

This week in history: December 26-January 1

28 December 2016

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25 years ago: The juridical liquidation of the Soviet Union

On December 26, 1991, the old flag of tsarist Russia was raised over the Kremlin for the first time since the 1917 October Revolution, marking the official end of the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gorbachev, president of the rump Soviet federal government resigned office the night before and the red flag of the USSR was lowered for the last time. That same day, to allow Russia to retain the Soviet Union's permanent Security Council seat, Russian Republic President Boris Yeltsin informed the United Nations that the name "Russian Federation" would replace "Soviet Union."

In early December, Yeltsin, Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk and Belarusian parliament chairman Stanislav Shushkevich signed an agreement in Belarus known as the Belavezha Accords, to dissolve the Soviet Union and establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Within the following two weeks, 11 of the 12 Soviet republics ratified the accords.

The final legal step in the dissolution was made on December 26, when the upper house of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, voted both itself and the Union out of existence.

The juridical liquidation of the Soviet Union was but the final stage in a process that undermined and eventually destroyed the first workers state in the world. Gorbachev introduced the economic program of perestroika in August of 1988, subsequently implementing further economic policies for the restoration of capitalism, provoking huge resistance in the Soviet working class.

The failed "August putsch" of 1991 was a pathetic last-ditch attempt by a cabal of KGB officials to preserve the rule and privileges of the Stalinist bureaucracy under the Soviet state system.

Under the program of "socialism in one country," announced in 1924, the Stalinist bureaucracy began the consolidation of its rule over the first workers state. Leon Trotsky, who, along with Lenin, led the 1917 insurrection, formed the Left Opposition to fight for a proletarian internationalist leadership.

In his 1936 book, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky characterized the USSR as a degenerated workers state, which would end in the restoration of capitalism unless the Stalinist bureaucracy was overthrown in a political revolution by the working class.

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50 year ago: De Gaulle attacks US war in Vietnam

On December 31, 1966, French President Charles De Gaulle used his annual New Year's address to France to issue a sharp criticism of the US war in Vietnam.

De Gaulle juxtaposed what he called the peace and prosperity of France and Europe to Southeast Asia, where "war rages." He said of Vietnam that it was an "unjust war, for it results, in fact, from the armed intervention of the United States upon the territory of Vietnam. Detestable war, because it leads a great nation to ravage a small one. We hold it necessary that [the US] put an end to the ordeal by bringing her forces back to her soil."

Vietnam, along with the rest of Indochina, was a former colony lost to French imperialism only after a bitter counterinsurgency war that culminated in France's defeat in the humiliating siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This was followed by the loss of its most important colony, Algeria, in a brutal war that lasted from 1954 until 1962. France, together with Great Britain the oldest of the colonial powers, now tried to refurbish its image by declaring itself, as De Gaulle said in his New Year's speech, as the "champion" of the "backward peoples," boasting that Paris gave more aid proportionally to developing nations than did the US or any other country.

De Gaulle's criticism of the US was part of a larger bid to create a multi-polar world based on French leadership of Western Europe, a goal that had animated French withdrawal from NATO, also in 1966, as well as the French central bank's highly public purchases of gold using US dollars as a means of challenging the Bretton Woods system of US-British domination of international finance.

French aid to the Third World was a "soft" mechanism for opening markets to French capitalism. In the same vein, De Gaulle spoke of improving relations with the Stalinist states of Eastern Europe and "working to build the economic and perhaps one day political grouping of the Western Six"—France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

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75 years ago: Battle of the Kerch Peninsula begins in Crimea

In the week beginning December 26, 1941, the Red Army launched amphibious operations in the Black Sea to relieve the Nazi encirclement of the Soviet garrison at Sevastopol in Crimea.

Red Army units landed first at the Kerch Peninsula's most eastern point on December 26 and further west at Feodosia on December 30. Red Army forces secured bridgeheads, defeating Romanian Axis forces attempting to repulse the landings.

Fearing encirclement by Soviet troops, German General von Sponeck tactically withdrew his forces from Kerch along the Parpach Narrows. The general was sentenced to death, subsequently commuted, for a tactical withdrawal without authorization.

The Red Army subsequently retook control of the city of Kerch on December 29. Because of Red Army penetration into the Kerch Peninsula, the Germans paused their assault upon Sevastopol and were also unable to send much-needed reinforcements from Crimea to reinforce Army Group South's campaign in Ukraine.

