



2014-096

Nicholas Best, *Five Days That Shocked the World: Eyewitness Accounts from Europe at the End of World War II*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2012. Pp. xiv, 369. ISBN 978-0-312-61492-8.

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Evaluating a quirky book that features scandal and gossip in a historical framework requires readers to sort several strong reactions. Juicy tidbits poured from the mouths, later the pens, of some of the famous and notorious who were active from 28 April to 2 May 1945 and survived to tell an often self-serving tale. Nicholas Best, a British journalist and fiction critic, has chopped up and then bricolaged the narratives of the then famous and later famous (Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, Otto Frank and Audrey Hepburn). He purveys the anecdotal of the collapsing and collapsed limbs of the Third Reich.

The events in the book propel the reader from one horrifying scene to another—mass rape in Berlin by the Soviets, liberation of those imprisoned, tortured bodies still alive at Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, maudlin moments amid suicides and infanticides in Hitler's Berlin bunker. Cheerful scenes such as the liberation of Italian towns or Operation Manna, the food drop over the starving Netherlands (chapter 8), occasionally lighten a mood of apocalyptic doom evocative of Bosch and Breughel. The text mixes well known and little known facts, but offers no revelations, no explanations of military strategy on any side, no social or political analysis, and only naive, feeble, or pro forma condemnations of German atrocities. Best seldom questions the memory, motives, or veracity of sources.

Despite its admirable emphasis on autopsy, the book often disappoints by merely paraphrasing the recorded, eyewitness observations of generals and secretaries and starving concentration camp inmates. Obviously, Best did not have the immediate postwar opportunities to interrogate his subjects that, for example, Cornelius Ryan energetically pursued. Moreover, his compulsive excerpting and crosscutting tends to simplify and flatten the personalities of his characters; complicated first-person histories congest his third-person prose. Actual quotations (set in italics) are far fewer than one would expect or like. Characterization of the unknown witnesses is jejune or absent and we get little beyond clichés about the “big shots”—Winston Churchill puffing on his cigar, George Patton sporting silver-handled pistols, Hitler maundering in self-delusions. American military commanders receive little space, presumably for lack of salacious details, like the sex and drinking going on in the non-smoker Hitler's bunker. Best's allusions to unexpected sexual possibilities found in the chair of the Führer's SS dentist, Dr. Helmut Kunz, are both lurid and unedifying (183–84). Another source, the memoir of Traudl Junge, Hitler's last secretary (1942–45),¹ also provided narrative segments of a recent sensational film.² Junge was never prosecuted; rather, many interviewers wanted to shake the hand that had shaken Hitler's (327)! Her cigarette break gets more attention (146) than US-Soviet arrangements for dividing Berlin. We learn, too, that the American reporter Lee Miller lifted Eva Braun's douche bag from her Munich suite, and female movie stars or their lingerie recur with fetishistic regularity.

Like its text, the volume's sixteen photographs make up a curious mélange of the bizarre and the unnerving: news reporter Miller in Hitler's bath; Mussolini's much battered, spat- and pissed-upon corpse; a rope-wearing Arthur Seyss-Inquart, an Austrian and Reichskommissar viciously active in Poland and the Netherlands and later hanged at Nuremberg; American GIs executing SS guards at Dachau. Best cites only books published in English, though some are translations from Russian, German, Dutch, and Italian originals; strangely, he makes almost no use of contemporary newspapers, witnesses' war recordings, or newsreels.

1. *Until the Final Hour*, ed. Melissa Müller, trans. Anthea Bell (NY: Arcade Publ., 2004).

2. *Downfall* (2004), dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel.

As each midnight approaches, we move on to a new day of the titular five. Best might better have reduced his twenty-six chapters to one per day. A typical chapter, the fourteenth, “Italy,” has the following subdivisions: “The surrender terms reach Bolzano; chaos at Wehrmacht HQ; Austria’s chancellor almost free; Venice ungrateful to the Allies; Mussolini’s body examined for syphilis; Rachele Mussolini fears execution” (but survived).

Early in the book (53–55), Best reports that Ezra Pound was understandably nervous about the approach of the American Army after his pro-Fascist broadcasts against the Jews, the United States, etc. But, rather than learning how his arrest came about, we get a bare mention, in a patchy epilogue tying up loose ends, of the poet’s American treason trial, which resulted in a verdict of insanity and twelve years of psychiatric imprisonment. Thirty-seven other bit players make appearances in this epilogue, including Mussolini’s wife, Rachele; Sophia Loren; Hitler’s cook; his rocket-scientist, the clever Wernher von Braun,³ and a severely wounded Bob Dole. Vidkun Quisling, the puppet governor of Norway, was not afraid once his Nazi puppeteers had retreated, but we do not learn of his capture and execution until the epilogue (133, 325). Henry Kissinger, in 1938 a young Jewish refugee from Fürth near Nuremberg, was at war’s end serving in the US Army and took command of the town of Krefeld (171)—a noteworthy instance of upward mobility in the Thousand-Year Reich that had rejected him.

Having consulted many biographical and autobiographical volumes to trace the actions of his subjects as the war hurtled to a close from the Rhine to the Alps to the Baltic, Best discloses where the Nazi-loving conductors Herbert von Karajan and Wilhelm Furtwängler escaped to (284–86); that Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, who killed nearly ten thousand per day at one time, feared “persecution” (269); and that it was Martin Bormann’s mother who disposed of the family’s deluxe edition of *Mein Kampf*, printed on human skin (304).

