

Book Reviews

The Second World War

By Anthony Beevor

Reviewed by Group Captain (Ret'd) Ian Shields

Introduction

Anyone attempting to capture the sweep, complexity and scale of the Second World War in a single volume has set themselves a considerable challenge. Anthony Beevor, one of the country's best known popular historians, has attempted this in a mammoth book of some 850 pages, and to a large extent succeeds. The great strength of this book is its very scope: by adopting a strict temporal construction and therefore looking at events all around the world in chronological rather than regional order, he demonstrates why World War Two was a truly global conflict. This enables the reader to understand the inter-connection between events in the Pacific with those of the Mediterranean, between Normandy and the Eastern Front. This grand sweep, moreover, highlights the complexities of the political facet of the War and while it cannot go into any great depth of the relationship between the various leaders (indeed, rarely goes into any depth in considering any aspect of the fighting) it does bring together all the various aspects of the Second World War, highlighting its very range and impact.

But this breadth has also to be a limitation, for to tackle the entire Second World War in a single book must mean that some aspects of the conflict receive only scant or no attention, and those seeking deeper insights will be frustrated. There are extensive notes, although these serve more to demonstrate the range of research rather than to point the reader towards other texts and a bibliography would have been useful for those seeking to follow-up certain angles. Then there is the issue of balance: again, in such a bold enterprise there will be many

left unsatisfied with the choice of emphasis, and here there is a justifiable criticism of Beevor for the book does show distinct biases. First, there is little reference at all to the Air war and the critical analysis of the Combined Bomber Offensive comes across as unbalanced and hackneyed. Likewise, the Naval war, while receiving more attention than the Air war, is arguably under-represented: a quick scan of the extensive Index will reveal an overwhelming bias towards the Land campaigns. While it could be argued that that was because the Second World War was primarily a Land war, it also reveals Beevor's own bias as a Land Warfare historian. Moreover, those areas on which he has already worked, in particular Stalingrad, receive extensive coverage: while few could argue that Stalingrad was a, if not the, pivotal event of the European campaign, the coverage it receives is somewhat disproportionate.

All of which sounds somewhat negative, but there is also much to commend in this book that has, rightly, received some high praise. Its coverage of the war in China, which receives little coverage in Western histories of the Second World War, is excellent and highlights the global and inter-connected dimension of the entire War. Bringing together so many themes and capturing the scale of the conflict and the human misery it created in just 850 pages is an immense achievement. This book deserves a place on your bookshelf exactly because it does cover most aspects of a long and lethal War in a single, well-written and informative book. It is highly unlikely that you will finish this book without having learnt something new; as a summary of the Second World War it is an excellent primer and a good stepping-off point for further reading.

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