

This week in history: February 17-23

17 February 2014

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

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25 years ago: Iran-Contra criminal trial reopens

Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist removed his stay on the criminal trial of Lt. Col. Oliver North and allowed the trial to reopen on February 21, 1989. The court proceedings had begun January 31, and opening arguments were scheduled for February 13, but the Justice Department intervened and appealed to the Supreme Court to halt the trial for national security reasons.

The jury had been selected, but not sworn in. A tenuous agreement was hammered out, behind the closed doors of the Justice Department, between Attorney General Dick Thornburgh and independent counsel Lawrence Walsh, whose office was prosecuting North on criminal charges relating to the illegal war against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government. North faced up to 60 years in prison and \$3 million in fines if convicted.

The trial promised to be a travesty. North's defense claimed to have evidence that his operations had the full knowledge and backing of President Reagan himself. Thornburgh insisted that he would "pull the plug" on the trial if any classified information emerged, including the names of any of the "third countries" involved in the covert activities that North was conducting.

Walsh promised to do Thornburgh's bidding and object any time classified information was raised in North's defense case, but the trial itself would be halted if Thornburgh decided that it jeopardized national security.

The phony character of the proceedings prompted the trial judge, Gerhard Gesell, to say from the bench, "This is not a country like other countries, where the entire script of the trial is worked out in advance, including the conclusion."

Just four days before the opening of the trial, newly-inaugurated President George H.W. Bush declared that the US would not abandon the Contras in the face of a plan to disarm them and close their bases. He promised to continue some sort of "humanitarian" assistance after the expiration of US aid at the end of March.

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On February 19, 1964, French soldiers crushed a coup d'état in the former colony of Gabon, the day after the government of its close ally Léon M'ba was bloodlessly toppled. At least 18 Gabonese were killed and another 40 wounded in the French attack. M'ba had recently dissolved parliament and had forbidden opposition politicians from running in upcoming parliamentary elections.

The coup took place in Libreville, Gabon's capital, on February 18, led by a group of army officers who announced they had formed a "revolutionary council." They proclaimed Jean-Hilaire Aubame, M'ba's chief rival, to be the new president. Aubame favored more rapid "Africanization"—eliminating French advisors from positions of authority—and paid lip service to "socialism." Immediately, French troops were rushed in from neighboring Senegal and the Congo Republic, also former French colonies. The reinforcements joined a French garrison of 150 in Gabon, formerly part of French Equatorial Africa. This was more than enough to deal with Gabon's tiny army of about 400.

The government of Charles de Gaulle claimed to be acting under a pact signed with Gabon—M'ba was staunchly pro-French, and had, in fact, opposed Gabonese independence. The real aim was to protect French economic interests, including major offshore oil fields, manganese deposits—then thought to be among the world's largest—and timber. French imperialism also sought to make an example of Gabon for its other former colonies, and to regain some "credibility" after its humiliating defeats in Algeria and Vietnam.

Since December, 1962, coups or attempted coups had taken place in a number of former French colonies: Senegal, Togo, Ivory Coast, the Congo Republic, and Dahomey. Coups and unrest had also taken place in the former British colonies of Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Uganda, and Ghana (where President Kwame Nkrumah had survived five assassination attempts since 1962) while Ethiopia and Somalia were embroiled in clashes over a disputed border, and in the Belgian Congo the pro-Western regime established after the CIA-backed murder of Patrice Lumumba in 1961 was engaged in a counter-insurgency war. Such was "independence" in sub-Saharan Africa in 1964.

"Of course coups are illegal," commented a member of the Gabonese opposition. "But how free is a country when a foreign power is the sole arbiter of when a coup is popular and when it is not?"

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50 years ago: France crushes coup in former African colony

75 years ago: Nazis showcase Volkswagen Beetle at auto show

On February 17, 1939 the Nazi regime held its German International Motor Show in Berlin. Hitler arrived to open the show escorted by a fleet of racing cars and motorcycles with Germany's best known drivers at the wheels while the fascist leader passed between the ranks of 20,000 men of the NSKK (Motor Corps).

As the London *Times* noted, the show more accurately might have been called the "*Great German Motor Show*" since the products of the German motor industry now included cars from manufacturers formerly within Austria and Czechoslovakia which only the previous year were foreign exhibits.

Recognizing the importance of automotive industrial capacity for war, Hitler hoped to narrow the enormous gap separating the German auto industry from the American, where the mass production techniques pioneered by Henry Ford had generated enormous new markets in the 1920s.

Opening the show, Hitler spoke of the might which had been added to the Reich by the creation of Great Germany. The annexation of Austria and the seizure of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia had brought Germany's population to 80 million, thus providing a larger internal market.

The prototype Volkswagen, the "Strength through Joy car," named after the leisure wing of the party, aimed to stimulate this market. Commissioned by Hitler to build an economical, affordable car, Ferdinand Porsche designed the "K.d.F Wagen" with its streamlined body and air-cooled engine mounted at the rear. The car was also made to ensure a machine gun could be mounted on the bonnet. Essentially the same design would later find popularity as the Volkswagen Beetle.

The dream to develop mass consumer markets was stillborn. According to historian Bernhard Rieger, only a fraction of the orders required to make car production at the Volkswagen Wolfsburg factory viable arrived before the outbreak of war. This reflected the poverty of the German population and a widespread anxiety about the future generated by Nazi foreign policy. Only 630 production models of the vehicle were made before the war, with most going to Nazi officials.

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100 years ago: Rosa Luxemburg convicted of sedition by German authorities

On February 20, 1914, prominent Polish-German Marxist Rosa Luxemburg was convicted of sedition charges and sentenced to a year imprisonment by the Frankfurt Criminal Court for opposing the growth of militarism and denouncing the treatment of soldiers by the officer caste and state authorities.

The basis for the charges against Luxemburg was a speech in September 1913, in which she called on the working class to oppose the preparations for war, and advance its own, internationalist perspective. She denounced preparations for a fratricidal conflict: "If they expect us to murder our French or other foreign brothers, then let us tell them, 'No, under no

circumstances!'"

At the trial, Luxemburg delivered an impassioned speech against imperialist militarism. She stated, "once the majority of working people come to the conclusion—and it is precisely the task of Social Democracy to arouse this consciousness ... that wars are nothing but a barbaric, unsocial, reactionary phenomenon, entirely against the interests of people, then wars will be impossible."

Luxemburg was targeted by prosecutors because she was the most consistent proponent of a socialist, revolutionary, and internationalist response to militarism in the German Social Democracy, under conditions of the growth of a national-opportunist tendency in that organization which increasingly adapted to the interests of German capitalism and colonialism.

The trial took place in the context of a German naval and military buildup, precipitated by growing tensions with France and Britain, and open discussion of the prospect of war. While found guilty, Luxemburg won broad support in the working class, speaking at dozens of public meetings.

She was again charged in June, for "insulting the military." At the ensuing trial, dozens of workers testified as defense witnesses to the outstanding role played by Luxemburg as a socialist leader of the working class. That trial also expressed the growing tensions within the Social Democracy between the revolutionary and national-opportunist wings—with the former advancing a militant, political defense of Luxemburg, and the latter calling for the processes of the capitalist courts to be "respected."

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