

Women's Contributions to WW2

Women were central to the war effort during WW2 providing a range of essential services from nursing to engineering. They also played a vital role on the Home Front, running households and fighting a daily battle of rationing, recycling, reusing, and growing food in allotments and gardens.

From 1941, women were called up for war work as mechanics, engineers, munitions workers, air raid wardens, bus and fire engine drivers. At first, only single women, aged 20-30 were called up, but by mid-1943, almost 90 per cent of single women and 80 per cent of married women were working in factories, on the land or in the Armed Forces.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Winston Churchill recruited around 60 women 'to set Europe ablaze'. They were deployed behind enemy lines, usually by parachute or fishing boats, to help form a 'secret army' of resistance fighters preparing the way for the Allied invasion.

There were more than 640,000 women in the Armed Forces, including The Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), plus many more who flew unarmed aircraft and drove ambulances. The WRNS were involved in some of the most secret planning for D-Day.

Many women worked at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire helping to intercept German communications, crack codes and operating the most advanced technology in the world. Their work was top secret and remained so for many years following the war.



DID YOU KNOW?

Queen Elizabeth II, who was Princess Elizabeth during WW2, served in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and trained as a driver and mechanic. She reached the rank of Junior Commander. Winston Churchill's youngest daughter was also a member of the ATS.

DID YOU KNOW?

During WW2, 10,000 women worked at the Rolls-Royce factory in Hillingdon, Glasgow, building the Merlin engines that powered Spitfires and the Lancaster Bomber.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Women's Land Army trained teams of girls as "Anti-vermin Squads". Their job was to protect the food and crops growing in the fields from pests such as rats and foxes. There were thought to be 50 million rats in Britain during WW2!

Activities

- 1 How many different organisations could women join and what sorts of tasks would they be doing?
- 2 Create a propaganda poster encouraging women to contribute to the war effort.
- 3 Look at some of the different uniforms for women and design a new uniform for one of the women's services. Think about the kind of work they would be doing and what sort of colour(s) the uniform would be.
- 4 What happened to women in work following VE Day. Or when the troops started to come home? Did they keep working? Did they return to the home? How would this affect them?
- 5 Write a diary entry for a woman working in a munitions factory. What would the conditions have been like? Would it have been hard work?

