

This week in history: April 1-7

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

31 March 2024

25 years ago: Russell Henderson pleads guilty to kidnapping and felony murder of Matthew Shepard

On April 5, 1999, Russell Henderson pled guilty to the kidnapping and felony murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming, beaten to death for his sexual orientation.

Shepard was tied to a fence post, beaten in the head with the butt of a .357-caliber Magnum, tortured, robbed and left for dead. His mutilated and unconscious body was discovered by a passing cyclist who first thought it was a scarecrow.

Shepard suffered irreparable brain damage from the crushing of his skull and was comatose when he entered the hospital in October 1998. There were more than a dozen lacerations, including burns, covering his head, face and neck. He also had hypothermia from being left out in subfreezing temperatures all night. An uncle described his injuries as “like something you might see in war.” Shepard died while on life support at Poudre Valley Hospital in Colorado.

The attack on Shepard was met by an outpouring of protest. Hundreds of marchers in the University of Wyoming’s homecoming parade, including the school’s marching band, wore yellow arm bands for Shepard after the murder. Hundreds of others held a candlelight vigil night outside the hospital. The head of Poudre Valley Hospital stated that in the space of 24 hours after the report broke of the attack on Shepard, the hospital received 2,000 e-mail messages from every continent and hundreds of hits on its website expressing concern and outrage over the attack.

McKinney and Henderson met Shepard at the Fireside Lounge, a favorite spot for students in the college town of Laramie. When they learned Shepard was gay, McKinney and Henderson said they were gay too, in order to lure him out of the bar and into McKinney’s pick-up truck. It was not the first time Shepard had been attacked. The 5-foot 2-inch, 105-pound student had been beaten twice before because of his sexual orientation, friends said. In a previous incident, his jaw was broken.

The attack occurred just days after the Center for Reclaiming America and Coral Ridge Ministries held a joint press conference with the Family Research Council to announce a series of anti-gay television advertisements, along the lines of a newspaper ad campaign they ran the previous summer, whipping up anti-gay sentiment.

Marv Johnson, executive director of the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, told the press, “The best way to

characterize that [anti-gay atmosphere] is by a comment a legislator made a few years back, when he likened homosexuals to gay bulls as worthless and should be sent to the packing plant.” Right-wing forces in Wyoming had also stymied passage of a hate crimes bill claiming it would give “special rights” to gay people.

50 years ago: French President Georges Pompidou dies in office

On April 2, 1974, the President Georges Pompidou of France died while still holding office, after succumbing to the effects of a blood cancer. Fearing the political instability that would come with an announcement of his illness, the French government had worked to suppress public awareness of Pompidou’s cancer. However, suspicions that the president was in ill health had existed for months as he had ceased all public appearances.

Alan Poher, the president of the Senate, would assume the role of acting president until a new election was organized for May 5, 1974. Poher had served as acting president once before after the resignation of Charles de Gaulle in 1969.

Pompidou, who had served as de Gaulle’s prime minister, was elected to the presidency in June 1969. His ascension to president came one year after the eruption of the May-June 1968 General Strike and near revolution that ultimately forced de Gaulle to resign.

During the crisis Pompidou served as lead negotiator for the government in talks with Georges Séguy, head of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). While the betrayals of the strike by the CGT and the Stalinist Communist Party of France massively discredited them in the 1969 election, Pompidou won by presenting himself as a “liberal Gaullist” open to negotiations and discussions of reform with the trade unions.

During the May 1968 negotiations with the CGT, Pompidou explained his political orientation to the unions, writing in the minutes of the meeting, “The government is convinced that the integration of the working class through the trade unions, which have the necessary training and appropriate influence, helps the smooth running of the factory.”

As President, Pompidou made several political maneuvers that broke with the old Gaullist program, most significantly in foreign policy. Where de Gaulle struggled for military and economic independence

from the United States and Britain, Pompidou sought a reproachment with the Nixon administration on trade and supported the UK's admission into the European Economic Community.

