This week in history: December 16-22

16 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: 270 killed in bombing of PanAm jumbo jet

On December 21, 1988 Pan American flight 103 from London to New York was blown out of the sky over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 243 passengers, 16 crew members and 11 residents of the small town.

The aircraft, a Boeing 747 jumbo jet, had left London's Heathrow Airport less than an hour before and was cruising at an altitude of 31,000 feet when a bomb tore a 20-inch hole in the fuselage, ripping off the jet's nose, sending it into an almost vertical dive within three seconds. The aircraft disintegrated as it plummeted, spreading wreckage over a mile radius and exploding in a huge fireball.

Within 24 hours of the disaster, the cockpit voice recorder was discovered, revealing that no distress signal was broadcast nor had emergency landing procedures been initiated. The CIA issued a "spot report" the day after the crash stating, "We have received no forensic evidence to confirm the cause of the crash of Pan American Airlines flight 103 yesterday; we do not rule out the possibility that a bomb was behind the crash."

The report went on to list several groups claiming responsibility for the incident. First on the list was: "A male caller claimed that a group called the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution had destroyed the plane in retaliation for Iran Air Flight 655 being shot down by U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf the previous July."

In the immediate investigation, 10,000 pieces of debris were collected and tagged. It was determined that a radio cassette recorder was used to disguise a plastic explosives device and placed in a suitcase which was in the hold of the airliner.

At least four US government officials were among the passengers.

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50 years ago: Truman warns of CIA in Washington Post op-ed

On December 22, 1963, exactly one month after the assassination of President John Kennedy, former President Harry S. Truman published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* entitled "Limit CIA Role." The *Post* removed the editorial from its afternoon and evening editions.

Truman, who created the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947, wrote, it "has become necessary to take another look at [its] purpose and operations." He claimed that the CIA's original purpose had been to provide to the president "the most accurate and up-to-the-minute information on what is going on everywhere in the world, and particularly of the trends and developments in all the danger spots in the contest between East and West."

By 1963 it was doing far more. "For some time I have been disturbed by the way CIA has been diverted from its original assignment," Truman wrote. "It has become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the Government. This has led to trouble and may have compounded our difficulties in several explosive areas." For a readership in 1963 the "explosive areas" referred to would have been taken as Cuba and Vietnam.

Truman continued, "I never had any thought that when I set up the CIA that it would be injected into peacetime cloak and dagger operations." He warned further that it had come to be perceived elsewhere in the world as "a symbol of sinister and mysterious foreign intrigue—and a subject for cold war enemy propaganda." Truman specifically asked that the CIA's "operational duties be terminated."

"There is something about the way the CIA has been functioning that is casting a shadow over our historic position and I feel that we need to correct it," concluded Truman, the Democrat and liberal anti-communist responsible for the decision at the end of World War II to

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incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a display of American ruling class ruthlessness.

It was not the first time that a president had made a direct warning over the power of the US security state. Three years earlier outgoing Republican President Dwight Eisenhower had publicly warned of the growing power of the "military-industrial complex," whose "total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government."

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75 years ago: Hungary declares adherence to the "Rome-Berlin Axis"

Toasts were exchanged in Budapest on December 21,1938, between the Hungarian Minister for Foreign Affairs Istvan Csaky and Italy's Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, when Csaky announced Hungary's adherence to the militaristic "Rome-Berlin Axis." The announcement had been widely anticipated but it was the first time a governmental minister had said so publicly. The term "Axis" was initially coined by Hungary's right-wing prime minister Gyula Gombos two years earlier when he advocated an alliance between Hungary, Germany, and Italy.

During the same evening Csaky gave a reception for Ciano and mendaciously explained how the aim of the friendship between the states was to establish and maintain a peace based on "justice" in Central Europe. Hungary, declared Csaky, was inseparably attached to the Axis powers and therefore intended to strengthen relations with other states friendly to Germany and Italy.

Hungary had drawn closer to Germany and Italy between the World Wars largely because of a shared desire to revise the peace settlements made after World War I, while many in the Hungarian ruling class openly admired and wished to emulate the anti-Semitic policies of Nazi Germany. Due to its pro-German stance, Hungary received a share of the loot, in the form of additional territory, when Germany dismembered Czechoslovakia.

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100 years ago: Spanish troops quash uprising in Morocco

On December 18, 1913, Spanish troops brutally suppressed an armed force of tribesman opposing the colonial domination of Morocco. Spanish control of northern sections of the country had been established on November 27, 1912, in a treaty with France. Colonial control of Morocco, which stretched back decades, had been formalized in the Treaty of Fez in March 1912, formally establishing a French protectorate.

The machinations of the major powers in the North African region had generated a series of anti-colonial rebellions, many of which were brutally suppressed. The establishment of the French protectorate had followed the Agadir crisis of 1911, during which French troops put down a popular rebellion against the Sultan, who was reviled for his collaboration with the European powers.

The Spanish protectorate in the north rapidly encountered the opposition of native forces. Newspapers reported that on December 18, 1913 a Spanish column was ordered to advance on rebel positions, discovering tribal soldiers hidden throughout rugged terrain. Reconnaissance flights by Spanish military aircraft searched out the Moroccan fighters, indicating their position to the Spanish troops below through the use of flags. The Spaniards proceeded to bombard the poorly armed rebels with artillery fire, while the pilots above dropped a "veritable rain of bombs tossed by hand by the airmen into the midst of the Moors," according to a Spanish military dispatch. Spanish troops secured victory following an infantry charge on rebel positions with bayonets. An unknown number of tribal fighters were killed.

The use of aerial bombardment as a method of warfare was relatively new, having first been used by the Italian army during the Italo-Turkish war of 1911-12, fought over control of modern-day Libya.

The Spanish aerial attack on Moroccan tribesmen was followed with "keen interest" by senior figures in the signal corps of the US War Department, according to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Colonel Samuel Rebor commented that the attack "confirms the experience of other nations in using the aeroplane in actual warfare and is a practical demonstration of the use of the aeroplane in a campaign."

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