

This week in history: April 15-21

15 April 2019

25 years ago: Fascists enter Italian government for the first time since Mussolini

On April 16, 1994, members of Italy's right-wing Freedom Alliance coalition were elected to head both houses of parliament. The votes laid the foundation for the appointment of media mogul Silvio Berlusconi of the Forza Italia (Go Italy) party to become prime minister, and allowed for the participation of a fascist party, the National Alliance/Italian Social Movement, in government for the first time since the fall of Mussolini 50 years before.

The parliament chose Carlo Scognamiglio from Forza Italia as Senate president and Irene Pivetti of the Northern League as speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. These choices represented a major shift away from traditional Italian politics in the postwar era, as the posts of speakers in both houses had often gone to the opposition.

Pivetti, an admirer of Mussolini, was well known for her anti-Semitic and racist writings. She gave an interview to the right-wing Catholic weekly *Italia Settimanale* in which she claimed she did not support fascism, but “could see all the good things fascism did for Italy.” Scognamiglio was a former member of the big-business Liberal Party with ties to Fiat.

Berlusconi, owner of the Fin-invest group—Italy's second largest business and the second largest media group in Europe—created an alliance with the separatist Northern League and National Alliance, winning a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and a plurality in the Senate.

The alliance was produced by the betrayals of the old leadership of the Italian working class, including the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS), successor to the Stalinist Italian Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and the trade unions, which blocked all efforts to mobilize the working class against capitalism.

Three hundred thousand workers and youth participated in public May Day protests in Milan against the new right-wing government. A day after the protests, leaders from Italy's three largest unions met with Berlusconi. They agreed that the government would maintain a cost-of-labor accord reached with the outgoing administration a year earlier, which abolished automatic cost-of-living increases and lowered the standard of living for millions of people.

50 years ago: Gustáv Husák replaces Alexander Dubcek as head of Czechoslovak government

On April 17, 1969, the Central Committee of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) voted to remove Alexander Dubcek as First Secretary. In his place Gustáv Husák was selected to lead the party. After the Warsaw pact invasion in August of 1968, sparked by fears that Dubcek's posture of “reform” was creating an opening for a mass working class revolt, Dubcek remained in his position, but as a virtual prisoner of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The final straw was the Czechoslovak hockey riots at the end of March 1969. After the Czechoslovak team defeated the Soviet team in the 1969 world ice hockey championships, thousands of Czechoslovakians took to the streets to celebrate. The celebrations quickly turned into protests against the Soviet military that continued to occupy the country. Ultimately the demonstrations were broken up by the military. However, the demonstrations prompted the Stalinists to officially purge Dubcek and his supporters from leadership.

The decision to place Gustáv Husák as the new secretary was a careful political calculation on the part of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Husák was himself the target of a party purge and spent 1954 to 1960 in prison, accused of a political conspiracy against the KSC. He spent much of this time writing letters to the party leadership insisting that the charges against him were a mistake.

After his release in 1963 his membership in the KSC was restored and he again became politically active. During the Prague Spring, Husák was an ally of Dubcek and supported some of his reforms. But after the Warsaw Pact invasion he quickly changed his positions to fall in line with Moscow. After his selection to leadership, his first move was to finish the removal any remaining supporters of Dubcek and the liberal reforms.

On April 19 Husák would announce that his government would, “fight without pity” against “anti-socialists” and “anti-Soviets.” He also imposed a new police policy that would see to the violent break-up of any large gatherings of youth. Husák would remain in power until 1987.

75 years ago: Amid series of offensives, Soviet troops

capture Tarnopol

On April 15, 1944, Soviet troops expelled Nazi forces from Tarnopol, in German-occupied Poland. The city, now known as Ternopil in modern-day Ukraine, was the scene of the mass slaughter of Jews and ethnic Poles and was considered a central strategic outpost by the German high command.

Tarnopol was occupied by the Nazis in June 1941, during their initial offensive on the eastern front. The Nazi troops immediately carried out massacres of the local Jewish population and viciously repressed opposition to their rule, as they did throughout occupied Poland. They established a ghetto in the city, and transported thousands of its inhabitants to their deaths in concentration camps.

Through the first months of 1944, Soviet troops pressed forward into Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, dealing a series of major blows to the Third Reich. In March, Adolf Hitler declared Tarnopol to be one of a number of “fortified places,” dubbed the “Gates to the Reich,” which were to be defended to the last bullet.

German troops repelled Soviet forces in March, prompting a massive Soviet heavy artillery bombardment. Brutal fighting continued for over a month. By the time Soviet troops liberated the city on April 15, an estimated 85 percent of its living quarters had been destroyed.

The capture of Tarnopol coincided with the successful conclusion of the Uman–Botoșani Offensive in Ukraine, around April 17. Over the course of a little over four weeks, Red Army troops advanced more than 300 kilometers. In the course of a series of offensive engagements, they expelled German troops from southwestern Ukraine, creating the conditions for Soviet troops to press ahead further into Bessarabia (now Moldova) and Romania.

In the course of the offensive, Soviet troops effectively split the German military’s army group south in two, with part of it forced south of the Carpathian Mountains and another to the north. This greatly hindered the Nazi regime’s ability to mount any effective challenge to the ongoing offensives of Soviet troops on the Eastern front.

100 years ago: French sailors mutiny in the Black Sea

On April 19, 1919, sailors on the French battleship *France*, anchored near the Black Sea port of Sevastopol, revolted over orders to shovel 700 tons of coal during the Easter weekend.

French imperialism had sent a fleet manned by thousands of war-weary sailors and soldiers, some of whom had seen service since 1915, to the coast of Crimea to supply the anti-Bolshevik White Army of General Anton Denikin with materiel and military aid. This provoked enormous discontent among French servicemen. From January to

April, several French units in southern Ukraine refused to fight, and the Whites were obliged to evacuate Odessa.

By the time the sailors of the *France* were ordered to shovel coal, military discipline was fraying throughout the fleet. When the colors were hoisted on the morning of April 19, some of the crew refused to salute. Then hundreds more assembled on the deck in the evening demanding a day off from work, and began to sing the socialist anthem, the Internationale. Soon sailors on a nearby ship in the fleet, the *Jean-Bart*, joined in the singing.

When officers showed up and demanded that the sailors disperse, they were greeted with jeers and threats. One officer promised to communicate the sailors’ demands to the captain. According to Andre Marty, a leader of the revolt, sailors then demanded to know, “What are we doing in Russia? We don’t want to fight the workers who are our brothers. And we want to leave.” The sailors of the *France* sent a delegation to the *Jean-Bart* and asked what their demands were. Their response was, “Back to [the French port of] Toulon! No more war against Russia!”

Despite a lecture from the fleet’s admiral on the evils of Bolshevism, sailors from both ships disembarked the next day and joined an anti-war march with workers in Sevastopol. Sailors from other ships joined, but French and Greek soldiers who were stationed nearby fired on the demonstration, killing and wounding dozens.

The French fleet erupted in anger and mutinies broke out on other ships for the rest of the month. The French presence in the Black Sea became militarily unviable and the fleet was forced to sail back to France in May.

The discontent of the mutinous sailors had its causes in short rations, unreliable mail delivery, lack of shore leave, and a brutal officers’ regime. But it was especially the beginning of a new war that radicalized them. Bolshevik propaganda played a crucial role in the mutiny. The Bolsheviks produced a newspaper in French called *Le Communiste* that articulated many of the demands of the sailors and educated them about the Bolshevik goal of world revolution.

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