

This week in history: February 22-28

22 February 2016

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25 years ago: Blitzkrieg by US forces against fleeing Iraqi troops

On February 26-27, 1991, US-led forces carried out an all-out air and ground attack against retreating Iraqi military personnel fleeing Kuwait along the highway to Basra. Even though Iraqi forces were leaving Kuwait in accordance with the US ultimatum issued a week earlier, the US attack was relentless.

“Through the night and into the day tomorrow, we will continue to press the battle,” Lt. Gen. Thomas W. Kelly, chief of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Pentagon briefing the day the attack began. “We are still engaged in combat, and we will not let up.”

The actual death toll may have been as high as half a million. One report said that of 620,000 Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait and southern Iraq, only 20,000 remained in organized units by the time of the US ceasefire early on February 28. All 42 divisions of the Iraqi army south of Basra were destroyed, including the last units of the Republican Guard, which according to press accounts, offered “fierce resistance despite overwhelming odds.”

The US commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, said at the time that it would never be known how many Iraqi soldiers were slaughtered. Their corpses were burned, buried in mass graves or simply plowed over with desert sand in their bombed-out bunkers. When Schwarzkopf was asked to account for the difference between the number of Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait and the number of prisoners held by the US-led forces, he replied, “There were a very, very large number of dead in these units, a very, very large number of dead.”

Soldiers seeking to flee north away from the fighting were attacked without mercy. Pilots flying missions against the highway between Kuwait City and Basra, the main evacuation route for Iraqi troops, described the systematic bombing and strafing as “shooting in a sheep pen.” The road, which became known as “the highway of death,” clogged by four lanes of one-way, bumper-to-bumper traffic, was carpet bombed by B-52s dropping 1,000-pound bombs, and repeatedly hit with laser-guided missiles and “smart” bombs.

The saturation bombing of Iraqi military positions in Kuwait and southern Iraq culminated in a weeklong holocaust in which napalm, fuel-air explosives and 15,000-pound bombs—last used in Vietnam—were rained down on Iraqi defenses. Iraq’s border

troops, numbering about 200,000 before the air war began, had been reduced by 50 percent when US ground troops launched their invasion.

The ground war itself was the bloodiest four days mankind had seen since August 6-9 1945, when US imperialism incinerated hundreds of thousands of Japanese in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In his announcement of the temporary cessation of military action on February 27, President George H.W. Bush declared, “We have no quarrel with the people of Iraq.” The real attitude of US imperialism toward the Iraqi masses was expressed by Schwarzkopf, who told the press conference, “They’re not part of the same human race.”

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50 years ago: Nkrumah ousted by military coup in Ghana

On February 24, 1966, Kwame Nkrumah, president of the western African republic of Ghana, was deposed in a CIA-backed military coup and replaced by a seven-man council made up of police and army officers.

The bourgeois-nationalist leader was overthrown while on a stopover in China on his way to North Vietnam. The military government announced the dissolution of Parliament and the abolition of Nkrumah’s Convention Peoples Party. Several ministers were reported killed.

The military council cited as the reason for the coup, along with alleged corruption, its opposition to Nkrumah’s announcement of the formation of a “people’s militia” separate from the armed forces, which he had claimed would be used to fight the racist government of Ian Smith in Rhodesia.

The US State Department quickly stated that it expected to have “good and favorable relations” with the new military rulers. The leader of the coup was exiled former Ghana intelligence chief Kwo Amihyia, who boasted openly of his CIA training. The coup was plotted by Amihyia in London, with European businessmen in Ghana serving as liaisons with the military conspirators.

The downfall of Nkrumah came only a month after the inauguration of the Volta river hydroelectric complex, forming the world’s largest manmade lake and irrigating 6,000 square miles of new farmland. Ghana’s economic position in recent years had been undermined by the drastic fall in the price of cocoa, the nation’s chief export.

Nkrumah was visiting Hanoi in an attempt to serve as a mediator

between the Stalinist bureaucracy and US imperialism in the Vietnam War. While claiming to be socialist, Nkrumah was a nationalist who upheld capitalist property relations and sought to balance between the United States and the Soviet bureaucracy.

