

This week in history: April 1-7

1 April 2019

25 years ago: Assassination of Rwandan president triggers genocide

On April 6, 1994, the airplane carrying both Juvénal Habyarimana, president of Rwanda, and Cyprien Ntaryamia, president of Burundi, was shot down as it attempted to land in Kigali. The two presidents, both from the Hutu population that constitutes the majority in both countries, were killed along with everyone else aboard the aircraft.

This event served as the trigger for the beginning of the Rwandan genocide, in which over a million people, mainly Tutsis, were murdered by Hutu soldiers and gangs over the course of the following three months. About 70 percent of the Tutsi minority—which had dominated the country during the period of colonial rule by Belgium—were massacred, along with other minority populations.

The plane crashed into the grounds of the presidential palace at 8:30 a.m. Within 45 minutes roadblocks were set up across the capital to prevent anyone from escaping, and the rounding-up and murders began. Within 24 hours, all Tutsi and Hutu opposition leaders had been killed under the direction of the military committee of Colonel Théoneste Bagosora, who took control of Rwanda after Habyarimana's death.

The shooting down of the plane was initially blamed on extreme members of Habyarimana's Hutu-led government to provide the pretext for a pre-planned genocide, but evidence later emerged suggesting that Tutsi leader Paul Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) may have been responsible. One account claimed that the missiles that hit the plane were from Iraq, acquired by the French and supplied to the Hutu military. Another account confirmed that the missiles were from Iraq but that they were provided by the US to the RPF through Uganda.

After several months, the mass killings came to a halt after the RPF invaded the country, defeating the Hutu military and seizing the capital, Kigali, where Kagame still rules a quarter century later. The French government used the invasion as a pretext to safely remove Hutu leaders from Rwanda, with the protection of the United Nations, called "Operation Turquoise."

Later investigations brought to light evidence showing that the French, Belgian and US governments, as well as the United Nations, were well aware of plans to exterminate the Tutsi population and did nothing to prevent it. Ethnic tensions had

been stirred up during the period of colonial rule, and the rival imperialist powers continued to stoke conflicts after nominal independence.

A senate inquiry in Brussels regarding the role of Belgium in Rwanda issued a report stating that Belgian authorities knew as early as 1992 of the preparations for the genocide by a secret military unit in its former colony, and had informed France and other countries.

50 years ago: First artificial heart transplant

On April 4, 1969 the first artificial heart was implanted into a patient. The operation was performed by Dr. Denton Arthur Cooley, an expert surgeon and specialist in heart research. Dr. Cooley performed the operation on Haskell Karp a 47-year-old man dying from severe heart disease.

The artificial heart used was designed by Dr. Cooley and Dr. Domingo Liotta. While a few instances of using an artificial, or partly artificial heart had preceded the April 4 operation, this was the first successful attempt at implanting a heart that was totally artificial. After removing Karp's diseased heart from his chest, Cooley installed the implant. It was a success and Karp regained consciousness while the mechanical heart maintained the blood flow to his body.

Due to limitations in the ability to maintain a long-lasting power supply to the artificial heart, it was only designed to be temporary until a human donor heart could become available. The implant heart successfully kept Karp alive for 64 hours when he then underwent another operation to receive a permanent human heart transplant.

Unfortunately, Karp died 32 hours after receiving the human transplant. His body had been infected by bacteria which caused pneumonia to spread into his lungs. He was not able to fight off the infection due to receiving immunosuppressive drugs, a necessity for heart transplant recipients to stop the body's natural defenses from attacking the foreign heart.

Nonetheless, the operation was an immense leap forward for medical technology. Since Dr. Cooley's 1969 operation, artificial hearts have been used in over 1,300 people to bridge the gap while waiting for donor hearts. In one instance, in 1984, the recipient was able to use an artificial heart for nearly two

years.

