

Lest We Forget Timeline

This *selective* history summarises some major landmarks in RAF history since 1918, covering

- relevant developments in British foreign policy in the transformation from empire to commonwealth
- the recruitment and treatment of Caribbean people (or those with a Caribbean heritage) into the RAF, weaving in details of the rich stories of local black RAF veterans of the West Midlands interviewed for this project
- the history of migration into the UK and the emergence of Black British identity

The text was researched and written by Andrew Wrenn, Fellow of the Historical Association on behalf of The Forgotten Generations with funding from the National Heritage Lottery Fund . It draws on the scholarship of David Olosuga, Audrey Dewjee, Peter Nevitt, Phil Vasili, Maureen M Dickson, Martin Lawrence, Mike Lepido, Barry Renfrew, Robert N Murray, Ben Bousquet, Colin Douglas, Mark Johnson, Tony Kushner, Stephen Bourne and Carl Chinn

1st April 1918 Formation of the Royal Air Force

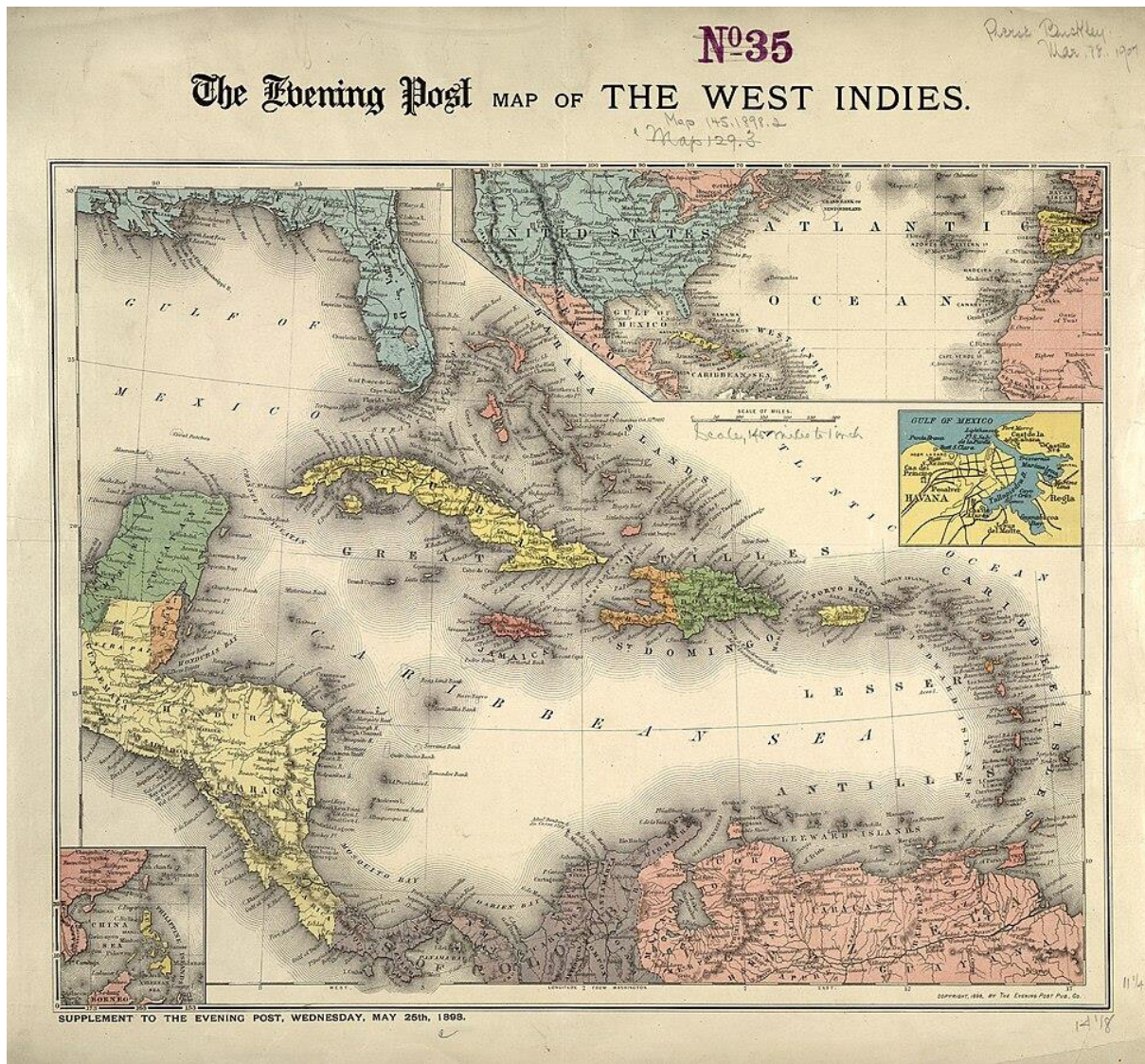
The Royal Air Force was formed in the last year of the First World War by merging the Royal Flying Corps (part of the British Army) and the Royal Naval Air Service (part of the Royal Navy).

1918 Caribbean recruitment at the beginnings of the RAF

Among RAF pilots in 1918 was Sergeant William Robinson Clarke from Kingston, Jamaica who had flown RE8 biplanes on the Western Front but was recuperating from wounds that year. The 1917 Air Force (Constitution Act) restricted recruitment to men of pure European descent but allowed the recruitment of 'negroes and other persons of colour' from British ruled territories in exceptional circumstances (promotion to an officer's commission was forbidden). During the First World War such recruitment was haphazard and dependent on the attitudes of recruiters. An unknown number of black men enthusiastically volunteered for service in the from the Caribbean colonies. A few were accepted, and at least two, including Lt William Patterson gained commissions despite the official ban. Sgt Clarke was accepted for service where others were refused partly because of the lightness of his skin.



Sergeant William Robinson Clarke as he appeared in 1914. He was honourably discharged in 1919 and the RAF paid for his passage back to Jamaica. (Public Domain)



The British Caribbean 1918-1939

Although this map of the Caribbean (known historically as the West Indies) dates from 1898, it shows the individual islands and territories which were British colonies in the 1920s and 1930s, the largest British island being Jamaica. Around 80% of their populations were descended from enslaved Africans brutally transported across the Atlantic by the British to work on plantations up to the abolition of (the Slave Trade was abolished in 1807 and slavery itself was abolished in 1834). Each island or territory has its own unique identity, a complex mix of African, European and indigenous cultural influences. Poverty and unemployment were very high among the around two and half million inhabitants and there was much labour unrest between the wars as workers fought for better pay and conditions. Despite this, the Caribbean populations mostly regarded themselves as loyally British. Children were usually educated in small, rural, mixed age classrooms, taught British Geography, History and Literature and learned to sing God Save the King in assemblies. They learned little about their own islands or their own history. Most received no secondary schooling, but the British Caribbean enjoyed one of the highest literacy rates in the world. White people amounted to about 3% while a proportion of the population in particular places such as Trinidad were of South Asian indentured labour descent (known as East Indians). Most British people of the time assumed European civilization was innately superior to other cultures. This belief was underpinned by the growing influence of nineteenth century 'Racial

Science. This divided humanity into races of different skin colour with white Europeans at the top of a hierarchy and black Africans and their descendants at the bottom. However, race relations were usually more relaxed in the Caribbean than in other parts of the Empire and many people were of mixed descent. As a general rule, those with lighter skins were more likely to succeed in society. Men from the Caribbean colonies had historically both strongly resisted and served bravely in the ranks of the British Armed Forces. Between the world wars British racism largely prevented their service.



(Public Domain)

Nov 11th 1918

When the First World War ended the Royal Air Force was the world's first, strongest and largest independent air force with over 22,600 aircraft and 300,000 personnel.



An RAF Bristol F2b Fighter built in 1918. [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/) (photographed in 2017 by Alan Wilson)

6TH Dec 1918 Mutiny of the West Indies Regiment

Soldiers of the West Indies Regiment awaiting demobilization in Taranto, Italy mutinied in protest at their static pay (not increased to the level awarded to white troops) and their tasks which included heavy manual labour and cleaning out white latrines. Radicalised ex-servicemen returned to join bitter strikes across the Caribbean. A secret colonial memo of 1919 noted *"Nothing we can do will alter the fact that the Black man has begun to think and feel himself as good as the white."*

31ST March 1919 The shrinking RAF

Air Secretary Winston Churchill re-appointed Hugh Trenchard as Chief of the Air Staff. He was told *'to make do with little'* and made drastic cuts, scrapping planes and selling off landing fields. Trenchard resisted attempts by the Army and Navy to shut the air force down.

9TH Nov 1919, Trenchard's Brats Nov

The School of Technical Training (Boys) was formed by Hugh Trenchard which operated at RAF Halton. His vision was that well educated (but usually middle or working class) boys would be recruited and go on to form 40% of the groundcrew for the RAF and 60% of its skilled tradesmen. Generations of RAF engineers, technicians and tradespeople were trained at Halton. On average only three of these 'Trenchard's brats' ever transferred a year to Cranwell for officer training as pilots or air crew.



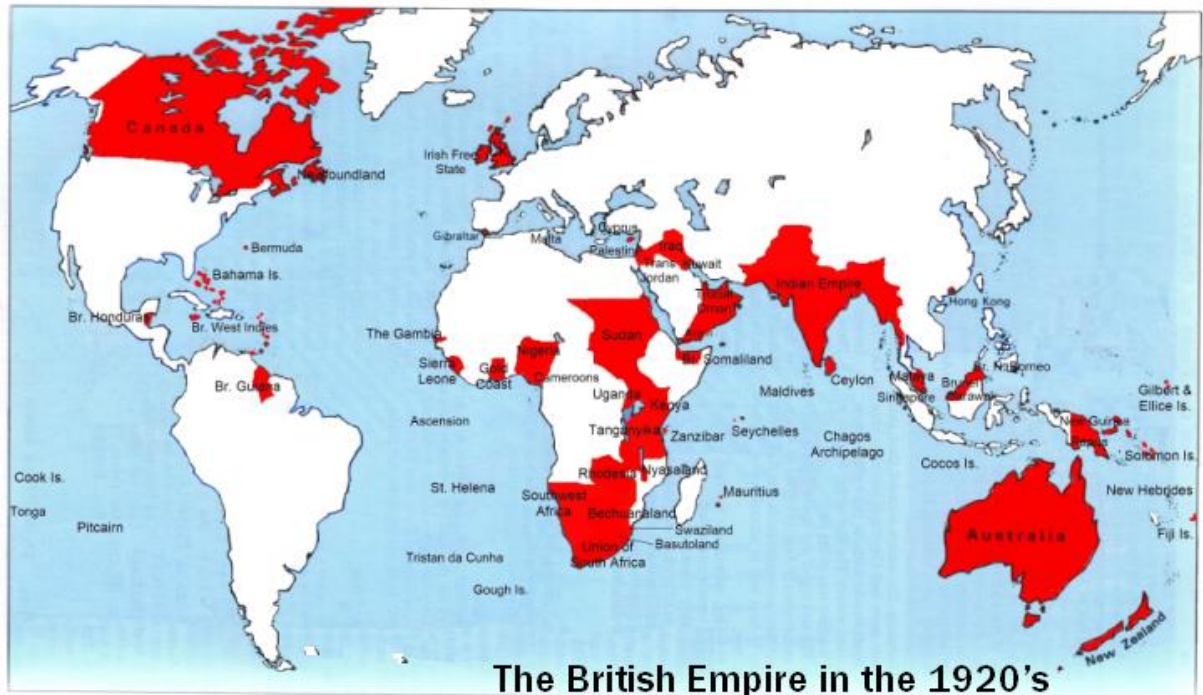
Lord Trenchard presenting a trophy to an RAF Halton apprentice sometime after 1927.
(Public domain)



A Z Force DH9 RAF aircraft being operated in an air ambulance role during the British Somaliland campaign. (Public Domain)

21st January 1920` *The cheapest war in history`*

Twelve RAF planes began a successful bombing campaign of rebel hill forts and villages in the east African colony of British Somaliland. Their inhabitants had never seen aeroplanes before. It took Air Power only three weeks to end a rebellion that the Army had failed to suppress since 1900. It was claimed to be *'the cheapest war in history'* and supported Churchill's 1919 justification for the retention of an air force by saying that *'the first duty of the RAF is to garrison the British Empire'*.



The British Empire in the 1920s

While the British Empire expanded as a result of the Versailles peace settlements of 1919 which ended the First World War, taking over former German colonies and Turkish territories, the British struggled to maintain their control over it. Air Power offered a cheap alternative to traditional military campaigns when post-war budgets were tight. The RAF established bases worldwide and self-governing dominions such as Canada set up their own air forces. ([Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#))



Image: IWM (Art.IWM ART 325) Hugh Trenchard (1873-1956), Chief of the Air Staff 1918 and 1919-1930. Painted in 1917 by William Orpen.

5th February 1920 Foundation of Cranwell College

An RAF college for training officers and air crew was founded at Cranwell in Lincolnshire by Hugh Trenchard. Between the world wars its intake was mostly from public schools. The college even had its own pack of fox hounds.



The College Hall at RAF Cranwell in 2011 by Charles Drake ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

1st April 1920 Disbandment of the Women's Royal Air Force

The Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) was disbanded. By this time the RAF had been reduced from 300,000 to under 30,000 personnel.

3rd July 1920 Royal Air Force Displays

The first Royal Air Force Tournament, later known as the Royal Air Force Pageant and finally as the Royal Air Force Display, took place at Hendon attracting 60,000 spectators. Politicians, celebrities and royalties attended over the years. It was part of Trenchard's policy to maintain the popular appeal of the RAF and promote the idea of air power as the future of warfare. It sometimes featured displays of planes bombing `native` villages as a celebration of the RAF's imperial role.



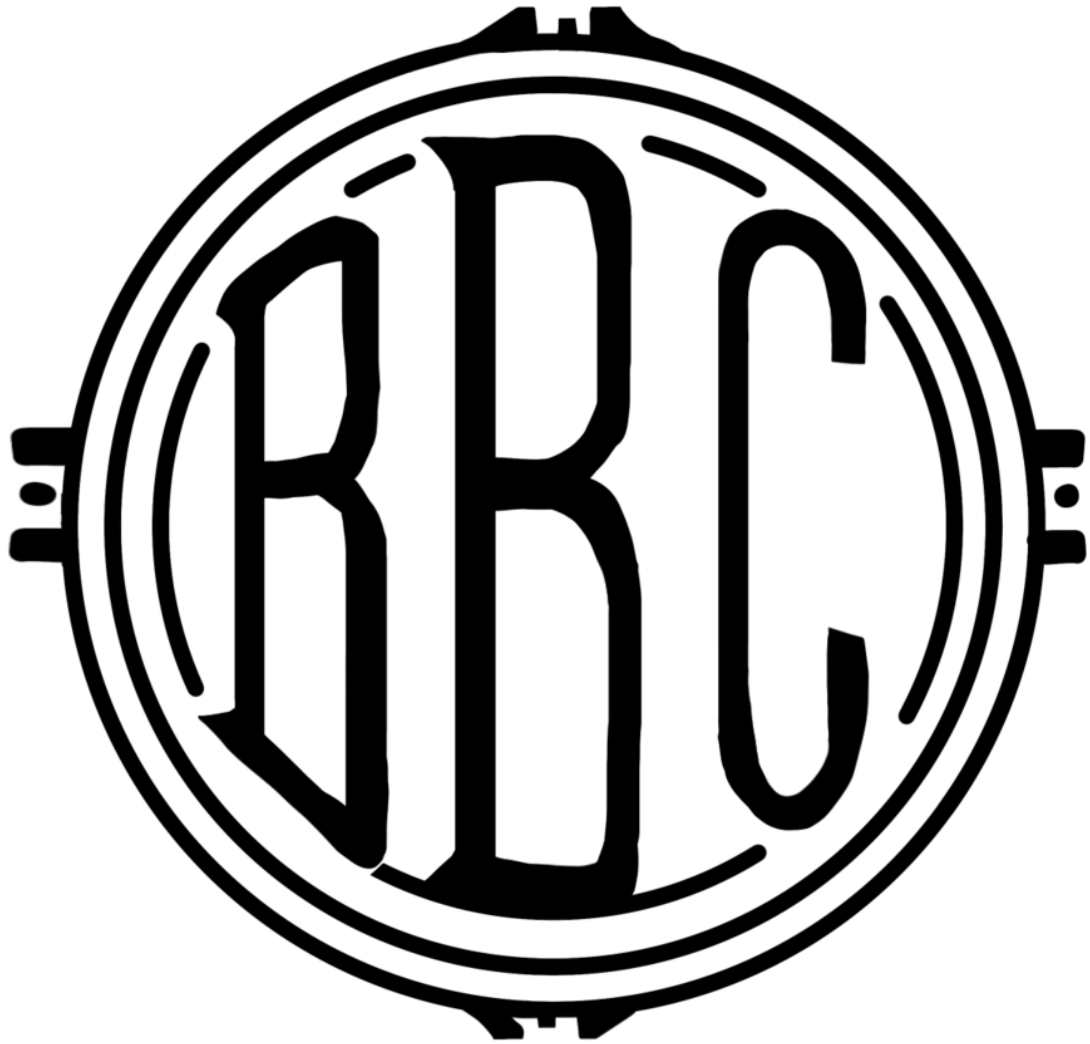
Poster for RAF Display, Hendon, 1925, published in [Flight Magazine](#), 2 July 1925. ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

1st October 1922 RAF control of Iraq

The RAF assumed control of military operations in Iraq, a former territory of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East allocated to Britain as part of the peace settlements of 1919.

1922 RAF Music

The RAF Central Band broadcast on BBC Radio for the first time. Many such broadcasts followed. This was part of Trenchard's plan to popularise the RAF.



British Broadcasting Company logo in use between 1922 and 1927. ([Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#))

August 1923 RAF Recruits of `Pure European descent only`

The Air Ministry published, for its own internal use, *'Recruiting Regulations for the Royal Air Force'*. Under the section *'Nationality'*, it was made clear: *'Recruits, including boys . . . must be of pure European descent and the sons of natural born or naturalised British subjects'*.

9th October 1924 Foundation of Auxiliary Royal Air Force

Trenchard established the Auxiliary Air Force whose volunteers were generally rich enough to have obtained or be prepared to obtain their pilot`s license at their own

expense, at a cost of £96, about £7,000 today. It was part of his vision of having an elite



reserve of civilian pilots.

Badge of what became the Royal Auxiliary Air Force (Fair use)

May 1925 RAF bombing in Iraq

RAF planes quelled a rebellion in Iraq by bombing enemy positions. The population was sometimes warned to evacuate in advance of the action.

1st October 1925 University Air Squadrons

The first of the university air squadrons was established at Cambridge University to train student volunteers as pilots. These squadrons succeeded in recruiting well educated men across the UK and their numbers were crucial in supplying the RAF with pilots during the Second World War.

May 1927- Nov 1928 RAF in Iraq

The RAF campaigned against Iraqi rebels.

1st January 1930 Trenchard stepped down

Hugh Trenchard stepped down as Chief of the Air Staff. He was immediately ennobled as Baron Trenchard of Wolfeton. Trenchard claimed *"I have laid the foundation for a castle. If nobody builds anything bigger than a cottage on them, it will at least be a very good cottage"*. His leadership and vision were crucial in establishing the RAF and ensuring its survival as a service but it was chronically underfunded (the entire RAF budget was 21 million pounds in 1930).

13th September 1931 The RAF won the Schneider Trophy

The Schneider Trophy, an international award for winning a contest between seaplanes was won by the Royal Air Force for the third time. Lieutenant J.N. Boothman flew a Supermarine S6B seaplane at an average speed of 340mph.

