

# This week in history: August 12-18

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.

**11 August 2024**

## **25 years ago: Izmit earthquake hits Turkey**

On August 17, 1999, a 7.4-magnitude earthquake hit Izmit, approximately 100 kilometers east of Istanbul. An official estimate placed the total casualties at over 17,000 killed and over 43,000 injured, but other sources estimated the actual figure to be closer to 45,000 dead and a similar number injured. It caused an estimated \$6.5 billion in damage, with 10 of the country's 81 provinces impacted.

An international rescue operation was mounted involving Greece, Britain, Israel, Switzerland, France, the US, Germany, Russia, Japan and other countries. Seven affected provinces were declared a disaster zone and the government promised compensation to victims of the quake.

But protests erupted against the government of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit for having not moved swiftly enough in dealing with the crisis and for its relations with corrupt builders responsible for erecting the substandard housing, the collapse of which led to so many casualties and fatalities.

Press commentary on the relief effort was scathing, with the *Radikal* newspaper proclaiming it a "pure fiasco." The *Shah* newspaper called the state "helpless." This was only a pale reflection of the anger felt by tens of thousands with family members dead or missing, and many more who were forced to sleep on the streets because they were left homeless.

In the Istanbul suburb of Avcilar, residents described the property speculators who had hastily thrown up buildings during the boom period of the previous 20 years as "killers." In Yalova, one contractor was almost lynched by an angry crowd and his car was torched. Many newly built houses in Avcilar collapsed quickly in the earthquake, killing many in their sleep.

The English online edition of the newspaper *Milliyet* wrote: "In Avcilar, the area of Istanbul most affected by the strong earthquake, most of the damage was due to the faulty construction and architecture of buildings. Mutlu Ozturk from the Engineering and Architecture Chambers' Association (TMMOB), after inspections in the area, said, 'The earthquake tore down those buildings with faulty construction, nature selected weak and illegally constructed buildings and forgave the strong.'"

Over half of the buildings in Istanbul, and in many other Turkish major towns, were built in this way and were known as Gecekondus (huts built overnight). They were mainly occupied by former peasants

and day laborers who fled to the west of the country to escape desperate conditions, as well as those who fled the civil war that was being waged against Kurdish regions of Turkey.

The apartments were constructed with no regard to the stability or the suitability of the materials employed in a country that is still regularly the victim of medium-sized earthquakes. State authorities regularly ignored unsafe conditions for bribes, with little to no systematic building regulation or control. Local politicians often allowed the building mafia to operate without hindrance.

## **Far-right paramilitary group massacres 210 in Cyprus**

On August 14, 1974, the far-right Greek Cypriot paramilitary group, the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters, known as the EOKA, carried out massacres of at least 210 Turkish Cypriots in the villages of Maratha, Santalaris, Aloda and Tochni. The killings were carried out against unarmed civilians in the villages, including many women and children. Young men of military age who had been previously held hostage by the EOKA were also executed.

The massacres were carried out as Turkey launched a second stage of its invasion of Cyprus and made a major advance that would capture the northern section of the island, including parts of the capital city of Nicosia. When the EOKA fascists learned of the advance and prepared their retreat, the commanders ordered the entire populations of the villages to be killed.

When EOKA first occupied the villages in July, they placed the men under arrest and transported them to a prison facility in Limassol, leaving the towns filled only with women, children and the elderly. Accounts by the few survivors of the massacres report that in occupying the villages, EOKA members were brutally violent against the civilian residents and committed crimes of torture that included mass rapes. Some survivors believe that the massacres were ordered so that there would be no witnesses of their crimes.

Only handfuls of people were able to escape the killings in the small villages. In Maratha, a village of 90, only 6 survived, in Aloda only three. Of the 85 men rounded up in Tochni, only one survived. After they had been killed, most by machine-gun fire, their mutilated remains were dumped into mass graves.

The EOKA was founded and led by Georgios Grivas, who had

served as a Lieutenant General in the Greek Army during the Second World War. An extreme nationalist and anti-communist, Grivas moved to Cyprus after the war, and began building a fascist political movement to unite the island with the Greek state.

