

Background Information

Empire and Commonwealth

In 1914 the British Empire occupied a quarter of the known surface of the globe, and its population of over 434 million exceeded a quarter of the estimated population of the human race. The Empire fell into two distinct parts: Britain and the dominions, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and those regions that were wholly or partly governed from London – Africa, India, the West Indies and the Far East. During the war the British Empire and dominions raised a total of 8 586 000 men for military service: 5 704 500 from the British Isles, 1 440 500 from India, 629 000 from Canada, 413 000 from Australia, 136 000 from South Africa, 128 500 from New Zealand and 134 200 from the other colonies. Of these, 702 410 from the British Isles, 141 005 from the dominions, 47 746 from India and 3 649 from the other colonies lost their lives.

In 1931 the Statute of Westminster gave the dominions much greater independence, including control of their own foreign relations. This meant that their participation in the Second World War as allies with Britain was not a foregone conclusion. However only Eire remained neutral during the Second World War. As in 1914, India and the colonies automatically went to war at Britain's side.

The Caribbean

There was great concern during the Second World War that German U Boats would operate in the Caribbean.

Memo: Administrator's Office, St Kitts, Nevis
4 September 1939

It is notified for general information that at about 6.30pm yesterday three submarines were sighted off the north-east coast of St. Kitts. The nationality of these vessels is unknown. In view of this and reports of the presence of enemy submarines in these waters originating from the USA stations which were broadcast yesterday, the public are asked to cooperate with the Authorities by reporting immediately the presence of any suspicious craft which may be seen around the coast.

The South Caribbean Force was established to staff coastal and anti-aircraft batteries.

The Caribbean was governed by Britain during the Second World War. However, by the Destroyers for Bases deal of September 1940, Britain agreed that the USA could acquire military and naval bases in St Lucia and other islands in this area.

Over 40 000 workers volunteered to live and work in the USA as agricultural labourers.

East and West Africa

Troops from the East and West African divisions were sent to fight in southeast Asia against Japan in 1943/4. Approximately 120 000 black troops served there in all, fighting alongside other troops from the Empire and Commonwealth in Burma. In January 1944 troops from the Royal West African Frontier Force were amongst the first Allied units to force a Japanese surrender there.

India

Japan's rapid invasion and occupation of British and French colonies in the Far East left India exposed. Indian troops predominated in the units that made up General Slim's Fourteenth Army, which fought against the Japanese in Burma. The Japanese established the Indian National Army from Indian troops that had been captured by them in battle, to fight against the Allies.

Three divisions of the Indian Army also fought in Italy and Greece.

The effect of the war was far-reaching. In 1947 the Indian Empire was partitioned to create two new dominions, India and Pakistan, and British direct rule was at an end. This division led to civil war.

Working for Victory

Supplies

Britain relied upon countries of the Empire and Commonwealth to supply the war effort, with raw materials but also through savings schemes and fundraising. At one point during the war South Africa was shipping 2 000 steel helmets a day to Britain, and workers in India made a total of 50 million pairs of boots for Allied use. West Africa supplied over 40% of Britain's fat ration during the war, and the city of Kano in Nigeria raised enough money to make an entire Spitfire.

Who supplied what for the war effort?

Country	Materials	To make ...
All area	Timber	Pit props
East Africa	Sisal	Rope
Malaya	Rubber	Tyres, dinghies
Rhodesia	Copper	For use in radios, radars
Sierra Leone	Iron ore	Tanks
South Africa	Paint Gold Zinc	Camouflage To pay for the war To galvanise metal to prevent rust

Working in Britain

In February 1941 the first group of skilled technicians from the West Indies arrived in Britain to work in industry. They were followed by 800 men of the British Honduran Forestry Unit, which worked in the forests of Scotland to produce pit props and wood pulp. During 1944-45 approximately 5 500 West Indies RAF personnel arrived in Britain. Of these, about 100 gained commissions and many won decorations for bravery. West Indians also served with the Royal Engineers at Clitheroe in Lancashire, and a contingent from the Bermudan Volunteer Rifle Corps joined the Lincolnshire Regiment.

Over 80 West Indian women served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in the UK, whilst others joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

War at Sea

Over 50 000 mariners of the Royal Navy were killed during the Second World War: over 30 000 Merchant mariners lost their lives during the war. The Merchant Navy's role in bringing goods to Britain was both crucial and dangerous, even after the introduction of the convoy system.

The Royal Indian Navy grew from 1 654 personnel in 1939 to 30 682 by VJ Day. RIN ships were engaged in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean. 40 000 Indians also served in the British Merchant Navy.

Women at War

The first women's branches of Britain's armed services were formed in 1917, where women performed such tasks as cooking, driving and clerical work. During the Second World War, when women's branches were re-established, the jobs given to women were more varied, including communications, coding and de-coding, staffing anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons. No women were allowed to go into combat.

The issue of recruitment of black West Indian women to the armed forces was raised in 1943, but it was not until 1944 that the War Office agreed to the scheme. Thirty volunteers arrive in Britain in 1944 to serve in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service).

War in the Air

In December 1939 the British Commonwealth Air Training Joint Scheme was established. The first flying school was opened in Canada five months later and this is where many pilots from the colonies and dominions were trained. The Royal Indian Air force grew from 140 men in 1939 to a force of 42 792 by 1945. The RIAF flew 16 000 sorties against the Japanese, winning 80 awards for gallantry. 4 000 airmen from the West Indies served in Britain. During the Battle of Britain 247 Commonwealth and Empire pilots flew with RAF Fighter Command, including men from Jamaica, Rhodesia and South Africa, and these were supported by many more ground crew.

War on Land

Over two and a half million Indian men joined the Army during the Second World War. All were volunteers, making this the largest volunteer Army in history. They served in North and East Africa, Italy, Greece and Burma. Indian women joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service to provide support for the fighting troops.

Thousands of men from the West Indies joined the Army and the local home guard. Eventually they were sent to Europe for training, but few were allowed to engage in active combat. At the beginning of the war no African or Caribbean soldiers were allowed on the frontline, but the War Office changed their policy in 1943. African and Indian troops played an important role in the fighting in Burma.

The Colour Bar

In October 1939 the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Malcolm MacDonald, announced that, for the duration of the war, British colonial subjects including those 'not of pure European descent', could enter the armed forces. This was a relaxation of the colour bar. The War Office was more reluctant to recruit black people than the Colonial Office, and this delayed the arrival of volunteers from the Caribbean to Britain.