

The British Empire and the Second World War

(Prologue to Ashley Jackson *The British Empire and the Second World War*)

The image of Britain standing alone after the fall of France in June 1940 is embedded in the public awareness of the Second World War, epitomized by New Zealander David Low's famous *Evening Standard* cartoon of the defiant Tommy standing on the cliffs looking towards the Continent and resolutely saying, 'Very well, then, alone!' But Britain was by no means alone: as one incoming telegram reassured the British public in September 1939, 'Don't worry; Barbados is with you'. A *Punch* cartoon by Fougasse, published on 17 July 1940, had a different take on Low's theme. Two soldiers are pictured looking out to sea. 'So our poor Empire is alone in the world', remarks the first soldier. 'Aye, we are', replies the second soldier, 'the whole five hundred million of us.'

This book addresses a major but generally forgotten fact about the Second World War. In Britain the war is primarily remembered as a European struggle, an understandable perspective born of geography and the close proximity of would-be invaders. This is not to say that some of the war's imperial landmarks are not recognized. The fighting role of imperial forces such as the Canadians at Dieppe and the pan-Commonwealth Eighth Army are well remembered. The role of Malta, a tiny but priceless launch pad for operations against Axis forces and convoys in the Mediterranean, is also well known. The fall of Singapore remains perhaps the most widely remembered imperial feature of the Second World War, and the Fourteenth Army in Burma is paradoxically remembered as the 'Forgotten Army'. These imperial features, however, tend to be recalled in isolation, or to be viewed, as in the case of the war in the Mediterranean and the Western Desert, as extensions of the European conflict.

This view is a parochial one. The war ought to be recognized as a global, and particularly as an *imperial* struggle, in which apparently disparate British battles and strategic concerns all formed part of one interconnected whole, and in which every campaign that the British fought was fought alongside imperial allies for imperial reasons. Who, as well as where, Britain fought was to a large extent dictated by Empire; there would have been no quarrel with Italy or Japan if it had not been for two centuries of British overseas expansion on their doorsteps. Even the battlefields themselves were decided by Britain's imperial history, whether on the sea routes of the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, in the skies above Iraq and Malta, the deserts of North Africa, the mountains of Abyssinia and north-east India, or the jungles of Borneo, Burma and Malaya. An imperial perspective helps connect all of these scenes of Second World War action to the European war, as well as providing a perspective on how features of that European struggle, such as the German conquest of France, had ramifications throughout the world.

The story of Malta and the war in the Western Desert is part of our appreciation of the European and Mediterranean war, but it is equally valid to see them as the result of Britain's imperial status in the Middle East and the Far East. They are also illustrations of Britain's dependence upon imperial bases and resources in order to fight the war. Malta had been a British colony since the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and the Mediterranean a major bastion of British imperial power since the eighteenth century. A third of the Tobruk garrison captured in June 1942 was South African, and the Eighth Army of which it was a part was the most ethnically varied army to assemble in modern history because of its imperial composition. In late 1941 the Eighth Army was a quarter British and three quarters imperial. It included not just the fighting men from Australia, Britain, India, New Zealand, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, but also men from Basutoland, Bechuanaland, Ceylon,

Cyprus, the Gambia, the Gold Coast, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Palestine, Rodrigues, Sierra Leone, the Seychelles, Swaziland, Tanganyika and Uganda. Further east, the war against Japan was not just an American conflict, despite Hollywood's colonization of that particular theatre. The territories of the Empire and Commonwealth played a notable part in fighting the Japanese and aiding American forces. The Fourteenth Army, which consisted of Indians from every corner of the Raj, Gurkhas from Nepal, Kenyans, Nigerians, Rhodesians and Somalis, as well as men from Kent and Cumberland, killed more Japanese soldiers than any other Allied formation in the war. By the summer of 1945 58 per cent of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command's personnel were Indian, and 25 per cent were African. This reflected the scale of India and Africa's manpower contribution to the imperial war effort.

