

# This week in history: March 22-28

21 March 2021

## 25 years ago: FBI standoff with Montana ultra-rightists

On March 25, 1996, leaders of the fascist Montana Freemen group were arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. A standoff ensued between the FBI and the band of followers of the heavily armed ultra-rightist organization.

The event demonstrated the extreme sensitivity of big business politicians and the federal government to the pressure of neofascist elements. The standoff took place in the wake of the public hearings on the 1993 Waco massacre and the 1992 shootout with white separatist Randy Weaver, where congressional Republicans openly sided with extreme right.

In this case, the FBI adopted a low-key and non-confrontational policy. The Justice Department only stepped in after repeated requests for federal assistance from Garfield County Sheriff Charles Phipps, whose two-man department had been receiving death threats from the Freemen for the previous two years. LeRoy Schweitzer, the group's leader, was indicted on tax and fraud charges four years earlier, but federal authorities took no action until 1996.

Media monopolies gave the standoff coverage normally reserved for major political events, puffing up the episode's importance and lending legitimacy to the far-right fringe group. Lacking was any consideration of the historical significance of the emergence of groups like the Freemen, or any serious examination of their political views and influence. They were described as tax protesters or participants in mail order fraud schemes, but not as racists, white supremacists, anti-Semites, or neo-Nazis.

The Freemen were part of a broader extreme right trend called "constitutionalists," whose ideology was a mixture of religious fundamentalism and Nazi-style race theories. They believed in differing citizenship status along racial lines, with white Christian men receiving their rights from God through the preamble and first ten amendments of the Constitution. Under this ideology, all others derive their rights from the 14th amendment, to be revoked by "organic citizens" as they see fit.

They appealed mainly to farmers ruined by the agricultural depression of the 1980s, offering a series of legalistically worded but bogus measures to defend farmers against foreclosure and eviction, revolving around claims that the departure of the United States from the gold standard rendered all dollar-denominated bank debts invalid.

The Freemen, the Militia of Montana, and similar groups made significant inroads into the Montana Republican Party. Republican state legislators introduced militia-sponsored bills to prohibit the presence of UN forces on Montana soil, to urge all residents to arm

themselves for militia service, and to require federal agents to give 24 hours written notice to local sheriffs before taking any action in the state.

## 50 years ago: *Washington Post* publishes details of FBI's COINTELPRO spying

On March 24, 1971, the *Washington Post* published a front-page story making public for the first time the extensive network of illegal surveillance and infiltration activities carried out by the FBI against American citizens under the secret operation COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence program). The FBI spying operation spied on, infiltrated, and plotted to publicly discredit a wide range of individuals and organizations associated with the civil rights movement, opposition to the war in Vietnam, and socialism.

The *Post* learned of COINTELPRO after being anonymously sent files that had been stolen from an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania on March 8, 1971. The files were accompanied by a letter explaining that the documents had been acquired by a group calling themselves the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI.

The group sent the FBI files to several newspapers and requested that the information be published so that the public could become aware of the government's illegal activity. Most major newspapers refused at first to print the story. However, after the *Washington Post* broke the news, it attracted worldwide attention, and the next day appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world.

The activities of COINTELPRO went far beyond simply collecting information and writing reports on the activities of left-wing groups. Under the operation, starting in 1956, the FBI plotted to infiltrate and destroy organizations and movements deemed to be "subverting" the national interest. Among those targeted by counterintelligence operations included virtually every socialist tendency, the civil rights movement and its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, women's liberation groups, and individuals as varied as black nationalist Malcolm X, boxing champion Muhammed Ali, and actress Jean Seberg.

A central component of the FBI strategy was to send agents into the targeted organizations and encourage internal disputes that would cause splits. Prominent among the government's methods was to promote violence or illegal activity that could then be used

to justify arrests and violent police attacks. Many groups like the Black Panthers and the Socialist Workers Party found themselves overrun with agents. The Black Panthers faced savage repression through COINTELPRO. Many members were murdered as the result of its operations, most notably Fred Hampton, leader of the Chicago Black Panther Party.

In April of 1971, in reaction to immense public opposition against the spy operations, COINTELPRO was officially terminated by the FBI. However, the spying and infiltration activities continued under alternative program names.

### **75 years ago: Bandung “sea of fire” incident amid Indonesian revolution**

On March 24, 1946, Indonesian troops fighting for independence oversaw the mass evacuation of Bandung, one of the country’s largest cities, and deliberately set much of its southern section on fire in an act of defiance against British authorities seeking to reestablish colonial rule. The incident, which led to a massive blaze, became known as the “sea of fire.”

In August 1945, Indonesian national leaders had issued a proclamation of independence after the World War II defeat of Japan, which had occupied the archipelago for the previous three years. The British, along with the Dutch, the former colonial power, rapidly intervened.

British troops arrived in Bandung in late September. In October, Indonesian independence militia, along with workers and peasants, launched attacks on remaining Japanese troops, disarming them and seizing their property. In late November, British forces, who had taken over much of the city, were similarly besieged. The attacks were carried out simultaneously with an armed uprising against the British in the city of Surabaya.

The British responded by demanding that northern Bandung be cleared of much of its population and serve as a base for the wealthy European elites and its own military. The governor and the national Indonesian administration, which were seeking a compromise with the imperialist powers, agreed to this demand. The city was effectively divided into a northern zone, controlled by the British, and a southern zone, where a newly-established Indonesian police force had authority. At least 100,000 inhabitants of northern Bandung left over the space of several months.

In March 1946, after clashes resumed between colonial troops and nationalist forces, the British extended their demand, issuing an ultimatum for all of Bandung to be cleared of Indonesian militia. In statements to the city authorities, this would be accompanied by an operation to secure British control over all of Bandung.

Facing the prospect of a bloody crackdown, as had occurred in Surabaya, nationalist forces headed by radical independence leader Nasution countered by declaring a general evacuation of southern Bandung on March 24. That evening, public buildings throughout the city and supplies were set alight, in a bid to prevent them from being used by the British and the Dutch. The fire spread rapidly

out of control.

Estimates of the number of residents who fled vary. It was estimated at the time that only 16,000 people remained in northern Bandung, with hardly any in the south, compared to a population before the upheavals of 380,000. Eighteen months later, a visiting journalist would describe it as a “dead city with grass growing in its streets.”

### **100 years ago: United States rejects trade agreement with Soviet Russia**

On March 25, 1921, Charles Evans Hughes, the Secretary of State for the administration of Republican President Warren Harding, rejected the resumption of trade relations between the United States and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In a cable sent to the Soviet government, Hughes stated that discussion on trade could not resume until there was on the part of the Soviets “the recognition of firm guarantees for the right to private property.”

Hughes’s statement was in response to a March 22 letter to President Harding sent by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets proposing discussion on the topic.

The *New York Times* reported that Hughes’s position was the result of extensive discussion by Harding’s cabinet at which Hughes made a two-hour review of the international situation. The *Times* noted the dire economic straits in Soviet Russia and that the decision of the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party to loosen the reins on capitalist property (soon to be known as the New Economic Policy) to revive the Soviet economy had been carefully studied in the State Department.

American officials had been anticipating a trade proposal since the United Kingdom signed a trade agreement with Soviet Russia earlier in March. In January, the US government had deported Ludwig Martens, an unofficial Soviet envoy who was attempting to negotiate trade relations between the two countries.



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