

This week in history: September 13-September 19

13 September 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: Earthquake devastates Mexico City

On September 19, 1985, an earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale hit Mexico City, followed by a series of powerful aftershocks. Around 10,000 people were killed, 30,000 were seriously injured, and 250,000 were left homeless.

Most of the suffering resulted from poor construction in the world's most populous urban area. Residents of the Nuevo Leon housing project, for example, had complained to authorities for years that the 13-story structure was visibly tilting and could not withstand even a small earthquake. Hundreds were killed when the building collapsed.

Also completely or partially destroyed were a number of hospitals, including the Mexico City General Hospital, where 80 newborn babies were among the dead. Thus, in the midst of the disaster, "the backbone of the city's health system was destroyed," Health Minister Guillermo Soberon acknowledged.

The solidarity of the city's massive working class was overwhelming. The rush to donate blood and clothing was "so great that government officials have had to stop taking them for lack of storage facilities," a correspondent for the *Bulletin*, forerunner to the *World Socialist Web Site* reported.

However, "the international banks have shown no such sympathy for the suffering of the Mexican people," the *Bulletin* noted. "On the same day that the first devastating earthquakes struck, Mexico was struck with a blow from the

International Monetary Fund which announced that it was revoking its loan agreement with Mexico, cutting off \$900 million in expected loans. The *New York Times* quoted one official of a Wall Street bank which has large outstanding Mexican loans as declaring, 'It's hard to see the banks going ahead with voluntary lending while Mexico is out of whack.'"

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50 years ago: Mobutu coup d'état against Lumumba

With the backing of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a Congolese military officer named Joseph Mobutu ordered the democratically-elected president of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, placed under house arrest in the capital of Leopoldville on September 14, 1960. Two days later, Mobutu carried out a full coup, suspending both parliament and the constitution.

The coup was the culmination of three months of orchestration by the US, the United Nations, and the old colonial ruler, Belgium. Lumumba's nationalism, it was determined, posed a threat to powerful European mining interests in the Congo. At the same time, the bringing down of Lumumba would serve as a warning to the rest of the African states, which were then gaining formal independence from European colonizers in rapid succession.

After Lumumba's election victory and inauguration in June, mineral-rich Katanga province seceded in the south, backed by Belgium. Belgians fled the country, and a "capital strike" brought the economy to a virtual halt. As civil society disintegrated, sections of the military revolted, forcing Lumumba to rely ever more-heavily on the "loyal" element, headed by Mobutu.

The UN under General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld

actively collaborated with the coup. The UN helped to precipitate the crisis by refusing to allow loyal Congolese soldiers use of its airplanes for transport, in effect siding with Katanga and other secessionist movements. In response, Lumumba appealed for support from the Soviet Union, which sent material and “advisors.” Then, after president Joseph Kasa-Vubu’s attempt to sack Lumumba on September 5 failed—Lumumba winning a vote of confidence in parliament—the UN shut down the capital’s radio station and blocked Soviet planes supporting Lumumba from its airfields.

In one of his first acts after the coup, Mobutu ordered the Soviets out of the Congo. The CIA had found its man.

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75 years ago: Nazis pass anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws

On September 15, 1935, the Nazi party unanimously adopted the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws during the party's Seventh Nuremberg Rally.

The first of the new laws was the Reich Citizenship Law, which stripped German Jews of their citizenship rights. A true German citizen, according to the racist law, was defined as a German who is “of German or kindred blood and who, through his conduct, shows that he is both desirous and fit to serve the German people and Reich faithfully.”

The second of the Nuremberg Laws was the Law For The Protection of German Blood and Honor. It banned marriage and sex between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans and prevented Jews from hiring any female, non-Jewish domestic servants under the age of 45. The law provided that anyone found guilty of “interracial” marriage or sex would be punished with “hard labor” or imprisonment.

Following the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, the Nazis officially defined as Jewish anyone with three or four Jewish grandparents. Those with one or two Jewish grandparents were defined as *Mischlinge*, or “mixed race.” Special charts were published to assist Nazi leaders in determining the race of an individual and how to enforce the new laws against them.

In a speech delivered at the Nuremberg rally, Adolf Hitler said the laws were “an attempt to regulate by law [the Jewish] problem, which, should this attempt fail, must then be handed over by law to the National-Socialist Party for a final solution.”

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100 years ago: Census shows rapid growth of US cities

The results of the 1910 Federal Census, which were released at this time in 1910, revealed astonishing population growth in US cities.

On the East Coast, New York City added 1.3 million people in a decade of 40 percent growth to reach a population of 4,767,000. Philadelphia and Boston grew by 20 percent each, to 1,350,000 and 670,000 respectively. But some of the most rapid growth took place among the Midwestern and Western cities. Even with the auto industry still in its infancy, Detroit’s population increased by 68 percent, from 284,000 to 464,000. Cleveland saw growth of 46 percent in the decade to 587,000 inhabitants. Chicago fortified its position as “the second city,” growing by about 30 percent to 2,183,000. Los Angeles, which had just over 100,000 people in 1900, tripled its population in ten years to 319,000.

The growth of the cities coincided with the rapid expansion of key industries such as meat processing, machine-making, textiles, and petrochemical production. The steel and electrical industries played a double role by providing hundreds of thousands of jobs and by fundamentally altering the nature of the city. Steel was used to build the cities upwards through steel-frame skyscrapers, and outwards through trains and streetcars. Electricity was coming into common usage, lighting public spaces and homes.

Much of the population growth was fed by immigration, especially from eastern and southern Europe, with Italians, Jewish immigrants, and Slavs supplanting the Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians as the largest groups. In 1910, 90 percent of the population of New York and Boston were foreign born or the children of foreign-born parents; the figure was 80 percent in Chicago.

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