

The falkland war: why did the argentine military junta invade and seize british t...



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The Argentine invasion of the British controlled Falkland Islands in April 1982 transformed the South Atlantic into a grand military battlefield that would captivate the world's attention for the next seventy four days (Gibran, 2007: 5). The War raised a number of compelling issues within the realm of international relations including territorial conflict and the continuous battle between democracy and totalitarian dictatorships (Gibran, 2007: 5). This essay will attempt to provide a contextual framework for understanding the reasons why Argentina invaded British territory and to what extent this invasion was associated with a combination of political and economic turmoil in Argentina at the time as well as the role played by both Argentine and British nationalism.

In order to understand the reasoning behind the conflict over the Falkland Islands it is pivotal to acquire an understanding of the history behind the islands as well as both parties involved, namely Britain and Argentina, this is paramount in order to determine the significance of the Falkland Islands to both sides and will undoubtedly assist in forming the necessary framework through which a conducive analysis of the conflict can occur. Only through an examination of the historical context of the importance of the Falklands to both sides can we fully comprehend the magnitude of the conflict. An analysis of both sides claim to sovereignty will be examined followed by an examination of the socio-political (dictatorial, oppressive military regime with little regard for the wellbeing of citizens) and economic woes (massive inflation, huge national debts) within Argentina during the 70s and 80s which no doubt played a pivotal role in initiating the conflict. History of the Falkland Islands: The question of sovereignty The question of sovereignty is

fundamental to the Falkland dispute and is an issue that is laden with confusion and gross historical misinterpretations on both sides (Gibran, 2007: 13).

In short, neither Argentina nor Britain's claim for sovereignty is sufficiently grounded according to International law. According to Daniel Gibran: " the application of legal principles to the thorny and contentious issue of sovereignty demands an understanding of certain relevant geographical and historical facts" (Gibran, 2007: 13). The continuous dispute regarding sovereignty still exists today and has been ongoing for over two hundred and fifty years (Freedman, 2005: 2). Historical records indicate that the islands were first discovered in 1600 by Dutchman Sebald de Weert, however, there are discrepancies in the historical records and both the Argentine and British have differing accounts regarding who first discovered the islands. The British claim that the Islands were first discovered by the British explorers, John Davis aboard the ship Desire in August, 1592 and Richard Hawkins aboard the Dainty in February 1594 (Beck, 1988: 62).

However, the Argentines argue that it was most likely the Spanish who discovered the islands citing Spanish domination in the region in the late 1500s and the early 1600s led by explorers such as Diego Rivero, Pedro Reinell and Diego Gutierrez as well as the depiction of " Las Malvinas" on Spanish navigation charts (Beck, 1988: 62). Both claims to sovereignty are subsequently rooted in the confusion and inaccuracy as to who first discovered the islands. Historical accounts from both the Brits and Argentines are riddled with incomplete log books and unclear maps which has rendered Dutchman Sebald de Weert as being the recognized discoverer <https://assignbuster.com/the-falkland-war-why-did-the-argentine-military-junta-invade-and-seize-british-territory/>

of the Falkland Islands on January 24, 1600 (Beck, 1988: 63). The following years up until the 1900s saw constant changes in ownership of the islands ranging from the British, Spanish, French and Argentines. The major dispute between the British and Argentines arose in 1842 when the British 'recolonized' the Islands after many years of abandonment citing that they were simply reinstating their claim to sovereignty made when they left the Islands in 1765 in which they left a plaque reading " Be it known to all nations that Falkland Ysland, with this fort, the storehouses, wharfs.

.. re the sole right and property of His Most Sacred Majesty George III, King of Great Britain" (Beck, 1988: 41). This enraged the Argentinian contingent who between 1820 and 1833 had claimed the Falklands as their own.

This claim stemmed from a belief relating to a right of succession in which Argentina were convinced that as The Falklands were previously under Spanish governance they had the rights to claim the Islands when the Spanish pulled out (Beck, 1988: 41). Therefore, Argentina viewed this annexation as an illegal act of colonialism and cited that they had their own right to sovereignty based around their previous thirteen year control of the islands and the right of succession after Spanish governance (Kozloski, 1996: 3). However, they did not have the military capacity or strength to remove the British who still govern the Falklands to this day, this argument continues to be a major point of contention in the modern conflict over sovereignty (Kozloski, 1996: 3). Despite the disputes over who originally discovered the islands, contemporary international law does not correlate original discovery with complete sovereignty, however according to Daniel Gibran such

territorial conflict played a fundamental role in the breakdown of foreign relations between Britain and Argentina (Gibran, 2007: 5).

