

## Chapter 1

In September 1939, war began to spread across the world as the Nazis invaded Europe. First, they invaded Poland, then Belgium, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and France. Less than a year later, just one country in Europe had not been invaded by Germany and that was Britain. It was at that time that a myth began. The myth was that Britain stood alone against Hitler and the Nazis. Across the country, in newspapers and over radio broadcasts, this message was spread – that Britain, small but fearless, was on its own against Nazi Germany.

By the time the war ended, British people had been told this myth so many times that it felt like reality. Very few people questioned whether it was the truth or not.

People looked at Britain and saw a brave little island nation that had fought to remain free, against all the power of the Nazi forces. This myth became part of British history. However, it just wasn't true!

Britain *wasn't* just a little island nation – even if that's how it looks on a map! The truth is that in 1939 (when the war broke out), Great Britain ruled a quarter of the world's population. It controlled one-fifth of all the land in the world in 1939. This became known as the British Empire and it stretched all the way from Canada, right down to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands in the South.



## Gurkhas

Britain first met the Gurkhas of Nepal when they were at war with each other. This happened in 1814, over 125 years before the Second World War began. Nepal and Britain disagreed about who owned particular pieces of land around the border of Nepal and British India. The British troops had better equipment, but the Nepalese soldiers were much better prepared for the climate and the terrain where they were fighting.

The British were impressed with the Gurkhas' fighting skills and when their war ended in a treaty (a mutual agreement), they decided that it would be better to have Nepal as a friend rather than as an enemy.

From then on, Britain recruited soldiers from Nepal into the British Army and the British Indian Army.



### Gurkha equipment

Gurkhas are best known for the special type of knife that they carried with them as a weapon, called a *kukri*. It is 45 cm long, curved and a traditional style of knife in Nepal since the 7th century.

Even today, Gurkhas are trained in how to use this knife. There is an old myth that says that if a Gurkha takes their *kukri* out of its sheath, it must draw blood before they put it back. While this isn't true – lots of Gurkhas just use their knives as a useful tool, rather than a weapon – this myth is probably one of the reasons that Gurkhas gained a reputation for being fierce warriors!



A kukri knife with its sheath

During the Second World War, the Gurkhas fought as part of the British Army, but they had their own regiments.