

This week in history: April 8-14

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.

7 April 2024

25 years ago: Niger military assassinates president

On April 9, 1999, Niger President Ibrahim Bare Mainassara was assassinated on orders of the country's military. Eyewitness reports stated that his own presidential guard shot him while he was boarding a plane in Niamey, the capital city. Niger diplomatic sources in Burkina Faso indicated that the coup had begun that morning. Telephone communications and borders were closed, and radio stations closed down. Mainassara was quickly buried the following Sunday, in a funeral attended only by family and foreign diplomats.

Troops positioned themselves at all key points around the capital, sealing off the international airport. In a broadcast, Prime Minister Ibrahim Assane Mayaki announced that the killing of the president had been a "tragic accident." He attempted to dissolve the National Assembly and to suspend all political activity. Opposition deputies opposed the dissolution and maintained that they would continue as normal. When news of the coup broke, deputies said that only the house speaker could dissolve the assembly on the death of the head of state.

In a further announcement, Mayaki stated that the military would rule until a new government of "national unity" had been decided upon. Military chiefs linked to the assassination, as well as politicians who were opposed to the former president's rule, met and appointed Major Daouda Mallam Wanke as Mainassara's successor. Wanke commanded the first military region and the presidential guard and had played a direct part in the assassination.

Mainassara himself came to power in a military coup in January 1996, overthrowing the civilian government of Mahamane Ousmane. Mainassara denounced Ousmane's government as the source of the country's political instability and said it was incapable of resolving Niger's severe economic crisis. Ousmane had come to power in 1993, officially ending military rule dating back to 1960 when France handed power to the Niger military. Mainassara, with a long history in Niger's army, having participated in a coup in 1974, was appointed as army chief-of-staff in March 1995.

Following the 1999 coup, military chief Major Daouda Mallam Wanke established the Council for National Reconciliation (CRN). The CRN scrapped the old constitution, proposed a new one and promised to hand over power to civilian rule by the end of the year. Elections were scheduled for October and November, from which military officers (both serving and retired) were barred as candidates.

50 years ago: Golda Meir resigns as prime minister of Israel

On April 10, 1974, Golda Meir resigned as prime minister of Israel. Meir had served as head of the Israeli government since 1969, following the death of Levi Eshkol.

Meir had been a longtime Zionist, leader in the Labor Party and ally of David Ben-Gurion. She was one of the signers of the Israeli Declaration of Independence that led immediately to the founding of the State of Israel and the Nakba expulsions and massacres of Palestinians. Shortly after becoming prime minister, Meir infamously stated in an interview that "there was no such thing as Palestinians."

The most consequential event during Meir's tenure, and ultimately the reason for her resignation as prime minister, was the Yom Kippur War against Egypt and Syria. Israel had suffered a major setback in the war, having been caught off guard by the offensive of the Arab countries.

In the first few days of the war Israel had taken major losses of both territory and military equipment. So many tanks were destroyed by the Egyptian military that the United States organized the largest airlift in history to resupply the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

While the Israelis would retake much of the territory lost in a counterattack that would see the IDF reach just 60 miles outside of Cairo, the conclusion of the war was a decisive political and strategic defeat for Israel. Largely due to the impact of the Arab oil embargo that wreaked economic chaos on the US, UK and other backers of Israel, Meir would be forced to make major concessions to Egypt in the ceasefire negotiations.

Most significantly, the terms of the November 1973 ceasefire would return control of the Suez Canal to Egypt. The canal, one of the most critical and valuable shipping routes in the world, had been closed since the 1967 Six Day War with Egypt, and Israeli forces had remained entrenched on either side.

In the aftermath of the war, the Israeli government began an investigation into the leadership of the IDF to determine how it was caught so unprepared by the Egyptian-Syrian offensive. In a report published April 1, 1974, the Agranat Commission found that several high-ranking officials in the IDF were aware of Syrian and Egyptian troops massing along the front to prepare their offensive and informed Meir, who decided not to take action or launch a preemptive strike.

When the report was released, it created an uproar in the Israeli ruling class with demands for her resignation coming from both her own Labor Party and the right-wing in the Knesset. Despite the report officially clearing Meir of responsibility, writing that she had followed the counsel of her advisers, the Israeli and American ruling classes decided that the setback of the Yom Kippur War was sufficient grounds to replace the current leadership.

Later reports would reveal that Meir dutifully followed the orders she received from Washington, who informed her that Israel would receive no assistance from the US if she mounted a preemptive strike. Still, it was

decided in the aftermath that the openly right-wing fascistic elements would be elevated into the leadership of the Israeli state.

