was also marked by remarkable acts of courage and even compassion. Drawing on unexplored Soviet and German archives and dozens of eyewitness accounts, Beevor brings us a harrowing portrait of the battle and its terrible aftermath, which would color world history for years to follow. --Gregory McNamee ExtraitBerlin in the New YearBerliners, gaunt from short rations and stress, had little to celebrate at Christmas in 1944. Much of the capital of the Reich had been reduced to rubble by bombing raids. The Berlin talent for black jokes had turned to gallows humour. The quip of that unfestive season was: 'Be practical: give a coffin.'The mood in Germany had changed exactly two years before. Rumours had begun to circulate just before Christmas 1942 that General Paulus's Sixth Army had been encircled on the Volga by the Red Army. The Nazi regime found it hard to admit that the largest formation in the whole of the Wehrmacht was doomed to annihilation in the ruins of Stalingrad and in the frozen steppe outside. To prepare the country for bad news, Joseph Goebbels, the Reichsminister for Propaganda, had announced a 'German Christmas', which in National Socialist terms meant austerity and ideological determination, not candles and pine wreaths and singing Heilige Nacht. By 1944, the traditional roast goose had become a distant memory.In streets where the faade of a house had collapsed, pictures could still be seen hanging on the walls of what had been a sitting room or bedroom. The actress Hildegard Knef gazed at a piano left exposed on the remnants of a floor. Nobody could get to it, and she wondered how long it would be before it tumbled down to join the rubble below. Messages from families were scrawled on gutted buildings to tell a son returning from the front that they were all right and staying elsewhere. Nazi Party notices warned: 'Looters will be punished with death!'Air raids were so frequent, with the British by night and the Americans by day, that Berliners felt that they spent more time in cellars and air raid shelters than in their own beds. The lack of sleep contributed to the strange mixture of suppressed hysteria and fatalism. Far fewer people seemed to worry about being denounced to the Gestapo for defeatism, as the rash of jokes indicated. The ubiquitous initials LSR for Luftschutzraum, or air raid shelter, were said to stand for 'Lernt schnell Russisch': 'Learn Russian quickly'. Most Berliners had entirely dropped the 'Heil Hitler!' greeting. When Lothar Loewe, a Hitler Youth who had been away from the city, used it on entering a shop, everyone turned and stared at him. It was the last time he uttered the words when not on duty. Loewe found that the most common greeting had become 'Bleib brig!' - 'Survive!'.The humour also reflected the grotesque, sometimes surreal, images of the time. The largest air raid construction in Berlin was the Zoo bunker, a vast ferro-concrete fortress of the totalitarian age, with flak batteries on the roof and huge shelters below, into which crowds of Berliners packed when the sirens sounded. The diarist Ursula von Kardorff described it as 'like a stage-set for the prison scene in Fidelio'. Meanwhile, loving couples embraced on concrete spiral staircases as if taking part in a 'travesty of a fancy-dress ball'.There was a pervasive atmosphere of impending downfall in personal lives as much as in the nation's existence. People spent their money recklessly, half-assuming that it would soon be worthless. And there were stories, although hard to confirm, of girls and young women coupling with strangers in dark corners around the Zoo station and in the Tiergarten. The desire to dispense with innocence is said to have become even more desperate later as the Red Army approached Berlin.The air raid shelters themselves, lit with blue lights, could indeed provide a foretaste of claustrophobic hell, as people pushed in, bundled in their warmest clothes and carrying small cardboard suitcases containing sandwiches and thermos. In theory, all basic needs were catered for in the shelters. There was a Sanittsraum

with a nurse, where women could go into labour. Childbirth seemed to be accelerated by the vibrations from bomb explosions, which felt as if they came as much from the centre of the earth as from ground level. The ceilings were painted with luminous paint for the frequent occasions during the air raids when the lights failed, first dimming then flickering off. Water supplies ceased when mains were hit, and the Aborts, or lavatories, soon became disgusting, a real distress for a nation preoccupied with hygiene. Often the lavatories were sealed off by the authorities because there were so many cases of depressed people who, having locked the door, committed suicide.For a population of around three million, Berlin did not have enough shelters, so they were usually overcrowded. In the main corridors, seating halls and bunk rooms, the air was foul from overuse and condensation dripped from the ceilings. The complex of shelters under the Gesundbrunner U-Bahn station had been designed to take 1,500 people, yet often more than three times that number packed in. Candles were used to measure the diminishing levels of oxygen. When a candle placed on the floor went out, children were picked up and held at shoulder height. When a candle on a chair went out, then the evacuation of the level began. And if a third candle, positioned at about chin level began to sputter, then the whole bunker was evacuated, however heavy the attack above.The foreign workers in Berlin, three hundred thousand strong and identifiable by a letter painted on their clothes to denote their country of origin, were simply forbidden entry to underground