

# UNIVERSITY INTELLECTUALS AND THE MILITARY, WHAT DID WE (NOT) MAKE OF OUR MALVINAS WAR?

By **ROSANA GUBER**

## Keywords:

- > Malvinas War
- > University intellectuals
- > Military intellectuals
- > Interpretative frameworks

## Abstract

This article presents a reflection on the three interpretative frameworks from which university and military intellectuals in Argentina have understood the Malvinas/Falklands War against the United Kingdom in 1982.

This text presents how these frameworks gave and still give meaning to what happened then, the reasons for their extraordinary validity and, also, the limitations that derive from them at the moment of approaching the investigation of the event and, particularly, the understanding of its two novelties: being the only international conflict of the 20th century in which our country was the main contender, and being the only international war in which Argentina participated and which included Argentine conscripts. Here we offer some hypotheses about the limitations and derivations of these interpretative frameworks<sup>1</sup>.

In these pages I am presenting some observations resulting from my work on part of what we call “Malvinas” in our country. Since 1989, that is, seven years after the Anglo-Argentine conflict over the Malvinas and South Atlantic Islands in 1982, I have been trying to understand what we Argentines made of an event that brought at least two novelties: it was the only international war in which Argentina participated as the main contender during the entire twentieth century, and it was the only international war in which Argentine

1. This text is a reworking of the conference of the same name presented at the symposium “40 years after the Malvinas conflict: Strategic, operational and tactical reflections”. CEFAA - Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces - Joint War College. CABA, 24 May. I thank the director of the Joint War College, Brig. Fernando Valentich, and Colonels Alberto Aparicio and Juan Carlos Marossero, as well as Dr. Eliana de Arrascaeta, for this invitation. I am also deeply grateful for the careful reading of Héctor D. Tessey, Alejandra Barrutia and Daniel Chao.



## The climate of unity among Argentines showed that the Malvinas gesture appeared to be a successful political initiative. The population immediately understood that it had to support its forces in the islands, and it did so on behalf of its sons, the soldiers.

conscript soldiers participated together with their Armed Forces since the creation of the Compulsory Military Service in 1901.

During these years I undertook several investigations trying to take advantage of the theoretical concepts of my discipline, social anthropology, and the methodological approach that social anthropologists call “ethnography”, the study in situ of ways of feeling, acting and thinking different from those we are used to, and letting ourselves be guided by our interlocutors instead of imposing our points of view and our notions.

The art of ethnography is precisely to learn to understand other human groups and their perspectives on life, past and experience. To do this we need those same people to tell us how to get to know them, what and how to ask, what and how to observe and listen, what and how to record. I graduated with a degree in Anthropology in 1981 from the University of Buenos Aires and began researching in a team that investigated the problems of the slums.

Precisely on that Friday 2 April in the Villa Tranquila in Avellaneda, I heard on the radio at Doña Silveria's house that the islands had been recovered. In 1986 I decided to go to the United States to do a doctorate in anthropology, to begin to understand what the Malvinas had been for the Argentines. It

was not enough for me to have been a contemporary of those 74 days. I needed a certain distance from what was usually said on the subject and also from my own academic environment. In short, my research career coincided with these post-Malvinas war years and with 39 years of hard-fought democracy. Shortly before the first decade, I began my “fieldwork”, that is, I began to see the faces of those who had been there, to talk to them and, sometimes, to ask.

Why this personal-historical introduction? Because no one can know from nowhere. People tend to think within our time and from our society. This is not because the era and society impose a homogeneous way of thinking, but because people, also researchers, think from the questions and debates that are generated in our time.

Also, from the silences. To put it more academically, our interpretative frameworks are oriented towards solving problems that mark the societies of our times. For this reason, we cannot ask just any question, but the one we consider significant according to the axes of discussion or debate that are the backbone of our social group of belonging. It is not just any debate, but the one we consider relevant, necessary, even urgent. From here, we formulate certain questions which, in turn, enable us to open up a certain range of

answers. I will now present what I identify as our main interpretative frameworks for thinking about the Malvinas and how they have affected our understanding and our research into what happened in 1982.

