This week in history: February 24-March 2

24 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: Ten killed in Bombay riots over *The Satanic Verses*

On February 24, 1989, 40,000 Muslims rioted in Bombay, India over Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verse*s. Riot police fired on the crowds, killing at least 10 and injuring some 40 people.

The previous week, Iran's Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared the British novelist's book to be "blasphemous" and called for the execution of the author. The public call for Rushdie's death came on the tenth anniversary of the Iranian revolution and was part of its attempt to whip up religious fervor to bolster the political base of the Iranian clerical regime.

In recent months, the regime had carried out the execution of hundreds of left-wing political opponents. On February 27, Iranian Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi told Al Mustakbal, a Paris-based Arabic magazine, that all dissidents held in Iranian prisons had been executed. He said, "To settle this matter once and for all, all those who have been arrested and those who joined them have been executed. They … announced war on the people."

The *Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*, published an editorial on February 25, condemning the threats against Rushdie by the "crisis-ridden bourgeois nationalist regime" and calling for the international workers movement to extend solidarity to the author.

The editorial continued, "The defense of Rushdie by the workers movement is motivated by a principled opposition to the latest attempt by the bourgeoisie in both Iran and Pakistan ... to utilize religion as a means of diverting the masses away from a direct revolutionary struggle against the two politically bankrupt capitalist regimes."

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50 years ago: US hints at attack on North Vietnam

This week in 1964 the administration of Lyndon Johnson made a series of moves that suggested it was preparing public opinion to escalate US involvement in Vietnam from counterinsurgency operations in the South to an attack on North Vietnam.

On February 24, 1964, both the State and Defense departments announced major new "studies" of the situation in South Vietnam, but, according to the *New York Times*, "officials stressed that the Administration was not yet nearing a decision on extending the war into North Vietnam." It was the first major public comment that such an escalation, a clear act of war and criminal aggression, was being considered at all. It was also announced that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was to travel to South Vietnam, accompanied by General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to assess the situation, which almost all observers agreed was increasingly favoring the insurgent National Liberation Front. "The war against the Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam is not going well," admitted the *Times* .

The strength of the NLF had been driven home by their dramatic victory in the battle of Long Dinh on Feb. 26, where they had defeated government forces using "classical" tactics of frontal assault rather than guerrilla methods. The same day came the sudden retirement of the assistant secretary of state for East Asia Affairs, Roger Hillsman, Jr., who supported escalating the war in South Vietnam, but not North Vietnam. Hillsman had been centrally involved in the removal and assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and favored stepped up use of counter-insurgency methods. He returned to his professorship at Columbia University.

At a press conference on Feb. 27, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk, when asked a question by a reporter, refused to rule out supporting a South Vietnamese invasion of the North. The omission was widely taken as tacit admission that the US was itself pondering invasion. In a lead editorial published Feb. 27 the *New York Times* called for "a more vigorous military effort." At that moment, the US had 16,000 "advisers" in Vietnam.

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75 years ago: US Supreme Court moves against sit-down strikes

On February 27, 1939, the Supreme Court clamped down on sit-down strikes in the case *National Labor Relations Board (*NLRB*) v. Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation*. In the ruling against the NLRB, the court decided that workers who had engaged in a strike at Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation in Illinois did not have to be reinstated by the company, even though the sit-down was triggered by illegal actions taken by the company.

The sit-down tactic was previously outlawed by the NLRB itself, but at Fansteel in 1937 the federal agency had ordered fired workers reinstated as the factory bosses, not the workers, had made a series of illegal actions, including the introduction into the workers' ranks of agent provocateurs, spies, and a company union—all actions illegal under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. Workers at the plant had sought to establish a trade union at their workplace but had been stymied at every step.

The five-member court majority—two justices dissented and two did not participate in the case—was motivated by a clear class hostility to the revolutionary implications of the wave of sit-down strikes that had swept the United States since August 1936. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, in his majority opinion, declared that ordering reinstatement of the Fansteel sit-down strikers would legitimize their seizure of private property and "would be to put a premium on the use of force instead of legal remedies and so subvert the principles of law and order which lie at the foundation of society."

Justice Stanley Reed, one of the dissenters, argued that the decision gave license to companies to use trumped-up charges to get around the right to strike for union recognition embodied in the Wagner Act of 1935. He wrote: "As now construed by the Court, the employer may discharge any striker, with or without cause, so long as the discharge is not used to interfere with self-organization or collective bargaining. Friction easily engendered by labor strife may readily give rise to conduct, from nose-thumbing to sabotage, which will give fair occasion for discharge on grounds other than those prohibited by the Labor Act."

The *Fansteel* decision was a key step in the right-wing counteroffensive against the mass movement of industrial workers that gave rise to the CIO unions. After the key victory of the United Auto Workers in the Flint sit-down strike against General Motors, in February 1937, the floodgates opened for the organization of American basic industry—until then a vast stronghold of the open shop. Within a month of the end of the Flint strike, nearly 200,000 workers had engaged in 243 sit-downs. Some 500,000 workers sat down in 1937, and the total number of strikers was almost 1,900,000.

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100 years ago: Greeks declare independence in Northern Epirus

The Autonomous Republic of Northern Epirus was declared on February 28, 1914, in a rebellion against the prospect of Albanian rule over the territory, whose population was of mixed Albanian and Greek origins. The conflict came in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, which shattered the domination of the Turkish Ottoman Empire over the entire region, leading to an explosion of ethnic, religious and nationalist claims and counter-claims.

What was then called Northern Epirus is now the southernmost portion of modern-day Albania. At the end of the Balkan Wars, the Greek Army had taken the area, which separated Greece and Albania. The boundary between the two states was of concern to the major powers, including Austria-Hungary and Italy. Italian Foreign Minister Tommaso Tittoni said whoever controlled Albania would have "incontestable supremacy in the Adriatic."

An International Commission of the major powers convened in September 1913 to determine the boundary, with Italy and Austria-Hungary insisting that Northern Epirus was Albanian while Russia, Britain and France maintained that while a number of older people spoke Albanian, among the younger generations the predominant language and culture were Greek.

Failing to reach consensus at the International Commission, Britain's Sir Edward Gray proposed Greece withdraw its military from Northern Epirus and cede the region to Albania. Greece agreed to these terms, set down in the Protocol of Florence in December 1913, and in a *quid pro quo*, was given several Eastern Aegean islands, which it had previously claimed at the London Conference in 1912-1913.

The decision was rejected by some of the Greek-speaking population of the border region, who established the Autonomous Northern Epirus Movement in February 1914, led by the former foreign minister of Greece, George Christaki Zographos. Fighting formally ended on May 1914 with the signing of the Convention of Corfu, which granted the rebels limited autonomy and access to religious services and education in Greek, as well as an ethnically mixed police force.

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