

# This week in history: February 26-March 4

26 February 2018

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## 25 years ago: Terrorist bombing of World Trade Center in New York

On February 26, 1993, far-right Islamic terrorists detonated a 1,336-pound bomb in a parking area beneath the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, causing six deaths and over 1,000 injuries and sicknesses. The terrorists' aim was to topple the North Tower into the South Tower, bringing both down.

Among the six dead were three maintenance workers: Robert Kirkpatrick, 61, Stephen Knapp, 47, and Bill Macko, 57; a secretary, Monica Rodriguez Smith, 35, who was seven months pregnant; Wilfredo Mercado, 37, a restaurant worker; and John DiGiovanni, 45, a dental products salesperson.

Following the explosion, the absence of adequate fire and safety devices in the 30-year old buildings, in combination with the knockout of both power supply systems, resulted in thousands of workers having to make their way to safety in total darkness through smoke-filled stairways. Workers, left isolated as high as the 110th floor, complained that they received no instructions, calls to emergency numbers within the building went unanswered, there were no emergency lights in the halls, the ventilation failed, and magnetic doors did not work and had to be broken down after the power failed. Smoke was sucked up within minutes through the skyscraper, which operated as a giant chimney.

Ultimately six men, of Middle Eastern or Pakistani origin, were convicted of charges relating to the bombing: Ramzi Yousef, Mahmud Abouhalima, Mohammad Salameh, Nidal A. Ayyad, Ahmed Ajaj, and Eyad Ismoil. The plot was partially funded by Yousef's uncle, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed. Mohammed and Abouhalima had been among the CIA-funded "Mujahadeen" who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS—forerunner to Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE) had caught Yousef and Ajaj, the two ringleaders, six months before the attack, when the pair attempted to enter the United States with fake passports and false names on the same flight, on September 1, 1992. Ajaj was captured with a bomb-making instruction kit. Nonetheless, Yousef was released on his own recognizance. Ajaj was imprisoned for six months, but from federal jail made frequent communications to Yousef to coordinate the plot.

Another conspirator, Abdul Rahman Yasin, was interviewed immediately after the attack by the FBI, but was released and the

next day departed the US for Iraq. One month after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, once again on the World Trade Center, the FBI finally placed Yasin on its most-wanted terrorists list. One year later, the George W. Bush administration rejected an offer from the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein to turn him over to US authorities. Yassin vanished in Iraq some time around the US invasion.

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## 50 years ago: Kerner Commission issues report on US riots

On February 29, 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, headed by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois, issued a summary of its report. The panel was appointed in July 1967 by President Johnson to study the causes of the urban riots.

The commission rejected Johnson's contention that the wave of uprisings by impoverished inner city workers and youth were the product of a "organized plan or conspiracy." It laid the blame for the disorders on grinding poverty, police brutality and "white racism." The report warned, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, on black, one white—separate and unequal."

Several commission members admitted to being shocked by the conditions they found in the inner cities during the course of their seven-month investigation. The commission, however, claimed that the horrific conditions facing black workers and youth could be overcome within the framework of capitalism. It advanced a series of proposals for social reforms that went beyond Johnson's Great Society programs.

Among the measures proposed by the commission were:

- The immediate creation of 2 million new jobs; 1 million by federal, state and local governments, and 1 million by private industry.

- Bringing 6 million new and existing housing units within the reach of low and middle income families over five years and 600,000 low income units in the next year.

- Expanding the welfare system to make more persons eligible and to raise the level of benefits.

Noting that incidents of police brutality sparked many of the uprisings, the commission called for the expansion of the role of the black petty bourgeoisie in administering the ghettos. It recommended the hiring of more black police officers and journalists and the expansion of the number of black elected officials.

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## 75 years ago: American Communist Party defends murders of Polish socialists

On February 27, 1943, the *Daily Worker*, newspaper of the American Communist Party, came to the defense of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin for his 1941 murder of two prominent Polish socialists. The CPUSA charged that Heinrich Erlich, leader of the Jewish Socialist Bund of Poland, and Victor Alter, president of the Polish National Council of Trade Unions, were Nazi agents who agitated among Red Army soldiers for a separate peace between the USSR and Germany, following Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Alter and Erlich were first taken prisoner when the USSR occupied eastern Poland in September 1939. Their 1941 execution did not come to light until two years later, when the Roosevelt administration passed on the information to the American Jewish Labor Committee, which in turn released the information on February 25, 1943.

The charge that the two Jewish labor leaders were agents of Hitler was obscene. Erlich and Alter had organized workers' battalions to fight against the 1939 German invasion of Poland. They were temporarily released to organize Polish prisoners of war into an army with its own officers under the command of the Red Army. They were then rearrested and shot.

The two were murdered not because they were pro-Hitler, but because they were anti-Stalin. Alter and Erlich, while never being revolutionary Marxists, had a history of opposing Stalinism. Under their leadership the Jewish Bund had branded the Moscow Trials as frame-ups and declared its belief in the revolutionary integrity of Trotsky. This was their crime, in Stalin's eyes.

Roosevelt hid the news of the murders of Alter and Erlich during the period when the Red Army was in retreat before the Nazi army. But as the Red Army went onto the offensive and its military victories began to generate revolutionary stirrings within the international working class, Roosevelt sought to use Stalin's crimes to discredit socialism.

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## 100 years ago: Bolsheviks sign Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, ending war on Eastern Front

On March 3, 1918, a representative of the revolutionary Bolshevik government, G.Y. Sokolnikov, signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty on terms dictated by German imperialism, officially ending Russia's participation in World War I.

The terms imposed by the Germans included the loss of more than one-quarter of the population, railways and cultivated land of the former Russian empire; half of its industrial plants and equipment; three-quarters of its iron and steel capacity; and 90

percent of its coal production. The treaty meant abandoning Poland, Lithuania, the Ukraine, the Baltic Provinces, Finland and Transcaucasia. The *Munich Post* exulted, "If the German emperor had demanded Moscow as his capital and a summer residence in the Ural Mountains, the Russians would have signed without batting an eyelash."

The Bolshevik regime was obliged to sign the treaty, on Lenin's insistence, in order to preserve the revolution itself. The Russian army had collapsed, the population was exhausted and a "revolutionary war," as advocated by Bukharin and the Bolshevik "Lefts," was out of the question. Lenin commented, "We have nothing to fight with."

All factions in the leadership counted on the German Revolution to relieve the beleaguered Russian proletariat, but Lenin was implacably opposed to any revolutionary romanticism. The Russian workers' government had to hold out as long as possible, and this required making the most painful concessions.

In order to provide itself with a granary in the Ukraine, as well as to deliver a blow against the revolution, German imperialism occupied Kiev (March 3), Odessa (March 13), Nikolaev (March 17), Kharkov (April 8), and then invaded the Crimea. At the same time, the Germans occupied the Aaland Islands (March 2) and intervened in the Finnish civil war, in support of the White forces who massacred about a quarter of the country's proletariat.

According to Trotsky's *My Life*, Lenin responded with great emotion to the attacks on the Finnish workers. Nevertheless, he was obliged to conclude, "Military action on our part would not be able to save the revolution in Finland, but it would most certainly ruin us. We must help the Finnish workers in every way we can, but we must do it without abandoning peace."

Only the outbreak of the German Revolution in November 1918, eight months after Brest-Litovsk, forced the withdrawal of the German military.

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