When considering the ethnic composition of the 'British' forces that took the field against enemy units around the world, it is also worth remembering the disproportionate role played by Scotsmen. For over two centuries Scottish scientists, missionaries, politicians, explorers and soldiers had played a prominent role in British overseas expansion. The Second World War was to again see men from north of the border to the fore on battlefields from Europe to Egypt to Hong Kong, as well as imperial units with distinctly Scottish lineage such as South Africa's Transvaal Scottish Regiment. Scottish ports and naval bases, like Glasgow and Scapa Flow, were integral to the functioning of British maritime security, convoys and trade during the war. Even Ireland, a reluctant British Dominion that insisted on remaining neutral throughout the conflict, furnished over 43,000 men for service with British forces.

The Australians played a key role in the war against the Japanese in New Guinea, particularly in the early stages before American power and resources had been fully mobilized and

deployed to the South-West Pacific. Many British territories in the Pacific as well as in South-East Asia fell to the Japanese, and though tied down in other theatres, the British had every intention of returning to reconquer them. To this end the British Pacific Fleet was formed in 1944 to operate from Sydney alongside American naval task forces, and plans were made to base British soldiers in Australia and RAF bombers on Okinawa so that Britain could contribute to the invasion of the Japanese home islands. As it happened, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki curtailed the realization of this major British commitment, but still it was British forces that took the surrender in Hong Kong and Singapore, Australians who rounded up the Japanese in Borneo and Sarawak, and Anglo-Indian divisions that arrived to supervise the Japanese surrendering in the Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China.

British Empire and Commonwealth forces fought a host of subsidiary military campaigns and obscure operations launched from little-known imperial bases. The names of Alamein and Malta, Singapore and Tobruk are familiar, but there were also imperial campaigns in Abyssinia, Borneo, Iran, Iraq, Java, Kenya, Madagascar, New Guinea, Iran, Somaliland, the Sudan, Sumatra and Syria. The Indian Ocean, as much as the Mediterranean and Atlantic, was the scene of significant naval operations and was a major naval battlefield by virtue of its vital sea routes, which connected Britain to Australasia and the major theatres of conflict in the Middle East and South Asia.

The air and naval forces of the Dominions, India and the colonial Empire, in supplementing British and American forces, also deserve greater attention. Commonwealth airmen formed nearly one half of Bomber Command's strength in Europe. In the Mediterranean Australian warships made an important contribution, as too did South African minesweepers, bombers

and fighter aircraft. The Royal Canadian Navy became the third largest navy in the world and played a key role in the Battle of the Atlantic, and by the end of the war the Indian-officered Royal Indian Air Force had 30,000 personnel and nine squadrons of fighter aircraft engaged in the war against Japan. The British Empire Air Training Scheme prepared 130,000 airmen for war from training schools in Australia, Canada, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. Places such as Assam and the Gold Coast became air bases of great importance to the fighting fronts in the Middle East, Burma and China.

As well as furnishing barracks for hundreds of thousands of soldiers, the Empire was the site of countless air strips, aerodromes, Royal Naval Air Stations and flying boat anchorages used by the squadrons of the RAF and the Fleet Air Arm, together with the air forces of America, the Dominions, India and other allies. Many international airports, including those in Bahrain, Ceylon, the Maldives, Malta and Mauritius, began life during the war as RAF aerodromes. Tiny specks in vast oceans could become important bases, such as the Cocos Islands, a busy base for RAF aircraft attacking Japanese shipping, supplying behind-enemy-lines units fighting in Malaya and dropping supplies to liberated prisoner-of-war camps. With the assault on Britain's global communications network presented by the war, diversions had to be arranged in some parts of the world. Thus to supply the Middle East with sufficient aircraft, an air supply route was developed across the African continent because of the risks involved in shipping or flying large numbers of aircraft via the Axis-infested Mediterranean.

As in the air so too at sea. Imperial ports and naval shore bases provided a global network for the warships of the imperial fleets and squadrons that had historically policed the world, from the South Atlantic Station to the Mediterranean Fleet and from the China Station to the Eastern Fleet. All over the world imperial ports were used to the full by warships and

merchantmen as they travelled in convoys around the world, and facilities were extended or created anew, particularly to compensate for the loss of bases in Singapore and the Far East. Thus Addu Atoll in the Maldives was developed as a major fleet base to supplement facilities at Trincomalee and Colombo in the light of the loss of Singapore. Ports such as Freetown and Halifax became essential convoy assembly points, and Durban acted as the base for the invasion of Madagascar. As a global economic community, the transfer of resources by seas was the lifeblood of the British Empire, in war as in peace. In war, the sea lanes of the world were also vital for the movement of martial resources to and from Britain, North America and the Empire's many overseas battle fronts.

