

This week in history: January 28-February 3

28 January 2019

25 years ago: Tonya Harding's ex-husband pleads guilty in attack on Nancy Kerrigan

On February 1, 1994, figure skater Tonya Harding's ex-husband Jeff Gillooly negotiated a plea bargain for his role in the attack on rival figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. He admitted organizing the attack on Kerrigan, viewed as Harding's main competition for a spot on the US figure skating team for the upcoming Winter Olympics. He contracted with Shane Stant and his uncle Derrick Smith.

The two men struck Kerrigan above the knee during a practice session at Cobo Hall in Detroit in early January. The blow resulted in temporary injuries including severe bruising, forcing Kerrigan to withdraw from the National Championships competition and abstain from competing to keep her US Ladies' Championship title.

The attack led to a frenzy of coverage by major media outlets in the US and internationally, including *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* and the television networks. Harding initially denied any involvement in the attack, later admitting she should have reported plans of the crime to authorities sooner.

The daughter of a waitress and single-mother, Harding had become popular for her working-class upbringing and rebellious attitude, as well as her athletic ability, as the first American woman to land a triple axel in competition in 1991. The media honed in on the skater's difficult personal life, including poverty, domestic violence, estranged mother and fights with skating judges, and pushed her into the public spotlight, making figure skating a household topic.

While the media coverage contrasted Harding's tough background to the grace and delicacy of figure skating, the *International Workers Bulletin* declared, "The reaction of the press and television commentators is hypocritical in the extreme. They express dismay that the ethereal world of figure skating has been invaded by this sort of unpleasantness. But why should they be shocked, particularly considering the vast amounts of money which 'amateur' sports generate? Did they really think women's figure skating was a moral preserve immune from the dog-eat-dog ethics which are glorified by the social order they uphold?"

The decision to use violence to gain an edge in a competition where the difference between finishing in the top two (and going to the Olympics) and finishing third (and not going) could mean millions in earnings and endorsements, flowed naturally from an American culture where cash is king, "winning" is everything, and the use of force is a staple, above all for those at the top.

50 years ago: Yasser Arafat elected to head the PLO

The Palestine Liberation Organization chose Yasser Arafat as its new chairman on February 3, 1969, at the Palestine National Congress held in Cairo. The 39-year-old Arafat replaced Yahya Hammoudeh, 60, who had held the position for only 13 months as an interim replacement for the PLO's first chairman, Ahmed Shukeiri.

Arafat's assumption of the leadership of the PLO was a byproduct of the immense radicalization among the masses of Palestinians—those living under occupation in Israel, those dispersed to other Arab nations in 1948-49, and above all, those living in the newly occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, seized by Israel in the June 1967 war.

The PLO was initially founded under the auspices of Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser, who named Shukeiri to the head the group and hosted its headquarters in Cairo. Arafat's Palestine National Liberation Movement, or Al Fatah, joined the PLO, but Arafat was opposed to the domination of the Arab bourgeois regimes and sought to develop an armed struggle against Israel.

The defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 was a turning point for the Palestinian national movement, marking an end to Nasser's pan-Arab project, and leading to a rapid turn to the right in all the Arab bourgeois regimes, particularly Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Palestinian groups turned to guerrilla warfare, with Fatah emerging as the most important and successful, particularly after its stand against Israeli forces in March 1968 at Karameh in the West Bank.

At the Palestinian Congress in Cairo, Fatah took control of the PLO and Arafat became chairman of the umbrella organization. As a result of its political and military successes, the PLO under Arafat developed into a genuine mass movement of the Palestinian masses. From the late 1960s on, the struggle of the Palestinian people and the PLO became the catalytic force and focus of revolutionary struggles throughout the Middle East.

The PLO was the most radical of the petty-bourgeois nationalist movements worldwide, and Arafat demonstrated tremendous personal courage and loyalty to the cause. That made its decline and fall all the more tragic. Based on a false perspective of national self-determination, increasingly unrealistic in a globalized world economy, and unable, after the 1991 collapse of the USSR, to maneuver between Stalinism and imperialism, the PLO capitulated to imperialism and Zionism in the Camp David accords. By the time of Arafat's death in 2004, the PLO had degenerated into a police agency directed against the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza, ruling on behalf of Israel and a thin layer of Palestinian capitalists.

