

This week in history: February 13-19

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

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25 years ago: British Parliament rubber-stamps war in Iraq

On February 17, 1998, the Tony Blair Labour government in Britain secured a massive parliamentary majority for military action against Iraq. Despite claims that Britain was pursuing all diplomatic channels, the government's motion made clear that the end result would be air strikes. In moving it, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook went so far as to warn of a nuclear attack on Baghdad.

Only 25 MPs voted against the government. The proceedings were a travesty of the democratic process. A proposed amendment by Labour MPs Tony Benn and Tam Dalyell calling for opposition to "any military action not explicitly authorized by the (UN) Security Council" was rejected by the Speaker, Betty Boothroyd, and could not be voted on.

In contrast, a Tory amendment that "fully supports the resolve of the government to use all necessary means to achieve an outcome consistent with" UN resolutions was accepted by the Blair government and incorporated into its resolution.

Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat politicians rose up to proclaim their unanimity with the British and American stance. John Major, Tory prime minister during the previous Gulf War, backed the government and called for "massive retaliation if Iraq attacked a third country like Israel."

This elicited Cook's threat of a nuclear strike in the event of Saddam Hussein using chemical weapons. The base level of discussion was exemplified when Cook said the threat of retaliation with chemical and biological weapons by Hussein was "low," but that such an outcome would prove that Iraq possesses such weapons.

Shadow Foreign Secretary Michael Howard was questioned on the fact that Iraq's chemical weapons program was developed with the previous Tory government's assistance. He replied that it was often very difficult to distinguish between chemical materials that could be used in medicine and those which could be turned into weapons. The Tory government was never in any doubt that it was supplying arms to Iraq. Moreover, Howard's defense of past British policy toward Iraq belied the justification for military strikes, which was based on the claim that virtually every chemical substance held by Iraq can be used for the creation of "weapons of mass destruction."

In their speeches and proposed amendments the government's opponents confined themselves to a timid appeal for military action to be made contingent on official sanction from the United Nations

Security Council. Benn said, "It would be the greatest betrayal of all if we voted to abandon the (UN) Charter and take unilateral action."

50 years ago: British Prime Minister Heath pledges no improvements to wages as energy workers strike

On February 14, 1973, 47,000 gas industry workers went on strike in Britain demanding higher wages to keep up with soaring inflation. Just two days earlier, the administration of US President Richard Nixon had announced a devaluation of the US dollar, which caused additional price spikes throughout the world and particularly among leading US trade partners like Great Britain.

UK Prime Minister Edward Heath responded to the energy strike with a hard line, refusing to grant any concessions to the striking workers. Heath's Tory government had been pursuing a wage-freeze policy, refusing to grant even the most modest increases.

Heath claimed that the wage freezes were to combat inflation. However, in reality, the so-called fight against inflation was used as an opportunity to strip away all the gains to living standards that workers had won in the postwar period and massively increase the profits of the corporations.

"There will be no such things as exceptions," Heath told reporters at a news conference after the strike began. "Our whole policy will disintegrate and then we will be back in the same inflationary state as before."

Later in the day, Heath invited leaders of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) to Downing Street to meet with them on the strike. The meeting was not a discussion but a demand from Heath for unconditional surrender. He issued an ultimatum to the TUC leaders: end all strikes or be crushed.

Recent years had already seen major struggles by the working class against the Heath government. Among the most powerful was a national miners strike in 1972 that virtually froze all industry in Britain.

Other struggles had emerged over the Industrial Relations Act of 1971, an anti-union law that made strikes illegal in all but the narrowest circumstances. By 1973, Heath had made three state of emergency declarations against strikes. The first, in 1970, was against dock workers. The next two, in 1971 and 1972, targeted miners. Heath

would use the declaration again against miners in 1974.

Following the meeting with Heath, the TUC leaders, who included Hugh Scanlon, Jack Jones, Harry Urwin, and Terry Parry, announced a special congress of the trade unions to prepare a strategy. However, the TUC delayed the actual meeting of the congress for three weeks, to March 5.