11th Dec 1931 Foundation of the Commonwealth

The Statute of Westminster gave effective independence to self-governing dominions of the British Empire, such as Canada and Australia. These countries were the founder members of the British Commonwealth of Nations (white-majority states apart from South Africa) and all acknowledging the British monarch as their head of state. As non-white independent countries and republics joined it after the Second World War, the organisation developed into the voluntary association of states it is today.



THE SCHNEIDER TROPHY
won outright by
GREAT BRITAIN 1931
after three successive
wins.

The Schneider Trophy ([CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))

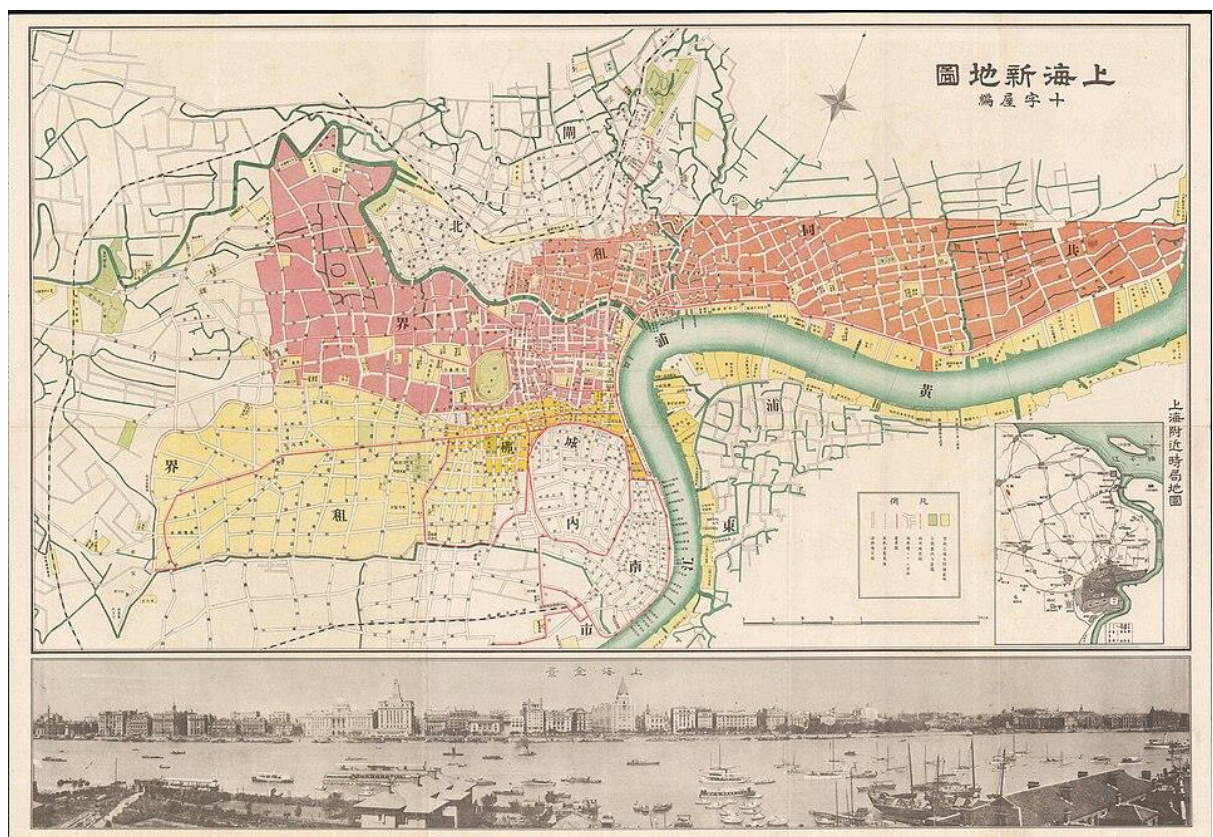


Portrait of Lord Trenchard in the uniform of an RAF Air Marshall in 1956 by [Stella Schmolle](#).

(Public Domain)

January 1932 Japanese bombing of Shanghai

Japanese bombers attacked the Chinese city of Shanghai. British newsreels showed the shocking scenes of a city reduced to rubble, strewn with bodies and with refugees streaming away from it. It appeared to predict how British and European cities might suffer in any future war. Mass poison gas bombing, reminiscent of the First World War trenches was also greatly feared. Conservative minister Stanley Baldwin later declared *'the bomber will always get through.'* The government he served had further reduced RAF funding to just 16.8 million pounds but Baldwin came to believe that the RAF should be the equal size of that of any potentially hostile power.



A Japanese map and photograph of Shanghai in 1932. (Public Domain)



Stanley Baldwin in 1932 (Public Domain)

30th January 1933 Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of Germany

Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party was appointed chancellor of Germany. An aim of his new dictatorship was to overturn the 1919 Treaty of Versailles banning Germany from developing its own air force (Luftwaffe). Baldwin believed that making the RAF as large as any new German air force would deter an attack.



Adolf Hitler 1933 ([CC BY-SA 3.0 de](#))

18th July 1934 RAF Expansion

The first Royal Air Force Expansion Scheme, Expansion Scheme 'A', was approved by the British Cabinet. The scheme provided for the growth of the Royal Air Force to a strength of 111 front-line squadrons at home and overseas (1,252 aircraft), together with sixteen Fleet Air Arm squadrons (213 aircraft) by 31 March 1939. Baldwin believed inaccurate reports about the size of the 'secret' new German air force which seemed to show that the RAF had twice as many planes.

26th February 1935 Formation of the Luftwaffe

The German government officially announced the establishment of its own air force, the Luftwaffe, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles.



Luftwaffe badge (public domain)

May 1935 Further RAF expansion

A shocked Stanley Baldwin (soon to be Prime Minister) learned that the new German Luftwaffe outnumbered the RAF by two to one, possessing 370 more planes. The Nazis had been training pilots in secret and building civilian aircraft that could be easily converted to military use. Proposals to increase the strength of the Royal Air Force by 1,500 aircraft by 1937 were announced.

6th July 1935 Royal Review of the air force

King George the Fifth reviewed the Royal Air Force at Duxford and Mildenhall in East Anglia. Every single plane, whether fighter or bomber that took part was still a biplane, reflecting the technology of the First World War.



The King's review of the RAF featured in British newsreels like this one (Fair use)



An official portrait of King George the Fifth for his silver jubilee in 1935 by [John St Helier Lander](#) (Public domain). Outwardly as powerful as ever, the British were being challenged by the rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe and growing demands for autonomy or independence from parts of the empire, such as in the Indian sub-continent.

6th November 1935 Test flight of the Hurricane

The prototype of the Hawker Hurricane fighter, with a Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, made its first flight, flown by Hawker test pilot P.W.S. 'George' Bulman.



The prototype of the Hawker Hurricane fighter (Public domain)

July 1936 Foundation of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

The Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve was established to provide a reserve of aircrew to draw upon in the event of war in addition to the members of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. Men between the ages of 18 and 25 could learn to fly and receive a payment of £25 for doing so. The founder of the Volunteer Reserve, Commodore Arthur Tedder realized that restricting recruitment for aircrew to the elite public schools was keeping RAF numbers low and he proposed that the service needed to be open *'to the whole middle class (and) the complete range of the output of the public and secondary schools.'*

1936 'Racial Science' applied to RAF recruitment

Officially the RAF did not operate a colour bar but the ban on recruitment of non-Europeans to the RAF was interpreted using racial categories reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

- One J.F. Adam was initially rejected internally because he could not prove the purity of his European descent and because the RAF claimed that *'This boy is definitely coloured'*. When the boy's father produced a family tree claiming to prove his European descent going back three generations, the RAF reluctantly enlisted Adams because they would have had to admit his rejection was on grounds of his appearance alone (recruiters had not failed him on his medical as sometimes conveniently happened).
- Another recruit in 1936 was James Ponting of Armenian descent. It was debated whether Armenia was in Europe or Asia and it was noted that Ponting's *'eyes are oriental and perhaps his mouth and head. His colour is dark, but no darker than many south Europeans', 'the colour of his nails is not oriental'* and his speech was

'quite all right'. Ponting was reluctantly accepted into the RAF, taking in to account his father's British war service.

- A Cheshire applicant, James Blake was rejected ostensibly because of his lack of knowledge of electrical engineering. In fact, it was noted that *'the boy is of strikingly non-European appearance, having "coal-black" hair and a yellow skin. He therefore appears to be of Indian, rather than negroid, descent'*. During the interwar years 'half caste' individuals were regarded as weak, of bad character and as unlikely to fit in with other recruits.

January 1937 onwards RAF bombing in India

The RAF bombed villages harbouring rebels in the North-West Frontier Province of the Indian Empire.

3rd September 1937 First use of Radar

The first successful use of radar equipment by British forces occurred. This major technical development proved vital during the Second World War for the detection of incoming aircraft.

December 1937 Hurricane entered service

The Royal Air Force's first eight-gun fighter, the Hawker Hurricane, entered service with No.111 Squadron at RAF Northolt.

July 1938 Civil Air Guard

The Civil Air Guard was established to create a reserve of civil pilots of both genders by subsidising training in light aeroplane clubs across the country. When the scheme was launched, no fewer than 35,000 people applied for registration, of whom 4,000 were already in possession of type 'A' pilot's licences.

August 1938 Spitfire entered service

The Supermarine Spitfire fighter entered Royal Air Force squadron service. The first squadron to receive the Spitfire was No.19 Squadron, stationed at RAF Duxford in East Anglia.



A new Spitfire being flown by a pilot of No.19 Squadron in 1938 (Public Domain)

24th September 1938 Appeasement at Munich

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain sought to negotiate a settlement with German leader Adolf Hitler at Munich over Nazi claims on Czechoslovakia (the Germans were allowed to occupy the Sudetenland). Despite the fervent hopes that peace would be maintained, Britain prepared for war. As trenches were dug and civil defences and evacuation plans organised, the RAF prepared pools of people for mobilization who could be called in to service quickly if war broke out.

1st November 1938 The Moyne Commission

The British government appointed Moyne Commission arrived in Jamaica to assess the poor social and economic living conditions which had resulted in strikes and discontent through Britain's Caribbean colonies during the 1930s. Its recommendations to increase public spending to alleviate conditions were only published after the Second World War.



Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister stands on the far left of the photograph with Adolf Hitler in the centre at the Munich Peace Conference 1938. [CC BY-SA 3.0 de](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/)

15th March 1939 Failure of Appeasement

Hitler ordered German troops to invade the remaining part of Czechoslovakia, breaking the promise made to Neville Chamberlain at Munich that he had no more territorial demands in Europe. It was now clear that Chamberlain's policy of appeasement had failed, and that war was now highly likely.

28th June 1939 Women's Auxiliary Air Force

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force was formed. This was partly created to free men from work that could be undertaken by women instead.

Join the WAAF



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A recruitment poster for the WAAF (Public Domain)

September 1939 Jews given refuge in the Caribbean

Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe were allowed to settle in the British Caribbean but were interned as `enemy aliens` once war broke out in humanely run camps (provided Jewish organisations paid for their maintenance). For example, around 1400 mostly Polish and Dutch Jews were interned in two camps in Kingston, Jamaica. Local people were generally sympathetic as they saw a parallel between the plight of Jews and the earlier fortunes of enslaved Africans.

October 1939 RAF Colour Bar officially lifted

The Colonial Office and the Ministry of Information believed that lifting the Colour Bar would rally support for the war effort from the Empire when manpower was short. The Air Ministry reluctantly announced that the ban on non-European recruitment would not be automatically enforced. In practise it was not easy to get to Britain in wartime and few volunteers were accepted for service at this stage. Racial stereotypes of Caribbean people (West Indians) as unintelligent, unable to follow complex orders, lazy and prone to drunkenness persisted in British ministries.

12th December 1939 Disastrous RAF bombing raid on Germany

Twenty four RAF Wellington bombers attacked shipping in Willemshaven, Germany, flying in close formation, in daylight and with no fighter escort. The Luftwaffe shot down twelve bombers- half the entire force. It seemed that the bomber would not always get through after all.



A Wellington bomber (Public Domain)

March 1940 Recruitment of Billy Strachan

Nineteen year old Jamaican Billy Strachan arrived in Britain to volunteer for the RAF. He had enthusiastically sold all his few possessions to buy a passage to Britain on a banana boat. Unusually, he rose to be an officer and served as a wireless operator/air gunner on Wellington bombers, surviving thirty operations. The RAF also used Strachan to

investigate reported racial discrimination within the air force as the war progressed. He claimed he never experienced racism.



Billy Strachan on crutches with his first wife, Joan in 1942. (Public Domain)

9th April 1940 Nazi occupation of Norway and Denmark

German forces invaded neutral Norway and Denmark. The RAF participated in the unsuccessful Allied campaign in Norway.

10th May 1940 Blitzkrieg

Germany launched its Blitzkrieg attack - `lightening war` on the neutral countries of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg. Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of a new coalition government.



Winston Churchill in 1941 (Public Domain)

11th June 1940 Italian declaration of war

Italy declared war on Britain and France.

June 1940 French defeat

France was knocked out of the war and British forces were evacuated from Dunkirk. By the end of the Battle of France the RAF had lost 959 planes ,320 pilots, dead or missing with 115 taken prisoner.

June 1940 South Asian (Indian) recruits to the RAF

Britain now fought against Nazi Germany without the French as an ally but supported by forces and volunteers from the Empire and Commonwealth. This British propaganda poster designed for a British audience gives the impression of imperial unity and solidarity behind the Mother Country in defence of freedom. But closer observers would have noted that soldiers of colour from India and West Africa are in the rear (a Caribbean soldier, sailor or airman is not depicted).

The Air Ministry reluctantly allowed more recruitment of Indians into the RAF, driven by manpower shortages and the belief that `Asiatics` were more martial than `Negroes`. 24 South Asian (Indian) pilots took part in the Battle of Britain.



IWM (Art.IWM PST 8457) (Fair use)

12th July 1940 Operation Sealion

Hitler ordered the destruction of the RAF in preparation for a German invasion of Britain (code named Operation Sealion).

July -October 1940 The Battle of Britain

Just 700 RAF fighters faced 3500 Luftwaffe aircraft during the Battle of Britain, Hitler`s attempt to destroy the air force. Churchill paid tribute to the young pilots of the RAF defending airfields, claiming that “Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few”. The Few included experienced Polish pilots, exiled from their country by Nazi and Soviet occupation and volunteers from the self-governing countries of

the Empire and Commonwealth such as Canada and New Zealand. They in turn were supported by skilled ground crew and women who performed valuable work in offices and even as pilots ferrying new aircraft from factories to airfields. The RAF was saved from defeat when the Germans switched from bombing airfields to cities instead.



This memorial to the Battle of Britain at Kenley Aerodrome pays tribute to the RAF pilots, ground crew and women who contributed to the Battle of Britain (Fair use)

November 1940 Serious Caribbean recruitment to the RAF

With the RAF now desperately short of men, the air force gave in to pressure from the Colonial Office and started seriously recruiting for ground crew in the Caribbean colonies. It is estimated that 3,000 male volunteers enlisted with the RAF between 1940 and 1942. They were motivated by a mix of reasons;

- a sense of patriotic duty to Britain as the Mother Country
- a youthful sense of adventure, with the dream of becoming a flyer, even though most were only recruited as groundcrew
- an awareness of the threat fascism posed
- a wish to exchange the poverty and unemployment of Britain's Caribbean colonies for a secure wage and better economic prospects
- a desire to travel beyond the confines of their own islands or territories and see Britain itself

A few sought to prove by their conduct that colonial subjects were capable of self-government or independence after the war.

28th March 1941 Lilian Bader

Lilian Bader, a black Briton from Liverpool with a Barbadian father and mother of Irish descent succeeded in joining the WAAF (Women`s Auxiliary Air Force), becoming one of the first black women to be recruited to the British Armed Forces. She described herself as `the only coloured person in this sea of white faces`. Lilian rose to be a corporal and trained in instrument repair; a trade newly opened to women. It has been estimated that there were between eight and fifteen thousand people of colour in Britain at this time.



Lilian Bader (fair use)

26th June 1941 Jamaica Squadron

Winston Churchill officially designated RAF Squadron 139 as Jamaica Squadron. This was in tribute to the donations from Jamaica towards the cost of 12 Bristol Blenheim bombers made from across the population of the island spearheaded in a campaign by The Daily Gleaner, the local newspaper. £20,000 was raised in the first ten days of the press campaign alone. Impressive monetary and other donations were made to the British war effort from other Caribbean colonies too. Individual colonial governments encouraged their populations to invest in British war bonds.

November 1940-May 1941 The Blitz

The German Luftwaffe switched from bombing RAF airfields to bombing London and other British cities. 43,000 British civilians were killed in these raids which were combated by the RAF.



A German Luftwaffe Heinkel He 111 bomber flying over Wapping and the Isle of Dogs in the East End of London at the start of the Luftwaffe's evening raids of 7 September 1940. (Public Domain)

June 22nd, 1941 Operation Barbarossa

The Germans launched Operation Barbarossa, a surprise attack against their eastern neighbour, the Soviet Union. German aircraft switched from bombing Britain to support the new invasion instead which advanced rapidly at first and took the pressure off RAF Fighter

Command. Britain and Commonwealth countries now had a powerful new ally against



Germany and Italy.

Operation Barbarossa (Public Domain)

November 1941 Ulric Cross

Young Trinidadian Ulric Cross joined RAF Bomber Command as a navigator and officer. He completed 80 bombing operations and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) Distinguished Service Order (DSO). He left the RAF in 1947 as a Squadron Leader and went on to become a judge and diplomat in an independent Trinidad and Tobago. It was unusual for black Caribbean aircrew to be accepted as pilot, partly because it was believed that white crew members might not accept their judgements. Cross attributed his appointment to his friendship with a famous Caribbean cricketer who was popular in Britain.



Ulric Cross (RAF Museum fair use)

Dec 7 th 1941 Pearl Harbour

Japan launched a surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii bringing America into the Second World War. Now Britain was part of a powerful alliance which included the United States and the Soviet Union. It was likely that the Allies would ultimately win the war in the end.

January 1942 Lancaster Bombers

The first Lancaster bombers entered RAF service. It could carry any size of bomb (including one as heavy as itself) and was the most successful British bomber of the Second World War.



The Avro Lancaster bomber photographed by Cpl Phil Major ABIPP/MOD (OGL v1.0).

February 1942 Bomber Harris appointment

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris was appointed to head up Bomber Command. Through a strategy called Area Bombing, RAF planes aimed to devastate German targets in order as Harris put it to destroy “ *the morale of the enemy civil population and in particular of the industrial workers*”.

13/14th March 1942 Gee

A new British navigational device called Gee was used on an RAF bombing raid on the German city of Cologne. Flares and incendiaries were used to illuminate the target and the accuracy of bombing was five times better than in an earlier raid.

27/28th August 1942 Pathfinders showed the way

A group of RAF bombers called Pathfinders illuminated targets effectively with flares and incendiaries ahead of the main bomber force in a raid over the German city of Kassel. This tactic along with the development of the Lancaster and the use of Gee navigation increased the accuracy of RAF Area Bombing.



Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris in 1943 (Public Domain)



Harold Mcmillan in 1942 (Public Domain)

November 1942 Macmillan at the Colonial Office

Conservative MP, Harold Macmillan ended his ten-month term as Under Secretary for the Colonies. In that time Macmillan promoted the idea of recruiting Caribbean people for active service in the interests of keeping the British Empire united and giving its colonial subjects an opportunity to become partners in the common war effort. He had to constantly battle against the War Office which resisted him and made multiple excuses for not wanting to recruit Caribbean colonials, especially black women on the grounds that it would offend the Americans. Macmillan's influence on policy endured through the Colonial Office Welfare Units that looked after the interests and treatment of Caribbean service personnel.

