

THE WAR

During the 1970s a number of events took place which were to set the scene for the 1982 conflict. The most important of these was surely the arrival in power by military coup of an armed forces regime, the most savage in Argentine history, with a highly nationalistic policy of national regeneration which was to include dramatic steps in the foreign policy field. Results at home included the conducting of a ferocious anti-guerrilla campaign both in the countryside and in the cities aiming at uprooting and eliminating entirely the Argentine left. The 'dirty war' as it was eventually termed was to cost thousands of civilian lives and wipe out all vestiges of democracy in the country.³

Such events were to have their international dimension. Needless to say, the idea of handing over the islands and the islanders to such a government was political suicide in London, and the popularity of any such project among Falklanders themselves can easily be imagined. In any case, the political turmoil in Argentina, which had been present and obvious for several decades, ensured that the Argentine option remained *lettre morte* among virtually all islanders. Nonetheless, British governments, especially when the Labour Party was in power, were anxious to resolve the issue and keen to make concessions if possible. Indeed, serious discussions with the Argentines took place in the 1970s with ideas such as 'leaseback' under Argentine sovereignty given a not always unfavourable hearing in Whitehall. Fierce opposition among the islanders, however, soon put paid to the idea, and what came to be known as the 'Falklands lobby' in Parliament proved more than able to shelve the leaseback as well as other proposals for major changes in status.

The military government had other international objectives beyond those related to the Falklands. The most important of these was doubtless the search for a favourable and final solution to the outstanding territorial disputes with neighbouring Chile, and especially that of the Beagle Islands. Buenos Aires and Santiago had been at odds over Patagonia since at least the middle of the 19th century and while most outstanding issues had been settled by the beginning of the 20th, resolution of the question of sovereignty over these small but politically significant islands at the Atlantic end of the Strait of Magellan had proven impossible.

Chile had doubtless done much more in the way of active occupation of the islands and exercise of sovereignty thereon and thereabouts than Argentina but Buenos Aires was desperate to block any Chilean pretensions to status as an Atlantic country which could come from ownership of these distinctly Atlantic outposts. The military government inherited a series of negative circumstances including international awards favourable to Chile actually in place. Given the Argentine military's determination to settle the issue on terms totally in line with their interests, it was only Papal intervention in 1978 that had kept the two countries from full scale-war. Indeed, Argentine special forces were already on Chilean soil when the Pope's timely diplomacy brought

³ Perhaps the best account of this is in Prudencio García, *El Drama de la autonomía militar* (Madrid: San Martín, 1985), for a full and balanced description of this campaign.