The Empire defined Britain's participation in a global war that was an experience of profound significance for colonial societies and economies the world over. The reason why is not difficult to discern. The British war effort was global because Britain ruled a quarter of the world's land surface, influenced much of the rest of it and had historically dominated its oceans. It was only because of empire that Britain fought Italy and Japan at all; Pearl Harbor would have had little significance for Britain had it not been for its status as an Asian and Pacific power responsible for the safety of millions, looked to by both Chiang Kai-shek and the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies for succour in the face of Japanese hostility. Unlike its enemies, Britain was obliged to fight both a European and an Asian war simultaneously after 1941, and all of its overseas territories were called upon to help defeat the powers that sought to overturn the international system of which Britain had been the prime creator and guarantor. Until the Second World War, Britain was the world's only superpower, and it was to Britain that countries such as Abyssinia and China looked in the 1930s when they were confronted by the aggression of the dictators. In 1939 America was not a global power in terms of military strength, international diplomacy, reputation and overseas

presence in the way that Britain was, despite the republic's phenomenal wealth and potential. The fact that by 1945 America had risen to global pre-eminence, and Britain had been eclipsed, is a measure of the war's impact on the world order.

The Second World War was fought throughout the world and touched the lives of all people living in it. Given that a quarter of those people were British subjects, the study of the British Empire and Commonwealth at war is a highly important but neglected one. Britain's war cannot be properly understood without due weight being given to its imperial responsibilities and imperial strategic vision and ambitions, and to the aid given by the far-flung territories of the Empire in its prosecution. Not only did empire dictate where and how Britain fought the war, but it also dictated how Britain's enemies sought to defeat British power. Naturally, Britain's enemies furthered their cause against Britain by attacking its Empire. For Italy and Japan, if less so for Germany, the main dispute with Britain was over access to the imperial fruits overflowing the British basket. Mussolini could not realize his ambitions for Italy if Britain continued to be the dominant imperial power in the region of the Suez Canal and eastern Mediterranean, and Emperor Hirohito's military government could not secure Japan's rightful place in the world if Britain continued to dominate Shanghai and monopolize so much of the treasure of South-East Asia.

In seeking to counter the mortal threat posed in every region of the world by the enmity of industrialized and militaristic enemies, Britain's capacity to wage war relied upon imperial bases and imperial resources for defence and the projection of military power. Territories such as Australia, Ceylon, Egypt, Fiji, India, Kenya and Mauritius became springboards for offensive Allied operations in neighbouring regions and bases for special forces engaged in espionage, sabotage and operations behind enemy lines. Familiar features of the British war

effort, such as Bletchley Park intelligence-gathering operations and the activities of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), also depended on base facilities in the Empire and the wider world.

British imperial forces - properly so called because nowhere did British soldiers, sailors or airmen fight without men from the territories of the Empire and Commonwealth either by their side or forming the vital rear echelon units supporting them - fought major campaigns in regions where the Empire had grown and therefore had to be defended. New territorial responsibilities were taken on as enemy colonies were conquered, making it more accurate to describe the British Empire at its greatest territorial extent *not* in the wake of its post-First World War gains but in 1945, when Britain had reconquered its own colonies lost earlier to the Japanese and the Italians, and acquired new territories as a result of the defeat of its enemies. British military administrations were established in Italian Somaliland, Libya, Madagascar, Sicily and Syria, and Southern Iran was invaded and taken over in order to prevent a German invasion from the north, to guard Britain's precious oil reserves and to maintain an Anglo-American supply link with Russia. British power was also extended into entirely new regions for strategic reasons, as when British armed forces took over the defence of Iceland in order to help prosecute the Battle of the Atlantic. At the end of the war Britain also became responsible for the Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China, as well as a sizeable chunk of Germany.

