

This week in history: April 18-April 24

18 April 2011

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Soviet Union acceded to Libya bombing

Media revelations this week in 1986 made clear that the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had given the Reagan administration a free hand to bomb Libya on April 15, 1986, which had killed more than 100. In spite of verbal protests after the fact, Moscow indicated to Reagan that the attack would not interfere with its efforts to conclude arms reduction deals.

The strongest Soviet response was the cancellation of a schedule meeting between Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and US Secretary of States George Shultz, an "action [that] was really the minimum action they could take," one unnamed senior diplomat told the *New York Times*. Moscow's central concern was that Reagan's actions would destroy its credibility. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev gave voice to this outlook at an April 20 press conference in East Germany. Asked by journalists whether the attack on Libya would scuttle detente, Gorbachev said a summit meeting and arms control could proceed, provided an "international atmosphere" could be created giving "real steps toward peace."

Libya was on paper a Soviet ally. The USSR was its main supplier of arms, having sold at that point 143 MIG-23 jets, hundreds of tanks, and a surface-to-air missile defense system. There were estimated to be between 5,000 and 6,000 Soviet-bloc military and intelligence advisers in Libya in 1986.

The Soviet bureaucracy had given Reagan numerous signals they would tolerate an attack. When Washington provoked a confrontation with Gaddafi's small navy in the Gulf of Sidra in late March, Soviet military advisers refused to provide Libya with satellite imagery, and remained in their bunkers throughout the exchange.

The Soviets tacit acceptance of the US attack on Libya marked a shift in world politics. Since the consolidation of Stalinist rule in the late 1920s, Moscow had based its foreign policy decisions on the material interests of the bureaucracy under the guise of building "socialism in one country," policies antithetical to the interests of the international working class. At the same time, to provide bargaining chips with imperialism the Soviet Union had backed certain nationalist leaders and movements in the Third World. This had allowed figures such as Gaddafi in Libya and Saddam Hussein in Iraq a limited ability to maneuver between East and West. The attack on Libya signaled that this period was coming to an end.

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50 years ago: Anti-De Gaulle putsch in Algiers

On April 22, 1961, four leading figures of the French military establishment, all retired from active service, ordered 2,000 paratroopers in Algeria to seize control of French government installations and block the transfer of local authority to Arab Algerians, which was set to proceed in line with a plan promoted by President Charles De Gaulle to end the war of independence that had been raging since 1952 at a cost of nearly one million Algerian lives.

The conspirators were Maurice Challe and Raoul Salan, both former heads of the French military operations in Algeria; Andre Zeller, former chief of staff of the army; and Edmond Jouhaud, former inspector general of the air force. Paratroopers acting on their orders arrested in Algiers government delegate general Jean Morin, French Transport Minister Robert Buron, and General Fernand Gambiez in the early morning of April 22. Quickly realizing that a coup was underway, De Gaulle ordered loyal elements in the military to engage the paratroopers. The putsch was not ended until Challe's surrender on April 27. April 25 had seen De Gaulle order the detonation of nuclear fission devices in the Algerian Sahara out of fear a nuclear weapon could fall into the hands of the mutineers.

Powerful elements in the military brass refused to abide by De Gaulle's recognition that France could not maintain its prized colony. De Gaulle's presidency and the Fifth Republic itself had been created by a 1958 coup of army generals and paratroopers led by Gen. Jacques Massu angered over the failure of the Fourth Republic to crush the Algerian masses. Massu turned against De Gaulle, and was sacked in January 1960 after explicitly threatening a coup.

None of the generals were seriously punished. Challe was charged with treason and sentenced to life in prison. He was released in 1966 and given a pardon by De Gaulle in 1968. Salan and Jouhaud went to Spain where, protected by Franco, they and other generals organized the Organisation armée secrète, which carried out assassinations in France and Algeria. Arrested in 1962, Salan was sentenced to death, but this was commuted to a life sentence and in 1968 he too was given amnesty. All these generals were fully rehabilitated by a law passed in 1982 under Socialist Prime Minister Francois Mitterrand.

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75 years ago: Arab-Jewish clashes in Palestine

This week in 1936 the Higher Arab Committee called a general strike in the United Kingdom's Palestinian mandate following a series of violent communal clashes between Arabs and Jews. The strike saw thousands of Arab workers leave their jobs and merchants shutter their businesses. The

action shut down the port of Jaffa.

Its leadership said the strike would continue “until the British government introduces a basic change in its present policy which will manifest itself in the stoppage of Jewish immigration.” It also demanded restrictions on land sales and the establishment of a democratic government.