In essence, the British right to sovereignty is generally perceived to be stronger, this is not only based around the historical facts but the right of prescription and self-determination of peoples which is enshrined in Article 1 of the United Nations Charter (Smith, 1991: 18). Despite the failure to identify whether British occupation in 1833 constituted the repossession of territory belonging to Britain or the usurpation of Argentine territory inherited from Spain which to some extent does undermine the British case for sovereignty it is evident that the majority of the Falkland Islands population has the desire to remain under British control, which in combination with the fact that British sovereignty has been exercised through open, continuous, effective and peaceful possession, occupation and administration of the islands since 1833 undoubtedly serves to consolidate the British position (Smith, 1991: 18). In addition, any case the Argentinians did have for sovereignty was heavily weakened in 1982 following the short-lived illegal occupation of the islands. Wayne Smith details to what extent the Argentinian invasion actually had the reverse effect on the Argentinian cause and further compounded the British case for sovereignty (Smith, 1991: 18). In an extract from a speech from The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee it was concluded that whatever the previous 'uncertainties' were with regard to the United Kingdom's legal claims to sovereignty the war had all but reasserted the moral and political force of Her Majesty's government and the her willingness and dedication in protecting the rights and interests of the Falklands population and of Britain (Smith, 1991: 18). However, during

the 1970s British interest in the Falkland Islands and her other territories in the South West Atlantic (South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands etc) appeared to be waning as a result of greater Downing Street emphasis placed on continental issues such as the EC and NATO, this neglect and lack of commitment demonstrated by the British government to the region resulted in economic declination that created an aura of political and economic instability that further discouraged private investment (Gibran, 2007: 45).

The withdrawal of the warship HMS Endurance from active service in the area also indicated a diminution of interests and a dilution of commitment towards the South West Atlantic which was greeted with massive euphoria in Buenos Aires who perceived these changes as being indicative of an inevitable British relinquishment of the Falklands (Gibran, 2007: 51).

According to Lawrence Freedman, the lack of political will demonstrated by Britain pre-April 1982 to effectively deal with the dispute or to accept responsibility for the islands hammered home the Argentinian belief that an invasion would prove successful (Gibran 2007: 51). However, the invasion was just as much motivated by external factors as it was motivated by the situation within Argentina at the time. There was a strong belief amongst the military junta that Britain, led by a woman prime minister, and experiencing a wide range of domestic economic pressures would not resort to a war over a territory in an isolated part of the Atlantic Ocean over eight thousand miles away (Gibran, 2007: 15). However, as mentioned previously, internal factors played a massive role in the Argentinian justification for an invasion which stemmed from the fact that the military junta viewed the potential

recapturing of the Falkland Islands as a last ditch attempt to restore morale to a hugely demoralized Argentinian population as well as an opportunity to instill a renewed sense of national pride that would propel the nation out of its massive economic and social woes (Roehrig, 2007: 46).

The internal causes of the conflict will be examined in more detail in the following section. The conditions within Argentina: Political, economic and social woes During the 1970s and early 1980s Argentina was controlled by a succession of military dictatorships that carried out many horrendous acts of state-sponsored violence and state terrorism. These acts were characterized by abductions, kidnappings, torture, repression and assassinations that destroyed families and cost thousands of lives. The main goals of the Argentinian military junta were to impose a particular cultural construct on society that would resolve the deep seated ills of Argentinian society and politics (Scheper-Hughes, 2004: 201).

Ever since 1955 political tension had been escalating as a result of the ousting of President Juan Domingo Peron from power which resulted in gross political dissatisfaction arising among the Argentinian population, this was further compounded by the emergence of a class-conscious younger generation who demanded political participation (Scheper-Hughes, 2004: 201). This fiery combination between 1969 and 1973 culminated into an unstoppable mass opposition movement against the ruling military dictatorship. However, change was limited and in 1975 the Argentinian 'Dirty war' commenced at a stage where political unrest and insurgency was plaguing much of Latin America (Horvitz and Catherwood, 2006: 21).

Terrorist acts, murder, assassinations, torture and kidnappings were evident <https://assignbuster.com/the-falkland-war-why-did-the-argentine-military-junta-invade-and-seize-british-territory/>

on a consistent basis which the junta justified as necessary in order to rid the nation of left wing sympathizers, political dissidents, intellectuals and traitors who were perceived as being enemies of the state and victims of a global campaign to contain the communist threat (Horvitz and Catherwood, 2006: 21). The campaign was therefore supported by the United States which is another reason why Leopoldo Galtieri ordered the invasion of the Falklands as he thought the United States would back Argentina against Great Britain (Horvitz and Catherwood, 2006: 21). The political problems within the country were further compounded by massive inflation rates (which according to Terence Roehrig had hit triple digits by 1981) and economic hardship caused as a result of an abandonment of fiscal austerity measures that caused millions of people to lose their wealth, these issues, along with the widespread economic calamities made it increasingly difficult for the military to maintain power and control.

