

This week in history: March 24-30

24 March 2014

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

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25 years ago: Massive oil spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound

On March 24, 1989, oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska, spilling up to 750,000 barrels of crude oil. Within six hours of hitting the reef, the ship spilled 10.9 million gallons (259,500 barrels) of crude oil from its 55 million gallon cargo. At its greatest extent, the crude covered 1,300 miles (2,100 kilometers) of non-continuous pristine Alaskan coastline and 11,000 square miles (28,000 square kilometers) of ocean, the largest oil spill in the US until the 2010 explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico.

Over subsequent weeks, the crude from the spill radiated southwestward along the Aleutian Peninsula, fouling the virgin shoreline and causing an unparalleled natural disaster.

The tanker, built less than three years earlier, deviated from the Prince William Sound shipping lane in order to avoid icebergs before its grounding in the shallow waters of Bligh Reef. The Exxon Valdez departed from the port of Valdez, Alaska only three hours before running aground.

Exxon Corporation immediately assigned blame to the tanker's captain, Joseph Hazelwood, and the US media followed suit, widely reporting that the captain was heavily drinking prior to the voyage. However, at the time of the incident, Hazelwood was asleep in his quarters and the third mate was at the helm.

The subsequent National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) investigation revealed the more fundamental causes: Exxon Shipping Company management failed to provide a sufficient and rested crew for the Valdez. The NTSB found that this was a common practice throughout the industry and recommended changes in safety procedure to Exxon and the industry.

Exxon also failed to maintain the Raytheon Collision Avoidance System (RAYCAS) radar. In 2008, based on the NTSB findings, investigative reporter Greg Palast stated, "Forget the drunken skipper fable. As to Captain Joe Hazelwood, he was below decks, sleeping off his bender. At the helm, the third mate never would have collided with Bligh Reef had he looked at his RAYCAS radar. But the radar was not turned on. In fact, the tanker's radar

was left broken and disabled for more than a year before the disaster, and Exxon management knew it. It was [in Exxon's view] just too expensive to fix and operate."

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50 years ago: Palace coup in Saudi Arabia

On March 28, 1964, King Saud was forced into abdication of his throne and exile from Saudi Arabia after his brother, Prince Faisal, won a contest for power in the oil-rich kingdom. Saud had ascended to the Saudi throne in 1953 after the death of his father Ibn Saud, who had been the founder of the state of Saudi Arabia, a country formed at the pleasure of the major imperialist powers.

During World War I, British imperialism cultivated the sheiks of Saudi Arabia as a proxy against Germany and the nominal ruler of the peninsula, the Ottoman Empire. Ibn Saud and his family, who were paid directly by British agents, proved to be the ultimate beneficiaries. Their position was strengthened when in the 1930s and 1940s US imperialism supplanted the British after vast oil deposits were discovered and then developed by the American oil firm ARAMCO. The enormous oil wealth of Saudi Arabia was extracted for the benefit of the American investors and the tiny Saudi ruling layer.

King Saud lived lavishly, building enormous palaces for his personal enjoyment, while the Saudi working class, drawn heavily from neighboring countries, lived in miserable poverty and without the most basic rights. Saudi workers struck in large numbers in 1953 and in 1957 demonstrated against the regime.

Factionalism developed over what was viewed as Saud's ineffective response to Arab nationalism. In 1955 Saud led Saudi Arabia into a regional defense pact with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan as an alternative to the US-backed Baghdad Pact. Saud also backed Egypt and Nasser during the Suez crisis of 1956. Tensions with Egypt quickly mounted, however, and Saud cultivated closer relations with the US, backing the so-called Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957. From 1962 Saudi Arabia armed royalist forces against anti-royalist forces and the Egyptian army in neighboring Yemen.

In 1962, Faisal, acting as prime minister, began to consolidate his authority by pushing Saud's sons out of their positions of authority. Faisal fashioned himself a reformer, promising limited modernization, including the eventual outlawing of slavery and the creation of an independent judiciary based on Islamic law.