Dr. Cooley would go on to become one of the most recognized surgeons and researchers in his field. His work helped to make transplants and heart valve replacement safer and almost routine. In the mid-1960s, when he was most active in his research, the mortality rate for heart valve transplants dropped from 70 percent to just 8 percent.

75 years ago: Winston Churchill jails British Trotskyists

On April 5, 1944, Scotland Yard, acting under orders from the government of Winston Churchill, raided the headquarters and meeting places of the Revolutionary Communist Party, the British section of the world Trotskyist movement.

Agents seized large quantities of socialist literature and bundles of the British Trotskyist newspaper, *Socialist Appeal*, which defended the mass strike wave of miners and other industrial workers that had rocked wartime Britain.

Following the raids, four Trotskyists were arrested for “inciting to strike” in the British government’s first use of the infamous 1927 Trades Disputes Act. They were National Secretary Jock Haston; Roy Tearse, national secretary of the Militant Workers Federation; Ann Keen, Northeast (London) district party secretary; and Heaton Lee, former mine organizer of South Africa.

The attack on the British Trotskyists was accompanied by a witch-hunt in the capitalist press, which sought to blame the strike by 100,000 coal miners on “outside agitators” who received “secret funds.”

In a public statement Haston declared the real cause of the strike was unbearable working conditions, and added, “If the government imagines that by closing us down and suppressing our publications they are going to stop the wave of strikes, they are mad. If the government nationalized the mines and operated them under committees of workers and technicians, they would settle the problem in 24 hours.”

The strike wave had erupted despite opposition and sabotage from the British trade union and Labour Party leaders and the Stalinist Communist Party. Even Churchill’s threats to draft strikers into the armed forces or imprison them had failed to head off the militant action.

A *New York Times* report revealed why Churchill and the Tory-Labour coalition targeted the Trotskyists: “(There are) an increasing number of signs that the political coalition on which the British government is based is beginning to break up. Millions of young men and women are open to the blandishments of any new seemingly dynamic party.”

100 years ago: Soviet republic declared in Bavaria

On April 6, 1919, in Munich, the capital of the German state of Bavaria, about 150 representatives of workers councils, left-wing political parties, trade unions, and ministers of the former government, assembled in the conference hall of the Bavarian Ministry of Defense and declared the formation of a Bavarian Soviet (Council) Republic.

The playwright Ernst Toller was elected head of state, and the new republic announced the arming of the working class and the formation of a Red Army.

Bavaria had been in the throes of revolution since November 1918. As in other parts of Germany, workers councils had been formed in the aftermath of the defeat of German imperialism in the First World War.

In Bavarian cities such as Augsburg, Nuremberg, and the capital of Munich, the councils expressed the revolutionary aspirations of workers but were politically dominated by the opportunist Social Democratic Party (SPD) and its centrist split-off, the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD).

On November 7, 1918, a government had been formed by a mass demonstration of workers and soldiers with journalist Kurt Eisner, a member of the USPD, at its head. King Ludwig III (Bavaria had retained its own monarchy within the German Empire) fled and later abdicated.

Eisner’s government, which called itself the People’s Republic of Bavaria, was made up almost entirely of members of the SPD and the USPD and claimed to represent the workers councils. It had a bourgeois character. It proclaimed an eight-hour day, women’s suffrage and other democratic measures but was unwilling to make inroads on capitalist property or the estates of the big landholders in the countryside. The old state apparatus, including the police and the bureaucracy, was left untouched, and leaders of the newly formed Communist Party (KPD) were arrested.

The Eisner government was unable to take measures to stabilize the economy and had lost any mass support by January, and Eisner himself was assassinated in February by a right-wing aristocrat. The murder, however, provoked a general strike and a further leftward development of the working class, especially in Munich. Bavaria was briefly ruled by the SPD-USPD dominated workers councils, and in March, SPD leaders set up a new coalition government which was overthrown April 6 by the new Soviet government, in which the KPD had increasing influence.



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