

The British Empire, 1939–1945

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‘A great Victory Parade was held in Colombo, at which some 3,500 representatives of all the services marched past in 35 minutes’, wrote Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten in his diary for 25 August 1945. As Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia, Mountbatten was proud of the size of his command, headquartered near Kandy in the highlands of Ceylon: ‘At this rate the 1,380,000 men in SEAC [South East Asia Command] would take nearly 9 days and 9 nights to march past!’, he noted with boyish pride. Ken Waterson, a lowlier member of the Royal Navy, was also in Ceylon at the time of the Japanese surrender and described the ‘unreal atmosphere’ that pervaded that memorable evening. When the news of the capitulation came through, he was on the middle watch aboard the destroyer *Relentless*, at anchor in Trincomalee harbour. The crew ‘got up a singing party and took the ship’s piano onto the quarterdeck’, he recalled. ‘There were rocket (distress flare) displays, jumping jacks and concerts. . . Ships were dressed, every colour of flag was flown. . . The dark night showed up illuminated Vs made up of coloured lightbulbs’. All the ships in harbour that night sounded their sirens, some spelling ‘VJ’ in Morse code; sailors got drunk and ships started firing rockets at each other and at the aircraft lined up on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Small fires broke out as awnings and gun covers caught fire, and this, in turn, led to hoses being used to douse fires and the crews of neighbouring warships.¹

Joyous sailors clambered over the superstructure of a British battleship in Sydney Harbour that same day; Swazi troops heard the news in North Africa; and crowds of civilians and service personnel thronged the streets of Ottawa and Toronto, as across the British Empire final victory was savoured. Yet

¹ BBC World War II People’s War Archive, A2237591. www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/91/a2237591.shtml (accessed 18 December 2014).

despite the celebrations, for the British Empire, the surrender of Germany and Japan would prove to be a pyrrhic victory. The astonishing essay in imperial power of the previous six years had brought on the climax of empire, the moment at which an overstretched system reached breaking point. Though mustering an unprecedented mobilization of imperial resources, the war plunged the British Empire into the abyss. Here, it was to find itself inadequately defended, bankrupted, buffeted by the currents of growing nationalism and communism, and dependent for survival upon a rival power, the United States of America, which placed the end of European colonialism high on its agenda.

The story of the British Empire's war, therefore, is one of imperial success in contributing toward Allied victory on the one hand, and egregious imperial failure on the other, as Britain struggled to protect people and to feed them, and failed to win the loyalty of colonial subjects – many of whom viewed the end of British rule with an indifference that shocked the British – or anti-British political leaders in Burma, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq and Malaya, men prepared to court the enemy in their desperation to get the British out. Furthermore, Britain proved incapable of countering the corrosive effects of emerging anti-colonial superpowers that were ostensibly on the same side, or of cordoning off its own colonial affairs from the critical scrutiny of the newly founded United Nations.

With surprising parochialism, many accounts of 'Britain's war' neglect the imperial dimension that was an integral part of it. Furthermore, general histories of the Second World War – including ambitious edited volumes – often fail to capture the reliance that Britain placed upon colonial resources in prosecuting the war, and the war's impact on colonized peoples. This is part of a persistent imbalance that tends to marginalize the importance, say, of colonial food and raw materials for British larders and war industries, or the significance of imperial military formations, which were far more than just 'bolt-ons' to the British armed services. The importance of the imperial military contribution, and the Empire's role in producing the raw materials that fed Britain's global war effort, render these omissions striking. But more than this, the depth of the war's impact upon the territories and peoples of the British Empire – most of whom were 'at war' for no other reason than their colonized status – demands that this angle of vision become part of the standard British war story. Terror, mass migration, shortages, inflation, blackouts, air raids, massacres, famine, forced labour, urbanization, environmental damage, occupation, resistance, collaboration – all of these dramatic and often horrific phenomena shaped the war experience of Britain's imperial

subjects. Air raids over Calcutta, Darwin, Mandalay, Singapore or Valletta, civilians fleeing the Japanese in Burma or evacuating Gibraltar, ARP wardens and rationing in Cape Town and Halifax, political ferment, enemy occupation, and the devastation of combat – the territories of the British Empire witnessed them all. This chapter explores a range of themes which offer an overview of the empire's war experience. They include an assessment of the imperial character of the 'British' war effort; the empire's contribution to Allied victory in terms of military formations, logistics and civilian labour; the colonial home front and the significance of colonial resources; the war as an engine of political and economic change; and the rise of American power in the empire.

An imperial state and an imperial war effort

The British Empire was an integrated economic, political and military zone, a veritable imperial state. In 1939, Britain was the

only global power with interests in every continent and in theory the means to defend them. No other great power could match its combination of military (mainly naval) and economic strength or its latent ability to coerce its enemies. The intimidating scale of its territorial extent, including its self-governing member states and colonial possessions, made it hard to imagine the ultimate defeat of such a global leviathan.²

For Britain, the Second World War was an imperial conflict in four ways. First, the manner in which Britain fought the war was, to a significant extent, dictated by the geopolitical, logistical and resources logic of a global empire. Britain mobilized, strategized and fought imperially, using imperial military units, infrastructure and supply routes to fight campaigns in imperial zones, especially after Italy and Japan's entry into the war had made it a truly global struggle. It fought the war from the British Isles and from a network of imperial bases (in particular, Australia, Egypt and India, but also Canada, Ceylon, Singapore, South Africa and a host of smaller colonies). Be they bases for fuelling, victualling and ammunitioning warships and aircraft, docks or aerodromes, rest and recreation facilities, barracks and military headquarters establishments or intelligence-gathering posts linked to Bletchley Park, the empire provided the boards from which Britain's global war effort sprang.

