

This week in history: January 4-10

3 January 2021

25 years ago: First atoms of antimatter created

On January 4, 1996, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) announced that a team of German and Italian scientists created the first complete atoms of antimatter, in an experiment carried out the previous September. Results were not made public until an independent check confirmed the findings. Professor Walter Oelert and an international team from Jülich IKP-KFA, Erlangen-Nuernberg University, GSI Darmstadt and Genoa University succeeded for the first time in history in synthesizing atoms of antimatter from their constituent antiparticles.

Antimatter was predicted in 1928 and first discovered in 1932 from a new symmetry discovered in the laws of nature. Physicists had long been able to create the antiparticles of electrons and protons for brief periods of time in high-energy particle accelerators. These antiparticles have the same mass and other characteristics as the particles to which they correspond, but the opposite electric charge. The dominance of matter over antimatter in the universe shows this symmetry is not perfect, a situation that makes detailed study of antimatter of immense significance not just for physics but also for cosmology.

It was not until 1995 that researchers were able to combine the antiparticles of the electron, a positively charged electron or positron, and the antiparticle of the proton, the negatively charged antiproton, to create a stable atom of antimatter, antihydrogen.

According to the European researchers, 11 atoms of antihydrogen, consisting of a single positron orbiting a nucleus of one antiproton, were detected during the three-week-long experiment, in which antiprotons were created at high energies and bombarded atoms of the inert gas xenon.

While the atoms of antimatter were believed to be internally stable, they only existed for 40 billionths of a second before colliding with atoms of ordinary matter and being annihilated. Part of the challenge which made the experiment difficult was that antiparticles do not exist naturally on earth, but had to be created in the laboratory.

The formation of these atoms could not be directly detected—their existence had to be inferred from studying the byproducts of their destruction. The creation of antimatter at CERN opened the door to the systematic exploration of antihydrogen and other antimatter atoms by physicists and laboratories around the world, research which continues to the present.

50 years ago: US plans forced resettlement of 2million-3 million Vietnamese peasants

On January 10, 1971 the United States and its puppet government in South Vietnam announced a plan to forcibly remove as many as 3 million Vietnamese peasants who lived in the northern regions of South Vietnam and resettle them over 500 miles to the south, closer to the capital in Saigon. The plan would have been the largest migration in Vietnamese history.

The official reason given for the resettlement plan was to find a more permanent home for refugees. The northern regions were among the poorest in Vietnam and had been ravaged by the war. But the areas where the governments planned to move the peasants to the south had also been devastated, often by US led “search and destroy” missions that targeted entire villages for destruction when suspected of harboring support for the National Liberation Front (NLF).

The South Vietnamese Minister of Social Welfare, Dr. Phieu Nguon Tran, claimed that the plan had been on the table for years, but had been delayed over fears that it would appear to be a tactical retreat. “Only now do we feel that we can go ahead with the plan,” he said. “Before this time political observers watching the peace talks in Paris would have seen the move as a preparation for handing the area to the North Vietnamese.”

In reality, the plan was an attack on the entire population of the northern regions where there was great political support for North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front (NLF). The Nixon administration hoped that by uprooting and moving millions of these peasants closer to Saigon they would cut off their connections to the North and be more easily subdued. The proposed forced exodus was a desperate bid to shore up the crumbling American position a decade into an imperialist war that had killed well over 1 million. It was consonant with a war that had coined such phrases as “destroying the village in order to save it.”

Significantly, the area to be evacuated was the same as that targeted for the use of nuclear weapons at earlier stages in the war, when the Pentagon discussed the possibility of sealing off the border between the North and South, either through irradiation or direct nuclear blasts.

By March, when preparations for the resettlement were slated to begin, the US and Saigon governments announced that the plan would be scrapped. It had become clear that the forced exodus would only erode the minimal support that the Saigon government maintained and drive more of the population to support the NLF.

75 years ago: Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann escapes from US detention camp

On January 5, 1946, Adolf Eichmann, one of the key organizers of the Nazi regime's genocidal "final solution" to murder all of Europe's Jews, escaped a detention camp run by the US military in Oberdachstetten, a municipality in Germany's Bavarian region. The war criminal would remain at large for another 14 years.

Eichmann had been captured in the wake of the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945. Over the following months, he was held in a number of facilities established for the imprisonment of former officers of the notorious Schutzstaffel (SS) paramilitary. Eichmann used forged papers providing him with the false name of Otto Eckmann. The former Nazi leader carried out his escape from a work detail after a tip-off that his real identity was about to be exposed.

Eichmann had played a central role in the organization of the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, at which the Nazis planned their mass murder of European Jewry. He was responsible for the deportation of Jews throughout occupied Eastern Europe to German death camps, where 6 million were murdered. The Nuremberg trials, which began in November 1945, would hear evidence of Eichmann's centrality to the genocide, and his glee over the mass killings.

Following his escape, Eichmann adopted the name Otto Heninger, and traveled about in Germany to avoid recapture. He worked in the forestry sector, before settling in the Lower Saxon town of Altensalzkoth. In 1948, Eichmann received false identity papers arranged by Bishop Alois Hudal, a Catholic official and Nazi supporter. These enabled him to travel in 1950 to Argentina on an International Committee of the Red Cross humanitarian passport.

Eichmann was one of many former Nazi leaders smuggled out of Germany along "the ratline" involving the Catholic Church, sections of the German state apparatus and the anti-communist dictatorships in South America. He would only be captured in 1960 by a daring raid of Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency, before being placed on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Jerusalem. He was convicted and executed on June 1, 1962.

a rebellion in their own ranks. Over the next few days, the Turks dug in and were reinforced. Greek forces were not able to keep up the attack because of poor supply lines and retreated.

As a result of the battle, the Turkish nationalists led by Kemal Ataturk proved the viability of a national army (the Army of the Grand National Assembly) as opposed to irregular forces. World opinion began to shift toward the recognition of Ataturk's forces, particularly the French and Italian governments, who increasingly viewed the Greek forces as British proxies opposed to their own imperialist interests. Ataturk concluded a treaty with Soviet Russia in 1921.

In Greece, the inconclusive battle weakened support for the Greek presence in Turkey. The government of Eleftherios Venizelos, the architect of the close alliance with British imperialism, had already been thrown into crisis after King Alexander died of sepsis from a monkey bite in October. Venizelos and his Liberal Party were routed in the elections in November.

Venizelos had attached Greece to the Allied imperialist powers and entered World War I on their side in 1917 on the promise of a concession of territories of the Ottoman Empire. Greek troops had been in Turkey since 1919, largely playing a support role for French and British troops but attempting to control areas of Turkey with large ethnic Greek populations, such as the city of Smyrna.

By 1922 the Greeks were forced to withdraw from Turkey, which sparked a military uprising in Greece, the Revolution of 11 September. Both countries conducted a population exchange—of Orthodox Christians in Turkey and Muslims in Greece—that constituted one of the first major episodes of ethnic cleansing in the 20th century.



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100 years: Greek and Turkish troops clash in Asia Minor

On January 6, 1921, Greek and Turkish forces fought in what has come to be known as the First Battle of İnönü. The battle marked a turning point in the Greco-Turkish War, a part of a wider war known in Turkey as the Turkish War of Liberation.

The battle began when Greek troops attacked formations of the newly organized regular army of the Turkish nationalists led by İsmet Pasha at the railway station near the village of İnönü in Central Anatolia. Under foggy conditions, the Turkish troops withdrew before the better armed Greeks and were forced to fight