

This week in history: February 3-9

3 February 2014

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: Soviet troops make final pullout from Afghan capital

On February 5, 1989, the last of the Soviet troops occupying Afghanistan pulled out of Kabul, leaving the capital city under martial law. The deadline of February 15 for final Soviet withdrawal was 10 days away, but tensions were high in the capital city.

The forces of the Soviet-backed regime of President Najibullah faced the armed resistance of the US-financed mujahedin. The withdrawal of Soviet forces was expected to lead to bloody battles for control of the capital.

Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze arrived days earlier in Islamabad, Pakistan for talks on Afghanistan. Pakistani Islamists demanded that Najibullah and his Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party be excluded from any future government in Afghanistan.

On February 3, Najibullah told a press conference that he rejected any such calls. He told an audience of 10,000 members of the People's Democratic Party that he refused to surrender. The crowd, brandishing Kalashnikovs, shouted, "Down with imperialism!"

Unnamed Soviet officials said that a battalion of 1,000 troops would remain in the outskirts of Kabul, near the airport to assist the supply airlift into the capital. On February 3, Soviet forces attacked rebel positions south of the Salang Tunnel, a strategic part of the route to the Soviet Union on the Salang Highway.

US Charge d'Affairs Jon Glassman accused the exiting Soviet forces of conducting a scorched earth policy. Najibullah warned residents along the Salang Highway to evacuate their homes in anticipation of fierce fighting there.

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50 years ago: Emilio Aguinaldo dead at 94

On February 4, 1964, Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the Filipino independence struggle against the Spanish Empire and the United States from 1896 to 1901, died at the age of 94 in Manila after a series of strokes. Aguinaldo was one of Asia's first nationalist leaders who sought to break free of colonial domination.

Born in 1869 to an elite family of mixed Chinese and Filipino background, Aguinaldo was educated at a Catholic school in Manila and joined the anti-colonial Katipunan in 1894. He soon emerged as the most prominent revolutionary in the struggle against the Spanish Empire in the Philippines, leading guerrilla soldiers in stunning victories over far better equipped soldiers.

American imperialism saw the crumbling of what remained of the Spanish empire in the Philippines and Cuba, where another rebellion had emerged, as a chance to catapult itself onto the stage of global power. It provoked and easily won a war with Spain, in the process facilitating the return of the exiled Aguinaldo back to the Philippines.

However, responding to the popular aspirations of the Filipino masses, Aguinaldo led an insurrection against the occupying US forces that would continue for three years and cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. Aguinaldo was captured in 1901.

In return for imploring Filipinos to end their resistance to the Americans, he was allowed to live comfortably for the remainder of his life in his Cavite Viejo villa. On his death he was praised by the American president, Lyndon Johnson, and the reactionary General Douglas MacArthur, whose father, also a general, had participated in the subjugation of the Philippines.

Aguinaldo's death found American imperialism embroiled in another vicious counterinsurgency war in Southeast Asia, this time in Vietnam.

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75 years ago: Franco issues "Law of Political

Responsibilities”

With Catalonia almost completely conquered by the fascist military forces under his command, General Francisco Franco decreed on February 9, 1939 a “Law of Political Responsibilities,” retroactively criminalizing any activity in support of the Spanish Republic from October 1934.

The law meant that in Franco’s eyes every Spaniard who did not support the military coup in 1936 was guilty of the crime of military rebellion. The new law’s concept of “serious passivity” legitimized the “lawful” persecution of all people who did not fight in the ranks of Franco’s forces or serve as fascist fifth columnists behind Republican lines. Any worker who had exercised political or trade union rights was also liable for trial and punishment. Survivors of the dead and those left behind by family members in exile could also be tried and punished.

The historian Paul Preston has described the law as “essentially a device to justify the expropriation of the defeated.” Punishments included enormous fines and the confiscation of private property like businesses, factories, clinics or houses, bank accounts, savings and shareholdings, even household furniture, cutlery and crockery.

Despite three years of fascist barbarism and the imminent fall of Catalonia, the Republican leadership, especially President Negrin, still wished to negotiate a military surrender and secure an amnesty for themselves. The new law was the Franco’s response to their pleas for non-reprisals. Once Republican territory was completely occupied, Franco embarked upon a huge wave of political detentions, trials, executions and mass terror.

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100 years ago: Russia and the Ottoman Empire sign Armenian Reform Agreement

On February 8, 1914, the Armenian Reform Agreement was signed between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, granting autonomous administrative rights to Turkey’s Armenian population in the six eastern provinces of the country where it was most heavily concentrated. The measure also established the position of two inspector-generals, to be appointed by the European powers, with significant judicial authority in those provinces.

Russia was tacitly backed by Britain and France, and Ottoman acceptance of the agreement was widely believed to have been prompted by its military weakness following

defeat in the first Balkan war, and fear of a Russian attack.

During the first Balkan war of 1912-13, which pitted the Ottoman Empire against its former possessions in the Balkan region, Russia had backed Serbia and Bulgaria in an attempt to improve its position relative to its main rival, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its stance was also aimed at utilizing the crisis of the Ottoman Empire to realize long-held ambitions to cut a pathway to the Mediterranean, through Turkey itself.

The critical geostrategic position of the region inhabited by the Armenians, straddling the Russian and Turkish borders, meant that the major powers sought to use their grievances over political oppression to further their own aims. Direct preparations for the reform agreement dated to Turkish defeat in the Balkan war, but the “Armenian question” had been a subject of international discussion dating back to the Congress of Berlin, in 1878, following the Russo-Turkish war.

The Ottomans had developed closer military ties with Germany in October 1913, with the establishment of a high-ranking German military mission to Turkey. Germany opposed the initial stipulations of the Reform Agreement, which would have unified the six Armenian-inhabited *vilayets*, or districts, into a single province. The agreement was modified to mandate the establishment of two provinces. The German ambassador to Istanbul, Wangenheim, had commented in a secret cable of August 1913 that “Russia desires an autonomous Armenia ... [but] autonomy is to be thought of as one step on the path that [ultimately] leads to Istanbul.”

With the outbreak of World War One, Turkey rapidly abandoned the agreement. Beginning in April 1915, the Ottoman authorities initiated a vicious campaign against the Armenian population, leading to the genocide of some 1.5 million Turkish Armenians.

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