My thesis is that in these 40 years intellectuals, mainly but not only academics, have tended to moralise the debate on Malvinas and, in this way, we have closed the research questions to a very few possible ones. Thus, we forced ourselves to think and debate in a framework relegating the subject of the war to the informal sphere of the corridors and common sense.

The reader may believe that there are tons written on the subject, but I would like to show that the frameworks we adopted over these four decades were basically the same, and that the two most important ones were pre-1982. Consequently, in general, we produced texts in which we overlooked the two novelties I referred to at the beginning of this article: that the Malvinas was the only war of an international character in which Argentina was the main contending country and the only one in which conscripts participated.

If interpretative frameworks allow us to ask questions and give answers within certain possible ranges, the reasoning becomes circular. This leads to two diseases that are often lethal



to research (and to the objects we study): knowing what will be found and concluding without new questions. My proposal is that the dominant positions for discussing the Malvinas War in Argentine research are considered according to established moralities that are assumed to be independent of history and political conjuncture. It was precisely the proximity and even dependence and subordination to those conjunctures that drowned this field of study in predictable and closed reasoning.

#### **A cause with history**

By 1982, the Malvinas issue was a pending territorial sovereignty issue that was already highly politicised, that is, present in society and the political system as an instrument or resource of power. This politicisation had gone through different stages of the organisation of the nation and had two particularities: its continuity, since all governments since 1833

had demanded the return of the islands occupied by a small British naval force, and its plurality, because such continuity was made possible by the active intervention of politically opposed sectors.

Thus, Malvinas did not only exist in the silent and secretive domains of Argentine diplomacy, but also in the public arena. This was discovered by intellectuals of very different affiliations and origins, who began to support the Malvinas issue as a matter of state and as a national and popular cause. Becoming a national and popular cause meant introducing it as a “problem” dear to Argentines.

It is often said that we learned about Malvinas in primary school. Probably, but I am not sure it was because it was part of the school curriculum. In fact, it is difficult to find references to the history of its occupation, first by the French, then by the Spanish and then by the River Plate. The Argentine presence and the subsequent British occupation do not appear as topics in textbooks

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or history courses. Only the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands and the Antarctic sector appear on maps.

The impact of the school on the development of the Malvinas issue is parallel to the early literacy of the Argentine population, which coincides with the progressive involvement of intellectuals who talked about the Malvinas, British colonialism and Argentine rights. The issue of the British occupation of the Malvinas Islands reached society through the written word in newspapers and periodicals, books and magazines, small volumes of popular history and political essays.

Several of those texts were published on patriotic dates (in 1910, on the occasion of the centenary of 1810, Paul Groussac) and allusive to the loss of the islands and economic sovereignty (for example, 1934, a year after the Roca Runciman Treaty and the centenary of 1833). Thus, by 1982, although without much detail, Argentina's rights to the South Atlantic

archipelagos were well known in this country. Consequently, by the time news of the recovery of the islands arrived on 2 April 1982, "everyone knew" that "the Malvinas are Argentine", that they were occupied by "England" and that they should be recovered.

That consensus gave rise, after 2 April, to what anthropologists call *communitas*, an era of unity, equality and fraternity, a parenthesis of deep and genuine solidarity and national integration. However, as anthropologists also know, the primacy of *communitas* must come to an end at some point. In this case it lasted 74 days.

The strange thing about this concord is that it took place under an authoritarian regime or, as we say in Argentina, "the last military dictatorship". It was the self-styled National Reorganisation Process which, before 2 April, was already unpopular due to the oscillating economic policy, political closure and, finally, humanitarian reasons. To reiterate a well-known fact in

the commentaries of the time, three days earlier, the police had harshly repressed a large trade union march that had the support of the whole of the still outlawed political parties.

The explicit slogan was "Peace, Bread and Work"; the implicit slogan was for political openness. 2 April arrived and the prisoners of 30 March, including the secretary general of the CGT, were released to celebrate the territorial recovery. The climate of unity among Argentines showed that the Malvinas gesture appeared to be a successful political initiative.