2 John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 476.

Second, it was an imperial war in that enemy and Allied powers alike sought to eradicate or diminish Britain's interests overseas. The Axis states wanted to conquer British colonies or replace British influence with their own in key non-European regions, while America and Russia sought to substitute British geopolitical, military and commercial power with their own. Third, it was an imperial war in the sense that a fundamental British duty was the defence of the empire and the trade and communications networks that invested it with life and substance. This was a view reinforced by the imperialist Prime Minister at the centre of the war effort, and the Tory majority in the House of Commons. This basic requirement was the subject of formalized pre-war planning and shaped the patterns of military procurement and force dispersal that governed the activities and dispositions of the empire's military formations, collectively known as imperial defence.³

Fourth, the Second World War was an imperial conflict because Britain depended upon imperial resources for its own survival and its ability to fight its enemies. Furthermore, as the war progressed and a dramatically altered post-war world hovered into view, Britain relied increasingly on imperial raw materials and dollar-earning potential to attempt to recover its economic independence. In a world where its power was visibly contracting, Britain came consciously to rely upon the retention of its empire, gathered closely about it like a shawl against the cold.

Britain's international political and strategic posture rested upon its alliance with the semi-autonomous Dominions, and its possession of India and a vast colonial empire. Britain was a unique belligerent, especially after its kindred imperial powers, France and Holland, had been defeated. No other power could call upon the resources that imperial statehood enabled Britain to command. It possessed within the empire significant inter-operable military forces, capable of rapid expansion, and a highly developed defensive and offensive infrastructure. It could recruit South Africans into the British Army, Jamaicans into the RAF, and Chitagonians into the Merchant Navy, and possessed a treasure trove of strategic raw materials and other assets, envied by Britain's resource-hungry enemies.⁴

Being a part of an integrated imperial state conditioned the war experience of Britain and all of its colonies. It strongly influenced where British imperial

3 For an overview of the mechanisms of imperial defence, see Greg Kennedy (ed.), *Imperial Defence: The Old World Order, 1856–1956* (London: Routledge, 2008).

4 Raymond Dumett, 'Africa's Strategic Minerals During the Second World War', *Journal of African History* 26:4 (1985), 381–408.

forces fought – such as the Atlantic, Burma, East Africa, the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia and the Western Desert. It strongly influenced offensive and defensive priorities and military capabilities, the dispersal of resources and strategic prioritization, convoy and logistics routes. British power was imperial power; an empire of trade, commerce and global resources centred on Britain, cocooned by a system of imperial defence. The reverse side of this coin was that British weakness was imperial weakness, as perhaps was most graphically illustrated by the bankruptcy of the ‘Singapore strategy’, for so long brandished as a panacea for all the empire’s defensive nightmares east of Suez. The British Empire suffered from the scourges that afflict all empires: overstretch, internal opposition and external rivalry. And despite Britain’s experience of fighting global conflicts, the Second World War brought a novel dimension; for the first time, Britain faced first-class enemies not only in Europe and the Mediterranean, but in the Far East as well, and lost its chief strategic ally early in the conflict.

The sheer diversity of the imperial war effort is one of its most fascinating aspects. While much has been written about the war effort of the empire’s more advanced territories (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa), a galaxy of ‘lesser’ colonies were also touched by the war in significant ways. Places as diverse as Borneo, the Cocos-Keeling Islands, Gibraltar, Sudan and Somaliland saw military action and were developed as military bases. The Gilbert Islands in the Pacific were occupied by the Japanese, as were the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, many of the inhabitants murdered in the process. The war history of Diego Garcia, a tiny atoll in the Chagos archipelago, illustrates how even obscure ‘outposts of empire’ contributed to military operations and experienced distinct ‘home front’ challenges. In May 1941, it was decided to develop Diego Garcia and the Seychelles as way stations guarding vital Indian Ocean sea routes, and Addu Atoll in the Maldives as a secret fleet base in case Singapore was lost. To protect the sea lanes, surface, subsurface and air patrols were required, and this meant developing base facilities on remote islands, and, almost as importantly, denying them to the enemy. The decision to develop the island as a military base meant that its harbour, capable of accommodating ships up to the size of cruisers and light aircraft carriers, was equipped as a refuelling base. The island was kitted out for radio communications, as a wireless telegraphy network was cast across the Indian Ocean. Moorings and stores of fuel, ammunition and lubricants, sufficient to sustain flying-boats for a month of operations, were also built up, as Diego Garcia developed as an important base for operations, serving as part of a chain of

islands across the ocean that provided anchorages for the operations of Catalina and Sunderland flying-boats. By 1944, the RAF was flying thirty sorties a month from the island. Ground forces as well as anti-aircraft batteries were needed to protect this burgeoning infrastructure, and the Diego Garcia garrison settled initially at around 500 men from Indian coastal batteries and engineer and grenadier units.

The military contribution and logistical network

The military contribution of the British Empire was a key facet of the 'British' war effort. In particular, the role of the (mainly land) forces of the 'white' Dominions and India was a definitive feature of the war and of the military power at the command of the British government. In terms of military manpower, India contributed nearly 2.5 million men, Canada over 1 million, Australia just under 1 million, South Africa 410,000, and New Zealand 215,000. The colonial empire produced over 500,000 uniformed service personnel, the majority of them from Africa. Few 'British' units – be they air force squadrons, fleets or divisions – were solely British; the Canadian navy became the third largest in the world, and Canada fielded an entire army as part of the Twenty-First Army Group on D-Day; armies such as the Eighth, Tenth, Twelfth and Fourteenth were entirely pan-imperial in their composition; units such as the King's African Rifles and Royal West African Frontier Force performed significant combat roles in East Africa and Burma; and Australians played a prominent role in Bomber Command's operations in Europe. While attention usually focuses on the larger imperial formations, such as the ANZAC divisions in the Western Desert or the Indian Army units in Burma, and while that attention increases the closer units were to front-line action, the picture of the empire's military contribution remains incomplete without reference to the host of smaller units, often engaged in essential 'rear echelon' (meaning behind the front line) military activities. These included units such as the Royal Indian Navy and the colonial naval forces of Kenya, Malaya and Trinidad; the East African Military Labour Service, the Arab Labour Corps, the 100,000 colonial subjects recruited into the Royal Pioneer Corps, and the numerous military units either created or expanded because of the war, such as the Aden Protectorate Levies, the Mauritius Defence Force, the Fiji Volunteer Corps and the Hong Kong and Singapore Garrison Artillery. Of the 32,000 Merchant Navy fatalities, over 5,000 of them were colonial subjects.

