

This week in history: November 30-December 6

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25 years ago: Gorbachev assumes emergency powers

On December 1, 1990, the Supreme Soviet approved constitutional changes which concentrated unprecedented executive powers in the hands of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. These measures served to subordinate the Soviet government directly to the presidency. Moreover, they created a Council of the Federation, another body to be controlled by the president, in which the leaders of all 15 constituent republics of the USSR would sit in a consultative capacity. Gorbachev, as president, was also to head up a new National Security Council, which would control all military and police.

In approving these constitutional revisions, the Supreme Soviet also granted Gorbachev emergency powers to begin implementing them right away, even before they would be submitted to the Congress of People's Deputies later that month.

These measures were first unveiled in the previous month's session of the Congress of People's Deputies, when that body overwhelmingly voted to approve a general outline of Gorbachev's proposal to end what he called "the paralysis of power." In the course of the debate, Gorbachev denied that he was establishing a dictatorship and insisted that he only wanted to "stabilize the situation, to continue the road of reform we've already chosen..."

The clamoring for "law and order" extended from the so-called hardline Stalinists right through open advocates of capitalist restoration. One of the latter, Leningrad Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, warned, "If public discontent reaches a critical point and triggers a rebellion, few of us will survive. The chaos of social unrest would provide little chance for survival for those who have been leading the country, no matter how good their intentions might have been."

Gorbachev used the devastating impact of his own economic policies as the pretext for assuming extraordinary powers. The systematic disbanding of state planning and all forms of centralized distribution dramatically intensified an economic

crisis which was the product of six decades of systematic abuse of the nationalized economy by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Gorbachev cynically claimed that emergency powers would enable him to deal with mounting food shortages. He even announced the formation of "workers committees" which—under the tight control of the KGB secret police—would allegedly be in charge of combating speculation and hoarding.

The real source of the economic breakdown and thievery was the parasitism of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the growing layer of gangsters and black marketeers, which constituted the embryo of the comprador-style bourgeoisie that Gorbachev's policy of restructuring (*perestroika*) had sought to create.

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50 years ago: De Gaulle fails to gain plurality in presidential bid

On December 5, 1965, French President Charles de Gaulle failed to gain a majority in the initial round of the first direct national presidential election held in the Fifth Republic, winning 45 percent of the votes. De Gaulle later won a December 19 runoff with François Mitterrand, who was backed by both the French Socialist and Communist parties (SFIO and PCF, respectively) as well as the capitalist Radical Party. Mitterrand took nearly 34 percent of the first round and 45 percent of the second.

Most official commentators had expected de Gaulle would easily win the first round, and several potential candidates in fact refused to participate because they viewed the election as another manifestation of the president's dictatorial tendencies. De Gaulle's relatively narrow victory instead indicated a gathering crisis of the Fifth Republic.

De Gaulle had been installed as the president in 1958, and the Fifth Republic created, in what was, in all but name, a coup d'état dominated by generals dissatisfied with what they believed was insufficient brutality in the attempt to suppress the Algerian independence movement. Yet de Gaulle was forced to acknowledge Algerian independence in 1962, and faced several assassination and conspiracy plots himself from right-wing

generals in the *Organisation armée secrète* (OAS).

However, within France, the long postwar economic boom—*Les Trente Glorieuses*—accelerated in the 1960s, with the French economy surpassing that of Great Britain in 1964, and strengthening the industrial power of the working class. This was highlighted by a December 1964 national strike that brought the country to a standstill. The call to strike was limited to 2.5 million workers, but well over 10 million responded.

In this context, the 1965 election was another shameful chapter in the history of French Stalinism. The PCF was the single largest opposition party in France, with the allegiance of millions of workers in its ranks and in those of the trade union confederation it dominated, the CGT. But rather than place itself at the forefront of a direct political challenge to de Gaulle, the PCF subordinated itself to the broad, non-socialist left formation headed by Mitterrand, which also included pro-capitalist parties such as the Radicals. Indeed, Mitterrand's entire electoral vehicle, the Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left, was constructed with the express intent of counterbalancing the PCF's dominant position in the working class.

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75 years ago: Nazi leadership plans invasion of the USSR

On December 5, 1940, German military leaders submitted planned objectives for an invasion of the Soviet Union to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler. The plans called for an attack at the earliest time possible, May 1941, given weather conditions in western Russia and Ukraine. Hitler revised and reissued the invasion plans on December 18, giving them the code name Operation Barbarossa.

The Nazis planned the invasion as a war of economic plunder on a vast scale, and from the beginning, as a war of “annihilation” of the Soviet masses. Operation Barbarossa would concentrate the initial attack upon the Soviet Union's northern and southern flanks, targeting the Soviet Union's access to the Baltic and Black Seas, as well as major economic targets such as the Baku oil fields. Moscow, in Hitler's view, was of no great importance. Almost 150 divisions were to be launched at the Soviet Union.

Nazi hubris was inflated by the Wehrmacht's smashing success over France and Britain on the western front in the summer of 1940, and the Soviet Red Army's poor showing in its war against Finland in the Winter War of late 1939 and early 1940. The Red Army appeared both disorganized and demoralized. It was known that Stalin's purges of the late 1930s had killed off or sent into exile the great majority of the Red Army's officer corps.

“The decision concerning hegemony in Europe will come in

the battle against Russia,” Hitler is reported to have said in the December planning meetings. “The Russian is inferior. The army lacks leadership.” Greatly underestimating both Red Army capability and the willingness of the Soviet people to fight, Hitler declared to Brauchitsch and Halder, “When the Russian army is battered once the final disaster is unavoidable.”

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100 years ago: IWW organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn acquitted

On November 30, 1915, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was found innocent of charges of “inciting to personal injury” during the Paterson silk mill strike of 1913. The IWW, a revolutionary-syndicalist organization that opposed World War I and sought to put an end to capitalism, had been heavily involved in that strike and a host of bitter struggles of various sections of workers, including some of the most oppressed and exploited.

Flynn was accused of having advised a meeting of strikers on February 25, 1913 to drive the scabs from the mills even if they had to “club them out, beat them out, or kick them out,” and to use “extreme force” if necessary.

Flynn denied the charge and the IWW fought the case as an attempted labor frame-up. She commented to the press, “I feel I have been tremendously vindicated. I feel sure the people of New Jersey do not cherish the same ideas as the Paterson manufacturers and the police regarding the right to free speech, and I shall certainly continue my fight.”

The jury took little more than an hour to deliberate and it was reported that only one ballot was taken. After the verdict, Flynn, who was accompanied by prominent IWW leaders Carlo Tresca and Joseph Ettor, both Italian immigrants, declared her intention to continue speaking in Paterson.

Henry Marelli, the IWW's lawyer, declared, “It is not unusual for cops to lie and ‘frame up’ people, and the longer they are on the force the better liars they become.” Less than two weeks prior to Flynn's acquittal, Joe Hill an IWW member famous for his radical songwriting, had been executed in Utah on a frame-up murder charge.

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