

This week in history: January 13-19

13 January 2020

25 years ago: Great Hanshin Earthquake strikes Japan

On January 17, 1995, the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck the Hyogo prefecture in southern Japan. It registered a 6.9 on the moment magnitude scale and reached a maximum intensity of 7 on the JMA Seismic Intensity Scale. It lasted about 20 seconds, and hit Kobe—a large port city nearest the epicenter, population 1.5 million—the hardest. It was the worst earthquake to strike Japan since the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake.

The final death toll was estimated at 5,502-6,434 killed. Reports claim 36,896-43,792 people were injured and upwards of 250,000 displaced from the wreckage. Nearly 400,000 buildings were irreparably damaged by the earthquake, which also triggered 300 fires that burned throughout the region, compounding utility disruptions. Kobe was the world's sixth-largest container port. Most of the facilities were destroyed and needed to be rebuilt entirely.

Emergency and rescue forces in the Kobe area were poorly trained and equipped, and collapsed under the stress of the quake. A week later, 300,000 were homeless, 1 million had no running water or gas, and tens of thousands lacked electricity. It took 10 days to designate the Kobe area a disaster zone.

Surveys of the damaged area showed a clear pattern in the destruction. Buildings dating from the post-World War II construction boom of the 1950s and 1960s, when safety concerns were largely ignored, were destroyed wholesale. Buildings erected after 1971, when the first national building code took effect, suffered lesser damage. Those built after 1981, when safety standards were upgraded, generally survived intact.

The earthquake revealed scandalous incompetence and indifference by the ruling class. Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama learned of the quake from television news reports two hours after its occurrence. The governor of Hyogo prefecture failed to request aid from Tokyo for five hours and no emergency forces were dispatched for nine hours. The governor of nearby Osaka, Kazuo Nakagawa, said that people affected “should cook for themselves but lack the will to do so.” The central government offered to rebuild a mere 7,000 homes, while financial analysts gloated that only 5 percent of homeowners were insured—good news for the insurance industry.

The *Japan Times* openly accused the administration of being responsible for deaths. “It is tragically clear that many more victims might have been found alive if a full-scale, coordinated rescue effort had been undertaken with greater speed,” it editorialized.

50 years ago: Frame-up at Soledad Prison in California

On January 16, 1970 three African American inmates at Soledad Prison in California were charged with the crime of murdering a guard. The accused, George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, all under age 30, would become known as the “Soledad Brothers” as they fought to prove their innocence.

A series of murky events led to the charges against the group. On January 13 a fist fight broke out between white and black inmates in the recreation yard. During the fight, one prison guard, Officer Opie Miller, shot at the inmates from a guard tower. Miller killed three black inmates and wounded one white. After the incident the prisoners in Soledad began protesting against the killings. Some inmates began a hunger strike and called for an investigation.

A grand jury ruled that the deaths of the inmates were “justifiable homicide” and Miller was exonerated. No inmates who witnessed the shooting were allowed to testify. Then, shortly after the ruling, a guard was found dead, having fallen from the third floor of a cell block. The prison administration believed that the attack on the guard was revenge for the death of the three inmates killed by Miller, and moved quickly to find culprits to hold responsible.

George Jackson was especially targeted for his political activity. By 1970 the 28-year-old had already spent 10 years in prison for a robbery charge for which he had pleaded guilty, while only a teenager, at the insistence of his attorney. He was given a sentence of “one year to life.” Jackson became radicalized in prison and joined the Black Panther Party. Prison officials declared him a “dangerous freewheeling convict leader who must be isolated because of his impact on the prison population.”

In August 1970, George Jackson's 17-year-old brother, Jonathan Jackson, mounted a desperate attempt to free his brother by holding up a courtroom and taking a judge hostage. The younger Jackson had been set up by a member of the Los Angeles Police Department's Criminal Conspiracy Section, Melvin Smith, who had infiltrated the Panthers. Smith told the younger Jackson that there would be eight armed Panthers waiting for him outside the courthouse in a getaway car and they could then negotiate to trade the judge for the elder Jackson's freedom. However, no such assistance ever came. Jackson, two inmates that he freed from the courthouse, and the judge all were killed by a hail of police gunfire as they attempted to flee the court in a van.

