

This week in history: April 1-7

1 April 2013

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: Honduran protesters killed at US embassy

On April 7, 1988, five protesters were shot to death outside of the US embassy in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa. About 1,500 Hondurans had laid siege to the embassy in protest against the illegal extradition to the US of Juan Matta, a reputed drug figure.

Matta was seized in a pre-dawn raid on his Tegucigalpa home by Honduran officials at the behest of the US, and transported, without a passport, to the Dominican Republic, then to the US. The Honduran constitution barred such extraditions.

Protesters initially surrounded the presidential palace of President Juan Azcona before marching to the embassy. At the embassy compound, demonstrators demanded the immediate withdrawal of all US military forces and the expulsion of contra forces from their bases in Honduras, from which the contras sought to topple the nationalist Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua. Protesters threw stones and assaulted the complex. One of the buildings was set afire.

The US denied firing any shots, but eyewitnesses described shooting coming from windows of the compound. Spokesmen for both the Reagan administration and the Honduran regime attempted to dismiss the rebellion as the work of drug traffickers or “foreign Marxists.”

The attack expressed the popular anger of Hondurans against the US degradation of the country into a servile semi-colony of Washington and the United Fruit Company, with grinding poverty and military death squads.

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50 years ago: Mass arrests in Mississippi, Alabama civil rights struggles

On April 3, 1963, 19 blacks were arrested in Greenwood, Mississippi, where they were marching in a demonstration led by the comedian Dick Gregory in support of a voter registration drive. Police refused to arrest Gregory. Eleven had been arrested a week earlier in Greenwood, the day after “night riders” riddled the home of a black resident with bullets.

Greenwood and majority-black Leflore County had become a battleground in the mass movement of oppressed black workers against “Jim Crow” segregation, the state-sanctioned racial caste system of the US South. The previous month had seen the attempted assassination of three voter registration volunteers in a drive-by shooting.

On April 4 four blacks were arrested when they sat down to eat at a whites-only lunch counter in Birmingham, Alabama, and 10 more were arrested the following day. The anti-segregation drive in the steel-milling industrial center was begun by local residents, but on April 3, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy flew in to assume leadership. Safety Commissioner T. Eugene “Bull” Connor promised, “I will fill the jails if [blacks] violate the laws as long as I am at city hall.”

Connor and local authorities arrested over 100 in the first week of April alone. On April 6, 42 were arrested in a march that police blocked from reaching city hall. On April 7, attack dogs and police swinging clubs descended on a crowd of several hundred blacks in Birmingham who had gathered in a park to watch another anti-segregation march. Twenty-six were arrested on charges of loitering, assembling without a permit, and disturbing the peace.

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75 years ago: Lerida falls to Franco

On April 3, 1938, the Republican-held town of Lerida,

capital of the west Catalan province of the same name, fell to General Yague's Moroccan Army Corp, assisted by thousands of elite Italian troops, after a bloody defense by Republican forces.

Lerida lay at a confluence of roads leading on towards Barcelona, Tarragona, and the French border. The city was evacuated of civilians before it was surrounded in late March. Shortly after taking Lerida, the fascist army also captured the Republican power station at Tremp which provided much energy for the city of Barcelona. The Catalan capital was temporarily plunged into darkness and thereafter throughout the remainder of the Spanish Civil War the city's industrial output for the Republican war effort was reduced.

By mid-March, convinced that France might intervene on the side of the Republic, Franco adopted the *blitzkrieg* method long advocated by his Italian and German military advisers. Dropping his caution, Franco utilized the overwhelming might of the Italian and German air forces to soften up targets, before advancing rapidly with overwhelming numbers of ground troops.

In Barcelona, the news of Lerida's fall, the blackouts and the repeated air raids by the German and Italian bomber planes deepened the public sense of foreboding. A Popular Front manifesto released in the Catalan capital called for some 100,000 volunteers for the army and a further 50,000 to build fortifications and ramparts.

"A parade of several thousand youths recruited for the two new divisions walked through Barcelona behind a band and some girls carrying banners," reported a correspondent for the *Times* of London. "They seemed young and raw material indeed."

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100 years ago: First trial run of the auto assembly line

On April 1, 1913, the moving assembly line, which revolutionized production in the United States and throughout the world, was first tested at the Ford Highland Park Factory in Michigan. It was the first time that large-scale manufacturing was conducted on a moving assembly line.

At the beginning of the 20th century cars were custom-made and expensive. To make cars more affordable, greater efficiency in production was required. The American industrialist Henry Ford began improving the assembly-line methods first used in meat-packing houses in Chicago in the 19th century.

In 1908 Ford and his team applied four principles to the

production methods of the Model T Ford: division of labor, interchangeable parts, reduction of wasted effort, and continuous flow. To improve productivity, a conveyor belt was introduced, and assembly processes were divided into a series of steps.

Although highly efficient, the machinery and assembly method made routine tasks more specialized and monotonous, and required mainly unskilled workers. By 1914 unskilled European migrants comprised the majority of the 14,000 laborers at Ford.

Ford, who surpassed his competitors' production levels, reduced the price of the Model T, and dramatically increased sales. To create more buyers for his cars, Ford increased his workers' wages to five dollars a day in 1914. This proved successful and with greater efficiency, the price of a car continued to drop. In 1914 assembly line workers were able to buy a Model T with four months' pay.

Productivity increased dramatically and by 1914 a complete car was assembled every 90 minutes, compared with a previous average of twelve hours. Ford produced more cars than all automakers combined. By the time Ford made the 10 millionth car, half the world's cars were Fords. Between 1917 and 1923, 15,000,000 Model Ts were produced. By 1925, two million Ford cars were manufactured annually, a rate of close to 10,000 per day.

This innovation in the automated assembly line revolutionized the process of mass production and automation, forcing other car manufacturers and other industries into automated production to compete.

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