

This week in history: March 25-31

24 March 2024

25 years ago: Paramilitary sharpshooters kill demonstrators in Paraguay after VP assassination

On March 26, 1999, paramilitary sharpshooters killed six demonstrators and wounded scores of others occupying the Plaza de Armas outside the Paraguayan Congress following the assassination of Vice President Luis María Argaña on March 23.

The assassination was the immediate trigger for the intense crisis and violent clashes, but the killing itself had its source in the bitter internecine warfare within Paraguay's narrow ruling clique, the product of the unresolved conflicts between the political heirs to dictator Alfredo Stroessner and the extreme backwardness and corruption of the country's capitalist economy.

While the crisis saw popular mass protests, a general strike and shocking bloodshed, its resolution was the working out of a protracted power struggle within the Colorado Party, the political machine built up by Stroessner during his 45-year military dictatorship.

While the resistance of the demonstrators, led by the so-called Youth for Democracy, an amorphous group that included factions of the ruling Colorados, was widely credited with preventing a seizure of power by the military and even greater loss of life, the outcome of these events was influenced decisively by direct pressure on the part of the US embassy, as well as an aggressive intervention by the Brazilian government aimed at achieving a political settlement within the ruling elite and an "orderly" end to the tumult in the streets.

The intra-party conflicts that erupted into bloodshed and provided the impetus for mass popular protests dated back to the former regime of President Juan Carlos Wasmosy, the country's first civilian leader following the ouster of Stroessner.

When Argaña was assassinated by three gunmen dressed in camouflage fatigues, the vice president's Colorado supporters as well as opposition parties in Congress charged President Raul Cubas Grau and his political ally General Lino Oviedo with ordering the murder. The protesters took up their position outside the legislature to defend the impeachment proceedings against what was seen as an imminent military coup.

Supporters of Cubas (who was forced to resign and leave the country for exile in Brazil) and General Oviedo (also forced to flee) claimed that the assassination was the work of a mafia inside the Colorado Party linked to former President Wasmosy and was aimed at destabilizing the government. The US embassy in Asunción played a key role in brokering an agreement between Cubas, the military and the congressional opposition that led to the defusing of the near-civil war confrontation.

50 years ago: Federal grand jury indicts eight National Guardsmen for Kent State massacre

On March 29, 1974, a United States federal grand jury indicted eight National Guardsmen in connection to the killing of four students and

injuring nine others during an anti-war protest at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. The eight men were charged with violating the civil rights of the massacred students.

Nearly four years after the massacre took place, the indictments came only after relentless protests from the families of the victims and their supporters. Yet even as the charges were being brought, it was clear a major whitewashing operation was underway. Most notably, the indictments only targeted the individual soldiers who opened fire on the students. Despite widespread calls for an investigation into the orders issued to the National Guard, the officers in command during the massacre and the public officials who sent the troops to the campus, the prosecution of the case went no further.

The charges were themselves evidence of the coverup. Rather than bringing murder charges against the soldiers who shot the unarmed students, the civil rights charges were chosen for the light sentence they carried—one year in prison.

Parents of the victims described the process of fighting for a criminal investigation as "a long road" and remarked that "so many obstacles were put in our path." Bernard Miller, whose son was killed during the massacre, told the press, "It's not enough. I'm pleased that they've dug deeper into it, but I still don't believe it's been done right." He explained, "No higher-ups were indicted. It is just like Watergate. This action is no compensation for the loss of my son."

Reporting on the indictments, the *Bulletin*, US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, explained, "The incident at Kent State was nothing short of a ruthless massacre of students peacefully demonstrating which was premeditated and carefully planned out by upper echelon military and government officials. It was part of a national conspiracy to crush the growing movement of students against the government's foreign policies."

Indeed, in the days following the Kent State killings, many other campuses were occupied by the National Guard, with students violently attacked. For example, at the University of New Mexico on May 8, 1970, 11 people were stabbed in a National Guard bayonet attack. On May 15, two students at Jackson State in Mississippi were killed by police gunfire, and 12 more were wounded.

Despite the overwhelming evidence against the perpetrators of the Kent State killings, all eight guardsmen would be acquitted. Even after admitting that "the evidence presented by the Government would support a finding that the amount of force used by the defendants was excessive and unjustified," Federal District Court Judge Frank J. Battisti argued that the Guardsmen could not be found guilty because they did not have the specific motivation of depriving students of their rights when they opened fire on them during a peaceful demonstration.

Battisti wrote in his opinion, "There is no evidence from which the jury could conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendants acted with premeditation, prior consultation with each other, or any actively formulated intention to punish or otherwise deprive any students of their constitutional rights."

After the acquittal the government made no further attempt to criminally prosecute or investigate the the Kent State massacre. None of those responsible, both those who pulled the triggers and those who ordered the

attack, were ever held to account for the deaths of the four students.

