

This week in history: April 11-17

10 April 2022

25 years ago: Italian troops land in Albania

On April 14, 1997, Italian troops crossed the Adriatic Sea and landed in Albania for the first time since Mussolini's invasion 50 years prior, ostensibly to bring "stability" to Europe's poorest country, which had been devastated by the restoration of capitalism in the early 1990s. The bulk of the 6,000-strong European "Operation Alba" intervention force, operating under a United Nations mandate, was drawn from Italy, which ruled Albania as a conquered territory from 1939 to 1943, during World War II.

In the preceding months, protests and looting had led to the near dissolution of the Albanian state. Demonstrations had erupted after many workers had been swindled out of their life savings through government-backed pyramid schemes. The protests escalated into a full-scale uprising in which armed rebels had taken control of approximately one third of the country.

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi arrived at the Albanian port city of Vlore on April 13, after a short helicopter ride across the Adriatic. He was accompanied by King Lena I, son of the late King Zog, who lived in exile in South Africa throughout his life and was welcomed by Albanian President Sali Ram Berisha. Prodi addressed a crowd of 10,000 Albanians, many of whom cheered his claim that the intervention would bring peace to the country. Italian Defense Minister Beniamino Andreatta warned that if the troops were attacked during peace-keeping operations they would open fire.

The first major overseas military intervention undertaken by Italy since the defeat of fascism was politically enabled by the two factions of the former Communist Party (PCI), which provided the bulk of the Olive Tree Coalition, the parliamentary supporters of the Prodi government. In a key parliamentary test of the decision to send the troops, the Party of the Democratic Left, by far the largest of the two Stalinist factions, voted with the government. The Rifondazione Comunista, the lesser faction, voted against sending troops, but only after RC leader Fausto Bertinotti was sure that Prodi would still obtain a majority from the votes of right-wing opposition parties like the Forza Italia of billionaire Silvio Berlusconi.

The pseudo-left groups in Italy for the most part joined the RC and shared responsibility for its decision to prop up the Prodi government, which had carried out right-wing austerity policies.

On April 11, 1972, over 210,000 public sector workers in Quebec began a general strike against the government, bringing much of the province to a standstill. Strike organizers demanded that the government provide a \$100 a week minimum wage, an 8 percent raise to match the inflation rate, job security guarantees, and equal treatment of male and female workers.

The strike involved workers from three unions—the Quebec Teachers' Corporation, the Quebec Federation of Labor, and the Confederation of National Trade Unions—that had recently formed an alliance called the Common Front. The organizations began holding joint meetings of the various public services workers in 1971, when a strike at the *La Presse* newspaper was suppressed by police. This, as well as the police killing of 28-year-old student protester Michèle Gauthier in October 1971, galvanized workers, especially the youthful rank-and-file, which had been radicalized by the Vietnam War and the May 1968 general strike in France.

The unions had hoped that they could reach an agreement with the government without a strike. However, the Quebec government of Liberal Prime Minister Robert Bourassa, who had put the province under martial law during the Crisis of 1970, refused to give any response. Even after a limited 24-hour strike on March 28 and an announcement that the union would be willing to negotiate the wage demand, Bourassa's government still refused to meet.

The government responded to the strike by arresting militant workers and passing a bill making strikes by public sector workers illegal. Despite massive working class support, the union heads laid down and accepted defeat, ordering workers to end the strike after 11 days. Bourassa's government took this as an opportunity to destroy the Common Front movement, and on May 9 he had arrested the heads each of the three unions. Outraged workers responded with a second and even more explosive general strike, involving hundreds of thousands. Street fighting with police was common, and the homes of some government officials were firebombed. In some small towns workers drove out local government officials and took control of radio stations, broadcasting news and calls of support for the strike.

On May 20, the government came to an agreement with the Common Front, establishing the \$100 per week minimum wage, but providing only a 5.5 percent general wage increase—an actual pay cut, given inflation—with no language for job security or equal pay for equal work.

