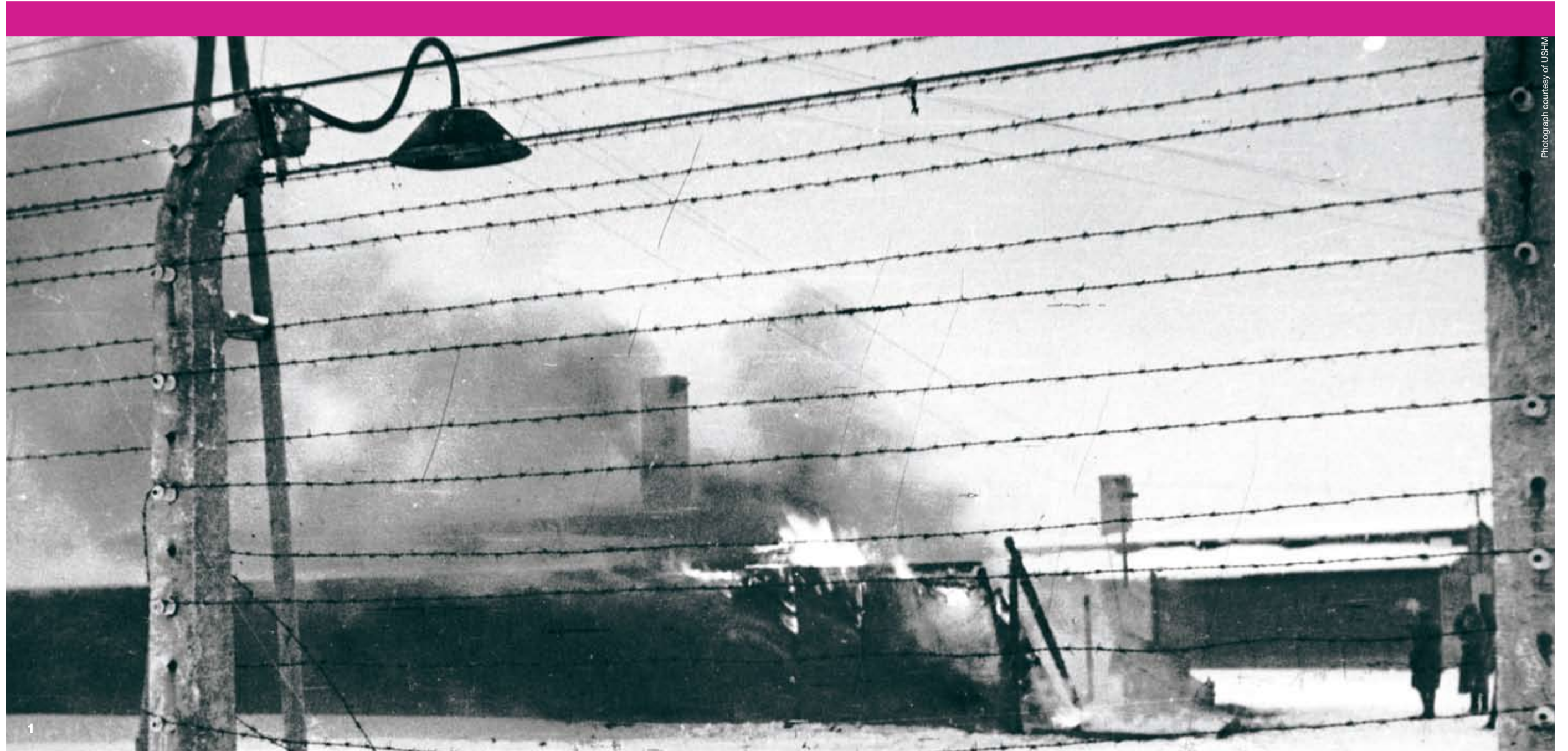
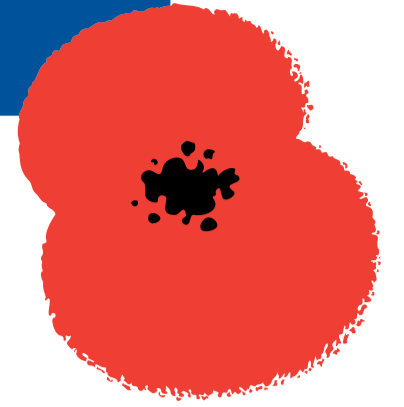


WORLD WAR II 1939–1945

THE ROYAL BRITISH
LEGION



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World War II (1939–1945)

World War II began when Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, attacked Poland in September 1939.

War spread across Europe and then the globe, with fighting occurring in many countries and on the seas. Countries lined up to support either the Allies (including Britain) or the Axis powers. Civilian populations were not exempt from the direct effects of the war as many countries were attacked and occupied, suffering from military threats, regulation and persecution.

The Home Front

Strong resistance in the air during the Battle of Britain meant that Germany did not attempt to invade Britain as it had done with the countries of mainland Europe. Conditions were

still very difficult for people living in Britain: rationing was introduced and conscription was set up so that most men between the ages of 20 and 40 were compulsorily enlisted into military service. Thousands of children were evacuated from cities to the countryside to escape the threat of bombing raids. Women without children were also expected to either join auxiliary military units, carry out war work in the countryside as Land Girls, work in the factories or to take on other roles formerly held by men. Anyone in a protected civilian occupation (such as teachers or men over serving age) also contributed by serving in the Home Guard, fire services, as miners or in the emergency medical services. From the summer of 1940, Britain was regularly bombed by Germany, resulting in thousands of people being killed and homes destroyed.

Allies and volunteers

British troops fought all across the world. Alongside them were nearly three million volunteer Service men and women from the Empire and Commonwealth countries. Those Empire and Commonwealth troops fought in all of the key battles, sometimes having to overcome racism and prejudice from their own side as well as fighting the enemy. Without their support, and the support of civilians in those countries who, like the British, engaged in war work or maintained the Merchant Navy shipping supplies, Britain would not have been able to maintain the war on its own for the year that it did. Nor would Britain have had the economic strength, supplies, or man power to last until it was able to push back against Germany and the Axis countries.

The legacy of World War II

World War II was a highly destructive war, severely affecting civilian populations, changing governments, altering borders and fostering the drive towards new weaponry. The global death toll, including the Holocaust and civilian casualties as well as those in the Armed Forces, is estimated at 50 million.

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many, to so few.”

Sir Winston Churchill
September 1940

- 1 Storage facilities of Auschwitz set on fire after liberation
- 2 A Sikh worker in a British arms factory in the 1940s
- 3 Men from all over the British Empire came to fight alongside British Forces during World War II
- 4 Women were trained as pilots and fulfilled many vital roles supporting the war effort
- 5 Young, anxious evacuees preparing for their journey to the countryside