

Esther Gilbert

# Martin Gilbert – History and the Jews, the Second World War and the Holocaust

<https://www.martingilbert.com/>

## Abstract

This article explores the methodology and contributions of Sir Martin Gilbert, one of the few historians of the twentieth century to integrate the Jewish experience into the broader historical narratives of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Gilbert's unique approach, characterised by meticulous research, the extensive use of primary documents, and personal testimonies, sought to highlight the intertwined fates of Jews and the nations embroiled in the war. His work emphasised that the Jewish story, often sidelined in traditional war histories, is an integral part of the larger narrative.

Through examples drawn from Gilbert's seminal works, including *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* and *The Second World War: A Complete History*, this study examines how he documented the plight of European Jewry alongside the strategic and political challenges faced by leaders like Winston Churchill. Key topics include Gilbert's mapping of synagogue destruction during Kristallnacht, Britain's Kindertransport initiative, Churchill's resistance to anti-Jewish immigration policies, and the Allied Declaration of December 1942.

As Lady Esther Gilbert reflects, Martin Gilbert's portrayal of Jewish resistance and defiance, such as Adolf Liebeskind's doomed attack on German forces in Cracow, ensures that these acts are remembered as more than just "three lines in the history books". By weaving the Jewish experience into the broader context of global conflict, Gilbert reshaped historical discourse, ensuring that the Holocaust was understood not as a separate tragedy, but as a fundamental part of the twentieth-century story.

One of the defining moments of the twentieth century was the Second World War, the reverberations of which resonate well into the twenty-first century, affecting the future, a direct result of the past. The attempt to obliterate the Jews of Europe, their religion, culture, language – their very existence – was intimately bound up with the German attempt to create a new world order based on Nazi ideology. In fact, the Nazi world view could not survive in a world in which Jews lived, as their visions were so diametrically opposed. Yet, most scholarship focuses either on aspects of the war, or on aspects of the Jewish story during the war, such as the Holocaust. To Sir Martin Gilbert, the history of the Jews of Europe during this time is rightfully woven into the general history of the war.

Why did Sir Martin do that? How did he do it, and how does he bring his readers along with him? I believed that Jews were a part of general history and I wanted to learn more. I became one of the many readers of his books.

During the fifty years of his working life, Martin wrote eighty-eight books, among them six of the eight volumes of the official biography of Winston Churchill, and

twelve volumes of documents, with the eleven additional volumes based on his research and methodology. It is called the “official” biography because Martin spent more than twenty years going through fifteen tons of Churchill-related documents, and he created the largest biography ever written.

All that page-turning taught Martin how he wanted to write history – by basing his work on the documents, and then giving a perspective, a flavour for Churchill’s life by quoting those who knew Churchill, those who worked with him, and those who worked against him. This method of using personal testimony – personal perspective – to give a human voice to the documents became Martin’s approach in all of his work. This is most powerful in his writings about the Holocaust, in which Jewish accounts, both contemporary and post-war, give us a window into the dire situation facing Jews at every turn.

Martin wrote three books on the Second World War, and eleven books on different aspects of the Holocaust, from *Kristallnacht* to *Final Journey*. But it was one of his correspondents who made me aware of how Martin viewed the Jewish story and its place in the wide expanse of history.

Martin answered all his correspondence, and when he became ill in 2012 it was left to me to take that on, if only to explain that Sir Martin had been taken ill and could not answer any of the various questions posed to him. One of the letters was from a gentleman in Greece who had read Sir Martin’s *The Second World War: A Complete History* and wondered why it contained so much about Jews.

My first reaction was that this gentleman must not particularly like Jews and did not like their appearance in a book about the history of the war. So, the letter went to the bottom of the pile. But eventually it surfaced again and I felt I had to answer it. This is what I wrote:

[i]n Sir Martin’s writing, he has always tried to weave in the stories of each country and the plight of the common man, whether as soldier, or civilian. From a humanitarian and an economic point of view, the story of the Jews of Europe is an integral part of the history of the war, because Jews lived in each of the countries involved.

It made me realise how Martin has woven the Jewish story into all of his books. And, indeed, his itemised index of his *The Second World War* shows 336 entries for Jews – in a book of 750 pages of text. In what other history of the war does the specific Jewish experience have such a significant presence?