These military formations, organized into large regional commands, relied on a huge network of military bases provided by colonial territories, such as Cape Town, where nearly 6 million service personnel stopped off between the east and the west during the war. Their operations also depended on imperial air, land and sea routes in terms of logistics. Sea routes were crucial to the British Empire's war effort, and numerous colonial ports were used as bases for their defence or suffered enemy attention because of their strategic location. Air routes traversed the empire, such as the 'Takoradi air route' that ferried over 10,000 aircraft across Africa to the Middle East and India. The same was true of land lines of communication, such as the Burma and Ledo roads and the 'African Line of Communication' which moved goods overland to the Middle East fighting fronts. Sudan's road and rail network conveyed 80,000 imperial troops and 5,000 military vehicles, its airfields refuelling 15,000 aircraft transiting across Africa. The Donegal air corridor was a narrow stretch of Ireland that the Dominion's supposedly neutral government secretly allowed the RAF to traverse in order to shorten the distance between a base in Northern Ireland and the Atlantic Ocean. Colonies and Dominions trained scores of thousands of pilots for the RAF as part of the British Empire Air Training Scheme. Shipyards were developed in Canada, Ceylon and South Africa that were indispensable in refitting and repairing the thousands of merchant vessels and warships of the Merchant Navy and the Royal Navy and its colonial and Dominion partners.

Colonial home fronts

The concept of the home front is a familiar one in accounts of the British war effort, but it should also be applied to the territories of the British Empire because the war had significant, indeed sometimes profound, impacts upon the social, cultural and economic life of the empire's people. The war brought taxation, rationing, price controls and inflation, as well as profiteering. For some, it brought opportunity: military employment offered better wages, though many people were compelled to join the military or perform war-related jobs. Sex workers moved to towns in places such as Sierra Leone, to be nearer to the market created by concentrations of Allied and imperial service personnel. In territories such as India and South Africa, the war stimulated significant industrialization. But on the whole, consumption was reduced in the colonies, mirroring what was happening in Britain. Colonial home fronts were impacted by food shortages – sometimes leading

to famine – and by dietary shifts, as staple foodstuffs such as rice disappeared from larders, and new ones, such as wheat, were introduced, requiring the deployment of ‘nutrition demonstration units’ offering bread-making lessons. The notorious Bengal famine of 1943 killed between 1.5 and 4 million people, and the presence of British and Russian occupying forces in Iran added to the food crisis of the Iranian population.

The Second World War was a war of strategic raw materials and competing labour demands. From the early days of conflict, the British government was thinking anxiously about colonial resources – including the need to deny those of French West Africa to the enemy (and secure them for itself) should France fall. The need to produce more food affected the whole empire; more food needed to be produced because less was being imported, and many regions needed to produce extra in order to feed concentrations of imperial troops, a relationship established, for example, between Britain’s East African colonies and the enormous Middle East Command to its north, with a ration strength of up to a million personnel. Yet there were competing demands for labour – the imperial military had a voracious appetite for man- and woman-power, as too did war-related industries and business involved in producing essential raw materials. Many colonies walked the man- and woman-power tightrope; more women, children and old people were called upon to do what had previously been considered ‘men’s jobs’. War placed an enormous burden on colonial societies in terms of civil and military labour demands, the production of food and raw materials, and the operation of a global military and logistics system that depended on ‘native’ labour, including clearing ground for runways and constructing road networks and anti-tank defences.

New sources of colonial production were urgently developed once traditional sources had been taken by the Japanese; the loss of Malaya, for instance, led to a great expansion of Nigeria’s tin industry, involving forced labour. With the loss of American and Dutch colonies in the East Indies, British African pyrethrum and sisal became highly sought-after. With the Japanese conquest of Britain’s rubber plantations in Malaya, Ceylon rubber production soared, to the point where trees were slaughter-tapped to meet war demand; and Africa, which had accounted for only 1 per cent of global rubber output in 1939, was producing 30 per cent by 1945. Wartime demand for railway sleepers and other timber products rescued the Tanganyikan forestry industry, while in order to secure crucial oilfields and refineries, Britain invaded and occupied southern Iran and remilitarized Iraq. The war deepened the connection between colonial regions and the metropolitan and

wider global economies. Britain benefited from the colonies as captive sources of supply in a time of great need. Regional marketing boards, such as the West African Supply Board, were created to rationalize the extraction of colonial products, such as palm oil, a priority commodity for the British ration. Bulk purchasing became widespread, and organizations such as the Middle East Supply Centre wielded enormous power in the import, export and distribution arrangements of huge regions.

War brought manifold disruptions, even to colonies far from the fighting fronts, such as Bechuanaland, landlocked in south central Africa, or Rodrigues in the middle of the Indian Ocean, where people prayed en masse to be delivered from the prospect of Japanese invasion. In Nigeria's Abeokutu district, struggles over foodstuffs between civilians and the military sharpened political tensions, as people sought to defend themselves in a new economic environment.⁵ Freetown, meanwhile, by virtue of its status as a principal naval base and convoy mustering point, with up to 200 vessels in harbour during peak periods, experienced rapid urbanization. Its expansion and strategic importance caused the colonial government to attempt to stimulate a wartime mentality among the population, and also brought strikes among workers developing their collective bargaining power.

As an additional disruption to people's lives, the war caused significant migrations and shifting patterns of temporary settlement. Tens of thousands fled the Japanese advance from Burma into India, and similar numbers of Polish refugees crossed from the USSR into Iran and India via the Caspian Sea.⁶ Thousands of civilians and military personnel fled the Dutch East Indies, Malaya and Singapore for Australia and Ceylon. Ceylon then became home to tens of thousands of African, Australian, British and Indian servicemen and women, initially in order to resist a possible Japanese attack, and then as it became a major base for military operations in Burma, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Bechuanaland lost 20 per cent of its adult male population to the army, and many more to the mines of South Africa, which were given permission to recruit despite the manpower shortage, because gold and minerals were considered vital war-related materials. Jews fleeing Central Europe were dispersed around

5 Judith Byfield, 'Feeding the Troops: Soldiers, Rice, and Economic Crisis in Abeokutu (Nigeria) During the Second World War', in Judith Byfield, Carolyn Brown, Timothy Parsons and Ahmad Sikaingi (eds.), *Africa in World War Two* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

