

This week in history: September 24-30

24 September 2018

25 years ago: Earthquake kills 10,000 in western India

A powerful earthquake struck the western Indian state of Maharashtra on September 30, 1993, killing nearly 10,000 people and injuring at least 30,000 more. The epicenter was in the district of Latur, nearly 500 kilometers east of Mumbai, and only 10 km below the surface, unusually shallow. This made the shock waves from the quake, which measured at 8.2 on the Richter scale, much more damaging.

Fifty-two villages in the largely rural area were entirely demolished. Since the quake struck at 4 a.m. local time, most of the dead were crushed inside their homes which collapsed on them while they were asleep. The region does not lie on the boundary between tectonic plates or near any major earthquake fault lines, and there was no advance warning of impending seismic activity.

Some 30,000 troops were deployed to the affected area, accompanied by tanks, indicating that the main concern of the government was law and order rather than aiding the local population. Government officials quickly declared that there was little prospect of rescuing survivors and that dead bodies had to be cleared in order to reduce the likelihood of an outbreak of disease.

The day after the earthquake, the military began to bulldoze the rubble, despite the opposition of villagers worried that friends and relatives were still alive, trapped underground and in danger of being killed. Their fears were validated when a 19-year-old girl, Priyanka Wagle, was rescued after being buried for 104 hours.

The provision of food, shelter and medical aid was grossly inadequate. The first supplies did not reach the affected area for more than 12 hours. More than three days after the earthquake, many villages had still not received any food, clean water, clothing or shelter. The survivors, many of them from poor families, were compelled to huddle together in makeshift shelters made of scraps of corrugated iron and plastic to escape heavy rains.

The lack of earthquake warning systems, the poor design and construction of housing and the inadequacy of emergency rescue and relief operations were a stark exposure of the extremely backward social conditions of rural India, which remained as impoverished as under British colonialism—the country did not even have a national disaster relief organization. An earthquake similar in strength to the Indian tremor struck Sylmar-San Fernando, California, in the Los

Angeles metropolitan area, in 1971, with a death toll of only 58.

50 years ago: Filibuster begins against US Supreme Court nominee

On September 25, 1968, Republican Senator Robert P. Griffin of Michigan began a filibuster to block the nomination of Abe Fortas to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Fortas, who was already an associate justice, had been selected by President Lyndon B. Johnson to replace Chief Justice Earl Warren, who was planning to retire.

Fortas joined the Supreme Court in 1965 as Johnson's first appointment, after Johnson persuaded Arthur Goldberg to leave the court and become US Ambassador to the United Nations, creating a vacancy for Johnson to fill with his long-time crony. Fortas had been an ally since he represented Johnson in his narrow victory in the 1948 US Senate race in Texas. He had experience arguing before the Supreme Court, most notably representing Clarence Earl Gideon in the landmark case *Gideon v. Wainwright*. In a unanimous 9-0 vote, the Warren court ruled that all defendants in criminal cases must be appointed a state-paid attorney if they cannot afford one.

The first sitting justice of the court to have to testify at his own Senate hearing, for his nomination to Chief Justice, Fortas initially had enough votes to secure the nomination, but Republicans like Griffin hoped that by delaying the nomination they could hold off the confirmation process until the Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, then leading in the polls, could win the presidency and take office in four months' time.

The issue cited by Griffin and others was that Fortas was too close to the office of the President and was not an impartial judge. Indeed, Fortas had a longstanding relationship with Johnson. During the Senate hearing it was revealed that Fortas had "regularly attended White House staff meetings; he briefed the president on secret Court deliberations; and, on behalf of the president, he pressured senators who opposed the war in Vietnam."

Even though the Democrats had the votes to confirm Fortas, they did not have the two-thirds majority required to force an end to the filibuster. Due to the controversy, Johnson withdrew the nomination and Fortas returned to his position as an Associate Justice. The Republican strategy succeeded, and Nixon appointed Warren Burger to succeed Earl Warren as

chief justice in 1969.