Martin was British and having followed Churchill’s life on practically a day-by-day basis, and having gone through the archives, especially those from Churchill’s time in government, Martin had a grasp of the realities of war from the British perspective in particular, which he had researched so thoroughly. I would like to touch on three areas that he has written about or shown in his maps.

In Martin’s book *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction*, he mapped the towns and cities where synagogues were destroyed: it covers thirteen maps. In his research and map drawing, he found that it was every synagogue in Germany and Austria that was destroyed.

Martin describes the pogrom itself, the lead up to it, and the aftermath. Britain took in more than 40,000 Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria before the war. Most had needed skills or job opportunities in Britain. But the international outcry when the news of *Kristallnacht* reached Britain led to an extraordinary event. Martin writes:

[o]n December 14 ... Neville Chamberlain’s Cabinet decided to allow a continuing influx of German Jewish children to enter Britain. The only provi-

sion was that the Jewish refugee organisations in Britain would guarantee to maintain them.<sup>1</sup> But then: A snag had arisen. According to British law, children could not be scattered in private homes all over the country unless each of them had a legal guardian. To ensure legality, Parliament passed the Guardianship (Refuge Children) Act in record time.

And Martin observes: “[n]o other country made such an effort to take in Jewish children as Britain”.<sup>2</sup>

It was only at the onset of war when the borders were sealed that the Kindertransport scheme had to stop. Still, nearly 10,000 children had come to Britain to safety. This evacuation of children from Germany and Austria was something Martin could empathise with. He was himself evacuated four times from his home in London, as were many British children and their families to be safe from German bombing and due to the fear of German invasion. Martin’s farthest evacuation was to Canada, where he spent four years in Toronto, having left as a three-year-old, without his parents, never sure if he would return or whether his family – and his country – would be intact when he did.

These were very real fears for Britain’s survival. From May 1940, when the Germans crushed France, until June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet-occupied lands, Britain fought alone. Churchill was able to negotiate help from Roosevelt, and by the end of September 1941 the Arctic convoys began with supplies diverted to the Soviet Union.

These materials sent to the Soviet Union ate into both Britain and America’s essential war needs and nearly starved Britain of much-needed supplies. Yet, despite many ships being lost by German sinkings, the materials kept the Soviet Union in the war. Britain had been unprepared, a country eviscerated by the First World War, a country that could not contemplate another disaster such as that.

In a 1993 speech which Martin gave at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Churchill and the Holocaust, which was later published, he described the harsh realities Churchill faced during this time when Britain fought alone:

Churchill did understand, in October-November 1940, that if the intense bombing of Britain continued to be as effective as it was then, the public might call for an administration which would demand peace with Hitler almost at the price of annihilation. It was always possible that the bombing would be too severe; that the way forward would not be clear; as he explained on one occasion to President Roosevelt, this could happen:

“Although the present Government and I personally would never fail to send the Fleet across the Atlantic if resistance was beaten down here, a point may be reached in the struggle where the present Ministers no longer have control of affairs and when very easy terms could be obtained for the British Island by their becoming a vassal state of the Hitler Empire. A pro-German Government would certainly be called into being to make peace, and might present to a shattered or a starving nation an almost irresistible case for entire submission to the Nazi will.”<sup>3</sup>

It was not only the Germans who were making life difficult for Churchill. In the same speech, Martin described what Churchill was up against in his hope to alleviate

1 Martin Gilbert, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 186.

2 *Ibid.*, 187.

3 Martin Gilbert, “Churchill and the Holocaust: the Possible and the Impossible”, in *Proceedings of the International Churchill Societies, 1992–1993*, ed. Richard M. Langworth (Concord, NH: International Churchill Society, 1995), 47.

the situation for the Jews of Europe while he had been First Lord of the Admiralty when war broke out in 1939:

Churchill was under the determination of the Conservative Government, of which he had become a part, not to alter any of the legislative acts which that government – which had an enormous parliamentary majority ... had passed before the outbreak of war, in particular with relation to Palestine, the Jewish refuge. It was pointed out to him, correctly from a constitutional point of view, that he was not the leader of the Conservative Party – this position was still held by Neville Chamberlain – and that he had not been brought to power by Conservative desire, but by the Labour Party's refusal to serve under Chamberlain. The Conservatives had their legislation, it had been voted, it was in place, and his duty was to conduct the war, not to carry out a retrospective, even a vindictive, attitude towards the policies he, as a maverick, as an outsider, had opposed.<sup>4</sup>