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75 years ago: Dutch workers strike against persecution of Jews

On February 25, 1941 an event occurred in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam that would become known as the “February Strike.” Upon hearing of the deportation of some 425 Dutch Jews from the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam, hundreds of thousands of Dutch workers downed tools, walked off the job, and went on an unofficial strike.

Local tram drivers were the first to join the strike organized by the banned Dutch Communist Party, and shortly afterwards, as the strike spread throughout the city, dockworkers from the local Amsterdam-Noord shipyard joined the protest and walked out en masse. The strike spread to other nearby Dutch towns, including Utrecht and Zaanstad.

The workers’ protest against the persecution of the local Jewish population by the occupying German military forces was violently crushed by the occupying Nazi forces the following day. Three local Communists were shot to death immediately after the strike was suppressed and a further 12 were sent to German jails. The Dutch February Strike remained the only such protest of its kind organized by non-Jews during the course of the Second World War.

The days leading up to the strike had witnessed pitched street battles between the local Nazi goons in the WA (Weerbaarheidsafdeling) and Jewish self-defense groups, in which a WA member was fatally injured. On February 12, German commanders placed armed guards at the entrances to the Jewish Quarter and entry to non-Jews was forbidden. Further violent clashes ensued until a large-scale pogrom was organized by the German authorities on February 22, when 425 Jewish young men were first taken hostage and then later deported.

Before the outbreak of war in 1940 Amsterdam was home to approximately 80,000 Jews, most of whom lived in the city’s Jewish Quarter (Jodenbuurt). By early February 1941 however, the Nazi occupiers had surrounded the Jewish section of the city with barbed wire and transformed the district into a ghetto.

After one Dutch resistance group burned down the registry of births in Amsterdam to hinder the search by German troops, Jews were subsequently taken from their homes in alphabetical order, then collected and registered in the Hollandsche Schouwberg theater. Almost every adult who entered the theatre was later murdered in the Nazi concentration camps in German-occupied Poland.

Almost all of the Netherlands’ pre-war 140,000-strong Jewish community were transported to Nazi death camps, including the young Anne Frank, whose parents lived outside the Jewish Quarter. Only Poland lost a larger proportion of its Jewish citizens

during the Holocaust than the Netherlands.

Today the February Strike is still remembered with an annual march past the De Dokwerker statue erected to commemorate the strike. The statue of the stevedore is located on the pavement outside the old Portuguese Synagogue from which the philosopher Baruch Spinoza was expelled by his orthodox Jewish co-religionists.

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100 years ago: Heavy fighting in the Battle of Verdun

This week in February 1916 witnessed heavy fighting between German and French forces in the Battle of Verdun. On February 21, Germany launched a major offensive in the northeast region of France intending to rapidly capture Côtés de Meuse overlooking Verdun, from which they could ward off any counterattack.

The Germans carried out an unprecedented shelling and artillery bombardment of French lines. According to one witness, the bombing campaign produced craters “that gave to all the countryside an appearance like the surface of the moon.” The advancing German troops also used flamethrowers and grenades.

The German offensive won initial gains, with their troops advancing some 3 kilometers on a 10-kilometer front by February 26. By then, French losses stood at around 24,000 men, while Germany had suffered 25,000 casualties.

Verdun was at the head of an awkward and useless “bump” in the French line of defense. The French high command had initially stripped the fortress of its guns in preparation for a surrender. However, French Prime Minister Aristide Briand was fearful that the fall of Verdun would result in the collapse of his government. On February 24, he visited the offices of the high command and demanded the defense of Verdun.

The Germans were seeking to bleed the French army and drive France out of the war. Between February 21 and the end of June, 78 divisions of the French army were sent to Verdun. The French only had one road into and out of the town, which was under continuous German fire. Some 3,000 trucks passed along the road every day.

The “successful” defense of Verdun shattered the French army and brought it to the verge of mutiny. At times during the battle, as many as 115 French and German divisions were crammed onto a front that was rarely more than five kilometers wide. By the end of the battle there were more than a half million casualties: French losses stood at 315,000 and German losses at 281,000.

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