

This week in history: December 22-28

22 December 2014

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25 years ago: Ceausescu falls in Romania

This week in 1989, military units joined the anti-Ceausescu uprising in Romania and the Stalinist regime collapsed. The previous week, a mass demonstration in Timisoara resulted in the deaths of thousands of protesters as troops were ordered to fire on the crowds demanding food and basic rights. There were reports that soldiers who refused to fire on demonstrators were publicly executed by security officials.

On December 21, Ceausescu made a televised speech from a balcony overlooking Palace Square in the capital of Bucharest addressing a crowd of 100,000. The ruler denounced the demonstrators in Timisoara as fascists and counterrevolutionaries, and working in the interests of foreign agencies. Despite packing the crowd with workers instructed to endorse the official line, Ceausescu was shouted down on several occasions. He and his wife were hustled back into the building as the jeers and whistles became an outright rebellion. Chants of “Down with the dictator!” and “Death to the criminal!” spread through the crowd.

Within a day, Ceausescu and his wife were forced to flee the Presidential Palace by helicopter and his regime was ousted. The army took the side of protesters and joined the rebellion. The Presidential Palace was reportedly set fire as fighting between security forces loyal to the regime and demonstrators supported by the army raged in the streets. Ceausescu’s son was arrested as he attempted to take control of the security forces.

In cities all over Romania, crowds filled the streets, burning portraits of Ceausescu and ripping down signs and placards from official buildings. On December 23, the Soviet regime of Mikhail Gorbachev pledged its support for the Front of National Salvation that was formed by former officials of the regime, including Ion Iliescu, who became head of the government.

Ceausescu and his wife were captured and given a drumhead military trial whose main purpose was to prevent any wider exposure of the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a whole. Within hours of being condemned to death, the two were

executed December 25 for crimes against the people.
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50 years ago: US postwar boom reaches zenith

In the final week of the year, preliminary economic data indicated that 1964 had seen nearly the sharpest growth of the US economy in the post-WWII era. The growth added to gross domestic product about 40 billion in contemporary dollars—roughly equivalent to the entire Canadian economy and about half the size of the French—to reach about \$625 billion. The US economy added an estimated 1.5 million jobs, and data on inflation-adjusted after-tax personal income showed an increase from \$2,125 a year to \$2,231, and a total increase of 12 percent from 1960. The growth in personal income drove consumer demand. There was record consumption in services and “soft” goods like clothing. The sale of “big ticket” items such as appliances were also at near record levels. A total of 8.1 million cars were sold. Driven by automation, labor productivity from 1960-1964 grew at a pace “at least as rapid ... as any other period in history,” according to the *New York Times*.

Despite the optimistic predictions of capitalism’s apologists, the mini-boom of the 1960s turned out to be an Indian Summer. In the longer sweep of the post-war boom, from the late 1940s through the early 1970s, US growth lagged behind its major rivals, a period known in Japan as “the Economic Miracle,” in Germany the *Wirtschaftswunder*, in France the *Trente Glorieuses*, and in Italy *il miracolo economico*. The economic growth in the US in the mid-1960s was driven, in part, by the immense military and government spending of the Johnson administration, but this was only contributing to the erosion of the dollar as the bedrock currency of global order.

Within the US, an increasing share of corporate profits were diverted from productive investment to a wave of corporate takeovers and mergers. Corporate profits grew by 65 percent over the decade. Yet corporations and wealthy stockholders increasingly diverted resources overseas—industrial investment by US corporations abroad increased by 500 percent in the 1960s—and toward financial speculation, setting the stage for the explosion of mergers and acquisitions from 1965 to 1969.

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75 years ago: Red Army debacle in Finland

On December 28, 1939, Stalin called a temporary halt to military action in the Winter War waged by the USSR against Finland. A crisis erupted amongst the Stalinist bureaucracy as a result of the military debacle of the Soviet Red Army against the Finnish forces in the first month of fighting.

After initial advances, the Red Army assault ground to a halt due to military-bureaucratic incompetence and adept resistance by the Finns. Stalin, thinking the campaign would be finished in a few days, ignored the logistical problems that both the Finnish terrain and the weather posed to an invasion.

Finland's forests, dotted with lakes and rivers, blunted the overwhelming superiority of the Red Army forces. Lacking proper clothes and boots, Soviet soldiers perished in the coldest winter in 25 years, with temperatures dipping to 30 and 40 degrees below zero. Meanwhile, mobile Finnish forces on skis were dressed to withstand the elements and attired in white capes that camouflaged them against the snow-covered landscape.

Soviet losses throughout the 105-day campaign were astronomical; one million Red Army soldiers died, 1,000 airplanes and 230 tanks were lost.

Within the Kremlin bureaucracy, Stalin sought to make Commissar of Defense Voroshilov a scapegoat over the affair. Voroshilov blamed Stalin, citing the impact of the purges of military officers: "You have only yourself to blame for all this. You're the one who annihilated the Old Guard of the Army; you had our best generals killed." Stalin then removed Voroshilov as Commissar of Defence and replaced him with Timoshenko.

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100 years ago: European troops hold unofficial Christmas truce

This week in 1914, some 100,000 British and German troops on the battlefields of the Western Front participated in an unofficial truce, halting the carnage of World War I over the Christmas period.

The fields of some of the bloodiest battles saw British and German troops exchange souvenirs, sing Christmas carols, converse, and even play football, in an expression of international working class solidarity that disturbed the military command of both nations and reflected growing disaffection

with the war. A smaller truce was also declared on the Eastern Front, involving Austrian and Russian soldiers.

Regular instances of fraternization between troops on opposing sides of the battle lines on the Western Front are thought to have begun as early as November 1914, following the end of mobile warfare, and the onset of static, trench-based fighting. News reports and letters from soldiers document instances of British and German troops visiting one another, declaring half-hour truces to collect the dead from the battlefield, and French and German soldiers exchanging newspapers.

The fearful response of the ruling elites to the new mood found expression in refusals to sanction a Christmas truce by the military commands of the various antagonists, despite appeals from numbers of pacifist organizations and the Pope. British military authorities issued a special order prohibiting fraternization.

The unofficial 48-hour Christmas truce began at Ypres, the scene of some of the heaviest fighting in Belgium, when German troops placed decorations around their trenches on Christmas Eve, before singing Christmas carols. British troops responded in kind, and the two sides joined in "no man's land" to exchange gifts. In some areas, the truce lasted until Christmas night, in others, until New Year's Day.

Lenin, the leader of the internationalist tendency in the world socialist movement, drew attention to the significance of the truce as an expression of growing anti-war sentiment in an article titled, "The Slogan of Civil War Illustrated." He contrasted the nascent international solidarity expressed among the troops with the nationalist response of the leadership of the Second International, who had betrayed socialism at the outset of the war by calling on workers to support the war efforts of their "own" governments.

Lenin concluded by noting the alternatives facing the socialist movement, and the working class: "... should we perish as blind and helpless slaves, in a war between slave-holders, or should we fall in 'attempts at fraternization between the slaves,' with the aim of casting off slavery? Such, *in reality*, is the 'practical' issue."

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