

# This week in history: April 5–11

4 April 2021

**25 years ago: Fighting breaks out in Monrovia**

On April 6, 1996, fighting broke out between rival militias in Liberia. Some 20,000 civilians took refuge at the United States embassy to escape the bloody battles, and in the following weeks hundreds of civilians were killed and much of downtown Monrovia was destroyed.

The fighting began when the Council of State—a temporary governing body implemented in the run-up to elections, including Charles Taylor and Alhaji Kromah—ordered its forces to arrest General Roosevelt Johnson of the United Liberation Movement (ULIMO-J) on charges of murder. Reports had been circulating since January claiming that his forces were responsible for the massacre of 50 civilians. Johnson was not given a seat on the Council of State and staged an occupation of the Barclay Training Center, which erupted in street fighting.

Approximately 3,000 US Marines were deployed aboard ships in waters off the Liberian coast, and 276 heavily armed troops were deployed on the ground to the US embassy. By the end of the month, the US forces would go into action in the country.

The renewed outbreak of civil war marked the collapse of the previous US strategy of relying on a West African peace-keeping force, comprised mainly of Nigerian troops, to stabilize Liberia. Press reports said that the peace-keeping troops were poorly fed and largely demoralized, with many soldiers joining teenage Liberian militia fighters in a campaign of looting.

In place of the West African force, the Clinton administration prepared to use American troops. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Twadell arrived in Liberia at the end of April as a virtual US pro-consul, meeting with militia leaders Taylor and Kromah and threatening destruction for anyone who violated the terms decreed by Washington. “Should anyone seize power by force,” he warned, “my government will seek to ostracize and isolate that leader and any illegal government that might ensue.”

Twadell announced that the Clinton administration would provide up to \$30 million to finance the West African force, which maintained nearly 10,000 troops in Liberia.

**50 years ago: Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna launches**

**uprising in Ceylon**

On April 5, 1971, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) launched an uprising against the government of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The uprising was focused in the rural areas where the JVP maintained most of its support and lasted until June. The response of the Ceylonese “united front” government was a brutal crackdown against not just the JVP but all left-wing political parties.

The JVP formed in 1965 out of a split in the Maoist wing of the Ceylon Communist Party. Dubbing itself the “Che Guevara movement,” the JVP hoped to emulate Latin American petty-bourgeois radicals by engaging in a series of bombings and kidnappings as a substitute for mobilizing the working class.

After years of the coalition government of Prime Minister Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the JVP had expanded its membership, particularly in the rural regions of Ceylon among peasants. After 1964, when the ex-Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) entered into the cabinet of the bourgeoisie and Stalinist coalition, the official “left” parties lost immense support among huge sections of the population. In that context, the JVP recruited heavily among layers of the disoriented peasantry and students.

The 1971 insurrection attempt was poorly coordinated with a strategy that heavily rested on a spontaneous rallying of the population to the JVP. However, the coalition government was initially caught unprepared. The JVP set off bombs at a number of police stations, seized one major armory, and captured large areas that had not been defended by the government.

Once it had collected itself, the Bandaranaike government declared a state of emergency and appealed for imperialist intervention to help suppress the uprising. Notably, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, India, and Pakistan all sent military aid to Bandaranaike. By June the rebellion had been crushed.

What followed was a sweeping repression in Ceylon targeting all the remaining left-wing parties regardless of their involvement in the uprising. Around 15,000, mainly youth, were killed by the government initially, with anyone who was suspected of being a socialist becoming a target for arrest.

The Trotskyist movement in Ceylon, the Revolutionary Communist League, was heavily targeted and forced to go underground after 1971. The party opposed the mass repression

and the slaughter of JVP youth, despite profound political differences. It was declared illegal by Bandaranaike, its headquarters were raided, and many members were arrested and killed by the police.

### **75 years ago: Japanese soldiers convicted of war crimes against Australian POWs**

On April 6, 1946, an Australian tribunal found army captain Susumi Hoshijima guilty of overseeing war crimes committed against detainees at Japan's Sandakan prisoner-of-war camp in the Malaysian state of Sabah. On the same day, Captain Takakuwa Takuo was executed after having been previously convicted of presiding over "death marches" of prisoners from Sandakan to Ranau in the final stages of World War II.

The widely-reported hearings that resulted in their convictions were among a series of trials conducted by Australian military authorities in Labuan, near where the Sandakan camp had been located. In the space of several months, 128 Japanese military officials and soldiers were found guilty of violations of international law.

In July 1942, Japan brought some 1,500 Australian POWs, most captured from Singapore, to the Sandakan camp. They were set to build a military airfield on Sabah, which was viewed as strategically crucial for Japan's efforts to dominate the Pacific. More Australian troops would be transferred to the camp, as well as over 700 British soldiers, bringing its population to a height of 2,500.

Soldiers testified at the Labuan hearing that Hoshijima, who had been in charge of Sandakan, presided over torture, including the use of electric shocks and waterboarding. Prisoners accused of infractions were frequently placed in small cages. The conditions worsened as positions conquered by the Japanese, including in Malaysia, were threatened by the US and its allies.

By 1944, hunger was endemic in the camp, combining with malaria and other tropical diseases to result in the deaths of hundreds. Australian prosecutors alleged that Hoshijima deliberately withheld food from detainees, and that the shortages were a result of deliberate policy, a contention that continues to be debated.

In January 1945, as the Allied bombardment made further construction of the airfield impossible, 455 prisoners were sent on a forced march hundreds of kilometres towards Ranau. Another 536 were dispatched in May followed by 75 in June. Without adequate supplies, most perished, while others were reportedly shot dead by Japanese soldiers. While the majority of those sent on the marches were Australian soldiers, only six of them survived.

### **100 years ago: British imperialism creates Emirate of Transjordan**

On April 11, 1921, the British created the Emirate of Transjordan, a British protectorate ruled by Abdullah bin Hussein, which included parts of today's Jordan and Syria.

The creation of Transjordan was a part of the imperialist division of the former Ottoman territories with the French. Abdullah had been one of the leaders of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War I and an ally of the British.

The French had defeated the nationalist Arab Kingdom of Syria in July 1920 and the British had quelled the Iraqi Revolt that year, laying the basis of the modern nation-state system of the Middle East.

Under the leadership of the Winston Churchill, the colonial secretary, Britain arranged the administration of their territories in the secret Cairo Conference of March 1921. In addition to making Abdullah emir of Transjordan, the British bestowed the Kingdom of Iraq on his brother Faisal and allowed Jewish immigration to Palestine to continue. The British also agreed to sanction the French control of Lebanon and Syria. The Cairo Conference, in essence, confirmed the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between the two imperialist powers.

On March 28, 1921, Churchill had met with Abdullah to assure him that Jewish immigration to Palestine would not displace the Arab population and have no impact on Transjordan. In return, the British asked Abdullah to restrain anti-French Arab nationalists. The British granted Abdullah a subsidy of 5,000 pounds a month.



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