

This week in history: April 13-19

13 April 2020

25 years ago: Oklahoma City bombing kills 168 people

On April 19, 1995, two right-wing terrorists, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, killing 168 people and injuring a further 680. The attack destroyed over a third of the building, ruined hundreds of buildings on the surrounding blocks, and caused \$652 million in damage. Until the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, it was the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil.

The bombing was a conscious political act. McVeigh was a disillusioned Gulf War veteran, inspired by *The Turner Diaries*—a fascist book published in 1978 in which a violent race war engulfs the United States, exterminating the “non-white” population. The Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled it the “bible of the racist right.” McVeigh’s stated motivation was revenge against the federal government for the siege of the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas, just two years prior. McVeigh was convicted on 11 counts, and eventually executed by lethal injection in 2001.

The ruling class deliberately cultivated a psychopathic element inside the military. A former soldier who fought with McVeigh in Iraq recited his unit’s daily chant for reporters: “Blood makes the grass grow. Kill! Kill! Kill!” The attack was also an indictment of the trade unions. The growth of right-wing and fascistic paramilitary groups in deindustrialized areas like Buffalo, New York, where McVeigh grew up, was a result of the inability and refusal of the trade unions to provide a way forward for the working class.

From the standpoint of the fascists who carried it out, their present lack of popular support was all the more reason for an outrage of huge proportions. It was their way of announcing their arrival on the political scene. They hoped that after the initial shock and revulsion dissipated, growing numbers of people would see them as a force to contend with.

US President Bill Clinton’s reaction to the bombing was a further lurch to the right, including the Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995, introduced by Senators Joe Biden and Tom Daschle. The revised version of the act, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, was passed.

The *International Workers Bulletin*, the predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote in 1995: “The Oklahoma City bombing raises starkly the danger of the growth of right-wing and fascist forces. But it does not mean they are about to take

power. Ahead lies a protracted period of political and social struggle. The class contradictions which grow sharper by the day can find a progressive outlet in the form of a broad political movement of the oppressed against an economic system which breeds poverty and injustice. Or they can assume the malignant forms of racism, fascism and homicidal violence directed against the victims of that system.”

50 years ago: Apollo 13 space shuttle avoids disaster

The week of April 13, 1970 millions of people around the world learned that the Apollo 13 space shuttle, headed for a landing on the moon, had suffered a significant mechanical failure that put the lives of the crew members, James A. Lovell, John L. Swigert, and Fred W. Haise in danger. The originally planned lunar mission would have to be abandoned and a struggle began to return the astronauts safely to earth.

The damage to the spaceship was caused by a faulty wire insulation inside an oxygen tank. During a routine stir of the oxygen tank the wire ignited and caused an explosion that shot the contents of the critical oxygen supply into space. The explosion also caused damage to the ship’s electrical systems, meaning the shuttle had to operate with reduced power.

After informing the Mission Control team in Houston, Texas, of the explosion, the crew was advised to enter and remain in the lunar module, which could be sealed off from the command module where the explosion had taken place. The lunar module however, was designed for two astronauts to travel down to the surface of the moon for two days and return, not to be the main transportation vessel of the full three-man crew.

Making precise calculations, the Mission Control team was able to instruct the crew of Apollo 13 on how to make the necessary adjustments to the ship’s normal operations in order for them to survive in the lunar module until they could return to Earth. This presented great challenges to the crew members as it would give them limited access to drinking water. They also had to improvise a way to adapt the carbon dioxide removal system from the damaged command module to function aboard the lunar module.

The Mission Control team rapidly ran tests to assist the crew of the shuttle by calculating solutions to the carbon dioxide problem with lists of all the materials aboard the shuttle that could be used to adapt the command module systems to work aboard the lunar module. The solution ultimately involved tearing out the covers of procedure manuals and using duct tape

to seal in the improvised system.

