

This week in history: February 9-15

8 February 2026

25 years ago: USS *Greeneville* sinks Japanese fishing vessel, killing 9.

On February 9, 2001, off the coast of Oahu, Hawaii, the US nuclear-powered submarine *USS Greeneville* collided with the Japanese fishing vessel *Ehime Maru*, killing nine.

The submarine had executed an emergency ballast blow—a maneuver designed to propel it rapidly to the surface—but in doing so, it struck and fatally damaged the *Ehime Maru*, which sank within ten minutes. Among those killed by the reckless act were four Japanese high school students studying the fishing industry, two teachers, and three crew members. The *Greeneville* suffered only superficial damage, though repairs cost several million dollars.

Commander Scott Waddle had welcomed 16 wealthy and well-connected civilian guests aboard the submarine to experience what was in effect a joy ride—and a public relations stunt for the US Navy. Two of these individuals occupied control positions at crucial movements during the ballast blow maneuver, compromising safety. The *Greeneville* was also operating outside its designated training area and used passive sonar instead of an active system that would have provided a clearer picture of nearby vessels on the surface. The submarine's sonar actually detected the *Ehime Maru* prior to the collision, but the information was ignored.

This disaster revealed once again the US military's contempt for civilian lives, fueling outrage in Japan. After the crash, Waddle arrogantly refused to apologize for the sinking of the civilian ship and the deaths of four students. Survivors said that rescue efforts from the *Greeneville* were insufficient. Although the Navy officially blamed Waddle for the "accident," he was neither court-martialed, imprisoned or charged with criminal misconduct. Instead, he was honorably discharged and allowed to retire.

50 years ago: Nigerian head of state assassinated

On February 13, 1976, General Murtala Ramat Muhammed, the 37-year-old head of the Nigerian Federal Military Government, was assassinated in an early morning ambush in Lagos. While he was traveling by car, a group of soldiers in civilian attire opened fire with automatic weapons, killing the general, his aide-de-camp and his driver.

The assassination was the initiation of a coup attempt led by

Lieutenant Colonel Buka Suka Dimka. The plotters seized the national radio station to broadcast a decree establishing a "young revolutionaries" government and accusing Muhammed's administration of "going communist." However, the uprising failed to gain traction within the broader military, and within six hours loyalist forces regained control of the capital.

Dimka fled, first seeking refuge at the British High Commission before escaping the city, prompting a weeks-long manhunt that ended in his capture in eastern Nigeria. After the coup was suppressed, the ruling Supreme Military Council quickly appointed Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo to succeed Muhammed.

After the news broke, tens of thousands of students and workers took to the streets to oppose the coup, directing their anger at imperialist diplomatic missions. Protesters stormed the British High Commission and the US Embassy, smashing windows and demanding that the UK extradite the former, imperialist-aligned leader Yakubu Gowon, who was living in exile in Britain and whom many Nigerians believed to be the ultimate beneficiary of the plot. Public suspicion was further fueled by revelations that the British High Commissioner, Sir Martin Le Quesne, had hosted Dimka for fifteen minutes following the assassination but waited several hours before reporting the meeting to Nigerian authorities.

Muhammed had risen to power only seven months earlier, in July 1975, through a bloodless coup that ousted Gowon. He won substantial popular support through an "anti-corruption" campaign, mass purges of the civil service, and promises of a return to civilian rule, while internationally adopting a more assertive posture by defying pressure from the Ford administration and backing the MPLA, the Soviet-aligned Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, in the Angolan Civil War. These measures reflected the outlook of a layer of the national bourgeoisie and military elite that sought to stabilize the post-colonial state by modernizing its administration and curbing the most flagrant abuses of the comprador elite, while ensuring that the essential control of international capital—above all over Nigerian oil—remained intact, a balancing act that would continue under Obasanjo.

75 years ago: Dockworkers begin largest industrial action in New Zealand's history

On February 13, 1951, New Zealand dockworkers began a strike against low wage increases and poor working conditions that would become the largest industrial action in the country's history.

The dockworkers, one of the most militant sections of New Zealand's working class, had previously won a 6 percent wage increase amid high cost of living increases. In January 1951, the Arbitration Court issued a general wage increase of 15 percent to industrial workers covered by the arbitration system. This did not include the dockworkers belonging to the Waterside Workers' Union (WWU), who were largely employed by British companies. Those employers instead offered only a 9 percent increase to cover the difference from the previous negotiations.

Many dockworkers responded by refusing to work overtime, beginning on February 13, when the WWU executive sent out a notice to all branches to impose an overtime ban from 5 p.m. onwards. The vast majority of New Zealand's ports rapidly came to a standstill in the following days, as the waterside employers responded with a lockout, penalizing and dismissing workers who refused to work the extra hours.

New Zealand dockworkers quickly came under attack from a hostile National Party government led by Sidney Holland, which had come to power in 1949 with the promise to crack down on militant unionism. The government imposed harsh measures, including sending in military personnel to replace the strikers, prohibiting meetings of striking workers, and even prohibiting people from giving food to striking workers or their families. The Labour Party gave no support to the dockworkers, with its leader Walter Nash declaring that we "are not for the waterside workers, and we are not against them".

The strike continued for 151 days, at its peak mobilizing 22,000 workers not only from the ports, but also in the mining and hydro-electricity sectors. But the strike ended in a defeat, and with the disbanding of the WWU and the seizing of its assets.

100 years ago: Mussolini issues threats to Germany over South Tyrol

On February 10, 1926, the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini made an aggressive speech against Germany over the question of the national rights of German speakers in northern Italy. In the words of the *New York Times*, he "again warned Germany to watch her step in meddling in what he considers internal Italian affairs."

Mussolini's speech was a response to a statement from the German Reichstag opposing the Italian government's attempts to impose Italian culture on the inhabitants of the South Tyrol region. The Reichstag, in turn, was responding to an even more vitriolic anti-German address to the Italian parliament by Mussolini on February 6 that drew world attention.

At issue was the fascists' effort to "Italianize" South Tyrol, a predominantly German-speaking region in Northern Italy that Italian imperialism had acquired from Germany's ally in

World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after its break-up in 1918.

Mussolini's February 6 speech had rejected German protests against Italian policies in the area, framing his response as a "true Fascist style" clarification of Italy's sovereign rights. He declared that Italy would meet any boycott by Germany with "reprisals raised to the third power," famously stating that Italy was prepared to exact "two eyes for the loss of only one eye."

The Reichstag's statement, which had been approved by all political parties except the German Communist Party, was equally nationalistic. In a phrase that foreshadowed Hitler's ultimatum to Czechoslovakia in 1938, it stated: "The German people ... will not permit themselves to be hindered from demanding the just treatment of German minorities under foreign rule."

German Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann said in a speech the same day, "Germany's right to sympathize with its blood brothers is a natural right of which we shall permit nobody to deprive us ... there is no doubt about the deliberate de-Germanization of the Southern Tyrol."

Stresemann was correct. Fascist nationalism was on the rampage in South Tyrol. The Italian government banned the German language in schools, courts, and public administration. Even German town names, first names, and inscriptions on tombstones were forcibly changed to Italian versions.

Stresemann, however, led Germany in de-escalating the conflict because Germany was intent on normalizing its status as an "equal" imperialist power. German imperialism supported the 1925 Treaties of Locarno, which legitimized postwar European borders and prepared the way for the membership of Germany in the League of Nations in September. Stresemann was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1926 for his role in "normalizing" Germany's role in Europe.



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