

ANTONY BEEVOR

IN DISCUSSION WITH ERICA WAGNER

Erica Wagner talked to the historian **Antony Beevor** in the Library's Reading Room recently about his interpretation of contemporary material in his research, and the dangers of historical fiction in an age of ignorance

Erica Wagner: Antony Beevor was a soldier before he was an author and of course the two are not mutually exclusive. After leaving Winchester College he was educated at Sandhurst, where he studied under the great military historian Sir John Keegan. A regular officer with the 11th Hussars, he left the army to write. His many books include *The Spanish Civil War* [1982], *Stalingrad* (1998), which won the Samuel Johnson Prize, and *Berlin: The Downfall 1945* [2002]. His book *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* was published earlier this year.

I'd like to start by asking what it was like to study under John Keegan, who is a historian I admire greatly.

Antony Beevor: Well, John is a very unusual character from a military environment at Sandhurst, partly because of his disabilities, obviously, but this made him a far better student of military foibles and mistakes, as he introduced a very necessary scepticism among his students. One of his most important books, which influenced me and for which I am always grateful, was *The Face of Battle*, because it changed the way of looking at military history. It was history from the bottom up, but not the oral history that we've seen as history from the bottom up. This was a very carefully studied and analysed description of what it was like being in the front line, and it was clear from this that military history really did need to change. One always had history written in collective terms – the history of the division, the army or even the country – and suddenly one was starting to see history written much more through the eyes of the individual. I think that in the 1980s society started to change, and became much more interested in that form of history than in the old collective histories of the past. The timing was very lucky for me, as that was the way I was moving anyway at that point. But much of that was thanks to John.

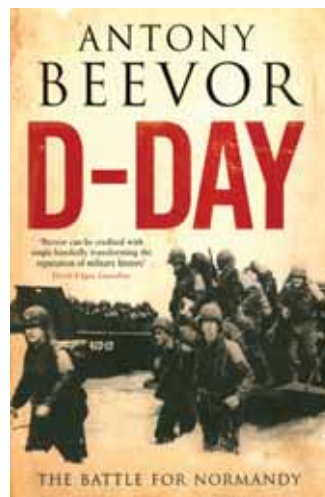
EW: You've referred to the bottom up and top down approaches to history. What are some of the difficulties of integrating those two – because surely if dealing with contemporary accounts or eye-witness accounts one has to judge how reliable they are?

AB: I think with experience you get a pretty good nose for documents that are false. I remember when starting on *Stalingrad*, I was doing some background reading which included a great bestseller in the 1950s called

Last Letters from Stalingrad, and I suddenly realised after reading it that something was very wrong. I didn't know what and I couldn't put my finger on it, and it was only after I was in the Bundesarchiv in Freiberg that I managed to get hold of whole batches of real last letters from Stalingrad. They were only about two or three lines long, for the simple reason that most people's fingers were so frostbitten that they couldn't write any more than that. So there was something wrong with these long, far too literary letters, and you've got to trust your nose to a degree with material like that. There are certain things obviously where you've got to be very sceptical straightaway. It's fascinating the number of Russian memoirs, generals' memoirs particularly, which are written almost as pure dialogue when you know perfectly well that they had no record of that. On the other hand, if you have, say, Marshal Zhukov, who has just had a conversation with Stalin, you've got a pretty good idea that he probably noted it down immediately afterwards because he needed to be sure of what was said at a particular moment. So there is not a hard and fast rule, but at the same time the contemporary material or diary material is actually the most important of the lot. Letters you have to be slightly more careful about; it's not that they are dishonest, but soldiers at the front in most cases are wanting to spare their families from suffering, and so as a result it's a self-censored account, but there should still be enough detail there to give you a pretty good idea.

Whereas a diary is more truthful, and that's why they were very useful for *Berlin*, for example. Most of the postal system had collapsed, but people living through this particular moment of history, knowing that this was the downfall of the Nazi regime, kept very careful accounts – above all women – and there is that superb diary, *A Woman In Berlin* by Marta Hillers. I think it's one of the most striking diaries I've ever read about warfare or the experiences of civilians in those circumstances.

EW: Since we're sitting here in this splendid library, it seems a good place to talk about your use of archives and libraries. How does one say new things when new material appears; for instance, you published a revised edition of your book about the Spanish Civil War, and in the case of your D-Day book, the story has been told many times before ...



Antony Beevor's *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (2009).

