

This week in history: April 11-17

11 April 2016

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

25 years ago: Bush reverses “neutrality” in northern Iraq civil war

On April 16, 1991, President Bush announced that America would belatedly join plans for an imperialist occupation of the northern part of Iraq. Having supported the destruction of the insurrection of the Kurds and repeatedly washing his hands of their fate, Bush reversed the disengagement of US troops and ordered them to begin building camps for Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq.

Just three weeks earlier, White House spokesman Martin Fitzwater announced that the US wouldn't involve itself in “the internal conflict in Iraq.” The Europeans, however, chose their moment to intervene. Led by the British, French and Germans, the European powers proposed the establishment of imperialist-patrolled encampments to house the Kurds and provide a foothold for the imperialist powers inside Iraq.

Nothing less than the partitioning of Iraq was underway. The political geography was significant. The war ended with American troops stationed in the Kuwaiti region and US bases being developed in Oman and the southern Gulf states. Then the Europeans, adroitly exploiting the Kurdish question and lining up support in Turkey and Iran, moved to position their troops strategically in the northern part of Iraq.

Within weeks of its crushing military victory, US imperialism, to its dismay, saw its aims being thwarted by the nimble footwork of its own allies. The European imperialists also demanded a major role for themselves in any Middle East peace conference to be held in the future, something the United States had so far resisted. Unable to forestall the European initiative and facing the prospect of being shut out of a major territorial carve-up in the northern region, the Bush administration felt obliged to join the plan at the last minute, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

Emboldened by the success of their initiative, the Europeans pressed their advantage. John Major, the British prime minister, explained from the first that the plan for “a Kurdish enclave” in Iraq, far from being a temporary center for humanitarian aid, would establish British control over “major population centers” and involve “a long commitment” for the occupying forces. The British policy even called for the enclave to be sanctioned by the drawing up of “legal boundaries.”

Perhaps even more assertive, however, was the role of the

German imperialists, who did not hesitate to use the genuine public sympathy for the fate of the Kurds to greatly strengthen their strategic position in the region. Under cover of bringing assistance to the refugees on the Turkish border, a “massive airlift” was initiated by the German military, a use of the Bundeswehr which was unprecedented since the end of World War II.

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50 years ago: Premier Ky agrees to elections in South Vietnam

On April 14, 1966, the military dictatorship in South Vietnam announced that elections to a constituent assembly would be held within three to five months. The move came after weeks of mounting political turmoil.

The opposition, led by the Unified Buddhist Church, demanded the lifting of press restrictions and the legalization of bourgeois political parties. The statement by Premier Nguyen Cao Ky came as Buddhist leaders prepared for a massive demonstration in Saigon.

The crisis of the Vietnamese puppet government caused deep concern in the Johnson administration. The Pentagon reported that the war effort was being slowed down, with South Vietnamese units launching fewer attacks against the National Liberation Front fighters. Workers at the US air base at Danang were refusing to unload American ships, causing a shortage of bombs, reducing by at least one-third the number of air sorties.

The continued repression against religious groups in South Vietnam prompted the first official statement by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil rights organization headed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., calling for the pullout of US troops.

The mildly worded resolution concluded by calling on the government to “reassess our position and seriously reexamine the wisdom of prompt withdrawal.” The more right-wing elements in the civil rights leadership, such as SCLC Executive Director Andrew Young, continued to oppose any linkage between the fight for civil rights and opposition to the war. Young complained that the statements of King against the war were costing the organization financial contributions. He declared that the SCLC resolution did not signify that the organization would participate in anti-war demonstrations or provide financial support for such activities.

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75 years ago: Stalin clings to the Axis

On April 13, 1941 Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin signed a five-year pact with Japanese Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka. The treaty was a cynical horse trade as Stalin recognized Japanese control over Manchukuo (occupied Manchuria), while Japan pledged to respect Soviet control over the Mongolian Peoples Republic. It amounted to an agreement between Moscow and Tokyo to partition Mongolia and North China. To obtain the agreement Stalin relinquished his previous demands over Asian territories, the Chinese Eastern Railway and the use of Pacific ports.

The agreement signified that Japanese imperialism had reached the limit of its claims in the north—for the time being—and was now orienting towards the Dutch Indies, Singapore and ultimately confrontation with US imperialism in the South Pacific over markets, raw materials and cheap labor.

Stalin's adherence to the pact was aimed more at appeasing Hitler than Japan, as rumors appeared even in the capitalist press that Hitler would invade the Soviet Union by summer. After the signing of the pact, Stalin groveled before German and Japanese imperialism as he left the Kremlin and for the first time publicly escorted the Japanese mission to the station. Stalin told Matsuoka, "We are both Asiatics." Then he sought out the German ambassador and while embracing him said, "We must remain friends, and you must do everything to that end!" He also embraced the acting German military attaché and told him, "We will remain friends with you—whatever happens."

Stalin made this public exhibition of bootlicking while he continued to honor trade agreements under his pact with Hitler. The USSR continued to ship large amounts of food and raw materials to Germany even though Hitler had fallen well behind in his commitment to repay Stalin with military and industrial equipment. Meanwhile, German divisions numbering 680,000 troops had massed in Poland in preparation for an attack on the USSR.

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100 years ago: Scottish workers' leaders convicted of sedition in Britain

On April 11, 1916, John Maclean, a socialist workers leader in the area of Glasgow, Scotland dubbed "Red Clydeside" on account of its traditions of industrial and political militancy, was convicted of sedition by British authorities. Maclean was charged under the 1915 Defence of the Realm Act, which provided for sweeping attacks on democratic rights as part of the war effort, following anti-conscription speeches he had delivered earlier in the year. He was sentenced to three years of penal servitude.

Three others—William Gallacher, the chairman of the Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC), John Muir, editor of *The Worker* and Walter Bell, business manager of the *Socialist Labour Press*—were also convicted on sedition charges. They were each sentenced to 12 months imprisonment. Between March and April 1916, ten CWC shop stewards were convicted of treason and deported to Edinburgh.

Beginning in 1911, Clydeside had been a center of mass strikes, including one involving 11,000 workers producing sewing machines, and widespread rent strikes. Trade union membership grew rapidly in the years immediately preceding and following the outbreak of war in August 1914.

In 1915, the British parliament passed the Munitions of War Act, which brought industrial relations in sectors of the economy involved in war production under the Ministry of Munitions. The move served to illegalize strikes, drive down wages, and prevent struggles for improved conditions. Workers were forbidden from leaving a company involved in war production without the consent of their employer. Prosecutions under the act were met with protests. The Clyde Workers' Committee was created as a result of mass opposition to the Act.

The growing unrest in Clydeside and the turn to sedition prosecutions were discussed in the House of Lords on April 11. The Earl of Desart declared, "A prosecution for High Treason, which is a very solemn and impressive thing, would awaken the imagination of the workmen throughout the country, and that is really what I have in mind." Making clear that he was calling for a turn to dictatorial forms of rule, he declared, "There are moments in the life of a nation when people must for a time sacrifice their most cherished principles, and I am not sure that this is not the time when that must be clearly faced." Other lords noted that the major trade union federations had entered into agreements with the government in support of the draconian wartime industrial relations regime, and claimed that the unrest was the work of a handful of agitators.

Maclean was the most prominent of a layer of revolutionary-minded socialists, who, while lacking a worked-out Marxist perspective, gave expression to the hostility of broad sections of the working class to the war and the associated attacks on the working class.

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