

This week in history: December 5-11

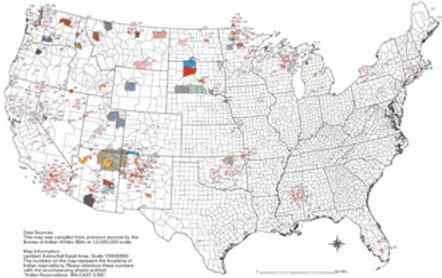
5 December 2011

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: Report documents plight of Native Americans

Indian Reservations in the Continental United States



A report issued on December 10, 1986 by the US Department of the Interior revealed the desperate conditions confronting Native Americans, the descendants of North America's native peoples prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 1500s. The report concluded that conditions among "Indians" on reservations were worsening, the result of cuts in federal and state social spending and declining prices for timber and oil.

According to the data, unemployment, including so-called "discouraged workers," stood at 58 percent among males aged 20-60 on reservations—nearly five times the national rate of 12 percent. Forty-one percent of Native Americans were living below the official poverty level, as opposed to 12 percent of the population as a whole.

The report said that about 25 percent of the 1.37 million Americans counted by the Census as "Indians" lived on the reservations, the impoverished treaty lands where the US government had confined tribes beginning with President Andrew Jackson's infamous Indian Removal Act of 1830.

The Reagan administration produced the report as a means of promoting a plan for "Indian Enterprise Zones" on reservations. The scheme would relieve corporate concerns such as mining and agribusiness firms of taxes and federal regulations protecting the environment and workers. The report noted that federal spending on programs benefiting Native Americans, especially anti-poverty programs, had fallen sharply. But it justified these cuts by claiming that the government assistance had failed to create "viable Indian economies."

Joel Starr of the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs commented that what the reservations needed was "business smarts." The reservations, he said, would now offer a labor supply that is "not all alcoholic, not all sitting around waiting for the next government check."

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50 years ago: USSR breaks off ties with Albania

On December 10, 1961, the Stalinist government of Albania confirmed that the Soviet Union had severed diplomatic relations, closing its embassy and withdrawing all military, technical and economic assistance, purportedly over Albania's "dogmatism."

Khrushchev's move had little to do with Albania per se and still less with political differences. What had been a longstanding feud between two Stalinist regimes in the Balkans—Enver Hoxha's Albania and Marshal Josip Tito's Yugoslavia—was seized on by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in a far more significant struggle over the conflicting aims of the rival national bureaucracies of the two Stalinist giants.

These conflicts centered on competition for influence over Third World nationalist movements, which both Moscow and Beijing hoped to manipulate for concessions from the imperialist powers, the USSR's cutting off of trade and economic aid during and after Mao's disastrous crash industrialization program called the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, and the USSR's cultivation of military and economic ties with China's chief rival, India.

As relations between the USSR and Mao's China deteriorated, the Chinese donned the mantle of the defenders of Stalinist orthodoxy and the legacy of Stalin himself. On this basis, the Chinese, joined by the Albanians, sharply criticized the rapprochement that Khrushchev had engineered with Yugoslavia after Stalin's death.

In retaliation, Moscow focused its denunciations on Albania. Matters came to a head at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in October 1961, when Khrushchev openly attacked Hoxha and Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai openly rebuked Khrushchev in response. Zhou then left the Congress early, but not before laying a wreath at the Stalin-Lenin Mausoleum in Red

Square bearing the inscription, “Dedicated to the great Marxist, Comrade Stalin.” Within days, Khrushchev ordered Stalin’s body removed.

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75 years ago: Mexico grants Trotsky asylum

On December 6, 1936, Don Eduardo Hay, the Mexican minister for foreign affairs, announced that the Mexican government of President Lazaro Cardenas would grant asylum to Leon Trotsky, the exiled co-leader of the Russian Revolution, and also to his wife Natalia.

Trotsky had been exiled from the Soviet Union to Turkey in 1929 as the central target in the Stalinist bureaucracy’s drive to eliminate the revolutionary socialist and internationalist political traditions of the Russian Revolution. He had been granted asylum in France in 1933 and Norway in 1935, but both countries capitulated to Stalin’s pressure. France first demanded his departure and the Social Democratic government in Norway placed him under house arrest and prepared to hand him over to Stalin. This was after the first of the infamous Moscow show trials in which Trotsky, in absentia, was the main Bolshevik leader singled out for extermination. Trotsky was accused on the basis of forgeries and lies of being a German spy responsible for heinous crimes in the Soviet Union.

The official announcement stated that the Mexican government was merely following the traditional policy of granting asylum to political exiles, while the privilege itself implied no agreement on political matters between the government and its guest. The Russian exile would be expected to obey Mexican law and not intervene in domestic political issues.

A formal application had been made weeks earlier to Mexican authorities, supported by the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. Muralist Diego Rivera petitioned President Cardenas in person to allow the couple to set sail for Mexico. The French Trotskyist Gerard Rosenthal, who as “Francis Gerard” was one of the original Surrealist artists, conducted negotiations on behalf of the Russian couple with the Mexican consulate general in Paris.

The Mexican Stalinists reacted to the news with vicious anti-Trotsky posters pasted up across Mexico City. Supporters of the movement launched by Trotsky for a new, Fourth International responded by covering the posters with ones of their own featuring a fine pencil drawn sketch of the Russian revolutionary. The Mexican Communist Party denounced former member Diego Rivera for helping persuade President Cardenas to grant asylum. An unsuccessful attempt on Rivera’s life occurred shortly afterward.

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100 years ago: Marie Curie wins Nobel Prize

Marie Curie was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry on December 11, 1911 for the discovery of the radioactive metallic elements of radium and polonium. She had previously been awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903, along with her husband and collaborator Pierre Curie and Henri Becquerel, for the discovery of radiation. Curie coined the term radioactivity from *radius*—the Latin word for ray. She was the first person to win two Nobel prizes in separate fields and was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize.

Curie’s discovery of radium and polonium flowed from her earlier work in identifying radiation as an integral property of certain atoms. She made this breakthrough while studying the radiation emanating from pitchblende, a uranium ore. It soon became clear that more radiation was being emitted than could be accounted for by the expected radioactivity of the amount of uranium contained in the pitchblende.

Curie suspected the presence of an unknown radioactive substance and undertook the arduous and dangerous task of processing large amounts of pitchblende in order to isolate the unknown elements. The process took years and the health dangers associated with radioactivity were unsuspected. Pierre Curie tragically died on April 19, 1906.

Polonium was isolated in 1898. It was over 300 times more radioactive than uranium. In July 1902, Curie finally produced pure samples of radium. “It has taken me almost four years to produce the kind of evidence which chemical science demands that radium is truly a new element,” she noted.

Curie’s work was part of the scientific ferment in the early 20th Century centering on profound questions about the structure of the atom and the relationship of matter to energy. Her discoveries seemed to defy the law of the conservation of energy. Curie described radiation as “an enigma, a subject of profound astonishment.” She asked, “What is the source of the energy coming from the Becquerel rays?”

Months earlier, in May 1911, Ernest Rutherford postulated the existence of the atomic nucleus, which would later be identified as the source of radioactivity.

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