The population immediately understood that it had to support its forces in the islands, and did so in the name of its sons, the soldiers. Support was reinforced in demonstrations and contributions when the war began on 1 May. However, it would be hasty and simplistic to read popular, public and enthusiastic support as support for that administration, as Sofia Vassallo and Juan Natalizio's research shows<sup>2</sup>.



## The recovery of the Malvinas enjoyed enormous political and military legitimacy at home and abroad. And this was in 1982, that is, after the fateful years of what some call "dirty war", "war against subversion" and others "state terrorism". However, as is evident, recognising the legitimacy of the recovery by the armed forces and standing behind them on the battlefield was not seen as contradictory.

When General Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri, who presided over the military junta, stepped out onto the balcony of the Casa Rosada, the seat of the national executive branch, he was not applauded by the crowd gathered in the Plaza de Mayo for his person or his investiture, but for the landing on Isla Soledad. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine how someone portrayed as politically basic by his contemporaries could have avoided getting "dizzy" in a scenario more typical of other times, and inaugurated as a political site alongside the origins of Peronism. In 1982, the general had to listen to some of the assembled sectors cheering Perón and the Malvinas, not the military in the government, but the military in the Malvinas (Falklands)

The news of the Argentine arrival at Port Stanley (Puerto Argentino) aroused the population's perplexity at first, then enthusiasm, and political, material and human support from then on until the afternoon of the Argentine surrender on 14<sup>th</sup> June. The recovery had the almost absolute consensus of the Argentine population resident in the country, including the political prisoners who volunteered to go to the front and the political prisoners who offered their blood for the wounded.

There was also the support of the Argentine population living abroad, particularly the exiles, mostly intellectuals, who in their public statements were at pains to distinguish their support for the anti-colonial recovery from their support for the regime. For their part, the leaders of all the political parties, despite the ban, went to different countries to explain to the governments with which they had ideological affinity the Argentine decision... not that of "the dictatorship". In short, the recovery of the Malvinas enjoyed enormous political-military legitimacy inside and outside the country.

This was in 1982, after 1976 and 1977, the dark years of what some call "dirty war", "war against subversion" and others "state terrorism". However, and as is evident in the "offerings" of political prisoners and exiles to national and anti-colonial unity, recognising the legitimacy of the recovery by the armed forces and standing behind them on the battlefield was not experienced as contradictory.

The thoughts and proposals came after 14<sup>th</sup> June, with Argentina's defeat by Great Britain and with the "Monday paper" in hand. From then on, talk of "the Malvinas adventure" began, the climate of *communitas* came to an

end and another stage began. There was too much to explain (or justify), not only on the part of the military in government or, rather, leaving it, but also on the part of all those who had participated and, therefore, had made that venture of unity possible. Of course, not all sectors did so.

### The Malvinas Paradox

The post-war period was beginning and, at the same time, the political end of the "Process". The oral reflections and texts published in the media and magazines tried to resolve the dismay, anger and even surprise at the defeat, seeking to identify "the guilty parties". Obviously, all the blame fell on the perpetrators of the political-military initiative, that is, on those who had held military and political power: the owners of the regime that had been in power since 24<sup>th</sup> March 1976.

However, it is one thing to be the author of the initiative and the movement of troops, their logistics and the strategic planning that affects tactical development, and quite another to be the sole political protagonists of such an event. And while the concentration of political

2. Juan Natalizio and Sofia Vassallo are members of the Malvinas Observatory of the National University of Lanús.

## **The Malvinas issue paradox goes like this: a national and popular cause, considered just and anti-colonial by the Argentine people, was taken up by a dictatorial, unpopular and anti-popular regime. In the form of a question, the paradox said: Could a national and popular cause, considered just and anti-colonial by the Argentine people, be taken up by a dictatorial regime?**

and military power was not new for the Argentines, this time its limits of action had been extended as never before, to the point of crossing borders (including Chile, a quasi-war that remained in that country's memory as more than just a mere memory).

