

This week in history: January 25-January 31

25 January 2010

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: *Time* acquitted in Sharon libel case over massacre

Both *Time* magazine and Ariel Sharon claimed victory in the days following a New York City jury's January 24 decision in a libel case brought by the former Israeli general against a paragraph in an article *Time* had published over his role in the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. The jury's final verdict acquitted the magazine of the central charge of libel, but had earlier found it had defamed Sharon by including false information. Sharon's libel lawsuit was an unprecedented attempt by a foreign leader to silence media criticism in the US.

On September 16, 1982, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) under Sharon's control ordered fascist Phalangist militiamen into the two refugee camps. The IDF then sealed off the exits and occupied high positions to monitor activities, and provided constant illumination to the Phalangists through flares. Over the next 48 hours, as many as 3,500 defenseless Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims—men, women, and children—were slaughtered while the IDF watched.

Sharon's \$50 million "blood libel" suit against *Time* was not over whether or not the massacre had taken place under Sharon's watch, or that he had allowed fascist Lebanese Phalangist militiamen into the camps. The February 21, 1983 article was, in fact, largely based on

Israel's own investigation of the massacre, which found Sharon indirectly responsible and forced his resignation from the IDF.

Rather, Sharon sued *Time* because of a single paragraph, based on anonymous sources, which claimed that Sharon had verbally encouraged the Phalangists "to take revenge" on the Palestinian refugees. Sharon and the Israeli government refused *Time's* requests that it release documents that might have proven the paragraph's veracity, and the anonymous sources used in the report—including an Israeli intelligence officer—refused to come forward, likely fearing retaliation.

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50 years ago: Belgium concedes independence to Congo

Its control over the Congo slipping and mindful of the disaster gripping its neighbor France in Algeria, Belgium on January 27, 1960, agreed to recognize the independence of its prized imperial possession at the end of June, after May national elections.

The Belgians released from prison Patrice Lumumba, the nationalist leader of the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), to attend the Brussels conference. He had been arrested in October 1959, blamed by Belgium for "inciting riots" in Stanleyville. There had also been major anti-colonial outbreaks in Leopoldville in January 1959. While Lumumba was in prison, the MNC handily won December local elections.

Powerful interests were at stake in the Congo's independence, and Belgium, backed by the United Nations, the United Kingdom, and the US, hoped to manage "decolonization" in such a way that western business and strategic interests would not be threatened. Britain, in particular, worried over important mining interests that dominated the region of Katanga's Union Minière du Haut-Katanga mine company, and its own colonial possession in neighboring Rhodesia. And the US Eisenhower administration worried that a nationalist Congo might become a Soviet ally in Africa.

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75 years ago: Revolt against President Terra in Uruguay

A major uprising was launched in Uruguay on January 28, 1935 against President Gabriel Terra. The revolt led to fighting between rebel groups and government loyalists in all of the country's 18 provinces. By January 29, a rebel militia had attacked government troops in the capital of Montevideo.

Rebel forces consisted of a loose coalition of civilians and members of political parties who opposed Terra, including the Independent Nationalist Party and the *Batllists*. Thousands took part in the fighting. General Basilio Muñoz of the Nationalist Party led the largest single group of fighters, numbering at least 1,000.

Tensions had been building for some time. In 1933, President Terra had suspended the congress, dissolved the National Council of Administration, which provided the only check on executive power and threw out the country's constitution. Terra would eventually establish ties with Mussolini and Hitler.

The 1935 uprising against him was dominated by a nationalist leadership of military figures and had no foundations in the Uruguayan working class. The aim of the revolutionaries was only to pressure Terra into resigning. Expectations that at least 10,000 would join in the fighting were soon disappointed as only half that number materialized. Without a strong central leadership

and no popular support among the working class, the rebellion was quickly isolated and demoralized.

Terra's forces eventually suppressed the rebellion in heavy fighting which included a bombing campaign against a large section of the rebel army at the Río Negro in early February.

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100 years ago: "White slavery" Mann Act passes House

The Mann Act, which made transporting women between states for "immoral purposes" a crime punishable by up to five years in jail and \$5,000, on January 26, 1910, passed the US House en route to becoming law.

Sponsored by Congressman James Mann of Illinois, the White Slavery Act, as it was also known, came in response to lurid and sensational media accounts of an alleged international trade in women associated with America's large immigrant populations. The US attorney for Chicago had earlier in the year made headlines by claiming, without evidence, that an international criminal syndicate was kidnapping women in Europe and selling them to Chicago brothels.

The reactionary law was presented as an instance of progressive reform. Rep. Mann, a Republican, had earlier introduced the legislation that was to become the Pure Food and Drug Act and was supportive of women's suffrage.

Among those to be prosecuted under the Mann Act were heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, actor Charlie Chaplin, music legend Chuck Berry, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, left-wing sociologist William I. Thomas, Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart and her lover, British poet George Parker.

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