February 1943 RAF survey

An RAF survey of the performance of 'coloured' air crew (a blanket term for Caribbeans, West Africans and South Asians) concluded that they were just as competent as other airmen but claimed that they should not be appointed to lead an air crew because their men

would have less confidence in them. It also might lead to such an air man regarding himself as `a privileged person` who might show resentment when disciplined by superior officers. British authorities worried that `coloured` air crew might challenge colonial authority after the war.

14th May 1943 Johnny Smyth at Bomber Command

Johnny Smythe, a West African volunteer of Creole descent from Sierra Leone was given an emergency RAF commission and later promoted to Flying Officer. On his 27th flight and 5th operation on 18 November 1943, he was shot down, wounded and captured. He spent the remainder of the war in a prisoner of war camp in Germany. RAF Bomber Command air crews, often made up of young men from different Commonwealth countries operating at night over Germany, experienced tense and terrifying flights. Around 44% of airmen were killed on these missions and the average age of volunteers was 23.

July 1943 Cy Grant featured in Nazi propaganda

RAF Navigator Cy Grant from British Guyana was shot down over the Netherlands and captured by the Germans. His photograph was featured in Volkischer Beobachter, a Nazi newspaper with the caption "*A member of the RAF of Indeterminate Race*". It was intended to highlight how Nazi Germany defended racial purity compared to a degenerate Britain. In fact, air crew like Grant were rare. He went on to become a successful actor and entertainer in post-war Britain.



A blue plaque commemorating Cy Grant ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

July and August 1943 RAF raids on Hamburg

60% of homes in the German city of Hamburg were destroyed by RAF bombing and over 42,000 people were killed by bombs and firestorms.



The results of bombing Hamburg (Public Domain)

22nd September 1943 Further RAF recruitment in the Caribbean

Advertisements in Jamaica's The Daily Gleaner newspaper, announced 'Recruitment for RAF begins today. 'It called for male volunteers between the ages of 18 and 32 to sign up. Men flocked to recruit and some were underage, but it was months before shipping was available for their passage to Britain. Similar advertisements recruited men from other colonies. By this point in the war the RAF no longer wanted to recruit black air crew from the colonies. One excuse for this was that their presence offended the Americans.



Air gunners Sergeant J.C. Dickinson RCAF and Sergeant Leslie Gilkes, 9 Squadron, 1943 (Courtesy of Audrey Dewjee). Sergeant Dickinson survived the war, but Sergeant Gilkes was shot down and killed on 3 August 1943. The Trinidadian has no known grave. This photograph is evidence of the friendships that could be forged between air crew of different backgrounds.

3rd June 1944 Caribbean ground crew in Britain

The first large group of 1,000 RAF recruits from the Caribbean landed at Liverpool to be greeted by a government minister and a military band. They were sent for basic training to RAF Hunnamby Moor, an ex-Butlins holiday camp at Filey in Yorkshire. A second contingent of about 1,000 men arrived in Liverpool on June 27th. These contingents were mostly from Jamaica but included recruits from other Caribbean colonies. They were treated well and welcomed by local people but some struggled with the cold weather and a diet that included the unfamiliar Roast Beef, Yorkshire Pudding and over cooked potatoes and cabbage.



Training at RAF Hunbanby Moor (IWM D 21136)

6th June 1944 D-Day

Allied Forces landed on Normandy beaches in France on D-Day to begin the liberation of Western Europe from Nazi occupation. Through 1944 the RAF and the US Air Force drove the Luftwaffe from the skies over Europe



The view from a US landing craft on D-Day on Omaha Beach (Public Domain)

June 1944 RAF claims of no Colour Bar

An Air Ministry order claimed that *‘All ranks should clearly understand that there is no colour bar in the Royal Air Force. Colonial personnel who come to this country are volunteers. They feel a close tie with the Mother Country and the mainstream of their desire to serve is a strong sense of loyalty . . . Any instance of discrimination on grounds of colour by white officers or airmen or any attitude of hostility towards personnel of non-European descent should be immediately and severely checked’*

October 1944 RAF debates over the Colour Bar

The RAF debated whether to return to the Colour Bar after the war. The Chief of Air Staff made clear that *‘we should maintain the requirement of pure European descent if enough white recruits could be obtained’*. In response, the Secretary of State of the Air Ministry argued that *‘to erect a colour bar against an officer who had earned a DFC would be indefensible and barbaric’*.

November 1944 Another contingent of Caribbean ground crew

Another contingent of Caribbean RAF recruits arrived in Glasgow and Liverpool. Again, they were officially greeted and transported to RAF Hunmanby Moor for training. A Caribbean veteran later referred to *‘all these black men, white men, Chineseall these different colours, different shades of people, different nationalities, all talking the same way, and we all got on so well. Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Barbadians, Guyanese – we were all one.’* The

food this time was more suited to a Caribbean diet. This reflects the influence of the Colonial Office's Welfare Officers, some of whom were black RAF flyers themselves. They succeeded in their brief of easing relations between the new arrivals and the British military who did not always understand each other. Local black RAF veteran Prince Albert `Jake` Jacob from Trinidad was one of the recruits trained at Hunmanby Moor.

13th and 15th February 1945 Destruction of Dresden

An RAF attack on Dresden, a beautiful city packed with refugees, but also a major railway centre for the German war effort was destroyed by firebombs, killing around 35,000. The overall effectiveness and morality of such area bombing is still fiercely debated. By 1945 RAF aircraft could operate by day as well as night because of the destruction of the German Luftwaffe.

February 1945 `Coloured` numbers in the wartime RAF

The Air Ministry estimated that around 422 `coloured` men served as air crew during the war with a further 3,900 acting as ground crew. In all, it is estimated that 6,000 Caribbeans were recruited to the RAF during the Second World War, around 400 serving as aircrew.



Dresden after the bombing [CC BY-SA 3.0 de](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/)

March 1945 More Caribbean groundcrew

A contingent of over a 1000 Caribbean RAF recruits arrived at Glasgow. There was no band this time but they were given hot drinks by WRVS ladies.

May 8th 1945 A costly victory in Europe

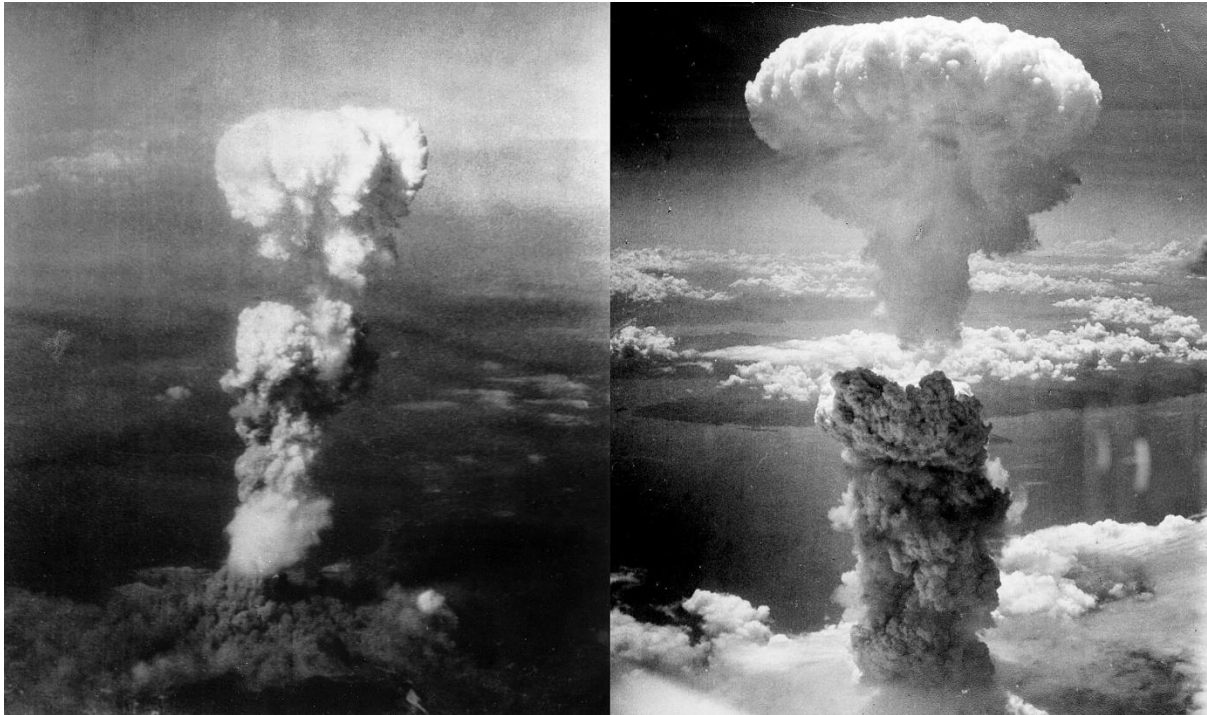
Britain celebrated Victory in Europe day as the German government agreed an unconditional surrender to the Allies (the war against Japan continued in the Far East). The debt ridden, war weary country rejoiced although it now had to face years of rebuilding and even more severe rationing. Among the casualties of the conflict over 55,000 aircrew of RAF Bomber Command were killed, out of a total of around 125,000 who served. Such was the controversy surrounding area bombing that an official memorial to Bomber Command was only unveiled in 2012.

August 15th 1945 Japanese surrender and a new Atomic Age

Britain celebrated Victory over Japan day, commemorating Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allies. Seeking a quick end to the war, the US air force had dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing around 105,000 people. So far, the US had a monopoly on this terrifying new weapon, which was partly dropped as a warning to its powerful ally, the Soviet Union (it had borne the brunt of fighting and casualties in defeating Nazi Germany). At the close of the Second War the RAF employed around 1,200,000 personnel with over 9000 aircraft. The new Labour government's commitment to build a welfare state and a belief that a new war was a distant prospect prompted rapid demobilisation. The RAF lost 900,000 people and Fighter Command was reduced to just 200 planes within two years.



Bomber Command Memorial in London ([Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#)).



Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Public Domain)

August 1945 Caribbean veterans mostly returned home

As the war closed the RAF restored the pre-war colour bar towards recruitment as an *'unwritten rule'*. Despite the contribution of Caribbean Airmen to the war effort, Air Marshall Sir John Slessor is recorded in a September meeting as saying A *"gentleman who looks as though he has just dropped out of a tree.....is clearly unlikely to make as good an officer or NCO as an otherwise less highly qualified white man, because the men won't take it from him"*. Official policy was to repatriate colonials as soon as possible to their country of origin although they were entitled to receive RAF training for employment in a trade before they left. RAF Veteran Johnny Smythe was employed by the Colonial Office to help veterans get back in to work in the Caribbean. Many did return home, a few signed on for further service in the RAF and a few settled in Britain as there was no legal bar to stop any British subject doing so. However economic conditions in the Caribbean colonies were still very poor, unemployment was high and some veterans sought agricultural work in the US to make ends meet.

8th June 1946 Victory Parade

Before being returned home, a number of Caribbean RAF ground crew took part in the Victory Parade held in London. Before it, the King and Queen visited them in one of the London parks where they were encamped.



King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret inspected the parade of Caribbean airmen. (Fair use)

Sept 1946 RAF jet fighters

Jet fighters started to replace war time aircraft.



A De Havilland Vampire jet fighter which entered RAF service in 1946 (Public Domain)

August 15th 1947 Indian Partition

Britain's Indian Empire was partitioned between the newly independent states of India and Pakistan, a year earlier than planned. The sub-continent had been becoming ungovernable, and it was clear that the British would lose control altogether unless they withdrew. However, there were still trouble spots across the remaining empire, such as Palestine where considerable manpower was needed. Demobilization, the beginnings of Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union and the loss of the Indian Army forced the government to introduce national service for able-bodied 18 to 30 year old men in 1947. This came in to force in 1949, providing the RAF with desperately needed personnel.

8th January 1947 A British Atomic bomb

The British government formally agreed to develop an atomic bomb of its own. In the developing Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, it was felt essential that Britain should have this weapon, both to deter a Soviet attack and ensure that the country retained its international influence, especially with the Americans. Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin said ` We've got to have this thing... We've got to have the bloody Union Jack flying on top of it`. Plans were prepared for a new RAF bomber force capable of carrying the new weapons. However ,this would take eight years to develop.



One of the first British atomic bombs, named Blue Danube

June 1947 Official lifting of the RAF colour bar

The British government quietly confirmed the permanent lifting of the Colour Bar to the British Armed Forces, including the RAF. This also applied to the blocking of promotion to the rank of officer on racial grounds. Despite this, the Royal Navy in particular found ways of discriminating against the recruitment of non-whites, for example on grounds of `character.`



Distinguished Flying Cross (Public Domain)

27th April 1948 A mixed marriage attracts criticism

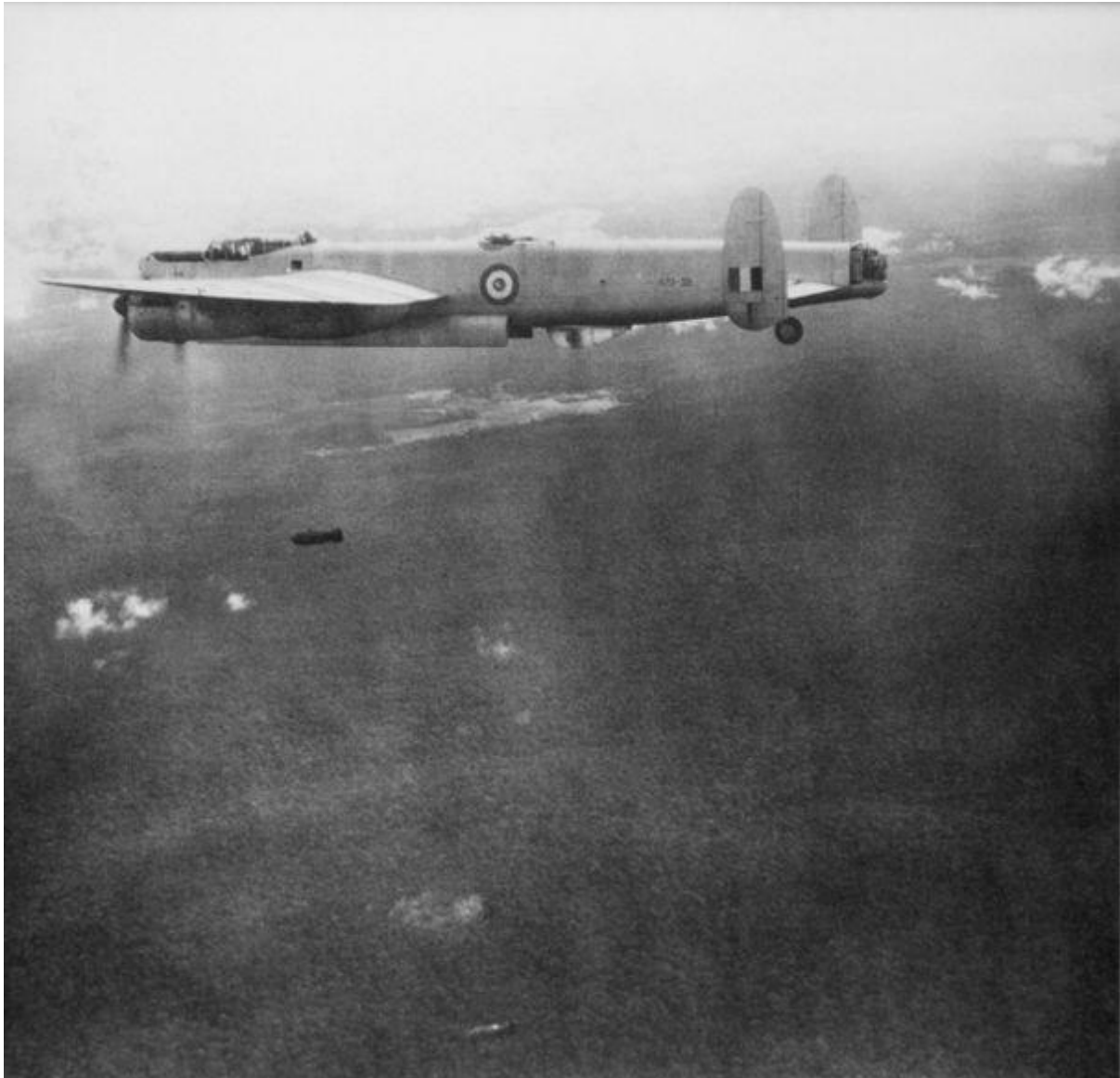
Prince Albert ` Jake ` Jacob, a newly returned RAF veteran from Trinidad married his wartime sweetheart, Mary Gore at Oldbury Registry Office in Birmingham. She was white, English and Jewish and such was her father`s objection to the match that none of her family attended the wedding. The couple were subjected to discrimination in post-war austerity Birmingham (people shouted to Mary across the street that she should not be with Jake). They were only able to obtain a mortgage in her name. and it was help from an RAF Association that lead to Jake`s successful career in the Post Office.

16th June 1948 Beginning of the Malaya Emergency

A state of emergency was declared in Malaya, one of Britain`s remaining Asian colonies.

It was the start of a sometimes brutal British and Commonwealth military campaign to suppress Communist insurgents attempting to overthrow colonial rule through guerrilla warfare with international communist backing. This was the beginning of the Malaya Emergency which saw the RAF deployed in defence of the rubber rich colony through Operation Firedog.

It was a conflict where the two post war defence priorities of defending the remaining empire and combatting communism coincided.



An Australian bomber participating in the Malaya Emergency in 1950 (Public Domain)

22nd June 1948 Arrival of the Empire Windrush

The Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks in Essex carrying 1027 passengers. 802 passengers gave their last country of residence as somewhere in the Caribbean, of whom 693 intended to settle in the United Kingdom. Jamaica was the most popular country of origin (539 people), followed by Bermuda (139), Trinidad (73), British Guiana (44) and other Caribbean and non-Caribbean countries. Many of the men were RAF veterans who knew Britain well. They were supported on board by veteran Johnny Smythe who was now a senior officer on the ship. Pathe News which covered the event positively, commented that *They served this country well. In Jamaica they couldn't find work. Discouraged but full of hope, they sailed for Britain, citizens of the British Empire coming to the Mother Country with good intent.* Their arrival was partly in response to an appeal to the colonies for labour to help in the post-war rebuilding of Britain which required 1.3 million people. However, it was only white migrants that were really wanted. There were racist assumptions made that

people of colour would never be able to integrate into British society. The ship has become a symbol for the Windrush Generation, a term for Caribbean migrants who settled in Britain between the 1940s and 1960s.



Public Domain

24th June 1948 MPs and the Prime Minister react to the Windrush

A group of 11 Labour MPs wrote to Prime Minister Clement Attlee calling for a halt to the 'influx of coloured people'. He replied that it would be 'a great mistake to regard these people as undesirable or unemployables. The majority of them are honest workers, who can make a genuine contribution to our labour difficulties at the present time'. Behind the scenes, Attlee referred to the arrival of these Caribbean migrants as an 'incursion' and suggested diverting the Empire Windrush to Africa where its passengers could be employed as agricultural workers picking ground nuts. This underestimated the skilled trades passengers brought with them, such as carpentry or engineering which RAF veterans had been trained in during the war.