6 Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The Second Homeland: Polish Refugees in India* (London: Sage, 2012).

the empire, having been denied access to Palestine, including 1,500 who spent the war as internees in Mauritius.⁷ Gibraltar's civilian population was almost entirely evacuated in order to expedite its conversion into a military bastion; in Malta, Valletta's population fell from 21,000 to 6,000, and 35,000 houses were destroyed or damaged, with over 5,000 Maltese citizens killed or wounded. Thousands of European civilians fled Egypt and Malaya and headed for Australia, Ceylon and South Africa. The bombing of Calcutta caused people to flee, as did the April 1942 raids on Colombo and Trincomalee. The Japanese bombing of Rangoon on 23 December 1941 caused an exodus of 75 per cent of the city's population. On Masirah Island at the mouth of the Persian Gulf,

a considerable amount of trouble was encountered with the local inhabitants in connection with the unloading of stores for HM [His Majesty's] Forces stationed there. As a result, most of the people fled from the Island and only a few have since returned. There are, however, now several hundred Muscati and a few Aden labourers who have been brought to the Island for the work required by the British and US Forces there.⁸

A minor, yet representative example of the fact that any place, anywhere, gains strategic importance, and the lives of these few hundred marginalized people, disrupted by war, are as much a part of the war's story as are those of the people on the British home front.

Partly as a result of the multiple migrations of civilians and military personnel, the war fostered a range of cross-cultural contacts between indigenous people and outsiders, as well as significant environmental change. Some had the most profound consequences, such as the cargo cults of New Guinea and certain Melanesian islands. Overwhelmed with the material bounty of Japanese or Allied soldiers during their transient stay, when the occupiers departed, ceremonies and rituals developed in order to get the 'cargo' to return, often involving the crude manufacture of imitation docks or aerodromes, and transmitters made of wood and coconut.⁹ Transnational relations had noticeable effects in other parts of the empire too: the enormous war effort of India, and the deep penetration of war-related activity,

7 See Genevieve Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel: The Story of Jewish Refugees in Mauritius, 1940–1945* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

8 The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CAB 66/66/3, Arabia – Acquisition of Masirah Island as a Permanent RAF Base, Memorandum by the Secretaries of State for Air and India, 29 May 1945.

9 See Holger Jebens (ed.), *Cargo, Cult and Culture Critique* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

reshaped military and civilian relations.¹⁰ Widespread prostitution was one aspect of the gendered wartime economy, closely linked to the subcontinent's militarization and to the effects of the 1943 Bengal famine. Elsewhere, Nigerian prostitutes moved to the Gold Coast to take advantage of the influx of foreign troops.¹¹

As well as the repercussions associated with the arrival of large numbers of soldiers, for civilians in many colonies the war's main effects were the reduction of supplies and the growing disruption brought by military activities. This had a range of effects, including changing use of land and buildings and an increase in the volume of traffic, both on land and in the air. In some colonies, tracts of land were taken over for the construction of military bases – barracks, airstrips and so on – or cordoned off as 'no go' areas reserved for military activities, such as jungle training and live firing exercises, including naval gunfire support. Vast swathes of bush and forest were cleared across the empire; coconut trees were bulldozed on the Cocos-Keeling Islands, so that pierced steel planking could be laid down for runways from which RAF aircraft could operate over occupied Southeast Asia, while Mountbatten's new South East Asia Command aerodrome in Ceylon destroyed 7,000 trees. Other land, meanwhile, was made over to food crops in an effort to boost self-sufficiency, given the shortage of shipping and available imports. In Bechuanaland, tribal chiefs were required to allocate communal 'war lands' and oblige their people to work them in order to build food reserves. In Ceylon, a sophisticated poster campaign associated growing food with supporting the war effort, and booklets on how to grow better crops were distributed, along with stickers and calendars encouraging ever greater agricultural endeavour. Special labour gangs, such as the Mauritius Civil Labour Corps and the Cochin State Civil Labour Unit, were recruited to perform war-related home front tasks. As in Britain, digging for victory became a major theme, encountered in the propaganda of the colonial state and in people's daily lives.

The extent to which the empire's home front experience mirrored that of Britain was evident in many ways, such as the requisitioning of buildings for military purposes. The National Museum of Ceylon in Colombo was commandeered as Army Headquarters, its collections damaged or lost in the

10 See Yasmin Khan, 'Sex in an Imperial War Zone: Transnational Encounters in Second World War India', *History Workshop Journal* 73:1 (2012), 240–58.

11 Carina Ray, 'Racial Politics of Anti-Prostitution Legislation: Sex Trade in British West Africa', in Byfield et al. (eds.), *Africa and World War Two*.

hasty removal and storage. The Gordon Memorial College on the banks of the Blue Nile in Khartoum was taken over for the same purpose, hampering the college's move toward university college status; students were obliged to evacuate King's College Lagos to make way for service personnel, leading to a student strike. In Colombo, schools and colleges were requisitioned for the Far East Combined Bureau, an intelligence outpost of Bletchley Park, and for the Eastern Fleet's large shore establishment. The Raffles Hotel in Singapore was taken over by the Japanese, then at the end of the war employed as a transit camp for liberated prisoners of war returning home. The headquarters building of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Statue Square, Hong Kong, was employed as the headquarters of the Japanese army, the bank's operations moving to London for the duration. In Bangalore, Chinese evacuees from Malacca were ordered to leave their houses for 'so-called Military use'. A concerned Tan Cheng Lock, a prominent Chinese Malayan public figure, feared for his home-in-exile on Millers Road. Having fled his home in Singapore, his new home in Bangalore was threatened with requisition, the military already having taken over the grounds of the Theological College next door.¹² In Singapore, the clubhouse of the Ceylon Sports Club was used by the British Army to store drums of petrol, until dynamited the evening before the island surrendered. The Japanese military then built barracks on the site, and its playing fields were cultivated in order to grow banana, tapioca and sweet potato.¹³

Occupation and liberation (to the extent that genuine liberation was ever possible in the context of competing imperialisms) are essential themes in the study of the British Empire at war, because many British colonies either fell to the enemy or were threatened by them (most notably the Japanese, but also the Germans, Italians and Vichy French), and because the British occupied significant Italian and French colonial holdings in Africa and the Indian Ocean region, as well as acting as proxy colonial liberators on behalf of France and Holland in Indochina and the East Indies. The Gilbert and Solomon Islands and New Guinea in the Pacific, Hong Kong, Brunei, North Borneo, Sarawak, Labuan, Singapore, Malaya, Burma, parts of India, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were taken by the Japanese, British Somaliland, more briefly, by the Italians.

