

This week in history: March 16-22

16 March 2020

25 years ago: Sarin gas attack in Tokyo subway

On March 20, 1995, a sarin gas attack by a terrorist group on the Tokyo subway system killed 13 people, injured over 50, and caused temporary vision loss for over 1,000 others. The gas, 500 times more toxic than cyanide, was released at five different points on three major subway lines in a coordinated action.

Two days later, 2,500 police carried out a massive raid on the offices and training facilities of religious group Aum Shinrikyo, or “Supreme Truth,” which prophesied an imminent Armageddon and had approximately 10,000 members in Japan at the time of the attack. Police claimed to have recovered two tons of chemicals similar to what was used in the attack and galleys of a magazine being prepared for publication, warning that attacks using the poison gas would kill 90 percent of Japan’s urban population. They also recovered several pieces of military equipment apparently purchased in Russia, where the group had recently expanded, including a military helicopter and a device for measuring the concentration of poison gas in the air.

Seven members of Aum Shinrikyo were executed at the Tokyo Detention Center in July 2018, including its leader Shoko Asahara, who maintained his innocence. The executions by hanging had been postponed until all convictions completed final appeals in January 2018. Several appeals against the death sentences were rejected. Others received life sentences for their roles in the attack.

50 years ago: US postal workers launch nationwide wildcat strike

On March 18, 1970 workers of the US Post Office went on strike. The strike began in New York City but spread nationwide to other cities, including Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and Detroit. In total, over 200,000 workers walked out in the first ever national strike by federal workers.

For decades postal workers dealt with low pay and poor working conditions. In 1970 they were pushed past their breaking point when US congressmen gave themselves a 40 percent pay increase while postal workers received only 4 percent, less than the rate of inflation.

The strike was carried out by the rank-and-file workers in opposition to the union leadership. Forced by workers to call a strike vote among New York carriers, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) headed by President James Rademacher, a supporter of Republican President Richard Nixon, campaigned heavily for a “no” vote. After defeating the union bureaucracy and securing a majority “yes strike” vote, tens of thousands of insurgent rank-and-file workers began the work stoppage. Then, without union sanction, the strike spread to other postal letter carriers around the US. On March 21, post office clerks joined the strike as well.

President Nixon responded by declaring the strike illegal and threatening to deploy the military to deliver the mail. He insisted he would not negotiate until strikers went back to work. Workers, in response, deepened the strike with Chicago workers voting to reaffirm their strike and new areas like Rhode Island joining in. On March 23, Nixon declared a state of emergency and ordered the military to take control of the mail service. Some 18,500 troops entered New York City, with plans for an additional 115,468 men in 35 cities if the strike continued.

NALC President Rademacher demanded workers capitulate, instructing them to call off picketing and return to work. Many workers resisted this betrayal and remained on the picket lines. However, as the union leaders partnered with Nixon to send strikers back to work, the rank-and-file gradually gave in. On March 25, after union leaders convinced enough workers to abandon the strike, negotiations began with the Nixon administration.

Despite the treachery of the union leadership, the militancy and solidarity of postal strikers resulted in concessions. Congress approved special legislation for a 6 percent increase at the end of the strike, and another 8 percent in August. The contract negotiated in 1971 had a new starting wage of \$8,440, exceeding the old top-of-scale wage, while the 21 years needed to reach top level was now reduced to

eight. The unions accepted the continuation of the strike ban on federal employees and binding arbitration under a so-called “neutral” arbitrator.

75 years ago: Hitler signs “Nero Decree”

On March 19, 1945, amid rapid Allied advances into Germany, Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler issued a decree entitled “Demolitions on Reich Territory.” Dubbed the “Nero Decree” after the emperor who burnt down Rome, the order provided for the destruction of civilian infrastructure in areas that were likely to fall to the armies of Britain, the US and the Soviet Union.

The decree was signed amid a series of German defeats. On March 16, Operation Spring Awakening, the last major German offensive of World War II, was successfully repulsed by the Soviet Red Army, which secured control over broad swathes of Hungary and neighboring Eastern European countries. Two days later, the German navy finalized the evacuation of 75,000 soldiers and civilians from the Kolberg pocket in West Pomerania. The region, located in modern-day northwest Poland, had been the scene of rapid Red Army advances. On March 18, over 2,000 Allied bombers and long-range fighters launched the largest daytime raid on Berlin during the course of the war, dropping 3,000 tons of bombs. The German navy suffered a series of defeats, while Allied troops made advanced preparations for an offensive aimed at capturing Berlin.

Hitler’s decree declared: “It is a mistake to think that transport and communication facilities, industrial establishments and supply depots, which have not been destroyed, or have only been temporarily put out of action, can be used again for our own ends when the lost territory has been recovered. The enemy will leave us nothing but scorched earth when he withdraws, without paying the slightest regard to the population.”

He ordered that “All military transport and communication facilities, industrial establishments and supply depots, as well as anything else of value within Reich territory, which could in any way be used by the enemy immediately or within the foreseeable future for the prosecution of the war, will be destroyed.” Hitler’s Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer was placed in charge of the operation.

100 years ago: Workers councils form central leadership

body during Germany’s “Ruhr Uprising”

On March 20, 1920, in Germany’s highly industrialized Ruhr Valley representatives of workers’ councils, which had been formed in the explosive general strike that had ousted the military Kapp Putsch of March 13, assembled in Essen to elect a central leadership.

Many workers in the region—which included over 300,000 coal miners—sought to pass from a defensive struggle that opposed the coup against the Social Democratic (SPD) government of Friedrich Ebert, Gustav Noske and Philip Scheidemann, to a struggle for power, and had formed councils to direct an uprising. The Ruhr Uprising, as the event was to become known, was organized primarily by the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) and the Communist Party (KPD).

On March 15 workers in Hagen, lead primarily by the USPD, staged an armed demonstration, and on March 17, near the town of Wetter, a workers’ militia known as the Ruhr Red Army attacked a unit of the right-wing paramilitary Freikorps that supported the Kapp Putsch, taking over 600 prisoners and capturing Dortmund. Over the next few days, the Ruhr Red Army, which consisted primarily of members of the USPD, KPD and anarchists, seized armories and disarmed the local police auxiliaries. It occupied the major cities of the region, and established centers in Hagen, Essen and Muelheim. Workers councils spontaneously grew up around the region consisting of representatives of the USPD, KPD and the SPD.

By March 22, with the failure of the Kapp Putsch the Social Democratic government of Fredrich Ebert returned to power, and the strike was officially called off. A conference in Bielefeld on March 24 between representatives of leftwing parties, the workers councils, the trade unions and representatives of the Ruhr Red Army on the one side and the SPD government on the other failed to disarm the workers in the region. The Ebert government unleashed the regular army and the Freikorps, much as it had done during the 1918 November Revolution in Berlin on the workers of the Ruhr Valley. The military massacred hundreds of workers, many by summary execution.

By April 5 the French occupied parts of the Ruhr valley since the presence of the German army was a violation of the terms of the treaty of Versailles of 1919.



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