# This week in history: February 9-15

**9 February 2015**

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

**25 years ago: Nelson Mandela released from prison**

After weeks of negotiation, the South African government of F.W. de Klerk released African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela from prison on February 11, 1990. Mandela had been imprisoned since 1962—a period of 27 years—by the apartheid regime.

De Klerk, along with a significant layer of the South African ruling elite, considered the continued existence of apartheid—the racial system of white supremacy over the black majority—no longer tenable. Discussions between Mandela and representatives of the regime took place while Mandela was still imprisoned and de Klerk determined that he could be relied upon to stifle the popular anger that had developed against apartheid.

In the week previous to Mandela's release, De Klerk legalized the ANC, the Pan-Africanist Congress, the South African Communist Party and 60 other anti-apartheid groups. Press restrictions which banned coverage of anti-apartheid protests were eased. The government also announced that political prisoners held for anti-apartheid activities would be released.

Mandela's release was unconditional, according to the government. Six years previously, Mandela refused an offer for his release by P.W. Botha on the condition that he would publicly repudiate violence. When asked whether the ANC leader had renounced violence, de Klerk said that Mandela would have to speak for himself.

Mandela returned to his home in Soweto, speaking before mass crowds after his release. Both de Klerk and Mandela announced that negotiations on the dismantling of apartheid would begin.

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**50 years ago: Cattle prods used on Selma school children**

On February 10, 1965, black school children demonstrating for civil rights were the victims of a brutal and sadistic attack by Selma Sheriff Jim Clark and his deputies, who led a group of over 100 young people on a forced march for over two miles during which those who fell behind were beaten or poked with cattle prods.

The school children had been quietly standing in front of the Dallas County Courthouse carrying crayoned signs demanding voting rights for blacks, when Clark announced their arrest for truancy. The children were forced to run for most of the distance while deputies rode in cars, taking turns on foot. Unable to continue because of exhaustion, the youth finally rebelled and took shelter at the home of one of the marchers.

Deputies blocked a bridge with a police car to keep newsmen from following as they prodded and beat the children. Marchers described how a young girl stopped along the way, unable to go on. A deputy jabbed her with a club, saying, "March, dammit, you are going to march." Another young girl received a large lump on her head after being jabbed with a cattle prod. One nine-year-old boy was forced to make the march barefoot, and a 15-year-old youth reported being hit in the mouth with a nightstick.

For weeks, Selma had been the scene of protests led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. against Alabama's manipulation of voter registration requirements to keep blacks disenfranchised. Since mid-January, 3,400 had been arrested in Selma and other cities. The brutal tactics of Sheriff Clark provoked widespread outrage and inspired greater determination on the part of workers and youth to expand the struggle.

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## 75 years ago: Stalin launches mass deportation of Poles

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On February 10, 1940, Stalin launched the first of four mass deportations of Poles from eastern Poland, which had been occupied by the Red Army and annexed by the USSR under a secret protocol of the Stalin-Hitler pact. In all, some 1.5 million Poles were deported by the summer of 1941 and scattered among 15 million deportees in Stalin's concentration camps.

During the night, NKVD agents, working from lists identifying opponents as "enemies of the people" and "socially unadapted elements" broke into houses and rounded up suspects and their families. Before dawn, some 220,000 Poles had been loaded on freight cars, locked in and deported to Archangel and Pechora in the northernmost part of the USSR.

Stalin had already arrested and liquidated individual members of the bourgeoisie and all working class political leaders. The mass deportations were aimed at uprooting and atomizing mass resistance in the working and middle class to the bureaucratic regime.

The conditions during transfer for deportees were nothing short of barbaric. Forty to 60 people were packed into freight cars meant to accommodate 25. They were forced to remain there for the three to six week period it took to reach their destinations. The only sanitation was a hole cut in the floor. Every two to three days, bread would be put into the cars. Only one or two buckets of water were made available in every 36 hours. Temperatures fell to as low as -40 Fahrenheit. It is estimated that 20,000 Poles perished from starvation and cold during transit.

Adult males were separated from their families and sent to labor camps where they worked 12-hour days in mines, on railroads, canals, airports and felling lumber. Other special labor camps were set up for men, women, children and elderly who were capable of work. So-called free deportees, composed of women and small children, the elderly and infirm, were left to entirely fend for themselves without shelter or food.

As brutal and reactionary as Stalin's Polish policy was, it paled compared to the bloodbath unleashed by Hitler. In all, about 6 million Poles, including 3 million Jews, were killed by the German Nazi regime, about 22 percent of Poland's prewar population and nearly all its Jews. In Hitler's Operation Tannenberg, about 22,000 Polish artists, intellectuals, and other public leaders were summarily executed.

## 100 years ago: Russian troops sustain heavy casualties in the Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes

This week in February 1915, Russian troops suffered massive casualties in the Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes, in the face of an offensive by Germany against Russian positions in East Prussia, modern-day Poland. By the end of the offensive, which had begun on February 7, 200,000 Russian soldiers were dead, wounded, missing or taken prisoner of war by the German authorities.

Plans for the offensive had been hatched by Paul von Hindenberg, German commander of the Eastern Front, in the wake of a series of successful attacks on Russian positions in 1914, including a victory in the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes, in September. Von Hindenberg's proposal was based on the perspective of a coordinated Austro-Hungarian and German offensive aimed at cutting off Russian troops in modern-day Poland. German military commanders approved of an assault on the Russian Tenth Army, but were reluctant to commit to Von Hindenberg's broader strategic outlook.

The surprise attack by German troops, carried out in the depths of winter, rapidly unsettled Russian positions. By February 10 Russian forces began to retreat. While some Russian corps managed to escape, the troops of the 20th Corps became surrounded by German forces in the forest of Augustow, eventually surrendering on February 21.

Rearguard Russian attacks ultimately prevented the German troops from continuing their advance, which largely came to an end on February 22, so the battle, while a severe tactical defeat for the Russian army, failed to break the strategic stalemate on the Eastern Front.

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