

This week in history: December 29-January 4

29 December 2014

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

25 years ago: Noriega surrenders to US forces

On January 3, 1990, former Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega was handed over to the US military, 15 days after the invasion of his country began. “Operation Just Cause,” the self-flattering name the Bush administration chose for its attack on a near-defenseless country, immediately destroyed the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) and forced Noriega into hiding. On Christmas Eve, the fifth day of the invasion, Noriega took sanctuary in the Apostolic Nunciature in Panama City, effectively, the Embassy of the Holy See.

The Vatican condemned the US as an “occupying power” and rejected its demands to hand over Noriega. On December 30, the UN Assembly denounced the invasion by a vote of 75 to 20. Every Latin American nation voted to condemn the invasion except the right-wing regime of El Salvador, which was engaged in a civil war, and Honduras, which abstained. Despite the apparent standoff, the Vatican was working to persuade Noriega to leave the embassy “of his own free will.” At 8:50 p.m. on the evening of January 3, the deposed general surrendered.

Earlier the same day, the officer chosen by the US-installed president to replace Noriega as head of the military resigned after “irregularities in his personal finances” were uncovered. Col. Roberto Armijo was the highest-ranking military officer remaining after US forces and newly installed President Guillermo Endara ousted leaders of the PDF tied to Noriega. Endara then announced that Col. Eduardo Herrera Hassan would be the head of the new army. His appointment was opposed by many due to his reputed role as a paid informant of the CIA. A prominent banker said, “Herrera may be a favorite of the Americans, but he was a product of, and a member of, a military system that opposes democracy and sees corruption as its natural right.”

Within an hour of his surrender, Noriega was flown to the US to face imprisonment and trial. Media reports indicated that while the US acted with “lightning speed” to hand Noriega over to federal courts, it might take a year to bring his case to trial due to the “sensitive” nature of Noriega’s relationship

with the US. The *Los Angeles Times* said at the time, “In particular, Noriega’s years of secret relations with the CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration pose potentially serious problems for the government.”

[\[top\]](#)

50 years ago: Syria nationalizes factories

The Syrian Baathist regime on January 3, 1965, announced the partial or full nationalization of 107 enterprises that formed the backbone of the Middle Eastern country’s industrial production. Twenty-two factories in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama were fully nationalized, while for another 24 enterprises the government assumed 90 percent control, and the remaining 61 firms were 75 percent nationalized.

The program of nationalization had begun in 1958 at the start of the abortive union with Egypt known as the United Arab Republic. In spite of a series of coups, failed coups, and counter-coups that broke Syria from the UAR and ultimately brought the Baathists to power, the nationalizations, largely controlled by the military, continued. By 1961, the regime had gained control of natural resources, and in 1963, agrarian reform stripped much of the holdings of big rural landlords, and commercial banking and insurance were nationalized. By 1966, the pricing of many commodities and much of the wage system was under bureaucratic government control. The Ministry of Industry controlled most factories and sought to promote Syrian production through a program of import substitution.

The US embassy declared January 1965 in Syria “the date of no return from when full-fledged socialism was reached.” Though calculated to emphasize its “anti-imperialism” and capitalize on the broad appeal of socialism among the masses, the regime’s nationalization was not socialization. There was no democratic control by workers. Management, engineering, and skilled-labor jobs were doled out not based on skill or competence, but loyalty to the military-dominated regime. As a consequence, many skilled workers emigrated. Import substitution and government pricing controls distorted and masked the real cost of production. The manufacturing growth rate index, measuring value added over the previous year, grew at only four percent annually through the remainder of the

decade.

The Syrian Baathist “road to socialism” won the backing of the Soviet Union, in spite of the fact that the neighboring Iraqi Baathists had cooperated with the American CIA in the 1963 slaughter of members of the Iraqi Communist Party, which had been one of the largest political parties and trade union movements in the Arab world. Their pretensions of socialism and “pan-Arabism” notwithstanding, the Syrian and Iraqi Baathists did not come close to uniting their adjoining countries, much less Egypt, where Gamal Abdel Nasser also proclaimed “Arab socialism” and unity.

[top]

75 years ago: Hermann Göring threatens Britain with air bombing

On December 30, 1939, Luftwaffe General Hermann Göring threatened Great Britain with the most ferocious air assault “the world has ever known” in an article published in the New Year's edition of the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*. “No land in the world is so vulnerable from the air as the British Isles,” Göring wrote. All that was needed was a “word from the Führer.”

As the year 1940 began, the so-called “Phoney War” continued in Europe with Poland carved up between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. However, the German military did not appear to be ready for a full-scale invasion of France. “The Wehrmacht had entered into hostilities in autumn 1939 with no well laid plans for a major war, and no strategy at all for an offensive in the West,” according to historian Ian Kershaw. “Nothing at all had been clearly thought through.”

With the lack of preparedness in mind, Hitler elevated Göring on January 4 to command of German war industries. “Field Marshall Göring is taking the direction of the war economy entirely in his hands,” an official announcement stated. Göring, a close Hitler ally and a Nazi veteran of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, had founded the Gestapo in 1933 and two years later was appointed Luftwaffe commander. After the autumn 1939 invasion of Poland, Hitler had declared Göring his future successor.

The air force was the best prepared of the three branches of the German military, but even there the armament program was targeted to reach fruition in 1942, not 1940. The German naval operational planning was working on a fleet that would not be complete, even in peaceful circumstances, until 1943 at best. Even the relatively brief Polish campaign had drastically reduced munitions and rendered half of the tanks and motorized units utilized by the Wehrmacht no longer serviceable.

[top]

100 years ago: Ottomans routed by Russian troops at the Battle of Sarikamish

This week in 1914, the Ottoman Third Army suffered devastating losses at the hands of their Russian opponents in the Battle of Sarikamish, which began in late December. The fighting was the initial campaign in the Caucasus front of World War I, the easternmost extension of the fighting in Europe, with Turkey allied to the central powers Germany and Austria-Hungary, and Russia fighting alongside Britain, France, and the other Allied powers.

Tensions between the Ottoman and Russian empires dated back centuries, the last war having been fought in 1877, during which Russian forces had seized control of Kars, an important strongpoint in the Transcaucasian region (the northeasternmost town in modern Turkey), establishing a fortress there.

Turkish commanders hatched an abortive plan, in collaboration with German advisers, to retake Kars and surrounding areas, while Russian attention was fixed on the battlefields of the Eastern Front. The Turkish troops began a hasty retreat on January 4. While estimates of casualties differ widely, as many as 90,000 Ottomans are thought to have died in the campaign, many from exposure, while thousands were captured or wounded. Russian casualties are thought to have numbered some 15,000.

The battle was decisive in ending Turkish-German plans to develop a broader pan-Islamic movement aimed at reconquering the Caucasus, and even challenging British domination over India. The participation of Armenian volunteers in the fighting, alongside Russian troops, was used by Ottoman authorities to demonize the Armenian population and promote Turkish nationalism.

[top]



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