

This week in history: March 19-25

19 March 2018

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25 years ago: US, Europe back Yeltsin dictatorship in Russia

This week in 1993 the Clinton administration, followed by governments of the western European powers and Japan, backed Boris Yeltsin's abrogation of the Russian constitution and declaration of dictatorial power.

Yeltsin's declaration, made on national television on March 20, also called for a national plebiscite of support on April 25, which would be followed by a new constitution, arrogating sweeping powers to the presidency, while dissolving remaining political forms inherited from the Soviet Union, including the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet. It was swiftly declared unconstitutional by Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi and Supreme Constitutional Court judge Valery Zorkin. Yeltsin's move was clearly illegal. As the *New York Times*, which cheered his declaration, conceded, "legality [is] obviously Mr. Yeltsin's weak spot."

Prior to his announcement, Yeltsin had been given assurances by US President Bill Clinton and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl that he would have their full backing. The very same day that Yeltsin declared his power grab, Clinton released a statement that the Russian president "has our support" and hailing his movement of Russia "toward a market economy." Clinton's affirmation was followed by similar statements from Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, and a few days later, Japan.

The western media also supported Yeltsin, and further demanded that he be prepared to do "unpleasant things," as former US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger put it in a television interview. "The bottom line of presidential rule, or the declaration of a state of emergency, is an army willing to shoot its own people... [Yeltsin] needs to show that he is in charge, and decisively in charge," wrote the *Financial Times*. This was necessary, insisted the *Economist*, to impose the "next painful wrench ... that Russians will find hardest to bear: the closure of ... factories and the consequent steep rise in unemployment."

David North, National Secretary of the Workers' League, then the US section of the International Committee for the Fourth International, commented on the developments in a lead article for the *Bulletin*:

"Whatever the immediate outcome of the struggle between Boris Yeltsin and the Congress of People's Deputies, this latest crisis has already provided the Russian and international working class with one crucial lesson: There will be no peaceful and democratic road to capitalism in the former Soviet Union.

The restoration of capitalism and the integration of Russia into the economic structures of world imperialism—requiring the physical dismemberment of Russia, the reduction of its scattered remnants to a semicolonial status, the systematic destruction of the industrial infrastructure upon which the impressive social and cultural achievements of Soviet society were based, and the pauperization of the vast majority of the population—can be achieved only through the methods of violent dictatorship."

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50 years ago: Johnson replaces Vietnam military commander

On March 22, 1968, President Johnson announced that General William Westmoreland would be removed as commander of US troops in Vietnam and appointed to a position in the Pentagon.

While publicly maintaining that the decision to remove Westmoreland from field duties was not related to recent military developments, it came as the Johnson administration undertook a full-scale, behind-the-scenes review of its policy in Vietnam in the wake of the Tet offensive. It followed the public exposure of the general's secret request for 206,000 additional troops.

The decision to fire Westmoreland represented a shift away from the strategy of large-scale "search and destroy" missions and the beginning of the course toward "Vietnamization," as it was called by Johnson's eventual successor, Richard Nixon. Johnson was holding extensive discussions, formal and informal, with former presidential advisers. The consensus among the top imperialist policy makers was to oppose further troop increases and seek negotiations. Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, a longtime supporter of the war, shifted his position 180 degrees. He told Johnson, "Get out of Vietnam. It was a real loser."

The political crisis of the Johnson administration mounted through the month. On March 12 Senator Eugene McCarthy nearly defeated Johnson in the New Hampshire primary, a contest the president was expected to win handily. The primary debacle was followed within days by the decision of Johnson's arch rival, Senator Robert Kennedy, to challenge him for the Democratic presidential nomination. On March 19 the US House of Representatives carried a resolution, in effect a vote of no confidence, calling for a review of policy in the Vietnam war, with 139 House members backing the resolution, including 41 Democrats.

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75 years ago: Corruption exposed in US war industry

On March 23, 1943, a Senate committee heard testimony that officials of the US Steel corporation had deliberately sold sub-standard steel armor plates to the procurement services of the government for use in the war industry. The practice resulted in the manufacture of products that endangered the lives of Allied soldiers, sailors and merchant seamen involved in World War II.

Witnesses revealed that US Steel had faked test reports to meet specifications for agencies such as the American Bureau of Shipping by recording false values for tensile strength. The hearing estimated that US Steel had passed as much as 30,000 tons of armor plate.

Inspectors for US Steel described how they had been instructed to "go easy on rejections" or fake test records. US Steel officials, in awkward attempts to dodge the charges, said, "There were intended to be limits to the faking," and "He went beyond his instructions." Company spokesmen, attempting to control the damage, stated that they had been ignorant of the practice and sought to scapegoat a few individuals.

The Senate committee did not investigate whether the orders to falsify tests and sell inferior steel were limited to mid-level management, or originated at the top levels of the corporation. The case was turned over to the FBI, where it was pigeon-holed.

The investigation arose after a newly-constructed 16,500-ton bunker broke in two in a California shipyard only a few hours after it had been delivered to the Maritime Commission. The Senate committee charged that the severed material was "more like cast iron than steel."

US Steel not only profited from government contracts to supply the US military, but shipped products to Britain and the Soviet Union through the Lend-Lease program. The Senate committee investigation only gave a glimpse of enormous corruption and profit-making of US corporations in World War II.

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100 years ago: US socialist indicted for opposing World War I

On March 21, 1918, radical author Scott Nearing, a member of the US Socialist Party and an opponent of the imperialist war, was indicted by a federal grand jury in New York City under the notorious Espionage Act. He was charged with writing and distributing through the mail a series of articles titled, "The Great Madness," in which he criticized US entry into World War I.

Nearing, a former University of Pennsylvania professor, was accused of denouncing the Liberty Loan and the selective draft law, of defending a pacifist opponent of the war, Senator Robert La Follette, and of making "other utterances which the government alleges tend to create mutiny, disloyalty and insubordination among the armed forces of the United States."

If convicted, Nearing faced 20 years in federal penitentiary, a fine of \$10,000 or both. The American Socialist Society, which distributed Nearing's book, was also indicted.

The first chapter of "The Great Madness" was titled "Give the Poor Trusts a Chance." It began: "The entrance of the United States into the world war on April 6, 1917, was the greatest victory that the American plutocracy has won over the American democracy since the declaration of war with Spain in 1898. The American plutocracy urged the war, insisted upon it, and finally got it."

In another chapter, Nearing referred to the propaganda campaign waged by the press, aimed at whipping up pro-war sentiment:

With the immense power of the public press at their disposal; possessing unlimited means; united on a common policy, the plutocracy spread terror over the land.

The campaign was intense and dramatic. Japanese invasions, Mexican inroads, and a world conquest by Germany were featured in the daily press, in the magazines, on the movie screens and in public addresses. Depredations, murder and rapine were to be the lot of the American people unless they built battleships and organized armies.

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