

This week in history: March 29-April 4

28 March 2021

25 years ago: US trade mission flight crashes in the Balkans, killing commerce secretary

On April 3, 1996, a United States Air Force Boeing CT-43A crashed into a mountainside while on an official trade mission to Dubrovnik, Croatia. The craft was carrying United States Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and 34 other people. There were no survivors.

Brown's trip was part of the US attempt to gain economic dominance in the Balkans. Accompanying Brown were a senior Vice President of construction giant Bechtel; an AT&T senior executive; the president and chief executive officer of Asea Brown Boveri Inc., the US subsidiary of the Zurich-based industrial products conglomerate; an executive vice president and head of international banking operations at Riggs National Bank in Washington; and the president of Guardian Industries' glass manufacturing in Europe.

Brown's mission was part of Washington's attempt to use US military predominance to further American economic hegemony in the region. He was meeting with the Croatian and Bosnian regimes to secure deals for US-based firms, largely at the expense of their European competitors.

Their aim was to use the trip and the influence of the US government to negotiate lucrative contracts for the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed by the civil wars in Bosnia and Croatia. The Bosnian government estimated that reconstruction in that state alone would reach around \$47 billion.

Brown's death was a considerable political blow to the Clinton administration. He ran the Commerce Department as a lobbying service for US big business abroad, becoming one of Clinton's key links to corporate America. Brown led similar trade missions of top CEOs to China, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and Africa, in many cases awarding seats on the plane to major Democratic Party contributors.

Brown was an operator within the Democratic Party. He chaired Jesse Jackson's bid for the Democratic nomination in 1988. In the wake of Michael Dukakis's defeat, he became chairman of the Democratic National Committee and was a key organizer of Clinton's 1992 election victory. If it had not been for various investigations into his personal finances throughout the early and mid-1990s, he likely would have played a more prominent role in the reelection campaign.

Soviet Union opens in Moscow

In Moscow on March 30, 1971, the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union opened. The congress saw about 5,000 delegates of the Stalinist bureaucracy gather in the Soviet capital to present the political position of the party and formally affirm the ninth "Five Year Plan."

Despite the pompous displays and speeches, the congress gathered at a time of immense crisis for the Stalinist leadership. The congress itself was delayed by one year amid vast conflicts both with the capitalist world and within the Soviet sphere of influence. Under conditions of working-class uprisings and national liberation struggles in every corner of the world, the Communist Party affirmed their commitment to be a bulwark against revolution and to negotiate concessions with world capitalism.

Leonid Brezhnev, the general secretary of the party, gave an opening report that outlined the Stalinist perspective on recent developments. He made clear that the party's main concern would be to crush any opposition that might threaten the privileges of the bureaucracy in the USSR, and, more implicitly, to assist imperialism in suppressing the revolutionary upsurges brewing in the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe.

Speaking on the war in Vietnam, the Stalinists issued the usual platitudes declaring opposition to the US war. However, in nearly the same breath they announced their willingness to negotiate a settlement that would create a coalition government in South Vietnam that would allow the US to maintain a foothold. This in spite of the undeniable defeats of the US invasions of Laos and Cambodia and the increasingly likelihood of their defeat by the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front forces.

On Czechoslovakia, Brezhnev attempted to defend the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion. He denounced the workers and youth who rose up against the bureaucracy as "counter revolutionary." Brezhnev said, "It was quite clear to us that this was not only an attempt on the part of imperialism and its accomplices to overthrow the socialist system in Czechoslovakia."

Brezhnev also declared his willingness to enter into a confrontation with the rival Stalinist bureaucracy that ruled China. In 1969 a number of skirmishes had broken out between Soviet and Chinese military forces over disputed border regions. Brezhnev called the orientation of the Chinese Communist Party "anti-Soviet" and reiterated that, "We shall never forsake the national interests of the Soviet state."