12 TCL Papers, Institute of South-east Asian Studies, Singapore, TCL 16/6, Tan Cheng Lock to Walter Fletcher, 1 March 1943.

13 National Archives of Singapore, CORD 002330, transcript of interview with Velayuther Ambivagar.

Furthermore, many British colonies and ex-colonies were ‘occupied’ during the war by significant concentrations of Allied service personnel, including Australia, Ceylon, Egypt, Fiji, the Gold Coast, India, Iraq, Sierra Leone and the West Indies. ‘Cairo still looks like an occupied city with camps all round it and in some of its parks’, reported a British official in 1945.¹⁴ Britain’s occupation by hundreds of thousands of American service personnel was replicated across the empire, the presence of American units reflecting the republic’s waxing power across the globe. The USA grew rapidly as a power in regions where the British traditionally claimed paramountcy. The September 1940 destroyers-for-bases agreement brought a growing American presence into parts of Newfoundland and the British West Indies; at one time, there were 20,000 Americans in Trinidad; over 10,000 in the Gold Coast, operating the air route across Africa to the Middle East; and 30,000 in Iran, as part of the new US Persian Gulf Command. Some British Pacific colonies were swamped with foreign soldiers too, and over a million Americans (including 100,000 African Americans) were based in Australia, ‘over-sexed and over-paid’ ‘Yanks’ stimulating the same kind of reaction as they did when billeted for lengthy periods near civilian populations in Britain.¹⁵ Australian indigenous peoples and those of islands such as the New Hebrides wondered at the appearance, comportment and apparent affluence and power of African Americans. In Ceylon and Mauritius, meanwhile, local people were afraid of African troops, fearing their rumoured ‘savagery’ and even fleeing villages in order to avoid them.

Political change

While the traumas visited upon the French imperial structure because of metropolitan defeat were not shared by the British, local defeat in so many colonies irrevocably altered the basis of colonial rule once it had been re-established, and also fostered civil conflict in places such as Malaya, and between pro-Vichy and pro-Free French factions in Mauritius. The war greatly accelerated India’s move toward independence, transformed the politics of Palestine, and brought demands for constitutional advance in

¹⁴ TNA, CAB 66/67/5, Imperial Security in the Middle East, 2 July 1945.

¹⁵ See Philip Bell and Roger Bell, *Implicated: The United States in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993). Fascinating recent work examines anti-racist and anti-colonial connections between Indians and African Americans. See Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2009).

colonies such as Ceylon and Nigeria. It is easy, from a metropolitan vantage point, to miss the tumult that war brought to many parts of the empire. On the political level, it transformed Britain's capacity to retain the empire because it destroyed the global preconditions upon which the British world system depended. On the ground in the colonies, war upset political relationships, increased the potency of nationalism, and strained the collaborative relations upon which British rule was based, as colonial intermediaries were asked to demand more of their people, and in turn demanded more of the British, and often took the opportunity to ask for political advancement in return.

From the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean to the Gilbert Islands in the Pacific, via the Malay barrier and Borneo, the British and their imperial allies were defeated by Japanese occupying forces, later to return as liberators. In attempting to expel the enemy, the British faced the awkward implications of arming movements resisting the Japanese that would later strive to eject the British, or working with forces, such as the Burma National Army, that had until recently fought for the enemy. The war also weakened (though by no means severed) Britain's political influence vis-à-vis the 'white' Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. These were the core members of the British Commonwealth-Empire, technically independent since the Statute of Westminster, but dependent upon Britain in numerous ways, not least for their security. Ensuring the unity of the Commonwealth alliance had been a key consideration in the diplomacy leading to the declaration of war in September 1939. But the war speeded up the Dominions' push for greater autonomy within a redefined imperial framework, and Britain's inability to guarantee their security further loosened the ties that bound. Symbolizing this transforming relationship, Australia, Canada and New Zealand concluded formal defence treaties with America, the coming superpower, which excluded Britain.

The loss of political authority in conquered colonies was lethal for the future prospects of the British Empire. So, too, were some of the measures employed to win these territories back or foment resistance to Japanese invaders, such as arming and aiding (though never controlling) Chinese communist rebels of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, many of whom would later oppose the colonial regime during the Malayan Emergency. The occupation itself significantly altered the political landscape – for example, the authority of the Malayan kings, upon which the British sought to rebuild their rule, had been seriously diminished by Japanese policies. The same was true in Palestine, a territory where war completely

undermined Britain's already precarious position. Here, military authorities allowed Jewish paramilitary and intelligence outfits a great deal of autonomy, to the chagrin of the Palestine government, in order to prepare the mandate for possible German attack. Before the war, the British had been trying to negotiate the Arab-Jewish tightrope, keen to use Palestine as a strategic base in case its position in Egypt became untenable. The Holocaust, adroit wartime manoeuvring by the Zionist movement, and the mounting gravity of the USA's voice in Palestinian affairs, meant that at the end of the war, British ambitions for the territory were in tatters. Rather than seeing Palestine as a potential base for the Middle East strategic reserve, the British now looked simply for a speedy exit from the Palestine imbroglio with the least possible dishonour, while salvaging the best possible relations with the region's Arab polities. Again indicating the way in which the war transformed relations between Britain and colonial and semi-colonial regions, London's gaze now came to rest on Libya as a base for British interests in the region.¹⁶

The war was also a game-changer for Britain's position in India. With the August offer (1940) and the Cripps offer (1942), promising post-war independence, London effectively abdicated control of the constitutional timetable. This was a novel and unforeseen eventuality born of the dire circumstances of early 1942, when imperial redoubts were crumbling east of Suez, Rommel was approaching Cairo, and Japanese forces had entered India. This situation, and the reliance on Muslim India for soldiers, also turned the prospect of a separate Pakistani state from a pipedream into a real political possibility.

