This week in history: January 19-25

19 January 2015

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

25 years ago: Soviets troops storm Baku

In the early hours of January 20, 1990, thousands of Soviet troops confronted Azeri militants in the streets of Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan. Soviet tanks and soldiers firing live ammunition broke through human blockades before heading into the city center where 25,000 people remained in the streets. The estimate of casualties for that day, dubbed "Black Saturday" in Azerbaijan, ranged into the hundreds.

In a nationwide address, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev claimed that the sending of troops into Azerbaijan was to prevent "dragging the people into an abyss of chaos and suffering." After a week of fighting between Azeri and Armenian nationalists, he decreed a state of emergency in Baku. He acknowledged that 24,000 Soviet troops were in the region and pledged to send an unspecified additional number.

The previous week, when the pogrom began in Baku, over 13,000 Armenians were evacuated from the city to other locations in the USSR. Azeris blockaded the port of Baku with several ships which the Soviets fired on and sank on January 24. A battle then took place at the main port terminal, where thousands of Armenians and Russians awaited evacuation.

After a week of the state of emergency, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov said that the Azerbaijani Popular Front was preparing to seize power on January 20 and had mobilized 40,000 armed militants: "Our task is not to arrest everyone but to destroy the structure of power that has formed at all enterprises and offices. …This is not a slip of my tongue—I mean power. They were preparing to seize it and were so sure of their success that … 24 hours before [Soviet] troops were introduced into Baku, they announced (their own) state of emergency."

Inside Russia, within days, popular opposition to the deployment of Soviet troops emerged. A young officer spoke at a Moscow rally: "Why are we fighting our own countrymen? How great was the danger that the army had to be deployed?"

The explosion of nationalism and ethnic conflict in the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia and the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh was one of the earliest stages of the collapse of the USSR.

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50 years ago: Leaders jailed in welfare strike

On January 20, 1965, New York Supreme Court Justice Irving Saypol found the leaders of the 17-day-old strike by workers at the New York City Welfare Department guilty of contempt of court. He ordered three AFSCME officials to begin serving 30-day jail sentences for violating his court order to end the strike. They were soon followed by 16 other officials of the two striking unions, AFSCME Local 371 and the Social Service Employees Union. It was only the second time that union officials had been jailed under New York state's anti-labor Condon-Wadlin Act.

The strike by over 6,000 workers forced the closure of 10 of the city's 25 welfare offices. Mayor Robert Wagner ordered the workers fired and fined two days pay for every day on strike. The strike continued in defiance of top AFL-CIO leaders, who demanded that the workers submit their demands for improved wages and working conditions to arbitration. The welfare workers' defiance of the city administration prompted the intervention of AFSCME President Jerry Wurf and AFL-CIO President George Meany, who became increasingly frantic in efforts to browbeat the strikers to return to work.

The welfare strike arrests came as 60,000 members of

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the International Longshoremen's Association continued a shutdown of East Coast ports after rejecting a sellout contract recommended by the leadership.

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75 years ago: CPUSA head Earl Browder convicted in frame-up

On January 22, 1940, Earl Browder, the leader of the Stalinist Communist Party USA, was convicted by a federal jury of using a US passport obtained by making a false statement, sentenced to four years in a federal prison and fined $2,000.

The alleged infraction had taken place six years earlier, in 1934, an indication of the trumped-up nature of the case. The prosecution avoided any mention of Browder's politics.

The sudden action against Browder was due to the shift in policy by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union from seeking a popular front alliance with the "democratic" capitalist countries to signing a pact between the USSR and fascist Germany. Following orders from the Kremlin, Browder had ended the CP's support for Roosevelt's Democratic Party and instead opposed US imperialism's preparations to enter World War II on the side of France and Britain and against Stalin's new ally, Nazi Germany.

During the years of the Popular Front, Browder had not hesitated to call upon the capitalist state to launch police actions against the Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyist movement in the US at the time. Nevertheless, the SWP took a principled position and defended Browder. The Trotskyist newspaper the *Socialist Appeal* wrote, "It is the working class itself that must deal with the Browders ...This is quite a different matter from allowing the Bosses to crack down at will. Our party ... has as part of its job the fight against the syphilitic germ of Stalinism. But against any assault of the Bosses we defend the Stalinists ... because we realize that any such assault will prove to be nothing but the prelude to an attack upon a far wider front against all workers organisations."

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100 years ago: German navy suffers heavy casualties in battle of Dogger Bank

On January 24, 1915, British and German naval forces confronted one another at Dogger Bank, a shallow area of the North Sea some sixty miles off the English coast. During the battle, the German armored cruiser *Blücher* was sunk with the loss of 792 men. Another 159 German naval personnel were killed in the battle along with 11 from the English forces.

In 1914 the British navy was the largest in the world and a mainstay of Britain's military power. In earlier wars the British navy used its strength to create a close blockade of enemy ports, but Germany had invested heavily in coastal defenses and was known to be using both mines and submarines to defend its coastal waters. The British blockade of Germany was conducted at a distance by patrolling the North Sea. From its base at Scapa Flow, the British navy was able to restrict the travel of German and neutral vessels.

In August 1914, the British successfully ambushed a German patrol, sinking four ships and sustaining almost no damage to their own ships. In December 1914, German ships evaded the patrolling British Fleet and shelled the coastal towns of Scarborough, Hartlepool and Whitby. Encouraged by this success, the German admiralty sent a squadron of four ships to attack the British fishing fleet at Dogger Bank.

Through intercepted radio messages the British learned of the planned attack and set sail in order to try to trap the German vessels. The British vessels intercepted the German squadron near Dogger Bank on January 24, 1915. With the British having superior numbers, the German squadron turned, trying to outrun the British boats. Within an hour the British caught up with the Germans and opened fire. The *Blücher* was forced to slow down, and the German commander ordered the rest of the squadron to leave the warship to its fate and steam for home. Two hours later the *Blücher* capsized and sank, with the loss of 792 lives.

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