Given the huge importance of imperial forces, resources and bases for the British war effort, the wartime alliance that defeated the dictators needs to be better understood. The ubiquitous term 'the Allies' has come to stand as shorthand for Britain and America's deservedly celebrated war-time partnership, with France and Russia somewhat uncomfortably tagged on

as well. Many people at the time, however, emphasized Britain's alliance with its fellow white Commonwealth countries, India and the colonial Empire. This is not surprising given the lengthy delay before Britain's great power allies came onto the scene. For nearly two years the American alliance remained strictly non-combatant and, after a little over six months of war, the ally on whom Britain had based all of its pre-war defence plans, France, was out for the count and its Vichy government and Empire added to the list of likely enemies. At the start of the war Russia was in a pact with Nazi Germany, and from April 1941 with Japan. An unlikely set of allies, one might think.

In sharp contrast, within a week of the expiry of Neville Chamberlain's ultimatum to Hitler on 3 September 1939, the entire British Empire was at war. For many people at the time, the fact that the British Empire and Commonwealth stood united against the dictators was a source of pride and comfort. This heterogeneous unit of over fifty territories supported Britain's declaration of war because of the imperial nexus, and contributed during six years of global struggle to the defeat of Germany, Italy, Japan and their allies. In addition, some of the 'lesser allies' who fought so bravely alongside British forces (and established their governments-in-exile in London) also aided Britain in imperial theatres. The Dutch contributed significantly, if vainly, to the defence of Malaya and British Borneo; Polish servicemen appeared in Iran, Iraq, West Africa and the Western Desert, as well as in the Battle of Britain; and Free French forces fought with the Eighth Army in the Middle East and the battleship *Richelieu* reinforced Britain's Eastern Fleet in Ceylon.

The war dramatically affected home fronts throughout the Empire because of its demands, as the need for labour remained constant at a time of global food and raw material shortage, and as countries unprepared for conflict became war zones. All the stops were pulled out to

increase agricultural production, to produce more raw materials and minerals, and to construct the air strips, barracks, bases, hospitals, internee camps, port facilities, roads and railways necessary for colonies to become effective military installations of Britain overseas. A million Indians built airstrips and installations in Bengal and Assam as the region became the great military encampment and supply dump from which the Japanese were to be pushed out of Burma and South-East Asia. Mauritian sugar planters turned their estates into vegetable gardens as the island faced starvation when import sources and the ships that delivered them dried up. Tasmanian women enrolled as factory workers when private companies turned their hand to the manufacture of high-technology weapons components. The Sultan of the Maldives ordered his people to aid the Royal Navy and RAF to build bases in their islands, and West Indian men and women found employment on new American bases constructed in their homelands, in the agricultural industry of America itself, and as labourers in Britain.

All of this, of course, was achieved whilst the colonial homelands were themselves under threat or actually experiencing direct attack. Few parts of the Empire escaped enemy attention, whether in the form of an occasional raid, propaganda broadcasts or leaflet drops, reconnaissance or bombardment, coastal minefields, the activities of secret agents, repeated bombing or years of enemy occupation. The use of colonies as bases for Allied military operations was a form of transformational 'friendly' occupation in itself, affecting people's lives on multiple levels. And of course, had Britain been defeated, every territory of the Empire would have changed hands and fallen under the sway of new imperial masters, as the largest imperial estate in history went under the auctioneer's hammer.

Different colonies were affected at different times and by different factors during the war, and to a greatly varying extent. For example, the entry of Italy brought colonies in the eastern

Mediterranean and East Africa into the front line, and the rise of Japan brought the war suddenly to the doorstep of Ceylon and engulfed Malaya and the great 'fortress' of Singapore, in which so many hollow inter-war security hopes had reposed. Losses to Japan also escalated the demand for production in places such as West Africa, necessitating conscription to provide the cotton, food, rubber, sisal, tin and other products that the imperial treasure trove contributed to the global economy in war as in peace. The physical impact of the war also varied from one territory to another. Some islands in the Solomon and the Gilbert and Ellice Groups saw fierce fighting and some territories in the Far East endured three years of Japanese occupation. The Indian province of Assam witnessed devastating battles between imperial and Japanese forces in 1944. Senior officers visiting Malta often evoked personal memories of the horrors of the Western Front in the First World War to convey the extent of the bomb damage inflicted on the island. Other territories, too, were bombed, including Aden, Burma, Ceylon, Cyprus, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Malaya, Palestine and Singapore. Scorched earth policies brought destruction to numerous imperial territories as Allied forces retreated, blowing up bridges and firing oil wells, as did fighting later in the war when Allied forces advanced. Submarine attacks affected Caribbean territories, and at a stroke, on the fall of France in June 1940, Britain's West African colonies were surrounded by hostile Vichy territory requiring a massive defensive concentration.

