

This week in history: April 18-24

18 April 2016

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

25 years ago: Imperialist carve-up of Middle East continues

This week 25 years ago, more countries became involved in the partition of Iraq. Following the April 16 announcement that the United States would join Britain, France and Germany in establishing camps on Iraqi territory for Kurdish refugees, Spain, Italy and Holland revealed plans to move troops into the area.

The first party of a planned 1,000 Dutch Marines arrived near the city of Zakhu on April 23 to set up a camp near the Turkish border, as Italy announced plans to build a camp for about 60,000 Kurdish refugees, possibly near the Iranian border, and guard it with 500 soldiers. Spain announced that same day that it would send 400 paratroopers and 200 army engineers and medical staff.

The fate of the Kurds had become the pretext for intervention by the imperialist powers on an ever-greater scale. The staging area for the combined US, British and French operation was a broad swathe of Iraq's Tigris River valley, from the town of Zakhu near the Turkish border south, nearly to the industrial center of Mosul.

In all, five or six major tent cities were intended to house up to 500,000 returning Iraqi Kurds. According to the plans of the imperialist powers, the Kurds would be disarmed and housed in semi-permanent tent cities under the watchful eye of armed soldiers.

Meanwhile, an autonomy agreement was reached by the leaders of the Kurdish Patriotic Front and Saddam Hussein, indicating that the Kurds were having second thoughts about the imperialists' plans for them. An agreement with Hussein was considered preferable to the reduction of the Kurds to stateless persons sitting in concentration camps under military supervision.

The imperialist powers were also sending minesweepers to the northern Persian Gulf to boost their presence in the region. Some 25 vessels from eight countries were involved, with warships from the United States, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, Belgium, Holland and Britain.

In the midst of the jostling for position by the different

powers, of particular significance was Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu's announcement that yet more minesweepers would be sent to the gulf, this time under the Japanese flag, the first overseas deployment of Japanese naval vessels since World War II.

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50 years ago: Johnson proposes spending slowdown

On April 18, 1966, President Lyndon Johnson proposed a significant slowdown in the expansion of social programs as the cost of the war in Vietnam skyrocketed. The budget proposal came after two consecutive months of sharp increases in the Consumer Price Index, signaling the inflationary pressures arising from increased federal spending.

Warning that the Congress was going "too far, too fast" in funding antipoverty programs, Johnson called for an outlay for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare that was \$500 million less than proposed by Congress. The administration also called for cutbacks in the budget for the Department of Agriculture. Among the cuts proposed by Johnson were reductions in the school lunch and school milk programs.

Liberals such as Senator Robert Kennedy called the proposed cutbacks "unfortunate" and insisted that the war in Vietnam could be sustained while maintaining domestic social spending. Defending a program of "guns and butter," Kennedy declared, "We must do what needs to be done in Vietnam and what needs to be done at home. We shall fail as a society if we do not do both."

Meanwhile, the Republican leader of the House of Representatives, Gerald R. Ford, launched an attack against Johnson's policies in the Vietnam War, declaring that the administration was guilty of "shocking mismanagement." He called the recent actions by South Vietnamese workers, in refusing to unload US ships, a "national scandal" and deplored the reported shortages of bombs for US warplanes.

In committee meetings held during the week, congressional Democrats voted to restore most of the cuts in social spending proposed by Johnson, amid growing opposition in the working class to the war and criticism of the "shift in emphasis" of the

administration that threatened a retreat from his grandiose promise of “Great Society.”

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75 years ago: Nazi Germany occupies Greece

On April 23, 1941, German military forces crushed the last resistance of Greek troops around Athens and the southernmost stretches of the Peloponnese and forced British expeditionary forces to evacuate to the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea.

In March, Britain had landed 50,000 troops at Salonika and near Mt. Olympus to aid Greece in its battle to repulse Mussolini’s Italian forces and to defend against Hitler’s army, which invaded Greece on April 6. In just over two weeks, German forces outflanked Greek and British units in the northern province of Thrace and swept southward. They took 270,000 Greek and 13,000 British soldiers prisoners, while the bulk of the British forces and the remaining Greeks were evacuated to Crete.

One month later, in May, Hitler dispatched his air force and paratroops against Crete and devastated the remainder of the Allied forces. The British Navy rescued only 16,500 of its troops and 2,000 Greeks. The rest were either killed or taken prisoner. The British Navy itself lost several cruisers and destroyers, along with 2,000 sailors in the costly evacuation.

Greece was divided among Germany, Italy and Bulgaria and placed under fascist military control. Hitler had now secured the Balkan peninsula, blocking any Allied threat to his rear when he unleashed his assault against the Soviet Union. It also allowed Germany to exploit the Balkans’ agriculture, mineral and oil resources to sustain its war effort.

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100 years ago: Easter Rising launched in Dublin, Ireland

April 24, 1916, was the first day of the Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland—a revolutionary uprising directed against the brutal oppression of British imperialism. During the revolt some 1,600 rebels took control of key administrative centers in Dublin. They were aligned with the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers.

Britain’s declaration of war on Germany in August 1914 had an immediate impact in Ireland. The long-promised Home Rule Bill, granting limited Irish autonomy, was enacted in 1914 but almost immediately suspended due to the outbreak of war. Some forces within the Irish nationalist movement argued that

Britain’s entry into the global conflict offered an opportunity to carry out a military revolt in Ireland and wrest rule from the British. Others positioned themselves as the most loyal supporters of the war effort to earn British favor after the war. This led to split, with those in the nationalist movement advocating an armed uprising retaining the name of the Irish Volunteers.

The early years of the twentieth century also witnessed the development of a militant working class movement in Dublin and Belfast which was strongly influenced by socialist ideas. James Connolly was the most prominent leader of this tendency. He became commander of the Irish Citizen Army, founded to defend striking workers during the Dublin lockout of 1913, and committed to using armed force to fight for an Irish republic. However the ICA largely left the class nature of such a republic undefined, and along with revolutionary socialists such as Connolly, included petty-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalists desirous of establishing an independent, capitalist Ireland.

The Easter Rising was brutally suppressed by British Army units and ended after six days. More than 400 civilians were killed along with some 100 British troops. Immediately following the uprising the leaders of the rebellion were detained and 90 of them were sentenced to death, with 15 actually executed, including Connolly. Following the uprising, the British cracked down on anyone associated with the Irish independence movement. More than 3,500 people were arrested in Ireland and nearly 1,500 were detained across Britain.

The Russian revolutionaries, Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin, both defended the uprising and hailed the revolutionary determination of Connolly and other socialist leaders of the Irish working class. Trotsky placed the political limitations of the revolt in a broader historical context, noting, “The general national movement, however it was expressed in the heads of the nationalist dreamers, did not materialize at all. The Irish countryside did not rise up. The Irish bourgeoisie, as also the upper, more influential layer of the Irish intelligentsia, remained on the sidelines. The urban workers fought and died, together with revolutionary enthusiasts from the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. The historical basis for the national revolution had disappeared even in backward Ireland.” He declared, “The undoubted personal courage, representing the hopes and methods of the past, is over. But the historical role of the Irish proletariat is only beginning.”

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