

Genevieve O'Grady

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Rule Britannia: Observing the Falklands War through Mass Observation

The Mass Observation Project is a British is an ongoing social project which began in the 1930s. The project asked correspondents to reply to certain directives, mainly questions regarding a specific event, such as an election or Royal celebration. A selection of these primary sources titled "Observing the 80s" can be found on the University of Sussex website,¹ chronologically ranging from 1981 to the spring of 1990. It is an invaluable source for social historians, as the material provides a direct link to people who experienced an event and conveys some of the emotional atmosphere and public attitude within the time frame. This analysis will look at the selected files pertaining to the response from the "Directive Falklands 1982" and the "Directive Falklands postscript 1982." This group of nine correspondents is of course not a large enough sample size to rely upon to accurately reflect the feelings of the whole nation or even of most Britons, but the reports do provide valuable insight into the emotional and intellectual reactions of some. As an alternative to controlled primary sources (such as newspapers and government statements), examining these reports reveals more intimate reaction and opinion to the key topics of the crisis and subsequent events.

The initial directive guided the correspondents' answers with many suggested questions, shaping the reports to focus on some issues more than others. The directive asked the subjects such questions as whether they approved of the government's handling of the situation and the negotiations, what actions should be taken if peace talks fail, if this war was a threat to world

¹ Mass Observation, *Observing the 80s*, <http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s/home/mass-observation/>

peace, how it altered domestic politics, and what was the attitude toward the statements of politicians and public figures. A postscript directive was later issued noting that the reports did expand upon the event after the taking of Port Stanley, asking for opinions on the London Falklands Parade and the Peace/Victory service at St. Paul's Cathedral. The archival reports answered these questions in a rather obvious way in most cases, but the reports included other topics the contributors deemed notable and thus gives the reader further insight into reactions back in Britain. Some of these topics include the contributors' initial reaction to the crisis and following armed conflict, Britons' attitude towards going to war over the islands, the role of media in the event, and how the crisis was perceived looking back upon the event for the London Parade and the St. Paul's Service.

Perhaps the most pressing question looking at the issue of the Falkland War crisis is what the public initially thought of the whole affair, as government actions do not always reflect the wishes of the citizens. In regards to the first news and statement of conflict with Argentina, there were some recurrent themes apparent in each file as well as some views that stood out. The first general theme is that of not previously being aware of the islands being within the British sphere. Most respondents alluded to this fact or stated outright that they were not particularly familiar with the Falkland Islands before the conflict with Argentina began. Wittily put by then 30 year old female D156, "it's funny but at the beginning of this report I couldn't spell Falklands." Correspondent S496, a then 55 year old female who described herself as belonging to the working class, confessed that she had little previous knowledge of the islands, even being completely wrong about their geographical position, "many people like me had heard of the Falkland Islands but like many people we know I thought they were off the coast of Scotland." S496 expresses disbelief over the possible armed conflict over this Atlantic island and possession

new to 'ordinary people' such as herself, "it seems we are heading for war over something ordinary people hardly knew existed." She, and many of the other reporters, had a condensed view of empire, if any view of it at all. This portrays a modern Britain that did not have a sense of empire, unaware of or barely familiar with an imperial possession in the Atlantic; and if they were not aware of the imperial possession then they could not have pride for the empire. This contrasts the 'empire fervour' of previous centuries, with 'buy empire products' and imperial exhibitions being normal and celebrated, respectively.

This geographical and intellectual disconnect of the islanders from the respondents in Britain may have affected their view of the island's inhabitants. D156 showed resentment and bitterness to the inhabitants of the Falklands. She started her report with a description of the Falklanders as "1800 people who wish to be British." Her knowledge of the task force taking "two weeks" to reach the islands invoked her outspoken opinion on the islanders. The geographical distance in regards to Britain made her refute the 'Britishness' of the Falklanders, stating "it strikes me that if they want to be British then they should live in Britain not an island off the coast of Argentina." This is a notable response in light of sympathy expressed in other reports; but while exceptional in these archival files, this view of resentment towards the Falkland Island citizens may not have been so isolated within the greater demographic of Britain.