December 11th, 1981 saw the ousting of President General Roberto Viola from power by the army's commander in chief, General Leopoldo Galtieri (Lopez and Stohl, 1987: 217). The fact that Galtieri had such a high position within Viola's regime serves as a chilling reminder as to the true extent of disagreement, confrontation and total lack of cohesion within the regime (Lopez and Stohl, 1987: 217). Galtieri's initial economic and political agendas did nothing to heal the demoralization and bolster the confidence of the people and armed forces; he was primarily concerned with bridging the gap between continued dictatorial role on one side and a rapid transition to electoral politics on the other side (Lopez and Stohl, 1987: 220). His economic policies were heavily frowned upon by members of the

government and did little in improving the dire economic situation throughout the nation. He appointed Roberto Alemann as minister of economics who was an extreme advocate of pure economic liberalism. Together, they decided to implement extreme economic measures in a bid to trim budget deficits from eight percent in 1981 to two percent in 1982 and reduce inflation via the implementation of policies that sought to freeze public sector wages - which affected over one and a half million workers, cutting government subsidies and social programs and cutting wages by forty percent as well as an ambitious plan to turn portions of the military industrial complex over to the private sector (Lopez and Stohl, 1987: 220).

These policies put an enormous strain on the working class, caused many banks to fail, increased external debt from US\$ 19 billion to US\$ 40 billion and only served to aggravate military industrialists (Lopez and Stohl, 1987: 220). A strong opposition emerged as a result of Galtieri's policies and there was a general consensus among the population that adequate economic reform would not be possible whilst Roberto Alemann was allowed to continue with the implementation of his economic recovery models, this adversely affected the already diminishing credibility of Galtieri's government. Domestic support was also waning as a result of the continuous controlled use of terror by the police and military to combat subversion. Antonius et al describes how the frustration of political expectation, growing labour unrest, defiant human rights protests and the accusations of gross human rights violations against Galtieri's regime proved to be a volatile mixture that further compounded the already exasperated economic conditions prevalent in the country which included massive inflation and

rising national debt which ultimately led to the downfall of Galtieri at the hands of the British (Antonius et al, 2005: 33) In a bid to restore national pride and boost his diminishing authoritative position within the government, Galtieri turned to the dispute surrounding the Falkland Islands, he sought to restore morale to a highly demoralized Argentinian population as well as an opportunity to instill a renewed sense of national pride through launching an invasion that aimed at propelling the nation out of its massive economic and social woes (Roehrig, 2007: 46) . The decision to invade was heavily miscalculated by the Argentinians and they underestimated both the military capacity and the response of the British. The Argentinian forces were so convinced that the British would not respond that they sent in a very inexperienced armed force under the instructions that the invasion would be symbolic as no enemy response was anticipated (Lopez and Stohl, 1987: 221).

This however was far from the case, the British, citing the invasion as an illegal act of aggression and conquest against British territory sparked into action and mobilized an entire fleet of warships and aircraft in a bid to regain control of the islands. Analysis of the nationalist influence According to Assa Okoth nationalism is an idea that tends to elude accurate definition and is an idea that is very much open to interpretation depending on a variety of factors (Okoth, 2006: 1). The idea of a nation is defined in subjective terms as being a socio-cultural and psychological concept and as a feeling of common identity amongst a group of people (Okoth, 2006: 1). Nationalism may therefore be inclusive of pride in a nation's: traditions, cultures, institutions, rights, achievements and responsibilities in the attempt to

maximize national unity, identity and consciousness (Okoth, 2006: 1). The concept of nationalism was therefore highly relevant on both sides of the Falkland War. The Falkland islanders themselves are descendants from Britain and consider themselves British in nationality whilst the Argentinians consider themselves to be Argentinian or Latin American in identity and are descendents from a mixture of Spanish, German and Italian people.

