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The Second World War A Complete History

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Introduction: A Monumental Work on the Most Defining Conflict of the Twentieth Century

Few historians have dedicated their lives to the study of war with the same depth, precision, and humanity as Sir Martin Gilbert. Among his many acclaimed works, **The Second World War: A Complete History** stands as a towering achievement. Originally published in 1989 and later revised, this single-volume narrative offers an astonishingly comprehensive account of the global conflict that reshaped the modern world. For anyone seeking a single, authoritative, and deeply human text on the subject, Martin Gilbert's complete history remains an essential companion. This article delves into what makes this book so remarkable, exploring its structure, its unique narrative voice, and why it continues to be a vital resource for students, scholars, and general readers alike.

Who Was Martin Gilbert? The Mind Behind the Masterpiece

To understand the magnitude of **The Second World War: A Complete History**, one must first appreciate the credentials of its author. Sir Martin Gilbert (1936–2015) was one of Britain's most distinguished historians. He is best known as the official biographer of Sir Winston Churchill, a monumental task that spanned decades and resulted in several volumes. However, Gilbert's expertise extended far beyond Churchill. He was a prolific writer on the Holocaust, the First World War, and, of course, the Second World War.

Gilbert's approach to history was meticulous and deeply sourced. He had an extraordinary ability to weave together high-level strategic analysis with the raw, personal experiences of ordinary people. This combination of the macro and the micro is precisely what makes **The Second World War: A Complete History** so powerful. He did not merely recount battles and politics; he documented the suffering, the courage, and the moral complexities of a world at war.

An Overview of The Second World War: A Complete History

This book is not a light read. It is a dense, detailed, and exhaustive narrative that covers the entirety of the conflict from its roots in the aftermath of World War I to the final surrender of Japan in 1945. Gilbert's central aim was to create a single volume that could serve as a definitive reference without sacrificing narrative flow or human interest.

A Global Perspective from Day One

One of the most striking features of this book is its truly global scope. Many histories of the Second World War focus predominantly on the European and Pacific theaters, often relegating other regions to footnotes. Gilbert,

however, ensures that every front receives its due attention. He covers the war in North Africa, the brutal campaigns in Burma and China, the war at sea in the Atlantic, the Arctic convoys, and the often-overlooked conflicts in the Middle East and East Africa. This global perspective allows the reader to understand the interconnected nature of the war. A decision made in Berlin had ramifications in the jungles of New Guinea, and Gilbert masterfully traces these threads.

The Interweaving of Military and Civilian Experience

A key strength of **The Second World War: A Complete History** is its seamless integration of military and civilian narratives. Gilbert does not simply describe the movements of armies and the strategies of generals. He constantly reminds the reader of the human cost. Using diaries, letters, memoirs, and official reports, he brings to life the experiences of soldiers in foxholes, civilians in bombed cities, prisoners of war in camps, and the millions of victims of Nazi genocide. This approach transforms the conflict from a series of abstract events into a deeply personal tragedy. The reader is not just learning about the Battle of Stalingrad; they are witnessing it through the eyes of a Russian mother searching for bread or a German soldier freezing in the ruins.

The Structure and Narrative Style of the Book

Gilbert organizes his material chronologically, which is both logical and effective for such a sprawling narrative. The chapters are divided by months and years, allowing the reader to follow the concurrent events across the globe. This chronological structure emphasizes the simultaneity of the war. While a bombing raid was taking place over London, a naval battle was raging in the Pacific, and a deportation train was rolling through Poland. Gilbert's prose is clear, direct, and unadorned. He lets the facts and the voices of the participants speak for themselves, which lends the narrative a sense of authenticity and urgency.

Maps and Documentation

The book is well-supported by maps and a comprehensive index. The maps are strategically placed to help the reader visualize the vast movements of troops and the geography of crucial battles. The documentation is meticulous, with extensive endnotes that allow serious readers to trace Gilbert's sources. This scholarly rigor does not, however, make the book inaccessible. The narrative flows smoothly, and the research supports the story rather than overwhelming it.

Key Themes Explored in Gilbert's Magnum Opus

Several major themes run throughout **The Second World War: A Complete History**, giving the book a philosophical and moral weight beyond mere chronology.

The Centrality of the Holocaust

Gilbert, who was a leading scholar of the Holocaust, ensures that the genocide of the Jews is not treated as a separate event but as an integral part of the war itself. He traces the evolution of Nazi anti-Jewish policy from persecution to systematic murder, showing how it was influenced by the progress of the war. He includes harrowing firsthand accounts from survivors and victims, ensuring that the human reality of the Holocaust is never forgotten. In Gilbert's telling, the war and the Holocaust are tragically intertwined.