Beginning in the 1950s, Grivas led a number of terrorist attacks against both Turkish Cypriots and the British administrators who governed the island. The goal was to force the British out, to ensure Greek domination of the island. EOKA members were steeped in anti-Turk sentiment and believed that Turks should be removed by force or death to ethnically cleanse Cyprus.

Grivas died in January 1974, but EOKA continued on, taking its orders directly from the Greek military junta. During the July coup by the Cypriot national guard EOKA played a leading role, with many officers in the guard having been members of the fascist group. After the Turkish invasion EOKA was incorporated into the official Greek military operations, and operated as a regular fighting force. No members of EOKA or its political leaders were ever prosecuted or held responsible for the massacres.

The Turkish invasion of the island resulted in about 40 percent of Cyprus falling under Turkish control and the island being partitioned into a northern and southern half, a border that remains to the present. The partition would force hundreds of thousands of Greek and Turkish Cypriot civilians to abandon their homes and move to the opposite side of the border.

#### **Fourth Geneva Convention adopted to protect civilians**

On August 12, 1949, an international conference in the Swiss city adopted the Fourth Geneva Convention, extending provisions of the international laws of war to include civilians as well as combatants, whose treatment was covered by the first three conventions.

All four conventions were adopted in response to the savage crimes committed by Nazi Germany during World War II, including the Holocaust and the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war. The conventions were to apply to all parties in future wars, but were later to be violated systematically by the United States and other imperialist powers, and by their allies and client states.

The Fourth Geneva Convention deals primarily with the protection of civilians in occupied territories, rather than during combat itself. One of the most prolific violators of this convention is the state of Israel, since the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the entry of settlers from an occupying power into the territory it seizes in war, as Israel has done systematically on the West Bank since 1967.

An additional protocol prohibits deliberate attacks on “the civilian population and civilian objects,” as well as “indiscriminate attacks” that lead to “incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.” That section reads like it was drafted specifically to apply to the actions of the Israel Defense Force in Gaza over the past ten months.

This rule, referred to as the principle of proportionality, was grossly violated by the United States military in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the two wars against Iraq, each of which included saturation bombing of civilian residences and infrastructure which had no military utility whatsoever, and was intended only to terrorize the

population into submission. Similar crimes were carried out in the course of the US conquest and occupation of Afghanistan, and the US bombing of Serbia in 1999 and Libya in 2011.

Similar actions took place in many other wars, and particularly civil wars, as by Russia in Chechnya, in numerous wars in Africa (Congo, Biafra, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan), and in the Iran-Iraq War.

#### **Imperialist powers ratify the Dawes Plan**

On August 16, 1924, a meeting of the leading European imperialist powers, held in London, ratified the Dawes Plan, devised by the Coolidge administration in the United States, to restructure the reparations debt of Germany imposed after its defeat in World War I. It provided a large loan to stabilize the German currency and end the worst hyperinflation in history, and set a deadline of one year for France and Belgium to withdraw troops from the Ruhr, which they had occupied after Germany defaulted on its payments.

The Treaty of Versailles, adopted by the Allied Powers in 1919, imposed a reparations plan that ultimately required Germany to pay 50 billion gold marks in compensation for damage caused by the world war. Germany made only one scheduled payment of a billion gold marks before it began to fall behind in both cash and deliveries of raw materials, and was declared in default in January 1923. The entry of French and Belgian troops led to strike action throughout the Ruhr and the eruption of a revolutionary crisis.

With the failure of the German Revolution in October 1923, the Coolidge administration’s intervention went forward. A commission was established, chaired by Charles Dawes, a prominent figure in both Wall Street and the Republican Party, and including two members each from the US, Britain, France, Italy and Belgium. They revised the schedule of payments, and, after protracted bullying of the German government, finally pushed it through.

The Dawes plan was a temporary success, but the subsequent growth of the German economy was driven by foreign loans and investment, and when the US stock market crash hit in 1929, Germany was the worst-affected country. The plan was a huge boost for Dawes personally, as he was nominated by the Republican Party as Coolidge’s vice-presidential running mate and elected in November 1924. In 1925, he received the Nobel Peace Prize—but eight years later, Hitler came to power in Germany after the demise of the US-led plans for restabilization of Europe.



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