

This week in history: February 1-7

1 February 2016

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

25 years ago: US saturation bombing kills thousands of Iraqi civilians

This week in 1991, Operation Desert Storm brought the saturation bombing of Iraqi cities, towns and villages by US warplanes. The real war aims of American imperialism were revealed: the destruction of Iraq, the seizure of its oil resources and the establishment of US domination of the Persian Gulf and the entire Middle East.

Thousands of men, women and children were killed in these attacks, which deliberately targeted civilian areas. US warplanes carried out deliberate plans to shatter Iraqi society, terrorize the Iraqi people, destroy their sense of national identity, and turn them into a conquered population of colonial slaves.

By the end of Desert Storm's third week, the US and other imperialist forces had already dropped a greater tonnage of bombs on Iraq than in all of World War II. In three weeks of around-the-clock assault, a total of 50,000 air strikes were carried out, with bombs hitting Iraqi targets at the rate of one a minute.

The systematic destruction of roads, bridges, homes, public buildings, factories and irrigation works would be felt for decades. Schools, mosques, hospitals and residential neighborhoods were hit, leaving most of the population of Iraq living without heat, electricity or running water.

In Baghdad, a city of 4 million, 1 million children were left without water or heat, with epidemics of diarrhea, typhoid and other mass killers expected. US B-52 bombers, which drop up to 15 tons of bombs on target areas one mile wide—a pattern known as carpet-bombing—hit working class suburbs on the outskirts of the city.

In the city of Basra, Iraq's second largest, the residents gathered drinking water from puddles in the streets. Foreign visitors said that thousands had been killed in the city. "All the roads are completely destroyed with very big craters," said Gangaram Kildolia, an Indian refugee who worked in Basra. "The bombing of Basra continues nonstop. It is as if they want to erase the city."

In the city of Nasiriya, near the ruins of the biblical town of Ur, 150 people were killed by a single US air strike February 5, including 35 children, when US planes bombed a bridge over the Euphrates River crowded with pedestrians in late afternoon. According to other reports, the city of Al Kut, on the Tigris River, halfway between Basra and Baghdad, was "completely

destroyed."

In a speech on February 6 to the New York Economic Club, where he received the plaudits of Wall Street for launching the war, US President Bush said the war would mean "a vastly restored credibility" for the United States in the eyes of countries throughout the world. In upcoming trade talks with Germany and Japan, he said, because of the toughness shown by the United States in the war, "We will have some—I wouldn't say leverage on them—but persuasiveness..."

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50 years ago: Soviet probe lands on the Moon

On February 3, 1966, the Soviet Union announced the successful soft landing of its unmanned Luna 9 spacecraft on the surface of the moon, in the lunar region called the Ocean of Storms.

Following four earlier failed attempts, the Moon landing represented a historic technological achievement, comparable to the launching of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, the first manmade object to orbit the earth. The Soviet probe immediately began transmitting pictures and vital scientific data on the composition of the moon's surface, its heat-conducting characteristics and its strength for supporting heavy objects.

The landing ended speculation that a manned lunar lander would sink into a sea of dust. Equipment on the lander was also designed to study the extent of meteorite bombardments of the Moon's surface and the frequency of moonquakes.

American scientists praised the Soviet achievement, while government leaders expressed concern that US imperialism was slipping behind in the "space race." NASA officials were consoled by the fact that data from the Luna mission could be used to advance US plans for a spectacular but much more costly manned landing on the moon.

Concentrating on unmanned space missions, the Soviet Union demonstrated astonishing technological skill, despite the mismanagement of the Stalinist bureaucracy. In 1959 the Soviet Luna 2 spacecraft became the first man-made object to hit the surface of the moon. The same year Luna 3 sent back the first pictures from the far side of the moon.

Beginning in 1963, the Soviet space program set as its goal to soft land an instrument package on the moon's surface. The next Luna missions carried out the refinement of the complex retro-rocket systems that were necessary to maintain the payload intact. The Luna 9 mission followed a landing attempt in December that

failed only during the final touchdown.

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75 years ago: Bulgaria drawn into Axis

On February 4, 1941, the Bulgarian government of Tsar Boris III was reported about to accept Berlin's demand to join the Axis powers' "Tripartite Pact." The *Times* of London noted that the German proposal to join the pact, brought back to Sofia by the Bulgarian minister in Berlin, Colonel Draganoff, while diplomatically worded, amounted to an ultimatum.

Germany, Italy and Japan were the original three members of the Axis. But by late 1940, with Mussolini's forces struggling to overcome Greek resistance to the Italian invasion, Hitler was aware of the possibility of a larger British intervention in the Balkans. Obligated to assist Athens by the Declaration of 1939, small numbers of British Empire troops had entered Greece in November 1940.

Unable to proceed with the planned invasion of the Soviet Union while his Balkan flank remained vulnerable, Hitler set about securing the Balkans and the Carpathians by coercing more states into the Tripartite Pact. Hungary, Romania and Slovakia all joined the fascist military alliance in November 1940.

On November 12, 1940 Hitler had issued Directive No.18, ordering the army to make preparations to occupy the northern portion of the Greek mainland should the Luftwaffe require air bases to fend off British RAF attacks upon Romanian oilfields. However, both the German air force and navy leadership objected and pressed for the occupation of the whole of Greece, including the Peloponnese.

The Wehrmacht operational staff agreed with their counterparts by the end of November and on December 13, Directive No. 20, "Operation Marita," started the campaign for the occupation of the Greek mainland. The Directive for "Operation Barbarossa"—the planned invasion of the Soviet Union—followed only days later. Nazi Germany planned to attack the Soviet Union in May along a massive front stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Bulgaria was the last government in the region to fall in line with the Nazi war plans. Menaced by German troops on the Romanian border, the Bulgarian leadership capitulated and formally joined the Tripartite Pact on March 1, 1941.

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100 years ago: Mass garment workers strike in New York City

Mass strikes of garment workers continued to grow in New York this week in 1916, with embroidery and lace workers in New Jersey walking out, taking the total number of striking garment workers in the New York metropolitan area to 25,000. Members of the Children's Dressmakers Union, the Lace and Embroidery

Makers' Union and the Kimono and Wrapper Makers' Union were all involved in the action. Those three unions lost an arbitration board hearing, which granted limited concessions to the members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

Numbers involved continued to grow over the following days, with 65,000 workers in the needle trades striking on February 9, along with another 20,000 ILGWU members employed in "independent" apparel stores. Twenty thousand others in the Dress and Waist Manufacturers Association quit work temporarily to allow for a readjustment of working conditions under the award of the arbitration board.

The president of the ILGWU, Benjamin Schlesinger, wrote a letter to New York City Mayor John Purroy Mitchell and police commissioner Arthur Woods, complaining that strikers in the children's dressmakers association were being assaulted, and demanding an investigation.

"About 6,000 workers in the children's dress industry in the city are out on strike for better wages and more humane treatment," he wrote. "No less than 90 percent of these strikers are women, a large number of them girls between the ages of 15 and 18. The strikers have been picketing their respective shops in a quiet and peaceful manner, as they have the right to do by law, and in a majority of cases, they are being harassed, assaulted and grossly insulted by professional gangsters hired by the employers. They get no protection from the police, and in many cases the latter openly side with the gangsters."

Garment workers, often vulnerable and super-exploited immigrant women, had carried out a series of heroic struggles over the preceding years. A famous strike by New York shirtwaist workers in 1909-10, dubbed the "Uprising of the 20,000" had won widespread support, and secured improvements to pay and conditions, along with establishing militant traditions among the workers.

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