

This week in history: March 18-24

17 March 2024

25 years ago: Nadezhda Joffe, daughter of Soviet Trotskyist leader, dies at 92

On March 18, 1999, Nadezhda A. Joffe, a member of Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition, survivor of Stalin's labor camps and author of the extraordinary memoir *Back in Time: My Life, My Fate, My Epoch*, died at a Brooklyn hospital. Nadezhda first suffered a stroke on February 9. While hospitalized she had two additional strokes and died after falling into a coma for a week. She was 92 years old.

The English translation of her memoirs was published by Mehring Books, the publishing house of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in 1995 and the Socialist Equality Party, the American section of the ICFI, held a successful book-launch event in New York City at which Nadezhda appeared and spoke about her experiences.

She was the daughter of Adolf Abramovich Joffe, a leader of the 1917 October Revolution. He served under Leon Trotsky's leadership on the Military-Revolutionary Committee that overthrew the bourgeois Provisional Government and established the Soviet state. Following the revolution, he was one of its most outstanding Soviet diplomats and formed part of the delegation for peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk. Joffe's diplomatic activity took him to Germany, China and Japan. Along with Trotsky, he was an early opponent of the newly emerging Stalinist bureaucracy in the 1920s. Severely ill and prevented by the Stalin faction from seeking treatment abroad, he committed suicide in November 1927 to protest Trotsky's expulsion from the Communist Party.

A committed socialist, Nadezhda became a member of the Left Opposition soon after its founding in 1923. Her remarkable memoir *Back in Time* provides a vivid account of Soviet life during the 1920s and explains why many, like herself, sought to defend Marxist principles. Evoking the sentiments of an entire generation during that period, Nadezhda wrote, "We wanted nothing for ourselves, we all wanted just one thing: the world revolution and happiness for all. And if it were necessary to give up our lives to achieve this, then we would have done so without hesitating."

The heart of her memoirs concerns the nightmarish years of the late 1930s, during which Stalin oversaw the physical extermination of socialist intellectuals and workers in the USSR. Nadezhda was first arrested and deported for several years as an Oppositionist in 1929. A far more brutal period began with her second arrest and deportation to the Kolyma region in Siberia in 1936. Here, Left Oppositionists, intellectuals, workers and peasants died by the hundreds of thousands in conditions of back-breaking labor and deprivation. Her first husband and political collaborator, Pavel Kossakovsky, was murdered in Kolyma in 1938.

Nadezhda's life represented the triumph of principle and human

decency over repression by the Stalinist terror machine. Nadezhda celebrated her 90th birthday with family and friends at a gathering in Brooklyn in 1996.

50 years ago: Arab oil embargo ends

On March 18, 1974, the members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) ended the oil embargo that had been placed on the United States and NATO-aligned countries. Beginning in October of 1973 the embargo had stopped all exports of oil to countries that backed Israel in the Yom Kippur War against Egypt and Syria.

The embargo was launched amid a period of setbacks for imperialism. The US defeat in Vietnam, international strike waves, including the UK miners' strike that brought down the Torry government, the inflationary crisis sparked by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in August 1971, when US President Richard Nixon severed the tie between the dollar and gold, and the Watergate scandal, when Nixon was forced to resign in 1974, all had contributed to a period of immense crisis.

In this context, the embargo dealt another heavy blow. In a matter of weeks, the price of crude oil jumped from less than \$30 per gallon to nearly \$70. With prices already rising at a high level of 9 percent in 1973, the oil embargo contributed to a further inflationary spike to over 12 percent in 1974.

In desperate attempts to offset the impact of the embargo, the affected governments imposed strict rationing measures on gasoline sales and other limitations to force the working class to pay for the crisis. However, workers refused to accept losses to their living standards and launched militant strikes across many industries.

To deal with the crisis, Nixon's initial preference was to launch an all-out offensive, both against the working class domestically by crushing strikes through police-state measures, and in the Middle East by supporting the Israeli war effort, invading and occupying the Arab oil-producing countries, thus using military force to end the oil embargo. Nixon went so far as to have Pentagon officials draw up logistical plans for such an invasion.

However, the administration calculated that such a decision would be massively unpopular and carried the potential of a revolutionary response from the working class. Nixon opted to grant limited concessions to the Arab bourgeois governments to stabilize the situation while also driving a wedge between the different Arab nations.

The agreement to end the oil embargo was bound up in the terms of the ceasefire negotiated between Israel and Egypt, with Henry Kissinger serving as lead mediator. It was decided that control over

the critically important Suez Canal would be returned to Egypt in exchange for an end to the embargo.

