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# Introduction

Special Issue in Tribute to Sir Martin Gilbert

## Abstract

This special issue of the S:I.M.O.N. Journal, dedicated to the memory of Sir Martin Gilbert, examines the intersection of the Second World War and the Holocaust – two pivotal events that shaped modern history but, quite surprisingly, were long studied as separate and disconnected phenomena. Inspired by an international conference organised by Western Galilee College in March 2024, this collection explores interconnected narratives of military strategy, genocidal policies, and resistance. Topics include Winston Churchill's complex relationship with Zionism, the controversial question of bombing Auschwitz, British responses to the Holocaust, and the ideological and genocidal dimensions of Nazi policies. The issue also delves into the experiences of children during the Holocaust, Wehrmacht operations, and Jewish resistance in Belarus. By bridging military and Holocaust studies, this volume underscores Sir Martin Gilbert's legacy and his pioneering approach to integrating Jewish history into broader historical narratives. Through this collection, the issue seeks to deepen understanding and inspire further exploration of the intertwined histories of war and genocide.

The interconnected histories of the Second World War and the Holocaust have increasingly garnered scholarly attention in recent decades. For too long, these pivotal events were examined in isolation, treated as separate spheres of academic inquiry. However, as Sir Martin Gilbert – one of the most prolific and respected historians of the twentieth century, the official biographer of Winston Churchill, and the creator of numerous historical atlases – demonstrated in his pioneering works, the intersection of these two histories offers insights into the ideologies, decisions, and consequences that shaped the modern world.<sup>1</sup> This special issue of *S:I.M.O.N.* is dedicated to the memory of Sir Martin Gilbert and his enduring contributions to Holocaust and Second World War studies.

This project has its roots in an international conference hosted by the Holocaust Studies Program at Western Galilee College in Akko, Israel, in March 2024. Scholars from around the world gathered to discuss and debate the intertwined narratives of the Second World War and the Holocaust, inspired by Gilbert's legacy. Considering the fact the conference took place in the shadow of the October 7 massacre and the Iron Swords War that followed, this event became more relevant than ever. What began as a vibrant exchange of ideas has now evolved into this special issue, which brings together a series of specially written articles that collectively explore the connections between military history, genocidal policies, resistance, and the lived experiences of those who endured and resisted the horrors of war and genocide.

The issue opens with Lady Esther Gilbert's reflection on her late husband's methodology and legacy. Drawing on Sir Martin's extensive body of work, she highlights his unique ability to weave the Jewish experience into broader historical narra-

1 Martin Gilbert, *The Official Biography of Winston S. Churchill*, vols. 3–8 (London: Heinemann, 1971–1988).

tives, ensuring that the voices of victims and survivors were never lost amid the grand strategies of war. Her essay sets the tone for the issue, emphasising the moral imperative of integrating Holocaust history into the study of the Second World War.

The contributions that follow examine the diplomatic and strategic challenges faced by world leaders during the war. Allan Packwood – drawing on his role as director of the Churchill Archives Centre at the University of Cambridge and his personal connection with Sir Martin Gilbert – delves into Winston Churchill’s evolving relationship with Zionism and the Jewish people. Packwood’s detailed analysis reveals Churchill’s ideological alignment with Jewish self-determination, set against the backdrop of British imperial constraints, and offers a nuanced view of his statesmanship and personal convictions.

Building on this exploration of wartime diplomacy, Glen Segell examines the role of Polish intelligence and its interaction with Allied decision-making. His work highlights the controversial question of why Auschwitz was not bombed – an issue tangentially addressed by Martin Gilbert in his groundbreaking work, *Auschwitz and the Allies*<sup>2</sup> – and sheds light on the diplomatic and logistical barriers that contributed to missed opportunities to save lives. Segell’s analysis provides critical insights into the complex interplay of intelligence, military strategy, and moral responsibility during the war.

Yaacov Falkov’s study brings a nuanced perspective to the geopolitical tensions of the time, exploring the fraught relations between Britain, Poland, and Germany during the early years of the conflict. Using newly uncovered archival materials, Falkov highlights the moral and strategic compromises that characterised wartime alliances and reveals the delicate balancing act of realpolitik in an era of existential threats.

Yaron Pasher shifts the focus to Britain’s strategic priorities, critically examining its responses to the Holocaust in the context of broader wartime objectives. Pasher’s exploration of the Evian Conference, the White Paper of 1939, and the Allied Joint Declaration of 1942, with an emphasis on the Casablanca Conference resolutions on “unconditional surrender”, illustrates the tensions between strategic imperatives and humanitarian obligations, revealing the complexities of British policy during the war.

From the focus on policy, diplomacy, and strategy, the collection moves to the ideological and genocidal dimensions of the Holocaust. Miriam Offer’s meticulous investigation into the anti-childbirth decrees in the Lithuanian ghettos uncovers one of the most harrowing aspects of the Nazi genocidal agenda. Her work contextualises these decrees within the broader framework of Nazi policies aimed at eradicating Jewish life at its inception, offering a sobering insight into the extremes of ideological warfare.

Boaz Cohen’s contribution centres on the systematic targeting of Jewish children as a distinct and deliberate aspect of the Holocaust. Through a detailed examination of bureaucratic and logistical measures, Cohen argues for the recognition of a specific “war against the Jewish child”, underscoring the genocidal intent and the organised nature of these atrocities.

Verena Buser brings a human dimension to these narratives by exploring the experiences of children who survived the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Her work draws on oral histories to reveal how children adapted to the extreme conditions of the camp, often forming networks of solidarity and resilience. Buser’s analy-

2 Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt, 1981).

sis highlights the psychological and social mechanisms that enabled survival in one of the Holocaust's most infamous sites.

Agilolf Kesselring broadens the scope with an in-depth analysis of Wehrmacht operations in Yugoslavia and Karelia. His work explores the nexus between anti-partisan warfare and genocidal policies, demonstrating how military operations often served as a pretext for mass atrocities. By examining the contrasting behaviours of the same military unit in different contexts, Kesselring provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of ideology, strategy, and circumstance.

Finally, Daniela Ozacky-Stern turns to the narratives of resistance, focusing on the transformation of Jewish victims into active fighters in the forests of Belarus. Through survivor testimonies, she examines the psychological shift from victimhood to empowerment, the challenges of integration into partisan units, and the moral dilemmas faced by those who chose to fight. Her work underscores the resilience and agency of individuals who, against all odds, took up arms to resist their oppressors.

This special issue underscores the importance of bridging military history and Holocaust studies to achieve a fuller understanding of both fields. By examining the intersections of ideology, strategy, and human experience, the articles collectively challenge traditional boundaries between these disciplines.

Sir Martin Gilbert's work serves as a guiding light for this endeavour. Much like the work of his contemporaries, such as Gerhard L. Weinberg, his dedication to integrating Jewish history into the broader narrative of the Second World War has inspired a new generation of scholars to pursue interdisciplinary approaches that honour the complexity of the past. This special issue stands as a testament to Sir Martin's vision and as a call to further explore the interconnected histories of war and genocide.

We hope that the contributions in this issue not only deepen our understanding of the Second World War and the Holocaust but also inspire future research that continues to break down disciplinary boundaries and prioritise the human stories at the heart of history.

Quotation: Yaron Pasher, Verena Buser, Boaz Cohen, Introduction, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 12 (2025) 1, 4–6.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0125/cont\\_pbce01](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0125/cont_pbce01)

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S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 12 (2025) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0125>

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