July 30th 1948 British Nationality Act

The British Nationality Act of 1948 was given royal assent and enacted in 1949. It confirmed that British subjects throughout the remaining empire but also citizens of independent Commonwealth countries such as India had the right to settle freely in the United Kingdom. The law was passed to ease white migration between Britain and mostly white populated dominions such as Canada. It was not foreseen that it might lead to extensive migration of brown and black British subjects or Commonwealth citizens at the time.

June 1948-July 1949 Berlin Airlift

The Soviet Union blocked all rail and road links into West Berlin which was controlled by the USA, Britain and France (like Germany itself the German capital was divided into US, British, French and Soviet zones of military occupation). Allied air forces, including the RAF supplied up to 5,000 tons of food and essentials to two million West Berliners a day through three air corridors, with flights landing every three minutes. Although the Soviets called off the blockade, it helped to unite Western allies in to forming a new defence pact in April 1949

called the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, under American leadership. Britain was a key member.



The three air corridors into West Berlin 1948-1949 ([CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))



Mr and Mrs Jacob, 27th April 1948 (we can use this)

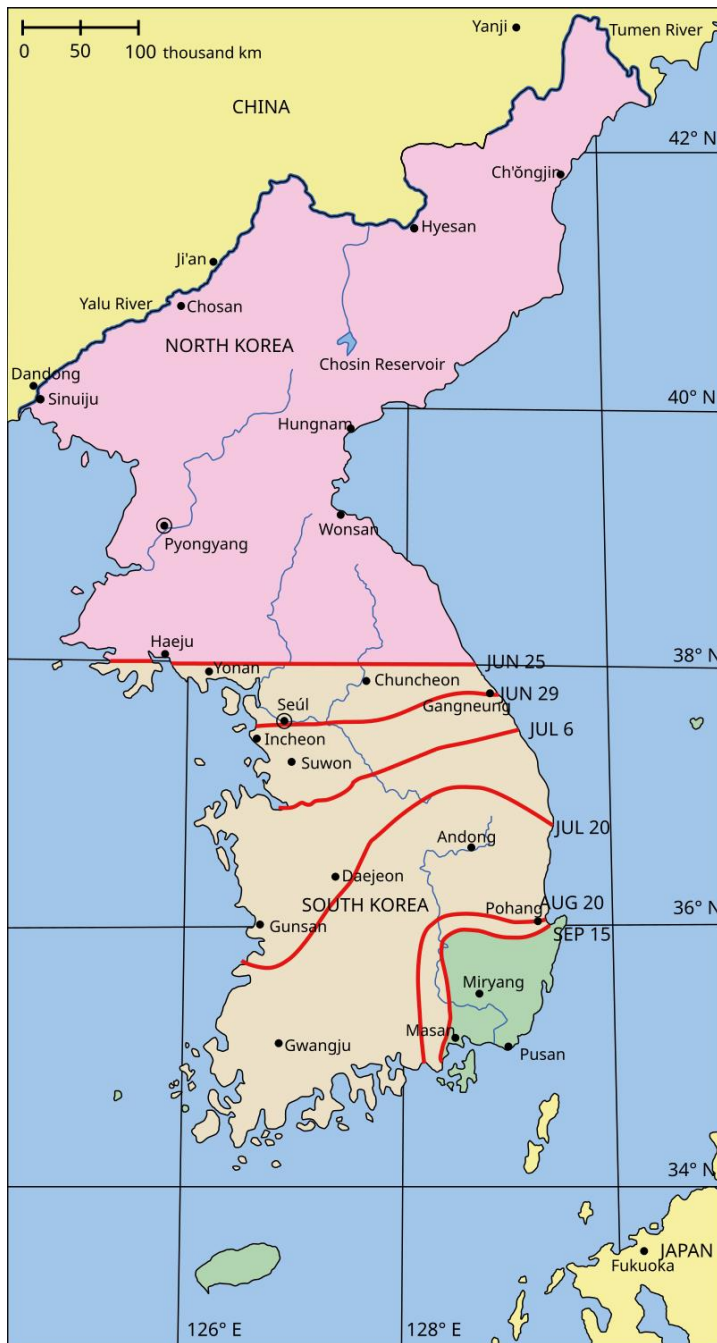
15th April 1949 Racial conflict in the West Midlands

The Birmingham Evening Despatch reported race rioting where resident Poles attacked resident Jamaicans at the Causeway Green Hostel in Oldbury. Local black RAF veteran Prince Albert `Jake` Jacob recalls an incident at the same hostel when he stayed there and incidents sometimes occurred in such hostels when black men were seen to be dancing with white women. Officials tended to blame black migrants and the `women of low repute` who consorted with them. It was assumed that the 180,000 European Volunteer Workforce (displaced people like the Poles and prisoners of war) would eventually integrate because of their skin colour.

25th June 1950 The outbreak of the Korean War

The Chinese and Soviet-backed People's Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) invaded the United States-backed Republic of Korea (South Korea). British forces, including the RAF participated in United Nations forces defending South Korea for the next three years. A total of 32 RAF pilots served in Korea. 4 pilots were killed in action, one was killed in a flying accident, and one was made a prisoner of war. 4 RAF pilots were awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses.

RAF aircraft numbered around 4,500 in 1950.



Map showing the initial advances of Communist North Korean forces down the Korean peninsula (Public Domain)

17th February 1952 Britain officially developed the Atomic bomb

The British Government announced that an atomic weapon would be produced in Britain.

20th September 1952 First female pilot

Pilot Officer Jean Lennox Bird of the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) Volunteer Reserve became the first woman to receive Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot's wings.

2nd-3rd October 1952 Detonation of the first British Atomic Bomb

At midnight, the first British atomic device was detonated in the Pacific Ocean.

12th October 1952 Birmingham`s colour bar

Caribbean activist Harry Gunter led a demonstration in the city centre against Birmingham`s colour bar. He campaigned against the routine exclusion of black people from hotels, dances, social clubs and jobs within Birmingham`s public transport system. Harry himself arrived as a well-qualified accountant from Jamaica in 1949 but could only find factory work locally.

21st October 1952 Mau-Mau Uprising in Kenya

The violent Mau-Mau uprising against British colonial rule in Kenya began.

1953 Caribbean migrants in the West Midlands

Around 3,000 Jamaicans had settled in Birmingham. Former black RAF veterans now lacked the legal protections the service had provided them with during the Second World War and the support of Colonial Office Welfare staff. They found accommodation hard to come by and encountered signs warning `No blacks, no dogs, no Irish` – in effect a housing Colour Bar. Denied council housing because they had not lived long enough in the West Midlands, Caribbean migrants tended to move into large Victorian houses converted into lodgings. In Birmingham there were concentrations of black communities in Handsworth, Small Heath, Spark Brook, Rotten Park, Birchfield and the borders of Balsall Heath and Mosely. The lack of welcome in local churches led to the establishment of black churches.

23rd March 1953 RAF action against Mau-Mau rebels

The RAF began providing support for the British Army in the ruthless countering of Mau-Mau rebels in Kenya. Atrocities were committed by both sides in the conflict. A notorious system of British prison camps was established where the ill treatment and abuse of detainees was deliberately concealed. Only decades later were secret Foreign Office files about the rebellion transferred for public access to the National Archives.

15th July 1953 RAF Coronation Review

The Coronation Review of the Royal Air Force commemorating the crowning of Queen Elizabeth the Second took place, including a fly-past by some 640 aircraft with 440 jet aircraft. The RAF had around 6338 aircraft in all.

27th July 1953 End of the Korean War

An armistice was signed in Korea halting fighting. The supposedly temporary boundary still marks the border between North and South Korea.

Dec 1953 `Keep Britain White`

Conservative Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill ordered a secret survey of employment exchanges to count the number of `coloured` dole claimants and requested Chief Constables to report on any idleness, criminality and welfare dependency observed in black migrant communities. He considered using the slogan `Keep Briain White` for the next general election campaign.

1953 Jamaican jazz in Birmingham

Jamaican RAF veteran Ron Daley formed a jazz band with his friend Andy Hamilton, another Jamaican. Andy Hamilton and the Blue Notes became famous on the Birmingham music scene. It included a white drummer (Hamilton believed there is no colour in music). Andy once had his front teeth knocked out by fascists.



Jazz saxophonist Andy Hamilton ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

7th & 14th November 1954 RAF took charge of atomic weapons

The first atomic bombs for the Royal Air Force were delivered to RAF Wittering.

1st January 1955 V-bombers in service

The first of the 'V-bomber' squadron, No.138 Squadron was authorised for formation at RAF Gaydon. The squadron had a unit establishment of eight Vickers Valiant B1s, capable of carrying nuclear payloads. In the same year local black RAF

veteran Karen Keller was born in Wolverhampton to recently migrated parents of the Windrush generation. Used to routine racial harassment in her childhood, a white pupil once told her that "My dad didn't fight for you!"

March 1954 Black staff on Birmingham public transport

Birmingham Transport Committee employed its first conductor of colour, breaking the colour bar and overcoming union resistance.

1955 Jamaican migrants in Birmingham

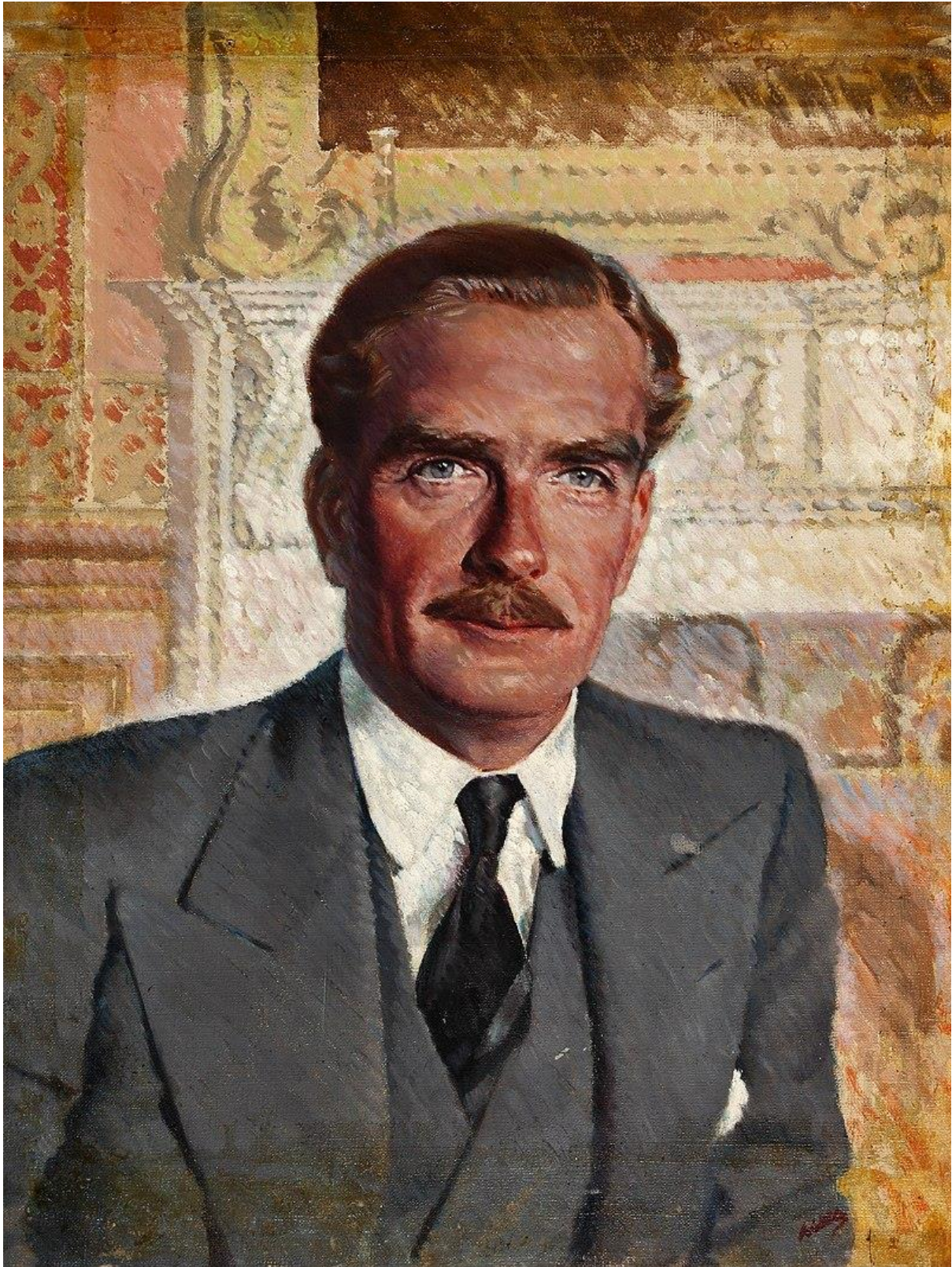
The Jamaican population of Birmingham had risen to almost 18,000. Immigration to Britain grew more attractive as the US had imposed restrictions on settlement there.

13th June 1956 British withdrawal from Egypt

British troops completed their agreed withdrawal from Egypt, ending 74 years of military presence in the country.

26th July 1956 Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal

The revolutionary government of Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal, previously jointly controlled by Britain and France. This major trade route had been completed in 1869 and jointly paid for by the British and French. International shipping used the canal to cut down on travel time around the coastline of Africa. The nationalisation of the canal confirmed to British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden that the Egyptian dictator, Gamal Abdel Nasser was an Arab Hitler, intent on destroying British and European power in the Middle East. He decided Nasser must be overthrown.



Sir Anthony Eden in 1945 (Public Domain)

22nd-24th October 1956 Britain and France plot with Israel

The British and French governments reached a secret agreement to seize back the Suez Canal by force. They plotted with the Israeli government so that it would attack Egypt after which British and French forces would occupy the Suez Canal zone on the pretence of

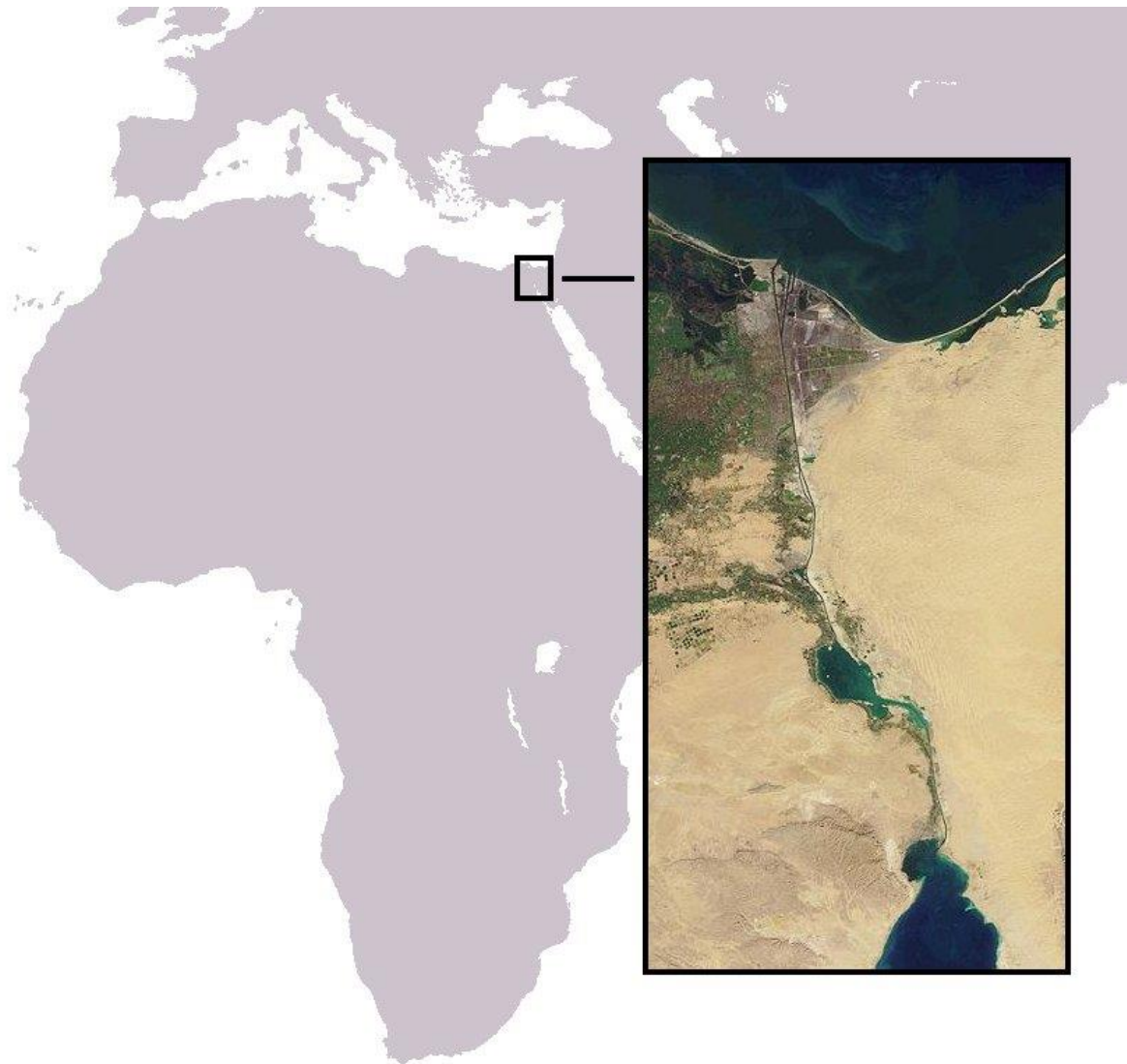
keeping the peace between Israel and Egypt. Neither the British or French governments informed their principal ally, the United States of their plans.

29th October 1956 Israeli attack on Egypt

The Israeli Army launched an attack on Egyptian positions in the Sinai Peninsula as planned.

30th October 1956 British and French ultimatum

Following the Israeli invasion, the British and French Governments presented an ultimatum to both Israel and Egypt demanding the end to fighting within twelve hours. The Egyptian Government was required to allow British and French forces to be stationed at Port Said, Ismailia and Suez, in order to safeguard shipping passing through the canal. These terms were accepted by Israel and rejected by Egypt.



Position of the Suez Canal ([CC BY 2.5](#))

31st October 1956 RAF action in Suez

Following the Egyptian Government's rejection of the ultimatum presented

by Britain and France and its closure of the Suez Canal, British and French forces began military operations against Egypt (Operation Musketeer). Twelve Egyptian airfields in the Canal Zone and the Nile Delta were attacked and over 250 Egyptian aircraft destroyed with no RAF losses. The Suez Crisis strongly divided public opinion in Britain, just as participation in the Iraq War of 2003 did decades later.

4th November 1956

Soviet forces invaded Hungary to suppress an attempted democratic revolution there. This escalated Cold War tensions.

6th November 1956 Suez cease-fire

Britain and France mounted an amphibious assault on Port Said with air support from the RAF. Under furious and intense American pressure and with threats of war from the Soviet Union, the British and French forces declared a cease-fire.

23rd December 1956 End of Britain as an independent great power

The last British and French troops left Egypt. The Suez campaign was a military success but a political disaster. Britain was unable to launch military action in future without the support or at least consent of the United States.

9th January 1957 Macmillan succeeded Eden as PM

Sir Anthony Eden resigned as prime minister. He was succeeded by Harold Macmillan who with rationing ended at last and an economic boom claimed "You never had it so good!"

6th March 1957

Britain's Gold Coast Colony became independent as Ghana. It was the first African colony to gain independence.

4th April 1957 Cuts to the RAF

A United Kingdom government White Paper on Defence decided that the future of Air Power lay more in missiles and the technology to intercept them than in manned aircraft. This justified cuts to the RAF. The development of new aircraft was mostly scrapped. However continued involvement in 'end of empire' and other conflicts proved that aircraft were still needed for conventional warfare that did not resort to nuclear weapons.

