

This week in history: December 8-14

8 December 2014

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25 years ago: Stalinism reels in Eastern Europe

This week in 1989, political upheavals continued in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with deepening popular opposition to the Stalinist regimes within Eastern Europe, events moved rapidly, portending the complete breakup of the Stalinist bloc.

Gregor Gysi, an attorney who became known for defending several prominent dissidents, was elected head of the East German SED on December 9, after former Stalinist leader Erich Honecker was placed under house arrest for corruption and the newly installed Egon Krenz was forced to resign as head of state.

Czechoslovakian CP President Gustav Husak resigned on December 10, shortly after swearing in a new coalition government with 11 of 21 posts being held by non-Stalinists, for the first time in postwar history. A deputy prime minister being sworn in was 45-year-old Jan Carnogursky, a political dissident who had just been released from prison. The previous week, Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec resigned and was succeeded by Marian Calfa. On December 12, the Czechoslovakian CP called for national presidential elections.

In Bulgaria, 50,000 rallied in Sofia against the Stalinist regime on December 10. Three days later the Communist Party, in response, ousted former leader Todor Zhivkov, along with two other Politburo members. New leader Petar Mladenov set a May 31 deadline for new free elections.

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50 years ago: Charges dropped against Mississippi Klansmen

On December 11, 1964, charges were dismissed against 21 supporters of the Ku Klux Klan accused by the FBI in connection to the murder of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi on June 21 that year.

Federal officials in Meridian and Biloxi, Mississippi refused to accept the testimony of an FBI agent about the signed confession obtained from one of the defendants, Horace Barnette. The action meant that the accused could not be indicted until a federal grand jury was convened. Barnette was one of ten men accused of carrying out the murder of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney, in a Ku Klux Klan plot that involved Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey. He was released along with the other defendants.

Following the ruling, the conspirators smiled and congratulated each other as they raced out of a courtroom filled with civil rights supporters. The defendants had all been freed since their arrest a week earlier on bonds totaling more than \$100,000. Their attorney denounced the charges, claiming they were the result of pressure by civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nineteen people had been charged with federal charges of conspiracy to violate civil rights, while the other two defendants were charged with refusing to disclose information. No murder indictments were ever filed. Ultimately seven conspirators were convicted on lesser charges and sentenced in 1967. None served longer than six years in prison. Sheriff Rainey was never convicted of a crime.

Civil rights leaders expressed shock at the release of the killers. King made a statement from Oslo, Norway, where he had just accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, calling on the forces of “good will” in the United States to carry out a boycott of Mississippi products.

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75 years ago: WPA strikers victimized

On December 8, 1939, 14 women and eleven men, all

striking WPA (Works Progress Administration) workers, were convicted in federal district court in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on charges of conspiracy to “interfere” with scabs crossing picket lines during a national strike against mass layoffs.

The trial was aimed at crushing working class militancy against cuts to jobs and social programs, as the US government shifted its budget to war preparations. The convictions stemmed from a violent police assault on a peaceful mass picket outside a WPA project in Minneapolis four months earlier.

A police detachment behind a convoy of armored cars attacked the crowd, firing guns, tear gas and hitting workers with clubs. Several strikers were wounded and one, a 60-year-old unemployed worker, was shot dead.

A capitalist press campaign laid the groundwork for the convictions by portraying the strikers as responsible for the violence. Witnesses at the trial, including the police, were coached by the FBI. It was also revealed that several FBI agents dressed as workers were planted amongst strikers during the mass picket, showing the whole affair was a provocation by federal and local authorities backed up by the Citizen’s Alliance, Minneapolis’s big business coalition.

A total of 162 Minneapolis workers had been indicted on various charges for violating Roosevelt’s claim that WPA workers “can’t strike against the government.” But as the trial drew to an end, there was an outpouring of support from the labor movement and large sections of the middle class across the country. That unnerved the Roosevelt administration and led to a delay in sentencing. Ultimately only 32 of the 162 were convicted, and 19 served prison terms of 45 days to a year.

The Roosevelt administration’s decision to strike hardest at the Minneapolis WPA workers was determined by the central role played by the Trotskyist leadership of the Federal Workers Section of Teamsters 544. The FWS initiated the actions that led to the 500,000-strong nationwide WPA strike.

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100 years ago: German naval forces routed in the Battle of the Falklands

On December 8, 1914, a contingent of the German navy, comprising eight warships, suffered a heavy defeat during a raid on British naval forces stationed at the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic Ocean. German casualties numbered over 2,000, while only ten British sailors died.

The German fleet, commanded by Admiral Graf Maximilian Von Spee, was returning to Germany from the East Asian region, in which it had operated prior to and immediately following the outbreak of World War I on August 4, 1914. It consisted of two armored cruisers, three light cruisers, and three auxiliaries, and was the only “blue water” formation in the German navy operating independently of German ports.

With the onset of war, Von Spee sailed through the Pacific, seeking to evade the better-equipped Japanese and Australian naval forces, stopping briefly to attack French shipping vessels.

In the first months of the war, Germany lost control of Tsingtao, a port city in Eastern China, to Japan, where Von Spee’s fleet had been based. Allied naval contingents, particularly from Australia and New Zealand, secured control of most of Germany’s colonies in the Pacific region. On November 8-9, the *Emden*, a German light cruiser that had remained in the southeast Asian region following Von Spee’s decision to flee, was defeated by the Australian HMAS *Sydney* in the Cocos Islands, with the ship lost and 134 German sailors killed.

While en route back to Germany, Von Spee’s forces engaged a British Royal Navy squadron off the coast of Chile, in what became known as the battle of Coronel. The German forces inflicted a heavy defeat. Four British war ships were sunk, while over 1,500 British sailors died. The battle, which did not result in any German deaths, was the first significant British naval defeat in over 100 years.

After rounding Cape Horn, Von Spee’s fleet attempted to raid the British supply base at Stanley, in the Falkland Islands. Quickly overwhelmed by the strength of the British naval forces, the Germans attempted to flee, but were pursued, losing most of their fleet. Von Spee and his two sons both died.

The battle resulted in a scaling back of German “commerce raiding” operations on the seas, and highlighted Britain’s naval superiority. Following the war, there were claims that Von Spee’s forces had been encouraged to engage the British fleet at the Falklands by a fake telegram purporting to be from German command, sent by British military intelligence.

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