Meir's cabinet would remain as a caretaker government until June when the Labor Party's new leader, Yitzhak Rabin, would replace her as prime minister. While the Labor-led coalition still narrowly held power after the December 1973 election, the right-wing Likud made major gains and was headed towards winning a plurality.

75 years ago: Last of the second round of Nuremberg Trials lets Nazi leaders off with slap on the wrist

On April 14, 1949, the last of a series of trials of figures responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime concluded. Dubbed the Ministries Trial, the defendants included a significant layer of the political leadership of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

The hearings were part of the Subsequent Nuremberg Trials. Unlike the Nuremberg trials themselves, they were heard not by an International Military Tribunal, but by a US military court operating under the direction of the American government.

The defendants were top-ranking officials. They included the Permanent Secretary of State in the Nazi foreign ministry, Hitler's chief economic adviser and leading figures in various government departments, covering logistics, food supply and the Schutzstaffel (SS), the paramilitary organisation that played a central role in perpetrating the Holocaust.

Eighteen of the 21 defendants were charged with crimes against peace, through their role in planning and executing Nazi war plans. Other counts covered participation in various war crimes, including the mistreatment and abuse of prisoners of war, and the enslavement and mass murder of those in regions conquered by Germany.

The court dismissed two of the charges outright, stating that there was insufficient evidence that those before it had participated in crimes against humanity, including the Holocaust, and that the accusation of plunder and spoilage of occupied territories fell beyond its jurisdiction. Two defendants were acquitted entirely, while the 19 others, generally convicted of some but not all of the charges against them, received sentences ranging between four and 25 years.

The defendants had sought to minimize their responsibility for the broader actions of the Nazi regime, with claims that they had focused exclusively on their specific departmental obligations. Some pointed to private letters, in which they had criticized one or another action of the Third Reich on tactical grounds.

Whatever the difficulties in securing convictions, the outcome was notable for its leniency against senior officials in the Nazi regime. As with other recently concluded trials, this was connected to the US shift towards an aggressive Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, which included collaboration with fascistic and Nazi forces who had recent experiences in waging war against Russia as well as in Eastern Europe.

All of those who were convicted and did not die in prison were released between 1949 and 1952. That included Gottlob Berger, one of the main leaders of the SS, and Walter Schellenberg, who had been second-in-command of the notorious Gestapo secret police.

100 years ago: Japan protests exclusion of Japanese nationals in US immigration law

On April 11, 1924, the Japanese ambassador to the United States,

Masanao Hanihara, personally handed a diplomatic letter to the US Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes, protesting the complete ban on Japanese immigration in the Immigration Act then under discussion in Congress.

The letter, written at the instruction of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, stated that the American law would "single out Japanese as a nation, stigmatizing them as unworthy and undesirable in the eyes of the American people. And yet the actual result of that particular provision, if the proposed bill becomes law as intended, would be only to exclude 146 Japanese per year. ... I realize, as I believe you do, the grave consequences which the enactment of the measure retaining that particular provision would inevitably bring upon the otherwise happy and mutually advantageous relations between our two countries."

The letter made public for the first time the "gentlemen's agreement" of 1907 between the United States and Japan by which Japan voluntarily limited emigration to the United States. In response, Hughes acknowledged that he understood the character of that agreement.

The letter caused commotion in the Senate, where the bill was being discussed in the Immigration Committee, with a California senator objecting vehemently to it. California legislators had been particularly strident in supporting the provision of the bill, which excluded all Asian immigration to the US. There was concern that Hughes and the Coolidge administration took the same view as the Japanese.

The Immigration Act also drastically limited quotas of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, where some of the most militant and socialist-minded workers in the post-World War I strike wave had migrated from.

Republican Congressman Albert Johnson, who sponsored the bill in the House, was a member of the Eugenics Committee, a private but influential organization that posited the superiority of the "Nordic race." The bill would be passed into law in May.

The anti-Japanese aspects of the bill were the subject of a right-wing demonstration in Tokyo later in April and calls to boycott American goods. The Japanese cabinet passed a resolution supporting the protest, and delegations of students, religious organizations, and businesses, were seeking audiences with the American ambassador to oppose the bill. The Foreign Ministry sent further letters of protest to Washington. American firms in Japan also publicly objected to the bill.

After the passage of the bill, a wave of anti-Americanism spread through the Japanese press, and the country saw right-wing "national spirit" demonstrations by ex-soldiers and Shinto priests. Finally, on June 1, the patriotic fervor reached a pitch when a Japanese citizen committed ritual suicide in front of the American embassy in Tokyo.



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