

All we have done is interpret the sentiment of the Argentine people

Leopoldo F. Galtieri

*"In late 1982, hardly any other country in the world was in a more alarming and unfortunate situation".¹ This statement by David Rock, in his book *Argentina 1516-1987*, although it does not lack the pathos of hyperbole, concisely describes the political, social and economic crisis in Argentina after seven years of military dictatorship.*

On 2 April, 1982, General Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri, third de facto president of the self-styled "National Reorganisation Process", from the balcony of the Government House addresses a cheering crowd celebrating the momentary recovery of the Falkland Islands, after almost 150 years under British rule. National papers titled the news somewhere between verifying and celebrating it: "Argentine troops land on the Falklands" (Clarín), "Argentina lands on the archipelago of the Falklands" (La Nación), "Today is a glorious day for our country. Argentina rules in the Falklands" (La Razón), and, "Argentina strikes: the Falklands have been recovered" (Crónica).

Two days earlier, on 30 March, 1982, the repression of a mass mobilisation to Plaza de Mayo in front of the Government House, hosted by leading Argentine unions under the slogan "Bread and Work", had revealed the decay of the living conditions in Argentine society and the decline of a dictatorship that had ruled cruelly and brutally since 24 March 1976, when it overthrew the constitutional president María Estela Martínez de Perón and closed all the fundamental institutions of democracy.

*In the early Eighties, the word "Malvinas" (Falklands) had multiple meanings in the collective memory of the Argentines: the colonial usurpation, the anti-imperialist struggle, sovereignty. From 1833 onward, that territory in the hands of Great Britain functioned in Argentina's culture and politics as one of the many metaphors of the Nation. The positions in favour of the recovery of the archipelago covered the most diverse political banners and were a constant in the national profiles outlined by national politics. Diplomatic and legal action was interrupted only during the Seventy-four-day war in 1982. After 1982, as suggested by Julieta Vitullo in *Islas imaginadas*, we say "Falklands" rather than "war".²*

*Between late December 1981 and early January 1982, the military junta had begun to outline plans to recover the islands. The purpose was to generate a stream of popular fervour to divert attention from current problems, as well as to regain lost credibility among large sectors of the country that would be sensitive to an action of patriotic interest such as this. The Falklands War sought to remember, as Leon Rozitchner indicates in *Las Malvinas: De la guerrasucia a la guerralimpia*, "old lost glories: the British invasions and the boiling oil, the Mendoza ladies weaving flags".³ The Falklands would become a strong mobilising driver of English anti-imperialism, which indelibly fuelled the collective Argentine nationalist imagination and its irredentism.*

The discourse of the beginning of the war was one of the last attempts by Galtieri, and the junta in

¹ David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987. Desde la colonización española hasta Raúl Alfonsín*, (Buenos Aires: Alianza Singular, 1991): 19.

² Eduardo Rinesi, "La 'cuestión' Malvinas", *Página 12* (2012): <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-200938-2012-08-13.html>.

³ Leon Rozitchner, "Recordando", *Revista Lote* 11 (1998): <http://fernandopeirone.com.ar/Lote/nro011/rozitch.htm>

© African Yearbook of Rhetoric 6, 2, 2015, Online ISSN 2305-7785: Leopoldo F. Galtieri; Mariano Dagatti (Ed.), "All we have done is interpret the sentiment...", pp. 65 - 67.

general, to gain the people's support. Foreign affairs gained importance as the public image of the armed forces declined nationally. In statements to the EFE agency on 29 April 1982, writer Julio Cortázar had declared with regard to the matter: "What the Argentine people needed right now was not for the military and navy to go to the Falklands but to the ranks".⁴ The dictator's nationalist interpellation sought to dissolve internal conflicts in the fervour of external conflict.

In late January 1982, the junta organised a new campaign against Chile for the Beagle Channel, which remained suspended after the mediation of Pope John Paul II in February 1978. He advocated for military involvement in Central America. The apparent convenience of a war with Great Britain over the Falklands gained consensus at the core of the armed forces, because if the regime increased tension with Chile there was the risk of a prolonged war that could spread to other parts of the continent, perhaps finally triggering an invasion by Brazil. And if Argentina got too entangled in Central America, internal dissidents would accuse the government of acting as a mercenary of imperialism, creating perhaps the union of Peronism and the left-wing sectors. Action in the Falklands seemed "the easiest of all wars".⁵ Some time later Galtieri himself would say: "Although it is believed that Britain would react, we did not think there would be a mobilisation for the Falklands".⁶ The idea was to win without fighting; after all, it was the only chance of success for a country that did not have troops involved in open conflict with foreigners since the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay in the late 1860s.

