

# This week in history: April 20-26

20 April 2020

## 25 years ago: Historically low turnout in French presidential election

On April 23, 1995, the first round of the French presidential election concluded with the lowest-ever voter turnout, demonstrating the vast alienation of the country's working class from its capitalist political system.

Alienation was also demonstrated in the low share of the vote going to the three main candidates. Lionel Jospin, Jacques Chirac, Eduard Balladur together received just 60 percent of the votes. The other 40 percent of voters cast their ballots for parties which had very few deputies in the National Assembly, or none at all. Chirac, the head of the Gaullist RPR (*Rassemblement Pour la République*), overtook Prime Minister Balladur, also of the RPR and the early favorite, to finish second.

The French press portrayed the first-place finish by the Socialist Party candidate Jospin as a surprise. In the country's presidential election seven years earlier, Socialist Party candidate François Mitterrand received 10 percent more votes in the first round than Jospin obtained in 1995, though compared to the parliamentary election in 1993 and the European Union elections in 1994, Jospin's result showed a certain recovery for the PS. In the runoff two weeks later, however, with Balladur eliminated, Chirac consolidated the vote of the traditional right, winning the presidency by a fairly narrow 53-47 percent margin.

The most alarming result of the 1995 election was the advance of the fascists. Combining votes for Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front and Philippe de Villiers of the Movement for France, one in five voters who participated in the first round gave their vote to the far right. The National Front was the strongest party among unemployed voters. Approximately one-third of unemployed voted for Le Pen—more than the combined vote for the Socialists and the Communist Party.

This growth was the product of the betrayals of the Stalinists and social democrats. Since Mitterrand's first election 14 years earlier, they supported attacks on the working class and sought to defeat or divert any resistance. On the evening of the election, former Socialist Party Minister of Culture Jack Lang declared that it was "entirely natural" that many who had voted for Le Pen would go on to support Jospin.

## 50 years ago: Liberals disband Vietnam Moratorium Committee

The Vietnam Moratorium Committee announced its dissolution of its organization on April 20, 1970, only days after renewed protests against the Vietnam War. Its leaders proclaimed that the project of mobilizing large demonstrations to demand the Nixon administration bring the war to an end had been a failure because there was "little prospect of immediate change in the Administration's policy in Vietnam." They called the mass demonstrations of workers and students against the war a "political fad" that had now passed.

The Moratorium Committee had been founded the previous year by David Hawk and Sam Brown, formerly organizers for the failed Democratic Party presidential campaign of Eugene McCarthy and, after McCarthy's withdrawal, that of Robert Kennedy. They formed the committee in response to growing popular sentiment against the Vietnam War. The Moratorium Committee's aim from the beginning was to limit those opposed to the war to appealing to the Democratic Party, which, under the presidencies of John Kennedy (1961-1963) and Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969), had been primarily responsible for the murderous war in Southeast Asia.

In October-November 1969, the Moratorium Committee was able to organize demonstrations against President Richard Nixon's escalation of the war that saw numbers of participants reach into the hundreds of thousands. However, the strategy of appealing to the White House and Congress proved fruitless and was increasingly rejected by radicalizing layers of workers and youth.

The Moratorium announced it would dissolve in the aftermath of a series of antiwar demonstrations on April 15, 1970. This was the byproduct of an intense political conflict among groups aspiring to lead the antiwar movement, which was actually growing by leaps and bounds, not declining. The Stalinists of the Communist Party USA and the revisionist leaders of the Socialist Workers Party sought to subordinate the antiwar movement to their alliance with the Democratic Party liberals, and deliberately held the April 15 protests as locally dispersed protests rather than one or two large-scale mobilizations, in order to diminish their political impact. But the liberals were increasingly focused on the 1970 congressional elections, and regarded the growing antiwar movement as a danger.

