

This week in history: December 30-January 5

30 December 2013

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

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25 years ago: Two Libyan aircraft shot down by US F-14s in Gulf of Sidra

On January 4, 1989, US Navy F-14 Tomcats shot down two Libyan MIG-23 aircraft over the waters just off Libya's coast. The Navy fighters were part of a battle group flying from the USS John F. Kennedy near the coast of Libya. The two jets were part of a strike force including two more F-14s and a group of A-6 Intruders.

US defense secretary Frank Carlucci claimed the downing of the Libyan aircraft was in self-defense, yet the deployment of a war fleet of 23 ships just offshore Libya, together with a Marine assault force of 2,000, belied such claims. Washington had been making repeated warnings of a potential strike against Libya, using the construction of a chemical plant in Rabta, allegedly a potential chemical weapons facility, as a pretext.

Before takeoff, the American pilots were briefed to expect hostilities. Four Libyan aircraft took off from Al Bumbah airfield. Two of them turned toward the incoming F-14s when US radar locked onto them, supposedly creating an audible beep in the MIGs. When the aircraft continued in the direction of the US planes, the F-14 pilots entered combat mode.

Much of the Gulf of Sidra was claimed as territorial waters by Libya in 1973, legitimizing a military response to unauthorized entry. The US refused to recognize the claim and responded by conducting naval operations in the area. In 1981, in what is known as the first Gulf of Sidra incident, two Libyan SU-22 fighters fired on two US F-14s and were subsequently shot down.

Only six months prior to the second incident in the Gulf of Sidra, the US also claimed self-defense when it shot down a commercial airliner over Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf,

killing 290 civilians.
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50 years ago: Communal violence in Cyprus

In the first days of January 1964, scores of Turkish and Greek families left mixed neighborhoods and suburbs of Nicosia, the capital of the eastern Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus, under the threat of ethnic violence. On the western side of the suburb of Ormophita, dozens of Turkish homes were burned or left in rubble. On January 1, two Greek monks and a teenage novice were gunned down at a monastery. Thousands of British soldiers were flown in, ostensibly to quell the violence. They would be replaced later in the year by a United Nations peacekeeping force.

The Turkish and Greek troops stationed on the island by Ankara and Athens moved outside of their bases, each claiming to protect its "own" ethnic community. The government dissolved as the Greek elite, which had the upper hand in an ethnic power-sharing arrangement imposed by the old colonial master of the island, Great Britain, sought to consolidate its position, and the Turkish elite responded by calling on soldiers and police to walk out with their guns.

The Communist Party of Cyprus was the strongest and best-organized party on the island, and it also commanded the allegiance of the largest trade union federation, with some 40,000 members, out of the island's total population of 580,000. But the membership of the Stalinist party was overwhelming Greek, and it failed to attract significant support among Turkish workers.

Cyprus had been a British colony or protectorate since 1878, when it was wrested from the Ottoman Empire. London viewed it as an indispensable naval base overlooking the Suez Canal, Britain's lifeline to the crown jewel of the empire, India. In the 1950s, a Greek nationalist organization called the EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston) began a bombing campaign seeking independence from Britain to be followed by union with Greece. This was

opposed by elements of the Turkish minority, who countered with the equally reactionary demand for partition of the island.

In 1960, Britain concluded an “independence” agreement for Cyprus that protected its interests. Cyprus gave important naval bases to the UK and entered the Commonwealth. Britain, with the backing of Greece and Turkey—all three were members of NATO—foisted a constitution on the island that deepened the communal divide: the president and the majority of the cabinet members would be Greek, the vice president and a minority of cabinet members Turkish. Each ethnic community would vote only for its own representatives. The outcome of this was the election of a Greek Orthodox patriarch, Archbishop Makarios III, as president, and a drive by the Greek elite to exclude Turks from government and move toward union with Greece. Violence escalated, and Turkey, which along with the UK and Greece maintained troops on the island, threatened full-scale invasion.

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75 years ago: Nazi decree bars Jews from German economy

Effective January 1, 1939, a Nazi decree took effect barring German Jews from operating shops, stores, markets or other small businesses. The “Measure for the Elimination of Jews from German Economic Life” had been approved by Field Marshal Hermann Goering, in his capacity as overseer of the Nazi four-year economic plan, just after the Kristallnacht pogroms of November 9-11, 1938.

After consultations with Hitler, Goering ordered a halt in all business activity by Jews at the beginning of the new year. The decree instructed police to shut down all Jewish-owned shops, whether the proprietors employed non-Jews, family members or merely themselves.

Any Jew who held a management position in any business or cooperative was to be dismissed within six weeks, without any recourse or compensation. Jews who were part-owners in corporations were ordered to retire in the course of 1939.

The language of decree was unsparing. Jews were compelled “to sell their enterprises, as well as any land, stock, jewels, and art works. They could use the services of ‘trustees’ to complete these transactions within the time limit. Registration and deposit of all shares was compulsory.”

This effectively legalized the mass theft of Jewish property

that had been a major feature of the Kristallnacht pogroms. Jewish stores and businesses had been wrecked and their merchandise carried out. Jewish homes had been invaded by Nazi thugs and valuables looted.

Many leading Nazis, including Goering himself, a major art thief, enriched themselves enormously from the resulting plunder.

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100 years ago: Battle of Ojinaga in Mexican Revolution

On December 31, close to 5,000 of Pancho Villa’s military force, the Northern Division, carried out an offensive against the Mexican Federal Army entrenched in Ojinaga, a city opposite Presidio, Texas, close to the US border. About 3,500 Federal troops, under the command of General Mercado, backed by the state’s oligarchy, had retreated to Ojinaga following Villa’s capture of Chihuahua in early December. Elected as provisional governor of the state by the region’s military commanders, Villa ordered Generals Natera and Ortega to attack Ojinaga and destroy the Federal army.

Villa was one of the insurgent leaders in the Constitutionalist movement, which included Emiliano Zapata, in the south, and Venustiano Carranza. The Constitutionalist movement fought for the land reforms promised by President Madero, which he failed to deliver. Their aim was to overthrow the military dictatorship of General Victoriano Huerta, who was supported by the army, foreign companies and investors, and large landowners. Huerta, after plotting with the US ambassador, had overthrown Madero and had him assassinated.

Villa’s rebels made repeated attempts to take Ojinaga throughout the first days of January 1914, and initially made some ground, but were beaten back by the Federals’ artillery. Withdrawing for six days to obtain fresh ammunition, the rebels renewed their attack. The Federal troops were weakened by the large numbers of injured and desertions. By January 2, the death toll was more than 1,000, and many wounded lay in the battlefield without medical aid.

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