The coming to power of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany three years earlier had created the greatest wave of Jewish immigration in Palestine’s history. Of the 170,000 who fled Germany and Eastern Europe for Palestine between 1933 and 1936, the majority were not Zionists. Rather, they were left with no other refuge due to anti-Semitic immigration quotas imposed in such countries as the United States and Canada. Their arrival doubled the size of the British mandate’s Jewish population.

Since the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, Britain had committed itself to “facilitate” the creation “in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people,” while claiming that it would protect the rights of the existing Arab population.

The rise in Jewish immigration deepened tensions under conditions in which land purchases by the Zionist movement, represented by the Jewish National Fund, had exacerbated the conditions of the Palestinian Arab peasantry, sections of which were forced off the land and into the ranks of the unemployed, already swelled—among Arabs and Jews alike—by the global depression.

The Palestinian elite, for the most part, worked to direct social anger against Zionism and Jewish immigration while seeking to accommodate itself to and win concessions from British imperialism. For its part, the Zionist movement, represented in its union movement, the Histadrut, advanced a policy of boycotting Arab labor and Arab businesses as the solution to unemployment among the Jewish population.

These were the social and political conditions that constituted the tinder for the spontaneous rioting that swept through the Arab populations of Tel Aviv and Jaffa on April 19, leading to the deaths of nine Jews and two Arabs and injuries to about 50, among them a number of Britons. The revolt was preceded by the murder of two Arab workers by the fascistic Zionist Irgun group, which in turn proclaimed the killings as a response to a Palestinian attack on a bus that had killed two Jews days earlier.

The British responded to the revolt with savage repression. In the ensuing three years they demolished thousands of Palestinian homes, executed hundreds and imprisoned and tortured thousands. They also stepped up the arming of Zionist militias.

Writing in the aftermath of the revolt, the exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky warned that “the facts of every passing day demonstrate to us that Zionism is incapable of resolving the Jewish question. The conflict between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine acquires a more and more tragic and more and more menacing character. I do not at all believe that the Jewish question can be resolved within the framework of rotting capitalism and under the control of British imperialism.”

He and his followers within the nascent Fourth International sought the unification of Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle against imperialism and for a united socialist Middle East.

On April 22, 1911, a private detective led a police raid of the headquarters of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers (Iron Workers) in Indianapolis, arresting union secretary and treasurer John J. McNamara in connection with the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building on October 1, 1910, in which 21 people had died. Earlier in the week, McNamara’s brother James and union member Ortie McManigal had been arrested in Detroit in the sensational case, which involved dozens of attacks on structural iron works across the US in the preceding years. These had caused slight damage, but the bomb that hit the *Times* building went off when it was full. The destruction was made worse through contact with gas lines.

The McNamaras were subjected to quasi-legal judicial railroading operation. For a week James McNamara and McManigal were held at a private residence in Chicago where they were denied access to legal counsel and very likely tortured. As a result, McManigal supplied evidence against the McNamaras and the leaders of the Iron Workers union that led to the Indianapolis raid. Investigators claimed to have found dynamite in the basement of the union’s headquarters and in a barn owned by John McNamara near Indianapolis. After John McNamara’s arrest, the brothers were sent to Los Angeles to stand trial.

The AFL, the Socialist Party, and the Industrial Workers of the World quickly rallied to the defense of the McNamaras. AFL President Samuel Gompers called the case a frame-up and promised a massive legal defense campaign. He secured the services of the famed attorney Clarence Darrow for what turned out to be an abortive defense—the McNamaras would eventually confess to the bombing to author Lincoln Steffens. Believing a conviction was imminent, Darrow urged a deal that included calling off a labor organizing campaign in Los Angeles. John McNamara was sentenced to 15 years. James, who admitted to planting the bomb, died in prison in 1941.

The turn to dynamite by the Iron Workers was the futile response to a vicious anti-union campaign spearheaded by the world’s largest corporation, US Steel, which had seen, in the preceding eight years, dozens of craft unions almost entirely rooted out of the steel, meatpacking, and other industries. The powerful corporate offensive came on top of changes in production that reduced the control of skilled workers over the production process, including the introduction of mass production techniques and scientific management. Among the cities, Los Angeles was perhaps the most viciously anti-union, led by the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harrison Grey Otis. A strike of the Iron Workers in the summer of 1910 had been effectively outlawed.

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100 years ago: McNamara brothers arrested in *Los Angeles Times* bombing