The Workers League, the Trotskyists in the United States, supporters of the International Committee, who went on to found the Socialist Equality Party, condemned both the capitulation of the liberals to Nixon and the capitulation of the Stalinists and revisionists to the liberals, in an editorial published in the *Bulletin*, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Citing the demoralized conclusion of the Moratorium leaders, that nothing could be done to advance the struggle against the war, because Nixon said so, the *Bulletin* editorial declared:

This is nothing but a green light to imperialism to continue its wars. This is indeed the perspective of the liberals that the CP and SWP have welcomed so warmly into the antiwar movement, as well as the entire capitalist class. Its interests stand directly opposed to the interests of the workers and peasants in Vietnam and the American working class. The question of struggling against the war in Vietnam is not a matter of choice. Just as Nixon cannot just “choose” to stop the war, so the struggle against it must go forward. The Workers League is determined to take this fight into the labor movement and among the students despite and against the liberals, with or without their supporters among the revisionists.

After folding up the Moratorium Committee, the leaders would continue to find work organizing campaigns of both Republican and Democratic candidates. Immediately after the dissolution of the committee, one of its leaders, Marge Sklencar, would go to work for the Republican Senator Charles E. Goodell. Sam Brown would go on to work in the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

### **75 years ago: Nazi Germany on the brink as Soviet Army enters Berlin**

This week in April 1945, it became clear that the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler was being militarily defeated and overthrown, as it suffered a series of catastrophic defeats, and the Soviet offensive against the capital Berlin began.

On April 20, Soviet artillery started shelling the suburbs of Berlin, having secured a series of victories over retreating German troops on the approach to the city. The following day, Hitler ordered a final offensive aimed at maintaining control of Berlin, declaring that it must involve the entire remaining military capacity of the Third Reich. The attack was to be led by SS commander Felix Steiner.

On April 22, Hitler was told at a military conference he had called in his Berlin bunker that the attack had not been carried out and that divisions of the Soviet army had entered the northern suburbs of the capital. He reportedly declared that this was the result of “traitors,” and acknowledged for the first time that the German war effort was futile. The dictator declared that he would remain in the capital rather than flee with other Nazi leaders.

On April 23, the two Soviet marshals, Georgy Zhukov and Ivan Konev, who had competed to be the first to arrive in Berlin, both marched their armies into the city proper. This was the signal for fierce street fighting and engagements throughout the city. The collapse of Berlin’s defenses intensified the crisis of the regime, leading Hermann Göring, who had fled the capital, to issue a telegram asking for permission to take leadership of the Third Reich. Hitler responded by demanding his arrest.

Over the course of the week, the Nazis lost Nuremberg and a

number of other German towns and cities. Fascist forces also suffered major blows in Italy and Eastern Europe.

### **100 years ago: Poland invades Soviet Ukraine**

On April 25, 1920, the Polish Army invaded Ukrainian territories that bordered areas under Soviet control and made a push toward the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, which the Poles took on May 6. The nationalist regime of Jozef Pilsudski made an alliance with the exiled Ukrainian leader Symon Petlura, whose anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian People’s Republic had carried out the worst massacres of Jews in history, until the German invasion of Ukraine in 1941.

Pilsudski’s immediate aim was to control Polish-speaking parts of Ukraine and to act as a regional overlord to the peoples who inhabited the borderlands with Russia, especially the Ukrainians. The broader geo-strategic goal, however, was to act as a bulwark for the imperialist powers against the Soviet regime. Leon Trotsky, the Soviet Commissar of War noted at the time, “By its onslaught upon us the Polish Government has proclaimed that it will not allow the Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Russia to co-exist with bourgeois Poland.”

Poland had a professional army of approximately 750,000 troops, many of whose officers had served in the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Tsarist armies during the First World War.

The Polish advance took by surprise the young Soviet Republic, which had eliminated most of the counterrevolutionary White armies by the spring of 1920.

The Red Army initially retreated to avoid being trapped by the Polish forces, but the Soviet counter-offensive was well-coordinated and thorough. By June 12, Kiev was retaken by the Soviets and the Poles were driven back by the brilliant Russian commander, Mikhail Tukhachevsky (later to be murdered along with other leaders of the Red Army by Stalin after a secret trial in 1937). Tukhachevsky chased the Poles 400 miles to the Vistula River in six weeks.

The thoughts and feelings of Red Army soldiers and officers as well as the social contradictions of the Red Army in this campaign were the subject of one of the monuments of world literature, Isaac Babel’s book of short stories, *Red Cavalry*.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**