75 years ago: Nazi crackdown in Poland

On February 1, 1944, Franz Kutschera, the Nazi SS and police chief of the Warsaw district was assassinated by agents of the Polish Home Army. A 13-person hit squad intercepted Kutschera as he travelled from his house to the SS headquarters in Warsaw, blocking his car and killing him and his driver. In the ensuing firefight, two members of the squad were mortally wounded and another two were killed by the SS as they attempted to escape.

The killing was part a larger assassination campaign, code named Operation Heads, which was carried out by the nationalist Polish Home Army against Nazi officials in Poland. Kutschera had been sentenced to death by a Special Court of the Polish Underground State for crimes against the Polish nation.

Kutschera, who was a close associate of Heinrich Himmler, was installed as Warsaw district chief on September 25, 1943. An Austrian, Kutschera joined the Nazi party in 1930 and was arrested several times by the right-wing Dollfuss regime in Austria. After *Anschluss* with Germany, he worked in the Nazi administration, becoming gauleiter of the province of Carinthia.

With the outbreak of World War II, Kutschera was in charge of SS repression in the Vosges region of France, then in Slovenia, where he targeted Tito's partisans. He went on to work as an SS police commander in occupied Belarus, where he hunted down Jews and partisans. His appointment came at a time of an acute crisis for Nazi rule in Poland. Poland's resistance had become one of the largest and most powerful in Europe. This coincided with significant advances by the Soviet Red Army against the German occupation.

In an effort to pacify the Polish resistance movement, Kutschera ramped up Nazi repression in the city. He was responsible for the political executions of up to 5,000 people in Warsaw.

In retribution for the killing of Kutschera, Nazi forces rounded up 100 prisoners from Pawiak prison, took them to the site of the assassination and executed them. In the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, another 200 prisoners were shot. A 100 million zloty fine was also levied on the citizens of Warsaw.

100 years ago: Soviet Council of People's Commissars created in Ukraine

On January 28, 1919, the Bolsheviks in Ukraine established a Council of People's Commissars in Kharkov as the government of Soviet Ukraine. The new ruling body replaced the Bolshevik Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government of Ukraine, which had functioned while the bourgeois-nationalist Ukrainian People's Republic (the Directorate) dominated Ukraine. The Directorate, under the leadership of Symon Petliura, had replaced the pro-German regime of Pavlo Skoropadsky.

The Red Army had begun its Ukraine Offensive in early January, under the overall command of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, with units heading in one direction towards Kiev and others to Kharkov, with a third group later advancing toward Odessa. Kiev fell to the Red Army on February 5.

Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, Ukraine had been ceded to the control of the German Empire, which had set up a puppet regime of Ukrainian nationalists. With the advent of the German Revolution in November 1918 and the collapse of the German military on the Western Front, German forces began to withdraw from Ukraine and civil war was fought out between Soviet partisans and the Directorate as a part of the broader Russian Civil War (1918-22).

The invasion of Ukraine by the Red Army in January 1919 did not end the civil war. By the summer, the White armies of Anton Denikin would invade and conquer much of south and central Ukraine. In June 1919, the Whites captured Kharkov and took Kiev in August, where they promptly fell out with the forces of Petliura, who had also participated in the battle. In May 1920, Petliura allied himself with the Polish regime of Józef Piłsudski, who invaded Ukraine and captured Kiev in May 1920.

Both the armies of Petliura and Denikin were notorious for their pogroms against Jews. It is no exaggeration to say, as one historian does, "As the pogroms of 1919 burst upon the Ukraine with incredible ferocity, the enemies of Bolshevism carried out some of the most brutal acts of repression in the modern history of the Western world."

In 1926, while in exile in Paris, Petliura was assassinated by a Bessarabian Jew, Sholom Schwartzbard, for the anti-Semitic killings under his command.

The Council of Peoples Commissars governed all of Ukraine after 1921, although partisan resistance by nationalists continued until the middle of 1922. In October 1922, the Ukrainian Council of People's Commissars became a part of the government of the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The early years of the government are sometimes known as the "Rakovsky Government" after its leader, the outstanding Bolshevik leader and later prominent figure in Trotsky's left Opposition, Christian Rakovsky.



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