The news of 2<sup>nd</sup> April initially aroused great perplexity because days earlier the regime had repressed Argentines in the streets. Now it was taking back the Islands with an anti-colonial preaching more typical of the sectors it had confronted. That same perplexity returned, in the form of a question/accusation, as soon as the outcome of the conflict became known and was expressed in the form of a paradox which, in my opinion, presents the problematic knot of the Argentine relationship with the 1982 war conflict.

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A paradox is a statement with two terms that are in contradiction, that are incompatible. But the

particularity of the paradox is that this contradiction is apparent. That is why paradoxes are interesting: they move us to think about the contradiction and to rearrange its terms, that is, they invite us to debate whether the contradiction between the terms is real or supposed. This has several derivations because it forces us to evaluate what has happened, our own position in its course and possible future courses of action. That is, as long as we keep the two components in relation, that is, we do not discard either of the two elements of the statement and, above all, its challenging articulation.

As we shall see below in the prevailing positions with which we have tried to explain the war conflict, we Argentines have ignored one of the two terms and, therefore, the meaning of their apparent contradiction. We did it in two ways, at the beginning, and added another, at the post-war 25. For example:

Argentina's surrender, technically called "capitulation", to Britain immediately gave rise to two positions that tried to resolve the paradox in order to situate themselves (the speaker and their political and/or social sector) in the face of what had happened (the enthusiasm for war) and what was

to come (the fall of the "Proceso", the elections and the occupation of posts in the new democratic administration). The first two positions were born at the end of the war but took up some of the assertions of the pre-war period. Although the validity of each has continued to the present day, they have been revitalised at different national political junctures.

A first line understands that everything is justified if the unredeemed lands are recovered, regardless of the political persuasion of the government that carries it out. Given that the islands were re-occupied by Britain, it is necessary to continue to uphold the Malvinas issue as just, because talking about the incapacity and delegitimisation of the third junta (Galtieri-Anaya-Lami Dozo) only supports the British argument. Thus, beyond the mistakes made by the national political-strategic leadership, the recovery is worthwhile. The Argentine military, including its soldiers, put up a tough fight.

This vision began to be made public in 1987 with the uprising of middle and junior army officers against their General Staff and, in fact, against the National Executive (the media called the rebels "carapintadas"). The uprising called for support for the institutional

authority of the army in the face of the growing number of trials for crimes against humanity, but in the meeting between President Alfonsín and the officers at the Campo de Mayo garrison in Buenos Aires province, the experience of some of them on the Islands took on an unexpected significance. After the parley, the president returned to Plaza de Mayo and from the usual balcony of the Casa Rosada declared the Easter Week conflict closed. It was nightfall on Sunday 19 April and at the opening of his speech President Raúl Alfonsín said that some of the rebels were “heroes of the Malvinas”.

This line of interpretation, which in other publications I have called “heroic”, had a diverse political presence, and despite its ups and downs came to occupy second place in Argentina’s main province, Buenos Aires. However, it should be made clear that this relationship between political conjuncture and interpretative line with respect to the Malvinas in 1987 did not mean

that the heroic line was generated by the uprising.

Strictly speaking, its basis of argument was the same as that held by most Argentines in their support for the 1982 recovery. With nuances, this position is shared by many war veterans, both conscript and military. The second line of interpretation affirms that Malvinas was a new victimisation of Argentines, embodied in the conscripts, by the armed forces. Accustomed to persecuting unarmed civilians, they tortured the soldiers, fled the battlefield and surrendered the square to the British.

This line, which I called “dictatorial”, maintains, like its opposite, that the Malvinas issue is a national and just sovereignty issue, but claims that the war was “a deathblow by the genocidal dictatorship”, with dark and petty purposes: to perpetuate itself in power. This line of reasoning began to be put forward almost immediately after the defeat and prevailed during the democratic

transition, subsided with the uprising of 1987 and resurfaced since 2003, especially in academic and university circles, and occupied some national state leadership. Its revitalisation accompanied the new series of trials for crimes against humanity, trying, unsuccessfully, to convict officers who were on the islands.