In regard to the United States, the Congress made clear that at every turn it would be prepared to negotiate concessions. Brezhnev

50 years ago: 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the

affirmed that bureaucracy's goal "with respect to the capitalist countries, including the U.S.A., is consistently and fully to practice the principles of peaceful coexistence, to develop mutually advantageous ties, and co-operate with states prepared to do so."

75 years ago: Anne Frank's diary publicly announced

On April 3, 1946, Jan Romein, a prominent Dutch historian, made the existence of Anne Frank's diary publicly known for the first time in a frontpage article for *Het Parool*, a daily newspaper associated with the anti-fascist resistance.

Under the headline, "A Child's Voice," Romein wrote: "[T]his apparently inconsequential diary by a child ... stammered out in a child's voice, embodies all the hideousness of fascism, more so than all the evidence at Nuremberg put together."

The historian, who did not name Anne Frank, added: "When I finished the book, it was night and I was amazed that the lights were still on, that there was bread and tea, that I did not hear the roaring of airplanes or the thumping of soldiers' boots in the street—I had been captivated and taken back to the unreal world that is now almost a year behind us."

Frank had written the diary between 1942 and 1944, while in hiding from the German Nazi forces occupying the Netherlands. In 1940, when the Nazis invaded, the Frank family was unable to leave the country. In July 1942, as mass deportations of the Jewish population to the concentration camps began, they took refuge in concealed rooms behind the family business owned by Anne's father Otto Frank. With his business partner joining them, a total of eight people lived in the cramped quarters for two years, with the secret aid of friends, colleagues and opponents of the Nazis.

In August 1944, they were discovered by the Nazi Gestapo. Anne Frank died of typhus at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northwestern Germany shortly before her 16th birthday. Her mother and sister were killed at Auschwitz.

With the defeat of the Nazis in May 1945, Otto Frank was the only member of their immediate family to have survived the Holocaust. He was given Anne's diary by Miep Gies, who had aided the family and rescued the document after the Gestapo raid. Frank gave the diary to Annie Romein-Verschoor, who unsuccessfully sought to have it published.

She then showed it to her husband Jan Romein, resulting in the *Her Parool* article. The diary was published in Dutch the next year, followed by five more print runs to 1950. Translations received large audiences over the next several years in the United States, France and Germany, while the first edition published in Japan rapidly sold out, with more than 100,000 copies distributed. The diary has since become known to millions as a powerful and moving exposure of the barbarity of fascism and the courage and humanity of its victims.

strike

On March 31, 1921, the British government of David Lloyd George declared a state of emergency after coal miners struck at midnight that morning. The strike, organized by the Miners Federation of Great Britain, had been called in response to the decision to return control of the mines, which had been operated by the government during the First World War, back to the owners. It was widely anticipated that the mine owners would lower wages.

According to press reports, despite the state of emergency, the government had no plans to send troops to the mines, although there was the possibility that the mines might be flooded because pump-workers had joined the strike.

Railways were due to be returned to control of private owners in August.

Militancy was running high in the British working class. Over 1 million workers were unemployed and the working class had had already gone through a massive postwar strike wave and such experiences as the Battle of George Square in Glasgow in 1919, and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The principal question was if two unions, the National Transport Workers' Federation (comprised of dockworkers, seamen, tram drivers and other workers) and the National Union of Railwaymen, which, together with the Miners Federation, comprised the Triple Alliance, would join the strike. The Alliance had been created in 1914 to coordinate common industrial action but had been quiescent during the war when many industries came under government control.

By April 3, mass meetings of transport and railway workers had passed resolutions of support for the miners. Nevertheless, the miners—and the working class as a whole—suffered a blow on April 15 when the transport and railway union leaders decided not to join the strike, under the claim that striking against wage reduction in time of high unemployment was difficult. Some local unions disobeyed the national leadership and struck, particularly in Scotland, and dockers engaged in a month-long strike against wage reductions.

However, the betrayal by the Transport and Railway unions destroyed the Triple Alliance. The decision was so unpopular in the working class that April 15 came to be known as "Black Friday." Memory of the event was a factor in the development of the 1926 general strike.



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100 years ago: Britain declares state of emergency over miners