

This week in history: March 7-13

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25 years ago: Serbia on the verge of civil war

On March 9, 1991, tanks and armored cars dispersed a mass demonstration against the Stalinist regime of Slobodan Milosevic, as the political crisis in Yugoslavia came to the verge of civil war.

More than 70,000 people marched and chanted slogans against Milosevic, the president of Serbia, the largest of six constituent republics in Yugoslavia. They denounced press censorship and the manipulation of the previous December's Serbian election, which was won by Milosevic's Socialist Party—the new name of the Stalinists in Serbia.

About 200 people, including Vuk Draskovic, leader of the bourgeois opposition party the Serbian Renewal Movement, were arrested after the clashes, which began after police moved in and tried to disperse a demonstration calling for the removal of the officials in charge of Belgrade Television.

The protesters threw rocks and bottles and charged the police repeatedly, taking control of the downtown streets and smashing windows until the tanks and more heavily armed police and soldiers moved in, firing tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets. A policeman and a 17-year-old demonstrator were killed and 120 people were injured.

Tanks took up positions at the Parliament Building, Belgrade Television, the Post Office and other government installations. The deployment was ordered by Yugoslavia's rotating eight-man collective presidency. Milosevic himself appeared on television to denounce "chaos and madness" and threaten forcible suppression of further protests.

After mass rallies continued on March 11, the Serbian parliament, controlled by Milosevic loyalists, began discussing a bill giving the government power to declare a state of emergency. Nineteen opposition legislators of the Serbian Renewal Movement began a hunger strike against the bill. Milosevic also revoked the national rights of the Albanian and Hungarian minorities within Serbia,

established under Tito, and initiated a campaign of repression on the largely Albanian region of Kosovo, whose leaders sought to break away Serbia and Yugoslavia.

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50 years ago: Australia to triple forces in Vietnam War

On March 8, 1966, the Liberal government of Australian Prime Minister Harold E. Holt announced that it would triple its contingent of troops in Vietnam from 1,500 to 4,500. The increase would surpass the commitment made to the imperialist war in Korea and make the country the third-largest foreign military participant in the US-sponsored aggression against Vietnam. South Korea had the second-largest foreign contingent.

Holt declared, "It is our judgment that this is the most militarily effective way in which we can assist the overall allied effort in Southeast Asia." He indicated that Australia could not leave the defense of imperialist interests in the region to the US and claimed that the war was against "Communist aggression," not for territorial or colonial interests. The Australian Labor Party opposed the increase in troop strength solely on the grounds that it would mean sending conscripts into combat.

The US meanwhile launched the heaviest air strikes to date against North Vietnam. The Pentagon reported that the number of individual sorties was the highest since bombing of the north began in 1965. While not made public, the figure was reported at over 200 on a single day. Four planes were shot down by Soviet-made anti-aircraft missiles in the raids.

In the ground war, US Marines reported a major "victory" against Vietnamese liberation fighters on the central coast after attacking the alleged headquarters of a North Vietnamese regiment in the village of Sonchou. American and South Vietnamese puppet forces withdrew from the town after suffering heavy losses from determined counterattacks by the enemy. Military spokesmen conceded that the losses suffered by the marines were the highest so

far for a single engagement in the war.

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75 years ago: Lend-Lease Act passes US Congress

On March 11, 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease Act moments after an overwhelming congressional majority passed the bill. Lend-Lease, more than any other event prior to the declaration of war, signaled US imperialism's intent to enter World War II against Nazi Germany.

The bill, as well as the congressional debate and reports in the capitalist press, was couched in defensive terms. Because of strong opposition to US involvement in the world war, the American people were told that by serving as the "arsenal of democracy," that is, by providing military aid to Great Britain to fight Germany, American troops would not be required to fight and die in Europe.

But the real intention of Lend-Lease was to stave off an imminent British defeat at the hands of Hitler in order to provide American capitalism a period in which to build up its military strength and weaken anti-war opposition before entering World War II.

From a technical standpoint, Lend-Lease was necessary as a replacement to the "cash and carry" amendment to the neutrality laws. "Cash and carry" limited the United States to supplying military aid to Britain under the condition they paid in advance and transportation was not provided on American ships. By the end of 1940 Britain was bankrupt and unable to pay for arms. Lend-Lease avoided the balance of payments problem and allowed the United States to sustain Britain's fighting capability.

Lend-Lease also concentrated virtual dictatorial powers in President Roosevelt's hands to decide who should receive aid and how much. This freed Roosevelt to establish American capitalism's alliance with Britain and China, which was waging a struggle against Japanese imperialism, indicating in advance of any congressional declaration of war US imperialism's hostility to the military expansion of German and Japanese imperialism.

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100 years ago: American troops pursue Pancho Villa in Mexico

This week in March 1916, the US government sent troops into Mexico on a "punitive" expedition targeting the famous agrarian revolutionary Francisco "Pancho" Villa and his supporters. On March 9, Villa and 1,500 of his followers had carried out a surprise armed raid on an army camp in Columbus, New Mexico, killing 17 US soldiers.

The Wilson administration, along with the corporate press, had labelled the raid "thoroughly unprovoked" and "an outrage," in a hypocritical bid to cover over the longstanding US interference in Mexican politics, including the ongoing occupation of the port city of Veracruz.

Major General Frederick Funston was placed in overall charge of the operation, while Brigadier General John J. Pershing was in command of the expeditionary force of 3,500 American soldiers. Both men were veterans of the brutal imperialist occupation of the Philippines, and had experience there in the violent suppression of opposition to colonial rule. Funston was given a free hand by the general staff in Washington to work out the problem of pursuing Villa into Mexican territory with "whatever force he thought necessary."

Villa had attacked Columbus in retaliation for the Wilson administration's support for the Carranza government in Mexico, which was locked in a fierce battle with the country's revolutionary peasant-based forces. In 1915, Wilson had allowed reinforcements for Carranza's army to pass through US territory, facilitating Villa's defeat at Agua Prieta in November of that year.

In a letter to fellow revolutionary Emiliano Zapata after the defeat, Villa had promised, "I shall not expend another shell on brother Mexicans, but will prepare and organize to attack the Americans on their own soil and let them know that Mexico is a land of the free and the tomb of thornless crowns and traitors."

The US army had made two previous incursions across the border, with the permission of the Mexican government, in 1884 and 1886 in pursuit of Apache Indian leaders. The pursuit of Geronimo in 1886 lasted more than two years, and at least two-thirds of the American army took part in it at one time or other.

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