

# This week in history: January 7-13

7 January 2013

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

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## 25 years ago: Second Kentucky coal miners' frame-up trial opens

The trial of miner Paul Smith opened on Monday, January 11, 1988, in a federal district court in London, Kentucky. Smith was among the five AT Massey coal miners charged in the shooting death of strikebreaker Hayes West on May 29, 1985, during the bitter 1984-1985 AT Massey strike. The other four miners, UMWA Local 2496 president Donnie Thornsby, David Thornsby, Arnold Heightland and Paul's cousin, James Darryl Smith, had previously been tried and convicted of involvement in the shooting.

The earlier trial began in August 1987 and ended in December. As part of the government's effort to railroad a group of militant miners into long jail sentences and thereby intimidate the rank and file, Smith was being tried separately, charged with firing the shot that killed West. He faced a life sentence. Smith was acquitted on all four counts, including shooting into the scab coal trucks and firearms violation, for lack of any evidence against him.

In a move that shocked supporters and relatives at the trial, Smith was immediately re-arrested and arraigned on state charges of murder on January 27, subjecting him to a possible death sentence. Smith's defense attorney moved to have the new charges thrown out on grounds of double jeopardy. Eventually Smith was again acquitted.

The prosecution case against all five miners, based entirely on the testimony of paid informants and stool pigeons, alleged that the shots that killed West were fired from the top of a nearby mountain. But West was killed by a blast from a shotgun, a close-range weapon, fatally wounded by ammunition that was generally available only to police and security companies. Witnesses reported seeing guards on the mountain at the time. None testified to seeing any union

miners there.  
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## 50 years ago: Togo president assassinated

On January 13, 1963, Togo President Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated in a military coup d'état. His bullet-riddled body was found feet from the US embassy in the capital city of Lomé. Olympio, a bourgeois and pro-US politician, would be replaced by political rivals he had exiled, and ultimately in 1967 by his assassin, Colonel Étienne Eyadéma, who would rule Togo until 2005.

Olympio, who had recently conducted a friendly visit with President Kennedy in Washington, was trained at the London School of Economics, a longtime executive in Unilever's African operations, and a member of one of Togo's handful of wealthy comprador families. He earned a modest anti-imperial reputation when he was imprisoned by the French Vichy regime during WWII, a persona he invoked to become Togo's first president after formal independence from France came in 1961. As an "independence" leader he cultivated close relations with the US, the UK, and West Germany.

Olympio had tense relations with neighboring Ghana, where political exiles from his regime sought the protection of Pan-African nationalist Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah called for the incorporation of Togo into Ghana, which would have united the Ewe people under one state. For his part, Olympio called Nkrumah a "black imperialist." It was never established, however, that Nkrumah backed the coup leaders, who had demanded Olympio form a larger army, including positions for many decommissioned members of the French Foreign Legion.

Togo, an ethnically heterogeneous state with an area smaller than the state of West Virginia, had been from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century a center of the African slave trade, from the late nineteenth century until WWI an imperial possession of Germany, and then the divided war prize of the victors of Versailles, Britain and

France.

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### **75 years ago: Republican forces take strategic town of Teruel, Aragon**

Republican forces finally took the Aragon town of Teruel, capital of the province of Teruel, after a long battle lasting weeks on January 7, 1938. It was the biggest battle of the Spanish Civil War to that point, fought in the depths of one of the worst winters Spain has ever experienced. During the protracted fighting, General Franco's army was prevented from utilizing his mechanized transport and German and Italian air force planes due to blizzard conditions. Both sides suffered thousands of casualties to exposure. The town was left in ruins.

Teruel was strategically crucial because, once held by the Republicans, it could be utilized as a center of communication for armies moving from Madrid to the Aragon front. The *Times of London* described the town as located at "the point of a salient thrusting itself towards the Mediterranean and menacing communications with both Madrid and Valencia." The Republican leadership was also keen to divert Franco's forces from an attack upon Madrid.

General Franco, against the wishes of his German, Italian, and Spanish military advisers, and anxious not to lose so much as one inch of territory won, diverted troops to Teruel from other battle fronts. According to the historian Helen Graham, he was also motivated by a bloodlust to exterminate as many as possible of the Republic's crack troops sent to take Teruel.

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### **100 years ago: Tibet and Mongolia sign defense treaty**

On January 11, 1913, Tibet and Mongolia signed a mutual defense treaty in which they proclaimed their independence from China. Article Four of the treaty stipulates that Tibet and Mongolia "from now and for all time afford each other assistance against external dangers." Tibet and Mongolia were of geo-strategic and political importance to imperialist powers Britain and Russia.

The treaty followed the Chinese revolution of 1911, which brought down the Qing dynasty. When Sichuan and Yunnan authorities attempted to colonize Tibet in August 1912, the

British presented a memorandum to the Chinese government, stating that while they recognized China's "suzerain rights" in Tibet, Britain did not and would not recognize China's right to maintain unlimited troops or interfere in the internal administration in Tibet.

The 1913 treaty also came six years after the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, which saw the two empires form an alliance to protect their regional interests against the growing strength and influence of Germany. Because of its location, Tibet was important to Britain, which, in 1904, sent Lieutenant Colonel Francis Younghusband and John Claude White, the political officer for Sikkim, to settle disputes over the Sikkim-Tibet border. This became a de facto invasion of Tibet when the two men exceeded their instructions from London.

In 1911, Russia began to encourage the Mongol princes' intrigues and seditionist moves against China. Mongol princes declared Mongolia's independence from China on October 1911. The Tsarist regime provided the Mongols 15,000 rifles, 15,000 sabers and 7.5 million cartridges. In November 1912, Russia signed an agreement with Mongolia pledging to maintain Mongolia's autonomy, in which the terms regarding trade between the two were clearly outlined, including "the rights and privileges of Russian subjects in Mongolia."

Through its relationship with Mongolia, Russia would be able to exercise direct influence in Tibetan affairs. Because Tibet was considered a buffer state, situated on India's northern frontier, Britain viewed Russia's support for Mongolian autonomy as an attempt to expand Russian influence in the region, and therefore a potential threat to their colonial interests there such as India and Afghanistan. Sir Arthur Nicholson expressed the concerns of Britain, stating that he was "anxious about Russo-Tibetan relations via Mongolmia...and a large increase, even if indirect, of Russian influence in Tibet."

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