Nevertheless, some of the correspondents did express concern for the uncertain future of the island and its citizens. Both the wellbeing of the islanders in wake of the possible armed conflict and the after effects of war on their home island worried some of the correspondents. G218, then a 36 year old female, was afraid for the Falklanders: "I fear for the safety of the islanders, what will their future be if they live[?]" Another report regretted potential long-term impacts, as S496 expressed concern over a prolonged military presence after the conflict, saying

"it will never be the same again for the people who live there." She goes on to assert that the safety of the civilians should be ensured before any invasion attempts are even made. Despite the great distance between the two peoples, the situation brought out strong feelings toward their fellow compatriots, both negative and positive.

Once over the initial reaction of confusion from their unfamiliarity and the subsequent sympathy for the islanders, there arose a sense of urgency for some sort of action. 48 year old male R470 wrote without doubt that, "certainly, we should act." He went on to give a detailed plan on what Britain should do to regain control of the Falklands, starting with the establishment of South Georgia as a foothold leading to the invasion of the Falklands and an attack of the naval and military facilities on the Argentine mainland. He goes so far as to assume a democratic government would soon replace the Argentine dictator, enabling Britain to "discuss a sensible plan" with the aggressor nation. While his views are radical in calling for a full attack on Argentinean soil, they do reflect the majority of opinions on initial military actions seen in the other reports. C108 was very straightforward with her answers, curtly answering the directive with, "Yes we should act. Fight." This trend continued with 40 year old female W633's original reaction to the crisis, that of "a feeling that we had to fight." It was even talked about in the streets, as G226 overheard what she called a group of pensioners proudly say, "We'll show 'em we're British, eh?" referring to the thought of sending a Task Force. A "show of strength" was also the right and necessary action in the mind of S496. As R470 summed up in his assessment, it was as if the "Blitz spirit [was] re-emerging." Hence the directive's question of whether to act or not certainly invoked straightforward answers of "aye, ready, aye," with firm calls to act in the face of aggressing Argentina over an island many had little knowledge of beforehand. These answers show the shifting reaction of the correspondents when introduced to the potential

conflict. From confusion over the particulars of an Atlantic island and sympathy or bitterness towards its inhabitants to a call to arms, their reaction grew into one that was ready and willing for war.

However, when peace talks looked as if they were falling through and the threat of war became a reality in April with the taking of South Georgia by the British forces, this proactive view seemed to switch to that of pacifism and apprehension. When the reality of war hit home, with battles with modern weapons and lives being lost, the bravado of the correspondents seemed to disappear. G218, a female 36 years old at the time, described the crisis as "out of control." She also records the feelings of those directly affected by the crisis, as she worked with wives of men in the Royal Air Force. She describes a stark emotional atmosphere, "the wives are scared. They never know when it will be their husband's turn to be called into action. ... It sickens me that anyone should lose life." She also expresses sympathy for the supposed enemy, stating that the Argentines are only 16 year old conscripts. Her final thought on the idea of this armed conflict is striking: war, as she puts it, is "a massacre." The start of the conflict had a substantial negative impact on G218, as she describes her first reactions to the war, "I was horrified when our Task Force set sail and day after day of news of wounded and injured deeply depressed me...war, whether small or large is destructive." It even affected her health so far as to require treatment from a doctor between May and September. This example may seem extreme, but there were similar effects reported by others. S496 describes her teenage daughter crying as the evening news reported the casualties of the latest attacks. C108's view of the war also reflects this sentiment, as she describes her attitude towards the war as one "mainly of sadness" in the face of "the loss of so many young men and the wounding and crippling of others." From a feeling of the need to act against the Argentines came a feeling of resentment towards war from

the correspondents. This shift in attitude seen in the recordings of the correspondents almost forebode the next key moment in the crisis.

The first event to test the public's newfound fervour for militant action in the Atlantic was the questionable sinking of the Argentine warship *General Belgrano*, sanctioned by the Iron Lady herself. The ship was outside of the British-declared "Total Exclusion Zone," but was treated as a threat and was sunk by a nuclear submarine. Reaction to this event was not one of pride and joy. When W632 learned of the event, "sheer disbelief greeted the fact that the *Belgrano* had been sunk in a non-British way." D156 echoed the shock, stating her opinion that the "attack was wrong." W632 describes the general reaction of those she knew as silence until the Government explained its actions while D156 felt that Britain's violent act had lost her the support of the world. However, it seems the public stood behind the decision, with a conflict that was continuing to escalate, as the Argentines retaliated with the sinking of the HMS Sheffield in early May, 1982.