After hiding from public view for months once Operation Barbarossa began, Stalin was now buoyed by the recent retreat of the Wehrmacht after their previous rapid advancement to within sight of Moscow. Turning from Cassandra to foolish optimism on the fate of the Soviet Union, Stalin prematurely believed German forces vulnerable to a general offensive. Stalin told his Armed Forces High Command to break the siege at Sevastopol in Crimea first, to be followed by pushing forward at Moscow, Leningrad, and in the Donbass to recapture Kharkov.

General Georgy Zhukov, who was earlier removed as Chief of the General Staff when Stalin objected to his plans to evacuate Kiev in Ukraine and subsequently demoted to commander of the Western Front, was horrified when he heard of Stalin's reckless plans. Despite slowing and even reversing the initially rapid Nazi advancements of Operation Barbarossa into the western territory of the Soviet Union, the Red Army still lacked basics like sufficient trained and battle-hardened reserves and ammunition.

The setbacks and disarray suffered by the Wehrmacht during the first winter of Operation Barbarossa created crisis within the Nazi leadership. In the days leading up to the opening salvos of the Battle for the Kerch Peninsula, Hitler replaced Field Marshal von Bock as the Commander of Army Group Centre after von Bock requested permission to retreat, fearing a rout. Field Marshal von Brauchitsch was sacked and Hitler himself assumed the position of the supreme commander of the German army, taking upon himself responsibility for military tactics and grand strategy.

Days before the beginning of the battle for Kerch, Hitler granted General Guderian, the Panzer commander of Army Group Centre, an audience to make his case for a tactical and limited withdrawal. Hitler chastised the Panzer commander and reiterated his 'Halt Order'—under no circumstances, without permission and prior preparation, should German forces retreat; rather, they must stand fast and dig in regardless of Red Army advances. Guderian too was dismissed by Hitler on December 2.

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100 years ago: Rasputin murdered in Petrograd

On December 30, 1916, Grigori Rasputin, the Siberian-born

religious mystic who had exerted inordinate influence over the Tsarist regime, and had a particularly close relationship with the Tsarina, was murdered in Petrograd. The assassination was a symptom of the increasingly crisis-ridden character of the autocracy which had ruled Russia for centuries, amid heavy Russian defeats in the First World War and mounting opposition in the working class.

With Tsar Nicholas II at the front in personal command of Russian forces, the Tsarina had granted almost complete power in Petrograd to Rasputin. Ministers and government officials were routinely removed at Rasputin's behest, and replaced by his cronies.

In the middle of November, Paul Milyukov, a leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party, denounced the Tsarina, Rasputin and the conduct of the government in the Duma, the Russian parliament. "Is this folly or treason?" Milyukov asked. Even the extreme right-wing deputies joined in the denunciation of the government.

In late December, the Duma issued a declaration against the "dark forces," referring to Rasputin and his cohorts, who it accused of "undermining the country's best efforts to conduct the war and creating disorganization in all departments of the government and in the interior." The Council of the Empire and the Council of the Nobles passed the same resolution.

On December 30, Rasputin was invited to the home of Prince Felix Yusupov, husband of the Tsar's niece. Yusupov and a group of conspirators first sought to poison Rasputin with cyanide. When this failed, they shot him. He managed to survive. The assassins battered him and dropped his body in the Neva River where it was found three days later.

In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky noted that the murder occurred amid murmurings of a "palace coup" within Russian ruling and aristocratic circles, concerned over the implications of the deepening crisis of the Tsarist autocracy. The Tsar and Tsarina responded to the assassination by promoting Rasputin's cronies, and banishing a number of aristocratic figures implicated in the killing.

Trotsky noted that within 10 weeks of Rasputin's murder, the regime would fall in the February revolution of 1917. He wrote, "The murder of Rasputin played a colossal role, but a very different one from that upon which its perpetrators and inspirers had counted. It did not weaken the crisis, but sharpened it. People talked of the murder everywhere: in the palaces, in the staffs, at the factories, and in the peasant's huts. The inference drew itself: even the grand dukes have no other recourse against the leprous camarilla except poison and the revolver. The poet Blok wrote of the murder of Rasputin: 'The bullet which killed him reached the very heart of the ruling dynasty'."

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