AB: Yes, there's the Stendhal remark that the history of Napoleon needs to be rewritten every six years, which I think is slightly exaggerated, but no book is ever going to be definitive, and I think certainly at this particular distance in time from D-Day, you will always be finding new material. There's been a huge amount of it over the last few years, and some has been made available, not so much through official documents having been opened, but because people before they died who were there at the time leave their diaries or letters to particular museums or archives, or after they have died their families hand them over, not knowing what to do with them, particularly in France – in the *Mémorial de Caen*. Obviously there are the provincial archives – the archives départementales – but I think the most important thing in a way is to look for the material that has been overlooked. I think that it is the accumulation of detail from all these different archives that is vital, and it's the way that you can create the mosaic through this particular collection of detail. To give an example about contemporary material – which I think is important – the United States army had an extremely far-sighted programme [during the Second World War] of employing combat historians. These were usually young historians, sometimes very young professors like Sergeant Forrest Pogue, who literally went straight in and interviewed the soldiers and officers as they came out of battle, so you had there a completely different version of events to what they may have said in interviews for oral history, 50 or 60 years after the event. One of the problems about oral history is that, although people are not in any way being dishonest – far from it – and they are not necessarily forgetting things, their memories have been filtered through what they've read about a particular battle. And it's very easy to convince yourself – yes, I saw that, or I must have been there or whatever – because memory shifts and that's why those combat interviews and contemporary diaries and other sources are so important.

EW: Your books about history have certainly caused trouble, fuss, in the present in different situations – I think particularly your book about Berlin. Can you talk a little about this – again, because I think it's looking at history from different viewpoints.

AB: Well, that's certainly true. Obviously one never sets out – or should never set out – to be controversial, and I didn't realise that *Berlin* was going to be controversial until I started coming across the material in the Russian archives while researching the book, and this is the important thing – that most of the accounts of the mass rapes and all the rest of it were actually in the Russian archives – it wasn't just from German research and German accounts. And maybe this is one of the reasons why it angered the Russians so much – I don't know, but anyway the point was that they were absolutely furious. Funnily enough when *Stalingrad* was published in Russia in 1999, apart from one or two old Stalinist historians who were unhappy, the actual veterans – the Stalingrad Veterans' Association and the rest – welcomed the book very warmly indeed, much more than I'd dared hope. So that, I thought, was very encouraging, but I guess that I knew the *Berlin* book was going to be a rocky ride, although I hadn't expected it to be quite so explosive. Unfortunately what happened was that in January 2002 – five or six months before publication – I did an interview with *The Bookseller*. And you always think, well, who reads *The Bookseller* apart from booksellers; but unfortunately journalists do too. The *Telegraph*

rather naughtily decided to do a two-page splash, extrapolating from just one or two things that I'd said in that particular article and bringing in a bit of their own research and a lot of speculation. Anyway, all hell broke loose and the Russian ambassador accused me of lies, slander and blasphemy against the Red Army and more. I then wrote to him to try and calm things down, because the last thing that one wanted was a media storm at that particular point. To my astonishment, I got an invitation to lunch from the Russian ambassador – just the two of us – a vodka lunch, and this was on a Friday so needless to say I had a pint of full-cream milk before we started. Anyway, it was very strange, as his attitude at that particular stage was to say, 'Oh, well, the Russian attitude to the war is going to change as the veterans die off and the people won't be quite so sensitive about it and so forth'. I made a big mistake by referring to Russia's financial problems and saying that rather as Germany was able to face up to its own past after their economic miracle, it would be much easier for Russia when their economy took off. But the comparison with Germany was not popular, as I should have realised. It was a slight diplomatic faux pas to say the least.

EW: Can we talk about the way things are for younger writers today, and the fact that historians are now turning to writing historical fiction. What do you think historical fiction has to offer history, and vice versa?

AB: Well there are one or two extraordinary exceptions where historical fiction can offer a huge amount. For example the Jonathan Littell book, *The Kindly Ones* [2009], which had this huge effect in France and won the Prix Goncourt, is a very important publication, not just as a superb work of literature, but also as a very significant work from a historical point of view. This novel takes on the guise of the defiant confession of an SS officer involved in the Final Solution, with Littell, who is Jewish, putting himself entirely into the mind of this SS officer. Now this approach, I think, can add another valuable aspect, because he can enter areas where historians cannot dare to tread because there simply is not the evidence nor the material there for them to use in a reliable fashion. Obviously one knows it's a novel; it is not fact. There are some real characters who appear in it – including Himmler and Speer – in walk-on parts, but that does not in any way make it fact.

I think that the curse and the danger today is fact, and especially cinematic fact, where you get Hollywood trying to convince everybody – and this is particularly dangerous in an era of historical ignorance – that what they're about to see is absolutely true, by shooting a date up on the screen with a place name. And while feature movies pretend to be based on a true story, which is sometimes well done as in the case of the film *Downfall* [2004] in Germany, they are moving slightly towards the documentary area. At the same time you get the documentary film-makers trying to move – purely for commercial reasons – into the feature-movie area with computer-generated imagery, dramatic reconstructions and all the rest of it. And this does worry me – that very grey area of fact – because people don't have a clue what's true and what's not.

This is an extract. Antony Beevor's latest book, D-Day: The Battle for Normandy, is published in hardback by Penguin Books.