

This week in history: January 27-February 2

27 January 2014

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

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25 years ago: Criminal trial of Iran-Contra conspirator opens

After months of legal wrangling, the trial of Lt. Col Oliver North was set to open on January 31, 1989. The result of negotiations presided over by US District Judge Gerhard Gesell, involving independent counsel Lawrence Walsh and both the outgoing Reagan administration and the incoming Bush administration, was the dropping of the main charges against North of conspiring to conduct a “secret war” and deceiving the congressional investigation through the theft and destruction of government documents.

Before the opening of the trial, a list of subjects was drawn up which became known as the “drop-dead list.” Anything in it was deemed unacceptable for courtroom discussion due to national security. The classified documents that would be needed to prosecute North on the major criminal charges were excluded. Gesell blamed US Attorney General Dick Thornburgh’s adamant refusal to release them, on national security grounds, for the dropping of the two felony charges.

On the eve of the trial, President George Bush, who served as vice president during the time of the US secret war against the government in Nicaragua, was excused from appearing before the court on the grounds there was “no showing (by North) that President Bush has any specific information relevant and material to the charges.”

The 12 lesser felony charges that North faced included lying to Congress, destroying documents and accepting an illegal gratuity. If convicted on all charges, the 45-year-old North could be sentenced to 60 years in prison and \$3 million in fines.

An indication of the controlled character of the trial was revealed on the second day of jury selection, when Gesell announced that he was considering charging ABC News with contempt of court for airing a portion of North’s 1987 testimony. Gesell told both prosecution and defense lawyers to question potential jurors intensely about their recall of North’s appearance before Congress. The judge said he would dismiss any juror who acknowledged reading about, watching or listening to North’s Congressional testimony about the 1985-86 US arms sales to Iran and the diversion of funds to the Contra mercenary forces.

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50 years ago: *Dr. Strangelove* opens

On January 29, 1964, the Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* opened in US theaters. Directed and co-written by Kubrick and loosely based on the Peter George novel *Red Alert*, the joint US-British production, centered around the launching of a nuclear war against the Soviet Union, remains a devastating social satire of America’s political and military leadership.

Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) is an unhinged US Air Force general who has ordered a first-strike nuclear attack on the Soviet Union because he has learned that the Soviets seek to pollute Americans’ “precious bodily fluids.” The film follows Royal Air Force Officer Lionel Mandrake (Peter Sellers), General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott), and the Adlai Stevenson-inspired President Merkin Muffley (also Sellers) as they try to call back the bombers. To complicate matters, the Americans learn that the Soviets have created a doomsday device that will detonate in the event of a nuclear attack, making the earth’s surface uninhabitable. Former Nazi scientist Dr. Strangelove (played once again by the brilliant Sellers) encourages Muffley to order a number of Americans, at a ratio of 10 females per male, into deep mine shafts where a breeding program can be launched to recolonize the earth’s surface in 100 years. All the while Major T.J. “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) navigates his bomber to drop a nuclear bomb on the Soviet Union.

The realism and accuracy of the film’s social satire, so absent from current Hollywood films, was precisely what made it so devastatingly funny. The madness of Dr. Strangelove mocked the preposterous official American position of “MAD”—mutually assured destruction—as a deterrent toward nuclear war. And there were certainly generals like Ripper: a sizable share of leadership in the American military-intelligence apparatus favored “rollback” of the Soviet Union over “containment,” even if it meant war.

Just two years earlier, in the Cuban Missile Crisis, high-level members of the US military, led by Air Force General Maxwell Taylor, had advocated war against the Soviet Union and were bitterly disappointed when President Kennedy did not use the crisis to do just that. Ironically, early screenings for the film had been slated for November 22, 1963, but Kennedy’s assassination that day prompted a delay.

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75 years ago: Kremlin announces end to mass purges

On February 1, 1939, a statement from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party declared that party membership was to be thoroughly reorganized. The method of mass purges was to be abandoned and expulsions from the party to be made only in rare cases. Party members, according to the Central Committee, were to have more personal security and the party as a whole more stability. Entry into the party was to be made easier, the period of probation reduced and members were to enjoy more rights as individuals with freedom to criticize.

To inaugurate the ostensible new era of freedom within the party, Pravda had published a “discussion sheet” in which members of the party were invited to criticize the proposed innovation before assembling for the 18th Party Congress in March. The language was ominously similar to previous such invitations, which invariably ended with those volunteering critical views arrested and imprisoned or shot.

Indeed of the old Bolsheviks who were present at the taking of power in 1917, little over twenty years later, in 1939, only three still lived—Stalin and his henchman Molotov and, on the other side of the veritable river of blood that ran between genuine Marxism and its Thermidorean negation, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution, Stalin’s political nemesis and leader of the Fourth International, Trotsky, then exiled in Mexico.

The latest announcement came after Stalin and his henchmen had physically liquidated approximately one million Bolsheviks, among them tens of thousands of Trotskyists, through the Moscow frame-up show trials and Stalin’s Great Terror. The three trials held in Moscow between August 1936 and March 1938, in which Trotsky was the chief defendant (*in absentia*), marked the climax of an unrelenting process of monstrous historical falsification, which began in response to the formation of the Left Opposition in 1923 against the increasing domination of the bureaucracy within the Soviet Union.

The Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin likened Stalin’s tactics to a “scorched earth policy,” whereby anyone connected to October was killed, together with their friends and family.

The trials and the terror targeted for extermination those who had played a role in the October Revolution of 1917, those who were in any shape or form associated with socialist opposition to Stalin and his regime, and those who were associated personally or through comrades and family, with Marxist politics, culture and intellectual life.

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100 years ago: Mass teachers strike in England

On January 31, 1914, teachers went on strike at 80 of the 178 schools in Herefordshire in the west midlands of England. The strike was caused by a three-year-long dispute over salaries between teachers and the Herefordshire Education Committee.

The increased cost of living had created a wave of industrial unrest beginning in 1912, and teachers joined other workers in protests against demands for increased productivity, falling wages

and rising prices. Herefordshire teachers were the poorest paid in the country. Their demands included an increase in wages and a new pay scale. The National Union of Teachers guaranteed the pay of striking teachers who were members for five years, and for three months for those who were not.

The response of the Local Education Authority (LEA) to the strike was to appoint new teachers, many unqualified, to replace those in the dispute. Many of the strikers were highly regarded members of the community and some of the students refused to be taught by “scab” teachers.

On February 1, 40 students from Ledbury Girls School marched into the town, chanting demands for the reinstatement of their teachers and “we want a strike.” At school they upturned desks and inkpots. Thirty students followed a replacement teacher into town during the lunch break, jeering her.

Replacement teachers returned to the school in the afternoon to be confronted by the student “strikers” blocking the entrance, refusing to give way to the teachers, singing songs in support of striking teachers and demanding their return. Other students entered the school via a back door and proceeded to pull down blinds, throw clothing out of the windows, and ring the school bell all day.

By the end of the school day, the scab teachers conceded defeat and left, again followed by a crowd of jeering schoolgirls. At Ross Boys’ school similar scenes confronted the two teachers in charge of 200 boys, who also marched through the town calling for a student strike.

Under mass pressure the council negotiated a settlement for a pay scale that increased Herefordshire teachers’ wages almost to parity with the national level.

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