

This week in history: April 7-13

7 April 2014

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

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25 years ago: Stalinists humiliated in Soviet election fiasco

On Sunday, April 9, 1989, the second round of elections in the USSR were held with the Stalinist bureaucracy still reeling over its losses on the first ballot, held two weeks earlier, on March 26. These elections were held to choose delegates to the Congress of People's Deputies. The April 9 elections were held to resolve inconclusive results in 64 constituencies.

The ballot expressed massive popular hostility to the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy and resulted in scores of senior Communist Party officials losing their seats in the Soviet parliament. President Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to play down the significance of the ballot, attributing the results to anger over food shortages: "The food problem is the fundamental problem at present...if we solve it there will be a colossal victory, not only in the economy but also in the political and social spheres." He added, "If the party and government bodies or individual leaders were severely criticized, then it was because people perceived *perestroika* as going too slowly."

The *Bulletin* newspaper, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, began a five-part analysis of the ballot, called "Behind the Elections in the Soviet Union," in its March 31 issue. The opening paragraphs follow:

"The outcome of last Sunday's elections in the Soviet Union has laid bare the almost universal disdain and contempt in which the Stalinist bureaucracy is held. The Stalinists suffered humiliating defeats in major cities throughout the country. In Leningrad, Yuri F. Solovyev, a member of the Politburo, was rejected. Anatoly Gerasimov, head of the Leningrad city party received only 15 percent of the vote. Every other leading member of the Communist Party bureaucracy in the city was defeated. Yuri Prokoviev, second secretary of the Moscow city party, received only 13 percent of the vote. The mayor of Moscow, Valery Saikin, also received a drubbing. Party leaders suffered defeats in Perm, Tomsk, Archangelsk, Ivanovo and Frunze.

"There is no question that millions of Soviet workers have taken advantage of these elections to express their hatred of the Stalinist bureaucrats, whom they hold responsible for the mismanagement of the economy and the increasingly acute social crisis."

The elections themselves did not represent a turn to democracy by the Soviet bureaucracy, but were the result of constitutional and electoral reforms worked out in secret within the highest echelons of the bureaucracy during the 19th Conference of the Communist Party in June 1988. Far from being "free" elections, they were organized as part of the *perestroika* initiative being orchestrated by Gorbachev and his high-level supporters to prepare the way for the restoration of capitalism. The elections would prove to be the last held before the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

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50 years ago: National US rail strike threatened

On June 10, 1964, union leaders called off a threatened nationwide rail strike against massive job cuts, averting a showdown with the US administration of President Lyndon Johnson.

The confrontation began on April 8 with a walkout by workers on the Illinois Central Railroad that caught authorities off guard. Freight trains were left abandoned on the tracks, and many commuters were left stranded in mid-trip. The strike closed thousands of miles of track in 14 states and threatened the loss of the whole Louisiana strawberry crop.

Presidents of the major railroads responded by announcing the implementation of long-sought rule changes that would eliminate 40,000 jobs at a savings of \$325 million annually, provoking the threat of a nationwide strike.

Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz, acting on Johnson's orders, held union leaders in talks with management until the threat to strike was called off. Calling union leaders into the White House, Johnson demanded they collaborate in imposing the attacks on the workers, saying, "Please give me this opportunity to show that our system of free enterprise can work."

In exchange for pay and benefit increases, union leaders

agreed to job cuts that decimated railroad employment. This included eliminating 90 percent of the firemen on diesels, along with many trainmen, switchmen, and maintenance jobs.

Johnson was so elated with the unions' capitulation that he raced out of the White House in a limousine to announce the agreement. At a hastily organized press conference, he declared, "Americans can be proud that the railroad management and the railroad brotherhoods came and reasoned together the American way."

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75 years ago: Mussolini's army invades Albania

Faced with minimal armed opposition, Italian forces entered Albanian territory on April 7, 1939 and completed their military occupation of the entire country by April 12. King Zog I fled into exile, and the Balkan state with a lengthy Adriatic coast was quickly incorporated into the Italian empire.

The smallest state in Europe, Albania had only come into being in 1920 after World War I brought about the final demise of the Ottoman Empire. Italian forces had occupied Albania during World War I, and gunboat diplomacy was used by the Italian navy when in 1934 Zog refused overtures to allow the continuation of Italy's favorable economic position in the impoverished country.

Albania held oil fields that Mussolini prized for the Italian war industry. The fascist dictator also hoped to make the Mediterranean "an Italian Sea," and eyed as crucial the port of Vlore and the island of Sazan, both within the bay of Vlore at the entrance to the Adriatic Sea. Further inland, Albania also offered a conduit into the strategically important Balkan region and Greece.

Simultaneously intimidated and inspired by the previous German annexations of Czechoslovakia and Austria, Mussolini issued an ultimatum to Tirana's monarchy on March 25, 1939, demanding the reduction of Albania to the status of an Italian colony. Buoyed by the successful protracted involvement of Italian troops and air force in the Spanish Civil War, but now freed from the Iberian theater after the capitulation of the Spanish Republic, Mussolini was able to send a sizable invasion force to subjugate and occupy Albania, initially involving some 50,000 troops.

In a brief military campaign led by General Alfredo Guzzoni, a former imperial governor of the Italian colony of Ethiopia, the Italian forces attacked Albania's seaports on April 7 and, finding little resistance, moved inland and occupied the entire country in just five days with minimal casualties.

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100 years ago: Tampico Affair triggers US intervention in Mexican Revolution

On April 9, 1914, in the midst of the Mexican Revolution, nine US seamen working off a whaling vessel in Tampico were mistakenly arrested by Mexican forces loyal to dictator Victoriano Huerta and quickly released. The minor incident—Mexican soldiers thought the sailors were attacking a bridge when they were in fact unloading cargo—was seized on by the Wilson administration to begin the occupation of Veracruz, Mexico's largest port, later that month.

After the sailors' arrest, Rear Admiral Henry T. Mayo imposed a series of humiliating demands on the Huerta regime: it would have to issue a formal apology, raise the US flag over Tampico, and deliver a 21-gun salute. Huerta issued the apology, but refused the other demands.

President Woodrow Wilson responded by insisting that "the salute will be fired" and imposed an April 19 deadline to comply, while dispatching further naval vessels to the Mexican coast. His demand unmet, Wilson went before Congress on April 20 and declared that the US had "no thought of aggression or selfish aggrandizement." An invasion would be done only to "maintain the dignity and authority of the United States."

Huerta, with the backing of US ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, had taken power after removing and assassinating elected president Francisco Madero. The envoy's primary objective was to protect the rich and the extensive US economic interests in Mexico—and especially its oil industry—against the demands of the Mexican workers and peasants.

However, the coup was an embarrassment to President Woodrow Wilson, who sought to portray the US as the global defender of democracy as opposed to the "imperial" European powers. He fired Henry Lane Wilson and shifted US support to the most right-wing of the factions opposed to Huerta, led by Venustiano Carranza.

The Wilson administration only decided to move against Huerta after he began to seek closer relations with Germany, and after more radical elements, including Pancho Villa in northern Mexico and Emiliano Zapata in the south, began to make military gains against his regime.

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