

# This week in history: August 10-16

10 August 2020

## 25 years ago: Indictments in Oklahoma City bombing

On August 10, 1995, a federal grand jury handed down indictments against the two main suspects in the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in which 168 people died. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were charged with making the explosive device from a combination of diesel fuel and fertilizer, transporting it in a rented Ryder truck, and detonating the bomb outside the Murrah Federal Building on the morning of April 19, 1995.

The 11-count indictment listed a total of 37 acts dating back to September 1994, ranging from a robbery committed to finance the bombing to the rental of storage lockers and the purchase of the farm chemicals required to make the bomb. It charged that McVeigh and Nichols carried out their actions together with “others unknown,” leaving open the possibility of further arrests.

Despite detailing eight months of preparation for the terrorist attacks, the indictment named only one other co-conspirator; Michael Fortier, a former friend and associate of McVeigh in both the US Army and in paramilitary right-wing circles. Fortier agreed to plead guilty to lesser charges and testify as a government witness, with the guarantee of a sentence no longer than 23 years in prison.

Fortier served just under eight years for his role in the mass murder and was released on January 20, 2006, into the Witness Protection Program, along with his wife and two children. McVeigh was executed by lethal injection in 2001, and Nichols is still serving 161 consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole.

Until the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, the Oklahoma City bombing was the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil. McVeigh’s main motivation for executing the attack was retribution against the federal government for the siege of the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas in 1993. The disillusioned Gulf War veteran was inspired by *The Turner Diaries*, a fascist manifesto which described a race war consuming the US.

## 50 years ago: New York prisoners riot against conditions

On August 10, 1970, prisoners held in the Manhattan House of Detention, or “The Tombs,” rioted against inhospitable conditions and attacks on their democratic rights in the vastly overcrowded jail. The Tombs, with a maximum capacity of 932 inmates, however had been packed with almost 3,000 men. *The Bulletin*, the publication of the American Trotskyist movement at the time, described the Tombs as “a veritable hell-hole of rats, roaches, lice, and filth with a shortage of everything from beds to soap.”

The riot came during a wave of unrest in American prisons, including the frame-up of inmates in Soledad, California for the murder of a guard in January. Just a week before the Tombs riot, 17-year-old Jonathan Jackson, the brother of Soledad inmate George Jackson, attempted to free his brother by taking a judge hostage in a California courtroom. Both Jackson and the judge died in the attack.

In the early morning hours, hundreds of Tombs prisoners on the ninth floor of the jail rebelled against the guards and took five of them captive. To draw attention to their protest burning mattresses and other objects were thrown from the windows of the high-rise jail.

The prisoners demanded improvements in their living conditions and the right to a trial. Many of the inmates, who were mostly poor black and Puerto Rican youth, had been locked up for as long as two years without being given trials for their alleged crimes and unable to afford bail. This meant that many had yet to be convicted of a crime.

For about eight hours the prisoners negotiated their demands in exchange for the safe release of the guards, who were being held hostage. After having brought national attention to their protest, gaining the promise of state officials that the prisoners’ grievances would be addressed and that the rioters would face no additional punishment, the inmates released the guards.

But the promise was not kept. Once the prison authorities regained control over the ninth floor, the prisoners found themselves in the same conditions as before. During the incident, New York Mayor John Lindsay made statements to the press that he would order the courts to clear their schedules so that the prisoners could receive their right to due process. However, Lindsay was well aware that a simple declaration would do nothing to free up the backlog in the courts that had been built up over years of mass arrests of young men in working-class communities.

Lindsay’s only measure was to send a number of the leaders

of the riot out of the Tombs and to the notorious Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York. Attica was also known for squalid conditions, in addition to holding prisoners considered to be the most dangerous. About one year later a riot would also break out in Attica resulting in the deaths of 33 prisoners and 10 guards.

## **75 years ago: Japan surrenders after nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

On August 15, 1945 the Japanese imperial regime officially declared that it would surrender to the United States, days after the American military dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in an unprecedented war crime that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives.

On August 6, the US bomber *Enola Gay* had dropped the “Little Boy” nuclear device on Hiroshima, rapidly killing an estimated 80,000 people. On August 9, an atomic bomb dubbed the “Fat Man” was dropped on Nagasaki, leading to a similar number of deaths.

The attacks, which shocked the world’s population, destroyed the two cities. They came on top of a yearlong campaign of US air raids involving conventional incendiary devices, which wiped out up to one-seventh of Japanese urban and industrial areas.

The Japanese government immediately responded to the atomic bombings by offering to surrender to the US on August 10, under the terms worked out by the Allied powers at the Potsdam Conference in July. The only condition was that the sovereignty of the emperor be recognized. This was rejected the following day, with US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes insisting that the terms of any Japanese capitulation be unconditional.

By this point, the Japanese regime was in an immense crisis, presiding over a state that lacked any of its previous industrial or military capacity and facing a rapidly escalating invasion from the Soviet Union. On August 14, Emperor Hirohito recorded a radio broadcast, calling on the Japanese population to “bear the unbearable,” including a full surrender to the US.

This touched off the Kyōjō incident, in which a group of staff officers at the Ministry of Defense, along with leading members of the Imperial Guard, sought to carry out a military coup to forestall the surrender and prevent Hirohito’s message from being nationally broadcast. The rebellion was rapidly defeated.

On August 15, Hirohito’s recording, dubbed the Jewel Voice Broadcast, was played on radio, insisting on the necessity for immediate and unconditional surrender. The emperor pointed to the ruinous state of the Japanese war effort.

He referred to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

stating: “[t]he enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.”

Japan had first raised the prospect of a surrender in May but had been rebuffed.

## **100 years ago: Polish troops break through Red Army lines outside of Warsaw**

On August 16, 1920, Polish troops counterattacked against the Red Army outside Warsaw, the Polish capital, and threatened to encircle it. In an exceptionally confusing battle along the Vistula River, only eight miles outside of the city, a Polish force made a bold attack on the left flank of the Red Army at a weak point in the Soviet lines, contrary to the advice of French imperialist advisors.

The plan was a gamble for Polish forces, and when the Soviet command intercepted plans for the attack, it disregarded them as fake. Nevertheless, on August 12, Red Army General Mikhail Tukhachevsky was taken by surprise when critical communications equipment between units was seized by the Poles, and he was unable to maneuver some of his forces. By August 16, Polish forces attacked the Red Army at its weakest point and were able to exploit a gap in the Soviet encirclement. Tukhachevsky was forced to retreat.

While the Battle of Warsaw preserved the Polish capitalist state, the Soviet Republic had successfully repelled a Polish invasion into the Ukraine in April, advanced the borders of the Soviet Republic hundreds of miles and secured the frontiers of an independent Soviet Ukraine. The hopes of French and British imperialism to intervene with their own or with proxy troops were dashed. The Poles and Soviets signed a peace treaty in October.

In assessing the Polish-Soviet War in a September speech, the Soviet Commissar of War, Leon Trotsky, noted that “such setbacks are inevitable in a big military campaign. War does not proceed like a chronometer in which each movement of each wheel, each hand, is calculated to a second. War is a fierce struggle between two powerful forces and is inevitably associated with unexpected events, and this is especially true of maneuvering, revolutionary war.”



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