Among the attitudes Churchill had opposed was that of trying to appease Arab opinion by severely limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Martin writes:

Churchill challenged these attitudes. He did so to the increasing annoyance of his colleagues and, while he remained at the Admiralty, in vain. "It seems to me", he told the Cabinet on Christmas Day 1939, "that with the world in flux and the life of every European nation and of Britain hanging in the balance, we ought not to say that the sole fixed immutable fact in the world is that Jewish immigration into Palestine must cease".<sup>5</sup>

Even as Prime Minister, Churchill faced a bureaucratic impasse, as Martin describes it: Britain was ruled, in war as in peace, by a vast bureaucratic apparatus ... the civil servants met together and came, after long deliberations which survive in their archives, to the conclusion that the question of Jewish refugees was not a political, but an administrative one, since the political decision to exclude the Jews had already been taken. Therefore, all that remained to be done was to carry it out administratively. This meant that it need not be the subject of memoranda and reports to politicians. In that way they could get on with it on their own, and no one in the Cabinet need know about it.<sup>6</sup>

In example after example, Martin found requests for help for Jews which never made it to Churchill's desk. However, Churchill was successful in ensuring that any Jew who reached Istanbul would be admitted to Palestine. By 1944, more than 6,000 Jews were able to reach safety with British passports, each passport containing hundreds of Jews listed.

Churchill had challenges not only with the British government but with Britain's allies. He was, however, able to stand his ground with the Allied War Declaration of 17 December 1942. Martin describes Churchill's success:

[i]n the course of my researches, I found that many members of the British government and the United States administration sought to water down this declaration about the nature of the crimes being committed. ... Churchill was emphatic that this should not be a declaration of what was thought to be happening or what might be happening, which is what the State Department wanted to say, but what was actually happening: "this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination" was the phrase used.<sup>7</sup>

4 Ibid., 44.

5 Ibid., 45.

6 Ibid., 45–46.

7 Ibid., 53–54.

An act of partisan defiance against the “cold-blooded extermination” took place five days later in Cracow. In his *The Second World War*, Martin describes the event, sandwiching it between the fighting in the Caucasus in early December, and the German Field Marshal von Paulus having run out of fuel outside of Stalingrad on 23 December and thus unable to relieve his “besieged Sixth Army”. Martin writes:

[o]n December 22<sup>nd</sup>, an act of defiance was carried out in the very centre of German-occupied Europe, in the Polish city of Cracow, where six members of the Jewish Fighting Organisation, which had been set up in Poland five months earlier, attacked a cafe frequented by the SS and the Gestapo. Armed only with pistols, their attack was doomed to fail. The aim of the attack, one of them later wrote, was “to save what could be saved, at least of honour”. Their leader, Adolf Liebeskind, was killed by German machine-gun fire. “We are fighting”, he had remarked a few weeks before the attack, “for three lines in the history books”.<sup>8</sup>

Martin told me that whenever he wrote about Liebeskind, he always made sure to give him at least four lines.

These are three of the many aspects of Martin’s work: what he reported and why he understood its importance having himself experienced the tides of history; the chronology and context of what was going on in the background when decisions were taken and acted upon that Churchill had to face; and how, in his quiet and subtle way, Martin Gilbert wrote History, giving the Jewish story the voice, the space to be the integral part that it is.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 388.

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**Lady Esther Gilbert** is the wife of the late Sir Martin Gilbert. She worked closely with him, travelling to numerous Holocaust and Second World War sites, including Volhynia in Ukraine, where her parents were born and her grandparents were killed. Since Sir Martin's passing, she has dedicated herself to preserving his legacy, ensuring that his books remain accessible to those interested in what he called "true history".

Recently, Lady Gilbert has overseen the publication of new editions of *Atlas of the Holocaust* and *Atlas of Jewish History*, integrating maps from Sir Martin's other works. She also maintains his website, [martingilbert.com](http://martingilbert.com), and writes monthly newsletters highlighting his contributions to history.

As a second-generation Holocaust survivor, Lady Gilbert has long been committed to Holocaust remembrance, a passion she has pursued since the 1980s. In the early 2000s, she created the *Holocaust Memoir Digest*, a project that uses quotations from published survivor memoirs to explore various aspects of the Shoah. To date, three volumes of the *Digest*, covering twenty-one memoirs, have been published.

Email: [esthergilbert36@gmail.com](mailto:esthergilbert36@gmail.com)

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