

This week in history: December 5-11

5 December 2016

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25 years ago: European Council drafts Maastricht Treaty

Leaders of 12 European nations met on December 9-10, 1991 in the Dutch regional capital city of Maastricht to discuss the institution of a single European market. After vehement disputes, the European heads of governments agreed to the establishment of a European currency union and the foundation of political union.

The motivation for the summit was the intensifying trade war which had, by the 1980s, replaced the relatively free world market of the postwar period. In order to overcome the historic split of Europe into different markets, with different taxes, production codes, legal restrictions and currencies, an attempt was made to strengthen the position of European capital by creating a European trading bloc against American and Japanese competition.

A common European currency would supposedly replace the national currencies no later than 1999. Important areas of foreign policy, defense policy and industrial policy would be transferred step by step under the authority of the European Community. Agreement was also reached on the question of closer military collaboration, the creation of a European police force and collaboration on the refugee question.

Eleven out of 12 EC nations moved to coordinate their social policies and embrace a common currency. Great Britain was allowed to go its own way after Thatcherite British Prime Minister John Major threatened to blow up the summit on that issue.

The Germans were the loudest in promoting a common European foreign policy and an “independent European defense identity,” for the creation of European troop contingents in the framework of the Western European Union (WEU), operating independently of the US-dominated NATO.

The agreements in Maastricht represented an important step in that direction. The role of the WEU as the military arm of the European union was emphasized explicitly. The purpose of this was also to cut through the constitutional restriction on the use of German troops abroad.

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50 years ago: Korean forces massacre Vietnamese village

Between December 3 and December 6, 1966, South Korean soldiers serving in the American imperialist war against Vietnam slaughtered 430 civilians in the village of Bình Hòa in Qu?ng Ngãi province, eleven miles from My Lai, where in 1968 US soldiers would rape, torture, and murder 504 villagers.

The Koreans, like the Americans at My Lai, killed every individual they found. Most were children, elderly, and women—21 of whom were pregnant when they were murdered, according to the testimony of relatives. After killing the people, they slaughtered the village’s livestock. People and animals were left in heaps to rot.

The massacre at Bình Hòa was not an isolated event in the mid-coastal provinces of Vietnam. It followed by just two months a similar mass murder at nearby Dien Nien-Phuoc Binh, where ROK troops killed 280 villagers on October 9-10, 1966. Early in 1966, Korean troops killed some 250 in the Tuy Hoa district of Phu Yen, including 170 killed in one day at Hoa My Tay village. Also in 1966 ROK forces killed upwards of 1,000 in a series of massacres at Binh An.

Across Vietnam historical markers commemorate these US-backed atrocities. A stone marking the spot where the village of Binh An once stood reads, “Deeply carve the hatred against the American aggressors. Here on Feb. 2, 1966, South Korean mercenaries, under the command of American imperialists, massacred 380 people.”

Decades after these events of 1966, General Chae Myong-shin, the commander of South Korean troops in Vietnam, admitted that it was “possible there were innocent civilian victims in those areas, but that was unavoidable in view of the peculiar nature of the Vietnam War.” He blamed such killing on the fact that it “was extremely difficult, or virtually impossible, to tell apart civilians and guerrillas.”

The claim that occupying forces could not “tell apart civilians and guerrillas,” which became practically a mantra of the American effort to defeat the Vietnamese Revolution, arose from a basic fact that the US and its allies could not admit: Their war was not against “communist aggression,” but against the Vietnamese people, in South as well as North Vietnam.

Among American “allies” in Vietnam, the US-puppet dictatorship of South Korea supplied the most soldiers, some 320,000 in all. Among these, over 5,000 were killed and nearly

11,000 wounded.

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75 years ago: Red Army drives back German forces outside Moscow

On December 5, 1941, a Red Army counteroffensive halted and drove back Hitler's armies at the gates of Moscow, delivering the first major defeat to Germany since the beginning of World War II in 1939.

On December 2, a final offensive by German forces against Moscow pierced defensive positions manned by poorly armed workers' battalions and remnants of Red Army units, allowing German tanks to advance into the city's suburbs. Marshal Georgy Zhukov had transferred 18 out of the remaining 25 Siberian divisions to Moscow, after the signing of the Soviet-Japanese Non-Aggression Pact of April 1941. These divisions—equipped with fast T-34 tanks whose armor was impervious to German antitank shells, highly trained and acclimated to the cold—were held back from the front and only thrown into battle at the last second to attack the German flanks both north and south of Moscow.

The counteroffensive caught the Germans off guard and threw them back even though they held superiority in men, artillery and tanks. The sight of the Siberian Red Army soldiers, clad in white quilted uniforms, armed with machine guns and grenades, instead of hand-made Molotov cocktails, caused panic among German forces. They abandoned guns, trucks and tanks in their retreat.

The counteroffensive pushed back the German army some 200 miles in the north and south and a minimum of 40 miles in the center just west of Moscow. Deepening the demoralization of the German army were temperatures as low as 63 degrees below zero. Some 100,000 cases of frostbite plagued the Germans. Over 14,000 of those cases were major and required one or more amputations.

Hitler reacted by firing three generals and ordering units to hold their positions at any cost. Gradually the Germans were able to halt the counteroffensive, but the Red Army had punctured the illusion that Hitler's armies were invincible.

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100 years ago: Central Powers invade Romania

On December 6, 1916, Austro-Hungarian and German troops entered Bucharest, the capital of Romania. The invasion signaled the end of Romania's participation in the war for a

number of months, nullified the threat posed by the Eastern European state to the Central Powers, and left large swathes of the country under Austro-German control.

Romania had entered the war on the side of the Allied powers, including Britain, France and Russia, on August 26, with its ruling elite seeking to share in the spoils of a new division of the Balkans. The Romanian regime was particularly anxious to seize Transylvania from Austria-Hungary. The Allies used the promise of the territory, which was heavily populated by ethnic Romanians, to induce the Romanian government to enter the conflict.

After two years of hesitation, Romania entered the war on the back of the superficial successes of the Russian offensive in the summer of 1916.

The Romanian army had doubled in size since 1914, but it lacked firepower and modern equipment. Its infantry had no automatic rifles, gas equipment, or trench mortars, and possessed few machine guns. Its artillery was inadequate and it possessed virtually no air force. Moreover, Romania only had around six weeks' supply of ammunition at the start of its offensive, after an explosion at the Bucharest arsenal destroyed nine million rounds of small-arms ammunition.

At the outset of the campaign, Romania's twenty-three divisions faced seven divisions of Austrian and Bulgarian troops. The success of its offensive, which depended on rapidity of action in the face of a better-armed enemy, was hampered by bad roads and the destruction of bridges. This gave German troops time to come forward and begin a counter-offensive.

The Romanian and allied Russian forces were overwhelmed by Austro-German troops on two fronts, pushing forward until a substantial portion of Romanian territory was under the control of the Central Powers. The Romanian army was crippled. While heavy fighting took place in the territory in 1917, Romania's offensive capabilities had been all but destroyed.

Following the defeat, British agents destroyed a number of oil wells, in a bid to prevent German and Austro-Hungarian authorities from using them.

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