The Second World War, notwithstanding the Eurocentric manner in which it is often remembered, was viewed at the time as an imperial struggle, not only by the politicians and senior servicemen responsible for grand strategy, but also by many ordinary people around the world. The British Empire and Commonwealth's war was fought by air marshals, admirals, generals, politicians and civil servants who had an imperial world view and an imperial strategic vision – unlike their adversaries from Germany, Italy and Japan. British

imperial forces, though stretched to the limit as a result of the Empire's overwhelming inter-war focus on peace, disarmament and the global status quo, were dispersed throughout the world to counter the threat of multiple enemies bent on British imperial nemesis. At the time of the Second World War, Britain and the Empire and Commonwealth were governed by men steeped in the imperial tradition, from the highest reaches of the departments of state in Whitehall down to the level of district commissioners living in remote corners of the Empire and supervising the day to day business of imperial government. At the summit of this vast and sprawling system of global rule was the King-Emperor George VI, an imperial monarch whose image was known throughout the world. Royal tours of the Empire and Commonwealth had been commonplace since the death of Queen Victoria, becoming part of the iconography of Empire as well as its high-level diplomacy, strengthening the bonds between Britain and its far-flung territories and ensuring that reigning monarchs were very much aware of Britain's overseas connections and responsibilities. King George (along with his brother, Edward VIII, during his short reign), had pioneered royal touring since his youth and visited all of the Dominions as well as dozens of the colonies before war broke out.

Many of the men who served as British government ministers during the Second World War also had direct experience of the Empire and its people. Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister at the outbreak of war, was the son of the most ardent imperialist Cabinet minister of the late nineteenth century, Joseph Chamberlain, and had run his father's plantation in the Bahamas in the 1890s. Winston Churchill, not surprisingly, had more imperial experience than any of his colleagues. The young Churchill saw action on the North-West Frontier in India, and in 1898 rode in the British Army's last cavalry charge at Omdurman in the Sudan. After observing the American-Spanish War at close quarters in Cuba, Churchill travelled to South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War as a war correspondent. In the Liberal government of Herbert Asquith,

he served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies. His imperial vision was given full reign in 1911 when he was made First Lord of the Admiralty, master of the most powerful weapon on earth. In Lloyd George's post-war cabinets, Churchill served as Secretary of State for War and Air, and as Secretary of State for the Colonies. Even when out of office in the inter-war years, Churchill remained a powerful imperial politician, particularly in the 1930s when he was the most vocal critic of the National Government's India policy.

Churchill's war-time administrations contained other men with significant imperial experience. Leo Amery, Clement Attlee, William Beaverbrook, Stafford Cripps, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan all had experience of living and working in the Empire, or of holding political positions that gave them an intimate knowledge of its affairs. Politicians from the Dominions were also naturally experienced in the affairs of Empire. Jan Christian Smuts of South Africa, the only Dominions politician to whom Churchill paid much attention, was a noted imperial statesman. He had been a member of the Imperial War Cabinet in the First World War, and played an important role in the Second World War in framing British policy in Africa and the Middle East. Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister in the early stages of the war, was even touted as a potential rival for the British Prime Ministership when Churchill endured a particularly torrid time in 1941 as a result of military reverses overseas. Peter Fraser, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, was born in Scotland and had lived in London until his mid-twenties, typical of the many people in the Dominions who comfortably divided their loyalties between their country and the Empire to which it belonged.

