

MARTIN GILBERT

THE
**SECOND
WORLD
WAR**

REVISED EDITION



In the transmission of the horror
of the war, Martin Gilbert has
achieved something no historian
could. There is indeed a
certain force about chronology
when it is used as a tool by an
historian of the stature of Martin
Gilbert. —John Keegan,
The Sunday Telegraph

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COMPLETE HISTORY



THE SECRET WORLD WAR



A COMPLETE HISTORY
OF THE
WAR
FROM 1914 TO 1918
BY
MARTIN SPENCER
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
J. H. B. COOPER

MARTIN SPENCER
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
J. H. B. COOPER
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THE SECOND WORLD WAR

A Complete History

Revised Edition

MARTIN GILBERT

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Merton College,
Oxford
22 February 1991

The German invasion of Poland

SEPTEMBER 1939

The Second World War was among the most destructive conflicts in human history; more than forty-six million soldiers and civilians perished, many in circumstances of prolonged and horrifying cruelty. During the 2,174 days of war between the German attack on Poland in September 1939 and the surrender of Japan in August 1945, by far the largest number of those killed, whether in battle or behind the lines, were unknown by name or face except to those few who knew or loved them; yet in many cases, perhaps also numbering in the millions, even those who might in later years have remembered a victim were themselves wiped out. Not only forty-six million lives, but the vibrant life and livelihood which they had inherited, and might have left to their descendants, were blotted out: a heritage of work and joy, of struggle and creativity, of learning, hopes and happiness, which no one would ever inherit or pass on.

Inevitably, because they were the war's principal sufferers, it is the millions of victims who fill so many of these pages. Many of them can be, and are, named; it is they, and the unnamed men, women and children whose tragedy is the bitter legacy of the war. There is courage, too, in these pages; the courage of soldiers, sailors and airmen, the courage of partisans and resistance fighters, and the courage of those who, starving, naked and without strength or weapons, were sent to their deaths.

Who was the first victim of a war that was to claim more than forty-six million victims? He was an unknown prisoner in one of Adolf Hitler's concentration camps, most probably a common criminal. In an attempt to make Germany seem the innocent victim of Polish aggression, he had been dressed in a Polish uniform, taken to the German frontier town of Gleiwitz, and shot on the evening of 31 August 1939 by the Gestapo in a bizarre faked 'Polish attack' on the local radio station. On the following morning, as German troops began their advance into Poland, Hitler gave, as one of his reasons for the invasion, 'the attack by regular Polish troops on the Gleiwitz transmitter'.

In honour of the SS Chief who had helped to devise the Gleiwitz deception, it had been given the code name Operation Himmler. On that same evening of August 31, the Soviet Union, Germany's ally of less than a week, had finally

been victorious in its battle with the Japanese on the Soviet-Mongolian borderlands, as Soviet forces, commanded by General Zhukov, destroyed the last resistance of the Sixth Japanese Army at Khalkhin Gol. As one war ended, another began, known to history as the Second World War.

The German advance into Poland on 1 September 1939 was not a repeat of the tactics of the First World War of 1914-18. Then, infantrymen, advancing towards each other until caught in a line of trenches, had mounted a series of attacks against a well dug-in enemy. Hitler's method was that of 'Blitzkrieg' - lightning war. First, and without warning, air attacks destroyed much of the defender's air force while it was still on the ground. Second, bombers struck at the defender's road and rail communications, assembly points and munitions dumps, and at civilian centres, causing confusion and panic. Third, dive-bombers sought out columns of marching men and bombed them without respite, while at the same time aircraft machine-gunned civilian refugees as they sought to flee from the approaching soldiers, causing chaos on the roads, and further impeding the forward movement of the defending forces.

Even as the Blitzkrieg came out of the sky, it also came on land; first in wave after wave of motorized infantry, light tanks and motor-drawn artillery, pushing as far ahead as possible. Then heavy tanks were to drive deep into the countryside, bypassing cities and fortified points. Then, after so much damage had been done and so much territory traversed, the infantry, the foot soldiers of every war, but strongly supported by artillery, were to occupy the area already penetrated, to deal with whatever resistance remained, and to link up with the mechanized units of the initial strike.