The delay gave Heath a major advantage, allowing the strike to be isolated from other sections of the working class. As *The Times of London* gleefully put it, “there is no organization in the country less capable of revolution” than the TUC.

The gas strike officially ended on March 23 in an agreement that granted an increase of just £7 per week, well within the limits of Heath’s wage freezes.

75 years ago: Ruler of Yemen assassinated in coup attempt

On February 17, 1948, the ruler of Yemen, Yahya Muhammad Hamid ed-Din, was killed in an unsuccessful coup attempt aimed at overturning the absolutist rule of his family. Yahya’s limousine was hit by a hail of gunfire as he traveled on the outskirts of the capital city Sana’a. The assassination was the spearhead of a coup plot aimed at establishing a new government.

Yahya was a representative of the al-Qasimi dynasty, which had ruled large swathes of Yemen, and portions of what was to become Saudi Arabia, for centuries. His rule began in 1918, after the death of his father. Yahya and his predecessors exercised both political and religious authority, serving as Imam of the Shia Muslim sect of the Zaydis and of Yemen.

Yahya’s rule had centered on the consolidation of a modern nation-state. This involved an attempt to expand the kingdom’s base of tribal support, as well as a crackdown on those tribes that were recalcitrant. Yahya fought a war against the emerging Saudi state in 1934. It ended in defeat, but he would become close to the Ibn Saud dynasty that ruled Saudi Arabia.

Yahya appointed his own children to be the leaders of the various provinces, providing them with far-reaching repressive powers. He was hostile to foreign influence, viewing it as a threat to monarchical rule.

Hostility to the stultifying, absolutist rule found expression in the development of the Free Yemen movement. It combined tribal disaffection, forms of Islamic nationalism and calls for at least nominal democratic rights, including a constitution.

The assassination of Yahya was carried out by tribesmen from the Bani Murad tribe, some of whom had previously been imprisoned by the autocrat. It was coordinated by the Alwazirs, a rival family of the ruling elite who wished to establish their own government. They rapidly set about establishing a “constitutional government” in Sana’a, appointing Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Wazir, a religious leader, as its imam. One of Yahya’s sons, who had fallen out with him, also joined the new regime.

It was only in power for several months. Another of Yahya’s sons, Ahmad bin Yahya, traveled throughout the provinces, building opposition to the new regime among tribesmen who remained loyal to his father’s dynasty, especially in the north. He would lead a successful attack against Sana’a and would become the new Imam.

100 years ago: French troops stop exports from Germany’s Ruhr Valley

On February 13, 1923, French troops took complete control of the border between the Ruhr Valley and the rest of Germany. French troops had previously taken key border towns in the region and had seized the railways and manned them with French railway workers. No steel or iron was to be exported to unoccupied Germany or abroad without French permission. French troops had cut off exports of coal earlier in the month.

The French had occupied the Ruhr Valley, Germany’s industrial heartland, on January 11 because Germany had repeatedly defaulted on its reparation payments imposed under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles after its defeat in World War I.

The French were preparing a tax on exported goods as well as taxes inside the region to fund reparations. The embargo on coal, iron and steel appears to have had little impact on unoccupied Germany since the employers had foreseen this move and stockpiled materials and made other arrangements for import.

The center-right German government of Wilhelm Cuno had called for passive resistance, with the endorsement of the Social Democratic Party, in the region, but the area was flooded with extreme-right activists and paramilitaries who engaged in violence against French troops.

In Essen, one of the largest cities in the Ruhr Valley, shops and restaurants refused to serve French soldiers. On February 13, French troops charged with drawn bayonets at protesting civilians in the town square along with, according to the *New York Times*, “promiscuous shooting.” In retaliation, Germans shut off electricity on the headquarters of French engineers in the city. Belgian troops seized coal at mines and confronted German miners who refused to cooperate. On February 17, bomb blasts went off in Essen.

The French occupation continued to stoke inter-imperialist antagonisms as well. The British, who had opposed the occupation, balked at French demands to control German coal shipments in a small area controlled by British troops along the Rhine. The British appealed to Washington, which had withdrawn its force of a thousand troops from the area in January, although the United States was not a member of the League of Nations.



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