"The exceptional political density of the Falklands issue – as stated by Marco Novaro and Vicente Palermo in *La dictaduramilitar 1976-1983* – rests primarily on its vast popularity: it was deeply rooted as a national cause in Argentine society".⁷ In this sense, the use of the Falklands cause as a sign of national unity against British colonialism does not oppose the evidence. The declaration of war was scheduled to celebrate the national holidays of the May Revolution (25 May) or National Independence (9 July), and even the Falklands matter was spoken of – in 1983 it had been 150 years since British usurpation. But the operation was brought forward when popular pressure on the junta became untenable: "The times of 2 April were not those of the Falklands, but those of the national process";⁸ say Novaro and Palermo. The temporal proximity shows that the Falklands War was, for the military, as Rozitchner notes, the continuation of the "dirty war" against "subversive elements" through a "clean war"⁹ against a power of heavy symbolism but a very weak imperial present.

Argentina's defeat began with the battles of Puerto Darwin on 27 and 28 May, and those deployed between 10 and 14 June in the hills surrounding Puerto Argentino, which concluded with the signing of the final surrender. The defeat in the Falklands War was the beginning of the end of the military dictatorship. Galtieri lost everything in the game. On 15 June he delivered his final address to the Argentine people. He blamed the defeat on foreign treachery and cited the "overwhelming superiority of a power supported by the military technology of the United States, surprising enemies of Argentina and its people".¹⁰ While Galtieri spoke, popular disillusionment erupted in a wave of violent clashes with police in the Plaza de Mayo in front of the Government

⁴ Marcos Novaro & Vicente Palermo, *La dictadura militar 1976-1983: del golpe de Estado a la restauración democrática*, (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2011): 411.

⁵ Rock, *Argentina 1916-1987*, 462.

⁶ *Ibid.* 464.

⁷ Novaro, *La dictadura militar 1976-1983*, 411.

⁸ *Ibid.* 426.

⁹ Leon Rozitchner, *Las Malvinas: de la guerra sucia a la guerra limpia*, (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1985).

¹⁰ Rock, *Argentina 1916-1987*, 468.

House. The final balance of the war in human lives was 649 Argentine military, 255 British and three island civilians.

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I know this day, 2 April 1982, marks a very important milestone in Argentina's history in the century we're living in.

At present, thousands of citizens, men and women across the country, in every town, on small farms, in cities and in this historic Plaza de Mayo that has marked directions through national history, you, the Argentines are publicly expressing the feeling and emotion held for one hundred and fifty years through a plunder that today we have washed clean.

(Applause and cheers: Argentina! Argentina! Argentina!)

The noble Argentine people, I repeat, the noble Argentine nation stretches out its hands to the adversary but accepts no argument when it comes to its rights, which we have patiently and prudently tried to claim through diplomatic channels.

The three commanders in chief, Commander of the Argentine Air Force, Commander in Chief of the Navy and myself, *(Applause)* all we have done is interpret the sentiment of the Argentine people *(Applause and cheers)* present here and throughout the republic.

I'm sure *(Cheers: Long live the Fatherland! Long live! Long live Lieutenant General Galtieri! Long live.)* I'm sure every one of you, men, women, the great youth of Argentina and the children *(Applause and cheers)* is feeling, like I am, a tremendous joy and excitement for this Argentine act. *(Applause and cheers: Argentina! Argentina! Argentina!)*

Today, 2 April, we have just begun with our approach *(Applause and cheers against the English)* Today, 2 April, we have just begun with our approach to recovering the Falklands and its whole area of influence, and already the Argentine flag waves on our islands *(Applause and cheers: Argentina! Argentina! Argentina!)*

May the international community and our circumstantial adversaries of today understand what Argentina's will is. We will accept a dialogue after this act of force *(Applause and cheers)*

But convinced that national dignity and pride must be maintained at all costs and at any price *(Applause and cheers: we will blow it up! we will blow it up! we will blow it up!)*

I thank you on behalf of the three Commanders and of the Armed Forces that are yours, not ours, the Armed Forces of Argentina belong to the people of the nation. *(Applause and cheers)* This display of emotion and joy that the whole Argentine people shares today after one hundred and fifty years of a shameful backing down.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. *(Applause and cheers: Argentina! Argentina! Argentina!)*

Translated from Spanish (Argentina) by Clara Tilve.¹¹

¹¹ <http://constitucionweb.blogspot.com.ar/2012/02/discurso-del-gral-galtieri-del-2-de.html>