While the crisis raged in the Atlantic Ocean, many of the reports make it clear that their respective authors felt marginalized by public opinion, feeling differently about the war than their peers. What is peculiar about this is that their minority opinion is actually the majority within the reports. G226 confesses within parentheses that her and her father "hold a minority view" seeing the episode as a mess for Britain. S496 states that the group she identifies with do not want a war, but then vehemently argues her point as to why, indicating that she feels she must defend this opinion against what most other people think. Reinforcing the idea of the pro-war public being seen as the majority is the relief described by W632 when she meets others who are against the war:

I at last met - at a training seminar - people of the same opinion as myself, fortish [sic] male and female and younger people. The only thing we had in common was that we wanted to be supervisors. Conversations after work at a residential course revealed that we were in agreement and embarrassed by [the war]. 44 male meter inspector said he couldn't believe it as he has constant contact with the general public and doesn't dare air his views in the face of almost unanimous support for the Governments [sic] actions.... The shock of finding agreement of views limited the scope of the conversation and not much more discussion took place.

This experience is rather striking, as you have a grown man extremely tentative or even unwilling to voice his opinions in fear of the backlash from his fellow citizens. This fear may have been substantiated however, with W633's anecdote of a man who did speak out against the war almost being shunned by his peers:

I did find that people opposed to the whole campaign kept their views very much to themselves if they were ordinary citizens and not sure of their company. One man (early thirties) who referred to "that bloody fiasco now going on in the South Atlantic" was met by a dead silence and hurriedly left the room.

This observation of those against the war keeping their opinions hidden presents another scenario in regards to a perceived majority backing Thatcher's actions. If fear of reproach compelled those against the war to not share their opinion, then it was probably never clear just how many people did oppose the campaign. There may have been many more citizens against the Falkland War than these contributors to the Mass Observation files originally thought.

An institution that likely shaped the public's opinion on these matters was the media. The influence of the media is present in every file, some more explicit than latent. The first shape the media takes within the recordings is how it actually shaped the correspondents daily habits during the crisis. Contributor W633 noted how uninformed of current events she was at times when there is no looming crisis, stating that at these times she lives with her "head in the sand," only casually listening to a morning radio programme while having breakfast and occasionally

reading a newspaper. She then explicitly states that she will make a conscious effort to consume 3 times more media than she used to, with plans to "tune in at 1pm, 5pm, and 10pm." A similar effort to watch more news coverage of the Falklands is seen in G226's experience. She describes herself as a busy student preparing herself for exams. Yet as busy as she is with her studies, she makes a point every evening at 10pm to join her husband for a drink and the news, even if this prolonged her studying afterwards.

The domination of the media by the crisis is also alluded to, with W633 seeing geographical names she had never heard of before "[crop] up in every bulletin," and G226 describing the coverage as more of a serial than reporting with viewing the media becoming compulsive as the conflict escalated. In this way, the Falkland Crisis became a sort of entity back in Britain that could be consumed, consciously or not.

The less explicit influence of the media is that of informing the contributors of the 'facts' and progress of the crisis that they in turn record in the Mass Observation reports. As none of the correspondents are in the British Armed Forces and none state a direct link to a government informant, every single factoid and every single figure they state in their reports had to have come from the media. All reports state figures at some time or another, quoting number of lives lost with the sinking of a ship or how many inhabit the Falkland Island, but one report stood out in terms of containing information on the events of the crisis. The report of N403 is so detailed and so thorough in recording the action of the Falkland crisis that it reads like a timeline. As the identities of the informants are kept confidential, one could not be certain that N403 does or does not have a link to or is a government or military source. However, as the content of the daily updates is rather diverse, it is unlikely that this person is getting information directly from different national and professional sources. Thus it can be assumed that this file is a meticulously

impressive compilation of news report for each day. The newspaper clippings contained within the file reinforce the notion of N403 being something of a 'news junkie.' Looking at the content of the file shows just how extensive the media coverage of the crisis was. For example, the entry for Tuesday May 11th reads:

An Argentine helicopter was shot down, and an Argentine tanker taking supplies from east to west Falkland was blown up in the narrow channel between the two islands. Mr. Tony Benn says the Falkland Crisis could escalate to a nuclear conflict.