bunkers and cellars. This was partly an extension of the Nazi policy to stop them mingling intimately with the German race, but the overriding concern of the authorities was to save the lives of Germans. A forced labourer, particularly an 'Ostarbeiter', or eastern worker, most of whom had been rounded up in the Ukraine and Belorussia, was regarded as expendable. Yet many foreign workers, conscripted as well as volunteers, enjoyed a far greater degree of freedom than the unfortunates consigned to camps. Those who worked in armaments factories around the capital, for example, had created their own refuge and Bohemian sub-culture with newssheets and plays in the depths of the Friedrichstrasse station. Their spirits were rising visibly as the Red Army advanced, while those of their exploiters fell. Most Germans looked on foreign workers with trepidation. They saw them as a Trojan Horse garrison ready to attack and revenge themselves as soon as the enemy armies approached the city.Berliners suffered from an atavistic and visceral fear of the Slav invader from the east, worked up after a dozen years of ideological indoctrination. Fear was easily turned to hate. As the Red Army approached, Goebbels's propaganda harked on again and again about the atrocities at Nemmersdorf, when Red Army troops invaded the south-eastern corner of East Prussia the previous autumn and raped and murdered the inhabitants of this village.Some people had their own reasons for refusing to take shelter during a bombing raid. A married man who used to visit his mistress regularly in the district of Prenzlauerberg could not go down to the communal cellar because that would have aroused suspicions. One evening, the building received a direct hit, and the luckless adulterer, who had been sitting on a sofa, was buried up to his neck in rubble. After the raid, a boy called Eric Schmidtke and a Czech labourer, whose illegal presence in the cellar had been tolerated, heard his screams of pain, and ran upstairs towards the sound. After he had been dug out and carried off for treatment, the fourteen-year-old Eric then had to go to tell the injured man's wife that her husband had been badly injured in this other woman's flat. She started screaming in anger. The fact that he had been with this woman agitated her far more than his fate. Children in those times received a harsh introduction to the realities of the adult world.General Gnther Blumentritt, like most of those in authority, was convinced that the bombing raids on Germany produced a real 'Volksgenossenschaft', or 'patriotic comradeship'. This may well have been true in 1942 and 1943, but by late 1944 the effect tended to polarise opinion between the hard-liners and the war-weary. Berlin had been the city with the highest proportion of opponents to the Nazi regime, as its voting records before 1933 indicate. But with the exception of a very small and courageous minority, opposition to the Nazis had generally been limited to jibes and grumbles. The majority had been genuinely horrified by the assassination attempt against Hitler on 20 July 1944. And as the Reich's frontiers became threatened both in the east and in the west, they drank in Goebbels's stream of lies that the Fiihrer would unleash new 'wonder weapons' against their enemies, as if he were about to assume the role of a wrathful Jupiter flinging thunderbolts at the ungodly. A letter written by a wife to her husband in a French prison camp reveals the embattled mentality and the readiness to believe the regime's propaganda. 'I have such faith in our destiny,' she wrote, 'that nothing can shake a confidence which is born from our long history, from our glorious past, as Dr Goebbels says. It's impossible that things turn out differently. We may have reached a very low point at this moment, but we have men who are decisive. The whole country is ready to march, weapons in hand. We have secret weapons which will be used at the chosen moment, and we have above all a Fhrer whom we can follow with our eyes closed. Don't allow yourself to be beaten down, you must not at

any price.' The Ardennes offensive, launched on 16 December 1944, intoxicated Hitler loyalists with revived morale. The tables had at last turned. Belief in the Fhrer and in the Wunderwaffen, the miracle weapons such as the V-2, blinded them to reality. Rumours spread that the US First Army had been completely surrounded and taken prisoner due to an anaesthetic gas. They thought that they could hold the world to ransom and take revenge for all that Germany had suffered. Veteran NCOs appear to have been among the most embittered. Paris was about to be recaptured, they told each other with fierce glee. Many regretted that Paris should have been spared from destruction the year before while Berlin was bombed to ruins. They exulted at the idea that history might now be corrected.The German Army's high command did not share this enthusiasm for the offensive in the west. General staff officers feared that Hitler's strategic coup against the Americans in the Ardennes would weaken the eastern front at a decisive moment. The plan was in any case vastly over-ambitious. The operation was spearheaded by the Sixth SS Panzer Army of Oberstgruppenfhrer Sepp Dietrich and the Fifth Panzer Army of General Hasso von Manteuffel. Yet the lack of fuel made it extremely unlikely that they would ever reach their objective of Antwerp, the western allies' main supply base.Hitler was fixated by dreams of dramatically reversing the fortunes of war and forcing Roosevelt and Churchill to come to terms. He had decisively rejected any suggestion of overtures to the Soviet Union, partly for the sound reason that Stalin was interested