As with the politicians, Britain's senior soldiers, sailors and airmen all tended to be old Empire hands in one respect or another, or to be themselves citizens of the Dominions. All of

Britain's wartime Chiefs of Staff, for example, had extensive imperial experience, as did the majority of Britain's senior theatre commanders.* Generals like Alan Brooke, Claude Auchinleck, Bernard Montgomery, William Slim and Archibald Wavell had decades of imperial service between them, as had admirals Andrew Cunningham, Dudley Pound and James Somerville. The same was true of the RAF, in the shape of its most senior commanders, Arthur Tedder and Charles Portal. At the operational level, many senior British commanders of the Second World War were from the Dominions, such as the Australian general Thomas Blamey, the New Zealand general Bernard Freyberg (who nearly became Commander-in-Chief Middle East in August 1940), and the New Zealand air marshals Arthur Coningham and Keith Park.

The Empire was a global community embracing millions of people around the world, particularly those in Britain and the Dominions bound by the thread of common racial heritage. The Empire was a given in the lives of many people, as much a fact of life as the European Union or America is today. This was reinforced in many ways. Stage productions, literature and popular songs such as *There'll Always Be an England* made reference to imperial themes. The *Daily Mail* bore the words 'For King and Empire' beneath its title each day, and BBC radio broadcasts went out to 'Listeners here, and in the Empire and the United States of America'. References to the Empire and Commonwealth were frequent features of Churchill's speeches and radio broadcasts. Schools also helped embed the Empire as a fixture in the world view of the British people and their cousins in the Dominions. To give one example out of millions, Al Deere grew up in New Zealand and as a young man fought in the Battle of Britain as a pilot in No. 54 Squadron. 'In my generation', he explained, 'as schoolboys we always thought of [Britain] as the home country, always referred to it as the

* The Chiefs of Staff were the three most senior representatives of the British Army, the Royal Navy and the RAF. They sat in committee with the Prime Minister and decided British strategy.

Mother Country. That was the old colonial tie . . . There was no question that if this country was threatened, New Zealanders wouldn't go to war for Britain.' School developed imperial consciousness in Britain too. In the film *Hope and Glory* a schoolteacher points to various parts of the world on the once-ubiquitous classroom wall map, and says 'Pink. Pink. Pink. Pink. What are all the pink bits?'

'They're ours, Miss', replies Rowan.

'Yes', says the teacher. 'The British Empire. What part of the world's surface is British?'

'Two-fifths, Miss', answers Jennifer Baker.

'Yes. Two-fifths – ours. That's what this war is all about. Men are fighting and dying to save all the pink bits for you ungrateful little twerps'.

From the British West Indies, Connie Macdonald joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (Jamaica) to work in the British Military Hospital at Kingston. As she recalled:

We were British! England was our mother country. We were brought up to respect the Royal family. I used to collect pictures of Margaret and Elizabeth, you know? I adored them. It was the British influence. We didn't grow up with any Jamaican thing – we grew up as British.

A general awareness of the Empire was common to all Britons, even if it had little direct significance or meaning for many of them. As the war progressed, more Britons had cause to contemplate the Empire, as sons or husbands wrote from distant jungles or islands, as children were evacuated to Canada, as hundreds of thousands of colonial subjects arrived in Britain as servicemen or labourers, and as food parcels marked 'From the Australian Food Front' appeared on the kitchen table. When Malaya fell to the Japanese there was panic buying of hot-water bottles. As one housewife in Birmingham put it in her diary, 'you won't be able to

buy one until we get our rubber back', referring to the well-known fact that Malaya, recently taken by the Japanese, was the Empire's greatest producer of that precious commodity.

In mobilizing the Empire for this extraordinary British and Dominions-directed global war effort, a massive strain was placed upon the imperial system and the fundamental bulwark of local political cooperation and popular acquiescence upon which the Empire had come to rest. It was always likely, once Germany, Italy and Japan were attacking Britain's global position simultaneously, that the costs of defending the Empire would outweigh the price that the Empire was capable of paying. In defending the Empire and using it as a strategic asset, the rising power of America was invited into many parts of the world that until the outbreak of war had been exclusive British fiefs, and indigenous peoples were brought into closer contact than ever before with the intrusive power of a modern imperial state. Still, the achievements and coordination of this global war effort was nothing short of miraculous; 'a prodigy of skill and organization', as Churchill aptly described it.