

This week in history: March 24-30

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

23 March 2025

25 years ago: Vladimir Putin wins presidential election in Russia

On March 26, 2000, former KGB officer Vladimir Putin won Russia's presidential election with 52.6 percent of votes cast. Putin had been serving as acting president, a position he assumed on Dec 31, 1999, after the resignation of Boris Yeltsin.

Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of Russia, came in second with 29.3 percent. The Yabloko Party headed by Grigory Yavlinsky managed to win 5.8 percent. Overall, almost 69 percent of the eligible population went to the polls, about the same as the previous election in 1996.

Despite reassurances from the Kremlin apparatus of a fair election, the elevation of the unknown Putin to the highest office in the state disclosed oligarchic machinations.

Putin's primary backers were found in the "Brezovsky-Abramovitch clan," a group of wealthy capitalists controlling important sectors of the economy and portions of the state apparatus. Brezovsky's golden rule summarized the logic of capitalist restoration in the former USSR: "Why buy an enterprise, if one can appoint its director?" The wheels of the state had to be greased and oiled to procure Putin as their finished product.

In the lead-up to the election, Putin refused to participate in any public debates, give speeches, or to run a typical political campaign in any manner. The state-run media favorably covered Putin and his Unity Party and gave him the majority of the spotlight on television and in newspapers while viciously attacking political challengers. An "official" biography of Putin, paid for by Brezovsky, became the only political campaign piece run on the news cycle.

As President Boris Yeltsin's popularity collapsed from widespread corruption and the reactionary nature of the war in Chechnya, the media handed Putin a free pass. It refused to disclose his essential role as prime minister in launching a nationalist war against the people of Chechnya in August 1999.

Putin's principal role was to secure the wealth of the *nouveau riche*, foster reactionary Russian chauvinism, and defend the private ownership of the means of production from attacks by the Russian working class. Indeed, once becoming interim president after Yeltsin's resignation, the first order of business was an executive order protecting Yeltsin and his family from any corruption charges.

For the Russian and former Soviet working class, Putin's elevation continued their suffering—with poverty wages, scarce job prospects,

and social and cultural debasement. Inequality soared. For workers, Putin's election "victory" was the bitter fruit of seeds planted by his political ancestors and mentors in the Stalinist bureaucracy and the anti-Marxist and nationalist theory of socialism in one country.

50 years ago: King Faisal of Saudi Arabia assassinated by prince

On March 25, 1975, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia was assassinated by his nephew, Prince Faisal bin Musaid, during a public audience in Riyadh. The killing came just days after Faisal met with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who had arrived in Saudi Arabia to shore up support for Washington's faltering Middle East strategy.

The assassination occurred during a majlis, a monarchist ritual where individuals are supposedly permitted to petition the ruler. Musaid approached Faisal during the event before drawing a pistol and firing. He was quickly apprehended and then later tried and sentenced to death. He would be executed in June 1975.

Musaid's family had been among a deeply conservative faction of the Saudi ruling class that was opposed to any attempts at modernization. His brother had been killed by police in 1965 during an assault on a newly launched TV station.

Regardless of the killer's motives, the death of Faisal caused concern in Washington, which had relied on Saudi Arabia as a key ally in its plans to control the region. Kissinger had appealed to Faisal for Saudi support in brokering a separate peace between Egypt and Israel while isolating Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The explicit aim of Kissinger's plan was to fracture and weaken the Arab states to secure US dominance over the region's oil resources.

At a March 26 press conference, Kissinger framed Faisal's death as a destabilizing blow, warning of "increasing radicalization and an increase in tension" that could lead to war, "in which inevitably the United States would be involved." He admitted the Ford administration was "reassessing its policy in the Middle East" to contain revolutionary movements threatening US interests.

King Faisal was a reactionary anti-communist who functioned as the leading ally of US imperialism in the Middle East, outside of Israel. His regime suppressed domestic dissent and aligned with Washington

to counter Soviet influence and Arab nationalism. Though Faisal publicly opposed Israel and endorsed the 1973 Arab oil embargo, he acted to restrain OPEC from more radical measures, ensuring that the embargo was relatively short-lived. To avoid direct conflict with neighboring Arab states, Faisal balanced anti-Israeli rhetoric with deepening economic ties to the United States.