Twenty-five years later, in 2007, some voices appeared that changed the axis of the argument, saying that sustaining the foreign policy issue of the Malvinas issue as if it were a national and popular cause brings us more problems than solutions, and is appropriated by populist governments and authoritarian sectors, as in 1982.

What should be dealt with is the diplomatic issue in a way that does not affect Argentina’s insertion in the world market. This position is claimed by some intellectuals who have aligned themselves with the opposition to Peronism in the 21st century.

The first two lines are the most widespread and are developed in



a speculative relationship. The recovery is due to the military function of the Armed Forces, for the first, and the loss of the islands is due to the political function of the Armed Forces, for the second. The Armed Forces fought, according to the former; the Armed Forces did not fight, according to the latter. The soldiers were fighters, for the former; the soldiers were boys tortured and abandoned by their superiors, for the latter. Every opposition of this kind hides a coincidence which is its object in dispute and which both values. Although it exceeds the limits of these pages and the strict time frame of the war, it could be offered as a hypothesis that both lines compete in claiming the ability to defend the homeland and represent the unity of the nation.

In any case, intellectuals entered the conflict from one of these positions, which inevitably affected the type of research questions and the possible range of conclusions. Post-dictatorship interpretative

positions or frameworks are stated in moral terms: the heroic, the dictatorial, the abusive, the courageous, and so on. When interpretative frameworks are posited as moralities that authorise or deny what can be said, questioned, thought and enunciated, there is no academic discussion, no knowledge, only confirmation. Empirical research ends up being subsidiary to the moral statement; it matters that the conclusions coincide with certain lines of thought or, as it is often said, with certain theory. It is worth remembering that theory allows us to understand, and that without concepts and theoretical approaches there is no research.

But it is also true that subordinating oneself to theory before, or despite, the data coming from the field leads to elaborations where researchers make “reality” say what they want it to say beforehand. When it comes to the Malvinas this turn resembles dogmatism and exoticisation.

### **Shattering the apparent contradiction**

For more than a century anthropologists have been analysing the phenomenon whereby some humans are regarded as utterly different because their behaviour, norms and values are unintelligible to us. Based on our studies, we have tried to show that, even when they do not obey the moral dictates of European civilisation, so-called “savage” or “barbaric” peoples have order, coherence, logic and history.

Indeed, the point is that the recognition of this “Other” as exotic denounces the existence of a social relation, for no one is exotic per se, but from the one who has so labelled him or her. Exoticisation has expressed these relations at the global and regional level. But there are also exotics at the national level. Wars are powerful sources of exoticisation. The enemy is always portrayed as an unprincipled and unmoral other, even if he is an old acquaintance, as the Russian indictment of alleged Ukrainian Nazism shows.



**At that time, the national cause and the dictatorship were not perceived as irreconcilable, not even by "enemies" of the regime, such as exiled intellectuals and political prisoners. All of them postponed their objections to the government while stressing the justice of the anti-colonial measure, and took up the war emergency, accompanying the regime's political-military decision by means of mass mobilisations towards the public squares and, also, towards the war.**

In wars, people and combatants are exoticised. After 14 June (only after 14 June!), the armed forces became a favourite target of exoticisation for civil society and for some political sectors that inhabited, especially, university academia. It was from these spheres that the Malvinas paradox remained in force throughout these 40 years. Let us return to it.

A popular and national cause for a pending sovereignty issue undertaken by a dictatorial regime. First, it would be very easy to demonstrate that there is no reason why a dictatorial regime should be prevented from occupying unredeemed territories and, at the same time, being celebrated by its people. The cases are innumerable in the past and present. The case of the Malvinas is one of them. The popular cause and the dictatorial government went together and were received together, because that is how the popular reaction was expressed from the moment they heard of the territorial recovery. However, at that time the national cause and the dictatorship were not perceived as irreconcilable, not even by "enemies" of the regime, such as exiled intellectuals and political prisoners.

All of them postponed their objections to the government while highlighting the justice of the anti-colonial measure, and took on board the war emergency, accompanying the regime's political-military decision by means of mass mobilisations in public squares and, also, towards the war. But, as we have already pointed out, this accompaniment was neither automatic nor unconditional, because the people, the masses or whatever one prefers to call the multitude gathered in public spaces, did not support the military in their political function, but in their military function.

