

This week in history: December 21-27

20 December 2020

25 years ago: Hundreds killed in Dabwali fire in India

On December 23, 1995, some 540 people were killed and a further 160 injured in a fire which broke out in the town of Mandi Dabwali, about 180 miles northwest of New Delhi, the capital of India.

A synthetic tent erected to hold a school awards ceremony for the local DAV Public School erupted into flames, apparently triggered by an electrical short circuit, trapping approximately 1,500 people inside the makeshift structure with only a single exit. The fire lasted only five minutes but was so intense that many victims were burned beyond recognition. More than 200 children were cremated without any identification. Some of the deaths were attributed to the stampede created when the entire crowd tried to escape at once through the single exit.

The fire sparked popular outrage over the corruption of local officials and the mismanagement of the health care system. Security men accompanying the top local government official present at the awards ceremony, M.P. Bidlian, reportedly barred women and children from fleeing the inferno until their boss had escaped. The owner of the facility was arrested for operating in violation of building codes.

The town of 50,000 had just one hospital with only 10 beds and few supplies. As hundreds of victims were brought in, relatives were told to go to local pharmacies to buy drugs and painkillers. Many children died without ever receiving any medical attention. Others had to be transported in private cars, for lack of ambulances, over distances of 100 miles or more to find an available hospital bed.

In 2003, a commission was created to investigate the incident and to calculate compensation owed to the victims' families. It took more than six years to finish the report. Court orders issued in 2009 demanded the Haryana government pay 45 percent and DAV management 55 percent of the total compensation amount of about \$7.4 million. Many families of the victims have yet to receive any compensation.

50 years ago: Nazi war criminal Franz Stangl convicted of killing 900,000

On December 22, 1970, former death camp boss Franz Stangl was found guilty of the deaths of 900,000 people who were murdered as part of the Holocaust carried out by Nazi Germany.

Stangl had been the commandant of the Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps from April 1942 to August 1943, and oversaw the forced labor and mass extermination of the hundreds of thousands of Jews sent to his camps by the Nazi regime. Among the inmates held in the camps, Stangl became known as the "White Death" because of a white coat and whip he would wear when inspecting new groups of prisoners.

In interviews from prison after his conviction, Stangl expressed his pride in his role as a mass executioner, saying he saw Jews to be the same as "cargo," and that running the camp "was my profession. I enjoyed it. It fulfilled me. And yes, I was ambitious about that, I won't deny it." He also said, "My conscience is clear. I was simply doing my duty." Stangl was sentenced to life in prison by the German court. He died six months later, on June 28, 1971.

Stangl had been captured at the end of the war by American soldiers. He was held until 1948, when he managed to escape through the Catholic Church's "rat line" via Italy, with the help of Catholic Bishop Alois Hudal, a Nazi sympathizer. From Italy he made his way to Syria where he lived for three years before arrangements were made for him to travel to Brazil and work for Volkswagen do Brasil, the Brazilian subsidiary of Germany's largest automaker.

For eight years, Stangl was sheltered by Volkswagen in Brazil, where he used his own name and was employed in "plant maintenance." VW chief executive and former Nazi party member Friedrich Wilhelm Schultz-Wink would later justify Stangl's employment, claiming that "Brazilian law forbids asking any questions of or collecting information on workers or employees."

While defending the Nazi war criminal, Volkswagen is known to have collected information on militant workers and collaborated with the Brazilian dictatorship in persecuting them. In fact, it is suspected that Stangl's real position at VW was to assist plant security who ruthlessly targeted socialist workers.

Only because of the efforts of Holocaust survivor and Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal was Stangl ever found. After Wiesenthal petitioned the West German government to pursue Stangl and seek his extradition to stand trial, Volkswagen attempted to halt the extradition and appealed to the Brazilian government to protect the mass murderer. Wiesenthal discovered Stangl in Brazil in 1964, but it was not until 1967 that the Brazilian government eventually arrested him and extradited him to Germany.

75 years ago: Imperialist powers establish the International Monetary Fund

On December 27, 1945, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was formally established, with 29 nations ratifying its articles of agreement. The financial institution would begin operations in March 1947, by which time 39 countries had signed up.

The IMF was established at the initiative of the victorious imperialist powers, the United States and Britain, following their defeat of Nazi Germany and Japan in the Second World War. It formed part of a broader plan to restabilize capitalism in Europe and internationally, following the wars, revolutions, and crises of the previous two decades.

In April 1944, Britain, the US and their allies had published a joint statement on the establishment of an international monetary fund. The following month, the US government organized a conference to discuss the establishment of such a body. A further gathering was held in July 1944, in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. It resulted in an agreement on a post-war “Bretton Woods system,” dominated by the US, providing for international economic cooperation among the Allied states and the reconstruction of Europe following the war.

Under the agreement, the IMF was to preside over a foreign exchange system under which rates were pegged to gold, in an attempt to stave off currency and financial crises. Participants pledged to make their currencies convertible for trade and other financial transactions, but there was no deadline on the ratification of this measure. Provisions were included for exchange rates to be altered by up to 10 percent, in the event of balance of trade issues among member states. All countries that ratified Bretton Woods were required to contribute to the IMF’s capital.

The new framework was aimed at preventing a return to the formation of rival trading blocs, which had contributed to the outbreak of the war. Its purpose was to establish greater capitalist stability amid mass working class struggles throughout Europe and internationally that threatened revolution. The suppression of these upheavals by the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union, and the formation of the new imperialist order, complemented one another.

At the same time, Bretton Woods and the establishment of the IMF served to formalize the hegemony of American capitalism. The US possessed some two-thirds of the world’s gold reserves, had further developed its industrial capacity amid the carnage in Europe, and was seeking to ensure its dominant position, both in relation to the vanquished powers in the conflict, Germany and Japan, and its nominal allies, above all, Britain.

100 years: Congress of Russian Soviets adopts electrification plan

On December 22, 1920, the Eighth All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’, Peasants’, Red Army and Cossack Deputies approved a plan for the electrification of the entire Soviet Republic, known as the GOELRO Plan (GOELRO is the acronym in Russian for the State Commission for Electrification of Russia.)

The GOELRO Plan was designed to lift the backward economy the Soviet Republic had inherited from tsarist Russia into the 20th

century, and to economically develop both industry and agriculture.

GOELRO was a body of about 200 engineers and scientists led by the engineer Gleb Krzhizhanovsky, an active participant in the revolutionary movement from 1895. GOELRO had been established in February by the Supreme Board of National Economy and had finished its plan in time for presentation to the Soviet congress, with Lenin’s intimate involvement.

The GOELRO Plan sought to build, over the next 10 years, 30 regional power plants, which would include 10 massive hydroelectric plants and many industrial establishments run by the electricity they generated. The goal was to increase yearly power output to 8.8 billion KWh. The tsarist regime had produced 1.9 billion KWh in 1913. The goal was achieved by 1931, with substantial increases to Soviet power generation for years after that.

The GOELRO Plan was one of the first successes of socialist economic planning, despite the errors and outright sabotage in developing the economy by the Stalinist regime that consolidated power after 1924.

In February 1920, when Lenin had proposed an electrification plan, he remarked, “the organisation of industry on the basis of modern, advanced technology, on electrification which will provide a link between town and country, will put an end to the division between town and country, will make it possible to raise the level of culture in the countryside and to overcome, even in the most remote corners of the land, backwardness, ignorance, poverty, disease and barbarism.”



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