only in the destruction of Nazi Germany, but there was also a fundamental impediment. Hitler suffered from an atrocious personal vanity. He could not be seen to sue for peace when Germany was losing. A victory in the Ardennes was therefore vital for every reason. But American doggedness in defence, especially at Bastogne, and the massive deployment of allied air power once the weather cleared, broke the momentum of attack within a week.On Christmas Eve, General Heinz Guderian, the chief of the Army supreme command, OKH, drove west in his large Mercedes staff-car to Fhrer headquarters in the west. After abandoning the Wolfsschanze, or 'Wolf's Lair', in East Prussia on 20 November 1944, Hitler had moved to Berlin for a minor operation to his throat. He had then left the capital on the evening of 10 December in his personal armoured train. His destination was another secret and camouflaged complex in woods near Ziegenberg, less than forty kilometres from Frankfurt-am-Main. Designated the Adlerhorst, or 'Eagle's Eyrie', it was the last of his field headquarters designated by codenames which reeked of puerile fantasy.Guderian, the great theorist of tank warfare, had known the dangers of such an operation from the start, but he had little say in the matter. Guderian's OKH was responsible for the Eastern Front, even though it was never allowed a free hand. The OKW, the high command of the Wehrmacht (all the armed forces), was responsible for operations outside the Eastern Front. Both organizations were based just south of Berlin in neighbouring underground complexes at Zossen.Guderian, despite having as quick a temper as Hitler, was very different in outlook. He had little time for an entirely speculative international strategy when the country was under attack from both sides. Instead, he relied on a soldier's instinct for the point of maximum danger. There was no doubt where that lay. His briefcase contained the intelligence analysis of General Reinhard Gehlen, the head of Fremde Heere Ost, the military intelligence department for the Eastern Front. Gehlen calculated that around 12 January the Red Army would launch a massive attack from the line of the river Vistula. His department estimated that the enemy had a superiority of eleven to one in infantry, seven to one in tanks and twenty to one in artillery and also in aviation.Guderian entered the conference room at the Adlerhorst to find himself facing Hitler and his military staff, and also Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsfuhrer SS who, after the July plot, had also been made commander of the Replacement Army. Every member of Hitler's military staff had been selected for his unquestioning loyalty. Field Marshal Keitel, the chief of staff of the OKW, was famous for his pompous servility to Hitler. Exasperated army officers referred to him either as the 'Reich's garage attendant' or the 'nodding donkey'. Colonel General Jodl, who had a cold, hard face, was far more competent than Keitel, yet he hardly ever opposed the Fhrer's disastrous attempts to control every battalion. He had very nearly been dismissed in the autumn of 1942 for having dared to contradict his master. General Burgdorf, Hitler's chief military adjutant and chief of the Army personnel department controlling all appointments, had replaced the devoted General Schmundt, mortally wounded by Stauffenberg's bomb at the Wolfsschanze. Burgdorf was the man who had delivered the poison to Field Marshal Rommel, with the ultimatum to commit suicide.Guderian, using the findings of Gehlen's intelligence department, outlined the Red Army's build-up for a huge offensive in the east. He warned that the attack would take place within three weeks and requested that, since the Ardennes offensive had now ground to a halt, as many divisions as possible should be withdrawn for redeployment on the Vistula front. Hitler stopped him. He declared that such estimates of enemy strength were preposterous. Soviet rifle divisions never had more than 7,000 men each. Their tank

corps had hardly any tanks. 'It's the greatest imposture since Ghengis Khan,' he shouted, working himself up. 'Who is responsible for producing all this rubbish?'Guderian resisted the temptation to reply that it was Hitler himself who talked of German 'armies' when they were the size of a single corps, and of 'infantry divisions' reduced to battalion strength. Instead, he defended Gehlen's figures. To his horror, General Jodl argued that the offensive in the west should continue with further attacks. Since this was exactly what Hitler wanted, Guderian was thwarted. It was even more provoking for him to have to listen at dinner to the verdict of Himmler, who revelled in his new role of military leader. He had recently been made Army Group commander on the upper Rhine in addition to his other appointments. 'You know, my dear Colonel General,' he said to Guderian, 'I don't really believe that the Russians will attack at all. It's all an enormous bluff.Guderian had no alternative but to return to OKH headquarters at Zossen. In the meantime, the losses in the west mounted. The Ardennes offensive and its ancillary operations cost 80,000 German casualties. In addition, it had used up a large proportion of Germany's rapidly dwindling fuel reserves. Hitler refused to accept that the Ardennes battle was his equivalent of the Kaiserschlacht, the last great German attack of World War I. He obsessively rejected any parallels with 1918. For him, 1918 symbolised only the revolutionary 'stab-in-the back' which brought down the Kaiser and reduced Germany to a humiliating defeat. Yet Hitler had moments of clarity during those days. 