

English Practice Essay

The Conflict of the Falkland Islands – Should they be British or Argentine?

The struggle between Great Britain and Argentina about the sovereignty over the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas¹ may appear as “two bald men fighting over a comb”², if one takes into consideration that these islands lie in the south Atlantic at a 8000 mile distance to the United Kingdom, have only about 2,221 inhabitants³, no significant wealth in oil, fishery or natural products⁴ and that in times of nuclear weapons their “strategic value” is not an issue anymore. Nevertheless in April 1982 a war between the named two countries broke out about them.

This essay intends to explain what led to the conflict and further discusses the question of whether the islands which are at present a United Kingdom Overseas Territory and associated to the European Union, should remain part of the United Kingdom or be handed over to Argentina.

The first recorded landing on the Islands was made in 1690 by the English captain John Strong who hence claimed them for the British crown. Until the Britons settled on the West Falkland Island in 1765, there was no human population found on either one of the two main islands, East Falkland and West Falkland, nor on any of the approximately 200 smaller ones. A later settlement established by the French on East Falkland was bought by the Spanish. Over the decades each party abandoned the islands for either financial reasons or lack of interest for some time, but came back and always tried to force the other one to leave.

Having been a Spanish colony and become independent in 1816, Argentina took over Spain’s claim of the Falkland Islands in 1820. Ever since then Argentina has insisted on being their rightful possessor but since 1833 Britain has always refused to hand them over.

Within the framework of a debate concerning de-colonisation, in 1964 and 1965 a UN committee discussed the position of the Islands and tried to solve the ongoing conflict. As a result Britain and Argentina were invited to find a peaceful solution. While Argentina’s justification for claiming the “Islas Malvinas” was the already mentioned Spanish legacy, their geographical proximity to South America and the apparent need to end a colonial situation, Britain based its claim on its continuous

¹ Spanish name of the Falkland Islands, translation of the French name “Îles Malouines”, given to them by the first French settlers who came from St.Malo

² Quotation of Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) Argentine philosopher, in *Freedman: Britain and the Falklands War*

³ According to the census held on 24th April 1996, <http://www.falklands.gov.fk/4.htm>,

⁴ *Goebel: The Struggle for the Falkland Islands*, Preface viii

administration of the islands and its determination to respect the Falklanders' will not be under Argentine rule.⁵

By 1982, seventeen years after the initiation of the debate, nothing had been agreed upon and it might seem understandable that the Argentines who had been fighting for the Falklands for 149 years by then⁶, decided to take on different measures. When on 2 April the Argentine military junta had its forces invade the Islands, war broke out. The United Nations Security Council tried to mediate between the two opponents but all intentions failed. Even though both Britain and Argentina didn't show themselves open to any UN proposals, the European Economic Community and the USA showed themselves as being clearly in favour of the British. After 72 days and nearly 1000 casualties (236 British, 655 Argentine and 3 Falkland civilians)⁷, a cease-fire was only agreed because Argentina's troops on the Falklands had been effectively defeated.

In this context it has to be mentioned that Argentina's being fed up with awaiting an agreement in their talks with Britain probably wasn't the main reason for hostilities. By starting a war the Argentine government intended to distract its people's attention from internal problems and wanted to regain its dictator's prestige. Ironically it was severely discredited by the later military defeat and so restoration of democracy in Argentina was made possible. The conflict's timing also proved to be quite opportune for Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as she as well was losing popularity in her country and the victory could help her re-election.

When the war was over it was decided that the Falklands should keep their status as a United Kingdom Overseas Territory. Nevertheless, Argentina's claim on them does not seem unreasonable when one takes into consideration their enormous distance from the United Kingdom. Also the fact that commercial and trade ties which have long existed between the "Islas Malvinas" and the Argentine mainland could be made a lot easier, would favour their handing-over to Argentina. Recent British governments have often said that they would do so if this were the will of their people.⁸ Questioned about it, however, the "Falklanders" who in fact are all English speaking and almost exclusively of British birth or descent, confirmed that they preferred to remain under British rule⁹. As a consequence it has to be stated that colonial times have come to an end a long time ago and that today it seems to be opportune to accept the affected people's wishes rather than take a decision and create a situation that might remind of Northern Ireland.

⁵ Ibid, Preface xiv

⁶ Hoffmann: *Sovereignty in Dispute – The Falklands/Malvinas 1493-1982* Epilogue, p.177

⁷ <http://www.yendor.com/vanished/falklands-war.html>

⁸ www.falklands-malvinas.com

⁹ Ibid