

Twenty-five years since the Malvinas war

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21 June 2007

With full military pomp, the British ruling class has been celebrating the 25th anniversary of victory in the Malvinas (Falklands) Islands. With religious services on the Islands and across Britain, parades and fly-pasts, there has been a definite air of imperialist triumphalism about the occasion. Some 900 people—255 British servicemen, 649 Argentines, and 3 islanders (killed during the naval bombardment of Port Stanley)—died during the 74-day war.

The mood was summed up by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who sent British troops to the Malvinas in April 1982. She recorded a radio message broadcast to Islanders and British forces in which she described the “liberation of our islands” as “a great victory in a noble cause.” Describing the war as “just,” she said Britain “rejoiced at the success; and we should still rejoice.”

Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed with her that there had been a “principle at stake.” The decision to go to war, he said in an interview for the Downing Street website last month, took “political courage,” but it was “the right thing to do.”

So what did happen 25 years ago?

Las Islas Malvinas, apparently uninhabited at the time of the European arrival in the New World, were a tiny fragment of Spain’s colonial empire in Latin America, but had been explored and claimed as well by the British and French in the late eighteenth century. Upon the declaration of their national independence from Spain in 1816, the Argentines asserted control to the islands as former Spanish colonial territory.

Britain twice unsuccessfully attempted to invade Argentina itself, in 1806-1807. During the wars that finally led to successful Argentine independence (1816-1853), Britain occupied the islands in 1833. Renaming them the Falklands, it began settling the islands with British citizens, and has used them to stake claims to oil and mineral resources in southern polar waters ever since. The Argentine government has continued to press its claim to sovereignty.

In 1982, the military junta of General Leopoldo Galtieri sought to use this legitimate claim to the islands to divert opposition to its bloody domestic policies. In March of that year, an Argentine scrap metal merchant landed on South Georgia, and Galtieri sent troops into South Georgia and the Malvinas on April 2.

Thatcher decided on a military response to defend British imperialist interests in the South Atlantic. A task force was sent the 8,000 miles to re-conquer the islands. Within five days of the Argentinean landing, the British government had already despatched ships for the South Atlantic, and declared a 200-mile exclusion zone around the islands.

Galtieri had expected no military response from the British government. The junta had received no response to its hints at invasion within the United Nations. Britain was scaling down its military presence in the islands. It had also been seeking to negotiate new arrangements for their administration for many years.

Sir Lawrence Freedman, professor of war studies at King’s College,

University of London, and author of the official history of the Falklands, revealed that Thatcher’s government offered to hand over sovereignty of the islands to Argentina two years before the conflict.

In June 1980, the Foreign Office drew up a proposal to hand over titular sovereignty over the islands to Buenos Aires, after which Britain would lease them back for 99 years. Foreign Office minister Nicholas Ridley met in secret with Comodoro Cavandoli of Argentina in Switzerland and again in New York, but the plan was scuppered by opposition to the proposals by the islanders as mooted by Ridley during an official visit, and by Labour in parliament.

The junta was also hopeful of sympathetic non-intervention from the US government in return for services rendered. Galtieri hoped for US support because of the junta’s record in torturing and murdering left-wing workers and students, as well as its assistance to the CIA in arming and training the Contras in Nicaragua.

Galtieri was to be disappointed. The US remained officially neutral throughout the conflict, but provided tactical and intelligence support to the British forces.

The reasons for the US to support Britain were strong. In the first place, Reagan and Thatcher were both allied in their championing of a monetarist economic agenda of counter-reforms and attacks on wages, jobs, trade union rights and social provisions. And secondly, it would set a dangerous precedent for anyone, even an Argentinean junta that had proved to be a valuable ally of the US, to seize territory from an imperial power.

Nevertheless, it was a political battle for Thatcher to secure US support, given its strategic interests in South America. According to the *Guardian*, Freedman also drew attention to how “the Thatcher government came under unrelenting pressure from Washington to agree a ceasefire after the Argentinean invasion and before the islands had been recaptured.”

At one point in the conflict, US Secretary of State Alexander Haig proposed a ceasefire with an international peacekeeping force, including US troops. Thatcher told Reagan over the telephone at the end of May 1982 that a ceasefire prior to an Argentinean withdrawal was unacceptable.

She asked Reagan, “How would the Americans react if Alaska were invaded and, as the invaders were being thrown out, there were calls for the Americans to withdraw?”

Thatcher repeatedly insisted that the sovereignty of the Falklands was an issue of principle. But there were major domestic political calculations behind her determination to go to war. In 1982, the Thatcher government was deeply reviled. Official unemployment figures stood at 3.6 million, with the unofficial total reckoned to be much higher. Its policies were meeting opposition in a number of industrial disputes and strikes across the major industries, and even a threat to strike by nurses. Government plans to close 23 coal mines had to be shelved in 1981 because of the threat of strike action.

Thatcher's government was on the ropes. The Labour Party's support for the Falklands war played a key role in rescuing it.

