Published on openDemocracy (http://www.opendemocracy.net)

The Malvinas and Afghanistan: unburied ghosts

By Fred Halliday,
Created 2007-05-03 23:00

A few years ago, in my office at the London School of Economics, I was visited by the shrewd former foreign minister of Argentina, Guido di Tella [1], then a visiting scholar at the University of Oxford. Di Tella, who belonged to a family of prominent liberal intellectuals, had been speaking to a seminar at LSE on the theme of Argentina's relations with the rest of the world.

His interpretation of his country's predicament has stayed with me. After all Argentina's modern dramas - the two regimes presided over by the populist military leader Juan Domingo Perón and his wives, Evita and Isabel (1945-1955, 1974-1976); proletarian insurrection; ferocious military repression [2]; flamboyant but fatally deluded guerrilla struggle; a rollercoaster economy which, in the 1920s was amongst the most prosperous in the world; and, not least, the Malvinas war [3]of 1982 itself - Di Tella made a heartfelt plea for Argentina to be a normal, serious, even boring, country. "For once let us be like Austria, or New Zealand", he remarked. To many Argentineans in his audience, and even to some like myself had been exposed over the years to the charms and rhetoric of its politics or the twisting passions of its football [3]or its tango music, this seemed a vain hope. But, liberal optimist and inveterate Anglophile that he was, Di Tella persisted.

Also in openDemocracy on the Falklands/Malvinas war:

Anthony Barnett, "Churchillism: from Thatcher and the Falklands to Blair and Iraq [4]"
(30 March 2007)

Ivan Briscoe, "Argentina and the Malvinas, twenty-five years on [5]"
(2 April 2007)

Justin Vogler, "Argentina and Britain: the lessons of war [6]"
(3 April 2007)

Celia Szusterman, "The *causa* Malvinas: mirror of Argentine political culture [7]"
(4 April 2007)

A changing climate

The reason Guido di Tella came to see me was more specific. The Malvinas war had ended over a decade earlier, and after a decade of cold peace Britain and Argentina had in 1995 reached an agreement to open up the fishing areas around the islands, to allow regular flights from southern Argentina to the islands' capital Port Stanley, and, in general, to a reduction in tension. The then president Carlos Menem [8] had even put aside his Peronist, populist credentials to visit Britain and pay his respects to the British war dead.

But Di Tella was worried: the British government, and the Falkland islanders [9] were deluded if they thought this peace would last. Britain's long-term possession of the islands was an anomalous and outdated arrangement that Argentines across the political spectrum would continue to push against. At least let discussions begin on joint sovereignty or other mechanisms to close the gap between the two sides. Di Tella had tried to get the attention of the British political elite and had even, in one of the more extraordinary peace initiatives of modern times, tried to woo the islands over Christmas by sending [10]each family a letter with a *Winnie the Pooh* bear.

Di Tella's initiative led to no change in British or Argentinean public positions. Instead, what he predicted has come to pass. The islanders, backed by the British government, are reaping the benefits of the 1995 fishing-rights deal: in a boom [11]largely fuelled by Spanish firms, they now have the highest per-capita income in Latin America (around $60,000) and foreign reserves of $360 million. The official British position remains unchanged: they will not move unless the islanders so wish, and there is little sign of that.

In Britain the twenty-fifth anniversary of the start of the war - which coincided with the overrated dispute [11]with Iran over the detention of British naval personnel - occasioned much nostalgic and blimpish commentary, usually linked to militaristic banalities about the prime minister of the time, Margaret Thatcher [12]. It was less often noted that the political climate in Argentina is changing in significant ways.

The current president, Néstor Kirchner [13], has challenged the 1995 agreement and repudiated some of its key terms. Direct flights from Argentina are now banned, and only one weekly plane, run by the Chilean firm LAN Chile, makes the journey from Punto Arenas to Port Stanley. The national claim to the Malvinas islands has again come to be a live issue [14]in Argentina; on 2 April, the day when the start of the war was commemorated, a mass rally was held in Ushuaia [15], the southernmost town of Argentina and the one nearest the islands, to commemorate the war and restate the Argentinean aspiration [16].