This sharp contrast in the national and cultural identity of the two regions inspired the Islanders Isolationism from mainland Argentina in order to preserve their unique cultural and national identity which only served to antagonize the greater quest from both sides for sovereignty (Kozloski, 1996: 12). British Nationalism British presence in the South Atlantic has been apparent since the 18th Century when colonialism was at its peak, the British viewed the occupation of territory in the region as having a strategic advantage that in the words of Lord Anson would make ' Britain the masters of the seas' (Kozloski, 1996: 12). It was this belief along with the international opinion that control over Cape Horn was extremely prestigious that drove home the Nationalistic viewpoint that would become the cornerstone of British political thought during the 18th and 19th centuries (Kozloski, 1996: 12). This idea was be the main reason for the colonization and occupation of the Falkland Islands and for the subsequent reclamation of the islands from the Argentinians in 1833 which was the root cause that ignited the conflict for sovereignty. The 1982 British victory in the Falklands was the greatest foreign and domestic policy victory since the Second World War.

It instilled a renewed sense of Nationalism amongst the British population and assured that Margaret Thatcher and her conservative government would generate the much needed support that enabled subsequent unchallenged governmental dominance throughout much of the 1980s despite her previous unpopularity with the majority of the electorate (Loehlin, 2000: 84). The Falkland War was therefore used by Thatcher as an exercise to renew dwindling National identity within Britain and increase her popularity in order to cement her place within government for the following years. Arthur Marwick demonstrates the significance of the Falklands campaign to Thatcher in the following quote: ' The Falklands factor was the crucial one . . . In neutralizing whatever effective resistance there may have been to the political triumph of Thatcherism" (Loehlin, 200: 84).

Beck takes this idea further and emphasizes how if Britain had not militarily responded to the invasion, the internal nationalistic uproar would have toppled the Thatcher regime especially after the failed Suez Operation of the 1960s (Beck, 1988: 19). The whole military response was therefore a nationalistic answer to solving the issue of wounded national pride and the political need to justify conservative governance in Britain (Beck, 1988: 19). Another important factor in the military response was the British allegiance to the Falkland Islanders who had sworn allegiance to Britain and had no desire to become Argentine. This definitely played a role in the British response as it was their duty to protect and uphold the rights and liberties of British citizens. This is best summed up in the following quote by Margaret Thatcher which demonstrates to what extent the British were prepared to fight for the Islanders, " The Falklanders loyalty to Britain is fantastic.

If they wish to stay British we must stand by them. . . . The People of the Falkland Islands have the right to determine their own allegiance” (Dunnett, 1983: 415).

Argentine Nationalism The Argentine case of nationalism as a primary cause of the Falkland War is just as strong as in the British case. For many years the Argentine contingent have cited that the Falkland Islands belong to Argentina and that they were unjustly and illegally colonized by Britain in 1833 after years of British abandonment. Since then, Argentina has placed an extreme importance on the recovery of the islands and according to Collier, sees the eventual recapturing of the Islands as ‘ nothing less than a nations encounter with its national destiny’ (Collier, 1983: 460). Additionally, Collier also emphasizes the high probability that the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands was motivated by the desire for Argentina to emerge as a victorious champion for Latin America in a symbolic battle against the colonial power of Britain and the European geopolitical arena that had long exploited and oppressed the region (Collier, 1983: 463). The highly nationalist military regimes at the time of the war were adamant that Argentina would become the major power in South America and therefore they were prepared to go to extremes to ensure the facilitation of this power became a reality. This idea was primarily motivated by geopolitical factors that facilitate Argentina’s control of the South Atlantic between the mainland and Antarctica (Beck, 1988: 72).

Argentina saw the occupation of the Falkland Islands as being a necessity in order to both improve the Argentine strategic position against Chile and to neutralize British ambitions in the region as well as to improve their role as <https://assignbuster.com/the-falkland-war-why-did-the-argentine-military-junta-invade-and-seize-british-territory/>

the " Gatekeeper between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans". (Beck, 1988: 72-73). The dispute over the issue of sovereignty of the Falkland Islands has been ongoing for such a lengthy time period as a result of stringent Argentine nationalistic views regarding the history of events that culminated in the conflict. Throughout the country, propaganda and education systems continuously convey the message that the Islands belong to Argentina and that they are being illegally occupied by Britain which severely hinders the ability of the two nations to engage in rational negotiations (Beck, 1988: 76). This highly nationalistic approach has resulted in over one hundred and fifty years of continuous, intense political determination in the form of demonstrations and protests revolving around regaining the islands and never giving up the claim to them which has been inspired by extreme nationalist agenda. The extreme nationalism demonstrated by Argentina not only played a major role in the onset of the war but was also fundamental in the diplomatic breakdown of sovereignty related negotiations with Britain as can be seen in the 1977 destruction of the Shackleton Report which was Argentina's last real hope of negotiating a deal with Britain before the invasion (Beck, 1985: 645).