Gen. Hans Krebs, who knew Russian, tried to negotiate surrender with Gen. Vasily Chuikov, but the Soviets had no interest in anything but unconditional surrender; some diehard Germans were shooting at compatriots rational enough to negotiate. Gen. Alfred Jodl had no better success in seeking favorable terms from the western Allies, to his surprise (319). Joseph Goebbels⁴ had no use for Karl Dönitz and vice versa; neither wanted anything to do with the disappointed Heinrich Himmler, who, passed over by Hitler for his successor, was now trying to get Dönitz’s attention; Gen. Wilhelm Keitel was despised by all active military men. The dawdling Albert Speer lacked authority and there was no place for the “posturing ninny” (215) Joachim von Ribbentrop. Admiral Dönitz had not wanted the Führer’s power and knew neither why Hitler had bestowed it on him nor what use to make of that hollow bequest. Even straightforward surrender was complicated by the multiple centers of power in the Nazi political hierarchy. Meanwhile, Josef Stalin reviewed the troops in Red Square on May Day, once the radio announced Hitler’s death. The search for his remains had only just begun.

A dustjacket blurb claims that “the author reaffirms [*sic*] his reputation as an expert on the final days of great wars,” alluding to his previous volume on the end of World War I, *The Greatest Day in History*,⁵ a book structured like the one under review, but limited to a single day. Unlike books on the end of the Second World War by, for example, Cornelius Ryan,⁶ Martin Gilbert,⁷ and Antony Beevor,⁸ *Five Days That Shocked the*

3. I cannot fathom Best’s worst statement (235, without documentation) that SS Major von Braun “wanted to deliver his entire team to the United States to ensure that their expertise was safely preserved for the benefit of all mankind.” This may have originated in one of the fawning biographies produced after von Braun resurfaced in the American military and space rocket programs. Best does not connect him to the murderous exploitation of slave laborers at the Peenemünde research center. In a similarly exculpatory comment, he observes that Josef Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), drafted into the Wehrmacht, “lived only for getting back to the seminary and catching up on his Latin and Greek” (236).

4. Best uses the spelling Göbbels throughout the book, but the Nazi propaganda minister himself always used *oe* rather than *o*-umlaut, as have nearly all historians.

5. Subtitle: *How, on the Eleventh Hour of the Eleventh Day of the Eleventh Month, the First World War Finally Came to an End* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2008).

6. *The Last Battle* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1966).

7. *The Day the War Ended: May 8, 1945—Victory in Europe* (NY: Holt, 1995).

8. *The Fall of Berlin, 1945* (NY: Viking, 2002).

World is not a work of original scholarship or even library scholarship. Its slim virtue arises from the author's fixation on the whereabouts and actions of his famous and infamous subjects as the war wound down: on Day 1 (28 April), Mussolini is caught on the run and shot, while Hitler issues an order to stand firm because the tide of war will turn his way within twenty-four hours (13). Himmler offers the Allies peace terms that he cannot deliver on, while Speer and Dönitz abscond to Plön, north of Hamburg, near Kiel, the sea, and neutral Sweden. Hermann Göring is under SS arrest for treason in Berchtesgaden, while Rudolf Hess, imprisoned in a Wales asylum, knows that the Germans cannot win the war because "specially trained Jews [had] hypnotize[d] the Germans and prevent[ed] them from defending the bridge" (35) over the Rhine at Remagen.

The Belsen chapter usefully reminds contemporary readers that mayors of German towns were not alone in denying any knowledge of the systematic torture, murder, and rape happening down the road—audiences in Britain disbelieved the eyewitness reports of such horrors by their own BBC war correspondent, Richard Dimbleby. The stolid citizenry feared it was just more British propaganda about German atrocities! (Shades of World War I.) The BBC censored what seemed, and should have been, beyond credibility (xii, 76). At Dachau, an American infantry push anticipated an SS-planned mass execution of starving prisoners (99). But even dead men told tales to the appalled men of the US Thunderbird division, who consequently, and quite illegally, shot some SS personnel left behind by their guiltier, fleeing comrades. Some prisoners, exhilarated by unexpected liberation, were accidentally electrocuted on a still charged fence; others died after well-meaning rescuers overfed them while they were in a precarious state of inanition. The guards at Ravensbruck were killing high-profile prisoners, often clubbing them to death or throwing them alive into crematoria to save bullets (155). Oskar Schindler's life-saving activities for his Jews, allegedly employed in constructing "secret weapons," get a brief but welcome mention amid the carnage.

Further summary of this fast-paced anecdotal compilation would be pointless, but some stories were certainly new to me, though they hardly count as revisionist research: Himmler believed in astrology (59); Eva Braun suffered from chronic severe menstrual problems (233); Soviet troops happily raped not only German girls, mothers, and grandmothers, but Jewish-German communist women who had awaited liberation in hiding for up to twelve years (72)—the wording of Best's statement that they "had initially welcomed the Soviets with open arms" is regrettable.

Readers will sorely miss any maps to assist them as they plunge through Berlin, or along the highways of Central Europe, or (in chapter 14) across the mountains of Switzerland and northern Italy with two German officers seeking approval for the surrender of the southern German armies to the western Allies.

One final tidbit from the epilogue is emblematic of Best's priorities throughout the book: "Else Krüger, Martin Bormann's secretary ... fell in love with her British interrogator. They married in 1947" (327). What more do you need to know about the end of World War II?