'I know the war is lost,' he said late one evening to Colonel Nicolaus von Below, his Luftwaffe aide. 'The enemy's superiority is too great.' But he continued to lay all the blame on others for the sequence of disasters. They were all 'traitors', especially army officers. He suspected that many more had sympathised with the failed assassins, yet they had been pleased enough to accept medals and decorations from him. 'We will never surrender,' he said. 'We may go down, but we will take a world with us.'General Guderian, horrified by the new disaster looming on the Vistula, returned to the Adlerhorst at Ziegenberg twice more in rapid succession. To make matters worse, he heard that Hitler, without warning him, was transferring SS panzer troops from the Vistula front to Hungary. Hitler, convinced as usual that only he could see the strategic issues, had suddenly decided to launch a counter-attack there on the grounds that the oilfields must be retaken. In fact he wanted to break through to Budapest, which had been surrounded by the Red Army on Christmas Eve.Guderian's visit on New Year's Day coincided with the annual procession of the regime's grandees and the chiefs of staff, to transmit in person to the Fhrer their 'wishes for a successful New Year'. That same morning Operation North Wind, the main subsidiary action to prolong the Ardennes offensive, was launched in Alsace. The day turned out to be a catastrophe for the Luftwaffe. Goering, in a grand gesture of characteristic irresponsibility, committed almost a thousand planes to attack ground targets on the western front. This attempt to impress Hitler led to the final destruction of the Luftwaffe as an effective force. It ensured the allies' total air supremacy.The Grossdeutsche Rundfunk broadcast Hitler's New Year speech that day. No mention was made of the fighting in the west, which suggested failure there, and surprisingly little was said of the Wunderwaffen. A number of people believed that the speech had been pre-recorded or even faked. Hitler had not been seen in public for so long that wild rumours were circulating. Some asserted that he had gone completely mad and that Goering was in a secret prison because he had tried to escape to Sweden.Some Berliners, fearful of what the year would bring, had not quite dared to clink glasses when it came to the toast 'prosit Neujahr!' The Goebbels family entertained Colonel Hans-Ulrich Rudel, the Stuka ace and the most decorated officer in the Luftwaffe. They sat down to a dinner of potato soup as a symbol of austerity.The New Year holiday ended on the morning of 3 January. The German devotion to work and duty remained unquestioned, however improbable the circumstances. Many had little to do in their offices and factories, owing to shortages of raw materials and parts, but they still set out on foot through the rubble or on public transport. Once again, miracles had been achieved repairing the U-Bahn and the S-Bahn tracks, even though few of the carriages had unbroken windows. Factories and offices were also freezing due to smashed windows and so little fuel for heating. Those with colds or flu had to struggle on. There was no point attempting to see a doctor unless you were seriously ill. Almost all the German doctors had been sent to the army. Local surgeries and hospitals depended almost entirely on foreigners. Even Berlin's main teaching hospital, the Charit, included doctors from over half a dozen countries on its staff, including Dutch, Peruvians, Romanians, Ukrainians and Hungarians.The only industry which appeared to be flourishing was armaments production, directed by Hitler's personal architect and Wunderkind, Albert Speer. On 13 January, Speer gave a presentation to army corps commanders in the camp at Krampnitz just outside Berlin. He emphasised the importance of contact between front commanders and the war industries. Speer, unlike other Nazi ministers, did not insult his audience's intelligence. He disdained euphemisms about the situation and did not shrink from mentioning the 'catastrophic losses'

sustained by the Wehrmacht over the last eight months.The Allied bombing campaign was not the problem, he argued. German industry had produced 218,000 rifles in December alone. This was nearly double the average monthly output achieved in 1941, the year the Wehrmacht had invaded the Soviet Union. The manufacture of automatic weapons had risen by nearly four times and tank production nearly fivefold. In December 1944, they had produced 1,840 armoured vehicles in a single month, over half what they had made in the whole of 1941. This also included far heavier tanks. 'The trickiest problem', he warned them, was the shortage of fuel. Surprisingly, he said little of ammunition reserves. There was little point producing all these weapons if munitions production failed to keep pace.Speer spoke for over forty minutes, reeling off his statistics with quiet professionalism. He did not rub in the fact that it was the massive defeats on the eastern and western fronts over the last eight months which had reduced the Wehrmacht to such shortages in all types of weapons. He voiced the hope that German factories might reach a production level of 100,000 machine pistols a month by the spring of 1946. The fact that these enterprises relied largely on slave labourers dragooned by the SS was not, of course, mentioned. Speer also failed to remark upon their wastage - thousands of deaths a day. And the territories from which they came were about to diminish further. At that very moment, Soviet armies numbering over four million men were massed in Poland along the river Vistula and just south of the East Prussian border. They were starting the offensive which Hitler had dismissed as an imposture.