A year later, in August 1971, George Jackson would himself be killed in a set-up by San Quentin prison guards just days before he was set to go on trial for the death of the Soledad guard. Jackson was given a defective pistol by prison guards and made an attempt

to escape during a riot. Unaware that he was being set up, Jackson was gunned down during the chaos. A whole new frame-up would emerge from Jackson's killing, where six inmates would be accused of being behind the escape attempt. They would become known as the "San Quentin Six."

The other Soledad brothers, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, were acquitted in March of 1972, as the jury found that the state completely failed to prove that the two had any involvement in the death of the guard.

75 years ago: Red Army liberates Warsaw

On January 17, 1945, the Soviet Red Army's First Belorussian Front secured control of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, expelling German troops from a city that had been the site of some of the worst crimes committed during the Second World War. The Soviet victory, which was greeted with outpourings of support from workers around the world, was one aspect of a broader routing of Nazi troops on both the Eastern and Western fronts.

The decimation of Warsaw, during the course of the war, began with German bombing raids in September 1939. Even before it was occupied, up to 25 percent of the homes in the historic city had been destroyed, while broad layers of its population had been hit with water and electricity shut-offs.

The crisis prompted the surrender of the city, beginning a brutal six-year occupation. The Nazis established the infamous Warsaw Ghetto, and carried out the mass murder of the city's Jewish population, while ruthlessly suppressing widespread social and political opposition. Uprisings against fascist rule were put down and followed by mass reprisals.

In January 1945, the Soviet regime launched the Vistula-Oder Offensive, aimed at pushing deep into Eastern Europe and taking parts of greater Germany. The first stages of the offensive witnessed rapid Soviet advances, with troops in some areas moving forward several hundred kilometres in the space of three weeks.

The Soviet troops enjoyed a vast superiority in numbers, materiel and armaments. Facing the prospect of a rout, Colonel Bogislav von Bonin, chief of the operational branch of the German Army General Staff, gave Army Group A permission to abandon Warsaw. German troops beat a hasty retreat, along with functionaries and civilians of German origin. At the same time, they sought to cover up their historic crimes. The day after Warsaw was liberated, the Nazis began the liquidation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, forcing more than 50,000 remaining inmates to begin a death march away from Soviet lines. The vast majority were killed.

The abandonment of Warsaw compounded the crisis facing the Nazi regime. Hitler had defined the Polish capital as a "Fortress City," meaning that it was to be defended at all costs, including in the event of a massive Soviet offensive. Von Bonin's order was a rebuke of this position. Hitler immediately responded by sacking Smilo Freiherr von Lüttwitz and Walter Fries, the generals directly

responsible for the defense of the city.

The same week, the Nazi dictator allowed Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt to begin a major retreat in the Ardennes region, encompassing vast swathes of Belgium, France and Luxemburg, in response to rapid Allied advances. Hitler held his final meeting with the field marshals in charge of blocking a full-scale Allied invasion of Germany. He retreated to Berlin, where he would spend the remainder of his life, before the defeat of his regime several months later.

By the time the Nazis were expelled from Warsaw, the vast majority of the city's buildings had been destroyed. A pre-war population of some 1.3 million had been reduced to fewer than 200,000.

100 years ago: Social Democrats declare martial law in Germany

On January 14, 1920, the Social Democratic (SPD) government, with Gustav Noske as minister of defense, declared martial law throughout Germany as government troops killed 50 protesters and wounded over 100 in front of the Reichstag. Thousands had assembled on the second day of protests against reactionary legislation being discussed in the Reichstag. Police threw explosives into the crowds of demonstrators.

By the evening the authorities had restored order. The SPD's newspaper, *Vorwaerts*, claimed that the police showed restraint. Noske banned *Die Freiheit*, the newspaper of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), and the Communist newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*.

Die Freiheit had called for demonstrations to protest a bill that would have placed factory councils under government control. On January 13, tens of thousands of workers assembled and peaceably demonstrated, but by the afternoon police had barricaded the Reichstag and begun to repulse workers with shots and bayonets. Over 100 were wounded, but protests continued the next day.

The post-World War I revolutionary upheaval—including the November Revolution of 1918, the mass strikes and insurrection in Berlin in 1919, and the creation of a Soviet republic in Bavaria later that year—staggered the German ruling class. But the working class was handcuffed at each stage by the absence of a prepared revolutionary leadership, a situation made worse by the murder a year before of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The SPD and the German bourgeoisie viewed with dread the first anniversary of their assassinations: January 15, 1920.



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