

The British Empire and WWII – David Gray

You might think that this is a bold statement; nevertheless, I believe it to be true:

“Apart from Britain and its Empire, every other country that fought in WWII did so either to directly defend themselves from attack or to gain territory.”

Britain declared war on Germany after the latter invaded Poland on 1st September 1939. France also declared war as she too was party to the same mutual defence agreement with Poland. However, Germany invaded France in May 1940 before Britain or France could carry out any realistic action against Germany, the ‘Phoney War’. Britain already had an expeditionary force in France which had begun arriving on 4th September. Britain now found herself having to help defend France as well as Poland.



British troops disembarking in France. From a British newspaper report on 3rd September 1939

Now let me narrow this down until we are left with just Britain and its Empire, first by removing all the countries allied with the Axis. I think we can state these were in it for territory and power.



Next, all the countries in Europe that were invaded and occupied by the Germans. E.g. **France, Belgium, Holland, Norway and Denmark**. Clearly there was nothing they could do about it; they had to fight for their existence or accept defeat.

Now let's rule out **Soviet Russia**. Russia invaded Poland (*left*), and Finland for territory (she invaded a few other states too). Then in 1941 she was invaded herself by the Germans so had to fight for survival.

We can remove the **United States** as she was neutral when the war broke out and even when she was able to help Britain with Lend Lease supplies, Roosevelt told the American people that helping Britain was crucial for the defence of the United States,

so it was in the interests of their own defence. Later Germany and Japan declared war on them so they were forced into it.

Summing up the United States' thinking:

- Britain's survival was seen as key to preventing German hegemony over Europe.
- Roosevelt believed that if Britain fell, the U.S. would be the next major target.
- Supporting Britain wasn't just "altruism" – it was also hard-nosed security policy.

This also nails the oft heard comment that the Americans came over and saved our skins. Their motive, no matter how much it was appreciated and let's admit, it was extremely welcome. It was only ever born out of self interest.

What about **China**? The Japanese invaded China on 7th July 1937, so they were embroiled in a fight for survival well before WWII even began.

I think that just leaves Britain and the Empire!

While Britain declared war on Germany, the Dominions (like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) had the autonomy to decide whether to join the war effort. They generally did so, but the decision-making process was separate from the declaration by Britain

When the United Kingdom declared war on Nazi Germany in September 1939 at the start of World War II, it controlled to varying degrees numerous crown colonies, protectorates, and India. It also maintained strong political ties to four of the five independent Dominions—Australia, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand—as co-members (with the UK) of the British Commonwealth. In 1939 the British Empire and the Commonwealth together comprised a global power, with direct or *de facto* political and economic control of 25% of the world's population, and of 30% of its land mass.

The contribution of the British Empire and Commonwealth in terms of manpower and materiel was critical to the Allied war-effort. From September 1939 to mid-1942, the UK led Allied efforts in multiple global military theatres. Commonwealth, Colonial and Imperial Indian forces, totalling close to 15 million serving men and women, fought the German, Italian, Japanese and other Axis armies, air-forces and navies across Europe, Africa, Asia, and in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic, Indian, Pacific and Arctic Oceans. Commonwealth forces based in Britain operated across North-western Europe in the effort to slow or stop Axis advances. Commonwealth air forces helped fight the Luftwaffe to a standstill over Britain, and Commonwealth armies helped to defeat Italian forces in East Africa and North Africa and occupied several overseas colonies of German-occupied European nations. Following successful engagements against Axis forces, Commonwealth troops assisted with the invasion and occupation of Libya, Italian Somaliland, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Madagascar.

Britain and the Commonwealth defeated, held back or slowed the Axis powers for three years while mobilizing its globally-integrated economy, military, and industrial infrastructure to build what became, by 1942, the most extensive military apparatus of the war. These efforts came at the cost of 150,000 military deaths, 400,000 wounded, 100,000 prisoners, over 300,000 civilian deaths, and the loss of 70 major warships, 39 submarines, 3,500 aircraft, 1,100 tanks and 65,000 vehicles. During this period the Commonwealth built an enormous military and industrial capacity. Britain became the nucleus of the Allied war-effort in Western Europe, and hosted governments-in-exile in London to rally support in occupied Europe for the Allied cause. Canada delivered almost \$4 billion in direct financial aid to the United Kingdom, and Australia and New Zealand began shifting to domestic production to provide material aid to US forces in the Pacific. Following the US entry into the war in December 1941, the Commonwealth and the United States coordinated their military efforts and resources globally. As the scale of the US military involvement and industrial production increased, the US undertook command in many theatres, relieving Commonwealth forces for duty elsewhere, and expanding the scope and intensity of Allied military efforts. Co-operation with the Soviet Union also developed. However, it proved difficult to co-ordinate the defence of far-flung colonies and Commonwealth countries from simultaneous attacks by the Axis powers. In part this difficulty was exacerbated by disagreements over priorities and objectives, as well as over the deployment and control of joint forces.

Although the British Empire emerged from the war as one of the primary victors, regaining all colonial territories that had been lost during the conflict, it had become financially, militarily and logistically exhausted. The British Empire's position as a global superpower was supplanted by the United States, and Britain hitherto no longer played as great of a role in international politics as it had previously done so. Stoked by the war, rising nationalist sentiments in British colonies, in particular those in Africa and Asia, led to the gradual dissolution of the British Empire during the second half of the 20th century through decolonisation.