3rd January 1958 The West Indies Federation

The West Indies Federation was set up consisting of most of Britain's Caribbean colonies. The British and pan-nationalist Caribbean activists hoped it would become an independent state, but internal disputes meant it collapsed in 1962. Independence for individual colonies followed over time.

1958 Continued Caribbean recruitment to the RAF

Barbadian George Phillips joined the RAF at the age of 21 as an electrician in London, having emigrated in 1955. He wanted to travel with the service. George later commented that "*There were a lot of black guys from various islands and they all got on well*". This

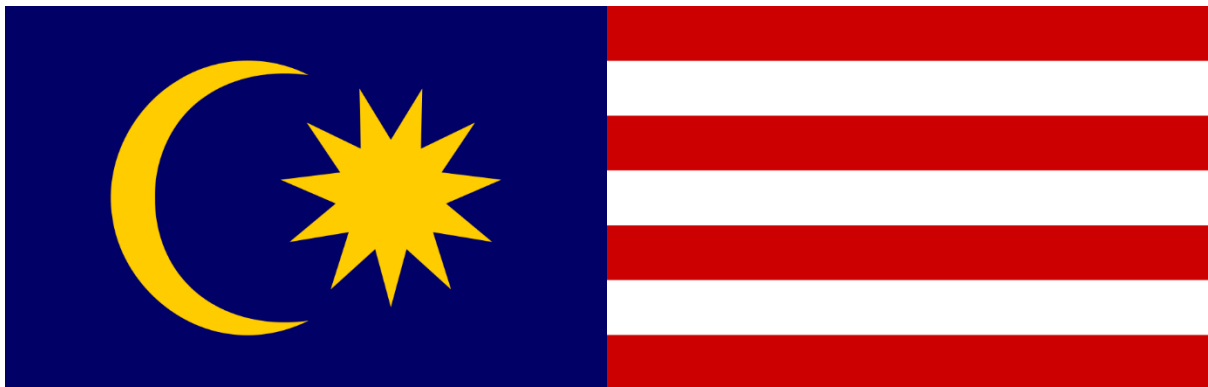
shows that the RAF were still recruiting from people with Caribbean backgrounds, but no figures are available for how many served at the time (some recent migrants served for two years as their national service obligation). It was far fewer than the numbers employed during the Second World War. George Phillips recalled that he and his black colleagues were challenged and physically searched when returning to their base from leave while white service men were not. When they complained a white guard was removed from his duties.

Sept 1958 Notting Hill Race Riot

Following on from a race riot in Nottingham, far-right white youths and demonstrators attacked the 5,000 strong black community in Notting Hill, London. The events deeply shocked national opinion. `Social problems` in migrant areas were usually blamed on the very presence of migrants of colour in Britain, rather than white racist attacks. Racism and racist street slogans against people of colour spiked. Ministers and officials desperately searched for means of restricting black and brown Commonwealth migration without appearing to be racist. Rumours that immigration would soon be restricted ironically caused the number of Caribbean migrants to increase nationally from 15,000 in 1958 to 57,000 in 1960.

August 31st 1957 Malayan independence

The Federation of Malaya gained independence from Britain. While still fighting communist insurgents in the country, the British could now claim they were defending the freedoms of a new democracy rather than a colony from communism.



Malaya flag in use between 1957 and 1963 ([CC BY-SA 2.5](#))

3rd February 1960 Macmillan Winds of Change speech

Prime Minister Harold Macmillan declared that the winds of change were blowing through the African continent and indicated that Britain would not stand in the way of colonies demanding independence. The ruling white minorities in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) actively opposed decolonization.

16th August 1960 Independence of Cyprus

Cyprus became independent as a republic but Britain retained Sovereign Bases at Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Local black RAF veteran Jeff Nelson served in Cyprus in the 1980s.

31st July 1960 End of Malaya Emergency

The Malayan Emergency was declared at an end.

1960 `Coloured` recruitment restricted to 2%

In confidential government communications it was acknowledged that `coloured` recruitment to the British Armed Forces was pegged at 2%.



Egyptian President Nasser ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))



A Vulcan bomber seen from below ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))



A Coronation photograph of H.M. Queen Elizabeth the Second in 1953 (Public Domain)

Colonial India in 1942 before partition (Public Domain)

6th August 1962 Jamaican independence

The British Crown Colony of Jamaica gained independence from Britain on 6th August 1962, becoming a democracy within the Commonwealth and retaining Queen Elizabeth the Second as head of state. Fundamental differences between Britain's Caribbean colonies had prevented the creation of an independent state that would have included all the islands. Other colonies gained independence over time. Local black RAF veteran Donald Campbell remembers celebrating Jamaican Independence Day happily as a boy without really understanding what it meant.



Flag of Jamaica (Public Domain)

13th August 1962 Construction of the Berlin Wall

The Communist government of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) began construction of a wall around Western controlled West Berlin to prevent its citizens escaping the country for West Germany (a democracy and NATO ally). The building of the Berlin Wall escalated tensions in the Cold War.

1st July 1962 Commonwealth migration restricted

The Commonwealth Immigrants Act divided Commonwealth migrants into categories of skilled workers with offers of work (A), unskilled workers with offers of work (B) and unskilled workers without an offer of work (C). As was intended the new law blocked most migrants of colour from entering the UK. Home Secretary R.A.B Butler commented "*The great merit of this scheme is that it can be presented as making no distinction on grounds of race or colour*". Exemptions applied to Commonwealth citizens who were resident in the UK at any point from 1960 to 1962, as well as wives and children under 16 accompanying a family member resident in the UK.

26th October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

US President John F. Kennedy imposed a quarantine (blockade) of the Communist ruled island of Cuba following the discovery of preparations for the deployment of Soviet ballistic missiles there. Nuclear war seemed imminent. RAF bomber V-force were kept on high alert, ready to take off with their nuclear weapons at a few minutes notice if the command to scramble came. Crews took to wearing their life jackets and at one point were so sure the order to take off would come that they sat inside their aircraft with engines running. The Soviet Union began to dismantle the missile bases on Cuba from 2nd November, and the US blockade was ended on 20th November.



Map showing the range of targets across North America that Soviet missiles in Cuba could have reached. Cuba is only 90 miles from the US state of Florida. (Public Domain)

8th December 1962 Brunei rebellion

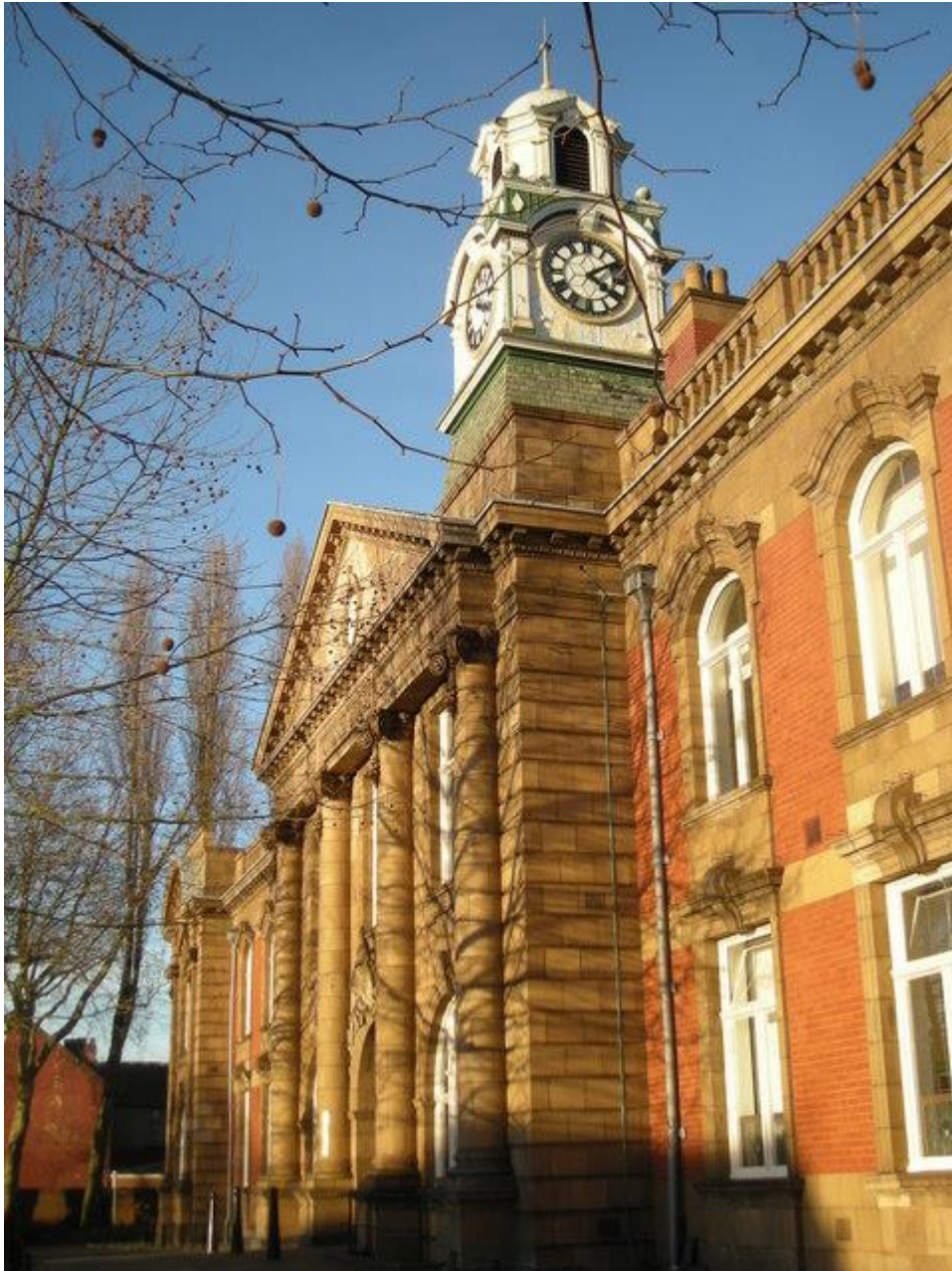
The RAF were deployed to Brunei to support its Sultan in resisting an Indonesian supported rebellion against him. It was quickly suppressed.

April 1963 onwards

The RAF were deployed to protect Malaysia (a new Commonwealth democracy) against incursions by Indonesian forces.

15th October 1964 A win for racism in Smethwick

The Labour Party won a majority of seats in the UK General Election but in the Smethwick constituency Conservative local councillor Peter Griffiths unexpectedly defeated the sitting Labour MP. Griffiths harnessed some white working-class resentment against migration by people of colour including South Asians who were blamed by some (although not all) for a local housing shortage. He campaigned using the slogan "If you want a nxxxxx for a neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour." The Smethwick result shocked national opinion but the Conservative Party at the time did not disown Griffiths (he had succeeded in winning it valuable working-class support).



Smethwick Council House where Griffiths victory was announced ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

November 1964 Demand for whites only houses in Smethwick

The Birmingham Post reported that “*twelve (white) angry housewives*” were petitioning the council to buy up houses in Marshall Street, Smethwick as they became vacant, and to let them only to white residents. It was claimed (wrongly) that half the street’s houses were now occupied by “coloured” residents and that Marshall Street was becoming a “Smethwick Harlem” – a ghetto where no white families would want to live anymore. In fact, people of colour and South Asians faced routine racist harassment, and a Colour Bar excluded them from local shops, bars and hotels. Not all white residents were hostile to migrants either. Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke, son of a poor Jamaican family remembers being brought up during the 1960s and 1970s in a very mixed part of Smethwick where community relations were harmonious (although he was aware of tensions elsewhere).

Dec 1964 Covert British support for America’s Vietnam War

US President Lyndon Johnson requested Prime Minister Harold Wilson deploy British forces in his growing military campaign against Communist North Vietnam. Wilson always refused but Britain offered valued advice on jungle warfare from its successful Malaya experience, shared useful intelligence, sent secret arms supplies from Hong Kong and supported military training. All this plus diplomatic support for the US during the unpopular Vietnam War was greatly appreciated by the White House.

12th February 1965 Malcolm X visited Marshall Street

World famous African-American civil rights activist, Malcom X visited Marshall Street in Smethwick. *"I was in Birmingham, Alabama, the other day,"* he told reporters, *"This will give me a chance to see if Birmingham, England, is any different."* Malcom X was refused a drink at a local pub as he knew he would be. His visit gave encouragement to local activists to combat racism. A few days after his return to the United States, Malcom X was assassinated.

February 1965 Low education expectations for black pupils

Local black RAF veteran Donald Campbell arrived in Birmingham from Jamaica to join his parents. He found that nothing was expected of him as a black pupil in his Birmingham school, that his Jamaican education had been superior and that he was placed in a low set. Donald later left school with no qualifications.

6th July 1965 Hastings Crash

An RAF Hastings aircraft crashed at The Baldons, Oxfordshire in which over 40 Service men were killed. Local black RAF veteran Kenneth Straun (originally from St Kitts) had only just been recruited the year before at the age of 20. He was deployed with an RAF team at the crash site to collect bodies (and body parts). The Hastings was withdrawn from service after the accident and replaced by Hercules transport aircraft.



An RAF Hastings aircraft ([GFDL 1.2](#))

8th December 1965

The Race Relations Act banned racial discrimination in public places and made the promotion of hatred on the grounds of 'colour, race, or ethnic or national origins' an offence. It was criticised at the time because it was not explicit enough in addressing discrimination in employment and accommodation. However, the act was the first UK legislation of its kind.

Colour bars still operated in some places and institutions despite the change in the law.

29th November 1967 British abandon Aden

British forces evacuated the colony of Aden in Arabia. The RAF organised the largest airlift since the Soviet blockade of West Berlin in 1948-49.

March 1st, 1968 Commonwealth Immigration restricted further

The 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act restricted UK citizenship to those born in the UK and their children or grandchildren. Those living in ex-colonies without a direct family connection to the UK were no longer automatically entitled to enter the country. The law was passed to restrict the rights of South Asians from newly independent countries in East Africa with British passports to settle in the UK.



Malcom X in 1964 (Public Domain)

20th April 1968 `Rivers of Blood` speech

Conservative MP for Wolverhampton , Enoch Powell gave an inflammatory speech to a party meeting in Birmingham where he warned that if mass migration was not controlled then it would lead to “*rivers of blood*”. He quoted a letter sent to him claiming that “*in this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.*” The speech sparked huge controversy and Powell was sacked from the shadow cabinet by Conservative leader, Edward Heath. As a Conservative minister in the 1950s Powell had actively recruited nurses from the Caribbean to serve in the NHS.



Enoch Powell in 1987 ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

August 20th 1968 Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia

The Soviet Union lead forces of its Warsaw Pact communist allies in an invasion of Czechoslovakia to restore communist control there after a period of liberalisation known as `the Prague Spring`. The invasion escalated Cold War tensions again.

25th October 1968 Race Relations Act

The Race Relations Act 1968 was passed making it illegal to refuse housing, employment, or public services to a person on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origins.

14th July 1969 RAF in Northern Ireland `Troubles`

The first detachment of Royal Air Force (RAF) support helicopters were despatched to Northern Ireland to support British Army units attempting to control violence between Protestant and Catholic communities. This was the beginning of a long-term conflict that developed in to `The Troubles`, pitching British forces against the IRA (the Irish Republican Army) who sought a united Ireland through terrorist violence. Local black RAF veteran Donald Campbell was deployed to Northern Ireland in the following year and remembers being warmly treated by local Irish people, who saw in his identity a fellow victim of British imperialism.

Sept 1st 1969 RAF EI Adem

Local black RAF veteran Kenneth Straun recalls standing guard outside RAF EI Adem in Libya, North Africa in a standoff with Libyan soldiers during a successful military coup there by Colonel Gaddafi. The base closed the following March.



The anti-British Colonel Gaddafi, leader of the Libyan military coup sat on a platform in the centre of a photograph with a military hat – President Nasser of Egypt sat on his left. (Public Domain)

23rd February 1970 Republic of Guyana

Guyana was the first of Britain's former Caribbean colonies to become a republic (it gained independence in 1966).

28th October 1971 Immigration Act

This new law introduced further restrictions on immigration to the UK. Commonwealth citizens had to have specific permission to reside in Britain, for example through a work permit or should have an ancestral link to the country. The impact of the legislation was a sharp decrease in immigration from Commonwealth countries. The law did not affect the right of previously settled migrants to remain in the UK but it did put the onus on such people to prove they had that right if they were challenged by the government.

31 October 1971

The Royal Air Force withdrew from most of its former bases in the Far East. This was part of a cost cutting exercise where the Armed Forces ceased most operations east of the Suez Canal. Most British colonies had gained independence by now.

1973

Trevor Macdonald became Britain's first black newsreader on ITV.

29th March 1973

The US completed its withdrawal of combat forces from Saigon, capital of South Vietnam which fell to Communist North Vietnam. This amounted to America's first defeat since the Second World War. Future presidents tried to avoid committing American ground troops to long and potentially perilous campaigns that might prove as unpopular and as divisive as the Vietnam War.

1st January 1973 Britain joined the European Common Market

Britain entered the Common Market which later developed into the European Union.

1973/1974 Discrimination and low expectations for black pupils in West Midlands schools

Local black RAF veteran Bryan Scott Hughes was turned down for a place at grammar school. He was only told this was because of racial discrimination two years later. Fellow black RAF veteran Jeff Nelson also found in his West Bromwich school in the same period that teachers had no academic expectations of him and assumed he would only excel at games.

1974

Britain held two general elections in one year and experienced widespread union unrest and political instability. Although living standards in general continued to rise, the 1970s was perceived at the time as a period of national decline.

1976

Trinidad and Tobago became the second former British colony in the Caribbean to become a republic within the Commonwealth, replacing Queen Elizabeth the Second with an elected president.



Flag of Trinidad and Tobago (independent 1962) (Public Domain)

Nov 22nd 1976 Race Relations Act

This banned indirect racial discrimination where ethnicities might be disadvantaged by their treatment by institutions or organisations. The Commission for Racial Equality was set up.

29th July 1977

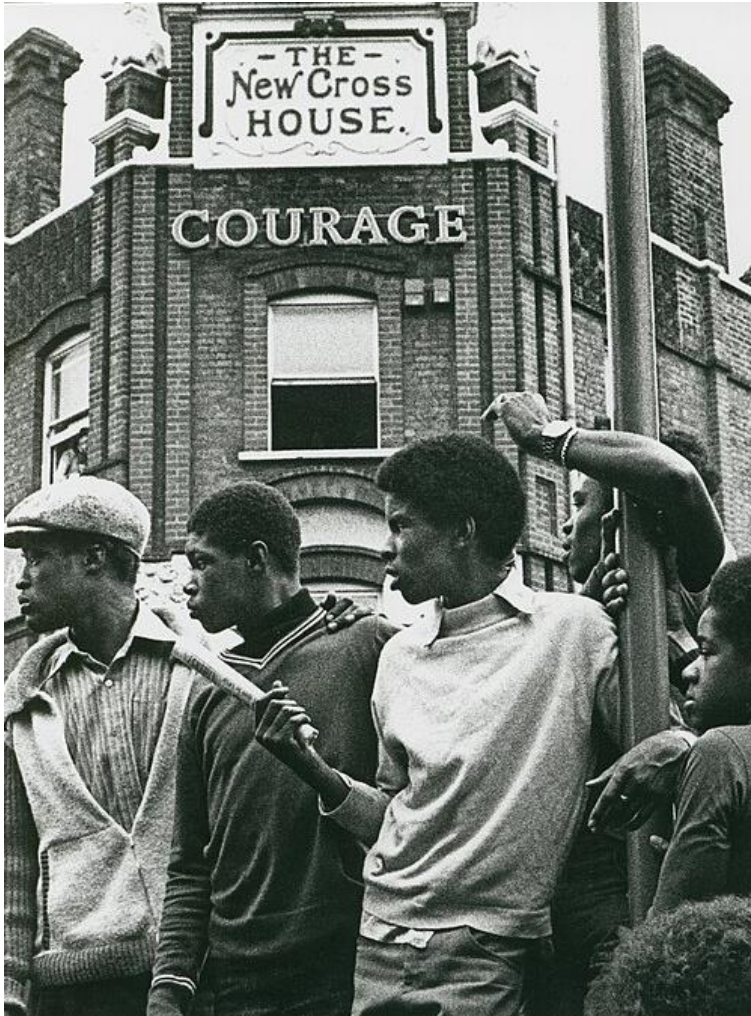
The RAF was reviewed by HM Queen Elizabeth the Second as part of her Silver Jubilee celebrations. The number of aircraft was much reduced compared with the Coronation Review of 1953 (only 74 static planes were on display) and numbers were bolstered from Commonwealth air forces. Local black RAF veteran Kenneth Straun worked on the maintenance of aircraft of The Queen's Flight at this time, reserved for use by the Royal Family and ministers. This experience resulted in successful promotion for him.



