

This week in history: December 28-January 3

28 December 2009

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 Years ago: Soviet invasion of Afghanistan enters fifth year

US-funded “Mujahideen” rebels bombarded Kabul for five consecutive nights in a display of defiance marking the fifth anniversary of the Soviet army’s invasion to prop up Afghanistan’s pro-Moscow government.

The rebels were based in Peshawar, Pakistan, and operated with the funding and support of both Pakistan and the US. Comprised overwhelmingly of ethnic Pashtuns from the border regions, the Islamist rebels also included Arab recruits, prominent among them a Saudi named Osama bin Laden, who worked with a group called Maktab al-Khadamat that funnelled money and arms from Arab regimes, Pakistan, and the US to the Jihadists, and which received training from the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Calling the anniversary of the Soviet invasion a “day of infamy,” US President Ronald Reagan, who had earlier extolled the Islamists as “the valiant and courageous Afghan freedom fighters,” condemned Moscow. “There is no excuse for a great power like the Soviet Union doing what is doing to the people of Afghanistan,” Reagan said.

The *New York Times* editorial board also condemned the Soviet Union, writing that Moscow initially claimed its military presence would be “limited and temporary.” “The war thus spawned in lies ... has now run longer than Stalin’s war with Hitler,” the leading US newspaper declared. The *Times* decried civilian casualties and complained that

the Soviet occupation force had reached 115,000 soldiers.

The same week US Republican Senator Gordon Humphrey issued a statement claiming that most US aid to the Mujahideen was unaccounted for and being lost in “a leaky pipeline.” The “mismanagement” of the aid was of “scandalous proportions,” he charged.

[top]

50 Years ago: Croatian fascist leader Pavelic dies in Spain

Ante Pavelic died at the German Hospital in Madrid on December 28, 1959, from wounds suffered in an assassination attempt in Argentina two years earlier.

Pavelic, a political disciple of Italian fascist Benito Mussolini, was the founder of the Ustaše in Croatia in the 1930s, and was dictator of the pro-Axis government called the Independent State of Croatia in World War II.

The Pavelic regime was responsible for arguably the highest level of killing, proportional to population, in the war. At least three quarters of a million Serbs, Muslims, Jews, Roma, and Partisans were killed by the Ustaše, often by means so gruesome that they horrified even the Nazi occupiers. Women, children, and the elderly were not spared. This was according to stated policy. Of the Serbs in Bosnia, Pavelic declared “we shall convert one third, we shall kill one third and one third will leave willingly or unwillingly.”

In spite of their professed hatred of Serbs, the Ustaše collaborated with the Serbian fascist militia, the Chetniks, who were supported by Italy and who killed an estimated 150,000 Croats, Muslims, and Partisans in Bosnia and elsewhere.

Pavelic escaped to Austria after the war, and then was hidden and protected in Rome by powerful elements within the Catholic church. From there he went to Argentina, where he served as an advisor to the Peron regime. The attempt on his life was likely ordered by Yugoslav secret service.

[top]

75 Years ago: Japan withdraws from Washington Naval Treaty

On December 29, 1934 Japan announced it would withdraw from the Washington Naval Treaty. Enacted in 1922, the stated purpose of the treaty was to restrict the growth of naval armaments among member countries the US, Britain, France, Italy and Japan.

During negotiations at the 1921-1922 Naval Conference in Washington DC that produced the treaty, the US had intercepted coded instructions sent to the Japanese delegates by their government containing the lowest acceptable number of ships allowed to Japan in any ratio among member countries and used the information to force the Japanese delegates down to that number.

The US had entered into treaty negotiations hoping to bring a halt to the expansion of the Japanese Empire in the Pacific and to assert its own strategic interests in the region. Japan, which was to invade Manchuria in 1931, entered into treaty negotiations in part to secure recognition of its interests in Chinese territory by the Western powers and in order to curb the growth of the US Navy which presented a challenge to those interests.

The treaty ultimately favored the US and Britain, both of which were allowed significantly more armaments than Japan, France or Italy. The decision by the Japanese government to withdraw from the treaty on December 29, 1934 was prompted by its inability to secure a more equitable agreement in additional negotiations such as those producing the London Naval Treaty in 1930.

[top]

100 Years ago: Manhattan bridge opens

The Manhattan Bridge opened on December 31, 1909 in New York City, connecting Lower Manhattan at Canal Street to Brooklyn over a span of 1,470 feet (448 meters). A major feat of engineering, architecture, and labor, the Manhattan bridge was only 40 meters shorter than the world's longest, the nearby Williamsburg bridge which had opened in 1903, and 38 meters shorter than the third suspension bridge over the lower East River, the famous Brooklyn bridge, which had opened in 1883.

The two-level bridge was designed by Leon Moisseiff and Polish engineer Ralph Modjeski. The bridge's 21-inch-diameter steel cables were the largest ever used in a suspension bridge. Measuring 3,224 feet in length, the cables supported two levels, the upper for streetcars and the lower for four lanes of traffic with space for subway tracks on either side, thus supporting more traffic than the already constructed bridges. The bridge cost \$20,000,000 to construct and used close to 60,000,000 tons of steel.

At its Manhattan approach and its anchorages, the architectural firm of Carrere and Hastings put in place ornate touches, including a baroque arch meant to invoke Paris' arch of Porte St. Denis.

[top]



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