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The Downfall 1945

Antony Beevor

Published by Penguin Books

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
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Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Viking 2002
First published in Penguin Books 2003
This edition published 2007
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Typeset by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ISBN 978–0–141–03239–9

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Berlin in the New Year

Berliners, 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 and Enlightenment, had announced a 'German Christmas', which in National Socialist terms meant austerity and ideological determination, not candles and pine wreathes and singing '*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*'. By 1944, the traditional roast goose had become a distant memory.

In streets where the façade 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 übrig!*' – '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 *Sanitätsraum* 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 *Aborte*, 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 3 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 over-use and condensation dripped from the ceilings. The complex of shelters under the Gesundbrunnen 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, 300,000 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 subculture 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. 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 had invaded the south-eastern corner of East Prussia the previous autumn and raped and murdered 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 Erich 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 Erich 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 Günther 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 polarize opinion between the hardliners 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 gibes 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 Führer would unleash new 'wonder weapons' against their enemies, as if he were about to assume the role of a wrathful Jupiter flinging thunderbolts as a symbol of his power.

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 Führer 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 Führer 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 the French capital 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 Oberstgruppenführer 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.