However, the conflict between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights was not included in these initial negotiations and was treated separately. This allowed the US and Israel to regroup and stabilize their forces as the flow of oil returned to normal and Israeli troops engaged against Egypt could be sent to the Golan front. Nor were any provisions made for Palestinians displaced by or living under Israeli occupation.

The strategy advanced by the US in the Middle East was to break up the alliances between the Arab countries by granting favorable concessions to the more powerful nations like Egypt and oil rich Saudi Arabia while remaining hostile to others. The oil embargo undeniably shook the world capitalist economy in a period of financial crisis. But its ultimate orientation was to appeal to American capitalism to cut a deal, not to oust imperialism from the Middle East entirely. Nixon was willing to accept these terms to help stabilize his own crisis while also laying the foundation for future imperialist plunder of the region.

75 years ago: Anti-fascists clash with Mosley's Union Movement in East London

On March 20, 1949, a parade of the Union Movement was disrupted in East London, as communists, socialists and defenders of democratic rights opposed its attempts to rehabilitate fascism in post-war Britain. The Union Movement had been formed in 1948 by Oswald Mosley, the notorious British aristocrat who had led the Nazi-aligned British Union of Fascists in the 1930s.

A dispatch from the Associated Press described the clashes as “the fiercest seen in London for 13 years.” It reported, “Shortly before the march 2,000 anti-fascists lined Kingsland Road, the main thoroughfare in the East End, shouting ‘down with Fascism’ and ‘They shall not march.’”

The police attempted to give the fascists protection. “Police cleared the area and diverted the marchers from Kingsland Road through a back street, preceded by a police radio car, a three-ton lorry and flanked by police at intervals of one yard. In the rear were a dozen mounted police, 200 police on foot, and three motor loads of constables.”

Despite the major state operation, the protesters effectively blocked the demonstration. They reportedly clashed with police, eight of whom were injured with bottles and other projectiles. Thirty-five protesters, described in the press as communists, were arrested, but none of the fascists. The day after the clashes, the Labour government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee decreed a ban on all political demonstrations in London for three days, in a significant attack on democratic rights.

Mosley had come to prominence in the 1930s. His British Union of Fascists held Nuremberg-style rallies, where he would ape the demagogic style and fascist rhetoric of Hitler and Mussolini. They would also stage fascist marches through working class neighborhoods, targeting Jews. Famously, in the Battle of Cable Street, workers, socialists, communists and Jewish people fought a Mosley-led demonstration which was held in East London.

Mosley's activities in the 1930s were the most blatant expression of the alignment of a layer of the British ruling elite behind fascism,

stemming from their hostility to the prospect of socialist revolution. He was marginalized when the prospects of a deal with Hitler, backed by significant segments of the British bourgeoisie, fell apart and war broke out. Mosley was imprisoned in 1940 for several years. After the war, he unified several far-right groups and rebranded his organization as a “Union Movement.” It included calls for European-wide unity, along with the old fascist rhetoric of vicious antisemitism and anti-communism.

100 years ago: Virginia passes Racial Integrity Act

On March 20, 1924, the Virginia General Assembly passed two of the most reactionary measures legislated since the Civil War.

The first was the Racial Integrity Act, which provided that all citizens of Virginia be designated on their birth certificates and marriage certificates as either “colored” or “white.” The act was designed to prevent the intermarriage of blacks and whites and to strictly enforce racial segregation.

The act defined a “white” person as one “who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian.” African Americans and Native Americans were defined as “colored,” although a provision, the notorious “Pocahontas Clause” was introduced into the law that allowed citizens of 1/16 or less Native American ancestry to be considered white, largely because some Virginia old colonial First Families claimed descent from the Native American princess.

The legislation had been drafted and promoted by Walter Plecker, a physician and the first registrar of the Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics. Plecker was a white supremacist and eugenicist who had helped to found the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America in 1922. In 1930 he persuaded the US Census Bureau to drop the category “mulatto” from its surveys. He was a sympathizer of the Nazi eugenics program and in correspondence with leaders of the program.

The Racial Integrity Act and subsequent racist laws remained in force until the 1967 Supreme Court ruling *Loving v. Virginia*.

The second piece of reactionary legislation enacted in Virginia in 1924 was the Eugenicist Sterilization Act which provided for the institutionalization or sterilization of any person who was “afflicted with hereditary forms of insanity that are recurrent, idiocy, imbecility, feeble-mindedness or epilepsy.”

The law was inspired by the work of Harry H. Laughlin, director of the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, New York, who had drafted a “Model Eugenic Sterilization Law” in Chapter XV of his 1922 book, *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*. While some 15 states adopted laws inspired by Lawson, Virginia was one of the few in which it was enforced.



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