

The Contribution of the Commonwealth to the Second World War



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Second World War

What do you already know about the Second World War?

Talk
About
It

Here are some key facts:

- The Second World War was from 1939 – 1945.
- It started when Germany, led by Adolph Hitler, invaded Poland.
- The Allied countries were led by the United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union. The United States of America joined the Allies in 1941 after Japan bombed Hawaii.
- The Axis countries were led by Germany, Italy and Japan.
- During the war, millions of Jewish people and other groups of people were murdered in what is known as the Holocaust.
- Across the world, parts of cities, such as London, Plymouth, Dresden, Stalingrad, Hamburg and Manilla were ruined. Millions of civilians were killed.

What Is the Commonwealth?

Today, the Commonwealth is a family of 54 countries. It includes countries from Africa, Asia, South America, Europe and Australasia.

Lots of these countries used to be in the British empire. The British empire was a group of countries around the world that were ruled by Britain instead of ruling themselves. The British empire no longer exists.

The head of the Commonwealth is usually the monarch of the United Kingdom, currently Queen Elizabeth II.

Did You Know?

Over 2 billion people live in a Commonwealth country. That's one out of every three people in the world!

The Commonwealth during the Second World War

During the Second World War, Commonwealth countries were still usually referred to as being part of the British empire.

Some countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, had their own governments and controlled most things themselves. These places were known as dominions. Other countries, such as India, Nigeria and places in the Caribbean (then referred to as the West Indies), were still controlled by Britain. These places were called colonies.

The dominions could choose whether to join in fighting in the Second World War. The colonies had no choice and had to fight for the Allies.

Many historians believe that without the Commonwealth troops, the Allies would not have won the Second World War.

India

Around 2.5 million Indian people volunteered to fight in the Second World War. This makes the Indian fighters part of the largest volunteer army in history.

Japan were fighting on the side of Germany and Italy, against the Allies. Many Indian soldiers fought in Burma against the Japanese. They also fought in East Africa, Italy and Greece, among other places.

Some soldiers joined the Royal Indian Navy or the Royal Indian Air Force. Others fought in British forces. Over 87,000 Indian troops died in the war.



The Caribbean

Caribbean countries in the Commonwealth include Belize, Jamaica and Barbados.

Over 10,000 troops from the Caribbean fought for the Allies. Some women from the Caribbean served in Britain in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

After the Second World War, many people from the Caribbean stayed in Britain to help rebuild the country following the devastation of war. Sadly, they frequently faced terrible racism, often not even being able to find somewhere to stay.



Africa

Many countries across Africa were part of the British empire. These included Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Nigeria, South Africa and Botswana. South Africa was a dominion but most other countries were colonies.

There was a lot of fighting in North Africa. In 1935, Italy had invaded Ethiopia. During the Second World War, there was fighting in Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and other countries.

More than 1 million African troops fought in the Second World War.



Canada

Canada was a dominion and chose to enter the war.

At the beginning of the war, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was started in Canada. The Royal Canadian Air Force trained the air forces of Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The Royal Canadian Navy had 700 ships and 95,000 sailors. The Canadian army was made up of around 500,000 soldiers. They served in Hong Kong, Italy, Europe and the North Atlantic. Canadian forces were part of the Normandy beach landings in June 1944.

Over 45,000 Canadian troops died during the war.



Australia and New Zealand

Australia and New Zealand were also dominions who chose to enter the war. Troops from the region fought in Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Around 140,000 New Zealanders served in the war and 11,928 of these were killed. This was the equivalent of one in every 150 New Zealanders.



Nearly 1 million Australians served and around 39,000 died in the war. Australia itself was attacked as Japan bombed northern Australia and their submarines attacked Sydney harbour.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is an organisation that looks after the graves of Commonwealth soldiers killed in the First and Second World Wars. It also keeps records of the lives of soldiers.

The CWGC cares for the graves of nearly 1.7 million people in over 150 countries.





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