

This week in history: March 31-April 6

31 March 2014

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](#)

[top]

25 years ago: Judge bars Reagan, Bush testimony on Iran-Contra

A March 31, 1989 ruling by US District Judge Gerhard Gesell refused to subpoena former President Ronald Reagan to testify at the trial of Iran-Contra defendant Oliver North. Asserting that North's defense attorneys had "wholly failed" to show why his case needed Reagan's testimony, Gesell stated in his 5-page ruling that, "While there is understandable public interest in what a President may have known or may have done, the focus of North's trial does not involve any necessity for such a generalized inquiry."

Also denying North's motions to dismiss the 12 felony charges against him, the defense case was set to be presented the following Monday, April 3. North's case centered on the assertion that the former National Security Council aide was operating with the approval of his superiors in the sale of arms to Iran to fund the Contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Two months earlier Gesell told the press that there was "no doubt of the naked power" he had to compel the testimony of Reagan and Bush, but that "that power is to be exercised with great deference to the office of the president. .. and not to be exercised except as a last resort."

On Thursday, April 6, North took the witness stand for the first time. He testified that he was instructed by superiors in the Reagan administration "not to tell anybody" about his role in transferring aid to the Contras.

His defense submitted as evidence previously classified information in a 42-page government document that became known as the "Quid Pro Quo Admission," showing, among other things, that a meeting between then-Vice President George Bush and Honduran President Roberto Suazo was arranged through secret discussions involving North. The meeting discussed stepped-up US aid to Honduras in exchange for that country's support to the Contras.

The following day, President Bush adamantly refused to answer questions from the press during a White House briefing, claiming it could influence the trial. Bush said, "I believe the legal process should run unfettered without you or me endangering the trial process."

50 years ago: CIA backed coup d'état in Brazil

On April 3, 1964, Brazilian President João "Jango" Goulart fled to Uruguay after a fascist-backed military coup swept away his reformist government. The very next day US President Lyndon Johnson extended his "warmest wishes" to the new right-wing regime, promising quick recognition. The coup ushered in a brutal military dictatorship that lasted 20 years.

Declassified documentation later revealed that the US was prepared to intervene militarily in support of the coup. On April 1, as the military revolt began, US President Lyndon Johnson dispatched an aircraft carrier, two guided missile destroyers and four destroyers to Brazil with the aim of intimidating sections of the Brazilian military still loyal to Goulart. An audio recording of Johnson's discussions with advisers can be heard [here](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:LBJ-Brazil.ogg).

The coup was prepared by funding from the CIA and the principal labor-CIA front group, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the Latin American agency of the AFL-CIO's Department of International Affairs. In cables from the US embassy in Brazil, ambassador Lincoln Gordon informed Washington of "covert support for pro-democracy street rallies...and encouragement [of] democratic and anti-communist sentiment in Congress, armed forces, friendly labor and student groups, church, and business."

AIFLD head William Doherty, Jr., bragged about the AFL-CIO's role in the coup. "What happened in Brazil on April 1 did not just happen," he said. "It was planned—and planned months in advance. Many of the trade union leaders—some of whom were actually trained in our institute—were involved in the revolution, and in the overthrow of the Goulart regime."

The Brazilian generals decided to move following Goulart's announcement of a series of concessions to the working class, including the nationalization of oil refineries, the legalization of the Communist Party, and an electoral reform that would have allowed some 20 million illiterate citizens to vote. On March 30 Goulart had announced an amnesty for navy and marine enlisted men who had staged a mutiny demanding reforms, prompting the charge from Washington that the Brazilian government was becoming "increasing[ly] subject to communist influence." The previous year had seen riots by unemployed workers of Brasilia and the seizing of land by the peasants in the northeast part of the

country. Prices in Brazil had doubled while production and real wages fell.