This conditionality allowed for a rapid change of position as soon as the surrender was known (what many call "exitismo", an adjective that does not seem to apply to the "loyalty" observed during 17 years of political proscription and exile of another military man: Juan Domingo Perón).

In this climate, the military returned from the islands to their units, and the troops to their homes and villages. From 15 June 1982, civilian attention focused on regime change and political openness, on the one hand, and on the soldiers returning from the front, on the other.

Former soldiers were the only direct protagonists of the war who would not be held responsible for the defeat. They represented the "people in arms" and the nation, as established by the 1901 Compulsory Military Service Act. This was stipulated in Article 21 of the National Constitution, which considered conscription a civic duty whereby "every Argentine citizen is obliged to arm himself in defence of the homeland and this Constitution, in accordance with the laws passed by Congress and the decrees of the National Executive".

And the soldiers had complied. But their political power as former soldiers came from having represented civil society, the people, on the battlefield. During the Argentine presence on the Islands, the collections were for them, as were the letters, the declarations of the trade unions and the political parties. The treatment was different for the officers and NCOs who were doing what they had been trained for, the war. The special attention was for "the sons of the workers and the Argentine people" who were now defending the sovereignty recovered in the South Atlantic. Of course, after 14

## Throughout these 40 years, the former soldiers tended to be listened to and interpreted from considerations that were not warlike but political-repressive, from a scenario of internal, not international, conflict.

June things changed: the armed forces were now accountable to the public.

When it was all over, the soldiers returned to their family and neighbourhood networks, to their communities and to their cities, towns and villages. It is often said that they did not want to talk because of the traumas of war or because of the pledge of silence signed in the confinement centres prior to discharge. It is possible, although it is hard to believe that such an institutional commitment to discredited forces would have been honoured to the letter and in all cases: did none of the thousands of young men who were able to return tell their parents, brothers and cousins, friends or girlfriends anything about their experience? What also happened was that, as they began to recount their experiences, the new arrivals found themselves strangely surprised by those who were waiting for them. And the reciprocal.

Neither they knew how to talk, nor their families, companions and neighbours knew how to listen to them. Whether out of fear that remembering would hurt them, or because of the superficial, banal or just plain stupid questions (did you kill? were you hungry? were you cold?), the basic incomprehension of the fact of war was evident. The interpretative frameworks discussed above were an important

part of the attempts to understand what had happened, both for those who were conscripted and for their contemporaries on the continent.

Meanwhile, in those early years, former soldiers began to be heard by social scientists in the universities of the new democratic era. For a long time, ex-soldiers were the only socially and politically acceptable interlocutors for sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and social workers. These young people had new experiences and had fought and suffered alongside those soldiers.

But this understanding held only during the interviews. When it came to interpreting the data and writing the monograph, report or thesis, it was necessary to adopt a certain interpretative framework accepted in the academy at the time. This framework referred to crimes against humanity and state terrorism. From this perspective, soldiers who had fought in the South Atlantic, especially on land against British forces, ended up being characterised as “abused” by their superiors in an internal political-military conflict.

Interpreting the Malvinas war as a clandestine insular detention camp - the interpretative framework I called dictatorial - evaporated the fact of war, while the soldiers began to be portrayed outside the war and the military structure that had trained them,

taken them to the islands and, in many cases, thanks to which they were able to return alive. The soldiers were turned into young men tortured by agents of the terrorist state, unrelated to their military function.

Thus, disciplinary sanctions, logistical deprivation, the rigours of the sub-Antarctic climate, starvation, the obvious physical and psychological wounds of each person, all came to feed the incrimination of “the military”, rather than the visualisation of the rigours of war. This certainly does not remove responsibility for the strategic plotting and logistical improvisation that affected some units. But many of the ex-soldiers who claim victimisation of their own superiors, as a distinctive feature of their role in the Malvinas, do not and did not then have the elements to attribute their failings to the omnipotent decision of their superiors, to the British encirclement and advance, and to the basic discipline of any operational unit.