75 years ago: Churchill delivers anti-Soviet diatribe in Boston

On March 31, 1949, former British prime minister Winston Churchill spoke before 15,000 people at Boston Garden in an address sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As with his entire trip to the United States, the address was a bellicose call for an escalation of the Cold War against the Soviet Union and a promotion of militarism.

Churchill's speech began with a rambling dissertation on human nature and the history of the 20th century. He noted the important role of American imperialism in the defence of global capitalism. Amid the collapse of empires and the revolutionary upheavals following World War I, the US had abandoned its nominal isolationism and embarked upon a policy of increasingly aggressive intervention. The irony, which Churchill did not address, is that this was bound up with and contributed to the decline in the position of British imperialism.

The latter sections of his remarks were the most noteworthy. In an anti-communist diatribe, Churchill declared: "The failure to strangle Bolshevism at its birth and to bring Russia, then prostrate, by one means or another, into the general democratic system lies heavy upon us today."

Turning to the present, Churchill stated: "In consequence of the Soviet conduct, the relations of Communist Russia with the other great powers of the world are without precedent in history. Measures and counter-measures have been taken on many occasions which in any previous period could only have meant armed conflict." He particularly bemoaned the advances of the Chinese Communist Party and other Stalinist-led forces in Asia.

On Europe, he said: "We are now confronted with something quite as wicked but in some ways more formidable than Hitler, because Hitler had only the Herrenvolk pride and anti-Semitic hatred to exploit. He had no fundamental theme. But these fourteen men in the Kremlin have their hierarchy and a church of Communist adepts, whose missionaries are in every country as a Fifth Column, awaiting the day when they hope to be the absolute masters of their fellow-countrymen and pay off old scores. They have their anti-God religion and their Communist doctrine of the entire subjugation of the individual to the State. Behind this stands the largest Army in the world, in the hands of a Government pursuing Imperialist expansion, as no Czar or Kaiser had ever done."

This was a relativisation of the crimes of the Nazis, under conditions where the imperialist powers were increasingly collaborating with fascist forces in the Cold War. Churchill hailed the atomic bomb as all that had prevented a victory of communism in Europe.

In reality, the Soviet bureaucracy had decades earlier repudiated the program of world socialist revolution, turning instead to the nationalist doctrine of "socialism in one country" and collaborating with the Western imperialist powers, particularly in strangling the revolutionary struggles of the working class before and after World War II. Churchill had been at the forefront of the shift away from the wartime alliance with the USSR against Nazi Germany, towards bellicose confrontation aimed at overturning the remaining gains of the Russian Revolution.

As was later revealed, Churchill had discussed at the conclusion of World War II the possibility of a prolongation of the conflict through a direct attack on the Soviet Union. His 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech had ushered in the Cold War.

100 years ago: Greece abolishes monarchy

On March 25, 1924, the Greek parliament declared the country a republic and formally deposed King George II, already in exile in Romania, and stripped him of his citizenship. The abolition of the monarchy was confirmed by a plebiscite on April 13.

George II had been crowned when his father, Constantine I was overthrown in a coup on September 11, 1922, in the aftermath of the defeat of the Greek army, along with the British, French and Italian imperialists, in Turkey by the nationalist forces of Kemal Ataturk.

Greece, then a country of about 6.5 million, had received over 1 million ethnic Greek refugees who had been forced out of Turkey, and the country was in the midst of a post-war depression. The Greek bourgeois state was highly unstable, and the postwar period was one of rapid change in ruling factions.

The immediate cause of the abolition of the monarchy had been the failure of a coup by monarchist elements in the Greek military in October 1923. The attempted coup, led by middle-ranking officers of the "Majors Organization," was in close contact with Ioannis Metaxas, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Greek army, who would seize power in 1936. George II had been implicated in the coup.

Parliament passed a decree that made it a crime punishable with up to six months imprisonment to advocate the return of the monarchy or dispute the results of the referendum. The Second Hellenic Republic, as the new state was called, soon saw a successful military coup in June 1925 led by General Theodoros Pangalos, who did not restore the monarchy. Pangalos was overthrown the next year in a countercoup by General Georgios Kondylis.

Greece was also embroiled in international conflict, which included an invasion of Bulgaria in October that year as well as the aftermath of the Italian seizure of Corfu in August 1923.

Internally, the republic persecuted workers organizations and exiled over 1,000 communists to remote Aegean islands, particularly after 1928 when Greece came to be dominated by veteran Greek nationalist politician Eleftherios Venizelos.

A coup in 1935 by General Kondylis restored the monarchy and reinstated George II, who remained monarch under the Metaxas dictatorship after 1936 and in exile during the Nazi occupation of Greece. He returned to the throne in 1946, after the defeat of the Stalinist-led forces in the Greek civil war, until his death the following year.



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