This week in history: December 9-15

9 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: Armenia seeks relief after devastating earthquake

European rescue teams and equipment were airlifted into Armenia on December 10, 1988, just days after the strongest earthquake on record for the region hit the Soviet Transcaucasus. The quake, with a magnitude of 6.9, virtually wiped out the region of Spitak, killing a large part of the population of more than 55,000. Armenia's second largest city of Leninakan, with a population of nearly 250,000, was more than 80 percent destroyed, according to a government communique.

Also devastated were the cities of Kirovakan and Stepanavan as well as the district of Akhuryanansky. In addition to Soviet troops and equipment that were sent into the disaster area to conduct rescue and relief operations, rescue teams, food, clothing, and medical supplies were flown in from around the world.

For days, people were trapped in the rubble of schools, factories and apartment buildings. The newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, *Pravda*, later said that poor construction from the era during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982) was responsible for the extent of the death toll. Rescue efforts were largely given up a week after the quake. The voices and cries for help from under the rubble dropped off sharply after December 12, when temperatures plummeted to below freezing.

In the aftermath of the quake, an estimated 500,000 were made homeless. In the freezing weather, displaced residents were forced to huddle around huge outdoor bonfires before tents arrived to provide limited shelter. The final estimated death toll was as high as 50,000, with injuries over 100,000.

[top]

50 years ago: Kenya gains independence

On December 12, 1963, the independence of Kenya from Great Britain was celebrated in the former colonial capital of Nairobi. One of the prominent figures of the African independence struggle, Jomo Kenyatta, was declared president. It was the final British possession in East Africa to gain independence. Like much of the rest of "independent" Africa, the new nation, roughly the size of Texas and with a population of 8,363,000 people, faced immense challenges for which the bourgeois nationalism of Kenyatta had no solution.

Kenyatta had been imprisoned for seven years, until 1959, for his alleged role in the Mau Mau uprising that had targeted white settlers and colonial authority. In the early 1930s he had flirted with Stalinism, studying at the Peoples of the East University in Moscow. After returning to London he established himself as a prominent figure among a group of radical pan-Africanists led by George Padmore.

But as the new president of his homeland, Kenyatta celebrated independence alongside Prince Philip, husband of Queen Elizabeth, and signed a series of loan agreements with Western powers and banks tightening, not lessening, the dominance of Western imperialism over a nation in which three-quarters of the population still lived in mud huts and 93 percent subsisted outside of the cash economy.

Kenyatta quickly began to assume dictatorial powers and, in a nation of at least 48 tribes, favored his own Kikuyu people. In the north, the Kenyatta government faced a near civil war against the Somali minority that sought unity with neighboring Somalia. The economy was dominated by the nation's 60,000 white settlers, and secondarily by over 200,000 Indians and Arabs, often merchants and owners of small businesses. The proposal of a union with neighbors Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar was stillborn.

[top]

75 years ago: Nazis put German socialists on trial

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The trial of arrested members of the International Socialist Militant League (Internationales Sozialistisches Kampfbund/ISK) continued December 9-15, 1938, in Germany. Standing before the so-called People's Court were Alexander Dehms, Frida Arnold and Martha Broker, all charged with spreading socialist beliefs on behalf of the league in the Hamburg and Bremen regions.

Days earlier, the alleged leader of the group, Julius Philippson, who was Jewish, had been sentenced to penal servitude for life for the crime of high treason. Hugo Schmidt, Johann Harnisch and Alwin Kessler had also been charged with activity on behalf of the league in Thuringia and sentenced to terms of imprisonment.

The ISK tendency was founded in 1917 by the philosopher Leonard Nelson and educator Minna Specht as an anti-Marxist and anti-materialist response to the taking of power in Russia by the Bolsheviks. Promoting a petty-bourgeois idealist brand of socialism, the organization attracted some prominent figures, including Albert Einstein, novelist Heinrich Mann, artist Kathe Kollwitz, poet and satirist Erich Kastner, and the anti-war writer Arnold Zweig, among others.

After Hitler's Enabling Act rendered all left-wing political activity illegal, the ISK destroyed their membership lists and party records and worked clandestinely against Nazi rule. They assisted political refugees to leave Germany and conducted sabotage operations. The ISK, according to the prosecution, spread its propaganda by means of pamphlets and literature and illegal gramophone records imported from abroad.

[top]

100 years ago: Rebels attack Tampico in Mexican revolution

On December 10, 1913, rebels attacked Tampico in the Huasteca region that includes the southern part of Tamaulipas state and the northern part of Veracruz state. Tampico was besieged by fighting for four days by Constitutionalist forces supporting Venustiano Carranza in opposition to the government of Victoriano Huerta.

Tampico was of particular significance to European, especially British interests. In 1910 British investor Weetman Pearson's Mexican Eagle Oil Company struck oil near Tampico, with a well that flowed at a rate of 100,000 barrels per day and provided 75 percent of Britain's oil requirements. In 1913 the company, whose board members included former president Porfirio Diaz's son and the finance minister, was among the 30 largest in the world. American Edward L. Doheny's wells in the Huasteca Petroleum Company south of Tampico were also enormously productive.

With the tacit support of Pearson, Huerta had instigated the overthrow of President Madero, whose revolution, according to US ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, had been backed by US oil interests while British oil interests "were behind" Huerta. Madero and his vice-president were murdered on February 1913 on Huerta's orders.

Political anarchy and the threat of economic collapse reigned in Mexico as rival factions sought military and political control. Huerta's favorable disposition to European interests compelled US mine owners, landowners, and Texaco Oil to persuade President Wilson's administration to support Carranza.

US Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan wrote to US diplomats in Latin America that President Wilson considered "it is his immediate duty to require Huerta's retirement," and that the United States would "proceed to employ such means as may be necessary to secure this result."

In August 1913, Huerta rejected all US proposals, including the offer of a large private loan if he agreed to an election without running as a candidate. Wilson's policy of "watchful waiting" was abandoned and instead, in autumn of 1913, the US encouraged the Constitutionalist rebels led by Carranza.

By December 14, the rebels were driven back in their attack in Tampico, resulting in 800 reported dead and a multitude of wounded.

[top]

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