But these shifts did not change the fundamental class issues that had brought about the 1968 general strike. At the time of Pompidou's death, a new strike wave was already underway. For example, in April 1974, 9,000 workers in Saint-Nazaire were on strike against a lockout, and bank workers had been engaged in a month-long national strike and staged a major march through Paris. Demands for strikes were growing among rail, gas, electric, and mine workers.

The *Financial Times* of London described the situation on the eve of Pompidou's death, writing, "The economic and political stakes in France are higher today than they have been for many years. While it is still much too early to speak of another May 1968, the pot is beginning to reach a boiling point."

The May 1974 elections would prove to be one of the most contentions in French history with the results decided by less than 425,000 votes, a margin of 1.6 percent. A coalition of the Socialist Party, Communist Party, and the Movement of Left Radicals behind François Mitterrand would be narrowly defeated by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing of the Independent Republicans, who had the backing of the Gaullists and other right-wing political forces.

75 years ago: US establishes NATO pact with European powers

On April 4, 1949, the US and a large group of European powers signed the North Atlantic Treaty, which stipulated the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The trans-Atlantic pact had been the subject of secret negotiations in Washington over the preceding weeks. It was a central component of the establishment of the post-World War II order, dominated by American imperialism.

Signatories to the treaty, aside from the US and Canada, including France and Britain, as well as eight other European states. Over the following decades, NATO would be expanded, including with the incorporation of West Germany in the 1950s and the bringing in of former Soviet-bloc states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

While the first articles of the Treaty center on pabulum about "international peace and security," the Treaty is a militarist document.

Article 5 commits all parties to consider any military attack one of them to be an attack on all. When it is invoked, all member states are obligated to respond militarily. Article 4 committed all members to consultation over military matters when "the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the parties is threatened." Such discussions were to take place in the North Atlantic Council, the principal decision-making body of NATO, composed of its permanent members.

The creation of NATO followed other US initiatives, including the Marshall Plan for the economic reconstruction of Europe under Washington's dominance, and the Truman Doctrine, which declared that America would intervene anywhere in the world where "freedom" and "democracy" were threatened. Those measures, and others, were part of the increasingly aggressive Cold War directed against the Soviet Union. The secrecy surrounding negotiations for the establishment of NATO was directly aimed at the Soviets, who were

excluded.

Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, NATO's first Secretary-General, was credited with coining the saying that NATO's purpose was to "to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." This summed up the attitude of British imperialism, and to some extent, of many of the other European powers.

100 years ago: Northern Rhodesia becomes British protectorate

On April 1, 1924, the territories of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), run by the British South Africa Company (BSAC), a charter company that had ruled the central African region for British imperialism since 1911, were turned over to British imperialism's full control as a protectorate with its capital at Livingstone, under the administration of the United Kingdom's Colonial Office, which appointed Herbert Stanley as its governor, a veteran imperialist bureaucrat who was later to be governor of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

A legislative council was also formed that included nine members appointed by London and five members who were elected by the European minority of about 4,000 settlers. No members of the African majority of approximately a million people could vote.

European settlers had been hostile to the BSAC for decades, but particularly since 1920, when the company had imposed an income tax on them. A sharp increase in taxes for Africans that year had also caused unrest. The BSAC was focused on supplying labor to mines in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Settlers and the British authorities wanted to more extensively exploit the mineral wealth, particularly copper, of Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo.

World War I had boosted demands for metals in Northern Rhodesia as well as foodstuffs particularly for the war against Germany in its colonial territories of East Africa, for which 3,500 troops were levied. After 1924, the rich copper deposits in the north of the country were developed, especially by the South African Anglo American Corporation, with the increase in demand for electrical components in the international auto industry. Low wages and poor working conditions would lead to mass strikes by African miners in the Copperbelt in 1935.

Northern Rhodesia became formally independent of British imperialism by 1964 when the African National Congress, led by Kenneth Kaunda, came to power in a universal suffrage election.



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