The need to curb protest and ensure a clear field for military tasks led to 'war imperialism' – robust military and police actions considered necessary in terms of winning the war, but auguring ill for attempts to win the colonial peace. Such actions included imprisoning political opponents and threatening or deposing unhelpful rulers. Thus, in India, leading Congressmen were incarcerated and their activities outlawed; in Iraq, Britain overthrew Rashid Ali's government because of his anti-British and pro-Nazi predilections and his attack on British bases in his country; in Cairo, the Abdin Palace was surrounded by armoured cars, and the khedive offered the choice of signing a British-prepared abdication document or appointing a less pro-Nazi government. In order to protect its vital oil interests, in 1941, Britain invaded Iran in conjunction with the Russians, and deposed and exiled the Shah. Political

16 See Saul Kelly, *War and Politics in the Desert: Britain and Libya During the Second World War* (London: Society for Libyan Studies, 2010).

change caused by the war could be slow-burning; in Kenya, wartime food shortages enabled white settlers to farm their land profitably, and because of this, they gained greater political purchase over the colonial state. They were able to eject Kikuyu 'squatters' from their land, thus creating the conditions that led to the Mau Mau rebellion.

Mobilizing the empire to assist in Britain's fight against the Axis powers required bargaining with colonial elites and their people. In West Africa, there was a view among the educated elite, articulated in the region's vibrant African-owned press, that while fighting Hitler and racism was a logical thing to do, Africans should expect to see political advancement once the war had ended. The wording of the Atlantic Charter, signed by Churchill and Roosevelt in August 1941, was widely reported, and its expansive pledges to non-independent peoples duly noted, to Churchill's chagrin. U Saw, the Burmese leader, asked Churchill during a meeting in October 1941 to apply the Charter's third clause, the right to self-determination, in the case of Burma, in return for support during the war.

Propaganda activities were needed in order to try to win people's favour and active participation, and this required the construction of arguments about the benefits of British rule. Posters, leaflets and films devised under the aegis of the Crown Film Unit and the Ministry of Information were all deployed in pursuit of this, as were agents such as Freya Stark, battling Axis influence in Aden and Iraq. 'Partnership' replaced 'trusteeship' in the language of colonial administration, and Americans were targeted, Lord Hailey assigned the task of showing the sceptical ally how enlightened British rule really was.¹⁷

As the war developed, it was widely recognized that new constitutions were needed for politically advanced colonies such as Ceylon and Nigeria, and for those such as Burma which had been occupied. An indication of the speed of the political shifts caused by the war was the abortive nature of constitutions and political plans intended to be applied when the British regained their colonies from the Japanese. The Malayan Planning Unit was established in the War Office's Civil Affairs Directorate in July 1943, comprising nearly 300 military and civilian officials planning for the insertion of a British Military Administration once the Japanese had been evicted. It envisioned the post-war world, while Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, Governor of Burma, sat in exile in the Indian hill station of Simla planning for the future.

¹⁷ Suke Wolton, *Lord Hailey, the Colonial Office, and the Politics of Race and Empire During the Second World War: The Loss of White Prestige* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

Often, the meticulously crafted new constitutions were stillborn, such was the power and pace of the political demands tabled by increasingly articulate colonial politicians. In Ceylon, ministers had originally accepted the 1943 Declaration as a basis for interim reforms which would enable them to increase the war effort of Ceylon. But little more than a year later, Mr Senanayake, Leader of the State Council, said that he was 'no longer prepared to proceed on the basis of the 1943 Declaration, but wished to press for the grant of Dominion Status'. In making his 'plea', Senanayake said that he was expressing the views of 'the great majority of the people of Ceylon'. He was unwilling to sponsor the recommendations of the Soulbury Commission, responsible for constitutional advance in Ceylon, without something to show for his visit to Britain.¹⁸ The May 1945 White Paper on Burmese constitutional advance offered a completely underwhelming three-stage programme of gradual political advancement, leading to possible independence no earlier than 1953. Burmese nationalists would not countenance it.

Demands for independence and pressure on the empire from outside occurred just as Whitehall came to appreciate fully how deeply Britain's economic recovery depended upon it, and how essential it was to Britain's status as a world power. The Middle East serves as an example of a region where these difficulties were starkly manifest. It was identified by the British government as essential to Britain's continued position as a world power. The Middle East abounded with 'vital' features and resources: Egypt and the Levant remained of great strategic importance; the region was a channel of communications, a strategic centre, the empire's main oil reservoir and, in the words of Sir Edward Bridges (Cabinet Office) and Sir Edward Grigg (Resident Minister Middle East), 'a region in which British political method must make good, if the British way of life is to survive'. The government considered it 'a region of life-and-death consequence for Britain and the British Empire'. But securing British interests here had become tougher as a result of the war. Political and financial conditions dictated policy: in pursuing British interests in the Middle East, for example, 'we are now entering an era in which political considerations will infallibly predominate'.¹⁹ While military strength remained important, Bridges and Grigg told the War Cabinet, 'we shall not be able in peace to ride roughshod over political considerations as we have done at necessity in war'. Acknowledging

¹⁸ TNA, CAB 129/3, Cabinet, Ceylon Constitution, Report by the Lord Privy Seal, Chairman of the Colonial Affairs Committee, 23 October 1945.

¹⁹ TNA, CAB 66/67/5, Imperial Security in the Middle East, 2 July 1945.

the superpowers' new-found strength, and Britain's need for allies, the British government also recognized that its 'status and influence' depended upon its being the 'parent state' to the Commonwealth. Hard work lay ahead if this position was to be maintained in the Middle East, the report recognized, and Britain could not 'expect the sensitive young nationalist movements of the Middle East to accept direction and control from us merely because it is necessary to us'. People had to be persuaded and, using classic horse-and-rider imperial language, 'we must ride them with the loosest possible rein. . .humouring their national sensitivities in every possible way', especially by giving 'close attention to the trappings of national independence' and fielding 'American complaints against us'. But as the British were soon to discover, in the post-war climate, this was to be insufficient nourishment for a new, more powerful and increasingly globalized anti-colonialism.