Queen Elizabeth the Second on a walkabout during her Silver Jubilee in 1977 (Public Domain)

13th August 1977 The battle of Lewisham

500 white members of the far-right National Front attempted a march in Lewisham, South London, an area with a strong black community. Thousands of counterdemonstrators were caught up in violent clashes with the police and the NF marchers in a conflict known as the battle of Lewisham. The battle is usually seen as a significant defeat for the National Front in its attempts to intimidate Black Britons and force a policy of repatriation on the British government. Many second-generation black Britons whose parents had migrated with the Windrush now took part in activism against racism and discrimination across Britain including in the West Midlands. They objected to prejudice, high unemployment, poverty, low quality housing and police harassment. Rastafarianism and its musical culture gained influence as some second-generation black Britons distanced themselves from their Caribbean backgrounds, traditional Christian churches and their more conservative parents. Some were drawn to left-wing and Pan-African ideologies and took part in campaigning against apartheid.



Black residents during the battle of Lewisham ([CC BY 4.0](#))

27th January 1978

Conservative Opposition leader Margaret Thatcher gave a television interview in which she addressed some of the fears and prejudices felt around immigration. She said *“people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different cultureif you want good race relations, you have got to allay peoples’ fears about numbers”*. The Conservatives won the 1979 general election. During the 1980s local black RAF veteran Karen Keller lived in at Chequers, the Prime Minister’s country residence, catering for Margaret Thatcher and her guests as an RAF chef. She also catered for parties at No 10 Downing Street.

1978

The popular BBC TV series the Black and White Minstrel Show, where performers blacked up to sing was axed. The young Lenny Henry appeared on the show as a teenager.

3rd November 1978 Republic of Dominica

Dominica became the third of Britain’s former Caribbean colonies to become a republic.

Nov 22nd 1976 Race Relations Act

This banned indirect racial discrimination where ethnicities might be disadvantaged by their treatment by institutions or organisations. The Commission for Racial Equality was set up.

1st December 24th, 1979

The Soviet Union began the occupation of Afghanistan in support of its unpopular Communist government. This escalated tension between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

18th January 1981 New Cross Fire

13 black teenagers and young people were killed in a fire in South London. The police resisted local pressure to investigate claims that the fire might have been the result of a racist arson attack. Tensions between the local black communities and the police increased.



A scene from the Brixton Riots or Uprising of 1981 ([CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))

10th and 12th April 1981 Brixton Riots or Uprising

The Metropolitan Police and mostly black youths clashed in a series of violent encounters in Brixton, an already deprived part of London where the Caribbean community suffered disproportionately from high unemployment, crime and poor housing. The violence, injuries, burning of police vehicles and looting of some shops and building was partly triggered by `Operation Swamp 81` where the largely white police force used the hated `sus` laws to search and arrest hundreds of black people, most of whom were not charged with any offence.

10th-11th July 1981 Handsworth Riots

Rioting occurred between black youths and police in Handsworth, Birmingham. This was one of a number of 'copycat' disturbances that occurred across some British cities, following Brixton. The Handsworth riot was not on the same scale as Brixton where relations between the mixed community and the police were deemed to be better than in London.

November 1982 RAF nurture of a future Caribbean officer

Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke joined the RAF and undertook basic training as an airman at RAF Swinderby. A white RAF sergeant expressly warned his class of white colleagues against using racist slurs towards their only black recruit. The RAF carefully nurtured John's ambitions to become an officer and flyer and in 1986 he attended Cranwell, subsequently training as a navigator. Throughout his career he felt protected from racism by his RAF colleagues.

9th-11th September 1985 Handsworth Riots

The police arrest of an Afro-Caribbean man on a traffic offence developed into two days of rioting which saw violence between local youths and the 1500 police officers deployed. Over 50 shops were either burnt or looted. Black unemployment was very high, and the scale of disturbance was much greater than in 1981.



West Midlands police officers during the 1985 Handsworth riots ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

January 20th, 1981 Inauguration of Ronald Reagan as US President

Republican Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as US President. His hostile attitude towards the Soviet Union which he later described as an 'empire of evil', convinced paranoid Soviet leaders and officials that the US was preparing a pre-emptive nuclear strike on their country

Dec 2nd April 1982 The Invasion of the Falklands Islands

Argentinean forces launched a surprise invasion of Britain's remote Falkland Islands Colony, 8,000 miles away at the tip of South America. The lightly defended islands were easily occupied against the wishes of the British inhabitants. The occupation was a spectacular failure for the intelligence services and the British government. The Foreign Secretary resigned. While professing neutrality at the outset of the crisis, US President Ronald Reagan assured Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in a private message that *'We will do what we can to assist you'*. RAF Hercules transport planes were immediately despatched to the American Wideawake air base on Ascension Island in the mid-Atlantic to establish an 'air bridge' between Britain and the Falklands. The base became crucial in supporting the Falklands campaign from Britain.



Map showing distances between Britain and the Falklands (The Malvinas is the Argentine name for the islands) (Public Domain)

5th April 1982 The Falklands Task Force

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government sent a hastily assembled Royal Navy Task Force from Portsmouth bound for the South Atlantic. Throughout the Falklands Campaign she resolutely determined to use force in recovering the islands from military aggression.

30th April – 1st May 1982 Bombing the Falklands

RAF Vulcan bombers successfully damaged the runway at Port Stanley, capital of the Falklands, flying over 15 hours from Ascension Island. Harrier fighters from the aircraft carrier HMS Hermes engaged with Argentine aircraft. During the Falklands campaign RAF Nimrod aircraft successfully refuelled in the air while flying missions between Ascension Island and the Falklands.



An RAF Chinook helicopter supporting British soldiers during the Falklands Campaign. (Imperial War Museum)

25th May 1982 The sinking of the Atlantic Conveyor

The British container ship Atlantic Conveyor was hit by an Exocet missile from the Argentine Navy. All the stores and nine RAF helicopters on board were lost when the vessel sank.

14th June 1982 British Victory and Argentinian Surrender

Argentinian forces in Port Stanley finally surrendered to British forces after the successful liberation of the islands. This unexpected war took 907 lives (255 British servicemen died) and the cost has been estimated at £2.9 billion pounds (£9.2 billion pounds in 2022 values) The RAF had one fatality as the result of a helicopter accident at sea. It became responsible for the air defence of the islands. The Falklands campaign demonstrated the continued need for the use of conventional aircraft and involved future defence expenditure in a remote part

of the world. American assistance during the Falklands Campaign, for example in the supply of crucial intelligence was an important factor in Britain's victory.

9th June 1983 Conservative General Election success

Margaret Thatcher won a majority in the general election. The victory in the Falklands War contributed to her success.

26th September 1983 Nuclear war avoided

The Soviet early-warning system incorrectly detected an incoming US nuclear ballistic missile heading towards the Soviet Union. Lt -Colonel Stanislav Petrov of Soviet Air Defence Forces, on duty in a Moscow bunker decided it was a false alarm so that an automatic Soviet retaliatory strike was not ordered. His decision narrowly avoided a nuclear war.

1984 Discrimination within the RAF in Northern Ireland

Local black RAF veteran Jeff Nelson started his period of service in Northern Ireland and played rugby for the RAF team there. During one game he was shoved and racially abused by a member of his own team. His commanding officer who was also part of the team, took no action.

11th March 1985 Gorbachev became Soviet Leader

Mikhail Gorbachev became the energetic new leader of the Soviet Union. He wanted to preserve Soviet Communism but realized that the Soviet Union could no longer afford the military costs of competing with the United States. Gorbachev tried to liberalize Soviet society and economics through his policies of Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring).

Margaret Thatcher on meeting him said "*I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together*"

12th May 1985 New Falklands Air Base

The RAF opened a new base in the Falklands at Mount Pleasant where aircraft were stationed to deter any future Argentine aggression. Local black RAF veteran Bryan Scott Hughes did work supporting the Falklands campaign from the UK. Local black RAF veteran Donald Campbell served briefly in the Falklands Islands but after the Falklands Campaign itself. Another local black veteran, Karen Keller also served there briefly.

11th–12th October 1986 Reykjavik Summit

Mikhail Gorbachev met with US President Ronald Reagan in Reykjavik, Iceland to discuss control of and cuts to stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Although the talks failed, they paved the way for future agreement and the two leaders got on well.



Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in Iceland 1986 (Public Domain)

8th December 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) in Washington DC cutting certain types of nuclear missiles. The agreement represented a significant thaw in the Cold War.

15th May 1988 - 15th February 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan

Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, ending a conflict that had stoked tension with Western countries.

11th June 1987 Black MPs

Four black Labour MPs were elected to the House of Commons. They included Dianne Abbott who was the daughter of Jamaican parents and Bernie Grant who was born in British Guyana.



Diane Abbott was first elected an MP in 1987 ([CC BY 3.0](#))

October 1987 Black History Month

The first Black History Month was held in London. It has since become a means of celebrating black history in many schools and communities across the UK. Black History Month has helped to forge a sense of what it means to be both Black and British and has widely spread awareness of Black British History.

9th December 1989 Fall of the Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall surrounding West Berlin was opened by East German border guards and floods of East Germans embraced West Germans after decades of separation during which over 100 people had died trying to escape to the West. This event was the culmination of pressure from popular protests within Communist eastern European countries to introduce democratic reforms. Remarkably Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Bulgaria all overthrew Communism peacefully (Romania was the exception in having a violent revolution). Unlike in in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Gorbachev chose not to support his Warsaw Pact allies and no Soviet tanks rolled in to save their regimes. It seemed that the

West had won the Cold War without firing a shot. A young KGB officer stationed in Dresden called Vladimir Putin was dismayed by what was taking place.



Germans united in celebrating the opening of the Berlin Wall ([CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))



Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (Public Domain)

10th May 1990 First operational female pilot

Flight Lieutenant Julie Ann Gibson become the first operational female pilot to fly RAF jet aircraft.

25th July 1990 Options for Change Paper

The UK government announced plans to reduce the British military presence in Germany as the end of the Cold War had removed the threat of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Western countries called this a peace dividend, allowing governments to spend money on

other priorities instead. Armed Forces personnel were cut by around 18% (the Royal Air Force was reduced to about 75,000 and bases in Germany were closed over time).

October 3rd 1990 German Reunification

Germany reunited after the former Communist state of East Germany joined West Germany's democracy and became part of NATO, ending a division which began in the late 1940s after the Second World War.



The flags of all German states flying outside the Federal Assembly on German Unity Day in 1990 [CC BY-SA 3.0 de](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/)

2nd August 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait

Saddam Hussein, dictator of Iraq ordered his forces to invade and occupy the neighbouring state of Kuwait. In response US President George H. Bush organised a large international coalition of powers for a military build-up to deter an Iraqi attack on oil-rich Saudi Arabia (Operation Desert Shield). The aims of the coalition gained the support of the ailing Soviet Union. During the remaining months of 1991, RAF aircraft were deployed in the region as part of Britain's contribution to the operation and in preparation for a coalition campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

2nd September 1991 Handsworth Riot

A nighttime power cut prompted widespread looting of shops and buildings as well as the theft of cars. 200 police officers were deployed. There were also disturbances in some other British cities.

16th-17th 1992 January Operation Desert Storm – the First Gulf War

RAF Tornados attacked Iraqi airfields as part of Operation Desert Storm, the US-lead campaign to liberate Kuwait. One Tornado was shot down. The crew ejected and were taken prisoner. This was the beginning of the aerial assault designed to destroy the Iraqi air force prior to an invasion of Kuwait.



US aircraft taking part in Operation Desert Storm (Public Domain)

15th February 1991 Start of the ground war in the First Gulf War

The ground assault by coalition forces to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait began. This included British soldiers. The RAF supported the campaign by bombing targets and delivering supplies to British land forces.

27th February 1991 Liberation of Kuwait

After a swift and successful campaign, President Bush declared Kuwait liberated. Coalition forces pursued the retreating Iraqis into Iraqi territory for a limited time to weaken them and ensure they did not have the capacity to attack Kuwait or other states in future.

28th February 1991 End of the First Gulf War

A ceasefire ended the First Gulf War. The RAF lost 7 Tornados in all and a Jaguar. 3 aircrew were killed in action.

25th June 1991 Break-up of Yugoslavia

Slovenia, previously part of Communist-run Yugoslavia declared its independence. This was part of the complicated collapse of Yugoslavia into separate, rival states. Some areas, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina had mixed populations of different ethnicities that were sometimes pitched against each other for the control of territory.



Flag of Yugoslavia under Communist rule (Public Domain)

Dec 31st 1991

The Soviet Union was officially dissolved. The unpopular President Gorbachev had been weakened earlier in the year by a failed hard-line Communist coup and chose to resign on Dec 25th 1991. The Soviet Union broke up into a number of independent states such as Ukraine but the most powerful remained the Russian Federation. This operated as a weak and unstable democracy during the 1990s. Russian forces were withdrawn from Eastern Europe over time. The selling off of inefficient nationalised industries in the Russian Federation led to much poverty, unemployment and discontent in the difficult transition to a market economy. A lot of wealth and power became concentrated in the hands of frequently corrupt businessmen known as oligarchs. The Russian Federation still possessed Soviet-era nuclear weapons but was in no position to challenge the supremacy of the West, even when it disagreed with Western policy.



The flag of the Soviet Union was lowered for the last time over the Kremlin in December 1991 and replaced by that of the Russian Federation (Fair Use).

April 7th 1992 Start of Bosnian War

Bosnia-Herzegovina declared itself independent of Yugoslavia. Local Serb forces began a war to take the territory from their Muslim and Croat enemies with the backing of Serbia. The capital of Sarajevo was surrounded by the Bosnian Serbs. It was the beginning of a long and bitter siege.

April 1992 First RAF base closed in Germany

RAF Wildenrath in Germany became the first base to cease all fixed wing flights. Local black veterans Donald Campbell, Bryan Scott Hughes and Karen Keller all served on RAF bases in Germany during their careers.

Aug 1st 1992

Black British athlete Linford Christie won a gold medal at the Barcelona Olympics.

April 22nd 1993 Murder of Stephen Lawrence

Black A-Level student Stephen Lawrence was murdered by a group of white men while waiting for a bus in London. Metropolitan Police investigations did not result in any convictions for his murder. His parents lead a public campaign complaining about the ineffectiveness of their enquiries.



Stephen Lawrence (Fair Use)

31st March 1993 Bosnian No-Fly zone

NATO established a No-Fly zone over Bosnia. This was designed to limit Bosnian Serb attacks on their enemies and hasten the end of the Bosnian War. The RAF contributed to NATO aerial patrols over Bosnia. However European and NATO countries were reluctant to be drawn in to the conflict itself on the ground.

7th June 1993

Black footballer Paul Ince became the first black captain of the England football team.



Paul Ince (Public Domain)

1993 Discrimination persisted in the RAF

Encouraged to apply for an officer's commission in the RAF by fellow black local veteran, John Winston Clarke, Jeff Nelson was a borderline case for acceptance. He later discovered that a person involved in discussion as to whether he should be accepted had written down 'skin pigmentation' against him as a deciding factor on the documentation. Jeff left the RAF and joined the police where he received active encouragement from white colleagues in challenging racism when he encountered it.

7th April-19th July 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

800,000 Tutsi people in the small African country of Rwanda were murdered by Hutu extremists. The US and NATO refused to intervene. France and Belgium evacuated their nationals and the UN withdrew most of its staff.

July 1995 The Srebrenica Massacre

Bosnian Serb forces massacred over 7,000 Muslim men and boys at the Bosnian village of Srebrenica. UN peacekeepers did not intervene. This shocking incident was a blatant example of 'ethnic cleansing', designed by the Bosnian Serbs to clear territory of their enemies. It was the first such massacre in Europe since the 1940s. Srebrenica shamed Western countries, particularly the United States in to taking direct military action against the Bosnian Serbs.



A memorial to the victims of the Srebrenica Massacre (Public Domain)

30th August - 20th September 1995 NATO bombing in Bosnia

NATO air forces (including the RAF) targeted Bosnian Serb positions from the air. This campaign, combined with advances on the ground by Croats and Bosnian Muslims forced the beginning of peace negotiations.

21ST Nov 1995 Dayton Accords

A complex peace agreement ending the Bosnian War was signed in Dayton, Ohio. The show of force by NATO was crucial in establishing peace.

13th December 1995 Brixton Riot

Five hours of rioting occurred in Brixton following the death of a young black man in police custody. Property and vehicles were damaged.

1996

The RAF published data on the ethnicity of its personnel for the first time. 1.2% came from ethnic minorities.

1st January 1997 Closure of RAF base in Hong Kong

The RAF's Hong Kong base closed, it's last in Asia, prior to the colony's hand-over to Communist China.

1st July 1997 Hong Kong hand-over to China

Britain ceded Hong Kong to Communist China after 156 years of occupation. The Chinese promised to preserve the city's capitalist economic system and the human and democratic rights of the population. These rights have been severely curtailed in the last five years, prompting the settlement of many Hong Kong residents in the UK. The Prince of Wales and British politicians attended the hand-over ceremony from the Royal Yacht Britannia, to some a reminder of imperial power. The yacht was decommissioned by Tony Blair's New Labour government later in 1997.



The Royal Yacht Britannia in 1997 ([CC BY 2.0](#))

22nd June 1998

Tate Gardens in Brixton, London was renamed Windrush Square to honour the Caribbean migrants who arrived on the Windrush in June 1948.

16th -19th December 1998 Bombing and Patrolling Iraq

The RAF participated with the US air force in bombing Iraqi targets in response to Iraq's failure to co-operate with United Nations inspectors searching for weapons of mass destruction. Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke flew in RAF sorties over the no-fly zones in Northern and Southern Iraq between 1995 and 1998.

28th February 1998 - 11th June 1999 The Kosovo War

A war was fought in the Serbian province of Kosovo between Serbian forces and ethnic Albanians who formed the majority of the population. Serbia accompanied its military campaign with repression and ethnic cleansing reminiscent of the previous Bosnian War. Between March and June NATO air forces, including the RAF bombed Serb targets which combated the oppression of Albanians and forced the Serbian government to sue for peace.

Serbia totally withdrew from Kosovo which in effect became independent under Western supervision. Western intervention was swifter and more consistent than in the Bosnian War and gave the alliance more confidence in the impact of air power which also reduced the risk of having troops actively involved on the ground.