50 years ago: Quebec general strike shakes Canada

75 years ago: Texas ammonium nitrate explosion triggers worst industrial accident in US history

On April 16, 1947, a fire onboard the SS Grandcamp, a cargo ship docked in the Texas City port, ignited ammonium nitrate stocks that it was carrying. The ensuing series of explosions and massive fire claimed the lives of at least 581 people, the deadliest industrial accident in the history of the United States.

The Grandcamp had served as a US Navy cargo ship during World War II. After having been mothballed, it was given to France to help in that country's post-war reconstruction, though it was carrying American cargo. Its load included 2,300 tons of ammonium nitrate, used for both fertilizer and explosives for mining. The highly explosive material was transported and stored at a high temperature, increasing its chemical activity.

At around 8 a.m. on April 16, smoke was spotted in the vessel's cargo hold. Attempts to extinguish it with water failed. The captain then ordered all hatches to be shut while the cargo area was filled with steam. This likely exacerbated the crisis by increasing the heat in the cargo hold and potentially converting the ammonium nitrate to nitrous oxide. At 9:12 a.m., the entire ship exploded. The blast triggered a 15-foot wave and destroyed approximately 1,000 nearby buildings. Ships also docked in the port were also ignited. Among them was the High Flyer, another cargo ship carrying ammonium nitrate. It later exploded, destroying two more vessels close by. A number of chemical plants, manufacturing facilities, industrial warehouses and an oil hold were also set ablaze on land, triggering widespread fires.

The disaster was of a scale that can only be compared with war. Of those killed, 63 bodies were never identified. Another 113 of the victims were listed as missing, because no remains were ever found. The accident decimated the Texas City fire department, with all but one of its frontline members perishing, many of them in the fires on land. Over 5,000 people were injured, with 1,784 admitted to 21 hospitals in the area. The seaport was destroyed, together with more than 500 houses, leaving an estimated 2,000 people homeless.

None of the corporations or government agencies involved were held legally responsible for the disaster.

100 years ago: Two leading figures in Armenian genocide assassinated

On April 17, 1922, two members of the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), Arshavir Shirakian and Aram Yerganian, assassinated Cemal Azmi and Bahaeddin Shakir, Turkish exiles in Berlin who had played leading roles in the 1915 genocide of nearly 2 million Armenians in Turkey.

Azmi was a founding member of the party the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), one of the factions of the "Young Turk" movement that ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I and conducted the genocide. He had been the governor of the Ottoman province of Trebizond in the northeast of what is now Turkey, along the Black Sea. One observer noted in 1915 that Azmi had thousands of Armenian women and children placed on a barge in the Black Sea and capsized, drowning all aboard. Azmi

and his family allegedly grew rich off the confiscated property of Armenians he had displaced and killed. In the aftermath of the war Azmi was condemned to death in a Turkish military court martial for his role in the genocide.

Shakir was also a founding member of the CUP and its paramilitary Special Organization, which played a key role in conducting the Armenian genocide. In March 1915 he wrote in a letter that the CUP intended "to annihilate all of the Armenians living within Turkey, not to allow a single one to remain.... On the question of how this killing and massacring will be carried out, the [central] government will give the necessary instructions to the provincial governors and army commanders."

Because there were no international extradition treaties for war crimes at the time in Europe, both Shakir and Azmi were able to live openly in Berlin.

In 1919, the ARF, also known as the Dashnaks, one of the oldest Armenian political parties, and a bourgeois nationalist organization that opposed the establishment of Soviet Armenia in 1920, decided to conduct Operation Nemesis in which perpetrators of the genocide would be assassinated. Arshavir Shirakian and Aram Yerganian were assigned to eliminate Azmi and Shakir. Shirakian and Yerganian encountered the two walking with their families in an upscale residential district in Berlin. Shirakian killed Azmi and wounded Shakir. Yerganian pursued Shakir and killed him.

The two assassins were never apprehended, but the German police rounded up dozens of Armenians in the following days.



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