Two years earlier, Shadow Foreign Secretary Peter Shore had attacked Conservative plans for new agreements with Argentina, using language that was to become familiar during the war itself. In parliament, Shore argued for the "paramount importance" of the islanders' views. With the decision to send the task force, the Labour Party collapsed headlong into patriotic support for imperialist militarism. Only 33 Labour MPs mustered an opposition to the war as Labour leader Michael Foot argued that the right-wing character of the junta justified supporting imperialism, insisting in a speech to parliament that outdid Thatcher in its demagoguery, that "foul, brutal aggression"—on the part of Argentina—must not be allowed to succeed.

Without Labour's support, the conflict and its attendant atrocities would not have been possible. Together with the media, Labour's warmongering allowed for a united effort to unleash a frenzy of patriotism around the "just war" against a fascist junta and on behalf of the Islanders that disoriented and confused broad sections of workers.

On April 25, while Haig and Belaunde Terry's peace negotiations were still ongoing, British Marines easily overcame the garrison on South Georgia. Thatcher, escalating her militaristic propaganda, rebuked journalists, telling them to "just rejoice at that news."

On May 2, the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano was sailing outside the exclusion zone on a west-north-west course of 270 degrees (i.e., away from the islands) when she was sunk by torpedoes from nuclear submarine HMS Conqueror, causing the deaths of 323 Argentine servicemen. The *Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, led with the headline "Gotcha!," which it was later forced to remove due to widespread disgust. The following day, the HMS Sheffield was hit by Argentinean planes, killing 20 of its crew and forcing the ship to be scuppered. Another five British vessels were sunk during the conflict.

With the commencement of the fighting on land, the disparity between the professional British army and the ill-equipped and ill-trained Argentine soldiers, many of them youth, became apparent. At Goose Green, on the first day of land fighting, an outnumbered British force lost 17 men, as against 250 Argentines killed. More than 1,000 prisoners of war were taken. The Argentine troops were able only to fight rearguard actions against the British as they advanced across the islands towards Port Stanley. Argentine forces in Stanley surrendered on June 14, and the British declared an end to hostilities on June 20.

Two days later, General Galtieri resigned. Popular anger at the bloody debacle on the Malvinas led to the collapse of the junta within a year.

Nevertheless, despite the speedy victory and Britain's clear military superiority, more British servicemen lost their lives than have so far been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. Its long-term consequences have also been dreadful. The intensity of hand-to-hand fighting has left a legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder among both British and Argentinean veterans. More British servicemen have committed suicide since the end of the war than were killed during it. According to veterans' organisation the South Atlantic Medal Association, 264 British veterans had committed suicide by 2002 compared to the 255 casualties of the war itself. According to a 2006 film, the current Argentine suicide toll is 454.

Labour was also responsible for the sharp revival in Thatcher's political fortunes that followed the Falklands victory.

Foot, a veteran pacifist and member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, had been elected party leader in 1980. This was the

result of the disgust felt within the party over how the Labour government of James Callaghan had paved the way for Thatcher to come to power through its attacks on the working class. He betrayed that sentiment and instead insured that Thatcher won a second term in office. In the June 1983 general election, the Tories won more than 40 percent of the vote, down only slightly. Labour won only 27.6 percent, down more than 9 percent—losing most votes to the Alliance formed between the Liberals and the Social Democrats, the right-wing split from Labour formed in 1981.

Thanks also to Labour, Thatcher's victory in 1983 opened the door to the wholesale attack on the living conditions of workers that reached its high point with the defeat of the year-long miners' strike and the wholesale privatisation of essential services.

These are the terms in which Thatcher measures the success of the Malvinas conflict. From the first victory parade, when disfigured veterans were barred from participating, her disregard for those who fought to give her this victory was clear.

Today, once again, Labour has united with the Tories in eulogising the Falklands conflict—though this time as the sitting government with Thatcher cast in the role of elder stateswoman. The motives of both are not merely the justification of a past crime, but the defence of those being carried out today and planned for tomorrow.

In her oration on the anniversary, Thatcher recalled her barbarous assertion of colonialism as a "great national struggle." She warned that there are "no final victories, for the struggle against evil in the world is never-ending. Tyranny and violence wear many masks. Yet from victory in the Falklands we can all today draw hope and strength."

For his part, Prime Minister Tony Blair seized hold of the Falklands anniversary to associate his own wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with this supposed earlier fight against "tyranny." Prior to attending the official celebrations, Blair posted a podcast on the Number 10 web site in which he was interviewed by the historian Simon Schama. Responding to a statement by Schama that the decision to go to war had been a "scary gamble" on Thatcher's part, Blair replied that it was and had required "a lot of political courage." But he too would have done the same as his political idol because "it was the right thing to do...for reasons not simply to do with British sovereignty, but also because I think there was a principle at stake."

When Blair speaks of doing the "right thing," and cites Thatcher as his role model, this should serve as a warning to treat the noxious brew of propaganda and nostalgia surrounding the Malvinas war with the contempt it deserves.



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