

This week in history: January 14-20

14 January 2019

25 years ago: Northridge earthquake strikes Los Angeles

An earthquake struck the city of Los Angeles at 4:30 a.m. on January 17, 1994, centered in the Northridge area of the San Fernando Valley. The quake lasted about 10-20 seconds and reached a magnitude of 6.7. Two aftershocks followed and ground motion was felt as far away as Las Vegas, Nevada, about 220 miles from the quake's epicenter.

While the official death toll was declared to be 57, other estimates reached as high as 72. Another 8,700 were injured, wreaking havoc on Los Angeles hospitals, which had to transfer patients to other areas in order to accommodate the influx of those needing immediate care. Many died during the immediate impact of the quake, with others succumbing to injuries in the days following, including stress-induced complications such as cardiac arrest.

Building and infrastructure damage was estimated at between \$13 and \$50 billion, making it one of the worst natural disasters in US history. Damage was recorded as far as 85 miles away from the city, but it was concentrated mostly in the San Fernando Valley.

Sections of major highways and interstates were closed due to structural collapse, including Interstate 5, Interstate 10, Interstate 210, and airport runways were also hit. The US Postal Service suspended operations in the affected area following the quake, and public libraries and schools were closed. Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan declared a state of emergency and mandatory curfews were enforced. California Governor Pete Wilson and President Bill Clinton both visited the area following the disaster.

While the National Guard was quickly deployed to enforce the curfew, the thousands of people declared homeless received late and little government assistance, if any at all.

Many insurance companies restricted or altogether discontinued offering earthquake insurance after losing money paying out on infrastructure damage. The California legislature created the California Earthquake Authority in response, a privately funded organization which offers minimal insurance coverage.

50 years ago: Japanese police storm Tokyo University

Over 8,000 riot police moved onto the campus of Tokyo University on January 20, 1969, at the request of school authorities to crush a student occupation. The force succeeded in clearing students from the main assembly building after a two-day siege. Police drenched the building with high-pressure water hoses, while helicopters dropped tear gas. More than 500 students were arrested, and 200 police and 30 students were injured during the operation.

The crackdown culminated a year-long student strike at Tokyo University, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in Japan. During the course of the clashes, many buildings along with important historical documents and archives were destroyed or damaged. Campus officials pledged to resume classes in April but said it would take many months to repair all the damage.

At the same time, police cleared about 1,500 students involved in a related protest from Kanda, Tokyo's Latin Quarter near the heart of downtown. The students had spent half a day tearing up the pavement and building barricades before being forced to flee by police.

The Kyodo Kaigi, a Maoist-oriented student group, organized the occupation. The Musei, the youth group of the pro-Moscow Japanese Communist Party, opposed the action. Medical students initiated the student strike in protest against new regulations. The action expanded to include other sections of students. They charged the university with catering to a tiny elite rather than the mass of youth.

The student strike served as a focal point for protests around a broad array of issues, such as the war in Vietnam and the influence of the United States on the policy of the Japanese government. The arrival of the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Enterprise served as the occasion for one of the largest student demonstrations in 1968.

Leaders of the student movement pledged to organize even bigger protests during the coming year as the date approached for the renewal of the Japanese-American security treaty, providing for US bases in Japan.

In the aftermath of the Tokyo University occupation and other student demonstrations the Japanese government would pass the University Management Law. The draconian legislation gave the police greater authority to intervene on University campuses and suppress anti-war activity.

75 years ago: Soviets launch offensive against siege of Leningrad

On January 14, 1944, the Red Army launched the Leningrad-Novgorod offensive aimed at breaking a protracted Nazi blockade of supplies to Leningrad, the second largest city in the Soviet Union, now known as St. Petersburg.

The siege had begun in September, 1941, after an offensive by Germany's Army Group North, which succeeded in cutting off supply routes to the city. The German assault was backed by a collaborationist army from Finland. The blockade of the city was one of the most destructive in history, resulting in widespread destitution, grinding poverty and mass starvation. More than 600,000 died in the space of just three years.

The Soviet military had begun a determined attempt to break the siege in 1943, after gaining the strategic initiative following the defeat of the deepest Nazi offensive into Soviet territory, at Stalingrad, and victory of Soviet forces at Kursk-Orel during the summer of 1943, the biggest tank battle ever waged. Large-scale troop movements began, first by ship across Lake Ladoga into Leningrad, and then on an even greater scale after the winter freeze made it possible to move soldiers and equipment by truck across the ice.

By the time the offensive began, more than 1.2 million Soviet troops with better equipment were facing fewer than 750,000 German troops whose lines were overextended. Hitler rejected all proposals from the military for a limited withdrawal to a shorter and more defensible position dubbed the "Panther Line."

The Leningrad-Novgorod offensive began with attacks by Soviet forces on January 14 on the Leningrad and Volkov fronts, and the 2nd Baltic front. The first days of the assault included an artillery barrage involving the deployment of some 220,000 shells directed on German lines. Following delays caused by inclement weather, the Soviet Second Shock Army expelled Nazi troops from the town of Ropsha on January 19.

On January 26, the Moscow-Railroad line was reopened, marking the end of the blockade and siege of Leningrad.

100 years ago: World War I victors open "peace conference" in Paris

On January 18, 1919, the imperialist victors in World War I, Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the United States, convened the infamous Paris Peace Conference to divide up the spoils of the four-year-long bloodbath, at the expense of the losers, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey. The conference would produce a series of oppressive settlements, including, most notoriously, the Treaty of Versailles.

The conference opened in the misnamed "Salon of Peace" in the headquarters of the French Foreign Ministry in Paris. Representatives from at least 32 countries attended, including some that had been created in the last few months from the break-up of Austria-Hungary. At the wish of the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, the opening date selected was the 48th anniversary of the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871 after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War.

The main work of the conference was the redivision of the world under the hegemony of the victorious imperialist powers. The Turkish Ottoman Empire's possessions in the Middle East were handed over primarily to France and Britain, along the lines of the previously secret Sykes-Picot Agreement and created the basis of the nation-state system in the region that persists to this day. German colonies in Africa were divided up between the French and British.

The Japanese delegation walked out of the conference after it received only half of what it wanted from German possessions in Asia and the Pacific. Italy achieved only small territorial claims in the Adriatic areas of Austria-Hungary bordering on Italy. This failure was a factor in the rise of Italian fascism in the next few years.

Excluded from official representation at the conference were both sides in the Russian Civil War, the monarchist-capitalist Whites and the Soviet government, although bourgeois pretender regimes in various parts of the former Tsarist Empire, such as Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia (under Menshevik rule) had official representation.

The conference sowed the seeds of the next world war through the Treaty of Versailles ultimately imposed by the victorious powers on Germany, with stiff reparations payments that contributed to the instability of the German Weimar Republic and of the rise of the Nazis.

It also created the League of Nations, initially proposed by US president Woodrow Wilson, which was a mechanism to regulate inter-imperialist antagonisms and to ensure the US a degree of oversight over European affairs. Isolationist sentiment in the US, however, was still strong and the US Congress refused to ratify American participation in the League.



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