

This week in history: February 2-8

2 February 2015

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: 300,000 demonstrate outside Kremlin

Huge crowds rallied outside the Kremlin on the eve of the Central Committee meeting held on February 5, 1990. Radio Moscow estimated the demonstration was 300,000. Soviet television described it as “more than anyone has seen in the streets of Moscow for 70 years.”

Boris Yeltsin was one of those to address the demonstration. “Things cannot continue as they are,” he said. “At this plenum, the party has been given one last chance. It is necessary to restructure the Communist Party. There must not be a party monopoly on political power.”

The mass mobilization outside the Kremlin signaled the popular opposition that existed to the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. Banners were seen saying, “Remember Romania,” referring to the 1989 overthrow of the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu and his execution.

Workers in the USSR had endured the same rampant inflation and undermining of wages and living standards that wreaked havoc on the economies under the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe. A threatened strike by steelworkers in Ukraine added to the pressure on the Soviet regime to respond to popular anger.

At the plenum, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev presented a plan to give up the political monopoly of the Communist Party and transition to a “mixed economy,” allowing private businesses to compete with state-run enterprises subject to the market forces of the capitalist economy.

The meeting was deeply divided. Vladimir Brovikov, an opponent of Gorbachev, said that perestroika “has thrown the country into the vortex of crisis and led it to the line where it will come face to face with anarchy,” saying of Gorbachev’s program, “It will give birth to social and political chaos.”

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50 years ago: US escalates Vietnam bombing campaign

From February 7 through February 24, the administration of US President Lyndon Johnson authorized a bombing

campaign against North Vietnam named Flaming Dart, which set the stage for Operation Rolling Thunder, the massive 44-month bombing campaign against civilian targets authorized by Johnson on February 13 and begun on March 2.

Johnson authorized the escalation under pressure from the American military brass, and supposedly as a response to a National Liberation Front’s successful February 7 raid on US military base Camp Holoway in the central highlands of South Vietnam, during which four C-7 Caribous, four light aircraft, and five helicopters were destroyed.

The US, which was attempting to drown a popular insurgency in blood and prop up an isolated South Vietnamese regime, described all such attacks on “Communist aggression” orchestrated by the Ho Chi Minh government of North Vietnam. In reality, Washington sought every opportunity to expand the war in the north, going back to the fabrication of the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964.

Tellingly, the US military expanded its bombing campaign not only against North Vietnam, but against South Vietnam as well, which it was ostensibly trying to protect. By war’s end, the US had dropped more than three times the bomb tonnage in Southeast Asia as on Europe, Asia, and the Pacific in all of World War II. Over 3 million Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians were killed, along with 55,000 US soldiers, by the time of the final collapse of the US-backed puppet government in 1975.

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75 years ago: Theater director and dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold executed by Stalinist bureaucracy

On February 2, 1940, aged 65, the visionary theater director and avante garde Russian dramatist Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold was executed by firing squad after he was found guilty of trumped up charges of treason and espionage by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow.

Meyerhold had fought tirelessly against the crude anti-Marxist propagandism of the Stalinist concept of “Socialist Realism,” which Leon Trotsky called “a system of bureaucratic command over art and ways of impoverishing it.” Meyerhold’s theater had been closed

down during Stalin's bloody purges of the 1930s and his works deemed antagonistic and alien to the Soviet people. He was arrested by the NKVD in the summer of 1939, shortly after his wife, the noted actress Zinaida Nikolayevna, was brutally murdered in their home, likely by the NKVD.

After being tortured by the Stalinist secret police Meyerhold confessed to the ludicrous accusation of espionage on behalf of the Japanese and British military intelligence services. In a letter to Molotov he recanted the confession, but was nonetheless executed.

A sympathizer with the struggles of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union against the counter-revolutionary policies of Stalin, Meyerhold was one of the many prominent figures involved in art and culture who would pay with their lives for their association or adherence to classical Marxism.

An early artistic supporter of the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution of 1917, Meyerhold joined the party the following year. He worked in the revolutionary government's Theater Division of the Commissariat of Education and Enlightenment, where he soon teamed up with Olga Kamenev, a theater director, Trotsky's sister, and first wife to another leading Bolshevik Lev Kamenev.

In the early 1920s Meyerhold founded an eponymously named theater company in Moscow and staged numerous productions and collaborations with the famous Soviet poet, playwright and actor of stage and film, Vladimir Mayakovsky. Meyerhold is said to have been the inspiration behind Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug*, a play about the parasitic nature of Stalinism and its counter-revolutionary philistinism.

The great revolutionary filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein worked with Meyerhold and was influenced by the "biomechanics" acting technique pioneered by the theater director. Opposed to the "method" school of acting, Meyerhold emphasized expression, movement and gesture rather than synthesizing the demands of the role with the actor's biographical experiences.

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100 years ago: Social Democrats denounce Liebknecht for antiwar stance

This week in February 1915 the combined forces of the German autocracy and the national-opportunist leadership of the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) sought to silence the revolutionary socialist and internationalist opponent of World War I, Karl Liebknecht.

On February 7, it was announced that the 42-year-old Liebknecht had been drafted to serve in the front lines of the army. The move was aimed at removing Liebknecht from the political scene, under conditions of escalating hostility to

the war effort in the working class. As a soldier, Liebknecht would be subject to military discipline, including strict regulations against anti-war activities. Liebknecht refused to fight on the front-line, and as punishment, was assigned the task of burying the war dead on the Eastern Front.

By early 1915, whatever initial nationalist fervor had greeted the outbreak of war in August 1914—assiduously promoted by the political establishment and the SPD leadership—had given way to anger over the number of casualties and the mounting social crisis within Germany, provoked in part by Britain's naval blockade of the country. Throughout February, food riots and protests, largely led by working class women, swept the country, while newspaper reports noted the fear among the wealthy of a broader eruption of the class struggle.

The SPD leadership boosted the state attempts to silence Liebknecht by officially censuring him for having voted against war credits in December 1914, and for continuing his agitation for an antiwar perspective among the SPD's ranks. The SPD had abandoned the program of socialist internationalism in August 1914 by supporting the war effort of the German government. Liebknecht's vote against war credits in December was the most public repudiation of that betrayal by a leader of the SPD.

While the most right-wing factions of the SPD called for Liebknecht's expulsion from the party in early 1915, the leadership, conscious of his prestige among broad sections of the working class, opposed such a course, for fear of the response it would provoke. Instead, they censured Liebknecht, and did nothing to oppose the state's moves against him.

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