

Fortieth anniversary of Malvinas/Falklands war exploited to protect Johnson and sanction NATO aggression against Russia

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The fortieth anniversary of the Malvinas/Falklands war has inevitably been seized on by the Conservative right to beat the patriotic drum, given that it falls amid NATO's proxy war in Ukraine.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's backers had already been referencing a "Falkland's moment", in which the government is rescued from popular hostility towards its criminal handling of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis by a belief that opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine justifies a political amnesty for the Tories.

Such discussions reflect the position of media "opinion formers" rather than any popular sentiment among working people. Indeed, even the discussion of such a "moment" is politically risky, because the Malvinas/Falklands war is such a grotesque example of a hated government utilising a military adventure to divert and suppress popular opposition to terrible effect for the working class.

Writing in *The Times* April 1, Andrew Rosindell, a Conservative MP and the former vice-chairman of the Conservative Party, described the war as "an example of Britain standing up to tyranny and dictatorship, in favour of democracy, liberty, freedom and sovereignty," before linking this not only to Ukraine but also to China, turning "its head towards Taiwan, following their atrocities in Hong Kong..."

He was incensed that young people were unfamiliar with the war, complaining that it is "absolutely atrocious" it "is not taught in schools in the UK."

Similar sabre rattling by the Tories has included a Christmas declaration to Falkland Islanders by Johnson proclaiming the UK's "absolutely unaltered... commitment to the Falkland Islands and their people." Argentina's Secretary of Malvinas, Antarctica and South Atlantic, Guillermo Carmona retorted that "Malvinas is not Ukraine, but today the principle of territorial integrity is also compromised there."

Given that the UK and the NATO powers are waging a de facto war against Russia in part citing the territorial integrity of Ukraine, it would be wiser for Rosindell and his ilk to keep their mouths shut and rely on the supposed ignorance of the younger generation. For any genuine understanding of the 1982 conflict with Argentina in the South Atlantic confirms it as a filthy imperialist bloodbath that is viewed with disgust by broad masses from previous generations.

Then Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sent a massive British military force to the Malvinas in April 1982 consisting of 127 ships, 9,000 personnel, 70 aircraft and six submarines, beginning a 74-day war against a much weaker conscript army. The conflict claimed 900 lives, 255 British servicemen compared with 649 Argentineans, and three Falkland Islanders who died during Britain's naval bombardment of Port Stanley.

Las Islas Malvinas are located 8,000 miles from the UK and just 400 miles from Argentina. They 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. On the declaration of independence from Spain in 1816, the Argentineans asserted control of the islands.

Britain twice unsuccessfully attempted to invade Argentina, in 1806-1807. During the wars that finally led to successful Argentine independence (1816-1853), Britain occupied the Malvinas in 1833. Renaming them the Falklands, they were settled and have since been used to stake claims to oil and mineral resources in southern polar waters. In 1982, there were just 1,500 British inhabitants of the islands.

The military junta of General Leopoldo Galtieri sought to use Argentina's legitimate claim to the islands to divert social and political opposition at home. 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 only in part to defend British imperialist interests in the South Atlantic. There were major domestic political calculations behind her determination to go to war.

In 1982, the Thatcher government was deeply reviled. Official unemployment figure stood at 3.6 million, with the unofficial total even higher. The Tories' policies were meeting opposition in major industrial disputes and strikes, 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.

Against this domestic background, a task force was sent to reclaim the islands and a 200-mile exclusion zone around them was declared.

Galtieri had expected no military response, given that London was scaling down its military presence in the islands and Thatcher two years earlier had offered to hand over sovereignty to Argentina before leasing them back for 99 years.

The junta was also hopeful of sympathetic non-intervention from the US government, because of its record in torturing and murdering left-wing workers and students and its assistance to the CIA in arming and training the Contras in Nicaragua. However, whereas the US remained officially neutral throughout the conflict, the Reagan administration did reluctantly provide tactical and intelligence support to British forces given the country's status as an important ally—both militarily and in Thatcher's co-championing of a monetarist economic agenda of counter-reforms and attacks on wages, jobs, trade union rights and social provisions.

As important as Washington's neutralisation for Thatcher was the support she won from the Labour Party and the trade unions. 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 British imperialism, insisting in a speech to

parliament 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 whip up patriotism around a supposedly “just war” against a fascist junta in a campaign that disoriented and confused broad sections of workers.

