This week in history: September 22-28

22 September 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Hundreds of thousands protest apartheid in South Africa

On September 22, 1989 and over the next several days, hundreds of thousands marched against apartheid throughout South Africa. Since September 13, when newly elected president F.W. de Klerk announced that authorities would not break up lawful, peaceful protests, mass demonstrations erupted throughout the country.

A multiracial demonstration of some 25,000 protested against racialist policies in Johannesburg. Another 15,000 conducted a peaceful protest in Durban, the country's largest port. A four-week nationwide boycott of white-owned retail business was also launched by black unions against a labor law prohibiting sympathy strikes. The flag of the outlawed African National Congress was raised on the flagpole at Durban's City Hall. Members of the City Council participated in the protest. In Oudtshoorn, a city of 40,000 in the ostrich-farming region 300 miles east of Capetown, 10,000 people protested.

On September 24, South African police arrested over 200 people during an anti-apartheid march by anti-apartheid women's groups. On September 27, officials in Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city, announced that the city council voted to end all racial segregation in buses, swimming pools and other urban facilities, effective immediately.

The government's liberalization toward the anti-apartheid movement also provoked a reaction among South Africa's right-wing organizations, such as the neo-Nazi Afrikaner Resistance Movement. They conducted their own pro-apartheid demonstrations in cities such as Pretoria.

[top]

50 years ago: Warren Commission publishes JFK assassination cover-up

On September 24, 1964, the official presidential committee convened to investigate the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy released its findings in an 889-page report. The Warren Commission, named after its chair, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, found that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing Kennedy on November 22, 1963, and that nightclub owner Jack Ruby also acted alone in killing Oswald two days later in the basement of Dallas police headquarters.

The Warren Commission addressed Oswald's strange biography—that he had emigrated to the Soviet Union and had returned via State Department funding, that he was known to the FBI, that he had started, uninvited, a branch of the dubious Fair Play for Cuba Committee in New Orleans, that he had been hired at the Texas Book Depository one month prior to Kennedy's visit to Dallas and before the route of the presidential motorcade was public—but found that none of this pointed to a conspiracy. The forensic evidence that pointed to multiple shooters was explained away through the infamous "magic bullet" theory that attributed several of Kennedy's wounds to a single shot.

In addition to Warren and Ford, who would later be US president, the commission included Allen Dulles, former director of central intelligence, whom Kennedy had fired after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961; former president of the World Bank (and former intelligence official) John J. McCloy; Democratic House Majority Whip Hale Boggs of Louisiana; and senators Richard Russell, Jr., (Democrat, Georgia) and John Sherman Cooper (Republican, Kentucky).

President Johnson had formed the Warren Commission with the express intent of reassuring the public that Kennedy's assassination was not the product of a political conspiracy. As FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover put it, the aim was "having something issued so we can convince the

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public that Oswald is the real assassin." If not, Johnson said, the assassination "would always remain an open wound with ominous potential."

See: A half-century since the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy

[top]

75 years ago: Japan suffers defeat in Battle of Changsha

The occupying Japanese army launched a fresh offensive in southern China against Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, on September 24, 1939. Though half destroyed by fire, Changsha was located in a strategic position on the railway system between two other cities the Japanese already controlled, Wuchang and Canton. The aim of capturing the provincial capital was to seal off the Chinese forces in their western base of Szechuan.

The Japanese marshaled a force totaling 120,000, organized into six divisions. After initially retreating slowly from the town and enticing into its ruined streets the increasingly disorganized invaders, the Chinese Kuomintang forces laid an ambush with a swift counterattack from the flanks. By early October the Japanese offensive was halted. The Japanese army suffered 40,000 casualties and in their headlong retreat lost large amounts of weaponry and ammunition.

The advance by Japanese forces upon Changsha was part of a strategic shift determined by the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Since signing the anti-Comintern pact with Germany and fascist Italy in 1936, Imperial Japan had prepared to seize control of the Soviet Far East. But the Nazi-Soviet pact temporarily freed the Red Army to respond to any attack on the eastern front. The Japanese leadership, dismayed at Germany's signing of the pact with the Soviet Union, was forced to restrain their designs upon Siberia and concentrate upon penetrating further into mainland China and seizing American and European concessions there.

[top]

100 years ago: World War I fighting reaches Tahiti

On September 22, 1914, German warships attacked Papeete in French Polynesia, as the bloody battles of the first month of World War I reached Tahiti in the Pacific. The armored German cruisers SMS *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* sank the French freighter *Walkure* and the gunboat *Zélée*, and then proceeded to bombard Papeete's fortifications.

Having learned that German Samoa had been captured by Australian and New Zealand forces, Admiral Maximilian von Spee of the German East Asia Squadron headed to Papeete from Ponape in Micronesia. The aim was to seize the 5,000 tons of high-quality Cardiff coal the French held there, to enable von Spee to replenish his squadron's supply.

Papeete, once the capital of French settlements in Oceania, was now a colonial backwater with no heavy defenses. Its garrison consisted of only 20 gendarmes and 25 colonial infantry. Having been alerted that German squadrons had been sighted off Samoa, Papeete's ranking officer and Commander of the *Zélée*, Lieutenant Maxime Destremau, ordered the removal of all the guns from the gunboat to be used ashore, instead of the outdated land batteries. Armored cars consisting of Ford trucks mounted with guns from the *Zélée* and 160 marines and sailors were drilled in preparation to repel a landing. The meagre fortifications included the unarmed German freighter, the *Walkure*, captured by the *Zélée* at the war's outset.

These preparations were inadequate against the heavily armed German cruisers, which were manned by more than 1,500 sailors. When local French officials refused to surrender, German forces opened fire on the town and shore batteries, sinking the *Walkure* and *Zélée*.

Von Spee decided against landing once he found that the French forces had already burned the coal supplies. Most civilians had fled to the island's interior. Two blocks of Papeete had burned down as a result of the German attack. French authorities responded by seizing property from German inhabitants of the island, and placing them in makeshift internment camps.

[top]

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