For this reason, and throughout these 40 years, former soldiers tended to be listened to and interpreted from considerations that were not warlike but political-repressive, from a scenario of internal, not international, conflict. Under the influence of university intellectuals, the Malvinas war became a supplementary issue to



the great thematic star of the Social Sciences in Argentina until the end of the 1990s: “human rights”, humanitarian organisations and the disappeared.

Far from deserving attention, the war ended up being pulverised along with the two novelties that 1982 brought us: the only international war in which Argentina was a contending country, and the only war in which conscripts participated on an international battlefield alongside its Armed Forces. In this act of conceptual magic, two central actors in the war drama disappeared from our research: the Argentine professional military in its defence role, and the British enemy.

However, the military world also had its intellectuals. The military world also had its intellectuals and academics. What happened to them? The first analytical and systematic contribution to the war was made by the six retired military officers who produced the research known as the “Rattenbach Report”, so named by its chairman, General Benjamín Rattenbach. Its official name is the CAERCAS Report, the

Commission for the Analysis and Evaluation of Responsibilities in the South Atlantic Conflict.

The report was requested by the fourth junta of the “Proceso” and its president, General Bignone. When the work was completed, its materials, testimonies and elaborations were closed to the public and classified as “secret” “until effective sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands is achieved” (Decree 2971/83). That is, sine die. In the meantime, the offices of each Force produced some institutional reports with data from spreadsheets and administrative records. The Army’s two-volume “blue cover” report is a chronological account of the events, with numerous annexes containing maps, tables and diagrams.

The Navy has reports by weapon, such as Admiral Martini’s volume<sup>3</sup> on naval aviation in the Malvinas, which includes different versions of the same event by its protagonists. The first interpretative and comprehensive work on this Force belonged to Admiral Mayorga. The

first edition of his book *No Vencido*<sup>4</sup> gave an account of decisions, planning and improvisation in this complex and diverse military institution, but was seized from the sales stands.

After being corrected, it was republished. Brigadier Rubén Moro’s aeronautical report remained almost intact in its transformation from institutional publication to popular volume, although the title of the latter, *La guerra inaudita*<sup>5</sup>, is critical of the force that went to war with political decisiveness and little preparation and equipment for waging war in a naval air scenario. Except for the relentless Rattenbach Report, which is restricted to the political and strategic level, none of these comprehensive works critically reviews the actions of the institution itself. Since neither the army nor the navy had institutional

3. Martini, Héctor (1992). *Historia de la Aviación Naval Argentina Tomo III*. Buenos Aires.

4. Mayorga, Horacio (1998). *No Vencidos*. Buenos Aires. Editorial Planeta.

5. Moro, Rubén (1996). *La Guerra inaudita*. Editorial Pleamar.

interpretative reports, the task was left to senior officers, heads of units such as the ARA General Belgrano cruiser and Marine Infantry Battalion 5 in the navy, and Infantry Regiment 7, Infantry Regiment 12, III Infantry Brigade, Artillery Group 3 in the army.

In 1093 crew members, Ganso Verde, from the Front and Llagas of a war, among others, show us what happened in the campaign and in the fighting, and how the respective authors justify the decisions taken during events. The soldiers, for their part, first appeared thanks to journalism, which cut out which segments of their stories could be “more interesting” to the public. The soldiers and young NCOs who decided to reconstruct their war experiences in writing did not always have professional and adequate interpretative frameworks to account for the course of the war and their hardships.

In general, these works recount what happened to each individual and from the limited perspective of one's own position in the field, up to

the climax of the fighting, then the return and some reflections. Almost all of these publications include an account of Argentine claims to the islands, which confirms the author's perception of his legitimate presence in the theatre of operations.

It is quite understandable that in military careers, especially in the first two post-war decades, officers have refrained from expressing critical perspectives on what happened in 1982. And this is not only because of the silence imposed by successive commanders. The senior commanders of the Forces left the government and, over time, lost the power they had held in the past.