The rise of other powers and the United Nations

Another factor weakening the empire was the rise of other powers, accelerated by the war, which threatened British imperial interests. One such power was China, though it was the USA's tremendous ascent in parts of the world previously dominated by Britain, including the Mediterranean and parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, that stood out. The war brought American competition for markets in many parts of the empire, demands for the termination of the old system of closed colonial economies, and the foundations of a new, American-led world order. It also brought a large military footprint, including hundreds of Flying Fortresses and Super Fortresses stationed in India. Churchill lamented the subordination of British strategy to American aims in places such as Burma, the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia, and clashed with Roosevelt over India's political future. In the Middle East, the USA encouraged state builders to 'transcend British tutelage en route to American-mandated post-colonial status'.²⁰ Anglo-American competition was visible in many parts of the world, such as the tussle over Venezuelan oil as two allied but rival commercial powers jockeyed for advantage; and in Saudi Arabia, where American petroleum rights were compromised by sterling area provisions.²¹

20 Simon Davis, 'The Middle East and World War Two', in Thomas Zeiler (ed.), *A Companion to World War Two* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), pp. 317–21.

21 See Mark Seddon, 'Incorporating Corporations: Anglo-American Oil Diplomacy and Conflict Over Venezuela, 1941–1943', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 10:2 (2012), 134–49; and Davis, 'The Middle East and World War Two', for Saudi Arabia.

The USA's entry into previously exclusively British zones, often as a dominant partner, and its ambivalent or distinctly critical stance on British 'imperialism', created interfaces of friction all over the world. The High Commissioner in Pretoria, Sir Evelyn Baring, wrote that American influence in South Africa 'will produce many thorny problems for you [the British government]'.²² The nationalists, Baring reported, look to the USA, not Britain. 'American influence is growing in many spheres of life. American ideas are welcomed by Nationalists who wish to be rid of the charge of being isolationists yet continue to hate the British'. The USA was all the rage, the High Commissioner noting, for example, that there was a demand for American cars which were 'far more suitable to rough conditions than British models'. Other examples of 'American infiltration' included the popularity of American expertise on the soil erosion question.

Whitehall monitored the 'receptioning' of Americans in the colonies. In the Pacific and the Caribbean, troubled waters had to be calmed at intergovernmental level, and prickly British officers or governors moved on in order to placate incoming Americans and smooth Allied relations. Such moves included the dispatch of Sir Bede Clifford from Mauritius to the governorship of Trinidad, where it was hoped that his pro-American outlook, American wife and personal friendship with the President would help resolve problems caused by the influx of American service personnel and senior commanders and the resistance of in situ British authorities.

At Yalta, Churchill 'declared that Britain would not permit the Empire to be placed in the dock and subjected to international examination'.²³ But the Yalta Protocol committed Britain to consult with the USA and China on colonial matters.²⁴ This was a familiar pattern toward the end of the war: Britain proclaiming in stentorian voice that the empire was not up for grabs, its future not negotiable, while all around its status in the international order was being renegotiated, despite attempts to ring-fence it from the unwelcome intrusions of external powers and 'busybody' organizations like the UN. The threat could also come from within the fold; though the British government was keen to ensure maximum unity with the Dominions in

22 TNA, CAB 129/2, Cabinet, Political Affairs in South Africa. Memorandum by Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 18 September 1945, letter from Sir Evelyn Baring (22 August 1945).

23 Piers Brendon, 'Churchill and Empire', in Brian Farrell (ed.), *Churchill and the Lion City: Shaping Modern Singapore* (National University of Singapore Press, 2011), p. 27.

24 TNA, CAB 66/64/8, War Cabinet, International Aspects of Colonial Policy, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 31 March 1945.

order to gain their support at international meetings such as the 1945 Council of Foreign Ministers, colonial politicians were themselves arguing for change.²⁵ India wanted out, and Australia and New Zealand ‘strongly urged that the United Kingdom Government should take the lead in putting our Colonies under some measure of international trusteeship’. While the thrust of this drive was aimed at colonies being returned to France and Portugal, whose colonial record was considered less than ideal, it was necessary for Britain to comply too. It ‘was just as important to do something to meet American criticism, however unjustified, of the Colonial activities of the Commonwealth’.²⁶ Frustrated British policy-makers pointed to alleged American double standards – for example, regarding the desire to retain islands prised from the Japanese by American arms. ‘The one thing that matters is that the United States, while occupying the islands, should not appear to have theoretical sovereignty over them (for that would be Imperialism)’.²⁷ The British, for their part, were desperate to avoid ‘throwing the whole Colonial Empire open to discussion by this motley assembly’.²⁸

Conclusion

Appearances can be deceptive. Because the British Empire emerged from the debris of war intact, and because the first major decolonization did not take place until two years had elapsed between the guns falling silent and the lowering of the Union Flag in India, it might appear that the war did not significantly affect the British Empire. Nothing could be further from the truth. The war holed the British Empire below the waterline, and from 1945 on, it was a slowly sinking vessel that had been taking on water even before the conflict erupted. After that, it was all about managing decline and attempting to deal with the Cold War and retain a world role. Though there were bursts of imperial vigour after the war, not least the ‘second colonial occupation’ of Africa and Southeast Asia, they were born of now terminal weakness and the overwhelming need to rely on the empire, given that

25 TNA FO 800/443, Private Papers of Sir Ernest Bevin: Commonwealth and Colonial Territories, 1945–1946, Notes of Meeting in the Foreign Secretary’s Room, 21 August 1945.

26 TNA, CAB 66/64/28, War Cabinet, International Aspects of Colonial Policy, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 10 April 1945.

27 TNA, CAB 66/63/55, War Cabinet, International Aspects of Colonial Policy, Memorandum by the Chairman of the Armistice and Post-War Committee, 28 March 1945.

28 TNA, CAB 66/64/8, War Cabinet, International Aspects of Colonial Policy, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 31 March 1945.

Britain had hit the buffers. Like a necromancer summoning his most puissant spell, the war educed the most remarkable display of imperial power, yet in that very effort enervated it to the point of collapse. This unravelling was aided by the demands of colonial peoples for a measure of the 'New Jerusalem' and enhanced democracy that the people of Britain were being offered as a reward for their wartime efforts.