This nationalistic [17]and militaristic impasse will, as Di Tella predicted, sooner or later explode; and it is to the discredit of successive British governments that they have refused to face up to this. The British claim to these islands [18], 8,000 miles (12,800 kilometres) from the "homeland", is on any basis - rational, geo-strategic and common sense - unsustainable (as if Japan were to claim part of Suffolk). It is one of the relics of colonialism and should be dealt with and despatched in that spirit. The islanders should, like all such displaced persons, be entitled to compensation and resettlement, a population of less than 3,000 hardly presents a major problem; there are many locations - Scotland, Wales, New Zealand and Australia suggest themselves - where they could feel comfortable.

The argument that London has to respect the wishes of the islanders also lacks logic, on two grounds. First, it implies granting a population of 3,000 people the right to determine matters of strategy, diplomacy and economic interest, which is a grotesque indulgence. Second, it carries a suspicion of racism, given that at the same time as the islands were being defended by the British armed forces, Thatcher's government was negotiating with Beijing to hand over 6 million citizens of Hong Kong [18] without even consulting them.

Fred Halliday is professor of international relations at the LSE, and visiting professor at the Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI). His books include Islam and the Myth of Confrontation (IB Tauris, 2003 [19]) and 100 Myths About the Middle East (Saqi, 2005 [20]).

Fred Halliday's "global politics" column on openDemocracy surveys the national histories, geopolitical currents, and dominant ideas across the world. The articles include:

"America and Arabia after Saddam [21]"
(May 2004)

"Iran's revolutionary spasm [22]"
(July 2005)

"Political killing in the cold war [23]"
(August 2005)

"A transnational umma: myth or reality? [24]"
(October 2005)

"Iran vs the United States – again [25]" (February 2006)

"A Lebanese fragment: two days with Hizbollah [26]"
(July 2006)

"A 2007 warning: the twelve worst ideas in the world [27]"
(8 January 2007)

"*Sunni, Shi'a* and the 'Trotskyists of Islam' [28]"
(9 February 2007)

"Al-Jazeera: the matchbox that roared [29]" (25 March 2007)

"Al-Jazeera: the matchbox that roared [30]"
(25 March 2007)

A nebulous cause

But the lessons of the Malvinas war [31] go deeper than that, for they exemplify a major issue involved in assessing the legitimacy of any war: proportion. Much jingoistic British press coverage of the Argentinean occupation conveyed the sense that two fantasy worlds had collided: as if the Wehrmacht had invaded the rural idyll of the long-running BBC radio soap-opera, *The Archers.* But the image of terrible cultural crimes being committed by the occupiers was far from the prosaic reality.

The islanders were not threatened with the crimes concurrently visited on Argentinean citizens under General Leopoldo Galtieri's [32] junta - torture, massacre, dispossession and exile. After all, their British-origin cousins in Argentina [33]formed a substantial community of around 100,000 people, and faced little or no persecution even during the dark years of dictatorship.

The war was not therefore about saving or protecting lives, but about protecting a way of life. Yet in pursuit of this nebulous but emotional cause [33], hundreds of young men had to die: 649 Argentineans (and another 1,068 wounded) and 258 British (777 wounded, including some terribly burnt and scarred for life). By no stretch of logic, law or humanity was this legitimate: *that in support of an illegitimate war* as many people (leaving aside the thousands of bereaved) were casualties than the total population of the islands themselves. This war was a paradigmatic crime, for which both governments should have been held responsible. It set a terrible example

of wasted lives, and of the indulgence of wildly disproportionate (imperialist and nationalist) claims [34], to the rest of the world.

Its outcome was paradoxical. Britain and Argentina slowly re-established relations, aided by the return of democracy [35]to Argentina in 1983, an event which the defeat in the Malvinas certainly precipitated. By a mixture of after-the-event planning and good fortune, the islands discovered a route to prosperity.

The singularity of these effects reflected the way that, in some respects, the war was outside the broader, cold-war pattern of international politics at the time. While the Soviet Union condemned Britain's role, I discovered during a visit to Moscow in July 1982 that Margaret Thatcher was extremely popular amongst many ordinary people and military officials in Russia (a fact confirmed by the then Moscow correspondent of the *Times,* Richard Owen, who told me that - as many in the USSR considered his paper to be the official organ of the British ruling class and state - he had received hundreds of messages congratulating him, and Mrs Thatcher, on "a great technical-military victory in the south Atlantic").

