

# The 20th century, by the book

**M**artin Gilbert's latest installment in his three-part "History of the Twentieth Century" is a history teacher's worst nightmare. The sprawling 1,000-page volume, covering 1933-51, plays into the worst stereotype of history writing — an endless recitation of facts, figures and dates so arid and soulless that it would cause even the most dedicated students to throw down their books in dismay.

Mr. Gilbert's new book is the second in a trilogy on the violent and chaotic century that is now drawing to a close. His plan is to create a "narrative" history, organizing the chapters by year and relying heavily on first-hand accounts of the events he chronicles. What he produces, however, is a boring catalog of details, shorn of any serious historical context and analysis.

The book is particularly disorienting as the author zooms, more or less randomly, around the globe. A chapter may start in Nazi Germany, zip to Afghanistan, turn back to obscure border wars in Latin America, visit China, then land back in Germany in just a few pages. He appears to be trying to suggest the frantic pace of events as they unfold, but the effect is off-putting.

Nor is his globe-hopping consistent and evenhanded. For example, he spends a dozen highly detailed pages on the violence associated with Indian independence, yet dispatches the entire reconstruction of postwar Japan with six widely scattered paragraphs. In fact, Mr. Gilbert pays comparatively little attention to the Japanese — Winston Churchill personally rates half a page in the index, while the entire 100 million-strong nation of Japan rates a quarter page.

Mr. Gilbert places a heavy emphasis on the human cost of World War II, recounting in minute detail the casualties of the many bombing raids, anti-partisan campaigns and massacres of civilians. This is a noble goal. Unfortunately, his method of dealing with these events is merely to list them in an almost day-by-day record of destruction and death. Rather than memorializing the nameless victims, this technique renders them mundane and tedious.

To make matters worse, the book is marred by several embarrassing errors and omissions. There are a series of typographical problems, including a maddening habit of capitalizing the word "party" whether Mr. Gilbert is referring to a specific political organization or not. The author also makes two glaring geo-

graphical errors, which are particularly baffling in light of the 42 pages of detailed maps Mr. Gilbert includes at the end of the text.

First, Mr. Gilbert asserts that the landing beaches at Normandy were named after "individual American States" and cites "Utah" and "Omaha" as examples. A quick

western side of Korea, more than 100 miles across dry land from the east coast.

These errors seem trivial, but they are so obvious and avoidable as to call into question the accuracy of the other details with which Mr. Gilbert assaults his readers.

More troubling are the things Mr. Gilbert leaves out. He makes much, to give just a single example, of the Allied ability to break the German military codes, an intelligence coup that may well have cost Hitler the war. He also spends time discussing the German raid on the city of Coventry in 1940, which killed almost 600 British people, flattened the city center, and set the stage for the murderous bombings of civilians by both sides later in the war.

Yet Mr. Gilbert never mentions the long-running debate over whether Churchill knew of the raid in advance from decoded German transmissions. Historians disagree about why he did not act to protect the city — he either learned of the raid too late or was afraid the Germans might realize their code was compromised. Either way, Churchill faced the gruesome realization that he was unable to protect hundreds of defenseless civilians from a fiery death.

For Mr. Gilbert — the official biographer of Churchill and author

## A HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, VOLUME TWO:

1933-1951

By Martin Gilbert

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REVIEWED BY SEAN SCULLY

glance at the two maps of the United States shows that Omaha is most definitely not a state.

Second, during his discussion of the opening days of the Korean War, Mr. Gilbert writes that, as United Nations troops were in headlong retreat on land, "on the eastern side of the peninsula the initiative in the war at sea lay with United Nations forces." He cites as an example a British naval raid that silenced a North Korean heavy artillery battery at Inchon. But that port, later the site of Douglas McArthur's daring amphibious invasion, is quite clearly on the



From the book

Coventry, November 1940: A firestorm caused by a German air raid the night before is still burning.

of six of the eight volumes of the definitive work on the wartime prime minister — to leave this widely reported and debated historical detail out of an otherwise numbingly comprehensive book is baffling.

Mr. Gilbert's work should have been a smashing success. His intentions are good, his historical cre-

dentials are impeccable, his source material is plentiful, his topic is compelling. It is deeply disappointing to see so much effort produce such a poor result.

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