Having said all that, this only became clear with hindsight. Looking forward from the vantage point of 1945 into an unknown future, it was all to play for, and British policy-makers set to the task with gusto. Yes, India had been offered independence and it was only a matter of time before it was granted. But the rest of the empire remained in tow, and the Dominions had not yet flown the nest, even though they were becoming far bolder in testing their wings. The determination on the part of the British government to ensure that the British Empire-Commonwealth remained a major force in global affairs remained strong too. Even though the war had irrevocably undermined the empire, some things took time to change. As the war was ending, the British government was manoeuvring to acquire new territory in order to protect its strategic interests. Libya was desired; so too was Masirah Island. The Secretaries of State for Air and for India recommended to the Cabinet that the government acquire a ninety-nine-year lease on the island from the Sultan of Muscat.²⁹ The island was valued as an air and naval base for patrolling the region, as a staging post on the South Arabian reinforcement and transport route to India, and as the hub of an air cover system also involving Aden, Bombay and Karachi. Brigadier Enoch Powell, meanwhile, was in Delhi as part of a planning team considering how to fight the next world war, against the USSR, using India as a strategic base.

Even though British rule remained in place throughout most of the empire, its geostrategic foundations had shifted. As Jan Smuts wrote to the Foreign Secretary in December 1945, 'in the Pacific in particular the UK will in future be largely dependent on the USA for the defence of British Commonwealth interests'.³⁰ The British Empire was beset by advancing threats. The international political landscape was visibly shifting to Britain's disadvantage, the country was bankrupt and nationalism stronger than ever before. Ultimately, the greatest threat came from Britain's allies and forces inside the empire, not from the enemies against which it had fought.

29 TNA, CAB 66/66/3, Cabinet, Arabia – Acquisition of Masirah Island as a Permanent RAF Base, Memorandum by the Secretaries of State for Air and India, 29 May 1945.

30 TNA, FO 800/443, Foreign Office to British Delegation Moscow, 21 December 1945.

The Foreign Office, in particular, was preoccupied, as the war's end came into sight, with the global implications of the emerging Cold War, adjusting to the protrusion of American power and the novel demands of the emergent United Nations, and dealing with Commonwealth, particularly Australian, desires for greater autonomy and greater consultation and cooperation. Metropolitan dependence on the empire for economic recovery was a symptom of war, leading to measures such as the 1945 Colonial Development and Welfare Act. It was a milestone piece of legislation, heralding a new policy regarding metropolitan investment in colonial development, a grand scheme to stimulate British recovery through more profitable colonial development policies.

Imperial territories, meanwhile, had been transformed by the war. Burma, for instance, had been devastated by two major military campaigns, laid waste by both sides, and its economy ruined. The High Commissioner in South Africa reported that rising gold prices started a boom that was given added impetus by war spending. This featured British government expenditure on provisions for convoys, investment in facilities for the South African branch of the British Empire Air Training Scheme, ship repairs, the receipt of large orders from members of the Eastern Group Supply Council, and demand for South African manufactured goods from adjoining territories deprived of overseas shipments.³¹ By 1945, South Africa had become a creditor country and had built up a large number of secondary industries, notably state-owned steel, coal and iron. These developments, together with the problems associated with soil exhaustion, had led to a drift to the towns. Riots and racial divisions were becoming more intense, and pass laws and labour migration were key issues.

Chairing a session of the War Cabinet in April 1945, Winston Churchill welcomed Field Marshal Smuts, Peter Fraser (Prime Minister of New Zealand), Frank Forde (Australian Minister of Defence), Dr Herbert Evatt (Australia's Minister for External Affairs), Field Marshal Lord Wavell (Viceroy of India) and Sir Firoz Khan Noon (member of the Viceroy's Council and Indian delegate at the San Francisco Conference). The meeting reviewed the 'world situation', the Prime Minister stating that 'recent developments had caused him to reflect upon the future role of the British

³¹ The Eastern Group Supply Council was formed in Delhi in October 1940, aimed at joint war supply of munitions and stores for 'eastern group' colonies, to ensure fullest cooperation for war purposes and to relieve Britain of as much of the burden of overseas war production and supply as possible.

Commonwealth in world affairs'. It was a gloomy picture. Difficulties with the USSR were mounting, and American power was now 'vastly superior to our own'. These were the 'dominating facts in the world situation', and Britain could only hold its own by 'superior statecraft and experience and, above all, by the unity of the British Commonwealth of Nations'. Smuts, Jonah-like, pointed out the continued need for secure sea lines of communication – the empire's spinal column – but that, problematically, Britain was no longer the predominant naval power. Relations with the Dominions were increasingly ambiguous. The most dramatic development in Britain's modern imperial history was gathering pace too: at this Cabinet meeting, Wavell argued that India was the 'urgent' post-war problem, and that the prestige and power of the British Commonwealth would depend very largely on 'our having found a solution of the Indian problem' and launched it as an important player in world affairs.³²

John Darwin writes that the 'strategic catastrophe of 1938 to 1942 and its devastating impact on the central elements of [the British world] system, were together so crushing that recovery (after 1945) was merely short-lived remission'.³³ Because of the war, Britain lost the vast bulk of its sterling assets, especially its dollars, wrecking the balance of payments; and its property empire was, to a large degree, liquidated. This forced Britain's retreat into a closed sterling zone and gravely damaged prospects of industrial modernization. The war transformed the terms of the Anglo-American relationship, making Britain dependent on the United States of America, a dependence only marginally offset by the value of Britain's contribution to a widening Cold War. The war also brought 'the lapse of Britain's claim to the (more or less) unconditional loyalty of the overseas dominions, and the irrecoverable offer of independence to India to meet the desperate emergency of 1942, marked the practical end of the British system created in the mid-nineteenth century'.³⁴

32 CAB 65/52/1 WM (45), 39th Conclusions, Minute 1, Confidential Annex, 3 April 1945, Review of World Situation. Noon made a fascinating point, saying that when he 'reflected upon the magnitude of India's war effort, he was sometimes surprised that China should be generally regarded as the fifth of the Great Powers; and he wondered whether it might not prove wiser to look to India rather than China to play a leading role in world affairs in the East after the war'.

33 Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 649.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 14.