Twenty-four hours after the German attack on Poland, an official Polish Government communiqué reported that 130 Poles, of whom twelve were soldiers, had been killed in air raids on Warsaw, Gdynia, and several other towns. 'Two German bombers were shot down, and the four occupants arrested after a miraculous escape,' the communiqué noted, 'when forty-one German aircraft in formation appeared over eastern Warsaw on Friday afternoon. People watched a thrilling aerial battle over the heart of the city. Several houses caught fire, and the hospital for Jewish defective children was bombed and wrecked.'

On the morning of September 2, German aircraft bombed the railway station at the town of Kolo. At the station stood a train of civilian refugees being evacuated from the border towns of Jarocin and Krotoszyn; 111 of them were killed.

Hitler's aim in invading Poland was not only to regain the territories lost in 1918. He also intended to impose German rule on Poland. To this end, he had ordered three SS Death's Head regiments to follow behind the infantry advance, and to conduct what were called 'police and security' measures behind the German lines. Theodor Eicke, the commander of these three Death's Head regiments, explained what these measures were to his assembled officers at one of their bases, Sachsenhausen concentration camp, on that first day of war. In protecting Hitler's Reich, Eicke explained, the SS would have to 'incarcerate or annihilate' every enemy of Nazism, a task that would challenge even the



The German invasion of Poland, September 1939

'absolute and inflexible severity' which the Death's Head regiments had learned in the concentration camps.

These words, so full of foreboding, were soon translated into action; within a week of the German invasion of Poland, almost 24,000 officers and men of the Death's Head regiment were ready to embark on their task. On the side of one of the railway carriages taking German soldiers eastward, someone had written in white paint: 'We're off to Poland to thrash the Jews.' Not only Jews, but Poles, were to be the victims of this war behind the war. Two days after Lücke had given his instructions to the Death's Head regiments, Heinrich Himmler informed SS General Udo von Woytsch that he was to carry out the 'radical suppression of the incipient Polish insurrection in the newly occupied parts of Upper Silesia'. The word 'radical' was a euphemism for 'ruthless'.

Whole villages were burned to the ground. At Truskolasy, on September 3, fifty-five Polish peasants were rounded up and shot, a child of two among them. At Wieruszow, twenty Jews were ordered to assemble in the market place, among them Israel Lewi, a man of sixty-four. When his daughter, Liebe Lewi, ran up to her father, a German told her to open her mouth for 'impudence'. He then fired a bullet into it. Liebe Lewi fell down dead. The twenty Jews were then executed.

In the weeks that followed, such atrocities became commonplace, widespread and on an unprecedented scale. While soldiers fought in battle, civilians were being massacred behind the lines.

On the afternoon of September 3, German bombers attacked the undefended Polish town of Sulciew, where a peace-time population of 6,500 Poles and Polish Jews were swelled by a further 3,000 refugees. Within moments, the centre of the town was ablaze. As thousands hurried for safety towards the nearby woods, German planes, flying low, opened fire with their machine guns. 'As we were running to the woods', one young boy, Ben Helfgott, recalled, 'people were falling, people were on fire. That night the sky was red from the burning town'.

On 3 September, Britain and France both declared war on Germany. 'The immediate aim of the German High Command', Hitler told his commanders, 'remains the rapid and victorious conclusion of operations against Poland.' At nine o'clock that evening, however, a German submarine, the U-30, commanded by Julius Lemp, torpedoed the British passenger liner *Athenia*, which it had mistaken for an armed ship. The *Athenia*, which was bound for Montreal from Liverpool, had sailed before Britain's declaration of war, with 1,203 passengers on board. Of the 112 passengers who lost their lives that night, twenty-eight were citizens of the United States. But the American President, Franklin Roosevelt, was emphatic when he broadcast to the American people on September 3: 'Let no man or woman thoughtlessly or falsely talk of America sending its armies to European fields. At this moment there is being prepared a proclamation of American neutrality.'

Confident of a swift victory, on the evening of September 3, Hitler left Berlin on board his special train, *Amerska*, in which he was to live for the next two weeks amid the scenes and congratulations of his first military triumph. The British Government, meanwhile, had put into operation its 'Western Air Plan

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