Prestige, too, in the face of legal proceedings for crimes against humanity. To state a critical perspective by a career officer, who was also a war veteran, could give rise to misinterpretations by both superiors and comrades. Any ambiguity could be interpreted as “going over to the other side” (I am not referring to the British), all this during successive legal proceedings

“for crimes against humanity committed in the Malvinas” and, since 2007, for crimes against humanity committed in the Malvinas.

Constantly on the defensive vis-à-vis the civilian political world, and with the Code of Military Justice extinguished in 2007, most veteran officers tried to avoid confusion. It all depended on whether the institution enabled its members to think, analyse and speak openly, narrowly or not at all. But the enabling was very narrow, and the Forces left little room for joint analysis and self-analysis, i.e., for study and review of what had been done that could lead to a thorough critique of the superior leadership of both the other military institutions and their own.

After a long time of talking to officers, I learned that they are the ones who are most aware of the mistakes, some of which were made at the time, others due to ineptitude and lack of foresight, others due to bad faith, just as they are also the ones who know the right things, the things done well, the courageous



## **We concentrate on the internal matter, discussing whether or not the Armed Forces were the legitimate leaders and representatives of the Nation, that is, whether or not they were its legitimate defenders, whether or not they defended the people who gave them their children, as well as the moral, political and material support to defend the national territory.**

acts, “doing one's duty”. They are the ones who know when a decoration was deserved and when it was not.

### **We owe them our share of the debt**

This is by the way a somewhat sketchy overview and is intended to be provocative enough to appeal to different kinds of readers. It is true that there are always lone strands that make attempts to break through in one direction or another. Also, in the case of Malvinas. But they are just that, solitary and often unheeded and silent threads that can emerge on round dates, as in these 40 years. The two lines of interpretation that have accompanied us until now and that continue to dominate the debate on these issues stand as speculative versions representing civilian and military academia.

Despite systematically avoiding each other, civilian academics and military intellectuals have maintained a mutually defensive and incriminating relationship. This axis keeps us stuck and prevents us from thinking about the warlike and international nature of that war. We prefer to concentrate on internal matters, discussing whether the Armed Forces were the legitimate leaders and representatives of the Nation, that is, whether they were its legitimate defenders, whether they defended the people who gave them their children, as well as the moral,

political and material support to defend the national territory. For university academics, the soldiers were the victims of state terrorism on the islands.

For military academics, the soldiers were as misunderstood combatants as the officers and NCOs who took part. Both lack passion, both lack analysis. The military defeat and the change in the final objective a few days after 2 April are as undeniable as the wartime performance of numerous military units.

Today, 40 years after the Malvinas (and 39 years after another recovery, that of democracy), it is extremely difficult not to associate these reflections with the conditions facing the Armed Forces and the non-existent (or unknown) Defence policy.

Neither the first nor the second line of interpretation that we have presented tells only truths, nor even lies. But this confusion is not resolved by legislating on the past, but by trying to understand it. Perhaps the conditions under which the Argentine state was organised in 1982 are not too different from those of 2022. Perhaps it is not a question of governments, but of state construction and functioning. In this sense, the third and last interpretative line we pointed out above only wants to address the sovereignty issue and confine it to the diplomatic milieu, while

trying to banish the national and popular cause as an instrument of retrograde nationalism (or populism).

No matter how well-intentioned it may be, this new turn faces several difficulties. The most serious is probably the fact that we Argentines have fallen in 1982 who went to war to defend a territory that the Argentine Republic claims as its own; that they did so as members of national institutions that, whether we like it or not, were made up of sons and daughters of our entire country; and that no social or political sector of the time protested the use of conscripts for defence.

This is made clear by the popular commemorations of this year 2022 and the popular donations to the front. Death in war always carries with it a mystique that is watered and grows, in many cases, with the families and offspring, the “bereaved” of those who have fallen. This is neither good nor bad, it is not nationalistic, retrograde or revolutionary. It is and happens where wars have occurred, perhaps in every corner of the globe. As intellectuals we could concentrate on bravely assuming the payment of our debt, make our own self-criticism and begin to study the Malvinas as our only international war of the 20th century and the only one in which conscripted soldiers participated. ■