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75 years ago: Spanish Republic surrenders Madrid to Franco

When the Spanish Republican government finally fell to Franco's fascist forces on March 28, 1939, it was not defeated militarily, but surrendered without so much as a shot being fired by the Republican army. The leading Republican military figures, coalesced around the National Council of Defense (Spanish initials CND), who seized power in a Madrid-based putsch against then-President Juan Negrin in early March, handed the city over to Franco without a struggle. General Sigismundo Casado, General José Miaja and other leaders of the putsch fled towards Valencia on the Mediterranean coast.

Unimpeded, General Franco's troops marched into Madrid at nine in the morning to be met by joyous "Fifth Columnists" who had assisted the CND in putting down the remaining resistance amongst the workers of Madrid. The army took control of the entire city of one million people within three hours. At eleven o'clock that morning the surrender of the capital city was officially announced from Madrid radio.

The CND had rendered the capital city defenseless by initially overthrowing Negrin (who had sought better terms from Franco prior to surrender) and then calling upon Republicans elsewhere in Spain to make their peace with the fascist reaction. In the days leading up to Franco's entry into Madrid, the CND set about softening up the still-resisting socialist and republican workers by sowing defeatism and surrendering the remaining rump Republican air force to the fascists. Their final crime was to flee, leaving the working class to the barbaric reprisals of Franco's army.

Writing in early March 1939 from exile in Mexico, in an article entitled "Once again on the causes of defeat in Spain," the leader of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky, explained how it came to be that the Spanish workers, the only revolutionary class in Spanish society and the only social force capable of defeating fascism, faced an imminent and cataclysmic defeat.

Trotsky explained that if the Spanish workers had been under the leadership of a Bolshevik-style vanguard socialist party instead of a treacherous leadership of bourgeois Republicans in cahoots with the Moscow clique of Stalinists, they would have established workers councils and redistributed wealth and land, and the struggle would have taken on a decisive socialist character and proven unbreakable. Towards the end of the article Trotsky wrote: "But because there was no revolutionary party in Spain, and because there was instead a multitude of reactionaries imagining themselves as Socialists and Anarchists, they succeeded under the label of the Popular Front in strangling the socialist revolution and assuring Franco's victory."

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100 years ago: Martial law near Buffalo to stop strike unrest

On March 24, 1914, martial law was imposed in the town of

Depew near Buffalo, New York. The state militia was called into Depew to patrol and crush strike action by unionized workers at the Gould Coupler Works and to safeguard strikebreakers.

The day before, seven people were shot in clashes between strikers and deputies guarding the plant. One bystander was shot in the head and died. Deputies fought with around 300 strikers who obstructed the rail carrying strikebreakers to the plant. Armed strikers shot into the windows of the train while others threw rocks. The train was too damaged to proceed and was backed into Buffalo. In the immediate aftermath the sheriff ordered every available deputy to shoot to kill the strikers.

The strike, which involved around 2,800 men, including machinists, molders, and other workers, had begun two months previously. In January, the new management sought to increase profitability by lengthening the workday from nine to nine-and-a-half hours, and cutting breaks. Charles Gould, the company owner, claimed workers at the plant were the highest paid in the United States, but they were paid on a piece-rate basis that came out to about \$3.50 a day, which was close to a dollar less than workers were paid in plants in other areas. But the event that precipitated the strike was the refusal of management to recognize the union shop.

The union had been demanding an increase of 25 cents per day. These requests were ignored by the company who instead demanded a reduction in the rate of piecework. At the outbreak of the strike, management had offered to rehire workers as individuals, but withdrew their offer when "rioting" began. In response to popular anger, the company declared that it would not hire workers from Lancaster and Depew, areas near the plant, and created its own police force, armed with shotguns and clubs. A nearby county also sent 15 deputies. The company stocked up on large amounts of bedding, food, and other supplies for the 800 strikebreakers.

The strike was defeated on March 29, after failing to receive widespread support from other unions. The striking workers were forced back to work under open shop conditions and without union recognition.

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