

Malvinas War veterans protest Argentina's social crisis

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Attempting to bolster his crisis-ridden administration with crude appeals to national chauvinism, Argentine President Eduardo Duhalde led an April 2 ceremony commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Argentine military's invasion of the Malvinas Islands, which the British call the Falklands. The observance, however, awakened bitter memories and called attention to the high rates of homelessness, unemployment, poverty and depression that afflict Malvinas veterans.

On April 2, about 2,000 Malvinas veterans were given medals in the southern city of Ushuaia. President Duhalde threw carnations into the Beagle Channel on the South Atlantic in remembrance of the nearly 700 Argentine dead. At least one group of veterans, representing the oil-producing province of Santa Cruz, refused to attend, signaling their opposition to President Duhalde and his economic policies. Many veterans loudly demanded jobs during ceremonies across Argentina.

The war constituted the last desperate act of a dying tyranny, an attempt by the brutal Videla dictatorship (1976-83) to divert growing opposition to its bloody policies by invoking nationalist sentiment against the 150-year British colonial rule over the Malvinas. The war proved a debacle for the Argentine military. The defeat, together with a spiraling economic crisis, provoked mass unrest that led to the downfall of the regime.

More than 11,000 Argentine troops participated in the war. Of these, 316 died in battle while another 323 drowned from the torpedoing of the cruiser *ARA General Belgrano*. There were 255 British casualties. The Argentine surrender on June 14, 1982 gave way to a cascading series of events that forced the military to relinquish power in 1983.

Twenty years after the surrender, Malvinas veterans are among the most affected by the desperate crisis of Argentine society. Over 60 percent of them are jobless, nearly two-and-a-half times the national average. They

share unusually high rates of suicide with their British counterparts. Veterans in both countries have taken their own lives in almost identical numbers—about 300 over the last 20 years—equaling or exceeding the number of battlefield casualties. The coincidentally high rates of suicide suggest high incidences of post-traumatic stress syndrome on both sides, related to the intense hand-to-hand combat that took place during the war.

Roberto Rada, general secretary of the Argentine Ex-Combatants Federation (FECRA), describing veterans' conditions to a BBC reporter, said that the Argentine veterans' "war madness" was the result of returning to a country in which there were neither jobs nor support services. "Some became isolated and depressed, turned to alcohol and drugs. Some contracted AIDS or ended up in jail," he said.

One manifestation of post-traumatic stress syndrome is profound depression. With little access to psychiatric care, to this day many veterans find it hard to hold jobs and have turned to substance abuse and other forms of self-destruction.

Three years ago, the suicide of 38-year-old Eduardo Paz, a friend of Rada's, made national headlines. He threw himself from the Monument to the Flag, a towering monument in Rosario, at the edge of the Parana River. Paz, a father of six, was unemployed and extremely depressed.

An Argentine veteran's letter to the Englishman that he killed describes how, after cutting him in half with his machine gun, he heard him crying in agony for over three hours. He was unable to reach him and give him aid due to the intense fighting on the Mount Longdon battlefield:

"We were the victims of incomprehensible humanity, your life ended and I feel your absence profoundly. I know today that deep inside I did not intend to provoke your death. I know that your family weeps for you, that your mother, your father, your wife, your brother, your

son, your girlfriend, all miss you. I suffer your disappearance because I was part of it. I honor your courage by always thinking of you. I do not allow myself to forget any of your last moments, your last cries of pain, moments that are present in me, as if they had just happened.” The veteran’s letter was the most read article in the April 3, 2002 issue of *Clarín*, the Buenos Aires daily.

The national chauvinism of the Ushuaia ceremony could not hide the truth about the war or the reality that confronts Malvinas veterans today. Veterans told of being sent into battle with guns that did not fire. They were also without food—Marco Augusto Jimenez, secretary of the Argentine Association of War Veterans, said he was forced to kill sheep to eat to stay alive. Other veterans described eating raw mutton and sleeping in their wet and freezing clothes.

Many political leaders absented themselves from the day’s ceremonies, in fear of being insulted by protesters. On the night of April 1, thousands of veterans and their supporters had marched in front of General Leopoldo Galtieri’s residence, denouncing his criminal role in the war.

Galtieri, the last general to head the military junta, sent the troops to war in 1982. He believed that Washington would back the Argentine invasion because of the services rendered by the dictatorship in the murder and torture of left-wing workers and students, as well as its subsequent aid and training for the CIA-backed “contra” guerrillas in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

The Reagan administration, however, valued its strategic alliance with the Thatcher government in Britain far more than the stability of its Argentine client. Under conditions in which it was waging military operations against nationalist movements from Central America to the Middle East, it was also loath to back any movement challenging colonial rule, no matter how reactionary its origins.

With US political and tactical support, the British used overwhelming military superiority to crush the Argentine military’s ill-prepared challenge.

Rodolfo Carrizo, a protesting veteran, was quoted by the Chilean *El Mercurio* newspaper: “We are saying yes to remembrance and to justice,” he said. “Galtieri is a symbol of everything that we repudiate—betrayal, corruption, impunity and the injustice of the pardons.” President Carlos Menem pardoned Galtieri and the other junta leaders in 1989. Galtieri had been condemned to a 12-year prison term for his role in the Malvinas War.

Returning veterans were left to their own resources. The *Buenos Aires Herald*, an English-language weekly, quoted Rodolfo, an artist: “I was sent to the islands when I was just 18—those of my friends who weren’t killed are struggling to make a living now, if not starving, forgotten by the state and public alike.”

An incident took place on April 3 that reveals the fear that government officials have of the public they supposedly represent. To raise money for a memorial to the war dead in Dawson, Falkland Islands, a concert took place on April 3 in Buenos Aires’ Opera House, the Colon theater, which featured tenor Dario Volonte and mezzo soprano Vera Cirkovic performing patriotic songs and arias by Mascagni, Puccini and Verdi. Volonte is a survivor of the *Belgrano*.

Clarín reported that though more than one thousand invitations had been sent to government officials, most federal politicians stayed away, fearing a negative reaction by the public. This included Peronist and Radical Party politicians who had been enthusiastic supporters of the War in 1982. Ironically, British Ambassador Robin Christopher did accept the invitation and agreed to participate with the relatives of the dead soldiers in a collection to raise 1.5 million pesos for the monument. Attendance at the concert was standing room only.

The twentieth anniversary of the war took place in the context of unprecedented mistrust of public officials by employed and unemployed workers and middle class people in Argentina, as economic conditions continue to deteriorate.

Duhalde’s feeble attempt to strengthen the government’s image failed. Instead, the events of April 2 and 3 served to underscore the deepening crisis of Argentine society, the desperate situation facing thousands of Malvinas War veterans and the political bankruptcy of Peronism and bourgeois nationalism in Argentina.



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