On April 25, British Marines easily overcame the Argentine garrison on South Georgia, prompting Thatcher’s notorious instruction to journalists 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 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 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.

At Goose Green, on the first day of land fighting, an outnumbered British force lost just 17 men, as against 250 poorly trained Argentinian conscripts. Argentine forces in Port Stanley surrendered on June 14, and the British declared an end to hostilities on June 20. Two days later, General Galtieri resigned. His junta collapsed within a year.

Nevertheless, despite Britain’s military superiority, more British servicemen lost their lives than in Iraq in 2003. Moreover, the intensity of hand-to-hand fighting left a legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder among hundreds of British and Argentinean veterans. More British servicemen committed suicide after the war than were killed during it.

The price paid by the working class more generally was very high. Thanks to Labour, Thatcher was able to stage a remarkable political recovery—with Labour’s nominally “left” leader playing the key role. Foot, a veteran pacifist and member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, had been elected in 1980 due to the widespread 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.

But as with Jeremy Corbyn 35 years later, Foot betrayed that sentiment and instead ensured 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 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 Democratic Party, the right-wing split from Labour formed in 1981.

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 1984-85 miners’ strike and the wholesale privatisation of essential services. For working people, smug references to the “Falklands factor” by Tories came to be viewed as an example of how millions had been temporarily fooled by their bitterest political enemies.

Lessons must be learned from such events—above all the need for working people to reject contemporary efforts to suppress opposition to the Tories utilising lies about the war in Ukraine also being about defending “democracy” against “dictatorship.”

Once again, the key role is played by the Labour Party. Writing in *Prospect*, leading Blairite Andrew Adonis asked, “Is Ukraine Boris Johnson’s Falklands?” He replied, “In the short term, the Battle of Kyiv has totally eclipsed ‘partygate,’ and rightly so. We only have one government at a time, and it would be unconscionable for the Tories to start a leadership contest during a military invasion of democratic Europe... the essential policy of the government has been correct in this crisis, and Johnson deserves particular credit for his decision some weeks ago—in conjunction with Biden and the US—to provide significant quantities of

defensive arms to President Zelensky’s heroic resistance.”

Or, as party leader Sir Keir Starmer told British troops more simply during a visit to Tapa military base in Estonia, March 10, “there’s no room for party politics” because the world faces “a very grave situation.”

The price paid for such political amnesties secured through lies is a heavy one. One of the more revealing responses to the Malvinas/Falklands anniversary was the account of Max Hastings in the *Sunday Times*, “The Falklands at 40: the war that transformed Britain.” Written by an ardent Thatcherite who boasts of being the first embedded journalist to arrive in Port Stanley, he makes clear the cynical political calculations behind his celebratory account of the war.

“It is hard for anyone who did not live through those times to understand how Britain’s national spirit soared at news of the victory of the South Atlantic task force in that little war against a tinpot Latin-American dictatorship.”

When he left to report the war, “The coalminers were rubbing their hands at the prospect of adding Thatcher’s scalp to that of Ted Heath.” The war was therefore necessary, he insists, to strengthen the hand of the British ruling class against the working class.

He openly admits, “Thatcher sent the task force not because the national interest required it—the Falklands were wholly irrelevant to the real problems facing Britain in 1982—but to save her own authority.”

He asks, “Was it all worth it? We could have given the Falkland Islanders £10 million apiece to move, for a total much smaller than the cost of the war and of fortifying the islands since... And yet, and yet. I am among those who believe that the Falklands war was worth fighting, because it empowered Thatcher, as a victress, to achieve the astonishing transformation of Britain over which she presided in the years that followed.”

What followed the political victory handed to Thatcher by Labour was an historically unprecedented transfer of social wealth from the working class to an emerging global oligarchy that has continued without let-up under successive Tory and Labour governments, and wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere that have claimed millions of lives.

Now an attempt to play the same political trick is being made under conditions in which the working class stands on the edge of an economic abyss and the world faces the prospect of a military confrontation between nuclear powers. The price for any let-up in the class struggle would be far higher.

There is no indication that workers are ready to declare a truce with the Tories and the employers. Strike activity and opposition to government cuts are growing. What is needed now is for the working class to consciously reject all support for Britain and NATO’s warmongering against Russia, and to unite opposition to war with a social and political struggle against the austerity drive of big business, the Johnson government and its Labour allies in a struggle for socialist internationalism.



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