By then, Fortas was no longer on the court. He resigned in May 1969 due to a scandal over unethical payments. It was found that Fortas accepted a deal to be paid \$20,000 per year (over \$100,000 today with inflation) by Louis Wolfson, a Wall Street investor. Wolfson was at the time being investigated for financial crimes and the support of a Supreme Court judge was thought to help his case. Wolfson would end up being convicted and spending time in prison.

75 years ago: Italian anti-fascist insurrection in Naples

On September 30, 1943, the last German troops retreated from the Italian city of Naples and its surrounding districts after failing to put down an insurrection by the city's working class. Naples, an Italian metropolis of a million people, had been betrayed into the hands of the Germans by the fascist Badoglio government, which had succeeded Mussolini and was now siding with the Allies.

For two weeks Naples had suffered under Nazi occupation. But when the local German commander ordered the demolition of the waterfront, which entailed the further destruction of the working class neighborhoods, and all young men to be seized for forced labor, the city rose in revolt on September 24.

Men, women and youth armed themselves with shotguns, old swords and kitchen knives to engage German troops. Street cars were lifted by hand from the rails and used to barricade streets. Within a day the youth had mastered the use of Molotov cocktails in harassing the Germans.

Organized under the name United Revolutionary Front, the masses took over military and civilian powers and issued manifestos. By the 28th they had managed to acquire a few machine guns and were able to seize flak guns which were then turned against German positions. Overwhelmed, the Germans opened negotiations with the Front and secured safe passage out of the city in return for the freeing of 47 antifascist prisoners that had been jailed by the Badoglio government.

An Italian colonel and a government minister tried in succession to assume control of the city in the name of Badoglio but were thrown out. When the Allies finally arrived and the Allied Military Government on Occupied Territories (AMGOT) was set up, two pro-monarchist generals were put in charge of the city and the United Revolutionary Front was removed.

100 years ago: Meuse-Argonne offensive begins in France

In what would become the last act of the first World War, British, French and American forces began a massive thrust on September 26, 1918, whose goal was the capture of a major railway hub that allowed the supply of much of the German army near Sedan, the site of the massive surrender and humiliation of the French Army during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. The offensive pierced the Hindenburg Line by September 29.

The Germans had built the Hindenburg Line in the winter of 1916-17. It was comprised of six defensive lines some 6,000 yards (5486 m) deep, made up of defensive fortifications such as pillboxes and camouflaged redoubts (as opposed to trenches), that utilized rapid reaction teams to repel attacks. The line was about 100 miles (161 km) long, stretching from Arras to an area near Reims in the north of France. It was the last large defensive fortification of the Germans.

While British and Belgian divisions drove toward Ghent in Belgium and the French attacked across the north of France, the bulk of the Meuse-Argonne action was made up of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF)—1.2 million men—under the command of General John J. Pershing. The Meuse-Argonne offensive remains the largest single battle in which American soldiers have fought.

Most of the AEF had not gone into combat until this offensive. In the weeks leading up to it, French and British officers were surprised at the unpreparedness of American troops. The American forces had inadequate transportation for supplies and reinforcements. Soldiers were often without the necessary weapons, and were drilling for bayonet charges, which were militarily irrelevant in this war. The American mobilization on the front was also delayed because of the insistence of Pershing that American troops not be placed under French or British command.

During the action, American artillery was often ineffective, and although AEF soldiers had great difficulty in neutralizing German machine gun nests, American officers repeatedly ordered them to attack. The result was 26,277 American dead, the largest number of any single American engagement in history, and 95,768 wounded. This made up about half of American casualties during the war. German losses were 28,000 dead and 48,000 wounded; only a small fraction of the 2.37 million killed and 4 million wounded the Germans suffered in the war.

The allied British, French and American imperialist forces had mounted their "Hundred Days Offensive" beginning in August along the Western Front after the German offensive of July had gradually lost momentum. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive struck the killing blow, although the offensive did not end until the armistice of November 11.

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