The Role of Intelligence and Technology

The book also highlights the crucial role of intelligence, particularly the breaking of the German Enigma code at Bletchley Park. Gilbert shows how this "Ultra" intelligence influenced major battles and campaigns. He also pays close attention to technological developments, from the development of radar to the jet engine and the atomic bomb. These technological factors are presented not as dry details but as critical determinants of the war's outcome.

The Morality of Total War

Gilbert does not shy away from difficult moral questions. He examines the strategic bombing campaigns against German and Japanese cities, the use of the atomic bomb, and the decisions made by leaders on all sides. He presents the facts and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions, but the underlying tone is one of profound respect for human life and a deep awareness of the tragedy of war. He gives voice to the victims of Allied bombing as well as Axis atrocities, offering a balanced, if deeply somber, perspective.

Why This Book Stands Out Among Countless WWII Histories

There is no shortage of books on the Second World War. Yet **The Second World War: A Complete History** by Martin Gilbert occupies a unique position. What sets it apart?

Comprehensiveness in a Single Volume

The sheer scope of the book is staggering. It is one of the few single-volume histories that can legitimately claim to be "complete." While no single book can cover every detail of such a vast conflict, Gilbert comes remarkably close. For a reader who wants one book that covers the entire war from start to finish, in all its global dimensions, this is an unparalleled choice.

The Human Touch

As mentioned, Gilbert's skill in blending the strategic with the personal is unmatched. Other historians might focus on the grand strategy of Operation Barbarossa or the D-Day landings. Gilbert covers those elements with authority, but he also tells the story of the individual soldier, the resistance fighter, the slave laborer, and the child caught in the crossfire. This makes the history feel immediate and real.

Accessibility for the General Reader

Despite its length and depth, the book is written for the general reader. Gilbert avoids academic jargon and convoluted theoretical frameworks. He tells a story. The book is long, but it is never boring. The narrative momentum carries the reader through even the most complex passages. This accessibility is a testament to Gilbert's skill as a writer and his deep respect for his audience.

Who Should Read This Book?

The Second World War: A Complete History is an excellent choice for a wide range of readers. Students of history will find it an invaluable reference and a model of clear, sourced narrative writing. General readers who want a deeper understanding of the war will find it engaging and enlightening. Military history enthusiasts will appreciate the detailed accounts of campaigns and battles. And anyone seeking to understand the origins of the modern world, with its geopolitical divisions, its moral complexities, and its enduring traumas, will find this book essential reading.

For the Student

If you are studying the Second World War at school or university, this book provides an excellent foundation. Its comprehensive nature means you can use it as a starting point for almost any topic within the war, from the home front to the war in the Pacific. The extensive bibliography and source notes are also a valuable resource for further research.

For the Enthusiast

For those who already have a solid knowledge of the war, Gilbert's book offers new perspectives and details. His emphasis on lesser-known fronts and his deep integration of personal narratives can provide fresh insights even for seasoned readers. It is a book that rewards rereading.

Critical Reception and Lasting Legacy

Since its publication, **The Second World War: A Complete History** has been widely praised by critics and

historians. It has been translated into numerous languages and remains a standard reference in libraries around the world. Reviewers have consistently highlighted its balance, its humanism, and its extraordinary breadth. While some have noted that its length can be daunting, there is a broad consensus that Gilbert achieved his goal of writing a single-volume history that is both comprehensive and readable.

The book's legacy is secure. It stands as a testament to Martin Gilbert's lifetime of scholarship and his deep commitment to remembering the past. In an age of increasing specialization, Gilbert reminded us of the value of the grand narrative—a story told with skill, integrity, and profound humanity.

Conclusion: Why This History Matters Now More Than Ever

In a world where the lessons of the past are often forgotten or distorted, **The Second World War: A Complete History**by Martin Gilbert serves as an essential corrective. It is a detailed, honest, and deeply moving account of a conflict that defined the twentieth century and continues to shape our present. By weaving together the grand strategies of generals with the painful realities of ordinary people, Gilbert reminds us that history is not just about dates and battles. It is about human choices, human suffering, and human endurance.

Whether you are a student, a scholar, or simply a curious reader, this book offers a profound and unforgettable journey through the most devastating war in human history. It is not just a history of the Second World War; it is a monument to the memory of all those who lived through it and a powerful reminder of why we must strive for peace. For anyone seeking to truly understand the modern world, Martin Gilbert's masterwork is not just recommended—it is essential.

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