

# This week in history: April 2-8

2 April 2018

## 25 years ago: Clinton-Yeltsin summit works out plan for selloff of Russian economy

In an April 4, 1993 summit held in Vancouver, US President Bill Clinton offered strong political support to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, as well as more than \$1 billion in aid in exchange for the guarantees on the plunder of what remained of the social wealth of the Soviet Union.

Clinton sought to prop up Yeltsin, whose government was threatened by a faction of the ex-Stalinist bureaucracy that opposed Kremlin efforts to finish off the liquidation of Soviet industry and to totally subordinate Russia to western imperialism. Matters had come to a head in preceding weeks, when Yeltsin had moved to usurp dictatorial powers, circumventing the Russian constitution and broadly threatening a coup d'état.

All of this made him, from the perspective of Yeltsin's western cheerleaders, like Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, a "democratic reformer." More, however, was expected of Yeltsin in exchange for Clinton's backing, which would include, in Friedman's words, "loans for Russian entrepreneurs [and] funds to help the Russian government sell state-owned industries ... to help promote free market skills."

Considerable efforts were made to obscure the pecuniary nature of the "summit"—to avoid making "this meeting appear to be what it is," according to Friedman, a groveling performance by a "Russian leader coming to the West with tin cup in hand." Even Yeltsin admitted that if he was handed too much money "this also could be bad. It can be used ... The opposition will say that we are shackled by the West."

## 50 years ago: Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated

At 6:01 p.m., on April 4, 1968, civil right leader Martin Luther King Jr., was shot by an assassin while standing on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel, in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone in support of a strike of sanitation workers. King was pronounced dead at a Memphis hospital a little over one hour later. He was

39.

Over two months later, on June 8, 1968, a suspect, James Earl Ray, was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport where he was attempting to board a flight to the "white republic" of Rhodesia under a false name. He was extradited to the US, where he submitted a confession in order to avoid the death penalty. Ray recanted his confession within a few days, and spent the remainder of his life arguing that he was an unwitting party to a conspiracy to kill King. The position that King was the victim of a conspiracy involving the FBI was supported by his widow, Coretta Scott King, as well as some prominent civil rights leaders, including Jesse Jackson.

While a US-government role in King's assassination remains unproven, King was indeed the target of a five-year-long "campaign by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to 'neutralize' him as an effective civil rights leader," in the words of the US Senate's 1975 Church Committee investigation. The FBI wiretapped King's phones and bugged his hotel rooms in an effort, according to J. Edgar Hoover, to "to insure [King] is disrupted, ridiculed, or discredited." This included seizing on information of King's extramarital affairs in an attempt to drive him to suicide.

Declassified documents also later revealed that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) opened a case on King over concerns that he was a "communist," and that the National Security Agency spied on him as part of its illegal "Minaret" program targeting domestic opponents of the Vietnam War. King had become, by 1968, an outspoken critic of the war in Southeast Asia and had embarked on a "Poor People's Campaign," attempting to achieve interracial unity over shared economic grievances of black, white, and immigrant workers.

In the days after King's assassination, over 100 American cities erupted in riots. Scores of people were killed and over 15,000 arrests were made. Property damage was counted in the billions of dollars. It was the most widespread civil unrest in American history outside of the Civil War.

## **75 years ago: Hitler and Mussolini meet amid deepening crisis of Axis forces**

On April 8, 1943, the German and Italian fascist leaders, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, and military commanders from the two nations, met in Salzburg, Austria, amid a deepening crisis of Axis forces in the Second World War.

The gathering was the first meeting between the two dictators since German troops had suffered a massive defeat in the battle of Stalingrad. The Soviet victory marked a decisive shift in the balance of forces on the Eastern Front. It was the beginning of the expulsion of German invaders from Russia, and was militarily and politically catastrophic to the Axis war drive internationally.

Discussions between Hitler and Mussolini also centered on the worsening position of their troops in Africa. Over the preceding months, Italian and German troops had suffered significant defeats to Allied forces in the North African countries of Libya and Tunisia.

Mussolini was fearful that French, British and American troops could launch an invasion of the Italian island of Sicily from their newly gained territory in North Africa. He asked that Hitler assist in the creation of a new southern army to repulse any move on Italian territory. Over the previous months, Mussolini had been advocating that Germany lessen its focus on the Eastern Front. Rumors emerged that he had even suggested a truce with the Soviet Union. Hitler rejected Mussolini's requests.

The meeting highlighted the deepening internal crisis of the fascist regimes. Mussolini was intensely fearful of mounting opposition from the working class, reflected in the emergence of strikes and mass anger over food shortages. He met with the head of the German SS Heinrich Himmler to discuss repressive measures that could be imposed to suppress the unrest, and prevent the overthrow of his government.

## **100 years ago: German-born coal miner lynched in Illinois**

At 12:30 a.m., April 5, 1918, Robert Prager, a German-born coal miner, was strung to a tree and hung until dead by a crowd estimated at 200 near the southern Illinois mining town of Collinsville. He was 30 years old.

Prager, who had emigrated to the US in 1905, was accused of holding pro-German war views, but there was no evidence to support this claim. He evidently held socialist views, perhaps a motivation for the rejection of

his membership by a local of the United Mine Workers (UMW).

The day before his murder, Prager had posted fliers around Marysville, another mining town close to Collinsville, denouncing the local UMW president. At a certain point a rumor was circulated that Prager was pro-German. A lynch mob formed, and Prager was marched through the streets of Collinsville wrapped in an American flag. Local police, after freeing Prager and briefly attempting to hide the miner, allowed the mob to find him and stood aside as he was marched out of the town on the road leading to St. Louis, with a rope around his neck.

Before the mob hanged him, Prager was allowed to write home to his parents in Dresden, Germany. His final words were, "Dear Parents I must on this, the 4th day of April, 1918, die. Please pray for me, my dear parents."

No one was ever punished for the lynching of Robert Prager. The *Washington Post*, commenting on the murder, wrote, "In spite of excesses such as lynching, it is a healthful and wholesome awakening in the interior of the country."

Whatever the local factors in his murder, Prager was a victim of the pro-war hysteria and climate of intimidation orchestrated by the Wilson administration, which targeted immigrants, German-Americans, socialists, and militant workers. Prager had the misfortune of fitting all four categories. He had only recently moved from Indiana to southern Illinois, a region of the US where the class struggle was especially explosive and violent. In spite of UMW efforts to honor a war-time no-strike pledge concluded with coal operators and the Wilson administration, wildcat strikes by coal miners swept Illinois in 1917 and 1918.

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