From ocean to mountain

The temptation to see the Malvinas war as an isolated, exceptional event should, however, be resisted. In particular, the covert United States-British collaboration which was central to eventual British victory [36]helped to consolidate a far more momentous (and far less publicised) military project then being implemented, one whose destructive impacts are still reverberating across the region and the world: the *jihad [36]*against the then Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

In this campaign, Britain under Margaret Thatcher's leadership joined the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in training, financing and arming the *mujahideen* guerrillas, and in encouraging young Arab militants to go and fight there. British special-forces (SAS) units were sent to Pakistan and into Afghanistan to assist the Afghan guerrillas, and Afghan fighters were brought to Britain for training (including in shooting down Soviet helicopters).

This concentrated effort helped create the conditions for the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan in 1989. But by then, the sorcerer's apprentices armed and incited by Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and their friends were no longer under the control of their paymasters, and set about planning attacks on their former patrons. In this, the Malvinas war - marginal to the main currents of global conflict as it may have seemed at the time, and in retrospect - in fact played a significant part in consolidating the forces that were seeding future conflict [37]and explosion far from the immediate theatre.

The real legacy of the 1982 war is, then, one of profound strategic and ideological irresponsibility, whose consequences were to be seen in the local wars and pitiless massacres perpetrated in many poor countries in the 1980s - El Salvador and Nicaragua, East Timor and Angola - by the friends of Margaret Thatcher [38]. Those who seek to conduct a balance-sheet of the grisly record of that decade must complement their assessment of the adventure in the south Atlantic by putting it in the context of wars in the Hindu Kush and beyond, then and now.

Source URL:
http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-falklands_malvinas/malvinas_ghosts_4591.jsp

Links:
[1] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2002/01/08/db0803.xml
[2] http://www.yendor.com/vanished/junta.html

[3] http://www.falklandswar.org.uk/
[4] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-falklands_malvinas/churchillism_4487.jsp
[5] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-falklands_malvinas/argentina_briscoe_4491.jsp
[6] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-falklands_malvinas/lessons_vogler_4495.jsp
[7] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-falklands_malvinas/causa_malvinas_4501.jsp
[8] http://www.carlosmenem.com/bio_ingles.asp
[9] http://www.falklands.info/history/history6.html
[10] http://www.guardian.co.uk/argentina/story/0,,1810296,00.html
[11] http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/falklands-face-a-new-challenge-prosperity/2007/04/01/1175366080810.html
[12] http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page126.asp
[13] http://www.presidencia.gov.ar/
[14] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/03/29/warg29.xml
[15] http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia07/argentina_sm_2007.gif
[16] http://www.mercopress.com/vernoticia.do?id=10127&formato=HTML
[17] http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/6014.html
[18] https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/fk.html
[19] http://www.palgrave-usa.com/catalog/product.aspx?isbn=1860648681 target=_blank
[20] http://www.saqibooks.com/ItemsStore.asp?sku=0863565298&prd=1target=_blank
[21] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-iraq/article_1900.jsp
[22] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-vision_reflections/iran_2642.jsp
[23] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/cold_war_2753.jsp
[24] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/umma_2904.jsp
[25] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-irandemocracy/again_3267.jsp
[26] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/hizbollah_3757.jsp
[27] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/worst_ideas_4228.jsp
[28] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/islam_4334.jsp
[29] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-village/aljazeera_qatar_4466.jsp
[30] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-village/aljazeera_qatar_4466.jsp
[31] http://www.orionbooks.co.uk/HB-32083/Razor%27s-Edge.htm
[32] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/03/13/wfalk213.xml
[33] http://www.economist.com/countries/Argentina/profile.cfm?folder=History%20in%20brief
[34] http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,2047981,00.html
[35] http://www.angus-reid.com/tracker/index.cfm/fuseaction/viewItem/itemID/14242
[36] http://www.falklands25.com/abouttheconflict.html
[37] http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521791405
[38] http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/kbank/profiles/thatcher/

Copyright © Fred Halliday, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.