

This week in history: January 12-18

12 January 2015

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

25 years ago: Nationalist anti-Armenian riots in Azerbaijan provoke civil war

On January 12, 1990, forces of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) seized the Caspian Sea port city of Lankaran, taking control of Communist Party offices and the local radio station. Lankaran is less than 300 kilometers south of the Azerbaijani capital of Baku. The nationalist PFA called for the independence of Azerbaijan from the Soviet Union, demanding that the Kremlin concede control of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh and organized pogroms against ethnic Armenians in the region.

Riots followed in Baku, with “hooligans” targeting Armenian minority neighborhoods for brutal violence and murder. Witnesses described scenes of Armenians being shot at point-blank range, hurled from buildings, burned alive and even dismembered by Azeri mobs. A Soviet journalist reported, “We have seen murders here of the cruelest sort. Men, women and children, the young and the old alike, were attacked and killed because they were Armenians. That alone—to be an Armenian in Azerbaijan—was a virtual sentence of death.”

The violence in Baku was the bloodiest in the region since 1988 when conflicts flared in Nagorno-Karabakh. Soviet news agency Tass reported over 30 dead, mostly Armenians, as ethnic conflicts spread quickly throughout the region, signaling the onset of a civil war.

In Yerevan, the Armenian capital, a rally of 300,000 called for the formation of an Armenian army to avenge the killings in Baku, denouncing the failure of the Stalinist-controlled government to restore order. “If our government will not carry out its duties, we must organize to defend ourselves,” declared Ashot Manucharyan, a leader of Armenia’s nationalist Karabakh Committee, calling for volunteer “self-defense units.”

In the two capitals of Baku and Yerevan, nationalist forces were raiding the arsenals in police stations and using the weaponry to conduct battles. Rocket launchers, large-caliber machine guns, anti-aircraft artillery and armored vehicles were utilized as the battles spread.

By January 16, the first contingent of 11,000 Soviet troops arrived to attempt to restore order.

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50 years ago: US, Canada eliminate auto tariffs

On January 16, 1965, US President Lyndon Johnson and Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson formalized an agreement striking down tariff barriers separating the two nations’ auto industries in a signing at Johnson’s Texas ranch. The Canada-United States Automotive Products Agreement affected industrial production but did not apply to resale prices or individual customer purchases, which still faced tariffs of 17.5 percent in Canada and 6.5 percent in the US.

Auto production was dominated by the same “Big Three” manufacturers and largely US-based parts firms, and was concentrated in the eastern Great Lakes region on both sides of the border: Michigan and Ohio in the US, and southern Ontario in Canada. The United Auto Workers (UAW), which had been organized on a cross-border basis including Canadian workers, played little active role in the development of the new tariff policy, but its Canadian section would grow rapidly based on the new pact.

The move had an enormous impact on the Canadian economy. Within years auto manufacture became its largest industry, supplanting timber and paper production. In 1964 Canada imported only 3 percent of the cars sold on its market from the US, and sold only 7 percent of the vehicles it produced in the US, yet it imported almost all of the parts used in production, resulting in a large automotive trade debt. By 1968, it exported 60 percent of the cars it produced.

The move followed by two days the announcement from Brussels that the member states of the European Economic Community—West Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—would eliminate all tariffs on industrial production by July 1, 1967.

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75 years ago: Fascists arrested in New York

On January 14, 1940, eighteen members of the Christian Front, fascist thugs promoted by the anti-Semitic Catholic priest Charles Coughlin, were arrested in New York by the FBI. The fascists were not charged with any of the numerous crimes they had committed in the course of attacks upon blacks, Jews and communists. Instead, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover alleged the Christian Front had as its aim the overthrow of the US government and exhibited a cache of small arms, ammunition and explosives confiscated from the organization's members.

The media sensation created around the case concealed from the public the close relations between the fascists and the capitalist state. Until then, the Christian Front had operated without hindrance by government authorities in their attacks on the working class. An internal investigation by the New York Police Department revealed that 1,000 policemen were self-admitted members of the Coughlinite movement. Over half of the Christian Front members arrested also served in the National Guard, and the chief ringleader was an officer in the National Guard.

Hoover's allegation of conspiracy to overthrow the government was not merely aimed at sidetracking inquiries into these connections between the government and the fascist groups, however. It was also aimed at establishing the validity of such broad conspiracy charges for use against left-wing and socialist groups which were the real target of the FBI.

At the same time as the move against the Coughlinite group, the Justice Department launched a union-busting drive against the building trades unions and other labor organizations under the guise of anti-trust violations. Four hundred indictments had been served with nearly all of them against union leaders. The arrest of the Christian Front also provided a precedent to launch an assault against the socialist movement on the same charges of attempting to overthrow the government.

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100 years ago: Japan issues "21 demands" against China

On January 18, 1915, Japan presented the Chinese government with 21 demands, aimed at securing dominance over China at the expense of the other major imperialist powers, including Japan's nominal allies in the First World War such as Great Britain, and the rising power in the Pacific, the United States.

The demands, which had been drawn up by the Japanese prime minister and foreign minister, were approved by the Emperor, and the Diet, or parliament, and presented to China's warlord president, Yuan Shikai. They were accompanied by a thinly veiled threat of war if Yuan's government failed to accept them.

Among the demands was the expansion of Japanese control

over Chinese railways and coastal centers, strengthened by the recent seizure of German-controlled ports. They also stipulated that Japan's control over southern Manchuria and resource-rich eastern inner Mongolia be extended.

In a bid to establish China as a virtual semi-colony of Japan, the demands included a call for the Chinese government to take on Japanese "advisers" who would have effective control of financial and governmental policy. Japan further demanded that the Chinese government refuse to grant further coastal and island concessions to any foreign power, other than Japan. Japan already controlled Taiwan, seized after a victorious war in 1895.

Britain had longstanding concessions, or areas of control, in China, dating back to the mid-19th century, as did a host of other imperialist powers. In making its demands, Japan sought to take advantage of both the fact that it was allied with Britain against Germany, and of the weakness of the Chinese regime which had been brought to power by the 1911 revolution against the ailing Qing dynasty.

The Chinese government, conscious of the threat of a Japanese invasion, sought to extend the negotiations. In early May, the Chinese regime acceded to a revised set of Japanese demands, which had been presented in late April, and did not include the demand for Japanese "advisers," following pressure from the US and Britain.

Washington was hostile to Japan's opposition to the American "open door" policy, which aimed to boost US trade with China, to the detriment of the more established imperialist powers. In March, Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan sent a note to his Japanese counterparts expressing concern over their moves against "Chinese sovereignty."

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