

This week in history: March 21-27

21 March 2016

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: US abets Iraq's bloody suppression of rebellions

On March 26, 1991, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater gave a press conference in which he declared, "We don't intend to involve ourselves in the internal conflict in Iraq." This public statement from the Bush administration followed several private briefings given by top officials who discounted any US support for Shi'ite and Kurdish rebels challenging the regime of Saddam Hussein.

The US claim that it was not involved in the internal affairs of Iraq was preposterous on its face. On the orders of President George H. W. Bush, the US military reduced much of the country to rubble in two months of warfare in January and February 1991, and US forces continued to occupy approximately 20 percent of Iraq's territory. In the course of the war, Bush personally made statements on numerous occasions urging the Iraqi people to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein.

Men, women and children were massacred in the Shi'ite areas in southern Iraq. Artillery, napalm and phosphorous were reportedly used in rebellious towns and cities. The death toll was said to be in the tens of thousands. With the Shi'ite rebellion suppressed, the Iraqi military was expected to turn its artillery and helicopter gunships against the Kurdish people in the north. Many predicted that a campaign to reassert government control over Iraqi Kurdistan would entail a massacre of genocidal dimensions.

From the outset, US intervention in the gulf was not aimed at "liberating Kuwait," enforcing United Nations resolutions or even merely toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein. On the contrary, the merciless destruction which was unleashed upon Iraq had as its goal the crippling of the country to such an extent that it could offer no challenge whatsoever to imperialist interests in the region, particularly US control over its vast petroleum reserves.

The US attitude toward the civil war conditions inside Iraq was determined by Washington's desire to see as many Iraqis killed as possible, Kurdish, Shi'ite and Sunni alike. Many

thousands, if not millions, more who survived the fighting faced famine and disease resulting from the destruction of Iraq's food supply and sanitation systems.

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50 years ago: Worldwide protests against Vietnam War

On March 26, 1966, protests against the war in Vietnam were held in New York and other major American cities, as well as in foreign capitals such as Rome, London and Ottawa.

The demonstration in New York was the largest held to that date against the US imperialist intervention, bringing out over 20,000 people, mainly college students. The action was organized by the pacifist National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam, based in Madison, Wisconsin, with the support of the Stalinist Communist Party USA and Students for a Democratic Society. The events were called "Days of International Protest."

In New York City, marchers were met by a hail of eggs from pro-war counterdemonstrators. About two dozen militarist thugs broke through police lines and assaulted the marchers with their fists. The day before the march, a firebomb was thrown into the New York headquarters of the Committee for Independent Action, an antiwar group, damaging its offices.

Speakers at the New York rally included novelist Norman Mailer and a former army master sergeant who had served in Vietnam. They opposed the war from a purely pacifist standpoint, framing it as a "mistake" by the US government, rather than as the outcome of American imperialism's aim of global hegemony. The chairman of the Ad Hoc Parade Committee in New York, the aged pacifist A. J. Muste, hailed the turnout at the protest demonstration, predicting that larger protests would "deescalate" the war.

In Ottawa, Canada, 2,500 students and housewives joined a rally called by the New Democratic Youth, the youth wing of the reformist New Democratic Party, in alliance with assorted pacifists, to protest in front of parliament against Canada's support for the war. A speaker from the trade union-based NDP denounced Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson for subordinating the interests of Canada to those of the US.

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75 years ago: Mass anti-fascist demonstrations in Yugoslavia

On March 25, 1941 a spontaneous demonstrations broke out in Yugoslavia following the monarchy's decision to sign Hitler's Tripartite Pact, linking Yugoslavia to Nazi Germany, Italy and the fascist satellite of Hungary. Demonstrations erupted in Belgrade, Split, Kragujevac and many other cities under the popular slogan "Better war than the pact."

The demonstrations escalated into the largest in Yugoslavia's history. Workers and youth smashed their way into the German Tourist Bureau and the Gestapo headquarters, tearing the swastika flag to shreds. The Communist Party, under the leadership of Josip Broz (Tito), came out from its long underground existence and openly addressed huge crowds. Their slogans were "Pact with Russia" and "We will defend the country."

On March 27, a group of young nationalist officers in the air force overthrew the government. Prince Paul, the regent, was arrested and deported, and a new government was established under General Dusan Simovic. While the masses continued their opposition to the pact, the new government made no preparations to defend the country. It sent a note to Hitler stating it would continue to observe the pact, while quietly seeking out possible help from Britain and the United States, which were not in a position to defend Yugoslavia.

A delegation sent to the USSR came back with nothing more than a Pact of Friendship and Nonaggression, as Stalin ignored the uprising of the Yugoslav workers and clung to his alliance with German fascism. Hitler required Yugoslavia's adherence to secure protection of his flank, as he prepared to attack Greece. For his long-term strategy, the attack on the USSR, he needed to ensure that none of the allies obtained a foothold in the Balkans that would put them within striking distance of the Romanian oil fields, vital for fueling his mechanized army.

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100 years ago: German U-boat attacks French passenger steamship

On March 24, 1916 a German U-boat torpedoed a French passenger steamship, the Sussex, while it was crossing the English Channel from Britain to France. The steamship was carrying 53 crew and 325 passengers when it was struck. It was severely damaged by the attack, drifting for 9 hours before being towed to Boulogne by a trawler. There were at least 80

casualties, including 50 fatalities.

From the beginning of 1915 the German navy had pursued a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant vessels belonging to or trading with the Allied nations. In justifying this, the German government pointed to the fact that merchant vessels often carried military supplies. At the time, the Allied powers were also enforcing a crippling naval blockade, aimed at starving the German war effort. The passenger steamship had apparently been mistaken for a minelayer by the captain of the German U-boat at the time of the attack.

Several of the injured passengers were American, provoking heated diplomatic exchanges between the United States and Germany. President Woodrow Wilson issued an ultimatum to the German government, saying in a speech in Congress "that unless the Imperial German government should now immediately declare and effect an abandonment of its present method of warfare against passenger and freight-carrying vessels this government can have no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with the government of the German Empire altogether."

As with previous instances of merchant vessels being attacked by German forces, the Sussex incident was used by those within the US ruling elite who favored intervention into the global conflict to whip up a pro-war climate. The US ambassador to Germany, James W. Gerard, followed up this speech, speaking directly to Kaiser Wilhelm on May 1 at the German army headquarters in eastern France. Protesting the continued submarine attacks on merchant ships, Gerard encouraged the Kaiser to announce a change of policy.

In response to the threat from the United States, Germany issued the "Sussex Pledge" on May 4, 1916. It promised a change in the policy of unrestricted naval warfare, undertaking that passenger ships would not be targeted and merchant ships would not be sunk until the presence of weapons had been confirmed.

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