

# This week in history: April 25-May 1

25 April 2016

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

## 25 years ago: Over half of Soviet population driven into poverty

A report released in the last week of April 1991 revealed that more than half of the Soviet population had been driven into poverty as a result of massive price hikes introduced by the Stalinist regime of President Mikhail Gorbachev on April 2.

The report, drafted by the economist Boris Bolotin of the IMEMO institute and accepted as accurate by leading figures within the bureaucracy, showed that the minimal subsistence income necessary to keep up with the increased prices had more than doubled, from 97 rubles to 207.

The price hikes, instituted as part of the Gorbachev bureaucracy's policy of paving the way for the capitalist transformation of the Soviet economy, provoked a massive wave of strikes and protests, particularly in Belorussia, where a general strike movement shut down most of the republic's enterprises.

Top Gorbachev aide Yevgeny Primakov said that Bolotin's figures were far more accurate than those prepared by the official State Price Commission. These claimed that prices had risen on average by 1.5 times, while admitting that prices for basic necessities such as bread and meat had doubled and tripled, and prices for shoes and other clothing items had shot up by four or five times.

The result of the price increases, according to the IMEMO report, was that now more than half the population of the Soviet Union was forced to live at or below the official poverty line.

While the bureaucracy claimed that wage increases provided for lower-paid workers had compensated for 85 percent of the price hikes, the IMEMO report said that it had barely covered one-third of the impact of the increases.

The newspaper *Commersant* confirmed that the other major impact of the bureaucracy's price "reforms" had been to further widen the polarization between the masses of Soviet workers and the strata of bureaucrats, striving petty bourgeois and aspiring capitalists.

The skyrocketing of state prices resulted in the forcing down of prices on the black market, particularly on luxury goods,

such as electronics, available only to the wealthiest layers of Soviet society. Those who could afford to pay the higher black market prices benefitted, while the workers who depended on the controlled prices at state stores saw their living standards devastated. Despite the bureaucracy's promises that the price hikes would mean an end to shortages, supplies remained just as poor as ever.

[\[top\]](#)

## 50 years ago: US troop strength in Vietnam tops 250,000

On April 29, 1966, the number of US troops in Vietnam surpassed 250,000 with the landing of 4,000 soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division at V?ng Tàu, as the Johnson administration stepped up its efforts to drown in blood the National Liberation Front (NLF) revolution in South Vietnam while extending its military operations to North Vietnam and Cambodia.

Signs pointed to a far greater escalation. In the face of growing criticism against the massive bombing campaign in North Vietnam, Vice President Hubert Humphrey led a chorus of administration officials in insisting there could be no let-up. "We must stay and see it through," Humphrey told an annual gathering of the Associated Press in New York on April 26, while dismissing calls for peace talks.

Having lost over 225 aircraft in North Vietnam to antiaircraft fire and enemy jets in just over a year, the Johnson administration also pledged that there would be no "sanctuary" in the pursuit of enemy aircraft—an implicit warning that they could be pursued even into Chinese airspace.

On April 29 the *New York Times* reported claims from unidentified US military officials that arms were being funneled through Cambodia and Laos into Vietnam. On May 1, the US attacked Cambodia for the first time, when Lt. Col. Richard L. Prillaman of the 2nd Infantry, claiming that US forces had come under fire, ordered artillery fire directed across the Cai Bac River, the border between the two nations. By the end of US involvement in the war, some 300,000 Cambodians had been killed.

[\[top\]](#)

## 75 years ago: Roosevelt intensifies Atlantic war drive

On April 26, 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt announced the United States would launch “sea patrols,” comprised of warships and planes, thousands of miles into the Atlantic, in order to detect hostile German navy forces that could endanger the shipping of US war materials to Britain. The move was calculated to bring US Navy forces into confrontation with Nazi Germany and provide the United States with an incident that could serve as a pretext for entry into World War II.

The stepping up of military supplies to Britain following the British defeat in Greece was touted by Roosevelt as a way for the US to aid in the struggle against the Axis powers “short of war.” Roosevelt’s use of the term “patrol” as opposed to “convoy” was to deceive public opinion, which strongly opposed American involvement in the European conflict.

But US imperialism could not stand on the sideline in the war for imperialist markets. John D. Rockefeller Jr. publicly demanded, “We of the Americas should stand by the British Empire to the limit and at any cost,” and called for the US to directly convoy ships to Britain. At the same time, the billionaire oil and banking magnate demanded the suppression of labor strikes at home.

After announcing the new policy, Roosevelt secretly arranged to report to the British navy the location of any German ships. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in reporting to his cabinet, said of the American policy, “The president ... said that he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more provocative. If the Germans did not like it, they could attack American forces. Everything was to be done to force an ‘incident’ that could lead to war.”

[top]

## 100 years ago: German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht denounces war at May Day demonstration

On May 1, 1916, the German Spartacus League, the organization of revolutionary socialists who opposed the imperialist world war that had erupted in August 1914, led a mass demonstration in Berlin on a socialist and anti-war program. Karl Liebknecht, one of its most prominent leaders, delivered a speech indicting German militarism, its crimes abroad, and the accompanying assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

The Spartacus League had been formally constituted at the beginning of 1916. It consisted of a handful of leading figures from the German Social Democratic Party, who opposed that organization’s betrayal of socialist internationalism when it responded to the outbreak of the war by supporting its own

government.

The Spartacus League was subjected to intense state suppression. Its publication was banned. Liebknecht had been forced by the German government, with the complicity of the Social Democrats, to join the army despite ill health, and had been given the task of burying the dead after refusing to fight. He returned to Germany in October 1915. Rosa Luxemburg had been imprisoned for a year beginning in February 1915, also for opposing the war.

Amid mounting hostility to the war, and a deepening social crisis, the Spartacus League decided to defy the authorities and launch their most public show of opposition to the war. A leaflet calling for the May Day demonstration, widely distributed in factories across Berlin declared, “Our enemy is not the English, French, nor Russian people, but the great German landed proprietors, the German capitalists and their executive committee ... Workers, comrades, and you, women of the people, let not this festival of May, the second during the war, pass without protest against the imperialist slaughter. On the first of May let millions of voices cry, ‘Down with the shameful crime of the extermination of peoples! Down with those responsible for the War!’” As many as 10,000 workers and young people responded, filling Potsdamer Platz on the evening of May 1.

A first-hand report quoted Liebknecht’s speech and described the reaction of the crowd: “‘By a lie the German workingman was forced into the war, and by like lies they expect to induce him to go on with war!’ A mighty shout went up from a thousand throats—‘Hurrah for Liebknecht.’ Liebknecht raised his hand for silence. Then steadily, though knowing the cost, he said: ‘Do not shout for me, shout rather, we will have no more war, we will have peace—now!’”

Liebknecht was dragged from the crowd and arrested. He was stripped of his position in the Reichstag (German parliament), and found guilty on a host of charges, including “attempted treason.” He was sentenced to two years in prison, which was increased to four years after he delivered another anti-war speech at an appeals hearing.

[top]



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