

# This week in history: April 18-24

17 April 2022

## 25 years ago: Oklahoma City bombing trial opens

On April 24, 1997, opening statements were delivered in the trial of Timothy McVeigh for the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, which killed 168 people, including 30 children. McVeigh was facing the death penalty, indicted on 160 state offenses and 11 federal offenses. The identities of the jurors were kept secret by court order, and the panel sat behind a wall which blocked trial spectators from seeing them.

Until the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the Oklahoma City bombing was the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil. A further 680 people were injured, and the attack destroyed over a third of the building, ruined hundreds of buildings on the surrounding blocks, and caused \$652 million in damage.

Lead prosecutor Joseph Hartzler cited several expressions of McVeigh's extreme right-wing views in order to demonstrate the political motivation for the bombing. At the time of his arrest, McVeigh was wearing a shirt celebrating the assassination of US President Abraham Lincoln. He was also carrying extracts from *The Turner Diaries*, a fascist and anti-Semitic novel in which the hero blows up a federal building with a truck bomb similar to the one he used in the Oklahoma City attack. McVeigh's stated motivation was revenge against the federal government for the siege of the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas, just two years prior.

Defense attorney Steven Jones claimed in his opening statement that the identification of McVeigh as the bomber was the product of false testimony by witnesses who were coerced by the government or influenced by pre-trial publicity. He also cited reports of systematic mishandling of physical evidence by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) laboratory.

The first major piece of evidence, the axle of the Ryder truck that carried the bomb, was to be introduced after the first few witnesses testified about the impact of the bomb blast. McVeigh had been identified by a clerk as the man who rented the truck.

He was eventually found guilty on all counts and sentenced to death. He was executed by lethal injection at the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Indiana, on June 11, 2001, six years after the Oklahoma City bombing.

## 50 years ago: Anti-war protests erupt at US colleges

During the week of April 18, 1972, a new wave of anti-war

protests swept through colleges and universities throughout the United States.

The demonstrations were sparked by news that the United States had begun a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam as retaliation for the Easter Offensive that was making steady progress retaking territory in the south and was encroaching on Saigon itself, capital of the US-backed puppet regime of South Vietnam. The US bombings largely targeted civilian areas resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Vietnamese non-combatants.

At several campuses the protests turned violent after police and national guard forces were deployed to suppress the students. Particularly intense clashes were reported at Columbia, Harvard, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Maryland.

Students at Harvard broke into the Center for International Affairs before police removed them and imposed a curfew. At Columbia 2,000 students walked out of classes and called for a strike to last until the war was ended. Over 4,000 joined the demonstration at the University of Wisconsin protest with some students throwing red paint on the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) building.

The demonstrations were particularly intense at the University of Maryland. There, the students also targeted the ROTC building, with some making attempts to burn it down. Several thousand came out to call for an end to the war and occupied a campus building. In scenes reminiscent of attacks against civil rights demonstrators, Maryland State Police were called and used clubs, gas, and even dogs against the student anti-war protestors. In the aftermath, hundreds of National Guard troops were deployed to occupy the campus and arrested over 150 students.

Most of the demonstrations were led by middle class protest organizations like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Maoist-oriented Progressive Labor Party (PLP). While claiming to support the revolutionary struggle of Vietnamese workers and peasants against imperialism, these groups offered no political way forward for students beyond appealing to the Nixon administration or the Democratic Party to end the war.

The exception was a demonstration on April 22 organized by the Young Socialists (YS), the youth movement of the Workers League, the predecessors to the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party.

Over 400 workers and youth came out to join the Young Socialist demonstration in New York City. The YS called for victory to the NLF against imperialism and for American antiwar protesters to turn to the working class and fight to build a revolutionary leadership as the method to end the war. One speaker from the Workers League told the crowd, "The spectacular victories of the NLF in South Vietnam are the sharpest

expression of the offensive of the international working class against capitalism. This powerful movement of the working class can be seen in this country as millions of workers fight Nixon's Pay Board."

### **75 years ago: Trial of Nazi industrialists begins in Nuremberg**

On April 19, 1947, six leading German industrialists were brought to the dock in Nuremberg, accused of participating in Nazi war crimes. The trial was the one of several involving charges against the leading personnel of major German businesses that had collaborated with Hitler's Third Reich. It was a US military tribunal conducted by American judges, which followed the main Nuremberg Tribunal involving all four of the Allied powers, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, as well as the United States. The trial also took place in Nuremberg because that city was part of the American-occupied zone in Germany.

The defendants in the April trial included Friedrich Flick and five high-ranking directors of his group of companies which operated as Flick Kommanditgesellschaft, or Flick KG. Flick had been a financial supporter of the Nazi party from shortly after its seizure of power in 1933. He and his associates also allegedly benefited from the Nazi regime's racialist expropriations of businesses owned by Jews. Flick's network of mines and industrial enterprises had played a crucial role in Nazi armament.

The charges against Flick were confined to the years of the Second World War. He and his co-defendants were accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, by participating in the enslavement of occupied peoples and their abuse as slave laborers; the plundering and spoilation of occupied territories, including the acquisition of plants and facilities in countries seized by the Nazis; the persecution of Jews and "aryanization" of property; membership of the Nazi party and the high-ranking Circle of Friends of Himmler group, and participation in a criminal organization, the Nazi SS.

The court dismissed the count on benefiting from the persecution of Jewish businesses, as the Nazi expropriations had occurred before the war. Three of the defendants were acquitted of all charges, two others were only found guilty of a minority of the offenses listed and were given lenient sentences.

Flick was found culpable on three of the counts, including for war crimes. He was sentenced to just seven years, with consideration for time served. Flick did not do even this time, being released in 1950 based on an amnesty. By the end of the decade and less than 15 years after the conclusion of the war, he had rebuilt his fortune and was among the richest people in West Germany.

### **100 years ago: American Communist leader released from prison**

On April 24, 1922, C. E. Ruthenberg, the Executive Secretary of the Communist Party of America, was released on a \$5,000 bond from the New York State Penitentiary in Dannemora, a maximum-security prison, after serving nearly two years of a five-year sentence.

Ruthenberg had been arrested in Chicago in 1919 at the request of New York authorities for violating the state's 1902 Criminal Anarchy Law. There had been no arrests under this law for 17 years when it was resurrected as a part of a broad witch-hunt of leftists and immigrants best known for the mass arrests under the notorious Palmer Raids, instigated by US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and carried out by future FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover.

Ruthenberg had been a part of the Left Wing faction of the Socialist Party and worked with leaders such as Louis Fraina to publish the *Revolutionary Age*, the first newspaper in the United States to support the goals of Bolshevism. The Left Wing, particularly its stance against imperialist war, had been influenced by Leon Trotsky during his exile in New York City in 1917, before he returned to Russia to lead the October Revolution with Lenin.

Tried in October 1920 with fellow Communist I. E. Ferguson, Ruthenberg was subjected to an examination on the principles of socialism and the reasons for their affiliation with the socialist movement. In his statement to the court, Ruthenberg said, "I go to prison because of support of a great principle that will triumph in spite of all the courts, in spite of all the organizations of the capitalist class."

A rally on May 13 in New York City of over 3,000 celebrated his release from prison.



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