

This week in history: December 2-8

2 December 2013

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: Argentine military rebels against civilian government

Officers demanding amnesty for the Argentine “dirty warriors” seized a section of the Campo de Mayo military base near Buenos Aires on December 2, 1988. This was the third such attempt since the so-called “Easter rebellion” of April 1987.

The mutinous officers demanded “the recuperation of the honor and historic role of the army.” After taking control of the infantry school at the Campo de Mayo, rebels attempted to seize control of the Magdalena military prison 60 miles south of Buenos Aires, which held officers and junta members from Argentina’s eight-year “dirty war.” Among the inmates was Jorge Videla, who headed the regime responsible for the bloodbath and “disappearance of as many as 30,000 workers and students.”

The rebels, called “carapintadas” because they covered their faces with camouflage paint, dug trenches at the base and deployed tanks. They were under the orders of right-wing Col. Mohammed Ali Seineldin. The attempted coup was repulsed by security forces.

Despite the massive public opposition and demonstrations the army rebellions provoked, the Alfonsín government responded with conciliation to the demands of the officers, limiting the prosecution of the dirty warriors. With each rebellion, the military forces mobilized greater numbers and the civilian government made more concessions.

[top]

50 years ago: Oswald named as lone gunman in Kennedy assassination

On December 3, 1963, the *New York Times* reported that the FBI’s initial report into the November 22, 1963 assassination of President John Kennedy would “probably” show that “[Lee Harvey] Oswald acted alone in firing the three shots that killed Mr. Kennedy and seriously wounded Gov. John B. Connally, Jr., of Texas.” Ten days after the assassination, Oswald’s later status in the official version of the killing had not yet been established: “This has been a crucial point—whether Oswald acted without accomplices in planning and executing the assassination,” the *Times* stated.

On December 5, the Warren Commission began its deliberations. The panel was convened by new president Lyndon Johnson to investigate the assassination and the murder of Oswald two days later in the basement of the Dallas police headquarters by nightclub owner Jack Ruby. “We are deliberating somewhat in the dark,” said commission chair and Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, “because we have no report as yet from any agency of the government. The information we have now is little more than what we have learned through the news media.”

On December 6, Dallas police reported that Oswald had been the assailant in the failed attempt to assassinate the right-wing extremist and retired General Edwin A. Walker in Dallas on April 10, 1963. Police were allegedly told this by Oswald’s Russian-born widow, Marina, whom the FBI had blocked from speaking with the media. Marina’s story was contradicted by the only witness to the attempt on Walker’s life, a 14-year-old boy who reported several men jumping into a car and speeding away after the shooting. Walker also reported having been stalked by more than one individual.

On December 7 the *Times* reported that the FBI had been investigating Oswald prior to the assassination, and by November 9, two weeks before Kennedy’s assassination, was aware of his employment at the Dallas School Book Depository. The *Times* also reported that it had learned that while in the Marines, “Oswald was by no means the best shot [and] would have had to use the rifle frequently to attain a high degree of accuracy.”

On December 8, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, an ostensibly pro-Castro organization in fact heavily infiltrated by federal agents, publicly released six letters between the organization and Oswald. The communications showed that

Oswald acted without the endorsement of Fair Play for Cuba when in the summer of 1963 he set up a branch office of his own accord in New Orleans, where he began to print and distribute pro-Castro propaganda. In the letters Oswald wrote of his desire to “attract attention.” In another he stated “I am very glad I am stirring things up and shall continue to do so.”

[top]

75 years ago: Ribbentrop and Bonnet sign Franco-German Friendship Pact

On December 6, 1938, during a visit to France, German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop signed the Declaration of Franco-German Friendship with his French counterpart Georges Bonnet. Yet another signal to the Nazi leadership that the major western powers would seek to avoid war, the pact was itself of little significance in military, diplomatic, or economic terms.

Ribbentrop would later claim that Bonnet made him a promise that France would recognize the whole of Eastern Europe as Germany’s exclusive sphere of influence. Ribbentrop interpreted Bonnet’s stated lack of interest in Eastern Europe as meaning France would grant Germany a free hand in Poland. Bonnet was part of a faction of the French ruling elite that favored détente with Germany and backing out of France’s military commitment to Poland. Bonnet later denied Ribbentrop’s claims.

While Ribbentrop perceived positive signals from the French government, it was an otherwise chilly reception in Paris. “When Ribbentrop drove through the streets they were completely deserted,” William L. Shirer writes in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. “[S]everal cabinet ministers and other leading figures in the French political and literary worlds ... refused to attend the social functions accorded the Nazi visitor.”

[top]

100 years ago: French cabinet falls amid sharpening political tensions

On December 2, 1913, the French cabinet fell, with the resignation of Prime Minister Louis Barthou. While immediately precipitated by differences over financial policy, the crisis of the government reflected deep-seated

differences within the French ruling elite relating to the growth of inter-imperialist tensions throughout Europe, and military setbacks suffered by French imperialism in North Africa.

Opposition to the cabinet within parliament was led by Joseph Caillaux, leader of the Radical Party and former prime minister, who opposed Barthou’s policy of seeking a public loan of £52 million without raising additional taxation. Caillaux, a demagogic populist with ties to sections of the Socialist Party, called for the introduction of progressive income tax.

Over a quarter of the proposed loan was designated to cover the costs of French military operations in the colonial protectorate of Morocco, which had witnessed substantial social unrest over the preceding three years. Barthou also claimed it was necessary to pay for the increase of the period of compulsory military service, from two to three years, that had been passed in May.

The introduction of the “Three Year Law” was widely opposed, with the Socialist Party and the major union federations holding demonstrations of up to 100,000 people. Caillaux had denounced the law for fear that it would become a focal point of opposition to militarism.

While the conscription law was widely viewed as a response to Germany’s increasing military build-up, Caillaux advocated closer relations between the two nations. He had been forced to resign as prime minister in January 1912, following revelations that he had conducted secret negotiations with the German government, without the permission of the president, at a time of intense Franco-German tensions over the control of Morocco.

Barthou resigned immediately after his Cabinet lost a vote on the loan bill in Parliament. President Raymond Poincaré offered the Radical deputy Gaston Doumergue the prime ministership, and Caillaux was installed as finance minister.

[top]



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