The period saw the Ford administration accelerate military preparations in the Persian Gulf. New US bases were established, arms stockpiled, and troops positioned for potential oil-field seizures. Kissinger's push for a separate Egypt-Israel deal was aimed at buying time for this militarization. The *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, condemned Kissinger's maneuvers as a bid to "build up America's war machine" and crush Arab resistance.

Faisal's assassination disrupted Kissinger's efforts to stabilize a regional order favorable to US oil corporations and Israeli expansion. While the new Saudi leadership maintained its support for imperialism, the assassination demonstrated the immense instability of the US-backed monarchy.

75 years ago: Fascist trade union CISNAL formed in Italy

On March 24, 1950, the Italian Confederation of National Workers' Unions, CISNAL (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Nazionali Lavoratori*), was formed in Naples by Giovanni Roberti, a leading member of the fascistic Italian Social Movement (MSI). Roberti, who was the first president of CISNAL, was elected two years prior as vice secretary of the MSI, a movement which based itself on reviving the fascist and anti-communist legacy of Benito Mussolini, founder of the National Fascist Party (PNF) and dictator of Italy for 23 years.

For the remainder of the 20th century, almost every single one of CISNAL's general secretaries was a member of the MSI, or one of its spin-offs such as the National Democracy (DN) party or the National Alliance (AN) party. Beginning with Roberti, CISNAL campaigned to gain electoral support for MSI, and for 30 years functioned as a direct subsidiary of the party.

Based on its political orientation to fascist parties, CISNAL was hostile to the interests of the working class. In a crucial event during the upsurge of working class struggles that began in the late 1960's, CISNAL refused to join other unions in calling for a general strike for housing in November 1969, occurring at the time of mass strikes and protests in Italy which came to be known as the "Hot Autumn." CISNAL received increased hostility from the Italian working class as a result.

Seeking to distance itself from its associations with fascist movements, CISNAL secretary Ivo Laghi signed a pact in 1980 with MSI that established the group's autonomy and independence from the party. Though later reformed as the General Labour Union (UGL) in 1996, the organisation never left its fascistic roots. UGL flags are seen today at far-right rallies of Matteo Salvini's anti-immigrant Liga (League) party. Leading figures of the UGL continue to support modern far-right movements, and some, such as Claudio Durigon, hold positions inside the fascistic government of Giorgia Meloni.

parliament

On March 26, 1925, fascist members of parliament physically assaulted Communist members during a session after the latter protested a speech by the dictator Benito Mussolini, who appeared in public after an absence of 40 days, ostensibly due to an illness.

The fascist murder in June 1924 of socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti had shaken the rule of Mussolini, who had come to power in 1922. The reaction to the murder included a boycott of parliament by the socialist faction and leaks to newspapers showing the involvement of Mussolini himself in fascist assassinations.

On January 3, Mussolini had taken a major step toward a personalist dictatorship by publicly accepting responsibility for and justifying the murder of Matteotti. By March, Mussolini had stabilized his government by placating elements of the fascist leadership and disciplining the leaders of the fascist fighting squads that had played a central role in suppressing working class struggles.

Mussolini took further repressive actions, including a wide-ranging press law that forbade newspapers from stirring up class hatred, hampering foreign policy or disparaging the Pope, the king and state institutions.

While it is generally accepted that Mussolini had actually been ill, it is not clear to historians exactly what his condition was and there has been speculation that his fight inside the fascist establishment had placed an enormous amount of stress on him.

The *New York Times* describes the scene in parliament that day: "His appearance was the signal for an enthusiastic and unforgettable ovation.... The whole chamber, including the occupants of the visitors' galleries, the royal box and the press gallery, rose to its feet and clapped its hands and cheered like mad for close on to 10 minutes."

The Communist faction interrupted with shouts of "Long Live Communism!" At first the fascists jeered them and began singing the fascist anthem "Giovinezza." They were joined by many in the galleries. The Communist delegation began singing the workers anthem, the "Internationale" and a melee broke out in which the leader of the Fascist National Party, Roberto Farinacci, at the time the second-most powerful man in Italy, notorious for his use of torture and his antisemitism, personally beat one of the Communist delegates. The communists were expelled from the chamber, though they were able to return shortly under guard from sergeants-at-arms.

The rest of the session was devoted to the adulation of Mussolini and the most grotesque displays of a leader-cult. Although Mussolini had been called "il duce," (the leader) early in the fascist movement, 1925 marked the beginning of the period when it became a formulaic title for the dictator.



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100 years: Fascists attack Communist representatives in Italian