Kosovo (marked in red) was originally an autonomous province of Serbia to the north.

[CC \(BY-SA 3.0\)](#)

1998

The Ministry of Defence agreed to work in partnership with the Commission for Racial Equality after a scandal exposed racism in the Household Cavalry. The Armed Forces, including the RAF would set targets for recruitment of ethnic minorities, increase the number of ethnic minority officers, remove barriers to promotion and promote a non-racist environment.

January-February 1999

The RAF bombed various targets in Iraq.

24th February 1999 Institutional Racism in the Metropolitan Police

Sir William MacPherson published an official inquiry in to how the Metropolitan Police handled their investigations of the 1993 murder of black teenager, Stephen Lawrence. He concluded these were “*marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers.*” The report led to detailed targets for the recruitment, retention and promotion of black and Asian officers, as well as the creation of the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

March 1999 NATO expansion

Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, all former Communist countries and members of the Warsaw Pact joined NATO. This strengthened their sense of security in case of a revival of Russian power and consolidated US leadership in Europe. The Russian government

objected but could do nothing about it. There had been talk of Russia joining NATO itself earlier in the 1990s but this never happened.

30th January 2000

The legal ban on LGBTQ people serving in the Armed Forces, including the RAF was lifted. Before this, individuals could be dismissed, arrested, interrogated, imprisoned and stripped of medals.

March 2000

Vladimir Putin was first elected President of the Russian Federation in free and fair elections.

April 2000

Only 1.1% of RAF personnel were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

30th November 2000

The Freedom of Information Act became law. This allows the public to request information from public authorities (within certain limits). Local black RAF veteran Bryan Scott Hughes always believed his promotion in the RAF was deliberately blocked or delayed because of his colour. He was never permitted to see the annual documentation that assessed his suitability for promotion at the time. When he requested to see these assessments under the Freedom of Information Act, sections of them had been blocked out. Local RAF veterans Donald Campbell and Jeff Nelson also experienced delayed or blocked promotion.

June 2001 Last RAF base closed in Germany

The RAF's last Cold War base in Germany closed.

1st September 2001 Robertson's gollies go!

Robertson's Jam dropped its popular black golly imagery. This had been criticised as a racist caricature since the 1980s.

11th September 2001 9/11

Islamist terrorists from Al Qaeda hijacked four civilian aeroplanes. Three of these were flown as flying bombs into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, a pair of skyscrapers in New York City while a fourth aiming for the Pentagon in Washington, DC crashed because passengers overcame the hijackers. Desperate people tried to escape from the skyscrapers by jumping from upper floors before the twin towers collapsed into rubble. The 2966 victims included 19 hijackers and 67 Britons. The youngest victim was 2 and a half. The attack deeply shocked America. It was the first experience of warfare on the mainland United States since the 1860s. A wave of sympathy and support swept much of the world, including Britain. President George W. Bush (son of President George H. Bush who held office between 1989 and 1993) invoked article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO's founding document) for the first time, committing all member states to come to the defence of another member if it is attacked. He also announced a 'War on Terror' to eradicate Al Qaeda and any groups or governments who supported it.



One of the hijacked planes approaching the World Trade Centre on Sept 11th 2001 (Public Domain)

20th September 2001 Bush ultimatum

President Bush demanded that Afghanistan's Taliban government hand over the Al Quada leader, Osama Bin Laden and his supporters operating in the country or face attack. The Taliban refused.

7TH October 2001 The start of the twenty-year Afghan War

The US and RAF aircraft started bombing Afghan airfields and alleged training camps. The US relied on local Afghan rebel groups to lead the fight against the Taliban on the ground with some support from NATO special forces. President Bush wished to avoid putting American `boots on the ground`.

13th November 2001 Fall of Kabul

Rebel Afghan forces entered the capital, Kabul. A pro-Western Afghan interim government was put in power. Fierce fighting continued against the retreating Taliban but Osama bin Laden, the Al Quada leader escaped the country to reorganise his forces in a remote part of neighbouring Pakistan.

April 2002 US Aid for Afghanistan

President Bush announced large scale aid for Afghanistan, but it was too little to rebuild one of the poorest, most war-torn countries in the world. American attention switched to Iraq, but the Taliban and Al Quada remained active threats to the new Afghan government. Forces from NATO countries were only lightly deployed in Afghanistan and were too few in number to make much difference to the security situation.



An RAF Chinook in Afghanistan in 2002 [OGL v1.0](#)

May 2002 First Black cabinet minister

Paul Boateng MP became the first black cabinet minister in a UK government.

17th March 2003 US Ultimatum to Iraq

President Bush gave Saddam Hussein, Iraq's dictator 48 hours to leave the country or face military action. Bush and his close ally, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair alleged that;

- Saddam was developing weapons of mass destruction (nuclear and chemical devices)
- he had direct links to Al Quada.

The US and UK decided to act alone even though many countries including NATO allies opposed war. The proposed military action strongly divided public opinion in Britain at the time, just as the Suez Crisis had in 1957.



US President George W. Bush with Prime Minister Tony Blair. The close relationship between a conservative republican and a Labour politician seemed to confirm the importance of the `special relationship` between the US and UK. (Public Domain)

20th March 2003 US-UK Invasion of Iraq

Spectacular bombing of targets in Iraq by American and RAF aircraft began, designed to cow the enemy through `shock and awe` tactics. This was soon followed by successful land invasions of US troops from the north and British troops from the south, supported by air power. Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke flew in the Iraq war as a squadron leader.

6th April 2003 Fall of Basra

British forces captured the oil-rich city of Basra in Southern Iraq. After an initial welcome, Shia militias sought revenge against former supporters of Saddam Hussein and looked to Iran, an enemy of the US and the British for leadership. Attacks soon began on British forces.

9th April 2003 Fall of Baghdad

American forces occupied Baghdad having met only sporadic resistance. Locals joyfully toppled statues of the hated Saddam Hussein.



A statue of Saddam Hussein toppled in Baghdad during the American invasion (Public Domain)

1st May 2003 The War on Terror won?

President Bush triumphantly announced that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” on board the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln. It was also announced that major combat operations had ended in Afghanistan where 8,000 US troops were still deployed at the time. However, there were too few Western soldiers and administrators on the ground in Iraq to effectively control the country. Weak American planning failed to restore the wrecked economy or rebuild the country after years of a brutal dictatorship. Violent opposition to the occupation of Iraq grew from Sunni supporters of Saddam Hussein and Shia militias linked to Iran.



The premature slogan above Bush as he announced near victory in Iraq (Public Domain)

July 2003 Darfur Genocide

A genocide began in Darfur, Sudan where up to 300,000 people were murdered according to the UN by 2005. The US and NATO took no action.

October 2003 Mary Seacole most significant Black Briton

A national poll voted a British Jamaican nurse, Mary Seacole (who nursed British soldiers during the Crimean War 1854-1856) as the most significant black Briton. Her story is now widely taught in primary schools.



Mary Seacole around 1850 (Public Domain)

13th December 2003 Capture of Saddam Hussein

Saddam Hussein, former dictator of Iraq was captured in his hometown of Tikrit.

2004 7 New NATO members

Former Communist and Warsaw Pact countries Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO. The three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania also became members (they had previously been part of the Soviet Union). In addition, Slovakia (once part of

Czechoslovakia) and Slovenia (previously part of Yugoslavia) also joined the alliance. The Russian government complained about the enlargement.

April 2004 Abu Ghraib Scandal

News spread of photographs showing the abuse, torture and deaths of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of the US Army in Abu Ghraib prison. The scandal helped turn Iraqi opinion against the United States.

April-November 2004 Second battle of Fallujah

US forces, with some British support seized the rebel held city of Fallujah in Iraq from a number of insurgent groups. It was one of the longest and bloodiest battles fought by US Marines since the Vietnam War.

July 2004 Iraqi link to Al Quada disproved

A US commission reported that they had found no evidence to link Saddam Hussein to Al Quada. This had been one of the main justifications for the US-UK invasion of Iraq.

6th October, 2004 No Iraqi weapons of mass destruction found

The US Iraq Survey Group reported that they had found no evidence that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had produced and stockpiled any weapons of mass destruction since 1991. This had been one of the main justifications for the US-UK invasion of Iraq. American and British intelligence services were strongly criticised after the Iraq War for trusting in unreliable sources of information.

November 2004 American fatalities in Iraq

By the time of the US presidential election (which saw the re-election of George W. Bush) around 1,000 American soldiers had died since the occupation of Iraq began in March 2003.

7th July 2005

Four British Islamist suicide bombers exploded devices across London's transport system. 52 people were killed and over 770 injured.



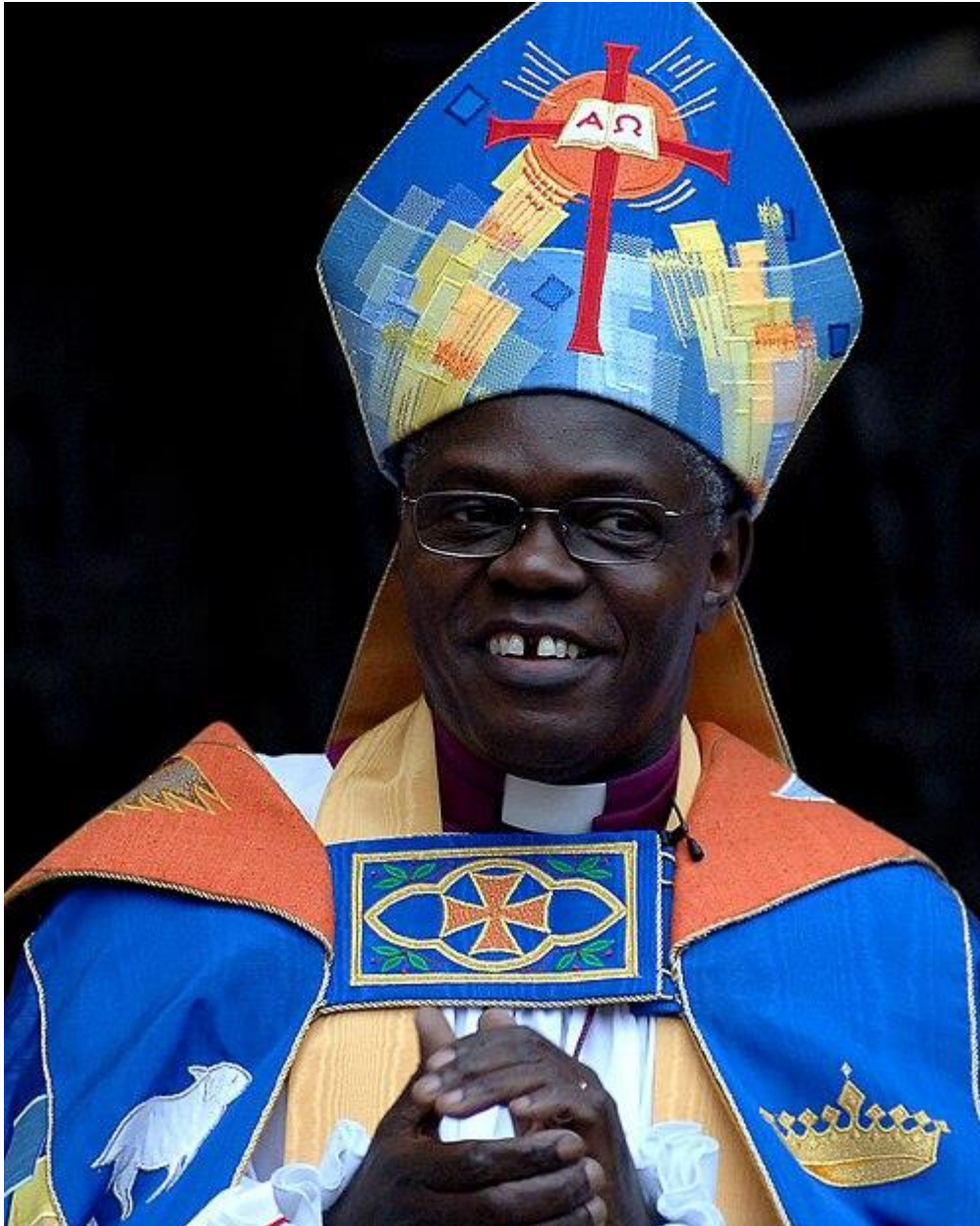
Ambulances in Russell Square, London during the 7th July attacks in 2005 (Public Domain)

30th November 2005 A Black Archbishop

John Sentamu was enthroned as the first black Archbishop of York.

January 2005-August 2006 Taliban suicide-bombing

The Taliban changed tactics in Afghanistan, avoiding direct combat with Western forces, launching 64 suicide attacks and other terrorist action. This undermined the recently elected but weak and often corrupt, pro-Western government. Retaliatory bombings by Western forces and the sluggish pace of reform stoked anti-western sentiment in Afghanistan. The Taliban dominated the Afghan production of opium whose sale abroad helped to fund their campaigns.



John Sermtamu [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic](#)

May 2006 The RAF in Helmand Province

Over 3,000 British soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan's Helmand province which was in danger of being overrun by the Taliban. The main UK base, Camp Bastion was the centre for around 9,500 UK soldiers at points in its history and became one of the largest airfields in the world. RAF helicopters played a vital role landing troops and supplies in remote areas. The threat from the Taliban was so serious that pilots were instructed to stay on the ground for no more than 30 seconds a time. RAF jet fighters continued to participate in the campaign against the Taliban. Between 2006 and 2010 Harriers and Tornados flew approximately 160 sorties per month. Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke helped to organise training in Britain for British Land Forces deployed to Afghanistan between 2005 and 2008.



[Open Government Licence version 1.0](#) RAF Regiment Gunners with Merlin Helicopter Landing in Afghanistan

30th Dec 2006 Death of Saddam Hussein

Saddam Hussein, former dictator of Iraq was executed after a trial for his crimes.

January 2007 American `surge' in Iraq

President Bush ordered a `surge' of an extra 20,000 American troops which contributed to lowering the level of violence in Iraq that year. Some Sunni fighters chose to fight with the Iraqi government and its US backers against Shia enemies.

7th July 2007 7/7 attacks in Britain

Home grown Islamist terrorists attacked London`s transport system, killing 52 people

September 2007 British abandonment of Basra City

Under siege from a Shia militia for months beforehand, British forces withdrew from the city of Basra and retreated to their base at Basra airport.

April 2008

The proportion of RAF personnel from ethnic minorities backgrounds had risen to 2.2%. 0.4% identified as black Caribbean.

8th-12th August 2008 Russian Invasion of Georgia

Russia successfully invaded and defeated its southern neighbour Georgia, recognizing the independence of two separatist Georgian territories it already controlled. Vladimir Putin's regime was becoming more authoritarian. The invasion harmed relations with NATO.

31st March 2009 British departure from Basra airport

Basra Airport, the last British base in Basra was handed over to US forces. RAF personnel, including the RAF regiment were the last to leave.

November 2008 American withdrawal from Iraq agreed

The Bush administration agreed a timetable with the Iraqi government for the withdrawal of US forces by 2011.

1st April 2009 NATO expansion

Albania (a former Communist country) and Croatia (formerly part of Yugoslavia) joined NATO.

Russia objected.

18th August 2010 US forces left Iraq

The last US combat troops left Iraq, a year earlier than originally planned. There had been over 4,000 American fatalities with many more Iraqi casualties. The casualties and high cost helped to turn much American public opinion against involvement in foreign wars.

May 2011 British forces left Iraq

The last British forces left Iraq. 179 members of the British Armed Forces died during deployment in Iraq, 19 of these were from the RAF. The cost of British involvement has been calculated as £9.6 billion.



The Basra Memorial Wall at the National Memorial Arboretum ([Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#))

December 2010-February 2011 The Arab Spring

Demonstrations in favour of democracy in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria started what is known as the Arab Spring, where dictatorships across the Arab world were challenged by popular unrest. The Tunisian and Egyptian presidents fled. Bahrain suppressed the unrest while the governments of Libya and Syria faced armed revolts. Yemen eventually descended into civil war.



Map showing countries of the Arab League marked in green ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

2nd May 2011 US assassination of Osama Bin-Laden

In a daring raid by US special forces on his safe house in Pakistan, the Al-Queda leader Osama Bin-Laden was assassinated. US President Obama watched the operation live from the White House.

2010 Destruction of Windrush landing cards

The Home Office destroyed the landing cards of those migrants who had arrived in Britain on the Windrush in 1948. For some, it was the only proof of their right to remain in Britain dating from before 1973.

March 2011 RAF in Lybia

RAF rebel forces in Libya seemed on the verge of defeat by the government. The United Nations allowed an international coalition of countries, including Britain to establish a no-fly zone over Libya for the protection of civilians which the RAF contributed to. RAF jets then joined other NATO countries bombing Libyan government targets on the ground which saved the rebels from defeat and probably the lives of many civilians from government reprisals at the time. However, there was no international agreement to take action in Syria against the government of President Assad. The US, its allies and some Arab countries opposed Assad but he retained the support of Russia and Iran.



An RAF Typhoon aircraft taking off to participate in operations in Libya, 2011 (OGL v1.0)

October 2011 Libyan government overthrown

The Libyan government was finally overthrown and dictator Muammar Al-Qaddafi was shot by the rebels. However, within three years Libya descended into civil war with different forces supported by rival foreign powers. Western countries and NATO were criticised for supporting the original Libyan revolution but doing too little afterwards to ensure that Libya could peacefully develop into a democracy.

May 2012 Hostile environment for illegal migrants

Conservative Home Secretary, Theresa May announced a new “hostile environment” towards illegal migration. From 2013 onwards many Windrush generation residents were treated unfairly as illegal immigrants because they could not prove their right to remain from before 1973. They could be told leave at once. Some lost their jobs or homes as a result of benefit cuts, could no longer access the NHS, were placed in detention and were deported

with no right of return. At least 83 people were wrongly deported. It meant that some in the Windrush Generation questioned their British identity after decades of residence.

July 27th 2012

Participants playing Windrush migrants appeared in the spectacular opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games as an integral part of British history.

August 21st 2013 Chemical weapons use in Syria

The Syrian government was suspected of using chemical weapons in Damascus during the bitter and complex Syrian civil war killing hundreds of people. The US, British and French governments considered taking military action against the Assad regime as a result. Assad's allies Russia, China and Iran opposed military action.

August 29th 2013 The British Parliament voted against military action in Syria

The British government lost a vote in parliament to authorise military strikes in Syria. Partly because of the unpopularity of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, MPs did not want to intervene in yet another foreign conflict. The vote helped to persuade President Obama to reach a diplomatic solution instead. In September Russia, Syria, and the United States agreed that all chemical weapons in Syria, should be placed under international control. The agreement showed Vladimir Putin that the appetite of Western countries for direct military intervention abroad was waning.

February-March 2014 Russian occupation of Crimea

A democratic revolution deposed the pro-Russian president of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin blamed this on western intelligence services and seized the strategically important Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine (this had once been part of the Soviet Union and before that the Russian empire). Western sanctions isolated Russia internationally but were ineffective in returning Crimea to Ukraine.

June 2014 Proclamation of ISIS Caliphate

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an extreme Islamist group defeated the Iraqi army and seized Mosul, one of the country's major cities. The group declared a caliphate across its territory in Iraq and Syria, claiming jurisdiction over all Muslims. Its brutal regime included terrorism, kidnapping, torture, beheadings, forced marriage, sexual slavery, persecution of religious minorities and desecration of religious buildings.