While Goulart attempted to lull the working class with his promises of reforms, the industrialists and the landlords prepared for counterrevolution, forming the United Front in Defense of Democracy and distributing arms to property owners all over the country. Disarmed by the Stalinist policy of “the peaceful road to socialism,” the Brazilian working class was crushed with only scattered resistance, while Goulart managed a comfortable exile.

[top]

75 years ago: Britain, Nazi Germany take steps toward war

During this week in 1939, Europe moved inexorably towards mass armed conflict. Already warned that an invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht was imminent, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared on March 31 that Britain was prepared to offer Poland a unilateral commitment that would serve to bolster Polish resolve against the aggressive demands of Nazi Germany.

“In the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power,” Chamberlain told the House of Commons.

Chamberlain’s declaration was followed by a state visit from Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs Jozef Beck to London April 4-6. On that final day of Beck’s visit to the British capital Chamberlain spoke to the House of Commons again. He told the gathered members of Parliament that Britain and Poland had agreed to sign a mutual assistance pact in the event of an attack “by a European power.”

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Chamberlain’s expectation that the declaration would deter Hitler had the opposite effect.

According to biographer Ian Kershaw, Hitler flew into a rage upon hearing the news, thumped his fist on the marble-topped table in his Reich Chancellery study, exclaiming, “I’ll brew them a devil’s potion.” Hitler told the head of the Wehrmacht, Walther von Brauchitsch, to prepare to take Poland by force. The German military immediately began to draw up its “Case White” plan for the military subjugation of Poland, to be implemented at any time after September 1, 1939.

Chief of the General Staff Franz Halder told officers “that the attack had to be crushing” and “that Poland as rapidly as possible [had to be] not only defeated, but liquidated” regardless of French or British intervention. Halder concluded his remarks by raising his crosshairs beyond Polish borders toward the Soviet Union. “[I]t will depend on the Russians whether the eastern front becomes Europe’s fate or not,” he said. “In any case, a victorious army, filled with the spirit of gigantic victories attained, will be

ready to confront Bolshevism or...to be hurled against the West.”

[top]

100 years ago: Russian aviator undertakes record flights

This week in 1914, reports appeared in the international press of two record-breaking flights undertaken by pioneering Russian aviator Igor Sikorsky. Prior to these reports, the young Sikorsky, who was born in Kiev in 1889, had been largely unknown in the international arena.

The first flight, which occurred late March, saw Sikorsky’s biplane, the *Ilia-Kourametz*, carry 16 people to a height of some 300 meters, or 900 feet, in a flight that lasted 18 minutes. The flight began at the Korpusny Aerodrome in St. Petersburg, and according to the *New York Times*, observers from below who witnessed the craft, with a 62-foot length and 114-foot wing-span, described it as an “airbus” resembling a “flying village.”

The next flight, which occurred two days later, was described as being even more ambitious. In a flight that lasted two hours and six minutes, the *Ilia-Kourametz* carried nine passengers from St. Petersburg, to Tsarsko-Selo, through Gatchina and back to St. Petersburg. Travelling at 3000 feet, the flight set the record for height and duration with that number of passengers aboard. The plane weighed 8,250 pounds without passengers. Sikorsky’s method of increasing the size and speed of the craft to allow for greater weight enabled flights that had previously been thought impossible.

The *Ilia-Kourametz* included a pilot’s chamber, a passenger’s saloon, an observation balcony, a cabin with a washroom, and a lounge for passengers. The cabins were lit by electricity, and a gas generator provided heating. The plane was powered by four Argus motors of 100 horsepower each, with two placed at the front of the plane and two at the rear, driving four propellers.

The Tsarist regime, which had been heavily involved in the recently concluded Balkan Wars, and was playing an increasingly aggressive role in European politics, immediately recognized the military potential of the new craft, commissioning Sikorsky to construct four more of them. In a sign of the growing inter-imperialist tensions in 1914, the *New York Times* noted that “The *Ilia-Kourametz* is useful merely as a passenger vehicle, but its chief value, of course, will be as a transport in war time.”

[top]



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