

This week in history: March 26-April 1

26 March 2018

25 years ago: Electoral disaster for Mitterrand and French Socialist Party

Elections held on March 28 and March 21, 1993 for the French National Assembly delivered a shattering blow to the Socialist Party (PS) of President François Mitterrand.

The Gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR) headed by Jacques Chirac, along with its electoral ally the Union Démocratique Français (UDF), won a supermajority in parliament, controlling 485 of 577 seats. The elections produced the smallest representation in decades for the major parties of the French left, the SP and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). The PS lost four-fifths of their seats. PS First Secretary Laurent Fabius was defeated, while the leading contender to succeed Mitterrand, Lionel Jospin, announced his resignation from politics. Pierre Bérégovoy, PS prime minister at the time of the election, killed himself on May 1.

The result was a rejection of the austerity policies of Mitterrand, whose presidency, which began 1981, had witnessed a doubling of the official unemployment rate, to over 10 percent in 1993, or 3 million workers. This was augmented by a corruption scandal that focused on the PS and touched Mitterrand as well as Bérégovoy. It was also a catastrophic result for the PCF, whose record of betrayals of the French working class had left it, by 1993, with almost no credibility. It won less than 5 percent of the vote in the second round, its worst result ever, and was routed in the traditional working-class areas. The PCF was beaten even by the neo-fascist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, which won over 6 percent in the second round.

However, the dominance which the right-wing parties enjoyed in parliament was a result of only a very marginal increase in their share of the vote. Fully one-third of the electorate had not even bothered to show up at the polls in the first round of voting, a huge abstention rate by French standards. Moreover, the combined vote share of the PS and the two main rightist parties, the RPR and UDF, actually fell from 72 percent of the total in the first round of the 1988 election to only 57 percent.

50 years ago: Lyndon Johnson announces he will not run for reelection

“I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.” So concluded a

nationally-televised speech by US President Lyndon Johnson largely given over to the crisis engulfing American imperialism in Vietnam, delivered March 31, 1968.

In his speech, Johnson outlined a plan to “unilaterally” cease major military operations against North Vietnam in exchange for a cessation of hostilities in South Vietnam, where, he conceded, the Tet Offensive had weakened the American hold on rural areas. But Johnson still refused to admit that the US was not only engaged in war against North Vietnam—which his administration had provoked by seizing on the bogus Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964—but a revolt waged by the oppressed Vietnamese masses against the American stooge regime in Saigon.

Johnson pleaded for a tax bill to fund the war—he made no new promises of social spending—and warned gravely of “the sharpest financial threat in the postwar era, a threat to the dollar’s role as the keystone of international trade and finance in the world.” He ended his speech by warning of the growth “of division in the American house,” an allusion to fears over the emergence of a militant working class as well as the shattering of the Democratic Party, whose liberal wing had abandoned him over Vietnam and whose reactionary southern wing, of which Johnson himself was a product, was coalescing behind the far-right demagogue George Wallace of Alabama.

The destruction of Johnson’s political career by the Vietnam War was a stunning turnaround. Ascending to the Oval Office from the vice presidency on November 22, 1963, hours after the assassination of John Kennedy, Johnson won reelection in 1964 in one of the largest landslides in American history. Responding to the mass movement of oppressed African American workers and youth in the South, Johnson signed off on a number of social and political reforms, including the Civil Rights Act and Medicare and Medicaid. But his administration vastly expanded the murderous US war in Vietnam, at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars, tens of thousands of US casualties, and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese dead. This proved his undoing.

Sensing the danger of mass opposition to the war, a faction of the Democratic Party sought an “anti-war” challenger to Johnson in the 1968 primaries. This was found in Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, who very nearly defeated Johnson in the New Hampshire Primaries on March 12. Four days later, on March 16, Sen. Robert Kennedy of Massachusetts entered the race. Polls suggested Johnson would lose badly in the next major primary, held in Wisconsin.

75 years ago: Axis troops forced to retreat in Tunisia

On March 26, the British Eighth Army secured victory of the Battle of the Mareth Line, forcing around 75,000 German and Italian troops to retreat deep into northern Tunisia. The action was the last significant set-piece battle by the Eighth Army and eliminated the last remaining major defensive position of Axis troops in southern Tunisia.

The battle followed a protracted retreat of Axis troops across North Africa that had begun in December 1942. Led by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, German and Italian troops abandoned most of Libya, including Tripoli, in the first months of 1943, establishing a new defensive position at the Mareth Line, a defensive fortification running from the coast to the Matmata Hills, originally constructed by French colonialists to protect Tunisia from any Italian attack launched from Libya.

In early March, Rommel mounted his last offensive against the Eighth Army in the Battle of Medenine. The action led to a rout of German forces and Rommel's recall to Germany. It was widely viewed as the beginning of the end for Axis forces in North Africa.

A frontal Allied assault on the Mareth Line failed on March 20. British commanders devised a new plan, involving a massive aerial bombardment and a complex outflanking maneuver spearheaded by New Zealand troops. On March 25, Allied troops initiated artillery attacks along with high-level bombing. On March 26, New Zealand troops, following a convoy of Crusader tanks, broke through German defensive positions, precipitating a full-scale retreat over the following days. Allied troops took some 7,000 German soldiers as prisoners of war.

The Axis defeat would intensify rifts between the Allied powers—Britain, France and the United States—over who would benefit from the imperialist redivision of North Africa that would follow World War II.

100 years ago: German-born director of Boston Symphony Orchestra arrested

On March 26, Karl Muck, director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was imprisoned in East Cambria Jail in Massachusetts as an "enemy alien." No charges were announced in relationship to the jailing of the Swiss citizen, who had been arrested by federal authorities a day earlier.

Muck was denied an attorney, though his wife and the director of the BSO were allowed to visit him at Boston's Federal Building. Meanwhile, federal agents raided his home and seized personal belongings, including musical compositions. Ultimately hand markings on a copy of the score of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," which Muck was to have conducted with the BSO on March 26, served as the preposterous excuse for the detention of the famed conductor throughout the war and beyond. Tragically, Muck had anticipated the performance of the baroque classic as his crowning achievement.

Muck was interned at Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia until August 21, 1919. Upon his release he was deported. He never set foot in Boston again.

The attack on Muck began the previous October, when it was alleged by the *Providence Journal* that the conductor had "refused" to play the American national anthem, the "Star-Spangled Banner," prior to a performance. Muck was attacked by, among others, former President Theodore Roosevelt, the Roman Catholic Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, and a rival conductor, the German-born Walter Damrosch of the New York Philharmonic.

Muck, who had previously served as director of the Royal Opera of Berlin and the Vienna Philharmonic, and who was considered one of the leading interpreters of Wagner, assumed his role with the BSO in 1912. He had in fact never "refused" to play the American national anthem, which is a romantic war poem set to a popular British drinking song. It was simply not part of the repertoire of the BSO.

Muck stated:

Art is a thing by itself, and not related to any particular nation or group. Therefore, it would be a gross mistake, a violation of artistic taste and principles for such an organization as ours to play patriotic airs. Does the public think that the Symphony Orchestra is a military band or a ballroom orchestra?

The BSO capitulated to the patriotic furor, adding the Star Spangled Banner to the end of each performance after November 3. This did not spare Muck, who became one of the more high-profile victims of the xenophobic and patriotic hysteria orchestrated by the Wilson administration to overcome mass anti-war sentiment in the US.



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