Instead of immediately turning the ship around and returning to Earth, fear that the propulsion of the main engine could also be severely impacted by the explosion led to a longer but safer rescue strategy to be implemented. The ship would continue toward the moon and use its orbit to loop around and then head back to Earth.

The plan proved to be a success. On April 17, 1970, Apollo 13 landed in the Pacific Ocean near American Samoa and was recovered by the US Navy. The only injury to the crew came in the form of a urinary tract infection that Haise developed because of the low water consumption. Otherwise, the three astronauts returned to Earth in good health and spirits.

75 years ago: Soviet armies liberate Vienna

On April 13, 1945, the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts of the Soviet Union's Red Army, accompanied by divisions of Bulgarian troops, liberated Vienna from the Nazis at the conclusion of a successful offensive that had begun on April 2.

German dictator Adolf Hitler had entered the city and declared an Anschluss, or joining of Austria to Nazi Germany, seven years earlier in March 1938. The move had been supported by the Austrian military and the country's political establishment. It set the stage for horrific crimes against Vienna's 200,000-strong Jewish population, including a brutal Kristallnacht pogrom in late 1938 and the later deportation of tens of thousands to the death camps.

The Soviet offensive targeting Vienna was prepared by sweeping Allied advances over the preceding months on the eastern and western fronts. The 2nd Ukrainian Front approached the city having played a key role in the liberation of Hungary. It was able to cross that country's border with Austria largely unopposed, after the failure of Germany's Operation Spring Awakening, the last Nazi offensive aimed at regaining lost ground on the eastern front.

The German SS 6th Panzer Army had retreated within the walls of Vienna and established defensive positions within, but it was isolated and incapable of any prolonged repulsion of the Soviet attack.

Beginning on April 2, two Red Army fronts surrounded the city and initiated a siege. They rapidly secured the city's eastern suburbs, before making advances in the heavily-fortified southern suburbs by April 8. Over the following days, the focus was particularly on the western quarters, which were home to the main railway station and other strategic official buildings. After days of heavy fighting, including close urban combat in some areas, the 6th Panzer Army retreated from Vienna, while the Red Army began a push further into Austria in the direction of Linz.

The liberation of the city, which had played a central role in the intellectual and cultural life of Europe, was welcomed by workers and resistance fighters around the world. It coincided with the beginning of the Red Army campaign to secure control

of Berlin, the German capital, which would mark the defeat of the hated fascist regime.

100 years ago: San Remo conference divides Middle East among imperialist powers

On April 19, 1920, the San Remo conference opened in Italy. It was the last of the major "peace" conferences sponsored by the League of Nations and its forerunner, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, to establish the imperialist division of the world after World War I.

The conference focused on the breakup of the former Ottoman Empire, an ally of Germany in the world war that had surrendered to the Allies in 1918. Participants included representatives from British, French, Italian and Japanese imperialism. The Americans sent a delegation only as observers. The conference also addressed the Allied attitude toward Soviet Russia and the obligations of Germany under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.

By the time the conference closed on April 26, it had decided to give Syria, including modern Lebanon, to the French under a mandate to oversee "independent" Arab states. The British received a mandate for Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Palestine. The Balfour Declaration, which allowed the Zionist colonization in Palestine, was ratified. The British also granted the French a 25 percent share of Iraqi oil production. The division followed the lines of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1917 between the British and the French, which the young Soviet state had made public to the world in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Mass movements in all the regions of the former Ottoman Empire had arisen against imperialism. In February, in Turkey itself, a national movement led by Kemal Ataturk had expelled the French from the city of Maras and was making military inroads throughout the country. In Syria, Arab nationalists had declared the Arab Kingdom of Syria, and in Palestine, nationalists agitated against British rule and the Zionist colonization. The Kurds were denied a state of their own and the imperialists failed to set up an Armenian bourgeois state, although the Bolsheviks founded a Soviet Armenia in December.

The division of the Ottoman provinces at the San Remo conference laid the basis for a series of bourgeois states in the aftermath of World War II 25 years later, including the establishment of Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

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