Territory controlled by ISIS at its height [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#)

September 2014 Air strikes on ISIS

The US included ISIS targets in its air strikes in Syria, supported by other countries including Arab ones. The RAF was a major contributor to the air campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, being responsible for about 20% of all air strikes over time.

26th October 2014 British Military withdrawal from Afghanistan October

British combat forces withdrew from Afghanistan, handing over Camp Bastion to the Afghan Army. Of the 457 British military fatalities, 16 of these were RAF personnel. The British Afghan campaign cost £32.8 billion pounds in current prices.

7th January 2015 Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack in Paris

Islamist terrorists linked to Al- Qaeda and ISIS burst in to the Paris offices of a satirical magazine called Charlie Hebdo, murdering 11 people.

May 2015 ISIS occupation of Palmyra

ISIS took control of Palmyra in Syria and began the demolition of ancient Greco-Roman ruins there.



A Palmyra arch demolished by ISIS in Syria [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

September 2015 Russian campaign in Syria

Russia began a campaign of its own in Syria, claiming to be targeting ISIS but in fact, directing most of its fire at anti-Assad rebel forces. Over time, this helped President Assad to regain control of most of Syria as a key Russian ally.

September-November 2015 European Migration Crisis

1.3 million asylum seekers, mostly Syrians escaping their civil war sought refuge in Europe. An estimated 550,000 people were admitted to Germany. At the time, crowds formed at railway stations to applaud the arrivals.

13th November 2015 ISIS terror attack in Paris

ISIS gunmen and suicide bombers hit a concert hall, stadium, restaurants and bars in Paris, leaving 130 people dead, with hundreds wounded.



The Eiffel Tower illuminated in the colours of the French tricolour after the ISIS attack on Paris. [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

23rd June 2016 Brexit referendum

Britain narrowly voted to leave the European Union. Migration was an important factor in the divisive referendum campaign.

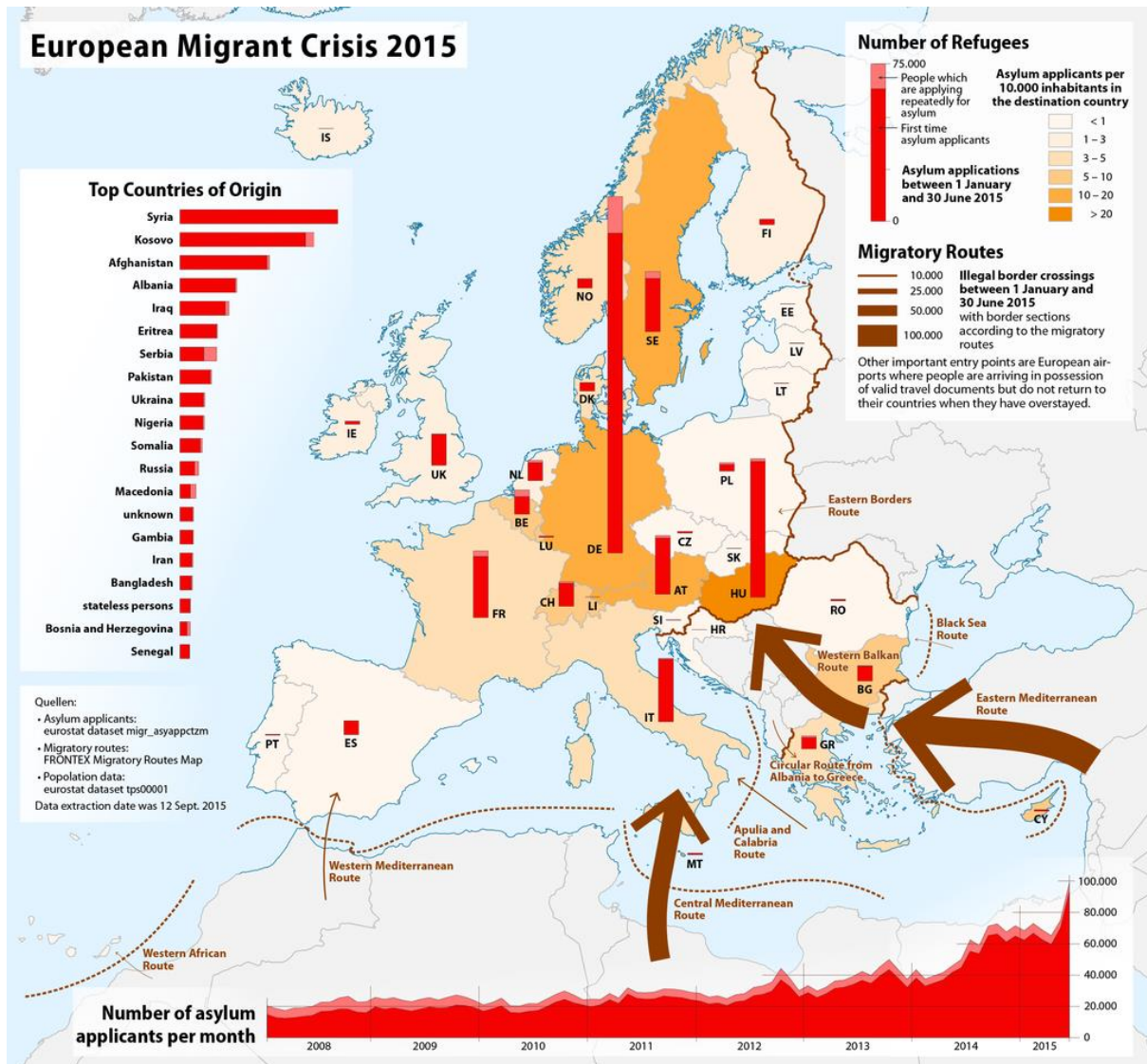
July 9th 2017 Iraqi recapture of Mosul

The Iraqi army recaptured Mosul from ISIS. Opposition from a range of forces including the Iraqi and Syrian governments, Kurdish troops and the effects of the U.S. led air strikes weakened the grip of ISIS on its territory.

November 2017 Defeat of ISIS

The Iraqi and Syrian governments declared that ISIS had been defeated. By 2019 it lost the last of its territory and its leader was killed by US forces.

The Eiffel Tower illuminated in the colours of the French tricolour after the ISIS attack on Paris. [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)



Map showing the European migration crisis of 2015 [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)

2017 Chinese oppression of Uighurs

The Chinese Communist government was accused of oppressing its Muslim Uighur minority, using mass detention, torture and forced labour as a means of control. Western governments, including the UK later accused China of genocide. The Chinese denied these allegations.

5th June 2017 Montenegro joined NATO.

Montenegro, formally part of Communist Yugoslavia joined NATO.

22nd May 2017 Manchester Arena attack

22 people were killed at the Manchester Arena bombing by an Islamist terrorist. ISIS claimed responsibility.

25th May 2017 Trump and NATO

US president Donald Trump met NATO leaders in Brussels and scolded them for not spending enough money on defence. Some of his advisers and NATO leaders feared that he might withdraw the United States from the alliance.

29th April 2018 Home Secretary's resignation because of the Windrush Scandal

Conservative Home Secretary Amber, Rudd resigned as Home Secretary as a consequence of the Windrush Scandal. It emerged from leaks that the Home Office had been working towards set targets for the number of deportations per year. Only some of those eligible for compensation ever received any and some had already died.

19th May 2018 Wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle

Prince Harry married American actress Megan Markle at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. She was the first person of colour to join the royal family. The couple subsequently settled in California with their children. Accusations of racist treatment were made by the couple against elements of the British media and members of Harry's family and those serving them.



The Duke and Duchess of Sussex ([CC BY 2.0](#))

15th March 2019 Pro-Democracy movement in Hong Kong

Pro-democracy demonstrations against the Chinese Communist government began in the former British colony of Hong Kong. The government led a ruthless crackdown, subsequently introducing a draconian National Security Law which severely curtailed freedoms in the territory.

April 2019 Mueller Report

The US Mueller report concluded that the Russian government had sought to interfere in the 2016 presidential campaign in favour of the republican candidate Donald Trump but that

there was insufficient evidence to bring any 'conspiracy' or 'coordination' charges against Trump or his associates.

31st January 2020 Brexit departure

Britain officially left the European Union.

27th March 2020 North Macedonia joined NATO

North Macedonia, formally part of Communist Yugoslavia, joined NATO.

6th January 2021 Storming of the US Capitol

Supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol building in Washington DC, two months after his defeat in the 2020 presidential election. Trump always falsely maintained that the result was rigged against him.



Storming of the US Capitol ([Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#))

June 2020 Rashford letter

Young Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford wrote an open letter to MPs calling on the government to extend a food voucher scheme for children in low income families through the summer of the Covid Pandemic. Conservative Prime Minister, Boris Johnson initially refused but soon agreed with Rashford's suggestion.



A Marcus Rashford mural ([CC0](#))

7th June 2020 Colston Statue toppled in Bristol

Demonstrators in Bristol toppled a bronze statue of seventeenth century local slave trader William Colston into the waters of the docks. This action was a result of the Black Lives Matter protest movement which gained support in Britain following the killing of African-American George Floyd in the United States by a white police officer. The movement sparked sometimes acrimonious debates and 'culture wars' over racism and the legacies of colonialism and the British Empire.



The defaced statue of Edward Colston on display after its toppling [CC BY 2.0](#)

8th June 2021 Gareth Southgate Dear England letter

The England football team faced criticism for 'taking the knee' during the playing of the National Anthem as a symbolic gesture protesting against racial injustice. England manager, Gareth Southgate wrote an open letter defending the right of his players to do this and explaining the shared pride of his young and diverse team in playing for their country.

August 2021 End of the Afghan War- RAF evacuation from Kabul

The United States and its allies withdrew from Afghanistan. The unexpectedly sudden withdrawal caused the collapse of the pro-Western government, the return to power of the Taliban and a surge of refugees desperate to escape the country. Over 15000 people were evacuated from a chaotic Kabul airport by the RAF but thousands were left behind. Women and those who had supported coalition troops were most vulnerable to Taliban retribution. A secret and very expensive scheme was organised to resettle vulnerable Afghans in Britain who had served with British forces or supported British officials. Their names were accidentally leaked by a government official .

30th November 2021 Republic of Barbados

Barbados became the fourth of Britain`s former Caribbean colonies to become a republic. The Labour government presented the change as a continuation of decolonization. Barbados used to be known as `Little England`.

24th February 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Russia invaded its neighbour, Ukraine starting the largest war in Europe since 1939. President Vladimir Putin labelled it a “special military operation” with the aim to “demilitarise and denazify” Ukraine. He claimed the war had been provoked by NATO expansion. Unexpected Ukrainian resistance led to a prolonged conflict, serious Western sanctions against Russia, the supply of weaponry by Western countries to Ukraine and the flight of 8.2 million refugees from the country.



Map of Ukraine showing shaded territory claimed by Russia (Public Domain)

March 2022 Royal Tour of Caribbean

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge toured Belize, Jamaica and the Bahamas as part of Queen Elizabeth the Second’s Platinum Jubilee celebrations. They were warmly received by local people but faced some protests and calls for Britain to pay reparations for slavery while the Jamaican prime minister commented that he would rather the island become a republic.

14th April 2022

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a plan to deport illegal migrants and asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing. This was partly in response to the ongoing illegal smuggling of migrants across the Channel in small boats and by other means. The scheme was cancelled by the new Labour government in July 2024. It is estimated to have cost £700

million pounds. Four volunteers ended up being deported while the scheme was in operation.

2022 Overdue WW2 medals awarded to local black RAF veteran

Prince Albert `Jake ` Jacob was at last awarded the service medals owed to him for his service in the RAF during the Second World War at the age of 97.

8th September 2022 Death of Elizabeth the Second September

Queen Elizabeth the Second died after a reign of 70 years. It is estimated that around 4 billion people watched her funeral worldwide.

25th October 2022

Conservative Rishi Sunak became the first South Asian and person of colour to be appointed prime minister. He held office until July 2024.



Rishi Sunak in 2022 ([OGL 3](#))

4th April 2023 Finland joined NATO

The traditionally neutral country of Finland joined NATO, horrified by Russian aggression against Ukraine and looking to gain greater security for its long border with Russia.

6th May 2023 Coronation of Charles the Third

Charles the Third was crowned King at Westminster Abbey. British- Trinidadian peer, Floella Benjamin carried the royal sceptre and the British-Dominican Baroness Scotland read from the Bible as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. The Prime Ministers of the remaining Caribbean realms processed into the Abbey behind their national flags. More former Caribbean colonies may become republics over time.



Floella Benjamin in 2023

22nd June 2023 Windrush anniversary

The 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush was celebrated. The King commissioned portraits of the Windrush Generation for the royal collection.

29th June 2023, Unlawful discrimination in RAF recruitment

A Ministry of Defence report accepted that positive discrimination in RAF recruitment towards women and ethnic minorities was unlawful and penalised white men. The RAF admitted that its target of a 40% female and 20% ethnic minority force by 2030 was unrealistic.

7th October 2023 Hamas attack on Gaza triggered war with Israel

The Palestinian group, Hamas launched a surprise terror attack on Israel from Gaza, killing around 1200 people and taking others hostage. This triggered a controversial campaign in Gaza against Hamas by Israel which is ongoing. Incidents of antisemitism and islamophobia in Britain increased sharply.

February 2024 Trump attacked NATO allies

During a republican rally campaigning for his re-election, former U.S. President Donald Trump encouraged Russia to attack NATO members who paid too little towards their own defence. Trump declared his priority to be to put 'America First' and to avoid 'forever wars'. He was also critical of the amount of US aid to Ukraine.



A US republican poster from the 2024 presidential election campaign (Public Domain)

7th March 2024 Sweden joined NATO

The traditionally neutral country of Sweden joined NATO, seeking greater security from potential Russian aggression.

22nd March 2024 RAF training for Ukrainian pilots

Ten Ukrainian pilots graduated from elementary flying training in Britain as preparation for fast jet training. The RAF has been involved in training the Ukrainian armed forces and has transported large amounts of material and equipment to the country.

June 2024 Ukrainian refugees in Britain

It was estimated that 217,000 Ukrainian refugees were living in the UK.

30th July -5th August 2024 Stockport Riots

Following the fatal stabbing of three young girls at a dance class in Stockport, far right, anti-migrant riots occurred in England and Northern Ireland. These were fuelled by false claims on social media that the perpetrator was a Muslim asylum seeker.

October 2024 RAF personnel figures- 4.4% ethnic minorities

There were 34,765 RAF personnel, including those not fully trained. 4.4 % of those below the rank of officer were from non-white ethnic minorities, up from 1.9% in 2012. Despite this increase, the RAF has the lowest proportion of ethnic minorities out of any of the Armed Forces (the equivalent figure for the Army is 18.9%). Overall RAF numbers fell from 56,600 in 2000 to 31,940 in 2023.

26th October 2024 Slavery Reparations

Commonwealth heads of government agreed to future discussions about reparation for slavery under pressure from Caribbean governments. The British government stated it would not pay financial reparations.

2nd November 2024 A black Leader of the Opposition

Conservative MP Kemi Badenoch was elected Leader of the Opposition, the first person of colour to occupy the role. She is of Nigerian heritage.

Dec 2024 Jamaican republicanism

The Jamaican government introduced legislation to adopt a republican constitution.

February 2025 Trump shock to Europeans

U.S. President Donald Trump cast doubt on America's willingness to come to the aid of NATO allies who spent too little towards their own defence. For the first time since the 1940's European countries no longer had the guarantee of being protected by America's nuclear umbrella. This was a profound shock. The UK government cut spending on foreign aid to raise defence spending towards 3% of GDP. Trump was demanding spending of 5%. Trump also spoke to Vladimir Putin about ending the Ukraine War and briefly paused co-operation with the Ukrainian government.

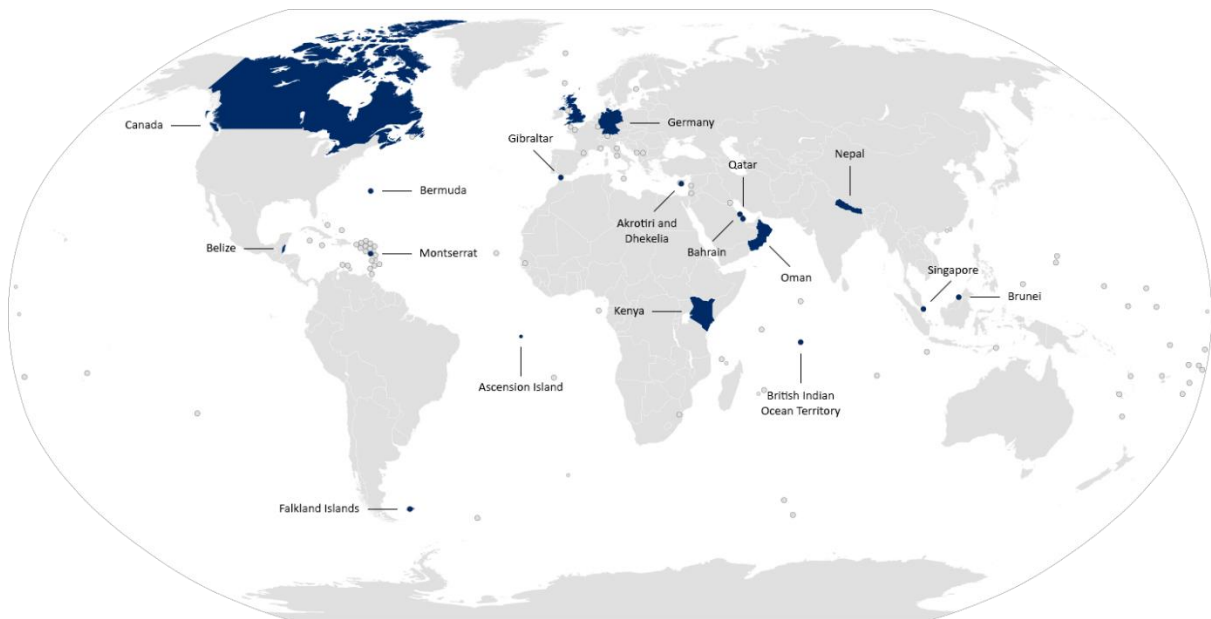
May 2025 Starmer `Island of Strangers` speech

Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer made a controversial speech calling for reduced immigration into the UK and greater migrant integration into British society. He said, "*In a*

diverse nation like ours ... we risk becoming an island of strangers, not a nation that walks forward together." Critics compared his rhetoric to that of Enoch Powell in 1968. Starmer later claimed that neither he nor his speech writer recognized the similarity in language. The Prime Minister publicly regretted the remarks.

May 2025 End of Empire?

The UK agreed to hand over the Chagos islands in the Indian Ocean to the Commonwealth island nation of Mauritius which will lease back a large British-US military base on Diego Garcia for the period of 99 years. The base was built in the 1960s after the forcible removal of the native islanders. Britain retains 13 other remaining overseas dependencies from its imperial heyday but where these are inhabited, the people still consent to British sovereignty. Britain also maintains around 145 military sites across the world in over 40 countries, the largest number of sites after the United States.



Map showing spread of British military sites worldwide in 2018 [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#)

14th June 2025 Israeli-Iranian War

Israel launched aerial attacks on Iran, targeting its nuclear facilities and leading regime personnel. President Trump subsequently ordered the dropping of bunker-busting bombs on Iranian nuclear targets.

9th July 2025

The model of a migrant boat was placed on top of a Unionist bonfire in Northern Ireland for burning during the marching season there. Police treated this as a hate crime. Violence also drove migrants from their homes in the province. Protests against the housing of asylum seekers in a local hotel in Epping, Essex attracted national publicity.

