

This week in history: January 18-24

18 January 2010

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

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World Court served notice that in the future US imperialism would not be constrained by international law, human rights or global public opinion.

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25 years ago: US defies World Court

On January 18, 1985, the Reagan administration announced it would not abide by any World Court ruling in a case brought by Nicaragua against the terrorist methods employed by the US in its drive to bring down the nationalist Sandinista government.

The US rejection of the international court in the Hague marked the first time in the body's 40 year history that a major western power disavowed its sovereignty. The court had been created by US design and formally established by UN charter in 1946 as a means of regulating international conflict.

In the short term, Washington's withdrawal from the court was a tacit admission that it had been carrying out war crimes—and intended to continue to do so—against the people of Nicaragua from the time the Sandinista movement replaced the dictatorship of US puppet Anastasio Somoza in 1979. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) organized the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, and the Pentagon and CIA funded, trained and oversaw the terror campaign of the right-wing Contra forces.

More fundamentally, rejection of the authority of the

50 years ago: De Gaulle fires Algerian commander

On January 22, French President Charles de Gaulle fired the commander-in-chief of French forces in Algeria, Jacques Massu, over comments the latter made to the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in which Massu called de Gaulle “a man of the Left” and said the army regretted installing him in power in 1958. Massu implicitly threatened a coup d'état, saying the military brass was no longer prepared to follow de Gaulle's orders in Algeria. “The Army has the power,” said Massu. “It did not show it yet, because the opportunity did not arise. But the Army will use its power on one precise occasion.”

Massu was a veteran of French imperialism's ill-fated attempts to maintain itself as a colonial power after World War II, serving as an officer in both Vietnam and the Suez Crisis of 1956. In Algeria, Massu was responsible for instituting the torture of prisoners as standard operating procedure and breaking the general strike in Algiers of 1957—arresting a third of the Casbah's male population in the process—in what came to be known as the Battle of Algiers.

Massu had been instrumental in the 1958 installation of de Gaulle in a presidency with greatly expanded powers in what was, in all but name, a coup. That May, Massu

agreed with right-wing conspirators to become the president of a “committee for public safety,” made preparations to land parachutists at Paris’ Villacoublay airfield, and actually proceeded from Algeria with an invasion of Corsica. This forced the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the creation of the Fifth.

Only two days after Massu’s removal, a renewed insurrection against French rule erupted in Algeria.
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75 years ago: Japanese military attacks Chahar province in China

The Japanese military launched an assault on China’s Chahar province this week in 1935, one of several efforts to assert the authority of Japanese imperialism on Chinese territory.

The Japanese Government claimed that Chinese forces had violated the Tanggu Truce of 1933 by occupying the demilitarized zone between China’s Chahar and Jehol provinces. The Tanggu truce had brought an end to combat that began with Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

The Japanese military answered the presence of a relatively small number of Chinese soldiers—an anti-Japanese militia numbering approximately 600 and not recognized by the Chinese government—by launching a major mobilization which included 4,000 troops, 20 field guns, several armored cars and eight airplanes, two of which were bombers. During the fight against the Chinese militia, the Japanese force extended its reach to attack a number of targets in Chahar province, overwhelming several small villages in the region with its extensive firepower.

In spite of the immediate pretext used by the Japanese government for the assault, the extension of Japan’s military forces into Chahar province had long been expected. Situated between Mongolia and the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, Chahar province was of

strategic significance for the expansion of Japanese imperialism in the region because it contained an important route connecting Mongolia—allied with the Soviet Union—and Northern China.

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100 years ago: Germany, France, US near trade war

On January 18, 1910, the German government cabled the administration of President William Howard Taft warning of “trade hostilities” over the imposition of tariffs as a result of the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act of 1909, which increased US duties on hundreds of goods.

In response, Germany threatened to put in place its general tariff, or “fighting tariff,” as it was called by the press, on all US goods on February 8. By that date, German law would no longer allow “the concessions hitherto granted to American wares,” a German trade representative warned the US Chamber of Commerce. The US, in turn, demanded a reduction of the German tariff on US meats, threatening Germany with its maximum duty regime of 25 percent on all products if the *Kaiserreich* did not relent by April 1, 1910.

Also on January 18, Taft listed nations that would receive the lowest possible US tariff, including the United Kingdom, Italy and Russia. Conspicuous in their absence from the list, in addition to Germany, were France and Austria-Hungary. The French ambassador to the US, Jean Jules Jusserand, said Paris regarded US “tariff pretensions as excessive,” but said that a new law gave France “the chance to retaliate, which would precipitate a veritable commercial war.”

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