This is one of the shorter reports logged within the file, but it shows the same variation as most of her longer entries. She begins with the action and subsequent damages of the day, even including the detail of the purpose of the aircraft and the specific location. Without a pause or segue, she provides a comment of a British politician regarding the possible direction of the war. As previously mentioned, many of her logs follow this pattern. Seemingly disjointed statements on topics varying from casualty statistics, to statements made by foreign diplomats, to covering domestic policies and even quoting Thatcher herself, N403's posts leave nothing to the imagination as to what was in the news reports on a given day during the crisis. This shows that she consumed a massive amount of media coverage. Perhaps she knew someone in the media business or she may have been working in it herself, but the point remains the same. There was massive media coverage of the event, which made all of these details of the crisis available to the public, some of which relied upon this outlet heavily.

As the crisis wound down in late summer and early fall, the media coverage shifted from action-oriented reports to that of retrospection of the Falkland War. As directed by the postscript directive, the contributors looked back on the crisis and the reports show it was viewed through two lenses. One of these viewpoints was an economic critique of the war, while the other showed

dissatisfaction with the government's diplomacy in the lead up to the conflict. D156 began her complaints with the cost of the islands, being expensive to defend so far away from British naval ports. She stated this burden would fall on the taxpayers, to whom the islands were of no economic value, as the transportation expenses of shipping the fish and oil in the Atlantic outweigh the potential profit. A more outspoken economic analysis but with a domestic emphasis appears in S496's file. Her first sentence puts the blame squarely on Thatcher, stating that if the Prime Minister had "spend more time on things that matter and less time figuring how to get the last penny out of us," that this whole war would have been avoided. She repeats D156's sentiments, saying that the islands will cost the taxpayers "a fortune." S496 expresses her view of the war as an unnecessary distraction from more important issues; domestic problems, such as high unemployment, are problems that Thatcher should be addressing, not an economically useless if not detrimental imperial asset.

The other critique focuses on how this diplomatic conflict escalated into a war, again criticising Thatcher's actions, or lack thereof. Being one of the questions presented on the initial directive, many contributors expressed whether or not they believed the crisis was mishandled from the beginning, with a general consensus being 'yes.' The tone is set with another blunt answer from C108, "yes it was mishandled from the start." She does not go on to specify who mishandled the situation, but another report narrows it down. In hindsight, W633 ventured to say that the British government had ignored the warning signs. She goes on to say that the threat of Argentinean invasion of the islands had been growing for some time so the government could have acted sooner to diffuse the diplomatic discord in the South Atlantic. This sentiment is continued in G218's report as she says, "I do feel it was handled wrongly that somehow negotiations should have worked," indirectly blaming the government again for failed

diplomacy. keeping with the trend of one outspoken report per topic, R470 did not hold back in his critique of the government. when asked if it was mishandled he replies, "Of course. British foreign policy always is. ... You name a time and a place and the F.O. have made a cock up of it." He even traces the origins of this crisis to another diplomatic blunder in the 18th century, when the "British Task force [sett] off to sort out the Falklands in 1771," clearly indicated to the Argentineans that Britain had no interests in the islands. R470's complete lack of faith in the British Foreign Office, blaming it for the 'mess' in the Atlantic, may be the most extreme view but it does parallel to the other reports accusing the government for not handling the situation before it escalated and for the failed peace talks. From the economic standpoint the government was doing too much in the Atlantic and from the diplomatic view, it was doing too little.

Looking at these Mass Observation files superficially gives ample amount information, but more than just answers to directives and directive postscripts can be gained. These files showed the feelings of a select group of Britons as they watched the crisis unfold on their 'telly,' a feeling that began as confusion as to what exactly the Falkland islands mean to Great Britain that morphed into a sense of urgency to act against (the supposed) aggressor Argentina, and then horror and sadness when they saw the reality of war. In this way, the sentiments that will forever remain in these files reflect the parade, as they described it. There was sadness for those lost in the war and bitterness towards the government and prime Minister Thatcher for landing them in the crisis, but most of all immense pride for the nation and those who fought for her, the same pride that prompted the people on the streets to burst into a rendition of Rule Britannia, in bittersweet honour to all Britain lost in the South Atlantic ocean.